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**A Postcolonial Interpretation of *Sea of Poppies***

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In the postcolonial world, among the postcolonial writers, Amitav Ghosh is one among the most versatile and prominent writers. He is an eminent international writer with extraordinary set of mind and thoughts. His books either reflect postcolonial scenario or depict the pre-colonial and colonial themes. His works, mainly novels, reflect his craftsmanship of weaving the themes against the historical, geographical and social backdrops. His central characters are travellers in diasporic exile: a psychological victim of the migrant sensibility.

Although Amitav Ghosh does not consider himself a postcolonial writer, he has depicted almost every bit and detail that comes under the umbrella term 'postcolonial'. Language, history and society on the whole are inseparable from postcolonialism. This concept of postcolonialism exists only because of imperialism and colonizers' occupation and exploitation of the natives, the indigenous people. Postcolonialism therefore deals with those cultures and societies which had been affected by the colonial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. It analyses and examines the aftermath of colonization. In other words, it undertakes those literary works that are the consequence of the colonial process. Postcolonialism, on the whole, deals with the search for cultural, social, individual identity in a colonized nation. It reflects the conflicts and dilemmas of developing national identity after colonialism.

Like Salman Rushdie, Khushwant Singh, Mukul Kesavan, Vikram Chandra, Shashi Tharoor etc., Amitav Ghosh also writes in a postcolonial space by using novel as a means of cultural representation. These writers "aim at enhancing an Indian cultural identity and projecting Indian cultural and historical heritage to enable an assertion of the Indian self". (Jain 2000: 32-33) As far as the novels of Amitav Ghosh are concerned, "History is a brooding presence..., almost a living entity able to shape the lives of his characters." (Basu 160)

Ghosh believes in the co-relation of all cultures. The concept of unified identity implies unity in diversity in his fiction. Being a cosmopolitan writer, he explores not only his native country but also the neighbouring Asian countries in his works. While dealing with his literary craftsmanship he maintains a balance between the memory of past and the desire for future by coming back to present. He writes about families and nations to emphasize upon the sense of dislocation and belonging. "Ghosh is one of the most sympathetic postcolonial voices to be heard today. He looks at love and loyalty and examines questions of Empire and responsibility, of tradition and modernity". (Soueif 5) As a writer of Indian Diaspora, he presents multiple viewpoints of the dispersed people of different nationalities. In his hands novel becomes an artistic tool for social betterment.

In Ghosh's works memory plays a crucial role. "Memory . . . is a complex phenomenon that reaches out too far beyond what normally constitutes a historian's archives, for memory is much more than what the mind can remember or what objects can help us document about the past. (Chakrabarty 143)

Weaving together childhood and adulthood, past and present, stories and happenings of various countries generates the action in the novel and determines the form of the novel. Ghosh's fiction has the quality of digressions, resolutions, looping, non-linear and a wide range of narrative techniques. To make his narrative technique complex, he sometimes employs a "memory-within-memory" (Joshi 111) of framework and sometimes projects memories clinging together in memories. Sparsely related and long-silenced memories as they are, memories come to the narrator in bits and pieces. While representation of memory in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is in the form of third person narrator where focus is impersonal and the perspectives shift from storyline to storyline through differing narrative voices, Amitav Ghosh's narrators act as participants in the story with extradiegetic voices. The regulation of narrative sequence and the use of such techniques as paralipsis, ellipsis, analepsis and prolepsis in the structure of narratives to manipulate the temperament of incidents and the intensity of temporality are notably different in Amitav Ghosh's fiction. He makes skillful use of narrational framework and free direct and indirect speeches to furnish the structural frame of the content of the fictional work.

Amitav Ghosh began his journey as a postcolonial writer and rose to worldwide recognition with *The Glass Palace*, an epic novel about Indians in Burma and the rise and fall of imperial powers in the twentieth century. Returning to the same perspective, he went on to write, *Sea of Poppies*, the first volume of his planned trilogy. The novel delineates how Indian present is shaped by the imperial past of the country. It is an apt and concrete commentary on how colonialism damaged and divided the Indian society. Both novels, *The Glass Palace* and *Sea of Poppies*, established Ghosh as an archetypal model of a postcolonial author.

*Sea of Poppies* is set in India at the time of the Anglo-Chinese opium wars during 1839-43 and 1846-60. The novel elucidates two enormous fiscal episodes of the nineteenth century. First, the fostering of opium crop in Bengal and Bihar for the Chinese marketplace and subsequently the conveyance of Indian bonded employees to harvesting the ripe sugarcane on islands like Mauritius, etc which were under the colonial rule. Imperialism has traditionally, racially and linguistically combined Indian culture with the European feelings. The novel is an observation on social and cultural progression of Indian subaltern society and a tale of great effort by the destitute and wretches of imperial India. The dispassionate and doleful account of the Indian peasantry which was forced into opium cultivation is a tale of their subsequent impoverishment and destitution. The evil design of the British is illustrated in the novel as:

As a family, their experience lay in the managing of kings and courts, peasants and dependents; although rich in land and property, they had never possessed much by way of coinage; what there was of it they disdained to handle themselves, preferring to entrust it to a legion of agents, *gomustas* and poor relatives. When the old *zemindar's* coffers began to swell, he tried to convert his silver into immovable wealth of the kind he best understood – land, houses, elephants, horses, carriages and, of course, a budge row more splendid than any other craft then sailing on the river. But with new properties there came a great number of dependents who had all to be fed and

maintained; much of the new land proved to be uncultivable, and the new houses quickly became an additional drain since the Raja would not suffer them to be rented. (*Sea of Poppies* 86-87)

The poor Indian peasant actually suffered due to this forced cultivation of opium. In their fields, peasant farmers were coerced to produce opium by the British, and this caused prevalent paucity, hunger and slavery because lands that supplied food with lifeline crops like wheat, paddy, pulses and vegetables were now deluged with the growing tide of poppies. In fact, the novel is set in an epoch of farming scam: when the western demands for inedible crops brought wealth to the colonial rulers but at the same time caused hunger in the subaltern world:

A few clumps of poppy were enough to provide for a household's needs, leaving a little over, to be sold: no one was inclined to plant more because of all the work it took to grow poppies.... Such punishment was bearable when you had a patch or two of poppies ... but what sane person would want to multiply these labours when there were better, more useful crops to grow, like wheat, dal, vegetables? But those toothsome winter crops were steadily shrinking in acreage: now the factory's appetite for opium seemed never to be sated. (*Sea of Poppies* 29)

Imperialism has traditionally, culturally and linguistically blended Indian ethos with the European sensibilities. The novel is a commentary on socio-cultural evolution of Indian subaltern society, a saga of struggle by the destitute and wretches of imperial India and the dispassionate and doleful account of the Indian peasantry forced into opium cultivation, the story of their subsequent impoverishment and destitution.

The novel delineates the utter helplessness of Indian laborers and farmers as the insatiable appetite of the British for revenue cripples them, and leaves them marooned, exploited and defenseless. The crafty and cunning business of British has snatched India of its riches, freedom and peace; and Chinese of their discretion and wisdom by poisoning them with opium.

Deeti Singh, the central character of the novel, is married as a young teenager to a man whose dependence on opium makes him an inadequate husband both physically and economically. She fears her sadistic and immoral brother-in-law as she was impregnated on her wedding night by him. Kalua, of colossal strength and resource, the low-caste ox-cart driver, saves her when she is forced to sit on her husband's funeral pyre and commit sati. All these impending circumstances leave her with no choice but to elope with Kalua joining, as she does, the club of poppy farmers. Later, faced with the stark reality of poverty and life, both Kalua and Deeti decide to join the crew of the *Ibis* and go to *Mareech* (modern day Mauritius) as *girmityas* (a distortion of the word 'agreement' which was signed between the British government and labourers who agreed to be taken to different faraway places to work on sugarcane fields).

A host of characters in *Sea of Poppies* assemble in Kolkata to board the ship, *Ibis* at Hoogli. They are people of different races, faith, castes, and sex. Ghosh's copious and deft detail makes the reader intimately familiar with the characters and their respective cultures and heritage. The novel exhibits a dozen of major characters like Deeti Singh, Burnham Brothers, Kalua, Zachary Reid, Serang Ali, Putli, Jodu, Raja Neel Rattan Halder, Baboo Nob Kissin, Ah-Fatt. Ghosh also introduces the readers to the *lascars* (members of the crew) of *Ibis*.

*Ibis* is a slave-trading ship and it is pressed into service to transport *girmitya*, indentured labourers to plantations on the island of Mauritius. It has a British captain, an American, second

mate, Indian troops to maintain law and order, and a crew of *lascars*. Among its passengers are people of all nationalities, backgrounds and beliefs, some crossing the seas to tide over the crises at home, some being transported as convicts. As they sail down the Hooghly and into the Indian Ocean, their old familial ties and traces are washed away and they begin their lives afresh. The sea becomes their new nation as the shipmates form new bonds of empathy. They leave behind the strictures of caste, community and religion; rename themselves as *jahaz-bhais* (brothers on the ship) and *jahaz-bahens* (sisters on the ship). Singing and ritualistic performances help these passengers to temporarily take their mind off the uncertainties awaiting them in the remote islands of *Mareech*. The ship ultimately becomes the epicentre for a wide variety of characters.

Each person escapes from a specific situation in his/her homeland. Mr Zachary Reid flees the American racial discrimination and Paulette is running away from the authoritarian European community in India. Accordingly, Deeti becomes Adii and Kalua transforms into Maddow. In fact, the orphaned Paulette enters the ship disguised as a man, Zachary Reid passes for a white person.

Migrants on the ship have to face different types of problems. Sometimes it appears whether they will be able to reach their destination or not. They have to confront the authorities for trivial things. In one such incident, on the *Ibis*, there was sharing for drinking water. This was new and unfamiliar problem to the *girmitiyas*. By afternoon, when the level of drinking water in the *gharas* became low, the migrants climbed on the ladder and began to shout, "Water! Listen, up there! Our *gharas* need to be filled." (*Sea of Poppies* 401) There was nearly a situation of riot on the ship and the *girmitiyas* were beaten up. In order to solve this problem, the captain called all the coolies on the deck and a container of fresh water was placed in the shade of the deck house and a messboy was deployed to drop a couple of ladlefuls into each woman's pot (*lota*). Later, Captain Chillingworth addressed the crowd:

"The difference is that the law of the land has no hold on the water. At sea there is another law, and you should know that on this vessel I am its sole maker. While you are on the *Ibis* and while she is at sea, in my hands is just one of the keepers of my law . . . I will use it without hesitation if it should prove necessary. But remember, always, there is no better keeper of the law than submission and obedience. In that respect, this ship is no different from your own homes and village." (*Sea of Poppies* 404)

Many other characters also tried to cope with the new environment. Zachary wanted to integrate with the *laskari* group. He easily coped with their speech "as if his oddly patterned speech had unloosed his own tongue" (*Sea of Poppies* 16) and changed his eating habits "to a *Laskari* fare of *karibat* and *kedgeree*- spicy *skillygales* of rice, lentils and pickles, mixed on occasion with little bits of fish, fresh or dry....he soon grew to like the unfamiliar flavours" (*Sea of Poppies* 23).

In his novels, Ghosh deals with the issues of self versus nation; identity versus nationhood and the representation of history concluding that all borders are imaginary constraints. He lays bare the national, geographic, regional and political boundaries and maintains his own idea that nationalism is an imaginative construct. *Sea of Poppies* projects the political and cultural complexities through the concept of nationalism, imperialism, and the subjugation of gender, class and caste. He has also presented a unique interpretation of history in fiction from the international perspective and writes imaginatively about the process of colonization in his writings.

*Sea of Poppies* is thus a manifestation of the desire to validate the postcolonial experience and to attempt a reconstruction of public history through a reconstruction of the private or the personal history. In brief, *Sea of Poppies* is a representative work of Amitav Ghosh permeated with the postcolonial ambience and atmosphere. The characters' personal lives portray the real picture of humanity. Their lives depict an entire history of the odds and advertise that ordinary individuals have to bear in their struggle for survival. This real history of survival, the pain and misery of suffering masses is overlooked by the mainstream history. By focusing on the lives of these individuals, Ghosh highlights that missing dimension of history which is needed to present a whole and exact depiction of humanity.

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