

CULTURAL BACKGROUND IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *SEA OF POPPIES*

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Abstract

This paper describes the Indian socio-cultural scenario of the nineteenth century and people's dominant beliefs and practices as portrayed in the *Sea of Poppies* by Amitav Ghosh. The story is largely dictated by two major events—the incidents that led to India's first Opium War and the Golden Triangle Trade China and Britain and the farmers' tremendous exodus to the British colonies' farmland. Ghosh has brought to light the social conditions of the time as well as the status of women in a male-dominated society by presenting the history of opium trade and indentured labor in India under colonial rule in the nineteenth century. Women are held in high regard in ancient India. They enjoyed equal status and privileges with men during the Vedic period. During the medieval period, the practices of polygamy, purdha system, dowry and sati degraded the status of women in society. The paper criticizes the traditional Indian forces that in fact are hierarchical, oppressive, and anti-feminist.

Key Words: Opium war, Vedic period, purdha system, sati, traditional Indian forces.

Sea of Poppies is a historical novel that opens on the eve of the opium wars in 1838. The story starts with the arrival of a former slave ship *Ibis* at Ganga-Sagar Island, situated in Eastern India and the Bay of Bengal. The schooner, discontinued as a black birder with the abolition of slave trade, is refitted to carry grimityas or indentured coolies from Calcutta to the sugar estates in the market. The British Mauritian colony. The novel unfolds with events that bring these "ship-siblings" together without any distinction in class, colour, ethnicity, language or faith as they push toward a common destiny. The story is split into three parts: land, river, and sea. The first section describes the situations brought to the ship by the protagonists. In the second part of the river near Kidderpore, when the ship is moored, all these characters get into the ship by some stroke of destiny or other. They get to sail the *Ibis* to a new life in Mauritius in the last chapter. Deeti's first character to be revealed is a young mother of a little one. Village in the northern province of Bihar, 50 miles east of Benares. Hukam Singh, Deeti's father, works in the opium factory in Ghazipur. He was wounded in the leg while serving as a sepoy in the British Army and began to eat opium to relieve him from the pain caused by the battle wounds, but it ended up in drug addiction.

This addiction slowly kills him, and Deeti is forced to immolate herself in the funeral pyre of her husband for a sati in the family to make them famous by the social custom and her relatives. Kalua, the ox-cart driver, saves her from the class of the leather worker who takes her husband every day to the factory. They run away from their home, but they find that their parents' rage has not subsided to their horror. They were looking for Deeti and Kalua, who gave the family shame. The couple had no choice but to leave the country and end up in *Ibis* on their way to Mauritius. The first section exposes rural folk's economic and social deprivation, the oppression inflicted on the colonized and the plight of classes and castes marginalized in India.

The victims of widespread social practices and beliefs are Deeti and Kalua. There was a perception that the stars they were born under had a great influence on one's future. Her star, Saturn or Shani, believed to carry discord, unhappiness and disharmony, ruled Deeti's destiny. With this shadow darkening her future Deeti had no high expectations about her married life, and she was not troubled by the possibility of marrying a handicapped man. He showed no interest in her but was always in a "somnia-induced state of torpidity, opium. Deeti is shocked to find that her brother in law impregnated her in an opium-induced condition to protect the reputation of the family, and this menial act was accomplished with the aid of her mother-in-law. Because of a woman, family honor has been considered more important than honor. He also refers in a state of trance to Deeti as Draupadi, wife of five brothers, and says that it's a lucky woman who bears each other's brother's children.

In the pre-independent Indian society, the role of women is depicted through Deeti's life and that of the other characters of women. Women were held in high regard in ancient India. They enjoyed equal status. During the medieval period, the practices of polygamy, purdha system, dowry and sati eroded the status of women in society. Females have been removed from the formal system of education. When Paulette tells the migrants she read from a book that in Mareech there are no snakes, how would a woman know what is written in a book? Jhugroo satirically replies. The rule of the day was child marriage. The novel reports that at the time of his birth Neel was betrothed to another landowning family's wife, and when he was twelve, the marriage was solemnized.

It was predicted that parents of the girls would send the groom money and gifts to get their daughters married off. As part of her dowry, Deeti's dad had to paw the roof of her groom's home. Although he could afford it poorly, he did not displease the cost. Home was considered a woman's right spot, but a man was free to live a life he wanted. The Raja had as many mistresses as there were days in the week, so that they could stay in a different bed every night. A girl child was treated as a burden whereas a male child was a marriage and motherhood, particularly begetting sons, were considered a woman's goals. On her wedding night, Deeti is impregnated by her brother in law as the new bride's role was believed to beget a family heir. His brother will naturally inherit the estate of a man who doesn't have a male heir. Being the mother of a girl child, after his death, Deeti has no chance to hold the land of her husband. She agrees to sacrifice her body in the funeral pyre for fear of her brother-in-law's heavy accumulation of land and property after the death of her husband and to avoid the sexual harassment of her brother-in-law. Family resource and privileges with men during the Vedic period. It was a patriarchal society where women did not have their own titles. They were either associated with their parent, son, or children. Just Kabutri-kima remembered Deeti.

Women's oppression was married to men; they were much older to beget a male heir. This is the case with Taramony, the widowed aunt of Nob Kissin. Her husband had married her in a final attempt to beget a child just six years earlier, and his final wish was for his young wife to be sent to an ashram in Brindavan's holy city. There were many facets of women. We have been exploited physically, mentally and psychologically. Deeti is not only assaulted by her brother-in-law on her wedding night, but she is also subjected to sexual assault by her husband in his death bed. His progress was so aggressive that she was afraid he could attack her, right on the bed of her husband. Malati, Neel's wife is a passive sufferer who carries out her duties without any aspirations as a wife and mother. Her pain is psychological, but she never cries or challenges the relationship between her husband and his mistress Elokeshi as a typical Indian woman. Neel's Mother was also neglected by her husband, and she lived secluded in the palace's gloomy wing while he enjoyed the pleasures of his mistresses, ceding to their demands, which resulted in his debts increasing. Mother was also neglected by her husband, and she lived secluded in the gloomy wing of the palace while enjoying his mistresses' pleasures, ceding to their demands, resulting in his debts rising. Dookhanee, a ship's prisoner, had signed as a worker unable to tolerate her sexually abusive mother-in-law's oppressions. An agent from the opium factory tricked Munia, and when he discovered that she had given birth to a baby, he set fire to her home, killing her husband, mother and child.

After being orphaned, Paulette is under the care of the Burnhams. But in the name of religious education, she is coerced into sexual harassment by the honorable Mr. Burnham. As Paulette asks Zachary how Mr. Burnham handled her, the white plantation owner reminds Zachary of his mother, the slave woman sexually abused by his uncle. He had told him how she had been shaking as a young girl of fourteen at the entrance to his cabin in the woods he kept for his slaves' bedding. Her feet were reluctant to move when old Mr. Reid told her to stop crying and get to bed. To hear his mother talk of that first time in Mr. Reid's cabin in the woods it had twisted him in a knot.

These incidents represent not only the callous exploitation of women, but also the society's muteness of women. Gayatri Spivak observes pointfully, the history of sexual distinction is doubly erased inside the subaltern subject's erased itinerary. The theoretical construction of gender retains the male dominant, both as an object of imperial historiography and as a focus of insurgency. If the subaltern has no history in the struggle of colonial creation and is unable to speak, the subaltern as a female is even deeper in the shadow.

An Indian widow's situation has been deplorable. The patriarchal philosophy loved the idea that the life of women should be denied "once the husband was gone. The Hindu widow had to immolate herself on the pyre of her dead husband. As Spivak points out, the rite was not caste or class-fixed. Sea of Poppies

presents a poignant image of Deeti in a blazing white sari that was taken to the pyre of her husband to be burned alive with him. She was bent, barely upright: she couldn't stand on her own feet, much less walk... Half dragged and half borne, she was taken to the pyre and made to sit on it, cross-beamed, beside the corpse of her husband.

Remarriage for high-caste widows was forbidden as it was regarded as the defilement of their social status 'purity'. A young widow, Taramoni, had to spend her widowhood in isolation and penance according to her husband's wish. The novel also documents Indian society's horrific system of caste discrimination. The caste system was a brutal hierarchical mechanism that marked as untouchable an unfortunate section of society and forced it to the periphery. Caste has been the center of social life in India for several centuries. It determined a person's job and social interaction. The novel also discusses the society's superstitious beliefs and practices. People's beliefs are steeped in superstition. Deeti felt it was terrible to draw realistic pictures of people alive. Her shrine's walls had portraits of two brothers and a sister who died in their youth but were depicted by diagrammatic pictures of their relatives who were alive. Her beloved son, Kesri Singh, was depicted as portraying his rifle and moustache by a few strokes. Inviting an invasion of ghosts and hungry pisaches to leave the dishes unwashed overnight, and so Deeti goes to the river at night when she saw Kalua being humiliated by the zamidars. The childhood home of Deeti overlooked a confluence of two rivers, Ganga and Karamnasa, which means karma killer.

The village people believed that the waters of Ganges were auspicious while the contact of the water of the karma-negating tributary would destroy a lifetime of merit, so household women chose to go to the auspicious river for bathing or hunting water. Looking at the parched land around Deeti, it was felt that the influence of Karamnasa had spread over its banks, spreading its blight far beyond the land drawing on its waters. It was believed that certain products and food items were auspicious while unclean objects were deemed inauspicious. Mr. Burnham visited the Raskhali Rajbari with money, gold, and auspicious gifts such as saffron and areca nuts at the end of the trading season when the ships returned from China. When Neel was preparing to go to court, he was made to eat a meal consisting of different types. Fried in the purest ghee and sweets of auspicious food-vegetables and puris. The road he had to follow was cleared off as jharus and toilet buckets with impure items. Night soil sweepers and porters who were considered ill-omen carriers were taken away. Parimal also made sure that the Neel-accompanying constables were high caste Hindus.

Amitav Ghosh has provided a clear picture of nineteenth-century Indian society with its values, practices and social issues such as inequality and the marginalization in the name of caste of a particular sect of men. The novel also exposes the male domination in a patriarchal society and the subsequent reduction of women to a secondary position.

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