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Religious Language and the Opium Trade in Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*

Bringing together individuals of many backgrounds on a ship carrying a mix of laborers and prisoners to the island of Mauritius, Amitav Ghosh’s 2008 novel, *Sea of Poppies*, highlights the impact of British imperialism and slavery in Southeast Asia by examining the largely neglected stories of the opium trade. Through the use of religious language, the novel depicts free trade, one of the lasting legacies of this period, as seemingly omnipresent, the international trade of opium transforming free enterprise into a widely-accepted dogma that validates the commodification of human bodies. This spiritual rhetoric is not only used by the Evangelical proponents of the opium trade preaching their values but by the natives who eventually co-opt these capitalist principles into their own religious practices. Ghosh illustrates how the opium market rapidly became a religiously-ordained institution for both those who benefit from it and those who have no choice but to accept it as an unstoppable and imposing force within their own communities.

Those most responsible for the conversion of free trade into doctrine are the leaders and promoters of the opium industry, including the novel’s antagonist, Mr. Burnham, a wealthy opium trader who uses his Christian teachings to glorify his business’s mistreatment of workers and consumers. A personification of the foundational philosophies of European imperialism and the moral high-ground it claims, Mr. Burnham is a fierce advocate of the British empire’s two biggest exports, Evangelism and free trade (Stanton 83). In a conversation with Neel, a wealthy raja, he asserts that he is like a travelling preacher, spreading his economic creed through the sale of opium and later proclaiming that “Christ is Free Trade and Free Trade is Jesus Christ” (113). This statement is reminiscent of an earlier part of the text in which he attempts to argue that slavery is its own kind of freedom (78). Though not as paradoxical, Mr. Burnham’s analogy between Christianity and free trade highlight the irony of his religious teachings in contrast to his actions and greed. By using this false equivalency, he is able to rationalize his acts of oppression by disguising them under the virtuousness and purity associated with Jesus Christ. Therefore, despite free trade bringing “addiction and intoxication” to China and many other parts of the world, Mr. Burnham justifies this devastation by declaring that the “antidote for addiction” lies in “one’s personal responsibility and his fear of God” (114). Even though his wealth depends on the public’s dependence on opium, he views himself as a good Christian who gives his customers the “freedom” to choose between sin and virtue. Combining the individualist undertones of free trade and Evangelical doctrine, the deeply-religious Mr. Burnham brushes away the societal ills that he plays a role in disseminating. In many ways, he embodies the misleading propaganda used to distract from the negative consequences of free enterprise.

Ghosh is very explicit in fleshing out the ways in which those transporting opium for Mr. Burnham are intrinsic to his business, serving as agents who disperse both his inventory and his deceitful teachings. For example, after Zach, an officer aboard Mr. Burnham’s opium-ship, the *Ibis*, finds Captain Chillingworth’s opium pipe, he pushes the Captain to acknowledge that he regularly uses the drug. “With the ceremonious air of a priest performing a ritual of Communion,” he then insists that Zach smoke it as well in an attempt to morally vindicate his opium-use (424). Claiming some form of spiritual authority, he cites the ritual of Communion in order to frame Zach’s introduction to the drug as a sacred rite of passage. In doing so, he is able to absolve himself of the consequences of offering his subordinate a substance that has proven to be habit-forming. Instead, he depicts opium-use to be highly useful and even necessary to his trade, claiming that it “kills a man’s desires…calms the unceasing torment of the flesh that pursues us across the seas” and “drives us to sin against nature” (424). Like Mr. Burnham, the Captain sincerely thinks positively of the opium market, believing that his habit is mostly responsible for preserving his sanity and keeping him from committing sin. As a supporter of and accomplice to Mr. Burnham’s capitalist venture, Chillingworth is truly like a priest serving his boss’s church, not only preaching the alleged benefits of opium use to Zach but actively participating in the spreading of this dangerous market.

Eventually, the effectiveness of Mr. Burnham and Captain Chillingworth’s efforts to sanctify the opium trade reveals itself through one of the novel’s characters, Deeti, as the text uses religious imagery to describe the inhumane conditions of her village’s opium plant. When Deeti goes to the Sudder Opium Factory, her village’s main source of employment, she notes the “bars of light…shining through the slit-like windows” and “enormous square columns” that simultaneously make the space feel like a prison and church (93). But unlike most places of worship, the factory contains many horrors, revealing to Deeti the various ways in which it mistreats its workers. When she finally enters the assembly room to find her husband, it is referred to as a “temple” with a “long, well-aired passage ahead…lined with two rows of dhoti-clad men, sitting cross-legged on the floor, like Brahmins at a feast” (94). As she observes the precision of their movements and their calculations while measuring the opium, Deeti thinks of the hypnotic nature of meditation or other forms of religious worship. By calling the room as a temple, the novel is insinuating that this congregation of men is in a transcendental—or cult-like state—while laboring, worshipping opium’s divinity. While the work does not seem too strenuous, there lies something much more ominous in this room that pretends to be a space of reverence. The efficiency in which the worker’s toil, their “hands moving at dizzying speeds” in what the text calls a “finely honed...system” also dehumanizes them (95). Though they seem to be in this quasi-religious sphere, they are also compared to machinery that lack personhood, their limbs representing mechanical parts. The fluidness of their work is motivated by the capitalist system forced upon them by the factory, their efforts driven by the need to make a living and support their families. Deeti soon comes to understand their mode of thinking, as this growing market successfully frames religion and industrialization as two sides of the same coin.

In fact, Deeti is one of the first characters who is able to sense the opium trade’s all-pervading presence through the lens of the religion she practices—Hinduism—indicating a transcultural adoption of laissez-faire principles from a non-Western perspective. While Deeti has always been fully aware of the role opium plays in her life, she relies on Hindu astrology to determine her future. Specifically, she adheres to “Saturn— Shani—a planet that exercised great power on those born under its influence (29). However, toward the end of the novel, when a dying companion gives her a pouch filled with poppy seeds—which are used to extract opium—Deeti finds that “it was not the planet above that governed her life: it was this miniscule orb—at once bountiful and all-devouring, merciful, and destructive, sustaining and vengeful” (439). Referring to the seeds as her Shani, Deeti takes this small object and instills within it an astronomically large amount of authority over her, densely packing it with spiritual meaning. Possessing both a destructive and benevolent quality, the seeds gain a divine agency that is evident in the chronology of Deeti’s life. It is because of this grander, economic force associated with the opium these seeds produce that her husband is a drug addict, her agricultural community can no longer grow more sustainable crops, and her family lives in extreme poverty. Thus, Deeti incorporates her worship of astrology and Hindu Gods into the poppy seeds that have tangibly impacted every aspect of her existence, relinquishing any sense of control she may have had over her life.

As one of “the most precious jewels in Queen Victoria’s crown” (89), the opium trade brought many Western ideals that, with differing success, embedded themselves in the nations forced under the umbrella of the British Empire. *Sea of Poppies*’ use of spiritual rhetoric in describing various aspects of the opium agribusiness—production, transportation, and consumption—depicts how free trade became a theological tenet for those both complicit and subject to the whims of this international economy. As an economic system, Britain’s brutal understanding of free trade developed a religious power that defends and deems the crimes of colonial oppression to be morally necessary, or in Deeti’s case, inevitable. While Ghosh focuses on the concept of empire during the 19th century in this novel, he has expressed an interest in more contemporary manifestations of powerful, capitalist markets. For instance, his popular essay, “Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter,” articulates a need for more literature that revolves around the oil conflict between the United States and the Middle East (138). In pointing out the rhetoric of imperialism both in the past and in the present, Ghosh raises many questions about how the exploitation of language, often used to encourage the implementation of free trade, continues to persist in what is meant to be a “postcolonial” era. Whether it be “globalization,” “development,” or “industrialization,” the various terms used to describe the practice of free trade across many communities and cultures contributes to the ways in which today’s society now sees this economic policy as a law of nature rather than just theory.

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