

## **GHOSH'S SEA OF POPPIES: A MANIFESTO OF INDIAN SOCIO-CULTURE REALISM**

**V R Borkar**

*Research Scholars, S P College, Chandrapur.*

**R G Munghate**

*Principal, S G M College, Kurkheda, Dist- Gadchiroli*

---

**Abstract:** The present paper reveals the social and cultural milieu in nineteenth century India. 'Sea of Poppies' has consumed various themes as 'denial of the right to happiness to a simple orphan', exploitation of under-privileged, the religious and cultural hypocrisy of Indian society, social practices, racism and discrimination, social and sexual degradation of human and religious concerns of man-woman relationship. At the same time it unfolds the impact of capitalism, industrialism and colonialism, religious hypocrisy of Indians as well as Britishers, relationship of the Indian and British in pre-independence days under the panorama of first opium war and the golden Triangle Trade between India, China and Britain. Due to Art is a reflection of society, Ghosh attempts to portray the practices of polygamy, poverty, humiliation, caste discrimination, untouchability, early marriage, sati, purdah system, dowry, debt, women's inferiority, man dominated society, superstitions, and cultural aspects. These practices came into being during the medieval period which deteriorated the status of women in the society.

**Keywords:** Discrimination, Exploitation, Indian Society, Religious and Cultural Hypocrisy.

---

**Introduction :** The image of India is portrayed from their culture, social structure, values, customs, their needs, the mode of life of people, their thought process and outlook of life, aims and aspirations; authentically it presents in the novels of Mulk Raj Anand, Bhabani Bhattacharya, R. K. Narayan as well as proposed novelist Amitav Ghosh. Rightly says as, "Literature and society are seen to be interrelated in the sense that literary values are social values; if they are to be values, will in the last resort come to terms with the working of the imagination and the telling of the stories." <sup>1</sup> Ghosh believes in the social significance and interference in art and literature as Bhabani Bhattacharya on his word, "I hold that a novel must have a social purpose. It must place before the reader something from the society's point of view. Art is not necessary for art's sake. Purposeless art and Literature which is much in vogue does not appear to me a sound judgement."<sup>2</sup>

In 'Sea of poppies' Ghosh has not just painted characters' life but has dealt with some of the most Indian themes like caste and class system, semi-feudalism, slavery and servitude. Typical Indian themes like caste system, social attitudes, social and religious taboos, superstitions, superiority and inferiority, poverty, women's inferiority, social evils as dowry system, padhada system, sati, early marriage and ill thoughts.

**Cast Discrimination:** Like Mulk Raj Anand and Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh could not live far away without including the heinous system of caste discrimination: untouchability which practiced in Indian society in 19<sup>th</sup> century. Prof. Fulzele keenly observes in his tribute, 'Quest for Identity and Liminality in Amitav Ghosh's sea of poppies', "Amitav Ghosh demonstrated that how poor low caste are often humiliated by upper caste zamindars by insulting them at that time in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century."<sup>3</sup>

Ghosh has attempted to portray the sorrows, tribulations, slavery degradation, ridicule and poverty experienced by untouchables. Indian society was divided by rigid social hierarchy known as 'Varn-vyavasthas'. Kalua is an ox-cart driver born into the chamar caste, whose trade was 'to collect the remains of dead cows and oxen'. (54) Though he has unique strength and power, his power and place in society are determined not by his ability but 'ipso facto' of his birth in a particular caste of untouchables which happens to be the lowest of the land. He does not move to help his passenger and always careful to keep his face hidden from higher caste fellow. Hukam Singh, a high-caste Rajput believes that 'the sight of his (Kalua) face would bode ill for the day ahead.' (4) They conversing amicably but never exchanging glances. Exposing social bigotry in India Nandini put forth "Ghosh represents the consciousness of subaltern through the protagonists Deeti and Kalua. Both characters are presented within the dire socio-economic reality of village life which consists of a life not only of poverty, deprivations and penury but also the finely graded beliefs in caste difference as well."<sup>4</sup> Untouchables'

bio gated from village by higher caste. They were not allowed to have their dwelling in the precincts of village. 'Kalua lived in the chamar basti, a cluster of huts inhabited only by people of his caste.' (53) It was a social taboo for the high-caste people to enter the hamlet occupied by these out-caste. Inter-caste marriage and inter religious marriages were considered as social taboos. An outcaste marrying a woman of high caste was considered to be a serious crime than murder. When Zachary Reid wanders why he has to be punished twice for the same offence, Captain Chilling worth replies that in the eyes of the subedar, murder was the least of his crimes and for the heinous crime he had committed he would be cut and feel to the dogs at home- "he's (Kalua) a pariah who has run off with a woman of high caste." (481) "Ghosh represents the consciousness of subaltern through the protagonists Deeti and Kalua. Both characters are presented within the dire socio-economic reality of village life which consists of a sight not only of poverty deprivations and penury but also the finely graded beliefs in caste difference as well. Inter-religious marriage also the matter of the creed, Jodu, a lascar belongs to Muslim community interconnected with Munia a Hindu woman, causes the panic suffer to Jodu. In Indian society it was effortless to know who was who, just hearing someone's name would reveal their religion, their caste, their village. Neel jumped in ambiguity to recognize western people, for him foreigners are so opaque, it is impossible to speculate about them. Social values, culture, morals and even laws differ from caste to caste. There was not equal punishment for same crime. When Nell's forgery case was on trial, a petition is submission on his behalf to mitigate his sentence as the penalty would cause. It was very disgusting to Neel to take lunch from unknown cook. Discrimination of race and religion is a subject of all over the world. Ghosh's American fellow Mr. Zachary Reid, an enlisted as 'Black', makes much trouble on the way of journey in Ibis.

**Cultural Phenomenon:** Ghosh provides cultural prosperity of India from various character which belongs different religion, caste, race and sex. Each of the subculture presents a unique value system in the common factor of "Indianness". In the words of M. N. Srinivas, "Each caste has a culture which is to some extent autonomous: there are differences in dress, speech, manners, ritual and ways of life."<sup>5</sup> Ghosh's describes accurately as Reed Way Dasenbrock uses the term "multicultural literature". As it is said by Srikanth, "Most importantly every culture is internally plural and reflects a continuing conversation between its different tradition and strands of thoughts. Cultures grow out of conscious and un-conscious interactions with each other and define their identity particularly multicultural in their origin and constitution."<sup>6</sup> This can be highly attributed in fiction of Ghosh. Characters of sea of poppies belongs from different culture and religion. It has high caste women Deeti, Rani Malati, men- raja Neel, Baboo Nob Kissin Pandar, Hukum Singh, Chandan Singh, Subhedar Bhyro Singh, untouchable - Kalua, Miss Puletta Lambert as French girl, American fellow Mr. Zachary Reid, Christian Mr and Mrs. Burnham, Mr. Chillingworth, Mr. Doughty, Muslim - Jodu, Serang Ali and Indo-chinese Ah Fatt. Uses multilingual term as Bhojpuri, Hindi, English, Bengali and Pidgin. Deeti represents a typical Indian wife and mother. After completed everyday work she used to do a proper puja with flowers and offerings. She also pays tribute to holy Ganga regularly. Folksongs usually sung by Deeti indicates the Indian culture. Under the social conditions it is but natural that we meet characters who are only too eager to follow the social values which they imbibe from their early childhood. They start every day with offering prayers to God. Naturally in difficult time they remember God, which they believe, would prevent them from calamities. Hearing about punishment to Kalua, naturally Deeti lack courage and determination to face the challenges of life that stand before her. She seems either being run away or surrender herself to her fate, praying for God's boon every now and then. Neel also took puja for an hour while go to court for his first hearing. It was a tradition among the Raskhali zamindar to learn flying kite. One such custom was followed by Raja that he cannot eat with unclean beef-eaters Britishers while feasting. Upper class Raja even did not shake hands with those people, they only folds the hand together in welcome. Baboo Nob Kissin, a Bramhan Brahminchary represents typical Hindu orthodoxy, devote of lord Krishna who awaits for incarnation of maa Taramony and getting freedom - Moksha. Dress manner too plays an eminent role to introduce cultural phenomenon. Author gives enough introduction about Indian dresses such as dhotis, kurtas, jooties, sari, choli, shawl and choga etc. as well as English dress manner like pyjamas, turbans, coats, ruby pin and hat. Description of Indian food and Bengali dinner manner aptly, "There was no food on the table, for meals in the Raskhali household were served in the Bengali fashion, in successive courses." (108)

Our blind and irrational adherence of society, decayed tradition and culture is very responsible for retardation of progress and healthy social change. Author in passive nature lies a democratic values upgraded to national liberty and cultural prosperity. For our happiness Deeti rejects all the bond, such as age, cast, creed and community. She is ready to flout openly the love laws. She shares to develop a maternal relationship with an untouchable, Kalua; Impact of colonization, imperialism and materialism society accepted their values and

manners. After travelling on the ship all the passengers might have forgotten their old identify and they were part and paired of one common identity as "Jahaz-bhai and Jahaz- bahen." (356) Hindu orthodoxy, Baboo Nob Kissin had not fear to lose his caste after crossing black water.

**Socio-Religious Taboos and Hypocrisy:** As Amitav Bhattacharya, Ghosh too refers to the various custom, traditions, superstitions and even blind beliefs. The faith and trust in horoscope and the part played by the matchmakers are graphically described. For the dogmas of horoscope Deeti's father worried about her marriage and future because her fate being ruled by Saturn – Shani. On the eve of Neel's first appearance, the Raskhali estates court astrologer determined that the date of the hearing was extremely auspicious, with all the stars aligned in the Raja's favor, the news provides cheer to Halder family, Rani Malati, who visits to the Bhukailash temple where she provides a feast for a hundred Brahmins, serving each of them with her own hands. The novel also presents the superstitious beliefs and practices in the society. The path in which Neel had to tread was cleared off impure objects as jharus and toilet buckets. Sweeper and porters of night soil who were considered to be carriers of ill-omen are ushered away. Parimal even made sure that the constables who accompanied Neel are of Hindus of high caste. As Deeti's beliefs, "to leave the dishes unwashed overnight was to invite an invasion of ghosts, ghouls and hungry pishaches." (56) In the eve of 19<sup>th</sup> century Padhada system was one of the most crucial practice in Hindu society and culture. Deeti, malati and other women including Paulette (on ship) always draw Ghungata over their faces. It was patriarchal society in which woman seems inferior to man. Women were excluded from the formal education system. When Paulette tells the migrants that she had read from a book that there are no snakes in Mareech, Jhugroo satirically retorts, "How would a woman know what's written in a book?" (390) Illiteracy of society makes much profitable to landlords. Due to poverty many people lived under debt. Hukam Singh, Deeti as well as Neel falls from his good destiny. For live hood Deeti made agreement for six months' worth of wheat, oil and gurrh with moneylender, "his rates were such that her debt would double every six months: in a few years, all the land would be forfeit." (156) Early marriage was other social evil pointed out in the novel. It records that Neel was betrothed at the time of his birth to the daughter of another landowning family and the marriage was solemnized when he was twelve. Deeti also thinks about his daughter Kabutri's marriage who was only six year old.

In male dominant society Dowry given by girl's parents. The girl parents are expected to offer money and gifts to the groom to get their daughters married off. Deeti's parents had to thatch the roof of her groom's house as a part of her dowry. In wedding ceremony of Heeru, a goat had been given to groom by girls side. Men superior society women suffers a lot due to her dependence on man for everything, especially economic. Women therefore becomes a tools of man's hand. Malati, is a passive sufferer who performs her duties as a wife and mother without any expectations. Although she bears mentally sufferings as typical Indian wife, she never complains or questions her husband's relationship with his mistress Elokeshi. Heeru was berated and beaten up by her husband which she lost her only child. To beget a son she was persuaded by her husband to do a puja at the temple of Hariharnath during the mela, she got lost and after few months, she came to know that her husband had married again. Munia is such sufferer of ill beliefs that in her monthly menstrual cycle she could not sleep in home with her parents and son. The scripture belief that the birth of son is necessary to everyone is pointed out as Bhattacharya claimed, "Our ancestors in heaven are joyful when a son is born to the house on earth."<sup>7</sup> Having son was the matter of only heir to family asset. Due to this Deeti bears much mentally harassment by her brother in law. After her husband's death she urges to spare all property to him, because of not having son.

**Social and Sexual Degradation of Human:** Social and cultural values exist on the moral, beliefs and true love. Betrayal, seduction and polygamy are the causes of degradation of human in society. After marriage Deeti is seduced by Chandan Singh in her marital bed at first night of her marriage. She faces much mental and physical harassment by him was the causes of her to be sati on her husband's pyre. Munia was cheated by an agent from the opium factory who had filled her belly with baby. He set fire her house. In that time higher caste men practices of polygamy, Neel was an illicit relationship with a nauch girl Elokeshi, who was older than him. His father the old Raja enjoyed with his mistresses causes the mounting up of his debts. Not only women but also men in lower caste suffers from panic humiliation. When Kalua defeated in wrestling, three landlords could not bear such insult, they decided to mortification of Kalua by wanted him met with horses brutally. They beaten him whenever he became unconscious. British famous businessman Mr. Burnham, who has done mentally and physically harassment of orphan girl Miss Paulette while teaching of Biblical lesson.

To conclude total involvement on the part of the writer and a systematic rendering of the typically Indian cultural or subcultural scene is most conspicuous in the prospect work *Sea of Poppies*. As it is very evident that every society is suffering from some fatal problems, like social inequality conservatism, racism and favourism, hence the creative geniuses of Ghosh has tried to uproot these age – old evils and to restore democratic ideal to give social justice to the suffering people. Ibis ship is the image of transformation of human being. In *The sea of Poppies*, Ghosh has not just pen pictured of characters life, but has stilt with some of the most Indian themes like caste and class system, semi-feudalism, slavery and servitude. Typical Indian themes are said to be: “The caste system, social attitude, social and religious taboos, superstitions, nations of superiority and inferiority.”<sup>8</sup> As written in open-ended novel, author possessed silently transformation from unjust to just, domination to freedom, discrimination to equality, humiliation to love and happiness. This is what Ghosh explores with emphasis that has made his debut novel ‘*Sea of Poppies*’ as one of top in the panorama of the world literature.

**References:**

1. Robert Weimann. “Structure and Society in Literary History” Lawrence and wishart, London (1979): p. 234.
2. Sudhakar Joshi. “An Evening with Bhabani : Sunday Standard” ( April 27, 1969).
3. D. B. Fulzele. “Quest for Identity and Liminality in Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*” *Three Indian Novelists*. (2012): p. 100.
4. Nandini. “Recharting the Narrative of Subalternity in Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*” *Three Indian Novelists*. (2012): p.125.
5. M. N. Srinivas. “India : Social structure” (1969; rpt. Delhi : Hindustan Publishing Corporation, 1986): p.11.
6. N. Rameshchandra Srikanth. “Multiculturalism: Origin and development in Indian writing in English.” *English studies international research journal*. vol.1 (2013): p.67.
7. Bhabani Bhattacharya. “Music for Mohini” New Delhi: An Orient paperbacks (1952): p.140.
8. Braj B. Kachru. “The Indianization of English” *The English Language in India*, Delhi OUP, (1983): p. 87.

\*\*\*