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Woman at Nowhere as Deeti in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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This paper intends to study the miserable condition of women in modern India. In India men decide what women do because a woman derives her status from a man, and therefore she does not have her own status. Gender inequality is not an episodic, ephemeral and a situational phenomenon. Its ramifications correspond with social and cultural differences in the Indian society. Amitav Ghosh's novel *Sea of Poppies* creates a vivid picture of modern society which does not give proper place for women and at the same time it exploits her also. The character of Deeti in this novel is a live example of those women who are tramped under the male dominating rules of society. Deeti was married to Hukam Singh an afeemkhor. In the day of her wedding night Deeti finds that his husband is an addicted afeemkhor. So to reduce the pain of the night she accepts the offer of her husband i.e. taking some opium. In the state of deep unconsciousness she was raped by her brother-in-law. All the family members her husband, her husband's uncle and her mother-in-law were a part of this incident. Deeti has some suspense about her pregnancy and after some time Deeti realized that in this case there was someone who knew her husband's condition and had made a plan to conceal his impotence in order to preserve the family's honor. After many months through her mother-in-law's statement Deeti find that the real father of her daughter was Chandan Singh her brother-in-law. After her husband's death Deeti was forced by her family to commit suicide but Kalua an ox-cart driver saves her life as God and she flees with him and starts a new life.

Thus we find that Deeti an uneducated poor village woman suffered much by her relatives and society. She has no right to live her life freely and according to her will. In our society we find that not only uneducated but also educated women face the gender inequality. Women face physical, mental, intellectual harassment; rape, trafficking, prostitution, sexual-exploitation, domestic-violence namely dowry death, female infanticide, sexual harassment etc. are various kinds of problems faced by women.

Gender is important to understand that the mind of each sex has some natural kind of basis which constitute a distinction of character, and that the happiness of both depends, in a great measure, on the preservation and observance of this distinction. If men and women understand this there will be a more equitable relationship between them. No doubt this will be tantamount to acknowledging a biological difference, but this is not biological, it is cultural, women have been raised to speak to shine or please, men to convince or to confute; women

admire what is brilliant, men what is solid; in literacy composition, women are pleased with point, turn and antithesis, men with observation and deduction, and so on and so forth. If this distinction is glossed over and acknowledged that it can be shed then there will be no debate, no need to contest gender divides. In 1992, Taslima Nasreen in her *Nirbachito column* wrote about the meaning of December 16, Victory Day, to her as a woman: “I burst into tears with the city’s obscene celebration. Is there anyone who can stop me and others like me from crying? Where are the laws and reforms in the country? The war of liberation gave so many people so many things but what does it give women?” (Rajul Bhargava 62).

In India men decide what women do because a woman derives her status from a man, and therefore she does not have her own status. Her identity is that of her father, and her husband and of their families. An unmarried girl is not registered as a voter in many parts of Rajasthan. A girl is sent to a school for the sake of family status and anuloma (hypergamy) marriage alliance. This is a reason that a woman is not a person. She is treated as an ‘object’ in many ways. Status inequality is reinforced between men and women through institutions of patriarchy, marriage, dowry, property and inheritance, subordination and gendered division of labor. Patriarchy runs through all walks of life, and it has not lessened in the wake of development in contemporary India. The new forms of subordination and gender asymmetry have superseded the old, leaving patriarchal control undisturbed in India. The idealization of women, though glamorizes their status and honor, but, in fact, forbids their equality with men. The notions of an ideal woman, a girl, a daughter, a mother, a daughter-in-law etc., are appropriated to bind women to certain roles and obligations. In practice, these idealized expectations become inviolable bindings, which adversely affect women’s health, education and personality.

Gender inequality is not an episodic, ephemeral and a situational phenomenon. Its ramifications correspond with social and cultural differences in the Indian society. Gendering is perennially a socio-cultural reality of all sections of society, through in varying proportions and degrees. This is so because the ideals are differently gendered for men and women and for members of different castes and communities. Gendering pervades over all aspects of social life, including food, cloths, allocation of work, decision-making, community representation, intra-familial relations, etiquette etc. Even sitting arrangements are gendered.

The saying, “Dhol-ganwar, shudra, pashu, nari, ye sab tadan ke adhikari” (Rajul Bhargava 178) is still very much in the male mindset. The saying reads: All idiots, untouchables, animals and women deserve reprimand. A girl is generally perceived as bhar (burden) and paraya dhan (property of others), because she has to leave her parental home after marriage. Marriage for a girl is inevitable, and it has to be anuloma (hypergamy). Dowry needs to be arranged. Even the present-day adverse male-female ratio in India ought to go in favor of marriageable girls because they are less in number. But the number-based principle of demand and supply does not apply to young girls because they are much less educated and qualified than the marriageable boys; hence boys become scarce and more marketable. A boy (son) stays with his parental family even after his marriage. He is expected to look after his old parents and siblings. So he is given all the attention to become a well-qualified earning member for the family. Therefore he is considered the right claimant of the family’s land and property, and not the daughter. Education of girls is thus adversely affected because of such a mindset. Enrolment of girls in schools and colleges has gone up in the recent years. But it has not much changed the male mindset. A school in a village in Rajasthan has forty percent girl students out of about, 1,000 total students. And a

large number of female students come from middle and lower castes. There are not many girl students from among Brahmins and Jains because they have migrated to towns and cities within and outside the state. The middle and lower castes' parents are encouraged to send their daughters to the school because they are today better off socially, economically, and politically than at the time of Independence. Some of them share political power in the village. However, gender-neutrality is still a dream. Sitting arrangements are gendered. Parents and teachers consider such arrangements desirable because girls should keep 'reasonable' distance from the boys.

In *Sea of Poppies* Deeti was the last of all the children of her parents to be married off. So her father had not much money for her dowry. She thinks that her prospects had always been bedeviled by her stars, her fate being ruled by Saturn - Shani - a planet that exercised great power on those born under its influence, often bringing discord, unhappiness and disharmony. With this shadow darkening her future, Deeti's expectations had never been high: she knew that if she were ever to be married, it would probably be to a much older man, possibly an elderly widower who needed a new wife to nurse his brood. Hukam Singh, by comparison, had seemed a good prospect, not least because Deeti's own brother, Kesri Singh, had proposed the match. The two men had belonged to the same battalion and had served together in a couple of overseas campaigns; Deeti had her brother's word that her prospective husband's disability was a minor one. Also in his favor were his family's connections, the most notable of which consisted of an uncle who had risen to the rank of subedar in the East India Company's army: on his retirement from active duty this uncle had found a lucrative job with a merchant house in Calcutta, and had been instrumental in finding good posts for his relatives - for instance, it was his uncle, who had procured a much coveted job in the opium factory for Hukam Singh, the groom-to-be. When Hukam Singh and his uncle come to Deeti's home through a crack in a wall, she examined the visitors carefully. As for Hukam Singh, she had been favorably impressed by his soldierly bearing, which was, if anything, enhanced by his limp. One thing she had liked better still was his drowsy demeanor and slow manner of speech; he had seemed inoffensive, the kind of man who would go about his work without causing trouble, not the least desirable of qualities in a husband. After this meeting Deeti was married to Hukam Singh.

Deeti was not much more than a child herself, after seven years of marriage, but a few tendrils of white had already appeared in her thick black hair. She was married to Hukam Singh in the early age of eleven. The skin of her face, parched and darkened by the sun, had begun to flake and crack around the corners of her mouth and her eyes. She had light grey eyes, a feature that was unusual in that part of the country. Despite the careworn commonplaceness of her appearance, there was one respect in which she stood out from the ordinary. Such was the color - or perhaps colorlessness - of her eyes that they made her seem at once blind and all-seeing. This had the effect of unnerving the young, and of reinforcing their prejudices and superstitions to the point where they would sometimes shout taunts at her - chudaliya, dainiya - as if she were a witch: but Deeti had only to turn her eyes on them to make them scatter and run off. Being declared as witch is a particularly serious problem for woman in rural areas which is beautifully raised by Amitav Ghosh in his novel. Deeti has seven years old daughter Kabutri. Although not above taking a little pleasure in her powers of discomfiture, Deeti was glad, for her daughter's sake that this was one aspect of her appearance that she had not passed on - she delighted in Kabutri's dark eyes, which were as black as her shiny hair. Hukam Singh has no care for her daughter so Deeti has all the burden of her daughter care. She loves her daughter very much. She

cooks food for her and massaging her hair daily. Deeti cares her daughter very much because she thinks that after four and five years her daughter gets married and after it she has enough time for her work. Deeti herself was not more than a girl when she was married to Hukam Singh and suffers much from her married life. Here a concept of early child marriage is clear which is miserable for the girl child who is unknown about the world and its sufferings.

When Deeti and her daughter were going to the sea, they were much surprised to see the ship because they had never seen this type of large ship “She had never seen the sea, never left the district, never spoken any language but her native Bhojpuri” (*Sea of Poppies* 8). Having the vision of this ship that was heading in her direction arouse fear in her. The knowledge of the ship terrified her. For she had never set eyes on anything that remotely resembled this apparition, and had no idea what it might portend. This picture shows Deeti innocence about the out-worldly knowledge. Deeti has firm faith in God and has also respects for her ancestors. In her house there was a small altar inside, with statues of Shivaji and Bhagwan Ganesh, and framed prints of Ma Durga and Shri Krishna. Deeti has also the power of intuition when her daughter Kabutri asked Deeti about ship that why a ship should find a place in the family pantheon? Deeti replied, “I don’t know for I too was puzzled by the sureness of my intuition: I just know that it must be there; and not just the ship, but also many of those who are in it; they too must be on the walls of our puja room” (*Sea of Poppies* 9).

Deeti was married to Hukam Singh an afeemkhor. In the day of her wedding night Deeti finds that his husband is an addicted afeemkhor. So to reduce the pain of the night she accepts the offer of her husband i.e. taking some opium. In the next morning she finds that her purity has exploited by someone. When she asked her husband about that night: “He nodded and gave her a drowsy smile. He said yes, everything was as it should be. You gave proof of your purity to my family. With heaven’s blessing, your lap will soon be filled” (*Sea of Poppies* 35). She lay on her pillow trying to remember what had happened but was unable to retrieve any memory of the latter part of the day. After some time her mother-in-law appeared by her bedside; wreathed in smiles, she sprinkled blessings from a container of holy water, and murmured, in a tone of tender solicitude: beti everything went exactly as it should. It is an auspicious start to your new life. Her husband’s uncle, Subedar Bhyro Singh, echoed these blessings and slipped a gold coin into her palm: beti, your lap will soon be filled - you will have a thousand sons. Deeti had some suspension about her pregnancy but it is her fate which forced her to live with her husband.

Deeti tried a few stratagems to break him from the spell of his pipe, but all to no avail: it was pointless to withhold opium from a man who worked in the very factory where it was processed; and when she tried hiding his pipe, he quickly fashioned another...Deeti was forced to conclude that he could never be a husband to her, in the full sense, either because his injury had rendered him incapable, or because opium had removed the inclination...When she tried to question her husband he spoke with pride about the consummation of their wedding...Deeti think was it possible then that her own stupor had also been arranged, by someone who knew of her husband’s condition and had made a plan to conceal his impotence, in order to preserve the family’s honor? (*Sea of Poppies* 36)

Deeti has also suspense about her mother-in-law that she was also present in the room but Deeti would not allow her to yield to her first suspicions: the identity of her child's father was too important a matter to be settled without further confirmation. In the end, it was the old woman herself who provided Deeti with the impetus to act upon her suspicions. One day, while massaging Deeti's belly, she said: "And after we've delivered this one, we must make sure there are more - many, many more" (*Sea of Poppies* 37). It was this throwaway remark that revealed to Deeti that her mother-in-law had every intention of ensuring that whatever had happened on her wedding night would be repeated; that she would be drugged and held down, to be raped again by the unknown accomplice. At last Hukam Singh told to Deeti that "You should know that this (opium) 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" (*Sea of Poppies* 34). After this incident Deeti had some knowledge about the reality of life and the falls notion of life had been shattered. Deeti had think, it was no use to weep and bemoan the influence of the planets. "She thought of her husband and his torpid, drowsy gaze: how was it that his eyes were so different from his mother's? Why was his gaze so blank and hers, so sharp and cunning? The answer came to Deeti all of a sudden - of course, the difference lay in the wooden box" (*Sea of Poppies* 37).

Deeti was so sharp minded that she had a clear conception about her plan to find out her Child's true identity. Deeti mixed a little trace of opium into her mother-in-law's sweetened milk. The old woman drank it thirstily and spent the rest of the morning lazing in the shade of a mango tree. In a very short time, the old woman grew quieter and more tranquil, her voice lost its harshness and her eyes became softer; she no longer took much interest in Deeti's pregnancy and spent more and more time lying in bed. Deeti began to pay closer attention to dais and ojhas, the travelling midwives and exorcists who occasionally passed through their village; she learnt to recognize plants like hemp and datura and would sometimes try little experiments, feeding extracts to her mother-in-law and observing the effects. 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 wandering, 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 saubhagyawati, who bears the children of brothers for each other..." (*Sea of Poppies* 38-39). 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.

Deeti was a wife of a crippled young man Hukam Singh. One day Deeti was working in the opium field. Chandan Singh, Hukam Singh's younger brother also working in the opium field where he saw Deeti.

A slack-jawed youth with a brood of five children of his own, he never missed an opportunity to remind Deeti of her paucity of offspring. Ka bhail? He called out, licking a drop of fresh sap from the tip of his instrument. What's the matter? Working alone again? How long can you carry on like this? You need a son, to give you a helping hand. You're not barren, after all... (*Sea of Poppies* 5-6)

Here the picture of our society is clear where poor, miserable women are treated by their relatives and society. The poor condition of Deeti is visible when Chandan Singh stopped his ox-cart at their door and shouted to them listen Kabutri-ki-ma Hukam Singh has passed out, at the factory. They said that you should go there and bring him home; it was typical of him to offer no

help while financial condition of Deeti was so worse that she had no money or any other thing to offer Kalua “She had no grain or fruit to spare, and as for money, there was not a dam’s worth of cowrie-shells in the house” (*Sea of Poppies* 27). After some time she realized that she had no option but to delve into the carved wooden chest in which her husband kept his supply of opium.

Hukam Singh was working in the assembly room when Deeti reached in this room she finds that: he was lying on the floor with his eyes closed and he looked as if he had some kind of seizure, for a thin line of bubbling spit was dribbling out of the corner of his mouth. Suddenly, Deeti was assailed by the sirdars who supervised the packaging room. He said; “What took you so long...Don’t you know your husband is an afeemkhor...Why do you send him here to work...Do you want him to die?” (*Sea of Poppies* 98). Despite the shocks of the day, Deeti was not of a mind to ignore these attacks. From the shelter of her sari, she snapped back: “And who are you to speak to me like that? How would you earn your living if not for afeemkhors?” (*Sea of Poppies* 98). The altercation drew the attention of an English agent, who rebuke to sirdar and told to Deeti that told your husband that he can have his job back whenever he wants. Deeti joined her hands together, to express her gratitude - but in her heart she knew that her husband’s days in the Carcanna had come to an end. On the way home, in Kalua’s cart, with her husband’s head in her lap and her daughter’s fingers in her hand, she had eyes neither for Ghazipur’s forty-pillared palace nor for its memorial to the departed Laat-Sahib. Her thoughts were now all for the future and she thinks how they would manage without her husband’s monthly pay.

Deeti’s intuition that her husband would not be able to go back to work was soon confirmed. Hukam Singh’s condition after his seizure at the factory was so enfeebled that he had not the strength to protest even when she took away his pipe and his brass box. But instead of initiating an improvement, deprivation provoked a dramatic turn for the worse: he could neither eat nor sleep and he soiled himself so often that his bed had to be moved out of doors. Drifting in and out of consciousness, he would scowl and mutter in incoherent rage: Deeti knew that if he had possessed the strength, he would not have stopped at killing her. Due to Hukam Singh’s ill health Deeti first brought in an ojha to exorcize the house and when this produced no effect, she consulted a hakim, who purveyed Yunani medicines, and a vaid who practised Ayurveda.

“The doctors spent long hours sitting at Hukam Singh’s bedside. When the treatments failed, they confided secretly that Hukam Singh was not long for this world, one way or another - why not ease his passage by allowing him a taste of the drug his body craved?” (*Sea of Poppies* 154).

After this incident she had all responsibilities of the house. She sold opium to the factory and purchased every house goods. On that day while sold opium to the factory Deeti found that her husband had taken much advance than she had thought so she had some money to spend. It is not enough to feed a child and Deeti forget Kalua’s fare, the word of Deeti’s plight filtered across the fields to Chandan Singh, who appeared at her door with a sackful of nourishing satwa. Deeti as for her daughter’s sake could not refuse to take satwa. This gave Chandan Singh an opportunity to enter in the house and flirt with Deeti.

He was entering he would brush his hand against her thigh. Sitting on his brother’s bed, he would look at her and fondle himself through the folds of his dhoti; when Deeti knelt to feed Hukam Singh, he would lean so close as to brush her breasts with his knees and elbows. His advances became so aggressive that

Deeti took to hiding a small knife in the folds of her sari, fearing that he might attack her, right on her husband's bed...He said to Deeti; listen to me, Kabutri-ki-ma. You know very well how your daughter was conceived - why pretend? You know that you would be childless today if not for me. (*Sea of Poppies* 157)

He nodded dismissively at his brother's bed it is the only truth. Hukam Singh couldn't have done it then any more than he can now. It was he; no one else. And that is "why I say to you: wouldn't it be best for you to do willingly now what you did before without your knowledge? After all your husband and I are brothers, of the same flesh and blood. Where is the shame? Why should you waste your looks and your youth on a man who cannot enjoy them?" (*Sea of Poppies*157). He said to Deeti that the time is short while her husband is still alive, if she conceives a son while he is still living, he will be his father's rightful heir. Hukam Singh's land will pass to him and no one will have the right to dispute it. But she knows herself that as things stand now, his brother's land and his house will become him on his death.

Jekar khet, tekhar dhan - He, who owns the land, owns the rice. When I become master of this house, how will you get by except at my pleasure? This is what I say to you, Kabutri-ki-ma: why not do willingly now what you will be compelled to do a short while hence? Don't you see that I'm offering you your best hope for the future? If you keep me happy, you will be well looked after. (*Sea of Poppies* 157)

There was a part of Deeti's mind that acknowledged the reasonableness of this proposal - but by this time her loathing of her brother-in-law had reached such a pitch that she knew she would not be able to make her own body obey the terms of the bargain. She said to Chandan Singh, what kind of devil, can speak like this in front of his own dying brother? Listen to her words: she will burn on her husband's pyre rather than give herself to you.

After the death of her husband Deeti decides 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. Deeti think that if she remained Kabutri 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. Here the beautiful picture of motherhood is shown to focus on human feelings as women love their children so strongly that she will go through anything to help them. The misfortunate woman Deeti finds safety of her child before deciding to her self-immolation. "When the boat sailed away, with Kabutri in it, it was as if Deeti's last connection with life had been severed. From that moment she knew no further hesitation: with her habitual care, she set about making plans for her own end" (*Sea of Poppies* 159). Thus a innocent, poor, woman was forced by her relatives to commit suicide but Kalua an ox-cart driver saves her life as God and she flees with him and starts a new life. Having the fear of their relatives they joined the slave-ship Ibis which carried indentured coolies to Mauritius.

On the ship Deeti finds opium seed and knew that it was not the planet above that governed her life: it was this minuscule orb-at once bountiful and all-devouring, merciful and destructive, sustaining and vengeful. This was her Shani, her Saturn. She said to Kalua, "Taste it, it is the star that took us from our homes and put us on this ship. It is the planet that rules our

destiny” (*Sea of Poppies* 452). Here we see that Deeti looked at the poppy seed and compared it to Shani who ruled her fate. Being an uneducated poor village woman she was wholly depend upon her fate. Deeti and Kalua knew that their best chance of escape was lay in travelling downriver, on the Ganga, in the hope of reaching a town or city where they would be able to disappear into a crowd: some place such as Patna or even Calcutta. Many days had passed but they had no job to even their livelihood. But Deeti did not lost any hope for the better future. Deeti would say: Suraj dikhat awe to rasta mil jawe which means when the sun rises the path will show itself - and so strongly did she believe this that not even at the worst of times did she allow her hopes to slacken. It’s through Deeti’s positive thinking that they found the job and become happy and handle every impediment in the way of their life. Deeti has a good sense of humor and sometimes she seems very clever when the condition was worse and beyond her limits. Deeti and Kalua both were afraid of their relatives having the idea of punishment. So they join the ship that carried indentured coolies to Mauritius for plantation. On the ship Deeti was a leader of all women. She has a good knowledge about women condition who had (no husband) alone. So when Ratna, Champa and Dookhanee hurried off to join their husbands, 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. She protects Munia many times from any scandal.

When with all the migrants Deeti was on the board. She heard the voice of her husband’s uncle, she immediately understands. “It was not a mortal man at all, but Saturn himself: It’s him, Shani, he’s been hunting you all your life and now he has you in his grasp. Her knees buckled under her, sending her crashing to the planks, at her husband’s feet” (*Sea of Poppies* 367). To give him warning, Deeti dug a fingernail into his toe, she said to Kalua beware of this person. Deeti’s prayer becomes successful after a moment’s hesitation when Kalua said to her uncle that malik, his name is Madhu. And after warning them his uncle left them. He says, “Don’t let me see either of you making trouble again” (*Sea of Poppies* 368). After this incident Deeti tells Kalua that: “He’s Bhyro Singh, my husband’s uncle; it’s he who arranged my marriage, and it’s he who sent people out to look for us. If he knows were here...” (*Sea of Poppies* 368). After some time Bhyro Singh said to Deeti:

I was recognized you in the same day of your making pretence but I left you without punishment in front of the deck’s people. His lips curled in derision: And bring shame on myself? Acknowledge a tie with a woman like you? A whore who’s run away with a filth-sweeper? An overheated bitch who’s brought shame on her family, her village, her in-laws? You take me for a fool? Don’t you know I have daughters of my own, to marry off? (*Sea of Poppies* 476)

In the end of the novel we find that Bhyro Singh Deeti’s husband’s uncle also wants to rape with her. Having the knowledge of her pregnancy he tries to rape with her and called Deeti a whore woman and finally killed by Kalua. Here we find that Deeti an uneducated poor village woman suffered much by her relatives and society. She has no right to live her life freely and according to her will. Deeti accepts everything her serious afeemkhor husband, her mother-in-law and relatives who were not good for her and even forced her to commit suicide after the death of her husband. Her relatives and also the society had not given her the right to live freely with her daughter after the tragic death of her husband and ultimately she wholly depends upon her fate. This is the true picture of our society which after the Independence did not give freedom to women. In our society we find that not only uneducated but also educated women face the gender inequality. We know that even educated and employed women are tortured and coerced

to surrender their pay packets to the in-laws and husbands. Torture, desertion or divorce and killings for dowry are quite often reported in a metropolis like Delhi. Stigma of desertion or divorce makes remarriage difficult even for educated women. Living alone for a woman is a nightmare. Women face physical, mental, intellectual harassment; rape, trafficking, prostitution, sexual-exploitation, domestic-violence namely dowry death, female infanticide, sexual harassment etc. are various kinds of problems faced by women.

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