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THE TREATMENT OF RACISM IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *SEA OF POPPIES*

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ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies* seems to be driving home the point that the malicious ideas about different races are socially engineered ills of the world and that they might get changed under the exigencies of life. And in the very beginning of the novel itself Ghosh introduces this theme. As the Ibis puts in to Cape Town, a motley crew of lascars gets signed on as her new sailors as her old crew have got melted away overnight on account of 'the hell-afloat with pinch-gut' reputation that she has earned. Accordingly, the skipper has decided to engage a lascar company led by one Serang Ali. Now to his great astonishment, Zachary -- a person of mixed racial background -- happens to realize that the Captain, racially a white, has started treating him very differently. This paper attempts to deal with some of Ghosh's main points of concern as regards racism that has been eating into man's civility, thereby leading to a crisis of conscience. In *Sea of Poppies* hardly anyone feels a pang of conscience at having resorted to racial discrimination, racial prejudice, racial harassment, racial inequality and the like.

Key Words: Racism, colonialism, discrimination, prejudice, inhumane, exploitation

Amitav Ghosh's skillful telling of the story appears to have made Captain Charles Chillingworth the personification of racial discrimination, prejudice, harassment and inhumane mentality embedded in the European psyche. Being in such a prejudicial frame of mind and having looked down upon Kalua, Captain Chillingworth, without going about his own business, not only refers to Kalua as a Pariah but also contemptuously and hotly points an accusing finger at him for his running off with Deeti, a high caste woman, who has happened to be a relative of the Subedar working on board the Ibis. Though Kalua's running off with Deeti is none of Captain Charles Chillingworth's business, the mere thought that Kalua has run off with a high caste woman makes the Captain's blood boil which is a clear indication of his old-fashioned and prejudicially affirmed racial mindset. Subsequently, going several

steps further, the Captain attempts at comparing and contrasting how things would be if Kalua were a Negro born and brought up in America who had happened to run off with a native white lady. As far as Captain Chillingworth is concerned, such a scenario in the conservative segment of American society is implausible, unimaginable and intolerable, and should a Negro ever dare run off with a white lady, the punishment and the treatment meted out to such a Negro would be beyond one's imagination.

" 'But sir,' said Zachary, 'surely his choice of wife is not our business? And surely we can't let him be flogged for it while he is in our custody?' 'Indeed?' said the Captain, raising his eyebrows. 'I am amazed, Reid, that you of all people -- an American! -- should pose these questions. Why, what do you think would happen in Maryland if a white woman were to be violated by a Negro? What would

you, or I, or any of us, do with a darkie who'd had his way with our wives or sisters? Why should we expect the Subedar and his men to feel any less strongly than we would ourselves? And what right do we have to deny them the vengeance that we would certainly claim as our due? No sir, ...' The Captain rose from his chair and began to pace up and down the cuddy, as he continued: '... no sir, I will not deny these men, who have served us faithfully, the justice they seek."¹

Captain Chillingworth's racially increasing white mindset gets amply reflected in his anxiety to preserve and promote the Indian caste system on board the Ibis as well as in the British-India so that colonialism can continue to rule its colony by putting into good use its policy of 'divide and rule.' Arguably, he has become a perfect representative of the forces of evil -- Racism, Colonialism and Imperialism. These forces of evil have been and still are on a tour of the world, exploiting the resources of the Third World countries without any qualms about doing so.

"For this you should know, gentlemen, that there is an unspoken pact between the white man and the natives who sustain his power in Hindoosthan -- it is that in matters of marriage and procreation, like must be with like, and each must keep to their own. The day the natives lose faith in us, as the guarantors of the order of castes -- that will be the day, gentlemen, that will doom our rule. This is the inviolable principle on which our authority is based -- it is what makes our rule different from that of such degenerate and decayed people as the Spanish and Portuguese. Why, sir, if you wish to see what comes of miscegenation and mongrelism, you need only visit their possessions..."²

Captain Chillingworth seems to be perpetrating institutional racism on board the Ibis. Institutional racism is said to imply institutional attitudes and behavior that exist in organizations or institutions and that seem to have been accepted as normal even though they are considered very bad generally. Attributing characteristics, intelligence, abilities, truthfulness, cleanliness and the like to people on the basis of the races that they are said to belong to and holding the view that some races are superior to others have greatly promoted racial

discrimination and racial inequality. Racism divides and then subdivides people into various distinct groups, thereby engineering artificial divisions in society so that the perpetrators of racism can exploit a deeply divided society. Institutional racism perpetrated in the Third World countries now is a legacy of European colonialism.

In any case, of the so many dark deeds that colonialism and imperialism have committed worldwide, the apartheid regime, the system of having slaves, trading in slaves, trading in indentured coolies and trading in highly harmful drugs at the expense of the colonies as well as the Third World countries are the well-known historical examples in the history of mankind. These are the European leftovers that need to be thrown to the dog. Of late what is more worrisome is while recklessly exploiting the resources of the Third World countries, i.e. the developing and poor countries, the modern day colonialism and imperialism wreak havoc on the environment of these countries, and consequently these countries are going to become a very poor place for future generations to live in. With the carrying out of the environmentally damaging umpteen upcoming projects in these countries under the pretence of extending a helping to them by the First World countries with the sole aim of plundering these countries' natural resources, the modern day colonialism sooner or later would make these countries permanently uninhabitable by stealthily spelling irreparable environmental disaster to these countries. "His descriptions bring a lost world to life, from the evocatively imagined opium factory, the intricacies of women's costumes and the lovingly enumerated fare on the opulent dining tables of the era, to the richly detailed descriptions of the Ibis and its journey."³

Apart from the two major themes -- opium trade and trade in indentured coolies -- that are dealt with extensively, Amitav Ghosh further in *Sea of Poppies* has inextricably interwoven several other themes such as the problems of racism, the furtherance and perpetuation of the evil system of casteism, the destruction of the colonized country's rural economy, the destruction of the colonized country's social fabric, its political destabilization,

colonization, attempts in furtherance of inequalities in wealth distribution and racial inequalities, and so on. Casteism and racism have been powerful weapons at the hands of the British to foster their interests in the British-Indian polity. Captain Chillingworth, along with his first mate -- MrCrowle, is the embodiment of evil coupled with British-racism.

"... Captain Chillingworth came on deck again ... As he emerged from the companionway, his eyes went straight to the stooped, drooping figure that was tethered to the mainmast. He turned a glance on the first mate, who answered with a grim laugh: 'The nigger's alive all right; kill that ziggerboo ten times over and he wouldn't be dead.' The Captain nodded, and began to shuffle to the windward side of the quarter-deck ..." ⁴

As MrCrowle happens to get his hands on the Ibis' crew manifest, to his great astonishment, he learns about Zachary's racial status which Zachary has been trying very hard all his life to keep hidden from others. And much to Zachary's chagrin, having referred to him as a mulatto and addressing him as 'mannikin,' MrCrowle tries his best to make use of this piece of information to blackmail him. Consequently, Zachary brilliantly tries to make light of the situation, but it can be told that he is greatly worried. As MrCrowle still, armed with a razor sharp knife, persists in his blackmail to get things done as per his likings, things lead them to a violent quarrel between them. In the meantime, being bent on taking revenge for the abuses that he has been made to endure at the hands of his white masters over a long period of time, Ah Fatt -- the half-Chinese convict, armed with a sharp-tipped handspike in his hands, storm into the first mate's cabin where in the dead of night Zachary and MrCrowle have been quarreling about the issue of Zachary's mixed origin. With Zachary being an onlooker, in the ensuing fighting between the first mate and the half-Chinese convict, Ah Fatt thrusts his handspike through MrCrowle's ribs, burying it almost to the hilt. When the spike is free of the first mate's body after the lynching of him, Ah Fatt, turning the bloody point towards Zachary, orders him to stay where he is or else he, too, will meet with the same fate. When Ah Fatt has left, with

sadness and a lot of sympathy for his first mate, Zachary falls to his knees to listen to MrCrowle's faltering voice. Soon his lifeless body gets rolled with the schooner's violent lurch. Ironically, the edge of the old crew-list is seen peering out of his vest, and Zachary, wasting no time in keeping his origin of mixed race secret forever, hurriedly pulls it out and stuffs it into his own pocket.

Fleetly bursting open the door and coming out of the first mate's cabin, Zachary goes racing up to the quarter-deck as a wave of lightning goes flashing overhead. In that unearthly light Zachary sees a longboat with five men in it, tipping over the crest of a wave, rowing away. As it has been just twenty yards off the schooner's beam, Zachary is able to clearly see the faces of the five men with Serang Ali at the rudder and the other four -- Jodu, Neel, Ah Fatt and Kalua -- huddled in the middle. Serang Ali, too, has seen Zachary, and hence he, raising his hand, waves at him as the craft drops behind a ridge of water and swiftly disappears from view. Understandably, the longboat with the five men in it appears to be heading for Singapore while the Ibis with Paulette, Deeti, Zachary and the others on her head for Mauritius. "The principal characters' fates are left unresolved -- this is a book that is clearly 'to be continued' -- but their stories are compelling. Even though the Ibis' journey is incomplete, it provides enough dramatic tension to keep the reader turning the pages." ⁵

Like a twister that spins very quickly and causes a lot of damage, racism along with casteism has wreaked havoc on the lives of the people on board the Ibis, leaving a trail of bloodshed and lynchings. The poor indentured coolies and convicts get brutalized at the hands of the white masters and their mercenaries. Some of them get flogged and tethered to the mast like animals. Consequently, a couple of the officers and mercenaries get killed in the ensuing retaliation against them. Brutal attacks on the defenceless, the uncontrolled and inhumane exploitation of the weak, and to make the weak dance to your tune are some of the worst manifestations of racism and casteism. "At times, *Sea of Poppies* reads like a cross between an Indian *Gone with the Wind* and a Victorian novel of manners. And yet Ghosh has managed a sharp

reversal of perspective."⁶

However, Paulette Lambourn, a French orphan, who has been brought up in the British-India Calcutta and who, accordingly, has preferred the Indian ways of life together with the Indian dress code to the western ways of life and their dress code, holds a clearly balanced view which is quite different from that of Captain Chillingworth's. Paulette and her best friend, Jodu, who has happened to be her Ayah's son, have grown up like siblings though basically both had different racial, social and cultural leanings. Like Deeti and Kalua, Paulette, too, hoping for a better future in Mauritius, has fled her adopted-parental home in Calcutta, where the Burnham family has been bringing her up, and got signed on in disguise as an indentured coolie on board the Ibis to escape from being given in marriage to one Justice Kendalbushe by her adopted parents against her liking. "The orphaned Paulette Lambert, who disguises her identity and smuggles herself on board, also seeks escape -- from the threat of an arranged marriage and the suffocation and depravities in the household of the English merchant (Burnham) where she is raised."⁷ Jodu, Paulette's sibling-like guardian angel, has also got signed on as a sailor, who is otherwise known as a lascar, on board the Ibis. They have considered themselves as misfits in the places that they really belonged to. Therefore, while getting signed on the schooner, they consider the Ibis as a safe sanctuary. But poor souls, sooner or later only to get dashed their high hopes and aspirations for the future, they have got signed on board the Ibis as indentured coolies and lascars. Paulette's balanced outlook for the future seems to advocate the need for tolerance and racial harmony.

" 'You have kept my secret,' she whispered. 'Perhaps you cannot conceive what that means in this world I live in? Look around you, Mr. Reid: do you see anyone here who would for a moment believe that a memsahib could think of a native -- a servant -- as a brother? No: the worst possible imputations would be ascribed.' 'Not by me, Miss Lambert,' said Zachary. 'You can be sure of that.' 'Really?' she said, looking him full in the eyes. 'It does not seem uncroyable to you that a bond so intimate and yet so innocent should exist between a

white girl and a boy of another race?' 'Not at all, Miss Lambert -- why, I myself ...' Zachary suddenly began to cough into his fist, cutting himself short. 'I assure you, Miss Lambert, I know of many, much stranger things.'⁸

Interestingly, though both Paulette and Zachary, whom she once chanced to meet at a dinner party hosted by the Burnham family at their residence in Calcutta, have felt drawn to each other ever since their first meeting, Paulette, while being on board the Ibis, has continued to remain in disguise without disclosing her identity. Similarly, though Paulette has already been privy to the fact that Zachary is of mixed race, she has not dared talk to him of it. Amusingly, Zachary, on the contrary, has remained oblivious to the fact that Paulette is on board the Ibis and that she has been in the know of his ethnic origin until she herself volunteers the information on her own accord. When Paulette, a woman of extraordinary talent, has been on a delicate mission to Zachary's cabin at midnight for the sake of Jodu, Neel Ratan Halder and others, she is left with no option but to disclose at the outset of the meeting that it is she, Paulette, who has come to him, Zachary Reid, the second mate -- the ship's officer who is just two ranks below the captain, seeking his favour. On hearing her name quite unexpectedly in the dead of night, he thinks for a while it could be a conjuration of his own wildest imaginings. Soon he comes to terms with the fact that she is there right in front of his very own eyes in the flesh.

Subsequently, in the course of her interactions with Zachary what comes to light is Paulette has now matured into a fine cosmopolitan person whose outlook of the problems of racism is well worth taking into consideration. There is no denying the fact that racism causes great harm to those races, nations, segments of black population, communities and individuals who are on the receiving end. Racial discrimination, racial prejudice, racial harassment and racial comments are an affront to their pride. Unlawfully, unethically, amorally and inhumanely racism denies freedom and dignity to the aforementioned segments of general population. To make one experience the bitter experience of racism would have profound

impacts and influences on one's mental and physical health and welfare. It is common knowledge that one's welfare is one's health and happiness. On the contrary, racism gives the least regard to the welfare of those who are at the receiving end. When the provision of education and welfare services are still beyond their reach, the proponents of racism still hold the view that the people of particular colours are second-class human beings who lack fundamental rights as well as human rights. They seem to have conveniently forgotten the fact that everyone has a right to dignity, regardless of their race or colour. Nailing her colours to the mast, Paulette seems to suggest that in her opinion, she cannot afford to let her judgement be coloured by personal feelings.

" 'Nor did I, Miss Lambert, mean to deceive you in the matter of my race. On the few occasions when we were able to speak to each other, I tried to indicate -- no, I tried to tell you, believe me.' 'What does it matter, Mr Reid?'... 'Are not all appearances deceptive, in the end? Whatever there is within us -- whether good, or bad, or neither -- its existence will continue uninterrupted, will it not, no matter what the drape of our clothes or the colour of our skin? What if it is the world that is a duperie, Mr Reid, and we the exceptions to its lies?' "9

Arguably, a racially motivated mindset lacks respect for the people of colour and denies their human rights. Therefore, racial malevolence begets a hostile, turbulent society where people at large never trust each other. Constantly exposed to the bitter experience of racism as an integral part of their life, they tend to withdraw from realizing their full potential, thereby making them contribute little to their country -- that is to say, their part of the contribution to the gross domestic product or gross national product is made to come to naught by the racially prejudiced powers that be.

In a nutshell, the Ibis, being a miniature version of the world itself, has turned good with Amitav Ghosh's skillful hands. The world needs to be sensitized to the burning problems of racism, for racism remains a potent weapon for tearing the world to shreds and keeping the relations between different races within a country as well as the relations between the races of different countries

on the boiling point. The concept that being in the same boat and not wanting to rock the boat is becoming totally alien to the world. The people of colour on board the Ibis are looked down upon by the white co-voyagers, and what is more, they are meted out extremely shocking inhumane treatments. Hence they are left with no option but to keep themselves racially segregated from the white who, on the contrary, appear to be lots happier to see this and get themselves racially segregated from the people of colour, and consequently Zachary, who is of mixed origin, and Paulette, who has got the mental make-up of the people of colour though she was born of French-parents, are left in the wilderness to be tearing their hair out and to burn themselves in the process, for they are not sure whether they belong to the racially segregated group of the white people or the racially segregated group of the people of colour.

The general misplaced notion of nationalism, which may be defined as referring to the fallacious love for your country and the irrational belief that your country is better than any other country in the world, appears to stem from the prejudiced desire by a group of people of the same race, ethnicity, origin, language or religion, and undeniably it has made almost every country or kingdom in the world go to war, thereby causing much bloodshed worldwide since time immemorial. Likewise, with the advent of the exploitation-driven European colonialism, racism has been dividing the peoples of the world into races on the basis of the genetically inherited traits which are nothing but skin-deep illusory visual perceptions. The idea of race has been a rallying point for most of the struggles the world has ever witnessed over the centuries. Amitav Ghosh seems to be dreaming of a casteless, classless, raceless and boundaryless world free of exploitation and built on the spirit of universal brotherhood and mutual trust. "Ghosh's purpose is clearly both literary and political. His narrative represents a prodigious feat of research..."10

Notes

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