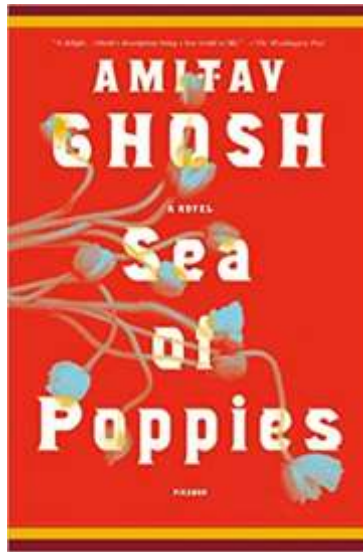


## Return of the Repressed in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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Courtesy: [https://www.amazon.com/Sea-Poppies-Novel-Ibis-Trilogy/dp/0312428596/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?crd=2V0QT1R4IXLKC&keywords=sea+of+poppies+by+amitav+ghosh&qid=1575262048&s=books&sprefix=Sea+of+Poppies%2Caps%2C1298&sr=1-1](https://www.amazon.com/Sea-Poppies-Novel-Ibis-Trilogy/dp/0312428596/ref=sr_1_1?crd=2V0QT1R4IXLKC&keywords=sea+of+poppies+by+amitav+ghosh&qid=1575262048&s=books&sprefix=Sea+of+Poppies%2Caps%2C1298&sr=1-1)

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### Abstract

Amitav Ghosh belongs to the group of Subaltern Studies project and all his novels are an attempt to deal with the history of the subaltern. His *Sea of Poppies* has been hailed as story where the focus shifts from the so called “mainstream” to the peripheral subjects. It is a story of a group of indentured labourers on board Ibis, a slave ship, on way to Mauritius. Ghosh makes the stove away convicts and few women as the centre of his story and narrates the story from their point of view. This is in line with the notion that the discursive focus should be on the marginalized rather than the hegemonic. The novel revolves around Deeti and Kalua, the main characters of the novel, who defy social norms and exert their will, at the same time face to face with hegemonic imperial power structures.

**Keywords:** Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, Subaltern, Women, Hegemony, Patriarchy, Colonialism

The representation of postcolonial subaltern is based on the notion that discursive focus should be shifted from hegemonic to the marginalized. The main impulse of this transitional operation is to consolidate and centralize the subaltern's peripheral position in society in social and political terms, as both are a result of systematic and structural marginalization. In postcolonial idiom, standard history is regarded as monologic representing the dominant discourse. It is believed that Official historiography, while constructing historical facts, selects from past from a particular national and ideological perspective. Postcolonial writers and theorists believe that the historiography is used by the imperial powers in a discursive way as an instrument to construct reality on behalf of the colonizer; and such history inevitably leaves out the histories of the colonized. This inevitably leads to the marginalization of many groups who are denied an official voice by hegemonic powers. For example, Ranajit Guha calls the history of Indian nationalism "a sort of spiritual biography of the Indian elite" (Guha, 1988: 34-41).

Postcolonial novels that include references to the colonizer's version of historical facts, with a critical distance, try to destroy the hegemonic accounts of the past by means of introducing the suppressed voices of the 'Others,' whose histories are silenced under the monology of colonizer's history. This gives rise to history of the Subaltern. Such novels are studied in terms of how they highlight the silenced histories of marginalized groups such as ethnic and political minorities, women and the colonized, through rewriting historical facts within the different contexts that the novels draw on. The postcolonial rewriting of history, therefore, is an attempt to rewrite alternative histories of the colonized as opposed to the official history of the colonizer. Besides the traditional national histories also tend to be elitist rather than egalitarian and therefore leave out the low rungs of society, particularly women. Therefore, the main attempt of 'subaltern history' is to focus on past events, situations and personages that 'standard' history chooses to ignore and exclude. The excluded events and personages are foregrounded, and their stories are retold as alternative histories.

The concern about the representation of the subaltern 'other' in national historiography prompted Ghosh to look at history from below thereby challenging and simultaneously rewriting the so-called 'official standard history'. In *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh makes an attempt to present an alternate version of history which otherwise would remain submerged and therefore absent from the pages of written history. Published in 2008, *Sea of Poppies* is the first book of Amitav Ghosh's famous Ibibtrilogy, the second being *The River of Smoke* (2011) and the third *Flood of Fire*(2012). Deriving its content from the colonial past of India, Ghosh casts his gaze at the 19<sup>th</sup> century opium trade between Britain and China in which the British were forcing opium into China for their tea and silk. Seemingly, the main subject of the novel is migration of indentured laborers on the Ibis, yet, the forces that propel their lives, the existence of British colonialism, opium trade and the Indian caste system and other related issues are explored in depth.

According to Anupama Arora “this novel also pushes ahead Ghosh’s project of investigating the multi dimensionality of postcolonial history and experience” as he “revisits themes and preoccupations of his earlier works and presents a historical novel of panoramic scope and great depth” (Arora, 2012: 21-42).

The novel throws light on the period when the East India Company forced the peasants, to turn over their lands into opium fields extracting huge dividends for itself while rendering the natives poor and hungry. Written in the backdrop of the Opium War of 1838, the novel not only traces the planned movements of British colonial subjugation but also reviews the extant social and traditional powers, which were often communal, racial, feudal and patriarchal in nature. In such a polarized society, the subjugated or subaltern people are condemned to suffer culturally, socially politically and economically at the hands of bourgeois class. They are helpless to raise their voice and powerless to resist the exploitation and humiliation by their masters. Though they remain inarticulate, yet they have a strong desire to come out of the mess in which they are submerged. *Sea of Poppies* is the representation of these subalterns and their identity that is why the focus shifts from centre to the periphery, which is the celebrated project of the subaltern school.

In this connection, Leela Gandhi asserts that the methodology of the Subaltern Studies group “Sketched out its wide- ranging concern both with the visible ‘history, politics, economics and sociology of subalternity’ and with the occluded ‘attitudes, ideologies and belief system...Subaltern Studies defined itself as an attempt to allow the people finally to speak within the jealous pages of elitist historiography and in so doing, to speak for, or to sound the muted voices of the truly oppressed. (Gandhi, 2005:1-2)

In *Sea of Poppies* Ghosh brings together people from different cultures, belonging to different social strata with different cultural, economic, and social background, on an old slaving ship on river Hugli, whose motley crew is made up of sailors, stowaway convicts and the English men. Peopled with such characters and their multiple stories which are woven together by a common thread i.e., the slave ship Ibis and their journey as indentured laborers to Mauritius, *Sea of Poppies* creates a bright and lively world, and it is through these characters and their interaction with the colonial masters and elite powerful natives, that Ghosh tries to reveal the brutal side of colonialism and imperialism, patriarchy and racial discrimination.

To begin with, it is the story of different people belonging to different cultures and social strata, including an upper caste young widow Deeti, a heroic untouchable Kalua, daughter of a French botanist Paulette, a bankrupt raja Neel Rattan, a Parsee- Chinese convict Lei Leong Fatt, a freed American mulatto Zachary Reid who hides his identity from his British officials, a Muslim boat boy Jodu, a Krishna worshipper Nob Kissan who imagines himself as a woman, an

enigmatic lascar Serang Ali and a ruthless British businessman Mr. Burnham. All these people undertake a journey to Mauritius as indentured laborers and as crewmembers of the slave ship Ibis. There are some other characters also discussed in the novel. They also, for varying reasons, represent subaltern positions within the dominant structure of Indian society. They, along with the major characters struggle with the forces of class, caste and gender inequality and colonialism. At first, the stories of these characters begin separately but as the novel moves on, their fates become intertwined and the different strands merge into one, a story of those people who in one way or the other have been exploited and subjugated by the elite native powers or oppressed by British.

The novel focuses mainly on three characters, namely, Deeti the upper caste young widow who is driven to perform *sati* by her relatives, Kalua- an untouchable and the savior-lover of Deeti and Raja Neel Rattan Halder- a zamindar by birth but trapped in a case of forgery by the English businessman, Mr. Burnham. In this novel, Amitav Ghosh has also explored the predicament of the Indian woman and the plight of the untouchables or the lower castes of the Indian society through the characters of Deeti and Kalua. The novel opens with a description of Deeti, whom Ghosh describes as “Such was the colour – or perhaps colourlessness – of her eyes that made her seem at once blind and all – seeing” (Ghosh, 2008:5). She is the most important female character in *Sea of Poppies*. An upper caste woman belonging to an impoverished family and married to a crippled opium addict Hukum Singh, she becomes a victim of a deceitful marriage. On her wedding night, her in-laws drug her and to consummate her marriage, she is raped by her brother-in-law Chandan Singh with the full patronage of his mother. However, the reality of her marriage is kept hidden from her and she constantly faces the jibes from her brother-in-law who time and again reminds Deeti of her inferiority and vulnerability. This clearly defines her position as an oppressed and exploited individual, a subaltern in the male dominated society who is robbed of her dignity and identity on the very first night of her marriage. In the orthodox patriarchal society, sexual exploitation of a woman becomes an instrument for the assertion of male dominance over a female of which Deeti is an example. In the portrayal of Deeti’s character, Ghosh does not glorify the pre-colonial past but puts forth various evils of pre-colonial India. In this type of society, sexual exploitation becomes a tool for torturing a woman physically. But at the psychological level it wounds her beyond repair. This results in her developing a sense of inferiority and further pushes her to the extreme recesses of the marginal position in the society. Deeti represents the double subalternity of woman in masculinist society where she is identified as the ‘other’, ‘non-man’, or ‘second sex’ despite her high position in the society.

Deeti’s husband Hukum Singh worked in the opium factory of Ghazipur and because of his opium addiction, his health deteriorated drastically till he lost his consciousness and the responsibility of bringing him back home fell on Deeti’s shoulders. As Ghazipur was far from

Deeti's residing place, she takes Kalua the carter with her. The untouchable Kalua is described as: "A man of unusual height and powerful build: in any fair, festival or mela, he could always be spotted towering above the crowd – even the jugglers on stilts were usually not so tall as he. But it was his colour rather than his size that had earned him the nickname Kalua – Blackie – for his skin had the shining, polished tint of an oiled whetstone" (Ghosh, 2008:54)

Kalua was an untouchable in the society where Deeti lived. He belonged to the class of 'chamars'- the leather makers. Hence he was not allowed to talk directly to the people of higher castes, consequently had to keep his face hidden from the other people of higher castes as it was "believed that the sight of his face would bode ill for the day ahead" (Ghosh, 2008:4). He became a victim of the wrath of the 'zamindars'. As a punishment and as an amusement sport for the 'zamindars', he was forced into a sexual act with a horse. Deeti, hiding nearby and witnessing this whole episode of Kalua's humiliation is forced to concede that "even a powerful giant of a man could be humiliated and destroyed, in a way that far exceeded his body's capacity for pain" (Ghosh, 2008:57). This inhuman treatment and enforced act of bestiality perpetuated by the drunken zamindars on Kalua reduces him to nothingness, and further pushes him to the margins. On seeing Kalua's powerless position, Deeti overcomes the ingrained sense of her higher caste, her fear of 'retribution', she cleans him and covers his naked body with some leaves. Her helping a person of lower caste is an act of resistance towards the Brahmanical society where even touching a person of inferior caste is supposed to pollute one's religious identity. Although physiologically different from each other, Deeti finds a kind of affinity with Kalua. Like herself, Kalua too is wronged by the people who consider themselves superior to him and therefore exert power on the powerless. The sense of powerlessness is a common thread that unites all the major characters on the ship. Kalua is an outcast, who cannot be allowed to co-exist peacefully with the 'touchable' communities and Deeti, being a woman, is more or less an 'untouchable' within the 'touchable' community who is oppressed by her own family. Regarding the oppression imposed on women by both patriarchal system and imperial power, Spivak states that "between patriarchy and imperialism (...) the figure of the woman disappears (...) into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the third-world woman caught between tradition and modernization" (Spivak, 1988: 102).

After the death of Hukam Singh, for Deeti it became virtually impossible to tolerate the sexual assaults of her brother-in-law. In a state of utter helplessness, she decides to be a *sati* instead of becoming his mistress. Instead of holding her back, her brother-in-law pushes her towards it, as it would benefit him materially by becoming the only inheritor of her property. Deeti, set to be a *sati*, is saved heroically by the untouchable Kalua from the funeral pyre of her husband. Deeti regards this miraculous rescue as her rebirth where she willingly chooses to live her whole life with Kalua: "She had shed the body of the old Deeti, with the burden of its karma;

she had paid the price her stars demanded of her, and was free now to create a new destiny as she willed” (Ghosh 2008:178).

Deeti becomes a symbolic personification of all subalterns, especially women, who are economically and socially marginalized, smothered by social injustice. She defies the very social norms of the society that bound, her by eloping with an untouchable. Their marriage is thus a resistance against prevailing caste divisions and an assertion to lead their lives based on their own feelings of love and equality, as opposed to subjugation to tradition and custom. For Spivak, “Patriarchal system creates a situation for the woman... whose minimal predicament as indeterminate is already available to the phallogocentric tradition” (Spivak, 1988: 82). This rebellion is an act of resistance against the very foundations of this society. Unlike most of the postcolonial novelists, Amitav Ghosh does not glorify the pre-colonial past of India but presents its unsavoury and unpleasant side too which comes to surface here through Deeti’s sufferings. Pertinently, this episode of Deeti’s rescue from the funeral pyre by the black Kalua can be seen as an attempt by Ghosh to subvert the colonialist representations in much British fiction like *The Far Pavilions* and *The Deceivers*, where the white man saves the victimized Indian woman from the brutalizing rite of Sati. In Ghosh’s postcolonial rewriting, a black, powerless, marginalized untouchable becomes the savior of a helpless widow about to be consigned to flames alive, thus undermining and destabilizing what Anupama Arora calls “the white male rescue fantasy” Arora, 2012: 21-42).

Deeti’s elopement with Kalua has many repercussions. In order to save themselves from the wrath of detractors, Deeti and Kalua decide to be ‘*girmityas*’ or indentured labourers and so they board the *Ibis* which was taking the indentured labourers to Mauritius. It’s on board *Ibis* that all the other characters of the novel meet and their stories are blended together. The tumultuous voyage of this motley array of sailors and labourers, stowaways and convicts down the Hooghly River into the Indian Ocean on the *Ibis* becomes the core of the novel. As they sail down the river, their previous identities and familial ties are washed away transforming them into new individuals who view themselves as “ship-siblings - jahaz-bhais and jahaz-bahens” (Ghosh, 2008: 356), building up a whole new world for themselves. Their vision of a community that stands for equality is an enthralling imagination. Ghosh paints the ship *Ibis* in a womanly image when Deeti thinks that “their rebirth in the ship’s womb had made them into a single family”. (Ghosh, 2008: 432)

Commenting on this new brotherhood forged by the sailors on board, Arora says: “Whilst life aboard the *Ibis* comes with its own rules, hierarchies and palpable dangers for crew and cargo alike, it is here, finally, that the schisms of Empire begin to come unstuck. Despite differences of caste, colour and creed, the characters come to view themselves as *jahaj-bhais* or

ship-brothers. As Deeti foresaw all along, from the *Ibis* an unlikely dynasty is to be born, which will span continents, races and generations. (Arora, 2012: 21-42).

This new brotherhood sows the seeds of resistance against the oppressors surrounding them and a subsequent mutiny that finally gets the better of their masters on *Ibis*. Bound into a new familial bond, the sailors, now *jahaz-bhais* and *jahaz-bahens*, come to view the vessel *Ibis* as “Mother-Father of her new family, a great wooden mai-bap, an adoptive ancestor and parent of dynasties yet to come” (Ghosh, 2008:356-357).

The *Ibis* has a British captain Mr. Crowley and a first mate Mr. Doughty, an American second mate Zachary Reid, Indian troops to maintain order, and a crew of Lascars. Amidst rising injustice and cruelty of the first mate Mr. Crowley towards the labourers on the ship particularly Jodu, Deeti rises to the occasion and leads a formidable resistance against the oppression. Deeti's courage is clearly shown when she raises her voice against the cruel Bhyro Singh, an Indian born British officer. “What does this mean? She said, in a show of defiance. Why did you want to see me alone? (Ghosh, 2008: 475).

Deviating from the old practice of calling the white masters as ‘mai- bap’, she calls the ship as their ‘wooden mai - bap’ and at the same time organises the labourers into a mutiny and insists on resisting the captain and his crew on the ship by making such a loud noise that would halt the ship amid the open sea. It is here in the dark basement on board *Ibis* that Deeti has her strange visions of the ship that she sketches out in one corner and starts worshipping it like a shrine. Deeti achieves mythic proportions and becomes a mouthpiece of all subalterns while reflecting on their emergence. The seeds of resistance sown by Deeti make their presence felt on the other parts of the ship also when Neel, Lei Leong Fatt and Serang Ali in connivance with Zachary Reid plan an escape from the ship. After much drama and bloodshed on the board *Ibis* in which Crowley and Subedar Bhyro Sing are killed, Neel, Ah Fatt, Jodu, Serang Ali and Kalua manage to escape in a small boat, unaware of the destination the sea waves would waft them to. Like a true postcolonial novelist and a practicing member of the Subaltern Studies group, Ghosh in almost all his novels, imagines and reconstructs the world from the viewpoint of the dispossessed peoples and focuses on histories often relegated to the margins of Eurocentric narratives of history.

The coolies and convicts that Ghosh deals with here are subaltern characters who do not have the power to write history and make their presence known. Hence, Ghosh takes the liberty to imagine them and conjures up their stories based on whatsoever sources are available to him. Instinctively, he does so with the artistry of an anthropologist than a novelist. His selection and adoption of characters from diverse backgrounds is a device that Ghosh employs to highlight the many forms of repression common under the erstwhile British colonial rule, and also the

different forms of indigenous oppression women and lower caste are subjected to in pre-colonial times. At the same time, it records the resistance put forth by men and women who are victims of social, political and economic hegemonies. As in other novels, Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies* not only exposes their subalternity but also infuses energy into their lives to enable them to speak in an attempt to shift their position from 'margin' to the 'centre'. Disillusioned with the elitist mainstream historiography, he attempts to write his fictional history from below, exposing the injustice and exploitation meted out to the lowest strata of the Indian society particularly women like Deeti.

Dutta Nandana in "Amitav Ghosh and the Uses of Subaltern History" says that "Ghosh, by retrieving and giving place/voice to the historically repressed event in the fiction, achieves a swerve from simply 'righting the record' and releases the marginal as a referent in the present. Such fiction enters the realm of intervention in public discourse, or carries the potential, by introducing considerations that create public consciousness about historical injustices, successfully 'using' subaltern history"(Nandana, 2015: 14-31).

In his defiance against the repressive feudal and patriarchal practices, and the inhuman treatment and the abysmal indifference of the hegemonic powers towards the deprived and the dispossessed, Ghosh inscribes the marginalized history of the subaltern into the national/postcolonial historiography. Thus the novel undertakes the task of revising a lop-sided, elitist and exclusivist history by bringing in the history of the marginalized. In fact the engagement of Ghosh's fiction with history is radical than merely adding on the 'erased' subaltern history to the existing historical narratives. He contests the social, ideological, economic and political structures that silence the voice of the subaltern, makes them invisible and pronounces their narratives to be unworthy of record and transmission. Such a contestation is clearly visible in his contextualization of the individual characters like Deeti and Kalua within the larger socio-political economic and historical milieu. He views the lived life of the individual subaltern as the primary site of power play and politics of domination. Here Ghosh makes an attempt at rewriting the historical "givens" by depicting in his writings the struggle of the socially marginalized characters against the oppression and discrimination by the upper class elite. By making the 'Other' the marginalized, subject of most of his works, Ghosh interrogates the absence of their stories in both literary and standard history.

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