



Amitav Ghosh's sea of poppies: A feminist perspective

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh is a well-known Bengali Indian post modern author of English literature. He is a socially conscious writer with multi-dimensional personality as an anthropologist, sociologist, novelist, essayist and travel writer. He was awarded the Padam Shri by the Indian government in 2007. His *Sea of Poppies* is the first novel of Ibis trilogy; the remaining two are *River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire*. This Ibis trilogy deals with the trade of opium between Indian and China by the east company and trafficking of labours to Mauritius. This novel was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2008. Amitav Ghosh through his novels raises a number of issues. Discrimination against women is one of the issues he deals with in most of his novels. We can study his novels like *The Shadow Line*, *The Calcutta chromosome*, *In an Antique Land*, *The Glass Palace*, *Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies* from the view point of feminism. In all these novels gender discrimination is a prominent theme. The paper aims to apply three historical phases of Elaine Showalter on *Sea of Poppies*.

Keywords: patriarchy, gender biasness, indentured labour, exploitation, sati system, feminine, feminist, female, helpless, pyre, opium addiction

Introduction

To define feminism in a single line or sentence is very difficult because it is a very wide and philosophical theory, but we can say that all those who had struggled for the rights of women-right to freedom, right to earn, right to vote and right for equality, came to be called feminists. All the feminists share together the central concern that is patriarchal system, in spite of different concepts of feminism. They regard that patriarchal system is a real villain which leads to all kinds of discrimination or devaluation against women. Political or economic systems are not roots but only auxiliaries. As Simon De Beauvoir argued in her famous work, "The Second Sex" that men are able to mystify women. As she put it, "one is not born a woman but one becomes one." Patriarchy makes use of sexual difference so as to maintain an inequality between men and women. According to her, femininity is not in-born but is only a social construction imposed on women by men to keep them down.

In the present novel *Sea of Poppies* there are many women characters as Deeti, Munia, Heeru and Pauletti who are representing Indian women's pain, anxiety, exploitation, subjugation, helpless identity and revolutionary attitude in patriarchal society. American feminist Elaine Showalter in her theory of feminist criticism has talked about three historical phases of women writers- Feminine (1840-1880), Feminist (1880-1920) and Female (1920-till now). According to her feminine is the concept of womanhood where woman has to play traditional role in relation to patriarchal society. In this category woman is not aware of her rights or her identity. In the second phase-feminist-woman strives for her rights and protests against male constructions. She tries to break from the ideological form and demands for her right and autonomy. In

the final phase-female-woman tries hard for self-discovery and even becomes revolutionary for her identity. Individually she creates her identity.

While discussing Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* all these phases can be applied on Deeti, the representative of Indian women. The novel opens with a simple village girl Deeti who is living by the Ganga, some fifty miles away east of Banaras. Patriarchal system dominated her life since her childhood till the end of the novel. Her marriage is also a result of this patriarchal domination. There is a wide gap between the age of Deeti and her husband, Hukum Singh. But Deeti has to marry him because her own brother, Kesri Singh has proposed this match without knowing her desire. Besides over age, Hukum Singh was opium addicted, invalid and impotent. So in the very first night of their marriage Hukum Singh made her inhale opium. Under the influence of opium she was raped by her brother-in-law Chandan Singh with the help of Bhyro Singh and her mother-in-law. She was not aware of this heinous crime but one day under the influence of opium, her mother-in-law accepts that her daughter Kabutri was fathered by Chandan Singh not by her husband. The truth of Kabutri's birth was a great shock to her. But what could be done now, she was helpless. Generally in patriarchal society males control values, dreams, desires and personal affairs of the family and females have no choice but they have to be subjugated before their males' schemes. Same thing has happened with Detti; she was raped unconsciously. So rape like heinous crime is acceptable in Indian patriarchal society just to maintain the honour of the family than the honour of the woman. Chandan Singh as the symbol of patriarchal system has always had an evil eye on Deeti and was ready to exploit her every time. Now her opium addicted husband is on

his death bed and she has nothing at her home, not even grains to feed properly to her daughter. Chandan had no interest in her poverty or in Hukum Singh's condition but now he began to insist on entering her house just to sit near his brother. But this insisting was due to his evil intention for Deeti. His villainous nature becomes clear when he enters her house and tries to touch her thigh. Sitting near his brother's bed, he would look at Deeti, even fondle himself through the folds of his dhoti. When Deeti knelt down to feed medicines or water to Hukum Singh, Chandan would lean so close as to brush her breasts with his knees. But Deeti is not a weak lady; she began to have a knife in fold of her sari.

Chandan, like the other males of society, regards Deeti as an object of entertainment who can be used after death of her husband for personal need. So he said to her:

“Listen to me kabutri –ke-ma, he said. You know very well how your daughter was conceived, why pretend? You know that you would be childless today if not for me ----- And this is why I say to you: wouldn't it be best for you to do willingly now what you did before without your knowledge. Your husband and I are brothers after all of the same flesh and blood.”

(*Sea of Poppies*, 157)

But Deeti now is well aware of her right, respect and identity so she retorts with anger to him:

“Listen to my words: I will burn on my husbands' pyre rather than give myself to you.” (158)

She is ready to accept sati system or be burnt on the pyre of her husband than to live with Chandan. This may be called her feminist phase because she is heating back to the proposal of her brother-in-law by accepting the celebrated death as Sati rather than to be dependent on Chandan. Ghosh here throws light on another form of patriarchal domination over woman through Sati system. It can be considered as the zenith of female oppression because to burn a living being with a dead person shows inhuman attitude of society towards women. According to this system after the death of husband the wife should sacrifice her life for the sake of husband to show that woman does not have the right to take breath freely. While on the other hand the husband can give up his wife without any solid reason as in the novel Heeru was abandoned by her husband. Heeru has lost her first born baby so her husband persuaded her to go to the temple of Hariharnath at some distance to get another baby as:

“If she was ever to bear another son she would need to do a pooja at the temple of Hariharnath during fare.” (242)

But it was a trick from the side of her husband to leave this lady and then remarry another one. After being persuaded by her husband Heeru became ready to go there but got lost in the fare according to her husband's plan. She had searched fruitlessly for many months but could not find her husband. One day she met her neighbor who told her that her husband had married a woman after she was lost in the fare. Now it

became clear to her that she was abandoned intentionally by her husband. That's why Heeru has to enlist herself as indentured labor to lead the life of salve among the known person. The patriarchal system has given all freedom to man not to woman. Other woman sufferer of the novel is Munia through whom the author shows this unbiased attitude of patriarchy. Munia is a simple girl who loves truly an agent from Ghazipur but he does not have the true feeling of love but lust towards Munia. She is a poor girl who works in Ghazipur opium factory. He impregnated her without marriage. Later her family has to face the ostracism due to her pregnancy. But miraculously her parents stood by her side accepting banishment from their community. They went to the agent to demand some financial help just to take care of the child:

“When the child became eighteen months old her parents went to the agent's house not to threaten or blackmail but just to show him that he had given them another mouth to feed.” (244)

The agent was very shrewd-he heard them peacefully and promised to help them further. But after sometime, his men set Munia's house on fire at the time of night. By chance Munia was not in the house, she was sleeping in the field outside. Helplessly she witnessed the hut being burnt down, killing her mother, father and child. So again finding no way to live in her village she also enlisted herself as indentured labor on Ibis ship. As we know that indentured labor is a poor chapter in Indian history; it is a form of slavery. The indentured labors have to sign some papers and are bound to work for another person for a specified time especially in return for some payment of travel expenses and maintenance. They are treated brutally by the representatives of leaders or British men.

So in the novel patriarchal exploitation forces women to colonial exploitation also. Deeti also enlisted herself as indentured labor but before it she gives up prisoned identity. She hits back patriarchal laws by marrying low caste Kalua as he has saved her from the burning pyre because he likes her. She renounces her earlier identity as she changed her name Aditi from Deeti; it was her female phase. She became the leader of girmitiyas or poor labors. She became a “pole star” for all women to guide them against the brutality of males. She is always ready to fight on Ibis for the sake of women. As in the case of Munia she went to the room of Silhdhars and English agents also with Kalua because they put Munia in their room. She exhorts other men and women labor to save Munia from the lust of Ibis English agents.

“Why're you all so quiet now? You are making enough noise a few minutes ago. Come on! Let's see, we can't rattle the masts on the ship; let's see how long they can ignore us.” (472)

She said to Silahdars boldly “You've taken one of our girls. We are worried about her.”(473)

But she was called inside the room because it was a plan from the side of Bhryo Singh to engulf Deeti alone in room. Deeti goes inside with Kalua. But the Silahdars tide his wrist with a rope outside the room to keep him quiet. Inside the room Bhryo Singh treated her badly as he called her “bitch” and “whore”. When she asked him for which purpose she was

brought there alone, he said “What does anyone want from a whore? His hand slipped through the neck of her choli and began to fumble for a hand hold” (477)

Besides this he accepts his part in rape as he says with smile- “who do you think it was who held your legs open on your wedding night? Did you think that green twig of a launda, your brother-in-law could have done it on his own.” (477)

After this incident Kalua came and killed Bhyro singh but again all Silahdars and English agents are ready to take revenge from Kalua. When she came to know that Silahdars were beating Kalua brutally with chabuk, she showed her unmoved courage by making a plan to save him. She with the help of Pauletti and others allowed Kalua to get off the Ibis to save his life from the cruelty of Silahdars and Captain Mr. Crowle.

Deeti did not show weakness at this misfortune also and saved the life of Munia and Kalua. It can be said that in a way Deeti's character is a bildungsroman to some extent as she develops herself from feminine phase to female phase due to her revolutionary and unmoved confidence. Every time problems and sufferings remain with her but she realizes that society is meant for the pleasure and profit of male's sexuality. So women should fight against such patriarchal society which has no corner for their happiness, respect, desires, dreams and emotions. In patriarchal society man holds power through fatherhood. It performs physical and ideological control over women's sexuality and labor. So Amitav Ghose has successfully presented the Indian women's world and their changing mindset up with the glimpses of customs, conventions and social changes through the character of Deeti and other women characters of *Sea of Poppies*. This novel can be perceived as a true post-modern feminist novel that brings about or creates compassion for the condition of women in a particular social milieu.

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