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Original Article

Influence of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in Ibis Trilogy

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Abstract

This research paper examines the influence of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's spiritual and devotional tradition in Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy, with particular emphasis on Sea of Poppies. The study focuses on Baboo Nob Kissin, a devotee of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, whose character reflects the impact of Chaitanya's bhakti philosophy under colonial conditions. The Ibis is interpreted as a symbolic space of pilgrimage, transformation, rebirth, incarnation, and liberation. Nob Kissin's spiritual relationship with Taramony and his belief in Krishna's divine presence shape his actions and enable him to resist oppression and assist the suffering girmitiyas, convicts, and other marginalized characters. The paper also explores the relationship between mythology, colonial history, the opium trade, indentured labour, and religious belief. It argues that Ghosh transforms the Ibis from an instrument of colonial exploitation into a space of spiritual and social transformation. Through Nob Kissin's incarnation of Taramony and his devotion to Chaitanya's ideals, the novel establishes a symbolic balance between good and evil and presents bhakti as a force capable of challenging oppression and creating a sense of collective identity.

Keywords: *Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Amitav Ghosh, Ibis Trilogy, Sea of Poppies, Nob Kissin, Gaudiya Vaishnavism, Bhakti, Taramony, Ibis, Colonialism, Opium Trade, Indentured Labour, Pilgrimage, Rebirth, Incarnation, Transformation.*

Introduction:

Sea of Poppies is the first book in the Ibis Trilogy, Ghosh has adopted the term 'Ibis' from Egyptian mythology. He approaches the myth from social anthropological point of view as it is the part of people's culture. The Ibis is a sacred bird of religious reverence particularly associated with God, Thoth, one of the most prominent deities of Egyptian mythology. Thoth was depicted with the head of Ibis, the bird. Therefore, the Ibis represents the head of Thoth that is the mind of God for the Egyptians. In Egyptian mythology, the Ibis is related to moon as it is said that the Ibis's beak resembles the crescent moon and associate with arbitration, magic, incarnation and the judging of the dead, while Thoth serves as a mediating power between good and evil, creating the balance between the two with his divine law. Ghosh uses the Ibis myth to document his anthropological and historical survey associated with colonial India, opium trade transportation of indentured labours and belief system of rural folk. Campbell defines myth as "the secret opening through which inexhaustible energy of the cosmos pour through into human cultural manifestation." In the novel the Ibis, is a name of a ship that resembles the bird, Ibis in the appearance. Ghosh describes the Ibis: The carved head of a bird that held up the bowsprit of the Ibis was unusual enough to serve as a proof, to those who needed it, that this was indeed the ship that Deeti saw while standing half immersed in the waters of the Ganga. (SOP,10) Deeti, a religious minded lady, while standing on the bank of Ganges with her daughter Kabutri, sees a vision that a ship will come to change her life. From that time she begins to worship the ship in her shrine. Ghosh points out the magic of the Ibis in the vision of Deeti; the image of the Ibis gets transported upstream "like an electric current, the moment the vessel made contact with the sacred water." (SOP, 10) The miracle happens when the Ibis drops anchor off Ganga-Sagar Island, in the holy river. There is something graceful about the Ibis, "the Ibis's yatch-like rigging, with her sails aligned along her length rather than across the line of her hull." (SOP, 11) Ghosh's description of the Ibis suggests that it is not an ordinary ship but something different as compared to others.

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The vision of Deeti comes true when she joins the Ibis with Kalua. *Sea of Poppies* is regarded as a narrative in epical form. The epic always contains the mythological stories related to the lives of saints, gods and super humans. Such stories are full of mysticism and miracles. The Ibis becomes the symbol of incarnation for Baboo Nob Kissin while her voyage from Calcutta to Mauritius is regarded as a pilgrimage. Nob Kissin had been influenced by Taramony in his life from childhood. His family was the devotee of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, a saint, mystic and devotee of Sri Krishna. They built a temple where Nob Kissin spent his childhood. His uncle was the custodian of the temple. He gave the education of Sankrit, logic rites and rituals to Nob Kissin. The dying uncle of Nob Kissin assigned a duty to him, to take his wife Taramony to an ashram in the holy city of Brindavan to spend her widowhood. Taramony was a woman of "extraordinary spiritual accomplishment, a devotee of a kind that he had never encountered before." (SOP, 161) Her spiritual thoughts conveyed the idea to Nob Kissin that as if she had experienced the grace of the presence of Sri Krishna. Baboo Nobokissin, is directly Chaitanya-influenced characters in *Sea of Poppies*. Unlike Paulette's indirect connection through Tantima, Nob Kissin is an active practitioner of Gaudiya Vaishnavism — and Ghosh uses him to explore how Chaitanya's bhakti tradition mutates under colonial rule. He's the gomusta, or accountant-clerk, for Burnham Bros on the *Ibis*. To the British he's a loyal, fawning, English-quoting "native" subordinate. But he lives a double life: he's secretly a Vaishnav devotee of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and a follower of the Kartabhaja sect, an 18th-century offshoot of Gaudiya Vaishnavism.

As a brahmachari Nob Kissin had been taught to turn his mind from sensual thoughts and the retention of semen. Taramony never permitted him to touch her in an unchaste way. He understood the profane version of his aunt that she felt for the divine lover of her visions. He also understood that only his aunt could cure his earthly desires. So he began to worship her like a priest. He said to her "you will be my Krishna and I will be your Radha." (SOP, 162) The saintliness of Taramony soon attracted a circle of devotees and followers. She accepted Nob Kissin as her spiritual disciple. She instructed him that his mission is different; he must go to the world to make money as their wish is to build a temple. So Nob Kissin went to the city and started his career as an accountant and very soon rose to the rank of gumosta into the office of Burnham Bros. Nob Kissin was very humble and kind in his business. There was a great sorrow in his life. He was denied the experience of divine love that he had hoped to achieve with Taramony. He wanted that she should make him free from the worldly life. He wanted to build their temple. Taramony asserted that he should follow the indications of incarnation even if they take him across the sea: "There will come a day when my spirit will manifest itself in you, and then the two of us, united by Krishna's love, will achieve the most perfect union- you will become Taramony." (SOP, 165) Nine years pass since the death of Taramony. Nob Kissin was looking for the indications as asserted by Taramony. He was working harder and harder for the temple. The days were passing without any sign of manifestation. He thought to renounce the world and to live the life of mendicant at Brindavan.

On the tenth death anniversary of Taramony, the Ibis drops the anchor off into the Bay of Bengal. The Ibis crew manifests to the office of Burnham Bros. Nob Kissin sees the notation beside Zachary's name- 'Black'. It reminds Nob Kissin the words of Taramony about the indications. So the word 'Black' indicates the 'Dark Lord' to him. The voyage of the Ibis reminds him the changeability of the world and the presence of divine illusion, of Sri Krishna leela. So it becomes clear to Nob Kissin why the things happened because "the Ibis was to take him to the place where his temple would be built." (SOP, 167) Nob Kissin suggests to Burnham that he should transport the migrants on the Ibis to recover his loss in the opium trade. Nob Kissin shows his eagerness to join the crew on the Ibis as a gumosta. Burnham reminds him that by crossing the 'Black Water' he may lose his caste. But for Nob Kissin pilgrims cannot loose caste. It suggests that the voyage of the Ibis from Calcutta to Mauritius appears to be a pilgrimage to Nob Kissin. Similar are the attitudes of the girmitiyas regarding the voyage. "On a boat of pilgrims, no one can lose caste and everyone is the same: it's like taking a boat to the temple of Jagannath, in Puri". (SOP, 356) The Ibis, the ship, contains the evil as well as good characters. The evil characters are the captain of the ship, Chillingworth, the first mate, Mr Crowle and Subedar Bhyro Singh. The good characters are Zachary Reid, Deeti, Kalua, Raja Neel, Jodu and Paulette. The evil characters exploit the good persons in the form of girmitiyas and the convicts. Bhyro Singh takes delight in humiliating the convicts Raja Neel and Ah Fatt. He treats them like a pair of plough oxen and loop chains around their neck and drives them like animals, slicing their legs with his lathi. Captain Chillingworth, the sole maker of law on the sea threatens the girmitiyas with his whip. The girmitiyas, lascars, convicts and the crewmen suffer silently and meekly on the Ibis at the hands of cruel and evil people.

The incarnation of Ma Taramony in Nob Kissin creates the balance between the evil and good forces as he helps the sufferers to escape. The Ibis becomes the symbol of manifestation, pilgrimage, change, rebirth, transformation and incarnation. The pathetic condition of Raja Neel and the striking change in his appearance makes Nob Kissin humbling, he thinks that it is like "midwiving the birth of a new existence," (SOP,388) of Raja Neel. The voyage of the girmitiyas, convicts and lascars in the womb of the Ibis symbolizes their rebirth as they frame a single family on the Ibis; they consider themselves as jahaj-bhais and jahas-bahens. The Ibis is not the ordinary ship like any other; it becomes a vehicle of transformation. Nob Kissin experiences the presence of Taramony within his body. Every day the womanly qualities grow inside his body, the signs of mounting revulsion, breasts, buttocks and maternal stirrings. Taramony's voice urges in his head to enter and "to manifest in him." (SOP, 424) Nob Kissin embraces every aspect of Taramony including her maternal love. He experiences the complete transformation in his body: "If avatar is new, how

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clothes can be old? Height, weight, privates, all must be changing, no, when there is alteration in externalities?" (SOP, 442) He wears the cloths like Taramony saffron -coloured alkhala and a robe voluminous. He feels the incarnation of Taramony within his body. The word 'Black' beside Zachary's name creates a vision of divine authority- Sri Krishna. The sound of Zachary's flute completes the circle, the ship begins to dance, the deck heaves with rhythm, Nob Kissing feels "blissful joy of pure anand," (SOP,504), and whispers to Kalua and Neel, "wait just a little bit, and you too will find your freedom ; moksha is at hand for you too…" (SOP, 503) Raja Neel sees Taramony "a mother incarnate" (SOP, 503), in the eyes of Nob Kissin. "Taramony's presence was fully manifest in him it was as if he had become the key that could unlock the cages that imprisoned everyone." (SOP, 503) So those who suffer on the Ibis bestow the blessings of Taramony. The incarnation of Taramony in Nob Kissin works like Thoth, mediating between evil and good forces with the divine law. To Burnham he's a servile babu. But through bhakti he believes he's spiritually superior to all — including the British. He calls Mr. Burnham "an asura." His vision tells him Deeti is Radha and Kalua is Krishna. So he helps them flee the *Ibis*, sabotaging the indenture system. Chaitanya's idea that "God appears in the lowest" becomes political action. By the end, he's gathering disciples among the coolies. The *Ibis*, an instrument of empire, becomes a floating *akhara* — a Vaishnav monastery — thanks to him. Ghosh thus creates the linkages between the Ibis myth and the history of colonial India, Opium trade and the transportation of the indentured labourers. In the skillful hands of Ghosh the Ibis becomes a symbol of empire's sordid underbelly slavery, opium trade, indentured labour, war pilgrimage, change, rebirth, manifestation and incarnation.

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