

The Interface of Historiography and Historical Fiction in Amitav Ghosh’s, Sea of Poppies

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ABSTRACT

This research primarily focuses on presentation of history of colonial exploitation and opium trade with the help of fictional form in one of the books of Amitav Ghosh’s “Ibis” trilogy i.e. Sea of Poppies. The plot of the novel is structured in such a coherent way that it aligns the events and the circumstances which natives and subalterns faced when the British arrived in India, making the novel a magnificent piece of historical fiction. Then there is a variety of characters, each unique in its own way and struggling to make its place in colonial rule in India and trying to find an identity away from home. Each character is significant and holds a historical importance in itself. The events and descriptions of the novel are historically symbolic. Even the places and geography takes readers to all the locations which have witnessed horrors of the tortures and torments of colonial legacy. Ghosh through abstractions, minute details, people and various situations, takes readers back to the beginning of nineteenth century, an important era which constructed a nation and suppressed another one. This research presents all the evidences from the text to prove it as a historical novel and its significance as compared to historical writings.

Key Words: Historical, Historiography, Colonial Rule, India & Opium.

Introduction

History plays a key role in the development of a nation or an individual. It's a recount of events of the past. What happened in the past, when it happened, how it happened and what were its motives and consequences are the things which history encounters with. Fiction, on the other hand, is an imaginative narration of imaginative characters and events. Sea of Poppies is a historical novel that depicts history through fictional events and characters. Ghosh in an interview said that “History is in the heart of the novel” (Khan 2013).

Sea of Poppies published in 2008 is the first part of Ibis trilogy. The trilogy encompasses the tale of British colonial rule and opium war fought between India and China through East India Company. The story is based in the first half of the nineteenth century. Trade was one of the major means Britain used to build and sustain its colonies. The conflict between both countries over the opium trade from 1839 to 1842 is known as the period of opium war. Most of the Chinese believe that an era of disgrace and humiliation began with this war, through which the

British Empire enforced a toxic drug on the people of China and India. The novel portrays this historical period of the opium war and how empire exploited and tormented its territories. This research describes the ways in which Ghosh has depicted history in fiction with the help of imaginative characters, dialogues, and plot.

This study employs the theoretical framework of historiography and historical fiction. It claims to prove that fiction helps readers to understand history in a better way. It makes history digestible for a large audience when it is told in the form of a story in an imaginative way. It is inclined to explore the fictional recount of the historical period of colonial exploitation and the process of trade between China and Britain through India.

In the novel, one encounters with a variety of characters each diverse in its own culture and language and dense in his/her dialogues and description. The novel is based on the initial years of establishment of East India Company in the first half of the Nineteenth Century. Gosh creates a few subplots in the novel which contribute to the development of one major plot of the novel. The main plot revolves around the consequences of colonial oppression, the trade of opium, the role of India in its production, its poisonous consequences on the people of India and China, the establishment of East India Company and the suppression of subalterns by various power structures.

Theoretical framework

This research draws on the work of two prominent theorists and critics of historiography and historical fiction, Richard Slotkin, and Hayden White. Richard Slotkin is a cultural critic and historian. He claims that a novel helps readers to examine the past in an imaginative and creative way which is restricted in historical writing. While both are accounts of the past, the poetic expression of fiction engages readers more with the history than historical books. He states that a novel can be as reliable as any history book while recounting the past events if it's written after vigilant research and precise study of all the evidence.

Hayden White's theory of historiography and historical fiction is employed to explain the importance of historical novels. A well-known American historian and influential scholar, White is famous for his work on historiography and historical fiction. This study employs White's theoretical insights to explain the importance of historical novels. He argues that historical writings were inspired by literary writings in many ways; the strongest one is its dependence on the technique of narrative for meaning. Accordingly, excluding the chances of "objective or truly scientific history" (White, 2005). He claims that history is most victorious when it uses the technique of narrative because it is what permits history to be full of meaning. He believes that all stories are a product of imagination. This research is vital because it addresses the emerging genre of historical novels which is a global and universal concern for historians and fictional writers around the world. It

The Interface of Historiography and Historical Fiction in Amitav Ghosh's, Sea of Poppies

addresses why it's important and why was it needed when history was there in the first place.

Literature review

Historical fiction has emerged as a whole new genre because it has now become inexorable to separate aesthetics and historical events from each other. It is a genre that has been widely read around the globe and has created many conflicts and controversies. Matthew J. Phillpott defines historical fiction as “a story or stories told about an event perhaps fictional or real and about people also fictional or real” (Phillpot, 2009: 1). Richard Slotkin writes the inadequacies of historical writing and how they contributed as an emergence of historical fiction as a genre:

Novels arise from the shortcomings of history.’ I take this remark by the nineteenth-century German romantic writer Novalis in a triple sense: as a criticism of the limits of history writing as a discipline; and as an observation about the inadequacies of historical experience itself. It is also a precise description of why I started writing historical fiction (Slotkin, 2007: 221-222).

It would be unfair to the genre of historical fiction to claim that historical writings present the past as it is a historical fiction does not. Historical writings themselves are an account of the past events from a viewpoint of a single person. History can never be told in its true form. Historians themselves have their own biases and prejudices when they describe a historical event. On the accuracy of historical novels Richard Slotkin writes:

A novel can be as accurate as a history in telling what happened, when and how. It can, and should, be based on the same kind of research and rigorous analysis of evidence. But the distinction and advantage of the fictional form lie in the way it uses evidence and represents conclusions. The truth the novel seeks is poetic rather than historiographical (Slotkin, 2007: 225-226).

In that sense, the purpose of both genres is almost the same i.e. a possible attempt to narrate the past. Richard Carroll in his research paper “The Trouble with History and Fiction” advocates this position that history and historical fiction have a common purpose of presentation of past. The historical novels are based on what is real and can narrate the past as truthfully or even in a more accurate way

than the history itself, which deals with what is real. In contrast to history, the historical novels are a mixture of reality and imagination (Carroll, 2011).

Fiction plays a major role in shaping the cultural memory and identifying the past because when one places oneself in that character, in that setting, and in those circumstances; one is able to relate oneself present with the past and helps in grasping the past. David Malouf supports this claim as he describes that it is the only possible way to grasp history which means what we went through and what regulates what and where we are now. The best possible way of accepting it is by people engaging into it with the help of their imagination, instead of the factual world, but by being there in that imaginative world. Fiction is the only way through which you reach there in that manner. Poetry and drama may be helpful too, but it's usually fiction (Malouf, 1996: 3).

Hayden White in his research article "Introduction: Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality" asserts that the recollection of the past needs art along with information, and the trouble with historical studies is that they have notably failed in their struggle to fulfill the expectations of 19th Century from historical studies to become a type of science that it hoped to be (White, 2005: 149).

Sahitiya Akademi in his review of the novel noted that in this novel, Ghosh examines the "twilight zones" of the past, writing about the type of things that are not mentioned in the historical writings and history books which makes the novel more fascinating (Akademi, 2009: 206). About the theme and subject of the novel, Ghosh said in an interview: "It brought the opium trade to life for many people – before that the subject had more or less vanished from public memory. It's extraordinary that opium, which has played such an important part in Asian history, had vanished from public memory in India" (Khan 2013).

Keeping in view the existing researches, the purpose of this research is to prove how fiction helps in a better understanding of history. It also explains that characters, dialogues, setting and plot of a historical novel make it easier for the reader to grasp the social, cultural, economic and political conditions of that particular time of history. What makes this research different from other researches or say what voids were left will be filled by my research is that it explores the gaps historical novels fill up that are left behind by historiography or historical writings.

Entwining of history and fiction

Ghosh's fiction is abundantly filled with facts. In the novel, he restores the outcomes of British commands of cultivation of poppies plants in India at the expense of all other plants and grains by various incidents and events. The detailed descriptions, multiple races, various languages and dense dialogue are major features of the novel which makes it stand out as a major work of historical fiction. In the novel, Ghosh also intertwines aftermaths of British rule in India in the text including the deterioration of agrarian system, the moral and financial collapse of

The Interface of Historiography and Historical Fiction in Amitav Ghosh's, Sea of Poppies

natives, the organized takeover of lands, properties, and estates like Raskhali and ruination of rulers like Raja Nell Rattan Halder. The plot and storyline of the novel are crucial in shaping it as a historical novel. The story begins in the 19th Century in a village. The novel introduces characters associated with Ibis, which was formerly used to transport slaves, now utilized for export of opium.

At the beginning of the novel, readers are shown the domestic culture of those times. Deeti's wedding and her wedding night is a recount of patriarchal values that continues to dominate the society. The views of Ghazipur opium factory depicts how opium was manufactured, packed and exported and how natives were tormented for its cultivation. The lives of native people were at stake because of a drug which has nothing to do with them. Deeti's husband, Hukam Singh was first wounded when he was working as a sepoy in British Government. Later, he dies while working at the Ghazipur opium factory.

The narrative begins in the second week of March 1838. The introductory paragraph of the novel is very symbolic and historical as well. In the paragraph, an image of a tall-masted ship is shown. Since the story of the novel is based in the initial years of establishment of East India Company, the image can be a metaphor of the arrival of East India Company. The image is of "Ibis" ship, which was used previously for slave transportation and now it is used for transportation of indentured labor, the *girmitiyas*. The hallucination of Ibis image represents the arrival of the ghost of colonialism through East India Company:

The vision of a tall-masted ship, at sail on the ocean, came to Deeti on an otherwise ordinary day, but she knew instantly that the apparition was a sign of destiny for she had never seen such a vessel before, not even in a dream: how could she have, living as she did in North Bihar, four hundred miles from the coast? Her village was so far inland that the sea seemed as distance as the netherworld: it was the chasm of darkness where the holy Ganga disappeared into the Kala-Pani, 'the Black Water' (Ghosh, 2009: 3).

Britain forced the toxic drug of opium on the people of India and China. The Indians were forced to cultivate it: "Deeti was preoccupied with the lateness of her poppy crop" (Ghosh, 2009: 3) shows that it was the only source of income for the family. Its growth was a source of relief for the family: "By the light of the newly risen sun, she saw, greatly to her relief, that some of her flowers had at last begun to shed their petals" (Ghosh, 2009: 5). And its delay was a source of worry for them. Ghosh also narrates the ways in which Britain enforced the drug on Indians and how they forced them to grow it by East India Company to cultivate poppy plants against their will. They had their white magistrates who would support them in carrying out injustices with the natives who refused to follow their instructions.

This paragraph from the text explains how they would accuse them of theft and forgery to get commissions:

But those toothsome winter crops were steadily shrinking in acreage: now the factory's appetite for opium seemed never to be sated. Come the cold weather, the English sahibs would allow little else to be planted; their agents would go from home to home, forcing cash advances on the farmers, making them 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. It was no use telling the white magistrate that you hadn't accepted the money and your thumbprint was forged: he earned commissions on the opium and would never let you off. And, at the end of it, your earnings would come to no more than three-end-a-half sicca rupees, just about enough to pay off your advance (Ghosh, 2009: 31).

India's land was filled with the cultivation of grains and wheat. People were rich enough to manage their household's finances well and still were able to save money for repairs and renovations. Dynasties took a different turn when opium cultivation was imposed on farmers. People were indebted and had to struggle to make their both ends meet:

The hut's roof was urgently in need of repairs, but in this age of flowers, thatch was not easy to come by in the old days, the fields would be heavy with wheat in the winter, and after the spring harvest, the straw would be used to repair the damage of the year before. But now with the Sahib's forcing everyone to grow poppy, no one had thatch to spare – it had to be bought at the market, from people who lived in faraway villages, and the expense was such that people put off his or her repairs as long as they possibly could (Ghosh, 2009: 30).

Ghosh tells readers that the Indian land was the possession of Britain. Every farmer was forced to sign a contract he has to fulfill no matter what. The lands were full with the sowing of the poppy plant:

She had only to look around to know that here, as in village she had left everyone's land was in hock to the agents of the opium factory: every farmer had been served with a contract, the fulfilling of which left them with no option but to strew their land with

The Interface of Historiography and Historical Fiction in Amitav Ghosh's, Sea of Poppies

poppies. And now, with the harvest over and little grain at home, they would have to plunge still deeper into debt to feed their families. It was as if the poppy had become the carrier of the Karamnasa's malign taint (Ghosh, 2009: 203).

Ghosh also gives readers a subtle account of the colonial oppression and exploitation in India in the era of colonialism: "Although not too far, the distance was too great for Hukam Singh to cover on foot, for he had been wounded in the leg while serving as a sepoy in a British regiment" (Ghosh, 2009: 4). The Indians worked diligently for Britain. But still, they were too cruel and ungrateful and thought it their right to mistreat the people of their colonies. Hukam Singh, Deeti's Husband who is still serving empire at the opium factory in Ghazipur was once got his leg injured while serving them and he still continues to do so with his damaged leg. Empire treated places of India as their own territories as well. The British Flag at the top of the factory is one such example:

The walls of Ghazipur opium factory were partially obscured by mango and jackfruit trees but the British flag that flew on top of it was just visible above the foliage, as was the steeple of the Church in which the factory's overseers prayed. At the factory's ghat on the ganga, a one-masted pateeli barge could be seen, flying the pennant of the English East India Company (Ghosh, 2009: 8).

Even, the day-to-day operations of the Ghazipur opium factory were managed by a senior official of the East India Company. Other British contingent was appointed on other top ranks. While Indians were appointed on lower ranks, British officers ruled over them: "The day-to day management of the factory was in the hands of a superintendent, a senior official of the East India Company who oversaw a staff of several hundred Indian workers: the rest of the British contingent consisted of overseers, accountants, storekeepers, chemists and two grades of assistant" (Ghosh, 2009: 94).

Deeti and her household depict the typical Indian domestic culture in those times. She would prepare the clothes of her husband and his meals, and then would take care of her daughter, Kabutri: "Deeti, too, was careful to keep her face covered in the driver's presence: it was only when she went back inside, to wake Kabutri, her six year-old daughter that she allowed the ghungta of her sari to slip off her head" (Ghosh, 2009: 4) indicates that Indian woman used to wear a veil to protect themselves from the gaze of unfamiliar eyes.

Ghosh takes us back to the colonial era. How Britain exploited and tormented its territories. Throughout the text, there is a subtle criticism of the ways and means the British used to enslave a rich nation like India. He indirectly keeps

hitting the Empire for the damage and wrongs they had done in India. Mr. Burnham, the owner of Ibis, believes that whites are a superior race and it's their obligation to treat other human beings as creatures of a lesser God: "Isn't that what the mastery of the white man means for the lesser races?" (Ghosh, 2009: 82). He thinks that the slave trade is a march of human freedom for lesser races.

Opium is a very toxic drug. Its intake deprives a person out of his/her senses. Ghosh at several points in the text shows the readers how its intake is injurious to one's physical and mental health:

She saw now why the factory in Ghazipur was so diligently patrolled by sahibs and their sepoy – for if a little bit of this gum could give her such power over the life, the character, the very soul of this elderly woman, then with more of it at her disposal, why should she not be able to seize kingdoms and control multitudes? And surely this could not be the only substance upon the earth? (Ghosh, 2009: 40).

In the above paragraph, Ghosh explains if a drug gives such capability to a person over another person, she must be powerful enough to capture kingdoms and rule the masses. He indicates it as one major component Britain used to colonize China and India: "In the good old days people used to say there were only two things to be exported from Calcutta: thugs and drugs – or opium and coolies as some would have it" (Ghosh, 2009: 79) reveals that the only thing Britain wanted India to export was thugs and drugs. The empire descended the exports of the Indian nation to such an extent they were only able to export coolies and opium: "That his money was accepted by the Englishman was the Raja's singular fortune – for, in eastern India, opium was the exclusive monopoly of the British, produced and packaged entirely under the supervision of East India Company" (Ghosh, 2009: 88). Even the Rajas built their fortunes through the profits and commissions earned through opium trade.

Zachary Reid, who is the second mate of "Ibis" questions Mr. Burnham who is symbolic of the empire and the ways it uses to operate and maintain its colonies: "D'you mean to use her as a slaver, sir? But have not your English laws outlawed that trade?" (Ghosh, 2009: 82) It is inevitable from the question that the empire broke its own laws and rules for sustaining its colonies and to do the oppression they would not allow even in their own part of the world.

The capture of the Rakhsali state by Mr. Burnham shows the readers that it was a cup of tea for the empire to snatch the properties of the colonized people. The magistrate himself is white and has close ties with Mr. Burnham: "Being well aware of the judge's friendship with Mr. Burnham, Neel turned to Mr. Rowbotham in alarm: 'Is that indeed Justice Kendalbushe? Is he not closely tied with Mr. Burnham?'" (Ghosh, 2009: 231) Neel knew how helpless he was when he was being arrested that he easily let go of the thought of escape. When the police come to arrest him he feels like escaping but soon the reality of British oppression and

The Interface of Historiography and Historical Fiction in Amitav Ghosh's, Sea of Poppies

power hits him. "For a wild instant, the idea of escape lodged in Neel's mind – but only to vanish, as he recalled the map that hung in his daftar and the red stain of Empire that had spread so quickly across it. Where would I hide? He said. The piyadas of Raskhali can't fight the battalions of the East India Company. No, there's nothing to be done" (Ghosh, 2009: 183). Neel brilliantly and ironically summarizes the systems of tyranny and oppression in these words:

For if his presence in the dock proved anything at all, it was surely opposite of the principle of equality so forcefully enunciated by the judge? In the course of his trial it had become almost laughably obvious to Neel that in this system of Justice it was the English themselves – Mr. Burnham and his ilk – who were exempt from the law as it applied to others: it was they who had become the world's new Brahmins (Ghosh, 2009: 251).

Even before the trial, Neel's lawyer was conscious of what the verdict might be and what to expect from the colonists. He already warned Neel about it: "let me tell you, dear Raja,' he said bluntly. 'There's no jury on earth that would acquit you – far less one that consists mainly of English traders and colonists'" (Ghosh, 2009: 211).

British colonists destroyed the system, inflicted poverty and looted the properties of natives. If that wasn't enough, they imposed their own laws in Indian courts which were different for Indian people and colonizers. They would get away with massive crimes against humanity and a native would be punished for a crime that he didn't even commit: "Lest you be unaware of the seriousness of your offence, let me explain that under English law your offence is a crime of the utmost gravity and was recently considered a capital crime" (Ghosh, 2009: 247). In the verdict of the trial of Raja Neel Rattan Halder, Ghosh employs satire. He indirectly criticizes Britain for the injustices that they have done in their colonies: "But we see no merit whatsoever in the contention that men of higher caste should suffer a less severe punishment than any other person; such a principle has never been recognized nor ever will be recognized in English law, the every foundation of which lies in the belief that all are equal who appear before it..." (Ghosh, 2009: 251).

Britain always treated the people of their colonies as inferiors and uncivilized people. While making them believe in this illusion that English's were superior and civilized and it was their duty to civilize others, they enslaved one of the richest countries of the world with a glorious past and a rich culture which had no match around the world: "In pronouncing your sentence I have a stark choice: I can choose either to let the law take its course without partiality, or I can choose to establish, as a legal principle, that there exists in India a set of persons who are

entitled to commit crimes without punishment.’ And so there does, thought Neel, and you’re one of them and I am not” (Ghosh, 2009: 251).

Ghosh compares British colonizers with Pharaohs or Mongols who killed people for their own benefits without faking it as an advantage for people or pretending themselves as heroes who want others to benefit from their heroic virtues as well. The only difference between both is the deception British colonizers did to conceal their mischiefs and pretend them as honorable acts: “The truth is, sir that men do what their power permits them to do. We are no different from the Pharaohs or the Mongols: the difference is only that when we kill people we feel compelled to pretend that it is for some higher cause. It is this pretense of virtue, I promise you will never be forgiven by history” (Ghosh, 2009: 275).

Richard Slotkin's argument that a novel can be as reliable as history in recounting of what, how and when something happened applies to these above-mentioned passages and arguments. It should be based on a similar sort of research and diligent analysis of proofs. The above extracts from the novel show that this novel is as much correct in presenting the colonial oppression in India as any history book. With its minute details, characters, and dialogues, one can place oneself in that time and relate how it happened, how it affects the present reality, and what will be its consequences in the future. Readers also come to know the cultural and domestic lifestyle of the past. The social and racial divisions that vindicated in the past is evident in the text. The relationship of power structures and subalterns is apparent in the novel.

Slotkin believes that a novel creatively reclaims the undetermined things of the past, the form of the novel permits author and readers to examine the other substitute prospects for faith, deeds, and political change, unachieved by history, which happened in the past. He expressed that if historical novels are written responsibly and carefully, they can be a most beneficial and powerful tool of popular awareness of the past, or at least it can pave a way to engage more people in the study of history known as historiography. The reality that novel searches for is artistic and symbolic, unlike historiography which gives an extremely dry and dull account of the past which is also in form of a story. The difference and edge of the fictional writing of history lie in the ways it uses proofs and represents the epilogue. He further explains that a historical novel has to incorporate in it the procedure of constructing knowledge into its portrayal, depicting the life of

The Interface of Historiography and Historical Fiction in Amitav Ghosh's, Sea of Poppies

characters as an individual encounter whole __ essentially drawing attention to the efforts and consequences which look most important simultaneously. The passages that are quoted above are a true depiction of the life of characters and their experiences as subjective whole encounters and simultaneously present the significant events in the novel which makes the novel a historical one according to Slotkin's theory.

Conclusion

The evidence presented has shown that one must keep a track of one's history and the importance of consciousness of history. Since historical writing is a narrative and an account of the past itself but in a dry way, historical fiction makes history reading engrossing and interesting. It stimulates ones interest in history. From the above analysis, it is clear that when history is described in fiction, it gives so much room to readers to interpret it easily. This research is relevant and much needed because it addresses one of the main concerns of the literary world and plays a part in the worldwide debate on historiography and historical fiction. While this research has tried to address the concerns of historians and the importance of historical fiction, there are still few questions for the future researches i.e., where historiography stands out if historical fiction is more understandable, what will historians do, if fictional writers are going to do what historians are supposed to do, will they change the way they present the history, and do they have any way to make historiography engaging like historical fiction?

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Sadia Saleem & Hasnain Saleem

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