

Postcolonial Identities in Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies

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Abstract

India is a beautiful country that is painted with ethnic, bio-cultural, and linguistic diversity. It has its roots connected with eternal nature. People of different classes, castes, creeds, and colours intermingle all together under a single roof. India is a country which accepts new things with an open mind in favour of humanity. A few decades back, what India is now was a slightly different tone. Sea of Poppies delineates the contemporary class domination, exploitation, caste brassiness, untouchability, male domination and the quest for identity. The book is a historical overview of India. Britishers suck the blood of the Indians by enslaving them. During the colonial period, starvation and violence spread in Bihar and Bengal. In this article, the ancient aspects of India and its connectivity with nature and culture are described briefly, and the dark side of the marginal people is discussed. The writer has not praised but protested the sheer exploitation of humanity; meagre steps taken against evilness destroying the Indian culture and social life and also throws a light of optimism towards the emerging thoughts which can mould the mindset of the younger generations to a more significant extent.

Keywords: *Opium war, Indentured labourers, migration, addiction, untouchability, male chauvinism, epitome of sacrifice.*

In the Sea of Poppies, The ancient aspects of India and its connectivity with nature and culture are described briefly, and the dark side of the marginal people is discussed. The writer has not praised but protested the inhuman treatment of the colonisers and also threw light on a positive approach towards the emerging thoughts, which by far can change the mindset of the younger generations to a large extent. Amitav Ghosh's Novel Sea of Poppies (2008).it is the first part of the Ibis Trilogy. It is followed by the other two parts, River of Smoke (2011) and Flood of Fire (2015). Today, Indian writing in English

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has become an area of concern and an indispensable section of modern Indian English language and literature. A blaze of striking points of postcolonial historical aspects and postcolonial has become the topic of today's speaking world. A bunch of specific influences of historical countenances, like colonial exploitation of the poor, performing sati, an essence of untouchability, caste brassiness, migration, economic exploitation by Britishers and male domination in the society, etc., are analysed briefly.

In a review, Jason Fernandes says that *Sea of Poppies*, the first novel of Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy*, has all the credentials of a significant literary work. It is a historical novel where disparate characters, trapped by the confines of class, caste, race, religion, gender, addiction or sexuality, fight for the opportunity to escape, transform and find independence. However, despite this apparent complexity and the fact that it benefits from thorough research, *Sea of Poppies* is highly 'readable'. It has all the page-turning qualities of a good old-fashioned yarn. Amitav Ghosh is one of the influential and prominent writers of postmodern Indian English literature. Born in Calcutta in a Bengali family, he has first-hand knowledge of Indian culture and society. As a historian and an anthropologist, he mainly focuses on the lives of Bihar and Bengal during the colonisation of India. The historical aspects of India and its social condition during postcolonial rule are covered minutely and without any embellishment.

Sea of Poppies is a historical fiction set in the background of the Opium War between India and China in the 19th century. It deals with two main themes: one is the cultivation of Opium as a cash crop in Bihar and Bengal for the Chinese market, and another is the transfer of indentured labourers to Mauritius for work in the sugar mills under the British through the ship named *IBIS*. This novel is divided into three sections on land, river and sea because, at first, this ship was used for the opium trade through the river Ganga. However, after the trade was considered illegal and closed, then the ship *IBIS* was used to carry indentured labourers to British colonies such as Mauritius. The ship *IBIS* was generally a slave carrier between Africa and America. However, when the slave-carrying business was entirely banned, it was rebuilt and used to carry indentured labourers to British colonies.

The first part of the trilogy ends in a dramatic note of suspense and excitement. It speaks about a great danger in the middle of the sea in which half of the people were

trapped, and the remaining were floating without control in the stormy ocean. Ghosh paints all the characters to their perfection while keeping the historical aspects in his mind. This can also be seen further in all his works. In *Sea of Poppies*, the characters and their nature have a deep insight into what really happened and what not, and even their names reveal their character's specifications.

Colonial exploitation is one of the major themes in Amitav Ghosh's novel *Sea of Poppies*. The villagers reside at Ghazipur, a small Hindu village between Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The people used to lead a simple and quiet life by growing staple crops for their survival and their families. Generally, wheat, cereals, and pulses were the principal crops which were grown by the villagers for their livelihood. They were compelled to stop growing their staple crops and switch to poppy farming. The British colonial factories processed these plants in factories to extract opium and transport it to China on a large scale.

The majority of the people of Ghazipur were compelled to work for low wages. The protagonist of the play, Dheeti, her husband Hukam Singh, who was the x-soldier also worked there for a low income; once Sheet visits the opium factory to bring her sick husband back from work, she notices the workers and says, "Their eyes were vacant.... Completely naked". (p 95). Here, we can see that the Britishers, on the one hand, banned the farming of the staple crops by the people of that place, and on the other, they forcefully compelled them to do opium farming. Here, we see that stopping the traditional crop farming leads to starvation of the villagers, and working to produce opium beyond their choice at meagre wages can be termed as the exploitation of the villagers. Similar was the condition of other Indian villages during the British rule.

Talking about Sati or Widow burning is a typical ancient Hindu tradition which is now banned in India, in which the wife or the lady has to burn herself on her husband's funeral pyre. It was considered a voluntary act which was quite courageous and heroic. The one who performed Sati was considered to be a goddess and was worshipped in homes in ancient India. In *Sea of Poppies*, we see that according to the plot, Deeti's husband, Hukam Singh, was found to be dead in the opium factory due to opium addiction. When it was time for the funeral of her husband, she forcefully had to perform sati. In ancient times, it was believed that a widow was no longer alive when her

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husband was dead, and her dignity remained until her husband was alive. When Dheeti's husband's health became ill, fortunately, her brother-in-law Chandan Singh came near. He said that he would take responsibility for her and keep her well only when she satisfies all his needs, but Dheeti, on the other note, said sharply to him that 'I will burn on my husband's pyre rather than give myself to you.' (p.158) This means that she has made a firm decision to perform satire and speak of the voluntary acts of Indian women to save their dignity at all costs. Here, Ghosh reveals the reason why many of the Indian widows were ready to perform sati in the past. As far as the Hindu widow is concerned, it is most well come to commit sati rather than to depend on others or relatives for one's survival. That is the reason why Dheeti said clearly to Chandan Singh that she would be performing sati rather than staying with him as her mistress.

Untouchability is also one of the themes of Sea of Poppies. While going through the novel, we see that Kalua, a dark-skinned giant figure, was a low-caste man and the owner of a cart in that village. Every day, his duty was to take Hukam Singh to an opium factory 3 miles away. As he was a low caste man, the people who sat in his cart had to sit facing back, and Hukam Singh also did it every day. It was considered that while doing anything or going anywhere, if somebody saw the face of any low caste, then it was considered as an ill-omen. So, while sitting facing back, even the passengers had to keep a hump of sack or curtain to avoid direct contact with the other low caste men who also were on their carts from the back or on the side of the road. Amitav Ghosh presents the social evil of untouchability very well. The same is true of Indian villages in the contemporary time. 'Ghazipur' is not a village but is a symbol of the village conditions in India.

Through this, it is clear that Ghosh is a keen observer of humanity and society. India is a land of diversity. All kinds of evil cultural practices are performed by us, made by us, and judged by us. Ghosh, through Sea of Poppies, tries to give a message that all these evil practices of our society should be banned and everyone should be treated equally in front of everyone. Plight due to untouchability can also be seen in Mulk Raj Anand's novel Untouchable. The protagonist of Untouchable, Bakka li,ke Kalua, was also not able to enter the British coloniser's houses. Often, he cleaned their toilets, and even

his sister, Sohini, was not allowed to take water from the well where the upper-class people, the pundits, etc, were taking water.

It is the caste that divides the society into classes according to the rank of the family, wealth and social background, and it leads the ones who come under this as untouchables. It even takes all the social facilities that the upper class enjoys. It is an evil practice that takes all the freedom from the ones who come under it. In modern times, though, it is neglected to some extent, but then it can also be seen in various places and particular activities.

Ghosh has a beautiful technique to depict the accurate picture of the caste system that prevailed in India in the 19th century in the first few chapters of the novel. Caste brassiness is a social evil that is deeply rooted among the residents of the village. According to this practice, whenever a high caste individual confronts a low class accidentally, it is considered to be an evil act, or it pollutes him. The cruelty done to the down caste is beyond our imagination; in the novel, we see three Thakurs of Ghazipur addicted to gambling. They have heard about Kalua's physical power and have promised him an ox cart for participating in the wrestling on their behalf. Kalua did so; unfortunately, he achieved his first defeat in front of the Maharaja of Benaras. Class distinction and discrimination are evident in most of the incidents.

The migration of the Indians to new British colonies is a common theme in Indian writings in English. Ghosh sheds light on the situation and focuses on the reason for such migration. The third part of the trilogy 'Sea' takes place in the schooner that moves from Calcutta to its final destination, Mauritius. Some colies sign a bond of contract labour to escape from the poverty and misery of their home. Here, Deeti is the protagonist in the novel. We see that when her husband, Hukam Singh, meets his premature death in the opium factory. During the last rituals, we see that Kalua, a low caste man from a neighbouring village, an ox cart rider, flew Deeti away from performing sati. This incident was considered a matter of extravagance and anger by her relatives; a low-caste individual rescuing a high-class girl who was married and was burning to ashes by the side of her dead husband flew away with a lower-class man was not accepted by her relatives, and the society of the village. In order to escape from the

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anger of her relatives' Dheeti and Kalua both run from there and sign to become indentured labourers on the ship named Ibis.

Similarly, in the last few chapters of the novel *Sea of Poppies*, we see that Neel Ratan Halder, who is the native king of Rakshli state who has business dealings with the colonisers, is accused of forgery by Mr. Burnham and his colleagues. The court punishes him to work as an indentured labourer in Mauritius for 7 years respectively. When he comes to the prison in Ibis, he counters Ah Fatt, a half-Chinese and half-Parsi, a serial opium addict from Canton, who becomes his sole mate Companion there. Similarly, Paulette, an orphan born and brought up in Calcutta, easily disguises herself in the indentured labours on Ibis. She was fascinating and had positive thoughts about Indian culture. She finds Indianess in more ease, like eating and wearing saris, than in Western cultures, and she has great respect for Indian culture. After her father's death, she was under the care of Mr Burnham for her nourishment, but later, when she grew to the age of marriage, she came to know that the Britishers had a plan for her marriage with an old English man named Justice Kendalbushe. So, she finally stuck to her decision of running to Ibis and disguised herself in a sari so nobody could recognise her. Hence, the Indian as well as British Women were victims of male Chauvinism and patriarchy.

Economic exploitation is one of the facts covered in many of Ghosh's narratives. In the novel, we see that Dheeti, the protagonist of the novel, when her husband, faces a premature and sudden death in the opium factory of Ghazipur. She felt the world was over for her and her life would end on the burning pyre. After she finally arranged to bring her husband's body from the opium factory with the help of Kalua, she was not given any financial support or aid as expected. In this way, it is clear that Dheeti was financially and physically exploited by the opium factory in which her husband worked for many years. Similar was the case in other factories all around the country.

Another point can be seen that the people of that village indulged in the farming of cash crops, which include wheat, grains, cereals and seasonable crops for their livelihood. Even the straw was used to make the roofs of their huts. However, they could only continue for a short time. British colonisers soon compelled them to stop their crop farming and forced them to cultivate opium. As opium cultivation benefited the Britishers on a large scale, their business grew.

However, on the other hand, the local villagers had to work overtime and were paid low wages, which was not enough for their overall survival. The same kind of situation can be seen in Mulk Raj Anand's novel "Untouchable" Bakha, a young boy who was also exploited by the aristocratic class. He was compelled to do those works which he never wanted, like cleaning the latrines and toilets of the Britishers. He was paid significantly less and sometimes even needed to be paid. Economic exploitation is one of the major themes in most Indian English novels. Ghosh is concerned about how the Britishers eventually exploited Indians from the day before independence, and it is very well-painted with characters in Sea of Poppies.

Indian society has belonged to man since time immemorial. Women have always been given second positions after men in Indian society from the beginning. She has been facing injustice, tolerance, inferiority, suppression, and discrimination in Indian society. In spite of being educated, she has not had an equal position in education, politics, or at home. They are treated as burdens to men and have to be dependent on them.

Male domination is an integral part of the patriarchal society of pre-independence India. In such a system, women depend on men. Dheeti here herself becomes a victim of this social system. Her husband, Hukam Singh, is deeply addicted to opium and cannot lead a happy marriage; her mother-in-law knows & about the demerits of her son, and on the wedding night, Dheeti was raped by her brother-in-law Chandan, and she knows that her cruel mother-in-law was also involved in this sin. She was confirmed about the child in her belly, and her father was her brother-in-law, Chandan Singh. She thinks "that confirmed Deeti's belief that the child in her belly has been fathered not by her husband, but by Chandan Singh, her leering, clacks jawed brother in law" (p.34).

When Hukam Singh is lying on his deathbed, his brother Chandan Singh approaches Deeti and gives her a choice to be his mistress. Besides the social system, it is a fact that if a lady has no male heir and after the death of her husband par, part of his property and land would be transferred to his brother. It was clear to Dheeti that after the death of her husband, her relatives would make her life hell and unbearable, so she decided to perform sati in his husband's funeral pyre. In a patriarchal society, women have no identity of their own. Her identity is closely associated with her Father, her

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husband, and her children. The same situation can be seen here; Dheeti, the protagonist of the novel, has no identity of her own. She eventually is called by the name 'Kabutri ki maa', which means the mother of Kabutri.

Similarly, Malati is an example of a typical Indian wife; she is the wife of Neel Ratan Halder. She does all her duties as a dutiful wife for her husband without any complaints. Even though she knows about Neel's illicit relationship with his mistress, Eloskesi, she never complains about it. Another fact is that Neel's mother is also neglected by her husband. She lives an isolated life. Before Neel is shifted to Mauritius, he is put in jail for some time. Malati comes to meet her husband, but she only says to take care of him and does not complain about why he did so and why he ruined her life. She was shifted to a small house, which had very little space to live in. Despite all the miseries of her life, she plays the role of a dutiful wife towards her husband without expecting anything from him. Indian Women have been portrayed as the epitome of sacrifice and patience.

As a historian and anthropologist, Ghosh knows well about the strengths and weaknesses of Indian culture and how it has affected Indian society over the decades. He never appreciated the caste system and sati tradition in India. Being optimistic, he has always been a possible answer to India's problems. He wishes to do this entire thing totally and believes his. It is clearly seen when a low-caste man, Kalua, comes and rescues an upper-caste Hindu widow, Deeti, away from the sati ritual and marries her. It is the beginning of a new era in their life. Ghosh also highlights the colonial British rule; when the villagers were asked to farm opium for a higher salary, they agreed despite the merchant cheating them and paid meagre wages, which were not sufficient for their survival. Here, Ghosh throws light on how the Britishers exploited the villagers physically and mentally. The last part of the novel is about the schooner, the Ibis. Here, different people belonging to different cultures come and unite under a single roof, leaving all the disparities of caste, class, race, nationality, and language. The black water of the Indian Ocean has washed away all the hindrances, conspiracies and flaws in the area. Considering all the historical aspects, we can proudly say that Ghosh's Sea of Poppies is a great treasure and the best contribution to Indian writing in English. The Indian macrocosm can be seen in the microcosm 'Ghazipur' Amitav Ghosh, through the

Sea of Poppies, which has tried to champion the cause of the downtrodden during the postcolonial times.

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