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Subalternity and Counter-Archive in Amitav Ghosh's *The Sea of Poppies*

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Abstract
Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* is a reimagining of colonial history as it foregrounds lives previously excluded from imperial and nationalist historiography. Drawing on Subaltern Studies, particularly Ranajit Guha's critique of elite historiography, this paper reads the novel as a literary counter-archive that restores historical agency to those hitherto marginal sections of society. Rather than centering administrators, policies, or nationalist leaders, Ghosh narrates empire through peasants, women, convicts, migrants, and racialised intermediaries whose actions rarely register as "political" within official historical records. Through an analysis of Deeti and Kalua, the paper shows how subaltern agency emerges through refusal, flight, these forms of action are not recognized by elite historiography consistently. Neel Rattan Halder's trajectory from zamindar to transported convict reveals how subalternity itself is produced through law and dispossession. The figures of Zachary Reid and Ah Fatt further complicate colonial hierarchies, demonstrating how empire sustains itself by distributing partial privilege to some while rendering others permanently disposable. The novel's polyphonic structure disrupts the linear, state-centred historical narration. This paper argues that *Sea of Poppies* does not merely recover forgotten lives; it interrogates the conditions under which history itself is written. In doing so, Ghosh transforms the novel into a site where subaltern lives emerge from the periphery they have hitherto been allocated in the colonial archive.

Keywords: Subaltern, margins, ghosh, agency, subjectivity

Introduction

The concept of the subaltern originates in the writings of Antonio Gramsci, who employed the term to denote a person of lower rank. He describes subalterns as groups of people who are denied political representation and often find themselves at the margins. In *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci notes that subaltern classes exist in a condition of historical fragmentation, observing that: "The history of the subaltern classes is necessarily fragmented and episodic, since they are always subject to the activity of ruling groups…" (Gramsci 55). For Gramsci, subalternity is not merely a condition of economic deprivation but a structural exclusion from historical narration itself. This insight became foundational to the Subaltern Studies collective, particularly in the work of Ranajit Guha, who extended Gramsci's formulation to colonial India. Guha argued that Indian both colonial and nationalist historiography remained dominated by elite perspectives that denied autonomy to popular political action. As he states in *"On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India"*: "The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism—colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism" (Guha 1). Guha's critique lays bare how elite historiography represents subaltern participation as either spontaneous or derivative of elite leadership, thereby stripping it of historical agency.

The general orientation of the other kind of elitist historiography is to represent Indian nationalism as primarily an idealist venture in which the indigenous elite led the people from subjugation to freedom. There are several versions of this historiography which differ from each other in the degree of their emphasis on the role of individual leaders or elite organizations and institutions as the main or motivating force in this venture. However, the modality common to them all is to uphold Indian nationalism as a phenomenal expression of the goodness of the native elite with the antagonistic aspect of their relation to the colonial regime made, against all evidence, to look larger than its collaborationist aspect. (Guha, 2)

Historical writing of this kind fails to acknowledge, far less interpret, the contribution made by the people on their own, that is, independently of the elite, to the making and development of this nationalism (Guha, 3). Thus, the subalterns were often marginalised in within their own historical narratives, and therefore for Subaltern Studies, it becomes a key points to bring these voices from the periphery to the center of theoretical discussion. Subaltern consciousness, he argues, must be understood on its own terms, outside the rationalist frameworks of colonial documentation. This challenge to historiographic authority was further developed by Dipesh Chakrabarty, who interrogated the universalising assumptions of European historical thought. In *Provincializing Europe*, Chakrabarty contends: "European thought is at once indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western societies." (Chakrabarty 16)

Chakrabarty's intervention exposes how colonial historiography views the European categories of time, progress, and political rationality as natural and thereby, rendering non-Western modes of life as either backward or ahistorical. Together, Guha and Chakrabarty call for a rethinking of history not as a singular, linear narrative but as a field of heterogeneous temporalities and suppressed voices. It is within this intellectual tradition that this paper seeks to read Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008). Set against the backdrop of the nineteenth-century opium economy and the global slave trades, the novel resists elite historiography by centering those figures who remain absent from colonial archives—peasants, women, convicts, and maritime labourers. Rather than narrating empire through administrators or imperial policy, Ghosh reconstructs history through embodied experience, and oral memory of these characters. Characters such as Deeti and Neel, along with the heterogeneous community aboard the *Ibis*, articulate a form of historical consciousness that exists outside official documentation. This paper argues that *Sea of Poppies* functions as a literary counter-archive, one that enacts the very project envisioned by Subaltern Studies. Through its polyphonic structure and focus on displacement and survival, the novel challenges the limits of colonial history.

Deeti and Kalua: Subaltern Action in Everyday Life

Ranajit Guha argues that elite historiography fails to recognise subaltern action because it looks for politics only in formal movements, leadership, or ideology. Actions that emerge from everyday survival—especially those undertaken by peasants, women, and low-caste laborers—are either ignored or treated as instinctive reactions. The story of Deeti and Kalua in *Sea of Poppies* directly challenges this way of writing history. Their lives, choices, and escape from the village reveal a form of agency that does not seem political and yet it is speaks of a sense of autonomy hitherto not represented in colonial historiography.

Deeti is a simple lady who is married to Hukam Singh, a worker in the Ghazipur opium factory. However, on the night of her wedding, she is drugged and raped by her brother in law so that the marriage can be consummated as her husband is impotent. When her husband dies, her fate is sealed as she is forced to commit the practice of Sati. However, an untouchable from the neighbouring village named Kalua emerges as her savior in this ordeal. Deeti is introduced as a woman trapped within multiple systems of control. She is bound by caste rules, subjected to marital violence, and economically crushed by the opium regime that dominates village life. In official histories, such a woman would appear only as a background figure, described in general accounts of rural poverty or social custom. Ghosh refuses this erasure by placing Deeti's inner life and decisions at the centre of the narrative. She realises that the structures surrounding her are designed to deny her any meaningful choice.

Kalua's intervention gives this resistance physical form. As a low-caste ox-cart driver, Kalua is a social outcaste. His body is tolerated for labour, not recognised as moral or political. In colonial or nationalist histories, he would appear only as a type of criminal or brute or not at all. Yet it is Kalua who acts when the moment arrives. Ghosh describes the rescue,

Racing to the mound, Kalua placed the platform against the fire, scrambled to the top, and snatched Deeti from the flames. With her inert body slung over his shoulder, he jumped back to the ground and ran towards the river, dragging the now-smouldering bamboo rectangle behind him, on its rope…All of this was the work of a minute or two and by the time Chandan Singh and his cohorts gave chase, the river had carried Kalua and Deeti away from the flaming pyre into the dark of the night (Ghosh 178).

Kalua, being a social outcaste cannot be expected to show such courage. This is precisely the kind of action Guha insists elite historiography cannot acknowledge since it does not emerge from figures of political or cultural authority and thereby rendered as meaningless. Deeti's life is saved, and the moral authority of the village order is broken. Their flight from the village marks a rupture as they leave, the structures of caste, kinship and ritual which had hitherto dominated their identities lose their force. On the road, Deeti begins to imagine a life not defined by inherited roles.

The ship removes Deeti and Kalua from the kinship ties of the village and inserts them into a flexible world where new relations become possible. Deeti forms bonds with other women, sharing stories and rituals that replace caste hierarchy with shared experience. She comes to name these ties in her own terms: "From now on, and forever afterwards, we will be jahaj-bhai and jahaj-bahin to each other. There will be no differences between us" (Ghosh 356). This declaration matters because it creates a social order not authorised by land or caste. It is a form of collective identity that exists entirely outside elite institutions.

Together, Deeti and Kalua embody what *Sea of Poppies* insists upon: that history does not belong only to those who command or record events. It also belongs to those who survive them. Through their story, Ghosh gives narrative form to Guha's central claim that although subaltern action does not find it in the historical archive, that does not imply that its inconsequential. Deeti and Kalua do not enter history through documents or movements.

Neel Rattan Halder: The Making of Subalternity

Neel Rattan Halder's story in *Sea of Poppies* begins from a position that history usually recognises. He is a zamindar, educated, English-speaking, and his family's has the zamindari of Raskhali. In the logic of elite historiography, Neel belongs among those whose actions are considered

historically meaningful. Yet it is precisely this position that Ghosh sets out to dismantle. Through Neel's gradual dispossession, the novel exposes how fragile elite status becomes once it no longer serves colonial interests.

Neel's decline is not sudden. It unfolds through contracts he does not fully understand as the family falls on bad times due to their investment in opium trade with China. He is falsely accused of forgery and brought before a colonial court where he is convicted and sentenced to penal transportation in Mauritius. He is stripped of property, status, and name. This transformation is central to a Guha's understanding of the subaltern. Ranajit Guha argues that elite historiography recognises agency only as long as individuals operate within sanctioned structures of power (Guha 1). Neel's story demonstrates what happens when that recognition is withdrawn. Once he is convicted, he becomes legible only through administrative categories: criminal, prisoner, transported body. In this sense, Neel does not simply lose power; he enters subalternity.

What distinguishes Neel from figures like Deeti and Kalua is that his subalternity is produced, not inherited. His descent reveals the conditional nature of elite identity under colonial rule. Neel had believed himself protected by education and class, yet these protections are taken away the moment he ceases to be useful. Neel's fall makes visible the process by which empire manufactures the subaltern.

Aboard the Ibis, Neel confronts the reality of his new condition. He has to depend on others for survival, and this world of the Ibis is governed by violence and arbitrary authority. Gradually, however, Neel begins to adapt. His literacy and education, once symbols of dominance, take on a different function. He becomes a translator and mediator, helping others make sense of the system. This shift does not restore his old status, but it allows him to survive within his new one. The ship thus becomes a space where Neel's identity is reconfigured. Removed from land, property, and institutional authority, he is forced to recognise a shared vulnerability with those he would once have considered beneath him. This recognition marks a quiet ethical transformation. Neel begins to see himself not as a fallen master but as one among many displaced lives.

To take care of another human being- this was something Neel had never before thought of doing, not even with his own son, let alone a man of his own age, a foreigner. All he knew of nurture was the tenderness that had been lavished on him by his own caregiver; that they would come to love him was something he had taken for granted-yet knowing his own feelings for them to be in no way equivalent, he had often wondered how that attachment was born. (Ghosh 326).

His state of mind is laid bare in his thoughts where he recognises that he has to go beyond himself if he has to survive and reminisces the times gone by. The narrative lingers on his growing awareness that dignity, unlike status, cannot be guaranteed by law or inheritance. From the perspective of historiography, Neel's experience exposes the limits of the colonial archive. His trial and transportation would be meticulously documented, yet the meaning of his dispossession would remain invisible. Elite history would record the legal outcome but not the human cost. By narrating Neel's inner life, Ghosh restores what the archive omits. He gives voice to the moment when an elite subject becomes historically marginal. In this way, Neel's story complements that of Deeti and Kalua. Where their lives reveal forms of agency that elite history never registers, Neel's life reveals how elite agency can be withdrawn.

Zachary Reid and Ah Fatt: Colonial Disposability

Through Zachary Reid and Ah Fatt, Ghosh shows that colonial power does not operate through a simple division between ruler and ruled. Instead, it produces intermediaries and outcasts, figures who are useful for a time and disposable thereafter. Zachary Reid is a mixed-race sailor who hides his background and adapts himself to British ways in order to rise within the colonial system. His success depends on pretending to belong, and his position remains fragile because it relies on silence and obedience to imperial authority. Ah Fatt is a Chinese opium addict whose life is shaped by addiction, displacement, and punishment under colonial rule. He is treated as a criminal, yet he refuses to explain or justify himself in ways that colonial power expects.

Aboard the *Ibis*, Zachary learns quickly how power works: through accent, posture, silence, and allegiance. His rise within the ship's hierarchy is not accidental. It is earned through careful self-fashioning and a willingness to accept the racial and social logic of empire. He does not challenge the system; he adapts to it. Yet Zachary's privilege is never secure. It depends on the continued suppression of his origins and the approval of those above him. This instability is central to understanding his role in the novel. In Guha's terms, Zachary is not subaltern, but neither is he sovereign. His agency exists only within narrow limits defined by colonial authority. He benefits from empire, but he does not control it (Guha 1).

What distinguishes Zachary from figures like Neel is not moral clarity but direction of movement. Neel falls out of privilege; Zachary climbs into it. Yet both trajectories expose the same truth: status under empire is conditional. He helps the colonisers by following their rules, maintaining order on the ship, and supporting their authority in return for safety and advancement. Ghosh presents this not as villainy but as erosion, and a gradual narrowing of moral vision.

Ah Fatt's story unfolds at the opposite extreme. A Chinese opium addict and petty criminal, he exists entirely outside the boundaries of respectability. Ah Fatt is a Chinese man whose life is ruined by the opium trade. He is addicted to opium, arrested, and treated as a criminal by the colonial system. Much of his journey in the novel takes place under punishment and confinement, especially aboard the Ibi*s*. He has no power, no protection, and no stable place in the world shaped by empire. The novel shows how he is moved, controlled, and punished rather than listened to or understood. From Guha's subaltern viewpoint, Ah Fatt represents a life that history usually records only as crime or disorder. Colonial authority sees him as a problem to be managed, not as a human being with a story. His silence, suffering, and refusal to explain himself are important because they show how subaltern lives are denied voice and meaning. Ah Fatt does not lead revolts or speak politically, but his broken life exposes the violence of empire and the limits of elite history, which cannot recognise such suffering as historically significant.

In historiographic terms, Zachary would be remembered as a minor colonial functionary, and Ah Fatt would likely disappear into logic of crime and punishment. By narrating both lives from within, *Sea of Poppies* disrupts this logic of remembrance. Placed alongside Deeti, Kalua, and Neel,

Zachary and Ah Fatt complete the novel's counter-historical field. If Deeti and Kalua reveal subaltern agency that history ignores, and Neel reveals how subalternity is produced through dispossession. In doing so, Ghosh reinforces Guha's central insight: that the most consequential histories of colonialism unfold not in official narratives, but in lives lived under conditions of unequal recognition.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that *Sea of Poppies* presents critique of elite historiography. By centring figures such as Deeti, Kalua, Neel, Zachary Reid, and Ah Fatt, Ghosh relocates historical meaning away from institutions, administrators, and archives, and into the lived experiences of those rendered marginal, disposable, or conditionally visible under colonial rule. The novel demonstrates that subaltern agency does not always take the form of organised resistance; it often appears instead as refusal, flight, adaptation, and the forging of new forms of belonging under constraint. Through its polyphonic narrative, shifting points of view, and emphasis on mobility, *Sea of Poppies* functions as a literary counter-archive. In doing so, the novel exposes the limits of elite historiography and insists that history must be read not only through documents and events, but through lives shaped by unequal power and incomplete recognition. Ghosh's narrative thus stresses the relevance of Subaltern Studies by showing how literature can imagine histories that the archive systematically excludes.

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