

SUBALTERN CONSCIOUSNESS IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *SEA OF POPPIES*

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ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh is unquestionably one of the most serious writers crafting fiction in English today. He has written consistently good novels and non-fictional prose works which have won great acclaim both in India and abroad. The present article is proposed to examine and explore the transformation of the discourse of the novel to narrate the story of indenture. It shows how Amitav Ghosh uses anthropological and historical perspective to renegotiate discourse subalternity from the perspective of the indenture Diaspora. *Sea of Poppies* creates a world made of a few privileged ones and masses of oppressed, exploited subjects. The lives of the marginalized subjects in this novel are conditioned and dictated by movements of people, commerce and empire. This novel delineates how present is shaped by imperial India. It is an apt and concrete commentary on now colonialism damaged and divided Indian Society. This novel paints a poignant portrait of the human devastation and decadence caused by imperialism.

INTRODUCTION

Sea of Poppies (2008) is the first volume of Amitav Ghosh's projected trilogy of which once again confirms his status as a master story teller. The novel primarily deals with opium war, a crucial event in world history and is set in an era of agricultural scandal when western demand for profitable but inedible crops like poppy caused starvation in the subaltern world. The novel highlights multiple concern that the author used to project, directly or indirectly in his previous work of fiction. A few amongst these are incessant movements of people from one place to another, crossing the geographical and political boundaries, trade, commerce, lives of men and women with little power, question of past, culture, identity, gender and caste.

This novel is set in India in 1838, on the eve of the Anglo - Chinese Opium Wars 1838 - 43 and 1846 -60. The novel *Sea of Poppies* elucidates two enormous economic episodes of 19th Century; the cultivation of opium as a cash crop in Bengal and Bihar for Chinese market and the transport of Indian indentured workers to cut sugar canes for the British on such islands as Mauritius, Fiji and Trinidad. 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 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. Amitav Ghosh within the text *Sea of Poppies* have been successful in exposing the crude reality of caste binarism existing within the social structure. The distinction of Ghosh's Vision lies in investigating the full humanity of the dehumanized subalterns and he finally takes the ground to construct their identity that can enable them to make spaces in the main stream of caste based oppressive mechanism of social order.

SUBALTERN CONSCIOUSNESS

Ghosh's writings reveal his in depth knowledge about colonialism, multiculturalism and different countries, which serve as an eye- opener to all the academicians, who wish to explore different areas in their quest for excellence. *Sea of Poppies*, his recent work, deserves all his kudos that it gets from connoisseur and experts for the simple reason, that it encompasses, a wide variety of characters spanning three generations and covering many decades. Caste differences raise its ugly head in the first few chapters in *Sea of Poppies*. Patriarchal set up of Indian Society in the pre colonial period is beautifully portrayed by Amitav Ghosh. The author focuses on almost every character belonging to different levels of society. The different incidents that take place in the character lives are interconnected. This is the most striking features of Amitav Ghosh.

Identity phenomenon is not a fixed kind of aspect of some body's personality. It is always in flux and therefore evolving by nature. Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* is a novel in relation to diasporic sensibility and reconstruction of identity. It has a number of characters, who groan under the British rule but Kalua is a man who is doubly marginalized. He was an untouchable and chamar by caste and that is why he had to bear the burden of being lowest in the caste hierarchy and simultaneously became the victim of British colonial rule. During late 18th Century Afganistan had been the chief producer and supplier of opium to Europe but in early 19th Century, the time period which has been depicted in the novel British fortune seekers in India converted the fertile banks of Ganges where the crops of pulses and wheat were raised once, into a sea of poppies. In spite of the orders of china to ban the opium trade, the forced refined opium to be shipped out to canton. Finally they persuaded London to wage the opium war, just denouncing the Chinese restrictions of free trade. It affected the life of native Indian adversely and brought them to serve poverty, starvation etc.

The marginalized section of the society suffered the most owing to the attitude of British rulers. The novel begins in this period of crises and shows eastern region of Bihar. It introduces Deeti, a simple pious lady, caring mother and an efficient house wife, married to Hukum Singh, a crippled worker in the Ghazipur opium Factory, the unfortunate Deeti figures out that on her wedding night, She was drugged with opium by her mother-in-law, so that her brother-in-law could rape her and consummate the marriage in place of her infertile husband. when her husband dies, Deeti sends her daughter Kabutri to stay with relatives. Deeti looks almost certain to meet her doom when she is forced to consider Sati ritual as the only option in the face of threats of more rapes by her brother-in-law, but Kalua, the untouchable Caste ox man from the neighbouring village, comes to her rescue. The couple flee and unite. This is not acceptable to high caste villagers. In order to escape Deeti's in-laws, She and Kalua become indentured servants on the Ibis.

Ghosh has drawn Kalua's Character with an eye of a researcher and presented the minute details with all his repressed desires, bondages to unreasonable tradition and as a victim of cultural constructs of Caste. The Sports loving landlords often used their powers to the weak creature like Kalua. In a heart rending incident they made him their easy prey in a very unnatural and heinous way. Like a subaltern he could not raise his voice against the inhuman treatment given to him by them. Kalua lived in a 'Chamber basti' which had often been situated at the outskirts of the village away from the residences of higher caste people. Their dwelling having doorless entrances more resembled a cattle pen than a proper hut, indicating their subhuman existence in the society. His Character was drawn by Ghosh with all the meekness, silence, helplessness that is often the predicament of a subaltern.

The first appearance of Kalua in the early pages of the novel clearly highlights novelist's intension to present him as an individual bearing the pangs of casteism. The author states that "he was of the leather workers' caste and Hukum Singh, as a high-caste Rajput, believed that the sight of his face would bode ill for the day ahead". (Ghosh 4)

Kalua, in a way, becomes the representative of subaltern consciousness. Being related to the subaltern studies project, Amitav Ghosh makes the relative recovery of the subaltern consciousness through the character of Kalua. Ghosh's vision reflect Spivik's thesis of subalternism."The historian must persist in his effort in this awareness, that the subaltern is necessarily the absolute limit of the place where history is narrativized into logic". (qtd . in B.K. Sharma 99)

Moving down streams, the ship takes in a bankrupt landowner, Raja Neel Rattan, despite being a Raja he owes heavily to the white money lender the veneer of his princely status. The court punishes him by sentencing him to work as an indentured labourer for seven years in Mauritius.

Zachary Reid, An American Sailor born to a slave mother and a white father receives a lot of attention, knows that he will be bound to a brutal history and the stigma of colour. For him, the mask of ship's second mate is a means of moving into water where no colour lines exist. The novel also features Paulette, a French Orphan, who also grown up in India, is brought up by Jodu's mother and her father, but Mr. and Mrs. Burnham take Paulette into their home after her father's demise. She becomes determined to run away because Mr. Burnham has behaved in an obnoxious manner with her in private. Paulette, who is disguised as an Indian Coolie to escape her guardian, her masking as a migrant is just a part of multiplicity of selves.

In the ship the Passengers survive by creating their own inside space. Whereas outside in the normative society, dominant class structure requires self-destruction, their in-between position entails self- construction. The other female characters on the deck, whether it is Heeru, Munia, Champa, Ratna or Dookhanee have common past of Patriarchal Society and they abandon restrictions of complex society and go ahead identify themselves as indentures on a strange land. They desire to leave their complicated past experience and seek betterment in future. They build up an egalitarian community which is classless and casteless.

Their vision of a community stands for equality is an enthralling imagination. In this respect Ghosh paints the ship Ibis in a womanish image when Deeti thinks that "at the start, that they were all kins now; that their rebirth in the ship's womb had made them into a single family".(Ghosh 432)

She invents a new identity which is quite valid and hence permissible to use margin word for them would be derogatory with negative connotations. In other field of study in diaspora, gender issue is focused where feminist scholars depict women as victim in process of migration and mobility. But in *Sea of Poppies* women characters not only participated in Cultural and Social activities but also they are very much involved in decision making process. Deeti takes the final decision to leave the homeland. Similarly other women characters are shown self-depend for their decision.

By using well defined people and their individual concern - people who are firmly located in the beginning, but follow a gradual process of dislocation ---- Ghosh brings us to a zone of comfort in which something like identification becomes possible. Perhaps catering to the question of identity and

identification, we have here a variety of characters that is truly astounding - we have low caste men, women of questionable social situation, indentured labourers, Indian soldiers, prisoners of different kinds, a white veteran captain, a black officer and so on, mingling together.

CONCLUSION

Amitav Ghosh within the text *Sea of Poppies* has been successful in exposing the crude reality of caste binarism existing within the social structure. The distinction of Ghosh's vision lies in investigating the full humanity of the dehumanized subalterns and he finally takes the ground to construct their identity that can enable them to make spaces in the main stream of caste based oppressive mechanism of social order.

Amitav Ghosh not only focuses on a group of individuals in this novel but a group that is challenging all established concepts that rule the general idea of the Indian past - including that of colonialism and nationalism. Moreover, Ghosh does not directly allow any connection to a larger history, or looking back in any anger or any reaction of such nature.

Ghosh takes care to avoid familiar figures from history and looks at marginal society that can give him a better point of fictionalizing and to his own end. In this novel, we look at a period of time in which the notion of nation itself is somewhat absent. The area that Amitav Ghosh concentrates on is beyond even the generalized subaltern that Ranajit Guha speaks of in his subaltern studies 1, 2. These are figures that are not a part of any theoretically constructed collective, but are a part of a group that is excluded by all structures and form all contexts. This is a group equally influenced by Colonialism.

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