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Whips and Whispers: Sex and Power in *Sea of Poppies*

Sea of Poppies, the 2008 novel written by Amitav Ghosh, spells a story with bodies. The first volume of a three-part series, the novel is set amid the booming opium industry in early 19th-century India. Ghosh constructs characters of diverse backstories, yet their experiences become entangled in a mutual grapple with the systems of power implanted in India by colonial agents. In each of his main characters, there exists a conflict with the body. This theme is the most prevalent battleground on which Ghosh presents colonial strife. Where agency is represented by ownership of the physical self, the cast of *Sea of Poppies* is introduced to the corruption of that sanctity. Ghosh displays this conflict sometimes plainly with a character's bodily relationship with opium, but more broadly, with those characters' bodily relationships to the legal and cultural framework that champions its production. It comes as no surprise that the body plays such a prevalent role in how Ghosh delivers his novel, as race and genealogy serve as the background, or instigator, for many of the characters' conflicts. A question demands to be asked, however: why does Ghosh choose to use the body as a literary intersection between colonialism and genealogical history?

The answer is sex. As, postmodern philosopher, Michael Foucault explains in his book *The History of Sexuality*, the study of and political interest in sex during the contemporary period of *Sea of Poppies*' setting had become a discursive epistemology –a scientific and intellectual investigation into bodies. As with other forms of power-knowledge, the science of sexuality

effectively ostracized forms of sexuality that did not agree with the political interests of the Western investigator – those being, especially in the case of *Sea of Poppies*, population and its racial makeup. Sexual encounters and attitudes in the novel reflect the extent of colonial domination over its characters. Ghosh's work elicits conclusions mirrored by Foucault's theory to depict how the creation of sexuality as a power-knowledge corrupts the bodily experience of England's colonial subjects.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault recognizes that Western understandings of sex and sexuality have been constructed by 19th-century political incentives. Foucault challenges the "repressive hypothesis" with this argument – a theory that the discourses of said period stifled intellectual engagement with sexuality (15). Instead, he finds that "practically the opposite phenomenon occurred" (18). The 19th century saw, specifically, "the multiplication of discourses concerning sex in the field of exercise of power itself" (18). In other words, rather than silence conversations of sex, the contemporary discourses thoroughly constructed novel attitudes toward sex, ones that pertained to the age's political excitements and fears. Sex became widely studied as a way of understanding and controlling the human capital of burgeoning industrial nations. Foucault puts that "one of the great innovations in the techniques of power in the eighteenth century was the emergence of 'population' as an economic and political problem" (25). The period that Foucault analyzes saw the emergence of studies concerning the makeup of society, including the discernment of its differences. The burgeoning capitalist class necessitated these differences, for their station was constructed through distancing themselves from the general populace – their relationship with the people needed to be commercial, numerical, efficient. Population was not a study of the capitalist elites, it was a mode of managing the broad working class, of categorizing its members, and constructing its apparent dispositions.

The study of sex constructed differences of appearance between workers and their capitalist overseers. Especially as industrial European nations began mining for capital by the construction of overseas empires, genealogical characteristics became the primary rhetorical guardian of the exploitive classes. Foucault mentions that “in the name of a biological and historical urgency,” studies of sex “justified the racisms of the state, which at the time were on the horizon” (54). Johann Blumenbach’s classification of mankind into five races was the epistemological match needed to ignite subsequent discourses on the bodily appearance of power. Sex became the science of certifying that performance – a field that gave reason to the correlation between race and power. The science of sex allowed for the emergence of racisms such as Social Darwinism, justifying class difference on an individual’s genealogical makeup. Sex was studied to monitor perversions – especially those interracial encounters that strayed from visible indications of purity. For the exploited and colonized, these investigations waged war on their bodies. European industry necessitated the intellectual domination of colonial sexuality. Sex assumed the position of their colonizer’s scientific guardian, a method of managing a population and making reason of their plight.

Opium, in *Sea of Poppies*, becomes more than a perilous component of the plot -- Ghosh uses interactions with the substance to depict how colonized bodies are sexually scarred. Deeti, the wife of an opium factory worker in Calcutta, describes how she was raped on her wedding night. Her husband warns her on their marital bed that his opium pipe, “is [his] first wife,” a foreboding metaphor of the abuse Deeti is to suffer. She later learns that, after accepting opium from her husband, she was raped by her brother-in-law to continue their family line (33). Deeti’s husband’s role as an “afeemkhor –” opium addict – in this situation makes him impotent (32). Unable to procreate, the industry that has psychologically enslaved him, has taken over the

sexuality of his body as well. Even more colonized, is Deeti who, by taking opium for the sorrow of being wed, unknowingly surrenders her body to the genealogically incentivized treachery of her husband's family. Ghosh colorfully describes the opium factory workers "as ants in honey --" stuck in an alluring trap that slowly ensnares them (78). This is the colonial experience Ghosh seeks to display through centering his story on the opium industry, and in Deeti and her husband's experience, this conflict moves the plot specifically as it comes into contact with their sexuality.

Ghosh reveals how the sexual corruption of colonial bodies is a component of the opium industry's success. Mr. Burnham, a wealthy opium trader, champions the substance by arguing "it would be well nigh impossible to practice modern medicine or surgery without such chemicals as morphine, codeine and narcotine" (94). Mr. Burnham's view is founded on the benefits that opium augments Western medicine. By advocating for its advents, he is justifying opium's harm at its sights of production for the privilege it grants to those near the center of its experimentation, particularly wealthy Westerners. His following argument is even more intriguing, however, as it relates to Ghosh's exploration of sex in colonialism. Burnham adds, "And what would our ladies -- why, our beloved Queen herself? -- do without laudanum?" (95). It was common for Victorian ladies, including Queen Victoria by rumor, to be prescribed opioids in the form of laudanum for daily use, yet this rhetorical question inarguably incorporates the novel use of opioids in child-birthing medicine. Here, a dichotomy is present between Burnham's comment and Ghosh's earlier scenes revealing Deeti's rape. Opium, to the colonizer, becomes a blessing for the potency it grants the West, despite the sexual infertility and loss of agency it inflicts upon the colonized. Opium becomes medicine only when it is used on "our ladies --" those impregnated by Western men.

Ghosh further illustrates the Western discourses of sex through the biological classifications imposed upon his characters. Take, for example, the experience of Neel, one of Ghosh's characters who is born an Indian Raja yet is imprisoned as a result of Mr. Burnham's ambitions. When Neel arrives in prison, he is stripped and inspected for diseases. During this startling treatment, he feels that his groin is being inspected in a way that was "neither intimate nor angry, neither tender nor prurient – it was the disinterested touch of mastery, of purchase or conquest" (Ghosh 227). Ghosh rejects Neel's treatment as "angry" or "tender" to detach it from emotion; instead, Neel is being scrutinized as a doctor or scientist would a patient. The calculated observations made by his captors are indicative of his "conquest." This Foucauldian pairing, between knowledge and power, is yet more present in the observation of Neel's sex when he compares the operation to the way "a man might inspect a house he had recently acquired, searching for signs of disrepair or neglect, while mentally assigning each room to a new use" (227). Neel's body is being compared to a house composed of uses. The correlation of this observation with the context of his groin being inspected implies that Neel's reproduction, his ability to pass on his genealogical makeup, is being branded and managed as one organizes their financial property. His genealogy is being handled with the incentive of a cattle hand.

Neel's journey serves to connect Ghosh's work with the philosophy of *The History of Sexuality* later in the novel, as well. When he is being sailed to the destination where he will carry out his sentence of labor, on board with the rest of the main characters, Ghosh depicts several instances of beatings and abuses committed upon those aboard. Colonial oppression crystalizes into overt, physical conflict in the last section of the novel. However, these painful scenes full of whips and insults, reminiscent of the grimace-inducing tales employed by American slave narratives, are crafted uniquely by their generally sexual themes and

connotations. In one instance, Ghosh describes the way that Byhro Sing, a crewmember and one of the same relatives that aided in Deeti's rape, sees Neel and his fellow prisoner: as if "they were not men at all, but castrated, impotent creatures – oxen, in other words" (300). The terms "castrated" and "impotent" speak to the repurposing of the inspection scene. The prisoner's sex is used as a point of classifying them as inferior, perverted elements of Western reproduction. Their potency serves as a degree by which they are afforded dignity and genealogical agency, and in their treatment, it is denied. Ghosh hammers in this motif when their abuser refers to them as "hijras," a general term for castrated or transgender Indian people. Neel's oppressors attempt to humiliate him by classifying him as a sexual perversion, an individual deprived of the sexual orthodoxy of the potent West. These scenes help illustrate a connection between Foucault's *History of Sexuality* and Edward Said's *Orientalism*. The sexual abuse suffered by Ghosh's characters reflects the sexual stereotype's affixed on colonized peoples that Said investigates. The "oriental" sexuality is often depicted as effeminate and erotic, rather than masculine and potent (Said 220). The implications of these stereotypes perpetuate an attitude that the Orient is doomed to be fertilized by the functionally superior sexuality of the West. These sexual classifications imposed on Ghosh's characters depict attitudes towards differences in population that accelerated hegemonic industry.

Ghosh builds on his illustrations of sexuality being colonized in *Sea of Poppies* by incorporating the taboo of interracial sex – primarily through the implementation of social ostracization and gossip. Race is one of the primary contemporary pseudo-scientific studies that investigated sex as a way of subjugating colonial subjects. Deeti's dramatic rescue by her friend Kalua from her husband's funeral pyre earns her position of extreme detest from her community. But it is not simply for running from suicide that she is subsequently sought dead by her

relatives, it is the fact that her rescuer is a lower caste man. When at sea later in the novel, Byhro Sing attempts to rape Deeti, justified by the accusation that she is “a whore who's run away with a filth-sweeper” (373). Deeti's escape is vilified because of the race of her rescuer, and the distinction becomes criminal by its association with sexuality. Deeti becomes branded as a “whore” because to regain control over her after her flight, her relatives would have to classify her interracial bond as a sexual perversion. When Deeti protests that she is with child, Byhro Singh gruesomely remarks, “A child from that scavenger? By the time I'm done with you, his spawn will be dribbling out of you like an egg-yolk” (374). The irony in this statement lays in the massive size of Kalua, yet due to the inferiority associated with his caste, Byhro Sing insinuates that his potency will outrival the fertilization capable of the darker man. The colonial and patriarchal powers that Deeti is victim to necessitate a reason to ostracize her for her relationship with Kalua; the sexual and pseudo-biological become their implement of marking her inferiority.

Ghosh plays with the intricacies of sexual ostracization in the rebellion formed in another relationship. Paulette, a white woman raised in India, conjures gossip surrounding her sudden disappearance. While really seeking to board the same ship sewed in the destinies of Ghosh's other characters, the consensus of the white, merchant society she belongs to suspects she has fled because she has “indulged in improper behaviors and [is] now expecting” (264). The full meaning of her “improper behaviors” becomes clear, though, when she learns her previous host initiated the lie “that native-bread is cooking in the coal-oven” (264). Again, Ghosh explores the social assumptions made in the aberration of a character's escape; in both instances, interracial perversions from sexual normativity are how their society classifies the loss of the escapee's participation. On the other hand, Zachary, Paulette's love interest and second mate of their

voyage, attempts to remain a participant in his society through the concealment of his genealogical history. Zachary hides his partially black ancestry until Paulette discovers it at the end of the novel, hoping to not suffer ostracization for the sexual taboo he embodies (392). Zachary's identity is the figure of social corruption; he is living evidence of pseudo-scientific sin, and so his racial makeup becomes his desperate secret. In this way, Paulette's interest in Zachary is not diminished after learning his history because her pursuit of him is a further escape from the society she is sailing from. To her, they simply share an assailant.

Amitav Ghosh's novel explores the arduous plight of colonial subjects through featuring their bodily experiences. These interactions are his colorful depictions of the Foucauldian relationship between sex and power, a discourse that classified identity-based on reproductive traits. Sex formed into a power-knowledge by the necessity to manage and distinguish populations incorporating increasingly diverse human capital. Opium, as presented in the novel, was an industry incomplete without the harsh sexual scrutiny of its human components. By the sexual abuse, biological classifications, and racial assumptions imposed upon the colonized characters of *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh presents the incredibly personal cost of an intellectualism that venerates hegemonic industry.

Works Cited

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