
Portrayal of Women in Amitav Ghosh's "Sea of Poppies"

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Thangam S
R. Ponmani Subha Chellam
J. Vasantha Sena

Abstract

The paper deals with the well-known fiction of Amitav Ghosh's, "Sea of Poppies". This fiction was published in 2008. Amitav's works mostly speak about ecological issues and it mainly consists of historical elements. To add some more information, this fiction was shortlisted for Man Booker Prize in the same year in which the book was published. And this fiction "Sea of Poppies" is the first book of his Ibis trilogy. The other books of this trilogy are: River of Smoke and Flood of Fire published in the year 2011 and 2015 respectively. Coming to the fiction, the story is set prior to the First Opium War, on the banks of the holy river Ganges and in Calcutta. The author compares the Ganges to the Nile, the lifeline of the

Thangam S
Research Scholar, PG & Research Department of English, A P C Mahalaxmi College for Women, Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu, India. sthangavarshini@gmail.com

R. Ponmani Subha Chellam
Assistant Professor Department of English, The MDT Hindu College, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India.

J. Vasantha Sena
Assistant Professor, PG & Research Department of English, A P C Mahalaxmi College for Women, Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu, India.

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Egyptian civilization in this work. He also portrays the characters as opium seeds emanating in large numbers, where every single seed is uncertain about its future. The story is about the intertwining stories of several people who find themselves aboard the Ibis, a former slave ship, in the early 19th century. The women characters from different circumstances are treated to the worst in this fiction. The major themes are of portrayal of women, environmental impacts on society, imperialism and colonialism under a backdrop of drug smuggling and human trafficking at the hands of the British in India and China. So the paper is going to revolve around the portrayal of women in this work.

Keywords

Environmental impact, Role of women, Opium, Deception.

Amitav Ghosh is an Indian author who uses complex narrative strategies to explore the nature of national and personal identity, particularly the people of India and South Asia. He has written historical fiction and also written non – fiction works discussing colonialism and climate change in a wide range. He has written 10 novels and 10 non - fiction works. For his contribution to the literature he was awarded with our country’s highest literary honours, such as Jnanpith Award, Padma Sri, etc.

Between 2004 and 2015, he wrote the Ibis trilogy, which revolves around the impacts of the First Opium War. The Ibis Trilogy as said before consists of books namely Sea of Poppies, River of Smoke, and Flood of Fire. This paper is going to deal with the novel Sea of Poppies which got published in the year 2008. Actually this book, “Sea of Poppies” was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. This story is set prior to the First Opium War, on the banks of the holy river Ganges and in Calcutta.

The book has won several prizes such as:

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- Vodafone Crossword Book Award for Fiction
 - British Book Design and Production Award
 - Indiaplaza Golden Quill Award for best novel
 - Indiaplaza Golden Quill Popular Vote Award
 - Tagore Literature Award

Before getting into the analysis of the portrayal of women in this fiction, let's have a brief summary of it. In *Sea of Poppies*, multiple characters' stories are interwoven about their experiences onboard the *Ibis*, a former slave ship, in the early 1800s. The main characters use differing degrees of deception when boarding the ship in various more and less ideal situations. The fiction's main themes center on imperialism and colonialism against a backdrop of drug trafficking and people trafficking carried out by the British in China and India.

Deeti sees the *Ibis* while tending to her poppy farm hundreds of kilometers inland at the start of Part 1. Deeti chooses to die on a window pyre since her spouse is an opium addict and a member of a wealthy family in the area. She assumes she has nothing more to give after his death. But at the last second, low-caste ox-cart driver Kalua comes to her rescue, and the two flee together. Zachary Reid, meantime, embarks on his first journey aboard the *Ibis* in Baltimore. After a string of misfortunes, he finds himself in Calcutta as the sole surviving member of the original crew and the acting captain, under Serang Ali's tutelage. After the *Ibis* smashes his boat, Jodu, a Muslim boatman, goes back to Calcutta to locate Paulette, the woman who reared him. Jodu asks Paulette to ask Zachary to secure work for him on the ship. Finally, when the *Ibis* arrives, Benjamin Burnham meets with Neel Halder, the Raja of Raskhali, to talk about his debts. Burnham puts him up on false accusations of forgery when he rejects once more to give up his lands.

Part 2 finds Deeti and Kalua continuing downstream while trying to stay out of sight. They eventually arrive in Chhapra, but choose to enlist as indentured slaves in Mauritius to flee after seeing

Bhyro Singh and learning that they are being pursued. While this is going on, Zachary starts to integrate himself into Calcutta's gentlemanly society. Burnham and company grow fond of him, but the first mate of the expedition despises him almost immediately and almost kills him at the end of the section. Jodu, a freshwater boatman, is initially disliked by the rest of the crew, but he soon wins their respect as he gets to know the ship. Paulette comes to the realization that she has to leave Calcutta and the Burnhams. She first approaches Zachary to get her on the ship, but when he refuses, she and Baboo Nob Kissin devise a scheme to be brought on board while posing as Bengali women and pretending to be going on an arranged marriage. Neel receives a penalty that includes losing his estates and working for seven years in Mauritius. He meets Ah Fatt, an opium addict who will be traveling with him, while being taken to jail to await his release.

As the many narratives come together in Part 3, the action is nearly exclusively set at sea. When Deeti and Kalua embark, they find out that Bhyro Singh is on board. They manage to avoid him for the most of the voyage, but they learn at the conclusion that he is aware of their presence. He starts to get even with Deeti; despite Kalua's ability to save her, one of Bhyro's guards goes crazy, and Kalua is accused of killing him. Kalua escapes his shackles and kills Bhyro while being flogged for the unrelated act of saving Deeti in Ghazipur. He is then condemned to be executed by Chillingworth.

While everything is going on, Zachary starts to settle into his role as second mate and regularly spars with Crowle, the first mate. Zachary learns that Serang Ali was a pirate through conversation. When Zachary approaches Ali, he consents to vanish in Port Louis.

When Crowle learns of Zachary's ethnicity, he tries to use extortion to force him to rebel, but Zachary refuses. Due to Jodu's infatuation with Munia, one of the migrant ladies, Bhyro Singh violently beats him. In the meantime, Paulette unintentionally reveals herself to Jodu before purposefully disclosing herself to Zachary when she learns of his ethnicity and realizes that Zachary is the only one aboard the ship who could comprehend her many identities. As Neel and Ah Fatt

become closer, Crowle intervenes and gets Ah Fatt to pee on Neel in exchange for what he thinks is opium.

As Zachary and Crowle argue in the last chapter, Ah Fatt enters covertly and murders Crowle as payback for what he did. Zachary watches Serang Ali, Jodu, Kalua, Neel, and Ah Fatt vanish in a stolen longboat that is sailing for Singapore as he dashes above board. Paulette, Baboo Nob Kissin and Deeti, the last of whom he has never met but knows are on deck.

"Gender is not an easy conversation to have. It makes people uncomfortable, sometimes even irritable." (Adichi, 8) This quote can be an apt one to begin with the paper. Because even though we live in the 21st century, people both men and even some women are not comfortable speaking or clarifying the issues based on the gender clash. To be more precise, they are not even ready to accept the fact that women and men are equal. Moving on to the fiction, it speaks a lot about the impact of opium which is lethal both in domestic as well as in society. And we are going to look at how the women characters are portrayed by the author as some were feeble, some were brave and some were made submissive.

One such character is Deeti, who lives in the village near Ghazipur, and is married to Hukam Singh, who was wounded in the leg while serving as a sepoy in a British regiment. She was also blessed with a daughter named Kabutri. The village is filled with prejudices and superstitions which are expressed via the character. "she had light grey eyes... this had the effect of unnerving the young, and of reinforcing their prejudices and superstitions to the point where they would sometimes shout taunts at her – chudaliya, dainiya – as if she were a witch" (5). This can be taken as a perfect example of the gender-biased practices in the village where even a natural deformity is considered evil and they are treated differently which is very rude.

Even though her husband has a deformity in his body, he works in the factory in Ghazipur. But Deeti would do the farming work as the village has been made to indulge in poppy cultivation. To their adjacent

field comes the field of Chandan Singh, her husband's younger brother. Being a family member, he never understands and supports her but to add up the problems he behaves as a pervert. "What's the matter? Working alone again? How long can you carry on like this? You need a son, to give you a helping hand. You're not barren, after all..." (6). Already he is a man of five children but he always ill-treats her. As she is used to his jibes she just ignores it as she has no other ways to stop his wrong attitude towards her.

And the main part of difficulties faced by the womanhood is dowry. This can be seen through this upcoming line in the novel: "The new thatch had been paid for by her own father, as a part of her dowry" (30). This denotes the dowry that was given to Deeti for her marriage even though her husband had a deformity that no one considered as a negative factor. Not only here, but wherever in the country we go, women face this problem of dowry, even if the girl is educated or uneducated, rich or poor, she is treated by the value of dowry she brings along with her during the marriage. "Even the language we use illustrates this. The language of marriage is often a language of ownership, not a language of partnership." (Adichi, 6) The people in the society don't see the bride as a human being, they treat her as a commodity and they exchange for fine offers as they do in business transactions.

Deeti's father was not a rich man to afford this but he did because he wanted to somehow marry her daughter because he strongly believed in her birth chart. This can be seen from the lines given: "Her prospects had always been bedeviled by her stars, her fate being ruled by Saturn-Shani-a planet that exercised great power on those born under its influence, often bringing discord, unhappiness and disharmony. With this shadow darkening her future, Deeti's expectations had never been high: ..." (30). This incident from the novel makes us to be clear in the point that even superstitious beliefs play a vital role in determining the fate of a woman.

Her dreams are shattered on the first night of her marriage when her husband makes her inhale opium and she is raped in a state

of unconsciousness by her brother-in-law Chandan Singh with the help of his uncle Subedar Bhyro Singh. She begins to doubt her husband after he starts ignoring her just after her first night and she becomes pregnant. Her mother-in-law says that she is like Draupadi which is expressed as: "In her last days, when her mind was wandering she often referred to Deeti as 'Draupadi': when asked why, she would murmur drowsily: Because the earth has never seen a more virtuous woman than Draupadi, of the Mahabharata, wife to five brothers. It's a fortunate woman, a saubhagyawati, who bears the children of brothers for each other . . ." (38-39)

She becomes sure that her mother-in-law knows everything about the father of her child and to reveal the truth to her mother-in-law, she starts giving her opium. One day under the influence of opium, she confesses that her daughter's father is her brother-in-law. The behavior of Deeti's mother-in-law shows how a woman is so blinded in love for his son that she helps her own sons violate the honour of a woman. This happens at times, a woman herself becomes the hurdle for another woman and that is the worst part of everything.

Days passed by, and when her husband became weak and was in the last days of his life, her brother-in-law started taking advantage of her situation. To the eyes of the world, he pretended as if he cared his brother's family, but on the contrary, he planned to seduce her by threatening about her and her daughter's future. But she is stubborn that she would never fall into his trap as she replies: "I will burn on my husband's pyre rather than give myself to you." (158) Even he was ready to give her life on the old aged tradition Sati just for the purpose of money. He is a man made of vices which can be easily grasped from these lines: "To have a sati in the family will make us famous. We'll build a temple for you and grow rich on the offerings." (158) In such circumstances, Deeti decided to protect her daughter and her future. So she sent her daughter to her brother's house so that she will be in safe hands.

Nearly 20 days later, Deeti's husband passed away. As told by her brother in law, they were about to prepare Deeti for Sati.

“Following close behind was a second procession, and upon its entry into the clearing, Kalua saw that it was headed by Deeti, in a resplendent white sari – except that she was slumped over, barely upright: she would not have been able to stand on her own feet, much less walk, had she not been supported by her brother-in-law, Chandan Singh and several others. Half dragged and half carried, she was brought to the pyre and made to sit cross-legged on it, beside her husband’s corpse. (177)”

From these lines, it is crystal clear that a woman has been subjugated in society and not even they don’t have a peaceful life after the death of her husband. So she decided to end her life to escape from the evils of the society. How pathetic to hear it! To their surprise, it was Kalua who saved her from the disaster. She is saved by Kalua, an untouchable from a society that is ruled by patriarchal laws. Kalua rescued her from the burning pyre and jumped into the river Ganga. Later when she regains consciousness, she feels “she had shed the body of the Old Deeti, with the burden of its karma; she had paid the price her stars had demanded of her, and was free now to create a new destiny as she willed, with whom she chose.” (178)

After her rebirth, she sheds meekness and weakness possessed by her as Deeti. She becomes confident and independent to make decisions about her future. Her marriage with Kalua can be seen as perfect in terms of understanding between them because before taking any decision Kalua consults Deeti and protects her from every danger. Her entry on the board of Ibis is symbolic because she enters the ship in gunghata as a new bride with people around her. Her change of name to Aditi while registering her name in migration list shows her search for identity because till now she was known as Kabutari-ki-ma. “It was on her lips to identify herself as Kabutari-ki-ma-the name by which she has been known ever since her daughter’s birth . . . Aditi, she said softly, I am Aditi.” (233)

“Deeti was not especially inclined to intervene, but when it became clear that no one else was going to say anything, what could

she do but speak up? Wait! She told the two boys. This isn't right, what they're telling you to do.

And who's going to stop us? Came the sneering response. You?

Not me maybe, said Deeti. But there are others here..." (414)

These lines expose the newborn quality of Deeti in expressing her voice for the voiceless people. The voiceless are the people who travel along with her in the Ibis. When a person among them was dead, the ship inmates were about to throw the dead body into the sea without allowing for the proper final rituals. So it's Deeti who voiced out and at last succeeded in it.

Not only she was the voice for the voiceless, she also played a crucial role in changing the future of the Ibis inmates by setting an exemplary role model. It can be seen from the decision taken by Heeru, an inmate from Ibis, who when approached for the new life, as she is a widow without any proper family connections, accepts the marriage proposal by one of the male inmate of Ibis. "What's your answer for now? What else, Bhauji? Yes, I'm ready . . . Deeti laughed. Arre Heeru! You're a bold one! Why do you say that, Bhauji? said Heeru anxiously. Do you think it's a mistake? No, said Deeti firmly." (441) These lines can highly explain that it was because of Deeti, that this change in the thought process of the inmates was possible and also in executing their thoughts into action which clearly shows the level of transformation among them.

Paulette Lambert is one of the female characters of this fiction. Paulette's father is a French botanist who lives in Calcutta. Her mother passed away during childbirth aboard Jodu's father's boat, and her father and Jodu's mother nurtured her thereafter. She thus grew up in close proximity to Jodu and mostly assimilated Bengali customs. She was raised by the Burnhams following the death of her father and was compelled to embrace Christianity and Europe. In a desperate attempt to flee, she first begs Zachary to get her aboard the Ibis so she can travel back to Mauritius, her mother's native country. When he declines, she slips by dressing like one of the Hindu women on board and pretending to be Baboo Nob Kissin's niece who is

traveling to Mauritius for an arranged marriage. “If we do something over and over again, it becomes normal. If we see the same thing over and over again, it becomes normal.” (Adichie, 2) So this line as said by Adichie strongly explains that people are used to the oppression and the submissiveness especially the women sector just because they see people control the orphans or hear the news of the orphans being controlled. But this has to be changed and that’s what happens in the fiction which the author expresses through the character of Paulette Lambert.

Another female character - Elokeshi, Raja Neel Ratan’s mistress, had a distinct personality. “A well-wisher in Calcutta had warned her of financial trouble in the Raskhali zemindary: she had paid no heed at the time, but she sensed now that something was really awry and that she might have to re-examine her options.” (46) She has the above said thought on Neel the Rashkali Zamindar because she was practical that she is not bound with love on him but she was bound with him just because of the money he had. The Zamindars had the right to have several women for sex, passion, and fun, but eventually, after Raja was detained on a false charge, she betrayed him after learning that he had lost his belongings.

While we go through the female characters of this fiction, next comes up the wife of Raskhali Zemindar – Rani Malati. Only the name suggests respect and value but no one especially her husband never considered her as a better half. “We use the word respect for something a woman shows a man, but not often for something a man shows a woman.” (Adichie, 6) As per these lines, only the wife has to respect her husband even he may not be a Zemindar, but whatever happens the husband in turn will not respect or not even think of her as his equal and the same happens here. He always had a liking and bonding with Elokeshi rather than his wife. But she, the Rani does all her duty perfectly as a wife and a mother. Later on, when he learns the betrayal of his mistress, he realizes the value of his wife.

Additionally fascinating is Taramony’s persona as Baboo Nob Kissin’s guru mom. She is the wife of his uncle, who unsuccessfully

married six years before he passes away in an attempt to have a male successor. Compared to his uncle, she is much younger. His uncle's final wish is to abandon her to a life of misery and suffering as a widow in Brindavan. She is roughly Baboo Nob Kissin's age, and he is struck by Taramony's spirituality and her love for her God, Lord Krishna, who has lotus eyes. They move into a tiny home in Kolkata's Ahiritola riverside neighborhood. The woman who lived with her niece was not a source of scandal, and her tiny group of devotees and followers referred to her as Ma and received spiritual guidance from her. She passes away from a fever, but not before promising to return and reappear in his body to complete their mission. Baboo Nob Kissin is constantly willing to assist ladies, whether they are Paulette or Elokeshi, Neel's mistress, thanks to the influence of Guru Ma. He develops empathy when resolving issues for ladies. Ghosh has attempted to depict the situation of Bengali upper class women who were married to much older men than they were and were forced to move after their husbands passed away.

Ghosh has made an effort to portray the suffering of women in nineteenth-century India, representing all facets of the society. He has dealt with societal issues such as sati and rape committed by the groom's brother under the guise of marriage to hide the groom's impotence and the hardships and seclusion of widowhood in relation to ladies from Calcutta's Brahman household who are sent to Brindavan. If women receive support from their male equivalents, as Deeti does from Kalua, as Ghosh suggests, there is hope. They have the capacity to gain independence and assume leadership roles, much like Deeti in the book. In the book, they are on a par with men.

So after analyzing most of the female characters in this fiction, Amitav Ghosh has instilled a transformation in them. Some people will say a woman is subordinate to men because it's our culture. But culture is constantly changing. (Adichi, 9) But the fact is culture is the one set by the human beings on their own for the peaceful life of a particular community. As said by Adichi, Culture remains changing with the time. So the person, that's we who make the culture, must

ensure that is for the development of the society and not for its destruction. So it is both men and women who have to work together to solve the gender issue.

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