

Women on The Margins: Subalternity in *Sea of Poppies*

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Abstract

Amita Ghosh, a postcolonial novelist has dealt with modern postcolonial themes like migration, existential crises like alienation, loss of identity, rootlessness, displacement and hybridity with a historical vision. Amita Ghosh is a novelist with extraordinary sense of history and place. His novels analyze the ideology of colonialism in its various shades. His multidimensional exposure of the problems related to immigrants and other socio-cultural problems with a humanist, cosmopolitan and postcolonial perception makes his fiction more interesting. He deftly includes India and its integrity or identity as a nation in his fiction. His *Sea of Poppies* is one of the best narratives of colonialism, Post-Colonialism and migration where a transnational diaspora mobilizes a collective identity of people dissolving their inessential ethos and milieus. Regarding his personal life, in an interview with *World Literature Today*, Ghosh clarifies, “my parents moved around a lot. I mean our home was in Calcutta in some way, but we also moved around a lot” (qtd in Rudramuni 218).

Keywords: Migration, Hybridity, Multidimensional, Immigrants, Socio-cultural, Colonialism, Post-Colonialism and migration.

The novel *Sea of Poppies*, the first volume in his *Ibis Trilogy* can be called a historical epic as the writer with his unique gift of storytelling, narrates the stories of people against the grand narratives of history. The ship takes the readers across race, class and culture across the

world countries. This remembers the slave trade after colonization and the people's sense of repression and resentments.

The novel truly represents the helpless people of India in the nineteenth century when people were forced to cultivate opium in their fields. The style of *Sea of Poppies* resembles his earlier novel *The Hungry Tide*. Etymologically the title of the novel gives the meaning of Poppies and sea, the two important events of the novel and these events occurred in nineteenth century, one, the business of Poppies and the displaced farmers of India were sent as grimes for the harvest of sugarcane in Mauritius. The story of the novel is taken right from the commencement of the Burma war of 1885. The image of women in fiction has undergone a change during the last two decades. Women writers have started questioning the patriarchal domination and they no longer puppets in the hands of man. A major preoccupation in recent writings has been a delineation of inner life and subtle interpersonal relationships. Women's presentation is more assertive, more liberated in their view and more articulate in their expression than the woman of the past is. Ghosh follows MacArthur's *Account of an Opium Factory* published in 1965 and it recaptures the history of the opium trade and the opium war of 1838 that disrupted the continuity of trade. The novel begins with these words:

the vision of a tall masted ship, at sail on the ocean, came to Deeti on an otherwise ordinary day, but she knew instantly that the apparition was a sign of destiny for she had never seen such a vessel before, not even in a dream.... It was the chasm of darkness where the holy Ganga disappeared into the Kala-Pani, 'the Black Water'”(SeaofPoppies1).

This novel runs under three symbolic sections: 'Land', 'River' and 'Sea'. Satwana Halder is in the view that, “the sea forms the background of the novel and the ship the Ibis, which had earlier been used for transporting slaves and was now remodeled for, the new transport, is at the centre”(Kumar 3). His novel is a moving picture of the human devastation by British

Colonial rule and its lopsided policies. *Sea of Poppies* opens with two indelible visions of Deeti, the protagonist of the novel: the vision of ibis and voluptuous agricultural crop-opium poppies. Through the story of immigrant characters, Ghosh presents a real condition of women in our society. Quest for identity of women is one of the central themes of the *Sea of Poppies* of Amitav Ghosh. The reason behind it lies at the core of the existence of the people who had been under the empire for over two centuries. The novel centers around the tragic life of Deeti. She is a simple village girl with a good heart but strong mind who eventually becomes a hardworking house wife and a caring mother. At the opening of the novel, She is called as “chaudaliya, dainiya and has the ability to turn her eyes on them and to make them scatter and run off” (*Sea of poppies*5). She is a young mother living by the Ganges some fifty miles of east of Benares with her addicted husband who works in the British Opium Factory at Ghazipur in Eastern Bihar. She grows poppies for the circumstances force her. The imperial commerce and the indifference of the British towards the rural economy of the poor Indians reveal how the lives of the poor Indians are shaped by British policy makers. This makes the people addicts to drug opium bringing in the economically backward Indians a moral degradation as they are conditioned to opium to forget their worries and to refresh themselves. As a result of that her family life is destroyed and her husband Hukam Singh, who works in the Sadar Poppies factory of Ghazipur, dies one day after eating large quantities of people.

Deeti, the protagonist of the fiction feels that the institution of marriage can guarantee safety, security and fulfillment but she gets disillusionment in its outcomes. Deeti, wife of crippled young man Hukam Singh is working in the opium field where she is noticed by brother-in-law Chandan Singh who is always ready to snatch the opportunity to rape his sister in law though he has five children but he never misses an opportunity to remind Deeti of her paucity of offspring and this situation is commented thus:

A Slack-jawed youth with a brood of five children of his own, he never missed an opportunity to remind Deeti of her paucity of offspring. Ka bhail? He called out, licking a drop of fresh sap from the tip of his instrument. What's the matter? Working alone again? How long can carry on like this? You need a saon, to give you a helping hand. You're not barren, after all.... (*Sea of Poppies* 5-6)

Patriarchal tradition treats woman as a subaltern, inferior in all ways to a man. Through its discourse it constitutes the position, status, identity of a subaltern woman. "The subaltern woman, in particular, has no position of enunciation. She remains within the discourse of patriarchy and colonialism as the object of somebody else's discourse"(Nayar 171). Subaltern means the colonised/oppressed subject whose voice has been silenced. According to Spivak, it is impossible to recover of the 'Subaltern' and to establish her view point; she speaks of widow immolation in India on the plea of performing 'Sati' at the pyre of her husband. Colonialism and Patriarchy both oppressed women and it is difficult for the subaltern to articulate her point of view and "there is no space from where the subaltern (sexed) subject can speak". Spivak laid stress on 'gendered subaltern' that, women who are doubly oppressed both by colonialism and patriarchy in the Third World Countries. She argues that there are contexts, wherein contesting representational systems violently displace/ silence the figure of 'gendered subaltern'. She observes:

Between Patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernisation.(Spivak 306)

Ghosh shows how our poor and miserable women are treated and subjugated by their relatives and society. Beauvoir expresses her views on Marriage of woman thus, "Marriage subjugates and enslaves women and it leads her aimless days indefinitely repeated, life that

slips away gently towards death without questioning its purpose”(Beauvoir 500). In the day of her wedding, Deeti finds that her husband is a serious a feemkhor. To avoid the pain of the night, she accepts the offer of her husband taking opium. She finds in the next morning that she has been exploited by someone. When she asks about it: “He nodded and gave her a drowsy smile. He said yes, everything was as it should be. You gave a proof of your purity to my family. With heaven’s blessing, your lap will soon be filled”(Sea of Poppies 34). This incident haunts her mind throughout her life:

Ever since the night of her wedding, Deeti had been haunted by images of her own violation: now, watching from the shelter of the poppy field, she bit the edge of her palm, to keep from crying out loud... so it could happen to a man too....(Sea of Poppies 57).

Her dreams are shattered into pieces on the very first night of her marriage when her newly married groom makes her breathes in opium and she is assaulted in a condition of obliviousness by her brother in law Chandan Singh with the assistance of her uncle Bhyro Singh. She is not able to remember what had happened in the night. But her mother in law sprinkles blessings from a container of holy water, and murmur, in tone of tender solicitude. Deeti has some suspension about her pregnancy but it is her fate which forces her to live with her husband. Deeti was forced to conclude that he could never be a husband to her, in the full sense, either because his injury had rendered him incapable, or because opium had removed the inclination. When she tried to question her husband he spoke with pride about the consummation of their wedding. “Deeti think was it possible then that her own stupor had also been arranged, by someone who knew of her husband’s condition and had made a plan to conceal his impotence, in order to preserve the family’s honor?”(*Sea of Poppies* 36).

Deeti initially endures all sorts of humiliations like rape by her husband’s brother, ill-treatment by her mother in law, and her justifying the act saying “the earth has never seen a

woman more virtues than Draupadi” (*Sea of Poppies* 39). According to Seneca Falls, women are suffering for their condition from a long period of time. They even do not have the authority over their own life. From the time women lost the right to control their lives, they were dispossessed not only of human rights but also of humanity. Feminist writings give them the chance to show the world their sufferings, needs and desires through their writing.

As her husband is in death bed, Deeti has taken the opium to the factory by herself, after the harvest is over. She hopes to get a couple of silver rupees to run her family but she is told that her husband has already taken a large advance and the proceeds are barely enough to cover his debts. When she is worried over the family conditions, the clerk in the company tells her, “Do what others are doing. Go to the money lender. Sell your sons” (*Sea of Poppies* 155). His harsh comments reflect the colonial exploitations and the grinding poverty that forced the peasants to sell themselves and their children as indentured labourers for their debts. The behaviour of her brother in law becomes unbearable for her in the subsequent days.

In order to retain her respect and dignity in the society, She warns him: Listen to my words; I will burn on my husband’s pyre, rather than give myself to you” (*Sea of Poppies* 158). Through the words of Deeti, Joshi has expressed the self-confident nature of Deeti. This shows that his women are accomplished to restore the dignity of womanhood which has been collapsed by male-dominated society. In this context; “Woman has always been, Beauvoir says, “man’s dependent, if not his slave; the two sexes have not shared the world in equality “(Dixit, 7).

Deeti remains calm and collected at the event of her husband’s death. She is reasonable in sending her daughter to her brother’s house. Though sad to cut off Kaburthi, her daughter from her life, she feels that it is no use “to weep and bemoan the influence of the planets (*Sea of Poppies* 37). Deeti’s maternal instinct is compared to Sethe in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. Motherhood is seen as an institution of patriarchy that ensures control of woman by their

imprisonment in domesticity. According to Adrienne Rich, “Motherhood is not only a core human relationship but a political institution, a key stone to the domination in every sphere of women by men”. (Dixit 6). Sethe’s maternal instinct leads her to kill her own daughter i.e. almost her own self- destruction. But Deeti finds safety of her child before taking a decision to her self-immolation. “When the boat sailed away, with Kabutri in it, it was as if Deeti’s last connection with life had been severed. From that moment she knew no further hesitation: with her habitual care, she set about making plans for her own end” (*Sea of Poppies* 159). The fact is that the scriptures never advised a widow to burn herself on a funeral pyre. It is clearly written in the *shastras* that a widow is entitled to possess the entire property of the deceased. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s arguments can be summarised thus:

She as a post-colonial intellectual finds the differences created by the west (the *Subject*). The colonised people are the *Other* and in Gramscian term the subaltern class. At present, there is a divide between the labour of the West and the labour of the East, the latter being subaltern. Women are subaltern at the global level, but they are in a worse position in the third world. History tells how women have been subjugated in the past. *Sati* has been opposed but *johar* (collective self-immolation) glorified..... Women have been made slaves and defiled most shamefully; Women immolated themselves in groups to save their honour and permanent protection from physical violence. (Sinha231)

When she is involving in self-immolation, Kalua jumps into the pyre and she is saved suddenly by ex-cart driver Kalua, “racing to the mound, he placed the platform against the fire, scrambled to the top, and snatched Deeti from the flames. With her inert body slung over his shoulder, he jumped back to the ground and ran towards the river, dragging the bamboo on the rope” (*Sea of Poppies* 177). After marriage with him, she ends up all the things and to take choices of their own and lead a peaceful life. Her marriage is viewed as a balanced mutual

understanding and Kalua counsels Deeti in the time of taking any decision and protects her in all fronts. She renamed herself as Aditi, while boarding Ibis and gets her newly found sense of identity.

Betty Friedan, in her book *The Feminine Mystic* delved deep into the psychological urges of women. She emphasized that a woman has a right to develop her potential to the maximum. At the same time she felt that a woman should fight 'Mashismo' - that is the male tendency to dominate (Nigam 54). Aditi, in her new role becomes assured and certain and is always ready to fight against in a tight situation in order to save anyone. She begins her foray into occupying the female space when she sheds quietness and strong enough to stand against all odds and guide all women against the brutality of males. One day Bhyro Singh identified Kabutri-ki-ma and tried to quench his lust. But she tried to strike his hand away from her neck but it stayed where it was. She shouted and many came to her help. After finding an opportunity Kalua killed Bhyro Singh with "his own chabuk broke his neck and now the Silahdars are going to take their revenge" (*Sea of Poppies* 491).

By choosing and changing so many things in her life. She gains agency on her and enters into realm of becoming a strong feminist. She becomes the leader of grimityas, and is called as bhaugi by all who travelled in the Ibis. She teaches her womenfolk to face the realities of life through solidarity and female bonding. She is the conscience and voice of a world community. Their voices are sometimes in pain and sometimes in anger as they struggle for freedom from colonialism. She questions the patriarchal authority and makes her resist the patriarchal values. Though passively resigned to her pathetic situation, she slowly gets herself empowered and fights back. As in the case of Munia she goes to room of Silhdhars and English agents also with Kalua because they put Munia in their room. She exhorts other men and women labour to save Munia from the lust of English agents in the Ibis. She has shown unmoved courage by making a plan to save her Kalua from the clutch of Silhdhars and captain

Crowle. Finally her space for her survival is known and she is endowed with her own “power, reason and maturity”.

The young woman Paulette, a parentless is raised by Jude mom as a her own child. She is an ideal case of resilience, an individual who pays equivalent regard to all societies of the world. She has no feelings of resentment and regards both locals and European equally. She turns into a grimityas on Ibis as niece of Babo Nob Kissin and voyages towards Mauritius. Due to her European descent and on account of her being an unmarried young woman, she is not allowed to board the Ibis, unless they are going as grimityas. She is kind enough to help others. She becomes an easy victim of molestation by her employer who has authority and power over her. Hence she hides her identity and escapes. Leaving the Burnhum’s household and liberating herself completely, she starts to shine light on her sense of independence and courage and seeks a bright future. As she is a creole woman, Paulette faces oppression and discrimination. Her understanding with different cultures is revealing her unique way of her life.

Munniah is another one of the characters travel on board Ibis keeps an illicit relationship with man working in opium factory and becomes impregnated but later her children got burned in the flame and she is disregarded. She becomes entangled in trouble when her friendship with Jodu is discovered and it seems to be a unacceptable event especially on the board. She conflates the norms of society by keeping an illicit relationship with a man and then pregnated out of wedlock. She comfortably breaks the ideological structures made in the journey for identity as an individual figure of society. Through the character of Malti, Ghosh has shown a calm and composed character of the novel. She has been made to play the role of mother and spouse of her husband. She does her domestic work as usual. As she has no desire in her life, she never expects anything from him. Her husband’s illicit relationship with Elokeshi comes to an end, when her husband loses his property and becomes prisoner by the British

government. She meet him in jail but never feels worry about the heart breaking event occurred in her life and never expresses displeasure over it. She endures all the things as it is.

Thus Amitav Ghosh has successfully pictured the women's world and their pressures to changing mindset up with the glimpses of customs, conventions and social changes through the character of Deeti and other characters of *Sea of Poppies*. This novel can be perceived as a true post-modern feminist novel that brings about or creates compassion for the condition of women in a particular social milieu. He shows his concern for women's issues such as marital incompatibility, gender discrimination at home and society and their inferior status in the family, the sadist sexual assault by males and beyond everything their socio-psychological problems due to rape. Indian patriarchal society with its various structure and organisations is essentially hostile to women's freedom and interested in keeping them subjugated in order to preserve the patriarchal power and authority.

Women have suffered silently and are still suffering in silence, waiting patiently for the day to come when they will be treated with respect and love in the true sense. He advocates that for women tolerance in family and self-help as the best option to overcome the current problems within and outside family and indicates that women should give up their weaknesses and misgivings, and correct and eradicate them in order to reach women empowerment/independence as Deeti in the novel. His women characters, after experiencing the trials and tribulations in the family and society, they travel in their journey of life and take choices to carry on with a free life.

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