

TRADITION AND CULTURE: A STUDY OF INDIANNESS IN AMITAV GHOSH'S SEA OF POPPIES**NAME: C.KARPAGAVALLI****RESEARCH SUPERVISOR: DR.SUGANTHA EZHIL MARY****ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH****VELS UNIVERSITY,VISTAS,Pallavaram. Chennai -600 117****ABSTRACT**

Amitav Ghosh a renowned Indian author and novelist known for his works among the contemporary writers. Ghosh's ambitious novel, 'Sea of Poppies' is an inaugural volume of his planned Ibis trilogy. As Indian Writing in English has become a powerful branch of modern English Language and Literature, Ghosh portrays the societal perspectives corresponding to the existing discrepancies of India, in his novel Sea of Poppies. This paper attempts to analyse the forms of an odd curiosity about striking aspects of Indianness, like Colonial manipulation of the poor, judicial exploitation, caste system performing Sati, migration of Indians to new colonies, male domination in the society, Indianness in using vernacular languages, culture tradition, religions and their practices briefly. Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies [2008], set prior to the first of the opium wars [1839-42] demonstrate unique and familiar images of polyculturalism and the making of language, identity and nation through characterizations and dialogue.

The ultimate purpose of this paper is to explore the of tangled themes, stereotyped situations and highly conventionalized language which expresses the touch of Indianness. Ghosh as a historian and anthropologist, depicts the life of the Indians especially in Bihar and Bengal, under the colonial rule meticulously.

Key words : Tradition, Culture, Indianness, identity, caste system, vernacular language

Introduction

Indian culture and traditions are unique across the world. India is a country of having many cultures, traditions and religions that made people living in a peaceful, colourful, rich and diverse nation. It is unbelievable that different directions of India like north, south, east and west have their own cultures and traditions. India is a vast country of 1.2 billion people with 30 states, more than 100 languages and dialects. It has an unique socio-cultural heritage where the yellow, brown, white and dark races live together and mingle easily.

It is beyond doubt that Amitav Ghosh one of the prominent Indian writer and his analysis of the various aspects of the Indian life , culture and religion, that have also helped him to 'construct' the notion of India .His works are attributed to a number of themes. Since his childhood days in Calcutta , Ghosh got the chance to visit a number of south east asian countries including Srilanka, Iran and Bangladesh, because his father was serving the Indian Army following which their family had to move in and out of India several times. Thus, many of Ghosh's fictional works are autobiographical in the sense that they reflect on his personal life history.

Ghosh, who often seeks to assert his national identity and resists being called a commonwealth or post colonial writer,has written his fictional works on India mainly to tell stories about how globalization effects international movements of labour.

While under taking the discussion of 'Indianess' as a representational mode , it became evident that the sources relevant to the discussion of 'Indianess' could be effectively assessed in connection with Ghosh's sea of poppies which is historical, topical, literacy, journalistic even political.

Ghosh's discussion of Indianess has been aligned with the interdisciplinary nature of any knowledge system, and the celebration of popular culture as the site of resistance to the exclusivist modern religious and cultural identities. Ghosh has a direct and intimate knowledge about the Indian social, cultural and historical back ground,and has presented them clearly in his sea of poppies.

SEA OF POPPIES

Amitav Ghosh's The sea of poppies [2008]. It traces the socio-cultural scenario of nineteenth century India and prevalent beliefs and practices of the people .This novel portrays the status of women in the medieval period who underwent many problems like polygamy, sati etc.

Sea of poppies that opens in 1838 on the eve of the opium war. It deals with the slave ship ibis. The story revolves around the ship occupants. The novel is divided in to three parts-land, river and sea.The first part presents the situation that leads the characters to board the ship.Amitav ghosh in the first part has realistically picturised the plight of the women under male domination. Deeti's husband is impotent and doesn't give any importance to her.All the more she is raped by her broher in law. She is referred to Draupati by Amitav. The second part shows the destiny of the characters of the ship. The third part brings out the voyage of the ship to Mauritius.

Deeti is the first character to be introduced . She is a young mother and her husband Hukum singh, is an opium addict. He in takes opium to get rid of his pain caused by his wound .

Slowly and gradually he became addict. Finally he dies in course of time and Deeti is forced to perform sati. She is saved by Kalua, an ox-cart driver who is an untouchable. They escaped from the village, underwent great struggle and got married. They fear the anger of her dead husband's relatives, become indentured workers to Mauritius and aboard the schooner. So as Deeti there are many more characters by their fate board on the ship. Originally a slave ship making raids in west Africa, the Ibis is not a prized vessel. One of its memorable passenger is a Raja seen at the height of power and privilege as the book begins. Later, humiliated and exiled, he sails aboard the Ibis past the fief he once ruled.

Another character Zachary Reid, who is the second officer [foreman] in the Ibis, is a Mulatto from Boston. Paulette, the orphaned daughter of a French botanist escapes from her British foster family who also seeks refuge aboard the Ibis. Jodu, a Muslim lascar in the ship who feels attachment to Munia; a Hindu girl and both of them become victims to the wrath of religious bigots on the ship. Ah Fatt, an ugly man is the co-convict of Neel Rattan. The ship faces a great danger in the mid-sea, with half of them trapped on board and the remaining adrift on a raft amidst a stormy ocean. The density of settings from rural India to teeming Calcutta to the sudder opium factory is historically convincing and the author pays close attention to variations in speech, culture and tradition. Ghosh makes use of this long formation of characters to depict Indianness in its palpable glory. The first novel of Ghosh's trilogy ends on a dramatic note of suspense and excitement.

Ghosh finds connection between past and present by reinterpreting the historical events with a creative insight that allows weaving a magical plot.

Ghosh's fictional world consists of magically realistic plots organized with post modern views injecting a sense of dejection that deals with human predicament disasters, dislocation and displacement.

Ghosh highlights colonial manipulation as one of the major themes of Indianness. The story commences in Ghazipur, a small Hindu village bordering between Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. People normally cultivate wheat, cereal and pulses which have been staple food items in the Indian subcontinent for centuries. The British East India company forced them to stop the farming of their traditional food crops and compelled them to cultivate poppy plants. The British factories process these plants in order to extract opium and export it in to China in large scale. Most of the people work for low 'wages'. This is one of the techniques applied by the British over poor Indians. Deeti's husband Singh, an ex-soldier works in Ghazipur opium factory. Here the colonizer boldly exploits the poor villagers in two ways: the authorities tempt them to starvation. In addition they lose their employability in farming and are forced to work at low wages in opium factories. The working condition prevailed in the Ghazipur opium factory is another example for how the colonizers manipulated the Indians.

Once Deeti is summoned notified to the factory to take her sick husband home. She couldn't believe what she witnessed there: "This vision- along with the over powering fumes- made her groggy, and to keep herself from fainting she began to move slowly ahead. When her eyes had grown more accustomed to the gloom, she discovered the secret of those circling torsos: they were bare-bodied men, sunk waist- deep in tanks of opium, tramping round and round to soften the sludge. Their eyes were vacant, glazed, and yet some how they managed to keep moving, as slow as ants in honey, tramping, reading "[pg 94,95].

Amitav Ghosh appears as a realistic writer by highlighting this unnoticed page of Indian history very realistically. His contribution to the Indian concept is unique and it always remains without a parallel.

Ghosh exposes constitutional exploitation through the Indians who underwent tortures by the colonial rule, from the common people to well- off land lords. One such case is the land lord of Rakhali, Neel Rattan Halder. He had an unshakable faith in the company's policy and high regard for the Queen's rule. Neel Rattan and his father had business dealings with the British merchant, Mr. Burnham.

Opium export business to China from Ghazipur plays a vital role in the life of poor people. Ghazipur opium factory harvests provide high profit but it does not give any compensation to Deeti for her husband's death. The company doesn't show any moral obligation for Deeti who deserves a reasonable help from the company for the premature death of Hukam Singh. The British judiciary did not insist the company to do something for Deeti who has no other source for survival.

India's caste system is perhaps the world's longest surviving social hierarchy. A defining feature of Hinduism, caste encompasses a complex ordering of social groups on the basis of ritual purity, in spite of constitutional abolition in 1950, the practice of "untouchability". The imposition of social disabilities on persons by reason of birth into particular caste-remains very much a part of rural India. For many decades caste constituted the core of social life of India.

Ghosh brings out the real image of the caste discrimination in India during the 19th century in the first few chapters of the novel. Ghazipur residents strongly associated untouchability with the social evil caste discrimination.

According to this evil practice, a person of high caste happen to view an untouchable quite accidentally, it would pollute him. Deeti's husband Hukam Singh who belongs to the upper class Hindu takes special care not to face Kalua, his carriage driver an untouchable, the travel towards the opium factory in his bullock cart to Ghazipur factory with Deeti.

“Deeti followed a step behind, carrying his food and water, handling the cloth-wrapped package to him after he had climbed in. Kalua, the cart driver of the ox-cart, was a giant of a man but he made no move to help his passenger and was careful to keep his face hidden from him: he was of the leather – workers caste and Hukum Singh, as a high-caste Raj put, believed that the sight of his face would bode ill for the day ahead. Now, on climbing in to the back of the cart, the former sepoy sat facing to the rear, with his bundle balanced on his lap, to prevent its coming in to direct contact with any of the driver’s belongings. Thus they would sit, driver and passenger, as the cart creaked along the road to Ghazipur-conversing amicably enough, but never exchanging glances.

Deeti, too, was careful to keep her face covered in the cart driver’s presence”.[pg4]

The humiliation done by the upper class to the lower class so called untouchables surpasses all our imagination. There were some characters like three young scious, thakur-sahibs in Ghazipur, who were much addicted to gambling. They made a deal with Kalua knowing his physical power, promised him an ox-cart for participating in the wrestling matches on behalf of them. No doubt Kalua gained victory in all the matches. Unfortunately he got defeated in the presence of the maharaja Benares. Kalua was cruelly tortured by the landlords who used him as a tool for entertainment. First he was made to mate with a prostitute named Hirabai but she refused considering Kalua as a beast. So the landlords without any mercy for their amusement planned to take Kalua to mate with a black mare. The landlords enjoyed the painful scene of the lower class man.

The colonial people were also passive to the injustice done in the name of caste. Byro Singh, the foreman of the Ibis seeks permission for sixty lashes to be inflicted on Kalua the untouchable for his elopement with Deeti, an upper caste widow, and his wish is granted by the British captain of the Ibis. The captain and others were sure that before the flogging came to an end, Kalua will meet his death.

Ghosh figures out a reformatory approach of sati through the plight of an Indian widow which startles every one. Hukum Singh an opium addict, started to take opium for his relief. Sudden death of Hukum Singh gave a terrible blow to Deeti, but her relatives took it as a golden chance to enhance the prestige of the family by forcing her to perform ‘Sati’. This culture and practice is followed in Hinduism of a widow burning herself, either willingly or by force, with the body of her dead husband. It is also known as widow burning ceremony. Deeti’s husband Hukum Singh’s health condition gradually grew worse. Few days before her brother-in-law Chandan Singh visited Deeti’s residence and promised the position of a ‘mistress’ after her husband’s death, in exchange he could take care of her well. Deeti could not tolerate this and she pushed him back and uttered strong words like.

“She dug her elbow into his bony chest and pushed him aside; baring just enough of her face to expose her eyes, she bit the hem of her sari, drawing it aslant across her face. What kind of devil, she said, can speak like this in front of his own dying brother? Listen to my words: I will burn on my husband’s pyre rather than give myself to you”.(pg 158)

Deeti prefers to die with her husband’s dead body than to struggle with Chandan Singh. She was ready to perform ‘sati’. A woman after the death of their husband doesn’t want to be dependent on their relatives. According to ancient Hindu customs, Sati symbolized closure to a marriage. It was a voluntary act in which, as a sign of being a dutiful wife, followed her husband to the afterlife. It was, therefore, considered to be the greatest form of devotion of a wife towards her dead husband. With time, it became forced practice. Women who did not wish to die like this were forced to do so in different ways. Traditionally, a widow had no role to play in society and was considered a burden. Ghosh has clearly pictured the real reason for the practice of ‘sati’ in the past.

Deeti’s husband Hukum Singh dies prematurely. One evening Kalua was coming back to his village, he met two unknown travellers and knew from them about the death of Hukum Singh, the former sepoy. He reached the place where the people were crowded. There was already an arrangement for performing ‘Sati’ by Deeti. He strongly decided to react on this practice. For time being he forgot that he was a mere bullock cart driver and an untouchable belonging to the charmer caste, where as Deeti wife of upper caste man. Kalua stowing from others observed the whole scene.

Hukum Singh’s corpse was carried out in procession and laid upon the mound of wood which was already arranged; following this a parallel procession was headed by Deeti, wrapped in white sari. Kalua planned strongly to save Deeti and he was waiting for the right moment. When the pyre was lit he moved down to the edge of the crowd like a hurricane. People scattered like cattles in different places. Kalua felt this as the right chance and he made this possible. He grabbed Deeti from the flame and ran towards river Ganga. Before Chandan Singh could stop the river moved them far from the crowd. Ghosh brings out that ‘sati’ is neither a sacrifice nor a solution to any situation in life. Kalua helps Deeti to board a ship named Ibis that carries slaves or indentured labourers from Calcutta to Mauritius. Ghosh has raised against sati and brings a solution through the character Kalua .

In this novel Ghosh explores the migration of Indians to British colonies .Indo-Mauritians are among the richest and most politically powerful of those descendants. As a British colony, Mauritius took the greatest share of indentured migrants. Many of the largest business are owned by Franco- Mauritius whose ancestors dated from the earlier French colonization. But Indo-Mauritians dominate the public sector. The migration of poor Indians to new British colonies is a common Indian theme in Indian Writing in English. The third part of the novel ‘sea’

takes place in the schooner which moves from Calcutta to its destination in Mauritius .In order to escape from poverty and misery people were forced to sign the agreement of labour contract.

Deeti and Kalua from Ghazipur escaped from Deeti's in-laws, signed as indentured workers on the schooner 'Ibis'. Neel Rattan Halder, the native king of Rakshali, who has business dealings with the British, is tried for forgery by Burnham and his cronies. He was sentenced to work as an indentured labourer for seven years in Mauritius. When Neel reaches the ship he met Ah fatt, a half Chinese and a half- Parsi, an opium addict from canton, as his sole companion.

Paulette, a French orphan born and brought up in Calcutta easily disguises herself as an Indian woman joins among the indentured workers on the ship.

Ghosh throws light on identity. In a patriarchal society a woman has no identity. Her identity is closely associated with her father, husband or children. Deeti's relatives and neighbours do not call her by her original name given by her parents. They call her 'kabutiri- ma' which gives her the recognition as Kabutri's mother.

In a patriarched society people believe male child as their asset but female child as a burden. As a parent of a girl child they need to provide money and gifts to the groom to get their daughters married off. Deeti got married in the same way but disappointed by her husband and his family .She realizes the truth only after her plight with Kalua from the funeral pyre of her husband .Deeti identified her new life and real name 'Aditi' wife of Madhu.

Neel Rattan Halder's wife Malathi, another passive sufferer of a patriarchal society. Ghosh stresses the beauty and value of our tradition and culture through 'Malathi' .She under takes her duty as a wife and mother without any complaints. She never questioned her husband's relationship with his mistress Elokeshi. This practice was in upper class families .Neel's mother also was neglected by her husband as an isolated wife in the palace. Later Neel got imprisoned and all his estates were confiscated. He was about to move as a prisoner to Mauritius. Before he left Malathi met him in the jail without any ill feelings or complaints. She accepts her pain with a smile. Malathi performed her duties without expectation. Neel identifies his real soul mate as Malathi.

"Malathi put away the jharu and came to sit beside him. We'll be all right , she said insistently. Don't worry about us; we'll manage. It's you who must be strong. For our sake, if not your own, you have to stay alive. I could not bear to be a widow, not after all this".[pg275]

Malathi worries about her husband not about her. Ghosh depicts the real identity of Malathi.

Ghosh has experimented with many languages. In 'Sea of Poppies', Ghosh presents a world of heterglossia that includes seafaring lingo, an fantastic spectrum of English. For an Indian English writer narrating a story in English that happened in the Indian social ,historical and cultural background is a herculean task. It is very difficult to translate the strange slangs and idioms used by the common people to English. If it is translated the reader will miss the pleasure of reading. So some scenes of the story were narrated in local language as suitable to the occasion. At the same time he describes them in English also. In the ship the migrants sing sometimes

“Majha dhara me hai bera mera,

Kripa kara asrai hai tera “

My raft's a drift in the current

Your mercy is my only refuge

As the above song is given in two languages –Hindi and –Englilsh- it doesn't hinder the flow of reading. Ghosh has given special care in giving meaningful names to his important characters. Like Deeti, Kalua ,Kabutri,Neel Rattan, Malathi. All these characters give this story a genuine Indian touch.

In conclusion as a historian and anthropologist, Ghosh has known well the strength and weaknesses of Indian social and cultural tradition. He has never appreciated the caste system and performing of Sati that followed in India for centuries. Ghosh highlights how the colonial British rule has exploited the poor villagers in the first part of his novel. As a writer Ghosh is optimistic by nature. The last part of the novel brings new hope and expectations. Ghosh has depicted the various aspects of Indianess in this novel sea of poppies which is a great asset to Indian writing in English.

Works cited:

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