

## HISTORICAL FACTS IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *SEA OF POPPIES*

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### Abstract

Today most of them fail to look into History as many consider it as boredom. But in reality, History is a record of past human action that serves as guide, knowledge, and criticism that act as a pool of information. Historical events are chaotic chronologies of unfamiliar facts and so there is a need of a historian to create a model and make sense of them. To connect, there is a close relationship between literature and history. So many literary writers used the source of Knowledge and facts from history and started retelling in their literary work. In this way how Amitav Ghosh select novel illustrate the historical facts and how he aims at retelling the national history by associating India's past with the present is the main focus of this conceptual paper.

Keywords: *History, fact, retelling, Slave, Opium*

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Ghosh is a historian who reconstructs the past and creates a model and makes sense of them. It has been a great influence which eventually makes his works throbbing with some sort of chronological pulse because past provides material for his aesthetic sensibility and creative urge. In his novels, he deals with the histories of different nations and the people who live as evidence to talk about their life and adventures. His vast experiences on reading the books and also his traveling to the multicultural nations have given him ample space for reviewing the cultural differences and also the historical distinctions. As evidence, this paper analysis and brings out how Ghosh has used historical facts as a material for his novel in his *Sea of Poppies*. It also delineates, how history, and in particular, colonial history in Asia affects lives today and how the present is shaped by that era.

Ghosh subtly explains the role that colonial powers played in the opium trade, and how under the rubric of the East India Company, Britain was a nation-state drug dealer and India became her poppy field. The colonizers colonized India for three advantages. They are for its large size, the very pleasant climate and the abundance of workmen of every profession and trade. In fact, *Sea of Poppies* is set in an era of agricultural scandal burgeoning western demand

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for profitable but inedible crops causing starvation in the subaltern world. Ghosh provides an informative and interesting account of how the opium cultivation and trade led to the growth of an Indian capitalist class and how East India Company's opium trade with China provided considerable external resources for the growth of capitalism in the colonizer's nation.

The novelist also pictures the history of the opium trade and the Opium War of 1838 that disrupted the continuity of trade. Opium played a decisive role in the history of the 19th and early 20th century Asia. Human civilization is inconceivable without it" (interview with an American radio station)." It was one of the financial pillars of the British Raj and it had catastrophic consequences for the Chinese society. Opium in India's past was the export commodity that led India in the nineteenth century. Ghosh brings the very human perspective on the pain and injustice of British colonial activities in India as tied to the opium trade. The plotter of the opium war believes that the opium war was "God's instrument for opening the Chinese oyster" (SOP 255). It is a war of capitalism. They grew opium in the land of Indians and the profit is taken by the Britishers. The colonial country gave the raw material or the labor and the colonizer gave back readymade material to the colonized countries. Invariably the profit is always with the colonizer. Ania Lomba asserts that the modern colonialism; "did more than extract tribute, goods and wealth from the countries that it conquered - it restructured the economics of the latter." (3).

The episode of the Opium War continues to be regarded as a great national tragedy in China. Some quantities of opium produced in India entered the local market and utilized for medicinal purposes in the form of morphine, an effective pain killer and anesthetic. During those days, opium used to be regarded as a social drug, just as alcohol is today. Even today in Rajasthan there is a tradition of welcoming the guest by giving opium water. A large portion of the opium is exported to China, the other large to Asiatic nations. The Britisher's plan was to make the Chinese so addicted and dependent on opium. Chinese realizing the ill effect of opium stopped the opium trade. The opium cultivation began in the region across eastern Uttar Pradesh and Western Bihar where farmers were coerced to devote their entire tracts of agricultural land to the growing of poppies for opium.

Like Ghosh, Julia Lovell in her debut novel *The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams and the Making of China* has written such a great history of the opium war. She explores in this novel the realities and the way in which distorted understandings of the war have shaped the Chinese past. The book concentrates more on the historical detail of the first Opium War. The workers in the opium factory move as slow as ants in honey. To this connection, Ghosh gives a short but a descriptive analysis of one of the character Hukam Singh's fate who is addicted to opium from his marriage to his grave. The life of a drug addict is tough. A drug addict in India is usually

from a poor and broken home. The reasons for addiction are many; for instance, the continuous harassment by security forces, to relieve from the pain caused by the injury, for mental pleasure, mounting debt, perennial lack of resources, procrastination resulting in the postponement of work, nagging health problem etc.

Opium being the central fact of Hukam's life, it is none too easy to get access into his inner life. It began as a mild painkiller and then became an addiction to it. Hukam hooked to opium which quite soon tightened its hold on him. He started consuming opium which, in turn, began to consume him. I would have died of pain, long ago" (SOP 33). The power of opium is said in the following lines: how frail a creature was a human being, to be tamed by such tiny doses of this substance!... –for if a little bit of this gum could give... such power over the life...why should she not be able to seize kingdoms and control multitudes? (SOP 37)

The same way the Britishers tortured and imprisoned a zemindar for false forgery. Neel Rattan Halder, a wealthy rajah is the zemindar of Rashakali for centuries. The zemindar had a link with the British in the opium trade and amazing wealth. But when the opium trade has come to a standstill, the zemindar has to lose its verve and become bankrupt. As a result of the resistance of the Chinese for the opium trade, the zemindar loses his trade. He could not pay the false debt imposed on him by the colonizers. He is forced to sell the zemindary which is his family's ancestral property and selling it would mean turning his back on his many dependants living in his household and in his zemindary. Neel's endurance is tested to the limit and he is humiliated every day and asked to sign a confession denouncing that he has committed forgery. He refuses and pays for it with his life. He is sentenced to work as a laborer for seven years on the island of Mauritius.

Ghosh uses different narrative means to present men at work in the opium factory and their sufferings under the condition of labor. The English manager curses and beats the Indian coolies working in the opium factory. The balls of the opium are thrown by the boys and if they miss it they are severely punished. Kalua belongs to the laborers' class. He inherits the stamp of labor. The laborer becomes houseless and penniless. The inconvenient circumstances of poverty and compulsions bring a lot of torture and agony to the laborers. This agony is caused by the colonizers. The Britishers and the local landlords enjoy by entailing the low castes in bloodshot. Kalua is made to fight with the bull and if he fails in the competition he is tied to the horse and dragged through the village. It shows the inhuman nature of both the colonizers as well as the local landlords.

Ghosh makes use of these characters in order to illustrate the economic and social changes that have taken place in India under colonial rule. He not only shows his interest in their

individual fate but also illustrates the economic and social changes taking place and the gradual transformation of feudal society into a capitalistic society. The reality of slavery and opium trade is recorded through the perception of history.

Thus Ghosh explores the struggle of the working class during the period of colonial history. He has indeed shown his artistic genius of recapturing history and correlating it to present times, dealing with the borders between nations in a unique way. His characters shift their locations either willingly or forcibly in order to survive or work under pressure but, ironically, they, through Ghosh's narration, register that the human-made borders list always the warning of danger.

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