

## Sea of Poppies Reading Guide

### The plot

It is in the poppy fields of Ghazipur in March 1838 when Deeti, washing in the Ganga with her daughter Kabutri, has an eerie premonition of a giant birdlike boat that will come to change her life for ever. When her husband dies a few days later she knows it can be no coincidence and over the next weeks, when she elopes to Calcutta with the gentle yet unsuitable Kalua, she understands that this is her fate.

It is on the day of Deeti's vision that Zachary Reid and what is left of his motley crewmates dock a familiarly birdlike schooner, the *Ibis*, a few hundred miles downriver from her village. Since setting sail as ship's carpenter in Baltimore eleven months previously Zachary, amid much chaos, and with considerable help from the wily lascar Serang Ali, has had to take charge of the vessel, so that it can be delivered safely to its owner, the powerful opium magnate and shipowner, Benjamin Burnham. And so successful does he prove in his task that within days he is commissioned to join the *Ibis*'s next voyage as second mate.

Meanwhile, in Calcutta, the recently orphaned friends Paulette Lambert and Jodu are trying to come to terms with their newly reduced circumstances. He, a poor young boatman, must realise a lifetime's ambition and find work aboard a ship; she, the daughter of an unconventional French botanist, must become accustomed to the constraints of 'proper' colonial life with her new guardians, the rich, powerful and fervently evangelical Burnham family. After a revelatory encounter with the master of the house, however, it is not long before she too resolves to escape to the seas.

Raja Neel Rattan Halder, the head of an old Bengali family in Calcutta, is also being forced to consider life in radically altered circumstances. Having naively become embroiled in – and indebted to – Benjamin Burnham's opium business, he finds himself the victim of a shady conspiracy to rid him of his family lands and brand him a criminal. It is in a dirty colonial prison that he strikes up an unlikely and yet extremely tender friendship with a Chinese opium addict, Lei Leong Fatt, as they await transportation to Mauritius.

Whether by chance, or by the *Ibis*'s curious magnetic pull, so it happens that Deeti, Kalua, Zachary, Serang Ali, Jodu, Paulette, Raja Neel and Lei Leong Fatt – as disparate and colourful a group as the British Empire could muster – all find their way onboard the *Ibis*, bound for the Black Waters. Whilst life aboard the *Ibis* comes with its own rules, hierarchies and palpable dangers for crew and cargo alike, it is here, finally, that the schisms of Empire begin to come unstuck.. Despite differences of caste, colour and creed, the characters come to view themselves as *jahaj-bhais* or ship-brothers. As Deeti foresaw all along, from the *Ibis* an unlikely dynasty is to be born, which will span continents, races and generations.

### Author biog

Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta in 1956. He grew up in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan), Sri Lanka, Iran and India. After graduating from the University of Delhi, he went to Oxford to study Social Anthropology and received a D.Phil. in 1982. In 1980, he went to Egypt to do fieldwork among the rural fellaheen, which contributed to his 1993

non-fiction work, *In an Antique Land*. Ghosh published his first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, in 1986, followed by *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *Incendiary Circumstances* (2006) and *The Hungry Tide* (2004). He has reported for *Granta* and the *New Yorker* and his writing has won many literary awards including the Prix Medici Etranger, one of France's top literary awards; the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Crossword Prize, two of India's most prestigious literary prizes; the Arthur C. Clarke Award, the Pushcart Prize and the Premio Grinzane Cavour. He is married to the American writer Deborah Baker and has two children; he divides his time between Kolkata, Goa and Brooklyn.

## **Background information**

The Opium Wars, 1839–1842 and 1856–1860:

Since trading began with China in the sixteenth century there was a high demand for tea, silk and porcelain in Britain. But due to the low demand for European commodities in the East, Britain had a large trade deficit with China and had to pay for its imported goods with silver. In 1773 the governor-general of India, Warren Hastings, decided to establish an East India Company opium monopoly in Bengal, encouraging Indian peasants to plant huge swathes of poppies and then illegally exporting the exceptionally high-quality opium to China to counter Britain's deficit. The opium trade took off rapidly, and the flow of silver began to reverse. Despite several attempts by the Chinese authorities to curb the trade, by the 1820s China imported 900 tons of opium from Bengal annually, enough to supply 12.5 million smokers: Chinese society was crippled and the whole economy disrupted. Eventually what started as a trade dispute twice erupted in war. China's defeat forced the government to tolerate the opium trade, opening up several ports to foreign commerce and yielding Hong Kong to Britain. This humiliation at the hand of foreign powers contributed to the downfall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, and it wasn't until Mao's ruthless Communist revolution in 1949 that China's opium pandemic – estimated at some 20 million addicts – was finally brought under control.

The ibis in Egyptian mythology:

The ibis was a sacred bird of religious veneration in ancient Egypt, particularly associated with the god Thoth, one of the most important deities of the Egyptian pantheon, who was usually depicted with the head of an ibis. Thoth (which means 'he who is like the ibis') has been likened to the mind of God. In Egyptian mythology he is strongly connected with the moon (the curve of the ibis's beak is said to resemble the crescent moon) and is often associated with arbitration, magic, writing, science and the judging of the dead. Thoth served as a mediating power, especially between good and evil, making sure neither had a decisive victory over the other, and was the master of both physical and moral (i.e. Divine) law. Sometimes he was depicted as a baboon, which was seen as a nocturnal and intelligent creature.

The history of the lascars:

The term 'lascar' (believed to derive from the Persian lashkar, meaning an army, a camp or a band of followers) dates back to the early 1500s when it was used by Portuguese

explorers to describe the sailors they encountered from modern India, Malaysia, Thailand, Burma, China, East Africa and the Middle East. By the seventeenth century, though, lascars were increasingly employed on British merchant ships as the Empire rapidly expanded and new trading routes materialised. Wanted for their cheap labour and apocryphal seafaring nous, thousands of lascars were recruited in gangs by native 'serangs' (from the Persian for 'overseer') who were responsible for their discipline and work, and for communication between the European and lascar crews onboard ship. So popular did the system prove that the 1660 Navigation Acts and the 1802 Lascar Act both sought – with limited success – to restrict the use of lascars in order to preserve jobs for British sailors. Lascars continued to be employed until the mid twentieth century, however, as their skills – and sheer numbers – proved invaluable to British merchants, especially during times of war when British crews were co-opted by the Navy.

## Questions

Fate is one of the main themes in *Sea of Poppies*. Which characters are most attuned to portents, kismets and signs? Does this prove valuable? How does the book's structure contribute to the theme of fate and destiny?

Would you describe *Sea of Poppies* as an 'epic' novel? If so, what epic qualities does it display?

'If it is God's will that opium be used as an instrument to open China to his teachings, then so be it' (p.109). What do you make of Benjamin Burnham's beliefs? Is he in any way a man of principle?

*Sea of Poppies* is a book of strict social rules and hierarchies – in the villages, in the palace, in prison, in the grand houses and onboard ship. Why is this? Who makes the rules? Who do they benefit? Who/what challenges them?

'She had shed the body of the old Deeti, with the burden of its karma; she had paid the price her stars had demanded of her, and was free now to create a new destiny as she willed' (p.166). What sort of person is Deeti? How does her 'rebirth' change her? Where does her power stem from?

Reviewers of Amitav Ghosh often praise his writing for its 'readability'. Is *Sea of Poppies* 'readable'? If so, what techniques does Ghosh employ to maintain the pace and tension?

'The two convicts appeared to be friends . . . neither seemed to want to overmaster the other: to Bhyro Singh this was a sign that they were not men at all, but castrated, impotent creatures' (p.355). What does *Sea of Poppies* have to say about masculinity and femininity in the colonial environment? Who breaks the mould, and with what consequences?

Does the fact that *Sea of Poppies* is based on real historical events affect your reading of it? Why [not]?

'The day the natives lose faith in us, as the guarantors of the order of castes – that will be the day, gentlemen, that will doom our rule' (p.444). Why is it so important for the British to guarantee the caste system?

What did you make of Crowle's proposal to Zachary (p.466)? Did his final words elicit any sympathy from you?

*Sea of Poppies* is peppered with a vast array of foreign words, regional accents, niche vocabularies and a general 'confusion of tongues'. Why is language so important in the book? Which characters have the greatest command of language? Is there a connection between language and power, as many modern theorists suggest?

Paulette refers to the 'multiplicity of her selves' (p.409). What does she mean by this? Who else in the book has multiple or shifting identities? Why do they?

'So there you are: that's the jadoo of the colonies. A boy who's crawled up through the hawse-holes can become as grand a sahib as any twice-born Company man' (p.72). Who in *Sea of Poppies* benefits from the opportunities of the colonies? Does the Empire bring democracy?

Why does Neel seem to find his transformation from zemindar to common prisoner relatively easy? What does he learn about himself? Are there any advantages to his new situation?

In a review of *The Glass Palace*, Pankaj Mishra describes Amitav Ghosh as one of few post-colonial writers 'to have expressed in his work a developing awareness of the aspirations, defeats and disappointments of colonized peoples as they figure out their place in the world'. How might this apply to *Sea of Poppies*? Is it a tale of disappointment, or of hope? Or both?

'Malum must be propa pukka sahib', said the serang. 'All lascar wanchi Malum be captin-bugger by'm'by.' (p.46) Why is Serang Ali so keen for Zachary to succeed?

Paulette 'has never worshipped at any altar except that of Nature; the trees have been her Scripture and the Earth her Revelation' (p.127). What is the role of Nature in *Sea of Poppies*? Is it divine? Has it been colonised too?

Baboo Nob Kissin 'regarded the new Raja as a dilettante, who had his . . . head in the clouds . . . anyone so foolish as to sign everything that was put before him, deserved to lose his fortune' (p.201). Do you agree?

'The *Ibis* was not a ship like any other; in her inward reality she was a vehicle of transformation, travelling through the mists of illusion towards the elusive, ever-receding landfall that was Truth' (p.390). What are we to make of the *Ibis*? Is she a living being, a divine force or simply a metaphor for something? What is her impact on the plot? Why '*Ibis*'?

*Sea of Poppies* is the first in an *Ibis* trilogy, but does it work as an entity in its own right? Can you guess how the story will unfold in the successive two parts?

Did you draw any parallels with the modern world from *Sea of Poppies*? If so, what were they? Do you think Ghosh intended them? Does it matter?

### **Ideas for Further Study**

*Sacred Games* by Vikram Chandra  
*The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai  
*Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie  
*Mister Pip* by Lloyd Jones  
*Kim* by Rudyard Kipling  
*Moby Dick* by Herman Melville

**Also by Amitav Ghosh**

*The Hungry Tide*, 2004  
*Incendiary Circumstances*, 2006  
*The Glass Palace*, 2000  
*The Calcutta Chromosome*, 1996  
*In an Antique Land*, 1992  
*The Shadow Lines*, 1988  
*The Circle of Reason*, 1986