

GIRMITIYAS' JOURNEY IN THE SILENCE HISTORY OF THE BLACK WATERS IN AMITAV GHOSH'S SEA OF POPPIES

KULDEEP MATHUR

R. R. MEHTA SCI. & C L PARIKH COLLEGE OF COMMERCE,
PALANPUR, GUJARAT, INDIA

Abstract

History is vocal. Nevertheless, colonialism under its supremacy and glory has buried few histories which gave a picture of its brutality, barbarism and savagery. Capital imperialism silenced the history of girmitiyas who were dispatched to nether land. The no point of return to their homeland and being exploited in black waters; was aptly conceived in Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies in the colonial backdrop. The experiences of Indian indenture emigration have emerged as a focal point for advanced studies for anthropologists, socio-linguists, historians, pragmatic researchers and post colonial novelists. This paper explores the early section of indentured labourers, girmitiyas, who bore the brunt of their inevitable migration to Mauritius in 1838, just a year after the Opium Wars waged by British colonial masters against china's ban on opium import from East India Company. Amitav Ghosh aptly presents enormous historical accounts of "forgotten history" of pangs and humiliation of girmitiyas mutilated their self while crossing the 'black water'. This paper also endeavors to assess the historical relevance of the novel in the colonial backdrop. The moral corruption coupled with imperial hegemony severed the lives of Mauritius bound Ibis ship of convicts considerably.

Keywords: *girmitiyas, colonial India, opium haroest, alternative history, sea archives.*

GIRMITIYAS' JOURNEY IN THE SILENCE HISTORY OF THE BLACK WATERS IN AMITAV GHOSH'S SEA OF POPPIES

-KULDEEP MATHUR

"Colonialism, we have seen, reshapes, often violently, physical territories, social terrains as well as human identities." (Loomba155)

The experiences of Indian indenture emigration have emerged as a focal point for advanced studies for anthropologists, socio-linguists, historians, pragmatic researchers and post colonial novelists. Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (SOP), aptly deals with the theme of indenture, migration and the transformation of self, submerging *girmitiyas* cultural identity from the Ganga's plains into the unprecedented and incessant turmoil and turbulences of / in colonial 'black waters.' The novel illustrates intimate relationship between "history, politics, and bodies of water" (Vergès 247). In his seminal work, *Imperial Connections*, Metcalf marked of how the Indian Ocean was turned to be a sea of 'silence history' in the colonial archives in the nineteenth century in contrast to the flourishing trading voyages and Christian supremacy: "It is as if a bustling sea full of vessels and people had suddenly been emptied, its waters drained away."

Agriculture Scam Backdrop:

In 1883, the British government sent the accomplished linguist Sir George Grierson to look into alleged abuses in the recruitment of *girmitiyas* from India ("coolies"- a generic term used to refer to indentured labourers from South, Southeast, and East Asia) who ended up on ships bound for British plantations throughout the world. In his diary, Grierson wrote about an encounter with the father of one female coolie in a village along the Ganges, noting that the man "denied having any such relative, and probably she had gone wrong and been disowned by him." The historical record

provides only a trace of this woman: a name, a processing number, a year of emigration. In his ambitious new novel, *SOP*, a finalist for this year's Man Booker Prize, Amitav Ghosh attempts to fill in the blanks left by the archives. Set partly in Bengal, the scene of Grierson's inquiry, and drawing on accounts the Englishman left.

Opium, like colonialism, is a sensitive and charged issue. Amitav Ghosh's *SOP* is set in India in 1838, on the eve of the first Anglo-Chinese Opium War of 1839- a war fought between the British East India Company and the Qing Dynasty in China from 1839 to 1842 with the aim of forcing China to import the British opium. Unlike the other colonial transgressions, one profound profitable carcass in the British imperialism cupboard was through opium trade. The epic novel elucidates two monstrous economic chapters of the 19th century: the cultivation of opium as a cash crop in Bengal and Bihar for Chinese market, and the transport of Indian *girmitiyas* to harvest sugar cane for British on such islands of Mauritius, Fiji and Trinidad.

The opium is presented in *SOP* as an epitome of colonialism. The novel highlights the link between the slave and the opium trade when Mr. Burnham describes his education as an imperial merchant: "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..." (76). The East India Company's wealth was accelerated as a result of illegal export of opium to China. Amitav Ghosh corresponds with an argument of Carl Trocki: "Without the drug, there probably would have been no British Empire" in the Indian subcontinent since "the economic foundation of the imperial economy laid on opium" (Trocki xiii).

For the centuries, the impact of Buddhism on China was so widespread, deep and comprehensive that Chinese feeling of rancor was never deep rooted. It was almost in the 1840s the Chinese were hell-bent to hold back a trade that had swiftly destabilized the economy by turning millions of them into opium addicts. Under the garb of freedom, British waged of first Opium

War against China. According to the educated Chinese, Indians have fallen from the path of virtue and *dharma*, leading to their spiritual degradation. The result was foreign domination. If the West had not conquered India, they would not have been able to spread the tentacles of imperialism all over Asia. Much of the 19th century Victorian British Empire phenomenally expanded with Christian superiority arrogance and furthered its Britain wealth and power built on drug money. For the British, free trade had the same status as Jesus Christ:

“The war, when it comes, will not be for opium. It will be for principle; for freedom-for freedom of trade and freedom of the Chinese people. Free trade is a right conferred on Man by God...” (115) (SOP)

The scheming and shrewd British Raj had seized India of its riches, freedom and peace; Chinese of their discretion and wisdom by poisoning them with opium. The poor Indian peasant severely suffered the brunt of this opium war. Peasant farmers were forced to produce opium in their grain fields which caused widespread poverty, hunger and agricultural degradation in the plains of Ganges. Each society and culture is convinced that its own drugs of choice are normal and natural; and that those of other societies are depraved and unnatural. Generally each society and culture has drugs of choice that have been assimilated to its cultural practices. The pleasures of these familiar drugs are known; their dangers minimized by taboos and social rituals of consumption, and their damage contained and ignored. Indian farmers usually consumed opium by swallowing small pills or they drank it in opium infused water. For generations Northern – east Ganges’ civilization was considerably affected with the rise of poppies cultivation and its uncontrolled consumption. When first new drugs appear and spread in any society, there is a period of adaptation that can often be devastating. As a matter of fact, poverty, hunger, and destitution coupled with their mundane intake of tantalizing smell of poppy in the fields at the cultivation hours and processing poppies in the factory, dragged subalterns into the opium consumption. The power

of opium affects all the characters in different ways. For example, Deeti is raped on her wedding night by her brother-in-law after smoking opium with her impotent husband; Deeti also uses the drug to slowly poison her mother-in-law, *girmitiyas* were engaged to smuggle opium to Canton. The main focus is placed on the condemnation of the colonial exploitation and on opium's history as the "most lucrative of the British Empire's products". In backdrop of such horrendous agricultural scam in the early part of the nineteenth century, *SOP* is fictionalized to unfold the 'never told' alternative history of subalterns, peasants, and *girmitiyas* or 'aásmi's pangs and plight rooted profoundly in the plains of Ganges, sailing through colonial 'black waters' - in the lost horizon; lost their self.

SOP charts the utter vulnerability and haplessness of Indian *girmitiyas* and peasants as the unfathomable appetite of the British for revenue left them with monetarily deprived, stranded in adversities, exploited physically and brutally fragmented *girmitiyas'* indigenous identity. Regarding the theme of opium dominating the novel, Ghosh elaborates:

"I love nineteenth-century nautical fiction so many of the details were just buried in my head...Opium was not at the forefront of my mind when I started thinking about this book. I was more interested in travel, migration and dispersal of Indians across the globe. But this dispersal began in earnest in the 1830s, just before the first Opium War, and the earliest immigrants were from a part of British India (northern Bihar) which became, under the rule of East India Company, the single most important opium growing region in the world,. There was really no getting away from opium: in this period, India, China and England were joined by sea of poppies." (Interview with Michelle Caswell, Asia Source, 18 March 2008)

Cargo of JahajiGirmitiyas:

In *SOP* the first volume of AmitavGhosh's projected *Ibis* trilogy, Ghosh chronicles the accounts of experiences of the North Indian indentured

labourers, the *girmitiyas* of the late 1830s. Chiefly locating the story in mid-nineteenth century India, Ghosh records the political and socio-economic conditions that led to the mass migration of impoverished Indian peasants as indentured laborers to the Mauritius islands. Indentured immigration created a Diaspora of Indians that is spread all over the world. This Diaspora is different from the other Indians of the Diaspora in many ways; mainly because they are “bound together by the common history of plantation economy and indentured servitude” (Maharaj). *SOP* takes us to the past when British colonizers turned the banks of Ganges into sea of poppies. In order to expand their wings in poppies business in other countries, they took the help of British East India Company and came up with indenture contracts. The heterogeneous assembly on board of the *Ibis* presents Ghosh’s concerns with border-crossing between caste, races, and cultures in a nutshell. The *Ibis* is also one kind of ship, travelling from Calcutta to Mauritius peopled with from all classes of ‘Brahmins, Ahirs, Chamars, and Telis’ (205). They were called *girmitiyas* because in exchange the silver that was paid for them went to their respective families, and ‘they were taken away, never to be seen again: they vanished, as if into the netherworld’ (72). The *girmitiyas* and travellers on the *Ibis* come aboard with different priorities, some under bondage, other professionally or emotionally driven souls, like Deeti (actually Aditi by name) maintains the *kabutari-ki-ma* identity, she is embodying a self burdened by patriarchal and unfathomable caste hierarchy, Paulette Lambert’s upbringing and growth raises question of colonial elitist conduct, she is a French woman and represents the Eurasian minority in India, Kalua is relegated to the margins of social spaces, Zachery Aid, mulatto, lives on the edges of perils because of his inter-racial identity, the missionary-capitalist Benjamin Brightwell Burnham, the owner of the *Ibis*, voiced colonial supremacy. For him both slavery and indenture are justified as a form of “emancipation” for Africans and Asians from indigenous dictatorship. He justifies the unjust policy of colonialism: “When the doors of freedom were closed to the African, the Lord opened them to a tribe that was yet more needful of it- the Asiatik.” (72)

There is an inherent and subtle recognition of their cultural history

which at the moments of extreme crisis, these cultural traits leave their imprints on their counterparts. The people who had crossed the oceans together made the siblinghood of the boat and called one another *Jahajibhais* and *bahens*. In Amitav Ghosh's *SOP*, the first part of the *Ibis* trilogy, it is Paulette who tells Deeti that they were "ship-siblings – *jaház-bhais* and *jaház-bahen* (ship brothers and sisters) – to each other" (Ghosh 356). The idea struck Deeti with its force of simplicity. There were "no differences between us". *Jaház-bhais* and *jaház-bahen* to each other... all of us children of the ship... [that was] a great wooden *mái-báp*, an adoptive ancestor and parent of dynasties yet to come" (356). The new ethnic group has evolved a hybrid tongue of sailors, lascars, and *girmitiyas* "spoken nowhere but in water" which was a tool of their expressions of sentiments. Ghosh's choice of *Ibis* significant as it is an Egyptian mythological figure. *Ibis* is a sacred bird and symbol of the deity Thoth, which is seen as mediating power between good and evil, the master divine and physical law, and as the judge over death. Nonetheless, the colonial *Ibis* ship is described as "travelling through the mists of illusion towards the elusive, ever-receding landfall that was Truth" (422). The *girmitiyas'* journey was qualitatively different from that of the journeys of traders, pilgrims or free travelers and tourists. First of all, for most of the *girmitiyas*, this trajectory is a terminal departure characterized by an absolute divorce from their motherland. Secondly, most *girmitiyas* were peasants and therefore their feet are deeply rooted in their soil, on which their generations had laboured. Their migration is observed with a stern resistance because of social and religious consequences of such shifts.

In *SOP*, Ghosh's focal point is *girmitiyas*, the early Indian diasporic group which encounters coarseness and violence, cruelties of the 'Black Waters' and colonial masters, negotiating the unprecedented mass of strangers to maintain the self. Such black magic of waters has also brought some emotional solace and kindness to the *jahajigirmitiyas*. The first among the *Ibis* trilogy, *SOP*, is not an anti-colonial rant but the story of men and women of all folks and races, castes and creeds, huddled on a voyage across the 'Black Water' that deprives them of dignity. The novel ends in the

clutches of tempest- a moving tempest of uncertainty.


Migrants and coolies board the *Ibis* not knowing what to expect. They are going to "Mareech-dip", "the Mauritius Islands", "les Iles Maurice". This destination could stand as the Promised Land, but instead, it conjures up images of hell and demons. Crossing the Black Waters is a curse, which taints the horizon and its promises of a better life. As he often does, Ghosh describes the horizon as a mirage. His characters are full of hopes and fears they project on imaginary lines. So in *SOP*, a fantasy of the border emerges. The immensity of the ocean, the horizon and Mareech fuel the imagination of the characters. Stories and rumours make their way through the narrative, and lure the reader into picturing the possible outcomes of the passage. Besides, the novel is divided into three parts, Land, River and Sea, which impersonate the journey of the characters. Thus, the narrative is deeply linked to the urge to leave. This paper is an attempt to explore how Ghosh redefines migrancy through the prism of indentured labour, and how the motif of the journey gives a particular impulse to the story. In fact, Ghosh craftily unravels an epic of the individual. His characters are attracted to the unknown, to the horizon which always seems to move further away. And Ghosh also plays with his reader's expectations in the same way, for this novel is only the first part of a trilogy."

Voyage of *Girmitiyas*:


It was the fate of *girmitiyas* which forced them to tear away from the plains of holy Ganges of Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Northern Bihar- land of Bhojpuri speakers. For such people, ocean or sea is a manifestation of demons, full of appalling energy and ill- fated waters. Civilization cherishes with its myths and religious ethos. From the stories of *samudramanthan* to demon Ravana's Lanka, oceans were comprehended as "the chasm of darkness where the holy Ganga disappeared into the kala-Pani, 'the Black Water'. This black water has developed a shadow lines between known world and netherworld.

In certain sections of Hindu Communities sea travel was forbidden on religious basis. The *Dharma Sutra* suggests a person can wipe off such

ostracism in three years by performing specific rituals prescribed in the Hindu *Shastra*. The reasons behind the taboo include the inability to carry out the daily rituals at the shipboard and the sin of contact with the barbarians; the traveller was cut off from the regenerating waters of the Ganges so he or she is deprived of reincarnation cycle. Such voyages also meant breaking family and social ties. Paradoxically, the terrains and waters of holy Ganges were transformed considerably into poisonous and life threatening with the rise in poppy farming and factories for its process. *Girmitiyas'* determination for sustenance adopted the notion of the survival of the fittest; they were left with Hobson's choice; and they destined their lives with crossing of 'black waters'; breaking time immemorial all mythological and religious beliefs and bondages. British were well acquainted with this Hindu religious taboo (in contrast, for Hindu religion this was a belief strongly authenticated with innumerable myths), as reflected in the accounts of Major J. F. A. McNair, the comptroller of Indian convicts in the Straits Settlements. They exploited religious sentiments. As a punishment, Indian natives were deported to overseas or "black water" in a convicts ship. McNair provides official accounts of such colonial practices in his *Prisoners Their Wanders*:



"... [kalapani] meant especially to a man of high caste...he could never be received in intercourse again with his own people...he was in point excommunicated and avoided." (9)



The natural calamities and colonial forces coupled with hunger and poverty in the Ganges terrains compelled subalterns to divorce their lands and they started haggling with their socio-religious identities in order to begin their second phase of life from the shambles. The sea becomes their new nation as the shipments form new bounds of empathy. They leave far behind the strictures of caste, community and religion. Ghosh is not oblivious to the fact that the connection between slavery and *girmitiyas'* journey. The *Ibis* ship itself is the strong manifestation of colonial viciousness which "had been built to serve as a 'blackbirder', for transporting slaves" (11).

Dislocated Identities: Re/ Discovered in the Midst of Uncertainties:

Severance from homeland is real, more concrete than the memory, as one is forced to forget the loss of land and the grief and encounters consequences, one which is a constant re-enactment, in the minds of *Girmitiyas*. Death and loss become insignificant in the face of shrinking spaces and the constant alienation forced everyone one on the ship. Singling out, segregation, ghettoisation, the madness of hatred, the erasure of languages and cultures- these are losses that go to make the aftermath a living hell. The laws of sea are utterly different from the laws of the land. The *girmitiyas* enter into a "state of existence in which their waking hours would be ruled by the noose and the whip" (405). Ghosh's *Ibis* becomes a vessel where native identities are washed away and new one discovered in the 'black waters'. Deeti's isolated and insignificant life gets galvanized when she protests against throwing of two dead bodies of *Girmitiyas* into the sea by soldiers and she demands to handover the corpses to their relatives. Deeti also becomes pregnant on the *Ibis*, Serang Ali, leader of the lascars, has deserted the ship along with the convicts and the condemned, Heeru and Ecka gets married on the *Ibis*, disregarding the fact that they are already married to different persons, Raja Neel Ratan lives a miserable life on the ship. Kalua pulled SubedarBhyro Singh to death as the latter tried to molest Muniya. Earlier Captain Chingsworth pronounces a flogging of Kalua with sixty strokes by Bhyro Singh as the Kalua accidentally kills a soldier when Kalua was trying to rescue Muniya from the shackles of SubedarBhyro Singh. Violence is perhaps a compulsive necessity of life. Violence deaths expose human vulnerability on one hand and the inhumanity on the other. On the *Ibis*, the irrationality and brutality overtake violence and that violence becomes abhorrent reality. At the fag end of the novel *SOP*, Kalua, Deeti, Zachary, Paulette, Baboo Nob Kissin, Serang Ali, Jodu, Neel Rattan and Ah Fart run away from the *Ibis* on a rescue boat during the emergency. This reality manifests *girmitiyas'* off-shores face of identity. Their uprising against the colonial masters on the *Ibis* ship in the midst of unfamiliar waters is last minute dying endeavor to save their ragged lives. *SOP* is a tale of Pyrrhic victory, after a colossal devastation

of the 'Self' and irretrievable loss of their belongings:

"Landless, nationless, the people buried their fathers in themselves, because the self was the only ground they had to stand upon." (Salman Rushdie, *The Jaguar Smile*)

WORK CITED

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

Ghosh, Lipi & Chatterjee Ramkrishna. Ed. *Indian Diaspora in Asian and Pacific Ocean: Culture, People, Interactions* India: Rawat Publications, 2004. Print.

Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/ Postcolonialism*. London: Routledge, 1998. Print.

Metcalf, Thomas R. *Imperial Connections*. Berkeley: Univ. of California, 2007. Print.

Paranjape, Makarand. ed. *In Diaspora: Theories, Histories, Texts*. India: Indian Publication Pvt. Ltd., 2001. Print.

Vergès, Françoise. "Writing on Water: peripheries, Flows, Capital and Struggles in the Indian Ocean." *Position* 11.1 (2003): 241-57.

Higher Education &
Research Society