

POPIED LIVES OFF /ON SHORE: A BARTHESIAN READING OF AMITAV GHOSH'S *SEA OF POPPIES*

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ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* is the first book of his Ibis trilogy. Sailing along the Opium route on board the ship named *Ibis*, the inmates discover many new things about themselves. What invisibly governs and binds their lives on and off shore is the magical poppy seed which produces the alluring drug opium. The paper proposes to delineate how the lives of the lead figures are propelled by this minuscule seed that holds within it enormous strength. The novel is partitioned into three sections: land, river and sea. The inmates dream of boarding the ship, to settle in another place or land where they can forget everything of their past. The ship becomes their new father and mother because life aboard helps them review their lives and revive their latent courage. The sea is the meeting place to erase all differences that they held on shore. The paper attempts to analyse the text based on Roland Barthes' propositions in his essay "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives".

KEYWORDS: Poppied Lives Off /On Shore: A Barthesian Reading of Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

INTRODUCTION

The French literary critic and cultural analyst, Roland Barthes, began as a structuralist and ended midway as a post structuralist. Barthes did not come up with any theory as such but his writings have inspired many deliberations hitherto. Barthes' reflections have been instrumental in charting out this paper. In his essay "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" Barthes says that "a narrative is a long sentence" (256). The structuralists rely on linguistics as a model to analyse narratives (254). Barthes says that, "Structurally, narrative shares the characteristics of the sentence" (256). Just as a sentence has a subject and predicate, a narrative too has certain "subjects" that lead to the "predicate". To put it simply, just as a sentence is made up of different units, which are significant for the structure of the sentence, a text has different units that contribute to the structurality of the text. "To understand a narrative is not merely to follow the unfolding of the story, it is also to recognize its construction in "stories"..." (259).

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* is the first book of his Ibis trilogy. Sailing along the Opium route on board the ship named *Ibis*, the inmates discover many new things about themselves. What invisibly governs and binds their lives on and off shore is the magical poppy seed which produces the alluring drug opium. The paper proposes to delineate how the lives of the lead figures are propelled by this minuscule seed that holds within it enormous strength. The novel is partitioned into three sections: land, river and sea. The inmates dream of boarding the ship to settle in another part where they can forget everything of their past. The ship becomes their new father and mother because life aboard helps them review their lives and revive their latent courage. The sea is the meeting place to erase all differences they held on shore. A Barthesian reading will undoubtedly follow the narrative structure. Barthes has identified three levels of

description in any narrative work: functions, action and narration. “These three levels are bound together according to a mode of progressive integration” (260). The whole narrative is divided into smaller functional units. These segments have a functional nature that is; they help in moving the narrative. The segment or unit functions as the seed that grows as a plant in the next level. The functional units govern the action which in turn controls the generation of meaning. Looking at the novel from this point, one may identify three signifiers that function as the units that modulate the action.

The novel is divided into three sections: land, River Sea. Three signifiers have been identified: name, ship and clothes. These help in building the narrative. The poppy seed functions as the nucleus of the narrative. These signifiers provide the thread of the narrative. It creates a sequence and this regulates the narrative. The poppy seed is “the star” that took the characters away from their homes and put them on the ship. It is also referred to as “the planet” that governs their destiny (Ghosh 452). The ship is primarily engaged in Opium trade but it moves under the pretext of transporting labourers to Mauritius. There are nine principal figures in the novel. They are Deeti, Kalua, Zachary, Neel, Paulette, Jodu, Lei Long Fatt, Serang Ali and Baboo Nob Kissin. Nine of them are directly or indirectly linked to the poppy seed. Deeti is wedded to an opium addict. Zachary is the captain of Ibis, a ship used to transport opium. Kalua boards the ship to escape to a faraway place. Neel, a prince, encounters a dip in his opium sale which thereby lands him in jail with Lei Long Fatt who is “an afeemkhor who has no opium”(315). Paulette joins the ship only to know more about plants. Baboo Nob Kissin is the supercargo of the ship. He has access to every part of the ship hence he is connected to all the other characters in the story. Serang Ali is the one who renames Zachary as Zikri. He accompanies Zachary throughout the journey. Jodu is saved by Zachary and this makes him part of the ship journey. The minuscule seed had the power to transport the user into “another world that was brighter, better, more fulfilling” (35).

The first functional unit in the narrative is the name of the characters. Offshore and onshore the characters assume different names. On shore, their names revealed their rank or caste (110). Change of name is indicative of change of identity. This is the functional attribute of the names. Deeti, a woman of the high-caste Rajput family assumes the name Aditi (233) when on board. Similarly, Kalua becomes Madhoo and Zachary-Zikri, Neel-Forgerer 1838, Paulette-Pugli, Jodu-Azad, Lei Long Fatt-Ah fatt and Baboo Nobo Krishna-BaboNob Kissin respectively. Each character consciously alters their names because they wanted to cut off all connections with their past. New names indicated natural shift in position and power on shore.

The ship is the next functional unit in the narrative. The Ibis is the name of the ship. It was initially built to transport slaves but with slave trade being on the verge of abolition, she was now being used for “a different trade: the export of opium”(11). The ship draws all characters towards her. Deeti is the first one to have a vision of the Ibis (3). Zachary, “the son of a Maryland freedwoman”(10) becomes the captain of the ship (51). For Neel Ratan Halder, the arrival of the ship “seemed to him to be sure indications of a turn in his luck”(41). Jodu’s dinghy collides with the Ibis. It was Paulette who identified Jodu’s boat and screams out to draw the attention of the crew members. Jodu and Paulette are childhood friends who are reunited on the ship (149). Paulette requests Zachary to appoint Jodu as a crew boy and thus Jodu also becomes part of the journey(151). Life on board is different. The ship turns out to be the world for the inmates but there were different positions for the inmates. The lower deck was assigned for the menial staff. The slaves were above this. The convicts were in the inner most deck. Each deck was independent. The inmates passed time but narrating stories about themselves. A streak of intimacy and compassion seeps into each of them. They regard themselves as family or ship brothers (356). Alliances are made because “the sea had washed away their past” (405).

Laws on land and off land also change. The captain declares, before they set out to sea that “At sea there is another law” (404). The captain’s whip and lathi become “the law” on sea (404). The ship is lodged near the land then it passes through the river and finally reaches the sea. Once out into the sea, the ship too undergoes a change of movement. The initial foray into the sea was marked by seasickness. Many of them died of dehydration and weakness (407). After a few days they began showing signs of recovery (414). After days of dizziness, diarrhoea and vomiting the ship moves on with a gentle gait (424). This in turn brings about a transformation in Baboo Nob Kissin, the central figure, who is connected to all the other eight characters in the story (423). Nob Kissin assists Neel, Ah Fatt, Jodu, Kalua and Serang Ali in their escapade (511).

The next functional unit is the clothes worn by the characters. Off shore and on shore what they wear determine what they are. Deeti, the wife of Hukam Singh wore sari. When taken to her husband’s pyre she’s draped in a white sari. On board, Deeti covers her face and head with her sari. Zachary, an ordinary sailor becomes Zikri Malum when he wears “a white linen shirt, riding breeches and a double –breasted summer paletot” (19). Baboo Nob Kissin joined the Ibis to go to the place where he could build a temple for Ma Taramony. He changes his attire and demeanour when he gets an insight regarding Zachary (167). Neel Ratan Raja was used to wearing gaudy and expensive clothes (107) but on board he has to wear convict’s clothes and on his forehead was inscribed “forgerer alipore 1838” (292). Paulette disguises herself as an elderly lady by wearing a sari (359) and thus manages to board the ship without neither Jodu nor Zachary recognizing her (361). Jodu was given “a shirt and a pair of canvas trowsers” to wear while on the ship (149).

These three functional units lead to the next level of description that is the level of actions. The action is done by the characters who are the essence of the story. As mentioned earlier, life takes a new turn on board. There is a complete role reversal while the ship sets out to sail. Differences are forgotten, new alliances are made and in some cases old rivalry is repaid. Barthes says that the characters are “agents” who carry out the narrative sequence (277). The characters in the novel exhibit two aspects offshore and on shore. Deeti is the docile daughter in law (Ghosh 38) on land but on the ship she is the strong ‘Bhauji’ (431). Kalua is the subjugated ox-cart driver of the chamar caste (53) on land but on the ship he is the strongest (478). Neel, the land owner is a fastidious man who does not mingle with other caste men (199) is ready to share the jail with another man (314). Zachary, an ordinary sailor (11) becomes second mate on the ship (25). Paulette, a French girl disguises herself as a Brahmin girl while on board (355). Jodu, a boat man becomes a lascar or a menial sailor (372).

Barthes says that “characters, as units of the actional level, find their meaning (their intelligibility) only if integrated in the third level of description, here called the level of Narration...” (281). The language of the narrative is the significant element in this stage. The narrator uses linguistic symbols to present his tale. The aim of the narrator is to generate a meaning. Certain signs or symbols within the story help navigate the narrative thread. The narrator is the principal figure who communicates/narrates the story to the reader. Here Ghosh is the narrator who presents the lives of the characters. The whole story line has within it certain signs or omens that pull the story onwards. The sea is the crux of the novel. The poppy seeds unite all of the characters but they are all drawn towards both through certain omens, visions or signs. Deeti has a shrine in her house wherein she kept “many tokens of her family and forebears” and she had painted pictures of her relatives on the wall (Ghosh 9). She draws the picture of the Ibis too on the walls of her shrine (10). She has a sea borne shrine too wherein she draws pictures of people she misses. The ship is her sign of connecting her past with her present (395). Ghosh has artistically contrived a number of signs that control the narrative. Zachary’s whistle, Baboo Nob Kissin’s vision of saving Neel Ratan and regarding Zachary as Lord Krishna are a few of the other signs that help in

bringing out a sequence of events that help present a meaning later on.

“The narrational level,” as Barthes says, is “occupied by the signs of narrativity...” (285). The narrator carries on the narrative by including certain signs or elements. The narrative achieves its “dynamism or energy” by the “incessant play of potentials” whereby “each unit is perceived at once in its surfacing...” (293). As Barthes points out later on, the “function of narrative” is “to constitute a spectacle still very enigmatic for us but in any case not of a mimetic order” (294). The aim of the narrative of the novel is to create a spectacle for us. The novel leaves the ends open. Just like the sea is a water body that moves towards the ocean, the novel too moves on to the next series in the trilogy.

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