CHAPTER III

HISTORICAL ELEMENTS

The novels of Amitav Ghosh either have a historical background or historical events viewed through the eyes of the characters in the novel. In an interview at the Duke University in 2012, he has remarked that “all novels are historical novels because every novel is an account of that has already happened. History is at the heart of the novel.” Ghosh emphasizes the importance of history by situating every work in a distinct time and place, dealing with issues confronted by men in a global context. He believes history to be central to the art of fiction and interprets it both at personal and social levels.

Ghosh sees history through the eyes of the common man and presents the helpless state of ordinary people whose lives twist and turn with the greed of policy makers. His works portray the repercussions of history on the lives of ordinary people and societies. The intimate family histories of the characters are inextricably linked to larger events in world history. His fiction is an interesting blend of fact and fiction; what Linda Hutcheon refers to as historiographic metafiction. “Historiographic metafiction shows fiction to be historically conditioned and history to be discursively structured” (Hutcheon 843).

Set in Burma, Malaya and India The Glass Palace takes the readers from the dethroning of King Thebaw to the rubber boom of the industrial age, from the management of teak forests in Burma to the growth of rubber plantations in Malaya, from the front lines of World War II to the rise of independence movements, from the fall of imperialism to the transformation of Burma into Myanmar under a military dictatorship. Within the framework of these great historical events, Ghosh situates the histories of individuals brought together by the embittered colonial history. The intersecting lives of
the Burmese royal family, the family of teak merchant Rajkumar and that of Saya John and Uma Dey is woven together with the interconnected histories of India, Burma and Malaya. Ghosh has mingled history and fiction in such a way that both looks not only as inseparable entities but also work as complimentary of each other.

The novel begins with the invasion of the British army on Burma. “The English are preparing to send a fleet up the Irawaddy, There’s going to be a war” (TGP 15) informed Mathew to Rajkumar. These words presage the end of monarchy and the birth of colonialism in Burma. The dethroning and the expulsion of Thebaw, the king of Burma is given in a persuasive manner. A British timber company was side-stepping the customs regulations of the kingdom, cutting up logs to avoid paying duties. When the royal customs officers had demanded arrears of payment for fifty thousand logs, the English men protested. They refused to pay and carried the complaints to the British Governor in Rangoon. Humiliating ultimatums followed. One of the senior ministers, the Kinwun Mingyi had suggested accepting the terms so that the British might allow the Royal family to continue to live in the palace. The proud queen refused to yield to the British ultimatum telling them that the kings of Burma were not princes, but sovereigns who had defeated the Emperor of China, conquered Thailand, Assam and Manipur.

Queen Supayalat is introduced as a proud and ruthless queen, as one who had risked everything to secure the throne for her husband Thebaw. In a bid to get rid of her husband’s rivals she stripped her mother of her powers, banished her to a corner of the palace and ordered the killing of seventy nine princes. To avoid the spillage of royal blood she had them wrapped in carpets, slammed them to death and threw the corpses into the nearest river. Every member of the royal family who was considered as a threat to her husband was put to death. The queen was in her eighth month of pregnancy. This
time she was sure to have a boy and she did not want to tell him that she had surrendered her patrimony because of a quarrel over some logs of wood.

King Thebaw proclaimed to his people that war was imminent. He issued a royal proclamation which reads thus:

To all Royal subjects and inhabitants of the Royal Empire: those heretics the barbarian English Kalaas having most harshly made demands calculated to bring about the impairment and destruction of our religion, the violation of our national traditions and customs, and the degradation of our race are making a show and preparation as if about to wage war with our state. They have been replied to in conformity with the usages of great nations and in words which are just and regular. If, not withstanding, these heretic foreigners should come, and in any way attempt to molest or disturb the state, His Majesty who is watchful that the interest of our religion and our state shall not suffer, will himself march forth with his generals, captains and lieutenants with large forces of infantry, artillery, elephanterie and cavalry, by land and by water and with the might of his army will efface those heretics will conquer and annexe their country. (TGP 15-16)

But the British proved too powerful for them and news reached that the British had destroyed the fort at Myingan and the Burmese soldiers had fled into the mountains. The annexation was occasioned by the inefficiency of the Burmese monarch and the deceit of his own ministers. Aware of his son’s limitation, King Mindon had remarked, “If Thebaw ever becomes king, the country will pass into the hands of foreigners” (TGP 38). Ghosh’s narrative exposes the treachery of the ministers also: “The two ministers were competing to keep the royal family under guard. They know the British would be grateful to whoever handed over the royal couple; there would be rich rewards” (TGP
The king was dethroned and exiled to Ratnagiri, a remote village in India. The annexation was carried out forcefully but quietly with the help of Indian soldiers for the novel records that a great majority of soldiers in the British invasion force were Indian sepoys. The war lasted only fourteen days but the repercussions of this fourteen day war are tracked for over a century.

The Konbaung Dynasty of Burma ruled over an area that included Modern Burma, Manipur and Assam. There were problems with military operations as the borders between Burmese frontiers and British India were not well defined. The British and the Siamese joined forces against Burma in 1824 and by the Treaty of Yandabo; Burma lost Arakan, Manipur, Assam and Tenasserim to the British in the First Anglo-Burmese War. In 1852, Commodore Lambert was sent to Burma regarding some minor issues over the Treaty of Yandabo. When he seized a ship that belonged to the Burmese King another war began and the British seized the Pegu Province later renamed Lower Burma. The war resulted in a rebellion in Burma and King Pagan Min was replaced by his half brother, Mindon Min. King Mindon established a new capital at Mandalay, resisted British encroachments and introduced administrative reforms in the country. He made Burma more receptive to foreign interests, entertained envoys from France and sent his own representatives to France.

Thibaw who succeeded Mindon as king of Burma in 1878, decided to pursue a policy of closer link with France much to the annoyance of Britain. A letter sent from the Burmese ministerial council to the French premier suggesting a mutual treaty on teak trade, posed a threat to British teak monopoly in Lower Burma. Meanwhile the ministerial council fined the Bombay Burmah Trading Company for underreporting its mining of teak from Tounjoo. The British authorities used this as a pretext to move
against Thibaw and issued an ultimatum to accept a British envoy and British control over Burmese trade and foreign relations. This ultimatum was rejected by the Burmese king that led to The Third Anglo-Burmese War and Upper Burma was annexed to the British Empire on January 1, 1886. History also records that Kinwun Mingyi was the chief minister during the reign of King Mindon and Thibaw. It was he who ordered the Burmese troops not to attack the invading British during the Third Anglo Burmese war and under colonial rule he served as a civil servant in the British administration. It was he who handed over the Royal couple to the British.

Exiled to India, the royal family was sent to Ratnagiri, a coastal village hundred and twenty miles south of Bombay- “a place too insignificant to be marked on the map” (TGP 60). Outram House, a shabby bungalow set inside a walled garden was chosen as the royal residence by the British. They had trouble finding servants and persuading them to stay as there was never enough money to pay their salaries while in Mandalay “resources were being exploited with an energy and efficiency hitherto undreamt of” (TGP 66).

The novel also records the visit of Chulalongkorn, king of Siam to Europe in 1897. He visited England, France, Denmark, Sweden, Belgium, Italy, Austria, Hungary, Spain, Netherlands, Monaco, Portugal, Russia, Switzerland, Germany and Egypt and was invited as the guest of King Edward VII to stay at Windsor Castle. King Thebaw came to know of this visit through The Bombay newspapers delivered to the Outram house. “In London King Chulalangkorn stayed at Buckingham palace. He was welcomed into Austria by the Emperor Franz Joseph; befriended in Copenhagen by the King of Denmark; feted in Paris by the President of France. In Germany Keiser Wilhem stood waiting in a railway station until his train rolled in” (TGP 86). The visit lasted for many
weeks and throughout the time, King Thebaw was preoccupied with it and nothing else engaged his interest. He compared his present state with the prominence that the Siamese king Chulalongkorn enjoyed as the guest of the imperialists.

He was reminded of his great-grand father Alaungpaya and his grandfather Bagyidaw who invaded Siam, defeated the rulers, crushed her armies and captured its premier city Ayutthaya. Consequently the defeated nobles chose a new ruler and made Bangkok the capital of Siam. It was because of his own ancestors, the kings of Burma that Siam had its present dynasty and its ruling king. The king mused “now they sleep in Buckingham Palace while we lie buried in this dung heap” (TGP 87). Ghosh’s novel not only projects great events but also accommodates the voices of the lost people whose plight escapes the eyes of the historian.

Ghosh’s historiography gives voice to the subaltern who had been written out of the record by conventional historical accounts. As Mondal points out Ghosh imagines the world from the perspective of displaced people and focuses on peoples’ histories often relegated to the margins of Eurocentric history. King Thebaw was stripped off his power, his wealth and dignity but he accepted it stoically. The palace was looted, his valuables were stolen and he was given just one hour to prepare for his journey of no return. He was made to travel in an ox-cart, the commonest vehicle on Mandalay streets. The ceremonial canopy fitted in the cart “had seven tiers, the number allotted to a nobleman, not the nine due to a king” (TGP 43). The British officers hardly bothered about the protocol and privilege, due to the royalty. His properties were appropriated and the royal family was made to live in a dung heap but all that the king could do was muse over his fate. The royal family was reduced to the status of subalterns. The craftiness and avarice behind the conquest is laid bare in the words of the queen:
Yes, look around you, look at how we live. Yes, we who ruled the richest land in Asia are now reduced to this. This is what they will do to all of Burma. They took our kingdom, promising roads and railways and ports, but mark my words, this is how it will end. In a few decades the wealth will be gone - all the gems, the timber and the oil - and then they too will leave (TGP 88).

With this historical event is intertwined the life of Rajkumar, the protagonist. When we first meet him, he has a temporary job in a tea stall in Mandalay but how temporary the job is, is determined by forces more powerful than him. The historical event that overthrew the king made Rajkumar a successful businessman trading in teak and men. He along with his mentor Saya John joined hands with the British in the exploitation of the teak forests of Burma. When Rajkumar learnt that the colonial government was desperate for labour to work in the oil wells, he seized the opportunity and transported labourers from India to Burma which helped him to establish his teak business.

The rags to riches story of the protagonist takes us to the rubber boom of the industrial age. Saya John who instilled the seed of ambition in Rajkumar as a young boy gave Rajkumar, “a spongy ball made of whitish-grey strings that were tangled around each other, like wool” (TGP 181) and introduced it as rubber. “This was the material of the coming age; the next generation could not be made to work without this indispensable absorber of friction. The newest motor cars had dozens of rubber parts; the markets were potentially bottomless, the profits beyond imagining” (TGP 182).

The history of rubber plantation in Malaya is also an outcome of colonial enterprise. The Imperial Government made its colonies cultivate a cash crop which they
exported to other countries around the world and earned great profits. In Malaya, dozens of spice gardens where pepper grew on vines were replaced by rubber saplings. In 1897 when Mr. Tan Chay Yan scion of a well-known Peranakan Chinese family of Malacca converted his pepper garden into a rubber plantation it had seemed like a mad thing, everyone had advised against it as rubber was known to be a risk. The imperial authorities in London had spent a fortune to have seed stocks stolen from Brazil, but Malaya’s European planters backed away when they learnt that it might take ten years for a rubber plantation to become productive. But when Mr. Tan Chay Yan had succeeded in milking rubber from his trees in three short years, everyone followed his lead and money poured into the city.

Land and labour were what a planter needed. While land was easier to come by, there was a shortage of labour. When the British colonial Government was looking to India to supply workers for the rubber plantations, Rajkumar became a steady supplier of labour force to the plantations in Malacca. As a partner in the plantations he was responsible for ensuring a steady supply of workers, most of them from the Madras presidency. When slavery was abolished in 1834, India which was impoverished under colonial rule became the cheap source of labour recruitment. A new system of Indentured Labour Contract was soon developed by the colonial administration to bring labourers from the Indian subcontinent. The methods of recruitment were deceitful. They were not told about the nature of work or the living conditions. The young men were made to put their thumb-prints on sheets of paper to repay the money their family owed to landlords and they were shipped to the plantations from which there was no escape until death.

Saya John and Rajkumar invested in the rubber plantation because of the commercial potential Saya John foresaw in rubber industry. In a casual conversation with
Mathew and Rajkumar, Saya John showed a newspaper report about the assassination of Grand Duke Ferdinand in Sarajevo but both of them shrugged it off. Neither of them had any inkling that the killing in Sarajevo would spark a world war and rubber would be an essential strategic material in this conflict: “that in Germany the discarding of articles made of rubber would become an offence punishable by law; that submarines would be sent overseas to smuggle rubber; that the commodity would come to be valued more than ever before, increasing their wealth beyond their most extravagant dreams” (TGP 201).

It is the interference of history in 1885 - the British conquest of Burma and the subsequent teak trade that elevated Rajkumar from an errand boy in Mandalay to a teak merchant and business tycoon in Rangoon. It is again the interference of history, the Japanese invasion of Burma in 1942 during World War II and the bombing of Rangoon that sent him as a refugee to India. Throughout the colonial era, many Indians came to Burma as soldiers, civil servants, traders and construction workers. Rangoon became the capital of British Burma and was largely occupied by these Indians who dominated commercial and civil life in Burma. But there were currents of hostility to the Indian presence in Burma. Burmese resentment was vented in violent attacks that paralysed the city. Dolly felt that Burma was no more a safe place for Rajkumar and her sons to live, but Rajkumar was of the firm belief that the Burmese economy would not work without Indian businessmen. The anti-Indian riots that broke out in 1930 lasted for several days and the casualties numbered in the hundreds. Despite his losses Rajkumar was adamant than ever about remaining in Burma.

Japanese entered the Second World War with simultaneous attacks on Pearl Harbour and Northern Malaya. One day Sahidzada Bahruddin Khan, an eminent member of the Indian community in Rangoon and a lawyer by profession informed Rajkumar that
the city’s prominent Indians had decided to form a Refugee Evacuation Committee. It was felt that in the event of a Japanese attack on Burma the Indians would be vulnerable on two fronts – against hostile sections of the Burmese public and the Japanese. The committee’s intentions were to get as many Indians out of Burma as possible. Rajkumar laughed over it saying it would be too soon to leave Burma but he proved to be wrong.

The Japanese air raided Rangoon on December 23, 1941. If teak spurred the colonial enterprise, natural resources especially the oil from fields around Yenangyaung and large surplus of rice impelled the Japanese attack on Burma. They targeted the city’s long waterfront and hit the mills, ware houses, oil tanks and railway lines. It created chaos in the city- “buses lay abandoned at intersections; trams had jumped off their tracks into the tar; rickshaws lay sidewise across the road; electric cables and tramlines lay knotted across the footpaths” (*TGP* 467). Looters were breaking into abandoned houses and apartments. The Indians panicking a Burmese mob attack fled or went into hiding. The Indians made up the entire working class of Rangoon and without them everything came to a standstill. In the port, ships were going up in flames with the cargoes intact as there were no dock workers to do the unloading. Having lost his son and all his possessions Rajkumar joined the thousands who were heading towards the northern landward passage to India. After an arduous journey Rajkumar reached Uma’s house, Lankasuka, in 1942 with his wife and granddaughter Jaya.

The exodus of Rajkumar and his family from Burma brings another historical event alive to the readers, the evacuation of Indian and British civilians from the country that marked the end of British rule in Burma. Ghosh mentions in his blog that very few published accounts of the march exist and Asian accounts of this march are rare that the historian Huge Tinker called it as ‘The Long Forgotten March’. Michael D. Leigh in his
book, *The Evacuation of Civilians from Burma* explores the social and political background of the evacuation and presents the first comprehensive account of the exodus. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour on the 7th of December 1941 came as a surprise but the British strategists overlooked the fact that the Japanese might be interested in capturing the port of Rangoon. Moreover it was always assumed that Burma’s Eastern Frontier was impenetrable and the British military preparations had been neglected. When Japanese war planes targeted Lower Burma in the beginning of 1942, the British air defence crumbled completely.

The bombing of Rangoon on December 24, 1941 was devastating. More than thousands died on the first day of the surprise raid on Rangoon. Successive raids for weeks strained the relations between the civilians and the military authorities and prompted thousands of residents to leave the city. When the British attempts to defend Rangoon failed, the army retreated northwards to Mandalay believing that it lay beyond the reach of Japanese stack. The Japanese planes bombed Mandalay on January 20, 1942 and a three day intensive raid sent thousands more into flight. On April 25, 1942 the British High Command decided to leave Burma. The Indians and European civilians were desperate to leave Burma as the Japanese soldiers were reputed to be arrogant and cruel. The antagonism of the Burmese towards the Indians and a fear of an attack by the local people resulted in the emigration of around 300, 000 Indians which is recorded as one of the most difficult and desperate mass evacuations in human history.

Another historical event that took place in the same year is also recorded and is interlinked with the narrative. It was in the same year that Mahatma Gandhi launched the Quit India Movement. Thousands of Congress workers were imprisoned. Uma was one of the thousands who were imprisoned but was allowed to return home due to illness. Uma
had been a couple of months at home when one afternoon, her elderly gatekeeper came to
tell that there were some destitute outside asking for her. This was only too common at
that time because Bengal was in the throes of one of the worst famines in history that the
city was full of starving migrants from the countryside. The famine was so worse that
people were sifting through the sewers for grains of rice.

This is a reference to the Bengal famine of 1942 which is referred to in History as
‘The Great Bengal famine’. Prior to partition of India, Bengal covered the state of West
Bengal in India and Bangladesh. It suffered a calamitous famine in 1943, when it was
estimated that two million people died of starvation and malnutrition in the Indian
province of Bengal. The factors that led to the catastrophe were the crop failure in 1942,
the damage to the crop due to tidal waves and a fungal disease epidemic. But this famine
is commonly referred to as a man-made holocaust as the indifference of the British
Government to the plight of the starving people of Bengal worsened the situation. When
Japan seized Burma, an important exporter of rice, the British bought massive amounts of
rice and hoarded it. This hoarding, profiteering and the failure of the government in the
equitable distribution of the available food grains led to enormous price rises. Further the
continued export of rice from Bengal to other British occupied territories and the British
troops all over the world and the refusal of the British Government to allow emergency
food supplies led to an increasing toll of famine deaths in Bengal.

The advent of World War II saw the emergence of Indian National Army. Formed in South-East Asia by the Indian Nationalists in 1942, the aim of the army was to
secure Indian independence with the help of the Japanese. It composed of volunteers from
Indian expatriate population in Malaya and Burma and Indian prisoners of war captured
by Japan in Malaya and Singapore. The INA fought along with the Imperial Japanese
Army against the British and Commonwealth forces in the campaigns in Burma. Hundreds of Indian troops fighting for the British army in Malaya changed their loyalties and enrolled themselves as fighters of the Indian National Army. Seeing this, Uma’s nephew Arjun realised that he had been made a mere tool in the hands of the British. The racism in the British army made him think about his identity. He knew that he had been serving the wrong side of the army and felt the need to rise above being a sahib in the English army fighting against his own brethren. He joined INA and died a martyr fighting for the freedom of his country. Arjun’s story brings to light the predicament of the Indian soldiers under the British Raj.

The first news about Indian National Army reached India only in the latter months of 1943 but this was not the same force Arjun had joined in Northern Malaya. The first INA was resurrected by Subash Chandra Bose, after its leader Captain Mohun Singh disbanded it. He invigorated it drawing tens of thousands of new recruits from the Indian populations of South East Asia which included Arjun, Hardy, Kishan Singh and Ilongo. At the end of the war thousands of members of the Indian National Army who were regarded as traitors to the Empire were brought back to India as prisoners of war but they were received as heroes by the Indian public. In December 1945, the colonial government charged three officers of the Indian National Army Shah Nawaz Khan, Gurubaksh Singh Dhillon and Prem Sahgal with treason. They were brought to trial which is recorded as the historic Red Fort Trials.

The first three senior officers of the INA became symbols of India fighting for her independence. Protests against the trials erupted all over the country. “General strikes shut down entire states; students held large public meetings defying curfew orders” (TGP 479). In the southern city of Madurai two people died when the police opened fire, in
Calcutta thousands poured into the streets and took over the city for several days, in Mumbai the naval ratings mutinied and in March 1946 the Royal Indian Air Force mutinied. All three defendants were set free to the joyous reception of tumultuous crowds. By then the end of British India was clearly apparent.

In Burma, resistance against British rule began in the 1920’s. Saya San rebellion broke out in the late 1920’s and a few weeks after the anti-Indian riots on 21, December 1930, Saya San had himself crowned as the king of Burma. He gathered together a motley band of soldiers and told them to avenge the capture of King Thebaw. The uprising started in the interior of Tharawaddy district and stormed a railway station. Indian troops sent by the British to hunt down the insurgents did not produce immediate results. The outbreaks spread in neighbouring states and the rebels were everywhere in Insein, Yamthin and Pyapon. They appeared like shadows from the forests, fought like possessed men running bare-chested into gunfire attacking aeroplanes with catapults and spears. The colonial authorities rooted out the rebellion by the end of 1932 by sending more Indian reinforcements. Saya San was hanged, hundreds of rebels were killed and thousands wounded. Uma was annoyed to see the uprising and the means of its suppression- “once again, Indian soldiers were being used to fortify the Empire” (TGP 247).

Returning to India, Uma saw an article published in a Bengal newspaper; an illustration of sixteen decapitated heads lined up on a table. The article said: “These are the heads of Burmese rebels who fell in an encounter with Imperial troops in Prome District in Burma. It was believed that they were displayed at the military headquarters at Prome for the purpose of striking terror into the hearts of those who might be seriously inclined” (TGP 253). The defeat of Burma’s Saya San rebellion made her rethink her
political ideas. It became clear that a revolution like this stood no chance of prevailing against a force that was so skillful and ruthless in its employment of its overwhelming power. She was convinced that the romantic ideas of rebellion were just pipe dreams; technologically backward population like India and Burma could never defeat a thoroughly modern military power like the Empire by force. Uma realised that Mahatma Gandhi’s Non-Violence is the only movement that can stand against colonialism, its very weakness its source of strength and she joined the freedom struggle with the Mahatma.

After the Saya San rebellion was routed by the Empire, Aung San, an acquaintance of Dinu from Rangoon formed the Burma Independence Army in Japan. When Dinu returned to Burma from Malaya in 1941, the Japanese invasion was under way and the Burma Independence Army was fighting alongside the Japanese who had promised that Burma would be freed once the British were defeated. By the time Dinu made his way to Rangoon in June 1942, the city was under Japanese occupation. All road and rail traffic was controlled through an elaborate regimen of cards and permits. The Japanese had installed a new government under the leadership of a Burmese politician Dr. Ba Maw. In 1944, under the command of General Slim, the Allies launched a counter-invasion of Burma. Though the Burma Independence Army had entered Burma with the aid of the Japanese, when Aung San realised that the Japanese were less interested in Burmese freedom he reversed his allegiance and negotiated an agreement with the British. In March 1945, Slim’s Fourteenth Army had a decisive victory and the Japanese were expelled from Burma.

In the introduction to his book, *The History of Modern Burma* Michael W. Charney writes, “The period from 1937 to 1947 were the most volatile and certainly one with the most serious ramifications for the future political history of the country.” He also calls
this period “the era of Aung San for it saw this student leader rise to head an army and then a nation, before he fell to an assassin’s bullet shortly before Burma achieved true independence” (2). Within months of the assassination of Aung San, a communist led revolution broke out in Burma. A major Karen organisation revolted against the Rangoon Government and others followed suit. Dolly arrived in Burma late in 1948, just as the riots were getting under way. She found most of the areas beyond the capital’s municipal limits in rebel hands and from village to village a different group was in charge.

The Karen group were the country’s largest ethnic group. During the colonial period, the army was recruited mainly from the ethnic minorities, especially the Karen. While the Burmese nationalists joined the Burma Independence Army and fought with the Japanese in the Second World War, these ethnic minorities fought with the Allies. With the outbreak of communal violence between Burmans and Karens, the Karen head of the army was removed. U Nu, a member of General Aung San’s cabinet was elected as the first Prime Minister of Burma and the country enjoyed democratic rule from 1948. In 1950’s there was a stand-off in the insurgencies and it was a relatively quiet time. But with ethnic fragmentation and class divisions, Burma had to go through a period of turmoil again and in 1958 Prime Minister Nu stepped down, inviting the armed forces to set up a caretaker government. Elections were held in 1960 but the political party which the government supported was defeated. Two years later in 1962, General Ne Win seized power in a military coup bringing an end to democracy.

The novel starts with the sound of the English cannon that put an end to monarchy in Burma and towards the end a burst of gunfire is heard which heralds the beginning of despotism. On the very day of the coup, the novelist records, dozens of students were shot down inside the university. Almost all private property was confiscated and handed over
to a number of military run state corporations. “Notes of certain denominations were declared to be valueless; overnight millions of Kyats became wastepaper.” The old mercantile elite left the country while thousands of the country’s intellectuals fled into the country side. “With each year the generals became more powerful while the rest of the country grew ever feebler: the military was like an incubus sucking the life from its host” (TGP 535).

The newspapers criticised imperialism and voiced the need to defend the country against neo-colonialism and foreign aggression. A new censorship regime developed and every book and magazine had to be presented to the scrutiny board. Dinu’s wife had to undergo the ordeal of going through the scrutiny board as her writings were examined by the military officer. The office was like a school and its corridors smelt of toilets. She was made to wait for a long time and finally when she was shown in, the officer condemned her saying he had wasted a lot of time correcting her story. She saw her manuscript covered with red pencil marks. The officer was “barely literate. He had run his pencil through everything he hadn’t understood- puns, allusion, archaisms” (SOP 536). Daw Thin Thin Aye stopped writing as the thought of another such encounter made the hours spent at writing unbearable. Dinu and his wife mixed with very few people were always careful about what they said and never involved in politics.

Severe political oppression and steady economic decline including the devaluation of currency led to an uprising and students came pouring out into streets. Persuaded by her students, Daw Thin Thin Aye began to attend meetings and helped them to write a pamphlet. Aung San Suu Kyi’s, public address revived Dinu’s lost interest in photography. He put together a pictorial record of movement in its headiest days. On July 8, 1988 students and supporters went on a march calling for the restoration
of democracy. Dinu and his wife were arrested with thousands of other civilians. General Ne Win renamed his government the State Law and Order Restoration Council in the fall of 1988. Any opposition to his government was met with indiscriminate arrests; universities were closed; curfews were imposed and meetings were prohibited.

The military regime in the modern state of Myanmar comes under scrutiny towards the end of the novel. Jaya’s dormant interest in the land of her birth and her curiosity to see her uncle Dinu brought her to Myanmar. When she arrived in Myanmar in 1996, the country was poor as queen Supayalat had prophesied hundred years earlier. The walls of the houses were either patched or discoloured. The numbering of the houses was rather confusing with numerals, fractions and complicated alphabetical demarcations. There were spies everywhere and the military was in constant vigil. Every household had a registered list of members and guests were not allowed to stay without the permission of the government. Police made regular checks at nights. There was no freedom and they made life hell for the people. People lived in constant fear. The novel ends in an optimistic note with the appearance of Aung San Suu Kyi at the public meeting held in her house.

Every date of historical importance in the span of a century is specifically presented and is related with the lives of fictional characters. The Glass Palace begins with the colonisation of Burma in 1885. The imperial fleet crossed the border on 14 November 1885. That was the year in which Karl Benz unveiled the motor wagon in Germany. Rajkumar was eleven years old when King Thebaw was dethroned and exiled to India. The new District Collector Beni Prasad Dey arrived in Calcutta in 1905, the nineteenth year of the king’s exile the time when politics was much in the minds of Indians. Meetings and marches against the British rule were held and people were told to
boycott foreign goods. Beni prasad was in his early forties when he arrived at Ratnagiri and his wife was fifteen years junior to him around twenty six.

Rajkumar married Dolly in 1907, the same year in which Uma lost her husband. The assassination of Duke Ferdinand of Sarajevo happened in 1914, the year when Dolly’s son Dinu and Elsa’s daughter were born. In December 1916 the second princess eloped with a British commoner which caused the death of the king. That was the time when Dinu was down with a bout of fever and hospitalised for a month. This incident brings a change in Dolly’s life and she becomes more inclined to the precepts of Buddhism. On April 16, 1919, the Queen started her journey from India and arrived in Rangoon four days later. The queen died in 1925 six years after her return from Ratnagiri. In 1929 Rangoon had acquired an air mail service. Rajkunar lost all his possessions when the Japanese air raid Rangoon on December 21, 1941. He returned to India in 1942 with his family when Bengal was in the throes of a severe famine. Dolly went back to Burma in 1948, the year of the country’s independence.

It is not just the background or the historical figures presented that makes the novel historical but the fictitious characters too have historical precedents. In an interview to Asia Society, Ghosh has stated that Uma’s career as described in The Glass Palace is formed on well-known historical precedents. In the British Empire, class was often the key to mobility and Uma belonged to that class of people who were able to travel freely. Her husband’s death left her with the financial means to explore the world. Ghosh has also mentioned in the interview that in the nineteenth century there were many Indian women who went abroad to study in the same way as Uma did. The first Indian woman doctor graduated from a British University in the 1880’s. “The same is true of Rajkumar. Rags to riches stories were very common among Indians in Burma. Many of the Indian
business magnates of pre-war Rangoon had arrived in that city with little more than a tin
suitcase and a few annas in their pocket.”

There is also an element of autobiography which gives a personal touch to the
novel. Speaking at the Indian embassy in Yangon on 15 November, 2012, Ghosh has
confessed that the book really began in a very little house in Kolkata where his uncle’s
family lived after having fled their home in Burma when the Japanese attacked in 1941.
“My uncle’s family was in Burma from the earliest 20th century. He created a big kind of
business in teak. He got the contract to provide the sleepers throughout India. So he
became very rich. On December 24, 1941, when the Japanese first bombed Rangoon, one
of the bombs fell on his timber yard which was right by the river and all his timber was
burnt up. That was the catastrophe for him. He left. He walked over the mountain, and
came back to Calcutta. I grew up with him, and it was amazing in life to see this man who
once was very rich, yet slowly his life dwindled and dwindled. All his life, even though
basically he left Burma, in his head he was living in Burma. So he would tell these stories
of Burma all the time. I just grew up with these stories. At certain point in my life I
wanted to write about this uncle of mine who had been pouring these stories into my head
for 20 years.” In delineating the character of the protagonist Rajkumar must have had his
uncle in mind.

In an interview to Alessandro Vescovi Gosh talks about Raghbir Singh, an
Indian Photographer of contemporary times who was a good friend of him. He confesses
“I used to spend a lot of time with him; he was a very close friend. I was two years into
writing The Glass Palace when he died very suddenly. It was after his death that the Dinu
character took shape and for me Dinu is the moral centre of the book. He is very much
like Ragubir, I thought of Raghubir in writing about Dinu and it was my way of saying good bye to Raghubir” (137).

Dedicating the novel to the memory of his father Lieutenant Colonel Shailendra Chandra Ghosh, who fought in the Second World War as an officer in the British-Indian army and was in General Slim’s Fourteenth Army during the British campaign in 1945, Ghosh says his ‘book is rooted in his father’s experience, his reflections on the war and his self-questioning.’ He was among those loyal Indians who found themselves across the lines from the traitors of the Indian National Army. Moreover in an interview to Chitra Sankaran in Singapore he has said, “The seeds of Arjun’s character were planted for me by many different people, including my father, who was in the Second World War. He was in Kohima during the war and he got into a fight with a South African who called him ‘nigger’ or something. And you suddenly realize this was something that they were constantly coping with, this racial denigration” (2). In an interview to Michelle Caswell he has also stated that his family history played a major role in opening his eyes to the calamitous events faced by Asia in the 20th century, for he affirms that “his family was divided not only by the partition of India and Pakistan but also by the Japanese conquest of Burma in 1942.”

As Chitra Sankaran writes “At the centre, what defines Ghosh’s writing is the distinctive way in which his works manage to hold together a global, ecumenical perspective while focusing on highly individual, often contested and marginalised histories as those of refugees, Indian sepoys under the British Raj, the lower caste ‘othered’ and voiceless women” (xiv).
Sea of Poppies does not present any historical figure nor does it depict any great historical event. The main subject is the migration of indentured labourers from India to various British colonies. The narrative tracks the origins and journey of the Indian diaspora in the nineteenth century. This class of people who supplied cheap labour to the British Empire travelled under horrendous conditions to escape the poverty and deprivation brought about by Imperial policies. The book chronicles the greed of the empire and the effect of their actions on ordinary people. As Said points out, “At some very basic level imperialism means thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is lived on and owned by others. For all kinds of reasons it attracts some people and often involves untold misery for others” (Culture and Imperialism 5).

The novel brings to light the history of colonial opium trade and the full impact of British rule in India- how it devastated local industry and agriculture pattern. The title refers to the poppy fields that replaced every other cultivation in the nineteenth century India. The emigration of indentured workers from India started in 1830’s just before the first opium war and that was the peak of opium trade. The majority of the immigrants were from the opium-producing countryside, forced by famine to seek a new life elsewhere. In an interview to Biswas, Ghosh has mentioned that “the earliest immigrants were from a part of British India (northern Bihar) which became, under the rule of the East India Company, the single most important opium-growing region of the world” The novel portrays the social, economic and political conditions that led to the exodus of these poor Indian peasants as labourers to Mauritius. “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” (SOP 76). The forces that drive their lives- the caste system, the British occupation and opium trade are portrayed in depth.
Sea of Poppies opens in March 1838 at the outset of the three-year opium war between the British and Chinese. The setting is British India, when the peasants are forced to cultivate poppies by the East India Company and by the Imperial government which causes poverty and hunger among the people. Opium trade out of India was flourishing under British rule and British merchants amassed unimaginable wealth by exporting opium to China illegally. Opium accounted for about 17-20% of Indian revenue. But the damage done to China was incalculable as the whole society was crippled and the economy disrupted. Despite several attempts by Chinese authorities to curb the trade, China imported 900 tonnes of opium annually, enough to supply 12.5 million smokers.

The British compelled the Chinese mandarins to keep their ports open in the name of free trade. Instigated by the East India Company, a delegation led by Macartney was sent to China in 1793 by George III, to persuade the Imperial court to open up the Chinese ports to trade with Britain. Emperor Qianlong, then ruler of China received the English ambassadors with ritual ceremonies but flatly rejected Britain’s proposal to extend trade beyond the southern port of Macao and Canton. The edicts of Qianlong to George III illustrate China’s disinterest in other countries’ products and how culturally superior the Chinese felt. The British request to send one of their nationals to be endorsed to the Celestial court and to be in control of their country’s trade with China was also rejected. The edict stated that the dynastic regulations would not allow the British envoy, liberty of movement and the freedom of corresponding with his country and so the king would not be able to gain anything by his envoy’s residence in China. Referring to England as barbarian land and the Europeans as barbarian merchants, the edict clearly
conveyed that the dynasty cannot alter established procedures and system of etiquette to meet individual views.

Twenty years later in 1816, a second attempt was launched by England to place the existing ‘exchange of goods on a broader footing.’ (Unschuld 20) Lord Amherst, who was to be appointed as the Governor-General of India, was sent to China to accomplish this mission. Landing in Baihe, he negotiated with Chinese protocol officers seeking an audience with Emperor Jiaqing. But he failed in his mission as he refused to kow tow before the Chinese emperor. In 1834, the British Government revoked British East India Company’s monopoly in China trade and brought it under state control. Lord Napier who was appointed the first Superintendent of trade in Canton set out to Canton to have a direct meeting with the Chinese Viceroy.

Ghosh weaves this historical visit of Lord Amherst to China in his narrative and makes his fictitious characters express the stance of the Chinese and the colonialists towards opium trade. Mr. Doughty tells it out loudly, “The Long-tails have to be given a taste of the lattee” for making a big fuss over the opium trade to which Mr. Burnham agrees: “A timely chastisement is always good.” When Neel questions if the British Government has decided to wage a war Mr. Burnham replies “It may well come to that, alas, Britain has been nothing if not patient but there’s a limit to everything. There he was on the very threshold of Pekin, with a shipload of presents- and the Emperor wouldn’t so much as receive him.” (SOP 113) The British disgust over the Chinese customs and superior attitude is expressed in the words of Doughty: “Wanted his lordship to kowtow in public! Why they’ll be asking us to grow long-tails next!” (SOP 113).
The novel also makes a mention of the trade policies of China. The Chinese Government had stringent terms with regard to foreign trade. A small enclave in the sea port of Canton was allotted to the foreign traders who came to trade with China. They were called as Fanquis or Aliens by the Cantonese and were permitted to stay on that small strip of land for the few months of their trading but “the precincts of the city were prohibited to them, as to all foreigners” (SOP 376). Moreover Chinese trade terms strictly prohibited foreign traders from establishing direct contacts with Chinese administration. Ignoring the trade rules, when Napier tried to meet the viceroy, he showed his annoyance by blocking deliveries of food and drink and ordered the soldiers to seal off the emissary’s apartment. Mr. Burnham informs, “And Lord Napier fared no better either. The mandarins paid him no more attention than they would this chicken” (SOP 113).

Napier blamed the Chinese authorities of perverse behaviour. Governor Lu retorted back calling Napier, ‘a barbaric dog of a foreign nation’ and stopped all trade between the foreigners and Chinese merchants. While legal trade between China and Britain failed after this incidence, the Chinese could not stop the illegal trading that was in progress. The illegal imports of the drug inflicted a plague of addiction on the Chinese population while making empire-sized fortunes for the British. Ultimately what started as a dispute erupted in war. Mr. Burnham tells his friends, “Mr. Jardine has written to say that he has prevailed on the Prime Minister at last” (SOP 260) and Lord Palmerston has agreed to send a fleet to China. China’s defeat in the opium war forced the Chinese government to tolerate the opium trade, opening up several ports to foreign trade.

*The Glass Palace* unfolds with a great historical event, the dethroning of the last Burmese king and colonisation of Burma but when *Sea of Poppies* opens in 1838 India has already been in a colonised state for nearly hundred years. Thomas Keightley in his
book, *A History of India* has recorded the humble beginnings of the Imperialists as traders in the Indian subcontinent. The East India Company was an English joint-stock company formed by wealthy merchants to trade with the East Indies and was given monopoly on all trade with East Indies on December 31, 1600. The company’s first ship arrived in Surat in 1608. The English obtained their first settlement on the continent of India in January 1613, when emperor Jehangir gave them permission to establish factories in Gujarat. “What human wisdom could have foreseen the consequences?” (Keightley 57) In the year 1639, the English got their first permanent settlement on the coast of Coromandel. By 1715 the English settlements in India formed three presidencies, namely Bombay, Madras and Calcutta. Numerous trading posts were established along the east and west coasts of India and considerable English communities developed around the three presidency towns.

Hitherto the English in India were nothing more than traders with a few factories but by the middle of the 18th century the scene changed and they began to engage in the quarrels of the native princes and step by step to the acquisition of empire. The company eventually began to assume administrative functions and began to rule large areas of the country with its own armies, exercising military powers. In 1757 when Robert Clive defeated the Nawab of Bengal, Siraj-ud-daulah at the Battle of Plassey, the company was transformed from a trading venture to a ruling enterprise. The Regulatory Act passed in 1773 placed India under the rule of a Governor-General. Warren Hastings was appointed as the first Governor General of India and it was he who initiated the idea of opium export to China in 1780.

China was exporting enormous amounts of goods to Britain as there was a high demand for tea, silk and porcelain in Britain. Due to the low demand of European goods
in the East, China was not interested in importing any European goods. This resulted in a huge deficit for Britain for they had to pay the Chinese in silver for the imported goods. As Mr. Burnham points out to Neel, “... there’s nothing they want from us- they have got it into their heads that they have no use for our products and manufactures. But we on the other hand, can’t do without their tea and their silks” (SOP 112).

To balance the trade, Warren Hastings decided to establish an East India Company monopoly in Bengal, encouraging Indian peasants to plant poppies in their fields and then exporting the high quality opium to China. “Opium agencies, constituting a distinct branch of the colonial administrative apparatus, were established in Bihar and Banares-Ghazipur to handle the enterprise. This is what came to be known as the agency system” (Farooqui 14). Tracing the history of opium trade in India, Farooqui further explains that the peasant producers were given the task of cultivation and extraction of raw opium which had to be handed over to the company’s officials. The processing and packing was done under the supervision of the East India Company in the company’s establishments. *Sea of Poppies* gives a vivid description of the processing of the opium in the factory at Ghazipur. The packed opium was sent to Calcutta for auction and the opium purchased at opium was exported to China.

China’s attempts to stop the illicit trafficking of opium ultimately failed but considering the fact that the lucrative opium trade provided for 20% of the British empire’s entire revenue at that time, the idea of walking away was out of question. This is echoed in the following words of Mr. Burnham to Zachary. “You are no doubt aware that in some years, the Company’s annual gains from opium are almost equal to the entire revenue of your own country, the United States? Do you imagine that British rule would be possible in this impoverished land if it were not for this source of wealth?” (SOP 115)
Opium trade thrived in the sub-continent because of the patronage they received from the Zamindars. The Halders were one such group who had built their fortune by making an indirect investment in the opium trade. The old Raja of Rashkali gave a sum of money to Mr. Burnham to increase the consignment of his agency and every year he got back a much larger sum which he light-heartedly referred to as a tribute from the Emperor of China.

Opium trade took off rapidly in the next 20-30 years reversing the flow of silver but the life of peasants was severely affected. The farmers were forced to grow poppy but were given a meagre amount for their labour which led to poverty and starvation. “Food crops were replaced by cash crops and the natives were forced to grow poppies in their fields instead of wheat, dal and vegetables for the factory’s appetite for opium seemed never to be satted” (SOP 29). Cultivation of opium was little focussed in western archives but Ghosh exposes areas of colonial oppression that were not highlighted earlier.

Indian trade under the British Empire witnessed a constant process of exploitation which led to a gradual collapse of the Indian economy. Resechning into historical facts Ghosh reveals the sad plight of unwilling farmers who were forced to cultivate poppy. Earlier poppies were grown in small clusters between the fields that bore the main winter crops such as wheat and the farmers liked to use poppy seeds as luxury items. “No one was inclined to plant more because of all the work it took to grow poppies- fifteen ploughings of the land and every clod to be broken by hand, with a dantoli; fences and bunds to be built; purchases of manure and constant watering and after all that, the frenzy of the harvest each bulb having to be individually nicked, drained and scarped” (SOP 9).
But now the English agents allowed little else to be planted and went to every home forcing cash advances on the peasants and made them sign ‘asami’ contracts. At the end their earnings was just about enough to pay off the advance. The economic conditions of the peasants became worse with each advancing year that they indentured themselves as coolies and were transported to the plantations in the British colonies. After coming into contact with other indentured labourers in the ship, Deeti realized that every farmer had been served with a contract, which left them with no option but cultivate poppies in their lands. When the harvest was over, the farmers found that they were destined to plunge deeper into debt.

In the Ibis, we are introduced to two sisters, Rama and Champa, married to a pair of brothers whose lands were contracted to the opium factory. As they were not able to support their wives any longer they indentured themselves as a family. After the harvest, Deeti took the opium to the factory by herself, as her husband was in his death bed. She hoped to get a couple of silver rupees but was told that her husband had taken a large advance and the proceeds were barely enough to cover his debts. When she was worried how she would feed her family the clerk answered, “Do what others are doing. Go to the money lender. Sell your sons” (SOP 155). The clerk’s harsh comment exposes the colonial exploitation and the grinding poverty that impelled the peasants to sell themselves and their children as indentured labourers in return for a few cowries.

The terrible poverty of the natives is depicted in the following passages from the novel.
“She (Deeti) was hard put to think of something to offer him: she had no grain or food to spare, and as for money, there was not a dam’s worth of cowrie-shells in the house” (SOP 27).

“Earlier that day Jodu had buried his mother in the village of Naskarpura, using one of his last coins to pay a molla-saheb to read the Qur’an over her freshly-dug grave” (SOP 61).

“...food was 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” (SOP 202).

Delineating the socio economic conditions of the colonial period that led to indentured labour Ghosh records:

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 country side: lands that had once provided sustenance were now swamped by the rise of poppies. (SOP 202)

The history of indentured labour is similar to that of African slavery. Examining the reason behind slavery Jordan says, “There would have been no enslavement without economic need, without persistent demand for labour in under-populated colonies. Of crucial importance too was the fact that for cultural reasons, African-Americans were relatively helpless in the face of European aggressiveness and technology” (39). The same can be attributed to indenturing in India for indenturing was just an alternative for the institute of slavery after its abolition in British Caribbean colonies from 1834. The
conversation between Zachary and M.d’Epinay, the owner of a sugar plantation in Mauritius throws light on the new trade of indentured labour. He told Zachary that he needed men from India as his canes were rotting in the field. “Now that we may no longer have slaves in Mauritius, I must have coolies, or I am doomed” (SOP 28).

Foreseeing the gain in the supply of indentured labour, Burnham commissioned his newly acquired schooner Ibis to transport indentured labourers to Mauritius. He justified the system of slavery and indentured labour with a typical colonial logic. He told Zachary that “the Africa trade was the greatest exercise in freedom since God led the children of Israel out of Egypt. Consider . . . the situation of a so-called slave in the Carolinas - is he not free from his brethren in Africa, under the rule of some dark tyrant?” (SOP 79) Then he informed Zachary that his ship was to transport coolies and not slaves and proudly proclaimed with a spiritual tinge, “Have you not heard it said that when God closes one door he opens another? When the doors of freedom were closed to the African, the Lord opened them to a tribe that was yet needful of it- the Asiatic.” (SOP 79)

The exodus of grimityas is the outcome of a complex network of colonialism and oppression. The plight of these grimityas was hardly different from that of the slaves. Once brought to Calcutta from the villages the recruiters feared that they would find job elsewhere in the city and kept them indoors by locking them and every year “a good number of people perished of communicable diseases” (SOP 197). In the ship these labourers were treated just like the slaves; kept in the holds, heavily guarded for fear of mutiny, flogged and beaten up. The plantation to which these indentured labourers were sent was a place of no return for most of them. In the belly of the ship Subedar Buro Singh tells Deeti that he had set her husband Kalua for a plantation in the north from
where he will never come alive: “You can take my word for it: that shit shoveller you call your husband is as good as dead” (*SOP 477*).

Expressing his views on indentured labour Ghosh remarks “India was to the nineteenth century what Africa was to the eighteenth- in the sense that it was a huge pool capital labour.” The demand for labourers in plantation colonies compounded by famine, unemployment and poverty led to the migration of indentured labourers to various colonies. “India became Africa’s replacement in that regard . . . . Everywhere that Indian migrants went in the nineteenth century, they went after the banning of slavery. So they were clearly substitutes” (Interview at Duke’s University). As Benjamin Burnham tells Zachary, “A hold that was designed to carry slaves will serve just as well to carry coolies and convicts. Do you think? We’ll put in a couple of heads and piss-daies, so the darkies needn’t always be fouling themselves” (*SOP 74*).

Jodu’s first impressions of the hold of the ship, presents a haunting image of the plight of the indentured labourers to be herded as cattle to British colonies in need of labour.

He picked up the chains, and on looking more closely at the bracelet-like clasps, he became convinced that it was indeed meant for a human wrist or ankle. Now running his hands along the floor, he saw that there were smooth depressions in the wood, of a shape and size that could have been made by human beings, over prolonged periods of time. The depressions were so close to each other as to suggest a great press of people, packed close together, like merchandise on a vendor’s counter. (*SOP 132*)
Dkhar writes “His novels are models of the history of the voiceless and marginalized rather than those of historical figures... portraying migrants as victims trapped in the caldron of history” (42). *Sea of Poppies* presents two types of migration - the grimityas or indentured labourers were forced to migrate because of the socioeconomic conditions and the South Asian sailors or the lascars who performed hard manual labour aboard the ships. They were the first to participate in a new international labour community and were influential in the development of British Raj during the nineteenth and twentieth century. The use of lascars started in the early 18th century on merchant ships when the East India Company was set up to establish trade routes.

Englishmen initially worked aboard these ships. The sickness and death rate among these seamen was high during long voyages and many deserted the ship midway. So lascars were employed to replace them. David Chappell states that the role of these non-European seamen on European ships “challenges the triumphant tales of European seafarers heroically globalizing the world and offers us instead an image of interdependency with alien ‘others’, whose skills made voyaging so far from home possible” (75-76). According to him, these lascars constituted “the unsung working classes” of Western trading ships. (77)

These sailors were from poor economic background; “their feet were as naked as the day they were born and many seemed to own no clothing other than a length of cambric to wind around their middle” (*SOP* 14). Zachary in his “first experience of this species of sailor, had thought that lascars were a tribe or nation, like the Cherokee or Sioux: he discovered now that they came from places that were far apart, and had nothing in common, except the Indian Ocean; among them were Chinese and East Africans, Arabs and Malays, Bengalis and Goans, Tamils and Arakanese” (*SOP* 13).
Tracing the linguistic and nautical etymology of the word lascar, Ghosh writes that it is an Anglo-Indian adaptation of The Persian/Urdu *laskhar*/*laskhari* meaning soldier or army and is “applied to all indigenous soldiers of the Indian Ocean” (Of Fanas and forecastles 57) Their experiences are central to understanding the earliest structures of colonial migration and labour. Ghosh calls these lascars “forerunners of today’s migrants” and remarks that “they were possibly the first Asians and Africans to participate freely in a globalised workspace” (58). Men were recruited by ghat serangs in South Asian ports who supplied groups to East India Company ships. On board ship relations between the European crew were complicated by linguistic and cultural differences. The Irish captain declared them to be a lazy bunch of niggers and to the second mate Zachary they appeared ridiculous.

The language that the lascars used amongst themselves for communication was “a series of contact languages and pidgins made up of elements of Swahili, Malay and Hindusthani. To communicate with officers and white passengers . . . they probably used variants of the Sino-Portugese- English Pidgin that came to be associated with the South China Coast” (Ghosh, Of Fanas and Fortcastles 56). Robert Hall in his study on Pidgin and Creole languages has recorded that China Coast Pidgin was an important lingua franca in the 18th and 19th centuries. It originated in Canton in the early seventeenth century since the English established a trading post there in 1664. The pidgin became widely used in Canton and Macao in the eighteenth century as the European demand for tea grew. The language of the lascars headed by Serang Ali projects the triangle trade that existed in the 18th and 19th century. Ghosh presents the Indian Ocean as a site filled with the history of cultural exchanges testifying to the global relationships across multiple
continents for “the great British land empire was intimately connected to and sustained by the Indian Ocean waters that linked it to a larger world order” (Metcalf 9).

The novel also explores 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” (SOP 83) for as the economist Carl Trocki points out, “Without the drug, there probably would have been no British Empire” since “the economic foundation of the imperial economy lay on opium” (Trocki xiii). The book presents in detail the opium factory run by the East India Company in Ghazipur and gives an explicit account of the processing of opium and the lives of workers whose existence depended on it. The surveillance of the factory confirms the immense value of the commodity.

It was a complex of enormous godowns with formidable fortifications and sharp-eyed guards “for the contents of those few sheds were worth several million pounds sterling and could buy a good part of the City of London” (SOP 91). In the factory’s entrance was the weighing shed where the farmers brought their poppy-leaf wrappers that was weighed and sorted into grades of fine and coarse. The shed led to a large iron-roofed structure with high ceiling, massive square pillars, and windows that stretched from the floor to the roof. There were gigantic pairs of scales where raw opium was weighed and sealed for processing.

In the dim tunnel like structure that followed, men sunk in tanks of opium were tramping round to soften the sludge. The smell of liquid opium in the mixing room was so powerful that Deeti felt like choking. Deeti was relieved to come out of the tunnel to the court-yard and take a fresh breathe of air. From the court-yard, she could see the wetting shed where the poppy-leaf wrappers were dampened and the house where
medicines were made. Diagonally across the courtyard was a gigantic shed, damp, dimly lit and quiet where the opium was brought to dry. In huge shelves were arranged black opium balls in the size of an unhusked coconut. Next was the assembly room where the assemblers lined hemispherical moulds with poppy-leaf rotis, moistening the wrappers with lewah, a light solution of liquid opium.

“The measure for every ingredient was precisely laid down by the Company’s directors in faraway London; each package of opium was to consist of exactly one seer and seven-and-a-half chittacks of the drug, the ball being wrapped in five chittacks of poppy-leaf rotis, half of fine grade and half coarse, the whole being moistened with no more and no less than five chittacks of lewah” (SOP 97). The number of containers that passed through the assemblers hands every hour was noted on a black board. The packed opium was sent to Calcutta where it was auctioned and from there exported to China.

India was turned into a country of opium producers and suppliers while China was turned into a country of opium addicts. China’s efforts to curb the import of opium led to the Opium wars which forms the background of the novel. Against this historical background, Sea of Poppies presents Indian farmers, merchants, sailors and convicts caught up in the opium-fuelled imperial greed. The British conquest was done under the assumed piety that they were doing good for the world. “But” as Ghosh has expressed in an interview (L’ Espresso Magazine, 2011) “beneath that there is the most horrific violence, the most avarice and greed.” The extent of Asiatic exploitation by the Imperialists can be glimpsed in the data given about the godowns that were used for the storage of opium.
The unequal terms of trade and the specific nature of the commerce of the colonial period is revealed in the dinner conversation at Neel’s budgerow. The conversation exposes the avarice of the colonial masters and the real motive behind the opium war. Mr. Burnham informs Neel that though the Chinese were trying to stop the import of opium they cannot be allowed to have their way as it would ruin British firms like that of Burnhams and the fortunes of rich Indians like Neel. He tells, “It is the unanimous opinion of all of us who do business there that the mandarins cannot be allowed to have their way” (SOP 112). These words of Mr. Burnham reveal the British dominance and the colonial’s view of the native’s freedom.

When Neel naively suggests that they can offer something better to China Mr. Burnham confesses “. . . there is nothing they want from us - they have got it into their heads that they have no use for our products and manufacturers. But we, on the other hand, can’t do without their and their silks. If not for opium, the drain of silver from Britain and her colonies would be too great to sustain” (SOP 112). Benjamin Burnham boasts of the necessity of a war between Britain and China but he says, “The war when it comes will not be for opium. It will be for a principle: for freedom – for freedom of trade and for the freedom of Chinese people” (SOP 115). It is to be noted that the colonizers justify their act of brutality and colonization in the name of freedom.

They attempted to legitimize their invasion and exploitation of the colonies they captured. Said enumerates this point of the colonizer thus: “Was it not true . . . that ‘we’ had given ‘them’ progress and modernization? Hadn’t we provided them with order and a kind of stability that they haven’t been able to provide for themselves?” (Culture and Imperialism 23) Under the pretext of civilization they imposed imperialism, which was replete with hidden political agenda and brutality. Ghosh’s rendering of history creates
an awareness of the practical reality of colonialism. As Inderpal Grewal emphasizes
Ghosh’s texts are important interventions that “emerge from a historical narrative
suppressed by Western Histories” and from ‘a world connected through its resistance to
European colonization and the construction of new histories” (180).

In an interview to Asia Society, Ghosh has mentioned that war often creates a
collision between history and individual lives. “In circumstances of war as in such
situations as revolution, mass evacuation, forced population movement and so on; nobody
has the choice of stepping away from history.” The selected novels have explicitly
chronicled the impact that these events had on individuals and nations and revealed how
the forces of history can irrevocably alter the lives of ordinary men and women.