

Addicted to Empire

Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh tells Benedicte Page about his new book, set amid Britain's opium trade with China in the 19th century

Amitav Ghosh, a trade favourite since booksellers took his historical epic *The Glass Palace* to their hearts back in 2000, has set himself his most ambitious project yet with new novel *Sea of Poppies* (John Murray, May). Itself hardly slender at close to 600 pages, the novel is just the first volume in what will be a sweeping historical trilogy set in the 19th century; it is concerned with a diverse group of characters forging out their futures amid the highly lucrative opium trade which Britain ran between India and China, and the war waged by Britain on China to protect that trade.

The trilogy will keep Ghosh occupied for the next 10 to 15 years, he says. "I am in no hurry. For me the real pleasure of it is in the writing, and I've had so much fun writing this book. *The Glass Palace* had a very long historical span, but after I'd written it my only regret was that I wished I'd written it as three books. There were so many stories in it which I wanted to develop and flesh out." With *Sea of Poppies*, he wanted to follow the histories of five or six families over a very long period: "It gives me the space and the ability to create this whole world into which my readers can disappear if they want."

Melting pot

The novel brings its characters together for a voyage on a former slaving ship, the "Ibis", travelling from India to Mauritius on the way to China. There is Deeti, an Indian woman fleeing enforced sati after the death of her husband; Neel, a pampered raja who has lost everything after falling foul of a ruthless British trader; Zachary, an American slave descendant who has reinvented himself as a sailor; and Paulette, born French but brought up by her Indian wet-nurse, who is fleeing a Bible-thumping suitor to chase Zachary's love. Together they and others make up the melting pot of nations and backgrounds that is life on board ship.

"That moment in history, the early 19th century in India, was a moment when everyone was reinventing themselves in new ways," muses Ghosh. "It was true of English people who were in India, it was true of Americans, it was true of Indians. There was this huge upheaval, people being torn away from their homes.



CV

1956 Born in Calcutta

Studied at St Stephen's College, Delhi; St Edmund Hall, Oxford; and the Faculty of Arts, Alexandria University

Worked for the *Indian Express* newspaper in New Delhi before writing his first novel

Novels include *The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines*, *In an Antique Land*, *The Glass Palace* and *The Hungry Tide*. He has won the Prix Médicis Étranger in France, the Sahitya Akademi Award in India and the Arthur C Clarke Award

After being based in the US for many years, now lives primarily in India with his wife, the writer Deborah Baker

"And you know, it was something to do with the sea. I love sea narratives; if you read 19th-century sea narratives, it's one of the things you notice—that the sea made it possible for people to reinvent themselves as something else. Committing to a three-month voyage on the sea was something quite different from taking a plane—the ship became its own world and the experience of the journey completely changed people. The ship is something which has always attracted writers—for example, William Golding's *Rites of Passage*, a wonderful book."

Ghosh is passionate about his historical theme—particularly the opium trade, by which the British fostered opium addiction in China to boost its profits and fund the empire. "It's so fascinating, and one of the things that got me interested in this period is that it's so much like today. The reason why the English started pushing opium on China was the enormous trade deficit, the balance of payments. Today the whole world is in an enormous trade deficit with China, but especially America. And, in a way, oil is the opium of today.

"The real genius of the opium trade was that Britain took it from India, sold it in China, took the money and brought it to England—it was the most efficient way of extracting money from a place that could possibly be imagined. There were many tortured reformists who were asking 'What are we doing? We are poisoning these poor people!' But it's like today, when there are many people who point out problems with the oil industry, without making any dent in it."

Comic streak

Despite the dark theme, a strong comic streak runs through the novel. Ghosh laughs over having found a description written by the superintendent of the opium factory in Ghazipur, which features in the novel. "He was trying to attract English tourists to come and visit it! All through these notes, he has: 'The tourist will find . . .'" He was equally amused by this entry from the diary of an opium trader in China: "So busy selling opium, could not read the Bible today." Ghosh says: "This is truly one of the most terribly appalling things in history, so much so that you can scarcely do anything but laugh."

But it is in the characters that he finds the heart of his story, particularly Deeti, the young Indian woman breaking out from her wretched life and taking the opportunity to start afresh. "It's wonderful to have a character like her," enthuses Ghosh. "Whenever I found myself in trouble with my writing, I always went back to Deeti. I had a little slogan for myself: 'What would Deeti do?' It is true that, in those times, someone like her who's really in a way wasted their life, suddenly they come into their life and they grow bigger and bigger and assume more and more power in it. This wonderful new life opens up for her. When you have a character, you don't always know what's going to happen to them, and I certainly didn't. As I kept writing, I was so excited for her!"