

Bonding beyond Cultures:

A Reading of Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies

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Abstract : This paper aims to analyze the Indian English writer Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008), the first book of the *Ibis Trilogy* in light of the cultural polarities depicted in the novel and how it helps to unravel the essential human nature and its inherent complexities. Ghosh challenges our conceptions regarding the influence of culture in determining our attitude towards fellow human beings. The bonding beyond huge cultural disparities might not be an unexplored theme in literature, but when it involves issues relating to social compulsions and questioning of social constructs resulting in may be a unique culture, it requires specific attention. The fact that it deals with the incidents during the colonial rule only authenticates it further. The rich language employed throughout the novel including many Asian words gets one thinking regarding its role in influencing culture both positively and negatively. The cross-cultural section of people presented in the novel is so diverse to the point of being termed global. The poppy seeds can be taken to be cultural symbols. Ghosh emerges as a writer informed by true social consciousness in this well researched saga.

Index Terms- global culture, cultural polarity, opium trade, indentured labourers.

I. INTRODUCTION

... it was rare, difficult and improbable thing for two people from worlds apart to find themselves linked by a tie of pure sympathy, a feeling that owed nothing to the rules and expectations of others. ... when such a bond comes into being, its truths and falsehoods, its obligations and privileges exist only for the people who are linked by it, and then in such a way that only they can judge the honour and dishonour of how they conduct themselves in relation to each other. (Ghosh 439)

The events depicted in *Sea of Poppies* happen in the year 1838, at a time when India has still to go a long way in its march towards political freedom. The cultural scenario during this period is marked by significant British influence in almost all fields like language, education, economy, religion, racial consciousness and so on. Set against the backdrop of the opium industry and the British trade with China, the novel in a sense serves to be a cultural utopia. Here the people belonging to different cultures find sympathy with each other and are finally united in the *Ibis*, a ship headed towards the island of Mauritius where most of them expect to find work as indentured labourers. The novel is divided into three parts namely Land, River and Sea. In the first section, Land, the crude realities of day to day life are presented. More than uniting people, culture serves to construct dividing lines between them. The river offers them some consolation by alleviating their pains with its soft caress, bringing back some life to them. But it is the all encompassing sea that takes them in its embrace in spite of all differences, providing them the impetus to move on. While at sea, the only reference point for any person, whether an emperor or a convict, is the ocean itself; beyond that everything gets dissolved.

II. CROSS-CULTURAL RELATIONSHIPS

The novel brings together many people from different cultural backgrounds to foreground this need to surpass differences. The relationship that develops between several characters like Deeti and Kalua, Neel and Ah Fatt, Jodu and Paulette, Zachary and Baboo Nob Kissin testify to this fact. The ship, *Ibis*, represents a space to give rise to cultural utopia. Benjamin Burnham, the ship's owner, appoints Zachary Reid as the first mate. Zachary belonged to mixed race, his mother a black slave and father, her white master. Thus he looked more like a *sahib*, which was utilized by the leader of the seamen or so-called *lascars*, Serang Ali to him, "For Serang Ali and his men Zachary was almost one of themselves, while yet being endowed with the power to undertake an impersonation that was unthinkable for any of them; it was as much for their own sakes as for his that they wanted to see him succeed" (50).

Burnham's clerk Baboo Nob Kissin too develops a liking towards Zachary as he perceives him to be the incarnation of Lord Krishna himself. By employing such a twist to the novel, Ghosh points to the fact that intense cultural affiliation might at times drive one to the point of becoming absurd. Baboo Nob Kissin joins the *Ibis* in order to build a temple in Mauritius Islands and to propagate his culture there. Kalua, a chamar, considers the ship as an opening to escape from his village due to the atrocities he

had to face as he was treated as an untouchable. On one occasion when three landowners tried to humiliate him by mating him with a horse to take revenge on him for accepting defeat in a wrestling match, it was Deeti who, despite belonging to a higher caste, saved him and covered his shame which required her to touch him. Her own experience on her first night when she was raped while in a drug induced stupor by her brother-in-law with the full support of other members of the family, might have led her to empathize with Kalua's plight. Under such circumstances, cultural restrictions fall too short before the values imbibed by a person.

Kalua repays his debt to her by saving her from observing sati. They get married just by garlanding each other without any ritualistic performance. Though this would have been unacceptable to any culture, this gesture is so intense in its purity that any other ceremony to sanctify their marriage would have been too insignificant in comparison. But the society that is steadfast on holding on to culture, follow them madly forcing them to escape in the *Ibis* as coolies. They take up false identity as Aditi and Madhu. Deeti finds it difficult to accept the identity of chamar, though she accepts Kalua easily. This signifies the enormity of caste that raises it to a position higher than man.

III. CULTURE AND IDENTITY

Culture, just like religion is something that at first determines one's identity based on social standards. Later on one may disown it, but only after severe struggles. In such a social set up, life poses a challenge before people whose circumstances deprive them a claim over any culture at all. Paulette, for example, was born to French parents. Her mother died at the time of child-birth and it was an Indian Muslim boatman's wife who had a son, Jodu, of her age who took care of her. As a result of this, she imbibed a mixture of English and Indian culture when it came to language, food habits and dress. Paulette and her father had to face social ostracism from the white community in view of their intimacy to another culture and denial of God's existence.

Paulette's father's death forces Jodu and his mother to find shelter elsewhere and Paulette is left in the care of Burnham, who takes it upon himself to make Paulette "cultured." When Paulette shares the secret of the sister-brother relationship that exists between her and Jodu to Zachary, he can readily accept it as normal whereas the society will certainly sneer at them. Zachary, like her is also facing a sort of identity crisis being of mixed origin. This ultimately brings them closer. The society would have never approved their relationship too. Culture, at times, becomes a tool to pry into others' lives. Fleeing from such a mindless society, Paulette takes refuge in the *Ibis* to go to her ancestor's place. Disguised as a Brahmin's daughter, she emerges as the knowledgeable person among the coolies. On being questioned whether she is not caste conscious, she is quick to affirm, "On a boat of pilgrims, no one can lose caste and everyone is the same: it's like taking a boat to the temple of Jagannath . . . From now on, and forever afterwards, we will all be ship-siblings—*jaház-bhais* and *jaház-bahens*—to each other. There will be no differences between us" (356). These assuring words turns out to be a source of relief and comfort to the dismantled group, especially Deeti, who from then on considers it as her *mái-báp* (mother-father). It even witnesses the marriage of Heeru which they conduct in a humble way like a family thereby strengthening their bonds.

IV. LANGUAGE AS A CULTURAL TOOL

Raja Neel Rattan Halder is one such person, who, following his culture, observed all the rituals of caste. During his court trial for forgery, he realizes that the English were above the law. He remarks, ". . . it was they who had become the world's new Brahmins" (239). The court seizes his property and orders him to be transported to the Mauritius Islands. In the interim, he is sent to the Alipore Jail. Here Neel complains in English to the white sergeant regarding the ill-treatment meted out to him by the *sepoys*. This infuriates the white man who takes it as an insult when ". . . spoken to in his own language, by a native convict . . ." (287). Neel here uses the coloniser's language to disarm them and ironically even if he is a prisoner and therefore powerless, he succeeds in enraging those in power. This perfectly explains the white man's feelings when a convict uses it as a weapon against his dominators. Insulting his language is no less than demeaning his culture. It is by means of this same language that Neel gains upper hand amidst the white officials.

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin writes in *The Empire Writes Back*, ". . . the emergence of indigenous theories in monoglossic settler cultures has also been linked to the question of language, of constructing a 'unique' voice, distinct from the language of the centre" (116). Ghosh specifically reiterates the significance of Bhojpuri language in this novel through the native speakers. Neel becomes his mouthpiece when he describes the power of this language to capture the ache of separation. Once in the jail, Neel is hard put to share the cell space with an opium addict, Ah Fatt, born to a Dan mother and an Indian father. Bishu-ji, another convict who dumps Neel into this cell tells him, "When you step on that ship, to go across the Black Water, you and your fellow transportees will become a brotherhood of your own: you will be your own village, your own family, your own caste (Ghosh 314). Truly enough, Ah Fatt presented as his alter ego, helps Neel overcome the restricting chains of caste and rituals and proves to be his savior by comforting him in trying situations.

V. CONCLUSION

Ghosh is not just glorifying cross-cultural encounters: he also sheds light on its negative effects. The captain of the *Ibis*, Chillingworth speaks against war stating that Britain is pretending to be virtuous by killing people in the name of a "higher cause," which he feels ". . . will never be forgiven by history" (262). As we know, war is not just synonymous to loss of lives but to a point even loss of culture. Even a man like Chillingworth is ready to compromise on matters relating to caste. According

to him, the very foundation of the British rule in India remains unchallenged because the British took care not to disturb the intricacies of the caste system. Discrimination based on caste, creed or race is present in all cultures. The politics of domination works not just through religion, but also through trade relations between countries. The growth of poppies and the thriving opium industry leads to the subjugation of many countries by appealing to the greed and false hopes of progress nurtured by the authorities. For Deeti, it is similar to her guiding star as it is exchanged in the absence of money to fulfill her needs.

Unfortunately she and her counterparts do not find rescue even after undergoing all these troubles because power systems never consider the sufferings of others. Serang Ali, Jodu, Neel, Ah Fatt and Kalua escape from the *Ibis* in a longboat following the commotion created by the murder of the subedar by Kalua. Thus the *Ibis*, the coolies' *mái-báp*, not only shelters them while in its lap, but also paves way to their freedom. As Baboo Nob Kissin ruminates, ". . . in her inward reality she was a vehicle of transformation, travelling through the mists of illusion towards the elusive, ever-receding landfall that was Truth" (422-23). Ghosh, through his work, accentuates only those encounters between cultures that do not privilege one culture over the other, ". . . Comparing the approach to culture in the works of Ghosh and Vikram Seth, Padma Murale feels, "They stride over the Manichean divide between cultures and establish bonds across political frontiers to engender hope for the possibility of a global or world culture in the future"(70).

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