

Ocean as a Transformative Force in Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* Trilogy: A Blue Humanist Study

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Abstract:

Oceans, in addition to being a backdrop of narratives and an immeasurable source of wealth, serves as an active agent inspiring minds and influencing the lives of people who cross. Despite its eternal presents and familiarity, they always remain a wonder. The narrators take immense pleasure in dealing with the experiences of people who encounter the ocean for the willing or the forced migration which results in formation of new identities, cultural hybridity, etc. The study of narratives exploring the oceans adventures come under the purview of blue humanities. Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* Trilogy discussing the Opium Trade of the British through the route of the Indian Ocean deserves to be analysed with blue humanities perspectives. Ghosh probes into the conditions in which the colonizers and the colonized crossed the Indian Ocean, their experiences, etc.

Keywords: Migration, blue humanities, cultural hybridity, the colonizers and the colonized.

Introduction:

Ocean, filling more than seventy per cent of the space on the earth, influences, as well as, is influenced by the living beings and the non-living. Ocean occupies a significant position in ancient epics such as the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Illiad*, the *Odyssey*, etc. Throughout the ages, Ocean, apart from being the major geographical space, plays a major role in shaping human history involving migration and cultural hybridity, conquests, colonization leading to emergence of new empires and oppression of the colonized. DeLoughrey states, "The sea is not empty space but a site of historical memory, colonial violence, and ecological transformation," (DeLoughrey 21). History shows that crossing the ocean brings changes and transformation in both the individual and the social lives. For example, the maritime exploits of the Europeans made the whites rich and rulers of the culturally and materialistically prosperous regions of the world, while the colonized lost their wealth, language, culture and identity.

From time immemorial, people have crossed seas and oceans in order to reach new lands. People have to travel across the large water bodies for trade, war, adventure, entertainment, education and sometimes as punishment. The European traders found new sea- route to Asian, African and American countries, Australia and New Zealand and established their colonies. The middle-class traders transformed themselves as rulers and administrators of the regions. They became the decision makers and determined the destiny of the natives. The voyage of the whites marked the historical shift in the trajectory of human civilization. The style, trends, and the way of the life of the medieval age came to an end and the modern age blossomed with the rise of the European powers and the fall of the natives and the colonized. The colonizers grew cruel with jealousy and greed. They swindled all the resources of the colonized people, exploited them, branded them as uncivilized, made them poor, erased their identity and converted them to Christianity. Further, migration became more active due to the influence of the colonial rule and need resulting in not only cultural hybridity involving human beings but also the disruption in ecosystem involving the life of the fauna and the flora and other aspects of the region. In this regard, DeLoughrey says, "Oceans have been critical sites through which colonial expansion, diaspora, and ecological change have been enacted and remembered," (DeLoughrey 32). Further she writes, " Sea routes are not empty corridors but storied pathways of violence, migration, and cultural change," (DeLoughrey 34). And, the statements uttered by Elizabeth DeLoughrey are testified to by the novels of the *Ibis* Trilogy which includes *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire* written by Amitav Ghosh. The atrocities done by the colonizers against the colonized have been presented by a number of writers such as Chinua Achebe, Maria Campbell, Beatrice Culleton, Jeannette Armstrong, Shashi Tharoor, Wole Soyinka, Sally Morgan, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, , Keri Hulme, etc. Among these writers Amitav Ghosh occupies a unique place, discussing not only the life of people living on the constant land but also the survival struggle of ever moving migrants travelling in the fluid sea expecting a change in life and their white masters always planning to plunder new wealth in new regions, and brings into light how the ocean plays a major role in chiseling their life. The *Ibis* Trilogy proves the words of Helmreich: "The ocean is a lively space of scientific, cultural, and political imagination, not a void but a volume teeming with life and meaning". (Helmreich 3).

The *Ibis* Trilogy can be considered as an epic in the sense that it moves among distant regions connected by the seas and oceans, as in the *Ramayana* which moves between the Bharath Subcontinent and Sri Lanka where the significant events took place. As in the case of the *Ramayana* in which all beings irrespective of their material status on the earth involve in heroic activities and reveal and prove their potentiality, when they happen to encounter the ocean, the simple people in the *Ibis* Trilogy get their opportunities to bring out their identity crossing the ocean waters. The people crossing the water bodies, in addition to amassing wealth and assimilating and

eliminating cultures, create new histories. John R. Gillis says, "We have imagined the sea as a boundary, but it has always functioned as a bridge connecting peoples, cultures, and histories," (Gillis 8). Amitav Ghosh has narrated the events of such a history that was decided by the currents and the waters of the Indian Ocean in South and South – East Asia during the middle of the nineteenth century, when most of the part of Bharath Subcontinent had already come under the control of the British regime. The *Ibis* Trilogy proves the words of Margaret Chen: "The sea offers a distinctive chronotype in which danger, labor, and adventure converge to produce new narrative possibilities" (Cohen 6). Further Cohen says, "Maritime fiction foregrounds the elemental power of water as an active agent rather than a passive setting." (Cohen 14). And the Indian Ocean described by Ghosh in the *Ibis* Trilogy is an example to the utterance of Cohen, as it is not just a background, but a dynamic participant in the happenings. The lives of the people belonging to both the dominant and the subaltern classes are British and other European concerns peacefully concentrating only on their profits while doing it through land. When they were forced to dare the dangers of the ocean after the fall of Constantinople, their ambitions too got broadened and deepened. The traders became rulers. The other dimensions of their personality were revealed. Their nature of extracting all resources and all people came in to light. In the same way, individuals also exhibited their full potentiality which brought into light their original identity, when they happened to encounter the inevitability of crossing the huge waters of the oceans in search of a new life. The *Ibis* Trilogy mentions so many characters, from different strata of society, who, without any plan, many a time, had to cross the oceans and discusses how their life got transformed.

Deeti is one of the important characters who took the ship that travelled to Mauritius. She was actually the last girl child of a farmer's family. She had been a great source of solace and moral support for her brother before marriage, though she had been considered a fragile, little female creature. Even after marriage, though she did major works involving herself in the agricultural activities, she remind only a subaltern wife to the physically challenged husband, always encountering a constant threat of sexual attack from her brother-in-law. After her husband's death, which taken to the cremation ground in the unconscious condition by intoxicating with the power of opium for performing the ritual of Sati, she was rescued of the outcaste, Kalua. Now, in order to escape the wrath of the caste conscious society, they decided to escape hiding their identities as grimitiyas to board the ship that took the coolies to Mauritius. On the way, to escape from the death in the hands of the whites, Kalua once again jumped in to the sea. As a pregnant woman, Deeti alone came to Mauritius. But, with her hardwork and determination, she established her own large clan in the alien land and got herself elevated to the position of her clan's matriarchal head.

Bahram Modi is another important character who with all his scholarship and talents could not establish his merit as a talented person, remaining a dull brother-in-law and son-in-law of an affluent Parsi family. But, he could prove his trade powers in China as an opium trader. Neel Rattan, a small king who lost all his estates because of the cunning tricks of the British traders got a new life when he got an opportunity to leave the motherland as a victimized and falsely changed prisoner. Bahram Modi's wife Sherinin remained a docile woman without having any dignity at her mother's house. After her husband's death, she took a bold decision to cross the ocean in order to get compensation from the British government for the loss of opium in the storm that struck her father's ship *Anamica* in which her husband and his opium travelled. This travel had become a revolutionary chapter in her life. An orthodox Parsi woman, who had never come out home, joined her hands with the foreigner, Zad – her husband's friends. And then happened when she had got her own grandchildren. She might not have thought of it, if she had not travelled by ship.

The whites always consider other civilization and their customs and cultural life inferior to the western one. But, the whites, while happening to live in India, adopt the Indian way of life to. For example, Poulette, the French girl only daughter of a French botanist, felt herself comfortable with the nearness of her Indian friend and the Indian way of life. Thus, the *Ibis Trilogy* presents a number of transformatory moments of individual's life caused by the oceanic displacements in an effective manner.

The ocean does not remain a Passive background setting but acts as an active transformative force in the life of individuals who are able to establish their identity in new cultural settings.

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