



BEYOND MAINSTREAM: EXPLORING CASTE ELEMENT IN THE *IBIS TRILOGY*

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Abstract: This paper examines the representation of caste in Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy*, a historical narrative set against the backdrop of the First Opium War and the system of indentured labourhood. Through a caste-based analysis, it explores how Ghosh intertwines caste dynamics with colonial power structures, revealing the entrenched social hierarchies of 19th-century India. The trilogy portrays characters from marginalized castes, such as Deeti and Kalua, whose lives are profoundly shaped by caste-based oppression and colonial exploitation. This paper explores how Ghosh critiques the global legacy of caste exploitation within the context of colonial history.

Index Terms: Amitav Ghosh, *Ibis trilogy*, Caste, *Sati*, Oppression

1. INTRODUCTION

The *Ibis Trilogy*, comprising *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke*, and *Flood of Fire*, falls under the genre of historical fiction and delves into 19th century events such as the Opium Wars and the transportation of indentured labourers. Ghosh examines a wide range of themes, including colonialism, trade, culture, gender, identity, and power dynamics. Notably, he also addresses casteism, a deeply ingrained system of Indian society, within this broader historical context.

II. CASTEISM IN THE *IBIS TRILOGY*

The caste system as it is defined simply is a hereditary social hierarchy that can determine a person's occupation. The system categorizes Hindus into groups and is one of the oldest existing forms of social stratification and it suppresses the classes in the society. Ram Ahuja in his *Indian Social System* asserts that many scholars have associated caste with varna because of the hierarchy of the four castes viz; Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishyaa and Shudra (233). Caste marks a person from birth to death and the practices in the system of varna are considered by a vast number of members in Hindu religion as religiously ordained. Generally a society is categorized in many ways including caste, class, race, ethnicity, gender, economic status, language and so on.

According to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the doctrine of inequality is the core and heart of the Hindu social order. In his *Ibis Trilogy*, Amitav Ghosh portrays the caste system in 19th-century India, which rigidly divides people into social categories with unequal status and privileges. Ghosh critiques the global legacy of caste-based exploitation within the context of colonial history, highlighting its pervasive impact. The trilogy's storyline revolves around the triangular trade of opium, where the British cultivated opium in India to trade with China. Using Indian peasants as conduits for opium farming, the British, through their ideologies and ideological state apparatuses such as the English East India Company, coerced farmers into growing opium in fields previously sown with essential crops like wheat and other provisions. This forced cultivation, coupled with colonial hegemony, left Indian farmers impoverished and struggling for survival.

Some characters involved in opium farming decide to migrate to Mauritius in search of a better life, linking the major events of the narrative.

Deeti, a village woman from Bihar, exemplifies the intersection of caste, patriarchy, and colonial exploitation. Born into an upper-caste family, she is married off to Hukam Singh, an impotent opium addict, without her consent. Her life is profoundly influenced by her caste, her marriage, and the pervasive impact of opium. Her daughter's birth and her eventual marriage to Kalua, a lower-caste man, are deeply entwined with these socio-economic and cultural dynamics.

Deeti's destiny is shaped by her astrological alignment with Saturn, or *Shani*, a planet in Hindu astrology believed to exert a powerful influence. Saturn is often associated with teaching humility, equality, and perseverance through difficult circumstances. Ghosh uses Deeti's alignment with Shani to reflect the social inequities she faces and her struggles within a rigid caste system. As narrated in *Sea of Poppies*, "Her prospects had always been bedeviled by her stars, her fate being ruled by Saturn – Shani – 'a planet that exercised great power on those born under its influence, often bringing discord, unhappiness and disharmony'" (*Sea of Poppies*, 30). With low expectations for her future, Deeti resigns herself to the possibility of marrying an older man or a widower in need of a caretaker, as dictated by her family and fate. It shows her forbearance to an undesirable marriage—one of the few prospects available to her due to her caste and gender. It illustrates how cultural and astrological frameworks often intersect to reinforce societal norms, perpetuating inequality. Yet, through Deeti's journey, Ghosh critiques this deterministic ideology. Her eventual defiance of societal expectations, as she joins a broader, transnational narrative aboard the *Ibis*, suggests a break from the fatalism symbolized by Shani's influence.

The caste plays important role in Deeti's life later also when Deeti's husband Hukam Singh died and she was forced to do *Sati*. Widowhood and remarriage were considered highly stigmatized in the Brahminical circle where women were forced to perform *Sati*. *Sati* is the act or custom of a Hindu widow burning herself to death; usually burned to death on the funeral pyre of her husband. According to ancient Hindu customs, *Sati* symbolized closure to a marriage. It was a voluntary act in which a woman followed her husband to the afterlife. It was considered a devotion of a wife towards her dead husband. Though it was practiced by wives voluntarily, it became a forced practice with time. Women who do not want to do so were forced to do so.

With all her courage Deeti goes through the rituals of *Sati*, but the low caste low ox-man Kalua rescued her. She starts a new life with Kalua somewhere away from her village hiding their identities. As their life progresses in the narrative they board the *Ibis*, the slave ship going to Mauritius. As a woman Deeti gets trapped under the religious norms, patriarchal gender based violence. She is afraid of ostracism as she got married to a low caste. Historically in 1829, Sati was banned by British colonial government considering it as a violation of human rights. The abolition was a result of efforts by Indian social reformers. Many families were afraid that after the death of her husband the woman go astray thus sati was the solution for them (Pachauri 898-908). Women were more and more exploited by religion and society and thus they were excluded from all important social and economic parts of life (Tharakan 120-134).

Deeti's story highlights how religious norms and patriarchal gender-based violence entrap women. She lives in fear of ostracism after marrying a low-caste man. The caste discrimination in India is portrayed through the character Kalua, Kalua who drives the ox cart for Hukam Singh to Ghazipur opium factory for his job. As Deeti belongs to a high caste family she covers her face when Kalua of Chamar caste comes to take her husband to job, reflecting the strict social norms of the time. "Kalua, the driver of the ox-cart, was a giant of a man, but he made no move to help his passenger and was careful to keep his face hidden from him: he was of the leather-workers' caste and Hukam Singh, as a high-caste Rajput, believed that the sight of his face would bode ill for the day ahead" (*Sea* 4). This stark contrast between high and low caste underscores the inequalities and complexities of Indian society during the colonial period. The veil of Deeti's face symbolizes the unseeability; the societal divide and the invisibility imposed upon certain groups. Through Deeti's story, Ghosh intertwines the themes of caste, colonialism, and patriarchy, shedding light on how these forces shape individual lives within the broader historical context.

Kalua as a low caste has faced much humiliation and inequalities. He was a man of unusual height and powerful build: in any fair, festival or mela, he could always be spotted towering above the crowd. It was his colour rather than his size that had earned him the nickname Kalua – 'Blackie' – for his skin had the shining, polished tint of an oiled whetstone. He was called Kalua as he was dark (*Sea* 53-54). The double marginalization Kalua faces, as both low-caste individual and a person of dark skin, underscores the pervasive nature of inequality in the era. His experience reflects how caste hierarchies and colourism worked together to reinforce systematic oppression, limiting social mobility and perpetuating societal exclusion.

The trilogy's narrative unfolds through the perspective of Deeti to depict Kalua's thorny life as a low caste. When she went to take water from river which was a short distant from her hut she saw four men; three on horses and one was on foot and it was Kalua on foot pulling on his halter, the men forced Kalua to his feet and pushed him stumbling towards the mare's swishing tail. One of them stuck his whip into the fold of Kalua's cotton langot and whisked it off with a flick of his wrist. Then, while one of them held the horse steady, the others whipped Kalua's naked back until his groin was pressed hard against the animal's rear. Kalua uttered a cry that was almost indistinguishable in tone from the whinnying of the horse. This amused the landlords:

"... See, the b'henchod even sounds like a horse..."

"... Tetua dabá dé... wring his balls..."

"Suddenly, with a swish of its tail, the mare defecated, unloosing a surge of dung over Kalua's belly and thighs. This excited yet more laughter from the three men. One of them dug his whip into Kalua's buttocks: Arre Kalua! Why don't you do the same?" (Sea 57).

It was the consequence of losing a fight by Kalua conducted by the sport loving landowners at Ramgarh Palace. Some families of the landowning zemindar (landowners) class of Ghazipur had an addiction to gambling. 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 tournament of wrestling 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 56 – 7).

Deeti on witnessing Kalua being treated in such an insulting manner, where he was beaten, kicked and forced to mate with a mare. He was whipped until he lose his consciousness. Deeti exclaimed that "Even a powerful giant of a man could be humiliated and destroyed, in a way that far exceeded his body's capacity for pain?" (Sea 56). 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.

Kalua was treated subhuman, whipped worse than an animal. The low-caste people, including Kalua, were forced to live on the outskirts of the village, in what was known as the untouchable's hamlet. It shows Kalua's suffering and also an examination of the systematic nature of caste-based oppression and psychological toll it takes on both individuals and society.

When it is analysed theoretically we take Franz Fanon's perception on the colonizer and the colonised. The upper caste and lower caste act as the coloniser and the colonised respectively. The upper caste restricts the lower caste socially thereby in all aspects in the society, where both need the other for a safe and extended survival. 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 trilogy portrays a world replete of the same.

The trilogy's narrative show cases that the low caste people 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 (Sea 53). In Ambedkar's view "isolation and exclusiveness makes the low caste anti-social and inimical to one another" (113).

The episodes of Deeti's violation on wedding night by her brother in-law and Kalua's abuse at the hands of their victimizers respectively are adequate 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 any effect on the civilization of the high standing in the social order.

Other caste based narration comes in the trilogy when the characters as indentured labourers are about to board the *Ibis* to embark on a journey to Mautitius. There comes the myth of crossing the sea, Kala Pani, a thing of impurity. Those who go overseas cannot be back as pure as they were; the crossing causes loss of caste status according to Hindu mythology. This 'black waters' trope is said to derive from long-held notions that sea crossings were antithetical to Hindu culture, entailing a separation of the traveller from the holy Ganges (Mehta 5).

Neel Rattan Halder, a Bengali zamindar and educated upper caste Hindu gets convicted on the false charges by the British and he is sentenced to travel on the *Ibis*. As he lost his status as an elite, wealth, and freedom he is forced to mingle with people from lower social classes and castes in the ship. Neel gradually learns to empathize with people from different backgrounds. His journey represents the erosion of caste distinctions under colonial exploitation. Although sumptuous meals were often served on the budgerow, the preparation of food was not permitted anywhere on the vessel. Though not Brahmins, the Halders were

orthodox Hindus, zealous in the observance of upper-caste taboos and in following the usages of their class: to them, the defilements associated with the preparation of food were anathema(*Sea* 40). Here, the narrator details the lifestyle of Neel where he uses to take care of mingling of castes, relating the preparation of food also. As he got convicted he has to travel with any class and caste in the ship as jaházbhais and jaházbahens – to each other. There'll be no differences between us as it is said by Paulette in the *Sea of Poppies*(356). Parimal had already gone ahead to make sure that the constables who were accompanying Neel to the court were Hindus of respectable caste and could be entrusted with his food and water(218). Parimal is the care taker of Neel and here also the narration describes how he was treated as an upper caste.

In Ghosh's depiction of the caste system, Kesri Singh's father, Ram Singh, asks Bhyro Singh, who has come to him with the offer to make his son a soldier (sepoy) for the East India Company. When he asks about caste mingling, Bhyro Singh states:

Ram Singhji, . . . you are completely mistaken: the English care more about the dharma of caste than any of our nawabs and rajas ever did. There is not a sepoy in the Bengal Native Infantry who is not a Brahmin or a Rajput. And these are not impostors, trying to pass themselves off as twice-born: every sepoy's caste is carefully checked, as is his body.(*Flood of Fire* 69)

As the conversation continues

In the gora paltan no one can join unless he is known to be of high caste, and no person of doubtful origin will last more than a couple of days. All our cooking we do ourselves or else we hire high-caste servants to do it for us. If we raise a question about any sepoy the officers will convene an inquiry at once. If there is anything doubtful about the man's caste-status he is sent straight back to his village. Why, even the girls supplied by the Company, for our 'red' bazars, are always from high castes. (*Flood* 69-70)

He continues to convince Ram Singh

I tell you, Ram Singhji, he continued, the Company has more respect for the dharma of caste than we do ourselves. Why, just listen to this: some time ago the English officers made a new rule that a bell had to be rung in our camp after every few hours. Of course none of us wanted to do the extra work so we said that it was against our custom for high-caste men to ring bells. And what do you think? Immediately they hired special bell-ringers to do the job! Do you think our nawabs and rajas would care at all about such things? If we told them we couldn't ring bells they would have laughed and kicked us in the gaand.(*Flood* 70)

Among sepoys there was a strict segregation where upper caste people were given certain privileges and low castes as cooks to adhere to purity qualities. The British created caste based regiments and reinforced social hierarchies. 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.

III. CONCLUSION

Thus, Amitav Ghosh in his *Ibis Trilogy* highlights how colonial powers used caste as a tool to maintain control over Indians. Set against the backdrop of the British Empire's opium trade, war and the system of indentured labour, the narrative sheds light on the intersection of caste and colonialism. The system of caste is depicted as being instrumental for the British colonial powers in reinforcing their control over Indian society exposing the entangled connection of caste oppression and colonial exploitation in the 19th century India. The trilogy's characters, such as Deeti and Kalua, are shown to be vulnerable to both exploitation and marginalization. Ghosh's portrayal of caste in the context of colonial exploitation invites a broader conversation about social justice, resistance, and the unsettled tensions between inequalities and struggles for equality. Ghosh exposes the insidious impact of caste on individual lives, from stigma of inter-caste relationships to the systematic subjugation of marginalized communities through the character like Deeti, Kalua and Neel. The trilogy is not only a historical narrative but also a thoughtful critique of the systems that continue to rule social identity and inequality today.

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