



**Title, Author:** *Sea of Poppies*, Amitav Ghosh

**Published:** 2008, Viking Press India

*Sea of Poppies*, a complex and magnificent tale, is an historical drama novel and part of the *Ibis' trilogy*, novels written by Ghosh covering the opium trade between India and China during the first half of the 19th century. "The vision of a tall-masted ship, at sail on the ocean, came to Deeti on an otherwise ordinary day". Deeti, an ordinary, pious village woman, becomes one of the main protagonists. She is a caring mother and diligent wife to Hukam Sign, a disabled retired soldier who works in the Ghazipur Opium Factory. Deeti and her village are heavily involved in the growth of the poppy crop for the East India Company, which will ultimately make its way to China, fuelling the opium trade and the coffers of the Britishers. We are also introduced to Deeti's brother in law who tries to rape her, but Kalua, who tends the oxen, saves her from her fate and their love catches fire. In order to escape the wickedness of the family and the opium, Deeti and Kalua make a plan to escape aboard the *Ibis*.

In the next scene, Ghosh introduces Zachary Reid, an American sailor from quadroon parents, who is on the run from racism in his home country. Zachary joins the *Ibis* voyage from Maryland to Calcutta, along with its new owner Mr. Burnham, who has acquired vast wealth through opium trading. A series of events happen on the voyage leading to the death of some of the crew and consequently Zachary is made up to second in command with the help of a Seang Ali, a close friend and militiaman. We are introduced to another complex and fascinating character, Neel Rattan Halder, who hails from wealthy ruling dynasty in the Indian subcontinents, but has also been a brutalised victim of the British rule, and they discuss the business of opium trading into China. Next we meet Paulette Lambert, who is to become a central character. She is the daughter of a famous French botanist, and raised in India by her father's mistress together with her native born friend Jodu, who is like a brother to her. Following the death of her father, Paulette is taken under the wing of Mr and Mrs. Burnham in Calcutta, the former having nefarious intentions. Paulette, together with Jodu, escape his clutches and she finds herself on board the *Ibis* and is miraculously reunited with her mother in Mauritius in the most serendipitous manner.

In the last section, the characters converge on board the *Ibis* as it sails to China heavily laden with opium and the fortunes of its richly assembled passengers. The novel closes with Jodu, Serang Ali, and Kalua starting a new journey to Singapore. Meanwhile, Deeti, Zachary, and Paulette find themselves en route to Mauritius in a longboat alongside impoverished migrant labourers also desperate to escape the opium fields, who have been tricked into slavery, having put their trust and livelihoods into the wrong hands.

*Sea of Poppies* is an impeccably crafted, rich and vibrant cloak and dagger page turner, which layers interwoven tales of the opium trade, the beginnings of Indian labour migration between Asia Europe and Africa, and the lead up to the Opium Wars between China and the British Empire. Ghosh is a fabulous story teller in the real sense who has crafted a saga stuffed with plots, sub plots and other machinations. The language is packed with Indo English regional dialects of the age using long discarded words and expressions. The style takes time to absorb and understand, but once fully immersed, the coarseness, the humour

and richness of the language join to cast a truly grand tale. *Sea of Poppies* is a beautifully crafted and hugely entertaining novel.

David Cornell  
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