

Gender Subalternity In Amitav Ghosh's Sea Of Poppies

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Abstract

This paper, titled Gender Subalternity in Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies, explores the depiction of how Deeti, is made gender subaltern both in her own house and outside. Deeti is the main female character in Sea of Poppies, the first Volume of Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy. Amitav Ghosh, a social anthropologist by academic training is born in Calcutta in a Bengali family. He has written extensively in both fiction and non-fiction sphere of literature and bagged many awards to his credit. He has been awarded 54th Jnanpith award, the highest literary award in India, for his outstanding contribution to the enrichment of Indian Literature in English. The materials for Amitav Ghosh's writings are drawn from the plight of human beings. In Sea of Poppies he has turned his eyes to the nineteenth century opium trade. Deeti in the novel is married to Hukam Singh, an Opium addict, who was wounded in battle. She has a daughter named Kabutri, who was actually fathered by her brother in law Chandn Singh. When Hukam dies, she is forced to marry Chandan Singh. She decides to commit sati on Hukam's funeral pyre, rather than marrying Chandan Singh. She is rescued by Kalua, an untouchable whom she once saved. Together with Kalua she leaves her village for Calcutta and boards the Ibis to go to Mauritius as an indentured labourer. 'The Subaltern Theory' proposed by Gayathri Chakravorthy Spivak is used to analyse how Deeti is made a gender subaltern. The study applies some central discussions of Spivak and Edward W. Said. They are mentioned as the important ones in order to illuminate various aspects of this issue. This study finds out that Gender Subalternity prevails in the life of Deeti due to patriarchal society in which Deeti lives. This study also concentrates on the role of patriarchy and its attempts to put the women in an undesirable situation. As a gender subaltern Deeti endures all the subjugation in her in-law's house. This study further shows how Amitav Ghosh, the writer portrays the cruelty imposed on the Indian women throughout the periods of time by the patriarchal system.

Keywords: Gender Subalternity, Double Colonization, Patriarchy, Other

Introduction

Sea of Poppies is the first book of Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy. . In *Sea of Poppies*, the author weaves a story of the Opium War and describes the sufferings during the difficult times through the character, Deeti. A group of people from different caste and class were moving together by leaving behind their past to find their way of living on the Ibis to go to Mauritius. Ibis is an ex-slave-trading ship bound for Madagascar with its cargo of Opium, indentured labours and criminals. The novel speaks from the heart of the characters and elucidates the feelings felt by the common men and women during this tumultuous period. It further deals with the trade of opium among India and China run by The East India Company and the trafficking of coolies to Mauritius. Ibis Trilogy comprises of three books namely *Sea of Poppies* written in 2008, *River of Smoke* written in 2011, and *Flood of Fire* in 2015. Through small historical narration, Amitav Ghosh shows the socio-cultural changes that take place within two or three decades.

The main focus of this study is how women suffer under the control of their own male counterparts and imperial power. Gayatri Spivak has widened the scope of subaltern literature including the works of literature of marginalized women. This study analyses the plight of Deeti on the light of Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* She says that rules, laws, and culture in the society control and oppress women in all aspects (Jouzaee 525). She shows how the male dominant society offers secondary position and an inferior role to women. In the words of Simon de' Beauvoir "male and female complement each other and have sometimes been seen as

two parts of a whole, they are not opposites.” But contrary to the above statement by Beauvoir, Deeti is made gender subaltern.

According to Spivak, women are underrated and underestimated to men in postcolonial literature. Spivak uses a subaltern to denote the lower rank and marginal status of women in society (Sawant, 2015:4). The domination of men leads the women to obey them. Patriarchy leads to discrimination or devaluation against women. According to Simon De Beauvoir, femininity is not inborn but it is created by society to make women in a lower position than men (Tyagi 6). The result is women will have anxiety, helpless identity, and a revolutionary attitude in a patriarchal society.

Deeti is a poor woman married to Hukam Singh, a rich man from high strata in their society. Deeti is raped by her brother-in-law, Chandan Singh on her wedding night and begets a daughter called Kabutri. Her mother-in-law and her uncle Bhyro Singh never love her properly. She is tortured and mocked by them every time. When the question of marrying Chandan Singh comes after the demise of Hukam Singh Deeti decides to burn herself with the pyre of Hukam Singh in Sati. Unfortunately, she is saved by Kalua, Hukam Singh's driver and then they escape together to the ship namely Ibis. They become immigrants there and meet other people who have the same faith like them. Patriarchy is also occurred in Ibis and Deeti is made a subaltern subject, When Bhyro Singh, Hukam Singh's uncle finds her and Kalua, they escape from the Ibis with their friends.

Thus, this study will focus Deeti, as a representative of the gender subaltern. After marrying Kalua she gets a new identity as Aditi. In this male dominated society she even loses her own identity.

Discussion

It is a well known fact that the Indian society is very much family oriented. Women are “the fixed foot” of the compass in their family. But ‘the third world’ women occupy only a secondary place and they suffer historically, physically and economically. They are the ‘other’ and succumb to ‘marginalization’ and become ‘gender subalterns’.

Even after the colonizers' leaving, women continue to be colonized and subjugated to the oppressions put forth by the patriarchal ideologies and by the imperial power. Thereby the women are doubly oppressed. Men exercise “their otherwise eroded power” to subordinate women. (AniaLomba 180)

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* is the first volume of his Ibis Trilogy. Here he discusses the trajectory of a ship named 'Ibis'. The book traces how the indentured labourers migrated from the villages of Bengal and Western Uttar Pradesh, the central location of the labour outflow from India, to the sugar estates of Mauritius during the colonial reign of British in India. This mass displacement of the labouring class and the indentured system affected the condition of women. The sexual exploitation of women is evidently seen in the novel. Ghosh very beautifully brings forth the pathetic plight of the colonized women.

Deeti as a Gender Subaltern

The narration of Deeti, in the novel is the main focus of this paper. It explores the depiction of gender subalternity of Deeti. It analyses how Deeti is made gender subaltern and doubly colonized both by patriarchy and colonization. Gender subalternity prevails in the life of Deeti due to her being a poor woman married to a rich man, though crippled.

Spivak in her essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ explains that the women, who are the subalterns in this context cannot speak due to lack of space. Deeti suffers from gender subalternity due to patriarchy that exists in their society and their imperial masters.

The unpleasant condition of women in Indian society can be vividly seen in the depiction of the other characters like Elokeshi, Paulette, Hearu and Munia in addition to that of Deeti's. These women are the “groups that feel subordinated” (Spivak290). Women and her position in the society, in the words of Gayathri Spivak, “are manoeuvred between indigenous patriarchy and colonial government.”(234). in the view of Spivak ‘women's desire’ is always restricted by the traditional patriarchal principles and the power of the rulers. (302)

Deeti, in *Sea of Poppies* is a young woman from a small village far from the East Coast. She is married to Hukam Singh. Hukam Singh served in the British army along with his brother. Hukam becomes crippled and so leaves army and joins the Opium Factory at Ghazipur. Opium permeates their entire life. Deeti endures troubles physically and emotionally at home. On their wedding night, her husband made her inhale opium by blowing it on her face. To hide his inability to perform the conjugal duties he allows his brother Chandan Singh to rape her unconscious body. All of the members of her new family are rude to her, As a gender subaltern her dreams shattered when she realizes that she is pregnant with her brother-in-law. She is oppressed by sexual violence. She remains submissive for the sake of her daughter.

Amitav Ghosh is famous for the use of myths in his novels. Myth is one of the most powerful tools used by men to subjugate women. “Men discovered that one of the best ways to control a woman is to construct myths about her.” (Tong 205) Deeti is tortured by her mother-in-law and her uncle Bhyro Singh. Her mother-in-law justifies the injustice done to her on her wedding night by calling her Draupati:

In her last days, when her mind was wandering her often referred to Deeti as ‘Draupadi’, when asked why, she would murmur drowsily: Because the earth has never seen a more virtuous woman than Drapadi, wife to five brothers. It’s a fortunate woman, a saubhagyawati, who bears the children of brothers for each other.(Ghosh 38-39)

As she refuses to live as her brother-in-law’s wife she is forced to undergo sati. She is made a gender subaltern with this practice against women. “Half dragged and half carried, she was brought to the pyre and made to sit cross-legged on it, beside her husband’s corpse” (177). Kalua, her husband’s driver, an untouchable from the neighbouring village saves her. She escapes with Kalua to the ship, Ibis. They become immigrants there. Deeti becomes a subaltern subject there also.

Conclusion

In the patriarchal society in which Deeti lived has made her a gender subaltern and objectified her. She even envisages her destiny as the novel opens. Domination is the patriarchal prerogative in which women are complicit. Here Deeti is complicit in her own oppression. Amitav Ghosh has thus portrayed the cruelty imposed on the Indian women throughout the periods of time by the patriarchal system.

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