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Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* : A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

The novel *Sea of Poppies*, set in the backdrop of 19th century opium wars, depicts the East India Company's imperial designs. The motive of the East India Company was not limited to trade and commerce, rather it expands the Empire's monopoly on the economic policies and then establish themselves as the rulers. At the centre of the novel there is a metaphor of journey of a slaving schooner *Ibis* set to travel across the 'Black Water' to transport the opium, coolies, convicts and indentured labourers. In fact the East India Company's trade and commerce turns out to be a new form of penal system for the British. The sub-text of the novel gives an obvious sense of colonial law that proved to be effective machinery in exercising authority and control on the natives.

Ghosh's projected *Ibis* trilogy named after the name of ship 'Ibis', which starts with the first novel *Sea of Poppies*. It is a very interesting novel which talks about the opium trade that was started by Britishers. It also talks about the consequences of this trade. *Girmitiya* system is also included in this novel.

Key Words: Girmitiyas, Opium Trade, Sati.

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* : A Historical Perspective

Amitav Ghosh has dealt with Indian history in many of his novels. Being an Indian, he is well familiar with the history of India. He uses history to convey his message by intermingling different themes with the history. Partition period of India and Pakistan, Emergency period, assassination of Indira Gandhi and the riots which followed are some of the examples of Indian historical events he has treated. Besides this he uses history of India in British and Asian context.

Ghosh's projected *Ibis* trilogy named after the name of ship 'Ibis', which starts with the first novel *Sea of Poppies*. It is a very interesting novel which talks about the opium trade that was started by Britishers. It also talks about the consequences of this trade. *Girmitiya* system is also included in this novel. He has based his first novel of this trilogy on these historical events. Answering the question, why he chose opium trade for his projected trilogy?, Ghosh says,

“Basically, it was opium revenues that made the British Raj in India possible. Indeed, it was silently acknowledged by the British who resisted all attempts to end the opium trade until the 1920s. In fact the British Empire didn't long outlive the opium trade”.¹

(<http://radioopensource.org/amitav-ghosh-and-his-sea-of-poppies/#>)

The novel is set up in 19th century India. It is based on the most famous trade of opium and the system of indentured labour. It also talks about the interconnection of both of them. The idea of this theme came from Ghosh's knowing why his ancestors moved to Chhapara in Bihar from their native place in Bengal. He found that the factories for opium processing established by Britishers were providing good opportunity to the migrants as they needed manpower. The novel includes the story of their getting jobs in opium factory and also the deterioration of their life. Peasants were forced to grow opium in their fields. They were also entangled into *girmitiya* system and they had to leave their land as well as livestock as *girmitiyas*.

Opium trade was another very successful wealth generator for Britishers. It came to flourish when the spice trade has no longer remained profitable for the Britishers. Sakoon Singh in his review of *Sea of Poppies* writes,

“It was a new triangle that defined the resurgent British economics at this time- opium produced in India, processed by the British in Indian Carcannas and sold to reluctant Chinese markets.....concurrently in the Americas, slavery was abolished and there was an acute vacuum in the labour market. The British needed hands to work on their fields and plantations abroad. The plight of the Indian peasants and the need for labour abroad- these two factors got together and Indian shores saw bands of poor impoverished Indians leaving their lands forever as contract labourers or *girmityas*”.²

<http://www.museindia.com/viewarticle.asp?issid=26&id=1625>

These very historical events have been used by Ghosh in this novel. With this he has interwoven the social evil of the ancient time in the novel *Deeti* who was married to a carcanna worker. Her husband was an opium addict and dies premature. She was forced by the people of their community to sit on her husband's funeral pyre and commit sati. Here, Ghosh reminds us of an age old ritual of being sati by setting a recent widow to fire during cremation of her dead husband. It was the same ritual against which Raja Ram Mohan Roy led a movement and removed it.

We find a social history also in the novels of Amitav Ghosh. Being a Social Anthropologist he was and is concerned with the social life and culture of particular time period. In his novels too he gives space to these aspects of human life. Sati ritual is one of such example. It is *Deeti* who dares to flee from the place with the help of *Kalua*. *Kalua* is a driver of an ox-cart in which *Hukam Singh* used to travel to his work place. While reading the description of the episode when *Kalua* comes to take *Hukam Singh* in his ox-Cart, we find another social evil that was present during the time in which the novelist has set this novel. *Kalua* hides his face so *Hukam Singh* cannot see him. *Hukam Singh* belongs to higher caste whereas *Kalua* is from lower caste. So it was believed that if somebody sees a face of anybody from lower caste, it is an ill-omen.

Here he talks about the concept of untouchability and superstition. He knowingly or unknowingly treats and depicts social history of India in his novels. Same concept of social evil has been placed before the readers in his novel *The Glass Palace* through *Uma*. Explaining reforming activities of the freedom fighters, *Uma* tells *Dinu*,

“It is true that India is driven with evils such as those you describe- caste, the mistreatment of women, ignorance, illiteracy. But take the example of your own country, Burma- they had no caste system there.

It is simple mistaken to imagine that colonialist sit down and ponder the rights and wrongs of the societies they want to conquer; that is not why empires are built”.³ (The Glass Palace, 294-295)

Ghosh attracts the attention of the readers towards the social evils of the day. He interweaves them with the main theme of the novel that they seem to be a part of it. In *Sea of Poppies*, with the main story of Opium Trade and indentured labour, he interweaves the evil rituals and customs of the time. Sanjay Sipahimalani rightly says,

“Ghosh takes his time in building up the characters, filling in their backgrounds and circumstances leading to their current predicament. In characteristically limpid prose and with the eye of a social anthropologist- a discipline in which he’s well-versed, he details the customs, diet, cloth and social restrictions of these individuals who are to be thrown together on *Ibis* to become ‘Jahaj-bhais’.”⁴

Though he seems more a historian, he is basically a fiction writer who mixes both of them and creates a newer one, a fictional history or historical fiction. He himself says, ‘History can say things in great detail, even though it may say them in rather dull factual detail. The novel on the other hand can make links that history cannot’. He presents history from present point of view which makes it fresh and live. In *Sea of Poppies* he does the same. He takes us back to India of 1838 when Opium trade was in its childhood and flourished under the effect of British colonialism.

Historically this trade was opted by Britishers to strengthen their economy which was down due to fall in spice trade. On the other hand they needed commodity exchange with china which they earned through Opium Trade illegally. Though *Ibis* is at the centre of the novel, there are many other stories and histories have been interwoven with the main theme. *Ibis* is directly related to both Opium trade as it was used to carry it and also with indentured labour (*Girmitiyas*) as it was used for this purpose too.

References

- ¹ Amitav Ghosh in conversation with Christopher Lydon
<http://radioopensource.org/amitav-ghosh-and-his-sea-of-poppies/#>
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- ⁴ Sipahimalani, Sanjay. "A Sea Change into Something Rich and Strange", *Sunday Hindustan Times* (New Delhi: 15th June, 2008), Pg.14.