

Between Two Worlds: Exploring Cultural Trauma in the Wake of Colonialism in Sea of Poppies

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* is a historical novel set during the early 19th century. It explores the effects of British colonialism on various communities in India. At the heart of the novel are characters whose lives are deeply affected by the systemic exploitation, displacement, and identity crises brought on by the British colonial presence in India. The central characters of the novel Deeti, and Paulette undergo profound cultural trauma as they grapple with colonial oppression, forced migration, and a clash of identities. This paper examines how these central characters experience and embody cultural trauma within the context of colonial India, focusing on the socio-economic disruptions caused by the opium trade, forced displacement, and the psychological effects of living under British rule.

Keywords: displacement, trauma, exploitation, imperialism and oppression.

In *Sea of Poppies*, Amitav Ghosh explores the multifaceted impact of colonialism on individuals and communities. Set in the early 19th century during the British opium trade, the novel reveals the profound cultural trauma caused by British imperialist policies. Ghosh's portrayal of characters from diverse social, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds offers a nuanced exploration of the psychological, emotional, and cultural upheavals inflicted upon them by colonial rule. In particular, the forced cultivation of opium, displacement, and migration, alongside a fractured sense of identity, are central to understanding the trauma experienced by the characters.

The British Empire's exploitation of India, particularly through the forced cultivation of opium, is the central element of cultural trauma in the novel. The British demanded the Indian peasants to grow opium instead of the cash crops. They then exported it to China and minted huge profit. They enriched the colonial power at the expense of the Indian populace. The characters in the novel were bitterly trapped in the consequences of the exploitative system. They were forced to encounter the economic and psychological burdens imposed by British imperialism.

Deeti is one of the central characters of the novel. All through her life, she faced hardships because of the colonial rule. Initially a village woman, Deeti's life is upended by the opium trade. Her opium addict husband is a crippled and he works at opium factory. Deeti singlehandedly managed the household chores and

opium cultivation. Her character is often used to symbolise the struggle for personal freedom and independence. Though she is a devoted mother and a diligent wife, Deeti faces immense physical and emotional hardships at home.

But what sane person would want to multiply these labours when there were better, more useful crops to grow, like wheat, dal, vegetables? But those toothsome winter crops were steadily shrinking in acreage: now the factory's appetite for opium seemed never to be sated. Come the cold weather, the English sahibs would allow little else to be planted; their agents would go from home to home, forcing cash advances on the farmers, making them sign asámi contracts. It was impossible to say no to them. (29)

The opium trade symbolises the wider impact of British colonialism, which disrupts local economies, robs people of their autonomy, and imposes foreign values. The British not only exploit India's resources but also enforce a system that dehumanises its subjects. As Deeti's experience illustrates, the traumatic effects of colonial policies are personal and profound, with the loss of traditional ways of life leading to both physical and cultural disintegration.

Ghosh demonstrates the extent to which colonialism displaces individuals and communities, both literally and figuratively. The novel follows several characters, including Deeti, who are forced to leave their homeland as a result of the British imperialist system. These migrants experience not only the loss of their homes and communities but also a profound disconnection from their cultural roots.

Deeti's forced migration aboard the ship, *Ibis* represents the physical displacement faced by many individuals under colonial rule. The passage clearly reveals the hesitations of Deeti:

The sensation of a full stomach had made Deeti groggy enough to hear Kalua out in silence, but now, her head boiled over with the heat of many inadmissible fears and she jumped to her feet in agitation. How could he imagine that she would agree to abandon her daughter forever? How could he conceive that she would go to a place which was, for all she knew, inhabited by demons and pishaches, not to speak of all kinds of unnameable beasts? (163)

The cultural trauma of forced migration is compounded by the uncertainty of the future and the inescapability of the colonial system that has stripped her of agency.

Ghosh presents migration as a process of hybridization, where characters are forced to navigate between conflicting cultural identities. The characters, like Deeti, who embark on long journeys are not only geographically displaced but also culturally displaced. As they move through different colonial spaces, they must adjust to new social orders, languages, and practices. The trauma of displacement

thus becomes a trauma of cultural rupture, where individuals must adapt to new worlds that threaten their traditional ways of life. Tony Walsh rightly said: "To become a refugee is to become dislocated, often separates violently from home, loved ones, work and community, and from all that is familiar and predictable. Physical, cultural, psychological and emotional displacement is the heart of the experience"(8).

The displacement experienced by the characters in the novel is further compounded by an identity crisis rooted in cultural hybridity. The forced movement of people across different colonial territories creates a complex interplay of identities, as individuals are exposed to multiple cultures, languages, and social structures. This hybridity, while a sign of resilience, also contributes to cultural trauma, as characters struggle to reconcile their past identities with the new, often hostile, environments they encounter.

Paulette, a French orphan raised in India, is another character who experiences this identity crisis. Although she is not forced into migration in the same way as Deeti, Paulette's hybridity results from her upbringing in India and her subsequent relocation to Mauritius. Her experience reveals the dissonance between her French heritage and the Indian culture she has come to embrace. Paulette's experience reflects the psychological dislocation of individuals caught between cultures, unable to fully belong to either.

Paulette's life begins with a sense of displacement. She is the daughter of a French botanist who lived in India, but after his death, Paulette is left to navigate the world alone. She faces the challenge of balancing her European heritage with the Indian environment around her. Although she speaks French and is connected to her French roots, she is raised in India and understands the local language and customs. This duality makes her feel disconnected from both cultures, as she does not fully belong to either.

The identity crisis is exacerbated by the imposition of colonial power, which dictates the terms of cultural interaction. Paulette's hybridity is not a choice but a result of the colonial context in which she is forced to navigate multiple identities. Ghosh illustrates that colonialism does not simply affect the material aspects of life but also imposes a deep psychological trauma, as individuals are caught in the tensions between cultures, unable to fully claim one as their own. Despite her position as a French woman, Paulette experiences discrimination because of the colonial system that labels her as "other" due to her foreignness and social status.

Paulette had laboured hard to behave and speak exactly as she should, but not always with success. Just the other day, in referring to the crew of a boat, she had proudly used a newly learnt English word: 'cock-swain'. But

instead of earning accolades, the word had provoked a disapproving frown.
(105)

Paulette's journey on the *Ibis* ultimately leads her to a deeper understanding of the oppression that defines the colonial system. Through her interactions with other passengers, including the indentured labourers and the crew, she begins to see the world through a different lens. Paulette begins to feel empathy for those who are oppressed by the system that also shapes her life, and she understands the broader consequences of colonialism. Her growth on board the ship is not only emotional but intellectual as well, as she gains awareness of the colonial exploitation that defines her world.

Paulette's time on the *Ibis* is transformative. It is a space where she confronts the colonial structures that have defined her life, forms new relationships that challenge social norms, and begins to forge a path toward self-empowerment. Her journey on the ship is both a literal and metaphorical passage toward self-realization, freedom, and a deeper understanding of the world around her. Through this voyage, Paulette moves from a place of confusion and displacement to one of greater clarity and strength.

Ghosh's narrative strategy suggests that memory and language are intimately connected to cultural trauma. The trauma of colonialism is not just a historical event but is encoded in the memories and linguistic practices of the characters. These elements work together to create a narrative that emphasizes the long-lasting psychological effects of colonial domination.

In *Sea of Poppies* Amitav Ghosh masterfully explores the theme of cultural trauma through the experiences of his characters, who are deeply affected by colonial exploitation, displacement, and the fractured identities imposed upon them by the British Empire. The novel's portrayal of forced migration, and hybridity highlights the ways in which colonialism dehumanizes individuals and disrupts cultural traditions. Through his multifaceted depiction of cultural trauma, Ghosh demonstrates how colonialism continues to shape the lives of its subjects, leaving an indelible mark on their identities and memories. The novel serves as a powerful reminder of the enduring impact of colonialism on both personal and collective levels.

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