

# Opium Wars and Subaltern Voices in Amitav Ghosh Novels

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## Abstract

*Amitav Ghosh is a renowned Indian English writer known for his skillful storytelling, combining historical events and intellectual insights. He focuses on the subaltern, marginalized, downtrodden, and subjugated individuals, as well as overlooked historical events. One of his notable works is the Ibis trilogy, which explores the overlooked Opium Wars, a conflict between Western nations and the ruling Qing dynasty of China. The term 'subaltern' refers to individuals in lower positions, often used in postcolonial studies to denote the dominance of ruling classes over subordinate classes like workers and peasants. Amitav Ghosh's works are based on the idea that history imparts knowledge of previous events, enabling us to comprehend the present and lay the groundwork for the future. His Ibis trilogy provides insight into the Opium Wars and serves as a foundation for his work. Existentialism is a philosophical movement that emphasizes the individual's existence and the meaning of life. It is the most individualistic philosophy among all contemporary philosophies, with its main principle being the complete freedom of the person.*

**Keywords:** Amitav Ghosh, Ibis Trilogy, Colonial Discourse, Opium Trade, Subaltern, Marginalized

## Introduction

Amitav Ghosh's characters often represent the subaltern class, providing a voice to those historically silenced by colonial powers. Similarly, Rushdie frequently centers on the experiences of individuals caught between cultures, using their stories to reflect broader societal issues. Arundhati Roy's works also highlight the economic and social struggles of marginalized communities, emphasizing the impact of colonialism and postcolonialism on their lives. By comparing these authors, we can see how they each address the complexities of identity, freedom, and alienation within the context of postcolonialism, offering unique perspectives on the struggles of marginalized individuals.

Amitav Ghosh's exploration of colonial history and subaltern voices is a significant aspect of his literary contribution, effectively highlighting the experiences of marginalized groups during the colonial era. The backdrop of the Opium Wars, a pivotal moment in colonial history that underscores the exploitation and suffering of various communities. Characters like Deeti, a widow from Bihar, and Bomma, an indentured laborer, serve as representations of these marginalized voices. Amitav Ghosh's narratives reveal the personal impacts of larger historical forces, emphasizing how colonial policies affected individual lives and communities.

Amitav Ghosh's ability to blend factual and fictional elements is commendable. He draws upon extensive historical research to create a rich tapestry that reflects the socio-economic realities of the time. This approach

not only enhances the authenticity of his characters' experiences but also invites readers to engage with the complexities of colonial history. The narrative structure allows for a nonlinear exploration of interconnected lives, showcasing how colonialism shaped diverse identities across geographical boundaries.

Amitav Ghosh's contribution to postcolonial literature is profound, particularly through his exploration of colonial history and subaltern voices. By focusing on characters often neglected in historical accounts, he sheds light on their struggles and significantly contributes to our understanding of the impacts of colonialism. His work serves as a reminder of the importance of including marginalized perspectives in historical narratives, enriching the discourse surrounding postcolonial studies.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* examines the intersection of personal lives with political and social injustices in India. Amitav Ghosh also addresses these themes but places a stronger emphasis on history and its influence on societal structures, as seen in *The Ibis Trilogy*, which explores the impact of the opium trade. Arundhati Roy's narrative style often focuses on the emotional depth of her characters' experiences. Amitav Ghosh's narrative tends to be more linear and structured, reflecting his anthropological background and desire to weave complex historical narratives.

Both authors explore cultural issues. Arundhati Roy's work often critiques the caste system and social hierarchies within Indian society. In contrast, Ghosh's narratives highlight the global interconnectedness brought about by colonialism and trade, showcasing how these historical processes affect individual identities across cultures. Amitav Ghosh shares thematic concerns with Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy regarding postcolonial identity, economic history, and marginalized voices, his unique focus on economic forces and historical narratives distinguishes his contribution to postcolonial literature. This broader perspective on different narrative techniques and thematic explorations enriches the discourse surrounding postcolonial studies.

The fundamental principles of Existentialism include permanence and change, the concept of the

ridiculous, the city of facts, alienation, abandonment, and existential crises. Existentialism rejects determinism and emphasizes the inherent freedom of human beings, asserting that the essence of an individual is not predetermined but rather shaped by their existence and choices. Absurdity arises when one person's desire for order clashes with another person's lack of order, resulting in a collision of consciousness. The concept of the ridiculous suggests that the world lacks inherent meaning and that the only meaning it possesses is the meaning we ascribe to it. Alienation refers to the experience of feeling disconnected or isolated due to the realization that one's sense of purpose or identity is derived from others rather than from oneself. In the absence of God, individuals are alone responsible for shaping their own identity and environment. An existential crisis is a rare phenomenon characterized by anxiety, seen as the manifestation of freedom when faced with self-experiencing anxiety. The philosophy of Existential Education emphasizes the principles of freedom, autonomy, and the expectation that individuals will honor the autonomy of others.

Opium has played a significant role in history, including its use in medicine, food, and recreational substances. It has been instrumental in the implementation of Imperialism, with the Portuguese first witnessing its use in India during the early seventeenth century. The British East India Company established itself in India, taking control of opium production and creating a monopoly over it. This led to the exploitation of Indian farmers and the drain of wealth from the opium trade with China. Lutchman, a distinct individual, was introduced to Ross by locals in the Nilgiri mountains. Ross's research on mosquitoes was conducted on the blood of one patient, Abdel Qadir, who had an innate ability to perceive changes in the parasite. An Indian assistant also brought to his attention the last significant advancements in the parasite. However, Ross did not acknowledge or attribute any recognition to Lutchman or other individuals.

*In An Antique Land*, Amitav Ghosh discusses the experiences and existence of a subaltern individual, Bomma, an Indian slave in the mid-twelfth century. Bomma served under Abraham Ben Yiju, a trader. Amitav Ghosh extensively investigates the lives

of marginalized individuals and those silenced by history. He meticulously examines historical records to identify Bomma, a slave named Ms. H.6.

“The very end of the letter that the slave makes his entry: Khalaf ibn Ishaq makes a point of singling him out and sending him ‘plentiful greetings.’ That is all: no more than a name and a greeting. But the reference comes to us from a moment in time when the only people for whom we can even begin to imagine properly human, individual, existences are the literate and the consequential, the wazirs and the sultans, the chroniclers and the priests the people who had the power to inscribe themselves physically upon time” (Ghosh *IAL* 6).

Bomma, an Indian slave in the mid-twelfth century, worked for Jewish dealer Abraham Ben Yiju. His name was first mentioned in a 1942 publication. Ghosh traveled to Egypt after discovering his name in a book by S. D. Goitein. The story explores the complex relationships between South Asian and Chinese traders, the Asian economy before Western intervention, the transformation of Indian landscapes due to tea plantations, opium trade, and conflicts between Indian sepoy and Chinese soldiers. It highlights the importance of cultural connections through affection, interpretation, and exchange of literary, religious, and botanical expertise. Deeti, a widow whose husband relied heavily on opium, seeks refuge with Neel Rattan Halder, a prosperous rajah who retains intellect and empathy. The story also features Ah Fatt, a Chinese boat woman and Parsi trader, and Benjamin Burnham, a dishonest British merchant. The story highlights the importance of understanding the relationships between India and China.

Amitav Ghosh’s trilogy, the *Anahita* is anchored near the mouth of the Pearl River during the Opium War. A mysterious figure, Babu Nobo Krishna Panda, arrives to proclaim the arrival of “Kaliyuga, the era of cataclysm” and points towards Britain’s formidable cruiser, *Nemesis*. He explains that the predetermined fate of the English to precipitate the apocalypse lies with the Manchester industrialists and imperialist traders such as Jardine Matheson. Ghosh’s fiction benefits from the historical fact of naming the ship *Nemesis* and creating the coal-fueled Forrester steam engines used to attack Chinese junks

in 1841. The name of the historical ship alludes to the inevitable punishment that befalls arrogant humans. The Greek deity *Nemesis* is connected to the proto-Indo-European term meaning “allocate”, which means the worldwide allocation of goods is the cause of the planet’s demise.

*River of Smoke* narrates the interconnectedness between opium farms and factories in the Ganges and Calcutta, the shipping of indentured laborers to Mauritius as a substitute for slaves in sugar plantations, and the illicit opium trade in China’s Pearl River. The protagonists in *Sea of Poppies* journey from Calcutta to Canton, the Chinese Empire, via the Pearl River. Amitav Ghosh’s novels delve into existential themes such as freedom and alienation, reflecting the human condition and the struggles of marginalized individuals. The connection between existentialism and subaltern studies is significant, as Ghosh’s narratives often highlight the plight of the subaltern, emphasizing their quest for identity and meaning in a world that marginalizes them. Amitav Ghosh’s works, particularly *The Ibis Trilogy* and *River of Smoke*, explore the limitations of freedom, a core aspect of existentialism. His characters grapple with the consequences of their choices, showcasing the burden of responsibility that comes with freedom. For instance, characters like Bahram Modi face existential struggles.

An alternative interpretation of this paragraph could center on the awareness exhibited by individuals living under colonial rule. Babu Nob Kissin asserts that Asians, particularly South Asians, consciously assist the unknowing British in causing global destruction. Singh realizes that he is being used as a pawn of British imperialism when he witnesses the intense opposition from Chinese soldiers. The trilogy exposes the colonizers’ moral and identity hypocrisies and the clever and strategic opposition of the colonized individuals. Babu Nob Kissin takes pleasure in assisting Zachary, an American sailor of mixed race, in the opium trade overseen by the East India Company.

Amitav Ghosh is a renowned author known for his historical novels, often categorized as historical novels. His works explore themes of migration, exile, cultural displacement, social unrest, humanism, cosmopolitanism, communalism,

colonial dominance, and history. The *Calcutta Chromosome*, released in 1995, is a medical thriller set in two metropolitan areas: Calcutta and New York, during the 1990s and an undefined period in the future. Antar, an Egyptian data analyst, discovers an identity card named Ava on his computer and sets out to find Murugan, who disappeared in 1995. Murugan, formerly employed by the LifeWatch group, was deeply fascinated by Ross' biography and moved to Calcutta. Antar uses digital archives to examine Murugan's activities and uncovers that Murugan had successfully solved the mystery of Ross' pioneering research on malaria.

*The Calcutta Chromosome* is divided into two parts. The first part revolves around Murugan's arrival in Calcutta on August 20th, 1995, coinciding with World Mosquito Day. Murugan arranges to be relocated to Calcutta to study the life and achievements of Sir Ronald Ross, who conducted his experiments in that city. Antar, using his computer and digital archives, embarks on a quest to locate Murugan, who went missing shortly after arriving there. "Urmila stared at him, openmouthed. 'But he's meant to come to our flat for dinner tonight,' she began to explain, meaninglessly. That's why I'm cooking this fish; that's why I'm going to be late for the press conference ..." (Ghosh *CC* 158).

The novel *Sea of Poppies* is based on the work of the International Water Council, a small yet esteemed non-profit organization that functioned as a global public health consulting and repository of epidemiological data. The malaria parasite, a type of protozoan belonging to the sporozoan genus *Plasmodium*, is transmitted to humans and other mammals or birds through mosquito bites and undergoes sexual reproduction. Colonial Discourse aims to shift the critical analysis of colonialism towards the linguistic expressions used by conquerors, imperial administrators, travelers, and missionaries. Alienation is another prominent theme in Ghosh's narratives. His characters often experience a sense of disconnection from their surroundings and from each other. This alienation is not just a personal struggle but reflects broader societal issues faced by subaltern groups. The intersection of existentialism and subaltern studies in Ghosh's work is crucial for understanding characters who are often voiceless in

society, such as laborers, women, and indigenous peoples. These individuals not only battling external forces but also confronting their inner turmoil as they seek authenticity and meaning in their lives.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* restructured the examination of colonialism by analyzing the portrayal of the East, particularly the Middle East, in Western history and literature. Said argues that Western societies often perceive Eastern cultures as lacking in religious or moral values, and that the acquisition of knowledge about non-European individuals was integral to the exertion of control and dominance over them. Gayatri Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" asserts that the subaltern have consistently expressed themselves, despite the reluctance of scholars and social scientists to pay heed. The question of whether the colonized can be represented is no longer a concern, as engaging in dialogues from various perspectives allows for listening to politically engaged individuals, such as writers from colonial, postcolonial, or Third World countries, who produce alternative discourse. "In the old days, farmers would keep a little of their home-made opium for their families, to be used during illnesses, or at harvests and weddings; the rest they would sell to the local nobility, or to pykari merchants from Patna. Back then, a few clumps of poppy were enough to provide for a household's needs, leaving a little over, to be sold" (Ghosh *SoP* 29).

Jean Paul Sartre argued that Western researchers objectified non-western civilizations by examining and analyzing them using Western concepts and classifications. The concept of colonial discourse has broadened the range of inquiry and allowed a reassessment of the communication element of colonial and postcolonial interactions. The *Slave of MS. H.6* is a narrative that combines elements of anthropology and detective fiction, centered around the enslaved individual under the ownership of MS H.6. The name was initially used in a 1942 essay published in a Hebrew journal named *Zion*, which referenced a letter purportedly penned in the summer of A.D. 1148 by Khalaf Ibn Ishaq, a Jewish trader, who resided in Mangalore, India. The letters contained information regarding the activities of traveling merchants and seamen who carried the letters to India.

Abraham Ben Yiju, a merchant with a commendable level of education and scholarship, was the owner of the Slave of MS H.6. He was a Jewish merchant with strong ties to the Indian Ocean trade and accumulated a substantial amount of wealth in India. Ashu, a former slave, was emancipated by Ben Yiju and may have been both the mother of his child and his wife. Ghosh speculates that his name could have been Bomma, Bamma, or possibly Bama. Upon his return to Cairo, Abraham Ben Yiju placed MS H.6, along with several other letters, in the synagogue. In medieval times, synagogues typically included a neighboring chamber known as a genizah, or storehouse, where community members would leave their manuscripts. Due to unknown circumstances, the Genizas of the synagogue were left for almost 800 years.

### Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh's characters' journeys reveal how their experiences of oppression explore existential themes within the context of subaltern studies. By examining freedom, alienation, and the search for meaning through the lens of marginalized characters, Ghosh not only addresses individual dilemmas but also critiques larger societal structures that perpetuate suffering and disconnection. This establishes a more explicit connection between existentialism and subaltern studies. Amitav Ghosh's exploration of marginalized voices in his novels can be effectively compared to the works of other prominent postcolonial authors, such as Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy. Amitav Ghosh often emphasizes the economic aspects of colonialism, focusing on how economic forces shape the identities and experiences of marginalized groups. In contrast, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* intertwines personal and national histories through magical realism.

The writings in Judeo-Arabic, a colloquial dialect of medieval Arabic written in Hebrew characters, provide valuable insights into the social history of Jewish communities and Islamic civilization in the Mediterranean region. In 1135, Bomma was only fulfilling the role of a messenger for his lord, and among his possessions were multiple letters that included explicit instructions on his responsibilities with trading companies. Amitav Ghosh discovered

Bomma's name in "Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders," a book written by S. D. Goitein. He began learning Arabic and initiated anthropological fieldwork in a small village located a few hours' drive southeast of Alexandria in 1980, observing that the Arabic dialect spoken in the village shared many similarities with the Genizas records.

Nabeel, a young man who served in the army during National Service, was not selected for a salaried position within the Agricultural Ministry. He left his village in Egypt and traveled to Baghdad, Iraq, where he worked as an assistant in a photographer's shop. His family belonged to the most economically disadvantaged households in the village. Nabeel and his family formed a friendship with Ghosh, who was residing in Egypt to conduct research in 1980. MS H.6's Slave is an Indian individual in servitude under the ownership of a Jewish merchant, Abraham Ben Yiju. Ghosh's predilection for sweets may be inferred from the gifts he received from his friend. Born in Tunisia, Ghosh amassed a considerable fortune in India before moving to Egypt. He was a man with a penchant for luxurious living.

Ashu, a former slave who was freed by Ben Yiju, is believed to be both the mother of Ben Yiju's kid and his spouse. The author has devoted extensive time to the scholarly examination of ancient manuscripts and active participation in dialogues with inhabitants of Egyptian rural communities. His thorough and well-informed approach poses a difficult model for literary critics in Western academics. Amitav Ghosh's "*The Calcutta Chromosome*" is categorized as a "mystery thriller" and received the Arthur C. Clark Award in 1997. The essay "The Slave of MS. H.6" which explores Abraham Ben Yiju's letters written in Hebrew and translated into Judaeo-Arabic. Ghosh highlights that the slave made a second appearance after a span of 24 years in a compilation of letters.

Human beings were impacted by discriminations based on gender, caste, class, color, and religion. The characters of Kalua and Deeti are placed in a specific context and viewpoint, where Kalua, from a lower social caste, plays a crucial role in Deeti's existence. Deeti, the primary female protagonist, is married to Hukam Singh in Ghazipur and is coerced into immolating herself on a flaming pyre as a "sati". The colonization of India is associated with



the extensive production of poppies and the cruel suffering endured by laborers involved in opium processing, leading to their untimely demise. The conquerors amassed a tremendous amount of fortune from the trafficking of opium in India. Sajal Kumar Bhattacharya highlights the influence of the Parsi traders' community, which engaged in the shipment of opium with the British in relation to China commerce. Membership of the Parsi Community was deemed essential in the traders guild established in Canton (modern-day Guangzhou) to advocate for and protect the principles of "Free trade" in China. Ghosh, a postcolonial author, criticizes imperialism for its brutality and discrimination, believing that art can counteract the alienation caused by these influences on people and communities.

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