

## **ECOLOGICAL CRISES IN RIVER OF SMOKE**

**D.Anandhi**, Assistant Professor, English Department (SF), PSG College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore, Tamilnadu: [thiruanuyalini@gmail.com](mailto:thiruanuyalini@gmail.com)

**Dr. Mary Neena .M**, Associate Professor, English Department (UG-Aided), Nirmala College for Women, Coimbatore, Tamilnadu : [neenacletus1412@gmail.com](mailto:neenacletus1412@gmail.com)

### **ABSTRACT**

The works of Amitav Ghosh have established a unique character in the field of Indian Writing in English. He primarily depicts modern subjects and conveys a sense of awareness of events that occurred in the past and continue to exist in the present. In Amitav Ghosh's novels, the environment has a pretty strong presence. Ghosh's concern for the environment can be found in practically all of his literary works, as well as in parts of his novels. The Glass Palace (2000), The Hungry Tide (2004), Sea of Poppies (2009), River of Smoke (2011), Flood of Fire (2015), and The Gun Island (2019). Ecological Imperialism and Ecocide are two problems that emerge highly prominent in these works, among many of ecocriticism facets.

Ecocriticism presents an ecological perspective on the interaction between nature and all living things, particularly humans. Ghosh describes the nineteenth century Asian subcontinent with imaginative zeal and great historical insight in River of Smoke (2011). He revisits history, passing judgments on the past misuse of authority to plunder imperial subjects' ecologies. Ghosh relishes the opportunity to depict the opium battle on a vast scale in a realistic manner. The Opium War was one of the most significant events in India's imperial history. This article will look at how the imperial power is fictionalised in order to portray the ecological calamity that occurred during the colonial period.

**Keywords:** Amitav Ghosh, River of Smoke, ecocriticism, environmental degradation, Opium War, free trade.

**Ecological imperialism** is the theory, advanced first by Alfred Crosby, that European settlers were successful in colonization of other regions because of their accidental or deliberate introduction of animals, plants, and disease leading to major shifts in the ecology of the colonised areas and to population collapses in the endemic peoples. A theory conceived by Alfred Crosby in his 1986 book *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900*, which proposes that colonization was not only a form of cultural and political tyranny, it was also a form of environmental terrorism. Indeed, Crosby goes so far as to argue that the ecological dimension was in fact primary. His reason for suggesting this is the evident fact that wherever colonists settled they brought with them diseases that devastated the local populations (of both people and plants and animals) as well as invasive pests and weeds that encroached on the existing flora and fauna, and eventually starved them out of existence. European-style agricultural practice utilized in dry regions like Australia and South Africa has had a catastrophic environmental impact. Crosby's work has sparked an enhanced interest in the role and significance of the environment in understanding colonial history in Postcolonial Studies.

Amitav Ghosh is a novelist who always sheds light on the lost past, bringing to light areas that have stayed in the dark due to neglect or the impact of colonial desires, and persuades his readers to ponder their previously acquired knowledge. The long-standing trade relationship with China has always been beneficial to the economy. Nonetheless, during colonialism, traders were constrained by the East India Company's monopoly rather than simply expanding their trade. The Ibis Trilogy is a set of three historical fictions that deal with the pre-Opium War situation, indenture, colonial history, migration, and the opium trade. The story starts in pre-First Opium War India, around 1838. The storyline of the book *River of Smoke (2011)* focuses on the Parsi traders who went

to China for opium trade and faced opium restriction. The narrative also records their use of pidginised language, affair with Chinese boat girls and the pre-war tension that mars the trade.

The opium battles of 1839-1842 are chronicled in *River of Smoke*, which was published in 2011. It provides context for European exploitation of India and China in particular. Migrants, lascars, traders, government officials, British officials, businesspeople, botanists, horticulturists, boatmen, and even painters are among the characters introduced by Amitav Ghosh in his work. He depicts the Asian subcontinent in the nineteenth century with imaginative zeal and historical clarity. The novel's most prominent theme is the cultivation of poppies in India, the refining of seeds into opium, and the illegal trade of opium in China. Colonisers justify environmental degradation in the name of free trade and supremacy or dominance. Imperial hegemony ruins the flora, wildlife, and human populations of the conquered ecosystems in a disastrous way. Ghosh opposes anthropocentrism, or the belief in one's own superiority or supremacy.

By revealing vistas of the Mauritius cliffs, portraying the Chinese landscape and gardens, and emphasising the detrimental effects of opium on the Chinese people and their environment, Ghosh aims to communicate his eco-critical position in the novel. The cliffs of Mauritius are shown as hostile dwellings. In contrast to Mauritius' inhospitable landscape, China's topography is regarded as gorgeous and mesmerising. It is represented as having a lot of different botanical varieties. It possesses a wide variety of plants that is both appealing and beneficial. China's beautiful environment tempts British and other foreigners to accelerate their efforts to buy the country's most valuable trees and flora. To gain key items such as silk, tea, and porcelain, Britishers aggressively introduce opium into China. As a result, throughout the novel, Ghosh narrates a number of instances that illustrate human exploitation of the land.

Ghosh revisits history in *River of Smoke*, passing judgement on how power was abused in the past to exploit colonial subjects' ecologies. It features actual and fictional personalities from the nineteenth century. It follows the fates of characters from his previous work *Sea of Poppies*, which is the first book of his Ibis trilogy. Neel, Deeti, Paulette, Kalua, Ah Fatt, and others are among these personalities. The lives of drug trafficking trader Bahram Modi, naturalist Mr Penrose, and artist Robin Chinnery, Chinese artist Lamqua, his pupil Jaqua, and a gardener Ah Fey or Mr Chan are also detailed in the narrative. Apart from Ibis, the narrative concentrates on two other ships: the Anahita, which is owned by an Indian drug baron named Bahram Modi, and the Redruth, which is owned by a British naturalist named Mr Penrose.

The narrative focuses solely on the outbreak of the opium war, which lasted from 1839 until 1842. After destroying India's ecology and stealing its capital, the British encourage the Industrial Revolution and imperial development. They reduce Indian soil to nothing more than a source of raw materials for English factories. The most evident component of the tale is the cultivation of poppy flowers and the processing of seeds into opium in India, followed by its sale in China by British, American, and Indian dealers. Imperialists and colonisers are mostly to blame for the deaths and destruction of native flora, wildlife, civilizations, and humans in annexed bioregions. The novel is on the exploitative nature of ecological imperialism. All advancements in technology, science, and commerce in the name of expansion are mostly anthropocentric, and they blatantly disregard our natural environment's demands.

Ecocriticism seeks to examine how metaphors of nature and land are used and abused. According to Alfred Crosby, European settlers were successful in colonization of other regions because of their accidental or deliberate introduction of animals, plants, and disease leading to major shifts in the ecology of the colonised areas and to population collapses in the endemic peoples. Ghosh portrays the economic motif or imperialist hunger of Britishers as the primary reason of exploitation of Indian and Chinese territories in the story. It is a reality that Englishmen have finally

succeeded in making serious inroads into China. Under the unfair license of free trade, they exploit their natural riches and human beings. The English merchants exploit free trade as an excuse to justify their reprehensible behaviour. In actuality, their business tactics are everything but free. The novel demonstrates that this authorised and systematic exploitation is supported not only by conservatives, but also by liberals. The British parliament and Queen are in collaboration with the merchants who bring in much-needed revenue from all corners of the globe.

Amitav Ghosh explains how the opium trade operates as a complete British monopoly. They are so wealthy as a result of this trade that they cannot imagine life without it. Millions of Chinese people have been enslaved by it. Monks, generals, housewives, soldiers, mandarins, and even students have all been affected. In Commissioner Lin's public dispatch to Queen Victoria, their participation in China's enslavement is explicitly stated.

Amitav Ghosh makes clear the tactics of the opium trade as a complete British monopoly. This trade has made them so rich that they cannot conceive of maintaining without it. They have made millions of Chinese people slaves to it. It has almost engulfed every one there - monks, generals, housewives, soldiers, mandarins and even students. Their role in China's enfeeblement is very clearly brought forth in Commissioner Lin's public dispatch to Queen Victoria. He holds foreign merchants guilty for luring China's population. They flood the country of China with illegally smuggled opium for their personal benefit. It is true that the Dutch introduced non-medicinal opium use to China. It was mostly utilised by the leisured upper classes at first, but British adoption of opium as a commercial operation resulted in death and devastation of land and people. One of the novel's characters, Neel, explains the British strategy:

The drug may come from India, but the trade is almost entirely in British hands. In the Bengal presidency, the cultivation of opium is their monopoly: few Achhas play any part in it, apart from the peasants who are made to grow it – and they suffer just as much as the Chinese who buy the drug. In Bombay, the British were not able to set up a monopoly because they were not in control of the entire region. That is why local merchants like Seth Bahramji were able to enter the trade. Their earnings are the only part of this immense commerce that trickles back to Hindusthan- all the rest goes to England and Europe and America (484).

In addition to revealing Imperialists' malicious policies, the author writes, "The traffic is the creature of the East India Company, itself the organ of the British government" (538).

In the story, Ghosh reveals that the British attract Chinese people to opium for personal gain. The brutality of imperialistic or economic avarice is exemplified through British trade methods. It is a parasitic system that preys on both humans and nature. Its main driver is the desire for profit, which necessitates perpetual expansion. Greed like this wastes resources and creates unneeded products, depleting the ecosphere's finite resources. Only poisons and pollution are returned.

An attempt has been made to give an ecocritical interpretation of the text through the novel's characters by focusing an ecocritical gaze on the cliffs of Mauritius, landscapes of Canton, inner sanctum of a walled Chinese garden, and plant life on Mr Penrose's vessel Redruth. Characters like Mr Lancelot Dent, Mr Slide, Burnham, Captain Elliot, Mr Jarden, Mr Innes, other foreign opium merchants, an Indian opium seller Bahram Modi, and a British naturalist, Mr Penrose, are presented as people who exploit nature. Characters like Paulette Lambert, her father Pierre Lambert, Robin Chinnery, Mr Chan, Commissioner Lin, and Charles King, on the other hand, worship and care for nature.

The illegal and enforced trade of opium, which is responsible for emptying the Chinese economy, is underlined in this depiction of life in Canton. It depicts the tumultuous lives that Chinese people lead as a result of the negative effects of opium on their environment and physical senses. Ghosh raises an alarm about a type of pollution that is apparent to the naked eye, can build up in bodily tissues over time, and can cause both chronic and acute poisoning. Many people have been hooked to this poison, and many have died as a result. Foreign merchants devastate and damage the

local ecosystem, which includes terrestrial and marine life forms, as well as human and non-human life forms. The Pearl River's condition is pitiful, as it is choked by affluent and poisonous opium smoke from factories. It has been turned into a poisonous stream. Foreign merchants retaliate with violence in response to Chinese authorities' opposition to the opium trade. War is regarded as a prime example of ecocide. It results in the death of people as well as the ruin of the physical environment. Canton's Fanqui town is set ablaze by opium smoke and British gunboat shelling. The location has been completely demolished.

China is depicted as having a wide range of plant types. It has a diverse range of vegetation that is both attractive and helpful. There are descriptions of golden camellias, chrysanthemums, peonies, tiger lilies, wisteria, rhododendrons, azaleas, asters, gardenias, camellias, hydrangeas, primroses, heavenly bamboo, juniper, cypress, climbing tea-roses, and roses that flower multiple times. Landscapes, gardens, and flora of China have been regarded as beautiful and enthralling. The dazzling variety of flower species is what draws outsiders to it, and this becomes the core cause of the opium war.

A large portion of the narrative is devoted to the shipping of rare plant species from Canton to other nations via the ship Redruth. Mr Penrose, a British naturalist who is portrayed as an imperial adventurer and exploiter of nature, owns the ship. By building little green houses on his ship, he has revolutionised the industry of shipping plants across the sea. His inventions and spirit are entirely dedicated to himself. He sees nature as a resource to be utilised. He is so consumed by his passion that he destroys other living forms, such as plump porpoises, which are a type of bird. He gives incentives for catching these birds, killing them, and composting their bodies for his plants. He is depicted as having a matching mentality and acting in a way that is akin to white races that make technological breakthroughs in order to exploit nature more easily. He devises strategies to profit from whatever he can get his hands on. He adheres to western philosophy and theology, which promotes man's anthropocentric nature by placing him at the head of the Great Chain of Being and thinking that God created plants and animals for man's benefit.

Characters like Paulette, Commissioner Lin, Mr Chan, Robin Chinnery, and Charles King, on the other hand, are portrayed as tremendous nature lovers. Paulette is depicted as a child of nature who is in spiritual communion with her surroundings. Commissioner Lin emphasises that all living and non-living things on the planet have inherent values. He is aware that ecological imperialism depletes nature's essential worth and converts it into a wholesale commodity. Plants are more important to Mr Chan/ Ah Fey than himself. He stands firm in his opposition to outsiders' anthropocentric attitudes about the flora and animals of the Third World. Penrose's floating garden is opposed by Robin Chinnery, who believes that plants are not supposed to grow on ships and that depriving them of their native home is cruel. He bemoaned the fact that Canton has endowed the Western world with the finest of flowers in exchange for a permanent plague of opium servitude, lamenting the ecocide caused by the opium conflict. He predicts that China would be remembered for its eternal flowers that will blossom indefinitely. In some ways, he seeks relief from the tragedy of battle by turning to nature.

With all of the above descriptions, the story delves into the nuances of ecological imperialism and the anthropocentric worldview of western nations over third- world nations, resulting in global supremacy, ecocide, and environmental injustices. It contains numerous incidents of human exploitation of the earth and the less powerful. Ghosh delivers a multitude of social, ecological, and ethical illumination and thoughts through the novel's characters in the pursuit of an ecological balance between nature and society, and even among human beings themselves. Ghosh's social ecological knowledge encourages readers to respect, defend, and care for both fellow humans and nature. The necessity of the hour is to reevaluate relationships within humans, between humans and nature, between society and nature, and between nature and the human soul. Ghosh emphasises that humans is a part of nature, and that increasing our consciousness and human freedom is a critical step toward resolving the environmental catastrophe. He aspires for all beings, human and non-human, to be free of all forms of unnecessary control and exploitation.

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