

A HISTORICAL CRITIQUE OF UNETHICAL SUPPLY CHAINS: TRADE, EMPIRE, AND POLITICAL POWER IN THE IBIS TRILOGY

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Abstract :

Ethical Supply chains find its origin in historical systems of trade that was profoundly unethical. Ibis Trilogy by Amitav Ghosh reconstructs one such system that of the nineteenth-century opium economy, which reveals how political power normalised exploitation, coercion and human disposability within global trade networks. It directly provides a link of how global trade when interfered by politics leads to ethical failure which Ghosh does through his historical fiction Ibis Trilogy. This paper broadens historical contextualization by incorporating primary historical events and figures like the opium war and the British East India Company's monopolistic practices thus revealing how unethical supply chains were tools of empire building.

Keywords: Ethical Supply Chains, Colonial Trade Systems, Opium Economy, Political Economy of Empire, Ethical Failure in Global Trade

Introduction :

A comparison between the price of an item on Amazon and its price in a physical retail store prompts us to question why Amazon can sell the same product at a significantly lower cost. The secret lies in the supply chain length and the hidden politics behind each step of the supply chain. This is true of everything we consume and its evolution is influenced by the trade policies, economy, population, political interference, the intermediary and the ideology of the concerned state. Moreover, the problem of ethical supply chains is something that has been one of the most debatable topics in contemporary times as it was when India was a colony of the East India Company as has been very aptly described by Amitav Ghosh in his historical fiction Ibis Trilogy.

The concept of the supply chain is often treated as a product of late capitalism and industrial modernity. Discussions of ethical and unethical supply chains usually focus on contemporary globalisation—sweatshops, fast fashion, extractive mining, or pharmaceutical monopolies—thereby obscuring the historical origins of such systems. This paper argues that unethical supply chains are not anomalies of the modern world but foundational to the rise of global capitalism itself.



The nineteenth century opium trade between British India and Qing China as is described in Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy, particularly in the Sea of Poppies and River of Smoke, offers a literary reconstruction of this trade as a complex, transnational network of production, circulation, and consumption sustained by imperial power. Ghosh reveals it as a vertically integrated supply chain in which coercion, addiction, and human disposability are systematically normalised.

By interpreting the novels through the lens of supply-chain ethics, this paper asserts that the Ibis Trilogy functions as a historical critique of unethical supply chains by exposing how political power, economic framework, and geographical distance together enable exploitation. Also, the paper demonstrates how empire transformed violence into logistics and suffering into profit.

Supply Chains and Ethical Critique :

Supply-chain scholarship highlights that global production networks depend on fragmentation, outsourcing, and distance, enabling corporations to transfer risk and accountability. Researchers mention ideas like asymmetry of visibility, where consumers and traders are aware of prices and profits but not the labour conditions or social damages involved. Ethical supply-chain discussions often depict abuse as a regulatory failure instead of a fundamental aspect of profit-oriented systems. Much of this research seldom addresses pre-industrial or colonial trade networks. This oversight hinders our comprehension of how unethical supply chains have historically developed and become normalized.

After Asymmetry of Visibility, the most important concepts in the current discourse on ethical supply chains is Risk Externalization. This refers to the process whereby corporations and states externalize economic, environmental, and bodily risks to those who are least able to resist them—peasants, workers, migrants, and colonized peoples—and retain profits at the other end of the chain. In such chains, suffering is not incidental but structural. The ethical problem is not with the abuse but with the structure of the supply chain itself.

When viewed in this light, Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy can be seen as a literary engagement with the ethics of supply chain management. By tracing the journey of the opium trade from farm to factory, from ship to port, and from market to battlefield, Ghosh lays bare the ethics of an early global supply chain. This shows that the failure of ethics is not merely a problem of excess or crisis but is inherent in the very workings of trade itself.

Historical Studies of the Opium Trade and Literary Criticism on the Ibis Trilogy :

The extensive literature on imperialism by historians on the opium monopoly carried on by the British East India Company, coercion of peasants in India, smuggling activities carried on the Chinese coast, and wars leading to the Opium Wars reveals a focus on economics, government policies, and political confrontations but on a segmental basis as agriculture, transport, warfare, and the like, and not as a seamless, integrated process.

A large body of historical research has focused on the agrarian aspect of the opium economy, especially the Company's poppy cultivation monopoly in Bengal and Bihar.



Research such as that carried out by J.F. Richards examines in great detail the coercive mechanisms by which Indian peasants were forced to grow poppy under advance systems, fixed prices, and oppressive enforcement. These researches persuasively illustrate how colonial financial necessities transformed rural society and increased peasant exposure. However, these researches typically close their investigation at the site of production, without following the coerced agricultural product into the larger commercial and political systems.

A second tradition of historiography has centred on trade and smuggling, analysing the ways in which the activities of private traders, receiving ships, and coastal middlemen circumvented Qing controls. Studies by historians such as Carl Trocki have placed opium in the broader history of global capitalism, analysing the ways in which the drug facilitated British commercial expansion in Asia. While such studies are incredibly useful in demonstrating the ways in which opium was a commodity that generated profit, they can sometimes isolate the processes of circulation and exchange from the violence inherent in production and enforcement.

The most impactful analyses of The Ibis Trilogy to-date have centred on its diasporic dimensions, its elements of hybridity and its aspects of language use as well as its subaltern histories. While recognizing Ghosh's importance on colonial commerce generally, no researcher to-date appears to use a detailed analytical approach to The Ibis Trilogy via its aspects of supply chain theory. The aim of this paper appears to close that gap.

Theoretical Framework of Supply Chains as Systems of Power :

This paper approaches supply chain as a system that connects geographically scattered sites of production, processing, transport, exchange, and consumption under a single logic of profit. A system that relies on distance, abstraction, and state power. Distance creates moral detachment, abstraction transforms human suffering into data and commodities, and state power which enforces circulation when market fails. Crucially, such systems rely on distance which creates moral detachment, abstraction, which transforms human suffering into data commodities, and state power, which enforces circulation when markets fail.

An unethical chain is thus not defined by its illegal nature, but rather by its inclination to externalise its negative effects on Unempowered Groups. This model thus allows us to read Ghosh's work not just as history but also as social commentary on the development of world trade systems.

Sea of Poppies situates the origins of the opium supply chain in the fields of colonial India. The novel depicts how poppy cultivation in Bihar was not a voluntary economic activity but a coerced agrarian system which was enforced through debt, contracts, and colonial authority. Peasants were compelled to replace subsistence crops with poppy, making them vulnerable to hunger and famine.

Through the character of Deeti, Ghosh portrays the process by which agricultural labour becomes a first site of violence. Thus, there is an embodied description of the poppy plant, which implies that the land is being colonised by an instrument of extraction. In



addition, the Ghazipur opium factory-heightens this violence by transforming the raw material of opium into a commodity, thus negating labour and pain.

Sea of Poppies locates the source of the opium supply chain in the fields of colonial India. The novel portrays poppy cultivation in Bihar not as a free economic enterprise but as an imposed agrarian regime through indebtedness, contracts, and colonial fiat. Peasants are forced to substitute poppies for subsistence crops, thereby making them susceptible to hunger and famine.

He reveals how agricultural labour becomes the first site of violence in the supply chain through the character of Deeti and her family. The poppy plant in itself described in bodily and invasive imagery, suggesting that the land becomes an instrument of extraction. The Ghazipur opium factory further intensifies this violence by converting raw opium into a standardized commodity, thereby erasing the hidden labour and suffering.

The ship Ibis is used as a central logistical hub in all three parts of this trilogy. From its previous role as a slave ship, it is now used to transport indentured labourers, criminals, and sailors across the Indian Ocean. This serves to illustrate how various forms of exploitation are interrelated.

In terms of supply chain management, "the vessel shatters the boundary between human and non-human cargo. The people are transported as surplus labour just as the opium is transported as surplus commodity." The ocean, while often romanticised in literary works, is portrayed as a space where "identities are stripped as lives are treated as interchangeable."

A shift occurs in the novel "River of Smoke," with the conversation transforming to exchange or the finance field, away from the themes of production or transportation present in the prequel. Located mostly in Canton, the novel largely revolves around the lives of merchants who consider opium an ordinary good like any other, with the conversation concerning themselves with issues like prices, illegality, the law, and competition.

Notably, Chinese opium addicts are totally absent from the narrative. The absence, again, means something. Here, abstraction operates as a characteristic of the higher levels of this drug trade. The more removed one becomes, the more open one becomes to seeing this as a neutral act. The opium, once infused with agrarian tragedy, is now data and profit.

Trade, Empire, and Political Power: When Commerce Becomes War :

In the opium economy reconstructed by Amitav Ghosh, war is a logical extension of commerce. When the circulation of commodities is disrupted, imperial power intervenes militarily to restore trade. The British justification for war is framed on the rhetoric of "free trade," a term repeatedly invoked to mask coercion as moral principle. As the novel moves toward open conflict, British forces prepare to violate Chinese sovereignty explicitly in order to protect commercial interests. Ghosh describes how the British were "determined to ignore the ban on opium trade and to make their way into the interior of the Chinese Empire, in the name of a new divinity: *Free Trade*" (Ghosh, *Flood of Fire*). This formulation reveals how ideology operates as a moral alibi, converting an illicit trade into a civilising mission.



“So much death; so much destruction—and that too visited upon a people who had neither attacked nor harmed the men who were so intent on engulfing them in this flood of fire” (Ghosh, Flood of Fire 505).

Ghosh carefully dismantles the ideological language that masks this violence. The rhetoric of free trade appears repeatedly in the trilogy as a moralised abstraction, invoked to legitimise coercion. Trade is presented not as mutual exchange but as an entitlement claimed by imperial power. When Chinese resistance threatened by this entitlement, commerce no longer defended through negotiation or reform but through force. The outbreak of the Opium Wars thus emerged as a logistical response to supply-chain disruption rather than a principled political conflict.

Flood of Fire, the last instalment in this trilogy concludes by revealing that the relationship between trade and political power is not incidental but structural. There are several real-life examples which validate the fact that empire doesn't merely facilitate commerce, it militarises it. This is evident from the fact that when trade is threatened the state adopts the language of war which exposes global commerce as a system sustained by the constant possibility of organized violence as is depicted in the Ibis Trilogy.

Conclusion :

This study argues that the opium economy portrayed in Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy is anything but an historical anomaly and that, in fact, it is a paradigmatic form of the modern global supply chain. Through its recreation of the nineteenth-century opium trade as a unified system of forced production, Ghosh shows how unethical supply chains are inherent in the very structure of global capitalism. In doing so, the trilogy refutes the current belief that ethical failure in trade is either exceptional or accidental and instead asserts that exploitation has long been normalized through distance, red tape, and state power.

The most important historical lesson that the trilogy teaches us is the transfer of moral accountability from the site of consumption to the roots of production and circulation. The popular moral tale of the opium trade tends to centre on addiction in China, which is implicitly to locate moral accountability at the site of the consumer. Ghosh turns this moral tale on its head by locating the roots of violence in the agrarian fields of colonial India, where the land and labour were restructured to meet the demands of the imperial market. The implications of this for modern supply-chain ethics are profound.

But equally significant is Ghosh's revelation of abstraction as a moral technology. As the opium passes from the field to the factory, the ship, and finally the market, the human costs inscribed in it are gradually effaced. By the time the commodity reaches Canton, pain has been encoded in prices, contracts, and lawsuits. This is no different from contemporary supply chains, where pain is abstracted away by outsourcing, subcontracting, and globalization. Ghosh's story is a reminder that moral blindness is not a consequence of ignorance but of systems designed to create distance.

The trilogy also provides a critical commentary on the relationship between trade and political power. The Opium Wars show how, when markets fail, the state steps in, not to



safeguard human life, but to get the circulation going. War, in this case, becomes a tool of enforcement of trade, laying bare the violent roots of “free trade.” This is all the more pertinent in the contemporary world where war, economic sanctions, and political coercion are still being used to gain access to resources, labour, and markets on the pretext of legality and order.

Finally, the Ibis Trilogy proves the special ability of literature to shed light on the human side of economic systems that tend to remain beyond the boundaries of mathematical analysis. By means of its polyphonic narrative, the trilogy brings back into focus those people who have been made disposable in the context of global trade—peasants, sailors, indentured labourers, and soldiers—compelling the reader to consider the real-world implications of economic choices that remain abstract. In this way, Ghosh not only retrieves a lost history but also offers a moral interpretation of the persistence of unethical supply chains in the modern era.

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