

Intersectionality in Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy*: A Postcolonial Feminist Reading

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersections of caste, class, race, and gender in the *Ibis Trilogy* through a postcolonial feminist framework. Focusing on *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke*, and *Flood of Fire*, the study analyses how Amitav Ghosh represents marginalised individuals negotiating colonial oppression and patriarchal structures in the nineteenth-century Indian Ocean world. The paper argues that the trilogy foregrounds the experiences of subaltern women such as Deeti and Paulette, whose identities are shaped simultaneously by caste discrimination, economic exploitation, racial hierarchies, and gendered violence. Drawing upon the theories of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, this article explores how Ghosh reconstructs colonial history from below by centring displaced labourers, coolies, sailors, and women excluded from dominant historiography. The paper further demonstrates that the ship *Ibis* functions as a liminal and transformative space where rigid social categories are simultaneously challenged and reproduced. Through multilingualism, maritime mobility, and transnational encounters, the trilogy interrogates colonial power and exposes the interconnected structures of domination that shaped the colonial world. Ultimately, the study establishes that the *Ibis Trilogy* redefines postcolonial historiography by integrating feminist and subaltern perspectives into narratives of empire, migration, and globalisation.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Postcolonial Feminism, Subalternity, Caste, Race, Gender, Amitav Ghosh, *Ibis Trilogy*, Colonialism

I.INTRODUCTION

Indian English fiction has increasingly engaged with questions of marginality, migration, colonial exploitation, and cultural displacement. Among contemporary Indian writers, Amitav Ghosh occupies a distinctive position for his historical imagination and his recovery of silenced voices within colonial narratives (Mukherjee 214). His celebrated Ibis Trilogy—comprising *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke*, and *Flood of Fire*—reconstructs the nineteenth-century world shaped by the opium trade, indentured labour, maritime migration, and the imperial expansion of the British Empire (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 92). Through a wide range of characters drawn from different castes, classes, races, and nationalities, Ghosh presents colonial history not merely as a political event but as a lived human experience marked by suffering, resistance, and transformation.

The trilogy foregrounds the harsh realities of colonial oppression where systems of caste hierarchy, racial discrimination, gender inequality, and economic exploitation intersect with one another. In this context, the theory of intersectionality proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw becomes highly significant. Crenshaw argues that oppression functions through overlapping structures of power that create complex forms of marginalisation (Crenshaw 1242). In the Ibis Trilogy, women, lower-caste individuals, peasants, coolies, and indentured labourers are subjected to multiple layers of domination simultaneously. Characters such as Deeti, Kalua, and Paulette reveal how identity is shaped by the combined pressures of patriarchy, caste restrictions, colonial authority, and social exclusion.

Postcolonial feminist criticism further deepens the understanding of these layered oppressions. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak questions whether the subaltern can truly speak within dominant ideological systems (Spivak 271), while Homi K. Bhabha emphasises hybridity, cultural negotiation, and liminality in colonial encounters (Bhabha 4). Ghosh's narrative reflects these theoretical concerns by recovering marginalised histories and giving narrative space to voices traditionally excluded from imperial discourse. Thus, the Ibis Trilogy emerges as a powerful critique of colonialism and a significant exploration of intersectional oppression in the context of nineteenth-century global history.

Intersectionality and Colonial Structures

The colonial world represented in *Sea of Poppies* and the wider Ibis Trilogy is structured through rigid hierarchies of race, caste, class, and gender. British imperialism establishes racial superiority while simultaneously exploiting indigenous social divisions and economic inequalities for commercial gain. The opium trade functions as a powerful instrument of colonial capitalism that reduces human beings

to commodities and sources of labour (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 101). Poor peasants are compelled to cultivate poppy under oppressive colonial policies, and many eventually become indentured labourers transported across the seas under exploitative conditions. Through this representation, Amitav Ghosh exposes the dehumanising consequences of imperial economic systems.

The character of Deeti powerfully illustrates the intersection of caste and gender oppression. As a high-caste woman trapped within a patriarchal marriage, she suffers emotional confinement, domestic violence, and social restriction. Her relationship with Kalua, an untouchable ox-cart driver, directly challenges orthodox caste structures and exposes the brutality of caste-based discrimination (Crenshaw 1245). Deeti's escape from sati becomes an act of resistance against patriarchal domination and religious oppression. As Barnali Sarkar observes, Ghosh reconstructs the discourse of sati through female agency and subjectivity rather than through colonial stereotypes of helpless Indian women (Sarkar 286).

Kalua's experiences similarly reveal how caste oppression intersects with economic exploitation. His lower-caste identity subjects him to violence, humiliation, and exclusion within traditional society (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 145). However, the voyage aboard the *Ibis* creates a liminal and transformative space where established social hierarchies begin to weaken. The ship becomes a site of cultural interaction and negotiation in which migrants from diverse backgrounds are forced into shared experiences. Although caste and class distinctions are not entirely erased, the maritime world challenges fixed social categories and opens possibilities for new identities and solidarities. Scholars therefore interpret the *Ibis* as a transnational and "transmodern" space that destabilises rigid notions of caste, race, and nationhood (Mohan).

Postcolonial Feminism and Women's Resistance

Women in the *Ibis* Trilogy are not portrayed as passive sufferers of colonial oppression; instead, they emerge as powerful agents of resistance who challenge both patriarchal traditions and imperial authority. Through characters such as Deeti and Paulette Lambert, Amitav Ghosh presents women who negotiate survival through courage, mobility, and self-determination (Mishra 73). Their experiences reveal the complex intersections of gender, caste, race, and colonial power that shape women's lives in the nineteenth-century colonial world.

Deeti, one of the central characters in *Sea of Poppies*, resists oppressive patriarchal customs through her refusal to submit to sati and her decision to escape an abusive marriage. Her journey aboard the *Ibis* symbolises liberation from rigid

social structures and the possibility of creating a new identity beyond caste and gender restrictions. Through Deeti's transformation, Ghosh highlights female agency within deeply oppressive circumstances. Similarly, Paulette Lambert represents cultural hybridity and racial ambiguity within colonial society. Although European by birth, she strongly identifies with Indian culture and rejects the racial boundaries imposed by British imperial ideology. Her movement across cultural and social spaces destabilises the fixed binaries of coloniser and colonised described by Homi K. Bhabha in his theory of hybridity (Bhabha 56).

The trilogy also exposes the commodification of female bodies under colonial capitalism. Women are subjected to forced marriages, domestic violence, sexual vulnerability, and exploitative labour systems. Yet Ghosh simultaneously emphasises female solidarity and resilience in the face of oppression. Feminist critics argue that the women in the trilogy negotiate and reshape the altered social realities produced by colonialism and the opium economy (Sekar 291). From a postcolonial feminist perspective, these characters resist both indigenous patriarchy and imperial domination, demonstrating that colonial exploitation cannot be separated from gender and caste relations. In this way, the trilogy reflects Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, where multiple systems of oppression operate simultaneously (Crenshaw 1249).

Subaltern Histories and Maritime Spaces

One of the most significant achievements of Amitav Ghosh in the *Ibis* Trilogy is his recovery of subaltern histories that have long remained absent from official colonial narratives. Conventional imperial histories generally focus on colonial administrators, military officers, merchants, and political elites, while the experiences of ordinary people are marginalised or ignored. In contrast, the trilogy foregrounds the lives of coolies, lascars, convicts, displaced peasants, traders, and women whose lives are deeply shaped by colonial capitalism and the opium economy (Sekar 66). By shifting attention from imperial centres to oppressed communities, Ghosh reconstructs history from below and gives narrative voice to those traditionally excluded from historical discourse.

The trilogy particularly emphasises the agency of subaltern characters who resist social, economic, and colonial oppression despite their marginalised positions. Sindhu Sekar observes that Ghosh redefines national and colonial history through subaltern perspectives and the experiences of ordinary individuals rather than imperial heroes (Sekar 65). Characters such as Deeti, Kalua, Neel, and Zachary Reid challenge dominant power structures through acts of migration, survival, and adaptation. Their stories reveal how colonialism affected everyday life across boundaries of caste, class, race, and gender. In this way, Ghosh questions elitist

historiography and presents history as a complex network of interconnected human experiences.

The sea occupies a central symbolic position within the trilogy. It represents both displacement and possibility, functioning as a space of suffering, migration, cultural interaction, and transformation. Maritime journeys aboard the Ibis create opportunities for individuals from different social and cultural backgrounds to encounter one another and renegotiate identity. At the same time, the sea also reflects the violence of colonial globalisation, as thousands are transported through exploitative systems of trade and indenture. Critics such as James Clifford argue that Ghosh's oceanic imagination moves postcolonial discourse beyond territorial nationalism toward transnational networks of migration, exchange, and cultural hybridity (Clifford 302). Thus, the trilogy presents the ocean as both a site of colonial exploitation and a space of new historical possibilities.

Colonial Capitalism and Human Commodification

One of the central concerns of the Ibis Trilogy is the relationship between colonial capitalism and the commodification of human life. Through the historical background of the opium trade and the indenture system, Amitav Ghosh demonstrates how the British Empire transformed both land and labour into profitable commodities for imperial expansion (Mukherjee 220). The forced cultivation of poppy in rural India symbolises the exploitative economic policies imposed by colonial authorities upon already impoverished peasants. Farmers were compelled to abandon food cultivation in favour of poppy production, which primarily served British commercial interests and the opium trade with China. As a result, local communities experienced deeper poverty, dependency, and social instability.

The trilogy further reveals that colonial capitalism functioned through coercion and structural violence rather than through free economic choice. Poor villagers, especially those belonging to lower castes and marginalised social groups, became trapped within systems of debt, exploitation, and economic dependency. Many were eventually recruited as indentured labourers and transported across oceans to plantations in Mauritius and other colonies under harsh and deceptive contracts. These labourers were treated not as human beings with dignity and agency but as replaceable units of labour whose value depended solely upon their productivity (Bahadur 58). Through their experiences, Ghosh exposes the inhuman realities of the indenture system, which operated as a continuation of exploitation even after the abolition of slavery.

The trilogy also critiques the hypocrisy of colonial modernity and the civilising mission claimed by the British Empire. Colonial rule presented itself as a

force of progress, law, and development, yet its economic foundations depended upon racial domination, violence, and systematic exploitation. In *Flood of Fire*, Ghosh highlights how imperial wealth and commercial prosperity were built upon the suffering of labouring populations across Asia (Ghosh, *Flood of Fire* 233). By foregrounding the voices of peasants, coolies, and displaced migrants, the trilogy challenges imperial narratives of progress and exposes the destructive consequences of colonial capitalism on human lives and social structures.

Migration, Displacement, and Identity Crisis

Migration serves as one of the central narrative forces in the *Ibis Trilogy*. Characters leave their homes due to poverty, social persecution, or economic necessity and enter unfamiliar spaces shaped by colonial power. These journeys across the sea symbolise profound transformations in identity and social belonging (Clifford 304).

The crossing of the *kala pani* or “black water” holds particular significance within Indian cultural traditions. Orthodox caste society considered sea voyages polluting because they disrupted ritual purity and caste boundaries. For indentured labourers aboard the *Ibis*, crossing the ocean therefore represented a break from traditional social structures (Mishra 81).

However, migration also produces psychological and emotional suffering. Many labourers experience homesickness, uncertainty, and fear regarding their futures. They are separated from familiar languages, customs, and social networks. The loss of homeland generates a deep sense of instability, particularly for women and marginalised individuals who already occupy vulnerable positions within society.

At the same time, migration enables characters to redefine themselves beyond the limitations imposed by traditional society. Deeti, for example, escapes patriarchal oppression and caste restrictions through her journey aboard the *Ibis* (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 312). The voyage allows her to imagine new forms of community and identity that would have been impossible within the rigid structures of village life.

The Ibis as a Symbolic and Transformative Space

The ship *Ibis* functions as one of the most powerful symbols in the trilogy. More than merely a physical vessel, it represents a microcosm of colonial society where diverse races, classes, castes, and cultures intersect. The ship brings together

convicts, sailors, traders, widows, labourers, and colonial officers within a confined maritime environment.

The *Ibis* initially appears to challenge rigid social hierarchies because individuals from vastly different backgrounds are forced into close contact. Traditional caste practices become difficult to maintain aboard the ship, particularly when food, water, and labour must be shared collectively. This creates opportunities for social mobility and interpersonal relationships that would have been impossible within conventional village society (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 356).

Yet the ship does not entirely erase inequality. Colonial authority remains firmly embedded within its structure. European officers continue to exercise power over Indian labourers and sailors, while economic and racial hierarchies persist through systems of discipline and control (Mohan).

The ship also symbolises transition and rebirth. Many characters undergo significant psychological transformations during the voyage. Old identities based on caste, family status, and regional affiliation begin to dissolve, allowing new forms of selfhood to emerge.

Resistance and Collective Solidarity

Although the *Ibis Trilogy* depicts extensive oppression and exploitation, it also foregrounds acts of resistance and solidarity among marginalised individuals. Ghosh rejects the portrayal of subaltern characters as passive victims; instead, he emphasises their agency, resilience, and capacity for survival under harsh conditions (Spivak 287).

Resistance in the trilogy often emerges through everyday actions rather than organised political revolution. Characters resist domination by refusing oppressive customs, forming emotional alliances, and preserving cultural dignity. Deeti's escape from sati represents a powerful rejection of patriarchal violence and religious orthodoxy (Sarkar 289).

Similarly, Kalua resists caste oppression through his refusal to accept humiliation and violence passively. His relationship with Deeti challenges deeply rooted social prejudices regarding untouchability and purity.

Collective solidarity becomes particularly important aboard the *Ibis*. Indentured labourers from different linguistic, regional and caste backgrounds gradually develop a sense of shared identity based on common suffering (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 372). These relationships create alternative social structures that challenge colonial and caste-based divisions.

Language, Hybridity, and Cultural Identity

Language plays a crucial role in the trilogy's representation of cultural interaction and identity formation. Ghosh incorporates multiple languages, dialects, and forms of pidgin speech to reflect the diversity of the colonial Indian Ocean world (Hofmeyr 20).

This linguistic plurality reflects the hybrid nature of colonial societies. Characters communicate across cultural and linguistic boundaries, often inventing new forms of expression that combine elements from different traditions. Language, therefore, becomes a site of negotiation and adaptation rather than a fixed marker of identity.

The use of multilingualism also democratises the narrative by giving voice to ordinary labourers, sailors, and migrants. Colonial discourse traditionally privileged the language of imperial authority, but Ghosh disrupts this hierarchy by foregrounding vernacular speech and local idioms (Kertzer 193).

Hybridity emerges not only through language but also through cultural interaction. Characters frequently adopt customs, beliefs, and practices from different communities, demonstrating that identity within colonial spaces remains fluid and dynamic (Bhabha 58).

Rewriting Colonial History from Below

One of the most important contributions of the *Ibis Trilogy* lies in its revisionist approach to history. Traditional colonial narratives often focus on political leaders, military campaigns, and imperial administrators. In contrast, Ghosh reconstructs history from the perspective of ordinary individuals whose experiences have been marginalised or erased from official archives (Mukherjee 219).

Coolies, sailors, widows, convicts, and lower-caste labourers occupy the centre of the narrative, transforming the trilogy into a form of subaltern historiography (Sekar 67). Through these characters, Ghosh reveals the human consequences of imperial expansion and global capitalism.

This focus on marginalised voices aligns closely with postcolonial and Subaltern Studies scholarship, which seeks to recover histories excluded from dominant discourse. Colonial archives often silence or distort the experiences of oppressed communities, particularly women and lower-caste individuals (Spivak 285).

Ultimately, Ghosh's reconstruction of colonial history emphasises interconnectedness rather than national isolation. The Indian Ocean world emerges as a space of global interaction where migration, trade, and cultural exchange connect diverse communities across continents.

II. CONCLUSION

The *Ibis Trilogy* presents a powerful critique of colonial modernity through its exploration of race, caste, class, and gender. By employing a postcolonial feminist framework, the trilogy reveals how multiple systems of oppression intersect in shaping the lives of marginalised individuals.

The characters' experiences demonstrate that identity within colonial society is never singular but always shaped by overlapping structures of power. Women, lower-caste individuals, and indentured labourers negotiate complex forms of exclusion while simultaneously resisting domination through mobility, solidarity, and cultural adaptation.

Ultimately, the trilogy transcends conventional historical fiction by offering an alternative historiography rooted in subaltern agency and transnational human experience. Through maritime spaces, linguistic hybridity, and feminist resistance, Ghosh challenges imperial narratives and reimagines the colonial past from the perspective of the marginalised.

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