**The Context: Journal of English Studies**
**Volume 12, Issue 6, September 2025**
ISSN: 2349-4948
www.thecontext.in

*Article*

# Decolonizing Indigenous History: A Postcolonial Reading of Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

**Dr. Dipanjoy Mukherjee**
Assistant Professor in English, Chhatna Chandidas Mahavidyalaya, Bankura, West Bengal, India;
dipanjoymukherjee@gmail.com

Accepted version published on 5th September 2025

DOI https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17060234

**Abstract:** Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008), the first volume of the Ibis Trilogy, presents a vivid literary reconstruction of the colonial encounter in India during the nineteenth century, particularly through the lens of the opium trade and the indentured labour system. This article, which narrativizes the undocumented history to demystify the myth of Eurocentric dominant discourse, explores the novel as a significant postcolonial text that reinterprets indigenous history by foregrounding the voices, experiences, and agency of marginalized communities silenced by colonial discourse. The alternative narratives of history are communicated through representations of indentured labour and the slave trade, the devastation of native industry and agricultural base, colonial exploitation of natural resources in Burma, and the thriving trade of opium in India under imperial rule. Through the interwoven narratives of peasants, coolies, zamindars, women, and sailors, Ghosh contests the Eurocentric historiography of empire and reclaims suppressed indigenous perspectives. Drawing upon postcolonial theory, this study examines how *Sea of Poppies* destabilizes imperial narratives, interrogates the colonial economy of opium and indenture, and offers an alternative framework for decolonizing history. The novel functions as both a literary archive and a critique of colonial modernity, illuminating the lived realities of subaltern subjects while challenging hegemonic versions of history.

**Keywords**: decolonization; postcolonialism; indenture; indigenous history; opium trade

> At the centre of it all, what defines Ghosh's writing is the distinctive way in which his works manage to hold together a global, ecumenical perspective while focusing on highly individual, often contested and marginalized histories such as those of refugees, Indian sepoys under the British Raj, the "lower" caste Othered, and voiceless women - (Chitra Sankaran xv)

ISSN 2349-4948

The writing of history has long been intertwined with power and empire. Colonial historiography constructed narratives that privileged European perspectives, relegating colonized subjects to the margins of discourse. In response, postcolonial writers and scholars have sought to "decolonize" history by re-reading the past through indigenous experiences and perspectives. Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* stands as a monumental attempt to reconstruct the colonial encounter by foregrounding subaltern voices excluded from official records. Set against the backdrop of the opium trade and the impending Opium Wars, the novel reveals how colonial capitalism disrupted indigenous economies, reconfigured social hierarchies, and produced transoceanic displacements through indentured labour. Ghosh blends meticulous historical research with narrative imagination, creating a polyphonic text that dismantles the Eurocentric frameworks of colonial historiography. In doing so, *Sea of Poppies* participates in what Gayatri Spivak calls the "strategic essentialism" of postcolonial literature—recovering suppressed voices to challenge imperial narratives (Spivak 203). This article reads *Sea of Poppies* as a postcolonial intervention into the politics of history to explore the way the novel critiques the colonial economy of opium, reclaims indigenous subjectivities, destabilizes imperial languages and discourses, and re-imagines the ocean as a site of transnational encounters.

Among the most prominent literary works by Amitav Ghosh is the book Sea of Poppies, which not only takes readers through a journey of the perils of indentured laborers but also sheds light on the history of slavery, British imperialism, opium trade, and migration in India. The distinguished tales of. The author uses the backdrop of the opium trade to throw light on the massive exploitation of natural resources to satisfy the needs of the colonial powers as well as the marginalized population of migrant Indian labour. Through the characters in *Sea of Poppies* who are traveling to their new destination on the schooner Ibis, Ghosh emphasizes that slavery is not abolished altogether; rather, it has mutated to indentured labour practices where enslaved people are now called girmitiyas. The author has combined his literary flair with the professional skills of a social historian to trace the discourse of these people once they have entered the 'girmits' or agreement written on a piece of paper. This report narrates the undocumented history of the indigenous people of India while shedding light on colonization and capitalist exploitation through the analysis of Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*:

> ...he (Amitav Ghosh) has been tracing history in so far unthought-of places, such as the stirring and manoeuvring of a schooner, the practice of opium production, the crew lists, the lists of migrants in the Mauritius National Archives, long-forgotten dusty dictionaries and language treatises, and tourists' vademecums. Besides, he has deconstructed these texts to recover what imperial ideology had tried to excise, and, again, through a precise use of imagination, he has finally been able to render his historical narration. (Vescovi 191-192)

The British colonial project in India was intimately tied to the cultivation and trade of opium. By forcing peasants to grow poppy under exploitative conditions, the

ISSN 2349-4948

East India Company transformed agrarian life into a site of economic violence. Deeti, the novel's central peasant woman, sees the poppy fields as "a sea of scarlet and mauve, stretching farther than the eye could see" (*Sea of Poppies* 4). The beauty of the scene belies its violence: fields that once grew sustenance crops have been transformed into narcotic monoculture. Ghosh emphasizes that "every village was planted with poppies, so that even the poorest farmer was forced to abandon his grain fields" (37). This passage demonstrates how imperial power subjugated indigenous subsistence patterns, aligning with what Ania Loomba terms the "colonial restructuring of indigenous economies" (110). In Saiel's opinion:

> Deeti and her addict husband, Hukam Singh, effectively portray the economic forms of colonial subjection imposed upon them by the British trading company. Forced to stop growing wheat, cereal, and pulses, which have been staple food items in the Indian subcontinent for centuries, Deeti and her farming community are now producers of poppies, which the British factories use to extract opium for a lucrative global export trade. (*Marginalized Communities* 24)

The effects are not merely economic but deeply personal. When Deeti's husband, Hukam Singh, succumbs to opium addiction after years of working in a factory, Ghosh notes that "the drug had eaten into his marrow, hollowing him out from within" (49). Here, addiction becomes both a literal and metaphorical embodiment of colonial domination–imperialism inscribed onto the very bodies of the colonized. By dramatizing these conditions, Ghosh displaces the focus from imperial profits and trade routes to indigenous suffering, thus decolonizing the historical narrative.

The quintessence of *Sea of poppies* being the migration of indentured labourers from India to various British colonies, the narrative does not endorse historical figure or event; rather it traces the origin of the Indian diaspora in the nineteenth century to record how the greed of the empire for opium trade created a hidden history of deprivation and how the impact of colonial policy devastated native industry and replaced agriculture by cultivation of poppies. Dkhar writes, "His novels are models of the history of the voiceless and marginalized rather than those of historical figures.....portraying migrants as victims trapped in the cauldron of history" (42). The emigration of indentured workers from India started in the 1830s, and Sea of Poppies opens in March 1838 and relates how the opium trade out of India was flourishing under British rule, letting the British merchants gain huge wealth by exporting opium to China illegally. Brinda Bose in *Amitav Ghosh: Critical Perspectives* says that Ghosh's aesthetics is a "fictional embracing of historical/ political subtexts, and an intellectual exploration of both the major, as well as the marginalized, contexts of modern history: nationalism/ internationalism, migrancy, memory/nostalgia, violence, communalism"(18). *Sea of Poppies* chronicles the roots and impact of British colonization as well as the deceitful strategies of the colonizers and the commercial goals of the imperialists to exploit the colonized nations. The novel depicts the insensible methods in which the inhumane colonizers had subjected the indigenous people to suffering and exploitation. Depriving the weak, dislocating people against

ISSN 2349-4948

their will, disregarding the dignity of the natives, and disparaging the emotions of the colonized are some of the aspects of colonialism that have been highlighted deliberately in *Sea of Poppies* to envisage the world from the perspective of displaced peoples and to focus on marginalized accounts that were relegated to the margins of Eurocentric narratives of history. Chitra Sankaran, in her introduction to the book *History, Narrative and Testimony in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction,* remarks,

> At the center of Amitav Ghosh's art, there seem to be two conflicting impulses at work - one, to give voice to the casualties of history and thereby bear testimony to the occurrence of a series of historical events that have been largely ignored or marginalized by the powerful Eurocentric master narrative of top-down history (xxi).

British history shows indifference to the gruesome truths of colonial exploitation of natural resources in Burma and the revolting record of the thriving trade of opium in India under imperial rule. *Sea of Poppies* unfolds the dark design of colonization and the hideous horrors of capitalist exploitation. More than a historical novel, it is conceived as an alternative human history. As an anthropologist and historian, Ghosh has probed into the history of this first wave of Indian Diaspora to delineate the socio-economic condition of the British Raj that led to the indentured Diasporas of nineteenth-century India:

> The town was thronged with hundreds of other impoverished transients, many of whom were willing to sweat themselves half to death for a few handfuls of rice. Many of these people had been driven from their villages by the flood of flowers that had washed over the countryside: lands that had once provided sustenance were now swamped by the rising tide of poppies (*Sea of Poppies* 202).

Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies* illustrates the impact of imperialism on the Indian subcontinent through highlighting the dissolved and disintegrated state of the traditional economy. The author narrates the changes in the social structure that have been brought on people through imperialism, which has rendered a massive population available for recruitment at very low wages. Also, the writer brings out the elements of imperialism by shedding light on how British powers first exploited the natural resources of the Indian subcontinent and are concentrating on the subjugation of human resources. The imperial indifference to the suffering of the native population is brought out in Ghosh's book in several instances, such as when Bhyro Singh, the foreman, seeks punishment for Kalua of sixty lashes of the whip for eloping with Deeti. The captain is aware that Kalua could die before the whipping came to an end. He remains indifferent to the suffering. In another incident of imperial superiority, Neel, a Raja, is convicted of forgery despite there being clear indications of forgery committed by the British merchant. The imperialistic British policies have resulted in seismic changes in the prevailing feudal system. Land ownership through the zamindari system is introduced to the detriment of the farmers. The zamindars are made proprietors of the land, who are measuring the price of lands to be as less as six months ' supply of staples. Ghosh narrates the marginalization of migrants through the powers of imperialism, colonialism, ethnocentrism, and patriarchy. The story focuses on the

marginalization of the weaker group by the dominant. Such as the rich exploit the poor, women by men, and the colonized by the colonial power. The author highlights how the ill-gotten situation of the marginalized migrants was created in the Indian subcontinent as a result of the Abolition of Slavery Act enacted in 1835. This led the region to become a cheap supply source for laborers. The marginalized migrants are put through discomforting experiences, where they are transported to work in different British colonies. They are first confined before their journey in depots. The author has described the journey of Girmitiyas being transported on the Ibis vessel as deplorable. There are cattle pens like compartments on board where the enslaved people who were earlier transported are chained to the floors. The labourers were forced on the ship where, "the migrants began to disrupt the careful circle of their mats, scuffling and shouting as they fought for space" (370). The difficult journey of Girmitiyas is further narrated using the metaphor of crumbs placed on a tilted tray. People slid and slipped and hurdled themselves on ladders of their compartment. Once on board, their belated attempt to escape was sealed by the hatch. They were transported in inhumane conditions, and swamped by tides of nausea in an enclosed space, they faced seasickness.

The novel's second major theme is indenture, a system that displaced Indians across the empire. Ghosh reconstructs this history with careful attention to its violence. The moment when peasants sign contracts they barely understand reflects coercion: "They pressed their thumb on a paper, not knowing what they had agreed to" (Ghosh 169). This detail dramatizes how colonial bureaucracy transformed illiterate peasants into bound laborers—a process Hugh Tinker famously described as a "new system of slavery" (6). Kalua's story deepens this critique. After saving Deeti from widow immolation, Kalua, a low-caste cart driver, flees with her and ends up recruited as an indentured laborer. The recruiter's promises of "sweet meats and good wages in a land of plenty" (Ghosh 176) conceal the harsh reality of exploitation. Such false promises expose the mechanisms of colonial manipulation, where poverty and caste oppression were exploited to sustain global labor flows. Neel Rattan Halder's transformation from a wealthy zamindar to an indentured convict aboard the Ibis further complicates the narrative. Stripped of privilege, Neel realizes, "On this ship there were no rajas or ryots—only jahaz-bhais" (Ghosh 329). This moment of leveling reflects Homi Bhabha's idea of "hybridity" (112), as identities are renegotiated in the liminal space of the Ibis. The ship becomes a floating metaphor for decolonization: a place where colonial hierarchies collapse and subaltern solidarities emerge. One of the novel's most radical strategies is its linguistic texture. Ghosh blends English with Bhojpuri, Bengali, Hindustani, and the "zubben," a shipboard creole, refusing to privilege imperial English. When Paulette first encounters Bhojpuri words like "jahaz-bhai," she insists on retaining them untranslated, saying, "There is no English word for it; it must be kept as it is" (Ghosh 332). This refusal to domesticate indigenous idioms into English represents what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o describes as the "decolonization of language" (26). The sailors' creole—filled with words like "malum," "lascar," and "serang"—also embodies resilience. Ghosh explains, "In the zubben there were no masters' words and servants' words: all were equal" (Ghosh 421). Here, the hybrid tongue becomes a symbol of diasporic

ISSN 2349-4948

adaptation, allowing marginalized groups to create new linguistic and cultural identities beyond the binaries of empire. By refusing the homogenizing logic of English, Ghosh destabilizes imperial discourse and reasserts the legitimacy of indigenous speech.

While colonial historiography often represents the ocean as a space of conquest, Ghosh re-imagines it as a site of survival and possibility. When the Ibis sets sail, Deeti reflects that "the black water was both death and rebirth: it had taken away her past, but it carried her into another life" (Ghosh 347). The ocean here symbolizes both trauma and transformation, displacement and renewal. Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* reminds us that oceans have historically been spaces of forced migration (15). Ghosh extends this to the Indian Ocean world, where indentured laborers were transported under conditions echoing the Middle Passage. However, unlike colonial accounts that erase these voices, Ghosh inscribes them into narrative memory. The sea becomes a decolonial archive, holding histories of violence but also of solidarity, hybridity, and cultural survival.

Perhaps the most radical dimension of *Sea of Poppies* is its insistence on subaltern agency. Deeti, initially depicted as a passive widow facing sati, chooses survival and reinvention. As Ghosh writes, "She would not die on her husband's pyre—she would choose her own fate" (157). Her refusal of widow immolation is a symbolic act of decolonization- reclaiming agency from both patriarchal and imperial structures. Kalua, too, embodies resistance. Though oppressed by caste and exploited by colonial labor recruiters, he emerges as Deeti's protector and partner, disrupting both caste taboos and colonial expectations. Their bond destabilizes Brahmanical hierarchies and imperial categorizations, highlighting how marginalized people forged new communities beyond imposed structures. In giving centrality to such voices, Ghosh answers Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?" (271). The novel suggests that the subaltern not only speaks but also survives, resists, and redefines history.

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* is more than a historical novel; it is a postcolonial discourse on the decolonizing of history. Through close attention to the colonial opium economy, the violence of indenture, the polyglossia of shipboard life, and the ocean as a decolonial archive, Ghosh dismantles imperial narratives and foregrounds subaltern voices. His use of vernacular idioms, hybrid spaces, and subaltern agency reclaims history from the margins, offering an alternative archive rooted in indigenous perspectives. By blending meticulous historical research with literary imagination, Ghosh resists Eurocentric historiography and restores dignity to those whom the empire sent to a world of silence. *Sea of Poppies* thus exemplifies and epitomizes postcolonial literature for reclaiming indigenous history and resisting colonial memory.

**Funding**: This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

ISSN 2349-4948

**Data Availability Statement:** The data sharing policy does not apply to this article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

**Works cited**

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

Bose, Brinda (Ed.) *Amitav Ghosh: Critical Perspectives*. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2003.

Dkhar, Jenniefer. 2012. "A Re-reading of History in the Novels of Amitav Ghosh." *Journal of Literature, Culture & Media Studies*. Jan-Dec 2012, Vol. 4 Issue 7/8, pp.41–56.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Harvard UP, 1993.

Ghosh, Amitav. *Sea of Poppies*. Penguin, 2008.

Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. 3rd ed., Routledge, 2015.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Heinemann, 1986.

Sankaran, Chitra (Ed.). *History, Narrative, and Testimony in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction*. Suny Press, 2012

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, U of Illinois P, 1988, pp. 271–313.

Tinker, Hugh. *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830–1920*. Oxford UP, 1974.

Saiel, Farhan Mohd. "Marginalised Communities: A Study of Sea of Poppies." *Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2019, pp. 23–25.

Vescovi, Alessandro. "Voicing Unspoken Histories: Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies as Research Novel." *History and Narration: Looking Back from the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge Scholar Press, 2011, pp. 190–209.