

## **Historical Capsulizing of the post-colonial India in Ghosh's Sea of poppies**

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### **Abstract**

India is a beautiful country painted with ethnic, Bio cultural and linguistic diversity. It has its roots connected with eternal nature. People of different class, caste, creed, and colour intermingle all together under single roof. India is a country which accepts new things with open mind in favour of humanity. Few decades back what India is now was slightly in its different tone. Sea of Poppies delineates the contemporary class domination, exploitation, caste biasness, untouchability, male domination and quest for identity. The book is a historical overview of India. Britishers suck the blood of the Indians by making them their slaves. During Post Colonial period starvation and violence spread in Bihar and Bengal. In this article the ancient aspects of India and its connectivity with nature and culture is described briefly, the dark side of the marginal people is discussed. The writer has not praised but protested the sheer exploitation of the mankind; meager steps taken against evilness destroying the Indian culture and social life and also throws a light of optimism towards the emerging thoughts which can mould the mindset of the younger generations to a larger extent.

**Key words: Opium war, Indentured labourers, migration, addiction, untouchability, male chauvinism, epitome of sacrifice.**

### **Aims and Objective:**

This article is to show the historical and social features of post-colonial India and its various practices that were happening during the time radius of India's independence. The barbaric customs like Sati (widow burning) which was a curse that was faced by the women of our country and lack of education lead to various exploitations is to be analysed in the realistic contemporary perspective . It aims at presentation of class-distinctions prevalent in the country and focuses on Opium cultivation and its impact on India- China relationship. The purpose of the paper is also to highlight the abominable condition of the Coolies who were sent as (indentured laborers) outside India. The

primary focus is to garner the unknown as painted by Amitav Ghosh in his *Sea of Poppies*. It further will expose the aftermath of imperialism and colonialism, and analyse the social, political, cultural and economic impact on the Indian people impartially.

### **Literature review:**

According to Gaiutra Bahadur as expressed in *The New York Times*, *Sea of Poppies* focuses on the Indian socio-cultural background. Racial discrimination, caste and class bias and intermingling of the various tongue is also a point of attraction in this narrative by Amitav Ghosh. He adds that the writer is a man who knows to play with cultures and their beauty.

However, critics like James Buchan presents his views in *The Guardian* about *Sea of Poppies* that it describes the various cultures and the pastoral language is used by the author to connect us to the novel. The lascars, sepoys, nautch girls, a slave ship where everybody is unknown to each other, survival of their life, and living as a family. All such incidents are beautifully displayed and the Indian Panorama comes out live before us in this novel which is the part of the Ibis trilogy. It is not without reason that Daulat Ram Rathore comments that Ghosh's novels are very fantastic, he takes interest in history, Anthropology, Quest for identity, colonialism and imperialism.

### **Introduction**

In the *Sea of Poppies*, The ancient aspects of India and its connectivity with nature and culture is described briefly, the dark side of the marginal people is discussed. The writer has not praised but protested the inhuman treatment of the colonizers and also throws a light of positive approach towards the emerging thoughts which by far can change the mindset of the younger generations to a large extent. Amitav Ghosh's Novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008).it is the first part of Ibis Trilogy. It is followed by the other two parts that is *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015). Today Indian writing in English has become an area of concern and indispensable section of modern Indian English language and literature. A blaze of striking points of post colonial historical aspects and post colonial has become the topic of today's speaking world. A bunch of certain influence of historical countenance like colonial exploitation of the poor, performing sati, an essence of untouchability, caste biasness, migration, economic exploitation by Britishers and male domination in the society, etc are analyzed briefly.

In a review Jason Fernandes says that *Sea of Poppies*, the first novel of Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy, has all the credentials of a major literary work. It is a historical novel where disparate characters, trapped by the confines of class, caste, race, religion, gender, addiction or sexuality, fight for the opportunity to escape, transform and find independence. But despite this apparent complexity, and the fact that it benefits from thorough research, *Sea of Poppies* is highly 'readable' and has all the page-turning qualities of a good-old-fashioned yarn.

Amitav Ghosh is one of the influential and prominent writers of post modern Indian English literature. Born in Calcutta in Bengali family, he has the first hand knowledge of Indian culture, society. As a historian as well as an anthropologist, he mainly focuses on the life especially of Bihar and Bengal during the colonization of India. The historical aspects Of India and its social condition during the post colonial rule are covered minutely and without any embellishment.

Sea of Poppies is a historical fiction set in the background of Opium war between India and China in 19th century. It deals with the two main themes one is the cultivation of Opium as a cash crop in Bihar and Bengal for Chinese market and another is the transfer of indentured labours to Mauritius for working in the sugar mills under British through the ship named IBIS .As this novel is divided into three section that in land, river and sea because at first this ship was used for opium trade through the river Ganga but after the trade was considered illegal and closed, then the ship IBIS was used to carry indentured labours to British colonies such as Mauritius. The ship IBIS was generally a slave carrier between Africa and America but when the slave carrying business was fully banned then it was again rebuilt and was used for carrying indentured labours to British colonies.

The first part of the trilogy ends in a dramatic note of suspense and excitement. It speaks about a great danger in the middle of the sea in which half of the persons were trapped and else remaining were floating without control in the stormy ocean. Ghosh paints all the characters' in their perfection while keeping the historical aspects in his mind. This can also be seen further in all his works. In Sea of Poppies the characters and their nature have a deep in sight of what really happened and what not and even their names reveal their characters specifications.

Colonial exploitation is one of the major themes in Amitav Ghosh novels in Sea of Poppies. The villagers reside at Ghazipur, a small Hindu village in between Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The people use to lead a simple and quite life by growing staple crops for their survival and for their family. Generally, wheat ,cereals, pulses were the major crops which were grown by the villagers for their livelihood. They were compelled to stop growing their staple crops and switch to poppy farming. The British colonial factories processed these plants in factories to extract opium and transport it to china on a large scale.

The majority of the people of Ghazipur were compelled to work on low wages. The protagonist of the play Dheeti her husband Hukam Singh who was the x-soldier also worked there for a low income, once dheeti visited the opium factory for bringing her sick husband back from the work she noticed the workers and said “their eyes were vacant.... Completely naked”. (p 95). Here we can see that the Britishers on one hand banned the farming of the staple crops by the people of that place and on the other they forcefully compelled them to do opium farming. Here we see that stopping the traditional crop farming leads to starvation of the villagers, and working for producing opium beyond their choice at a very low wages can be termed as the exploitation of the villagers. Similar was the condition of other Indian villages during the British rule.

Talking about Sati or Widow burning, a typical ancient Hindu tradition which is now banned in India, in which the wife or the lady has to burn herself on her husband funeral pyre. It was considered a voluntary act which was quite courageous and heroic in nature. The one who performs Sati was considered to be goddess and were worshipped in home in ancient India. In *Sea of Poppies* we see that according to the plot Deeti's husband Hukam Singh was found to be dead in the opium factory due to opium addiction. When it was the time for the funeral of her husband, she forcefully has to perform sati. In ancient time it was believed that a widow is no more alive when her husband is dead and her dignity remains until her husband is alive. When Dheeti's husband health became ill fortunately her brother in law Chandan Singh came near and said that he will take responsibility of her and keep her well only when she satisfy all his need, but dheeti on the other note said sharply to him that 'I will burn on my husband's pyre rather than give myself to you.' (p.158) it means that she has made a strong decision of performing sati and speaks of voluntary act of Indian Women to save their dignity at all cost

Here Ghosh reveals the reason why many of the Indian widows were ready to perform sati in the past. As far as Hindu widow is concern it is most well come to commit sati rather than to depend on others or relatives for one's survival. That's the reason why Dheeti said clearly to Chandan Singh that she will be performing sati rather than to stay with him as her mistress.

Untouchability is also one of the themes of *Sea of Poppies*. While going though the novel we see that kalua, a dark skinned giant figure, was a low caste man the owner of a cart in that village. Every day his duty was to take Hukam Singh to opium factory 3 miles away. As he was a low caste man the people who sits in his cart had to sit facing back and Hukam Singh also does it every day. It was considered that while doing anything or going anywhere if somebody sees the face of any low caste than it was considered as an ill-omen. So, while sitting facing back even the passengers had to keep a hump of sack or curtain to avoid the direct contact of the other low caste men's who also were on their carts from the back or on side of the road. The social evil of untouchability is very well presented by Amitav Ghosh. The same is true of Indian villages in the contemporary time. 'Ghazipur' is not a village but is sylbolic of the village conditions in India.

Through this it is clear that Ghosh is a keen observer of the mankind and the society. India is a land of diversities. It can be inferred that all kinds of evil culture practices are performed by us, made by us, judged by us. Ghosh through *Sea of Poppies* tries to give a message that all these evil practices of our society should be banned and everyone should be treated equally in front of everyone. Plight due to untouchability can also be seen in Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable*. The protagonist of *Untouchable*; Bakka be like kalua was also not able to enter the British colonizers house often he cleaned their toilets and even his sister Sohini was not allowed to take water from the well where the upper class people the pundits etc were taking water.

It is the caste that divides the society into class according to the rank of the family, wealth and social background, and it leads the ones who come under this as untouchables. It even takes all the social facilities that upper class enjoys. It is so evil practice that takes all the freedom from the ones who

come under it. In modern times though it is neglected to some extent but then also it can be seen in various places and in particular activities.

Ghosh has the beautiful technique to depict the real picture of the caste system that prevailed in India of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the first few chapters of the novel. Caste biasness is a social evil that is deep rooted among the residents of the village. According to this practice whenever a high caste individual confronts a low class accidentally, it is considered to be an evil act or it pollutes him. The cruelty done to the down caste is beyond our all imagination, in the novel we see three Thakurs of Ghazipur addicted in gambling. They have heard about kalua's physical power and have promised him an ox cart for participating in the wrestling on behalf of them. Kalua did so; unfortunately, he achieves his first defeat in front of the Maharaja of Beneras. The class distinction and discrimination is evident in most of the incidents.

The migration of the Indians to new British colonies is a common theme in Indian writings in English. Ghosh throws light on the situations focusing on the reason for such migration. As the third part of the trilogy 'sea' that takes place in the schooner that's moves from Calcutta to its final destination Mauritius. Some colies sign a bond of contract labour to escape from poverty and misery of their home. Here Deeti is the protagonist in the novel. We see that when her husband Hukam Singh meets to his premature death in the opium factory. During the last rituals we see that, kalua, a low caste man from neighboring village an ox cart rider, flew Deeti away from performing sati. This incident was considered a matter of extravagance anger by her relative, a low caste individual rescuing a high-class girl who was married and was burning to ashes by the side of her death husband flew away with a lower-class man, was not accepted by her relatives' and the society of the village. In order to escape from the anger of her relatives' Dheeti and kalua both run from there and sign to becomes indentured labours on the ship named Ibis.

Similarly, in the last few chapters of the novel Sea of Poppies we see that Neel Ratan Halder who is the native king of Rakshli state, who has business dealings with the colonizers, is accused for forgery by Mr. Burnham and his colleagues. The court punishes him to work as an indentured labourer in Mauritius for 7 years respectively. When he comes to the prison in Ibis there, he counters Ah Fatt, a half Chinese and half Parsi, a serial opium addict from Canton, who becomes his sole mate Companion there. Similarly, Paulette an orphan born and brought up in Calcutta easily disguises herself in the indentured labours on Ibis. She was fascinating and has positive thought for Indian culture. She finds Indianess in more ease like eating and wearing sari than of the western cultures she has great respect for Indian culture. After her father's death she was under the care of Mr. Burnham for her nourishment but later when she grew to the age of marriage, she comes to know that the Britishers has a plan of her marriage with an old English man named Justice Kendalbushe. So, she finally stuck to her decision of running to Ibis and disguises herself in sari so nobody could recognize her. Hence the Indian as well as British Women were victims to the male Chauvinism & Patriarchy.

Economical exploitation is one of the facts that is covered in many of the works of Ghosh narratives. In the novel we see that Dheeti the protagonist of the novel, when her husband faces a premature un sudden death in the opium factory of Ghazipur. She felt the world is over for her and her life would end on the burning pyre. After she finally arranged to bring her husband body from the opium factory with the help of kalua; she was not given any financial support or aid as expected .In this way it is clear that Dheeti was financially and physically exploited by the opium factory in which her husband worked for many years. Similar was the case in other factories all around the country.

Another point can be seen that the peoples of that village were indulged in the farming of cash crops which include wheat, grains, cereals and seasonable crops for their livelihood .Even the straw of was used for making roof of their huts. But they could not continue for a long time. British colonizers soon compelled them to stop their crop farming and forced them to cultivate opium. As opium cultivation benefited the Britishers on a large scale and their business grew. But on the other hand the local villagers had to work overtime and were paid low wages which was not enough for their overall survival. A same kind of situation can be seen in Mulk Raj Anand novel “untouchable” Bakha, a young boy was also exploited by the aristocratic class .He was compelled to do those works which he never ever wanted like cleaning latrines and toilets of the Britishers. He was paid very less and sometimes even not. So, the economical exploitation is one of the major themes in most of the Indian English novels. Ghosh do have a concern about how Indians are eventually exploited by the Britishers from the day before independence and it is very well painted with characters’ in Sea of Poppies.

Indian society belongs to man since the time immemorial. Women have always been given second position after men in the Indian society from the beginning. She has been facing injustice, tolerance, inferiority, suppression, discrimination in the Indian society. In spite of being educated she has not got equal position in education, politics, as well in home. They are treated as burden to men, and have to be dependent on them.

Male domination is an integral part of the patriarchal society of pre independence India. In such system women depend on men. Dheeti here herself becomes a victim of this social system. Her husband Hukam Singh is deeply addicted to opium and cannot lead a happy marriage, her mother-in-law know & about the demerits of her son, and on the wedding night Dheeti was raped by her brother-in-law Chandan and she knew that her cruel mother in law was also involved in this sin. She was confirmed about the child in her belly and her father was her brother in law chandan Singh. She thinks “that confirmed Deeti’s belief that the child in her belly has been fathered not by her husband, but by chandan Singh, her leering, clacks jawed brother in law” (p.34).

When Hukam Singh was lying on his death bed his brother Chandan Singh approaches Deeti and gives her a choice to be his mistress. Besides the social system it is a fact that if a lady has no male heir and after the death of her husband the part of his property and land would be transfer to his brother. And it was cleared to Dheeti that after the death of her husband her relatives will make her life hell and unbearable so she decided to perform sati in his husband’s funeral pyre. In patriarchal

society women has no identity of her own. Her identity is closely associated with her Father, her husband, and her children. Same situation can be seen here, Dheeti the protagonist of the novel has no identity of her own She eventually is called by the named 'Kabutri ki maa' which means the mother of Kabutri. Similarly, Malati is an example of typical Indian wife; she is the wife of Neel Ratan Halder. She does all her duties as a dutiful wife for her husband without any complain, even she knew Neel's illicit relation with his mistress Eloskesi, but she never complains about it. Another fact that Neel's mother is also neglected by her husband she lives an isolated life. Before Neel is shifted to Mauritius, he is been put n the jail for some time. Malati comes to meet her husband but she only says to take care and does not complain that why he did so and why he ruined her life. She was shifted in a small house very less space to live. Despite all the miseries of her life she plays the role of a dutiful wife towards her husband without expecting anything from him. Indian Women have been portrayed as an epitome of sacrifice & patience.

As a historian and anthropologist Ghosh knows well about the strength and weakness of the Indian culture and how it affected the society of India over decades. He never appreciated the caste system and sati tradition in India. Being optimistic in nature he has always a possible answer to the problem of the Indian society. He wishes to totaly change this entire situation and beliefs. It is clearly seen when a low caste man Kalua comes and rescues an upper caste Hindu widow Deeti away from the sati ritual and marries her. It is the beginning of the new era in their life. Ghosh also highlights the colonial British rule, when the villagers were asked to do the farming of opium for a higher salary, they agreed despite the merchant cheated them and paid very low wages which was not sufficient for their survival. Here Ghosh throws light on how Britishers exploited the villagers physically and mentally. The last part of the novel is taken on the schooner the Ibis. Here different people belonging to different cultures comes and unite under a single roof leaving all the disparities of caste, class, race, nationality, and language. All the hindrances, conspiracies and flaw in nature have been washed away by the black water of Indian Ocean. Considering all the historical aspects we can proudly say that Ghosh's Sea of Poppies is a great treasure and best contribution to Indian writing in English. The Indian Macrocosm can be seen in the microcosm 'Ghazipur' Amitav Ghosh through the Sea of Poppies has tried to champion the cause of the downtrodden during the post colonial times.

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