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Beyond the Autonomous Self: A Postcolonial Critique of Existentialism in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction

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Abstract: This paper examines Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* as a palimpsestic text whose reinterpretation of the Indian Ocean in the 19th century revolves around concepts of diaspora, communal memory, and intercultural fusion. Against the context of the British opium trade and the replacement of slavery with indentured labor, the paper discusses the role played by the Ibis, a former slave ship, as a third space, where a community of displaced and traumatized individuals such as lascars and coolies come together. This paper analyses memorial discourses in the form of farewell songs and extinct languages like lascari to illustrate how Ghosh employs vernacular cosmopolitanism to resist the process of colonization. The analysis shows how crossing the Kala Pani (the black waters) functions as the beginning of the process of cultural metissage that challenges the existing caste-based hierarchy by establishing a concept-based hierarchy through the concept of ship-siblingship of the jahajbhais. Finally, it is argued that Ghosh's polyphonic narrative restores the subaltern history by reclaiming the Indian Ocean as an intensive space of identity construction.

Keywords: *Postcolonialism, Existentialism, Subaltern History, Jahaj-bhai, Vernacular Cosmopolitanism, Indian Ocean Studies*

The Indian Ocean during the mid-19th century is not an ordinary geographic entity, but rather the core of an international economy based on the movement of opium, capital, and labor across vast expanses of sea. Amidst this oceanic setting, Amitav Ghosh's novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008) unfolds its rich layers of subaltern voices against the backdrop of the British Raj's meticulous records. In contrast, Western philosophy, more specifically the Existentialism of the 20th century, has always been preoccupied with the notion of the "autonomous self", a concept that defines the radical individual capable of constructing its own essence in a freedom-filled vacuum. Ghosh's story illustrates that this idea remains a privilege for the colonizer. Unlike the Western existential self, subaltern identity does not arise out of introspective meditation but rather out of the collective act of surviving. The Ibis represents the "third space" of cultural amalgamation through the act of crossing the "Kala Pani" as a means of transformation. The rigid social structures of the Indian mainland, especially those of the caste system, begin to break down as the ship moves closer to the Mauritanian plantations. In their place emerges a "vernacular cosmopolitanism," a resilient form of identity reconstruction born from the shared trauma of their displacement.

The Disintegration of the Autonomous Self

The novel opens with a striking critique of the existentialist ideal of the "autonomous self," showing that the radical freedom to determine one's own essence is an unattainable luxury beneath the oppressive weight of a colonial machine. Human individuality is not a sovereign domain of conscious choice in the rural landscape of nineteenth-century Bihar but rather a brittle reality methodically crushed by the compulsory cultivation of the poppy. Deeti, the main character, finds her high-caste identity reduced to a state of extreme vulnerability as a result of this ecological and economic tyranny invading the most private areas of her life. A crippled veteran of the British Opium Wars, her spouse Hukam Singh is a tragic, physical representation of the trade, his body and mind taken over by an opium-induced slumber that makes him nothing more than a biological extension of the empire's commercial ambitions. The existentialist idea of an autonomous "choice" is shown to be a myth when his death compels Deeti to choose between the violently inevitable options of Sati or sexual subjugation by her kin; instead, the subaltern must negotiate varying degrees of violence and erasure. Deeti experiences a radical "social death," purposefully shedding her name, caste, and ancestry by escaping her village with Kalua, an untouchable. This metaphorical burning away of the self is a frantic, visceral prerequisite for physical survival rather than a path chosen out of existential angst, demonstrating that the inflexible structures of the mainland must completely crumble before any new style of being can begin to emerge.

This physical erasure turns into a systemic, totalizing dehumanization as the story moves from the ancestral soil of the poppy fields to the sterile bureaucracy of the migrant depots and the Ibis's hold. The brutal logic of commoditization underpinning the British East India Company's operations completely ignores the complex inner lives, spiritual ancestry, and unique personalities of its Indian subjects. These diverse human beings are stripped of their historical specificities and legal sovereignty upon entering the colonial apparatus, and they are rebranded under the singular, flattening signifier of "coolie"—a linguistic and ontological cage that reduces their human worth solely to their caloric output and ability to perform manual labor. The British no longer saw the passengers on board the former slave ship Ibis as "beings-for-themselves' but rather as entries in a shipping manifest, human cargo crammed into the cramped, dark depths of the hold. The subaltern position is reduced to a state of total "non-being," where their bodies are merely tools of a divine, worldwide free-market providence, through the paternalistic and clinical lens of individuals such as the merchant Mr. Burnham. The colonial state operates as a comprehensive institution intended to create a clean slate by depriving people of their personal belongings, attire, and indigenous social structures. Ghosh shows how the subaltern experience reveals the existential "void" as a site of profound historical violence, where the autonomous self is methodically crushed by a global empire, forcing the dispossessed to seek a completely different, collective path toward reclamation, whereas traditional Western philosophy sees this void as a space of terrifying personal freedom.

The *Kala Pani* as a Philosophical Void

The move to the ocean signifies a change from institutional dehumanization to a deep ontological crisis when the autonomous self was systematically erased in the colonial hinterland. The Ibis's spatial architecture and the crossing of Kala Pani (Black Water) serve as a philosophical void that destroys individual identity in favor of a community consciousness. The migrants are forced into the frightening Kala Pani, a maritime gulf that serves as both a literal and philosophical void after leaving the Indian landmass. Crossing the "Black Water" was a disastrous taboo in nineteenth-century Hindu mythology, signifying irreversible spiritual death and the complete loss of caste purity. According to Western existentialism, the ultimate catalyst for individual liberty is facing a void, which compels the sovereign ego to recognize its radical independence. However, for the displaced people on board the Ibis, this oceanic emptiness functions with a cruel, equalizing brutality that makes fun of individualistic self-determination. Instead of granting the existential hero's lonesome independence, the Kala Pani consumes the very socio-religious coordinates that formerly enabled these people to define their place in the universe. The expanse of the sea dissolves the strict hierarchies of the Varna (caste) system as the shoreline recedes, leaving both disenfranchised peasants and high-caste Brahmins in a state of existential nakedness.

The Ibis's distinctive spatial architecture, which serves as a Foucaultian "heterotopia"—a real, physical environment functioning on its own transgressive, inverted rules—accelerates this fluid unmaking of the self. The confined, oppressive darkness of the ship's hold fosters extraordinary, visceral intimacy among the migrants, in contrast to the organized surveillance of the mainland. Ghosh uses the physical proximity of people who would not be allowed to interact on land to depict the breakdown of the autonomous self. The shared reality of illness, perspiration, and fear destroys the notion of innate superiority as Neel, a former Raja, is shackled next to Kalua, an untouchable. Individual boundaries are rubbed raw and erased in the furnace, which is the ship's hold. The sovereign "I" is completely useless in this transitional area between a lost past and an unknown future. In the depths of colonial displacement, the self can no longer be maintained as a solo endeavor; instead, it must be renegotiated in the dark with the stranger lying next to you. This is demonstrated by the full decoupling of survival from the prior individual standing.

From Individual to "Jahaj-Bhai"

The essential postcolonial critique of the autonomous ego is represented by the formation of the jahaj-bhai relationship under the grasp of the Ibis, which radically rewrites the terms of existential survival in the novel. According to conventional existentialist, realizing one's own freedom frequently leads to a profound sense of loneliness, which is best summed up by Jean-Paul Sartre's famous statement that "Hell is other people." However, full isolation under a colonial government is a death sentence for the subaltern subject; as a result, Ghosh completely reverses this paradigm, portraying the "Other" as the only place of redemption rather than a danger to autonomy. The sovereign "I" willingly collapses into a protective, interconnected "We" as the migrants share their scant supplies, tend to each other's wounds, and incorporate their sadness into group songs of departure. This radical, chosen kinship of the ship effectively neutralizes the aggression of the white sailors and the commodifying logic of the shipping manifest, replacing the biological families and ancestral lineages lost to the mainland. While Neel, the overthrown Raja, finds meaning as a scribe and instructor for his fellow travelers rather than in his lost title, Deeti changes from a runaway widow into a fiery, communal mother. The explicit declaration of their shared rebirth—“we are jahaj-bhais to each other now... there are no differences between us; we are all of one boat-lineage”—encapsulates this intentional rejection of previous divisions in favor of a shared destiny.

The Linguistic Reconstruction (Lascari)

A postcolonial critique of the existentialist concept of language as a tool for solitary awareness and individual self-determination is staged by the Ibis’s linguistic landscape, which functions as the ultimate, definitive disintegration of the independent self. According to conventional existential theory,

especially within the Sartrean framework, language is the means by which a sovereign, isolated ego creates personal meaning, defines its own reality, and proclaims its subjective freedom against a ridiculous universe. However, Ghosh challenges this personalized paradigm by showing that, in the context of colonial oppression, seeking a pure, solo voice is a trap of erasure; subaltern agency is found in a polyphonic, hybrid vocabulary rather than in the interiority of an autonomous subject. A varied crew of lascars, coolies, and misfits from various geographical backgrounds is thrown into a linguistic matrix in the ship's liminal area, rendering their native, isolated tongues meaningless. Lascari, a flexible marine idiolect that serves as a "vernacular cosmopolitanism" from below, arises from the collision of Bhojpuri, Bengali, Arabic, and Portuguese. Characters like Malum Zikri and the lascars, whose speech is a complex, rhythmic tapestry of instructions and companionship and densely studded with terminology like "lashkar," "chawni," "pice," and "malum," are used in the narrative to effectively show this linguistic "issage." As a mode of communication that is "tossed from hand to hand, like coins in a bazaar," this polyglot language creates a covert, collective architecture that directly challenges the existential solitude of the individual." The characters reject the lonely existential weight of defining oneself in a vacuum by giving up the solitary purity of their ancestral language. Rather, they enter a communal haven where words are part of the "boat-lineage." Finally, Ghosh demonstrates that the subaltern creates a complex, polyphonic tapestry of voices that boldly declares their survival as an interwoven, interconnected community rather than speaking to affirm a solitary, independent cogito.

Conclusion: Beyond the *Cogito* of the Colonizer

Ghosh provides a significant postcolonial remedy for existentialist fear of the "Other." In Being and Nothingness, Sartre argues that the "Other" poses a threat to individual autonomy. This struggle is embodied in the Look (le regard), which objectifies the self and gives rise to the well-known statement in No Exit that "Hell is other people." This worldview is completely reversed by Ghosh. Hell for the passengers in the Ibis's hold is the complete, atomized seclusion required by the plantation and the slave ship, not their buddy in chains. The refugees avoid lonesome despair by negotiating the transformational emptiness of the Kala Pani, a marine chasm that serves as a literalization of existential ludicrousness. The acceptance of Lascari codifies this shift from the Cartesian cogito ("I think, therefore I am") to a subaltern collectivism ("We endure, therefore we are"). The characters resist bad faith (mauvaise foi) by giving up the linguistic purity of their original, isolated dialects in favor of a shared, polyphonic maritime idiolect; they neither seek a lonely, pointless autonomy nor passively accept the "coolie" essence imposed upon them by the British gaze. Rather, they create a "vernacular cosmopolitanism" from below, demonstrating that language under oppression is a communal haven for world-making, rather than a tool for solitary consciousness.

In conclusion, *Sea of Poppies* reframes the nineteenth-century Indian Ocean as a philosophical laboratory where a new human mode emerges rather than as a passive transit zone of imperial expansion. The reader is finally left with a strong theoretical mandate by Ghosh's polyphonic narrative: the subaltern does not find emancipation by strengthening the boundaries of the solitary, autonomous self in the face of historical trauma. True resistance is the voluntary surrender of the "I" to the safe haven of the "We," finding refuge in the radical, shared boat-lineage of collective survival rather than the solitary freedom of the existential hero.

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