

Continuing Columbian Exchange: A Study on Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy

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Abstract

The most important modifications brought on by the voyages of Christopher Columbus were not social or political, but biological in nature. 1492 sparked the travel of not just humans around the world but also flora and fauna in all directions across the globe. So the plants and animals that humans used were exchanged. The result is a strange globalization of species. In 1972, the British environmental historian Alfred Crosby coined the term the "Columbian exchange" in his book *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* to refer to the biological exchange between the Old World and the New World that drastically changed the entire environmental history of Earth forever. Amitav Ghosh responds to post colonialism and ecological concerns in his novels. Most of his works deal with the impelling policies of colonial power structure. *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015) form the Ibis trilogy. The paper is an attempt to analyse Ghosh's Ibis trilogy from a postcolonial ecocritical perspective and to trace the ecological history of the colonized territory and the native use of land before the massive environmental disruption of land during the British colonial era.

KEYWORDS: ecological imperialism, Columbian exchange, impoverishment

Introduction:

Amitav Ghosh connects the past and the present through an ecological framework. Ibis trilogy documents the happening from 1838 to 1841, a time when the East India Company promoted large scale poppy cultivation in India, and exported opium chiefly to China culminating in the Opium Wars. The novels throw light on the imperialist modes of ecological imperialism during colonial era that had its origin with the Columbian exchange that began a few centuries ago. Alfred Crosby observes how the Europeans set about transforming the colonized territories with the exchange of flora and fauna from the New World to the Old World and the vice-versa. The spreading of ideas and exchange of non-native species have greatly impacted the environmental history of the world, especially those of the colonized countries. Environmental historians observe a huge biological change that has occurred due to travelers exchanging organisms and other life forms to the other world. Crosby notes that the environments of the world changed so drastically that the inhabitants of the worlds were affected.

Not only were useful animals and cash crops exchanged between the worlds, plants and animals for ornamental purpose were also exchanged. Exotic plants from the East were transported to the European nations for ornamental and horticultural purposes. DeLoughrey and Handley observe that, "the eighteenth-century European mania for plant collecting, particularly the New World flora, enabled the production of Carolus Linnaeus's binomial plant taxonomies and developed into a hierarchy of species backed by an emergent Enlightenment science" (10). Exotic plants were introduced in the botanical gardens and maintained as a mark of sophistication.

In *River of Smoke*, Ghosh draws attention to the character of Robin Fitcher Penrose, a British naturalist, who capitalized the western craze and demand for exotic oriental plants. His Redruth was filled with greenery. Fitcher “revolutionized the business of transporting plants across the seas” (76) and did it with the motif of profit. The returns Penrose gained from his consignments of greenery were “astronomical” (77) writes Ghosh. Paulette observes that, “Fitcher’s intention was to exchange these American plants for Chinese species that had not yet been introduced to the West.” (77). The concept of Columbian exchange inspired Penrose to prosper. Sir James mentions to Penrose that China was a country blessed “in its botanical riches, being endowed not only with some of the most beautiful and medicinally useful plants in existence, but also with many that were of immense commercial value” (101). He observes that the species of camellia from which tea originated “accounted for an enormous proportion of the world’s trade and one-tenth of England’s revenues” (101). Hence colonists like Penrose continued with the age old Columbian exchange for their personal benefit.

Another major consequence of Columbian exchange was the introduction of cash crops and plantations across the globe. Alfred Crosby and Richard Grove, the British environmental historians coined the term ‘ecological imperialism’ to refer to ‘the violent appropriation of indigenous land to ill-considered introduction of cash crops in colonised terrain’ (Haggan and Tiffin, 3). Amitav Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies* sets his story in one such ecologically imperialized territory in the Indo Gangetic plains. Deeti, the lead character in *Sea of Poppies* recalls how poppy had been a luxury when she was young, “grown in small clusters between the fields” that bore wheat, masoor dal and vegetables. But after the advent of the British the Gangetic plains transformed into endless stretches of poppy fields “mile after mile.” Alvarez cites AbulFazl, who found agriculture flourishing “in high degree” in Bihar, where rice “which for its quality and quantity was rarely to be equalled” (53). He also mentions Ives reference to “the endless variety of vegetables” used by Indians in their curries and soups. (53) Once, the valleys of all rivers consisted of “one sheet of the richest cultivation” (53) but after the British East India company took control over the land, the rich rice yielding terrains transformed into a sea of poppies.

Nathan Allen in the book *The Opium Trade* also documents on the extensive and forced cultivation of poppy in the fertile Indo Gangetic plains. While referring to the cultivation of poppy he adds that “Malwa, Benares and Behar (or Patna) are the principal localities in Bengal for its cultivation” (8) but the Indian farmers were forced to cultivate poppy. During the colonial government, Alvarez observes that the British “set about interfering directly in the kind of commodity the farmer should produce. Nowhere is this clearer than in the production of opium for the Chinese market” (157). A similar happening is described in *Flood of Fire*, where Ram Singh notices that the Company had begun to interfere with matters like crops and harvest. He observes that the Company’s opium factory in Ghazipur had started to send many agents – “arkatis” and sadarmuttus – to press loans of farmers, so that they would plant poppies in the autumn” (52). Not only do such activities affect the ecology of a place, but also have dire effects on the lives of people.

Peder Anker sees man as “the great biotic factor working on vegetation” and quotes two other authors who point out that “civilized man, of course; destroys natural

vegetation altogether on an extensive scale, and replaces it by buildings or by planted crops” (37). He further observes that all such activities were done “in the interest of the British Crown” (37). The colonizers modified and modeled colonized nature according to their economic, social and political gain.

The introduction of invasive and alien cash crops in the colonized lands had catastrophic consequences on ecology. Because of the Columbian exchange, humanity has achieved the ability to manipulate the world.

Colonialism that claims to civilize and provide sustainable development among the colonized has succeeded; to use the words of Ramachandra Guha; in ‘pauperising millions of people in the agrarian sector and diminishing the stock of plant, water and soil resources at a terrifying rate’(Guha, quoted in Haggan and Tiffin, 1). Crosby in his historical studies describes the destruction wrought on indigenous environments with the introduction of alien flora and fauna that causes adverse effects on native species and ecology. He reflects on ways in which both material and ideas were exchanged between the colonizing and the colonized worlds. The exchange of ideas continues but under a different name, in a different form. The white settlers of the past imported cash crops and cattle thereby exterminating local ecosystems of the colonized world

Crosby concludes his historical studies stating the positive result of Columbian exchange. He claims the exchange to have brought about:

“an enormous increase in food production and, thereby, in human population. The negative results have been the destruction of ecological stability over enormous areas and an increase of erosion that is so great that it amounts to a crime against posterity. ... The ... exchange continues and will continue.(211).

Ecological imperialism that followed suit Columbian exchange annihilated the rich and varied forms of indigenous crops and also millions of native agriculturalists. He observes thus so: “the Columbian exchange has left us with not a richer but a more impoverished genetic pool. We, all of the life on this planet, are less for Columbus, and the impoverishment will increase” (219). Transformation of land thus leads to impoverishment.

Summing up:

The descriptions of ecological change done to colonized terrains prove that European expansion has drastically changed and influenced not just the culture, religion and language but the ecology of the colonized territory as well. Be it exchange or exploitation of the natural resources, both play a vital role in any imperial project. Helpless natives become victims when land is appropriated by ravenous imperialists. As a result animals, plants and even human beings were commodified and transported across the seas. Ghosh thus rewrites history from an ecological perspective, thereby conscientising the readers of the impending dangers of the continuing Columbian exchange.

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