

Reading affective communities in a transnational space in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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Abstract

This paper seeks to shed light on the formation of communities in a transnational space in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* which chronicles the lives of a motley group of people who, after many upheavals, board the *Ibis*. *The Ibis* becomes a space where cross-cultural caste, class, gender, and national collaborations blur all sorts of boundaries and enable the formation of new alliances. The ethics of compearance defiantly resists the instruments of power, colonial or otherwise, to orchestrate divisions and exclusions through its politics of immediate conjunction, conjuncture, coalition and collaboration. The paper tries to unravel how the novel presents the emergence of reconstituted families within contexts of domination and resistance. With the erasure of the boundaries of language, class and caste among these migrants, they replaced the notion of authentic, discrete national cultures with a shared openness to the world, espousing a utopian belief in a trans-racial human collectivity. The crisscrossing oceanic trading routes offer an affective map of the world of unlikely kinships and intimacies formed on the fluid world of the ocean as a consequence of the machinations and practices of Empire. The paper argues how the narrative creates a transnational space above the narrow confines of a singular culture, nation, territory and community, a free space (in a world without binaries) which is supposed to be above all temporal or spatial constraints.

Keywords: Transnation; Compearance Community; Imperialism; Colonization; Diaspora

"From the very day they assembled at the port, they were huddled together; allocated work indiscriminately, shared facilities, ate the same food, slept together, and in general lost all visible signs of caste differentiation. Barracks on the plantations reinforced the trend. The migratory experience also generated the spirit of solidarity and weakened the sense of hierarchy." — Bhikhu Parekh, "Some Reflections on the Indian Diaspora."

...I'm drawn to marginal people in India, I'm drawn to marginal people around the world, I'm drawn to Burmese, Cambodians, to obscure figures, defeated figures and people who salvage some sort of life out of wreckage...these characters appeal to me, they interest me. — "Diasporic Predicaments", Amitav Ghosh's interview with Chitra Sankaran.

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*Introduction—Beyond modernism, postmodernism and postcolonialism:
The aesthetics of Ghosh's narration*

Amitav Ghosh's specialty lies in his deft handling of political and philosophical issues without sacrificing the graces of art. Exhibiting a profound sense of history and space, his novels explore the human drama amidst the broad sweep of political and historical events. One of the reasons why Ghosh is considered to be an important writer by contemporary critics is that his narratives do not occupy a "neutral" zone. Rather, they offer a sensitive and multifaceted view on the contemporary problems of the worlds he writes about. Ghosh seems to be intent on moving his readers through his narratives beyond the aesthetic of indifference. Ghosh's first commitment is to his art. The question that has engaged him a lot is whether this commitment excludes all other commitments. He has to admit that "a writer is also a citizen, not just of a country but of the world" (cited in Hawley 2005: 11). Whether a writer should be a responsible citizen or an insouciant aesthete is the issue that occupies him in the essay "The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi". His point of departure is Dzevad Karahasan's essay "Literature and War" which touches on the relation between modern literary aestheticism and the contemporary world's indifference to violence. Karahasan holds that "The decision to perceive literally everything as an aesthetic phenomenon—completely sidestepping questions about goodness and truth—is an artistic decision. That decision started in the realm of art, and went on to become characteristic of the contemporary world" (cited in Ghosh 2002(a): 60). Ghosh abhors Karahasan's brand of aestheticism, and plumps for moral activism:

Writers don't join crowds—Naipaul and so many others teach us that. But what do you do when the constitutional authority fails to act? You join and in joining bear all the responsibilities and obligations and guilt that joining represents. My experience of the violence was overwhelmingly and memorably of the resistance to it. (Ghosh 2002(a): 61)

By advocating resistance to violence and rejecting the "aesthetic of indifference", Ghosh is squarely denouncing the postmodernist dogma of pan-aestheticization as enunciated by Patricia Waugh: "Postmodern theory can be seen and understood as the latest version of a long-standing attempt to address social and political issues through an aestheticised view of the world, though it may be more thoroughly aestheticising than

any previous body of thought” (Waugh 1992: 6). For Ghosh, it is “the affirmation of humanity” that is more important, “the risks that perfectly ordinary people are willing to take for one another” (Ghosh 2002(a): 61). Ghosh thus straddles the currents of both modernism and postmodernism. Meenakshi Mukherjee underscores Ghosh’s refusal to be categorized, but she does so with respect to Ghosh’s rebellion against the templates of genre (Hawley 2005: 4). Ghosh is too eclectic to embrace a particular “ism” and in the process stifle all his innate dynamism. Ghosh’s works occupy a critical juncture between postmodern and postcolonial perspectives, exploring the potentialities and limits of postcolonialism as also evading any strategic alliance with postmodernism. He is rather an intellectual amphibian, partaking of all ideas and “isms” that are congenial and pertinent to his artistic pursuit.

Conceptualizing the ‘transnation’ and ‘space’ in Ghosh’s literary realms

The transnation is much more than “the international” or “the transnational”, which is more appropriately conceived as a relation between states. Transnation is neither simply universal, nor simply between or across nations, but is the “embodiment of transformation: the *interpolation* of the state as the focus of power, the *erasure* of simple binaries of power, the *appropriation* of the discourses of power, and the circulation of the struggle between global and local” (Ashcroft 2008: 4). Primarily, it is the fluid, migrating outside of the state that initiates within the nation. “The transnation”, asserts Ashcroft, is an “‘in-between’ space, which contains no one definitive people, nation or even community, but is everywhere” (Ashcroft 2008: 5). For the eminent Singaporean scholar Rajeev Patke it is only apt that history, stories, bodies and values exist in a space of in-betweenness because it liberates historical objects from the trappings of nostalgia. What this “in-betweenness” indicates is that transnation does not refer to ontology. It is not an object in political space but a mode of talking about subjects in their ordinary lives, difference in their differing, an act which is continual: “The really difficult thing for human subjects to comprehend, given their entrapment within the discourses of history, nation, race and ethnicity, is that *all* subjectivity is *difference in its differing*. It is this that is normal not the fixity of cultural or national identity, the conviction of one true, shared, essential being” (Ashcroft 2008: 8). This “in-

betweenness” signals a liberation which is deeply entrenched in transnational subjectivity, liberation from matters of absence and loss, alienation and not-at-homeness. For Bhabha, “the time of liberation is a time of cultural uncertainty, and most crucially, of signifiatory and representational undecideability” (Bhabha 1994: 35). This representational undecideability subverts a stable system of reference, be it a tradition or a community. This, believes Fanon, is “the zone of occult instability where the people dwell” (Fanon 1963:182-3) and is “a veritable theatre of metamorphoses and permutations” (Deleuze 1994: 56) where all “I”s or claims of self have been transcended. This liberation of the human subject from his entrapment within the discourses of history, nation, race and ethnicity culminates in a “world *without identity*” (Deleuze 1994: 56) where the division between finite and infinite is dissolved. Hence this “zone of occult instability”, this “theatre of metamorphoses”, this world beyond the closure of identity is the space of the transnation.

Ghosh prioritizes space over time as the structuring principle in his narratives. In “The March of the Novel through History”, he applauds the novel’s specialty to eloquently communicate a sense of place and also to interweave the entire spatial continuum from local to global:

The novel as a form has been vigorously international from the start; [...] And yet, the paradox of the novel as a form is that it is founded upon a myth of parochiality, in the exact sense of a parish — a place named and charted, a definite location. [...] Location is thus intrinsic to a novel [...]. (Ghosh 2002(a): 294).

Reflecting on “the rhetoric of location” (Ghosh 2002(a): 303), Ghosh stresses that he is not thinking merely of place or the physical aspects of the setting. Asserting that the links between India and her diaspora are “lived within the imagination” (Ghosh 2002(a): 247), he examines the modes in which “the spaces of India travel with the migrant” to create what Rushdie calls the imaginary homeland:

That is the trouble with an infinitely reproducible space: since it does not refer to actual spaces it cannot be left behind. [...] Eventually the place and the realities that accompany it vanish from memory and [...] [t]he place, India, becomes in fact an empty space, mapped purely by words. (Ghosh 2002(a): 248-9)

These “words” which signify memories and inherited values, are the “metaphors of space” that constitute “the symbolic spatial structure of

India” for the migrant (Ghosh 2002(a): 248). Ghosh calls this kind of alternative mapping in terms of sites of lived experience and memory and not of material location “the cultural representation of space” (Ghosh 2002(a): 250). In Ghosh’s fictional realms, local or global, seen or unseen space is perceived and imagined in the narrator’s memory as a fundamental facet of individual, national, familial, and communal metamorphoses. Space is not merely remembered as an imaginative construct but is represented as a domain of political and cultural encounters, encounters which actually shape the connection of different characters with territory and location. Hence, space is represented as a dynamic arrangement between people, places, cultures and societies. James Clifford argues that “space is never ontologically given. It is discursively mapped and corporeally practiced” (Clifford 1997: 54). According to Clifford, space is composed through movement, produced through use, at the same time an agency and result of action or practice. The construction of space in Ghosh’s novel does not simply manifest territorial struggles but serves to show the interplay between local and global influences, national and transnational reconfigurations and above all the search for community and alliances that cut across boundaries of cultural and ethnic identity. Ghosh compels the reader to imagine space above the narrow confines of a singular culture, nation, territory and community, a free space (in a world without binaries) which is supposed to be above all temporal or spatial constraints. This contentious space is a transcultural space—a space of cultural and ethnic transactions where characters seek to overthrow artificial frontiers to come to terms with the reality of cultural and political transformations. This space, as Nadia Butt argues, is of “overlapping histories and territories, shifting countries and continents where different people, cultures, nations and communities communicate above the ‘shadow lines’ of social, national and territorial barriers” (Butt 2008: 4).

Sea of Poppies has had a diverse critical reception. Stephanie Han believes that the novel “demonstrates unique and familiar images of polyculturalism and the making of language, identity, and nation through characterizations and dialogue” (Han 2013: 298). Murray Baumgarten argues that in *Sea of Poppies* (2008) Amitav Ghosh “sets the individualist love ethic of the great tradition of the western novel into dialogue with traditions of Indian culture that emphasize the generalizing force of love” (Baumgarten 2014: 375). While Anupama

Arora conjectures that “one can read *Sea of Poppies* as a narrative of place where the ocean is central but where the dynamics on land intimately create and affect the world of the ocean” (Arora 2012: 21), Christopher Rollason interprets it as a historical novel.

Sea of Poppies explores alternative ways of constructing the world based on connections that dismantle the rigid binaries and empiricism of Western modernity. It interrogates both the grounds and the production of historical knowledge by reading between the lines of the imperial archives and emerging as alternative discourses for expressing the subaltern past. Ghosh’s novel transforms the discourses of Western modernity, be they scientific or novelistic, by producing an ethically informed narrative that subverts the discursive knowledge production strategies that originally produced those discourses. Radhakrishnan, who, like Ghosh, is engaged in a project of dismantling the hegemonic position of a Western-originated discourse (the discourse of postmodernism, in his case), maintains that for genuine transcultural readings to become possible, other realities will have to be “recognized not merely as *other histories* but as *other knowledges*” (Radhakrishnan 2003: 58, italics original). To transcend the incommensurability in worldviews, the participants would have to imagine their own “discursive-epistemic space[s] as a form of openness to one another’s persuasion” (Radhakrishnan 2003: 61). Ghosh’s narratives consistently explore this ethical imperative to keep the channels of communication between the self and its other open, so that one might “hear that which [one] do[es] not already understand” (Ghosh 2002(b) 11). Jean-Luc Nancy is suggestive in this context. Being-in-common, he maintains in *The Inoperative Community*, “does not mean a higher form of substance or subject taking charge of the limits of separate individualities” (Nancy 1991: 29). Nor does it obtain its genesis “from out of or as an effect of [...] a process that emerges from a ground [fond] or from a fund [fonds] of some kind [...]. It is a groundless ‘ground’, less in the sense that it opens up the gaping chasm of an abyss than that it is made up only of the network, the interweaving, and the sharing of singularities” (Nancy 1991: 29). Neither a settled arrangement from above nor one from below, the axes of utopic community is horizontal and latitudinal, seeking cohesion in what Nancy identifies as a process of “compearance.”

Compearance, asserts Nancy,

does not set itself up, it does not establish itself, it does not emerge among already given subjects (objects). It consists in the appearance of the *between* as such: you *and* I (between us) — a formula in which the *and* does not imply juxtaposition, but exposition. What is exposed in compearance is the following, and we must learn to read it in all its possible combinations: 'you (are/and/is) (entirely other than) I' [...]. Or again, more simply: *you shares me* [...]. (1991: 29)

An open and hospitable community is a countermand against social exclusion. As the marker of direct affective singularity “between you *and* I” the ethics of compearance defiantly resists the instruments of power, colonial or otherwise, to orchestrate divisions and exclusions through its politics of immediate conjunction, conjuncture, coalition and collaboration. Furthermore, as “the appearance of the *between* as such”, compearance impels its agents a qualifying ethico-existential capacity for the radical expropriation of identity in face of the other—a capacity for self-othering. Nancy is apposite again: “singular beings are themselves constituted by sharing; they are distributed and placed, or rather *spaced*, by the sharing that makes them *others*” (Nancy 1991: 25). This creates the shape of what we might call an “affective cosmopolitanism”.

Transnation, identity and the Indian diasporic spaces

Vijay Mishra has categorised Indian diaspora into two relatively autonomous and largely exclusive groups which he designates as “diasporas of classical capital and late modern capital” (Mishra 2011: 91) or rather between the “sugar” and the “masala” diaspora. Classical capital produced a peasant plantation diaspora (as to be moulded into a working class) built around a single commodity, sugar; late modern capital produced a more mobile, economically astute, and essentially middle-class diaspora which came into being as the result of the loosening of the racist immigration policies in settler nations and in Europe” (Mishra 2011: 91). The “sugar” diaspora designates the semi-voluntary flight of indentured Indian peasants to plantation colonies such as Mauritius, South Africa and the Caribbean between the years 1830 and 1917. The “masala” diaspora represents postmodern dispersal of new migrants of all classes to cosmopolitan states like Australia, Canada, Britain and the United States. The transnation, as Ashcroft proposes, comprises not only of diasporas but of the rhizomic interplay of

travelling subjects within and between nations. The transnation exists within, beyond and between nation-states:

It is a collectivity comprised of communities who may be drawn in one way or another to the myth of a particular nation, but who draw away perpetually into the liberating region of representational undecideability. Because the transnation exists already within the boundaries of the state, it offers itself as a space of commingling, a nomadic space within and between the institutional and political specificities of nation states. (Ashcroft 2008: 11)

This space within and beyond the state, might best be described by Deleuze and Guattari's term "smooth space". It is the possibility of the emergence of new and different kinds of subjects and spaces that makes smooth space a space of potentiality, a space where a people and a nation yet to be known may emerge. In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy theorizes the space of the ship which involves "the flows, exchanges, and in-between elements" (Gilroy 1993: 190) of the migrants' identity. Working upon Gilroy's focus on diasporic study of the Black Atlantic, Vijay Mishra calls the ship as first of the cultural units in which the social relations were "re-sited and re-negotiated" (Mishra 2011: 74). It is on the ship that the old identities get dissolved and discarded; new identities are acquired. Thus the passage—the movement—becomes extremely crucial to define the status of the inmates of the ship. Once the new identities are defined and consolidated the ship becomes redundant. This, in turn, necessitates a new journey, a new beginning. 'In my beginning is my end' becomes crucial. Thus the characters move away towards a new horizon, a new beginning. The motley group of people who, after many upheavals, board the *Ibis* range from a light-skinned African American freedman passing for white, an Indian female farmer who has been rescued from sati (widow immolation), a French woman disguised as an Indian labourer, an Indian zamindar, a half-Parsi, half-Chinese convict and a heterogeneous band of lascars forming a transnational community on the ship. The schooner, formerly a slave carrier between Africa and America, now transports indentured, colonial labourers, the *girimityas*, to new colonies. The body of the ship itself—deck, timbers, and holds—carries inscriptions of different histories (of non-Western sailors, the slave trade, and indentured labour). Cross-cultural caste, class, gender, and national collaborations blur all sorts of boundaries and enable the formation of new alliances.

Like her indomitable father Pierre Lambert, Paulette rejects imperial European society to declare solidarity with foreigners, outsiders, and alleged inferiors. By “wholly” opting from the idiom of their own culture, the Lamberts craved for a “new utopia untouched by any Hobbesian dream” (Nandy 1983: 36). This explains their rejection of the exclusionary structures of instrumental binary reason and defiant flights to the unknown destinations of radical alterity. Mrs. Lambert’s death at child-birth places Paulette in Jodu’s mother’s arms and thus her identity becomes amorphous as she meanders through the in-between spaces of cultural contact zones at times resulting in complete assimilation: “the first language she learnt was Bengali. And the first solid food she ate was a rice-and-dal khichri cooked by Jodu’s mother. In the matter of clothing she far preferred saris to pinafores” (Ghosh 2008(a): 67). The chameleonic Paulette’s multifaceted identity is signified by the various names by which she is known—Putli, Puggly and finally Putleshwari on the *Ibis*. She is compelled by social circumstances to don on new avatars and by sequences of elisions and transformations her subjectivity is always in the making and remaking. Disguised as a “*bamni*, a Brahman’s daughter” (Ghosh 2008(a): 355-356) Paulette soon establishes a deep communion with the other women on board and proves that Jodu and Zachary’s doubts about her ability to endure the strains of a marine journey were only misgivings. Paulette’s reworking of the binarism between the self and the other enables her to enter into an inter-racial, inter-religious “siblingship” (Ghosh 2008(a): 381) with Jodu and inter-cultural exchange of hearts with Zachary. Transcending all barriers she creates a reciprocal relationship with her fellow travellers on the *Ibis* and “in a tone of unalloyed certainty” dissolves the self’s alienation from the other: “[o]n 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. From now on, and forever afterwards, we will all be ship-siblings—*jaház-bhais* and *jaház-bahens*—to each other. There’ll be no differences between us” (Ghosh 2008(a): 356). Paulette’s rhetoric of communitarianism is based on an “understanding of subjectivity, one that values mutual dependency, reliance, appreciation, and trust between the Self and the Other” (Lin 1998: 11). This indeed is a “paradigmatic reconsideration of the status of the Other in our understanding of who we are—our self, identity, and individuality” (Lin 1998: 11). The self’s being “with” the other is an integral part of the ethical relationship with

the other. This “withness”, conceptualizes Margaret Chatterjee, “covers up the essential difference that there is between people, although we are endowed with the capacity of bridging that distance by embarking on the project of being ‘towards’ the other” (Chatterjee 1963: 220). This act of imagining a utopian community is an act of resistance that functions as a “counter flow” to colonialism, which seeks to reduce them to commodities. *The Ibis* gets invested with new symbolic meanings by the migrants and is remade into a vehicle of transformation from which new selves and identities emerge. Different characters feel the “birth of a new existence” on the ship: Kissin, Neel, and Deeti, among others (356). Deeti is drawn to Paulette’s re-imagining of their situation and sees a new family being birthed in the womb of the ship: “[T]his vessel that was the Mother-Father of her new family, a great wooden *mái-báp*” (Ghosh 2008(a): 328). Deeti, who mirrors and echoes Zachary, and who has left everything of her old life (caste, village, and daughter) behind, finds this new conceptualization of sibling-ship empowering. Instead of losing family, the migrants were gaining an extended family, not bound by caste but by shared experiences and the creation of new rituals.

Vijay Mishra observes that the crossing of the sea, the *kala pani*, has remained a powerful symbol of travel across troubled waters to lands from which no body returned home. In his article “Memory and Recall” Mishra associates *kala pani* with the more general Hindu fear of crossing the sea, for it meant “loss of caste as well as indenture and servitude for earlier migrants to the Empire’s plantation colonies” (Mishra 2011: 90). The indentured labourers who went to work on overseas plantation colonies in the nineteenth century were called *girmityas*. Ghosh informs us that “they were so-called because in exchange for money, their names were entered on ‘girmits’—agreements written on pieces of paper. The silver that was paid for them went to their families, and they were taken away, never to be seen again” (Ghosh 2008(a): 72). Mishra further contends that in the case of the old Indian diaspora, a ship “produced a site in which caste purities were largely lost (after all, crossing the dark ocean, the *kalapani*, signified the loss of caste) as well as a new form of socialization that went by the name of *jahaji-bhai* (ship-brotherhood)” emerged (Mishra 1996: 74). The migratory experience also generated the spirit of solidarity and weakened the sense of hierarchy. Most of the indentured Hindus belonged to low castes and had every reason to efface all traces of their social origin.

In *Sea of Poppies*, we see how Deeti and the other migrants, confined to the depot on shore before their embarkation, anxiously see their impending migration as a *kala pani* (dark waters) experience, seeing it through “the prism of incarceration.” In her essay, “Convicts and Coolies,” Anderson suggests that scholars pay attention to the connections between the labour regimes of convict transportation and indentured labor: “The practices and experiences of indenture are best understood primarily in relation to the institutions and imaginative discourses that framed the well-established contemporary colonial practice of penal transportation as a process of social dislocation and rupture” (Anderson 2009: 94). For the labourers, migration to Mauritius indeed results in dislocation and loss of caste and kin. The pool of migrant labourers, in addition to providing manual labour required for infrastructure development on the plantation islands, also served a rhetorical purpose for Britain. It allowed Britain to discursively present these indentured laborers as “free labour” and the abolition of slavery (“primitive labour”) as an “enlightened” move (Lowe 2006: 194). In her essay, “The Intimacies of Four Continents,” Lowe contends that out of the “global intimacies” of Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas, “emerged a modern racialized division of labor” (Lowe 2006: 192). She suggests that the Asian indentured labourers “were used instrumentally in this political discourse as a collective figure, a fantasy of ‘free’ yet racialized and indentured labour, at a time when the possession of body, work, life, and death was foreclosed to the enslaved and the indentured alike” (Lowe 2006: 194). However, as glimpsed in the novel, the migrants’ conditions of transportation, arrival, and contract betrayed the omissions of the British rhetoric that spoke of a “free” population to work on plantations after the abolition of slavery.

The experience of migration and overlapping histories

As the slave ship becomes a coolie ship, the histories of the indentured labourers will be written on the hold of the ship that contains traces of those older histories of slavery. The depressions made on the wood by the bodies of slaves will now be occupied by other “disposable bodies” of Empire: those of the colonial subjects herded as cattle to islands in need of their labour. The British owner of the *Ibis*, Benjamin Burnham, says to Zachary, “A hold that was designed to carry slaves will serve just

as well to carry coolies and convicts. Do you not think? We'll put in a couple of heads and piss-dales, so the darkies needn't always be fouling themselves. That should keep the inspectors happy" (Ghosh 2008(a): 74). The experiences of the indentured labourers on ship (which includes abuse, disease, death, mutiny) echo not just that of the slaves but also of convicts, thus suggesting connections between these different forms of incarceration.

Zachary Reid, the *Ibis*'s second mata and a "mulatto" from Boston, displays like Paulette multiple identities to conceal his authentic self. The son of a Maryland freedwoman, Zachary suppresses his mixed parentage from his British employees fearing discrimination. His ambiguous racial status dissolves the barriers between the Western naval officers and the subaltern lascars. Such is Zachary's bonhomie with the lascar leader Serang Ali that he feels startled at the "unaccustomed ease" in which he communicates with them in their pidgin language "as if his oddly patterned speech had unloosed his own tongue" (Ghosh 2008(a): 16). An adept sailor and an experienced man of the world, Serang Ali emphasizes the importance of performance in business transactions to the greenhorn Zachary. This reminds the reader of the relation between Saya John and Rajkumar in *The Glass Palace*. Serang Ali transforms Zachary's identity to such an extent that the latter occupies a hybrid cultural space beyond recognition.

Serang Ali insists that Zachary must wear "propa clothes" to be "one big piece pukka sahib" (Ghosh 2008(a): 50) to unsettle the structure of colonial dominance. The hybrid identity of the colonial mimic man "as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 1994: 86) is, in Bhabha's thinking, a mode of anti-colonial resistance because it not only "ruptures" the entire colonial discourse but also "becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a 'partial' presence" (Bhabha 1994: 86). As an "incomplete" and "virtual" (Bhabha 1994: 86) imitation, mimicry is a play between equivalence and excess and hence both reassuringly similar and terrifying, "resemblance and menace" (Bhabha 1994: 86). Zachary realized that his performance of a Westernized colonial identity, as a "Free Mariner" meant so much to the serang: "For Serang Ali and his men Zachary was almost one of themselves, while yet being endowed with the power to undertake an impersonation that was unthinkable for any of them; it was as much for their own sakes as for his that they

wanted to see him succeed” (Ghosh 2008(a): 50). Furthermore, the old serang looks up to Zachary as a substitute for his deceased son-in-law Adam Danby and pours all his affections on the “mulatto”. Such is the intimate attachment between the old lascar and the young mate that the strange assortment of peculiar words which forms the lascari language can never be an obstacle in their relationship. In fact, “beneath the surface of this farrago of sound”, their emotions “flowed as freely as the currents beneath the crowded press of boats” (Ghosh 2008(a): 104). Disrespecting all racial and cultural boundaries, Zachary strongly endorses the principle of posthumanism which enables “two people from worlds apart to find themselves linked by a tie of pure sympathy, a feeling that owed nothing to the rules and expectations of others” (Ghosh 2008(a): 439).

It is this empathic bond between the self and the other which impels Zachary and Jodu to rescue each other when in distress in the waters. His ambiguous inter-racial position enables him to understand Paulette’s predicament much better than anybody else, an understanding that gradually matures into love. Zachary also realizes that this crew is itself “produced” in the Indian Ocean, that the lascars “had nothing in common except the Indian Ocean; among them were Chinese and East Africans, Arabs and Malays, Bengalis and Goans, Tamils and Arakanese” (Ghosh 2008(a): 13). Zachary’s ease with lascars and laskari is symbolic of his openness to “difference” and his dis-investment in rigid or categorical distinctions that are often used as an instrument of discipline and control. He thinks of his relationship with Serang Ali in these terms: “two people from worlds apart . . . linked by a tie of pure sympathy, a feeling that owed nothing to the rules and expectations of others” (Ghosh 2008(a): 403). These ties between two individuals, unrelated by blood or kinship or race, suggest a world of possibility imagined outside of categorical boundaries of race, class, and nationality. On the ship, these seamen are a group of workers bound to each other in an oceanic kinship.

The theme of love and identity as breaking the colonial hegemony

Sea of Poppies not only creates a hybrid language of love appropriate to its representation of the power of love across social, class, caste, cultural, and national divides but also accommodates a multiplicity of selves, endowing this multiplicity with the power to disrupt colonial hegemony.

Paulette's question "Are not the things of this world mere dross when weighed against love?" has a revolutionary ring that can undermine the colonial order. They continue the changes occasioned by love initiated when the lower-caste Kalua, the ox-cart driver giant of a man, rescues Deeti from the funeral pyre on which she is expected to immolate herself along with her dead husband. Their marriage is thus a resistance to the prevailing caste divisions between them, and an assertion to lead their lives based on their own feelings of love and equality, as opposed to subjugation to tradition and custom. These actions set into motion a chain of events that disrupt the expectations generated by place, empire, and caste. Instead of remaining imprisoned in their environment, runaway lovers bond with other outcasts; ultimately, the power of the opium empire to enslave them is thwarted as they push into the open. Their love leads them out of the traditional world of caste and class into the open sea and beyond, as they head to Mauritius. Instead of love and loving as a privatizing experience, this principle functions as a revolutionary force to build and rebuild community, over and against the imperial destruction of traditional kinship bonds. And Paulette and Zachary discover the need to articulate their potential intimacies in those new terms. Indeed, the power of love, of romantic passion, suddenly reveals to Paulette the extent of her connection to Zachary: "She saw now how miraculously wrong she had been in some of her judgments of him: if there was anyone on the *Ibis* who could match her in the multiplicity of her selves, then it was none other than Zachary. It was as if some divine authority had sent a messenger to let her know that her soul was twinned with his" (Ghosh 2008(a): 430–31). The quintessence of the "human love" of Paulette and Zachary inheres in mutual recognition, acceptance and fulfillment.

Despite their feeling of commonality, the female immigrants on board get a sense of their distinctive identity through the stories they tell about themselves. The catalogue of subaltern tales that Ghosh ascribes to these Third World women is a record of their wretched lives on land—Munia's immature amorous experiences and the destruction of their family, the tortures and abuses of Dookhanee's oppressive mother-in-law, the two sisters Ratna and Champa's starvation after their husbands' lands were seized by the opium factory, Heeru's desertion by her husband. Each narrative not only crafts a self but by being located in a material world also explores the socio-economic matrices that govern

their lives. The interplay between experience and expression is a dynamic one. It is grounded in the phenomenological assumption that entities are given meaning through being experienced and the idea that narrative is a vital resource to bring experiences to conscious awareness. The recollection of experiences through references to significant places in their lives—"the great cattle mela of Sonapur" (Ghosh 2008(a): 242), the poppy fields in Ghazipur—evoke for the listeners particular times and circumstances. As a narrative is apprehended, it gives rise to the selves that apprehend them. "Narrative is radical", believes Toni Morrison, "creating us at the very moment it is being created" (cited in Blair 1998: 11). As it reaches out to tap a pre-existing identity, the narrative constructs a "fluid, evolving identity in the making":

Spinning out their telling through choice of words, degree of elaboration, attribution of causality and sequentiality, and the foregrounding and backgrounding of emotions, circumstances, and behaviour, narrators build novel understandings of themselves-in-the world. In this manner, selves evolve in the time frame of a single telling as well as in the course of the many tellings that eventually compose a life. (Ochs and Capps 1996: 23)

The story of Heeru's separation from her husband was "told so many times that they all felt as though they had lived through it themselves" (Ghosh 2008(a): 242). Being discursive constructions of the past, these narratives are symbolic strategies of addressing their present predicament. Stories negotiate the past and its meaning and also seek ways of moving forward. They elucidate a community's understanding of itself. What is more, the act of narration invites the listener into a "matrice of ideas" (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 77) beyond his own sedimented notions of self. Ah Fatt's graphic presentation of his past to Neel invites Neel to "a venture of collaboration", an act of "a shared imagining" (Ghosh 2008(a): 375): "In listening and prompting, Neel began to feel that he could almost see with Ah Fatt's eyes: there it was, the city that conceived and nurtured this new half of himself" (Ghosh 2008(a): 375-376). The world of the text and the world of the reader interpenetrate each other through a "fusion of horizons", through "refiguration": the "active re-organization of our being-in-the-world performed by the reader following the invitation of the text to become the reader of oneself" (Ricoeur 1995: 47). Reminiscent of Ricoeur's constant reference to Gadamer's "fusion of horizons", Merleau-Ponty asserts that

narrative/narration carries “the speaker and hearer into a common universe by drawing both toward a new signification through their power to designate in excess of their accepted definition” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 75). Narration, emplotment, reading/listening is, therefore, mediums in quest for an answer to the elusive question “Who am I?”

Ibis as a contact zone: Resistance to Empire

If the ethics of posthumanism resolves the binarism between the Self and the Other, their animosity is revealed in the brutal torture of the immigrants by the English mates and their Indian henchmen. The *Ibis* becomes a space where different forms of domination, resistance, and collaboration develop between individuals and groups of people as they negotiate the realities of the ship. Thus, one sees the formation both of different “forms of exploitation, cooperation, and hybridity” as well as the formation of “corridors of power and resistance” (Vergès 2003: 243). The dialectical relationship between domination and resistance is seen on board in the interactions between the migrant workers and the British and their Indian collaborators. Asserting themselves as the ultimate lawgivers on the ship, Captain Chillingworth (the British Captain in charge of the *Ibis* as it transports the labourers to Mauritius) and Subedar Bhyro Singh (the native Indian overseer in charge of maintaining discipline among migrants and guarding against mutiny) wish to maintain absolute imperial division between “us” and “them.” Both these characters are violently oppressive and enforce divisions. For both, “in matters of marriage and procreation, like must be with like, and each must keep to their own” (Ghosh 2008(a): 442). This is deliberately ironic considering the heterogeneity of the characters on the ship. For the Captain, what distinguishes the superior British Empire from the other empires is this policing of boundaries: “it is what makes our rule different from that of such degenerate and decayed peoples as the Spanish and Portuguese” (Ghosh 2008(a): 442). And for Bhyro Singh (who is Deeti’s dead husband’s uncle), the upper-caste Deeti’s union with the lower-caste Kalua disobeys caste strictures and is a cardinal sin for which both of them must suffer. Singh’s easy camaraderie with the cruel Crowle and Chillingworth shows the collusion between native and foreign tyrannies which mutually benefits both sets of individuals. Singh’s minions, the guards who are former sepoy of the Empire, continue their role as

collaborators for Empire by guarding its interests and property. They are described as swaggering hooligans—“a conquering force” with their “weapons and armaments—lathis, whips, spears and swords” (Ghosh 2008: 303). Rather than demolishing traditional tyrannies and holding up the promise of the white man’s burden of bringing the “caste-ridden” colonies to modernity, the British Captain lends his support to the native tyrant to uphold caste strictures, thus undermining the colonizer’s claim to progress. While this trio of Crowle, Chillingworth, and Singh are naked power wielders, Ghosh also shows more subtle networks of power through characters who have conflicting interests. In his previous works, too, Ghosh has been attentive to the ambiguous role that many Indians occupied within colonialism, where they were simultaneously collaborators and victims of Empire. For instance, in *The Glass Palace*, the Indian soldiers serve the British army and help in conquest, and Indian businessmen (like Rajkumar, a timber merchant) profit by shipping migrant labour from India to Burma and aid the commercial expansion of Empire. Similar characters populate the narrative world of *Sea of Poppies*. Baboo Nob Kissin, Burnham’s Indian accountant who is also in charge of the shipping of migrant labour, is shown to be colluding with the British merchant in his accumulation of riches.

To consolidate the colonial regime, The British realized the vital importance of the anthropologization of colonial knowledge to understand and control its subjects, and to represent and legitimate its own mission. Ethnographic knowledge could enable the colonial administrative machinery to devise “new ways to claim the loyalty of subjects on the basis of custom and culture, and [...] to delineate the autonomous and proper domains of religion and custom” (Dirks 2004: 77). The British first mate Crowle explicitly states this intricate policy of domination to Zachary when he protects against the natives’ physical torture:

[...] there is an unspoken pact between the white man and the natives who sustains his power in Hindoosthan—it is that in matters of marriage and procreation, like must be with like, and each must keep to their own. The day the natives lose faith in us, as the guarantors of the order of castes—that will be the day, gentlemen, that will doom our rule. This is the inviolable principle on which our authority is based. (Ghosh 2008(a): 482)

When the budding romance between Jodu, the Muslim lascar and Munia, a Hindu indentured labourer is detected, Crowle connives with

the subedar Bhyro Singh to inflict flogging on the poor young lascar to reduce him to a “carcass” (Ghosh 2008:(a) 471). Things get worse when to settle an old personal grudge against the low-caste Kalua, Bhyro Singh has him imprisoned and sadistically enjoys the spectacle of Kalua’s whipping unto death. Kalua is flogged on the deck and all the migrants are forced to witness his execution to “share in the experience of the pain” (Ghosh 2008(a): 486). What they enjoy is the rise of an agonist against the combined powers of imperialism and native feudalism. The blood smeared Kalua, calculating the drumbeat and the subedar’s paces of the whip-lash, makes such a sudden improvisation, that the whip coils around Bhyro Singh’s neck and he lies dead on the deck. The victim emerges victorious, momentarily though, as Crowle soon announces Kalua’s death sentence. The infuriated migrants trapped in the hold below, threaten to destabilize the ship. Echoing other Middle Passage narratives of mutiny on slave ships, this moment imagines resistance to Empire by ordinary people. Deeti powerfully instigates the migrants in rabble-rousing rhetoric: “Let’s see if we can’t rattle the masts on this ship; let’s see how long they can ignore us,” and as the migrants start shouting, singing, stamping their feet, and beating utensils to create a deafening noise of resistance, it seemed “as if some uncontainable force had been released inside the [hold], an energy that was capable of shaking the oakum from the schooner’s seams” (Ghosh 2008(a): 433). The migrants pose the threat of mutiny to the oppressive regime formed by agents of the imperial state. The ship is not merely a vessel for domination and displacement, for transfer and circulation of commodities for profit-making, but a forcing house of internationalism and it becomes the means and site for border-crossings and resistance of different kinds.

Zachary’s mettle as an individual is severely tested when the first mate and his adversary Crowle confronts him with his closely guarded racial identity. Armed with the crew-list of the *Ibis*, Crowle tries to blackmail Zachary and rope him in his desire to overthrow Chillingworth and supplant him as the ship’s captain. Zachary has been a persistent critic of Crowle’s malicious designs against the native immigrants and the crew all through but now the ground seems to slip beneath his feet since he feels “amazed to think that something so slight, so innocuous could be invested with so much authority” (Ghosh 2008(a): 508). Unfazed in this critical juncture, Zachary holds on to his integrity and

challenges the imposing first mate: “I’m sorry but this deal o’ yours won’t work for me. It may look to you that this piece of paper has turned me inside out, but in truth it’s changed nothing. I was born with my freedom and I ain’t looking to give any o’ it away” (Ghosh 2008(a): 508). Crowle has uncovered Zachary’s racial identity, Zachary knows his anarchic motives. When Crowle attempts to finish Zachary off, he is brutally stabbed by the half-Chinese convict Ah Fatt. The opium-addict convict not only avenges his humiliation at the hands of Crowle but also restores Neel’s faith in him as a resurgent individual. Ah Fatt’s Indian father Bahram insisted his son to learn boxing because he wanted him to learn things that an Englishman must know. Bahram’s emphasis on physicality seems to stem from his celebration of “Ksatriyahood as true Indianness” and his nationalistic zeal to “beat the colonizers at their own game and to regain self-esteem as Indians” (Nandy 1983: 52). Physically effete throughout the novel, Ah Fatt asserts his individuality at the end by eliminating the British First Mate. The four convicts—Jodu, Neel, Ah Fatt and Kalua—escape in a boat steered by Serang Ali. They are criminals in the eyes of the law but when judged within the framework of personal accountability each is a transgressor to assert his individuality. Narrative sympathy is reserved for these characters that transgress and transcend racial boundaries and form alliances across divides in gestures of solidarity.

Transnation and trans-linguistic dynamics

A corollary of this rich hybrid world in motion is the exhilarating carnivalesque mix of languages, sonorous yet at times confusing. The English language in *Sea of Poppies* is interspersed with Indian terms from Bengali or Bhojpuri, as well as scattered French. Ghosh posits the colonial language as a flexible and innovative one that unites disparate voices in a community that originates onboard a ship. When the narrative ventures out in sea along with the *Ibis*, it enters into the intricate world of Laskari language. In *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh takes pains to recreate the multiethnic and multilingual world of the nineteenth century seas. He illustrates the regional and religious heterogeneity and individuality of the lascars: one is, “a Cooringhee Hindu,” another a “Shia Muslim,” and still another “a grey-haired Catholic from Goa” (Ghosh 2008(a): 174). On the ship, these seamen are a group of workers bound to each other in

an oceanic kinship. The Laskari language was a rich cosmopolitan language, the language of command or sailing ships drawn from the English, Malay, Hindusthani, Chinese, Malayalam and the entire Babel of languages spoken on board. An eclectic web, the laskari language has a labyrinthine network which can be a puzzle to a newcomer as Zachary discovers:

He had to get used to ‘malum’ instead of mate, ‘serang’ for bo’sun, ‘tindal’ for bosun’s mate, and ‘seacunny’ for helmsman; he had to memorize a new shipboard vocabulary, which sounded a bit like English and yet not: the rigging became the ‘ringeen’, ‘avast!’ was ‘bas!’, and the cry of the middle-morning watch went from ‘all’s well’ to ‘alzel’. The deck now became the ‘tootuk’ while the masts were ‘dols’; a command became the a ‘hookum’ and instead of starboard and larboard, fore and aft, he had to sya ‘jamna’ and ‘dawa’, ‘agil’ and ‘peeheil’. (Ghosh 2008(a): 15-16)

The Laskari language, Ghosh observes is more like a “technical” and “specialized jargon” (Boehmer and Mondal 2012: 34). The steady linguistic flow of this “unseen net of words” is the prime reason for the efficient functioning of the ship: “To work a sailship efficiently, dozens of men must respond simultaneously to a single command” (Ghosh 2008(b): 58). This lively melange of tongues brings to mind Alu’s “khichri of words” (Ghosh 1986: 279) with which he communicates with the immigrant community in al-Ghazira. By foregrounding the remarkable vibrancy of the Laskari language the narrative celebrates the unsung lives of this mobile community and their lingua franca. The Lascars were the first Afro-Asians to participate freely in a globalized workspace, the first extensive travellers to settle in Europe, the first to adapt to a scheduled work culture and emergent new technologies. The Laskars were thus “in every sense the forerunners of today’s migratory computer technicians, nurses, high-tech workers, and so on” (Ghosh 2008(b): 58). The *Ibis* thus becomes a floating world with its own lexicon. This linguistic hybridization is, no doubt, a corollary of multiculturalism. But to celebrate this multilingualism as a product of intermeshing of cultures is to overlook the strategies of resistance of South Asian colonized countries. By seizing the language of the centre i.e. English and re-positioning it in a discourse suited to the colonized space, post-colonial literature writes back by the dual processes of “abrogation” and “appropriation” as Ashcroft explains:

The first, the abrogation or denial of the privilege of 'English' involves a rejection of the metropolitan power over the means of communication. The second, the appropriation and reconstitution of the language of the centre, the process of capturing and remoulding the language to new usages, marks a separation from the site of colonial privilege. (Ashcroft 1989: 37)

Conclusion

By dislocating British English and introducing new cultural patterns into it, a postcolonial writer localizes it for creative use thereby producing a variety of "englishes". "To conquer English", declares Rushdie, "may be to complete the process of making ourselves free" (Rushdie 1991: 17). By employing the strategies of code-switching and vernacular transcription, Ghosh abrogates the Standard English thereby strengthening his anticolonial stance. The carnivalesque mode inflects and transforms the novel as it charts the "switching" from contained to "open communal spaces" (Toker 2010: 11). Characters who live in more than one language simultaneously, express thereby the possibility of seizing opportunities and thus making inner freedom an outward, objective possibility.

The Indian Ocean is a palimpsest for Ghosh, and in his evocative mapping of this place and time, it becomes a rich archive where he reads layers upon layers of stories of power and violence, exchange, resistance, and survival. The novel presents the emergence of reconstituted families within contexts of domination and resistance. The crisscrossing oceanic trading routes offer an affective map of the world of unlikely kinships and intimacies formed on the fluid world of the ocean as a consequence of the machinations and practices of Empire. In a response to Eurocentric history, Ghosh reclaims the Indian Ocean as a site full of history of cultural exchanges, conflict, and contestation, testifying to the tangled global relationships across multiple continents. In Radhakrishnan's view, these basic insights involving the use of a certain kind of ethical imagination in the envisioning of interhuman and interdiscursive relationships amount to a newness in and of the imagination: "If only the world could be imagined that way!—new and emergent perceptions of nearness and distance; long denied and repressed affirmations of solidarities and fellow-heartedness in transgression of dominant relationships and axes of power; new and emergent identifications and recognitions in profound alienation from canonical-dominant

mystifications and fixations of identity” (Radhakrishnan 2003: viii). The great British land empire was intimately connected to and sustained by the Indian Ocean waters that linked it to a larger world order (Metcalf 2007: 9). The novel is thus an intervention that addresses the relative neglect of studies of the Indian Ocean as a vital site of conflict, of heterogeneous historical encounters, of the flow of commodities, a site distinct from but with similarities to the Atlantic slave trade.

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