

Portrayal of Women in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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ABSTRACT: *Amitav Ghosh is one of the vibrant writers of Indian English literature. He thoroughly analyzes the Indian pulse under the colonial rule. As a man of narration and social thinker he speaks for the unspoken of our society in yester centuries. Amitav Ghosh has established himself as a writer of unusual talents who combines literary panache with an atypical significance of rationale. His novel Sea of Poppies is the finest example for this and which was also shortlisted for Man Booker Prize in 2008. In Sea of Poppies he has attempted to show how women can be empowered, enlightened and independent that they may become self-regulating in the future India. His portrayal of women folk is realistic in every aspect of post-colonial study. This novel can be read as a post-colonial novel as it retells the story of the colonized India. Ghosh has gone a step down in the history and hears the voice of the voiceless which is unheard amidst the fussy and fast growing present world. Why this man is so much worried about the past? He is so concerned about the society's welfare and foretells the past to warn the future. The current scenario of our society is going to face the past experience once again in the disguise of some beguiling government schemes introduced by the so called well-wishers of our neighbouring countries. Hence, this is the message that Ghosh wishes to convey through his social novel 'Sea of Poppies'.*

KEYWORDS: colonial impact, status of women and forewarning on future.

INTRODUCTION

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At the outset, Ghosh has spot lighted the hierarchical social systems of the period and also the status of a male centered society. In the earliest years of India, womenfolk were treated with high respect. So as to say, they shared equivalent position and civil liberties with men during the vedic period. But during the medieval period, they were encountered with many derogatory crimes against them by men folk such as rape, sexual assault, insult to modesty, polygamy, abduction, cruelty by intimate partner or relatives, trafficking, persecution for dowry, dowry deaths, indecency, purdha system, and sati which ultimately deteriorated the rank of women in the society. The paper critiques the conventional supremacy of India focusing greatly on male-chauvinism, feudalism and ardent anti-feminists who campaigned against equal rights through his novel '*Sea of Poppies*'.

The novel elucidates 19th century Calcutta & Waterfront in a grand aspect and the meet of two extremes. More than one million men and women traversed the black waters and misplaced their purity in the eyes of those at home in order to reach various colonies where there was a requirement of exhaustive and little paid labour and Mauritius was one such to receive the leading proportion of the indentured labourers for its sugarcane plantations in the next ninety

years. The novel portrays the Poppy Cultivation and Opium Processing and Packing at Ghazipur and its transportation to different parts of the world excluding Britain. The east coast of India was mostly used for this rationale. The narrative exposes the seamy side of the opium trade from India to China: how British enslaved and enlivened the poor marginalized farmers who led a miserable life with meager income. The geographical and societal hostility paved a way for exploitation. The cruelty of British is enforced on Indians to the core without any retention from the natives outwardly. The novel is set in a slave transporting schooner 'Ibis'. It symbolizes the Noah's Ark which saved the sacred species of men and animal society. It arrives at the Bay of Bengal to carry slaves (coolies) as 'filthy animals' for the Whites to Mauritius where the Opium factory is established. The white man controls the ship and runs it, but the immediate control is in the hands of the brown sahibs. Not only does the white man see the coolies in essentiality and deprecating manner, but also the brown Sahibs like Subedar Bhyro Singh ill-treat them. This brown Sahib's location is stated by the Captain of the ship (white) who tells the coolies:

"While you are on her [Ibis], you must obey Subedar Bhyro Singh as you would your own zemindars, and as he obeys me. It is he who knows your ways and traditions, and while we are at sea he will be your mái-báp, just as I am his" (Ghosh 599). The novel unfolds the stories of women characters in the pre-independent Indian society. The novel depicts the real condition of marginalized women picturing their plight during colonial rule. Some women characters in the novel were like Paulette, Sarju, Heeru, Munia and the central figure Deeti. The events which are brought these "ship-siblings -- *jaházbhais* and *jaházbahens*" on board and traces the commencement of their voyage from Calcutta to their indefinite fortune across the Black Water sets the background of this novel.

The ban on education for women is proven clearly when the character Paulette tells the migrants that she had read from a book that there are no snakes in Mareech, Jhugroo satirically retorts,,,"How would a woman know what's written in a book?" (390) Identity crisis and exploitation were also multifaceted in the so called patriarchal society where women did not have an identity of their own and they were identified either with their father, or husband or children. The protagonist Deeti was recognized only as Kabutri-ki-ma. Their real names and identities weren't recognized anywhere. They were subjected to all kinds of physical, sexual and emotional abuses. Not only is Deeti raped on her wedding night by her brother-in-law, but with her crippled husband in his death bed. She is subjected to sexual harassment by both of them. She feared a lot as their advances were so violent that she might be attacked right on her husband's bed.

While a male child was an asset to the family, a female child was considered to be a yoke. In the marriage system, the bride's parents were expected to offer money and gifts to the groom so as to get their daughters married off. The novel also records the culture of child marriage which was the norm of the day since Neel was betrothed at the time of his birth to the daughter of another landowning family and the marriage was solemnized when he was at the age of twelve. Women were confined within four walls at their own home as it was considered the right place but men were free to live a life of choices. The Raja had as many mistresses "as there were days in the week, so as to be able to spend each night in a different bed" (86).

Malati, the wife of Neel is a submissive victim who performs her familial duties as a wife and mother without any complaints and expectations. Her psychological suffering as a typical

Indian wife could never let her to complain or question her husband's relationship with his mistress Elokeshi. Nonetheless, Neel's mother was also ignored by her husband and in a dark wing of the palace she led a secluded life while her husband enjoying with his mistresses by satisfying all her physical and material demands which ultimately resulted in the rising up of his debts drastically.

As far as Heeru is concerned she was condemned and severely beaten up by her husband several times. Once he insisted her to perform some rituals at the temple of Hariharnath during the mela, so as to bring back the missed son, the only heir of the family. But after a few months, she was abandoned by him and found that he betrayed her by marrying another woman.

Munia was another victim in the novel who was swindled by an agent from the opium factory. The same agent also set fire to her house that killed her entire family when he found that she gave birth to a baby. The inability and fear for men could pave way for such crimes undoubtedly.

Mr. Burnhams takes care of Paulette when she is orphaned. But as one of the rituals of religious system, she is forced to bear sexual advancements by the highly regarded Mr. Burnham. Zachary connects Paulette with his mother when she tells him the ill-treatment of Mr. Burnham, and he recalls his slave mother's exploitation by his father, the white plantation owner. She pathetically explained him the bitter experiences she had faced at the age of fourteen. She was trembling at the doorway of his cabin in the woods that he kept for such illegal affairs with his women slaves. She was highly reluctant when old Mr. Reid ordered her to stop crying and come near the bed "It had still twisted him in a knot to hear his mother speak of that first time in Mr. Reid's cabin in the woods" (305). These incidents voice the unvoiced and act as a mouthpiece of the contemporary society.

Gayatri Spivak keenly observes that, "within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. ...both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the contest of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow (32). She also points out the ritual was "not caste or class -fixed." (2006, 33) *'Sea of Poppies'* presents a poignant picture of Deeti in a resplendent white sari being carried to her husband's pyre to be burnt alive with him. "She was slumped over, barely upright: she would not have been able to stand on her own feet, much less walk ... Half dragged and half carried, she was brought to the pyre and made to sit cross-legged on it, beside her husband's corpse" (177). Remarriage for widows of high castes was strictly prohibited as it was supposed as the tarnishing of the sanctity of their social rank.

She travelled on board as indentured labourers on Ibis from Calcutta to Mauritius. Deeti, a runaway widow from an opium farm, misjudges the scope of her benevolent maternal authority. The story revolves around the subjugation of women under both British, Indian bureaucrats and the harassment on women by their own society. Deeti, is one of the leading female characters in the novel and as an ordinary village woman with wishes high about her future. She suffers from gender bias since her childhood. Due to the colour of her eyes, she is called as "chudaliya, dainiya as if she were a witch: but Deeti had only to turn her eyes on them to make them scatter and run off" (5). Deeti's father had to thatch the roof of her groom's house as a part of her dowry. He did not begrudge the expense though he could ill afford it. Marriage

and motherhood, begetting sons in particular were considered to be the goals of a woman. Deeti is impregnated by her brother-in-law on her wedding night as the task of the new bride was assumed to beget an heir for the family. The property of a man who does not have a male heir would automatically be inherited by his brother. Being the mother of a girl child, Deeti has no chance of holding her husband's land after his death. She decides to sacrifice her body in the funeral pyre for fear of forceful accumulation of her land and property by her brother-in-law after her husband's death and to escape from her brother-in-law's sexual harassment. Women were married to men, much older to them to beget a male heir.

She is married to Hukum Singh. He served in the same battalion of British Army with her brother Kesri Singh. After that, he was working in an Opium Factory at Ghazipur. Her marriage with Hukum Singh was arranged without her consent by offering high amount of dowry from her parents.

The uncharitable behaviour of Deeti's mother-in-law shows how a woman is shadowed by love of her son. It also elucidates how women are against women in the pretext of culture and tradition. Hence, they all have to undergo triple subjugation by their countrymen, colonizers and own family. They are powerless and voiceless. When her opium addict husband is in his death bed, she is bodily battered by her brother-in-law. In order to escape from him she says. "Listen to me: I will burn on my husband's pyre rather than give myself to you." (154) This shows how she is victimized when her husband is bed ridden and inactive.

After her husband's death she is forced to perform sati and to do this she is given Opium to inhale and in such a state of unconsciousness, she sits on the pyre, and his brother-in-law says "To have a sati in the family will make us famous. We'll build a temple for you and grow rich on the offerings" (155) Likewise everywhere in the novel she is treated and recognized as mere commodity. The system of sati is forced despite their resistance, Ghosh acts as a mouthpiece of the buried saga of Indian women then. And nowhere Deeti is depicted as an immoral woman and she fights only for her birth rights. She finds no place to rest her soul and no one to console. But the twist appears when she is rescued by Kalua, an untouchable from a society to start a new life. Kalua saves her from the smoldering pyre and jumps into the river Ganga. The Ganga gives her new identity while takes an immense dip. She sends her daughter to her brother's home because she believes that Kabutri will be safe there. She discards discrimination and marries Kalua as her second husband.

"She had shed the body of the old Deeti, with the burden of its karma; she had paid the price stars had demanded of her, and was free now to create a new destiny as she willed with whom she choose and she knew it was with Kalua that this life would be lived, until another death claimed the body that he had torn from the flames". (175)

After her resurrection she discards timidity and weakness obsessed by her as Deeti. She becomes convinced and self-regulating to take decisions about her expectations. Her marriage with Kalua can be considered as ideal in terms of caring between them because before taking any resolution Kalua consults Deeti and protects her from every risk. Her entry on the board of Ibis is symbolic because she goes into the ship in Gunghata as a new bride with people around her to start a new life. Her change of name to Aditi while register her forename in migration list shows her hunt for new identity as till now she was identified as "Kabutari-ki-ma....it was on her lips to identify herself as Kabutari-ki-ma, name by which she been known ever since

her daughter's birth –her proper given name was the first to come to mind. Aditi, she said softly, I am Aditi. (233).

While she sets out, the *Ibis* has been changed from a painful past slave ship into an auspicious “vehicle of maneuver, uprising and reformation” where rules of social groups and territory will be either broken down by buoyant exiles or imposed with viciousness by the ship's sentinels. “On a boat of pilgrims,” says Deeti, “no one can lose caste and everyone is the same.” She becomes leader of Grimityas on *Ibis*. She is called Bhaugi by men and women on the ship for the reason that she possesses the solution of their problems. She is self-assured, experienced and geared up to battle for anyone in crisis. She is totally a changed personality with an iron heart and soul.

Ghosh has attempted to prove that socio political changes fetch radical transformation in women folk to get rid of their anguish. Women are leading a life of confinement and not allowed to express their wishes as it should be. The coming of the *Ibis* paved a way for the life which they dreamt for. It brings psychological changes in them as they get new identity and new role to play. Besides, confronted by new challenges they attain uniqueness. In *Ibis*, they can live for their own sake without any intimidation and restrictions. Mentally, economically and socially they breathe the air of freedom.

To conclude, *Ibis* acts not only a mere Schooner for transporting the coolies and convicts to the Mauritius Islands across the Indian Ocean. In a time of colonial cataclysm in the mid-nineteenth century, the economic unstableness has thrown as a dice to determine the destiny of the citizens by the colonizers. The voyage diminishes the familial ties and social boundaries and they think themselves as jahaj-bhais or ship-brothers in the remote islands where they served as labourers. The plight of woman in the then society is clearly depicted as a real story by Ghosh skillfully. It proves that he is a talented story-teller to the modern readers. This novel not only depicts the story of women of the era but it brings out the alertness. It foretells how women can empower themselves by choosing the right path at a right time withstanding the storms around them. Hence, it acts as a scripture which leads the coming generation of womenfolk in a convincing way. Ghosh clearly pictures the pathetic state of affairs in this novel with the colonial hangover. His message to women is very lucid that a woman should accept a new life when offered to her by men of good spirit. Accepting second life with the new frame of mind by women is clearly depicted in this social novel by Amitav Ghosh.

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