

CHARACTERIZATION IN AMITAV GHOSH'S NOVEL, 'SEA OF POPPIES'

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Abstract

Amitabh Ghosh's ambitious novel, 'Sea of Poppies' is an inaugural volume of his planned Ibis trilogy. The two other novels of this trilogy are River of Smoke (2011) and Flood of Fire (2015). The novel, 'Sea of Poppies' is set in India in 1838, on the eve of the Anglo-Chinese opium wars of 1839-43 and 1846-60. It is an apt and concrete commentary on how colonialism damaged and divided Indian society. It paints a poignant portrait of the human devastation and decadence caused by imperialism. To his own confession, it took four years to write Sea of Poppies. The novel was also shortlisted for Britain's Man Booker Prize.

Keywords: *characterization, amitav, amitav ghosh, sea of poppies, poppies*

The novel 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. The poor Indian peasant actually suffered 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 were now deluged with the rising tide of poppies. The British forced 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 which cause starvation in the subaltern world:

"Back then, a few clumps of poppy were enough to provide for a household's needs, leaving a little over, to be sold: no one was inclined to plant more because of all the work it took to grow poppies...Such punishment was bearable when you had a patch or two of poppies...but what sane person would want to multiply these labours when there was better, more useful crops to grow, like wheat, dal, vegetables? But those toothsome winter crops were steadily shrinking in acreage: now the factory's appetite for opium seemed never to be sated." (*Sea of Poppies*, page 29)

The novel delineates the utter helplessness of Indian laborers and farmers as the insatiable appetite of the British for revenue, rendered them crippled, marooned, exploited and defenceless. The crafty and cunning business of British snatched India of its riches, freedom and peace; and Chinese of their discretion and wisdom by poisoning them with opium. The novel 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* assembles 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 etc.

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:

“Slowly, as the women’s voices grew in strength and confidence, the men forgot their quarrels: at home too, during village weddings it was always the women who sang when the bride was torn from her parent’s embrace – it was as if they were acknowledging through their silence, that they, as men, had no words to describe the pain of a child who is exiled from home.” (*Sea of Poppies*, page 366)

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 *jabaṅ-bhais* and *jabaṅ-babens*. 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.

Ghosh also exposes the dilapidating plight of women in ancient and colonial India who are subjected to suffer numerous persecutions at the hands of men who have been treating women only an object of quenching carnal desire and household maidservants. Enforcing 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 biasing.

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 a superior to the lascars. His likely soul mate 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 and he 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 from his royal

estate by a British jury. Not only that he is driven out of his palace, 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 Lambart. 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 stinking state into a dark cell. He shares his cell with Neel Rattan Holder. Initially they are at loggerheads but gradually they come closer to each other and this intimation and friendship makes the novel 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've hardly been given their due and recognised in official naval chronicles. The novel is replete and reverberates with the pidgin used by the lascar.

For the slave ship and the people aboard, suddenly unborn destiny is born. Catastrophic cloud hovers in the sky, sea darkens and storm doesn't 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.

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