

**Portrait of women in Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies**

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**Abstract**

*Indian English fiction has gained rapidly numerous accolades at home and abroad. Ghosh's "Sea of Poppies" deals with women characters, all women characters in the novel are directly or indirectly related to opium which affects their lives. Here we study and analyses women characters causes and reasons of marginalization, exploitation and sufferings in the society who chose a very uncommon profession in those colonial times as a colonized subject. In relation to that in Sea of Poppies the most problem faced by women seems to be sexual abuse, which involves both physical and psychological violence and how their lives alter afterwards. Ghosh's "Sea of Poppies" produces a situation in which various aspects of Indian women's are portrayed. The problems of alienation, migration and existential crises in life of unprivileged class of the society are explored through fiction.*

**Keywords:** *Sufferings, Marginalisation, Opium.*

**Introduction**

Literature as an observation of society depicts the social biography and the spirit of the age it represents. Some examples of this literature society are Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, *Restoration Comedy of Manners* and the plays of Bernard Shaw. While Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* gives an accurate picture of the ethics and etiquettes of the England of his times, *Comedy of Manners* portrays the artificiality and shallow affections of the elitist society of the day, and Shaw's plays uncover the rottenness of the social life of England in the 20th century. Ghosh's

*Sea of Poppies* (2008) was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2008, the first volume of the Ibis trilogy.

*Sea of Poppies* first in projected trilogy is big and baggy, a self-proclaimed epic with colossal content and almost a dozen major characters, including the orphaned daughter of a French botanist (who is passing as a coolie), son of an American slave (who is passing as white) and an Anglophile raja (who has been wrongly sentenced to a penal colony on Mauritius). But a majority onboard is poor Indian farmers from the opium-producing countryside, incumbent by famine or scandal to seek a new life elsewhere. Adoring to reinvention, Ghosh's plot focuses are on one of these villagers: Deeti, a widow who undertakes another name and the (lower) caste of a new love as they flee together on the Ibis.

## **Tale of opium**

The factual links between opium, British Empire, and indentured labor and the nearness between land and sea are shown through portraying the trajectory of Deeti, one of the main characters in the novel. Through Deeti's stunned eyes, the novelist gives us the "structure of sentiment" to accompany the documentary situation and material realities of opium production and Empire. The opium factory of Ghazipur where Hukam Singh works is described in great detail when Deeti accepts a journey into and through this heart of lightless, a cavernous and devouring hole, to bring her husband home after he passes out because of being sick. Through Deeti's journey, the insides of the opium factory uncover the truth of the "work" of Empire, with the factory serving as a symbol of its enormous exploitative economic system. Deeti notices the gigantic pairs of scales stood against the walls, here used for the weighing of raw opium.

## **Status of Women**

The status of women in the pre-independent Indian society is depicted through the life of Deeti and that of the other women characters. In ancient India women were held in high regard. Throughout the vedic period, they relished equal position and rights with men. The practices of polygamy, purdha system, dowry and sati which came into being during the medieval period, crumbled the status of women in the society. Women were eliminated from the formal education

system. Paulette had read from the book and tells migrants that there are no snakes in Mareech, Jhugroo satirically retorts. How would a woman know what's written in a book? Child marriage was the norm of the day. The novel reports that Neel was betrothed at the time of his birth to the daughter of another landowning family and the marriage was solemnized when he was twelve. Home was considered the appropriate place for a woman but a man was autonomous to live a life he wished for. The Raja had as many mistresses as there were days in the week, so as to be able to spend each night in a different bed. A female child was conceived to be a burden while a male child was an asset to the family. The girl parents were forwarded to offer money and gifts to the groom to get their daughters married off. Deeti's father had to thatch the roof of her groom's house as a part of her dowry. He did not envy the expense though he could ill afford it. There was a tradition, after getting married begetting sons in particular were considered to be the goals of a woman. Deeti is impregnated by her brother in law on her wedding night as the task of the new bride was assumed to beget an heir for the family. The land and property of a man who does not have a male heir would automatically be inherited by his brother. Being the mother of a female child, Deeti has no chance of holding her husband's land after his death. She opt to sacrifice her body in the funeral pyre for fear of forceful collection of her land and property by her brother-in-law after her husband's death and to escape from her brother-in-law's sexual harassment. Early marriages were in practice women were married to men, much older to them to beget a male heir. Such is the case with Taramony, Nob Kissin's widowed aunt. Her husband had married her only six years before in a last effort to beget an inheritor and his final wish was that his young wife be sent to an ashram in the sacred city of Brindavan. Women did not have an identity of their own in this kind of patriarchal society. They were named either with their father, husband or children. Deeti was recognized only as Kabutri-ki-ma. Exploitation of women was multifaceted. They were subjected to physical, sexual and emotional abuse. Deeti was not only a single woman who was raped on her wedding night by her brother-in-law, but with her husband in his death bed, she is also subjected to sexual harassment by him. His improvements were so fast-growing that she feared, he might attack her, right on her husband's bed. Malati, the wife of Neel is a peaceful sufferer who performs her duties as a wife and mother without any expectations. Her suffering is mental but as a normal Indian wife, she never complains or

questions her husband's relationship with his mistress Elokeshi. Neel's mother was also neglected by her husband and she lived a secluded in a desolate wing of the palace while he enjoyed with his mistresses, giving in to their demands which had the consequences in mounting up of his debts.

These incidents not only exploit the emotions of women but also depict the muteness of women in the society. Gayatri Spivak pointedly detects within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. The ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. It is because both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency. As for as colonial production is concerned, there was no history of subaltern and cannot talk, the female folk was deeply worsened in the context of subaltern.

### **Female Exploitation**

Amitav Ghosh's novel brilliantly explored the much neglected aspect of female exploitation. Dr. Sen's analysis was based on the stories from *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke*. In *Sea of Poppies* she discussed the gendered aspect of migration through the lens of literary story telling. She discussed one character named Deeti, an uneducated Brahmin widow of an impotent opium addict faced sexual exploitation from her own brother-in-law. After her husband's death, she gets attracted to a chamar man named Kalua in the ship. She wants to become sati but Kalua dramatically rescues her. Both of them want to get married and since then, they pretend to be a married couple and Deeti calls herself a chamar woman.

Referring to Ghosh's mouthpiece, Deeti, the women preferring to marry men who are settled rather than of the same caste. Being away from their own social spaces allows them more leverage. The poverty in the homeland, which caused the Diaspora in the first place, was forgotten or overwritten with the feeling that it was home, a place where the present alienation of the diasporic person did not exist. Because they knew there were no possibilities of physical return back to their home, therefore, spiritual, religious and emotional bonds were ongoing necessities. Like hawkers, they carried things such as a Ganapati idol, a dog-eared copy of the Gita or the Quran, an old sari or other deshi outfit, a photograph of pilgrimage or, in modern

times, a video cassette of the latest hit from the home country along with their head-loads and or suitcases.

### **Women's sufferings**

Deeti is an ordinary village woman. She is one of the prominent characters in the novel. In the novel she suffers from gender discrimination since her childhood in the. In the first chapter of the novel the colour of her eyes was different it is told that due to colour of her eyes, she is called as "chudaliya, dainiya as if she were a witch: but Deeti had only to turn her eyes on them to make them scatter and run off". She is married to Hukum Singh who served in the same battalion as her brother Kesri Singh of British army. Deeti was young girl her marriage with Hukum Singh is fixed without her consent as this proposal is seen as better than marrying to a man much older than Deeti. Hukum Singh got hurt on one of his leg while he was in British regiment due to which he cannot walk properly but this is seen as minor problem in her marriage with him. Her dowry contributes to building of roof of his husband's house. There was an opium factory in Ghazipur where he works. Hukum Singh is fond of opium, her dreams are shattered on the first night of her marriage when her husband makes her inhales opium and she is raped by her brother in law Chandan Singh with help of her uncle Bhyro Singh as Deeti was in a state of unconsciousness. It is only later while she is travelling on Ibis that she becomes aware that her uncle Bhyro Singh was also responsible for her rape by her brother in law. She begins to doubt about her husband after he starts ignoring her just after her first night and she becomes pregnant. Her mother-in-law says that she is like Draupadi. She becomes sure that her mother in law knows everything about father of her child and to disclose the truth from her mother-in-law, she starts giving her opium. One day in state of unconsciousness under the influence of opium, she concedes that her daughter's father is her brother in law. The behavior of Deeti's mother in law shows how a woman is blinded in love of his son that she helps people to violate honour of a woman. While her opium addict husband is in his death bed, she is physically assaulted by her brother in law and in order to escape from him she says."Listen to me: I will burn on my husband's pyre rather than given".

### **Conclusion**

Ghosh has tried to depict sufferings of women from all sections of Indian society during the nineteenth century. He carried with societal problems like sati, rape by brother of the groom in the name of marriage to hide impotency of groom. Amitav Ghosh has furnished a candid picture of 19th century Indian society with its customs, beliefs and social problems like poverty and the marginalisation of a particular sect of people in the name of caste.

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