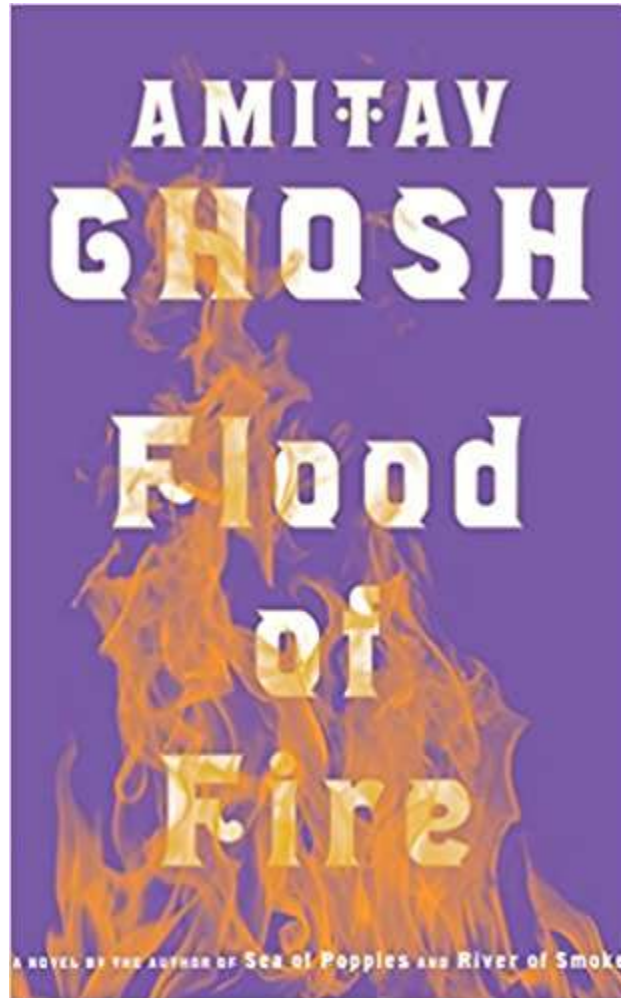


## **A Holistic Societal Perspective of Amitav Ghosh's Novels**

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Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/Flood-Fire-Trilogy-Amitav-Ghosh/dp/1511368802>

### **Abstract**

This study has looked at the societal perspectives of Amitav Ghosh corresponding to the existing discrepancies of India, in the forms of language, culture, tradition, religions, and their practices. It has tried to identify the havoc caused to the Indian societal set up through external war, diplomats who instigate societal threats to demolish Indian societal networks constructed in the form of close families; and it has explored the idea of international conspiracy over destroying the Indian Society in the form of bio-wars evidently seen through the series of Ibis Trilogy and

other works of Amitav Ghosh. It looks further to comprehend the defense tactics played by a nation to protect the citizens and the communities in which they live.

**Keywords:** Amitav Ghosh, *The Sea of Poppies*, Ecocentrism, Historicism, the Opium War, Japanese invasion of Burma, Feminine sensibility, *Ibis Trilogy*, Indentured labour

## Introduction

Amitav Ghosh specializes in packaging his writings, blending the essence of literary philosophy, politics, current affairs and a glimpse of history in a perfect combination. Being an Indian writer of both fiction and non-fiction he has a profound impact on culture, society and its physical development. Born in Calcutta in 1956, he comes from an army background. His father being a lieutenant-colonel in the Indian army had given him the upper hand to visit many nations like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and India. He studied in Delhi, Oxford, and Egypt. His teaching experience at various universities in India and the United States had enriched him with abundant exposure. His first job was at the Indian Express newspaper in New Delhi after which he went on to author several fiction and non-fiction books. He currently lives in New York with his wife, and two children. He is a professor of comparative literature at the Queen's College in the City University of New York and has been contributing as a guest lecturer in renowned universities. His novels are usually the products of interesting ideas or captivating characters that he conceives in his heart and then gives them ample time to develop and evolve into mysterious works that have won numerous prestigious accolades. The first among them *The Circle of Reason* (1986) won him the **Prix Médicis étranger**, a top literary award of France. His second book, *The Shadow Lines* (1988) won the famous the prestigious literary Indian award, Sahitya Akademi, in 1990 as well as the Ananda Puraskar, in Calcutta. *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995) won the Arthur C. Clarke award for 1997 while *The Glass Palace* (2000) won the grand prize for fiction at the Frankfurt International e-book award in 2001.

Among his works in non-fiction *Countdown* (1999), a book on India's nuclear policy, the *Imam and the Indians* (2002), a collection of several essays on different topics. Other books include *Dancing in Cambodia and At Large in Burma* (1998), and *Countdown* (1999). When he felt that his novels were becoming a bit more predictable he decided to push himself to the limit and began spending more time with characters in his mind and the outcome were books such as *The Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015) between 2004 and 2015, better known as the Ibis trilogy.

The writings of Ghosh have a significant connection in history and exhibit much influence by his inherent connection with people and places. The Bay of Bengal, The Arabian Sea and The Indian Ocean are the regions that have interested him the most. He is also a strong believer in fundamentalism which is quite evident in his writings.

## Historicism

Amitav Ghosh gives great prominence to social and cultural incidents in his writings for bringing about a significant impact among the masses of this world and considers historical development an absolute necessity. His creative writing, both fiction and non-fiction, in general, take on issues of history and geography as well as politics and use it in the form of story-telling to

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bring a significant effect in history. He sees humanity in the perspective of being drawn to their destiny. His novels transport the readers to various locations in different times and sensitize them to the importance of being connected to places and what is going on in every place. Ghosh does not totally accede to the claims of historicism. He quoted in *The Shadow Lines* (1988) about ‘arbitrary and invented divisions between people and nations’. Almost all writings of Ghosh carry the purpose of impacting historical and political change and not just to carry the reader into the realm of fantasy. In *The Glass Palace* (2000), for instance, Ghosh brings to light the spark in an eleven-year-old, Rajkumar, when he glances on Dolly, an attendant of the princess, and falls in love with her instantly. And then though they are separated quickly when they are thrown into exile by the British, Rajkumar overcomes years of adversity and eventually when he has made his fortune, he still remembers Dolly. His dream becomes a reality when he finds Dolly, marries her and takes her out of the family that she had been exiled with, and they go down to Burma.

### **Existentialism**

The writings of Amitav Ghosh often highlight the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining their own development through acts of their will is their basic right. His work shows that he is no respecter of caste, creed or color. As a practitioner of post modernism in novels, he focuses entirely on colonialism’s impoverished, and usually non-white, victims and they are given the central position, not their white masters. His novels contain a colorful array of seamen, convicts and laborers sailing forth in the hope of transforming their lives. Hence, he addresses issues of all sorts. His work makes it evident that characters are his targets. The Brits whom he depicts are basically scheming, perverse and ruthless to a man, but Ghosh has portrayed them not as rounded characters who grow. They are largely caricatures. Amitav Ghosh invokes the idea of non-existent shadow lines between two nations and communities. Amitav Ghosh applies this idea: ‘to a wide domain of inner and outer realities without which human beings could hardly live through a single day of their lives’. (*The Shadow Lines* 299)

### **Ideal of Man**

Ghosh respects the ideal of man being free irrespective of his background, and hence his writings deal with people of all nationalities. At the end of *Sea of Poppies* (2008), he brings to light conditions that were seen to be looming, as British opium interests in India pressed for the use of force to compel the Chinese mandarins to keep open their ports, in the name of free trade. Symbolically, the novel ends amidst a raging storm, rocking the triple-master schooner, the Ibis. In *The Glass Palace* (2000), Amitav Ghosh narrates the havoc caused by the Japanese invasion of Burma and its effect on the Army officers and people. He creates a sense of dejection that deals with so much human tragedy, wars, deaths, devastation and dislocation.

### **Eco Criticism**

Amitav Ghosh in his writings bears the ideal of engaging with environmental history, values and science studies. They contain a variety of elements and give different flavor to his work. Taking for instance, *The Shadow Lines* (1988), Ghosh focuses on Calcutta in India as well as Dhaka. He talks about the terrible incident of a span of time, namely World War II, and the riots of Dhaka and Calcutta in 1963 and 1964, and later into incidents of the twentieth century. He looks seriously at the political and economic growth in the city of Calcutta and India from the time of

World War II. The novel covers issues with a positive approach based on standard moral values. Thus, it throws light on reality when people are faced with tough times and face nightmares. It shows how attitude, determination, purpose and resolve play a vital part in accomplishing one's dream with grit, that they overcome all odds. The writings impress upon the reader the importance of places in course of time that history marks, the places man sets foot on, the places he dwells in; and in this book the author values these places, by showing his readership goal is to set his focus on locations, addresses, the houses and eventually revisit those places far and wide, in Gole Park, Lyminton Road, London and his grandmother's uncle's place in Dhaka. Amitav Ghosh has warned mankind against the overt exploitation of nature. The Tide Country is a harsh landscape, full of peril and death in many forms: 'At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy or expel them. Every year, dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles'. (*The Hungry Tide* 7)

### **Feminine Sensibility**

The sense of depicting feminine sensibility or virtue is eminent in Amitav Ghosh's novels irrespective of the age group. A range of virtue depicted in almost all instances of feminine characters. Amitav Ghosh maintains a critical perception of feminism in his novels. They mark a divergence of interests between the feministic criticism of the Indian subcontinent and the western academe. He repeats some of the national gestures of portraying women as emblematic figures, signifying culture, tradition, nation and authenticity. This is precisely a counter argument for the novel's gender politics. In all his other novels there is relatively little debate about the representation of gender and other issues of sexuality. But as a matter of academic speculation, women have become very significant in all his other works. The feminine quality of the novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008) is also evident in some of the small, but authentically feminine actions of some of the characters. Deeti had been cornered by her own brother, and husband, betrayed by her brother-in-law, insulted by the BhyroSingh, uncle of her husband and rendered destitute by the people of her own family. "She has no right anywhere- as daughter, wife, sister and citizen". (*Sea of Poppies* 177, 191)

### **Cultural Studies**

Cultural study concentrates upon the political dynamics of contemporary culture. Its historical foundations define traits, conflicts and contingencies. These are the aspects and traits that a good writer follows, not merely in the work of their writings, but also imbibe them as part of their personality and character. This is what gives a good writer the right perception and leads them to communicate values in the stories, through the characters in their stories.

*The Hungry Tide* (2004) is all about the ruthless suppression and massacre of East Pakistani refugees who ran away from the Dandakaranya refugee camps to Marichhampi as they felt that the latter region would provide them with familiar environs and therefore a better life. In *Sea of Poppies* (2008), the indentured laborers and convicts are transported to the island of Mauritius on the ship Ibis where they suffer a lot. These instances are brought to light, to cause people to stand up for values such as cultural environment preservation, not merely for the motive of bringing out just another novel of horror or violence as in some cases.

## **Ibis Trilogy**

The Ibis trilogy is a work of historical fiction by Amitav Ghosh. The story is set in the first half of the 19th century. It deals with the trade of opium between India and China run by the East India Company and the trafficking of coolies to Mauritius. It comprises *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), and *Flood of Fire* (2015). The trilogy gets its names from the ship Ibis, on board which most of the main characters meet for the first time. The Ibis starts from Calcutta carrying indentured servants and convicts destined for Mauritius, but it runs into a storm and faces a mutiny. Two other ships are caught in the same storm—the Anahita, a vessel carrying opium to Canton, and the Redruth, which is on a botanical expedition, also to Canton. While some of the passengers of the Ibis reach their destination in Mauritius, others find themselves in Hong Kong and Canton and get caught up in events that lead to the First Opium War.

The novels depict a range of characters from different cultures, including Bihari peasants, Bengali Zamindars, Parsi businessmen, Cantonese boat people, British traders and officials, a Cornish botanist, and a mulatto sailor. In addition to their native tongues, the novels also introduce the readers to various pidgins, including the original Chinese Pidgin English and variants spoken by the lascars.

## **Environmentalism versus Historicism**

Environmentalism is the focus of protecting and conserving the environment, through social and cultural behavior, whereas Historicism is the development of social and cultural events, pointing society towards betterment and progress. And Amitav Ghosh advocates these traits in his literature. He puts Environmentalism and historicism into a good book. These aspects are very important and can have tremendous impact around the world. Research into the writings of Amitav Ghosh brings to light the huge impact a good book can have over people in general, over communities, and nations of the world.

## **Thematic Studies**

Amitav Ghosh has the inclination to being diasporic matters into his writing. He mostly focuses on the sense of belonging or rootedness. He is a postmodernist writer who tends to include the political, environmental and cultural surroundings of post independent India. Being a great traveller, he has been enriched by the advantage he had to visit foreign lands, for which reason he possesses the great skill to take the readers from one place to another through his work. In *The Shadow Lines* (1988), Amitav Ghosh makes the East and West meet on a platform of friendship, especially through the characters like Tridib, May, Nice Prince and others. He emphasizes globalization more than nationalization. The characters in *The Shadow Lines* (1988) are from middle class families and they cannot afford free movement without accountability. On the other hand, it is certain that there is commonness of issues like rootedness, national boundaries, riots on communal differences and communal clashes that affected the lives of all these characters of middle class families, profoundly entrenched in three generations of families.

His work the Ibis trilogy is the purest of historical fiction. The *Calcutta Chromosome* (1995) finds the author trying on his fantasy, horror and science fictions aspects. It deals with extrapolation upon the history of discovering a cure for malaria and its possibility today resulting in an informative thriller is a worthwhile offering to the speculative fiction market by a jack-of-all-trades author. He takes the loop holes among the various journals and researchers' notes surviving the



decades as the premise of the novel. The answers filling these holes are not always synchronous, a strange and mysterious situation arises, but they have become beyond paranormal, secrecy surviving until today. His works are surprisingly well versed on what makes a plot suspenseful for this, his first thriller. By revealing a little here, introducing an unfamiliar and therefore mysterious element there, the pages fly by, implications testing the limits of reality, he keeps readers hanging by a thread; the reader never knows what will happen next but desperately wants to. Only occasionally lyrical, he writes in taut, declarative sentences that guide the narrative infallibly. Often using the motif of introducing an idea, then jumping back in time to backfill the history to that point, the transition points between characters rotate seamlessly, proving as flexible in style as subject.

As the pages turn, the reader comes to an understanding of not only the research and immunology behind cure for malaria, but also the singular and yet unknown potential of the malaria virus. The reason the novel won the Arthur C. Clarke award is undoubtedly due to the occasionally creepy, often profound speculation he performs on malarial cell generation and its potential within human DNA. The topics of medicine and pathology not often tackled in specific terms, it's great to see the possibilities intertwined in a thrilling yet interesting story.

In the end, *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995) is a highly readable and informative book that will have the hairs on the back of your arm standing up as he explores the history of malaria from a present-day perspective of history. Knowing exactly what little morsels and tidbits will lead the reader on, he unveils the state of India and immunology at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as a few mysteries of his own, with appropriate entwining of factors.

## Conclusion

This study has touched upon the societal perspectives of Amitav Ghosh, corresponding to the existing discrepancies of India in the forms of language, culture, tradition, religions, and its practices. It has tried to identify the havoc caused to the Indian societal set up through external war, diplomats who instigate societal threats to demolish Indian societal networks constructed in the form of compact families; and it has explored the international conspiracy over destroying the Indian Societies in the form of bio-wars, evidently seen through the series of Ibis Trilogy and other works of Amitav Ghosh. It looks further to comprehend the defense tactics employed by a nation to protect the citizens and their communities in which they live.

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