

The Girmitiya Identity-Story of Sweat, Blood and Toil from a known to an Unknown Land: A Study in Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy

¹Dr Klinsa Kurien

¹Assistant Professor in English

¹Acropolis Institute of Management Studies & Research, Indore.

¹klinsakurien@gmail.com

I. Introduction

The Gimitiyas have always stood tall in the genre of Indian Writing in Literature. These are the people who have borne the burden and yoke of the civilization and shone so brightly that a whole culture is motivated and inspired by them. They were subjected to harsh living conditions like indentured labour work on schooner ships, slave like work in homes and countries, sugar plantation work in extremely harsh weather conditions. Girmits were agreements that the workers agreed upon. It was like bonded labour. The most noteworthy feature was that these girmitiyas built new identities and relationships in the host countries and gained prominence from it. The Northern parts of India had people agreeing to work as bonded or indentured labourers due to their poverty filled conditions. Alongside this, natives of other countries were also agreeing upon the idea that they had established identities to further continue into this tradition of newness or belonging. These Girmitiyas had a special place in the minds and hearts of people to such an extent that they built fresh and new communities of their own. Many writers in Indian Writing in English have written on the situation and position of the Girmitiyas. Writers like VS Naipaul, Satendra Nandan, Sudhesh Mishra, Totaram Sanadhya, Munshi Rehman Khan, Rajendra Prasad, Brij V. Lal and Amitav Ghosh have delved deep into the culture of the Girmitiya tradition. The Diasporic Tradition of immigrants have always been deeply buried in their experiences which seem common place but are unique.

Totaram Sanidhya's writing and researching has been highly acknowledged while dissecting the works of Fiji writers where millions of migrant workers were subject to harsh conditions working in the sugarcane fields. Unequal distribution of wages ensued and the African workers were treated brutally. The equation of two is to two exists wherein the indentured Indians exist on one hand and the native population on the other. Both have their shared immigrant experiences. His contribution of the debut novel "Mother Ocean Father Nation" is set in a South Pacific Island where a military coupe exists. Gandhiji had also mobilised the indentured workers lending his full support.

On the other hand women's situation is also at stake because of the fact that they leave their Mother Land and go away to live in a No Man's Land. They are being ill-treated to a great extent. For the purpose of my analysis, I am taking up three novels of Amitav Ghosh's Trilogy named the Sea of Poppies (2008), River of Smoke (2011) and Flood of Fire (2015).

In this research paper, I wish to examine three premises:

1. The Social and Cultural Identity of the Girmitiyas
2. Their Point of Contrast and Regenuity of identity
3. Reconstruction or Deconstruction of the Native and New identity

The Sea of Poppies penned in the Ibis Trilogy centres itself on the theme of the Girmitiyas problems and identity. Apart from being condemned to fend for their own identity, they get transported to the British Colonies in the 19th Century. They were forced to leave their hinter lands and explore the naivety of the continents. Bihar and Bengal based immigrant workers are portrayed throughout the novel. They cross the kaala paani and reach Mauritius from where a new lease of life will begin and they will be referred to as jahaj bhais (ship-brothers). The colonial exploitation of the native lands begin when the traditional lands for native crops were being utilised. This gave rise to the traditional food patterns getting destroyed and giving way for commercial crops like opium. The Ghazipur Opium Factory represents the imagery of exploitation where the character Hukam Singh is poisoned by beliefs.

The pertinent theme of transforming or assuming a new identity by the characters is one of the leitmotifs of the novel while retaining the nostalgia for things past. Despite these communities being unmade, it became remade again. The real irony lies in the fact that the Girmitiyas were supposed to support a community from economic strain but they ended up with a dentured economic identity. The Central character Protagonist Deeti manages to keep the Jahaj Bhais and Behens together. Deeti took charge of her life and sewed it up together after saving herself from dying on her husband's funeral pyre. She got a new lease of life. Paul Gilroy a critic acclaims that the ship is reminiscent of a micro political system in motion. The Sea journey is representative of creating something new and carving an identity but is at times fractured and tainted. The collapse of the identity of the immigrants is compared to the imagery of Orlando Patterson's theory of Social Death who claimed that rejection through the immigrant experience is not merely an economic problem but a state of powerlessness. Marriages happen and real life family ties are built due to circumstantial problems. Heeru loses her first born child and her husband abandons her. She sets up her house with a character called Ecka Nack when she reaches the island (Mareech). Child Deliveries also happen on board the ship. Normal and Unusual situations are handled with confrontation and great ease. Their struggle is not one of identity alone but swift decision making and alignments at every step and stage. Power Mongering happens in this novel but the Migrants possess one united identity without a crisis situation.

Literary texts are aesthetic and moral repositories of knowledge and insights. The natural instinct of the writer Amitav Ghosh, is to observe the Marginal Section of Society with great ease and observe their necessities. His fascination for examining the lives of Cambodians, Burmese and the wrecked ones on ship are a fancy. Ghosh's narrativity lies in the fact that Subalternity and Subjectivity intermingle with each other. This kind of writing of Ghosh fits into the meta-narrative, where there is a juxtaposition of the popular and the ground reality. There is an intersection between history, journalism and anthropology. The self/other kind of a relationship is formed wherein a scrutiny occurs in a reciprocal relationship. The ontological and epistemological divides retain the alterity of purpose and play. Ghosh displays the Migration Experience from a safer angle. Contemporary Ethical Criticism is linked with the theme of otherness in a text. More than the aspects of struggle, the affirmation of the Human race is an important factor in a person willing to undertake risks for another. The vitality of human existence is to understand each other's condition and situation. River of Smoke has characters transcending the barriers of race and time.

The Flood of Fire was published in the year 2015 and the backdrop of it was the first Anglo Chinese Opium War. It moves back and forth between Rangpur, Hong Kong, Singapore and Mauritius. Historical

Materialism is being used in the story. Neel Rattan Halder, the main person of the novel finds himself in the Translation office of Commissioner Lin.

The severely crippled society of caste discrimination is portrayed in this novel. The local people suffering under the colonial yoke of the British is typecast. The political issue of Free Trade and the problems of the locals. This novel mostly deals with the lower rungs of society. They do not have a voice of their own and struggle through situations and circumstances. The Parsis in the novel were on a hunt for their old ancestral Chinese relatives. Women characters suffer in silence and for an identity. Paulette a woman character represents Feminism in every aspect as she successfully comes out of her step father's male dominated zone. Ghosh's handling of the characters from the side to the centre takes along the question of full identity being granted to them. The Indian characters of authority are also silenced because of the fact that the White Colonial Powers will control or have subjugation over them.

The most current debates of Ecology, Climate Change and Sustainability are being examined. It also has an effect on the minds and hearts of the characters. Environmental Justice, Ecological upheavals decide the fate of the characters in this otherwise fiery novel. The fragile quality of the rivers and its resistance bear with it some fruit of the existence and effort. Sub- Alternism and History blend to portray the seeds of resistance and approach.

The novel also prepares itself from the war crisis. There is another novel of Amitav Ghosh called "The Great Derangement", in which the central concept of Nemesis was being described. The description of the factory machines being run and the British dictating terms to them. The characters Shireen and Zadig don't participate in the land auction at Hong Kong. They wait for the future with hope and the symbolism of the storm paving way for a challenging life ahead.

Salman Rushdie, had commented on the novels of Amitav Ghosh as "an arabesque in the pattern of a carpet". This itself portrays the richness and gumption of the novels of Ghosh itself. As a holistic pattern, the Giritiyas are a self- developed community of one's own. They are independent, reverberating with themes, colours, cultures, vibrancy and buoyancy. One needs to recognize them and their efforts which are endearing. In order to keep this community vibrant, their need for identity and assertiveness is to be identified and finally enhanced.

References

- [1] Agrawal, Shuchi. New Historicism: Voicing the Subalterns in Amitav Ghosh's The Flood of Fire, 2016
- [2] Bala, Nilanjan. The Teller & the Tales: A Study of The Novels of Amitav Ghosh. Nilanjan Bala State Council of Educational Research & Training, Quest journals. Vol 5, Issue 8, 2017.
- [3] Batsha, Nishant. The Haunted Line: Autofiction Against Indenture. What Totaram Sanadhya's short story tells us about the space for solidarity. 2018.
- [4] Devi, Satya K and S Prakash. International Journal of Research in English the ecology of empire : Environmental Histories in Amitav Ghosh's Flood of Fire, 2016.

- [5] Glazier, Stephen D. Slavery and Social Death by Orlando. Collective Memory and Restructured International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews, 2022.
- [6] <http://theachieversjournal.com> Vol 5, issue 3. Journal of English language, Literature & Culture, 2019 Print.
- [7] Mallick, Sanchita Y. Amitav Ghosh's Exploration of Identity and Displacement in the Ibis Trilogy: Bodhi Taru: A Global Journal of Humanities Vol 7, issue 3, 2024
- [8] Pattanayak, Kalyan. Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*: Disseminating Diasporic Discourse, 2014.
- [9] Pragnya Parimita Chayani. The Circle of Opium Trade, Indentured Labour, and Imperialism in Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy: The Creative Launcher: A Study, 2023.
- [10] Rohitashwani & Shalini Yadav. Struggle and Sufferings of Girmitya: A Study of the Writings of Indo-Fiji. Culture and Memory, 2024. 309-324.
- [11] Roy, Binayak. Exploring the Orient from Within: Amitav Ghosh's River of Smoke. Postcolonial Text. Vol 9. No 1. 2014.
- [12] www.literarydruid.com
- Glazier, Stephen D. • Slavery and Social Death by Orlando Patterson. "Collective Memory and Restructured Identities: A Reading of Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies and Peggy Mohan's Jahajin as Narratives of Indenture Shanti Polamuri Research Scholar Department of English Ramniranjan Jhunjhunwala College International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews
- [13] An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English Vol. III & Issue VI (February- 2019)

The Circle of Opium Trade, Indentured Labour, and Imperialism in
Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy: A Study

Pragnya Parimita Chayani

Ph. D. Scholar,

IIT Dharwad

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. III & Issue VI (February- 2019)