

Nuancing the Indentured Migration in Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies

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Abstract : This paper is motivated by the implications of indentured migration depicted in Amitav Ghosh's critically acclaimed novel, *Sea of Poppies* (2008). Ghosh's perspective on the experiences of North Indian indentured labourers moving from their homeland to a distant and unknown location across the seas suggests a radical attitudinal change among the migrants on board the *Ibis*, a schooner chartered to carry the recruits from Calcutta to Mauritius in the late 1830s. The novel unfolds the life-altering trauma of the bonded servants, including their efforts to maintain a sense of self while negotiating significant social and cultural transformations during the voyage which leads to the breakdown of familiar life-worlds. Equally, the migrants are introduced to an alternative network of relationships to ensure their survival away from land. They relinquish their entrenched beliefs and prejudices and commit themselves to a new brotherhood formed by 'ship siblings.' With the official abolition of direct slavery in 1833, the supply of cheap labour to the sugar plantation in British colonies as far-flung as Mauritius and Fiji to East Africa and the Caribbean sharply declined. Around the same time, China's attempt to prohibit the illegal importation of opium from British India into China threatened the lucrative opium trade. To run the ever-profitable plantation colonies with cheap labour, Indian peasants, wrenched from their village economies, were indentured to plantations as *girimityas* (vernacularized from 'agreement') by the colonial government using the ploy of an optional form of recruitment. After the British conquest of the Isle of France in 1810, Mauritius became Britain's premier sugar colony bringing waves of Indian immigrants to the island. In the articulations of their subjectivities one notices how the recruits cope with the alienating drudgery of indenture, mitigate the hardships of the voyage and forge new ties with pragmatic acts of cultural syncretism in a forward-looking autonomous community of 'ship-siblings' following the fracture of traditional identities. This paper tests the hypothesis that Ghosh envisions a kind of futuristic/utopian political collectivity in a hierarchically rigid, racially segregated and identity-obsessed world. In order to ground the claim and frame the complex representations of alliance and love across the boundaries of caste, religion, gender and nation, the essential methodology here is a close textual analysis of the novel. This methodology will be geared to explicate the utopian futurity that the novel gestures towards by underlining new regulations of life during voyage and dissolution of multiple differences among the indentured migrants on board the *Ibis*.

Keywords : indenture, colonial, opium, sugar plantation

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