

Chronicle of Indentured Laborers in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*: A New Form of Slavery to Promote Free Trade and Capitalism?

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh in his novel *Sea of Poppies* illustrates an untold narrative of the miseries of the indentured laborers under the rule of British colonial power. It narrates the brutal torture of the East India Company on the natives which led them to give thumb imprint to be indentured workers and thus embraced the lives of new form of enslavement, forcing them to migrate from their rooted place in search of new life and freedom to a foreign land under the colonial rule and became part of the diaspora. Under the Slavery Abolition Act 1833, the plantation slavery was largely for two reasons: first, in the British tropical colonies where the plantation slaves outnumbered the colonists, there was a constant fear of mass uprising. Second, the rise in free trade and capitalism also caused the abolishment. This paper examines these two causes to argue that in *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh is indicating the perpetuation of slavery promoting free trade and capitalism by the British imperial ruler under the guise of indentured labor.

Keywords: Indentured laborers, slavery, migration, free trade, capitalism, imperialism

Introduction

In *Sea of Poppies* Amitav Ghosh narrates the rise of the indentured workforce in the wake of growing trade and commerce relation of the colonial power with the outside world at the end of slavery. In fact, the trade relationship reached a momentum with the introduction of indentured labor. According to Merriam Webster Thesaurus, 'indenture' is a contract binding one person to work for another for a given period of time. Indentured Labor from South Asia (1834-1917) shows "Indentured labor was a system of bonded labor that was instituted following the abolition of slavery. Indentured laborers were recruited to work in sugar, cotton and tea plantations, and rail construction projects in British colonies in West Indies, Africa and South East Asia" ("Indentured Labor from South Asia (1834-1917)", n.d.). Ghosh portrays this type of labor as a deception on the part of imperial ruler to get profit by engaging the natives into work which might look like an alternative to slavery. The locals are convinced or forced to sign up for indentured work with the assurance that they would be able to lead a free life in a new land with hopes and promises. This is how the colonized were trapped to embrace a life full of uncertainty and separation from their own land. In order to promote free trade and capitalism, the colonial rulers engaged the local workers

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into dehumanizing enslavement even after the abolishment of slavery. In addition, these indentured laborers were doubly colonized by the local agents of the British traders who acted as middlemen. However, there are arguments in favor of the indentured labor as to how this new work transforms the lives of the diasporic population and makes their contribution towards the global economy a significant part of the history. This historic event is fictionalized by Amitav Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies* by narrating the lives of the cross section of local people from poor peasants to outcast upper caste family member or falsely indicted feudal ruler or marginalized community who were left with no choice but to opt for migrating to an unknown destination as indentured workforce. This paper will investigate whether this indentured labor is an act of deception promoting enslavement after the abolition of slavery and whether this is introduced to materialize the petty self-interest of making profit out of free trade and thus paved the way of capitalism. This article will also focus on how sense of otherness and racism are created in dealing with the indentured workers by the imperial repressive forces to give way to capitalism.

To carry out this research a qualitative method is applied under the theoretical framework of postcolonial ecocriticism. Under the purview of this theory, it is shown how imperialist capitalism brings havoc to both humans and nonhumans causing widespread catastrophe to the environment. The transatlantic human movement was the outcome of the colonial repression and hegemony perpetuated to promote capitalism and globalization. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin in *Post-Colonial Ecocriticism* opines:

Once invasion and settlement had been accomplished, or at least once administrative structures had been set up, the environmental impacts of western attitudes to human being- in-the -world were facilitated or reinforced by the deliberate (or accidental) transport of animals, plants and peoples throughout the European empires, instigating widespread ecosystem change under conspicuously unequal power regimes (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015, p.6).

The West also tries to establish that the mass human transportation took place to accelerate development which according to Huggan and Tiffin is a “little more than a disguised form of neocolonialism, a vast technocratic apparatus designed primarily to serve the economic and political interests of the west” (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015, p.29). The migrants lost their identity not only in their native place but also in the diasporic land. Their treatment as lesser human is tantamount to slavery. This research requires the frequent reference to the context to show to what extent Ghosh fictionalizes the historical background.

Several research works have been carried out on the lives of the indentured labourers in *Sea of Poppies*. Anupama Arora in her article “‘The Sea is History’: Opium, Colonialism and Migration in Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*’ gives us an account of the ‘transnational connectivity’ through ‘movement, border crossings and heterogeneous encounters’ (Arora, 2012, pp. 21-42). Here she also

shows how land and ocean have strong impacts on each other. The British Empire uses the vast oceanic network to transport people, commodities and ideas. According to her, ocean is an archive possessing layers of stories of 'power and violence, exchange, resistance and survival' (Arora, 2012, pp.21-42) In 'Displacement in *Sea of Poppies*' Derya Bidercidinc shows how the identity of the migrant workers is created and recreated with displacement and mobility. So, she analyzes the construction of identity in relation to place from the perspective of postcolonial ecocriticism. (Bidercidin, 2018). Imperialism expanded with an apparent intention to civilize the so-called brutal and savage people of the non-European origin. Considering the natives as 'other' the hegemonic oppression, injustice, deception and misrule were established by East India Company. Sooner rather than later it dawned upon the colonial masters that India is inhabited by people where there were scholars, venerated spiritual leaders and respected administrative rulers observed by Edmund Burke in his 'Speech on the East India Bill' Burke also shows how the company broke the treaties they had signed with the local feudal leaders leading the age old feudal system to utter destruction. Burke claims that the charter by which the East India Company was governed was written to favour the interests of the ruling class and endorse the monopoly of the British traders. This also legitimized the brutality and oppression of the colonial masters over the natives. Burke also points out how this East India Charter violates the basic human rights of ordinary Indians. He compares the charters with Magna Carta which is considered to be an ideal document to safeguard the natural rights of the people. In his speech Burke epitomizes the deception of the East India Company. Burke's claims are based upon his research and close observation on bad governance and misrule of the colonial rulers over the years. Burke vivifies the brutality of the colonial rulers by saying "In India all the vices operate by which sudden fortune is acquired, in England are often displayed, by the same persons, the virtues which dispense hereditary wealth." (Burke, 1783, p. 55). He further mentions:

Here the manufacturer and husbandman will bless the just and punctual hand, that in India has torn the cloth from the loom, or wrested the scanty portion of rice and salt from the peasant of Bengal, or wrung from him the very opium in which he forgot his oppressions and his oppressor. (Burke, 1783, p. 55)

Indentured laborers were popularly known as 'girmitya' which is originally derived from the word 'girmitya', a distorted form of the English word 'agreement'. To meet the growing need of workforce, the indentured migration was introduced in the nineteenth century in the aftermath of the abolition of slavery in 1833 in British Empire. As Malhotra (2018) stated:

In the 37 years spanning 1879-1916, nearly 60,500 laborers from various religions and castes would be transported to Fiji islands on 42 ships making nearly 87 trips. These migrants were

themselves a part of more than one million Indians who travelled to the colonies in the Indian and Atlantic oceans. (Malhotra, 2018)

The colony which came under the control of British Raj was badly in need of laborers who can multiply the economic development. Malhotra observes:

Acquired by the British Crown in 1874, the colony of Fiji was expected to show economic development and growth. But neither capital nor labor was readily available. Sir Arthur Gordon, the first substantive governor of the island, invited the Colonial Sugar Refining Company of Australia to extend its operations to Fiji. For the workforce, he turned to India, which already supplied indentured labor to other British colonies. (Malhotra, 2018)

The indentured laborers were also derogatively known as ‘coolie’ who signed a contract in their own country to work abroad for a period of five years. They were committed to give wages, a small piece of land and a return passage once the contract is over. In many cases the migrants could not come and their wages were very poor. They had to live in a very harsh condition. Many workers tried to escape from this inhuman living condition but failing to do so they were imprisoned and their length of service was doubled to ten years for breaching the contract. Ghosh perfectly captures the demand of the planters in *Sea of Poppies* when the planter Monsieur d’Epinay handed a letter to be delivered to Mr. Burnham. He said “my canes are rotting in the field, Mr. Reid”. “Tell Mr. Burnham that I need men. Now that we may no longer have slaves in Mauritius, I must have coolies, or I am doomed” (Ghosh, 2008, p.21). To meet the demand of the planters and to consider the prospect of profit, the indentured labor form was initiated immediately. In the novel, those who are destined to be transported by the ibis to the island of Mauritius, are addressed as ‘coolie’ by the British rulers and their local agents. Hence, Deeti, Jodu, Kalua, Munia and others have chosen to be coolie to embrace a new life far from their native land. When Deeti and Kalua reached a camp dedicated for the registration of the indentured workers, they were stopped by the gomusta who was in charge of the camp. The gomusta took them to the English planter who after finishing a sumptuous lunch was snoring. The gomusta was frantically calling ‘Doughty-sahib coolies are coming; registration proceedings must at once be commenced’ (Ghosh, 2008, p.282) Doughty became annoyed at the sudden uproar of the gomusta, ‘God damn your eyes, Baboon! Can’t you see I’m having a little rest?’ (Ghosh, 2008, p.282). Uttering his helplessness the gomusta said ‘What to do, sir?’ Delighted by the influx of the coolies the gomusta uttered, ‘Coolies are coming like anything. As such registration proceedings must be commenced without delay’ (Ghosh, 2008, p.283).

Ghosh shows how the British merchants analyzing the prospect of opium trade with China to minimize the huge trade deficit started the opium cultivation, production in India and export to China. Ghosh refers to opium as “among the most precious jewels in Queen Victoria’s crown” (Ghosh, 2008, p 83-84). This, in fact, supports the view of economist Carl Trocki who mentions “Without the drug, there probably would have been no British Empire” for “the economic foundation of the imperial economy lay on opium” (Trocki, 1999, p. xiii). As a result, instead of producing regular crops like rice, wheat, and pulse the peasants of India were abused to grow opium much to the economic hardship of all the Indians. So, poverty, social injustice, colonial oppression, false lawsuit, bankruptcy compelled the Indians to embark on migration.

Richard B. Allen in the abstract of “Indian Ocean Indentured Labor, 19th and Early 20th Century” observes that to meet the requirement of free labor, a vast number of men, women and children from various colonial countries were transported across the Indian Ocean to other French and British colonies. The abolition of the slavery gave rise to the free (nonslave) labor trade in the late 18th and early 19th centuries ‘to satisfy the demand for labor in European colonies’. Allen further shows how the Indian and Ceylonese convicts were employed in the development of plantation economies during the 19th century to produce commodities to be exported to the imperial and global markets. The heritage of this labor trade had a strong impact on the social, cultural, economic and political lives of the people of the former colonies (Allen, 2013).

The social, environmental and economic impacts of colonial rule on the place and people of the colonies are beyond imagination. The colonies became the base of their capitalist hegemony. The age-old crops that satisfied the need of the teeming millions were subverted all on a sudden to give way to the production of new cash crops like sugar, opium, indigo, tea to boost the British coffer. The economic and social cost of the production and distribution and transshipment of these crops destroyed the traditional living standard. Deeti, one of the central characters muses over her childhood memories-

Poppies had been a luxury then, grown in small clusters between the fields that bore the main winter crops-wheat, masoor dal and vegetables. Her mother would send some of her poppy seeds to the toil-press, and the rest she would keep for the house, some for replanting, and some cook with meat and vegetables. As for sap, it was sieved of impurity and left to dry, until the sun turned it into hard abkariafeem. (Ghosh, 2008, p.29)

The nostalgic view of the past sends Deeti in frenzy when she ruminates over the present affliction. She can easily draw comparison between early and present lives -

In the old days, farmers would keep a little of their home-made opium for their families, to be used during illnesses, or at harvests and weddings; the rest they would sell to the local

nobility, or to pykari merchants from Patna. Back then, a few clumps of poppy were enough to provide for a household's needs, leaving a little over, to be sold. (Ghosh, 2008, p. 29)

So, the bulk production of poppy was not necessary since it was not an essential crop. Peasants were not interested to grow poppy because they had to pay a lot for cultivating the crop-

no one was inclined to plant more because of all the work it took to grow poppies- fifteen ploughings of the land and every remaining clod to be broken by hand, with a dantoli; fences and bunds to be built; purchases of manure and constant watering; and after all that, the frenzy of the harvest, each bulb having to be individually nicked, drained and scraped. (Ghosh, 2008, p. 29)

Therefore, in terms of cultivation and production, poppy is not an essential crop. Rather it is considered to be persecution and meaningless sparing time, effort and money for producing poppy-

Such punishment was bearable when you had a patch or two of poppies- but what sane person would want to multiply these labors when there were better, more useful crops to grow, like wheat, dal, vegetables? (Ghosh, 2008, p.29)

However, the basic human rights of the local people were robbed away by the imperial rulers and their agents. The production of winter crops was steadily dwindling because of the growing requirement of the opium by the British traders to be transported to China. To do so colonial oppression came in the naked form-

Come the cold weather, the English sahibs would allow little else to be planted; their agents would go from home to home, forcing cash advances on the farmers, making them sign *asami* contracts. It was impossible to say no to them: If you refused they would leave their silver hidden in your house, or throw it through a window. It was no use telling the white magistrate that you had not accepted the money and your thumbprint was forged: he earned commissions on the opium and would never let you off. And at the end of it, your earnings would come to no more than three-and-a-half sicca rupees, just about enough to pay off your advance (Ghosh, 2008, p. 30).

The benefit of poppy cultivation was not only enjoyed by the East India Company but also the British traders with the assistance of their local employee who started taking the advantage of opium production and trading. This local employee in order to protect his interest instigated his employer to usurp the property of the local feudal leaders causing bankruptcy to the owner of the estate and miseries to the farmers. It was Baboo Nob Kissin who informed his employer, the British trader Benjamin Burnham, to acquire the Raskhali estate in order to grow poppy since the East India Company is rumoured to give up the

production of poppy in Eastern India “Were that to happen, poppies might well become a plantation crop, like indigo or sugarcane: with the demand rising annually in China, merchants who controlled their own production, rather than depending on small farmers, would stand to multiply their already astronomical profits.” (Ghosh, 2008, p. 215) With this end in view, Burnham with the aid of his employee Baboo Nob Kissin filed fake accusation against Raja Neel Ratan Halder, owner of Raskhali estate, and in a farcical trial convicted him and it ended up confiscating his large estate and deporting him as indentured labourer to Mauritius.

Deeti was led to the funeral pyre to die with her dead husband Hukum Singh which was widely known as ‘Sati’. Alternatively, she would have to marry his brother-in-law, a profligate against her will. She dared to run away from the funeral pyre and chose to marry Kalua, a lower caste, shrugging off all the social stigma. However, this venture led her and her newlywed husband to sign the contract of ‘girmitya’ or indentured labourer since the social class and caste system of India would never let her live in her homeland. So, Ghosh very aptly portrays how the Indians became indentured labourers either by choice or by force.

Profit of any sort is not ignored by the British merchants. Their Indian employees are also quick to provide them with necessary information and opportunities to strengthen their positions. Baboo Nob Kissin, the gomusta of Mr. Burnham, convinced his employer to transport the indentured workers when Burnham’s main concentration is in opium trade- “The gomusta was well aware that Mr. Burnham considered the transportation of migrants an unimportant and somewhat annoying part of his shipping enterprise, since the margins of profit were negligible in comparison to the enormous gains offered by opium” (Ghosh, 2008, p. 213). But the gomusta could persuade his employer in taking an alternative strategy of making profit by transporting the migrant workers when a possible threat is looming large in the flow of opium to China. In addition, the gomusta himself is willing to board the migrant ship as an overseer of the indentured workers. In fact, this Indian employee of the British employer could smell profit to act as a middleman in human trafficking, so he did not even hesitate to cross the Black Water which was a stark infringement of religious dogma.

Crispin Bates and Marina Carter in *Enslaved Lives, Enslaving Labels A New Approach to the Colonial Indian Labor Diaspora* shows the role played by the middleman recruiting sirdars, men and sometimes women who had been overseas and could speak with firsthand experience of conditions in the colonies, emerged- both formally and informally (they did not always bear the title of sirdar)-as a "middleman" network between the subaltern and employer. This undoubtedly typified the involvement of sirdars in recruitment for industrial labor within India as much as abroad (Bates and Carter, 2012).

These middlemen became the local recruiters of the migrant workers. The fate of the workers largely depended upon these local employers. The growth of

British trade and economy got a steady pace because of the contribution of the middleman.

The transformation of India into a source of cheap labor for the British Empire, and the increasing involvement of overseas capitalists in recruitment for plantation economies, resulted in competition both among colonial recruiters and between them and local employers. The sourcing of recruiters from within the ranks of migrants became crucial to the effectiveness of labor mobilization, but in the process the increasing autonomy of these agents subtly altered the balance of power between laborer and employer, with far-reaching consequences for the plantation societies to which they resorted in large numbers (Bates and Marina, 2012).

In “Servitude and the Changing Face of the Demand for Labor in the Indian Ocean World, c. 1800–1900”, Gwyn Campbell shows:

The nineteenth century marked the single most important turning point in the economic history of the world: the creation of a truly international economy, centered on the burgeoning capitalist economies of Western Europe and North America, which by the close of the 1800s had drawn all but the remotest regions of the globe into its orbit. The new international economy was driven by ever-accelerating technological change that transformed the relationship between the West and the rest of the world, underpinning the economic and political expansion of the West, including modern European colonialism. It also fundamentally changed labor relations. (Campbell, 2013)

In ‘Origins of the Girmitiyas’, Brij V Lal asserts “On 9 September 1834 36 impoverished and lost looking Dhangars (tribal people) were accosted by some recruiters in Calcutta and asked if they would be willing to emigrate to Mauritius as indentured labourers” (Lal, 1983). Considering the stay at the colonial state for stipulated five years of time and high remuneration and also Mauritius is close to Bengal these people agreed to undertake this sojourn. These migrant workers then affixed their thumb impression in order to show that they agreed with the terms and conditions of the contract provided by the Chief Magistrate at the Calcutta Police Court and that they were travelling of their own accord. “These men were the forerunners of over one million indentured labourers who left India during 82 years of indentured emigration to colonies scattered across the globe” (Lal, 1983). He also observed that origin of most of the indentured workers is from North India and especially from Bihar where migration was nothing new since pre modern period. As a result, the migration offer by the colonial government seemed to them quite lucrative. According to Lal these emigrants signed a contract with the promise that they would be provided with a congenial working environment, higher wages, better living standard and optional free return passage to India. As a result, the indentured workers accepted the offer voluntarily with the expectation of better life far afield.

Social scientists, especially, anthropologists have pointed out the positive and negative sides of this migration. According to them, this venture was a promise to a life of opportunities which would release them from the oppression of caste, class and social degradation. However, there are counter arguments against this claim. According to these scholars this indentured system entails unfairness, injustice and atrocities towards migrant workers. Hugh Tinker in his book has shown the difference between indenture and slavery by mentioning that while indenture is a temporary settlement, slavery is a permanent institution. But both had to go through physical and mental sufferings. Professor Tinker also mentioned the trickery adopted by the recruiters in recruiting the migrant workers.

Lal did another fascinating exploration by illustrating Hindi folk songs sung by the emigrants to capture their various feelings about the oppression and traumatized experience they encountered.

This migrant worker left his motherland because of poverty:

Mother! Far away in a distant land,
The thought of thine is crushing me.
Poverty, abject poverty, mother,
Has separated me from thee. (Lal, 1983)

Some folk songs give the impression of the deceitful nature of the recruiters and the registration officials:

Oh recruiter, your heart is deceitful,
Your speech is full of lies!
Tender may be your voice, articulate and seemingly logical,
But it is all used to defame and destroy
The good names of people. (Lal, 1983)

Crossing the ocean was an ordeal for most indentured workers:

Several months on the ship passed with great difficulty,
On the seven dark seas, we suffered unaccustomed problems. (Lal, 1983)

The above songs collected by Lal give a vivid expression of the ordeal endured by the indentured workers. Lal epitomizes the untold miseries and sufferings of the indentured workforce through this anthology of folk songs. Ghosh tries to remain faithful to all these factual details in portraying the navigation of these migrant workers across the ocean.

Deeti and her fellow migrant workers discovered a new environment on board the ibis which can only be compared with prison. The migrant workers were accommodated in the hold which:

...“ran the length of the vessel, and had no compartments or internal divisions: it was like a floating storage shed, with a ceiling so low that a grown man could not stand upright in it for fear of hurting his head. The hold’s windows, of which there were several, were usually kept shut for fear of thieves, thugs and river-dacoits; after the rains came down they were almost permanently sealed, so that very little light penetrated inside, even when the clouds cleared.” (Ghosh, 2008, p.231)

Deeti had a feeling that she was jumping into a well where there was abysmal darkness. However, when a little light allowed her to see the condition of that compartment she was awestruck to see an unimaginable number of people in a small space. There was a stark discrimination of the compartments between the local migrant workers and their superior commanders. The migrant workers got little space to stay which was suffocating while their supervisors were blessed with all the comforts and luxuries.

“With no flame lit and the hatch secured, such light as there was came from cracks in the timber and the opening of piss-dales. The leaden gloom, combined with the midday heat and the fetid stench of hundreds of enclosed bodies, gave the unstirred air a weight like that of sewage: it took an effort even to draw breath.” (Ghosh, 2008, p.370)

Such was the condition of the space allotted for the accommodation of the seamen. A little space to get settled inside the mere hollow space of the ship was a dream for the migrant workers. “No sooner had the overseers departed, shutting the hatch behind them, than the migrants began to disrupt the careful circle of their mats, scuffling and shouting as they fought for space” (Ghosh, 2008, p. 370). The female folks were engulfed by unprecedented fear “As the noise of the tugboat mounted, Munia began to tremble, and Paulette, guessing that she was on the verge of hysteria, drew her closer” (Ghosh, 2008, p.370). So many migrants in a small space who never experienced seafaring before found themselves in an unimaginable situation “The schooner lurched to its Jamuna side and down in the darkness of dabusa, people slipped and slid and tumbled upon each other like crumbs on a tilted tray” (Ghosh, 2008, p.371). The situation gets worse when riot breaks out among the migrants “dozens of terrified migrants hurling themselves at the ladder, pounding on the fastened hatch, in a belated attempt at escape” They were imploring to let them free but all in vain. Their appeal was heard by none of the officers or their loyal forces. Getting annoyed Neel silenced them saying “Be quiet you fools! There’s no escape, no turning back...” (Ghosh, 2008, p.371). Two different meal plans were allotted for two categories of passengers of the Ibis: officers and indentured migrants. The officers were served with roast lamb, mint sauce and boiled potatoes while the migrant seamen rice, dal and lime-pickle (Ghosh, 2008).

Conclusion

The untold miseries of the indentured labourers were the chronicles of the legacy of the imperial power. The voices of these migrant workers were not given due precedence in contemporary literature. The darkest side of this human trafficking which took place to promote free trade and capitalism is confined within few official and historical documents. The colonial masters would never have expected the absolute hegemony, had there been no indentured workforce after the abolishment of slavery. In *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh revived the old trading diasporas of the Indian ocean as part of the transoceanic trading system to show the large scale movement of indentured labour from South Asia to other colonial outposts. Ghosh maintains the perfect alignment with history by fictionalizing the miseries of the migrant workers. The racial discrimination they faced is no less than the sufferings of slaves. They were uprooted from their rooted home only to face the trauma of identity crisis. This research is an attempt to show from the perspective of postcolonial ecocriticism how Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies* illustrates the status of the indentured laborer as a lesser human to face the dichotomy of self/other to give way to Eurocentric economic development.

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