

Exploitation of Women in Amitav Ghosh’s “Sea of Poppies”

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Abstract: The impact of colonialism on the cultural, social and political lives of the colonised countries is examined carefully by an observant eye of Amitav Ghosh. The industrial revolution in many European countries has been facilitated, expedited and made possible with the capital accumulated due to the exploitation of the so called backward races. The advanced races imposed their will and culture on those who were vulnerable in the process. Then they presented their mission of all pervading and shameless exploitation as one of cultural and religious salvation of the barbarians and pagans. They had the power, the power to speak, write, reason and prove: all were theirs. So, they created the narrative of a history from their perspective and objectified the objectification of the natives. As the postmodern historiography points out, historical inquiry is born less of the necessity to establish that certain events occurred than of the desire to determine what certain events might mean for a given group, society, or culture’s conception of its present tasks and further prospects. The history of the Empire was meant for the consumption at two levels: by the white man and by the black/brown/yellow one too. Therefore, it had to be convincing.

Sea of Poppies can be seen as an attempt to narrate a specific history from a particular perspective. Ghosh revisits the past with a very critical eye. His fiction curiously, strongly and predictably enough, abounds in postcolonial themes of cultural translation, of braided temporality, of marginality itself. He has his own version of it – that arises out of the consensus among the postcolonial intelligentsia – and he makes the narration of his fiction his tool to propound his thesis.

Keywords: *Exploitation, Marginality, Temporality, Vulnerable*

1. INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* is a terrific novel, the first volume in “Ibis trilogy”, revisits in new, breathtakingly detailed and compelling ways some of the concerns of his earlier novels. Among these are the incessant movements of the peoples, commerce, and empires which have traversed the Indian Ocean since antiquity; and the lives of men and women with little power, whose stories, framed against the grand narratives of history, invite other ways of thinking about the past, culture and identity.

During British rule, manual labourers were forcibly taken away from their homeland to work on plantations in countries like Mauritius, Fiji and Suriname. Though physically uprooted from their homelands, they took their culture and languages like Bhojpuri to these foreign lands, where it is spoken till date, mixed with languages like French and Creole.

The action begins in March 1838 with the arrival of the Ibis at Ganga-Sagar Island and later Calcutta. Discontinued as a “blackbirder” with the abolition of the slave trade, the schooner is scheduled to transport girmitiyas – indentured coolies – to Mauritius. For the merchant-nabob, Benjamin Burnham (the rhetoric has changed little today), “when God closes one door he opens another”.

Back in India, it is to join the expedition, London is putting together “to take on the Celestials”. With the first Opium War, as it is to be called, only months away, what is at risk for the British drug industry in India, should the Chinese continue to block the trade, becomes clear. We learn, beyond the brilliant colours of the flower, the realities of the enforced cultivation of poppies: the ways of collecting sap from the pods, the activities in the processing factory, the medicinal uses of opium, and its pernicious influence.

Caught within the dark web of the empire’s history is a mixed cast of characters for whom the Ibis is a projection of the uncertainties of their lives and the routines of home. On the Ibis a community of sorts begins to form among the migrants. Relationships are forged or break up, hostilities erupt, and individual destinies undergo sudden changes of direction.

The broad canvas of *Sea of Poppies* displays many features of a sensational novel – a widow rescued from the funeral pyre, a court trial, runaways, disguise, heroic exploits, vengeful acts, murder. A controlling theme running through the many strands of plot is the question of identity.

Cut off from their roots, in transit, and looking ahead to a fresh start, the migrants are prone to invent new names and histories. For some, like Paulette, disguised as an Indian coolie to escape her guardian, the “layers of masking” do no more than bear witness to a human being’s “multiplicity of selves”. For others, like Zachary, the second mate, the truth is bleaker by far. The son of a slave and her white master, he is always bound; it seems, to a brutal history and the stigma of colour. All have stories to tell and secrets to hide. Like the sketches of people which Deeti finger-paints as keepsakes for her “shrine”, the narratives teases the mind with discontinuities and suggestiveness; and as with Ah Fatt the opium addict’s descriptions of Canton, his old home, “the genius... lay in their elisions”.

With the colourful characters, another bedazzling aspect of *Sea of Poppies* is the clash and mingling of languages. Bhojpuri, Bengali, Laskari, Hindustani, Anglo-Indian words and phrases, and a fantastic spectrum of English including the malapropisms of Baboo Nob Kissin, Burnham’s accountant, create a vivid sense of living voices as well as the linguistic resourcefulness of people in the Diaspora. The “motley tongue” is as much a part of the cultural scene at the lower reaches of the Ganges, and of the multi-layered history of the subcontinent, as the collision of peoples on one of the great rivers of the world.

The novel closes with the Ibis in mid-ocean in a storm. Serang Ali, leader of the lascars, has abandoned ship, along with the convicts and the condemned; the first mate as well as the subedar are dead; of the key figures only Deeti, Paulette, Nob Kissin and Zachary are left, watching from the deck the disappearance of the long boat and those close to them. We also watch, awaiting with eagerness the second volume of the trilogy.

The vast sweep of this historical adventure spans the lush poppy fields of the Ganges, the rolling high seas, the exotic backstreets of Canton. But it is the panorama of characters, who's Diaspora, encapsulates the vexed colonial history of the East itself that makes *Sea of Poppies* so breathtakingly alive - a masterpiece from one of the world's finest novelists.

The story begins with Deeti, a simple, pious lady, caring mother and an efficient housewife. Married to Hukam 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 looks 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 ox man from the neighbouring village, comes to her rescue. The couple flees and unites. This is not acceptable to their fellow villagers. In order to escape Deeti's in-laws, she and Kalua become indentured servants on the Ibis.

Zachary Reid, an American sailor was born to a slave mother and a white father, receives a lot of attention. He has been on the Ibis since the schooner started her arduous journey, and hopes to die with it. He maintains that in his lifetime he has never seen a more admirable article than the Ibis and it is no less than a mother to him, supporting him in his dark hours and rejoicing with him in his happiness. With the support of the head of the Lascars, Serang Ali, he becomes the second in command of the ship, when it was refitted to carry indentured labour to the island of Mareech or [Mauritius](#) instead of the tradable opium.

Neel Rattan Halder, a wealthy rajah whose dynasty has been ruling the [zemindary](#) of Rakshali for centuries, is 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 at the height of the opium trade. But now that the opium trade has come to a standstill, as a result of the resistance shown by the Chinese authorities, he is left with no money to clear his loan. When Mr. Burnham proposes to settle the load for Halder's zamindary, Halder refuses the deal as the zamindary is his family's ancestral property and selling it would mean turning his back on his many dependents living in his household and zamindary. He is tried for forgery, but it is a sham trial orchestrated by Burnham and his cronies. The court punishes him by sentencing him to work as an indentured labourer for seven years in Mauritius. It is then that he meets Ah Fatt, a half-Chinese, half-[Parsi](#) opium addict from Canton, his sole companion in prison since the two are eventually transported together on the Ibis.

The book also features Paulette, a French orphan, who has also grown up in India. Her father was an eccentric but kind botanist, and her mother died in childbirth. Mr. and Mrs. Burnham take Paulette into their home after her father's death. She becomes determined to run away because Mr. Burnham has behaved in a disturbing way with her in private. Also, he is trying to get her married to his friend, the stern, elderly Justice Kendalbushe. As it happens, Paulette had met Zachary Reid, the American sailor, at a dinner at the Burnhams'; she was instantly drawn to him, and he to her. She has resolved to travel to

[Mauritius](#), as her great-aunt did, in the hope of finding a better future. Along with Jodu, her childhood friend (or brother, as both Jodu and Paulette are brought up under the care of Jodu's mother following the death of Paulette's mother at childbirth), she boards the Ibis, unaware of her destiny. Paulette easily disguises herself as an Indian woman, using her fluent [Bengali](#), which she has learnt in childhood growing up at close proximity with Jodu and his mother. Paulette's upbringing in India has also made her feel more at ease with Indian manners, food, and clothing than with Western ones.

As the stories merge, each carrying its share of joys and sorrows, the Ibis becomes a shelter to those in destitution.

After much strife 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 Chinese opium trade, which the world history reports with the exploitation of the Chinese at the foreground and that of the Indian peasant's at the background, has been inverted in the narration of *Sea of Poppies*. Ghosh is really successful in revealing the suppression and the exploitation; his characters suffer throughout the story.

2. REFERENCES

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