

ISSN: 2349-2147



Modern Research Studies

**Editor-in-Chief
Gyanabati Khuraijam**

**An International
Journal of
Humanities and Social
Sciences**

www.modernresearch.in

**Title: Elements of Diaspora in Amitav Ghosh's
*Sea of Poppies***

Author/s: Sachidananda Angom

**Volume 1, Issue 1
June 2014**

pp. 82–89.

Email: editor@modernresearch.in
mrsejournal@gmail.com

Managing Editor: Yumnam Oken Singh



Elements of Diaspora in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

SACHIDANANDA ANGOM

Ph.D. Scholar

Manipur University, India

Abstract: Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008) reconstructs the history of the first wave of Indian diaspora. This novel is remarkable for its portrayal of 19th century imperialism and the migration of the North Indian indentured labourers in large numbers to various British plantation colonies; specifically to Mauritius in the novel. In 1833, the abolition of slavery in the British Empire ended the supply of cheap labour for the colonial plantations. Moreover there was an impending threat to the lucrative opium trade due to new trade regulations by the Chinese empire. In the wake of such historical developments, the recruitment and transportation of indentured labourers from India became a profitable venture for the British imperialists. The labourers had to sign an "agreement" known as *girmity* in the vernacular North Indian language; thus they were known as *girmityas*. And this novel is a saga of these *girmityas* who became the first Indian diaspora.

This paper intends to explore how the coercive British policies uprooted the agrarian economy of India and forced the colonized subjects to become exiles. And using the parameters of 'diaspora theories', this paper attempts to analyse the various aspects of this early Indian diaspora by highlighting the various diasporic elements present in the novel. Main among these aspects will be the loss of the homeland, cultural and national identity due to migration and how the individuals try to establish a new identity in a foreign land, symbolised by the slave-schooner *Ibis*.

Keywords: Diaspora, hybridity, *girmityas*, blackwater, indenture.

Sea of Poppies, the first novel in the 'Ibis trilogy' by Ghosh is a historical saga set during a time when opium trade was flourishing during the British colonial rule. This novel is remarkable for the minute portrayal of the coercive effect of colonialism which crippled the agrarian economy of India and the resultant mass migration of indentured labourers from the Indian mainland to alien shores in order to support themselves. The diaspora which resulted due to this is now known as the 'old indenture diaspora' in the discourse of diaspora studies as against the twentieth century diaspora of educated young Indians in various parts of the world. These two forms of diaspora can be seen as "two relatively autonomous archives designated by the terms 'old' and 'new'. The old (that is, early modern, classic capitalist or, more specifically, nineteenth-century indenture) and the new (that is, late modern or late capitalist) traverse two quite different kinds of topography" (Mishra 3).

The Greek term *diaspora*, meaning 'to disperse' is the voluntary or forced movement of people from their homelands into new regions. In the endeavour to straddle between two cultures; the old one which is lost and the new one which is acquired, diasporic writing is characterized by a "dislocation *from*" and "relocation *to*" a new place (Nayar 189). The physical as well as the psychological distance from "the homeland becomes so far that the motherland remains frozen in the diasporic imagination as a sort of sacred symbol, almost like an idol of memory and imagination" (Paranjape 9). Exile and displacement narratives frequently feature angst at the loss of the homeland resulting in a sense of longing and nostalgia for the old home; its myths, religion, history, landscape. It becomes conspicuously noticeable that an attempt to negotiate with the new surroundings, along with the retention of a "collective memory, vision or myth about the original homeland including its location, history and achievements" and the idealization and commitment "to the maintenance or restoration of the original homeland" is made (Cohen 6).

In this paper an attempt is made to trace the effects of colonialism which led to indenture and also the diasporic elements that are interwoven into the historical narrative of the indentured labourers who throng the pages of *Sea of Poppies*. It may be noted here that, post-

Midnight's Children, a number of global Indian fiction writers have wrestled with the issue of diaspora; notably in the works of Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry, Anita Desai, Jhumpha Lahiri and others. These diasporic writers, commonly referred to as the 'new diaspora writers', have resided in various parts of the U.K and the U.S for education and work during the late twentieth century and their writings reflect their experiences in a new culture; and also the themes of dispossession, dislocation and the emergence of a hybrid and ambivalent existence. Amitav Ghosh is a prominent one among these new diasporic writers. However, as far as the *Sea of Poppies* is concerned, Ghosh takes a new stance in that he writes not about his own experiences in a diasporic individual. Rather, as a trained anthropologist and historian, he delves into the history of the first wave of Indian diaspora which have been relatively neglected in the corpus of diasporic writings by authors of Indian origin. The scarcity of writings in this area is succinctly summarised by Nandini Bhautoo-Dewnarain:

The old story of indenture is hard to produce for many reasons – the first being its remoteness in time and the paucity of evidence apart from the bare fact of official documents . . . it is also an experience of dispossession which is painful and prospectively derogatory in a popular sense because of the association with poverty and peripheral lives. (43)

Keeping the difficulties aside, Ghosh attempts to create a fictional history of the indentured diaspora of nineteenth century India by relying on historical sources from a number of scholars, lexicographers, linguists and historians which he gratefully acknowledges. Ghosh is preoccupied with the question why the Indians became indentures in the first place. He delineates the socio-economic conditions of the British Raj in which the farmers of the Gangetic plains had been forced to cultivate opium leading to the rapid destruction of the agrarian economy thereby depriving the farmers of their sustenance as Ghosh records:

The town was thronged with hundreds of other impoverished transients, many of whom were willing to sweat themselves half to death for a few handfuls of rice. Many of these people had been driven from their villages by the flood of flowers that had washed over the countryside: lands that had once provided sustenance were now swamped by the rising tide of poppies; food was so hard to come by that people were glad to lick the leaves in which offerings were made at temples. . . . (202)

Historically, the recruitment of indentured labourers began as a result of the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833 that ended the supply of cheap labour for the colonial plantations. At Por'Lwee in Mauritius, Monsieur d'Epinay, the French landowner informs Zachary Reid, the second mate of the *Ibis*, "Tell Mr Burnham that I need men. Now that we may no longer have slaves in Mauritius, I must have coolies, or I am doomed" (Ghosh 21). The rising demand of labourers in plantation colonies compounded by the famine, unemployment, and poverty led to mass migration of indentured labourers to various colonies like Mauritius, Trinidad and Fiji islands. The cultivation of opium, "(the) most lucrative of the British Empire's products . . ." (Ghosh 97) and its trading become a symbol of the British oppression in the novel. Thus Benjamin Brightwell Burnham, a leading merchant of the East India Company, who profits enormously through the opium trade explains to Zachary "that British rule in India could not be sustained without opium... the Company's annual gains from opium are almost equal to the entire revenue of . . . the United States" (Ghosh 115). He also justifies free trade, which is essential to maintain the 'wealth of the nation' saying, "Jesus Christ is Free Trade and Free Trade is Jesus Christ. . . . If it is God's will that opium be used as an instrument to open China to his teachings, then so be it" (Ghosh 116). At another instance, he adds, "Free trade is a right conferred on Man by God, and its principle apply as much to opium as to any other article of trade. More so perhaps, since in its absence many millions of natives would be denied the lasting advantages of British influence" (Ghosh 115).

In the wake of such developments, Burnham is far-sighted enough to see the new gains he can earn from the supply of indentured labourers to the plantation colonies:

Have you not heard it said when God closes one door he opens another? 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. (Ghosh 79)

Thus he commissions his newly acquired slaving schooner – the *Ibis* for transporting indentured labourers to *Marrech-dip* (Mauritius). The exodus of the *girmitiyas* from their homeland thus begins through a complex network of colonialism and oppression. Once recruited, the *girmitiyas* were kept in inhumane conditions and treated no better than a slave and “. . . every year a good number of migrants perished of communicable diseases. From an investor's point of view, each dead, escaped and incapacitated recruit represented a serious loss. . .” (Ghosh 197). Ghosh captures their angst in an empathic manner:

How had it happened that when choosing the men and women who were to be torn from this subjugated plain, the hand of destiny had strayed so far inland, away from the busy coastlines, to alight on the people who were, of all, the most stubbornly rooted in the silt of the Ganga, in a soil that had to be sown with suffering to yield its crop of story and song? It was as if fate had thrust its fist through the living flesh of the land in order to tear away a piece of its stricken heart. (Ghosh 399)

Among the *girmitiyas*, who have boarded the *Ibis*, we find Deeti, a high caste Hindu widow, who was saved from committing *sati* by Kalua, a low-caste *chamar*. Both of them flee their home to escape death at the hands of her in-laws. We also notice Paulette, born and brought up at Bengal and who is more Indian than French in her choice of attire and language; and her foster-brother Jodu who has joined the ship as a *lascar* (deck-hand); and Baboo Nob Kissin, Burnham's *gomusta* (financial agent). We also find other minor woman characters:

Ratna and Champa who became indentures rather than to starve; Sarju, a midwife forced into exile due to her mistake in the delivery of a noble's son; Munia, whose parents and infant are murdered at the behest of an opium factory agent; and Heeru, who was abandoned by her husband. Lastly, Neel Rattan Halder, the bankrupt raja who is falsely implicated in a forgery case and the Chinese opium addict Ah-Fatt join the *Ibis* as convicts.

The angst and sorrow of separation from one's homeland and a sense of longing, which forms an important aspect of diasporic narrative, is vividly captured by Ghosh in the migration of these *girmitiyas*:

. . . the migrants, standing clustered at (the temple's) threshold, gathering together to say their last prayers on their native soil; it would be their parting memory of sacred Jambudwipa, before they were cast out upon the Black Water. They would speak of it to their children and their children's children, who would return to it over generations, to remember and recall their ancestors. (Ghosh 197)

For Paulette, this dislocation from her adopted homeland brought tears in her eyes and watching the jungle of Sunderbans from the *Ibis*, she realises the trauma of migrancy, “. . . (the plants) were the companions of her earliest childhood and their shoots seemed almost to be her own, plunged deep into this soil; no matter where she went or for how long, she knew that nothing would ever tie her to a place as did these childhood roots” (Ghosh 381). Neel recoils at the thought of being extradited as a convict to an unknown island and has a nightmare “in which he saw himself as a castaway on the dark void of the ocean, utterly alone, severed from every human mooring” (Ghosh 342). The crescendo of this angst arrives to the migrants at the moment when the last landmark of their homeland, the Ganga-Sagar, recedes from their vision, “remind[ing] the migrants of the yawning chasm ahead” (Ghosh 396). The memory and nostalgia about the lost homeland among the women on the *Ibis* is captured in their lamentations:

Among the women, the talk was of the past, and the little things that they would never see, nor hear, nor smell again . . . and now, those embers of recollection took on a new life, in the light of which their presence here, in the belly of a ship that was about to be cast into an abyss, seemed incomprehensible, a thing that could not be explained except as a lapse from sanity. (Ghosh 397)

In order to come to terms with the sorrow of separation from the homeland the *Ibis* resonates with the lament songs usually sung when a bride leaves her parents' home:

Slowly, as the women's voices grew in strength and confidence, the men forgot their quarrels: at home too, during village weddings, it was always the women who sang when the bride was torn from her parents' embrace—it was as if they were acknowledging, through their silence, that they, as men, had no words to describe the pain of the child who is exiled from home. (Ghosh 398)

Crossing the Black waters (*kalapani*) was a taboo in nineteenth century India and the masses, especially the Hindus believed that one would become an outcaste by crossing the sea. Thus, Deeti flinched when she heard that the *girmitiyas* were to be taken to *Mareech*; an island like *Lanka* which evoked the fear of Ravana and his demon legions in her. "How was it possible that the marchers could stay on their feet, knowing what lay ahead? She tried to imagine what it would be like to be in their place, to know that you were forever an outcaste. . . ." (Ghosh 72). However, caste was not a problem in the recruitment of labourers. The *duffadar* at the migrants' depot clarifies that "caste doesn't matter . . . All kinds of men are eager to sign up – Brahmins, Ahirs, Chamars, Telis. What matters is that they be young and able-bodied and willing to work" (Ghosh 205).

Interestingly the rigid caste system which was ferociously guarded at the mainland became dissolved and immaterial upon the

Ibis. The barrier which divided the different castes turned into solidarity and support for one another, thus binding the migrants together in the bonds of brotherhood and sisterhood. When Deeti asked Paulette whether she was not afraid of losing caste by crossing the Black Water, she replied, “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 all be ship-siblings – *jahaz-bhais* and *jahaz-behens* – to each other. There will be no differences between us” (Ghosh 356). At another point, Bishu-ji, the prison’s *jemadar* says to Neel, “. . . the sentence you have been given will tear you forever from the ties that bind others. 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” (Ghosh 314). Highlighting this fact, Robin Cohen mentions that an important feature of ‘indentured diaspora’ of the nineteenth century is the “strong retention of group ties sustained over an extended period (in respect of language, religion, endogamy and cultural norms)” (Cohen 57).

Another primary concern of diasporic communities, according to Rajesh Rai and Peter Reeves, is to retain “some sense of Indian-ness” (8). This aspect of diaspora is constantly revisited in the novel. Among the *girmityas* who have gathered upon the *Ibis* there is a tendency to preserve their cultural past and their self-identity with a new fervour. When the *girmityas* had to arrange a make-shift marriage between Ecka Nack and Heeru onboard the *Ibis*, Deeti knew that they would have to improvise. Despite the lack of proper arrangements, the migrants kept their culture intact by performing the “tilak ceremony”; the anointing of both bride and groom with turmeric paste; and finally the ritual of the “seven circles”, in which the bride and groom circled around a *thali* (plate) lit up with candles, without which a Hindu marriage would be regarded meaningless. Though a physical return to their homeland was not possible, the migrants nevertheless retained their emotional and spiritual connection to their roots. In fact their home had become a construct of the mind as Rushdie has maintained in his seminal essay *Imaginary Homelands* that diasporic communities “will not be capable to reclaim precisely the thing that is lost” and it must be constructed in “imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind” (10).

On nearing her death, Sarju hands over an assortment of the seeds of ganja, datura, and the best Benares poppy to Deeti. These seeds are the relics of a dislocated past life which Deeti will never be able to see again. The seeds also symbolise the dispersal of the innumerable migrant communities to far flung plantation colonies, throwing them into an unknown future. Thus Deeti cannot help asking herself:

How was it possible that after spending so much of her life with these seeds she had not had the foresight or wisdom to bring some with her – as a keepsake if nothing else? (Ghosh 451)

Thus for the earlier diaspora these relics and fragments from their homeland were of immense value and their diasporic imagination “was triggered by the contents in gunny sacks: a Ganesha icon, a dog-eared copy of the *Ramayana* or the *Qur'an*, an old sari or other *deshi* outfit, a photograph of a pilgrimage, and so on” (Mishra 4).

Sea of Poppies is indeed a remarkable historical narrative which minutely captures the journey and experiences of the North Indian indentured labourers within the early Indian diaspora. The novel is notable for its intimate portrayal of the early diasporic community who were forced to lose their caste and face several hardships under the British colonialism. However in the journey of their migration Ghosh shows how the migrants dissolved the caste system and became *jahaz-bhais* and *jahaz-behens* in order to come in terms with their new reality and also how they successfully maintained their own individual, cultural and national identities even in the worst circumstances. This novel is indeed a new revision of the old diaspora of India and a representation of their fears, hopes and aspirations in the form of a historical saga.

References

- Bhautoo-Dewnarain, Nandini. 2012. “*The Glass Palace: Reconnecting Two Diasporas.*” In *History, Narrative, and Testimony in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction.* edited by Chitra Sankaran, 33–46. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2012.
- Cohen, Robin. 2008. *Global Diasporas: An Introduction.* 2nd ed. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers.
- Ghosh, Amitav. 2009. *Sea of Poppies.* New Delhi: Penguin.
- Mishra, Vijay. 2007. *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorising the Diasporic Imaginary.* London: Routledge.
- Nayar, Pramod K. 2008. *Postcolonial literature: An Introduction.* New Delhi: Pearson.
- Paranjape, Makarand. 2001. Introduction to *In Diaspora: Theories, Histories, Texts.* edited by Makarand Paranjape, 1–14. New Delhi: Indialog Publications.
- Rai, Rajesh and Peter Reeves. 2008. Introduction. *The South Asian Diaspora: Transnational networks and Changing Identities.* edited by Rajesh Rai and Peter Reeves, 1–12. London: Routledge.
- Rushdie, Salman. 2010. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991.* London: Vintage.