

**Migration Issues in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*****Dr. Dev Kant Sharma**Assistant Professor of English  
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Dist. Solan (Himachal Pradesh)**Abstract:**

This paper seeks to present migration as a major thematic strand having far-reaching consequences for the migrants uprooted from their native land as portrayed by Amitav Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies*. Ghosh as an author brings to the fore the trials and tribulations faced by the indentured labourers who as migrants have to undergo such ordeals as oppression, suppression, mental anguish, gender discrimination and marginalization either at the hands of the dominant or powerful groups of society or because of their displacement from their motherland. Not only does Ghosh portray quite realistically various types of oppressive measures inflicted upon the displaced migrants but he also highlights, in a highly truthful manner, migration as the root cause of the problems faced by the ethnic minorities. *Sea of Poppies* is remarkable for its truthful depiction of the migration of Indian indentured labourers in large numbers to various British plantation colonies, Mauritius being the one represented in the given novel. Ghosh accomplishes the self-imposed task of unearthing the historical truth about the opium trade between India and China in the mid-nineteenth century and its repercussions and ill-effects upon common native Indians who find themselves uprooted from their homeland and are compelled by circumstances beyond their control to move to Mauritius as indentured labourers. The objective of the present paper is to bring to the fore the ramifications and various nuances of migration and displacement in the world portrayed by Amitav Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies*.

**Keywords:** migrants, indentured, marginalization, migration, displacement, plantation colonies

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* is remarkable for its truthful depiction of the 19th century imperialism and the consequent migration of Indian indentured labourers in large numbers to various British plantation colonies; specifically to Mauritius. In 1833, the abolition of slavery in the British Empire ended the supply of cheap labour for the colonial plantations. Further there was an imminent threat to the lucrative opium trade due to new trade regulations by the Chinese empire. In the wake of such historical developments, the recruitment and transportation of indentured labourers from India became a profitable venture for the British imperialists. The labourers were forced into signing an 'agreement' known as *girmit* in the vernacular North Indian language; thus they were known as *girmityas*. And this novel is a saga of these *girmityas* who became the first Indian diaspora.

Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies* attempts to create a fictional history of the indentured migrants of nineteenth century India by relying on historical sources obtained from a number of scholars, lexicographers, linguists and historians which he gratefully acknowledges. Ghosh is preoccupied with the question why the Indians became indentures in the first place. He delineates the socio-economic conditions of the British Raj in which the farmers of the Gangetic plains had been forced to cultivate opium leading to the rapid destruction of the agrarian economy thereby depriving the farmers of their sustenance as Ghosh records:

The town was thronged with hundreds of other impoverished transients, many of whom were willing to sweat themselves half to death for a few handfuls of rice. Many of these people had been driven from their villages by the flood of flowers that had washed over the countryside: lands that had once provided sustenance

were now swamped by the rising tide of poppies; food was so hard to come by that people were glad to lick the leaves in which offerings were made at temples... . (*Sea of Poppies* 202)

Here Ghosh has attempted to explore those regions that are not accessible even to history. And he has succeeded in unearthing such long-lost aspects of history as are essentially associated with migration and displacement.

*Sea of Poppies* chronicles the saga of the fictional lives of a number of characters belonging to different countries such as India, Britain, America, France and China. Coming together by a stroke of destiny on the Ibis, a schooner that was once used as a slave carrier between Africa and America and now, after the abolition of slavery in 1833, has come to be used to transport indentured labourers from colonized countries to new colonies ; these people form a unique company that is made up of diverse cultures. Though these migrants hail from distinct socio-cultural setups, they are bound together by their being uprooted from their native lands, thereby foregrounding migration as an overarching reality.

The narrative is fabricated around the lives of a number of characters such as Kalua who is an untouchable in a caste-ridden Indian society, Deeti who despite being a high-caste Hindu widow elopes with Kalua after being rescued by him from funeral pyre, Zachary Reid who is a Mulatto from Boston and works as the Ibis's foreman, Paulette who is an orphaned French girl and runs away from her British foster family, Jodu who is a Muslim lascar on the Ibis whose romance with a Hindu girl Munia on the schooner heading to Mauritius creates an uproar and also Neel Ratten Haldar, a poor Hindu Raja, who has inherited debt from his father and due to this he faces a penal servitude of seven years in Mauritius.

Taking a cue from the historic event of the opium trade, Ghosh shifts his attention to the opium ship and opium factory and weaves the story of a number of ordinary folks who despite belonging to different cultural set-ups and different countries come together on board a ship called Ibis that is making its way to sugar plantations of Mauritius. *Sea of Poppies* is also the story of people whose lives are adversely affected by poppy plantation. Opium cultivation is forced upon the Indian farmers by the British rulers who themselves thrive upon opium trade but the farmers whose land is used to cultivate poppies are constantly crushed under grinding poverty. In the very beginning of the novel, the flowering plants of poppy indicate that opium will play a very significant role in the lives of the major characters whose lives as migrants will go upside down once they get displaced from their native places. People suffered a lot due to the cultivation of opium and had to die from hunger or migrate to Mauritius in the hope of leading a happy life there. Deeti remembers how edible crops were grown earlier and they got both edible food and material for making roof. Deeti herself says:

In the old days, the fields would be heavy with wheat in the winter, and after the spring harvest, the straw would be used to repair the damage of the year before. But now, with the sahibs forcing everyone to grow poppy, no one had thatch to spare - it had to be bought at the market, from people lived in faraway villages, and the expense was such that people put off their repairs as long as they possibly could. (SOP 29)

Thus Ghosh has juxtaposed migration with imperialism and colonialism. Poppy was initially grown to fulfill the needs of the household but the consolidation of the colonial powers

changed everything. People were compelled to grow poppy and it resulted in debt and migration for them in the long run.

The banes of colonialism and imperialism have not only stripped India of its riches but also adversely affected the lives of the ordinary and the poor whose mental anguish can be understood if the history is revisited keeping in mind their perspective and standpoint. First and foremost, colonisation is very much about “the struggles to possess” territory, as Edward Said writes, with the further intention “to dispossess, ruin, maim and distort the lives of many, all in the cause of land” (Said 82).

It is through Deeti and Kalua’s forced journey on the schooner to the Mareech that Ghosh highlights the themes of migration and displacement. Migration has been an all-pervasive phenomenon in all ages of the past. In his “Immigration Lecture” that he had delivered in Hague, Lal categorically chalks out the three phases of emigration from India: “First, in the era before the emergence of European dominance, was the ‘Age of Merchants’, ... The second phase was the ‘Age of Colonial Capital’ of the 19th and 20th centuries ... the third phase, ‘The Age of Globalisation,’ is essentially a product of the post -World War II era” (Lal 9).

Historians have been biased in so far as they have delineated migration and displacement as factors affecting the lives of the rich and the powerful only whereas the poor and the weak have been brushed aside as of little importance in the making of history given the context of migration and displacement. *Sea of Poppies*, overtly concerned with the depiction of the second phase of outward flow of indentured immigrants as substantiated by Lal, thrashes out migration and displacement as significant factors destabilising the lives of the ordinary people during the mid-nineteenth century. Ghosh himself stated in an interview with BBC that he began the Ibis

trilogy as a narrative of indentured immigrants from Bihar and eastern U.P. Its scope was later on widened to include not only India but also other parts of the world such as China and Mauritius. The reasons for the displacement and dislocation of the people have been looked into whereby it is not only colonial and imperial rule that gets exposed but also the self-centredness and selfishness of human nature have been viewed as destabilising factors in the lives of common people. The evils prevalent in the Indian society too have been dealt with in a unique manner. The problems of poverty, marginalization of women in Hindu society, widowhood, and forced marriages have been depicted as dominant factors leading to the displacement of people from their homeland.

After exploiting the natural resources of India unconsciously, the British East India Company was all set to exploit the human resources of India during 1830s. The time was ripe as recurrent drought and utter poverty had made people willing to try their luck somewhere else away from their own country. The European merchants availed themselves of the opportunity and started the evil business of indentured labour that was to adversely affect the lives of millions of people for good. Historically, the recruitment of indentured labourers began as a consequence of the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833 that put an end to the supply of cheap labour for the colonial plantations. At Por'Lwee in Mauritius, Monsieur d'Epinay, the French landowner informs Zachary Reid, the second mate of the *Ibis*, "Tell Mr. Burnham that I need men. Now that we may no longer have slaves in Mauritius, I must have coolies, or I am doomed" (SOP 21). The growing demand of labourers in plantation colonies compounded by the famine, unemployment, and poverty led to mass migration of indentured labourers to various colonies like Mauritius, Trinidad and Fiji islands. The cultivation of opium, "(the) most lucrative of the British Empire's products . . ." (SOP 97) and its trading become a

symbol of the British oppression in the novel. Labourers were required badly in the plantation economies of the European imperial powers. Mauritius was one of such economy.

Setting sail from Calcutta, Bombay or Madras, often in deplorable conditions, shiploads arrived in Mauritius almost on a daily basis. The journey took anywhere between eight and ten weeks and several didn't make it to their final destination.

(Sivaraj Web)

The plight of the labourers can be gauged from the fact that they were not only paid low wages for their work but also had to face ostracization from their own community because of having crossed the black waters. People of Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar formed the chunk of the migrants sailing for Mauritius that attracted people of Indian origin the most. The novel conjures up the long history of

...the incessant movements of the peoples, commerce, and empires which have traversed the Indian Ocean since antiquity; and the lives of men and women with little power, whose stories, framed against the grand narratives of history, invite other ways of thinking about the past, culture, and identity. (Arora 21)

Deeti's character is significant in that her stance posits the historical truth about the indentured migrants. After escaping from the funeral pyre and before entering Bihar, she witnesses an en masse exodus of "hundreds of impoverished transients, many of whom were willing to sweat themselves half to death for a few handfuls of rice"(SOP 298). Compelled by the inexorable circumstances, these poverty-ridden people had no other option but to put down their signatures on a contract that offered them a meagre amount of money but enslavement of a life-time. Kalua is witness to a scene in which eight men sign the agreement not because they are

fooled but because they want to avoid a sure death due to hunger. These people do not belong to lower castes only, as in the words of duffadar:

Caste doesn't matter ... All kinds of men are eager to sign up - Brahmins, Ahirs, Chamars, Telis. What matters is that they be young and able-bodied and willing to work. (SOP 302)

Here another important point about crossing of sea by the Hindus comes to the fore that, as Vijay Mishra observes, has remained a powerful symbol of travel across troubled waters to lands from which no body returned home. In his article "Memory and Recall" Vijay Mishra associates *kala pani* ( the crossing of the sea) with the more general Hindu fear of sailing across the sea, (Mishra 91) since it meant "loss of caste as well as indenture and servitude for earlier migrants to the Empire's plantation colonies" (SOP 90). Hindu traditions have it that the sea was like the netherworld or the hell which, despite being touched by the Ganges as she unleashed her holy waters in it, remained a forbidding place from which no traveller returned (SOP 89). Deeti too reflects on the consequences of crossing the black water one of which was obviously the losing of one's caste:

She tried to imagine what it would be like to be in their place, to know that you were forever an outcaste; to know that you would never again enter your father's house; that you would never throw your arms around your mother; never eat a meal with your sisters and brothers; never feel the cleansing touch of Ganga. And to know also that for the rest of your days you would eke out a living on some wild, demon-plagued land. (SOP 72)



*Emigration from India* reports that the coolies were shipped in crowded vessels, just as the case in the dabusa of the Ibis. Indentured migrants were not treated as human beings but as a commodity. The medical facilities was either inadequate or virtually absent (*Emigration from India* 6). The evident consequence of this indifference towards the welfare of the coolies resulted in the death of many of them during their transportation that took about ten weeks from Calcutta to Mauritius.

Ghosh is one of those scholars who pay attention to the connections between the labour regimes of convict transportation and indentured labor. It goes to the credit of Ghosh that he has well understood the connections between the real histories of both the slaves and the indentured labourers. Through the plight of migrants, he has established a close resemblance between the two scourges of colonial history. For the labourers, migration to Mauritius indeed results in dislocation, displacement, loss of identity and loss of caste and kin. Ghosh accomplishes the self-imposed task of unearthing the historical truth about the opium trade between India and China in the mid-nineteenth century and its repercussions and ill-effects upon common native Indians who find themselves uprooted from their homeland and are compelled by circumstances beyond their control to move to Mauritius as indentured labourers. The objective of the present paper is to bring to the fore the ramifications and various nuances of migration and displacement as portrayed by Amitav Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies*.

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