CHAPTER – III

Monoculture: An Environmental Curse in Sea of Poppies

Whatever is being contrived in the fields of science, technology, economics, history, literature, sociology or other branches of knowledge, environment and ecology play a paramount role. Humans have always been preserver, conserver, exploiter, and destroyer and scourged in relation to eco-environment. In the history of English literature, different eras have particular time span and location where the different events occurred. Sea of Poppies by Amitav Ghosh published in 2008 is set prior to the opium wars and is the first volume of Ibis trilogy on the nineteenth century opium trade and its effect on the lives of a group of variously ordinary people: a young widow, Deeti; an American sailor, Zachery Reid; a Krishna worshipper, Baboo Nob Kissin; a heroic untouchable, Kalua; a Chinese convict, Ah Fatt; an enigmatic lascar, Serang Ali; a raja (landlord), Neel Rattan Halder; bilked by a ruthless British opium businessman, Mr. Burnham; Paulette, an orphan, daughter of a French botanist Pierre Lambert and others.

Sea of Poppies is an account of the imposed opium monoculture in Bihar and Calcutta for the Chinese market responsible for the enormous wealth of Britain. It highlights how the fate of the human beings in this hinterland is written by poppy flowers and its entire ecosystem is entrapped by ecological imperialism. Imperialism not only concerns the devastating effects on colonized community but includes its adverse effect on the ecology of colonized lands. Alfred Crosby and Richard Grove— the British environmental historians coined the term ‘Ecological Imperialism’, in the wake of such issues. The term refers to “the violent appropriation of indigenous land to ill-considered introduction of non-domestic livestock and European agricultural practices” (Huggan and Tiffan 3). Ecological imperialism is defined as the intentional destruction through exploitation, extraction and transfer of natural resources of the colonized lands in the interest of scientific and economic progress. It is therefore a manifestation of anthropocentric thought of British Empire to exploit and re-shape the ecosystem of colonized bio-
regions for their own economic welfare. The anthropocentric worldview is the root cause of ecocide. William Rueckert aptly writes:

\[\ldots\] we are in an environmental crisis because the means by which we use the ecosphere to produce wealth are destructive of the ecosystem itself. The present system of production is self destructive. The present course of human civilization is suicidal. In our unwitting march towards ecological suicide we have run out of options. Human beings have broken out of the circle of life, driven not by biological need, but by social organization which they have devised to conquer nature \ldots (116)

Ecological degradation due to excessive exploitation of nature is underscored by Ghosh in the novel, when he refers to the deceptive ways in which Britishers make money through illegal production of opium.

Ghosh’s narrative urges readers to take the review of British imperialism in the Indian subcontinent. During the imperial rule, a range of economic, social, physical, political and environmental subjectivations were enforced upon the native populations, which resulted in seismic changes in their traditional occupation and their ecosystems. British policies in the Indian subcontinent resulted in the transformation from the feudal system to a zemindari (landlord) system of land ownership, where the tax collector or zemindar became the proprietor of the land. As a result, the poor natives were struggling to facilitate their needs under the double burden of zemindari exploitation as well as colonial exploitation of their lands and labour. Agricultural production was forced to change from staple wheat, pulses and other food items to the cultivation of cash crops most notably opium, the drug who’s export brought huge profits to the empire. This new cultivation encapsulated large areas of India and broke the age-old crop cycles. This, in turn, damaged irreparably and irreversibly the sustainable ways of land use and life.

In Sea of Poppies the British merchants are shown to be pathologically addicted to the growing and selling of opium, abusing natives to grow opium to
meet their insatiable greed for it. Through this novel, Ghosh calls opium as the root of strength of imperial Europe. As he states in many of his interviews, he does investigate the silence around Britain’s role in the drug trade of the nineteenth century. Ghosh refers to opium as among the most precious jewels in Queen Victoria’s crown. He is in agreement with an economist, Carl Trocki’s contention that, “without the drug, there probably would have been no British Empire since the economic foundation of the imperial economy lay on opium” (Trocki xiii). Trocki states that by the middle of the nineteenth century, opium was a major source of government revenue and a major export in British India. In the novel, Burnham, a leading opium merchant of East India Company admits the same fact to Zachary Reid, an American sailor that the main motive of the East India Company’s stay in India is the flourished trade of opium. He further asserts that, otherwise, there is no point of the Britishers to still have the clause of its rule clenched in this impoverished land. According to him, opium is the easy source of wealth for them. He reveals to him the astounding fact that the East India Company’s monthly outcome from opium trade is equivalent to the yearly revenue of big nation like America. Ghosh subtly explains the role that colonial powers play in the opium trade. He asserts that under the rubric of the East India Company, Britain becomes a drug-dealer and India becomes her poppy field. Ghosh makes an effort to present colonialism as an ecocidal venture. He critiques the ecocultural damage brought by India’s prolonged brush with the British imperialistic machinery.

The novel shows how this forced monoculture of poppies leads to the physical subjugations and ruins lives of farmers and local poor factory workers. Ghosh draws upon a gamut of torture and punishment devices used by the Britishers on Indian peasants to facilitate their interests. Ramachandra Guha very aptly maintains that the colonialism that claims to civilize and provide sustainable development among the colonized has succeeded in “pauperising millions of people in the agrarian sector and diminishing the stock of plant, water and soil resources at a terrifying rate” (qtd. in Huggan and Tiffin1). In the same manner, Ghosh shows how imperialists start controlling and owning the lands of Bihar and
Calcutta by forcing monoculture of poppy in a greedy manner. However natives try to resist but they are helpless in front of the outsiders. DeLoughrey and Handley in “Introduction: Toward an Aesthetics of the Earth” quotes Edward Said:

If there is any thing that radically distinguishes the imagination of anti-imperialism, it is the primacy of the geographical in it. Imperialism after all is an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control. For the native, the history of colonial servitude is inaugurated by the loss of locality to the outsider, its geographical identity must there after be searched for and somehow restored. (3)

The novel shows that the fertile land of the Gangetic plains blooms only with poppies that are beautiful but deadly which deny the farmers the right to grow the traditional crops to sustain themselves. As such, in the novel, Ghosh clearly highlights environmental racism imposed by Britishers on poor colonized people. Environmental racism is a form of ecological imperialism. Dean Curtin, an American environmental philosopher defines environmental racism as, “the connection in theory and practice, of race and the environment so that the oppression of one is connected to, and supported by, the oppression of other” (qtd. in Huggan and Tiffan 4). Environmental racism draws a parallel between the exploitation of indigenous ecologies to the oppression of the colonized community. In the novel, Ghosh shows that the lands that have once provided sustenance are now swamped with the rising tide of poppies. He presents many such accounts in the novel, showing how the peasant farmers are obliged to turn over their fields to opium production that causes widespread poverty and hunger. They are unable to feed their families. They often go without food and as such are undernourished or malnourished as human physiology needs multi-nutrients to carry on their life processes. The lack of food resources has an adverse effect on their health in general. This is how they suffer because of the cultivation of a single crop. The lack of different varieties of food in the region leaves the locals poor and ravenous:
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. (202)

The above extract of the novel depicts the miserable human condition. It shows oppression of environment by humans and oppression of humans by humans. As such, Ghosh points towards the environmental injustice and environmental racism imposed upon collective bodies of life that entails both human and non-human existence.

Ghosh introduces the character of Deeti as a victim of the opium. From the first day of her marriage to opium-seduced, impotent and handicapped man, Hukum Singh, her life is dictated and cursed by opium. She loses her land—which is her only hope of sustenance to opium. Inspite of toiling hard, her harvest of poppy is not sufficient to meet her family's day-to-day basic necessities. Managing the house hold responsibilities and caught up in poverty and hunger, she gets badly trapped in debts. Portraying her as a victim of the curse of opium, Ghosh writes:

She gave in and agreed to place the impression of her thumb on the Seth’s account book in exchange for six month’s worth of wheat, oil and gurh. Only as she was leaving did it occur to her to ask how much she owed and what the interest was. The Seth’s answers took her breath away: his rates were such that her debt would double every six months; in a few years, all the land would be forfeit. Better to eat weeds than to take such a loan: she tried to return the
goods but it was too late. I have your thumbprint now, said the Seth, gloating. There’s nothing to be done. (156)

*Sea of Poppies* clarifies that with the arrival of imperialists, there is a shift towards the concept of working to survive. It throws light on the status quo of agriculture in India and emphasizes the environmental injustice caused to the land and to the people. Though unwilling, people are forced to adapt this new crop culture as Britishers would go from home to home, forcing cash advances on the farmers and their forged thumbprint. The farmers are unwilling but bound to such contracts because if they refuse, the British soldiers would hide the silver in their houses to prove them culprits and make them convicts to be transported beyond the seas as indentured servants. In addition, their refusal to oblige leads to forfeiture of their properties.

Deeti is not a conscious environmentalist but her awareness with regards to significance of nature in human life is derived from the fact that the natural world plays an important role in sustaining human life. Ghosh, through the character of Deeti tries to highlight how green and greenery of nature relieve humans of the tensions and pressures of life. Many biological researches reveal that the surrounding environment has a great power to increase or reduce the stress and other emotional pressures. A sound environment helps one to cope up with the anxieties of life. The stress of an unpleasant environment causes one to feel anxious and worrisome. The growth and peace in the human world develops in accordance with the tranquility to be found in nature. Deeti laments over the lost greenery of the landscape. She bewails for this loss and infers the change in the landscape as:

... it seemed to her that the Karamnasa’s influence had spilled over its banks, spreading its blight far beyond the lands that drew upon its waters: the opium harvest having been recently completed, the plants have been left to wither in the fields, so that the countryside was blanketed with the parched remnants. Except for the foliage of
the few mango and jackfruit trees, nowhere was there anything green to relieve the eye. (192)

Ghosh through the snippets of narrative succeeds in presenting the problems posed by opium to the environment. The novel focuses on the lives of Indians particularly the peasants and shows how opium succeeds in storming into their lives and create havoc. It provides a vivid picture of the exploited farming class. Deeti maintains that earlier they lived in harmony with nature. She yearns for useful crops like wheat, *dal* and vegetables. These gestures of Deeti show a happy and symbiotic environment of the earlier times. Earlier farmers would keep a little of their home-made opium for their families, to be used during illnesses, or at harvests and weddings; the rest they would sell to the local nobility, or to “pykari” merchants from Patna.

Deeti is aware of the curse posed by monoculture. She notices that there are no vegetables or grains but only glaciers of white-petalled poppies. She longs for the lost rich and varied seasonal crops that are useful to them in many ways. She recollects the memory of lost varieties. According to her, during winters, fields used to be covered with wheat and after the spring harvest; the straw would be used for different purposes like fixing the hut roofs. She realizes that it has been seven years since roof of her hut was last hatched. She does not have money to buy a handful of straw. The Britishers have left the natives handicapped by raising the price of small accessories like straw. Being helpless to fix the roof of her hut because of the unavailability of thatch, she murmers:

. . . in this age of flowers, thatch was not easy to come by in the olden 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 sahibs forcing everyone to grow poppy, no one had thatch to spare. (29)

The monoculture imposed has certain short-term benefits, primarily in terms of economy of scale. Monoculture farming method has numerous negative effects on the environment and further more these negative effects tend to become
amplified over the long run. The most compelling disadvantage of monoculture farming is that it is not adaptable. Wild ecosystems are diverse and wild populations of plants and animals are also diverse. Greg Garrard in his book *Ecocriticism* warns, “The ultimate concern about species is that they may become extinct due to human activities” (176). An ecosystem contains numerous different species, each with unique adaptations to its environment and distinct strengths and weaknesses in response to changing conditions. Similarly, the natural population of plant or animal species has genetic variability and each individual plant or animal has slightly different traits. Furthermore, each population and the ecosystem as a whole is constantly changing, adapting to the changing environmental conditions and the conditions imposed by the other populations and species in the ecosystem. Monoculture destroys the diversity and replaces it with single species and single rows of genetically identical crops. The monoculture crops are not changing and are not able to adapt because they have no genetic variability and as such do not reproduce naturally. Ghosh is a supporter and advocate of biodiversity. Christopher Manes in his essay “Nature and Silence” condemns monoculture and quotes views of Thomas Aquinas an Italian theologian:

> The goodness of the species transcends the goodness of the individual, as form transcends matter; therefore the multiplication of species is a greater addition to the good of the universe than the multiplication of individuals of a single species. The perfection of the universe therefore requires not only a multitude of individuals, but also diverse kinds, and therefore diverse grades of things. (20)

The imposed monoculture results in stoic silence of nature and natives. Both nature and natives wait for a chance to break free from the shackles of their masters but they keep a vigilant eye on them and crush all signs of resistance from them. The Britishers gain control of natives only after they conquer nature. They gain control on their lands and as such, exploit the poor families. It is pertinent here to mention DeLoughrey and Handley, who in the “Introduction: Toward an Aesthetics of the Earth” quotes Franz Fanon, “For a colonized people the most
essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity” (3).

Earlier poppies used to be only a luxury grown in small clusters. But now, no one is inclined to the plantation of poppies as these peasants are forced to grow it on vast areas of land. When planted in excess, this plantation takes many ploughings of the land and takes tremendous effort for the poppy clods to be broken by hand. It also requires fences and bunds to be built, constant watering and a good supply of manures. It seems like a punishment for farmers to grow poppy at large. Ghosh explains that as compared to useful crops like wheat, dal, and other vegetables, 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. As a result of this cultivation, natives are facing shortage of toothsome winter crops and on top of that are facing difficulties at the hands of gluttonous and covetous factory owners. The peasants are forced to sell the harvest to the East India Company which not only rules the country but has a monopoly in this forced trade. Ghosh avers the fact that opium is the exclusive monopoly of the British that is produced and packaged entirely under the supervision of the East India Company. These poor peasants have no control even over their own produce as opium is bought by the company run factories at arbitrary prices. Alfred Crosby in *The Columbian Exchange* and *Ecological Imperialism* reflects on ways in which both material and ideas are exchanged between colonizing and colonized worlds. Colonizers have always imported and introduced cash crops in the annexed terrains by exterminating local ecosystems and marginalizing the down trodden.

The British merchant’s heavy surveillance of the Sudder Opium Factory in Ghazipur leaves no doubt about the immense value of opium. It is the life of factory workers that is being risked by the agents of factory for their own profit, “The fortifications here were formidable, and the guards particularly sharp-eyed and well they might be, for the contents of those few sheds, or so it was said, were worth several million pounds sterling and could buy a good part of the city of
London” (91). Environmental injustice is portrayed at its best in Ghosh’s description of the opium factory. The inhumane working condition of the employees in the factory is witnessed by Deeti, who goes there to take her sick opium addict husband home from work. She goes there with her six year old daughter, Kabutri in Kalua’s cart. Kalua is the driver of the ox-cart, who usually drives Hukum Singh from his house to factory. Deeti notices that the workers inside are subjected to the most deplorable working conditions. The factory looms like a demon in the lives of workers and their families. Environmental injustice imposed on the poor employers of the opium factory is brought forth by Ghosh when Deeti approaches the factory:

. . . her eyes were met by a startling sight- a host of dark, legless torsos was circling around and around, like some enslaved tribe of demons. This vision- along with the overpowering fumes- made her groggy, and to keep herself from fainting she began to move slowly ahead. When her eyes had grown more accustomed to the gloom, she discovered the secret of those circling torsos: they were bare bodied men, sunk waist- deep in tanks of opium, tramping round and round to soften the sludge. Their eyes were vacant, glazed, and yet somehow they managed to keep moving, as slow as ants in honey, tramping, treading. When they could move no more, they sat on the edges of the tanks, stirring the dark ooze only with their feet. These seated men had more the look of ghouls than any living thing she had ever seen: their eyes glowed red in the dark and they appeared completely naked. (94-95)

In the above passage, Ghosh narrates the whole trauma that Deeti goes through in an ecological metaphor. She identifies the victims in the factory as slow moving ants having looks of ghouls. In the opium factory, there is an opium filled environment and poor workers are compelled to work under such hazardous conditions. The workers are made to sink in deep in the opium filled tanks. They are made to trudge and rove like animals to soften the sludge. Deeti finds these
workers naked and they appear like circling torsos. The scene leaves her bewildered and confound. Even children are not spared from working in this opium polluted environment. These workers are made to work for long hours without any rest and are subjected to most inhumane treatment. They are even caned and punished for trivial mistakes. The factory is full of hazardous, unhealthy and unhygienic atmosphere, “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” (94).

The novel confronts the readers with the appalling working conditions in the opium factory; the miasmic fog that envelopes it, the sickly odour of opium sap that hangs in the air and the smell of the liquid opium mixed with sweat and stench. As per Hukum Singh’s earlier statement, about two hundred and fifty men are made to work in every single concentrated room. The scene at factory invokes horror and pity. Besides factory’s inner environment, its surroundings are mushroomed up with dirty and intolerable poppy fog. There is a miasma of lethargy always hanging over the factories vicinity. As Kalua’s cart rumbles towards factory’s main compound, all the passengers including Deeti, Kabutri, Kalua and even oxen sniff and try to resist the environmental pollution caused by a fine dust of poppy trash that hangs in the air like a fog of snuff. Ghosh highlights the effect of poppy filled air even on the animals of the surroundings:

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 to resume their stupefied scrutiny of the Ganga and its currents. (91)

Ghosh skillfully highlights the impact of this poisonous drug on human as well as non-human world. Being a deep ecologist, he is equally distressed on noticing the
tranquil effects of opium on animals such as monkeys, who have lost their chatter and ways of existence. They are presented no more like their fellow beings. These animals are shown to be seduced by and addicted to this poison. Ghosh makes the readers observe the streaming noses of the oxen. The animals passing by get entrapped in this sort of pollution. Ghosh’s vigilance about the animals who live in the vicinity of opium factory run parallel to the vision of John Tallmadge, who in “Toward a Natural History of a Reading” very aptly writes, “although the world ‘speaks’, we have grown deaf; we do not think of other beings in nature as ethical equals, possessing valued attributes such as language, feelings, or character; as a result, we recklessly consume and despoil” (283).

Ghosh exhorts and also shows his concern for holy river Ganga. He points to the fact that it has also become a victim to pollution because waste and effluents of opium factory is let mercilessly into it. Having an ecological vision, Ghosh not only focuses his vision on terrestrial life forms- humans as well as non-humans but also on the aquatic life forms. It is a fact that water bodies have always been used as dumps for wastes. These wastes in the form of chemical effluents get into water and then to aquatic environment. It is believed that even the fish are under the tranquil effect of opium. The fishermen have easy access to fish in this stretch of water. These chemical effluents through the aquatic life pass on to terrestrial life forms and as such the chain continues. Ghosh depicts this long chain disturbance as:

This stretch of river bank was unlike any other, for the ghats around the Carcanna were shored up with thousands of broken earthenware gharas- the round bottomed vessels in which raw opium was brought to the factory. The belief was widespread that fish were more easily caught after they had nibbed at the shards, and as a result the bank was always crowded with fishermen. (92)

Ghosh like Jonathan Bate is a key figure in the context of re-union between humanity and nature and views that the root of modern human malaise is its separation from its original unity with nature. Bate in Romantic Ecology details the
emergence of an environmental and ecological consciousness, that is the result of noting the destruction of forest and farm lands by urban sprawl, as well as recognizing what Wordsworth, in his eighth book of *The Excursion* calls the ‘outrage done to nature’ by newly established factories that foul the air and pollute the water ways. Ghosh’s consciousness about this pollution makes him observe a pacifying effect of opium even on insects like bees, grasshoppers, wasps and butterflies. The butterflies flap their wings in oddly erratic patterns, as though they do not remember how to fly. One of the butterflies land on the back of Kabutri’s hand and is not able to take wings until it is thrown up in the air. Ghosh’s such concerns seems to be in resonance with a great ecocritic Christopher Manes who in his essay “Nature and Silence” writes, “It is as if we had compressed the entire buzzing, howling, gurgling biosphere into the narrow vocabulary of epistemology” (15). He writes that it is because of human’s anthropocentric dominance, nature including minorities and non-human life forms like animals, insects, birds, plants and even inert entities such as stones and rivers are left mute and silent. A similar fact is manifested by Philosopher, David Abram, who in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, a work that has aroused considerable interest among ecocritics, argues that:

Our environmental problems have arisen because we have lost the habit of relating to other creatures in a manner consistent with how we actually perceive them; we regard beings in nature as inscrutable, mysterious, incomprehensible, or ‘other’, but a close phenomenological analysis shows that we actually encounter them synesthetically as perceiving, expressive beings who interact with us in an ‘intersubjective field’. (qtd. in Tallmadge 283)

The poppy functions as a metaphor at many opposing levels: as the creator and palliative agent of physical misery, as the cause of agricultural collapse, and also as the sole means of eking out a livelihood under the British rule. It also functions as the incentive for trade and war. While explicitly implicating the imperial powers for agricultural subjugation, Ghosh also clearly exposes the role of the native “rajas”, who enjoy the financial rewards of complicity in this exercise as
long as they remain on the right side of the imperial power. This is evident in the initial portrayal of Neel Rattan and his late father’s business dealings with the colonizers. Ramchandra Guha in *Environmentalism: A Global History* rightly says:

In India and Malaya the businessmen and industrialists (the most hostile critics of the greens) are joined by state officials and technocrats, with both private and public promoters of development attacking environmentalists as motivated by foreigners... or as wishing only to keep tribal and rural people ‘backward’, placed in a museum for themselves and their fellow romantics to gawk at. (124)

Neel Rattan is the owner of Raskhali estates, who are considered as one of the oldest and most noted landed families of Bengal. Their family fortunes, have long been dependent on the firm founded by Benjamin Burnham. Later on, Neel also gets trapped in the debts of Burnham Company. He is cleverly confronted by Mr Burnham with the need to sell off his estate in order to pay for the debt he gets in because of the opium trade with them. Neel denies selling off his property; as a result, he is falsely convicted for the crime of forgery by Burnham, an influential British opium merchant. His property is seized and sold; he is ill treated, jailed and transported beyond the seas, to the penal settlement on the Mauritius Island for a period of seven years.

Deeti occupies the lowest end of the hugely profitable opium production machinery, living in an inadequately thatched hut with a little food to eat and little financial sources. The great divide between the lives of natives like Deeti and Neel is evident in the novel. Later on both become victims to the power of British on their lands. This control over their lands is an attempt to turn both natives as well as land impotent and infertile for their own immediate benefits. Thomas Berry, an ecotheologian writes:

Since the human survives only with in this larger complex of ecosystems, any damage done to other species, or to other ecosystems, or to the planet itself, eventually affects the human not only in terms of physical well being but also in every other phase of
human intellectual understanding, aesthetic expression and spiritual
development. (qtd. in Ashford 68)

Ghosh highlights the condition of natives- humans as well as non-humans and shows how this monoculture is working against the natural laws according to which ecosystems work. It is completely unsustainable in the long run and has got crucial negative environmental effects. Here pollution becomes an ecological problem created deliberately by the intervention of British imposed monoculture. Ghosh alarms about a kind of pollution that is visible to the senses, can accumulate over time in body tissues, and can produce chronic as well as acute poisoning. The horror of opium addiction finds detailed description in the novel. Britishers deliberately encourage the use of opium among the common masses so that the demand for opium increases and more number of agriculturalists are forced to cultivate opium. Through the character of Deeti’s husband, Hukum Singh, Ghosh shows the physical misery caused due to impact of poppy on the human species of ecosphere. Deeti discovers the power of opium when she uses it to sedate her troublesome mother-in-law. She realizes that even tiny doses of opium can tame the power of mighty human creatures. She further says that even a small dose of this poison is sufficient to enslave mighty kingdoms of the world and leave the whole planet in disaster. The drug gives a momentarily sigh of relief but leaves its consumers crippled for ever and kill their desires. Ghosh rightly conveys through one of the characters of the novel, Captain Chillingworth that after consuming this drug, one loses its hold on earth. It seems as if the pull of earth’s gravity automatically finishes and the body becomes as light as clouds. It seems to ease out every trace of tension from the body and mind. Ghosh warns readers about the ill effects of the opium drug as it produces illusionary respite but ultimately damage the body tissues forever. He identifies the uncontrolled motion of Captain’s fingers as motion of slow-worms. This is how the drug accumulates in the organ systems and cause addiction and intoxication.

Deeti’s husband and Ah Fatt are reduced to a heap of filth and grime because of drugs. Ah Fatt is an opium addict from Canton. He is son of an Indian
opium merchant, Bahram Modi and a Chinese boatwoman, Chee-mei. He is falsely accused of robbery by Britishers and is sentenced to be moved to Mauritius as an indentured servant. In Alipur jail, Neel is made to share his cell with Ah Fatt. Neel discovers his cellmate’s physical condition unbearable to be watched as the intoxication of the drug has disfigured him physically as well as mentally. His body tissues and muscles are totally weakened, “The outlines of his muscles would show through the grime on his skin, alternately contracting into knots and then briefly relaxing, but only to seize up again: it was like looking at a pack of rats squirming in a sack” (321). Neel narrates the whole trauma he undergoes through on seeing the helplessness of his cellmate. He identifies Ah Fatt’s body as if a pack of rats in a sack. Noticing the horrible physical symbols, helplessness of a grown human being, Ghosh brings forth the ill effects of opium on human bodies. When Hukum Singh, Deeti’s opium addict husband falls sick and is bed-ridden; Deeti encounters the horrors of opium addiction. His condition gets enfeebled day by day because of the intoxication of opium. He is neither able to sleep, nor eat. He soils himself so often that his bed is moved out of doors. He gets out of consciousness and loses awareness of his own surroundings. Ghosh boldly warns about the abuses of the drug. He clarifies that this poisonous drug, injures the life for ever. Smoking opium, in its first stages, impedes business; and when the practice is continued for any considerable length of time, it throws whole families into ruin, dissipates every kind of property, and destroys humans for ever.

Ghosh in the novel shows how the Britishers gain a complete hold on native peasants and nobility and there is a little viable option for them to resist back. The cultivation of opium leads to exploitation of human beings and their physical environment alike. Both become victims at hands of monoculture brutally imposed on them by British imperialists. Ghosh draws attention to these historical consequences of imperialism leading to migration and displacement of people leaving behind their native lands under cruel occupation of deadly crop of poppies. Murali Sivaramakrishnan in Ecological Criticism for our Times writes:
grave environmental crisis, no doubt, posing a threat to human existence and the need for creating a sustainable and balanced relationship between man and the natural world is one of the urgent social and environmental issues being felt by men across the globe in this millennium. (256)

*Sea of Poppies* is imbued by a deep commitment to human values. The novel traverses the least treaded path of Indian colonial history by exposing the crafty business acumen of British, who scrapes India of its riches and leaves its people exploited and defenseless. For these helpless people, migration to other countries seems the only available course with a dream of a harmonious life. People are ready for taking the drastic risk of crossing the Andaman sea or black waters. These people on the land behave in a different manner, each of them belong to different community, religion or caste and are bound to strict conventions. While black water erases their caste, class and past, *Ibis* fills new essence in their lives. *Ibis* is a schooner that was formerly a slave carrier between Africa and America. It was used to transport slaves from Africa to America, but after the abolition of slavery, the schooner is sold to British shipping company, Burnham Bros, in Calcutta to transport indentured labourers from colonized countries to new colonies like Mauritius in the Caribbean islands.

Destiny brings varied characters together on *Ibis* which sails across the Indian Ocean towards the Mauritius islands. Ghosh presents *Ibis* as an ecotopia for these people who are uncertain about their future. Ecotopia is defined as an ecologically ideal region or form of society. Its origin is from the title of a novel by Ernest Callenbach, originally denoting the pacific coast of the US. Regarding the environment of ecotopia, a society is created in which humans develop a different perspective of their relationship to the environment and put it into practical actions. Anupama Arora observes the *Ibis*, “gets invested with new symbolic meanings by the migrants and is remade into a vehicle of transformation from which new selves and identities emerge” (38). Ghosh creates a vivid world, peopled by characters of different cultural backgrounds on *Ibis*. This vessel is portrayed by him as a
metaphor for a huge womb where the characters are socially reborn. He has skillfully taken different characters from multiple backgrounds aboard. Deeti, the high caste widow and her low caste lover, Kalua come on the ship to escape persecution; a young French woman born and brought up in Calcutta comes aboard dressed as a Brahmin woman; a land lord and raja, Neel Rattan, fasely accused of forgery finds a friend in a recovering opium addict, Ah Fatt from China; a hill man, Ecka Nack from Sahibganj finds his life partner in a woman, Heeru from plains. Old identities begin to dissolve on the ship, Ibis.

All characters aboard have a tale of exploitation, torment and deprivation. Each one’s past narrates the wrongs done to them by the tyranny of the ruling class. Kalua is a socially low class untouchable, who is unfit in his own habitat. He is treated inhumanly by the village landlords. Being led like a horse, some drunken high caste zemindars (landlords) perpetuates a forced act of his bestiality with a mare. This act of humiliation, destruction and human exploitation leaves him a complete non-human, “Kalua uttered a cry that was almost indistinguishable in tone from the whinnying of the horse” (57). This act exemplifies both human abuse and animal abuse. Animal abuse refers to the harm or suffering imposed on an animal for sake of personal pleasure or amusement. Depicting this scene, Ghosh purposefully mentions that during this bestial act, the mare reares, as if in a response to a snake bite and gallops off instantly. In Postcolonial Ecocriticism Huggan and Tiffan quotes Cary Wolf, an American poet and bioethicist:

The humanist concept of subjectivity is inseparable from the discourse and institution of a speciesism which relies on the tacit acceptance that the full transcendence to the human requires the sacrifice of the animal and the animalistic, which in turn makes possible a symbolic economy in which we can engage in a ‘non-criminal putting to death’, as Derrida phrases it, not of animals but of humans as well by marking them as animals. (5)

Deeti is surprised and awestruck with this scene of human exploitation. Watching the sight of Kalua’s exploitation, she is thunderstruck, “So it could happen to a
man too? Even a powerful giant of a man could be humiliated and destroyed, in a way that far exceeded his body’s capacity for pain” (57). Kalua has really lost his place in the world. He makes his cattle-pen where his two small white oxen live, his dwelling place. At this juncture, there is a reference to the violation of Deeti’s body as she is rendered unconscious by opium at the hands of her in-laws on her wedding night so that her brother-in-law, Chandan Singh can consummate the marriage in place of her impotent husband.

Migration in a way is an escape from the extreme physical and psychological hardships. When Deeti’s husband dies, she sends her daughter, Kabutri to stay with relatives. She chooses to go with sati ritual (immolation on husband’s funeral pyre). Kalua rescues Deeti from her husband’s funeral pyre and in order to escape persecution, the two sign a document on Ibis so that they would be transported to Mauritius as indentured labourers.

Zachery Reid, the Ibis’s foreman, conceals his mixed race status from his British employers fearing discrimination and loss of livelihood. He runs away from the American racial discrimination as he is born to a slave mother and a white father. He is aboard with a new identification hoping for a better place in the world.

Paulette, an orphan French girl escapes from her foster home because of a proposed marriage with an old British judge, Justice Kendalbushe. Moreover, she is sexually abused by Mr Burnham. She gains access to Ibis by disguising herself as a Brahmin’s daughter.

Sarju has been a midwife, left homeless because of her mistake in delivery of a thakur’s son. Two sisters, married to a pair of brothers whose lands are contracted to the opium factory are left with no sources to survive. They decide to indenture themselves to remote place across blackwaters in order to find a sustainable dwelling. Ibis gives them refuge. Another married woman Dookhanee along with her husband escapes long endured oppression of a violently abusive mother-in-law. On the board Ibis, old identities begin to dissolve. The barriers of caste, class, and religion are all eventually broken down. This new established
family, at a new place begins to identify themselves as jahaz- bhai and jahaz-bhen,

On a boat of pilgrims, no one can lose caste and every one is the same: it’s like taking a boat to the temple of jagannath, in Puri. From now on, and forever afterwards, we will all be shipsiblings-jahaz- bhai and jahaz- bahen- to each other. There’ll be no differences between us. (356)

There develops a new kind of intimacy among the new members of a new society in a new environment. They call themselves as children of the ship, “This vessel that was the Mother-Father of her new family, great wooden mai- bap, an adoptive ancestor and parent of dynasties yet to come: here she was, the Ibis” (357). Different characters feel the birth of a new existence. Ghosh is adopting social ecological wisdom in the novel. He creates Ibis as such sort of social platform which brings new spirits for the migrants. The ship becomes a new home for them wherein they creatively reclaim new familial relations that give them strength to survive and tie them to each other. Ghosh tries to create an ecological society as suggested by Murray Bookchin. Bookchin in The Ecology of Freedom argues that in an ecological society:

Hierarchy, in effect, will be replaced by interdependence, and consociation would imply the existence of an organic core that meets the deeply felt biological needs for care, cooperation, security, and love. Freedom would no longer be placed in opposition to nature, individuality to society, choice to necessity, or personality to the needs of social coherence. (318)

In a way, Ghosh wishes to create an ecological society of non-hierarchical affiliation exactly as promoted by social ecologists. Social ecology promotes a decentralized society of non-hierarchical affiliations avowedly derived from an anarchistic political tradition, “A fundamental unit will be the commune, a closely knit, small community based on love, friendship, shared values, and commitment to a common life” (qtd. in Greg Garrard 33). The Ibis gets invested with new
symbolic meaning by the migrants and is remade into a habitat of transformation from which new selves and identities emerge. The new setting gradually blurs the thick borderline between the characters. Deeti who leaves behind everything of her life’s past- caste, village, daughter, finds this new conceptualization of siblingship empowering. On a proposal of marriage of a hillsman, Ecka Nack with a plainswoman, Heeru, Deeti ponders that the marriage of people from different castes or regions would have never been feasible or accepted if they were on land. She regards the fate of Heeru same as her own fate. She is grateful to the ship, as it provides them a new environment that is heaven for all the migrants aboard. The water of the sea washes away their acidic past.

Ghosh attempts to prove Ibis as a habitat- an ecotopia where people of different religions, castes, societies and cultures live in harmony. Ghosh’s such utopia is seen in his earlier novel The Hungry Tide, where Sir Daniel Hamilton, a Scotsman establishes a place where there are no petty little divisions and differences among its inhabitants. There are no Brahmins or untouchables, no Bengalis and no Oriyas and everyone has to live and work together. In Sea of Poppies, instead of losing family, the migrants are gaining an extended family, not bound by caste but by shared experiences and cultures. Ghosh maps Ibis as a rich geographical and socio-cultural place.

The members of the new family are receiving both odds and evens of the local atmosphere. At the Ibis, many of the migrants experience stirrings of discomfort and a state of infantile helplessness because of seasickness. As the vessel plunges and climbs, many migrants lose their energy because of the seasickness. They face health problems like vomiting and frequent and watery bowel movements. This leads to the disturbances in their surrounding environment, “The smell of vomit added to the already noxious odours of the enclosed space, multiplying the effects of the vessel’s motion. Soon it seemed as if the hold would be swamped by a rising tide of nausea” (407). The extremity of pollution is so severe that a man drowns in a pool of his own vomit and his death remains unremarked for much time. Ghosh highlights the plight of the passengers in
accordance with the disturbance in ecosphere. The deteriorating condition of migrants creates an atmosphere of despondency and demoralization. Approaching the black water, everyone is awestruck and seized by malady, staring in stupefaction, “It was impossible to think of this as water at all- for water surely needed a boundary, a rim, a shore to give it shape and hold it in place? This was a filament, like the night sky, holding the vessel aloft as if it were a planet or a star” (395).

The phase of turbulences fades out slowly and the Ibis starts overpowering the disturbances. It is because of the determination of the migrants; Ibis regains its power. Like an animal returning to its natural element, the Ibis seems to grow ever more exuberant as it moves forward on the open sea. Slowly, with the motion of the vessel, migrants begin to absorb the finality of what is underway for them. Although the voyage is towards the void of blackwaters, yet, the migrants feel happy and contented. Jodu, who always aspires to have job on ocean going ships, feels full of enthusiasm and energy:

At last, he was leaving behind these muddy shores to meet the waters... As the mast began to sway, his chest swelled with pride to see how fine a figure the Ibis cut amongst the craft that clogged the river- the caramoussals and perikoes and budgerows. At this lofty elevation, it seemed as if the schooner had given him a pair of wings to soar above his past. (372)

Just as Wordsworth rejoices in nature and in every meanest flower that blows and just as his heart dances with the dancing daffodils, Jodu also rejoice in nature but he has his own ways of reaping joys out of it. He enjoys being on water, feeling a sort of freedom and a destiny of his own will. He hardly cares about the hardships of the journey. In the same way, Paulet rejoices in the flora of nature. Deep in the watery labyrinth of the Sundarbans, she is glad to seize every opportunity to gaze at the river’s mangrove-cloaked shores. This provides her a clear view of the jungle and she is lost in the memories of helping her father catalogue the flora of this forest during week’s long trip in Jodu’s boat. Her eyes are still sifting through
the greenery of that habitat. She is watchful towards the familiar foliage of her father’s time. The scene fills her eyes with tears. She claims that these plants are the companions of her earliest childhood and their shoots seem almost to be her own, plunged deep into this soil. In this place, she finds her childhood roots. Her father, Fitcher Penrose who is a botanist by profession very aptly describes her as:

. . . a child of nature, that is what she is, my daughter Paulette. As you know I have educated her myself, in the innocent tranquility of the Botanical Gardens. She has had no teacher other than myself, and has never worshipped at any altar except that of Nature; the trees have been her Scripture and the Earth her Revelation. She has not known anything but Love, Equality and Freedom: I have raised her to revel in that state of liberty that is Nature itself. (136-37)

On the other hand, for Munia, the forest is a place of fear and terror. Pointing to a sinuous form of a creeper branch, hanging from the branch of a mangrove, she animates it with a snake. This scene is synonymous with Bharathidasan’s “Kurangin Acham”, a short poem from the collection, Azhagin Sirrippu that describes a scene where a monkey catches hold of a snake mistaking it for an aerial root. As a reflex action, the monkey jumps in fear, leaps from branch to branch mistaking every hanging root to be a snake. In the same way, Munia, looking at a creeping branch, utters a horrified gasp and clutches Paulette’s arm. Paulette explains it as a creeping plant, bearing beautiful and mesmerizing flowers that grow on the bark. It is her father, who has named it Dendrobium pauletii and as such has related this beauty with Paulette’s name.

In the novel, even though the characters are placed in a new environment which is difficult for adjustment, they settle down in the alien culture and attempt to adopt new culture. Amidst of struggles and hardships, the people cope up with the new surroundings in an effort to settle in the unfamiliar environment. According to Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer, ecocriticism believes in “contact, cooperation and co-evolution as the driving force in ecosystem (qtd. in Sumathy (7). The alchemy of the open water has endowed the ship with her own will and
her own life. The turbulences of the ship are described by Baboo Nob Kissan as, “The *Ibis* was not a ship like any other; in her inward reality she was a vehicle of transformation, travelling through the mists of illusion towards the elusive, ever-receding landfall that was truth” (423). *Ibis* as such encourage and enable positive transformations in the characters aboard.

Neel’s transformation from a self indulgent aristocrat to a man who converts a fellow convict, Ah Fatt, from an out-of-control addict to a sober and clean man exemplify the immeasurably positive change adopted by an aristocrat Brahmin. Ghosh, earlier in the novel portrays Neel as an extremely fastidious and caste-conscious orthodox. When he is taken into custody, he finds it difficult to cope up with rest of his prison-mates:

Returning to the tapori, he seated himself beside it, lifted a few morsels to his lips and forced himself to swallow them. It was as if he had ingested a handful of burning embers, for he could feel each grain blazing a trail of fire through his entrails- but he would not stop; he ate a little more, and a little more, until his very skin seemed to be peeling from his body. That night his dreams were plagued by a vision of himself, transformed into a moulting cobra, a snake that was struggling to free itself of its outworn skin. (268)

The new environment provides him supreme will power and effort and he accepts the changes thrust upon him. At the first sight of his cell mate, Neel hardly guesses if the man is naked or clothed. It is the smell of the ordure that makes him realize that it is not just mud but also faeces and vomit the man is covered in. He realizes that Ah Fatt is going to be his everything- his caste, his family and friend. He reaches out a helping hand to him by washing and cleaning him. Moreover, like sweepers, he scoops up his cell-mate’s shit. He is now a completely transformed man. He can feel the intimations of irreversible alterations. Pondering over his own transformation, Neel asks himself:

Was it possible that the mere fact of using one’s hands and investing one’s attention in some one other than oneself, created a
pride and tenderness that had nothing whatever to do with the response of the object of one’s care—just as a craftsman’s love for his handiwork is in no way diminished by the fact of it being unreciprocated? (326)

Depicting Neel’s transformation, Ghosh adopts the social ecological wisdom, as Bookchin in *The Ecology of Freedom* claims that People must try to create a new culture, “that attempts to remove the symptoms of our crisis without affecting their sources. We must also try to extirpate the hierarchical orientation of our psyches, not merely the institutions that embody social domination. (34)

This journey develops a kind of human bonding and communication in every member of *Ibis* society. This is the evidence of transformation from self absorbed humans into humans who develop in themselves the mental strength to accept others. Ghosh tries to remove the boundaries that divide human being from each other and from other creatures of the ecosphere. He actually wishes to create a complete parity or equality between all the individuals. He imagines a place, a habitat—an ecotopia where there are no superior beings. He tries to assure that the hierarchical level man himself has set up with other human beings or with nature are worthless and transitory. Ghosh in a way is trying to rupture hierarchy and domination. Murray Bookchin in *The Ecology of Freedom* very rightly argues, “We can no longer afford to be unimaginative: we can no longer afford to do without utopian thinking. The crisis is too serious and the possibilities too sweeping to be resolved by customary modes of thought” (41). Therefore, he solemnly adds, “if we don’t do the impossible, we shall be faced with the unthinkable” (41). By ‘doing impossible’, he means to do away with hierarchy and domination in order to maintain balance between nature and society. Ghosh’s thinking is in resonance with Bookchin, who wants his readers, “to dare to be innovative, to try to dream utopias, to think the impossible, in Bookchin’s words, to try to turn the world upside down” (348). Ghosh’s invention of an ecotopia does not mean that he is comfortable with the ravages wrought by the opium trade but as
an ecocritical writer, he brings forth the harsh truth that new generations cannot resist exploitations of either human beings or their surrounding nature.

In addition to deep ecological vision, Ghosh brings forth his social ecological wisdom wherein he makes it clear that environmental problems are not caused by anthropocentric attitudes alone, but follow from system of domination or exploitation of humans by other humans. It is further highlighted that the present generation needs to know about the root cause of the domination of nature. The idea put forth is that each individual being on this planet whether human or non-human deserves respect, right treatment, due consideration; should not be made slave, and should not be exploited.

Ghosh further points out that one cannot happily expect to treat the natural world appropriately if one does not treat other human beings appropriately. He as such adopts social ecological wisdom in his novel. He makes it clear that humanity is part of nature. The development of awareness about human freedom is an important step in ending the environmental crisis. He has laid down a quest about freeing all beings from unnecessary kind of control and exploitation. Like social ecologists, Ghosh believes in the change of social structure, and believes that the elimination of authoritarianism and hierarchy in human societies will end and crush the environmental crisis.

Ghosh lays stress on the fact that from the feeling of unity between individual and the community emerges a feeling of unity between the community and its environment. Again through his writing, he generates a sense of symbiosis. The symbiosis generated here is of communal interdependence and co-operation that tends to transcend raw feeling of terror and awe. Highlighting the curse of monoculture imposed by British imperialists, Ghosh shows that in nature, balance and harmony are achieved by ever-expanding diversity. Ecological stability is not a function of simplicity and homogeneity but of complexity and variety. The capacity of an ecosystem to retain its integrity does not depend on the uniformity of the environment but on its diversity. It is this ecological diversity which is being disrupted and disturbed by British imperialists, the impact of which is still being
felt on the land of India. Apart from the loss of biodiversity caused due to monoculture, Ghosh shows the contamination of water and air caused deliberately by extractive and productive processes are the most significant consequence of ecological imperialism. This sort of imperialism also results in loss of biodiversity and the extinction of plant and animal species which in turn disrupts the precarious balance of ecosystem.