
AMITAV GHOSH'S SEA OF POPPIES: A YARN OF SUBALTERN PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT: This paper attempts to analyse and survey the transformation of the discourse of the novel *Sea of Poppies* to narrate the story of indenture as part of subaltern literature. It shows how the postmodernist writer Amitav Ghosh uses anthropological and historical perceptions to renegotiate discourses of subaltern concerns from the perspective of the indenture Diaspora with the predominant interference of subaltern concerns. Amitav Ghosh's attention as an intellectual humanist bestows him with the ability to deal with the subaltern, in the world where "wazirs and sultans, the chroniclers and the priests... had the power to inscribe themselves physically upon time". Almost all of his works are replete with the experiences of the subaltern characters. The mosaic of the characters in his works is characterised by the subalternity almost in his all works; particularly in *Sea of Poppies* (2008).

There is no other-go for the powerless. Living on the margins is very dangerous. The English sahibs created and controlled the whole power structure of hegemony. The subaltern didn't have any voice, right or human status. Thrown on the periphery, he was forced to observe the centre of power and its functioning from a distance. The peasants of India, who were forced to grow poppy, instead of food grains or vegetables, were exploited to such an extent that they barely survived and started floating toward marginality and lifelessness. History is revisited and judgement is passed over the power misused to exploit the imperial subjects dwelling in the power structure of hegemony. *Sea of Poppies* unearths one of the main and recurring motifs of the subaltern woes: the mechanism of exploitation, in its full detail.

Keywords: Diaspora, indentured labour, subaltern woes, voice of the voiceless, reconstruction of history.

Introduction:

"Everyone lives in a story... stories are all there are to live in,

it's just a question of which one you chose. " ...

Amitav Ghosh

Many big changes go quietly ignored. History is a 'story' of people of particular time in past. The authenticity of the documentation always dwells under skeptical criticism. The focus is mainly shifted to what history does not say. This gap of what is not being said becomes the foreground for matter-of-fact imagination for Amitav Ghosh who endeavours to establish a connection between the past and the present through his writings.

Amitav Ghosh's attention as an intellectual humanist bestows him with the ability to deal with the subaltern, in world where "wazirs and sultans, the chroniclers and the priests... had the power to inscribe themselves physically upon time" (Ghosh 17). Almost all of his works are replete with the experiences of the subaltern characters. The mosaic of the characters in his works is characterised by the subalternity almost in his all works; particularly in *Sea of Poppies* (2008).

As soon as one comes across the word 'subaltern', 'silence and speech' become the mind gripping subjects of deliberation. With these issues the destructive power of the centre and the devised incapacity of the subaltern to 'answer back' hold the position of determinants in the discussion.

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transformation of the discourse of the novel *Sea of Poppies* to narrate the story of indenture as part of subaltern literature. It shows how the postmodernist writer Amitav Ghosh uses anthropological and historical perceptions to renegotiate discourses of subaltern concerns from the perspective of the indenture Diaspora with the predominant interference of subaltern concerns.

Amitav Ghosh's Ibis trilogy assures to be his most thoroughgoing take on post colonialism; a backward glance at the infamous opium trade cycle that finally lead to the Anglo-china Opium War and China's subjugation to the omnipotent "free trade". *Sea of Poppies*, the first part of the trilogy starts a cycle of stories that is continued in the next book *River of Smoke*. History percolates into the stories of the characters in so many ways that they become histories of colonial exploitation.

Sea of Poppies (2008) is a voyage on the ship *Ibis* set in a time of 1838, where large cast of characters tell their own history and add in a collective history. Either it is Deeti-Kalua; running away from the village, Raja of Raskhali, Paulette Lambert; a colonial daughter looking for a new life, Jodu; aspiring to become a lascar or Babu Nobkissin; undergoing a spiritual metamorphosis. On their way to Black Water to the island of Mareech, these characters are exposed, give an insight in the broader social classes of the British Raj. The novel also maps out the opium trade begins at Deeti's small opium farming village, one of many such in the state of Uttar Pradesh the

opium goes from Ghazipur to Calcutta. The novel also shows the dark web of the empire's history as a mixed cast of characters for whom the *Ibis* is a shelf of the uncertainties of their lives and routine of home.

The novel *Sea of Poppies* depicts the East India Company's imperial designs. The motive of the East India Company was not confined to trade and commerce; rather it expands the Empire of the monopoly on the economic policies and then settle down themselves as the rulers.

At the centre of the novel, there is a metaphor of an expedition of a slaving schooner *Ibis* set to travel across the 'black water' to transport the opium, coolies, convicts and indentured labourers. In fact, the East India Company's trade and commerce turns out to be a new form of castigatory disciplinary system for the British. Neel's discourteous journey in the *Ibis* with the other convicts besides coolies exemplifying the disciplinary power of the British rulers show the height of subaltern issues.

Why do these people seem indifferent to any of the laws that would protect them? However apart from the prisoners like Affat and Neel, the natives like Kalua and the widow Deeti are subject to corporeal punishment inflicted on them by their own people? The sub-text of the novel gives an obvious sense of the colonial law that proved to be effective machinery in exercising authority and control on the natives.

The initiative of Diaspora as migration and colonization denotes a collective trauma, an expulsion where one dreams of home but lives in an exile. Thus the idea of Diaspora recognizes that notion of the old- country deep in language, religion, culture or folk lore and a migratory person is always linked with its past history. Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* refers to the indentured labour Diaspora with its mercantile history. In this novel, we unearth the diasporic consciousness evolves among workers and they are to be addressed with the slogan 'the voice of the voiceless'.

There is no other-go for the powerless. Living on the margins is very dangerous. The English sahibs created and controlled the whole power structure of hegemony. The subaltern didn't have any voice, right or human status. Thrown on the periphery, he was forced to observe the centre of power and its functioning from a distance. The peasants of India, who were forced to grow poppy, instead of food grains or vegetables, were exploited to such an extent that they barely survived and started floating toward marginality and lifelessness.

Race engendered sense of inherent superiority (in the master race) and inferiority (in the subject races), is brought forth effectively in *Sea of Poppies*. Moreover, Ghosh seems to be creating that much wanted space, so that *the subaltern can really speak*. In a

postcolonial twist to the stereotypical perspectives, this novel *Sea of Poppies* gives precedence to the perspective of the colonized over that of the colonizer. It's not because of any bias in the narrative voice but because of the predominance of subject voices that are heard in the polyphony of positions centred on characters portrayed in the form of individual subject consciousnesses.

History is revisited and judgement is passed over the power misused to exploit the imperial subjects dwelling in the power structure of hegemony. *Sea of Poppies* unearths one of the main and recurring motifs of the subaltern woes: the mechanism of exploitation, in its full detail. It shows how the peasant was exploited and how the agricultural timetable of a nation and the sustainable lifestyle of its people were altered with devastating effects on the economy. The character Deeti remembers the good old days when the fields

"Would be heavy with wheat in the winter... now, with the sahibs forcing everyone to grow poppy, no one had thatch to spare... poppy had been luxury then, grown in small clusters between the fields that bore the main winter crop"(Ghosh 42).

The vicious cycle of debt that the peasants of the opium belt entered, made any idea of escape impossible. The grain crops and vegetables were not grown. There was only a sea of poppies in all the fields. To feed their families they took more debt and thus they became more confirmed in their state.

The accursed crop 'opium' broke the very fabric of the society, as was the case when Deeti and Kalua came across the impoverished transients in Chhapra, "driven from their villages by the flood of flowers that had washed over the countryside" (Ghosh 298).

Common misfortunes unite people. Hunger pressed them so much that they were ready to forget all bindings of caste, religion and concern for life and its safety. They only had one thing in their minds: 'survival'. That's why they signed agreements to work on the farms in some unknown lands, even hazarding to cross "black waters" willfully agreeing to face the loom of disgrace of life.

If money was the main motive behind the exploitation of the Indian farmer, the same was true in the case of the Chinaman too. He was drowned in the river of smoke, while the white suppliers of opium glibly produced altruistic justifications all the time:

"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? Bloody hurremezads can hardly eat now: they'll perish by the crore" (Ghosh 385).

The very idealistic Mr. Burnham, the devotee of Free Trade, surprisingly happens to be a very forceful

supporter of the English merchant's right to supply opium to china, even if the Chinese are against it. He sees the Chinese Emperor's addict against opium as halting the

"march of human freedom" and, ironically, explains it to a racially mixed Zachary that freedom meant "mastery of the white man" (Ghosh 117).

He very happily and confidently expresses his joy at America's being the last bastion of liberty: because slavery is legal there!

Considering a particular timeframe that centres on the pre-political days of the populace, Ghosh shows how there were many Indians who were coerced into the *other kind* identity; or willingly accepted exclusion. Imperialism or colonialist yarn is not the factor that is always significant in this exclusion-oriented movement that *tradition* that is a component of nation-building.

To say, the term *postcolonial* has nothing to do with a particular geographical location or the point of origin of a specific thought. It is related more to the nature and orientation of a thought or an idea. It is a paradigm shift just like from a west centric approach to world history where in it gave way to the spread of democracy resulted into a more diffused and decentralized approach to history. Thus towering discourses were challenged effectively and even replaced by strategically developed mini or local narratives in the countries that had been exploited in the past. The literature taking birth in various nations is very diverse in nature, yet it has something that becomes visible occasionally, and runs as a subterranean stream at other times. The truth under

consideration is ... 'that' thing is its response to its colonial past. It is this past that joins the peoples and experiences of these countries, and their literature too.

Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* is a magic realistic account of the effects of racialization and rationalization of history on the subject races: colonized, tormented and exploited. It presents the central concerns of subaltern literature all through its yarn. One of the glaring themes is the mechanism of how the pseudoscientific theories of race, with its binary division of backward or advanced race, is translated logically into master or subject races and then, naturalized and internalized by the ruling and the ruled alike.

The novel as well displays through its narration and actions and words of prominent characters, how economics drove history of the colonies that were later designated as the commonwealth. Added to this, it also shows how the lust of money and power rule out ethics and reason too. Money clouded the eyes of the exploiters so much that they forgot the tenets of Christianity and liberal humanism. The mechanism of exploitation is presented in its full ghastly detail, sometimes very vividly and graphically with interpretation enough towards once and for all in our life time. With all these strands of the concerns of eternal nature are woven the strands that belong to a puny individual characters personal quest and destiny. The public and the personal-private elements are pictured beyond description to convert them into something rich and strange.

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