

Exploring Colonialism and Migration: A Study of Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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Abstract:

The book *Sea of Poppies* by Amitav Ghosh presents a vast examination of the themes of colonialism, migration and identity, interwoven into the structure of the *Ibis Trilogy*. The novel is set in the early 19th century and explores the complications of the opium trade and its destructive consequences to India, China, and the rest of the colonial world. Ghosh manages to present colours of human cost of imperialism through various experiences of its characters, whose backgrounds vary, including Indian peasants, British traders and Chinese workers. The story, which is driven by the movement of the indentured workers into the Ibis, is full of historical and sociopolitical backgrounds explaining how colonial systems of power influence the lives of individuals.

The novel is centered on the issues of displacement and cultural hybridity, the process of how various identities are created and recreated in the atmosphere of colonial violence. The characters that are trapped between their home countries and the destinations are negotiating new identities as they move across geographical and social borders. This storytelling by Ghosh unites the individual in conflict with the greater political and economic powers of an individual and points to the malleability of the human experience within the colonial relationship. The *Sea of Poppies* is not only a work of historical interests like the forced migration of labourers, but also a medium, through which one can interpret the contemporary interests in globalization, identity, and the heritage of colonialism. Ghosh, through his subtle account of migration and cultural interaction highlights the timelessness of these subjects in the contemporary world.

Keywords: *Sea of Poppies*, geographical and social borders, cultural hybridity, globalization, colonialism, global power etc.

Introduction

The works of Amitav Ghosh can be described as a case of cosmopolitan perspective, which breaks the lines of boundaries. Being a thinker, he questions the existence of boundaries, trying to remove the differentiations which separate humanity. It is well known that Ghosh is the most exposed or well-read among the contemporary writers of Indian English and Ghosh as R.K. Dhawan (1999) points out, has a global vision. His universal outlook makes him very meaningful as a writer who breaks boundaries and develops new stories about the contemporary world (56). The novels of Ghosh with their global appeal make him one of the most prominent personalities among the new generation of novelists and

showcase his creative genius as well as his profound knowledge of human life. His narration is thought-provoking and makes one think and reflect, combining the complex details with deep themes. Ghosh is also known to be a master of language and has been praised by the leading critical journals of the world and his style of narration is seen to be real and filled with emotional touches.

Ghosh as a contemporary author has greatly contributed to the Indian English literary works. His first compositions, *The Circle of Reason* (1986) and *The Shadow Lines* (1988), placed him as one of the voices in the post-*Midnight's Children* period, which was a revival of Indo-Anglian fiction.

Ghosh accentuates his origin of the Indian subcontinent that he perceives as part of him and the creative process. Although Amitav Ghosh was inspired by the works of such writers as Salman Rushdie, he offers his personal vision of the story that is greatly based on the political and social context of India. Born on July 11, 1956 in Calcutta, not long after India's independence, Ghosh has been shaped to a great extent by his upbringing in post-colonial India. He was brought up on the principles of nonviolence and civil disobedience by Mahatma Gandhi and memories of his father about the Indian struggle to gain independence and the effects of Partition left an unerasable imprint on his writing. The early years of Ghosh were passed in different countries, such as Sri Lanka, Iran, and East Pakistan (modern Bangladesh) and in Indian boarding schools. This was an intellectual growth that enabled him to venture into writing after being exposed to a variety of cultures.

Ghosh has frequently dealt with political reality in his works, and many critics consider his novels a critique of post-colonial material circumstances. They address such issues as globalization, post-modernism, and the issues of intricacies of political involvement. In *The Shadow Lines* (1995), Ghosh probes into the world of human experience and contemporary political reality by being metaphorical and John Mee praises anthropological imagination of Ghosh and his thoughts about space and time. Criticisms such as those of Robert Dixon have noted that Ghosh is excessively idealistic in his perception of a humankind in *In An Antique Land* and *The Shadow Lines*, and criticizes his utopian vision without ignoring his liberal and postmodern instincts. The political ambiguity of Ghosh though, paves the way to questioning what politics means in the globalized, post-colonial world.

The literary works of Ghosh are put in the larger context of post-modernism, where he touches upon the problems of nationalism, migration, violence and communalism. Ghosh relates to the Indian, as well as South Asian diaspora, drawing upon a multitude of scholarly fields of study, such as history, sociology, and anthropology, and ponders upon the ambiguity that the latter contains. Such novels as *Sea of Poppies* from *The Ibis Trilogy* provide a subtle examination of the colonial history, the plight of the marginalized groups, and the strange nature of freedom in the globalized environment. His work is a combination of fact and fiction with history being his constant inspiration. Ghosh attempts to contest this grand narrative of colonialism and re-plays the world where the marginalized voices are heard, offering an intellectual challenge between the fact and the possibility of imagination.

The novels of Ghosh have international renown and appeal. They demonstrate his creative ability and place him among the world's foremost novelists. He has the ability to influence his clients based on his moods. His description of the heartfelt issues provokes

introspection and reflection. The author's style and content are both excellent. His command of the language is so strong that he has been praised by the world's leading critical journals. He crafts the language in such a way that each detail appears breathtaking. His narration technique is so unique that it evokes a sense of realism.

Among the most notable contemporary Indian writers in English language, Amitav Ghosh is also known as the first person to mimic the literary style of Salman Rushdie (Chaudhuri 45). The work of Ghosh is greatly impacted by the political and social atmosphere in India, stories told to him by his parents when he was a child, which left a strong and deep impression in his mind. The city he was born in on July 11, 1956, Calcutta, a few years after independence is one of the major themes in his writing (Ghosh, *The Glass Palace* 112). He was educated by his mother about the history of Mahatma Gandhi, nonviolence, and civil disobedience as a young boy, which formed the initial view of the history of India (Ghosh 30). Moreover, his father narrated on the war in India and the Indians who fought alongside the British in the same war, which concluded with the Partition in 1947 (Nair 67).

Ghosh was under the burden of the demands of the society. He was brought up in Sri Lanka, Iran, and East Pakistan (modern day Bangladesh) and in Indian boarding schools. He studied in the schools in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Doon school in Dehra Dun, and St. Stephen college in New Delhi, at a time when it was the nationalist euphoria, which was about to fade away (Das 89). He started by studying the English Literature in college but later changed to History because he found the former to be a boring subject (Chaudhuri 54). In 1976, he started his Bachelor of Arts in History at St. Stephen College of Delhi where he graduated with a Master of Arts in Sociology in the year 1978. He once briefly served The Indian Express in the Emergency (Nair 72). He went on to get a diploma in social anthropology at St. Edmund Hall in Oxford in 1979 after he finished his graduate studies there. He also studied Arabic in Tunis (Das 96). In 1980, the University of Alexandria Faculty of Arts financed his dissertation fieldwork in Lataifa in the Fellaheen hamlet of Egypt (Chaudhuri 60). In 1981, Ghosh received a doctorate in social anthropology at the Oxford University in his dissertation, *Kinship and the Economic and Social Organization of an Egyptian Village Community*. Travelling in the country and world combined with his education made him a budding writer, whose experiences would later be reflected in his literary works (Nair 75).

There is a distinct difference in the response of Amitav Ghosh by critics in the Indian subcontinent and the Western academia with regard to the purpose of the criticism. The political implications of the works by Ghosh are quite substantial and especially the examination of the post-colonial material realities. His work is a response to post-modernism and analysis of effects and political structures in a subtle manner. The novel *The Shadow Lines* (1995) for example, is one of the strongest appeals to this point of view since the author cites the human experience and contemporary political realities as metaphors to create the discussion of interrelatedness of history and identity. In *The Burden of the Mystery*, John Mee (2003) praises Ghosh due to his anthropological imagination, and how he is able to introduce intricate ideas with respect to space and time. Ghosh thus carefully analyses the application of divisive issues like racism, imperialism and economic exploitation especially through Indian nationalism in his writing.

Another main critic, Robert Dixon, has suggested that Ghosh offers a childish

idealistic picture of humanity in *In An Antique Land* and *The Shadow Lines*, starring. Dixon (1996) considers the writing of Ghosh liberal as well as postmodern. Nevertheless, it can also be said that the works of Ghosh are a manifestation of an unwillingness to come into contact with the harsh political realities, with the characters in his works usually escaping the repercussions of the political involvement. This position is based on the concept that participation in the global politics is a critical duty. Ghosh, then, does not produce a work that is politically activist and more of a theoretical investigation of politics and human experience in the globalized world. In the case of Ghosh, globalization has increased the contradiction of post-modernity and thus renders his political views to become unclear. The political ambivalence is important as it makes the readers question the sense of political participation in a post-colonial globalized world.

The post-modernist structure of Ghosh sums up the anxieties of the modern society and culture, which is one of the main themes of his writings. As a linguist and a literary critic, Ghosh focuses on the philosophical and psychological implications which language produces upon human thought and action. He claims that self-representation is not created under an essence but rather an inborn soul of a person. Ghosh opines that the identity of a person is constantly formed through the experiences, language, and interactivity with cultures, and, therefore, the self-identification process is complicated and dynamic in nature. Due to the complex history of the Indian subcontinent, the writing of Ghosh is fundamentally connected to the issue of diasporic and postcolonial identities. The tension of the identity of the global Indian and South Asian diaspora is embodied in his works which represent the complex character of these identities. Ghosh tends to cross boundaries in his creativity as he tends to use a broad spectrum of academic fields in his writing including history, sociology and anthropology among others. He is keen on the diaspora due to its ambiguity as it moves around the cultural memory, identity and displacement. The writing of Ghosh by examining the various parts of the world relative to their historical backdrop explores how cultures and continents are interrelated thereby pushing the frontiers of literary and intellectual research.

India, Bangladesh, Egypt, Burma, and Malaya with their pasts appear alive through the words of Amitav Ghosh. In addition to such writers as Wilson Harris or Derek Walcott, Ghosh reconsiders the ways in which the evils of colonialism can be corrected. One of the major themes in his works is his exploration of the weight of the colonial past on the globalizing post-colonial generation. Ghosh has unlocked the final mystery of freedom whereby the concept of freedom is intricate in the post-colonial world. His treatment of the imagination is safe when inverting the great story about colonialism. Ghosh explores the themes of nationalism, internationalism, migration, violence, and communalism in his academic writings using the prism of marginalized histories. He is fond of mixing fact with fiction, and his literature is always filled with historical events. His interpretation of the human state frees humans out of the weight of the past that is quite oppressive in the post-colonial environment. The way Ghosh managed to manoeuvre through the intricacies of Indian society and history has provided his novels with a unique point of view that can be applicable across the borders.

Amitav Ghosh and the Cultural Theory

To the cultural theorists, culture is more than the artistic achievements, it is seen to be the daily routines, institutions, and common meanings of a people. We can find this

highlighted by Raymond Williams (1958) in his text, who points out that the first fact is that culture is ordinary; that culture can be viewed as a whole way of life that can convey certain meanings and values; but further adds that culture can manifest itself not only in art and learning but also in institutions and daily behaviour (3). This wider perspective places literature and other creative works as one of the crucial elements of cultural principles and social standards.

This idea is furthered by postcolonial theorists like Homi K. Bhabha (1994), who believe that culture cannot be restricted to a specific nation or tradition. According to Bhabha, culture so as a survival strategy is not only transnational but also translational (4) and that an international culture, one formed upon the inscription and articulation of the hybridity of culture is the result of the interaction and encounter of global movements and encounters. These concepts highlight the role of migration, diaspora and displacement in disrupting solid conceptions about culture in an expressive way, demonstrating the fluid and hybrid nature of culture.

Nadia Butt (2008) contributes to this debate by highlighting the importance of the space as a representation of the political and cultural encounters, experiences that actually remake the relationship of various characters with space and place (3). Space in Ghosh works is dynamic and is constantly redefined amongst individuals, places, cultures and societies. According to Butt, such a way of seeing space disbands the above-mentioned differences between a definite space and an exclusive culture, allowing people to see more complicated conceptions. John Thieme (2008) also writes on this concept by saying that undifferentiated environment is a place, when humans attach significance to the environment by naming it and mapping it (73). This vision of space goes in line with the style of narration of Ghosh, in which space is not merely a passive setting but an active environment that creates and affects the cultural and political activities of the characters.

In his reflection of society Amitav Ghosh goes across cultures and walks the idea of the third space. The term the third space is coined by a prominent cultural and post-colonial theorist called Homi K. Bhabha (1994) who defined it as the space of the intersection of two cultures. It is here in the in-between space that the meaning and the representation are always renegotiable which leads to the birth of an entirely new thing. Here new cultural identities are always formed, reformed and evolving. Sometimes, artists in the third space refer to it as a creative advantage, a space that is familiar and at the same time foreign, a kind of home and at the same time not a home.

In *Culture and Society* (1960), Raymond Williams points out that cross-cultural interactions are presented in all of the novels written by Amitav Ghosh which reflects the fluidity of culture. Williams claims that the definition of the term culture is controversial and complicated. As an anthropological approach, culture tends to be in a conflict with the normative values promoted by major thinkers. This results in a more cost-effective usage of the word, perceived not as the natural manner of life of the people, but a realm of social conflicts and contradictions. Globalization, Williams maintains, has brought about a period of cultural annihilation and the erosion of culture has become more pronounced in the war between nationalisms. Hereby, cultural interaction among national cultures leads to the formation of third-space inhabitants who swing between two predominant cultures continuously experiencing this strain (254).

Culture is considered to be dynamic and ever changing. To get a clear picture of cultural exchange, it is necessary to analyse its constituent parts assimilation, enculturation, acculturation, adaptability, contact zones, cross-culture, cultural diffusion, and cultural dissonance. Besides these, there are also the problems of cultural shock, gender and religious discrimination, enslavement, and transculturation that are also essential in cultural interactions. Nevertheless, in the context of the analysis of the Amitav Ghosh works, those aspects of cultural interchange, which touch upon the relations between China, the United Kingdom, and India, are the most relevant in the context of the *River of Smoke* (as part of the Ibis Trilogy). All three countries are the center of the cultural processes in the novel.

Narratology principles are followed in many of the other novels by Amitav Ghosh including the *Dancing in Cambodia*, *At Large in Burma* and *In an Antique Land*. Another interesting instance of how Ghosh used the post-colonial themes is *Sea of Poppies*. These novels combine past and present, exploring the modern issues of identity, movement and aftermath of colonialism, and combining the narratives with a reflection on the past. Displacement, space and cultural identity are entrenched in Ghosh works as postcolonial issues. These problems are discussed in his novels through different angles which are not limited to geographical or social boundaries. Another interesting feature about his works is the employment of the third space to analyze the issue of displacement and cultural identity critically. Ghosh addresses the issue of identity construction and the influence of space on identity formation by developing characters who move between their originating environments and the enforced realities of the current time.

Diaspora and ‘Sea of Poppies’

Diaspora means the movement of people out of their mother lands to the new territories voluntarily or involuntarily. This notion is essential in the process of studying colonialism since it encompasses the involuntary or voluntary movement of people as a result of imperial control. The diaspora theme is depicted in the *Ibis Trilogy* by Amitav Ghosh, which consists of *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), and *Flood of Fire* (2015), presenting the British colonization and, particularly, opium trade and the issue of coolies into Mauritius. Ghosh reinvents the history of colonization by telling the stories of people involved in the British trade and domination of the territories of India and China in the middle of the 19th century. Opium trade and the human trafficking system that transferred people with the convicts that were sent by the British government contributed greatly to the formation of the lives of the effected persons either directly or indirectly.

Throughout the *Ibis Trilogy*, Ghosh is in a unified tone, which contributes to the formation of a single narrative structure. The trilogy is a series that tracks the influence of the British Empire on the lives of different characters with diverse social and cultural setups. The results of colonialism, opium wars, and human cost of empire are also discussed in all three novels, but the lives of peasants, convicts, and labourers are given special attention. The stories of the people who travel with the Ibis, the vessel that goes to Mauritius are the focus of the story and they demonstrate how migration, colonialism and identity affected the personal lives.

In the first book of the trilogy, *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh transports the reader to the beginning of the 19th century in India as it was under the British colonial rule. The novel is a very intricate combination of the stories of the different people living in the world, which

makes it the Indian peasant, the British officials, and the Chinese workers, all of whom are united through their destiny as they travel together. Ghosh focuses on the subject of colonialism, opium trade, and how the British rule affected people. *Sea of Poppies* highlights what is intricate about the present state of affairs through storytelling that brings to the fore historical occurrences and the personal issues and desires of the characters. The novel explores the questions of identity, migration, and liberation that offer an engaging storyline and a compelling critique of the empire and the world forces that determine the lives of people.

Fanqui town is described as a culture amid corruption in Canton. The authenticity of the places described by Ghosh such as Fanqui Town is well-known making his novels have strong sense of time and place. This historical truth is an important element of literary art of the works of Ghosh, and it is what makes them universally popular. Ghosh wrote a number of novels, some of them being on the subject of immigration, race relations, and seeking personal identity that feature in the *Ibis Trilogy*. What is of central concern to works of Ghosh is the structures of dominance and colonial power because in his works, he explores how colonialism influenced the economic and military policies of the empire. In their descriptive study of the post-colonial conditions, these works prompt the reader to approach history in a variety of ways, particularly through the eyes of the marginalized and subalterns, which makes the effects of colonialism more subtle.

Amitav Ghosh is a historical fiction novelist whose works are set in the early nineteenth century. The story is constituted of a variety of characters, such as Bihari farmers, a Bengali landlord, an octoroon American sailor, a Parsi businessman, British traders, Company agents, Indian and Chinese merchants, a Cornish botanist, many laskars of different places, among other people. This narrative is based on three vessels, the *Ibis*, *Anahita* and *Redruth* which are caught in a storm. Ghosh is a superb narrator and the readers can find it easy to fill in the backgrounds of his characters and appreciate the appalling circumstances that propelled them to their present plights of captives or forced labourers. Several of the main characters are to travel to the Chinese seaport of Canton and participate in the First Opium War, all united by terror and doubt. Through hard work and detailed narration, Ghosh reinvests the narrative, highlighting the violence applied to the colonized individuals especially after being shipped to foreign lands as a result of colonialization and business.

Amitav Ghosh, in *Sea of Poppies* (2008), has given one of the best illustrations of migration wherein the people of a multinational diaspora gain a collective identity by forgetting their personal cultures and settings. This initial group of Indians emigrated out of their native land towards the beginning of the nineteenth century as a British imperialist and capitalist enterprise in search of a brighter future. Combining the historical fiction, the colonial, postcolonial, exilic, multicultural, cosmopolitan, and hybrid themes are mixed in the novel. Social, economic, political, and linguistic consciousness make his fiction more than a creative expression and provide Ghosh with an extra layer which makes his works timeless and geographical.

This period is covered in novels such as *Kanthapura* by Raj Rao, *Coolie* by Mulk Raj Anand, *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding and *1984* by George Orwell and even in many of the novels of Ghosh himself. Ghosh aims to provide a voice to the downtrodden and the subordinate and reclaim voices of the people who are lost and locked out. Ghosh is very

concerned with the ways in which India is incorporated into the greater world cultural networks as a recipient of the Padmashri in 2007. The style of writing adopted by Ghosh is unique and involves a combination of creativity and sharp insight of an anthropologist. He twists the boundaries separating fact and fiction by using his imagination to apply to the less well-known historical events. He writes as an economic migrant, a traveller, a student, a prisoner, a researcher, a settler, a peasant, and an indentured worker and offers new perspectives on the issues concerning the colonial heritage of knowledge, the resistance of colonized societies, the creation and re-creation of identities in colonial and postcolonial settings, doubt, and the socioeconomic struggle to survive. His writings are very much interested in the concept of multiplicity in culture and how societies negotiate their identities during the pressures of oppression and transformation.

The Sea of Poppies is set just prior to the Opium Wars and deals with the British activity in India and the opium sales plans that targeted China. Opium war was a conflict between the East India Company and the weakened China under the Qing Dynasty between 1839 and 1842 to create free trade in China to the British merchants. British were in great demand of Chinese tea, silk and porcelain since the sixteenth century. British commodities were however less demanded in the East, this resulted in increase in trade gap between Britain and China and resulted in the necessity of using silver to finance imports. To counter this imbalance, in the year 1773, British Governor-General Warren Hastings gave the East India Company the mandate to create an opium monopoly in Bengal, which motivated Indian peasants to grow large amounts of poppies. The opium that was produced in Bengal was of high quality; it was then smuggled to China. This gave rise to a spurt in the opium trade and when the opium tide started getting low, the addiction of opium in China increased. Although the Chinese government had made many efforts to stop the opium trade in the 1820s, they kept importing the opium in bulk, and the opium kept a number of smokers at 12.5 million. This helped in the breakdown of social and economic system in China resulting in two wars. The defeat of China led to the government opening various ports to the western trade, surrender Hong Kong to Britain and legalize the opium trade. There were reported 20 million addicts as a result of the opium crisis whose Qing rulers later failed because of the humiliation they had received at the hands of foreign powers which finally led to the loss of power in 1949 when China was again in control.

Another aspect that Amitav Ghosh brings out is the destruction that the British colonial government caused to the economy and lifestyle of India. Indentured workers of India have been the inspiration of Ghosh work as Ghosh tells it in a recent interview. When Britain ended slavery, estates of British in the Far East and the West Indies still depended on indentured labourers, who were called 'grimitiyas'. These workers were usually Indians who were travelling to distant countries like Mauritius, Fiji and Trinidad to avoid being crushed by poverty in their homeland. They were shipped to labour under the most inhuman conditions with a contract called 'girit' (a perversion of the word agreement) which was like they were forced to perform labour in the motherland. They could not guess that Mauritius would turn into a paradise to them, as they would have to endure a sequence of tribulations. Ghosh states that the East India Company regulated the production, harvests and sale of opium, which had a significant impact on the lives of the Indian peasants. When people lost their lands and means of livelihood to British policies, the social upheaval and

population movement of the nineteenth century made millions of people leave their homes and find the economic opportunities.

In the *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh develops the issue of societal and economic impacts of mandatory production of opium in such countries as Bihar and Bengal where opium was cultivated to serve the Chinese market. The novel also revolves around the transportation of the initial party of the Indian emigrants on the ship Ibis. The name Ibis is not insignificant since Ibis is a holy bird in Egyptian religion that is closely related to the god Thoth who is one of the most influential gods in the Egyptian pantheon. Thoth, who is often represented with an Ibis head, did not only arbitrate between good and evil, but also controlled physical and moral laws. The association of this bird with Thoth is also a metaphor of the moral and physical journey that the characters are experiencing, through the stormy seas of colonialism, migration and surviving.

‘Sea of Poppies’ – A Socio-political Novel

Sea of Poppies is an impressive socio-political novel, which is written in the form of a travelogue and unites history, sociology, anthropology and politics. Amitav Ghosh in this novel depicts that the British used their financial might to deprive Indians of their riches and the Chinese of their respect and dignity, most of which they did by means of opium trade. It is a dark period in the history of Indian colonialism that is executed by a chain of interlinked tales. The Ibis, a schooner, is purchased by the British shipping firm Burnham Bros in Calcutta following an end of slavery where it will bring in indentured labour in British colonies in the Caribbean. The interior of the Ibis is as diverse and multifarious as the story itself: there is Captain Chillingworth, an opium addict; there is First Mate Mr. Crowley, a rogue; there is Second Mate Mr. Serang Ali, a mulatto freedman, whose looks are claimed to look like those of Genghis Khan (Ghosh 14).

The trilogy is the *Ibis Trilogy*, which comprises three books, the first of which is *Sea of Poppies* (2008). Land, river and sea used throughout the trilogy are metaphorical structures of the narrative. The sea as a whole, the sea which is stormy, is a symbol of the troubles and struggles in realizing the dreams one has and the river which feeds off the land is an embodiment of the hopes and the aspirations of the people at large. The story takes place in Calcutta and along the holy river the Ganges, preceding the beginning of the Opium Wars. Ghosh, presenting the models of emergence and decline of civilizations, makes some parallels to the laws of a field of poppy seeds where each seed has its destiny that is not fair. The book is an epic story of life in Calcutta in 1830s, and there is a wide range of characters, associated with ultimately love-hate relationships. It gives a precise description of the opium growing in northeastern India by the British East India Company and the 19th century maritime period in general. The poppy is a flower that is very beautiful and at the same time very dangerous, and it is now considered a metaphor of imperialism and exploitation.

The protagonist of the novel, Deeti is a modest and pious woman, a motherly woman loving and a domestic worker athlete. Having found out that her mother-in-law had been poisoned on their wedding night so that her brother in law did not have anything to replace her with her sterile husband, Hukum Singh, a crippled employee working in the Opium factory of Ghazipur, Deeti is devastated. The death of Hukum Singh causes Deeti to take her daughter, Kabutri to her family. Deeti, just as she is about to engage in the act of suicide through the sati ceremony, is rescued by a cow man, a low-caste, called Kalua, who is a

resident of a nearby village. They themselves elope and get married. But the anger of the villagers over their rebellion compels them to become indentured servants in the Ibis in order to get out of the the wrath of the in-laws of Deeti.

The main characters of the novel are also overwhelmed by a number of additional narrations. Here the American sailor, Zachary Reid, who is the descendant of a white father and black mother, is a clear example of a stranger against the background of discrimination. His ambiguous identity causes him to be unliked by the Asians and Europeans well as he becomes a sadist and nasty character, especially in scenes where he is delighted at the pain inflicted on Kalua and he also punishes the crew. The trip in the Ibis is also connected to the existential conflict of identity and belonging that Reid undergoes (Ghosh).

Neel Rattan Halder, a rich rajah is persuaded by Mr. Burnham, the British merchant, to sell his lands in order to clear his debt with the opium trade with China. This story follows closely the case of Prawnkissen Holder who was on trial at the Supreme Court of Calcutta in 1829 because he forged works. Paulette, a French orphan growing up in India is also a main figure in the story. Instead, Paulette feels safer with Indian customs, food, as well as attire, rather than with her French roots. Her miserable life in France also causes her to reinvent her life in India as a member of the bigger colonial struggle (Ghosh).

The Ibis turns into a refuge of the homeless since the plots get confused and each has its own achievements and tragedies. Following much of the struggle, treachery, and bloodshed in the ship. Neel, Ah Fatt, Jodu and the leader of the group, Serang Ali, and Kalua leave the Ibis on a boat. The story ends with Deeti, Paulette, Zachary, and Nob Krishna, who are the crew of the Ibis, tossed about in the middle of the ocean. Kalua and Ah Fatt kill the tyrannical Bhyro Singh and the evil Mr. Crowley respectively. To adequately represent the society at the time and the history of the pioneer group of Indians to leave their native land, the stories in the novel mix a rich assortment of myths, beliefs, languages, cultural, and historical factors. Ghosh does not portray rich White masters as the heroes in her novels but the vengeful colonial subjects.

It all started in 1834, when a band of misfortunate souls banded together out of a shared experience of hardship. In the first book of the Ibis trilogy, Paulette reveals to Deeti that they were "ship-siblings" (jahaj bhais and jahajbahens). (527)

Deeti was drawn in by how simple and powerful the idea was.

There was nothing that made jahazbhai different from jahazbahen. Children of the ship...a huge wooden mái-báp, an adopted ancestor and the father of future families" (528).

The Ibis carries passengers of various ethnicities mixed together to Mauritius, and all of them get lost. Multiethnic and multinational groups of seamen called lascars were sailing the Indian Ocean and their experience is celebrated in *Sea of Poppies*. In his studies on indenture, Ghosh found out that despite what many people thought, a large proportion of individuals returned back home once the indenture period had been completed. Nevertheless, most of them did not decide to go back to India. Ghosh also discovered letters by locals in Mauritius asking their relatives and families to immigrate to Mauritius. His finding of various Brahmins and individuals of other upper castes in the indentured labourers breaks the theory that the migrants were mainly of lower classes.

Duffadar informs Kalua that caste does not count anymore. Men of all origins like

Brahmins, Ahirs, Chamars and Telis are immediately ready to enroll as long as they are youthful, healthy, and ready to work (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 302). In the process of this labour and displacement, these laborers were able to seek comfort through their songs and rituals. The Indians, Europeans, Asians, and Africans are found in the novel. There is a strong threading of Bhojpuri, Bengali, Lascari, Hindustani, French, American, and Anglo Indians words and phrases throughout the tale, with a panache of an eclectic English, whether the pidgin of the seafarers, the comically incomprehensible English of Bengali Babu Nob Krishna or the Indian Foreigner Paulette Lambert. These outcast characters are in need of a clean slate, so they develop completely new characters to lead them into a new life.

Indentured Immigration resulted in the well diffusion of Indians throughout the globe. It was the process which started in 1834 and lasted until 1920 which made a separate community, connected by the common misfortune. The Ibis turns out to be a cultural Utopia where the borders of culture are destroyed to confront the humanitarian principles. The ship which is famous by carrying coolies and criminals takes the form of a microcosm of the bigger world. To further his argument, Brij Lal (2008) points out that the people were crippled by the revenue policy of the British in addition to being severely affected by the natural calamities but he also says that the people were crippled by crippling indebtedness, fragmented land holdings and scattered families; all of which were a continuation of the process of displacement already going on in the subcontinent (6). The Truth and Justice Commission (TJC) Report also explains how the white men took advantage of the immigrants and plundered them amid this turbulent time.

Every time humans are mentioned, "The Dhangars" are compared to monkeys. They are willing to work since they have no other needs but food, water, and a place to sleep, and they lack any religious or intellectual convictions. (298)

Over one million individuals were going through the treacherous oceans in order to find a few well-paid positions in a number of the colonies where they worked, such as Mauritius. The majority of them were seventy-five percent of those who spoke Bhojpuri in a section of northern India. When Deeti quits Bihar (Ghazipur) she witnesses hundreds of miserable bums, many of which were willing to sweat themselves to death to get a handful of rice tossed out of their towns by the flood of flowers which had flooded the area (298). The narrator says,

"When it got cold, the English sahibs didn't let much else be planted. Their agents would go from field to field, forcing farmers to sign "Asami" contracts in exchange for money." (28) It was hard to say no to what they asked. (29-30).

Also, the farmers were forced to grow poppies and indigo for the benefit of the British economy, which messed up their complicated crop cycle that had been built up over hundreds of years. The Masters didn't just use the country's natural riches to the fullest extent; they also used its people to the fullest extent.

Laboured Indian Slaves

Deeti and her drug addict husband Hukam Singh were only two of the numerous farmers who had their livelihood devastated by the British Trading Company who were compelled to cultivate poppy rather than food crops. Raja Neel Rattan, having participated in the opium business, is the one to face an identical economic catastrophe as the British take over his Rash Kali estate. Physically, too many slaves worked inhumanely to the satisfaction

and pleasure of their masters in farms, in opium factories, and even in Ibis. At this point, the British do not agree to save Deeti by the process of ritual suicide by fire as required by the Hindu tradition of sati, although the former is ready to do it. Bhyro Singh defeats Kalua due to the hostility of locals towards his intercaste marriage with Deeti and British imperialism. Kalua and Deeti come across a big crowd of girmityas on their way to the factory:

"a hundred or more; ringed in by a ring of stick-bearing guards; walking wearily in the direction of the river" (70).

In the Mauritian island, the Schooner Ibis was a miniature society which was proactive enough to encourage the abolition of caste. The characters in the story acquire different and anglicized identities and at the same time follow the bonds of their jahaji nata. Jogging with Serang Ali, the company changed its name: Deeti was renamed Aditi, Dalit Kalua was renamed Maddav Colver, Paulette was renamed Gomasta Baboo, the niece of Nob Kissin became Pultishwari, Jodu changed his name to Azad, and Zacchary changed to Zikri Malum.

This cruelty of indentured employees is verified by the captain of the ship who tells him, he follows me...when you are on her (Ibis), you must follow Subedar Bhyro Singh as you follow your own zamindars, and as he will be your mai-bap, just as I am his. (599).

Heeru addresses the gender inequality on Ibis. It is stated that if a lady rides Mareech, she will be torn to pieces.

Consumed... many males, few females. What would it be like to be all by yourself in that place, Bhauji? (653).

According to the statistics of migration, the coolies travelled in overcrowded vessels such as the Ibis in the Indian diaspora. They did not get special attention, and their medical attention was at best of poor quality (Hugon 6). A good number of them also did not make it through the 10 or so weeks journey between Calcutta and Mauritius. They were kept in prisoner cells, their advances stolen by Mauritian agents in Calcutta, they were shipped in unclean conditions, without enough cover, food, and medical care (Hugon 152). The Portuguese explorers in the early 1500s used the term Lascar to refer to the sailors that they came across in what is now modern-day India, Malaysia, Thailand, Burma, China, East Africa, and the Middle East. Zachary also regards lascars as an example of location changeability:

He found out that the lascars were a tribal nation, as unlike the Cherokee or the Sioux, and that the members of the tribal nation were distributed throughout the world, and had nothing in common but the waters of the Indian Ocean. It consisted of Chinese and East Africans, Arabs and Malays, Bengalis and Goans, Tamils and Arakans (13).

The indentured 'girmityas' found solace in the little things in life as they prepared to leave their homes and families behind. A terrifyingly unknown destiny awaited them on this strange island in the middle of the ocean. Over time, though, they developed new connections, and just as some friendships blossomed, others withered. Women who were never married were able to quickly find male guardians.

Sailors speak Lascari, a creole that combines elements of patois, Hindustani, Malay, and Chinese. It is another example of the story's characters' linguistic and behavioural diversity. More information on the new bonded labour trade is provided by the

exchange between Zachary and Monsieur d' Epinay, who gave him a letter to deliver to the ship's owner in Calcutta. His canes were rotting in the fields, he told Zachary. Please let Mr. Burnham know that I am in need of guys. Even if Mauritius abolishes slavery altogether, I will need coolies to survive. (21)

Burnham specified that the relocating population would not be "slaves" but "coolies" this time around. No slave-coolies," he noted. A closed door means God is opening a window of opportunity somewhere else, right? As the Lord denied freedom to the Africans, he granted it to the Asians, who were just as deserving (79).

Mr. Burnham uses even religious feelings to make money. He said, "Jesus Christ is Free Trade and Free Trade is Jesus Christ." (116)

He also said,

"If it is God's will that opium be used as a tool to teach China about his teachings, then it shall be so" (116).

Mr. Doughty's comment,

"...indeed, compassion requires it; just think of the poor Indian peasant's situation if his opium can't be sold in China," shows how hypocritical their humanism is. (260).

With their "divide and rule" mindset, colonizers take advantage of the people who live there to make huge amounts of money. Mr. Burnham also says,

"The march to the glittering city is never easy, is it? Did the Israelites not have to go through hard times in the desert? (79)

The book also talks about how little is known about the Indian Ocean as a place of conflict, different kinds of historical interactions, and the movement of goods, which is different from the Atlantic slave trade but similar (Arora 25). It shows "the connections between different histories and civilizations in the nineteenth century through a map of the Indian Ocean as a rich physical and sociocultural location to study the movement of trade, people, ideas, and customs." (39).

The political implication, the culture of cheating, the advent of self-destiny-seeking girmityas, it all can be related to being chewed up in colonialism and mixing the Indian ethos and milieus with the egocentric European mind. The Ibis is described in detail by mysterious traveller Nob Krishna. And the Ibis was no mere ship; it was a vessel of transformation, which had to sail the seas in the quest of the distant shores of reality.

Modernity has made sense when history articulates the themes in the novel which are modern such as rationalism, enlightenment, liberty, the individual, state, civil society, democracy. Therefore, *Sea of Poppies* covers the traumas and powerlessness of people after the shocks of the colonial society in the nineteenth century when peasants were threatened to relinquish their lands to opium. Amitav Ghosh ends by outlining a period of agrarian scam such as the growing demand in the West of profitable yet edible goods, which has led and is leading to the development of starvation in the developing world. The richness of his vocabulary gives him a fantastic job in terms of communicating the distinct views of his characters. *Sea of Poppies* is a masterpiece of twenty-first-century English literature because of its scope of historical narrative, monumental number of characters, boundless linguistic vitality, and excellent narrative style.

Sea of Poppies leaves no other as far as its ability to illustrate cosmopolitanism is concerned. Ghosh tries to be correct but also plays around with words by amalgamating

various dialects of India with the Anglo-Indian that is spoken by the elite of India. Not satisfied with that, he tries to imitate the language of the seafaring lascars, and Laskari as it is called. Ghosh is honouring the world vision of Moby Dick in all events as he inverts a genre of colonial writers like Conrad and Kipling with his nautical stories. His new work seems to be a radical breakthrough of the previous ones at first. (Gone is the postmodernism that was the hallmark of the previous novels). His politics and his general interest in the past and colonialism, frontiers crossing (and recollections), and the accretion of knowledge remain largely the same. In *Sea of Poppies*, different individuals come through a variety of times at different points of the novel. Many of these happenings can be followed to Deeti, the widow of a drug addict. Orphans Paulette and Jodu were treated as brothers wherever they were put, be it France or Bengal. Opium business is key to the economic stability of a young landowner called Neel. Next there is Zachary Reid, a mulatto American who has been causing ripples in the Ibis organization.

One finds it interesting due to the complicated form and detailed critique of the work. It is a tough read but most definitely a rewarding one. Ghosh has made the *Sea of Poppies* brim with bad omens, whereas the *River of Smoke*, the consecutive novel in the *Ibis Trilogy* is the calmer nature of its course. The readers will observe that Ghosh takes a looping path to pick the plot up where the previous novel left the cliffhanger.

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