

Unravelling the Mystery behind Opium Wars: An Analysis in

Margaret Gaan's *White Poppy*

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Abstract:

Margaret Gaan is a versatile writer. Her novels are primarily set in China. Her books devote a lot of attention to Chinese culture and heritage. She is a writer with a distinctive style. The untold story of the aftermath of opium wars is the subject of the book *White Poppy*. She depicts the conflict between two cultures in the book. It also emphasises the suffering of opium users as well.

The aim of the article is to analyse the negative consequences of opium use in China as well as the suffering of addicts. Additionally, it tries to outline the efforts made to bring a halt to the drug trade.

Keywords: addiction, culture, drug trade, opium war, treaties.

Margaret Gaan (1914-1998) was born in Shanghai, China. Her family backdrop was part European and part Chinese. It helped her to be well-versed in English and Chinese cultures. She spent her young days in China, she is well aware of the effects taken by the Britishers to open free trade with China. During her days in China, she became acquainted with the culture, customs and traditions of the country. In her writings, readers can visibly notice the difference of culture in China and Britain. Most of her novels depict the Opium Wars as the major theme, she talks of characters of British origin make their living in China feels completely out of place.

For the present study *White Poppy* is chosen. It covers nearly fifty years of the crucial Chinese history. It unravels the background of the critical historical changes of the country ever gone through. The second opium war fought by Britain and its allied countries made China to legalise opium market. It created an immense opportunity for the drug produced in Patna, India. China started her indigenous production of opium encouraging their farmers to cultivate poppies for extraction and soon the drug become a common commodity as any other goods in use.

The central theme of the novel was to abolish opium from China which the main characters take up as their 'life duty' in repentance of their involvements in drug trading in their earlier stages of life. Their efforts were to design to encourage China's commercial development and limit the foreign business interests. Various crises hamper their stealthy attempts to hinder the foreign merchant's importation of Indian opium. However, the author eloquently describes the history of the chaotic period of China.

The sequence of events of the war front astounds the readers with her spellbinding narrative approach. Every move of the allied forces and the Chinese unpreparedness to face

the well experienced powerful forces equipped with modern weapon of the time and advanced fleets are exceptional to read.

From the British point of view, the treaty signed after the first opium war didn't satisfy the white traders. They strongly believed for another war to stratify their wishes. The Chinese authorities balked to legalise opium trade but the British merchants insists on it as that was the only moneymaking commodity for them. On realising the consequences of the opium addicted Chinese society the emperor refrained from the very idea. He said "nothing would persuade him to earn a revenue from the vice and misery of his people" (WP 8).

Before the second opium war the Manchu ruled China was weak in power and they faced many rebellious movements to over through the Kingdom. They tried in south China, Tai-ping in the Yangtze Valley, the Small Swords around Shanghai and many others. The white felt that if these forces became powerful the country would become splinters and their trade deal would be difficult so they want the country to be united for their enormous market and stood with Manchu.

Another war was inevitable to satisfy the whites to open the Chinese market for the contraband to persuade their covetousness. The insatiable merchants initiated their move to get support in British parliament to wage war and they succeeded keeping aside all the consequences which the guiltless Chinese citizens comprising women, children, and the aged would face. The foreign merchant communities were the eye witness of the first opium war and they were well aware of the carnage the war could make. Knowing all the catastrophe of war their united voice echoed for the merciless act for legalisation of opium in the Chinese market.

Andrew the opium trader explained the situation in Canton to his nephew Donald:

In 1842 our navy whipped hell out of the Chinese, and we made 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 favour, damn them! (WP 8)

Andrew lamented for the out flow of silver to the Chinese as they showed least interest for the foreign goods, barter system did not pick up any momentum even after so many decades of trade dealings. That was the opinion of all the foreign merchants not only the English traders, the Americans, the French united to go for another full-fledged war against the Chinese even with their own differences. The incompetent Chinese authorities were not aware of the allied forces and their strength with modern weapons and engaged to face them rejecting any negotiations

Gaan's explicating revelation of the second opium war and its consequences on the people of China take hold of her readers. Lord Elgin who led the allied forces had great confidence on the forces even though the strength was less than the Chinese forces.

Our men are a well-balanced force of foot, horse, and guns, well trained to respond to generals who know how to fight battles. He says the Chinese tactics are from the Middle Ages-as, of course, are their bows and arrows. (WP 28)

The above were the words of Lord Elgin on his assurance of his forces before facing the opponents.

I do not wish to make the Chinese people suffer more than they already do from the vainglory of their masters. I wish only the Emperor to suffer. Therefore I order that his playground, the Summer Palace, all its buildings, everything that is left of it, be burned to the ground" (WP 39)

The war brought great damage to the Chinese, surrender of Peking, the destruction of the famous Summer Palace was the worst deplorable act of British vandalism. Yuan-ming-yuan or the Summer Palace was the glory of Chinese earlier dynasties. Lord Elgin the High Commissioner and Plenipotentiary justified the war for the obstinacy of the Chinese authorities and the Treaty was ratified by Prince Kung the representative of Emperor.

Gaan's depiction of war and the butchery of the allied forces were awful to read particularly the new generations in the present world beyond their imaginations.

Soldiers smashing in doors, dragging cowering people out from behind them, rushing in to search and break and tear apart. Soldiers calling merrily to each other, setting fires. Soldiers pulling screaming women along by legs or hands or waists or hair, whatever was handiest. Soldiers fighting each other to get at the women, helping each other to hold them down, stumbling over other soldiers humped on spread-eagled women(WP 31)

Gaan's description on the aftermath of war makes her readers to look back at the history of China and makes them to realise the situation with great heartache. The agony of the innocents on the hands of foreign troops, looting, raping, killing injuring them to suffer worse than death etc takes her readers to the site.

The Chinese negotiators didn't even bring that matter for discussion which put the white merchants in a gloomy state of situation. But the British merchants strived to legalise opium trade and believed force was the only way available to achieve their goal.

The novel *White Poppy* pictures the defeat of China in Opium Wars. Despite the desire of the Chinese authorities to prohibit the poison trade, the majority of British citizens

became involved in opium trading after realising the potential profit. The trade offers the British people a lot of advantages. They worked quite hard to keep up the trading. Even after the success of the Britishers, the characters of the novel complain about the trade imbalance. They intended to increase trade.

The Opium Wars exposed the weaknesses of the Chinese Qing dynasty in terms of its military abilities and internal corruption. The war aroused the Victorian Britain people to question the morality of their power in going to war to support an illegal narcotics trade which caused misery and death for millions of Chinese. In the end, the British were able to overcome their reservations with their narrative as these two wars was a great success. British casualties were small and the gains were enormous, the British opium trade to China did continue for more than fifty years after the end of the Second Opium War.

From the Chinese point of view, the Opium Wars marked the end of Qing dynasty. Imperial China's great history of development in isolation got defeated within fifty years of the invaders with humiliation of Opium Wars. Further the revolution took place to overthrow the imperial court and turned China into a republic. Although they are hardly remembered today, but the Opium Wars changed the face not just of China but also of the whole of Asia.