

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN AMITAV GHOSH'S SEA OF POPPIES

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ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh's novel "Sea of Poppies" was shortlisted for Man Booker Prize in 2008. The novel is based on historical setting of colonial rule in India and fulfill its need of supply of opium to China. His portrayal of women is realistic. In his novel women characters are few in comparison to men characters. Ghosh has represented women from every section of Indian society. The position of upper class women is not very different than women of lower class. Women in the novel suffer from gender discrimination, class and caste structure.

Key Words: Opium, Discrimination, Mythology, Multiculturalism, Identity.

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008) is a unique fictional creation based on a wide research not only on various aspects of the colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent but also the sea – routes of the time, the technical know – how of piloting ships, the typical language of the 'laskars' in a ship and so on. In an interview given in 2002, Ghosh says, "I don't think there's a big difference between writing fiction and writing non – fiction. When you're writing non – fiction, there's real world out there that has to be taken seriously which means that you have to take step outside the confines of what happens in your head and engage with the real world. But my fiction is also founded on very extensive research. The world interests me. Sometimes the world interests me as fiction and as non – fiction and I don't see a distinction".

The statement is applicable to all his works including *Sea of Poppies* where hitherto unrevealed aspects of colonial oppression, inflicted by a section of white men who were desperate to make up the loss caused by the abolition of slavery, are exposed through the rendering of how the business of carrying slaves in ships were replaced with the business of opium and indentured laborers.

The sea forms the background of the novel and the ship of the Ibis, which had earlier been used for transporting slaves and now remodeled for the new transport, is at the centre. The novel is divided into three parts: 'Land', 'River', and 'Sea'. In the first section 'Land', the characters who were somehow related to the ship are introduced along with the ship. The second part 'River' centers on the activities of the owner of the Ibis in Calcutta and also some of his friends. The third part 'Sea' is concerned with the inmates of the ship as it leaves Calcutta and moves on towards its destination. Even before the actual ship is described, it is visualized in the very beginning of the novel by a Bhojpuri women Deeti, the wife of a worker in Ghazipur's opium factory, a poor, illiterate woman who did not have the chance of witnessing a ship when she visualized a ship.

Sea of Poppies depicts how the small farmers and agricultural laborers in colonial India were forced by circumstances to be coolies and deported in Mauritius and other places. The portrait of the Bhojpuri woman Deeti who had the vision of the Ibis in the very beginning of the novel is typical example of such oppressed farmers. The novel shows how after losing her husband, who served in the opium plantation, Deeti is ready to die in her husband's pyre only to serve herself from the lust of her brother - in- law, she says, "Listen to me: I will burn on my husband's pyre, Rather than given myself to

you". But is rescued by a lower class or caste man Kalua, who marries her by eloping in secret and then takes her to the ship to be coolies in some other land.

Amitav Ghosh reveals areas of colonial oppression that were not much highlighted earlier along with the much talked about topic of the oppression of the poor by local moneylenders. The British businessmen wanted to earn easy money from cash crops and to meet their greed the Indian farmers were compelled to produce crops according to the liking of the colonials, depriving themselves of wheat and paddy that they needed most to support themselves. The cultivation of Indigo 'Neel' that was included later in the agenda of national movements, but the cultivation of the opium was little focused. Here in this point of view, Ghosh sincerely reveals the plight of the formers like Deeti who fell in the clusters of the English businessmen and began poppy plantation. Before poppy plantation was introduced, the fields were heavy with wheat in winter and after the spring harvest, the straw could be used to repair the hut's roof. But now, with the shahibs forcing everyone to grow poppy, no one had thatch to spare. It had to be bought at the market from people who lived in faraway village and the expense was such that people put off their repairs as long as they possibly could.

It tells the stories of upper caste and lower caste of characters grapple with their sense of place and self. Their struggle come to terms with new ways of living is violently shaken by upper caste and lower caste like Dalit and that of the British trade and their business with opium in India. Ghosh's dazzling cast of characters manages to buff and shine through much of the prosaic dullness back to splendors. He chooses upper caste people and lower caste like Dalit people as his characters who are rich and particularly, some of them are high – caste Rajput and low caste Dalit chambers are displaced. Ghosh's characters get involved in unexpected relations across castes and cultures. As it said, "*That women be free to define themselves, Instead of having their identity defined for them and again, by their culture and their men.*"

Ghosh's characters taken individually are certainly real, it is the combination of characters of high – caste and lower – caste Dalit and Zamindar according to situations that they are placed in which make the novel a reality within fantasy and history which interfaces fiction. His bewildering array of both upper – caste and lower – caste of characters and their erratic behavior adds to fantasy actually under lies life's reality.

In *Sea of Poppies*, Amitav Ghosh assembles from different corners of the world like sailors, mariners, coolies, stowaways and convicts for the Ibis; its destiny is a tumultuous voyage across the Indian Ocean to the Mauritius Islands. Moreover, it is a slaving schooner, which converted the transport of coolies for open water; Ghosh provides the reader with all manner of stories and equips himself with the personnel to man and navigate and old – fashioned literary three – decker. Amitav Ghosh has always a surprise for his readers. Moreover, in each text, he experiments with a new genre. *I Sea of Poppies* he however, revisits in amazingly migration of people from one country and continent to another, the incessant movements of ordinary men and women whose stories, framed against the grand historical narrative, call for different ways of looking at past, cultural and identity.

The trade was monopolized by the British merchants under seal of the company. Peasant farmers of Bihar and parts of Bengal were forced to turn over their agricultural lands by the company's agents for opium production. Moreover, this caused widespread poverty and hunger because lands that had once provided sustenance were now swamped with the rising tide of poppies.

By this time, Britain had abolished slavery and the Empire's plantations in far east and the west Indies needed workers who were slaves by another name 'giritiyas', indentured laborers with a signed contract or 'girit' (a corrupted derivative of English 'agreement'). Shiploads of coolies travelled the Indian Ocean under horrible conditions to escape the dismal deprivation in their native land and to supply cheap labor for British sugar planters on such islands as Mauritius, Fiji and Trinidad. The

novel centers round these two broad economic themes of the 19th century: the compulsory cultivation of opium as a cash crop in Bihar and parts of Bengal for the Chinese market and its disastrous consequences and the origins and transport of the first batch of Indian Diaspora.

At the heart of this epic saga is a ship, the Ibis. Originally built in America as ‘blackbirder’, from transporting slaves from Africa; it has undergone a transformation after the abolition of slavery. This schooner is sold out to a British shipping company and trading house, Burnham Bros, which has extensive interests in India and China. The new owner, Benjamin Burnham, who has his business headquarters and principal residence in Calcutta, has acquired the novel vessel with an eye to refitting it for a trade different trade. Shipping opium to China and transporting indentured laborers to British colonies in the Caribbean Islands. The ship has a British captain Mr. Chilling Worth, who is an opium addict, and a first mate, Mr. Crowle who is a rogue. Its second mate Zachary Reid is a Mulatto Freedman who has sailed with it from Baltimore.

The novel follows about Deeti’s fate or destiny through so many difficulties. There are no protagonists in this novel. However, the novel revolves round the central character Deeti. Each character in the novel *Sea of Poppies* has its own identity.

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