



## **Fragmented Identities: The Impact of Colonialism and Opium in Amitav Ghosh's *Smoke and Ashes***

**\*Bincy R.C. and Selva Mary Gokila S. George**

Department of English, Holy Cross College (Autonomous), Nagercoil - 629 004

Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli - 627 012

### **ABSTRACT**

*Post-colonialism examines the enduring effects of colonial rule on societies and how the identities of the colonized are shaped by its impact. In Amitav Ghosh's *Smoke and Ashes*, the opium trade serves as a pivotal theme that reveals the legacies of colonial exploitation and addiction. This study investigates the post-colonial perspective in the text, focusing on the economic and cultural impacts of colonialism on Indian society. The narrative illustrates how colonial practices dehumanized individuals and reinforced harmful stereotypes. By analyzing these themes, this study reveals the lasting consequences of colonialism and underscores the importance of remembering these histories in shaping contemporary identities and struggles.*

**Keywords:** *post-colonialism, exploitation, colonialism, opium*

### **Introduction**

Post-colonialism is a theory that examines the social, political and economic consequences of colonization. This field of study emerged in the 1960s as scholars from formerly colonized nations began to articulate their experiences. It focuses on the lingering effects of colonialism, analyzing literature, history and culture that were transformed by imperialism. Post-colonialism is closely intertwined with concepts such as Orientalism, developed by Edward Said in his influential text *Orientalism*, Gayatri Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity. Post-colonial literature often explores how cultural memory is shaped by colonial powers in colonized nations. Additionally, it enables authors to raise questions about what is forgotten and what is remembered, frequently revealing the dominant group's power over marginalized voices.

Amitav Ghosh is an Indian writer born in Kolkata. He is primarily known for his complex narratives that often discuss climate change and colonialism, portraying the realities of Indian life. Ghosh is best known for his *Ibis* Trilogy, which is set against the backdrop of the opium trade. The trilogy consists of three works: *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke*

(2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015). In this trilogy, the effect of colonialism is depicted through the lens of the opium trade.

*Smoke and Ashes: A Writer's Journey Through Opium's Hidden Histories* is a travelogue, memoir and a work of non-fiction published in July 2023. The two decades of research involved in writing the *Ibis* Trilogy culminated in this work. The text focuses on the East India Company's role in the opium trade and the exploitation of Indian farmers, which ultimately contributed to global addiction. It serves as a powerful reminder of the forgotten narratives of colonialism and the relationship between India, China and Britain, revealing the dark realities of significant events such as the Opium War, the Sino-Indian War and the American Opioid Crisis.

### **Post colonialism**

Post-colonialism explores the dehumanization of the colonized by the colonizers. Ania Loomba states in her book *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* that "The process of forming a community in the new land necessarily meant unforming or re-forming the communities that existed there already and involved a wide range of practices including trade, plunder, negotiation, warfare, genocide, enslavement and rebellions" (21). In *Smoke and Ashes*, Ghosh examines how the opium trade was used as a tool of colonial control. The forced cultivation of opium replaced traditional farming practices, leading to a loss of agricultural heritage and self-sufficiency. British coerced Indian farmers into cultivating opium instead of food crops, effectively transforming India's agricultural system into a mechanism for British economic interests. For example, farmers in the region of Bihar were compelled to cultivate opium rather than essential crops like rice and sugarcane. Furthermore, the British sought to monopolize the trade in the Malwa region, forcing people to cultivate white poppies instead of red ones. Ghosh references Emdad-ul Haq, who states that "This large-scale conversion of paddy fields into poppy cultivation contributed to a famine in Bengal in 1770" (44). This manipulation of agricultural practices and dehumanization not only devastated local communities but also exemplified the destructive impact of colonialism, leaving lasting scars on the cultural and economic landscape of India. However, economic upliftment is the primary reason behind exploitation.

### **Post-colonialism in *Smoke and Ashes***

Post-colonialism explores how colonial powers exploited their colonies for economic gain. According to Ania Loomba "Colonialism was the midwife that assisted at the birth of European capitalism, or that without colonial expansion the transition to capitalism could not have taken place in Europe" (23). In *Smoke and Ashes* Ghosh explains that the British used

both India and China as major tools for economic upliftment. Opium was introduced in China as a substitute for bullion payments, as the Chinese had a strong demand for tea. Through this, the British government created its colonial network. India was exploited for its agricultural production, with farmers in states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh forced to cultivate opium. The processing took place in factories built in these regions, specifically the opium factories in Ghazipur and Patna. The Indians working in these factories were treated without dignity and offered only menial job opportunities. The finished product was then sent to the port of Guangzhou via the port of Calcutta. This exploitation highlights the fundamental dynamics of post-colonialism, revealing how colonial practices laid the groundwork for modern economic systems at the expense of the colonized.

Bombay largely escaped exploitation by colonizers and experienced upliftment, mainly due to the military power of the Maratha states. Additionally, Bombay's geographical location characterized by mountains, rough terrain and harsh climatic conditions made it difficult to traverse. During the same period, the state of Purvanchal was experiencing defeat. This legacy of colonial impact persists today, with Bihar facing issues such as poor sanitation, health problems and low literacy rates, while Bombay has become one of the wealthiest cities in India. As Ghosh notes, the trade network between Purvanchal and Calcutta significantly contributed to the flourishing of cities like Singapore.

From the perspective of the colonizers, the colonized were viewed through a stereotypical lens. Edward Said states in his text *Orientalism* that the Orient is the cultural mirror of the West and a projection of the West's fantasies and desires, often depicted as exotic, backward and uncivilized. In *Smoke and Ashes*, Indians and Chinese are similarly viewed through these stereotypes. Indians were compelled to engage in smuggling due to poverty and the British monopoly on the opium trade, leading to their characterization as natural thieves. In contrast, the Chinese became addicted due to the high availability of opium rather than demand and they were labeled as naturally addicted to drugs. Meanwhile, the cultivation of the white poppy plant was enforced due to these stereotypes, even though the red poppy plant produced better opium. Ghosh highlights that “not only did Western colonizers succeed in using opium to extract incalculable wealth from Asians, but they were also successful in obscuring their role in the trade by claiming that it had existed from time immemorial because non-white people were by nature prone to addiction and depravity” (46). These stereotypes not only justified colonial exploitation but also continue to influence perceptions of the colonized today, illustrating the enduring legacy of colonialism.

Post-colonialism looks at how the impacts of colonialism still affect societies today, influencing their social, economic and cultural situations. The legacy of the colonial drug issue continues into the modern era with the production of various opium derivatives such as OxyContin, heroin and fentanyl. The American opioid crisis today is reminiscent of the colonial drug addiction in China. The British profited significantly from this trade by employing Canton graduates as smugglers and using indentured laborers from the colonies. Today, substantial profits are generated through the use of technology to produce genetically modified plants and through online sales.

### Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh's *Smoke and Ashes* explores the lasting effects of colonialism through the opium trade, highlighting its deep impact on both India and China. Ghosh explains how the forced cultivation of opium altered farming practices and reinforced negative stereotypes, portraying Indians as "natural thieves" and Chinese as "naturally addicted." These perceptions still resonate today, especially in light of the current opioid crisis. By exposing the economic exploitation and loss of dignity imposed by colonial rule, Ghosh emphasizes the importance of remembering these often-overlooked histories. Ultimately, *Smoke and Ashes* reminds us of the need to understand the past to build a fairer future.

### References

1. Ghosh, Amitav. *Smoke and Ashes*. New York: Harper Collins, 2023.
2. Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism-Postcolonialism*. UK: Routledge, 1998.
3. Wikipedia Contributors. "Postcolonialism." Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 18 Mar. 2019, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postcolonialism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postcolonialism).
4. Yesapogu, Venkateswarlu, et al. "The Impact of Post Colonialism in Amitav Ghosh's Novels-A Post Colonial Perspective." *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL)*, 2016; 4: 26 - 38. [www.arcjournals.org/pdfs/ijSELL/v4-i1/16.pdf](http://www.arcjournals.org/pdfs/ijSELL/v4-i1/16.pdf).
5. Paul, Manjima. "A Study on Amitav Ghosh's *Smoke and Ashes*: A Journey from Colonialism to Modernity." *Journal of Namibian Studies*, [Namibian-studies.com/index.php/JNS/article/view/6411](http://Namibian-studies.com/index.php/JNS/article/view/6411).