

**CULTURAL HYBRIDITY AND DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS IN AMITAV GHOSH'S
SEA OF POPPIES****Sambhu R.**Assistant Professor, PG Department of English, N.S.S. College, Pandalam, Kerala
3333sambhu@gmail.com**Abstract**

Amitav Ghosh dons the mantle of a historian with an unsparing eye for detail in his sixth novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008), the first volume of the *Ibis* trilogy. Ghosh's novel, which narrates the diverse experiences of indentured labourers on board the *Ibis*, becomes at length a rumination on the cultural and psychological effects of displacement. The novel strikes an intricate balance between the ideal of individual happiness and communal strength in unravelling how displacement works in aid of freeing identity from static and obstinate representational schemas. It analyses how the indentured labourers enter into relations of hybridity and thus reconfigure their status outside a colonizer/colonized dialectic. The present article explores the manner in which the characters create new identities for themselves following a process of linguistic multifariousness. It also employs Bhabha's notion of "third space" to shed light on the generation of cultural heterogeneity at the borders of diametrically opposed categories like "high" and "low", "elite" and "untouchable", "amateur" and "master" and so on to establish "hybridity" as the most important force shaping diasporic consciousness.

Keywords: hybridity, diaspora, third space, heterogeneity, indenture

Amitav Ghosh, who was born in Calcutta in 1956 and grew up in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Iran and India, won his laurels as a master storyteller with novels like *The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), and *Incendiary Circumstances* (2006). In *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh takes on the task of imagining the ways in which the histories of slavery, Opium trade, British imperialism, and migration come together to form a vibrant mesh of cross-cultural significance. The present paper examines *Sea of Poppies* as a novel that articulates a unique vision of cultural hybridity predicated on the idea of "third space" as formulated by the Indian postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha. It examines the heterogeneous array of characters on the ship *Ibis* where the story unfolds in order to reconceptualise diasporic consciousness within the framework of hybridity.

The novel presents with remarkable dexterity the convoluted history of the ceaseless movements of the peoples and cultures across the Indian Ocean. It is for this reason that Anupama Arora observes that "the novel offers a narrative of and about movement, border-crossings, and heterogeneous encounters" (21). The cultural polyphony that the Opium trade activates helps to generate a narrative that retrospectively resolves the strained relations between indentureship understood as slavery and as a jumble of subject-positions in which the roles of the master and the slave are enacted within a fluid spectrum of hybridity. The novel's championing of polyphonous voices manifests itself through the multifariousness of the vernaculars that the characters speak. Anyone who reads the novel carefully will be struck by the semantic inventiveness and plenitude that Ghosh carefully weaves into the narrative. Reviewers like Janet Maslin opine that *Sea of Poppies* is written in "thick, polyglot jargon that is made more or less self-explanatory by its context but still gives the book a mischievous linguistic fascination" (*New York Times*) and those like Lise Guilhamon note that the book "deliberately entangles its readers in a thicket of playful language" (67) which ultimately imparts it a Rushdian exuberance.

Sea of Poppies is set against the exotic background of the Opium trade whose roots go back to the Opium Wars that raged on from 1839 to 1842 and from 1856 to 1860. The story begins in Ghazipur in March 1838 by introducing Deeti, a simple-minded woman married to Hukam Singh, who spends most of his time in an opium-induced stupor. On the nuptial night, Deeti's mother-in-law drugs her so that Chandan Singh, Hukam Singh's brother can molest her. Deeti comes to understand that the outrage was cleverly orchestrated by her in-laws since Hukam Singh is impotent. Their wife succeeds when Kaburti is born out of this illicit union. Although Deeti cares deeply for Kaburti, she sends the girl away after Hukam Singh's death so that she can finally be free of her manipulative family. Having saved her daughter, Deeti prepares to immolate herself by performing sati since she can find no other alternatives to the shenanigans concocted by her brother-in-law to keep her in everlasting thralldom. But she receives a new lease of life when Kalua, an Untouchable, rescues her from the pyre and the couple flee from the hidebound villagers who are sure to frown upon the coupling of a high-caste woman with a pariah. They sever their social ties completely when they enlist as indentured laborers on the Ibis.

The Ibis is not just a ship carrying indentured labourers to strange and far-off places. It is endowed with a set of mythical associations that sustain the reader's belief and interest in it as a vessel of salvation. The ship first appears to Deeti in a hyperphantastic episode when she visualises it as rising out of the waters of the Indian Ocean. Although Deeti lives almost four hundred miles away from the sea, she is able to perceive the ship in all its jaw-dropping splendour. She describes it to her daughter as "a ship like I've never seen before. It was like a great bird, with sails like wings and a long beak" (Ghosh 6). Deeti at once realises the ship was "a sign of destiny, for she had never seen such a vessel before, not even in a dream" (Ghosh 3). The ship is aptly named "Ibis" for in Egyptian mythology the ibis was a bird of religious veneration and was connected with magic and the occult arts. The ship's mythic significations hint at the magical ways in which the fate of each of the characters who have sought asylum on its deck will be transformed. The name also foregrounds Deeti's visualisation of it as an enormous bird, which is metaphorically justified considering the ship's previous avatar as a "blackbirder" ferrying slaves.

The Ibis becomes the perfect refuge for the ostracised and disowned characters in the novel since it is already home to a motley crew spanning races and continents. In addition to Deeti and Kalua, the novel's main characters include Zachary Reid, the light-skinned son of an ex-slave in Maryland; Paulette Lambert, the young daughter of a French botanist who was raised in Calcutta and feels more comfortable in Bengali saris than European gowns; a boatman, Jodu, who was raised as Paulette's brother; a disenfranchised Bengali zamindar, Neel Rattan Halder, who is arrested by the British and forced to board the Ibis; and Ah Fatt, a mixed-race Chinese prisoner.

Like Deeti and Kalua, these characters are also alienated from their communities and are looking for a means of integration other than what shared ties of caste, ethnicity, or religious belief can provide. They also reinvent themselves as they start their voyage on the Ibis. Thus, the zamindar Neel Rattan Halder becomes Neel without any seigneurial appellations; Paulette, who forms a Western counterpart to Deeti, becomes Putlishwari; and Zachary Reid is elevated to the status of "Malum Zikri" by the lascars. It is the Ibis's mosaic of cultural differences that gives them enough leeway to invent new names and thereby new destinies cut off from the inexorable tug of the past. Unlike in their respective communities, here the characters do not feel the urge to conform to the protocols of social hierarchies overlapping variously with caste and race obligations since their worth is indexed to the fulfilment of mutually accepted roles and not to preconceived essences. This way, they transgress the oppressive boundaries of gender, caste, race, and nationality in much the same way the sea, by its constant mingling with other water bodies, obliterates the logic of boundaries.

It is interesting to note how Ghosh presents the indentured labourers on board the *Ibis* as a diasporic community united by differences rather than commonalities. Diaspora Studies has emerged in the last two decades as a way of reimagining national as well as individual identity. Any productive engagement with diasporic studies is best begun by considering the implications of the term “diaspora” itself. The etymological trajectories of “diaspora” can be seen to reflect its double-edged nature: “dia” meaning “division and dispersion” and “spiro” meaning “the act of sowing”, pointing simultaneously to the ceaseless mobility implied by “dispersion” and the urge to strike new roots that the sense of “sowing” conveys. The OED identifies the first possible use of the term in Deuteronomy xxviii, where it is said: “thou shalt be a diaspora in all kingdoms of the earth” (Oxford Reference).

Although the term “diaspora” unambiguously referred to the condition of the people living outside their homelands in the past and was used mostly in association with the dispersion of the Jews, the modern sense of the term has demonstrated an expansiveness to accommodate a more general sense of displacement, with certain common features of diasporic communities like belongingness, divided loyalties, the idea of home, and travel attracting greater focus than geographical or ethnic specifics. Whereas “the classical form of diaspora relates to forced movement, exile, and a consequent sense of loss derived from an inability to return” (Kalra 10), the modern sense highlights the dynamics between the exilic condition and the possibility of returning to a place that is no longer familiar. The redrawing of the boundaries of the word to signify the identarian and existential struggles of “any group living in displacement” (Clifford 310) is a fairly recent phenomenon inaugurated by the postmodernist repudiation of singular narratives. The broader conceptualisations of displacement have fed into contemporary discourses on hybridity and multiculturalism, with the trauma associated with diasporic identity formation being parlayed into an opportunity for contesting the sanctity and perseverance of dominant socio-cultural patterns.

The primary difference between the classical Jewish sense in which dispersion is understood and the way in which it is employed in the Indian context is that the latter is not framed by a particular historical period or an event on the cusp of which a massive exodus occurs. The Indian diaspora is formed by slow and sporadic migration over a period of time. It is possible to divide these migrations into two categories from the perspective of the Independence movement. Whereas hordes of Indian men and women were transported in the form of indentured labour to colonies in Fiji, Trinidad, Mauritius, South Africa, Malaysia, Surinam, and Guyana by their colonial masters before attaining independence, the post-independence period witnessed a new form of servitude with IT professionals migrating overseas voluntarily to slog the daylight hours under the yoke of ruthless companies in the Silicon Valley. Sudesh Mishra in his essay “From Sugar to Masala” provides further classifications for the “old” diasporic community framed by the colonial context. He says:

We must modify this assertion to include, under the category of ‘old’, for instance, the Shamsi merchants who commenced settling along the coast of East Africa in the nineteenth century and Surat’s traders, who followed the *girmityas* (indentured labourers) to Fiji after 1879; and those from privileged or comprador classes who found themselves drawn to imperial London, sometimes as emissaries for nationalists, sometimes as seekers of a ‘sound’ Oxbridge education, sometimes driven simply by an implanted nostalgia. Although the old diaspora is made up of communities that hail from different provinces, who speak different languages and practice different religions, and who are often inspired to leave ‘home’ for quite dissimilar reasons, the category is justifiable on the grounds that the earlier or older migration happened in the context of (and was determined by) colonialism in the heyday of capitalism.” (353)

The reference in the beginning of the extract to the Indian indenture system must be made clear. It is a system that saw thousands of Indians being transported to various European colonies starting with 1833 and continuing through to 1920. These indentured labourers were known as “girmityas” because they had to sign a “girmitya” (a mispronunciation of “permit”) to be taken on. *Sea of Poppies* supplants the popular notion of the indentured labourers signing up voluntarily for work in the plantations with the bleaker reality of their socio-economic circumstances dictating their future. The novel also upsets the predominant conceptualisation of Indian labourers as having an unextinguishable zeal for hard work. Instead, it argues in favour of the colonizers’ unsparing truculence as the possible reason for this perceived diligence. Unlike other indenture-related fiction that conflates slavery with indentureship, *Sea of Poppies* depicts the indentured labourers’ plight as the result of the lack of opportunities rather than coercion or volition. The novel’s re-evaluation of the relationship between slavery and indenture is embodied by the *Ibis*, the decommissioned slave ship that has been transformed into a transport vessel for indentured labourers. The *Ibis*’s role as a ship that forges hybrid relations underscores the need to eschew practices of interpretation that ensconce the novel in narratives of trauma and slavery. This is not to say that the novel turns a blind eye to the repressive structures implied by indentureship; rather it encourages a panoramic view of the socio-economic relations of the period, including those of polyphony and cultural diversity.

It is only when one understands the ramifications of the “old” diasporic community that one can approach *Sea of Poppies* from the vantage ground of history. For this one must delve into the hierarchies that existed within the pre-Independence diasporic community, with the privileged classes at the top and the indentured labourers at the bottom. Such a study will help one understand that far from being a homogeneous group, the Indian diasporic community was characterised by vast socio-economic inequalities, which in turn dictated the degree of national affiliation members belonging to each category sought. Whereas the Oxford-educated elites looked back on their homeland as a place that must inevitably be extricated from the stranglehold of British colonialism by employing the very skills they acquired or sharpened by means of a progressive Western education, the indentured labourers’ retrospection was curtailed at once by their incomplete identification with the homeland.

It is the latter notion of diaspora that Amitav Ghosh employs in his *Sea of Poppies*. His reading of the indentured labourers as a diasporic community with multiple loyalties and as one that does not occupy a fixed cultural space, thus resisting hegemonic norms of race and nationality, ties in with the notion of “hybridity” whose most ardent theorisations can be found in the work of the cultural critic Homi Bhabha. Hybridity, which refers to the coexistence of a multitude of heterogeneous sources or disparate elements in socio-cultural spaces, has proved to be most useful for the conceptualisation of subjectivity and identity in the postmodern epoch. Because of its manifest recalcitrance to the idea of static significations and grand narratives aimed at preserving the status quo, hybridity has been deployed in cultural theory across a range of controversial topics like race, caste, ethnicity, and so on. Owing to its privileging of flux over fixity, hybridity can be used as the theoretical tool par excellence for deconstructing essentialist narratives.

Bhabha employs his concept of hybridity to demonstrate how cultural identity is constructed within the conditions of colonial repression that seek to position the colonised as the Other in a dualistic schema vis-à-vis the coloniser but end up giving birth to something familiar yet new and challenging. Bhabha argues that hybridity arises as a result of the interlarding of the subject-positions of the colonizer and the colonized in a manner that defies the authenticity of hermetic boundaries. Bhabha conceptualises hybridity as the opposite of essentialism, which is “the belief in invariable and fixed properties which define the ‘whatness’ of a given entity.” (Fuss xi). Echoing Bhabha’s idea of hybrid spaces, Ashwin

Desai and Goolam Vahed argue in their book *Inside Indian Indenture: A South African Story, 1860-1914* that while the system of indenture was presented by the colonizers as a given and the indentured as a blank slate on which the socio-economic pressures of late colonialism could be cunningly imposed, “in reality, indenture saw its colours being established, resisted, and renegotiated as the indentured and their white masters were constantly involved in a shared but uneven economic and political dynamic” (vii).

Postcolonial theory calls into question the traditional view that cultural identity is immutable or that it is anchored in a matrix of static values. He not only contends that all aspects of culture are caught in a flux but also that there is a constant slippage between the signifier and the signified in a symbolic cultural universe, leading to the creation of a “third space” between the colonizer and the colonized that disrupts the overweening sway of hegemonic narratives. Calling our attention to the disruptive space between the subject positions occupied by the colonizer and the colonized, Bhabha advances “hybridity” as the site where “the cutting edge of translation and negotiation” (Bhabha 155) takes place.

Bhabha’s idea of “third space” is antithetical to the essentialist notion of an originary culture serving as the yardstick for all other cultural formations. It is a space that creates new possibilities as opposed to a space that allows the status quo to be upheld. It is also an ambivalent site where cultural meaning and representation have no “primordial unity or fixity” (Bhabha 37). Bhabha argues that the third space provides “the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal” (Bhabha 2). He labels it as the place where cultural differences are mediated and pre-existing cultural codes are redefined to generate new identities. The hybrid identities that the third space encourages counteracts unilateral forms of identity by reconfiguring the power relations between opposed entities within a non-dualistic framework. It is these “in-between spaces” located away from the centre that Ghosh portrays in his novel with uncanny precision. Using a wide array of characters whose destinies interweave most dramatically and situations that resist analysis along the lines of a dialectic struggle between the colonizer and the colonized, Ghosh injects his sprawling novel with the medic of hybridity that saves it from foundering under the weight of its dilemmas much like the *Ibis* herself. By negotiating a hybrid identity for his characters on board the *Ibis*, he materialises a spatial politics of inclusivity that “initiates new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation.” (Bhabha 1)

What differentiates the diasporic community on board the *Ibis* from others is the fact that they do not look upon their place of origin with nostalgic eyes because of the trauma they have suffered in their early life. They do not hark back to notions of “Mother India” or “Mother Africa” since the patriotic frenzy such labels conjure for them is caught up with a sense of disempowerment and ostracism. They supplant the idea of an originary place of birth with that of “hybridity”, with the *Ibis* as its exemplar. In rechristening themselves, the crew effects a complete break with the baggage of repressive ideologies. It is the process of displacement that leads to the creation of a new diasporic community on board the *Ibis*. The bond between the displaced characters can be defined as “jahaji nata” translated as “relationship of the ship”. It is not just Deeti who echoes this relationship but characters like Paulette too, who despite belonging to a completely different racial background, displays a striking resemblance to Deeti as regards the violence she has suffered at the hands of her opium-trading husband Benjamin Burnham. When Deeti tells Paulette that they will all be ship-siblings—“jahazbhais and jahazbehens” (Ghosh 328), she is hinting at the evolution of a new communal identity that derives its strength from the fearless encounter with repressive power structures.

Similarly, Kalua and Azad are “jahazbhais” since their respective caste and religious denominations position them outside mainstream society. Being a Dalit, Kalua is considered an Untouchable and discriminated against on land; the same holds true for Azad who is a Muslim, though

the degree of exclusion might vary. But on board the *Ibis*, the rationale for excluding them from social processes finds no purchase since the ship is a liminal zone that facilitates the mutual osmosis of “high” and “low”. Zachary is another example. Being born to a quadroon mother and her White master, Zachary is an octoroon and his skin is the colour of “old ivory”. Ghosh says at the beginning of the novel that though Zachary’s complexion hides vestiges of a White heredity, he was lumped with the coloured population on board the ship on account of the difficulty in classifying him. Originally a carpenter in Baltimore, Zachary chooses the sea on witnessing a repulsive act of racial oppression at work. His choice is deliberate since he is trying to rewrite the tortuous history of the Atlantic slave trade by striving for self-improvement on the *Ibis*. He achieves his goal when in less than a month, he advances from the role of a mere carpenter to the first mate of the ship consequent upon a number of unexpected deaths and desertions. To the chief of the lascars, Serang Ali, he is “Malum Sikri”. When Zachary tries to correct Serang Ali’s appellation by asserting his real heritage, the latter tells him that it is all the same. Thus, it is clear that on board the *Ibis*, the traditional distinctions have crumbled and become insignificant. It is in the light of such happenings that Ghosh calls the ship “an adoptive ancestor and parent of dynasties yet to come” (Ghosh 357).

It is not just the dissolution of the barriers separating castes and ethnicities that promotes cultural hybridity in the novel. This is achieved as much through the mingling of languages and narrative polyphony. The languages spoken on the ship include English, Bhojpuri, Bengali, Laskari, and Hindustani. But rather than remain as discrete languages, they come together to form a language of the seas that poses no difficulties of comprehension to the crew. Laskari, the typical tongue spoken by Serang Ali and his cohorts, is in itself a whimsical blend of languages. Though tantalisingly similar to English, it is amusingly different in its overt reliance on onomatopoeic effects and words that conjure up vivid images rather than abstract ideas. Laskari, which contains many colourful replacements for English nautical terms, facilitates the larger fusion of languages that happens on board the *Ibis*. It is Zachary Reid who makes the motley language spoken on the ship intelligible to all. Commenting on the lascars, he observes that they had nothing in common among them except the Indian Ocean. There were among them “Chinese and East Africans, Arabs and Malays, Bengalis and Goans, Tamils and Arakanese.” (13) Zachary has to teach himself the new tongue which employs “malum” instead of “mate”, “serang” instead of “bo'sun”, “seacunny” for “helmsman”, and so on.

As the foregoing discussion has proved, there is a movement from the peripheries to the centre in Ghosh’s novel, with characters who were wrongfully silenced and marginalised because of their caste, sexuality, and ethnicity breaking free of the restraints of social hierarchy and integrating themselves into the polyphonous diversity promised by the *Ibis*. The ship, which is described using a set of vivid avian metaphors, emerges in the novel as a maternal force carrying different characters across the Indian ocean, perhaps in a manner that embodies the escapist fantasies of each of them as they were caught in various traumatising circumstances. The paper has identified how the novel successfully communicates the creation of diasporic identity through a mix of vernacular cosmopolitanism and cultural hybridisation. Although the destinies of the indentured labourers are still hanging in the balance, they have been given a new lease of life. Therefore, they feel a sense of relief that they will be able to exercise some amount of control over their impending destinies rather than pain at the realisation of leaving the motherland. Thus, Ghosh’s novel interweaves the destinies of an array of interesting characters by drawing on the elements of myth, history, and literary genres ranging from nautical to revisionist literature to engender a narrative wherein hybridity structures the diasporic consciousness.

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