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Lives In Struggles: Humanizing Poverty Through Subaltern Resistance in Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies

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Abstract

Sea of Poppies (2008), a work by Amitav Ghosh, is one of the great pieces of postcolonial historical fiction. Subsequently, the novel is the first of the Ibis Trilogy; it defines events in the context of the First Opium War. Philosophies like colonialism, migration, indentured servitude, and the opium trade from India to China become important in the Sea of Poppies. Sea of Poppies demonstrates how the story unfolds along the river Ganges and the Indian Ocean before the Opium Wars. Numerous individuals who are affected by colonial trade and a strict caste system become the vital characters. Among them are peasants, widows, laborers, prisoners, and sailors, who suffer from the colonial system, and the ship Ibis turns out to be a prison for them as well as a place full of hope. In addition, Sea of Poppies shows clearly what poverty means. For farmers, it means growing opium instead of food crops, which leaves no chance to survive and leads them to debts. In turn, for women like Deeti, poverty means the incapacity near be free and respected due to the local social practices. A number of individuals leave their homes out of desperation rather than hope, since economic factors can force them to leave everything behind. However, the story also emphasizes the humanity of all the people, regardless of how bad the situation might be. Indeed, the main idea of the book is that, despite the inequality and oppression in society, the strangers manage to develop a relationship that goes beyond caste, religion, or even history. By looking at what happens in the characters' lives, we gain insight into the need for justice and equality to help people break the vicious cycle of poverty. It should be noted that in Ghosh's "Sea of Poppies," the problems faced by Indian women are viewed from various perspectives. As the power plays an important role, the problems of Indian women become much more complex. In such an oppressive society, the wishes of these women are oppressed by the power of men and the latter cannot even speak about them.

Keywords: Double Colonization, Oppression, Power, Patriarchal Society, Subaltern.

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Introduction

Ghosh's novel Sea of Poppies continues to be a great piece of Indian literature, written in English. In the narrative that reflects India's historical background and culture, he takes readers back to the end of the eighteenth century, before the Opium Wars. Sea of Poppies offers a vivid picture of that era, when the country was deeply influenced by colonial domination, international trade, and a stratified society (Fanon, 1967). The novel is about a collection of characters who finally meet aboard the Ibis. Every individual here belongs to a different social class: they can be peasants, zamindars, widows, sailors, and traders. Thus, completing the sentence, Amitav Ghosh successfully depicts all kinds of people who constitute Indian social life at that period in history. It is worth noting that diversity is a characteristic feature of Indian literature, as several voices can be heard in each work, offering a picture of the country (Naik, 1982). Consequently, there is a strong possibility of connecting the works of two different Indian authors, such as Arundhati Roy and Ghosh (2008), through themes of social inequality, oppression, and marginalization. Despite differences in style and historical period, each writer uses their fiction to show the oppressive system and question it (Spivak, 1988; Ashcroft et al., 2002; Said, 1994). For instance, Arundhati Roy's work The Divinity of Trivial Gears addresses the formation of humanoid groups through social hierarchies based on sex and gender (Landary & Maclean,1996; Pearson, 2023). Both Jhumpa Lahiri and Amitav Ghosh examine the displacement of people compelled to leave their homelands due to colonialism. They migrate from one place to another and pass through a hard journey over the ocean, which makes them feel hesitant. This physical movement plays a significant role in their survives, transforming them both internally and externally.

There remains a strong connection between the literature of Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh, as both writers emphasize antiquity, historicity, and the intermingling of art. Both authors employ literary techniques to explore the effects of history on particular individuals and their lives. The novel "Sea of Poppies" by Amitav Ghosh represents the 19th-century colonial Indian society and its opium trade and migration. Likewise, Salman Rushdie often absorbs with historical measures such as the Partition of India in his novels, demo how huge partisan changes deeply affect personal and family lives. Their first connection lies in the way they incorporate historical fiction with a great deal of imagination (Islam, 2015). Though Ghosh sensibly discusses history, yet he provides it with some fictional characters who experience it in person. Similarly, Rushdie, too, employs imaginative storytelling techniques and tends to socialize realism with myths and magic realism. Although their narrative techniques may vary, neither Ghosh nor Rushdie accepts the idea of history as static or simplistic. In his novel 'Sea of Poppies', Amitav Ghosh provides an extensive description of life during the colonial era of India, in which every section of society is involved in issues of opium trade, poverty, and migration (Fedtke, 2025). Similarly, the works of Rohinton Mistry also reflect the same tendency because he writes around the poor and downtrodden suffering from poverty and injustice.

Rohinton Mistry and Amitav Ghosh can be compared because both writers have similar concerns about the common man affected by the social, political, and economic circumstances.

Both Khaled Hosseini and Amitav Ghosh can be compared based on their depiction of human misery and displacement. Although their narratives take place in different contexts, it is evident that both authors emphasize how much impact circumstances have on common people. Indeed, the characters of Amitav Ghosh's novel "Sea of Poppies" seem to belong to people who live in colonial India, surrounded by such issues as opium business, poverty, and displacement. Most of them come from somewhere else and are forced to make dangerous journeys for survival. Likewise, one of the key themes in the novels of Khaled Hosseini is related to wars, conflicts, and instability in Afghanistan that force people to leave their homeland. Despite their very distinct literary styles, it is possible to draw a connection between the literature of Chaudhuri and Ghosh, since both authors have a common interest in topics like culture, history, and ordinary people's lives. The book by Amitav Ghosh titled "Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies" is an enormous historical novel that covers topics ranging from colonialism, migration, and opium trade among others. The book illustrates numerous events and many characters coming from diverse social classes. Meanwhile, Amit Chaudhuri is known for his quiet literature that focuses on simple situations from real life rather than significant historical events.

The literary pieces of Kiran Desai and Amitav Ghosh can be linked together through their focus on migration, identity formation, and influence of global phenomena on individuals. Despite differences in style and setting, both authors are extremely interested in depicting how human beings can be influenced by the transformations that take place within society. In fact, the historical fiction penned by Amitav Ghosh is entitled Sea of Poppies. It tells about the life of individuals whose lives were altered by the trade of opium and migrations. Similarly, Kiran Desai has also focused on describing the influence of globalization and migration on individuals. Displacement is a key link between these writers. In *Sea of Poppies*, characters are physically uprooted and taken across the sea, leaving behind their homes

and identities. In Desai's work, displacement is both physical and emotional, as characters move between countries or feel alienated even within their own society. In both cases, displacement leads to a deep sense of uncertainty and transformation. Jesus Christ is Free Trade and Free Trade is Jesus Christ." I doubt that there could ever have been a truer statement made before. If God willed that opium should serve as the means for spreading Christianity throughout China, then so be it.

The quoted speech delivered by the ruthless British trader, Benjamin Burnham, In Sea of Poppies by Amitav Ghosh, reveals the irony and selfishness behind the belief system that was used to legitimize the opium trading activity undertaken by the British traders in China in the late 1830s.When Burnham equates the "Free Trade" to "Jesus Christ" and describes the opium-induced addiction of millions of people as an instrument, granted by God, that can help the British in opening up China, he refers to a "civilizing mission," which was used by the colonizers to disguise their financial greed with a veil of religious responsibility. A literature review is a section of a research project where you explore and discuss what other researchers have already studied about your topic. Instead of simply listing summaries, it involves understanding, comparing, and connecting different ideas, findings, and viewpoints from existing sources such as books, journal articles, and reports. The main purpose of a literature review is to show that you are familiar with the background of your topic. It helps identify what has already been discovered, what methods were used, and where there might be gaps or unanswered questions. By doing this, you can position your own research more clearly and explain how it adds value to the existing body of knowledge.

Effects Of Cultivation of Opium

In order to protect edible food crops from the harmful consequences of opium cultivation, these crops have been abandoned. Deeti remembers a time when they produced edible crops, which not only provided them with food but also served as a source of building materials for their roofs. It was a great existence; however, due to the fact that opium is grown there, people are compelled to either migrate to Mauritius or perish from famine for their own safety. According to her explanation "Previously, the crops were sown extensively with wheat during the winter season, and the straw produced by the spring crop was utilized to mend the damages incurred the previous year." On the other hand, because the sahibs ordered everyone to plant poppies, nobody had any spare thatch. Instead, they were required to purchase it from villagers from distant villages at the market. The reason being that it was very expensive, and hence they postponed the repair work for their houses as much as possible.

yet 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; it was as if they were sitting balanced on the edge of a precipice, and the island were an outstretched limb of sacred Jambudvipa, their homeland, reaching out to keep them from tumbling into the void.

Through his characters in Ganga Sagar is shown in the novel Sea of Poppies by Amitav Ghosh as the frontier between the familiar world of the migrants' homeland of Jambudvipa and an unknown and frightening world that awaits them across the sea. The joining of the river and the sea illustrates the state of mind and soul that the people find themselves in – being secure but at the same time standing right at the edge of the "precipice". In order to illustrate how the shift in cropping pattern has impacted their lives, Deeti draws similarities between the two. The remainder of the poppy seeds were kept for the family, with some of them being replanted and the rest being used for cooking with meat along with vegetables. The mother used to take some poppy seeds to the oil mill.

It is recalled by her that when she was a child, the opium plant used to be grown along with wheat, masoor dal, and vegetables. She also remembers that opium was sown in the same fields. Opium addiction is a condition that, according to the book, affects not just people but also all other living things in the environment around them. During this time, Kalua gives his cow opium in order to assist it calm. The delightful aroma of the poppy pod, as stated by Ghosh, is what attracts insects such as bees, grasshoppers, and wasps. After a few days, these insects are suffocated by the liquid that is oozing out of the pod. In addition, the insects who consume the bees will start to drink from the poppy flower's nectar and end up becoming drunk and acting oddly throughout the story. Once the sap turns black, he states that the dead bodies of the with the sap and transform into a component of the opium that is bought and sold in the market. The flow of sewage from opium plants into the Ganga is one of the ways that the water quality of the river is adversely affected. Even though the water of this river is consumed by all living creatures, the fact that it is contaminated with filth makes it unfit for human consumption. The Indian population worships this river. Ghosh draws parallels between it and the Nile River, which was the most important source of life for Egyptian civilization.

Lives Shaped by Empire and Survival

The novel shows how people's lives are deeply shaped and often controlled by powerful systems like colonial rule and the opium trade It is not by choice but rather by necessity that ordinary people are exiled from their homeland and sense of identity. When the boundaries of caste, class, and culture are crossed, these individuals begin forging new relationships and forming their identities. From the narrative provided, it seems that humans have the ability to adapt, build connections, and start anew despite all being stripped away from them.

It becomes clear throughout the novel that the British Empire extends further than just a political force; its influence stretches into the lives of villages and homes. Through manipulation, the farmers were made to plant opium, which destroyed their land and caused famine amongst the people. It became apparent that the empire was not only an idea but had control over the very survival of the farmers. Thus, their autonomy is constrained, and they become subjected to the regulations that were not made by them. In addition, staying alive seems to be the primary objective of most characters. They are no longer struggling for lofty ambitions and dreams because all that matters to them now is the struggle for existence amidst harsh conditions. Being impoverished, oppressed, and treated unfairly, they have no other choice than making such decisions. They are compelled to abandon their lands, their families, or even themselves to continue living. Such compromises are hard, but there is little choice left. Another reason why the motif of oppression makes the movie so human is that despite all obstacles, people are still able to resist and cope.

To be more precise, they learn to adapt and make concessions under certain circumstances. Specifically, when they are brought together aboard the ship, characters come from very different backgrounds – different castes, cultures, religions, and so forth. Under ordinary conditions, these differences would never cease to exist and would prevent them from establishing any contact. However, being forced to stay together in a life-threatening situation makes them forget about the differences and look for ways to survive. New relationships are formed, and people begin to create a sense of belonging even in unfamiliar spaces. Their identities start to change not because they want to forget who they were, but because they need to adjust to who they are becoming.

Fact is, sir, that men act as much as their strength enables them to do. There is nothing about us that is different from Pharaohs or Mongols except that where they killed men without giving any reason, we must kill them while telling lies about the virtues behind them. It is our hypocrisy of virtue, I assure you, that will never be pardoned by history.

The quotation of Amitav Ghosh from his book "Sea of Poppies" could be interpreted as a harsh indictment of the post-colonial age of British imperialism when people believe that power, rather than virtue, dictates action. This quote draws attention to the point that the British Empire itself was always violent and savage, like all other tyrants in history (e.g., Pharaohs or Mongols), yet hypocritical in its attempts to justify this savagery through virtue. The theme is also an illustration of the injustice inherent in the process. The rich and powerful benefit from the plight of others, whereas the weak have to face all challenges. Still, the book does not concentrate only on misery. It also tells us the story of the power of people who never surrender despite all obstacles.

Overall, in this context, this theme is concerned with the way powerful institutions of Empire rule over humans, but at the same time how humans try to resist and adapt to adverse conditions. Thus, this theme can be described by the way in which human beings manage to persevere through the most difficult moments, showing true human traits and developing relationships, regardless of what they face. This subtopic covers the way human survival gradually transforms a person from the inside out. Extreme conditions lead to the gradual release of any rigid ideas about the hierarchy of life, pride and even identity. For example, the transformations of the characters in Sea of Poppies seem to be a natural and very human process. The heroes don't simply grow stronger overnight and become brave; rather, they learn and mature in difficult conditions through interaction with others. The process of growth shown in the book means that surviving implies changing and adapting to circumstances. These aspects make the development process in the book seem very human in the sense that when under pressure, people can change dramatically. Under such conditions, the characters learn to view each other not as strangers separated by social stratification but as companions and fellow sufferers.

Colonialism and Exploitation

The work highlights economic and social exploitation of India by the British Empire, including forced poppy production. Indian farmers have to plant poppy, leaving no room for growing food crops. Sea of Poppies demonstrates the exploitative nature of colonial rule through the example of its negative impact on daily life. Colonialism in the story is a personal invasion that is not only unjust but seems to be particularly humiliating for the natives. Colonialism in India, however, is mainly associated with economic oppression, which is best exemplified by the opium system Deeti's family, along with other farmers, are not merely choosing what they want to grow. Rather, they get forced into

cultivating poppies rather than food. Though the agents offer money, which is a form of advance or loan, there are strings attached to it. Accepting the money means becoming subservient to the cultivation of opium. This creates a trap from which one cannot get out once one falls in. This is evident in the plight of farmers knowing that they will be forced to eat the grass while cultivating poppies. However, owing to the exploitative nature of the system, refusal of the same can lead to dire consequences. Not all forms of exploitation are open and loud. Such subtle forms are also seen through the emptiness of the grain storage house, the anguish of the farmers due to inability to meet demands, and so on. The lands that once helped sustain the community turn out to be a means of imperialistic profit, for it is only traded globally without helping the community itself. What makes this theme particularly compelling is the sheer humanity behind the story. One gets to know how individuals find themselves forced into impossible positions. For instance, the farmer is not simply a victim of the "history." He is an individual struggling for survival, safety, and self-preservation despite circumstances that take away his ability to make decisions for himself. Ghosh seems to imply that exploitation occurs when it is masked under the guise of opportunity. There is an appearance of a lawful, systematic approach to the arrangement, and yet beneath all that lurks the coercion. The farmers become convinced that it is their fault why they have suffered when actually they are subject to unreasonable demands. Hence, in this context, colonization is more than an outside force; it is the control over people's livelihood and their manipulation. The idea of colonialism and exploitation depicted in Sea of Poppies is not presented as a general political term, but rather a factor that defines the daily life of an ordinary person. It shapes how he eats, works, and what options he thinks he has. Rather than concentrating solely on the rules and laws created by them, the story sheds light on the silent suffering of people who make personal sacrifices while being part of a system aimed at benefiting somebody else. An example of the exploitation in question can be seen when talking about the cultivation of opium. Rural farmers are forced to plant poppies instead of other crops. At first glance, the process may seem like a regular economic exchange in which the colonial administration grants the farmer a loan in exchange for growing a specific crop. The reality, however, is much more complicated. When the farmer agrees to take the advance, he automatically agrees to adhere to strict rules defined in a contract. It produces an uncomfortable paradox. Land that once nourished them now works against them. Rather than using the fields to cultivate food for themselves in the form of rice or wheat or even vegetables, farmers have to concentrate on poppy cultivation, which provides no food value. Hunger becomes a permanent fixture in their lives. The issue does not lie in the lack of fertility of the land; instead, it lies in the misdirection of this fertility for the benefit of another party. Such exploitation feels even more cruel in this context, since one is exploiting something that can give them life, but does not anymore. Another consequence of the entire arrangement lies in the creation of dependency cycles through the process of debt. While such financial assistance seems very convenient to begin with, particularly for struggling families, they end up becoming too heavy a burden to bear. This means borrowing again, sinking deeper into obligation. Over time, debt stops being a temporary problem and becomes a way of life.

I could sense the whole universe pulsing through my veins. Tossing my umbrella to the ground, I tilted my head back and opened myself up to the breeze and the suns. It seemed that in one night alone, I had finally thrown away the void that I had been carrying around inside me for so long.

Consequently, "Sea of Poppies" marks a period of awakening for the character, Deeti. The demise of her husband marks an end to a life that was full of misery and poverty, and opium production, and social oppression, Deeti leaves behind her old self and her sense of grief and "emptiness." By leaving her umbrella and allowing the forces of nature into her world, she makes a statement that challenges her fear about her future and embraces an uncertain yet freer existence within nature itself. This crucial change signals her evolution from the victim of the colonial system to someone who takes control of her life and destiny. The colonizer's strategy of exploitation in the novel also takes on the form of presenting the exploitation as legitimate and ordered. The entire system of domination is based on contracts, laws, and other documentation. Everything seems to operate in accordance with legality. Thus, it does not appear as disorder, and rather, as an orderly and civilized process. However, the exploitation remains hidden within the apparent order because, while there is a choice presented to the natives, it is, in reality, non-existent, and choosing anything else apart from what the colonialists have set out leads to harsh consequences. In addition, it should be mentioned that the profits from this enterprise are divided unequally. Thus, the profits acquired by growing and selling opium are not reaped by Indians themselves. On the contrary, the profits are exported from the country and used for enriching other countries' economies, thus emphasizing the global character of exploitation of colonies. While for the people involved at the core level, this looks like progress in terms of economics, for those on the fringes, it looks like suffering and dispossession. In addition, the novel makes it clear that exploitation is not necessarily carried out through violence. Violence is there, but most of the manipulation arises out of coercion, dependency, and the absence of any other option. Complacency is not because the people believe in it; it is because the alternative of fighting back simply

doesn't seem feasible. In this way, the people may end up blaming themselves and their bad decisions in life, even when all the decisions they ever made were limited options in the first place.

Conclusion

It goes without saying that there was a number of significant socio-economic as well as artistic changes associated with the opium trade in the 19th century, which are skilfully described in the novel "Sea of Poppies" woven by Amitav Ghosh into an amazing tapestry. The setting of the book is the period of India's submission to the laws established by the British Empire, and the plot revolves around the various characters whose fates cross due to their connection to the trade. In discussing the aspects of exploitation typical of colonial period, Amitav Ghosh manages to show that apart from economic shifts, the uncontrolled thirst for opium on the part of the British Empire inflicted substantial damage on Indian traditional society. With the help of vivid description and careful reconstruction of the historical events, Ghosh brings to light personal and social pains experienced by people caught in the cruel web of the imperial economy. Along with portraying resilience and adaptability, Ghosh tells the truth about resistance, addiction, and migration. In this regard, Amitav Ghosh accurately portrayed Indian society during the nineteenth century and its beliefs, practices, and social issues like poverty and discrimination of one caste group over others. This is evident since his books describe both past and contemporary society in the way that even his latest book, Gun Island, highlights the significances of weather variation on societies alive in Sundarbans, which is a common part among India and Bangladesh. Apart from being concerned about various social issues, the works of Amitav Ghosh are also famous because of the vivid descriptions of environments. Many of Ghosh's novels often take the readers through various parts of the Indian sub-continent as well as other countries and allow them to explore the environment there. From the foregoing discussion, it can be seen that Sea of Poppies is an example of the book that criticizes elitist history of Indian subcontinent. By centering people such as Deeti, Kalua, Neel, Zachary Reid, and Ah Fatt, he has lifted the import of history to the working-class skills.

It must stay famous that the subaltern partiality fixes not certainly accept the organized scrap for truths; it can manifest the situation as refusal, aircraft, lodging, and new creations of fitting. The polyphony of the novel, changing perspective, and focus on movement make Sea of Poppies the literary counter-archive. Through this, the novel reveals the limitations of the historical discourse of the elites and claims that history must be read not only in terms of archival documents and events, but also by means of life marked by inequality and partial recognition. In such a way, Ghosh proves that Subaltern Studies are crucial for literature by demonstrating that literature may produce the histories ignored by the archive. The recalls, desires, and new links take them near their destination.

The possessions of opium farming derive calm mightily in Sea of Poppies written by Amitav Ghosh. It is evident from the novel that the production of opium was not just an economic endeavor but a system of slavery. It is through this system that people were enslaved and lost everything including their humanity. entire communities in cycles of poverty and dependence. Farmers who once grew food for their families were forced into growing a crop that brought them little benefit, leaving them hungry, indebted, and powerless. This transformation was not merely economic but also touched on their sense of security, self-respect, and relation to their land. With colonialism in power, there was no guarantee of life, and it compelled the people to make hard choices for mere survival. Therefore, they had no other option but to abandon everything they knew and familiar, entering a new life by compulsion rather than choice. The novel also demonstrates that despite living in such harsh conditions, humanity never stops shining. Suffering together provides strange impacts that help individuals connect to each other in a way that is otherwise impossible.

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