

Sea of Poppies (2008)

Story *Sea of Poppies* is the first instalment in Amitav Ghosh's trilogy of stories about characters caught up in the opium trade between India and China in the early 19th century. The narrative begins in Ghazipur, in India, where Deeti learns that her mother-in-law drugged her with opium on her wedding night in order that her brother-in-law could rape her, in lieu of her crippled husband, who works in local opium factory. She gives birth to a daughter, her husband dies and Deeti prepares to commit *sati* (self-immolation on her husband's funeral pyre). But she is rescued by Kalua, an untouchable man, who takes her to safety down river, eventually to Calcutta, where this new couple became indentured workers on the *Ibis*, a ship bound for Mauritius. Now we meet a second central character, Zachary Reid, an American sailor born of mixed race parents. Through the loss of crew on the journey from Baltimore to Calcutta, Reid becomes second in command. The third key character is Neel Rattan Halder, a wealthy ex-*raja* whose family once owned vast estates but who has now fallen into debt from bad investments in the opium trade. Things go from bad to worse when Halder tries to clear his debt through the British owner of the ship, who cheats him and has him put on trial for forgery. Halder is convicted and sentenced to penal transportation to Mauritius, on the same ship that Deeti, Kalua and Reid are on. The final passenger on the *Ibis* is Paulette, a French orphan who lives with the family of the corrupt British ship-owner. She meets and falls in love with Reid and later boards the ship disguised as a man. After the ship sets sail, numerous crises unfold, including attempted rape, flogging, hidden secrets and revealed identities. In one incident, Kalua kills a man who attempted the rape, after which he and Halder escape on a long boat to Singapore. The others (Deeti, Reid and Paulette) continue toward Mauritius.

Characters

Deeti Deeti is the most important of the central characters in this first volume. She is a simple, pious woman, whose suffering is extreme and yet who retains an optimistic view of life. Despite her meek external behaviours, she is resourceful, clever and strong.

Zachary Reid Zachary Reid is an American sailor, with mixed racial parentage, who rises to become second in command of the ship. He is an intelligent person, who speaks several languages, assumes many identities and thus symbolises the polyglot, multi-ethnic smorgasbord of the opium trade.

Kalua Kalua, like Deeti, has only one name because of his low status as an Untouchable. However, he is the hero of this novel, rescuing the poor Deeti from the funeral pyre and shepherding her to safety. They marry but later are separated when he jumps ship and goes to Singapore.

Neel Rattan Halder Neel Rattan Halder is a riches-to-rags character. A wealthy man, a former *raja*, whose family owned large amounts of land, he makes bad investments in the opium trade (declining at that time) and ends up sent to penal servitude to Mauritius. He is portrayed as weak, more sinned against than sinning.

Paulette Lambert Paulette Lambert is a French orphan who has turned 'native' after living in India for a long time. Like Reid, she is neither fish nor fowl, and is something of a rebel. She falls in love with the American Reid and follows him on the ship to Mauritius.

Mr Burnham Mr Burnham is the corrupt British owner of the ship, who cheats Halder and has him brought to trial over false accusations of forgery. He is morally repugnant, in both his business practices and his personal life. He lies and hides from his lies, unable to face the consequences of his action, such as his sexual advances to the young Paulette.

Themes

Identity One of the interesting themes in this richly textured novel is the fluidity of identity. This fluidity is in keeping with the author's view of history, in which people, goods, ideas and languages cross borders and mingle. All the main characters have their identities altered by the opium trade and its consequences. After her symbolic rebirth (escaping the funeral pyre), Deeti takes up with a new man, an Untouchable, marries him and uses a new name for herself. Kalua (her new husband) also takes on a new identity as Maddow Colver. Reid is the product of two races and assumes the position of second in command on the ship, later dressing like an urbane gentleman in Calcutta. Paulette is French but becomes Indian. Neel Rattan Halder is a wealthy, respected man who ends up a disgraced criminal.

Globalisation In this novel, Ghosh tells a story of globalised trade in the early 19th century, when the waters around India and China became a 'sea of poppies.' The poppies grown in India were processed into opium and transported to China for sale, with the British-controlled factories and ships as the key links. In the novel, Americans, Chinese, Malays, Indians, French, British, Arabs and Africans jostle for success and happiness in this sea-borne trade.

Colonialism Ghosh never lets us lose sight of the true losers in this beguiling portrait of people and history. They are the rural Indian poor, whose staple diet of rice and wheat was being replaced by the cash crop of opium. In the author's words, '[t]he town was thronged with hundreds of other impoverished transients, many of whom were willing to sweat themselves half to death for a few handfuls of rice. Many of these people had been driven from their villages by the flood of flowers that had washed over the countryside: lands that had once provided sustenance were now swamped by the rising tide of poppies; food was so hard to come by that people were glad to lick the leaves in which offerings were made at temples.'