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# Pragmatics of Opium Trade: Tracing the Trajectory from *Sea of Poppies* till Contemporary Time in the Light of New Historicism

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**Abstract:**

The inception of the British rule in the form of colonialism is chiefly traced from the late sixteenth century, gradually developed across the seventeenth and eighteenth century, and catapulted to heights in the nineteenth and early twentieth century with overseas possessions and maritime expansion for overseas trade to vie with France and other European powers. The empire's expansion can be understood from the technologically-advanced trading posts like the East India Company to establish the trading monopoly of the goods that brought out lucrative consequences of the British endeavours in India. With the establishment of the British East India Company in 1600 in India, the country's prominence as a significant textile-producing region gradually reduced to a major supplier of raw cotton, opium, indigo and tea.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the British Empire utilized opium to correct the trade imbalance with China since it was high in demand over there, a demand that was created by the British themselves. The importance of opium, which carried traditional medicinal value was transferred to becoming a commodity of widespread addiction and social upheaval, especially for China. It became a commodity of profitable trade for the British coupled with the rise of colonial injustice, imperialism, slave trade and indentured labour. This paper traces the pragmatics of the opium trade till the contemporary period, with a special focus on Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008), highlighting the origin, development, and colonial history of opium in British India, and all by adopting a New Historicist framework. The article also takes into account the symbolic presence of opium in the novel, to explore the historical, cultural, and socio-political dimensions of the opium trade within the British Empire and the colonial legacy that still haunts the contemporary world. In

addition to discussing subaltern voices, imperial power dynamics, and global capitalism, this analysis will demonstrate how *Sea of Poppies* functions as a literary re-creation of colonial history, offering valuable insights into the long-term consequences of the opium trade.

**Keywords: colonialism, New Historicism, China, imperialism, opium trade, commodity.**

## Introduction

The eighth edition of Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines the word commodity as "a product or a raw material that can be bought or sold" and traces its origin from old French *commodite* which means "convenient" (299). The expansion of the colonial empire in India can be seen intertwined with the exploitative measures adopted for resources and commodities like tea, coffee, cotton, indigo and largely opium, causing sizeable damage to the local and indigenous people's social, political, economic and cultural lives. "The cultures of commodities" (Chaudhary et al. 1) and colonialism in India are mutually associated which have been narrated by Amitav Ghosh in his first installment of the historical novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008), which is centralized on the power of commodification, i.e., opium and its trade, consequently leading to the First Opium War (1839-42) in the subsequent books of the trilogy - *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015). The collection of the three novels, entitled *Ibis Trilogy,* has the setting of the opium trade and the opium wars with colonialism including global trade during the nineteenth century British Raj. Ghosh uses opium both as a destructive and constructive symbol for India and Britain respectively, depicting the colonial power structures, slave trade and exploitation of labour in India. In the backdrop of colonial justice, imperial exploitation and economic inequality, the nineteenth century witnesses the complex socio-political issues of identity, power and resistance in the nautical historical fiction.

The historical trajectory of opium in colonial India—its transformation from a medicinal product to a commodity used for economic exploitation—can be analyzed through a New Historicist approach that looks at the power structures embedded in colonial rule. The mechanism of the opium trade has been illustrated through the diverse characters created by Ghosh from various backgrounds. These include the opium traders, sailors, labourers, British officials and rural characters from Indian background exploring the themes of identity, belonging and power dynamics, all rooted into the commodification of opium and its trade. In his non-fiction book *Smoke and Ashes (A Writer's Journey Through Opium's Hidden*


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*Histories)*, the keen researcher Ghosh recalls that "the novel's central characters are a couple called Deeti and Kalua who set off on a journey to Mauritius, in 1838, as indentured workers. This being the basic arc of the narrative, I knew that the research for the book would take me to Mauritius" (1-2). The use of opium as a commodity, with its cultivation in India and its export to China by the British East India Company, acts as a metaphor in the novel for the social and cultural upheavals caused by colonialism. Commodities shape the culture of any area and its exploitation affects the same which is again shown by the different characters through the episodic events of the novel either on the land or across the sea, the Indian ocean. Ghosh's remarkable use of opium and its impact on his characters exemplifies the views mentioned in the introduction of the book *Commodities and Culture in the Colonial World* (2017), "Commodities shape culture by defining not only social practices of labour and leisure, craft and technology, production and consumption but also – and arguably at a more profound level – epistemologies, world-views, affective processes, and ideologies" (Supriya et al. 5).

Unlike the earlier days when opium poppy, *papaver somniferum* was used for medicinal purposes, the East India Company used it to aggravate their lucrative policies which increased the addiction of its intake in the people of China and to some extent, of India. To comprehend the presence of opium as trade commodity, it is imperative to trace its history which will shed light on its lucrative value for the British Empire which was once venerated as the empire "on which the sun never sets" (Wilson 527).

**New Historicism: A Scale to Explore *Sea of Poppies***

The emergence of New Historicism is credited to "the return to history in literary criticism" (Wilson and Dutton 1) with a challenge to New Criticism which rests on Formalism and believed in the autonomy of the text, i.e., disregarding the historical context while interpreting literature. In the early 1980s, it marked its presence with the publication of several texts, including American critic and scholar, Stephen Greenblatt's seminal work *Renaissance Self Fashioning* (1980), H. Aram Veeser's anthology of essays *The New Historicism* (1989) and other theorists who contributed to the journal, *Representations* (1983-present) which Greenblatt co-founded at the University of California, Berkley. A New Historicist studies literature in the context of social, political and cultural history. It is a parallel reading of literary and non-literary text belonging to the same historical epoch


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wherein both the text and "co-text" (Barry 167) are given equal weightage and are employed to study literature (Barry 166). This definition is further propounded by Louis Montrose as "equal weighting" by further adding "textuality of history and historicity of texts" (Veeser 20; Brannigan 203).

New Historicism maintains that history is objective and serves as a background to literature, and the text mirrors the history of its times. A New Historicist looks at a text with the premise that history cannot affirm the past in its totality. It is merely a representation and discourse of the past where each discourse is ideologically loaded with the representations of the social, political and economic culture of its time. Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* mirrors the historical approach to examining the cultural and socio-political realities of colonial India and the opium trade. The British Empire's expansion and the East India Company's monopoly in the late 16th to 19th centuries are critical backdrops to Ghosh's narrative. The exploitative material conditions in which the opium trade flourished, including British imperial policies, technological advancements in maritime trade, and the resultant exploitation of raw materials from India, serve as key power structures that buttressed the crown to flourish in India. The focus on power dynamics between Britain, China, and India during the opium trade shows how the British Empire manipulated economic resources for its benefit, simultaneously creating socio-political upheaval, particularly in China. East India Company and Opium Factories governed by colonial authorities, suggest that these power structures are not merely historical facts, but are woven into the social fabric, influencing cultural products (like novels) that reflect and critique these structures.

In his book, *"An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India",* Shashi Tharoor provides a critical analysis of the British colonial impact on India, with several sections devoted to the opium trade. He says that the colonial measures with exploitative measures and unjust policies in the past can never be forgotten or taken lightly by the colonized and nothing can ever justify the misdeeds. "History, in any case, cannot be reduced to some sort of game of comparing misdeeds in different eras; each period must be judged in itself and for its own successes and transgressions" (Tharoor 21). The British conquest of India was an act of unmitigated exploitation. To fund their ambitions and imperial grandeur, the British devised the 'triangular trade' in opium. They forced Indian farmers, who could otherwise have grown food, to cultivate opium in order to finance their administration. This opium was then sold to China, plunging an entire society into addiction. India was merely a pawn in the


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British imperial strategy — its resources and people used to enrich the colonial master" (Tharoor 71).

**History and Origin of Opium**

Opium can be defined as "an inspissated juice of garden poppy capsule or poppy opium or white poppy plant Papaver Somniferum" (Patrich 39). The origin or birth of opium is dubious in history as there is no positive proof of its evolution or discovery, however, Martin Booth, in his book *Opium: A History,* mentions that opium whose botanical name is *papaver somniferum* is considered to have evolved from the wild poppy, *papaver setigerum* which indigenously grows in the countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea, or from a poppy native to Asia Minor (1). The question of the origin of opium can be effectively answered through the statement of A R Neligan in his book *The Opium Question* that "the earliest known mention of the poppy, as a joy plant, is in the language of the Sumerians, the non-semitic people who descended from the uplands of Central Asia into Southern Mesopotamia, there to found a kingdom some five or six thousand years before the birth of Christ" (53).

According to New Historicism, texts should not be treated as isolated artifacts but as part of a larger cultural and historical fabric. In *Smoke and Ashes* (2023), a non-fiction book by Amitav Ghosh, he discusses his journey of collecting data for his *Ibis Trilogy* and how that journey unfolded unknown parts of the lives of notable people of the then and his own family at large. Ghosh supports the fact that research on opium is inexhaustible as documents related to this historical event are widely dispersed and even unknown, most of the times. The consumption of opium poppy, *papaver somniferum*, was discovered not only in Alexander's army, Mongol rulers and Mughal empires but also in the modern elites.

Among the earliest civilizations, the Sumerians, Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans were known to cultivate opium poppies which were primarily used for its medicinal properties especially as a sedative, a painkiller and sometimes a recreational drug. In the Foreword of his book *Opium: A History* (2017), Martin Booth mentions, "Whan the payne is grete, then it is nedefull to put therto a lytell Opium" (when the pain is great, then it is needful to put there a little opium) (9). Booth's quoted text confirms the use of opium as a medicinal drug. It was in the ancient time that "alcohol and opium, both of them originally medicines, passed into use as popular stimulants" (Edkins 109). The medicinal use of opium has also been documented by the Islamic philosopher Avicenna in his book *The Canon of Medicine* (1025). Many scholars who worked on researching medicines and cures have mentioned the


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advantageous features of opium in their particular languages. The advantages vary from intoxication to sedation, leading either to alleviate the pain or to cure any disease or to induce sleep.

Ghosh, through his description of the opium trade in the nineteenth century underscores the long history and use of opium in the historical period by oscillating between the present and the past. As opium was primarily used both for its analgesic and euphoric properties, Ghosh has manifested the same conviction through his characters who live in the nineteenth century. He relates in *Sea of Poppies* how "farmers would keep a little of their home-made opium for their families, to be used during illnesses, or at harvests and weddings" (29). Through the character Deeti, Amitav Ghosh relates the medicinal value of opium in *Sea of Poppies:*

> He placed the chest on the bed and pushed back the lid, to release a powerful, medicinal smell – an odour that was at once oily and earthy, sweet and cloying. She knew it to be the smell of opium, although she had never before encountered it in such a potent and concentrated form. (33)

The introduction of opium in India and China is credited to the Arabs who did it, focusing on the trade which was done with the Chinese Empire as early as the eighth century. In China, opium was initially introduced for medicinal purposes during the Tang dynasty (618–907 AD). J S Rice in *History of Opium* (1951) mentions that the addiction of smoking opium mixed with coconut fibre and tobacco was brought to China from Java via Formosa. Opium was brought for the Emperor and the Empress in China and presented to them as a gesture of tribute. Gradually, the traders, merchants and the Chinese also developed the habit of smoking opium, though the Qing state had passed a ban on it as early as 1729.

The historical journey of opium's transformation gradually experienced a shift from a medicinal substance to a commodity of political and economic significance. Though the production and consumption of opium in India was quite common before the arrival of the British Raj, the use of opium for recreation is dominantly found in the Mughal Empire. Opium is found to be an integral part of Akbar's court. It was "one of the elements (along with gold, silk and other luxuries) of the weighing ceremony, where he donated materials equal to his body weight" (Manuel 20). The addiction of opium in Akbar's son, Jahangir, is infamous in history. In the words of William Hawkins, an Englishman, "Jahangir would drink wine and chew opium till he passed out" (qtd. in Manuel 20). Though opium played a


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significant role in courtly life of Mughal rulers, the drug was not a primary source of revenue. The Battle of Plassey (1757) and the Battle of Buxar (1764) proved decisive for the East India Company in grabbing most of the opium-producing regions of Bihar. In 1799, the Company decided to set up a bureaucracy with opium departments for the production and supervision of the drug, i.e., from the planting of poppies to the auction of the product in Calcutta. They were "the Banaras Opium Agency, which oversaw modern-day Uttar Pradesh and beyond, and the Bihar Opium Agency, which oversaw the lands in Bihar in Bengal" (Manuel 41). The agencies brought exponential profits in opium trade which increased from 1000 chests in 1767 to 4570 chests in 1800. The opium production was so lucrative that the East India Company had to appoint spies and informers to curb the underground selling of opium, which was a powerful lure for impoverished rural folk. The British East India Company's monopoly on the opium trade, as depicted in *Sea of Poppies*, can be seen as a reflection of the larger economic and political systems that existed during British colonialism, contributing to the creation of capitalist networks that had long-lasting consequences, even in the postcolonial era. In *Smoke and Ashes*, Ghosh states:

> The contracts that were forced upon farmers were binding, and those who failed to fulfil their quotas were suspected of having sold some of their product on the sly to private traders—for the East India Company's monopoly had brought into being, as monopolies are apt to, a thriving 'black market'. (59)

Opium trade became "a keystone of empire" (Trocki 58) because the British had to import tea from China, a beverage of which the British were highly habitual, and China accepted only silver. Britain needed something that could solve the imbalance of trade which was gradually on increase. However, the British cultivation of poppy in Bengal, Bihar and Malwa and the support of efficient factories for export of purified opium to China turned out into immense economic and social burden for the Chinese during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Rolf Bauer quotes from *The Cambridge Economic History of India* (1983) by Kirti N. Chaudhari in his book *The Peasant Production in India:*

> In the eighteenth century, the East India Company had developed a large trade in Chinese tea, silk, and porcelain. Since the demand for European goods was low in China, as in India, the trade was balanced by large exports of silver from Europe. The possibility of developing opium as an alternative means of financing this trade came


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after the acquisition of Bengal and its adjacent province of Bihar which was the main opium growing area of India. (845-46)

The profit of British empire was based on the addiction of the Chinese empire and to prevent it, a Chinese Commissioner Lin Zexu was appointed whose efforts led to the First Opium War (1839-42). The Second Opium War (1856-60) demolished all the barriers for the British to maintain a profitable business to service the cost of running the British Empire and reducing the trade deficit with China. Four years after the war, "opium importation increased from 58,000 chests in 1859 to 105,000 chests in 1879" (Hanes and Sanello 293) which encouraged the consumption of Indian opium in China bringing considerable losses to the country and its countrymen.

**Symbolic Significance of Opium in *Sea of Poppies***

Amitav Ghosh's writings offer a polished and well-researched depiction of South Asian culture, the Indian ocean and the transnational life and manners which is crowded with numerous characters drawn from different castes, occupations, classes, gender and nationalities. When the novel is seen through the lens of New Historicism, Ghosh's portrayal of colonial exploitation is central to understanding how historical events influence the narrative. The socio-political environment—the British-imposed economic policies, the shifting global power relations, and the imperialistic labour exploitation—are intricately woven into the plot.

Ghosh's fiction relates the unknown tales of the common man trapped in the gyrate of time against the backdrop of historical facts and incidents. His skill of blending history and fiction, travelling across time and space, in which he shifts back in time to excavate from history in order to narrate the unheard and unspoken voices, has made his literary oeuvre a strong axis around which the history of human relationships in social, political and colonial complexities can be studied and analysed. *Sea of Poppies* serves as an archive where Ghosh illustrates layer upon layer of tales of violence and power, domination and resistance, struggle and survival, and most importantly, opium and empire.

From a New Historicist perspective, opium's transformation from a medicinal to a social commodity serves as a metaphor for the broader consequences of colonial capitalism, where material and symbolic economies overlap. Amitav Ghosh has used opium as a symbol in his historical fiction intending to reveal the exploitative measures of the British Raj and the degradation of the rural people executed by encroaching their lands through some enacted


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laws primarily introduced by the Company under the aegis of the crown. The title of the novel itself offers "clues and informs the reader about the protagonist or the setting or the location" (Singh 135), which imparts a symbolic connotation and picturises vast stretch of opium fields in the rural areas of Bihar and Ghazipur where the villagers grow opium to be taken by the agencies owned by the Britishers. The trajectory of opium, in the novel, encases the introduction of Deeti, the protagonist from a village in Ghazipur where farmers are engaged in the cultivation of opium for their livelihood and for the opium factories. Through the shift of past and present, a common trait of postcolonial writing, Ghosh delineates the impact of opium on the then-Indian society owing to the opium trade, transportation, consumption and addiction. The tangible form of colonialism, class conflict, identity crisis and the dynamics of power and cultural exchange have been potently employed by the writer to show the bleak realities behind opium cultivation and its trade.

To justify opium's role in the novel, Rolf Bauer's introduction of *Sea of Poppies* in his book *The Peasant Production in India* states*:*

> Ghosh's protagonist was one of many North Indian peasants producing crude opium for the British Indian government. At the height of the colonial opium industry almost 1.5 million small peasant households cultivated the highly labour-intensive poppy plant on their fields and they then delivered the harvested raw opium to the nearest government opium office. A few thousand workers—men, women and children—manufactured the peasants' produce in two large opium factories on the river Ganges. They dried and mixed the semi-liquid substance, formed it into cakes the size of a melon and then packed the opium balls into chests …
>
> The government's opium industry was one of the largest enterprises … a similar output to Afghanistan's notorious opium industry today, which supplies the global market for heroin. However, unlike the illicit trade in Afghanistan, India's colonial opium economy was a legal business that was not only sanctioned but organised and actively promoted … The question then arises of how the British would have financed their colonial enterprise on the subcontinent without opium. (2)

The first chapter of *Sea of Poppies* begins in the year 1838 with Deeti preparing food for her husband, Hukam Singh, who is employed at Ghazipur opium factory, and who has lost his leg while serving as a sepoy in the British regiment. She envisions the appearance of the *Ibis* vessel "when the *Ibis* dropped anchor off Ganga-Sagar Island, where the holy river


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debouches into the Bay of Bengal" (10). To signify the colonial injustice, there are other symbols in the background with opium like *Ibis* vessel which was used to transport enslaved people but was bought by Mr. Burnham for transporting indentured labour and the export of opium from the opium factories where opium was taken for further processing after being harvested.

Ghosh has shown opium factories metaphorically to indicate the degree of exploitation towards the rural people and workers. Nic Allen states in his essay *Bengal Opium: A Study in Continuity* that after harvest, the opium was transported to the *sudder* (head) factories at Ghazipur and Patna, which were under the supervision of the agents named Rivett Carnac and Mangles. Poppy cultivation was a toilsome task, and the farmers were coerced into cultivating opium, often at the detriment of food crops, leading to widespread famine and social dislocations (Richards 75). In the novel, Deeti contemplates the past and feels that no one was inclined to plant more (opium) because of the hard work involved in the cultivation – "fifteen ploughings of the land and every remaining clod to be broken by hand; fences and bunds to be built; purchases of manure and constant watering; and after all that, the frenzy of the harvest, each bulb having to be individually nicked, drained and scraped" (29). Deeti's household even does not have thatch to mend the hut's roof owing to "the sahibs forcing everyone to grow poppy" and even after that "the factory's appetite for opium seemed never to be sated". (29)

The brutal face of the East India Company with the implementation of opium factories is revealed to the readers through Deeti's eyes when she visits the Ghazipur Opium Factory to bring her sick husband, Hukam Singh, back home. However, he died after twenty days with his waning health. Referring to the potency of opium in the rural society, Ghosh reveals how it had become the part of exchange, a kind of barter system when Deeti uses it to hire Kalua, a low-caste owner of the ox-cart. She is surprised to see the vastness of the factory and how it has a sedative effect on its workers. She sees "the offspring of her fields" in the factory as being processed and packed, and observes the interior:

> Facing her was a doorway, leading into another immense iron-roofed structure, except that this one was even bigger and higher than the weighing shed – it was the largest building she had ever seen… the space in front of her was so vast that her head began to spin and she had to steady herself by leaning against a wall. (*Sea of Poppies* 93)


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Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* is rich with such subaltern voices: the opium cultivators, labourers, indentured servants, and others who suffer from colonial exploitation. The novel provides a literary space where these voices can be heard, representing the social and political realities of colonial subjects subjected to imperial domination. The indentured labour system, which Ghosh subtly critiques, provides an avenue for exploring the ways in which British colonialism reduced human lives to mere commodities in the global trade system.

Ghosh presents most of the characters from different classes and creeds as victims of opium addiction and the opium trade in the novel. The vicissitudes of these characters' lives provide a broad picture of how people were inflicted with social and political pains during the colonial reign. The tragic demise of Deeti's husband and her self-immolation under the *Sati Practice* (a sacrifice made by a widow by sitting atop her deceased husband's funeral pyre) is intervened by Kalua to save her, the ruin of Rajah Neel Rattan Halder owing to the debt and unjust policies of the colonial government, the greed of the American sailor Zachary Reid in the maritime opium trade, the addiction of Ah-Fatt, the illegitimate son of Bahram Modi, and the drastic downfall of merchant Bahram Modi, all serve to reflect the diverse and far-reaching consequences of the opium economy and politics. All characters are somehow influenced by opium and, excluding Bahram Modi, their lives move either towards the punitive policy of exile by the British government or towards the fate of indentured labour in Mauritius, where they were taken in a schooner, the *Ibis.* As the story projects, Kalua kills a man who tries to rape Deeti onboard and to escape from the sentence, he flees in a stormy night with Neel and Ah Fatt. How everyone's destinies are reinforced by opium is clearly shown through Deeti's contemplation over an orb of opium on the *Ibis:*

> She looked at the seed as if she had never seen one before, and suddenly she knew that it was not the planet above that governed her life: it was this minuscule orb – at once bountiful and all-devouring, merciful and destructive, sustaining and vengeful. This was her Shani, her Saturn. When Kalua asked what she was looking at she raised her fingers to his lips and slipped the seed into his mouth. Here, she said, taste it. It is the star that took us from our homes and put us on this ship. It is the planet that rules our destiny. (452)

Language in colonial discourse plays a crucial role in constructing power relations. The British colonial apparatus not only relied on economic exploitation but also on linguistic domination. The linguistic exchanges and the role of translation in *Sea of Poppies* throw light


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on how colonial authorities imposed their language and, in doing so, restructured cultural identities and facilitated their domination. It shows how language becomes both a tool of oppression and resistance, as seen in the characters' interactions. The phraseology employed by Ghosh in the novel presents the exploitative impression of the opium factories when he compares the factory to *"sepulchrally quiet", "cavernous shrine",* the guards to "*cane wielding overseers"*, the workers in the opium factory to *"as slow as ants", "bare bodied men"* and tools and opium to *"fearsome instruments"* and *"dark syrups"* (94-96). He has presented a vivid picture of the traditional exploitative measures of the British exercised during the opium trade, with dire consequences for both India and China. The British government "did not publicly dirty its hands by bringing the drug to China" (Lovell 19) and it was processed, packed and shipped to Calcutta for auction from where it was traded to China, mainly to be sold from Canton port. Limitless export of opium to China gave rise to full-scale addiction, ruining huge masses socially and economically. However, the British government was engaged in reaping profits totally depending on the degradation of the two mentioned countries. Considering "the British–Indian–Chinese trade triangle" (51), Julia Lovell explains the intensity of this havoc for China by citing the opinion of Guo Songtao, the Qing ambassador to London, that "opium was both cause and symptom of the rot in the Chinese national character to which the Chinese were doubly contemptible: for having allowed themselves to become addicted to opium, and for failing to feel ashamed of their weakness" (294). Thus, opium symbolizes both havoc and heaven for India, China, and Britain respectively. Opium, its production and the Sudder Opium Factory are potent symbols of British monopoly and the silver treasured by them through the opium trade which is reported by Deeti's visit to the factory as "kinds of dark syrups and strange white powders that were much valued by the sahibs" (95) and she reflects it to be "the most precious jewels in Queen Victoria 's crown" (91).

Rolf Bauer, a professor of Economic and Social History at the University of Vienna, in an interview with BBC, finds it amazing how several thousand opium clerks could control millions of peasants and compel them to grow a crop that finally goes against their interests. He further adds that "the opium business was hugely exploitative and ended up impoverishing Indian peasants. Poppy was cultivated against a substantial loss. These peasants would have been much better without it" (152). Ghosh's novel fictionalizes all these events and examines how the journey of opium since the day it was grown in India, proved not only as a pain reliever but also a commodity in British hands, causing immense suffering


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and destruction, addiction, social disintegration, and personal loss; all of which is intensified in the other two novels of the trilogy.

**Legal Framework of Opium and Opium Production**

It is generally said that China invented the anti-opium movement because "in 1729, an edict was issued by Emperor Yung Cheng which prohibited the smoking of opium and its domestic sale except under license as a medicine" (Booth 133) though it wrought lukewarm effects. Therefore, "the ban of 1729 was reaffirmed in 1796" and saw "a reaffirmation of reaffirmation in 1799" (Lovell 47), prohibiting the importation of opium, its use in China and domestic poppy cultivation. It was also to remind the populace that opium possesses a violent and devastating nature. Such laws created trouble for the British Empire including many merchants who auctioned their lot at the Canton Port. In the novel, Mr. Burnham is found conveying the problems erected by China in selling opium to Canton Port. He tells Zachary that the Chinese are trouble in the trade and don't understand the value of free trade (Ghosh 78).

The defiance of the Chinese government against the opium trade culminated in the First Opium Wars (1839-1842) between Britain and China and the Second Opium Wars (1856-1860) between Britain supported by France and China. The wars ended with the Treaty of Nanking and the Treaty of Tientsin, respectively (Fairbank 162). The mounting profits from the opium trade silenced everyone from the British parliament to the Indian merchants, except for some missionaries in the UK and British India, who did raise their voices against this unfair trade. Dadabhai Naoroji voiced against the trade, "This opium trade is a sin on England's head, and a curse on India for her share in being the instrument" (Chandra 506).

**Opium in the Contemporary Period**

To regulate opium production, its trade and consumption, the British government introduced Opium Act of 1857 which established its monopoly over the production and sale of opium. The Indian Opium Act of 1878 reinforced the government's monopoly over opium and provided licensing to opium growers and sellers. The Opium Revenue Act of 1911 introduced a tax structure on opium, and was followed by the Prohibition of the Opium Act in 1926 to restrict the consumption of opium, and to restrain addiction in concern for public health.


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After independence, the control over opium cultivation and manufacturing passed into the hands of the Government of India on 1st April, 1950 (Sharma 62). The 1980s witnessed two anti-drug laws take effect: the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act 1985 and the Prevention of Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act 1988 (Manuel 228). In compliance with Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961, India is one of among twelve nations that have been allowed by the United Nations to legally grow opium for medical, domestic purposes and for export in the tracts validated by the Government of India. Currently, these tracts are part of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh.

In the contemporary world, the repercussions of this trade continue to shape geopolitics, economics, and even social structures. Through historical recovery manifested in the novel, Ghosh's portrayal of colonial pasts resonates with the modern-day global narcotics trade, linking colonial history to contemporary issues such as the drug trade, economic imbalances, and neocolonial exploitation.

**Conclusion**

In Ghosh's postcolonial historical fiction *Sea of Poppies*, he comments on issues of colonialism, cultural identity, and historical memory, by explaining how the history of colonialism, oriented to the cultivation and trade of opium, shaped global dynamics and commercial structures in the interest of the British Raj. The novel, divided into three sections – "Land", "River" and "Sea" – presents "the history of trauma that is part and parcel of postcolonial writing" (Singh 133). Administration policies maximized revenue from opium, usually at the cost of the local population. The British East India Company had instituted an administration where opium was auctioned in Calcutta, with the money going directly to the colonial treasury. This implied enriching the British crown at the cost of poverty-stricken Indian farmers and increasing social and economic inequalities in the country (Ghosh 175).

Through intertextual readings, historical contextualization, and theoretical analysis (using New Historicism), this paper traces the trajectory of opium traffic from its very inception to contemporary times, as seen through the lens of New Historicism in the shades of the political, social, psychological and colonial prism of Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*. It reveals how the opium trade impacted—both critically and in a literary representation—the colonized opium-producing and consuming regions, socio-politically, economically, and individually.


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