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Crime, Punishment and Discipline in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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Abstract:

Sea of Poppies by Amitav Ghosh is his first novel in his Ibis trilogy, *The River of Smoke* and *The Flood of Fire* being the other two novels of this trilogy. Set in the backdrop of the nineteenth century Opium wars, the novel has journey as the central trope in the novel. The narrative uncoils itself with the characters, setting off to cross the 'black waters' in Ibis, the slaving schooner. In this paper I have looked at the British sense of laws and the legal institution that claimed to dispense justice to the natives. Through the portrayal of the character of Raja Neel Rattan I wish to understand how the novel gives a sense of the colonial policing that proved to be effective machinery in exercising authority and control on the natives. Also I have tried to argue how the discourse of incarceration had a disciplinary agenda on the part of the colonial rulers.

Keywords: The Black Waters, British Laws and Legal System, Natives, Colonial Rulers, Colonial policing and Discourse of Incarceration.

The novel *Sea of Poppies*, set in the backdrop of the nineteenth century Opium wars, depict the East India Company's imperial designs. The first in Amitav Ghosh's Ibis trilogy of novels, *Sea of Poppies* has a slaving schooner 'Ibis' at the centre of the narrative. The metaphor of travel emphasizes the theme of migration in the novel as the tales of each of the characters culminates in the journey in the schooner Ibis. In this paper through the portrayal of the character of Raja Neel Rattan I wish to understand how the novel gives a sense of the colonial policing that proved to be effective machinery in exercising authority and control on the natives. Here I have looked at the British sense of laws and the legal institution that claimed to dispense justice to the natives. Also I have tried to argue how the discourse of incarceration had a disciplinary agenda. The idea was not only to punish a person for crime but to also discipline the offender, rightfully in keeping with the coloniser's project of civilizing the 'crypto-barbaric'¹ natives.

Neel was the heir to the Raskhali Estate. He not only inherited the property from his father Raja Ram Rattan Halder but also his indulgence in women and wine. His clannish sense of purity was imbibed from his ascetic mother. Unlike his father he did not have many mistresses but only one called Elokeshi, on whom he bestowed all his wealth

¹ Ashis Nandy in his book *The Intimate Enemy* has explained how the British legitimised the project of colonialism as a civilizing mission for the native civilization was that of 'kafirs' and the 'moshrebs' and the 'yavanas' and the 'mlecchsa' who were capable of cruelty and barbarism. Thus he uses this term for the natives who were latently barbaric.

and affections. Elokeshi's popularity was not only for her shapely figure but also for her expertise in music and an enchanting voice. Neel as a Zamindar hardly looked into the stately affairs and instead left all the matters of the zamindari to his gomustas and agents. He too, like his father blindly adhered to the British terms and conditions and enjoyed their favour and shares in profit especially in the lucrative opium trade. The old Raja was a, 'doting lover' and so had many mistresses to please. This had increased the debts of the Raskhali Estate. Understandably the creditor's investment was the only resource that would help the estate to survive and so he signed many, 'promissory notes-or hundees'. Neel Rattan too following his father's footsteps signed many hundees for the merchants who enabled Neel Rattan to draw in investors on behalf of the Raskhali Zamindars. He just signed the papers prepared by his father's clerks without any enquiry. He spent his time leisurely in his stately budgerow on the river Hooghly, flying kites and seeking pleasure out of Elokeshi's song and dance. Neel Ratan's rival Benjamin Burnham on the other hand was an expert businessman, very cunning, clever and shrewd. Burnham's experience in trade and commerce was immaculate. I analyse the character of Neel Rattan in the 'dyadic'² relationship of the ruler and the ruled. Colonialism, as put by Ashis Nandy in his book *The Intimate Enemy*, is not only a geographical but also a psychological entity. Nandy in his book has identified that the colonial consciousness was pervaded by the concept of 'purusatva' (the essence of masculinity), 'naritva' (the essence of femininity) and 'klibatva' (the essence of hermaphroditism). The dichotomy of masculinity and femininity in a gendered society was replaced by 'purusatva' and 'klibatva'. Klivatva as discussed by Nandy is the concept of femininity in masculinity, 'the final negation of a man's political identity, pathology more dangerous than femininity itself' (Nandy 7-8). Neel Rattan too in contrast to his rival Benjamin Burnham proves to be an effeminate and weak king who fails to keep his zamindari, leaves his son, wife and other widowed relatives unprotected and above all loses his caste. He is easily gullible to British statecraft and is entrapped for an apparent crime of forgery. Neel Rattan is like Shatyajit Rays' dancing, singing poet-king in his film *Shatranj ke Khiladi* who loses out to British statecraft. The Nawab, similar to Neel's indifference to the stately affairs, is seen engrossed in the game of chess when General Outram's men had already invaded the state of Oudh.

Burnham had moved to Calcutta to try his luck in the opium trade. Through his experience in trade and commerce he could establish himself as a business tycoon by the age of thirty. His first venture was in the transportation of convicts to islands like Penang, Bencoolen, Port Blair and Mauritius which were prisons for many people. A band of Pindaris, Thugs, dacoits, rebels, head-hunters and hooligans were transported by the muddy waters of Hooghly to various islands around the Indian Ocean as prisoners. The Halders of Raskhali had collaborated with Mr. Benjamin Burnham's agency where the Halders invested money and the company gave them '10% dasturi on profit' and this added considerably to the wealth of the family of Halders. Things were fine until one day in the year 1837 Raja Neel Ratan Halder received a letter from Burnham's agency about

² The word literally means two individuals maintaining a sociologically significant relationship. In my paper I have borrowed the term from Ashis Nandy who has identified the coloniser and the colonised in a sociologically significant relationship and he has analysed how the mind of an individual in both these position is influenced by the other.

its failure to produce profits for its clients in China and also to return the debts that they owed to the company. On realizing the seriousness of the situation Neel got an idea of inviting Burnham for a grand dinner on the Raskhali budgerow so that he could negotiate his dues with Burnham's firm. Though the dinner was never up to the mark as was expected of the Halder family yet Raja Neel Rattan was able to get his guests and put his hitch in front of Burnham. However, the shrewd Burnham demands the Raskhali estate to atone the debts that the Halder family owed to the Burnham Bros. and Company. Raja Neel Rattan does not give in to the proposal of Mr. Burnham and Burnham leaves the raja's budgerow dissatisfied. The crime of Raja Neel Rattan is crafted by Burnham as a revenge that he inflicts upon the Raja for having denied his proposal of giving away the Raskhali estate to atone the debt that Halders owed to Mr. Burnham. Raja Neel Rattan is accused of forgery. The raja is accused of forging the signature of Burnham, which was done by the Raja on the promissory notes. Neel Ratan had an expertise in 'calligraphy' and so instead of using a stamp of Burnham he wrote the name of his collaborator on the 'hundees' assuming it to be under his discretionary power according to the agreement between Mr. Burnham's firm and the Raskhali Zamindary. The vindictive intention of Burnham was soon revealed to Neel with his arrest and in the trail that was manipulated, unfair and one-sided. The trial of Neel Ratan becomes a spectacle, his relatives, and his contemporaries of the 'Bengal Landowners' Association' come to watch the trial. He becomes apprehensive about the trial when he sees Justice Kendalbushe presiding over the trial. Kendalbushe being a good friend of Mr. Burnham, Neel Rattan expresses his doubts about a fair trial to his advocate Mr. Rowbotham. To his apprehensions Mr. Rowbotham assures him of justice, 'I am confident he is a man of unimpeachable fairness.' And instead Rowbotham briefs Neel about the irrefutable evidence against him in the form of the, 'sworn affidavit', given by his concubine Elokeshi. This affidavit turns out to be fatal and Neel Rattan indeed losses everything because of this affidavit. However, the strategies of control of the Raj were not only in the form of exercise of the force by the police and the judiciary but also in various forms of coercions and by creating some categories and social stereotypes. Analysing the complex nature of colonial policing in the nineteenth century India, Peter Robb writes:

The business of controlling India began with Indian collaborators. Because the British insisted upon discrete categories and social stereotypes in interpreting India, they led to a selective reinforcement of hierarchies. (Anderson and Killingray 131)

Raja Neel Rattan and his father were such stereotypes who thrived as 'collaborators' of the Raj and enabled the British to execute their agenda of imperialism. It was not until Neel Rattan proved a dissent that he lost his security that the British provided him. The gomustas and the mootsuddies were also stereotypes of the British administration. Baboo Nob Kissin, the gomusta of Mr. Burnham's firm was an enterprising clerk who not only dispensed his duty well but also was able to provide Burnham the idea that Elokeshi's affidavit can be used to teach Neel Rattan a lesson and the Raskhali Estate is a potential land for opium cultivation which can be confiscated once Neel Rattan is proved guilty in the trail, though his motive was to win the post of 'supercargo' in the Ibis. Subedar Bhyro Singh, the leader of the transportees on Ibis was such an employee who effectively imposes the laws of the rulers and he is rewarded

instead as he is allowed to take the revenge on Kalua lawfully, the outcaste who ran away with his widowed wife of his brother, Deeti. The rulers made sure that such loyalists enjoyed favours and patronage so that they can promote the imperial rule.

Neel Rattan was punished for his crime as his offence was a kind of ‘felony’ and thereby unpardonable. Also the justification of punishing a Raja was that English laws unlike the Indian penal system was equal for all and above all, even a Raja like Neel Rattan, the English judge asserts, cannot be exempted. The principles of the laws remain unchanged as, ‘the very foundation of which lies in the belief that all are equal who appear before it.....’ (238). Neel Rattan finds this statement farcical and ponders upon the irony of such a belief:

In the course of his trial it had become almost laughably obvious to Neel that in this system of justice it was the English themselves—Mr. Burnham and his ilk—who were exempt from the law as it applied to others: it was they who had become the world’s new Brahmins. (239)

Neel’s punishment, as dispensed by the ‘new Brahmins’ in power, was his transportation to the penal settlement on the Mauritius Islands for a period of seven years. The court pronounced the judgement that all his properties should be seized and sold to pay the due debts to the East India Company. The preparation of Neel’s journey to Mauritius begins with his movement from the Lalbazar prison to the Alipore jail. This transformation robs Neel of everything, his high status, his honour and something more valuable, his caste. Neel is abused and assaulted in the prison. He is stripped and each part of the body, his teeth, his toes and even his genitals are examined to ensure the presence of ‘lice’, ‘birthmarks’ or any sexually transmitted diseases like, ‘Syphilis or Gonorrhoea’. Neel feels the touch of the orderly which almost penetrates through each part of his body. The narrative describes the grossness of this examination:

The touch of the orderly’s fingers had a feel that Neel could never have imagined between two human beings – neither intimate nor angry, neither tender nor prurient— it was the disinterested touch of mastery, of purchase or conquest; it was as if his body had passed into the possession of a new owner, who was taking stock of it as a man might inspect a house he had recently acquired, searching for signs of disrepair or neglect, while mentally assigning each room to a new use. (289)

Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of Prison*, though in a different context, argues that the body subject to punishment is invested with relations of power and domination and therefore knowledge of the body is part of the penal procedure. The anatomical examination of Neel’s body in the prison before being transported in Ibis is a form of punishment but stripping him and forcefully examining his body is also with a purpose to discipline it. Foucault in the chapter on ‘Discipline’ underlines the significance of body as, ‘the object and target of power’ and the requirement of an, ‘analyzable body to the manipulable body’ for any kind of domination. He writes, ‘A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and

improved' (Foucault 136). In a certain sense, 'discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, 'docile bodies'. Discipline as Foucault defines is:

Methods, which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility, might be called discipline. (Foucault 137)

Thus Neel having lost his status and caste is asked to do some menial work of cleaning the dirty prison room and his cell mate Ah Fatt thus preparing him for the task that he has to do in Mauritius as a prisoner. The examination of the body and then the marking of it with the tattoo made on his forehead of a forgerer make his body totally under the control of the new rulers. In his article on the colonial prison, David Arnold writes that the prison system emerged in the colonial India of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century with the British motive of, 'extraction of revenue and the maintenance of law and order.' However, the birth of colonial prisons in India sets apart the British rule from the pre colonial era that was full of barbaric practices of the native society as compared to the former's, 'uniquely rational and humane' means of punishment executed by the rulers to maintain law and order. Arnold in this context writes:

By pointing to the extremes of cruelty and depravity exhibited in such practices as female infanticide, sati, and the self-immolation of pilgrims beneath the car of Jagannath, the West found a way to condemn India, a civilization that an earlier orientalist generation had held in such apparent esteem. (Arnold 150)

The kinds of bodily incarceration that Neel goes through being barbarous were later abolished. Neel's travails as a convict continue even in his journey to Mauritius. Apart from the tormenting memories as a 'Raja' of the Raskhali estate he and Ah Fatt had to undergo the physical hardships of convicts en route in Ibis. Unlike the other migrants these two convicts were imposed with some restrictions, they were kept in 'taporis' and not allowed even on the decks for food. They had to clean their toilet buckets and under the supervision of Bhyro Singh they were given some exercises every day. The last errand of these convicts was an enactment of, 'a pair of plough-oxen' and Bhyro Singh, 'a farmer, tilling a field'. This act gave Bhyro Singh immense pleasure as he was able to inflict pain upon them with his lathi and pulling the loop of chain around their neck. This gesture enthralled Bhyro Singh because to him, 'this was a sign that they were not men at all, but castrated, impotent creatures—oxen, in other words' (384). Bhyro Singh had no sympathies for Neel and Ah Fatt for they were not like other criminals and also their friendship enraged him.

Ah Fatt too like Neel realizes his failure to prove his masculinity. Though the journey was a torturous one for Neel yet it also gave him a renewed identity, one of a sense of a different individual, racially and pathologically than those who were their friends once. Along with Ah Fatt, Jodu and Kalua with Serang Ali as their leader Neel drifts away in the Ibis into the watery oblivion.

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