



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Humanistic Concern Under Colonial Rule In *Sea Of Poppies* By Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract

Humanism is the term widely used in literature to emphasize the ethical perspective of human being, both individually and collectively. Humanistic concern is the major concept discussed in most of the works of art and literature. The major constituents of humanism have always been freedom, equality, dignity and sovereignty of man. Society has always lived by certain code of norms and human values since the beginning of the civilization. Human values have undergone several changes along with the changing socio cultural and political developments. Humanism includes the philosophical outlook of human race.

The human values and dignity are spoken more, when there is a decline in the humanistic concern. As and when the time demands the learned scholars and eminent and efficient writers expound their protest through their writings. Their target of attack has always been the socio-political and religious establishment in the society. The works of Arun Joshi, Arundhati Roy, Shobha De, Vikram Seth and Amitav Ghosh evolve around the humanistic values. The more works on humanistic concern symbolize that we are at the verge of losing the human values and the scholarly writers remind the concerned authorities and the privileged people about the social and economical loss that they have caused to the under privileged people.

In the novel '*Sea of Poppies*' Ghosh traced the history and portrays the real picture of the people who face difficulties under both the native ruler as well as the British Empire. The major concern is the obliteration of human rights and values by the ruthless rulers.

Key Words: Humanism, Privileged, Suppression, Opium, Abuse

INTRODUCTION

There has always been violence against the human race based on certain criteria like racial and communal discrimination. From time immemorial, literature is the reflection of culture and social life of the people. The writers of various periods depict the real picture of the society that they have visualized. When taken for study, Humanism has always been the major topic discussed at various levels. Every society is partitioned by affluent and impoverished people. The under privileged are always suppressed and even the basic human rights have been rejected. And for many years the impoverished are kept ignorant about their rights. The writers have always focused on suppression instigated by the bourgeois over the downtrodden people. Amitav Ghosh like Eugene O'Neil does not concern a man as an individual in the society but a man in a social order, tortured, starved, disillusioned, thwarted and driven to disaster by the forces of a system which cares nothing for the general welfare of society. The character Yank in O'Neil's *The Hairy Ape*

identifies himself with an ape in the zoo, which is caged and taunted. Ghosh's most of the characters can also be identified with O'Neil's Yank who is miserably ill-treated by the society and chased.

The political turmoil is also another major cause for the agony of the people. Political party and the government have always favoured the rich. The poor are exploited by the rich people and the government; they are forced to perform the menial jobs which hindered their upliftment. Similarly Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, pictures the danger of deteriorating sociological tract in the society. The events in the life of Bakha, the hero of the novel, represent the agony of humanity caught in the coils of a ruthless inhuman social system. An incident in the sweet stall, when Bakha accidentally brushes against a man, the man yells at him in the foulest language which like venom paralyzed the senses of Bakha. "Bakha stood amazed, embarrassed. His senses were paralyzed only fear gripped his soul, fear and humility and servility." (*Untouchable*, 46).

An Analytic Overview

Sea of Poppies is about the people, who are denied their basic rights and lead a painful and sorrowful life. The focus is on the desperate Deeti who comes across all sort of struggle. Through the characters Deeti and Kalua, Ghosh expresses the human values at various circumstances. He also portrays the inhuman nature of the government and its outcome. The author traces the history and selects the heart-rending incidents through his marvelous narrative skill. It is similar to E. M. Forster's portrayal of Chandrapore in his *A Passage to India*, an embarrassing picture of the most inhuman treatment of the Indian natives by their British masters who consider themselves racially and culturally superior. Of course, Forster as a humanist was vehemently opposed to the rationale of the British Colonial – imperial subjugation of Indians.

Amitav Ghosh explicitly attacks the traditional and religious belief that persistently wedges between people preventing unity among them, thereby reducing their power in the name of oppression. His novels chronicle the fictional life of diversified characters from different countries especially India. Ghosh selects characters at all levels from coolie to Zamindar; his portrayal of common feature among his characters; the colonial subjection like physical, economic, political, religious, judicial and social suppression.

In *Sea of Poppies* the working condition in the opium factory is very horrible. Worst kind of treatment towards humanism can be seen inside the opium factory where even young boys were not spared. When Deeti visits the opium factory to bring back her sick husband Hukam Singh she gets terrified. The description about the conditions prevalent in the Ghazipur opium factory reveals the inhuman working conditions of the employees. "Her eyes were met by a startling sight- a host of dark, legless torsos was circling around and around, like some enslaved tribe of demons" (94). These men were almost insensitive, they were bare bodied except a bit of cloth around their waist, their eyes are as blank as dark clouds without vision, and it is a mere reflection of their own life. Without any future plan, they all move like an ant in honey tracking their next step. Moreover "Their eyes were vacant, glazed and yet somehow they managed to keep moving, as slow as ants in honey, tramping, treading" (95).

Inside the factory the white officers watch the work and maintain discipline among labours. These men are "armed with fearsome instrument: metals scoops, glass ladles and long handled rakes" (95). Even children are not spared from this dreadful working condition in the opium filled environment. The punishment for the children is as harsh as for those of adults, as Deeti sees:

"Suddenly one of them indeed dropped their ball (of opium) sending it crashing to the floor, where it burst open, splattering its gummy contents everywhere instantly the offenders was set upon by cane-wielding overseers and his howls and shrieks went echoing through the vast, chilly chamber" (96).

Reality is that these people have no other option to feed their family. Even the farmers have no other alternative because they are forced to grow only poppy in their field and after getting the yield, they are compelled to surrender their yield to the factory in exchange of their debts. Sirdars one of the relatives of Deeti who works in the factory asks Deeti. "Don't you know your husband is an afeemkhor? Why do you send him here to work?..... Do you want him to die?" (98). Just like others Deeti too has no option, other than her husband's income. The very thought of Hukam Singh's sickness, the hope and light dimmed in her eyes. Hukam Singh's illness and subsequent death does not result in any financial compensation from his

factory. She is left desperately to fight against all odds in the society. Deeti is the ultimate sufferer in the novel *Sea of Poppies*. Unable to endure the hardship inflicted on her by her family members and the society, she decides immolate herself in the funeral pyre of her husband. Though she is saved by Kalua her fate never allows her to lead a happy life. It is this desperate condition which propels Deeti forward and she dares to take another chance to re-live her life with Kalua. This is where Ghosh establishes himself as a great humanistic writer.

“Kalua was a man of unusual height and powerful build: in any fair, festival or mela, he could always be spotted towering above the crowd” (53). Despite Kalua’s gigantic frame, he is very soft and polite in nature; sometimes even small children could take advantage on him. “So easily was he duped, that on his parents passing, his brothers and other relatives had not had the least difficulty in cheating him of the little that was his rightful due”(54). It is his colour which earned him Kalua which means ‘Blackie’; though he has a very strong psyche he is very soft and light hearted. He is such a humble man, who never raised any objection when he was evicted from his own house to make his living in a cattle-pen. Even though he has good physique he was humiliated in the match against champions of Benares court.

Ghosh brings out that fact that how even a man like giant suffers humiliation in the hands of upper caste landlords. In another incident, when Deeti goes out to fetch water from the Ganga which is a short walk away from her home, during full moon night, she sees another disgrace being done to Kalua. The three sport-loving landowners of Ghazipur, led Kalua like a horse with a halter around his neck, the landlords dismounted their horses; they led one among the three horses towards Kalua. On which “Kalua fell on his knees clutching at the thakur’s feet he whimpered that “.....forgive me, masters...the fault wasn’t mine...” (56). These landlords ignored the plea of Kalua and the painful fact is that they did not even consider Kalua as a human being; Kalua is compared with something less than human being and treated worse than an animal. Further, “By pulling on his halter, the men forced Kalua to his feet and pushed him stumbling towards the mares swishing tail. One of them stuck his whip into the fold of Kalua’s cotton langot and whisked it off with a flick of his wrist.”(57). They didn’t stop with this. They made the horse to defecate on Kalua’s belly and thighs, and one of them dug the whip into Kalua’s buttocks saying “why don’t you do the same?”(57). These incidents exemplify the inhuman attitude of the people towards the soft natured Kalua. Deeti who hides in the poppy field to escape the eyes of these inhuman landlords could not believe her own eyes, Kalua receives all sort of shameful actions forgetting his physical power. At this point Ghosh reminds us that it is only money decides whether one is strong or weak. This incident reminds her of her unforgettable night mare of her own wedding night. Deeti, married to Hukum Singh, an ex-service man in the British army and an opium addict undergoes all sort of mental and physical trauma. At the very first day of her married life she mirrors her future destiny. She was seduced by her husband by blowing a smoke of opium on her face during her first night and with his permission and with the blessings of her mother-in-law, her brother-in-law Chandan Singh raped her unconscious body. This incident haunts her throughout her life.

“Ever since the night of her wedding, Deeti had been haunted by images of her own violation: now, watching from the shelter of the poppy field, she bit the edge of her palm, to keep from crying out loud..... so it could happen to a man too? Even a powerful giant of men could be humiliated and destroyed, in a way that far exceeded his body’s capacity for pain?“(57).

The indifference is further reinforced in the ship *Ibis*, the lascars were ill-treated and were denied even the basic rights. When the foreman Bhyro Singh seeks permission to punish Kalua with sixty lashes for his elopement with Deeti and his wish is granted by the captain of the *Ibis*, with the full knowledge that Kalua would certainly die before the final whip lash. Kalua becomes the victim of the combined hegemonies of British Imperial power and native abhorrence for inter-caste marriage. All these result in multiple layers of subjugation that prevails in the society. The Subedar’s freedom to inflict unendurable pain on the body of the transgressor reflects the relaxation given to the upper class people. Ghosh explicitly pictures the overriding concern to maintain class divisions, which makes the victim powerless to raise his voice.

Deeti on her way to her brother’s house to leave her daughter Kabutri under the care of her brother comes across a group of people with a bundle of their belongings on their head. They all march towards the direction of the river. It seems that they have already travelled a long way. Later Deeti and Kabutri come to know through Ramsaran-ji, the leader and Duffadar that these people were Girmitiyas.

“They were so called because, in exchange for money, their names were entered on ‘Girmits’-agreements written on pieces of paper the silver that was paid for them went to their families, and they are taken away, never to be seen again they vanished, as if into the netherworld.” (72)

These Girmitiyas were taken to an island Mareech by name. The Girmitiyas were unaware that they were going to spend the rest of their life without seeing their family members. Deeti imagines as to “what it would be like to be in their place, to know that you were forever an outcaste; to know that you would never enter your father’s house that you would never throw your arms around your mother; never eat a meal with your sisters and brothers;”(72). And this made Deeti to tremble in fear. These Girmitiyas had to live a life like slaves; once they sign in the agreement, their entire life would be at stake and it’s the end of their life.

Ghosh’s strong indictment of colonial and native repressions is explicit throughout the novel. He brings out the inhuman act of extreme cruelty. The narration has various descriptions of cruelty and violence perpetrated by British imperials as well as the upper-class Zamindars, Ghosh instinctively gives counter act for each violation through selfless act of generosity, sensitivity or courage. When Kalua is subjected to the act of beastly activity with the horse by the perpetuated drunken and angry Zamindars, Deeti who watches the brutality of the Zamindars, shackles away the long withstanding tradition and she overcomes the ingrained sense of her superiority. She cleans Kalua and covered his nakedness with leaves. Deeti empathizes with Kalua and her simple act to restore the dignity of a bruised Kalua is the positive sign of humanity. Similar kind of instinctive support for a human in distress is seen in the same novel when Zachary and Jodu come to each other’s rescue, in the ship Ibis, even risking their life they transcend racial and class barriers to help a fellow human who is in extreme distress.

In *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh’s depiction of the prevalence of class system, segregation of race and assumed superiority affect almost every individual in the novel. Every individual character in the novel has a story of suppression to share. Each character undergoes mental and physical agony, either because of native upper caste people or the British. These people are under the assumption that they have no other alternative to lead a peaceful life. They believe that they are born to struggle and life without struggle is not affordable by these poor people. In *Sea of Poppies*, Deeti’s parents believe that, Deeti is under the spell of Saturn and it is quite common that whoever is under the spell of Saturn would face hardship in the life and they would never have a smooth sail of life. So with this view Ghosh makes his characters to accept the destiny of fate and proceed with their troublesome life.

Even amidst such sufferings, Ghosh sounds a positive note as he shows how despite all odds, life finds a way. All the characters, chased away from their land by their own troublesome fate and they all get united in the ship Ibis and travel towards the uncertainties awaiting them in the unknown remote Islands of Mareech. Ruskin Bond’s *The Room on the Roof*, which deals with the alienation and isolation of Rusty resembles Deeti in *Sea of Poppies*. Just like Deeti makes friends in the ship, Rusty also makes new friends who later become a hope in his life. The tenderness and warmth shown by strangers changed the life of both Deeti in *Sea of Poppies* and Rusty in *The Room on the Roof*.

With all kind of suppression, Ghosh makes his characters to reinstate and get acquainted with the second chance of life they get. His characters try to make their living, fighting against all odds with courage. There is no discrimination of gender, rich and poor, in facing the consequence. Ghosh brings everyone under one umbrella, the Human, and tells the world that humiliation and pain are same for the rich as well for the poor. The social status of man acquired in his life, may go away at any point of his life time.

An indepth analysis reveals the fact that Ghosh has clearly pictured the inhuman nature of the Indian tradition starting from ‘Sati’ to ‘Tonsuring’. He braved his widowed women to overcome all the odds of the society with courage and boldness. In this novel Ghosh has reshaped the life of a widowed wife.

In Ghosh’s point of view, the major force threatening human values are the social norms and politics. Too much intrusion of the social norms and politics in different aspects of life leads to subordinate humanistic concerns in the society.

“The working of politics does not allow the social and cultured institutions to work for the dignity of man. Instead of being the centre, man is subordinated to the level of a means to serve the ends of those powers that control different institutions. Human values can be protected only if politics is made to serve man.” (208)

The politics of the native people at different levels is the major threat to the humanistic values. As the novel *Sea of Poppies* is set in the early years of East India company establishment, its major source of income is opium trade with China.

Benjamin Brightwell Burnham, the British representative of the East India company had lent money at astronomical rate of interest to the landlord King Halder. He is already in debt and the debtors start tightening their hold. At such situation, Halder signs on behalf of Burnham for credit and this grave error take an unexpected turn in his life. Halder is arrested on the complaint lodged by Burnham for forgery and sentenced to seven years of imprisonment, in the prison camp at the Maricha islands, the Maldives, where the British maintain a penitentiary. He was cunningly trapped and when his guilt is confirmed he is taken to the ship to be transported to the prison in Maricha.

The inhuman nature of British is shown inside the prison, where in the name of examining, they brutally stripped off his magnificent muslin Dhoti which is torn into pieces and he is made to stand naked. His mouth is forcibly opened in order to count his teeth. “The guards on either side of Neel took hold of his face and expertly prised his mouth open, sticking a wooden wedge between his teeth to hold his jaws apart” (287). Further,

“He is made to bend unceremoniously by the guards to examine his hind parts to confirm that he is not attacked of any communicable diseases. Neel was now standing with his legs apart and his arms extended over his head while the orderly searched his flanks for birthmarks and other ineradicable signs of identification” (289).

He is constantly abused in the filthiest language. The food given to him is unbearable “he was raising his hand to his lips, it occurred to him that this was the first time in all his years that he had ever eaten something that was prepared by hands of unknown caste” (267). He is physically abused till he swallows it forcibly. The garment given to him is also more like a jute sack. The place provided to sit is the filthiest place that he has ever seen. The defecation and cleansing with minimum water is done under the supervision of the guards. The next level of his experience begins with Hafimchor, a drug addict who confines himself within his narrow prison. He is filthy, stinking, wallowing in his own defecation.

The inscription of the tattoo on his forehead declaring his crime “forgerer, Alipore 1838” completely obliterates his past and presents him with a new identity, a new persona. Ghosh projects the truth that

“In early nineteenth century India, convicts destined for transportation were often branded with tattoo. Apart from identifying the prisoners these marks also served the purpose of humiliation.” (32)

Neel Halder through his constant effort awakes the inner conscience of his inmate. Halder holds him in an intimate embrace to comfort him. He introduces himself as ‘Lei Long Fatt’ and shortly called as ‘Ah Fatt’. For the first time Halder acknowledges the fact that all are human being and everyone is equal, as his wife Malati says early at Lalbazar apartment in custody. “We are no different now from anyone on the street” (269).

It is understood that no matter whether the man is King or common man, the inner feelings are same for everyone. The author critiques the structure of traditional Hindu society with its rigidity against inter-caste marriages, the professed superiority of the upper caste over the low caste, and exposes the multiple layers of subjugation prevalent in society. The Subedar’s free reign to inflict unendurable pain on the body of the ‘transgressor’ reflects the laxity given to the upper class natives when faced by resistance by the lower classes. Amitav Ghosh in his interview with Mahmood Kooria expressed that “Some of the most violent characters in my books are Indians. The subedars were constantly beating other people. This too was reality”(np). Also, he aptly revealed in *Sea of Poppies* that “ The judicial credibility given to male narratives of ‘Shame and disgrace’, ‘sudden anger’ and ‘great provocation’ as a mitigating factor, readmitted patriarchal prerogatives under the aegis of rule of law” (123).

Against this overriding concern to maintain class divisions, the victim was powerless to raise their voice. According to Shalini Jain “Zachary’s disbelief at this extreme form of punishment (flogging and execution) echoes the gross injustice of this feudal judgment” (69).

The author deals with such acts that tend to subjugate the common people. He clearly states, how the social and cultural norms are different for the rulers and the ruled, for the rich and the poor. Ghosh’s fictional devices liberate the concept of humanism. “ Ghosh’s perspective here come closer to an understanding of multiple possibilities of human existence that tends to make his humanistic concerns multidimensional in forming plurality of views defining human values”(207).

Conclusion:

Ghosh expresses his humanistic concern through his fictional expression. He has strongly supported the suppressed and oppressed people. He tells how the concept of humanism has different meanings for the rulers and the ruled. The repeated depiction of the inhuman conditions shows the author’s critical view on human dignity. From a detailed study of the selected novel, it is observed that the author has great respect for human values. He has raised his voice against the underprivileged people. The irrational behavior of English and those people who imitate English are brought to light. The selfish act of different socio-political organizations in stifling the fellow beings for their own growth and development does not last longer; rather it leads to a revolutionary act demanding the rights that they deserve.

Ghosh has enriched the experience of each character by crafting a unique personality for each of his character.

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