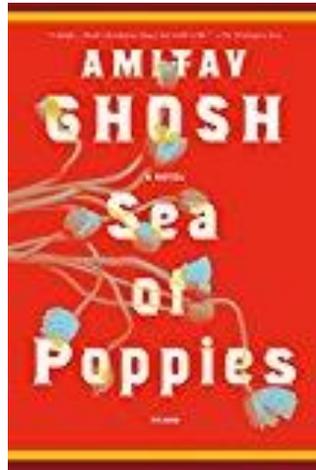


## The Voices of the Voiceless: A Study of Ibis Trilogy by Amitav Ghosh

S. Sreehas, Ph.D. Research Scholar and Dr. C. Santhosh Kumar

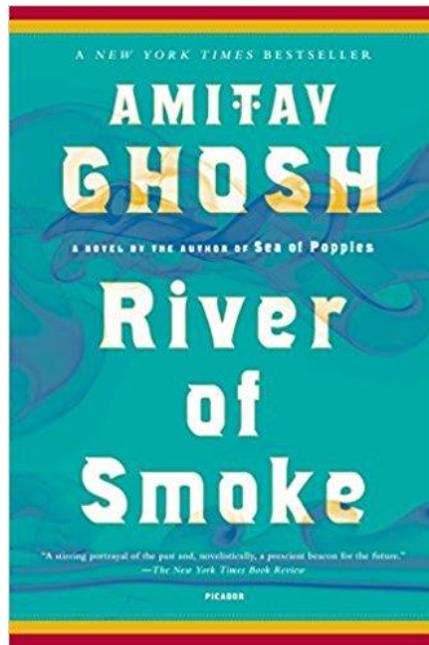
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### *Subaltern*

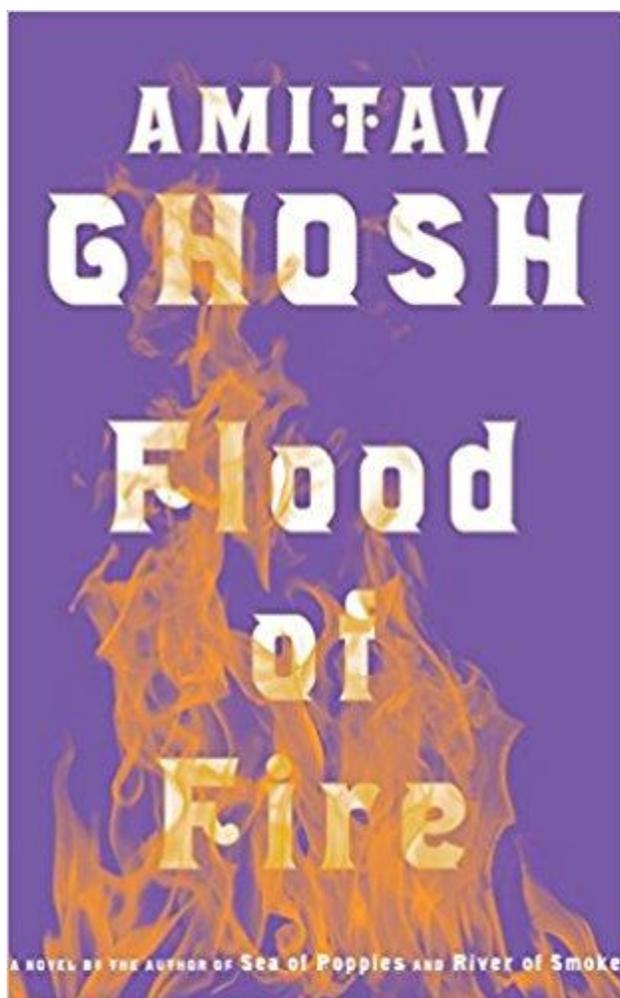
In post-colonial literature the term ‘subaltern’ means socially, politically, and geographically outside the hegemonic power structure of the colony. These subaltern people can be considered voiceless in one way or other. Subaltern studies become prominent in the field of postcolonial studies through the writings of a group of artists known as Subaltern studies Group. The writers in this group addressed the issues of the society from among the masses of the low levels of society rather than giving preference to the upper class. The term subaltern was coined by the Marxist intellectual Antonio Gramsci in his work *Cultural Hegemony*, which speaks about a group of excluded people from a society’s well-established institutions thus become voiceless in their society.

The Subaltern has become a standard way to designate the colonial subject that has been constructed by European discourse and internalized by colonial peoples who employ this discourse; “subaltern” is a British word of someone of inferior military rank and combines the Latin terms for “under” (sub) and “other” (alter). A current topic of debate is how, and to what extent, a subaltern subject, writing in a European language, can manage to serve as an agent of resistance against, rather than of compliance with, the very discourse that has created its subordinate identity. (Abrams 238)



### **Amitav Ghosh**

Amitav Ghosh is one of the most prominent Indian English novelists of our time. He began his career in writing with *The Circle of Reason* (1986), which fetched him the Prix Medici Estranger Award, one of the France's top literary awards. His other works are *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *In an Antique Land*(1992), *The Calcutta Chromosome*(1996), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungary Tide* (2004), *Sea of Poppies*(2008), *River of Smoke*(2011), *The Flood of Fire*(2015) and his nonfictional works, *Dancing in Cambodia*, *At large in Burma*(1998), *Countdown* (1999), *Imam and the Indian*(2002). In all these works we can analyze his well-versed knowledge in the disciplines of sociology, anthropology and post colonial issues. These qualities make him prominent in each and every aspect of writings, especially in the field of subaltern studies. His characters in the novels convey a lot of information regarding post colonial aspects. "The characters in Ghosh's novels do not occupy discrete cultures, but 'dwell in travel' in cultural spaces that flow across borders - the 'shadow lines' drawn around modern nation states" (Khair 10).



### **Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy**

Ghosh's Ibis trilogy consists of three novels namely *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire*. All these three novels are beautifully picturises some historical incidents like opium war and trade as settings. Ghosh made a ship called Ibis as a microcosm of culture in which people from different nations, cultures and castes were forced to intermingle with each other, ignorant about their future destination. In these novels history is no longer a dominant stratum of society like kings, queens and some eminent personalities, but also for poor Lascars, outcasts and people from other nationalities like Africans, Arabs etc. Thus, Ghosh successfully provides a platform for this voiceless section to raise voice against the atrocities committed against them by the colonizers.

The ancestry of postcolonial criticism can be traced to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* Published in French in 1961, and voicing what might be called 'cultural resistance' to France's African empire. Fanon (a psychiatrist from Martinique) argued that the first step for 'colonialised' people in finding a voice and an identity is to reclaim their own past. For centuries the European colonising power will have devalued the nation's past, seeing its precolonial era as a pre-civilised limbo, or even as a historical void (Barry 186).

Ibis trilogy is a story set in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It speaks about the opium war and trade and trafficking of coolies to Mauritius. The first volume of Ibis trilogy, *Sea of poppies*

speaks about the stories of Deeti, an ordinary village woman of higher caste and her husband Hukum Singh, an opium addict worker in Gazhipur opium factory. Here Ghosh picturises Deeti, one of the central character in the novel as doubly marginalized because being a woman and a wife of an opium addict. Throughout the novel the reader can analyse the emotional pangs she was forced to withstand. At first she was seduced by her husband's brother, when she was unconscious then she was forced to attain sati from which she narrowly escapes with the help of Kalua, a down trodden man of low caste. Her husband's relatives chased them furiously. All through the sufferings one could notice Deeti and Kalua undergo their difficulties voicelessly, but towards the end of the novel there emerges a new man and a woman in Kalua and Deeti. They began to raise their voice against the atrocities leveled against them and poor Lascars by the colonial authorities. 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?" (Poppies 475).

### ***Sea of Poppies***

Throughout the novel we see Kalua, a low caste man with well-built physic voicelessly bear all pains, but towards the end of the novel he broke out all his silence and kills Bhyro Singh, when he physically manhandles Kalua. "With a flick of his wrist, he sent it snaking back so that it looped itself around Bhyro Singh's Ox like neck." (Poppies 489). The novel also portrays the life of Neel Ratten Halder, a rich raja of Raskhal, who is cheated for forgery by Mr Benjamin Burnham, a rich British merchant. Thus, Halder become a victim of colonization, his life inside the jail moulded him into an ordinary man from the life of the rich king. The jail authorities suppressed his voice through harsh treatment. When he entered inside the jail the jail authorities asked him to remove his dress, he protested but his voice was forcefully suppressed. "Without a glance in his direction, the sergeant issued another order, in Hindustani: Kapra utaro ... take off his clothes" (poppies 288). Through these kinds of characters Ghosh tries to convey the difficult situations through which characters have to evolve. Here Halder became a voiceless prisoner of the rich powerful king.

Ghosh in his novel *Sea of Poppies* presents certain characters of foreign nationals like Zachary Reid, an American sailor who at certain occasion support the poor Lascars of Africa and Asia.

### ***The River of Smoke***

The second volume of Ibis trilogy, *The River of Smoke* concentrates more on opium trade and how it remained the root cause of the financial bankruptcy in China and India. Ghosh introduced certain new subaltern characters like Ah Fatt, an illegitimate son of a rich parsi opium trader Baharm Modi and a Chinese boat woman in Canton Chei Mei. Ah Fatt symbolizes the pathetic conditions of Chinese opium addicts who lose their life and belongings because of the illegal flow of opium inside China. The horrific life of Ah Fatt is exposed when he speaks about his useless and aimless life to Neel. For him there is no value for Canton fishermen boy inside China "What use was calligraphy to him when boat people were banned by law from sitting for Civil Service examinations?" (Smoke 89).

### ***Flood of Fire***

In the third volume of the trilogy *Flood of Fire* Ghosh speaks about Kesri Singh, brother of Deeti who joins British service as an Indian soldier at the rank of a sepoy. He became a sepoy against the wishes of his father who wants to join him in Mughal Badshah's army. Joining in British government jobs are considered as something great. The majesty of the British army was picturised through the conversation between Ram Singhiji, father of Kesari Singh and Bhyro Singh.

But why Ram Singhiji? Bhyro Singh protested. The boy is young and you are his father. You should explain to him that Delhi is not what it used to be; a soldier who wants to rise in the World needs to go to the East India Company's capital - Calcutta. There is no army in Hindus than that can match the terms offered by the British (*Fire* 67).

Thus, it is very clearly evident that the British agencies are successful in tactfully trapping the resourceful youngsters in Asia and Africa. These youngsters who don't even processes in depth knowledge about the concerned department enter the service and are forced to serve the British government like a subaltern. After entering into the English East India Company as a soldier, Kesari Singh experiences a sense of isolation. For the white officers he is something other "The colonizers were the centre, 'the self', and the colonized were the margins, the other" (Nagarajan 186).

### **To Conclude**

In short Ghosh's Ibis trilogy can be considered as a work with plenty of subaltern elements. It is not just the story of three ships namely Ibis, which starts its journey from Calcutta carrying indentured servants and convicts to the Island called Mauritius. Another ship called Anahita, a vessel carrying opium to Canton, and Redruth which is on botanical expedition, also to Canton. The novel depicts lots of characters from different nations, castes, religions, poor Laskers, etc., which arise a sense of universal humanism. Ghosh raises his voice against the subjugation of the marginalized in the society.

Ghosh also gives voices to women by introducing certain powerful characters like Deeti and Paulettie Lambart, thus creating a sense of identity for women secessions. Paulettie though being a white woman was suppressed by her step father Burnham, but she destroyed all the shackles and entered into the ship called Redruth, which is on its voyage to Botonical expedition. Ghosh as a prominent writer acknowledges about the importance of women in each and every aspect of the society

A critic Anne McClintock observes in the book *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory*, 'In a World where women do two-thirds of the world's work, earn 10% of the world's income, and own less than 1% of the world's property, the promise of post colonialism has been a history of hopes postponed (Nagarajan 189).

Thus, it is very clear that Ghosh's Ibis trilogy is about the history of commons, downtrodden voiceless section of the society like poor Laskers. It is a well-known fact that every great movement and accomplishments are not possible with the help of certain high-class sections like Kings, Queens and land lords. But it is possible only through the help of people from the lower strata of the society. It is this section who has to raise their voice so that there will be a great change. India got her freedom in 1947 not with the effort of a few leaders but by the continuous

and deliberate efforts of millions of Indians. Ghosh in his Ibis trilogy explicitly used his narrative technique in order to create characters left with no voice with the intention of supplying them with the strength to speak out their difficulties and remain like the majority.

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S. Sreehas, Ph.D. Research Scholar

Dr. C. Santhosh Kumar  
Associate Professor

Dept. of English  
Annamalai University  
Annamalainagar  
Tamilnadu  
India