

## **The Voice of the Marginals : A Postcolonial Study of Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy**

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### **Abstract**

Marginality is a key-concept in postcolonial socio-historical and literary discourses. The need for their empowerment and voicing their unheard story is widely felt in present Globalised worldview. Amitav Ghosh with his enormous research on history and social anthropology, brings into foreground, the accounts of the nameless marginals and the marginalized individuals, groups and communities in his vast fictional canvas. In this article, I would like to demonstrate, Amitav ghosh's projection of the stories of the marginals and marginalized characters, groups and communities in his majestic Ibis trilogy. He deals with the sagas of ordinary people, who witness and suffer a tremendous setback in the face of a vast historical change or transformation. He brings into foreground, the complex working and reworking of postcolonial history, that brought about immense disaster in the lives of the marginals and the Subalterns. Hence, this paper seeks to isolate the stunningly human account of the marginals who are the helpless victims against the vast backdrop of the Anglo-China OpiumWar of 1838-1842. My attempt will be to analyse the narratives of the three volumes, of the Opium Trilogy, and highlight the complex currents and ccross-currents of history, that cuts across the fortune of nameless marginals and the disempowered.

**KEYWORDS :** Marginality, Diaspora, Historiography, Post-collonial, Migration

The voice of the marginals and the rootless, is a major preoccupation of Amitav Ghosh in his novels as well as non-fictional prose. Against the backdrop of a vast postcolonial historical resurgences, Ghosh projects the untold and sub-merged accounts of the poor migrants, rootless labourers and the socio-politically disadvantaged community or country. Beginning from his first work *The Circle of Reason* (1986), to the last outcome of his Ibis trilogy *Flood of Fire* (2015) he remains engaged in his meticulous effort to bring into foreground the complex currents and crosscurrents of colonial and postcolonial history, highlighting the stories of untold socio-political and historical sufferings of nameless individuals, group or community. His central focus is to explore the subtle and complex relation between history, politics and the individuals. He incorporates into his broad historical canvas the incessant flow of migrants from one place to other within the country and abroad, in the face of enormous post-colonial social and historical upheavals. Hence, the quest or the journey constitutes the central motive and a major thematic crux in most of his novels.

Unlike his earlier works, the narratives of his projected Ibis trilogy are based on a firmer and more plausible historical saga that lends enormous historical insight and refreshing flavour of thrill and suspense to all the three volumes. As the novelist unfolds the Ibis trilogy before the vast historical event of Anglo-China opium war of 1837-39, a vast range of characters and multiple thematic strands are wonderfully incorporated and harmonized within the skillfully constructed narratives. This article seeks to explore

Ghosh's comprehensive rendering of the crisis and struggle of dispossessed marginals and the subalterns before a vast historical cataclysm, war and devastation. In this article my cardinal attempt will be to isolate this story of a few individuals who are either marginals or marginalized by some inscrutable force of history. Following the trajectory of the novelist, my aim will be to illuminate the saga of a few individuals who transform themselves into noteworthy personalities within the framework of the narratives. They are either transformed by an unforeseen historical uprising or demonstrate their valor against the terrible blow of fate or chance. On the whole, the Paper aims to study Ghosh's Ibis trilogy with its enormous probe into the subdued currents of colonial history and narrativisation of the plight and misery of the marginals and the marginalized.

Like his earlier works, in the three volumes of Ibis saga Amitav Ghosh brings into the central narrative, the hitherto untold and unheeded areas of history and anthropology which played vital and significant role in the complex process of human evolution. His narratives charts the untrodden paths of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial period with its unforeseen twists and turns. The novelist sets his narratives in such a dramatic art of story-telling, that the continuity never disrupts and the readers' interest remains intact.

The Ibis trilogy opens with the *Sea of Poppies* (2008) that unfolds the story of a group of marginals, mainly the indentured labourers led by Deeti or Adeeti :- An illiterate woman and a pre-mature widow from eastern Bihar. Her story is told against the terrifying backdrop of the opium war that traversed the Indian Ocean in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Along with Deeti, there are a few other characters in the novel, who are either from a relegated section of society, or dispossessed by some stupendous blow of fortune or tempest of history. The account of Raja Nilratan Halder who was once a prosperous zamindar of Raskali, turned a marginalized convict by the cruel conspiracy of a British opium merchant Benzamin Burnham, is also dealt with earnest human sympathy and intense narrative interest. Most of the characters projected in the *Sea of Poppies* are either directly present in the subsequent volumes or are hinted at with renewed narrative interest. Thus, Amitav Ghosh constructs his narratives with an interwoven storyline and recurring thematic pattern. My exploration will begin from the *Sea of Poppies* and incorporate the two subsequent works, *The River of Smoke* (2011) and *The Flood of Fire* (2015).

Ghosh's narrative of an alternative construct of history and marginality is mainly centered around three key-concepts of postcolonial socio-economic rationale : 1.Movement of indentured labourers in various British and European economic projects outside the subcontinent, 2.Transnational trade network across the Third World and 3.A complex wave of Mercantilism and commercial enterprise between the colonizing and colonized nation. According to critics and reviewers, the three volumes of Ibis trilogy are significant texts that dwells upon the dominant traits of postcolonial cosmopolitanism. They explore with substantial historical insight and adequate narrative intensity the transformation, dislocation and displacement of a decentered individual or community.

As I have mentioned earlier, *The Sea of Poppies* dramatizes the story of Deeti, a marginal premature widow so too, is the *River of Smoke*. The former not only focuses upon this journey of a single marginal woman, but also brings into centre several other marginal or marginalized individuals who are exposed to the inscrutable force of history, chance and

change. Characters like Raja Nilratan and Ahffat have fallen from prosperity to adversity by terrible blow of fortune, while some others are in search of luck and redemption in new lands and territories. Ghosh's success lies in harmonizing and fusing together their divergent tales backgrounds and purposes. All the marginalized figures are brought into a common utopian platform of the Ibis, a Mauritius bound merchant ship carrying "Girmitias", coolies and subaltern labourers. There are three types of marginalized people : 1.The labourers, 2. The laskars and 3.the sentenced convicts. Sometimes they are at cross-purposes. In an Illuminating essay on Sea of Poppies , T. Dinesh Kumar in the attempt of discussing the subaltern agency in the novel, aptly suggests the epithet "Marginality Afloat".

Ghosh sails into the stirring event of 19<sup>th</sup> century Opium War that traversed the Indian ocean and worked havoc to the scenario of Anglo-China trade relation and British colonial expansion. Ghosh's narrative always unfolds against the perspective of post-colonial legacy and the dense network of global connection and inter-continental trade and commerce. He explores the stories of marginalized people and the hidden archives of history against these dominant post-colonial issues and discourses. The persons who figure in the first volume of the trilogy, reappear, or are hinted at in the subsequent works, though often in a transformed way or in a different context. The accounts of Neel Ratan Halder, Zachary, Deeti, Babu Nob kissin, Paulette, Jodu Laskar, Serang Ali are all such marginalized projections whose life-stories undergo terrible transformation through sorrows and sufferings before this stupendously powerful historical upheaval. The novelist with his brilliant story telling technique puts the marginal characters against the sprawling historical events and develops their stories with enormous humanistic insight and psychological interest. His characters are drawn from different socio-economic strata which blurs the conventional distinctions and discriminations for creating a eutopian community. The coolies, indentured labourers, 'laskars', convicts and the dispossessed zaminders are brought into a common platform of solidarity, fellow-feelings and empathy. Their destiny is inseparably linked to each other and at length to a broader canvas of history. In fact, He explores several shades of marginality and marginalization through his vast calydosopic vision.

The characters in the Ibis trilogy are dispossessed and displaced from their indigenous roots in the face of gigantic historical uprise which brought them into a shared platform of relocation, quest for identity in the form of migration and transportation. In the tenor of migration and voyage in the sea, all social restrictions and boundaries are blurringly transgressed and swept away under the umbrella of "Jahaji bhai and bahin"(Brothers and Sisters of the same ship). Ghosh's narrative charts and records the blossoming of the bond of humanity and solidarity inspite of rigorous hardwork in the ship and restrictive colonial repression and discrimination. The journey that starts from the Ibis in the 'Sea of Poppies' and ends with 'The Hind' in the 'Flood of Fire'. The voyage across the sea, is a metaphor, or a symbolic journey that the marginalized voyagers undergo within their tormented psyche. They are tormented from within and without. On the one hand, they are trapped and handcuffed to the tyranny of history and colonial subjugation, on the other hand, to a nostalgic pool towards the root. Hence the sea voyage of the marginals form the crux of the narratives of the trilogy.

The pattern that Ghosh begins to weave in the Ibis, “comes full circle” in ‘The Hind’. Some of the actors of this live drama are present in the three volumes, while some others are introduced in the last two books or are lost in the anonymities of history. That may be the fate of thousands of nameless marginals and subalterns who figure in his earlier narratives, adds variety, vibrancy and intensity. The marginalized characters, whose stories Ghosh foregrounds in the volumes leave an indelible impression in the minds of the readers and makes his works vibrant with dramatic and narrative interest. Their stories are actually foregrounded under the three paradigms of historical evolution: 1. History creating, 2. History bearing and 3. History suffering. This dominant paradigms may be applied to all the important characters and major subtexts of the opium trilogy. Ghosh successfully handles the narrative in the decade long project with meticulous research of history and anthropology as well as probing deep into the multiplied problems of the marginals and rootless in the face of a changing world view. He never allows the narrative interest to dwindle, even he never deviates from his primal aim of foregrounding the sagas and the unheroically heroic battle of the hapless marginals.

The fictional journey begins at a small village of eastern Bihar, incorporates a vast geographical area of the country and finally transcends the border to encompass a stupendously wide area of the continent, especially the islands of Hong Kong, Macao and Canton. The Anglo-China opium war of 1839 traverses the navel equation of the Indian ocean, and works havoc on the colonizer/colonized relation in the Indian sub-continent and the neighbouring south-Asian countries as well. In spite of so many digressions in the Ghosh’s broad narrative canvas, he never withdraws from his central pre-occupation of telling these stories of dislocated marginals either floating in the ocean, or wondering about in quest of a root in strange lands. The characters like Deeti, Kalua, Neel, Ah faat, Jodu, are all such displaced victims, desperately searching for a resettlement and identity. They are trapped and find themselves helpless before a changing social, political and cultural world view. Most of them are mercilessly displaced from their former state of peace, order and prosperity by fraud, deceit and cunning of the advancing imperial power or the collapse of indigenous economic structure. Thus, the novelist with his meticulous research of history, anthropology and cultural studies, articulates the ambivalent response of the subalterns to such gigantic forces like war, disaster and cataclysms. At one point in the ‘Flood of Fire’, Neel realizes “In other ways too the day was a revelation to Neel. He had never witnessed a battle before and was profoundly affected by what he saw. Thinking about it later he understood that a battle was a distillation of time: many years of preparation and decades of innovation and change were squeezed into a clash of very short duration. And when it was over the impact radiated backwards and forward through time, determining the future and even, in a sense, changing the past, or at least the general understanding of it.....it was an acknowledgement that just as the earth splits apart at certain moments, to create monumental upheavals that forever change the terrain, so too do time and history.” ( Amitav Ghosh- Flood of Fire – P 388)

The responses of the displaced marginals to imperial aggression, war and historical upheaval vary from story to story, person to person. Rajkumar in the Glass Palace(2000) finds the British invasion of Burma and its aftermath to be an appropriate time to rise in fortune both economic and social. The penniless orphan builds his fortune

“In Time of the breaking of nations and becomes a successful timber merchant and prosperous business tycoon of British captured Burma. Likewise Zachery, an Afro-American starts his career as the third officer in the Ibis and becomes rich by selling opium in the territory of China in the troubled period of British invasion and opium war. Meanwhile there are characters like Deeti, Kalua, Ah faat(later Freddie), Paulette are swept away by the flood of changing space and time. They are either perished, or becomes a lifelong victims of opium, or lost in the anonymity of history and time.

Amitav Ghosh’s novels explore several aspects of post-colonial socio-economic conditions and opens before us issues of contemporary historical and literary relevance. His narratives unfold the post-colonial predicament of Diasporic alienation, Rootlessness and fragmented identities. Inter-continental and trans-continental migration constitutes a major thematic issue in Ghosh’s novelistic discourses. The ordinary people on the move and the concomitant problems are the basic preoccupations in his concern for the subalterns and the disempowered marginals. He dwells upon several areas of marginalization and disempowerment. The role of ordinary people in making, unmaking and remaking of history becomes the central concern in his novels. He projects the debate as to whether the ordinary people or the rootless marginals be given adequate importance in the construct of conventional academic historical discourse. So is the case with his Ibis trilogy. Though the trilogy is triggered against the backdrop of the great nineteenth century opium war, yet his ultimate focus is on how such devastating war makes and mars the life of ordinary individuals, like the indentured labourers, poor widows, disempowered zaminders, laskars, formerly wealthy merchants and displaced opium addicts. His success lies in depicting their stories with enormous insight and sincerity and likewise making them stunningly vibrant and intensely humane.

The second volume of the projected sequel not only advances the story, but also introduces a new set of twists in the events and new characters. The River of Smoke (2011) shifts the narrative to Mauritius, Canton, Macchao and Fanqui-town. As the Sea of Poppies, epitomizes the large scale cultivation of opium in the Gangatic plain of Bengal and Bihar under the forced instruction of East India Company, so is the River of Smoke, set on the bank of the Pearl river which became smoky with the smoke of opium. The large scale consummation of opium by the Chinese, is the central concern of the novel. The story narrates the confiscation of the stocks of opium from the foreign merchants by Commissioner Lenn, and the subsequent military venture of the British against China.

The central figure of this narrative is Bahram Modi, a Bombay based Parsi opium merchant becoming prosperous in China. He transports in huge cargoes in his ship ‘Anahita’ capturing an important place in the trade network of China along with a few other eminent foreign opium merchants. Like the story of Rajkumar in the Glass palace (2000), here too, the narrative charts the rise and tragic downfall of Bahram as a merchant in the foreign land. The novelist here dexterously uses the complex working of memory to activate the past and to fuse it with the events of the present. Bahram recalls his struggle to become a successful opium dealer and also the shared memories with his family in Bombay. The fugitives in the stormy night from the Ibis are either referred to or are vibrantly present in the present volume. In the opening section of the River of Smoke, we encounter Neel Ratan, the displaced former Raja of Raskali drawing an image of

Deeti in her temple in Mauritius as an embodiment of courage, unflinching commitment and heroism in the face of adversity and colonial oppression. Neel and Deeti were both among the runaway boarders in the *Ibis*, and serves as links between the two volumes. In fact, Neel has lost his former glory and texts the job of a 'Munshi' of Sheth Bahram ji Modi. He is continuously present in the volume and adds variety and new shade of experiences in the Chinese territories. Through Neel's experiences and bitter-sweet encounters with persons from several stratas of society, Ghosh foregrounds newer perspectives of subaltern response and Diasporic alienation against a changing worldview. Though Bahram's story is the focal point of the narrative yet the events of contemporary politics and recent history remains a brooding presence and a dynamic backdrop throughout. In an interview with Azeen Khan titled "

History is at the Heart of the Novel" Ghosh comments upon his conception and use of history in his post colonial novels as indispensable background. He says-  
"There is a sense in which all novels are historical novels because every novel is an account of something that has already happened, unless it is a science fiction. So history is absolutely at the heart of the novel."  
(Narratology and History in *River of Smoke*)

In keeping with Ghosh's concern for history and the historical process of human evolution, it may be said that *River of Smoke* narrativizes the account of Chinese opium war in the colonial period and its related history of the indentured migration across the British plantation in the continent in general, and from India to Mauritius and to China in particular. As I have mentioned earlier the *River of Smoke* is not an unifocal narrative but is a story with inter-connected and overlapping strands of narratives. The narrative oscillates between the third person narrator (the authorial point of view) and the first person focalizer. The first person narrative of Neel Ratan (Anil Munshi of Bahram) and the third person narrative are interchangeably used to make the narrative interesting and worth reading till the end. Moreover, the narrative incorporates the accounts of Paulette Lambert, Robin Chinnery : An enthusiastic young artist who came to Canton with his artistic and botanical ventures. The story also focuses upon Zadig Bey, another European enterpriser and his friendship with Bahram. It also focuses upon the attachment between Neel and Ah fatt who became good friends in the period of their imprisonment in the *Sea of Poppies*. Ghosh maintains the narrative interest sustained between the volumes by interconnecting the mutually overlapping storylines. Ah fatt in turn becomes the illegitimate son of Bahram whose Chinese name was Freddie.

The novelist successfully incorporates several genres within the framework of his text to provide it with a broader panoramic canvas. The novel simultaneously deals with the official historical facts of a British invasion in China, problems of Anglo-China opium trade and large scale migration of poor indentured labourers across the colonies, along with the endless sufferings and multiplied miseries of displaced subalterns and rootless migrants in the foreign lands. Ghosh's central pre-occupation is to foreground the untold sufferings and submerged struggle of nameless individuals against the colonial oppression and imperial aggression. In fact, the story re-invents and re-writes the story of the past on the perspective of colonial oppression and ruthless marginalization. Ghosh's approach is of an unbiased historian and a liberal anthropologist whose aim is to project a

dynamic and lucid version of nineteenth century colonial history with its enormity and comprehensiveness.

The Flood of Fire, published in 2015, is the magistic finale of this epoch-making trilogy of the history of opium trade and war in colonial era. Ghosh keeps the narrative interest intact, and progresses the story by investing new shades of significance to the pivotal characters of the earlier volumes and by giving dramatic twist and turns to the ongoing story. Raja Neel Ratan, Paulette, Babu Nob kissin, Mrs. Burnham, Ah faat and even the minor characters are all transformed by turn of events and the challenging perspectives in the new territories. Each marginalized figure undergoes significant transformation to grapple with the changing colonial socio-economic and historical scenario. On the one hand, Ghosh makes the readers come to terms with the actual events of opium history, on the other hand, he makes us aware of its terribly in-comprehensible effect on the lives of the migrants engaged in this work, irrespective of rich and poor. In doing so, Ghosh relies upon the official documents of Macchao, Canton and Fanki-town, as well as 'Hukum-namas' and the Annals of Colonizers for his rendering of the details of opium war. As a successful story-teller, Ghosh makes this long forgotten historical event vibrant by harmoniously interweaving them with numerous tales of marginalized individuals who were trapped in the complex cobweb of historical commotion and imperial aggression.

Amitav Ghosh's works powerfully attest to the fact that he doesn't render historical fiction, but fictionalized history. His accounts of the historical events are imbued with profound human appeal for their interconnected series of events that cut across the paths of thousands of marginalized individuals, group or community. Instead of focusing upon dry historical records with the approach of a conventional historian, Ghosh brings into foreground the effects of the historical upheavals on the lives of dispossessed and rootless marginals. The plight of the Burmese Indians in the 'Glass Palace' (2000), the struggling refugees in the 'Hungry Tide' (2004), and the sufferings of the migrant labourers in the 'Sea of Poppies' (2008), clearly epitomize his aim of recreating and reconstructing history from subaltern perspectives.

Ghosh explores different issues of marginality within the framework of his fictions such as Class, Caste, Gender, Refugee resettlement and migration from one country to other. His novels unfold several issues of oppression and dislocation of the nameless individuals or a community on the verge of a massive historical uprising. The last volume of this majestic Ibis trilogy, (The Flood of Fire (2015)) too deals with the problem of a few individuals, cut-off from homeland and living in China. Shireen Modi, the widow of Bahram, sets out for China with the hope of recovering the compensation for her husband's opium business in China with the intervention of East India Company, as well as with the curiosity of encountering Bahram's illegitimate son Ah faat. Defying the dictates of her conservative brothers, she arranges for a passage to China with the help of her dead husband's friend Zadig Bey. She remains centrally important in the narrative. The narrative also focuses upon Zachery, who by dint of hard labour becomes a successful opium trader in China. The story also introduces Kesri Singh, a habildar in the British Indian army who was also sent to China as a member of expeditionary force. In fact, He is the brother of Deeti, the female protagonist in the Sea of Poppies. The

narrative wonderfully interweaves his Saga with other threats. Kesri starts his journey as a teenager in a small village of Eastern Bihar, gets enlisted in the British army and ultimately finds himself as an important member in the opium expedition.

Thus, the three gems of this grand trilogy superbly epitomizes a continuous progress of the narrative with the interlocking themes and a few characters present in almost the three volumes. With the Flood of Fire Ghosh puts a seal to his decade- long project of great intensity and sweeping enormity. His quest into the untrodden areas of history and social anthropology gives his novels a profound human intensity and literary dignity. Like his earlier works, the present trilogy too, illuminates the long forgotten historical episode of opium war with a renewed human appeal and nuanced narrative arrangement. It may be concluded that, the people from the margin, like Deeti, Neel, Kalua, Zachery, Paulette, Shireen and Bahram may or may not be given adequate importance and legitimate place in the Canonical discourse of history, yet, in the novels of Amitav Ghosh they are represented with such a variegated colour, intensity and human dignity that” Posterity will not willingly let them die”.

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