



The Exploitation and Oppression of Colonial in Amitav Ghosh's "Sea of Poppies"- A Colonial Aspect

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Abstract: Amitav Ghosh reveals areas of colonial oppression that were not much highlighted earlier along with the much talked-about topic of the oppression of the poor by local moneylenders. The British businessmen wanted to earn easy money from cash crops and to meet their greed the Indian farmers were compelled to produce crops according to the liking of the colonials, depriving themselves of wheat and paddy that they needed most to support themselves. The cultivation of Indigo 'neel' that was thrust upon the farmers in Bengal was highlighted in Bengal writings of the period and was included later in the agenda of National movements, but the cultivation of the opium was little focussed.

Here in this point of view, Ghosh sincerely reveals the plight of the farmers like Deeti who fell in the clutches of the English businessmen and began poppy plantation. Before poppy plantation was introduced, the fields were heavy with wheat in winter, and after the spring harvest, the straw could be used to repair the hut's roof. "But now, with the sahibs forcing everyone to grow poppy, no one had thatch to spare- it had to be bought at the market, from people who lived in faraway villages, and the expense was such that people put off their repairs as long as they possibly could" (29).

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INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008) is a unique fictional creation based on a wide research not only on various aspects of the colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent but also the sea-routes of the time, the technical know-how of piloting ships, the typical language of the 'laskars' in a ship and so on. In an interview given in 2002, Ghosh said, "I don't think there's a big difference between writing fiction and writing non-fiction. When you're writing non-fiction, there's real world out there that has to be taken seriously which means that you have to take step outside the confines of what happens in your head and engage with the real world. But my fiction is also founded on very extensive research. The world interests me. Some times the world interests me as fiction and sometimes it interests me as non-fiction and I don't see a distinction" (3). The statement is applicable to all his works including *Sea of Poppies* where hitherto unrevealed aspects of colonial oppression, inflicted by a section of white men who were desperate to make up the loss caused by the abolition of slavery, are exposed through the rendering of how the business of carrying slaves in ships were replaced with the business of opium and of indentured labourers.

The sea forms the background of the novel and the ship the *Ibis*, which had earlier been used for transporting slaves and was now remodeled for the new transport, is at the centre. The novel is divided into three parts: 'Land,' 'River' and 'sea.' In the first section 'Land,' the characters who were somehow related to the ship are introduced along with the ship. The second part 'River' centres on the activities of the owner of the *Ibis* in Calcutta and also some of his friends. The third part 'Sea' is concerned with the inmates of the ship as it leaves Calcutta and moves on towards its destination. Even before the actual ship is described, it is visualized in the very beginning of the novel by a Bhojpuri woman Deeti, the wife of of a worker in Ghazipur's Opium Factory, a poor, illiterate woman who did not have the chance of witnessing a ship when she visualized one.

She had never seen the sea, never left the district, never spoken any language but her native Bhojpuri, yet not for a moment did she doubt that the ship existed somewhere and was heading in her direction. The knowledge of this terrified her, for she had never set eyes on anything that remotely resembled this apparition, and had no idea what it might portend. (8)

That she was fated to be in that ship is suggested through her premonition, and surprisingly, the picture of the ship that she drew to clarify her vision to her daughter, “was an uncannily evocative rendition of its subject” (10). Later, it was accepted by the seasoned sailors that the vision of the ship was granted to Deeti by the sacred river Ganga. “In time among the legions who came to regard the Ibis as their ancestor, it was accepted that it was the river itself that had granted Deeti the vision: that the image of the Ibis had been transported upstream, like an electric current, the moment the vessel made contact with the sacred waters. This would mean that it happened in the second week of March 1838, for that was when the Ibis dropped anchor off Ganga-Sagar Island, where the holy river debouches into the Bay of Bengal.” (10) The real ship is described, as it was perceived by Zachary Reid, the American who joined as a carpenter but soon became the second mate of the ship on its way from Baltimore to Calcutta.

The Ibis was a schooner of old-fashioned appearance, neither lean, nor flush-decked like the clippers for which Baltimore was famous. She had a short quarter-deck, a risen fo’c’sle, with a fo’c’sle-deck between the bows, and a deckhouse amidships, that served as a galley and cabin for the bo’suns stewards...One thing Zachary did know about the Ibis was that she had been built to serve as a ‘blackbirder,’ for transporting slaves. This, indeed, was the reason why she had changed hands: in the years since the formal abolition of the slave trade, British and American naval vessels had taken to patrolling the West African coast in growing numbers, and the Ibis was not swift enough to be confident of outrunning them. As with many another slave-ships, the schooner’s new owner had acquired her with an eye to fitting her for a different trade: the export of opium. In this instance the purchases were a firm called Burnham Bros., a shipping company and trading house that had extensive interests in India and China. (11)

Sea of Poppies depicts how the small farmers and agricultural labourers in colonial India were forced by circumstances to be coolies and deported in Mauritius and other places. The portrait of the Bhojpuri woman Deeti who had the vision of the Ibis in the very beginning of the novel is a typical example of such oppressed farmers. The novel shows how after losing her husband, who served in the opium factory and whose land had been forcibly used for opium plantation, Deeti is ready to die in her husband’s Pyre only to save herself from the lust of her brother-in-law, but is rescued by a lower class or caste man Kalua, who marries her by eloped in secret and then takes her to the ship to be coolies in some other land.

Earlier poppies were grown in small clusters between the fields that bore the main winter crops such as wheat and the farmers liked to use poppies seeds as luxury items. As per the sap, it was left to dry to get hard ‘akbari afeem’ which the farmers could sell to local nobility and were also free to keep some amount for personal use during illness. But now the ‘chandu’ opium was made and packaged in the English factory for business and the farmers who supplied the poppies were ill paid and were not even allowed to keep some parts of the harvest with them for free selling or for personal use. Having done a lot of research on poppy plantation, Ghosh shows how the unwilling farmers were forced to plant poppy and face loss:

no one was inclined to plant more because of all the work it took to grow poppies-fifteen ploughings of the land every remaining clod to be broken by hand, and the English sahibs would allow little else to be planted: their agents would go from home to home, forcing cash advances on the farmers, making them sign asami contracts. It was impossible to say no to them: It was no use telling the white magistrate that you hadn’t accepted the money and your thumbprint was forged: (29-30).

Here is a detailed description of colonial oppression by compelling the Indian farmers, poor and illiterate, to harvest crops in their own land for the benefit of the British businessmen who had support of judiciary with them. After Deeti came in contact with other indentured labourers she came to know that everyone's land was in hock to the agents of opium factory, and that every farmer had been served with a contract, the fulfilling of which left them with no option but to strew their land with poppies. And when the harvest was over the farmers found that the little amount of grains they could bring home would not be able to feed their families and that they were destined to plunge deeper into debt (91). Amitav Ghosh also reveals the plight of the workers inside the Opium factory-the hazards faced by them and the insecurity of their dangerous job- in this book.

Sea of Poppies also reveals that export of opium to China was brain child of the British and the American businessmen, and thus the myth of China's hunger for opium since antiquity is broken. In the dinner party offered by the landlord Neel Ratan Mr. Doughty proudly proclaims: "the yen for opium would still be limited to their twice-born if not for the perseverance of English and American merchants. It's happened almost within living memory-for which we owe a sincere vote of thanks to the likes of Mr. Burnham" (112). In this regard, Mr. Doughty commented at this point: "Johnny Chinaman thinks he can return to the good old days, before he got his taste for opium. But there's no going back." (112).

Introducing the conversation of the British and American characters on the topic of their illegal business, Ghosh discloses the shameless Colonial policy of making money as well as spreading Christianity through illegal and immoral ways. Here Ghosh's own ironic comment on the function of the Parliament in England is also provided through Burnham's proud remarks. Actually proclaiming the gospel by illegal business is not God's will. "Jesus Christ is free trade and free trade is Jesus Christ" and explained that it is not at all God's will for the business of opium by name of God, which means any people should not deceive by the name of God. "If it is God's will that Opium be used as an instrument to open China by His teachings. However, the hypocrisy in their attitude for earning money is once again exposed through their deeds because regarding preaching gospel by Opium trade is not at all a God's will.

It tells the stories of upper caste and lower caste of characters grapple with their sense of place and self. Their struggle to come to terms with new ways of living is violently shaken by upper caste and lower caste like Dalit and that of the British trade and their business with opium in India. Ghosh's dazzling cast of characters manages to buff and shine through much of the prosaic dullness back to splendors. He chooses upper caste people and lower caste like Dalit people as his characters who are rich and downtrodden in the social ladder. Particularly, some of them are high-caste Rajput and low castes Dalit Chamers are displaced. Ghosh's characters get involved in unexpected relations across castes and cultures.

Ghosh's characters taken individually, are certainly real, it is the combination of characters of high-caste and low-caste Dalit and Zamindars and according to situations that they are placed in, which make the novel a reality within fantasy and 'History which interfaces fiction'. His bewildering array of both upper-caste and lower-caste of characters and their erratic behavior adds to fantasy that actually under lies life's reality.

Sea of Poppies in an ambitious and stunningly vibrant work of new trilogy which covered more than a century of colonial history in trade with opium and current affair of sexual harassment and the exploitation of Dalit by the characters spread across upper-castes and lower-castes and also different cultures of South East of Asia. Ghosh always sets history as a background for his novel. He gives importance not only to the individuals but also to the background. In an interview Paul William Roberts, he tells: I go to a great deal of trouble to make the background as realistic as possible, but the essential focus is still the lives of the individual people and their predicaments.

Sea of Poppies demonstrates the author's voice in balancing the sweep of history with the depth and complexity of the individual. Ghosh spins the reader with a lingering disquiet about how the forces of history can irrevocably

alter the lives of ordinary men and women and high –caste and low-caste and different cultures. According to Meanakshi Mukherjee, Meaning lies not in individual utterances, but in their dialogical negotiations the emphasis being on the plurality of viewpoints. The stances of most of the major figures get gradually modified during the course of the novel through mutual interaction-theory and experience duty and emotion often getting into each other's way to complicate both polemics and praxis.

It emerges as the most eloquent example of a post –colonialist text. This text also intends to render the post colonial and sexual harassment and also the exploitation and the plights of Dalit's argument. It was clearly projects the effects of the dismantling of Euro centric discourses and clearly interprets the ideas and the ideologies of colonialism and sexual harassment of own family and also the plights and exploitation of Dalit by upper-caste.

Sea of Poppies is a critical revisiting of the colonial past, a reinterpretation of the past. The novel encompasses the colonial trade and its effects aftermath starting from 1838 till the end of the war with China regarding opium trade, in its long sweep the novel also covers Anglo-Chinese war. On behalf of opium trade among British, China and India. These three countries were transformed into a theatre of the opium war.

Ghosh has used a grand canvas to unravel the processes of colonization and also of the revolt against the castism, superstition and the colonizer across the castes and cultures. He shows that how the castism and superstitions ceased the current society of Indian states and also focuses on how the castism and superstitions unified the Indians in anti colonial nationalist movements such as against satisahgaman (sati) etc. Ghosh account of colonial and his rendering of the past allow sufficient distance, as it were in which to reconsider some of the issues that racked south Asian history more objectively.

Sea of Poppies, Amitav Ghosh assembles from different corners of the world like sailors, marines, coolies, stowaways and convicts for the Ibis; its destiny is a tumultuous voyage across the Indian Ocean to the Mauritius Islands. Moreover, it is a slaving schooner, which converted the transport of coolies for opium. In bringing his troupe of characters to Calcutta into the open water. Ghosh provides the reader with all manner of stories, and equips himself with the personnel to man and navigate and old-fashioned literary three-decker.

Amitav Ghosh begins in the village of eastern Bihar with Deeti who was the central protagonist and who soon to be widowed; her addicted husband Hukam Singh a high caste Raj-put who works at the British Opium factory at Ghazipur, Who also had a caste feeling towards Dalits. So that he did not touch the belongings of his ox-cart driver Kalua. Such a superstitious man he was!

Two metaphors are here in this novel, one infolded within the other, serving as situational frames. The first metaphor, in fact, opens the narrative that is Deeti's "Shrine". As a trope encapsulating a motley assembly, this metaphor is organized to carry substantial weight, for though we find it mentioned at various stages of the narrative, its actual materialization is effected only at the very end. It is a telescoping that threads the opening and closing points of the novel. The second metaphor visits the previous one, but is more than just a vehicle of communication. It is the source and agency that arranges the multiple trajectories of the plot, it is the Ibis. Through we encounter the Ibis briefly on its way in, the gathering of the people who eventually make it to the ship as its occupants, takes up considerable narrative space. There appear to be two conditions behind the process, one the widely located and culturally diverse sources of origin and two, the crafting of distinctive personalities.

Take for instance, the opening phase of the novel where Deeti's situation surfaces through the dense maze of class, clan and caste and also affiliations. It is the narrative of a personal history-from being hazily aware of being forced by her brother-in-law on her, wedding first night (confirmed towards the very end by Bhro-Singh) to make of Kalua a proposition that is much more than a survival vehicle this is a history of deception, guile,

tack and anticipation other survival stories that acquire their own character may still display the conditions of tack, guile or anticipation we can see this in the cases of Baboo Nob Kissin or Neel but their circumstances are peculiarly different discrimination between the people, castes who find themselves under the same banner that the bearings of culture assert its marks most vociferously.

The travelers on the Ibis come aboard with different priorities, some under bondage, other professionally driven and still others, like Paulette and Nob Kissin, following impulses that have odd individual histories, even under extremely trying conditions, a dialectical map elaborates a mindset, which can not be dissociated from its originating circumstances. An argument such as this is open to the question about. Origins' or dialects and sources but on the one hand there is no attempt here to read the idea of roots and legacies of history which interface to current fiction as matching a case for a dialectical or cultural embeddedness which contributes to the way we understand, define or situate these characters

There is, in a way, an inclination on the part of the characters of this novel to carry-forward aspects of cultural or dialectical history, which they recognize as significant to their personalities and even in moments of extreme crises, these aspects leave their mark in this narrative. The fact that the people who eventually assemble on this Ibis represent different social bodies makes ground clearing process an extensive one. As we can see soon, the movements towards social formation make for individuation in ways that come to centre on the physical, physiological, cultural, or dialectical.

Let us consider briefly the conditions through which history interface fiction in this novel. The narrative imagination of Amitav Ghosh signposts the dialectical- contexts of the characters by zeroing in on carefully selected minutiae. It is also clear that Ghosh's projection of colonial temperament or subaltern response is an exercise in particularization. Colonial experience in Sea of Poppies is evoked through some samplers that facilitate the movements of the narrative. While this is not a fully realized India of the early nineteenth century's history matrices are elaborately networked.

The early pages of this novel presents in great graphic detail the circumstances surrounding Deeti's life with an impotent affemkhor husband, pivoted by the opium economy and beset by rigorous caste manacles. Deet's prospects had always been bedeviled by her stars, her fate being ruled by Saturn-shani a planet that exercised great power on those born under its influence. She knew that if she were ever to be married it would probably be to a much older man, possibly an elderly widower who needed a new wife to nurse his brood.

For instance, those above words convey the pathetic and miserable life of Deeti with her own experience. In real life also there were so many innocent women who deceived by highly rich people like Nawab Sahibs of Soudi or Kuwait or Zemindars in the Indian history right now. Even now –a-days also incidents like this are happening that are being watched and observed by newspapers and TV Channels. The same situation had happened once upon a time in the reigns of Kings and Kingdoms. This is nothing but history through interface the fiction.

He also clarified the British policy of 'divided and rule' according to which the class of Indian people that helped the British to continue Colonial rule in their country must be supported by the British. Thus, Ghosh has analyzed this mindset of the colonizers and also exposed the various ways of exploiting the natives to enrich their coffer.

The Colonial rulers exploited not only this subaltern class but also the well-off Indians, the landlords in particular, who had unshakable faith in the Company's policy and a high regard for the Queen's rule. It was due to their ignorance of reality that the well-off persons like the landlord of Rashkhali, Neel Rattan Halder, were trapped by the British businessmen and got ruined. Neel Rattan was financially exploited by Burnham and being accused of forgery, he was sent to a Jail across the black water, as a part of capital punishment. That the British judiciary system was far from impartial is once again proved in his case. When Neel Rattan saw that Mr. Justice Kendulbushe was going to preside over the trial, he doubted his impartiality, as he was well aware

of the Judge's friendship with Mr. Burnham. Moreover, the result was according to his anticipation. The Judge passed upon him the sentence of the law of forgery and explained to him that it was a crime of the utmost gravity. The Colonial pride is expressed in every word uttered by the Judge. Actually (this trial is based, as Ghosh writes in his 'acknowledgements', on the 1829 forgery trial of Prawn Kissen Holdar in the Supreme Court of Calcutta). With him, we also meet, in Alipore Jail, another convict awaiting deportation. The man is Ah Fatt, the illegitimate son of a Parsi trader in Canton and a Chinese woman, and a living witness to the terrible human wreck caused by the Opium trade.

Forgery was a hanging offence—a measure which played no small part in ensuring Britain's present prosperity and in conferring upon her the stewardship of the world's commerce. Moreover, if this crime proved difficult to deter in a country such as England, then it is only to be expected that it will be very much more so in a land such as this. How is society to judge a forger who is also a man of education, enjoying all the comforts that affluence can bestow, whose property is so extensive as to exalt him greatly above his compatriots, who is conceded a superior being, almost a deity among his own kind?...would it not be the duty of this court to deal such a man in exemplary fashion, not just in strict observance of the law. (235-37)

Neel Rattan was taken across the black water in the ship the Ibis where he had to suffer such humiliation as could never be dreamt of by a man of his status. He was to stay with a man who lay unconscious, making the place full of shit and urine and Neel had to cleanse the place as sweepers do. Gradually, however, he developed a sort of friendship with his cell-mate, Ah Fatt, who had been so much addicted to Opium during his first meeting with Neel Rattan that he was almost senseless at the time. Both Neel Rattan and Ah Fatt were harassed by the first mate who took sadistic pleasure in inflicting torture on them in unthinkable ways and towards the end of the Novel both of them are seen escaping in a boat along with Serang Ali, Jodu and Kalua.

Kalua killed Subedar Bhyro Singh—the man who engaged for looking after the indentured labourers, happened to be a relative of Deeti's husband and he whipped Kalua in public apparently to punish him for eloping with a woman of upper class. Actually, for taking a revenge on him after his failure to pervert sex relationship with Deeti. Moreover, Deeti embodying a self burdened by patriarchal and well-sedimented caste regulations. There are others still, marginal, but carrying the marks of specific cultural and dialectical traits, the Burnhams, Zachary Reid, Baboo Nob Kissin, Jodu, Ahfatt and Serang Ali. Amitav Ghosh uses different modes to engage the contexts in which they are placed. Ghosh also creates separate frames through which each one of them appears distinctly individual and unique. It is this blending of dialectical cultural memory and individuality that is realized in Paulette's perception of the natural world: Now, watching the familiar foliage slip by, Paulette's eyes filled with tears. These were more than plants to her, they were the companions of her earliest childhood and their shoots seemed almost to be her own, plunged deep into this soil, no matter where she went or for how long, she knew that nothing would ever tie her to a place, as did these childhood roots.

Actually, the circumstances from which Deeti flees reclaim and engulf her very sense of being. Bhyro Singh, representing her deceased previous husband's family in the most horrific avatar imaginable demonstrates to Deeti the past is inexhaustible capacity to surprise. He knew prior to Bhyro Singh's revelation that Deeti is identified all along her past. At least she believed, which was left behind the shores that the Ibis had distanced herself from so long ago. In effect, Deeti has none but Kalua and Neel his friend Ah Fatt. This brings us to another assumption that informs the transgressors. Pairing: Kalua and Ah Fatt are conditioned to function as foils. Each serving to remind them social deviants of what they have become, and also what they have ended up choosing as their destinies. Because existence in the present novel is so caught up with the process of transformation. The ways in which these people occupy their new spaces engage the condition of inevitability.

If the Neel-Ah Fatt drama bears the marks of a private understanding, the case of Deeti is fraught with traces of social rhetoric. On the ship, within the community of women, she takes on a magisterial role (she is now

Bhauji) and is at great pains to follow norms that convey to her a sense of cultural authenticity. During the impromptu organization of marriage rituals of individuals actions operate through a variety of registers, some quite 'marginal' and other wholly immaterial in terms of their impact potential, yet they carry great value for those who struggle to identify themselves with it. Whether in the maintenance of the evil. As stricter clan and caste, rigour would mark them in narrower social brackets. For Deeti, the suggestion of an alternative geography is imbued with the mark of the unknown, as she and Kalua ran out to trek the new territory, her worries are mounted upon a choice she has not made by will: She tried to imagine what it would be like to be in their place, to know that you were for ever an outcaste, to know that you would never again enter your father's house, that you would never throw your arms around your mother, never eat a meal with your sisters and brothers, never feel the cleansing touch of the Ganga. And to know that for the rest of your days you would eke out a living on some wild, demon-plagued island?

Neel finds himself in Alipore Jail; along with a change in dress code, Neel encounters his fall from grace through numerous other fates. He adapts quite well to his new circumstances, but as he confronts his new meal menu, he stares straight at a situation stamped with the signature of culture. As he was raising his hand to his lips, it occurred to him that this was the first time in all his Years that he had ever eaten something that was prepared by hands of unknown caste... the intensity of his body's resistance amazed him: for the fact was that he did not believe in caste, or so at least he had said, many, many times, to his friends and anyone who would listen. If, in answer, they accused him of having become too tash, overly Westernized, his retort was always to say, no, his allegiance was to the Buddha, the Mahavira, Sri Chaitanya, Kabir and many other such- all of whom had battled against the boundaries of caste with such determination as any European revolutionary.

This response can be seen in conjunction with his consciousness of his body. "Neel had been brought up to regard his body and its functions with a fastidiousness that bordered almost on the occult: this was largely the doing of his mother, for whom bodily defilement was preoccupation that permitted neither peace nor rest" (198-199) Neel takes great pride in showcasing his understanding of allegiance to the British and Western way of life: he said to Mr. Burnham that I am not an ignorant native, to be spoken to like a child.

The tension is wrought not by Neel's allegiance to the worthiness of European Civilization, but by his inability to locate his identity in any given straitjacket. However, Ghosh does not organize his character as one transplanted from one to the other extreme, not at least culturally and dialectically, so that he retains much of the European in him even as he realizes that the west has not fully undone much of what is distinctively Indian.

Thus if we are to read this understanding the dialectic of history which can interface to his novel as representative of political dialectic, such registers are substantially qualified by the presence of other structures of power, social and political, which are not equally vocal. The problem also resides in the haunting presence of the European imagination, in Deeti's shrine, in structures where ideologies and ideals are fashioned to reflect standard Western expectations (Zachary's transformation from a mulatto to the white male, professionally, individually and culturally is one example) and in the concerns about conduct. There are other power structures that play important roles in society and culture, but the rhetoric is not so pronounced. We may see Bhyro Singh disciplining exercises, Neel's relations with his dependents, the caste-equations among the local population, including the ghirmityas on the ship and even the convict-hierarchy at Alipore Jail as examples political culture.

The public lynching of Kalua by Bhyro Singh is a case in point. Captain Chillingworth's sanctioning of such a penal exercise pushed the dialectical argument further. There are also other instances in the novel where the rhetoric of the unspoken presents the stance of defiance the articulation in such cases is not quite uniform Kalua's silence in the whipping scene, Nob Kissin's searching and superstitious gazes at Zachary, or Munia's

coquettish responses to Jodu's wooing-yet they all challenge the expected by hinting at possibilities derived from extremely personal priorities in this novel. Moreover, this is all happening due to lack of forgivable nature in humanity.

There is also a claim made in the novel for reading Ah Fatt as one who is essentially better than what he is made out to be, primarily through a reference to his past, a personal history that he recounts for his solitary audience, Neel Rattan Halder. By the time we see a mentally and physically alert Ah Fatt confronting his oppressors, the narrative of personal history frames his bearing in distinctive terms. We cannot now see him alone. He is now imbued with a cultural matrix that draws upon his narrative of his past with the accumulated details that place him in conjunction with Neel. Both convicts now became a community, desirous to take on anything that challenges their union. The frame that structures his responsibility towards his fellow-prisoner involves two additional tracks: his refusal to forgive the First Mate and his determination to transgress in order to assert his individuality(7).

Forgiveness, responsibility and transgression have occupied considerable discursive space in the spheres of moral philosophy and theology. To whom and to what extent one is answerable remains an issue of great debate. Derrida, for instance, has argued that a case can be made for the operational domain of forgiveness, which is constantly caught up within the logic of the private/ public space. "In a certain way, it seems to us that forgiveness can only be asked or granted 'one to one', face to face, so to speak, between the one who has committed the irreparable or irreversible wrong and he or she who has suffered it and who is alone in being able to hear the request for forgiveness, to grant or refuse it. This solitude of two, in the scene of forgiveness, would seem to deprive any forgiveness of sense or authenticity that was asked for collectively, in the name of a community, a Church, an institution, a profession, a group of anonymous victims, sometimes dead, or their representatives, descendants, or survivors. In the same way, this singular, even quasi-secret solitude of forgiveness would turn forgiveness into an experience outside or heterogeneous to the rule of law, of punishment or penalty, of the public institution, of judiciary calculations, and so forth."(25) Jacques Derrida "To Forgive" in John D. Caputo et al.eds. *Questioning God*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001. For a counter-view, that discusses the "unforgivable" see, Martin Beck Matustick, *Radical Evil and the Scarcity of Hope*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008.

Amitav Ghosh has always a surprise for his readers. With each book, he startles them with a novel theme and new setting. Moreover, in each text, he experiments with a new genre. In *Sea of Poppies* (2008), the first volume of an intended epic trilogy, he, however, revisits, in amazingly detailed and impressive ways, some of the thematic concerns of his earlier novles, like the mass migration of people from one country and continent to another, the incessant movements of trade, commerce and empires that have travelled over the Indian ocean since antiquity, and lives of ordinary men and women whose stories, framed against the grand historical narrative, call for different ways of looking at past, cultural and identity.

Sea of Poppies is divided into three sections: 'Land', 'River', and 'Sea'. *Sea of Poppies* is a historical novel set in 1830s, against the background of the first set of opium wars. Incredible though it may sound now, Britain was once engaged in drug-trafficking. The country was the world's biggest opium producer and supplier, not unlike today's Afghanistan that produces poppies to illegally supply heroin to Europe and America. It is an established fact which the British version of history glosses over. About two centuries ago, when the East India Company, the forerunner of the empire, was spreading its stranglehold on the subcontinent, British fortune-seekers in India amassed fabulous wealth-that sustained the colonial rule-by turning the banks of the Ganga into a sea of poppies to grow opium and export it illegally to China. The trade was monopolized by the British merchants under seal of the company. Peasant farmers of Bihar and parts of Bengal were forced to turn over their fertile agricultural lands to the company's agents for opium production. Moreover, this caused widespread poverty and hunger because lands that had once provided sustenance were now swamped with the rising tide of poppies.

Moreover, the Chinese rulers were determined to stop a trade that was rapidly undermining the country's economy by turning millions of people into opium addicts. Despite the emperor's decrees that banned the trade, British merchants went on shipping out barrels of refined opium, produce in the company-run factory at Ghaziabad, to Canton, relying on the growing number of addicts to defy his order. In the end, they used force, defying the Chinese restrictions on free trade, and persuading the British Crown to wage the notorious opium war. Fought in 1839-42 between British East India Company and a weakened China under the Qing dynasty, its ostensible purpose was 'free trade', i.e., access to China's huge market for British merchants.

By this time, Britain had abolished slavery and the Empire's plantations in far East and the West Indies needed workers who were slaves by another name - 'girmytias', indentured labourers with a signed contract or 'girmit' (a corrupted derivative of English 'agreement'). Shiploads of coolies travelled the Indian Ocean under horrible conditions to escape the dismal poverty and deprivation in their native land and to supply cheap labour for the British sugar planters on such islands as Mauritius, Fiji and Trinidad. The novel centers round these two broad economic themes of the 19th century: the compulsory cultivation of opium as a cash crop in Bihar and parts of Bengal for the Chinese market and its disastrous consequences, and the origins and transport of the first batch of Indian Diaspora.

At the heart of this epic saga is a ship, the Ibis. Originally built in America as 'blackbirder', from transporting slaves from Africa; it has undergone a transformation after the abolition of slavery. This schooner is sold out to a British shipping company and trading house, Burnham Bros, which has extensive interests in India and China. The new owner, Benjamin Burnham, who has his business headquarters and principal residence in Calcutta, has acquired the novel vessel with an eye to refitting it for a different trade. Shipping opium to China and transporting indentured labourers to British colonies in the Caribbean Islands. The ship has a British captain - Mr. Chillingworth, who is an opium addict, and a first mate - Mr. Crowle who is a rogue. Its second mate - Zachary Reid - is a Mulatto Freedman who has sailed with it from Baltimore.

Moreover, Zachary who is a daring seaman who knows no boundaries but who will always be bound to the brutal history of colonialism and stigma of colour. There is mutual distrust between two mates who do not like each other. The ship picks up its lascars crew in Cape Town on its way to Calcutta where it will be refurbished to transport a hord of coolies to the sugar plantations in Mauritius. The lascars have come from places, which are far apart, and they have nothing in common except the Indian Ocean. The crew comprises Chinese, East Africans, Arabs, Malays, Bengalis, Goans, Tamils and Arakanese. They use a delightful lingo, picked up in Asian and East African seaports, as their shipboard vocabulary. Their leader, Serang Ali, is a man of formidable appearance, with a 'face that would have earned the envy of Genghis Khan' (14).

The action starts with the arrival of Ibis, and the dropping of her anchor, near Gangasagar Island in the second week of March 1838. As the ship waits for the Pilot boat to take it to Calcutta Port, the story begins in a riverside village in eastern Bihar where Deeti, the first victim of enforced opium cultivation in the book, is introduced.

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* tells the story of Deeti, who also called as Aditi, and the Kabutri-ki-ma designation. The novel follows about Deeti's fate or destiny through so many difficulties. There are no protagonists in this novel. However, the novel revolves round the central character Deeti without whom the entire novel is not possible. Each character in the novel 'Sea of Poppies' has its own identity.

CONCLUSION

Against this historical backdrop, *Sea of Poppies* paints a moving picture of the human devastation caused by British Colonial rule and its lopsided policies. With an unusually sharp eye, Amitav Ghosh looks through the spectacular historical trends at how these trends moulded ordinary human lives. Instead of being drawn towards the narration of the political intrigues of the Opium trade itself, the novel keeps its focus on creating

its large cast of characters, and letting history tell itself through their lives and stories which are shaped and influenced by socio-political forces beyond their control.

The novel is nowhere weighted down by the burden of anti-Colonial sermonizing, although the author has no illusions about the hypocrisy, greed and cruelty that underpinned Colonial rule. In fact, what Amitav Ghosh has achieved in the novel is a complete reversal of perspective. Unlike European writers - like Rudyard Kipling, E.M. Forster and Joseph Conrad who wrote about the colonies and placed the whitemen at the centre of their narratives, Ghosh relegates the British imperialists to the margins of history, given the pride of place to the neglected subjects of the Colonial enterprise.

As an evocative and scholarly re-creation of a by-gone era and its forgotten history, *Sea of Poppies* is brilliant. What is more important, he won the minds of the readers that history is composed not of spectacular events and heroic characters but of ordinary individuals and their destinies. His book is, as always, more about people than about issues. It is this concern with living individuals that takes the novel away from the dry discourse of historiography and brings it closer to fictionalization of history. His characters are not historical figures, like those of Victor Hugo and Leo Tolstoy, but unremarkable men and women - imperialism's neglected victims who are caught in the intricate web of history, which is beyond their comprehension.

Ghosh's success as a historical novelist depends as much on the distinctiveness of his characters as on his enviable gift of story telling. He conjures up each character with meticulous care, etching even the minor figures in the reader's mind with deft touches. These are bolstered by a solid mass of specialist information and painstaking attention to social and economic details. The novel represents an incredible feat of research without sacrificing its narrative and characters. It brings vanished experiences of a lost World to life, from the evocatively imagined Opium cultivation in eastern Bihar, and the nostalgically itemized *carte du jour* on the luxurious dining table of the time, to the detailed descriptions of the *Ibis*, its nautical niceties and tumultuous journey across the Indian Ocean. In fact, the book provides an encyclopedic knowledge of early nineteenth century Indian food, dress, religious worship and funeral rites, Sea-faring and trade, Botany and horticulture, sexual practice and criminal justice. It has been remarked by many reviewers that the seaboard sections of *Sea of Poppies*, with their welter of maritime details, rival those in the novels of Joseph Conrad, Melville and James Clavell.

Another dazzling aspect of the novel is the clash and mingling of people, cultures and languages. There are Indians and Westerners, Asians and Africans in the story. So that this results in what Peter Parker has called, in his "The Sunday Times review", 'a glorious babel of a novel'. This wonderful literary device, by which as many languages as people inhabit the text, creates a sense of living voices and of linguistic resourcefulness of the people of diaspora. Amitav Ghosh has ransacked the nineteenth century dictionaries and lexicons of nautical commands. Solidier's slangs, Babu English and Colloquial Anglo-Indian words for his characters. Two most important of these sources are Henry Yule's *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases* (1886) and *English and Hindostanee Naval Dictionary of Technical Terms and Phrases*, published in 1811 by Lt. Thomas Roebuck. But, this multifarious language that marvelously captures the multilingual perspectives of the characters, is so well integrated into the text that the book remains accessible to the readers, no matter how obscure and obsolete some of its words are. With its broad canvas, grand historical sweep, vast panorama of characters, linguistic exuberance and superb story-telling style, *Sea of Poppies* 2008 is sure to become an enduring masterpiece of 21st century English fiction.

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