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Subverting Colonial Discourse: An Examination of Subaltern Voices and Resistance in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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Abstract:

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008), the first novel of the Ibis trilogy, reconstructs the machinery of the 19th-century colonial opium racket. This paper examines how the novel represents subaltern figures—indentured labourers, lascars, impoverished peasants, and displaced elites — who were caught within the exploitative system through the theoretical lens of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'. The paper, in addition to acknowledging structural silencing and epistemic violence found in colonial power dynamics that Spivak delineates, explains how Ghosh's narrative crafts portrayals of subaltern agency, voice, and resistance. The novel, after a thorough close analysis of the characters with narrative strategies drawing attention to cultural hybridity and acts of defiance, is found to demonstrate that subaltern subjects find complex, mediated, and dynamic ways to assert their presence, preserve their identity, and stand against dehumanization; however, they are systematically marginalised and often made voiceless in official histories. The tension between subaltern silencing and expression is explored

by Ghosh, suggesting that while subalterns may not 'speak' directly with dominant discourses, their voices resonate strongly through acts of survival, solidarity, and cultural persistence.

Keywords: Subaltern, Suppression, Colonialism, Resistance, agency, solidarity.

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* is a significant work of historical fiction set in the mid-19th century, a time when the British were in the opium trade with the Chinese (Ghosh, *SoP*). The novel portrays a wide variety of characters ranging from the opium farmers of Bihar, sailors, lascars, and officers, a zamindar who lost his lands, and a French orphan, who all end up on the ship called Ibis. Ghosh's primary goal in this novel is to portray these subaltern people who were ignored by history and whose perspectives are often erased (Hawley, *The Ibis* 39-41). As Ghosh observes, "It is because opium is a historical force in its own right that it must be approached with due attention to ways in which it has interacted with humans over time. If these interactions are difficult to conceptualize, it is largely because they are very strongly inflected by class and power differentials. Nevertheless, those difficulties are further compounded by the fact that the necessary vocabulary does not yet exist for thinking about history in a way that allows for the agency of non-human entities" (Ghosh, *S&A* 29). This paper is going to analyze the novel in relation to Gayatri Spivak's provocative essay, 'Can the Subalterns Speak?'. According to Spivak, "the subaltern cannot speak" (Spivak, "Can" 271). *Sea of Poppies*, however, explores the efforts of these subalterns to be heard and act for themselves. Ghosh here answers Spivak's question by illustrating how these characters always fight back, unite, and try to express themselves (Ghosh, *SoP*).

Theoretical Framework

“Can the Subalterns Speak?” by Gayatri Spivak remains a key text in postcolonial studies that questions whether oppressed and marginalised people can truly speak for themselves within a history dominated by the voice of Western elites (Spivak, “Can” 271-75; Nayar, *Postcolonial Literature* 162-65). The complex argument in the essay, combined with Marxist ideas, feminist theories, and deconstruction, shows how colonialism damages and distorts the knowledge and understanding of the people (Derrida 10-12; Guha, “Prose” 1-12). According to Spivak, “The subaltern is the social group who - politically, socially and often geographically - is outside of hegemonic discourse” (Spivak, *A Critique* 271). The most oppressed individuals, especially women, are treated as complete outsiders whose true thoughts are unreachable, and their efforts to speak are constantly taken over and spoken for by those in power (Spivak, “Can” 295; Morris 7). Recent scholarship broadens this definition by viewing subalternity not always as a state of pure voicelessness: “This volume suggests using the word ‘subaltern’ in the sense of Peter D. Thomas’s reading of Gramsci...and more specifically along the lines of his definition of the ‘citizen-subaltern’ who was/is not necessarily characterized by a complete absence of ‘expressive capacity.’...Indeed, being subaltern was and is not a passive, paralysing state, but a dynamic that can be placed on a sliding scale, showing different ‘degrees of emergence’ from it” (Lauwers, Suodenjoki, and Beyen 2). The subalterns are not just oppressed people. They are people who are completely shut out of opportunities for advancement and are unable to find a space to represent themselves (Guha, “Preface” vii; Gramsci 12-13). As Biswas notes, “These are figures that are not part of any theoretically constructive, but are a part of a group that is forced to migrate, a group that is excluded by all structures and from all contexts. However, this is a group equally influenced by colonialism; it is only their response that creates the need for exclusion from later general

narratives" (Biswas 171). Spivak's concept builds upon Antonio Gramsci's notion of the subaltern, where "The intellectuals are the dominant group's 'deputies' exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government" (Gramsci 12). For Spivak, colonial discourse commits what she terms "epistemic violence," which "is to actively obstruct and undermine non-Western methods or approaches to knowledge" (Spivak, "Can" 282; Stoler 1).

Even though Spivak acknowledges the importance of the project of the Subaltern Studies Group, started by Ranajit Guha, which aimed to uncover the history of ordinary people, separated from the stories told by elites of the nation, she criticised it for oversimplifying the 'subalterns' and ignoring the challenges involved in representing them accurately (Spivak, "Can" 284; Guha, "Preface" vii; Morris 8). While Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and mimicry explain how colonised people can challenge authority from within the system, where "colonial mimicry is 'the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite'" (Bhabha, "Of Mimicry" 127), Spivak emphasises that some people are entirely left out of the process. Bhabha argues that "Ambivalence describes this fluctuating relationship between mimicry and mockery, an ambivalence that is fundamentally unsettling to colonial dominance" and that "in the very practice of domination the language of the master becomes hybrid" (Bhabha, Location 86, 89). The novel explores the complex theoretical concepts; it shows a world full of the kind of intellectual and cultural damage that Spivak describes, where people are treated like products, their histories are erased, and they are forced into colonial labels (Ghosh; Chowdhury 104). However, as Edward Said argued, "The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them" (Said, Culture xiii). Stories and literature can be a powerful tool to fight back against the narrative of empires (Ashcroft et al. 8). Through its story, *Sea of Poppies*

explores whether it is possible to show the thoughts and actions of oppressed people, gently questioning Spivak's deep skepticism while still recognising the critical challenges she pointed out (Hawley, "The Ibis" 41). The novel serves as a place to examine both the potential and the restrictions on the voices of oppressed people under extreme pressure.

Exploring Subaltern Voices: Appropriating Suppression

Ghosh populates the *Ibis* with characters embodying diverse subaltern positions, each navigating suppression while revealing distinct forms of agency (Ghosh, *SoP*; Mondal 115–18).

Deeti

Deeti, a peasant woman from Bihar who farms opium, is a perfect example of the type of oppressed woman Spivak describes, who faces multiple layers of discrimination (Spivak, "Can" 305; Mukherjee, *Postcolonial Environments* 142). She, who was trapped in a loveless marriage and expected to be burnt alive on her opium addict husband's funeral pyre, represents how both local traditions and colonial rule silenced women (Ghosh, *SoP* 33–42). Artanti and Wedati poignantly describe, "Deeti is a real representation of the subaltern, she could not speak anything or even ask her husband about something she wonders from... She likes the live statue in the human body. She feels anything but her mouth just keeps silent. Her hands just wiped off her tears and she pretended [sic] to be a happy wife in front of her husband. Even [sic] she hates a man who likes to consume opium, but she has no option except still being his wife" (Artanti and Wedati 7). Here, Deeti's silent suffering is emblematic of what Spivak identifies as the lived reality of subaltern women—those whose voices are systematically erased and whose agency is denied by both patriarchal and colonial structures. However, she does not simply accept her fate. It became a powerful act of rebellion against the caste system and oppressive tradition when she was rescued

from the funeral pyre by Kalua. Her later journey is marked by her powerful spiritual vision of Ibis as a vessel that will carry everyone towards a shared future, a vision born of trauma but generative of hope and future community (Hawley, "The Ibis" 54). This vision, which blends her Hindu beliefs with her new reality on the ship, gives her a unique voice to express a sense of meaning that the coloniser cannot understand (Mondal 116). On the ship, she purposefully unites the other indentured women, building a community through their shared experience, signifying a crucial form of subaltern voice enacted through solidarity and future-oriented action (Carter and Torabully 47). Through her journey, she changes from a victim into a symbol of hope and collective identity. Artanti and Wedati affirm, "Although she tried to protect herself by escaping from her Sati with Kalua and they became the migrants in the Ibis, ... these ways are implemented on the system, by using subalterns, oppression, submission, and patriarchy.... Most of them are victims that being the subjects who cannot speak what they want. ... Through Subalternity, they show that subalterns are not always weak people who can never speak for what they belong to. If it is hurt [sic] them so much, they will speak to get their own freedom as human beings" (Artanti and Wedati 13–14). It indicates that Deeti's journey, while marked by initial voicelessness, ultimately reveals a kind of subaltern agency and the human drive toward self-determination.

Kalua

^[1]_{SEP} Kalua embodies the subaltern individual characterized by his physical presence and his subtle yet impactful actions. As a low-caste cart driver, he is at the very bottom of the society and is the type of person Spivak described—illiterate, with no voice in the system, and known only for his physical work (Spivak, "Can" 304–07; Tinker 23–25). His most important action is a direct physical challenge to authority—saving Deeti from being burnt on her husband's funeral pyre, an

act more than just brave, a major breaking of both the caste system's rules and patriarchal religious ritual (Ghosh, *SoP* 42–45). It requires no speech for him to express himself, as his action itself is his voice, instantly breaking the established social rules. He shows his ability for protection by safeguarding Deeti and boarding the ship alongside her, which is evidence of working outside of the conventional system of power (Hawley, Amitav Ghosh 105). He is the type of oppressed person whose 'voice' is seen in his decisive action against injustice, which challenges Spivak's pessimistic view. However, he rarely tells his own story, which shows the exact problem Spivak pointed out (Spivak, "Can" 308). His presumed death in a storm portrays how easily such a person is forgotten by history, but his one action changed Deeti's life and shows the power of the oppressed to make a dramatic impact.

Neel Rattan Halidar: ^[L]_[SEP]Neel's story provides a unique perspective on what it means to be a subaltern. He starts as a wealthy, Anglophile zamindar, a native elite whose voice was often heard and who sometimes worked with the colonial system (Chatterjee 16; Banerjee 38–41). He had a catastrophic downfall when he was framed by colonial power for a crime, lost all his money and societal standing, and was sent to prison, which thrust him into the position of subaltern (Ghosh, *SoP* 183–85; Banerjee 51–54). He learns what it feels like to be treated in a dehumanised way from his experience in prison and later on the ship *Ibis*. However, he finds a way to take action in surprising ways. His literacy, once a sign of high status, becomes an instrument that now helps him build a bond with Ah Fatt, an opium addict of mixed Chinese and Parsi heritage (Viswanathan 88). His transcription of Ah Fatt's fragmented multilingual testimony unintentionally becomes the writer for another subaltern voice (Ghosh, *SoP* 342–48). This is where Spivak's issue about the subaltern has been raised, as Neel is writing for someone else (Spivak, "Can" 284). Nonetheless, this action also facilitates the narration of a story that might have otherwise been lost,

demonstrating that literature can serve as a means to connect subalterns and preserve their history. (Hawley, "The Ibis" 57). Neel's personal evolution, transitioning from an elitist perspective to recognizing his equality with other marginalized individuals, represents a profound declaration of identity in opposition to colonial efforts to diminish him to nothing more than a convict figure.

Ah Fatt

 Ah Fatt represents the subaltern fragmented by colonial violence and who is left almost mute by its tools (Nayar, "Bhopal's Gothic" 102). Being a son of parents from different backgrounds (Parsi and Chinese), he does not fit neatly into society in either India or China (Young 156–60). He is a victim—an addict of the very opium trade the novel deals with, and his addiction shows how colonialism secretly and physically destroys people (Ghosh, *SoP* 96). For a significant portion of the narrative, he remains in a nearly catatonic condition, rendered mute by his substance abuse and profound emotional distress. He exemplifies Spivak's perspective on marginalized individuals who struggle to express a coherent narrative about their identities as a result of the extensive cultural and psychological trauma they have endured (Spivak, "Can" 314). He shows his broken sense of self and his inability to express his experiences within a single, dominant discourse when he speaks in a fragmented and multilingual voice (Ghosh, "The Ibis Chrestomathy" 515–18; Roy 75). However, his agency surfaces in crucial ways when he narrates his painful story to Neel in jail. Despite the incoherence, he tries to make his own suffering and violence against his mother known, which is an act that demands to be acknowledged (Ghosh, *SoP* 346). When Neel acts as an important channel for his story by transcribing his broken voice, it finally comes out (Mukherjee, "This Gift of English" 172–76). As an act of silent defiance, he survives his addiction, jail time, and violent treatment. Later, he shows his surprising strength and unexpected resilience

during the storm, when the effect of the drug weakens (Ghosh, *SoP* 424–25). His character clearly shows the heavy price that colonial power oppression takes on a person's mind and voice. He might be the character who best fits Spivak's pessimistic outlook, but then his efforts to articulate his fragmented story with the help of another subaltern character are a deep, sad, and powerful way of proving his existence against forces trying to erase him.

Paulette Lambert

Paulette is a unique character with a mixed identity who chooses to be an outsider (Ghosh 57–60; Mondal 124–27). Being an orphaned daughter of a French botanist and raised by a Bengali ayah, she exists in a complicated space between cultures (Hawley, Amitav Ghosh 113). Although her white skin initially grants her the privilege of colonial class (as seen in her connection to Burnham), she turns away from that identity, as she is deeply involved in Bengali language, culture, and local plant knowledge, which shows her strong connections to the world of the colonised and challenges the strict colonial ideas about race (Young 140; Cleary 232). She embodies a character that aligns with Bhabha's notion of mimicry, which can be seen as disruptive. By utilizing her knowledge and appearance to assimilate into colonial environments, she subsequently challenges these systems by prioritizing local knowledge and assisting other marginalized characters (Bhabha, "Of Mimicry" 131). As a way of self-subalternization, she, disguising herself as a coolie boy, fled from her colonial society and joined the indentured labourer, giving up her colonial privilege to find freedom and belonging with the oppressed, choosing to stand with them rather than staying safe (Carter and Torabully 181). She bridges the two worlds, possessing fluency in English and Bengali, along with an understanding of both cultures (Roy 78; Varughese 98). She exemplifies her forging kinship across racial and social lines on her own terms

when she calls the lascar Jodu 'Jodu-bhai,' confirming her sibling bond with him (Ghosh, *SoP* 205). Her voice is not one of a born subaltern but of affiliation and rejection of colonial hierarchy, using her mixed identity to resist the system from within its gaps.

Zachary Reid and the Lascars

^[1]_[SEP] Son of a freed Black woman and a white American sailor, Zachary Reid lives in an uncertain space between worlds (Ghosh, *SoP* 24–27; Young 133). He always risks his identity being discovered, though he can pass as a white person, which gives him benefits on the ship (Young 145). This shows how vulnerable racial labels were during colonial times (Young 145–47). His situation shows that race is a social idea and that having a mixed background can be a way to challenge the system (Young 160). The lascars, who are sailors from many different ethnic groups (Indian, African, Malay, and Arab), are distinctly the class of subalterns who were vital for the imperial shipping yet were treated as if they were disposable (Balachandran 187). They primarily exhibit their presence in the novel by collaborating and preserving their culture and identity through their networks of solidarity (Carter and Torabully 101–02). Protesting over poor working conditions and food, they show that the oppressed can take action through organised rebellion instead of formal debate (Balachandran 220–21; Tinker 143). They challenge the strict boundaries set by colonialists and nationalists just by existing as a mixed, international community of sailors (Balachandran 210).

Narrative Mechanisms: Agency through Cultural Expression and Solidarity

In *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh employs special narrative techniques to get around the problem of direct subaltern speech and show their power through other forms of expression and collective

bonds (Hawley, “The Ibis” 42). This approach aligns with new subaltern histories that “do not only bridge the divide between political and apolitical frames of reference, but...also provide a new perspective on the dichotomy between loyalty and resistance by acknowledging the nuances of these seemingly opposing stances” (Lauwers, Suodenjoki, and Beyen 1).

Collective Storytelling, Songs, and Hybrid Languages

The official discourse of the coloniser seeks to compel all those they have colonised to remain silent by reducing them to a homogenised identity (Spivak, “Can” 295; Stoler 87–89). In response to this, Ghosh illustrates the vibrant cultural practices of the subalterns, depicting them as means of resistance and a means to preserve their identity (Mukherjee, “This Gift of English” 175; Roy 80). For many, the Ibis represents much more than a ship—it becomes the new locus of identity and belonging as caste, race, and regional labels are set aside. Nayana and Manjula observe, “Ghosh illustrates how migrants, cut off from national, family, and personal connections, create a new identity and embrace the Ibis as their cultural group, deconstructing entrenched conceptions of national and cultural identity” (Nayana and Manjula 221). For example, the indentured labourers on the ship share stories, building a collective memory and a sense that they are sharing the same fate (Mukherjee, “This Gift of English” 175; Roy 80). Songs are used to store cultural information, express sadness and hope, and strengthen their community bond (Mukherjee, *Postcolonial Environments* 149). Most importantly, Ghosh celebrates the linguistic hybridity, as the conversations in the novel are a colourful mix of many languages and dialects, including Bhojpuri, Hindi, Cantonese, Lascar English, and nautical jargon (Ghosh, “Ibis Chrestomathy” 515–20; Roy 74–75). This is notably seen through Zachary’s experience: “Zachary had to familiarize himself with a new set of provisions, bearing no resemblance to the accustomed

hardtack and brined beef; he had to learn to say 'resum' instead to 'rations', and he had to wrap his tongue around the words like 'dal', 'masala' and 'achar'. He had to get used to 'malum' instead of mate, 'serang' for bosom, 'tindal' for bosom's mate, and 'seacunny' for helmsman; he had to memorize a new shipboard vocabulary, which sounded a bit like English and yet not: the rigging became the 'ringeen', 'avast!' was 'bas!', and the cry of the middle morning watch went from 'all's well' to 'alzbel'" (Ghosh, *SoP* 24). This mixing of language is not just for the show; it represents a clever subaltern strategy—it creates a unique linguistic space where characters can talk, understand each other, and express their true selves without using perfect colonial English, resonating with Bill Ashcroft's concept that "Language becomes the medium through which conceptions of 'truth', 'order', and 'reality' become established. Such power is rejected in the emergence of an effective post-colonial voice" (Ashcroft et al. 7) and Mary Louise Pratt's idea of the 'contact zone' where oppressed groups create new ways to communicate. Pratt defines contact zones as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths" (Pratt 4–7). This linguistic hybridity serves as a means for individuals to maneuver through the realm of colonialism, simultaneously resisting its homogenizing influence. It represents an alternative mode of 'expression' that operates beyond the bounds of official authority (Varughese 93; Roy 76–77).

Shared Suffering and Inter-Subaltern Solidarity

Colonial systems, such as the indentured labour system, aimed to dismantle communities and isolate individuals to facilitate control over them (Tinker xvi; Davis 125). However, *Sea of Poppies* shows how these same systems unintentionally forge new bonds between people (Hawley, "The Ibis" 56–57). The horrible experiences that people shared on the *Ibis* while crossing the Kala

Pani became a trial and test for forming new identities and relationships (Ghosh, *SoP* 379). The idea of becoming ‘Jahaz-bhai’ and ‘Jahaz-behen,’ which ignored differences in social class, religion, and background, is perhaps the most potent agency in the novel (Carter and Torabully 107). Deeti’s spiritual vision helps in fostering this new sense of family (Mondal 117). As Nayana and Manjula note, “Ghosh’s protagonists form unexpected caste, race, and culture-spanning relationships. Having been colonised for a long period, the affected people take steps to control injustice and defend acts of tyranny” (Nayana and Manjula 223). Characters like Neel, Ah Faat, Paulette, and Lascars create friendships based on their shared marginality rather than inherited social structures. The unity among these subalterns began out of necessity and grew into genuine friendship, forming a deep resistance to the dehumanising logic of colonialism (Guha, “Prose” 20; Scott 34). It builds a nascent counter-community where people respect and help each other. It gives them a group voice to speak out against the empire’s silencing mechanism (Mukherjee, “This Gift of English” 178). The unity, though fragile and constantly tested, shows the subaltern capacity to forge meaning and relationships in the face of colonial oppression (Guha, *Elementary Aspects* 39).

Colonialism Exploitation as a Catalyst for Subaltern Agency

Ironically, the systems designed to manage and exploit the subalterns frequently result in the emergence of opportunities for them to express themselves and assert their voices (Scott 16; Cleary 230). The indentured labour system, a key part of the colonial economy after slavery, tried to turn people into anonymous, replaceable workers (Tinker 2; Davis 107). The colonial project, however, was “carried out with the intention of mass human and natural resource exploitation that would benefit the British while harming the Indian people greatly” (Nayana and Manjula 222). However, it is precisely under such oppressive and extractive regimes that the seeds of solidarity,

agency, and new forms of resistance are sown among the oppressed. However, on the Ibis, a new kind of social laboratory was created as the confined space of the ship, a microcosm of the colonial world, became a place where new identities and communities, like the 'Jahaz-bhai' bond, are forged (Ghosh, *SoP* 432; Hawley, "The Ibis" 59). Deeti's resistance, from surviving sati to imagining a new future, is fueled by the brutality of the opium economy and the system of indentured servitude (Mondal 119). Her agency is a direct reaction to being exploited by the colonisers. Similarly, the lascars' collective identity and resistance come from their unique role as the maritime colonial workforce (Balachandran 191; Carter and Torabully 132). Their exploitation creates a transnational sense of unity and unique cultural habits that challenge easy categorisation and control (Young 154). *Sea of Poppies* addresses the shortcomings of the official colonial records, which detail the system with precision yet overlook the personal experiences of individuals, by envisioning the rebellious thoughts and collective actions that the system unintentionally produces (Stoler 126; Ghosh). David Scott argues, "colonialism not just creates victims but also complex subjects who are capable of negotiation and resistance" (Scott 93). The ship, in the novel itself, which used to be a slave ship and is now used for indentured labourers, becomes a powerful symbol. It is a ship of oppression that is turned into a vessel of survival and a new community through the actions and dreams of the people on board (Davis 117). This illustrates the ongoing struggle between being stifled and discovering their voices and the strength to take action.

Conclusion

Gayatri Spivak's stark argument that "The subaltern cannot speak" within the discursive frameworks of power is an important reminder of epistemic violence embedded in colonialism and

its historiographies (Spivak, “Can” 271). *Sea of Poppies* does not simply refute this idea. Instead, it clearly portrays how people were silenced by being treated like commodities, having their history erased, being unfairly labelled, and being crushed by patriarchal and hierarchical systems that render specific subjects fundamentally unintelligible to the colonial order (Spivak, “Can” 294; Stoler 4). As recent subaltern studies scholarship notes, “Rather than writing histories of violence or history of social movements, this edited volume places loyalty and resistance on a sliding scale. Similarly, the contributions concentrate on various groups of subalterns, who can be situated in different places on the sliding scale from oppressed subalternity to hegemony” (Lauwers, Suodenjoki, and Beyen 7). For example, Deeti almost faces death on a funeral pyre, Neel endures judicial and prison brutality, the lascars endure dehumanising work, and all of them face the obliterating force of the Kala Pani (Ghosh, *SoP* 92, 203). However, Amitav Ghosh’s brilliance as a writer is that he does not allow this silencing to be the end of the story. Through its detailed characters and deliberate narrative strategies, *Sea of Poppies* illuminates the subtle, strong, and often collective ways in which subaltern subjects take action and make themselves heard (Hawley, “The Ibis” 60). Deeti’s leadership, Kalua’s act of rescue, Neel’s solidarity and mediation, the lascars’ hybrid culture, the forging of ‘jahaaz-bhai’ bonds, and the power of stories, songs, and mixed language are the ways the subaltern speaks, beyond, beneath, or against official colonial discourse (Mondal 120; Mukherjee, “This Gift of English” 177; Roy 80; Varughese 102).

Therefore, Ghosh’s novel presents a complex literary answer to Spivak’s theoretical question (Spivak, “Can” 310). It proposes that even if the system prevents the subaltern from speaking within the dominant hegemonic register, they are not silent or helpless (Guha, *Elementary Aspects* 109). Their voices are heard in their acts of rebellion, in the new communities they build, in how they preserve and transform their culture, simply by their will to survive (Ashcroft et al.

34). Standing as a significant contribution to postcolonial literature precisely, *Sea of Poppies* avoids both the trap of romanticising subaltern resistance and the pitfalls of portraying only victimhood. Instead, the book expertly explores the dynamic area between being suppressed and having agency, showing the many fragmented but powerful ways the victims of the opium trade actually do speak, but only when we learn to listen to their language of action, solidarity, and cultural persistence (Hawley, "The Ibis" 61).

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