

# SEA OF POPPIES

Amitav Ghosh

*Sea of Poppies* (2008)

## Story

*Sea of Poppies* is the first instalment in Amitav Ghosh's trilogy of stories about characters caught up in the opium trade between India and China in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The narrative begins in Ghazipur, in India, where Deeti learns that her mother-in-law drugged her with opium on her wedding night in order that her brother-in-law could rape her, in lieu of her crippled husband, who works in local opium factory. She gives birth to a daughter, her husband dies and Deeti prepares to commit *sati* (self-immolation on her husband's funeral pyre). But she is rescued by Kalua, an untouchable man, who takes her to safety down river, eventually to Calcutta, where this new couple became indentured workers on the *Ibis*, a ship bound for Mauritius. Now we meet a second central character, Zachary Reid, an American sailor born of mixed race parents. Through the loss of crew on the journey from Baltimore to Calcutta, Reid becomes second in command. The third key character is Neel Rattan Halder, a wealthy ex-*raja* whose family once owned vast estates but who has now fallen into debt from bad investments in the opium trade. Things go from bad to worse when Halder tries to clear his debt through the British owner of the ship, who cheats him and has him put on trial for forgery. Halder is convicted and sentenced to penal transportation to Mauritius, on the same ship that Deeti, Kalua and Reid are on. The final passenger on the *Ibis* is Paulette, a French orphan who lives with the family of the corrupt British ship-owner. She meets and falls in love with Reid and later boards the ship disguised as a man. After the ship sets sail, numerous crises unfold, including attempted rape, flogging, hidden secrets and revealed identities. In one incident, Kalua kills a man who attempted the rape, after which he and Halder escape on a long boat to Singapore. The others (Deeti, Reid and Paulette) continue toward Mauritius.

## Themes

**Identity** One of the interesting themes in this richly textured novel is the fluidity of identity. This fluidity is in keeping with the author's view of history, in which people, goods, ideas and languages cross borders and mingle. All the main characters have their identities altered by the opium trade and its consequences. After her symbolic rebirth (escaping the funeral pyre), Deeti takes up with a new man, an Untouchable, marries him and uses a new name for herself. Kalua (her new husband) also takes on a new identity as Maddow Colver. Reid is the product of two races and assumes the position of second in command on the ship, later dressing like an urbane gentleman in Calcutta. Paulette is French but becomes Indian. Neel Rattan Halder is a wealthy, respected man who ends up a disgraced criminal.

**Globalisation** In this novel, Ghosh tells a story of globalised trade in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the waters around India and China became a 'sea of poppies.' The poppies grown in India were processed into opium and transported to China for sale, with the British-controlled factories and ships as the key links. In the novel, Americans, Chinese, Malays, Indians, French, British, Arabs and Africans jostle for success and happiness in this sea-borne trade.

**Colonialism** Ghosh never lets us lose sight of the true losers in this beguiling portrait of people and history. They are the rural Indian poor, whose staple diet of rice and wheat was being replaced by the cash crop of opium. In the author's words, '[t]he town was thronged with hundreds of other impoverished transients, many of whom were willing to sweat themselves half to death for a few handfuls of rice. Many of these people had been driven from their villages by the flood of flowers that had washed over the countryside: lands that had once provided sustenance were now swamped by the rising tide of poppies; food was so hard to come by that people were glad to lick the leaves in which offerings were made at temples.'

## Characters

Deeti Deeti is the most important of the central characters in this first volume. She is a simple, pious woman, whose suffering is extreme and yet who retains an optimistic view of life. Despite her meek external behaviours, she is resourceful, clever and strong.

Zachary Reid Zachary Reid is an American sailor, with mixed racial parentage, who rises to become second in command of the ship. He is an intelligent person, who speaks several languages, assumes many identities and thus symbolises the polyglot, multi-ethnic smorgasbord of the opium trade.

Kalua Kalua, like Deeti, has only one name because of his low status as an Untouchable. However, he is the hero of this novel, rescuing the poor Deeti from the funeral pyre and shepherding her to safety. They marry but later are separated when he jumps ship and goes to Singapore.

Neel Rattan Halder Neel Rattan Halder is a riches-to-rags character. A wealthy man, a former raja, whose family owned large amounts of land, he makes bad investments in the opium trade (declining at that time) and ends up sent to penal servitude to Mauritius. He is portrayed as weak, more sinned against than sinning.

Paulette Lambert Paulette Lambert is a French orphan who has turned 'native' after living in India for a long time. Like Reid, she is neither fish nor fowl, and is something of a rebel. She falls in love with the American Reid and follows him on the ship to Mauritius.

Mr Burnham Mr Burnham is the corrupt British owner of the ship, who cheats Halder and has him brought to trial over false accusations of forgery. He is morally repugnant, in both his business practices and his personal life. He lies and hides from his lies, unable to face the consequences of his action, such as his sexual advances to the young Paulette.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

**DEETI** (Resourceful)

**Character** Deeti might be seen as the moral heart of this story of cruelty and kindness. She bears her immense suffering without self-pity or recrimination of others. She, however, is not a saint or a fool. She is practical, determined to get the best for her daughter and responds to any intention cruelty with an 'eye for an eye.' Deeti is something of an 'everywoman,' a mythic character, who is a devout Hindu, as well as a sacrificing wife and a loving mother. She is the wife of a crippled man who works in an opium factory in north India and then dies an early death. She then prepares to immolate herself on his funeral pyre but is rescued at the last minute, which provides the turning point in her life. As the novel develops, notably after the symbolic 'rebirth' of the funeral pyre, she gains a new identity and new confidence, becoming a source of strength for the oppressed people on the ship, and especially for the women. Even the men aboard the ship nickname her 'the rebel.' By the end, we appreciate that this poor peasant woman possesses imagination and vision. In this way, the novel traces the transformation of a meek wife into an independent (and remarried) woman.

**Activities** Deeti cares for her crippled, addicted husband, rubbing his back with oil, massaging his feet and sometimes carrying him on her back. She does housework when he is at work. Later, on board the ship, she performs much the same tasks for the indentured labourers travelling with her. She tends to the sick, cooks for everyone and wins special privileges (extra food and sleep) for those who need help.

## Illustrative Moments

Imagination The book opens with a calm but revealing vision. It is Deeti's vision. The impoverished wife of an opium addict, she is standing on the bank of the Ganges, holding her daughter's hand, while pouring water in a ritual to a goddess. In the distance, one can see the roof of the opium factory with a fluttering British flag. Suddenly she sees something in her mind's eye: 'The vision of a tall-masted ship, at sail on the ocean, came to Deeti on an otherwise ordinary day, but she knew instantly that the apparition was a sign of destiny, for she had never seen such a vessel before, not even in a dream.' Deeti is convinced 'that the ship existed somewhere and was heading in her direction.'

Resourceful Whether as an impoverished wife of a drug addict or (later) as the beloved wife of a compassionate man, Deeti has her wits about her. She may be pious, but she is not passive or weak and meets 'fire with fire.' A good example of this quality occurs early on when Deeti discovers that her mother-in-law had drugged her with opium on her wedding night so that her brother-in-law could rape her (since her husband is crippled). 'What should she do?...It was no use to weep and bemoan the influence of the planets.' She finds her husband's store of opium, breaks off a little piece and mixes it in with her mother-in-law's tea. Day after day, very slowly, so that the 'bitch' wouldn't notice, she turns her relative into an addict.

Clever Deeti is clever enough to seize the opportunity given when she is rescued from the funeral pyre and invent a new identity for herself. First, she marries her rescuer, who is an Untouchable but a very fine man. A more telling scene occurs later when she boards the ship as an indentured labour bound for Mauritius. The officer in charge writes down all the biographical details of each passenger, beginning with their name. When she is asked, she hesitates: 'It was on her lips to identify herself as Kabutri-ki-ma [mother of Kabutri, her daughter's name], the name she had been known by ever since her daughter's birth. Then her proper first name came to mind, since it was who she was. "Aditi [long form of 'Deeti']," she said softly. "I am Aditi." The significance of a married woman using her own name was not lost on the others.'

### **ZACHARY REID** (Adventurous)

**Character** Zachary Reid is an American born of racially mixed parents, and as such he represents the history of slavery in America. This 20-year-old, sharp-tongued son of a Maryland freedwoman is described as a man who 'laughed easily and carried himself with a carefree lightness.' He is sensitive, intelligent, articulate and later shows compassion and love to others, while at the same time looking out for himself. A key element of Reid's character and his identity is its hybridity. He is a 'mulatto', a combination of white and black parents, who speaks several tongues, American English, British English and pidgin, the language of those who speak different languages but must communicate on a sea journey. Reid begins his journey on the ship (which, we should note, was once a slave ship) as an ordinary sailor, but he rises up the chain of command through both his own talents and the fortunate loss of other crewmen. Although he gains authority over others, he remains trapped in the capitalist, racist and imperialist trade of the poppy flower. To succeed, he has to speak the language of the white man and imitate his (sometimes) cruel behaviour. Yet, he manages to retain most of his moral principles to the end. As the character who we will follow through all three books in this series of sea voyages and personal transformations, he embodies the spirit of the entire trilogy: adventure.

**Activities** Zachary Reid is the 'in between' man on the ship, the intermediary between the captain and the crew. He spends time in the lower deck, speaking with the crew and in the cabins speaking with the officers. During his time down 'below' he takes time to learn the pidgin language used by the Malay, Tamil, Indian, African and Chinese crew. We also see him move about in Calcutta, visiting gentlemen's clubs and restaurants.

### **Illustrative Moments**

New identity One of Reid's first tasks is to refit the decaying ship before its long journey to Mauritius. While supervising this work, Reid uncovers the slaving history of the ship. Ghosh describes the scene in these words: 'Zachary discovered that the 'tween deck, where the schooner's human cargo had been accommodated, was riddled with peepholes and air ducts, bored by generations of captive Africans.' As part of creating a new identity for himself, Reid removes these remnants of the slave trade, which is his ancestral past. The refurbished slave ship thus stands as a symbol of Reid's own condition that he wishes to erase.

Principled Reid's moral principles are severely tested in one dramatic moment on the ship. Reid is second in command, but another officer, Mr Cowle, discovers his mulatto identity and tries to blackmail Reid into joining him in a plot to take over the ship (if he does not agree, Cowle will reveal his background). Reid has distrusted Cowle throughout the journey and does not succumb to his threat. Refusing the offer, Reid says, 'I'm sorry but this deal of yours won't work for me. It may look to you as if you...have turned me inside out, but in truth it's changed nothing. I was born with my freedom and I ain't looking to give any of it away.'

Compromised At the same time, Reid is compromised. A 'free man' and an officer, he is still under the command of superior white men who control the opium trade. In the very next scene, Cowle

brutally beats some of the sailors for daring to mutiny. Standing with a pistol in each hand, Cowle orders Reid to disarm the mutineers. With little choice, having sworn to obey the rules of the ship, Reid can only reply, 'Yes, sir.' The scene is even more sad because one of the officers has been killed and Reid is forced to name the murderer who is then hung from the ship's mast.

Vulnerable Reid is easily harmed, vulnerable to insults and humiliations. This edgy side of his character is demonstrated in a scene in the final pages of this long novel. When his true identity as a mulatto is revealed, he thinks (mistakenly) that Paulette (the young French woman he is in love with) is responsible for the revelation. 'Pray tell me, Miss Lambert, what was it for, all this trickery and deceit? Just to show me up for a fool?' She tries to convince him that she is not responsible and asks, 'in any case, what do appearances matter?' But he shakes his head and replies, 'I fear that I am too simple a man for these subtleties.' The scene ends with Reid again accusing her of mistreating him.

**KALUA** (Humiliated)

**Character** Kalua is an untouchable because he works with leather, a substance considered polluting because it is from a dead animal. He is also a strong man, who has humility, moral courage and physical strength. He has only a first name, like Deeti, the main character, who is high caste and whom he eventually marries. But unlike her, he is an untouchable and lacks self-belief. He therefore behaves with extreme deference to everyone above him in the hierarchy, which means nearly every person in the novel. He is also a loyal person, who not only rescues Deeti from a funeral pyre but is indispensable in her escape downriver and onto the *Ibis*, a ship bound for Mauritius, where she hopes to begin a new life. Even on board, Kalua is instrumental in her gaining authority over the other passengers, using his massive frame as a sort of shield to protect her.

**Activities** Kalua is an untouchable, a man who is told what to do and when to do it. For example, he takes Deeti's husband (who cannot walk because he has a bad leg due to an injury suffered while in the army) to the opium factory every day in his cart and brings him back in the evening. And, when the husband finally dies in the factory, he brings him back for the final time. Kalua is often hired out by the landlords to fight in wrestling matches, saying that if he wins three of them, they will give him a cart. He rescues Deeti and marries her, and the two of them flee to Mauritius on a boat. Life on board the boat is similar to that on land—he acts like a servant to Deeti and at times uses his physical strength to protect her.

### Illustrative moments

Obsequious Despite his 'unusual height and powerful body,' Kalua scrapes and bows. His obsequious behaviour is shown in every scene in which he appears, but none more so than in the very first when he arrives at Deeti's door with his cart. He has come to transport Deeti's husband, incapacitated from a war wound, to work at the opium factory a few miles away. As he approaches the husband, Kalua attempts to hide his face so that the upper-caste man will not see him and thereby pollute himself. All the way to the factory, the two of them will talk, but Kalua will never turn his head, so 'as not to make the day bode ill for him.' This is one of the many physical restrictions that governed the life of untouchables in rural, nineteenth-century Bengal. But it most have been among the most degrading, for it prohibited a man, let alone a woman, from 'facing' others. Some people spoke of 'losing face,' but Kalua had none to lose.

Humiliated The degradation that Kalua suffers from his status as an untouchable is extreme. A particularly despicable example of his humiliation is described by Ghosh when he is forced into an act of bestiality with a horse. A group of drunken landlords have arranged a sort of feast and as part of the 'entertainment' they have 'hired' Kalua to perform a sexual act with a horse. He is forced to complete the act, after which the horse defecates on him. He then lies there on the ground covered with faeces, while the crowd cheers and laughs at him. Only Deeti, who is horrified by this sadistic action by a man of her caste, comforts him. Given the author's meticulous historical research, we can only assume that this kind of forced bestiality actually took place at the time.

Courageous The kindness shown by Deeti to Kalua, when he was humiliated by sadistic landlords (described above), is repaid in full when he rescues Deeti from death. Following the death of her husband, Deeti as a high caste widow is expected to commit sati and immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre. Although this was not a widespread practice, neither was it uncommon at the time, especially in rural Bengal. Kalua learns of the funeral by chance and, having never forgotten Deeti's act of sympathy to him, plans to save her. He knows it will not be easy. People will attempt to

stop him as they are deeply committed to tradition. But he decides he must free her. He takes the bamboo platform off of his cart and ties a rope to it. Rushing into the crowd, swinging the large platform around and forcing everyone to scatter, he grabs Deeti from the flames. Then, carrying her on his shoulders, he runs to the river bank, where he has built a raft, and they escape. As they float downstream under the cover of darkness, he whispers to her, 'It was me I saved. I love you and if you had died, I couldn't have lived.'