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ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh explores subjectively the people’s consciousness as regards culture, myths and existence. He embraces the fact that the myths and the ways of the seas/rivers purports the reality of culture, the creation of challenges, fabulation and skilful time shifts, sense of paranoia and hyper reality past the industrial age. His novels are reactions to the questions of the chaotic, pluralistic, or information-drenched aspects of postmodern society which depicts the theme of fragmentation and a metaphysically unfounded, chaotic universe of the people’s life on the banks of the holy river Ganges in Calcutta in context of trans-historical phenomena happened prior to the First Opium War/ Anglo-Chinese War during 1839-42. His novel exhaustively examines expeditions, encounters, exploitation and escapes of criminals/ indentured labourers/underclass off the coast of Canton, Hong Kong, Macao and Indian migrants travelling through ships to seek indentured labour for plantations in Mauritius and in British West Indies. The present study proposes to study the seas/river symbolisation as the creative power of nature and time. The study deals with the question how the interior reality is marginalized by placing the individual within a historical context i.e. exterior reality. Thirdly the study aims to observe the third world cultural texts and context in view of the writer’s historical and political dimension.
Introduction

Amitav Ghosh has written two historical fictions of Ibis Trilogy in sequel, the first one is Sea of Poppies (2008) and another one that follows the previous events of the story is River of Smoke (2011). Both deal with the backdrop of the first half of the nineteenth century, when there was commercial exchange of opium between India and China, under the imperial dominion of the East India Company, which was done with Mauritius at the cheapest cost of the human trafficking of coolies that include women, men of Indian Subcontinent origin.

Most of the main characters meet for the first time on board of the ship *Ibis*, which carried indentured workers, coolies, and garmitiyas from Calcutta. It also included the convicts from Indian subcontinent, belonging to higher caste, who were destined to be deported to Mauritius. Ibis met with mishap facing storm and mutiny. Besides it there were two other ships the *Anahita*, vessel carrying opium to Canton and *Redruth*, which was enroute to Canton for its botanical expedition. *Ibis* could make to Mauritius, while some passengers on *Anahita* and *Redruth* were able to find destination to Hong Kong and Canton, which consequently led them to fight for their survival in China and the event of the First Opium War happened during 1839-42.

A wide range of characters from different cultures make their appearance in the novels among them Bihari peasants, Bengali *Zamindars*, Parsi businessmen, Cantonese boat people, British traders and officials, a Cornish botanist and a Mulatto sailor. In the novels *Hungry Tide, Sea of Poppies and River Smoke*, we find the immense use of vernaculars as well as travestied tongues, including those spoken by the lascars and the original Chinese Pidgin English.

History of India in Fiction

The novel *Sea of Poppies* reconstructs the historical setting of early nineteenth century South Asians, natives of India. The Great Experiment, which involved transport of indentured labour from India to work on the sugar plantations of Mauritius, and the trade of opium between India and China. The British played a significant part in both of these and to dominate the overseas campaigns the British Sahibs of East India Company involved the investments of Indian Zamidars, Seths of Gazzipore and Bihar, in order to carry its “shipment of Chalan Opium” (SOP 7). At the center of Ghosh’s story stands a man who owes his life to Canton: Bahram Modi, a Parsi merchant from Bombay. Entirely absent from the first book in the trilogy, Bahram is almost everywhere in the second, and serves as a channel for much of its energy. One of the few independent Indian
businessmen in a trade controlled by the East India Company, he is both insider and outsider. A self-made man who has staked his fortunes on one massive shipment of opium, Bahram is paradoxically rich and poor, caught between a group of British merchants who swear by “the elemental force of Free Trade” and a Chinese establishment eager to root out the commerce in opium. If there is one thing that reveals all the elements of Bahram’s life, it is his language, which is “silted with the sediment of many tongues — Gujarati, Hindustani, English, pidgin, Cantonese” (Sea of Poppies – An Epic Tale of Opium and Empire: 2009)

Its narrative threads does the comic revelation of polyphonic tongues, that had become popular amidst the sailors, jahajbhais, jahajbhens and coolies and it significantly causes at dramatic level the linguistic overtones to express their fears, hopes, longing, belongingness and nostalgia while enroute to Mauritius, Canton, Hongkong and to East Asian lands on ship.

Amitav Ghosh elaborates the aspiring misc-e-scene of Fanqui-town, a tiny foreign enclave on the edge of a formidable but mysterious civilization that is beginning to resent the corruption of its people by opium. The outpost is populated by traders from around the world (but dominated by the agents of the East India Company) and surrounded by a flotilla of boats that ferry smuggled goods and serve as eating and pleasure houses. Although so small it’s “like a ship at sea,” Fanqui-town is, in one observer’s memorable description, “the last and greatest of the entire world’s caravansaries (Amitav Ghosh Review in Tessa Hadley’s The London Train)

Ghosh clearly sets up the events leading to the breakout of the Opium War of 1839 as a mirror to contemporary realities. His British merchants, although fully realized characters, are what today might be called free-trade fundamentalists, adroitly dodging any moral criticism of their position (Chandrahas Choudhary Review: 2011)

The Myths of Seas and River

One of the myths of sea is used as an allegory by the novelist that manifests his interest of knowledge beyond science and proves that the Unmanifest Destiny of human appears to be controlled by power position holders or by scientific power of their creations or by their mind, but it is only the nature or cosmic energy that bestows blessings or redemption.Amitav Ghosh writes that sixty thousand sons of King Sagar were incinerated by a single glance from one of the sage’s burning eyes. Until one of the scions of Ikshvakudynasty, the good King Bhagiratha was able to persuade the Goddess Ganga to pour down from the heavens and fill the seas to relive the sixty
thousand Ikshvaku princes from their unhallowed ashes i.e. they were redeemed from the underworld. In the novel the narration of this story seem to be a heightened emotional lyricism on the part of the raja Neel Ratan and it appeared insensible to the hopeless, powerless common mass sailing in the ship Ibis towards Mauritius. The garmentas were unable to extract the significance of this Allegory; on the contrary the novelist uses this narration to reiterate the hope against “a state of infantile helplessness” (SOP 407) and the fatality of sea-sickness, nausea, demoralization, despondency and death prevailed upon their weak mind. The garmentas were mostly outlaws, outcaste groups of individuals “who have not necessarilyexperienced events or may even consider them at an interval of several centuries” (Gould, 1981:105). They could not derive what Neel meant by telling this story. The novelist’s narrative voice significantly considers this historical reference of myth to give expression “to reinterpret history for itself and this need is more acutely felt in times of crisis, alienation or simply existential anxiety” (Sundararaghavan, Fictionalising Myth and History, p.33). The author tries to craft the “polarization between the negative and positive”(33) social forces which were causing devilish havoc on the bonding of Jhajbhais and bhens; it was the journey that was reinforcing the fact “forget about Hindustan, move to West – a place of civilized nations” (SOP 422).

The concept of “purity and impurity” was also dominant among these immigrants when they had to cross the Kalapani (that is they sailed through Hooghly River and crossed the Bay of Bengal, moved towards East Asia and went beyond the socially attributed margins of the River Ganga that set its boundaries at the sacred Jambudvipa in 1830s) which was against the religious faith as it was believed that one becomes impure after crossing it. The “Jahaji Bhai” phenomenon was predominant during the colonial period. The Indian immigrants felt homelessness and rootless while residing outside the country. The ship's crew and passengers — opium factory workers, American sailors, French runaways, lascars, coolies, convicts, rajas and sahibs — reflect Calcutta's cosmopolitan racial and socio-economic swirl. Theirs is a polyglot world, ringing with pidgin, Chinglish, Hinglish and the inimitable slang of seafarers (Gender and Diaspora, p. 32).

The novel Sea of Poppies also allegorically refers the Myths of Seas and Rivers to the cultural memory and constructing homelands that evasively hold the center in the lives of migrants especially for those whose life had envisioned other dreams but circumstances changed their course of life. To Deeti her hut in the village of Gazzipur was “like a tiny raft, floating upon a river of poppies (SOP 28-29). Deeti, whose name was Aditi on Ibis, introduced herself as Chamarin
disguise, not as upper caste Hindu and her rescuer Kalua as husband and as Chamar. Her Saviour Kalua, an ox-cart driver of her late husband Hukum Singh who suffered disability in the First Opium War, became addicted to Afeem as he then worked as labourer in the Gazipur Opium Factory. His impotence at the time of marriage with Deeti was hidden, and she got impregnated by her brother-in-law Chand Singh in the state of her trance of drug-dose, so that her child’s paternity may remain undisclosed. But when her husband got bed-ridden and died and left behind his daughter Kabutri; Deeti constantly got sexually thwarted by her brother-in-law and forced to be immolated as Sati on the flaming pyre along with the corpse of her husband. The author conveys that her saviour Kalua indeed rescued from her endangered identity from the flaming pyre, but she finds herself awakened and floated on a river. Symbolically the river Karmanashak, a tributary of the River Ganga, washed off her past and her re-emergence from the the holy river sanctified her ‘Self’ and led her to a new state of life and survival. The ‘river’ and ‘jamraj’- the God of Death became motifs of shaping the destiny of Deeti. Metaphorically these motifs help her to reach out to the new frontiers of unknown future. Both Deeti and Kalua saved themselves from the acrimony of upper caste Hindus, ferried from Chappar Ghat to Hooghly through Pulawar and joined the bands of migrants on Ibis as coolies, escaped the eyes of Subedar Bhairoy Singh, the known to her father-in-law at Gazipur in eastern Utter Pradesh.

The Ways of Seas and Rivers

Amitav Ghosh's entrancing new novel, *Sea of Poppies* is literally the sea or the vastness of the cultivated fields of poppies is mirrored by another Sea i.e. the Bay of Bengal, where the opium trade flourished in the early 19th century. Both seas provide backdrop and engine for Ghosh's tale. The novel begins with the conversion of a former slave ship, the *Ibis*, into a transport vessel. The ship will henceforth carry opium bound for China and indentured servants to colonies like the British West Indies. As the *Ibis* is outfitted, readers are led through the splendidly exciting cosmos of 1838 Calcutta. The bustling port city is the prohibited place of romance, disguise, deceit, courtroom dramas and ritual suttees (the practice of burning contemporary times widows in the eastern part of Banaras and Gazipur in Uttar Pradesh Province of India). A Cornish Paulette Lambert (stayed with Mrs. and Mr. Burnham to work over father project in the Botanical gardens of Sunder bans in Calcutta) and many other Indian women Deeti, Munia, Ratna, Champa etc. from Banaras and Gazipur had to immigrate because their life’s destiny transformed or changed its direction, just as Ibis opted for itself new fate of transportation across the Kalapani. It happened because Ibis, the British-American schooner’s past mission failed on account of the abolition of
slavery in 1830 to transport slaves to West-African Coast. Meanwhile it lost its sail in navigation, passed through the Cape of Town, reached to the Western Shores of Indian Ocean, where then it was led by Zachary Reid, the son of a Maryland Freedwoman who had departed from Baltimore in America as slave, but while reaching to the Eastern Shores of Hooghly River Point, Zachary became the Chief, representing the owner Mr. Benjamin Burnham and Company, an agency of British East India Company, whose mission then became to involve in Opium Trade with China, for that they sought lascars for whom sea-journey was a ‘fana’. Amitav Ghosh writes that “lascars were sea-farers for whom ‘fana’ was their sea-boat/ship. It was their home, their shelter, destiny, and passion. As iterant and vagrants they indulged in merry – making. As children they had been sold to the ghat-serangs, who supplied lascars to ocean-going vessel, their gangs would kidnap naked Urchins from the streets and bearded Sadhus from Ashrams; they would pay brothel-keepers to drug their clients and thugs to lie in wait for unwary pilgrims” (SOP 188). There was gomusta Baboo Nob Kissin Pander who acted as a broker to negotiate with whites’ seamen, stewards or subehdars the worth of an Indian coolie/the capacity of an indentured labourer and then he used to register them to be taken to the islands of Mareech/Mauritius. In this way on Ibis, the schooner, the polyglot world of such immigrants revolve around “the more controversial claims of realist theories of experience’ (Paula and Michael, p.153).

The novel Sea of Poppies also consists of the survival of the other multi-cultural and multi-ethnic communities from across the globe involved in the lucrative trade of opium. Through the reference of the Fanquis – Ahens known to the Cantonese, the author mentions that they had built factories in a narrow enclave of Canton, just beyond the South Western gates of the walled-city. The writer also mentions the devilry of Japanese, Malays, Malayalis, Black-hat Arabs, besides Red-faced Aliens from England, Flowery-flag Aliens from America and a lot of others from France, Holland, Denmark and so on. Among these the most popular tribe was white-hatted Aliens, Parsees from Bombay who were quite similar to Fanquis. One of the Fanqui of devilish charm was called as Bahramji Naurozji Moddie, who got famous in trading cargoes of opium to Canton with his father-in-law’s support and ship, while later he came across a Dan girl named Lei Chi Mei, subsequently his extra marital affair resulted in being a father of a boy called Fremjee Pestoanjee Moddie, who was finally named by her mother as Leong Fatt. It is the same person, Ah Fatt who on Ibis, before the schooner got engaged in mutiny and later in Opium War, creates fantasies about the vision of canton to Raja Neel Rattan Haldar of Rashkali (called as Roger on Ibis). He described Canton as
metropolis as Calcutta – “a place of fearful splendor and unbearable squalor, as generous with its pleasures as it was unforgiving in the impositions of hardships” (SOP 375). Satya P. Mohanty frames the issue succinctly in his essay “Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity” that the account of identity that treats experiences as claims to knowledge, which involves the complex processing of revision. Such identities are constructed real; these are based on interpreted experience and on theories that explain the social world” (202-34).

The South Asians who ventured on sea-voyage in Ibis ship from the Gangetic plains of North India were merharus (coolly women), quoddies, coolies, maistries, bhnadaries, gomustas, lascars, garmityas, silahdars. They were addressed with nothing else more than as ‘haramzadas’ (SOP 357) or Sab barabar! Or Habes Sale, habe’s! (Haul you bastards! Haul!) Or Habes – habeskutte, habes! habes! (SOP 371). These people as migrants in Edward Said’s words enabled Europe to advance securely and unmetaphorically upon the Orient (quoted in “The Other Question”, The Location of Culture, p.103). Such natives of South Asia along with many other rioters (unaware of the death or birth that the debusa/pulawars consisted of) sailed their destiny of life in the darkness through Indian Ocean to be transported to plantations on the island of Mauritius as replacement for the slave labour recently abolished by the slavery Abolition Act of 1833 (Crane, Postcolonial Text Vol.6 (4): 2011). Amitav Ghosh narrates the unconscious sense of latent orientalism in which ‘Pouvoir/Savoir’ places subjects in a relation of power and recognition that is not part of a symmetrical or dialectical relation – self/other, master/slave – which can then be subverted by being inverted (Bhabhha, p.103). Many of the passengers went through unknown, unsuspected horrors, pains and irresistible temptation at daytime and at night forcing many desperate groups of migrants to suicide – enough to throw themselves into the water (SOP 373). They were firmly closed within the iron bars and frames that were built in a passageway between decks of a ship. “Garmityas were allowed up only in small groups and were herded back into the debusa as soon as they had finished their rice, dal and lime-pickle’ (SOP 373). The bhandaries and maistries took care of migrants, while mess-boys served steward, captain and other English seamen roast-lamb, mint sauce and boiled potatoes that had been loaded in Calcutta in the Ship Ibis. But there was less conviviality in the officers’ cuddy, and then there was around Chuldan (deckhouse). They were heard singing and occupied in merrymaking while facing suspense, fear, severed of their homeland and human mooring. The snatches of song were

“Majhadhara me haiberamera
Kripakaraasaihaitera”
My rafts’ adrift in the current
Your mercy is my only refuge…..

Semiotically these lines represent the epistemological articulation of Orients’ essence against appearance; Orients’ belief in Science; but it also reflects paradoxically an unconscious positivity and spiritual view. It was ironically “engaging with the alterity and ambivalence of Orientalist’s discourse” (Bhabha, p.102). Indeed the lexicography of the song deciphers the search for new shelter in the guidance of the pilot of the Ship, i.e. God. It also underlie the latent Orientals’ power/savior formation on whose mental state depends the metaphysical existence of slaves/subjects, for example – The captain says to Baboo Nob Kissin “At sea there is another law, you should know on the vessel. I am its sole maker, while you are on Ibis and while she is at seas. I am your fate, your providence, your lawgiver” (SOP 404). If we interpret this analogy with a difference, then the novelist attempts to relocate colonial discourse on the pretext that ‘the instrumentalist notion of power/knowledge’ especially the words of the song, become to the ears of whites on schooner ‘as deformations of their knowledge and power’. Bhabha relates it to ‘the power functions productively as incitement and interdiction’ (Location of Culture, p.104) to migrants’ desire on one hand; while on the other hand the captain of the ship who is power/savior of these garmentyas reacted to their song and he uttered with hatred – “Damned Coolies, Bloody Doomsday couldn’t put a stop to their caterwauling” (SOP 374). Linguistically this discourse analysis refers to the myth of historical origination of racial purity, cultural difference and cultural priority. The reprimanded voice of Englishmen, the derogatory elicitation refers to the stereotypical objectification. The novelist splendidly catches the contention and disavowal of difference where the garmentyas/convicts/south Asians/underclass/margins are significantly represented in the psychic and social relations in context of the positioning of the subjects as ‘elusive centre’. The novel Sea of Poppies theorizes the complexity of geopolitical framework of the historical past concerning the transnational borders formed by seas/rivers/ocean in the northern and eastern part of the Subcontinent India. The book reclaims across the borders of rivers, seas, ocean ‘the intricate configurations of experience of the Third World’ (Paula, p. 102) as well as labourers/coolies ‘spiritual adventure’ (Fanon, p.235), besides the novelist’s intellectual idea through his work to “valorize the Fanon’s idea of decolonization” (Wretched of the Earth: 1968) and to create homogeneity which resulted in a new language, new humanity and hybridity (Devitt, p.157).
Notes Cited

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