

## Review Essay

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### **A Glimpse of Colonial India: Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies***

#### **Abstract**

*The essay explores the representation of social conditions, colonial exploitation, and conflicts in Amitav Ghosh's novel, **Sea of Poppies**. 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.*

**Key words:** India, Imperialism, Exploitation, Identity, Conflict, Poverty.

Post-colonialism can be popularly perceived as the social, political, economic, and cultural practices that come out in response and resistance to colonialism. Independent movements around the world put a culmination to colonialism, yet the residual repercussions of imperialism continued to cast their shadows on the tradition and culture of the former colonies. There was a wider awareness of the power discriminations between the West and Third World cultures. All these give rise to post-colonialism. And India is the integral part of this movement and most of literary works of India is circling on the theme of colonial India and its after effects. There has been astonishing flowering of fiction in particular and literature in general of Indian Writing in English in post colonial era. Authors like R K Narayan, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, Sulman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Arun Joshi, Amitabh Ghosh, Vikram Seth etc infer their theme of fiction from the imperialism and its side effects. Their thematic concerns have won recognition for Indian English novel both at home and abroad.

The anthropologist, historian, journalist, dogmatic researcher and novelist, Amitav Ghosh, embarked on 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. Turning on the same leaf he went on to write his most recent and ambitious novel, *Sea of Poppies*, which is an inaugural 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.

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Amitav Ghosh was born and brought up in Kolkata. Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Iran, Burma, Egypt, England, America, China and, of course, India, have been haunting places and recurring themes of his works. In the list of Indian novelists, Amitav Ghosh is the most international as he derives his theme of fiction and non-fiction from perennial problems pertaining to the countries of India, America, Britain, China, Burma, Bangladesh, Egypt and Cambodia.

After graduating from the University of Delhi, he turned to Oxford to study Social Anthropology and received a D.Phil. in 1982. Though he is basically from India, he remained a man of cosmopolitan personality which is further authenticated by his wedding an American author, Deborah Baker. He splits his time between Kolkata, Goa and Brooklyn. Ghosh did what very few had accomplished before when he refused to receive the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for which he was named Eurasia regional winner for his novel *The Glass Palace* in 2001. In a letter to Sandra Vince, the prize's Manager of the commonwealth Foundation, he writes:

As a grouping of nations collected from the remains of the British Empire, the Commonwealth serves as an umbrella forum in global politics. As a literary or cultural grouping however, it seems to me that 'the Commonwealth' can only be a misnomer so long as it excludes the many languages that sustain the cultural and literary lives of these countries. (It is surely inconceivable, for example, that athletes would have to be fluent in English in order to qualify for the Commonwealth Games).

When it comes to achievements, awards and appreciation for Amitav Ghosh, we have a long list: the Prix Medici Etranger Award, the Sahitya Akademi Award, the Crossword Prize, the Arthur C. Clarke Award, the Pushcart Prize and the Premio Grinzane Cavour. Apart from that he has been in news in the *Granta* and the *New Yorker*. Also significant is that he is to be shortlisted for Britain's Man Booker Prize the novel, *Sea of Poppies*.

The most recent award for Amitav Ghosh is **Dan David Prize** as on 29 Apr 10, The *Hindustan Times* writes:

“JERUSALEM: Amitav Ghosh has won the Dan David Prize for his reworking of the great tradition of the western novel in transnational terms. Ghosh (53) is the third Indian to win the award, joining chemist C.N.R. Rao and musician Zubin Mehta”.

Various critics, reviewers, journals, newspapers and literati around the world shower appreciation on his novels with special reference to his most recent and magnum opus, *Sea of Poppies*:

1. “I cannot think of another contemporary writer with whom it would be so thrilling to go so far, so fast” - *The Times*.

2. “If there is a distinctive genre known as Indian Writing in English, then Amitav Ghosh is perhaps its most scholarly practitioner. Ghosh is a traveler in the physical as well as the metaphysical, a writer of formidable learning and intelligence” – *The Indian Express*.

3. “Ghosh has established himself as one of the finest prose writers of his generation of Indian writing in English” – *The Financial Times*.

4. “The first of a trilogy, *Sea of Poppies* is Amitav Ghosh's most ambitious work to date, displaying his rare ability to blend gripping narrative power and vibrantly human characters with fascinating historical detail” - *The outlook magazine*.

M K Naik observes, “Ghosh has a gift for playing with ideas; in his hands, the general and the abstract turn into concrete realities.”

To his own confession, it took four years to write *Sea of Poppies*. The novel paints a poignant portrait of the human devastation and decadence caused by imperialism. Regarding the devotion, dedication and diligence that he undertakes for details such as nautical references and the language used, he says in an interview:

I love nineteenth-century nautical fiction so many of the details were just buried in my head. As for the rest, it was so deeply pleasurable; I don't know whether I should even call it research. I traveled to Mauritius, to look at the National Archives and some other libraries; I spent some time in Greenwich, England, looking at the magnificent collection of the National Maritime Museum. But the best part of all was learning to sail—that was an experience that surpassed everything I had imagined.

The first in a projected trilogy, *Sea of Poppies* is set in India in 1838, on the eve of the Anglo-Chinese opium wars of 1839-43 and 1846-60. According to *Outlook*. 26 May 2008, *Sea of Poppies* elucidates two enormous economic episodes of the 19th century: the cultivation of opium as a cash crop in Bengal and Bihar for the Chinese market, and the transport of Indian indentured workers to cut sugar canes for the British on such islands as Mauritius, Fiji and Trinidad. Amitav Ghosh in conversation with Sheela Reddy acknowledges - The Ghazipur and Patna Opium factories together produced the wealth of Britain.

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 East India Company is piling unpredictable wealth by growing opium and illegally exporting it to China. The Chinese are hell-bent to curb a trade that is rapidly undermining the economy by turning millions of them into addicts of opium. As the Chinese stood up in their defence and banned the import of opium, the company took its revenge by waging a war on China under the garb of freedom.

The poor Indian peasant actually suffers the brunt of this opium war. Peasant farmers have been obliged to turn over their fields to opium production, and this causes widespread poverty, hunger and slavery because lands that had once a means of sustenance are now deluged with the rising tide of poppies. The British force everyone to grow poppy in place of useful and lifeline crops like wheat, paddy, pulses and vegetables. In fact the novel is set in an era of agricultural scam: when the western demands for profitable but inedible crops cause starvation in the subaltern world.

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 defenceless. 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. Regarding the theme of opium dominating the novel, Amitav Ghosh elaborates:

Opium was not at the forefront of my mind when I started thinking about this book. I was more interested in travel, migration and the dispersal of Indians across the globe. But this dispersal began in earnest in the 1830s, just before the first Opium War, and the earliest immigrants were from a part of British India (northern Bihar) which became, under the rule of the East India Company, the single most important opium-growing region of the world. There was really no getting away from opium: in this period, India, China and England were joined by a *Sea of Poppies*.” It opens in a remote village devastated by these circumstances. Deeti, watches her inert husband yield to addiction; he collapses at the opium-packing factory where glazed workers move ‘as slow as ants in honey’.

A host characters in *Sea of Poppies* assemble in Kolkata to board on Ibis ship at Hoogli. They belong to numerous races and people of differing castes, creeds and sexes. 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 Ibis, Deeti Singh, Burnham Brothers, Kalua, Zachary Reid, Serang Ali, Putli, Jodu, Mauritian, Raja Neel Rattan Halder, Baboo Nob Kissin, Ah-Fatt, lascars

Ibis is a slave-trading ship and it is pressed into service to transport *girmitya*, indentured laborers, 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* and *jahaz-bahens*. Singing and ritualistic performances become their sole source of sustenance from the colonial reality and the uncertainties awaiting them in the remote islands of Mareech. The ship ultimately becomes the epicentre for a wide variety of characters.

Regarding the protagonist of the novels, there has been long debate and discussion but majority of reviewers and readers consider Deeti Singh as the central character of the novel. Even Amitav Ghosh has a similar opinion in this regard as he describes:

Deeti was, for me, the central character in this book: whenever I was at a loss, I always looked to her to help me out, and somehow she always came through. But I also came to love many of the other characters, especially Paulette, Zachary, Baboo Nob Kissin, Neel and Jodu. Mrs. Burnham is not onstage very long, but she quickly became another favorite.

Deeti Singh, the central character of the novel, 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, immoral and "leering, slack-jawed" 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 make her to elope with Kalua and she also joins the club of poppy farmers. Though when she has no options left other than facing the stark reality of poverty and life, both decide to join the crew of the Ibis and go to Mirich as *girmityas*. This state of novel is the most moving, poignant and heart-rending one as she leaves her six years daughter in the lurch. She knows she is never going to return as she is going to land of unknown geography.

Ghosh also exposes the plight of women in ancient and colonial india who were subjected to numerous persecutions in the hands of men who regard women as objects of quenching carnal desire. Forcing protagonist Deeti Singh to sit on her husband's funeral pyre and commit sati; and the life which her six-year-old daughter must expect including her marriage in another three or four years, diffuse staunch smell of gender bias.

Zachary Reid is a young sailor from Baltimore who has left America because professional jealousy has led him to constant harassment by other American sailors. With the support of the lascars and Serang Ali, the leader of the lascars, Zachary Reid has raised his soul above his station and the potential to progress to officer status, something

impossible for him at home. Though Reid's own background is not so different from that of the lascars, he is a foreigner, a man who has no known caste within Indian society, and Serang Ali treats him as superior to the lascars. His likely soulmate is Paulette Lambert, the educated daughter of a French republican freethinker and horticulturalist in Calcutta, who was adopted by Burnham after her parents died and was raised by a Bengali wet nurse.

Benjamin Burnham is an unscrupulous British merchant who owns the *Ibis* and engages in the opium trade, which his family controls in Ghazipur, fifty miles east of Benares. Since the slave trade has been officially ended, Burnham has kept the *Ibis* intact and simply switched to the transport of exiled prisoners and coolies. Though Burnham is the son of a Liverpool tradesman, his willingness to finance and manage these exploitative trades has led to enormous wealth and a lavish lifestyle impossible for him in England.

Neel Rattan Halder is a Bengali landowner and profiteer in the opium trade. He is materialistic, decadent and promiscuous. He has to pay the price for refusing to sell his estates to Burnham. He is framed for forgery and dispossessed of his royal estate by a British jury. Not only is he driven out of his palace, he is separated from son and wife and made to share a room with a stinking convict, Ah-Fatt and now aboard the *Ibis*.

Jodu is the son of the wet nurse and foster-brother and childhood companion of Paulette Lambert. He is a poor fisherman and his boat is struck by the *Ibis* and he finally finds employment aboard.

Ah-Fatt, beastly and inhuman character, is a bastard child of a Parsi father and Chinese mother. He looks for his father who spurns him to avoid social ignominy. He is on trial in India and left in a stinking dark cell. He shares his cell with Neel Rattan Halder. Initially, they are at loggerheads but gradually come closer and this intimacy makes the novel a most enchanting and delightful journey.

Baboo Nob Kissin is accountant, treasurer and personal assistant of Benjamin Burnham.

The inclusion of lascars in the novel by Ghosh is revealed by the truth that they worked in the very worst and shabby conditions on East India company ships, and died disproportionately on ships during the First and Second World Wars. And they have hardly been given their due and recognised in official naval chronicles. The novel is replete with pidgin used by the lascar.

Ghosh portrays characters from all strata of society and all part of the world; so also the language used by them. Such homogeneous amalgamation and confluence of the elite and the subaltern, the occidental and the oriental, the master and the slave influence the readers of all persuasions. There has to be colossal credibility gap between the lascars and the British that rule over them. To keep up this difference he makes use of words which bear the stamp of originality of Hindi, Bengla, and Bhojpuri vernaculars but the

accent of the British. To combat this challenge, he visited the National Archives of Mauritius and also devoted some time in National Maritime Museum of Greenwich, England and ultimately able to trace out Sir Henry Yule's *Hobson-Jobson*, the celebrated

19<sup>th</sup>-century dictionary of colloquial Anglo-Indian words and phrases, as well as English and Hindustani Naval dictionary of technical terms and sea phrases. It is enchanting to go through the extracts of such words:

*'jahaj-bhais* for ship-brothers, *jahaz-bahens* or ship-sisters, *kalapani* for black water, *girmitiya* for indentured laboureres, *gomusta* for accountant, *zamindars* for landlords, *sahibs* for masters, *dal* for pulse, *Chitty* for letter, *dawk* for postbox, *Shishmull* for mirror palace, *Dufter* for office, *Balty* for bucket, *Hurremzads* for bastards, *Jildee* for quick, *Gantas* for bells, *Tuncaw* for salary, *Quoddie* for prisoner, *Bawhawdery* for courage, *Coorsy* for chair, *kubber* for news, and etcetras.'

Regarding the challenge in writing the language used by the lascars, Ghosh reveals:

A ship manned by lascars must have been a kind of floating babel. Sailors from all around the Indian Ocean went by the name 'lascar'—East Africans, South Asians, Filipinos, Chinese, and Malays. When you look at one of those old crew lists, you can't help wondering how things got done on a ship with such a cosmopolitan crew. It must have been a specially pressing issue on a sailing vessel, for it's impossible to work a sail ship without clear commands—that's why there's such an extensive nautical jargon in English. So how did lascars communicate, with their officers (who were usually European) and with each other? These questions puzzled me for a long time and then one day, while looking through a library catalogue, I came upon a nineteenth-century dictionary of the 'Laskari' language. I'd never seen any references to this dictionary anywhere, so it was a really exciting discovery. And the language proved to be a wonderful nautical jargon that mixed bits of Hindi, Urdu, English, Portuguese, Bengali, Arabic, Malay and many other languages. It was fascinating for me personally because it incorporated elements of many of the languages I grew up with.

Ghosh also amazed and captivated the readers by using some awesome metaphors and ornate words:

How had it happened that while choosing the men and women who were to be torn from this subjugated plain, the hand of destiny had strayed so far inland, away from the busy coastlines, to alight on the people who were, of all, the most stubbornly rooted in the silt of the Ganga, in a soil that had to be sown with suffering to yield its crop of story and song? It was as if fate had thrust its fist through the living flesh of the land in order to tear away a piece of its stricken heart.

In *Bloomberg News*, Hephzibah Anderson writes: "Ghosh conjures up each character with alacrity, fixing even minor players in the reader's mind with a few deft words. A stout Englishman has "beefy cheeks and liverish lips." His plump wife's face hangs "like a setting moon, under a great cloud of henna-red hair."

Appreciating narrative technique of Amitav Ghosh, *The Daily Mail* writes:

"Each scene is boldly drawn, but it is the sheer energy and verve of Amitav Ghosh's storytelling that binds this ambitious medley."

For the slave ship and the people aboard, suddenly unborn destiny is born. Catastrophic cloud hovers in the sky, sea darkens and storm does not want to keep anything for tomorrow. Indentured labourers and lascars have no sigh of relief as predicaments, one after another, roll upon. The novel closes with the *Ibis* in mid-ocean in a storm. Serang Ali, leader of the lascars, has deserted ship, along with the convicts and the condemned; of the kingpin characters only Deeti, Paulette, Nob Kissin and Zachary could survive, watching from the deck the drama of doom and devastation played by Nature on the doleful stage of the sea. Neither we nor the characters arrive at Mauritius but, rather, are left amidst a storm on the Indian Ocean or "the Black Water" when the novel comes to its denouement but Amitav Ghosh reaches where he wants and supposes to. The novel comes to a satisfying halt but not to a safe sailing, Ghosh leaves several issues open for discussion hinting the journey he would embark upon along with the surviving characters to tide over the novel's sequel. Deliberate and ambiguous ending of the novel shows that we can only propose but the key of disposal lies in the ink of Ghosh. He leaves the readers in anticipation and himself in perspiration to see its sequel in publication. He uses this termination to take us to the tour of another two of trilogy, as he says: "The really exciting thing is it doesn't commit me to anything. I have some distant idea, but I'm very far from knowing what actually happens. It's like being on a very dark stretch of water late at night, and you can see lights in the distance, but you don't quite know what's in between, and how to get there."

Though the storm has sunk the boat and excitement of passionate readers who do not want to wait for its sequels, the novel opens floodgates for historians, movie makers, colonial experts and research scholars who always look for new and creative themes. Ghosh also conveys significant message to modern Indians who, in avant-garde and materialistic lifestyle, have tended to forget the sacrifices and oblations that their ancestors and forefathers made to erect independent India. He further cautions Indians, lest they fall victim of yet another enslavement.



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