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**FACETS OF FREEDOM: SOCIAL DEATH AND KARMIC REBIRTH IN AMITAV  
GHOSH'S *SEA OF POPPIES***

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper argues that Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* highlights the transcultural continuities between indenture in the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic slave trade while simultaneously foregrounding the specificities of servitude in the Indian Ocean World. To do so, it demonstrates the remarkable relevance of Orlando Patterson's concept of slavery as "social death" to the Indian experience of crossing of the "Black Water," one that has traditionally been articulated through the cultural trope of death. However, rather than a simple reconfirmation of indentured labour as social death, Ghosh's novel offers a nuanced, counter-balancing correlative to social death: karmic rebirth as narrative event and metaphoric idiom. By using the double-level of meaning offered by symbolism and allegory, Ghosh is able to sensitively balance exploitation and oppression on the one hand (the "outward" or objective reality of social death) and resistance and agency on the other (the "inward reality" of karmic rebirth). In this sense, his novel is ultimately a reaffirmation of Patterson's Hegelian insight that slavery is not antithetical to freedom, but is the pre-condition for its emergence.

**KEYWORDS:** Amitav Ghosh, Atlantic Studies, colonialism, freedom, Indian Ocean World, indenture, slavery, social death

**RESUMEN:** Aspectos de la libertad: La muerte social y la reencarnación *kármica* en *Mar de amapolas* de Amitav Ghosh

Este artículo afirma que la novela *Mar de amapolas* de Amitav Ghosh hace hincapié en la continuidad transcultural entre el trabajo contratado del Océano Índico y el comercio de esclavos del Atlántico, a la vez que pone de relieve las características singulares de la esclavitud indoceánica. Para demostrarlo, destaca el concepto muy pertinente de Orlando Patterson sobre la muerte social que representa la esclavitud. El artículo contrasta esta "muerte social" del Atlántico con la experiencia india de atravesar el "Agua Negra", tradicionalmente articulada como un tropo cultural de la muerte. Sin embargo, en lugar de ofrecer una simple reafirmación de la esclavitud como muerte social, la novela presenta una alternativa a la muerte social: la reencarnación *kármica* como un evento narrativo y un lenguaje metafórico. Ghosh explota los dos niveles de significado que ofrecen el simbolismo y la alegoría para poder equilibrar de una forma sensible la explotación y la opresión (la realidad objetiva o "exterior" de la muerte social), por un lado, y la resistencia y la acción humana (la realidad "interior" o el renacimiento del karma), por el otro. Finalmente, en este sentido, su novela es una validación de la percepción hegeliana de Patterson: la esclavitud no es antitética a la libertad, sino que es la condición primaria para su emergencia.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Amitav Ghosh, estudios atlánticos, colonialismo, libertad, Océano Índico, trabajo contratado, esclavitud, muerte social

“I was born with my freedom” (526), proclaims Zachary Reid, the son of a Maryland freedwoman, in Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* (2008). Speaking five years after the abolition of slavery in the British colonies in 1833, Reid’s declaration of personal independence is a reformulation of the ideal of inalienable freedom enshrined in the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and the French Declaration of Rights (1789). As Jacob Crane (2011) has noted, Zachary’s encounters with racism in America and his attempt to build a new life and livelihood for himself aboard the *Ibis* ship parallel Frederick Douglass’s slave narrative from oppression to empowerment. Zachary’s narrative arc of freedom also prefigures the emancipatory trajectories of Indian characters such as Jodhu the river-boatman and Deeti the opium-cultivator. Both leave the homeland, but also free themselves from caste hierarchies and colonial oppression in India. However, like Zachary, who is later re-enmeshed in the race distinctions on the ship, Deeti and Jodhu too are constantly reminded of their new subaltern status as a lascar sailor and indentured labourer (*girmitya*) respectively during their sea voyage. Given this ambivalent representation of freedom in *Sea of Poppies*, it is not surprising that the issue has divided critics into two camps. While scholars such as Omendra Kumar Singh (2012) and Ravi Ahuja (2012) see the narrative as a re-enactment of hierarchies of oppression, Anupama Aurora (2011) and Jacob Crane emphasise the dual dynamics of contact and coercion, though the latter two lean clearly towards discourses of subaltern agency. In this paper, I would like to place this critical discussion on oppression and agency within the broader perspective of studies of slavery, including Afro-American studies. Using Orlando Patterson’s formulation of slavery as “social death,” I turn around the theoretical telescope by approaching the debate on freedom from the opposite end of slavery. I argue that Ghosh’s novel is ultimately a reaffirmation of Patterson’s Hegelian insight that slavery is not antithetical to freedom, but is the pre-condition for its emergence. I also posit that “social death,” a concept from comparative sociology used by Atlantic Studies scholars, should be conjoined with Ghosh’s poetics of karmic rebirth inspired from the Indian Ocean World as a way of productively reformulating the terms of the academic debate surrounding slavery and freedom.

The similarity in the dialectic nature of the debates on Atlantic slavery, on the one hand, and indentured labour in the Indian Ocean, on the other, is striking. In Atlantic studies, one set of academics comprising Trevor Burnard (2004), Ian Baucom (2005), and Vincent Carretta (2005) have underscored the overwhelming domination of the European masters over the

African slaves. Such absolute domination has been expressed through the concept of “social death,” a term coined by Orlando Patterson in his seminal *Social Death and Slavery*, published in 1982. This is a notion I will explain in detail further on. However, such social death would seem to preclude any form of political resistance or agency on the part of the enslaved. Indeed, the work of scholars like Melville J. Herskovits (1941), Paul Gilroy (1993), and Walter Rucker (2006) are forceful refutations of the premise that the enslaved are socially dead. One thus encounters striking analogies between what Vincent Brown has aptly called a competition between “hopeful stories of heroic subalterns versus anatomies of doom” (2009: 235) in Atlantic slavery studies and what Ravi Ahuja has called “heroic globalisation narratives” versus “relations of domination” (2012: 81, 83) in the case of Indian Ocean Studies.

Through this brief comparative overview of the affinities between the Atlantic and Indian Ocean World criticism, I hope to have provided the theoretical equivalent to Ghosh’s fictional exploration of the continuities between these transnational, maritime spaces. As Jacob Crane has pointed out, the histories of these oceans intersect through the co-presence aboard the *Ibis* of Zachary, a product of the Black Atlantic, and the indentured labourers bound for Mauritius, who will become part of the Indian Ocean World. These traditions of scholarship also provide the canvas against which I will locate my intervention. Patterson’s concept of “social death,” already a controversial term in Afro-American studies, is a valuable critical tool for understanding the notion of freedom in *Sea of Poppies*. Though I apply a sociological term that has found critical currency in Afro-American studies to the Indian Ocean World, I do so not to universalise its scope, but on the contrary to emphasise its specific utility in the Indian Ocean context where indentured labour and crossing the *Kala Pani* or Black Water has traditionally been articulated and apprehended through the cultural trope of death.

Jamaican-born Patterson is a child of the Black Atlantic, crossing it to pursue a doctorate at the London School of Economics in the 1960s, returning to Jamaica to promote economic development a decade later, and finally settling in America as an academic. His involvement in the Caribbean Artists Movement in London and in Jamaican politics no doubt shaped his ideas on race, socio-economic disparities and oppression, which are enduring themes in his work. The overlap in the academic backgrounds of Patterson and Ghosh (both specialise in economics and sociology) also explains the synergies between their works. The heuristic value of Patterson’s notion of “social death” to Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* lies in his approach to slavery

not merely as an economic system of exploitation, but also as a social apparatus of control. Drawing from Karl Marx's emphasis on slavery as a relation of domination, Patterson highlights three principal aspects of slavery as social death: first, the use of coercive violence, which in its most extreme form, is the threat of physical death; second, "natal alienation" or the absolute erasure of ties to the slave's family, culture, and history resulting in the removal of social and legal rights including inheritance and property rights; and third, debasement and dishonour of the slave whose only honour may, therefore, not be found in himself but in his master. Patterson's concept is intended as a transhistorical one, covering sixty-six slave societies across ancient Greece and Rome, the Islamic world, as well as precolonial Asia, America, and Africa. Patterson also fully acknowledges the absolutist nature of any theoretical definition which necessarily hinders it from being a "perfect fit" with reality. His formulation of the slave as socially dead as a result of violent cultural and social enslavement is nonetheless extremely productive for a reflection on freedom. As Patterson points out in his critique of Hegel's master-slave dialectic, "[t]he slave, by his social death, and by living 'in mortal terror of his sovereign master' becomes acutely conscious of both life and freedom" (98).

Patterson insists that "social death" is specific to slavery and does not apply to other forms of servitude such as indentured labour. I would argue that its value lies in the opposite direction: it constructively helps us pinpoint the continuities and specificities characterising slavery and indentured labour. Thus Patterson's first condition of violence, would, at first glance, seem to confirm his stance: by definition, the labour of the indentured worker is voluntary and contractual instead of being based on coercive violence which includes the threat of death. This threat of death, Patterson explains, was very real in antiquity when war prisoners and capital offenders could escape death by being slaves. Slavery, he concludes, emerges in part as a kind of "conditional commutation" of a death sentence: "The execution was suspended as long as the slave acquiesced in his powerlessness. The master was essentially a ransomer. What he bought or acquired was the slave's life [...] Because the slave had no socially recognised existence outside of his master, he became a social nonperson" (5). In *Sea of Poppies*, literal death is constantly intertwined with metaphorical forms of social death, highlighting the ambivalent dynamics of choice and force that undergird indentured labour. The Rajput Deeti and the untouchable Kalua are literally fleeing the socially-sanctioned death sentence passed on them because they have flouted the caste hierarchy and the tradition of widow immolation or *sati*. Furthermore, the contract of indenture is a "conditional

commutation” of death: the literal death sentence is reduced, conditional on their total subservience to their new ransomers: the faraway plantation-owners whose authority, *in absentia*, is wielded by the Captain and supervisors on board the eponymous *Ibis* ship, itself a former slave-ship. Captain Chillingworth, who formerly plied slaves on the Guinea coast (377), holds full legal power over them, which extends to punishments and even execution, echoing the powers of the plantation owners over the indentured labourers. This is made clear by the Captain’s disciplinary speech to the migrants:

At sea, there is another law and you should know that on this vessel, I am its sole maker. [...] I am your fate, your providence, your lawgiver. [...] But it is not the only one, there is another [...]

Here the Captain held his whip up and curled the lash around to form a noose.

... This is the other keeper of the law, and do not doubt for a moment that I will use it without hesitation should it prove necessary. (421)

The whip, coiled in a noose, is a grim symbol of the coercive violence and the constant threat of death on board the *Ibis*. The hangman’s noose makes it abundantly clear that the indenture contract is not an unconditional release from death but is conditional on the migrants’ abdication of fundamental human rights.

It is also an abdication of their socio-cultural existence and identities. In this sense, to escape to Mauritius initially appears *worse* than the prospect of physical death from which they flee. When Deeti realises she and Kalua must flee across the Black Water to get to Mauritius, and hence lose caste, she says to him: “it would have been better if you’d left me to die in that fire [of the sati pyre]” (216). The peculiarly Indian concept of the Black Water is thus a forceful illustration of Patterson’s second concept of “natal alienation” as a component of social death. Patterson defines the slave’s natal alienation in the following manner: “Alienated from all ‘rights’ or claims of birth, he ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order. [...] Not only was the slave denied all claims on, and obligation to, his parents and living blood relations but, by extension, all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors and on his descendants. He was truly a genealogically isolate” (5). In a strikingly resonant mode of reasoning, Deeti and Kalua see the Black Water as a place of death, a “chasm of darkness,” a “netherworld” (3), a land of the “living dead” (75). Deeti tries 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 our father’s house; never eat a meal with your sisters and brothers; never feel the cleansing touch of the Ganga” (75). “Social death” helps us understand what truly horrifies

Deeti. It is not merely the loss of caste and the distance from the Ganges, the ultimate source of Hindu purity, but being a genealogical and cultural “isolate,” severed from her ancestors, her living relations, and her immediate descendant, her daughter, whom she must leave in India. In other words, leaving India and crossing the Black Water is initially already tantamount to being socially dead. In this context, “social death” rather than demarcating the categories of slavery and indentured labour helps foreground the loss of self, security, and family history involved in both phenomena, even if the African traditions were far more difficult to preserve in the absolute violence of the pre-abolition context.

Moreover, Deeti’s fears stemming from her apprehension of social death are not unjustified. Legal expert Tayyab Mahmud, citing the historian Hugh Tinker, reminds us that “[r]ather than being an avenue of opportunity, for the majority of Indians indenture was an ‘exile into bondage’ as ‘many found they had exchanged one form of poverty and servitude for another, and many more found only death and disease’” (235). Such poverty and servitude pertain to life on the plantation, a facet of Indian diasporic existence not directly represented in the *Ibis* trilogy. While its absence may reinforce the charge levied against Ghosh of romanticising diasporic experience and globalisation (Ahuja), I would agree with Omendra Kumar Singh’s contention that the *Ibis*, a former slave-ship refitted as an opium-carrier bearing Indian migrants, is already a microcosm of the plantation (53). It reproduces the plantation’s structural inequalities and oppression. Zachary flees racism in America only to be re-embedded in the race hierarchies of the *Ibis*. Jodhu the boatman dreams of global maritime mobility only to be persecuted by his Indian and colonial hierarchical superiors on board. Deeti and the migrants, who wish to liberate themselves from caste, are reinserted into a rigid system of surveillance, control, and exploitation. Significantly, they are placed in the hold formerly reserved for the African slaves. The migrants, the lascars, and the two convicts on the ship are thus subject to oppression, humiliation, and punishments of glaringly unfair proportions. This corresponds to the third element of social death—dishonour and degradation.

It has been pointed out that the presence of Neel, a former landowner dispossessed of his property and family, as well as Ah Fatt, the half-Chinese drug addict, serve as a constant reminder that all the subalterns on the *Ibis* are subject to varying degrees of surveillance and incarceration on board (Aurora 30). The veiled threat symbolised by Chillingworth’s rope, alluded to earlier, is, thus, concretised in punishments involving chains, humiliation, lashing,

and flogging. The Muslim Jodhu is mocked and brutalised for his liaison with Munia, a Hindu migrant; Neel and Ah Fatt are pawns in a perverse game of degradation involving urination and excrement, played by the head supervisor Bhyro Singh and First Mate Crowley; Deeti, sexually exploited by her brother-in-law on her farm, risks becoming a sexual object once again aboard the *Ibis*; and Kalua is publicly flogged like a criminal for coming to the rescue of Deeti, the prototype of the political activist, who articulates the demands of the migrants for humane treatment. Characteristic of degrading punishment is the experience of abjection, of being forced from one's upright position to one of bending down on all fours, facing the lower stratum of the body and being thrust into the animal state. The First Mate Crowle mercilessly lashes Jodhu with a rope in order to make him crawl on all fours "like the dog that y'are" (488), before stripping him and whipping his buttocks. Animal imagery also highlights the abjection of Ah-Fatt and Neel. Bhyro Singh makes a public spectacle of their degradation by making them pretend they are plough-oxen tilling his fields as he curses and whips them. In Kalua's case, the use of criminal sanctions (i.e. flogging) for what is clearly a civil labour dispute runs counter to the classical liberal legal system that the colonial powers hypocritically extol. Kalua's punishment is a direct echo of the predicament of the plantation labourers, whose breaches of conduct would subject them to a penal code, and not to a civil code (to which they would be legally entitled in the context of a labour disagreement and not a criminal act).

To recapitulate, social death makes us sensitive to the limitations of freedom and its radical suppression in the novel through the prisms of coercive violence, natal alienation, and degradation. However, these theoretical premises have been challenged. Scholars have asked why ranks and authority may still be found among slaves themselves despite the "death" of their identities; how transformed vestiges of their native culture may still be found if they were "nationally alienated"; and how recurrent forms of resistance and revolt could characterise plantation life if slaves were indeed "socially dead" (Craton 1984). Ghosh seems to address these debates through the figurative resources of fiction instead of the empiricism of historical fact. Rather than a simple reconfirmation of indentured labour as social death, Ghosh's novel offers the necessary, but nuanced, counter-balancing correlative to social death: karmic rebirth as a narrative event and a metaphoric idiom. Vincent Brown has highlighted the weakness of the concept of social death as one that casts the slave as damaged, dispossessed, and socially dead. It therefore follows that "[s]cholars of slave resistance have never had much use for the concept of social death" (1242). However, Brown also posits a contrapuntal reading: if we see

“the fear of social death not as incapacity but as a generative force—a peril that motivated enslaved activity—a different image of slavery slides into view” (1244). Extending Brown’s observations, it can be said that Ghosh proposes a new, “different image” of servitude—and a new critical vocabulary anchored in the Indian Ocean World in *Sea of Poppies*. Running parallel to the threnody of leave-taking and death is the life-song of new beginnings and karmic rebirth. Deeti’s infant child in her womb (a product of her love for Kalua and not of rape, as is the case with her first child, Kabutri) is both the literal manifestation of her new life with Kalua and a symbol of the new identity she constructs for herself as a result of her choice to become a *girmitiya*. Deeti realises that “her new self, her new life, had been gestating all this while in the belly of this creature, this vessel that was the Mother-Father of her new family, a great wooden *mái-báp*, an adoptive ancestor and parent of dynasties to come” (372-3). The epic vocabulary of progenitors and founding figures restores a new dignity and social identity to the subalterns on board: running the risk of becoming socially dead gives them the opportunity to be socially reborn through self-fashioning rather than hereditary social categories. The ship is therefore both an anticipation of the plantation (evidenced by the violence of the diegesis) and a symbolic womb engendering new lives (reflected in tropes of simile and metaphor). This regenerative role can only be articulated in the language of mystical symbolism: “in her inward reality, she was a vehicle of transformation, travelling through the mists of illusion towards the elusive, ever-receding landfall that was Truth” (440). By using the Indian notion of *maya* or worldly illusion and the double-level of meaning offered by the literary resources of allegory, Ghosh is able to sensitively balance exploitation and oppression on the one hand (the “outward” or objective reality of social death) and resistance and agency on the other (the “inward reality” of karmic rebirth). Thus, Ghosh simultaneously offers, on the one hand, a narrative of genealogical isolation and economic exploitation, and on the other, an allegory of agency and empowerment. The sense of karmic rebirth is reinforced by the new names adopted by the characters: Azad (meaning freedom) Lascar for Jodhu, Aditi for Deeti, Madhu for Kalua, Putleshwari for Paulette. In addition, like Afro-American historians who have pointed to the persistence of Afro-American slaves’ native traditions (Rucker 2008), Ghosh deliberately draws attention to the songs, prayers, epic stories and marriage rituals that the Indian migrants carry with them on the ship but also adapt to their shipborne experiences. Though they fear becoming “genealogical isolates,” the *girmitiyas*’ recreation of the past in fact re-anchors them in a newly created culture of “ship-siblings” (*jahajis*) and, significantly, gives them the psychological resources and



cultural confidence necessary to stage protests aboard the *Ibis*, thereby securing a minimum of respect for their customs such as death rituals.

The cultural resilience and embryonic demands for political freedom aboard the *Ibis* are complemented by a network of images surrounding spiritual freedom. The characters' narrative arcs of ongoing transformation, particularly as articulated by Nob Kissin Pander, draw heavily from the religious register of *moksha* or liberation from the karmic cycle. (Here, one finds echoes of the Christian arc of conversion and resurrection in the Afro-American slave narratives.) As Pander physically sets Neel free, he underlines the possibilities of metaphysical release: "he held the keys out to Neel: here they are, take them, take them; may they help you find your release, your *mukti*..." (520). Like Patterson's use of social death as a metaphor for the confiscation of identity, Ghosh's karmic rebirth is a symbol of the beginning of the recuperation of new identities and existences for the subaltern characters. This conjoining of Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds is most forcefully underlined by Zachary's double rebirth aboard the *Ibis*—at the beginning of the novel, when the Lascars help him mask his mixed racial origins and rise to First Mate; and at the end, when Zachary's deliberate withdrawal from his benevolent father-figure of the Indian Ocean World (the Malay Serang Ali, previously involved in piracy, as Zachary later learns) rendered in both the symbolic language of the Atlantic's triangular trade and in the maritime metaphor common to all oceans: "It was for him, Zachary, to find an honourable resolution to his dealings with Serang Ali; in this would lie his manumission into adulthood, his knowledge of the steadiness of his helm" (456).

Patterson's thesis therefore allows us to critically revisit the opposing approaches to slavery outlined at the beginning of the paper: the first focusing on oppression, the second on agency. For Ghosh, agency derives from the insight that social death is a gestation for transformation and social rebirth. The counterpointing of social death and karmic rebirth allows us to see that in *Sea of Poppies*, it is not a question of celebrating servitude, but recognising in servitude the possibility, however faint, of resilience and revolt. To use Giorgio Agamben's notion of "bare life," social death urges us to think of agency as "an aspect of existence to be assumed even under conditions of 'bare life'" (Brown 1246). Thus, we may think of freedom and slavery not as neatly aligned, antithetical philosophical constructs, but co-existing and co-defining referents. The metaphor of gestation also implies that this rebirth is an ongoing process rather than a finality. As Patterson notes, freedom "is continuously active and creative" (98).

The narratives of the novel's myriad characters follow arcs of varying degrees of transformation and ongoing negotiation of liberties. Zachary is transformed from a discriminated freedman to a Second Mate, but is still haunted by racism; Jodhu moves from parochial boatman to a global sailor who must, nonetheless, resist limits on his freedom; Deeti and the other migrants evolve from caste, region, and gender-bound cultivators into a casteless brotherhood whose coordinated protests anticipate the activism of the freedom struggle. It has, in fact, been argued that the indenture system, by bringing together Indians of diverse linguistic, regional, and religious backgrounds, paved the way for the Indian freedom struggle by forging "a collective identity in resistance to a shared experience of a singular form of colonial oppression" (Mahmud 239). The novel may, therefore, be seen as a homage not only to the cultural legacy bequeathed by the first *girmitiyas* to the diaspora, but also to their indirect political legacy to freedom fighters abroad and in the homeland. Gandhi's struggle for freedom, one may recall, began in the Indian diasporic community of Natal and served as the prototype for political resistance in India.

*Sea of Poppies* is, therefore, a powerful illustration of Patterson's premise that "[t]he slave, in his social death, is already transformed" (98). If the politics of social death have traditionally been perceived as disempowering through its concentration on death, Ghosh's poetics of karmic rebirth revitalise the notion by highlighting the potential for agency even in the conditions of bare life. Through the lens of social death and karmic rebirth, one may better appreciate the extent to which, to rephrase Patterson, the "men and women [who] struggle for freedom" in the novel are those who "think of themselves as free in the only meaningful sense of the term" (342).

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