

Colonization of Indian Women in Amitabh Ghosh's Sea of Poppies

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Abstract: Colonization and the capitalist economy that come with it have had a great impact on the lives of indigenous women. Generally in pre-colonial times, men and women had different yet equally important roles in their indigenous societies. However, the European culture rendered men superior to women and hence women were treated differently in colonial times. The aim of my paper is to study the effects of colonization on Indian women as depicted by Amitabh Ghosh in his novel Sea of Poppies and also study the different forms of suppressions imposed upon them by the patriarchal society. The theme of double colonization is shown through the characters of the protagonist, Deeti and other minor characters like Elokeshi, Paulette, Heeru and Munia. It also tries to show how the patriarchal society creates wrong images of women and challenges such images. The agents of power support the male dominated society and accept its notions regarding women in order to accomplish their own goals. The novel deals with various aspects of the Indian women's problems. The power structure operating in the society makes the condition more difficult. In such conditions, the marginalized sections are not given the right to speak. The novel beautifully captures the agony of these marginalized and dispossessed women.

Keywords: Colonization, Oppression, Power, Patriarchal Society, Subaltern

1. Introduction

The Ibis trilogy of Amitabh Ghosh consists of three novels- Sea of Poppies, River of Smoke and Flood of Fire. They deal with the historical events of Opium war and trade. The ship, Ibis, acts as the microcosm of culture in which people of different cultures and traditions come together with no certainty of the future. The novel, Sea of Poppies, deals with the numerous problems faced by Indian women and also the relationship between men and women in a patriarchal society. The novel depicts the effects of colonial power not only on women but also on different spheres of the native people's lives like political, economic and cultural. Another issue that the novel deals with is the issue of double-colonization. The term, double-colonization, refers to a situation in which women are colonized twice- firstly by the patriarchal ideologies operating in their own motherland and secondly by the imperial colonial powers.

In such conditions, women have to undergo different forms of oppressions imposed upon them by different forms of power. In colonial societies, women are represented as the colonized

objects and not subjects. This is a direct way of marginalization of women by treating them as subordinate to men. The subsequent marginalization and absence of women from significant social activities represents their trivial importance in the society. In such a case, if there is another power greater than the patriarchal power, than the situation of the women worsens. Indian society, for a long time has been largely male dominated. Therefore, the native women of India had to tolerate the pressures of both the colonial power and the patriarchy. Hence, they can be said to have been colonized doubly.

Patriarchy- the ruling social system almost all over the world ordains that a woman's pace is her home and her role as a wife and a mother is synonymous with her total human existence. There has been successive evolution in the European countries in this matter. However, in contrast to Europe, India has refused to evolve through the successive stages of history and has continued an archaic existence. The ancient norms and ideas, instead of undergoing revision have continued to dominate the ethos in decadent form. Therefore, the ever-obedient and self-suffering Sita continues to be the dominant feminine archetype whereas Draupadi is depicted as destructive.

2. How Colonization Affects Women

Women in pre-colonial times were honored for their unique roles in the society. For example, in pre-colonial Canada, women were respected for their role in giving and nurturing life. Many of the indigenous societies were matrilineal. It meant that their wealth, power and inheritance were passed on from one generation to the other through the mother. Based on their respected roles, women were chosen to speak on behalf of the community with the colonial settlers. But the settlers looked down upon women and insisted on dealing only with men.

The Indian Act, introduced in 1876, applied to and defined rights for all "status Indians" in Canada. It imposed rules and requirements upon the "Indians" on how they were supposed to live as per British law. This act had a severe impact upon the indigenous women by introducing patriarchy. Patriarchy lessened the traditional respected roles of women and treated them as less equal than men and gave them fewer rights. The colonial policies and practices tried to erase indigenous customs, beliefs, language, culture etc. This had a dramatic and

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negative impact on mostly the indigenous women.

3. Women- the Subaltern

As a post-colonial novel, the novel, *Sea of Poppies*, explores the new aspects of the west and also the problems faced by the Indian women. Gayatri Spivak, a post-colonial critic, whose works have a peculiar effect on feminism, attempts to reveal the phenomenon of double colonization and the inferior status of women in the society in comparison to the other members of the society. In her book, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Spivak argues, "My readings are, rather, an interested and inexperienced examination, by a postcolonial woman, of the fabrication of repression, a constructed counter narrative (sic) of woman's consciousness, thus woman's being." (1988:95). She considers a woman in equality with the other groups of society and also considers her an important part of it. In place of the common terms used for women like "colonized", she uses the term "subaltern." Subaltern refers to any group of people who are lower than the others from different points of view which Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean define as "the kinds of groups that are claimed to be subaltern are simply groups that feel subordinated in any way" (290). The women thus are considered as inferior in almost every sphere of human life-economic, politic, cultural etc. The prejudices formed by an imperial power and guarded by its rules and regulations is exposed through the theory of subaltern. Spivak describes how women are marginalized from important social events and are considered as objects and possessions desired and controlled by men. Their desires and freedom are controlled by traditional patriarchal principles. She declares "the subaltern cannot speak" and clarifies the position of women, especially, Indian and writes "the subaltern has not the right to talk." (1988:104)

4. Deeti

The novel opens with a rural woman named Deeti and her daughter, Kabutri whose living condition is very deteriorating. Like the other women characters, Deeti also belongs to a poor family and has to work in the poppy farm to help her husband who works for a British family. Her husband, Hukam Singh is an opium addict and on her wedding night she is raped by her brother-in-law, Chandan Singh because of her husband's infertility. While this happens, some of her husband's relatives participate in this brutality.

Amitabh Ghosh attempts to expose in his novel, the strong hold that patriarchy has over the society which creates undesirable situations for the women. Deeti marries Hukam Singh only because her brother Kesri Singh has arranged the match. The brother represents the force of patriarchy that decides and sets rules for the women in the society. Ghosh describes the marriage of Deeti and Hukam Singh in a way as if some sort of crime was happening. He throws light on the advices given to her by the women which show that it was very natural for Indian women and that they have accepted it: "The songs had grown increasingly suggestive while she sat waiting for her husband, and her neck and shoulders had tightened in anticipation of the grip that would push her prone on the bed.

Her sisters had said: Make it hard for him the first time or he'll give you no peace later, fight and scratch and don't let him touch your breasts (22). Then he writes, "when the door opened to admit Hukam Singh, she was sitting coiled on the bed, fully prepared for an assault. (22). Depicting her first night as a war scene and the acceptance of most women about it, Ghosh tries to show how the patriarchy has imposed cruelty on Indian women in all spheres of their lives. Chandan Singh uses the patriarchal rules in order to force Deeti to have sexual relationship with him. He tries to rape her instead of helping her when his brother is dying. He creates such a condition for Deeti where she has to carry a knife in order to protect herself against him. He frightens her by using the rule that a daughter cannot inherit her father's property. He uses this norm against her. She is seen as an object which he can use according to his wish. Through the character of Chandan Singh, Ghosh shows how the male dominated society creates unpleasant conditions for women and oppresses them.

Deeti has to choose to be burnt alongside her deceased husband's pyre against her will. This choice is imposed upon her by a dominant power and she has no right to speak against it as her voice won't be heard by anybody. Such a woman is considered as "Oriental women" by Edward Said and argues, "She never spoke for herself, and she never represented her emotions, presence or history." (1978:6). The colonial voice of the patriarchal society is the superior and the empirical voice is easily heard. However the voice of the subaltern or the doubly colonized women cannot be heard and hence are easily oppressed and traumatized by the dominant groups.

The concept of Sati- a male construct, shows how a patriarchal rule performed in a patriarchal society by some men (in Deeti's case- Chandan Singh) forces women to choose a brutal death against her will. Spivak explains the origin of Sati in this way:

"The Hindu widow ascends the pyre of the dead husband and immolates herself upon it. This is widow sacrifice. (The conventional transcription for the Sanskrit word for the widow would be Sati. The early colonial British transcribed it Suttee. (1988:93). The funeral pyre depicted by Ghosh is not for the self-immolation of Deeti. It is created by the flame of the patriarchal society that burns all the desires and freedom of the Indian women. This fire takes away the basic rights of these women to talk, breathe or even live. The Sati was an oppressive term and an instrument for both the colonizer and the colonized communities of the patriarchal society to victimize women and limit their freedom. Spivak condemns the practice of Sati and declares that Sati is constructed by the patriarchal society as a reward for the widowed women and shows the imperial powers as a social mission in order to legitimize itself among the colonized people. These explanations can be observed upon certain subaltern women characters of the novel.

5. Other Women Characters of the Novel

The novel tries to expose the various ways in which women are dominated by the society. The women characters like Deeti, Paulette and Munia are depicted as the victims of both the patriarchal as well as the feudal society (both the native and the

Western). The position of women as laborers in the colonial society shows the obvious form of domination. Ghosh puts the Indian women as subaltern in his novel in a difficult way in order to expose the role of colonial power more clearly: "In the old days, the fields would be heavy with wheat in the winter, and after the spring harvest, the straw would be used to repair the damage of the year before. But now with the Sahibs forcing everyone to grow poppy, no one had thatch to spare- it had to be bought at the market, from people who lived in faraway villages, and the expense was such that people put off their repairs as long as they possibly could. (19).

Everything happening in the social and economic sphere of the novel is under the control of the British forces. The men who work under the British are the dominant agents of the society who rule over the women. Therefore, the development of the subaltern under such condition is complicated by the imperialist. The colonized and the male dominated society limit the freedom of women in all the spheres of their life.

Ghosh creates a hosts of women characters from different races and parts to show how women are marginalized by the dominant powers of the society everywhere. The character of Paulette, who does not belong to India or any other colonized nation, also shows how all women are treated in a patriarchal society under an imperial rule. Paulette grows up in India with the support of Mr. Burnham Benjamin Bross. When the women are sent to Mauritius as laborers by the colonial forces, they are seen as inferior or as animals by the people of their own land, who consider themselves as the dominated group. So, it can be seen how both forms of power use different strategies in order to have the women under their control. However, some of the women characters show resilience in the face of adversity and

refused to be the subaltern. Deeti acknowledges her love and respect towards Kalua after he saves her from the funeral pyre. She takes initiative in tying the knot with him thus showing resistance to the caste difference that exists between them. Paulette, though being a White woman was suppressed by her step father. But she was able to break herself free from his shackles and entered into a ship called Redruth, which is on its voyage to Botanical expedition.

6. Conclusion

The concepts of colonizer and colonized came into being when certain imperial nations, like the British Empire invaded certain inferior countries like India with the thought to rule and govern them according to their ideologies. Ghosh's novel portrays the aspect of double colonization of women in three areas- land, river and the sea. He successfully shows that the pervasive masculine image concerning women remains same irrespective of place. Though the main motive of Ghosh is to show the evil effects of colonization on the marginalized communities, yet he gives voice to women by creating powerful characters like Deeti and Paulette and creates a sense of identity for them. Ghosh, as a writer acknowledges the importance of women in every sphere of life.

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