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Deconstructing Human Society: An Appreciation of Amtav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

# Deconstructing Human Society: An Appreciation of Amitav Ghosh's *Sea Of Poppies*

Ravi Bhushan, Ph.D. & Ms Daisy

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## Abstract

The recent short listing of Amitav Ghosh's latest novel *Sea of Poppies* for this year's Man Booker Prize is an occasion for all of us to rejoice. In fact, *Sea of Poppies* has been received favorably by the Booker jury for the compelling story told against an epic historical canvas. The first in Ghosh's new trilogy of novels, *Sea of Poppies* is a stunningly vibrant and intensely human work that confirms his reputation as a master storyteller.

*Sea of Poppies* tells the compelling story of how it is that in the ship Ibis, headed to Caribbean sugar plantations, small new worlds are forged, bringing together north Indian women, Bengali Zamindars, black men, rural laborers and Chinese seamen. The novel closes with the Ibis in mid-ocean in a storm. Serang Ali, leader of the lascars, has abandoned the ship. Few key figures survive and watch from the deck the disappearance of the long boat.

If Rushdie can be said to have revitalized the Indian novel in English with the 1981 publication of the magnificent *Midnight's Children*, Ghosh's fiction has over the years probed the unlit corners of the genre and brought it into powerful dialogue with other places, peoples and times.

Amitav Ghosh's career began in the experimental wake of *Midnight's Children* and the techniques it put into play: magical realism, satire, wordplay, mythology, allegories etc. one of the recurring themes in Ghosh's work is that globalization in terms of trade, migration and cultural contact is not new. Putting up a moderate stance, Ghosh believes that although European colonialism constitutes a great rupture in the histories of Asia and Africa, out of these tragedies communities were unmade and again made.

*Sea of Poppies* is imbued by a deep commitment to human values. In this joint paper we propose to examine the underlying philosophy of Amitav Ghosh, in understanding the evolution of human society and to reclaim all that in our heterogeneous culture is valuable and ultimately indispensable. (326 words)

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## **Amitav Ghosh and His Inventiveness**

Amitav Ghosh is a writer concerned with India's place in larger international cultural networks, whose fiction seems directly informed by contemporary academic debates about colonialism and culture. His very first novel, *Circle of Reason* (1986) written in Salman Rushdie's magical realist mode, attempts to recover a continuing tradition of cultural exchange for India.

Ghosh is a novelist given to generic inventiveness and champion of post-modern cultural weightlessness, but his writing is as interested in the ties that bind as in the transitory nature of global culture. In fact Amitav Ghosh has, over the last two decades, brought substance and range to Indian English fiction and indeed, added richly to the literature of the subcontinent as a whole.

If Rushdie can be said to have revitalized the Indian novel in English with the 1981 publication of the magnificent *Midnight's Children*, Amitav Ghosh's fiction has over the years, probed its unlit corners, and brought it into powerful dialogue with other places, peoples and times. Ghosh has chosen to set new literary challenges for himself, constantly transforming his work over the years.

## **Amitav Ghosh's Writing Career**

Ghosh's career did begin, like that of many of his contemporaries, including Shashi Tharoor and Mukul Kesavan, in the experimental wake of *Midnight's Children* and the techniques it put into play: magical realism, satire, wordplay, mythology, elaborate allegories, and layers of interconnected stories. His debut novel *Circle of Reason* draws on these resources and opened up a rich seam of stories and themes that Ghosh would excavate in later works. From happenings in the physical world, some probably prosaic, such as teak-felling, rubber-tapping, opium production, dolphin migration, sari-weaving and even the anopheles mosquito bearing deadly malaria, Ghosh's writing draws out poetry, insight and wondrous histories.

Amitav Ghosh has a distinctive style of writing that synthesizes the imagination of a writer with the insightful detaining of an anthropologist. He takes up the obscured events in history and transcends the boundaries of fiction/ non-fiction by sprinkling over them the colors of his imagination.

One of the recurring themes in Ghosh's work exposes the fact that despite the relative newness of capitalism and the violence of the imperialism that put it in place, globalization in the sense of trade, migration and cultural contact is not itself new. Although European colonialism would constitute a great rupture in the histories of Asia and Africa, out of these often tragic upheavals communities were unmade but also made again.

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## *Sea of Poppies*

*Sea of Poppies*, the first in a trilogy, has been received favorably by the Booker jury for the compelling story told against an epic historical canvas, its deft use of diverse tongues and a memorable cast of characters.

*Sea of Poppies* tells the story of how it is that in the ship *Ibis*, headed to Caribbean sugar plantations; small new worlds are forged, bringing together north Indian women, Bengali *Zamindars*, black men, rural laborers and Chinese seamen. It is the story of people whose fate is written by poppy flower, the British who forced opium cultivation on farmers, the ruined lives of farmers, the people who were addicted and the poor factory workers, deceit of the British, ship that transported the opium and which carried Indians to a life of slavery.

### **The Background**

*Sea of Poppies* is set in India in 1838. The East India Company, yet to be curbed of its excesses by the British Crown, is amassing unimaginable wealth by growing opium and illegally exporting it to China. Peasant farmers have been obliged to turn over their fields to opium production, and this causes widespread poverty and hunger because lands that had once provided sustenance were now swamped with the rising tide of poppies. Furthermore, the Chinese are determined to stop a trade that is rapidly undermining the economy by turning millions of them into addicts. As the Chinese stood up in their defense and banned the import of opium, the Company took its revenge by declaring war on China under the rhetoric of freedom.

While Chinese were being poisoned under the guise of triangular trade of opium in the mid 19th century, the poor Indian peasant actually suffered the burnt of this poisoning. The English '*sahibs*' forced everyone to grow poppy in place of useful crops like wheat, *dal* and vegetables.

Amitav Ghosh aptly captures the sheer helplessness of Indian laborers and peasants as the factory's growing appetite for revenue rendered them exploited and defenseless. *Sea of Poppies* traverses the least treaded path of Indian colonial history by exposing the shrewd business acumen of British, who scrapped India of its riches and Chinese of their discretion by poisoning them with opium.

### ***Sea of Poppies* Resembles Calcutta!**

A large cast of characters in *Sea of Poppies* assembles in Calcutta, teeming city in which numerous races and people of differing faiths and creeds live together. The *Ibis*, a former slave ship, is being refitted to take a large group of '*girmityas*' or indentured migrants to Mauritius (Islands of Mareech).

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## **The Ibis, the Slave Ship**

The Ibis has a British captain, an American, second mate, Indian troops to maintain order, and a crew of lascars. Among its passengers are people of all nationalities, backgrounds and beliefs, some crossing the seas to escape difficulties at home, some being transported as convicts. They belong to different strata of society ranging from a widowed village woman *Deeti*, a low caste ‘giant of a man’ *Kalwa*, the gomusta Baboo Nob Kissin Pander, a mulatto American freedman Zachery, an orphaned French girl, Paulette, her play mate Jodu and the bankrupt Raja Neel Rattan of Raskhali.

As they sail down the Hooghly and into the Indian Ocean, their old familial ties are washed away and they begin their lives afresh. The sea becomes their new nation as the shipmates form new bonds of empathy. They leave behind the strictures of caste, community and religion; rename themselves as *jahaz-bhais* and *jahaz-bahens*.

### **A Positive Note Amidst All Suffering**

Even amidst such sufferings, Ghosh sound a positive note as he shows how despite all odds, life somehow finds a way. Singing and ritualistic performances become their sole refuse from the colonial reality and the uncertainties awaiting them in the remote islands of Mareech.

In fact, through *Sea of Poppies*, we can compare the vexed diasporic experiences of colonial India with that of an equally perturbed colonial history of Africa and the numbing diasporic experiences of Africans as poignantly encapsulated in Walcott’s poems. The dilemma faced by *jahaz-bhais* of the Ibis, while crossing the ‘chasm of darkness where the holy Ganga disappeared into the *kalapani*’ is aptly portrayed in the following lines of Walcott’s poem ‘*Names*’ (1970):

‘Behind us all, the sky folded as history folds over a fish line, and the foam foreclosed-----to trace our names o the sand which the sea erased again, to our indifference’.

### **Polyglot Communities – Indian Panorama in the Ibis**

Both Calcutta and Ibis are polyglot communities; the people on this ship speak everything from pidgin and Bhojpuri to the comically mangled English of a Bengali Babu and a young Frenchwoman. To do this, Ghosh has perused not only Sir Henry Yule’s ‘Hobson-Jobson’, the celebrated 19<sup>th</sup> century dictionary of colloquial Anglo-Indian words and phrases, but also more obscure 1811 English and Hindustani Naval dictionary of technical terms and sea phrases.

### **Incessant Movements and Community Building**

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*Sea of Poppies*, the first volume in Amitav Ghosh's 'Ibis Trilogy', revisits some of the concerns of his earlier novels. Among these are 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.

On the Ibis community of sorts begins to form among the migrants. Relationships are forged or break up, hostilities erupt, and individual destinies undergo sudden changes of direction.

Cut off from their roots, in transit, and looking ahead to fresh start, the migrants are prone to invent new names and histories. All have stories to tell and secrets to hide. The controlling theme running across the novel is the question of identity.

### **Eastern Humanism?**

Amitav Ghosh, as always, proposes a very particular, non-western form of humanism, a belief in commonalities that exist across 'race', class and culture. Political imperatives determine many of the relationships in the novel, but for the most part fail to quench the force of individual human emotions-memories and desires, disappointment and aspirations. Ghosh's success as a historical novelist owes much to the distinctiveness of each of his characters. These are underpinned by a mass of researches, specialist information, which brings a bygone era and vanished experiences to life through vividly realized detail. We get taxonomy of the various types of opium and their effects, an account of what life in both mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Calcutta and its hinterland might have been like.

### **Globalizing Opium Trade**

*Sea of Poppies* dramatizes two great economic themes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the cultivation of opium as a cash crop in Bengal and Bihar for the Chinese market, and the transport of Indian indentured workers to cut sugar canes for the British on such islands as Mauritius, Fiji and Trinidad. Caught up in this war of opium is the central character Deeti, who discovers the power of opium when she begins to use it to sedate her troublesome mother-in-law:

The more she administered the drug, the more she came to respect its potency: how frail a creature was a human being, to be tamed by such tiny doses of this substance! She saw now why the factory in Ghazipur was so diligently patrolled by the *sahibs* and their *sepoys* for if a little bit of this gum could give her such power over the life, the character, the very soul of this elderly woman, then with more of it at her disposal, why should she not be able to seize kingdoms and control multitudes?

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## Controlling Milling Multitudes

Controlling multitudes is at the heart of this novel: Zachary Reid, American sailor, takes a job on board the ship. Benjamin Burnham, the new owner of the Ibis has no time for progressive ideas which stand in the way of his own progress. The Chinese are trying to stop the trade of opium into their country, so Burnham says, “till then, this vessel is going to do just the kind of work she was intended for: Zachary, surprised at this suggestion, says “Do you mean use her as a slaver ship, sir? But have not your English laws outlawed that trade?” “That is true”, Mr. Burnham nodded, ‘yes, indeed they have, Reid. It is sad but true that there are many who will stop at nothing to halt the march of human freedom’. ‘Freedom, sir?’ said Zachary, wondering if he had misheard. “Freedom, yes, exactly,” said Mr. Burnham. “Is not that what the mastery of the white man means for the lesser races?”

## The Past in the Present

*Sea of Poppies* delineates, how history, and in particular, colonial history in Asia, affects lives today, how the present is shaped by that era. Ghosh subtly explains the role that colonial powers played in the opium trade, and how under the rubric of the East India Company, Britain was a nation-state drug dealer, and India became her poppy field. In fact *Sea of Poppies* is set in an era of agricultural scandal: burgeoning western demand for profitable but inedible crops is causing starvation in the subaltern world.

It opens in a remote village devastated by these circumstances. Deeti, watches her inert husband yield to addiction; he collapses at the opium-packing factory where glazed workers move ‘as slow as ants in honey’. She has a small plot of land, but its poppies will not feed her and nor will the proceeds of their sale. After she is widowed, *Sati* seems the most appealing option. People like Deeti are displaced by the company, come together to form an unnamed association on Ibis. Describing Ibis, Baboon Nob Kissin, one of the characters in the novel says, ‘the Ibis was not a ship like any other; in her inward reality she was a vehicle of transformation, traveling through the mists of illusion towards the elusive, ever-receding land that was truth’.

In a time of colonial upheaval, fate has thrown together a diverse cast of Indians and Westerners. An unlikely dynasty is born, which will span continents, races and generations. The vast sweep of this historical adventure embraces the lush poppy fields of the Ganges, the rolling high seas and the crowded backstreets of Canton. It is the panorama of characters, whose Diaspora encapsulates the vexed colonial history of the east itself, that makes *Sea of Poppies* so alive. Fate is the central theme of *Sea of Poppies*; Ghosh shows us that while the migrants are cut off from families and their caste system, the intrepid voyage also offers a chance of new lives and beginnings.

## Pun and Sorrow

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Amitav Ghosh has beautifully juxtaposed pun with sorrow ness of the plot. When the ibis anchors for one last night in Indian waters, Ghosh describes this:

The last place from which the migrants would be able to view their native shore: this was Saugor Roads, a much trafficked anchorage in the lee of Ganga-Sagar, the island that stands between the sea and the holy river. The very name Ganga-Sagar, joining, as it did river and sea, clear and dark, known and hidden, served to remind the migrants of the yawning chasm ahead’.

When the *Ibis*, leaves Calcutta and sets out across the Bay of Bengal, carrying indentured migrants, many of whom will become the equivalent of slaves, the seas darken and become stormy. As the ship tosses and conditions deteriorate, the ship soon becomes a microcosm for life on land, full of tumult and unexpected twists of fate, and each person’s heart is laid bare. Everybody aboard is escaping from something, so anxious to put their problems behind them that they see no choice but to submit to the atrocious living conditions and sometimes sadistic overseers aboard the *Ibis*. Life aboard the ship is as stratified and as subject to both cruelty and courage as the occupants have experienced on land, but as the ship heads for new ports in foreign lands, its occupants still see it as the only possible escape from their past and its problems.

### **Opium War and *Sea of Poppies* – Myriad Participants**

Set in India in 1838, at the outset of the three-year **Opium War** (See [www.wikipedia.org/wiki/First\\_Opium\\_War](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Opium_War) for details) between the British and the Chinese, this epic novel follows several characters from different levels of society, who become united through their personal lives aboard the ship and, more generally, through their connections to the opium and slave trades. Deeti Singh married as a young teenager to a man whose dependence on opium makes him an inadequate husband and provider, is forced to work on the family’s opium field outside Ghazipur by herself, though she fears her sadistic brother-in-law. When she has no options left that make sense to her, she escapes, eventually joining the migrants aboard the *Ibis*.

The *Ibis*, owned by Burnham Brothers, carries as one of its mates a young sailor from Baltimore, Zachary Reid, who has left America because his status as an octoroon has led to constant harassment by other American sailors. These two characters, Deeti and Reid, see life as it is, recognizing all its cruelty but also seeing its potential, and their clear-eyed observations of life around them vividly convey their cultures and the roles open to them.

At the opposite end of the scale from Deeti and Reid, is Benjamin Burnham, who owns the *Ibis* and engages in the opium trade, which his family controls in Ghazipur, fifty miles east of Benares. Since the slave trade has been officially ended, Burnham has kept the *Ibis* intact and simply switched to the transport of exiled prisoners and coolies.

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Though Burnham is the son of a Liverpool tradesman, his willingness to finance and manage these exploitative trades has led to enormous wealth and a lavish lifestyle impossible for him in England. Among his acquaintances is Raja Neel Rattan Halder, the Zemindar of Raskali, whose life epitomizes the unimaginable opulence that upper caste Brahmins assume, is their right by birth. Never questioning his high caste existence, Neel has paid little attention to his dwindling resources, and he has now accumulated debts.

### **Ghosh, Master Craftsman**

Ghosh depicts the lives of these characters and their acquaintances in extravagant and thoroughly researched detail, bringing to life Deeti's misery, the expectations for her within her husband's family, the customs which she must honor, and the life which her six-year-old daughter must expect (including marriage within three or four years). Zachary Reid, aboard the *Ibis*, becomes the protégé of Serang Ali, the leader of the lascars, those native seamen who perform the hard manual labor aboard ships. Though Reid's own background is not so different from that of the lascars, he is a foreigner, a man who has no known caste within Indian society, and Serang Ali treats him as a superior to the lascars, all of whom are either low-caste or caste-less. With the support of the lascars and Serang Ali, Zachary Reid has the potential to progress to officer status, something impossible for him at home, and as he shares his thoughts about his own life, he is also commenting on the human condition in general.

The first book in a projected "Ibis trilogy," this historical novel pulses with life, filled with details of everyday existence and the cultures of the characters, which make the actions of its characters understandable. A monument to the desire for a better life and the willingness of people to take chances in order to attain it, the novel is also a vibrant and textured depiction of the historical moment—at the time when China declared it would prohibit the importation of opium, which was decimating its addicted citizens. British traders, who had been forcing Indian laborers to turn over their fields to the growing of poppies, were willing to declare war to save their profits, despite the fact that the British government did not know that the traders were about to declare war.

### **Linguistic Diversity**

As the story progresses, we also meet a cross-section of Europeans who have been living or trading in India for decades, and who now speak a highly diluted form of English that incorporates Hindi or Bengali words. Ghosh simply presents their speech as it is, without italicizing the Indian bits or providing a glossary at the end (something that is frequently done – and overdone – in Indian novels written in English). Further, he spells the local words not as an Indian reader would recognize them but to reflect the European accents with which they are spoken. The result is that even for a reader who knows the words and their meanings, some of these passages require constant interpretation or trapolation.

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As illustration, here's a short list of some of these words and phrases in the form that they appear in the book (spelt according to the foreign pronunciation). In parentheses, we have included the spellings that an Indian reader would be more familiar with. "Zubben" (*zubaan*), "Chawbuck" (*chabuk*), "Pollock-sawg" (*paalak-saag*) for spinach dishes, "Chitty" and "dawk" (for *chithi* and *daak*, or letter and postbox), "Shishmull" (*sheesh mahal*, mirror palace), "Dufter" (*daftar*, office), "Balty" (*baalti*, bucket), "Hurremzads" (*haraamzadas*, bastards), "Jildee" (*jaldi*, quick), "Chupowing" (from *chupna* or hide), "Gantas (bells) in a clock-tower", "Tuncaw" (*tankha*, salary), "Tumasher" (*tamasha*, fuss, used here to mean a large celebration), "Oolter-poolter" (*ulta-pulta* or upside-down), "Quoddie" (*qaidi*, prisoner), "Bawhawdery" (*bahaduri*, courage), "Coorsy" (*kursi*, chair) and "kubber" (*khabbar*, news), later "kibber" is used instead of "kubber".

### Colonial Expressions and English – Birth of Indian English

In this context, some of the most entertaining passages are the conversations between Mrs Burnham, and an orphan named Paulette, who has been living under her care in their Calcutta mansion. In Mrs Burnham's manner of talking, we get the full measure of how deeply the local language has altered the speech patterns of the Europeans who have been living here for years or decades. She says things like "Don't you samjo, Paulette?" and "Where have you been chupowing yourself? I've been looking everywhere for you." On one occasion she asks Paulette if "little chinties" had got into her clothes. On another, explaining that Paulette is lucky to have received a proposal of marriage from a judge, she says:

I can tell you, dear, there's a 'paltan' of 'mems' who'd give their last 'anna' to be in your 'jooties'...you're lucky to have a judge in your sights and you mustn't let your 'bunduk' waver.

And when she mistakenly thinks that Paulette is with child, the phrase she uses is a local variation of "bun in the oven": "There isn't a *rootie in the choola*, is there?" Naturally, names undergo changes as well: one of the principal characters, Babu Nobokrishno Panda, likes being addressed by the Anglicized version of his name, Nob Kissin Pander or Nob Kissin Baboo.

In another novel, some of this might have become tiresome after some time, or begun to seem affected. But it's very appropriate to Ghosh's book, which is after all a panorama of different cultures, attitudes and belief systems colliding with each other, or at least circling suspiciously around each other – more than a century and a half ago, when concepts like "globalization" didn't exist in the sense that we understand them today, and the world was still a very large and frightening place.

### A Mammoth Work

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*Sea of Poppies* is laced with political overtones, revealing the hypocritical and dangerous mindset of the then Englishmen, who compelled the natives to the level of subaltern in their own land. On the societal level, the message conveyed by the novel is enormous-the 'girmityas' who gather on the Ibis leave behind their identities in terms of caste, religion etc and adopt a new identity of 'oppressed'; a new community takes birth. Amitav Ghosh takes a dig at the Englishmen's attitude towards religion, when one of the characters in the novel says, "Trade is Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ is trade".

It is a mammoth work by Amitav Ghosh, juxtaposing historical evolution of Indian society with the contemporary nuances of Indian polity. It is an apt commentary on colonialism, which though has harmed Indian society but it has brighter side too. Colonialism has culturally and linguistically amalgamated Indian ethos with the European sensibilities; on social level there was a synthesis of societies. In fact it is a commentary on socio-cultural evolution of Indian subaltern society. It is a saga of struggle by the have-nots of colonial India. Amitav Ghosh has ventured into one of the ugly areas of Indian history. By doing so, Ghosh exposes the modern reader to the colonial past of Indian society. This relocation to their past is nothing but reclaiming what is indispensable to our existence.

Amitav Ghosh's work like that of other major sub continental writers-Tagore, Premchand, Senapati, Chughtai-is imbued by a deep commitment to humane values. In a world so palpably ravaged by greed and intolerance, this literature is surely no luxury but a necessary reclamation of all that in our heterogeneous culture is valuable, possible and, ultimately, utterly indispensable.

As *Sea of Poppies* comes to a satisfying close, Ghosh leaves several doors open suggesting the direction he will take with this novel's sequel, which will undoubtedly continue into the Opium War itself with many of the same characters. On the short list of nominations for the Man Booker Prize for 2008, this rich and exciting historical epic has something for everyone.

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