

*Depiction of Ecological Factors in Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies*  
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## ***Depiction of Ecological Factors in Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies***

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### **Abstract**

*This paper deals with Amitav Ghosh's novel Sea of Poppies. It is a description of colonialism, ecological factors and its effect on environmental degradation. Ghosh is a famous Bengali Indian post-modern writer of English literature. Both natural and human made environment influence our life styles. The novel deals with the cultivation of opium and its harmful effects on the life of the people and the environment. Ghosh throws light on the crisis like social, culture and natural dominance in Sea of Poppies. There are many forms of environmental degradation. Cultivation of poppies hugely reduced the cultivation of food crops in Bihar. Poppies are beautiful petalled herbaceous plant with showy flowers, milky sap and rounded seed capsules. It contains alkaloids and is a source of drugs such as morphine and codeine. It makes the whole environment imbalanced and also affects the ecology of colonized lands. Lifespan of animals, insects, birds and plants are left mute and affected by consuming this opium. The waste properties of the opium factory are responsible for huge causes of health problems among humans and animals. The racial changes made in the environment to suit mankind's need are seen as the output of environmental degradation.*

**Key words:** *environmental degradation, pollution, opium, health issues, colonial rule.*

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## **Introduction**

Literature is purely a personal experience of an individual. It deals with the common questions of life, death, destiny and nature. Amitav Ghosh is a famous Bengali Indian post-modern writer of English literature. He was honoured with the Padmashri award by the Indian government in 2007. Ghosh's novels deal with history, politics, socialism, humanity, anthropology and art. He is a contemporary Indian-English writer and an eminent novelist. Ghosh has written several novels concerning colonial impact on colonized people as his main themes.

*Sea of Poppies* was written by Ghosh in the Year 2008, discusses the chronicles the ship's voyage and with it the history of opium trade. *Sea of Poppies* traces the historical evidences of the rural villages in the 18<sup>th</sup> century during colonialism and the effect on the environment in India. The novel has raised many issues including caste hierarchy, Zamindari system, domination of patriarchy, impoverishment, gender discrimination exploitation of slaves, racial problems, environmental lament and so on. The novel deals with the cultivation of opium and its harmful effect on the life of the people and the environment.

Environmental issue is a sociological problem that can affect the healthy surroundings. Ghosh throws light on the crisis like social, culture and natural dominance in *Sea of Poppies*. At present, environment issues are in full swing and it is assessed by theory worldwide. Human attitude is expressed in nature writings. This genre has many names like green nature studies, environmental literary criticism, Ecology and Ecocriticism, which are some branches of nature criticism. This paper focuses on how the environment gets polluted through human practices.

There are many forms of environmental degradation. When habitats are destroyed, biodiversity is lost, or natural resources are depleted, the environment is hurt. Pollution is occurring all over the world and poisoning the planet's oceans. In some areas, the natural environment has been exposed to hazardous waste. In other places, major disasters such as oil spills have ruined the local environment. For economic growth, new industries have earned a bad name for producing pollutants and harming the environment.

*Sea of Poppies* is a version of the forced opium trade in Bihar and Calcutta for the Chinese market and they play a vital role for the massive wealth of Britain. It flourishes on how the destiny of human environmental subjectivity was enforced upon the native population. Ghosh's novel refers to the deceptive ways in which the money minded British had earned through illegal production of opium. Ghosh's description desires readers to mark British rule upon the native population, which resulted in an enormous change in their occupation. Opium Factory is a prerequisite for economic development. But it has caused a large scale disturbance to the environment.

In the novel *Sea of Poppies*, cultivation of poppies hugely reduced the cultivation of food crops in Bihar. The story begins at Ghazipur, where poppies were produced in a large amount during the British regime. Ghosh describes the biotic component of the environment, "the Ganga seemed to be flowing between twin glaciers, both its banks being blanketed by thick drifts of white - petalled flowers." (SP 1) Physical component of the environment is the hydrosphere. It gets polluted by the human beings. The Indo-Gangetic plains are best suited for producing poppies.

The novel shows that the fertile land of the Gangetic plains blooms only with the beautiful petalled poppy flowers. They are beautiful but poisonous objects which spoil the farmers' practice of growing traditional crops for their livelihood. The beautiful petalled poppy flowers make the whole environment imbalanced and also affect the ecology of colonized lands.

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; food was so hard to come by, that people were glad to lick the leaves in which offerings were made at temples, or sip the starchy water from a pot in which rice had been boiled. (SP 202),

The above said lines depict the humans' depressed condition and oppression of the surroundings which were man-made. As such, Ghosh points out the environmental crisis. The Earth is called a cow that gives milk which is nourishing. Ghosh describes the character Deeti, wife of opium addict Hukum Singh, and the mother of young child. Deeti's life is cursed by opium trade, who runs her life as an agriculturist after her husband's demise. Indian peasants were forced to cultivate opium in the vast land. It is the reason for both cause and effect of environmental degradation on the rural poor. Deeti has limited resources for her livelihood.

Cultivation of poppies is the major reason for the environment problem that leads to the unhealthy life style of Deeti's family and the neighbourhood in the village. The cultivation of opium demands extra care and labour which proves to be an extra burden to the native farmers especially, when the farmers are not getting much profit from opium cultivation.

Ghosh views that as a result human activities which are harmful for nature are on the rise, something which is invariably taking a toll on our natural surroundings. That which pertains to land is improper use of land which leads to several problems

including soil erosion, degradation of land and desertification. “The sap seemed to have a pacifying effect even on the butterflies, which flapped their wings in oddly erratic patterns, as though they could not remember how to fly. One of these landed on the back of Kabutri’s hand and would not take its wing until it was thrown up in the air.” (SP 28), Ghosh reveals the effect of opium in butterflies.

Human beings will become addicted to opium for joy and pleasure or hidden reasons. Intake of opium continuously causes psycho –somatic disorder among human beings and opium affects all the living beings in the environment. Poppies are very bright and colourful. They are made up of three layers of cell, butterflies get attracted towards the flower and suck the nectar of the poppies. Ghosh states that the poppy pod attracts insects for pollination and serves as food for many plant eaters. Non-human lifespan forms like animals, insects, birds and plants are left mute and silent by consuming this opium.

The monkeys that lived around it, for instance: Deeti pointed a few of these out to Kabutri as the ox-cart trundled towards the walls. Unlike others of their kind, they never chattered or fought or stole from passers-by; when they came down from the trees it was to lap at the open sewers that drained the factory’s effluents after having sated their cravings, they would climb back into the branches. (SP 91)

Ghosh makes the readers observe the drug on animals such as monkeys which lived near the opium factory. Humans who are exposed to the drug eventually become addicted to or dependent on the drug. Similarly, Ghosh states that monkeys lost their temper and addicted to this poison. They behaved in an abnormal way and were not able to swift from one place to another place spontaneously. The waste properties of the opium factory are responsible for huge causes of health problems among humans and animals.

People living near factories often suffer from headaches, nausea and respiratory distress due to the far-reaching effects of factory. “The belief was widespread that fish were more easily caught after they had nibbled at the shards, and as a result the bank was always crowded with fishermen.”(SP 92)water is a spectacular natural resource, and next to air, the important requirement for all organisms is water. Ghosh describes that the impure water is widespread in the river. The impure water is not a precious resource to humans and animals.

Fish could be caught easily with an earthen ware filled with opium. The opium factory was surrounded by the river Ganga, and even the fish get addicted to opium. Fishermen use opium filled Gharas as a tool to catch the fish easily without any stress. “The air inside was hot and fetid, like that of a closed kitchen, except that the smell was not of spices and oil, but of liquid opium, mixed with the dull stench of

sweat a reek so powerful that she had to pinch her nose to keep herself from gagging.” (SP 92) Ghosh glimpses about the worker's condition in an opium factory through Deeti's visit to the factory. Polluted air is the fifth leading cause of death in India. It faces an unprecedented public health crisis due to polluted air. Opium has many negative effects on dulling all the senses among workers in the factory. Gosh compares the opium factory with a kitchen. “Nature gives us fire, water and the rest it demands to be used with the greatest care and caution.”(SP 92), the writer delivers the message to the reader about the environment which is created by nature. Human environment refers to changes that have been made by man on those natural elements. Both natural and human made environment influence our life styles.

Ghosh has tried to depict the harmful effect of opium which destroys the entire environment. The colonial rulers implemented cultivation of poppies for their own benefit, but it affects the whole environment, land, air, animals, insects and humans. This fiction is a documentary for environmental degradation. There is so much around us that is natural. The land on which we build on houses, the air we breathe, the rivers that provide us water for drinking and irrigation are all part of our natural environment.

Human interaction with the environment started from the moment man appeared on earth. The early man afraid of lightening, thunder, dense forests and darkness, started worshipping different aspects of nature. Human activities or interaction with the environment had very little impact on it. The racial changes he made in the environment to suit his need is the output of environmental degradation.

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