

## **A Record of Concealed Indentured Labour in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies***

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### **Abstract:**

Indian diaspora has been spread across the world vividly, and each phase records different characteristics or motives for a migrant's movement. During the colonial period, a lot of people moved away from their roots as Girmitya's or Indentured labours. Their thumb impression acted as their ID card for working as an indentured worker; thus, they soon started to accept the form of enslavement. It was an involuntary force that led them to migrate from their rooted place in search of new life and liberty in a foreign land under colonial rule and thus they became a part of the diaspora. This paper focuses on Amitav Ghosh's novel *Sea of Poppies* which narrates an untold tale of the griefs of the "Girmitya system" during the colonial phase. The novel *Sea of Poppies* is set in the 19th century and it depicts the East India Company's imposing designs on the Girmitya system through Deeti, the female character of the novel and other characters who decide to move across the Indian Ocean to an unfamiliar island where they are ready to substitute with new identities. The Metaphor of the novel is the migration and displacement of the indentured slaves who were sent in Ibis a ship, set to move

across the "Black Water" to transport the opium and indentured labourers. Departure and arrival are permanent emblematic relevance in Ghosh's narrative structure. This paper examines the vivid picture of the suffering of indentured labours and the migration during the colonial phase in the black water which offers a home for several endangered and threatened species.

**Keywords:** Record, Concealed Indentured Labour.

### **Introduction:**

Diasporic Literature is a vast concept and its roots in the sense of migration, displacement and alienation. In due course period, it is an amalgamation of cultures. It reflects an experience that comes out of the settlement in a new land. Uma Parameswaran has defined it as follows:

...first is one of nostalgia for the homeland left behind mingled with fear in a strange land. The second is a phase in which one is busy adjusting to the new environment and there is little creative output. The third phase is the shaping of diaspora existence by involving

ethnocultural issues. The fourth is when they have 'arrived' and start participating in the larger world of politics and national issues. (Parameswaran 165)

The term 'Diaspora' is associated with the scattering and exile of the Jews from their homeland, their longing for their motherland and the alienation experienced by them in the new location. It is a complex social formation that has been shaped by political imaginaries and defined by the materiality of national economies. Scholars have grappled with the concept of diaspora and its classic construction of forced or unforced dispersal, nostalgia, displacement and imagined homelands. With the radical changes in the conditions of migration under globalization, there is a recognition of the transnational and cultural contradictions that frame diasporic lives. These experiences of crossing and relocating raise questions that interrupt their nationality, citizenship and belonging.

The physical diversity of the Indian diaspora has been shaped against the backdrop of the historical forces of colonialism, nationalism and globalization. In each of these forces, the demand for workers has led the diaspora to various locations, with its sets of trials. But this in turn has also created a variety of migrant experiences and practices. Each stream of Indian migration is diverse, the historical particularities connect and traverse on different levels. In various nations to which they have migrated, Indians have counterfeit networks of attachment and a perceptible diasporic presence. However, the 17th century saw an early rise in

migration from India. People migrated for Trade and religious purposes as main reasons. Their migration was short and their arrival in their homeland was expected. Their migration in the Precolonial phase was sporadic. Data provides a trace to the early century, when merchants, princes, priests, and artisans journeyed to other countries. Indian wandering movements to the Asian province were limited. The seafaring history of pre-colonial India shows evidence of continuous contact.

When the British colonized India with trade, the migration of Indians started on a large scale to the British colonized lands. Migration during the colonial period is basically of two types: the "indentured labour system" and the "Kangani" system. During this time India was politically fragmented though there was rich talent in India in all fields including engineering, agriculture, and architecture. But the scenario was different when Britishers came to India as traders. They started to deteriorate the situation by giving responsibilities to rent collection to landlords. This worsened the agricultural situation. Farmers weren't able to meet their ends. As a result, Britishers took advantage of this scenario and they exploited the poor by sending them to their colonies as indentured labourers.

In 1834, slavery was officially abolished by the social activists of European countries. Then some private companies and British officials together started the indentured labour system and very easily they started exploiting the innocence of the poor in India. They sent the people to Mauritius, West Indies, Fiji,

Jamaica and many other colonies. All of them were lured by false promises and assurance of better life. They were promised that the agreement is for five years and later they will gain rights as citizens in their new land. But the promises were never kept and the migrants suffered worse in the new places. The people taken as indentured labourers were abused and killed in the transportation through waterways. Later the Kangani system came, in these, the migrants were recruited by 'Kangani', the headmen who are a migrant themselves. Situations were different. The demand for labourers declined with time.

During the 18th and 19th eras, people were uprooted for serving in the British Empire in various parts of the world. Multiple events of the 19th and 20th Century has created the situations for the relocation of large numbers of Indians to various parts of the world. European expansion depended on both the movement and guidelines of the bodies of the colonized. During colonial rule, India was determinedly rooted in British colonial projects and schemes which spanned the Empire's possessions. Brown affirms:

"India was at the heart of this deepening global interconnection, and became increasingly significant for Britain as a source of raw materials, as [a] market for manufactured goods, a destination for capital investment, and a source of labour for other parts of the Empire" (14). Indians filled a variety of labour needs of the British Empire, it required various skills extending from farmers, plantation workers, soldiers, sailors, nannies and clerks. The unskilled, indentured workers represented

the dramatic numbers of Indians who worked overseas in the colonies. And in the latter part of the 1940s due to the partition, Hindus from Pakistan migrated to India and Muslims from Pakistan migrated to India. Later in the early part of the 20th century, people travelled for their improvement in the job sector. In the new land, they had to work for lesser wages and suffered discrimination. A new aspect of this Migration towards developed countries on their arrangement either to avoid economic difficulties in their native land, to study or as professionals which Gayatri Chakravarty-calls part of 'brain-drain'. Since then, this change in other countries has been continuing. It is important to highlight that whatsoever the reasons for migration, the immigrants experience a sense of displacement in the new lands. They try hard to assimilate into the new cultures but they persist on the edge of the adopted land and are treated like others. These Diasporas live in a condition that is very distressing to them as stated by Bhabha as there is a yearning for 'home' and that remains a "mythic place of desire in diasporic imagination" (Bhabha,77).

This paper aimsto provide a backdrop and trails described by the authors; we touch on the very brief history of the mobility of Indian diasporic communities during the colonial phase.

Amitav Ghosh was born in 1956 and grew up in India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Ghosh shows a keen interest in projecting the diasporic life. His narratives focus on the political, cultural and social environment of post-independent India, exoduses' histories, and the individuals'

diasporic experiences. The blend of history and anthropology in Ghosh's novels helps him to convey the presence of the past in many aspects. He views the wars, politics, economy and other affairs from the perspective of a common man who suffers under all these major events and changes.

His works are *The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Glass Palace*, *The Hungry Tide*, *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke* and *The Flood of Fire* from the three volumes of *The Ibis Trilogy*. Dominantly his works deal with historical issues. His non-fiction works are *In an Antique Land*, *Dancing in Cambodia* and *at Large in Burma*, *Countdown*, and *The Imam and the Indian*. These works of Ghosh reflect the political, historical, cultural events, and social consciousness noticeable by themes that go side by side with colonialism.

Ghosh's first novel *The Circle of Reason* was awarded France's Prix Medici Award in 1990. It is a roguish novel that worries about the adventures of Alu, a weaver from a small village, who leaves his home to travel across the Indian Ocean to the oil town on the Persian Gulf and African Sahara then back to India. This novel's Diasporic themes of displacement, self-identity, migration, alienation, quest for home and rootlessness. His fifth novel, *The Glass Palace* is a tale of three generations of a family. It is a historical novel and it received the international e-book award at the Frankfurt Book Fair. The story is about Rajkumar, who reaches Burma as a poor and later becomes one of the richest traders. It is also about the dilemma of the migrants. The novel covers the episode of the last

king of Burma and his doomed family who is been exiled to Ratnagiri. The Royal family is left with no other option but to live among the commoners. With the outbreak of a plague and less money, they had no other alternative but to let the villagers build a village around the compound of Outram House. "The sense of exile results in a deep feeling of loss, ache, separation, yearning for recuperation and restoration" (Shukla 7). Migration verifies to be a curse but in the case of Rajkumar, he is been transformed from a coolie to a timber merchant. Migration grows into an important theme in Ghosh's novel as each journey serves to impact the identity of the traveller or the migrant.

The Diasporic theory accounts for the physical and psychological journey of an individual. Travel implies impermanency to the experience of moving abroad, it can be called a temporary migration. The characters suppress their memories or passively allow them to be submerged in them, some of them recollect the vision of the past while others keep up with reality. The state of migrancy is a state of indetermination of the tentativeness, "in-between's" as Homi Bhabha calls it, a migrant is observed as a critical participant-observer.

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* traces the history of the opium trade. During the colonial period, 1.3 million peasant households in northern India had a cash crop that occupied a quarter and half of a peasant's holding. The trade was run by the East India Company, a powerful company established for trading. This trade was attained largely through two wars

which forced China to open its doors to the British Indian opium. Poppy farming influenced the lives of 10 million people in the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. This novel portrays the migration of the Girmitya of North India to Mauritius. It appears as a historical saga of the colonial phase migration. To the Britishers, it was a commercial venture. The workers signed an "agreement" called girmitya and so they were known as girmityas. The Girmityas were the second set of Indian diasporic migrants. The foremost aspect of the novel is the loss of the homeland, national and cultural identity and how the labourers try to find a new identity in a host land, demonstrated by the slave-schooner Ibis. We also tend to see some of the oppressive trading strategies of British traders.

### **Background Information:**

Madhavi Thampi states as following:

"The Histories of both the former Han and later Han Dynasties enumerates many products from different parts of India, including precious stones, pearls, perfumes, spices, fine linen, copper, tin, and exotic animals such as the rhinoceros and peacock"(40).

We had an age-old relationship with China. During the colonial Phase, the traders were bound by the East India Company and the Parsis carried the opium from India to China and the Parsis. During the pre-opium war, it was not only the labour diaspora but also another group of men that is Indian sepoys crossed the geographical border and stayed in a new land for years and fought got wounded and died. Though few came back with a scared

mind. These soldiers were an understudied group being away from the light. They left their village and joined the British camp to undergo training. The metamorphosis which they went through created an impact on them. When they wanted to get back home in the middle of the training, the flow of money and comfort forced their family to send them back to the camp. By focusing on the historical reports of Commissioner Lin, Ghosh has proved that his trilogy isn't completely fictional. Migration and the indentured labour experience have attracted him and he decides to give voice to those 'coolies', He has very well used the 'Opium war' as a connecting cord in his Ibis Trilogy. Later the Chinese restrictions on the opium trade led to dissatisfaction war. The Opium War affected the lives of many who were far away from the war area. Some of the researchers hardly State it as a result, which is getting faded from the memory and with it the pain of Indians who were directly or indirectly linked to it.

Opium is shown as the backdrop *Sea of Poppies*, which is more than a war that created the Girmitya system. Amitav Ghosh has shown how the forced cultivation of Opium has left the farmers in poverty. British took complete possession of the harvest. Once the opium is traded to China, the opium intoxication forced the Chinese officials to take action against the traders, it not only disrupted the flow of money but marred the business of the Parsis. As a result, the dissatisfaction with the Chinese officials led to the war and finally opium strained India's relationship with China. The ocean held an important place as it was the medium through which

the Indenture labourers shifting, opium trade, and the opium war took place actively. Ocean became an archive that holds long-forgotten stories. These stories are not facts but they are tales of power, violence, marginalization, trauma, resistance and survival. Historians have focused on the role of Opium wars in colonial expansion. Opium profited the Britishers as they do not hesitate to disrupt the lives of the colonized men. The opium trade was a smuggling trade and Ghosh highlights how the Indians were taken as Indenture labour and sepoys received nothing in return except trauma.

### ***Sea of Poppies* A Chronicle Of Indenture Labour:**

*Sea of Poppies*, a historical novel begins in 1838 on the eve of the opium wars, set in Eastern India and the Bay of Bengal. The story starts with the arrival of a former slave ship Ibis at Ganga- Sagar Island. Withdrawn with the abolition of the slave trade, the Ship is settled to transport the coolies from Calcutta to the sugar estates in Mauritius which is under the British colony. The ship Ibis turns out to be the shelter for the migrated people. Amitav Ghosh thus discusses the problem of being multiethnic in this work. Without any variance of caste, colour, religion, or language they are holding a hand towards a similar fate.

The novel is divided into three parts namely the Land, River and Sea. The first part embodies the situations which bring the characters to the Ibis ship. Deeti looks at the Ibis while working on her poppy farm. Her husband is an opium addict and comes

from a powerful family in the village. When he dies, Deeti assumes she has nothing left with worries and decides to die on a widow's pyre. But, Kalua, a low-caste cart driver, saves her and the two run away together. Meanwhile, Zachary Reid joins the Ibis which is ported in Baltimore as his first voyage due to some mishaps he reaches Calcutta and is the only remaining member of the original crew and the stand-in captain, under the wings of Serang Ali. Jodu, a boatman, returns to Calcutta to find Paulette, by whom he was raised. However, Ibis destroys his boat, so he asks Paulette to request Zachary to get him employment on the ship. Lastly, Neel Halder, the Raja of Raskhali, sees the Ibis arrival and meets Benjamin Burnham to discuss his debts. When he refuses one last time to surrender his lands to Burnham, Burnham brings him upon an exaggerated forgery charge.

In the second part, the ship is anchored near Kidderpore, all these characters are moved into the ship by some blow of their destiny. In Deeti and Kalua continue to travel together downriver, they try to remain unseen by the villagers as much as possible. They soon make their way to Chhapra, but in vain when they encounter Bhyro Singh and hear that they are being hunted by their village men and so they decide to sign up as an indentured servants in Mauritius to escape. Zachary begins to ingratiate himself into a gentlemanly lifestyle in Calcutta; Burnham starts to like him, though the first friend of his voyage dislikes him from the start and is nearly killed by him at the end of the section. Jodu becomes acquainted with the ship and manages to gain the respect of the

rest of the crew who initially dislike him, as he is a freshwater boatman. Paulette realizes that she must escape Calcutta and the Burnhams asks Zachary to help her to get her on the ship. Zachary declines, so she hatches a plan with Baboo Nob Kissin and is brought on board disguised as a Bengali woman, under the trick of travelling for an arranged marriage. Neel is sentenced to 7 years of labour in Mauritius and loses his lands. He is transported to jail and awaits his departure where he meets Ah Fatt, an opium addict who is transported with him.

The third part is about the sail in the *Ibis* to a new life that awaits in Mauritius for them. The various narratives come together, Deeti and Kalua discover upon boarding that Bhyro Singh is on the ship and they manage to escape from him as much of the journey but their presence on the ship is discovered at the end Bhyro begins to exact his revenge on Deeti even though Kalua rescues her, one of Bhyro's guards falls overboard in the process and so Kalua is charged with murder. While being whipped for the crime of rescuing Deeti in Ghazipur, Kalua manages to break free from his chains and kill Bhyro, after which he is sentenced to be executed by Chillingworth. Meanwhile, Zachary begins to fall into his role as the second mate, fighting frequently with the first mate Crowle. Through their conversation, Zachary discovers that Serang Ali was a pirate. Zachary confronts him, and he agrees to disappear to Port Louis. Crowle, discovers Zachary's race and attempts to blackmail him into mutiny but Zachary declines. Jodu's flirtation with one of the migrant women Munia results from a severe

beating from Bhyro Singh. Paulette reveals herself at first to Jodu accidentally, then intentionally to Zachary. Later she discovers his race and realizes that Zachary is the only person on the ship who can understand her multiple identities. Neel and Ah Fatt grow close but they are disrupted by Crowle who convinces Ah Fatt to urinate on Neel in exchange for what he believes to be opium.

In the final chapter, as Zachary and Crowle argue Ah Fatt sneaks in and kills Crowle in revenge for his actions. Zachary runs above the board soon on time to Ilok at Serang Ali, Jodu, Kalua, Neel, and Ah Fatt as they disappear on a stolen longboat, heading to Singapore. On the deck are Baboo Nob Kissin, Paulette and Deeti, the last of whom he identifies, though he has never met them.

### **Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* in Diasporic Lens:**

Amitav Ghosh is not only focusing on the group of indentured labours in this novel but he also challenges and establishes concepts of the Indian past - including the major theme of colonialism and nationalism. People are located in a small village and then they are moved towards the process of dislocation. While travelling in the *Ibis*, the characters attempt to reconstruct their identities, they are influenced by the supremacy of hierarchic people and to them, the world surrounds them with their own beliefs, feelings, and memories. Identity is being recreated through the effects of names, family, social class, memories, environmental forces and historical background. All of these notions

act uninterruptedly to shape the identity of the characters. The transformation of the important characters in the novel gets a place on the Ibis ship. Deeti becomes Aditi, Kalua becomes Maddow Colver. When Mr. Zachary Reid moves from the American racial discrimination, he is transformed into Malum Zikri, Jodu becomes Azad Naskar and Paulette disguises herself as Gumasta Baboo Nob Kissin's niece Putleshwari or Pugly, and then she moves away from a rigidly defined European community in India. Though Raja Neel Rattan is a Raja, he owns a lot of money from the white money moneylender. So, the court punishes him by making him work as indentured labour for seven years in Mauritius. All these characters falsify their identities and the colonial setup works as a catalyst for their transformations. Paulette, a French Orphan who matured in India, is nursed by Jodu's mother and Mrs. Burnham takes Paulette to their home after her father's fate. She moves away when Mr. Burnham behaved badly to her in private. Aiming to lead a new life, Paulette joins the Ibis under the camouflage of a Brahmin's daughter. She senses more about Indianness and her ancestral European culture. Ghosh figures this European woman's identity as a duplex constructive. When we see characters such as Heeru, Munia, Champa and Ratna all have the same past in a patriarchal society so they try to abandon these restrictions of the complex society and go ahead to identify themselves as indentures in a strange land. They yearn to leave their intricate past and need betterment in the future. They want to build a community that is equal in all terms. The dark ocean

kalapani signifies the loss of caste with a new formula that inculcates socialization. The journey on Ibis provides a sort of free space to act and react to all the characters which they were not able to do. Deeti on her lips identifies herself as Kabutari- ki-Ma, the name which she had known since her daughter's birth, her proper name strikes in her mind and no one has used it. The novel retains the characters' identity after displacement. When we look at the name of Deeti it is identical to her current situation of existence whereas Aditi a woman granted a blessing to relive her life again and history repeats itself. Ghosh's novels are a trip to the past, the past is an unchanging factor with the present and drifting through time. Diasporic writers are recurrent invitees of the culture, nation, tradition, and past because they had been a part of that. Enduring the part of the migration from their roots, the voyagers of Ibis change their identity and opens up their culture. Ghosh sketches the diasporic culture as thus when one enters the ship to pass through the Blackwater, the fellow transporters form a brotherhood. Here we tend to see the outline of a new society of diaspora people on new land that is an act of creation and progress of civilization. Societies are designed and Cultures are established. This is an aspect of the journey presented in an unreal space of the novel. The ship soon becomes a 'new home' for the labours.

#### **Role of Identity and Displacement:**

The indentured migration during the early phase was only a small number of women. They were called the 'jahaji behans'

in the trilogy. Ghosh skillfully used the story of Deeti and Kalua as 'girmityas' and he describes their sufferings in the camp and Ibis ships. The novel pictures the sufferings they went through on the land and the sea. A blanket, some clothing and a round brass lota were given to the men who entered their names in the list as grimitas. They were served a meal to appreciate their new status as grimitas. When one of them asked "Why? Are we being fed for the slaughter, like goats before 'Id?'" (Ghosh 204) Ghosh's words make a high impact on the readers. The Pulwar became a cauldron of rumours it spread like a fire that beef and pork were included in their ration. Soon the Labourers worried as it was against their tradition. When they reached Mareech, they feared that they might be forced to convert to Christianity and that their bodies would be buried in the soil after death, as there was no provision for cremation. Migrants were then taken to their camps in rowboats. At first, they were taken to an office, where they registered their names. Babu, the gomusta and the Pilot Mr. Doughty were responsible for the camp. Kalua had been registered as Colver instead of Madhu Kalua. It happened as the words sound alike. They were made to stay in camps as prisoners and "They would stand around for hours, watching, pointing, and staring, as if at animals in a cage." (Ghosh 339). Their situation tempted the migrants to escape from the depot. Moreover, the climate of the new place made them ill. The migrants decided to do pujas, namazes and recitations. Finally, the departure day came. The duffadar Ramsaran-Ji informed the migrants that they would be under different

sets of guards and supervisors until they reached Mareech where each will be allotted to a plantation. The girmityas team got ready to board the vessel Ibis. The women's section was set in a curtained alcove and it was not crowded as the men's compartment. But Deeti found half-dozen women and later she introduced herself as Aditi, wife of Madhu to save herself and Kalua from her late husband Hukam Singh's family.

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* shelters the concepts of identity, it deals with the issues that an individual comes across in their social, political and cultural context. In the novel, he projects the identity of the characters as adjustable, adaptive and eager to transform as they are in a quest for identity rather than mourning for their situations. He has primarily projected the colonial impact over the characters in the form of projection of secondary identity.

*Sea of Poppies* immensely deals with the term diasporic identity. The most important thing that prevails in the novel is the displacement of the characters. The colonial situation has made them move due to their personal reasons or bad circumstances. Paulette, Azad, Baboo moves because of their choice whereas Lascars and others move for economic reasons and King Neel moves due to colonial injustice. Their situations in life act as a catalyst for their movement. This aspect of diaspora has been slightly ignored in the diasporic writings but Ghosh has made an effort to depict the reality. In the novel, Ghosh presents the details of their displacement and how the girmitya's

handled them. Ghosh accounts for the political and socio-economic conditions that led to the mass migration of the impoverished Indian peasants as indentured labourers.

With this migration of people, the issue of survival and identity in an unfamiliar land was traumatic. Diasporic awareness is occupied with issues in the form of belonging, alienation, nostalgia and culture and self-identity. Defining oneself in a new setting is important in maintaining the identity in a new situation. It can be identified with their role of them in the past and their present situation and their future outlook. People who boarded the ship as indentured labour were disappointed and they suffered from natural calamities, and colonial forces tied with hunger and poverty. They decided to distance themselves from the obstacles they had in the name of structures of class, community and religion. They were horrified by the cultural differences and when they formed a unified identity as indentured labour girmityas journey made a composite sense. The girmitya's despite their class at the ship formed their group, which developed the 'we' feeling in them.

The majority of the characters in the novel showcase extraordinary skill in handling the situation and the new place. The characters make an effort for their identity reconstruction to suit the new place. As Stuart Hall says, "diaspora identities are constantly producing and reproducing themselves as a new, through transformation and difference" (438). They are adoptive as well as adaptive. "It is the ability in relocating to a new space and

adapting to a new space that gives a threshold to the characters. They belonged to a group of people who were unfettered by the burden of 'otherness'. Though the novel presents the colonial phase of forced diaspora where the characters fled from their land, leaving them with no choice but to tolerate, it develops a new vision of diasporic sensibility in the form of restoration and reconstruction of identity. In *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh presented an overall approach toward diasporic consciousness. Instead of crying over the past. They were earlier dejected but when they find a way to cope by reconstructing their new identity.

In the novel, *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh successfully exposed the reality of binarism existing within the social structure during the colonial period. Ghosh investigates the humanity of how people felt dehumanized and he finally takes a stand to construct the girmitya's identity that can enable them to make spaces in the mainstream. The uncountable despairs of the indentured labourers were the chronicles of the colonial power. Their voices weren't given importance in contemporary literature. The darkest side of promoting free trade and capitalism is confined within historical documents. The colonial rulers had never expected the hegemony, In the *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh revives the colonial diasporas of the transoceanic trading system which shows the large-scale migration of indentured labour from India to colonial outposts. Ghosh maintains a perfect position with histories of miseries of the girmitya's. The discrimination they faced is no less than their sufferings as slaves. The rumours among the labourers and the ill-

treatment received by them are narrated in detail through meticulous research, by tunneling the Indian archives to make his narrative realistic. The hidden stories are brought out and thus, this paper has attempted to portray the indentured labourers during the colonial period through a diasporic lens and by illustrating their status as minor humans to face the contrast of self away from their homeland.

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