

## **GIRMIT: DIASPORA OF THE ASIATIC SLAVES IN SEA OF POPPIES BY AMITAV GHOSH**

---

**Dr Avinash Badgujar**

Arts, Comm and Science College,  
Varangaon. Dist- Jalgaon, Maharashtra

---



**Abstract:**

The word girmmit refers to the transportation of labour on the basis of the agreement. It also refers to the indentured labour system prevailing in the early nineteenth century. Satis Rai uses the word girmmit for "a group of Indians who left the shore of India more than a century ago to fulfil labour needs of the British and other European colonial empires under the Indian indenture system." (Girmmit Focus, Para, 1). I wanted to understand what it was like

for deeply rooted people from India's heartland to travel across the seas (which they thought as the 'kalapani'). It took a great deal of courage to undertake such a journey- this is one of the reasons why I am fascinated by the migration of labourers. (Chasing the dragon). On the day of Deeti's vision, Zachary Reid, the son of American freedwoman and her white master, along with his motley crewmates dock the bird-like ship, the Ibis, a few hundred miles away from the village of Deeti. Zachary has started his career on the Ibis as a carpenter in Baltimore but very soon he is promoted to the second mate of the ship. The issue of identity gives birth to the diasporic consciousness of the girmmit. Diaspora is a transnational network of dispersed and displaced political subjects. The idea of diaspora acknowledges the language, religion, culture and folk lore of the native country and the migrant always links it with past history. The girmmit suffer from seasickness; due to the fear and threat of the officials, some of the girmmit throw themselves into the sea. They are not allowed to come on the deck, their bodies become weaker, and the deteriorating conditions of the girmmit create an atmosphere of demoralization.

**Keywords:** transportation, carpenter, demoralization, nineteenth century, .etc

The word girmmit refers to the transportation of labour on the basis of the agreement. It also refers to the indentured labour system prevailing in the early nineteenth century. Satis Rai uses the word girmmit for "a group of Indians who left the shore of India more than a century ago to fulfil labour needs of the British and other European colonial empires under the Indian indenture system." (Girmmit Focus, Para,1) Today the word girmmit has become the popular currency. The process of labour transportation started in the beginning of the sixteenth century. These were the non- European labour who worked for the Europeans. These labours were the African slaves who were used to work on the newly captured lands in America and the Caribbean islands. The official records reveal that near about forty million African slaves were enslaved by the Europeans and put into ships for America. Many of them perished in their journey those who survived were sold in auction as slaves and worked free for their masters till the end of their natural life. The slavery in America continued till 1834, then the slavery was abolished, the slaves then refused to work for their masters.

The pages of history reveal that slavery ended officially in 1834, while the girmmit system started in the same year. In *Sea of Poppies* Ghosh opens the most painstaking page of human history in which the girmmit system in Asia remains marginal or unhighlighted. The novel is based on the social anthropological and historical investigation of the girmmit. In his interview with Sailen, Ghosh explains his point of view:

I wanted to understand what it was like for deeply rooted people from India's heartland to travel across the seas (which they thought as the 'kalapani'). It took a great deal of courage to undertake such a journey- this is one of the reasons why I am fascinated by the migration of labourers. (Chasing the dragon)

In the beginning of the fourth decade of the nineteenth century, the most human transportation in the form of girmmit began in the history of mankind. The refusal of the former slaves to work on the newly found islands such as Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad and Jamaica, for plantations created severe labour problems for the planters in the colonies. By this time India was also colonized by the British. The Indians were exploited economically by the British through the practice and introduction of the land tax system. As the people were unable to pay the tax, the colonizers forced the people to sign the agreements of indentured labourers. The people (Ghosh, 2008) "entered their names on paper girmmits; after these agreements were sealed, they had been given a blanket, several articles of clothing, and a round-bottomed brass lota." (P, 204) Girmmit, the indentured labour system thus replaced the African slavery and which took millions of Indians to different colonies. *Sea of Poppies*, the inaugural volume of the Ibis Trilogy, is an amalgamation of anthropology, history and fiction. It is an authentic record on how colonialism and opium trade damaged and divided Indian society. The setting of the novel is Bihar and Bengal of 1838 when the British East India Company had the complete hold on the trade and commerce under the purview of the Company

---

Bahadur's rule. The policies of British East India Company enforce the opium cultivation on the part of rural folk and destroy the indigenous agriculture and trade. The rule of Company Bahadur spells havoc in India's villages and towns. This sets the background of the novel.

The novel is divided into three parts- 'Land', 'River' and 'Sea'. The first part of the novel 'Land' deals with the poppy cultivation of the peasants and its effects on the peasants. The second part 'River' deals with the signing of the rural folk as indentured labourers, as their land yields no grains or fruits due to poppy cultivation. While the third part 'Sea' is about the voyage of the indentured labourers, girmityas, convicts and lascars on the Ibis, the victims of colonial policy, colonial law and the circumstances. The voyage of these wretched of the earth reminds the voyage of African slaves. The canvas of Ghosh is much wider than historical plot; he uses history to the certain extent from which one may look at life in its totality. The novel paints a picture of human devastation and destruction caused by colonialism. The setting of the novel, the events and incidents throw light on colonial India.

At the bank of Ganges, Deeti, bathing with her daughter Kabutri, has an eerie premonition of a giant bird-like ship that will come to change her life forever. She is married to Hukum Singh, a disabled person addicted to opium smoking, who works at Gazipur Opium Factory. The opium addiction has made him impotent. On the very wedding night of Deeti, Hukum Singh reminds her that opium is "my first wife." Deeti comes to know that this is her fate and she has to accept it. Even her daughter Kabutri does not belong to Hukum Singh. Her mother in law compares Deeti with 'Draupadi' a woman who begets children for her husband's brothers. Deeti can guess that Chandan Singh, the brother of her husband is the father of Kabutri. Whenever Chandan Singh finds Deeti lonely in her poppy fields, he tries to seduce her. She knows his evil intentions. When her husband dies, she decides to be a sati on the pyre of her husband. But she is saved by Kalua from becoming sati. She elopes with him to Calcutta.

On the day of Deeti's vision, Zachary Reid, the son of American freedwoman and her white master, along with his motley crewmates dock the bird-like ship, the Ibis, a few hundred miles away from the village of Deeti. Zachary has started his career on the Ibis as a carpenter in Baltimore but very soon he is promoted to the second mate of the ship. He gets help from a lascar, Serang Ali. They wish to hand over the vessel safely to its owner, the powerful opium tradesman, Benjamin Burnham. Zachary and Serang Ali after the successful meeting with Benjamin Burnham, once again are commissioned to join the Ibis for the next voyage from Calcutta to Mauritius and then to Canton.

In Calcutta, the recently orphaned childhood friends Paulette Lambert and Jodu try to overcome their miserable circumstances. Jodu is a son of the boatman, finds the pleasure in the same work. He has the ambition to work on a ship and finally, he gets the chance to work

---

as a lascar on the Ibis. Paulette is the daughter of an unconventional French botanist, becomes orphan after the death of her father. She is adopted by the Burnhams, who try to bring her up through the constraints of proper colonial life. But after the strange encounter with her guardian, Benjamin Burnham, she decides to escape from his house and wishes to go to Mauritius, the birthplace of her mother.

Raja Neel Ratan Halder of Raskhali estate becomes the victim of the opium trade and the colonial policy. He gets indebted to Benjamin Burnham's opium business. Benjamin Burnham lays down the charge of forgery against Raja Neel. Raja Neel's estate gets confiscated by the British law. He is held criminal and sentenced the imprisonment for seven years. At first, he is taken to Alipur Jail, a dirty colonial prison where he encounters a Chinese opium addict, Ah Fatt. Later on, the colonial authorities decided to transport them to Mauritius.

Babu Nob Kissin, the gumosta of Benjamin Burnham suggests to his master that he can recover the loss of opium trade by transporting the girmityas, the indentured labourers to Mauritius for the plantations of sugar cane. Benjamin Burnham accepts the idea. Nob Kissin is haunted by the spiritual ideas of Taramony who has instructed him that one day they will be united. He finds that the Ibis is his destination and Zachary, a black, is the incarnation of 'Krishna'. So Nob Kissin decides to join the crew of the Ibis.

Whether it is by chance or accident or by the magnetic pull of the Ibis, so it happens that Deeti, Kalua, Jodu, Paulette, Raja Neel, Ah Fatt and Nob Kissin, a group of different caste, creed, race, religion and nation find their way onboard the Ibis. The Ibis is going to take them across the black waters. It suggests that they are going to lose their caste, creed, race and identity. Despite the differences of caste, creed, race and religion, these people view themselves as ship brothers and ship sisters. One can foresee all along that the Ibis will create an unlikely dynasty, which will span continents, races and generations.

The conquest of Christopher Columbus in 1492 is often cited as the starting point of the process of colonization. Colonialism and imperialism are often used interchangeably. The word colonialism comes from the Roman. 'colonial' which meant 'farm' or 'settlement'. Colonialism can be defined as (Ania Loomba, 2007) "the conquest and control of other people's land and goods." (P, 8) Colonialism in this sense is not merely the expansion of various European powers in India and elsewhere from the sixteenth century onwards but it has become a recurrent feature of human history. In India, colonialism extracted goods and wealth by conquering the local rajas and landlords. It restructured the economies of the conquered nations, drawing them into a complex relationship with their own, so there was the flow of human beings and natural resources available to the colonizers. This flow of human beings worked for them like the slaves, the girmityas, the indentured labourers for the

---

plantations of agricultural crops in metropolitan cities, meant for the consumption, for the European countries. So the human beings and the material travelled for the profits of the colonizers.

Ghosh explains the reasons behind the girmitee and the process that is responsible for taking so many Indians away from their homeland to the newer part of the world. Ghosh has spent a month in Guangzhou that is Canton, researching the nineteenth-century opium trade. He found many shocking things in his research which he has explained in this novel. In his interview he admitted that he (Tony, 2011) “did a lot of research in libraries and archives,” (Seafaring Novel) and further added that he wanted to approach the issue of (Samhata, 2011) “migrations out of India in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and then it became clear that the cultivation of opium was very much a part of the background.” (The Telegraph, 18 June) Migration is the result of poverty, drought, hunger and lack of employment. Ghosh suggests that the opium cultivation and migration of indentured labour, the girmitee have close relations, they are the two sides of a coin.

In the nineteenth century, there was the complete hold of the East India Company over India. The eastern provinces like Bengal, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh were also under the purview of the Company Bahadur's rule. The Company Bahadur's rule and policies enforced the rural folk for opium cultivation and destroyed the indigenous agriculture and trade, this rule created havoc in Indian villages and towns. It is the great socio-economic tide that sweeps Deeti and the rural folk away from their village and out to sea. So poppy cultivation is the factor, which is responsible for the migration of the girmitee.

Most of the girmitee belong to Chapra, a town in Bihar. Deeti and Kalua run away from their village and reach to Chapra where they join a group of girmitee. Chapra is also known for gunpowder, opium, indigo and the source of indentured labour.

The girmitee were the rural folk, the most rooted people. The courage it took at that time for a girmitee to set out across the ‘kala pani’ is something one can barely conceive of it. They cross the ghats, buildings and shipyards across Hooghly and depart from their roots and shoots. On their way to the ‘Black Water’, the island of Mareech the girmitee cut off from their roots and family ties, in transit they look ahead to a fresh start. The girmitee prone to invent new names, identities and histories, for Deeti, migration brings a change in her name. At first, she identifies herself as ‘Kabutri-ki-ma’. Then she introduces herself as Aditi and Kalua as Madhu. The corruption of names takes place when the indentured labourers get off their ships and English clerks enter their names in ledgers. So Kalua, a Chamar by caste that is cobbler becomes ‘Covler’. Before climbing up the ships, the girmitee have the migration certificates. Ghosh informs that the corruption of names of the girmitee is (Ramana, 2011) “a real



discovery” (Colonial History) for him in his social anthropological and historical investigation of the girmmit.

The issue of identity gives birth to the diasporic consciousness of the girmmit. Diaspora is a transnational network of dispersed and displaced political subjects. The idea of diaspora acknowledges the language, religion, culture and folk lore of the native country and the migrant always links it with past history. The folk song of Deeti in a regional language, Bhojpuri, reveals the trauma of the diaspora:

*Kaise kate ab*

*Biraha ki ratiya ?*

How will it pass

This night of parting? (P, 398)

The men on the ship acknowledge their longing, through the silence; they have no words to describe the pains of exile from home. The voyage on the Ibis where the large number of characters including the girmmit, lascars, convicts and the runaway people tell their own story and contribute a collective diasporic identity. The girmmit belong to different strata of the society, Deeti, a widowed village woman, a high caste, a Rajput, Kalua, a low- caste, a chamar, Raja Neel, an exiled landlord, Nob Kissin, a gumosta, the newly orphaned childhood friends Paulette and Jodu. These people belong to different cultures, caste, religion and nation. They sail down to Hooghly and then to ‘Black Water’ into the Indian Ocean.

Ghosh reveals that the voyage of the girmmit and the treatment given to them by the colonial officials is none better than the African slaves. The voyage of the girmmit from India to Mauritius reminds the voyage of the African slaves to America. The girmmit are exposed to all kinds of rumours and temptations. The stories are told by the troublemakers regarding the migration of the girmmit; many of them run away to their villages and many find other work. Therefore, the duffadars try to keep the girmmit indoors by locking them. The unhealthy atmosphere creates many problems, a number of them possess communicable diseases. Many of them think that they are being fed up so that they will be fattened for the slaughter, like goats before Id. Some of them are told that they will be hanged upside down and the wax from their brain will be taken out for making the candles or the oil that to be found in the human brain “the coveted minimal-ka-tel.” (P, 247) The rumours and the troublemaker’s stories create the panic among the girmmit.

The Ibis, in the past, was known as the slave ship that used to transport the slaves from Africa to America. After the abolishment of slavery in Europe and America, the owner of the ship, Burnham, engages the ship in the opium trade. The opium transportation to China offers enormous gains to him. But after the few years, the interruption in the flow of opium transportation to China creates a heavy loss for him. So to overcome the loss of opium trade, Burnham decides to enter in the business of transporting the indentured labour from India to

---

Mauritius. Burnham takes the pride in justifying the unjust policy of colonialism regarding the transportation of the African slaves – “slavery is freedom” (P, 79), as the colonizers make the Africans free from the rule of some dark tyrant. The conditions of the slaves in America are better as compared to the slaves in Carolinas. The slaves are freer in America as compared to their behind in Africa. Burnham wants to suggest that the white men are generous to the lesser races as they make the Africans free from the tyranny of their rulers. When the British law outlaws the slave trade, Burnham feels uneasy as he could not use the Ibis as a slave ship.

To fulfil the need of colonizers, Burnham enters in the business of transporting the indentured labourers in the form of Asiatick. In the opinion of Burnham, the Asiatick replace the African slaves. Burnham asserts: Have you not heard it said that when God closes one door he opens another?. (P, 79)

The Asiatick included thousands of Pindaris, Thugs, dacoits, rebels, peasants, rural folk, headhunters, hooligans and the members of every class of the society – "Brahmins, Ahirs, Chamars, Telis." (SOP, 205) The girmits were those slaves who were forced to work for their owner's lifelong like the African slaves in exchange of few anas. The girmits were never seen by their family members. For instance, Deeti leaves behind her daughter Kabutri, Munia gets separated from her brothers, Heeru deserted by her husband while Ratna and Champa support their brother by indenturing themselves. These characters never see or meet their family members in time and space.

The Ibis, the girmits transporting ship was congested one, there was not enough space for the girmits to sit and sleep. “To spend three weeks in that small, dark and airless space should have been, by rights, an experience of near – unbearable tedium.” (P, 241) The officials on the Ibis include Captain Chillingworth, a ruthless man, an opium smoker and who asserts his colonial law on the ship. He uses his whip on the girmits to set the things rights and threatens that he is the sole maker of the law on the ship- “I am your fate, your providence, your lawgiver.” (P, 404) The other administrative officials include Mr Crowle the first mate and Zachary the second mate. The Ibis brings no respect to any of the girmits; instead, their problems go on increasing. They realize that they are not only leaving their homes but also crossing the ‘Black Water’ and enter a state of existence in which they find that they are ruled by the noose and the whips of the colonial officials.

The girmits suffer from seasickness; due to the fear and threat of the officials, some of the girmits throw themselves into the sea. They are not allowed to come on the deck, their bodies become weaker, and the deteriorating conditions of the girmits create an atmosphere of demoralization. The medicines which was provided to the girmits to recover from seasickness was said to be concocted from the hoofs and horns of the cows, horses and pigs. Their bodies dwindle almost like skeletons. When the girmits die on the ship, the officers used to throw

their bodies into the sea. Ghosh provides the unique history of the girmit and the history of migration in India and how the girmit that is the Asiatick are treated like the slaves by the colonizers.

#### References

- Amitav Ghosh, (2008), *Sea of Poppies*, New Delhi, Ravi Dayal
- Satis C.Rai, (n.d) *Girmit Focus*, Retrived, 30<sup>th</sup> Dec 2017  
<http://www.girmitunited.org/girmit-focus.htm>
- Sailen, Interview: chasing the dragon with Amitav Ghosh, 11 July, 2011  
<http://blog.flipkart.com/interview-chasing-the-dragon-with-amitav-ghosh-river-of-smoke...>
- Tony Thakran, Amitav Ghosh looks back to weave new seafaring novel, 30 August , 2011 <http://uk.reuters.com/assests/print?aid=UKSP12619520080709>
- Samhta, Mystic River, Interview with Ghosh, *The Telegraph*, Saturday, June 18,2011
- Ramana, Colonial History of India-2 About the colonial period,  
<http://www.india.forum.com/forums/index.php?/topic/2114-colonial-history-ofindia-2/>
- Devyani Agrawal, Diasporic Consciousness in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* : Writing Nation and History,  
<http://museindia.com/regularcontent.asp?issid=38&id=2748>
- Alessandro Monti,(2010), *The Fiction of Amitav Ghosh, An Assessment* "Babooing Languages, Shaking the Pagoda Tree", in Om Prakash Dwivedi (ed.), Jaipur, Book Enclave
- Ania Loomba, 2007, *Colonialism/PostColonialism*, London, New York
- Samhta,(2011) *Mystic River*, Interview with Ghosh, *The Telegraph*, Saturday, June 18
- Ramana,(2011) *Colonial History of India-2 About the colonial period*, 28August,  
<http://www.india.forum.com/forums/index.php?/topic/2114-colonial-history-ofindia-2/>
- Devyani Agrawal, (2011) *Diasporic Consciousness in Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies* : Writing Nation and History, 28 August  
<http://museindia.com/regularcontent.asp?issid=38&id=2748>
- Jabberwork, (2011) *Language variations in Sea of Poppies*, 16 September  
<http://jaiarjun.blogspot.com/2008/06/language-variations-in-sea-of-poppies.html>



- Book Browse,(2011) Amitav Ghosh- an Interview with author, 11 October  
<http://www.bookbrowse.com/author-interviews/full/index.cfm?author-number=568>
- Ultrabrown,(2011) Opium, giant whales and khidmatgars : a conversation with Amitav Ghosh, 28 May
- <http://mars.select-servers.com/~ultrab/posts/opium-giant-whales-and-khidmatgars-a-conv...>
- Robert Dixon, (2008) “Travelling in the West The Writing of Amitav Ghosh” in Tabish Khair (ed.), *Amitav Ghosh, A Critical Companion*, New Delhi, Permanent Black,
- Neeta, (2011) “Deconstructing Caste Centered Oppressive Mechanism in Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*,” in B.K.Sharma(ed.)*The Fiction of Amitav Ghosh, A Postcolonial Perspective*, New Delhi, Sarup
- Vivekanand Jha,(2011) “*Sea of Poppies* : A Glimpse of Colonial India,” in B.K.Sharma (ed.) *The Fiction of Amitav Ghosh, A Postcolonial Perspective*, Sarup, New Delhi, Sarup
- Dinesh kumar, (2011) “ Marginality Afloat : Race, Caste, Class, and Colonial Ship in Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*” in B.K.Sharma (ed.) *The Fiction of Amitav Ghosh, A Postcolonial Perspective*, Sarup Books, New Delhi, Sarup
- Campbell, (2011) The Mask of God- Primitive Mythology, quoted in Anna from Canberra, What is Myth? 04 August
- <http://www.paganlibrary.com/reference/what-is-myth.php>
- BBC News, (2010) ‘Opium financed British rule in India’. 07 October  
[http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/74606...](http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/74606...)
- William Dalrymple,(2011) Casualties of an empire’s addiction, 27 September  
<http://www.theaustrilian.com.au/news/casualties-of-an-empire-addiction/story-e6frg8no>