

## AMITAV GHOSH'S *SEA OF POPPIES*: A STUDY IN COSMOPOLITANISM

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### Abstract

*Amitav Ghosh's novels explore the concept of Cosmopolitanism from various angles. His novel Sea of Poppies, from Ibis trilogy, encapsulates the themes such as history of 19<sup>th</sup> century Opium trade, Colonialism, decolonization, and Indian Cultural ghetto into a coat of Cosmopolitanism. The story of the novel right from beginning to end goes on to explore different shades of Cosmopolitanism. Critical, Cultural, Civic, Religious and Feminist Cosmopolitanism show themselves up on the surface of it. The novel in a way weaves a poetics of Cosmopolitanism. The present research paper is an attempt to study the aspect of Cosmopolitanism in the novel of Sea of Poppies by Amitav Ghosh.*

**Key Words:** Cosmopolitanism, History, Colonialism, Trade etc.

From the perspective of Cosmopolitanism Amitav Ghosh's novels offer themselves as a significant contribution with their exploration of Asian multicultural societies. His novels have wider settings, involving more than one nation and community. (Kshirsagar 2). While tracing the important historical moments in the lives of the multicultural societies, he probes the issues such as; socio-cultural evolution, migration experience, gender, identity, ethnicity, human values, power structures, role of state, diverse ways of thought, and their accommodation with the concept of good life. Robert Dixon underlines the element of Cosmopolitanism in the novels of Ghosh in the following words: "...like Edward Said's Orientalism these novels also remain bound up in the notion of a universal humanity" (Dixon 10). Cosmopolitanism, as a political theory is based upon an acknowledgement of a notion of common humanity; a culture of shared coexistence where individuals are aware of moral duties toward others by virtue of humanity only. "Cosmopolitans believe that the primary units of moral concern are individual human beings, not states or other forms of

communitarian or political association” (Brown and Held 1). It is like believing that all human beings are citizens of world.

Themes of Amitav Ghosh’s novels spread on a vaster scale. His novels move between different concerns such as; Colonial and Pre-colonial world, Decolonization, History of trade and commerce, Cultural study, Medical thriller, to Ecocriticism. Amongst these varied interests, every now and then his cosmopolitan orientation resurges to the surface of stories in his novels. In Ibis trilogy Amitav Ghosh as a historian and an anthropologist revisits the Indo-China opium chapter with a critical and compassionate understanding. The first novel in the trilogy; *Sea of Poppies*, begins in 1838, a little before the first Opium War, fought between 1839-1842. The story of the novel does not move around a few select characters, but around many of them. There are many important characters. They have their own stories. All the characters come together on the ship Ibis which is heading to Mauritius. The ship ‘Ibis’ has recently been bought by an English merchant Mr. Benjamin Burnham for the transportation of Indentured labourers.

One of the central characters Deeti lives in a village near Ghazipur in Bihar. Her husband Hukamsingh is a crippled ex-Armyman. He works in Ghazipur Opium Factory, where he gets addicted to opium and dies of it. After her husband’s death she is to go ‘Sati’ (live immolation of wife on husband’s funeral pyre), but Kalua, a Chamar, from the village breaks in at the right time and whisks her away from the burning pyre. Both board on Ibis as indentured labourers. Along with Deeti and Kalua there are many indentured labourers, crew, Lascars and a couple of prisoners on board. Raja Neel Rattan Halder and Ah-Fatt are the prisoners. Raja Neel was a Zamindar of a part called Raskhali Rajbari in West Bengal. He was in debts of Mr. Benjamin Burnham. He had borrowed a huge amount of money by him and invested in opium trade. But now all his investments had slipped in loss because of the ban on opium in China. He goes bankrupt and his property is claimed by Mr. Burnham. Raja Neel is sentenced to be transported as a prisoner-cum-labourer to Mauritius for seven years.

Amongst the navigating officers, Zachary Reid is an American. He is the Second Mate on Ibis. Due to his humble background, he finds himself to be alone amongst the British officers on the schooner. While in journey he finds a good friend in Serang Ali, a leader of the group of Lascars. The Lascars find Zachary to be one of them. Serang guides him in various matters. A French girl, Paulette has secretly boarded the ship in order to run away from Mr. Burnham; her caretaker, after her father’s death. She disguises herself as a boy and boards Ibis which is going to Mauritius, the birthplace of her mother. Paulette is also joined by her foster brother Jodu. After her mother passed away it was Jodu’s mother who took care of Paulette. Baboo Nob Kissan, a Bengali agent of Mr. Burnham, is accompanying the ship. He is a mystic. He feels that he has a call from his godly beloved Ma Taramony to travel by Ibis. Bhyro Singh, a subedar is an in-charge officer on the prisoners. He was uncle of Deeti’s dead husband Hukam Singh. He recognizes Deeti and Kalua. Being a hard-core Rajput, and unconsciously a beneficiary pawn of patriarchal, and hierarchical social structure now wants

to take revenge on Kalua. He arranges for an open flogging of Kalua for killing one of the soldiers in one of the incidences on Ibis. During flogging, Kalua snatches the whip getting it round Bhyro Singh's neck, which kills him in no time. The same night a terrible storm rises in the sea. Taking the benefit of the storm and the darkness, Nob Kissan sets all the prisoners free. The novel ends with Raja Neel, Ah Fatt, Serang Ali, Kalua, and Jodu escaping in a small boat, and the raging winds jerking the schooner.

The concept of a cosmopolitan character is quite open-ended. All the positive attributes that are in favour of common humanity, freedom, equality, and brotherhood go in the making of cosmopolitans. "...a more genuine Cosmopolitanism is first of all an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other. It is an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity" (Hannerz 239). Ulf Hannerz's definition of Cosmopolitanism applies to most of the characters in Ghosh's novels. Throughout the story of *Sea of Poppies* the ever-present agenda of Cosmopolitanism of Ghosh's novels reflects palpably.

Deeti's evolution as a cosmopolitan individual goes parallel with the development of the story. When she is on her farm in Ghazipur, she is a docile and dutiful wife. She does not know much beyond poppy farms, her husband, her daughter; Kabutri, and the household responsibilities. Her escape from the burning pyre of her husband brings a great change in her character. As she gets her liberation, she works as an agent of liberation and humanitarianism for the others. She mixes with all the people there. Everybody calls her 'Bhauji' (Ghosh, SOP 430). At one of the points, she even says that on Ibis all of them were tied by a relationship. They were Jahaz-bhai and Jahaz-bahen (Ghosh, SOP 356). When the Soldiers of Bhyro Singh take one of the girls namely Munia to the inner rooms, it is Deeti who dares to enter there and get her out from the clutches of Bhyro Singh. The other labourers also support to her endeavour. Thus, she becomes a harbinger of resistance and change. Anjali Roy rightly notices that most of the subaltern characters in Ghosh's novels are on the move. They are open-minded and ready to connect with the wider society outside. She calls them as "subaltern cosmopolitans" (Roy 70). Deeti in this novel, stands for feminist as well as civic cosmopolitanism. Feminist in the sense, she does not wait and watch when Munia is in the custody of Bhyro Singh. She risks her life to save Munia. Universal sisterhood, the welfare of other women irrespective of caste, creed, nationality, or language, can be considered as the corner stones of Feminist Cosmopolitanism. In this novel she stands as a staunch Feminist Cosmopolitan. She shows a way to other women on Ibis. She considers others as her brothers and sisters; thus, she stands for Civic Cosmopolitanism also. She considers all as belonging to one family. The idea of '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*' from Indian philosophy seems to be coming alive in Deeti.

Zachary Reid is an American. He is son of a white American and a black slave that was freed later on. He often introduces himself as "the son of a Maryland freed woman" (Ghosh, SOP 10). He was proud of his origin. Being a half black around the time of 1838,

when slavery had just ended, he knew the value of freedom. The crew on Ibis feel him as one of them. Owing to this Serang Ali, the chief of the crew patronises and guides him through various experiences during the journey. When Ibis is on its way to Mauritius Island Mr. Crowle, feels jealous of Zachary. Since Zachary was an American, he holds him as a competitor to the post of Captain of the ship. Zachary's rising importance among the Lascars and the crew on the ship, is another reason as to why Mr. Crowle hates him. Crowle at the end accidentally comes across the list of the crew on Ibis, where he finds that Zachary was a mulatto and not a complete white. Suddenly he is filled with strange excitement. He calls Zachary in his cabin and makes an offer to him to cooperate with him in his ambition of getting the post of captain of the ship. When Zachary does not respond, he threatens him with his life. Upon this Zachary looks straight in to his eyes and says that he was born free and would not compromise with that. Zachary is the person of individual opinions. On many occasions he counters the ideology of the whites. Mr. Burnham, one of the ardent supporters of the 'Anti-abolitionists' in the first meeting with Zachary, speaks in good terms about slavery, to which Zachary answers straight that his views were different from Mr. Burnham. Zachary believes in humanism, and equality of all. Zachary Reid can be considered as a conscious individual of Contemporary Cosmopolitanism. He values the virtues of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity above all. Individual worth is of primary importance for him.

Paulette is the daughter of a French Botanist. After the death of her mother during the birth of Paulette she is looked after by Jodu's mother who worked at her home. Being born and brought up in such circumstances she grows in to a humanitarian individual. She considers Jodu's mother as her mother and Jodu as a brother. Paulette can speak Bengali quite beautifully. Later when her father dies, she stays with Mr. Burnham. Mrs. Burnham and the maids there expect Paulette to be like a European girl. But Paulette finds this to be an absurd expectation. Since she lived in India right from her birth, she feels India to be her home. She feels comfortable in Indian ways of life. At one of the points her father Mr. Lambert summarises her character in the following manner; "a child of Nature ... and has never worshipped at any alter except that of Nature; the trees have been her Scripture and the Earth her Revelation. She has not known anything but Love, Equality and Freedom" (Ghosh, SOP 137). Paulette and Zachary Reid represent universal humanism as a philosophy of life.

Raja Neel Rattan Halder is a Zamindar of one of the parts in Bengal called Raskhali Rajbari. He is a feudal lord as long as everything is going alright. But when he goes bankrupt and is sentenced to serve for seven years as a labourer in Mauritius, a humanist transformation takes place in him. On Ibis he shares a cell with Ah Fatt; a Chinese convict. Ah Fatt was an opium addict. Since his consumption of opium is stopped, all day he remains in stunned unconsciousness. In the company of Ah Fatt Raja Neel emerges as a patient humanitarian. He takes care of Ah Fatt, and cleans his dirt. He is a real cosmopolitan: "To be cosmopolitan however, is to have an orientation towards the other" (Roy 74). By and by friendship between himself and Ah Fatt grows more felicitous. Raja Neel is seen a

sympathetic humanitarian. As a prisoner, through his ideal behavior, he holds a hope for Cosmopolitanism.

In the course of the story Religious Cosmopolitanism is seen to be generating in a character, namely Babu Nob Kissan. He is an accountant of Mr. Burnham but by the end, because of his religious inclination and love towards a saintly lady turns into a mystic. Thus religion, spiritual love, and mysticism have potential to make a person humanitarian and cosmopolitan. Babu Nob Kissan is a fervent devotee-cum spiritual lover of a saintly figure called Ma Taramony. He loves her immensely, and wants to become one with her. Unfortunately, she dies before the wished union could take place. On her death-bed she promises a spiritual union with Nob Kissan after her death. She promises him that one day her soul would unite with his soul. But for this to happen, he was supposed to be watchful of signs. Eventually an expected change sets in him; his physical appearance also undergoes a change. He grows his hair long, and wears clothes; which are somewhere in the midway; could suit to both men as well as women. He is pulled by the intended sea journey of Ibis. While on board he feels as if Ma Taramony wanted Raja Neel to be set free. As it had been asked by Ma Taramony on her death-bed that he should follow the signs, he listens to his internal voice and sets Neel Rattan free. He helps him escape from the ship along with some more rebels. He feels motherly love for Neel Rattan, which he thinks to be pouring out because of Taramony's presence in him. By the end, presence of Taramony is fully manifest in him, and thus he attains a virtual union with the soul of Taramony. Religious Cosmopolitanism, is a special kind of cosmopolitanism, it should be seen and studied positively and sensitively. Religion inherently prescribes a good code of conduct, and humanity.

To conclude it can be said that while studying the diverse societies around the world, Ghosh as a progressive humanitarian pays special attention to the aspect of humanism and cosmopolitanism. His novels carry a clear mark of Cosmopolitanism. They seem to be passing a message that Cosmopolitanism is the most preferable alternatives in the multicultural set-up of the world. The novel *Sea of Poppies* advocates for most of the types Cosmopolitanism. Thus, it is a good study in the concept of Cosmopolitanism along with other thematic concerns.

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