

# Labour and Migrant Labour in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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**Abstract:** The fiction of Amitav Ghosh has frequently portrayed labourers. Migrant labour has been his special concern. His fiction is concerned with migration and travel as a basic feature of human experience especially in the colonial era. *Sea of Poppies* portrays the fate both of the labourers who work in opium fields and the inhuman condition of the Ghazipur opium factory and that of illegal migrant labour aboard the trading vessel, *Ibis*, and the inhuman treatment they have to put up with. Thus Ghosh severely indicts perpetrators of the opium trade in the colonial era.

*Keywords:* Opium, migrant, factory, ship, trader

The fiction of Amitav Ghosh is marked by travel; diaspora and illegal migrant labour both figure in his fiction. Travel is easily possible for those who have passports. Those who lack passports travel covertly. Amitav Ghosh's fiction shows concern and empathy with the working class in general and migrant labour in particular. *Sea of Poppies* (2008) recreates the nineteenth century era of the opium trade and portrays labourers in the village who work on poppy fields and suffer at the hands of their colonial employers; they run away to sea to become migrant labour in countries like Mauritius and undergo horrendous journeys on the ships. Ghosh critiques an era when migrant labour became very prominent and the colonial masters sent massive numbers of men and women from India to other countries for the purpose of enhancing trade. The continuing movement of migrant labour in the world today can be seen as a hangover from colonial precedents.

In *The Circle of Reason* (1986), his first novel and *Gun Island* (2019), his latest novel, Ghosh depicts the movement of migrant labour from India to Al Ghazira and Italy respectively. In the first novel, "the faceless migrants ...have no privileged relationship with their 'New World.'...multinational corporations are responsible for their exploitation....third world migrants in the Gulf are marginalized" (Chambers 58). In *Gun Island* a number of illegal immigrants from West Bengal and Bangladesh make their way to Italy: "When Deen travels to Venice ... he discovers that many Bangladeshis are being employed as illegal migrant labour. Their hazardous journey across the Middle East and Africa and the strong, even militant, opposition to their presence by Italian authorities" is described (Joshi 98). However, in these two novels, the concern with migrant labour is a subsidiary concern while it is the primary concern in *Sea of Poppies*.

The opium trade by the British carrying opium from India to China is the central concern of the novel. Mr. Burnham tells Neel, the Raja of Raskhali, that "British rule in India could not be sustained without opium.... The Company's annual gains from opium are almost equal to the entire revenue ... of the United States. Do you imagine that British

rule would be possible in this impoverished land if it were not for this source of wealth? And if we reflect on the benefits that British rule has conferred upon India, does it not follow that opium is this land's greatest blessing" (115).

Elsewhere in the novel, the British enterprise of growing opium is justified. Mr. Burnham states that the ill effects of opium in China are not worse than the effects of gin in London. One cannot ban liquor, it is the small man's daily pleasure; similarly one cannot ban opium. Opium's medicinal by-products, Burnham points out, include morphine, codeine, nicotine — "those are but a few of the blessings derived from opium" (116). The Chinese authorities are opposing the opium trade as they are not getting an adequate cut from the profits. So a war becomes necessary to bring China to its heels. As usual any colonial effort is presented as having a philanthropic motivation: "a war is necessary if China is to be opened to God's word." Burnham says the reason for the Opium War becomes a missionary effort to save Chinamen. Also the war will help the Indians more than anyone else: "We need only think of the poor Indian peasant—what will become of him if his opium can't be sold in China?" (260).

The novel opens with the involvement of poor farmers in growing poppies at the behest of the East India Company to feed the Sudder Opium factory in Ghazipur. We are given a detailed fictional depiction of the experience of labour in the poppy fields. Deeti, a central character in the novel, sweeps up poppy leaves and heats them on an iron plate on her small domestic fire. They soon melt and form "rotis" like pieces of bread. These rotis are sold to the Sudder Opium factory to line the earthenware containers in which opium is stored.

In the old days the villagers would grow a little poppy and sell some and keep some. Poppies were grown in small quantities between clusters of wheat, masoor dal and vegetables. The sap was sieved of impurities and left to dry and became "akbari" afeem. Some opium was kept for illnesses and domestic cooking. The rest was sold to local nobility. A few clumps of poppies were adequate to grow. The actual growing of poppy was difficult and we see how on insisting on using their fields entirely for the growth of the crop of poppy, the British imposed a very unfair demand on the poor farmer.

The growing of poppy required fifteen ploughings of land; fences had to be built, manure procured and there had to be constant watering of the crop. No one wanted to plant more than a small amount of poppies—wheat, dal, vegetables were far more profitable to grow. But "the factory's appetite for opium seemed never to be sated" (29). The agents would go from house to house forcing cash advances on the farmers, making them sign contracts. At the end the earnings of the farmers just paid off the advance. The opium growing farmers were reduced to extreme poverty forcing them to run away and explore other options like becoming migrant labour sailing international waters from Calcutta.

The farmers are very badly treated not only by the British agents but also the local nobility. An example is Kahua, a very tall, strong man. He is hired by a family of three noblemen to fight and win wrestling matches for them and he earns them vast sums of money. Then they have a lewd desire to watch him in a sexual encounter with a prostitute. She refuses. He is forced to perform a sexual act with a mare and is led back to the village, utterly humiliated, led by a halter.

There are two important spaces in the novel pertaining to labour and migrant labour—the Sudder Opium factory, and later the ship, *Ibis*, which carries migrant labour to other ports in Mauritius. Both spaces indicate the colonial attitude to the poor, destitute labour class, used as a mere tool in trade and not seen or treated as human at all.

The British flag flies on top of the Sudder Opium factory. The factory looks like a medieval fort. Armed guards and sentries pace the factory keeping a close watch on the workers. The factory has a lazy atmosphere. The monkeys on the trees are stupefied by the fumes of the factory. Inside the factory the odour of raw opium sap befuddles the senses of those who work inside. The raw opium gum is stored in earthenware vessels.

Ghosh's vivid imagining of the interior of the nineteenth-century factory helps us to realize the actual, horrendous circumstances in which the workers functioned. The factory itself is like a tunnel. The air inside is hot and smells of liquid opium mixed with the stench of sweat. Deeti sees a number of dark, lifeless torsos. These are bare-bodied men sunk waist deep in the opium and have glazed eyes. We can see how dangerous the work is. These men have "the look of ghouls" (95). The white overseers are armed with fearsome instruments: metal scoops, long rods.

On the upper scaffolds are boys who throw the spheres of opium to each other, relaying them from hand to hand until they come to rest on the floor. The slightest slip from that height can mean death. If one of them drops a sphere he is thrashed with a cane, "his howls and shrieks went echoing through the vast chilly chamber" (96). The overcrowded factory employs two hundred and fifty adult men and five hundred boys.

The *Ibis* carries a motley crowd of people including migrant labour. It is headed for Mauritius. In Amitav Ghosh's work bodies of water like rivers and seas figure prominently. In *The Circle of Reason* the *Mariana*, a small ship, takes a group of migrant labour to the Arab kingdom of Al Ghazira. The boats in Ghosh's work are an ironic version of the Biblical Noah's ark. In a way the ships have a salvational role because they help the migrant workers to escape to newer places with hope of profit and better life circumstances. But the conditions on the ships, including those of the *Ibis*, are deplorable and inhuman.

The *Ibis* was "Blackbirder' for transporting slaves." The reason she changed hands was that slavery was being abolished in America. The new owner "had acquired her with an eye to fitting her for a different trade: the export of opium" (11). As such she was acquired by Burnham Bros., based in Calcutta, having extensive interests in India and China.

Again, with the failure of the opium trade and in the wake of the looming first Opium War with China, the ship was put to a new use of exporting coolies from India to Mauritius. When the ship reaches Port Louis, the owner of the plantation requests the foreman, Zachary Reid, to bring coolies: "tell Mr. Burnham that I need men. Now that we no longer have slaves in Mauritius, I must have coolies, or I am doomed" (21).

The description of the housing quarters of the ship for slaves and coolies is frightening. The area is divided into pens as is done for animals. There are chains nailed onto a beam ending in a clasp for a human hand reminding us of the time the *Ibis* was used to transport slaves.

There are depressions on the wooden floor which could only have been made by humans: "packed close together, like merchandise on a vendor's counter". (143). Earlier Zachary discovers that the middle deck, "where the schooner's human cargo had been accommodated, was riddled with peepholes and air ducts, bored by generations of captive Africans" (12).

The kinds of people who manage the *Ibis* trace the hierarchy of persons the British used to control the migrant labour. These persons are opportunists who have moved up the scale from the lowest rungs and are quite happy to cruelly enforce the demands of their employers on the workers. The second in command is a coloured man, Zachary Reid. He was born to a quadroon mother and a white father. To escape racism he runs away and joins the *Ibis* on its first voyage from Baltimore to Calcutta.

The owner of the *Ibis* is Benjamin Burnham whose first voyage was to the prison island, Port Blair. Here he acquires education and befriends the prison chaplain. He finds employment with various firms dealing with the China trade. In 1817 he becomes a free merchant for the East India Company and starts exporting opium to China. His first foray into trade, though, is transporting men, convicts. He makes a huge profit and can enter the opium trade. He is smug that the slave trade has been replaced with the opium trade: “when the doors of freedom were shut to the African, the Lord opened them to a tribe that was yet more needful of it—the Asiatic” (79).

Serang Ali, of uncertain origins, is the chief of lascars or deck hands, themselves a form of migrant labour. Nob Kissin who comes from a religious family from a village near Calcutta becomes a “gomuster”, an agent of the East India Company, to sign bonds with weavers and artisans to deliver goods to the Company at fixed prices. These agents were ruthless and punished artisans for delays. Nob Kissin is a typical employee of the Company—domineering and cruel to the poor labour class and obsequious to the white employer: “He never took offence if a sahib called him a dung-brained gubberhead, or compared his face to a bandar’s bung-hole” (163). The language of the white man shows that they look on the Asian labour force as little better than animals.

The migrants aboard the *Ibis* consist of “girimtiyas” or indentured labour and lascars who are deck hands: “Shiploads of coolies travelled the Indian Ocean under horrible conditions ... to supply cheap labour for the British sugar planters in such islands as Mauritius” (329). As Deeti goes to pick up her husband from the opium factory, she sees hundreds of people walking past with bundles on their heads. They are hemmed in by stick-bearing guards. Deeti is told they are girimtiyas:

They were so called because, in exchange for money, their names were entered on ‘girimtis’—agreements written on pieces of paper. The silver that was paid for them went to their families, and they were taken away, never to be seen again: they vanished as if into the netherworld” (72).

Deeti is told they are going to “Mareech ... an island in the sea—like Lanka, but further away” (72).

Later, when Deeti cannot repay the advance taken by her husband for the poppy planting she is rudely told to sell her sons as girimtiyas: “Do what others are doing ... Sell your sons. Send them off to Mauritius” (155).

The recruiter (daffadar) of girimtiyas for the *Ibis*, Ramsaran, approaches Nob Kissin to create a camp to house the girimtiyas till they board the ship. The aim is commercial not philanthropic:

In the past, duffadars like Ramsaran had usually kept their recruits in their own homes until they were shipped out. But this practice had proved unsatisfactory ... for one, it plunged the would-be migrants into city life, exposing them to all kinds of rumours and temptations.... A few duffadars had tried to keep their recruits indoors by locking them out—but only to be faced with riots, fires and break-outs. The city’s unhealthy climate was yet another problem, for every year a good number of migrants perished of communicable diseases. From an investor’s point of view, each dead, escaped, incapacitated recruit represented a serious loss and it was increasingly clear that if something wasn’t done about the problem the business would cease to be profitable... a camp had to be built” (197).

Nob Kissin, the overseer of the *Ibis*, knows that Burnham will not be in favour of wasting money on building a camp: “Burnham considered the transportation of migrants an

unimportant and somewhat annoying part of his shipping enterprise (213). However, following the fall in the opium trade, it was the coolies who have been an unfortunate alternative to the more profitable cargo of opium.

The girmitiyas are recruited across caste: "All kinds of men are eager to sign in—Brahmins, Ahirs, Chamars, Telis. What matters is that they are young and able-bodied and willing to work" (204-5). The duffadar tells Kahua he is willing to take women like Deeti as people in Mareech want female recruits. Women were cheaper to hire than men: "Women have always represented a significant share of migratory movements" (Eagle, 1)

At a slightly higher level than girmitiyas are the lascars who work as deck hands on the ship. However, they are treated as badly. On his first voyage on the *Ibis* Zachary has a mutiny on hand: "with the crew on half-rations, eating maggoty hard tuck and rotten beef, there was an outbreak of dysentery ... two of the black crewmen were in chains for refusing the food that was put before them" (12-13).

Zachary had thought that lascars were a tribe like Cherokee Indians. Ghosh presents an interesting sociological portrayal of lascars. They include Chinese, East Africans, Goans, Tamils and Arhanese. They come in groups of about fifteen, each with a leader, who speaks on behalf of the group. To break up the group is impossible—they have to be taken together or not at all. Though they come cheap they have their own idea of how much work they would do. Three or four lascars usually have to be employed to do one man's job" (13).

A central female character in the novel is Deeti, who escapes from Ghazipur to Calcutta. She is widowed and has to perform *sati*—that is, she has to be burnt on her husband's funeral pyre as per custom. She escapes this fate. Her journey up the river on a smaller boat with other migrants is described. This is her first travel on a smaller ship before she boards the *Ibis*. Deeti is marked by her defiance—she plans her escape: "Both Deeti and Kahua knew that their best chance of escape lay in travelling down river ... to Patna, perhaps or even Calcutta" (191).

Aboard the boat Deeti takes the other women under her fold. Ghosh gives us details of a few of the women bringing alive a few members of a faceless majority of female labour. There is Sarju, a midwife, who made a mistake while delivering a noblewoman's baby, causing her to be driven from her house. Ratna and Champa are sisters, married to two brothers whose lands were contracted to the opium factory and could no longer support them. Hence becoming indentured labourers was a better option to them than starvation. Dookhaneer has escaped the oppression of living with a violently abusive mother-in-law; Muniya states she is travelling to join her two brothers who are already in Mareech. The description of these women shows the kind of women who were recruited as female migrant labour. Deeti appoints herself "a guardian of the single women" (378). The sisterhood of the women sustains them on their journey.

*Sea of Poppies* is an effective portrayal of the life of indentured labour and their plight in their homeland as planters of poppies and aboard the ship as they are carried to new destinations. The merciless nature of the white employer and his inhuman treatment of the workers are vividly conveyed bringing alive for us the life and times of poppy farmers in an era gone by.

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