

Identity Crisis in Sea of Poppies

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Abstract

The present study examines not only the individuals' quest for representing themselves in various means but also how the characters in Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies attempt to reconstruct their identity by hiding their names, bodies, caste and racial origins and ultimately restart their lives to fill new essence.

Keywords:

Identity , oppression, colonialism, rootlessness, self- invention

Identity construction is a prominent element in this novel but appears to be influenced by the ethico-political and socio-economic dynamics that constantly change characters' roles and trajectories to

reconstruct new identities in new milieu.

Colonial upheaval interrupts the contours of the roles assumed by the persons in the social context. A superficial reading of the novel might give the impression that it is a historical novel set in the colonial period as it records the dramatic turn of events and destinies befalling the main protagonist and her interaction with a hodgepodge of other characters with whom she moves from land to river and climactically travel through sea. But the creation has a deeper level that Ghosh has effortlessly gone to sea depths by carefully peeling its social, economic and political layers and at a still deeper level, the metaphysical. The episodes which follow the main character, Deeti stress at one level, the struggle between capitalism and

socialism; at another level, the narrative appears to be a clash for the hierarchical power. Deeti can also be seen to transform herself into a new identity allowing for meta-fictional reflection and an acceptance of destinies as indicated in her decision to marry Kalua who rescued her from sati.

Even then she did not feel herself to be living in the same sense as before: a curious feeling, of joy mixed with resignation, crept into her heart, for it was as if she really had died and been delivered betimes in rebirth, to her next life: she had shed the body of the old Deeti, with the burden of its karma; she had paid the price her stars had demanded of her, and was free now to create a new destiny as she willed, with whom she chose... (SOP 178).

It seems that Ghosh's manner of constructing Deeti's identity in his narrative is a two dimensional process. On the one

hand, he combines and imaginatively interprets and interweaves the textual traces from the pages of Sir Gierson's diary. Gierson mentions in this historical record about his encounter with the father of a female coolie in a village along the Ganges noting that the man "denied having any such relative, and probably she had gone wrong and been disowned by him" (Bahadur). This diary provides only a little mention of this woman with a processing number, while Ghosh attempts to recreate and fill the blanks left by the archives with his imagination as a novelist and with impulses as an anthropologist.

On the other hand, in the process of narration, Deeti's character is developed as a product of its origins and circumstances; is also a process of self-invention. Moreover, the two aspects are integrally related with regard to the recognition and construction of identity. According to Singh "Though Deeti assumes another name and caste thus erases

her caste identity, she is distinctly recognizable for hereditary caste characteristics.” The meaning of her new name ‘Aditi’ suggests to a mythical Hindu goddess who releases from sin and to a person having a deep inner desire to use her abilities in leadership and to have personal independence. The leadership traits that Deeti possess can be associated to Bass’ transformational leader who creates significant change in the life of people. The followers of such a leader feel trust, admiration, loyalty and respect for the leader who offers an inspiring vision and give them an identity. Towards her fellow people on the ship, Deeti’s conduct is typical of a considerate and trustworthy leader. Soon she comes to be known as bhauji and for many she is a friend, protector and confidant. It happens naturally, as she takes responsibility and speaks for truth and justice. Even Deeti shoulders the responsibility of guarding the

single women like Munia, Sarju and Heeru throughout their journey to Mauritius.

The central theme that runs through the novel is identity. Throughout it we learn how a person’s identity can be defined by different aspects, including appearance, family, relationships, men, oppression and liberation, motherhood, and age. The novel explores the devastating effects of colonialism on individual’s lives, and how it has consequences on the rest of their lives.

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