

‘The Sins of the Father are to be Laid upon the Children’ as seen in Amitav Ghosh’s The Ibis Trilogy

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's 'The Ibis Trilogy' is a chronicle spanning continents and countries, history and commerce, success and disappointments, journey and the destination. The sins committed by the parents have greater implications on their progeny and this is proved in the Ibis Trilogy. Important characters like Ah Fatt and Raja Neel Rattan Halder undergo sufferings created by the laxity and foolhardiness of their fathers. Their nexus with the British lead to the sufferings of many people thus increasing their sins, which later on affects their sons. The concept of children suffering for their fathers' crimes can be seen in religious concepts too.

Key Words: father, son, suffering, sin.

“The sins of the father shall be visited upon by the son”, so says Launcelot to Jessica in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. The sins that Shylock had committed would be later visited upon on Jessica, his daughter, is the interpretation of these lines. The original phrase 'sins of the father' finds reference in the Holy Bible. Hindu philosophy also believes that the sins of the parents will be borne by the children. In other words, the children to some extent suffer for the misdemeanors committed by their parents. Amitav Ghosh's *The Ibis Trilogy* exemplifies this aspect in some of the important characters. The Ibis Trilogy consists of *The Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire*. In the three novels are found myriad characters from different countries and races, leading completely diverse lives and coming together for a grand finale in the end.

Raja Neel Rattan Halder is the Zamindar of Raskhali dominion. An English educated son of a promiscuous Zamindar, Neel is unlike his father. He just has one mistress, as opposed to his father who had many concubines for the upkeep of which he had spent a lavish amount of money. The old Raja liked to live life King-size, drinking and lording it over his many lands and subjects. He neglects his people and forgets his duty as a ruler and protector. Like his forefathers before him he hooks himself to whichever power is ruling over the country at that particular point of time. The old Raja forms a partnership with Mr Burnham, a trader in opium and bonded human labour. He leaves all the complications and bureaucratic muddle to the Englishman, receiving only his allotted money. The total lack of concern for his subjects deeply mired in penury is of no concern to him. He has no understanding of their plight and how the people

are forced to sell their lands and forced to work in opium fields and factories.

His business dealings with Mr Burnham costs his son dearly, when the English educated Neel finds the ideologies of the English at subpar with his own. The English with swift and planned calculation slowly and surely take over the lands of the people, both wealthy and deprived. Neel's lands are also confiscated after a tiff with Mr Burnham. The nature of the British is such that they even disregard those families which helped them in the past and will spare no expense to torment them if they do not continue to follow their orders. Neel, the Raja of Raskhali is transported out of the country and his property confiscated as he does not comply with the wishes of the British overlords. Neel is thrown in prison on charges of forgery and fraud. All his property and lands are transferred to Mr Burnham. The punishment for the former King comes when the alien powers move him to the jail at Alipore.

In Alipore silence weighs down like the lid of a coffin. It is synonymous with Neel's sentence of transportation to the penal settlement of Mauritius for seven years. When Neel's carriage, accompanied by the guards reaches prison, he is reluctant to get down and face his bleak and terrible future. He is compared to a reluctant dog, tugging at his leash. He suffers the fate worse than that of a dog. The guards unravel his dhoti and call him Draupadi and Shikhandi. Draupadi, wife of the Pandavas in *The Mahabharata* is humiliated by the Kauravas and protected by Lord Krishna. As her sari is unraveled, he keeps providing her with fresh saris and her modesty is thus saved. But no Krishna comes to save Neel as he is subject to the ignominy and mortification of a thorough body check-up. Shikhandi is another character in

The Mahabharata who is born as a girl to King Drupada and later changed to a man to avenge the great Bheeshma. Shikhandi is neither man nor woman and is likened to a transgender or eunuch. This exposure of Neel's manhood or lack of it comes up often –previously when his wife's veiled face is exposed. The identity of the Raja is peeled off as he is exposed to the prying eyes of the policemen.

This is the zone of transformation for Neel, the inevitability, the plight and struggles he has to undergo to overcome it. He is plagued by the vision of the shedding off his old skin and acquiring a new skin. It is the experiences in the prison, which modifies his mind and makes him question his priorities.

Neel is not allowed visitors and has to eat what is made by unknown hands. This is unlike when his food would be prepared by specific people according to their varnas. Neel feels a deep disgust at the food served to him at the jail but somehow manages to swallow it. Neel as the Raja and his father before him, have not only failed in their duty to protect the common people but also their means of subsistence from the British invaders. Neel, himself once a King and responsible for opium cultivation, due to the irresponsible and selfish nature of his ancestors, is driven out of his native soil to live in hiding in an alien soil. Neel is to be shipped off to Mauritius. His head is shaved, he is dressed in a convict's clothes and his only property is a bowl, glass and a blanket. The once opulent lifestyle is shredded to a basic garb and he is condemned to live a life of a person in the lowest rungs of humanity. The King who has lost everything clings on to words to create a world for himself.

Bahram Moddie, an opium trader by profession fathers an illegitimate son with a Chinese washerwoman. He veers from his duty towards his wife Shireenbai and their two daughters who he has left behind in India. He is a well-established trader of opium in China, thereby dealing a double blow to his karma. In China he forms a relationship with Chi-mei with whom he bears a son, Ah Fatt. Unknown to Shireenbai, he leads a double life in Canton spending time with Chi-mei and their son. In the end he has to answer for his sins as Ah Fatt gets addicted to opium and becomes a complete mess, being forced to escape the country and ending up in a jail in far off Calcutta. Ah Fatt is fascinated by stories of his father's country- India. He wants to go there and meet Father's Big Wife and her family. Bahram is aghast when he hears of this suggestion. He forbids Ah Fatt to ever talk of it again. If Ah Fatt goes to India, Bahram

would be ruined as his family would find out the truth of his double life. The prospect of facing social death is tortuous to Bahram. Ah Fatt resents his father as he does not allow him to get in touch with his roots and visit the land of his forefathers. He takes to opium and becomes such a slave to it that he turns into the walking dead. It is ironic since Bahram had been instrumental in spoiling the lives of many youth in China. He has to pay the price for that sin, with the abject deterioration in the life of his beloved son and also ultimately his own life. This is exactly what opium does. It takes over the life of a human in such a way that he becomes a habitual addict. When Neel hears of Ah Fatt for the first time from the jail jemadar, he's in a terrible state. Opium has ravaged his body and made him suffer the ultimate despondency.

Ah Fatt's psyche is damaged when Chi-mei tells him she is his aunt and his real mother is dead. Bahram is also introduced as a benevolent guardian. She prevents him from playing in the water with the other boys as she fears he will be eaten by a fish. Ah Fatt is denied of his birthright from both his parents. He is not allowed to be a true son of the river, with his mother denying his desire to play in the river like the other children and his father making sure he gets an English education and upbringing. Later on, when Ah Fatt realizes the truth about his parentage, he feels deceived, more so when his father does not publicly own him.

Bahram's relationship with his illegitimate son with Chi-mei leads to a lot of complications in their lives. Bahram, although he provides money to his second family, cannot provide the one thing Ah Fatt wants-acceptance. This leads to Ah Fatt drowning his sorrows and inadequacies in the comforting arms of opium and steadily moving towards friendship with dangerous drug peddlers like Lenny Chan. Bahram is also responsible for this state of the youth of China which is reflected in the fate of his son. When Bahram robs China in the name of trade, his son, comes to India in search of his roots. Unfortunately, as a punishment to his father he is transported out of India on charges of being a robber and opium addict. The atonement for Bahram's sin is borne by Ah Fatt.

He is charged with illegal possession in Bengal and thrown in prison where his cell mate is the displaced Raja, Neel. He is incidentally called Aafat by the jail people which means calamity. Neel himself is atoning for the sins of his ancestors, who had given the Englishmen charge to carry on the opium trade in India, thus creating afeem khors or opium addicts. "... Neel

had already begun to feel that he was somehow implicated in his cell-mate's plight: it was as if their common destination had made their shame and honour a shared burden" (SP 324-25). They both carry the shame of their fathers' role in the opium trade and atone for it in their own ways. It is ultimately the son who pays the price for his father's sin.

Ah Fatt insists that he should go to his father's land. This is the soul's longing to be rooted in the ancestral soil. Bahram tries to orient Ah Fatt to the western world but the unconscious pulls the boy to his father's land, Hindustan. The soul yearns to go to the native soil and this is a psychological problem for the boy and he feels as if he is a fish out of water. The land of the father or one's ancestors is the place of atonement for any soul in order to have its psychological balance. But this is denied to Ah Fatt as he is an illegitimate child. The land of one's ancestors is very essential as a background for a healthy mind. This psychology is imbibed in Ah Fatt and that's why he goes in quest of India.

Money making by ill means will eventually dissolve the ancient traditions which help keep the families intact. But due to such illegal and immoral means of earning money families collapse, old values are shattered bringing shame to the individual involved as well as their children. Bahram at this stage of his life questions himself and his actions in dealing with opium. On the one hand he is terrified at the idea that he will lose all his money and consequently his family. On the other hand, he is worried at the implications his actions will have on his soul. The sin of taking a million Chinese lives hangs on the shoulders of the traders.

Ah Fatt later sees the vision of his dead parents inside the water. He says, "I can hear them, lah – calling me, the two of them, my mother and father" (FF 454). Bahram and Chi-mei call out to Ah Fatt with the promise of the affirmation and embrace he always craved. Bahram who enjoys all the pleasures of life through his ill-begotten money gives birth to a son who suffers from identity crisis and at the end starts seeing the ghost of his own father like Hamlet. Thus, Ah Fatt is already called out to his final resting place by his parents. And it is his and Chi-mei's spirit which calls out to their son as they know that his time is up, and so that they can be united in death as they could not be in life. Ah Fatt slowly enters the spirit world with the help of opium. He dies at the hands of Lenny Chan's men, who ultimately takes revenge on Ah Fatt. Thus, passes away Ah Fatt- the troubled son

of two soils, at war with each other. The war outside is reflected in his mind too and his two different identities.

Tess in Thomas Hardy's, *Tess of the d'urbervilles* gives birth to an illegitimate child and names him Sorrow. She dotes on him but unfortunately, he passes away and Tess is devastated. "So passed away Sorrow the Undesired□ that intrusive creature, that bastard gift of shameless Nature, who respects not the social law..." (111).

Ah Fatt on the other hand receives acceptance from Shireen, a part of his birth right he had always wished for. Orphaned and adrift he finds a mooring in Shireen's acknowledgement of her husband's illegitimate and distressed son. The first time she meets him, she sees in his eyes a type of wildness, "it was as if the curtains of adulthood had parted to give her a glimpse of a deep well of suffering that went back to his boyhood." (FF 323) Shireen arranges for Ah Fatt to be buried next to her husband, thus giving him the acceptance and acknowledgement, he had craved since his birth. She invokes the wrath of the influential traders of the Parsi community, but threatens to expose their double standards to their families back in India. Most of the men have another family in China which they conveniently hide from their relatives.

The illegitimate children suffer from lack of rootedness to the soil. Born to traders who move from place to place they themselves do not have an identity. Their fathers do not realize the importance of historical sense or have any responsibility. Their lack of belongingness to one particular land destroys their psyche. No ancestral memory or understanding of the past and present of one's country, leads them to broken lives with no redemption.

The sins of the father as borne by the children also lies in the story of King Bhagirath, who had brought the Holy Ganga to Earth. Neel tells the story of the Ganga Sagar Island to the migrants reminding them of the story of the King who atoned for the sins of his ancestors. Neel tells the story of Bhagiratha, the young King who persuades Ganga to come to the earth and fill the seas, thus redeeming the ashes of sixty thousand Ikvakshu princes who were his ancestors and cursed by Sage Kapila for disturbing his austerities. King Bhagiratha brings down the Holy Ganga at whose touch the sins of his ancestors are washed away. Neel and Ah Fatt too thus atone for the sins committed by their fathers and forefathers, of having neglected their duties and indulging in the opium trade. Neel

through his total downfall realizes the mistakes of his forefathers and also his own in neglecting his duties and family. His pride falls and his wife and son take foremost place in his mind, as he works towards the day they can come together as a family.

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