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PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *SEA OF POPPIES*

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I will be dealing with women characters in the novel of Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*. I will focus on the plight of women during the nineteenth century and under colonial rule their condition was even worse. Opium effects life of all women characters directly or indirectly in the novel. I will discuss briefly character of each woman with special focus on Deeti. The character of Paulette daughter of a French botanist living in Calcutta, she respects Indian culture like French. Some minor women characters in the novel like Sarju, Heeru, Munniah and others, who travel on board as indentured labours on *Ibis* from Calcutta to Mauritius. The story presents a vivid picture of subjugation of women. Through the character of Taramony, life of a widow is described and how they were sent to Brindavan to live a life of suffering and hardship.

Keywords: Colonial, Culture, Opium, Suffering, Women.

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Sea of Poppies (2008) is a novel by Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh which was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2008. It is the first volume of the *Ibis* trilogy. The second volume is *River of Smoke*. In his ambitious new novel, "*Sea of Poppies*," a finalist for this year's Man Booker Prize, Amitav Ghosh attempts to fill in the blanks left by the archives. Set partly in Bengal, the scene of Grierson's inquiry, and drawing on accounts the Englishman left, it opens in 1838 on the eve of the Opium Wars. A former slave ship called the *Ibis* has been refitted to transport coolies from Calcutta to the sugar estates of Mauritius and for hundreds of pages we watch as its crew and passengers are slowly assembled until it finally gets on its way. The first in a projected trilogy, "*Sea of Poppies*" is big and baggy, a self-styled epic with colossal themes and almost a dozen major characters, including the son of an American slave (who is passing as white), the orphaned daughter of a French botanist (who is passing as a coolie) and an Anglophile raja (who has been wrongly sentenced to a penal colony on Mauritius). But a majority onboard is Indian peasants from the opium-producing countryside, forced by famine or scandal to seek a new life elsewhere. Devoted to reinvention, Ghosh's plot focuses on one of these villagers: Deeti, a widow who assumes another name and the (lower) caste of a new love as they escape together on the *Ibis*.

Figures like Deeti, merely hinted at in the official record, have long preoccupied Ghosh — as in his elegant travelogue "*In an Antique Land*," which shifted between Egypt and India, the 12th century and the 1980s, as he hunted for the story of a slave mentioned in letters between an Arab-Jewish merchant in Manga-

lore and his associates in Cairo. The reference astonished Ghosh because of its medieval date, “when the only people for whom we can even begin to imagine properly human, individual existences are the literate and the consequential . . . the people who had the power to inscribe themselves physically upon time.” The coolies who inspired “Sea of Poppies” didn’t have that power. Unlike Grierson, they didn’t leave diaries behind; after all, they couldn’t even write. So where does that leave those who would tell their stories? Ghosh is forced to imagine them, based on the limited sources available, but he does so with the instincts of an anthropologist more than a novelist. (He is, in fact, an anthropologist by training.) With the aid of out-of-print dictionaries, he recreates esoteric dialects (Hobson-Jobson, Hinglish, Chinglish and the salty argot of sailors, to name a few). His characters are often incomprehensible to one another, which makes for occasional comedy, but too often they’re also incomprehensible to his readers. And his penchant for meticulous detail — the innards of an opium factory, the organization of a coolie ship — impedes the progress of his various plots and subplots. Ghosh obviously wants to make the novel a literary excavation, digging up the stories of people lost to history, but in the process his characters themselves often seem like artifacts.

Deeti, for one, is hard to believe in. And not just because Ghosh gives her a back story as overwrought as the script for a Bollywood movie: wedded to an opium addict too enervated to consummate their marriage, impregnated in lieu by his brother and resigned to die on her husband’s funeral pyre until rescued by a hunky untouchable, with whom she elopes. Many of the women who fled India as coolies were indeed upper-caste widows, but there were no brawny heroes to snatch them from their fates. They simply left, alone — an act dramatic enough for that time and place that it shouldn’t need the enhancements of pulp plotting.

Deeti’s weakness as a character may stem from Ghosh’s desire to be an archaeologist of the powerless. That’s a noble ambition, but it turns Deeti into little more than a skeleton on which to hang a history. And she has a mystical quality that nags. Wading in the Ganges at the novel’s start, she envisions a ship “like a great bird, with sails like wings and a long beak.” Though she has never before laid eyes on a schooner like the Ibis, she somehow knows that it is coming for her. At the novel’s close, lying one night on the deck of this same vessel, she holds a poppy seed between her fingers.

Female Exploitation

Amitav Ghosh’s novel brilliantly explored the much neglected aspect of female exploitation. Dr. Sen’s analysis was based on the stories from ‘Sea of Poppies’ and “River of Smoke”. In “Sea of Poppies” she discussed the gendered aspect of migration through the lens of literary story telling. She discussed one character named Deeti, an uneducated Brahmin widow of an impotent opium addict faced sexual exploitation from her own brother-in-law. After her husband’s death, she gets attracted to a chamar man named Kalua in the ship only. She wants to become sati but Kalua dramatically rescues her. Both of them want to get married and since then, they pretend to be a married couple and Deeti calls herself a chamar woman.

The women being co-workers in plantations could choose their own partners. Unlike other Indian women, Deeti had this privilege and free ground to choose her life-partner at that point of time. The causal argument would be the distance from the traditional restrictions of their own society. Then, the discussion proceeded with how caste system had an impact on Diaspora. The research shows that the watertight caste compartments tend to loosen up in the unknown shores.

Referring to Ghosh’s mouthpiece, Deeti, the women preferring to marry men who are settled rather than of the same caste. Being away from their own social spaces allows them more leverage. The poverty in the homeland, which caused the diaspora in the first place, was forgotten or overwritten with the feeling that it was home, a place where the present alienation of the diasporic person did not exist. Because they knew there were no possibilities of physical return back to their home, therefore, spiritual, religious and emotional bonds were ongoing necessities. Like hawkers, they carried things such as a Ganapati idol, a dog-eared copy of the Gita or the Quran, an old sari or other deshi outfit, a photograph of pilgrimage or, in modern times, a video cassette of the latest hit from the home country along with their head-loads and/or suitcases.

Amitav Ghosh’s River of Smoke is the second book in his much acclaimed Ibis trilogy. The book begins with a glimpse into Diti’s shrine. Diti is widowed yet again as her new husband Kalua alias Madhu is forced to flee from the ship. The name which the Colonizers had imposed on him – Maddow Colver, now becomes the name

of Diti's clan. The clan has grown and prospered and Diti now appears to be the matriarch of a large and a fairly prosperous family. Diti's influence on the family can be seen in her organization of the trips to her shrine and by continuing to remain the link between her brethren on the ship. In this novel, Paulette is foregrounded. Her escapades continue to be dramatic as she takes on the garb of a man and continues to live by herself in the Isle of Maurice. Later, Paulette joins Mr. Penrose on a journey to Canton on a botanical expedition. Canton becomes the centre of Ghosh's concern in this novel and much of the China of the 19th century is seen through the eyes of Paulette who deciphers the place from the long letters written to her by Robert Chinnery, the fictional illegitimate son of the painter George Chinnery. As in the previous book, Ghosh stresses the worth and solidity of his female characters. They are seen as doers with very definite agency. In the life and times of the first set of Diasporics, it is the women who create, construct and nurture. From life unfolding from the Hindu tool box to the annual visit to Diti's shrine, Ghosh presents his women characters as the creators and nurturers of civilization. In the debate on gender and diaspora whether it is liberating or debilitating for women, Ghosh opines with the former. While being torn away from one's land and cultural traditions is extremely painful, his women characters are able to thread their lives in the adopted land and start their lives afresh emphasizing their zest for life and a very definite political and social agency.

Later on, Dr. Veena Sharma, who moderated the seminar, gave her insights over this concept of indentured system in India and explored various socio-cultural issues related to immigrants of India. She pointed the "Jahaji Bhai" phenomena which was predominant during colonial period. The Indian immigrants felt homelessness and rootlessness while residing outside the country. The concept of "purity and impurity" was also dominant among these immigrants when they had to cross the Kala-pani, which was against the religious faith as it was believed that one becomes impure after crossing it.

Women's Suffering

Deeti is an ordinary village woman. She is one of the prominent characters in the novel. She suffers from gender bias since her childhood in the novel. In the first chapter of the novel it is told that due to 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". She is married to Hukum Singh who served in the same battalion as her brother Kesri Singh of British army. Her marriage with Hukum Singh is fixed without her consent as this proposal is seen as better than marrying to a man much older than Deeti. Hukum Singh got hurt on one of his leg while he was in British regiment due to which he cannot walk properly but this is seen as minor problem in her marriage with him. Her dowry contributes to building of roof of his husband's house. He works in an opium factory in Ghazipur. Her dreams are shattered on the first night of her marriage when her husband makes her inhale opium and she is raped in a state of unconsciousness by her brother in law Chandan Singh with help of her uncle Bhyro Singh. It is only later while she is travelling on Ibis that she becomes aware that her uncle Bhyro Singh was also responsible for her rape by her brother in law. She begins to doubt about her husband after he starts ignoring her just after her first night and she becomes pregnant. Her mother-in-law says that she is like Draupadi. She becomes sure that her mother in law knows everything about father of her child and to reveal out the truth from her mother-in-law, she starts giving her opium. One day under the influence of opium in state of unconsciousness, she confesses that her daughter's father is her brother in law. The behavior of Deeti's mother in law shows how a woman is blinded in love of his son that she helps people to violate honour of a woman. While her opium addict husband is in his death bed, she is physically assaulted by her brother in law and in order to escape from him she says, "Listen to me: I will burn on my husband's pyre rather than given."

The Feminist Perspective of Critical Elucidation

According to Elaine Showalter, "In the Feminist phase or the winning of the vote, women are historically enabled to reject the accommodating postures of femininity and use literature to dramatize the ordeals of wronged womanhood". Feminist is the concept of the theory that they are fighting for their rights, trying to break from the ideological form. Feminist was a stance or tone of women that strives for the recognition of their rights and the fight for their identity as individuals in the society. According to Elaine Showalter, "In the Female phase women reject both imitation and protest-two forms of dependency and turn

instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous art". Female is the concept of the theory that conveys woman is an individual. The movement towards the understanding of woman as a female, as power, as an erotic symbol of desire is the recognition given to her maturity.

Conclusion

This is precisely a counter argument for the novels gender politics. In all his other novels there is relatively little debate about the representation of gender and other issues of sexuality. But as a matter of academic speculation, women have become very significant presences in all his other works. Ghosh has tried to depict sufferings women from all sections of Indian society during the nineteenth century. He has dealt with social problems like sati, rape by brother of the groom in the name of marriage to conceal impotency of groom. The misery and isolation of widowhood with reference to women of Brahman family in Calcutta who are send to Brindavan. Ghosh gives us a ray of hope that if women get support from their male counterparts as in the case of Deeti who is supported by Kalua. They can be empowered to become independent and can become leader as Deeti in the novel. They are more than equal to men in the novel. He has tried to depict women's search for identity and their right to live a life of freedom and dignity. In his novel women are strong, they travel and take decisions to live an independent life. They are not controlled by men. They are individuals with freedom and progress.

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