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**'COOLITUDE': REFLECTION ON TRANSCULTURAL PROCESS  
WITH REFERENCE TO AMITAV GHOSH'S 'SEA OF POPPIES'****PARAG PRAKASH CHAUDHARI**Asst. Professor,  
S.S.Dhamdhare College,  
Talegaon Dhamdhare, Shirur,  
Pune.**ABSTRACT**

*Coolitude is a word coined by Mauritian poet Khal Torabully to describe lives of migrant Indians living in Mauritius. The novel 'Sea of Poppies' recreates nineteenth century social history of British India. The plot of the novel depicts migration of 'coolies' or 'girmityas' taken to Mauritius by British as indentured laborers. Therefore, it becomes novel of unique kind that foregrounds transcultural process of migration.*

**Keywords:** Coolitude – Negritude – transcultural process- girmityas – process of displacement and uprootedness – essentialist theory – willful and forceful migration – Ibis trilogy – social history

Coolitude is a term coined by Mauritian poet and scholar Khal Torabully to describe the cultural interaction of the Indian and Chinese coolie diaspora and by extension also similar migrations. It refers to transcultural process of migration of indentured laborers to Mauritius during nineteenth century by British colonial rulers. The word 'coolie' originating in Tamil means "laborer" with the implication that the labor provided is physical in nature. The term 'Coolitude' echoes with 'Negritude' not only in rhyming sense but in spirit of the term that refers to literary movement initiated by the oppressed. Negritude was a political and literary movement by African thinkers and leaders like Aime Cesaire, Leon Damas and Leopold Senghor. Negritude was primarily an essentialist movement meant to create theoretical and practical framework for self-assertion of black colonized people of Africa. It was an attempt to create a common ground where every black African is given space for asserting his/her own self against white colonizers.

'Coolitude' shares spirit of the negritude movement but it is not essentialist in nature. Poet and scholar Khal Torabully posits that there is no one singular "Indian" and the word "coolie" suffices as allowing for this diversity and multiple identities. In this positioning of Coolitude, Torabully supports the diffusion of culturalisms among groups of people in the colony. Coolitude does not subscribe to lament on the loss of Motherland or even yearning and imagining original homeland. The coolies in the course of time have built their homes and have developed their roots in Mauritius Island. They no longer want to come back to India but on the contrary they want to flourish in the soil of the Island. The 'Coolitude'





essentially aims at recognizing one's own roots and accommodating diversity in all cultural and social aspects of life. The word 'coolie' otherwise connotes derogatory or inferior economic status but 'coolitude' celebrates this status the immigrants owned right from their arrival on Mauritius island. Rajiv Mohavir quotes a South African Bhojpuri folk song to describe the identity of 'coolies'. The song runs as follows:

*Kuli nam dharaya  
Natalwa me ai ke  
Bhajan karo bhaya  
Hath me cambu  
Pardesita ghare jai*

*They've given you the name "coolie"  
You've come to Natal,  
Give thanks in song, brother  
With a cambu in your hand  
And a hoe on your shoulder,  
Let the foreigners go home. (A South African Bhojpuri folk song,  
Mesthrie, 198)*

Amitav Ghosh, being anthropologist himself, recreates this past of immigration of 'coolies' or 'girmityas' from states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in the nineteenth century. The first novel of the Ibis trilogy, 'Sea of Poppies' describes this migration of indentured laborers in the vessel Ibis. The Ibis is a symbol of the whether forceful or willing but painful migration of these laborers to the island of Mauritius. The Ibis ship is the place where all the laborers belonging to different caste in Indian caste and religious hierarchy come together and create a culture where everyone of them could adjust and accommodate. The ship brotherhood is unique example of 'transculturation'. There are two hundred men and eight women being taken to Mauritius as plantation workers. Every one of them has his or her own reason to go to Mauritius. The basic reason is financial though. These two hundred and eight people belong to different castes, regions and religions. This is an instance where we come across the process of transculturation taking place within Indian social order of 'caste'.

#### **Dimensions of Ship brotherhood:**

#### **Decasting or 'deculturation' of 'girmityas' or the recruits for the transportation: A Prerequisite for neoculturation.**

'Girmitya' is a substitute word for 'coolie'. 'Girmit' is an Awadhi (Indian language) for agreement. Those who went to Mauritius or any other island on a contract with British are called 'Girmitya'. 'Girmitya' is the only identity that sticks to these indentured laborers. They no longer identify themselves with any caste or category. Indian Caste is a rigid social order in India. Caste is closed within social system which neither can be acquired nor can be changed. It is obtained by a child from his or her parents. The caste hierarchy has been maintained in India through 'roti' & 'beti' that is by exchanging 'meal' and 'marriage' within the caste. This practice keeps the caste system undisturbed by the external interventions.





But, in case of 'girmityas' caste does not matter. Untouchability and discrimination which is a reality of caste system does not exist when it comes to girmityas or recruits taken to Mauritius and such other islands as plantation workers. These workers belong to all castes and religions. In fact, forgetting one's caste and willingness to work was the only pre-condition for plantation workers to get recruited. An instance from the novel can be mentioned here when Paulette joins the group of migrants in a disguise of daughter of Brahmin be married to a maistry working in Mauritius. Aditi mistakes Paulette Lambert for a daughter of Brahmin and it serves as disguise for Paulette in order to go to Mauritius. Paulette becomes Putleshwari be married to a plantation worker in Mauritius by her uncle. There was a belief among Indians then that one would lose caste if crosses the sea. Paulette who is ethnically French but brought by an Indian Muslim ayah in a disguise of Brahmin girl discards the caste issue:

"On a boat of pilgrims, no one can lose caste and everyone is same: It's like taking a boat to the temple of Jagannath in Puri, from now on and forever after wards, we will be ship-siblings jahaz-bhais and jahaz-bahens to each other. There will be no difference between us." (Page no. 356, *Sea of Poppies*, Amitav Ghosh)

The ship brotherhood is extended even to the convicts, Raja Neel Ratan and AhFat. Neel Ratan from the duct of his cell listens to the Bhojpuri songs and stories of transportees about Mareech deep or Mauritius. He shares the mythical stories of King Bhagirath bringing Ganges to earth from Kailas. AhFat shares his memories of home at Guangzhou (English name Canton). The ship-brotherhood among migrants has been tested on several occasions. The first such incident occurs when one of the Muslim migrants died and the guards come to throw away the dead body in the water. Aditi becomes the voice of migrants and everybody accepts her leadership. Aditi stops the guards from taking the dead body and asks the guards to offer minimum dignity in such cases. She claims the dead body to perform last rites as he belonged to the group. Thereafter, Aditi becomes 'Bhauji' or matron of migrants. The migrants start creating new bonds among themselves as if all old ties were immaterial now that the sea had washed away their past. Aditi arranges the marriage of Heeru and Eeka Nack and the migrants actually perform all marriage ceremonies in symbolic way in the lower part of the ship itself.

The circumstances on the boat set the migrants against all adversaries and they come up with unique responses which can be called 'transculturation' at its subtle form. The migrants face one more confrontation with the subedar Bhyro Singh and his guards when Munia, one of the migrants and Jodu, the lascar are caught on the board by the guards. Aditi challenges the migrants and make them register their protest. The ship brotherhood remains intact till the end of the novel. In the end, five men including two convicts Neel Ratan and AhFat, two lascars Serang Ali and Azad and one migrant Kalua escape from the 'Ibis'.



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**'Transcultural' bonding of Human relations:**

This set of people belongs to all different nationalities, religions but in the due course of their lives, they become integral part of each other's lives. Paulette Lambert is epitome transcultural humanity. She had been brought up by her father in the company of nature keeping her away from any religious orientation. She is the real child of Nature knowing nothing but love, freedom and equality. The fundamental principles of transculturation of humanity are the same love, equality and freedom. Paulette acquires the minutest ways and customs of Indian life that she calls Azad, the Muslim lascar as her brother and the only family member. This relationship between Azad and Paulette doesn't recognize boundaries of religion and nationality.

Zachary's feeling of love for Paulette falls in the same category. Zachary is an American but that doesn't stop his tender feelings for Paulette. He hires Azad as a lascar on the ship only on Paulette's request. Similarly, Baboo Nob Kissin Pander's search for spiritual unification through Zachary could be otherwise taken as a whim but in the context of transculturation this seems to be fitting example. Baboo Nob Kissin who is the disciple of Ma Taramony who belongs to cult of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, a devotee of Lord Krishna. Baboo Nob Kissin believes that Ma Taramony would be reincarnated through Zachary Reid the young American seaman. His intuition drives him to this assumption. Zachary Reid is unaware of Pander's intention but he doesn't oppose Pander's otherwise foolish activities. The spiritual zeal of Nob Kissin Pander transcends religious, territorial and national boundaries and hence can be called a transcultural act.

**Aditi and Kalua :-**

The novel 'sea of poppies' depicts the complete transformation in the character of Aditi. It is not only the (in her name) transformation from Deeti to Aditi but the transformation of her persona. Aditi doesn't hesitate to lose her status of upper caste- Rajput and married to lower class Kalua, her savior. Aditi and Kalua also transcend the most rigid and unchangeable barrier of caste. They are ready to embrace life wherever they can live. Aditi and Kalua know that they have disconnected their previous bonding and have no hope to return to it. They register their names in recruits taken to Mauritius and hence transcend the geographic and territorial boundaries. Aditi and Kalua overcome fear of crossing the sea and the fear of being killed by demons at Marech deep or Mauritius.

They become the part of the process of global migration taking place in nineteenth century. The novel 'Sea of poppies' describes the process of migration of Indians in various parts of the world like Mauritius as coolies and plantation workers. The Indians such as Aditi, Kalua and the whole lot of two hundred and eighty girmitiyas have evolved life and culture unique of its type in all parts of world like Carebian Islands, Fiji, Singapore, and Mauritius. They were then taken as migrants but now they are the part of new kind of civilization i.e. 'transcultural civilization'.



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