CHAPTER VI
SUMMATION

*The Glass Palace* and *Sea of Poppies* present the causes and consequences of British colonization and the deceitful strategies of the colonizers to exploit the colonized nations. The novels also highlight the commercial aims of the Imperialists for the accomplishment of which, they waged unlawful wars and exploited the colonies. The study expounds the economic, social, cultural, political and ecological degeneration wreaked by the British in their colonies. The dislocation of the people from one place to another had a tough bearing on the native population – on their psyche, their social and economic conditions and above all on their identities. The novels depict how unjustified and inhumane the British were, in subjecting the indigenous people to displacement and exploitation. Expulsion of the weak and the poor in the interest of the powerful, dislocation and relocation of people against their will, humiliation and harassment of the natives with no regard for their self-respect and dignity and indifference to the feelings and emotions of the colonized are some of the aspects of colonialism that have been dealt with, in the present study.

The novels have created awareness about ecological sensibility by depicting the impact of colonialism on environment. The Mandalay palace was situated in a sprawling complex of pavilions, gardens and corridors. The pebbled path that led to the South Garden Palace was meandered between picturesque pools and goldfish-filled streams. There is a self contained, peaceful, sylvan civilization in harmony with nature. East of Irrawady waterway down the Sittang River, Huay Zedi is introduced as a small village that was a day’s journey from the river bank town of Pyinmana. Saya’s work often took him to this village that stood above a sandy bank where a mountain stream had drifted into
a winding curve. It seems to be a place where nature is in harmony with culture. The stream was shallow and the water rose only to knee-height making it congenial for the village children to patrol it with small crossbows. The silver-backed fishes that circled in the shallow waters were dazed by the sudden change in the flow of water. The villagers’ dwelling was surrounded by huge trees growing thickly together to form a towering wall of foliage. Hidden behind this wall lived flocks of parakeets and troupes of monkeys. Even domestic sounds from the village life the scraping of a ladle on a pot would alarm these creatures and made them flee in fear. Dolly loved the electric stillness of the jungle and she would spend hours by the stream sketching the thickly forested slope. She seemed to find solace in the bounty of nature.

Uma too loved the splendor of the valley of the Kajali River where she would spend an hour or two every day enjoying the beauty of nature. The Collector’s bungalow was situated on the crest of a hill, overlooking the valley of the Kajali River. There stood a peepul tree in the woods that extended out over the valley. It was an old tree with thick aerial roots hanging from its twisted branches. She could see more of the valley from there than from her house. Uma was amazed by the view of the winding river, the curve of the bay and the windswept cliffs. The goatherds came to graze there only at dawn and the place was deserted the rest of the day. Every day she managed to slip out of the house without the knowledge of the servants and sat with a book in the shade of the tree. All of it was ruthlessly invaded by expansionist, technologically advanced power.

Presenting a vivid picture of pre colonial, colonial and post colonial Burma, The Glass Palace portrays the ecological devastation caused by European intervention in South Asia. The fact that teak provided for the motive for the colonization of Burma is explicitly brought forth in the novel. “None can doubt that the desire for profitable trade,
plunder and enrichment was the primary force that led to the establishment of the imperial structure” (*Beginning Colonialism* 7). In Malaysia dense forests housing rich variety of flora and fauna were destroyed to make place for commercially lucrative rubber. Dense forests were cleared and rich vegetation set to fire to give way to rubber plantations that great plumes of smoke rose skyward from the mountains. “The hillside looked as though it had been racked by a series of disasters: huge stretches of land were covered with ashes and blackened stumps” (*TGP* 200).

In *Sea of Poppies* Gosh has drawn upon the impact of opium on the environment – the imbalance it caused in the ecology and its negative effect on animals and human beings. Opium cultivation forced on the natives by the colonizers ceased the cultivation of edible food crops. The odour of raw opium mingled in the air causing lung infections and a miasma of lethargy seemed to hang over the factory’s surroundings. Not only human beings but all living beings were affected by it. Opium so transformed the ecology that even the insects and animals were intoxicated. The sweet aroma of the opium pods attracted swarms of insects and the air was buzzing with bees, grasshoppers and wasps. These insects got stuck in the sap flowing out of the pod and lost their lives. The poppy sap had a pacifying effect on the insects and they flapped their wings in an erratic way as if they had forgotten to fly. The monkeys that lived in the opium factory’s surroundings never chattered or fought but were in a stupefied state. They came down from the trees only to lap at the open sewers that drained the factory’s effluents and once their cravings were satiated they would climb back “to resume their stupefied scrutiny of the Ganga and its currents” (*SOP* 91).

Poppy trash used for the packaging of the drug was ground for storage and “these remains produced a fine dust that hung in the air like a fog of snuff” (91). The riverbank
near the factory was shored up with the gharas in which raw opium was brought to the factory. The fishes that nibbled at the broken earthenware were in a state of lethargy that they were easily caught by fishermen. The Ganges was considered a holy river by the natives and was worshipped by the people. Its water was used for drinking by all living beings but the river itself was polluted by the effluents from the factory flowing into it that the water became unfit for drinking. The landscape near the river was so dry, covered with the parched remnants of opium harvest and there was no green foliage anywhere to relieve the eyes. As Captain Chillingworth points out “. . . like all the gifts that Nature gives us- fire, water and the rest - it (opium) demands to be used with the greatest care and caution” (SOP 436). Every crop has its own importance and anything grown in excess out of greed or selfish ambitions destroys the ecological balance of nature.

The study has also brought forth how fact and fiction have been interwoven in the selected novels to expound the impact of larger events of history on individual lives. In The Glass Palace Ghosh has recreated some of the historical events like the dethroning of the Burmese King Thebaw in 1885, Japanese invasion of Burma in 1942, the constitution of Indian National Army in 1943 the coup of Ne Win in 1962 and has recorded the experiences of a variety of multigenerational diasporic characters buffeted by the tide of history. In Sea of Poppies he has focused on the events that led to break out of the First Opium War in 1839 during which the British enforced a treaty opening Chinese ports for international trade. The mainstream of his literary works is focused not only on historical events but also on the question of how history is to be written and measured.

His novels envisage the world from the perspective of displaced peoples and focus on histories relegated to the margins of Eurocentric narratives of history. As Anshuman A. Mondal points out The Shadow Lines interrogates the legacies of partition in the Indian
subcontinent and the silence surrounding the riots in nationalist histories. In *The Glass Palace* Ghosh focuses on the forgotten histories of World War II such as the Long March to India and the distressing experience of the Indian settlers in Burma on the wake of a Japanese attack. *The Hungry Tide* gives voice to the massacre of Bangladeshi refugees at Morichjapi by the Indian state in 1979. Highlighting the realities of the Empire, *Sea of Poppies* presents the histories of non-western sailors, the slave trade and indentured labour.

Chitra Sankaran in her introduction to the book *History, Narrative and Testimony in Amitav Ghosh’s Fiction* remarks, “At the centre of Amitav Ghosh’s art there seems to be two conflicting impulses at work - one to give voice to the casualties of history and thereby bear testimony to the occurrence of a series of historical events that have been largely ignored or marginalized by the powerful Euro-centric master-narrative of top-down history” (xxi). The focus is shifted to what history does not say. British history glosses over the colonial exploitation of natural resources in Burma and the thriving trade of opium in India under the imperial rule. *The Glass Palace* and *Sea of Poppies* unfold these aspects of colonization and the horrors of colonialism and capitalist exploitation. More than a historical novel it is an alternative way of conceiving human history.

The British annexation of Burma has been recorded as a great historical event in the annals of history. But the pain and agony that the royal family had to undergo suddenly deprived of their sovereign power, their suffering in exile, the state of their attendants who were orphans, the dilemma of the Indian soldiers in the British Indian army, their role in awakening national consciousness among their countrymen and the plight of the subalterns under the capitalists of British India which were left undocumented in history has been openly expounded by Ghosh in *The Glass Palace*. 
*Sea of Poppies* 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. Western archives reveal that foreign trade greatly flourished in Britain during the reign of Edward III and Queen Elizabeth but British rule in India was basically financed and sustained by their opium trade to China. As Mr. Burnham tells Zachary, the Company’s annual gains from opium was almost equal to the entire revenue of United States of America (SOP 115). Sharing an interesting fact Ghosh reveals “Before the British came; India was one of the world’s biggest economies. All the empirical facts show that British rule was a disaster for India. Before the British came 25% of the world trade originated in India. By the time they left it was less than one percent” (Interview by Soutik Biswas).

The novel also penetrates into the lives of Indians in the nineteenth century. On one hand opium cultivation resulted in the gradual percolation of opium culture into their lifestyle. It created health hazards and moreover the employees working in the opium factory developed a habit for opium intake resulting in inertia. On the other hand they ended up in poverty and so had to indenture themselves as laborers and were shipped to the rubber and sugarcane plantations in various British colonies. As an anthropologist and historian Ghosh has probed into the history of this first wave of Indian Diaspora and delineated the socio-economic condition of the British Raj that led to the indentured Diasporas of nineteenth century India.

The impact of the British Empire’s domination of the Indian subcontinent is established through the mixing cultures and languages that permeate the two novels. The books display use of different varieties of globalised English with its different dialects and registers and also the laskari, the language of the sailors. In *Sea of Poppies* especially language serves as an index of the cross-cultural fusion that was operating in the Indian
Ocean region in the nineteenth century. As Ghosh himself has said in the interview to L’Espresso magazine, researching for *Sea of Poppies*, he was astonished to see a lot of crew lists from 19th century ships which were diverse with sailors from East Africa, the Gulf, Sumatra, Persia, India, Malaysia and China. He was puzzled how things were done in a ship with such a cosmopolitan crew when he came upon a nineteenth century dictionary of the ‘Laskari’ language. The language proved to be a nautical jargon that mixed Urdu, English, Portuguese, Bengali, Arabic, Malay and many other languages.

Language is also used to reflect the difference in class and the urban-rural divide that was prevalent in the society. Deeti was intimidated by the clerk in the opium factory to whom she had come to sell her opium. She spoke to him in Bhojpuri. “He answered her not in her native Bojpuri, but in a mincing citified Hindi: Do what others are doing, he snapped. Go to the moneylender. Sell your sons. Send them off to Mareech” (*SOP* 155). Sailing down the Ganges towards Calcutta, the pulwar in which the migrants were travelling took them “into a watery rain-drowned land where the people spoke an incomprehensible tongue: now when the barge stopped for the night, they could no longer understand what the spectators were saying, for their jeers and taunts were in Bengali” (*SOP* 246). When they reached Calcutta the boatman spoke “in quicksilver citified Hindustani that Deeti could just about follow” (*SOP* 278) and meeting the migrants in Calcutta was the gomusta, speaking in “heavily-accented Hindi” (*SOP* 282).

Taken into custody by the Burnhams after the death of her father, Paulette found that even the servants in the Mr.Burnham’s household held strong views on what was appropriate for Europeans. Kitchen Hindustani was the language of command in the house and the servants ignored her if she spoke in Bengali or any other language. When Neel was convicted and sent to jail, he protested against the treatment meted to him by the
jailers and complained to the sergeant in English. The sergeant was incensed “by the mere fact of being spoken to in his own language, by a native convict” and replied in “rough Hindusthani” (SOP 287). He was burning with fury and considered it “an act of intolerable insolence in an Indian convict, a defilement of the language” (SOP 289). On board the Ibis, Subedhar Byro Singh could not stand the sight of Neel talking to Zachary Reid in English and Neel was beaten up for conversing in English.

Each character can also be defined by the way in which they speak. Mr. Burnham’s language is that of dominance as in his justification of waging a war with China. Mr. Crowle and Captain Chillingworth speak in a tongue that reflects their position and arrogance. Their words are crude and vulgar with a racial undertone. Deeti’s speech reveals her leadership quality, her concern for the womenfolk and assertiveness. Neel’s words move from self indulgence to submissiveness.

The language used in the novels not only echoes the Empire’s domination and the class divisions prevailing in the society but also the post colonial resistance to language. Ghosh’s abrogation of the language is reflected in the interweaving of native words to make it socially relevant. As the authors of The Empire Writes Back remark “The technique of selective lexical fidelity which leaves some words untranslated in a text” conveys “the sense of cultural distinctiveness” (63). Post colonial abrogation is also revealed in the mixing of the crude lascar slang and in the use of American discussions, Indian expressions and French vernacular in the course of the conversations of the characters. The mixing of different languages in the same utterance as in the following reminiscence of Doughty is a fine example of the author’s abrogation of language.
Wasn’t a man in town who could put on a burra-khana like he did. Sheeshmull blazing with shammers and candles. Paltens of bearers and khidmutgars. Demijohn of French loll-shrub and carboys of iced simkin. And the karibat! . . . Now there was another chuckmuck sight for you! Rows of cursies for the sahibs and mems to sit on. Sittringies and tuckiers for the natives. . . . Chunchunis whirling and tickytaw boys beating their tobblers. (SOP 47)

This multilingualism seems to be the antithesis of the monolingual tendencies of colonial discourse, which attempts to close down the plurality of voices in colonized societies.

After writing about cloth and oil in The Circle of Reason, spices and sugar in In an Antique Land, Gosh has turned his attention to another material commodity, teak and rubber in The Glass Palace. Wood is presented as symbol that pervades the lives of the characters in The Glass Palace. The novel starts with a war fought over wood. A dispute between a British timber company and the Burmese king Thebaw leads to battle and the Burmese king is dethroned. A war over teak sends the royal family to exile while trading in teak elevates Rajkumar, an errand boy in the tea stall to a man of social repute. Saya John earns rich profits by ferrying supplies and provisions to teak camps in the forests of Burma and by investing in rubber plantations in Malaya. Mathew builds Morning side as a monument to wood for he tells his wife Elsa, “Everything I have, I owe to trees of one kind or other- teak, rubber” (TGP 219). Each room had wood of a different kind and the house was aglow with the rich warmth of polished wood. The walls of the corridors were paneled with rich fine-grained wood brought from Burma, Celebes and Sumatra and that of the dining hall with knitted bamboo. The dining hall was very big with a long, polished hardwood table at the centre.
The wood that enabled Rajkumar to build his fortunes wrecks his life and brings him to nothing. When Rajkumar saw the flames leaping from the ‘well-stacked wood’, when he found that the flames had claimed his lifetime’s accumulation of labour, he was shocked. It was a part of his plan to hold all his assets in one place but the bombs had claimed it all. Nevertheless he thought “nothing mattered so long as Neel was unharmed. The rest were just things, possessions” (TGP 463). He was shattered when he heard from Doh Say that his beloved son had fallen under the logs. Rajkumar saw Doh Say dragging a body through the alley, almost unrecognizable, crushed by the immense weight of wood. Despite its disfigurement, Rajkumar knew it was his dead son.

Empty handed Rajkumar landed in Buma in 1885 and empty handed he leaves the country. Having lost everything when Rajkumar returns to India by foot, wood is the only possession he has. “Rajkumar would get angry if they lost any part of their trove of wood…. In the evenings when they stopped he would walk into the jungle and come back carrying armloads of firewood. . . . The firewood was their only capital, their only asset” (TGP 470). Money was of no use and it was this wood that Rajkumar traded for food, as there were always people who needed wood to cook their wood.

If wood is presented as the animating force in The Glass Palace, opium plays an important role in Sea of Poppies. For Deeti opium has permeated deep into her family life. She grows poppy in her field as she has to or she is forced to. She is married to an addict who confronts her on the wedding night with a wooden box filled with opium and a smoking pipe and confesses “this is my first wife” (SOP 34). She remembers how as a little girl she had laughed with her playmates at the habitual opium eaters in the village who sat staring at the sky with dull, dead eyes. She had never thought of the possibility of marrying an afeemkhor. When her husband offers her the drug, she accepts it believing it
would disquiet her heart. But her husband fills her lungs with smoke and she feels herself slipping away into another world only to find that she had been molested. She drugs her mother-in-law with the same drug to find the truth.

When she is summoned to the factory to take her sick husband home she has no money at home to give the ox-cart driver and makes the payment with a piece of opium. To ease her husband’s suffering she brought in an ojha to exorcise the house, consulted a hakim who tried yunani medicines and a vaid who gave ayurvedic medicine. When the treatments failed Deeti resorted to opium, to ease his pain and postpone the prospect of widowhood. At her husband’s death she is carried to her husband’s funeral pyre again in opium induced state.

It is opium trade that elevates Mr. Burnham, an ordinary Liverpool merchant to own Burnham Bros., a shipping company and trading house. Mr. Burnham points out that every possession of Neel is also paid for by opium - his budge row and the houses. But the same drug ruins Neel’s life and he is sentenced to seven years punishment in Mauritius. When Neel’s crime, the name of the prison and date is to be tattooed in his forehead, the tattooist pushes a little ball of opium between his lips to relieve the pain. In the jail he is put up with an afeemkhor Ah Fatt, who later becomes his friend and companion. Ah Fatt’s body had grown accustomed to consuming the drug in excess and now that the drug was suddenly withdrawn “it had the effect of sending the bladder and sphincter into uncontrollable spasms, so that neither food nor water could be retained” (SOP 322).

Captain Chillingworth tells Zachary that opium had helped him to cope up with a debilitating disease. He adds that the most miraculous property of opium is that it kills a man’s desires. “That is what makes it manna for a sailor, a balm for the worst of his afflictions” (SOP 436). It calms the interminable torment of flesh that pursues them across
the seas and drives them to sin against nature. The captain offers Zachary the opium pipe and as he drew in a breath of smoke, he felt so relaxed as if “every trace of tension had drained out of his muscles” (*SOP* 438). Earlier he had wanted to tell the captain, the truth about the watch that Serang Ali had gifted him. Once he took the drug, he determined whatever had happened between them would be resolved between them. He wondered if the fumes had given him a clear vision of the world.

Towards the end of the novel when Sarju is about to breathe her last, she gives three pouches to Deeti. One of the pouches had ganja seeds, another Datura and the third pouch contained seeds of the best Benares poppy. Handing over the pouch of poppy seeds she says, “there’s wealth beyond imagining; guard it like your life” (*SOP* 450). When Deeti meets Kalua in the deck she finds a grain lodged under her thumbnail and “suddenly she knew it was not the planet above that governed her life; it was this minuscule orb- at once bountiful and all devouring, merciful and destructive, sustaining and vengeful. This was her Shani, her Saturn” (*SOP* 452). She slips the seed into Kalua’s mouth and tells him that the poppy seed is the star that took them from their homes and put them on the ship and it is the planet that rules their destiny. These words of Deeti sum up the entire idea behind the novel for it is not just Deeti’s destiny that is ruled by opium but the lot of all the characters and also that of nations.

Administering the drug to her mother-in-law Deeti realized the secret strength of opium. “She saw now why the factory in Ghazipur was so diligently patrolled by the sahibs and their sepoys - for if a little bit of this gum could give her such power over the life, the character, the very soul of this elderly woman, then with more of it at her disposal, why should she not be able to seize kingdoms and control multitudes?” (*SOP* 38)
The study shows how the novels render a truthful portrayal of India and Burma under colonial rule - the European greed in the exploitation of natural resources and the ecological imperialism implicit in the European domination of Asia; the displacement of royalty and the poignant accounts of people scattered through post colonial dislocation and the suppression, subjugation and exploitation of the native population by the imperial powers. It also reveals the patriarchal domination of a caste-ridden Indian society where women are exploited by men, the poor by the rich, the powerless by the powerful and the colonized by the colonizer.

The research also points out the repercussion of history on ordinary people and societies and reveals how history has been rewritten to acknowledge suppressed or forgotten histories. Through his stories Ghosh has highlighted a number of important but neglected issues: slavery in the East, indentured labour contract, racism in the British Indian army and the futility of wars. Finally a study on the language and style of the novels shows that Standard English has been abrogated and appropriated as a culturally significant discourse and the language nativised through the process of socio-linguistic acculturation in the Indian context. *Sea of Poppies* presents a world of heteroglossia that mirrors socio-historic issues and the cross-cultural encounters in the subcontinent under colonial rule. While the multiple languages and dialects employed in the text echo the empire’s dominance, the appropriation of language reflects postcolonial resistance to European hegemony.

However the study is limited to just two novels of Amitav Ghosh. It could be extended to the other novels by the author, particularly *River of Smoke*, the second book in the projected Ibis trilogy. A comparative study with other postcolonial writings in African or Canadian literature can be done to compare and contrast the impact of colonialism on
these countries. A purely linguistic study on the Ibis trilogy would be interesting as the
novels employ diverse languages including laskari, pidgin and creole. A study on the
etymology of words in these languages will enable us to gain more knowledge about the
colonial trade in the late eighteenth century.