

## **Dereliction of Duty in Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy**

**Dr.Sharmila Priya S**, M.A. M, Phil, NET, SET, PhD, Assistant Professor, Sri Krishna Arts and Science College, Coimbatore, Postal Address- 31, Springfield Valley, KovaiPudur  
Coimbatore- 641042

---

**Article Received:** 02/7/2022,

**Article Accepted:** 02/08/2022,

**Published online:** 08/07/2022,

**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2022.4.8.01

---

**Abstract:** Amitav Ghosh's The Ibis Trilogy is a saga of history and commerce, love and loss, joy and suffering, jubilation and disappointment. Ultimately, it is the story of India's forgotten past with fictional characters displaying the magnitude of the events that led to the Great Opium War. The topic becomes more potent in the current times when humanity is meandering on a lost path, and the sense of nationhood is questioned due to rising globalization and the influence of foreign powers. The characters in the trilogy support the British and forget their allegiance to the motherland. Blinded by greed for money and transitory, external power, they join forces against their fellow citizens. One of the primary reasons for the British entry into India was the lack of unity among its fellow citizens and their sense of duty which they had forgotten. The trilogy, among other things, reminds the readers of the importance and necessity of carrying out one's designated burden and the unpleasant consequences the characters suffer from the neglect or dereliction of their duty.

**Keywords:** Opium, dereliction, duty, motherland.

The Ibis Trilogy consisting of Sea of Poppies, River of Smoke, and Flood of Fire, is a supernatural tale told across multiple countries and involving various characters and histories. It is a work of intricate and daring research into forgotten past and shared emotions. The Opium Wars in the background lends credence to the story thread and gives the reader an insight into a part of history that has not been much discussed or debated upon. History teaches a lesson to those who listen, and its accounts give us a sense of accomplishment and resentment. Carrying out one's duty is an essential component of a human being's life, and dereliction of this duty leads to consequences that are not in tune with nature.

R.K. Narayan writes, "Mother earth has been there since the beginning of creation, being one of the five ancient elements. She has seen countless pairs of feet running about on thousands of aims and pursuits, both evil and good, and will continue until the time ("Kala") swallows and digests everything." (The Ramayana 59) The mythological conception of the Earth is an oft-repeated one, where unrighteous people and their deeds overburden it. The Ibis Trilogy depicts the lives of characters caught in the more considerable turmoil of the events

leading up to the Great Opium War and the two countries which are reluctant participants- India and China. It depicts the small everyday events leading up to the war and the Indians caught in a battle that is not theirs. The Indians are pawns in a giant game of lies and deceit, justified by the tenets of Free Trade.

Amitav Ghosh, through his story flow, has depicted characters who have willingly aided in manufacturing and exporting opium to countries like China. These very same characters, in a way, also help the English win the Opium war against China. They willingly and knowingly, in dire or conducive circumstances, give up the freedom of their selves and bind themselves in servitude to the English. They are motivated by reasons as varied as greed for wealth, property, false honor, and even immoral acts. The characters in the Ibis Trilogy shirk the essential duty expected of them or the post they occupy. The protagonists are forced to leave their native lands and all that they considered dear to them, creating an upheaval they had never anticipated. They are uprooted and are planted elsewhere in bleak circumstances and hostile conditions.

The English carried out a system of bonded labor in which they transported coolies or migrants to their colonies like Singapore and Mauritius. The poor and desperate are rounded up and made to sign on papers called 'garments,' making them girmitiyas or bonded laborers. Some of the important characters, like babu Nob Kissin, support the British cause of plundering and displacing the vast majority of people from their homeland through their activities. They are proud members of the Indian side of the British retinue, which supports the concepts of Free Trade, without any human considerations. Bonded labor, along with opium, was the most lucrative business of the East India Company. The characters neglect their duties, leading to mental and spiritual turmoil.

Babu Nob Kissin Panda, the guiding force in the lives of many characters, is a learned man coming from a long line of Panders or temple priests. The maintenance and upkeep of the ancestral temple is the responsibility of the Nob Kissin family, and babu is the next in line to take over the priesthood, having sworn himself to eternal bachelorhood. Babu relinquishes his future as the temple priest when he is enamored with his late uncle's young widow. He is entrusted with leaving his aunt at Brindavan so that she can spend the remaining years of her life in the devotion of Lord Krishna. Though in love with her, he expresses his wish to live in her spiritual shadow for the rest of his life and requests her to come with him to Calcutta.

Babu and Taranmoy live in Calcutta, abandoning Taranmoy's intention of living the rest of her life in the home of Lord Krishna, Brindavan. Their relationship is, however, platonic, strictly within the confines of a Guru and disciple, and he wishes to live his life in the presence of her colossal divine strength and profundity. She becomes his spiritual Guru, guiding him even after her sudden and untimely death. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that babu shirks his spiritual duty towards his temple and the people who come there to worship the

Lord. He abandons the will of his ancestors and becomes a gomusta in Mr. Burnham's office, thus helping him to further the opium trade and transport of migrants, not only in India but also overseas. He is instrumental in advancing the cause of the British empire in his small way and proves to be straying from his duty. He suffers the early loss of Taranmoy and pines away in her thoughts.

The Kings, represented by Raja Neel Rattan Haldar and his father, fail to do their duty of protecting their subjects and the many dependents they have to look after. It is Neel who has to pay for the sins of his father- the old Raja who has signed a deed with Mr. Burnham blindly and without any background checks. He is portrayed as the 'yes man to the British and subservient to the British Crown. The Rajas of Raskhali have a long history of loyalty to whoever is in power. They ingratiate themselves to the British as they had previously done with the Mughals- opportunists who care not for the motherland but make use of the prevailing situation to further their monetary interests and shape their lives. They are not natural nobility; they call themselves Rajas but are Rai with an honorary title, a bucksheesh, or gift for loyalty to the Crown.

The Kings of yore believed the principle of dharma to be higher than any other. Dhristadyumna, Draupadi's brother details the duties of a Kshatriya in The Palace of Illusions: The warrior-king must honor men of wisdom, treat other kings with respect due to equals, and rule his people with a firm yet merciful hand. He should be fierce and fearless in the war until death, for the warrior who dies on the battlefield goes to the highest of heavens. He must protect anyone who seeks refuge with him, be generous to the needy, and keep his given word though it leads to his destruction. (Divakaruni 22)

Many families and rulers in India made a pact with the foreigners instead of fighting against them. They earned their affluence by putting the lives of innocents at stake. Nevertheless, India has had a long history of Kings and generals who fought against the British, thus protecting their dominions. Their entire lives, including that of their families and dependents, were dedicated to the cause of independence and freedom from the clutches of the British. Kings like Neel and his ancestors foiled the attempts of such noble Kings who fought against the British. The deep-rooted attachment to the soil is missing in the rulers and soldiers of the Ibis Trilogy.

People like the old Raja of Raskhali make consignment trade of opium with Mr. Burnham without knowing the perils of such work and how the risks would be borne by those who provided the capital. The writer gives a glimpse of how the old Raja lives without morals, spending each night on a different bed of his many mistresses. His debts increase as he maintains a lot of dependents. Eventually, he has to expand his circle of investors, signing many promissory notes. Neel is English educated and thinks of himself as a loyal subject to the British. He refers to Hume, Locke, and Hobbes as British parliamentarians with the Queen as

his rescuer. He lacks the connection with his motherland and does not realize that he, like his forefathers, has furthered his cause at the cost of duty.

The subjects of the principality especially suffer for the sins and misdemeanours of the King. They become penurious, are forced to cultivate poppy, and ultimately mortgage their lands to the British. Once they lose their lands, the impoverished farmers are forced to leave their lands in the hands of the English and forced to become migrant laborers. Instead of protesting the injustices being meted out to their subjects, Neel and his forefathers join the outsiders in high jacking their livelihood. The regional rulers created an artificial wealth while their issue's cultivated opium and starved without food:

Many of these people had been driven from the villages by the flood of flowers that had washed over the countryside: lands that had once provided sustenance were now swamped by the rising tide of the poppies; food was so hard to come by that people were glad to lick the leaves in which offerings were made at temples or sip the starchy water from a pot in which rice had been boiled. (SP 202)

As a consequence, Raja Neel Rattan is expelled from his land. Neel becomes the laughing stock of Calcutta when he is stripped of his bare essentials. When Burnham asks Neel to give up the Raskhali grounds, Neel tells him that nine generations of the Halder family had owned the lands, and it was not for him to give away that which belonged to his son and his unborn children. He also thinks of the concern of his subjects and their dependents, but it is too late. Due to his refusal, he is later arrested on charges of forgery on the complaint of Mr. Burnham, and all his lands and houses are confiscated. He and his family are reduced to poverty, and he is shipped off on the Ibis to serve his sentence in the Mauritius Islands. He also pays for his total lack of connection with his soil. Neel is introduced in the novel lying on his budge row- a pleasure boat. He is shown as floating on the water, with no connection or orientation towards the land. The budge row symbolizes the luxury and opulence that his father enjoyed but has since fallen into disrepair. He is not connected to the Earth element but floating in a haze of falsity and disillusionment. Being educated in the tenets of the English, Neel is attuned to the peripheral sensibilities and lives in a secure world of his own, untouched by the ground realities of life. Generations of landed leisure had made Neel opposed to the difficulties of his subjects. Problems arise when there is a dereliction of duty on the part of the characters as they deviate from their designated paths, disrupting their lives in unimaginable ways.

It is the careless attitude of the Rajas and soldiers which allowed the entry of the British and the subsequent bondage of the Indians for nearly two hundred years. The soldiers represented by Bhyro Singh, Kesri Singh, Hukam Singh, and Chandan Singh also fail in their duty of protecting the country. Singh does not experience a twinge of guilt at having abandoned his compatriots and forges an enviable position for himself and his relatives in the English army. He lures young men like Hukam and Kesri into the English army with promises

of a colorful lifestyle and English patronage. Chandan Singh supported the British whenever the time demanded. He is a mellowed-down version of Bhyro Singh but has the same slavish feeling towards the English. Kesri rejects his duty of serving in an Indian army and prefers the false glory and promise of wealth and pension associated with the British army. The local customs insist on the firstborn staying at home and tilling the land with the second born given the option of joining any military as a soldier. Kesri, the elder son, loves the pomp, show, travel, and glory associated with the life of a soldier in the English army. He does not want to be stuck in the confines of his village like his brother, Bhim, and till the land. Ultimately, he joins the army, where his dreams of a respectable life inside the platoon are destroyed. Singh treats Kesri like a runaway dog and a pariah. Singh berates Kesri for his disobedience. He has to wash the dirty langot and vest of Hukam Singh, disobedience to which leads to inhuman beating. He, who had spent his formative years learning the Indian art of wrestling and maintaining celibacy or brahmacharya in the company of Naga Sadhus, undergoes humiliation at the hands of his men and the foreigners.

Bahram Moddie, an opium trader by profession, veers from his duty towards his wife Shireenbai and their two daughters. He has an extramarital relationship with a Chinese washerwoman with whom he begets a son. Unknown to his family in India, he leads a double life that plagues him towards the end of his life. His inability to be entirely accurate and sincere to both his families torments him. He also trades in opium in China, thereby dealing a double blow to the dereliction of his duties. Opium makes the youth of China into unsuspecting addicts. The most significant impact on Bahram comes when he realizes his inadvertent trade of opium has made his son into a drooling, dribbling addict. His sins come crashing down on him as he realizes that he will lose his own and his investors' money in the opium seizure by the Chinese authorities. Unable to bear the magnitude of his hand in the debasement of the many youths, including his son, and the looming bankruptcy, he takes away his life in a fit of deranged illusion. The dereliction of duty towards his family and motherland drives him to this extreme step.

The English hijack all aspects of the Indians' life and force them to live according to their plans. The Indians, in turn, become willing slaves and accept their lot. The English thus take over India completely, systematically pillaging and looting not only the land but also the very essence of the country, including the ethical and historical sense of the natives.

### **References**

- Ghosh, Amitav. *Sea of Poppies*. London: Penguin Books, 2009. Print.
- Divakaruni, Chitra B. *The Palace of Illusions*. London: Picador, 2008. Print.
- Narayan, R.K. *The Ramayana*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1993. Print.
- Priya, Sharmila S. *A Study of Symbols and Imagery in Amitav Ghosh's The Ibis Trilogy*. Dissertation. Bharathiyar University. Coimbatore. 2021. Print.