

# Schooner and placeholders in Sea of Poppies

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**Abstract-** *Sea of Poppies* is a novel that originally starts with its attention centred on the plight of the Indian immigrants transported for the British sugar plantations on the islands like Mauritius, Fiji and Trinidad and ends with the discovery of the linked histories of the travel of opium, lascars, and migrant labour. The stories of the placeholders such lascars, coolies, indentured labourers in the schooner *Ibis* is a great exposure and major discovery of Ghosh, from the linked histories of the travel of opium, lascars, and migrant labour. It is the discovery which has given a large and valid platform for the enactment of many instances related with opium trade in the novels of Ghosh's trilogy.

**Index Terms-** Schooner, Lascars, Coolies, opium, girmityas

## INTRODUCTION

*Sea of Poppies* is a novel that originally starts with its attention centred on the plight of the Indian immigrants transported for the British sugar plantations on the islands like Mauritius, Fiji and Trinidad and ends with the discovery of the linked histories of the travel of opium, lascars, and migrant labour. What is astounding in the novel is that the centre is kept intact during the vast expansion of the narration. This has been achieved by the canvas of myriad characters and the narration of their 'past' and 'present'. His voyage which is seen moving from the history of the immigrants witnesses many historical discoveries, mainly the revelations of the two major economic themes of Empire. The voyage, often disrupted in its middle by the absence of the immigrants' major contributions to the Indian Ocean history and thus burdened with many historical discoveries en route, emerges as a fiction as Ghosh himself asserts once that History can say things in great detail, even though it may say them in rather dull factual detail. The novel on the other hand can make links that history cannot.

While the emptiness of the Indian Ocean history and the silence of the British about its role in opium trade

have prompted Ghosh on this scholarly pursuit, the vast different backgrounds of the immigrants have captivated his creative impulses for a fiction. The task of accomplishing both historical and fictional demands results in keeping the Indian Ocean at its centre, which is "a palimpsest for Ghosh, and in his evocative mapping of this place and time, it becomes a rich archive where he reads layers upon layers of stories of power and violence, exchange, resistance, and survival" (22) as observed by Anupama Arora.

The treatment of the British about Indian Ocean is exposed by Metcalf in his book *Imperial Connections*. While detailing how the Indian Ocean came to be neglected in the colonial archives in the nineteenth century in contrast to the drama of the trading voyages and Europeans rivalries of the previous centuries, he rightly describes, "It is as if a bustling sea full of vessels and people had suddenly been emptied, its water drained away" (24). Ghosh relates this emptiness in the historiography with the silence being kept by the British for its role in the 'drug trade' of the 19th century, thereby emphasizing the linked histories of the travel of opium, lascars, and migrant labour and contesting their marginal place in the colonial archives. Thus, the novel is an intervention that addresses the relative neglect of studies of the Indian Ocean as a vital site of conflict, of heterogeneous historical encounters, of the flow of commodities, a site distinct from but with similarities to the Atlantic slave trade. (Anupama Arora 24)

Anupama claims that that most of the details are drawn from the works of historians such as Clare Anderson, Sugar Bose, and Thomas Metcalf in the last decade, which shed light on the palimpsestic nature of the Indian Ocean world as it functioned as the arena for the multifarious encounters. For studies on the British Empire in Asia and its vast enterprises which circulated commodity of opium and its significance for European expansion and empire-building, Ghosh, she argues, should have relied on the works of Carl Trocki, Davis Anthony Bello, and

Curtis Marez. For the novel's treatment of the circuits of global migration and the counter-culture of modernity, Ghosh should have relied on the earlier work of Paul Gilroy, Peter Linebaugh, and Marcus Rediker on the Atlantic Ocean, she further claims, adding that "in the wake of this scholarship, the novel pushes ahead his project of investigating the multi-dimensionality of post-colonial history and experience" (23).

While the opium den narratives which were circulated in the metropole "played a crucial role in the reproduction of imperial ideologies" (26), in *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh shows how the British merchants are pathologically addicted to the growing and selling of opium in the nineteenth century. However, the description of the clandestine operations of the British is displayed through the depiction of different characters of different continents of Asia, Europe, Africa and America. This investigation of finding out the roots of the strength of the imperial Europe and the roots of diasporas in the Caribbean and their intimate ties constitutes as what Anupama claims, "a "writing back" to the Eurocentric treatment of opium that focuses on opium abuse by the Asian in opium dens seen as sites of corruption, read as signs of Asian criminality and pathology" (25).

Unlike the previous novels like *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *In an Antique Land* and *The Shadow Lines*, where the lapses of the history have been explored with the apparent mentions of the exact timings, places, events and even the persons involved in the events in innumerable ways, the treatment of Ghosh's trilogy with history is so different and subtle that there is no mention of any of these obviously. Through the fictional inputs with the assistance of the large cast of characters, Ghosh tries to put the readers to see themselves the history. As did before, he has made an extensive research on the history and scrutinized a vast number of materials for the facts. However, instead of exploring the lapses in the history and filling the gaps with speculations, assumptions and supernatural elements, the facts are fictionalized in the lives and stores of the large cast of characters and, through which, the human devastation due to opium in the history of the 19th century is being dealt with meticulously.

The root of the novel is centred on the history of the opium drug as Ghosh is in agreement with economist Carl Trocki's contention that, "Without drug, there

probably would have been no empire since the economic foundation of the imperial economy lay on opium" (25). Trocki's statement that "Opium was a major source of government revenue in British India and a major export" (25) has been fictionalized by Ghosh who refers to "opium as among the most precious jewels in Queen Victoria's crown" (83) in the novel.

The novel originates from the historical background of the 19th century. About two centuries ago, the British East India Company, the forerunner of the British Empire, was spreading its stranglehold on the subcontinent, British fortune seekers amassed wealth by turning the banks of the Ganga into a sea of Poppies to grow opium and export it illegally to China. The Trade was monopolized by the British merchants under the seal of the company. A large number of farmers of Bihar and parts of Bengal were forced to turn over their fertile agricultural lands to the company's agents for opium production, which caused widespread poverty and hunger in many parts of the states. This drug-trafficking history of Britain, its devastation on the Indian farmers, their forced conversation as indentured labourers or coolies and their plight on the voyage to the British sugar plantations play a major part of the narration.

Thus, the novel centres round the two broad economic themes of the 19th century: the compulsory cultivation of opium as a cash crop in Bihar and parts of Bengal for the Chinese market and its disastrous consequences and the origins and the transport of the first batch of Indian Diaspora. Against the backdrop, the novel paints a moving picture of the human devastation caused by British colonial rule and its lopsided policies.

The schooner and its placeholders

The platform that provides space for the enactment of the major historical discoveries and for the delineation of the multiple trajectories of the characters is *Ibis*, the schooner originally built in America as 'blackbirder' for transporting slaves from the country. In fact, the boat itself is a significant instrument Ghosh has discovered for the accomplishment of his historical and fictional demands. It is a kind of framework that supports the characters in times of crises and shapes the narration very often. Neel's sudden turn of fortune, Deeti's elopement with Kalu and Paulette's escape from the brutal clutches of Benjamin Burnham have pushed

the characters into the Ibis where they undergo major transformations in their lives. Their acts of transgression in the boat in one way or another express the tyrannies of the Empire. The stories told by the immigrants about their 'past' and wretched and helpless 'present' conditions in the boat, on the one hand, expose the prevailing functions of the structure of power on land and sea. On the other hand, they are the survival, personal stories that display the conditions of deception, guile, tact and anticipation.

The schooner itself is a kind of palimpsest having the traces of the slavery history. It is a typical schooner used in the 19th century for transporting slaves and now purchased by the British merchant, Benjamin Burnham, for opium trade. Even after the transformation of the boat with a new business intention, it still has the traces of the past as Ghosh describes,

...there were several such chains in the pen, nailed into the far beam: they ended in bracelet like clasps, each fitted with eyeholes, for lock...it was more a human odour, compounded of sweat, urine, excrement and vomit, the smell had leached so deep into the timbers as to have become ineradicable..." (143)

Placing Ibis as the framework of the novel itself is an irony as the schooner is often subjected to transformations. It camouflages itself and plays multiple roles for fulfilling the historical demands: it is acting a carrier of slaves, indentured labourers and opium. Its functions vary depending on the demands of the European market.

Another exposure that has been discovered by Ghosh by the means of the schooner is its oceanic routes which are typical as it provides the criss-crossing oceanic trading routes of the Empire. The boat offers up, as Anupama has rightly pointed out, "... an affective map of the world of unlikely kinships and intimacies formed on the fluid world of the ocean as a consequence of the machinations and practices of Empire". (22)

She also observes,

This focus emphasizes how the British Empire was situated within global networks and highlights the textured realities of the Empire – "a complex web consisting of horizontal filaments that run among various colonies" rather than a strictly vertical

relationships between the centre and individual colonies. (22)

Thus, Ghosh's fictional tool 'Ibis' is a carrier of the inscriptions of different histories of non-Western sailors, the slave trade and indentured labour, where cross-cultural, caste, class, gender, and national collaborations blur all sorts of boundaries and a harbinger of the formations of new alliances and emergence of reconstituted families within contexts of domination and resistance.

Ghosh in his preparation of the novel should have started his research study on the history of the immigrants. The movement of the immigrants and his attention on the Indian Ocean history should have made a shift in his approach, both in the novel and in his research work. The description of the farmers in the beginning of the novel is much less comparing with the adjoining chapter that elaborates on that of the lascars boarded from Cape Town on its way to Calcutta. This shift may be due to two reasons: the first one is that it should be the result of his updated scholarship on the Indian Ocean studies; the second is the absence of the contributions of the non-westerners on the Indian Ocean history.

For emphasizing the indispensability of southeast lascars to European navies and the flow of commerce in the oceans in the nineteenth century, Anupama points out that Ghosh should have relied on the works of David Chappel, who provides the valuable role of non-European seamen like lascars on European ships. He states that "their presence challenges the triumphant tale of European seafarers heroically globalising the world and offers us instead an image of interdependency with alien 'others'. He calls the lascars "the unsung working class" of Western trading ships. (qtd. in Anupama 27)

The value of the lascars to the functioning and survival of the ships from the beginning of its journey is established by Serang Ali's manoeuvrable skill as a sailor helping the boat reach its destination during the absence of the Europeans. Jodu's rescuing effort from the drowning of the ship in the middle of the novel could also be seen as the latent talent of the lascars who has just started his career in the boat. Serang Ali and Jodu are exemplified in particular among the lascars community and their performance in the demanding times renders the white shipmate incredible and later, their free association with Zachery, the second mate, causes him to consider

their moments of association as disruptive and a kind of collapse to the function of the hierarchical system in the boat.

In the description of the lascars, Ghosh seems to be so meticulous and diplomatic that he describes through the eyes of Zachery, an American sailor, a mulatto freedman who has sailed with the boat from Baltimore. This device “allows the reader to see through non-judgemental eyes” (Anupama 28). Through the description, Ghosh also exposes the regional and religious heterogeneity and individuality of the lascars in the nineteenth century and paints the fuller picture of their lives in a realistic tone, their language, clothes, foods and method of functioning as a unit.

The crew comprises Chinese, East Africans, Arabs, Malays, Bengalis, Goans, Tamils and Arakanese. They use a delightful lingo, picked up in Asian and East African sea-ports as their shipboard vocabulary and their leader is Serang Ali. Their origins are put forth by Ghosh in different terms that that some do not know whether their origins lay, having been sold off as children to the ghat-serangs who supplies lascars to ocean-going vessels and that many, being apprehensive of denigration, never open the past.

The hardships they experience scatteredly referred to by Ghosh throughout the voyage hint the cruel treatment of the British and their dual purpose of keeping them at work as they are badly in need of the work force, but treating them inferior to prevent the display of their interdependency on them. Their experiences expose the negligence of the basic facilities and the absence of the fundamental rights including the systematic reduction of the provision of food, the gradual inclusion of rotten and banned food items, the disposal of the dead bodies of the lascars throughout the voyage and their inhuman living conditions in the ship.

The hierarchy of the power structure plays a major role in the mechanism of exploitation in the schooner, especially in the case of indentured labourers, the treatment on whom is thus more intense than that of the lascars. It seems that Ghosh should have drawn most of the factual details about the treatment of the non-westerners, including lascars, indentured Indian labourers, African slaves and convicts from the works of the scholars like Linebaugh and Rediker, who argue that they are considered as “place

holders”, foundational to the prosperity of imperial power and that ships are the “engines of commerce, the machines of empire” (Anupama 28)

Ghosh’s account of the stories of the indentured labourers in the schooner, though grounded on the factual details collected from their works, has a good proportion of fiction to express the plight of the coolies. Besides, the account follows some apparent order despite the fact that the maintenance of the order takes place in the different parts of the novel. It starts from the description of the conditions of the coolies, then narrating the recruitment procedure and ending with their confinement in the special camps. His account is general at sometimes and personal at other times through some character.

Their long march of the people from the villages around Ghazipur has the mention of their routes such as Patna, Calcutta and Mareech, the destination where they are placed to work as girimityas. The assimilation of the routes is an act of fictional adoption from the part of Ghosh though the general description of their exhausted conditions with bundles of belongings may have the mixture of imagination. Their final destination causes some kind of bafflement to Deeti to whom it is an enchanted, dysfunctional place where life is non-existent.

The irony is that Deeti too is later becoming one of the girimityas, along with Kalu, a low caste cart driver, with whom she elopes. Some scholars claim that Deeti’s story has been drawn from the diary of the accomplished linguist Sir George Griergson sent by the British government to look into alleged abuses in the recruitment of indentured servants from India who ended up on ships bound for British plantations throughout the world. In his diary, Griergson wrote about an encounter with the father of one female coolie in a village along the Ganges, noting that the man denied having any such relative, and probably she had gone wrong and been disowned by him. The historical record provides only a trace of this woman: a name, a processing number, a year of emigration.

The recruitment process of the girimityas has the resemblance of bankrupt farmers being forcibly converted into coolies with all their lands confiscated by some means of conspiracy. But, in the case of girimityas, the offers are diplomatic and lucrative with the purpose to exploit their poverty. The description details how systematically they are convinced tactfully by offering sufficient money or

gold coin with the supply of necessary of food at every meal before getting assimilated as grimityas and all kinds of men from different caste systems who are recruited, the commonness of whom is young and able-bodied.

The detailed account of the various practices of keeping the coolies in the recruiters' homes imply Ghosh's scholarship behind this meticulous description, most of his reliance in such cases lays probably on the works of the 19th century scholars and chroniclers, whom he mentions in his acknowledgements. His explanations and inferences for the cessation of some practices and the adoption of new practices in keeping the coolies in camps point out not only the lapses in each practice but also the rectification of the lapses in the next practice with some new adoptions in the rules more cunning, more lucrative and more intent than forever. Ghosh inclines to figure out the palimpsest of speculation and imagination in the forms of rumours to fill the gaps in the lapses of the practises by the recruiters for switching over one method to another. However, the ultimate purpose is not to show the fissures in the practice but to reveal the untold sufferings of the coolies. The following passage is a case in point:

The practice plunged the would-be migrants into city life, exposing them to all kinds of rumours... A few duffadars had tried to keep their recruits indoors by locking them in...the city's unhealthy climate was yet another problem, for every year a good number of migrants perished of communicable diseases. From an investor's point of view, each dead, escaped and incapacitated recruit represented a serious loss... (197)

Rumours listed out by Ghosh, which shake their religious faiths, are the confluence of the facts and the palimpsest of fiction. It seems Ghosh has obviously made use of imagination to explore the possibilities of their apprehensions and present them as rumours. The following passage expresses their apprehensions in the forms of rumours:

On hearing them, their fears and apprehensions bubble over: their rations would consist of beef and pork; "... those refused to eat would be whipped senseless and the meats would be thrust down their throats. On reaching Mareech, they would be forced to convert Christianity; they would be made to consume all kinds of forbidden foods from the sea and the jungle,... their bodies would be ploughed into

the soil, like manure.... It (the most frightening of the rumours) was because they (the white men) were after an oil that was to be found only in the human brain... (198)

The proximity of the lascars and the indentured labourers in terms of freedom, the former enjoying more than that of the latter and Zachery's nominal freedom that more or less could be linked to both the other nominally "free" populations, with the descriptions of their experiences grounded on these demarcations, allow Ghosh how "a political hierarchy ranging from 'free' to 'unfree' was deployed in the management of the diverse bodies of colonized peoples" (33). Zachery's case is an instance of disenfranchisement on land when he recalls the incident that triggered his decision to sign on to the Ibis to ship out the stultifying racial hierarchies he experiences on land.

Britain's way of presenting these indentured labourers as "free labour" and the abolition of slavery as an "enlightened move" and its treatment on them as a whole reminds of the words of Lisa Lowe, who contends that out of the "global intimacies" of Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas emerged a modern racialized division of labour", also suggesting that the Asian indentured labourers "were used instrumentally in this political discourse as a collective figure, a fantasy of 'free' yet racialized and indentured labour, at a time when the possession of body, work, life and death were foreclosed to the enslaved and indentured alike". (qtd. in Anupama 31) Thus, the stories of the placeholders such lascars, coolies, indentured labourers in the schooner is a great exposure and major discovery of Ghosh, from the linked histories of the travel of opium, lascars, and migrant labour. It is the discovery which has given a large and valid platform for the enactment of many instances related with opium trade in the novels of Ghosh's trilogy.

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