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Subjugation and Resistance: A Study of Indian Women in Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh is unquestionably one of the most serious writers crafting fiction in English today. He has written consistently good novels and non-fictional prose works which have won great acclaim both in India and abroad. The present article is proposed to examine and explore the transformation of discourse of the novel to narrate the story of indenture. In my paper, I will be dealing with women characters in the novel of Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies. This study puts its emphasis on the novel to reveal the problems of the Indian women and to expose different oppressions imposed on them by patriarchal society. I aim to explain the position and conditions of women by focusing on Deeti, the main female character of the novel, and some other minor characters, for example Elokeshi, Paulette, Heeru and Munia to show their unpleasant condition in Indian society. In his novels, the position of upper-class women is not very different than women of lower class. Women in the novel suffer from gender discrimination, class and caste structure. Through the character of Paulette he tries to show development of a child irrespective of discrimination results in respect for all whether it is European or Indian.

Keywords: Sea of Poppies, Amitav Ghosh, Indian Women, Subjugation, Resistance, Patriarchy, Colonialism, Feminist Perspective

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh is one of the leading writers of Indian English literature. His novel Sea of Poppies was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2008. The novel is based on the historical setting of colonial rule in India and to fulfill its need of supply of opium to China. In his novel, Ghosh describes the lives of men and women with little power, whose stories are framed against the great narratives of history. He invites other ways of thinking about culture and identity. His portrayal of women is realistic; in his novel women characters are few in comparison to male characters. In Sea of Poppies he has tried to show how women can be empowered so that they may become independent in the future.

Ghosh highlights the plight of women in the nineteenth century and their worsening condition under colonial rule. In the novel, opium affects the lives of all the female characters, directly or indirectly. In Sea of Poppies, Ghosh vividly depicts these oppressive realities through female characters whose lives are shaped by both indigenous patriarchal practices and colonial economic policies. However, the novel is not merely a narrative of female suffering. It also highlights the resilience, courage, and

agency of women who challenge oppressive structures and seek to redefine their identities. This paper examines the themes of subjugation and resistance in Sea of Poppies, focusing on the experiences of Indian women. Through the analysis of major female characters such as Deeti, Paulette, and other women aboard the Ibis, the study demonstrates how Ghosh portrays women as victims of social and colonial oppression while simultaneously presenting them as agents of transformation and resistance.

Historical and Social Context

To understand the plight of women in Sea of Poppies, it is essential to consider the historical context of nineteenth-century India. During this period, Indian society was deeply influenced by patriarchal norms that regulated women's lives. Women were expected to remain obedient daughters, wives, and mothers. Their identities were largely determined by their relationships with men, and their freedom was restricted by social customs and religious practices.

The caste system further intensified women's oppression. Upper-caste women faced strict controls over their behavior and sexuality, while lower-caste women were vulnerable to economic exploitation and social discrimination.

Widowhood often resulted in social exclusion, and practices such as sati reflected the extreme expectations placed upon women. At the same time, colonial economic policies disrupted traditional social structures and created new forms of hardship. The expansion of opium cultivation forced many peasants into poverty and indebtedness, affecting women and families across rural India. Ghosh situates *Sea of Poppies* within this historical framework, illustrating how gender oppression intersects with colonial exploitation. The novel reveals that women suffer not only because of patriarchal traditions but also because of the economic and social transformations brought about by British colonial rule. Consequently, female oppression in the novel is multidimensional, involving gender, caste, class, and imperial power.

Deeti as a Representation of Female Oppression

Among the women portrayed in *Sea of Poppies*, Deeti stands out as the most significant representation of female suffering under patriarchal and colonial structures. Her life reflects the harsh realities faced by many Indian women in nineteenth-century society. Married at an early age to Hukam Singh, whose life is ruined by opium addiction, Deeti experiences emotional neglect and an absence of personal freedom. The colonial opium economy indirectly contributes to her misery by fostering her husband's dependency and the instability of her domestic life.

Within the family, Deeti remains subject to rigid patriarchal authority. She is denied the power to make decisions regarding her own future and is expected to unquestioningly accept the norms imposed upon her. Her identity is defined through her relationship with male family members rather than through her individuality. The revelation surrounding the birth of her daughter Kabutri further exposes the vulnerability of women, demonstrating how their bodies and choices are often controlled by others.

The peak of Deeti's suffering occurs after her husband's death, when she is expected to commit sati. This practice illustrates the extreme extent of patriarchal domination, where a widow's worth is measured solely through her connection to her husband. Her own desires, ambitions, and right to live are disregarded by society. Through Deeti's experiences, Ghosh exposes the oppressive customs that reduce women to subordinate positions and deprive them of personal agency. Her story reflects the broader condition of countless women trapped within restrictive social and cultural systems.

Deeti's Journey from Victimhood to Empowerment

While Deeti initially appears as a victim of social oppression, she gradually transforms into a symbol of courage and self-determination. Her refusal to perform sati represents a decisive act of resistance against patriarchal authority. By choosing life over death, she challenges a deeply entrenched social custom and asserts her right to exist on her own terms. Her decision to flee with Kalua, a man from a lower caste, further demonstrates her rejection of conventional social norms. This relationship breaks caste barriers and challenges the rigid hierarchy that governs Indian society. By leaving her village behind, Deeti not only escapes oppression but also embraces the possibility of

constructing a new identity beyond traditional restrictions. The voyage aboard the *Ibis* serves as a metaphorical journey of rebirth. Away from the confines of her former life, Deeti develops confidence, independence, and a stronger sense of self. She becomes a source of support for fellow migrants and gradually assumes a leadership role among them. Through her transformation, Ghosh illustrates that resistance often emerges through personal acts of defiance and the determination to shape one's own destiny.

Paulette Lambert: Challenging Gender and Cultural Boundaries

Paulette Lambert provides another important perspective on women's resistance in the novel. Although she is of European origin, her upbringing in India creates a strong connection with Indian culture and traditions. Unlike many members of colonial society, she refuses to accept rigid distinctions between cultures and identities. Paulette's life is also shaped by patriarchal expectations. Her guardian attempts to determine her future through an arranged marriage, reflecting the widespread belief that women should remain dependent upon male authority. Rather than submitting to these expectations, Paulette chooses independence and actively seeks control over her own life. Her resistance operates on multiple levels. She challenges patriarchal assumptions regarding women's roles while simultaneously rejecting the cultural superiority often associated with colonial ideology. Through Paulette, Ghosh demonstrates that the struggle for freedom is not limited by nationality or ethnicity. Women from diverse backgrounds confront similar systems of control and seek opportunities for self-expression and autonomy. Paulette's determination and independence contribute significantly to the novel's feminist outlook. Her character emphasizes the importance of personal choice, cultural openness, and the rejection of imposed identities.

Colonialism and the Marginalization of Women

The experiences of women in *Sea of Poppies* are shaped not only by patriarchy but also by the economic and political consequences of colonialism. British colonial policies, particularly the expansion of opium cultivation, generate widespread poverty and social disruption across rural communities. The forced cultivation of poppies often replaces food production, leaving peasant families vulnerable to economic hardship. Women bear a considerable share of this burden as they struggle to maintain households under increasingly difficult conditions. Ghosh demonstrates that colonial exploitation intensifies existing inequalities and creates additional obstacles for women.

The *Ibis* itself symbolizes the far-reaching impact of imperialism. Many women aboard the ship leave their homeland because social and economic circumstances leave them with few alternatives. Their migration reflects the displacement and uncertainty produced by colonial systems of power. By linking gender oppression with colonial exploitation, Ghosh presents a comprehensive critique of the forces that shape women's lives. The novel reveals how patriarchal and imperial structures work together to limit women's opportunities and reinforce their marginalization.

Female Solidarity as a Form of Resistance

A prominent theme in *Sea of Poppies* is the emergence of solidarity among women. Despite differences in caste, class, and cultural background, the female characters develop bonds based on shared experiences of suffering and resilience. The environment aboard the *Ibis* creates opportunities for relationships that would have been impossible within the rigid social structures of mainland society. Women who were previously separated by social divisions begin to support and protect one another. These connections challenge traditional hierarchies and foster a sense of collective identity. Deeti's relationships with other women demonstrate the empowering nature of mutual support. Through companionship and cooperation, the female characters find the strength to confront adversity and imagine new possibilities for their lives. Ghosh suggests that solidarity is a crucial element in resisting oppression and overcoming social barriers. These supportive networks also function as alternatives to patriarchal authority. By creating communities based on trust and understanding, women establish spaces where their voices and experiences are acknowledged. The novel ultimately portrays female solidarity as a powerful source of empowerment and social transformation.

Gender, Caste, and Social Hierarchy

Ghosh's portrayal of women is notable for its recognition of the interconnected nature of social inequalities. The experiences of female characters are shaped not only by gender but also by caste, class, and economic status. As a result, women's oppression takes different forms depending on their social position. Deeti's relationship with Kalua illustrates the restrictive influence of caste on women's lives. By choosing a partner from a lower caste, she challenges deeply rooted social conventions. The hostility directed toward their relationship reveals how caste hierarchies reinforce patriarchal control by limiting women's choices and freedoms.

Similarly, women from economically disadvantaged backgrounds face multiple forms of exploitation. Their lack of resources increases their vulnerability and restricts their access to opportunities. Through these portrayals, Ghosh demonstrates that gender inequality cannot be understood in isolation from other social structures. The novel's attention to caste, class, and gender highlights the complexity of oppression and provides a nuanced understanding of women's experiences in colonial India.

Feminist Perspectives in *Sea of Poppies*

Although *Sea of Poppies* is primarily a historical novel, it contains strong feminist concerns. Ghosh challenges conventional representations of women as passive and powerless figures by depicting them as individuals capable of resistance, adaptation, and self-discovery. The narrative critiques social practices that restrict women's autonomy while simultaneously emphasizing their resilience and strength. Characters such as Deeti and Paulette refuse to accept the limitations imposed upon them and actively seek alternative paths. Their stories demonstrate that even within oppressive circumstances, women can exercise agency and challenge established norms.

Ghosh's feminist vision is further reflected in his focus on

marginalized voices. By placing women's experiences at the center of the narrative, he offers an alternative perspective on history that highlights the contributions and struggles of those often excluded from official records. The novel ultimately celebrates women's capacity for endurance and transformation, presenting them not merely as victims of history but as active participants in shaping their own futures.

Final Observation

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* presents a powerful portrayal of the lives of women in nineteenth-century India. Through characters such as Deeti and Paulette, the novel exposes the intersecting forces of patriarchy, caste discrimination, and colonial exploitation that restrict women's freedom and opportunities. The hardships endured by these women reveal the deeply unequal structures that governed society during the colonial period. At the same time, the novel is a testament to female resilience and resistance. Deeti's rejection of sati, her challenge to caste boundaries, and her transformation into a confident and independent woman demonstrate the possibility of empowerment in the face of oppression. Similarly, Paulette's pursuit of personal freedom highlights the importance of self-determination and individual choice.

Ultimately, *Sea of Poppies* suggests that resistance emerges through both personal courage and collective support. By portraying women as agents of change rather than passive victims, Ghosh offers a nuanced and inspiring representation of female experience. The novel remains an important literary exploration of oppression, identity, and the enduring strength of women in the struggle for dignity and freedom.

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