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## Post-Colonial Identity

Every single nation in the world has its own history. Including the ones left neglected off the face of the earth. Somewhere, somehow, at some point a few centuries ago, European establishment began spurring across the globe. With the aid of a ship and a book. European explorers advanced to conquer a multitude of nations for personal wealth and national pride. As a result, their endless manifestos imprinted on the colonized, leaving the oppressed people with the merciless questions of hybridity. Who are we? Who am I? Western or I? This is solely one of the main social effects that the system of colonialism left on the cultural identity of the respective people in such afflicted countries. For instance, there is a novel which challenges and therefore exhibits on this idea. *Sea of Poppies*, published in 2008, by Amitav Ghosh. Is a novel in which the author presents characters throughout the book whom foil themselves around the question of hybridity and which identity they would have to fall the most into. Either that of their inherited identity or towards the societal 'improved' colonized self. This essay will focus on the character Neel, as he shows how caste and literacy play into the complexity of the identity post-colonialism produces. At large, *Sea of Poppies* seems to suggest that the post-colonialism world has left not only an unresolvable cultural conflict but rather an everlasting deconstruction of the self in order to assimilate into another identity.

In the novel *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh seems to suggest that identity is split not just by weather the characters fluctuate towards the assimilation of a different identity. However, it also

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incorporates the subcategories of caste and literacy. Which evidently amount to the formations of a distorted identity. For instance, in *Sea of Poppies*, the highest people in the caste system are not only of mixed descents ranging from European to Asian Indian. But are all seen to conform to the values of the European class in order to stay on top of the caste system. The character Neel Rattan Halder from *The Rajas of Raskhali* bloodline was amongst the highest in the caste system. This as an Asian Indian because he and his forefathers adapted to the European expected rules of living while also having to maintain a cultural tie to tradition. For instance, when Mr. Doughty is giving Zachary some background information on Neel, Mr. Doughty describes him in the following manner, “See, if there’s one thing I can’t abide it’s a bookish native: his father was a man who knew how to keep his jibb where it belonged—wouldn’t have been seen dead with a book” (47). This quote alludes to two primary details. The first, is that clearly the manners in which the Raskhali descendants are carrying themselves to be in front of their European counterparts is only subjecting them to remain in an inferior state to the European. Thus, they are substituting their Asian Indian identity in order to please their fellow European friends. Which leads into the second point. The character Mr. Doughty is used here as an example of what the colonizer wanted the colonized to remain in. That is, illiteracy. Clearly, Mr. Doughty is upset that Neel would rather read a book and gain power through literacy than to flaunt his wealth with innumerable amounts of woman and parties. This is where the blurred lines come into play. Here, Neel is clearly frowned upon by Mr. Doughty because theoretically by gaining literacy he is getting more than even with the oppressor. Therefore, not only is he losing his Indian identity by conforming by his European counterparts stated ideas of what goes—gaining European

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literacy—but is also having to add a piece of European identity in the process thus concluding into an added hybridity.

Fast forwarding a bit into the novel, Neel ends up being tried in court for forgery as a consequence for refusing to sell his sacred zamindari to Mr. Burnham. The following is stated by the judge, “But we see no merit whatsoever in the contention that men of high caste should suffer a less severe punishment than any other person; such a principle has never been recognized nor ever will be recognized in English law, the very foundation of which lies in the belief that all are equal who appear before it...” (234). This leads into some key points. The first is that clearly, in the literal sense, Neel is being robbed of his identity through the sacred land that he so desperately wanted to hold. As for the figurative sense, this evidence points to the idea that culture is taken away from the colonized people and replaced with the new universal western culture. Secondly, as it is shown in this part of the novel, not only he but every other Indian present in the court did not argue with the ‘English’ law but decided to submit to what the western judge declared was right in their own traditional land. Additionally, this shows that submitting to European power is a force renounced idea of the western identity but they have no choice. In, *The Endless Process of Becoming and the Transformation of Identity in Amitav Ghosh’s Sea of Poppies* by Maroua Touil, the author states the following, “Western thought is based on fixing a centre and excluding the margin. The white man is seen as the norm for universal humanity while the other is an inferior being with a shattered identity” (518). This is what is exactly what is seen in Neel’s case, though not exclusively particular to him but rather as

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to the whole nature of their culture in this novel. It is the establishment of European cultural values which have left the cultures identity intrinsically confused as to what even is right to identify themselves with. Thus, the oppressed will always yield if not revolve back to the rules of European law accordingly and will have to then integrate western cultural establishments externally unwillingly.

During Neel's incarceration, caste and literacy emerge once again in a reciprocating way. For instance, when Neel is being examined by the serjeant. He realizes that when he speaks to the serjeant in English, it sets him off. "The man's eyes flared and Neel saw that he had nettled him, simply by virtue of addressing him in his own tongue—a thing that was evidently counted as an act of intolerable insolence in an Indian convict, a defilement of the language" (283). Here, Neel's character comes at last to the realization that his fluent ability to speak in English is what will get him a ledge over the oppressor. Neel, as a representative of the Indian race in the novel was never truly meant to become an equal with the oppressor through the use of the English language. Similarly, it is intriguing to note that even the author acknowledges that a culture must assimilate to the European one in one way or another— weather it is literacy or caste— in order for two alter objectives to be accomplished even more complexly with the colonized. The first is that they would come to the realization that their identity is influenced by colonization. And the second that when that realization emerges that they would be able to identify how to attempt to dissimilate themselves with those aspects. Even though as a result they would have gained

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nothing more than self-consciousness of their true identity. That is to never truly be one or the other.

In conclusion, there is nothing post about colonialism. Colonized countries and the respective people still feel that colonialist influence everywhere around the world. Thus, the gloomiest part is that colonization destroyed cultures and thus pulled at the colonized people's individual identities. The author of Introduction: Hybridity in Contemporary Postcolonial Theory, states the following, "Hybridity is everywhere. It represents in many instances the triumph of the postcolonial or the subaltern over the hegemonic. The resistant always appropriates the cultural onslaught and modifies its products or processes for its own purposes" (12, Hybridity). Thus, the effects of colonialism will never come to an end.