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Sea of Poppies: A Socio Cultural Evolution of Indian Diaspora: A Saga of Struggle

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh is one of the leading writers of Indian English literature. His novel *Sea of Poppies* was shortlisted for Man Booker Prize in 2008. The novel is based on historical setting of colonial rule in India and to fulfil its need of supply of opium to china. 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 India peasantry forced into opium cultivation. It is a novel in relation to diasporic sensibility and reconstruction of identity. The majority of the characters of novel show an extra-ordinary ability of coping with situation and the new place. The characters make effort for identity reconstruction or transformation to suit with the new place.

Keywords – Colonial, Socio Cultural Evolution, Diaspora, Reconstruction of Identity.

Amitav Ghosh is one of the leading writers of Indian English literature. His novel *Sea of Poppies* was shortlisted for Man Booker Prize in 2008. The novel is based on historical setting of colonial rule in India and to fulfil its need of supply of opium to china. The novel primarily deals with opium was a crucial event in world history and is set in an era of agricultural scandal when western demand for profitable but inedible crops like poppy caused starvation in the subaltern world. This novel is set in India in 1838 on the Anglo Chinese

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opium wars 1838-43 and 1846 -60 The novel *Sea of poppies*. Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008) re-enacts the history of their problems and position in the society, their dislocation, the anguish of departure from their motherland and the way they confronted the issue of identity. Ghosh in his novel has penetrated the issue of identity of characters that are related to their personal, socio-political and national arena. Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* covers all the mentioned concepts of identity and deals with the issues of identity and covers the aspects of identity that an individual comes across in his social, political or cultural context. In the novel he has projected the identity transformation as they are in constant quest for identity, rather than lamenting on situations and facing identity crisis. He has also projected the colonial impact over the characters.

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 sailor, passengers and mariners from different corners of world for the ship Ibis, a slaving schooner new converted to the transport of coolies and opium of China. In bringing his troupe of character to Calcutta into the open water, Ghosh provides the reader with all manner of stories and equips himself with the personal to man and navigate an old-fashioned literary three-decker.

Sea of Poppies written by Amitav Ghosh reconstruct the first wave of history of Indian diaspora *Sea of Poppies* is a remarkable novel for its portrayal of imperialism and the migration of the indentured labourers of North India; specifically to Mauritius in Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*. The eradication of slavery in 1833, in the British Empire stopped the supply of the cheap labour for the plantation of the new trade regulation by the empire of China. In such historical improvements, the transportation and the recruitments of indentured workers from India became a commercial venture for the Britishers of imperialism. The workers had to sign an agreement called as 'girmity' in the North Indian language; so they were called as 'girmityas'. The novel *Sea of Poppies* is a saga of the 'girmityas' those who were the first Indian diaspora. In the novel *Sea of Poppies* Amitav Ghosh highlights the different diasporic elements in the early Indian diaspora. The main aspect of the novel is loss of homeland, national and cultural identity because of the migration and how the labourers try to form a new identity in a foreign land, exemplified by the slave-schooner Ibis. Ghosh points the ship Ibis in a womanish image when Deeti thinks that "at the start, that they were all kins now; that their rebirth in the ship's womb had made into a single family" (Ghosh 432)

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 India peasantry forced into opium cultivation. It is a novel in relation to diasporic sensibility

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and reconstruction of identity, By definition, a diaspora 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) Deeti's description of the Ibis that "as a vessel that was the mother-father of her new family, a great wooden 'mai-baap' an adoptive ancestor and parent of dynasties to come"(356-57) is suggestive of their new adoptive homeland, the plantation colony of Mauritius.

In the novel, almost all the character 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 passenger 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 this 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 ship experience new place and events comparing it with the past in the present in a different location.

Diaspora refers to the displacement of a person. Generally "at the heart of the notion of diaspora is the image of a journey. Diaspora is clearly not the same as casual travel. Nor do they normatively refer to the temporary sojourns. Paradoxically diasporic journeys are essentially about setting down, about putting roots 'elsewhere'" (Brah 443). Diasporic identity refers to the issues of identity related to diasporic people. In literary terms place and identity play significant roles, as it is the place that normally renders identity and reinforces vehement nationalistic passion. Place includes landscapes language environment culture etc. Identity is the way in which an individual or a group defines itself with these constituents of place. The importance of it can be traced in self conception social mares and national understanding.

Sea of poppies colossally deals with the term diaspora and diasporic identity. The most important thing that prevails in this novel is that the displacement and the journeys of the characters are undeniable. The subalterns of the society move due to their personal reasons or bad situation. In the beginning of the novel we find Deeti a simple, pious lady caring mother and an efficient house wife. Married to Hukam Singh, a crippled worker in

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Ghazipur opium factory, the unfortunate Deeti figures out that on her wedding night she was drugged with opium by her marriage in place of her infertile husband this brother in law is the real father of Deeti's daughter Kabutri when he husband dies Deeti sends Kabutri to stay with relations. Deeti looks almost certain to meet her doom when she is forced to consider sati ritual (immolation on her husband's funeral pyre) as the only option in the face of threats of more rapes by the brother-in-law, but then Kalua, the untouchable caste ox man from the neighbouring village comes to her rescue the couple flee and unite. This is not acceptable to the high caste villagers. In order to escape Deeti's in-laws, she and Kalua become indentured servants on a schooner named Ibis.

Neel Rattan Halder, a wealthy rajah whose dynasty has been ruling the 'zamindari' of Rakshali for centuries; is confronted by MR. Burnham with the need to sell off his incurred when trading opium with china at the height of the opium trade has come to a standstill, as a result of the resistance shown by the Chinese authorities he is left with no money to clear his loan when MR. Burnham proposes to settle the load for Halder's 'zamindari' is his family's ancestral property and selling it would mean dependents living in his house and 'zamindari'. He is tried for forgery but it is a sham trial orchestrated by Burnham and his cronies. The court punishes him by sentencing him to work as an indentured labourer for seven years in Mauritius. It is then that he meets 'Ah Fatt', a half-Chinese; half-Parsi opium addict from canton, his sole companion in prison since the two will eventually be transported together on the ibis. Paulette Azad Baboon ob Kissin move because of their choice Lascars and others moves for economic reasons and Neel, the king moves due to colonial injustice. Their events & situations of life act as a catalyst for their movement be it any global notional or personal reasons. Ghosh in his novel *Sea of Poppies* deals with the first wave of Indian diaspora, referred as old diaspora. Though this aspect of diaspora has been somewhat ignored in the corpus of diasporic writings yet Ghosh has made an effort to depict a true picture of it. As an anthropologist and historian, he takes help of historical records, lexicographers, linguists, historian and document to present the picture of the indentured diaspora of nineteenth century India. In the novel, Ghosh presented the reason of their displacement and their way of handling this "In *Sea of Poppies*.....Ghosh records the political and socio-economic conditions that led to the mass migration of impoverished Indian peasant as indentured labourers to the Mauritius island. Indentured immigration created a diaspora of Indians that is spread all over the world"(Mathur 5-6)

The majority of the characters of novel show an extra-ordinary ability of coping with situation and the new place. The characters make effort for identity reconstruction or transformation to suit with the new place. As Stuart Hall in his book says "diaspora identities are constantly producing and reproducing themselves a new, through transformation and

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difference”(438). They are highly adoptive as well as adaptive and adjust very well with the new place and role. “It is this ability to relocate to new spaces and adapt to these spaces that gives a verge Ghosh’s characters. They belong to a new group of people unfettered by the burden of “otherness” and wonderfully blessed with the diasporic hope equipping them with a rare strength to fight with anxiety”(Bhattacharya 133).

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. Maker and Paranjape, in his essay, “Displaced Relations: Disporas, 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 or 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 Mark’ puts it in his book ‘Capital’ (1906) the “transformation of feudal exploitation of feudal exploitation into capitalist exploitation”(1:699). Earlier the common people were exploited by feudal by system, now they are under the grip of exploitation of British colonialism. Amitav Ghosh has tried to depict women’s search for identity and their right to live a life freedom and dignity in his novel women are strong, they travel and take decisions to live an independent life. They are not controlled by men. They are individuals with freedom and progress.

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 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. In the novel Ghosh has shown the rebellious approach of those people who boarded the Ibis and leave behind their identities in terms of caste, religion etc. And adopt of new identity of the oppressed-a new community takes birth. In this context of Binarism Saumini writes:

Amitav Ghosh within the text *Sea of Poppies* have been successful in exposing the crude reality of caste binarism existing within the social structure. The distinction of Ghosh’s

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vision lies in investigating the full humanity of the dehumanized subalterns and he finally takes the ground to construct their identity that can enable them to make spaces in the main stream of caste best oppressive mechanism of social order. (Saumini1110)

The diasporic Hindu is no longer a Hindu happening to live abroad, but one deeply transformed by his diasporic experiences. Parekh Bikhu, a political theorist, in his article “some reflection on the Indian Diaspora” (1993) “Indian diaspora groups evolved distinct identities that mark them of both from each other and their counterparts in India leading to the creation of little and large” ‘Indians’ 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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