

SKEPTICISM AND HISTORICISM IN AMITAV GHOSH'S 'SEA OF POPPIES'

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Abstract

Historical fiction often portrays fictional account or dramatization of historical figures or events. Literature has its roots in history and the literary texts are the products of historical environment. It is in the historical novel that the actual skepticism, socio-economic struggle, political upheaval and survival of life can be encountered, examined, exposed, challenged, and rectified. Amitav Ghosh is one of those contemporary Indian novelists who combine their professional skills as social historians with a literary flair to create works of art which are profoundly concerned with civilization and history. The novel *Sea of Poppies* presents the traumas and helplessness of people in the wake of colonial upheaval in the nineteenth century when people were forcibly compelled to turn over their fields to opium production. That was a time of enormous social disruption and displacement in large parts of India. Historically the novel is set just prior to the opium wars and revolves around the British involvement in India and their trade practices exporting opium from India to China. Ghosh depicts an era of agricultural scandal: burgeoning western demand for profitable but inedible crops which is causing starvation in the subaltern world till date. The novel reveals the damage done by British devastation which has reeked upon the Indian economy as well as the society at large. There is the panorama of characters encapsulating the vexed colonial history of the East which makes *Sea of Poppies* a breathtaking masterpiece.

Work cited:- Colonial History, Scandal, Political, India, British.

History, myth and fiction have always been porous genres having overlapping concerns as well as mutual influences. Nonfiction and fiction blend: they merge creating a new history, a new fiction. Historical fiction often portrays fictional account or dramatization of historical figures or events. Literature has its roots in history and the literary texts are the products of historical environment. It is in the historical novel that the actual skepticism, socio-economic struggle, political upheaval and survival of life can be encountered, examined, exposed, challenged, and rectified. Amitav Ghosh is one of those contemporary Indian novelists who combine their professional skills as social historians with a literary flair to create works of art which are profoundly concerned with civilization and history. The use of myth and history in literary texts is an interpretive strategy, a part of programmed narratology. "The past can be

grasped only through its relevance to the present which is why the text is embodiment of the past and the present experiences and interests. The writers seek to ‘renovate’ history with the use of myth”. (A.S Rao, 6). History and myth both possess their own ideological underpinnings; myth strengthens the functionality of the fiction; history justifies the claim of text on actuality. Thus they become the means of preserving traditions and cultures beyond skepticism and socio-political strife.

In Amitav Ghosh’s fiction the historical facts in terms of time and space forms an integral part of a work of art transcending the creative expression to achieve wider dimensions of universality induced with both social and political consciousness. This is amply reflected in the novels of the period like-Raj Rao’s ‘Kanthapura’, Mulk Raj Anand’s ‘Coolie’, William Golding’s ‘Lord of the Flies’, and George Orwell’s ‘Nineteen Eighty four. Amitav Ghosh evokes postcolonial situation, social milieus, cultural dislocations and anxieties to look for better perspectives. He combines his professional skills as social historian with a literary flair to create works of art which are profoundly concerned with civilization and history. In Indo-English fiction too there obtains an increasing preoccupation with thematizing Indian cultural history in recent years. The major novels, for instance are Salman Rushdie’s ‘Midnight’s Children’, The Enchantress of Florence (2008), Gita Mehta’s ‘Raj’, Shashi Tharoor’s ‘The Great Indian Novel’ (1989), Vikram Seth’s ‘A Suitable Boy’ (1993), Mukul Keswan’s ‘Looking Through Glass’ (1995), Amitav Ghosh’s ‘The Glass Palace’ (2008) and ‘Sea of Poppies’ (2008). Authors like Chinua Achebe (Nigerian), V.S. Naipaul (Caribbean), Rudy Wiebe (Canadian) and Alex Haley (Black American), to cite a few instances, also attempt to review their cultural/communal histories across the world. Revision of indigenous cultural, communal history has come to constitute an important preoccupation amongst the contemporary and post colonial writers. In a sense every novelist tries to enshrine a period in a text; in other words every novelist is a historical novelist. This historical reality in terms of time and space forms an integral part of a work of art and is transmuted in the reprocess of giving it a creative expression; in the process it achieves wider dimensions of universality and at times a state of timelessness.

Amitav Ghosh (b.1956-) is an Indian-Bengali author who is known for his works in English language in India and abroad. He was born in Kolkata and was educated at the Doon school; St. Stephen’s College, Delhi, Delhi University; and St. Edmund Hall, Oxford. He held various academic positions in different universities. At present he is a distinguished professor teaching comparative literature at the Queens College, New York University. Amitav Ghosh is the author of seven highly acclaimed novels which are ‘The Circle of Reason’ (1986), ‘The Shadow Lines’ (1988), ‘The Calcutta Chromosome’ (1995), ‘The Glass Palace’ (2000), ‘The Hungry Tide’ (2004), ‘Sea of Poppies’ (2008) and ‘River of Smoke’ (2011). Ghosh has also written five non-fictional works namely- ‘In an Antique Land’ (1992); ‘Countdown’ (1999); ‘Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma’ (1998); ‘Countdown’ (1991); ‘The Indian and the Indian’ (2002), and ‘Incendiary Circumstances’ (2006) He has received numerous awards for his works like ‘The Prix Medici’s Estranger’ for ‘The Circle of Reason’ (1986); ‘Sahitya Akademi Award’ for ‘The Shadow Lines’ (1988); ‘Grand Prize for Fiction of the Frankfurt international e-book awards’ for ‘The Glass Palace’ and ‘Sea of Poppies’ was shortlisted for the 2008 Booker Prize and also ‘Vodafone Crossword Book Award for Fiction’. In 2007, he was awarded the Padma Shri by the Indian Government.

Amitav Ghosh is known as a novelist with an extraordinary sense of history, myth and place. His works are profoundly concerned with Indian myths, civilization and history. “Amitav Ghosh always researches and brings together the social, cultural and political events of the past,

the far-past, the present and future” (Indira Bhatt & Indira Nityanandan, 14). Amitav Ghosh is a writer concerned with India’s place in larger international cultural networks. His fiction seems directly informed by contemporary academic debates about historical as well as anthropological elements. “Ghosh has a distinctive style of writing that synthesizes the imagination of a writer with the insightful detaining of an anthropologist. He takes up the obscured events in history and transcends the boundaries of fiction/nonfiction by sprinkling over them the colors of his imagination” (Ravi Bhusan and Daisy, 134). Ghosh mediates upon a core set of issues from a new perspective ; the legacy of colonial knowledge; colonized societies, people, ideas: the formation and re-formation of identities in colonial and post colonial societies; skepticism and socio-economic struggle for survival; and an engagement with cultural multiplicity through economic migrants, travelers, students, prisoners, researchers, settlers, peasants and indentured laborers. Wealth, Power and Privilege establish new strife among the people, societies and nations.

The novel projects the socio-economic themes of the 19th century: the forced cultivation of opium as a cash crop in Bihar and Bengal for Chinese market, its disastrous consequences and transport of first batch of Indian Diaspora through the ship *Ibis*. Amitav Ghosh synthesizes his imagination with the insightful detaining of an anthropologist taking observed events in history to sprinkle the colors of fiction/non-fiction into his writing. *Sea of Poppies* like a travelogue becomes an important socio-political document that draws its raw material from history, sociology, anthropology and politics. It traverses the dark path of Indian colonial history by exposing the shrewd business acumen of British, who scrapped India of its riches and Chinese of their discretion by poisoning them with opium. Opium wars was fought in 1839-42 between British East India Company and a weakened China under the Qing Dynasty, to acquire ‘free trade’ of Opium across the huge market of China for British merchants. *Ibis*, the ship originally ‘blackbirder’ in America was used to transport slaves from Africa, but after the abolition of slavery, the schooner is sold to British shipping company Burnham Bros, in Calcutta to transport indentured laborers to British colonies in the Caribbean Islands. Even the captain Mr. Chillingworth is an opium addict, first mate Mr. Crowley is a rogue and second mate is a mulatto freedman, Zachary Reid the leader of lascar, and Serang Ali, has ‘a face that would have earned the envy of Genghis Khan’ (14). *Sea of Poppies* (2008) is the first volume of what will be the *Ibis* trilogy. The *Ibis* is the name of a vessel carrying the characters of the story, which is symbolically, narrated under three symbolic parts namely ‘Land’, ‘River’ and ‘Sea’. Land symbolizes social, political and economical strife of people for survival which passes on to River symbolizing flowing or running after the dreams those which becomes impossible and difficult to attain on the rough surface of vast unknown Sea The main characters include Deeti, an ordinary village woman, a mulatto American sailor named Zachary Reid, an Indian rajah/zamindar called Neel Rattan Halder, and Benjamin Burnham, an evangelist opium trader. The story is set prior to the Opium Wars, on the banks of the holy river Ganges and in Calcutta. The author compares Ganges to the Nile, the lifeline of the Egyptian civilization, attributing the provenance and growth of these civilizations to these selfless, ever flowing bodies. He portrays the characters as poppy seeds emanating in large numbers from the field to form a sea, where every single seed is uncertain about its future. The novel is an epic saga with multitude of characters in love hate relationships, “detailed description of opium production” in north east India by British Trade Company, the period of the 19th century seafaring and picturizing life in 1830’s Calcutta. Imperialism seems to be beautiful and deadly like the poppy flowers. Both Calcutta and *Ibis* are polyglot communities, where people speak pidgin, Bhojpuri and mangled

English Bengali. Language works here as a major technique to unite divide people and confuse or clarify situation. It is set just prior to the opium wars which devastated Indian Economy as well as society at large.

The story begins with Deeti, a simple pious lady, caring mother and an efficient housewife. Married to Hukum Singh, a crippled worker in the Ghazipur Opium Factory, the unfortunate Deeti figures out that on her wedding night, she was drugged with opium by her mother-in-law, so that her brother-in-law could consummate the marriage in place of her ‘infertile’ husband. This brother-in-law is the real father of Deeti’s daughter Kabutri. When her husband dies, Deeti sends Kabutri to stay with relatives. Deeti took almost certain to meet her doom when she chooses to go through with the ‘sati’ ritual (immolation on her husband’s funeral pyre), but then Kalua, the low caste ox man from the neighboring village, comes to her rescue. The couple flees and unites. This is not acceptable to their fellow villagers. In order to escape the anger of Deeti’s in-laws, she and Kalua become indentured servants on the Ibis. Some other stories do add to the plight of the main character in the novel. Zachary Reid, an American sailor born to a slave mother and white father, receives a lot of attention. He is looked down by Whites and hated by Asians and Orientals. His neglected identity made him sadistically cruel and wicked. He took pleasure in cruel flogging of Kalua, and brutally punishes other people on board. He has been on the Ibis since the schooner started her arduous journey, and hopes to die with it. Neel Rattan Halder, a wealthy ‘rajah’ whose dynasty has been ruling the Zamindari of Rakshali for centuries, is cleverly confronted by Mr. Burnham with the need to sell off his estates in order to pay for the debt he had incurred when trading opium with China was at the height of the opium trade. He is being cheated and robbed of his riches by the British as it was the trend of the Empire. The book also features Paulette, a French orphan, who had also grown up in India. Paulette’s upbringing in India has also made her feel more at ease with Indian manners, food, and clothing than with Western ones. France being the rival of British Empire made Paulette’s life hell and she disguises herself to escape to a new life through Ibis. As the stories merge, each carrying its share of joys and sorrows, the Ibis becomes a shelter to those in destitution. After much strife, conspiracy and bloodshed on board the Vessel, Neel, Ah Fatt, Jodu, Serang Ali and Kalua manage to escape, unaware of the destination the sea waves will carry them to. The stories of the novel interweave various myths, beliefs, languages, cultural and historical elements to portray true picture of the then respective society. The two broad themes of the novel are: during nineteenth century, the compulsory cultivation of opium as a cash crop in Bihar and parts of Bengal for the Chinese market and its disastrous consequences, and the origins and transport of the first batch of Indian Diaspora. Ghosh protagonists are the neglected subjects of the colonial enterprise instead of powerful White masters unlike Rudyard Kipling and E. M. Forester. The process had started in 1834 resulting into the creation of a distinct set of people bonded with the force of adversity that they had faced together. In Amitav Ghosh’s ‘Sea of Poppies’, the first part of the Ibis trilogy, it is Paulette who tells Deeti that they were “ship –siblings—jahaj bhais and jahaj bahens—to each other.”(527)

The Report of the Truth and Justice Commission (TJC) mentions how immigrants were looted upon by the white men: “The Dhangars” are always spoken of as more akin to the monkey than the man. They have no religion, no education and in their present state, no want beyond eating, drinking and sleeping; and to procure which, they are willing to labor”. The indentured labor was badly needed in the monocropping plantation economies of the various colonies of the European imperial prowess, Mauritius was one such economy. More than 1 million people crossed the black waters for a few paid labors in various colonies. More than seventy five

percent of them came from the Bhojpuri speaking North India. The novel is set in the 1830's when the Chinese rulers banned the opium trade, leading to opium war and conquest of Hong Kong by the British. Deeti moving out of Bihar (Ghazipur) sees, " hundreds of ...impoverished transients many of whom were willing to sweat themselves half to death for a few handfuls of rice...driven from their villagers by the flood of flowers that had washed over the countryside." (298).The narrator says, " come the cold weather, the English sahibs would allow little else to be planted; their agents would go from home to home , forcing cash advances on the farmers, making them to sign asami contracts. It was impossible to say no to them" (29-30).The description of the sudden opium factory at Ghazipur is based on a realistic account published in 1865 by its one time superintendent, J.W.S Mac Arthur. The scene at factory evokes horror and pity like Dickens, "bare bodied men sunk waist deep in tanks of opium, tramping round and round to soften the sludge. Their eyes were vacant, glazed and yet somehow they managed to keep moving, as slow as ants in honey, tramping, treading." (94-95).The duffadar tells Kalua: "caste doesn't matter...all kinds of men are eager to sign up-Brahmins, Ahirs, Chamars, Telis....they be young and able-bodied and willing to work." (302). The peasants were hit hard by "the crippling effects of British revenue policy which caused crippling indebtedness, fragmented land holdings and scattered families..Migration to the colonies was an extension of the process of displacement already underway on the subcontinent," (Lal, 6). Moreover, the subtle crop cycle that had developed through ages by the farmers was broken and was forced to grow commercial crops Poppy and Indigo for the benefit of British economy. The duffadar tells Kalua; "....caste doesn't matter...All kinds of men are eager to sign up-Brahimns, Ahirs, Chamars, Telis...they be young and able-bodied and willing to work."(302) The Masters not only exploited the natural resources of the country but also the human resources to their fullest. Even Raja Neel Rattan understands humanity under adverse conditions, ".... To take care of another Human being- -this was something Neel had never before thought of doing, not even with his son, let alone a man of his own age, a foreigner." (300).

The Socio-economic Subjugations goes on in the novel with "transformation of feudal exploitation into capitalist exploitation". (Capital, 787). Deeti and her addict husband Hukam Singh is forced by the British Trading Company to grow poppy instead of staple food items causing agricultural collapse and thus destroying the family. Similar Economic failure is experienced by Raja Neel Rattan by trying his hands in opium Trade and thus losing his Rashkali estate to the British. Physically too people worked in inhuman conditions in their fields, opium factories and even on Ibis to give a sense of pride and contentment to their masters. Even Deeti is ready for self immolation under Hindu Practice of 'sati' without any legal protection from British. Kalua after being flogged by Bhyro Singh becomes the victim of the combined hegemonies of British imperial power and native abhorrence for inter caste marriage to Deeti. The Schooner Ibis acted as a microcosm providing suitable environment to a caste free social system in the island of Mauritius. The characters in the novel accept new identities tied together in a jahaji nata. Deeti become Aditi, Dalit Kalua rechristened Maddav Colver, Paulette impersonating the Gomasta Baboo, Nob Kissin's niece Pultishwari, Jodu Calls himself Azad, and Zacchary calls as Zikri Malum running along Serang Ali. The subhuman plight of indentured laborers is affirmed by the captain of the ship, " while you are on her(Ibis), you must obey Subedar Bhyro Singh as you would your own zamindars, and as he obeys me...he will be your mai-bap, just as I am his ." (599). Heeru comments on the skewed female ratio towards men on Ibis. " They say in Mareech, a woman on her will be torn apart...Devoured...so many men and so few women...can u think what it would be like, Bhauji, to be alone there." (653).

Even the religious sentiments are exploited for profitable trade by Mr. Burnham, “Jesus Christ is Free Trade and Free Trade is Jesus Christ” and explained, “if it is God’s will that opium be used as an instrument to open China to his teachings” (116). Their hypocritical humanism is exposed through Mr. Doughty’s remark, “...indeed ,humanity demands it , we need only think of the poor Indian peasant-- what will become of him if his opium can’t be sold in China? “ (260). Colonizers “divide and rule” mind-set exploits natives to utmost for their huge capital gains.

Historically, the novel is set just prior to the Opium Wars and revolves around the British involvement in India and their trade practices exporting opium from India to China. 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 of the 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 1820, 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 1949 that China’s opium pandemic estimated at some 20 million addicts was finally brought under control. Ghosh also reveals the damage done by British colonial rule and the devastation wreaked upon the Indian Economy, as well as society at large. Although apparently Ghosh’s creative inspiration was the indentured people of India, he says in an interview:

“[...] Once I started researching into it, it was kind of inescapable-all the roads led back to opium. The indentured emigration [out of India] really started in the 1830s and that was [around the time of] the peak of the opium traffic. That decade culminated in the opium wars against China.”

Indian peasants were forced to cultivate poppies instead of food crops and sell the harvest to the East India Company which ruled the country and held a monopoly in the opium trade. Ghosh avers:

...opium was the exclusive monopoly of the British, produced ... and packaged entirely under the supervision of the East India Company....
(85)

Sea of Poppies traverses the least treaded path of Indian colonial history by exposing the shrewd business acumen of British, who scrapped India of its riches and Chinese of their discretion by poisoning them with opium.

Come the cold weather, the English Sahibs would allow little else to be planted; their agents would go home to home, forcing cash advances on the farmers, making them sign asami contracts.

It was impossible to say no to them. (29-30)

As a result, the fertile lands of the Gangetic plain bloom only with poppies, beautiful but deadly, denying the farmers the traditional crops to sustain them, and indebting them to moneylenders and landowners or compelling them to sign the ‘girmit’. They have no control

over their opium produce either, because it is produced by the company- run factory at arbitrary prices. One gets taxonomy of the various types of opium and their effects, an account of what life in both mid 19th century Calcutta and its hinterland might have been like. With the help of the character of Kalua Ghosh describes the caste system in nineteenth century India: in Kalua lived Chamar basti, a cluster of huts inhabited only by people of his caste. To enter the hamlet would have been difficult... (53)

Moreover, Ghosh also points out the low living standard of low caste people through Kalua: ...not look like a hut at all, but had more the look of a cattle-pen ... (53)

Ghosh imagines and captures the helplessness of the poor lives of rural India, hellish life of opium factory workers, the violence and conspiracy on ship and the diverse culture of an India in the mid –nineteenth century.

Deepak Thakur adds in the discussion that “the movement of the novel is from Land to River to sea. Dissolution of sense of place is gradual and purposeful” (Thakur, 54). On *Ibis* the sense of place dissolves as people from diverse cultures are thrown together on the journey to Mauritius. Moreover, they float on a piece of land, dislocated from specificity of place and mono culturalism. Now they have become jahaj bhais and jahaj bahens (356). Indrajeet Hazra opines that *Sea of Poppies* also celebrates the sea faring lives of the lascars, the multi-cultural, multi-national groups of sailors across the Indian Ocean” (Hazra, 9). In India, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar became the epicenter of the indenture movement. During his research on the subject of indenture, Ghosh discovered that contrary to popular perception, many people came back home after completing their indenture contract, though most people chose not to return to India. Some of those who returned went back later to Mauritius. Ghosh also found letters written by people in Mauritius inviting their relatives and friends to join them. It was in fact, those who had returned home that became the most actively involved in the organization of migration in India. Another myth of indenture is that it was mainly the lower castes that migrated, but Ghosh discovered many Brahmins and other upper castes among the indentured workers. The indentured workers reflected the wide variety of castes and communities found in rural India in those days. They carried their songs and rituals which provided solace in their time of suffering and dislocation. It also shows their love and affection to the homelands. There are Indians and Westerners, Asians and Africans in the story. They fill the narrative with sprinklings of Bhojpuri, Bengali, Lascari, Hindustani, French, American, Anglo-Indian words and phrases, and a fantastic spectrum of English from the pidgin of the seafarers to the comically garbled English of Bengali Babu Nobkrishna and Indian ‘Foreigner’ Paulette Lambert--that result in what Peter Parker has called, in his *The Sunday Times* review, ‘a glorious Babel of a novel’ (TK, Ghosh, 338).

In *Sea of Poppies* the myths deployed for the purpose of mental strength, culture and comparison are the ancient Indian myths of the holy Ganga, Shivji and Bhagwan Ganesh, Ma Durga, Shri Krishna, Shani, Draupadi, Ravana and his demon-legions and the Egyptian myth of *Ibis*. In Indian mythology Ganga is considered a Hindu Goddess that personifies the river. It has also been important historically. Many former provincial or imperial capitals (such as Patliputra, Kannouj, Kara, Kashi, Allahbad, Murshidabaad, Munger, Baharnpur and Kolkata) have been located on its banks. In the present novel people shout an invocation to the river “Jai Ganga Mayya ki...” and gulped down a draught of air, before throwing themselves in (7). In Deeti’s room there was a small altar inside with statues of Shivji and Bhagwan Ganesh, and framed prints of Ma Durga and Shri Krishna. It shows her religious bent of mind. In the novel Ghosh

also explains that it was the sacred river of Hindus (Ganga) that had granted Deeti the vision to overcome all the obstacles.

According to Indian mythology ‘Shani’ gives us the results of one’s deeds through one’s life through appropriate punishments and rewards. In the novel the fate of Deeti is ruled by ‘Shani’. Ghosh writes about Deeti: “Her prospects had always been bedeviled by her stars, her fate being ruled by Saturn-Shani- a planet that exercised great power on those born under its influence, often bringing discord, unhappiness and disharmony. With this shadow darkening her future...” (30). In fact on the other side the shade of Saturn reminds her of her destiny.

The ‘Ibis’ in Egyptian mythology was a sacred bird of religious veneration, particularly associated with God Thoth, one of the most-important deities of the Egyptian pantheon who was usually depicted with the head of an Ibis. Thoth served as a mediating power, specially 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. Meenakshi Mukherjee in her essay, “The anxiety of Indian Nurse” articulates a characteristic skepticism towards the perceived globalizing trend in post colonial Indian writing: ‘The Indian novelist to be taken seriously is the ones not conditioned by the pressures of the global market.’ Ghosh seems to have escaped the persistent stink of self marketing, promotions and willful co modifications that has pursued other contemporary Indian writers. Colonialism has culturally and economically amalgamated Indian ethos and milieus with the selfish European sensibility resulting into political overtones, hypocritical society and the birth of “girmityas”, who gathers on Ibis in search of their futures. Babes Nob Kissin, a mysterious passenger comments on Ibis,” 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-reseeding landfalls that was truth.” Amitav Ghosh fiction demonstrates a concern with migrants, refugees and displaced persons dramatically unite on Ibis putting aside their rigid cultures and identities; thus History makes sense of modernity, articulating modern themes of novel i.e. rationalism, enlightenment, liberty, the individual, state, civil society, the democracy and struggle for survival .The novel reveals the damage done by British devastation which has wreaked upon the Indian economy as well as the society at large. Amitav Ghosh depicts an era of agricultural scandal; burgeoning western demand for profitable but inedible crops which is causing starvation in the subaltern world till date.

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