



A Study of Identity in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's remarkable novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008), shortlisted for "Man Booker Prize" and which is first in his projected trilogy of novels, deals with a chaotic voyage across the Indian Ocean to Mauritius Island returning to a self-reflexive question about the nation. Its story unfolds in north India and the Bay of Bengal in 1838 on the eve of British attack on the Chinese port known as the first opium war. Set in 1838s, just before the opium war (1839-1842), this novel encapsulates the colonial history of East. In the novel, Ghosh assembles the sailors, passengers and marines from different corners of world for the ship *Ibis*, a slaving schooner now converted to the transport of coolies and opium to China. In bringing his troupe of characters to Calcutta into the open water, Ghosh provides the reader with all manner of stories, and equips himself with the personnel to man and navigate an old-fashioned literary three-decker.

Key Words: aspirations, culture, desires, history, human emotions, memories, sensibility

Dealing with the 19th century opium trade, which is an exciting tale in and of itself, fraught with voracious greed, power-mongering and racism, *Sea of Poppies* broadens the definition of diaspora as a third space, neither homeland nor metropolitan but a place where a history of its own is unfolding. In the novel, Amitav Ghosh represents multilingual communities of India on *Ibis*. With the colourful characters, the novel is the clash and mingling of languages; Bhojpuri, Bengali, Lascari, Hindustani, Anglo-Indian etc. The mingling of these languages creates a vivid sense of living voice as well as the linguistic resourcefulness of people in diaspora. Ghosh believes in Eastern Humanism and shared aims that exist across race, class and culture. Political obligations determine many of the relationships in the novel, but for the most part fail to quench the force of individual human emotions-memories and desires, disappointment and aspirations.

The novel is a commentary on socio-cultural evolution of Indian diaspora, a saga of struggle by the destitute and wretches of colonial India and the dispassionate account of the Indian peasantry forced into opium cultivation. It is a novel in relation to diasporic sensibility and reconstruction of identity. By definition, a diaspora is a transnational network of dispersed political subjects. The idea of diaspora as migration and colonization signifies a collective trauma, a banishment where one dreams of home but lives in exile. The *Ibis*, which was earlier a slave ship, is being refitted to take a large group of "girmityas" or indentured migrants to Mauritius. On one level, it is a vessel to transport the girmityas from India to the plantation colony of Mauritius, but on the other, it is a microcosm of the plantation colony itself. Paul Gilroy, in his work *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), has called the labour ship on the way to plantation colonies "a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion" (4).



The ship *Ibis* resides of people of different nationalities, backgrounds and beliefs, some crossing the seas to escape from the difficulties at home, some being transported as convicts. It is packed with a multitude of characters both high and low, including a mixed-race novice sailor from Baltimore, a Rajah in debt to a British businessman, a Chinese criminal, a French stowaway, Malay crew man, farmers, soldiers and a mob of indentured Indian peasants. As the passengers of the *Ibis* sail down the river Hooghly into the Indian Ocean, their old family ties are washed away and they begin their lives afresh. The sea becomes their new nation as the shipmates form new bonds of empathy and understanding. They leave behind the structures of caste, community and religion; rename themselves as “jahajbhais” and “jahajbahans” (356). Wretched from their familiar life worlds and finally plucked from their homeland, the passengers indentured to plantation underwent a traumatic metamorphosis that changed their sense of subjectivity and affected their outlook on the world around them.

The journey of the passengers on the ship *Ibis* turns into a crucible of a novel model of community entailed compromising with social and cultural behaviour in a new life, altering the situations to fresh coordinates of belonging. In the novel, almost all the characters feel the sense of place. In fact, they long for locality where they had come from. The ship becomes an alternate place for people to form their new identities and new communities as well. The colonial sense of place gives an impression in the present to alter the notion of place and history of place at present. Travel exposes new places and helps the passengers to chronicle new histories. In connection with this, Robert Dixon rightly says of Ghosh that the fact Amitav Ghosh has been able to move freely in his writing “between anthropology, history and fiction is symptomatic of the extent to which traditional boundaries between those disciplines have themselves broken down. (13)” The characters on the ship experience new places and events, comparing it with the past events, and live the past in the present in a different location.

In his novels Ghosh has portrayed his diasporic feelings, loss of identity and rootlessness. While going through *Sea of Poppies* we can compare the vexed diasporic experiences of colonial India with that of an equally perturbed history of Africa. The dilemma faced by jahajbhais of the *Ibis* while crossing the chasm of darkness where the Holy Ganga disappeared into “kalapani”, is aptly portrayed in the following lines of “Walcott’s poem *Name* (1970)—“Behind us all, the sky folded as history folds over a fish line and the foam foreclosed. to trace our names on the sand which the sea erased again to our indifference”.

Within the novel the force of Kala-pani taboo to deconstruct territorialized forms of identity is extended beyond the South Asian chartacters of the novel as both the traumatic “third” space of diaspora and a stage by which newness enters the world via global oceanic ecologies. The ship becomes a vehicle for the articulation of polyphonic diasporic associations across cultures that overcome but do not entirely erase territorialized forms of Identity. Ghosh describes the destiny of the people on the *Ibis*:

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 stayed so far inland 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. (399) On the *Ibis*, community of sorts begins to form among the migrants. Relationships are forged or break up, conflicts blow up and individual destinies go through change of direction. Cut off from their roots, in transit and looking ahead for fresh start, ocean since antiquity the migrants are prone to invent new names and histories.



The diasporic consciousness is closely associated with the question of identity and sense of belonging. The characters in Ghosh's novel have chosen to travel across the Indian Ocean to an unfamiliar island where they must reconstruct new identities. Belonging to different strata of Indian society, these characters rebel against the callous and constructive colonial setup and chart out their own course of action to carve out a unique identity out of the straining circumstances. But it is an identity in flux since all of them are ever on the go towards self-formation and reconstruction. In *Sea of Poppies*, there is a new learning about old phase (forced) diaspora that people migrated in a forced but chosen condition because they were not owning a respectable status in their homeland and consequently they gained an altogether new identity of "jahaj-bhai" and "jahaj-behan" to define their identity. In the novel, each of the characters try to connect his/her past with the present, memory with desire, old ties with new associations and moves to reach their destination with a strong degree of ambivalence.

In diaspora, identity of migrant subjects is not at the margin all the time. They do not evoke self-pity for being estranged from homeland, but rather try to accommodate with new situations. The notion of identity has indeed been a major preoccupation with Ghosh in the present novel. It appears to be influenced by the ethico-political and socio-economic dynamics that constantly change characters, roles and trajectories to reconstruct new identities in the new milieu. Colonial upheaval interrupts the contours of the roles assumed by the persons in the social context. In his novels Individual identity is shown to be in struggle with collective or communal identity. He looks upon all forms of realities as stories point to his affiliation to the postmodern mode of thinking. Like the poststructuralist Marxism of Spivak, who in her work *In Other Worlds* (2006) speaks of making "strategic use of positivist essentialism" (205) in order to retrieve the subaltern consciousness, Ghosh approaches a transcendental humanism by developing certain postmodern characteristics like provisionality, fictionality and fluidity of all discursive formations.

In the novel, the people who are firmly located in the beginning follow a gradual process of dislocation. Perhaps catering to the questions of identity and identification, we have here a variety of characters that is truly outstanding. We have low caste men, women of questionable social situation, indentured labourers, Indian soldiers, prisoners of different kinds, a white veteran captain, a black officer and so on, mingling together. Here the foreigner is not the stereotypical white tyrant or abuser, but is another individual coincidentally present within the scope of this novel. Within the layers of foreignness, we find various questions of loyalty and identity, questions which are, to a certain extent, vital to the construction of the unknown future that this novel leaves us with. Ghosh takes care to avoid familiar figures from history and looks at margins of society that can give him a better point of fictionalizing and to his own end.

Set against the backdrop of opium war and migration of Indians as indentured labour to sugar plantation islands, *Sea of Poppies* explores socio-cultural and civilizational impact on Indian diaspora as a consequence of British exploitation. It suggests the "labour diaspora" with its mercantile history. Here, the diasporic consciousness evolves among workers and they are addressed as "girmitiyas" noticeably. Diasporic writing are related with two kinds of migration, the one that is forceful as in case of indentured labour occurred during late 18th and 19th centuries, or willingly to seek better prospects in life and career. Prof. Makarand Paranjape, in his essay, "Displaced Relations: Diasporas, Empires, Homelands" (2001) argues, that "to first category belong all those migrations on account of slavery or indentured labour, while the second would encompass the voluntary migrations of businessmen and



professionals who went abroad in search of fortune” (8). Migration becomes a new identity to the characters in the novel as Deeti is termed as “Kabutari-ki ma”, on the ship. She is a symbol of the labourer caught up as “Karl Marx” puts it in his book *Capital* (1906) the “transformation of feudal exploitation into capitalist exploitation” (1:669). Earlier the common people were exploited by feudal system, now they are under the grip of exploitation of British colonialism.

The culture of diaspora is global in the sense it generates its own culture beyond the ethnic boundaries. In diaspora moving across the boundaries is symbolically crossing the boundaries. At one place Neel is told that, “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” (314). On the ship, the passengers from various sections had a story of exploitation, torment and deprivation at the back. The place of their origin has never been the place of their self-satisfaction but the diaspora place that is ship becomes their place of living together and self-development. The social interaction during these sea voyages begins a process of rebuilding ethnic and cultural identities. The class or gender subalternity in diaspora does not confirm a lack of identity rather they reconstruct a new identity and a new life full of self-respect and dignity.

Through Deeti’s narrative of survival as an indentured labourer, Ghosh attempts to recreate through the genre of historical fiction the lost personal accounts of the first wave of South Asian coolie labour after the formal end of British slavery. In doing so, he attempts to fill a conspicuous void in the modern history of labour migration and displacement. Ghosh suggests that for the overseas Indian diasporics in pursuit of their lost roots, discovery of their roots may also turn out to be a discovery of some squalid story at the root of their ancestor’s migration from India as indentured labourer. In recent years as the Indian attitude to overseas diaspora has undergone important changes, and as more and more Indians came into contact with them, the overseas diasporics have enthusiastically reciprocated the Indian gesture. Needless to say, the memory of lost roots compels the Indian diaspora to look back nostalgically to their lost homeland, as Salman Rushdie states in his famous work *Imaginary Homelands* (1992), that If we look back, “we must also do in the knowledge- which gives rise to profound to give uncertainty- that our physical alienation from India most inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost” (10).

The diasporic Hindu is no longer a Hindu happening to live abroad, but one deeply transformed by his diasporic experiences. Parekh Bikhru, a political theorist, in his article “Some reflections on the Indian Diaspora” (1993) says, “Indian diaspora groups evolved distinct identities that marked them off both from each other and their counterparts in India leading to the creation of “little and large” “Indias” each with a distinct history, social structure and mode of self-conception,” all over the world.” (142) Though Amitav Ghosh admits that the overseas Indian diaspora is an important force in world culture and its culture is increasingly a factor within the culture of the Indian subcontinent, he does not encourage his sentimental pursuits in India.

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