

## Reinventing Caste: Indian Diaspora in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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### Abstract

Profoundly engaged in capturing the outward flow of plantation diaspora from India in the nineteenth century, Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008) focuses on one female *girmitya* named Deeti, a high caste widow from Ghazipur in Uttar Pradesh, who elopes with an untouchable. Taking cue from the pages of Sir George Grierson's diary, Ghosh recovers Deeti from history, not so much with the imagination of a novelist as with the instincts of an anthropologist. Devoted to reinvention, the novel tackles the loss of Deeti's caste, its contested status in the migratory experience and its final recovery as a thematic concern. Though the traditional caste hierarchy was practically lost in the migratory process, I argue, it continued to exist in alternative form and only waited to be found in time. I also argue that the old Indian diaspora's sentimental search for their ancestral roots in India is played out in the novel with the suggestion that their search may reveal some uncomfortable truth they would not like to know.

### Abstract in Malay

Menganalisa secara mendalam pergerakan keluar diaspora perladangan dari Indian di abad ke sembilan belas, karya *Sea of Poppies* (2008) tulisan Amitav Ghosh bertumpu kepada seorang *girmitya* perempuan dari Ghazipur, Uttar Pradesh bernama Deeti, seorang balu dari kasta tinggi yang berkahwin lari dengan seseorang dari kasta terendah. Mengambil pengajaran dari buku catatan harian Sir George Grierson, Ghosh menemui semula Deeti dalam sejarah, bukan sangat sebagai novelis tetapi dengan mata hati seorang ahli antropologi. Bernumpu kepada penciptaan semula, novel ini berkisar tentang kasta Deeti yang hilang, perdebatan status tersebut dalam pengalaman penghijrahan dan penemuannya semua sebagai suatu tema. Walaupun hirarki tradisi kasta hilang dalam process penghijrahan, saya mendebatkan it terus wujud dalam bentuk yang lain dan cuma menunggu untuk ditemui suatu masa nanti. Saya juga membahaskan bahawa pencarian sentimental diaspora India dalam mencari akar-umbi keturunan mereka di dalam novel tersebut, mungkin menyerlahkan hal-hal sebenar yang tidak menyenangkan yang mereka tidak mahu tahu.

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## Keywords

Anthropology, black water, caste, *girmitiya*, plantation colony, reinvention

## Keywords in Malay

Antropologi, black water, kasta, "Girmitiya," koloni ladang, penciptaan semula

Exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. (Rushdie 10)

## Introduction

The quest of the members of the Indian diaspora to reclaim their identity in the homeland as expressed in the above epigraph finds endorsement in Amartya Sen's view that Indian identity is important not only for those who live in India but also "for the very large Indian diaspora across the world – estimated to be 20 million or more in number" (73). Though the overseas Indian diasporic community has retained a sense of affiliation and companionship with India and Indians ever since the system of indentured labour began soon after the abolition of slavery in the British empire in 1833, Indian interest in old Indian diaspora<sup>2</sup> is fairly recent. Vinay Lal notes that the truly heroic saga of nineteenth century indentured labourers, who made their way to various plantation colonies, has received sustained scholarly attention only in the last two decades, and the government of India's interest in this diaspora, indeed acknowledgement of its existence, is even more recent. It is at the annual gatherings known as Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas, initially orchestrated by the government of India in 2003, that the "possibility of embracing the Indians of older diasporic communities as the children of Mother India was first seriously established in the post-independence period" (Lal, "Living in the Shadows" 146). By the mid-1990s, "the 'old' diaspora was no more an exclusively working class diaspora than the 'new' diaspora was a diaspora comprising professional elites" (Lal, "Living in the Shadows" 147). The Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas gatherings were "designed to invoke an ecumenical conception of the Indian diaspora that the government of India has almost always disowned" (Lal, "Living in the Shadows" 147). In response to this new found Indian interest in them, the old Indian diaspora vigorously started inventing their caste roots,

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<sup>2</sup> Vijay Mishra has categorised Indian diaspora into two relatively autonomous and largely exclusive groups which he designates as "diasporas of classical capital and late modern capital. Classical capital produced a peasant plantation diaspora (as to be molded into a working class) built around a single commodity, sugar; late modern capital produced a more mobile, economically astute, and essentially middle-class diaspora which came into being as the result of the loosening of the racist immigration policies in settler nations and in Europe" ("Memory and Recall" 91). For a more detailed discussion, see Mishra's "New Lamps."

which their ancestors had lost by crossing the black waters. Mauritian Prime Minister, Navin Ramgoolam, unveiled the statue of his father and the first Prime Minister of Mauritius, Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, in his ancestral village Hargaon, in the Bhojpur district of Bihar, in 2008. Earlier, Mauritian President Caseem Uteem had made a brief visit to Doobhawan village in the Azamgarh district of Uttar Pradesh in 1996 to meet his fifth cousin. Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, Basdeo Panday, visited Lakshmanpur village in the Azamgarh district of Uttar Pradesh in 1997 to discover his long forgotten relatives, and Kamla Persad Bissessar, Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, in her most recent visit to India as late as January, 2012, found her ancestral roots in Bhelupur village of Bihar. What is conspicuous by its very commonality in the discovery of all these diasporic leaders is that they all found their roots in higher castes – a revelation which calls for our attention to the nature of diasporic caste, which was long since lost. I argue in this essay that Amitav Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies* shows that although traditional caste hierarchy in the old Indian diaspora was practically lost over time, it continued to exist in some form and waited to be found. I also argue that the novel treats the Indian diasporic community's enthusiastic search for their lost roots in India with a strong degree of ambivalence suggesting that at the end of this search there may be lying a truth they would not like to know.

### **Black Waters**

For several millennia, caste constituted the core of social and religious life in India. Rooted in religion and based on the division of labour, the caste system in India, among other things, dictated the type of occupation a person would pursue and the social interactions a person would have. Castes were ranked in hierarchical order, based on birth, which enjoined that the ruler would do little more than maintain the prevailing social order while requiring the lower castes to do all the necessary work for him. 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. The crossing of the sea, the *kala pani*, Vijay Mishra observes, has remained a powerful symbol of travel across troubled waters to lands from which no body returned home. In his article "Memory and Recall" Mishra associates *kala pani* with the more general Hindu fear of crossing the sea, for it meant "loss of caste as well as indenture and servitude for earlier migrants to the Empire's plantation colonies" (90). Hindu traditions have it that the sea was like the netherworld, which in spite of being touched by the Ganges as she disgorged her holy waters in it, remained a forbidding place from which no traveller returned (89). Mishra notes that all major writers of the plantation Indian diaspora – for instance, Abhimanyu Anant (*Lal Pasina*) and V.S. Naipaul (*A House for Mr. Bismarck*) – have

worked this symbol into their works. Unfreezing the meaning of *kala pani* from the OED, Mishra maintains that the more specific meaning of transportation and loss of caste is found in Mulk Raj Anand's *Across the Black Waters* (1940) and Paul Scott's *Jewel in the Crown* (1966). However, ultimate implication of losing one's caste is implied in the citation from Paul Scott's *Jewel in the Crown* (1966): "Unclean by the traditional Hindu standards and custom because I had crossed the black water" (qtd. in Mishra, "Memory and Recall" 90). Mishra further notes that, according to R.S. McGregor, in its Hindi usage *kala pani* meant transportation to the Andaman Island penal colony while in popular imagination the idea of transportation has been transformed into a more generic meaning of "life-imprisonment" (90).

In *Sea of Poppies* Amitav Ghosh amplifies these associations in more descriptive terms. In the novel, Deeti, the protagonist, who turns into a *girmitiya* on board to Mauritius plantation colony at the sight of *girmitiyas*,<sup>3</sup> reflects on the implication of crossing the black water and thereby on one's caste:

She tried to imagine what it would be like to be in their place, to know that you were forever an outcaste; to know that you would never again enter your father's house; that you would never throw your arms around your mother; never eat a meal with your sisters and brothers; never feel the cleansing touch of Ganga. And to know also that for the rest of your days you would eke out a living on some wild, demon-plagued land. (72)

Unsentimentally, Ghosh adds that the silver that was paid for them "went to their families, and they were taken away, never to be seen again; they vanished, as if into the netherworld" (72). Here Ghosh's choice of words and phrases – "never to be seen again," "vanished," "into the netherworld" – skilfully implies the consequences of the loss of caste which signified an ignominious death.

### **Translating Caste**

A trained social anthropologist, Amitav Ghosh admits that his writing has been influenced by his training but, at the same time, asserting the limitations of anthropology, pronounces his preference for fiction:

At the same time I also felt the limitations of anthropology very keenly. My essential interest is in people and their lives, histories and predicaments.

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<sup>3</sup> The indentured labourers who went to work on overseas plantation colonies in the nineteenth century were called *girmitiyas*. Ghosh informs us that "they were so-called because in exchange for money, their names were entered on 'girmits' – agreements written on pieces of paper. The silver that was paid for them went to their families, and they were taken away, never to be seen again" (*Sea of Poppies* 72).

There is not much room for this in formal anthropology, which is more interested in abstractions and generalizations. So I realized very early that I did not share the basic concerns of anthropology and that fiction is my proper metier. (Hawley 7)

It is, therefore, hardly surprising that Ghosh pursues his anthropological interests in fiction. Gaiutra Bahadur, in his review of *Sea of Poppies*, reveals that Ghosh excavates Deeti from the pages of Sir George Grierson's diary who was sent by the British government in 1883, to look into the alleged abuses in the recruitment of indentured labourers from India. In his diary Grierson records an encounter with the father of one female coolie in a village along the Ganges, noting that the man "denied having any such relative, and probably she had gone wrong and been disowned by him." (qtd. in Bahadur). The historical record provides only a trace of this woman: a name, a processing number, a year of emigration. Ghosh attempts to fill the blanks left by the archives with his imagination, but he does so more with the instincts of an anthropologist than that of a novelist for, Ghosh admits, "if history is of interest to me it is because it provides instances of unusual and extraordinary predicaments" (Hawley 6). Ghosh has long been preoccupied with figures like Deeti, the protagonist in the novel. Earlier *In an Antique Land* he had discovered as a footnote, Bomma, the Indian slave to the Tunisian Jew, Abraham Ben Yiju, who initially appears in the letter written in 1148 by the trader Khalafibn Ishaq to his friend, Abraham Ben Yiju. The letter, bearing the catalogue number MS H. 6 of the National and University Library in Jerusalem, provided Ghosh impetus to track Bomma's trail (Mongia 78).

But in *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh has designs on Deeti, the unfortunate protagonist of the novel. Poverty-stricken and much wronged in life, Deeti is resigned to die on her husband's funeral pyre, until she is rescued dramatically by Kalua, the untouchable, with whom she elopes only to land on a ship called the *Ibis*, in Calcutta. Commenting on Deeti's escapade, Bahadur argues that "many of the women who fled India as coolies were indeed upper-caste widows, but there were no brawny heroes to snatch them from their fates. They simply left, alone – an act dramatic enough for that time and place that it shouldn't need the enhancements of pulp plot." Thus at the cost of the plausibility of plot, Deeti and Kalua are placed on the *Ibis* in the company of other gimitiyas which constituted the outward flowing nineteenth century plantation diaspora. The majority of them are from the opium-producing countryside, forced by famine or scandal to seek a new life elsewhere. Others were beggars, hawkers, artisans, the agricultural castes, untouchables, bonded labourers, and a "small number of Brahmins and higher castes" (Parekh 110).

Ghosh endows Deeti with the traditional characteristics of upper caste Hindu while Kalua, the untouchable, behaves like one from the lower caste.

Though Deeti assumes another name and caste and thus erases her caste identity, she is distinctly recognisable for her hereditary caste characteristics. It was her traditional high caste qualities which enabled her to assume leadership of girmityas on the *Ibis* and, by implication, on the plantation colony of Mauritius. She introduces herself and Kalua to other girmityas as “Chamars” (234), of the leather workers’ caste. It is significant that Ghosh makes Deeti lose her upper caste identity instead of elevating Kalua to a higher caste. Ghosh, a social anthropologist, suggests that having suffered ignominy, insult and abuse for thousands of years, untouchables could not behave like upper caste people, for in India it is the caste that determined then how a particular person would be behaving towards the other castes in society. Kalua’s obsequious behaviour with Deeti’s husband Hukam Singh, daffadar Ramsharan ji, Gomusta, subedar Bhyron Singh and others abundantly proves this view. His fictitious elevation to higher caste would certainly have made him vulnerable, and led both Kalua and Deeti to death, for the novel indicates that “family’s honour won’t be restored till they’re dead” (224).

Deeti’s leadership qualities are made to compensate for the loss of her caste identity as Gosh carefully translates her distinctly high caste characteristics in terms of distinct leadership qualities. In other words, Deeti’s high caste Hindu identity is coded in terms of leadership qualities. In the hierarchical nature of caste and high caste and qualities of leadership and command being synonymous to each other, Deeti’s caste privilege continues to exist and is respected even when she assumes a lower caste. The idea that lower caste people were seen as only a dribbling mass of humans devoid of any leadership qualities finds expression in Ghosh’s earlier novel, *The Hungry Tide* (2005) as well. In that novel the Dalit refugees of the Morichjhapi revolution have been considered as “an abstract mass of statistical units” (Singh 248). There are no more individuals on the Morichjhāpi island. In the entire revolution no leadership was raised to be followed except the non-descript leaders of wards in which the island was divided: “People in charge of each of these wards took decisions and helped organize every essential activity” (*The Hungry Tide* 172). On the contrary, in *Sea of Poppies* Deeti is shown to be a leader in the making. Early in the novel, she goes to bring back her ailing husband from the opium factory in Ghazipur where she endures the jibes of the factory officers because her husband is an opium addict. Far from being humbled by the rude behaviour of the factory workers, she snaps back at sirdars who called her husband “afeemkhor”: “And who are you to speak to me like that? How would you earn your living if not for afeemkhors” (70-71). Her leadership qualities become noticeable again when on the Calcutta-bound boat she puts those men in their places “who tease and provoke and do all kinds of chherkani” with the young and pretty women (243). She would command Kalua to “go and set him right” and tell him “don’t you dare do it again, or you’ll find your liver on the wrong

side of your belly” (244). But Kalua “would go lumbering over” and ask, in his polite way, “tell me truthfully, were you bothering that girl? Could you tell me why?” (244).

In an effort to bring out the leadership qualities of Deeti on the ship and, by implication, on the plantation colony as well, in *Sea of Poppies*, a former slave ship, called the *Ibis*, refitted to transport coolies from Calcutta to the sugar estates of Mauritius, is double coded by Ghosh. At one level the *Ibis* is a vessel to transport the girmitiyas from India to the plantation colony of Mauritius, but on the other, it is a microcosm of the plantation colony itself. Deeti’s description of the *Ibis* that “as a vessel that was the Mother-Father of her new family, a great wooden *mai-bap*, an adoptive ancestor and parent of dynasties to come” (356-57) is suggestive of their new adoptive homeland, the plantation colony of Mauritius. With the rationing of food and water, the living conditions of the girmitiyas on the *Ibis* are hardly distinguishable from those on the plantation colony. Besides, there are overseers and *maistris* to watch their activities, *subedar* and *silahdars* to beat them down and the white colonial officers to be served. Women were also required to do menial work like washing clothes, sewing buttons, repairing seams and taking care of the livestock. The other activities suggestive of a plantation colony include occasional protests and confrontations between the authorities on the ship and the girmitiyas. One of the most significant incidents evocative of the plantation colony milieu on the ship is the marriage between Ecka Nack, a hillman from Chhota Nagpur and Heeru, a deserted woman from the plains of Bihar. This marriage could certainly have been performed on the land, had it not been Ghosh’s intention to reconstruct a plantation colony on the ship itself. In this symbolic plantation colony on the *Ibis*, Deeti’s conduct is typical of an upper caste person. In the event of death of a young Muslim *julaha*, she dares overseers and *maistris* to throw the dead body in the sea waters unceremoniously, and succeeds in wresting the concession from the authorities for a respectful burial of the dead. Again, she dares to confront the authorities when she hears Munia, an orphaned girl, crying for help. Receiving no answer from the overseers and *maistris* to her knocking at the door of *dabusa*, she turns towards the girmitiyas for not volunteering and exhorts them to act: ““And you?” She said to her fellow migrants. ‘Why’re you all so quiet now? You were making enough noise a few minutes ago. Come on! Let’s see if we can’t rattle the masts on this ship; let’s see how long they can ignore us”” (472). However, not merely a confrontationist, she is a persuasive mediator, a sensitive human, organiser of events and a trustworthy person. She cleverly, yet sensitively, mediates between Ecka Nack and Heeru, fixes their marriage and finally makes it take place with all the possible rites and rituals on the ship. Sarju, the oldest of the female girmitiyas on the *Ibis*, passes on her most valued treasure of life – the seeds of

Ganja, Dhatura and the best of Benares poppy – to Deeti, her most trustworthy and able friend, to make best use of it before she dies onboard (451).

There is no denying the fact that caste lost much of its hierarchical nature on the ship and later, on the plantation colonies, yet it did not disappear altogether. In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy theorises the space of the ship which involves “the flows, exchanges, and in-between elements” (190) of the migrants’ identity. Working upon Gilroy’s focus on diasporic study of the Black Atlantic, Vijay Mishra calls the ship as first of the cultural units in which the social relations were “re-sited and re-negotiated” (“New Lamps” 74). Mishra further notes that in the case of the old Indian diaspora, a ship “produced a site in which caste purities were largely lost (after all, crossing the dark ocean, the *kalapani*, signified the loss of caste) as well as a new form of socialization that went by the name of *jahaji-bhai* (ship-brotherhood)” emerged (“New Lamps” 74). Similar observations have been made by Bhikhu Parekh who produces a detailed account of *girmitiyas*’ day-to-day life from the beginning of their journey to the plantation colony:

From the very day they assembled at the port, they were huddled together, allocated work indiscriminately, shared facilities, ate the same food, slept together, and in general lost all visible signs of caste differentiation. Barracks on the plantations reinforced the trend. The migratory experience also generated the spirit of solidarity and weakened the sense of hierarchy. Most of the indentured Hindus belonged to low castes and had every reason to efface all traces of their social origin. In a new environment the caste had no occupational relevance either. For these and related reasons the caste system weakened over time among the indentured Hindus. (126)

But Parekh does not fail to note that caste system was “so deeply embedded” in the “consciousness and way of life” of the overseas diaspora that it continued to exist as an “important but largely innocuous marker of their social identity” (126). In *Sea of Poppies*, though Deeti having done away the caste differences among the *girmitiyas* declares that from now on “we are jahaj-bhai and jahaj-bahen” (356), she herself is not able to reconcile with the idea that crossing the black water means the loss of caste. She reflects on her identity and is filled with a sense of perpetual remorse and guilt:

If the Black Water could really drown the past, then why should she, Deeti, still be hearing voices in the recesses of her head, condemning her for running away with Kalua? Why should she know that no matter how hard she tried, she would never be able to silence the whispers that told her she would suffer for what she had done – not just today or tomorrow, but for kalpas and yugas through lifetime after lifetime, into eternity. (431)



In another instance, it is evidenced in *Sea of Poppies*, as one of the *girmityas*, Jhugroo, is said to always “set friend against friend, caste against caste” on the ship (397). If the caste is lost, how can one caste be set against the other? A similar argument is furnished in Mohan K. Gautam’s critical take on Munshi Rahman Khan’s<sup>4</sup> autobiography, *Jeevan Prakash*, which offers us an opportunity to make sense of the continuance of caste in the plantation colonies. Gautam notes that the “Brahmins and Thakurs” who migrated to Surinam had maintained their original castes while persons who belonged to lower castes like “Kurmi, Chamar, Kori, Ahir, Lodh, Hajjam, Kakar, Musahir and Pasi” did not have surnames. He further notes that in his autobiography, Munshi records that when his group of 6 people was taken by boat to the plantation of Lust en Rust, his boatman was a Brahmin. Gautam argues that if the caste lost its hierarchy in the main depot of Calcutta and on the ship, and finally on the plantation, then “why he found the Brahmins in Surinam” (108). Ghosh’s own authorial comment in *Sea of Poppies* explicitly confirms the continuance of the caste in the original: “While many would choose to recast their origins, inventing grand and fanciful lineages for themselves, there would always remain a few who clung steadfastly to the truth” (284-85).

Ghosh does not, in fact, subject the readers of *Sea of Poppies* with the trouble of decoding Deeti’s leadership in terms of caste. In the last pages of the novel, Deeti is recognised to be a “woman of high caste – a relative of the subedar as it happens” (481). This dramatic intervention serves mainly two purposes: Deeti redeems her lost caste, and Kalua is mercilessly flogged before he is made to disappear from the scene for ever. It is true that the subedar did not reclaim Deeti for the gravity of the sin she had committed; it is also significant that she is allowed to sail unharmed, no more as a Chamarin but a high caste woman. In Deeti’s losing her caste and regaining it, *Sea of Poppies* makes a statement on the nature of the caste of overseas diasporic Indian community which continues in alternative but recognisable terms only to be found in its original form in their original homeland.

### Footnoting History

However, in the process of narrating Deeti’s rise to leadership, Ghosh suggestively raises the question of expendability of Kalua, Deeti’s Other. Though Ghosh refuses to be categorised as a political writer, his interest in footnoting history with his fiction is well established. Brinda Bose observes that

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<sup>4</sup> Munshi Rahman Khan was an emigrant from India who came to Surinam in 1898. Since he used to write a daily diary, he compiled his diaries in 1943 and made it the basis of his autobiography, *Jeevan Prakasa* (98). His writings are important, for he records in them his experiences right from his recruitment, his stay in the sub-depot in Kanpur, travel to Calcutta, stay in the main depot at Golden Reach harbour waiting for the ship, the ship *Avon*’s three month journey to Surinam and his work in the plantation of Lust en Rust (Gautam 99).

clearly, “those dilemmas of diaspora that are engendered in the margins of history are foregrounded in Ghosh” (237). He expresses keen interest in historical themes and constantly looks for ways in which he can render history into fiction; in a certain sense he is also seeking to pit fiction against history, to challenge the “latter’s implacability with the former’s potentially more humane qualities” (Bose 238). In a recent interview Ghosh defends his choice of fiction over history: “I think the difference between history historians write and the history fiction writers write is that fiction writers write about the human history” (“Shadow Script” 30, qtd. in Bose 238).

Deeti’s rise to leadership in *Sea of Poppies* recalls Jane Eyre’s personal progress in Charlotte Bronte’s novel *Jane Eyre* which is predicated upon the violent effacement of the half-caste Bartha Mason. Bartha’s function in the novel, Gayatri Spivak in her seminal critique of the book tells us, “is to render indeterminate the boundary between human and animal and thereby weaken her entitlement under the spirit if not the letter of the Law” (Spivak 249). According to Leela Gandhi, Spivak insists that “Jane’s rise to the licit centre of the novel requires Bartha’s displacement to the fuzzy margins of the narrative consciousness” (90-91). Kalua is instrumental in Deeti’s journey from her village in Ghazipur to Calcutta and in establishing her leadership on the *Ibis*. Kalua’s massive frame is always a protective cover for Deeti. On one occasion Deeti’s leadership is challenged by the quick-tongued and quick-witted Jhugroo, who earned a certain kind of following among the young and the more credulous girmityas. But Kalua’s menacing intervention puts an end to this challenge once and for all.

Kalua’s disappearance after having served as an instrument in Deeti’s progress to leadership on the *Ibis* requires him to be Deeti’s perpetual Other in Ghosh’s scheme of things in the novel. Ghosh, therefore, pursues caste in terms of race<sup>5</sup> to fit Kalua in the category of the species which according to the German anthropologist Theodor Waitz is expendable without compunction. In his *Introduction to Anthropology*, Waitz asserts:

If there be various species of mankind, there must be a natural aristocracy among them, a dominant white species as opposed to the lower races who by their origin are destined to serve the nobility of mankind, and may be tamed, trained, and used like domestic animals, or... fattened or used for]

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<sup>5</sup> Ghosh’s endeavour to pursue Kalua in terms of race recalls Charlotte Bronte’s use of the term “caste” for “race” in her novel *Jane Eyre*. In the novel, the young orphan Jane chooses to go to a boarding house rather than to her poorer relations because she was not “heroic enough to purchase liberty at the price of caste” (*Jane Eyre* 19). The concept of caste is marked here by a “social, economic and religious hierarchy overlaid with connotations of purity and pollution, similar to those that shape the idea of race. For the young Jane, a movement down the class ladder is understood as a transgression of caste, a virtual crossing of racial divides” (Lomba 123).

physiological or other experiments without any compunction. (qtd. in Young 7)

Kalua, therefore, is required to have an impulsive nature, a rhythmic consciousness and the physical frame needed to be cast in the primitive mould. Drawing on the works of Senghor, Irele and Cesaire, Loomba concludes, “African civilization is described in terms of precisely those supposed markers of African life that had been for so long reviled in colonialist thought – sensuality, rhythm, earthiness and a primeval past” (212). The primitive attributes of Kalua cast him in Deeti’s perpetual Other. He is “a giant of a man” (4), “two-legged beast” (55) and a “whirling demon” (177). “He earned him the nickname Kalua – ‘Blackie’ – for his skin had the shining, polished tint of an oiled whetstone” (53-54). Kalua possessed a primitive rhythm that speaks truly to the consciousness even before thought can form. *Sea of Poppies* informs us that his “body had gained at the expense of his mind, which had remained slow, simple and trusting” (54) and a “patient enumeration happened in his head whether he liked it or not” (174). At home “in his ox-cart, it had been a habit with Kalua to count the squeaks of his wheel to keep an accurate measure of time and distance” (478). He intuitively knows the dangers ahead and acts on impulses, as we see him recovering Deeti from her funeral pyre or attacking the subedar on the *Ibis*.

In the light of Arjun Appadurai’s observation that Anthropology “operates through an album or anthology of images (changing over time, to be sure) whereby some feature of a group is seen as quintessential to the group and as especially true of that group in contrasts with other groups” (39), Kalua’s disappearance from the *Ibis* signifies the disappearance of upper castes’ Others on the plantation colony. As caste had lost its occupational relevance, the indentured Hindus who belonged to low castes “had every reason to efface all traces of their social origin” (Parekh 126). In other words, as *Sea of Poppies* informs us, they “invented grand and fanciful lineages for themselves” (284) putting an end to their being the Other of the upper caste Hindus while caste as a marker leading to recognisable social identity remained important for the upper caste Hindus. Appadurai’s comment is significant in this regard. “In the discourse of anthropology,” Appadurai notes, “hierarchy is what is most true of India and it is truer of India than of any other place” (40). Intensely conscious of their hierarchy and caste in India, Bhikhu Parekh tells us, the Brahmins kept caste as much alive as the circumstances permitted (126).

### Reinventing Caste

Deeti’s recognition as a high caste woman in some degree corresponds to members of the Indian diaspora’s recognition of their roots in their lost homeland. But what is significant in the recovery of Deeti’s original caste is that

it is inevitably accompanied by the scandal she had committed and which compelled her to flee. Ghosh suggests that for the overseas Indian diasporics in pursuit of their lost roots, discovery of their roots may also turn out to be a discovery of some sleazy story at the root of their ancestor's migration from India as indentured labourer. In recent years as the Indian attitude to overseas diaspora has undergone important changes, and as more and more Indians came into contact with them, the overseas diasporics have enthusiastically reciprocated the Indian gesture. Navinchandra Ramgoolam, Prime Minister of Mauritius, unveiled the statue of his father and the first Prime Minister of Mauritius, Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, on January 17, 2008 in his ancestral village Hargaon in Bhojpur district of Bihar. However, two more villages, Chhatturpur and Keshhopur in Buxar district of Bihar staked their claim on Seewoosagur's family. Villagers from Chhatturpur sent a fax to the embassy of Mauritius claiming that Seewoosagur was the son of one Swaymvar Ojha who had been taken as a bonded labourer to the island nation in 1871 by the British. Kamla Bissessar, Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, whose great grandfather, Ramlakhan Mishra, set out for the Caribbean islands in 1889 as girmitya labourer, echoed sentimentally when she paid a visit to her native village, Bhelupur, in Bihar, on January 11, 2012: "Whatever I am today is because Bihar is in my DNA and whatever my ancestors taught me" (Ahmad). Earlier Basdeo Panday, Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, discovered and visited his relatives in Lakshamanpur village of Azamgarh district of Uttar Pradesh on January 26, 1997. These stories of visiting leaders of the diaspora remind one of the story of Deeti's loss of caste, her assumption of the diasporic leadership and then, finally, the recovery of her lost caste, carrying within it the necessary possibility of a scandal or an unpleasant story.

However, the fact remains, that the interest of the members of the overseas Indian in India is "largely nostalgic, sentimental, patchy and without a focus" (Parekh 144). As far back as in 1948, a year after Indian independence, Parekh notes, several Trinidad Indians threatened to commit mass suicide unless their government agreed to facilitate their return to India. In spite of Nehru's appeal they went to India, but only some stayed back. In 1947 hundreds of Indians in Jamaica "organized 'back to India' demonstrations, but nothing came out of these" (Parekh 145). It has been noted that for many overseas Indians, increased contact with India meant picking up the thread of history after nearly a century and a half – a period during which both India and the overseas diaspora had "undergone profound changes" resulting in the union which "was not always happy" (Parekh 145).

This sentimental interest, intense and confused, was generated by the tremendous loss which the members of the old Indian diaspora suffered after being "cast adrift by the black waters, damned as a consequence by loss of caste, the hope of return denied by distance" (Mishra, "Memory and Recall")

92). Totaram Sanadhya notes that even when some returned, the rejection by the homeland was uncompromising (ctd. in Mishra, “Memory and Recall” 92). Deprived of their homeland, the Indian diaspora turned to memory “as a way of making sense of their lives” (Mishra, “Memory and Recall” 92). But it was the kind of a traumatised memory Juliet Mitchell noted by asserting that it “must create a breach in a protective covering of such severity that it cannot be coped with by the usual mechanisms by which we deal with pain or loss” (121). The trauma of displacement was further reinforced by the arrival of new diaspora who brought with them fresh stories and songs of the homeland (Mishra, “Memory and Recall” 92).

Needless to say, the memory of loss instantiates and compels the Indian diaspora to look back nostalgically to their lost homeland, as Salman Rushdie states in his famous work *Imaginary Homelands* (10), but Rushdie further suggests in the same book that “if we look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation from India most inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost” (10). Stuart Hall’s conception of diasporic identity is particularly illuminating and helpful in comprehending the essence of Rushdie’s statement:

There is, however, a second, related but different view of cultural identity. This second position recognizes that, as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute ‘what we really are’; or rather – since history has intervened – ‘what we have become.’ We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about ‘one experience, one identity,’ without acknowledging its other side – the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute, precisely, the Caribbeans’ uniqueness. Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being.’ It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in mere ‘recovery’ of the past... identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (394)

## Conclusion

This conclusion accrues from the observations of Rushdie and Hall that the overseas old Indian diaspora needs to realise the reality of their inevitably fractured and transformed identity. Since they migrated to different plantation colonies, they adjusted themselves over time to the demands of “different colonial structures” (Parekh 142). Not surprisingly then, the Indian diaspora

groups “evolved distinct identities that marked them off both from each other and their counterparts in India” leading to the creation of “little and large ‘Indias,’ each with a distinct history, social structure and mode of self-conception,” all over the world (Parekh 142). The diasporic Hindu was “no longer a Hindu happening to live abroad, but one deeply transformed by his diasporic experiences” (Parekh 142). Though Amitav Ghosh admits that the overseas Indian diaspora is “an important force in world culture” and its culture is increasingly a “factor within the culture of the Indian subcontinent” (“The Diaspora” 73-78), he does not encourage its sentimental pursuits in India. In *Sea of Poppies*, he digs a hole under the waterline of the emotionally charged diasporic longing for their putative homeland by juxtaposing the traumatic loss of the old diaspora with the possibility of some unsavoury tale lying buried at the root of their ancestor’s migration from India. The detailed reconstruction of the history of the characters in *Sea of Poppies* has been rendered with a compelling urgency towards the recognition that the first generation old Indian diaspora was not necessarily driven to the plantation colonies by destitution alone but also by scandals. Having scandalised society, Deeti and Kalua fled for their dear life. And given their characters, the likes of Munia and Jhugroo will not be desirable within the Indian society, which, though pitied them for their poverty, viewed them with fear and disgust for their unsavoury influence. Ghosh’s ambivalent attitude in *Sea of Poppies* allows the old Indian overseas diaspora the privilege of proudly looking back on the achievements of their ancestors in their adopted land but with the caution that they should not indulge in inventing their roots in their lost motherland to cover themselves in glory.

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