

AMITAV GHOSH'S *SEA OF POPPIES*: A MYTHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

A human being is both consciously and unconsciously attached to his Motherland. A number of men of letters have migrated from India, their motherland and settled in abroad but still think and write about the land of their origin. They make others know their relation and understanding of tradition, custom, legend, rituals, beliefs, social practices and culture of their past homes.

*Amitav Ghosh, the great diasporic novelist dreams and writes about his Imaginary country where people believe in Karma, rebirth and sacredness of Srimad Bhagavad Gita. Ramayan Mahabharat, river and mantra. His works centre on Indian life, Culture and their beliefs which mould the thoughts and actions of characters. His *Sea of Poppies* may be studied as a diasporic work which is loaded with custom, legend, tradition, superstition and geography related to Indian life.*

*Deeti, the central character in the novel *Sea of Poppies* represents Indian life and attitude. Like a true Hindu woman she relates every incidents of her life to Indian culture, myths and belief. The other characters also seem to be true Indians who appear to be governed by fate and Religion.*

Keywords: Destiny, ghosts, divine, fate, rebirth

Myths deal with human culture, order and system : human as well as superhuman, mystery, cycling processes of life and death, existence of the world, the arrival of chaos, sin, demons, gods, the tales related to living or non-living things in the world. Heinrich Zimmer in his book *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization* explains some of the tales related to Indian myths like eternity and time, wheel of Rebirth, wisdom of life, maya, water, existence, non-existence, the living world of serpent, bird, lotus, elephant and sacred rivers.

Myths are a common feature to traditions and communities and are a basic constituents of human culture. They are related to the creation of works, both living and non-living world, human beings, their belief, their culture, rituals, Gods, goddesses, supernatural elements, events and imaginary tales in an imaginary world.

As a popular diasporic novelist Amitav Ghosh represents “the displacement of a community/culture into another geographical and cultural region” (Nayar, 187). He is settled in U.S.A., but his writings are loaded with Indian mythologies, custom, legend, tradition, belief, superstition, geography related to Indian life. His novel *Sea of Poppies* is to be studied in such perspectives.

History, myth and fiction have great influence on the novelist and they are found in distinct way in his writings. The use of myth and history in literary text appears to be a strategy in his narrative. “The past can be grasped only through its relevance to the past and the present experiences and interests. The writers seek to ‘renovate’ history with the use of myth’ (qtd.Rao 6). History and myth both appear distinct in their own ways. History justifies reality and shows the depth of knowledge about the past happenings, and experience of a nation. Myth is also related to past and continues to present. It is interlinked to the present living of the people and their way of beliefs, tradition, custom and culture.

Amitav Ghosh is popular novelist with an extraordinary sense of History, Myth, Geography, tradition and attitude of Indians towards life, death, and holy books. His works are rich in Indian myths, history, geography and culture. “Amitav Ghosh always researches and brings together the social, cultural and political events of the past, the far past, the present and future (Bhatt and Nityanandan, 14)

The story centres around Deeti, a simple pious lady, caring mother and an efficient housewife. She is married to Hukum Singh, a crippled worker in the Ghazipur opium factory. She is forced to be drugged with opium by her mother-in-law on her wedding night, so that her brother-in-law could consummate the marriage in place of her ‘infertile’ husband. Her daughter Kabutri’s real father is Chandan Singh, the brother-in-law. When her husband dies, Deeti sends Kabutri to stay with her relatives. She is forced to die on the funeral pyre of her dead husband according to superstitious ‘sati’ ritual. Kalua, the low caste ox man from the neighbouring village comes to her as a great rescuer and they run away from the orthodox caste ridden society. Their living together is not accepted by the conservative social setup.

The novel describes another character zachary Reid, an American sailor born to a slave mother and white father, receives a lot of attention. His neglected identity makes him sadistically cruel and wicked. The novel shows the precarious condition of Neel Rattan Haldar, a wealthy Razah by the British colonial rulers. The book further gives attention to paulette, a French orphan who has grown up in India. Her upbringing in India makes her feel more comfortable with Indian manners, food and clothing than with western ones. After a lot of strife, conspiracy and bloodshed on board the Vessel, Neel, Ah fatt, jodu, serang Ali and Kalua manage to escape without knowing the destination of the sea waves, they are carried away through the waves. “The stories of the novel interweave various myths, beliefs, languages, cultural and historical elements to portray true picture of the then respective society’(RSIRJIE 598).

The novelist in this novel meticulously presents Indian culture, belief, and philosophy through ancient Indian myths of the holy Ganga, Shivji and Bhagvan Ganesh, Maa Durga, Sri Krishna, Shani, Draupadi and his demon. legions and the Egyptian myth of Ibis. Ganga is considered a Hindu Goddess in Indian mythology. The river has been personified carrying historical importance. A number of former provincial or imperial capitals such as Pataliputra, Kannauj, Kana, Kasha, Allahabad, Murshidabad, Munger, Baharanpur, and Kolkata have been found on the bank of river Ganga. In the present novel people invoke the river and gulp down a drought of air, before throwing themselves. There was a small altar in Deeti's room with statues of Shivji and Bhagwan Ganesh, and framed prints of Maa Durga and Sri Krishna. She represents the typical Hindu woman's religious bent of mind. The novelist narrates about a Hindu woman's belief in Ganga Mata's offering vision to overcome all the obstacles in life.

Fortune or misfortune is taken as the influence of gods, goddesses, planets and stars in Hindu life. Deeti, the central character in the novel *Sea of Poppies* takes her suffering due to the evil influence of Saturn in her life.

Her prospects had always been bedeviled by her stars, her fate being ruled by Saturn – Shani – a planet that exercised great power on those born under its influence, often being bringing discard, unhappiness and disharmony, with this shadow darkening her future. Deeti's expectations had never been high. She knew that if she were ever to be married, it would probably be to a much older man, possibly an elderly widower who needed a new wife to nurse his brood.(30)

Deeti finds Hukum Singh, her husband as a great opium addicted person. She understands about her future and remembers how as children she and her playmates used to laugh at the afeemkhors of their village. The ill impact of Saturn comes to her consciousness.

It was useless. she knew to be seized by regret now, on the very night when her fate had been wedded to his : it was as if the shade of Saturn had passed over her face, to remind her of her destiny (p.34)

When Deeti has spent her first night with her husband, her mother-in-law appears by her bed side. She sprinkles 'blessings from a container of holy water' and wishes an auspicious start to her new life.

Indian women are afraid that ghosts may invade their houses due to slight negligence in their day to day life. Deeti leaves her husband's dishes unwashed due to short of water. She apprehends that leaving the dishes unwashed overnight is 'to invite of invasion of ghosts, ghouls and hungry pisaches'(55-56). In another incident jodu remembers the rumour how the devil ships descended on the coast to kidnap entire villages and the victims were being eaten alive.

Worship to god or goddess is a part and parcel of a Hindu's life. As a great observer of Hindu life and practice he mentions about the devotion towards gods and goddess in his novel. In this novel Deeti enters her puja room, picks up a green mango leaf, dips a fingertip in a container of bright red sindoor and draws with a few strokes, two wing like triangles

hanging suspended in a hooked bill. It could have been a bird in flight but kabutri recognized it at once for what it was – an image of two masted vessel with unfurled sails. She is amazed that her mother has drawn the image as though she is representing a living being.

Hindus believe that a mouse is the creature of lord Ganesh. A mouse is believed to be ‘familiar of Ganesh thakur, god of opportunities and remover of obstacles’ (84). The old zamindar also takes ‘the visit of mice as an indication of divine will’ (84). There is also description of Hindu god Lord Shiva as the ‘Blue Throated Lord-shiva Neela Kanth’(146)

The goudasta declares himself to be fervent devotee of Sri Krishna. He is noticed with the three lines of sandalwood paste on his forehead. He believes that Krishna-whose very name meant ‘black’ and their darkness has been celebrated ‘In thousands of songs, poems and names’. He goes further in reminding Krishna as ‘Ghanashyam the cloud – Dark Lord’ (146). He remembers the yellowish shirt of Krishna, ‘the joyful lord to dispel himself with the lovelorn girls of Brindavan’ (146). The description also goes on how God in guise comes to test the quality of his devotee’s faith.

The belief in karma, rebirth and death God is reflected in this novel. Deeti thinks that she has got an afeemkhor as her husband due to her destiny. When she was floating in the river Baitarani, she imagined every wave carrying her closer to the far bank. ‘Where the god of death, Jamraj had sway’ (178). When she knew that she was being helped and accompanied by Kalua, she felt that her earlier self had died and she had taken rebirth.

.....For it was as if she really had died and been delivered betimes in rebirth, to her next life. She had shed the body of the old Deeti, with the burden of his karma, she had paid the price her starts demanded of her, and was free now to create a new destiny as she willed, with whom she chose – and she knew that it was with kalua that this life would be lived, until another death claimed the body that he had torn from the flames. (178)

A Person even after death is in memory of Hindu family members. Their photographs and used articles are given respect to get their blessings as well as good wishes to the family. Deeti’s Puja room is not only featured with photos and images of gods and goddesses but also with many tokens of her family like relics of her dead fathers wooden clogs, a necklace of rudraksha beads left to her by her mother and faded imprints of her grandparent’s feet token on their funeral pyres. The walls around the altar are devoted to the pictures that Deeti has drawn herself, in outline, on papery poppy petal discs. Such are the charcoal portraits of two brothers and a sister, all of whom have died as children. A few living relatives are represented too, but only by dramatic images drawn on mango leaves. Deeti believes it to be bad luck to attempt overtly realistic portraits of those who have yet to leave the earth. Thus her beloved older brother, kesri singh, was depicted by a few strokes that stood for his sepoy’s rifle and his upturned moustache.

Rishis and philosophers believe life in this mundane world as unreal and illusion. He has no attachment towards the living and the actions of day to day life. It alludes to ‘Nishkama Karma’ in *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*.

He had thought of his everyday routines as a performance, a duty nothing more; one of the many little enactments that were required by the demands of a social existence, by samsara none of it was meant to be real, it was just an illusion, no more than a matter of playing a part in the great charade of conducting a house holder's life. (267)

Ghosh's novels carry Indian beliefs, myths in almost all his novels. The rivers hills, trees and the elements of Nature are sacred and to be worshipped in Hindu belief. Deeti regularly worships the river Ganga as a kind mother with the prayer 'Jai Ganga Mayyaki'. When a few of the migrants were trying to recall the story of Ganga Sagar Island king Neel reminds his listeners.

... that if not for this island neither the Ganga nor the sea would exist, for according to myths, it was here that Lord Vishnu, in his avatar as the sage Kapila, was sitting in meditation, when he was disturbed by the sixty thousand sons of King Sagar who were marching through the land to claim it for the Ikshvaku dynasty. It was here too, exactly where princes were punished for their impudence, being incinerated by a single glance from one of the sage's burning eyes; it was here that their unhallowed ashes had lain until another scion of their dynasty the good king Bhagiratha, was able to persuade the Ganga to pour down from the heavens and fill the seas; this was how the ashes of the sixty thousand Ishvaku princes were redeemed from the underworld (399-400).

The characters of *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* are very much alive in the novelist's mind when king Neel is illtreated and his garment is pulled and torn, he appears like 'a real Draupadi... clinging to her sari' (287). When he is made to stand bare with underclothing, he appears to be more of a 'shikhandi'.

The characters of great epic *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* influence our life and the people compare the persons with the characters of two great epics for their activities. Deeti's mother-in-law in trance refers to Deeti as 'Draupadi'. In response to Deeti's enquiry she considers 'Draupadi' in *Mahabharata* as a virtuous woman as she is the wife of five brothers. Deeti understands the child in her belly has not been 'fathered by her husband but by Chandan Singh, her leering slack jewed brother-in-law (39).

The ancient Rishis believe that the mantras or prayers please the gods and goddessa and a person gets rescue from disease, suffering and dangerous situation. To get relief king Neel utters Gayatri mantra, 'Om, Bhur Bhuvah Swah, tat Savitur Verenyam.....' means O giver of life, remover of pain, and sorrow.....' (372).

Nob Kissin is introduced as student and a brahmachari. He has spent much of his own childhood in 'the town Nabadwip, a centre of piety and learning consecrated to the memory of chaitanya Mahaprabhu – saint, mystic and devotee of Srikrishna' (160). He has once been in line to succeed his uncle as the temple's custodian, and in his boyhood he has been carefully groomed for his inheritance. He has received a thorough education in Sanskrit and logic as well as in the performance of rites and rituals. He cannot really object the term 'Baboon' addressed to him by his goumasta. He knows the creature as an avtar of lord

Hanuman. He has been trained to turn his mind from sensual thoughts. The characteristics of a brahmachari is described as:

..... yet he would find himself trembling in her presence; at times his body would go into a kind of seizure, leaving him drenched in shame (161)

Saintliness is not only limited to the Indian male generation but also the women. In this novel Taramony, is a 'woman of uncommon charm and comeliness' (161). Nob kissin discovers her as 'a person of extraordinary spiritual accomplishment, a kind that he had never encountered before; one who spoke of the Lotus-Eyed Lord as if she had personally experienced the grace of his presence (161).

A saintly person is no more considered to be a human being but a part of divinity. Nobkissin calls Taramony, 'ma' and requests her to accept him as a disciple. He spends his days to receive spiritual instruction from her. She even promises him that a day will come when her spirit will manifest in him, and then two of them will be united by Krishna's love, and will achieve the most perfect union. He takes the world's changeability as 'the presence of divine illusion, of Srikrishna's leela' (166).

The novelist knows that superstition is a part of Indian life. It is even related to the slight different appearance of women in India. Deeti looks different for her light grey eyes which is unusual in that part of the country. Colourlessness of her eyes makes others think her as "Once blind and all-seeing" (5). It reinforces their prejudices and superstitions. They shout and taunt at her 'chudaliya, dainiya, as if she were a witch' (5) There is the fear of ghosts, spirits as well as steps of eradication in superstitious belief. For example, Baboo Nobkissin mutters prayers 'He Radhe, he shyam' to ward off a ghost from paulet Lambertt in this novel. The migrants talk of Pujas and Namazes like recitation of the *Quran* and the *Ramcharitmanas* and the *Alha Khand* to counter rumors and auguries.

An Indian women feels comfortable seeing her children without any physical signs causing criticism to them. Deeti in this novel is glad for her daughter's sake that her appearance has not passed to her girl 'she is delighted in Kabutri's dark eyes, which where as black as her shiny hair – and nobody can use derogatory words as they used for her.

The novel records the prevalent 'Sati' system in Indian society before Independence of India. After the death of Hukum Singh, his widow wife Deeti is forced to put on white saree and asked to get ready for being burnt along with the dead body of her husband.

Half dragged and half carried, she was brought to the pyre and made to sit cross legged on it, beside her husband's corpse. Now there was an out break of chanting as heaps of kindling were piled around her, and doused with ghee and oil to ready them for fire. (177)

Indian traditionalists and conservationists believe that one would lose one's caste by crossing the black water or ocean. Deeti asks the girl if she will not lose her caste by crossing the black water. It is believed that one does not lose one's caste by making journey on a boat. Ghosh also reminds the car festival of Puri where is no feeling of caste, creed, sex and wealth.

On a 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 – jahaj – bhais and Jahaj bahens – to each other. There will be no difference between us. (356)

Amitav Ghosh has great depth in Indian myth, tradition, rituals, legend and belief. Being an Indian and writing on Indian back ground, he has used the myths in this novel for the progress of thought and plot. The description of river Ganga, Baitarini, sea, Brahmachari, gods and goddesses, Karma, rebirth, death etc show the mythical world in this novel.

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