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Gender Discrimination and Women Subjugation in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*: A Feministic study of Contemporary Indian Society

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Abstract

This paper presents various aspects of gender discrimination and subjugation of women to male dominated society and orders, set by a particular group of society, against women. Women are suffering silently in the hands of patriarchal code and system of society. This discrimination leads to heinous crimes against women and at last they lost their lives. Today the problem of lower sex ratio is a consequence of this gender discrimination. This is a challenge before country how to tackle this social evil and make India a developed country where women and children can live without any fear and threats. This paper also presents the ways which have been accepted by our government and intellectuals to tackle this inequality and discrimination through the processes of strict legal and reasonable laws, constitutional provisions and Acts which are mentioned in Indian Constitution. This study expresses an intense urge for gender justice and elimination of discrimination in its all forms and to establish equality and fraternity in society and a welfare state for all in spite of their cast, creed, religion, gender, status and birth place. Amitav Ghosh has shown the effects of patriarchal orders, along with colonial rule, on women and their lives in Indian society with the help of his novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008). His novel is a commentary on the established orthodoxal orders in society by male which cause women to suffer silently without any resist against this patriarchal dominance.

Keywords- Patriarchy, Society, Subjugation, Liberty

Amitav Ghost is a contemporary Indian-English writer and an eminent novelist. He has written several novels concerning with colonial impact on colonized people as their main themes. His novels reveal the effects of imperial governance on social, political and economic aspects of colonised people. *Sea of Poppies* is one of the novels that he creates as the continuance of almost a real event happened for a woman named Deeti as the consequence of the gender discrimination and presence of patriarchal system in society.

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Ghosh opens *Sea of Poppies* with a rural woman named Deeti with her Daughter Kabutri who live in a very bad condition. Deeti, like the other women in that society, is a woman with a poor family who has to work on the poppy farm to help her husband who works for a British factory. She is married with an opium addicted man, Hukam Singh, who is her brother's friend. In her wedding night, her husband makes her unconscious with opium and she is therefore raped by her brother-in-law, Chandan Singh, instead of her husband because of his infertility. This event happens while some of her husband's relatives participate in this terrific ceremony.

When she discovers anything about that night told by her brother-in-law and while her husband is near to death she is confronted with the shameful request of her brother-in-law on having sexual relationship with her in order to have his support, a request for which she chooses to die with her husband's funeral pyre necessarily. Being saved from Sati by Kalua, Deeti runs away from his homeland to an unknown destination while she surrenders his only daughter to her aunt. In the novel there is a situation in which some landlords request for more women as labourers in order to work in agricultural fields. These labourers are transported on the Ibis in which Deeti has the same destination with the other women gone to Maurities. Indian women experience the same situation on the Ibis just like when on the land. They have hard responsibilities on it such as cleaning, cooking, serving food, and washing the clothes. At the end of the novel Kalua, Deeti's current husband, with some other men escapes from the Ibis and leaves Deeti alone and unsupported. These sufferings of Deeti reflect the gender discrimination and exploitation in the hands of patriarchal system which prevail in the society.

Amitav Ghosh begins his novel with this scene as "the sand was hot enough to sting the soles of their bare feet" and portrays the crucial situation of women and the works considered as intolerable for them (SP, 5). He portrays Kabutri, Deeti's daughter, with her in order to show this idea that this situation will continue for the next generation of the Indian women. One of the main and significant elements that Ghosh attempts to expose in *Sea of Poppies* is the patriarchal system dominated over its different parts which creates an undesirable condition for the Indian women. Ghosh illustrates Deeti who marries Hukam Singh only "because Deeti's own brother, Kesri Singh, had proposed the match. The two men had belonged to the same battalion and had served together in a couple of overseas campaigns" (SP, 21). In a patriarchal society, it is the law of the male member of family that controls their values, dreams and desires. Brother is the representation of the men in a particular community surrounded the women. They control everything in the family, the law, the rules, desires, decisions, personal affairs and the women have to obey, because, as Landry and Maclean state, "they are inescapably patriarchal" (86). She explains the unpleasant situation of the women in patriarchal societies and under their rules. Ghosh describes the marriage ceremony of Deeti and Hukam Singh as if a crime is happening. He focuses on

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those women who advise Deeti for her first night of marriage to show this issue as a natural one which is quite common among the Indian women so that they have accepted it:

The songs had grown increasingly suggestive while she sat waiting for her husband, and her neck and shoulders had tightened in anticipation of the grip that would push her prone on the bed. Her sisters had said: Make it hard for him the first time or he'll give you no peace later; fight and scratch and don't let him touch your breasts. (SP, 22)

Ghosh portrays the behavior of Chandan Singh as a symbol of patriarchal system towards Deeti who is the representation of the Indian women who are living under discrimination and suffer silently exploitation in hands of powerful male centric system.

Although he had never before shown any interest in Hukam Singh's condition, he now began to insist on his right to enter the house in order to sit beside his brother's bed. But once past the door, he paid no attention to his brother and had eyes only for Deeti: even as he was entering he would brush his hand against her thigh. Sitting on his brother's bed, he would look at her and fondle himself through the folds of his dhoti; when Deeti knelt to feed Hukam Singh, he would lean so close as to brush her breasts with his knees and elbows. His advances became so aggressive that Deeti took to hiding a small knife in the folds of her sari, fearing that he might attack her, right on her husband's bed. (SP, 106)

Chandan Singh, in a very rough condition of his brother's life, aims to seduce Deeti to rape her instead of helping her. He creates such an evil circumstance for Deeti so that she has to carry a knife in order to support herself if it is necessary as if she is always ready for a fight. Chandan Singh tries to use the patriarchal rules in order to satisfy Deeti to make love with him. He frightens her from a rule which does not allow daughters to be their father's heir. On the other hand he, like the other men in male-dominated society, sees Deeti as an object which can be used based on his tendencies. Woman is considered as a land that is fertile and can give the desired products of patriarchal society. Ghosh again focuses on the unpleasant condition of the Indian women in male-dominated society that causes them to tolerate more oppression by men.

Responding her brother-in-law's proposal and answering his threat concerning that she will be burnt with her husband in his funeral pyre, Deeti imagines "better by far to die a celebrated death than to be dependent on Chandan Singh, or even to return to her own village, to live out her days as a shameful burden on her brother and her kin" (SP, 108). Obviously Ghosh attempts to portray the position of the Indian women in such a rigid society in which there is no equality between its different groups.

Deeti has to choose to be burnt on fire quite against her will. It is completely clear that this choice is imposed on her by those who are in dominant group. In such a situation the women do not have the right of making decision for themselves because their voice can be heard by nobody.

Spivak condemns Sati and writes "obviously, I am not advocating the killing of widows" (1988: 97). She considers Sati as an act in which a great number of the widows are

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killed without a logical reason. She portrays that Sati is introduced by patriarchal society as a reward for the widowed women and shows the imperial powers as a social mission in order to legitimize itself among the colonized people.

The activities of women are determined based on the masculine norms. Male-dominated society describes Women traditionally as working class who tend to be active and a part of the social activities. Landowners and the political structures created by power community in the colonial period oppress them.

Deeti is a woman who thinks how to repair the roof of their house. Landlords force her, like the other families and women, to work harder in order to grow more poppies to deliver to the English opium factory. Concerning the present situation of Deeti, Spivak writes "caught thus between patriarchy and imperialism, she is in a representative predicament" (1999: 234). Spivak focuses on the women, like Deeti, who are the real victims of the strategies of both the colonizer and patriarchal system. Ghosh shows them known as the working forces even on the ship in which they work for the men as in their families and patriarchal society and writes:

The maistries quickly let it be known that the female migrants would be expected to perform certain menial duties for the officers, guards and overseers. Washing their clothes was one such; sewing buttons, repairing torn seams and so on, was another (...) Paulette elected to share the washing with Heeru and Ratna, while Deeti, Champa and Sarju opted to do the sewing. Munia, on the other hand, managed to snag the only job on board that could be considered remotely glamorous: this was the task of looking after the livestock, which was housed in the ship's boats and consumed almost exclusively by the officers, guards and overseers. (SP, 258)

Ghosh selects some women from various castes and different parts in order to show that the view regarding discrimination as women is common in different positions even on the ship. Regarding the woman living in such a condition, Frantz Fanon declares "she is a woman (...) that (...) is not accepted in this society" (1967: 30). He means that the patriarchal society does not accept the concept of the woman at all.

Women are marginalized from the main activities and events happened in society. The marginalized person cannot take part in social activities both directly and indirectly considered as the consequence of the Western structure and imperial law. In this concern Ashcroft and others state

the perception and description of experience as 'marginal' is a consequence of the binaristic structure of various kinds of dominant discourses, such as patriarchy, imperialism and ethnocentrism, which imply that certain forms of experience are peripheral (ibid, 135).

The patriarchy, imperial or colonial power, and ethnocentrism are the major sources in creating marginality. The unpleasant treatment of people in a patriarchal society regarding women under the authority of the imperial power is one of the main concerns of Ghosh, for

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he assigns to this issue in different parts of the *Sea of Poppies*. He focuses on one of his female characters, Paulette, who does not belong to India or another colonized nation but grows in India with the support of Mr. Burnham Benjamin Bross and in his house. Ghosh describes the situation of the society and the way of their treatment regarding women from the viewpoint of Mr. Burnham:

She has had no teacher other than myself, and has never worshipped at any altar except that of Nature; the trees have been her Scripture and the Earth her Revelation. She has not known anything but Love, Equality and Freedom: I have raised her to revel in that state of liberty that is Nature itself. If she remains here, in the colonies, most particularly in a city like this, where Europe hides its shame and its greed, all that awaits her is degradation: the whites of this town will tear her apart, like vultures and foxes, fighting over a corpse. She will be an innocent thrown before the money-changers who pass themselves off as men of God. (SP, 92)

They divide colonized people into two genders and specify the domination of authority and limitation for each gender. Men represent the superior and dominated group; however, women are the inferior and obedient one.

When imperial power sends the women into the Maurities as the working forces by its controlling rule, they are kept in a place in which they are seen as the inferior people and as the animals by the other people from their own country, the ones who consider themselves as the dominated group.

As to conclude we can say that in India there are many legal efforts which have been accepted to tackle the problems of gender discrimination and women subjugation and to establish gender equality and justice in society. In the Constitution of India there are Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of States Policy which state firmly against inequality and discrimination in all its forms. Indian constitution provides strong Acts and Provisions through Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of State Policy to eliminate inequality and discrimination based on cast, creed, gender ,believes and birth places etc. from Indian society. The constitution of India has certain Acts to enforce gender equality in society;

Article 14's equality provisions,

Article 15's prohibition of sex discrimination and

Article 21's protection of life and personal liberty etc.

These Articles are most relevant to provide gender equality and gender justice in Indian society. The constitution of India covers all aspects of discrimination and inequality so there are six broad categories of Fundamental Rights provision to ensure lesser degree of discrimination and inequality in the society. These six categories are;

- Rights of equality,
- Freedom,
- Protection against exploitation,

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- Freedom of religion,
- Cultural and educational rights and
- Rights to constitutional remedies.

Apart from constitutional provisions and Acts, India is also participating continuously in International conventions and implementing the commitments to ensure safe and secure environment for women, children and backward classes of society to live independently with dignity and liberty.

India is a full supporter of Convention of Elimination of all kinds of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). CEDAW has objectives to eliminate discrimination against women in all forms by any institution, organisation and individual person. India also supports and implements the commitments of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) to protect the lives of women, children and downtrodden people of the society.

Instead of these acts, laws ,commitments and constitutional provisions mass awareness is much necessary to implement these laws because unless people will aware of such practices which are blot on society, only laws cannot establish a safe and secure environment for women without participation of individual citizen of the country. Literature plays important roles to make people aware of social evils and wrong practices which are disturbing social harmony and gender equality. Literature plays unique function to provide entertainment to the masses through irony, comedy and mockery of contemporary social evils and it urges to reform society from all such evils practices.

Though the present scenario of the society has changed and some people are aware of these social evils and practices which are threats for women and children but most of the people are not educated and well aware of the consequences of these inequality and gender discrimination. Mass awareness is most necessary to establish equality and liberty in society with respect to women and children. To establish a welfare state and a utopian state, it is necessary that common people of the society must come forward against practices of gender discrimination and inequality. Now revolution and reformation are taking places in society to change the old, dried and wrong orders and believes in order to establish the new, progressive and reasonable practices.

It is responsibility of our educational institutions, media and literature to make people aware of the consequences of gender discrimination and crime against children and women. These consequences are of self-destructive nature which will destroy the social harmony and human civilisation and will result in extinction of human race from the Earth because without women the existence of human beings is not possible on this Earth. To make this Earth liveable for women and children, it is dire need of time to give women equal rights and liberty same as male in the society so that it may ensure social harmony that will lead to human beings may survive for long time. Therefore people must express their consent with legal, progressive and reasonable practices and must comply with laws, Acts and provisions

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mentioned in the constitution of the country in order to make society safe, secure and congenial for women, children and our future generations.

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