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Soldiers of Empire: Military Identities and Colonial Power Structures in Amitav Ghosh's *Flood of Fire*

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Abstract

In the context of the First Opium War (1839-42), this paper discusses the complex interplay between military identities and colonial power structures in Amitav Ghosh's *Flood of Fire* (2015). Using the personal and cultural changes of the characters in the colonial military apparatus, Ghosh explores how British colonial authority influenced and undermined traditional social orders and identities of Indian soldiers, or sepoys. It focuses on characters like Kesri Singh and reveals changing loyalties, cultural dislocation, and challenges of being a sepoy in an ambiguous role, being both coloniser and colonised. This analysis looks at how Ghosh represents the British military as a tool of empowerment and erasure: redefining individual identities within its ranks while maintaining a strict power hierarchy. This novel provides a nuanced perspective of the recruitment policies of the colonial army, shifts in loyalty, and identity crises that occur from such recruitment in the empire of Britain.

***Keywords*:** Military Identities, Colonial Power Structures, Amitav Ghosh, Opium War, Postcolonialism

3.0 Introduction

Amitav Ghosh's *Flood of Fire* probes the interweaving of complex military identities and colonial power structures in the First Opium War (1839-42). Through an elaborate narration involving characters such as Kesri Singh and Zachary Reid, Ghosh examines how

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colonialism reshapes identities and repositions ideals of honour and service in the minds of soldiers being colonised. Using a postcolonial perspective, the novel depicts how these identities were used by the British colonial authority to exercise superiority over the Indian soldiers that were deployed in the Bengal Native Infantry. This is a study on colonial power and military loyalty with regards to the novel, arguing that these definitions represent larger postcolonial theories of identity formation and control by an empire. Colonial power structures, according to Ghosh, also make social hierarchies in relationships between Indian soldiers and British officers' complex. It is especially clear in the mentorship that Kesri receives from Captain Mee, who, despite being a good friend, remains the epitome of colonial privilege and authority. The shared experiences and mutual dependence between Kesri and Mee bring to the surface the underlying inequity of Mee retaining the privileges of his rank and race, whereas Kesri's status was confined strictly to his position in the Indian ranks, no matter what his abilities or years of service. Kesri is portrayed as:

> But their complaints caused him no undue concern; was not a man to put much store by the opinions of his peers; they were dull stolid men for the most part, and it seemed only natural to him that they should be jealous of someone such as himself (Ghosh 2015:9).

Such sentiments reveal how Kesri's sense of superiority within the sepoy ranks does not necessarily translate to recognition from British command, reflecting the limits imposed by racialised hierarchies. There is colonial discourse full of instances wherein British authority makes Indian sepoys stick to the spurious loyalty where, like Kesri Singh, is a perfect image of an obedient colonial soldier. As a havildar of Bengal Native Infantry, he holds both soldier's pride and psychological struggle the British created in manipulating the definition of loyalty. Frantz Fanon's thoughts on the colonial violence and identity describe in detail how the colonial machinery forces Kesri and fellow comrades to absorb British visions of soldierly duty, turning them into "native representatives" representing colonial power. This imposition transforms their role. They are no longer simple soldiers but emblems representing British hegemony that bears the brunt of colonial violence, as perpetrators and victim alike. It goes further in the discussion as Ghosh describes economic exploitation that is inherent within colonialism.

Service, when rendered by the sepoy under compulsion due to monetary needs, turns out to be an apparatus of mercantilism on part of the British according to the theories of Edward Said, who indicates how colonisation commodifies the body it intends to control for economic gains. Kesri's pledge towards military service is perpetually tested by the exploitative tendency of the East India Company, which gradually starts looking at Indian soldiers as nothing more than disposable materials. Commodification of the very men is just a synonym of Said's words on *Orientalism* as a corporate institution in systematic dehumanisation of natives as a whole in serving to the economic goal. Perhaps, it is the same line of reasoning how one's loyalty changes against the ruthless commodification imposed by colonial rule as seen in the eventual disillusionment of Kesri, who realises that the military campaign of Company is exploitative, particularly when it concerns opium trading. Also, the idea of mimicry which Homi Bhabha refers to may be found with Zachary Reid. In this light, Reid functions within both British and colonial Indian worlds by mimicking the styles and sensibilities of the British officers. Bhabha further claims that mimicry "disrupts authority" (1994: 88) by laying bare its artificial constructs. Zachary's desire to join the British power circles brings out the contradictions in colonial authority. His "mimicked" identity, straddling both British and Indian cultures, questions the stability of colonial hierarchies. Ghosh's depiction of Zachary underlines the instability, portraying him as a collaborator and an

opponent of the imperial framework at the same time. The irony of his transformation from an outsider to an agent of the colonial enterprise reflects Bhabha's assertion that mimicry inverts power structures by highlighting their constructive quality, thereby destabilising the authority it ostensibly supports. Using the theoretical framework of Michel Foucault on power and surveillance, Ghosh further probes into the mechanisms of control that the British exerts over Indian soldiers. According to Foucault, it is the disciplinary function that constitutes the central core of modern power systems that preserve control through the mechanisms of observation and punishment of persons (1995:299). This disciplinary power which Foucault defines is the same oversight the British officers continually place upon sepoys such as Kesri in *Flood of Fire*. The manner sepoys follow the military codes strictly with a menacing punitive action depicts how the colonial authorities use the mechanism of surveillance in order to ensure control. It's now such tight disciplining in an infantry group of Kesri which offers power mechanism for Company to thwart any kind of insurrection and to restrain rebellion that might come alive within colonised groups of soldiers. Foucault can say about instrument and control through power in that every moment of life of sepoys and their even minute particulars would come under regulation just like any object forms as interest upon the list for the British government.

3.1 Military Identities: Ambivalence and Hybridity

Military identity in *Flood of Fire* provides a spot to concentrate regarding talking about individual and group identities within the hierarchies of colonialism. Amitav Ghosh's narrative traces the tale of the people working within the British Empire's army, Indian sepoys, and British officers who have had significant phases of demonstrating their characters and loyalty and the after-effects of military life on their personal as well as cultural selves. Ghosh raises the questions about the complexities of colonial subjects who enlist in military service for the empire - how such identities are circumscribed, jostled, and exploited under imperial auspices. Postcolonial theory, particularly as outlined by scholars such as Homi K. Bhabha, focuses on the "hybrid" identities that colonial subjects often adopt under imperial rule. Soldiers in colonial armies, such as the Indian sepoys in Ghosh's novel, embody this hybridity. They are caught between their native identity and the foreign colonial power they serve. Their uniforms, ranks, and participation in the military might offer them a certain level of prestige and authority, but this authority is limited and undercut by their position as colonial subjects. In*Flood of Fire,* Havildar Kesri Singh serves as a quintessential figure who embodies this duality. He is proud of his military rank and his regiment's reputation, yet his loyalty is constantly tested by the precariousness of his position under British officers. As Ghosh describes: "Subedar Nirbhay Singh's hold on the paltan was such that even Major Wilson, the battalion commander, hesitated to cross him" (Ghosh 2015:10). This illustrates the partial authority granted to native soldiers within the British military, but even figures like Subedar Nirbhay Singh, who command respect, remain subject to the overarching colonial power structure. This creates a tension that is emblematic of Bhabha's notion of ambivalence-where the colonial subject both collaborates with and resists colonial authority. The sepoy in the colonial army exemplifies the contradictions inherent in military service under an imperial power. While sepoys like Kesri are essential for the British military campaigns, their loyalty and service are often manipulated for colonial ends. Ghosh highlights how sepoys are positioned not only as enforcers of colonial rule but also as potential threats to it. The Indian Rebellion of 1857 (often termed the Sepoy Mutiny) stands as a historical reminder of the volatility of these military identities. The sepoy's role as both protector and potential rebel

underscores the precarious balance of power in colonial military structures. In *Flood of Fire*, the sepoys march through territories already subdued by British forces, symbolising their dual role as both the face of colonial power and the embodiment of native strength:

> 'East India Company sepoys were an unusual sight in this remote part of Assam: to have a full paltan of the Bengal Native Infantry's 25th Regiment- the famous 'Pacheesi'- marching through the rice-fields was probably as great a tamasha as most of them would witness' (Ghosh 2015: 8).

This spectacle reinforces the idea that military identity, especially under colonial regimes, is performative. The military march is not just a demonstration of power but also an assertion of identity, one that is carefully choreographed to maintain colonial authority. Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) offers insights into the relationship between colonial violence and identity. Fanon argues that colonialism is sustained through violence and that the colonised subject's identity is often forged in response to this violence. Soldiers in colonial armies, particularly those from the colonised territories, are enmeshed in this cycle of violence. They are tasked with enforcing the colonial state's power, often through violent means, yet this same violence shapes their own identities as subjects of colonialism.

In the novel, the sepoys' participation in British campaigns, such as the opium trade war against China, places them in direct confrontation with other colonised peoples. The soldiers become instruments of colonial violence, but this role is fraught with internal contradictions. Kesri's experience exemplifies this, as his loyalty to the British is constantly at odds with his own desires for autonomy and recognition beyond the colonial structure. Colonial armies, such as the Bengal Native Infantry, are tools of the state, but they also highlight the fragility of colonial power. The fact that Kesri and others like him hold onto their ranks and strive for promotion within the colonial army suggests that colonial power structures depend on the consent and participation of the colonised to some extent. At the same time, their aspirations are limited by the racial and hierarchical boundaries imposed by colonialism. The colonial military functions as a microcosm of broader colonial power structures, embodying the hierarchies and tensions that define colonial relationships. Officers like Captain Mee in *Flood of Fire* represent the British upper class, who, despite their close interactions with native soldiers, maintains their authority through a rigid system of rank and race. Yet, Ghosh presents Captain Mee's relationship with Kesri as one of mutual dependence, albeit within the confines of colonial dominance. 'I've been ordered to report to Fort William, in Calcutta. The high command's putting together an expeditionary force, for an overseas mission - I'd got wind of it and sent in my name.' (Ghosh 2015:30). This interaction illustrates how British officers relied on their native subordinates to maintain control and discipline within the ranks, but the power dynamics always leaned in favour of the colonial authority. The colonial military hierarchy was not simply a matter of rank but also of race and ethnicity. European officers occupied the highest ranks, often receiving superior pay, living quarters, and respect, while local soldiers were kept in subordinate positions, no matter their achievements or experience. This racialised hierarchy reflects Edward Said's concept of *Orientalism*, where the "Other" (in this case, the colonial subject) is constructed as inherently inferior to the Western subject (Said 2003:204). Military structures were thus used to reinforce the civilisational discourse of empire, where European officers were portrayed as the bearers of discipline, modernity, and order, while native soldiers were cast as less capable but necessary auxiliaries. This racialised division also served to distance the colonial rulers from their subjects, perpetuating a narrative of difference that justified the colonial project itself.

Military identity under colonialism is deeply steeped in notions of masculinity, requiring them to demonstrate bravery, loyalty, and hardness. Indian sepoys in *Flood of Fire*, moreover, are depicted to be representative of a "militarised masculinity" that stands against their supposed status as the weaker section under colonial rule. According to W. Connell, theorising hegemonic masculinity, militaries encourage a hegemonic form of masculinity which emphasises hardness and control. However, for Kesri, soldier identity needs to convey to others a sense of adherence to that ideal form of masculinity, at the same time his own racial and colonial status subverts the very notion of masculinity with which he is trying to cope; thus, his self-concept remains fragmentary. This is in contradistinction to Judith Butler's theory on performativity whereby identity is constructed through repeated performances. So, the Indian sepoys' adherence to military codes of conduct and honour is a performance of the ideal military identity, yet it is perpetually undermined by colonial prejudices. We observe in *Flood of Fire* that military identity is constructed, externally legitimised but still internally plagued, as Kesri's efforts to live up to military ideals are again and again foiled by his colonial situation (Ghosh 2015: 114).

3.2 Colonial Power Apparatus

To signify the delicately maintained hierarchy of inclusion and exclusion of Indian soldiers from the British military elite, Ghosh presents Havildar Kesri Singh, who belongs to the Bengal Native Infantry's 25th Regiment. His position within the paltan, or battalion, reflects the intricacies of colonial military identity. It is a leadership position constrained by strict hierarchy that excludes Indian soldiers from their British counterparts. The emphasis of condescending benevolence placed by the British commanders focuses on the rigid class boundaries that defined colonial military institutions, wherein Indian soldiers were conditioned to be loyal to British command despite significant racial barriers. The loyalty is portrayed as an outcome of both social conditioning and limited upward mobility, as Kesri's ambitions to ascend within the ranks illustrate. Kesri's realisation of the colonial power structure's role in shaping military order by severing soldiers' connections with family and community:

> 'He understood now that the first step in building units of that kind was to strip the men of their links to the world beyond. In the regular Bengal Native Infantry, it was impossible to do this; the ties between the men and their communities were just too strong' (Ghosh 2015:207).

Kesri's job obsession, as exemplified in his desire to "make a good show" (Ghosh 2015:2) for both the villagers and for his commanding officers, has much more psychological undertones in such a system flourished based on the mere show of loyalty and discipline. However, his hopes were well anchored in his nature as an Indian sepoy under a colonial order that used Indian officers for the sake of showing British dominance over the native masses. This form of power structure where natives were appointed to control their own kin is the very example of what postcolonial scholars' term "mimicry," where colonised subjects are partially empowered but fundamentally marginalised. The desire and manner of Kesri to prove himself for promotion in his regiment exemplify the colonial machinery that used loyalty to British interest by formulating a model of colonial militarism based on controlled assimilation rather than actual inclusion.

The colonial power structure also speaks in line with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the "subaltern." Spivak (1994:89). claims that the subaltern, or the subordinated subject, is often silenced in the colonial discourse because they are constantly spoken for instead of being granted the right to self-representation. In Ghosh's text, Indian sepoys such as Kesri are confined to roles that reduce their freedom, demonstrating how the colonial power subordinates the native voice. Despite his loyalty, however, Kesri realises his inability to resist the colonial machine, as his position affords him no authority to challenge British exploitation or oppression. Suppression aligns with Spivak's argument that colonial discourse eradicates the subaltern's autonomy to reduce Kesri's military identity to a colonial construct that serves imperial purposes. By the end, he realises the futility of his endeavour for recognition with a system that would not recognise the identity that emerged beyond that of a mere colonial scheme. The use of theoretical frameworks shall be embedded into the narratives of *Flood of Fire* to draw out exactly how military identities at the coloniser's front are constituted through exploitation control and also by means of effacement in this regime. The novel becomes a strong commentary on the psychological and social ramifications of colonial power structures, revealing how colonialism appropriates and reshapes identities to maintain hegemony. Ghosh's narrative invites readers to ponder the ways in which systems of colonialism manufacture identities to propagate subjugation, with the long-term consequences of imperialism on postcolonial societies.

The *Flood of Fire* narrative thus reveals this manipulation of military identities ran beyond the single ambition level and into a system of familial and social loyalty upon which colonial powers played for the re-entrenchment of control. Subedar Nirbhay Singh represents this idea of militarised loyalty, strongly based within family and caste, at the top rank of authority among the sepoys, to which Kesri looked for direction. Familial authority of Nirbhay Singh among the sepoys reflects the British strategy to enlist soldiers from martial castes who, once inducted, formed familial ties that further solidified their allegiance to the British. For instance, Nirbhay Singh's influence comes from his family's multi-generational association with the regiment, linking military service with familial duty, which subsequently tightens the colonial grip on the battalion. Through these dependencies, the British military could always be certain to receive the loyalty of the soldiers, first reaching beyond personal selfish motives to their family members and communities. This is evident in how, on one hand, native soldiers are represented as symbolic figures of colonial power and order. Ghosh's description of the march of the sepoys through Assam, parading under the East India Company flag, recalls the role of sepoys as agents of imperial order but in a manner that proved carefully choreographed to project British power. The parade of the Bengal Native Infantry, carefully designed to awe the local villagers, speaks of an exercise in the intent of the East India Company to use Indian soldiers as visual instruments of imperial dominance. This calculated spectacle reveals the psychological underpinnings of colonial control whereby native forces were not mere military assets but symbols of a disciplined and controlled colonial state. This is consonant with Foucault's discourse on power being performative, wherein the power regime is predicated on observable enactments of control to validate authority over the colonised people.

Ideological basis of the colonial power regime is further probed by Ghosh in the narrative of British officers like Captain Mee, who embody the condescending attitude of the colonial elite towards the Indian soldier. Even as personal amity may be between Mee and Kesri, structures of classes and racist tendencies have become solidified in the British military institution. Such a colonial psyche where Indian soldiers are taken for granted as capable auxiliaries but inferior has been a firm footing in solidifying power dynamics which gave British officers a straddling place at the apex of military hierarchy and the social strata.

Kesri's need for acceptance by Captain Mee, who treats him condescendingly, is indicative of the internalised subjugation that the colonial structure instilled in native soldiers. This asymmetry of power structure is telling of how the machinery of colonial power went beyond oppressive forces to create psychic dependences among colonised people. The novel also further explores the role of material rewards in sustaining the colonial military structure. The promise of "prise money" (Ghosh 2015: 25) for foreign campaigns was a recruiting and retaining tool used by the British, appealing both to aspirations and economic needs in the Indian soldiers, though this came at an exorbitant cost, reinforcing the exploitative labour system where Indian soldiers were treated as disposable tools in the expansion of British commercial interests. This suggests that the economic benefits from military service did not offset the underlying differences and dangers, showing how Indian soldiers were also precarious assets to the colonial project. These economic dynamic finds relevance in Marxist critiques of colonialism, which posit that the colonial apparatus relied upon economic allurements to support a labour force that backed the imperialist agenda without finding ways to rectify basic inequities of colonial rule.

3.4 Conclusion

In *Flood of Fire*, Amitav Ghosh depicts a complex understanding of the power structures in colonialism, revealing the intricately intertwined identities of the military through imperial agendas. Through the character of Kesri Singh, Ghosh reveals the subtle hierarchy and enforced loyalties that the sepoys were under the East India Company. The Company army recruits Kesri and others, indicating a sort of exploitation of the colonial subjects who, as part of the process, achieve a form of identity bound to servitude and obedience. Kesri tells himself that the internalisation of values in a colonial structure can be perceived as showing an ambition born out of bondage, where hierarchy and devotion overrule personal freedom. Another interesting aspect about the work of Ghosh is that it brings into light the issue of ethics and the debate between loyalty and autonomy by Indian soldiers. Experiences of Kesri also make one infer that colonialism forces on them a wrong sense of identity and a purpose while playing upon their own cultural values such as honour and family loyalty. Entry into the British army is not just a professional move but very personal, motivated by belief in upward mobility within the limited limits of colonial military rank. This ambition stands in contrast to brother Ram Singh, who rejects the British as being even worse than joining the English Company's army for him. This intra-familial struggle is one expression of the broader ideological divide within colonised states, where the colonial regime extends into even the closest relationship, entangling the very nature of identity and loyalty. Ghosh also explores how the British military apparatus uses native factions against each other. By using sepoys as an extension of imperial ends, the British create an apparatus that makes colonial subjects, overnight transformed into "officers" and "soldiers" within the Company's ranks, at once oppressors and the oppressed. This army hierarchy, where British officers are at the higher rank and Indian sepoys at the lower ranks despite their experience, was a deliberate design to retain control and suppress unified resistance against colonial rule.

The account of the first Anglo-Chinese Opium War in the novel also focuses on the moral decay brought about by colonial warfare, as seen in the case of Zachary Reid, who starts from being a novice seaman to an opium trader. Zachary eventually embracing the British imperial mission as a "triumph of modern civilisation" (Ghosh 2015: 476), loss of innocence is what emerges, as how colonial agenda creeps into the fabric of individual

identity. His change in perception mirrors how the larger colonial mentality dictates that imperial conquest is entitlement of "civilised" nations. In short, Ghosh's *Flood of Fire* critiques colonialism's impact on individual and collective identities within military contexts, exposing the false promises of advancement and belonging crafted by imperial powers. By intertwining personal ambitions with colonial hierarchies, Ghosh underscores the inherent conflict faced by colonised subjects who, entangled in these structures, are manipulated into advancing an agenda that ultimately undermines their autonomy and heritage.

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