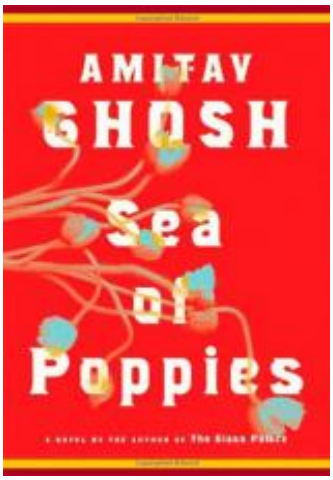
Sea of Poppies

by Amitav Ghosh



About the Book

Turning his eye to the nineteenth-century opium trade, the acclaimed author Amitav Ghosh has crafted a novel that is by turns witty and provocative, while delivering a magnificent historical adventure. An intricate saga, **Sea of Poppies** brings together a motley array of sailors and stowaways, coolies and convicts, who have embarked on a tumultuous voyage across the Indian Ocean in the midst of the Opium Wars between Britain and China. This panorama of characters, including a mulatto freedman from America, a bankrupt raja, a beautiful, free-spirited French orphan, a widowed tribeswoman, and other disparate members of society, brings to life a period of colonial upheaval that caused seismic cultural shifts throughout the globe. The events transpiring aboard the *Ibis* (a former slave ship) provide a rich tapestry of a time when the world stood poised to witness some of the most profound destruction --- and most sweeping liberation --- in the history of humanity. From the lush poppy fields of the Ganges to the crowded backstreets of Canton, across a rolling high sea that beckons throughout the narrative, this is a portrait of fateful events you will not soon forget.

Discussion Guide

1. Discuss how the relationships between the various classes of people aboard the *Ibis* change throughout the novel. To what extent does the caste system affect these relationships? Which characters undergo the most significant changes?

2. How are women?s roles different from men?s in **Sea of Poppies**? What common ground do Deeti, Paulette, and Munia share?

3. What does the *Ibis* represent to Zachary at various points in the novel? How does his perception of the ship change as his perception of himself changes?

4. Many of the lives Ghosh depicts are shaped by social and political forces beyond their control. What are some of these forces? Describe some of the individual acts of bravery, defiance, or deception that enable his characters to break free

from what they see as their fate.

5. How do those involved in the opium trade, from British factory owners to frontline harvesters, justify their work in **Sea of Poppies**? How does their industry compare to modern-day drug trafficking versus the pharmaceutical industry?

6. When Mr. Burnham gives religious instruction to Paulette, what does he reveal about his mindset in general? How does he balance his shame with his attitudes toward suffering, including his notion that slavery somehow yields freedom?

7. Discuss the power of love as it motivates the characters. Does obsession strengthen or weaken Baboo Nob Kissin? What kind of love is illustrated when Deeti gives up her child? What kinds of love does Neel experience in the presence of his loyal wife and his fickle mistress?

8. What gives Neel the ability to endure Alipore Jail and his subsequent voyage? Does he feel genuine compassion for his cell mate, or is he simply trying to make conditions more livable for himself? Ultimately, who is to blame for Neel?s conviction?

9. How did Paulette?s free-spirited upbringing serve her later in life? What advantages and disadvantages did she have?

10. What does Zachary teach Jodu about loyalty and survival? How is trust formed among the suspicious *Ibis* crew?

11. To what degree is Mr. Crowle powerless? What does the future hold for those who defied him?

12. Which historical aspects of the Opium Wars surprised you the most? What did you discover about colonial India by reading **Sea of Poppies**?

13. Sea of Poppies makes rich use of Asian-influenced English. Some of the words, such as *bandanna*, *loot*, and *dinghy*, are still used frequently, but many others, like *bankshall*, *wanderoo*, and *chawbuck*, are now rare, although they were once common and are included in The Oxford English Dictionary. Discuss the *Ibis* Chrestomathy, which appears at the end of the book. What do Neel?s observations suggest about language and culture? Why do you think some words disappear from usage, while others endure? Can a culture?s vitality be measured by how eagerly its language absorbs outside influences?

14. In an interview with TheBookseller.com, Ghosh stated that ?oil is the opium of today.? Do you agree or disagree?

15. How does **Sea of Poppies** reflect themes you have observed in Amitav Ghosh?s previous works? What new issues does he explore in this novel?

Author Bio

Amitav Ghosh is the author of the bestselling *Ibis Trilogy*, composed of SEA OF POPPIES (shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize), RIVER OF SMOKE and FLOOD OF FIRE. His other novels include THE CIRCLE OF REASON, which won the Prix Médicis étranger, and THE GLASS PALACE. He is the author of many works of nonfiction, including THE GREAT DERANGEMENT, THE NUTMEG'S CURSE and SMOKE AND ASHES. He has received two lifetime achievement awards and five honorary doctorates. In 2018, Ghosh became the first English-language writer to

win the Jnanpith Award, India?s highest literary honor. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.

Critical Praise

"The seaboard sections rival those in Melville and Conrad, but the scenes ashore are equally gripping and one leaves this long page-turner wishing it could continue. One waits eagerly for its sequels. **Sea of Poppies** is a tremendous novel . . . [The] ?Ibis? trilogy will surely come to be regarded as one of the masterpieces of twenty-first-century fiction."

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