

Customary Practices in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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ABSTRACT

Indian society is made up of a number of various castes and classes. The first novel in Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy has a village as its background. The life of the people in the village is so complex and is bound to the customs and traditions of the society. Familial situations often compel its members to make certain negotiations. Adverse circumstances in life impel to go in search of new fortune. While certain characters in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* ever cling to the patterns of the society others at certain crucial moments in their life are able to go beyond their belief patterns. This paper presents the various belief and practices of the people and describes how some transcend their mentality at the face of certain circumstances.

1. Introduction

Cultural practices bind the people to their respective society. Often the deviation from the norms is perceived as abnormal and such one would be ostracized from the society.

Certain cultural practices hinder the people from lower sections from appearing in the limelight of the society. Often the performances of tasks are based on the divisions of labour, and particular categories are assigned to specific tasks. Even if so, unexpected course of events in the life enable people to surpass the societal ties which bind them.

The first novel in Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy, *Sea of Poppies*, begins by presenting a small village situated on the outskirts of the town of Ghazipur, some fifty miles east of Banares. Deeti is one of the protagonists of the novel. She hails from a remote village and she was the last of her parents' children to be married off. Her prospects had always been distracted by her stars, "her fate being ruled by Saturn-Shani a planet that exercised great power on those born under its influence, often bringing discord, unhappiness and disharmony" (30). As the result of been under its influence, Deeti's expectations in life always remained low. She knew that if she were ever to be married it would probably be with an elderly widower who needed a new wife to nurse his brood. Besides, her eyes are quite different from the ordinary one. She had light grey eyes, which was unusual in that part. "This had the effect of unnerving the young, and of reinforcing their prejudices and superstitions to the point where they would sometimes shout taunts at her-chudaliya, dainiya- as if she were a witch: but Deeti had only to turn her eyes on them to make them scatter and run off" (5). Not quite different from her expectations, her fate is to get married to Hukam Singh, a wounded man in the leg while serving as a sepoy in a British regiment. To get relief from pain he starts to consume opium and thus he becomes an addict to opium. It deteriorates his health and while he is in his death bed, she is physically threatened by her brother-in-law to have physical relation with him and in order to save herself from him she says. "Listen to me: I will burn on my husband's pyre rather than given myself to you" (158).

Deeti's resistance takes an extreme turn when she decides death is preferable to her living conditions. In selecting her mode of suicide, Ghosh exposes the ancient Hindu practice of 'sati' or self-immolation by a widow on her husband's funeral pyre. In one aspect it was promoted by the husband's family to get rid of the financial burden of supporting the widow and her legal right over the family property. Lata Mani in her article *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* points out; "the hungry brahmins greedy for the money due to them for officiating such occasions applied pressure on the widow for Sati by extolling the virtues and rewards of the practice" (125). In Deeti's case it's quite different. After her husband's death, since she opposed to yield to the wishes of her brother-in-law, she is forced to practice sati. With this purpose she is given opium to inhale and in such a state she sits on the funeral pyre, the intention of the brother-in-law is evident from his words: "To have a sati in the family will make us famous. We'll build a temple for you and grow rich on the offerings" (158). The then prevailed one of the economic motives behind sati is clear from his words. Despite the barbarity of such a practice, there is no British legal protection offered in the form of police forces to stop Deeti from committing such an atrocity. Once again Mani observes, according to Ewer, at the time of practice of sati, "the entire population will turn out to in dragging her to the bank of the river, and in keeping her down the pile" (125). Ewer thus concludes that "the widow is scarcely ever agent at the performance of the suttee" (125).

In the case of Deeti, while she is been laid on the funeral pyre, from the flames of death she is been heroically saved by Kalua, a chamar and the currents of the river leads the raft which is carrying them, to downstream then she feels as if it's her next life. She has paid the price for her star. "She had shed the body of the old Deeti, with the burden of its karma; she had paid the price her stars had demanded of her, and was free now to create a new destiny as she willed, with whom she chose-and she knew that it was with Kalua that this life would be lived, until another death claimed the body that he had torn from the flames" (178). Deeti's childhood home which looks on to Ganga was joined by a river Karamnasa which means destroyer of karma, "it was said that the touch of its water could erase a

lifetime of hard-earned merit" (192). The story behind the formation of this river is given by, N.K Singh and A. P. Mishra in their *Encyclopaedia of Oriental Philosophy and Religion A Continuing Series*, "some ancient conflict of rival cults, represented by the contest between the sages Vasistha and Visvamisra" (397). Karmnasa means destroyer of the merit of works. Once again N.K. Singh and A.P. Mishra observes; "it is the accursed river of Hindu mythology, which rises in the Kaimur hills of Bengal (lat,24°32'N.,long.83°26'E) forming in part of its course the boundary between the provinces of Bengal, Bihar, and U.P. and finally after a course of about 146 miles, joining the Ganges" (397).

The ideology of purity and pollution existed in that community at that time. H. Kotani in his book *Caste System, Untouchability and the Depressed* states; "which was developed by the religious leaders of the Hindu society, the brahmana, contributed to the social stratification in villages organized according to many castes" (16). In comply with the blooming of this ideology, class of inferior castes, who were looked upon as ritually impure, were designated as untouchable. The binary opposition of High caste and Low caste is drawn in the relationship between land - owning families and the poor. High caste people are the landowners and the people doing leather works belong to the Chamar caste. Kalua is a chamar and lives in the Chamar - basti which is located near the main road to Ghazipur. The chamars being one of the lowest casts had to reside on the outskirts of the village or in their own hamlets away from the village. For their daily sustenance they were doing the works which would pollute the higher class people. In *Caste System, Untouchability and the Depressed*, Kotani once again observes:

The chamars were traditionally expected to remove dead cattle from the village, for which they were entitled to obtain them, tan leather from their hide, and manufacture leather goods. They were also responsible for making leather buckets, which were absolutely essential for agriculture, leather ropes, mats, bags and shoes and to supply them to the villagers. (34)

Kalua lived in the Chammer village, a cluster of huts inhabited only by people of his caste. The other caste people were forbidden to enter this hamlet. He is a man of unusual height and well build. As a child, Kalua had a strong desire for the meat and his family satisfied this by "feeding him carrion; being leather-makers, it was their trade to collect the remains of dead cows and oxen—it was on the meat of these salvaged carcasses that Kalua's gigantic frame was said to have been nourished" (54). Every morning Deeti's husband Hukam Singh, goes in an ox-cart to work in Ghazipur opium factory. While getting into the cart Kalua, the driver of the cart made no move to help his passenger and was careful to keep his face hidden from him: "he was of the leather-workers' caste and Hukam Singh, as a high-caste Rajput, believed that the sight of his face would bode ill for the day ahead" (4). Rajputs is one of the two great warrior tribes in India. Rajputs represent the Kshatriya or warrior class of Manu's system. They were created, W. Crooke, in his article *Rajputs and Mahrattas* states "Manu says from the arms of Brahma for the protection of the human race" (39). After climbing onto the back of the cart

Hukum Singh "sat facing to the rear, with his bundle balanced on his lap, to prevent its coming into direct contact with any of the driver's belongings" (4), throughout the way they would spoke friendly but never looked at one another.

Certain characters in this novel publically reveal their belief in omens. Once when Mr. Benjamin Burnham, was in the initial days of his trading, comes to see the old Raja with a request for a business office. He wanted to present the case before Raja but then he had no sufficient money to make instant payment for the office.

While he was presenting his case, a white mouse had appeared under his chair - hidden from the trader, but perfectly visible to the zemindar, it sat still until the Englishman had had his say. A mouse being the familiar of Ganesh-thakur, god of opportunities and remover of obstacles, the old zemindar had taken the visitation to be an indication of divine will: not only he had allowed Mr Burnham to defer his rent for a year... and in Benjamin Burnham he had recognized a coming man. (83-84)

The unexpected appearance of the white mouse is seen as an auspicious sign for, mouse represents Lord Ganesha. He is the destroyer of obstacles. Subodh Kapoor in his book *Indian Gods & Goddesses: An Introduction to the Vedic, Pauranic and Popular Gods and Goddesses of the Hindus* states; "Lord Shiva says to Parvati that Ganesha will create numerous obstacles for those who do not follow the path of dharma but he will remove all the obstacles to those who revere knowledge, shruti and guru" (647).

Division of labour based on birth and community was keenly observed by that society. In *Sea of Poppies* various categories of servants are deployed to look after the chores at the house of old Raja. After getting up in the morning quickly, Paulette locks her cloths in a trunk for, this was the one place where it would be safe from the eyes of servants who make a procession to clean their bedroom later in the day "the bed-making bichawnadars, the floor-sweeping farrashes and the commode-cleaning matraness and harry-maids" (123). Before going to the trial in the court, Neels' wife makes it sure that "the constables who were accompanying Neel to the court were Hindus of respectable caste and could be entrusted with his food and water" (218). Neel is also further reminded of "to make sure of keeping the windows closed, so that his gaze would encounter no ill-augured sights- on this of all days, it was best to take every possible precaution" (218). Raja Neel also follows certain customs in the foods served in his table. He never takes beef and avoids any type of physical contact with the persons taking beef. In his kitchen-boat the crockery that is being used to serve food is set apart to prevent contamination by serving food for foreigners. Mayer Adrian C, in his article "The Dominant Caste in a Region of Central India" states "The general feeling in favour of meat-eating was not only created by the personal habits of the ruling casts. It stemmed from the activities of majority of the village for all the lower castes were meat-eaters- both in customary procedure and in ritual acts" (413).

People migrate to other parts of the country in search of better livelihood, income, and sheer biological survival. These

migrations are on account of bad climatic conditions and scarcity when they have nothing to lose. Such migration and particularly, Lakshmidhar Mishra in his book *Human Bondage* states; "the category under which people are recruited with advance and with a lot of allurements, often turn out to be more calamitous than the calamity in the native soil" (38). The Indian immigrants felt homelessness, rootless and alienated while residing outside the country. Even if they are conscious of the difficulties in a foreign land they are not left with many options. Without barest minimum facilities and amenities they have to work for long hours in unsafe, unclean, and unhygienic working environments. There they lead a fragile sub-human existence. Thus they are unable even to bargain to secure for the minimum entitlements. Life in these camps turns out to be a nightmarish existence. The ship, Ibis contains people from all categories of the society. They are from different classes and sections and are going to work in a foreign land. In the ship they are striving against the hostile environment, and for them caste doesn't matter. To get a place in Ibis all kinds of people are eager to sign up in the agreement - Brahmins, Ahirs, Chammars, and Tellis. What matters here is that they be young and able-bodied and be willing to work. At another point, Bishu-ji, the prison's *jemadar* says to Neel, "the sentence you have been given will tear you forever from the ties that bind others. When you step on that ship, to go across the Black Water, you and your fellow transporters will become a brotherhood of your own: you will be your own village, your own family, your own caste" (314).

The concept of purity and impurity was also important among these immigrants when they had to cross the Kalapani. Jayshree Singh in his article "The Myths and Ways of the Seas/Rivers in Amitav Ghosh's Novel- *Sea of Poppies*" mentions "that is they sailed through Hooghly River and crossed the Bay of Bengal, moved towards East Asia and went beyond the socially attributed margins of the River Ganga that set its

boundaries at the sacred Jambudvipa in 1830s which was against the religious faith as it was believed that one becomes impure after crossing it" (17). In the Ibis to the Island of Mareech, it is inhabited by rescued and escaped women from various adverse circumstances. On the way Putleshwari a Brahmin, replays to Deeti that her purpose is to get married in the island. She is not afraid of losing the caste by crossing the Black Water, and being on a ship with so many sorts of people. While Deeti express her doubt regarding the prospect of marriage in an unknown land she replies, "On a boat of pilgrims, no one can lose caste and everyone is the same: it's like taking a boat to the temple of Jagannath, in Puri. From now on, and forever afterwards, we will all be ship-siblings - *jaház* - *bhaís* and *jahá* - *bahens* - to each other. There'll be no differences between us" (356). Every woman warmly accepts this statement. Thus the barrier which divided the different castes is turned into solidarity and they support one another, binding the migrants together in the bonds of brotherhood and sisterhood. The ship-siblings phenomenon was predominant during the colonial period.

2. Conclusion

Through the journey of their migration, Ghosh shows how the migrants dissolved the caste system and became *jahaz-bhaís* and *jahaz-behens* in order to come in terms with their new reality and also how they successfully maintained their own individual, cultural and national identities even in the worst circumstances. Whereas in this novel, a smooth running traditional society strongly upholds its concepts on religion and caste and takes necessary steps to preserve it accordingly. At the face of hostile environment and situations in life, the novel shows people are willing to go beyond the barriers and caste considerations of the society.

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