

Portrayal of Women in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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ABSTRACT: *In my paper I will be dealing with women characters in the novel of Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies. I will focus on the plight of women during the nineteenth century and under colonial rule their condition was even worse. Opium effects life of all women characters directly or indirectly in the novel. I will discuss briefly character of each woman with special focus on Deeti. The character of Paulette daughter of a French botanist living in Calcutta, she respects Indian culture like French. Some minor women characters in the novel like Sarju, Heeru, Munniah and others, who travel on board as indentured labours on Ibis from Calcutta to Mauritius. Their story presents a vivid picture of subjugation of women. Through the character of Taramony, life of a widow is described and how they were sent to Brindavan to live a life of suffering and hardship.*

Keywords: Colonial, Culture, Opium, Suffering, Women

I. INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh one of the leading writers of Indian English literature. His novel *Sea of Poppies* was shortlisted for Man Booker Prize in 2008. The novel is based on historical setting of colonial rule in India and to fulfill its need of supply of opium to China. His portrayal of women is realistic. In his novel women characters are few in comparison to men characters. In *Sea of Poppies* he has tried to show how women can be empowered so that they may become independent in the future.

His novel is based on historical background of colonialism, of cultivation of opium in India to fulfill demand of opium in China and migration of indentured labours to Mauritius for working in plantations. It is in this context story vivid picture of plight of women during colonial rule is represented in the novel. The suffering of a woman in zamindar family and an agriculturist is nonetheless similar.

I will be dealing with women characters in the novel. Deeti, one of the leading female characters in the novel and it is around her that novel revolves. Ghosh has represented women from every section of Indian society. The position of upper class women is not very different than woman of lower class. Women in the novel suffer from gender discrimination, class and caste structure. Ghosh has dealt with spiritual love between god and a devotee. Through the character of Paulette he tries to show development of a child irrespective of discrimination results in respect for all culture whether it is European or Indian. I will be dealing them in detail in my paper.

II. WOMEN AND SUFFERING

Deeti is an ordinary village woman. She is one of the prominent characters in the novel. She suffers from gender bias since her childhood in the novel. In the first chapter of the novel it is told that due to colour of her eyes, she is called as "*chudaliya, dainiya* as if she were a witch: but Deeti had only to turn her eyes on them to make them scatter and run off"(5). She is married to Hukum Singh who served in the same battalion as her brother Kesri Singh of British army. Her marriage with Hukum Singh is fixed without her consent as this proposal is seen as better than marrying to a man much older than Deeti. Hukum Singh got hurt on one of his leg while he was in British regiment due to which he cannot walk properly but this is seen as minor problem in her marriage with him. Her dowry contributes to building of roof of his husband's house. He works in an opium factory in Ghazipur. Her dreams are shattered on the first night of her marriage when her husband makes her inhale opium and she is raped in a state of unconsciousness by her brother in law Chandan Singh with help of her uncle Bhyro Singh. It is only later while she is travelling on Ibis that she becomes aware that her uncle Bhyro Singh was also responsible for her rape by her brother in law. She begins to doubt about her husband after he starts ignoring her just after her first night and she becomes pregnant. Her mother-in-law says that she is like Draupadi. She becomes sure that her mother in law knows everything about father of her child and to reveal out the truth from her mother-in-law, she starts giving her opium. One day under the influence of opium in state of unconsciousness, she confesses that her daughter's father is her brother in law. The behavior of Deeti's mother in law shows how a woman is blinded in love of his son that she helps people to violate honour of a woman. While her opium addict husband is in his death bed, she is physically assaulted by her brother in law and in order to escape from him she says."Listen to me: I will burn on my husband's pyre rather than given

myself to you.”(154)after her husband's death she is compelled to perform sati and to do this she is given opium to inhale and in such a state of unconsciousness, she sits on the pyre, and his brother in law says “To have a sati in the family will make us famous .We'll build a temple for you and grow rich on the offerings“.(155)

She is saved by Kalua, an untouchable from a society which is ruled by patriarchal laws. Kalua saves her from the burning pyre and jumps in the river Ganga. She sends her daughter to her brother home because she feels that Kabutari will be safe there. She discards discrimination and marries Kalua as her second husband. She had shed the body of the old Deeti, with the burden of its karma; she had paid the price stars had demanded of her, and was free now to create a new destiny as hse willed with whom she choose and she knew it was with Kalua that this life would be lived, until another death claimed the body that he had torn from the flames. (175)

After her rebirth she sheds meekness and weakness possessed by her as Deeti. She becomes confident and independent to take decisions about her future. Her marriage with Kalua can be seen as perfect in terms of understanding between them because before taking any decision Kalua consults Deeti and protects her from every danger. Here entry on the board of Ibis is symbolic because she enters the ship in *gunghata* as a new bride with people around her. Her change of name to Aditi while registering her name in migration list shows her search for identity because till now she was known as Kabutari-ki-ma.

...it was on her lips to identify herself as Kabutari-ki-ma, name by which she been known ever since her daughter's birth –her proper given name was the first to come to mind, since it had been used by anyone it was good as any. Aditi, she said softly, I am Aditi.(233)

She becomes leader of *grimityas* on *Ibis*. She is called *bhaugi* by men and women on the ship because she possesses the solution of their problems. She is confident and ready to fight for anyone in trouble. As it is said “that women be free to define themselves, instead of having their identity defined for them time and again, by their culture and their men”(Susan Faludi 82). Ghosh has tried to show that socio political changes bring drastic changes in women to come out of their sufferings.

Paulette daughter of a French botanist who is born on a boat of Jodu's father and her mother dies on the boat. She is brought up by Jodu's mother like her own child. When Paulette is born Jodu's mother leaves him naked, lying on the boat and wrapped Paulette with blanket first to keep her close to her dying mother. She calls her Tantima- aunt mother. She learns Bengali and the first solid food she eats is rice and dal *khichdi*. Her personality is a fusion of French and Indian culture. She is a perfect example of tolerance, a person who pays equal respect to all cultures of the world. She is without any grudges and respect all natives and European equally. She speaks in Bengali, Hindustani and English. She becomes a *grimityas* on *Ibis* as niece of Babo Nob Kissin to reach Mauritius. As she is not be permitted to travel on *Ibis* as she is a European and a girl, and people travelling on *Ibis* are *grimityas*,. Nobody in the ship is able to identify her till she reveals it herself.

The character of Taramony as guru ma of Baboo Nob Kissin is also very interesting. She is the wife of his uncle who marries just six years before his death in order to get a male heir but results in failure. She is much younger than his uncle. His uncle's last wish is to leave her in Brindavan to lead a life of widowhood which is full of suffering and hardship. As she is about the age of Baboo Nob Kissin, he is impressed by the spiritual knowledge of Taramony and her devotion towards her God Lotus eyed Lord that is lord Krishna. his feelings were same as her for lord Krishna”You will be my Krishna and I will be your Radha”(162). They start living in a small house in Ahiritola waterfront neighborhood of Calcutta. There was no scandal on a woman living with her niece and a small circle of devotees and followers called her Ma and gave spiritual instructions to them. She dies of fever but tells him that she will come back and enter his body to fulfill their goal. It is under the influence of guru ma that Baboo Nob Kissin is always ready to help women be it Elokeshi, mistress of Neel or Paulette. He becomes sensitives in solving problems of women. Ghosh has tried to show condition of Upper Class women in Bengal who were married to men much old than their age and after their husband's death, they were compelled to live a secluded life of penance and suffering in Brindavan. He has also described existence of spiritual love between God and his devotee and between a guru and a *shishya*, which is pure and spiritual.

Women on the board of *Ibis* like Munniah, who indulges in illicit relationship with a man working in opium factory in her village and becomes pregnant. Her decision to give birth to her child is supported by her parents on the contrary of her belief that they will expel her. But she has to leave her village as nothing is left for her parents and child are dead as they got burnt in the fire and she is left alone. She evokes conflict when her affair with Jodu (*Azad*) is known to the people commanding *Ibis*, a relationship between a Hindu girl and a Muslim boy is not acceptable to them. Jodu is beaten ruthlessly and Munniah is locked in a room it is only after the intervention of Deeti that she is released. Through this Ghosh has tried to depict existence of communalism even though people travelling on *Ibis* do not know their future.

Through the character of Heeru, Ghosh has tried to depict plight of women left by their husband due to some disease or inability to give male heir to the family.. She is left by her husband in a fair due to her disease of forgetfulness. She agrees to marry on the ship with one of the indentured labour who is much older than her

because she is told that women will be torn down in Mauritius as there are few women in comparison to men. Her marriage is for security to lead a peaceful life unaware of the hardship in Mauritius.

Few other women on the board of Ibis like Sarju, one of the oldest women on the ship, a dai midwife in her village near Ara. She commits a mistake in the delivery of a Thakur's son as a result she is punished by sending her away from her village to Mauritius. She is deprived of company of family just because she belongs to a lower class of society. She dies on the ship and gives Deeti seeds of poppy, bhang and dhatura to keep with herself for future use in Mauritius. After receiving seeds from Sarju, Deeti realizes how important it is to take something for their future and as an agriculturalist seeds are most important in their life. They are like an asset for them.

Through the character of Ratna and Champa Ghosh has tried to depict life of women who have accompany their husband when their land is confiscated. They are sisters married to a pair of brothers whose land was contracted to the opium factory and then confiscated due to not being able to pay rent and driving them out to leave their village and go to Mauritius in search of fortune. Another woman named Dokhane travelled with her husband to escape from the oppression of her abusive mother in law. And she is happy that her husband has joined her in her escape. She is unaware of the hardship and inhuman living conditions of plantation workers in Mauritius.

Through the character of Neel's wife Malti, it is shown how his wife is a passive sufferer and her condition is not better than Deeti's. Her life is controlled by patriarchal laws. She is made to play role of mother and wife, without any expectations while her husband enjoys with his mistress Elokeshi who betrays him as soon as he loses his property. She is just a silent spectator in the house performing duties and never questioning her husband. But when Neel is in jail and is about to be deported to Mareech and all his estate is confiscated. She comes to jail to meet him and did not show any sign of disaster which has completely destroyed their life. She has to live in a small house and she only says to Neel is to take care to himself. She suffers due to mistake committed by her husband but never complains. Here Ghosh has tried to depict nature of a typical Indian wife who performs her duties without expecting anything.

The characters of Mrs Burnham and her daughter are representative of the mindset of Britishers that they are superior than Indians and anything which is a part of Indian culture is looked upon as inferior be it people, dress or language. This is the reason why Paulette finds it difficult to live in Burnham's house their house and due to this she wants to escape to Mauritius. She is brought up in such an atmosphere where she is taught every culture has to be respected.

III. CONCLUSION

Ghosh has tried to depict sufferings women from all sections of Indian society during the nineteenth century. He has dealt with social problems like sati, rape by brother of the groom in the name of marriage to conceal impotency of groom. The misery and isolation of widowhood with reference to women of Brahman family in Calcutta who are sent to Brindavan. Ghosh gives us a ray of hope that if women get support from their male counterparts as in the case of Deeti who is supported by Kalua. They can be empowered to become independent and can become leader as Deeti in the novel. They are more than equal to men in the novel. He has tried to depict women's search for identity and their right to live a life of freedom and dignity. In his novel women are strong, they travel and take decisions to live an independent life. They are not controlled by men. They are individuals with freedom and progress.

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