



An Ecocritical Interpretation of Colonial Capitalism in The Ibis Trilogy: The Opium Empire and Environment

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Abstract

This paper offers an ecocritical reading of Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy - Sea of Poppies, River of Smoke, and Flood of Fire - to show how the opium trade between India and China under colonial capitalism would change human societies and the ecological systems that sustained them. It argues that Ghosh's narrative brings together environmental destruction and imperial history, showing how forced monoculture, botanical imperialism, and military keying to water-borne violence changed landscapes, disrupted human systems of belonging, and caused lasting environmental damage. Using postcolonial ecocriticism and Rob Nixon's conception of "slow violence," the reading demonstrates how Ghosh attempted to resuscitate lost environmental histories and reconstruct nature as an agency of the empire, both witness and victim. Thus, the trilogy becomes a literary archive denouncing the extractivist logic of contemporary colonial capitalism, rather than a Eurocentric scientific archive. Ghosh's insistence on the place of environmental memory as an act of resistance and recuperative resilience, is engineered through the sumptuous layering of stories about people, places and power. By reworking the manner in which people, places, and power intersect, Ghosh compellingly argues for a reevaluated sense of historical and ecological position.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Colonial Capitalism, Opium Trade, Botanical Imperialism, Environmental Memory, Slow Violence.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a growing body of scholarship has emerged on the environmental trajectories of literature with a focus on works linked to colonialism and capitalism. This new ecocritical approach already differentiates itself from literary criticism by placing emphasis on the agency of the natural world and the long-term impacts of human actions within ecosystems. Within the evolving critical context, Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy - Sea of Poppies, River of Smoke, and Flood of Fire - is important. The extant works are set in the midst of the opium trade across the British Empire between 1838-1841, representing entangled histories of commerce, conquest and environment. Although the reception of Ghosh's work has praised, among other things, his polyphonic narratology, historical detail, and attention to subaltern voices, his ecological depiction of transformation under colonial capitalism is under-analysed yet nonetheless significant.

The Ibis Trilogy maps journeys of people, plants, and power across the Indian Ocean world, and reveals how landscapes—from the highly productive Gangetic Plains to the heavily trafficked waters of Canton—are altered in the imperial quest to profit from the transformation of nature. The East India Company dispossessed Indian farmers of foodstuffs to grow opium, shifting agriculture to monoculture, depleting the soil, redoing their irrigation systems, and rendering paid work as farmers impossible. These environmental damages are not mere background to the main actions, but rather inseparable from the story being told: the ecological costs of expropriation disclose themselves through the characters and nature. Ghosh positions nature not as an empty stage, behind which exploitative or oppressive human activities are carried out, rather as an active register of violence and change to the corporeal and conceptual environments that make life mournable. Ghosh makes openly visible the slow and almost invisible environmental degradation connected to the processes of colonial extraction.

Drawing from the theoretical perspectives of ecocriticism- specifically referring to Rob Nixon's version of slow violence; the slow, leak, and often hidden forms of environmental damage that has occurred is what Nixon calls slow violence, this paper makes the case that Ghosh is recovering the subject of environmental memory and making it serve as a form of resistance.

The trilogy itself is a narrative archive and recovers the history of ecology subject to an erasure of memory for reasons of imperial narratives associated with progress and development. Ghosh's multi-layered narrative not only dissects the destructive logic of colonial capitalism; it reclaims the relationship between people and the environment as one of dependent vulnerability and resilience. Ghosh positions the natural world as both witness and victim of imperial violence; as a position of ongoing global narratives about accountability and environmental justice, Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy is a timely literary intervention.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Ameen (2018) examined the environmental consciousness inherent in Ghosh's historical fiction. He posited that the Ibis Trilogy presents ecological degradation as part of the dynamic of imperial conquest and means of colonial oppression. Ameen pointed out how Ghosh's invocation of images of nature (the rivers, the crops, and the climate) as implicit witnesses to colonial violence, may also be understood as a response to the neo-Colonial destruction of the environment as a literary form of environmental warfare. His exploration provided a framework for ecocritical readings of the trilogy in relation to the connection of environmental trauma to colonial capitalism.

Balkan (2019) studied the connection between an environmental crisis and imperial history, arguing that the Anthropocene, or the geological epoch of anthropogenic impact, can be considered as integrated with the history of empire. Balkan identified the forms of colonialism institutionalized in extractive relationships with nature on which colonialism relied and which became apparent as global environmental characterizations of crisis. Her work is significant in the theoretical framing of environmental degradation as a systemic outcome of empire, which fits well conceptually with the thematic center of Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy.

Bawa and Arora (2022) examined Ghosh's trilogy through the dual lenses of ecology and history. They argued that the trilogy highlights a complicated interplay between ecological consciousness and historical realism, especially within the colonial maritime world. The eco-historical authors grappled with how the trilogy foregrounded the environmental transformations that have marked the opium trade and colonial expansion. They described how Ghosh situated nature in the dual role of either a witness to human ingenuity or a victim of imperial ambitions. Their reading emphasized the significance of ecological aspects - monsoons, ocean currents, and farming landscapes - not only as backdrops to human interaction/impact, but as participants in the directions of human feats and fate. Their historical-ecological reading, as they described, evidenced how environmental degradation was tied to the machinery of colonial exploitation and resulted in an exploration of environmental narratives in postcolonial literature.

De and Vescovi (2022) examined Amitav Ghosh's intellectual and cultural framework by placing his writings in a wider discourse of civilizational identity, ecological awareness, and global history. They claimed Ghosh's writings, the Ibis Trilogy included, worked like a "cultural chromosome", to preserve and pass on various and multi-layered histories, ecologies, and collective memories. Their conversation suggested how Ghosh retold linear, Eurocentric narratives of progress into lost or marginalized ecological and cultural epistemologies, which placed him outside of the category of novelist, and more as a cultural thinker writing in dialectic and cotemporal engagement with Anthropocene, climate change, and the unresolved legacy of colonialism. Hence, the authors allowed the reader to notice the philosophical and ecological work at the heart of Ghosh's literary enterprise, particularly his upset of how we think about culture, ecology, and history configurations.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ECOCRITICISM AND COLONIAL CAPITALISM

Ecocriticism is no longer limited to a concern with nature as a backdrop in a literary text. Most recently, ecocriticism has moved in a direction that embraces the relationship between human systems and ecological processes.



Figure 1: Fundamental Themes of Eco- Criticism

For example, the second-wave of ecocriticism has introduced the notion of postcolonial ecocriticism. Postcolonial ecocriticism speculates about the ways in which imperial histories exist within environmental changes. Postcolonial ecocriticism also reflectively critiques Eurocentric narratives of environmental custodianship as they reclaim marginalized ecological knowledge and indigenous ways of knowing that were often erased by the very things they were expanding at the time. In the space of postcolonial literature, we see a witness, or an accounting, of the environmental conditions that developed as a direct result of empire or colonization, for example, deforestation, monoculture, commodification of nature, etc. At the same time, we also see a witness to the disenfranchisement of different ways of relating to land. Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* is an example of postcolonial ecocriticism, that clearly illustrates a narrative tapestry that uses natural surroundings as a vehicle to understand political and economic trajectories powered by colonialism.

Colonial capitalism, a term coined by Jason W. Moore, describes the pairing of capital accumulation with systemic environmental dispossession. Under the auspices of the British Empire, ecological dispossession involved changing fertile agricultural land into monocultural poppy fields to supply the imperial opium economy. This agricultural reconfiguration eliminated subsistence farming and contributed to long-term ecological effects like soil depletion and chronic water stress. The maritime component of the opium economy—infrastructure in port cities, shipping routes, naval based control—further reinforced ecological dispossession. Rob Nixon's description of slow violence is important here, as these environmental damages happen very slowly, often invisibly, and impact the poor and colonized disproportionately. Ghosh's examples of environmental damages attributable to the opium economy demonstrate this form of violence, where the imperial project stamped its will upon both human lives and ecosystems over time. Through this theoretical lens, the trilogy illustrates how colonial capitalism subordinated nature and native peoples to an imperial profit agenda.

4. OPIUM MONOCULTURE AND AGRARIAN DISPLACEMENT IN SEA OF POPPIES

In *Sea of Poppies*, Amitav Ghosh emphasizes the transformation of the Gangetic plains through British Colonial rule. The British colonial rulers changed vast stretches of fertile land into poppy fields. Through a system of agrarian control, the British East India Company coerced Indian farmers into cultivating opium, effectively displacing food crops. The state capitalism of the Colonial state required Indian farmers to abandon subsistence farming, reject their familial and customary agricultural practices, and produce singular monocultures not by choice, but through economic coercion, land tenancy provisions, and the sanctions of colonial law. Additionally, Ghosh shows how colonial capitalism transformed peasants into instruments of imperial commerce, producing a narcotic commodity, used to facilitate Britain's aspirations for trade in China.

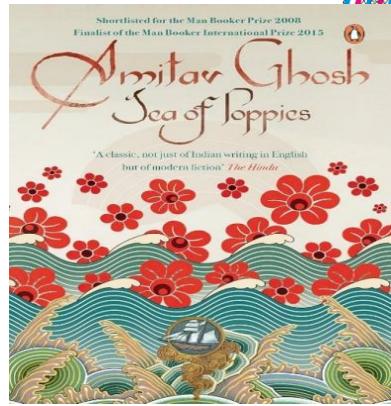


Figure 2: Sea of Poppies

Sea of Poppies is a novel by Ghosh that explores the transformation of the opium industry, which led to agrarian displacement and environmental degradation. The poppy plant, a lucrative option for colonial agents, depleted soil, diminished biodiversity, and required massive irrigation, drained local water. This led to hunger and economic precarity for farmers, as well as a cycle of dependency and debt. The novel also highlights the loss of knowledge systems and sustainable farming practices, resulting in a new logic tied to market demands and colonial extraction. Sea of Poppies depicts monoculture as a form of social and environmental violence, dispossessed of land, economic future, and well-being. The novel aligns this environmental injustice with broader themes of imperial hegemony and resistance. Through the stories of displaced farmers and indentured laborers, the novel acts as a reclamation piece, restoring visibility of those silenced by colonial histories and highlighting the environmental impacts of empire.

5. BOTANICAL IMPERIALISM AND THE CANTON TRADE IN RIVER OF SMOKE

In River of Smoke Ghosh critiques how colonial science taken native knowledge, commodified nature, and used botanical imperialism to exert ecological and cultural power. Using settings such as Canton and symbols, like botanical gardens, he reveals the entangled violence of empire, trade, and environmental violence.

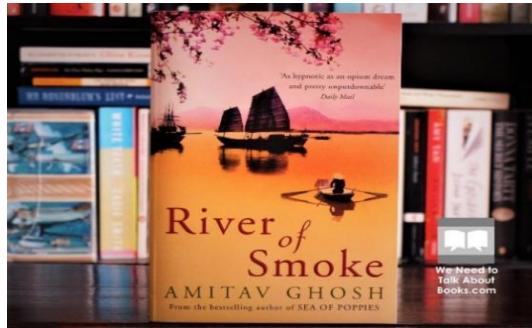


Figure 3: River of Smoke

a) Colonial Science as Appropriation of Knowledge

Colonial botanists such as Fitcher Penrose, in River of Smoke, are characterized not as dispassionate scientists but as agents of empire who colonized the indigenous botanical plant knowledge. Ghosh specifically discusses colonialism as a project that concealed extraction as science. Penrose's collecting and cataloguing plant specimens from Asia symbolized the colonial science that extracted traditional knowledge systems such as Ayurveda, Unani, and Chinese herbal medicine while denying any recognition to the communities where that knowledge originated from. Often times, these epistemologies were disqualified as superstition, while their wealth of intelligence became "discoveries" in western science. The extraction of traditional knowledge promoted the systematic erasure of the intellectual traditions of the non-western world.

b) Commodification of Nature

Ghosh illustrates how plants—especially cash crops such as opium, tea, and cotton—were taken out their ecological and cultural contexts and reduced to commodities in the global capitalist economy. After being valued for their medicinal or ceremonial uses, the plants were reduced only to their economic uses. Their growth was produced by coercive colonial policies that led to the reorganization of indigenous agrarian societies into exploitative, export-oriented ones. This form of commodification impoverished local farmers and disrupted sustainable agricultural techniques developed by local farmers over thousands of years, increasing ecological fragility.

c) Canton as a Crossroads of Eco-Politics

Canton (Guangzhou), as a port city, serves as a smaller version of the world's imperial realities, where commerce and ecology mix. It is showcased as a lively, yet conflicted space in which East and West clash not just over trade goods like opium, but over access to natural resources such as plants. Ghosh highlights how specimens of plants were illegally excised by Western botanists and traders in order to supply botanical gardens and drug companies in Europe. Canton becomes a site of symbolic resistance, where the Chinese were trying to matter and defend their ecological paradigm from exploitation.

d) Environmental Violence and Displacement

Ghosh uses careful narrative and historical reconstruction to illustrate how colonial practice created environmental change and displacement. The imposition of opium monoculture in places like Bihar reduced biodiverse ecosystems to the vulnerability of single-crop economies. Important to note, ecological change is not short term and sensationalist; ecological change is unrecognized and destructive conglomerate of experiences over time, what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence". These policies not only displaced human inhabitants, any more critically, they displaced non-human inhabitants, deteriorated soil health and fertility, altered hydrologic cycles, and normalized vulnerabilities in rural communities that relied on land for their subsistence.

e) Symbolism of Botanical Gardens

Botanical gardens in colonial hubs like Kew (London) and Calcutta were more than scientific sites - they were imperial moments of conquest over the ecological wealth of other cultures. Ghosh sees botanical gardens as metaphors for imperial mastery, not just over nature but over knowledge and power in narrative. That plants grown in these gardens were separated from their environmental origins and contextual meanings, labelled and classified with Latin taxonomies, rendered trophies of colonial entitlement. They were places of experimentalism, and these expanded environments of ecological imperialism served their purpose as cultivation, redistribution and also deeply fed the imperial beast with scientific legitimacy and commercial gain.

f) Ecological Hybridity and Cultural Resistance

Even amid the overwhelming forces of empire, the River of Smoke grants voices to those resisting or undermining colonial ecological domination. Local gardeners, herbalists, and farmers are shown to engage in active navigation of regime priorities, mutually preserving local knowledge and principles while also resisting total assimilation into the colonial Western discursive framework, process, and identity. This ecological hybridity (with local and foreign species, practices, and ideas) represents a subtle form of resistance. Acknowledging the agency of subaltern actors allows us to question the colonial narrative of domination, while recognizing how ecological balance and cultural identity persisted despite imperial rupture.

6. MARITIME ECOLOGIES AND OCEANIC IMPERIALISM IN FLOOD OF FIRE

Flood of Fire by Amitav Ghosh explores the ocean as a site of imperial domination, particularly in the Indian Ocean. The ocean was once considered a shared ecological and cultural site, but now it is reframed as a site of colonial capitalism and armed violence against empire through



advocacy for militarization. The introduction of steamships, naval guns, and trade-based gunboat diplomacy negates Indigenous maritime means of exchanging and surviving, diminishing localized ways of trading, fishing, and navigation.

The novel highlights the oceanic ecosystem being marked by imperial violence, including battles, naval blockades, overfishing, and pollution from an industrializing Canadian-based shipping fleet. Steam powered ships are seen as major impediments to an oceanic ecosystem, as many vessels were dependent on wind instead of fossil fuels. This introduces coal-based pollution into marine systems, where sea life is tuned into the colonial timetable and military patrols.

The ocean as a space of fluidity is losing opportunities for achieving fluidity, and its ecological costs are marked by empire, obliterating margins between the ocean and trading systems through dehumanization mechanisms. Zachary Reid and Kesri Singh offer complementary views into this militarized maritime context, representing the evolving sense that the ocean was a neutral, open space that is now colonized, surveilled, and militarized. Ghosh complicates the romance of the sea by depicting its evolution into a geopolitical and ecological proving ground, underlining his more general critique of colonial capitalism's effects on the environment.

7. LANDSCAPES OF RESISTANCE AND ENVIRONMENTAL MEMORY

In the Ibis Trilogy, and especially through repeating motifs in Sea of Poppies and Flood of Fire, Amitav Ghosh complicates our thinking about nature and the environment by depicting it not as passive landscape but as an active force with memory, feeling and resistance. Rivers that "remember," storms that "speak," and landscapes that "mourn" elevate the natural world as a witness to and participant in the trauma of colonial capitalism. Deeti's visionary experiences -- often initiated by her encounters with aspects of nature -- add a metaphysical dimension to an ecological narrative revealing the interplay between ancestral memory and environmental continuity. These tropes are not merely poetic elements but subversive gestures that resist the Enlightenment concept of mute or objectified nature that can be commodified and exploited. In this sense, Ghosh relates a story of ecological resilience where lands, though marked by imperial violence, holds on to primal memories of precolonial harmony, and then the chances for renewal. One way to think about the implications of his geography is through the lens of environmental justice literature that aims to reclaim the silenced or marginalized ecological voices or, in the case of Ghosh, restore the muted environmental histories. Ghosh's anthropomorphizing of nature reclaims the landscape from, and challenges, colonial cartography and the rationality of industrial logic; remembering that restoration is a process of awakening the landscape, not simply a human task.

8. CONCLUSION

Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy makes an important ecocritical contribution to the literary representation of colonial capitalism by describing how imperial commerce (especially the opium trade) relied on modes of environmental destruction that went hand in hand with forms of cultural displacement. By describing conditions of agricultural monoculture, botanical imperialism, and maritime militarization, also considered forms of ecological violence not simply culminating in violence in any immediate way, Ghosh draws on Rob Nixon's idea of "slow violence." He also recovers the natural world as sentient-archive of historicoo-environmental trauma resisting forgetting, erasure, or disappearance within the space of its combination of memory, agency, and resilience. The Ibis Trilogy re-presents landscapes, oceans, plants, and ecological knowledge as active agent-histories of the story of empire, making strong challenges to anthropocentric and Eurocentric narratives, suggesting agency by the natural world to argue for environmental injustice and historical accountability. Whether offering a kind of literary or ecological reckoning, Ghosh's literary imagination reconsiders the intertwined fates of colonized people in which ecological milieu has discomfiting effects or histories.

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