



# Multicultural and Multilingual Aspects in Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies

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**Abstract**— *Sea of Poppies* is the novel by Amitav Ghosh which was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2008. It is the first part of his Ibis trilogy, a saga set just before the Opium Wars. All the characters in this novel blend with the people of all races and languages run through the stories, supplying the novel with a plenty of words and terms from East-Asian, Pacific and pidgin languages that turn the trilogy into a unique cocktail of multicultural and multilingual ecriture. Through this reaserch paper , I aim to highlight the cultural and linguistic diversity and present how Ghosh is able to create a cultural and linguistic hybrid space.

**Keywords**— *Language, culture, multilingual, multicultural, hybridity, pidgin.*

This paper aims to present the cultural and linguistic diversity which is displayed by Amitav Ghosh in the first novel of his Ibis Trilogy. I focus on the elements of multicultural and multilingual “hybrid space” of communication, as Homi Bhabha named it, and on the way the language mix embedded in the narrative turns the reader into a multicultural researcher and establish the author as a significant representative of the category of “hybrid writers” (Bhabha 55).

Amitav Ghosh is an eminent Indian writer in the postmodern era whose work reflects a postcolonial consciousness. His work has been informed by his early childhood memories heard from his parents from Calcutta who lived during the final period of the colonial rule and during Ghandhi’s nonviolent movement towards achieving independence for the Nation. His fiction highlights colonial and postcolonial aspects of identity, rootlessness and multiculturalism. The *Ibis* trilogy is an intertextual saga where dissimilar characters, of different social background, of different ethnic origin end up in a combination setting and as a varied crew on a slave ship.

In the Novel, “Sea of Poppies” the reader is taken back in time to the South Indian opium trade period, where, after advancing on the social scale, all the

characters smash together and begin to see each other as comrades, developing an unlikely coalition that goes beyond the conventional bonds of family and nation. The triple intertextual description begins with the story of Deeti, a young widow of an opium dealer from a distant village in northern Bihar. In fact, she is saved from her husband’s funeral pyre by Kalua, an extra-large low-caste person who falls in love with her. The second story is that of Paulette, an orphaned daughter of a French botanist, who arrives on board the ship with a purpose to delete her contentious past and meets Jodu, the son of her nurse, the only connection to her past. The other tale is that of a bankrupt *Raja*, who is chased from his estates which fall into the custody of a gluttonous opium dealer.

It is the Destiny that connects these characters and many others on *Ibis*, an old slaving ship which sails across the Indian Ocean towards the Mauritius (“Mareech”) Islands. This ship is depicted by Amitav Ghosh as a symbol for a huge womb where all these characters are socially reborn. While on land, all these characters behaved in a different manner, each of them belonging to a particular community, religion or caste and were bound to orthodox conventions. The new setting, however, gradually smears the thick borderline between

them. Just like the characters from Ondaatje's *The English Patient* find the new settings, the desert and the Italian villa, as common spaces of communion, accordingly all the entire disparate protagonists in the *Sea of Poppies* with the schooner Ibis, the mobile setting they land on. Most of those on board are going to the island of Mauritius as indentured labourers, the differences between them as regards caste or culture being suspended by their predicament. Their simply way out of it is the only option to cross their own ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic borders and to communicate to their own good. Deeti, the female protagonist seals their fate from the very beginning of the journey when she dooms:"...from now on there are no differences between us, we are *jahaz-bhai*<sup>1</sup> (...) to each other; all of us children of the ship". (SOP,p. 120)

Even if significant reviewers turn on the postmodern aspect of the storyline (see Sreelatha M. *Reconstructing Identities in Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies: A Postmodernist Perspective and Fictionalization of History in Sea of Poppies* by S. K. Singh), I firmly believe that the most outstanding aspect of the novel is its multilingualism. What surprises the unwarned reader is the multilingual and multicultural blend which, in spite of the limits of the period of the events, how Amitav Ghosh manages to build. William Rycroft, one of the reviewers, opines that the language style of the novel has at the commencement a disorienting consequence on the reader alike the *nadsat* language introduced by A. Burgess in *A Clockwork Orange* which gradually turns into a rich and exciting mix of languages. (Rycroft, *Just William's*) By mixing so many languages and dialects, Amitav Ghosh is capable to paint the complete range of diversity on board with differences in class, caste, nationality or religion designated by the words, dialect or language used to communicate. From the first few pages of the novel, we are showered with a large quantity of words and terms from East-Asian, Pacific and pidgin languages which vividly turn the text into an unreadable *Finnegan's Wake*-like description. The author himself states that in his acknowledgements page that "the cultural and linguistic blend from his book owes a lot to the 19<sup>th</sup> century scholars and many reference books, dictionaries as well as to modern sources". (SOP, p.531)

Deeti comes from a far-flung village in Eastern India. Beginning with Deeti's "vision of a tall-masted ship", (SP 1) the story unfolds to describe her predicament. Her village is near to the town of Ghazipur. It is winter and like everybody else in the village she is

worried about "the lateness of her poppy crop" (SP 1). A straightforward lady and a caring mother, Deeti is married to Hukam Singh, a handicapped worker in the Ghazipur Opium Factory. On her wedding night she is offered drug with opium by her mother-in-law and Kabutri, Deeti's daughter, is "fathered not by the husband, but by Chandan Singh, her leering, slack-jawed brother-in-law".(SP 39) She became doubtful when her husband showed no attention in her afterwards and who "usually remained in a state of torpid, opium-induced somnolence by the time he fell on his bed". (SP 36) The use of opium had left him for nonentity. After the demise of Hukam Singh, Deeti is about to meet her doom when she decides to go through with the sati ritual, but then Kalua, the ox man from the adjacent village, comes to her release and the both flow "away from the flaming pyre, into the dark of the night" (SP 178) to become indentured servants on the Ibis. These indentured labourers with dissimilar religions, castes, customs and beliefs form their own multicultural society. They come across other people who are also drifting as indentured labourers as well as lascars and sailors. As the novel steps forward, characters like Jadu, Paulette, Deeti, Kalua along with some others get together and plan to get away from the ship in which they thrive.

Even though the characters are placed in fresh environment which is complex for modification, they settle down in the foreign culture and attempt to take on new culture either by assimilation or by culturalism. Out of struggles and hardships, the people cope up with new surroundings in an effort to settle in the unfamiliar environment. The alien integrate with natives as a result of which the existing differences are reduced and gaps are successfully filled to extract lasting benefits for both. In this novel, Zachary's character is redesigned to suit to the new conditions in association with new relationships.

The lascar Serang ali's influence on Zachary Reid is immense and deep. The reason for Serang's enthusiasm to transform Zachary into a gentleman, a pukka sahib is not only out of paternal feeling but also the lascar's feeling to perceive him as one among their group of seamen. Zachary finds himself not just adapting to their speech with ease: "as if his oddly patterned speech had unloosed his own tongue" (16) but also begins to relish their flavor and changes his food habits "to a Laskari fare of karibat and kedgeree- spicy skillygales of rice, lentils and pickles, mixed on occasion with little bits of fish, fresh or dry....he soon grew to like the unfamiliar flavours"(23). Zachary's reconstruction of identity in integration with laskari group is as similar as Paulette's assimilation to Indian culture.

As the story progresses, we also come across a section of Europeans who have been living or

<sup>1</sup> Online Hindi-English Dictionary . Hn. *Jahaz-bhai*-Engl. *cabin-boy* see <http://hindi-english.org/index.php?input=jahaz-bhai+%amp;trans=Translate&direction=AU>

trading in India for many decades, and who now speak a highly diluted form of English which is imbued with Hindi or Bengali words. Amitav Ghosh simply presents their speech as it is, without italicizing the Indian bits or providing a glossary at the end (something that is frequently done-and over done-in Indian novels written in English). Further, he spells the local words not like an Indian reader would recognize them but to reflect the European accents with which they are spoken. The outcome is that even for a reader who knows the words and their meanings, some of these passages demand constant interpretation or extrapolation.

For the illustration, here's a brief list of some of these words and phrases in the form that they emerge in the book. In parentheses, we have included the spellings that an Indian reader would be more familiar with.- Zubben (zubaan),- Chawbuck (chabuk),- Pollock - sawg (paalak-saag) for spinach dishes,- Chitty and-dawk (for chithi and daak, or letter and post box), - Shish mull (sheesh mahal, mirror palace), - Dufter (daftar,office),- Balty (baalti,bucket),- Hurremzads(haraamzadas, bastards), - Jildee (jaladi, quick), - Chupowing (from chupna or hide), - Gantas (bells) in a clock-tower,- Tuncaw (tankha, salary),-Tumasher (tamasha, fuss, used here to mean a large celebration), - Oolter-poolter (ulta-pultaor upside-down), Quoddie (qaidi, prisoner), Bawhawdery (bahaduri,courage),- Coorsy (kursi, chair) and - kubber (khabbar, news), later-kibber is used instead of - kubber.

The Novel has its own lexicon, an *addendum* that Amitav Ghosh entitled "The Ibis Chrestomathy". The author makes use of this lexicon to present complicated amplifications of his favorite turns of phrase and to connect those words with the characters that occupy them. Of all the sources he mentions, the most significant are, in my view, T. Roebuck's *An English and Hindostanee Naval Dictionary* and *Hobson-Jobson-a Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases* written by Henry Hule and A.C. Burnell. Moreover, he yet confessed, in the aftermath of the publication of the novel, how some personal experiences helped to contribute to the usage of such a vast variety of words and phrases from different languages. Here are some instances: "One of first recurring words which shock the reader is the words "lascar" and "malum." We read in the novel that "lascar" as a sailor who "came from places that were 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" (Ghosh *Sea* 12). Ghosh goes on and clarifies this in his comment published in *Hindustani Times*:

"I came to be astonished by the number of Asian sailors who figured on the crew-lists of 19th century sailing vessels. These 'lascars' as they were called, came from every part of the Indian Ocean and the more I read about them, the more I was intrigued by their lives. What drew them to the sea? How did they communicate, among themselves and with their officers? One day, in a library I chanced upon an early 19th century dictionary of the 'Laskari' language. Leafing through its pages, I began to wonder what it would be like for a new recruit to learn those words, to discover the nautical world — and so was born Jodu, one of the central characters in the novel". (Ghosh, *Confessions*)

"Malum", Ghosh confirms in his article on the language in *Ibis* from 2012, comes from 'Arabic' and it means "mate" (Ghosh, *Of Fanas and Forecastes*, p.34). A repeated word used by the lascars is "hokum." According to Roebuck's dictionary, "hookum" means in Laskari, the lascar language, "command" (Roebuck in Ghosh, *Of Fanas*). We may suppose that the relation between *lascars* and their *malums* was one of subordination, a colonial master-slave relationship, in Hegelian terms.

Then, we come across a mixture of sea slang and words and phrases of so many different origins, from English Creole to South Asian languages and dialects that roughly dizzy the reader. As far as the usage of Laskari language in sailing context is concerned, Ghosh explains:

"Laksari (...) was really just a language of command. For the rest, the lascars probably used, amongst themselves, a series of contact languages and pidgins, made up of elements of Swahili, Malay, and Hindusthani. To communicate with officers and white passengers (...) they probably used variants of the Sino-Portuguese-English pidgin that came to be associated with the South China Coast". (Ghosh, *Of Fanas and Forcastles*, p.56)

In the words of Townson N., "pidgins are simplified languages which are developed in contact situations between people with no common language and are used for restricted, functional purposes". (Townson, p.93) Similarly, Romaine notes that "pidgins are the simplified languages characterized by a minimal lexicon, little or no morphology, and limited syntax" (Romaine qtd.

in Townson, p.94). Here is a first example of this sort: "Serang Ali wife-o hab makee die. Go topside, to hebbin. By'mby, Serang Ali catches another piece wife." (17) Or, in another sample which resembles a pidgin language: "Must too muchi shout: you go barn shoot sister. I on epiece pukka-sahib, no can catch. You take pistol in pocket, if bugger try shangai, shoot in the face" (21).

Besides that, the Laskari dialect contained many swear words which come out frequently in the novel. Many of these can be found in Roebuck dictionary without translation though. Amitav Ghosh notes that "this is excusable since his dictionary was mainly a technical one" (Ghosh, *Of Fanas and Forecastle*, p.60). In turn, *Hobson-Jobson* includes such words explaining that they are "terms of abuse which we should hesitate to print if their odious meaning were not obscure to the general. If it were known to the Englishmen who sometimes use the words, we believe there are few who would not shrink from such brutality". (Hule H. and Burnell A. C. in Ghosh *Of Fanas*) Roebuck presents a list of words from Laskari dialect along with their etymology, which proves the diverse as well as a result of hybrid nature of this language. Here are some of these words which appear in the novel explained by the author as:

"Serang," the senior most- derived from Malay;"sukkânî," (rendered in English as 'seacunny') comes from the Arabic for *rudder* (sukkân);"ishtor," the word for *steward*, of Arabic origin;"jamnâ burdu," *starboard and larboard*, in Laskari;"fo'c'sle," coming from the English "fore-castle" – a ship part, a shallow, curved space between the bows;"Balti," derived from the Portuguese "balde", it probably referred originally to ship's buckets;"karma," came from the Portuguese "camara", itself a derivative of the Latin 'camera' (room, vault). In the novel it is used to mean the ship's cabin.

(Roebuck

in Ghosh, *The Ibis Chrestomathy*)

Another type of words and phrases which appear nearly illegible are those employed by the Europeans who lived and did trade in South –Asia for many decades during the colonial period. Their language diversity is a fusion of English spiced up with many Hindi, Bengali and Gujarati terms. In the novel, Amitav Ghosh does not italicize or explain the words as they emerge in the text as do most Indian writers in English, a thing that makes reading quite complicated unless a reference book or dictionary is consulted. More than that, these words are

spelled so that the European accent of the speaker is highlighted. Singh, a recent reviewer of Ghosh 's work, who is a speaker of both Hindi and Bengali, states in this respect that " for a reader who knows the words and their meanings, some of these passages require constant interpretation or extrapolation"(Singh *Language*).

One of the protagonists, Paulette, a French merchant's daughter, speaks such a variety with Mrs Burnham, her *ayah*(au pair) the wife of a shipping merchant, who took care of her in a mansion in Calcutta: "Mrs Burnham: "Where have you been *chupowing*(italics mine) yourself? I've been looking everywhere for you"(203). "Chupowing" derives from the Hindi verb "chupna" and it means "to hide"(Singh *Language* ) Singh also provides a list of words of this kind and their original meaning in Hindi or Bengali. Here are some of them: "Pollock-sawg" (paalak-saag) for a spinach dish, "chitty" and "dawk" (for chithi and daak, or letter and postbox), "dufter" (daftar, office), "hurremzads" (haraamzadas, bastards), "oolter-poolter" (upside-down) (Singh *Language*). The last one appears in the following: "He turned a ship oolter-poolter in the Spratlys, which is considered a great piece of silliness amongst sailing men". (SOP, p.102)

To conclude with, in "Sea of Poppies", Amitav Ghosh creates a distinctive lexicon of the early 19th-century cultural references where its multicultural aspect is in the limelight. By doing this, he may rightly be equated with other postcolonial writers such as Salman Rushdie or Derek Walcott, whose lifetime pursuit has been that of cultural border crossing and multicultural communion. This hybrid mixture of Amitav Ghosh's constructs in this novel has both an enlightening and a dizzying effect on the readers which turns them into intra-textual and inter-textual researchers.

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