

The Bitter Harvest: Imperial Power, Resistance, The Opium Trade in Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy

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Abstract

The primary purpose of this paper is to examine the central role of opium in the British colonial era, as based on Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy. Opium, which had been used for centuries as medicinal substance, got transformed as the most important instrument of inter-continental trade, representing the strategic enforcement of colonial power. In the meantime, it also prepares a background for subaltern resistance. Unlike the existing literatures, this paper studies the simultaneous presence of imperial authority and resisting voices, powered by the opium trade. While doing so, Said's Contrapuntal Reading approach is innovatively employed as a theoretical framework. With a qualitative textual analysis, the paper explores Sea of Poppies, River of Smoke and Flood of Fire in detail. The analysis concludes that resistance is not always necessarily radical or revolutionary, but may appear in everyday gestures, through ethical refusal and counter-voices of the narratives as a response to power-enforcement.

Key Words: Contrapuntal Reading, Opium Trade, Power, Postcolonial Literature, Resistance.

Introduction

In the nineteenth century, the cultivation and trade of opium served as a significant component for European imperial expansion in Asia, both economic and administrative ways (Trocki, 1999). Before that, the opium product had been primarily used as a medicinal substance, particularly in need of releasing pain and inducing sleep. However, it equally carried the risk of addiction, dependence, and health hazards. With the British East India Company's entry to India, the opium product underwent a transformational application as a trading substance. Since then, the opium trade became not only an international business activity of the English Empire, but also a key economic and administrative strategy, which altered the course of global trade networks. Prior to the British involvement in the opium trade, poppy cultivation was mainly restricted to indigenous economic activities and traditional medicinal applications, as well as some commercial transactions in a restricted area in the eastern part of India, mainly in the influence of Dutch and French traders and local merchants. The opium appeared to be a business product only at the hands of the British, "it was only under the British rule that it became a major item of trade" (Bauer, 2019). The opium industry grew to an unprecedented size and economic importance in the 1770s due to the increased commercial and quasi-missionary activities of the British East India Company. While China was 'converted into the largest market of opium by the British from early 19th century, India served as the most fertile ground for both the cultivation of poppy and manufacturing of the opium' (Deshpande, 2009). In 1871–72, around 560,608 acres of poppy cultivation were observed, with 49,695 chests of opium sold, at an average price of £139 per chest, which would give a net profit of £90 per chest and total revenues of £7,657,213 (Booth, 1996). This figure would translate to about £1.12bn – £1.13bn in 2025 in real 2025 pound terms. That such a profit level is astounding reveals that opium was a weapon of strategic value for British merchants – a commodity of immense value and significance, just as important as gold, oil and even semiconductor chips to current power dynamics.

The phrase "the bitter harvest" metaphorically refers to the negative, exploitative and adverse socio-economic consequences faced by the Indian peasants because of the forced cultivation of the opium in India. More particularly, the plains of present-day Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal that once sustained diverse food and cash crops, were gradually transformed into mono-cultural plantations of poppy. This transformation was not organic, nor was it voluntary. The British East India Company, driven by economic gains, enforced the vast cultivation of opium in that fertile agricultural lands in the British-controlled Bengal and Bihar, which not only disrupted the traditional agricultural practices but also pressurized the Indian farmers into producing opium instead of food crops, consequently leading to widespread famine and poverty (Prabakar et.al, 2023).

This forced agrarian shift ensured a steady supply of opium that was illicitly exported to China, where it was exchanged for tea, silk, and silver, the commodities crucial to sustaining Britain's imperial economy. In fact, according to Ghosh (2023), China's export of tea to Europe was a central pillar of the British imperial economy, with taxes on imported Chinese tea constituting one of the largest sources of revenue for the British Empire. Despite imposing taxes as high as one hundred percent, tea remained the most dominant imported commodity from China. The trade imbalance caused by the tea appeared to be headache for British leaders and merchants, and it compelled to think about the alternative ways of balancing the trade, "In order to pay for the larger purchases of Chinese tea (China was then the sole producer and exporter of the tea in the world), the company developed its own exports from Europe to Canton, and although it still possessed a theoretical monopoly of all Eastern trade, it didn't discourage the now growing community of private merchants from shipping their Indian cotton and Bengal opium to China" (Le Pichon, 2006. p. 3). Consequently, they discovered and decided the Indian opium poppy as the only source of trade balance with China.

Scholarship And Study Need

The Ibis Trilogy has provoked much scholarly attention in its vivid depiction of 19th century colonialism, the opium trade, shipping and cross-cultural interactions. It has been read from various angles.

Scholars like Khabibullina (2023), Bajaj (2024) have analyzed Ghosh's emphasis on the forgotten histories of indentured laborers, merchants, sailors, and colonial subjects in the trilogy. Balasubashini and Anbarasi (2019) have discussed on the historical aspects of the Opium cultivation and trade and offer analytical details of the Opium Wars. Kapoor (2021) views the trilogy as a critique of the ideology of free trade, which served as a political justifications for Britain's colonial expansion.

Martín-González and Martín-González (2021), Sawhney (2025) and Ayushi (2025) confirm that Indian Ocean exists as a transnational space of connection between multiple people, cultures, commodities and empires. They show that water-based spaces, such as ships, ports, rivers and oceans, become sites of negotiation of identities and facilitation of colonial mobility. Also looking at the spatial construction of Canton, Joseph (2022) has written on River of Smoke and Kiranmayee and Reddy (2026) on the representation of the global trade.

The other significant tradition of scholarship concern Diasporas, migration and subaltern experiences. Amin (2020), Shahab and Rawal (2020), Arunprasath and Thenmozhi (2023) explore the marginalization, displacement of indentured labourers, migrants and marginalized communities under colonial rule. They explore the processes of hybrid identities, multicultural encounters, and subaltern agency in the Indian Ocean world.

Conclusively, despite the huge scholarship on the Ibis Trilogy from multiple perspectives, an important need of study is missing i.e., simultaneous study of power and resistance in terms of the use of opium trade.

Theoretical Perspective:

This study adopts Edward Said's idea of contrapuntal reading (Culture and Imperialism, 1993) to investigate the interconnected relationship between imperial power, the opium trade, and colonial resistance in Ibis Trilogy. This approach also gets enriched drawing connections from Said's Orientalism, Bhaba's The Location of Culture and Spivak's Can Subaltern Speak?, while interpreting the texts.

In Culture and Imperialism, Said argues that colonial texts cannot be understood adequately if they are read only from the perspective of imperial authority or solely from that of the colonized. They should be read simultaneously because their histories are intertwined and overlapped. Although the Ibis Trilogy is technically a postcolonial work (based on publication date), it embodies the subjects of the colonial era, and therefore it needs to be read with the creative application of the contrapuntal principle. Khanal and Gupta (2025) have further justified, "the methodological principles of contrapuntal analysis are equally applicable to any postcolonial historical fiction. Said's central concern is not the nationality of a text but the simultaneous reading of imperial and resistant histories that coexist within cultural narratives. Consequently, this study extends Said's contrapuntal framework beyond its original application to metropolitan canonical texts. He further defines this approach as "contrapuntal reading must take account of both processes—that of imperialism and that of resistance to it" (Culture, p. 83).

Contrapuntality also requires readers to move beyond binary oppositions such as ruler and ruled, victor and victim, or East and West. Said explains that the histories of empire and colony are deeply interconnected rather than independent and opposite.

We must therefore read the great canonical texts, and perhaps also the entire archive of modern and pre-modern European and American culture, with an effort to draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented in such works." (p. 82)

Meanwhile, this paper also borrows some conceptual connection of power from Foucault's *The Subject and Power* (1982) and *The History of Sexuality* (1990). Foucault argues "where there is power, there is resistance" (1990, p.95). This proposition clearly complements Said's contrapuntal framework.

Critical Analysis

Interestingly, Amitav Ghosh places opium at the very center of *The Ibis Trilogy*. The poppy was more than simply a medicinal substance or an agricultural product; it was an important instrument used to build and maintain colonial power, capitalist accumulation, global commerce and patriarchal social hierarchies. From a contrapuntal perspective, the trilogy reveals two inseparable histories operating simultaneously: one is the history of imperial accumulation, commercial prosperity, and expansion of British influence; the other is the history of dispossession, addiction, displacement, and resistance experienced by those subjected to that same system. Opium as a medicinal substance offers its therapeutic value, as a commercial product supports the Western economy, a geopolitical weapon strengthen the imperial superpower, whereas on a contrapuntal sense, it serves as a narcotic causing destructive consequences to the health and lifestyles of the people of the colonized regions. Ghosh refuses to privilege either perspective.

The foundations of this imperial system are established in *Sea of Poppies*, where Ghosh portrays the cultivation of poppy in the Gangetic plains of Bihar (Patna, Ghazipur, etc). In the past, "farmers used their fields for the cultivation of useful crops like wheat, dal, vegetables, etc and only a little land was cultivated with opium (p. 29). But later, the Sahibs and their agents went home to home, forcing cash advances on the farmers, making them sign asami contracts. "It was impossible to say no to them: if you refused they would leave their silver hidden in your house, or throw it through a window" (pp. 29-30).

At first glance, Deeti's village appears distant from global commerce and imperial politics, "Her village was so far inland that the sea seemed as distant as the netherworld: it was the chasm of darkness where the holy Ganga disappeared into the Kala-Pani, "the Black Water" (p. 3). Yet the novel quickly reveals that colonial power has already penetrated rural life through the compulsory cultivation of opium.

Opium becomes the reasons of suffering and strength, social recognition and feudal exploitation particularly evident in the households of Deeti. Her husband, Hukam Singh, an opium addict, calls the opium his 'first wife' and believes that he would have 'died of pain long ago' without it. (*Sea of Poppies*, P. 34). Deeti, on her first night of wedding, had been intoxicated with opium and unknowingly got engaged with sexual relationship with Chandan Singh, the brother of Hukam Singh. Deeti's mother-in-law expressed extreme contentment over the pregnancy of Deeti and referred her as 'Draupadi' of Mahabharata, the most virtuous woman on earth serving as wife to five brothers (pp. 38-39). Interestingly, after a course of time Deeti 'administered the weapon of drug', understood its importance and applied it in controlling her mother-in-law providing her sweetened milk, acharas, dalpuris, pakoras, dal, etc, mixed with a little trace of opium (p. 38). This scene clearly reveals the imperial feudal practice and marginalized's resistance against that. The commodity that enriches merchants and administrators simultaneously destroys individual lives.

Deeti's ability to resist the oppression of caste and the control of men is an example of resistance within the structure of oppression. Her exit from the village and her boarding of the *Ibis* is an attempt in self-determination. Most noticeably, her travels resemble those of opium field to the ship, but unlike the commodity, she does not take the path colonial and social hierarchies have marked out for her. Originally a slave ship used to transport indentured laborers. *Ibis* is a profoundly contrapuntal space. On the one hand, it is a tool of empire, and plays a significant role in the movement of opiums and indentured labourers to their markets. Deeti, when she first encounters the *girimtiyas*, being taken away with no return guarantee ever, she feels moved with a big sense of dislocation and alienation:

what it would be like to be in their place, to know that you were forever an outcast; to know that you would never again enter your father's house; that you would never throw your arms

around your mother; never eat a meal with your sisters and brothers; never feel the cleansing touch of the Ganga. (72).

On the other hand, the same Ibis serves as a strong platform for the formation of the jahaj-bhai and jahaj- bahren community. Pugli metaphorically calls the Ibis as 'a boat of pilgrims' and Deeti considers it as 'mother':

no one can lose caste and everyone is the same: it's like taking a boat to the temple of Jagannath, in Puri. From now on, and forever afterwards, we will all be ship-siblings- jaha-bhais and jahaz-bahens- to each other... all of us the children of the ship (356).

Presenting this new community in the Ibis, Ghosh illustrates how spaces created by imperial power can unexpectedly generate forms of resistance.

Bahram Modi, the wealthy Parsi merchant from Bombay, a passionate advocate of free trade, represents an ambivalent character, who despite being a non-English entrepreneur, not only take the benefit of the British imperial economic system as an independent opium trader and owner of the opium-supplying ship Anahita, but also serves the interests of the Western power as his participation in the imperial trade network causes enormous sufferings to the Chinese people. Bahram recognizes that the emerging global economy increasingly derives profit not from useful commodities but from manufactured desires and dependencies. Reflecting on sugar, alcohol, and opium, he argues:

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. (RS, p. 51).

This observation of Bahram Modi clearly reveals that British's interests of forceful selling of opium to China was not only guided by immediate business motives; rather they wanted to establish Chinese dependency on drugs through addiction for the sustainable trade and economic profits. Like Zadig Bey, Bahram, whose character itself seems very contrapuntal, plays the role of an intermediary merchant having his commercial life intertwined with both the colonizers and the colonized. He believes that people become rich selling bad things; the "Chinese rulers have grown rich from opium" (RS, p. 203). Through Bahram, Ghosh exposes a disturbing principle of colonial capitalism: human vulnerability becomes a source of commercial accumulation.

This contradiction becomes even more apparent in the rhetoric of "free trade" employed by foreign merchants,

"the doctrine of Free Trade has given them license to do exactly as they please. And amongst the people of Canton there is mounting anger at the impunity with which the foreigners defy the law. If not for the police, says Zadig Bey, the townsfolk would surely have torched the factories and driven the Fanquis out of the city (RS, p. 373).

British traders justify the opium trade as legitimate commerce although it is evident that "the chief interest of the foreign merchants is not in the legal trade, but in the trafficking of the opium" (RS, 228), while simultaneously violating Chinese laws prohibiting the drug. Jardine's ironic remark that the father of all smuggling and smugglers is the East India Company, momentarily exposes the hypocrisy underlying imperial economic discourse

Opium's tremendous worth is constantly reiterated in the trilogy. Opium is said to be the "most precious jewels in Queen Victoria's crown" (Sea of Poppies. p. 91), it must be a very special commodity. This metaphor is a way of making the narcotic product an icon of imperial wealth. Opium cultivation and distribution come into being alongside the prosperity of the British Empire. Prosperity of the British Empire unites with opium cultivation and circulation

In the Trilogy, the Sea of Poppies and River of Smoke reveal the mechanisms of imperial accumulation, while the Flood of Fire exposes the violence required to sustain them. Benjamin Burnham shares the strategic purpose of the opium that 'one of the expedition's chief aims was to force the Chinese to cede an island off the China coast: a new port, embodying all the ideals of Free Trade"(Flood of Fire. p. 283) although on general conversations he describes the war a design of God and a gift of economic liberty to Chinese people. The British merchants' intention would also be "selling their goods; creating a better demand of opium eliminating the disruptions in the supply as they believe every chest would fetch a fortune" (p. 282). The Chinese side definitely put efforts in protecting their people and land. Commissioner Lin served at the forefront, "he had detained all the foreign merchants and forced them to surrender the opium they had shipped to China that season!"(Flood of Fire. p.41).

The most prominent resistance shown in the trilogy is that of Commissioner Lin Zexu. He opposes the free trade arguments of the foreign powers in his struggle to seek an end to opium imports and assert China's right to exercise sovereignty over her own territory. Under his determined leadership and command, "the chests are opened, balls of opium are broken up and mixed with salt and lime and then

thrown into the water-filled trenches" (Flood of Fire, p. 534). Contrapuntally, the Opium War could be seen as a battle between two visions: Britain's free trade advocacy and China's claim of political sovereignty.

The complexities of imperial warfare are also examined at the character of Kesri Singh. . Kesri's situation is very paradoxical. Despite being a colonial subject, he is used as a tool by the British against the other colonized. As he sees Chinese defenses being destroyed, Kesri starts to wonder about the moral justification of the war, "so much death; so much destruction - and that too upon a people who had attacked or harmed the men? What was the meaning of it?" What was it for?" (Flood of Fire, p. 505). Kesri's minds undergo the contrapuntal existence of the sense of loyalty to the owners and sense of belonging to his race.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, the Ibis Trilogy illustrates multiples experiences of lives revolving around the opium product. Usually, these experiences are embedded on two specific dynamics: traces of imperialism and efforts of resistance. In the process, the two, despite sounding opposite and independent, coexist and function simultaneously just like the independent melodic lines of a musical instrument combined, lead to the grand structure of a symphony. Indeed, the process embodies the centrality of opium as the engine of colonial administration for the 'West', and a reason of unity and resistance for the 'East' against the exploitations imposed.

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