

ISSN: 2278-9529

GALAXY

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

July 2016 - Vol. 5, Issue- 4

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

www.galaxyimrj.com

About Us: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/about-us/>

Archive: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/contact-us/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/faq/>

Voicing the Marginalised in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*: A Subaltern Perspective

S.Vahitha

Ph.D Research Scholar,
Research Department of English,
Scott Christian College,
Nagercoil.

This paper entitled, “Voicing the Marginalised in Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*: A Subaltern Perspective” focuses on the dark world of the marginalised victims of all sorts. The novel is set in the 1830s and the paper analyses the caste and gender oriented Indian society which pushes Kalua and Deeti respectively to run for their lives towards the margin. The paper also satirises the colonial powers who force the Indian peasants to grow poppy plants in order to export opium into China in the name of “Free Trade” (115). This subjugates the poor Indian peasants as they become the victims of poverty. There are also clear evidences in this paper to defend the plight of the zemindar Neel Rattan Halder against the horrible clutches of colonialism which reduces him to a voiceless convict. Amitav Ghosh’s powerful portrayal of the subaltern world is given a detailed expression in this paper to voice the pains and pangs of the marginalised.

The contemporary Indian English writer Amitav Ghosh reconstructs history and unfolds its marginalised sect through his creative writing. He captures the impact of colonialism, imperialism and the caste system which divides the natives and sets them apart as marginals. He voices the pain of these marginalised sects of people who are subordinated for generations by the oppressive chains of power. In *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh picks up many issues which push the subordinates towards the margin. These marginals are pushed forward to occupy a third space, and this is a prevalent theme in the postcolonial literature. This third space is occupied by the social outcastes of all sects who remain Othered from the “upper-class taboos” (40) of the dominant society. These subalterns occupy the third space to voice their marginalisation.

Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* exposes the subaltern world of Kalua, Deeti, and Neel who face the atrocities of the caste system, gendered subjectivity and the colonisers respectively. These individuals are dominated and dispelled into non-existing entities. They attempt to resist this subjectivity, and end up in utter despair. The oppressive forces dominate Kalua, Deeti and Neel and result in their segregation into a third space and this is given an in depth study in this paper.

The caste system has always been a scar on the Indian society. It alienates the lower caste people and silences their voice for generations. Their pain remains unknown to the world and they are confined within their untouchable dwellings and becomes the “occupant of the space outside the boundary of the village” (Mukherjee 10). Kalua is one among these unfortunates, as the very sight of his face is considered to bring undesired events as he is a low caste. Hukham Singh, a high caste Rajput, while travelling in Kalua’s cart prevents “direct contact with any of the driver’s belongings” (4). Hukham Singh sees that they never exchange glances, as the very sight of Kalua can defile him:

However, the fact is that it is precisely the experiences that flow from a centuries-old hierarchical and hereditary system, unalterable because sanctioned by

religion, with the concomitant notion of people as polluted and untouchable, which makes the Dalit unique and distinct. All other experiences of exclusion, subjugation, dispossession and oppression, experiences that resemble those of other groups, result from this fundamental reality. (Mukherjee 11)

Kalua's well-built body creates a kind of vulgar amusement to the rich land owners and they force him to mate with a horse. This is a demeaning humiliation that a man can ever experience and "Kalua uttered a cry that was almost indistinguishable in tone from the whinnying of the horse. This amused the landlords. . . . See, the b'henchod even sounds like a horse" (57). These oppressors shame him and make him a target of fun and laughter only because he is from a marginalised caste of the Indian society. The horse shits its dung over his thighs and belly and the land owners whip him at the back and ask him to do the same. This very incident leaves Kalua "unconscious in the sand, naked and smeared in dung" (57). This kind of marginality,

results from disadvantages which people and communities experience in a socially constructed system of inequitable relations within a hegemonic order that allows one set of individuals and communities to exercise undue power and control over another set with the latter manifesting one or a number of vulnerability markers based on class, ethnicity, age, gender and other similar characteristics. (Mehretu 91)

Kalua is humiliated and detained by the upper class society whereas Deeti, on the other hand is subjugated because of her gender. In an organised patriarchal society, woman is only "a beast of burden with a human face; the master exercised tyrannical authority, which exalted his pride and he turned against woman. Everything he gained he gained against her" (de Beauvoir 110). Woman suffers physically and psychologically, only because the gender roles make her secondary. Deeti, with her prospects "always been bedeviled by her stars" (30) is put up with trouble as her fate is governed by "Saturn- Shani- a planet that exercised great power on those born under its influence often bringing discord, unhappiness and disharmony" (30). This fate proves her a misfit for marriage and she accepts Hukham Singh gratefully without knowing that he, who works in an opium factory, is an addict of opium. On the very first night of their wedding, Deeti finds that she had married an "afeemkhor" (34). When Hukham Singh points out the drug and says, "this is my first wife" (34), Deeti understands that "the shade of Saturn had passed over the face, to remind of her destiny" (34).

Things become worse, as Deeti, the new bride is given opium and seduced by her brother-in-law Chandan Singh in the presence of her mother-in-law and subedor Bhyro Singh, their relative. This is the ugliest phase of women oppression and Deeti wonders, "Who could have impregnated her if not her husband? What exactly had happened that night?" (36). Deeti's state is pathetic as she wonders about the identity of her child. It is only when she hears her mother-in-law referring her to "Draupadi" (38) and "Saubhagyawati" (39), that Deeti confirms that the child is fathered by Chandan Singh and not by Hukham Singh, her husband.

As a woman, Deeti encounters all kinds of disturbances from her brother-in-law, who desires to have her as his mistress after her husband's death. He threatens her that she and her child will be deprived of her husband's land if she fails to co-operate with him. As he says, "my brother's land and his house will become mine on his death . . . he who owns the land, owns

the rice. When I become master of this house, how will you get by except at my pleasure” (157). Deeti refuses to surrender to her brother-in-law’s carnal desires and plans to die as a sati. Chandan Singh mocks her reminding her that she is unchaste as she has been seduced by him and not by her husband. He ridicules her saying he will be happy if she dies as a sati, as it would make their family “famous” (158) and he says, “We’ll build a temple for you and grow rich on the offerings” (158). It is only by the timely intervention of Kalua she escapes death and flees. This kindles her husband’s relatives to search for them in order to kill them so that they could restore their “family’s honour” (224). These circumstances transform Kalua and Deeti into *girimtiyas* or in other words, indentured labourers in the ship *Ibis* to be transported to Mareech. Such situations stripe them off their identity too. Deeti becomes Aditi and Kalua becomes Madhu Kalua and in the ship records, the English men change his name as “Maddow Colver” (284). As Dinesh Kumar says, “Both Deeti and Kalua become outsiders to their society - Deeti for abandoning her dying husband and her daughter; Kalua for living with an upper caste Hindu woman. Gender suffocates Deeti and Kalua is ostracized by the caste norms. They represent two different marginal locations of colonial India” (Kumar 35).

Kalua and Deeti, oppressed to such an extent decide to become *girimtiyas* to escape the situation and this decision makes their life even more awful. In the case of the *girimtiyas*, their families are paid and they are taken away so far “as if into the netherworld” (72). When Deeti first hears about the *girimtiyas*, she imagines herself to be one of them and it proves to be unbearable. She is ignorant that one day she would be part of them:

She tried to imagine what it would be like to be in their place, to know that you were forever an outcaste; to know that you would never again enter your father’s house; that you would never throw your arms around your mother; never eat a meal with your sisters and brothers; never feel the cleansing touch of the Ganga. And to know also that for the rest of your days you would eke out a living on some wild, demon-plagued island? (72)

The following saying describes the events even better - “In the good old days people used to say there were only two things to be exported from Calcutta: thugs and drugs – or opium and coolies as some would have it” (76). Ghosh effectively satirises the colonisers’ import of coolies or slaves from India to carry on their overseas projects, in the name of “*girimtis*” (72).

Besides the issues on the caste and gendered subjectivity, Ghosh also reveals the plight of the bankrupt zamindar Neel, under the horrible clutches of colonialism. Neel, the Raja of Raskhali who gives too much importance to caste and creed later suffers as a social outcaste in the hands of the colonisers. Neel is accused of forgery in his dealings with Benjamin Burnham and is left a bankrupt landowner at the mercy of the British officials. At his trial at court, Neel is announced to be the convict as it is obvious that the British are exempted from the law, which is applicable only to the natives. Neel echoes the words of the author in saying that, “it was they who had become the world’s new Brahmins” (239). All through his life, Neel has never eaten anything prepared by the “hands of unknown caste” (267) and in prison; his body resists the intake of food. He is cast away as a convict, along with “thousands of pindaris, thugs, dacoits, rebels, head-hunters and hooligans” (76) and therefore let down from his princely status.

Neel thinks of escaping the horrible situation, and the idea just vanishes as he also thinks about the overwhelming power of the colonisers – “For a wild instant, the idea of escape lodged

in Neel's mind – but only to vanish, as he recalled the map that hung in his daftar, and the red stain of Empire that had spread so quickly across it. Where would I hide? he said. The piyadas of Raskhali can't fight the battalions of the East India Company. No, there's nothing to be done" (173).

Neel's very entry into the Alipore jail gives a sour introduction as he is brought naked in front of the English master for examining his body. For Neel, "it was as if his body had passed into the possession of a new owner, who was taking stock of it as a man might inspect a house he had recently acquired, searching for signs of disrepair or neglect" (289). The former zamindar feels powerless to defend himself from the atrocities of the English master. To add to all miseries, his forehead is inscribed with Roman letters "forgerer alipore 1838" (292), which he would have never imagined to happen.

Worst of all is Neel's fate to clean the shit and vomit of Ah Fatt, his fellow convict, who is an afeemkhor. The previous royalty of Neel, does not coincide with the present situation - "In a way, he was none other than the man he had ever been, Neel Rattan Halder, but he was different too. Lowering himself to his heels, he squatted as he had often seen sweepers do, and began to scoop up his cell-mate's shit" (323). Neel's alienation is so severe that he considers himself to be a "castaway" (342) in his society. Later in his journey towards the jail in Mauritius in the ship *Ibis*, he is chained like an animal along with Ah Fatt. The subedar Bhyro Singh undertakes all possible ways to ill treat the Raja of Raskhali "as if to show the convicts what they were in for, the subedar took hold of their chains and herded them along like oxen, prodding them in the arse and occasionally flicking the tips of their ears with his lathi" (357). For the subedar Byro Singh, Ah Fatt seems to be a "filthy foreigner" (383) and Neel "a fallen outcaste" (384). These "misbegotten, befouled creatures" (383) are insulted by the subedor just for "the amusement of the maistries and silahdars" (384).

Ghosh also reveals the notorious opium trade carried on by the colonisers under the label of Free Trade. With this label, they get opium in India and export the same to China, and this in turn questions the lives of the Indians as well as the Chinese. Opium proves to be a boon to the colonisers as India is fertile enough to grow poppy plants abundantly. "The sahibs" (29) force the farmers to grow poppy plants instead of wheat, and if they refuse, they just throw silver into their house cunningly and make them accused in the presence of a bribed magistrate:

Come the cold weather, the English sahibs would allow little else to be planted; their agents would go from home to home, forcing cash advances on the farmers, making them sign *asami* contracts. It was impossible to say no to them: if you refused they would leave their silver hidden in your house, or throw it through a window. It was no use telling the magistrate that you hadn't accepted the money and your thumbprint was forged: he earned commissions on the opium and would never let you go off. (30)

The lives of the peasants are within the grip of the colonisers and are tightened according to the needs of the British. Stephen Morton is right when saying that in the "historical archives of the British Empire, the lives and political agencies of the rural peasantry in India were subordinate to the larger project of imperial governance and social control. . ." (Morton 50).

Burnham, the Englishman, a typical representative of the colonisers and supporter of Free Trade as a "God-given duty" (115) feels nothing wrong in exporting opium into China. When

China rejects this proposal, the colonisers do not hesitate to proclaim war against them, saying “If it is God’s will that opium be used as an instrument to open China to his teachings, then so be it” (116). Ironically, it does not trouble the colonisers “to invoke God in the service of opium” (116). Edward Said, in his *Culture and Imperialism*, lashes his anger against the colonisers as follows - “Dismissed or forgotten were the ravaged colonial peoples who for centuries endured summary justice, unending economic oppression, distortion of their social and intimate lives, and a recourseless submission that was the function of unchanging European superiority” (24).

The ship *Ibis* itself stands as a symbol of the subaltern world carrying off convicts and slaves to Mauritius. It has been “built to serve as a ‘black birder’, for transporting slaves” (11) and Burnham, the owner “had acquired her with an eye to fitting her for a different trade: the export of opium” (11). It serves its purpose best by carrying off men and women from different sects of the discriminated space towards an unknown fate. All these people are shifted only to work in the sugarcane fields of the British colonies as slaves. However, the ship wreck leaves these marginalised individuals free to survive amidst all odds and left to the sympathy of fate.

It is evident that gendered subjectivity, untouchability and colonialism prove to be the most demeaning oppressions suffered by individual characters at the hands of the society. These problems of caste, gender and colonialism happens everywhere around the world and *Sea of Poppies* highlights only a microcosmic part of it. Deeti suffers because of her gender and Kalua, because of his lower caste. Neel, on the other hand is at the mercy of the colonizers, who reduce the Raja of Raskhali to a worthless convict. All these marginalised characters start their journey towards the island of Mareech as coolies and convicts. Ghosh proves the plight of these marginalised victims with ample historical details and shows the subaltern world and their darkness. Though these victims are oppressed by the powerful hands of the dominants, they raise their voice, but in vain. These marginals are pushed within their boundaries of the third space as subalterns to be Othered from the dominants.

Works Cited:

Ghosh, Amitav. *Sea of Poppies*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2008. Print.

de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Trans. H. M. Parshley. UK: Vintage, 1997. Print.

Kumar, Dhinesh. “Marginality Afloat: Race, Caste, Class and the Colonial Ship in Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*”. *The Fictions of Amitav Ghosh: A Postcolonial Perspective*. Ed. B.K.Sharma. New Delhi: Sarup Book Publishers, 2011. 33-38. Print.

Mehretu, Assefa and Lawrence M. Sommers. “Concepts in Social and Spatial Marginality.” *Human Geography* 82.2 (2000): 89-101. Print.

Morton, Stephen. *Gayathri Chakravorty Spivak: Routledge Critical Thinkers Essential Guide for Literary Studies*. London: Routledge. 2003. Print.

Mukherjee, Alok. “Reading Sharankumar Limbale’s *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: From Erasure to Assertion*”. *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*. Trans. and ed. Alok Mukherjee. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2007. 1-18. Print.

Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage Books. 1994. Print.