

A Voyage towards Utopia: A Study of Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh is an excellent storyteller. His novels deal with themes like violence, exile, historical and cultural displacement and so on. This paper analyzes how in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*, Ibis, the once-slave ship brings together a wide range of people from all walks of life: from the Raskhali Zamindar to the Chinese convict; from the high caste Deeti to Kalua, who belongs to the low caste of the Chamars; and from the French stowaway Paulette to the Mulatto Zachary, who has been recently freed. It studies how all the barriers of caste, class, and religion are shattered to pieces in the voyage from Calcutta to Mauritius. It also explores how each character in the novel changes and evolves at the end and the switching over of power from one to the other. This paper also attempts to bring out how Ghosh has presented colonial India and the mindset of the colonizers and the colonized through his characters, some of whom are trying to run away from their past that is fast approaching at their heels and some who look forward to the future so that they can return to their waiting lives from their past.

KEYWORDS

Indentures; Colonial oppression; Multiculturalism

The first of Amitav Ghosh's trilogy *Sea of Poppies* is set in the colonial period of mid-nineteenth century. Ghosh artistically weaves together characters of different cultures, caste and religion and brings them all to the Ibis, the schooner. This paper discusses how the main characters of the novel are caught in tumultuous situations and land in Ibis, the schooner on a voyage from Calcutta to Mauritius.

Sea of Poppies is divided into three parts: Land, River and Sea. In the first part, "Land," the characters come across various troubles and struggle to escape from their past lives by changing their identity. In the second

part, "River," they all travel through the river to board the Ibis. This period forms as the waiting period where the characters go through a change in their views. The cultural beliefs, caste differences and religious rituals they upheld on the land are put to test. In the last part "Sea," in spite of all their struggles, differences and beliefs they reach a utopia where they all come together as one across the thresholds of all the man-made barriers.

The novel's first part begins in March 1838 in a village near Ghazipur. The protagonist Deeti's vision of a tall-masted ship sets the story in sail. Deeti's family, like many others from her village, cultivates poppies for

the opium trade. Poppies become the life source of these villagers since they are forbidden by the government to cultivate vegetables and are forced to take loans to plant poppies to send to China. Deeti's husband, Hakum Singh who served the British and got crippled ends up working in the opium factory in Ghazipur and becomes an opium addict. He drugs Deeti on her wedding night and lets his brother rape her because of his own incapability. He falls sick and Deeti is made to work harder to make ends meet for her family. She uses Kalua, the low caste cartman to go to Ghazipur to sell opium. She pays him with a small ball of opium. Hakum Singh dies and Deeti plans to give herself up as sati but at the exact moment of her sacrifice, Kalua saves her. They both flee and get married. They wind up in the Ibis as indentured labourers with changed identities to escape from her husband's relatives. Through Hakum Singh, Ghosh brings to focus the ill effects of opium cultivation that crushed not only the livelihood of many villagers but also their lives in the name of drug addiction. The author also attacks the British attempts at opium trade in China that instigated the opium wars.

Deeti belongs to the high caste and has always kept a distance from the low caste people like Kalua. She always covers her face in his presence. Hakum Singh travels in his cart to work daily, talks to Kalua amicably enough, but refuses to treat him as a fellow human being. He carefully keeps his things away from Kalua's things so as not to make contact with anything that belongs to him. Kalua is portrayed as someone who knows his place and he refuses even to look these high caste people in the eye. Ghosh tries to bring out the mindset of the low caste people through Kalua. Though he is well built and strong, he is naïve and is taunted by other men belonging to the high caste.

Ghosh highlights how the rules change from land to sea. In land, Deeti is very particular about her caste but in the sea, Deeti as Kalua's wife finds it easy to pronounce herself as belonging to the low caste of chamars. They change their names to Aditi and Madhu, which in turn becomes Aditty and Maddow Colver when pronounced by the English man. Through Deeti and Kalua and few others on the ship, Ghosh highlights the lives, fears, and aspirations of the indentured labourers, some of whom are sent on a contract basis by their families in return for a very little amount of money and some who want to earn and start a new life. They all come together in the Ibis regardless of their caste differences. This fact is highlighted one of the young girls in the ship ask others about their caste status, the other women say, "How does it matter any more? We're all sisters now, aren't we?" (235). Ghosh makes it a point to mingle people belonging to different ladders of the society.

In the ship, Deeti becomes the big sister for everyone, as they look up to her for advise on all matters. She boldly confronts difficult situations and tries to get justice done. This is also something that is unimaginable in the land. The women cannot opine against the men in high posts. But in the sea the power shifts and for a short while she gets the things she wanted. The officers in the ship give in at first fearing that the labourers might protest, but not for long. They separate her from the rest of the group and the Subedar, Bhyro Singh who happens to be her dead husband's uncle, deciphers her real identity and tries to molest her. But Kalua saves her and ends up tied down, for the death of a soldier who accidentally falls overboard when Kalua is trying to save Deeti. The Captain orders Bhyro Singh to whip Kalua. While he was whipping him, suddenly Kalua gets hold of the whip and kills Bhyro Singh by strangling him with it. Then he escapes with few other men in a small

boat. Bhyro Singh is presented as someone who manipulates the people around him because of his position in the Indian Army. He also takes immense pleasure in humiliating the convicts by treating them as if they are animals. He is ruthless to his own people but he is eager to please the British. He tries to exercise his power over the indentured laborers and makes their life miserable. Through him, Ghosh attacks men in the Army who worked for the colonial masters and oppressed their own kind.

Another important character in the novel is the zemindar Raja Neel Rattan Halder. Ghosh imparts the information that injustice is done not just for the poor and the oppressed but also for the rich and the powerful. He highlights how they are exploited by their British counterparts through the depiction of Neel's character. Neel's father, the King had dealings with a British businessman Benjamin Burnham. Many of his relatives invested their money through the King. As it was customary to sign on behalf of Burnham for credit, by the King, Neel continues to follow this practice after his father's death. But Burnham trying to find a way to get hold of the Halder properties files a complaint against him. Neel is accused of forgery and ends up in jail with a seven-year sentence to be served in Mauritius. Through the character of Neel, the author demonstrates how the English committed blunders in the name of justice:

In the course of his trial it had become almost laughably obvious to Neel that in this system of justice it was the English themselves — Mr Burnham and his ilk — who were exempt from the law as it applied to others: it was they who had become the world's new Brahmins. (239).

He is humiliated in jail and is attacked for addressing the officer in English. The officer is furious that a convict has the audacity to talk to him in English. But Neel is very stubborn

and refuses to budge. He waits in Alipore jail to be transported and there he meets Ah Fatt, a Chinese opium addict. He learns that he is the one who is going to accompany him in the long journey in the ship.

Ghosh moulds Neel's character from that of an orthodox *zemindar* to that of the convict. Neel is a very orthodox person and is meticulous in following all rituals and rules to the extent of taking a bath to purify himself if he comes in contact with any low caste people. At first, he is repulsed by Ah Fatt's filthy and stinking condition. He realizes that if he has to keep himself sane he will have to first deal with the Ah Fatt. He bathes him and cleans the room and makes him look human. A special bond develops between the two of them. In the ship, Bhyro Singh tries to humiliate him but Neel stays strong. In spite of their differences, Neel and Ah Fatt develop an unlikely friendship. It is tested when Mr Crowle, Ibis's first mate asks them to urinate on each other and promises to treat them well if they do so. Neel refuses to comply but Ah Fatt gives in when he is promised some opium. Here again, Ghosh illustrates the ill effects of opium which makes an individual lose his own self. But in the end, he doesn't get it and feels all the more ashamed for his own behaviour, especially after all that Neel has done for him. As for Neel, this breaks his spirit but not for long. In the chaos that follows the death of Bhyro Singh, Ah Fatt kills Crowle and then they both escape along with Kalua.

Another character who lands in Ibis is the young French woman, Paulette Lambert. She is the daughter of a French botanist. Her mother dies in childbirth and she is brought up by an Indian woman. She is very much attached to her nanny's son Jodu and can speak more fluently in Bengali than in English. She is more comfortable in saree than in gowns. But her father dies and she is left in the care of Benjamin Burnham who insists that she is ignorant of the Lord's words and is bent

on teaching her. He preaches her religious sermons regularly and asks her to whip him, as he is also a sinner. At first, Paulette is mortified by his suggestion but as days go by, this becomes regular too. It is on one such occasion that Paulette finds out that he is asking her to flog him for his own pervert reasons. Ghosh brings to light the fact that even some Europeans had to go through difficult situations in India during the colonial reign.

Benjamin Burnham is portrayed as a hypocrite who is well respected in society but leads a filthy personal life. It is brought out more through his view on opium trade in China:

One of my countrymen has put the matter very simply: "Jesus Christ is Free Trade and Free Trade is Jesus Christ." Truer words, I believe, were never spoken. If it is God's will that opium be used as an instrument to open China to his teachings, then so be it. For myself, I confess I can see no reason why any Englishman should abet the Manchu tyrant in depriving the people of China of this miraculous substance. (116)

He also states his opinion on opium war with China:

"But it cannot be denied that there are times when war is not merely just and necessary, but also humane" to which his friend Justice Kendalbushe, who wants to marry Paulette, adds, "My friends in the Missions are agreed that war is necessary if China is to be opened up to God's word. It's a pity, of course, but it's best to get it over and done with. (260)

Paulette flees from Burnham's house and stays with Jodu for some time. She has already seen the Ibis and through Burnham's gomusta, Bob Nob Kissin she secures a place in the ship in the disguise of a coolie, without the

knowledge of Jodu and Zachary, the second mate whom she loves. In the ship, she manages to keep her real identity a secret and reveals it to Jodu and Zachary only when she feels that Jodu's life is in danger. She helps Jodu to escape along with the other men.

Jodu's ending up in Ibis is an accidental one. He is the owner of a small river boat, inherited from his father. After Paulette's father Mr Lambert's death, he returns to his village with his sick mother and treats her there. On her deathbed his mother makes him promise her that he would go and give Paulette a visit. While he is waiting to see Paulette, the approaching ship, Ibis, accidentally hits his boat. He narrowly escapes death with the help of Zachary and the head-lascar of the Ibis, Serang Ali. Zachary, who already has a soft corner for Paulette, develops a bond with Jodu in spite of the grumblings of Serang Ali. He secures him a place in the crew of the Ibis, which has been a long-term goal of Jodu. Eventually, Jodu earns the trust of Serang Ali by saving Zachary's life in trouble and thus escapes with the other men when his own life is in jeopardy. Ghosh presents the sea life of the lascars in meticulous detail that one is left with no doubt on the amount of research he has done for writing *Sea of Poppies*.

Zachary is Ibis's second mate. He is the son of a freed slave woman. His mother is sexually exploited by her white master and later freed. In India, he is well respected, since no one except a few, know that he is a mulatto. Serang Ali, the head-lascar senses this and tries to make a gentleman out of Zachary. When the ship's second mate dies at sea, Zachary fills the position for want of officers in the Ibis. Serang Ali grooms him and dreams to make him a ship's captain one day. When Zachary realises what Serang Ali is trying to do with him he attempts to get out of his grip. For Serang Ali, Zachary is one of his own kinds. If he comes up in life, it is like one of the lascars reaching a high position. He fears that

Zachary's attraction towards Paulette might ruin his future. Ghosh depicts these two characters in such a way that it is difficult to tell who has the upper hand.

Baboo Nob Kissin is another important character in this novel. He is Burnham's *gomusta* [clerk]. He is the one who gives Burnham the idea of giving a complaint of forgery against Neel. Nob Kissin represents the Indians lived during the colonial period who tried to please their masters in every possible way. He insists on using his anglicized version of his name Nomoshkar Nobokrishno-Babu, which is Nob Kissin Pander. He prefers to talk to Europeans only in English. He is spiritually attached to his aunt Ma Taramony who has asked him to work towards building a temple for Lord Krishna. Before her death, she tells him that Lord Krishna will reveal himself to him in some form. So naturally, when he hears Zachary playing his mouth organ, he mistakes him for Lord Krishna and secures a passage for himself as supercargo in the *Ibis*, to be near him. He also mistakes Zachary's listing as 'black' in the crew list to be the black avatar of Krishna himself. Zachary, who is clueless as to Nob's notions, assumes that Nob Kissin has gone mad. Nob is strangely filled with a motherly protectiveness towards Neel, gives him food on the pretext of examining the convict's section of the ship. He too helps Paulette in letting the men escape. He also changes his identity by wearing his aunt Taramony's saffron robes and dreams to build a temple in Mauritius.

Stuti Khanna comments on how the differences that are predominant in the land are being dissolved in the sea in *Sea of Poppies*:

The crossovers entailed in the fact of trade, exploitative and unequal as it maybe, loosen up lines that separate

people of different castes, classes, races and languages from one another. So that it becomes possible for a Chamar to marry a Rajput; for a French girl to be Putli as much as she is Paulette; for Kalua Madho to become Maddow Colver, a new man. We know we have entered a fluid watery world, where unexpected, incongruous, and yet wholly logical links are continually being forged- a "sea" that has been made by "poppies." (22)

All the main characters in the *Sea of Poppies* face obstacles while living on land: Deeti and Kalua face trouble from Bhyro Singh; Neel and Paulette from Benjamin Burnham; Zachary and Jodu from Crowle. But the *Ibis* unites them all in the sea. In sea too, they are not without troubles but they join hands past their differences—in caste, religion, and language—and overcome them. They reach a utopian world in the sea where the barriers that tied them on the ground no longer exist. While some are waiting to be reunited with their loved ones in the future—Deeti with her daughter Kabutri; Neel with his wife and son—others look forward to starting a new life in the Mauritius Island. Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* ends on an uncertain note as to where the *Ibis* is headed and also with a tinge of hope with the men escaping from the ship, hopefully assumed to be reunited with the others on the Mauritius islands and the journey from Calcutta to Mauritius turns out to be a voyage towards utopia.

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