

Seeking Routes to Suppress Opium Trading: An Analysis of Margaret Gaan's *White Poppies*

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Abstract:

Margaret Gaan is a British-Chinese novelist. Her works are largely set in China. Her novels extensively focus on the culture and tradition of Chinese culture. As a novelist, Gaan has gained considerable merits. She has emerged as a writer of unique style. The novel *White Poppy* deals with the hidden history of the aftermath of opium war. In the novel, she presents the struggle between two different cultures. It also highlights the pangs of opium addicts.

The research paper aims to put forth the measures taken to bring an end to the opium trading. It also attempts to discuss the harsh effects of opium in China and the sufferings of the addicts.

Keywords: culture, addiction, opium war, trading, hidden history.

In the history of China, opium trading emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries. Western countries primarily Britain exported and sold opium grown in India to China. Westerners with the establishment of the East India Company in India forced the Indian peasants to grow opium instead of the regular crops. They developed factories in India to

process opium. The addiction of the westerners for Chinese products like silk, porcelain and tea made them continue the trading. The western traders acquire a very huge profit in opium trading. Year by year the quantity of opium imported to China increased tremendously. The Chinese nationals are addicted to the usage of opium.

The Qing dynasty desired to put an end to opium trading. The measures taken by the Chinese authorities to curtail the trading infuriates the British traders. The regulation methods taken by China and the response of the western countries resulted in the violent confrontations of the two countries. The Britishers with their mighty force defeated the conventional Chinese in the first Opium War. The Qing dynasty was compelled to agree to the Treaty of Nanking in the year 1842. The Chinese started referring to it as 'the unequal treaties'.

Margaret Gaan has written handful novels to her credits. Her novels are *Last Moments of a World*, *Red Barbarian*, *White Poppy*, *Blue Mountain*, and *Little Sister*. The novel *White Poppy* is chosen for the present study. *White Poppy* is the second novel of the opium trilogy. The trilogy elaborately discusses the opium wars and the anguish of the people of China.

The novel *White Poppy* is set in China after their defeat in Opium War. Most of the British nationals took up poison trading by seeing the lucrative profit, despite the wish of the Chinese officials to put an end to the trade. The trade fetches a number of benefits for the Britishers. They put in enormous efforts to continue the trading. The characters in the novel sulk for the trade imbalance in spite of the victory of the Britishers. They wanted to expand the trade.

We need China. We need this enormous market. In 1842 our navy whipped hell out of the Chinese, and we made them sign a treaty that opened up the Treaty Ports and gave us all sorts of concessions. But now, eighteen years later, the balance of trade is still in their favor, damn them! Last year we bought tea and silk to the tune of fifteen million pounds sterling, and all they bought from us was three million pounds in their favor, which we'd have had to pay in silver, if not for opium. (7,8)

One of the prime characters in the novel, Donald comes from London to monitor the tea trading business of his uncle's firm but he is totally against opium trading. Andrew

wants Donald for his opium business. According to Donald, opium spoils the citizen of China. He does not want to engage in sinful business. Andrew is seeing the profit of the trade and is not so mindful of the ill effects of opium. Andrew shares his happiness over the legalisation of opium but Donald feels bad. He thinks that legal opium is so dangerous.

“Legal opium’s worse than smuggled opium, in my opinion.”

In high good humour, Andrew laughed.

“I’m surprised at you, Donald! Legal’s legal, after all. It would have been legal last year if we hadn’t messed up the ratification. The Chinese don’t *want* to ratify, you know. We’ve got to *make* them.” (8)

The desire of the Britishers is to obtain additional trade benefits in China. It includes opium legalisation and gaining territorial concessions. Gaan presents the dominant attitude of the Britishers in a realistic way. The greedy traders persuade the British representatives to dance to their tunes. Lord Elgin sails from Britain to make the emperor accept their demands. If the treaties are not ratified, they are ready to attack.

He’s been put in charge of getting the new treaty ratified. After that fiasco last year they’re not taking any chances. This time there’s an armada of more than two hundred ships, British and French, behind Lord Elgin and the French plenipotentiary. (10)

For many years China remained a closed country. Westerners are allowed only in certain areas to do trading. No Chinese should teach their language to foreigners. Before the opium war Britishers experienced a lot of difficulties to do trading. Britishers thought that the war would bring an end to all the discomforts, but China retained its restrictions. It infuriates the Britishers.

According to the 1842 treaty we have every right to enter the city. But that damned Viceroy says the people hate us so much he couldn’t guarantee to protect our lives. Damned incompetency! (12)

In the novel, many characters are against opium trading. The family of Yin-kwa wanted to abolish opium altogether from China. They took up the abolition of opium as their life duty. Yin-kwa meets Donald to discuss his motives and to persuade Donald to join him. Yin-kwa plans to take control of all the opium which is imported into China by

the westerners. He shows his anger at the greedy attitude of the westerners. "Should the English be allowed to debauch our people, and no Chinese try to control them?" (15)

Yin-kwa devises different strategies to deal with the export of opium in abundance. He plans to grow opium in China. But the quality of Patna opium lures the addicts and they are not so mindful of the homegrown opium. Yin-kwa got the seed of the high-quality opium from India.

The English think they're very clever, but what will prevent the Chinese farmer, then, from growing poppies? What will prevent the Chinese from creating a system? The opium market will no longer be at the mercy of British smugglers." (15)

The life duty is not accomplished during the lifetime of Yin-kwa. It is then passed on to his son-in-law Jin-see. Jin-see searches for a good place to grow Patna opium. He wants to do everything without the knowledge of the guild members and westerners. The attempt of the native to grow Patna opium will not be welcomed by them. "Do what he'd planned for so many years- go up north to find a place where the great Patna poppy would grow as well as in Patna".(133)

To accomplish the goal the characters in the novel joined in anti-opium movements. For the suppression of the opium trade, Donald joined in the Executive Committee. He also joined in the coordinating body of the English anti-opium societies in England. Jin-see imagines the same in China. To fulfil his desire, he indirectly uses his son Great Dragon as he is to get an appointment in the new Board of Foreign Affairs.

Jin-see convinces the peasants of the Shansi to grow Indian opium in secrecy. He then promises to acquire all with ten percent higher than the members of the Guild with the help of Ah-fet. The peasants in the province have high regard for Ah-fet.

The farmers of the three villages would keep on growing poppies every year, as before, but for Jin-see, not the Guild, with seeds that Jin-see would provide, seeds of the great Indian poppy, whose capsules grew to a size more than two inches in diameter and produced twice as much opium, of twice the quality of ordinary poppies. (149)

Jin-see notices that opium is becoming a dangerous social problem. He also recognises that once addicted to drug, people can go to any length to continue their access. He is so keen to establish anti-opium societies in China and centres to treat the people who are suffering from withdrawal. In the book *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, addiction habit of the Chinese people is recorded:

Soon people were smoking opium simply for its narcotic effects: it relieved both physical and emotional pain and made tedious or physically taxing work seem less onerous. But opium was addictive; withdrawal symptoms included severe cramps, muscle twitching, chills, and nausea. (236)

The Chinese authorities wanted to punish the opium addicts in a severe way. They tried all the measures to eradicate the drug completely. But the illegal trading was happening through the corrupt officials. It causes severe problems on economic and social levels. The widespread habit critically affected the growth of the country.

Huang recommended heavy punishment for ordinary consumers of the drug— who, in recognition of how difficult it was to break their addiction to opium, would be given a grace period of one year to get clean before the full force of the law went into effect against them. (455-456)

The members of the Guild wanted to continue opium trading for their own benefits. The greedy nature of the western traders matches with Guild members. In the culture of China, merchants occupy the lowest strata despite their richness. Jin-see talks to one of the senior Guild members and explains his wish to exterminate opium trading. The member is so angry at Jin-see and he even tries to put an end to Jin-see.

I will tell you something, Wei Jin-see. Your plans are stupid. You are stupid. Opium is part of the life of this country. Millions smoke it and other millions earn their living by it. You cannot deprive all these millions of their pleasure and their livelihood. (163)

The measures taken by Jin-see to uproot opium are not heading in the right direction. In England, Donald is also trying his best to get support to root out opium trading. “His Committee got an anti-opium motion put before Parliament. It was voted down, 151 to 47, but he was very pleased that as many as 47 members voted for it”. (173)

Jin-see and Donald are happy that at least some people are supporting their cause in Britain and in China. The hong members see Jin-see as their biggest intruder. For his plans to suppress opium completely from China is not at all accepted by them. They wanted to put an end to the eradication by putting an end to the life of Jin-see.

Everything became dreamlike. A club raised high above his father's head began to descend slowly, slowly. He tugged at his father's arm, his sweated hands slipping, his arms weak against his father's frenzied determination. The club cracked down onto his father's head and his father's blood and brains splashed hot over him. (217)

The paper presents the hardships faced by the prime characters of the novel to suppress opium trading. The mission to put an end to the trading in the novel is passed on from one generation to another. As the task is not accomplished during the lifetime of one generation it is then passed to another. The characters in the novel strive to get rid of opium as it causes many problems to the country. Margaret Gaan has given a realistic picture of the sufferings of the Chinese people. The evils of opium trading instigated severe health issues eventually leading to social and moral disintegration.

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