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Archives of Unfair Trade

Suhasini Vincent

In his ecocritical fiction Amitav Ghosh considers “nature not just as the stage upon which the human story is acted out, but as an actor in the drama” (Glofelty 1996, xxi). In *The Glass Palace*, the Irrawaddy River serves as a witness to the materialistic exploitation of colonial times when timber, ivory and precious stones were transported through the riverways to the British Empire. In *The Hungry Tide*, the marshy waters of the Sundarbans are alive with stories of environmental injustice where the preservation of man-eating tigers takes precedence over human life as the Indian government launched Project Tiger. In the Ibis Trilogy - *The Sea of Poppies*, *The River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire* - the ocean is the lieu of maritime trade affecting politics on land, agricultural production and environmental policy making. Ghosh lays bare the colonial intent of the British in the nineteenth century monopolizing the waterways like the rivers and seas to transport Opium from the East to the West. Ghosh shows how the West’s fascination for the East as seen in Orientalist’s initial quest for spices like nutmeg, cloves, pepper, coffee, cacao, sugar and tea lead eventually to the discovery of the addictive narcotic drug ‘opium.’

In *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh paints a vivid picture of how the British wipe out teak forests, convert them into timber yards for commercial purposes and wipe out unique flora and fauna. By portraying the drastic change in the landscape from rich and fertile forests of teak to that of a bare landscape without any vegetation, Ghosh archives effects of greedy colonial enterprise on nature. The rivers witness a flux of activity as British ferries transport teak and spices to the Empire. The peaceful Irrawaddy River metamorphoses into a commercial waterway. The *chaungs* or rushing mountain streams of Burma are transformed into teak trade winds. The teak tree assumes the status of a tree that had “felled dynasties, caused invasions, created fortunes, brought a new way of life into being” (Ghosh 2000, 71). The West’s fascination for the East as evident in the Orientalist quest for spices resulted in the ensuing discovery of rubber

and teak: “The rise of global capitalism all occurred together [...]. Gold and silver from the West crossed the Atlantic or the Pacific, it ultimately found its way to Asia (east of Suez) to purchase the “riches of the East” and to allow the otherwise deprived inhabitants of the north-west Eurasian peninsula to share in the fabled Oriental splendours” (Trocki 1999, 7-8). This idea stems from Edward Said’s contention in *Orientalism* where he describes ‘Orientalism’ as the Western attitude that views Eastern societies as exotic, primitive, and inferior. This “ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority” (Said 1998, 881) is evident in Ghosh’s postcolonial textual response in *The Glass Palace* where the margins write back and lay bare materialistic colonial intent of the past by reconfiguring and reliving the teak trade in the fictional space.

In the *Ibis trilogy*, Ghosh highlights the European position of bringing law, order and freedom to the uncivilized East through free trade. Interestingly, the word ‘freedom’ holds different connotations for the sailors. While the Indian sailors associate freedom as a way of living one’s life, ‘free’ from one’s former white masters, the British trade lords consider freedom as a means of enhancing their lucrative business in colonies. This archive of unfair trade still exists in today’s world as seen in the IOR-ARC treaty signed by countries that share the Indian Ocean, but present-day Myanmar is not one of the signatories. Though created with the intention of being a platform for the peoples of the Indian Ocean Region to reconnect with each other, to discover their common heritage and deep-rooted affinities, to celebrate their shared cultural history and chart their own destinies, the free trade association that has been criticized for not having included Myanmar, despite its presence near Indian Ocean shipping lanes. Ghosh criticizes the policies and government strategies of postcolonial governments where government policies take advantage of poor peasants in the name of common good by appropriating eco-friendly policy labelling. Fanqui town, the port city in *River of Smoke*, described as the “threshold of the last and greatest of all the world’s caravanserais” (Ghosh 2011, p. 197) resembles the contemporary setting in postcolonial countries that have to fight against the trade of illicit drugs. Ghosh’s work is typical of postcolonial ecology where the literary form becomes a critical engagement with an aesthetics of the earth.

In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh’s archive highlights the plight of indigenous populations who were displaced to make way for the conservation of tigers. Here, humans are victims of environmental devastation caused by red-tape bureaucrat decision makers, ecology managers and eco-tourism operators. In the novel, Ghosh also seeks to show how governmental proposals to create an eco-tourist haven in the Sundarbans at the expense of rare species, is typical of the selfish human decision to survive at the expense of animal deterioration and “exploiting nature while minimizing non-human claims to a shared earth” (*Postcolonial Ecocriticism* 5). Ghosh rekindles stories that had lapsed into oblivion, accounts of the perpetual plight of refugees in

the settlement of Morichjhapi that were never penned nor publicized in the press. The dalit refugees who fled to India from Bangladesh after Partition and the 1971 Bangladesh war of Independence, sought refuge in Dandakaranya camp in Madhya Pradesh, and resettled later in the Sundarbans forest reserves, but their hopes of creating ‘home’ in the mangrove islands turned into a flight for survival in 1979 when the Left Front government under the leadership of the Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu, decided to call the police to scuttle the boats of the refugees and to evict the four million refugees from tiger protected land.

Ghosh’s ecocritical writing seeks to illuminate how displaced communities have to deal with hostile forces of natural environment and insensitive governments that ignore human attempts of survival in the name of protecting broader ecological concerns of the planet. Even though the ocean is usually the lieu of maritime trade, all trade in Burma is limited to its rivers and does not enter into the ocean space as the trade is colonial with the terms being dictated by the British empire. In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh shows how governments have unthinkingly rendered the UNESCO heritage site of the Sundarbans, ‘inhabitable’ for man, but ‘hospitable’, ‘reserved’ and ‘protected’ for the tiger species. Ghosh also highlights that the protection of tiger species take precedence over other forms of nature, as in the case of the spawn of tiger prawns, where commercial fishing with fine-threaded nylon nets result in a consequent ensnaring of the eggs of other rare fish, leaving the environment fragile to a depletion of fish species that sustain the existence of river dolphins in the Sundarbans. In this context, it should be remembered that the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve was created in 1973 to save the dwindling numbers of the fast-disappearing species and the reserve was declared a World Heritage site in 1997 to preserve the mangrove habitat and vegetation essential for its survival. But efforts at ecological protection to save tigers and protect forests often disadvantage indigenous people who farm, forage, fish, subsist on nature, and struggle to preserve their village lifestyle from external intrusion.

In today’s postcolonial India, the cultivation of opium poppies is now regulated with farmers being constrained to produce only the required amount needed for medicinal or research purposes. However, the meagre remuneration offered to its cultivators, has resulted in drug smuggling turning into a lucrative trade. Thus, Ghosh also seeks to show how governmental proposals to create a drug free state at the expense of poor farmers, is typical of contemporary selfish political decisions to frame programs at the expense of the livelihood of poor farmers and exploiting nature while minimizing human claims to a shared earth. He criticizes the policies and government strategies of postcolonial governments where government policies take advantage of poor peasants in the name of common good by appropriating eco-friendly policy labelling. His postcolonial ecocritical writing is typical of how margins write back by creating archives through fiction that criticizes the contemporary political and economic

situation in postcolonial countries like India and Burma. Ghosh thus records untold stories of colonial injustice, unfair trade treaties, and postcolonial governmental ecological projects that are launched in the name of common good.

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