



Ecological Imperialism and Environmental Degradation in Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy*

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Abstract: Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy*—*Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), and *Flood of Fire* (2015)—reconstructs the nineteenth-century history of the opium trade, indentured labor, colonial expansion, and the First Opium War. While the trilogy has been extensively discussed in relation to colonialism, migration, diaspora, and transnational history, its ecological dimension offers an equally significant perspective on the workings of empire. In *Sea of Poppies*, forced poppy cultivation replaces food crops, impoverishes peasants, disrupts biodiversity, and contaminates the Ganga. *River of Smoke* expands this ecological critique through botanical imperialism, plant hunting, biodiversity commodification, animal exploitation, and water pollution. *Flood of Fire* connects these ecological processes to imperial warfare and maritime expansion. This paper examines the trilogy through postcolonial ecocriticism, ecological imperialism, and the concept of slow violence. It argues that Ghosh represents colonialism not merely as the domination of human communities but as a systematic transformation and commodification of the more-than-human world.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Ecological Imperialism, Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Opium Trade, Environmental Degradation

Introduction

The relationship between literature and the physical environment has become an important field of literary inquiry through the emergence of ecocriticism. Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). Such an approach challenges the anthropocentric tendency to treat nature as merely a passive background to human action. Instead, ecological criticism examines how literary texts represent landscapes, rivers, animals, plants, climate, resources, and the material conditions of human existence.

Ecocriticism becomes particularly significant when literature engages with colonial history. Colonialism involved not only political occupation and cultural domination but also the appropriation and transformation of ecological resources Jayswal (2026). Land was reorganized for commercial agriculture, forests were exploited, plants were collected and transported, animals were commodified, and waterways became sites of industrial and commercial waste. The exploitation of nature consequently operated alongside the exploitation of colonized communities.

Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* provides a particularly productive literary representation of this relationship between imperialism and ecology. The trilogy consists of *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), and *Flood of Fire* (2015). The novels move across India, Mauritius, China, and the Indian Ocean world, reconstructing the historical networks generated by the opium trade and British imperial expansion. The first novel emphasizes the cultivation of opium and the displacement of Indian peasants; the second foregrounds the opium trade in Canton alongside botanical exploration and the commercialization of plants; and the third brings these economic networks into the violent context of the First Opium War Bisht (2026).

The ecological implications of the trilogy have already attracted critical attention. Priyanka Maral argues that *Sea of Poppies* represents the environmental consequences of colonial opium cultivation, including its effects on “people, animals, insects, birds, and the Ganga” (Maral 364–69). In her study of *River of Smoke*, Maral further

identifies ecological imperialism as a major concern and emphasizes the impact of colonial commercial activity on the “flora and fauna of India, China, and Mauritius” (Maral 823–33).

Recent scholarship continues to extend this ecological reading. Prakash and Sathya Devi identify *Flood of Fire* as an environmental history of empire in which “poppy monoculture, biodiversity loss, soil depletion, rural displacement, rivers, and maritime routes” become interconnected with colonial capitalism (Prakash, Devi 67–70). Likewise, studies of the trilogy’s oceanic ecologies emphasize the Indian Ocean as an active ecological and political space rather than merely a backdrop to colonial mobility and trade Singh and Jaiswal (2026).

The trilogy demonstrates that the colonial economy does not exploit human beings and nature through two separate processes. Rather, both forms of exploitation are structurally interconnected. The same imperial system that converts the Indian farmer into an instrument of opium production also converts agricultural land into a monoculture, the river into a waste channel, plants into commodities, animals into marketable products, and the ocean into a route for imperial circulation. The present paper therefore examines how ecological imperialism functions across all three novels as a fundamental mechanism of colonial domination.

Ecological Imperialism and the Transformation of Agricultural Landscapes in *Sea of Poppies*

The ecological critique of the *Ibis Trilogy* begins most prominently in *Sea of Poppies*. The novel opens with a visually attractive but ecologically troubling image of the Gangetic landscape. Ghosh describes the Ganga as though it were “flowing between twin glaciers, both its banks being blanketed by thick drifts of white-petalled flowers” (1). Their economic function immediately complicates the beauty of the poppy fields. The flowers are not simply part of the natural landscape; they are the visible expression of a colonial agricultural system.

The forced cultivation of opium constitutes one of the clearest examples of ecological imperialism in the trilogy. Agricultural land that previously supported food crops is reorganized to serve the international opium market. Poppies displace wheat, pulses, vegetables, and other subsistence crops. The result is a form of monoculture that transforms the relationship between farmers and their land.

Maral observes that Ghosh connects colonialism with environmental destruction by showing how the forced cultivation of opium affects the people and the natural environment of India (Maral, “Ecocritism” 364–69). These observations demonstrate that the poppy is not simply an agricultural crop in the novel; it is a symbol of a capitalist system that reorganizes nature for imperial profit. The economic consequences of this transformation are visible in the lives of Deeti and the other farmers. Ghosh explains that the farmers’ earnings from the crop are barely sufficient to repay the advances imposed upon them: “at the end of it, your earnings would come to no more than three and a half sica rupees, just above enough to pay off your advance” (30). The quotation exposes the contradiction at the center of colonial agriculture. The land produces an enormously profitable commodity, yet the cultivators themselves remain impoverished.

The ecological transformation therefore produces social transformation. When food crops decline, the communities dependent upon them become increasingly vulnerable. Deeti observes the changing agricultural landscape and realizes that the farmers are compelled to cultivate poppies even though they have no grain to harvest for their families. The colonial economy consequently turns ecological dependence into economic dependence.

This relationship between environmental degradation and human displacement is central to the concept of slow violence. Rob Nixon describes “slow violence as a form of destruction that occurs gradually and often remains invisible because its effects are dispersed across time and space” (Nixon 2)—the ecological damage represented in *Sea of Poppies* functions in precisely this manner. There is no single catastrophic event through which the countryside is destroyed. Instead, the ecological system deteriorates through monoculture, declining food production, indebtedness, pollution, and the gradual destruction of local livelihoods.



The final consequence is displacement. People who can no longer sustain themselves through agriculture are pushed into indentured labor. Thus, the migration of the *Ibis* passengers cannot be separated from the environmental transformation of their homeland. Ecological degradation becomes one of the conditions that makes forced migration possible.

Meanwhile, the contamination of the Ganga is especially significant. The river is simultaneously a physical ecosystem, a source of livelihood, a cultural symbol, and a sacred presence. However, the colonial factory transforms it into a site of waste disposal. The contradiction reveals two different relationships with nature. For Deeti and the local population, the river possesses cultural and spiritual value; for the colonial economy, it becomes a resource for production and a convenient channel for waste. The Ganga consequently functions as an ecological witness to colonial exploitation. The destruction of the river parallels the destruction of agricultural livelihoods. Both are consequences of an economic system that privileges commodity production over ecological sustainability.

Ghosh describes the migrants as “headed towards the nothingness of the Black Water” (387–88). The crossing of the *kala pani* is traditionally associated with the loss of caste and separation from homeland, but within the context of the trilogy it also represents ecological displacement. The migrants are separated from the land, river, agricultural practices, and social environments that have previously shaped their lives.

Deeti and Kalua's experience offers a contrasting model of human dependence upon nature. After leaving their village, their proximity to the Ganga enables them to survive: “Since the Ganga was so nearby, they had never gone hungry or thirsty” (189). Nature here is not a commodity but a source of sustenance. This distinction is crucial to Ghosh's ecological imagination. The colonial system sees land, rivers, plants, and animals primarily in terms of economic value. Deeti's relationship with the Ganga is based on dependence, reverence, and reciprocity. The novel thus juxtaposes an extractive relationship with nature and a relational one.

Botanical Imperialism in *River of Smoke*

River of Smoke expands the ecological critique into the sphere of botanical imperialism. The novel introduces a network of botanical collectors, plant hunters, gardens, nurseries, merchants, and ships through which plants are transferred across geographical boundaries. Maral identifies *River of Smoke* as an example of ecological imperialism, particularly emphasizing the novel's representation of flora and fauna in India, China, and Mauritius (Maral 823–33). The novel thus extends the ecological critique beyond agricultural land to the global circulation of biological resources.

Penrose's plant hunting reveals a contradiction within colonial science. On the one hand, botanical exploration can produce knowledge about the natural world; on the other, that knowledge can become a mechanism of appropriation. Rare plants are removed from their environments and transferred into commercial and imperial networks.

Paulette represents an alternative relationship with plants. Her understanding of gardening is spiritual rather than purely commercial:

“Tending a garden was... no mere matter of planting seeds and pruning branches; it was a spiritual discipline, a means of communicating with forms of life that were necessarily mute” (78–79).

Paulette recognizes plants as living beings rather than commodities. Her attitude therefore challenges the anthropocentric logic of Penrose's botanical enterprise. This contrast is important because it prevents the novel from treating botanical science as inherently destructive. Ghosh distinguishes between knowledge based on care and knowledge based on possession. Paulette observes and protects; Penrose collects and commercializes.



The search for the golden camellia makes this distinction particularly visible. Penrose explains that the plant could become extremely valuable if its medicinal properties were confirmed and it could be propagated commercially. The plant's value therefore emerges from its potential transformation into a commodity.

The vulnerability of rare species reveals the ecological consequences of this logic. Once a plant becomes commercially valuable, its rarity itself becomes an incentive for further extraction. The eventual disappearance of species such as the golden camellia demonstrates the relationship between commodification and extinction.

River of Smoke also develops the ecological theme through its representation of polluted waterways. The novel's descriptions of the waterways around Canton reveal the material consequences of urban and commercial expansion. One creek is described as “a combination of open sewer and tidal stream” (318). The image collapses the distinction between natural waterway and industrial waste channel. The polluted creek becomes a representation of ecological breakdown. Water, which should sustain life, becomes associated with waste, decay, and disease. The presence of animal carcasses and accumulated refuse further demonstrates the transformation of an ecological space into a site of contamination.

The destruction of confiscated opium presents another ecological contradiction. The Chinese authorities attempt to eliminate the drug by dissolving it and allowing it to flow into the river. Ghosh writes that after the opium is mixed with salt and lime, “the sluices are opened, and opium is allowed to drain into the river” (534).

The episode illustrates the complexity of environmental action within a damaged ecological system. The authorities intend to protect human beings from the social and physiological consequences of opium addiction, yet the method of disposal creates another form of environmental harm. Ghosh therefore avoids a simplistic distinction between good and bad uses of nature. Instead, he reveals how ecological systems respond to interconnected human actions.

Ghosh's ecological critique further extends to animals. *River of Smoke* depicts the commercialization of rare birds and animal products, revealing the consequences of transforming biodiversity into luxury commodities. The nests of rare birds become valuable products in the Chinese market, encouraging the extraction of resources from vulnerable ecosystems. The relationship between commerce and extinction is therefore made explicit. When a species or its biological product acquires high economic value, increased demand can lead to overharvesting. The novel demonstrates that market forces often intensify ecological vulnerability.

Ecology, Economy, and Imperial War in *Flood of Fire*

The ecological processes established in the first two novels culminate historically in *Flood of Fire*. The third novel places the opium economy within the context of imperial warfare. Recent scholarship has specifically identified *Flood of Fire* as an ecological history of empire, emphasizing poppy monoculture, biodiversity loss, soil depletion, rural displacement, rivers, and maritime routes. The novel demonstrates that ecological exploitation and military power are not separate historical phenomena. The British economic interest in the Chinese opium market is ultimately defended through military force. The Opium War is therefore the violent extension of an economic system already dependent upon the transformation of land and labor.

The environmental implications of this history are transnational. Opium is cultivated in India, transported across the Indian Ocean, sold in China, and protected through imperial military power. Indian laborers are simultaneously transported to plantation economies such as Mauritius. Plants travel from Asia to European botanical networks. Animals and animal products enter global markets. The movement of commodities and the movement of people therefore take place within the same imperial infrastructure. The ocean becomes the medium through which ecological and human exploitation are connected.

Recent scholarship by Prakash and Sathya Devi further emphasizes that Ghosh's repeated imagery of rivers, floods, and maritime routes presents natural systems as active participants in the history of empire (Prakash, Devi



67–70). This is significant because it prevents the environment from functioning merely as scenery. Nature becomes part of historical causality. Although the *Ibis Trilogy* documents extensive environmental destruction, Ghosh does not reduce nature to a passive victim. His novels also contain characters who recognize the intrinsic value of the nonhuman world.

Deeti's relationship with the Ganga represents an ecological ethic grounded in dependence and reverence. The river is a source of water, food, spiritual identity, and cultural continuity. Her relationship with the river contrasts sharply with the colonial use of waterways as commercial routes and waste channels.

Paulette's relationship with plants offers another example of ecological consciousness. She regards plants as living beings whose existence deserves care and protection. Her emotional response to the removal of her plants challenges the commercial logic of Penrose's plant hunting.

These characters suggest that ecological ethics emerges from recognizing interdependence. Humans cannot exist independently of soil, water, plants, animals, and climate. The destruction of these systems therefore constitutes a threat to human communities as well.

Huggan and Tiffin's postcolonial ecocriticism is valuable in this context because it challenges the hierarchical separation of humans from animals and the environment. Postcolonial ecological criticism, in their formulation, requires attention to the connections among human exploitation, animal life, and environmental degradation (Huggan and Tiffin ii).

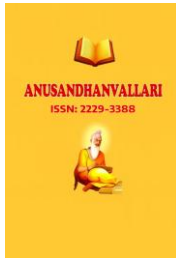
Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* can be read as an ecological history of empire in which colonial capitalism operates simultaneously upon human and nonhuman worlds. The trilogy's representation of opium cultivation, botanical exploration, animal commodification, water pollution, indentured labor, maritime circulation, and imperial warfare demonstrates that environmental exploitation is not an accidental consequence of colonialism but one of its structural mechanisms. Existing scholarship has already established the importance of ecological imperialism, ecocide, and ecology-economy relations in Ghosh's trilogy. This paper has argued that ecological imperialism provides a unifying framework for understanding the trilogy. In *Sea of Poppies*, imperial capitalism reorganizes agricultural land through forced poppy cultivation, producing food insecurity, indebtedness, ecological degradation, and migration. In *River of Smoke*, the same extractive logic extends to plants, animals, rivers, and botanical knowledge. In *Flood of Fire*, commercial exploitation becomes military imperialism, demonstrating the relationship between economic power, warfare, and environmental transformation.

The *Ibis Trilogy* therefore establishes that ecological justice and social justice cannot be considered independently. Environmental destruction disproportionately affects those whose survival depends directly upon land, water, forests, and agricultural systems. By foregrounding these connections, Ghosh's historical fiction becomes a powerful postcolonial ecological critique of imperialism and its enduring environmental consequences.

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