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**OPIUM TRADE IN SEA OF POPPIES: A GEOGRAPHICAL AND POLITICAL LENS  
ATTACHED FOR ANALYSIS**

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**ABSTRACT**

Opium, through trade, connected China, India to the European markets. Trade emerged competitive, roots of which lied in the restrictions of tea imports. Maritime routes, ports, roads were the modes through which opium attained a global standard. All these were represented by Amitava Ghosh in his novel, Sea of Poppies. The novel is the first one to be composed in Ibis Trilogy. Here, Ibis is the ship which carries opium and indentured labors involved in exporting opium to Mauritius. Aim behind exports were to attain economic profits, which shadowed ethical considerations.

**Keywords:** Opium, trade, Sea of Poppies, geography, politics, lens, analysis

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Opium was a substance found in colonial times in India. During this time, India was under the rule of Britishers, who treated them as slaves. Poor peasants and farmers were forced into opium and poppy cultivation. If they denied, consequences were horrifying, dwindling their whole existence. For protecting their social status, they were left with no other choice than to submit to the orders of colonizers that is Britishers (Sawhney, 2025). All these experiences are felt by the readers when they read the novels composed during this period. One such novel is the Ibis Trilogy, which gained popularity through the hands of Amitava Ghosh. Within this Trilogy, one of the novels is Sea of Poppies.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Geographical lens**

First reading of the name of the novel in the trilogy, indicates a wide area on which opium is cultivated. Based on this, sea is the symbol of vastness, representing the quantity of opium being produced. From the literary lens, it can be asserted that Sea of Poppies, by Amitav Ghosh (2008), is the first novel in the Ibis Trilogy. Reading between the lines, readers get to know that the backdrop is 19th-century when relations between India and China were strengthened through opium trade. Through its characters and settings, Makovnyka, (2020) stated that the novel helps readers to explore how geography and imperial politics sketches opium economy. Besides sketching, these politics and geography also transforms societal constructs and their predicament across continents.

Geographical lens can be attached with the reference to Ganges River Basin, which is known as the land of exploitation. At the initial stage, readers find fertile plains of Bihar, particularly Ghazipur, where peasants are being forced to cultivate opium poppies instead of food crops. Experts were of the view that alluvial plains of the Ganges possess ideal soil for poppy cultivation. Reference can also be cited of British-controlled opium factories like Ghazipur Opium Factory. Here, Irum and Yaqoob, (2024) stated raw opium is cultivated and processed into export-ready chests. In this context, geography becomes a symbol for empire, which comprises of fertile land. Reading between the lines, readers are redirected from subsistence agriculture to cash-crop

monoculture. Rivers in these areas are transport artery used for carrying opium downstream to Calcutta. These downstream channels demonstrate integration of natural waterways into imperial trade networks.

Narrowing down the search, Calcutta can be investigated. Calcutta, earlier, was considered as colonial port city. Kolkata (then Calcutta) operated as the nerve center of Britishers for conducting imperial trade. Benefits of the city was extracted through connection between rural India to global markets. Docks enabled people to ship opium to China. According to Saha, (2024), the ports also helped the officials in departing indentured laborers bound for Mauritius, involved in exports. Urbanization in the domains of geography, reflects colonial hierarchy, which segregated Europeans and Indians. This separation reaffirmed colonial and political dominance.

The Indian Ocean and maritime routes are also important in this context. The ship Ibis travels across Indian Ocean toward Mauritius. Reading about the ship, readers get to know about the important sea routes, which connect India, China, and European markets. Readers are also exposed to the contributions of maritime geography with expansion in capitalism. Aulakh, (2019) was of the view that transformation of the ocean into an imperial highway makes the readers understand the symbol of water for both mobility and displacement. Evidences of this lies in the ship carry opium, convicts, and indentured laborers.

China and Canton connection emerged as a global demand during the colonial period. This was because of the opium trade. Guangzhou (Canton) represented demand side of the trade. China's restrictive trade policies intersected with British's commercial interests. This created an imbalance, igniting opium trade. Imports of tea by Britain was the main source, which triggered the war. Internationalization is also reflected here, which Sevim, (2025) supported with the links between South Asia to East Asia. This connection was nothing beneficial, as it emerged as the web of exploitation.

## **2.2 Political Lens**

Political lens comes from the policies enforced by British Colonies for evolving monopoly. Loans were advanced to peasants to involve them into contracts related to opium production. Monopoly was seen over the processing and exports of opium. Choudhary, G. (2025) stated that private traders were roped in for auctions, conducted in Calcutta. Control of British was established

through exerting colonial governance. Roots of this governance was found in extractions of peasants for economic profit gains. *Sea of Poppies* take the readers back into Opium wars, which raised between Britain and China. Smuggling of opium was unethical, still it was justified by Britain, through consideration of free trade. Dhar, (2022) stated that China attempted to conceal opium imports as a protection for the common people. Imperialism ignited political tensions, behind which there was military power.

Social hierarchies and power are represented from politics, which operates from multiple perspectives. Social classes concerned here were peasants, zamindars and British agents. Europeans were more privileged in terms of race, as they possessed more authority as compared to Indians and Chinese. Reference can be cited of women characters like Deeti, from the novel, who experience both colonial and patriarchal oppression. This is common to observe within the society even in the modern context. The ship, in this context, as Khorasani, (2025) stated, becomes a symbol of empire, where there is unequal distribution of law and power.

Here, capitalism and globalization are also significant. Opium trade in *Sea of Poppies* anticipates modern globalization, as commodities are produced in one region and exported to another. This process reshapes societies, transforming them in another. In this context, Díaz et al., (2025) stated that corporate power (East India Company) is sketched as a rival for the state authority. Economic interests overpower ethical considerations.

### **2.3 Integration of geography and politics**

In *Sea of Poppies*, geography is exempted from being passive. Instead, it is politically engraved. Fertile land, navigable rivers, strategic ports, and maritime corridors are used for gaining imperial profit through cultivation, processing and export of opium as a trade. Zaheer, Idris, and Idris, (2025) argued that British Empire transforms simple natural landscapes into global capitals. Policies are enforced for igniting economic dependency. Through the novel, readers get to know geographical formation of empires to cultivate opium and poppies. Politics, for readers of the novel, is a source, which organizes exploitation of poor farmers and peasants. These farmers and peasants' lives are put at stake for creating prospective global trade networks.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Based on the topic, case study analysis is effective for understanding the impacts created on readers from the novel, *Sea of Poppies*. Deductive approach comes next in sequence, to deduce the essential aspects from the cases considered. These cases are collected from secondary sources like books, journals, articles, government websites, reports and others.

### 4. CONCLUSION

Through geographical and political lens, *Sea of Poppies* exposes readers to the opium trade, which ignited from tea imports by Britishers during colonial period. This trade acted as a system sustained by environmental resources, imperial control, policies, ethics and global economic imbalance. This imbalance contradicts ethics, overpowering commercial interests of colonizers. The novel engulfs personal suffering within vast transnational global networks and structures, showing convergence of land, sea, and power towards the creation of a commercial empire.

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