



## **Politics of Inequality: Dynamics of Subalternity in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies***

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### ***Abstract***

*The term 'caste' has had its roots deep within our society; it not only indicates the difference between various sections of a religion, it has also created discrimination and boundaries. The lines of demarcation seen in our society today are reflective of the divisions which prevailed since time immemorial. Our society today is divided into many parts in the name of caste, class, race, ethnicity, gender, economic status and language which result in the hegemony of one section and subjugation of the other. Caste and social structure play a significant role in our society. Their importance was evident in nineteenth-century British India. Since the British colonisation, India has been witnessing quite a few changes in society as a result of the interaction between two nations, societies, cultures, and races. Nineteenth-century, too, was no exception to this norm. The Ibis Trilogy portrays a world replete with the same. Deeti and Kalua are some of the characters from *Sea of Poppies* (2008), the first instalment of the Ibis Trilogy, who faced discrimination in the name of gender, caste, class, appearance and language. They were subjected to a subaltern treatment not only at the hands of the governing British but at the hands of fellow natives as well.*

***Keywords:*** *Caste, Hegemony, Subjugation, Subaltern.*

The word 'society' finds its origins in the Latin language as *socius* which means dwelling in companionship. Human trails trace back to the prehistoric man. Since the inception of society, man has tried to ape either a tribe or a person of eminence. Those in power and hegemony incumbent on such positions were either because of hierarchy or because of their intellectual and physical prowess. With the evolution of human society, divisions, such as race, ethnicity, gender, caste, religion, territory and nationalities emerged.

To understand the relevance of these systems, it is of vital importance to understand the origin of evolution. Caste system in the science of society is viewed as social stratification

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which enables social inequality where the members of a society are divided into social positions because of the societal structures. These divisions in a society, in the opinion of lexicographers, is known as the caste system. These caste systems paved the way for suppression of classes at the hands of the ruling class which further divides the society into various classes, race, ethnicity, and gender-based on the differences in family origin, rank and wealth, thereby resulting in the hegemony of one section and subjugation of the other. The origin of the term 'caste' has had its roots deep within human society; it not only indicates the difference between various sections of religion. Instead, it has created discrimination and boundaries between each. The lines of demarcation seen in our society today are reflective of the divisions which have prevailed since time immemorial.

Many sociologists believe that the caste system has a religious beginning, made so, for the division of labour in the civilization, thus maintaining their opinion that such a system having divine origin will continue to exist. They further state that the caste system may be referred to both, as a unit and as a system. As a unit caste can be understood as a group of closed rank status, where the standing of its members, their vocation, the procedure of marriage and dealings with others is fixed. Whereas, when considered as a system, caste system then refers to the interrelated positions and premeditated patterns of communication among the pre-established castes to prevent the conversion of its members from one section to the other, to thwart any attempts from the occupants of any of these divisions from changing their occupation and thereby their statuses. For none of the castes can survive in isolation. Just as Frantz Fanon has presented his thoughts on the psychological stance of both, the colonizers as well as the colonized; where both need the other for a safe and prolonged stay of their own sect. The 'self' requires the presence of the 'other' to thrive by creating a divide reflective of the difference among the two, similarly, the citizens of the upper class need the company of those from the lower, to maintain the divide and the existence of the other; for neither can survive without the other. Likewise, neither the classes nor the castes would be able to continue to exist in isolation. It is a dialect between a 'master' and 'subject,' where the former needs the latter to establish their hegemony in the prevalent society.

Ram Ahuja in *Indian Social System* (2017) states that many scholars have associated caste with *varna*, through its development as *varna* because of the hierarchy of the four castes viz., Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra (233). Although, many sociologists and scholars maintain their opinion that the two are separate concepts, yet a segregated understanding of the two concepts has not been made. Also, because it helps the scholars understand the concept and definition of caste by associating it with the *varna* stratification, as it is an important part of the Indian society in the present times. The fact that the caste of a person was the governing factor in pre-independent India, and how it still is seen as an indispensable part of one's identity, cannot be overlooked. An unavoidable and ubiquitous part of the Indian society is the caste system, as it has engulfed the society since long.

The hierarchal differences pave way for friction, disharmony, and violence among the higher and lower castes of society. Violence in the name of caste is a crime witnessed too many times in the recent context as well. The agenda of caste differentiation is not allowed to

rest for political motives as well. The hierarchical perspective is embedded in minds through the atrocities committed against the lower caste. Such misconduct is revealed not only by mass media but by the rise of Dalit Literature as well, where the subject is provided with the agency to speak for themselves in discourse. They provide the world and enrich it with the revisionist history where the subaltern subject imparts their readers with the unspoken and unheard stories of the oppressed and silent subject.

Caste and social structure play a significant role in the context of Indian society. Their importance was evident in nineteenth-century British India as well. Since its enslavement by the British, India has been witnessing quite a few changes in society, and social structure as a result of the interaction between two nations, societies, cultures, and races. Nineteenth-century, too, was no exception to this norm. This transaction between nations, one being the colony (India) and the other being the colonizing nation (Britain), moreover, the outcome of the colonizing ideology resulted in the strengthening of the divisions of religion and caste. The Ibis Trilogy portrays a world replete of the same.

In the Ibis Trilogy, consisting of *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), and *Flood of Fire* (2015), Amitav Ghosh portrays a world where the elements of divisions of caste and societal structure are at their strongest, through the employment of sources such as *Girmitiya*, Sati, lower caste, subjugation and subaltern; through characters ~~from~~, who faced discrimination in the name of gender, caste, class, appearance, and language. The characters of the Trilogy were subjected to a subaltern treatment not only at the hands of the governing British but at the hands of mammon hungry natives as well.

One of the characters to suffer in the name of the customs and rituals of society was Deeti, a resident of a village on the outskirts of Ghazipur, was a 'seer' – a person who sees visions of the future; was married to Hukam Singh, a former sepoy in the British regiment. He had a disabled foot as a result of the injury he received in the course of his services in the army. The pain of this wound was unbearable for him; he turned to opium to alleviate his pain. Opium might have been used as a crutch at the beginning but over the years Hukam Singh's dependence on the substance changed and eventually, he became an addict to it. His addiction had now become sustenance for him to survive on. He was least bothered about the worldly affairs taking place around him, so much so that even though he had married Deeti he could not have cared more to look out for her well-being. This unawareness on his part was to be paid for, with Deeti's innocence, where she was drugged on her wedding night, in order to consummate her marriage. Instead, she was raped by Chandan Singh, her brother-in-law; this incident was a premeditated plan of her in-laws. This 'consummation' resulted in the birth of Kabutri, Deeti's daughter.

It was Deeti who was oppressed and robbed of her voice, her power to decide for herself when she was married to Hukam Sigh. Her marriage was arranged with Hukam Singh without her consent. For she was bedevilled by her stars so were her prospects, being born under the reign of Saturn – "a planet that exercised great power on those born under its influence, often bringing discord, unhappiness and disharmony" (*Sea of Poppies* 30). In order

to get her married sooner rather than later her family did not even enquire a background check of the potential groom; just knowing that he was the nephew of Subedar Bhyro Singh, a villager who had risen to the rank of a Subedar in the East India Company, was enough knowledge to overlook the groom's disabled foot; which was a minor disability. In her family's opinion, Hukam Singh's prospect seemed a good one, as they and Deeti herself were prepared, as was evident in her expectation that *if* she were to be married it would be to a much older man, possibly a widower who needed a wife to look after his children. Hukam Singh's family's connections were enough to know no more about the groom himself, whether or not he had any addiction or other bad habits.

A woman, irrespective of the century and nation she belongs to is not considered self-sufficient and brave enough to survive on her own without the protection and refuge of a man. That man could be a father, a brother, a husband, a son or in Deeti's case a brother-in-law. The question regardless arises, that why is a woman not safe without a man's presence to safeguard her? Why is society so adamant to make her dependent on a man? The opinion of the woman in question is not of consequence to consider it as a valid reason. This avoidance leads to the woman being robbed of her voice. Thus, in this manner, she is not given the opportunity to make her own decisions or for her loved ones, let alone to take important decisions for her own life.

Apart from Deeti, it was Kalua who was persecuted on the basis of his birth in a lower caste. Another cause of his being oppressed was his huge physique. This chauvinistic inequality reached to an extent where Kalua was treated in a sub human manner, where he was whipped worse than an animal. In fact, animals too, are not whipped till they lose their consciousness. But this was the fate suffered by Kalua, an ox cart driver; who hailed from the leatherworker's caste. The rancour and preconceptions about the difference in castes affected the lives of lower caste people to a great extent. To maintain these differences many people like Kalua would be cautious to keep their faces hidden for the higher caste people perceived the sight of the lower caste people would be inauspicious to begin the day with. Yet, those of high standing had no qualms at using services offered by the members of the lower stratum, as was evident in the onset of the plot of *Sea of Poppies* where Hukam Singh is seen hiring conveyance from Kalua as he had to commute to the Opium factory where he worked. Three miles was not a short distance to cover on foot for a person like Hukam Singh who had a disabled foot.

Kalua is a representative of the low caste people and his life was merely a reflection of the downtrodden lives led by the lower echelons of the society. They were given space to reside not in the village but on its outskirts, known as the untouchable's hamlet. Kalua and the people living in his hamlet lived in places which were no less than a cattle-pen, let alone a hut. Deeti's opinion on seeing Kalua's hut was not much different when she had come to seek him for his services, as Hukam Singh was unwell and had to be brought back home from the opium factory in Ghazipur.

Some families of the landowning *zemindar*(landowners) class of Ghazipur had an addiction to gambling which became a saving grace for Kalua, as three heirs from one of the prominent families too had the interest to bet on wrestling matches. They heard of Kalua's strength and wanted to witness it for themselves. They enticed Kalua to their bet with a promised reward. The Thakurs belonged to the upper class and they wanted to reinstate their superiority over Kalua, marginalized by forcing him to perform in a wrestling tournament by bullying him by endangering his job.

Kalua was a man of simple thoughts, he did not know the workings of the treacherous world; it was probably the reason why for his subjection to the landlords' aggression in a drunken stupor:

...You lost on purpose, didn't you, *dogla* bastard? ...the others whipped Kalua's naked back ... leaving Kalua unconscious in sand, naked and smeared in dung (*Sea of Poppies* 56 – 7).

Deeti on witnessing Kalua being treated in such a derogatory manner, where he was beaten and kicked, forced to mate with a mare, whipped till he lost his consciousness was astonished. Her shock made her feel an affinity with Kalua, for since her wedding night she was haunted with nightmares of her own violation, a meditated conspiracy of her in-laws. She wondered "So it could happen to a man too?" (*Sea of Poppies* 57). This empathy made her realize that the misuse of power and the downtrodden manner they were subjected to was not about gender nor was it about caste. As Deeti and Kalua did not hail from the same stratum of the society but both were victims or rather both were survivors who endeavoured and overcame the conspiracies and clutches of their oppressors. It was about the power, it was about the hegemony of the upper class over the marginalized. Irrespective of their social standing the weak one is alienated and made to suffer for the sake of the survival and the welfare of their *izzat* (honour), hollow respect. These episodes of Deeti's violation and Kalua's abuse at the hands of their victimizers respectively is sufficing to state that the weaker section of the society and those belonging to it are treated in a sub-human manner, the loss of their lives will not have an adverse effect on the civilization of the high standing in the social order.

Deeti was then forced to take the matter in her own hands when there was no way out for her on her husband's death, apart from accepting death as her refuge from the world which was adamant on making her an underdog just because she was a woman, a female from a class lower than the one she had been married in. Deeti was suppressed by hegemony which had shackled her life and thoughts with 'Patriarchy,' because the society Deeti had encountered since her girlhood days was dominated by the males, be it of her own family or those belonging to different sections of the society. If not for Kalua's interference in the ritual of Deeti's immolation that her life was saved, else her existence had become an ornament for the honour, the *izzat*, of her in-laws' family. Her life and her being were rendered as a means to attain an end. It was as if she was considered as a human being for none except for her daughter, Kabutri, and Kalua who was her kindred spirit.

It was her kindness and helping nature that saved her, it was since the incident by the river that night where she had witnessed Kalua's abuse at the hands of the Thakurs and came to his help that Kalua did not hesitate to return the favour to help his saviour. He kept a count of days it had been since he had last seen a glimpse of Deeti; it was after twenty days that he heard of Hukam Singh's demise and certain whisperings about Deeti's impending immolation. He from a distance observed Deeti's slumped figure being led to the awaiting pyre in a widow's attire. Kalua's forte was not his agility or even his strength but his element of surprise, where he could shock many by his abrupt actions, which buys him the requisite amount of time to get his act together. This was the same strategy Kalua used to save Deeti who was "half carried and half dragged" by Chandan Singh and numerous others (*Sea of Poppies* 177). Kalua bided his time by calmly observing the happenings from shadows by the river, waiting for the opportune moment to get his act together and save her in time. By doing so he saved her from being used once again; because Deeti had been cheated, lied to and deceived by her in-laws in the earlier stages of her marriage and she would have been wrung out and exploited the second time by Kalua's interference.

As a married woman Deeti was drugged and raped but to add salt to her wounds Chandan Singh gloatingly expresses that if she would not submit herself to his wills and would prefer to die, he would let no opportunity bypass him. He further states that it would add to their prestige having a daughter-in-law perform 'sati,' as it would enable them to earn in her name even after her death by erecting a temple which would earn them funds and donations "don't depend on me to stop you...To have a sati in the family will make us famous. We'll build a temple for you and grow rich from the offerings" (*Sea of Poppies* 158). Her life bore the causal effects of the decisions taken by men in her life, she suffered a great deal in the name of patriarchy – a male-dominated society, a world of the stronger gender where the will and voice of the other half of the populace held no importance and was preferred to be ignored, so much so that the women go silent with their broken wills and unheard voice. It was as though; women were created to be silenced and utilized for the servitude of men.

The circumstances created by Ghosh vividly paint the helplessness of the marginalized where they more often than not have suffered the consequences of other person's deeds. There is a point of tolerance beyond which fear ceases to exist and the oppressed snaps and their instinctual defence mechanism of fight or flight take over their sensibilities and work. That was how the subaltern characters made their escapes and not only saved themselves; from the oppression but others as well.

A world without discrimination was a utopian world made a reality by the "ship-siblings," who were subjected to a subaltern treatment on the basis of their gender, caste, class, appearance, preference, and association though the journey to realize such a world was replete of hardships (*Sea of Poppies* 356). Yet they had formed a world where they were free of the shackles of the discriminating thoughts of the upper crust of the populace. They had grown to care for each other as a family would, none of them were related by blood yet their

bonding was not affected by the lack of it; families which originate from the heart are much stronger and are indifferent to the bigotry of the distinguishing nature of the upper classes. The obstacles they faced were those of survival, lack of freedom, being subjected to inequality and prejudice where each of the marginalized characters from the Trilogy at one point or the other had to migrate in order to take refuge and live.

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