



History Fictionalized and Fiction Historicized: A Study of Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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Abstract: In the wake of postmodernism and post-colonialism, reality has come to be perceived in a quite unprecedented manner. When it comes to the representation of historical reality by contemporary authors, they have focused their attention on such facets of past that had remained hidden either due to dominant ideology or due to the negligent attitude of the writers. Amitav Ghosh is undoubtedly one of those major contemporary authors who have commingled historical events and imaginative insights whereby a unique picture of the past has come to the fore. Thus Ghosh seems to have both fictionalized history and historicized fiction in his novels by means of which he has come to be known as an exponent of postmodern historical novels. The objective of this paper is to study *Sea of Poppies* as a historical novel in which Ghosh has conjoined history and fiction in such a manner that all barriers between history and fiction seem to have crumbled.

Keywords: historical fiction, history revisited, post-modernism, subalternism, post-colonialism, historiography, documented history, history from below

I. INTRODUCTION

The clear-cut division between history and fiction has received a severe jolt with the onslaught of theories like Postmodernism, Post-colonialism, Subalternism and Neo-Historicism. History has come to be viewed as a human construct like literature. The postmodernist view of history argues against conventional history writing and its claims to present historical events objectively and truthfully. The long-standing distinction between history and fiction has blurred with the passage of time and such expressions as 'historiographic metafiction' and 'postmodernist revisionist historical novel' have come to be widely adopted with a particular emphasis upon the insertion of historical events into fictional narratives. Traditional historiography is no more regarded as a valid and appropriate method of writing history. The boundaries between history and fiction have become porous with the result that the contemporary writers have subverted historical events and facts by means of their imaginative and intuitive insights. The assumed connection between language and reality has come to be questioned and the belief in the fixity of the past is not acceptable anymore. Hayden White, a leading postmodernist philosopher of history, avers that historical facts cannot be represented objectively because they cannot exist independently of the historian.

There is no denying the fact that historical events are accessible only through documents and other texts dealing with history and it is historiography that turns historical events into historical “facts”. Such an argument lays emphasis on the role of the historian as a determining factor in giving significance and shape to certain historical events and using only these events into historical accounts while casting aside others, sometimes for ideological reasons. Historians can no longer claim that they are able to represent external reality since the “past is something we construct from already written texts of all kinds which we construe in line with our particular historical concerns” (Seldon 188).

Hayden White claims that conventional historiography makes use of the narrative form which blurs the distinction between history and literature. It is commonly believed that historical facts make no sense on their own due to their fragmentary and incomplete nature. Historical record exists in the form of chronicles that need to be given some form. It is now universally acknowledged that historians have felt compelled to give narrative form to such incomplete events of history. Using their imagination or reason, they turned historical events into stories claiming that their study was scientific and objective. What is important to note is that this process of (hi)story writing was based on selection of some events and rejection of others. Such historical events as were ignored as insignificant lay buried in the mire of oblivion and the so-called important events changed the direction of history. Thus only one side of the coin became known where as the other side was gradually forgotten.

The contemporary authors have taken upon themselves the task of unearthing the other side of the story (history) that is all but forgotten. One of the major voices in contemporary Indian English Writing, Amitav Ghosh has amalgamated history and fiction in such a manner that both not only appear inseparable from each other but also work as complimentary to each other. He becomes fictional when it comes to his narration of history and he is a historian in so far as his treatment of past is authentic and veritable. An excellent past-master, Ghosh is a historical novelist having traits both of an historian and of a fiction-writer who himself asseverates: “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” (Ghosh *Sunday Hindustan Times*).

As a postmodern writer, Ghosh’s outlook on reality is cosmopolitan. He is not blindfolded by any inflexible or rigid attitude towards life and its problems. The same stands true in the context of history and its delineation by him. He shows his comprehension of his subjects by presenting reality in a subtly remarkable manner. History is rendered in an altogether fascinating way by him in his fictions that are suffused with the truths of lives of such people as have always been disregarded as insignificant in the documented history. He decodes and deciphers it differently only to review and reconstruct the past in the light of a common man’s role in it.

Sea of Poppies chronicles the saga of the fictional lives of a number of characters belonging to different countries such as India, Britain, America, France and China. Coming together by a stroke of destiny on the Ibis, a schooner that was once used as a slave carrier between Africa and America and now, after the abolition of slavery in 1833, has come to be used to transport indentured labourers from colonized countries to new colonies; these people form a unique company that is made up of diverse cultures. The narrative is fabricated around the lives of a number of characters such as Kalua who is an untouchable in a caste-ridden Indian society, Deeti who despite being a high-caste Hindu widow elopes with Kalua after being rescued by him from funeral pyre, Zachary Reid who is a Mulatto from Boston and works as the Ibis’s foreman, Paulette who is an orphaned French girl and runs away from her British foster family, Jodu who is a Muslim lascar on the Ibis whose romance with a Hindu girl Munia on the schooner heading to Mauritius creates an uproar and also Neel Ratten Haldar, a poor Hindu Raja, who has inherited debt from his father and due to this he faces a penal servitude of seven years in Mauritius.

What is strikingly prominent in the novel is the new and unique interpretation imparted to the little known history of the mid nineteenth century. Ghosh himself has acknowledged that “his essential interest is in people and their lives, histories and predicaments” (Hawley 7). An anthropologist by training, Ghosh, as Gaiutra Bahadur has mentioned in his review of *Sea of Poppies*, found Deeti’s character in the diary of Sir George Grierson who was deputed by the British Government in 1833 to investigate the alleged abuses in the recruitment of indentured labourers from India. In his diary Grierson has made a mention of an encounter

with the father of one female coolie in a village along the Ganges, pointing out that the man “denied having any such relative, and probably she had gone wrong and been disowned by him.” (qtd. in Bahadur). The historical record supplies only a trace of this woman in terms of a name, a processing number, a year of emigration. Ghosh attempts to fill the blanks in the historical archive imaginatively and intuitively. He picks up an ordinary woman as his protagonist and builds up the entire action of the novel around her in such a manner that the whole historical reality comes to be viewed from her perspective.

Taking a cue from the historic event of the opium trade, Ghosh shifts his attention to the opium ship and opium factory and weaves the story of a number of ordinary folks who despite belonging to different cultural set-ups and different countries come together on board a ship called Ibis that is making its way to sugar plantations of Mauritius. It is also the story of people whose lives are adversely affected by poppy plantation. Opium cultivation is forced upon the Indian farmers by the British rulers who themselves thrive upon opium trade but the farmers whose land is used to cultivate poppies are constantly crushed under grinding poverty. The imbalance in the ecology due to the cultivation of opium and its effect on human beings and animals is shown in the novel.

Ghosh’s work constitutes ‘writing back’ to the European empire that made opium an indispensability for the colonized subaltern. Significantly, Ghosh’s setting is the Indian hinterland state of Bihar, which was the center of opium cultivation and from where the indentured labourers came, allowing him to show the workings of Empire and its far-reaching consequences. *Sea of Poppies* disconcerts the reader with the appalling and pathetic working conditions in the opium factory. The miasmic fog that surrounds it, the sickly odour of opium sap that hangs in the air, and the smell of liquid opium mixed with the sweat and the stench testify to the deplorable conditions of the working hands. Marez elucidates how the opium den narratives that circulated in the metropole “played a crucial role in the reproduction of imperial ideologies” as they were designed to “enlist ideological support for the British Empire in Asia by disavowing its origins in war and plunder” (Marez 42). In *Sea of Poppies*, the British merchants are shown to be inhumanly given to growing and selling of opium, forcing Indian farmers to grow opium to meet their insatiable greed for profit.

Opium was grown in such profusion that other crops were almost neglected. People were forced into the cultivation of opium and sowing of edible food crops was quite minimal. Deeti remembers how edible crops were grown earlier and they got both edible food and material for making roof. It was an ideal life but the cultivation of opium changed everything. People suffered a lot due to the cultivation of opium and had to die from hunger or migrate to Mauritius in the hope of leading a happy life there. Deeti herself says:

In the old days, the fields would be heavy with wheat in the winter, and after the spring harvest, the straw would be used to repair the damage of the year before. But now, with the sahibs forcing everyone to grow poppy, no one had thatch to spare - it had to be bought at the market, from people lived in faraway villages, and the expense was such that people put off their repairs as long as they possibly could. (SOP 29)

Ghosh has here clearly shown that the material which was freely available to the people earlier had become expensive due to the shift in cultivation from food crop to cash crop. People’s lives also changed considerably due to the change in the cropping pattern. Deeti remembers when she was a child, opium was grown between the main crops of wheat, masoor dal and vegetables. Deeti’s mother “would send some of the poppy seeds to the oil press, and the rest she would keep for the house, some for replanting, and some to cook with meat and vegetables” (SOP 29). Thus poppy was grown to fulfill the needs of the household but the consolidation of the colonial powers changed everything. People were compelled to grow poppy and it resulted in debt and migration for them in the long run.

The historical links between opium, British Empire, and indentured labour—and the intimacy between land and sea—are presented through delineating the trajectory of Deeti, one of the main characters in the novel (*Younger Hindu*). Deeti is the farmer-wife of a high-caste Rajput named Hukam Singh who works in the opium factory. The viciousness of Empire is illustrated in Singh’s injury as a sepoy in a British regiment, which results in his addiction to opium, further aggravated by his employment at the British opium factory

(Chatterjee Web). It is this addiction, Deeti realizes, that constitutes his main 'disability' rather than his slight limp.

Deeti ends up on the Ibis as an indentured labourer after being saved from becoming a sati (on her husband's funeral pyre) by the lower-caste horse-cart driver, Kalua. Like Zachary Reid, the mixed-race American freedman, Deeti ends up on the sea because of disenfranchisement on land. Through this incident of Deeti's rescue, Ghosh also writes back to colonialist representations in much British fiction (*The Far Pavilions*, *The Deceivers*), where the enlightened white man saves the victimized Indian woman from the "barbaric" rite of sati (Sangari Web). In Ghosh's postcolonial intervention, a brown man becomes the rescuer of an Indian woman, thus undercutting the white male rescue fantasy.

Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies* accomplishes the self-imposed task of retracing the historical truth about the opium trade between India and China in the mid-nineteenth century and its repercussions and ill-effects upon common native Indians like Deeti, her husband Hukum Singh, Kalua etc. who find themselves uprooted from their homeland and are compelled by circumstances beyond their control to move to Mauritius as indentured labourers. The banes of colonialism and imperialism have not only stripped India of its riches but also adversely affected the lives of the ordinary and the poor whose mental anguish can be understood if the history is revisited keeping in mind their perspective and standpoint. First and foremost, colonisation is very much about "the struggles to possess" territory, as Edward Said writes, with the further intention "to dispossess, ruin, maim and distort the lives of many, all in the cause of land" (Said 82). Moreover, "Imperialism is a depraved choice of national life, imposed by self-seeking interests which appeal to the lusts of quantitative acquisitiveness and of forceful domination surviving in a nation from early centuries of animal struggle for existence" (Hobson 368). The subjugation of the native Indians by the British colonialists has no doubt been well-represented by Indian historians but what has always remained untouched in the representation of the past is the interests, concerns, anticipations and aspirations of the poor and the weak. The effect produced by colonialism and imperialism on the psyche of the commoners and the ordinary has remained conspicuous by its absence from all kinds of historical representations since little record pertaining to their plighted existence is extant today. Therefore the task of a historian and a writer of historical fiction becomes all the more significant as he has to make good use of whatever little factual information he may be having of the past to delineate the experiences of the ordinary people. Ghosh is a past-master in the writing of historical novels as transpires from his fictions. In *Sea of Poppies*, like all his other novels, he has shown his mettle by the truthful representation of the mid-nineteenth century period but what he has done remarkably is the depiction of the lives of the poor and deprived Indians of the time.

The migrants on board the schooner belong to different parts of India, especially areas lying along the Ganges from the modern Uttar Pradesh to Calcutta. Not only have they been individualized by their unique temperament and countenance but also made representatives of the class and caste they belong to. Moreover, Ghosh has paid special attention to the portrayal of women characters and the issues pertaining to them. The Ibis is not merely a ship carrying migrants but a sort of micro world for its inmates who not only interact with one-another but also throw a great deal of light upon the socio-economic and political system of the times. What is peculiar about Ghosh's craftsmanship here is that he has made a study of the existing social, cultural, and political set-up from the view point of the people belonging to the marginalized and oppressed sections of Indian society. He has made it his avowed objective to render in clear and definite terms the issues, problems, socio-cultural nuances and both major and minor historical events from the standpoint of the suppressed and the subjugated.

It is also important to note that Amitav Ghosh sought to view those aspects of historical truth which were relegated to the background because of being regarded as insignificant. Noteworthy is the fact that common man's perspective has always been kept in the periphery and what caught the attention of the historians was the viewpoint of the rulers, elites and colonizers. Thus the portrayal of the past has always been lopsided and it is writers like Ghosh who took upon themselves the task of setting right what was the wrongdoing of the earlier historians. There is no gainsaying the fact that the exact rendering of the past is all but impossible but studying history from the perspective of the common people to a certain extent fills the missing links or gaps in the existing historical accounts.

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