

**The Sad Plight of the Indentured Labourers in the Novel  
*Sea of Poppies***

**Mrs. B. Priyadharishini, M.A., M.Phil.**

---

This article deals with the wonderful novel of Amitav Ghosh's trilogy, *The Sea of poppies* (2008). The novel is divided in to three parts as Land, Water and sea by the author. The focus of this article is mainly towards the final part, 'sea', where the author makes all the main characters to assemble on the ship named ibis. Along with the fictional characters the author has introduced some characters who lived in the early eighteenth century. The system of indentured labourers was introduced by the British Government from the end of slavery in the United Kingdom in 1833 and continued towards 1920s. The Indian indenture system is a form of debt bondage, by which 3.5 million Indians were transported to various colonies of European powers to provide labour for the plantations. The suffering of these people is widely discussed in many novels and even it was taken as films. Ghosh as an anthropologist undoubtedly brings forth the sad plight of the Grimityas or the indentured labourers to the eyes of the readers in the last section of his novel.

In the novel the members of disprage section of society face abuse and exploitation publicly and individually and even life threats, therefore, when they find a chance to move away from their native land, they make a decision to go far away. The prevailing situations force them to leave their place. The people of poor sects are dissatisfied with the existing life. They volunteer themselves as indentured labourers. The members of Ibis are Deeti, Kalua, Paulette, Neel, Ah Fatt, Jodu and other passengers share a common past of disregard and dirt and as the result of this they unite on the ship expecting a new life, freedom and individuality. On the ship identity transformation and rebuilding takes shape facing lot of difficulties. All people along for the ride are Girmits from different places, route towards one destination, that is, Mareech Island.

Deeti and Kalua the main characters of the novel who volunteer themselves as indentured labourers hide their actual identity because they wanted to live a new life with rapidly changing situations and locations. In fact, she readily loses her identity in order to have a new identity. Before boarding the ship, she was pleased to introduce herself as Kabutari-ki-ma, the name by which she had been known after her daughter's birth, her proper, given name Aditi for the first comes to her mind while landing on the ship and since it had never been used by anyone. And here, for the first time the relevance of her name proves her modern condition.' Aditi' was a woman acknowledged by a boon of living her life again. But in the ship she was addressed by the Grimityas respectively as Bhauji.

The captain of the ship, Chillingworth introduces himself to the Grimityas as a hard task master. He threatens the passengers by stating the laws of sea. He is of the opinion that he is the sole maker in the vessel. He boasts himself as their providence, fate and lawgiver. There is another law giver which is also present in the sea that is the whip in the hands of the captain where he often curls the lash around the handle in order to threaten the Grimits. Through his notion it is clear to them that it will be used on them at times if anything moves wrong. Many of the labourers decide their fate by throwing themselves in to the sea during the journey. The Grimityas become unspeakable in the presence of Byro Singh who is compared with the zemindar of a village by the captain.

The next threat to the labourers in the sea was none other than the sea itself, many of the Grimits began to experience stirrings of discomfort while the ship was still on the Hooghly. They were all under sea sickness. As the vessel plunged and climbed, more and more of the labourers lost the use of their legs, the smell of vomit multiplied the effects on the poor Grimits, After a few days majority of them began to recover from their seasickness, but a few showed no signs of improvement at all, every few days, the guard would sprinkle vinegar around the edges of the hold, and they will give some foul-smelling medicines to the patients which is believed to be collected from the hoofs and horns of the pigs, cows, and horses, many will spit out the liquid as soon as the guards take leave. One by one they began to die, and they threw them to the sea like the skin of a peeled onion.

The ship carries different people, diverse culture, and various languages. Deeti represents high class Rajput woman, Kalua is Dalit subaltern, Paulette is an orphan, Ah Fatt as a child with biological and cultural hybridity and so on but on the ship, they call themselves 'jahaj bhai' and jahajbahren'. Paulette asserts herself: "On the boat of pilgrims, no one can lose caste, and everyone is the same: it's like taking a boat to the Temple of Jagannath in Puri. From now on, and forever afterwards, we will all be ship siblings- Jahaz bhais and Jahazbahens to each other. There is no difference between us". (p. 356). The other female characters on the deck, is Heeru, Munia, Champa, Ratna or Dookhane, have common past of patriarchal. In order to escape from the dreadful past and the present worries in the deck the poor Grimits sings often in order to find solace. They even plan a wedding for Heeru and a labourer on the deck and the wedding is planned by Deeti and Kalula. On their own ground there were separations, dissection and differences among the people of a country but on the ship Ibis they exercise a mixed culture. They cannot arrange a proper marriage with all the ceremonies but they try all the possibilities to make it as a memorable moment but that is disturbed by the guards as two of the members on the deck are punished severally.

The poor creatures munia, a Hindu and jodu, a Muslim was caught red handed while they were talking, mere talking itself is considered as a crime and jodu was beaten almost to death and munia was dragged all through the deck, her shouting disturbed the marriage, immediately the crew started shouting in order to save the one among them. Deeti was volunteered by the crew and she asked her husband kalula to accompany her as there is no one trustworthy in the ship. But kalula was stopped at a particular distance by the guards. As soon as she enters the deck where munia is kept, she comes to know that was a trick played by Byro Singh to take her away from the crew. Munia was freed and Deeti was kept inside the storeroom. But both of them are just waiting outside for Deeti's

word, on hearing Munia's voice kalula tries to set the alarm, in order to get help from the crew, in that fight a guard was slipped down from the ship and dead.

Inside the deck Byro Singh converse with Deeti, addressing her as 'Kabutriki ma' and reveals the truth that he worked as an assistant to Chandan in cheating Deeti in her wedding night. Deeti questions him then why she was admitted in the ship, he replies that he cannot allow a 'whore' to survive in his homeland. So, he boasts himself by saying that he is the one who is going to decide her destiny in a new land. He will not allow Deeti and Kalula to have a common workplace. Since the alarm was rung, she was immediately freed from there, but Kalula the poor creature was tied in the mast for the charge of murder.

Byro Singh like a devil beats kalula and often he addressed Kalula as 'Scavenging dog'. Kalula with lots of pain explains that he has not done any harm to him. ByroSingh irritates him by saying that his present state itself is a sin. 'Done? he said. Isn't it enough, that you are what you are?'(p.488). These words echoed through kalula's head and finally Kalula killed Bhyro Singh at least he has saved the life of Deeti and the crew from the hands of the tyrant. It is not the pain that made Kalula to kill him but the shame he felt by the words of Bhyro Singh. It will be clear to the reader by reading the novel that no one can decide anyone's fate because it is the Lord who designs and decides the life. As the novel ends Deeti witnesses Kalula as carried over in the boat by some of the crew members.

For many of the crew members the ship itself is a destiny as told by one of the characters while witnessing the labourers. "... the ibis was not a ship like any other; in her inward reality she was a vehicle of transformation, travelling through the mists of illusion towards the elusive, ever-receding landfall that was Truth.'"(p. 422-423). Thus the novel ends among the waves, amid of heavy storm, where some of the labourers manage to escape with the help of life boats and some on the ship helplessly witnessing the other side. Through this novel the author revealed the sad plight of the indentured labourers of eighteenth-century Indian scenario.

---

---

### Works Cited

- The Fiction of Amitav Ghosh, A Critical Perspective, Sarup Publishers, New Delhi, 2011.  
"Sea of Poppies." Rev. of Sea of Poppies by Amitav Ghosh. New York Times. 28 Nov. 2008. Online. 19 March 2012.  
"Sea of Poppies: An Overview" The Novels of Amitav Ghosh. Ed. R. K. Dhawan. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2010.  
A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830- 1920. London: OUP, 1974.  
Trocki, Carl A. Opium, Empire, and the Global Political Economy: A Study of the Asian Opium Trade, 1750–1950.

=====

B. Priyadharishini M.A., M.Phil.

Ph.D. Research Scholar (part-time), L. R.G.Govt. Arts College for Women, Tirupur  
[priyakrishnan\\_93@yahoo.co.in](mailto:priyakrishnan_93@yahoo.co.in)

=====

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 18:12 December 2018

Mrs. B. Priyadharishini, M.A., M.Phil.

The Sad Plight of the Indentured Labourers in the Novel *Sea of Poppies*

224