

Subjugation to Self-assertion: Tracing Women's Journey in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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Abstract

This article explores the women's journey to overcome self-imposed limitations and the boundaries created by society in the novel *Sea of Poppies* through the perspective of feminist literary analysis. Further, it highlights women's quest to find their strength and identity on their own. Amitav Ghosh, a renowned Indian diasporic author, often deals with a lot of historical events in India and Southeast Asia in his writings. In this particular novel, he focuses on the female journey towards self-realization and the way they draw themselves towards their goals. Through his writings, Amitav Ghosh presents the female subjugation, forced marriage and women's conditions within the family and society. He creates unique and strong female characters in his novels and further illustrates the struggles and challenges they endure. In his works, Ghosh introduced memorable female characters and traces their

journey of resistance. Among them, the characters Deeti and Paulette emerge as victims of social conventions who finally overcome those limitations and discover their true selves

Keywords: Self- discovery, Identity, Personal liberation, Subjugation, and Female agency.

Introduction

This study focuses on women's journeys in the novel *Sea of Poppies* to challenge social dogmas and boundaries created by society. It further explores their struggle to discover their inner strength and build an identity of their own. *Sea of Poppies* is set in nineteenth-century colonial India and was published in the year 2008. It is the first book in the Ibis trilogy by the eminent Indian writer Amitav Ghosh. Ghosh is well known for his narrative techniques, multiple timelines and interconnected stories with different cultures and shared histories. His works deal with history, anthropology, myth, ecology and critically reflects on the impacts of imperialism and colonialism in the South Asian countries. Through the Ibis trilogy, the writer explores the opium trade and its consequences in India and China. The trilogy contains *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire*. In this trilogy, Ghosh presents the strong female characters who challenge the rigid structure of class, caste and gender. These women characters in this novel emerge as a symbol of resilience, resistance and intelligence within a rigid colonial framework.

In most of his novels, women play a central role. In the Ibis trilogy, the writer presents the role of colonialism and how it played a crucial role in women's lives. His female characters represent women whose roles are shaped by society. He presents woman as carriers of the legacy of myth, storytelling, cultural and historical values passed on to future generations. Feminist reading is one of the important aspects of Indian English Literature. Issues of power, gender, Identity, family structure and their impacts on women are analysed and expressed through feminist studies. The feminist approach in Literature explores issues such as female agency, motherhood, female subjugation, desires, marriage and identity. This

theoretical perspective further focuses on female liberation, freedom of choice and rational individuality. These themes are portrayed by writers like Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Sashi Deshpande, Arunthathi Rai and others in the context of Indian English Literature. Amitav Ghosh, in his novels, presents different kinds of female characters like Thamma, Deeti, Paultette, May Price, Ila and Piyali Roy. They are all examples of female power and act as agents of change. He presents women as complex individuals. The present article examines how women face marginalization in India, both under colonial rule and within their own family and society. This paper analyses how the female characters in the novel *Sea of Poppies* represent female agency, determination and resistance while also reflecting the struggles and realities faced by women through the lens of a feminist perspective.

Review of Literature

Ghosh's novel *Sea of Poppies* is set in the 1830s and deals with different characters and their journey as indentured laborers on the ship Ibis. It explores the opium cultivation and its significance in society. The writer clearly presents the struggles faced by women and shows how they become victims of cruel treatment and societal beliefs. Critics generally recognize that the novel *Sea of Poppies* presents the female experience and further deals with the fact that women are burdened with physical and psychological trauma. A previous study suggests that the novel reveals gender discrimination and female subjugation in Indian society. Another major area of interest is the role of colonialism and its impacts on the lives of women in the family and society. It is observed that Amitav Ghosh employs the patriarchal system to demonstrate how difficult the survival of women is under oppression. Several analyses point to the ways the novel represents women's resilience. The present study explores the journey from female subjugation to self-realization. The females are thrust into new beginnings and their paths interweave during a risky ocean voyage.

Methodology

This study employs a feminist literary approach to investigate the novel *Sea of Poppies*. The purpose of this methodology is to examine the experiences of women as marginalized subjects within patriarchal structure and to analyse how Amitav Ghosh presents female agency and resilience. Further, the qualitative approach is employed, as the study examine themes, narrative techniques and character development. The primary data source for this study is the novel *Sea of Poppies*. The secondary sources include scholarly articles, books and critical essays on feminist theory. Data were gathered through a close reading of the text and a careful examination of sections related to violence against women and female subjugation. Relevant academic sources that support these observations were also reviewed.

Discussion

The novel *Sea of Poppies* is set in rural Bihar. In this novel Amitav Ghosh presents the colonial impacts on the lives of the Indian people. This article analyses the female subjugation under colonial rule and how society suppressed female rights and voices. Patriarchal society dominates the female race through the mediums of family, culture and social norms. The women characters in this novel represent both subjugation and their journey towards freedom. The novel portrays 19th-century India and the cultivation of poppies. The poppy cultivation and the opium factory serve as the starting point of the story. In *Sea of Poppies*, the author illustrates the conditions of the women in pre-independent India. The characters Deeti and Paultee suffer as victims of the harsh realities faced by the female race. The story opens with the central character Deeti and her life as the wife of Hukum Singh, a former soldier and now a worker in the Gazipur Opium factory. Deeti's marriage was arranged by her family members without her consent. This reflects the patriarchal condition of Indian society. After her marriage she endures a lot of physical and emotional struggles because her husband becomes impotent due to the use of opium. So the

family wants to hide this from society. This incident illustrates how women are oppressed by their own family members. Society considers women as possessions and neglects their feelings and respect. They believe a woman's role is to have children and work for her family.

Women in Pre-independence Indian society had little personal identity outside their domestic roles. Amitav Ghosh exposed how female identities are neglected in the male-dominated culture and society through his narration. In this novel, Deeti is not identified by her own name; she is known as Kabuthri-ki-ma. She symbolizes the oppression faced by the majority of women during that time. Women were identified by the names of their father, husband and children. They faced suppression and struggles. As a woman, before marriage, Deeti's life is decided by her father and brother. Later, it is decided by her husband's family members. Women lacked autonomy and decision-making power. The novelist presents how women's identities were overshadowed by tradition and patriarchy. Through his narration, the novelist presents the superstitious beliefs and customs, which were highly male-oriented. In the name of tradition, these customs were used to subjugate the female voice and women faced a lot of cruel treatment and hardships. In the novel, Deeti is forced to commit sati on her husband's funeral pyre by his family members. As a widow, she believes that sati is preferable to continued life as a widow. Despite this belief, her participation in sati is not voluntary; she is given opium and placed on the funeral pyre in an unconscious state. Her family members believe that this ritual would make their family famous in the surrounding society and bring them fame and money. This incident illustrates the harsh realities and hardships faced by millions of women at that time.

In the name of ritual and tradition, patriarchal society dominates women in many ways. The novelist portrays how society uses female subjugation as a means to maintain male domination and power. Deeti is rescued by Kaula, a low caste cart driver. Kaula is also a

victim of caste discrimination and oppression. Through this character, Amitav Ghosh portrays the cruelty of caste based discrimination and untouchability. Kaula faces physical and psychological abuse. The high caste male members treat him like an animal. In one such situation, Deeti saves him. Both Kaula and Deeti escaped from their village and searched for new hope and Identity. At this moment, Deeti breaks all the boundaries and restrictions imposed by society on women and she decides to create her own identity. They both boarded the ship Ibis, as indentured labourers for Mauritius.

The author illustrates the constrained, patriarchal and hypocritical position of European women in colonial India through the character of Paulette Lambert. He presents the reality that, although these women are racially privileged compared to Indians but they are socially controlled in much the same way as Indian women. Paulette is a good example that racial privilege alone is insufficient to protect women from oppression and issues regarding women's freedom. She is the daughter of Pierre Lambert, a great Botanist who worked as an assistant curator at Calcutta's Botanical Gardens. Paulette was orphaned in her childhood due to her father's sudden death and was raised by her Indian servants. She is very close with her caretaker and her son Jodu, reflecting her deep connection with Indian society. Because of her upbringing she is very familiar with Indian customs, language and tradition. As noted, "As for Paulette, the first language she learnt was Bengali, and the first solid food she ate was a rice-and-dal khichri cooked by Jodu's mother. In the matter of clothing she far preferred Saris to pinafores for shoes she had no patience at all, choosing, rather, to roam the Gardens in bare feet, like Jodu"(Ghosh 67). This background makes her culturally hybrid and differentiates her from her European culture.

In this novel, the writer presents Paulette as a symbol of cultural hybridity and resistance to colonial authority. Through her character, he deals with how colonial authority restricts female identity and obstructs women's journey towards individual choice and self-

realization. After her father's death, she comes to live with the Burnhams family, who place her under strict surveillance. Colonial society is particularly concerned about European women and their connection to Indian customs and culture. The Burnhams aim to erase Indian influences on her and to change her into a conventional Western woman. Paulette is restricted in the freedom to make her own life choices and lives under the constraints of her benefactress. She experiences alienation and loneliness in her new surroundings.

Amitav Ghosh explores how racial privilege not only gives freedom to women. The writer examines the idea that the English woman lived free and liberated lives in India during the colonial period through Paulette. She leads a highly confined life under the roofs of Burnhams. Like her father, she is fascinated by plants and attempts to finish her father's unfinished manuscript *Materia Medica*, but she doesn't have the freedom to do what she wants. She wakes up early in the morning for that manuscript work. "Dawn was the only time of day that she felt to be entirely her own; in the spending of that hour, there was no need to feel any guilt, even if she chose to do something that she knew to be displeasing to her benefactors" (Ghosh 129). As a woman she is torn between two ideas. On one side, she was driven by her passion and on the other side she was restricted by guilt for her unwillingness to betray her benefactors.

Educated by her father, especially in botanical terms and through her connection to Indian languages like Bengali and Sanskrit, she was alienated within colonial society. At the Burham's house her intention to tutor Annabel was rejected because her education was considered contrary to Mrs. Burnham's view of the proper education for a girl. In the Burhams household, her main duty was to improve her knowledge of scripture under the guidance of Mr. Burnham. She was also expected to attend church regularly, maintain proper behavior and be willing to receive religious instruction. Her experience highlights that as a Western woman, she also faced emotional subjugation and humiliation by her own colonial

members because despite her European identity she did not follow the colonial ideals of femininity and religious practices. She was marginalized and judged by the Burnhams. This shows how colonial power not only oppressed the colonized but also enforced fixed hierarchies within their own group, especially for women.

Amitav Ghosh explores how societal pressure and expectations restrict female freedom. This restriction denied women of choices and shaped their destinies. Paulette was compelled by the Burnhams to marry Judge Kendlebush, who was much older than her. She was hesitant about the union and worried about the marriage without love. Mrs. Burnham convinced her by sharing her own experiences of married life and explaining the necessity of marrying a wealthy man like Mr. Kindlebush. Mrs Burnham shared Mr. Burnham's approval of the match and urged Paulette to accept her position and obey the wishes of her beneficiaries instead of acting on her own desires. This incident illustrates that, irrespective of race and culture, women are subjects of oppression. Racial privilege doesn't change the realities women faced. Paulette wanted to escape this suppression and asked for Zachary Reid's help but he refused. Then she sought Baboo Nob Kissin, who helped her board the Ibis for her journey to Mauritius.

In this novel, the writer portrays women as oppressed by patriarchal, social and colonial structures, reflecting Simone de Beauvoir's theory. According to her, "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 267), which suggest that gender roles are socially constructed rather than free choice. Deeti and Paulette are both victims of physical and emotional subjugation. Deeti was oppressed by the Indian patriarchal system, through practices such as forced marriage, widowhood and faced the threat of sati. She is imprisoned in an abusive marriage, which represents how women are treated as the "other" in a male-dominated society. A Women's role is measured by her reproductive function rather than by her individuality. On the other side, Paulette faced European colonial norms such as convent

life, moral surveillance and forced marriage. Although the forms of oppression differ, the structure remains the same. Women are denied control over their bodies and futures.

Simon de Beauvoir employs the concepts of immanence and transcendence to explain the condition of women in society. Immanence deals with the way society frames the role of women as confined and passive, such as domestic roles, economic dependence on men, lack of power, obedience and sacrifice. Society portrays women as existing for others rather than for themselves. The concept of transcendence deals with human freedom and self-determination. Beauvoir uses both these concepts to explore female confinement and their journey toward transcendence. Deeti and Paulette, in this novel illustrate Beauvoir's concepts of Immanence and transcendence. Despite their racial differences, both initially experience Immanence imposed by social structures such as Patriarchy, caste oppression, gender roles, forced marriage and domestic violence. Deeti's journey represents her rejection of caste boundaries and social norms as she escapes the cruel treatment of her husband's family and the threat of sati. Her decision to escape with Kaula and board the Ibis signifies a woman's journey to redefine her identity. Paulette is expected to accept European norms of education, social order and obedience but she rejects these constraints and disguises herself and boards the Ibis in search of liberation. Their voyage on the Ibis represents women's journey towards the creation of a new identity beyond imposed rules.

Conclusion

The study investigates the women's journey from subjugation to self-assertion in Amitav Ghosh's novel *Sea of Poppies*. Despite oppression, women resist. Deeti rejects sati and reconstructs her life, while Paulette challenges social norms in her search for freedom. Their actions display women as active agents rather than submissive victims. Both Deeti and Paulette are deprived of individuality and autonomy. Paulette's life is controlled by colonial structures. Even though, she is European, she is treated as inferior and dependent. This

reflects Beauvoir's view that gender oppression cuts across race and culture. It reinforces women's position as the second sex. Ghosh presents the effects of female resistance through pivotal acts of self-assertion. Deeti's decision against the oppressive social system and her escape from sati with Kaula and Paulette's escape aboard the Ibis, illustrate their acts of resistance. Through these actions both women challenge the submission and the roles imposed by society on women. It symbolizes women's journey towards freedom and redefining their identities.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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