



## **HUMAN DESTINY AT STAKE – A PEEP INTO “SMOKE AND ASHES” OF AMITAV GHOSH**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Amitav Ghosh, a famous Bengali writer and the winner of 54<sup>th</sup> Jnanpith award, has many novels to his credit. His book Smoke and Ashes: A Writer's Journey Through Opium's Hidden Histories is a travelogue in which he traces out the spread of opium trade among the three important nations namely, China, India and Britain. In fact, it is a socio-historic novel. He delves deep into the transformative effect that the trade had produced in these three countries in particular and the whole world in general. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, India had witnessed the rampant growth of opium at various places within the country under colonial rule, and its lasting effects on the people. Now-a-days, human beings are facing potential threats from many quarters. Man and his craving for wealth is the biggest threat to the environment. It not only spoils nature but also corrupts himself to the core. I have selected this prolific writer's non-fiction out of concern for nature and human destiny.*

**Key Words:** travelogue, delves deep, transformative effect, rampant growth, biggest threat, human destiny

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## INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh, a Kolkata born gifted scholar, having been educated in Dehra Dun, Delhi, Oxford and Alexandria, works in the City University of New York and in Columbia University and lives with his family in Brooklyn, New York, the U.S.A. He has contributed a lot for the enrichment of Indian literature in English. Ghosh, being an anthropologist, expresses his concern, through his novels, for human beings who are becoming slaves to drugs and turning themselves into useless lot. Human existence and growth will be in doldrums once the youth get used to narcotic drugs. His writing being diffracted through the prism of research, Ghosh is unique and is held in high regard by many in the literary community. By using complex narrative strategies in his novels, he probes the nature of national and personal identity. His thinking is not just restricted to Indian youth and their welfare only, but extended further to the entire youth of the world and the overall development of humanity. He is a visionary writer with prospective expectations. His themes move round the protection of nature in general and humanity in particular. His erudition and world view has no trace of solipsism. He shows in his novel of eco-criticism *The Hungry Tide*, set in the Sundarbans, both symbiotic and antagonistic relationship with nature. The important themes in this novel are environmentalism and destabilisation. Here, Ghosh tries to show that there is environmental force that glues the plant, animal and human life together and, one is affected by the other invariably either directly or indirectly. To underestimate Nature in showing its revenge is quite wrong. The land grabbers and resource exploiters who have insatiable hunger, destroy Nature irredeemably, whereas Nature in turn, devours human life and property ravenously like storms and tigers.

Having studied social anthropology at Oxford, Ghosh produced a vast body of work that includes historical novels and journalistic essays which are thought provoking. Through his writings, he made the readers travel across the continents and oceans. By writing historical fiction as well as non-fiction, he intends to discuss the topics like colonialism, climate change and derangement. As a leading postcolonial writer, with his global vision, he focuses in his works mainly on the relationship of a person with history and culture. Being a conscientious and productive writer, he touches upon diasporic elements in some of his novels as he himself has personally suffered in his life. In his novel *The Shadow Lines* for which he was honoured with Sahitya Akademi Award (1990), he shifts his attention to identity crisis, displacement, alienation and sense of rootlessness blended with the woes of partition of Indian territory. During the

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British rule, drug and human trafficking were quite common, and these both exposed the venomous fangs of colonialism and imperialism.

By portraying the picture of Nature as mother, Ghosh gives a message that human beings can be properly nurtured with natural resources. Nature has all the potential to satisfy the bare needs of everyone provided, man thinks nothing about luxuries and flamboyant life style. Modern man aggressively attacks Nature with malafide intentions to quench his thirst for earning and lavish living. His malignant and fraudulent attitude questions the very existence of Nature in its plenty. Even crossing the generic boundaries between anthropology and art work, Ghosh stretches his themes to history and memory, political struggle and communal violence and, travel and diaspora.

#### **A Glance at Amitav's other Novels:**

Amitav's first novel *The Circle of Reason*, is distinctly post-colonial in its marginalization of Europe as well as post-modern with a fine blend of fable and picaresque elements. Together with this novel, his another novel, *The Shadow Lines* gained him an international readership. His novel *Sea of Poppies* is the first book in his Ibis trilogy that describes the indentured labourers and opium. In his novel *Gun Island* he focuses on climate change, and in his *In an Antique Land* he describes his experiences in a rural Egyptian village in the early 1980s. His non-fiction works include *Incendiary Circumstances: A Chronicle of the Turmoil of Our Times*, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*, *Dancing in Cambodia*, *the Imam and the Indian*.

#### **Ibis Trilogy:**

Ibis Trilogy include three great novels, namely *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015). We must be aware of Ibis Trilogy to have a comprehensive idea about my selected novel *Smoke and Ashes*. The novel *Sea of Poppies* is of course the first novel in Ibis trilogy. During the colonial rule, opium trade ruled the roost. "The opium poppy may be humble in appearance. But it is one of the most powerful Beings that humans have encountered in their time on earth", says Amitav Ghosh. The publisher's note makes it clear that the novel deeply explores the catastrophic effect of opium trade on world history and shows how opium continues to impact our lives today. While talking about this novel, the writer makes a powerful comment that "only by recognizing the power and intelligence of the opium poppy can we even begin to make peace with it". The second novel in this series *River of Smoke* focuses more on opium trade. It also deals with how China and India became bankrupt financially due to this



opium trade. In the third novel *Flood of Fire* the novelist successfully makes an attempt on issues like nationalism, globalisation, love, greed and ambition.

My focus in this paper is on Amitav's novel *Smoke and Ashes*.

***Smoke and Ashes: A Writer's Journey Through Opium's Hidden Histories :***

Amitav Ghosh is equally adept in writing both fiction and non-fiction. His non-fiction work *Smoke and Ashes* is in fact an excursion into both cultural and economic history. This novel mirrors the author's own engagement with opium's hidden history. It is the writer's memoir with deep insights into the process of writing the Ibis Trilogy. His renowned skill in turning meticulous research into an interesting narrative is once again manifest in this novel. It is the chronicle of the history of opium and its impact on humanity. In short, this novel is based on a large quantities of material he had gathered while researching the trilogy of novels written between 2005 and 2015. It is neither a fiction nor history, but it gives all humans of the present days the most despicable element behind the existing state of civilization. In fact, it is not less than knowing ourselves from a new perspective.

*The book prompts us to reflect on "the chain of causation that has made China what it is today, how opium traders reconciled their criminal dealings with their consciences, how inflicting incalculable harm on people around the world is not reprehensible, how ideologies of Free Market / Trade capitalism sanctioned new levels of depravity in the pursuit of profit, and how long it will take for humanity to realize who now are the expendables like the Chinese were just another set of expendables hundred years ago-- Manicka in his review titled 'Eye Opener'.*

It was some twenty years ago when Amitav Ghosh was working for his valuable research on Ibis Trilogy, he happened to know hitherto unknown startling facts about the lives of the soldiers and sailors of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The known fact to the world is that their lives were actually dictated by the passing swift currents of the Indian ocean. But the hidden truth is that their lives were also commanded by the most valuable commodity namely opium, that was carried in large quantities on those currents of the sea. The British were able to subjugate people around the world by making them addicted to opium to sustain and expand the colonial empire.

**Opium--Its adverse effect on our bodies:**

Opium is a narcotic drug that is used in medicine in minor quantities. Its users experience a euphoric rush, followed by relaxation and relief of physical pain. It can also be used to control

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diarrhoea by reducing the frequency of bowel movements. Its use leads to physical and psychological dependence, and can lead to overdose. If it is overused, it results in slow breathing, dizziness, seizures, weakness, hypertension and coronary problems. Severe withdrawal side effects follow physical dependence. That's why opium should be taken as per the doctor's prescription only.

For every work we undertake, there will be two angles, good and bad. Some people make most of the loopholes existing in law. Some others use their absolute power to have an upper hand over the resources which they think are lucrative. In the backdrop of industrialisation, the Britishers came to India searching for the raw material they needed to feed their native industries. Their motto is to earn money by various means which were available in those days. They saw that opium was a gold duck to get plenty of money. For the survival of their empire, they needed a lot of money, and so they engineered a plan to grow opium on Indian soil and export it to China to earn the filthy lucre. "Opium became the main source of capital accumulation for indigenous merchants and bankers in Western India and Bombay became the Medellin of British India" –Manicka, the reviewer. The saddest thing was that smuggling had become the order of the day, an open secret, and no feeling of guilt could be seen on their faces for destroying the very humanity.

The small opium poppy plant played a key role in the making of the world which is now reeling under its ill effects. Ghosh has skilfully moved his pen through issues like social and cultural repercussions generated through the spread of colonialism in the world, the horticultural histories as well as the mythologies of capitalism and above all, through this novel *Smoke and Ashes* he revealed to the world the abuse of opium and its debilitating effects on the youth, the wealth of the world. Ghosh, during his research, has found opium at the origins of several of America's most powerful institutions and families as well as world's biggest corporations. The worst and long-term consequences were more miserable in India. The fact that the author's own identity and family history were swept up here in the story, is most surprising.

***Within a few decades, exactly as intended, it solved the East India Company's balance of payments problem: the drain of silver from England to China ended, and huge quantities of bullion began to flow in the other direction –Amitav Ghosh.***

With regards to the role of opium in history, nobody can overlook the conception of intelligence at work. Poppy's ability to create cycles of repetition stands evidence to this. In the future also they will manifest themselves into similar phenomena. It builds symmetries that rhyme with each other. The various efforts that we take to root out this menace will yield

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nothing. The fact that cannot be denied is that opium poppy will never vanish. It will not go away from being cultivated. In the guise of medical use, it will be grown beyond the set limits, and there are always the smugglers to blindfold the governments. For instance, notwithstanding the stringent steps taken by the Mexican government to put a check, the cultivation of poppy has continued to rise. The irony is that the world has witnessed a recorded production of opium now than it was earlier. “We can at least begin to make peace with opium after noticing the intelligence and power of the opium poppy,” says Amitav.

### **Background history:**

Amitav’s non-fiction work *Smoke and Ashes* is set in Guangzhou in China under Qing dynasty during 1839. Thousands of crates of opium that came mostly from India, was seized at Canton in China and destroyed on the banks of the Pearl river by Chinese diplomat. This adventurous act had far-reaching impact in world history, and it triggered a series of battles fought by the British just to protect their economic interests. By way of forcibly introducing opium into different countries, the colonial administration had put people’s right to live at stake. By using the aggressive addiction to the narcotic drug that enslaved many people in the colonial rule, the British administration had committed a heinous crime. This story is remarkable, and revelatory, because opium poppy plant lies at its heart. As the author peels layer after layer off perceptions and understandings of Indian and Chinese histories, trade patterns and cultural imperatives, our view of the past expands progressively and gains a deeper, sharper focus.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Amitav Ghosh, a popular modern Indian writer, by touching the sordid realities of contemporary world and the colonial period, has enlightened the global readers and won their hearts. His latest book *Smoke and Ashes: A Writer’s Journey Through Opium’s Hidden Histories* examines how the opium poppy has shaped the world for centuries with its commodification during colonial rule of the British. The book also exposes the creation of the world’s first imperial narco-state by the Dutch, its perfection by the British in India “through the involvement of Armenian, Bohra, Ismaili, Jain, Jew, Parsi, Marwari and Bengali business/trading families during the colonial era”—Manicka, the reviewer.

Its philosophical undertones, its sensitivity to the inviolable Nature’s laws gives the readers immense joy and also, it is in fact an eye opener.

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