

EXPLORING THE LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *SEA OF POPPIES*

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Abstract

This research paper analyses the linguistic aspects presented in *Sea of Poppies* (2008), the first book of the Ibis Trilogy by Amitav Ghosh (1956). It analyses the diverse society of nineteenth-century British India, which is recreated and portrayed vividly by Ghosh throughout the Trilogy. Ghosh is famous for his tendency to showcase the weaker and marginalized sections of society. Pidgin like the subjugated section of the society was overlooked, overshadowed, and ignored And the writer did not shrink from illuminating yet another marginalized phenomenon by implementing the use of language as a recurrent theme in the Trilogy Ghosh also sheds light on the lives led by the sailors belonging to the nations and princely states around the Indian Ocean, also known as Lascars, a part of diverse faiths and cultures who spoke different languages such as Malay, Portuguese, English, Arabic, Hindustani and Malayalam. Ghosh by deciding to write upon the Lascari language brought it back to life. With centuries passing, the language was dying if it were not already dead. The study focuses on semblance between the Lascari speech and the messaging language used in the contemporary times with reference to the enunciation of a word in a particular language.

Keywords: Lascari, Marginalization, Pidgin, Subaltern, Subjugation

Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta and grew up in India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. He studied in Delhi, Oxford and Alexandria and is the author of *The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines*, *In an Antique Land*, *Dancing in Cambodia*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Glass Palace*, *The Hungry Tide*, and *The Ibis Trilogy*, consisting of *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire*. His most recent book, *The Great Derangement*, *Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, a work of non-fiction, appeared in 2016. Amitav Ghosh holds two Lifetime Achievement awards and four honorary doctorates. In 2007 he was awarded the Padma Shri, one of India's highest honors, by the President of India. In 2018 the Jnanpith Award, India's highest literary honor, was conferred on Amitav Ghosh. He was the first English-language writer to receive the award.

Sea of Poppies is the first book of *the Ibis Trilogy* by Amitav Ghosh. The story is beautifully told and set in India, Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean on the eve of the First Opium War. In this book each and every character has been assigned a goal by the author. Whether it is to escape death or home life, each character has his/her own agenda. Most of their actions are deeply rooted in self-interest even if they appear to be beneficial to others. Ghosh's fascination with the migration of words into other languages is apparent, and, with snippets of Bhojpuri language, folk songs, nautical terms and colloquial Anglo-Indian, the dialogue has a truly authentic feel. There is some beautifully descriptive prose and marvelous imagery: "The noise never failed to amaze him: the whiplash crack of the sails, the high-pitched shriek of the wind in the rigging, the groan of the timbers and the surf-like pounding of the bow-waves: it was as if each ship were a moving tempest and he an eagle, circling close behind to hunt in the ruins of her wake." and "The wind was blowing strong and hard, and the waves and the clouds seemed to be racing each other across a single, vast firmament, with the schooner straining in pursuit, her timbers groaning with the effort of the chase. It was as if the alchemy of the open water had endowed her with her own will, her own life."

What does poppy signify? To answer this question in a regrettably schematic manner: it signifies three things. It stands for the logic of capitalist production, capitalist distribution and also alienation. With mass cultivation of poppy, the colonized land as well the colonized consciousness was introduced to the idea of the commodity: an item produced not to be consumed but to be sold. Furthermore, the serf who had some control over her/his labor process was transformed into a worker who had absolutely no control. The decisions were made on a plain beyond comprehension of the worker. The Opium Wars of 1839-40 were fought because the paternalistic Chinese monarchy was unwilling to let the British continue poisoning its subjects, and such unwillingness defied the interests of British capitalism. So then this becomes one of the many wars fought for the "profit motive." Finally, poppy becomes a symbol for an entire way of life, a life of un-involvement, of alienation, of escapism. Alienation which starts with man's relation with the larger world, seeps into his very existence, all his relationships; and "drug abuse" as the twentieth century teaches us is a good way of escaping it, or at least a good way of attempting such an escape. Whether it is Deeti's lame husband or the disillusioned skipper of the *Ibis*, opium is the most readily available cure for alienation. On the margins of consciousness exists Ahfat, the decomposing, at times barely-human addict, acting as a warning for those who attempt such an escape.

The ship is a double metaphor. On one hand, it is a metaphor for a voyage; in this case an incomplete one since the novel ends in the middle of the ocean. On the other, it becomes a metaphor for fate, insofar as once they are on the ship, the direction in which the people move is determined by the movement of the ship, and hence, it becomes possible to discern who has greater agency and authority within the limits set by history. At the same time, the ship is not merely a metaphor, but is also the seed from which the narrative germinates. The writer begins with a ship that is going to make a journey from India to the Caribbean (of

course broadly speaking the writer has already decided what he wants to write about). On exploring the ship he finds a set of people on it, namely, a bunch of Indian (to be) indentured labourers, Indian soldiers in British employment, a few captives, captain, steward, seamen and so on. Here onwards he charts the histories of these characters. That they meet on this ship is no artificially contrived coincidence, since they are simply a bunch of passengers on a ship, a very commonplace occurrence. The history gets an interesting twist when the ship is revealed to be one of those that served in the Middle Passage in the transfer of Africans to the Caribbean and to America as slaves (Zachary's story is a similar twist). Before getting on the ship, Ghosh explores the sequences of exploitation and suffering those characters undergo, in which the role of the new rulers and of older prejudices is clearly discernible. At this point, the Ibis comes like the saving ark to Kalua and Deeti, a phenomenal reconstituting of the slave ship. Furthermore this ship then becomes a site where camaraderie is created – a carnivalesque demolition of older hierarchies takes place.

One of the novel ways of interaction brought about the existence of pidgin in India along with other colonies of England and Ghosh has endeavoured to recreate and present a true and an accurate account of the multicultural, multilingual and multinational society of the colonial times of nineteenth-century India. In order to achieve the aim discussed in the previous sentence, Ghosh delved deep into. Thomas Roebuck's *A Laskari Dictionary or Anglo-Indian Vocabulary of Nautical Terms and Phrases in English And Hindustani* (1882), Sir Henry Yule and A. C. Burnell's *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases, and of Kindred Terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical and Discursive* (1903), Dr Shaikh Ghulam Maqsood Hilali's *Perso Arabic Elements in Bengali* (1967), Rozina Visram's *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes: Indians in Britain 1700-1947* (1986) and Herman Melville's *Redburn: His First Voyage, being the Sailor Boy Confessions and Reminiscences of the Son-of-a-Gentleman in the Merchant Service* (1957) for his detailed study to compose the Trilogy. Ghosh is thorough and accurate with the details of the setting and the characters of the Trilogy.

Ghosh uses language to depict the discrepancies apparent amidst people of varied classes in the nineteenth century, employed language to "reincarnate the social, cultural and political milieu" of nineteenth-century British India (Choudhury 3). To depict the multicultural scenario where none of the languages remained isolated or unchanged, all of these languages were sprinkled with words and expressions from other dialects and tongues, to portray which Ghosh experimented with at least 23 languages in the narrative voyage spanning over 1600 pages (Kertzer 187). This combined form of lexicons used by the people of diverse classes is known as a Pidgin. Pidgin is the outcome of interaction between people from different origins, who meet to attain goals like plantation work, trade or business and do not have a common language to communicate in. Pidgin like the subjugated section of the society was marginalized. Ghosh is well known for his inclination towards the marginalized section of the society. And the author did not hesitate from

shedding light on yet another marginalized phenomenon by employing the use of language as a recurrent theme in *the Trilogy*. Though Ghosh attains the goal by using the colonial language, as Achebe states, he as a postcolonial writer learnt in the art for "infiltrating the ranks of the enemy and destroying him from within" (qtd. in Gallagher, 260). Another reason responsible for postcolonial writers selecting English as a medium to communicate and write in was that English due to the spread of globalization had become a global language and was received, spoken and understood by a majority across the globe.

Through *Ibis Trilogy*, Ghosh not only recreates and portrays the mixed society of nineteenth-century British India, but he also succeeds in vividly depicting the circumstances braved by the people of the multilingual, multiracial and multiethnic British Indian society. He reveals the Company's trade of opium had become a means to gain power and the upper hand in its transactions with the Qing Dynasty of China. The trade also established India as the "first narco-state". Ghosh also sheds light on the lives led by the sailors belonging to the nations and princely states around the Indian Ocean. These sailors, also known as Lascars, were a part of varied faiths and cultures and spoke different languages such as Malay, Portuguese, English, Arabic, Hindustani, and Malayalam. With regards to the language spoken by the lascars, Lieutenant Thomas Roebuck claimed that the rules of the Lascari dialect were not much different than Court "Hindoostanee" and suggests that the grammar was similar to that of "Urdu/Hindustani" ("Of Fanás and Forecasts" 2010). Although Ghosh does not agree with Roebuck's claims stating that the group of disparate and unlettered Africans, Arabs and Malays were also fluent in Urdu was a thought that unsettled him. Even the South Asian lascars were Tamils, Kachhis, Bengali, Goans and so on, nevertheless, the thought that some of them might have been familiar with Urdu might have been probable, but to assert that all or even most were fluent speakers of Urdu was implausible. As lascars only knew of certain terms of order necessary run the ships properly, thus rendering the courtly Hindustani language as a dialect of command. The lascars to communicate among themselves concocted a language infused with Hindustani, Malay and Swahili, whereas to converse with the foreign passengers and officers, the lascars many a time used a pidgin language made of Chinese, English, Portuguese and so on used in the coastal regions of South China. The Sino-Portuguese-English pidgin language was a tongue that flourished in its time but did not prevail beyond the Age of Sail, beginning in the sixteenth century until the nineteenth century ("Of Fanás and Forecasts" 2010).

Ghosh through the *Trilogy* attempts to portray a realistic account of the nineteenth century India, a nation which was under Britain's colonial rule. As a colony of Britain, it (India) was involved in various trades of Britain, its imperialist metropole. The timeline of the *Trilogy* coincides with the last century of the Age of Sail, the nineteenth century; which means that all international and intercontinental travels, personal or commercial, were only possible through watercraft. International travels also meant that the crews for large waterborne vessels were people of different nations and tongues. An instance of which is portrayed through

the character of Serang Ali, a lascar from Rohingya. Lascars usually were a group of 10-15 members, each by a leader who acted as their spokesperson on their behalf. The unity among the members of group a group was so strong that if a trader wished to hire one lascar from the group he would have to hire the whole group, for "they had to be taken together or not at all" (Sea of Poppies 13). headed Because the lascars had a premeditated strategy of the amount of work to be executed by each lascar, which meant that a job that could be carried out by a single seaman was to be shared by three to four lascars. Due to which they were often declared as a bunch of indolent "niggers by Captains of racist mindset (Sea of Poppies 14).

The lascars were people wearing multicoloured attires and the vibrant hues were also evident in their vocabulary. Serang Ali's conversations with his fellow shipmates and with Mr Zachary varying with songs of longing, celebration and farewell or departure also form a part of language, based on which the giritivas bond together critics like Vijay Mishra and Sudesh Mishra, too, discuss the various songs sung by the indentured labourers who had worked on the plantation sites for a long period of time long for their homeland, spouses and loved ones. As songs of genres had become an outlet for the oppressed and marginalized giritivas to stay connected to and relive the memories of happier times and homeland because on the plantation sites they had no other form of memento to recall all the people, things and places they longed for. The significance of these songs as Helen Myers in Music of Hindu Trinidad: Songs from the Indian Diaspora (1998) notes was that they presented the Indian perspective regarding time which differs from the Hegelian perspective, that is, these songs do not allude to the hope of forthcoming better times and world (264). Rather what they do signify is the stagnancy of where theses indentured labourers were locked in a dark phase of time, which is referred to as the "degenerate fourth age (kaliyug)" in the mythological eras (units of time) according to Hindu cosmology, where people "can only nostalgically recall a distant golden age encapsulated in the kingdom of Rama, the god-hero of the great epic" (Mishra "Writing Indenture History through Testimonios and Oral Narratives" 4). Folk songs of viraha (separation), sawan (monsoon), bidesiyas (songs from foreign lands) were the only forms of solace available to the indentured labourers, which reflected the plantation diaspora, the stigma and pain of ostracism with all its gravity.

Ghosh by deciding to write upon the Lascari language brought it back to life. With centuries passing, the language was dying if it were not already dead. With modern times and technologically operated ships of the century, the Lascari language is rare to be employed as English and other languages have been acknowledged to transcend international borders in the present times and have replaced the Lascari language. Lascari and the messaging language used in the current times are alike with reference to the enunciation of a word in a particular language. All dialects have basic underpinnings that make them coherent for the individuals who speak and comprehend them. These underpinnings are foundations which support and strengthen the structure of a language and serve the purpose of making a language cohesive

and coherent for the ones who speak and comprehend it. The five main underlying structural components of rules that help make a dialect succeed in communication are phonemes, morphemes, lexemes, syntax and context. The first of the five rules, a phoneme is the smallest unit of sound that can source a change in the meaning in a dialect with the alteration of a single phoneme of a v such as "soar" and "roar". A phoneme may not be able to stand or convey a meaning independently but within a set of phonemes making a word, it may change the meaning of the word. A morpheme is also known as morphology, the second component of the structure of a language, word unlike a phoneme can be individual words and can survive on their own are known as free morphemes. Whereas a bound morpheme cannot exist on its own and needs to be attached to a word as a suffix, a prefix or even as a linguistic piece which does not stand by itself yet can change the meaning of a word when attached, bound morpheme can result in the plural form of a word. The third underpinning rule, lexeme, can be understood to be the various inflected forms of a particular word, such as create has varied forms like the creator, creating, creation. Syntax, the fourth rule, is a set of rules aiding in the formation of a sentence with combining groups of words and phrases, syntactic rules differ in different dialects. Context, the last structural component, is composed of many features such as a sentence is accompanied with the tone, body language, the words and phrases, employed by the speaker work together in order to convey the intended meaning of their sentence or speech.

The Lascari language used by the lascars or Indian sailors as proposed by Captain Thomas Roebuck in A Laskari Dictionary or Anglo-Indian Vocabulary of Nautical Terms and Phrases in English and Hindustani (1882) refers to the language as a "Corrupt Jargon" of English and Hindostanee languages (6). The translated terms finding their place in the dictionary originate from Urdu or Hindustani languages in Roebuck's opinion. The Lascari language, believing the author's claim, can be comprehended to be closer to the phoneme of the foreign languages they were translated into. For, the transcribed words were closer to phonemic pronunciations of the languages they were translated into. The difference between English and Urdu or Hindustani is that unlike the former, the latter two do not have silent letters in words of their respective languages, they are enunciated with the sounds of the alphabets that compose and contribute to its spelling. For instance, words like "all", "aloft", "captain", "cord", "to float" and "to land" were transliterated into "sab", "upar", "kaptan", "rassi", "tairna" and "utarna", respectively. The fact that the combination of Hindi, Urdu and English speeches, supposedly invented in the present age of technology, used to effectively and easily communicate and convey their message across, is a descendant and varied form of the lascari language of the Indian sailors. This combined form of Hindi, Urdu and English is popularly known as Hinglish or the SMS (Short Message Service) language or the text-speak in the present century, it is employed by the regional speakers in the Lascari also known as the Lashkari zaban (language) sheds light on the fact that the Hinglish of majority or all of the three languages mostly by people of Asian origin. Thus, Ghosh by writing language of the present century is an Anglo-Indian adaptation of the Lascari language, which was first used among the Persian, Arabic, Pashto (also known as Pukhto or Pakhto),

Balochi speaking soldiers of the Mughal Army hailing from various ethnicities (Kamal 2009). Lascari language allowed the transaction of the confluence of foreign words into other languages, which with time become such an integral part of the new language that the descendants of future generation are unable to tell the origin of a word apart. The term for a bucket in Indian language, for example, is a balti meaning a pail was originally derived from blade, a Portuguese term for a bucket. The word room, when transliterated into Indian language means kamra; it is a more common substitute employed by the speakers of the Hindustani language. On the contrary, the word karma is a modified variation of kamre, a Latin word, used aboard ships to refer to a ship's cabin. Likewise, another popular term used for a form of bread is pav, a name and staple food imported and introduced in the Indian cuisine and language by the Portuguese in Goa and later in Bombay, Western parts of colonial India. They have since long been in use, so much so that many speakers of Indian languages conjecture that words such as balti, karma and pav among others are of Indian origin and they could not have been farther from the truth with their speculations. Similarly, there are many Arabic, Persian, Latin, Turkish and Portuguese words among other foreign words injected into the Indian languages which are perceived as Indian in origin. The journey of these words through which they found their place in Indian languages was through the exchanges among the lascars on board the ships.

Through the employment of linguistic aspects in the Trilogy, Ghosh portrays the varied ways in which language becomes a tool of hegemony or subordination of a culture and its civilization by extension; the author also portrays how language functions to bring together a section of society by overcoming hurdles of psychological and international boundaries. It is through language that the writers of the formerly colonized nations establish their distinctive presence in discourse. Ghosh through Pidgin, Lascari and sentences structured in languages other than English attempts to establish that language had become a means of, both, maintaining the gulf of discrimination among people in the colonial era as well as uniting the section oppressed by the internal (native) and external (foreign) sources of colonialism. The Trilogy over the course of four years (1838-1841), portrays language as an integral part of an individual's identity; it also depicts how the possession of linguistic skill privileges one section over the other and how people through songs and language by association articulated the associated with displacement and the stigma of ostracism.

In the contemporary Indian Literature, Amitav Ghosh is the only writer who reflects the bitter truth of Indian reality. He has significant involvement in the world literature too. All his major works have enjoyed vast academic attention and produced a lot of literary criticism across the whole world. He executes with admirable assurance as an anthropologist, sociologist, novelist, essayist, travel writer and a teacher. He slips into global responsibility for establishing peace and harmony as a diplomat. He has created a wide readership through his outstanding writings and unique presentation skills. The novel has raised several issues including the zamindari system, caste hierarchy, gender discrimination, domination of patriarchy,

impoverishment, destitution, exploitation of slaves, racial problem and so on. The author has discussed numerous issues with the presentation of more than a dozen of characters including Deeti, a widow, mother of Kabutri who eloped with her lower-caste lover to escape together, Kalua, a lower caste leatherworker, Raja Neel Rattan Halder, a Bengali Zamindar or Raja of Rakshali who was wrongly sentenced to a penal colony on Mauritius, Mr. Zachary Reid, an American sailor, Miss Paulette Lambart, the orphaned daughter of a French botanist and others.

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