

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

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### ABSTRACT

The paper traces the socio-cultural circumstances of nineteenth century India and the broad principles of the citizens as presented in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*. The interpretation is repeatedly dictated by two massive events- the events leading to the major Opium War and the Golden Triangle service between India, China and Britain and the gigantic immigration of the peasants to the cultivated area in the British colonies. In presenting the observations of opium service and indentured labor in nineteenth century India under magnificent ruling, Ghosh has brought to glow the collective conditions of the phase and also the position of women in a male dominated society. Women in initial India were held in renowned regard. The paper critiques the Indian banal powers which were deliberately patriarchal, feudal and anti-feminist in environment.

**Keywords:** Colonialism, hypocrisy, disagreement, annoyance, patriarchal, untouchable.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Literature is usually the reflection of the society, and almost all good Literature does reflect the society. It showcases the age and its varied hues. From the very beginning of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* to the present day Novels have all tried to depict the society. Literary works have usually shown both the good, and the bad side of the society. Literature also shows the social conventions and historical events of the age and how it impacts its characters. All the works of literature is influenced by another literary work. The Second World War not only inspired a lot works, but lot of works was inspired from war related literature.

It is clear that writers have portrayed a lot of things through their writing. They have talked about colonial problems, industrialization and poverty. The modern writers like Amitav

Ghosh were certainly influenced by the cultural milieu of post independent India. The works of Ghosh are certainly filled with historical and social consciousness. Without doubt they are marked with colonialism.

The novel under consideration for this paper is *Sea of Poppies*. This novel is a historical novel, and it opens in the year 1838. It is set during the opium war. Ibis is a former slave ship and it is now serving the purpose of transporting coolies from Calcutta to the British colony of Mauritius. All the characters from different cultural background gather in this ship. The story is seemingly divided into three parts and they are land, river and sea. The first part of the story certainly brings all the characters together, and in the second part the ship is moored somewhere near Kidderpore. All these characters in the last part get together and follow their destiny in the Ibis.

The first part shows the economic and social exploitation of village and rural people. The colonizers really suppressed them by the means of classes and castes. They used these tools to divide the people. People during that time believed in stars, and they thought the stars had great influence on them. The society believed in such things. One of the characters named Deeti was born under the star of Saturn which is believed to bring bad luck to the person. This becomes true as her life turns out badly. For instance she did not have big hopes for the future and she married an invalid. The invalid husband unfortunately was also impotent. Thus her mother-in-law drugs her with opium and impregnates her with her brother in law just to save the honor of the family. Even this incident shows the cultural and social aspect in the novel. They have plainly followed the social norms.

The next aspect that can be seen is the status of women. Throughout the novel one can see the portrayal of Deeti and other women characters. In ancient days women were kept and seen in an esteemable place. But evil practices like polygamy, purdha, and dowry systems followed the ancient days. Women in fact were excluded from formal education. It was a rare thing to see women who could read. The next evil that was prevalent during that time was child marriage. The novel clearly says the Neel just when he was born was betrothed to some daughter of a landowning family. Eventually the marriage was solemnized when he was twelve. In those days home was considered the rightful place for women, this can be validated by the various women characters in the novel. Dowry was another culturally accepted thing during that time. In the novel Deeti's father thatches the roof of her groom's house. This is considered as part of her dowry. Even though he knew that the expense was high he did not complain about it as the culture dictated it. The novel shows the patriarchal society, the families were keen to have only male children as to ensure the wealth remained inside the same family. Women are also married to very wealthy older men. They were surely subjected to physical, mental and emotional abuse. Malati, the wife of Neel is not like Deeti. She is a passive sufferer. She goes about her work like an ordinary wife and mother. Her suffering is mental, and she was neglected by her husband and they lived in a secluded palace while her husband enjoyed with other women. This caused a lot of debt to him, and the family was ruined. All these small incidents perfectly show the type of patriarchy that surrounded the culture during that time.

Another character named Heeru was beaten up her husband. She lost her only child but her husband asked to perform some sort of poojas so she can give birth to a son. But she got lost in their Pooja, and after few months she comes to know that her husband had abandoned her and married again. Following this another character called Dookhanee also was abused to such a point by her mother-in-law that she abandoned her home, and she had signed herself up

for a laborer. These are domestic problems of the society and they are also portrayed in the novel.

There are many sexually abusive cases in the novel as well. For instance there is Paulette who is under the custody of Mr. Burnhams. But in the name of a religious instruction he abuses the girl. Paulette tells all these things to Zachary. She on the other hand is reminded of her mother who was a slave and how she was exploited sexually by the white plantation owner. All these incidents certainly show the callous exploitation of women. As Gayatri Spivak points out regarding the 'muteness' of women.

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 society and culture cannot be separated from literature as mentioned earlier. The problems of the society, the cultural issues can all be seen in the novel. The plight of widows was worse during that time. They were not supposed to marry, and remarriage to higher caste was completely not allowed as they thought it would defile the purity of the social status. The novel also presents the superstitious beliefs of the people. For instance silly superstitious beliefs were steeped in the people, Deeti believed that it is a bad luck to draw a realistic picture of a person who was still alive, and also Neel was given some auspicious food comprised of vegetables and puris while he was taken to court. These incidents all show the social and culturally aspects of the society even to the last minutiae.

In conclusion it must be noted that Amitav Ghosh has shown a simple but a candid picture of 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian society. He shows the beliefs and customs of the people. He also shows the evils of the society like poverty and marginalization of a particular set of name, usually in the name of caste. The novel also brings to light the male domination in the society and how women during that era were always kept in the secondary position. Thus socio and cultural are unequivocally shown in the novel *Sea of Poppies*.

## II. WORKS CITED:

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