

Socio-Cultural Aspects in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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Abstract: *The paper traces the socio-cultural scenario of nineteenth century India and the prevalent beliefs and practices of the people as presented in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*. The narrative is mainly dictated by two great events- the incidents leading to the first Opium War and the Golden Triangle Trade between India, China and Britain and the great migration of the peasants to the plantations in the British colonies. In presenting the history of opium trade and indentured labour in nineteenth century India under colonial rule, Ghosh has brought to light the social conditions of the period and also the status of women in a male dominated society. Women in ancient India were held in high respect. During the vedic period, they enjoyed equal status and rights with men. The practices of polygamy, purdha system, dowry and sati which came into being during the medieval period deteriorated the status of women in the society. The paper critiques the Indian traditional powers which were blatantly patriarchal, feudal and anti-feminist in nature.*

Key Words: *Exploitation, suppression, discrimination, affliction, patriarchal, humiliation.*

I. Introduction

Literature as a reflection of society mirrors the social life and the spirit of the age it represents. Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, Restoration Comedy of Manners and the plays of Bernard Shaw are some examples of this literature society correspondence. While Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* gives a realistic picture of the morals and manners of the England of his times, Comedy of Manners depicts the artificiality and superficial affections of the aristocratic society of the day, and Shaw's plays expose the rottenness of the social life of the 20th century England.

Literature also reflects the tendencies and concerns of the age. Social conventions, historical events, religious and political ideals make up a writer's background and are reflected in the themes he chooses and the way he treats them. Shakespeare's plays were influenced by the Renaissance, a period notable for expansion in commerce, new scientific discovery, religious controversy and an awakened interest in ancient classics. The spirit of enquiry and criticism, religious uncertainty and the demand for social justice that marked the Victorian age is reflected in the literary works of the age. The two world wars make up the history of modern age and as a consequence man's lost faith in accepted values, pessimism and a note of bitterness on the grim realities of life are prominent in modern British literature.

After the First World War, Indian novelists like R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand were influenced by ideologies that challenged Colonialism and Capitalism. Novels of Mulk Raj Anand depict imperial oppression and the lives of downtrodden under capitalism. The social, economic, religious, political and familial problems that were submerged in the flood of freedom movement drew the attention of the creative writers of the post-independent era. While Kushwant Singh portrayed the communal riots after partition in *Train to Pakistan* (1956), economic problems like the strained relations of land owners and landless peasants, the impact of industrialisation on the life of common man and poverty of the rural classes became the focal point of novelists like, Bhabani Bhattacharya and Manohar Malgoankar. Writers like Amitav Ghosh were greatly influenced by the political and cultural milieu of post-independent India. The works of Ghosh are replete with political, historical and social consciousness and are marked by themes that go side by side with colonialism.

II. Sea of Poppies: An Overview

Sea of Poppies is a historical novel that opens in 1838 on the eve of the opium wars. Set in Eastern India and the Bay of Bengal, the narrative begins with the arrival of a former slave ship *Ibis* at Ganga-Sagar Island. Discontinued as a black birder with the abolition of slave trade, the schooner is refitted to transport grimityas or indentured coolies from Calcutta to the sugar estates in the British colony of Mauritius. The novel unfolds with the events that bring together these 'ship-siblings' (356) with no difference of caste, colour, religion, language or creed as they move towards a similar fate.

The story is divided into three parts- land, river and sea. The first part presents the circumstances that bring the characters to the ship. In the second part when the ship is moored in the river near Kidderpore, all these characters get into the ship by some stroke of destiny or other. In the last part they get to sail the *Ibis* to a new life that awaits them in Mauritius. Deeti the first character to be introduced is a young mother from a small

village, fifty miles east of Benares, in the northern province of Bihar. Deeti's husband Hukam Singh works in the Ghazipur opium factory. He had been wounded in the leg while serving as a sepoy in the British Regiment and started consuming opium to relieve him off the pain that was caused by the battle wounds but it ended up in an addiction to the drug. This addiction slowly kills him and Deeti is compelled by the social custom and her relatives to immolate herself in her husband's funeral pyre for a sati in the family would make them famous. She is saved by Kalua, the ox-cart driver an untouchable from the leather-worker's caste who takes her husband to the factory every day. They run away from their village but to their horror they find that the fury of her relatives has not subsided. They were in search of Deeti and Kalua who had brought disgrace to the family. The couple had no other option but to flee the country and they end up in Ibis which is on its way to Mauritius.

The first part exposes the economic and social exploitation of the rural folk, injustice meted out to the colonized and the plight of suppressed classes and castes in India. Deeti and Kalua are presented as victims of the prevalent social practices and beliefs. There was a belief that the stars under which they were born had a great influence on one's life. Deeti's fate was ruled by her star, Saturn or Shani which was believed to bring discord, unhappiness and disharmony. With this shadow darkening her future Deeti did not have high expectations about her married life and the prospect of marrying a disabled man did not bother her. But as feared her marriage brought only unhappiness as husband was not only invalid but also impotent. He showed no interest in her but was always in a 'state of torpid, opium induced somnolence' (36). Deeti is shocked to find that to preserve the family's honour she has been impregnated by her brother in law in an opium induced state and this menial act was done with the help of her mother-in-law. Family honor was considered more important than the honour due to a woman. In a state of trance, she even refers to Deeti as Draupadi, wife to five brothers and tells that 'it's a fortunate woman, who bears the children of brothers for each other' (39).

III. Status of Women

The status of women in the pre-independent Indian society is portrayed through the life of Deeti and that of the other women characters. Women in ancient India were held in high respect. During the vedic period, they enjoyed equal status and rights with men. The practices of polygamy, purdha system, dowry and sati which came into being during the medieval period deteriorated the status of women in the society. Women were excluded from the formal education system. When Paulette tells the migrants that she had read from a book that there are no snakes in Mareech, Jhugroo satirically retorts, 'How would a woman know what's written in a book?' (390) Child marriage was the norm of the day. The novel records that Neel was betrothed at the time of his birth to the daughter of another landowning family and the marriage was solemnized when he was twelve.

Home was considered the right place for a woman but a man was free to live a life he wished for. The Raja had as many mistresses 'as there were days in the week, so as to be able to spend each night in a different bed' (86). A girl child was considered to be a burden while a male child was an asset to the family. The girls' parents were expected to offer money and gifts to the groom to get their daughters married off. Deeti's father had to thatch the roof of her groom's house as a part of her dowry. He did not begrudge the expense though he could ill afford it.

Marriage and motherhood, begetting sons in particular were considered to be the goals of a woman. Deeti is impregnated by her brother in law on her wedding night as the task of the new bride was assumed to beget an heir for the family. The property of a man who does not have a male heir would automatically be inherited by his brother. Being the mother of a girl child, Deeti has no chance of holding her husband's land after his death. She decides to sacrifice her body in the funeral pyre for fear of forceful accumulation of her land and property by her brother-in-law after her husband's death and to escape from her brother-in-law's sexual harassment. Women were married to men, much older to them to beget a male heir. Such is the case with Taramony, Nob Kissin's widowed aunt. Her husband had married her only six years before in a final attempt to beget an heir and his final wish was that his young wife be sent to an ashram in the holy city of Brindavan. (161)

It was a patriarchal society in which women did not have an identity of their own. They were identified either with their father, husband or children. Deeti was recognized only as Kabutri-ki-ma. Exploitation of women was multifaceted. They were subjected to physical, sexual and emotional abuse. Not only is Deeti raped on her wedding night by her brother-in-law, but with her husband in his death bed, she is also subjected to sexual harassment by him. His advances were so aggressive that she feared, he might attack her, right on her husband's bed. Malati, the wife of Neel is a passive sufferer who performs her duties as a wife and mother without any expectations. Her suffering is mental but as a typical Indian wife, she never complains or questions her husband's relationship with his mistress Elokeshi. Neel's mother was also neglected by her husband and she lived a secluded in a gloomy wing of the palace while he enjoyed with his mistresses, giving in to their demands which resulted in the mounting up of his debts.

Heeru was berated and beaten up by her husband. When she lost her only child she was persuaded by him to do a puja at the temple of Hariharnath during the mela, to beget a son. When she got lost he abandoned her and after a few months, she came to know that her husband had married again. Dookhanee an inmate of the

ship had signed as a labourer unable to endure the oppressions of her violently abusive mother-in-law. Munia was cheated by an agent from the opium factory and when he learnt that she had given birth to a baby, he set fire to her house that killed her father, mother and child.

Paulette is under the custody of the Burnhams after she is orphaned. But she is forced to sexual harassment by the respectable Mr. Burnham in the name of religious instruction. When Paulette tells Zachary the way she was treated by Mr. Burnham, Zachary is reminded of his mother, the slave woman who was sexually exploited by his father, the white plantation owner. She had told him how as a young girl of fourteen she had stood trembling at the entrance to his cabin in the woods that he kept for bedding his slaves. Her feet were unwilling to move when old Mr. Reid told her to quit her weeping and get over to the bed. 'It had still twisted him in a knot to hear his mother speak of that first time in Mr. Reid's cabin in the woods' (305).

These incidents not only depict the callous exploitation of women but also the 'muteness' of women in the society. Gayatri Spivak pointedly observes,

'Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. ... Both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the contest of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. (32)

The plight of an Indian widow was deplorable. The patriarchal ideology cherished the sentiment that women's existence should lose 'its rationale once the husband was dead.' (Sakunthala Narasimhan, 51) The Hindu widow had to immolate herself upon the pyre of her dead husband. As Spivak points out the rite was 'not caste or class -fixed.' (2006, 33) *Sea of Poppies* presents a poignant picture of Deeti in a resplendent white sari being carried to her husband's pyre to be burnt alive with him. 'She was slumped over, barely upright: she would not have been able to stand on her own feet, much less walk ... Half dragged and half carried, she was brought to the pyre and made to sit cross-legged on it, beside her husband's corpse' ((177). Remarriage for widows of high castes was forbidden since it was perceived as the defilement of the purity of their social status. Taramoni, a young widow had to spend her widowhood in loneliness and penance as per the wish of her husband.

IV. Caste Discrimination

The novel also records the heinous system of caste discrimination practiced in Indian society. The caste system was a brutal oppressive mechanism that branded an unfortunate section of the society as untouchables and thrust them to the periphery. For several millennia caste constituted the core of social life in India. It dictated the occupation and the social interaction of a person. Nicholas Dirks in his introduction to *Colonialism and Culture* remarks, '... Culture in India seems to have been principally defined by caste. Caste has always been seen as central in Indian history and as one of the major reasons why India has no history, no sense of history. Caste defines the core of Indian tradition, and caste is today- as it was throughout the colonial era – the major threat to Indian modernity.' (8)

Describing the caste system in India Amdedkar remarks

In India castes are not merely non-social but anti-social. The Hindus will not allow the Untouchables to take water from a well. The Hindus will not allow Untouchables entry in schools. The Hindus will not allow the Untouchables to travel in buses. The Hindus will not allow the Untouchables to travel in the same railway compartment. The Hindus will not allow Untouchables to wear clean clothes. The Hindus will not allow Untouchables to wear jewelry. The Hindus will not allow Untouchables to put tiles on their houses. The Hindus will not tolerate Untouchables to own land. The Hindus will not allow Untouchables to keep cattle. The Hindus will not allow an Untouchable to sit when a Hindu is standing. (Quoted Kamala Visweswaran, 158)

The record of the afflictions and humiliations to which Kalua is subjected speaks of the pathos of an untouchable's existence in pre-independent India. Kalua the ox-cart driver was of the leather-workers' caste and so was considered an untouchable. Hukam Singh as a high-caste Rajput believed that the very sight of a person of low-caste would augur bad tidings. 'Climbing on to the back of the cart, the former sepoy sat facing to the rear with his bundle balanced on his lap, to prevent its coming into direct contact with any of the driver's belongings' (4). They travelled conversing amicably but were careful not to exchange glances.

The wretched living conditions of the out-caste and the sub human treatment they were subjected to is truthfully portrayed through the life of Kalua. The untouchables were not allowed to have their dwelling in the precincts of the village. Kalua lived in the chamar- basti a group of huts inhabited only by the chamars. It was a social taboo for the high-caste people to enter the hamlet occupied by these out-castes. His dwelling place had no door and it looked more like a cattle-pen than a hut. The door way was so dark and low that Kalua had to stoop low to make his way out. As if to confirm that he lived in a cattle-pen the two oxen that pulled his cart also lived with him in the hut.

Disgraceful behaviour by a caste Hindu meant degradation to the position of an outcaste. When Neel's forgery case is on trial, a petition is submitted on his behalf to mitigate his sentence as the penalty would cause

himself, his wife and innocent child to lose caste and be shunned and ostracized by their kinsmen. As the Raja of Rashkali Neel enjoys the privileges of a caste Hindu but once he is convicted, he loses caste and is made to clean the cell that he shared with Ah Fatt. When he had to take hold of the jharu, 'he could not prevail upon his hand to make contact: the risk involved seemed unimaginably great for he knew that he would cease to be the man he had been a short while before.' (323) Crossing the sea also meant losing one's caste. Seeing the grimityas marching towards the river, Deeti reflects on the implications of losing one's caste. 'She tried to imagine what it would be like to be in their place, to know that you were forever an outcaste.' (72)

Inter – caste marriages and inter-religious marriages were considered as social taboos. Jodu a Muslim is beaten to the point of death when he is found with a Hindu girl. An outcaste marrying a woman of high caste was considered to be a serious crime than murder. Captain Chillingworth informs Zachary that Kalua has to be flogged the next day for murdering the silahdar and later the case would be heard by a judge in Port Louis. Zachary wonders why he has to be punished twice for the same offence. The captain replies that in the eyes of the subedar, murder was the least of his crimes and for the heinous crime he had committed he would be cut and fed to the dogs at home – 'he's a pariah who has run off with a woman of high caste' (481).

V. Superstition

The novel also presents the superstitious beliefs and practices in the society. People were steeped in superstitious beliefs. Deeti believed it bad luck to draw realistic pictures of people who were alive. The walls of her shrine had portraits of two brothers and a sister who had died in their childhood but her relatives who were alive were represented by diagrammatic images. Her beloved brother, Kesri Singh was depicted by few strokes that represented his rifle and moustache. To leave the dishes unwashed overnight was believed to invite an invasion of ghosts and hungry pisaches and so Deeti goes to fetch water from the river at night when she saw Kalua being humiliated by the zamidars. Deeti's childhood home overlooked a confluence of two rivers, Ganga and Karamnasa meaning destroyer of karma. It was believed by the village folk that the waters of Ganges was auspicious while the touch of the water of the 'karma-negating tributary' would erase a lifetime of merit and so women from the household preferred to go to the auspicious river to bathe or fetch water. Looking at the parched land around Deeti felt that 'Karamnasa's influence has spilled over its banks, spreading its blight far beyond the land that drew upon its waters' (192).

Certain things and food items were considered to be auspicious while unclean things were considered to be inauspicious. At the end of the trading season, when the ships returned from China, Mr. Burnham visited the Raskhali Rajbari with money, gold and auspicious gifts like saffron and areca nuts. As Neel was prepared to be taken to the court, he was made to eat a meal that composed of various kinds of auspicious foods- vegetables and puris fried in the purest ghee and sweets. The path in which he had to tread was cleared off impure objects as jharus and toilet buckets. Sweepers and porters of night soil who were considered to be carriers of ill-omen were ushered away. Parimal even made sure that the constables who accompanied Neel were of Hindus of high caste.

VI. Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh has rendered a candid picture of 19th century Indian society with its beliefs, customs and social problems like poverty and the marginalisation of a particular sect of people in the name of caste. The novel also brings to light the male domination in a patriarchal society and the consequent relegation of women to a secondary position.

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