

Adam Smith and sea
of poppies: does
ghosh celebrate self-
interest or empathy?



Sea of Poppies by Amitav Ghosh follows the narratives of a multitude of characters in pre-Opium War India. Following the ship named Ibis, an old slave ship transformed for use in opium trade and transporting coolies, the reader invests in the stories and decisions of both sailors and indentured servants alike. Widowed Deeti and her lover Kalua are traveling to Mauritius to become girmityas along with many other smaller characters who the reader meets once they arrive on board. Another main character, American sailor Zachary Reed, has worked his way up to second mate with the aid of the lascars including their leader Serang Ali. Neel Halder, an opium trader in debt to Mr. Burnham is brought onto the ship as a prisoner with a Chinese opium addict called Ah Fatt. Benjamin Burnham's adopted daughter Paulette runs away from him and her home life to be free on the sea with her Bengali foster brother Jodu and her love interest Reed. Throughout all the complex sub-plots and when navigating the stories of the many characters of Ghosh's novel, there is an important economic undertone that is very important to explore. Entangled within the historical monetary background of opium trade, lascars, and indentured labourers, this book is an important work for understanding world order and economic markets during the late 19th century.

Adam Smith, father of modern economics, cannot be ignored when trying to discern why each character in Sea of Poppies makes the choices they do. By looking at two of Adam Smith's works, The Wealth of Nations and Moral Sentiments, the reader can observe that these works have a slight contradiction in justifying human behavior within the field of economics.

Werhane's comment in "Adam Smith's legacy for Ethics and Economics"

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perfectly explains the disparity in the two works by saying that “Moral Sentiments” describes people as acting out of sympathy whereas “Wealth of Nations” focuses on humans as selfish and self interested. Sympathy, or rather empathy, is a more moral view of how people make economic decisions. An article reviewing the role of empathy and sympathy in economics perfectly defines them saying, “Sympathy is generally taken as the concern for the welfare of others” while empathy, “the capacity to put oneself in someone else’s shoes and thus to share the sentiments or thoughts of that person” (Kirman, 1). Smith explains why people do things for others when he says, no matter how selfish one is, they are invested in the fortunes of others even if they just have the, “pleasure of seeing it.” These two theories overlap in many instances, although in this book the focus is on when they overlap for the purpose of false justifications.

In *Sea of Poppies*, most characters are able to focus on their own interests, while keeping others in mind; sometimes even having positive benefits on other characters. Although explained in *Wealth of Nations* with the statement that “every man, as long as he does not violate the laws of justice is left perfectly free to pursue his own interest in his own way,” the definition of self interest can be cleared up to better fit *Sea of Poppies*. With Smith not giving a clear meaning to “laws of justice”, it can be argued that in *Sea of Poppies*, a character is free to go after their own interests as long as they are not hurting anyone or breaking any laws. A famous quote of Smith’s helps to explain this is, “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker that we expect our dinner but from their regard to their own interest.” The baker makes bread not so you can eat it and be satisfied but

so he can gain money. The baker is free to make his bread for his own profit as long as it is legal and not directly detrimental to someone. His bread not only is legal and does not hurt anyone, but also has a positive impact on being available for people to eat it. He is a perfect example of how Smith and Ghosh advocate for practicing self-interest. It is essential to understand how self-interest is being defined to understand Ghosh's opinions that he presents to the reader in *Sea of Poppies*. The basis for this paper leans on the fact that these two ideas are intertwined, and Ghosh realizes this. Most of the characters in this book are able to pursue self-interest while also being sympathetic. These two ideas often work together in *Sea of Poppies*. What Ghosh shows in *Sea of Poppies* is that self-interest is completely warranted and acceptable, but what is not acceptable is using the excuse of sympathy to justify self-interest that harms others or breaks laws. In this book, which highlights self interest over empathy, but shows how many characters incorporate both into their decisions, Ghosh critiques the misuse of self interest that Burnham justifies by claiming empathy, but supports self interest that refrains from harming others. He does this with his formation of characters as protagonistic, or antagonistic depending on how they go about achieving their goals.

Each character has a goal in this book. Whether to escape death or home life, each character has their own agenda. Most of their actions are rooted in self-interest even if they are beneficial to others. This is not to say that they are bad because as long as they have no adverse effects on other characters, Ghosh and Smith find no problem with self-interest. Some of the best examples of this are Deeti and Sarju. Most of their actions are a mix of

sympathy and self-interest, showing that these actions are combined, and everything is acceptable as long as it is respectful to others. A good example of this is when Deeti leaves her daughter. She cannot be worrying about herself and her own daughter. This is evident when the narrator says, “ She had no idea where her next meal would come from...At least with her Aunt and cousins the girl would be looked after” (131). It would be a great burden to have to not only provide for herself but also her daughter. She is in no position to take her daughter with her for her own sanity and for her daughter’s benefit. By giving her daughter to relatives, it is rooted in self-interest but also a show of empathy. She wants her daughter to have a better life, and have basic human necessities like a stable food source and shelter. She wants a safe life for her daughter, while also taking some pressure off herself. This example uses sympathy in conjunction with self-interest. She looks in the interest of both her daughter and herself. It makes both of their lives easier and does not harm anyone, which makes it an acceptable form of self interest. Deeti uses a combination of self-interest and sympathy in her choices, and this is most clearly seen through her decision to leave her daughter.

A lesser character does something of a similar action to Deeti: Sarju gifts Deeti seeds that will not only help her start her new life on Mauritius, but will give her a steady supply of money to feed and house herself. It is an immeasurable gift especially with everyone stuck penniless on the ship headed towards a life of poverty and hardship. Deeti and she get along well in the book, and Sarju wants to give her last possessions to someone she actually has feelings for. Although it could be a gift out of the kindness of her

heart to thank for Deeti's friendship and leadership on the boat, an alternative motive is revealed. Sarju, who could have spread out the seeds between all the women to help more people, gives them only to Deeti because she knows she will get something out of it. She even says, " Don't let the others know. Don't let them see these seeds"(310). Sarju, who is dying, shares the common fear with everyone close to death that they will be forgotten. She wants someone to remember her and carry on her memory on earth. When Deeti questions why she was given the seeds, Sarju says, " Because I want to be there too, she said. I want to be remembered in your shrine" (310). These characters are written as to have the audience like them and root for them, unlike the antagonist Benjamin Burnham. Because their actions are informed by self-interest and empathy, proving that you can both help others and help yourself, they are portrayed as protagonists, and Ghosh moves the reader to feel positively for them. Their pursuits and decisions never break laws, or harm anyone. Here it is made clear that Ghosh supports self-interest as long as it is just.

A character whom Ghosh writes as a negative light is Burnham, who chooses to partake in " unjust" forms of self-interest, and even justifies his actions by trying to hide them within sympathy. He, along with Mr. Doughty are the only characters who shows a lack of sympathy and deliberately chooses actions that will harm others. Benjamin Burnham is the perfect contradiction to Smith's Wealth of Nations. He pursues self-interest, but it usually happens at the expense of others. He also, in many instances, tries to use sympathy, as mentioned in Moral Sentiments, as an excuse for his unacceptable (if going by Smith's definition) pursuit of self interest. The clearest example of

him making a negative impact on others comes when he tries Neel for forgery. Neel does not want to give up his land to pay back his debts to Benjamin so he offers, “ I will sell my houses...I will sell everything I can” (127). Instead of indulging in sympathy, Benjamin focuses only on self-interest, more specifically, self interest at the cost of another, which defies Smith’s laws for pursuing one’s desires. He goes out of his way to charge Neel of forgery and fix the trial so he not only loses his property, but his whole life. Neel is forced onto the ship as a prisoner and loses his cast and his family. Burnham gets his debt paid back, but he does this in a way that it hurts and negatively affects Neel’s life, when he had other options. It did not hurt just Neel, but also his family and all the people living on his property. The way Ghosh writes Burnham’s character as the antagonist makes us see that he is against people using self-interest as a motive that may cause harm to others, thus agreeing with Smith.

Another point that Ghosh makes clear is his opinion on Burnham’s use of sympathy as an excuse for his hurtful actions when he never takes into account how anyone else is feeling or what they might be going through. This is seen at two main points in the book. He first justifies opium trade at the expense of China and then excuses his involvement with slavery as something that is positive when it is an unacceptable and oppressive system. When Burnham and Mr. Doughty have a discussion with Neel, they try to use the Chinese people as an excuse for their actions. They rationalize their excitement for the opium wars by saying it is not a fight for their right to trade, but rather for “ the freedom of the Chinese people” (77). In this instance, We see the Mr. Burnham and Mr. Doughty should not be able to

express self interest due to the fact that their actions not only harm others, but breaks the law. Neel asks Burnham if opium selling is illegal in China, to which he answers, “ Trafficking in opium has been illegal there for some time” (118). Neel also brings up the point that there is, “ a great deal of addiction and intoxication in China” (117). This shows the men’s indifference for the people of China, and the wishes of the government. They should not be able to pursue self-interest according to Smith, and they cover up their greed by using sympathy as an excuse. Being some of the only characters who don’t show any sympathy in the book, it is even worse that they constantly use it to explain their actions. Mr. Doughty uses care for poor Indian farmers as his excuse saying, “ what will become of him if his opium can’t be sold in China?”(176). This was disproven in the start of the book when background was provided on Indian peasant farmers and their interactions with the British. These farmers are controlled by the English and kept in poverty through a system of borrowing and taking out advances. Agents would come from England “ making them sign asámi contract...if you refused they would leave their silver hidden in your house, or throw it through a window. It was no use telling the white magistrate that you hadn’t accepted the money and your thumbprint was forged: he earned commissions on the opium and would never let you off” (20). The selling of Opium benefitted neither the Indian nor Chinese. Not only do they say that by getting profit from illegal opium sales it helps Chinese people gain freedom, but it helps the peasants who are forced into growing it.

It is prevalent among the upper caste characters that are so rich to care about no one but themselves, but to argue that sympathy is their motive. Mr.

Burnham then reveals to Reed that he is going to make the Ibis into a slave ship, yet another illegal activity. He even calls slavery, “the march of human freedom” saying that some people have to suffer for the benefit of everyone else. Of course, Mr. Burnham will never be the one suffering. Neel is obviously uncomfortable and expresses he is happy he is not in slavery because it doesn’t sound like freedom to him. Mr. Burnham reiterates that the, “mastery of the white man” over other races is freedom for them. He is trying to argue that he is doing something good. He talks so much about how he is helping people rather than hurting them that he might actually believe himself at this point. After Burnham tries to convince everyone he has sympathy for others, he concedes. On page 120, he acknowledges that, “British rule would not be sustained in India without opium.” The reader is finally able to see that everything he does is in order to hold his own position and help keep British rule over India, and perhaps even move it to China. Captain Chillingsworth explains that men in power like to try to excuse themselves and pretend they are being sympathetic. He says, “We are no different from the Pharaohs or the Mongols: the difference is only that when we kill people we feel compelled to pretend that it is for some higher cause”(177). Benjamin Burnham and Mr. Doughty are practicing self-interest that causes damage others, and this goes against legal restrictions. Even worse, they explain their actions by saying that they are not doing it because of themselves, but rather for the good of others.

Ghosh critiques those who justify self-interest in the name of empathy they do not feel, but supports the pursuit of self-interest that does not harm others and respects the law. Characters such as Deeti and Sarju show how

one can follow self-interest without hurting others, and even how self-interest and can be connected to empathy. In Ghosh's negative portrayal of Burnham, we see that he agrees with Smith in that self-interest can be justly followed unless it is detrimental to others or breaks the law. In addition, making up for self interest by pretending to have empathy for others is looked down upon. The article "The Benevolence of Self Interest" says "self-interest: this stunted, inward-looking trait is transformed, through spontaneous social co-operation, into a force for the common good." This quote perfectly summarizes the paper. By working together and caring for other's as well as one's own self interest, helps create a functioning environment.

Works Cited

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