

AMITAV GHOSH'S EXPERIMENTATION WITH LANGUAGES AND DIALECTS IN *IBIS TRILOGY*

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ABSTRACT: *Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy at face value is a historical fictional work that recreates the murky opium trade between British India and China which culminates into a full blown war between England and China. However, the three novels Sea of Poppies, River of Smoke and Flood of Fire also explores political, social, commercial and linguistic intricacies of the early colonial period. This article examines how Amitav Ghosh throughout over-1600 pages of his much acclaimed trilogy experimented with at least 23 other languages and dialects, at the backdrop of the vast seascape of the Indian Ocean, from Cape Town to Hong Kong the Opium War between the British Empire and China in 1839.*

KEYWORDS: Ibis Trilogy, Amitav Ghosh, Language, Indian Writing in English

INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh is one of the most prominent faces among contemporary Indian writers in English along with Salman Rushdie, Kiran Desai, Vikram Seth and Arundhati Roy. He hit the sphere of Indian Writing in English in 1986 with *The Circle of Reason*, a magical story of the misadventures of Alu, a young master weaver from a small Bengali village, who flees his home, traveling through Bombay to the Persian Gulf to North Africa. His next novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988) opens in Calcutta in the 1960s and follows two families—one English, one Bengali—as their lives twirl in tragic and comic ways. The anonymous narrator traces events back and forth in time, from the outbreak of World War II to the late twentieth century, through years of Bengali partition and violence, observing the ways in which political events invade private lives.

Ghosh also wrote *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), *The Glass Palace* (2000) and *The Hungry Tide* (2004) before he ventures out into his ambitious bid to author *Ibis* trilogy, which comprises *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), and *Flood of Fire* (2015). This is an epic saga surrounding the export of opium by British empire during the first half of nineteenth century and how the trade had impacted lives of people from almost the whole globe---from Baltimore to Canton.

Throughout his literary career, Ghosh's repertoire of themes include travel and diaspora, history and memory, political struggle and communal violence, love and loss, while all the time crossing the generic boundaries between anthropology and art work. Lately, he widened his domain of interest by focusing on one of the most burning issues of today's world: global warming. His most recent work is a nonfiction titled *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), where the writer poignantly examines our generation's

inability---at the level of literature, history and politics---to grasp the scale and violence of climate change.

However, Ghosh's experimentation with use of languages in his works remains one of the major features of his creative journey, that only a handful researchers have talked about. *Ibis trilogy* remains the most remarkable example of how he used different languages and dialects to achieve his creative goal. Throughout his novelistic voyage spanning 1680 pages, Ghosh recreates languages that were spoken in the second quarter of the nineteenth-century in the northern and eastern parts of India like Bhojpuri and Bangla, different varieties of Pidgin languages used by the sailors of different races in the Indian Ocean, Bay of Bengal, and their costal region that emerges as a new identity in *Ibis trilogy* (Bhawna and Jha, 2016). Ghosh incorporates a motley of varied forms of English, including nineteenth-century British, American, and Indian Englishes, nautical terms, Hindi-, Urdu-, and Chinese-influenced pidgin English, and the language of the lascars (Han, 2013).

Sea of Poppies is the first volume of the trilogy which depicts how characters from different backgrounds--sailors and stowaways, coolies and convicts--come together to board the ship named *Ibis* to travel to Mauritius. For Ghosh the ship is a miniature of India in particular and humanity in general with their happiness, sufferings, love, disputes, fun, violence and struggles. At a time of colonial turmoil, destiny has brought all these people together on the ship: Neel a bankrupt raja, Deeti a widowed tribeswoman, Zachary a mulatto American freedman, Paulette a free-spirited young French woman and many others. As their old family ties are washed away, they, like their historical counterparts, come to view themselves as *jahaz-bhais* and *jahaz behns*, i.e. ship siblings, and an unlikely dynasty is born, which will span continents, races, and generations.

The second installment of the trilogy named *River of Smoke* (2011) takes us further deep inside the opium trade in the 1830s. It follows the story through to Canton in China, where the opium was traded. The Chinese government is trying to stop illicit imports of opium, which has made a huge chunk of its population addicted to it, while making great fortunes for the insatiably greedy traders, mostly Europeans. One of the focal points of this novel is the life of the all-male Canton trading enclave, called Fanqui town or "Achha Hong" where a key object of focus is an Indian community. The name is itself a significant hybrid coinage, "achha", the Hindusthani/Hindi term meaning "all right", which was also used by Chinese to mean an Indian, and "hong" a Chinese word for trading house (Concilio, 2016).

In *Flood of Fire* (2015), the final novel of this epic tale, the British government declares war against China after its all-out crackdown on opium smuggling. One of the ships requisitioned for the attack, *the Hind*, travels eastwards from Bengal to China, sailing into the midst of the First Opium War. The turbulent voyage brings together a diverse group of travelers, each with their own agenda to pursue. Among them are Kesri Singh, a *havildar* in the East India Company who leads a company of Indian sepoy; Zachary Reid, an impoverished young sailor searching for his lost love, and Shireen Modi, a resolute widow travelling to Canton to reclaim her late opium-trader husband's wealth and reputation. Thus the novel follows a varied cast of characters from India to China, through the outbreak of the First Opium War and China's overwhelming defeat, to Britain's capture of Hong Kong.

The *Ibis Trilogy* is thus a historical fiction which deals with multiple motifs like colonial geopolitics, cruelty of caste system in India, early capitalism, migration, etc. However, the trilogy also recreates languages that were spoken in the second quarter of the nineteenth-

century in the north-eastern part of India, different varieties of Pidgin languages used by the sailors of different races in the Indian Ocean, Bay of Bengal, and their coastal region that emerges as a new identity in *Ibis Trilogy*. This article examines how in *Ibis trilogy*, Ghosh has successfully used language to reincarnate the social, cultural and political milieu of early colonial period.

Sea of Poppies

The first instalment of the trilogy is a fine balance between the author's craft and his deep research. It enthralls reader with 19th century Bhojpuri songs, slangs and swears spoken on Indian streets, minute details of opium cultivation, Chinese society and culture, the peculiar language of the *lascars* (sailors), botany, the engineering details of ships and intricacies of sailing them on the high seas, the Indianized English spoken by East India Company officials, Parsi customs, and even early 19th century pornography.

The story begins from the village of eastern Bihar in which Deeti, one of the chief protagonists, lived on the "outskirts of the town of Ghazipur, some fifty miles east of Benares" (*Sea of Poppies*, p. 3). The opening of the novel also reflects upon the vision of a ship which Deeti sees:

The vision of a tall-masted ship, at sail on the ocean, came to Deeti on an otherwise ordinary day, but she knew instantly that the apparition was a sign of destiny for she had never seen such a vessel before, not even in a dream: how could she have, living as she did in northern Bihar, four hundred miles from the coast?

The lascars in the novel were sailors who "came from places far apart, and had nothing in common, except the Indian Ocean; among them were Chinese and East Africans, Arabs and Malays, Bengalis and Goans, Tamils and Arakanese. They came in groups of ten or fifteen, each with a leader who spoke on their behalf" (*Sea of Poppies*, p. 13).

Many of these lascars, having been separated from family at a very young age and employed in the trade since as long as they can remember, don't even know their country of origin; it can truly be said of them that the sea is their only nation. Their speech too is an odd hybrid of words, phrases and slang that have been picked up and assimilated over time from different places; some of the lascar talk in *Sea of Poppies* can have a dizzying effect on a reader.

Serang Ali wife-o hab makee die. Go topside, to hebbin. By'mby, Serang Ali catchi nother piece wife. (*Sea of Poppies*, p. 16)

What for Malum Zikri make big dam bobbery'n so muchee bukbuk and big-big hookuming? Malum Zikri still learn-pijjin. No sabbi ship-pijjin. No can see Serang Ali too muchi smart-bugger inside? Takee ship Por'Lwee-side three days, look-see. (*Sea of Poppies*, p. 17)

Thus, Zachary, the mulatto from Baltimore, who took sail as a carpenter on board the *Ibis*, has to learn a completely new language from Serang Ali, the head of the lascars: "resum" instead of "rations", "malum" instead of "mate", etc.

Thus, within first few pages the *Ibis* sails from Baltimore to Cape Town to Mauritius to Calcutta, and the story steers to the mainland in Bihar, India, where Deeti complains because

"now, with the sahibs forcing everyone to grow poppy, no one had thatch to spare" (*Sea of Poppies*, p. 26):

"Come the cold weather, the English *sahibs* would allow little else to be planted; their agents would go home to home... making them sign *asami* contracts." (*Sea of Poppies*, p. 29)

Deeti will be one of a group of men and women, coolies, who sign contracts as indentured labourers or *girmitya*, who are so called because "in exchange of money, their names were entered on *girmitya*---agreement written on pieces of paper," to be transported to Mauritius on board the *Ibis*. They compensate for the loss of black African slaves followed by abolitionism. On board the *Ibis*, there are also Kalua, a giant of a man, a chamaar or a social outcast, who had helped Deeti's flight from what would have been her *sati*, her immolation on her husband's funeral pyre, together with other men and women, and two convicts: a Chinese young opium addict, Ah Fatt, and an Indian nobleman, Neel, the Raja of Raskhali, who is wrongly convicted of embezzlement.

The first volume of the trilogy, which denounces how "British rule in India could not be sustained without opium" (*Sea of Poppies*, p. 106), closes with a mutiny on board, where Kalua, the convicts and three sailors manage to flee after killing a guard and both the ship, and the lifeboat are caught in a tempest that disperses them. Interestingly, it closes on a surprising note, the journey of enslavement becomes for all the characters a journey of liberation, for Paulette more than once sets herself free through transvestism, first as an Indian woman in spite of her European ancestry, then as a man.

Sea of Poppies thus has ventured, among other things, into linguistic experimentation, where English is peppered with not just Bengali and Bhojpuri expressions but also shipping vernaculars. There are many instances in the novel in which language is used to emphasise class and the urban-rural divide. Raja Neel Ratan Halder, who is fluent not only in English and Bengali, but also in Hindustani, Persian and Urdu, and even with knowledge of Bhojpuri, speaks an aristocratic Bengali, with "silky phrasing and refined accent", who could detect "a raffish, river-front edge" in Paulette's Bengali from her inflection and accent" (*Sea of Poppies*, 360). In the intermingling of language, there is also an intermingling of races and cultures. The novel also uses different linguistic registers related to class difference in the British characters as well. On the one hand we have Mr Burnham, the pious and ambitious merchant from Liverpool, who speaks the Queen's English. But, on the other hand, there is James Doughty, the pilot, who in one scene enlightens Zachary on the necessity and art of speaking "the flash lingo of the east," presenting a performance of it in the process.

When Neel is subsequently convicted and sent to jail, a British serjent [sic] is so angered "by the mere fact of being spoken to in his own language, by a native convict" that he mistreats Neel and answers him "in rough Hindustani" (281). Although in his most reduced state while being stripped and humiliated, Neel realizes that English, the colonizer's language, at this moment, is a powerful weapon to use for his own advantage:

"Sir", he said, "can you not afford me the dignity of a reply? Or is it that you do not trust yourself to speak English?" 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. ..., he decided, as in the rest of his life as a convict, he

would speak English whenever possible, everywhere possible, and starting with this moment, here”(*Sea of Poppies*, 283).

Again on the board of *Ibis*, Neel is beaten for talking in English to Zachary. The *Subedar* slaps him across the face: “You think you can impress me with two words of angrezi? I’ll show you how this ingi-lis is spoken...”(*Sea of Poppies*, 355).

River of Smoke

Like *Sea of Poppies*, the second volume of the trilogy, *River of Smoke* (2011) also starts with Deeti, who is now a charismatic leader of her community on Mauritius Island and speaks a French-English *patois*. She paints scenes from her life and of her family on the walls of a cave, a sort of graffiti or rock-paintings. There, she also establishes a shrine for her *pujas* and asks her son to complete the final picture, in order to leave a memoir of the migrants’ passage on that land.

Most of the other important characters have by now reached the doors of the Chinese Empire, and thus the language of the novel shifts to Chinese-English or pidgin. Most of the British and Indian merchants’ ships are stuck at the mouth of the Pearl River, between Hong Kong and Macau, unable to move any further towards Canton. This deadlock has a purpose: to conjure up China and put it on the foreground as a new geo-political theatre of colonial aggression. Thus, we indulge at the mouth of the river in contemplation of all that China discloses, including its language. Foreigners are not allowed into the interior and foreign women are not admitted even in Fanqui Town, where the outposts of Western commercial enterprises are set (the thirteen factories/hongs).

Paulette, the Bengal-born French woman, who travelled on the *Ibis* dressed in a sari, who tended the botanical gardens of Port Louis, Mauritius for a while, disguised as a man, until her identity was revealed and she was invited to take care of a boat-garden by the British botanist Fitcher Penrose. The history of botanical gardens runs parallel to the history of the opium trade, for import of rare plants and flowers to enrich European collections was well on its way. *River of Smoke* also includes historical characters: major botanists, like Pierre Poivre, Sir Joseph Banks, the scientist who accompanied Captain Cook in his explorations and who became curator of the Kew Gardens in England, and of course Napoleon Bonaparte. The latter, while in exile at St. Elena, receives two merchants, Bahram and Zadig, on their way from China to Europe and asks to be informed about the British fortunes in the East. Napoleon is quite satisfied when he hears that the British are having troubles in smuggling their opium into China and takes leave from the two visitors by saying: "What an irony it would be if it were opium that stirred China from her sleep" (*River of Smoke*, p. 166).

Similarly, through a narrative stratagem and the insertion of some letters, Paulette – and the reader with her – is informed of what happens in Canton and is even led into the forbidden Chinese gardens. She is at anchor in Macau and, since she is a woman, travelling inland is impossible for her. Luckily, Robin, a former Indian friend of hers, the son of a famous painter from Calcutta, is now sailing to Canton. When she briefly meets him, she manages to entrust him with some botanical drawings in order to collect information about a mysterious and rare flower. Soon, he starts sending her detailed letters about the life of westerners in the Chinese city of Canton. The language of his letters are very similar to Marco Polo’s accounts: they are full of realistic details and marvel. He tells her about the riots, subsequent to turmoil due to the outlawed opium trade; he describes the factories with their flagpoles (Dutch, English,

American...) and the Chamber of Commerce, finally, he describes the life of the city and its shops and markets and buildings. Thus, the reader is taken by hand to Canton through those epistolary chapters.

The novel also witnesses a weaving of Indian terms into an English syntactic matrix especially culture-specific registers, for example, the culinary. In Canton, a kitchen-boat eatery offering Indian fare is described as follows:

“Everything was cooked in reassuringly familiar ways, with real masalas and recognizable oils, and the rice was never outlandishly soft or sticky: there was usually a biryani or a fish pulao, some daals, some green bhaajis, and a chicken curry and tawa-fried fish. Occasionally – and these were considered blessed days – there would be pakoras and puris.” (*River of Smoke*, 303)

A second significantly recurring register used in the novel is related to clothes and tailoring, as is seen while describing dressing for a business dinner:

“Bahram ... chose a knee-length white jama of Dacca cotton; it was discreetly ornamented with white jamdani brocade, and the neck and cuffs were lined with bands of green silk. Instead of pairing this with the usual salwar or pajamas, Bahram settled on a pair of black Acehnese leggings, shot through with silver thread. The weather being still quite warm he picked, as an outer garment, a cream-coloured cotton choga embroidered with silver-gilt karchobi work. The ensemble was completed by a turban of pure malmal muslin.” (*River of Smoke*, p. 216)

Further, Bahram’s working place in the *Achha Hong* is always his “daftar”, and not an office, and Neel is not his secretary but his “munshi”.

Many characters in the trilogy are multilingual, and they show an amazing array of contact phenomena in their speech. Paulette Lambert, for example, is raised by a French-speaking father in India. Though her English is good enough, she is not very good at English idioms or Indian English slangs. In general, her French interference is very subtle, though it becomes more pronounced when she is affected by some strong emotion. As Robin writes to her from Canton:

As for the query with which you ended: why, of course, you can certainly depend on me to do whatever I can to help you with your spoken English! But in the meanwhile, I do strongly urge you to exercise some care in your choice of words. There is nothing wrong of course in speaking words of encouragement to the crew, but [...] I confess that I too would be quite astonished if a young lady of tender years were to felicitate me on my dexterity in “polishing the foc-stick”. Far be it from me to reproach you for your spontaneity, Puggly dear, but you must not always assume that it is safe to transpose French expressions directly into English. The English equivalent of bâton-à-foc, for instance, is definitely not “foc-stick” – it is “jib-boom”. (*River of Smoke*)

Flood of Fire

The third instalment of the trilogy, *Flood of Fire* (2015), opens once again with Deeti, who receives the letters written by the painter Chinnery, and a canvas, representing the destruction of Canton by an immense fire – an event that was still to happen. Then the story moves back to India, to Bombay and Calcutta, where the wives of two merchants have been living very

different lives. In Calcutta, Mrs Burnham, for instance, after securing a job as a carpenter to Zachary, makes him a tool to fulfil her sexual fantasies. Thus, the novel gets a touch of the libertine plot, more typical of 18th Century plays and novels. This also shows how class privilege could allow colonialists to flirt with both the soul and the body of the colonized.

Simultaneously in Bombay, Mrs Bahram, once informed that her husband died in China and left a son there, although shocked and surprised because of his completely unsuspected double life, is determined to go to Macau apparently to claim compensation for her husband's confiscated opium. Kesri, a sepoy who had enrolled with the British army, experiences both humiliations and moments of glory in the army. Through his story the author introduces the life in the army in the colonial international context, discrimination against natives, their uniforms, their hierarchies, their training and barracks life, their pipers and drummers.

Meanwhile, in China, after the mysterious death of Bahram, Neel, the ex-convict now free, loses his job as *munshi* and becomes official translator and interpreter for Chinese authorities. Thus, his journal takes the place of Robin's letters from Canton. The year 1840 opens with news about possible military actions in China by the British, who are determined to ignore the ban on opium trade and to make their way into the interior of the Chinese Empire, in the name of a new divinity: Free Trade. Rumours of war soon spread in India, where the *sepoys* are on the alert and the colony is meant to sustain major financial and military efforts.

Thus while the first volume of the trilogy was about departures (from India), diaspora, family dismemberment (Deeti abandons her daughter, Paulette abandons her adoptive family), and exile, the third volume is about arrivals (in China), attempts at family reunions (fathers and sons, wives and husbands, lovers). In particular, the figure of Zachary, once again sailing on a ship and destined to be a free, independent opium merchant in China, also becomes a catalyst, through whose adventures, the readers meet one by one all the protagonists of the first volume, for the *Ibis* has shaped their life collectively and their individual destinies are forever intertwined.

The new year 1841 begins with a war, small yet very powerful, when flotilla of warships the British manage to take the Chinese by surprise. Their cannons and firearms easily pulverise bastions, walls and fortresses, while the *sepoy* army surrounds the enemy from behind and slaughter and massacre are thus granted. However, the both Indian soldiers and Chinese fail to understand why Indians are part of this war. As Kesri procrastinates:

So much death; so much destruction---and that too visited upon a people who had neither attacked nor harmed the men who were so intent on engulfing them in this flood of fire. What was the meaning of it. What was it for? (*Flood of Fire*, p. 505)

After the defeat, the new Commissioner for the Southern Provinces signs an agreement by which the island of Hong Kong passes under British sovereignty, and huge sums of money are promised as a compensation for the opium that had been confiscated to British and Indian merchants. Nevertheless, in the hope to solve the matter through diplomacy, the Chinese authorities only manage to accelerate the British attacks. They are forced into a "flood of fire" that lasts more than one year, and ends under a hurricane that completes the apocalypse of total debacle.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, in *Ibis Trilogy* Amitav Ghosh has used a language that has mirrored all jargons, patois, pidgins, idioms, dialects, rhythms and intonations, cries and whispers. He made communication across linguistic and cultural barriers possible, across what the text itself calls “apparently unbridgeable gaps of language” (*River of Smoke*, p. 323). The trilogy is marked by a sense of the complexities of multilingualism and the interaction of languages: Indian tongues – Neel’s Bangla, Bahram’s Gujarati, the then Indian lingua franca Hindusthani, as well as “Tamil, Telugu and Oriya” and “Marathi, Kachhi and Konkani”; Cantonese Chinese, Portuguese, French, Mauritian Creole and the hybrid that is pidgin.

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