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Politics of Pollution: Eco-Imperialistic Reading of Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke*

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Dr. S. Jayanthi**

Every living and non-living thing is a part of the natural world. The human condition, literature, and environment are all inextricably connected. The world is currently facing danger due to the recent peak of ecological issues brought on by industrialization and its accelerated growth. Amitav Ghosh is a well-known writer who attempts to use his works to convey his opinions about the environment and educate readers about ecological circumstances and their detrimental effects. In his works, Ghosh illustrates how human brutality to the natural world has made an impact on living things. He is one of the successfully acknowledged writers of the environment. Not only are his books an important collection of writing that addresses social and historical issues, but they also show how the writer has approached ecological issues from an ecocritical perspective. His book concerns the idea that the survival of humans on earth will be threatened by the fast deterioration of biological variety. The primary goal of this paper is to investigate the extent to which the chosen book is illuminated by an ecocritical viewpoint in terms of ecological imperialism. He clearly evaluates the political circumstances behind the devastation of the ecosystem and brings out the plight of the native people who suffer under the umbrella of imperialism. With the motive of extending territories, the colonisers never thought of improving the colonised. Colonisers intended only to use the resources for the welfare of their own nation and they turned blind eye towards the colonised countries by exploiting the manpower.

Keywords: Pollution, Degradation, Imperialism, Contamination, Opium.

Introduction

An ecological viewpoint on the relationship between humans and nature is offered by ecocriticism. In his book *River of Smoke*, Ghosh combines tremendous historical understanding with imaginative fire to picture the Asian subcontinent in the nineteenth century. He looks back into history, making judgements on how power has historically been abused in plundering the ecosystems in imperial aspects. The economy has always benefited from the strong commercial tie-up with China. However, rather than merely growing commerce under colonisation, traders of India faced restrictions due to the monopoly of agriculture which confined the expansion of the trade. Three historical fiction books that explore Opium War conditions, colonial history, indenture, the opium trade, and migration are collectively titled *The Ibis Trilogy*. Amitav Ghosh's writings have carved out a distinct niche for themselves in Indian writings. He illustrates in detail about contemporary topics and evokes awareness of historical events that have happened and are still happening now. Amitav Ghosh's works have a significant environmental discussion. Ghosh's environmental concerns are evident in his writings. Among the several aspects of ecocriticism, ecological imperialism acquires a prominent concern. Ghosh is very clear about his area and took the opportunity to describe the opium war and its events in a genuine way. Opium war is considered as an important event in the imperial history of India. This study will examine how authority is fictionalised to illustrate the environmental catastrophe that took place during the era of colonialism.

Eco-Imperialism

Eco-imperialism is about how rich countries and environmental groups push their environmental rules on poorer countries. It shows the unfairness between rich and poor countries in dealing with environmental issues. Rich countries want strict global rules to tackle problems like climate change and pollution. However, these rules do not always consider the specific needs and challenges of poorer countries. Eco-imperialism, or the idea that rich countries should control environmental policies, can hinder economic development in poorer

nations. Environmental laws often target industries like mining and farming, which are crucial for many developing countries. This pressure to meet high environmental standards can limit their use of natural resources and business growth. It is unfair that developed countries faced fewer restrictions during their industrialization, yet now demand environmental protection over economic progress for developing countries. Eco-imperialism involves imposing Western environmental standards and political systems on other countries, often ignoring local traditions and needs. This can result in environmental neocolonialism, where wealthier nations dictate land use and resource management to poorer ones, without providing adequate resources or technology for sustainable development. *River of Smoke* by Amitav Ghosh explores the concept of eco-imperialism through the lens of British colonial exploitation of natural resources and local populations, particularly focusing on the opium trade in Asia. The narrative illustrates how imperial powers, especially the British, imposed their economic and environmental practices on colonised regions like India and China, disrupting both natural ecosystems and traditional lifestyles. The British's pursuit of economic gain, particularly in the opium industry, led to the expansion of opium cultivation in India, mirroring contemporary eco-imperialism where wealthier nations exploit the natural resources of poorer regions for profit, often at the expense of the environment and local communities. The introduction of foreign agricultural techniques and trade systems further disturbed the ecological balance and marginalised indigenous practices. This exploitation resulted in environmental issues such as soil degradation and loss of biodiversity, as well as social disruptions. The book highlights the unequal power dynamics inherent in colonialism, where the needs and sustainability of local populations were neglected in favour of imperial interests. This theme is echoed in contemporary eco-imperialism, where powerful nations impose their environmental policies on developing countries without adequately considering their unique circumstances or providing sufficient support.

Discussion

Ghosh revisits history in the work *River of Smoke* and renders a verdict on the abuse of authority during the colonial period to take

advantage of the ecosystems. It features personalities from the era of the nineteenth century. As *River of Smoke* is the second of the trilogy, the reader can find some of the characters that dwell in the *Sea of Poppies*. The heroin trafficker Bahram Modi, artist Robin Chinnery, naturalist Mr. Penrose, Chinese artist Lamqua, and botanist Ah Fey or Mr. Chan are further detailed in his narrative. In addition to Ibis (a ship which has slaves), the narrative centres on two additional ships: Redruth, owned by British naturalist Mr. Penrose, and Anahita, owned by Bahram Modi. The start of the opium war (1839-1842) is the sole subject of the book. The British encouraged the Industrial Revolution and the growth of the empire after destroying the Indian environment and stealing its capital. They made the Indian land to serve manufacturers in England as a supplier of raw materials.

Ecological imperialism in simple terms is conquering and colonising not only the people of other countries but also the land, flora, and fauna which even tries to impose vegetation that is not related to the land. This in fact changes the original ecosystem of the region. The theory of Eco Imperialism forwarded by Alfred Crosby in his book *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900*, suggests that colonialism is a kind of environmental terrorist activity in addition to a kind of political as well as cultural oppression. The use of European techniques and farming practices in various locations has disastrous effects on the natural world. Because of his work, postcolonialism has grown into a more interesting topic regarding the function of the environment and importance in comprehending the history of colonialism. Pedregal Villodres and Lukic comment that “At each stage of imperialism’s development, the modes of domination (slavery, debt, financialization) were not replaced by others, but each was incorporated and integrated into new forms of domination” (Pedregal and Lukic, 2024, p. 8)

The book discusses ecological imperialism as a system of exploitation. The advancements made in science, business and technology can be considered primarily anthropocentric and they unquestionably reject the demands made by the natural surroundings. According to Nygren Eco Imperialism is a theoretical approach, “which refers to the forceful imposition of Northern environmental views on

the Global South. The debate over eco-imperialism arose from criticism of historical explanations of European colonization of the rest of the world in environmental terms” (Nygren, 2013, p. 4). The British went for China in order to secure their growth. They desired silk, tea and various other precious materials from China, whereas China did not want any goods made in the United Kingdom. In *River of Smoke*, Amitav Ghosh critiques capitalism as a forceful resource theft which damages the ecosystem of the country wherein other specified indigenous flora and fauna find it hard to survive. The act of the British aimed at draining out the resources of the colonised countries. *River of Smoke* tells the tale of Parsi businessmen who encountered opium restrictions while travelling China to traffic in the drug. The story also details their relationship with the boat girls of China. And the animosity that existed before the Opium war which affected trade. *River of Smoke*, gives background information on the European exploitation over India and China. He paints a vivid and historically accurate picture of colonised Asia during the nineteenth century. The main themes that are imbibed in this book are the illicit opium trade, the damage of the original ecosystem in India by growing the poppy plant. Environmental deterioration is rationalised by colonisers as it improves the economy. Mukhtar says “It is a fact that the capitalist system has shown the capacity to commodify and reify everything, including people and human’s relations, and overwhelmingly, nature” (Mukhtar, 2016, p. 79). Imperial supremacy has a terrible effect on human communities, animals and plants. Ghosh is against anthropocentrism and his works showcases the advent of humans over nature.

Amitav Ghosh explains the hazardous act of the British people by using the monopoly system to enhance their trade market. They have become so wealthy from this commerce and it became a drug for them that they are unable to imagine living without the trade. Amitav Ghosh mentions the intensity of the trade by saying, “The traffic is the creature of the East India Company, itself the organ of the British government” (Ghosh, 2011, p. 538). Almost all the Chinese people are enslaved to the act of the British. People of all categories in China became opium addicts which almost affected their routine life. The British never set their intention to get back the trade; rather they

“have been doubling and even tripling their investment with every consignment they send to China” (Ghosh, 2011, p.51). Commissioner Lin stopped the trade in order to save the native people and so he sent an official report to Queen Victoria. He holds the opium traders accountable for luring the Chinese populace. They brought opium into China even after the official order commanded by the government of China to ban the opium trade. Though Dutch people brought opium to China it was Britain that diseased the Chinese people with the hazardous trade. The opium trade, which mostly involved Britain, China, and India, is seen as an important and contentious element of world history, especially during the 18th and 19th centuries. The political and economic ties between East Asia and Western nations were significantly shaped by the opium trade. In Bengal and other parts of British-controlled India, the British East India Company grew opium. Despite its detrimental impact on public health, the opium subsequently shipped to China, where it became a profitable product. In the 18th century, British traders started smuggling opium into China, despite the country’s long-standing ban on its usage and sale. As opium addiction expanded, it caused a public health emergency and depleted China’s silver reserves, which were frequently used to buy the narcotic. The Opium Wars are sometimes credited with initiating China’s “Century of Humiliation” (1839–1949), a period of recurrent invasions, territory losses, and internal conflict brought on by both domestic corruption and foreign meddling. An important turning point in Chinese history, the Opium Wars prepared the way for the nation’s subsequent industrialization and 20th-century attempts to regain its independence. Opium was once used mostly by those in the wealthy and leisurely classes, but the British government’s commercialisation of opium resulted in deaths and led to the devastation of land and people. In the book, Ghosh bemoans the reality that such companies, by turning the huge areas of agricultural land in certain Indian regions into mounds of poppies, made the regions of Bihar, Banaras and Malwa as the principal locations of opium fields. It is the harsh reality that capitalism has demonstrated the ability in commodification of everything that never fails to include humans and nature. It can be right to say that capitalism enhances the conflicts between the growth of the economy

and the worsening of the environment. The injustice done on humans and nature through the trade of poisonous opium and the damage that occurred to the lifestyle of the indigenous people shows the adverse effect of capitalism.

Ghosh makes it clear that Chinese people had been used for the financial gain of the government by seducing the people with opium. The brutality of the capitalistic lust is amply demonstrated by the strategies used in British commerce. The only driving force for the British government in expanding the trade was their ultimate greed towards the growth of the economy. They had transmitted the same attitude to the Indian traders who got a huge profit through commerce. The trade adversely gives a negative effect on natural resources like water and land. The book clarifies the negative consequences of opium that was posed on those who took it. Death Imagery is used to convey these negative impacts. According to Ghosh, opium is a poison that has a terrible impact on follow-up, turning the users into gaunt monsters and corpses. Ghosh uses smoke as a death imagery that depicts the dissolved lives of the people of China within opium. The term 'Smoke' directly refers to the cooking smoke from the boats or vessels anchored at the Pearl River. The personified meaning denotes the smoke of opium which has arrived to demolish the future of China by finding its way through the Pearl River. China issues a declaration to the foreign traders of opium who have fully entangled the town of Fanqui in Canton, in an effort to break free from the drug's coils. Ghosh proclaims, "You bring opium to our central land, chousing people out of their substance and involving their very lives in destruction? I find that with this thing you have seduced and deluded the people of China for tens of years past; and countless are the unjust hoards that you have thus accumulated" (Ghosh, 2011, p. 431).

Aldo Leopold and his reflections on land ethics define ethics from an ecological perspective as a restriction on one's action throughout the battle for survival. It can be correlated with Ghosh's idea of embracing land ethics which would rescue the land. The distinction between antisocial and social behaviour is fundamental to the philosophical understanding of ethics. Leopold says that the primary set of ethics addresses interpersonal connections. The interaction

between people and society is covered in the next set of ethics. He wants to avoid considering land as property and so the third stage in the land ethic is to establish a connection between land and man. As stated in the *Sand County Almanac*, “The land-relation is still strictly economic, entailing privileges but not obligations” (Leopold, 1949, p.168). Ghosh therefore wants humans to change from being the conquerors of land and promotes to just being its members and citizens as a way to rescue the world and the inhabitants of it. He underlines how important it is for people to respect one another as well as the ecosystem, which consists of flora, fauna, and other non-living things. He exhorts people to give up the idea that land usage is only determined by economic factors.

The orphaned coolies and workers are depicted as living in terrible conditions on the cliffs of Mauritius in the book *River of Smoke*. These people are forced to work dangerously and suffer from severe environmental injustice that denies every worker’s right to a healthy and secure work environment. The tale depicts how the labour there lacked any desire and frequently went bare needs like water and food. The forced and illicit opium trade is emphasised in the depiction of Canton life, which is the cause of China’s economic collapse. It depicts the chaotic existence that Chinese people lead as a result of opium’s negative impact on their surroundings and senses. Ghosh raises the alert about a type of pollution that may cause both acute and ongoing poisoning. It is perceptible to the senses and can build up over time in bodily tissues. Numerous people have been hooked to this poison and many have died as a result. The native ecology, including both terrestrial and marine life forms as well as non-human ones, is destroyed and contaminated by foreign traders. The Pearl River is shown in a pitiful state, choked by the rich and lethal opium fog from factories. It has been transformed into a poisonous stream. “The destruction of opium the chests are opened, balls of opium are broken up and mixed with salt and lime and then thrown into the water filled trenches; when the opium melts the sluices are opened and opium is allowed to drain into the river. It is hard work: five hundred men, working long hours, can destroy only about three hundred chests a day” (Ghosh, 2011, p. 534). When Chinese leaders resist the opium

trade, international traders responded with war. The village Fanqui in Canton has been destroyed by the British and the location has been completely devastated.

It is said that the Chinese environment, gardens, and flora are captivating. The striking diversity of flower species is what draws in outsiders and it gives rise to the opium wars. A significant portion of the book is devoted to the journey of rare plant species being transported from the city of Canton to all other nations by the ship known as Redruth. The owner of the ship is a British naturalist named Mr. Penrose, who is portrayed as an imperial naturalist and explorer. He created tiny green cottages in his ship, which completely changed the original environment of the plants from its usual region due to the transportation across the ocean. “My plant cases are as precious to me as life itself: I water them by day and sleep beside them at night; and when the weather grows hot. I build little huts over them, with my own sparse clothing” (Ghosh, 2011, p. 445). Here Ghosh gives clearance to the readers that plant species too experience changes within themselves when humans tend to separate them from their birth place which results in the change in the characteristics of the plants. He views nature as a resource that can be used for profit. He is so consumed by his ardour that he ends up killing other living things, including a sort of bird called the plump porpoise. He kills these birds and uses them as fertilizer for the plants that he had in his ship which prompts the commodification of nature. His behaviour is comparable to white people who develop technology to make it easier to abuse nature. He devises plans to take advantage of all what his eyes sees and what his hands touch. He adheres to western theological and philosophical thought, which has promoted anthropocentrism which holds the idea that God created plants and animals specifically for human use and it places man at the top of the vast web of being. Characters include Paulette, Mr. Chan, Robin Chinnery, Charles King and on the other hand, are shown as tremendous admirers of the natural world. Ghosh has employed such characters to show his readers how to be and how not to be. Though Chinese people are greatly affected by opium, it is Indians who willingly did trade in order to earn money. Amitav Ghosh in one of his interviews proclaims that

all of the rich people in northern India today have somehow been involved in the opium trade to earn money. Their ancestors must have earned money by indulging in this evil trade. Likewise, Bahram Modi also wishes to do opium trade and when he discusses his opinion to his father-in-law one of the foremost shipbuilders rejects his idea insisting him that his decision is immoral.

But look at the world around us; look at how it is changing. Today the biggest profits don't come from selling useful things: quite the opposite. The profits come from selling things that are not of any real use. Opium is just like that. It is completely useless unless you're sick, but still people want it. And it is such a thing that once people start using it they can't stop; the market just gets larger and larger. That is why the British are trying to take over the trade and keep it to themselves. Look at the returns that some other firms are getting of late, by exporting cotton and opium: they have been doubling and even tripling their investments with every consignment they send to China (Ghosh, 2011, p. 51)

Paulette is shown as a natural kid who is in a state of spiritual harmony with the natural world. Commissioner Lin emphasises that every living thing on the planet, even inorganic forms, has intrinsic worth. He understands that ecological imperialism transforms nature to a commercial commodity and strips it of its inherent worth. Plants are of greater significance to Mr. Chan/Ah Fey than he himself. He vehemently disagrees with outsiders' anthropocentric view of the flora and wildlife of the third world. Penrose's mobile garden is opposed by Robin Chinery, who also says that it can be cruel to take plants out of their native environment and suggests they are not designed to flourish on ships. He laments the opium war's ecological toll and points out that although Canton has given Western nations the most beautiful flowers, he additionally placed the globe permanently under the opium sickness. He predicts that China will continue to be known for its ever-blooming flowers for all time. He sorts of looks to nature for comfort from the horrors of battle. The work of Amitav Ghosh provides a detailed account of ecological imperialism, characterised by an anthropocentric view that elevates Western nations above developing ones, ultimately resulting in global dominance and ecological

injustices. It records several instances of human abuse of the planet and its weaker inhabitants.

Findings

Capturing an empire and bringing wealth to one's own nation has been a practice since centuries. The problem begins when the colonisers promote anthropocentric approaches not only by exploiting the resources but also the humans of the colonised countries. In the novel, Amitav Ghosh criticises the devastating results of colonialism and also the desire of man in bringing more wealth rather than safeguarding nature. Prominent characters of the novel portray the rise and downfall of humans in their process of development. Bahram Modi who trades opium even after the warning given by his father-in-law indulges in trade for his own greed. Thus, British invasion created ideological corruption in the mind of Bahram. Representation of Mr Penrose, a gardener is shown as an ecologist but yet he too indulges in injustices. He is even condemned by Robin Chinery for changing the natural habitat of the plants. This proves hybridity in the environment where the act of Mr. Penrose enhances the changes in the characteristics of the indigenous varieties of plants by keeping them in ship.

Conclusion

Ghosh offers a plethora of ecological, social, and ethical insights and ideas via the characters to achieve a harmonious equilibrium between environment and society, as well as individual humans. Ghosh's understanding of social ecology inspires readers to protect, cherish and show compassion for both the natural world and their fellow people. Reevaluating ties among society as a whole, between humankind and the natural world, the human spirit is imperative at this hour. Ghosh highlights that people are an integral component of nature as well as a crucial first step in averting the current ecological crisis. Ghosh's adoption of the ecological knowledge exhorts readers to value, preserve, and show respect for nature. Ghosh emphasises that understanding humans are an element of the natural world and that achieving ecoconsciousness among humans is crucial to resolve the climate crisis. He wants to see an end to all needless forms of oppression and control for all creatures.

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