

# HEROIC DEEDS OF THE MARGINALISED AND DOOMED CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL SEA OF POPPIES

Dr.Olive Thambi, B.Priyadharishini

Assistant Professor, Research Scholar (PhD)

LRG Govt Arts College for Women, Tirupur.

## Abstract

The present paper focuses on the heroic deeds of the characters in the novel *Sea of Poppies*. The entire backdrop of the novel is Opium. Each and every character in the novel is related in the processing of Opium, Some of the characters in the novel face life threats and some comes under survival issues. Since the characters are destitute, they have no one to look on. In order to survive the characters boards the ship Ibis. The difficulties they face in the voyage, how they overcome the problems, the changes came over in the characters are discussed elaborately.

## Keywords

Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, Adventure, Opium, Migration, travel, Protagonists, Positivity.

## Introduction

“... To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

Alfred Lord Tennyson

Amitav Ghosh is a keen observer about the impact of colonization in his country and is very careful in projecting the plight of the marginalized people of the post-colonial era in his novels. The author skilfully point out the troubles of the marginalized characters. They usually have no one to look on, and have only a few to raise voice on behalf of them. These aspects are cleverly portrayed in his novels. The first novel of the Ibis trilogy *Sea of Poppies*(2008) is a complete blend of a grand narratives of history which is concerned more for the lives of men and women who are powerless, gives a new dimension in thinking about the past, culture, identity, love, fate, revenge, sex and friendship. The novel is divided into three parts as land, river and sea. The story takes place during the opium war when Britain used India to grow poppy seeds that were sold as opium to the Chinese to create a more favourable balance of trade for Britain. Through his magical narrative skill, the author takes the readers to Ganges and to Calcutta, where the poppies are grown and opium is processed. In India, there is a belief that fate rules mankind, so are the characters in the novel. By the magnetic pull of Ibis all the major characters of the novel, despite differences of caste, colour and creed come to view themselves as ‘jahaj-bhais’ in the ship Ibis.

The present article is focused on the heroic deeds of the marginalised and the doomed characters in the novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008) .The major historical occurrence which act as a setting to the plot of this novel is the transfer of indentured labour from India to work in the sugar plantations of Mauritius. Compared to the other two novels of the Ibis trilogy, in the present novel, the protagonists are given a strong advocacy. Their heroic deeds in the novel give a cinematic effect to the novel. The ship Ibis has a key role in uniting the characters. It provokes realisations about their lives and makes them leave their temporary fallback by the seaside and make them ready to stand as a changed, strengthened people off the shore.

Every incident, that happens in a human’s life mould and shapes his personality. In this novel also the characters faces many hardships in their lives, but how the characters react and face the problems in life is a lesson given to everyone who reads the novel. Though the novel is about post-colonialism and its effects on the people, it is enjoyable because of the strong will of the characters. When a person is tormented continuously for a long time, they have only three ways to come out, either they become hopeless or dejected or will stand against the problem or else will try to escape them from the situation. Disappointment is found in all sorts of life, but how to tackle is the biggest challenge in life. Similarly the characters in the novels are highly disappointed in their lives, but once they decide to move on, everything changes and gives them a way for a new life. Positivity and hope makes human beings survive in the world. The characters in the novel daringly design their life according to the changing situations. Ibis, the ship in the novel gives, a path, changeable and uplifting, nourishing and helpful. The ship stands as a representation not only of death, but for a new birth, not merely of peace but of violence. The ship holds the promise both of freedom and of enslavement. Its sparkling surface is inviting, and its height is mysterious and daunting.

The trilogy gets its name from the ship Ibis in which most of the main characters meet for the first time. The Ibis, starts from Calcutta carrying indentured labourers and convicts directed to Mauritius, but runs into a storm and faces a revolt. Two other ships are caught in the same storm the Anahita, a ship carrying opium to Canton, and the Redruth, which is on a botanical expedition, also to Canton. While some of the travellers of the Ibis reach their destination in Mauritius, others locate themselves in Hong Kong and Canton and get trapped up in events that lead to the First Opium War.

The novel portrays different characters from diverse cultures counting, Bihari peasants, Bengali Zamindar, Parsi businessmen, British traders and officials, and a mulatto sailor. As the sea accepts everything, the characters on board also readily accept them despite the colour, caste and creed. In addition to their native languages, the novel also brings in the readers to various pidgins as well as the original Chinese Pidgin English and variants spoken by the lascars. The novel has for the most part been well received. The novel *Sea of Poppies* is comprised of twisting narratives involving a village woman Deeti, an American sailor

Zachary Reid, an Indian rajah Neel Rattan, and an opium trader Benjamin Burnham. The story begins with its major character, Deeti, a religious mother and wife, finds a 'tall-masted ship' in her vision, at sail on the ocean. Her husband, Hukam Singh, a former military man, physically-challenged, was a worker in opium factory functioning in Ghazipur. Deeti discovers that on the night of their wedding, her mother-in-law pillaged her with opium. Without her knowledge, she is molested by Hukam's brother Chandan Singh, the real father of Deeti's daughter, Kabutri. The family believed they have justified the marriage due to Hukam's impotency. After the death of Hukam, Deeti sends Kabutri, to live with her brother's family. Deeti finds herself facing death when she must consider the ritual called sati. She was hopeless and moves along with her husband's dead body to accept the ritual of sati. Ghosh portrays the scene of sati very clearly in this novel. Kalua, an untouchable approached the burial ground, listens to the verdict of the people and understands that 'sati' was to take place with the cremation. He makes an instant arrangement with his cart by letting free the oxen. He takes the bamboo platform from the hinge from his cart and ties it around its centre. With that time he sees the procession coming out from the house with Hukam Singh's body. Kalua waits for the occasion, as everyone becomes busy towards performing sati awaiting the pyre to light. He acts very promptly by leaving no time for others to realise about the happenings. He speeds up to the fire and saves her from the platform against the fire. Again he scrambles to the top, and snatches Deeti from the flames. So Deeti is able to escape from this option when she gets the opportunity to flee from her husband's funeral pyre, with Kalua, a lower caste man from a nearby village. By protecting Deeti from death, Kalula shows his gratitude towards Deeti as she once helped him to escape from a brutal attack by his master. The Ibis as a mother carried its mates generously. The pair becomes indentured servants travelling on the ship, the Ibis. In the ship many labourers' die due to sea sickness and their bodies are thrown into the sea, just like peeling the onion and throwing the remains away, the poor lascars were also disposed by the guards of the ship. When the shipmates were quiet, Deeti raised her voice against the practice. She asked the guards to allow their family or friends to do the final rights to the dead body. Another notable thing about the pair in the ship is they work together, and Deeti trusted Kalula completely. Soon Deeti was considered as a leader by the ship mates and they call her respectively as Bhauji. There was a common enemy held in the ship to take revenge on Deeti and Kalula. His name was Byro Singh, a relative to Deeti. Though Byro Singh beats him badly, he never thought of killing him, but his disgracing words made Kalula kill him brutally in front of the crew. In this novel Kalula is portrayed as a beast and an untouchable initially feels low comparing himself to others as in the story of *Adventures of little green Dragon* written by Mari Privette Ulmer. In the story there is an ugly green Dragon rescues the life of a beautiful Princess from an evil king, it judges that the Princess will not accept his love but luckily the princess fall in love with the Dragon, the story conveys the moral values everyone should have in their life. The Green Dragon learns that he must initially accept himself and then he can truly believe others and others can recognize him. Likewise Kalula made his attempt to save Deeti, so she falls in love with him and he is accepted by his crew members as a fellow human being.

The next character travels in all the three novels is Raja Neel Rattan Halder, a Zemindar, and his dynasty had been in power for centuries in Raskhali. Burnham approached Halder, hoping to sell his estates. As a way to pay for debts, he has run up investing in the opium trade with China. Trade has stopped due to confrontation from authorities in China, leaving the rajah in financial ruin. Burnham suggests Halder to use his zamindari to clear up the loan, but he refuses as it is part of his family's ancestral property. His acceptance would harm his dependents. Burnham and some of his friends file a case and Halder is accused of forgery. He is sentenced to seven years in prison in Mauritius, which will also bring disgrace to his family. While in prison, Halder meets Ah Fatt who is a half-Chinese, half-Parsi opium addict from Canton. Their friendship can be compared to that of Huck and Jim in the novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Both of them are put in the Ibis. Halder might have sold his property, but as a Zamindar, he could not let his family down, he cannot stand against the government, so he readily accepts things to go in its way. He escapes from the sea through a life boat and as he could not go back to his native place, he continues his life in the guise of translator.

Another major character in the novel is a French orphan Paulette grew up in India with her best friend Jodu, the son of her nursemaid. Paulette's mother was dead during her birth and her father, a political radical, passed away after that. Burnham and his wife took her in their custody. Paulette was more comfortable with Indian ways than with the Western lifestyle. This brings conflict to the Burnham's family unit. Paulette meets Zachary at a dinner at the Burnham's home and they are immediately drawn to each other. Paulette was forced by Burnham to marry his friend, Justice Kendalbushe, so she flee to Mauritius and hopes for a better future. Jodu and Paulette both travel on the Ibis. Jodu travels as a lascar, with Paulette disguised as a niece of one of Burnham's workers. Though Paulette is helpless in her life, lives with the support of Burnham she hopefully travels in the Ibis in the same ship Burnham travels. She hides her identity even from his lover, Zachary the second mate of the ship. Paulette's strong will reminds the readers about the female character Elizabeth Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice*. Eliza refuses to marry Willaim Collins, a man of his father's choice, but accepts Darcy for his true love, status is not a barrier for Eliza, and similarly Paulette also rejects Kendalbushe for Zachary. Both the characters do not compromise their love for economical security. As the stories of various characters persist, the Ibis turns into a place of safe haven for those who do not fit in or are exiles for one reason or another. By the end of the novel some characters, including Halder and Jodu, are headed for Singapore aboard a longboat while Paulette, Deeti, and Zachary head for Mauritius.

Amitav ghosh's study on tradition is deeply and cleverly projected on his characters former class distinctions. One can witness the characters from *Sea of Poppies*, Deeti and the French orphan Paulette running from their past lives, who slips aboard the Ibis. The novel is amazing in its portrayal of characters and incidents. Throughout the story, as butterflies glide dizzily among the poppies and the dazed factory workers pitch through their work, the mind-altering properties of the British East India Company's beneficial merchandise are never out of mind. *Sea of Poppies* works well as a self-supporting novel. But it also lays the groundwork for Ghosh's larger project. The deep sea is carrying not only the travellers but their culture, their beliefs, lot of expectations about their lives in a land which is new to them. All the characters in the novel had a story of abuse, distress and denial at their background. It is bliss for a person to stick in to their place of origin. As for many people it is not the same, they live in a place without self satisfaction, just to sacrifice or survival purpose. What they were while steeping in to the ship was completely different while they step out in the shore. Throughout their journey, they were tormented because of the captain and others, but their unity, bravery and the togetherness paved the way for them to escape and to have a new beginning in a new land. Though they were also floating in the sea like the poppy seeds without knowing the destiny as the ship caught in the storm, there was confidence in the faces of all the main characters to survive in a new land with their new identities as they had created for themselves in their Journey.

Heroes generally need not walk on a tall building or prevent bombs with an outspread hand. They need not wear boots and robe. They need not bleed or be injured, and have some meticulous powers. They are also common people who are aware and ready to risk their own lives and they could unravel someone else's trouble even their situation is terribly worse. Their action to safeguards others will take them to touch the peak of the world. The novel *Sea of Poppies* also has such characters. In order to safeguard her

shipmate, Deeti took the initial efforts, which made her to be a prisoner. But her crew mates safeguarded her and Kalula while they were in danger. Kalula killed the common enemy of the ship. Throughout his life, he never reacted to any situation as he was considered as an untouchable, but his valour was revealed before his crew at the end point of the novel. Neel Rata Halder was not compromised with the judicial action of surrendering his properties to Burnham, instead of that he safeguarded his ancestral properties to his future generations. Paulette on the other hand refuses to marry Kendalbushe, she was ready to risk her life in order to conquer her love. Among the characters travelling in the ship some were rejected from their society, from their land, from their people, some were doomed to lead the life of a convict, but nature as a mother rescued them by its strong blow (the storm) parted the ship mates and safely landed them in different shores. The determination of Ulysses is reflected in the characters of Amitav Ghosh towards the end, though it was a heavy storm, situations in front of them alarms them they are going to die, the positive energy of the crew and their determination to live carried them towards the shore.

[1] Ghosh, Amitav. "Sea of Poppies". New Delhi: Penguin Viking, 2008. Print.

[2] The New York Times – Sunday Book Review by Gaiutra Bahadur, published:  
November 28, 2008.

[3] Stranger's undersail reviewed by Shirley Chew, The Independent, Friday, 16 May 2008.

[4] Ulmer, Privette Marry. "Adventures of the Little Green Dragon"  
Unity Books.1998.Print.

