

Caste Instincts in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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ABSTRACT: *Caste and class have jointly determined the position of an individual in the society. Especially rural areas have shown ardent interest in the rituals and strictures to be followed. Urban areas are no exception where if not for caste, class distinctions have been in the fore. This paper aims to bring out the implications of caste and creed as portrayed in Amitav Ghosh's novel Sea of Poppies. It shows a clear picture of people being suppressed in the name of difference of caste and class being conferred by birth for which they hold no responsibility. Most of the characters whether Indians like Neel, Deeti, Bhyro Singh or of foreign descent like Burnham and Chillingworth have a strong hold towards their beliefs. With the advent of time, some accept the change in their social conditions while some stick to their way of life till the end.*

KEYWORDS: *distinction, class, beliefs, change*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh is a writer, who though born in India has spent most of his life in other countries. His frequent travels and stay in different nations has helped him assimilate the livelihood and characteristics of varied people. He has not left a chance pass on in his writings where he could fill his gathered experience and expertise. All his novels have their setting in and around India demonstrating his interest in Indian history. They on no account fail to show the distress endured by Indians in various periods. Ghosh's novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008) set in 1838 at the precincts of opium war, charts out a clear picture of caste sense imbibed into the natural selves of mankind.

II. CASTE SYSTEM AND ITS AGONIES

Caste has been bred in the blood of Indians for centuries. The prevalent caste system in India during the period of first opium war is brought out through characters like Kalua, Deeti, Neel and his mother. Untouchability was highly prevalent in the Hindu society for a long period of time and untouchables were commonly called by the name chandals. The restrictions conferred on them were to a great degree suppressive. "If a chandal touched a member of any other caste he was considered to have been defiled and had to purify himself by taking bath with his clothes." (Raychaudhary 65) The first pages of the novel bring us to the instances between Kalua, the driver of an ox-cart and Hukam Singh, his passenger.

he was of the leather-workers' caste and Hukam Singh, as a high caste Rajput, believed that the sight of his face would bode ill for the day ahead. Now, on climbing into 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. Thus they would sit, driver and passenger ...conversing amicably enough, but never exchanging glances."(4)

Deeti, Hukam's wife also covers her face in Kalua's presence and takes her ghungta off her head only after entering her house. Contrastingly, future holds a different situation where Deeti, marries the same Kalua from whom she holds a space then. Her opium addict husband eventually meets his end and she decides to take up sati as an alternative to escape from her ever disturbing brother-in-law, Chandan Singh. She is saved from the fire of sati by Kalua at the very last moment, flees from the village and in due course marries him to live as his wife. They reach the nearby city to find some work but are left to beg before the temples of Chhapra in the unknown city. Unexpectedly, they happen to notice men from their village and overhear them speaking "... you're of our caste, you understand...as you can understand, the family's honour won't be restored till they're dead..." (224) Social groups stick on to their ideals so strong that instead of letting people decide their lives want them dead to pacify their sentiments.

Kalua then gets to meet Ramsaran-ji, the duffadar and finds out that he is recruiting girmitiyas-indentured labourers to be sent to Mauritius. To escape from the villagers' rage over their flight, Deeti along with Kalua takes up the ship, Ibis to Mauritius as an indentured labourer losing her caste never to return. The

ship again holds a different destiny for Deeti where she is caught by Bhyro Singh, the relative who arranged her marriage with Hukam. Being the subedar of the ship, he plans to kill Kalua for their blasphemy to behold the significance of his caste. Kalua absconds with few others in a lifeboat and Deeti lives her life on her own with the conceived child of Kalua in Mauritius.

The portrayal of the character Neel shows a different dimension of the caste injected into the lives of people. Being the zeminder of Rakshali estate, Raja Neel Rattan Halder's each and every action is interlinked with his class where he is forbidden to touch people of other castes, to dine with them and a lot more restrictions, as such actions are believed to bring ill omens to their life. "Though not Brahmins, the Halders were orthodox Hindus, zealous in the observance of upper-caste taboos and in following the usages of their class: to them, the defilements associated with the preparation of food were anathema." (40) Even during their sail, Halder's take a small boat along for preparation of food and to accommodate people relating to their kitchen-tender. Neel's family has been regular investors in the opium trade, co-partnering Ibis' owner Burnham. During one of his sails, he invites the crew members of the Ibis for a dinner but the restrictions of the Rakshali household deny his sharing the table with them as "unclean beef-eaters were not a part of that small circle." (106) His mistress, Elokeshi too eats in secret when he visits her. With the arrival of guests, Neel welcomes them with folded hands. The Englishmen bow their heads in response but Zachary Reid, an American moves forward to shake hands with him. Mr. Doughty, the pilot quickly warns him "Touch him and he'll be off to bathe, and we won't be fed till midnight." (107)

In the later part of the novel, Neel is imprisoned for forging the name of Mr Burnham in the bonds given to his relatives in lieu of money they offered for investment in opium trade. Owing to his caste, an office in the prison is cleared and offered to him with a bedroom and separate pantry. He even gets the privilege of a servant to attend to him and food to be brought from his palace for the jailors worried about to be accused of making "the Raja of Rakshali to lose caste before his case was brought to the court." (198) Other than these privileges, Neel feels grateful to use the toilets set aside for officers. His fastidious attitude in such matters could only be attributed to his mother as he grew up under the tutelage of her elaborate practices of cleanliness and cleansing. She has her own set of rules regarding her caste and class. She makes sure to wash her hands for half-an-hour before and after meal and is very particular about the cleaning of utensils. She forbids looking at the sweepers and cleaners who dispose the sewage off the palace and even the sight of brooms would haunt her for days. With the way he is brought up "...no aspect of his captivity held great terror than the thought of sharing a shit-hole with dozens of common prisoners." (199) He undergoes all these distress with the hope of acquittal soon. His relatives too give him hope that every important force in the government is looked into as they could not allow a member of their class to suffer in prison like a common criminal.

On the day of verdict, the judge suggesting a ring of optimism, refers to the recommendations put forth by pundits and men of his religion that it is against law to punish a man of their caste in line with others and the penalties apart from him would also make his wife and son to lose caste. Nonetheless, he concludes that English law always treats all men as equal and a man of higher caste or station cannot be permitted to pass through with a less severe punishment for the crimes committed. Neel's mind waves in the situation "...that in this system of justice it was the English themselves-Mr Burnham and his ilk-who were exempt from the law as it applied to others: it was they who had become the world's new Brahmins" (239) reflect the favour shown by men to people of their caste and class. Finally, the judge orders his properties to be seized and sold for his debts and Neel to be evicted to Mauritius for seven years.

Neel now evidently witnesses the change in the attitude of the jailors towards him after the sentence. In spite of being given the same room before being taken to a jail at Alipore from where he would be transported to Mauritius, all his luxuries are drawn out. The unbearable situation for the most part is that his food from Rakshali palace is stopped out of the blue. It happens to be the first time in his life to consume something "that was prepared by hands of unknown caste." (267) Regardless of all this behavioural patterns, Neel has believed so far that he held no belief in the caste system and has reiterated the same to his friends. They would mock at him to have become so westernized for which he would snap back at them that "his allegiance was to the Buddha, the Mahavira, Shri Chaitanya, Kabir and many others such-all of whom had battled against the boundaries of caste" (267) Even for his principle, he could not recall a single moment where he had taken food from people of other castes. It unveils to him now that whatever life he has led so far has not been in his own discretion but guided "by the demands of social existence, by samsara-none of it was meant to be real; it was just an illusion" (267) however, the convulsion shown by his body was real.

The question of life and death is placed before Neel and he regrets that he has to accept the situation to be alive. Each morsel let into his mouth travels producing a burn in its track as if he swallows burning embers. Unable to cope up, his night's sleep is bombarded with visions of his own body transform to a cobra struggling to ward off its skin. A similar circumstance occurs in Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988) where the character Thamma's uncle, Jethamoshai possesses the same attitude and suffers in his life. When she meets her uncle after a long time, she sees a sea of change in him. "There was a time when that old man was so orthodox that he

wouldn't let a Muslim's shadow pass within a ten feet of his food? And look at him now, paying the price of his sins." (231) Being old now and no one to care for him, he is being offered food by his tenant Khalil's wife, a muslim.

Every new experience in the prison, adds a bunch of discomfiture to his presence. All the more, the anguish to be faced by his family appears hard for him to take in. Bereft of all the property, he cannot afford to send his wife Malati and their son to her father's family for the reason that "...if her brothers took her in, their own sons and daughters would never be able to find spouses of their own station." (269) Life's existence discloses little by little to Neel, when Malati comes to visit him in the prison. He is shocked to see her to have come to a place where she can be witnessed by everyone overlooking the constraints of Rakshali household. She replies to him calmly that "it means nothing now: we have nothing to preserve and nothing to lose."(269)

The ordeals, he face in the Alipore jail where he is stripped naked for identifications and tattooed on his forehead as forgerer make him realize that he has harboured the illusion of caste in his life to a very deeper point. His change of attitude is to the level that when a sergeant hits him with his left hand in the prison, he lingers "...had he been at home, he would have to bath and change. But that was in some other life" (290) and believes that his body is no longer his own, other than the situations where he is forced to experience a pain. While being allotted his cell in the prison, he is notified by the jailors that the usual allocations go as per origins but pertaining to his sentence; he is severed from his caste permanently and has to share the room during his confinement in the prison as well as in the ship to be transported, with Ah Fatt, an opium addict. "When you step on that ship, to go across the Black Water, you and your fellow transportees will become a brotherhood of your own: you will be your own village, your own family, your own caste." (314) Neel accepts him, with whom he is to spend his life henceforth, to be his caste, family and friend and proceeds to clean him who is drenched in his own faeces and vomit. A real changeover is evident in Neel's way of thinking, as he has started to treat men with humanity, rather than on caste identity.

In the novel, Ghosh not only throws light on the agonies undergone by people due to class distinctions in India, but also reveals that characters from the western countries too show inclination towards their social order. Zachary Reid, the son of a Maryland freedwoman begins his career in Ibis as a carpenter and excels to the level of second-mate. Certain incidents in the novel reveal that, though being a second-mate he too is ridiculed and threatened, for he is mentioned as 'Black' in the ship's list. His experience in Baltimore reveals the class distinctions in America, where his black friend who is not a free man is knocked to death by their fellow white carpenters. He holds a feeling of remorse as he could not help his friend in his last moment, being afraid that he too would be killed. Even at the point of death, his friend does not accuse him for his state, instead urges him to leave the place and save his life. "It's about jobs; the whites won't work with you, freeman or slave: keeping you out is their way of saving their bread." (52)

Benjamin Burnham, the son of a Liverpool merchant, skillful in the art of trade settles in Calcutta years before. With a strong hold in the opium trade, he buys the ship, Ibis, a slave schooner to enlarge his trade opportunities. The situation changes as China puts a stop to the import of opium and he decides it to be used to shift coolies to Mauritius for a while. Burnham is a man who would take any a step to fulfill his dreams. On a discussion with Zachary on Ibis' next plan he clarifies that he wants it to continue the work of shifting men. Zachary is unwilling to work for him in that case. Mr. Burnham persuades him citing that slave trade is nothing wrong for it means freedom to him. "Isn't that what the mastery of the white man means for the lesser races? ...Do you mean slaves, sir? ...Why no, Reid. Not slaves-coolies...When the doors of freedom were closed to the African, the Lord opened them to a tribe that was yet more needful of it-the Asiatick."(79) Burnham's thoughts are bound with his profits alone as he treats the transport of opium or men alike.

The captain of the ship, Chillingworth, happens to know of Kalua and Deeti's elopement from Bhyro Singh and permits him to flog Kalua. He assures to file a case on their way in Port Louis as he is unable to sentence him in his ship. Zachary pleads with him that one cannot implode into a man's choice of wife for which he replies "he's a pariah who's run off with a woman of high caste ... what do you think would happen in Maryland if a white woman were to be violated by a Negro?...Why should we expect the subedar and his men to feel any less strongly than we would ourselves?" (482) He becomes so emotional and talks about the unspecified agreement between the natives and the white men that "it is that in matters of marriage and procreation, like must be with like, and each must keep to their own. The day the natives lose faith in us, as the guarantors of the order of castes-that will be the day, gentlemen, that will doom our rule." (482) He clearly depicts the English's tactical move in dealing Indians with their mental and emotional connection to their social order.

The coolies on their transportation to Ibis are confused with rumours like the rations in the ship would comprise of beef and pork, would be compelled to eat them, would be converted to Christianity once they land in Mauritius, would be ploughed in to the very lands they work for in the absence of cremation grounds there. Nevertheless of losing their caste of crossing the sea, they cannot bear to accept these situations as they are believed to castrate them from their background. With their entry into the ship, they become united which is expressed through the words of Paulette, the daughter of a botanist who too takes up the ship to escape a

marriage arranged by Mr. Burnham, her benefactor to an elderly man. "On a boat of pilgrims, no one can lose caste and everyone is the same: it's like taking a boat to the temple of Jagannath, in Puri. From now on, and forever afterwards, we will be all ship-siblings...to each other. There'll be no differences between us." (356) Her assurance adds a positive note to their future in Mauritius leaving out the differences shown by people hither to in the novel.

III. CONCLUSION

Equal to men, women are also depicted in the novel as showing a strong convention regarding their belief system. Neel's mother is shown to have an extraordinary inclination towards her caste that is revealed in all her actions. . Caste in one form or the other permeates the mind and actions of the people to an intense level forcing them to take extreme steps to maintain its value as cherished by their community. The novel exemplifies that casteism and class distinctions are prevalent all over the world in variant forms and everyman's leaning towards their culture and customs has selective distinctions

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