

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* - A Unique Blend of Public History and Private Histories

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Abstract: It is of supreme importance to understand how Ghosh juxtaposes public history with private histories of ordinary people whereby a new meaning is imparted to history. In all his novels, Ghosh in the backdrop of momentous historic events portrays the private lives of common people who break down under the inexorable circumstances brought about by such political or historical events. For instance, partition of India has come to be known by one and all as one of the ghastliest events in the history of India and a number of historians have dealt with it but little attempt has been made to figure out how the partition affected the personal lives of common people who did not have anything to do with the existing political scenario of the time and were concerned about the well-being of their own kith and kin amidst the political turmoil. What is documented and remembered is only public history of the historic partition that divided the country into two and history has failed to show how the emotions and sentiments of ordinary individuals were affected by this public history.

Keywords: History, Public, Private, Migration, British Empire.

The objective of this paper is to see how Amitav Ghosh, one of the major voices in contemporary Indian English Writing, has dovetailed public history into private histories in such a manner that both not only appear inseparable from each other but also work as complimentary to each other. Ghosh as a writer of historical fiction has focused his attention not on the historical events but on the portrayal of such ordinary people as have been by and large overlooked in traditional historiography. By intertwining the historical events and narratives of ordinary people, he has recreated history about the lives and experiences of ordinary people who were the real sufferers when the momentous historical events such as imperialism and colonialism caught the attention of thinkers and scholars. Thus Ghosh detracts monumental history that gives a one-sided reality of the past and presents a multi-layered picture of the past that gives equitable room to the poor and the weak. His preoccupation in his novels has been to record the experiences and lives of ordinary people who have so far been overlooked in traditional historiography. *Sea of Poppies* is remarkable for its truthful depiction of nineteenth century

imperialism and the migration of 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. Further there was an imminent 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 were forced into signing an “agreement” known as *girmīt* in the vernacular North Indian language; thus they were known as *girmītiyas*. And this novel is a saga of these *girmītiyas* who became the first Indian diaspora.

Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies* attempts to create a fictional history of the indentured migrants of nineteenth century India by relying on historical sources obtained 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. . . . (Sea of Poppies:202. *Further references to this novel will appear as page numbers preceded by SOP*)

Here Ghosh has attempted to explore those regions that are not accessible even to history. And he has succeeded in unearthing long-lost aspects of history. Ghosh himself asserts that *Sea of Poppies* is not about any one thing. There can be no doubt that colonialism was the dominant political reality during the 19th century India. Yet it is also significant to remember that it was just one facet of that reality. People also lived and laughed and loved as indeed people do everywhere no matter what their political circumstances. In *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh revisits themes and preoccupations of his earlier works and presents a historical novel of panoramic scope and great depth, populated with characters from different continents with complex histories and conflicting interests. His

predominant concern in this novel is essentially with the depiction of the lives of the ordinary people caught in the vortex created by outer social and political forces. "Ghosh obviously wants to make the novel a literary excavation, digging up the stories of people lost to history,"(Kundu Web). The narrative is set in the year 1838 when the opium trade between British-ruled India and China was in full swing. Lots of people were made to work in opium factories and farmers were forced to cultivate opium instead of other traditional crops as the British traders made a lot of money out of this opium trade. The ships which were once used to carry slaves were now used to carry opium which helped the British East India Company generate huge revenue and wealth.

Sea of Poppies chronicles the historical saga of the private lives of a number of characters belonging to different countries such as India, Britain, America, France and China. Coming together by a stroke of destiny on the *Ibis*, a schooner that was once used as a slave carrier between Africa and America and now, after the abolition of slavery in 1833, has come to be used to transport indentured labourers from colonized countries to new colonies ; these people form a unique company that is made up of diverse cultures. The narrative is fabricated around the lives of a number of characters such as Kalua who is an untouchable in a caste-ridden Indian society, Deeti who despite being a high-caste Hindu widow elopes with Kalua after being rescued by him from funeral pyre, Zachary Reid who is a Mulatto from Boston and works as the *Ibis*'s foreman, Paulette who is an orphaned French girl and runs away from her British foster family, Jodu who is a Muslim lascar on the *Ibis* whose romance with a Hindu girl Munia on the schooner heading to Mauritius creates an uproar and also Neel Ratten Haldar, a poor Hindu Raja, who has inherited debt from his father and due to this he faces a penal servitude of seven years in Mauritius. The British trade with China began and flourished in the sixteenth century due to the growing demand for tea, silk and porcelain in Britain. The demand for the European commodities was comparatively low in the East that resulted in a huge deficit for Britain and the loss thus incurred was covered up by paying silver to China. In 1773, the Governor General of India, Warren Hastings, decided to consolidate the trade with China by exporting illegally high-quality opium produced in Bengal. Indian peasants were both encouraged and forced into planting huge swathes of opium that made up for the trade deficit of Britain. The opium trade flourished rapidly and the flow of silver began to reverse. By the 1820s things came to such a pass that 900 tons of opium was exported to China from Bengal that resulted in the breakdown of Chinese economy. The Chinese fought tooth and nail against the malicious trade that was rapidly destabilizing their economy by turning them into drug-addicts.

Though they banned the opium import, they had to face the strong opposition from the British East India company. Trade dispute between Britain and China culminated eventually in two wars and China's defeat further provided a fillip to the opium trade. This humiliating defeat at the hands of the foreign powers led to the downfall of the Qing dynasty in 1911 and it was not till Mao's ruthless Communist revolution in 1949 that China's opium pandemic, that had led to some 20 million addicts, came to be nailed.

Taking a cue from the historic event of the opium trade, Ghosh shifts his attention to the opium ship and opium factory and weaves the private histories of a number of ordinary folks who despite belonging to different cultural set-ups and different countries come together on board a ship called Ibis that is making its way to sugar plantations of Mauritius. It is also the story of people whose lives are adversely affected by poppy plantation. Opium cultivation is forced upon the Indian farmers by the British rulers who themselves thrive upon opium trade but the farmers whose land is used to cultivate poppies are constantly crushed under grinding poverty.

The historical links between opium, British Empire, and indentured labour—and the intimacy between land and sea—are presented through delineating the trajectory of Deeti, one of the main characters in the novel (Younger *Hindu*). Deeti is the farmer-wife of a high-caste Rajput named Hukam Singh who works in the opium factory. The viciousness of Empire is illustrated in Singh's injury as a sepoy in a British regiment, which results in his addiction to opium, further aggravated by his employment at the British opium factory (Chatterjee Web). It is this addiction, Deeti realizes, that constitutes his main “disability” rather than his slight limp. Deeti ends up on the Ibis as an indentured labourer after being saved from becoming a sati (on her husband's funeral pyre) by the lower-caste horse-cart driver, Kalua. Like Zachary Reid, the mixed-race American freedman, Deeti ends up on the sea because of disenfranchisement on land. Through this incident of Deeti's rescue, Ghosh also writes back to colonialist representations in much British fiction (*The Far Pavilions*, *The Deceivers*), where the enlightened white man saves the victimized Indian woman from the “barbaric” rite of sati (Sangari Web). In Ghosh's postcolonial intervention, a “brown man” becomes the rescuer of an Indian woman, thus undercutting the white male rescue fantasy.

Ghosh's success as a novelist consists in his keen insight into the psyche of ordinary people from whose standpoint he relates the history of physical subjugations imposed by the British colonizers on Indian natives in the form of torture, merciless beatings of poor farmers and

other forms of punishment used to maintain discipline amongst the colonized workers. It is through Deeti's stunned eyes that the novelist portrays the "structure of emotion" to accompany the historical situation and material realities of opium production and Empire (Kumar 101). The opium factory of Ghazipur where Hukam Singh works is described in great detail when Deeti undertakes a journey into and through this heart of darkness, 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 expose the truth of the "work" of Empire, with the factory serving as a symbol of its giant exploitative economic system.

Her eyes were met by a startling sight - a host of dark, legless torsos was circling around and around, like some enslaved tribe of demons...they were barebodied men, sunk waist-deep in tanks of opium, tramping round and round to soften the sludge. Their eyes were vacant, glazed and yet somehow they managed to keep moving as slow as ants in honey, tramping, treading...these seated men had more the look of ghouls than any living thing she had ever seen: their eyes glowed in the dark, and they appeared completely naked.(SOP 95)

Deeti notices the "gigantic pairs of scales stood against the walls, here used for the weighing of raw opium. Clustered around each set of scales were dozens of earthenware gharas, of exactly the kind she herself had used in packing her harvest" (SOP 86). The farmers and their vessels pale into insignificance in the face of the instruments of imperial weightage. The white officers were deputed to keep watch over these workers who were flogged time and again for any lapse in work. Even children were made to work in these pathetic conditions and they too received severe punishments for being slow and negligent. What is notable here is the rendering of a harsh truth from the point of view of Deeti, a poor Indian native.

Ghosh has come to be known as a writer of lost histories of those people whose lives and experiences did not find place in the documented history. In all his novels, he emerges as a mouthpiece of those people whose voices went unheard for ages. In *Sea of Poppies*, he brings out those aspects of the bygone era of the mid-nineteenth century which remained buried in oblivion. The characters of Deeti and Kalua are important not only because they represent the suppressed classes of Indian society but also because through their journey, another little known history of the girmityas is brought to the fore by the novelist. Girmityas are none other than coolies belonging to different castes and classes who were

transported to Mauritius where they were made to work in inhuman conditions as indentured labourers. Ghosh has here focused upon the journey of these coolies from Calcutta to Mauritius in the schooner known as the 'Ibis' that was earlier used for carrying slaves but is now used to carry coolies whose lot is nothing less than that of slaves. Even on board the ship, they are made to live in pathetic conditions so much so that lots of them die during hazardous journey. This trade of human beings by the British colonizers is carried out to strengthen their position in Mauritius. The inhuman side of colonialism gets exposed through this evil business run by the Britishers.

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