



'CASTE' – A CATARACT OF OUR SOCIETY IN AMITVA GHOSH'S *SEA OF POPPIES*

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ABSTRACT

Ghosh's anthropological precision has enabled him to focus on 'humanism' that is shrouded in the name of caste. Caste-ism as to Ghosh is a cataract of our Indian society that blinds people to treat the subjugated as humans.

This paper is an attempt to portray the evils of caste-ism. Ghosh through his characters' brings to light the ruthless danger caused by the fellow human beings to the other in the name of caste. He proves that men who belong to the high caste community lack the core of being human by indulging in inhuman activities, whereas men who are doomed and rejected as inferior lot possess the quality of being human – humanism. Thus Ghosh's prime focus is on establishing bonding amidst humans dispelling the cruel differences like caste, race, nation and nationality.

Keywords : Caste, subjugation, humanism and brotherhood

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Indian society has set up its own framework on categorizing its people in the name of caste. Caste is the branding of people based on their birth and the nature of their work. Initially there were four major divisions, Brahmins – the intellectually elite, Kshathriyas – the brave and valour, Vaishyas – the merchants and the Sudras – the labour community.

The intellectually elite community were treated with reverence and respect. The brave were honoured for their sacrifice for the country and the merchants were sought after for the enormous goods of utility. But the labour community were treated with contempt seldom realizing the fact that they are the people who attend to the daily needs of the hierarchical community. In the course of time this caste system soon transformed itself into 'master-slave' relationship. Omendra Kumar Singh in his

article *Re-inventing Caste: Indian Diaspora in Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies* writes,

Castes were ranked in the hierarchical order, based on birth, which enjoyed that the ruler could do little more than maintain the prevailing social order while requiring the lower castes to do all necessary work for him.(49)

Thus caste has become an identity for every individual even before their birth in the Indian society.

In *Sea of Poppies* (2008) Ghosh has attempted to prove that caste has blindfolded humans from humanism. He proves that caste is just a mark that the society has given and not the ultimate identity. The novel narrates the story of the protagonist Deeti who is mercilessly doomed to destruction in the name of caste by her family

members and her revival or new birth gifted by an untouchable of her village. The novel instils new hope that life could be led happily beyond the man made boundaries like caste, culture, tradition and religion.

The story is arrayed with motley of characters from different sections of the society. The story introduces the protagonist Deeti, and the spell bound consequences of opium cultivation. Her husband Hukum Singh, an opium addict dies prematurely yielding to his addiction. Deeti decides to send her daughter to her brother's house and commit 'sati' than to be the wife of her brother-in-law who is the father of her six year old daughter. She is saved by Kalua, the ox-cart driver whom the society has branded as 'untouchable'. She deems her rescue as a new birth and marries Kalua but the couple were sought after to be killed for dishonouring the family. It portrays their plight for survival as 'grimityas' and their willing choice to join the *Ibis* as indentured labourers.

Caste domination has been to the very nerve of every individual of high caste community. The high caste community people assumed themselves to be the lords over the people whom they brand as inferior community. They have assigned a separate place of dwelling for the inferior lot in the outskirts of the village and are treated with contempt. Kalua, who belong to the leather caste community, is not given the privilege to live in the village. He lived in "the Chamar-basti, a cluster of huts inhabited only by the people of his caste" (SoP 53). He was called as 'Kalua' because of his dark complexion, "it was his colour rather than his size that had earned him the nickname Kalua – 'Blackie'" (SoP 53). Kalua, "was a giant of a man" (SoP 4) known for his strength and valour. Besides his massive built he was naive to the cruelties of the society, that his own brothers have cheated him his share and have made him to live in the cattle pen with his oxen. The act of discrimination based on physical appearance and colour is a proof of caste domination by high caste community.

Kalua made his living by transporting people and goods with an ox cart. Hukum Singh, a high-caste Rajput, required Kalua's ox-cart for commuting to his

factory that is three miles away from his house but had never treated him like a human. He would deliberately avoid looking at him for he "believed that the sight of his face would bode ill for the day ahead" (SoP 4). He would be careful enough to avert his face from glancing at him. He would be seated facing the rear of the cart so that their backs would be in opposite sides. He would also be careful in keeping his lunch bag on his lap in order to prevent his bag touching any of the belongings of the drive, "the former sepoy sat...with his bundle balanced on his lap, to prevent its coming into direct contact with any of the driver's belongings...conversing amicably enough, but never exchanging glances" (SoP 4).

Hukum Singh and Kalua is the representation of the domination by the high caste over the low caste. The society creates an unfriendly atmosphere for low caste people like that of Kalua. In such a situation the question arises whether the society is subjugated to the colonizers or to such beliefs like caste, culture, tradition and religion. If caste is so much deeply rooted in the mind and blood of such high caste people like Hukum Singh, the question of doubt lingers of why then they utilize the facilities offered by people like Kalua, whom they regard as low caste people. If the very act of looking at another human being (Kalua) bodes ill for the day then won't it be a curse to sit in his cart and commute to his factory? Thus the belief of caste could be altered and adjusted according to the convenience of these high caste people.

The quality of life of high caste people proves to be abysmal. The three sport loving landlords who are addicted to gambling hire Kalua to win wrestling matches just for their fun and amusement. They had promised Kalua for an ox cart in exchange of his strength to make his living. Kalua in order to lead a descent and independent life accepted the offer of the landlords and had won several wrestling matches. His victory earned the landlords enormous profits and soon Kalua became their possession. He was also taken to the square of Ramgarh Palace to exhibit his strength in front of the Maharaja of Benares. Kalua suffered his first defeat, shame and loss of dignity.

The young landlords exploited Kalua for their pleasure and amusement. The high caste landlords desired to witness Kalua's lovemaking with the woman, without his consent. They hired Hirabai to be his feast when these landlords were at a considerable distance to watch the act, "there with a select audience watching from the shelter of a marbled screen, Kalua had been led into her presence wearing nothing but a langlot of white cotton around his waist" (SoP 55). But the woman (whore) on seeing Kalua disagreed and humiliated him by screaming, "This animal should be mated with a horse, not a woman..." (SoP 55). This very act of the landlords reveals their pride and carnality.

The bitterness of caste-ism is revealed through the inhuman act of the three high caste landlords. The landlords on loosing huge amount in bet against the Maharaja took revenge on Kalua by implementing the idea given by Hirabai. On a full moon night, in the banks of Ganga, the three landlords riding on the horse tethered Kaula like an animal and brought him to the field, he, "had a halter around his neck and was being led like a horse" (SoP 56). Kalua pressed his plea against such an act of bestiality, "Kalua fell suddenly to his knees, clutching at the thakur's feet: ... forgive me, master... the fault was not mine... This earned him volleys of kicks and curses..." (SoP 56). The very act of bestiality and the pain Kalua suffered excited and amused the so called high caste landlords. Kalua became a creature of amusement in the hands of these inhuman, insane high caste rich people. Thus Kalua becomes a toy in the hands of these beastly human beings forcing him to violate the law of nature and that of a rule from Bible written in the book of Deutronomy, in verse 23 of chapter 27 "Cursed is the man who has sexual relations with any animal" (NIV, Deu. 27:23). Domination over another human being thus existed in the name of caste.

The narrowness of high caste family is explicit through the life of Deeti. Deeti's family regarded her as a tool for reproduction. She was used just as a land to cultivate the seed of their family that too from her brother-in-law even without her knowledge. All the more even when her husband was alive and sick in

bed her brother-in-law persuades her to be his wife, he says,

And this is why I say to you: wouldn't it be best for you to do willingly now what you did before without your knowledge? Your husband and I are brothers after all, 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?... 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" (SoP 157).

Deeti's chastity was robbed off by the whole family as she was only a tool for the growth of their family generation. Her brother-in-law also revealed her the secret of her daughter's fatherhood that happened at the very first night of her wedding, he said, "You know very well how your daughter was conceived – why pretend? You know that you would be childless today if not for me" (SoP157). Such shameful act is considered shameless for the high caste people of Deeti's family. This incident proves that the high caste people were at their liberty to go against the law because there was no one to question them. It was these high caste people who designed and decided the limits and limitations of low caste people like Kalua. High caste people always enjoyed the privilege of going against the law of nature and become inhuman to rule and illtreat other fellow human beings in the name of caste.

The cruelty of the Indian high caste society is portrayed through Deeti's in-law family. When the whole villagers had the stone heart to witness Deeti performing 'sati' it was the low caste Kalua who had the heart of flesh filled with compassion, mercy and humanism to rescue her. She was rescued by Kalua in an unconscious state as she had consumed opium with forethought of escaping the pains from the burns and death from funeral pyre. Deeti later understands that her rescue by Kalua is her new birth and new life. She embraced her new life with warmth forgetting and forgoing all differences and discrimination, whereas her family members were raging in anger to kill Deeti and Kalua for bringing such a disgrace to their family.

The family considers that 'killing' a life for the sake of prestige is no sin than to let them live elsewhere, for the novel indicates that "family's honour won't be restored till they're dead" (SoP 224) . They were constantly sought after to be killed and massacred just in order to restore their lost honour.

The young couple opts to become a 'grimiti' where caste shed its grip on them, "Caste doesn't matter, said the duffadar. All kinds of men are eager to sign up – Brahmins, Ahirs, Chamars, Telis. What matters is that they be young and able-bodied and willing to work" (SoP 205). To Deeti the thought of losing caste was once equal to death. Omendra Kumar Singh in his article "Re-inventing Caste: Indian Diaspora in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*" comments,

Since caste was a given, it remained inalienable from birth to death; so much so, that even after conversion, it would not fade away. The prospect of losing one's caste was, therefore, unthinkable for it permitted no possibility of social life outside the caste system. (49)

But now in retrospection she understood that her previous birth, caste and family had only given her bitter experiences. It had also pushed her to the point of death. Thus Deeti decides to heed the premonition, the revelation about her future that would force her to lose her identity, caste and nationality to embrace a new identity, a new caste in a new land.

Humanism is filled in the heart of the subjugated, inferior lot of the Indian society. Though being subjugated and ill-treated in the name of caste Kalua exhibits his humanistic concern over Hukum Singh in the time of his need. When Deeti summoned him to bring home her sick husband, he immediately came to her aid. All the more Kalua also exhibited his valour in the act of rescuing Deeti from the funeral pyre. His act of rescuing her filled her with joy that she decides to live her new life with Kalua who gifted her a new life, as to Deeti, "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" (SoP 178). Deeti too shed her

belief on her caste and assumes the caste of Kalua as her's – 'Chamars'.

The Indian nation despite of enjoying Independence from British for more than half a decade is still under the dominances of such beliefs like caste, tradition and religion. These beliefs become the cataract of the society that blurs the vision of humanity from humanism on the whole. The novel is evident in depicting that caste and power are indelible cords that bounds humanity to slavery but proves that this cord could be broken with the powerful weapon of humanism.

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