

**UNIVERSIDADE DE SÃO PAULO
FACULDADE DE FILOSOFIA, LETRAS E CIÊNCIAS HUMANAS
DEPARTAMENTO DE LETRAS MODERNAS
PROGRAMA DE PÓS-GRADUAÇÃO
EM ESTUDOS LINGÜÍSTICOS E LITERÁRIOS EM INGLÊS**

**AMITAV GHOSH'S *SEA OF POPPIES* (2008):
A WEB OF GENDER, CULTURAL AND MYTHIC RELATIONS IN THE
NINETEENTH-CENTURY COLONIAL INDIA**

REGIANE CORRÊA DE OLIVEIRA RAMOS

**Versão Corrigida
São Paulo — 2016**

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**Tese de Doutorado apresentada ao Programa
de Pós-Graduação em Estudos Linguísticos e
Literários em Inglês do Departamento de
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Laura Patricia Zuntini de Izarra.**

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ABSTRACT

This doctoral dissertation focuses on Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008) to investigate, from a postcolonial perspective, the way in which the writer deconstructs gender in the nineteenth-century India. In Chapter I, I analyze men and women within the Indian familial space in the nineteenth century, demonstrating how both are subjected to the disempowering effects of traditional rituals (such as *sati*), structures of Brahminical morality and patriarchal violence. The main character pair — Deeti and Kalua — is an example of how the persons are sexually assaulted (rape) and then silenced by an oppressive system. Chapter II, I examine men and women within the British colonial space, indicating how they are effected by the opium cultivation in the Indian hinterland. The peripheral characters — peasants, eurasian and convicts — are highlighted to show how they are uprooted from homeland and forced to be taken across the seas by the colonial administration to work as indentured labour. In Chapter III, I investigate the gender roles ascribed to Indians by the British colonizers. The secondary character pair — Nob Kissin and Taramony — shows how Ghosh deconstructs gender with the use of Indian mythology and storytelling. In the conclusion, I point out how Indian mythology is retrieved as an instrument of resistance.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, Indian English Literature, Indian myths

RESUMO

Esta tese de doutorado tem como objetivo investigar, sob a luz do questionamento pós-colonial, como Amitav Ghosh em *Sea of Poppies* (2008) desconstrói a narrativa colonial sobre gênero na Índia colonial no século XIX. No Capítulo I, analiso homens e mulheres dentro do espaço familiar indiano, demonstrando como ambos estão sujeitos aos efeitos de desempoderamento dos rituais (como *sati*), da moralidade bramânica e da violência patriarcal. As personagens — Deeti e Kalua — exemplificam como os sujeitos, vítimas de violência sexual (estupro), são silenciados pelo sistema opressor. No Capítulo II, examino homens e mulheres dentro do espaço colonial britânico, indicando como os indivíduos são afetados pelo cultivo do ópio na Índia. As personagens periféricas — camponeses, anglo-indianos e condenados — servem de exemplo para destacar como essas pessoas são arrancadas de seu país e forçadas a migrar para as colônias inglesas. No Capítulo III, investigo como os ingleses inferiorizam os indianos. As personagens secundárias — Nob Kissin e Taramony — mostram como o conceito de gênero é desconstruído através da mitologia. Concluo argumentando que Amitav Ghosh faz uso da mitologia indiana como um instrumento de resistência.

Palavras-chaves: Amitav Ghosh, Literatura Indiana de Língua Inglesa, Mitos Indianos

RESUMO EXPANDIDO

Durante a minha estada de um ano no campus da Jawaharlal Nehru University, que atrai estudantes de todos os cantos da Índia, eu tive a minha primeira experiência da diversidade cultural da Índia. Observei a multiplicidade de línguas, a variedade topográfica, as seis estações, o sistema de castas, a diversidade religiosa, as diferentes práticas culturais, a rica e variada culinária, as ideologias políticas divergentes, a literatura, o cinema, os vários deuses e a mitologia, etc. As ruas de Délhi me fizeram perceber que a diversidade indiana não se limita apenas à língua, religião, etnia e classe social, mas também se estende ao gênero. Os *hijras* — “que são ao mesmo tempo masculino e feminino, nem masculino e nem feminino, eunuco e travesti” (LAL, 2005, p. 200) — são uma força viva, apesar de serem desprezados por muitos, que desestabiliza o conceito de gênero. Na Índia, a questão do gênero é ainda mais complicada porque precisamos levar em consideração classe, casta e religião. O debate sobre os direitos das mulheres e do empoderamento também é complexo, pois envolve desigualdades entre homens e mulheres e entre as próprias mulheres. Esta complexidade decorre de uma série de estruturas de poder dentro dessa sociedade: casta alta e casta baixa, rural e urbana, alfabetizados e analfabetos, ricos e pobres, público e privado, velhos e jovens, e hindus e muçulmanos — os dois maiores grupos religiosos do país. No entanto, essa rica mistura de culturas e tradições pode ser um pouco complexa de entender, especialmente para a maioria das pessoas que chegam à Índia pela primeira vez. Mas depois de passar um período considerável vivendo em Délhi e viajando pelo país é que as palavras de Shashi Tharoor começaram a fazer sentido para mim. Em seu livro *Introduction to India: From Midnight to*

the Millennium and Beyond, Tharoor diz que “o pluralismo da Índia emerge de sua geografia, é refletido em sua história, e é confirmado por sua etnografia” (THAROOR, 1997, p. 6). Sua heterogeneidade e sua complexidade tornam a Índia um lugar fascinante.

É isso que tento mostrar nesta tese também. Como diz o clichê, há muitas Índias e elas coexistem simultaneamente em várias épocas diferentes ao mesmo tempo. Para entender as questões sociais, culturais, econômicas e políticas indianas, é preciso colocar a Índia, o estado-nação, em diálogo com a Índia, a civilização. Segundo Vinay Lal, o estado-nação indiano tem que “entrar em diálogo com as tradições dos povos marginalizados, com as formas locais de conhecimento, com o não-moderno (embora não necessariamente tradicionais), com o anti-histórico, com os mitos, com o vernáculo, e com os elementos pluralistas da civilização indiana” (LAL, 2005, p. xiii). Lal alega que, ao contrário do estado-nação, a Índia como uma civilização é mais resiliente. No entanto, esse “eu resiliente” indiano foi descartado e inferiorizado pelos ingleses durante o período colonial.

É essa identidade indiana que Amitav Ghosh busca resgatar em sua obra. Esta tese, portanto, se propõe a investigar como Ghosh desconstrói a questão de gênero no século XXI a partir do século XIX durante a presença britânica na Índia. A obra literária analisada é *Sea of Poppies* (2008). Esse romance faz parte da *Ibis* trilogia — *Sea of Poppies* (2008) *River of Smoke* (2011) e *Flood of Fire* (2015). A saga percorre as águas do Oceano Índico, narrando o comércio do ópio entre Índia e China e suas consequências na vida dos cidadãos indianos e chineses. Entre as várias histórias, das quase duas mil páginas, a narrativa apresenta a história da primeira diáspora indiana, causada pelo comércio do ópio. Milhares de indianos são obrigados a deixarem a Índia e desembarcarem nas Ilhas Maurício como trabalhadores contratados (*indentured laborers*). Esta tese demonstra através da análise das personagens a

rede de relações tecidas por Amitav Ghosh para fazer de sua narrativa uma metáfora de resistência.

No Capítulo I, analiso homens e mulheres dentro do espaço familiar indiano, demonstrando como ambos estão sujeitos aos efeitos de desempoderamento dos rituais (como *sati*), da moralidade bramânica e da violência patriarcal. As personagens — Deeti e Kalua — exemplificam como os sujeitos, vítimas de violência sexual (estupro), são silenciados pelo sistema opressor. No Capítulo II, examino homens e mulheres dentro do espaço colonial britânico, indicando como os indivíduos são afetados pelo cultivo do ópio na Índia. As personagens periféricas — camponeses, anglo-indianos e condenados — servem de exemplo para destacar como esses indivíduos são arrancados de seu país e forçados a migrar para as colônias inglesas. No Capítulo III, investigo como os ingleses inferiorizam os indianos, sua mitologia e seu comportamento. As personagens secundárias — Nob Kissin e Taramony — mostram como o conceito de gênero é desconstruído através da mitologia. Essas três etapas da análise me permitiram concluir que Amitav Ghosh faz uso da mitologia indiana como um instrumento de resistência.

ABBREVIATIONS

All direct quotations from primary texts by Amitav Ghosh are given as follows:

Sea of Poppies (SOP)

River of Smoke (ROS)

The Imam and the Indian: Prose Pieces (TITI)

In An Antique Land (IAAL)

INTRODUCTION

*“If America is a melting pot, then to me India is a **thali**, a selection of sumptuous dishes in different bowls. Each tastes different, and does not necessarily mix with the next, but they belong together on the same plate, and they complement each other in making the meal a satisfying repast. Indians are used to multiple identities and multiple loyalties, all coming together in allegiance to a larger idea of India, an India that safeguards the common space available to each identity”.* Shashi Tharoor

Although I had read and studied a lot about pluralism in India during my master’s degree program at the University of São Paulo, I only began to understand its real magnitude when I was a PhD fellow at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi (2012-2013).¹ During my one-year stay in the sprawling campus, which attracts students from all corners of India, I had first-hand experience of Indian diversity and pluralism. I observed the multiplicity of languages, the variety of topography, the six different seasons, the caste system, and the diversity of religion, cultural practice, cuisine, political ideology, literature, film industry, and multiple gods within the Hindu pantheon with their diverse, sometimes overlapping or contradicting, mythology, etc. The streets of Delhi made me aware that Indian diversity is not just limited to language, religion, ethnicity, and caste, but also to gender. The *hijras* — who,

¹ In one of her National Movement classes in the Centre for Historical Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Professor Mridula Mukherjee explained to the students the importance of going to the country which you were researching about. She told them that it would be important at least to breathe the local air. She commented this when she was talking about Rajani Palme Dutt who wrote about India, but he had never been to India.

to quote Vinay Lal in *Of Cricket, Guinness and Gandhi: Essays on Indian History and Culture* (2005), “are at once male and female, neither-male and neither-female, eunuch and transvestite” (200) — are a living force, despite being despised by many, which troubles the concept of gender. Hijras are born as male children biologically. However, psychologically they feel they are female. In a verdict in 2014, the Indian Supreme Court gave the *hijras* or transgenders the status of the ‘third gender’. Historically and culturally, the community of *hijras*, who exist on the margins of society in modern India, defies the gender binaries (male/female).

In India, the gender issue is further complicated by class, caste and religion. The question of women’s rights and empowerment is also complex, as it involves inequalities between men and women, among women themselves and among men themselves. This complexity stems from a series of power structures based on divisions within the Indian society: upper-caste and lower-caste, urban and rural, literate and illiterate, rich and poor, public and private, young and old, and Hindus and Muslims — the two biggest religious groups in the country. From the Vedic period (1500 BC to 600 BC) to the present times, the representation of women has undergone a mutation: from mother-goddess figure in ancient times to mother and from mother to daughter.² The role of women has been defined and adopted in different periods according to the different perspectives: colonialist, nationalist, post-independence and feminist movements. In “Whatever happened to the Vedic Dasi? Orientalism, Nationalism and a Script for the Past,” Uma Chakravarti argues that the Orientalists and colonial writers created a mythical golden age of Indian womanhood in the Vedic period. The women of this period were seen as spiritual, tenderhearted and devotional

² The Vedic Period, as S. Radhakrishnan explains, “covers the age of the settlement of the Aryans and the gradual expansion and spread of the Aryan culture and civilisation” (33).

to their husband and family. For Chakravarti, this ‘lost glory’ of Indian civilization still puts a huge burden on Indian women.

In recent times, several writers have called India a modern state but an ancient civilization. In its more than 5,000 years of history, the Indian civilization has been a coveted place, attracting peoples, cultures, religions, myths, invaders and colonizers. This rich mix of cultures and traditions can be a bit complex to understand, especially for most first-time travelers to India. But after spending considerable period in India and getting exposed to this great diversity, which is living and thriving even today, Shashi Tharoor’s words began to make sense to me. In his book *Introduction to India: From Midnight to the Millennium and Beyond* (1997), Tharoor says that “India’s pluralism emerges from its geography, is reflected in its history, and is confirmed by its ethnography” (6). Like a *thali* — “a platter of sumptuous dishes in different bowls” — various faiths like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Sikhism, Judaism and hundreds of different ethnic and caste groups co-exist in the same ‘dish-land’. Though distinct, they complement each other in making the cultural diversity of India. Its heterogeneity and complexity makes India such an exciting idea, which became a modern nation-state only when it got independence from the British colonial rule (1947) and a republic in 1950.

But, as the cliché goes, there are many Indias and the country exists in several different epochs at the same time. These Indias, traversing several time periods, meet, interact and collide with each other every day. To understand the social, cultural, economic political issues in the subcontinent, one has to, as Vinay Lal argues in *Of Cricket, Guinness and Gandhi: Essays on Indian History and Culture* (2005), make India, the nation-state, dialogue with India, the civilization. For Lal, the modern nation-state has “to enter into a conversation

with the traditions of marginalized people, local forms of knowledge, and the non-modern (though by no means necessarily ‘traditional’), antihistoricist, mythic, vernacular, and pluralist elements of Indian civilization” (xiii). Lal contends that, unlike the nation-state, India as a civilization is more resilient and sensible. But this Indian ‘self’ was systematically discarded by British colonial rule in the name of maturity, adulthood, normality, manhood, development and civilization.³

All this diversity and all the constant conversation between its various parts, with its accompanying array of languages, religions and ethnicities, extends to the Indian literary world as well. In *Indian Literature: Notes towards the Definition of a Category* (2000), Aijaz Ahmad argues that the difficulty of having an Indian literature does not lie in the fact that India has many languages or overlapping and multilayered histories, but in the “narrativization of history” (244). So the questions remain: Whose history is being written? History of the elite or the subaltern? For Ahmad, this has:

privileged High Textuality of a Brahminical kind to posit the unification of this literary history; or assembled the history of the main texts of particular languages (in a very uneven way) to obtain this unity through the aggregative principle; or attempted to reconstruct the cross-fertilization of genres and themes in several languages, but with highly idealistic emphases and with the canonizing procedures of the ‘great books’ variety, with scant attempt to locate literary history within other sorts of histories in any consistent fashion.

(244-245)

³ In *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (1983), Ashis Mandy explains how colonialism delegitimized femininity, childhood and old age.

In other words, Ahmad criticizes the inadequacy of the model developed by the nineteenth-century Orientalists for inventing India's past as a Hindu 'golden age'.⁴ He contends that this tendency of the Orientalists contributed to creating a single canonicity of religious and literary texts. As raised by Ahmad, the issue of "Sanskritization" or Brahmanization (i.e. the process through which the upper-caste lifestyle, traditions and values become the desired culture for all lower castes, leaving aside all the diversity found in the subcontinent, most of all the Dravidian tradition from southern India) of texts like the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*⁵ over local versions, which vary from region to region and from caste to caste, haunts the academic agenda and provokes heated debates among scholars in India.⁶ In his works, the poet and scholar of Indian literature Attipat Krishnaswami Ramanujan (1929-1993) has demystified the widely-held belief that Sanskrit poetics is all that ancient India has to offer. In "On Ancient Tamil Poetics," Ramanujan raises the prestige of *Tolkāppiyam*, a work on the grammar of the Tamil language and literature, containing the history of ancient South India. In the Tamil literary tradition, the Sangam Age — reign of the Chera, Pandya and Chola dynasties — is considered the cultural heritage of the entire

⁴ William Jones, Henry Thomas Colebrooke and Max Muller, the founding fathers of the Asiatic Society, were responsible for the rediscovery of India's past. William Jones created a 'golden age' based on the glories of ancient Hindus. His theory of language became a racial theory which is very much contested by historians and scholars.

⁵ In the thesis, I use Chakravarti Rajagopalachari's English version of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. In *Indian Philosophy*, S. Radhakrishnan dates the Epic Period from 600 BC to AD 200 in which the epics the *Mahabharata* (composed by Vyasa) and the *Ramayana* (composed by Valmiki) "serve as the vehicles through which was conveyed the new message of the heroic and the godly in human relations" (33). See Radhakrishnan, S., *Indian Philosophy* Volume I. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008.

⁶ For a comprehensive discussion of this recent critique, see Tharu, Susie and K. Lalita, *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1991. Print. and Sarkar, Sumit. *Modern Indian: 1885-1947*. New Delhi: MacMillan, 2012. Print. See also Ranajit Guha who argues that there is no unitary nation to speak for. For him, the important question is how and through what practices an official nationalism emerged that claims to represent such a unitary nation. Guha, Ranajit. "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India." In: *Selected Subaltern Studies*. ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. Print.

southern region. The Sangam literature produced during this period, which lasted from 3rd century BCE to 4th Century AD, deals with love, war, governance, trade and loss.⁷

For Ramanujan, as well as for several other liberal writers, artists, and intellectuals, Indian literature must be seen as a story told in many languages and versions, and not in a single idiom. After all, there are 23 major languages and 22,000 distinct dialects in India. Unique in its plurality of language, religion, custom, cuisine, costume, etc., India is not a nation-state in the European sense of the term. India cannot sustain itself as a modern state based on one language, one religion and dominance of one region. This pluralism, as Tharoor observes, “is acknowledged in the way India arranges its own affairs: all groups, faiths, tastes and ideologies survive and contend for their place in the sun” (8). In “Literature in the Indian *Bhashas*: Front Yards and Backyards,” Udupi Rajagopalacharya Ananthamurthy uses two metaphors — front yard and back yard — to explain the socio-cultural clash in Indian society. On the one hand, the high traditions or high cultural domain includes the great gods and goddesses, the Sanskrit language, the caste/varna structure, the Bhraminical values, the male-centered outlook, the temples and priests, and the *Puranas* and the epics.⁸ On the other hand, the low tradition or low cultural domain comprises the small gods and goddesses, the *bhasha*/vernacular languages, the anti-caste/anti-varna structure, the anti-Brahminical outlook, and the female-centered society.⁹ Ananthamurthy speaks out in favor of ‘the back yard’, “which

⁷ Although Ramanujan published poetry in English, Kannada and Tamil, he became known for his translations from Kannada and Tamil. He was concerned not only about conveying words from one language to the other but also about translatability of categories, concepts and cultures. Translation plays a especial role in India due to the linguistic complexity. For further reading see, Ramanujan, A. k.. *The Interior Landscapes*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967. Print.

⁸ I use O’Flaherty, Wendy Doniger. *Hindu Myths: A Sourcebook*, translated from the Sanskrit. Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1975. Print. as a reference to the Puranas.

⁹ *Bhasha* means native Indian languages, but Ananthamurthy argues in favor of the word *bhasha* because of the pejorative connotations the word vernacular has, that is, imperialist implications. He uses the terminology Indian literature in *bhashas*.

still is the world of women, *shudras*, the secret therapeutic herbs and has roots and tendrils for new tastes, keeps literature in the *bhashas* continuously supplied with new themes and treatment”, and opposes the ‘front yard’, which is “framed impressively by massive well-carved pillars” and is “a place of authority” (151; 149).

Besides the linguistic tussle between different domains as described above, another debate spins off in the same field with the language of the colonizer, that is, English. In his foreword to *Kanthapura* (1989), Raja Rao demonstrates the difficulty in telling an Indian story in the English language. This linguistic conundrum is best captured in his own words:

the telling has not being easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word ‘alien’, yet English is not an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up — like Sanskrit or Persian was before — but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will some day prove to be as distinctive and colorful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it. (v)

From being the language of the colonizer, in today’s India, English has become the language of the middle class and urban elite, dominating other Indian languages and

obfuscating their growth and literary value.¹⁰ In *Mirrorwork: 50 years of Indian Writing 1947-1997* (1997), Salman Rushdie's statement diminishes the role of vernacular languages:

the prose writing — both fiction and non-fiction — created in this period by Indian writers *working in English*, is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the 16 'official languages' of India, the so-called 'vernacular languages', during the same time.

(viii)

Rushdie's assertion brings out the bitter quarrel over authenticity of narration, a sensitive issue which often sparks angry debates in conferences and newspaper columns. At the root of this debate is a crucial question: Does creative writing in English represent Indian reality? For some critics, it does. For many others, it does not. In "The Anxiety of Indianness: our Novels in English," the Indian literary critic Meenakshi Mukherjee states that the Indians writing in English, mainly diasporic writers, tend to "a homogenization of reality, an

¹⁰ It is also the language of business, and the language associated with modernity. Because of the very low level of literacy, literature in whatever language is not a popular form in India. It also falls in the hand of a privileged group.

essentialising of India” (171).¹¹ For Mukherjee, only two Indian writers, Vikram Seth and Amitav Ghosh, do not create an exotic India. She contends that while Seth “manages to capture the linguistic diversity of Indian life”, Ghosh “interrogates rather than defines the concept of a totalizing India” (184).

Mukherjee’s critique refers to the Indian diasporic writers who have been gaining international recognition and prestige since the 1980s. It was with *Midnight’s Children* (1981) by Salman Rushdie that the Indian English Literature truly arrived on the world stage.¹² However, the Indian writing in English, as Mukherjee observes in *The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English* (2000), truly began to emerge in the nineteenth century and survived unnoticeably until the early twentieth century.¹³ It was in the 1930s and 1940s, with Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan, that Indian English literature became a visible body of literary work. In “Novelists of the 1930s and 1940s,” Leela Gandhi also

¹¹ Her critique provokes howls of outrage among the writers. In response to it, Vikram Chandra writes three articles refuting her arguments. See Chandra, Vikram. “The Cult of Authenticity: India’s cultural commissars worship “Indianness” instead of Art.” *Boston Review* 1 February 2000. Web. 2 January 2013. <<http://bostonreview.net/vikram-chandra-the-cult-of-authenticity>>; Chandra, Vikram. “Arty goddesses.” *The Hindu* 1 April 2001. Web. 2 January 2013. <<http://www.thehindu.com/2001/04/01/stories/1301061q.htm>>; and Chandra, Vikram. “Arty goddesses II.” *The Hindu* 8 April 2001. Web. 2 January 2013 <<http://www.thehindu.com/2001/04/08/stories/1308067d.htm>>.

Other writers also entered this debate see Rushdie, Salman. “Writing in English in India, again.” *The Hindu* 18 February 2001. Web. 2 January 2013. <<http://www.thehindu.com/2001/02/18/stories/1318067m.htm>>; Rajan, Rajeswari Sunder. “Dealing with anxieties.” *The Hindu* 25 February 2001. Web. 2 January 2013. <<http://www.thehindu.com/2001/02/25/stories/1325067a.htm>>; Tharoor, Shashi. “Bedevilling question in the cadence of English.” *The Hindu* 5 August 2001. Web. 2 January 2013. <<http://www.thehindu.com/2001/08/05/stories/13050676.htm>>; and Gandhi, Leela. “Indo-Anglian Fiction: Writing India, Elite Aesthetics, and the Rise of the ‘Stephanian’ Novel.” *Australian Humanities Review* Issue November 1997. Web. 2 January 2013. <<http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-November-1997/gandhi.html>>

¹² The Sahitya Akademi has accepted Indian English Literature as the most suitable nomenclature for this body of writing because the term, for them, emphasizes two ideas: 1) This literature constitutes one of the many streams that join the great ocean called Indian Literature. Though written in different languages, it has an unmistakable unity. 2) It is an inevitable product of the nativization of the English language to express the Indian sensibility. Its definition suggesting that Indian literature is one though written in many languages causes certain kind of discomfort because it sounds like homogeneous term. Thus it is an elusive term. The reader will find Indo-Anglian literature or Indian Writing in English as a reference to the by-product of the encounter between Britain and India in the eighteenth century. For further reading, see Naik, K. M.. *A History of Indian English Literature*. 12th ed. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2007. Print.

¹³ In “The Beginnings of the Indian Novel,” Meenakshi Mukherjee argues that the Indians’ lack of preservation of documents from the past and the high rate of paper disintegration due to the climate in India are the two factors which unable a more precise historical evidence of its trajectory in the subcontinent.

includes in her list Aubrey Menen and G. V. Desani as part of this generation of novelists whose writing, “underscored by the sense of cultural schizophrenia” [caught between “the Alps of the European tradition and the Himalayas of my Indian past” as Anand used to highlight], “has become the hallmark of recent and self-consciously post-colonial Indian fiction” (190). The writers of this period owe their inspiration to two contexts: the social and political upheavals of the national movement led by Gandhi, and the era of late-modernism in Europe.¹⁴ The dichotomy between tradition (Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi) versus modernity (Jawaharlal Nehru), that is, the home and the world, permeates the pages of these novels.¹⁵ While the Gandhi believes that the solution to India’s problems lies in its communities, cottage industry and their traditional ways, Nehru attempts a secular identity and scientific attitude in the name of modernity.

But this scenario was to change soon. In the 1950s and 1960s the trio of Anand, Rao, and Narayan continue their writing, but new voices start to come up too. Writers like Kushwant Singh, Ruskin Bond, Manohar Malgonkar, P. M. Nityanandan, Arun Joshi and M. Anantanarayanan became big names of Indian writing. In this period, a number of female writers also enters the scene: Venu Chitale, Zeenuth Futehally, Mrinalini Sarabhai, Attia Hosain, Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai and Ruth Prawar Jhabvala.

¹⁴ The nationalist movements are: Swadeshi Movement (1905-1908), The Non-cooperation Movement (1920-1922), The Dandi March or The Salt Satyagraha (1930), and The Quit India Movement (1942).

¹⁵ With European roots, modernity is seen as a historical process initiated by social, political and technological changes. It is related to the Enlightenment, the philosophical movement in the 18th century, which emphasized the use of reason. For the thinkers of this period, rationality, knowledge and truth become the index of a modern civilization which is coeval with the idea of process and development. The term modernity is very much criticized because it sets the dichotomy between pre-modern society and modern society. It diminishes the value of the certain peoples, representing them as irrational, barbarian, animal-like, child-like and effeminate. The Indians, for example, were typically characterized as passive, soft, seductive, languid, and effeminate when compared to the strong colonizers. For further reading, see Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002. It is important to distinguish between modernity in History and Literature. The former is dated to begin at the end of Medieval Period and the latter is a phenomenon of the end of nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century.

These new novelists produce the popular discontent with modern life and present the alienated individual who chooses, as Shyamala A. Narayan and Jon Mee state in “Novelists of the 1950s and 1960s,” “a more authentic idea of India in the landscape, provincial town, or traditional village life” (259). But the novels written by female authors also bring up the condition of women in Indian society. Since the 1970s, as Meenakshi Mukherjee points out in “Mapping an Elusive Terrain: Literary Debates in India in the last Half Century,” female scholars have been disinterring forgotten texts and bringing the Indian woman writer to critical attention. This initiative results in anthologies whose aim is:

to make available for English-language readers in India and around the world a group of works that together will illuminate the conditions in which women wrote; bring more significant women’s writing to light; help us reevaluate writers who were reasonably well known but had been misunderstood or dismissed; give us a sense of the themes and literary modes women drew on and made use of; and help us capture what is at stake in the practices of self or agency and of narrative that emerge at the contested margins of patriarchy, empire and nation. (xvii)

The quotation above is found in the preface of the two-volume anthology, *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present, Volume I: 600 B.C. to the Early Twentieth Century* (1991) and *Women Writing in India. Volume: II The 20th Century* (1993), edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita. In these volumes, the editors compile more than 140 authors in 11 Indian languages: Bengali, Gujarati, English, Hindi, Kanadda, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, Tamil,

Telugu and Urdu. They show that women have been writing for a long time in almost every Indian language. In Ancient times, women writers wrote within the context of pre-Aryan or non-Aryan cultures (it is a linguistic and not a racial category). Their writings presented women in powerful conditions in the agricultural societies and their folk songs celebrated harvesting cycles. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita argue that ancient India “holds the key to the understanding of the subsequent history of the subcontinent and to its contemporary condition” (42). Being aware of ancient history, according to them, helps to question the representations of the past (the Indologist or Utilitarian readings of Indian history) which have shaped the debate on women, women’s subjecthood, and women’s writing in the nineteenth century and twentieth century. In Medieval Period, women wrote from within the Aryan culture. They depicted women annoyed with the structure of the family and household. Writing in local languages, they defied the supremacy of Sanskrit and the domination of the upper-caste Brahmins. They were part of the *bhakti* (devotion) movement which rejected the caste system, the Vedas, the growing materialism, the structure of Hindu social life, and the Brahminical dominance.¹⁶ Despite the fact crimes against women are at a very high level in India even today and range from dowry deaths, honor killings, female infanticide, female feticide, rape, human trafficking, domestic violence, forced and child marriage, a great degree of sensitivity about gender issues has been generated due to these narratives about the condition of women in this period.

The 1980s and 1990s are known for the boom of Indian writing in English and the

¹⁶ A. K. Ramanujan’s books are superb works on the bhakti poets. For further reading see Ramanujan, A. K.. *Speaking of Siva*. London: Penguin, 1973. Print. and Ramanujan, A. K.. *Hymns for the Drowning: Poems for Vishnu by Nammalvar*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981. Print.

spotlights fall on Rushdie's novel.¹⁷ Besides him, other names appear too, telling the story of India. Allan Sealy, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Shama Futehally, Rukun Advani, Amit Chaudhuri, Kiran Nagarkar, Shashi Tharoor, Mukul Kesavan, Vikran Chandra, Anurag Mathur and Vikram Seth are some names which become known in India and the English-speaking world in those decades. Among women writers, Shashi Deshpande, Gita Hariharan and Arundhati Roy make their presence felt in this period. Among these writers, Amitav Ghosh comes across as a strong voice which draws a parallel between the past and present. According to Shobhan Saxena:

Writing history is one thing but to recreate the past with all its smells, sights, sounds and chaos is a different ballgame altogether. Amitav Ghosh can do both with equal ease. He can also draw a parallel between two different phases — “then” and “now”— of history which may look detached from each other.¹⁸

The narrative in the 1980s and 1990s questions the idea of unity, campaigned by the nationalists during the nation-state formation, and brings Indian diversity — multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-religious and multi-ethnic — to the center of attention. The novels narrate the story of India as a nation, responding to the political situation: the challenges to the

¹⁷ Jon Mee starts his article criticizing the glamorization of *Midnight's Children* (1981). For Mee, the “messianic critic” should be familiarized with I. Allan Sealy's account on *The Trotter-Nama* (1998) before praising Rushdie's book (358). Sealy, as Mee explains, also created a narrator who was born at midnight of Indian independence. Unfortunately *Midnight's Children* was published before, so Sealy was forced to change his version. Although he modified it, it was impossible to alter the historical context which India was living and in both books “the fate of the narrator still mirrors the fate of the nation” (359). It is known that the novel has always contributed to the idea of European view of the nation. See Mee, John. “The novel in the 1980s and 1990s.” In: *A Concise History of Indian Literature in English*. ed. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2008. Print.

¹⁸ Saxena, Shobhan. “Opium of the Empire” *Times of India* 3 November 2011, New Delhi: Sunday. Web. 15 October 2015. <<http://epaper.timesofindia.com/Default/Layout/Includes/TOINew/ArtWin.asp?From=Archive&Skin=TOINew&BaseHref=CAP%2F2011%2F07%2F03&ViewMode=HTML&EntityId=Ar01500&AppName=1>>

Nehruvian India's secularism, which relegates religion to the private sphere.¹⁹

Using allegorical, digressive and non-linear narratives, the writers place side by side different conceptions of the world — mythic, religious and secular — to have a better comprehension of what constitutes the nation. They introduce several Indian literary forms (the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, the *Panchatantra*, and other *folktales* just to name a few) to the narrative to destabilize India's colonial and postcolonial history; write dialogues in English mixed with local words to show India's linguistic diversity; record the suppressed histories to represent the point of view of the colonized; describe the modern metropolis to celebrate India's plurality; and begin the process of rewriting the Indian myths and reimagining the nation. In addition to this, women novelists question the traditional Hindu narratives which lessen possibilities for women, and denounce gender, caste and ethnic oppression.

The 1980s is also marked by the reinterpretation of the Indian national movement. A group of scholars, mainly historians, set up the Subaltern Studies Group. The success of a rural peasant rebellion against the Indian state in Naxalbari (West Bengal) in 1967 makes these historians rethink the national movement narrative. Its aim is to formulate a new narrative of the history of India, bringing the subaltern groups — peasants and indigenous tribes who resisted and rebelled against the British — to be viewed as the subjects of history. They criticize the colonial and Indian elite's historical representation of this uprising — as

¹⁹ In "What Secularism is and where it needs to be headed," Romila Thapar explains the difference between secular, secularism, and secularizing: "Secular is that which relates to the world and is distinct from the religious. Secularism involves questioning the control that religious organisations have over social institutions. This is sought to be justified by arguing that it ensures morality. But the morality fundamental to secularism goes beyond any single religion and extends to the functioning of the entire society. Secularism does not deny the presence of religion in society, but demarcates the social institutions over which religion can or cannot exercise control. This distinction is fundamental. And finally, secularising is the process by which society changes and recognises the distinction". Visit <http://thewire.in/2015/10/18/what-secularism-is-and-where-it-needs-to-be-headed-12539/>

spontaneous acts of violence with no political content or organization — and ‘retrieve’ the subaltern’s political voice and agency. They attempt, as Dipesh Chakrabarty argues in *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (2002), “to align historical reasoning with larger movements for democracy in India” and “looked for anti-elitist approach to history writing” (7). For these historians, historiography, a genre associated with the colonial ideas of the European Enlightenment and written by victors, tried to reduce all histories to a universal narrative modeled after the Europeans.

In the eighteenth century, European scholars wrote Indian history in two forms: to represent India for ‘them’ (Europeans) and to represent India for Indians. In sum, they, as Uma Chakravarti points out, were “engaged in giving to Indians the greatest gift of all — a history” (31). To ‘repair’ the enormous injustice produced by the European historiography, writers, historians, artists and intellectuals start writing the history of India from the point of view of the colonized. Consequently, the novel plays a crucial role in representing the ‘new’ Indian history.

The 1980s and 1990s also see the intensification of the culturally-hybridized phenomena called literature of the Indian diaspora, which constitutes an important part of the burgeoning field of Anglophone, postcolonial literature.²⁰ The authors of Indian origin, who are settled or born and raised across the world — mainly in the United Kingdom and in the United States — use Indian locales, myths, historical and fictional narratives, and socio-cultural motifs in their fiction. India thus becomes the theme for the western reader. In one

²⁰ The term diaspora describes any population which is considered ‘deterritorialized’ or ‘transnational’, that is, groups of people that were forced to leave their homeland. Steven Vertovec defines three modes of diaspora: diaspora as social form; diaspora as type of consciousness; and diaspora as mode of cultural production. These approaches contribute to a better understanding of the complex transnational flow of people throughout the globe. See Vertovec, Steven. “Three meanings of ‘diaspora’, exemplified among South Asian religion.” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* Vol 6 No 3 (1997): 277-299. MUSE. Web.

way or another, their narrative is dominated by themes like displacement, loyalties to homelands or host countries, discrimination and exclusion, collective memory, identity or community politics, politics of recognition or difference, cultural identity, and tradition and modernity, which became part of the circulatory system of the novels. In the work of diasporic women writers, the stories often focus on the conflict which women face in their world which has two sets of social values — Western and Eastern. This is a brief reference to Indian writing in English, which has a pretty short history but it is quite vast in its social and cultural terms.

Portraying Amitav Ghosh

Taking the sociocultural and linguistic conflicts in India into consideration, it is important to elucidate the context in which the present thesis is placed in. As all PhD theses need to delimit their areas of study to be able to examine the material in some depth, the present one focuses on Indian English Literature (IEL). I have extracted this scope from the extensive field of Indian literature because Amitav Ghosh's *œuvre*, my object of investigation, fits into this 'category' as he writes in English. His novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008), which is the focus of this study, will be analyzed as per the findings of postcolonial studies in dialogue with history, anthropology, sociology, gender studies and mythology.

The first step in this direction is to examine why a novel, with its fictional characters and imaginary situations, is suited to study a historical situation. I step back in history to get an answer. Govardhanram Tripathi (1855-1907) was a major Gujarati social thinker of his time. He had planned to write a series of philosophical essays on the human condition, but, as he has stated in the preface to his legendary literary work *Saraswatichandra* (1887 and 1901), "writing about reality in flesh and blood under the guise of fiction can reach more people than abstract discussions" (193). Tripathi has written the four-part novel *Saraswatichandra* (2006), which became the canonical text of Gujarati literature. It is not only considered to be the best Gujarati novel but also is seen as one of the best novels ever written in an Indian language. For the Gujarati novelist, it is not the element of magic or fictiveness that should form the core concern of the novel, but the characters and the situation. They should assume, he thinks, primary importance if the purpose of the novel is to raise the consciousness of the reader. But

Tripathi affirms that the “ideal characters cannot inspire readers to aspire for a higher life. Nor does mere depiction of evil act as deterrent” (195).

Like Tripathi, Amitav Ghosh also defends his choice of fiction for penning history. In an interview to *First City* magazine, Ghosh says:

I think the difference between the history historians write and the history fiction writers write is that fiction writers write about the human history. It's about finding the human predicament, it's about finding what happens to individuals, characters. I mean that's what fiction is... exploring both dimensions, whereas history, the kind of history exploring causes, causality, is of no interest to me. (18)²¹

Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta (now Kolkata) on July 11, 1956.²² His birthplace, its language, culture and politics have a profound influence on his fiction and they permeate all his novels. For him, “a novel [...] must always be set somewhere: it must have its setting, and within the evolution of the narrative this setting must, classically, play a part almost as important as those of the characters themselves” (TITI 294). Calcutta and the memories of it are the key device to understand his characters, their stories, and their predicaments. His birthplace also plays a crucial role in classifying his work within literatures of India. In the foreword for *Calcutta: A cultural and literary history* (2003), Anita Desai describes the changes through which Calcutta has gone, and I quote it in its entirety:

²¹ Amitav Ghosh. Interview. “Shadow Script.” *First City* New Delhi. 30 September 2000.

²² He belongs to the *bhadralok*, the upper and middle sections of Bengali society that emerged in the nineteenth century as a consequence of the reorganization of the Bengal economy under colonial rule.

the city's many adjustments — from its humble beginnings as a group of fishing villages in the Gangetic delta where Job Charnock, an agent of the East India Company, chose to situate its chintz and muslin, jute and indigo business, to the “city of palaces” where adventures and entrepreneurs, generals and satraps fought duels and dined by candlelight on “goat curry and Madeira”, and entertained themselves by watching “nautch” in the “zenana”; from the scholarship of early Orientalists like Sir William “Asiatic” Jones to flaunting of wealth by “nabobs” and the somewhat ludicrous struggles of the Bengali “babu” to ape such western ways. [...] the course of a violent history that includes the sensational “Black Hole of Calcutta” affair, the great famine of 1943-44, the riots during partition and the huge influx of refugees during the birth of Bangladesh [...]. (x)²³

All this transformation and the historical events nourish Ghosh's *œuvre*. He presents the Bengali culture and its particularities.²⁴ Anyone who wants to understand his fiction must situate it within the cultural richness of West Bengal. In his literary vein, to use one of his own metaphors, runs *The Calcutta Chromosome*, that is, his ‘Bengali chromosome’. In “Maps and Mirrors: Co-ordinates of Meaning in *The Shadow Lines*,” Meenakshi Mukherjee highlights the Bengaliness of his novel saying that *The Shadow Lines* (1989) might as well be “a Bengali

²³ Calcutta has nourished a wide range of writers, painters, musicians, actors, filmmakers, scientists, thinkers and reformists. It became an exciting intellectual center, and most of the early reform campaigns were launched there by an eagerly developing intelligentsia.

²⁴ Watch the video narrated by Amitav Ghosh about Calcutta: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2XpeDiTC1yU>

novel written in English” (259). This ‘Bengali chromosome’, however, suggests a strong sense of rootedness. Amit Chaudhuri points out in *The Vintage Book of Modern Indian Literature* (2004) that the legacy of the Bengal Renaissance represents an overwhelming influence on Ghosh’s work: “his love for the inscape of words, his attendance to the mysteries of art and the world, and his troubled liberal conscience” (538).²⁵

Amitav Ghosh graduated in history from St. Stephen’s College, Delhi. He did an MA in sociology from the same institution. Later, he did his PhD in social anthropology at Oxford University. In his work, in which fiction is his proper *métier*, Ghosh not only deconstructs the Eurocentrism of history by focusing on non-European histories (or rather to use Dipesh Chakrabarty’s words “minority histories”) but also has a critical reading of imperialism. He challenges the tenuous line which separates history and fiction. In *Amitav Ghosh* (2010) Anshuman A. Mondal says that Ghosh’s

texts straddle the border between history and fiction and it is from this indeterminate site that they attempt the impossible double-task of writing historically about pasts that could not have been articulated through historical discourse in the first place. (162)²⁶

²⁵ The Bengal Renaissance refers to a socio-cultural and religious reform movement during the nineteenth and early twentieth century in undivided India’s Bengal province, though the impact of it spread in the whole of India. As the Indian bourgeois society developed under western domination, this class sought to reform itself, initiating campaigns against caste, polytheism, idolatry, animism, purdah, child-marriage, sati, and more. For an excellent discussion on this, see Schwarz, Henry. *Writing Cultural History in Colonial and Postcolonial India*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997. Print.

²⁶ For debate on history and fiction, see Munslow, Alun. *A History of History*. London and New York: Routledge, 2012. Print. Munslow argues for “the idea of history as a narrative creation and not a narrative discovery” (9). He discusses “history as a form of narrative making — a fictive undertaking” (9). See also Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000. Print.

With nine major novels and four works of non-fiction, Amitav Ghosh has become a major contemporary author writing on India and on Southeast Asia.²⁷ For Mondal, his voice is “being the most prominent of all post-Rushdie generation of Indian writers in English” (163). Ghosh became widely known with the publication of *The Shadow Lines* (1988) in which he critiques nationalism and national identity and analyzes the consequences of the Partition of Bengal’s borders. His other works and essays reveal his critical views about colonialism and its forms of knowledge. He recovers silenced stories, and engages with cultural multiplicity and difference, bringing the subaltern to the center of the narrative. Since the late 1980s up to the present times, there has been a decent amount of critical material about his writings. His fictional and non-fictional works have influenced many scholars and generated a range of critical books, essays, and researches.²⁸ Though there are a great number of studies on Ghosh, what makes the present thesis different and unique is the fact that it examines the representations of gender in his writing. Mondal affirms that it is “an area that demands further thought and research” (169).

Gender, as Bharati Ray has stated, informs every aspect of men’s existence as well as women’s. It is not the same as sex, though the two terms are often used interchangeably. Gender is generally considered to be cultural, and sex, biological. Gender is the social organization of different kinds of bodies into different categories of people. It is important to highlight that gender is historical — it changes through time — and it varies from place to

²⁷ Fiction: *Flood of Fire* (2015), *River of Smoke* (2011), *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *The Glass Palace* (2002), *The Calcutta Chromosome: A novel of Fevers, Delirium and Discovery* (1995), *In an Antique Land: History in the Guise of a Traveller’s Tale* (1993), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), and *The Circle of Reason* (1986).

Nonfiction: *Incendiary Circumstances: A Chronicle of the Turmoil of our Times* (2005), *The Imam and The Indian: Prose Pieces* (2002), *Countdown* (1999), and *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma* (1998).

²⁸ In Brazil there are chapters of dissertations on Amitav Ghosh, but my M.A. dissertation was the first academic research to focus entirely on his work. See Ramos, Regiane Corrêa de Oliveira. “Entre Oriente e Ocidente: “As Vozes das Travessias em Amitav Ghosh.” M.A. Universidade de São Paulo, 2010. Print.

place and culture to culture. It is contingent, as it depends on a lot of different unrelated things coming together. However, the aim of this thesis is to examine both male and female characters as the objects of the literary analysis in the Indian context. I investigate different aspects of the male and female characters' lives, struggles, works, contribution, dreams and political engagement during the colonial period. All this is investigated and analyzed in Ghosh's novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008), which is part of the *Ibis* trilogy that includes *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015).

To probe the web of gender cultural and mythic relations in *Sea of Poppies* (2008), this thesis poses a set of questions: How does Amitav Ghosh bring different kinds of oppressions together? How does he establish a link between caste and oppression? Does he place different kinds of oppression in the same category to challenge the Orientalist discourse and to question the 'essentialized' India? How does Ghosh structure his novel around gender relations and myths? How does he extol them? Does he reverse them? How does he empower the female characters who, in spite of possessing agency, are entrapped in the social structure that they are part? How is empowerment constructed in his narrative? And does he empower man and woman equally?

I see that gender has been an important part of Ghosh's writing, and in *Sea of Poppies* (2008) he has put sufficient stress in the male-female relations to build his narrative. In the course of an interview about gender, when asked if there was a conscious or perhaps unconscious gender patterning evident to him at all, Ghosh replies:

Well [laughs] I think it's for readers rather than for me as a writer to think about that. Certainly if there is a gender patterning, that doesn't reflect my

theorems of the world. I think men and women are fragile, are strong, sometimes break down, sometimes don't ... (12)²⁹

In another interview on a similar topic, he says that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe gender becomes central to their way of thinking. The whole idea of masculinity, Ghosh asserts, appears absolutely essential to the Europeans. According to him, this idea of masculinity creates a terrible oppression for the other gender. The First World War, he argues, is all about masculinity being reinforced: Do I have courage? Am I a man? Am I a man enough to be courageous? However, comparing this situation with India, he explains that all the great warriors in Indian epics and mythology, in a certain moment of a battle or in a particular phase of their life, turn into or dress as a woman.³⁰

In his novel, which is a postcolonial narrative of the nineteenth-century India, Ghosh does not depict a conflict between the masculine and feminine from the point of view of the colonial British. On the contrary, he empowers his characters and exposes both man and woman suffering the same kind of violence. He does not place his female characters in an inferior position. He presents the tension and the complexity of women that seem to be, at the same time, victims of an oppressive environment and agents of their own history.

Sea of Poppies (2008) is not Ghosh's first book where he raises — and deals with — the gender question. *The Circle of Reason* (1986) and *The Shadow Lines* (1988) are peopled by a few female figures. In *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), a female character occupies a

²⁹ Gosh, Amitav. "Diasporic Predicaments: An Interview with Amitav Ghosh." Interview by Chitra Sankaran. In: *History, Narrative, and Testimony in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction*. ed. Chitra Sankaran. Albany: University of New York, 2012. Print.

³⁰ This interview, "Amitav Ghosh: A Dialogue", was held at the Faculty of Arts at the Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok on November 22, 2012. At this conference, I had the great pleasure of meeting Amitav Ghosh in person.

crucial role in developing the climax of the novel. Mangala, a sweeper-woman who works in the laboratory where the British are conducting experiments on malaria, is seen as, in the words of Suchitra Mathur, “an alternate mode of being/knowledge that provides scope for third-world/women’s agency” (131). It is in the subsequent novels, *The Glass Palace* (2002); *The Hungry Tide* (2004); and *Sea of Poppies* (2008), that they start gaining more space in the narrative. It is in *The Hungry Tide* (2004) that a female character, Piyali Roy, appears for the first time as a protagonist. This novel has a cast of female characters — Mashima, Kusum, and Moyna — which gives, as Mondal has perceptively noted, a “feminine perspective” to the text (169). In *Sea of Poppies* (2008) the female character — Deeti — assumes the center of the narrative with her drawings, in which she tells the story and records the past. Though Ghosh uses a historical backdrop in most of his novels, *Sea of Poppies* (2008) — and the *Ibis* trilogy — he deals directly with how Indian history has been molded by colonialism. Through his characters and the situations they find themselves in, largely created by the colonial policies, Ghosh narrates how the British created a whole new power structure from which the subaltern was removed and marginalized.

The *Ibis* trilogy — *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), and *Flood of Fire* (2015) — crisscrosses the Indian Ocean, revealing a narrative of movement, border-crossings, and heterogeneous encounters.³¹ The ship, in Paul Gilroy’s word, is “a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion” (4). With *Ibis*, *Anahita*, *Redruth*, and *Hind*, the ships present in the trilogy, Ghosh thus invites the reader to go on board to discover the historical

³¹ “The characters of my new book may be different, the setting different and the time period different, but it is not unlike my other books because it also focuses on migration. I have been writing about migration and exodus long before globalization. It is the reality of my times — the Asian times,” said Ghosh. Ghosh, Amitav. “Migration is the Reality of My Times.” *DNA* 16 June 2008, Mumbai: Report. Web. 23 July 2014. <<http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-migration-is-the-reality-of-my-times-1171521>>

load they are carrying. The first novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008), which is the focus of this thesis, is set in Bihar and Bengal before the Opium Wars in China in the first half of the nineteenth century.³² It grounds the transport of indentured laborers from India to Mauritius, and arches over the opium trade between India and China, both controlled by the East India Company in the same period. The novel chronicles the opium produced in India and the *girmityas*' experiences of indentured labor.³³ On the one hand, the narrative exposes the reality of the enforced cultivation of poppies, the activities in the processing factory in Ghazipur in eastern part of United Provinces, and its pernicious influence on people's life. As it will be revealed, the Indians are forced into cultivating opium at the cost of their traditional crops, a large number of Chinese become hopelessly addicted to it, and the British East India Company and its officials benefit enormously from it. On the other hand, the novel also records the experience of the first Indian diaspora and shows how this group of indentured laborers negotiated between their known surroundings and the world "inhabited by demons and *pishaches*, not to speak of all kinds of unnameable beasts" (SOP 190).³⁴ This historical background is presented through a fascinating array of characters ranging from an upper-caste wife of an opium addict (Aditi/Deeti) to a low-caste ox-driver (Kalua Madhu), from a Bengali

³² Bihar is a state in northern India. It is famous for the *Kisan Sabha* movement (peasant movement). In 1929, Swami Sahajanand Saraswati mobilized the peasants against the *zamindars* (Indian princes who lost their sovereignty to the British rule). Soon it spread throughout India. The *zamindari* system was a system of taxation. For revenue systems of land tenure, see Sarkar, Sumit. *Modern Indian: 1885-1947*. New Delhi: MacMillan, 2012. Print.

³³ Those recruited to work in the colonies after slavery was abolished in the British Empire signed an indenture agreement — vernacularized in North Indian languages as *girmit*; they became known as *girmityas* and they were transported to British colonies. Ghosh also uses the term coolie to refer to them. The word "coolie" describes the unskilled laborers or indentured laborers from South, Southeast and East Asia. See Mishra, Vijay. *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: theorizing the diasporic imaginary*. London and New York: Routledge, 2007. Print.

³⁴ According to *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History and Literature*, *pishaches* are flesh eating demons. Although some believe that they were created by Brahma, their origin is still unsure (234-235).

zemindar (Neel Rattam Halder) to a half-Parsi and half-Chinese opium addict (Leong Fatt known as Ah Fatt), from an opium trader (Benjamin Brightwell Burnham) to *lascars* and from a widow (Taramony) and a half-French orphan raised in India (Paulette Lambert) to a *gomusta* (Nob Kissin Pander).³⁵ The novel has, as Adam Mars-Jones rightly observes, “plenty of action and adventure à la [Alexandre] Dumas, and a drop or two of Dickensian sentiment”.³⁶ Its three parts — Land, River and Sea — present a movement from fixity to fluidity which leads to transformation. With the Slavery Abolition Act 1833, the *Ibis*, which was a blackbirder, has to be adapted to transport *girmityas* to Mauritius and opium to China. On the ship, these migrants, in the words of Ghosh, become “a brotherhood of your own: you will be your own village, your own family, your own caste” (SOP 290). The ship figures as “a vehicle of transformation, travelling through the mists of illusions towards the elusive, ever-receding landfall that was Truth” (SOP 388). It is an in-between space where the so-called social norms are challenged and deconstructed. *The Ibis*, in Shashi Tharoor’s words, sails

in Joseph Conrad territory, through waters since romanticized by the likes of James Clavell. But whereas those writers and so many others placed the white man at the center of their narratives, Ghosh relegates his British colonists to the

³⁵ From the sixteenth century until the beginning of twentieth centuries, European ships employed Indian and some other Asian sailors who were called *lascars*. A *lascar* preferred to called by title of rank such as *serang*, *tindal* or *seacunny*. See *The Ibis Chrestomathy* in *Sea of Poppies*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008. Print.

³⁶ Mars-Jones, Adam. “And they called it poppy love.” Rev. of *Sea of Poppies*, by Amitav Ghosh. *The Guardian* 8 June 2008, London ed.: The Observer. Web. 6 July 2014. <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/jun/08/fiction1>>

margins of his story, giving pride of place to the neglected subjects of the imperial enterprise. (n.pag.)³⁷

Ghosh says in an interview that “opium trade accounted for one-fifth of India’s revenue [around 1839]” and “this part of Indian history is missing from history books”.³⁸ Therefore, he is documenting history in a new form introducing peripheral characters and multiple languages. Although *Sea of Poppies* (2008) is written in English, the Laskari language spoken on board enriches the narrative. In “Of Fanás and Forecastles: The Indian Ocean and Some Lost Languages of the Age of Sail,” Ghosh contends that it is “the language of command on the ship drawn from the English, Malay, Hindustani, Chinese, and Malayalam” (56).³⁹

While *Sea of Poppies* (2008) reveals how the opium is cultivated, how the laborers are exploited and discriminated against in the British colonies, and how people lived, laughed and loved, *River of Smoke* (2011) explores the streets of Canton where the opium is traded. The second novel of the trilogy continues narrating the story after the storm hits the schooner. Two *lascars* (Jodu and Serang Ali), two convicts (Neel and Ah Fatta) and one of the passengers (Kalua) escape from it. Deeti, Paulette Lambert, Baboo Nob Kissin Pander (the *gomusta*, the agent responsible for the shipping of indentured migrants) and Zachary Reid (the *Ibis*’s first mate) are left on board, watching from the deck the disappearance of the small boat. With this

³⁷ Tharoor, Shashi. “Soldiers and Victims of the Opium War.” Rev. of *Sea of Poppies*, by Amitav Ghosh. *The Washington Post* 19 October 2008, Washington ed.: Books. Web. 6 July 2014. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/story/2008/10/17/ST2008101702010.html>>

³⁸ Ghosh, Amitav. Interview by Tom Ashbrook. On Point. WBUR, Boston. 13 October 2011. Radio. 6 July 2014. <<http://onpoint.wbur.org/2011/10/13/amitav-ghosh>>

³⁹ Ghosh, Amitav. “Of Fanás and Forecastles: The Indian Ocean and Some Lost Languages of the Age of Sail.” *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol 43 No 25 (2008): 56-62. Web. 6 July 2014.

incident, the narrative is taken to Canton (Fanqui-town),⁴⁰ a place where the Thirteen Factories (houses of the traders, mainly Europeans) existed before the first Opium War (1838-1842).⁴¹ At this stage, two more ships are introduced into the story. First one is the Bombay merchant Seth Bahram Naurozji Modi's *Anahita*, which is a cargo ship laden with opium; the second one is *Redruth* that transports rare plants, especially the mythic golden camellia. The Parsi opium merchant Bahram Modi, the protagonist who travels for trading, his estranged half-Chinese son Ah Fatt, Neel Rattan Halder, Paulette Lambert, and the homosexual painter Robin Chinnery, and many others form its cast. This novel digs out the history of Canton, the only Chinese city, according to Ghosh's findings, which was allowed to trade with the western world for centuries. With this historical excavation, Ghosh shows that people have always been global citizens, and that globalization is not a modern phenomenon.⁴² Furthermore, the doctrine of free trade, which is highly quoted in the text, is a rhetoric device that masked the amorality of smuggling opium and of colonial rule. In a review for *The Washington Post*, "Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke*: Stormy sequel doesn't disappoint," Shashi Tharoor reminds us again how Ghosh deconstructs the western classics:

⁴⁰ In an interview to the *L'espresso Magazine*, Ghosh explains that the principal setting of *River of Smoke* is a place that no longer exists. It is Canton's old foreign enclave, known as the Thirteen Factories. In the novel, he calls it Fanqui-town. This part of Guangzhou (Canton), according to him, was razed to the ground in 1856. Almost no trace of it remains, so he had to rebuild entirely from the historical documents, old paintings, memoirs etc. He said he tried to make his recreation as realistic as possible. This ancient trading port, the city of Canton, became the protagonist of the story along with Bahram Modi. See Ghosh, Amitav. Interview by Angiola Codacci. *L'espresso Magazine* 24 November 2011, Rome ed.: Magazine. Print. <http://www.amitavghosh.com/interviews.html#gpm1_3>

⁴¹ In her Introduction to *The Opium War*, Julia Lovell asserts that "the Qing state's war on opium began in earnest in the 1830s, and would continue — intermittently, inconsistently — over the next hundred years" (3). The historical division sets two Opium Wars: the first from 1839 until 1842, and the second from 1856 until 1888. See Lovell, Julia. Introduction. *The Opium War*. London: Picador, 2011. Print.

⁴² Arjun Appadurai argues that the circulation of goods, images, people, finance and ideas predates the present global flows. For further reading, see Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Delhi: Oxford UP, 1996.

At times *River of Smoke* reads like a cross between a Capt. Hornblower tale and a Victorian epistolary novel, yet Ghosh's sharply anti-imperial vision subverts both types. Above all, the novel reclaims a story appropriated for too long by its winners: those who, centuries ago, conquered (or imposed their will on) foreign lands, subjugated and displaced their peoples, replaced their agriculture with deadly cash-crops, thrust addictive poisons on them for profit and enforced all this with the power of the gun masked by a rhetoric of civilization and divine purpose. (n.pag.)⁴³

Flood of Fire (2015), the final installment of the trilogy, presents the British preparations for the First Opium War, its outbreak and the carnage that follows. With a varied cast of characters — a havildar of the East India Company (Kesri Singh), an ambitious sailor (Zachary Reid), and a determined widow (Shireen Modi) to name a few — the narrative shows how the British destroy the Chinese economy and society in the name of free trade. With a disastrous defeat of the Chinese, Britain takes over Hong Kong in 1841, transforming its port into a globally influential center of trade. However, opium becomes the most rentable commodity of the British Empire. He also points out how the Indian soldiers were submitted to British army ranks and occupied the lower posts.

The linguistic experimentation (so many foreign words in the text) of *Sea of Poppies* (2008) continues in *River of Smoke* (2011), but seems to lose rhythm in *Flood of Fire* (2015). Presenting the multilingual atmosphere of the period with Bengali, Gujarati, Tamil, Telugu,

⁴³ Tharoor, Shashi. "Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke*: Stormy sequel doesn't disappoint." Rev. of *River of Smoke*, by Amitav Ghosh. *The Washington Post* 26 September 2011, Washington ed.: Books. Web. 6 July 2014. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/amitav-ghoshs-river-of-smoke-stormy-sequel-doesnt-disappoint/2011/07/11/gIQArpZW0K_story.html>

Oriya, Marathi, Kachhi, Konkani, Hindustani, Cantonese Chinese, Portuguese, French, Mauritian Creole, and English, Ghosh challenges the “apparently unbridgeable gaps of language” (ROS 346). For him, these three novels are “individual books that can be read on their own” and “there is no linear connection” between them. As the reader can perceive, “each book is quite different from the other”.⁴⁴

As Amitav Ghosh’s concerns resonate with the critique the postcolonialists provide, my line of enquiry in the present thesis is influenced by — and within the framework of — postcolonial theory.⁴⁵ For Stuart Hall, the postcolonial discourse allows to rethink colonialism as “part of an essentially transnational, transcultural ‘global’ process that produces a decentred, diasporic or global rewriting of earlier nation-centered imperial narratives” (247). Ghosh rereads the colonial period and establishes in his work a sociocultural space for the voices and stories of the subaltern peoples whose past is omitted from the official narratives. For him, the ‘grand narratives’, as he writes *In An Antique Land* (1994), hide from view “the barely discernible traces that ordinary people leave upon the world” (IAAL 17). He asserts that they vanish into the “anonymity of history” (IAAL 353). However Ghosh, along with subaltern historians, sets the subaltern groups as the subject of history. Or, to put it in a slightly different manner, he disclaims the universal historical narratives which are embedded in the ideas of modernity, development and progress and opens up a space for, to use Dipesh Chakrabarty’s words, different “life-worlds” and a new “subject” to emerge (18). In “A

⁴⁴ Ghosh, Amitav. Interview. *Untitled Books* 5 July 2011, Issue 50. Web. 6 July 2014. <<http://untitledbooks.com/features/interviews/amitav-ghosh/>> ; Amitav, Ghosh. “The trilogy is over.” Interview by Ziya Us Salam. *The Hindu* 6 June 2015, Opinion sec.: n. pag. Web. 14 June 2015. <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/columns/Ziya_Us_Salam/amitav-ghosh-talks-about-flood-of-fire/article7286098.ece>

⁴⁵ In an interview with Neluka Silva and Alex Tickell, Ghosh denies that his work can be put under the postcolonial umbrella. He argues that colonialism does not interest him. The non-European narratives, subordinated to the margins of Eurocentric narratives, are his main preoccupation.

Choice of Histories: Ghosh vs. Hegel in *In an Antique Land*,” Leela Gandhi asserts that

Ghosh’s work is readily accessible to reading as an intellectual product of the rich dialogue between contemporary poststructuralism and postcolonialism: in particular, their common and collaborative challenge to inherited categories of historical thought. (57)

Thus, my interest in gender leads to reflections on socially and culturally construed notions of gender relations in these different life-worlds. The aim of my thesis is the study of gender, cultural and mythical relations in Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* (2008). However, to attain it, I will focus on the female characters who are able to find a way out of situations on the verge of impossibility. They reveal their survival strategies and their transformations, their relations with other women and men who are also violated or abused.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the male stories of violence are still a taboo and very little is said throughout the novel. Ghosh’s strategy to bring out women’s stories of violence allows the reader to discover the hidden male stories. These characters express their own individuality and end up telling ‘their-story’, a history of resistance on the margins of the ‘grand narratives’ that moves across nations, oceans and empires.

An examination of a text like *Sea of Poppies* (2008) offered several challenges. One of the big challenges is that Indian literary criticism has a tendency to analyze the text

⁴⁶ In *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Chandra Talpade Mohanty sets the difference between “Woman” and “women”. The former is “a cultural and ideological composite other constructed through diverse representational discourse (scientific, literary, juridical, linguistic, cinematic, etc.)”. The latter is “real, material subjects of their collective histories” (19). See Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism without borders: decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. Print.

ideologically, with the critics expecting the writers to tie up the loose ends in order to find and offer a 'solution' to social problems. A literary text deals with different levels of complexity where this binary of right/wrong does not apply. Following this critical trend, Makarand R. Paranjape in "Beyond the Subaltern Syndrome: Amitav Ghosh and the Crisis of the Bhadrasmaj" (2012) argues that "all his [Ghosh's] erudition, experience, and narrative skill do not help him overcome his hesitation in confronting the crisis head-on so as to venture an alternative or a solution" [to his novels] (367).

However, I believe that in *Sea of Poppies* (2008) Ghosh depicts both men and women as victims of a system that is patriarchal as well as colonial. The writer refuses to take sides, consequently he disrupts the conventional binary representation associated with the male/female equation.⁴⁷ Does the writer need to point a way out of the entrapment in which the characters find themselves? If "the writer's mission is not only to make sense of our world, but also to portray it responsibly", as Paranjape contends (364), does Amitav Ghosh have to tie up the loose ends? The answer comes from Ghosh in his own words: "I don't feel that I have to write a book just tying up the ends. That will not be a very interesting thing to do. [Laughs] So, I feel like I'm free to go in whatever direction I like".⁴⁸

On the question of ideological reading of text by Indian critics, Ghosh argues that the situation is changing. In the interview granted to me, Ghosh says that "They do tend quite

⁴⁷ In an interview to *The Hindu*, The Indian feminist Kamala Bhasin argues that "we talk about what our women have to go through because of the society, but it is equally sad what our men have to go through because of the way society wants to perceive them. Unless men change, their humanity would be destroyed." Bhasin's argument is very much similar to what Ghosh is trying to highlight in his novels. She is pointing out to what patriarchy is doing to men and women all together. For her, both of them are victims of this repressive system and "men don't need to change to support women, but to save themselves from being brutalised by centuries of exposure to patriarchy." See Pisharoty, Sangeeta. "She lives it!" *The Hindu* 27 April 2013, New Delhi ed.: Metroplus 1+. Print.

⁴⁸ This was said in an interview to SifyNews: <http://www.sify.com/news/amitav-ghosh-on-river-of-smoke-imperialism-arundhati-imagegallery-features-lhirBtedgce.html>

often to take sort of fairly instrumental view of the text. But it used to be more true 10-15 years ago. The younger critics are quite different.” Further explaining how the nature of criticism has changed, he adds:

There has been huge improvement in the standard of reviewing and criticism in India. Many of the younger critics are good critics. They read thoughtfully. In generally speaking, this whole postmodernist, postcolonial sort of turn in literary studies has got many Indian academics to prominence. Wherever you go in America, for example, many of the critics are Indians and many of them are really good. So I do not think they always look for solution to social problems.

Most critics of *Sea of Poppies* (2008) see it as a narrative of exploitation of the colonized peoples and the total destruction of their economy, way of life and livelihoods. Others contend that Ghosh challenges the dominant discourses and replaces them by local narratives. This decentralized approach has made it possible to look at history from different perspectives. In the case of this thesis, that perspective is that of gender. There is nothing natural about gender roles in a society. Like all other identities, gender too is construed — and constructed — socially and culturally. In *Sea of Poppies* (2008), Amitav Ghosh created male and female characters and a transgender character who are able to find a way out of extremely difficult socially-oppressive situations despite being violated and abused.

This is the web of gender relations at the intersection of cultural and mythic issues, departing from a focus on women, that I propose to examine here. The hypothesis is that in

his novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008), Amitav Ghosh deconstructs the colonial narrative of gender in the Indian society of nineteenth century. He challenges stereotypes of the sex-related women victimization and destabilizes the gender (male/female) binaries. To test this hypothesis, I propose to analyze Ghosh's characters by placing them in their historical, social and mythological context. In order to prove it, I will answer the previously raised questions throughout the following three chapters.

In Chapter I, I analyze men and women within the Indian familial space in the nineteenth century, demonstrating how both are subjected to the disempowering effects of traditional rituals (such as *sati*) and traditional structures of Brahminical morality and patriarchal violence. I use Amitav Ghosh's main pair OF characters — Deeti and Kalua — to exemplify how the persons are sexually assaulted (rape) and then silenced by an oppressive system.

In Chapter II, I examine men and women within the British colonial space, indicating how they are affected by the opium cultivation in the Indian hinterland. I use Amitav Ghosh's peripheral characters — peasants, Eurasian and convicts — to highlight how they are uprooted from homeland and forced to be taken across the seas by the colonial administration to work as indentured labour.

In Chapter III, I investigate the gender roles ascribed to Indians by the British colonizers. I use Amitav Ghosh's secondary characters — Nob Kissin and Taramony — to show how Ghosh deconstructs gender with the use of Indian mythology and storytelling.

In the hands of Ghosh, Indian mythology, which was ridiculed and marginalized during the colonial period, becomes an instrument of resistance, as his characters defy the set of traits

attributed to the colonized. Thus, Ghosh turns the tide against the colonizer and tells other versions of the Indian colonial story in the *Sea of Poppies* (2008).

CHAPTER I: STRATEGIES OF SURVIVAL

*“Women are neither subjects nor objects, but
rather the ground of the discourse on site”*

Lata Mani

This chapter focuses on the British colonial rule in India in the nineteenth century and depicts how both men and women are subjected to violence. In both cultural and legal terms, violence reflects the power some social groups have over the others — either physically or emotionally. In *Sea of Poppies* (2008) Amitav Ghosh’s two characters — Deeti and Kalua — and their stories serve as an example to illustrate how the body is violated to maintain and protect the institution of marriage and to impose caste superiority.

Nothing evokes stronger images of gender discrimination in India than the mere mention of the word *sati*. A Sanskrit term denoting a practice in which a woman burns herself to death on funeral pyre of her husband but has been banned for decades, *sati* has been provoking heated debates among scholars in academic institutions across the world.⁴⁹

Although a huge volume of literature has been produced on this controversial issue, both in India and in the rest of the world, Paul B. Courtright asserts that “there is much we do know

⁴⁹ In *Sati the blessing and the curse: the burning of wives in India*, John Stratton Hawley explains the wide semantic range that the term acquires depending on the language it is spoken. *Sati*, as he asserts, is referred to “the action or event whereby a woman is immolated on her husband’s pyre, to the woman who is at the center of this spectacle, and to a goddess” (11). In “Dead Women Tell No Tales: Issues of Female Subjective, Subaltern Agency and Tradition in Colonial and Post-Colonial Writings on Widow Immolation in India,” Ania Loomba uses the term *sati* for “the act, the practice of widow immolation, and for the woman who dies” (224). In “Institutions, Beliefs, Ideologies: Widow Immolation in Contemporary Rajasthan,” Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid employ “‘widow immolation’ to designate the primary violence and ‘sati’ to indicate those structures of belief and ideology which gain consent for widow immolation” (WS-3). The colonial or anglicized spelling of *sati* is *suttee* and it means the ritual immolation itself rather than the person who is burned. These definitions will be used throughout this chapter.

about sati; still there is also much we do not know. Much continues to elude us” (28). In the first section of this chapter, I chart out various sites and forms in which *sati* appears: mythical, caste-legend, colonial, national, and feminist. The idea is not to construct a history of *sati*. My purpose is to provide a historical contextualization to prepare the reader, who is not familiar with Indian customs and traditions, to the literary analysis. In the next section, I analyze Ghosh’s representation of *sati*.⁵⁰ I address the complexity of the issues involved, especially the multilayered level of violence which leads Deeti, the female protagonist of *Sea of Poppies* (2008), to opt for *sati*. In this chapter, I trace the intertwining of tradition and gender as it shapes the subject of *sati*, and I focus my investigation on the violated woman as the subject of narrative and of *sati* in a contrapuntal reading of male rape.

Throughout this thesis, I am going to use Joan W. Scott’s definition of gender. In “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” Scott defines gender as “a way of denoting “cultural constructions”— the entirely social creation of ideas about appropriate roles for women and men. It is a way of referring to the exclusively social origins of the subjective identities of men and women. Gender is, in this definition, a social category imposed on a sexed body” (1056). Crucial for post-colonial national politics and culture, the issues of gender are important to acquire an understanding of decolonization and the historical process of new nation-state formation.

⁵⁰ It is important to point out that *sati* inspired the European literary imagination. It is present in Jules Verne’s adventure novel *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873) and in M. M. Kaye’s novel *The Far Pavilions* (1978). Rajan makes a very interesting critical analysis of colonialism in these two novels. See Rajan, Rajeswari Sunder. *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism*. London: Routledge, 1993. Print.

Sati: The Indian Perspective

Often defined as anonymous tales, myths are stories about the origin of the world, the creation of mankind, the feats of gods or heroes, and the tragedies which befell ancient families. They, as Northrop Frye has argued, permeate the imaginary, and lie in the collective unconscious of a culture.⁵¹ In India, there are three primary sources of myths: two epics — the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* — and the *Puranas*. Over the course of Indian civilization, they have dominated the Indian imagination, and become a major source of mythical icons.

There are several instances of women committing *sati* in these literary texts. The death of wives of kings, warriors and sages is compared with grandiose demise of their husbands. The goddess Sati is among the 330 million gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon.⁵² The legend is that Sati, also known as *Dakshayani*, kills herself when her father, the great god Daksha, insults her husband Shiva. She invokes her yogic *Agni* (the god of fire) and immolates herself. Enraged by her death, Shiva carries her body across the earth, and starts his dance of destruction. In some other versions, wherever the pieces of Sati's body fall, temples for *Shakti* (the female energy of a deity) are established. In others, Sati is reborn as Parvati and wins Shiva anew in that life through her extraordinary asceticism. The moral lesson of this story — as seen in Indian tradition — is that a wife should be devoted to her

⁵¹ For more information on myths, see Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: four essays*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2000. Print. and _____. *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1991. Print.

⁵² It is said that in India there is no original, but many originals. There is not a master text to be reduced to. There is, for example, no one *Shakuntala*, but many originals of *Shakuntala*. This is the problem of reading oral corpus which cannot be reduced to a single author and yet had certain marked tendencies. Bearing this in mind, I want to inform that the story about goddess Sati presented here might be one version of many in the Indian narratives.

husband.

Very different from the mythical *sati* is the caste-legend *sati*, a practice restricted to the *Kshatriyas* (warriors). Under this practice, the warriors' wives would immolate themselves in the belief that they would ascend to heaven with their husbands. It is also considered a female heroic equivalent of the warrior's death in a battle. According to historical records, Rani Sati was the first woman who immolated herself on her husband's funeral pyre. She was married to an Agrawal man who died in a battle. The exact date of her death is still unclear, but 1295 and 1595 are the two most often cited years. Rani Sati's temple is a famous monument located in Jhunjhunu in Rajasthan.⁵³ Here, it is important to highlight the distinction between *jauhar* (collective immolation by women) and *sati* (individual suicide).⁵⁴ The Rajput practice of *jauhar* dates back to the medieval wars between different states. It's important to note that *jauhar* was committed only in exceptional circumstances. When defeat in a battle was imminent, the Rajput men went out on a suicide mission to fight till death and their women ended their lives by jumping into huge fires inside their forts.

As a myth and cultural practice, *sati* has existed in India since time immemorial. But it undergoes a major change with the arrival of the Europeans in India. It is known that Europeans started traveling to India since the 1500s onward for trade. They recorded their observations and attitudes towards *sati*. According to Barbara Ramusack and Sharon Sievers in *Women in Asia: Restoring Women to History* (1999), their early accounts of *sati* show an

⁵³ In "Sati Worship and Marwari Public Identity in India," Anne Hardgrove shows how the Marwari's belief and practice of *satipuja* provide a means to consider how *sati* can be a significant ingredient in the way a community both practices kinship and defines its public boundaries (723-752). Hardgrove, Anne. "Sati Worship and Marwari Public Identity in India." *The Journal of Asian Studies* Vol 58 No 3 (1999): 723-752. JSTOR. Web. 18 May 2012.

⁵⁴ The Rajputs were not merely a caste, but a ruling military aristocracy rising prominence during the ninth and twelfth centuries in the North, West and Central India. See Barnerjee, A. C. *Rajput Studies*. Calcutta: A. Mukherjee, 1944. Print.

acceptance to the devotion of Hindu wives to their husbands and recognize the religious ritual.

But as the British turn into colonizers from mere traders, there is some change in their attitude towards this practice and they begin to see it as a disturbing religious practice. It is during the later colonial period, when the British are consolidating their power across the Gangetic belt in India, that these practices become controversial. In “Whatever happened to the Vedic Dasi? Orientalism, Nationalism and a Script for the Past,” the Indian historian Uma Chakravarti points out that “the construction of a particular kind of past is also the context for the construction of a particular kind of womanhood” (78). This historical construct, to which Chakravarti refers, has *sati* as a connecting thread. She accounts that the first group of Orientalists wanted “to reintroduce the Hindu elite to the ‘impenetrable mystery’ of its ancient lore”, that is, to reconstruct an Indian history based on the glories of ancient Hindus (31).⁵⁵ The women’s question is not their major topic. The Asiatic Society’s avid interest is on Sanskrit literature, history, and philosophy.⁵⁶ It is only with Henry Thomas Colebrooke’s essay, “On the Duties of the Faithful Hindu Widow”, that the Orientalists become aware of it. Colebrooke describes *sati* as a barbaric ritual, and this created an image of India as a savage society. The Indian reformist Rammohan Roy refuted this statement using Maitreyi-Yajnavalkya episode to show that the status of women in the ancient past had been high.⁵⁷

Roy accuses the pundits, who interpreted Indian *shastras* (scriptures) for the colonial

⁵⁵ William Jones, as Uma Chakravarti highlights, did not pay any attention to *sati*. He simply mentioned Gargi, describing her as “eminent for her piety and learning” (30). Gargi Vachaknavi was one of the great natural philosophers. She challenged the sage Yajnavalkya raising difficult questions about the *atman* (soul).

The early Orientalists who were directly engaged in giving a history to the Indians were: William Jones (1746-1794) and Henry Thomas Colebrooke (1765-1837), and the students from Fort William College (1800). The Fort William College was founded by Lord Wellesley, whose purpose was the development of Oriental Studies.

⁵⁶ The Asiatic Society was founded by William Jones on January 15, 1784. The founding fathers’ aim was to rediscover India and her past.

⁵⁷ Rammohun Roy uses this episode to assert that Yajnavalkya had transmitted the high Indian philosophy to Maitreyi, and she not only had comprehended it but also had acquired divine knowledge.

administrators, of misinterpreting them.⁵⁸ At first, these Orientalists do not interfere in the Hindu society since they are only studying it. But later on, the colonial writers have a different concept of the subject. While the former suggest that in ancient time the Hindus were people of high culture and now in a state of decline, the latter consider them uncivilized from the beginning. The colonial discourse, as Edward W. Said defined in *Orientalism* (2001), is justified on grounds of moral superiority which enables the rulers to “protect” the colonized and to “intervene” in the colonial state (6). One of its main justification is the subjugation of women.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the emerging Indian elite have a dual encounter with the colonial ideology: on the one hand, they had the glories of the ancient Hindus; and on the other hand, there was the negative image of the present that the colonial administrators, missionaries, and travelers gave in their accounts. It is in this historical context that the moral superiority of the colonial rulers is established. The women’s question, however, becomes a crucial issue in the colonial ideology. The British intervention on the Indian social structure is made more evident with the banning of *sati*. The reaction to the representation of Hindus as effete, and their women requiring protection from the barbaric customs incited the national consciousness. A major element of it is the development of a deep consciousness about a Hindu past symbolized by the great works of art, literature, and philosophy. A new identity, which stemmed from this nationalism, chooses features related to Brahminical values that are central to its conception, but, as some critics have said, excluded

⁵⁸ Brahmin pandit/pundit (learned) refers to someone who was erudite in various subjects. He conducted religious ceremonies, offered counsel to the king, and belonged to the brahmin varna (caste). During the East Company permanence in India, as Lata Mani points out, the pundits were instructed to respond to colonial administrator’s questions with “a reply in conformity with the scriptures” (98). See Mani, Lata. “Contentious Traditions: The Debate on *Sati* on Colonial India.” In: *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*. eds. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid. New Delhi: Zubaan an Imprint of Kali for Women, 1999. Print.

all the other Indian castes, religions, languages, and ethnicity.

With the rise of this consciousness, a new identity is formed for both men and women. The 'national' identity of women is based on three issues: the whole question of the continuing impetus to reform their status; the need for protection of their minimum rights; and raising their status through education. In this process, each writer creates his/her own 'national identities' or 'national heroes', according to his/her cultural values and ideals. Here it is relevant to mention Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, the Bengali writer, and his conception of womanhood in West Bengal. In a moment of national crisis, Bankim constructs this 'new woman' opposing the one who in the past performed sacrifices to the gods by her husband's side as an equal partner in the offering of ablutions. On the other hand, this 'new woman' is supposed to fight shoulder to shoulder with her husband for the freedom of India.

All these historical and national constructions are mainly devised either by British or Indian men, especially in relation to the myth of the golden age of Indian womanhood located in the Vedic period. However, Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) deconstructs this idea in *High Caste Hindu Woman*. Ramabai states that there has never been such an age, and that women have always experienced oppression and suffered injustice in her three stages of life: childhood, marriage, and widowhood (qtd. in Chakravarti 68). Like Ramabai, Chakravarti also contends that:

the miseries of widowhood are such that although sati is gruesome and entirely the creation of a "wicked priesthood," if it appeared to the widow that it was a sublime act it was because it was the only relief she had against a cruel world. [...]

While Ramabai recognized the value of social reform she saw also how

limited its reach was and its failure as a practical means of ending the window humiliation. (71)

Ramabai's perception of local reality is meaningful because she was describing the conditions of her time. As a woman, she knows far too well the hardship of living under men's domination, and criticizes what she saw as 'the hypocrisy of Manu' (qtd. in Chakravarti 71). The arguments presented by Ramabai in the nineteenth century can be detected in the theoretical issues analyzed by Bharati Ray *From the Seams of History — Essays on Indian Women* (1995) are related to the role of women in the past. According to Ray, the emergence of a 'consciousness' among women about the realities of a patriarchal culture in India is bound to the freedom movement, especially with the *Swadeshi* movement in Bengal.⁵⁹ These women were urban middle-class Hindus, that is, *Bhadramahila* (*Bhadralok* is the Bengali word for middle-class men).⁶⁰ While all middle-class women are not equally transformed, nor able to reconstitute new roles for themselves, a considerable number of them evince a desire for equal socio-political rights along with men, question the culture of patriarchy, and strive to

⁵⁹ In the *Swadeshi* movement of 1905-1908, women boycotted foreign cloth and made spectacular bonfires with them. As Tanika Sarkar reminds us, women helped nationalist volunteers with their ornaments. They also sheltered terrorists. For further reading, see Sumit, Sarkar. *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal: 193-1908*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 1973. Print.

⁶⁰ This is the new elite in West Bengal. They constituted the junior partners of the colonial rulers. The reform movement supported by them was neither to attack the patriarchal system nor to make women equal partners of men in the socioeconomic world. Their intention was to improve the position of women within the patriarchal framework and to make them more capable of fulfilling their roles as wives and mothers within the family. That is, the paradigm of a model women was imported from Victorian England with the 'traditional' qualities of Indian women. For an excellent discussion on this aspect, see Chatterjee, Partha. 1999. "The Nation and Its Women". Ranajit Guha, ed. *A Subaltern Studies Reader, 1986-1995*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. 240-262. Print.

build up an organizational network of their own.⁶¹

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Bengali women exist in a deplorable state of ignorance, illiteracy, superstition and physical seclusion. The improvement in women's condition begins in the mid-nineteenth century, with the help of Rammohun Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and other social reformists. As a result of several reformist movements, *sati* is abolished in 1829, widow remarriage is permitted through the Hindu Widow's Remarriage Act, and women's education introduced in schools. As Ray explains, this process of women's condition has two important issues: "the emergence of an urban culture as distinguished from the rural one; and "the growth of an English-educated professional generation at odds with traditional zamindars" (179).

Bengal Renaissance: 'The New Woman'

It is a known fact that West Bengal is the first great center for reform movements in India. The new elite (*bhadralok*) tries not only to challenge the culture of the colonizer, but also to reassert the cultural identity of the colonized. Ray emphasizes that it is done through the representation of women. This colonized elite projected a 'glorious' Hindu past with

⁶¹ The term 'a double colonization' is used by Kirsten Holster Petersen and Anna Rutherford to refer to the ways in which women have simultaneously experienced the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy. They also argue that colonialism celebrates male achievement in a series of male-oriented myths such as 'mateship, the mounties, explorers, freedom fighters, bush-rangers, missionaries' (9), while women are subject to representation in colonial discourses in ways which collude with patriarchal values. 'A double colonization', in other words, means that women are colonized: one, by colonialist realities and representations; two, by patriarchal realities and representation. For a detailed analysis of 'double colonization' of women, see Petersen, Kirsten Holst and Anna Rutherford, eds. *A Double Colonization: Colonial and Post-Colonial Women's Writing*. Oxford, England: Dangaroo, 1986. Print.

‘glorious’ women, as explained earlier. They, however, create a ‘new’ woman combining ‘ancient’ eastern qualities with ‘modern’ western ones.⁶² The women are educated and ‘modernized’, but at the same time have to do the domestic chores. They have to read and write in Bengali and English, learn housework, and be a good mother and a devoted housewife.⁶³ The dualism between the West and the East in the nineteenth century, which influences very much the women’s role, is not solved in the twentieth century. Ray affirms that “new forces and influences were released to shape the contours of women’s consciousness” (181). She highlights that the western feminist ideologies had a great impact on Indian women and the important difference in the change of women’s images, ideas and life-situations occurred during the freedom movement.⁶⁴ The educated elite, by the end of the nineteenth century, become disillusioned with the British rule, realizing that they were not working for the development of India. This historical approach described above offers relevant and illuminating commentaries on *sati* and shows how it has evolved into a feminist concern. It is within these different discursive fields, from mythology to feminism, that the question of female subjectivity emerges and the divergent readings of *sati* are constructed. The abolition of *sati*, as many critics have pointed out, serves as the moral pretext for the colonial rule itself. *Sati*, as described above, has raised innumerable questions and debates.

Thus, it is to the literary representation of *sati* that I turn now to see the sequences of

⁶² The western model was based on Victorian English women. The Eastern model referred to the classical Indian ideal. These both models were idealized, and were out of touch with the realities they tried to represent.

⁶³ English was used to communicate with the ruling class.

⁶⁴ Annie Besant and Margaret Cousins brought Indian women under the influence of western feminist ideologies. Annie Besant was a suffragist in England who went to India, and settled down in Madras. Besant gained wide reputation as theosophist and was the president of the Theosophical Society for many years. She became involved in the women’s movement in India and also in Indian politics playing a key role in forming the Women’s Indian Association (1917). In 1918, she was elected the president of the Indian National Congress. Margaret Cousins was a theosophist, along with her husband, and a suffragist from Ireland. She helped in the formation of the Women’s Indian Association and also in the India Women’s Conference in 1927.

violence which are embedded in it. This violence, as it will be shown, makes the woman choose for *sati*.⁶⁵ It cannot be forgotten that freedom of choice, as Nivedita Menon argues in the *Seeing like a Feminist* (2012), is “always exercised within strict boundaries that are non-negotiable-these boundaries are defined by economic class, by race and caste, and, of course, by gender. [...] but within those limited boundaries, people do make choices” (175). I want to bring attention once again to the Indian cultural diversity and emphasize that *sati* has had different manifestations at different times and places in India. These are not homogeneous events. The act of woman killing herself with her dead husband can be similar in all the cases, but what serves as a major conduit for it varies from one case to another. Thus, *sati* cannot be isolated from its context due to the complexity of the issues related to it. I also want to stress that any literary text is open to many interpretations and this can be one of many possible readings.

Violence against Body and Soul

In order to move forward, it is important to ask some probing and challenging questions: Who are these men and women that Amitav Ghosh represents in *Sea of Poppies*? What are the faultlines, conflicts, differences, fears and contentment that they undergo in their everyday lives? Does Ghosh criticize the patriarchal system and caste system in India? If he does, how? Does he demystify the western way of conceiving the Third World subjects? If he

⁶⁵ For the discussion on freedom, see Sen, Amartya. *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006. Print.

does, how? How does he raise the issue of masculinity and femininity in the Indian context? Does he critique the way the West colonizes gender? If he does, how? Does he re-conceptualize men and women as agents or victims? If they are depicted as agents, what are the strategies of survival that they present? And does he make their agency visible or invisible in the narrative?

I will answer these questions throughout the literary analysis, not necessarily in a chronological order, but beginning with rape as two characters — Deeti and Kalua — are victims of sexual assault at two different stages — and contexts — in the story.

Rape is one of the most common crimes in India. In *The History of Doing: An Illustrative Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India 1800 — 1990* (1993), Radha Kumar classifies them as: the 'landlord rape', where a man exercises his power to assault women, who work for him as slaves or the wives of men who are his slaves; the 'rape by those in authority' comprising the exercise of power within the workplace to rape women employees; the 'caste rape' in which upper-caste men exercise their power to assault lower-caste or outcast women (such as 'tribals'); and then there are more categories of class rape, police rape, army rape, marital rape, rape within the family, rape of minors, and rape of prostitutes (128). Sexual assaults on such a wide scale is the main signature of violence against women in India.⁶⁶ Nowadays, some women show courage to file police complaints against the rapists, but it has always been one of the most under-reported crimes in the

⁶⁶ For further reading on violence against women in Indian society, see Das, Veena. "Language and Body: Transaction in the Construction of Pain." *Social Suffering* Vol 125 No 1 (1996): 67-91. JSTOR. Web. 18 May 2012.

subcontinent.⁶⁷ The reason behind it ranges from the shame of being exposed as a dishonored woman⁶⁸ to the lack of legal protection, and to the definition of rape and molestation.⁶⁹ In India, police inaction, caste, and *panchayat* interference play an important role in how rape victims are perceived.⁷⁰ In this patriarchal society, rape could be worse than death for women.⁷¹ A normal life for the raped woman is something inconceivable (there is still a lot of stigma attached to it, but the feminists and the women's movement are fighting against it). In a male dominated society like India, often it is the victim who is blamed for the crime for three possible reasons (just to name a few because the list of absurdity is long⁷²): she left her home; she went out after dark; and she dressed in unconventional ways.⁷³ I believe that this

⁶⁷ Radha Kumar explains that the campaigns against rape started against police rape. According to Kumar there are two kinds of police rape in India: "incidents of mass rape which are acts against a community or class which is engaged in a struggle with those who hold power over it, and the rape of individual women who generally belong to relatively powerless or marginal groups and communities." (128) Besides this there are also other problems involving the police. First, some women are raped again when they go to the police station to file a complaint. They also often face hostility or skepticism about what they have experienced. Second, more than half of acquittals were due to police failure to perform adequate investigations.

⁶⁸ For fear of being shamed by their family and community, victims are scared of filing a complaint against the rapist. Those who are brave enough to go to the police face numerous challenges to put the attacker behind bars such as reporting the rape to hostile police, unsympathetic forensic examinations, a lack of counseling, poor police investigations and weak prosecutions in the courts.

⁶⁹ The dilemma is the definition of molestation and rape. The latter refers to the phallus penetration only. Any other object which penetrates the woman's vagina falls under the molestation category. Oral and animal penetration is considered molestation instead of rape. This is provoking lots of controversial debates in India nowadays. With this "unfair" definition the activists are requesting a change in legislation for new laws which protect the victims and punish the perpetrator with the fair judgment.

⁷⁰ *Panchayat* system is a local self-government in the villages or in small towns in India. The word *panchayat* literally means assembly of five wise and respected elders chosen and accepted by the local community. In 1993, the 30% of the seat reservations in the *panchayat* system went for women.

⁷¹ It is important to highlight that the nuclear, patriarchal, and patrilineal system is not natural and is not the only form of the family in the Indian culture. In some parts of India, the matrilineal system still prevails. It was normal in the Nair community in Kerala. Even today the Khasis (tribe people) in the state of Meghalaya follows this system. In her discussion on the forms of the Hindu family, Nivedita Menon argues that the British colonialism interfered in the varied forms of the Hindu family delegitimizing them because they did not fit under the "Victorian and upper-caste Hindu norms of modernity" (24).

⁷² Watch *It's my fault* http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8hC0Ng_ajpY

⁷³ This patriarchal argument is not restricted to lower-caste men only. It is widespread among the other castes as well.

argument does not hold water when the discussion is ‘rape within the family’, or rather, it does not make sense at all. Isn’t her house a ‘safe’ place?⁷⁴

Although the rapes explored in *Sea of Poppies* (2008) is imaginary, it is unfortunately a reality that lots of Indian women (mainly lower-caste) face. In contemporary India, rape as phenomenon has more to do with social power than with sexual desire. One important aspect of rape in modern India is the caste rape. In an article, “India’s Caste Culture is a Rape Culture,” Thenmozhi Soundararajan explains how the caste system is lethal to Dalit women and points out, according to India’s National Crime Records Bureau, that four Dalit women are raped every day:

India’s culture of caste is a culture of rape. Both for oppression and opportunism, caste-based sexual violence is meant to silence our communities. Each attempt to achieve equality — going to school, getting a job, or voting — brings greater risk of reprisal. Because at its heart, caste-based sexual violence is about creating a climate of terror so that Dalits will fear challenging this system. This reprisal violence though has now reached record numbers with a recent study by the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights reporting that over 67% of Dalit women have faced some form of sexual violence. (n. pag.)

⁷⁴ During my stay in India, I asked lots of people about ‘rape for reproduction’ in the family context. The only answer I got was: “it is something common here.” After that a long silence. The normalcy and the silence did bother me.

In Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Soundararajan remarks, Rashida Manjoo argues that such crimes persist because there is a “deeply entrenched patriarchal attitude of police officers, prosecutors, judicial officers” (n. pag.). The episode in *Sea of Poppies* (2008) plots the narrative of a raped Rajput woman who is born under an unlucky star, Saturn (*Shani*). Deeti, the protagonist, is married to Hukam Singh. Her disadvantages begin when she is born: “Her prospects had always been bedeviled by her stars, her fate being ruled by Saturn-Shani-a planet that exercised great power on those under its influence, often bringing discord, unhappiness and disharmony” (SOP 28). With this ‘death sentence’, she could never expect something good from life. If she were ever to be married, her husband would be much older, and probably a widower with a bunch of kids. Singh, however, is neither older nor a widower. He is an ex-sepoy who works in an opium factory. When the marriage is arranged, Deeti’s brother (an ex-sepoy as well) tells her that “her prospective husband’s disability was a minor one” (SOP 28). It is only on the wedding night that she finds out what the minor problem was. Singh is addicted to opium. He tells her: “You should know, he said at last, that this [pointing to the pipe] is my first wife. She’s kept me alive since I was wounded: if it weren’t for her I would not be here today. I would have died of pain, long ago” (SOP 31). After hearing this, Deeti goes back in time and remembers how the children used to laugh at the *afeemkhors*’ drugged face in their village. She cannot believe in what lies ahead for her, and has to conform to the idea that “the shade of Saturn had passed over her face to remind her of her destiny” (SOP 32). If opium soothed Singh’s pain of a shattered bone, it would be impossible for her not to accept a puff on his pipe to tranquilize her ‘emotional’ pain. When the smoke starts to entering her body, “the fibres of her muscles began to soften and go slack; her body seemed to drain itself of tension and a sensation of the

most delectable languor followed in its wake” (SOP 32). The hallucinogenic effect of opium takes Deeti into a “brighter, better, more fulfilling” (SOP 32) world, and also makes her ‘more’ vulnerable. It is at this very moment of vulnerability that she is raped, and:

When she opened her eyes next morning there was a dull ache in her lower abdomen and a painful soreness between her legs. Her clothes were in disarray and she reached down to discover that her thighs were crusted with blood. Her husband was lying beside her, with the brass box in his arms, his clothes undisturbed. She shook him awake to ask: What happened? Was everything all right last night? (SOP 32)

For Joan W. Scott, “we must pursue not universal, general causality, but meaningful explanation” (1067). She argues that “we need to deal with the individual subject as well as social organization and to articulate the nature of their interrelationships” (1067). Keeping that in mind, the case study of this rape must take the social interaction between an individual and family into consideration. While Deeti is under opium-induced somnolence, Chandan Singh, Hukam Singh’s brother, rapes her. The excerpt above describes the morning after the crime. Like her marriage, the rape is arranged by the family (the brother-in-law is the perpetrator and the mother-in-law is the accomplice).⁷⁵ To preserve the family’s honor (or rather to hide Singh’s impotence) and to ensure reproduction (especially the male child⁷⁶),

⁷⁵ In “Bargaining with Patriarchy,” Deniz Kandiyoti points out that under classic patriarchal system women’s subordination is tempered by “the control older women attain over younger women” (274). See Kandiyoti, Deniz. “Bargaining with Patriarchy.” *Gender and Society* No 3 (1988): 274-290. JSTOR. Web. 4 December 2013

⁷⁶ A son preference leads to a thousands of female feticide in India.

Deeti's body is violated. She is raped in her new house, a space normally designated as 'safe'.⁷⁷ This episode thus reveals how the concept of honor is manipulated by the family and how speech and silence work. Prevalent in the Indian subcontinent, the Hindi-Urdu word *izzat* literally means honor, that is, the concept of correct conduct, especially the female sexual conduct. It depends exclusively on a range of women's actions.⁷⁸

In her work, the American anthropologist Jane Schneider argues that "honor and shame complement institutional arrangements for the distribution of power and the creation of order in society" (2). In the patriarchal culture like that of India⁷⁹, it is an established belief that the family's honor must be kept intact and it cannot be destroyed by any immoral act.⁸⁰ Thus, the patriarchal mentality in India sees rape as an evil because it is a crime against the family's honor, and not as violation of an individual. But, as the literary example above shows, some families commit brutal crimes in the name of *izzat* and silence the victims. Unlike this patriarchal understanding, for feminists, as Nivedita Menon reminds us, rape is a crime against the woman's bodily autonomy and integrity. As long as Hukam Singh's integrity

⁷⁷ When a woman marries, she has no rights in her natal home. She has to leave it forever and move to her husband's house. If she has to go back to her parents' house for any reason, a shame falls on her family. In the new house, she is subordinate not only to the men but also so to the senior women, especially the mother-in-law as it is described in *Sea of Poppies*. That is, older women gain power through married sons, oppressing the wives.

⁷⁸ The feminists see it as a way of controlling women's sexuality.

⁷⁹ It is not my intention to provide a review of the theoretical debates on patriarchy. It is important to emphasize that patriarchy is different across time and space. For more details, see Walby, Sylvia. *Theorising Patriarchy*. New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991. Print.; and Hartmann, Heidi. "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a more Progressive Union". *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*. Ed. Lydia Sargent. London: Pluto Press, 1981. Print.

⁸⁰ In his field work, the sociologist Steve Darné interviewed 49 upper-caste, upper-middle-class Hindu men in Banaras. One of them gave the following opinion on family honor: "The woman caste is so vulnerable that any type of unlimited step in any field could destroy the honor [*izzat*] of her family [*ghar*]. Whatever the social restrictions are, if she doesn't live according to them, then the honor [*izzat*] of the family [*ghar*] is finished. If she goes out on her own without telling anyone, people will point fingers at her over this. If she roams around [*ghūmmā-phirnā*], then people can point fingers at her" (209). See Darné, Steve. "Hindu Men Talk about Controlling Women: Cultural Ideas as a Tool of the Powerful." *Sociological Perspectives* No 2 (1994): 203-227. JSTOR. Web. 4 December 2013.

and his family's honor are kept untouchable before the community, Deeti's body can be violated.

Rape within the family is not the only crime women in India have to face. In the name of family honour, they have to carry several other burdens too. To take forward my argument, I would like to raise a pertinent question borrowed from Dipesh Chakrabarty. In "The Subject of Law and the Subject of Narratives," he talks about the cruelty inflicted on Hindu widows in Bengali families.⁸¹ As it is known among the Hindus, the rituals of widowhood prescribe some rules as Chakrabarty enumerates them:

celibacy, a ban on meat eating, avoidance of certain kinds of food, and frequent fasting. Unadorned bodies that carry certain marks (such as the lack of jewelry, shaved head or cropped hair, white saris with no-or black-borders) aim to make widows unattractive and set them aside from others. (118)⁸²

He poses a challenging question: "What kind of intervention would be possible in this case?" (110). For him, there are two kinds of interventions: "the social intervention through

⁸¹ In this essay, Chakrabarty presents a few cases of widow testimony. *Akhara* is a Hindi word which literally means a compound, but it acquires another meaning when it is associated with the widows. It is the "living death" space and this compound is a "second society" for female outcasts. The widows are exploited by the sadhus and some forced into prostitution. See *Water*. Dir. Deepa Mehta. 2005. Film. and also Saxena, Shobhan. "Unwanted, widows live on the dark side of hope." *The Times of India* 5 December 2010, New Delhi ed.: Deep Focus. Web.

⁸² In *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2000), Chakrabarty explains that the widowhood became a problem in Bengali society only with the coming of colonial rule. Before that the concerns were: "the daughter-in-law's suffering at the hands of the mother-in-law and sister-in-law, the question of chastity of women, jealousy and quarrel between cowives" (118). Thus the question of sati and Widow Remarriage Act (1856) are consequences of British intervention.

the law, and the social intervention through narrative” (110).⁸³ It is only through the latter (the testimonies) that the widows’ suffering is documented. Thus, it is in fiction that stories like Deeti’s break the cultural of silence and reveal the cruelty hidden behind family honor. As Chakrabarty acknowledges:

Narrative points to a sphere of modernity that seems more compatible with ethics of being face-to-face with the victim of suffering. Yet we build civil-political spheres on theories that view the social in terms of abstract, homogeneous units. While these theories do make formal equality possible either between commodities or between citizens, they will never be adequate to the demands of the politics of cruelty/affection that define and dominate the life processes of family and kinship. (114)

Either biography, autobiography or fiction, the narrative, however, puts the reader face-to-face with the victim of cruelty. So what is the alternative that a woman like Deeti has after the husband’s death? Face widowhood or commit *sati*? When her husband is dying, her brother-in-law starts molesting her. Of course, *sati* would be the best solution for her to end her misery. As it was explained above, *sati*, among the *Kshatriyas* (the caste to which Hukam Singh belongs), provides a heroic female equivalent to the warrior’s death in a battle. Singh’s

⁸³ For the women’s movement the solution rests on gender-just laws, that is, to create a legislation on aspects not covered by personal laws at all (family laws in India are different when Warren Hastings in 1772 created provisions prescribing Hindu law for Hindus and Islamic law for Muslims, for litigation relating to personal matters). The Domestic Violence Act 2005 (domestic violence under this act includes actual abuse or the threat of abuse whether physical, sexual, verbal, emotional or economic) protects women’s right in the matrimonial home (Menon 2012).

death, however, was far from being heroic.⁸⁴ As Romila Thapar explains in *India: Another Millennium?* (2000), “sati could be distinguished from mere suicide because the widow would die for something positive” (9).⁸⁵ Indeed, Deeti’s suicide is neither devotional nor heroic. It, therefore, functions as an elaborated attempt to eliminate suffering and violence because she is a product of a culture that largely negates any meritocratic individualism and envisages an entirely subordinate role for women. But with few alternatives (the restrictions within a patriarchal space), she tries to revert her oppressive situation before committing *sati*. She makes use of opium as a subversive device to make the domestic space less oppressive, ‘taming’ her mother-in-law. With this, Deeti finds out who her daughter’s father is (she gets pregnant when raped). This shows a tenuous individualism which leads to a form of resistance. The identity that she, as a raped woman, acquires in the novel, according to my reading, is based neither on a conventional acceptance of the loss of chastity nor on a diminution of womanhood. In the words of the narrator:

From that day on she began to slip traces of the drug into everything she served her mother-in-law; she sprinkled it on her achars, kneaded it into dalpuris, fried it into her pakoras and dissolved it in her daal. In a very short time, the old woman grew quieter and more tranquil, her voice lost its harshness and her eyes become softer; [...] if a little bit of this gum could give her such power over life, the character, the very soul of this elderly woman, then with more of

⁸⁴ He had been discharged from the British regiment, for he got his leg wounded. It would not be possible in this paper to analyze Hukum Singh’s story, but it is one of those stories which have been silenced.

⁸⁵ For further reading, see Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorti. “Can the Subaltern Speak?”. *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*. Ed. P. Williams and L. Chrisman. New York: Colombia University Press, 1994. In this essay, Spivak examines the difference between ritual and crime.

it at her disposal, why should she not be able to seize kingdoms and control multitudes? (SOP 35)

Perceiving the power of the opium, she acquires knowledge of it with *dais* and *ojhas*⁸⁶, and uses it in her own benefit to know the truth (who was her daughter's father):

It was a decoction of datura that wrung the truth from the old woman, by sending her into a trance from which she never recovered. In her last days, when her mind was wondering she often referred to Deeti as 'Draupadi'; when asked why, she would murmur drowsily: Because the earth has never seen a more virtuous woman than Draupadi, of the *Mahabharata*, wife to five brothers. It's a fortunate woman, a *saubhāgyawati*, who bears the children of brothers for each other... It was this allusion that confirmed Deeti's belief that the child in her belly had been fathered not by her husband, but by Chandan Singh, her leering, slack-jawed brother-in-law. (SOP 36)

The justification for the rape given by the mother-in-law in this story alludes to Draupadi's story in the *Mahabharata*. She, ironically, recalls the legendary figure of Draupadi from the epic who is married to five Pandavas brothers. In "Sexuality, Vulnerability and the Oddness of the Human", Veena Das points out two moments "when the question of how

⁸⁶ During the colonial period, the indigenous and traditional Indian medical system of *dais* (midwives) was replaced by midwives trained in western medicine and hygiene. For a better understanding of this colonial intervention and the problem it caused, see Forbes, Geraldine. *Women in Colonial India: Essays on Politics, Medicine and Historiography*. New Delhi: Chronicle Books, 2005. *Ojha* is the name given to the profession of exorcists who occasionally pass through villages.

human life comes to be embroiled in cycles of violence” in the *Mahabharata*. The first involves the bet Yudhisthira makes in a game of dice and loses Draupadi to his rivals, and the second refers to the Arjuna’s paralysis.⁸⁷ For the former, Das argues that:

Draupadi is dragged into the public assembly (*sabha*) of the Kaurava kings. Dushasan, one of the Kaurava brothers, tries to disrobe her since she is nothing more than their slave now. This is an iconic moment, nothing less than a rape and that too of a kinswoman. Draupadi calls out to Krishna to save her and through his intervention a miracle occurs in which she is wrapped in infinite number of saris and thus cannot be disrobed. (7)

At the symbolic level, the excerpt above shows Draupadi being raped as she is disrobed. This juxtaposition of Deeti and the mythical heroine from the *Mahabharata* marks a distinctive characteristic of Ghosh’s narrative and it can be seen in contemporary writers as well. In her study of myth as technique in Indo-Anglian novels in *The Twice Born Fiction* (2010), Meenakshi Mukherjee claims that “not all mythical heroines are popular with fiction writers” and asserts “Draupadi has never been a prototype of the characters of fiction” (154). Mukherjee argues that:

None of the *Mahabharata* characters have ever become everyday models of reference in Indian life as the characters of the *Ramayana* have. Not only does *Ramayana* provide us with the literary archetype of womanhood, but also of

⁸⁷ Draupadi and Arjuna are the main characters of the *Mahabharata*.

the ideal king, the ideal brother, the ideal subjects, and even an ideal villain.

But *Mahabharata* presents no ideals. (154)

The reason for not to refer to *Mahabharata* is, as Mukherjee points out, its polemic themes: adultery, deception, rape, treachery, pride, lust, and etc. *Sea of Poppies* (2008) thus touches upon the rape issue and peels the layers showing all the parts involved, direct or indirectly. In the epic, Krishna saves Draupadi at the moment of the ‘supposed rape’. In *Sea of Poppies* (2008) Kalua saves Deeti when she is about to commit *sati*. The rescue scene shows that she is saved not from death but from the oppression of patriarchal and caste system:

a curious feeling, of joy mixed with resignation, crept into her heart, for it was as if she really had died and been delivered betimes in rebirth, to 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 — and she knew that it was with Kalua that this life would be lived, until another death claimed the body that he had torn from the flames. (SOP 163-164)

The scene explicitly suggests, ‘a new destiny’, the romance between the rescuer and the rescued⁸⁸, but, besides it, it indicates the representation of the rescue as an individual

⁸⁸ According to the Hindu ancient tradition (*sastras*), it is important to keep the racial status of women unlowered. She hence cannot marry man of a lower caste. In the *Mahabharata* chapter V (The Marriage of Devayani), Yayati explains to Devayani that “*anuloma* (the practice of marrying men of higher castes) was legitimate and *pratiloma* (the practice of marrying men of a lower caste) was prohibited by the *sastras*” (33). Deeti is Rajput caste and Kalua is Chamar (one of the untouchable communities). See Rajagopalachari, C.. *Mahabharata*. Mumbai: Bhavan’s Book University, 1970. Print.

intervention instead of the coercive apparatus of the State or the colonial intervention. It can also be inferred, as a critique of colonialism, that the Indians are capable of saving their own women. In the *Ramayana* (2012), Sita has to prove her chastity and undergo a fire ritual:⁸⁹

Ye Gods, I bow before you. Oh *rishis*, I bow to you. Oh Agni, you at least know my purity and will take me as your own! With these words she jumped into the flames And wonder of wonders! The lambent flames were crowded with celestial figures, for all the gods came and assembled there; and Brahma spoke: “Narayana! Mighty God that took human form to slay Ravana! Is not your own Lakshmi?” Agni, God of fire, rose in his own body out of the flames and lifting Seeta in his arms with all her clothes and jewels untouched and intact, presented her Rama. (468)

Like Sita in *Ramayana*, Deeti undergoes the purification for being a violated woman through a symbolic death. Kalua is Agni, the God of fire who rises out of the flames and rescues her with a “untouched and intact” virtue. Within Ghosh’s frame, the female victim of rape becomes respectful woman when she is placed in another context. In the ship, the other women see her as a leader. In a narrative which is structured with visible female agency⁹⁰, first she gives opium to her mother-in-law, then she has the courage to opt for *sati*, but the

⁸⁹ Chastity is not a virtue to which men are generally taught to aspire and is not an attribute associated with proper manhood.

⁹⁰ For the discussion on agency, see Ahearn, Laura M.. “Language and Agency.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* Vol 30 (2001): 109-137. ANNUAL REVIEW. Web. 3 November 2013.

greatest blow comes when Deeti is rescued by Kalua, a low-caste (*chamar*⁹¹) man. This brings shame on her family, village and the in-laws.

In *Sea of Poppies* (2008), Ghosh challenges again and again the colonial portrayal of Hindu women as passive victims of patriarchy. Indian feminist writing provides a thorough critique of western view which sees Indian women as victims instead of agents. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan in *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism* (1993) points out that “the reification of female victimhood is a familiar procedure in the fiction of several male novelists” and that “all that is left for the raped woman to do is to fade away” (72). Rajan is referring to Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* (1748) and E. M. Foster’s *A Passage to India* (1924). Ghosh’s protagonist does not fall into this pattern raised by Rajan. He gives continuity to Deeti’s story (she goes to Mauritius and intertwined with her journey is the female indentured labor’s narrative), and also presents her as an empowered woman assuming a leadership position, proving that agency and resistance exist in everyday life.

If Deeti’s suspicion is first revealed metaphorically, its concrete confirmation comes in the form of humiliation and violence, that is, an attempted rape by a family acquaintance Bhyro Singh:

He leant forward so that his belly was against her breasts. He smiled again:
Who do you think it was who held your legs open on your wedding night? Did
you think that green twig of a launda, your brother-in-law, could have done it
on his own? Have you no shame? said Deeti, choking. Is there nothing you
won’t say? Do you know I’m with child? Child? Bhyro Singh laughed. A child

⁹¹ It is an untouchable community whose traditional profession is tanning. In the caste system, it is consider a degrading activity because they deal with dead bodies.

from the scavenger? By the time I am done with you, his spawn will be dribbling out of you like an egg-yolk. Tightening his hold on her neck, he reached up to a shelf with his other hand. His fist came back to brandish a foot-long roti-rolling *belan* under her nose. So what do you say, Kabutri-ki-ma? he said. Are you whore enough for this? (SOP 437-438)

Although the following passage is a bit long, it is worth quoting it entirely since it traces Deeti's concerns about her daughter's future. It shows she was neither passive, nor was she ready to surrender herself and her daughter to the oppression of her family:

Once the idea had been planted in her mind, Deeti could not think of little else: better by far to die a celebrated death than to be dependent on Chandan Singh, or even to return to her own village, to live out her days as a shameful burden on her brother and her kin. The more she thought about it, the more persuasive the case — even where it concerned Kabutri. It was not as if she could promise her daughter a better life by staying alive as the mistress and 'keep' of a man of no account, like Chandan Singh. Precisely her daughter's natural father, he would never allow the girl to be the equal of his other children — and his wife would do everything in her power to punish the child for her parentage. If she remained here, Kabutri would be little more than a servant and working-woman for her cousins; far better to send her back to her brother's village, to be brought up with his children — a lone child would not be a burden. (SOP 145-146)

The extract highlights that Deeti wants to avoid putting her daughter into a more difficult and complex situation, where she would be exposed to the same violence. In “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak contends that “the proper place for the woman to annul the proper name of suicide through the destruction of her proper self is on a dead spouse’s pyre” (300). Spivak identifies this ritual as the legal displacement of the woman’s subjectivity. Deeti’s decision to commit *sati* deconstructs all the arguments presented by the British and by the reformists on *sati*. It reinforces Chakrabarty’s assertion about the universal abstractions of law. It is the individual and not the universal that matters. Thus, the subaltern cannot speak, as Spivak affirms, because, even if he/she does so, their voices will not be heard. As far as women are concerned, their voice is so deeply embodied in patriarchal codes defined by Hindu society in which widows are “shameful burden”. Moreover it is not possible for them to be heard and have their rights recognized (But things are changing in India).

Male rape: The Untold Story

Opposed to the colonial narrative, which portrays women as the victims and men as oppressors, Amitav Ghosh uses rape to show a male character — Kalua — also suffering at the hands of a patriarchal and caste-based society. Though Kalua faces sexual violence, he has different social conditions as compared to that of Deeti. Ghosh juxtaposes their situation to

create a web of gender to deconstruct the colonial construction of male-female divisions in the Indian society. Like Deeti, Kalua too is assaulted, but as a man of lower-caste (his family collected the remains of dead cows and oxen) he is a victim of upper-caste landowners. When he cannot win in a fight (three *thakur-sahibs* made him a wrestler because of his physical prowess), the three young scions take their revenge on him:

By 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 folds 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. [...] 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? (SOP 52-53)

Stories of male rape are rarely reported in Indian media. Though not as widespread as assaults on women, it is not a rarity in India, if not an everyday occurrence. But the issue of male rape is completely silenced and deprives any support to its victims. In "Male Rape and Human Rights", Lara Stemple argues that the international human rights framework fails to address the sexual abuse against men and boys. Stemple explains that men are excluded from the definitions of sexual violence and only women and girls are covered by this category. She stresses that "there are well over one hundred uses of the term "violence against women" —

defined to include sexual violence — in U.N. resolutions, treaties, general comments, and consensus documents. No human rights instruments explicitly address sexual violence against men” (619). It is in the term ‘gender-based violence’, as she points out, that sexual violence might extend to both men and women.⁹² However, Stemple goes on to explain that the term still does not recognize the need for gender analysis of male rape because in the human rights instruments ‘gender-based’ knows only discrimination against women and it is applied to describe female victimization. In other words, male and female rape occur in different contexts, but in many cases they are used specifically to humiliate the person in their sexuality or sexual identity. In the case of man, they might be humiliated in their virility, forcing to assume a ‘female role’, whereas women might be humiliated with dishonor. Both cases are ‘gender based’ because they target the individual as a representative of his or her own gender.

Deeti was the only witness to the whole scene of Kalua’s rape, and it reminds her of her own rape on her wedding night. Thus, this episode establishes a bond between them, associating her with the man who had been so utterly degraded and humiliated:

Ever since the night of her wedding, Deeti had been haunted by images of her own violation: now, watching from the shelter of poppy field, she bit the edge of her palm, to keep from crying out aloud. So it could happen to a man too? Even a powerful giant of a man could be humiliated and destroyed, in a way that far exceeded his body’s capacity for pain? (SOP 53)

⁹² Stemple asserts that distinction between sex and gender is “terribly muddled in the human rights canon” (619). In her article “Male Rape and Human Rights”, she criticizes the way U. N. interprets the term “gender-based violence”. For her, it focuses only on violence against women and leaves the male half of the population out of protection. Thus this reinforces norms of privilege.

Awareness of sexual violence against Kalua makes Deeti realize that not only women but also men can be subjected to such humiliation. Later, on her late husband's pyre, ready to be sacrificed, Deeti is rescued by Kalua.⁹³ Unlike Gayatri Spivak's famous formulation, the novel shows a brown man (lower caste) saving a brown woman (rape victim) from another brown man.⁹⁴ This puts Deeti in a situation where she dishonors her family. So both have to leave town. From then on, these two disenfranchised characters have to rebuild their lives in another place. As the story continues, however, they end up becoming indentured laborers in the Mauritius Islands. There, they are exploited by the master of the sugar plantations and, therefore, their oppression continues in a different form.

In the novel, violence against Deeti and Kalua remains hidden. Both characters never speak about it. There is, however, a double layer of silence: the victims themselves are not able to reveal their suffering and subjugation to anyone; and their stories are effaced from historical records. Silence, therefore, refers to the impossibility of the subject to speak, to make their story known and to free themselves from a system that excludes them from the social *stratum*. The literary work can represent tangentially the social environment in which all this violence takes place and the implicit approval given by society to this kind of humiliation. Thus, the subaltern subject is the victim of several layers of degradation, and it is possible to argue that even in the literary work his own voice cannot be directly heard. If *Sea of Poppies* (2008) were written in the first-person, it would have given more autonomy and

⁹³ In "As exéquias do Buda Sakyamuni: morte, lamento e transcendência na iconografia indiano-budista de Gandhara", Cibeale Aldrovandi illustrates that in Vedic times before the body of her husband was cremated, the widow would lie down beside him, and then was summoned to come back to the world of the living as described in the *Rig Veda* [X.18]. This ritual that would simulate the death of the woman was later to become the actual death, symbolizing the widow's devotion to her late husband (240). Aldrovandi, Cibeale. "As exéquias do Buda Sakyamuni: morte, lamento e transcendência na iconografia indiano-budista de Gandhara". PhD Diss. Universidade de São Paulo, 2006. Web.

⁹⁴ "White men saving brown women from brown men.

‘credibility’ to the narrator. As it has a conventional third-person narrator, the characters’ voice and desires are presented through the narrator’s eyes, which has no emotional attachment to the story being narrated. If this is taken into consideration, this choice of literary structuring weakens the subaltern voices once again. Consequently, this could be defined as a layer of silencing. In a way this reinforces Chakrabarty’s statement about the subject of narrative, in which the witnesses are the only one who are empowered to speak for themselves. He states that “this is another way of saying that theory/law can never address the victim here in her own language as [testimonial] narrative does” (111).

The concept of *sati*, furthermore, is embodied in a wider context, that of the construction of the Indian nation while still under the colonial rule. The opposite views of the widow sacrifice stress her character as a dependent being who has to live according to traditions imposed on her by men, either the Indians in ancient times, or British or the Indian reformers and nationalists in the nineteenth century. All of them used the woman’s image in order to achieve their own goals, never taking her needs or desires into consideration. As contemporary feminists complain, as soon as they achieved their objectives, the woman was once again relegated to their role as a dutiful wife and mother, which emphasize her domesticity and submission. The situation of the widow was even worse in the nineteenth century because there was no place for her in the ‘new’ Indian society reformists were devising. For many, committing *sati* was their only way of avoiding a life of submission and helplessness.

It is well-known that literary texts can provide a field for the discussion of issues that are present in the lives of human beings. As far as Indian literature is concerned, it offers readers a space where important topics related to colonized characters are seen in a wider

context. This context revolves around the creation and growth of an ‘Indian nation’, which wanted to free itself from colonial rule. However, as much as this setting and discussion of the topics are relevant, it is not always possible to claim that the author presents certain issues in a new way. When Ghosh sets the story of Deeti and Kalua in the context of the colonial rule in India and the opium trade, he is looking backwards and trying to imagine and reconstruct what the characters would do in specific conditions. Far more important than any ‘novelty’ in his treatment of *sati*, of violence and of circumstances in which the subaltern subject lived in nineteenth century India, there is the opportunity that contemporary readers have to discuss, through the eyes of the narrator and the characters, the matters presented in the novel which are still relevant. The silence imposed by violence and repression is a characteristic that has been present in every stage of the development of human societies. Literary texts provide us with the opportunity of analyzing and making connections between fiction and the real context in which it was produced. Thus, literature offers a space in which such topics can be investigated. When Ghosh depicts low-caste and female characters, both disempowered subjects in his novel, he gives them visibility, instead of a voice, which official history has denied them. Even though, as it has been shown, this visibility is mediated by the narrator.

That takes us to the question of representation. As Spivak states, European theories of representation are not adequate to discuss the situation of the disempowered — most of all women — in the Third World, and that intellectuals will still silence the voice of the subaltern, which have been however far ignored and dismissed. Ghosh, in his role as Indian intellectual, presents the subaltern subject in a literary text raising colonial binaries such as modernity and tradition; colonizer and colonized; men and women; patriarchal and feminine; universalism and locality; self-consciousness and lack of consciousness. These binaries have

been the subject of nineteenth-century European novels. However, Ghosh transforms them using peripheral characters, Indian myths and transgender character.

Literary texts make room for the analysis of social and cultural structures that permeate our lives. Only the literary genre (mainly the novel) is able to set the place where writers and readers alike can feel comfortable enough to discuss important matters, and which are more difficult to face, since society usually prefers to hide them or ignore their existence. The role of writers such as Amitav Ghosh is to open the possibility of questioning rules, conventions and traditions, both from the past and the present. This allows them to speculate on further social changes for the future. In *Sea of Poppies* (2008), Ghosh uses an Indian tradition — the *sati* — for his literary reconstruction that reinforces, as explained above, the view that Deeti's attempted *sati* was neither a heroic act expected from a *Kshatriya* widow nor a forced act. It was rather a lack of choice due to social condition. As Ghosh states in an interview to John C. Hawley:

My fundamental interest is in people — individuals and their specific predicaments. If history is of interest to me it is because it provides instances of unusual and extraordinary predicaments. But to me the historical (or non-fictional) aspect of the situation is interesting only insofar as it creates a unique predicament for a character. (6)

In *Sea of Poppies* (2008), Ghosh introduces a reconstruction of *sati* which is based on a theoretical and ideological point of view. This is directly associated with Spivak's assertion that "the subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with "woman" as

pious item” (308). However, Ghosh also presents another kind of degradation, the one perpetrated against Kalua. Male rape, as it is known, is not discussed as openly as female rape. By doing so, the author goes a step further, depicting how the silence, surrounding the victims of violence, is embedded in every society and in every discourse throughout history. When Ghosh raises issues of violence against both male and female, bringing their suffering to the same level, he dissolves ‘dualism’, and at the same time empowers the literary narrative as a form of contestation and a place for social representation of victims of social violence.

In his interview he granted me on 23 September 2015 at the Bertram Inn - Boston MA USA, when asked about the problem of presenting the tension and the complexity of female characters that seem to be victims of an oppressive environment and agents of their own history at the same time, Ghosh states:

What you are saying about the female character is true of all human beings. We all are victims of some system. If you want to look like that, we all have to deal with some system. We’re also (all of us) agents of one kind or another. So, I do not think of it being something quite different. When you are writing about any character, you have to give them their freedom, their agency, their ability to make their own way in the world. When I started writing these books, that was what really interesting to me about all the characters. I mean Deeti was very important in writing *Sea of Poppies* and for exactly this reason. She came to me as a very strong character. Someone who is really making her own life. It is a fact that in Indian life there are women like that, who are very strong, who actually stand behind the whole family.

In *Sea of Poppies* (2008), Ghosh showed a male character — Kalua — as a victim of the social system (caste) as well as violence (rape). With this, the writer points out that manhood is neither static nor timeless; it is historical. It is not the manifestation of an inner essence; as we know, but constructed socially. It is created in and by culture. Masculinity means different things at different times to different people. In the colonial imagination, masculinity and feminine are the twain that never meet. But in the Indian mythology, cultural practices and religious philosophy, it is only through the union of male and female that beings can transcend to a higher level. This issue will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapters.

CHAPTER II: MOVING ACROSS THE INDIAN OCEAN

“There is one knows not what sweet mystery about this sea, whose gently awful stirrings seem to speak of some hidden soul beneath” Herman Melville

Chapter I explored how both men and women are subjected to Brahminical morality and patriarchal violence in the nineteenth-century India. Chapter II analyzes the male and female experiences in their forced exile to Mauritius by the colonial indentured system. Amitav Ghosh’s literary characters — the coolies — serve as an example to demonstrate how the opium cultivation and consumption affected men and women simultaneously.

Amitav Ghosh, as Anupama Arora points out, “reclaims the Indian Ocean as a site full of history of cultural exchanges, conflict, and contestation, testifying to the tangled global relationships across multiple continents” (24). Given the importance of the ocean in the narrative, I see the sea as a metaphor which highlights the difference between official and personal events: the waves, bigger and easily seen, stand for the recorded facts; the ripples, smaller and not always perceptible, represent the personal stories of the voyagers who dare cross the *kala pani* or black waters. The waves of the Indian Ocean are depicted by colonialists as breaking on the shore with empty history/stories. However, it is in the hands of the writer that the ripples, full of history indeed, inundate the shore, bringing with them their hidden stories. It is through them that Ghosh’s narrative presents the first modern mass migration from South Asia and the system which dispersed a large group of Indians.

Furthermore, it shows the female indentured laborers sharing a common background of geographical and cultural displacement, forced labor, resistance and familial dispersal with their male counterparts. Women's participation in the *kala pani* crossing is an attempt to transcend the confinements through emigration, despite the traditional erasure and obfuscation in the historical documentation of the Indian Ocean.⁹⁵

Colonialism, as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin would remind us in *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (2000), "was a radically diasporic movement" which involved "dispersion and settlement of millions of Europeans" throughout the globe (69). Adding to this, Amitav Ghosh claims that colonialism, an issue that deeply concerns him, also dislocated millions of Indians. The difference is that the former went as conquerors and colonizers and the latter as slaves and indentured laborers.⁹⁶ "The huge migration from the subcontinent," according to Ghosh, "began in the mid-nineteenth century" and is "one of the most important demographic dislocation of modern times" (TITI 243). In "The Diaspora in Indian Culture," Ghosh calls it "The Modern Indian diaspora" (TITI 243).⁹⁷ The great

⁹⁵ In *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860-1920* (2008), Thomas R. Metcalf argues how the Indian Ocean was ignored in the colonial archives. "It is, Metcalf explains, as if a bustling sea full of vessels and people had suddenly been emptied, its waters drained away" (9). For a detailed analysis, see Metcalf, Thomas R.. *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860-1920*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008. Print.

⁹⁶ David Northrup argues that "Indentured labour was also distinct from the larger European migration of the nineteenth century in its composition, in its destinations, and its legal circumstances". Northrup goes on asserting that "Yet indentured migrants' motives in emigrating, the voyages that carried them and their struggles to establish a new life once their contract was over do resemble those of "free" migrants and deserve to be included in that larger story" (154). David Northrup and Amitav Ghosh share the same view of recording the "small narratives" and giving them visibility. See Northrup, David. *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism, 1834-1922*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Print.

⁹⁷ In *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (2000), Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin define dislocation as a "term for both the occasion of displacement that occurs as a result of imperial occupation and the experiences associated with this event. The phenomenon may be a result of transportation from one country to another by slavery or imprisonment, by invasion and settlement, a consequence of willing or unwilling movement from a known to an unknown location. The term is used to describe the experience of those who have willingly moved from the imperial 'Home' to the colonial margin, but it affects all those who, as a result of colonialism, have been placed in a location that, because of colonial hegemonic practices, needs, in a sense, to be 'reinvented' in language, in narrative and in myth" (73).

waves of migration that spread Indians across the world are marked, according to Colin Clarke, Ceri Peach and Steven Vertovec, by two periods:

The first is a phase conditioned by imperialism, in which large numbers of South Asians - particularly Indians - were transported in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to various colonial territories around the world, where they would serve mostly as indentured labourers; others followed freely as traders and administrators. The second, current, phase has occurred since early this century, in which persons of South Asian descent have travelled freely and in increasing numbers to western countries and the Middle East to undertake occupations of all kinds - unskilled, skilled, entrepreneurial and professional.

(3)

In “Diasporas and the Art of Impossible Mourning,” the Indo-Fijian literary theorist Vijay Mishra distinguishes these two movements of people as the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ Indian diaspora and argues that they are connected with two moments in the history of capital. The old diaspora, Mishra points out, is “the moment of classic capitalism, the movement, that is, of cheap labor — slave and indenture — for the production of raw materials as well as luxury items for the growing British and European bourgeoisie”. The new diaspora, he contends, is “the moment of late capitalism with economic migrants and refugees entering the metropolitan centers of the ex-Empire as well as the New World and Australasia” (26). In other words, he explains that they, as provisional terms, can be classified as “the old diaspora

of exclusivism (of plantation or classic capital or modernity) and the new diaspora of the border (of late modernity or postmodernity)” (26).

Historically, Indians have not been a static people; ageless society of village communities and caste, as certain tropes, determine the contours of colonial discourse on India. One example of this mobility is how Buddhism spread throughout Asia, with Indians traveling to all parts of the region. In modern times, as Mishra says in the passage, the expansion of British empire and the growth of capitalism are the conduit for the movement of people.

The old diaspora, which interests us in this chapter, generates four types of migration in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: indenture system, *maistry* system, commerce and imperial auxiliaries. The first kind of migration, in which the indentured workers are the central figure and are of paramount importance in *Sea of Poppies* (2008) as a whole, is presented by Ghosh in his novel. He represents this historical fact through the eyes of those who were victims of this forced migration to Mauritius during the East India Company’s rule in India, and describes their departure, voyage and arrival. As a complex topic, migration can be studied at four different phases: departure, voyage/middle passage, arrival and return. However, I emphasize on the first phase: the departure.

The Departure

In the “Journal of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies” (SPAN), Mishra argues that the *Oxford English Dictionary*, that is, “the

voice of authority from the Metropolitan Center”, misrepresents the concept of diaspora in its entry. According to him, it refers to the dispersion of the Jews and their experience only. Hence he provides an additional entry or a “supplement”, to use Jacques Derrida’s concept:

1. Relatively homogeneous, displaced communities brought to serve the Empire (slave, contract, indentured, etc.) co-existing with indigenous/other races with markedly ambivalent and contradictory relationship with the Motherland(s). Hence the Indian diasporas of South Africa, Fiji, Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, Surinam, Malaysia; the Chinese diasporas of Malaysia, Indonesia. Linked to high (classical) Capitalism.
2. Emerging new diasporas based on free migration and linked to late capitalism: post-war South Asian, Chinese, Arab, Korean communities in Britain, Europe, America, Canada, Australasia.
3. Any group of migrants that sees itself on the periphery of power, or excluded from sharing power. (n. pag.)

Although Mishra’s critique is relevant — it makes space for the “complex history of twentieth century capitalism” in which the history of India is also included (n. pag.) — it is important to see diaspora, as Kevin Kenny highlights in *Diaspora: A Very Short Introduction* (2013), “not as a social entity that can be measured, like Mishra’s argument suggests, but as an idea that helps explain the world migration creates” (n. pag.). I, for reasons of space, will have to simplify issues related to the concept of diaspora that have more twists and turns in them than I can accommodate here and I will limit myself to refer to diaspora to this world

that migration creates, that is, a space of dislocation and its implications.⁹⁸ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin define dislocation as:

a term for both the occasion of displacement that occurs as a result of imperial occupation and the experiences associated with this event. The phenomenon may be a result of transportation from one country to another by slavery or imprisonment, by invasion and settlement, a consequence of willing or unwilling movement from a known to an unknown location. (73)

People migrate for many different reasons, such as economic, social, political or environmental and various authors have expressed an interest in migration and the immigrant culture. Salman Rushdie, for instance, observes the metamorphoses immigrants undergo, and the divided selves that result from negotiating two or more cultures simultaneously. The Nobel laureate Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul is credited with initiating the writing on the dissemination of Indian labor throughout the British Empire of nineteenth century. Naipaul largely writes about the arrival — the new unfamiliar space — of the immigrants who are brought to Trinidad as indentured labor, but he acknowledges that the voyage is at the heart of

⁹⁸ The history of Africans, Armenians, Indians, Palestinians and other communities cannot be, in Vinay Lal's words, "conceived except in the language of diaspora"— a reference to the dispersal of the Jewish people (21). The debates have shown the difficulty in deploying the term "diaspora" which denotes the movements of population. For further reading on the conceptualization of the term, see Anthias, Floya. "Evaluating 'Diaspora': Beyond Ethnicity?." *Sociology* Vol 32 No 3 (1998): 557-580. JSTOR. Web. 6 May 2012.; Clifford, James. "Diasporas." *Cultural Anthropology* Vol 9 No 3 (1994): 302-338. JSTOR. Web. 6 May 2012.; Cohen, Robin. *Global Diasporas: an Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.; Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993. Print.; Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. Ed. Jonathan Rutherford. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990. Print.; and Safran, William. "Diaspora in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return." *A Journal of Transnational Studies* Vol 1 No 1 (1991): 83-99. Project Muse. Web. 6 May 2012.

his writing.⁹⁹ Unlike Naipaul, Amitav Ghosh focuses on the moment of departure, the push factor, and it gains a pivotal role, along with the other moments which constitute the whole process of migration, in the *Ibis* trilogy. The traumatic tone of Naipaul's stories is another element which distinguishes the two authors. In Ghosh's novels, the sense of joy for overcoming suffering and celebrating cultural diversity sets a positive tone. Although Naipaul's critical views of the coolie's descendants have been questioned and contested by critics, he is one of the first writers to show a coolie character in his books: *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), *Miguel Street* (1959) and *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961).

On being asked by Azam Zanganeh about the comparison people make between him and V. S. Naipaul, Ghosh states that he does not agree with a lot of things Naipaul says, mainly his representation of India and Islam, but the Trinidadian author is important to his development as a writer. More importantly, the different personal and familial experiences of both writers provide distinct backgrounds to their literary output. While, Naipaul, as the descendant of someone who is forced to abandon India, has the view of the hardships of being away from one's culture and country, Ghosh imagines what might have happened to fictional characters. Thus, he is able to see the more positive aspects of the diaspora. Moreover, Ghosh himself is not a diasporic in the sense that he grows up in India. In an interview to *Outlook*, "The Ghazipur And Patna Opium Factories Together Produced The Wealth Of Britain", Ghosh talks about this difference:

⁹⁹ Naipaul's grandfather emigrates from India to work as indentured servant in the sugar plantations in Trinidad. His work is very much influenced by his family experience and his own. Although V. S. Naipaul has written about India and has an Indian origin, he is not placed in Indian English literature only. In "On V. S. Naipaul on India", Suvir Kaul argues that "because Naipaul is a postcolonial writer that he is an Indian writer, that he is a West Indian writer, that he is a black British writer" (261). For further reading, see Kaul, Suvir. "On V. S. Naipaul on India". In: *A Concise History of Indian Literature in English*. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, ed. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2008. Print.

From writers like Naipaul and so on, we had a picture of what it was like for the Indian migrants after they arrived in places like Mauritius. But for me what was hard to imagine, so incredibly poignant, was the moment of departure. What did it mean for them? They were farmers, the most rooted people. The courage it took that time for a Bihari to set out across the *kala pani* is something you and I can barely conceive of. (63)

Ghosh unveils the enigma of departure, disclosing the context in which they live before leaving, the major conduit which forces them to cross the Black Waters, and the challenge of abandoning everything they have. Therefore, he describes the indentured migration through the Indian Ocean after abolition of slavery and exposes the imperialist strategies in the colonies. Like Mishra, who claims the entry of South Asian and Southeast Asian dispersion into the concept of diaspora, Marina Carter and Khal Torabully reclaim the entry of history of the indentured migration into history. In *Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora* (2002), they contend that the *négritude* movement — the theory of the distinctiveness of African personality and culture — does not take into consideration “the ethnic complexity of post abolition societies in the Caribbean and Indian Ocean” and coolitude:

is designed to fill that lacuna, to describe and encapsulate the distinctive characteristics of the streams of indentured migration which have decisively shaped the modern nations such as Mauritius, Trinidad, Guyana, Fiji, and influenced others like Guadalupe, Martinique, East and South Africa (1).

In “Some Theoretical Premises of Coolitude,” the historian Marina Carter interviews the poet Khal Torabully, who extends the argument and explains that the term coolitude redresses “the state of oblivion and neglect attached to the condition of the Coolie/indentured” who replaces the slave in the sugar plantation and whose life-history is similar to the slave (143). For the Mauritian French writer, it accommodates the experience of Indians beyond the seas and the Indian labour diaspora from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, registering their memory of the voyage and “a ‘*remise en perspective*’ (recollection) of the cultural elements of the coolie which were *mis à mal* (stifled) by the colonial history” (144-145).¹⁰⁰ It would be, as Torabully observes, “unwise to overlook this historical and human fact” (144). Thus, Amitav Ghosh — like Naipaul, Torabully and many others to name a few — retrieves the coolies’ trajectory, bringing out in his prose a voice which was muffled by the colonizer. He integrates the presence of the coolie in the Indian English Literature, as a space of representations which mediates their relation to the past and the present.¹⁰¹ Besides the coolies, Ghosh also brings back opium — which is “the true hero of the tale [Confessions of an English Opium-Eater (1821) by Thomas De Quincey] and the legitimate centre on which the interest revolves” and appears in the fictional representations of the nineteenth-century novels (78).

India’s tryst with opium goes back a long way. But it is only with the advent of colonialism in India that the drug acquires a new character — a commodity that is the source

¹⁰⁰ There were attempts to bring coolies from China, Ethiopia, Brittany and from Africa before bringing massively coolies from India. For coolitude, as Torabully argues, India is a reference. It is “the essence, or essences, from which the ‘self’, the cultural perception and complex identity of the coolie originate” (148).

¹⁰¹ In *Cale d’Etoiles: Coolitude* (1990), the founding text of coolitude, Torabully uses poetry to convey his visions of the world of the coolies. Although the book is divided into three parts—‘The Book of Métissage’, ‘The Book of the Voyage’ and ‘The Book of Departure’—which can be read from the beginning to the end or the other way around, the author gives more emphasis on ‘The Book of the Voyage’ as a space where the trauma can be revisited. See Torabully, Khal. *Cale d’Etoiles*. La Réunion: Azalees Editions, 1992. Print.

of addiction and displacement at the same time. In a paper titled “The Economic Importance of Indian Opium and Trade with China on British’s Economy, 1843 — 1890,” Sarah Deming has followed the trajectory of opium, from creation to an instrument of British empire, and argues:

It is said that Alexander the Great introduced opium to India as early as 330 B.C.; while uncertain if it was actually Alexander the Great, it is clear that opium had been a significant part of Indian culture before British imperialism. The Portuguese, who first observed Indian opium use in 1600, stated that opium was widely used and was highly valued in society. Opium’s role in culture was just as important when the British East India Company established itself in India. (1)

The British have a different view of opium — an addiction that dulled one’s senses — and it reflects on a series of writings on it.¹⁰² While these British writers, in a way, are concerned more about the sensations caused by the opium in the psyche, Amitav Ghosh is

¹⁰² Despite a number of criticisms, De Quincey’s *œuvre* — *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821), “Notes from the Pocket Book of a Late Opium-Eater” (1823), “Sketches of Life and Manners from the Autobiography of a Late Opium-Eater” (1834), “The English Mail-Coach” (1849), and *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845) — influences readers who become opium addict, doctors who do research on opium use, and writers who depict opiate addict. The opium, as a trope, is found in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848), Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853), in William Wilkie Collins’s *Armada* (1856) and *The Moonstone* (1868), Charles Dickens’s *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871-72) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876), in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), and in Arthur Conan Doyle’s “The Man with the Twisted Lip”, the sixth of the twelve stories in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892).

In “A Pharmacy of Her Own: Victorian Women and the Figure of the Opiate”, Kristina Aikens argues that De Quincey, the most influential person on Victorian writers, “does not discuss the implications of drug use for women” and she, in her Ph.D. dissertation, foregrounds the female character and the opium.

interested in the opium as commodity and its trade across the seas.¹⁰³ Already in the nineteenth century, Elizabeth Gaskell and Wilkie Collins present, as Kristina Aikens points out, the debates about opium use “as medicine, myths and fears about that use, and anxiety about its ties to imperialism” (17). However, Ghosh sparks off an intense debate on the imperialist practices, which like the smoke of opium have vanished instantly from the sight during the Victorian age.

Here it is important to understand the role played by opium in the first ‘Modern Indian diaspora’, that is, the departure. In the 1830s, India is under the rule of British East India Company, which is establishing its supremacy in the subcontinent. In addition to the colonial presence, a severe drought is affecting large areas of the country.¹⁰⁴ Consequently, thousands of people are facing famine and a mounting burden of debt. On the other hand the world is watching the expansion of British empire, the growth of capitalism, the boost of the plantation economy, and the development of international market. This ‘prosperous’ scenario is hit by Slavery Abolition Act in 1833 — an Act of the Parliament of the United Kingdom abolishing slavery throughout the British Empire.¹⁰⁵ Now that black men and women are ‘free’, the

¹⁰³ In Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*, a sedative, “a strong opiate”, is administered to Lucy Snowe which should quiet her “for one night”, provoking, “instead of stupor”, “excitement” and “[She] became alive to new thought — to reverie peculiar in colouring” (562). See Brontë, Charlotte. *Villette*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. Print.

¹⁰⁴ India is an agrarian country with around 60% of its people depending directly or indirectly upon agriculture.

¹⁰⁵ Britain abolished the slave trade in 1807, but it did not ban until 1833. The Parliament of the United Kingdom abolished slavery throughout the British Empire, but the territories in the possession of the East India Company, the Island of Ceylon, and the Island of Saint Helena were the exceptions. However, in 1834 they were included in abolition. The first attempt at importing Indian labour to Mauritius failed in 1829. Laborers had been transported from Pondicherry and Karaikal on contract of debt bondage. With Slavery Abolition Act throughout most of the British Empire, the transportation of Indian labor to the island gained pace in 1834. As it has been pointed out, by 1838 25,000 Indian laborers had been shipped to Mauritius. According to Niall Ferguson, “between 1820s and the 1920s close to 1.6 million Indians left India to work in a variety of Caribbean, African, Indian Ocean and Pacific colonies” (217).

plantation owners have two big concerns: Who is going to work in the colonies? And how to maximize profits? They are desperately looking for cheap labor:

My canes are rotting in the field, Mr Reid,’ said the planter. ‘Tell Mr Burnham that I need men. Now that we may no longer have slaves in Mauritius, I must have coolies, or I am doomed. Put in a word for me, will you not?’— they start putting pressure on the colonial State to solve this problem (SOP 20).

Under economic distress, the British see India as their savior. Through arrangements between colonial planters and the State, as some historians have argued, a system of indentured Indian immigration is established in Calcutta and in Madras, subsequently in Bombay. Slavery, the forced labor and trafficking, is replaced by indentured labor, a contract binding one party into the service of another for a specified term. Recruitment firms are sent to uncharted areas beyond the coastal district, “so far inland that the sea seemed as distant as the netherworld”, to bazaars, and to pilgrimage sites in India to search for workers (SOP 3).¹⁰⁶ In times of drought, it is not difficult to find them in large numbers. In his poem “Escaping from Famine into Namelessness,” Torabully describes the role of natural disaster as one of the root causes of migration in 1830s to Mauritius:

I was from Agamoudia, Cammalas, of Pallys, of Pallas

I was Sheikmoudine Sheikboudou

Of Tottys of Vannias of Vellagas

¹⁰⁶ Initially the agency of *duffadars*, who are responsible for the recruitment, used to hire the laborers, but because of corruption proper licensed recruitment agencies are established by the British.

I fled the misery of the straw-huts of Fyzabad
 Of Cavares of Ambalcacas
 To the list I can add the drought
 In Rajpoutra Sourane
 The rarefaction of grain and famine
 In Arcot in Tinnevely in Chinglepet
 And the archives of dust
 Which deprived me of the fuel of my name. (30)¹⁰⁷

The drought in the 1830s affects the northern part of India, mainly Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.¹⁰⁸ Like the extract below shows, it takes the recruiters a long time to come with the recruits from these estates to the port cities where the ships are docked:

It so happened that just that morning Baboo Nob Kissin Pander had received a
 chit from Ramsaran-ji, the recruiter: he was still deep in the hinterland, the
 duffadar wrote, but he expected to arrive in Calcutta in a month's time with a
 large party of indentured workers, men and women. (SOP 181)

This literary quotation is interesting on several counts. There seems not a moment within it for the existence and acknowledgement of transport system in India. How did these

¹⁰⁷ The original poem is written in French and this is Torabully's own translation. See Torabully, Khal. *Chair Corail, Fragments Coolies*. Guadeloupe: Ibis Rouge Editions, 1999. Print.

¹⁰⁸ A personal link is evident in Ghosh's interest in writing about the Biharis. His ancestors left East Bengal in 1656 and settle in Chhapra in the state of Bihar for over 150 years. His father, Shailendra Chandra Ghosh, grows up speaking Bhojpuri.

recruiters bring these men and women to Calcutta? As the first train journey in India between Bombay and Thane happens only on 16 April 1853, which supposedly propels the country into modernity, they have to cover the route from the hinterland to the port city either on foot or by bullock. With this fact, it can be affirmed that the arduous life of these people starts at the moment of recruitment and intensifies throughout the trip, reaching its peak in the plantation in the colonies. Most of the workers are from the Hindi-Bhojpuri belt in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. According to the British National Archives which hold Colonial Official records from the colonies, these people are nomadic peasants or natives from the Gangetic plains. After 1840, many other Indians — high castes and low castes, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians —also go to Mauritius. Drought, debts and economic distress might have been the cause of this exodus, but, as the novel illustrates, the British ‘appetite for opium’ is another (SOP 27). Many of these people, the narrator argues, “had been driven from their villages by the flood of flowers that had washed over the countryside” (SOP 187). Before the arrival of the British, “no one was inclined to plant more [just small clusters] because of all the work it took to grow poppies” (SOP 27):

fifteen ploughings of the land and every remaining clod to be broken by hand, with a dantoli; fences and bunds to be built; purchases of manure and constant watering; and after all that, the frenzy of the harvest, each bulb having to be individually nicked, drained and scraped. Such punishment was bearable when you had a patch or two of poppies — but what sane person would want to multiply these labours when there were better, more useful crops to grow, like wheat, dal, vegetables? (SOP 27)

Deming argues that the British took control of opium production and established a state monopoly because the trade was “very lucrative and was imperative in paying for the cost of imperialism in India” (1). So the colonizer, “the sane person”, imposes this harsh punishment — the mass cultivation of opium — on the Indians. In the heart of Ghazipur, a town in the state of Uttar Pradesh whose land has been mortgaged for the farming of poppies by the British officers, the Opium Factory is established by the British East India Company in 1820 and opium becomes the medium of exchange when it is insidiously inserted into the Chinese market.¹⁰⁹ Opium ruins the lives of the Indian peasants, and transforms their way of living:

This, she knew, was what her own fields looked like, and were she at home today, she would have been asking herself what she would eat in the months ahead: where were the vegetables, the grains? She had only to look around to know that here, as in the village she had left, everyone’s land was in hock to the agents of the opium factory: every farmer had been served with a contract, the fulfilling of which left them with no option but to strew their land with poppies. And now, with the harvest over and little grain at home, they would have to plunge still deeper into debt to feed their families. It was as if the poppy had become the carrier of the Karamnasa’s malign taint. (SOP 178)

¹⁰⁹ It is still the biggest legal factory in the world, producing the drug for the global pharmaceutical industry.

The dismantling of India's traditional internal economy furthers Britain's demand for the luxury of Chinese tea. The Chinese are neither interested in any British goods, "to put the matter simply: there is nothing they want from us", nor are "[wasn't] easy to get him to take to opium" (SOP 103), but the

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 your own country, 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? (SOP 106)

India, 'the impoverished land', sustains the nineteenth-century global economy and maintains the British Empire. In sum, as Sumit Sarkar argues in *Modern Indian: 1885 — 1947* (2012), the "amount of being drained away represented a potential surplus which might have raised Indian income considerably if invested properly inside the country" (27). In *Sea of Poppies* (2008), these peasants from Ghazipur are represented in Deeti's story, whose life is ruined and transformed by the poppies. The ruthless exploitation is, as the narrator exposes Adam Smith's popular thinking of the time, "for the freedom of trade" since "the Freedom of Trade is a right conferred on Man by God" (SOP 106). This ironic justification provides Ghosh's scathing critique of British colonialism. In an interview entitled "Opium financed British rule in India" to BBC News, he states that "all the indentured workers at that time came from all the opium growing regions in the Benares and Ghazipur areas" (n. pag.).¹¹⁰ He

¹¹⁰ In this interview, Ghosh declares their lives/stories in fact have been a great inspiration to him to start the book. Amitay, Ghosh. "Opium Financed British Rule in India." Interview by Soutik Biswas. *BBC News* 23 June 2008: n. pag. Web. 31 Mar. 2015. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7460682.stm>.

goes on explaining that the indenture emigration starts in the 1830s and it is the high peak of the opium traffic.

In *Opium City* (2006), Amar Farooqui claims that the Dutch East India Company initiates opium trade in the seventeenth century in Bihar and the drug becomes the principal profitable commodity exported from Bengal to the Indonesian archipelago. When the English East India Company conquers Bengal and Bihar, the Dutch East India Company starts losing its business. In 1773, Warren Hastings — the first governor general of British India — abolishes free trade and the Dutch East India Company loses its legal authority over opium trade. Consequently, the English East India Company acquires the full right to all the opium in its territories in eastern India. With the Bengal Regulation VI in 1799, the Company has the absolute control of the cultivation of the opium. As Farooqui contends:

The cultivation of the poppy crop and extraction of raw opium from it was left to peasant producers. The peasants had to obtain a license from the Company that specified the actual area on which the crop was to be grown. The entire produce was supposed to be handed over to the Company's officials. Raw opium was processed and packed by the Company in its own establishments so that it was partly involved in the production as well. (20)

Unlike Farooqui who talks about the bulk of opium which comes from Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan (Malwa opium), Ghosh writes on opium from Bengal and Bihar (Bengal opium). The most read passage of the novel in lectures and interviews is Chapter Five of *Sea of Poppies* (2008) where the narrator, through Deeti's eyes, describes the Sudder

Opium Factory. This description, which Amitav Ghosh presents in a literary form, is based on what J. W. S. MackArthur writes in *Notes on an Opium Factory* (1865). MackArthur, Ghosh declares, narrates in excruciating detail the operation of the plant and the booklet even serves as a tourist guide to the opium factory.¹¹¹ The body description and the details used by Ghosh in this scene hold the reader's attention during the course Deeti takes to find her husband. For peasants like her, the assembly line of the factory where "the assemblers' hands moved with dizzying speed as they lined hemispherical moulds with poppy-leaf rotis, moistening the wrappers with lewah, a light solution of liquid opium" could only be compared to a temple (SOP 89). The 'honed system'

could indeed have been a temple that Deeti had entered now, for the long, well-
aired passage ahead was lined with two rows of dhoti-clad men, sitting cross-
legged on the floor, like Brahmins at a feast, each on his own woven seat, with
an array of brass cups and other equipment arranged around him (SOP 89).

Her comparison puts capitalism and caste system on the same level of oppression as the narrator explains how the opium is industrially processed and how the employees are

¹¹¹ In an interview with Jai Arjuna Singh, Ghosh describes his finding: "It was just pure luck – I was looking in the British Library one day, looking at their archives and collections, and suddenly I found this very rare book, published in the 1860s in Calcutta (though I'm sure it doesn't exist in Calcutta anymore). It was called "Notes on an Opium Factory" and it was written by the superintendent of the Ghazipur Opium Factory. He wrote it as a kind of tourist guide – he wanted to attract British tourists to the place, and he described the place in great detail. Nothing in that passage in my book is made up – nothing about the factory, that is; Deeti of course is a fictional character. You won't believe how amazing it was to learn about how the opium was processed: the directors of the East India Company, sitting in London, would send directions about how every ball of opium had to have so many chittacks, how there had to be just so many leaves...it was a completely industrialised process. We talk about Henry Ford rationalising the industrial process, but these guys were doing it much earlier". See the whole interview, Ghosh, Amitav. "Opium, giant whales and *khidmatgars*: a conversation with Amitav Ghosh." Interview by Jai Arjun Singh. *Jabberwock* 20 June 2008, Blog sec.: n. pag. Web. 27 May 2015. <<http://jaiarjun.blogspot.com.br/2008/06/opium-giant-whales-and-khidmatgar-s.html>>

treated. The working conditions in the factory are dreadful and the workers are set in a space where “the air inside was hot and fetid” and they:

were bare-bodied men, sunk waist-deep in tanks of opium, tramping round and round to soften the sludge. Their eyes were vacant, glazed, and yet somehow they managed to keep moving, as slow as ants in honey, tramping, treading. When they could move no more, they sat on the edges of the tanks, stirring the dark ooze only with their feet. These seated men had more the look of ghouls than any living thing she had ever seen: their eyes glowed red in the dark and they appeared completely naked, their loincloths — if indeed they had any — being so steeped in the drug as to be indistinguishable from their skin. Almost as frightening were the white overseers who were patrolling the walkways — for not only were they coatless and hatless, with their sleeves rolled, but they were also armed with fearsome instruments: metal scoops, glass ladles and long-handled rakes. (SOP 87)

In this passage, the British East India Company is depicted as a ghoul, eating the workers’ flesh to grow its profit: the enslaved bodies work until they could move no more; the metal scoops, glass ladles and long-handled rakes leave the oppressor’s distinguishing hands on the already mistreated bodies. As Jean-Paul Sartre states in the preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), “violence in the colonies does not only have for its aim the keeping of these enslaved men at arm’s length; it seeks to dehumanize them” (7). The novel illustrates that colonial system is constituted by violence — the destruction of the Indian rural economy is of

no concern to the British — and not even the nature is exempt from it. The narrative depicts the harmful impact of opium not only on human beings, but also on the environment: the monkeys which live nearby present a strange behavior, they seem lethargic and do not fight or steal from passers-by like others, famous for their monkeyshines of their kind. Even fish are affected by the factory's waste since it has contaminated the flow of water to the river; local fishermen realize they have become easy prey and flock to the margins of the river.

The impact of opium on the individual has ranged from alleviation of pain and sedation to intoxication and from pleasure to hallucination, as it has been discussed by philosophers, medical community and scholars. Ghosh's trilogy reveals how the Chinese population falls victims to opium. Indian workers are also prone to becoming addicts. Ghosh depicts Hukam Singh, Deeti's husband, as a representative of the Indian *afeemkhors* — addicts. Singh tells Deeti how he begins smoking opium while serving as soldier, since the alleviation of pain and sedation are the primary medical reasons for administering narcotics:

About my pipe? He laughed. No; how could he? I only learnt to smoke after I was wounded and taken to the hospital barracks. The orderlies there were from the country we were in, Arakan, and when the pain kept us awake at night, they would bring us pipes and show us what to do. (SOP 32)

Through these words of Hukam Singh, Gosh shows the reader that opium is used as palliative for various kinds of pain, corroborating what Aiken says about its use in Victorian England. In fact, the plant and its derivatives have been used since antiquity by Sumerians, Assyrians, Babylonians, and Egyptians. Initially, the poppy seed has medicinal use, as the

passages point out; later it becomes a highly addictive drug. But it is in the hands of the British East India Company that the *papaver somniferum*, the scientific name of opium, develops its two-sided nature: a plant which is both damaging and lucrative. It turns millions of Indian into “impoverished transients” — “many of these people had been driven from their villages by the flood of flowers that had washed over the countryside” to towns — and millions of Chinese into opium addiction (SOP187). The pipes to which Singh is referring in the quotation above are for smoking tobacco with opium and they become the addicts’ inseparable object, along with the opium lamp, and the opium needle.¹¹² Opium also leads the British Empire to money addiction, the logic of capitalism, and makes them grow a voracious appetite for more profit. In Benjamin Brightwell Burnham’s discourse, the owner of “Burnham Bros., a shipping company and trading house that had extensive interests in India and China” (SOP 11), Ghosh brings out the colonizer’s justification for their interest in trading opium:

‘I thought not,’ said Mr Burnham. ‘So you would do well to bear in mind that it would be well nigh impossible to practise modern medicine or surgery without such chemicals as morphine, codeine and narcotine — and these are but a few of the blessings derived from opium. In the absence of gripe water our children would not sleep. And what would our ladies — why, our beloved Queen herself? — do without laudanum? Why, one might even say that it is opium that has made this age of progress and industry possible: without it, the streets

¹¹² They are found in opium dens and have been mentioned among others by Charles Dickens and Agatha Christie. In *The Art of Opium Antiques*, Steven Martin explores the art and accoutrements associated with opium smoking in nineteenth-century China. These objects become part of the Chinese art. See Martin, Steven. *The Art of Opium Antiques*. Washington: University of Washington Press, 2007.

of London would be thronged with coughing, sleepless, incontinent multitudes.

And if we consider all this, is it not apposite to ask if the Manchu tyrant has any right to deprive his helpless subjects of the advantages of progress? Do you think it pleases God to see us conspiring with that tyrant in depriving such a great number of people of this amazing gift?' (SOP 107)

Burnham presents a “miraculous substance” along with the idea of modernity and progress. The irony of his statement can be completely reversed, revealing what the colonial discourse conceals: with opium, the streets of Ghazipur and Calcutta, unlike the streets of London, are “thronged with coughing, sleepless, incontinent multitudes, poverty and despair”. The “blessings derived from opium” are not for the peasants/slaves who plough, sow, and harvest the land by hand or for the employees of Sudder Opium Factory who process and pack the opium under miserable conditions, but for the beloved Queen/master whose work only is to be armed with fearsome instruments for revenue purpose.

In many interviews, Amitav Ghosh has argued that opium is the commodity which finances the British Raj in India. In “The Business World of Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy,” Asiya Siddiqi contends that not only the British are beneficiaries of opium trade but also some Indians, for example, the Parsi-Indian merchant Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy who makes a huge fortune. Farooqui extends Siddiqi’s argument and demonstrates in his book that Bombay is built with the money coming from the opium trade.¹¹³ While some trade communities, such as the Parsis, Marwaris, and Gujaratis etc, make a profit on their partnership with European

¹¹³ For more details on the significant role of opium for the capital accumulation in Bombay and the growth of the city, see Farooqui, Amar. *Opium City: The Making of Early Victorian Bombay*. New Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2006. Print. and Lovell, Julia. *The Opium War*. London: Picador, 2011. Print.

traders, some peasants/agricultural communities are deprived of land revenue and exploited. These facts, as the three writers have argued, had been glossed over in both Indian and British history. On the Indian side, as Ghosh supposes, “there is a sort of shame and a general unawareness”. On the British side, to use Farooqui’s statement, it is “the sordid underside of colonial past” in which they want to hide (18). The silence has been broken and the contemporary writers are giving voices to the narratives of silenced communities.

What Stratum of Life Do They Come from?

In order to understand the life and hardships of those who face the perils of the sea voyage, it is interesting to establish the changes the individuals undergo and the names they are referred to throughout the process of dislocation. As it is mentioned by Ghosh himself, in the majority they are farmers, people who are deeply attached to their land and their customs:

How had it happened that when choosing the men and women who were to be torn from this subjugated plain, the hand of destiny had strayed so far inland, away from the busy coastlines, to alight on the people who were, of all, the most stubbornly rooted in the silt of the Ganga, in a soil that had to be sown with suffering to yield its crop of story and song? It was as if fate had thrust its fist through the living flesh of the land in order to tear away a piece of its stricken heart. (SOP 367)

Nevertheless, they are forced to abandon the area of residency due to famine, poverty or the change of cultivable land into a place only to grow poppies. The act of leaving the land transforms them temporarily into migrants — moving out of rural areas to urban areas, that is, from villages to port areas. The recruiter of laborers plays a double role in the migrants' mind: illusion and disillusion. This dualism is expressed in the folksongs sung by recruits in the colonies which describe the recruiter as a deceiver and a liar. In other words, the lyrics reveals, as Vijay Mishra asserts in the *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the diasporic imaginary* (2007), “a sense of betrayal, a sense that the promises of fulfillment were never met” (39). Those who made the pioneer journey realize these false promises at the depot, “our last place of rest, before we're cast out on the Black Water . . .” (SOP 259). The depot is built to confine the immigrants before sending them to the colonies. In the novel, Baboo Nob Kissin, the *gomusta*, idealizes it as:

a cluster of huts standing here like the dormitories of ashram; the premises would have a well, for drinking water, a ghat for bathing, a few trees for shelter, and a paved space where the inmates' food would be cooked and eaten. At the heart of the complex there would be a temple, a small one, to mark the beginning of the journey to Mareech: he could already envision its spire, thrusting through the wreathed smoke of the cremation ghat; he could imagine the migrants, standing clustered at its threshold, gathering together to say their last prayers on their native soil; it would be their parting memory of sacred Jambudwipa, before they were cast out upon the Black Water. They would

...speak of it to their children and their children's children, who would return to it over generations, to remember and recall their ancestors. (SOP 182)

Unlike this ideal place — with dormitories, a well, a ghat for bathing, a few trees for shelter, a temple, and a kitchen — the depot, designed for embarkation and disembarkation, becomes a place of cluster of desperate people kept in extremely bad conditions. Its architecture resembles a prison where the migrants are under surveillance not to escape in the crowded Calcutta. Mishra explains:

it was in the shape of a semicircle with the sheds for cooking on the periphery and a nullah or large drainage system along the diameter. From the periphery to the centre of the diameter, the semicircle was divided by a road leading to a hospital on the left. On the right of the road were coolie bungalows not unlike the barracks on the plantations. (79)

Knowing the place that would welcome the recruits — the depot — to be more like a [concentration] camp destroys the illusion that it is the the place of great opportunities for the disenfranchised in colonial India. Instead it is “just a kind of jail where they had been sent to die; that their corpses would be turned into skulls and skeletons” (SOP 321). Their first step into an unknown life fills them with a foreboding that the future will not be as they expected it to be. In fact, although slavery is formally abolished, the circumstances in which the indentured laborers find themselves are not much different from slavery: low wages, lack of freedom and, in many cases, isolation from their culture and traditions. Thus, there is a

difference between slavery and indentured labor which is of great importance for Ghosh and his narrative:

It is true that indenture was in some ways similar to slavery, and that the conditions were often just as bad. Yet, one of the ways in which indenture was different from slavery is that it usually involved some degree of volition (although there was undoubtedly a great deal of coercion, fraud and chicanery). For a writer, this element of volition, however small, is of crucial importance. Its absence meant that it was very difficult to provide the slave characters with any subjectivity. (n.pag.)¹¹⁴

The volition, the act of making a conscious choice or decision, to which Ghosh refers to appears in *Sea of Poppies* (2008) in the scene of registration. The coolies had to register themselves (name, place of origin and caste) before going aboard. This fact can be further corroborated by the following lines:

‘Yes, sir. I will supply all necessary informations.’ The gomusta inclined his head in Deeti’s direction. The woman? he said to Kalua. What’s her name? Her name is Aditi, malik; she is my wife. [...] Caste? said the gomusta to Kalua. We are Chamars, malik. District? Ghazipur, malik. (SOP 261)

¹¹⁴ Ghosh, Amitav. “Confronting the Past.” by Priyamvada Gopal. *The Hindu Times* 1 June 2008, New Delhi ed.: Literary Review. Web. 6 July 2014. <<http://www.hindu.com/lr/2008/06/01/stories/2008060150030100.htm>>

Ghosh, in an interview to *Untiled Books*, also makes a distinction between slavery and indenture. Slavery, he argues, tears people away “from their communities, from their brothers and cousins whom they would have relied upon”. The fear is “not only of what is happening to them but also fear of isolation”. Indenture, he goes on, takes “them as communities”. These workers “were people from the same castes, from the same villages, they spoke the same languages”. For him, the act of traveling “as community makes an enormous difference”.¹¹⁵ In *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1995), Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, who also goes to Africa, describes how they are classified within this system, and I quote at some length his taxonomy:

The Indians were divided into different groups. One was that of Musalman merchants, who would call themselves ‘Arabs’. Another was that of Hindu, and yet another of Parsi, clerks. [...] The indentured labourers were those who went to Natal on an agreement to serve for five years, and came to be known there as girmitiyas from girmit, which was the corrupt form of the English word ‘agreement’. The other three classes had none but business relations with this class. Englishmen called them ‘coolies’ and as the majority of Indians belonged to the labouring class, all Indians were called ‘coolies’, or ‘samis’. (177)

In a more contemporary approach to the subject, Brenda J. Mehta in her essay, “The Colonial Curriculum and the Construction of “Coolie-ness” in Lakshmi Persaud’s *Sastra* and

¹¹⁵ Ghosh, Amitav. Interview. *Untiled Books* 5 July 2011, Issue 50. Web. 6 July 2014. <<http://untitledbooks.com/features/interviews/amitav-ghosh/>>

Butterfly in the Wind (Trinidad) and Jan Shinebourne's *The Last English Plantation* (Guyana)", affirms that:

Colonial misappropriation inscribed cooliehood within a double displacement, characterized by the physicality of cooliehood, as demonstrated by the indentured slave trade, as well as a more pervasive (and invasive) attitudinal or psychological coolie-ness that was constructed in India, as result of three centuries of colonial domination and, later transplanted from the ancestral land to various diasporic locations. (125)

These *girmityas*, who gained Gandhi's attention from 1893 to 1914¹¹⁶ and who also awake him to fight against social injustice in South Africa, become Ghosh's main characters in *Sea of Poppies* (2008). Their stories enrich the narrative and allow the writer to give a literary approach to a subject which has been mainly studied by sociologists, anthropologists, economists, and historians. Though Ghosh himself is an anthropologist and a historian, his characters are fictitious. It is important to highlight that the story element, as Tapan Kumar Ghosh and Prasanta Bhattacharya remind us, "has been a very strong part of Amitav Ghosh's writings" and his interest in the "story of history or histories ranges from the very personal to the transnational" (3). However, the story still gains priority over history and the storytelling element is also present in his non-fictional work.

¹¹⁶ In "Gandhi and the Diaspora Question: Histories, Texts and Readings", Sudhir Kumar highlights the importance of Gandhi's involvement in mobilizing the *girmityas* in South Africa for almost twenty years. See Kumar, Sudhir. "Gandhi and the Diaspora Question: Histories, Texts and Readings" In: *In Diaspora: Theories, Histories, Texts*. Paranjape, Makarand R.. New Delhi: Indialog Publications Pvt, Ltd., 2001. Print.

The Middle Passage and the Crossers of the *Kala Pani*¹¹⁷

On 2 November 1834, the first ship coming from India, the *Atlas*, berths in Mauritius with 36 Indians. As it is found in the Mauritian Archives, 30 men and 6 women are on board, mostly from the hills of Bihar. They come under Hunter-Arbuthnot & Company, the major British company in Mauritius. The British Historian Brenda Howell calls these 36 Indians “the pioneers of a migration which is [was] eventually to transform the character of Mauritian life and industry” (qtd from Lemaucien). However, it is known that the British used to send convicts to the colonies prior to 1834. According to the report of the Royal Commission of Enquiry, Indian convicts under Governor Farquhar’s governance are taken to work in Mauritius between 1815 and 1820.¹¹⁸

The statistics shows that 451,796 Indian laborers disembark in Mauritius between 1834 and 1910. As it has been discussed above, the economy in India is weak in the beginning of nineteenth century and worsens considerably with the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857, which devastates the northern part of the subcontinent and contributes substantially to the dispersion of Indians. From 1834 onwards, ships continue to sail, for ninety years, docking in Port Louis, bringing Indian indentured laborers. On 20 March 1916, Madan Mohan Malaviya carries a resolution in Indian Legislative Council to abolish the system of Indian indentured labor. As reported by Maharaj Kunwar Singh, the last batch of laborers arrives in Mauritius in May

¹¹⁷ I borrow the title of this section from V. S. Naipaul’s book *The Middle Passage: Impressions of Five Societies – British, French and Dutch in the West Indies and South America* (1962) and the other from Janet J. Ewald’s essay “Crossers of the Sea: Slaves, Freedmen, and Other Migrants in the Northwestern Indian Ocean, c. 1750-1914”.

¹¹⁸ Previous to the Indian indentured laborers, Portuguese laborers from Madeira, freed African slaves from America, and Chinese are part of the first wave of sugar plantation workers to Mauritius.

1924; after that the Indian immigration comes to an end, but the indenture system goes on until 1939.

The Indian Ocean (the *Kala Pani*) separates India from Mauritius, and appears, as Françoise Lionnet points out, “in a sizable corpus of travel narratives and other literary genres that have influenced the direction of European literary movements from the eighteenth century to the present” (446). However, Thomas R. Metcalf demonstrates that the colonial archives present it without history, that is, “as if a bustling sea full of vessels and people had suddenly been emptied, its waters drained away” (9).¹¹⁹ Unlike the colonial archives, Amitav Ghosh shows the Indian Ocean full of history, disclosing the silent narratives where people and commodities have flown from the East to the West and vice versa. The decks and holds of the ships, the “engine of commerce and the machine of empire”, in Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker’s words, carry stories of power, violence, resistance and survival (150).¹²⁰ Yet for Janet J. Edwald the Indian Ocean creates “different historical dynamics” and “a different historiography” (69). In addition Edwald contends that the arrival of Vasco da Gama in Calicut in 1498, the victory of the British at the Battle of Plassey in 1757 and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 contribute substantially to the history of Indian Ocean. Thus, Ghosh unveils the dynamics of the maritime world system, telling the stories of non-European sailors — mainly the *lascars* from the Indian subcontinent and others from the Malay Archipelago, China, Arabia, and East Africa — and of Indian migrants and their interaction between the

¹¹⁹ The archives — usually a collections of documents, texts of various kinds — have been assembled since the introduction of print and the classificatory practices of the nineteenth century. In *Archive Stories*, Antoinette Burton argues that the archives serve “as technologies of imperial power, conquest and hegemony” and the dominant’s interpretations prevail (7). For further reading, see Burton, Antoinette. *Archive Stories*. Durham: Duke UP, 2005. Print.

¹²⁰ While Paul Gilroy, Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker focus on the Atlantic Ocean, Thomas R. Metcalfe, Clare Anderson and Sugata Bose center critical reflections on the Indian Ocean, so does Amitav Ghosh.

Land and the Sea.¹²¹ The crossers of the sea crosscut the vast and open waters of the Indian Ocean, confined on the ships.¹²² Their hidden stories burble to the surface by the hands of the coxswain, Amitav Ghosh, which steer the reader's gaze to this reservoir of memory.

In the *Ramayana* (2012), Hanuman — the Lord of Crossings — is told that “crossing the sea is no hard task for you [him]” (308), but it is for human beings. For the Indians/coolies/*girmityas*, the journey starts on a boat from Patna to Calcutta and “from there they’ll go to a place called Mareech” by ship (SOP 67). The departure is as painful as the *Doli* ceremony —that is, “the pain of the child who is exiled from home” (SOP 366).¹²³ Unlike Mishra’s argument that “the predominantly Hindu ‘old’ diaspora found a grand template in the myth of Rama and his banishment”, or rather a male exile (230), Ghosh evokes, through the *Doli* ceremony and the song, “Kaisé katé ab/Birahá ki ratiyã?/How will it pass/This night of parting?” (SOP 366), a female exile. The voyage signifies the rupture and

Among the women, the talk was of the past, and the little things that they would never see, nor hear, nor smell again: the colour of poppies, spilling across the fields like ábír on a rain-drenched Holi; the haunting smell of cooking-fires drifting across the river, bearing news of a wedding in a distant

¹²¹ The lascars, according to Ghosh’s findings, are the early Asian pioneers to work in a western industrial process, the first to work in a cutting-edge modern technology (the nautical engineering was cutting-edge technology of the 19th century), the first to acquire a colloquial familiarity with European languages, the first to work with European rhythms of time (the western-style ship was on run four-hour watches) and the first to set up settlements in London. They were paid a fraction of what white sailors were paid for the same work.

¹²² Ghosh argues that the British destroyed the Indian shipbuilding industry. It was comparable with the western industry right up to the 1820s. Through a series of financial measures and laws, the Wadia shipyard in Bombay, the most advanced on the planet, and minor ship yards lose their competitive edge. To write about it, Ghosh contends, is to recognize that India and Asia have contributed to the technology and labour of the sailing ship.

¹²³ *Doli Vidaai* is a traditionally sad ritual where the bride says goodbye to her parents, siblings and rest of her family. Her brothers/male cousins then lead her to her husband, who waits to take her to his family home to begin her new life as a married woman.

village; the sunset sounds of temple bells and the evening azan; late nights in the courtyard, listening to the tales of the elderly. No matter how hard the times at home may have been, in the ashes of every past there were a few cinders of memory that glowed with warmth — and now, those embers of recollection took on a new life, in the light of which their presence here, in the belly of a ship that was about to be cast into an abyss, seemed incomprehensible, a thing that could not be explained except as a lapse from sanity. (SOP 365)

The departure also means to leave behind the space of Mother Earth — “the fields”, “the sunset”, “the color of poppies”, “the haunting smell of cooking-fires”, and “the courtyard” — to step on the terrain of the Lord of the Ocean, the mysterious water. The sea space is often perceived, specially for long voyages, as the place of foul spirits, as the immensity where the purity of one’s life is lost. It is the “two wing-like triangles hanging suspended above a long curved shape that ended in a hooked bill” of Deeti’s drawing, that is, the two-mastered schooner, which transport them on “the Black Water” (9). The schooner used to be slave ship, “blackbirder”, and now is fitted to carry indentured laborers and opium. It, as Jodu observes, still carries the marks of slavery:

Falling to his knees, he discovered that there were several such chains in the pen, nailed into the far beam: they ended in bracelet-like clasps, each fitted with eyeholes, for locks. The weight and heft of the chains made Jodu wonder what sort of cargo they were intended to restrain: it occurred to him that they might be meant for livestock — and yet the stench that permeated the hold was

not that of cows, horses or goats; it was more a human odour, compounded of sweat, urine, excrement and vomit; the smell had leached so deep into the timbers as to have become ineradicable. He picked up one of the chains, and on looking more closely at the bracelet-like clasps, he became convinced that it was indeed meant for a human wrist or ankle. Now, running his hands along the floor, he saw that there were smooth depressions in the wood, of a shape and size that could only have been made by human beings, over prolonged periods of time. The depressions were so close to each other as to suggest a great press of people, packed close together, like merchandise on a vendor's counter. (SOP 131-132)

The traces of previous inscriptions of violence against the slaves — “chains ending [ended] in bracelet-like clasps, each fitted with eyeholes, for locks” — overlap with the violence against the indentured laborers: “one of the convicts turned his head, as if to catch a last glimpse of the city. This brought Bhyro Singh's lathi crashing down on his shoulder with a thwacking sound that made the trikat-wale wince, all the way up in their perch” (SOP 329). Although the ship sheds its skin to refit “for a different trade”, the continuity of the brutal forms of the past remains (SOP 11). Thus “a hold that was designed to carry slaves will serve just as well to carry coolies and convicts” (SOP 80).

The *Sea of Poppies* (2008) narrative is set mostly on the *Ibis*. It is “in the belly of a ship” that Ghosh's literary approach sheds light on one specific aspect of the indentured labor: the participation of women. They, like the slaves, leave their mark. If it is not physically, “smooth depressions in the wood, of a shape and size that could only have been made by

human beings”, at least the historical mark. In the academic texts, indentureship is most of the time presented through a general perspective neutralizing or negating the force or effect of gender and individuality. The literary text offers the writer a space to incorporate a bigger range of topics to be discussed about and thought of. Amitav Ghosh, who has repeatedly commented on this issue, explains to Nicholas Wroe in an interview to the Guardian, “Amitav Ghosh: ‘There is now a vibrant literary world in India — it all began with Naipaul’”, that he does not make the truth-claims that historians make and acknowledges:

[...] the difference between writing fiction and writing history is that fiction doesn’t commit you to one view. That is why I was never a historian or an academic. I don’t think theoretically. What interests me about history is that there are so many alternative ways of telling it. I have had my life and experiences and I have my opinions. But I have also forced myself to see the world through, say, the eyes of an opium trader, and that is one of the great strengths of historical fiction. It encourages you to step out of your skin and see the world from other points of view. (n. pag.)

The female indentured laborers constitute a small fraction in the Indian diaspora in the nineteenth century. In *Sea of Poppies* (2008), the sprout or ‘the poppy’ of this fraction is evident and stresses the need for further discussion and analysis to retrieve women’s silenced stories. Therefore, in this section, I focus on the women who dare to cross the sea to go to the colony, challenging the traditional course of history in a significant way. Although their stories are overshadowed, there is a great demand for women in the colony. The *duffadar* tells

Kalua that he would take him and his wife:

Many girmitiyas go with their wives. We've had letters from Mareech asking for more women. I will take you and your wife as well, if she wants to go. After thinking about this for a bit, Kalua asked: And jāt — what about caste? Caste doesn't matter, said the duffadar. All kinds of men are eager to sign up — Brahmins, Ahirs, Chamars, Telis. What matters is that they be young and able-bodied and willing to work. (SOP 189)

The history of Indian women in Mauritius has suffered a misrepresentation as subservience, passivity and victimhood are the nouns which identify these women during the indentureship. In *Lakshmi's Legacy: The Testimonies of Indian Women in 19th Century Mauritius* (1994), Marina Carter argues that Asian women migrants tend to be depicted either as “dependents and spouses, reluctant to migrate, and of negligible labour value” or a “lone females of dubious virtue” (n.pag.). Through letters, petitions and statements from the Mauritius archives, Carter displays a different portrait of these women, so does Amitav Ghosh in his text.

The dreaded waters of the Indian Ocean do not intimidate dependent wives, single women, and widows who are dissatisfied with their continued state of marginalization and oppression at home. The voyage is not only a matter of leaving the homeland but also going against the *Samudrolanghana* or *Sagarollanghana*, the taboo of crossing the sea. In *Dharmaśāstra of Baudhayana*, sea voyages are the first offenses which cause the loss of

varna.¹²⁴ The Scripture encourages the belief that voyage would take the Indians away from their daily rituals and would put them in contact with the *mlecchas*, peoples who do not conform to what is culturally acceptable in their culture. In addition, it would lead to the end of the reincarnation cycle, as the traveller would be away from the regenerating waters of the Ganges. In short, it means breaking family and social ties with India:

‘But Baboon,’ said Mr Burnham, with a satirical curl of his lip. ‘Are you not afraid of losing caste? Won’t your Gentoo brethren ban you from their midst for crossing the Black Water?’ ‘Oh no, sir,’ said the gomusta. ‘Nowadays all are going for pilgrimage by ship. Pilgrims cannot lose caste — this can also be like that. Why not?’ (SOP 215)

The crossing, according to Brinda Mehta, is associated with “expatriation of convicts, low castes and other “undesirable” elements of society from the mainland to neighbouring territories to rid [Indian] society of any visible traces of social pollution” (5). This “social cleansing” refers to men as well as to women who become part of the indentured populations. Considering that the crossing may sound a major loss of roots for the men, it becomes, as Metha’s conclusive argument stresses below, a considerable gain for the women. For her, “the Hindu women, who represented a significant minority, had the most to gain by crossing over

¹²⁴ Dharmaśāstra are rules of conduct and rites as practiced in the Vedic schools. It is related to the duties of people at different stages of life like — studenthood, householdership, retirement and renunciation — known as the ashramas or the four periods of life. The Dharmaśāstra is divided into three major topics: one, ācāra contains the rules of daily rituals, life-cycle rites, and other duties of four castes or varṇas; two, vyavahāra includes the rules of the procedures for resolving doubts about dharma and rules of the substantive law categorized according to the standard eighteen titles of Hindu law; and three, prāyaścitta lists the rules of atonement and penances for violations of the rules of dharma. See Olivelle, Patrick. *Dharmasūtras: The Law Codes of Āpastamba, Gautama, Baudhāyana, and Vāsiṣṭha*. New York: Oxford UP, 1999. Print.

different lands because their confinement within Hindu patriarchal structures in India made them victims of abusive family and communal tradition” — as it was analyzed in Chapter I (5).

Initially, as Carter’s statistical data indicate, women form only one to two percent of the early migration which start in 1830s. By 1842, the British government assumes the control of migration and starts regulating the lives of the Indians under indenture. These governmental regulations, which last for 76 years, change the sex ratios, estimating 40 women to 100 men. For instance, in Mauritius, as the literary excerpt above shows, women are recruited to attend social needs, and not economic ones. As Marina Carter states, “women were incorporated into both the internal and external industrial migration streams for the dual purpose of providing ‘cheap, dexterous and docile’ labour and as a means to stabilise the male labour force” (n.pag.). The migrant ships, consequently, have to comply with the legal requirements and have them on board. Despite the growth in the numbers of sex ratio, this recruitment leads to a social problem. As it has been mentioned, the coolies register themselves as an act of “free choice” (it is important to highlight that some forced circumstances are behind it, for example, socioeconomic problems), but many women, as Carter points out, are deceived and taken to the ships to meet the quota established by the government. The author claims that “the literature on indentured migration itself, particularly where influenced by the Indian nationalist critique of the labour diaspora, tends to over-emphasise the moral depravity of life in the ‘coolie lines’, appraising women migrants as “single, broken creatures” (n.pag.).

In the world of *girmityas*’ history, Ghosh points female characters challenging the patriarchal structures. On the journey down the Ganges to the depot in Calcutta, they are

depicted using the storytelling device, à la Scheherazade, “as for stories there was no end to them”, to endure the “dark and airless space” of “their curtained enclosure” on the boat (SOP 223). The main story concerns the violence against women which is followed by personal stories of peasant women: Ratna and Champa, who are both evicted from their lands which is contracted to the opium factory (colonial violence); Dookhanee is abused by her mother-in-law (sociocultural violence); Heeru is beaten by her husband (domestic violence), Munia is impregnated by the colonizer who also kills her parents (colonial violence); Sarju is forced into exile to escape a *Thakur*’s reprisal (caste violence), and Deeti is subjected to sexual abuse (cultural and sexual violence). Besides these female characters, there is Paulette Lambert, the daughter of French father and Mauritian mother, who is exploited by Benjamin Brightwell Burnham in his sadomasochistic rituals (sexual violence).

The space of the boat configures the bonds of solidarity and on the ship they “[we] will all be ship-siblings — *jaházbhais* and *jaházbahens* — to each other” (SOP 328). Although the meaning of *jaházbhais* is brotherhood, the term solidarity, instead of sisterhood, is more appropriate to describe the feelings of the women on the bow or in the hold. It does not assume an ahistorical universal unity among women as sisterhood does. For Chandra Talpade Mohanty, as she explains in *Feminism without borders: decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity* (2003), sisterhood sets “a homogenous group of women with same interests, perspective, and goals and similar experiences”(110). Yet solidarity, Mohanty explains, does “not try to deduce one from the other”, but “foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together” [...] in the building of alliances” (116; 7). As it was shown above, each character has their own trajectory and is “building alliances” to bear out the trauma of migration. The space of the ship marks, as Mishra reminds us, “a

radical break from their familiar surroundings” and they, through solidarity, try to reconnect with home (77). Thus, it is possible to see that the *kala pani*, instead of representing a threat for the future, stands for a possibility of hope, or at least of a life not so oppressive and abusive as the one left behind.

Considering the fact that Deeti has to leave her home, it may be argued that for the women depicted in the novel, crossing the Black Waters is a possibility of renewal, self-assertion and relative independence, which is not true for men since they go primarily as laborers, who should spend many years of their lives in a state of near slavery.

Unlike Brinda Metha’s statement that “male writers create female fictions reducing women to “the phenomenon of invisibility” (Metha quoting Ramabai Espinet) by obfuscating their presence behind a screen of shawls, saris and *obrnis* (Indian headscarves)” (28), Ghosh, in my reading, does not obfuscate female characters like this. He does not perpetuate the myth of the, to use Metha’s words, “eternal feminine” and does not negate “the possibility of more wholesome and plausible presentations” (28). Although Ghosh recreates female characters set in the Hindu patriarchy, he depicts them neither as a mere appendage of male characters nor as subservient wives or adoring mothers or passive victims. He creates them as constituent part of the social system, highlighting their significant role. Also, he shows the counterpoint to the official side of the history: While men work in the opium factory, “not another woman to be seen” except Deeti, women work in the fields cultivating opium. (SOP 85); While male migrants have some task on the *Ibis*, “the female migrants would be expected to perform certain menial duties for the officers, guards and overseers. Washing their clothes was one such; sewing buttons, repairing torn seams and so on, was another” (SOP 349); While only merchants live in Fanqui-town, women on the flower-boats perform “many small but essential

services for the Fanquis, including taking in their washing” (SOP 348). Although the female characters’ tasks are not ‘remotely glamorous’, they are always portrayed in exactly parallel to male characters’ activity or stories.

It is worth noting that Metha’s feminist critique in *Diasporic (Dis)locations: Indo-Caribbean women negotiate the Kala Pani* (2004) refers to writers such as Sam Selvon, V. S. Naipaul and Shiva Naipaul and her locus of enunciation is the Caribbean, but her criticism seems to generalize male authors and assumes that only female writers are able to present “accurate, interesting and complex images of Hindu women” (29). In Ghosh’s creative hands, Draupadis, Sitas and Lakshmis of yesterday shed their shawls, saris and *obrnis* and unveil their power. An example of this can be seen in the analysis in Chapter I, which shows Deeti as a woman who is able to make her own decisions and fight against the oppressive system.

On the ship Deeti also is a leader and trustworthy friend who helps other women and acts as counsellor to Munia, the youngest of them. She acts as a surrogate mother or older sister to other single girls, trying to preserve the most important values of Indian culture on the ship — demeanor (as when Munia flirts with the shipman and allows him to see her face, dropping the veil that should screen her from men). Her relationship with Kalua also enables her to have power, since she can ask him to take care of Munia when men start “making eyes” at her, (or when the boatman teases the women who are afraid to jump from the ship). So Deeti’s ascendancy over other female indentured laborers is not surprising. It is related not only to that specific moment — the crossing — but will be developed in her future life. During the crossing, she is seen as a *bhauji*, “the sister-in-law that everyone dreamed of, friend, protector and confident” and “she had been appointed the matron of the dabusa by common consent”, giving advice on matters that are important to other *girmityas*, for

example, marriage permission: “He wants to know, said Kalua, whether Heeru would be willing to set up house with him when we reach Mareech” (SOP 225; 395). Deeti’s reflection on Heeru’s and Ecka Nack’s marriage on the ship, “Heeru was, by her own account, a married woman, whose husband was still alive; and no doubt Ecka Nack himself had a wife or two, back in the hills of Chhota Nagpur.”, presents the inconceivability of this kind of union in Indian villages. However, in their new context, “over there, on the island, what would it matter whether you were from the plains or the hills?”, the Indian values, or rather “the old ties were immaterial now that the sea had washed away their past?”, are resignified and “there was no pressing reason for them to seek the sanction of anything other than their own desires”. (SOP 395- 396). Although “they were all cut off from home, there was nothing to prevent men and women from pairing off in secret, as beasts, demons and *pishaches* were said to do”, the narrator poses a challenging question: “With no parents or elders to decide on these matters, who knew what was the right way to make a marriage?” (SOP 396). With no caste system or *panchayat* system to guide them, the *girmitiyas* step into the space of individuality, making decisions for themselves and constructing their own new rules: “Yet, despite her resentment of the imposition, Deeti could not help but recognize that Ecka Nack was, by his own lights, trying to do what was right and honourable” (SOP 396). Her hesitation, “what right did anyone have to thrust her into this tangle”, points out that the diasporic space makes the individual aware of their new role in society. Losing the collective moorings, maybe temporarily, however, the subject, mainly Indian villagers, starts operating in the new world, assuming an individual identity which will clash with the roles assigned to them in the traditional Indian society. This ‘new’ identity, though, is not really new, since they have their own frame of reference with notions of cultural adequacy with which they rule their

new life. Therefore, Deeti is asked to assume the position of the elders in the *panchayat* system, and, in turn, Kalua is designed by her to act as the elder brother who will keep an eye on the young men who want to dishonor the single women.

The West in the East: The Eurasian

Among the female travelers on board of the *Ibis*, Paulette Lambert, the daughter of a French father and a Mauritian mother, offers the readers the possibility of encountering an interesting character who carries the marks of cultural hybridity: Europe and Asia are mingled in her. And she, alone of all other characters, has the power of choice: either accepting her European ancestry or her native upbringing, or even adapting herself to both of them. Her father, Pierre Lambert, had to leave his country as “he had been involved, in his youth, in a revolt against his king; that he was shunned by respectable English society because he had publicly denied the existence of God and the sanctity of marriage” and goes to India as an “assistant curator of Calcutta’s Botanical Gardens” (SOP 63;61). Being orphaned since her birth, Paulette is brought up by Lambert as “a child of Nature” and receives a formal education which is unusual even for many boys at that time (SOP 125). Her schooling:

had consisted of assisting her father as he went about his work. This provided a wider range of instruction than might be supposed, for it was Pierre Lambert’s practice to label his plants, when possible, in Bengali and Sanskrit, as well as

in accordance with the system recently invented by Linnaeus. This meant that Paulette had learnt a good deal of Latin from her father, while also absorbing Indian languages from the learned munshis who had been enlisted to assist the curator with his collections. French she had studied of her own volition, reading and re-reading her father's books until she knew them almost by heart. Thus, through effort and observation, Paulette had become, while still quite young, an accomplished botanist and a devout reader of Voltaire, Rousseau, and most particularly M. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, who had once been her father's teacher and mentor. (SOP 120)

This unconventional upbringing enables her, as it will be shown later, an agency which goes against both the European moral standards and Indian values of the time — she is independent and determined, perfectly able to take care of herself without the aid of male presence. After her father's death, however, she is taken to Mr Benjamin Brightwell Burnham's house. If it had not been for Mr Burnham's request, Paulette would have been sent to "the newly instituted poorhouse for destitute Eurasians and white minors" created by the British (SOP 119). Eurasian is a term which involves a question of nationality, race and culture. According to Valerie E. R. Anderson, Portuguese, British, French, Americans, Danish, Germans and Dutch are present in India in eighteenth and nineteenth century, forming the so-called Eurasian population — people mixed of European and Asian ancestry. With British hegemony during the colonial period, these other Europeans, as Anderson notes, are subjected to British influence and are seen as inferior race along with Indians and Anglo-Indians. The Eurasian hybridity, and Anglo-Indian miscegenation become, in Anderson's words, "a

problem for the British who sought to legitimize their rule with an illusion of European superiority” (3). Through Paulette, the French-Indo (not to say French-Mauritian-Indo) literary example, Ghosh criticizes this British idea of superior race and makes the reader think of the complexity behind ‘not belonging to’, that is, the half-breeds. Retrieving Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s novel *Paul et Virginie* (1788), he draws a suggestive parallel between Virginie and Paulette, showing how Paulette adapts herself to the Indian culture, thanks to being brought up by her foster mother, and Virginie fails to do it, for she tries to follow European patterns of behavior in Mauritius. However, unlike the docile and prudish Virginie who submits to her family’s wishes and goes to Europe and later on refuses to abandon her French attire in order to try to save herself when the ship drowns, Paulette is resourceful and determined, and is able to escape by fully adopting the identity she feels most comfortable with — the Indian identity. It is worth noticing that Ghosh does not include the point of view of Indians regarding Paulette; she is fully accepted on the ship, because it is a place where social conventions are slowly dissolving; in the mainland, she would have no place to live. She might feel as an Indian, but her European background would make her be regarded as a foreigner among the Indians. Thus, Ghosh exposes the difficulties of being half-breed in any given society, noting that the question of identity is never simple. The colonial state tries to fix an identity to Europeans, Anglo-Indians and Indians, making them embrace it ignoring differences of class, caste, religion and gender. Also, it does not take into account the fact that the children of mixed marriages are seen as ‘alien’ by the culture of both their parents.

At Bethel, Paulette’s teachings are rejected and “her offers of helping in tutoring Annabel had been politely declined” because “not only was her [Paulette’s] command of

English far from perfect, her education had followed a path exactly contrary to that which Mrs Burnham deemed appropriate for a girl” (SOP 102). The attempts of the Burnhams to mould Paulette according to their British culture fail as she resists any kind of imposition. The hiding of a sari, which “she had slept in at night. It was only in the seclusion of her bedroom, sheltered from the prying gaze of the staff, that she dared wear a sari at all”, and the refusal to get married to Mr Kendalbushe are her forms of resistance (SOP 113).

However, her decision to live with the Burnhams proves not to be the best option for her: besides not being able to adapt herself to the European standards which they expected her to accept, Mr Burnham is a sadomasochist who attempts to seduce Paulette and craves after punishment in order to have sexual pleasure, frightening her. Running away is the only possible solution for her; and her struggle produces a double to Deeti’s: both women have to escape twice — from the family and from the land — so that they can live in safety without the constraints of society and having control of their lives.

It is worth noticing that Paulette’s French heritage is only useful for her as far as academic knowledge is concerned. She is brought up by an *ayah*, wet-nurse, after her mother’s death (maternal death) and a bond of affection develops when Jodu’s mother “had opened her heart to the baby the moment she held her to her breast” (SOP 61). The *ayah* brings her up along with her son Jodu (as siblings), teaching her Bengali culture and language. The upbringing in India makes her feel more comfortable with Indian manners, food and clothing than with western culture. The extent of her mobility between different worlds can be seen in the changes her own given name (identity) undergo as the context changes. She is born Paulette Lambert, but she becomes Jodu’s mother’s daughter “Putli — ‘doll’ — which was her a way of domesticating the girl’s name” (SOP 61). At Bethel

“Paulette was Puggly to Mrs Burnham and Annabel” (SOP 117) The nickname little Annabel Burnham gives her — Puggly — is suggestive: “Look what the puggly’s done!”, she says, when Paulette appears in the dining-room wearing an old dress of Mrs. Burnham’s which has been adapted to her (SOP 117). However, the dress does not fit her — it is too short and goes down to her ankles, leaving her bare feet exposed. The fact that Annabel says “the puggly” is a possible reminiscence of an animal, since no article is used when referring to people. In English, one of the names of the platypus is “puggle” — the platypus is a semiaquatic egg-laying mammal, having a broad flat tail, webbed feet, a snout resembling a duck’s bill which lives both in water and on land, thus being a sort of hybrid, just like Paulette, who partakes of two worlds — Europe and Asia. However unconsciously, Annabel links her to an animal because of her lack of social graces and ‘good behavior’.

In order to escape the situation which is unbearable to her at the Burnhams’, she decides to go aboard the ship bound to Mauritius, where she relives her grand-aunt Jeanne Baret’s story. As the narrator explains, Baret, known as Madame Commerson, is the first woman to complete a voyage of circumnavigation and “was a scientist: to be precise” (SOP 235). But if Jeanne Beret had to disguise herself as a man in order to travel, Puggly does not have to adopt a fake identity, she dresses herself as an Indian woman, the identity she is more comfortable with. On representing Paulette as a botanist, Ghosh one more time brings out the story of pioneering women who do not adapt themselves to the role society has assigned them.

In this novel, Ghosh shows how a literary text is good vehicle for retrieving old topics and bringing new perspectives to his readers. He presents in this trilogy a view which defies the official history, showing how ordinary people can also be agents and change their lives.

This is true most of all when we consider the women's stories (Deeti and Paulette, who run away from painful and dangerous circumstances) and, on doing so he helps raising the readers' awareness about this time. The silenced stories of the *girmityas* highlight a side of nineteenth-century colonialism which should be analyzed in more depth — the indentured labour — and how it shaped the lives of thousands of people who had no option but to submit to the colonizer's rules and impositions. Therefore, Ghosh reverses the expected role of submission and dependency of Indian women as depicted in official historiography.

Silently, the women collected their belongings and crept out of their enclosure; Ratna, Champa and Dookhanee hurried off to join their husbands, but Deeti, having appointed herself the guardian of the single women, gathered Munia, Sarju and Heeru around her and took them along to wait with Kalua. (SOP 255)

Also, it can be noted that Ghosh's representation of violence is not related only to the female characters: both Neel and Ah Fatt are humiliated in prison, where the guards try to prevent their growing friendship by turning one against the other. However, when Ah Fatt complies, what he gets is not the promised reward (opium), but animal dung. Besides, in *Sea of Poppies* the character Kalua, an outcast, is subjected to violence and humiliation by the sons of the local landowners, who belong to a higher caste. Kalua suffers both mentally and, most of all, physically, when he is raped (as demonstrated in Chapter I).

The convict

In the beginning of *Sea of Poppies* (2008), Neel is shown as having a luxurious life. The zemindar's son suffers the consequences of his father's inability to deal with the British and his debts lead Neel to prison. From this moment on, he is subjected to humiliating process of "de-glamourization", to quote K. M. Chandar's word (184). The first step consists in his being stripped off his dhoti in the jail:

The novelty of this treatment confused Neel into thinking that some sort of mistake had been made. Still grappling with his dhoti, he protested: Stop! You can't treat me like this; don't you know who I am? (SOP 264)

Neel clings to his former position of authority. He questions: "Don't you know who I am?" It shows how he is not conscious of the changes his life will undergo in jail as now he is seen as a criminal. The second step is the allusion the guards make to the *Mahabharata* in which Draupadi has her sari torn off:

There was a momentary check in the motion of the hands that had been laid upon him; then someone caught hold of the end of his dhoti and gave it a sharp tug. The garment spun him around as it unravelled, and somewhere nearby a voice said: . . . Now here's a real Draupadi . . . clinging to her sari . . . (SOP 264)

The third step is to be despised by someone “recruited from the deep hinterlands” (SOP 264). Neel’s jailers belong to an inferior caste, and being thus abused by people he would previously see as subalterns who should be respectful marks his descent into degradation. Besides, their remark, comparing Neel to a female character, is deeply offensive given the usual status of inferiority in which Indian women lived at that time.

Ah Fatt is also portrayed as a submissive being, whose first description is that of a man covered in vomit and faeces; when the guards try to turn Neel against him, refuses to comply. Then the guards tempt Ah Fatt with a reward they know he cannot refuse: opium, to which he is addicted. Even though Neel tries to warn him that this is a trap, Ah Fatt believes the guards will give him what they promised, and he does what he is asked to do, that is, urinate on Neel. Having done that, when he tries to get the ball of opium, the guards, who mockingly refer to him as “Jackin-ape”, give him a small ball of goatshit. It is only after undergoing this trial that Ah Fatt will cease to believe the jailers, and a real friendship between him and Neel will grow. This relationship marks a turn in Neel’s beliefs, since as a zemindar he would keep very much to his family and social class, and any sort of dealings with people who did not belong to his caste would be unthinkable for him.

Thus, I can say, Ghosh’s representation of humiliation and degradation is not restricted to only female characters: he shows that violence is spread within Indian society, and its perpetrators are not only the British, but local people as well, who seize the opportunity of despising Neel, who once was a ruler. The victims of violence comprise people of all levels of society, both men and women. In the Indian context, famous for its rich mythology and oral tradition, memory, which is reinforced by repeated story-telling is a ‘réservoir’ of signs and a potent source of relation to the world.

In colonial India, the mythological stories become a weapon of resistance to the colonial narrative. This phenomenon — the use of mythology to build a counter narrative to colonial construction, as employed by Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies* (2008) — will be explored in the next and final chapter of this thesis.

CHAPTER III: TRANSGENDER AND MYTHS

“Life is lived in transformation”
Rainer Maria Rilke

Chapter II presented the trajectory of opium cultivation in colonial India and its impact on men and women, leading to their forced migration to distant lands. Chapter III shows how devotion for God manifests itself in human body and transforms it beyond gender (male/female). In *Sea of Poppies* (2008), Amitav Ghosh’s secondary character — Baboo Nob Kissin Pander (*gomusta*) — is depicted as transgender.

In the past couple of decades, the word transgender has gained a lot of attention (since at least the 1950s) and come into widespread use. It refers to the person who moves away from the gender they are assigned at birth. The term means ‘transcending gender’. Broadly speaking, it indicates a transgression, that is, to be ‘trans’ is to defy rigid, binary constructions of gender and to live partly, or fully, beyond gender roles expected by society. Transgenders have existed across societies, but in India they have formed distinct communities with histories and mythologies that go back hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Age-old texts such as the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, and the *Kama Sutra* refer to them, and there are tales of gods who change genders on a whim. In Modern times, the transgender history can be drawn from the history of minority movements for social change, to the history of sexuality and gender, and to feminist movement and politics.

Colonization, as explained by Robert J. C. Young, is not only about capturing of other people’s land and exploiting their economic resources for the building of great empires.

Colonialism is also a narrative — a discourse that offers justification for the subjugation of other people by categorizing them as inferior beings. The British colonial administration in India achieved this in a systemic manner, with Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay, who played the most important role in introducing English and western concepts to education in the sub-continent, implementing policies that led to the replacement of Persian by English as the official language. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, handiwork of Macaulay, describes all forms of non-procreative heterosexual sex as unnatural and carnal, making them a criminal offence. English and the criminalizing of all forms of non-procreative sexual activity stemmed from the Victorian purism. The British official publicly described the Bengali men as “feeble and even to effeminacy” (511). Lord Macaulay was not the only British official who created the image of men from Bengal, the first Indian province to be completely colonized, as being ‘weak and ineffectual and devoid of any form of masculinity’, but he was the leading figure in building this colonial narrative. For Priya Chacko,

this discourse constructed a gendered and radicalized hierarchy of effeminized, non-white Indians against masculine white Europeans. The stereotype of the effeminate Hindus draws on hegemonic codings of both race and gender and can be traced back to the beginnings of colonial rule in eighteenth century. Since masculinity is frequently constructed as a cornerstone of modernity and white Europeans were thought to be at the pinnacle of modernity the pathologizing of the Indian men as effeminate, due to both mental and physical weakness, became an integral part of the ideology of the British civilizing

mission and was used extensively in nineteenth and twentieth century writings on India. (13)

In the nineteenth-century India, the British had set up a whole industry to portray Indian men as weak, with a large amount of literature being produced about it. They also expressed their horror at Indian myths and mythology, especially those found in the *Puranas*, which they saw — and criticized — as ‘backward’. In *Make Me a Man: Masculinity, Hinduism and Nationalism in India* (2005), Sikata Banerjee describes how both fictional work as well as nonfictional accounts by the colonials “disseminated ideas of Christian manhood” and derided Indian men as weak and fragile (27). According to Banerjee, the monograph published by the Religious Tract Society refers to “British colonial administrators and military leaders such as Warren Hastings, Henry Lawrence, and General Henry Havelock as living examples of Christian manliness” (27-28). Banerjee argues that the British “gendered lens sorted Indian men in several ways, the categories ‘martial’ and ‘non-martial’ as depicted in Sir George MacMunn’s text ‘The Martial Races of India’ (1933) being the most common” (28). A quote from the above-mentioned book more or less summarizes the British attitude towards Indian men: “We do not speak of the martial races of Britain as distinct from the non-martial, nor of Germany, nor of France. But in India we speak of the martial races as a thing apart and because the mass of people have neither martial aptitude nor physical courage” (qtd in Banerjee 28). According to Banerjee and other scholar of colonial India, the masculinity of Indian men was judged by the Europeans from a Christian/western perspective. Along with the introduction of anti-sodomy law, the British also suppressed *Rekhti* (Urdu poetry representing sexual intimacy amongst women) and the heterosexualization of the Ghazals,

which apparently imbibed passion amongst men. The same-sex sexual practices were criminalized by the British as they did not fit into that binary of male-female division and Victorian morality. So the effeminate Indian men are ready to be colonized.

In *Sea of Poppies* (2008), Amitav Ghosh turns this colonial narrative on its head with the use of Indian mythology and history.¹²⁵ In his articulation of gender and myth underlies the notion of devotion (*bhakti*), an inherent principle of the *Puranas*. It is through this logic of devotion that he sets the cultural differences between the West and the East and ‘reorients’ the West about the Indian sexuality: its polyvalence of gender identities and sexual desire.

In *Seeing Like a Feminist* (2012), Nivedita Menon argues that the rigid distinction of bodies into male and female only was absent in Europe before the sixteenth century, and it did not exist in South Asia and Africa before the nineteenth century. It is with the advent of ‘modernity’, which came to Asia and Africa with colonialism, that this division gets ossified, engendering four assumptions: “the idea that nature exists separately from humans as a passive, inert set of resources to be put to human use”; “that bodies are naturally entirely one sex or another,”; “that hermaphroditism (bodies possessing male and female sexual characteristics) is a disease”, and “that desire naturally flows only between ‘opposite’ sexes” (53). It is against these assumptions, Menon contends, that *bhaktas* (devotees or poets of the *Bhakti* movement) are an example that challenges the normative notions of masculinity and femininity.

¹²⁵ It is important to highlight that in India there are often many versions of the same story, and one version may contradict the details of another. They can be either oral or written and Hindu or Buddhist.

Mythic Narratives

In “Myth as Technique,” Meenakshi Mukherjee argues that the Indo-Anglian writers started using myth as literary device in the 1950s. They turned to Indian mythology — the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Puranas*, local legends, folk-lore, and rituals (for rain, for harvest, or for fertility etc.) — “to create significant patterns of fiction” (129). This device developed into two forms in the narrative: digressional technique (weaving in stories within a story or pausing to narrate a parable) and making a structural parallel (where a mythical situation underlies the whole or part of the novel). Although this mythic device is recurrent nowadays, it evolved slowly in Indian English writing. Sudhin Ghose, Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, B. Rajan, and Mulk Raj Anand are considered by Mukherjee to be the pioneers of this technique.¹²⁶ After them, many Indian writers started using the myths either to question the colonial stereotypes (postcolonial criticism) or to interrogate the patriarchal representation (feminist criticism), as already mentioned in Chapter I. In *Sea of Poppies* (2008), Ghosh resorts to the *Bhagavata Purana* to dismantle the colonial codes and conventions of gender role because the British not only sought to assume control of the state in India, they also tried to impose their notions of morality and sexuality on Indians. The Indian classics — the *Ramayana* (*kavya or poetry*), the *Mahabharata* (*itihasa or history*), and the *Puranas* (old tales) — have proved to be a great reservoir of material to some Indian writers and filmmakers. These timeless stories, their characters, and the themes of the epics and mythological tales of the *Puranas* have entertained Indians from local *addas* (informal gatherings) to modern television soap operas, and from primary schools to universities. They

¹²⁶ In the West, it is known that W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot and James Joyce initiated a revival of the interest in myth, making it, as Mukherjee asserts, “meaningful in the modern world”.

have always served as a point of reference to historians, sociologists, and psychoanalysts to problematize complex issues involving power, hierarchy, body, gender, and sexuality.

The *Ramayana* tells the story of Rama, the king of Ayodhya. The epic, written by Valmiki, culminates in the battle between Rama and Ravana, the king of Lanka, for the abduction of the former's wife Sita. In the subsequent literature and in Indian culture, Rama and Sita are viewed as the ideal Hindu couple who never deviates from their *dharma* (duty or moral conduct) despite all kinds of trials and tribulations. As discussed earlier about the *sati* issue, Ghosh draws a parallel between Deeti and Sita. Although this version of the epic is most popular — and acceptable — among ordinary Indians (even this has different readings in the country), there is a whole range of Rama's story across India and Southeast Asia. In "Three Hundred *Ramayanas*: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation," A. K. Ramanujan records and analyses hundreds of tellings of this story in different cultures, languages and traditions. He mentions, for example, Kampan's *Ramavataram* written in Tamil during the twelfth century, which generates many other tellings such as *Ramacaritmans* (India), *Hikayat Seri Rama* (Malaysia) and *Ramakien* (Thailand).¹²⁷ Ramanujan argues that "for every such Rama there is a *Ramayana*" (113). He points out that the differences among the *Ramayanas* lie in style, details, tone, and texture. In addition to this, the beginning of story, the end of the story, and the main character also vary. Besides the epic form, the *Ramayana* appears in different genres:

¹²⁷ A. K. Ramanujan refers to Santosh N. Desai's essay "*Ramayana* an Instrument of Historical Contact and Cultural Transmission between India and Asia" (1970) which maps the routes the epic took from India to Asian countries and how the story of Rama was adopted and absorbed along with Buddhist Pali Canon and Sanskrit Sutras. According to Desai, the *Ramayana* reaches Asia in the early centuries of the Christian era with Hindus and Buddhists.

Sanskrit alone contains twenty-five or more tellings belonging to various narrative genres (epics, *kavya* or ornate poetic compositions, *puranas* or old mythological stories and so forth). If we add plays, dance-dramas, and other performances, in both classical and folk traditions, the number of *Ramayana* grows even larger. To these must be added sculpture and bas-reliefs, mask plays, puppet plays, and shadows plays, in all the many South and Southeast Asian cultures. (133-134)

In the conclusion of “*Ramayana* — an Instrument of Historical Contact and Cultural Transmission between India and Asia,” Santos N. Desai asserts that “the richness, diversity and elasticity of the Rama legend” in its various genres have created hundreds of *Ramayanas* (20). However, Ramanujan concludes that “no text is original, yet no telling is a mere retelling — and the story has no closure, although it may be enclosed in a text” (158). Ramanujan’s essay caused a controversy in Delhi University in 2008 as some activists of the Bhartiya Janata Party, a Hindu nationalist party, attacked professors and demanded that the essay be removed from the reading list of one of the history courses because for them it was impossible to have more than one version of the story of Rama. The issue ended up in the Supreme Court of India and finally the essay was banned from the university syllabus. In “Deity to Crusader: The Changing Iconography of Ram,” Anuradha Kapur contends that the Hindu right-wing transformed the feminized Rama from Tulsidas’ *Ramacaritmanas* (gentle, boy with an androgynous body) into a hyper-masculinized Rama which led Hindu fanatics to demolish the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, a historical mosque, in 1992. An interesting feminist retelling of *Ramayana* is offered by the Kannada poet Du Saraswathi, who gives no space for Rama to be

neither extolled nor venerated as the most virtuous of all man — the *Maryada Purushottam*. According to Anuradha Raman's article, Saraswati brings Sita to the center of the narrative, weaving the stories told by dalit women in the villages of Karnataka. In Sanntimmi's hands, the protagonist created by Saraswathi, the *Ramayana* becomes a political weapon to fight against caste and gender discrimination in Indian society.

It is the best known case in the *Ramayana* that when Rama began his fourteen-year exile in the forests, the people of Ayodhya follow him to the outskirts of the town to bid him farewell. Rama turned to his followers and said to them that men and women who loved him had to return to their homes. Among them were hijras who were neither men nor women. As Rama had implored only the men and women to return home, the hijras stayed at the outskirts of the town for fourteen years until he returned. Thus he granted them a boon that their blessings and curses would come true. Who are the hijras? The word hijra comes from the Urdu language "leaving one's tribe". In *Me Hijra Me Laxmi* (2015), an autobiography of a hijra, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi tells her life story and explains:

Hijras are born as male children biologically. Psychologically, however they feel they are female. Sexually, they are attracted not to the opposite sex, but to their own sex. This conflict between their biological, and psychological and sexual identities is borne out by their body language — their gestures, mannerisms, movements, and expressions all belong to girls rather than boys. Their social behavior, which includes dress, hairstyle, make-up, jewellery, etc., is also that of women. Thus, there's a feeling of entrapment, of being jailed in the wrong body. (172)

In India, ostracized by the mainstream society, they live in a community of hijras to overcome the feeling of isolation. As Laxmi contents:

Such a person desperately seeks out others like him and bands with them. Together with them, he may decide to get rid of his male sexual organs, either through sex reassignment surgery, or by having another hijra sever his private parts from the rest of his body, without anesthesia. Together, they may acquire breast, either through hormone therapy or simply by sporting falsies. That is how hijra communities are formed. (172)

As a category, hijra is a social construct. He starts out as an effeminate homosexual man who becomes a hijra later. Not all hijras undergo castration. If he castrates himself, following the ritual called nirvana, he becomes a eunuch. The hijras are not simply another sex, they are a third gender.

The *Mahabharata* tells the story of the Great War of the Bharat dynasty, that is, the conflict between two groups of cousins — the Kauravas and Pandavas — fighting for land and power in their kingdom. This epic is a repository of Indian myths, folkloric motifs, archetypes, proverbs, religious practices and beliefs, and philosophical systems. It has a complex range of characters and the stories branch off in various directions often providing a story within a story. The *Mahabharata* has been retold and rewritten a number of times by novelists, folk storytellers, poets, playwrights, film-makers, and choreographers by making use of the stories, themes and characters of the epic in different circumstances. The basic

storyline is more or less the same in all versions, but the perspective from which the story is told is different. For example, three different versions of the *Mahabharata* have been written from the perspective of Draupadi, Karna and Bhima respectively. The *Mahabharata* has influenced literature and arts (ceramics, drawing, painting, sculpture, printmaking, design, crafts, photography, filmmaking, architecture, and various dance forms). Ghosh takes the story of Draupadi and recreates it partially in Deeti's story. Like the *Ramayana*, there are multiple *Mahabharatas* as most Indian languages have their own version of it written by prominent writers in the past hundreds of years. Even in the present times, a good amount of literature — derived from and inspired by the epic — has been coming out. In *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni retells the story of Draupadi, the leading female character in the epic, by placing her in the forefront of action. In the author's note, Divakaruni argues that female characters in the *Mahabharata* remain shadowy figures — whose thoughts and emotions are portrayed only when “they affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers or husbands, brothers or sons” — but in this narrative she wanted to invite the reader to hear the story from the Draupadi's perspective (xiv).

Mahabharata is also famous for containing transsexual characters. In “Vyasa's *Mahabharata: 'Sikhandin's Sex change'*”, Ruth Vanita highlights the story of Sikhandin as the well-known case of sex change. Sikhandin, Vanita points out, “later become a term to refer to eunuchs and men of doubtful sexuality” (36). Indians grow up hearing stories about the man who becomes a woman. As Laxmi argues,

I knew about Arjuna who had become Bruhannada in the *Mahabharata*, and I knew about the khojas who guarded the harems of kings. I also knew about

Shabnam Mausi, the MLA from Madhya Pradesh, who was the first among us to join politics. (51)

Though the two great epics have dominated the Indian imagination through hundreds of years, at the heart of Indian mythological literature lies the *Puranas*. In “The Mythic Dimensions of Hijra Origin Stories,” Vinay Lal argues that

the Indian epics, and more generally the vast literature encapsulated under the category of the puranas, still provide the categories through which Indians order the world around them and give shape to their lives. The stories of the epics, which exist in myriad forms in numerous oral traditions, resonate in the everyday life and practices of Indians, and not only Hindus. (190)

The *Puranas* means old tales and deal with philosophical and existential issues. They represent the deep mythic structure of Indian civilization which, as Lal asserts, expand, modify, and transform the orthodox Brahminism of the Vedas with the idea of devotion (*bhakti*). In the *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History and Literature* (2011), John Dowson argues that the definition of a *Purana* by the Sanskrit lexicographer, Amara Sinha, has five topics (*pancalaksana*): “the creation of the universe; its destruction and renovation; the genealogy of gods and patriarchs; the reigns of Manu, forming the periods called Manwantaras; and the history of the Solar and Lunar races of kings” (245).¹²⁸ Because of thousands of years of genealogy of kings and its time-cycle, the

¹²⁸ Not all the *Puranas* conform to this description, that is, some accord with it and some not.

British scholars defined the *Puranas* as fanciful, hyperbolic and absurd Hindu texts. From the perspective of Indians, the British were not able to understand the subtlety of the *puranic* literature which narrated much more than stories of gods and the struggle between the *suras* (any benevolent supernatural beings) and the *asuras* (any malevolent supernatural beings). Composed between 6th Century AD and 10th Century, the *Puranas*, which carry stories about the gods who had become the objects of people's devotion and about the modes of worship of these gods, are a major turning point in the religious discourse of India. The gods, which appear in the *Puranas*, are not Vedic gods.¹²⁹ The *Puranas* mark the beginning of the Hindu trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva as gods who should be the subject of one's devotion. In their allegorical form, the *Puranas* present the struggle within each person due to the external forces. Besides it, the *Puranas* set out the religious obligations (yoga, vows, pujas, prayers, and sacrifices) and the everyday customs for the individuals to live life according to the *dharma* (moral duty, right conduct, or righteousness). Although the numbers can be larger (as everything in India), there are eighteen major *Puranas* and eighteen minor *Puranas*.¹³⁰ Some of the main *Puranas* are *Bhagavata Purana*, *Agni Purna*, *Skanda Purana*, *Vishnu Purana* and *Padma Purana*. It is the *Bhagavata Puranas* which interests us in this chapter.

The *Bhagavata Puranas* is compiled in twelve books (*skandhas*) which promote the devotional love to Supreme God Vishnu. It is the book ten of this compilation that became the most popular text in India. It tells in detail the history of Krishna, the eighth avatar of Vishnu.

¹²⁹ Not Vedic gods are, for example, Krishna and Rama who are both, *avatars* of Vishnu.

¹³⁰ The major *Puranas* are classified according to the Trimurti: Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver) and Shiva (the destroyer or transformer), that is, *Brahma Puranas* (Brahma Purana, Brahmanda Purana, Brahma Vaivarta Purana, Markandeya Purana, and Bhavishya Purana), *Vaisnava Puranas* (Vishnu Purana, Bhagavata Purana, Naradeya Purana, Garuda Purana, Padma Purana, Varaha Purana, Vamana Purana, Kurma Purana, and Matsya Purana) and *Saiva Puranas* (Shiva Purana, Linga Purana, Skandia Purana, and Agni Purana). It can also be classified in three *gunas* (qualities): *sattva* (purity), *tamas* (impurity or ignorance) and *rajas* (passion).

Before gaining centrality in this narrative, Krishna had appeared in the *Upanishads* (the son of Devaki), in the *Mahabharata* (an advocate of morality) and in the *Bhagavad Gita* (counselor to Arjuna). In the *Handbook of Hindu Mythology* (2003), George M. Williams explains how Krishna became a major figure — and cult — in Indian mythology:

Except for the revelation of his true nature as Vishnu, Krishna's story was that of a charioteer in *Mahabharata*. But the *Gîtâ* provided support for the central claim of the Krishna cult — that Krishna was the Supreme. Krishna's divine birth and childhood are not found in the *Gîtâ* but in the *Puranas*, especially the *Bhâgavata Purâna*. Krishna's myth cycle was nested within Vishnu's since he was the eighth avatâra (reincarnation) of Vishnu. (79)

A large part of the legend of Krishna in the *Bhagavata Purana* narrates his relation with the *gopis* (devotees) in the land of Braj. His feminine attributes make him attractive to women as he engages in *Rasa Lila*, the dance of heavenly enjoyment with the *gopis*. Radha, one of the *gopis* (cowherdresses) and Krishna form the love couple. She holds a place of particularly high reverence and importance in a number of religious traditions in India, especially within Gaudiya Vaishnavism whose followers worship Krishna and Radha. This narrative in the *Bhagavata Purana* represents Krishna in various roles: divine child, naughty boy (butter thief), the slayer of demons, and the seducer of girls (*gopis*).

It is this love between Krishna and Radha — the archetype of devotion in Indian mythology and as good as a living tradition in present day India — that Amitav Ghosh uses

as the model for creating the characters of Nob Kissin Pander and Taramony in *Sea of Poppies* (2008). In the novel, Ghosh reverses the roles of Krishna and Radha. The worshipper becomes the worshipped as Nob Kissin Pander and Taramony transcend the gender relation through the union of the halves, involving a loving relationship with the divine. Combining both the feminine as well as the masculine aspects of God, he writes: “There will come a day when my spirit will manifest itself in you, and then the two of us, united by Krishna’s love, will achieve the most perfect union — you will become Taramony” (SOP 152). From this, it can be inferred that Ghosh is pointing out that different societies associate certain kinds of characteristics either as masculine or feminine and that these attributes are not the same across different cultures.

Rewriting the Myth of Transformation

Nob Kissin Pander’s story makes reference to Chaitanya Mahaprabhu’s (1485-1533). In the sixteenth century, Mahaprabhu founded the Achintya-Bheda-Abheda, a philosophical school which promoted the devotional worship of Krishna in Bengal. His teachings also disseminated *Bhakti* movement in East India, particularly Bengal and Odisha. In the *gurukul* (an educational system prevalent in India before the colonial rule) following the teachings of the guru (teacher or master), the students learned to turn their gaze towards Brahman, the Supreme being. So, in the novel, Nob Kissin Pander is described as being raised in “his family’s temple [which] was in the town of Nabadwip, a centre of piety and learning consecrated to the memory of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu — saint, mystic and devotee of Sri

Krishna” (SOP 147). As a student, he is given “a thorough education in Sanskrit and logic, as well as in the performance of rites and rituals” (SOP 147). Besides this he is “trained to turn his mind from sensual thoughts”, a practice referred to as *brahmacharya* (SOP 148). In the *dharmashastras* (law books), the life of Hindus is described in four stages: *Brahmacharya* (student, commonly associated with celibacy), *Grihastha* (householder), *Vanaprastha* (retired) and *Sannyasa* (renunciation). At the age of fourteen, while he is still a student, Nob Kissin’s dying uncle asks him to escort his wife, Taramony, to the “holy city” of Brindavan where she would live as a widow. With the story of Taramony, Ghosh raises the question of the status of the widows in India and how the *Bhakti* movement offered salvation to them. In the nineteenth century, after the practice of sati had been banned, the widows were cast out by their families and abandoned left on the margins of society. Like Taramony in this novel, some are sent to Brindavan (also Vrindavan or Vraj, the land of Krishna) in the Mathura district of Uttar Pradesh. Although widows no longer throw themselves on the funeral pyres of their husband, life for them is still very tough in India. It reflects the patriarchal desire to control women’s sexuality, as shown in Chapter I.

Ghosh’s literary representation of Taramony as a devotee of Krishna refers to the women in the *Bhakti* Movement:

Taramony’s saintliness was so patently evident that she soon attracted a small circle of devotees and followers. Nob Kissin would have loved nothing better than to join this circle: to call her ‘Ma’, to be accepted as a disciple, to spend his days receiving spiritual instruction from her. (SOP 149)

The *Bhakti* movement is a major turning point in making an improvement in the social condition of women in India before the medieval times. In the seventh century, Andal emerges as a female presence among the twelve Alvar *sants* of south India who devoted their lives to the gods Vishnu and his reincarnation Krishna. The *Bhakti* movement, with its emphasis on love and devotion and less role for the priests, opens up a space for not only to the lower-caste and but also for women. Both have been denied access to the Vedas and both had been seen as unfit to receive religious and spiritual instructions. The shift in the language of worship from Sanskrit (Vedas) to common Indian languages (*bhashas*) permits them to position themselves politically against the Brahminical dominance and express their devotion. Unlike Buddhism and Jainism, which initiate revolts from outside the Vedic religion, some scholars argue that the devotees (*bhaktas*) initiated a revolt from within. Their discontent and rebellion are expressed most of the time through poetry. It is important here to make a distinction between *bhakti sants* and *bhakti* poets. The *bhakti sants* are those who propagated the *bhakti* ideas across the country and *bhakti* poets use poetry as their medium of expression and find their imagery in the everyday lives of working people. While all poets can be called *sant*, but not all *sants* can be called poet. In the history of *Bhakti* movement, Mirabai (1498-1565) is an example of a *sant* who can be called poet as well. As Mirabai spreads her devotion to Krishna through poetry, she became extremely popular and rose to the level of *sants*. In one of her poems, as Susie Tahru and K. Latia argue, Mirabai spoke of a childhood vision of Krishna. While some devotees (*bhaktas*) had a guru, others had no guru, but like Mirabai, claimed to have received a divine vision. Most of the female *bhaktas* declare themselves married to the God. Though married (she was forced to wed to a Rajput prince), Mirabai assumes Krishna as her only lover/husband. Mirabai's love for Krishna is resurrected by Ghosh in his novel in the

form of Taramony's story where "Krishna was her only man, she said, the only lover she would ever have" (SOP 149). Susie Tahru and K. Latia contend that many of the female devotees (*bhaktas*) were women who "chafed at the strictures of the household and the family" (58).¹³¹ Some scholars see the *Bhakti* movement as a space of contestation in which women questioned Indian patriarchalism. It can be exemplified in the work of Akkamadhadevi, Sule Sankavva, Janabai, Rami Gangasati, Ratanbai, Mirabai, Molla, Bahinabai, and Tarigonda Venkamanba. Their poems, written in different Indian languages, were translated into English and compiled in Susie Tharu and K. Lalita's book, *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present* (1991), they show their interaction between material and the spiritual worlds. The mythological love between Krishna and Radha, who was actually his aunt (she was married to his uncle), is further used by Ghosh to build up his narrative — and postcolonial argument — in the novel.

On his journey to a new place, Nob Kissin Pander finds out that his aunt, Taramony, is a spiritual person who has a kind of devotion he has never seen before. He decides to stay beside her, to share her spirituality, and with the money his uncle had left he could rent a small house, where both live as aunt and nephew. Taramony's saintliness attracts many disciples and devotees, and they plan to build a temple. When she falls severely ill, she promises Nob Kissin that they will not be separated for a long time and that he must live in the world and make money to build the temple and wait for a sign of her coming back, and then they will be reunited as one.

In order to support both, Nob Kissin has to find a job and become a successful *gomusta*, a go-between who helps sending Indians to Mauritius and the Caribbean; as this he

¹³¹ Susie Tahru and K. Latia argue that the biographies of the *bhakti* saints highlights the break that they had with family and community before started wandering throughout the country.

goes on living after Taramony's death. However, there is a paradox in Nob Kissin's life: he undergoes the training in the temple and aims for a spiritual life, but has to work. He passes the entire novel "searching [for] Lord Krishna" who "He is not heeding..." (SOP 127). While he waits for the signs, that is, for "his awakening", his body, personified in his clothes, suffers a transformation:

As he was closing the almirah, Baboo Nob Kissin's eyes fell on a saffron-coloured alkhalla — one of the long, loose gowns that Taramony had liked to wear. On an impulse, he slipped it on, over his dhoti and kurta, and went over to a looking-glass. He was amazed by how well the robe fitted him. Reaching up to his head he undid the bindings of his tikki, shaking out his hair so that it fell to his shoulders. From now on, he decided, he would never again tie it or cut it; he would leave it open, to grow, so that it hung down to his waist, like Taramony's long, black locks. As he gazed at his own image, he became aware of a glow, spreading slowly through his body, as if it were being suffused by another presence. (SOP 153)

The creation of Nob Kissin character allows Ghosh to critique the European idea of heteronormativity, which assumes heterosexuality as normal and natural, demystifying the body and sexuality. Nob Kissin is characterized by Ghosh as "a fervent devotee of Sri Krishna" and as "a celibate Seeker" who, throughout the narrative, transforms himself into a woman (SOP 122). The process of transformation makes him an eccentric figure in the eyes of the colonizer:

Mr Burnham was sitting at a massive desk, bathed in the muted glow of a skylight, far above. His eyes widened as he watched Baboo Nob Kissin walking across the room. ‘My good Baboon!’ he cried, as he took in the sight of the gomusta’s oiled, shoulder-length hair and the necklace that was hanging around his neck. ‘What on earth has become of you? You look so . . .’

‘Yes, sir?’

‘So strangely womanish.’ (SOP 196)

As the excerpt points out, the encounter between the West and East can only be comic. Mr Burnham introduces an element of disbelief and mockery with his question “What on earth has become of you?” Nob Kissing puts into words, the absence of words represented by the ellipsis, the way the British constructed the Other as “womanish”, that is, effeminate. His reply to Mr Burnham’s astonishment goes beyond the mere assumption that normal sexual behavior springs from nature:

The gomusta smiled wanly. ‘Oh no, sir,’ he said. ‘It is outward appearance only — just illusions. Underneath all is same-same.’

‘Illusion?’ said Mr Burnham scornfully. ‘Man and woman? God made them both as they were, Baboon, and there’s nothing illusory about either, nor is there anything in between.’

‘Exactly, sir,’ said Baboo Nob Kissin, nodding enthusiastically. ‘That is what I am also saying: on this point no concession can be made. Unreasonable demands must be strenuously opposed.’ (SOP 196-197)

The “illusion” mentioned by Nob Kissin refers to Indian philosophical doctrine of *maya*. Though generally translated into English as illusion, *maya* also means ignorance (*avidya*) and transformation (mostly in Buddhist tradition). Ironically, Nob Kissin tries to lead Mr Burnham from ignorance (“nor is there anything in between” man and woman), to knowledge (“underneath all is same-same” body). His argument desexualizes the body, pointing out that every convention is an illusion which can be reconfigured. In other words, the “unreasonable demands must be strenuously opposed”. The story of the colonial domination is here narrated from different angles and the British are presented in the context of their political, social and cultural relations with the Indians. By using Indian narrative form and mythology, Ghosh tries to examine the East-West encounter, that is, the Indo-British contact and cultural interaction, which is actually a relationship of unequals: the colonizer and the colonized. The use of *bhakti* figures and concepts serves a useful purpose here as during that movement Indians had broken established norms and power structure of that time.

In her book, Nivedita Menon argues that the poets of the *Bhakti* movement serve as an example breaks the conventions that “sex the body” (57). The *Bhakti* movement originates in the sixth century AD in the region of Tamil Nadu and spreads to nearly all corners of India by medieval times. It develops as a counter-structure to Hinduism with its own hierarchy of behavior, belief and emotions. There are two types of *bhakti* (devotion) and both are equally important: *nirguna* (God appears as formless) and *saguna* (God appears with a form). The

nirguna sants expressed, as Menon asserts, “a kind of desire for God that travels through the body and reconfigures it. Their desire was to attain the loss of maleness as power and the loss of femaleness as sexualized powerlessness” (57). Like these saints, Nob Kissin’s desire for Taramony (Goddess) captures his body and transforms it:

Nowhere was this transformation more evident than in himself, for the presence of Taramony was so palpable within him now that his outer body felt increasingly like the spent wrappings of a cocoon, destined soon to fall away from the new being that was gestating within. (SOP 388)

The role reversal seen in the excerpt above is a recurrent theme in Indian narratives. In one traditional *bhakti* painting, Krishna appears in the guise of Radha, while Radha is painted in Krishna’s clothes. It is arguable that in choosing to play a role reversal of the characters (Nob Kissin in the guise of Taramony) Amitav Ghosh shows the Indian tolerance of femininity and androgyny over the homogenizing tendencies of sexuality by the colonial. The masculinity of the colonizer tried to devalue the feminine and androgynous part of Indian culture which can be found in the local narratives, paintings and sculptures. Mythology is as a living force in India and it transcends the realm of fiction. For example, the famous case of a police officer, D. K. Panda, who became ‘Doosri Radha’ (the second Radha) in 2005. In a strange reversal of roles, the man entrusted with the task of maintaining law and order in the state of Lucknow, donned the role of Radha — beloved of Lord Krishna. According to media

reports, Mr. Panda said that in 1991, he had a vision of Lord Krishna who told him he was in reality his beloved Radha. Sexual transformation had not been a taboo in India. On the contrary, it has been desired by some. In his article, “Transsexualism, Gender, and Anxiety in Traditional India,” Robert P. Goldman records the phenomenon of transsexualism:

drawn from the religious and mythological texts of ancient and medieval India, the cultic practices at various shrines in north and south India, and the lives and teachings of several important modern Indian religious figures and members of organized religious communities. (376)

Goldman refers to several Indian texts to reveal the nature of transsexualism in India, and his examples are from the epics and the *Puranas*. Talking about the legend of Krishna and his love for the *gopis*, Goldman writes that:

in several versions of this story, one finds references to the love-maddened *gopis* who, in their frenzy at being abandoned by the mischievous Krishna, project fantasized sexual transformations upon themselves and engage in love play with one another. (383)

Similarly, Goldman argues, one comes across references to the *gopas*’ wish to become women so that they may directly experience the *madhuryabhdva*, or state of erotized bliss, generally regarded as the highest expression of *bhakti*. This analogous phenomenon even finds mention in the *Ramayana*, which is more concerned about *dharma* (duty) and *maryada*

(morality). Quoting the work of the social anthropologist Peter van der Veer, who made an elaborate study of the Ramanandis, a sect of Ram worshippers, Goldman describes the appearance of transsexualism in this tradition:

In the common seva of the Ramanandis it is Ram, the Ultimate Being, who is served by the worshiper. In the *rasik* tradition it is the divine couple, Ram and Sita, what they call the yugal sarkdr, ‘the royal couple.’ The worship of Ram and Sita together creates a problem.

Male sadhus cannot serve Sita; they cannot, for example, bathe her. Therefore when serving Sita they must think of themselves as women who are female friends (sakhis) of Sita. (qtd in Peter van der Veer 389)

This transformation beyond one’s own gender is a long-running theme in Indian traditions from ancient times to the present and it is used by Ghosh to show the changes in his character (Nob Kissin) and what it signifies. As shown in the previous chapter, the ship was a place of transformation for the *girmityas*, allowing the breaking of rules and development of new ties, especially between the women. However, the *Ibis* is also a means of transformation for Baboo Nob Kissin, whose changes, which had begun while he was still in the land, become more noticeable. His transformation can be a parallel to the one that happened with the women: they had to abandon the rules of society which defined them according to caste, and develop a new form of thinking based on friendship. Baboo underwent a change which was not only spiritual, but also physical — his outer appearance changes, as well as his way

of thinking. Both are significant, since they point out to the fact that new identities can be formed when people are far from the society that constrains them. He acquires a ‘new avatar’ and changes his appearance completely:

‘If avatar is new, how clothes can be old? Height, weight, privates, all must be changing, no, when there is alteration in externalities? Myself, I have had to buy many new clothings. [...] ‘You cannot see?’ The gomusta’s eyes grew even rounder and more protuberant. ‘You are blind or what? Bosoms are burgeoning, hair is lengthening. New modalities are definitely coming to the fore. How old clothes will accommodate?’ (SOP 406)

Although commonly translated as incarnation, the word *avatar* means “to descent”. As the God of protection, Vishnu descends to earth in different forms (*avatars*) to restore the cosmic order. The story of Vishnu and his *avatars* (Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Narasimha, Vamana, Parashurama, Rama, Krishna, Gautama Buddha and Kalki) is found in the *Puranas*. Metaphorically speaking, the *gomusta*’s new avatar is his new gender identity. He needs new clothes to accommodate his new self as “bosoms are burgeoning” and “hair is lengthening”.

In her chapter on body, Menon explains that before the nineteenth century, India had a “polyvalence of gender identities and sexual desire which was banned through legal and social intervention by the British” (96). As shown in the beginning of this chapter, the institution of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was a major step in that direction. The *gomusta*’s transformation into Taramony (man into woman) marks the recurrent theme of a

change in sex in Indian mythology and also marks the recent debate of the queer politics which underlines the fluidity of sexual identity and sexual desire.

Transsexualism has a particularly long and complex history in India. This theme, which has an ancient origin, won endorsement of the law in 2014 when the Indian Supreme Court passed the Rights of Transgender Persons Bill which recognizes transgenders as a third gender and confers them all fundamental rights. Now the transgender persons have the right to decide their identity as male, female or as third gender. They have also acquired reservation in education and jobs, financial aid and social inclusion. For example, Manabi Bandyopadhyay is India's first transgender who became the principal of Krishnanagar Women's College in West Bengal. In interview to Monobina Gupta, Bandyopadhyay vents "my harassers belonged mostly to the educated, urban, middle classes" (n.pag.) For a patriarchal society, India has given a big step towards equality, but still, as it can be observed, there is a long journey to change people's mentality.

In the Indian mythology, transsexualism appears in many episodes where man transforms into a woman, either temporarily or permanently: in the *Mahabharata*, Arjuna spends a year as Brihandala; Amba, for vengeance, reborn a man (Sikhandi) to kill Bhishma; King Bhangasvana, because of Indra's anger, is transformed into a woman; and gopas who wish to become women. Goldman observes that transsexualism is not only found in Indian myth and legends, but also in religious cults, and in biographies of modern Indian spiritual leaders. He notes that the ritualized transsexualism is not limited to Vaisnava movements of north of India, but it can be found in a variety of cults in the south as well. For example, the cult of the goddess Yellamma and *jōgappa* (sacred female men) in Karnataka and the *teyyam* cult in Kerala. For Goldman, Paramahansa Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886) and Paramahansa

Swami Yogananda (1893-1952) are example of feminization of the gurus as their life stories present their spiritualized fantasy of becoming a woman. It denotes, as Goldman contents, that “the desire of the male devotee to mask or eliminate his maleness as an obstacle to union with Krishna may go beyond emotional transformation to involve varying degree of modification to both one’s costume and even anatomy” (388). This shows the Hindu culture’s ability to tolerate ambiguities which differs from western culture. As Ashis Nandy argues in *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (1983), “India’s heterogeneity and complexity, her incoherence and ancient mystery, her resistance to the mechanization of work as well as man, and ultimately her androgyny threaten the ‘stability’ of the West”. (70). Nandy’s assertion is also reiterated by Serena Nanda in *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* (1990) where she argues that “where Western culture strenuously attempts to resolve sexual contradictions and ambiguities, by denial or segregation, Hinduism appears to allow opposites to confront each other without resolution” (23).

As opposed to the Abrahamic religions or even Indian sects like Buddhism and Jainism, Hinduism does not have a single god or a book or a core belief system. Hinduism, as we know it today, has evolved over thousands of years, with a mixture of thoughts, mythologies and rituals which can overlap as well contradict each other. Because of this, Hinduism has a tendency to accommodate all kinds of thoughts and practices, which may not agree with each other. In *Hinduism* (2010), Vinay Lal asserts that Hinduism is not a religion of negation, renunciation and asceticism commonly associated to it. On the contrary, it insists on the affirmation of the life and the duties of human beings in this life. Besides the four castes and the four stages of life, the Indian social order presents the four aims of life (purusarthas): *dharma* (moral conduct), *artha* (material wealth), *kama* (love) and *moksha*

(spiritual emancipation or salvation). After being physically transformed, Nob Kissin achieves his liberation (*moksha*) through the dance.

It was here, he remembered, in this very place, that the start of his transfiguration had been signalled, by the sound of a flute: everything had come full circle now, everything was as foretold. His hand went to his amulet and he slipped out the piece of paper that lay inside. Hugging it to his chest, he began to turn around and around; the ship was dancing with him too, the deck heaving to the rhythm of his whirling footsteps. Seized by the transcendent, blissful joy of pure ananda, he closed his eyes. (SOP 461)

“Ananda” is a Sanskrit word which means the state of bliss or happiness. In the Hindu philosophy, those who renounce the material world and submit themselves completely to the divine achieve happiness (*ananda*) in perfect union with God. The true devotee (*bhakta*), either male or female, is expected to approach God as woman. That is why Ghosh shows Nob Kissin as transforming himself into Taramony. In the Shiavite tradition of India, Nataraja, the king of performers, is a depiction of Shiva as the cosmic dancer who performs his divine dance — *tandava* — to destroy a weary universe and make preparations for the god Brahma to start anew the process of creation. With a similar dance, Nob Kissin frees himself and announces that coolies will also be free “Wait, he whisper to Kalua. Wait just a little bit longer, and you too will find your freedom; *moksha* is at hand for you too...” (SOP 460).

Though dance is normally associated with female art, Indian mythology presents it as having a masculine origin; Shiva is the first dancer in the universe. Shiva, Krishna, Arjuna,

Kamadeva, Ganesha, Anjaneya and Ravana, just to name a few, also perform dances in different texts. In *Sea of Poppies* (2008), the flexibility and fluidity of gender continues to such an extent that not only Taramony becomes Krishna (female turning into male) and Nob kissin is *gopi* (male into female), they switch over each other's gender and identity:

Now that Taramony's presence was fully manifest in him, it was as if he had become the key that could unlock the cages that imprisoned everyone, all these beings who were ensnared by the illusory differences of this world. It was the fullness of this insight that carried him, drenched and battered, but ecstatic in the possession of his new self, towards the after-cabins. (SOP 461)

With this description and technique where his characters indulge in the reversal of gender roles, Ghosh challenges the concepts of masculine and feminine typical of western narrative. The constant use of Indian mythology by Ghosh is an attempt by him to deconstruct the colonial narrative which branded Indian men as effeminate and the *Puranas* as backward. In his interview granted to me, Amitav Ghosh explains how flawed the western reading of Indian texts has been and why they fail to perceive Indian myths as they are:

I feel fortunate that I was first exposed to the *Mahabharata* in Bengali and I still read the it in Bengali. The telling of the *Mahabharata* in Indian languages is completely different from what it is in English. Someone recently sent me an English translation of the *Mahabharata* and I was comparing it with the famous Bengali version of Kashiram Das. It is so interesting because in the

Indian telling, lot of it is about women's lives, marriage, how marriage happens, and how people's life get interconnected. Domestic life is very important in the *Mahabharata*.

To give an example about the difference in the western and Indian reading of the *Mahabharata*, Ghosh speaks a famous scene, where five brothers — the Pandavas — marry Draupadi and argues that

the English version takes a masculine reading and it is completely a feminine reading. It is very interesting the way the domesticity is worked out in the Indian version. Whereas in western retellings, it is all reduced to an epic, like Iliad, where it is fundamentally about war and women are not really present. But here it is quite different.

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the colonial project was also concerned about building narratives that portrayed Indian myths as absurd and Indian men as effeminate. With the use of myths itself from various Indian traditions, it can be said that Amitav Ghosh deconstructed the gender and gender roles as defined by the colonial in the nineteenth-century India.

CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to study the web of gender, cultural and mythic relations in India during the colonial times — nineteenth century, to be precise — as narrated in Amitav Ghosh's novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008). It is a well-established fact that when the full-blown colonization of India began in the mid-eighteenth century, the country, being ruled at that time by the Mughal Empire in decline, was the second biggest economy in the world with around twenty-five percent share of global trade. But by the time the British left India in 1947, its share in global trade was down to less than one percent. But more than 200 years of European rule not just brought ruin to India's economy and society, it also changed the way the world perceived India and its culture. From an ancient civilization, with a splendid medieval period, India was reduced to a poor, violent-prone country struggling to become a modern nation-state.

In his work, Amitav Ghosh describes in great detail the colonial process which ruins the Indian social structure. It is in this socio-historical context, I aimed at looking how Ghosh deals with the issues of colonialism, gender, culture and mythology in *Sea of Poppies* (2008). Through the thesis, I showed how he deconstructs the colonial narrative and how he addresses the issue of gender — placing it in the wider context of colonialism, culture, and Indian mythology. A close analysis of the novel, within that web of relations, reveals how the writer analyses the effects of colonialism as it uprooted communities and destroyed societies as well as individuals. The imperial discourse changed the narrative about India by making its

mythology look ‘backward’, its culture ‘inferior’, and the fluidity of sexuality prevalent at that time as ‘criminal’.

As I wrote in the introduction of this thesis, during my stay in India as part of this research, I came across the diversity of Indian culture, languages, religions, mythology and gender. In the beginning it was a bit intriguing to see *hijras*, who appear like men dressed as women, walking around the streets of New Delhi and visiting people’s houses during wedding celebrations and other private functions. The *hijras* are one of the oldest communities in India, with their history going back to thousands of years. Though some people may see them with respect during weddings and child birth, ostracism, poverty, humiliation, abuse, brutality, violence and hate are part of the lives of hijras. They exist as the third gender, and have existed like that for thousands of years — in reality and mythology.

More than anything else the *hijras* represent Indian multiculturalism, which ranges from religions and languages to myths and gender. However, the British thought of Indian diversity as a problem — a handicap in the making of a modern nation. They also saw Indian mythology, with hundreds of thousands of gods, goddesses and temples, as backward and regressive as it did not conform to their Christian beliefs and worldview. As this multiplicity did not fit in the their colonial narrative of gender (male/female) and sexuality (hetero/homo) binaries, — official reports, novels and paintings — the native Indians appeared as exotic and weird.

While Chapter I established how both men and women were subjected to the disempowering effects of traditional rituals, structures of Brahminical morality and patriarchal violence, Chapter II explained how the peasants were uprooted from their homeland due to opium cultivation and forced to go across the seas by the colonial administration to work as

indentured labour. Chapter III showed how Amitav Ghosh deconstructs the colonial concept of gender with the use of Indian mythology.

In the final stages of the novel, the two characters Nob Kissin and Taramony switch over each other's role: man into woman and woman into man/God. Therefore, Nob Kissin appears more precisely as both man and woman. In doing so, I conclude that, Ghosh presents him as a transgender / hijra / third gender. In the allegorical level, the image of *Ardhnarishvara*, where the male and female elements of Shiva and Parvati and Purusha and Prakriti are combined, illustrates the conflict between the biological, psychological and sexual identities. It is the representation of 'transcending gender'. The hijras are devotees of Lord Shiva in his avatar as *Ardhnarishvara*, the 'Lord who is half woman'.

The best sculptures of *Ardhanarishvara* can be found in the Ellora Caves and Elephanta Caves (see picture in appendix I). Cut into gray or brown stones, the iconography is not only important in religion, but also in history. The depiction of Shiva as half-male and half-female form has continued over the centuries. In the Indian Calendar Art, made popular by the artist Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906) in the late nineteenth century when he started painting Indian gods with European realism, the figure of *Ardhanarishvara* turns colourful, with female part dressed in red and holding a lotus in her hand and the male part draped around the waist in tiger skin. *Ardhanarishvara* is not just a mythical icon. In this form, Shiva symbolizes the union of masculine and feminine characteristics — a harmony between the creative and the annihilative, the strong and the soft, and the proactive and the passive. In fact, it obliterates any material distinction between the male and female, altogether. This is why in the texts and arts of ancient India there are plenty of evidence of homosexuality, bisexuality, androgyny, multiple sex partners, and open representation of sexual pleasures.

Unlike the west, where history has made a clean break from mythology, in India, they exist side by side and often overlap so much so that sometimes it is difficult to differentiate one from the other. So *sati*, *Kala Pani*, *hijras*, Draupadi, Vishnu, Krishna, Shiva, and *Ardhanarishvara* are all culture, mythology and history rolled into one single entity.

With the use of *Ardhnarishvara* as metaphor, Amitav Ghosh resurrects icons from India mythology that were suppressed and criminalized the colonizers. By this, the writer succeeds in overturning the colonial construction of Indian men as effeminate and weak, Indian women as victims of patriarchal society, and transsexuality as a diseases. In *Sea of Poppies* (2008), Indian mythology indeed becomes an instrument of resistance in the hands of the writer as Ghosh weaves it in a web of gender, culture and social structure to deconstruct the colonial narrative about nineteenth-century India.

APPENDIX I: *Ardhanararishvara* (picture)

Place: Elephanta Island, Mumbai - India

Date: 29 March, 2013

Photographer: Regiane Corrêa de Oliveira Ramos

Sculpture: The *Ardhanararishvara* — the left is female and the right is male, depicting Shiva and Parvati

Date: late 5th to late 8th century AD



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¹³² It is based on MLA (Modern Language Association) style. MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers (7th ed.)

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