

LP² STUDY GROUP PROPOSAL FOR FALL 2022

**SEA OF POPPIES,
A NOVEL SET IN INDIA ON THE EVE OF THE OPIUM WARS**

Coordinator: Susanne Yellin

The year is 1838. Victoria is Queen. England is about to launch a war in China over the opium trade. We join a colorful group of indentured laborers, prisoners and crew as they make their way to Calcutta and board the former slave ship Ibis en route to Mauritius and China. Along the way we will learn about the history of the British Raj, poppy cultivation in Bengal, trade with China and traffic in indentured labor, and we'll encounter the Qing Emperor, William Gladstone and Lords Elgin and Palmerston. This fascinating historical novel (the first of a trilogy) by Indian-American author Amitav Ghosh features action and adventure, beautifully drawn characters and vibrant use of language.

Sue Yellin has previously co-coordinated study groups on Russian Short Stories and Cold War period espionage. She is an avid reader of world literature, with the opportunity it offers to delve into new areas; she has had a long-time interest in Indian writers in particular.

Type of Study Group: Mostly discussion

Readings and other Materials/Online Services

Sea of Poppies by Amitav Ghosh, (about \$15.00 new on Amazon}; we will read approximately 50 pages of the novel per week.

Optional but recommended: *The Opium Wars: The Addiction of One Empire and the Corruption of Another* by W. Travis Hanes III and Frank Sanello, (\$17.00 on Amazon).

Additional reading materials to be provided by coordinator: maps, videos, diagrams, illustrations and vocabulary lists.

***** SYLLABUS - A WORK IN PROGRESS *****

WEEK 1

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TOPIC: Setting the scene

READING:

Sea of Poppies: Chapter 1; Additional materials to be provided

QUESTIONS:

What does the world of our story look like in 1837? Where has the Ibis been and where is it headed? How do the first characters we meet – Deeti and Zachary Reed – disclose what this story is about? What are your first impressions of Mr. Burnham, owner of the Ibis and Doughty, the pilot?

WEEK 2

TOPIC: Brahmins and Untouchables

READING:

Sea of Poppies: Chapters 2-3; Additional materials to be provided

QUESTIONS:

How is the process of the opium poppy culture introduced through the characters Deeti and Kalua? What kind of life has Raja Neel Rattan Halder, Zemindar of Raskhali, lived until now; do we have any hint as to how his fate will be bound up with the others? What is the relationship between Jodu and Paulette? What are their immediate goals?

WEEK 3

TOPIC: Foreign merchants in Canton

READING:

Sea of Poppies: Chapters 4-5; Additional materials to be provided

QUESTIONS:

Why did Lord Amherst refuse to kowtow? What are the restrictions on foreigners doing business in Canton? Why have they been imposed? What transpires during dinner on board Neel's budgerow? How does the dinner discussion reflect the actual situation in China? What arguments are put forth in favor of and against conduct of the opium trade in China? What about the transport of indentured workers ("Coolies")? Who is on which side?

WEEK 4

TOPIC: Signs and portents

READING:

Sea of Poppies: Chapters 6 and 7

QUESTIONS:

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Who is Baboo Nob Kissin? What is he seeking? How has he gone about it?

How do the transformations of Jodu, Deeti and Kalua begin? What signs and portents occur in the stories of Baboo and Zachary Reed? How does Neel come to be arrested? What kind of person has he been?

WEEK 5

TOPIC: On the River Ganges

READING:

Sea of Poppies: Chapters 8 -9

QUESTIONS:

Where is the Ibis currently located? Who is on board? What are the duties of each of the crew? How does fate catch up with Deeti and Kalua?

How does Paulette begin to take charge of her own destiny? What are the conditions of Neel's imprisonment? What is he most concerned about?

WEEK 6

TOPIC: Heading toward Calcutta

READING:

Sea of Poppies: Chapters 10-11

QUESTIONS:

What are Baboo's three proposals to Burnham? What further developments occur in the lives of Neel, Deeti, Jodu and Paulette? What is a pulwar; what is life like on board? How does that brief voyage prove transformative?

How does the mood change as the river bends toward Calcutta?

WEEK 7

TOPIC: Convergence

READING:

Sea of Poppies: Chapters 12-13

QUESTIONS:

How has Neel's status changed as a result of his conviction? His wife's? Their relationship? How does he adapt to his changed circumstances at Alipore Prison? Why is the tattooist in the story? What is the significance of Neel's dream? How does Paulette react to Mr. Kendalbusche's wish to propose to her? Why does he want to marry her? What does the BeeBee

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suggest? What is life like in the camp that Burnham has had built at Baboo's suggestion?

WEEK 8

TOPIC: Preparing to board

READING:

Sea of Poppies: Chapters 14-15

QUESTIONS:

What are the parts of a sailing ship: how is it designed to separate the classes/ranks? Why does Jodu summon Zach in the middle of the night? How does Neel's transformation begin? Who is his cell mate? What are the ranks among the prisoners? What does he come to realize? Where are we on the eve of the ship's departure - who is on board, what are their states of mind, what are their roles, what are the relationships among them? Are they pilgrims? What does the Ibis represent at that moment? What sign discomfits them at the last minute?

WEEK 9

TOPIC: Last days on the Ganges

READING:

Sea of Poppies: Chapters 16-17

QUESTIONS:

Describe the boarding of the Ibis and the facilities for the various groups. What superstitious signs do they recognize? Who is Bahram Nauroz Moddie – Barry Modie? Why is Ah Fatt telling the story of Barry? What is the significance of the encounter between Neel and Ah Fatt, being 'exercised' on deck, and Zach? What is the reaction of Baboo witnessing the encounter?

WEEK 10

TOPIC: At sea

READING:

Sea of Poppies: Chapters 18-19

QUESTIONS:

What is the mood on board the Ibis on the last night before they enter the ocean? What is the story of Zachary Reed's watch? Why is it here? How did Ah Fatt come to learn how to pick flies out of the air? How do the various characters continue to change?

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WEEK 11

TOPIC: Call her Bhauji

READING:

Sea of Poppies: Chapters 20-21

QUESTIONS:

What do we make of the wedding celebration? What transpires during/after Baboo's visit to the chokey? What is Ah Fatt's vow? What string of events are triggered during Munia's disappearance? How has Jodu transformed? How does Paulette see the new Jodu?

WEEK 12

TOPIC: Wrapping up

READING:

Sea of Poppies: Chapter 22

QUESTIONS:

How does the fully emerged presence of Ma Taramony become 'the key that could unlock the cages that imprisoned everyone, all these beings who were ensnared by the illusory differences of this world'? Who are the five who escape? What does escape mean to each of them? Whose lives were transformed in the course of this story? In what ways? What was Ghosh's point in writing this story?