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By the Histories of Sea and Fiction in its Roar: Fathoming the Generic Development of Indian Sea-Fiction in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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Abstract:

Indian literature has betrayed a strange indifference to sea-experience and sea-culture as a subject of literary interest though it cannot overlook the repercussions of sea voyages on Indian social, political and economic conditions specifically after colonization. Consequently, nautical fiction as a category of writing can hardly be traced in the history of Indian literature. Nautical fiction as a substantial body of writing emerged from Anglo-American history of maritime experience. This paper is an attempt to perceive Amitav Ghosh's novel, *Sea of Poppies* as an Indian response to the sub-genre. Due to the scarcity of Indian reference point, the paper has to anchor on the western definition and categorization of sea fiction to evaluate the novel though much emphasis has been given in the individuation of the author. The author has given a freewheeling treatment to the genre, making a potpourri of several aspects together such as history, commerce, *girmitya* (indentured labor) transportation. Thus, his approach to the genre evades any kind of narrow categorization. Sea is the setting as well as the space where all the stories converge and enfold the maritime culture. He has balanced the over-board view of sea with the below-deck marine-experience contrasting the master's deck of open sky with the ever dark dabusa (cabin below the deck of a ship) of the *girmityas* and the convicts in a slave ship.

Keywords:

Indian nautical fiction, maritime culture, *girmitya*, slave ship

“Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean- roll!
Ten thousand fleets sweep over thee in vain:” (Byron 4. 1603-1604)

Even in the romantic rendering of the lines from Byron's “Childe Harold's pilgrimage”, Canto IV, the symbolic connotation of sea is not free from its historical significance as it alludes to the famous defeat of Armada, the fleet sent by Philip II of Spain against England in 1588. What primarily characterizes nautical fiction is that palpability of sea as a material or physical space beyond its symbolic rendering. Sea is the mise-en-scene of such novel. Foulke talking about the unfixed nature of nautical fiction as a literary genre in the Introduction to *The Sea Voyage Narrative* remarked

The varied fare of sea literature comes in Protean forms and guises, and it resists easy definition...sea literature belongs to a larger family of writing about travel that is equally amorphous and uneven in quality. It is probably the primordial form of travel writing in Western culture's amalgamation of Hebrew and Greek sources, beginning with Noah and Jonah, Odysseus and Jason (xii- xiii).

Nautical fiction primarily focuses on sea as a material, physical space which has been witnessing histories from the very inception of human civilization and the beginning of transoceanic activities of human relationships. Sea is also an eyewitness to the massive change in socio-cultural character of nations which is a corollary of transformations in world economy and politics due to sea voyages and trades. Peck gives a sumptuous detail regarding the formative influence of maritime economy upon British life and literature (2). Every wave of history written on/by "sea-water" is necessary to connect with the changes it brought on the histories of land.

If we do a little generalization, we will find that travelling is at the core of human history. Continual human migration from one place to another is the formative influence behind the nations making world-history an ever-mobile, ever-mutating reality. Even most of our epics are written in the form of a journey or travel of the hero which can be shared by the collective consciousness or saga of its people. But different nations take different mode of journey. In this context, I am particularly tempted to make a superficial comparison between *Valmiki's Ramayana* and Homer's *Odyssey*. Both the epics in a way fall into the category of travel literature. Interestingly 'ayan' means travel, thus 'Ramayana' means Rama's travel while the word "odyssey" in its present-day usage means a long and eventful journey. Storyline of these two epics is analogous as both of them recounts the long exile of the respective protagonists, killing monsters on the way and rescuing wives before or after returning home. But there is a basic difference. While Odysseus's adventure is set on sea, *Rama*, hero in *Ramayana* takes the land route wandering mostly in the forests. And when time comes to get across the sea to rescue *Sita* (wife of Rama) kept hostage in the island Lanka, *Valmiki* finds it easier to make a bridge between the two nations than to go through the trouble of building a ship. To avoid the sea-hazards, the writer made *Pushparath*, an aeronautical device for *Ravana* (the antihero) while *Hanumana* (ally of Rama) who has knowledge of aerodynamics being the son of Wind-God, *Pavan* became self-mechanized flying machine. Thus sea-voyage as such as an adventure and experience is kept totally out of the narrative of Indian epic.

It was not that India was not aware of sea-voyage or trans-oceanic trade. Research of ancient texts of India proves that India was not only expert in ship making and maritime knowledge but also ruled the maritime economy in ancient times. In *Ramayana* also, there is the reference of islands of Java and Sumatra. But we can see that Indian sensibility is strangely land-sensitive which went to such extremes as to make sea voyages a taboo fabricated in the stories of *Kala-Pani* or the black-water. For Brahmins, sea voyages were prohibited and a whole set of rituals of penance are

enlisted in *Manu Smriti* to absolve one from such sin. The fear of losing one's caste just by crossing the sea-water set into the minds in a way as to make sea voyage a dreadful thing. It, however, can be seen that sea is deep in the racial memory of those nations whose very existence and identity has been formed by repetitive intrusions or invasions that came across the sea instead of mere physical exposure to it. It is noteworthy that most of the foreign invasions India faced, before the arrival of East India Company, came by land. Thus the literary response of India to this genre is not as strong as we find in Anglo-American narratives of past two centuries where sea is a recurring subject. Looking from this perspective it does not seem surprising that Indian subcontinent instead of being garlanded by oceans from three sides does not have ample number of literary contributions in its history to record the explicit experience of sea. We have our '*Pather-Panchali*' (song of the road) but little to listen of seafarers.

Now the question that comes to our mind is what is the present scope or relevance of the field. Commenting on the recent rise in maritime scholarship in various disciplines, Mentz said,

Historians explain the appeal of maritime scholarship through its reconfiguration of materials across and beyond national and linguistic borders. The oceans also connect the physical sciences with historical and cultural studies, as efforts to 'historicize the oceans' are currently bringing together historians, ecologists, marine biologists, environmentalists, and activists...New theorizations of the maritime in literary culture have begun to appear recently, often drawing explicitly on recent historiography. (998)

It is necessary to emphasis on maritime history to grasp the socio-cultural and economical changes in the past two centuries especially on global scenario. Sea literature is of immense help to study not only the impact of transoceanic activities on the colonized countries but also to trace and imagine the possibility of an alternative experience and perspective towards the sea. Sea literature produced in the former colonies can retrieve, rethink and rewrite their ancestral history. Maritime history of India will also assist in etching out the untold story of massive migration of indentured labors from the palimpsest of history. It will also be helpful to trace the undocumented stories of cultural transaction and assimilation between India and other nations as a corollary of such transoceanic business and migration. It is in this background that I would like to locate Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* as extensive researched novel to recreate histories written on sea-culture at a particular juncture of time. The author has pronounced a challenge to master narrative contributing to the gamut of postcolonial literature as well.

In *Hungry Tide*, a novel written prior to the *Ibis* trilogy, the author has dealt with the nautical atmosphere but he has restricted his story into the archipelago of *Sundarbans*, his narrative moving mostly in the rivers and the bay keeping the setting close to the land. It is as if Ghosh has been honing his seafaring skills before plunging into the vast project of the *Ibis* trilogy. *Sea of Poppies*, first of the *Ibis* trilogy is set in

the year of 1838, when *Ibis*, a two-masted schooner anchored off *Ganga-Sagar* Island to enter Calcutta on its way from America to pick up indenture labors to transport them in *Mareech* (Mauritius). It is interesting to note that it was around that time that the early sea fictions *The Pilot* (1824) by James Fenimore Cooper and *Mr Midshipman Easy* (1836) by Frederck Marryat were penned down. From the very beginning the novel sets the nautical atmosphere. Deviating from realism, the author opens the novel in supernatural light giving Deeti, one of the central characters the pre-vision of the ship as a signal of her predestined future quite in the tradition of Indian forecasting. She is one of the thousands peasants who grow poppy seeds much against their will for the English East India Company. Her *afeem-khor* (opium-addicted) husband works in one such opium factory which exports opium to counties like China. Thus, we can see even before her actual arrival on the ship and consequent voyage as a coolie, her domestic life is controlled by such maritime business. It also unfolds the importance of India playing a vital role in world economy as opium producer. The next story switches over to the description of real *Ibis* which now envisions the readers like Deeti to create the image in their mind. Description of *Ibis* is also very important and quite in the tradition of nautical novel. Its description resonates with romanticism, mystery and gothic attributes. Its outward beauty as a white bird is deceptive and symbolic as well. Its correct designation is “blackbirder” because it was used to transport African slaves.

It is in this retrospective chapter unfolding the history of *Ibis* and Zachary that an important aspect of nautical fiction is manifested. It is the sensational adventure of Zachary that we follow breathtakingly where almost all the conventions of adventurous nautical fictions are touched. In the praise for the book, *The Literary Review* says that “The seaboard sections rival those in Melville and Conrad”. In the very first chapter, the author recounts the tumultuous voyage of *Ibis* in a cinematic clarity. Readers are given a string of sensational flashes of *Ibis*’s sailing short-handed from the port of Baltimore with a crew of nineteen, a serious damage due to its deplorable condition of the ship, on-board conflicts due to scarcity of rations, outbreak of dysentery costing three lives, mutiny of crewmen, mysterious death of the second mate who was hated by the black men, its forward march facing the tempests and foul weather, change of directions and finally reaching Cape Town earning reputation as a “hell-afloat with pinch-gut pay.” It is in the Cape Town that we got another important character Serang Ali who has been created quite like in the shades of captain Ahab of Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*. Serang Ali’s description as the head of ‘lascar’ company is as mysterious and apprehensive as that of a disguised pirate leader. He has been described through the eyes of Zachery as

a personage of formidable appearance, with a face that would have earned the envy of Genghis Khan, being thin, long and narrow, with darting black eyes that sat restlessly upon rakishly-angled cheekbones. Two feathery strands of moustache drooped down to his chin, framing a mouth that was constantly in motion; its edges stained a bright, livid red: it was as if he were forever

smacking his lips after drinking from the opened veins of a mare, like some bloodthirsty Tartar of the steppes. (Ghosh 14)

The readers are kept in suspense till the end of the novel to discover a real link between Sarang Ali and pirates and to find out the reasons behind his affection towards Zachery. Another sensational, breath-taking incident which is also a very important link to the main plot is the delivery of a letter to the owner of a sugar plantation in Mauritius, some miles from Port Louis. Zachery is strictly warned against the dangers lurking the forests and mountains both by Serang Ali and the owner, Monsieur d'Épinay. Paradox of the situation in the Island is that if Zachery goes there attired in workaday clothes, he will be captivated as a slave by the gentleman masters and when he is transformed by Serang Ali into "one big piece pukka sahib", he is equally in danger of being attacked by the escaped slaves because "The mountains around are filled with marrons and desperadoes and escaped slaves" (Ghosh, 22). Thus in this single section of first chapter the adventure and transformation of Zachery in his journey from Baltimore to Calcutta, through the time span of eleven months from a carpenter to the position of first mate and finally the only human survivor of the original crew of Ibis has been summed up with an unimaginable mastery of condensation. This single chapter consists of the materials rich and eventful enough to be sketched separately in a nautical novel or at least a novella tracing the story line of Zachery. Besides serving as a prelude to the larger frame of sea fiction that would be unravelled in the latter part of the section, it serves as a parody of the Anglo-American nautical fictions, speedily finished to mark its limitation as the author would steer the narrative in other direction- the untold story of *Girmitiyas*, the coolies who had substituted the slaves by the time.

As Ibis is anchored at the mouth of Hooghly River, waiting for a pilot to be taken inside the river to Calcutta, the author takes a break from the on board narration and starts gathering and linking the disparate stories to be conjoined on Ibis again. It is beautifully said by the author himself that as if a signal "had been transported upstream, like an electric current, the moment the vessel made contact with the sacred waters" (Ghosh 10) to call up all its doomed travellers from different part of the land. It is interesting to note that all the main character's lives are inseparably connected to the water. With them we experience on-board river-adventures before coming to the ocean. River Ganga is connected to Deeti's life not only as a holy river and part of everyday life but also it is the very passage through which Kalua, one from leather caste and her future husband, saves her from being Sati on the pyre of her husband. First she travelled in the makeshift boat that Kalua build from his tethered cart and then in the boat taking them to Calcutta as *girmitiyas*. Raja Nil Ratan Haldar was acquainted with the readers when he was on his way to Calcutta from his *zamindari* estate Raskhali in a luxurious houseboat. He will also be heading to *Mareech* as convict stripped off all the glamour and respect of a *zamindar*.

We meet Jodu alias Azad Naskar, son of a boat man in his dinghy with the aspiration of becoming a lascar someday. It is with Jodu and his dinghy that the author

rows the readers through the peculiar nautical culture of ports and harbors. This description of Kidderpore dockyard goes with the convention of nautical fiction. Jodu, similar to Robinson Crusoe is a prototype character of sea-fiction who runs away in the sea chasing his dream, imagination and adventure. With Jodu comes the story of Paulette who is also fated to board the ship Ibis but in disguise to go to Mauritius, her mother's place of birth. Paulette, daughter of Lambert-sahib, a French botanist was interestingly born on the very dinghy mid-river in a stormy night. Paulette's disguise following the family legend of her aunt who equally took a sea voyage disguised in the attire of man is reminiscent of *The Female Marine; or the Adventures of Louisa Baker*, assumed to be written in 1815 by American Louisa Baker. It seems as if all of them come floating down their fate in their rivulets of histories to be a part of a shared history.

Sea-fictions are incomplete without nautical language. It is one the basic demand of nautical fiction giving it its distinct flavor. The author is unsurpassable in his play with linguistics and apt usage of the sea-jargons and pidgin language to recreate each and every on-board scene. But it is his dealing with *laskari* language which demarcates him from other novel of this kind making the scenes vibrant and imbued with life. It has been explained by the author himself

Laskari- that motley tongue, spoken nowhere but on the water, whose words were as varied as the port's traffic, anarchic medley...yet beneath the surface of this farrago of sound, meaning flowed as freely as the currents beneath the crowded press of boats. (Ghosh, 104)

In the final section of the novel the author comes back to Ibis again. Here begins the journey of the *girmitiyas*' towards their future crossing the much-dreaded Kala pani, an irreversible passage of their life. Rumors and stories revolving the condition of the coolies in Mauritius is the added flavor of suspense and apprehension. Stepping into Ibis the coolies underwent a cultural assimilation. Losing their caste, they all became now "ship-siblings-*jahaz-bhais* and *jahaz-bahen* (Ghosh 356)." Ibis became their ancestor "a great wooden *mai-bap*(356)" and they are the children of the ship. The ship literally became divided into five groups- in the first rank, the captain and his two mates including Zachery, then the guards with Subedar Bhyro Sing as their head, the coolies under the vigilance of these guards, the *laskars* as the crew of the ship and the two convicts comprising Nilratan and Aah Fat. Finally gathering all the stories into the cauldron of Ibis, the author engages us into a series of incidents with every toss of the waves. One after another the incidents occur without giving the readers any time to speculate. It starts with the emergence of chaos among the coolies and few casualties in their futile effort to escape, home sickness more than sea sickness killing one woman of the eight women, beating of Jodu by the guards when caught with Mayna, imprisonment of Deeti and Kalua, men falling overboard, flogging of Kalua, Bhyro Sing's murder in the hands of Kalua and finally reaching the climax of the novel, the night of tempest when the two convicts, Serang Ali, Jodu and Kalua will escape in a long boat. The first of the Ibis trilogy closes itself with Deeti, Zachery, Paulette and

Nob Kissan Baboo staring at the longboat drifting away from Ibis. The novel ends with an incompleteness that signals at the remaining sea adventures in the next two sequels of the trilogy.

The genre of nautical fiction has helped “Ghosh’s humane historian travel(s) between cultures, and negotiates what has now come to be called the “third space” in social studies” (Bose 19). Ghosh deviates from the Anglo-American trend of sea-fiction by providing multiple perspectives to sea experience. The ship becomes the rendezvous between the narrative of the dominator and the narrative of the dominated. It upholds one of the darkest aspects of commerce and colonization i.e. labor trade. Many maritime novels have engaged the theme of profit versus morality but Ghosh “influenced by his association with the subaltern studies scholars... returns to a rigorous mode of empirical research to recover the historically situated subjectivities of a network of traders and their slaves operating between North Africa and south-west India during the Middle Ages. (Dixon10).” *Sea of Poppies* is an Indian literary contribution to maritime scholarship.

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BIO-NOTE

Smriti Chowdhuri teaches as an Assistant Professor of English at M. M. Mahila College, VKSU, Bihar, India. She is pursuing her Doctoral Research from the prestigious Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi. Her area of research is folk theatrical forms in West Bengal.

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