

“The Sea is History”:¹
Opium, Colonialism, and Migration
in Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*
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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, a British opium merchant, a half-Parsi and half-Chinese convict—these are some of the “mongrel” characters with complex histories that populate Amitav Ghosh’s most recent novel, *Sea of Poppies*. Published in 2008, this novel is the first installment in a trilogy, which takes on the task of imagining the ways in which the histories of slavery, Opium trade, British Empire, and migration are interwoven. The story is set in 1838 against the backdrop of the opium trade and the beginnings of migration of indentured Indian labour to the Caribbean. The range of characters on the ship *Ibis*, an American ex-slaver now transporting Indian labourers to Mauritius, offers a broad canvas for Ghosh’s historical novel of transnational connectivity. Through the interweaving of the characters’ stories and through deploying elements from a variety of genres (historical novel, nautical novel, travel and adventure fiction), the novel offers a narrative of and about movement, border-crossings, and heterogeneous encounters.

While Ghosh alludes to the link between land and sea through the title and the tripartite structure (land, river, sea) of the novel, most of the novel takes place on the *Ibis*, and even Part One of the novel (which is titled “land”) is full of references to sailors, bodies of water, boats and ships.² Almost all the characters feel the effects of the ocean on their lives in one way or another. Thus, 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. The novel illustrates the intimate relation between “history, politics, and bodies of

water” (Vergès 247) through its attention to the Indian Ocean.³ This focus emphasizes how the British Empire was situated within global networks and highlights the textured realities of Empire—“a complex web consisting of horizontal filaments that run among various colonies” rather than a strictly vertical relationship between the center and individual colonies (qtd. in Metcalf 7). Through oceanic networks, ideas, commodities, and people flow from India to a variety of spaces—China, Mauritius, England, the United States. Thus, 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 body of the ship itself—deck, timbers, and hold—carries inscriptions of different histories (of non-Western sailors, the slave trade, indentured labour). Cross-cultural, caste, class, gender, and national collaborations blur all sorts of boundaries and enable the formation of new alliances (both oppressive and liberating) and emergence of reconstituted families within contexts of domination and resistance. The crisscrossing oceanic trading routes offer up 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.

Its broad canvas with intersecting plot-lines situates *Sea of Poppies* within the context of recent interest in studies of the Indian Ocean, transatlanticism, opium and Empire, and of older well-known studies of the Atlantic Ocean. The work of historians such as Clare Anderson (*Convicts in the Indian Ocean*), Sugata Bose, and Thomas R. Metcalf in the last decade has demanded a critical reflection on the Indian Ocean and the histories found there as a significant site for studying global relationships. Through studying the movement of peoples, practices, ideas, and goods in this place, these scholars shed light on the palimpsestic nature of the Indian Ocean world where multiple histories exist. Recent studies on the significance of opium trade to the global imperial economy have also contributed to the interest in the Indian Ocean, since it functioned as the arena for the multifarious encounters. Carl A. Trocki, David Anthony Bello, and Curtis Marez (*Drug Wars*) have all offered studies on the British Empire in Asia, focusing on the circulat-

ing commodity of opium and its significance for European expansion and empire-building. If Ghosh builds on the recent work of these historians of the Indian Ocean and opium, it is also impossible to think through the novel's treatment of the circuits of global migration and the counter-culture of modernity without the earlier work of Paul Gilroy, Peter Linebaugh, and Marcus Rediker on the Atlantic Ocean. *Sea of Poppies* follows in the wake of this scholarship, and this work infuses and inspires Ghosh's fictional world. This novel also pushes ahead Ghosh's project of investigating the multi-dimensionality of postcolonial history and experience. Anshuman A. Mondal lists a set of "core issues" that Ghosh meditates upon in all his works.⁴ For instance, Ghosh's novels often imagine the world from the perspective of displaced peoples and focus on peoples' histories often relegated to the margins of Eurocentric narratives of history. In *The Glass Palace* (2000), Ghosh focuses on the "forgotten" histories of WWII such as the "Forgotten Long March," the harrowing march of Indian settlers from Burma to India in the wake of a Japanese advance. In *An Antique Land* (1992) explores African-Asian connections preceding British colonialism and "other" non-European worlds and connections. *The Shadow Lines* (1988) interrogates both the legacies of Partition in the subcontinent as well as the silence surrounding riots in nationalist histories since riots call attention to the failures of the postcolonial nation-state. The massacre at Morichjhāpi of Bangladeshi refugees by the Indian state in 1979 finds voice in *The Hungry Tide* (2004), where Ghosh focuses on the islands of the Sunderbans to unsettle the notion of progress by showing the costs of developmentalism through the predicament of refugees and indigenous peoples. And, in *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), Ghosh questions the colonial narrative of discovery and progress by disputing the colonial "truth" of Ronald Ross' discovery of the cure for malaria. Thus, Ghosh has variously exposed the limits of (imperial) archives and questioned the myth of progress in his corpus. In *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh revisits themes and preoccupations of his earlier work and presents a historical novel of panoramic scope and great depth, populated with characters from different continents with complex histories and conflicting interests.

I. Archiving the Ocean: A Tale of Opium and Sailors

Ghosh emphasizes the linked histories of the travel of opium, lascars, and migrant labour and contests their marginal place in the colonial archives. Scholars such as Antoinette Burton, Laura Ann Stoler, and Durba Ghosh have theorized that colonial archives “served as technologies of imperial power, conquest, and hegemony” (Burton 7). Scholars contend that archives are not simple or simply repositories of “fact” and “truth” but are imbricated within power, involving processes of construction, selection, and interpretation. Thus, archives silence as much as reveal the past, privileging some narratives over others. In his book, *Imperial Connections*, Metcalf writes of how the Indian Ocean came to be neglected in the colonial archives in the nineteenth century because it came to be seen as “empty” of history in contrast to the drama of the trading voyages and European rivalries of the previous centuries: “It is as if a bustling sea full of vessels and people had suddenly been emptied, its waters drained away” (9). 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. 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 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.

In literary studies, the archive of the Black Atlantic has dominated, shaping a particular narrative of the circulation, routes, and demographics involved—a focus on the Atlantic, Middle Passage of slaves from Africa, the experience of trauma and violence, and European sailors’ culture. Ghosh opens up this limited perspective of oceanic worlds by emphasizing the connections between bodies of water, the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans. He links the maritime worlds of the Atlantic and Indian Ocean by placing an African-American freedman in the Indian Ocean and Indian indentured labor in the holds of an ex-slaver which will eventually carry opium, showing how the “forces from the Atlantic . . .

affected the Indian Ocean World” (Ewald 71). And in his reading of the oceans as archives, evidence of the traces of “the intimacies of four continents,” the interdependencies between them, begin to show (Lowe). People and histories from these different parts of the globe—from the continents of Asia, Europe, Africa, and America—are joined together in the journeys of the Ibis. Through following the “routes” of people, commerce and capital, Ghosh investigates the “roots” of the strength of imperial Europe and the “roots” of diasporas in the Caribbean—and emphasizes these intimate ties.

As he states in many of his interviews, Ghosh is investigating the silence around Britain’s role in the “drug trade” of the nineteenth century. Ghosh, who refers to opium as “among the most precious jewels in Queen Victoria’s crown” in his novel (*Sea* 83–4), is in agreement with economist Carl Trocki’s contention that, “Without the drug, there probably would have been no British Empire” since “the economic foundation of the imperial economy lay on opium” (Trocki xiii). Trocki states that by the middle of the nineteenth century, opium was a major source of government revenue in British India and a major export. In Ghosh’s novel, the British merchants’ heavy surveillance of the opium factory leaves no doubts about the immense value of the commodity:

The fortifications here were formidable, and the guards particularly sharp-eyed—and well they might be, for the contents of those few sheds, or so it was said, were worth several million pounds sterling and could buy a good part of the City of London. (*Sea* 84)

Moreover, British power ensues not just from control over territory and peoples—i.e., poppies grown on land by Indian peasants—but also from managing ocean trade routes, since opium is transported through ships to China.

Ghosh shifts attention to the opium ship and the opium factory rather than the opium den, a staple of late-19th century English literature.⁵ This constitutes a “writing back” to the Eurocentric treatment of opium that focuses on opium abuse by the Asian in opium dens seen as sites of corruption, read as signs of Asian criminality and pathology. Instead,

the novel confronts the reader with the appalling working conditions in the opium factory—the miasmatic fog that surrounds it, the sickly odour of opium sap that hangs in the air, and the smell of liquid opium mixed with the sweat and the stench. Marez writes how the opium den narratives that circulated in the metropole “played a crucial role in the reproduction of imperial ideologies” as they tried to “enlist ideological support for the British Empire in Asia by disavowing its origins in war and plunder” (42). In *Sea of Poppies*, the British merchants are shown to be pathologically addicted to the growing and selling of opium, abusing Indian farmers to grow opium to meet their insatiable greed for it.

The historical links between opium, British Empire, and indentured labor—and the intimacy between land and sea—are shown through delineating the trajectory of Deeti, one of the main characters in the novel.⁶ Deeti is the farmer-wife of a high-caste Rajput (Hukam Singh) who works in the opium factory. The vicious circle of Empire is illustrated in Singh’s injury as a sepoy in a British regiment, which has resulted in his addiction to opium, further aggravated by his employment at the British opium factory.⁷ It is this addiction, Deeti realizes, that constitutes his main “disability” rather than his slight limp. Deeti ends up on the Ibis as an indentured labourer after being saved from becoming a sati (on her husband’s funeral pyre) by the lower-caste horse-cart driver, Kalua. Like Zachary Reid, the mixed-race American freedman, Deeti ends up on the sea because of disenfranchisement on land. Through this incident of Deeti’s rescue, Ghosh also writes back to colonialist representations in much British fiction (*The Far Pavilions*, *The Deceivers*), where the enlightened white man saves the victimized Indian woman from the “barbaric” rite of sati.⁸ In Ghosh’s postcolonial intervention, a “brown man” becomes the rescuer of an Indian woman, thus undercutting the white male rescue fantasy.

Through Deeti’s stunned eyes, the novelist gives us the “structure of emotion” (Kumar 101) to accompany the historical situation and material realities of opium production and Empire.⁹ The opium factory of Ghazipur where Hukam Singh works is described in great detail when Deeti undertakes a journey into and through this heart of darkness, a cavernous and devouring hole, to bring her husband home after he

passes out because of being sick. Through Deeti's journey, the insides of the opium factory expose the truth of the "work" of Empire, with the factory serving as a symbol of its giant exploitative economic system. Deeti notices the "gigantic pairs of scales stood against the walls, here used for the weighing of raw opium. Clustered around each set of scales were dozens of earthenware gharas, of exactly the kind she herself had used in packing her harvest" (*Sea* 86). The farmers and their vessels pale into insignificance in the face of the instruments of imperial weight-age. Significantly, Ghosh's setting is the Indian hinterland state of Bihar, which was the center of opium cultivation and from where the indentured labourers came, allowing him to show the workings of Empire and its far-reaching consequences. These farmers disenfranchised by the practices of Empire would now be offered "freedom" and escape from their debt or lost farms by being shipped off to plantations in other British colonies that were feeling the neglect after the legal abolition of slavery.

In addition to tracing and tracking the centrality of the commodity of opium to empire-making, Ghosh tracks the labouring lascars, who are the ultimate border-crossers as they float from ship to ship, between national borders, shore and sea in search of work. By emphasizing the indispensability of Southeast Asian lascars to European navies and the flow of commerce in the oceans in the nineteenth century, Ghosh extends in fiction the work of Rediker and Linebaugh, which focuses on the European sailors' culture. In his essay, "Ahab's Boat," David Chappell notes the valuable role of non-European seamen like lascars on European ships, and he states that their presence "challenges the triumphant tale of European seafarers heroically globalizing the world and offers us instead an image of interdependency with alien 'others,' whose skills made voyaging so far from home possible" (75–76). For Chappell, non-European seamen like the lascars "constitute the unsung working class" of Western trading ships (77). Ghosh establishes the lascars' value to the functioning and survival of the ship from the beginning since the head of the lascars, Serang Ali, maneuvers the ship after all the Europeans die in the initial journey of the *Ibis* from Baltimore to Calcutta. Ali's skill as a sailor allows the *Ibis* to reach its destination.

While Ghosh introduces a lascar figure (Rajkumar) in *The Glass Palace*, Rajkumar's seafaring life is not given narrative space in that novel. In contrast, 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" (*Sea* 174). Ghosh's response to colonialist demonization or archival marginalization of these sailors is not necessarily to portray them as romanticized heroic adventurers but rather to paint a fuller picture of their lives in a realistic and sympathetic tone. The novel employs the figure of Zachary, in some ways the classic figure of the ingénue abroad, to introduce the lascars—their language, clothes, foods, and method of functioning as a unit—and this device allows the reader to see these sailors through non-judgmental eyes. They might be as unfamiliar to the reader as they are to Zachary, but this unfamiliarity does not carry negative valence. And, after his initial surprise, Zachary finds himself not just adapting to their speech with ease (the "oddly patterned speech had unloosed his own tongue") but also begins to enjoy their food ("he soon grew to like the unfamiliar flavours") (*Sea* 22). 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" (*Sea* 13). On the ship, these seamen are a group of workers bound to each other in an oceanic kinship.

II. "Like Merchandise on a Vendor's Counter":

Disposable Free/Unfree Bodies of Empire

Lascars, opium, indentured Indian laborers, African slaves, convicts—all are commodities or "merchandise" and provide a variety of labour forms in the imperial world.¹⁰ Ships were, as Linebaugh and Rediker put it, the "engine[s] of commerce, the machine[s] of empire" (*Many-Headed Hydra*, 150). Considered the "sinews of Empire," ships transported materials and commodities (products or groups of people) foundational to the prosperity of imperial powers. On the *Ibis*, indentured workers

occupy the holds once held by slaves and where they are, so to speak, “place holders,” until opium can be shipped to China again. Echoing the brief description of the coolie ship and middle passage of Indian migrants to Southeast Asia in *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh captures the lascar Jodu’s first impressions of the hold of the Ibis in a haunting image:

He picked up the chains, and on looking more closely at the bracelet-like clasps, he became convinced that it was indeed meant for a human wrist or ankle. Now, running his hands along the floor, he saw that there were smooth depressions in the wood, of a shape and size that could only have been made by human beings, over prolonged periods of time. The depressions were so close to each other as to suggest a great press of people, packed close together, like merchandise on a vendor’s counter. (*Sea* 132)

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” (*Sea* 74; emphasis added). 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. Burnham, who has already made money in transportation of convicts to the British Empire’s network of island prisons, places these groups adjacently, hinting at the only nominally free status of indentured labourers and pointing to the intimate “relationship between the political economy of convictism and indenture” (Anderson, “Convicts and Coolies” 95). Burnham ships coolies and convicts as commodities

to fill his coffers by meeting the demand for labour to develop the newly acquired British Mauritius.

In fact, Burnham's own trajectory—Liverpool, Andaman Islands, Canton, Calcutta—embodies the dense networks of imperial commerce and society. Burnham's life functions as a microcosm of the webbed network of different phases of the Anglo-American Empire as he makes his way through the Atlantic slave trade and work with missionaries and the selling of opium in China to become a successful merchant who uses an American ex-slaver to transport indentured labour, opium, and convicts. His trajectory through different imperial outposts reiterates one version of the history of Empire.

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” (94). For the labourers, migration to Mauritius indeed results in dislocation and loss of caste and kin. And, like the convicts, the indentured are housed in confined depots, subjected to medical inquiry, and once on the ship are kept in the same holds and heavily guarded for fear of mutiny or desertion. By showing how the boundaries between the colonial categories of convict and coolie blur, the practices of Empire are brought into focus: the native viewed as commodity and criminal and subject to surveillance and other forms of disciplinary control.

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 194). In her essay, “The Intimacies of Four Continents,” Lisa Lowe contends that

out of the “global intimacies” of Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas, “emerged a modern racialized division of labor” (192). Lowe 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” (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.¹¹

For Burnham, free trade and the flow of commodities is equated with freedom—with free trade as the word of God—suggesting the unholy nexus between evangelical Christianity, colonialism, and market capitalism. In Burnham’s neoliberal discourse of “market globalism,” the opium trade brings the benefits of free trade, the spread of democratic ideals and promotion of freedom and progress to the Chinese. From his point of view, the opium war is a war for these “principles.” He makes hypocritical, self-serving statements such as, “Free Trade is a right conferred on Man by God” (*Sea* 106). The merchant’s arguments stun Zachary into stuttering silence.

Freedom . . . isn’t that what the mastery of the white man means for the lesser races? As I see it . . . the Africa trade was the greatest exercise in freedom since God led the children of Israel out of Egypt. Consider . . . the situation of a so-called slave in the Carolinas—is he not more free than his brethren in Africa, groaning under the rule of some dark tyrant? (*Sea* 73)

The irony of Burnham’s pontificating on the benefits of slave trade to a freedman who is passing for white is not lost on the reader or on Zachary as he responds, “Well, if slavery is freedom then I’m glad I don’t have to make a meal of it” (*Sea* 73). The perverse workings of Burnham’s self-serving logic are revealed again in his act of “charity” toward the orphaned Paulette, whom he takes into his household and then exploits to fulfill his sexual desires in sadomasochistic nocturnal rituals. In light of these goings-on, Burnham’s self-righteous refusal to

watch the dance of the nautch-girls at Neel's house, because "it is not his practice to participate in spectacles that are injurious to the dignity of the fairer sex" (*Sea* 111), rings hollow, and all his claims to morality, piety, and virtue are quickly dismantled. Moreover, when confronted by Zachary for hiding his connection with the South China Sea pirates, Serang Ali turns Zachary's piracy-as-crime accusation on its head: "Crime, Malum Zikri?' Serang Ali's eyes flashed. '[Is] smuggling opium not crime? Running slave-ship better'n piracy?'" (*Sea* 409). Ali calls the imperialists' bluff, trims the British rhetoric of justificatory frills and exposes them as racketeers. He refuses them any moral authority in condemning piracy when they themselves engage in the coolie and opium trades.

Ghosh connects not only the labor and vulnerable positions of the indentured workers racialized as coolies to that of the lascars, but further shows how Zachary's unstable position intimately echoes that of these other mobile non-Western workers. For example, similarities the novel highlights between the positions of Zachary and the migrants are both the power of the paper "agreements" or contracts (what the indentured call "girmits") to seal the migrants' fate as "coolies" and the power of the ship's log, which carries the notation "Black" next to Zachary's name, to expose him to danger. When the ruthless and racist British first mate, Crowle, finds the piece of paper and discovers that Zachary has that incriminating "drop of Negro blood," he threatens Zachary with that discovery, and the novel observes, "[Zachary] was amazed to think that something so slight, so innocuous, could be invested with so much authority: that it should be able to melt away the fear, the apparent invulnerability that he, Zachary, had possessed in his guise as a 'gentleman'" (*Sea* 465). Although Zachary contests, "Whatever that paper is, it's not a letter of indenture," thus trying to find reassurance in his position as a "freedman," he also knows that it means little in a race- and color- obsessed hierarchical imperialist world where his situation is fragile because of the danger associated with the discovery of his racial identity (*Sea* 466). This statement allows Ghosh to emphasize the "unfree" status of the indentured group. Zachary too has only nominal freedom, which ultimately

links him with the other nominally “free” populations on the ship, the indentured labourers and the lascars. Similarly, while the lascars have relatively more “freedom” than the indentured workers, they still occupy a liminal space between freedom and unfreedom since they are still low-paid and subject to the tyrannies, oppressions, and petty humiliations of the British as well as the Indian middle-men (the guards). Thus, through suggestive overlaying, Ghosh shows how “a political hierarchy ranging from ‘free’ to ‘unfree’ was deployed in the management of the diverse labors of colonized peoples” (Lowe 194–95).

Zachary’s presence on the *Ibis* and the Indian Ocean is determined by his need to “ship out” of the stultifying racial hierarchies he experiences on land. Through Zachary’s remembering of the incident that triggered his decision to sign on to the *Ibis*, Ghosh reveals something of his oppressive life at the Baltimore shipyard:

[Zachary] remembered, as if it were happening again, the encirclement of Freddy Douglass, set upon by four white carpenters; he remembered the howls, ‘Kill him, kill the damned nigger, knock his brains out’; he remembered how he and the other men of colour, all free, unlike Freddy, had held back, their hands stayed by fear. And he remembered, too, Freddy’s voice afterwards, not reproaching them for their failure to come to his defence, but urging them to leave, scatter: ‘It’s about jobs; the whites won’t work with you, freeman or slave: keeping you out is their way of saving their bread.’ That was when Zachary had decided to quit the shipyard and seek a berth on a ship’s crew. (*Sea* 48)

Zachary’s decision to leave “home” relates back to this moment. In this brief glimpse into Zachary’s past, Ghosh taps into the historical narrative of Frederick Douglass and locates Zachary as a carpenter who spent eight years working in the Gardiner shipyard as a carpenter at Fell’s Point in Baltimore. Zachary’s encounter with the Indian Ocean, his decision to cross national borders, is therefore tied to this history of disenfranchisement on land. Half of the original crew of the *Ibis* when

it sailed from Baltimore had been Black, suggesting the appeal of the sea for African Americans at the time. The waters promise mobility and freedom, a relative egalitarianism, and an unmooring from the chains of slavery on land.¹²

It is important to note the contexts within which this violent memory intrudes on Zachary's consciousness in Calcutta—his meeting with the beefy Englishman James Doughty and his annoyance with Serang Ali—since they provide insight into Zachary's anxieties and aspirations. This petty Englishman introduces Zachary to societal ranking in imperial British India. For Doughty, the best kind of native is one like the zamindar Neel Rattan Halder's father, a profligate native who stayed "in his place." Neel, the "bookish" son, irks him because he becomes a menacing mimic man ("a right strut-noddy," in his colourful language) whose privileged class background and superior education unsettle the crass Englishman (*Sea* 44). Doughty's real contempt is, however, reserved for the mixed-blood Eurasians (derogatorily called "Chee-Chees"), and this education into imperial racial gradation disconcerts Zachary, not least because he himself has a "touch o' tar," is passing for white, and fears being discovered. Thus, this conversation with Doughty ignites the memory of his placement within the American racial landscape that he has sought to escape by signing on to the crew of the *Ibis*. Ironically, however, the confinements of the Anglo-Indian society he encounters turn out to be as restrictive as those of the American society he escaped from.

III. "We're All in the Same Boat": The Pilgrims' Progress and Emerging Siblingship

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 243). The dialectical relationship between domination and resistance is seen on the ship 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, invested in the maintenance of boundaries and the vocabulary of pure/rigid identities, are shown to be violently oppressive. They come together to enforce divisions. For both, “in matters of marriage and procreation, like must be with like, and each must keep to their own” (*Sea* 442).¹³ This is deliberately ironic considering the heterogeneity of those 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” (*Sea* 442). And for Bhyro Singh (who is Deeti’s dead husband’s uncle), upper-caste Deeti’s union with the lower-caste Kalua, which disobeys caste strictures, is a cardinal sin for which he will make both of them 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” (*Sea* 303). Rather than attacking traditional tyrannies and thus 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. It is the middle-man Nob Kissin who suggests that Burnham seize Neel's assets when the zamindar is unable to pay back the merchant's debts. Nob Kissin's motivation to help Burnham is self-interested in that he hopes to negotiate with Burnham for a place on the Ibis by helping him. He hopes to build a place of worship for the indentured labourers in Mauritius which would be the realization of his dream and the fulfillment of his promise to his spiritual mentor. While Nob Kissin works to benefit the Raj, he is still at the receiving end of their scorn, and his British employers value him as much for his obsequiousness and for "his apparently limitless tolerance of abuse" (*Sea* 150); after all, he takes little offense to Burnham's mocking him as "my Nut-Kissing Baboon" (150). Similarly, Neel's father and Neel have lived leisurely, dependent on the profits from Burnham's opium trade. Ghosh refuses to give a clean chit to Indians who served as accomplices to the British in exploiting the situation to varying degrees and profiting from Empire by participating in its businesses to pursue their own ends. Thus, these various arrangements reveal layers of complicity and complicated power relations.

The novel, as a rejoinder to the Manichean colonial logic, revels in "unnatural" liaisons—whether ones between an Indian ayah and a Frenchman, a Parsi man and a Chinese woman, a high-caste Indian woman and an untouchable, an Indian serang and a mixed-race American. Narrative sympathy is reserved for those characters such as Deeti, Paulette, and Zachary who transgress and transcend racial boundaries and form alliances across divides in gestures of solidarity. Such seemingly improbable relationships exist in many of Ghosh's other works, such as the friendship between the Englishwoman May and the Bengali man Tridib in *The Shadow Lines* or the bond between the Indian-American cetologist Piya and the indigenous fisherman Fokir in *The Hungry Tide*. In *Sea of Poppies*, 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” (*Sea* 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.

Moreover, when Singh’s men mete out brutal violence on one of the lascars for flirting with one of the female migrants and also take her away to be punished, the migrants, albeit 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: “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” (*Sea* 433). While victimized within arbitrary and random maritime authority structures, the migrants are not hapless coolies and here 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” (Linebaugh and Rediker 151), and it becomes the means and site for border-crossings and resistance of different kinds. It is apt that Paulette Lambert—the French woman brought up by an Indian ayah, who is more at home with Indian clothes, food, language, and people than European culture and who has an “adopted” brother “Jodu” (the son of her Indian *ayah* or surrogate mother)—articulates the ties that bind the indentured voyagers. She knows the intensity and depth of intimacies that are crafted and not naturally produced by blood. Rather than aligning herself with metropolitan imperial power, this white European woman “renounces the privileges of imperialism and elect[s] affinity with victims of [European] expansionist

cultures” (Gandhi 1). Like her father, a naïve Romantic and a French botanist at odds with social strictures (being anti-monarchy, anti-marriage, and an atheist), Paulette too rejects imperial European society to declare solidarity with “foreigners, outsiders, alleged inferiors” (Gandhi 2). She imaginatively re-configures their journey as a “pilgrimage” rather than punishment and suggests that the migrants are “ship-siblings—*jahāzbhais* and *jahāzbahens*—to each other” (*Sea* 328). While the close proximity forces an intimacy that is not chosen, by calling/naming each other ship-brothers and ship-sisters, the migrants “create communities of choice” as they creatively reclaim the cramped hold to write on it new familial relations that give them the strength to survive and tie them to each other. This act of imagining a utopian community is an act of resistance that functions as a “counterflow” to colonialism, which seeks to reduce them to commodities. Paulette’s character is also a reminder that there were other empires, like the French empire, that also produced its own submerged histories of oppression, border-crossing, and resistance.

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 *māi-bāp*” (*Sea* 328). This assertion of the Ibis as *māi* (mother) and *bāp* (father) replaces the paternalistic logic of the British imperial metropole as the “Mother Country” and the colonizer as the benevolent *māi-bāp* of the colonial subjects. It is also a response to the Captain and Bhyro Singh’s assertion of their status and authority as *māi-bāp* of the migrants on the ship (371). Deeti, who mirrors and echoes Zachary, and who has left everything of her old life (caste, village, 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.

Sea of Poppies is a narrative about “bodies” that come “in contact” in the colonial maritime labour market within the far-reaching web of

empire (Ballantyne and Burton). In its panoramic scope, it explores forms of contact, conflict, and intimacy that emerged from within imperial trading networks. The novel shows how in response to colonialism's incarceration and reduction of colonial subjects to capital, "a variety of moving subjects utilized a wide range of intimate opportunities and practices to negotiate, contest, and reconfirm the boundaries of rule" (Ballantyne and Burton 2). It illustrates the connections between multiple histories and cultures in the nineteenth century through a mapping of the Indian Ocean as a rich geographical and socio-cultural place to study mobility of trade, people, ideas and practices. In the process, it recovers a different history of racialized bodies and geographies to unearth the complex and intimately interrelated operations that defined the nineteenth-century world, a world marked more by border-crossing and heterogeneity than the clean divides of imperial rule.

Notes

- 1 I borrow the title from Nobel Prize winner Caribbean poet Derek Walcott's poem of the same title, "The Sea is History."
- 2 Ghosh has often set his narratives in the liminal spaces where land and sea intertwine, such as the Sunderbans in *The Hungry Tide*.
- 3 I am indebted to Vergès' suggestion to conceive of the Indian Ocean as an "archive," "the archaeology and genealogy of its texts" revealing a multiplicity of stories (246).
- 4 For Mondal, these core issues are "the troubled (and troubling legacy of colonial knowledge and discourse on formerly colonized societies, peoples, and ideas; the ambivalent relationship to modernity of the so-called 'developing' or 'Third' world; the formation and reformation of identities in colonial and post-colonial societies; the question of agency for those previously seen as the objects but not subjects of history; the recovery of lost or suppressed histories; an engagement with cultural multiplicity and difference; and an insistent critique of Eurocentrism in general" (2).
- 5 For example, the opium den as a place of menace and mystery, as the heart of darkness within the metropole, appears in fin-de-siècle authors such as Oscar Wilde and Arthur Conan Doyle. See also Marez (257–87) and Harris (447–66).
- 6 Ghosh's creation of Deeti as a central, detailed, and individualized female character in his novel, and his creation of other strong female characters (such as Paulette), is to be noted, especially since he has been criticized for his representations of women in his earlier novel, *The Shadow Lines*. Ghosh has been more careful in crafting the identities of his female protagonists in some of his other

- post-*Shadow Lines* works such as *The Hungry Tide* (Piya, Nilima) and *The Glass Palace* (Dolly, Uma). For a critique of *The Shadow Lines*, see Rajan (287–98).
- 7 In fact, we are told that Hukam Singh was a volunteer in the British East India army in Burma; in his earlier work, *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh focuses in detail on the role of Indian soldiers in the British army.
- 8 For scholarship on sati within colonial discourse, see Mani (119–56); and Spivak.
- 9 In an interview, Ghosh speaks about why he writes novels. “[H]istory and anthropology cannot give you the emotion, it cannot give you the affect, it cannot give you what individual characters feel as they experience history. So this is why I write novels, because I think novels can synthesize geology, history, personal relationships, emotion, everything” (Kumar 103).
- 10 For a discussion of the phenomenon of forced migration in Ghosh’s earlier work, *The Glass Palace*, see Prusse.
- 11 Indo-Caribbean novelists, of whom V.S. Naipaul (*A House for Mr. Biswas*) is the most famous, have illustrated the realities of the lives of these indentured laborers after their arrival and insertion into Caribbean socio-cultural economies. For a discussion of diasporic Indo-Caribbean identities, see Mehta and Puri.
- 12 See Bolster for more information on the topic (138–68).
- 13 For the role that matters of sexuality and the intimate played in Empire, see Stoler.

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