

Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies – A Review

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Abstract

This article explores the way in which Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* characters—Ghosh has portrayed the plight of women in the 19th century which were worse during the colonial period. They were subjugated and oppressed both within the patriarchal as well as zamindari system. Deeti, was herself a victim of male oppression and patriarchal violence in her husband's family. She suffered marital rape by husband, sexual assault by brother in law, abuses like chuddail or chuddailiya after her husband's death and the enforcement of 'sati' system wherein she was forced to die along with husband. The character of Elokeshi was different who was a mistress of Raja Neel Ratan. The Zamindars had right to enjoy multiple woman for fun, lust and sexual desires but eventually when Raja was arrested in a false case, she betrayed him as she got to know that he lost his property. On the other hand, Malti, the wife of Raja Neel Ratan performed all the duties of a so called 'good wife and mother'. She was a 'bahu' of a Zamindari family who was not allowed to speak in front of male heads. She was silent spectator and passive sufferer and her condition was not better than Deeti's condition. The character of Taramony as guru ma of Baboo Nob Kissin is also very interesting. She was much younger than her husband and was leading a life of widowhood which was full of suffering and hardship. However, Baboo Nob Kissin was so much impressed by the spiritual knowledge of Taramony and her devotion towards her Lord Krishna. Both of them started living together in a small circle of devotees and people called her Ma who gave spiritual instructions to them. This is another set of relationship between a man and woman which shows their spiritual and pure love between a guru and a shishya.

Key words: Ethical, Universals, Character, Amitav Ghosh, Sea of Poppies

Introduction

While Ghosh alludes to the link between land and sea through the title and the tripartite structure (land, river, sea) of the novel, most of the novel takes place on the Ibis, and even Part One of the novel (which is titled "land") is full of references to sailors, bodies of water, boats and ships. (2) Almost all the characters feel the effects of the ocean on their lives in one way or another. Thus, one can read *Sea of Poppies* as a narrative of place where the ocean is central but where the dynamics on land intimately create and affect the world of the ocean. The novel illustrates the intimate relation between "history, politics, and bodies of water" (Verges 247) through its attention to the Indian Ocean. (3) This focus emphasizes how the British Empire was situated within global networks and highlights the textured realities of Empire—"a complex web consisting of horizontal filaments that run among various colonies"

rather than a strictly vertical relationship between the center and individual colonies (qtd. in Metcalf 7). Through oceanic networks, ideas, commodities, and people flow from India to a variety of spaces--China, Mauritius, England, the United States. Thus, the Indian Ocean is a palimpsest for Ghosh, and in his evocative mapping of this place and time, it becomes a rich archive where he reads layers upon layers of stories of power and violence, exchange, resistance, and survival. The body of the ship itself--deck, timbers, and hold--carries inscriptions of different histories (of non-Western sailors, the slave trade, indentured labour). Cross-cultural, caste, class, gender, and national collaborations blur all sorts of boundaries and enable the formation of new alliances (both oppressive and liberating) and emergence of reconstituted families within contexts of domination and resistance. The crisscrossing oceanic trading routes offer up an affective map of the world of unlikely kinships and intimacies formed on the fluid world of the ocean as a consequence.

Objective:

This paper intends to explore **Amitav Ghosh** is the author of ten highly acclaimed works of fiction and non-fiction which include the Booker Prize shortlisted **Sea of Poppies** depicting Ethical Universals and Characterization.

Sea of Poppies Ethical Universals

The tale told engagingly by “Sea of Poppies” is hardly a straightforward one. Beyond the clever circuitousness of Mr. Ghosh’s narrative there is also a language barrier to be surmounted. “Sea of Poppies” is written in thick, polyglot jargon that is made more or less self-explanatory by its context but still gives the book a mischievous linguistic fascination. For instance: “Wasn’t a man in town who could put on a burra-khana like he did. Sheeshmull blazing with shammers and candles. Paltans of bearers and khidmutgars. Demijohns of French loll-shrub and carboys of iced simkin. And the karibat!” Many such passages also have a cryptically obscene ring.

“Sea of Poppies” comes equipped with a lexicon of sorts, an addendum that Mr. Ghosh calls “The Ibis Chrestomathy.” If you need to pause to contemplate what chrestomathy means (one dictionary definition: “a selection of literary selections, especially in a foreign language, as an aid to learning”), it won’t be the only time “Sea of Poppies” slows you down. Mr. Ghosh uses this lexicon to provide elaborate amplifications of his favorite (though by no means all of the book’s) turns of phrase and to connect those words with the characters who use them.

It would diminish the pleasures of “Sea of Poppies” to make these notations too penetrable. This book deliberately entangles its readers in a thicket of playful language, and that language is a virtual character in the elaborate story. Besides, wordplay aboard the Ibis can be as dizzying as the opium that also abounds. Mr. Ghosh’s scholarly bent allows him to draw on sources like a 19th-century article on

Bhojpuri folk songs, a study of Bhojpuri Traditions in Mauritius (at a time when Mauritius was a British penal colony) and Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases, and of Kindred Terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical and Discursive. Burdensome as this background information may sound, Mr. Ghosh juggles it to make it lighter than air.

In ways that are acutely and wittily alert to its characters' former class distinctions, "Sea of Poppies" winds up assembling Deeti and her daughter, names changed, running from their past lives; a French orphan named Paulette who slips aboard the Ibis and later dresses as a man to help with an escape; Paulette's lover, since this book has a thoroughly romantic heart; and a man inhabited by the spirit of his dead mother, since this book's heart can also be enjoyably quirky. Throughout the story, as butterflies drift dizzily among the poppies and dazed factory workers lurch through their work, the mind-altering properties of the British East India Company's lucrative merchandise are never out of mind.

Self-created identities of Characters

"Sea of Poppies" works well as a free-standing novel. But it also lays the groundwork for Mr. Ghosh's larger project. By the time this book ends, the reader has been caught up in a plot of Dickensian intricacy, the Ibis readied for whatever its mission may be, and the characters firmly enveloped in new, self-created identities.

Post-colonialism socio-economic adversities of the workers

'Sea of Poppies', a novel written by Amitav Ghosh in the year 2008, discusses the trajectory of a ship named 'Ibis'. The book is divided into three parts: land, river and sea. The book traces the historical records of indentured labour migration from the rural villages of Bengal and Western Uttar Pradesh to the sugar estates of Mareechhi (Mauritius) in the early 18th century during the colonial reign of British in India. The story talks about the recruitment of girmitiya mazdoor (slaves) and coolies from the rural belt of Western Uttar Pradesh and Bengal, which were also the central location of the labor out flow from India. The book tries to explain the socio-economic adversities of the workers, which forced them to leave their mother-land. Ghosh has narrated an epic story centered around the opium cultivation in the Ghazipur district of Bengal, near Ganga Ghat and opium trade between Indians and Britishers during colonial time on the one hand, and the migration of Indian agricultural workers and coolies under a contract on the other hand and their links and connections.

The novel has raised several issues including zamindari system, caste hierarchy, gender discrimination, domination of patriarchy, impoverishment, destitution, exploitation of slaves, racial problem and so on.

The author has discussed numerous issues with presentation of more than a dozens of characters

including Deeti, a widow, mother of Kabutri who eloped with her lower caste lover to escape together, Kalua, a lower caste leather worker, Raja Neel Ratan Halder, a Bengali Zamindar or Raja of Rakshali who was wrongly sentenced to a penal colony on Mauritius, Mr. Zachary Reid, an American sailor, Miss Paulette Lambart, the orphaned daughter of a French botanist and others. The title of the novel is 'Sea of Poppies' which clearly stated the message that it is the voyage of the poppies in which all of them were passaged together having their individual stories. Each one belonged to different socio-economic and class background but they are all 'Jahaz Bhai's' on the ivory. The two words are important here, 'sea' and 'poppies' – 'sea' gives an understanding of the passage (to move across the black water) and 'poppies' refers to the flowers sprouted from the opium seeds which existed the real purpose of that sea voyage. Therefore, 'poppies' refers to the significance of the poppies for the long sea journey. In this pretext, the word 'poppies' has been used for the migrants on boarded the ship.

During 19th Century, caste hierarchy was very severe and adamant in the society. During that time, the rule of the Zamindars and Rajputs were dominant for the so called lower caste people. The attitude of Hukam Singh, as a high caste Rajput has been portrayed as authoritative towards Kalua who was ox-cart driver. Hukam Singh believed that the sight of his face would bode ill for the whole day. On the other hand, there is Raja Neel Ratan Halder, a Zamindar who loses his empire Rakshali due to the indebtedness under the British Opium company. Nevertheless, he was leading a fake royal life with his wife, son and dearest mistress. Since his childhood, he led a royal Zamindar life which he did not want to lose from the British traders. His empire 'Rakshali' was dear to his heart. He had a fear that if he will lose Rakshali, he would have to lose his 'izzat' which was maintained right from his great grandfather to him. Therefore, when he was arrested he felt very sad, low and hopeless before the huge crowd of the villagers.

Apart from the story and characters, the author has tried to represent how the 'trade relations' persisted during the colonial reign in the early 18th century. The author has discussed the plot and its characters under the influence of whole India and China opium relations. The author has set the characters that how the Indo-China trade relations influences the characters. The novel, however, a fine work in Diaspora literature which provides the in-depth knowledge of meaning, nature, characters of migration and Diaspora with an epic story, multiple incredible characters and the conversations between them. In addition to this, the novel manages to illustrate the lives and sufferings of indentured workers, migrant during the colonial times which also has relevance in the present context. A significant number of migrants today constitute the segment of unskilled, semi-skilled workforce going to the Gulf states,

South Asia, South East Asia and other Western countries. Like the indentured past, these too face multiple hardships and struggles on a daily basis in the host land and receive scant attention of the homeland government.

Conclusion

Ghosh has portrayed the vibrancy of socio-cultural-religious practices, beliefs and customs among the migrants. Deeti used to do 'puja', offered flowers to the idols every day, in her husband's home. She used to cook 'roti', dal, achar for her husband's lunch and carried them up to the opium factory all alone. Also, she had a belief that her fate was ruled by 'Shani' or 'Saturn' who brought all the bad luck, unhappiness and sorrow in her life. The river water of Ganga was considered as pure, pious and 'Mukti Srot'. Deeti believed that unlike sea water, Ganga is pure enough that if a person bathe in the Ganga water, his/her sin will be clear out from the water. Moreover, Bhojpuri words used in the dialogues between the ladies illuminated the language of the novel.

The novel did justice to put the issues and problems of the individual characters. The author has adequately represented the issues of migration with the incredible characters who were facing similar dilemma. Ghosh tried to depict the sufferings of women from all sections of Indian society during nineteenth century. He exposed the social evils like sati, sexual assault, rape, stereotypical image of women in the society. Indeed, he narrated the powerful and bold women character like Deeti who decided to elope with a lower caste guy leaving behind all patriarchal bonds. Ghosh has tried to narrate beautifully the reason of their sea voyage. Furthermore, the representation of dialogue, habits, tastes, costumes, objects etc. were creating excitement in the story.

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