



# அரண்

பன்னாட்டுத் தமிழாய்வு மின்னிதழ்

(Peer Reviewed Journal Multidisciplinary)

ISSN: 2582-399X



காலாண்டு இதழ்  
(ஐனவரி, ஏப்ரல், ஜூலை, அக்டோபர்)  
ஆகிய மாதங்களில் வெளிவரும்

# அரண்

# Aran

பன்னாட்டுத் தமிழாய்வு மின்னிதழ்

International e Journal of Tamil Research

## EDITORIAL BOARD

Founder / Editor in Chief

**Dr PRIYAKRISHNAN**

Publisher

**MR P. JAYAKRISHNAN**

Editorial Board Members

**Dr V SELVAKUMAR**

Professor And Head of The Department of Maritime History and Marine Archaeology Tamil University, Thanjavur, TamilNadu, India  
selvakumar.v@tamiluniversity.ac.in

**Dr. S. KAVITHA**

School of Indian Languages and Comparative Literature, Tamil University, Thanjavur. TamilNadu, India

**Dr.K.DAYANIDHI**

Assistant Professor & Head i/c , Department of Vaishnavism , University of Madras, TamilNadu, India. dayanidhi@unom.ac.in

**Dr O.MUTHIAH**

Professor of Tamil, The Gandhigram Rural Institute (Deemed to be University) Gandhigram - 624 302 Dindigul District, TAMIL NADU

**DR UMADEVI**

Professor In Tamil, Department of Modern Indian Languages And Literery Studies University of Delhi, Delhi . dumadevi@mil.du.ac.in

**DR JAGADEESAN.T.**

Assistant Professor of Tamil, Department of Indian Languages, Faculty of Arts, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi- 221005, Uttar Pradesh, India.

**DR SENTHIL PRAKASH.S**

Teacher – in- charge/Assistant professor (SG), Department of Tamil, Institute of Languages, Literature & culture, Visva – Bharathi University, Santiniketan, West Bengal, India -731235

# அரண்

பன்னாட்டுத் தமிழாய்வு மின்னிதழ்

# Aran

International e Journal of Tamil Research

## EDITORIAL BOARD

### **DR R TAMILSELVAN**

Assistant professor, Aligarh Muslim University, Uttar Pradesh,India-202002

### **Dr SWARNAVEL ESWARAN**

Associate Professor Departments of English, and Media and Information  
Michigan State University. USA. eswaran@msu.edu

### **Dr SILLALEE A/L S.KANDASAMY**

Assistant Professor University Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR), Sungai Long,  
Cheras, Selangor, Malaysia. sillalee@utar.edu.my

### **Dr (Ms.) NILANKA LIYANAGE**

Senior Lecturer in Dance ,Department of Dance,Drame&Theatre Arts,  
Swamy Vipulananda Institute of Aesthetic Stidies,Eastern University Srilanka

### **Mrs THULSIVANTHANA UDAYASHANKAR**

Senior lecturer Gr II in English, Swamy Vipulananda Institute of  
Aesthetic Stidies ,Eastern University, Srilanka

### **Dr N.MUTHUMANI**

Principal, PPG College of Arts And Science,Coimbatore - 641035.

### **Dr KANDASAMY**

Asst Professor Department of History, Rajus college  
Rajapaalayam Madurai Tamil nadu [herostone78@rrc.edu.in](mailto:herostone78@rrc.edu.in)

### **Dr S. KARUMPAAYIRAM**

Junior Research officer,Central Institute of Classical Tamil,Chennai-600100

### **Dr B. DHANANJAYAN**

Associate Professor, Sir Theagaraya College, Old Washermenpet,  
Chennai - 600 021.

# அரண்

# Aran

பன்னாட்டுத் தமிழாய்வு மின்னிதழ்

International e Journal of Tamil Research

## EDITORIAL BOARD

**Dr S.KANNADASAN**

Assistant Professor, Tamil Department, The Madura College, Madurai.  
Kannadasan@maduracollege.edu.in

**Dr P.SEKAR**

Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Govt. Institute of Advanced Study  
in Education, Saidapet, Chennai-600015. sekar@iasetamilnadu.ac.in

**DR G.UMAMAHESWARI**

Asst professor and Head , Department of Tamil , P. K. R Arts college  
for women , Gobichettipalayam , Erode (Dt) , [umag@pkrarts.org](mailto:umag@pkrarts.org)

**Dr CHANDRAKALA**

Asst Professor and Head, Department of Tamil , PPG college of  
Arts and Science, Coimbatore - 641035.

**நிறுவனர்/பதிப்பாளர்/நிர்வாக ஆசிரியர்**

**இதழாக்கம்**

**திரு ப. ஜெயகிருஷ்ணன்**

**முதன்மை ஆசிரியர்**

**முனைவர் பிரியாகிருஷ்ணன்**

**+917299587879**

**[www.aranejournal.com](http://www.aranejournal.com)**

**[aranjournal@gmail.com](mailto:aranjournal@gmail.com)**

அரண் பன்னாட்டுத் தமிழாய்வு மின்னிதழில் வெளிவரும் ஆய்வுக்கட்டுரைகள் அனைத்தும்  
(Peer Review)பீர் ரிவியூ செய்யப்பட்டு பதிவு செய்யப்படுகிறது என்பதைத்  
தெரிவித்துக் கொள்கிறோம்.



# ആന്തരികം

## Routes and Roots of Subaltern in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

W.M.Seenivas Leandar Bias

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Bharath College of Science and Management (Autonomous)

(Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli)

Thanjavur - 613005.

### Abstract:

In *Sea of Poppies* (2008), Amitav Ghosh a variety of hybrid characters whose complicated backgrounds create tension with the established definitions for race, nationality, and identity. These hybrid characters include a light complexioned African American man who pretends to be white; an Indian widow rescued from sati, a female French citizen dressed as an Indian employee; a British drug dealer; and a Chinese/Indian convict. With these complex characters, Ghosh strives to provide a glimpse into the connections between the experiences of slavery and drug trafficking, the expansion of imperialism and migration in the world. Ghosh's portrayal of this story takes place in 1838 and looks back at the development of opium production and the early days of indentured labor for immigrants from India to the Caribbean. Amitav Ghosh demonstrates the connections between the Atlantic and Indian Oceans in his novel *Sea of Poppies* through how he places an African American man on an ex-slave ship in the Indian Ocean. Additionally, he has implemented Indian indentured labourers into this journey on the ex-slave ship and uses opium as a means to tie them together into both the Atlantic and Indian Ocean. By doing so, Ghosh highlights how historical, economic and technological forms of domination created through the Atlantic slave trade create massive ripple effects into the Indian Ocean world through the journeys of the Ibis ship and its crew. Therefore, Ghosh shows that all the people and history travelling along the Ibis journeys intersect historically, economically, and technologically across continents that demonstrate how imperial systems are global in scope.

**Keywords:** Subaltern, Trade, Violence, Slavery Power, Histories and Identities.

### Introduction

In his analysis, Ghosh points to the intertwined histories of lascars, migrant labour and the opium trade as having been consigned to the periphery of colonial archives. In this way, *Sea of Poppies* acts as a corrective to the relative invisibility of the Indian Ocean in terms of being a focal point of violence, diverse historical exchanges, and the movement of goods - a location structurally similar to the Atlantic world created by the transatlantic slave trade but entirely different in its identity as a regional space. In terms of literary studies, the archive related to the Black Atlantic has taken centre stage in studies of the Atlantic; this has created a dominant narrative around the Atlantic Ocean, the Middle Passage and trauma and violence associated with the transatlantic slave trade, and subordinated European sailors' cultural influence.

In the 19th century, opium was a significant revenue source for the British Empire in India, and was one of the most profitable exports from India. Through the British merchants' intense scrutiny of the opium factory in *Sea of Poppies*, it is evident that it was a commodity of great economic and political importance to the British Empire during the 19th century. Ghosh intentionally shifts the reader's focus from the more traditionally depicted opium dens in most late 19th-century English literature to focus the reader's attention on the opium factory and the opium ship, which is an interesting new look at the evolution of the opium economy in a much more concentrated manner.

Through this narrative movement, Amitav Ghosh is able to write "counter" or "back" against Eurocentric portrayals of opium in which the focus is primarily on Asian suffering from addiction and moral decay to the exclusion of the Western imperialists who created those addictions and moral decay. The alternate view comes from understanding that the British merchants are just as addicted to opium--and by extension their own financial and economic greed--and that the British merchants created the addiction in Deeti's husband. "As for Deeti, the more she ministered the drug, the more she came to respect its potency: how frail a creature was a human being, to be tamed by such tiny doses of this substance! She saw now why the factory in Ghazipur was so diligently patrolled by the sahibs and their sepoys" (SOP 36).

Raja Neel of Raskhali, greatly benefitting from his opium trade, meets his best friend (an abuser of opium) during the time that this individual is struggling with the same substance that buoyed Neel's empire. This friendship, between two opposites, is facilitated via incarceration. Once more, Ghosh juxtaposes Objective Freedom and Subjective Enslavement to show the dialectical interplay of Modernity. Neel's self-identity and his social being are violently torn apart during his imprisonment. Unlike the character Jim in Conrad's novel, Neel is given the opportunity to reconstruct himself via a greater ability to feel for one another. The coerced prisoner group becomes his new community in which he embraces, as opposed to embracing each other under the old ranks/status/privileges.

Like Jim in J.M. Coetzee's *Lord Jim*, Zachary Reid, our multicultural second mate, is not only the source of a great deal of confusion as far as which culture he is considered to belong; but is also extremely troubled by the racial boundary between him and his fellow lascars on board the ship and by the racial boundary between him and the British officers. The uncertainty of being in a state of liminality produces a psychological experience that exposes the breakdown of the colonial hierarchy and a realization that there is no valid basis for establishing rigid standards of racial classification. By placing Zachary at the center of this community created by Ghosh's writing, he allows readers to see the damage that empire does and continues to do to individuals that exist within the margins of empire.

Amitav Ghosh uses the metaphor of the sea itself as a social laboratory to build a community of people who were brought together on board a ship during the process of developing the drug trade. At the same time, Ghosh is able to depict the new voices that emerge and how they recreate themselves.

This process allows Ghosh to reconstruct the experience of subalternity, not from the fixed perspective of imperialism but from the perspective of a diasporic population as they experience the *kala pani*, or 'dark waters', of the Indian Ocean during their travels.

At the time of the First Opium War, which began in 1838, the novel addresses two major themes of the nineteenth century: Eastern India's cultivation of opium as a cash crop for the Chinese market and the transportation of Indian indentured servitude to British-owned sugar plantations in Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad and elsewhere around the world. Although the 'Opium Economy' impacts the events that occur on the Land, the center of the story is indenture, as Indenture constructs the way in which dispossessed and deprived peoples gathered together and travelled aboard the *Ibis*. The indentured servants' experience of servitude formed an Indian diaspora that transcended the boundaries of time and distance through deep and lasting historical links.

The *Sea of Poppies* highlights how the Imperial Economy was realized through human lives and revealed the extent to which those lives were part of the British Raj experience. Nevertheless, Ghosh uses the lives of people who were marginalized by gender, class, race and imperial power, in order to give an alternative reading to Imperial History from below, thus restoring emotion, agency and nuance to those that have been rendered voiceless in institutional archives.

The connection between opium, Empire, indentured servants, and the land/sea connection is a recurring theme throughout the novel, and one of the best extractions of these connections is illustrated through the life of Deeti. Her husband Hukam Singh is a high-caste Rajput who served as a sepoy in the British military and, after he returned to India, he worked in the opium factory. The result of Hukam Singh's service to the British Empire and the money the British received from opium is painted in a brutal way on Hukam Singh's body with scars from his injuries and the tattoos he received after he left the army. After some time, Deeti learns that Hukam Singh's addiction to opium is not as serious a problem as Hukam Singh's physical ailments.

After the death of Singh, Deeti is saved from becoming a *sati* (a widow) and meeting a fiery end on her husband's funeral pyre by Kalua, a lowly cart driver of the lower caste. By inverting the colonial narrative of 'saviors' from the British to a 'brown man', Ghosh presents a post-colonial re-configuration of the colonial rescue narrative through the actions of Kalua. Deeti's later journey to the ship *Ibis* as a laborer creates the context for her involvement in the larger imperial migration machinery and serves as an example of the many layers of migrant experiences associated with British colonialism. Bihar's historical significance as a center for opium production and a major source of migrant labor highlights the imperial consequences of debt, dispossession, and ultimately offers the illusion of freedom when these men are sent to work on plantations in other British colonies where slave labor could no longer be relied on after the abolition of slavery.

How had it happened that when choosing the men and women who were to be torn from this subjugated plain, the hand of destiny had strayed so far inland, away from the busy coastlines, to alight on the people who were, of all, the most stubbornly rooted in the silt of the Ganga, in a soil that had to be sown with suffering to yield its crop of story and song? It was as if fate had thrust its fist through the living flesh of the land in order to tear away a piece of its stricken heart (SOP 340).

In this passage, we see the author reflecting on a terrible event occurring to people being taken from their homes against their will. The phrase “subjugated plain”, indicates that the land was conquered or oppressed by the conquering people; “fate” is personified as actively selecting individuals from this land. The words “so far inland, away from the busy coastlines,” suggest that the people lived far away from those areas that were busy with commerce and trade, therefore, their position was even more remote, distant, and arbitrary.

Additionally, Ghosh presents lascars as an essential part of the imperial maritime network. Ghosh establishes from the beginning that the expertise of lascars was vital to the survival and operation of the ship. During the initial leg of their journey from Baltimore to Calcutta on the Ibis, a number of European crew members died, leaving Serang Ali, head of the lascars (Indian sailors), to help navigate the ship to its destination. Through these and other similar events, the novel *Sea of Poppies* illustrates the labor and knowledge of non-European sailors, which are often overlooked, as integral to imperial trade and mobility. *Sea of Poppies* traces the “routes” (trade routes) of people, commerce and capital, allowing the author to interrogate the “roots” (the source of Western power and how it is built) for European imperial expansion and the development of diasporic communities; thus, emphasizing the relationship between immigration, empire and maritime power.

Amitav Ghosh has repeatedly stated in his interviews that he was inspired to write *Sea of Poppies* by the silence around Britain’s role in the drug trade during the nineteenth century. In Ghosh’s description of opium as “one of the most precious jewels in the crown of Queen Victoria,” the author shows that narcotics were an integral part of the British Empire’s wealth and exposes the hypocrisy and revisionist history that has shaped the prevailing narratives surrounding the empire. The Ibis’ wide-ranging cast of characters a former American slave ship converted to carry indentured laborers to Mauritius gives Amitav Ghosh plenty of room to explore the historical connections between different countries around the globe.

Also, using several different personal accounts and mixing genres such as history, marine literature and travel essays creates the narrative of *Sea of Poppies* as an account about how people have travelled, migrated, and interacted across borders through time and cultures. Although the title of the novel and the three-part structure (“Land”, “River” and “Sea”) indicate a movement away from land toward water, in fact much of the book is set on the decks of the Ibis with respect to where the reader

will find much of the activity within the book. The opening scene appears to describe an event happening on land, but is filled with all kinds of seawater, ships, sailors and maritime activities.

All of the main characters, either directly or indirectly, are influenced by the sea and its effect on their lives. Therefore, the narrative of *Sea of Poppies* is one that describes the environment where the key character(s) of this work of fiction exist, with the sea assuming the primary role within the story of *Sea of Poppies*, while being interdependent with the connections to the land. Amitav Ghosh's novel depicts the way in which the intermingling of history, politics and bodies of water occurs, particularly in relation to the Indian Ocean world. It highlights the interconnectedness of the British Empire and other imperial powers with global networks of exchange and trade. Recent research into the Indian Ocean and the opium trade has also examined how peoples, goods, cultures, and ideas were transported from and through this vast area, and how this area has been constructed by a series of "palimpsest-like" layers of history. It is clear that multiple histories co-exist and continue to influence one another.

While the transformation of the slave ship to the coolie ship represents an evolution of the history of indentured labor, the legacies of slavery are both symbolically and literally present in the hold of the vessel. The indentures have been inscribed over the indentured labor of slaves, and the depressions left on the wood of the ship by the bodies of enslaved people were used to transport other "disposable bodies" to their colonial homes. The shift in cargo and the continual cycling of colonial subjects, now as "disposable bodies," underscores the continuity of imperial systems and their methods of reconfiguring existing forms of exploitation, in a manner similar to that which occurred after the legal end of slavery.

Benjamin Burnham, the British owner of the Ibis Ship, clearly describes this rationale to Zachary when he states that "a hold built to transport slaves can likewise carry coolies/convicts." Burnham has already profited from transporting convicts throughout the British Empire via its vast network of island prisons, serving as a prime example of how the transition from slavery to coerced labor has been seamless. Not only did the migrant laborer pool provide the plantation infrastructure with manual laborers, but they also had a significant ideological role for Britain. By identifying the indentured worker as "free labor," the empire was able to proclaim the purported ethical superiority of abolitionism while continuing to operate under the mechanisms of coercion and displacement.

## Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh's re-creation of this period of historical reconstruction illustrates the social injustices embedded within the rhetoric of freedom and how the legacies of slavery continued through the structures of indenture created under British imperial authority. In discussing his inspiration for writing novels, Ghosh expressed that "Both history and anthropology are incapable of generating the emotions, the affections, and the perceptions of individuals." Through the use of narrative and character

in *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh represents these emotional aspects of human experience during this significant time of British imperial expansion and colonization that official documents cannot.

Deeti's union serves as a means to demonstrate how the oppressive and harsh practices within rural cultures are adhered to as a result of a family-based hierarchical structure. As such, the system forced Deeti into the arms of a man who had been addicted to opium and unable to complete the marriage ceremony; the only means available for the family to generate a descendant was for Deeti's family to use drugs on Deeti to forcefully manipulate Deeti into having sexual relations with a man. Deeti's experiences reflect how caste, property, and family are upheld through violence and coercion; these systems of oppression contribute to Deeti's eventual journey across the ocean.

The expanse of individuals making a journey on the Ibis an American slaving ship converted into a vessel for transporting indentured labourers from India to Mauritius creates an opportunity for Ghosh to use the novel as a way to discuss the interconnectedness of various cultures throughout history. The author uses all of the characters' own histories and experiences with different forms of creative expression historical novels, adventure stories, nautical fiction—as a means to illustrate movement or 'migration' between land and sea across physical barriers as well as borders and between cultures.

The title of the book gives the impression that there will be a straightforward outline of the journey from land to sea but the book primarily takes place on the ship and we see elements of water, sailors, and shipping depicted in the sections that are supposedly based on land. Every character in the novel has been influenced in some way by their relationship with the ocean and thus we have a maritime-based narrative within which the sea is intertwined with the land. This illustrates how the forces of violence and coercion alongside the ability to move people and goods at sea connect the social structure of land to the maritime structure of the sea, thus creating a continuum throughout personal histories and between the structure of an empire, labour, and capital throughout the globe.

## References

1. Arora, Anupama. "“The sea is history”": Opium, colonialism, and migration in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*." *ariel: a review of international english literature* 42.3-4 (2011).
2. Dhar, Nandini. "Shadows of slavery, discourses of choice, and Indian indentureship in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*." *Ariel: a review of international English literature* 48.1 (2017): 1-35.
3. Ghosh, Amitav. 2008. *Sea of Poppies*. New Delhi: Penguin Books
4. Rai, Rajesh, and Andrea Marion Pinkney. "The girmitiyas' journey in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*." *History, Narrative, and Testimony in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction* (2012): 65-78.
5. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the subaltern speak?." *Imperialism*. Routledge, 2023. 171-219.

6. Stasi, Paul. "Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies and the Question of Postcolonial Modernism." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*. Vol. 48. No. 3. Duke University Press, 2015.
7. Trocki, Carl A. *Opium, Empire, and the Global Political Economy: A Study of the Asian Opium Trade, 1750–1950*. London: Routledge, 1999. Print.





# அரண்

பன்னாட்டுத் தமிழாய்வு மின்னிதழ்

## அறிவிப்பு / Announcement

அன்பான தமிழ்ச் சொந்தங்களே

வணக்கம்.

வரும் 2026, ஏப்ரல் மாதம் வெளிவரும் அரண் பன்னாட்டுத் தமிழாய்வு மின்னிதழ்க்கான ஆய்வுக் கட்டுரைகள் ஆய்வாளர்களிடமிருந்து வரவேற்கப்படுகின்றன.

கட்டுரை வந்து சேர வேண்டிய கடைசி நாள் - ஏப்ரல் 10. அதற்கு பின் வரும் கட்டுரைகள் ஏப்ரல் இதழில் இடம்பெறாது என்பதை தெரிவித்துக் கொள்கிறோம்.

[www.aranejournal.com](http://www.aranejournal.com)