

Construction of Women's Identity in Amitav Ghosh Sea of Poppies : A Feministic Study of Indian Society

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This paper is to analyze female dynamics in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*. This novel investigates the construction of identity and the nature of the self. The leading character Deeti tries to transform her all the internal and external forces that shape her identity mainly her historical background, her family ties and at last her memories. She put at margin due to exploitation, migration and colonialism. She tried to travel from the margin to the centre and changes her identity from Deeti to Addi. Women in ancient India were held in high respect. During the vedic period, they enjoyed equal status and rights with men. The practices of polygamy, purdha system, dowry and sati which came into being during the medieval period deteriorated the status of women in the society. The paper critiques the Indian traditional power which was blatantly patriarchal, fudal and anti-feminist in nature.

The postcolonial revisiting and revision of history started since the time when the colonized subject, silenced and marginalized, started asserting his own identity instead of one that was purely constructed by his colonial masters, during the process of decolonization or at the end of the socio-political decolonization when, intellectually, their nation was still in the clutches of the intellectual and cultural hegemony of their

erstwhile rulers. The postcolonial writers of fiction wove their narratives intricately, patterned with the themes that appealed to or were infused into them. Their work took roots in the land that had been liberated recently from the pernicious foreign control. They reacted against exploitation of the powerless- theirs and, in general, anybody's. Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* is a narrative woven with the warp of individual stories and woof of general history. Great historical events are shown being shaped by individual agents, and vice-versa.

Amitav Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies* draws the position of women in Indian society. Deeti the leading protagonists of the novel is the victim of the society. Being a woman, Deeti is not permitted the same privileges as her brother before marriage and her husband after marriage, But the life story of Deeti carves her rout from subjugation to liberation.

In *Sea of Poppies* the status of women in the pre-independent Indian society is portrayed through the life of Deeti. Women in ancient India were held in high respect. During the Vedic Period, they enjoyed equal status and rights with men. The practices of polygamy, purdah system, dowry and sati which came into being during the medieval period deteriorated the status of women in the society. It is patriarchal society in which women

have no identity and voice of their own. They are identified either with their father, husband or children. Concerning the position of native women, Bill Ashcroft et al in *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* explain:

The main reason of this silence as 'gender bias, and constructions of the traditional or pre-colonial are often heavily neglected by a contemporary masculine's bias that represents 'native' women as quietist and subordinate.(104)

Women do not have the right to take part in the economic or cultural activities. They are forced to be colonized and disconnected from social events, as Landry and Maclean consider the subaltern as 'the most oppressed and invisible constituencies' (6).

In this concern they, possess the most awful condition in society. In early pages of novel with the scene as "the sand was hot enough to sting the soles of their bare feet" (7) symbolically portrays the crucial situation of women and the works seems intolerable for them. This depicts Kabutri, Deeti's daughter, with her in order to show this idea that this situation will continue for the next generation of the Indian women. They have to work hard and on the farm and deliver the harvest to the opium factory alone. Nawal EL Saadawi in *Women at Point Zero* remarks:

women in most countries have not achieved much because they can't be liberated under the patriarchal, capitalist, imperialist and military systems that determine the way we live now, and which is governed by power, not justice, by false democracy, not real freedom. (23)

Indian social, economic and political system is dominated by patriarchal set up. Sea of

Poppies exposes the patriarchal system dominated over its different parts which creates an undesirable condition for the Indian women. Patriarchal Society projects as law, the dictate of the male member of family that controls their values, dreams and desires.

From the beginning till the first half of the novel a series of events reveal how Deeti (colonized) is dominated by the Patriarchal (Colonizer) system. She is forced to marry Hukam Singh because Deeti's own brother, Kesri Singh, had proposed the match. "The two men belonged to the same battalion and had served together in a couple of overseas campaigns" (30).

However, it was a mismatch because Hukam Singh was a disabled person. In spite of all this, her marriage was finalized because of her brother. He tells Deeti that "her prospective husband's disability was a minor one" (31).

Her silent subjugation explains the unpleasant situation of the women in patriarchal societies and under their rules. Simone de Beauvoir in her famous work *'The Second Sex'* remarks:

Woman has always been man's dependent, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality. (445)

Further, on the condition of the married women, Beauvoir avers:

Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society'. She further says 'one is not born' but rather becomes, a woman. (445)

The marriage ceremony of Deeti and Hukam Singh depicts in novel as if a crime is happening. Marriage is not consider as the union of two souls but revealed as two opponents are entering in battle field and ultimately one have to surrender. This is not considering as the matter of

equal participation. During marriage time a few women advise Deeti to show protest at first night of marriage, whereas, the issue of conjugal union is not taken as a natural one. When she sat waiting for her husband on conjugal bed, she tightens her neck and shoulders in anticipation of the grip that would push her prone on the bed. Her sisters also suggest her that: "Make it hard for him the first time or he'll give you no peace later; fight and scratch and don't him touch your breasts" (32).

Here the words 'fight' and 'scratch' are used as if somebody is going to enter in a battle field. And view point of men is revealed regarding women and explicates the lovely and the sweet night for the most couples as a terrible scene resembling to a battle. Then 'when the door opened to admit Hukam Singh, she was sitting coiled on bed, fully prepared for an assault' (33).

Such treatments and situations are accepted by the women. They completely submit themselves to the rules and tendencies of patriarchal community. Depiction of lovely night as a battle reveals the cruelty imposed on the Indian women throughout the different periods of time by patriarchal system.

Marriage and motherhood, begetting sons in particular has been considered the goal of women since yore. Deeti is impregnated by her brother-in-law on her wedding night as the task of the new bride was assumed to beget heir for the family. Deeti is dazed with opium by her own husband and raped by her brother-in-law through the co-operation of his mother and uncle. There are some ambiguous facts about that night for Deeti until she completely discovers everything when her brother-in-law, Chandan Singh, just near her moribund husband confesses "you know very

well how your daughter was conceived—why pretend? You know that you would be childless today if not for me" (157). Here Chandan Singh is a symbol of patriarchal system while Deeti represent the Indian women,

Although he had never before shown any interest in Hukam Singh's condition, he now began to insist on his right to enter the house in order to sit beside his brother's bed. But once past the door, he paid no attention to his brother and had eyes only for Deeti: even as he was entering he would brush his hand against her thigh. Sitting on his brother's bed, he would look at her and fondle himself through the folds of his dhoti; when Deeti knelt to feed Hukam Singh, he would lean so close as to brush her breasts with his knees and elbows. His advances became so aggressive that Deeti took to hiding a small knife in the folds of her sari, fearing that he might attack her, right on her husband's bed. (156-157)

Chandan Singh tries to take the advantage of the bad condition of his brother's life, aims to seduce Deeti and to rape her instead of helping her. He creates such an evil circumstance for Deeti so that she has to carry a knife in order to support herself if it is necessary as if she is always ready for a fight. Chandan Singh tries to use the patriarchal rules in order to satisfy Deeti to make love with him. He frightens her from a rule which does not allow daughters to be their father's heir. On the other hand he, like the other men in male dominated society, sees Deeti as an object which can be used based on his tendencies. Woman is considered as a land that is fertile and can give the desired products of patriarchal society.

Novel reveals the unpleasant condition of the Indian women in male-dominated society that causes them to tolerate more oppression by men. Chandan Singh wants to abuse her and permits himself to do such a shameful work because, as Spivak states: 'the woman giving pleasure, without the usual affective charge, as use-value, in need' in the patriarchal society' (182).

It is very true in Indian society that a daughter is not considered as higher apparent, similarly, the norms in the patriarchal society do not allow Deeti to have her husband's properties and Chandan wants to use such a condition against her. Concerning this issue Said in *Culture and Imperialism* argues. The oriental woman is no more than a machine or an object. (187)

He aims to say that a woman is a programmable machine with some particular tasks utilized in any path based on the standards of the patriarchal system. Responding her brother-in-law's proposal and answering his threat concerning that she will be burnt with her husband in his funeral pyre, Deeti imagines "better by far to die a celebrated death than to be dependent on Chandan Singh, or even to return to her own village, to live out her days as a shameful burden on her brother and her kin" (158).

Such happenings with Deeti reveals that the position of the Indian women in rigid society. Deeti has to choose to be burnt on fire quite against her will. It is completely clear that this choice is imposed on her by those who are in dominant group. In such a situation the women do not have the right of making decision for them because their voice can be heard by nobody. Said considers such a woman as an "Oriental woman" and in *Culture and Imperialism* argues:

She never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. (6)

The colonial voice dominated by the male society is the superior and the emperor voice is easily heard, however, the subaltern voice of the women is not heard because they are inferior group controlled by the others. This kind of control and superiority torture them so that they consider themselves as weak individuals. Even after the death of Hukam Singh, Deeti half unconsciously dragged to pyre. Duff and dumb resignation of assembly reveals the power of masculinity. Sati in the novel is shown from the viewpoint of Kalua, which is called as "widow sacrifice" by Spivak (235).

Kalua saw that it was headed by Deeti, in a resplendent white sari – except that she was slumped over, barely upright: she would not have been able to stand on her own feet, much less walk, had she not been supported by her brother-in-law, Chandan Singh, and several others. (177)

Whole episode here shows a patriarchal rule performed in a patriarchal society by some of the men as its male authorities. Deeti, who is very anxious concerning her destination and makes it clear that this event happens quite against her real desire. Spivak explains in *The Origin and the History of Sati* in this way:

The Hindu widow ascends the pyre of the dead husband and immolates herself upon it. This is widow sacrifice. (The conventional transcription of the Sanskrit word for the widow would be Sati. The early colonial British transcribed it suttee (93). She clarifies that this ceremony is accepted even by the British colonizer identified as suttee. Concerning the reasons forming Sati, she declares "as long as the woman (as wife)

does not burn herself in fire on the death of her husband, she is never released from her female body. (97)

She describes a wrong consideration regarding Sati which creates an unpleasant imagination in the mind of the Indian women that makes it easy for them to accept such a ceremony more simply. Symbolically it portrays a fire of traditional ideas flamed by the patriarchal society in which all the desires and expectations of the women are burnt. It is a fire that does not allow the Indian women to live, to breathe, and to speak; however, it is itself a voice for them trying to call out.

Spivak explains Sati as an oppressive term and an instrument for both the colonizer and the colonized communities utilized by patriarchal system in order to limit the freedom of women and to victimize them. She declares 'if I ask myself, how is it possible to want to die by fire to mourn a husband ritually? I am asking the question of the (gendered) subaltern woman as subject'(282). Sati refers to a sign used for the representation of the situation of Indian women and their silence in the colonized societies. Spivak views this issue as an awful one and asserts 'since Sati was not the invariable rule for widows, this sanctioned suicide could paradoxically become the signifier of woman as exception' (235). Spivak condemns Sati and writes 'obviously, I am not advocating the killing of widows. (97)

She considers Sati as an act in which a great number of the widows are killed without a logical reason. She portrays that Sati is introduced by patriarchal society as a reward for the widowed

women and shows the imperial powers as a social mission in order to legitimize itself among the colonized people. These explanations are constructed based on some wrong images which only help them to reach their desired goals.

In this novel focus is also on the position of the women in society and the domination of their activities in patriarchal system as a double colonized figure. Women's introduction, as workers shows the viewpoint of the society regarding them. In a scene in the novel, some traders demand for more women laborer tells the mentality of colonial system and "had letters from Mareech asking for more women" (137). Landlords buy them as slaves by giving some money to their families: "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" (48).

Women compare themselves with the men in a given society and experience the inequalities and injustice with them. Spivak considers all the women around the world equal and declares, 'Women in development and gender (...) to say that women of the global dominant, from all the countries of the world, and women who suffer poverty everywhere could be equal' (44).

She notices all the women with different situations in the same level of equality and with the same rights. The activities of women are determined based on the masculine norms. Male-dominated society describes Women traditionally as working class who tend to be active and a part of the social activities. Landowners and the political structures created by power community in the colonial period oppress them, an issue which Landry and Maclean write:

It is a well-known fact that the worst victims of the recent exacerbation of the international division of labor are women. They are the true surplus army of labor in the current conjuncture. In their case, patriarchal social relations contribute to their production as the new focus of super-exploitation. (124)

The position of the women as the laborers in the colonial system and patriarchal domination is noticeably an obvious reality. They, indeed, play a major role in imperial strategies as the important instruments applied to different parts. They have a particular situation in developing the strategies of patriarchal society through different ways. Indian women as subaltern in an awful situation in *Sea of Poppies* to expose the role of colonial powers more clearly:

In the old days, the fields would be heavy with wheat in the winter, and after the spring harvest, the straw would be used to repair the damage of the year before. But now, with the sahibs forcing everyone to grow poppy, no one had thatch to spare – it had to be bought at the market, from people who lived in faraway villages, and the expense was such that people put off their repairs as long as they possibly could. (19)

Deeti is a woman who thinks how to repair the roof of their house. Landlords force her, like the other families and women, to work harder in order to grow more poppies to deliver to the English opium factory. Concerning the present situation of Deeti, Spivak writes 'caught thus between patriarchy and imperialism, she is in a representative predicament (234).

Spivak focuses on the women, like Deeti, who are the real victims of the strategies of both the colonizer and patriarchal system. Everything in

Sea of Poppies is under the control of the British forces. They superintend all the activities which are in progress in social and economic parts. In the opium factory, "the coolies pounding the trash were no more affected by the dust than were their young English overseers" (62).

Superiority of the colonizer and inferiority of the colonized are quite obvious in this scene. The men, who work under the authority of the British forces, are the dominant agents who rule over the women in patriarchal society. It is true that the development of subaltern is complicated by the imperialist.

The pressure constructed by both colonialism and male-dominated society makes the women to be receded and limited in freedom in various places as in society.

It is traditionally thought that women have instincts that make them selfless nurturers. Such assumptions, in turn, shape social practices that make women automatically responsible as decision taker with time and space. From the beginning of Deeti's life story we observe that although she is sufferer but she is able to retaliate with situation. And this instinct gives her voice from time to time. In her child hood due to color of her eyes she is called as 'chudaliya, dainiya as if she were a witch:

But Deeti had only to turn her eyes on them to make them scatter run off. (5)

Thus she is not a passive sufferer. She knows how to fight tormentors. She is the captain of her own soul, and a person willing to face and resolve any conflict and, a woman who refuse to see herself as a victim of man-made biological circumstances – she is able to separate herself as a warrior from those 'ordinary' people, male or female, who are willing to drift with the current and bent with every breeze.

After marriage Deeti begins to doubt her husband when he starts ignoring her just after her first night and she became pregnant. Her mother-in-law says that she is like Draupadi. She becomes sure that her mother in law knows everything about the father of her child and reveal about the truth from her Mother-in-law, she start giving her opium. One day under the influence of opium in a state of unconsciousness, she confess that her daughter's father is her brother-in-law:

As for Deeti, the more she ministered the drug, the more she came to respect its potency: how frail a creature was a human being, to be tamed by such tiny doses of this substance! She saw now why the factory in Ghazipur was so diligently patrolled by the sahibs and their sepoy – for if a little bit of this gum could give her such power over the life, the character, the very soul of this elderly woman, then with more of it at her disposal, why should she not be able to seize kingdoms and control multitudes? And surely this could not be the only such substance upon the earth? (38)

Power is generally associated with masculinity. But here, when Deeti with dare gave opium to her Mother-in-law to know the truth, reveals that Deeti a village woman of 1838 living in northern Bihar, some sort of power over her mother-in-law, and not only that she has the intellect to understand how opium is used by the British Empire to dominate and subjugate its colonies. She learnt this art very first night from her husband when she became unconscious under the influence of opium and deliberately used by other.

When her opium addict husband was in his death bed, she is physically assaulted by her

brother-in-law "Your husband and I are brothers after all, of the same flesh and blood. Where is the shame? Why should you waste your looks and your youth on a man who cannot enjoy them? Besides, the time is short while your husband is still alive- if you conceive a son while he is still living, he will be his father's rightful heir." (157).

Unable to tolerate the behavior of her brother-in-law she warns him: "Listen to my words: I will burn on my husband's pyre, rather than give myself to you" (158). Through these words Deeti showed her assertive nature and tried to restore the dignity of womanhood. When she doesn't accept Kesri Singh, she is forced to undergo Sati. Kalua, an untouchable man, by way of his physical force, helps Deeti escape Sati.

When Kalua manage to save Deeti from funeral pyre for sati they lost in the dark of night for new light of new day. Deeti at one level, the struggle between capitalism and socialism; at another level, appears to be a clash for the hierarchical power. Deeti can also be seen to transform herself into a new identity and an acceptance of destinies as indicated in her decision to marry Kalua who rescued her from sati.

Even then she did not feel herself to be living in the same sense as before: a curious feeling, of joy mixed with resignation, crept into her heart, for it was as if she really had died and been delivered betimes in rebirth, to her next life: 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.... (178)

After her rebirth she sheds meekness and weakness possessed by her as Deeti. She becomes

confident and independent to take decisions about her future. Here entry on the board of Ibis is symbolic because she enters the ship in gunghata as a new bride with people around her. Her change of name to Aditi while registering her name in migration list shows her search for identity because till now she was known as Kabutari-ki-ma.

...it was on her lips to identify herself as Kabutari-ki-ma, name by which she been known ever since her daughter's birth –her proper given name was the first to come to mind, since it had been used by anyone it was good as any. Aditi, she said softly, I am Aditi. (233)

Now Deeti becomes Aditi.

In Hindu Mythology, Aditi means, 'one who is a protector and wades away all sins'. The name Adity, shows Deeti as a protector and at the same time brings out the fact that she was running away from the social cruelty. Renaming Deeti as Aditi, is a complex transformation from slavery to freedom. It shows the journey of personal change that happens in the travel from Meerich to Mauritius. The Author metaphorically describes the change of the character of Deeti to Aditi. The change of name also shows the reality in history and the need for freedom in an individual.

Deeti's is developed as a product of its origins and circumstances; is also a process of self-invention. Moreover, the two aspects are integrally related with regard to the recognition and construction of identity. The meaning of her new name 'Aditi' suggests to a mythical Hindu goddess who releases from sin and to a person having a deep inner desire to use her abilities in leadership and to have personal independence. The leadership traits that Deeti possess can be associated to Bass' transformational leader who creates significant change in the life of people.

Deeti in contradiction to her previous role on land as victim, changes into a revolutionary and social activist. On the Ibis, she thinks about the deported persons that "they were all kins now; that their rebirth in the ship's womb had made them into a single family" (432).The followers of such a leader feel trust, admiration, loyalty and respect for the leader who offers an inspiring vision and give them an identity. Towards her fellow people on the ship, Deeti's conduct is typical of a considerate and trustworthy leader. Soon she comes to be known as bhauji and for many she is a friend, protector and confidant. It happens naturally, as she takes responsibility and speaks for truth and justice. Even Deeti shoulders the responsibility of guarding the single women like Munia, Sarju and Heeru throughout their journey to Mauritius. She washes out her previous identity and adopts a new identity which is quite binding and hence use of marginal word for them would be offensive with negative connotations.

She leaves her miserable life and flees away from restrictions and complexities of society. Deeti is metaphorically used to describe an individual's fight for freedom and independence. She desire to be free from her dogmatic society to leave her complicated past experience and seek betterment in future. She build up an egalitarian community which is classless, casteless and above all creating space to develop her own identity which is self-constructing in contradiction to the outside society which is prone to self-destruction. She very much involved in decision making process and become self-dependent.

Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies* brings into limelight two social evils – widow honour killing and exposes the reality of Hindu society. Two sides of human character are revealed. One side of

character where jealous and cruel Deeti's relatives wanted to cast her into husband's burning pyre to bring honour to the family. On the other side is humanity - the compassion and kindness that Kalua shows towards Deeti, and helps her avoid her brutal killing. In the later part of the novel, after Deeti escapes the slavery at home, she is portrayed as a migrant. Deeti keeps moving from one place to another. When she is in Varanasi, she bemoans her lost life and feels sad thinking about her child and dead ill husband. Though she feels lost without her family, she sculpts a new identity with Kalua's help. She takes small, but purposeful steps to become a bold and confident woman. The Girmitya people start looking upon her as their God. She becomes the leader of Girmitya on the Ibis. She is confident and ready to fight for anyone in trouble. Women can do anything if they are free to define themselves, instead of having their identity defined for them time and again, by their culture and their men"(Susan Faludi 82).

The desire of a lower class colonized Indian like Deeti and Kalua can be compared to the concept of 'the mirror image' by the Indian postcolonial critic, Homi Bhabha in his book *The Location of Culture* (1994):

It is true for there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler's place. It is always in relation to the place of the Other that colonial desire is articulated: the phantasmal space of possession that no one subject can singly or fixedly occupy, and therefore permits the dream of the inversion of roles.... The fantasy of the native is precisely to occupy the master's place while keeping his place in the slave's avenging anger ... It is not the colonialist Self or the colonized Other, but the

disturbing distance in between that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness the white man's artifice inscribed on the black man's body. (44-45).

Here, the colonized individual always wants to conquer and possess the power and position of the colonizer. The desire is for the other's position and power. The novel opens with the lines: The vision of a tall mast of ship, at sail on the ocean, came to Deeti on an otherwise ordinary day, but she knew instantly that the apparition was a sign of destiny for she had never seen a vessel before, not even in dream'... it was the Chasm of darkness where the Holy Ganga disappeared into the Kala- Pani, 'Black water'. (1)

Deeti had a vision of going in a ship, and later her dream comes true when she travels to her freedom on the Ibis. The ship that carries Kalua and Deeti is a metaphor to describe the transformation from slavery to independence. The name Ibis refers to a sacred bird in ancient Egypt, which is associated with God Thoth. The Symbol is connected with the moon and associated with arbitration, magic, writing, science and judging the dead. Moreover, Thoth was an Egyptian God who served as a mediator between the good and the bad. In the same way, the historical ship just served as a means of transportation for those who wanted to escape their personal and social problems to seek freedom. There was no judgment of their past or their future, whether good or bad. The people in the ship were traveling towards their destiny. Deeti as a metaphor shows the life of a woman in the 19th century. "The Ibis was not a ship like any other; in her inward reality she was a vehicle of transformation, travelling through the mists of illusion towards the elusive, ever receding landfall that was Truth' (390).

She invents a new identity which is quite valid and hence to use the word margin for them would be derogatory with negative connotations. But in *Sea of Poppies* women characters not only participates in cultural and social activities but they also are very much involved in decision making process. Deeti takes the final decision to leave the homeland. Similarly other women characters are shown self-depend for their decision.

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