

NEGOTIATING IDENTITIES OF THE GIRMITIYAS IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *IBIS TRILOGY*

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Abstract

Identity and migration has evolved as a major area of study in contemporary literature. This paper considers Amitav Ghosh's treatment of the subject in his magnum opus *Ibis Trilogy*, which depicts the trauma and the various circumstances associated with the imperial policy of migration and the negotiation of the identities that the indentured labourers were forced to work on. Writing as from "down under", postcolonial literature, especially its branch of Subaltern literature, has focused on the voice of the oppressed, the marginalized. It is from this context that Amitav Ghosh's "Ibis Trilogy" gains significance, which portrays a large canvas of characters from various backgrounds, united in their journey in the Ibis. In doing so, Ghosh depicts the consequences of such movement against the imperial policy of indentured labour and their migration.

Ghosh records the political and socio-economic conditions that led to the mass migration of impoverished Indian peasants as indentured laborers to the Mauritius islands, thus creating an Indian Diaspora which is unique as it is bound by the common history of plantation economy and indentured servitude. The heterogeneous assembly on board of the Ibis presents Ghosh's concerns with border-crossing between caste, races, and cultures in a nutshell.

Keywords: Migration, Identity, Negotiation, Girmitiyas, Imperialism

The concept of identity has evolved as an important field of study in the wake of globalization and mass movement. The postcolonial literature, especially dealing with imperialism and its associated policy of migrating indentured labour to new colonies, depict the distress of migrating people.

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Amitav Ghosh's writing explores the "transit lounge of culture", which re-conceptualizes migration as a category of fluidity and change, on "ongoing histories of migrations and transnational cultural flows" (Dixon, 2003: 11). Ghosh's fictions are remarkable for his interest in the 'shadow lines' of cultures and its consequent impact on the identity of individuals which renders it flexible. This is most clearly discernible in his Ibis Trilogy (*Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire*). The trilogy primarily adheres to the genre of historical fiction, comprising of elements of historiographic metafiction, which tells us more about our present than about the historical past, set just before the two mid-nineteenth-century Anglo-Chinese Opium Wars (1839–1842 and 1856–1860). The trilogy depicts the complex network of human categories that seem unmatchable. Robert Dixon notes that "*The characters in Ghosh's novels do not occupy discrete cultures, but 'dwell in travel' in cultural spaces that flow across borders – the 'shadow lines' drawn around modern nation states*" (Dixon, 2003: 10). In the process of traversing the "shadow lines" of national boundaries, Ghosh's characters transform from their subaltern identity, bound by the rigid political borders, to inhabit "*a discursive space that flows across political and national boundaries, and even across generations in time*" (Dixon, 2003: 18). During the process of transformation, they evolve as complex, modern characters who are able to transgress their monolithic identities by means of a greater understanding of human relationships.

In *Sea of Poppies*, the first volume of *Ibis trilogy*, Ghosh chronicles the accounts of experiences of the North Indian indentured labourers, the girmitiyas of the late 1830s. Chiefly locating the story in mid-nineteenth century India, Ghosh records the political and socio-economic conditions that led to the mass migration of impoverished Indian peasants as indentured laborers to the Mauritius islands, thus creating an Indian Diaspora which is unique as it is bound by the common history of plantation economy and indentured servitude. The heterogeneous assembly on board of the Ibis presents Ghosh's concerns with border-crossing between caste, races, and cultures in a nutshell. They were called girmitiyas because in exchange the silver that was paid for them went to their respective families, and '*they were taken away, never to be seen again: they vanished, as if into the netherworld*' (72).

In *Ibis Trilogy*, Ghosh creates motley of characters whose notion of subjectivity is constructed through discursive connections with people, places and situations. The identity that is thus created is one in flux, closer to the fluid and changing character in the postmodern sense. All of them are on the go towards self-formation and reconstruction by construing between their past and their future aspirations, moving to reach their destination with a strong degree of ambivalence.

While travelling in the Ibis, the characters try to reconstruct their identities, influenced by power hierarchies and the world that surrounds them as well as their own feelings, beliefs, memories, or imaginations. Thus, Deeti becomes Aditi, Kalua becomes Maddow Colver in order to hide their real identity with a desire to live a new life with a 'true' and respectful identity. Mr Zachary Reid, running away from the American racial discrimination. is transformed into Malum Zikri; Jodu turns to be Azad Naskar; Paulette, impersonating into the gumasta Baboo Nob

Kissin's niece Putleshwari or Pugly, is running away from a rigidly defined and divided European community in India. Raja Neel Rattan Haldar becomes Neel and transported as a convict for the offence he has not made. All these individuals forge a new identity for themselves, and the colonial setup acts as a catalyst for their transformations.

The girmitiyas on the Ibis are not seasoned travellers. They are peasants who have left their homes out of economic necessity as also to escape their unhappy lives comprising of the factional caste, class and gender violence rampant in their village in Bihar. In the Ibis, Deeti realizes that all migrants have an unhappy story to tell. Ghosh imagines the lives of these subaltern women and writes them into a narrative of global history and trade. This is done very effectively, and it is quite remarkable that one of the main characters of *Poppies* is a female indentured labourer, Deeti, who plays the key role in building the ship community (jahaz-bhai and jahaz-behens) as well as a clan (Diaspora) in Mauritius. Ghosh underscores the cosmopolitan practice of migration by developing a narrative that is closely concerned with the lives of his characters, and thus creates a literary engagement with migration. Arguably, this constitutes a cosmopolitan practice of writing in which histories of migration and indentured labours are re-imagined and rewritten.

Sea of Poppies, the prequel to the second novel of the trilogy, *River of Smoke*, charts the protagonist Deeti's and her 'low-caste' lover Kalua's decision to become girmitiyas. It concludes at the beginning of their sea journey aboard the Ibis. The narrative of *River of Smoke* opens about fifty years ahead from where its prequel left off, and then comes back to narrate the events aboard the ship and its impact on some of the major characters. Deeti, now the matriarch of the "Colver" (anglicisation of Kalua's name) clan, visits her memory temple in Mauritius. There, she recounts the journey from India to Mauritius and the incidents that took place on the fateful Ibis. By means of this 'memory narrative', Ghosh describes the great difficulties that the girmitiyas faced during their marine transportation as also the extreme working conditions on the plantations. The point that deserves consideration is that while many of the girmitiyas, like Deeti and Kalua, willingly opted to become indentured labourers, Ghosh questions the historical and structural compulsions associated with such a 'choice' as well as the 'mobility' it facilitated. By reading the sea journey and situation in Mauritius alongside the events of Deeti and Kalua's lives in Bihar in *Sea of Poppies*, I argue that Ghosh is able to effectively narrate the reality of many girmitiyas like them and how the rise in migrant labour was often due to the agrarian conditions in these provinces.

In a further critique of the imperialist policy of indentured labourers, Ghosh narrates, through the voice of its central character, Deeti, the exploitation of the African slaves who were employed in the plantations. Their place was taken by the girmitiyas after the abolition of slavery. As an illustration, Deeti narrates the horrific tale of mass suicide of the fugitive slaves, who mistook soldiers sent to inform them about the abolition of slavery in 1834 for a search troop out to capture them. "*That the soldiers might be messengers of freedom was beyond imagining—mistaking them for a raiding party, the marrons had flung themselves off the cliffs*" (11). The inclusion of this seemingly marginal anecdote in the text is significant as it highlights the prior trade in slaves and their forced transportation to European-owned plantations in colonies such as Mauritius. The replacement of slaves with girmitiyas like Deeti and her shipmates from newly-acquired colonial territories in parts of Hindustan can be seen as an

effective continuation of the pre-existing system of exploitation and domination. This reinforces the argument that the flow of people cannot be perceived as voluntary mobility but a coercive migration of human capital under a capitalist globalised system, already established in the Indian Ocean area by the early nineteenth century. Throughout the novel, Ghosh subtly forges a network of characters with fascinating life stories which double as histories of the transnational movement of people under British imperialism.

River of Smoke depicts various forms of colonial subjugation, such as physical, economic, political, religious, judicial and social. Cathleen Schine's description of the novel as "rarely subtle" is certainly to the point; one can view Ghosh's choice of characters as almost pointedly allegorical or symbolic: Deeti, the poor woman who is a victim of sexual, economic and social subjugations, driven to attempt sati; Neel, the pleasure-loving native raja, lost in the world of poetry, western philosophy and nautch-girls; Burnham and Doughty, the Englishmen with a ruthless streak for power and profit, etc. The typical Ghoshian postcolonial characters evolve by virtue of his attention to the detail in crafting a unique personality for each of them, achieved by means of the individual idiom typical to each of the characters, ranging from the Queen's English, to the creole language of the lascars to the broken English, French and Bengali, which "creates a vivid sense of living voices as well as the linguistic resourcefulness of people in diaspora" (Chew). As the plot advances, the characters, who initially seem to be prototypes, gain individuality by showing tremendous sense of resourcefulness and resilience in the face of personal adversity, thereby overcoming the dangers of stereotypy.

By the 1830s, the British exercised significant administrative and juridical control over acquired territories. As part of such regulation, the British had instituted statutes such as the Permanent Settlement Act for the seizure of the property of native elites and peasants and control over their corporeality. Under such regulations, zamindars were first transformed into pliable agents and mediators who had little responsibility towards the peasants in terms of improvement of the land but complete responsibility towards the Company in the matter of collection of taxes. Encouraging such absentee landlordism often led to further ruin of agricultural land and labourers, already burdened under the forcible cultivation of indigo and opium. A drop in production led to a fall in tax collection on the part of the landlord and in case of a lapse in their duties, the regulations ensured their utter ruin and the consequent transfer of their estate to the East India Company. Such landlords were thereafter transported to offshore prisons such as those in Mauritius, which was part of their administrative and regulatory mechanism. One such case, recounted in *The Sea of Poppies*, is that of Raja Neel Ratan Halder —loosely based on a real character—a gullible zamindar who falls prey to this colonial statute through the machinations of the wily gomastha (an intermediary and agent often with conflicting loyalties). Again, a fictional re-creation of lives under colonial rule becomes Ghosh's mode of integration of critical historiography within his work, opening up these life-worlds for an imaginative reception. In the novel, Neel is one of the convicts being transported to an offshore colonial penitentiary aboard the Ibis. He is also one of the principal characters who is shown to have the potential to change, once he is beyond the pale of collusion and participation in colonial practices, through his own experience of 'subalternisation.'

Marginalized and powerless, the silenced Deeti chooses to self-immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre. Reflecting on the "voiceless, hopeless" plight of Indian women,

Josephine Butler sympathetically remarks that "their helplessness appeals to the heart, in somewhat the same way in which the helplessness and suffering of a dumb animal does, under the knife of a vivisector" (cited in Burton, 144). The narrative vividly presents the barbarity of the Hindu practice of "sati" as Deeti, "*in a resplendent white sari*" (SP, 177), is drawn towards the fire: "*Half dragged and half carried, she was brought to the pyre and made to sit cross-legged on it, beside her husband's corpse. Now there was an outbreak of chanting as heaps of kindling were piled around her, and doused with ghee and oil to ready them to the fire*" (SP, 177). Deliverance comes through transcendence. The impoverished "high-caste" Hindu widow is rescued by the gigantic untouchable Kalua whose identity is circumscribed by calcified social segregation. Kalua and Deeti's intermeshing of caste and sexuality validates their transgressive claim. A couple of years back Deeti had surreptitiously witnessed Kalua's torture and humiliation by three sport-loving landowners of Ghazipur. As he lay "*unconscious in the sand, naked and smeared in dung*" (SP, 57), Deeti "in defiance of the world's unseen presence" (SP, 58), nursed Kalua's wounds. Physical intimacy with this untouchable rouses her flaming passion which bums all her humanity. His powerful physique which lay "peacefully inert", "the softness of mere flesh", her awareness of his breathing, "a faint stirring and swelling" (SP, 58) mesmerize her with the prospect of a fulfilling sexual liaison. As the final realm of pleasure and truth, sexuality is the zone of experience where an individual achieves self-realization. Accordingly, Deeti "suddenly" wakes into a "reality" as she "sat with her hand resting intimately upon the most untouchable part of this man" (SP, 58-59). By asserting her biological desire for Kalua, Deeti subverts the hierarchies of class and caste. She also undermines the male tendency to dominate by initiating the sexual act. Deeti frequently revisited the scene in her memory, "sharpening the details and refreshing certain particulars" (SP, 59). Having given up all hope for a return to life, Kalua's rescue act provides her a "rebirth", "*her next life*": "*she had shed the body of the old Deeti, with the burden of its karma; she had paid the price her stars had demanded of her, and was free now to create a new destiny as she willed, with whom she chose*" (SP, 178). The two elope and marry but are haunted by fears of certain capture and inevitable death. With nowhere to go, the couple registered as indentured labourers, 'girmitiyas', and board the Ibis to migrate to "Mareech", i.e. Mauritius.

In spite of the differences in their identities, some common factors help in creating a group out of them. Dispossession, threat to person, lack of well-being, or simply gullibility is cited as the reason behind the migrants signing up for the trip to Mauritius. But, without exception, immigrant women in the novel are on the ship owing to matters sexual- some thwarted, some forced upon and some in anticipation. Hence even within their shared marginalisation, the agency of the women on the ship is determined by their sexualities. After Deeti's husband's death, she would have been forced to sleep with her brother in law to ensure her survival, the other unaccompanied women on boat, including Paulette were either easy preys to their benefactors or threats to the existing social fabric. The resolution offered in the novel, viz migration to Mauritius, however, occurs within the limits of this contestation and never transgresses it. Crucial twists in the novel are governed by desires and power that seek to govern women's bodies not only through the operation of physical intimacy but also through cross-dressing, such as the gomusta, who though an object of ridicule, transfers his unrequited desire for Zachary into extreme aggression and has to die, the extreme physical and emotional proximity that the two convicts share is wondered upon, by the narrative: but not treated homosocially. Heterosexual love on the other hand takes the plot forward. Deeti is saved by

Kalua twice, once from being burnt alive and the second, from most violent rape. Paulette manages to divert Zachary's attention by feigning intimacy so that the escapees succeed. However, in spite of being crucial to the movement of the plot, in fact, of being the one who conjures the entire novel into being with her line images of the important characters and the ship: Deeti has no place in the final action. The cross-dresser, the French woman who wants to roam freely like men and the pregnant woman look on as the rest of the central characters embark upon a new adventure.

Sexuality bubbles over *Sea of Poppies*, in abuses, references, songs and celebrations, through its deviations from the norm as well as its acceptance of the heteronorm even provides impetus to the plot, and carries the action forward. But as Serang Ali instructs Zachary, "*What for wanchi flower-girl? He not big pukka sahib now?*" (22)-the resolution, at least in this part of the trilogy has to be brought about through a disavowal of women's sexuality, it has to be built by the actions of marginalised men, even as the women or wanting to be women, look on.

While Deeti is marginalized by a feudal and patriarchal society and Neel Rattan is trapped by imperial deceit, Paulette is exposed to a subjugation of a different kind. Just as Deeti is ostracized from mainstream society, Paulette's widowed father, the French botanist Pierre Lambert, is occluded from the English society in Calcutta because of British snobbery and intercultural rivalry. Lambert's isolation is compounded by his iconoclasm: he denied God's existence and the sanctity of marriage. Mrs. Lambert's death at child-birth places Paulette in Jodu's mother's arms and thus her marginalized identity becomes amorphous as she meanders through the in-between spaces of cultural contact zones at times resulting in complete assimilation: "*the first language she learnt was Bengali. And the first solid food she ate was a rice-and-dal khichri cooked by Jodu's mother. In matter clothing she far preferred saris to pinafores*" (SP, 67). "Putli", meaning a doll, becomes the domesticated version of "Paulette", and her nurse becomes "'Tantima'- aunt-mother'" (SP, 66). The rich "confusion of tongues that was to characterize her upbringing" (SP, 66) provides her a linguistic fluidity that reference. Pertinent to the issue is Raymond Hickey's observation that "nativeness is not a question of choice or assessment by others, but a result of early language acquisition" (507). The freedom which Paulette enjoys as a "native", signified by her bare feet roaming, is curbed when the Burnhams decide to adopt and "civilize" her. "Colonialism minus a civilizational mission" asserts Ashis Nandy, "is no colonialism at all" (11). The Burnhams attempt to acculturate Paulette by urging her to accept British social and domestic norms and cognitive categories. Their strong disregard for botany forbids Paulette to instruct the Burnhams' daughter Annabel in botany, philosophy or Latin. "Self-appointed moral guardians of society declared" observes Patricia Fara, "that they wanted to protect young women from the corrupting influence of botanical education" (12). Nowhere is the Burnham's civilizing zeal more vigorous than in the religious domain. What they vehemently demand of Paulette is "regular churchgoing, good behaviour and a willingness to open herself to religious instruction" (SP, 130). By imposing Biblical sermons on the poor girl, Burnham establishes British supremacism and the cultural inferiority of the "Other". Richard Congreve, Bishop of Oxford, believed that "God has entrusted India to us to hold it for him, and we have no right to give it up" (cited in Rao, 26). That the Bible was manipulated by the British to conform to their belief that they were performing a divine mission is neatly articulated by Nicholas B. Dirks:

Indeed, by the late nineteenth century, Christian triumphalism was folded into a new kind of imperial nationalism, in which the rule of the world by Britain was sanctioned both by history and faith. [...] Missionary rhetoric was used to celebrate the accomplishments of empire rather than the message of Christ. (76)

Consequently "colonialism encouraged the colonizers to impute to themselves magical feelings of omnipotence and permanence" (Nandy, 35). Such is Burnham's desire to structure Paulette's consciousness and determine the parameters of her existence that he forces her to marry the widowed Justice Kendalbushe. But despite Kendalbushe's intense desire to marry her and Mrs. Burnham's reiterations that marrying him would be "a prodigious stroke of kismet" (SP, 273), Paulette refuses the proposal where her sentiments are not involved. Rejecting the bliss of domesticity and material comfort she decides to determine her own destiny. Inspired by her botanist grand-aunt Madame Commerson who travelled all round the world in male disguise, Paulette flees the ideological trappings the Bumhams and, helped by Baboo Nob Kissin's improvisations, boards the Ibis. Disguised as a "bamni, a Brahman's daughter" (SP, 355-356) she soon establishes a deep communion with the other women on board and proves that Jodu's and Zachary's doubts about her ability to endure the strains of a marine journey were only misgivings. Such is Paulette's skill in the acts Zachary wonders that she has "so perfected the arts of impersonation" that they have become "the core" of her "soul" (SP, 500-501). Paulette has surreptitiously penetrated into Zachary's closely guarded secret that he is a "black" American, a "mulatto", and is convinced that in terms of "the multiplicity of[...] selves" (SP, 443) they are on the same register. She thrusts at Zachary her profound realization that despite the fragmentary pluralism of one's empirical being there is an underlying unifying substratum: "Whatever there is within us - whether good, or bad, or neither - its existence will continue uninterrupted, will it not, no matter what the drape of our clothes, or the colour of our skin?" (SP, 501). Paulette's enunciation celebrates the unity beneath a plethora of selves and deviates from the poststructural contention that identity is nomadic, endlessly wandering or deferred. Her contention has its philosophical grounding in Schopenhauer's validation of the will which gives "unity and sequence to consciousness" (139), which "alone is unalterable and absolutely identical, and has brought forth consciousness for its own ends. It is therefore the will that gives its unity and holds all its representations and ideas together, accompanying them, as it were, like a continuous ground-bass" (140). Furthermore, "it is the will alone that is permanent and unchangeable in consciousness, [...] the true and ultimate point of unity of consciousness, and the bond of all its functions and acts" (140). Thus assured of her own being she interrogates Neel Rattan whether it is "forbidden for a human being to manifest themselves in many different aspects" (SP, 497). Paulette's reworking of the binarism between the self and the other enables her to enter into an inter-racial, inter-religious "siblingship" (SP, 381) with Jodu and inter-cultural exchange of hearts with Zachary. Transcending all barriers she creates a reciprocal relationship with her fellow travelers on the Ibis and "in a tone of unalloyed certainty" dissolves the self's alienation from the other: "On a boat of pilgrims, no one can lose caste and everyone is the same: it's like taking a boat to the temple of Jagannath, Puri. From now on, and forever afterwards, we will all be ship-siblings --jahaz-bhais and jahaz-bahens- to each other. There'll be no differences between us" (SP, 356). Paulette's rhetoric of communitarianism is based on an "understanding of subjectivity, one that values mutual dependency, reliance, appreciation, and trust between the Self and the Other" (Lin, 11). This indeed is a "paradigmatic reconsideration of the status of the Other in our understanding of who we are-- our self, identity, and individuality". The self's being

the other is an integral part of the ethical relationship with the other. This "witness", conceptualizes Margaret Chatterjee, "covers up the essential difference that there is between people, although we are endowed with the capacity of bridging that distance by embarking on the project of being 'towards' the other" (220).

The relationship between the self and the other is a fluid one which takes on various dimensions according to the peculiarity of the circumstances. Far from being reduced into a passive target of scrutiny, the self and the other enter into a reciprocal relationship as active agents. This open-ended dialogue is exemplified in the aristocrat Neel's conversion of the chronic opium addict Ah Fatt in prison and their subsequent intimacy. The fastidious Neel was very conscious about the purity of his "body" that "bordered almost on the occult" (SP, 198). He inherited this strict observance of the rituals of cleanliness and purification from his mother "for whom bodily defilement was a preoccupation that permitted neither peace nor rest" (SP, 199). Given to cleanse his "dribbling, leaking, spewing cell-mate" (SP, 322), Neel is initially reluctant to part with his ingrained convictions but by being open and responsive to the loathsome Ah Fatt he "could feel the intimations of an irreversible alteration" (SP, 323). Alterity, i.e. the unknowable and unreachable nature of the other, cannot be attained, but it can be approached and negotiated. Admittedly, to "know the other is both to discover the other and to discover the self" (Margaret Chatterjee, 222): "In a way, he was none other than the man he had ever been, Neel Rattan Halder, but he was different too" (SP, 323). The more Neel knows Ah Fatt through physical intimacy the more he learns to treat him as a person possessing value, an end in himself. The act of generosity designates to the other a world which was hitherto the self's sole possession. "The loss of the world of the self", contends Doukhan in analyzing Levinas's philosophy, "thus gives rise to a hospitality the other within that world. The self's exile allows for welcoming of the other" (243). This welcoming stance generates a profound sense of transcendence and erases all possible difference between the self and the other: "Having spent a few days in the same space, Neel had already begun to feel that he was somehow implicated in his cell-mate's plight: it was as if their common destination had made their shame and honour a shared burden" (SP, 325). Thus through generosity the world of the self widens to welcome the dimension of the other; the self's homeland has become a haven for the other, "subjectivity" is presented "as welcoming the Other, as hospitality" (Levinas, 27). This initiates Neel's profound empathic bond with Ah Fatt which is further intensified when he listens captivated to Ah Fat's life-story. In a self-reflexive stance the narrator muses on the impact of the narrative on its audience and the latter's engagement with it as Neel is captivated by Ah Fatt's recollections of his life in Canton:

It was not because of Ah Fatt's fluency that Neel's vision of Canton became so vivid as to make it real: in fact, the opposite was true, for the genius of Ah Fatt's descriptions lay in their elisions, so that to listen to him was a venture of collaboration, in which the things that were spoken of came gradually to be transformed into artefacts of shared imagining. (SP, 375)

The act of interpretation demands the reader's active participation because it is he who excavates the gaps and silences in the narrative. For Tabish Khair reading is "an act of digging" (15) and identifying the "superfluous omissions and not meant-to-be-noticed silences" (14) in the text. Far from being a passive receptor, the reader is an active co-creator and interpreter who not only

"stays on the surface of the text", but is "an active thinker and interpreter. She attends to the text, but she also accomplishes and takes charge to an extent" (15). Neel is very much the active collaborator the narrator wants his readers to be.

The huddling together of a varied cast of characters on the Ibis allows the narrative the space to explore the processes of identity formation. "There are two meanings of the word 'subject'", believes Foucault, "subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to one's own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge" ("The Subject and Power", 212). The "I" is subject to forces and effects both within and without, subject to others "by control or dependence" (212) from even before his/her birth. Being a subject has specifically to do with language: "You cannot be an 'I' without having a proper name[...]. We are born into language, we are born - more precisely -into patriarchal language, into being identified by a patronym, by a paternal proper name" (Bennett Royle, 126). The chameleonic Paulette's multifaceted identity is signified by the various names by which she is known - Putli, Puggly and finally Putleshwari on the Ibis. As argued earlier, she is compelled by social circumstances to don on new avatars and by sequences of elisions and transformations her subjectivity is always in the making and remaking. Tori Moi notes that Beauvoir's central thesis in *The Second Sex* is that "[o]ne is not born a woman; one becomes one" (92). Paulette's multilayered identity validates Catherine Belsey's notion of "cultural construction of identity" (593) and her focus on "process" and possibilities for change therein: "The subject [...] is the site of contradiction, and is consequently perpetually in the process of construction, thrown into crisis by alterations in language and in the social formation, capable of change. And in the fact that the subject is a process lies the possibility of transformation" (597). Incidentally, it is in the course of her role-playing that Paulette realizes that notwithstanding the fragmented, fluid nature of her social self she cannot disengage herself from what is deeply embedded in her:

Now, watching the familiar foliage slip by, Paulette's eyes filled with tears: these were more than plants to her, they were the companions of her earliest childhood and their shoots seemed almost to be her own, plunged deep into this soil; no matter where she went or for how long, she knew that nothing would ever tie her to a place as did these childhood roots. (SP, 381)

A postmodern strand of creativity seems to appear in Ghosh's manner of narrating the plot with colonial background as he blends history with fantasy, juxtaposes native with naïve, units a high caste with an out caste, pastiches genres and mingles languages to create a vivid picture that included a motley mix of characters. His pen is not out of ink to bring to pass the same trend in revealing the origins of characters like Zachary and Ah Fatt as creoles. Moreover, individual identities are portrayed as being shaped by the great historical events. At the point in time when the industrial revolution and abolition of slavery were being celebrated, another system of servitude was underway: indentureship. Indenture labour resulted in the migration of millions of people from place to place and country to country especially-- into British and French colonies. A great Majority of them, either helpless or compelled by the situations, stayed back in the countries and participated in the creation of new, Creole cultures.

The friendship and relationship between the migrants promote sense openness to "difference" and erasure of rigid or categorical distinctions – a common theme of postmodern

novel. These ties between the individuals, unrelated by blood or kinship or race, suggest a world of possibility imagined outside of categorical boundaries of race, class, and nationality. Their caste, class or origin is washed away by the very black water that they have dared to cross. While the Indian Ocean erases their past, the Ibis fills new essence in their life, to be enlivened on Mareech deep. In the light of Anupama Arora's observation the Ibis "gets invested with new symbolic meanings by the migrants and is remade into a vehicle of transformation from which new selves and identities emerge. Different characters feel the "birth of a new existence" on the ship" (38).

The schooner brings new spirits for the migrants. The ship takes image of a new home as the demented figures "create communities of choice" as they creatively reclaim new familial relations that give them strength to survive and tie them to each other. And the migrants obtain a new identity called 'Jahaz-bhai' and 'jahaz-bahens'. The black sea is very symbolic as expressed in following lines: To Deeti "all the old ties were immaterial now that sea had washed away their past" (431). As the relationships among the boarders on the ship are getting revived and aligned, they are allowed to restart their lives with a fresh breathe and new identities. This is how old alliances become frail and past ties are broken to construct their fragmented identities into new. In conclusion, Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies is surely a gripping and engaging novel if assessed from post modernist's point of view. The way the identities of the characters constructed and reconstructed can yield interestingly new insights into the meaning and understanding of postmodern identities in the present era. According to Stuart Hall, "Identity becomes a 'moveable feast'; formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in postmodern societies."

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