

**The (His)Story of IBIS: A Reading of Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire*****Nivedita Misra**

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**Abstract**

*Colonial and postcolonial theory has given very little space to the economics that governed the colonial enterprise. Intermittently, people have written on the economic aspects that gave rise to the enslavement of the Africans and the indenture of Indians. Two aspects that have found little expression in fiction are: 'free trade' laws that overtly favoured a single colonial power, and the 'balance of payments' argument, with its attendant case for reparations. In this paper, I read the Ibis trilogy written by the Indian author, Amitav Ghosh, namely, *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke*, and *Flood of Fire*. The paper traces the journey of the fictional IBIS ship across the oceans as its ownership changes hands as does its loads. Rather than following the journey of the main protagonists, I map the journey of the ship across the ports in America, Africa, India and China, keeping in mind the economic histories of the places visited.*

**Current state of Diaspora studies**

Vijay Mishra makes a distinction between the old diaspora and new diaspora. In his view, due to the nature of travel, commonly held beliefs and untold histories, the old diaspora was more cut-off from mother culture and developed in a vacuum elsewhere. The new diaspora, on the other hand, is deeply connected to the mother culture and remains in constant contact through modern means of communication and travel. Mishra theorises the trauma of not knowing the past yet being haunted by it because the old diaspora never articulated the reasons for leaving India for a home elsewhere. In his articulation, V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* is a seminal text that forever binds the old diaspora across nations.

For me as a member of the new diaspora, my past was known to me yet it contained no information about the indentured labourers who were taken to Trinidad, Guyana, Fiji, Mauritius, Africa and elsewhere. Through my travel to Trinidad, I got *inserted* into the narrative of an older diaspora. It was when I arrived in Trinidad that I realised that I had fellow Indians who had been here for over five generations. There was no camaraderie between us; there was little commonality on the surface in terms of dress, language and manners. However, just as one began scratching a little, all the deep-rooted cultural connections came out. In one of my early interactions, I had visited a primary school holding a Ramleela on its grounds. The reading of the *Ramcharitamanas* and its translation into English was followed by the playing out of the episode with children cheering behind with a hop step jump motion. With *jalebis* and *pholouries* being made in the background, the atmosphere soothed my senses and connected me to a whole new community. Other than personal contacts and relationships made, I felt connected to a new yet different society that helped me cope up with change. I also realised that a lot of the descendants of the older diaspora had gone to India and come back feeling that their forefathers had taken the right decision in not going back to India.

Over the years, it is their experiences and their thinking about India that has influenced my thinking about how to come to grips with the sense of dislocation that happens in spite of the best communication systems now. I am building on the differences articulated by Vijay Mishra between the old and new diaspora. I am also building on Gauitra Bahadur's articulation of memories that bind the old and new diaspora together in America. While meeting my fellow diasporic Indians provides one avenue of interaction, reading books provides another. And here I introduce the topic of this article, which is the story of Ibis ship in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire*.

## The Story of IBIS

Ghosh calls it the *Ibis* trilogy because the characters are bound by virtue of being on the ship called *Ibis*. The story is a historical period drama happening roughly between 1838 and 1841. The story evolves out of the interaction between disparate Indians aboard the ship *Ibis* as it sails out from Calcutta to Mauritius carrying its first load of indentured Indians. The main characters in the book are:

- Deeti, a higher caste woman running away from an unhappy marriage and the death of her husband.
- Kalua, a lower caste wrestler running away from a society that never honored him.
- Neel, a raja, who is bankrupt and has been sentenced to seven years imprisonment on the charge of forging an Englishman's signature
- Ah-Fatt, a Chinese-Indian half caste, an opium addict, searching for his identity.
- Paulette, a French botanist's daughter who lives off charity of the English after the death of her father.
- Jodu, or Azad Naskar, who is a childhood mate of Paulette and is employed on the ship.
- Serang Ali, a lascar
- Zachary Reid, son of a quadroon mother and a white father, working on the ship as a carpenter but rising to the rank of Captain.
- Bahram, a Parsi trader, involved in opium trade
- Shireen, his wife
- Zadig Bey, an Armenian, who is a friend of Bahram and trader in opium, and
- Vico, or Victorino Martinho Soares, an East Indian Catholic from Bombay

As is evident from this cast, the story is international in its scope as it involves not only the British and Indians, but also Americans, French, Chinese, and Malaysians among a host of people of unknown and mixed birth. The reader is presented with the story material through a pastiche of viewpoints and the reader him/herself builds up the scenery of Ghazipur and Calcutta in India, Mauritius, Singapore, Malacca in Malaysia, Hong Kong, Macao and Canton in China in 1838 or thereabouts. Given the geographical spread of the books, the writer carefully builds his authority upon his characters, and vice versa. The characters voice their individual backgrounds as symbolic of their community's history in that area. The writer uses these to build his documentary evi-

dence about the operations of colonial enterprise. Vice versa, the characters are given authentication because the writer allows them the space to provide these details. In such a complex narrative design, the ship becomes both an agent of imperialism and escape. I read the characters as symbols and agents of change.

## The First Sightings of Girmityas

There is virtually no first-hand account by the people who were indentured to go to the sugar estates of Trinidad, Guyana, Fiji, Mauritius and elsewhere. By a leap of faith, Ghosh provides the first sightings of girmityas in his book *Sea of Poppies*:

The road was filled with people, a hundred strong or more; hemmed in by a ring of stick-bearing guards, this crowd was trudging wearily in the direction of the river. Bundles of belongings sat balanced on their heads and shoulders, and brass pots hung suspended from their elbows. It was clear that they had already marched a great distance, for their dhotis, langots and vests were stained with the dust on the road (2009: 70-71).

The writer mentions two other points: they were called girmityas: 'They were so called because, in exchange for money, their names were entered on "girmits" — agreements written on pieces of paper. The silver that was paid for them went to their families, and they were taken away, never to be seen again: they vanished, as if into the netherworld' (2009: 72). This obscures the actual history in which many indentured returned and set out for another contract subsequently. But yes, around 75% settled in the countries they went to for good. The reference to 'netherworld' connects to the second idea, the loss of caste:

She [Deeti] tried to imagine what it would be like to be in their place, to know that you were forever an outcaste; to know that you would never again enter your father's house; that you would never throw your arms around your mother; never eat a meal with your sisters and brothers; never feel the cleansing touch of the Ganga. And to know also that for the rest of your days you would eke out a living on some wild, demon-plagued island? (2009: 72).

Crossing the seas, generally referred to as 'kala pani', or Black Waters, was related to the breaking of the caste rules; hence, people who crossed the seas were deemed outcastes. However, this is disputed among trader castes who crossed the seas and coastal communities which saw the sea as a source of food and wealth. The crossing of the seas was a taboo only among the land-

locked communities who never saw a reason to do so. In the above passage, the social restrictions cited act as sources of rebellion and escape into an unknown future. Driven by poverty, famine, lack of employment and disputes, many enrolled for the indenture in the belief that the colonial masters would take care of them.

The colonial masters, on the other hand, saw the indentured laborers merely as *goods* to be transported and made use of without any sense of responsibility about their welfare. The ship *Ibis* had been a 'blackbirder', meant for transporting slaves across the Atlantic, and had been bought by Burnham and Company in Calcutta to support their mercantile interests. The ship was built in Baltimore and at the beginning of the first book, it makes its first journey across the Atlantic, round the Cape of Good Hope to India: 'The *Ibis* had a short quarter-deck, a risen fo'c'sle, with a fo'c'sle-deck between the bows, and a deckhouse amidships, that served as a galley and cabin for the bo'sons and stewards' (2009: 11). Through a series of unfortunate accidents in which the captain gets indisposed on this journey, the first mate and the second mate fall, Zachary Reid, a carpenter, takes charge of the ship. This is a travesty since Reid is himself a half-caste born to a quadroon mother and a white father. On the ship log, he is listed as black. As many sailors die on the journey across the Atlantic, when it docks at the Cape of Good Hope, lascars are brought on the ship to help it sail further. The lascars are non-European composite groups of Chinese, East Africans, Arabs, Malays, Bengalis, Goans, Tamils, and Arakanese. They are a community among themselves and though they are good at sailing they lack morals and training. Zachary becomes the first mate, with Serang Ali as a lascar, because no one else is ready to sail the ship.

They next dock at Port Louis in Mauritius. Zachary becomes the Captain for the final leg of the journey from Port Louis to Calcutta. Eleven months since its departure from Baltimore, it drops anchor in Hooghly, Calcutta. By this time, we have been told that the journey across the seas comes with its manifold dangers that include the pirates and diseases.

The ship needs to be refitted before it carries its next set of cargo, the indentured Indians to Mauritius. The Between-deck of *Ibis* is the dabusa. Initially when the ship comes into harbour, we are told:

Standing on the tip of the dabusa, with his feet on the ladder, Jodu became aware of a sickly, fetid odour, welling upwards from the darkness below: it was a smell that was at once offensive and disturbing, familiar and unrecognisable, and it became stronger as he descended...Although as wide as the vessel, the dabusa had a close, cramped feel— partly because its ceiling was not much taller than a man, but also because it was divided, by timber ribs, into open compartments, like cattle-pens. As his eyes became accus-

tomed to the dim light, Jodu stepped warily into one of the pens and immediately stubbed his toe upon a heavy iron chain. Falling to his knees, he discovered that there were several such chains in the pen, nailed into the far beam: they ended in bracelet-like clasps, each fitted with eyeholes, for locks. ...Now, running his hands along the floor, he saw that there were smooth depressions in the wood, of a shape and size that could only have been made by human beings, over prolonged periods of time. The depressions were so close to each other as to suggest a great press of people, packed close together, like merchandise on a vendor's counter (2009: 143).

The ship is refitted in Calcutta and makes its first trip, under the Burnham banner, to Mauritius carrying a load of indentured Indians. Indians are being taken to Mareech-dip or pepper island. Even after its refitting, the dabusa 'was still as grim, dark and foul-smelling as he remembered—merely an enclosed floor, with arched beams along the sides— but its chains and ring-bolts were gone and a couple of heads and piss-dales had been added' (2009: 319). Once, refitted and loaded, the ship travels from Calcutta to Diamond Harbour, to Hooghly Point, to Gangasagar, to Sunderbans, and is finally at sea. Seeing the sea for the first time, without borders, several girmityas jump ship:

The wind had fallen off, so there was not a fleck of white visible on the surface, and with the afternoon sun glaring down, the water was as dark and still as the cloak of shadows that covers the opening of an abyss. Like the others around her, Deeti stared in stupefaction: it was impossible to think of this as water at all— for water surely needed a boundary, a rim, a shore, to give it shape and hold it in place? This was a firmament, like the night sky, holding the vessel aloft as if it were a planet or a star (2009: 395).

Intermittently, throughout the journey, people keep dying and are thrown overboard.

As the story progresses, eleven days into sailing, Serang Ali plans his escape near the Great Nicobar Island and the Malacca Strait in the Sumatra Channel. Using the eye of the storm, he steers his escapee longboat to an island. Serang Ali, Jodu, Neel, Ah Fatt and Kalua make their way out of the storm. From there, Serang Ali, Jodu and Kalua go to Mergui, Ah Fatt and Neel go to Singapore and Malacca.

### Indenture and Opium

The story of the indentured goes on but let us take a look at the other in-

formation that emerges from the book regarding colonial trade interests. Mr. Burnham, the current owner of the ship, lives in Garden Reach, Calcutta. He is a merchant-nabob. He is a well-established trader and well-known in Calcutta society for his charity. Unscrupulous in his business, he sees nothing wrong in trading in slaves, labor or opium. His first successful bid was for the transportation of convicts to island prisons of Penang (Malaysia), Bencoolen (Singapore), Port Blair (South Andaman Island) and Mauritius. In a conversation between Burnham and Neel, Burnham reveals his business interests: '...for in eastern India, opium was the exclusive monopoly of the British, produced and packaged entirely under the supervision of the East India Company; except for a small group of Parsis, few native-born Indians had access to the trade or its profits' (2009: 85). Justifying the slave trade, Burnham pronounces:

Consider, Reid, the situation of a so-called slave in the Carolinas— is he not freer than his brethren in Africa, groaning under the rule of some dark tyrant?...

Have you not said that when God closes one door he opens another? When the doors of freedom were closed to the African, the Lord opened them to a tribe that was yet more needful for it — the Asiatick (2009:79).

On being queried if the British would go to war with China to force open its shores for opium, Mr. Burnham answers:

Free trade is a right conferred on Man by God, and its principles apply as much as opium as to any other article of trade. More so perhaps, since in its absence many millions of natives would be denied the lasting advantages of British influence....that British rule in India could not be sustained without opium— that is all there is to it, and let us not pretend otherwise. You are no doubt aware that in some years, the Company's annual gains from opium are almost equal to the entire revenue of your own country, the United States? Do you imagine that British rule would be possible in this impoverished land if it were not for this source of wealth? And if we reflect on the benefits that British rule has conferred upon India, does it not follow that opium is this land's greatest blessing? Does it not follow that it is our God-given duty to confer these benefits upon others? (2009: 115).

Further, Burnham combines the will of God with all his business interests: 'several missionaries had close connections with opium traders' (2009: 76) because '[i]f it is God's will that opium be used as an instrument to open China to his teachings, then so be it' (2009 :116); and 'Merchants like myself

are but the servants of Free Trade, which is as immutable as God's commandments' (2009: 117).

Ghosh, through this presentation of Burnham and his businesses, presents an aspect of colonial history that has been whitewashed and brushed under the carpet. None of the curriculums in universities of the formerly colonial nations are made aware of the British opium trade or of the human trade that was vociferously defended by the traders' interests in their House of Commons. Subsequently these were outlawed but that does not mean that we should be thankful to the British for having outlawed these 'trades'. The British government paid 3000 slave-owners a sum of £20 million to compensate for the loss of their 'property' when slave-ownership was abolished in Britain's colonies in 1833. No such compensation has ever been paid to the societies or descendants of the enslaved or the indentured.

The Anglo-Chinese opium wars between 1839-60 had a lasting effect on world economy. The treaty, after the first Opium war, forced China to cede the Hong Kong island. The treaty also demanded a twenty-one-million-dollar payment to Great Britain, with six million paid immediately and the rest through specified instalments thereafter, for the losses sustained by the British in waging the war. The second Opium war resulted in the Treaty of Tientsin (1858), which forced the Chinese to pay reparations for the expenses of the recent war, open a second group of ten ports to European commerce, legalize the opium trade, and grant foreign traders and missionaries rights to travel within China. Further, as Ghosh himself points out in one of his interviews: 'And today when people talk about the doctrine of free trade, they do it as though it were this thing without any history, as though it had nothing preceding it. And yet, this doctrine comes to us soaked in blood and soaked in criminality' (Alford, 2020).

### **Unknown to me, the World was always Globalised**

Amitav Ghosh's historical fiction reveals how the world was always globalised but postcolonial histories of formerly subservient nations never emphasised these connections. Hence, we grew up thinking that we were known only to ourselves with the socialist governments protecting us from the onslaught of free economies. The 'liberalisation and globalisation era' of the 1990s was an opening up of local markets to big multinational companies from America, Britain and China. We never realised that by closing up our economies, our governments in effect also closed up our histories and geographies. I build my narrative here upon my reading of how history is being written in the present because histories are never written in isolation. They must interact and interweave in global discourses to have any impact.

My first point of inflection is Shashi Tharoor's Oxford debate that in this day and age 'went viral.' Tharoor's moot point was that unlike other countries and regions, the Britishers systematically destroyed India's industries to subjugate its population. India's contribution to world economy was 23% at the time that the British landed in India. It was less than 4% by the time they left.

Compare this to how historians are writing about the erstwhile British empire within Britain. John Darwin (2009) writes: 'The British world-system was not a structure of global hegemony'. The sentence makes little sense because either the 'British world-system' did not exist or the hegemony did. Darwin would have us believe that British traders acted on their own will to 'build' the British empire without political will or military support. Building his argument upon 'British reluctance', he writes: 'It was strategic control of the Cape Colony (whose economic value was derisory before 1870) that secured the naval gateway to Asia from European waters. The prime function of Egypt, occupied by the British in 1882 was to preserve British use of the Suez Canal and protect the 'Clapham Junction' of imperial communications. John Darwin would have us believe that there were no imperial designs and that the traders were the foot soldiers who defined and defended the empire. India is constantly cited as an exception to this rule of expansionism.

In *India Conquered: Britain's Raj and the Chaos of Empire* Jon Wilson (2016) writes: 'They [Robert Clive to Lord Mountbatten] allow many, Britons and some Indians, to look back on the 'Raj' as a period of authority, a time when Pax Britannica imposed reason and order on Indian society and corruption or violence were less rife than now' (2016: 4). He further goes on to write that 'whether using guns or cannons, railway lines or survey sticks, the techniques used to assert British power shared a common effort to rule without engaging with the people being ruled' (2016: 6). These benign activities are highlighted while how the import of British-made vessels [from the 1830s] annihilated the Bombay ship-building industry (208); or how the British perpetuated the killing of between twelve and thirty million people by starvation or famine-related diseases [Famine of 1876-8, 1896-7, and 1900-01] in India in the last quarter of the nineteenth century (318) are mentioned but greatly overlooked.

Jonathan Eacott's *Selling Empire: India in the making of Britain and America, 1600-1830* concludes: 'Over time, Britons used these Indias together, exploiting each in different ways to eventually make Britain the most powerful India of all' (2016: 437). He uses 'India' as the name of the desire to rule since 'by the 1830s India was no longer a leading manufacturer for the empire and the world' (2016: 440).

This brings me to my second point of inflection since this argument is quite different to the one offered by those in the Caribbean. Eric Williams, in *Capitalism and Slavery*, made the point that the practice of slavery and its abo-

lition were economically sensible decisions. While it was profitable to indulge in human slavery, the empire indulged in it. When the practice became economically unviable, it was abolished. By extension, the practice of indenture was introduced and abolished for the very same reasons. Williams in his later *History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago*, reiterated that the colonies should have taken on free West Indian labourers than the indentured Indians. However, this is to believe that either it would have been profitable for the estate owners to bite the bullet and increase labour wages, or to believe that the British had a heart.

Ghosh refers to the need of 'balance of payments' requirements to keep the British economy afloat through a fictional meeting of Zadig Bey with Napoleon on the island of St Helena. Bey explains in the *River of Smoke*:

Since the middle years of the last century, the demand for Chinese tea has grown at such a pace in Britain and America that it is now the principal source of profit for the East India Company. The taxes on it account for fully one-tenth of Britain's revenues. If one adds to this such goods as silk, porcelain and lacquerware it becomes clear that the European demand for Chinese products is insatiable. In China, on the other hand, there is little interest in European exports—the Chinese are a people who believe that their own products, like their food and their customs, are superior to all others. In years past this presented a great problem for the British, for the flow of trade was so unequal that there was an immense outpouring of silver from Britain. This indeed was why they started to export Indian opium to China (2011: 173).

So, between 1812 (when Zadig Bey meets Napoleon) and 1839 (when the British forces are stationed outside Canton), we have Britain creating a market for opium in China to offset their balance of payments. The trader's needs are so great and the stakes so high that the British Chamber of Commerce in Canton has no qualms in inviting the British forces: 'They speak of Free Trade and yet their intention is to invite the armed intervention of none other than Her Majesty's government' (2011: 241). As Bahram listens, he turns the lopsided arguments into a matter of semantics and rhetoric: 'Really, there was no language like English for turning lies into legalism' (2011: 349). Mr Burnham argues that opium would ace the attempts by Chinese bureaucracy to stem its trade: 'It is not within the mandarins' power to withstand the elemental forces of Free Trade' (2011: 404). He is supported by the Parsi merchant Dinyar Ferdoojee who hails 'the spirit of Free Trade [that] is self-dependent and all-sufficient for her own wide-extended, extending and flourishing existence!' (2011: 406). Such free speech is hailed as the 'cleansing stream that will sweep

away all tyrants, great and small!' (2011: 406). However, in a moment of reflection, Bahram reflects on the use of Free Trade as an imperialistic strategy. He remembers the time when his father-in-law had a flourishing ship-building industry in Bombay:

For years he had been building ships for the English— for the East India Company and for the Royal Navy. Five frigates he built, and three ships of the line and any number of smaller vessels. He could build them better and cheaper in Bombay than they could in Portsmouth and Liverpool— and all the technical improvements too. ... They talk of Free Trade when it suits them— but they made sure that the rules were changed so that the Company and the Royal Navy could no longer order ships from us. Then they created new laws which made it much more expensive to use India-built ships in the overseas trade (2011: 452-53).

Bahram reflects the fact that Britain systematically moved and passed laws that would not allow native industries to compete with the British. When the British traders are given the order that they must turn-in all the opium to the Chinese authorities, they come up with a fallacious argument that though the ships are theirs, the goods are their investors' (2011: 465). However, they agree to surrender the opium because 'the seizure of property belonging to British subjects has provided the grounds for a declaration of war...[and] Extensive reparations were later extracted' (2011: 515). The British evoke democracy in their favour while calling the Chinese ruler a despot and tyrant: 'What years of attempted negotiations have failed to achieve will be quickly settled by a few gunboats and a small expeditionary force' (2011: 516). The extent of the opium trade can be surmised from the fact that 20,381 chests of opium are surrendered.

The third Book, *Flood of Fire*, begins on the point of reparations. Shireen Modi decides to go to Hong Kong in order to claim reparations from the Chinese for the loss of goods on her husband's ship, the *Anahita*. Mr Burnham decides to take another consignment of opium to China in spite of the face-off between the British traders and the Chinese authorities:

Not only would vast profits be created when the markets of China were opened to the world, but the expedition would also establish a new pattern of war-making, in which men of business would be involved in the entirety of the enterprise, from the drafting of strategy to dealing with Parliament, informing the public, and providing logistical support... To a degree unheard of before, said Mr Burnham, the expedition would rely on private enterprise for support,

and this itself would open up innumerable avenues for profit, in matters ranging from the chartering of vessels to the procurement of supplies for the troops... Under the protection of the Royal Navy's warships, British merchant vessels would be able to sell their goods offshore, near heavily populated areas where the demand for opium was sure to be huge, because of the recent disruptions in the supply of the drug (2015: 282).

Besides the profit motive and the greater stake in Home government, Mr Burnham predicts that the mission would ensure British expansionism: 'One of the expedition's chief aims was to force the Chinese to cede an island off the China coast: a new port, embodying all the ideals of Free Trade, would be created there... from this new bastion of freedom, the products of Man and the word of god would alike be directed, with redoubled energy, towards the largest, most populous nation on earth' (2015: 283). They all go on to announce Free Traders as 'Apostles of Liberty' (2015: 413). On the accession of Hong Kong, the traders also receive compensation for their lost goods. The Chinese are made to pay twenty-one million dollars. At the end of the novel, Serang Ali, Jodu, Neel, Raju, Kesri and Maddow (Kalua) make their escape on the *Ibis*.

This was a world dominated and connected by the seas. Today, we would say air power is more detrimental than sea power. However, before the two World Wars, the advent of airplanes and atomic power, the seas dominated the world balance of power. A combination of gun-powder and ship power led to the domination of seas by the British fleet. Britain, which did not allow opium to be imported into its own country, was ruthless in demanding that India manufacture opium at the cost of its own agriculture and China consume opium at the cost of its own population.

Niall Ferguson, in *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World*, writes that economic historians focus their attention on 'flows of commodities, capital and labour [instead of] flows of knowledge, culture and institutions [putting emphasis on] the importance of legal, financial and administrative institutions such as the rule of law, credible monetary regimes, transparent fiscal systems and incorrupt bureaucracies' (2003: xx). For these reasons, 'When imperial authority was challenged— in India in 1857, in Jamaica in 1831 or 1865, in South Africa in 1899— the British response was brutal. When famine struck (in Ireland in the 1840s, in India in the 1870s) their response was negligent, in some measure positively culpable' (Ferguson, 2003: xxi). Somehow the first set of 'principles' offset the last set of circumstances. Ferguson highlights colonialism's cultural exports than its sheer economic brutality. Ghosh shows

various little cross-streams of cultural exchanges through a referencing of the songs, music, dance, painting and botanical exchanges. However, these exchanges remain peripheral to the colonial enterprise. And the players are little more than minor characters who do not and cannot have stakes in the business and administrative world. To imagine that it was the major stake holder is to obscure the traders' interests that governed the British Parliament. Hence, Ferguson's emphasis on the cultural exports is fallacious:

Yet the fact remains that no organisation in history has done more to promote the free movements of goods, capital and labour than the British Empire in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And no organisation has done more to impose Western norms of law, order and governance around the world.... Without the British Empire, there would be no Calcutta; no Bombay; no Madras. Indians may rename them as many times as they like, but they remain cities founded and built by the British (2003: xxi).

Contrast this to the fact that by the 1830s and 1840s, 40% of Indian exports were opium though the Chinese had prohibited the import of opium after 1821. This was followed by the Opium Wars of 1841 and 1856. The theory of cultural exports also hides the need of military reinforcements: 'In 1898 there were 99,000 regular soldiers stationed in Britain, 75,000 in India and 41,000 elsewhere in the Empire. The navy required another 1,00,000 men, and the Indian native army was 148,000 strong' (Ferguson, 2003: 245). Hence, the colonies are repeatedly cited as progressive outposts of an empire that reaped huge benefits upon itself. They hide the economic and human atrocities in the name of cultural exchanges and hence, continue to perpetuate the myth of a happier life under the empire, at least for the British.

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### About the Author:

**Dr. Nivedita Misra** graduated with her doctoral degree from the Department of Literary, Cultural and Communication Studies, The University of the West Indies, Trinidad and Tobago. She served previously as Assistant Professor, Satyawati College (E), University of Delhi, Delhi, India, having completed her B.A.(Hons) English, M. A. (English) and M.Phil (English) from the University of Delhi, India. She has to her credit publications in various anthologies and peer-reviewed journals such as *Journeys, South Asian Review, Transnational Literatures and Postcolonial Text*. Email: [nivedita.misra1@gmail.com](mailto:nivedita.misra1@gmail.com)