Chapter 1. Introduction

In June 2019, thousands of Hongkongers flooded the streets in pro-democracy demonstrations against the Chinese government's plans to pass legislation that would allow the Hong Kong government to extradite dissenters and offenders to mainland China. The protests were harshly repressed by police forces, leading to an escalation in violence without precedent in the semi-autonomous Chinese region. The extradition bill was finally withdrawn in October that year but since then protests have continued – only temporarily assuaged by the COVID-19 pandemic – while the National People's Congress in Beijing has passed anti-sedition laws to further silence anti-Beijing political adversaries and dissidents and tighten its grip over the city.

Hong Kong holds a singular position in postcolonial history and global imperialism. Since the hand-over of the island from the British government to China in 1997 – marking the 'official' end of the British Empire and making effective the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984 – Hong Kong has been developing as a truly global city but is still troubled by its colonial legacy. As the sovereignty of Hong Kong was transferred from a Western empire to an Eastern one, and as Hongkongers have developed an identity that differs significantly from mainland Chinese inhabitants, the particular status of Hong Kong, Ackbar Abbas points out, is "quasi-colonial, but with an important historical twist: the colonized state, while politically subordinate, is in many other crucial respects *not* in a dependent subaltern position but is in fact more advanced—in terms of education, technology, access to international networks, and so forth—than the colonizing state."[1]

The 2019-2020 protests in Hong Kong are just the tip of the iceberg of the region's unresolved post-coloniality. As the 'one country, two systems' legal framework under which Hong Kong is ruled is increasingly curtailed by the Chinese central government, the protests seem to have widened the cultural breach between Hongkongers and Chinese mainlanders, traditionally divided by their respective ideas of freedom and democracy, as well as by less transcendental issues, such as

the colonial-inherited British royal emblems in Hong Kong post boxes[2], or "spitting on the street and knowing how to queue."[3] This bitter cultural antagonism is exemplary of a wider polarization in global politics which has witnessed a decline in transcultural exchange and solidarity and a rise in exacerbated nationalisms, anti-refugee discourses, and the (re)instatement of borders. I want to take these concerns over national and cultural boundaries as a starting point for my analysis of Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy in relation to the recent upsurge of maritime criticism in critical theory. Ghosh's outstanding trilogy, comprising *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), and *Flood of Fire* (2015), fictionalises the First Opium War (1839-1842) between Britain and China (which actually resulted in the British occupation of Hong Kong), re-imagines the fractal tissue of diasporas which generated in the Indian Ocean during the early nineteenth century, and provides a powerful critique of Victorian imperialism and its unresolved legacy in contemporary neo-liberalism. My analysis of the *Ibis* trilogy sets off from the notion that the Victorian period stands today as a fulcrum point for nation-building, transoceanic migration, and global politics. As Duncan Bell has argued, in nineteenth-century Britain

> the Roman Catholic Relief Act (1829) and the Reform Act (1832) ushered in a new era, marked above all by the rise of liberalism, the slow gestation of democracy, the increasing importance of ideas about nationality and 'national character', and the move from mercantilism to free trade.[4]

In light of this, my contention is that Ghosh's trilogy, via its reimagining of transoceanic connections in the Indian Ocean waterworlds in the first half of the nineteenth century, may provide not only alternative insights into globalisation, world history, and transculturation but also an advantageous lens to *think on, through and beyond* rigid national and cultural boundaries which seem to be informing contemporary global politics. As I will argue in what follows, Ghosh's literary production is an apt object of study to reflect on the arbitrariness and constructedness of borders.

One of the overarching arguments that articulate this book is that the trilogy's take on transoceanic migration in the nineteenth century can be read as an era of proto-globalisation that facilitates a materialist critique of the inequities of contemporary global neo-liberalism. Scholars such as Benita Parry[5] or Neil Larsen[6] have insistently pointed out that postcolonial thought has been exhibiting symptoms of debility due to its redundant dependence on postmodernism and post-structuralist theory. This work expects to contribute to this debate by arguing that in order to maintain its critical sharpness, postcolonialism must re-direct its focus towards today's most obvious legacy of nineteenth-century imperialism: capitalist globalisation. I argue that Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy allows for a diachronic analysis that lays bare the continuities between Victorian imperialism and "capitalist-based globalization – which is a newer term for colonialism."[7]

In their introduction to *Many Middle Passages: Forced Migration and the Making of the Modern World* (2007), Marcus Rediker, Cassandra Pybus, and Emma Christopher contend that "it might be possible to relate the experiences of slaves, indentured servants, transported convicts and coerced migrants of all kinds."[8] My analysis of Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy is grounded on an analogous proposition. The characters populating the narrative texture of the trilogy include African American ex-slaves, black and Indian sailors, Indian indentured labourers, or wrongly convicted inmates, to name just a few. All of them engage in transoceanic crossings through nineteenth-century sea lanes and are coerced, in varying degrees, by the machinery of Victorian imperialism. This work intends to inquire into how these dispossessed collectives made sense of their identities in the Indian Ocean waterworlds and illustrate the political possibilities provided by the sea crossing and its fluid boundaries.

Amitav Ghosh, born in Calcutta in 1956, is one of the most celebrated exponents of Indian fiction written in English today. However, the geographical extent and ambitions of his work far exceed the concerns of India as a nation. His literary production is indeed characterised by a markedly global vision, with a particular

interest in the connections between India and its adjacent regions (Bangladesh or Burma, for example), the South-Asian littoral, and the Indian Ocean more broadly. In his 2007 monograph on the author, Anshuman A. Mondal notes that Ghosh's childhood accompanying his parents on diplomatic journeys in Iran, Sri Lanka, or Pakistan may have kindled the author's attraction for travelling and border-crossing as well as his sensitivity to the perspectives of displaced individuals.[9] The *Ibis* trilogy stretches the familiar geographical canvas of Ghosh's work even further: although the novels situate India as their epicentre, much of the narration extends towards the western arc of the Indian Ocean (Mauritius) as well as towards the eastern area of the South and West Asian littoral, reaching the South China Sea.

Ghosh graduated in History at Delhi University (where he also completed an MA in Sociology) before moving to Oxford to pursue his PhD in Social Anthropology. His training as historian and anthropologist is palpable in his literary production, although his works occasionally and deliberately depart from the concerns and principles of such disciplines. The writing of *The Glass Palace* (2000) attests to the historiographical education of the author. The novel records the underexplored collapse of British rule in Burma during the Second World War and the displacement of Burmese refugees to India. In an interview conducted by John C. Hawley, Ghosh stated that due to the lack of historiography about the links between India and Burma, he had to undertake himself most of the primary research while composing the novel.[10] Nevertheless, much of what constitutes the object of Ghosh's work is precisely what slips through the fingers of the historian and the anthropologist. Ghosh's interest as a writer lies in individual and particular experiences – those which are often unrecorded by historiography – against the backdrop of grand historical circumstances.[11] Similarly, in the above-mentioned interview, Ghosh states that his appeal for the "histories and predicaments" of individuals clashes with the focus of formal anthropology on "abstractions and generalisations."[12]

The ever-growing bulk of scholarship on Amitav Ghosh gravitates around a series of core topics, some of which have already been pointed at in the previous paragraphs: a concern for margins and borders (whether figurative or literal) as well as for the crossing of those borders; the role of the anonymous and unrecorded individual in the maelstrom of convoluted historical events; issues of travelling, (free or forceful) displacement and uprootedness; the porous boundaries between fiction and historiography; the lasting legacy of colonialism on postcolonial societies and different formerly colonised groups; or the trope of the 'family' over the category of the 'nation', among other issues.[13] These core topics cut across the different works in Ghosh's corpus and some of the concerns which emerge in the pre-*Ibis* period do surface again in the trilogy under analysis: The Indian Ocean as a matrix for transcultural connections, which informs much of *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke* (through the character of Zadig Bey, among others), is a key issue in *In an Antique Land* (1992) – which I briefly engage with below; the linguistic versatility of the *linkister* and wrongfully convicted Neel in the trilogy echoes the multilingual Kanai in *The Hungry Tide* (2000); the characters of Rajkumar and Arjun in *The Glass Palace* (2000), whose respective positions as teak-trader and soldier in the Indian army under British hegemony encapsulate the ambiguous position of Indian subjects within Britain's larger imperial and military projects in Asia, clearly predates the characters of Bahram Moddie and Kesri Singh in *River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire* respectively; the figure of the border-crosser, the migrant or the refugee, which features noticeably in *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *The Glass Palace* and even in his debut novel, *The Circle of Reason* (1986) does resurface again in the *Ibis* trilogy under the guise of different characters (Deeti, Paulette, or Zachary); or the author's exploration of the Sundarbans in *The Hungry Tide* prefigures his interest in liminal and maritime topographies of the trilogy in general. These connections that cut across the different works in Ghosh's oeuvre suggest that the *Ibis* trilogy sits within a significantly consistent intellectual project.

Taking into consideration the foregoing mapping of the *Ibis* trilogy within Ghosh's oeuvre, this work seeks to analyse the trilogy as a case study of contemporary maritime fiction set in the nineteenth century. Indeed, as Lisa Fletcher notes, Ghosh's fiction evinces the author's fascination with "interstitial spaces such as oceans, estuaries, rivers and […] islands."[14] Ghosh's appeal for these maritime topographies – which also applies to *Gun Island* (2019), his most recent novel to date – makes his literary production an apt object of study from the viewpoint of maritime criticism. I articulate my analysis of the *Ibis* trilogy in terms of its engagement with the politics of Victorian imperialism in the Indian Ocean and its representation of key events in nineteenth-century and Victorian imperial history, such as the abolition of slavery, indentureship, and the First Opium War. Additionally, by utilising the critical tenets of maritime criticism that I outline in Chapter 2, I analyse how the trilogy's engagement with the aforementioned contexts contributes to broader debates on neo-colonialism and globalisation.

The Indian Ocean is garnering increased media attention today as an arena in which new world orders and new patterns of globalisation are materializing. India and China are quickly emerging as global superpowers today and the massive inflow of Chinese investment and capital in Africa has already been qualified as a modern-day 'scramble for Africa.'[15] The contemporary Indian Ocean illustrates, Ghosh and Muecke suggest, "a set of transnational relations *alternative to* hegemonic northern globalisation."[16] It is yet to be seen whether the growing power of India and China represents an alternative globalisation to that of North-Atlantic capital or whether the global capital which has been dominated by North-Atlantic nations since the rise of modernity is simply being superseded by Eastern nations, as other scholars signal.[17] What is evident is that the Indian Ocean is a testing ground to analyse the shape-shifting contours of globalisation. Ghosh's representation of Indian Ocean exchanges in an earlier stage of global relations and in an under-analysed period within Indian Ocean scholarship, as a prefigurement of modern world

politics, may hopefully provide a lens to better comprehend a changeable global order.

Even though Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy is the most significant contribution to sea fiction and the literary representation of sea migration in the last decade, to date there exists no study that situates the trilogy in sustained interaction with maritime criticism. Some notable exceptions are a handful of articles that partially delve into maritime perspectives in the trilogy – principally the novels' relation to Indian Ocean historiography – but which are largely insufficient in the face of the trilogy's global ambitions and the plethora of topics it touches upon.[18] The latest edited volume – to my knowledge – that delves upon Ghosh's work, a collection of essays edited by Bibhash Choudhury (2016), devotes 4 essays to the trilogy, including the still under-analysed *River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire*, but still none of the essays engage with maritime scholarship. Perhaps, Anupama Mohan's recent essay "Maritime Transmodernities and the Ibis Trilogy" (2019) is the contribution which best aligns with the objectives of my study. I coalesce with the author's calls to abandon the terracentrism of postcolonial studies and to go beyond the strict and barren category of the nation – which are after all two main corollaries of oceanic studies.

Nevertheless, this book departs from Mohan's suggestion to qualify the *Ibis* trilogy, following Enrique Dussel, as representative of the *transmodern* novel, rather than the postcolonial novel.[19] I share the author's deployment of the transmodern approach as a valid frame to unearth alternative modernities that may potentially challenge the Eurocentric pre-eminence of Western Enlightenment, but abandoning altogether the postcolonial approach runs the risk of sidestepping the material inequalities that still afflict countries in the global south out of their postcolonial condition. Certainly, the idea that Eurocentric modernity should be displaced by a global modernity "in order to include moments that were never incorporated into the European version" and to restore undervalued cultures to "their status as actors in the history of the World System" is an urgent task but my

contribution turns instead to focus on Ghosh's disclosing of the continuities and parallelisms of maritime diasporas of the nineteenth century in the inequalities which typify contemporary neo-liberalism.[20]

That said, and pursuing the aforementioned overarching purposes, I delve into the so-called 'oceanic turn' that has been garnering attention in literary and cultural criticism in relation to perspectives on colonial history at least since the publication of Paul Gilroy's ground-breaking *The Black Atlantic*: *Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993). In the wake of this renewed interest in maritime culture, scholars from disciplines as varied as literary criticism, human geography or sociology have been outlining how the ocean has been socially and spatially constructed since the very inception of capitalist modernity, challenging the traditional notion of the sea as an empty space beyond history. In tune with these recent attempts to give the ocean a history – as it is signalled in Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mackenthun's volume *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean* (2004) – this book draws upon the intersections between maritime criticism and postcolonial thought to provide, via an analysis of the *Ibis* trilogy, alternative insights into nationalism(s), cosmopolitanism and globalisation.

One of the central statements in maritime criticism which inform Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy is the notion that the ocean is a liminal and transitional locus which destabilises the centre/periphery axis typically articulating postcolonial thought. As I will illustrate in my analysis of the trilogy, the midway status of the sea, located between terrestrial origin and destination, enables the fluidity of racial, cultural, and national boundaries and allows for a challenge to land-based orthodoxies in nineteenth-century culture. By privileging the sea crossing over the points of departure and destination, both metropolitan and colonial values are seen as adrift and prone to be subverted and mutually transformative. This perspective fits in with the in-between position which typically informs contemporary postcolonial novels dealing with diaspora. This *in-betweenness*, Véronique Bragard argues, "between two

extreme tendencies of fanatically rejecting or imposing one's culture … announce[s] the acceptance of the dynamics of pluricultural identity construction."[21]

An oceanic lens may hopefully prove to be very productive for a writer like Amitav Ghosh, whose cosmopolitanism and diasporic consciousness have been often pointed out by critics. In her preface to *Worlds Within: National Narratives and Global Connections in Postcolonial Writing* (2009), Vilashini Cooppan has described Amitav Ghosh as a writer characterised by a "postcolonial national-cosmopolitanism".[22] Cooppan situates Ghosh within a bunch of writers, among whom she includes Joseph Conrad, V.S. Naipaul, W.E.B. Du Bois, Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Salman Rushdie, or J.M Coetzee, who

> betray a certain distance from the place into which they were born and a powerful pull toward other places, be they imperial centers, emergent new nations, or regional alignments. The majority of these writers are exiles, border-crossers, migrants, cosmopolitans, and global citizens, while a few stay put and write their nations from within their borders.[23]

The diasporic consciousness of these writers illustrates diaspora as a privileged position to analyse the shortcomings of both the imperial centre and colonial peripheries. Similarly, Cooppan argues, these authors' works generally dismiss nations and nationalisms as "residual forms in the era of globalization" and illustrate the 'global' as "a kind of inside, an imaginary of cross-cultural connection and movement that has been mobilized to express various national identifications and disidentifications".[24] Following this, I want to situate Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy as a contribution to sea fiction that seeks to deconstruct the legacy of European imperialism in its transoceanic outposts, particularly in the Indian Ocean basin. In turn, this work argues that the *Ibis* trilogy situates Indian ocean cultures at the crux of critical debates on cosmopolitanism and globalisation. As I have argued, Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy and the author's 'postcolonial national-cosmopolitanism' retrieve Victorian imperialism in the Indian Ocean as an era presaging today's capitalist globalisation. Additionally, the manifold transnational and intercultural voyages – both

geographical and metaphorical, as well as free and coerced – engendered by European economic exploits in the Indian Ocean contribute to the construction of subalterns' perspectives in that oceanic region as typifying vernacular modernities and alternative cosmopolitanisms that challenge western-based historiography and world narrations, creatively bridging the gap between Western colonising drives and current neo-colonial globalism.

Amitav Ghosh already exhibited his interest in the Indian Ocean as a broad transcultural matrix in his unclassifiable travelogue *In an Antique Land*. This work has been deemed as "the pivotal book in Ghosh's oeuvre" because it summons many of the concerns that recur in the author's novels.[25] *In an Antique Land*, which is at the same time autobiographical, historiographical, and anthropological, records its author's stay in a rural Egyptian village while researching for his PhD thesis in the 1980s and also gives a historical account of an Egyptian Jewish merchant and his Indian slave and the trade relations they engaged in between Egypt and India in the twelfth century. The book is considered today a foundational work for scholars engaged in reconceptualising the Indian Ocean waterworlds[26] and has garnered Ghosh the consideration of "one of the most dedicated chroniclers of the Indian Ocean"[27] or a torchbearer "ahead of the historiographical curve" whose gap-filling research work on the Indian Ocean "pre-empted the 'transnational turn' in contemporary history-writing, which only really took off in the late 1990s."[28]

Significantly, Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* and its recuperation of transnational oceanic connections around the pre-colonial Indian Ocean have been positioned on a par with Paul Gilroy's mapping of black identity as a counterculture of Euro-American modernity in Atlantic culture in *The Black Atlantic*, both works being considered as engaged in similar methodologies of mapping routes, circulation, and migration.[29] Nevertheless, as Inderpal Grewal suggests*, In an Antique Land* can be considered a corrective "to the ways in which Gilroy's work delinked the Atlantic from the Indian Ocean."[30]

A deficiency that can be imputed to Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* is its arguable provincialism and Eurocentricity because of its exclusive focus on the Atlantic. Neil Lazarus has pointed out that the weakness inherent in Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* lies in its "loss of a specifically *global* perspective."[31] In Lazarus's view, "*The Black Atlantic* clearly obliges us to revise our assumptions as to the racial provenance of modernity, [but] it leaves assumptions as to the Western provenance of the modern potentially undisturbed … modernity [being] still a Western and not a global phenomenon."[32] The challenge of Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* to Gilroy's work lies in the former moving away "from the contest between a 'West' and the 'non-West'" by creating "a world in which the West was either nonexistent or irrelevant and where the focus was the relationship between two 'non-Western' regions."[33]

As this book will attempt to demonstrate, Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy takes up such challenge to narrations of the Atlantic in two directions: firstly, the trilogy seeks to establish synergies and continuities between the histories of the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean, illustrating both oceanic regions as providing counter-cultures of modernity and vernacular models of cosmopolitanism. Secondly, the trilogy's re-imagining of a thriving pre-colonial trading culture is not only oriented towards a challenging construction of the East 'without Europe' but it also delineates the author's views on future South-South political orientations in the contemporary globalising world.

In light of the aforementioned, chapter 2 sets out to provide an analysis of the 'Oceanic turn' in literary and cultural criticism in relation to perspectives on colonial history. This chapter firmly argues that the sea still occupies a prominent position in contemporary culture and for that purpose, it revisits the place of the ocean in narrations of the globe since the early-modern period. I draw considerably on sociology and human geography to outline how the ocean has been socially and spatially constructed since the very inception of capitalist modernity. The main idea

surfacing out of this exploration is that the sea has been traditionally constructed as a *void* space out of history and therefore impermeable to land-based social forces – a notion which is being challenged by historians and theorists who aim at 'historicising' the ocean as well as by recent insights from Indian Ocean scholarship, which is the focus of the second half of the section.

In section 2.1, I narrow down my inquiry to evaluate the social construction of the ocean as seen through the actors populating the sea lanes in the age of navigation, as well as the impact on the transoceanic and diasporic identities of such subjects. I argue that the in-betweenness of the sea crossing – between points of departure and destination – symbolically evokes the transitional character of diasporic identity, perpetually navigating between home and host cultures. In a more materialist sense, I contend that the aforementioned in-betweenness of maritime travel prevented either metropolitan or colonial values from being fully in operation, what translated into a fluidity of land-locked racial, cultural or national boundaries that was leveraged by sea migrants for transgressive or transformative purposes. I support this idea with specific references to global maritime culture and English literature and history – with a marked focus on Indian Ocean figures such as the lascar and the indentured migrant – and cement my analysis by drawing on some notions developed in Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*.

Further on, section 2.2 provides an examination of one of the most remarkable topographies in maritime literature: the ship. The most important mediator in human-ocean relations, the ship holds a troubled position in the Western imagination when placed within colonial history, evoking adventure, exploration, and knowledge, but also racial terror and slavery. I draw both on cultural history – including Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* – and human geography and sociology to provide an appraisal of the ship in colonial history. Firstly, I provide a literary-cultural analysis of the ship in Victorian maritime culture, providing specific examples in nineteenth-century Anglo-American culture, literature, and history and focusing

particularly on the multi-ethnic composition of ship crews. On the other hand, the analysis pursues a critical inquiry into the socio-cultural construction of the ship. For this purpose, I delve into two critical perspectives: ship as *heterotopia* and ship as *contact zone*. The terms *heterotopia* and *contact zone*, as understood by Michel Foucault and Mary Louise Pratt respectively, allows for a perusal of shipspace from a socio-cultural viewpoint that can be brought upon the analysis of Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy. I further complement this chapter by intersecting these critical readings of the ship with postcolonial thought and Victorian maritime history. Finally, to close chapter 2, section 2.3 develops a brief account of sea fiction in relation to nineteenth-century maritime culture. I provide examples from nineteenth-century novels as well as from contemporary sea narrations set both in the Atlantic and Indian oceans to map what might be the position of the *Ibis* trilogy within the subgenre and outline the contributions of Ghosh's fiction to contemporary perspectives on oceanic culture.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 analyse respectively the three instalments of Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy from a transoceanic perspective. I articulate my analysis of the trilogy in terms of its engagement with the politics of Victorian imperialism in the Indian Ocean and its representation of key events in nineteenth-century and Victorian imperial history, as well as from the point of view of Indian Ocean scholarship. Additionally, I analyse how the trilogy's engagement with the aforementioned contexts contributes to broader debates on neo-colonialism and globalisation. Each individual chapter on the trilogy focuses on different contexts which contribute to ascertain what can be gained from applying the tenets of maritime criticism and to illuminate the trilogy as a shining example of contemporary sea fiction set in the nineteenth century in general and of the transnational turn that seeks to incorporate the history of peoples and nations around the Indian Ocean in world narrations in particular. Chapter 3 provides an analysis of *Sea of Poppies*, the first instalment in the *Ibis* trilogy. Among other concerns, this chapter delves into topics such as the abolition of slavery and the transition to indentureship in the context of Victorian maritime

culture, the opium traffic in the Indian Ocean, the representation of lascars, and the fluidity of identity, culture and language in sea crossings. Chapter 4 delves into *River of Smoke*, the second book in the trilogy. In particular, I provide a reading of Canton, one of the most important littoral cities in nineteenth-century South-Asian migration, as is illustrated in the novel. My main contention within this section is that the novel retrieves the pre-colonial language fluidity that characterised the Indian subcontinent as a challenge to Victorian imperial monolingualism. Finally, chapter 5 analyses *Flood of Fire*, the last instalment of the trilogy and largely under-analysed to date. In this section I read the sea as a locus for the projection of power and for that purpose I delve into the novel's representation of the First Opium War and its cultural reverberations in the present. Among other ideas, I suggest that the novel unearths Indo-Chinese affective, economic, and cultural relations during the Opium Wars between Britain and China as a model to promote South-South collaboration in the globalised present.

By bringing into focus Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy in relation with the critical tenets of maritime criticism, this work expects to demonstrate, by discarding the terracentrism which typically characterises historiography and postcolonial thought, that Ghosh's maritime interventions into narrations of the globe may provide alternative and counter-nationalistic insights of globalisation and retrieve subaltern histories from oceanic oblivion that are potentially relevant to understand contemporary global capitalism

[1] Abbas (1997, 5-6). Original emphasis.

[2] Wong (2015).

[3] England (2012).

[4] Bell (2007, 2).

[5] Parry (2004).

[6] Larsen (2002).

[7] Dwivedi and Kich (2013, 10).

[8] Rediker, Pybus and Christopher (2007, 2).

[9] Mondal (2007, 3).

[10] Hawley (2005, 12).

[11] John C. Hawley illustrates this by citing some examples from Ghosh's oeuvre: the Indian slave in *In an Antique Land*, the street urchin in *The Calcutta Chromosome* or the fisherman in *The Hungry Tide* (Hawley 2005, 16). Ghosh's focus on these 'anonymous' individuals unrecorded by history also situate him side by side with the Subaltern Studies group. Ghosh himself contributed to this South Asian network of researchers with the publication of "The Slave of MS. H.6" in *Subaltern Studies* (Ghosh 1993), which lies at the genesis of *In an Antique Land.*

[12] Quoted in Hawley (2005, 7). Conversely, Robert Dixon has suggested that Ghosh's fiction concurs with a significant concern of contemporary anthropology, namely "the porosity of cultural boundaries" against the more anthropological traditional view that cultures were self-contained units with clear-cut boundaries (Dixon 2003, 10).

[13] See Khair (2003, vii-viii), Dixon (2003, 10-11), Mondal (2007, 1-2) and Hawley (2005, 5) for more detailed discussions of the most prominent topics in Ghosh's oeuvre.

[14] Fletcher (2011, 4-5).

[15] Moorthy and Jamal (2010, 4).

[16] Ghosh and Muecke (2007, 2). Original emphasis.

[17] Moorthy and Jamal (2010, 24).

[18] See Crane (2011), Machado (2016), Lauret (2011) and Mohan (2019).

[19] Mohan (2019, 7). In a 2007 interview Ghosh himself disavowed the term 'postcolonial', arguing that writers should pay attention to the specificity of each place and location, rather than wrongly "imagine that the postcolony of India is the same as the postcolony of Pakistan or whatever" (Kumar 2007, 105). Still, notwithstanding the much debated issue of historical specificity in postcolonial thought, Ghosh's fiction inescapably illustrates many of the concerns, problematics and predicaments that typify the postcolonial condition.

[20] Dussel (2006, 168).

[21] Bragard (2008, 115).

[22] Cooppan (2009, xvii).

[23] Ibid., xvii.

[24] Ibid., xvi-xvii.

[25] Mondal (2007, 15).

[26] Machado (2006, 1547).

[27] Desai (2006, 1531).

[28] Frost (2016, 1539).

[29] Desai (2006, 1531).

[30] Grewal (2008, 184).

[31] Lazarus (1999, 62). Original emphasis.

[32] Ibid., 63.

[33] Grewal (2008, 184).

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Chapter 2. The 'Oceanic Turn' and the Indian Ocean: Maritime Criticism, Cosmopolitanism and Nineteenth-Century Oceanic Culture

On 2 September 2015, headlines in international newspapers shocked the world with the image of Aylan Kurdi, a three-year-old Syrian child who drowned in the Mediterranean together with his five-year-old brother and their mother as they were trying to escape the military conflict between the Islamic State and Kurdish forces in Syria.[1] The harrowing image of Aylan's small body lying lifeless on a Turkish beach, after his family attempted to reach the Greek island of Kos, went around the world, becoming a ghastly symbol of the Syrian refugee crisis in particular and the horrors of unofficial sea migration in general. And yet, seas and oceans blocking asylum-seekers' escape are the same which still nurture First World capitalism. In fact, despite the advent of aircraft transport, around 90-95% of current world trade is transported by sea.[2] The ocean emerges as a contradictory and protean symbol in contemporary culture, featuring simultaneously as a barrier and a conduit.

Immigrants and refugees' bodies being washed away to Western shores as the flotsam and jetsam of global modernity, trying to reach 'fortress Europe' as maritime trade keeps fertilizing Western economy, reiterate histories of colonial oppression and subaltern resistance at sea in the modern age.[3] The ocean played a pivotal role in the making of western capitalist modernity, facilitating the circulation of people, goods, information, and ideas from the age of explorations and all through the 18th and 19th centuries.[4] However, such maritime circulation which paved the way for Western hegemony dovetailed with histories of racial conflict, loss, dispersion, slavery, and forced migration. The ocean in contemporary culture emerges then as a complex symbol "in the making of occidental modernity [which] propels us to set modernity on floating foundations."[5]

That oceans and the maritime world were crucial in the making of Western modernity is the main claim upholding the renewed interest in cultural, historical, and literary insights into the ocean which has characterised cultural criticism in the last decades. This 'oceanic turn', also referred to as the "new thalassology", seems inserted into wider perspectives on social sciences and humanities that call for a 'spatial turn' in the analysis of the past, or the necessity of re-presenting the past from a spatial perspective.[6] Philip J. Ethington claims the following:

> The past is the set of all places made by human action. The past cannot exist in time: only in space. Histories representing the past represent the places (*topoi*) of human action. Knowledge of the past, therefore, is literally cartographic ... historical interpretation [is reconsidered as] the act of reading places, or *topoi*.[7]

In tune with this 'spatial turn', the 'oceanic turn' aims at dredging up the oceanic space, not simply as an intermediate locus between disparate locations, but as an actual *topos* of history. This notion seems to inform Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mackenthun's volume *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean* (2004), which in its attempt to give the ocean a 'history', seeks to challenge "the cultural myth that the ocean is outside and beyond history."[8]

Certainly, the ocean's position within society has been a debatable issue since at least the early modern period. The publication of the treatise *Mare Liberum* (*The Free Sea*) in 1608 by the Dutch philosopher and jurist Hugo Grotius already established the deep oceanic space as an international arena unrestrained from national jurisdictions to be freely crisscrossed by nations for trade and mobility.[9] Since then, the idea that the oceanic space escaped the states' control and dominion has triggered the ocean to be constructed as a non-place or a blank space outside society and history. Positively, this conception of the oceanic space was the one that dominated the historiographical construction of the ocean at the end of the eighteenth century and all through the nineteenth century. According to Philip E. Steinberg, during the industrial capitalist era "the deep sea – the area distant from coastal lands – was idealized ... as a *great void* outside society and insulated from social forces.

It was constructed as the wild antithesis of society (or place), the space of *anti-civilization.*"[10] The nineteenth-century sea was seen, therefore, as a volatile terrain escaping land-locked parameters of control, society, and history. The anthropologist and cultural historian John Mack puts it in this way:

> [The sea is] a space not a place. The sea is not somewhere with 'history', at least not recorded history ... The predominant Western view of the sea might be characterized as that of a quintessential wilderness, a void without community other than that temporality established on boats crewed by those with the shared experience of being tossed about on its surface, and a space without ruins or other witness to the events which may have taken place on its surface."[11]

The categorisation of the ocean as a *space* rather than as a *place* opens the way for the ocean to be considered an arena of change, progress, and transition. The historical geographer Charles W. J. Withers claims *space* to be a sphere for *action* and *movement* whereas *place* involves "stopping, resting, becoming, and becoming involved."[12] The *placelessness* and unceasing movement which characterise the ocean makes it a "laboratory of another modernity, in which the hegemonic time and space of capital are viewed askance, diverted and subverted", a domain where land-locked frameworks, such as racial or national boundaries, can be subverted and challenged.[13]

The construction of the ocean as an untamed space during the industrial-capitalist era found its way through the literary field in Romanticism. Jonathan Raban credits the Romantic writer Lord Byron to have conceived the nineteenth-century literary sea.[14] This is illustrated in the following verses from Canto IV in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812-16):

> Roll on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean – roll!
> Ten thousand fleets sweep over thee in vain;
> Man marks the earth with ruin – his control
> Stops with the shore; - upon the watery plain
> The wrecks are all thy deed, nor doth remain
> A shadow of man's ravage, save his own,

When for a moment, like a drop of rain,
He sinks into thy depths with bubbling groan,
Without a grave, unknell'd, uncoffin'd and unknown.[15]

Byron devises the ocean as a ruthless territory which, oblivious to human suffering and death, bypasses social confinement and terrestrial control. The sea as featured in the Romantic poetry of Lord Byron, Percy B. Shelley, or Samuel Taylor Coleridge was heavily influenced by the idea of the 'sublime' developed in Edmund Burke's aesthetic treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). The vastness and fierceness of the ocean makes it, according to Burke, "an object of no small terror" but simultaneously "productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling."[16] Romantic writers and artists assuredly capitalised on the sublime by rendering man-ocean encounters as an asymmetrical confrontation between human beings and the unimpeded forces of nature. Certainly, the sublimation of the sea, although it lost some of its significance after the emergence of steam travel in the 1830s, was bequeathed to Victorian culture and kept permeating nineteenth-century literature at least up to Joseph Conrad.[17]

The literary appropriations of the sea and its related topographies (ships, beaches, islands) have provided a repository of symbols, similes, allegories, and a long repertoire of metaphorical uses for past and present writers. Interestingly, Joanna Rostek claims that the literary sea illustrates postmodern perspectives on the past, as is illustrated in her listing of contemporary writers' figurative uses of the ocean: "subjection and concurrent resistance to control and administration, the capacity to preserve but also to transform, the capability of swallowing and silencing people, the existence of unexplored and unknown realms, dangerousness, boundlessness, instability, unpredictability, permanent movement."[18] Tamsin Spargo's introduction to *Reading the Past: Literature and History* (2000) provides an interesting point here. Spargo affirms that the past, although it is "real but ... by definition, irrecoverable in its pastness", refers to events prior to the present as they actually

occurred whereas history is the discourse about what we know from the past and hence prone to change over time and to be affected by ideologies and biases.[19] The unearthing of submerged histories in the oceans of history attests to the re-analysis and re-interpretation to which the past is subjected in contemporary culture. Post-modern historiography and fiction deal with the exploration of the conflicts and gaps between the past and history. The ocean, as a silent witness to the past, provides a watery archive of lost histories to be imaginatively retrieved.

The 'oceanic turn' aims, as I have already argued, to historicise the ocean as a territory that, "despite the idealization of the industrial capitalist-era ocean as an empty void outside society, [was] intensely used (and hence shaped) by society" and not at all unaffected by the forces of modernity.[20] Michael S. Reidy's analysis of tidal research in British colonial history provides a pinpoint exponent of the projection of social control into the ocean. According to Reidy, mid-Victorian scientists carried out effective research into tide prediction and sea-lanes control resulting in the production of tide tables for British colonial territories. In Reidy's view, mid-Victorian scientific control over the ocean, even if it was cartographic, was exploited by Victorian imperial scientists as a vector for projecting power and ultimately securing imperial domination.[21]

Recent conceptualisations of the sea in maritime criticism seek then to re-write the ocean out of modern constructions of the sea as a *void* space outside society, history, and modernity, or in the oft-quoted words of Lewis Carroll, "a perfect and absolute blank."[22] Indeed, Lewis Carroll's long epic poem *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876) is repeatedly referred to by social historians and geographers to illustrate the reduction of the ocean to a vacuous or blank space during the nineteenth-century.[23] Rethinking the sea, which has been traditionally conceived within human geography as an 'other' to land which cannot be populated and where "there can be no domus ... no monumentalism, no stone memorials to the glory of human achievement", brings about significant repercussions for the thinking of history itself.[24]

Thinking *from* the water, as Anderson and Peter suggest, challenges the steadiness of the historiographical archive and its seemingly hermetic national(ist) histories.[25]

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari claimed in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987) that "history is always written from a sedentary point of view and in the name of a unitary State apparatus, at least a possible one, even when the topic is nomads. What is lacking is a Nomadology, the opposite of a history."[26] Conversely, the fluctuation of history when unanchored at sea is in tune with what Iain Chambers, following Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1942), has called "history not from a stable point but through a movement in which historians, no longer the source of knowledge, emerge as subjects who can never fully command or comprehend their language."[27] History is set adrift when placed on the ocean and this correlates with the fact that maritime history is said to be endowed with autonomous timelines, distinct from ordinary eras in the Western World. The fluidity of timelines at sea disrupts the linearity of time and highlights discrepancies in land-based models of history and periodisation. In this respect, Margaret Cohen identifies the age of global sail to encompass four centuries, starting with the transoceanic voyages by European navigators in the sixteenth century and reaching the 1840s, which marks the invention of steam transport and the ensuing routinisation of sea travelling.[28]

In a similar fashion, maritime perspectives compel us to reconsider world history in general and global nineteenth-century history in particular. Michael Geyer and Charles Bright identify two strands of world historiography: one dealing with the study of grand civilisational studies and comparative studies of the history of power and another focused on maritime empires and the history of migration and nomadism.[29] The latter demands we reconsider world history through the lens of maritime diaspora as well as to reconsider national histories by considering and acknowledging the impact of overseas migrants. Incorporating (sea) migration into world history may equally result, Donna R. Gabaccia and Dirk Hoerder point out,

"in a critique of present-day understandings of global migrations and of globalization itself as new, recent and unprecedented."[30]

And yet, despite oceanic scholarship's gravitation around aforementioned ideas of global connectivity, world history, and transnationalism, the Indian Ocean has been blatantly absent or underexplored in significant works of maritime criticism.[31] As the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, the Arctic, and the Pacific have been familiar seascapes in the 'oceanic turn', until very recently maritime scholarship has glossed over the Indian Ocean, startlingly failing to incorporate traditional scholarship about that oceanic basin into academic insights of oceanic global connectivity. As a possible reason for this omission, Michael Pearson has ventured that "for most of its history the Indian Ocean was crossed and used by people from its littorals, not by Europeans."[32] If Pearson is right, the exclusion of the Indian Ocean from some works on oceanic scholarship can only respond to Eurocentric biases and a privileging of those ocean basins that have been traditionally dominated by European powers.

This parochialism of maritime scholarship that is being belatedly amended is also symptomatic of problematic Western-based visions about modernity as a state-of-affairs originating in Europe to later encompass the rest of the globe. Within maritime criticism, a vastly influential reading of modernity is that provided by Paul Gilroy in his ground-breaking *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993). Drawing on a reading of past and present black intellectuals and personalities such as Frederick Douglass, Toni Morrison, Martin Delaney, William Wells Brown or Alexander Crummell, Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* provocatively foregrounds the horror of slavery and its aftereffects as an unacknowledged component of modernity, making a strong case for a memory of the Atlantic shared between Africa, Europe, and the Americas and challenging the notion of the West as an ethnically uniform category.[33]

The critical benefits of Gilroy's model of the Black Atlantic are undoubtedly varied and significant. Gilroy conceptualises the Atlantic Ocean as a "single, complex unit of analysis" where the hybrid, fractal, and transcultural circulation of subjects and ideas across the Atlantic Ocean as a reverberation of the slave trade unearths black subjects as historical agents with an intellectual history.[34] Additionally, Gilroy's cultural refocusing towards the ocean reveals the Atlantic experience of modernity as a transnational and multicultural phenomenon that surpasses ethnic boundaries and, most importantly, national and geographical frontiers. Indeed, Gilroy's vision on oceanic diasporas, in tune with world-history perspectives which I have outlined above, distorts the hermeticism and homogeneity of national histories and celebrates pluriorigins, multidirectional crossings, and hybrid identities, stressing "the incompatibility of the Atlantic as a cultural unit with the academic logic of viewing history in nationalist terms."[35]

Nevertheless, for all the usefulness of Gilroy's Black Atlantic model as a template to shed light on transoceanic experiences, Gilroy devises modernity as a phenomenon, if not European, inescapably originating in the North-Atlantic hemisphere. Such seems to be the concern of Adam McKeown, who has identified a growing *Atlanto-centrism* in contemporary social analyses of migration and world history. He points out a "world historical narrative in which processes that began in Western Europe gradually expand to engulf the world. In terms of migration, this narrative is grounded in a shared ignorance of migrations beyond the Atlantic."[36] Similarly, Geyer and Bright highlight the focalisation of world history in the European-Atlantic core and the necessity of integrating East Asian politics in the narration of the world's past.[37]

Accordingly, incorporating the Indian Ocean into a prominent position within maritime criticism entails acknowledging the fact that modernity was not a fire torch bequeathed by European empires to nations beyond the North-Atlantic hemisphere but rather a phenomenon that sprung up in different parts of the globe

under different incarnations. Traditional scholarship on the pre-colonial Indian Ocean, such as K.N Chaudhuri's *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (1985) or the aptly-named *Asia before Europe: Economy and Civilization of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (1990), has unearthed an intricate network of cultural, commercial and political relations reaching back into antiquity which involved "zones of separate cultural identity."[38] Assisted by their mastery of the seasonal monsoon winds and by sophisticated shipping technologies and craftmanship, seamen and traders from as remote corners as China, Sri Lanka, Persia or Arabia engaged in a variety of long-distance cosmopolitan exchanges conducted in Arabic, Swahili, or Gujarati, among other non-European languages.[39]

Considering the singularly cosmopolitan, transcultural, and transnational character of Indian Ocean relations, Isabel Hofmeyr has stressed the necessity of "think[ing] of the Indian Ocean as the site par excellence of *'alternative modernities*', those formations of modernity that have taken shape in an archive of deep and layered existing social and intellectual traditions."[40] In a similar vein, diverse scholars working on the interactions around the Indian Ocean littoral have read Indian Ocean relations as typified by a cosmopolitan form of modernity that eschews the rigidity and homogeneity of its Western counterpart. For example, John C. Hawley uses the term "subaltern cosmopolitanism" to refer to the South-South flow of cultural exchanges between Africa and Asia.[41] G.V. Steene alternatively uses the terms "parallel modernity" or "parallel globalization" equally to refer to cultural transactions between the African and Asian continents.[42] Regardless of the terminology, critics are pointing to the Indian Ocean basin as a generator of markedly non-Western forms of globalization and modernity.

A particularly influential study on Indian Ocean oceanic exchanges has been provided by Sugata Bose in *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (2006). This work qualifies the Indian Ocean as "an *interregional*

arena of human interaction", a space which situates somewhere "between the generalities of a "world system" and the specificities of particular regions."[43] Bose's persuasive approach carves out a space for the Indian Ocean in the interstices between the layers of the nation and the globe in order to sift out patterns of unity, circulation, and flux between apparently discrete regions.[44] This tallies with Shanti Moorthy and Ashraf Jamal's views in their introduction to *Indian Ocean Studies: Cultural, Social, and Political Perspectives* (2010). In their view, "heterogeneity has been an immutable fact of life in the Indian Ocean world, assailed now by the advent of Western-style modernity (with its concomitant intolerances) and nation-states."[45] Additionally, they argue that "the uniquely littoral nature of Indian Ocean societies makes engagements between regions inevitable."[46] Taken in this light, the Indian Ocean emerges as a fluid and porous matrix which allows for regional and local elements to acquire a global dimension.

An additional advantage of Bose's *A Hundred Horizons* lies in its challenge to a problematic omission in more traditional scholarship on the Indian Ocean: the exclusion of the African continent. This deficiency can be attributed to the aforementioned K.N. Chaudhuri, one of the most reputable historians on the Indian Ocean region. In Chaudhuri's vision, the Indian Ocean problematically fuses itself over the Asian continent, excluding the African continent from his scope. In his view, his deliberate omission of Africa is justified on the grounds that "the indigenous African communities appear to have been structured by a historical logic separate and independent from the rest of the Indian Ocean."[47] Several scholars have taken issue with this view, such as Moorthy and Jamal (2010) or Gaurav Desai, who has emphatically used the term 'Afrasian' "as a form of protest against the ethnocentrisms that would label a shared ocean as only Indian."[48] Certainly, Chaudhuri's tunnel vision about the Indian Ocean does not pay sufficient attention to the close ties between Africa and the Islamic world, or to contemporary hybrid subjects who are the result of centuries of Indo-African exchange – the Sidis in India and the Bombay Africans of Mombasa are two cases in point –, among other common

patterns. Bose's model of the Indian Ocean as an *interregional arena* may contest Chaudhuri's exclusion of Africa in Indian Ocean scholarship because of its focus on Indian Ocean cultures as discrete regional units but connected through flows of trade, culture, language, and economy. These patterns of unity and material commonalities seem a more productive and insightful approximation to the Indian Ocean waterworlds than Chaudhuri's Afro-exclusionary grand approach.

The contribution of Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy to the foregoing outline of Indian Ocean studies is significant at least in two senses. Firstly, the trilogy firmly eschews the exclusion of Africa that has characterised traditional scholarship on the Indian Ocean. Several elements in the trilogy – the Egyptian character Zadig Bey's trade relations in Asia and the Middle East, the Mauritian *Kreol* culture generated among descendants of Indian indentured labourers, or the sedimented traces of East and South African cultures in the representation of lascars – give pointed note of the plethora of Indo-African interactions generated by the Indian Ocean in the nineteenth century. Additionally, the trilogy covers a historical period which is still largely underexplored in Indian Ocean scholarship: the post-abolition period. As Bose has claimed, "insightful scholarship on the Indian Ocean as an interregional arena and level of analysis in the period after 1750, and especially after 1830, is still in its early stages."[49] By situating most of the narration in the 1830s, the trilogy captures key and under-analysed transitional episodes in the history of the Indian Ocean and this may hopefully re-orient scholarship on the oceanic region.

The somewhat overdue incorporation of Indian Ocean scholarship into maritime criticism promises to modulate or utterly obliterate certain corollaries which were taken for granted in oceanic thought. Notably, Moorthy and Jamal have pointed out the inadequacy of the above-stated model of the ocean as void space as understood by Steinberg (2001) to account for Indian Ocean relations:

> As we inscribe the movements or fluxes of the Indian Ocean, we counter Philip Steinberg's notion of the Indian Ocean as a void, as

> anonymous high seas to merely be charted, plotted and mapped onto an impersonal grid, in an Enlightenment inspired exercise of anxious classifications and proprietorial enclosures. The high seas of the Indian Ocean have never been *mare liberum* in the opportunistic Grotian sense, or *mare clausum*, but a shared communal space with intensely local capital and social inter-course.[50]

As can be inferred from Moorthy and Jamal's statement, the Indian Ocean before the consolidation of western powers was not a space for the projection of power but an arena for mostly peaceful cultural exchanges which were characterized by a fluid circularity of the global and the local. Indeed, what characterized pre-colonial Indian Ocean trade was its non-military nature – in opposition to Western gunpoint trade and its projection of European nations' military state power. The non-violent and non-state character of Indian Ocean trade enabled non-Europeans, Enseng Ho points out, to engage, "into relations with locals that were more intimate, sticky, and prolonged than the Europeans could countenance,"[51] as well as to play out different facets of their local identities in a global setting. This fluid circularity between the local and the global did surely have an impact on the relation between the sea and maritime subjects, which is the focus of the next section.

2.1 Fluid Spaces: Transoceanic Encounters and Diasporic Identities at Sea

This chapter has discussed so far the 'oceanic turn' that has been generated in literary-cultural criticism in the last decades and its contribution to academic insights into globalization and modernity, including the belated incorporation of Indian Ocean scholarship. This subsection turns now to lay out the principles of sea crossings and their impact on migrant subjects in the nineteenth-century maritime world. What position does the ocean fulfil between the metropolitan 'centre' and its colonial 'peripheries' in nineteenth-century maritime crossings? What role might the sea voyage play in the Indian Ocean worlds reconstructed by Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy and how do we account for the impact of maritime mobility on the identities of the migrant protagonists?

A first approximation at the maritime crossing reveals the ocean, following Jennifer L. Gaynor, "as a mediator of historical experience shared between disparate places."[52] Indeed, maritime scholars from several disciplines typically emphasise the connective potential of seas and oceans in the making of histories, cultures, and ideas. Contemporary geography, in particular, conceives the great oceans of the world – Atlantic, Indian, Pacific, and Arctic – as "a single interconnected expanse, one continuous body of salt water that is the defining geographic feature of planet earth."[53] A similar claim is argued by Gabaccia and Hoerder who highlight "four inter-connected bodies of water – the Indian Ocean; the East and Southeast Seas of Asia; the Atlantic; and the Pacific, all with their adjoining coasts and hinterlands."[54]

This interconnectedness that is often underscored by maritime scholarship seems nevertheless at cross purposes with the rigid binarism between metropolitan centre and colonial periphery which often typifies postcolonial insights into nineteenth-century literature and culture. Edward Said claims in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) that nineteenth-century imperialism and colonial discourses rested on "a *hierarchy of spaces* by which the metropolitan center and, gradually, the metropolitan economy are seen as dependent upon an overseas system of territorial control, economic exploitation, and a socio-cultural vision."[55] That *hierarchy of spaces* alluded to by Said, which replicates his influential model of Orientalism, keeps articulating contemporary postcolonial analyses of nineteenth-century literature and culture around a centre/periphery axis. Tabish Khair, for instance, in his analysis of the obscure presence of non-Westerners in under-read Victorian literature, claims that "mainstream English literature gives a rather muted account of this presence of the imperial 'periphery' in the 'centre' of empire all through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries."[56]

The implications of adopting a maritime stance for the analysis of postcolonial fiction are evident. The ocean feels like a liminal zone where the centre-periphery dichotomy is blurred. Significantly, Kären Wigen has noted that "ocean-

oriented communities are repeatedly described as civilizations '*without a center*' ... That oceanic histories invert scholarly convention by turning political peripheries into regional cores is a recurrent theme."[57] Thus, by refocusing the analysis of the migrant subject on the maritime crossing, the transition is privileged over the points of departure or destination and therefore we may productively and temporarily abandon the centripetal character of postcolonial thought. In the examples that I am going to discuss in what follows, the colonial maritime world has the potential to liquefy national boundaries and parameters linked to the nation and to collapse the asymmetrical attachments between the metropolitan centre and its colonial peripheries, even if this potential is temporally limited to the aqueous realms in which the maritime crossings take place.

The in-betweenness of the nineteenth-century maritime world brought about significant impacts on the identity of non-Western subjects at sea via the temporary effacement of land-locked racial demarcations. A significant example in the context of the British Empire is that of non-European sailors in the British Merchant Navy and Royal Navy, as illustrated by the Navigation Acts. Enacted by British Parliament in 1651 and in force until their repeal in 1851, the Navigation Acts underpin the fluidity of Britishness when applied to foreign sailors aboard British merchant and naval vessels. Indeed, as Linebaugh and Rediker have claimed, despite the nationalism exhaled from the Navigation Acts and their declaration that English ships must be sailed by English sailors, statistics indicate that many of the sailors on British ships were definitely not English or European.[58]

Alan Gregor Cobley points out that, notwithstanding that originally the Navigation Acts demanded that three-quarters of the sailors in all British ships should be British, the demand for sailors during the American Revolutionary War (1777-1783) and the French Revolutionary Wars (1792-1802) triggered Britain to extend the category of 'Britishness' to black seafarers serving on British ships.[59] In fact, the Navigation Acts evince a fluid demarcation of British citizenship. Suffice it to

mention that, according to the "Act for the further Encouragement of *British* Mariners," enacted on the 11th of June 1794, "foreign seamen serving three years in the navy in time of war may be employed as masters or *British* seamen on certificate of their service" and that any subjects who have become "his Majesty's subjects" by denization or "by virtue of conquest ... shall be deemed British Seamen".[60] In plain terms, non-Western sailors on British ships were participatory, albeit temporarily, of British citizenship. This lends weight to the notion that the ocean's midway status between origin and destination turns it into a transitional locus where neither metropolitan nor colonial parameters are fully operative. At the turn of the nineteenth century, British vessels were widely manned by black seafarers, be it through the recruitment of slaves from the West Indies, through the impressment of African Americans or out of the free will of black sailors.[61]

In the post-emancipation period, free black seafarers from the North-Atlantic core were joined by sailors from Asia and other territories around the Indian Ocean, typically named *lascars*. Lascars had been populating English vessels since the early days of the East India Company in the seventeenth century but the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833 certainly resulted in an increase in the employment of sailors from the Indian Ocean on board English ships. Although the restrictions in the Navigation Acts on the hiring of foreign seamen were presumably in force until the mid-Victorian period, according to David A. Chappell demographic research estimates that the British merchant service recruited around 12,000 lascars native from diverse corners of the Indian Ocean littoral and by the 1840s it is estimated that three thousand South-Asian seamen arrived in England every year out of English vessels.[62] Besides the employment of lascars by merchant vessels in the East India Company, seamen from the Indian Ocean were also recruited for military operations in the Royal Navy and their participation in several armed conflicts during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815), the First Opium War (1839-1842) – as narrated in Ghosh's *Flood of Fire* – both World Wars is well documented.[63]

Lascars are undeniably a shining exponent of the maritime cosmopolitanism that characterised the Indian Ocean in the early nineteenth century. The 2015 reprint of Rozina Visram's pioneering *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes: The Story of Indians in Britain 1700-1947* (1986) and other up-to-date works such as Aaron Jaffer's *Lascars and Indian Ocean Seafaring, 1780-1860: Shipboard Life, Unrest and Mutiny* (2015) bespeak the relevance of this rare maritime figure today. Characterised by a uniquely transcultural, transterritorial and multi-ethnic character, lascar crews were composed of sailors from locations as remote as China, India, Malaysia, Somalia, South Africa or Arabia and although it is generally agreed that most of them were Muslims, Hindus and Christians were also found within their lines.[64] Amitav Ghosh himself has tellingly described lascars as "the first Asians and Africans to participate freely and in substantial numbers in a globalised workspace."[65] Thus, the singularity of lascars makes them a priceless field of research for world labour history and globalization studies more broadly.

Another category from Indian Ocean maritime labour which is worth exploring are indentured labourers. The abolition of slavery in 1833 endangered the economies of British sugar plantations, which had been relying until now on free labour. With the end of the Apprenticeship system, the machinery of the British Empire turned now to shield its economic interests by inducing South-Asians to travel under indenture contracts to British colonies both in Africa and the Caribbean, including Mauritius, South Africa, Trinidad, Natal, or British Guiana. Indentured labourers, pejoratively named then as *coolies*, were tied to work for a specific master for a particular number of years. After that period, they could arguably choose between staying in the overseas colony or being offered a free passage back to India. As I will discuss in detail in chapter 3, the low standards of living of indentured labourers and the dubious terms under which they signed their indenture contracts points towards a new system of slavery.[66] Between 1838 and 1917, it is estimated that around 1.5 million Indian – and to a lesser extent Chinese – emigrants left the Indian subcontinent, a seemingly insignificant number of people which nevertheless gave rise,

together with other Indians who travelled freely, to a section of contemporary diasporic populations in Africa and the Caribbean with South-Asian ancestry.[67]

Diverse thinkers and scholars have generated different ideas and concepts to make sense of the shared history of migration, displacement, and dislocation of South-Asian indentured labourers. Following Gilroy's concept of the Black Atlantic, Véronique Bragard has devised the term 'Indo-Black Atlantic' as a shorthand for the diverse histories and creolization processes of the South-Asian diaspora in the Caribbean.[68] A more evocative term is that of *coolitude*, coined by the Mauritian poet Khal Torabully in *Cale d'étoiles-Coolitude* (1992). Echoing Aimé Césaire's concept of *négritude*, coolitude resignifies the word 'coolie', once a derogatory address, into a term of resistance and empowerment to enhance the cultural impact and shared histories of indentureship in the Indian Ocean world. In Marina Carter and Khal Torabully's words, "coolitude explores the concept of the ocean as a nodal moment of migration, a space for destruction of identity, yet also one of regeneration, when an aesthetics of migration was created."[69] In like vein, Bragard points out that "by making the crossing a moving process, [coolitude] attempts to avoid any essentialism and connection with an idealized Mother India, which is clearly left behind."[70] By foregrounding the centrality of the voyage and maritime transition, coolitude points to the sea as the inception of diverse and fluid creolization processes, a generator of new and composite identities which allow for Indian, African and creole elements to coexist and enrich each other within the migrant subject.

As the previous accounts of lascars and indentured labourers demonstrate, placing the focus on the ocean unequivocally unfolds the cross-culturality and hybridity typifying the first wave of globalization which reached a fulcrum point in the mid-nineteenth century. Gabaccia and Hoerder mark the years spanning between 1830 and 1940 as the first great age of global migration and the creation of the first global migration networks, an assumption similarly supported by Adam

McKeown, who identifies the global wave of transoceanic mass migration to reach between the 1840s and 1930s.[71] These recent insights into oceanic global migration, overstep nationalist perspectives in favour of transnational and transcultural approaches embedded in the trope of maritime diaspora. In this sense, for all its shortcomings, Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* should be credited to have provided a template to think, literally or metaphorically, on transoceanic experiences beyond the nation and their impact on diasporic identity.[72] By privileging the transit over the origin or destination, or to use Gilroy's oft-quoted words, by advocating "routes over roots", the focus on the maritime subject complicates centre/periphery views which typically inform postcolonial thinking and compels us to think beyond the rigid category of the nation.[73]

We have discussed so far crucial aspects of the impact of maritime mobility on diasporic subjects, namely the fluidity of land-locked parameters, national frontiers, and racial demarcations. To close this section, it is also worth exploring the effects that oceanic travelling exerts on sea migrants' psyche, particularly upon their perception of time and space. Anna Ryan's *Where Land Meets Sea: Coastal Explorations of Landscape, Representation and Spatial Experience* (2012) provides an interdisciplinary vision on the relationship between subjects and their maritime surroundings. Drawing on a considerable array of philosophical theories, including those of Maurice Merleau-Ponty or Gilles Deleuze, as well as on reports from travellers journeying through deserts and oceans, Ryan showcases the oceanic experience as one typifying human embodiment and as the quintessential confrontation between the self and the elementals.[74]

Ryan's *Where Land Meets Sea* conceives the sea as an iterative space endowed with "an endless physical materiality", analogous to sky, desert, snow, or ice, which enacts a disruption of time perception during the sea crossing:[75]

> Distance is imploded: it is impossible to gauge the movement of [the] body marked against the passing physical environment. As a

> consequence of this non-measurability of movement, time is no longer functional. The cyclical rhythm of time is blurred by the singularity and on-going nature of the surroundings ... physical movement forward [is] imperceptible in these places, any feeling of the passage of time is also not noticeable.[76]

The sea as an iterative, repetitive and incomplete space gives rise to an alternative time-space perception in which the linearity of time is obliterated and the subject experiences "an intensity of awareness of the present."[77] This particular temporality in sea crossings allows for a metaphorical reading of time and memory as cyclical and dynamic. Similar in spirit is Marina Warner's *Indigo, or, Mapping the Waters* (1992), a Caribbean retelling of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611) in which the sea works as a metaphor for the fluidity of time and memories:

> [Islanders] did not know time as a straight line that can be interrupted, even broken, as the people did who were arriving in their archipelago, the slaves from Africa, the adventurers from Europe ... they did not possess a past, for they did not see themselves poised on a journey towards triumph, perhaps, or extinction ...The indigenous islanders could conceive differently of the time and space they occupied, and see it as a churn or a bowl, in which substances and essences were tumbled and mixed, always returning, now emerging into personal form, now submerged into the mass.[78]

Warner's island protagonists, in opposition to the British invaders, conceive time in a non-chronological way in which past events and memories evoke the ebb and flow of the ocean, intermittently rising to the surface (and the characters' conscience) to be submerged again into oblivion. This cyclical conception of memory and time revealingly evokes the historiographical reconstruction of drowned histories which come back with post-colonial tides. From a postcolonial viewpoint, oceanic subjects' perception of temporality as cyclical and dynamic symbolically elicits the postcolonial mistrust on the linearity of time in the Western historiographical archive. Anne McClintock sees linearity as "one of the most tenacious tropes of colonialism."[79] In her view, by means of this linearity, colonial discourse looks at history as "the 'progress' forward of humanity from slouching deprivation to erect,

enlightened reason."[80] Contrarily, postcolonial authors such as Salman Rushdie are reclaiming, in opposition to Western narratorial modes and conceptions of time, the traditional oral narrative which is generally not linear or chronological but "it goes in great swoops, it goes in spirals or in loops, it every so often reiterates something that happened earlier to remind you, and then takes you off again."[81]

Incidentally, a similar trope of circulation is often deployed to qualify nineteenth-century migratory flows in the Indian Ocean. Sugata Bose has claimed that some Indian Ocean migratory flows should be understood as "constituting a kind of circular migration instead of an emigration."[82] Paralleling the alternating comings and goings of the monsoons, many Indian Ocean exchanges among traders, emissaries, lascars, and other migrants were multidirectional and constantly in flux. The circular movement of these migrant communities, Bose adds, "meant they never really lost touch with their points of departure."[83] This circularity, aligned to the perpetual movement of the sea, serves as a powerful liquid metaphor for the diasporic identities narrated in the *Ibis* trilogy, which are constantly transforming themselves anew.

2.2 The Ship, or Maritime Heterotopias

In his foreword to Jon Anderson and Kimberley Peters' edited volume *Water Worlds: Human Geographies of the Ocean* (2014), Philip E. Steinberg highlights that human-ocean encounters are always "mediated":

> Whether by ships, scuba tanks, surfboards, or bodily movements, as well as, less physically, by stories, memories, sea shanties, fears, or dreams, our encounters with the sea are never 'pure'. There is always an outer layer between us and the sea that keeps us – and our experiences and thoughts – afloat.[84]

The voluble materiality of the ocean and our ensuing inability to fully grasp it or inhabit it have encouraged humans to devise mediators which facilitate human experiences of the ocean. Among these mediators, the ship is by far the most

privileged locus in human-ocean relations. A symbol of transport technology and the epitome of modern-capitalist circulation and exchange, ships are fully invested with conflicting meanings in Western culture, symbolising global connectivity, freedom and exploration but also forced migration, uprootedness, and slavery.

Literary conceptions of the ship in European culture have been saturated by the "tension between the fluidity of the sea and the hydrarchy of the ship."[85] Indeed, the spatial self-containment of the ship in the immensity of the sea has articulated literary representations of ship-board communities as analogous to life on land. Anthony Trollope's Victorian novel *John Caldigate* (1879) illustrates this parallelism between living on board and life ashore. The eponymous protagonist, who is sea-travelling to Australia to make a fortune after being disinherited by his father, comments on his impressions on life on board:

> How completely the society has formed itself into separate sets after the three or four first days! How thoroughly it is acknowledged that this is the aristocratic set, and that the plebeian! How determined are the aristocrats to admit no intrusion, and how anxious are the plebeians to intrude![86]

Trollope's description of shipboard life features the ship as a microcosm where, via an enclosed rendition of land-locked life, the writer is actually speculating on domestic concerns in a different location.[87]

When placed against colonial history, the ship nevertheless acquires a more problematic dimension which exceeds the allegorical equation ship-society. The ship in colonial history navigates the dark corners of the Western imagination invoking the image of the slaver and the harrowing conditions of the slave trade as well as later coerced migrations. Contemporary rewritings of the Middle Passage by novelists of African or Caribbean origin, such as Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997), Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990), or Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* (1991) retrieve the oceanic memory of the Transatlantic slave trade to reveal

the slaver as a shameful symbol of Western modernity, which overshadows Britain's naval history in the age of sail and its celebratory overtones, as well as the British abolitionist movement.[88]

In the above-mentioned *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy often invokes the image of the ship as a crucial chronotope in his Black Atlantic model to analyse the links between modernity and slavery. The circulation of ships around the Atlantic, crisscrossing the ocean between Europe, Africa and the Americas, turns the ship into "a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion" that turns our "attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts."[89] Gilroy acknowledges the conflicting uses and constructions of the transatlantic vessel, for although ships "refer us back to the middle passage, to the half-remembered micro-politics of the slave trade and its relationship to both industrialisation and modernisation," they also illustrate "a means to conduct political dissent and possibly a distinct mode of cultural production."[90] Accordingly, in its transatlantic context the ship not only refocuses slavery as an unacknowledged component of Western modernity but also potentially and subversively turns our attention to alternative Pan-African modernities. Gilroy's vision of ships as the vectors enabling the circulation of Pan-African ideologies obviously recalls the circular character of some Indian Ocean migrations that I explored above. A question that I will explore in my analysis of the *Ibis* trilogy – especially by looking at the character of Zachary Reid – is whether Gilroy's trope of Black Atlantic circularity is extensible to the Indian Ocean via the continuities and transactions between the two oceans that surround the African continent.

Together with slavery, uprootedness and coercive migration, the history of the ship in the context of Victorian imperialism dovetails with tales of exploration, commerce, and science. As I have already argued, ships were – and still are – crucial in the development of global commerce, labour and capitalism and the chief engine

facilitating the activities of trading companies. By the second half of the seventeenth century, Linebaugh and Rediker claim, the ship was a site for the exploitation of human labour which encapsulated all modes of production "in the sphere of circulation."[91] They further claim that the ship "was thus not only the means of communication between continents, but also the first place where working people from those different continents communicated."[92]

The rise of global commerce and capitalism in the seventeenth century coincides, not surprisingly, with the development of the East India Company. Founded in 1600, the East India Company is exemplary of the pivotal role that ships played in trading companies. Miles Ogborn, for instance, in his analysis of the East India Company in early seventeenth century global geographies, has suggested a threefold understanding of the ship as "as a material space, as an accounting space and as a political space."[93] Susheila Nasta, significantly, reads the East India Company's early maritime travels as the outset of Britain's contemporary black and Asian diasporic populations, which persuades us to trace the seeds of British multiculturalism on the ships of the East India Company.[94]

In their review of the ship within the field of human geography, William Hasty and Kimberley Peters additionally underline the ship as a "scientific instrument" of cardinal importance for the production of knowledge[95]. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, ships aided scientists to chart the globe and the physical world and contributed significantly to the rise of natural sciences. An emblematic exponent of the contribution of ships to nineteenth-century science is the second expedition of the HMS *Beagle*, in which Charles Darwin, together with other naturalists, circumnavigated around the globe researching the natural history and geology of South America and Oceania. Darwin's report about his five-year circumnavigation aboard the *Beagle* provided, in the guise of journal entries, detailed sketches and observations on the flora, fauna and geology from the manifold locations charted during the voyage.[96] Darwin's observations on the expedition around

the Falkland Islands and the mouth of Santa Cruz in April 1834 are markedly tainted with an imperialistic discourse and the thrill of sailing through uncharted territories populated with foreign 'aliens':

> Beyond the place where we slept last night, the country is completely *terra incognita*, for it was there that Captain Stokes [captain of the first voyage of the *Beagle*] turned back. We saw in the distance a great smoke, and found the skeleton of a horse, so we knew that Indians were in the neighbourhood."[97]

Ships were therefore the chief vector contributing to mythologise nineteenth-century explorers as national heroes, procurers of imperial knowledge and vehicles of civilisation and progress in the Western imagination.

The early Victorian era was marked by a crucial event in the history of shipping that altered significantly cultural responses to the sea: the invention of the steamship. A natural product of late eighteenth-century river steamboats, ocean-going steamships navigated the seas at the opening of the nineteenth century and started to replace sailing vessels in the 1830s and 1840s. The sail-steam transition in those decades modulated significantly the 'sublimation' of the sea referred to above. As steam-propelled ships cut their way through the waves, sea travelling was no longer perceived as a dangerous confrontation between man and nature. This transition, termed by Margaret Cohen as the "routinization of sea travel", contributed, coupled with the absence of further terra incognita to be explored in the mid-nineteenth century, to an attenuation of the mythologising effects of oceanic travelling in the European imagination.[98]

Two references illuminating Victorian cultural responses to the rise of the steamship seem suitable here. The Romantic painter J.M.W Turner, celebrated for his seascapes and his pictorial depiction of light, notably illustrated the sail-steam transition in the early Victorian age in his oil painting *The Fighting Temeraire* (1839).[99] The painting features the HMS *Temeraire*, one of the most outstanding fighting ships during the Battle of Trafalgar under Lord Nelson's leadership, being

towed up the Thames by a paddle-wheel steam tug on 6 September 1838 to be demolished.[100] As the outline of the warship looks blurred against the blazing dusk, the dark tugboat and its ominous column of smoke stand out in the scene, symbolising the demise of the age of sail and the intrusion of steam shipping in Victorian maritime culture.[101] Similar in spirit in Joseph Conrad's "The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*"* (1897), a late-Victorian novella set in the Indian Ocean. At the beginning of the narration, the eponymous merchant vessel is being towed out of the Bombay Harbour into the sea. Conrad's description of the steam tug reads as follows:

> The tug turned short round and went away towards land. Twenty-six pairs of eyes watched her low broad stern crawling languidly over the beating water with fierce hurry. She resembled an enormous and aquatic black beetle, surprised by the light, overwhelmed by the sunshine ... she left a lingering smudge of smoke on the sky, and two vanishing trails of foam on the water. On the place where she had stopped a round black patch of soot remained undulating on the swell — an unclean mark of the creature's rest.[102]

Conrad's depiction of the tug in zoomorphic terms and the grimy trail left by the engine unveil the author's regressive views on steamshipping, signalling that a nostalgia for the age of sail still predated naval authors in the late-Victorian era. As Jonathan Raban points out, "in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature ... the sea still belongs to sail. The ship moves in nature, propelled by the natural force of the wind. When steam engines, turbines, and diesels show up, they are there for special purposes, as intruders on a world over which the sailing ship rightfully reigns."[103]

The rise of steam shipping in the first half of the nineteenth century additionally broaches a point I raised above which is of major importance in the *Ibis* trilogy: the multi-ethnic composition of ship crews. Historians such as Alan Gregor Cobley have recorded a parallelism between steamships and the growing number of non-British sailors serving on British ships. As the new steamships demanded less sailors skilled in rigging and sailing, Cobley reports, they required more unqualified

sailors to feed and stoke the furnaces.[104] The growing mechanisation of ships in the first half of the nineteenth century, together with the lax enforcement and final repeal of the Navigation Acts in 1851 as explained above, facilitated the increasing hybridisation of nineteenth-century ship crews. The consolidation of the steamship also had an impact on the routines of lascars on board merchant and passenger ships, who were now required not so much on deck but in the stokeholds and engine rooms; this made lascar sailors less visible to passengers and more marginal to the social world of the ship.[105]

The hybridity of ship crews resulted in non-white sailors finding, Cobley argues, that "the hardships and dangers they shared with white colleagues at sea helped to promote an atmosphere of non-racial egalitarianism and mutual respect unknown ashore."[106] This camaraderie, according to Pedro L. V. Welch, could have infiltrated onto littoral cities and further inland.[107] In his report of nineteenth-century American whaling and the sinking of the Nantucket whaleship *Essex*, Nathaniel Philbrick is more specific about the equality and transcultural solidarity between white and black sailors.[108] Even if black seamen should have faced discrimination from their peers on board or from littoral collectives, Philbrick argues, "they were assured of being paid no less than a white person with the same qualifications ... in a tight spot, a captain didn't care if a seaman was white or black; he just wanted to know he could count on the man to complete his appointed task."[109]

Religion was also a component that determined life and social relations on board to a significant extent. Regarding lascar crews, records indicate that Hindu and Muslim lascars took separate cooks within their crew on board in order to respect caste and food taboos.[110] Conversely, religion might have also worked as a catalyst for cross-ethnic identifications among sailors. For example, American black sailors were often appealed to on religious grounds, particularly in times of peril, and asked to pray on the crew's behalf, as white sailors looked up to black evangelical worshipping.[111] Similarly, there exist reports of Christian lascars joining

European officers in Catholic ceremonies of worship on board, as well as evidence of European sailors and officers participating in funerals of deceased Christian lascars as their bodies were thrown into the sea.[112]

In light of the above-mentioned, my analysis of Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy seeks to read the ship as a materialisation of Bhabha's Third Space in which hybridity is shaped as a surrogate social order. Considering the ship as Third Space adds a spatial dimension to Bhabha's concept of that interstitial location which generates hybridity and post-colonial identities. From a critical point of view, shipspace becomes therefore a "mini-state where such questions about the moral condition of society can be studied in a microcosm" and "the gap between the regime of the ship and the management of shore-based life is a reflection of competing impulses in social thinking."[113] The ship, as represented in Ghosh's novels, emerges as a chronotope, to use Mikhail Bakhtin's term, where the racial politics of land-based Victorian culture are played out, encapsulated and problematised, condensing "all the contradictions of social antagonism ... in its timbers."[114] For these ends, I pursue a two-fold and complementary critical appraisal of the ship: ship as *heterotopia* and ship as *contact zone*.

Firstly, I draw upon an understanding of the ship that is indebted to Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia. Originally an anatomical term, Foucault's own delineation of the term as applied to the social sciences is generally sketchy and was initially and briefly devised as a linguistic concept.[115] I actually call on the French philosopher's less ambiguous account of the term in his posthumous essay "Of other Spaces" (1986). In it, Foucault defines heterotopias as follows:

> Places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society ... which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.[116]

In light of Foucault's cursory definition of the term, we might initially consider heterotopias as self-enclosed socio-cultural locations that simultaneously mirror and contest the world outside, "a social or cultural space that is both in place and out of place."[117]

Among the manifold and conflicting readings of Foucault's heterotopia in a variety of disciplines, the sociologist Kevin Hetherington has provided a clarificatory interpretation of the term. He defines heterotopias as "*spaces of alternate ordering* [that] organize a bit of the social world in a way different to that which surrounds them. That *alternate ordering* marks them out as *Other* and allows them to be seen as an example of an alternative way of doing things."[118] Hetherington anchors his understanding of Foucault's heterotopia around the notion of social order and therefore heterotopias emerge as social spaces where things occur in a surrogate way to that of outer society.

Because of the term's marked relation to otherness, alterity and non-hegemony, heterotopias have been frequently read as spaces for transgression and resistance, in a similar fashion to Bhabha's Third Space. Nevertheless, as Teresa Davis argues, "while Bhabha's Third Space is explicitly defined as a space from where resistance and subversion are born, especially in relation to cultural dominance, Foucault's heterotopias are not explicitly such sites of resistance."[119] Davis seems right is establishing this contrast between heterotopia and Third Space, given that, as it transpires from Foucault's work, heterotopias are not wholly detached from the hegemonic structures of social order, but seem to articulate a challenge from within those very structures.

Even so, sociologists and theorists of social space such as Henri Lefebvre or Edward W. Soja have facilitated readings of heterotopia as spaces of transgression. In *The Production of Space* (1991) Lefebvre argues that "[spatial] differences endure or arise on the margins of the homogenized realm, either in the form of

resistances or in the form of externalities (lateral, heterotopical, heterological)."[120] Following Lefebvre, Edward W. Soja similarly develops his theory of Thirdspace in parallel to Foucault's heterotopia, arguing that it is an "intentional *ambiguity* that keeps Thirdspace open and inclusive rather than confined and securely bounded by authoritative protocols."[121] Accordingly, if heterotopias are *spaces of alternate ordering*, as Hetherington understands them, which facilitate resistance, ambiguity and marginality, they should be seen at least as conterminous to Bhabha's Third Space of enunciation.

Contrary to utopias, which have no real place, heterotopias are indeed localisable and Foucault cites examples such as the prison, the boarding school, the cemetery, the museum or travelling fairs. Nevertheless, for Foucault "the ship is the heterotopia *par excellence.*"[122] "Linked ... to time in its most fleeting, transitory, precarious aspect," Foucault argues, the ship "is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea."[123]

In light of Foucault's words, the ship as heterotopia facilitates a distinct linearity of time that unveils, DeLoughrey claims, the "epistemological limits in recording the immensity of ocean history, which paradoxically, is depicted in the condensed chronotope of [the] ship."[124] Such 'fleeting' character of time aboard the vessel amid the immensity of the sea can be illustrated in the following excerpt from Joseph Conrad's "The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'": "the smiling greatness of the sea dwarfed the extent of time. The days raced after one another, brilliant and quick like the flashes of a lighthouse, and the nights, eventful and short, resembled fleeting dreams."[125] The ship as heterotopia features then as a spatio-temporal locus where the temporalities of either origin or destination are provisionally disrupted.

The adjoining boundaries between heterotopia and Third Space aforementioned can equally be recorded in the context of the shipspace during the nineteenth

century. As I argued earlier, the markedly multicultural character of seafaring crews in the nineteenth century allows for a reading of shipspace as Third Space, that is, as a spot facilitating the hybridity of identity which challenged Victorian essentialist conceptions of culture. Nevertheless, it would be naive to ignore the fact that ships were above all an instrument of vital importance for the political, economic, and scientific development of European powers. This entails that ships were conceived as a natural extension of imperial domination and were therefore linked to land-locked protocols of social control. Hence that in his maritime memoir *Two Years before the Mast* (1840), Richard Henry Dana Jr. noted the lack of agency and resistance for sailors in the Anglo-American maritime world: "What is there for sailors to do? If they resist, it is mutiny; and if they succeed, and take the vessel, it is piracy. If they ever yield again, their punishment must come ... if a sailor resists his commander, he resists the law, and piracy or submission in his only alternative."[126]

Richard Henry Dana's personal account is corroborated by social historians such as Jann M. Witt, who relies on memoirs of seamen, codices of maritime legislation and records of maritime court trials to reveal the asymmetrical relations between captain and sailors. Although the captain did not have judicial power nor could put a sailor on trial on board, Witt illustrates the captain in the nineteenth-century maritime world as a "master next to God," which meant that "seamen did not have the right to resign before the end of the voyage or the expiration of the contract. Except in certain cases, such as shipwreck or the sale of the ship, only if the captain agreed could a seamen could [sic] leave the ship before the contract expired."[127] This entails that desertion was the only way to escape the harsh treatment of a ruthless captain or unfair working conditions. In parallel to the contrast between heterotopia and Third Space, my literary-cultural reading of the ship will therefore lie upon this tension between control and rebellion, hegemony, and resistance.

To close this section, I pursue a secondary and complementary critical reading of the ship that is indebted to Mary Louise Pratt's concept of *contact zone*. Initially introduced in the keynote article "Arts of the Contact Zone" (1991) and further developed in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), the concept borrows from the linguistic notion of 'contact language' to theorise on the geographical loci of colonial encounters. Pratt uses the term 'contact zone' to refer to "the space of imperial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict."[128] Therefore Bhabha's Third Space, itself a dialogical category of enunciation and hybridity, presupposes a physical, cultural or linguistic association that is encapsulated in the spatial category of 'contact zone.'

Within the versatile application of the term deployed by Mary Louise Pratt in her literary and cultural analysis of imperialism, she points out two effects or phenomena arising out of contact zones. Firstly, she borrows the term *transculturation*

> to describe how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture. While subjugated peoples cannot readily control what the dominant culture visits upon them, they do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, how they use it, and what they make it mean.[129]

As Pratt acknowledges, the term 'transculturation' was coined by the Cuban anthropologist and sociologist Fernando Ortiz in the 1940s to replace the terms 'acculturation' and 'deculturation' in his analysis of Afro-Cuban culture.[130] From a transcultural perspective, the relations between the imperial metropolis and peripheral cultures are no longer seen as a one-way transference that serves the interests of the former. Rather, transculturation is a dynamic and reciprocal process in which subordinated groups creatively adapt and transform the culture and material transmitted to them by dominant or metropolitan groups.

The second phenomenon arising in contact zones, and largely a product of their transcultural character, is *autoethnography*. By autoethnographic expressions, Pratt refers to "instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that *engage with* the colonizer's terms."[131] Differing from native forms of self-representation, autoethnography alludes to "texts the others construct in response to or in dialogue with ... metropolitan representations" and involve "partly collaborating with and appropriating the idioms of the conqueror".[132] These forms of self-representation, Low and Wolfreys argue, divest imperial ethnography "of its disciplinary claims to truth and knowledge" and become "fully cognizant of its subjective origins."[133]

In light of the aforesaid, and given the multicultural character of ship communities illustrated in this section, the ship as contact zone fits Pratt's definition of her spatial category as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – such as colonialism and slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today."[134] The ship as contact zone therefore dismantles the opposition between centre and periphery, a dichotomy that, according to Caroline Reitz, became part of "a Victorian self-fashioning," which disavowed "the manifold interdependencies between" the metropolitan centre and colonial periphery and is in keeping with postcolonial theorists' insistence on the fact that the colonial periphery informs the metropolitan kernel.[135] As I will illustrate in the analysis of the titular vessel of Ghosh's trilogy – as well as other vessels that feature in the trilogy such as the *Redruth* or the *Anahita* – the ship as contact zone equally compels us to reimagine life on board as the very genesis of hybridity and transnationalism. For the Indian Ocean subjects who inhabit the shipspaces narrated in the *Ibis* trilogy, the ship allows for a temporary flattening of differences that can result in transcultural forms of solidarity. The chronotope of the ship, as a mobile contact zone, foregrounds the deterritorialized nature of sea actors' collectivity and historical origin and the fluid and composite nature of their identities. The ship, therefore, emerges

not as a geographical location but as a trope of "historical presence/absence" in land-based historiographical archives.[136]

2.3 Sea Fiction and/in the Nineteenth Century

In her 2012 monograph *Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of the Empire*, Elizabeth Ho devotes her last chapter to maritime perspectives in the neo-Victorian novel.[137] Ho's delving into what she calls the 'neo-Victorian-at-sea', out of a scrutiny of texts such as Andrea Barrett's *The Voyage of the Narwhal* (1998), Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers* (2000), or Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008), privileges the sea crossing both as a metaphorical and actual space of globalization, "forcing us to rethink even further the usual structures of centre and periphery that mark most postcolonial fiction."[138] My analysis of Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy is fuelled by a similar drive to that of Ho in her attempt at resituating contemporary fiction set in the nineteenth century on the sea. Ghosh's trilogy is indeed an imaginative reconstruction of maritime connections in the nineteenth century around the Indian Ocean. Considering this, this last section which precedes my close reading of Amitav Ghosh provides a brief account of the maritime novel, providing examples both from nineteenth-century and contemporary texts, to ascertain what might be the position of the *Ibis* trilogy within the wider corpus of sea fiction set in the nineteenth century and maritime fiction more broadly. In this sense, my analysis of the trilogy might lay the groundwork for future research into an ever-expanding genre that has experienced a telling popularity in the last decades.[139]

In their edited introduction to *Connecting Seas and Connected Ocean Rims* (2011), Gabaccia and Horder claim that the nineteenth century is the "great era of nation-building worldwide ... nations and nation-states emerged within a context of sweeping and sizeable migrations ... and they emerged in the context of a global plantation belt, global mining investments, and global searches for raw materials."[140] In light of this, sea fiction and its emphasis on transnational connections seem appropriate for problematizing and questioning ideas of the nation then and

today. After all, Miles Taylor claims, "between the defeat of Napoleon and the partition of Africa, it is the sea that stands out as the connecting thread of the British Empire."[141]

Early nineteenth-century and Victorian fiction exhibited a certain investment in highlighting the connections between maritime economy and trade and the British bourgeoisie. For example, John Peck illustrates the transactions between the seafaring world and British domestic life in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814): the Bertram family, Fanny's relations, have interests in the West Indies and Fanny's brother is in the Royal Navy, which means that the maritime world shapes the domestic life in Austen's narration.[142] A mid-Victorian example is Elizabeth Gaskell's *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863), which is concerned with the press gang, littoral life and the emergence of the middle-classes out of maritime trade.[143]

Victorian works more explicitly focused on the sea, such as the fictions of Joseph Conrad, Frederick Marryat, or William Clark Russell, similarly broach the interrelations between British domestic life and the maritime experience, although their main interest resides in making sense of Britain's global stance at the time, exhibiting "an awareness of the emergence of a global cultural, social and economic space" and a drive to "'cognitively map' an emerging global reality."[144] The following extract from Frederick Marryat's *Mr Midshipman Easy* (1836) illustrates this cognitive mapping of the ocean as a global locus and the social construction of the ocean as a territory beyond nationalist sovereignty that I outlined above:

> Although the whole earth has been so nefariously divided among the few ... the waters at least are the property of all. No man claims his share of the sea –every one may there plough as he pleases, without being taken up for a trespasser. Even war makes no difference; every one may go on as he pleases, and if they meet, it is nothing but a neutral ground on which the parties contend. It is, then, only upon the ocean that [it is] likely to find that equality and rights of man, which we are so anxious to establish on shore.[145]

Marryat's vision of the sea as 'the property of all' brings to the fore the multi-ethnic and cosmopolitan configuration of shipboard communities that I have discussed in this chapter. In like vein, William Clark Russell's nautical novel *John Holdsworth* (1895) explicitly alludes to such multicultural configuration when the narrator describes the crew: "It was a queer sight to see their busy figures in the twilight of the forecastle – here the black face of a negro; there the broad features of a Dutchman; here a mulatto; there a lantern-jawed Yankee...They were most of them friends already."[146] Bonds of solidarity and hospitality among sailors of different ethnicities predictably surface in times of peril at sea. Before the sinking of the ship the captain in Russell's *John Holdsworth* addresses his sailors, stating: "you are most of you Englishmen, and those who are not are all brave fellows, and no man can be better than that, let him hail from what port he may."[147] Similarly, in Joseph Conrad's "The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' " sailors of the titular vessel risk their lives as they descend down the sinking 'Narcissus' to save James Wait, the black sailor of the title who is dying from tuberculosis. As will be illustrated in the next chapters, Ghosh also configures his fictional crews and sea subjects around notions of transcultural solidarity.

As can be inferred, the maritime worlds created by Victorian nautical novelists were built around strong notions of masculinity. Victorian maritime fiction was certainly almost exclusively male-oriented and male-impersonated. As John Peck argues, "the masculine culture of the ship, business and war is set against the feminine-influenced values that dominate domestic life."[148] Also, it should be pointed out that there exist numerous sea shanties and sailors' memories alerting seamen of the bad luck brought about by bringing women on board.[149] This deliberate absence of women in narrations of the sea is being challenged by maritime historiography. For example, Margaret S. Creighton and Lisa Norling's edited volume *Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Seafaring in the Atlantic World. 1700-1920* (1996) provides evidence of female pirates, cross-dressed sea captains, or

captains' wives on board whaling ships, challenging the received notion that the maritime experience was an exclusively male domain.[150]

As I will outline in the ensuing analysis of the *Ibis* trilogy – via a close reading of female characters such as Deeti, Paulette, or Shireen – contemporary sea fiction is also modulating this trend and increasingly contemporary narratives of the nineteenth century have been portraying the experiences of female characters at sea. Barbara Chase-Riboud's neo-slave narrative *Hottentot Venus* (2003), which narrates the life of Sarah Baartman, is a case in point.[151] The novel describes the voyage of the titular protagonist from South Africa to London aboard HMS *Exeter*, in which she befriends some black sailors against white passengers' rejection.[152] In this section of the novel Sarah expresses the impact of the sea voyage upon her psyche during a storm between the Cape of Good Hope and St. Helena Island in a language that is reminiscent of the sublime.[153] In a particularly evocative section, Sarah stands on the storm-battered deck imagining the storm's voice and its indifference to racial differences: "Drenched on deck, I listened to the storm's voice ... want to leave the Cape of Storms? it seemed to say ... You will have to get past me. For I rule here, not white men. The sea is mine and no man, white or black, can outrun me or outstare me."[154]

Female sea migrancy during the Victorian period also features in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996). Atwood's novel is a fictionalisation of the life of Grace Marks and the murders of Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper and mistress Nancy Montgomery in 1843 Upper Canada. Two servants, Grace Marks and James McDermott, were declared guilty for the crime and sentenced to hanging and life imprisonment respectively. Atwood's novel narrates, in the form of a patchwork style which combines Marks's unreliable first-person voice with newspaper articles, poems, and other characters' perspectives, the life of Grace Marks since her sea crossing from Ireland in the years preceding the Irish Famine.[155] Marks's narration exhibits the interstitial position of her identity, being Irish but, as she states, "our

family were Protestants, and that is different."[156] Neither English nor fully (Catholic) Irish, Marks' identity is played out during her voyage from the misery of Northern Ireland to Upper Canada. Atwood's account of Marks' transatlantic voyage, which illustrates what scholars have recently termed the 'Green Atlantic,' evinces the flattening and reconfiguration of cultural differences at sea that I outlined above:

> The passengers were Catholic and Protestant mixed, with some English and Scots come over from Liverpool thrown into the bargain ...Those who would cheerfully have cut each other's throats on land, were often to be seen holding each other's heads ... I have sometimes noted the same thing in prison, as necessity does make strange bedfellows. A sea voyage and a prison may be God's reminder to us that we are all flesh.[157]

In parallel to the reconstruction of female identities at sea, contemporary sea narrations of the nineteenth century delve significantly into the identities of the victims of colonization. As I have already stated, Victorian maritime fiction did illustrate the multicultural character of ship crews and did replay and often transform land-locked race relations. Nevertheless, as Siobhan Carroll has recently pointed out in *An Empire of Air and Water: Uncolonizable Space in the British Imagination, 1750-1850* (2015), Victorian maritime novels did *not* speak "from the perspective of exploited colonial peoples but from the perspective of an alienated community of imperial labor formed in the black space between imperial center and colonial periphery."[158] This claim resonates with sustained perspectives in maritime criticism from Marxist points of view. Increasingly more scholars are considering nineteenth-century seafarers, in their cooperation, struggle, and collective resistance, as the genesis of the international working class. Philip E. Steinberg follows Marcus Rediker in affirming that "late mercantilist-era sailors established many of the norms and solidarities that went on to characterize the industrial capitalist-era proletariat" and in turn "early twentieth-century anarcho-syndicalists ... saw in the international sailing class the roots of a new, non-nation-state-based social order created first on sea and then on land."[159] Additionally, it is worth pointing out that black sailors incorporated their strategies of slave resistance to modern wage labour resistance.[160] Accordingly, another aspect of nineteenth-century maritime novels

which is modulated by their contemporary counterparts is the inclusion of the perspective of the colonised and their engagement in denouncing imperial violence and oppression from a postcolonial point of view.

Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers* (2000) provides an example of contemporary sea fiction deeply concerned with racism, the viewpoint of the colonised and the devastating effects of Victorian imperialism. Ambitiously narrated through over twenty first-person narrators – including scientists, Tasmanian aborigines, governors, sailors, reverends, or Tasmanian white settlers – the novel unfolds in two parallel narrations in two different time frames, set in the 1820s and 1850s respectively. The narration opens in 1857 with the happenings leading up to the departure of the *Sincerity*, a ship bound for Tasmania – originally known as Van Diemen's Land – on a scientific and religious expedition, to move back to 1820s Tasmania. The early nineteenth-century narration is told, among other minor narrators, through Peevay, a mixed-race Tasmanian resulting from his Aborigine mother being raped by a white settler. Peevay's narration recounts the destructive effects of the white settlers on his people and the Aborigines' plight to adapt to the cultural changes imposed upon them. As the *Sincerity* arrives in Tasmania, the two narrations collide for the conclusion as the Tasmanian Aborigines are facing their imminent extinction.

The titular passengers in the *Sincerity* showcase a construction of the ship as a vector for the projection of power and the procurement of scientific knowledge. Reverend Geoffrey Wilson is an Anglican priest who, deluded by mystical visions and Religious fanaticism, hires the ship to find the Garden of Eden, which he is convinced to be somewhere on the island of Tasmania. To this expedition joins the equally fanatic Dr Thomas Potter –a character modelled on the Victorian physician Robert Knox and an exponent of scientific racism– who expects to find scientific evidence among the Tasmanian Aborigines for his racist theories. Both Wilson and

Potter are surrogates of British imperialism, representing religion and science respectively as instruments legitimising the British imperial project.

Nevertheless, the *Sincerity* also illustrates a more subversive perspective of transoceanic exchanges, as is illustrated by its Manx captain Illiam Quillian Kewley and his crew. The Manx crew have fitted their ship to make it double-hulled, the space in between the two hulls devoted to the smuggling of tobacco and brandy. In order to dupe British Customs officials, the room allocating the trapdoors to the illegal cargo is decorated with prints of Queen Victoria and her family, together with two busts of the English monarch and Prince Albert. This fake display of British nationalism comically contrasts with Kewley and his Manx crew's disdain for "interfering English politicians" and English people in general.[161] Laughing at a damaged wet English rifle, Kewley mocks the whole imperial project:

> Day and night ... Englishmen go boasting about how clever they are with their steel and railways and ships that they're saying the whole world wants to have, and now it turned out their rifles couldn't even take a little wet. Did they expect everyone to go fighting Russians and hunting tigers only in fine sunny weather? Truly, it was a miracle to me how they'd ever managed to conquer half the world like they had.[162]

Kneale's satirical portrayal of Kewley and his crew from the Isle of Man – still today a self-governing Crown Dependency with significant control over its own affairs– mobilises and liquefies stable conceptions of the nation, turning the deck of the *Sincerity* into a whirlpool for competing versions of Britishness. It is revealing, John Glendening points out, that "Kewley characterizes the empire, along with other flawed indices of national greatness, as English rather than British; it appears that as a Manxman he feels too much connection with the Celtic portions of Britain to include them. He reserves his disgust for the English."[163] Kewley's dislike for the English appears justified when he learns about the "purest gibberish" of Dr. Potter's racial theories, that qualify "the Celtic Type (instance: Manx)" as "altogether inferior in physique to the Saxon, being smaller, darker ... lacking in strength ... of inferior intelligence."[164] Similarly, it seems no coincidence that on the *Sincerity*'s

arrival in Cape Colony, Kewley expresses his pity and compassion for Africans and Indians and how they are mistreated by English and Dutch settlers.[165]

Obviating Amitav Ghosh's work, other anglophone writers have put forward sea narratives that reproduce Indian Ocean exchanges and the migratory flows between Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. A remarkable instance is the Tanzanian novelist Abdulrazak Gurnah. The author was born in the semiautonomous island of Zanzibar and much of his fiction deals with the history of that island and its connections with the Indian Ocean rim. That is the case of *By the Sea* (2001), an epic narrative criss-crossing three continents. One of its protagonists is Saleh Omar, a refugee arriving from the island of Zanzibar to London. There he meets Latif Mahmud, a person also originally from Zanzibar who is closely related to his past. When Saleh Omar arrives in London applying for asylum, he only brings with him a small backpack in which he keeps a very significant object: a wooden box with incense (ud-al-qamari). This fragrant substance, the protagonist states, was "obtained … from a Persian trader from Bahrain who had come to our part of the world with the musim, the winds of the monsoons, he and thousands of other traders from Arabia, the Gulf, India and Sind, and the Horn of Africa. They had been doing this every year for at least a thousand years."[166] Further on in the narration, Saleh Omar recounts that Persian trader's stay at his family home: "Sometimes people called to sit with them and listen and chat, people I didn't know were friendly with my father at all, and they all spoke in loud voices mixing English and Arabic and Kiswahili in polyglot good humour."[167]

As can be observed, Gurnah is constructing a markedly cosmopolitan vision of the East African littoral in which multilingualism and transculturation are the norm rather than the exception. *By the Sea* certainly paints Zanzibari society as a multicultural hub articulating the connections between African, Middle East, and Asian cultures via the Indian Ocean sea-lanes. Nevertheless, as Shanti Moorthy has keenly stated, Gurnah "contests depictions by Indian Ocean scholars of apparently

idyllic premodern East African societies. His writings lend themselves to more nuanced and problematic readings of these societies as cosmopolitan."[168] The following excerpt is illustrative of Gurnah's critical vision about the East African littoral:

> For centuries, intrepid traders and sailors, most of them barbarous and poor no doubt, made the annual journey to that stretch of coast on the eastern side of the continent … And they brought their hungers and greeds, their fantasies and lies and hatreds, leaving some among their numbers behind for whole life-times and taking what they could buy, trade, or snatch away with them, including people they bought or kidnapped and sold into labour and degradation in their own lands.[169]

Gurnah is clearly pointing to the slave trade that already existed in Africa before the advent of European colonialism, a trade in which both African and Middle East Arabs and Indians were complicit.[170] The complexities of the pre-colonial Arab slave trade and its significant differences with the European-dominated transatlantic slave far exceed the purposes of this work.[171] However, it is worth pointing out that Gurnah problematises the reductionist notion that the collapse of Indian Ocean cosmopolitanism exchanges should be ascribed exclusively to the irruption of European colonialism. In the author's view, the destruction of Indian Ocean multiculturalism as well as more recent traumatic events in the history of Zanzibar – namely, the 1964 Zanzibar Revolution that ended up with the expulsion of Omani Arabs and Indian minorities from the island – are clearly related to pre-colonial interethnic prejudices.

A far lesser-known author whose work nonetheless provides interesting insights into Indian Ocean exchanges is the South African author Agnes Sam. She was born in Port Elizabeth into a family of Indian origin but raised as a Catholic, and her works illustrate the conditions of South Africans of Indian ancestry before and during the Apartheid regime, as well as cultural transactions between Indian and South-African cultures more broadly. Her first work, the long-forgotten collection of short stories *Jesus is Indian, and Other Stories* (1989) was written during her exile in England and was published at the time within the remarkable *African*

Writers Series by Heinemann. Remarkably, the author is a direct descendant of Indian indentured labourers who arrived in South Africa in the mid-nineteenth century in the post-abolition period. Shortly before leaving South Africa for her exile in England, Sam found out by sorting through her family papers that her great-grandfather arrived in Durban in 1860 under an indenture contract. In the author's introduction to the collection, Sam comments on this family finding:

> The discovery brought with it the immediate realisation that the history of Indians in South Africa was suppressed. For, as a schoolgirl in Port Elizabeth, I was taught a history beginning with a Portuguese sailor in the fifteenth century … But how and why the largest group of Indians outside the subcontinent came to be in South Africa was never accounted for.[172]

As can be inferred from Sam's words, Indians have remained a conspicuously invisible presence in South Africa, both in terms of their exclusion from the South African literary canon as well as their contribution to South African culture more broadly.[173] Sam's work constitutes a singular contribution to the memory of the Indian labour diaspora in the African continent, a migratory movement whose descendants have not generally been engaged in projects of memory work.

Sam's vision in her collection of short stories is very much focused on the experiences of South African women of Indian descent from a feminist point of view. The narrations illustrate how the author's Indo-African female protagonists negotiate their composite identities in relation to the complex South African apartheid society, especially how they tried to reconcile their Indian culture with African and European cultures in syncretic ways. In the story that gives the collection its name, "Jesus is Indian", the protagonist conflates the figure of Jesus Christ with Indian culture in order to harmonise her seemingly conflicting Hindu and Catholic facets of her identity: "Don't Jesus wear a dhoti like Gandhi? Don't Hama talk to Jesus in our language? Don't Jesus answer all Hama's prayers? … Jesus is Indian."[174] This syncretism, which has been persuasively described by Veronique Bragard as "a form of mimicry in reverse", constitutes Sam's take on South-African

Indian women and their strategies of resistance and adaptation to transform in hybrid ways the Catholic culture that was imposed upon them.[175]

As all the above-mentioned examples illustrate, contemporary sea narrations unmoor competing and often silenced visions of the globe. The protagonists crisscrossing the oceans and populating the ships of the *Ibis* trilogy Ghosh's fiction are the dispossessed, the subaltern, the victims of imperial oppression who made sense of their identities out of their global geopolitical awareness and had their own and singular cosmopolitan views of an unfolding globalization. In this sense, a significant contribution of the *Ibis* trilogy to the subgenre of maritime fiction is its portrayal of the changing notions of cosmopolitanism that are being put forward in global studies. Bruce Robbins claims in his introduction to *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation* (1998) what follows:

> Cosmopolitanism has often seemed to claim universality by virtue of its independence, its detachment from the bonds, commitments, and affiliations that constrain ordinary nation-bound lives. It has seemed to be a luxuriously free-floating view from above. But many voices now insist ... that *the term should be extended to transnational experiences that are particular rather than universal and that are unprivileged – indeed, often coerced*.[176]

Robbins has also suggested elsewhere that "the old wisdom on the subject would suggest that the great century of cosmopolitanism is the eighteenth, while the nineteenth century on the contrary sees an exponential growth in nationalism and racism."[177] In contrast to the aloof and abstract conception of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism, I argue that the *Ibis* trilogy unearths a concrete and "actually existing cosmopolitanism", that belonging to nineteenth-century migrants, lascars, South-Asian indentured labourers, runaway African American slaves, all of whom forged and configured their cosmopolitan identities in an emerging global world, even if their cosmopolitanisms were *coerced*, *unprivileged* and against their will.[178]

The analysis of Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy that I set about to articulate now is useful in ensuring "the vitality of a cosmopolitan ethico-political project as in providing a

richer history of globalization's Victorian antecedents."[179] The following chapters may demonstrate that Amitav Ghosh's maritime perspectives in the *Ibis* series can provide a fecund ground for underscoring Meghnad Desai's claim that "globalization is a phase of capitalism, but not so much a new phenomenon as a revival or resumption of a similar phase in the late 19th century."[180] Out of the cosmopolitan viewpoints expressed by the transoceanic exchanges narrated in the *Ibis* trilogy, I expect to mobilise ideas of the nation, signalling the nineteenth-century water-worlds and maritime routes as the inception of capitalist globalization and re-orienting contemporary political actions towards the unfair legacies of colonialism in the neo-liberal present.

NOTES

[1] Smith (2015).

[2] See Steinberg (2001, 14) and Cohen (2010, 658).

[3] Thomas (2014, 8).

[4] The Internet is today the paramount channel for transmitting information. However, it is worth noting that the circulation of data on the Internet still evinces a maritime metaphor when we *surf* or *navigate* the web. Bernhard Klein (2002, 10) provides further instances of these linguistic traces of the maritime past in the age of global information, such as to catch a plane at the air*port* or to *log on* to a computer.

[5] Chambers (2010, 679). Chambers follows Cesare Casarino in illustrating the unstable foundation of modernity with a 'floating' metaphor. Casarino claims that Western civilization since the Renaissance has "been run in all sorts of ways by ships" and therefore the inception of modernity rests on a "floating and itinerant foundation that had gone unnoticed for so long": Casarino (2002, 12).

[6] See Mentz (2009, 10) and Horden and Purcell (2006, 723).

[7] Ethington (2007, 465-466). Original emphasis.

[8] Klein and Mackenthun (2004, 2).

[9] The 'freedom of the seas' inherent in Hugo Grotius's *Mare Liberum* (1608) has garnered him distinction as the founding father of modern ocean law and modern international law. See Steinberg (2001, 31).

[10] Steinberg (2001, 112). Original emphasis.

[11] Mack (2011, 17).

[12] Withers (2009, 640).

[13] Chambers (2010, 679). This conception of the ocean as a space for upheaval saturates Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker's *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (2000), which, as the title indicates, reveals the buried actions of resistance and rebellion by dispossessed collectives in the Atlantic.

[14] Raban (1992, 14).

[15] Byron (2009, 250).

[16] Burke (1999, 13-43). According to Jonathan Raban, Edmund Burke's construction of the ocean as the archetype of the sublime, as well as a wild space which produces horror and escapes human control is indebted to John Locke's disciple Joseph Addison, whose essay on the sea published in the *Spectator* (1712) is revealing: "Of all the objects that I have ever seen, there is none which affects my imagination so much as the sea or ocean … when it is worked up in a tempest, so that the Horizon on every side is nothing but foaming billows and floating mountains, it is impossible to describe the agreeable horrour that rises from such a prospect. A troubled ocean, to a man who sails upon it, is, I think, the biggest object that he can see in motion": Quoted in Raban (1992, 8).

[17] Consider this fragment from Joseph Conrad's autobiographical memoir *The Mirror of the Sea* (1906): "The sea … has no generosity. No display of manly qualities – courage, hardihood, endurance, faithfulness – has ever been known to touch its irresponsible consciousness of power. The ocean has the conscienceless temper of a savage autocrat spoiled by much adulation. He cannot brook the slightest appearance of defiance, and has remained the irreconcilable enemy of ships and men ever since ships and men ever since ships and men had the unheard-of audacity to go afloat together in the face of his frown. From that day he has gone on swallowing up fleets and men without his resentment being glutted by the number of victims": Conrad (2001, 166).

[18] Rostek (2011, 17).

[19] Spargo (2000, 1).

[20] Steinberg (2001, 125).

[21] Reidy (2008, 9-10).

[22] Carroll (2009, 13). Carroll's fantastical poem, dealing with a crew sailing in search of a fictional sea-creature, was published together with a series of illustrations by Henry Holiday, one of which presents an 'Ocean-Chart' that is, actually, a totally blank space. See Steinberg (2001, 115-116).

[23] Anderson and Peters (2014, 3).

[24] Connery (2010, 688).

[25] Anderson and Peters (2014, 4).

[26] Deleuze and Guattari (2005, 23).

[27] Chambers (2010, 682-683).

[28] Cohen (2010, 659).

[29] Geyer and Bright (1995, 1038-1039).

[30] Gabaccia and Hoerder (2011, 6).

[31] For instance, Michael Pearson (2010, xv) points a finger at the multi-authored "AHR Forum: Oceans of History" in the *American Historical Review* (2006) and the book *Seascapes: Maritime History, Littoral Cultures and Transoceanic Exchanges* (2010) for their omission or scarce treatment of the Indian Ocean. Conversely, in the same year as Pearson published the aforementioned concerns, *PMLA* published a theoretical and methodological special issue on Oceanic Studies in which the Indian Ocean does have a prominent position.

[32] Pearson (2010, xv).

[33] Gilroy (2002, 190).

[34] Gilroy (2002, 4-17).

[35] Klein and Mackenthun (2004, 5).

[36] McKeown (2011, 57).

[37] Geyer and Bright (1995, 1043).

[38] Chaudhuri (1985, 3).

[39] Connery (2010, 687)

[40] Hofmeyr (2007, 13). My emphasis.

[41] Hawley (2008, 1).

[42] Steene (2008, 141).

[43] Bose (2006, 6-11). My emphasis.

[44] Among other commonalities and patterns of unity around the Indian Ocean, Bose (2006, 12) cites the Muslim Hajj – which typifies the spread of Islam in the pre-modern period to forge cultural and trade networks –, the wearing of Indian cotton – especially that produced in the regions of Gujarat, Coromandel, or Bengal –, and the configuration of sea lanes and port life around the alternating monsoon winds.

[45] Moorthy and Jamal (2010, 7).

[46] Ibid., 8.

[47] Chaudhuri (1990, 36). The unjustifiable exclusion of Africa in Indian Ocean studies can also be imputed to some works on Amitav Ghosh scholarship such as Mondal (2007). It is quite revealing that Mondal follows Chaudhuri's afro-exclusionary vision to problematically affirm that "Ghosh's Indian Ocean emphas[ises] a triangular relationship between the Middle East, the South Asian peninsula, and South East Asia" (Mondal 2007, 124). To my knowledge, Ghosh has not explicitly taken issue with the exclusion of Africa in Indian Ocean scholarship but his frequent allusions to East Africa in some of his non-fiction works – see, for example Ghosh (2008, 57) – as well as several elements in the *Ibis* trilogy that I will discuss in subsequent chapters, suggest that his vision about the Indian Ocean matrix is far more inclusive than traditional scholarship on that maritime region.

[48] Desai (2013, 8). The word 'Afrasian' was already used in 1998 by Michael N. Pearson in his concept of the 'Afrasian Sea' (Pearson 1998, 36-7). The term seems to have stuck among scholars who analyse African-Asian exchanges, as seen in the recent edited volume *Afrasian Transformations: Transregional Perspectives on Development Cooperation, Social Mobility, and Cultural Change* (2020).

[49] Bose (2006, 7).

[50] Moorthy and Jamal (2010, 3).

[51] Ho (2006, xxi)

[52] Gaynor (2007, 54).

[53] Tuerk (2012, 1).

[54] Gabaccia and Hoerder (2011, 4).

[55] Said (1994, 59). My emphasis.

[56] Khair (2009, 8).

[57] Wigen (2006, 720). My emphasis.

[58] Linebaugh and Rediker (2000, 150).

[59] Cobley (2007, 156).

[60] Evans, Hammons and Granger (1836, 105), original emphasis. 'Denization' is an outdated legal term in English law alluding to the process by which a foreign subject may be considered 'British' with some reservations. A law dictionary published in 1764 states the following under the entry for the word 'Alien': "An alien born may become a subject of *England* two ways, by *denization* and by *naturalization*; denization is by the King's letters patent, which receive him into the society as a new man, and make him capable to purchase, and to transmit land by descent; but it doth not make him inheritable to any other relation": Cunningham (1764).

[61] See Bolster (2009, 103) and Cobley (2007, 155-156).

[62] Chappell (2004, 79-81).

[63] See Wemyss (2009, 150) and Ahuja (2009, 14-15)

[64] Jaffer (2015, 50).

[65] Ghosh (2008, 58). This article, entitled "Of Fanas and Forecastles: The Indian Ocean and Some Lost Languages of the Age of Sail" and published on the same year as the first instalment of the *Ibis* trilogy, was later reprinted in Gupta, Hofmeyr and Pearson (2010).

[66] Ramdin (1999, 49-52).

[67] Brown (2013, 123).

[68] Bragard (2008, 21-59).

[69] Carter and Torabully (2002, 17).

[70] Bragard (2008, 52).

[71] See Gabaccia and Hoerder (2011, 5) and McKeown (2011, 42).

[72] Together with the above-mentioned *Atlanto-centric* character which qualifies Gilroy's account of modernity, some additional limitations have been attributed to Gilroy's work which Véronique Bragard sums up in what follows: "It ignores the experience of women; it homogenizes and masculinises the definition of trans-oceanic voyaging; it disregards the specificities of class and regions, it does not take into account the ways in which nation states continue to patrol watered borders": Bragard (2008, 68). An additional shortcoming ascribed to Gilroy's work is his insufficient acknowledgement of Caribbean or South American contributions to his transatlantic model. See Goebel and Schabio (2006, 4).

[73] Gilroy (2002, 133).

[74] Ryan rounds up her interdisciplinary research into spatiality and cultural geography by analysing sixty-two participants' reports about their experiences of the Irish coast in the form of interviews, photographs, and drawings: Ryan (2012, 181-216).

[75] Ryan (2012, 3).

[76] Ibid., 2.

[77] Ibid., 2. Against the constant motion of the waves, stars generally outstand in sea narratives as "the only fixed references for the travelers", enabling somehow their cognitive self-mapping: Bragard (2008, 79). Ocean navigators equally relied on the stars, the sun and heavenly bodies in general to chart their ongoing voyages until the invention of the magnetic compass in the 12th century. See Coote (1989, 269-275).

[78] Warner (1993, 121-122).

[79] McClintock (1992, 253)

[80] Ibid., 84-85.

[81] Rushdie (1985, 7).

[82] Bose (2006, 73).

[83] Ibid., 150.

[84] Steinberg (2014, xv).

[85] DeLoughrey (2010, 708). Coined by the 17th century English philosopher Richard Braithwaite, the term 'hydrarchy' may allude to the ancestral command of water by human beings or, in its most modern sense, to the organisation of shipspace. Elizabeth M. Deloughrey is surely implementing the term to refer to the internal organisation and governance of a ship and its maritime community.

[86] Trollope (2004, 31).

[87] According to John Peck's analysis of the novel, Trollope's humorous comment on lower classes trying to break their way up to the upper-class areas of the ship veils deep domestic concerns about working-class threats on the established social order. This interpretation endorses the idea that the locality of the ship is prototypically and occasionally appropriated as second-self to landed society. See Peck (2001, 141).

[88] Imperial historians have identified economic reasons underlying the abolition of slavery which problematise the humanitarian role of British abolitionism. McDonough argues the following: "Although in the eighteenth century West Indian sugar was a one-way ticket to economic prosperity, it was fighting a losing battle against foreign competition by the early years of the nineteenth

century. Many British sugar producers were losing money in the years which led up to abolition. The compensation offered by the British government gave the slave owners an easy was to escape from what was already looking like a bleak economic future": McDonough (1994,17). I have provided elsewhere a reading of Victorian (female) abolitionism as illustrated in Belinda Starling's neo-Victorian novel *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2007): Martín-González (2016, 192-196).

[89] Gilroy (2002, 4).

[90] Ibid., 17.

[91] Linebaugh and Rediker (2000, 149).

[92] Ibid., 152.

[93] Ogborn (2002, 161).

[94] Nasta (2002, 3).

[95] Hasty and Peters (2012, 661-662). According to Hasty and Peters, the construction of the ship as a scientific instrument is still relevant today, as ships are deployed as 'floating laboratories' to research the effects of climate change, the biodiversity of oceans or the underwater deposits of oil and gas, among other purposes.

[96] Darwin's account of the voyage, published in present-day editions as *The Voyage of the Beagle*, was published under the title *Journal and Remarks, 1832-1835* (1839). He published an extended second edition in 1845, entitled *Journal of Researches into the Natural History and Geology of the Countries Visited during the Voyage of H.M.S. Beagle round the World* and significantly dedicated to Charles Lyell, author of *Principles of Geology* (1832) and, as Darwin himself acknowledged, an obvious antecedent of his evolutionary theories. See Darwin (1871) and (1987, 55).

[97] Darwin (2008, 292). Barbara Korte has learnedly identified a series of strategies in Victorian travel writing to sustain the British imperialistic project which are identifiable in Darwin's report on the voyage of the *Beagle*. Korte argues that Victorian travel narratives typically evade the portrayal of interpersonal contact between the European and the indigenous inhabitant, the latter being significantly 'silenced' in the narration: Korte (2000, 188). She further argues that the description of the native population is totally split off from geographical and topographical sketches – the colonial land seems, then, unpopulated – and the stress on "landscape aesthetics is used to veil the ambition to conquer the land": Korte (2000, 92-93).

[98] Cohen (2010, 659). Also, Barbara Korte claims that by the mid-Victorian period, "once Europe had 'discovered' Australia, there were no more continents to be found": Korte (2000, 87).

[99] Its full title is *The Fighting Temeraire tugged to her last berth to be broken up, 1838* (1839). Turner is also famous for his renowned *Slave Ship* (*Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On* (1840), in Gilroy's view, an "invocation of racial terror, commerce, and England's ethico-political degeneration": Gilroy (2002, 16).

[100] Stein (1985, 168).

[101] Significantly, a strand of contemporary naval fiction, including authors such as Alexander Kent or Patrick O'Brian, focuses on the Royal Navy and the years around the Napoleonic Wars, just before the age of sail faded with the arrival of steamships.

[102] Conrad (2007, 24).

[103] Raban (1992, 17).

[104] Cobley (2007, 158).

[105] Hyslop (2014, 213).

[106] Cobley (2007, 156).

[107] Welch (2003, 92).

[108] The whale-ship *Essex* that set sail from the small island of Nantucket (next to the coast of New England) was sunk by a sperm whale in the Pacific Ocean in 1821. It is an event widely known in American maritime culture today and it allegedly inspired Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851).

[109] Philbrick (2001, 26).

[110] Jaffer (2015, 14).

[111] Philbrick (2001, 132).

[112] Jaffer (2015, 51-53).

[113] Peck (2001, 5).

[114] Linebaugh and Rediker (2000, 152).

[115] In his preface to *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966), Michel Foucault first developed his concept of heterotopia out of his analysis of Jorge Luis Borges's essay "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins" (1942). Foucault delves into Borges's "certain Chinese encyclopedia" and its bizarre animal taxonomy – See Borges (1964, 103) – to reflect on the arbitrariness of the linguistic categorisation and ordering of the world. Foucault then describes heterotopias as "disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy 'syntax' in advance … heterotopias … desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source": Foucault (2005, xix).

[116] Foucault (1986, 24).

[117] Johnson (2013, 797).

[118] Hetherington (2003, viii). My emphasis.

[119] Davis (2010, 663).

[120] Lefebvre (1991, 373).

[121] Soja (1996, 162). My emphasis. Soja unhooks his markedly spatial category Thirdspace from that of Bhabha's Third Space, which he describes as "occasionally teasingly on the edge of being a spatially ungrounded literary trope, a floating metaphor for a critical *historical* consciousness that inadvertently masks a continued privileging of temporality over spatiality": Soja (1996, 141-142). Original emphasis.

[122] Foucault (1986, 27). Original emphasis.

[123] Ibid., 26-27.

[124] DeLoughrey (2010, 704).

[125] Conrad (2007, 26).

[126] Dana (2001, 114).

[127] Witt (2001, 239-240)

[128] Pratt (2008, 8).

[129] Ibid., 7.

[130] Ibid., 244-245.

[131] Ibid., 9. Original emphasis.

[132] Ibid., 9.

[133] Low and Wolfreys (2005, 209).

[134] Pratt (2008, 7).

[135] Reitz (2004, xvii).

[136] Bragard (2008, 75).

[137] Ho (2012, 171-201). This final chapter, entitled "The Neo-Victorian-at-Sea: Toward a Global Memory of the Victorian," was republished under the same title in Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss's edited volume *Neo-Victorian Literature and Culture: Immersions and Revisitations* (2014).

[138] Ho (2012, 174).

[139] Among this growing corpus of sea novels set in the nineteenth-century, we might name Nora Hague's *Letters from an Age of Reason* (2001), Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers* (2000), Colum McCann's *TransAtlantic* (2013), Joseph O'Connor's *The Star of the Sea* (2004), Peter Behrens's *The Law of Dreams* (2006), Harry Thompson's *This Thing of Darkness* (2006), Nathaniel Philbrick's *In the Heart of the Sea* (2005), Carsten Jensen's *We, the Drowned* (2011), Shahida Rahman's *Lascar* (2012), Sarah Stovell's *The Night Flower* (2013) or Valerie Martin's *The Ghost of the Mary Celeste* (2014).

[140] Gabaccia and Hoerder (2011, 7)

[141] Taylor (2013, 11).

[142] Peck (2001, 3).

[143] Ibid., 133-134).

[144] Wegner (2014, 247).

[145] Marryat (1998, 44).

[146] Russell (1895, 21).

[147] Ibid., 76.

[148] Peck (2001, 5-6). It is quite significant that William Clark Russell, considered the greatest nautical novelist in the mid-Victorian era and admired by Oscar Wilde, Arthur Conan Doyle and Herman Melville, used female pseudonyms when he tried his hand at writing sensation fiction, being the sensation novel conventionally associated with a female readership at the time. See Nash (2014, 2-4).

[149] Pearson (2009, 695).

[150] See Klausman, Meinzerin and Kuhn (1997) and Smith (2004).

[151] Saartjie, or Sarah Baartman, was a South-African Khoikhoi woman who was taken to Europe under doubtful circumstances and was exhibited in freak shows all over Britain and France during the Napoleonic period. After her death in 1815, Sarah was dissected by the French anatomist Georges Cuvier, and her skeleton, brain and genitalia were exhibited in the Parisian Museum of Natural History well into the twentieth century, until she was finally expatriated to South Africa in 2002. Barbara Chase-Riboud's novel concurs with other non-fictional excavations into the historical Saartjie Baartman, such as Rachel Holmes's *The Hottentot Venus: The Life and Death of Saartjie Baartman: Born 1789 – Buried 2002* (2007) and Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully's *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus* (2009) or other creative engagements such as Elizabeth Alexander's *The Venus Hottentot: Poems* (1990) or Suzan-Lori Parks's play *Venus* (1996).

[152] Chase-Riboud (2004, 74).

[153] Ibid., 76-78.

[154] Ibid., 76.

[155] The Irish Famine, or Potato Famine, was a period of starvation and misery in Ireland between 1845 and 1851. In the mid-Victorian period, Irish peasant farmers were heavily dependent on potato crops for their daily diet. When the crop failed in 1845 with devastating effects, Irish peasants faced the prospect of emigrating or starving. See Hollet (1995, 11).

[156] Atwood (1997, 103).

[157] Ibid., 117. Obviously set against and in relation with Paul Gilroy's 'Black Atlantic', the Green Atlantic seeks to incorporate narrations and memories of transatlantic Irish crossings into the dialogues and critical debates of transatlantic exchanges in Atlantic studies. See O'Neill and Lloyd (2009).

[158] Carroll (2015, 76).

[159] Steinberg (2001, 191-197).

[160] Cobley (2007, 161).

[161] Kneale (2001, 2).

[162] Ibid., 413.

[163] Glendening (2013, 91-92).

[164] Kneale (2001, 442, 119).

[165] Ibid., 172.

[166] Gurnah (2001, 14).

[167] Ibid., 87.

[168] Moorthy (2010, 73).

[169] Gurnah (2001, 15).

[170] The Arab slave trade is the focus of another remarkable novel by Gurnah, *Paradise* (1994).

[171] Following Gwyn Campbell's *The Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (2004), Isabel Hofmeyr summarises the differences between Indian Ocean slavery and its Atlantic counterpart as follows: "The Indian Ocean trade was largely female, not male; it involved predominantly household slaves rather than plantation workers; the boundaries between slave and free

were much more blurred than in the Atlantic; and , furthermore, the association of race and slavery did not exist in any marked form" (Hofmeyr 2007, 11).

[172] Sam (1989, 1).

[173] A recent work that attempts to bring writers of Indian origin to the South African literary canvas is the edited volume by Felicity Hand and Esther Pujolràs-Noguer (2018).

[174] Sam (1989, 33).

[175] Bragard (2008, 112).

[176] Robbins (1998, 1). My emphasis.

[177] Robbins (2010, 422).

[178] Robbins (1998, 3)

[179] Goodlad (2009, 438).

[180] Desai (2000, 16).

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Chapter 3. Of Coolies, Lascars, and the *Kala Pani*: Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008)

Amitav Ghosh inaugurated his *Ibis* trilogy with the publication of *Sea of Poppies* in 2008, becoming an instant bestseller and being shortlisted for the 2008 Man Booker Prize.[1] The novel, set in 1838 in the context of the looming First Opium War (1839-1842), presents a motley crew of individuals whose fates are joined by the *Ibis*, a vessel sailing from Calcutta to Mauritius: Deeti, a North-Indian uppercaste peasant escaping her abusive in-laws who is saved from her funeral pyre by Kalua, an Indian lowcaste; Neel Rattan Halder, a bankrupt Indian *zemindar* (landowner) wrongly convicted of forgery who befriends Ah Fatt, a Parsi-Chinese fellow convict and opium addict; Zachary Reid, a mixed-race African-American sailor who manages to be promoted to second mate on board the *Ibis* on its arrival in Calcutta; Jodu, a Muslim boatman with personal ambitions to join a ship's crew; Paulette, a French orphan and daughter to a French botanist who grew up as an adoptive daughter to Jodu's family and is now trying to escape her English benefactors, the Burnhams; and Baboo Nob Kissin, a Bengali *gomusta* (clerk) to Mr Burnham, the *Ibis*'s owner, who has religious delusions about him sustaining a reincarnation to merge his soul and body to that of his deceased aunt and spiritual leader Ma Taramony. This wide array of characters and their individual perspectives shape the narrative tapestry which shapes the novel.

Despite the novel's foregrounding of the sea voyage in its title and book cover, Ghosh delays his cast of characters boarding the *Ibis* until the third part of the novel. The narration, subdivided into three parts, namely *Land*, *River* and *Sea*, adopts a microhistorical perspective, with the first two parts providing minute descriptions of the lives of North-Indian peasantry, river life and littoral Calcutta and the third section recording the voyage of the characters on the *Ibis* from Calcutta to the sugar plantation and penal colony of Mauritius. There are four contexts that I want to discuss in relation to the narration: the production and traffic of opium; indentureship and its relation to historical debates on slavery; the impact of sea travel on identity and changing notions of cosmopolitanism; and language diversity

around the Indian Ocean. All of these contexts shed light on *Sea of Poppies* as a sea narration.

The plot of the *Ibis* trilogy is dominated by two trades: the opium trade and the trade in indentured labourers. Whereas the latter is the main focus of *Sea of Poppies*, the first part in the narration pays heed to the cultivation and manufacture of opium and how it eventually pushed Indian peasants to become indentured labourers in overseas British colonies such as Mauritius, South Africa or the West Indies. Indeed, Amitav Ghosh has been credited to be "one of the few writers to examine the interwoven history of the imperial opium and indentured labor trades, whereas most scholars who specialize in these fields have tended to discuss them separately."[2]

The abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833 put an end to the providing of cheap labour in the sugar plantations. At the same time, the profitable monopoly enjoyed by the East India Company over the opium trade, in which the drug was produced and manufactured in India to be shipped to China, came under threat after the Chinese government repeatedly tried to suppress the influx of the drug into its coasts at the turn of the nineteenth century. These two factors coalesced to turn the recruitment and transportation of indentured labourers into a profitable trade.[3] Chinese restrictive policy on the inflow of opium into China is the concern of the free trader Mr Burnham, owner of the trading firm Burnham Bros and the *Ibis*: "there is nothing they [Chinese] want from us – they've got it into their heads that they have no use for our products and manufactures. But we, on the other hand, can't do without their tea and their silks."[4] This imbalance in trade in Anglo-Chinese commercial relations exposes the massive importance of opium for the British Empire at the time. Ghosh has pointed out in an interview the tendency of imperial historiography to gloss over the dependency of the British Empire on opium: "All this opium stuff is such a secret, it's not taught, it's not known, it's never spoken

about, the history books disguise it. Yet, there it was, the foundation of the British Empire was opium, it was the foundation of free markets, of capitalism."[5]

Although the passage from the novel quoted above illustrates Sino-British trade relations as a whole – a point I further develop in chapter 5 –, the narration's main concern with the opium trade deals with how the drug eventually pushes the subaltern characters to board the *Ibis* for Mauritius and how the cultivation of opium played havoc with Indian peasant life. The opening of the novel illustrates the extent to which the poisonous drug has taken over Deeti's household. The opening of *Sea of Poppies*, that shows how the production of opium has invaded the traditional Indian lifestyle under the British occupation, "produces a metaphor for Western imperialism on a par with Rudyard Kipling's bridge in *The Bridge Builders* and Joseph Conrad's river steamboat in *Heart of Darkness* ... this is an imperialism, both colorful and menacing, that invades the Indian heartland."[6]

As her husband has left for work in the Ghazipur's Opium Factory, Deeti and her daughter Kabutri exhibit how they have necessarily adapted their lifestyle to the enforced introduction of opium in India as they cook potatoes in poppy-seed paste and comb their hair in poppy-seed oil.[7] Further on, Deeti reflects upon the time-consuming process of growing opium:

> Fifteen ploughings of the land and every remaining clod to be broken by hand, with a dantoli; fences and bunds to be built; purchases of manure and constant watering; and after all that, the frenzy of the harvest, each bulb having to be individually nicked, drained and scraped. Such punishment was bearable when you had a patch or two of poppies.[8]

In the face of this painstaking process, Deeti wonders "what sane person would want to multiply these labours when there were better, more useful crops to grow, like wheat, dal, vegetables?"[9] As Ghosh's narrator further comments on the deceitful and coercive means by which *sahibs* (polite address for 'man') compelled North-Indian peasants to grow opium – forcing cash advances, forging the peasants' thumbprint, bribing white magistrates, we perceive Victorian free-trade imperialism

at its most merciless, upholding a Victorian global economy – under the banner of the East India Company – while simultaneously altering the Indian landscape into a sea of poppies, destroying the traditional Indian lifestyle and compelling the increasingly impoverished peasants to face starvation or become indentured labourers overseas.[10] In Eddy Kent's view:

> This description of the open collusion between State and Capital – made easy in the colonial sphere where the East India Company operated both as sovereign and merchant – shows the forcible ejection of colonial subjects out of their traditional livelihoods and *their placement within a cash economy ... in short, they have entered modernity and become proletarian*.[11]

Modernity in the Indian Ocean and the traffic of opium acquires conterminous signifiers to those in the Atlantic. If, as I have argued earlier, for African Americans crossing the Atlantic in the nineteenth century North-Atlantic modernity entailed a negotiation between the unacknowledged memory of slavery and access to citizenship, for Indian subjects implicated in indentureship access to modernity implied getting involved in a vast network of global capital and markets as their only way out of misery and towards upward mobility.

To further confirm the opium trade as the main engine of Victorian industrial capitalism, Ghosh provides a memorable passage narrating Deeti's visit to Ghazipur's Opium Factory. Although, as the narrator observes, "there was nothing about [the factory's] exterior to suggest to an onlooker that it was among the most precious jewels in Queen Victoria's crown", the industrial, quasi-Gothic, undertones of the interior of the factory highlight the connection between the opium traffic and Victorian imperialism.[12] With the opium fumes intoxicating the air and Indian factory workers "sunk waist-deep in tanks of opium," like an "enslaved tribe of demons" with "the look of ghouls," this passage reveals the industrial scale of the opium production and the transference of the logic of industrial capitalism from Victorian Britain to the Indian subcontinent.[13] This transaction between the imperial centre and the colonial periphery is underlined when the narrator explains that, for the

production of opium, "every ingredient was precisely laid down by the Company's directors in faraway London."[14]

For his description of the opium factory, Ghosh has claimed in an interview to have relied on a rare book published in 1865 in Calcutta, J. W. S. MacArthur's "Notes on an Opium Factory," which he came across in the British Library. In the interview, Ghosh states:

> How amazing it was to learn about how the opium was processed: the directors of the East India Company, sitting in London, would send directions about how every ball of opium had to have so many chittacks [ounces], how there had to be just so many leaves...it was a completely industrialised process. We talk about Henry Ford rationalising the industrial process, but these guys were doing it much earlier.[15]

In his commentary on this interview, Eddie Kent claims that "in positioning 'these guys' as the forerunners of Henry Ford ... Ghosh situates the East India Company at the origins of rationalised industrialism, an argument that discloses the diachronic intention of his novel."[16] This diachronic intention is articulated, Kent cleverly argues, by establishing in the reader's imagination the production and global circulation of opium in the Victorian era as "the precursor for manufacturing under the direction of the multinational corporation, where an executive working at corporate headquarters in a global city designs a process that takes place in the global periphery, where regulations are few, taxes and wages are low, and lives are cheap."[17]

This diachronic parallelism is further cemented by invoking contemporary capitalist globalization and the Western neo-liberal consumption of cheaply manufactured products – at the expense of maintaining the asymmetrical position of underdeveloped economies – in the growing appetite and dependence of opium not only in the increasingly intoxicated Chinese subjects but in Victorian subjects as well – including, Mr Burnham points out, "our beloved Queen herself" – who are described as heavily dependent on morphine, narcotine and laudanum.[18] The

manufacture of opium is presented then as a centripetal industry with the Indian subcontinent and Indian subalterns as its core and Britain and China as its transoceanic outposts.

If the manufacture of opium features prominently in the first chapters of *Sea of Poppies*, it is the trade in South-Asian indentured labourers that dominates the rest of the narration. Indenture is deemed today a minor vector of Asian mobility in the nineteenth century, indentured workers being highly outnumbered by millions of Asian migrants who travelled un-indentured for trade or in the service of the British Empire. John McKeown points out that "less than 10 percent of Indians and 4 percent of Chinese emigrants were ever directly indentured to Europeans. Most migration was organized along lines broadly similar to the transatlantic migrations."[19] Nevertheless, the statistically insignificant number of indentured labourers within global networks of migration in the Victorian era has not prevented the indenture system from being widely discussed in historiography. The shadows of coercion and violence which surrounded the indenture system in the Victorian era have attracted wide scholarly attention, which has often polarised into progressive views which considered indentureship as an avenue for improvement and possibilities for labourers, and critical views which emphasised the exploitation and quasi-slavery conditions under which labourers were recruited, transported and put to work in the overseas colonies.

One of the earliest critical and documented accounts of indentureship was that provided by Joseph Beaumont in 1871, *The New Slavery: An Account of the Indian and Chinese Immigrants in British Guiana*. As the title unambiguously indicates, early critical views on indenture signalled the affinities between the system and the abolished chattel slavery. Among other claims, Beaumont points out the discrepancy between the terms in the indenture contract and the actual conditions in the destination (in terms of pay, security and health), the harsh discipline in the plantations, the impossibility for labourers to move beyond two miles from their

estate, the poor conditions in medical assistance and housing and the difficulties for labourers to effectively get a passage back to Asia.[20] After outlining all these grievances out of first-person accounts, Beaumont emphatically states:

> This is not a question of more or less, of this or that safeguard, or an occasional defect here, or excess there. But it is that of a monstrous, rotten system, rooted upon slavery, grown in its stale soil, emulating its worst abuses, and only the more dangerous because it presents itself under false colours, whereas slavery bore the brand of infamy upon its forehead.[21]

The rhetoric of constructing indentured labour as a new slavery reaches the twentieth century, with works such as Hugh Tinker's *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas* (1974) and the more recent Ron Ramdin's edition and publication of *The Other Middle Passage: Journal of a Voyage from Calcutta to Trinidad, 1858* (1994), that retrieves the voyage of the ship *Salsette* as recounted by its captain E. Swinton (along with comments by his wife Jane, who was also on board).[22] In twenty-first-century criticism, scholars have kept discussing South-Asian labour migration around the debate 'new slavery' vs. 'free labour' or foregrounding further analogies with other systems of oppression or labour regimes such as the system of convict transportation.[23]

Among the scholars who have argued against the neo-slavery theory is Verene A. Shepherd. On the one hand, Shepherd acknowledges many of the grievances of the indenture system outlined above, pointing out additionally the coercive means by which labourers were recruited (occasionally recruitment involved kidnappings) and signalling recorded cases of sexual abuse on female Indians by the recruiters and the crew on board.[24] Nevertheless, she seems to demonstrate that indentureship, for all its violence and coercion, was short of the brutality of chattel slavery and she does so by pointing out abysmal differences between both systems: slaves were deemed chattel (i.e. as their master's property they could be sold, exchanged, etc.); slavery was for life whereas indenture was temporal and under

contract; and, in opposition to indentureship, slaves' children inherited the condition of slavery after their progenitors.[25]

Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* adopts a somewhat in-between position in the debate on indenture. The narration certainly points out the coercive aspects of indenture and presents the system as the natural inheritor of slavery in the nineteenth century. However, for Deeti, indenture seems her only way out of the tyranny of her in-laws after the death of her husband. As Deeti realises that her husband, Hukam Singh, is impotent due to his opium addiction, she learns that she was impregnated on her wedding night by her brother-in-law Chandan Singh, with her mother-in-law's consent. When her opium-addicted husband dies and Deeti rejects Chandan's sexual advances, she faces being burned in her husband's funeral pyre. However, in a reversal of Gayatri C. Spivak's catchphrase 'white men saving brown women from brown men', it is a brown man, the low-caste Kalua, who saves Deeti from her sati.[26] After sending Kabutri to her brother's village to avoid her becoming a servant to her husband's family, Deeti and Kalua have no option but becoming *girmitiyas* (indentured labourers) on the *Ibis* to escape Deeti's in-laws. Just like Deeti, Paulette is also a victim of gender violence and abuse from her benefactors, the Burnhams. Paulette must confront both Mrs Burnham's insistence on her marrying the stern judge Mr Kendalbushe against her will and Mr Burnham's morbid requests to spank his buttocks. Dressing herself as an Indian woman, Paulette stocks away in the *Ibis* as a coolie. For Deeti and Paulette, indenture, despite all its shortcomings, represents the prospect of a break-away with the past and a new life overseas.

Nevertheless, Ghosh's narration is keen to establish continuities between the abolished chattel slavery and the new system of indenture. As virtually every scholar on the novel has signalled, the *Ibis* is an old slaving ship which has been refitted for new purposes: the transportation of opium and, as the latter has been interrupted due to Chinese pressure, coolies. When Jodu first inspects the *dabusa*

(hold) of the ship where coolies are to be located during the voyage to Mauritius, he experiences first-hand the past of the ship:

> Falling to his knees, he discovered that there were several such chains in the pen, nailed into the far beam: they ended in bracelet-like clasps, each fitted with eyeholes, for locks. The weight and heft of the chains made Jodu wonder what sort of cargo they were intended to restrain ... the stench that permeated the hold was not that of cows, horses or goats; it was more a human odour, compounded of sweat, urine, excrement and vomit; the smell had leached so deep into the timbers as to have become ineradicable.[27]

Similarly, later on Deeti fixes her attention on nail marks on the timber of the beam under which she sleeps, developing a sort of physical intimacy with the marks left by the slaves who crossed the Atlantic crammed in the hold of the vessel:

> Never was Deeti more grateful for the beam's proximity than during the first days of the voyage, when she was still unaccustomed to the vessel's motion: it gave her something to hold on to, and she found that she could lessen the whirling sensation in her head by focusing her eyes on the wood. In this way, despite the half-light of the dabusa, she became intimately familiar with that length of timber, learning to recognize its grain, its whorls and even the little scratches that had been carved into its surface by the nails of others who had lain where she lay.[28]

This physical, almost organic connection with the former slaves in the infamous Middle Passage allows for a palimpsestic reading of the ship. The physical traces left by former slaves on the hold not only connect the histories of the Atlantic to those of the Indian Ocean but also highlight a continuity between analogous systems of oppression. I would argue that Ghosh does not conflate slavery with indentureship but he rather makes both regimes participants in the same system of power – western global capitalism. The experiences of slavery and indentureship, even if they may not be equated, might be seen as conterminous with the propelling of power and capital of western capitalism.

Thus, the chronotope of the *Ibis* signals the ship not only as a geographical location but also as a trope for *presence/absence* of ongoing and shifting forms of

colonial oppression, which ties in with neo-historical fiction's preoccupation with the past and its material effects in the present. The shipspace, as portrayed in *Sea of Poppies*, transcends its spatial dimension and becomes a powerful trope of historical continuity which illustrates the historical narrations' emphasis on presentness and preservation and the increasing abandonment of postmodern discourses on the irretrievability of the past more broadly.[29]

Slavery and indentureship are therefore both participant of the same system of capitalist exploitation. This is suggested by the *Ibis*' owner Mr Burnham, who argues that "a hold that was designed to carry slaves will serve just as well to carry coolies and convicts ... 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."[30] Motivated by dubious notions of *freedom*, Mr Burnham reads indentureship as the obvious inheritor of slavery in the face of the growing abolitionist movement: "Have you not heard it said that when God closes one door he opens another? When the doors of freedom were closed to the African, the Lord opened them to a tribe that was yet more needful of it – the Asiatick."[31] In this sense, the significance of *Sea of Poppies* lies in implicating the Victorian Age in the history of slavery, arguably finished and abolished by the time of Queen Victoria's accession to the throne.

Together with the chronotope of the *Ibis*, the most powerful link between Atlantic slavery and South-Asian indenture is Zachary Reid, the light-skinned African American who is promoted to Second Mate on the *Ibis*. Ghosh underscores Reid's links to the Atlantic tradition in the character's recollection of an episode involving Frederick Douglass:

> For the first time in many months, [Zachary's] vision turned inwards, travelling back across the oceans to his last day at Gardiner's shipyard in Baltimore. He saw again a face with a burst eyeball, the scalp torn open where a handspike had landed, the dark skin slick with blood. He remembered, as if it were happening again, the encirclement of Freddy Douglass, set upon by four white carpenters ... That was when Zachary had decided to quit the shipyard and seek a berth on a ship's crew.[32]

Zachary remembers his encounter with Frederick Douglass as the episode which drove him towards the sea. In this, Ghosh is making Reid participant in the liberatory potential of the Atlantic for African Americans that I outlined in chapter 2. Nevertheless, his transatlantic passage proves to be far from liberating for Zachary for he sees a reimposition of landed epistemologies of race upon his persona: as the *Ibis* sails away from Baltimore, Reid is listed as 'Black' in the crew record, compromising his performance of 'white' seamanship and reinscribing the archival violence of the Middle Passage.[33]

However, as Jacob Crane cleverly observes, the *Ibis*'s voyage reaches a turning point at the very border of the Atlantic, Cape Town, where the *Ibis* is joined by lascars.[34] As the vessel is berthed in South Africa, most of the sailors desert her, which enables Zachary to eventually become first mate. Cape Town emerges as the limit between the conceptual boundaries of the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans. In Crane's view:

> It is Zachary's ability to cross this arbitrary line-in-the-water that reaffirms a homology between Western and Eastern counter-narratives of modernity. Only beyond the borders of Gilroy's ... black Atlantic system ... do the monolithic discursive structures of race in modernity start to break down.[35]

Atlantic epistemologies of race collapse in the first encounter between Zachary Reid and Baboo Nob Kissin. A vehement devotee of Krishna – whose name means *black* – Nob Kissin looks for signs of the arrival of the 'Dark Lord' on earth. As he listens to Reid playing his old penny-whistle, Nob Kissin considers Reid can be the emissary of Krishna on earth – the Hindu deity is usually portrayed with a flute in Indian iconography – which prompts Nob Kissin to detect traces of *darkness* in the American sailor.[36] As Nob Kissin further notices the notation 'Black' next to Zachary's name in the logbook, he sees the inscription not as an indication that Reid is an African American passing for white, but as proof that the sailor is actually an emissary from the Dark Lord Krishna on Earth.[37]

Baboo Nob Kissin's misreading of Zachary's racial identity not only indicates Nob Kissin's religious delusions but also attests for blackness to adopt alternative signifiers in the Indian Ocean, beyond the memory of the Black Atlantic and the racialised violence of the Atlantic archive. Zachary's position in the *Ibis* is compromised at the end of the novel when Mr Crowle, "wielding the coercive power of the archive," finds the logbook page recording the African American's racial identity and blackmails him into hijacking the *Ibis*.[38]

Zachary Reid illustrates, in Rudrani Gangopadhyay's words, "a surrogate for black Atlantic memory, harking back to another history of sea crossing and locating the novel within another discourse of diaspora and migration." [39]The African American sailor illustrates, then, Ghosh's attempt to relocate the memory of the black Atlantic *beyond* the borders of the Atlantic and to render visible the interconnections between Atlantic and Indian Oceans (and their respective systems of oppression, slavery and indentureship) by pushing the boundaries of Gilroy's Black Atlantic model towards the East and throwing in relief the regimes of each oceanic basin. It is quite illustrative that Ghosh's mapping of Indian Ocean interactions in the *Ibis* series is triangulated between China, India and East Africa, clearly mirroring the transatlantic triangular trade between Britain, Africa and the Americas that articulates Gilroy's Black Atlantic model.[40] The fact that Zachary, a proxy for the Black Atlantic model, become enmeshed in the Indian-Ocean-specific trade of indentured labourers – and in *Flood of Fire*, actively involved in the opium industry – underscores the centrality of the American character to facilitate Ghosh's tracing of the historical continuities and transoceanic transactions between the Atlantic and Indian Oceans.

Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* seems fuelled by a drive to retrieve the persona and psyche of the coolie among the quantitative records of nineteenth-century world migration. The absence of first-person accounts of coolie experiences has triggered the figure of the South-Asian indentured labourer to be constructed either by

external viewpoints or, occasionally, by the labourers' contemporary descendants.[41] This cultural invisibility becomes even more accentuated if the coolie is placed against slaves in the Atlantic tradition, who set about initiating projects of memory and healing in their slave narratives and whose cultural legacy is underpinned by the neo-slave narrative genre. In this sense, Isabel Hofmeyr argues, "the Indian Ocean has been home to failed diasporas, notably people who move but do not embark on projects of cultural memory and constructing homelands."[42]

Shanthini Pillai, out of her exploration of accounts of indentured labourers such as the colonial official H. L. Stevenson's *Burma Legislative Council* or George Orwell's *Burmese Days* (1934), points out that representations of the coolie often highlight his/her misery, docility and outcast status.[43] *Sea of Poppies* springs from similar attempts to resignify the figure of the South-Asian indentured labourer that forgo the representations alluded by Pillai. The word 'coolie' itself, at the time used derogatorily, has been re-appropriated by Indo-African and Caribbean scholars and writers to challenge traditional representations of indentureship. Rajkumari Singh, for instance, asserts that the word "coolie" "conjures up poignancy, tears, defeats, achievements" but he argues that "the word must not be left to die out, buried and forgotten in the past. It must be given a new lease of life."[44] Likewise, the Mauritian poet Khal Torabully uses the term *coolitude* to reclaim the experience of indentureship, for all the suffering it involved, as a transformative crossroads of different cultural experiences in opposition to essentialist notions of culture which reductively gravitate around one race, ethnicity or religion. In Torabully's words, coolitude "symbolizes, in its broader definition, the possibility of building a composite identity to ease the pain and enrich culturally the lands in which [the coolie] settled."[45] Coolitude as seen through Ghosh's novel features as a category which defies boundaries of race, language and caste, and at the same time, it retrieves the humanity of the coolie as an agent in charge of creatively reconceptualising his or her identity in the face of adversity, dislocation and uprootedness.

That said, the most salient aspect of coolitude in *Sea of Poppies* is the impact of sea travel on the coolie's identity. The oceanic voyage through the Indian Ocean is particularly dramatic for Hindu characters in the narration since in Hindu mythology and especially for high caste Hindus the crossing of the *Kala Pani*, or Black Water was associated with impurity and the loss of caste. The iconic Mahatma Gandhi records this Hindu taboo with sea travelling in his autobiography. In 1888, as he was preparing to leave Bombay for England to pursue law studies, Gandhi recalls his family's misgivings upon him crossing the seas, despite Gandhi's own confidence in his decision and the fact that the taboo was gradually disappearing in the second half of the nineteenth century.[46] Conversely, and as I have argued before, Kenneth McPherson points out certain coastal communities in the Indian subcontinent, such as the Chettiars, the Gujaratis, the Paravas or the Mappilas, who engaged in transoceanic trade around the Indian Ocean in the pre-colonial period and had no concerns for Hindu taboos on sea travel.[47]

The most extreme exponent of the stern caste system in India, as represented in the novel, is Neel Rattan Halder, the fallen *zemindar* and Bengali aristocrat fraudulently convicted to transportation to Mauritius. The strict standards of caste and purity are illustrated in Neel's behaviour and habits before his conviction: he avoids shaking hands with foreigners – unless he carries out a bath and change of clothes afterwards –, he cannot sit to eat with foreigners, his food is prepared according to strict rules, and he cannot eat anything prepared by a foreigner or an individual from an unknown caste. This firm system of caste boundaries and orthodox rules of purity is blown up when Neel is taken to Alipore Jail and he is compelled to clean up the faeces and vomit of his cell mate, the Parsi-Chinese and opium addict Ah Fatt – in Neel's words, "the incarnate embodiment of his loathings" – who suffers from incontinence because of withdrawal symptoms.[48] The moment in which Neel takes the *jharu* (broom) and scoop is illustrated as a moment of transformation for his self, for "he knew that he would cease to be the man he had been a short while before."[49] This carnivalesque fixation on scatological images, Nicole Thiara argues,

"lends itself to a critique of caste ... but it also opens up a space for the denigration of colonialism and its civilizing mission."[50]

If bodily taboos in the Indian caste system are articulated around the character of Neel, the Hindu taboo with the sea voyage is nevertheless voiced through the character of Deeti. Her religious background, just like Neel's, is closely attached to India as a sacred land and is strictly articulated around the rigid caste system. Indeed, as Rai and Pinkney point out, Indians of particular high castes could face exclusion, ostracism and loss of caste on their return from overseas lands.[51] As the coolies are about to get on board and Deeti expresses her anxiety over crossing the *Kala Pani* in the presumably polluting company of people from all walks of life, it is the feisty and clever Paulette who manages to soothe Deeti's fears:

> On a boat of pilgrims, no one can lose caste and everyone is the same: it's like taking a boat to the temple of Jagannath, in Puri. From now on, and forever afterwards, we will all be ship-siblings – *jaházbhais* and *jaházbahens* – to each other. There'll be no differences between us.[52]

The fluidity of the sea crossing enables the flattening of caste and class differences among radically diverse cultural groups out of a shared collectivity and traumatic dislocation. As victims of Victorian imperialism, the ship-siblings on board turn the *Ibis* into the Third Space of diaspora, as it is suggested by Deeti's reaction to Paulette's comforting words: "her new self, her new life, had been gestating all this while in *the belly of this creature, this vessel that was the Mother-Father of her new family*, a great wooden *mái-báp*, an adoptive ancestor and parent of dynasties yet to come: here she was, the *Ibis*."[53] The womb imagery exhibited in this fragment illustrates the ship as heterotopia, a space inserted in structures of Western imperial domination but prone to provide possibilities of transgression and generation of new hybrid identities. In this sense, the vessel as womb further suggests the conterminous boundaries of the ship constructed as Third Space and heterotopia, that is, as a locus which is spatially identified with the very inception of

resistance but whose transgressive effects suggest indeed a *temporal* subversive take on identity as a result of provisional "spaces of alternate ordering."[54]

The lasting communion between the ship-siblings on board the *Ibis* is recorded in Deeti's shrine in Mauritius, the heroine's memorial to the multicultural community on board the *Ibis* which is presented to the reader in several flash-forward references throughout the narration. This shrine features as a material afterimage of the shape-shifting character of identities in the maritime crossing. That the subaltern individuals boarding the *Ibis* are developing new identities is underscored by the characters being renamed before and throughout the sea voyage. As Mr Doughty fails to transcribe Indian names correctly, Deeti and Kalua are re-christened Aditi and Maddow Colver, respectively. The *zemindar* Neel Rattan Halder is deprived of his nobility titles to be referred to as simply Neel. Zachary Reid is called *Malum* (Mate) Zikri by the lascars on board, including the Serang (and former pirate) Ali and Paulette is alternatively referred to as Paulette, Putli or Pugli. The multiplicity of names attests for the identity of the diasporic subject to be in permanent transformation.

The coolies on board the *Ibis* constitute an 'actually existing' form of cosmopolitanism;[55] they are a group of outcast individuals who have become enmeshed in a global network of capitalist interests and therefore have become "cosmopolitan against their will."[56] The cosmopolitan character exhibited by the coolie characters on board the *Ibis* therefore records recent conceptualisations of cosmopolitanism out of coercive networks of migration and eschews "the predominant focus in contemporary postcolonial criticism on the celebratory elements of exile and displacement, the *heroic* potential of migrancy as a metaphor for a 'new' form of aesthetic freedom."[57] Ghosh's carefully woven patchwork of subaltern encounters and the fluidity of the protagonists' increasingly cosmopolitan identities under the coercion of indenture illustrate also "an attempt to reinscribe an Indian Ocean cosmopolitanism into the history of the ocean that is seen to have been eroded over time under

European—particularly British—imperial rule from the later nineteenth century and through the politics of postcolonial states."[58]

Significantly, the sea migrants on the *Ibis* strive to make sense of their newly globalised identities while trying to retain some *Indianness*. This is illustrated when Sarju, a coolie midwife dying of seasickness and exhaustion, gives Deeti some Indian seeds in small pouches: ganja (cannabis), datura and poppy. For Deeti and Sarju the seeds represent the promise of a continuation of their Indian culture in their future land, Mauritius, and a material link with their native homeland. Later on, when Deeti moves to deck and sits with Kalua, she notices that a seed of poppy is caught under her thumbnail. As Deeti dislodges the poppy seed and places it on her palm, she looks in awe at "this minuscule orb – at once bountiful and all-devouring, merciful and destructive, sustaining and vengeful ... it is the star that took us from our homes and put us on this ship. It is the planet that rules our destiny."[59] For Deeti, whose psyche has been but newly unmoored from her rural India, equating the tiny seed of opium with a planet seems the closest available metaphor to make sense of her and the coolies' position within a global cash economy.

Ghosh's rendition of the sea voyage as a catalyst for the collapse of caste, race and cultural boundaries does not prevent the narration from paying heed to the brutal aspects of colonialism on board. The growing intimacy and connection between the *girmityas* are altered when Jodu and Munia, a Muslim and a Hindu respectively, are caught in a rendezvous and Kalua and Deeti's identities are uncovered. Violence erupts as Kalua is tortured on deck by the subedar Bhyro Singh, a colonized subject himself at the service of the colonial structures that oppress him but simultaneously upgrade him in the colonial ladder. After Kalua counterattacks and kills the Subedar, Kalua, Serang Ali, Neel and Ah Fatt escape the *Ibis* on a boat. The ship as heterotopia may facilitate an alternate order of things but it is still linked to colonial structures of power. Ship-heterotopias as seen through the colonial context which informs the novel may become channels for temporary and protean

reconfigurations of identity but also for new regimes of power which illustrate the asymmetrical positions occupied by different colonised groups within the complex web of imperial hierarchies.

If the sea voyage in *Sea of Poppies* pays heed to the collapse of caste boundaries, the narration is no less attentive to the ocean as a locality for gender transgression. William Hasty and Kimberly Peters have identified in recent heterotopic approaches to the sea voyage by social geographers a "notion of the ship as a site of alternative orderings and a place where the conventions of identity – figured in terms of class, gender, race, nationality, and so on – are subverted."[60] More specifically Philip E. Steinberg claims that "as a space that is almost universally represented as female but that is populated overwhelmingly by males, the ocean is an arena of intense gendering processes, which impact and reflect social conceptions of gender at sea and on land."[61] Ghosh points to these gender processes when he describes lascar sailors who, "unlike sailors elsewhere, often spoke of their ships in the masculine."[62]

A more remarkable example of gender transgression in *Sea of Poppies* is that of Mr Burnham's *gomusta*, Baboo Nob Kissin. His delusive perception of his body receiving the spirit of Ma Taramoni triggers him to adopt conventionally feminine codes throughout the sea voyage by letting his hair loose in long ringlets, wearing female dresses and necklaces, and imitating Taramoni's swaying hips. In Heilmann and Llewellyn's view, "this flamboyant character's spiritual and bodily hybridity expresses itself in a progressively subversive rejection of imperial codes of gender purity through the public cultivation of femininity."[63] This unorthodox behaviour occurs much to the distress of the Victorian imperialist Mr Burnham, who scornfully claims when observing Baboo Nob Kissin's 'womanish' appearance: "Man and woman? God made them both as they were, Baboon, and there's nothing illusory about either, nor is there anything in between."[64] Baboo Nob Kissin's act of

gender crossing therefore challenges imperial gender codes and subvert land-locked gendered constructs of behaviour.

Sea of Poppies also exhibits a zealous determination to undermine the nineteenth-century maritime experience as exclusively male. For this purpose, Ghosh not only foregrounds Deeti and Paulette, and their respective perspectives on sea travel, as key generators in the narration, but he also uses feminine metaphors to shed light on the indenture experience or uses female characters to channel recent historiographic perspectives which challenge the sea as an all-male domain. For example, as Rai and Pinkney observe, Deeti's arrival in the hold of the *Ibis* just before weighing anchor, as she feels observed by the other female coolies, is compared to "the examination of a new bride by her husband's neighbours."[65] For Rai and Pinkney, this metaphor is noteworthy since

> it neatly underscores the notion of exile that is at the core of the diasporic condition. Nuptial alliances in the vast majority of South Asian communities are patrilocal, meaning that, upon the occasion of marriage, the bride leaves her natal place and shifts to her husband's family's place of residence ... in seeking to capture the girmitiyas' sense of banishment, Ghosh consciously employs a feminine metaphor in evoking the trope of a bride's exile.[66]

Nevertheless, Ghosh's most decisive drive to counterbalance the traditional all-male construction of the sea is channelled through Paulette. The French orphan, in her attempt to escape the Burnhams, is determined to stock away in the *Ibis* by disguising herself as a lascar. Her plan is eschewed by Baboo Nob Kissin, who manages instead to infiltrate her on board with the rest of female *girmitiyas*, but Paulette's motives for cross-dressing as a male mariner are revealing: she claims to be the grand-niece of Jeanne Baret, also known as Madame Commerson.[67]

A true historical figure, the Frenchwoman and scientist Jeanne Baret (1740-1816) is credited today to have been the first woman to circumnavigate the earth. Disguised as a man, Baret served as botanical assistant to Philibert Commerson, a

French naturalist and botanist who joined Louis Antoine de Bougainville in a French scientific expedition around the globe between 1766 and 1769.[68] In reclaiming her ancestry to the remarkable Jean Baret, Paulette seeks to discredit Zachary's claim – and the readers' expectations – that "there sure aren't any woman marines."[69] Additionally, Paulette's reclamation seems informed by recent historiography which unveils maritime culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a remarkable arena for "forging modern gender identities."[70] This line of research on maritime gender transgression, which often focuses on female pirates, seems to be recording a continuum in the appropriation of the sea to challenge and subvert landed gendered norms.[71]

To close this chapter, a context of the novel that is crucial to understand the polyculturalism exhibited in the narration is language. The heteroglossic character of Ghosh's narration reveals a strikingly hybrid perspective of the Indian Ocean and its watery routes.[72] Ghosh's literary strategies when dealing with language are varied and complex. To begin with, the author blows away any stable category of standard English by breaking the language into multiple varieties of English which coexist and are in friction with each other. To the American English articulated by Zachary Reid, Ghosh juxtaposes the Anglo-Indian language spoken by long-time British residents in India (Mr Doughty, Mrs Burnham), the Baboo English of Bengali clerks (Baboo Nob Kissin) or Pidgin Chinese-inflected English (Ah Fatt). On the other hand, Ghosh tries to resurrect Laskari, the nautical jargon used by lascars which was composed of a vast array of linguistic influences including English, Arabic, Portuguese, and Hindi. To further complicate this polyphonic narration, Ghosh infuses the text with words from other languages, including Bengali, Urdu, Bhojpuri, Hindi, French or Chinese.

This medley of languages exhibited by Ghosh's characters is the author's most vivid strategy to reveal the polyculturalism of the Indian Ocean and underscore the characters' personalities and emotional sinews. The reader may be bewildered

in the first pages by the polyphonic character of the text but as the narration progresses, these motley voices are perceived as flowing naturally from the characters and they stand out as Ghosh's main strategy of revealing the characters' conflicts. In *The Dialogic Imagination* (1982) Mikhail Bakhtin argues that "language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the border between oneself and the other."[73] Following this, I argue that Ghosh constructs a notion of language as another *contact zone*, in Mary Louise Pratt's terms, in which language friction is a basic axiom articulating self-other relations and the diasporic experience.

Ghosh's creative use of the cohabitation of different languages in his narration represents the hybridity and multiplicity of his identity as a writer. Ghosh has made pointed note in diverse interviews of the reciprocated influence between English and eastern languages. On the one hand he has noted the influence of English on Bengali syntax and literature.[74] On the other hand, regarding Indian words used by English characters in *Sea of Poppies*, he has emphatically pointed out that "80 per cent of them are in the complete Oxford English Dictionary, they are English words."[75] In light of the Asian influence on English in the nineteenth century, Ghosh states that "if we [Asian writers] are going to write in this language at all, then we must reclaim for it what it historically had."[76] This "mutual interconnection" between English and Indian forms of expression must be recognised, in Ghosh's view, "as a source of strength and richness as opposed to something else," an idea that, I argue, should be productively extended to postcolonial states and diasporic cultures in general to signal their privileged interstitial stance to comment on the shortcomings of both colonising and colonised cultures.[77] In the same fashion, Ghosh's portrayal of the linguistic cross-fertilisation between English and Indian languages in the nineteenth century contributes to set Victorianism within a larger "Victorian geopolitical aesthetic" which re-situates Victorian culture as permeable to the manifold colonial cultures with which it came into contact in nineteenth-century global cosmopolitan networks.[78]

One of the idioms that Ghosh seeks to retrieve in *Sea of Poppies* is the Anglo-Indian variety of English used by British residents in India during the British Raj. Rudyard Kipling's work already illustrated Anglo-Indian life from a linguistic point of view, his texts being peppered with words from Indian vernacular languages. Nevertheless, as Lise Guilhamon cleverly observes, the Indian words used by the characters in Ghosh's novel do not reproduce the Indian pronunciation but rather the manifold ways in which British living in India mispronounced and misspelt those words.[79] In contradistinction to earlier Indian English novels, *Sea of Poppies* does not provide a glossary at the end of the text nor are the warped words translated or clarified – except for Deeti's interventions in Bhojpuri. The results of this strategy are jarring dialogues that lead to linguistic friction and misunderstanding – and the reader's linguistic defamiliarisation.

Mr Doughty, who has been living in India for over twenty-five years, is a telling example of this linguistic intermixture; he uses words such as *cuzzanah* (money), *tumasher* (show, spectacle) or *gudda* (donkey, fool) much to the bafflement of Zachary Reid.[80] Exchanges between Mrs Burnham and Paulette present scenes of further linguistic confusion – given the French background of the latter – and feature among the few moments of comic relief in the narration. For instance, when Mrs Burnham wrongfully thinks Paulette is pregnant, she inquires on the matter by using an Anglo-Indian equivalent of a common English expression – "there isn't a rootie [bun] in the choola [oven], is there?" – which Paulette misunderstands as having an upset stomach.[81]

English language is not the exclusive domain of British characters though. The Raja Neel Rattan Halder exhibits an excellent mastery of English language and culture, and this gains him the mistrust of the British characters in general and the disdain of Mr Doughty in particular. This linguistic dexterity has allowed him to keep a privileged position among the Indian elite because of his long-established business relations with English merchants. As his trade relations with Mr Burnham

put him unjustly in prison, Neel starts to reconceptualise English as a tool of resistance against the colonisers. He finds out so when he unsettles the colonial serjeant in Alipore Jail, "simply by virtue of addressing him in his own [English] tongue – a thing that was evidently counted as an act of intolerable insolence in an Indian convict, a defilement of the language."[82] Finding out the subversive potential for an Indian native to speak perfect English, Need decides that "in the rest of his life as a convict, he would speak English whenever possible."[83]

Neel equally appropriates the English language as a medium to become the *Ibis* community's chronicler and lexicographer and as a tool of communication with Ah Fatt, his fellow convict in Alipore Jail and in the *chokey* of the *Ibis*.[84] Joined by their misery and their victimhood under the tyranny of colonial justice, Neel and Ah Fatt, Bhojpuri- and Chinese-speaker respectively, use pidgin English as an in-between medium that becomes "a gateway to humanity and understanding, the language of intimacy and connection."[85] The inquisitive Paulette witnesses the increasingly close connection between the two convicts:

> After yet another stolen glance, [Paulette] saw that the two men were now speaking to each other, and this further excited her curiosity ... What language might they share, this skeletal Easterner and this tattooed criminal? ... when she put her ear to a seam in the wood, she found, to her astonishment, that she could not only hear what was being said, but understand it too – for, amazingly, the two convicts were conversing in English.[86]

As Ah Fatt starts to unravel and narrate his memories to Neel, both come to develop a shared envisioning of their outcast status and to get over race and nationality boundaries. Ah Fatt's descriptions of his birth town Guangzhou (Canton) and his half-Chinese half-Parsi ancestry play a particularly evocative effect on Neel, who starts to displace his admiration for British cultural heritage towards cultures and heritages geographically more accessible, including his own repressed Bhojpuri language and culture. As Neel listens to Ah Fatt's cherished childhood memories from his Chinese mother in Canton and Deeti and the other women's Bhojpuri songs

through the air duct in the chokey, his memories start to retrieve the 'rustic' Bhojpuri language of his childhood which his father compelled him to unlearn in favour of Hindustani, English, and Persian to "communicate with those who held the reins of power."[87] Neel's recuperation of the Bhojpuri of his childhood illustrates the almost transcendental character that *local* colonial cultures, effaced by imperial violence, acquire when situated in the waters of transoceanic diaspora, again highlighting the fluid interplay between the global and the local in oceanic interactions.

What truly transpires out of Ah Fatt's boyhood memories from Canton is that he represents an alternative model of hybridity beyond English culture and language. In his recollections, Ah Fatt describes how Bahram Moddie, his Parsi father, has ambitions for him to learn English, play cricket and travel someday to the West. Ironically, for the Chinese-raised Ah Fatt, "the West in question was somewhat nearer at hand; in fact it was intended to be none other than Mr Moddie's very own homeland – Hindusthan, or Jambudvipa as it was called in the old books."[88] In contradistinction to his father's colonised mind, who states that the real West is "France or America or England, some play where people are civilized," Ah Fatt aspires to a non-European modernity and civilisation which lies outside English language and culture.[89] Ah Fatt's hybridity challenges and remaps the binaries West/East and coloniser/colonised and his use of Pidgin English ironically features as an instrument to express and disseminate his own English-free cultural heritage.

Paulette's, Neel's, and Ah Fatt's uses of the English language illustrate what Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch'ien has called *weird English*. In her analysis of authors who use unorthodox forms of English, such as Vladimir Nabokov or Maxine Hong Kingston, Ch'ien argues that non-native eccentric uses of English, through their *weirding*, deprive "English of its dominance and allows other languages to enjoy the same status" since "the rhythms and structure of orthodox English alone are not enough to express the diasporic cultures that speak it."[90] Following Ch'ien, Stephanie Han considers that the *Ibis* subalterns make use of the language of their colonisers in the

guise of "liberating forms of English" to articulate their new identities.[91] The weirding of the language of the coloniser therefore articulates the core of the diasporic experience, revealing the empowering potential of the characters' multilingual and intercultural dexterity.

Besides the manifold deterritorialised varieties of English which Ghosh reproduces, the author also seeks to resurrect Laskari, the pidgin shared between lascars across the Indian Ocean:

> That motley tongue, *spoken nowhere but on the water*, whose words were as varied as the port's traffic, an anarchic medley of Portuguese calaluzes and Kerala pattimars, Arab booms and Bengal paunch-ways, Malay proas and Tamil catamarans, Hindusthani pulwars and English snows – yet beneath the surface of this farrago of sound, meaning flowed as freely as the currents beneath the crowded press of boats.[92]

This rendering of Laskari as an idiom sedimented with several languages and 'spoken nowhere but on the water' illustrates the Indian Ocean and their waterways as a map of travelling words, the lascars beings vectors for the trajectories of a multilingual lingo shared by a transoceanic and global workforce. The decks of lascar-crewed vessels emerge as multilingual and multicultural contact zones in which Laskari features as the obvious result of a multiplicity of actors and situations in which imperial monolingualism is no longer operative. Laskari and its rendition in *Sea of Poppies*, in the words of Lise Guilhamon, as the "epitome of a diasporic tongue . . . in a proto-globalized world,"[93] ironically prefigures the rise of English as global lingua franca today. Laskari, as a harbinger of contemporary global English, is illustrated as a deterritorialised idiom, unmoored from the logic of the nation and left to drift the waves of the ocean, readily available to be appropriated and transformed by its seaborne actors.

Sea of Poppies ends with a cliffhanger, with Deeti impregnated and Reid observing impassively how Ah Fatt, Neel, Kalua and Serang Ali are escaping the *Ibis* on a boat in a storm-tossed sea, raising the problematic question of whether

Reid, the son of an African American slave, is complicit in perpetuating a system of oppression borne out of the very roots of Atlantic slavery that is taking *girmitiyas* to Mauritius to satisfy sugar planters' demand for cheap labour. The open-ended denouement in the middle of the sea, however, coalesces with the scope often adopted by the experience of maritime diaspora and sea narrations, that is, the foregrounding of the sea voyage over the points of departure and destination.

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[1] Elizabeth Ho argues that some postcolonial neo-Victorian novels 'write back' against the British Empire while they simultaneously evoke the nineteenth century in a celebratory and non-critical way. Thus, she argues, "postcolonial neo-Victorian texts can appear mainstream in the hands of writers like Peter Carey and Margaret Atwood who subtly attend the subaltern experiences of empire and are supported by the apparatus of the Booker Prize, which maintains Britain as the imperial (literary) centre": Ho (2012, 11). In light of Ho's assertion, it would have been interesting to know Ghosh's reaction had he been awarded the Man Booker Prize. In fact, in 2001 he tellingly withdrew *The Glass Palace* (2000) from the Commonwealth Writers' Prize out of his discontent with the term 'Commonwealth', which in the author's view is a "euphemism for some incredible violence that was done to the world that is now seeking to whitewash itself": Ghosh (2012a, 4).

[2] Frost (2016, 1541).

[3] Rai and Pinkney (2012, 66). The Apprenticeship system, that worked from the abolition to slavery until 1838, is usually seen as a transitional form of labour from slavery to indentureship that replayed systems of domination under similar relations of production. In the West Indies in particular, after the passing of the 1833 Act, ex-slaves were required to serve an apprenticeship period of four or six years, depending on whether they were domestic slaves or field slaves respectively. See Shepherd (2002, 344) and Olfield (2013, 45).

[4] Ghosh (2008c, 117).

[5] Ghosh (2012b, 35).

[6] Frost (2016, 1540).

[7] Ghosh (2008c, 7).

[8] Ibid., 30.

[9] Ibid., 30-31.

[10] Ibid., 31.

[11] Kent (2015, 121). My emphasis.

[12] Ghosh (2008c, 95).

[13] Ibid., 99.

[14] Ibid., 101.

[15] Ghosh (2008b).

[16] Kent (2015, 112).

[17] Ibid., 120.

[18] Ghosh (2008c, 121).

[19] McKeown (2011, 58).

[20] Beaumont (2011, 32-33).

[21] Ibid., 35.

[22] As Verene A. Shepherd states, following Ron Ramdin, the *Salsette* "set sail from India bound for the island of Trinidad in the Southern Caribbean with 324 Indian contract workers on board. The voyage lasted 108 days and at the end of it, 124 of the emigrants had died": Shepherd (2002, 343).

[23] See Mishra (2009), Anderson (2009) and Rupprecht (2014).

[24] Shepherd (2002, 344).

[25] Ibid., 346.

[26] Ghosh (2008c, 184-186). In her landmark essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) Spivak claims that the silence of the female subaltern is typified by the debates on widow immolation, or sati, in colonial India. She examines carefully reports in the records of the East India Company around the British abolition of widow sacrifice in 1829 to argue that the female subaltern is always the *object* of patriarchy and imperialism and is never assigned a subject-agent position, that is, "there is no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak": Spivak (1994, 93, 103).

[27] Ghosh (2008c, 150).

[28] Ibid., 411.

[29] See Arias (2014, 113) and Wolfreys (2013, 164).

[30] Ghosh (2008c, 83).

[31] Ibid., 83.

[32] Ibid., 53-54.

[33] Ibid., 13.

[34] Crane (2011, 8).

[35] Ibid, 9.

[36] Ghosh (2008c, 152-153).

[37] Ibid., 174.

[38] Crane (2011, 11).

[39] Gangopadhyay (2017, 60).

[40] I credit and thank the anonymous reviewers of this book for kindly drawing my attention to this parallelism.

[41] See Agnes Sam's collection of short stories *Jesus is Indian* (1994).

[42] Hofmeyr (2007, 18).

[43] Pillai (2012, 48).

[44] Singh (1996, 353).

[45] Torabully (2002, 144).

[46] Gandhi (2009, 73-74).

[47] McPherson (2006, 34-36).

[48] Ghosh (2008c, 336).

[49] Ibid., 337.

[50] Thiara (2016, 664).

[51] Rai and Pinkney (2012, 69).

[52] Ghosh (2008c, 372).

[53] Ibid., 372-373. My emphasis.

[54] Hetherington (2003, viii).

[55] Robbins (1998, 3).

[56] Kent (2015, 122).

[57] Nasta (2002, 4). Original emphasis.

[58] Machado (2016, 1549).

[59] Ghosh (2008c, 469).

[60] Hasty and Peters (2012, 664-665).

[61] Steinberg (2001, 191).

[62] Ghosh (2008c, 14).

[63] Heilmann and Llewellyn (2010, 73).

[64] Ghosh (2008c, 224).

[65] Ibid., 244.

[66] Rai and Pinkney (2012, 71).

[67] Ghosh (2008c, 267).

[68] Schiebinger (2003, 22-25). Another well-known case of cross-dressing at sea is that of James Miranda Barry, a surgeon who joined the British army as a medical officer and military surgeon and whose female sex was only discovered after her death. Her remarkable life and voyages around the globe were fictionalised in Patricia Duncker's historical novel *James Miranda Barry* (1999).

[69] Ghosh (2008c, 267).

[70] Steinberg (2001, 192).

[71] See Creighton and Norling (1996) and Klausman, Meinzerin and Kuhn (1997). A remarkable account of maritime female transgression is that of the American suffragist campaigners Margaret Foley and Florence Luscomb. In 1911 Foley and Luscomb went aboard the steamship SS *Bohemian* on behalf of the Boston Suffrage Association to attend an international suffrage convention in Stockholm. While on board, Foley and Luscomb engaged into activities such as lending books to passengers and organising public debates on board to spread feminist and suffragist ideas across the Atlantic: See Cresswell (2006, 203-207). A recent but no less remarkable instance is the non-profit organisation *Women on the Waves*, which carries out safe abortion services in international waters to women residing in countries with strict abortion laws. The organisation was founded by the Dutch physician and women's rights activist Rebecca Gomperts in 1999 and is fully operational today: See Hasty and Peters (2012, 664).

[72] I use the adjective 'heteroglossic' in the Bakhtinian sense. In R. Brandon Kershner's words, "Bakhtin uses the term 'heteroglossia' to refer to the fact that speech, insofar as it is always embodied in a particular situation, is always multiple, always a mixture of languages which themselves can be further reduced … thus language is always double-voiced, embodying both the language of the speaker … and any immediate or anticipated addressee": Kershner (2001, 22).

[73] Bakhtin (1994, 293).

[74] Ghosh (2012a, 7).

[75] Ghosh (2008b).

[76] Ibid.

[77] Ghosh (2012a, 7).

[78] Goodlad (2010, 399).

[79] Guilhamon (2011, 71).

[80] Ghosh (2008c, 51).

[81] Ibid., 288.

[82] Ibid., 302.

[83] Ibid., 302.

[84] See Ghosh (2008a). Amitav Ghosh published this glossary – the *Ibis Chrestomathy* –, available on his webpage, explaining the etymologies and meanings of the multiple Hindi-, Bengali-, or Urdu- influenced words in the English language which feature in the *Ibis* trilogy. Fictively composed by Neel Rattan Halder and his grand- and great-grandchildren since 1880s, the introduction to the glossary plays on a migrant metaphor to underscore the diasporic condition of words: "words, no less than people, are endowed with lives and destinies of their own … [they are] among the many migrants who have sailed from eastern waters towards the chilly shores of the English language."

[85] Han (2013, 299).

[86] Ghosh (2008c, 379).

[87] Ibid., 416.

[88] Ibid., 438.

[89] Ibid., 439.

[90] Ch'ien (2004, 11).

[91] Han (2013, 299).

[92] Ghosh (2008c, 108). My emphasis.

[93] Guilhamon (2011, 73).

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Chapter 4. Of Hongs, Achhas, and Fanqui-Town: Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke* (2011)

River of Smoke, Ghosh's second volume in the *Ibis* trilogy, resumes the first instalment's excavation of nineteenth-century globalization and maritime trade. Whereas *Sea of Poppies* focuses on the production of opium in the Indian subcontinent and the ensuing scattering of impoverished peasants through indenture across the Indian Ocean, *River of Smoke* portrays the actual trade and traffic of the drug in early nineteenth-century Canton (today's Guangzhou) and the Pearl River. The narration's move to China therefore extends the maritime mapping of the geography of free trade and the opium traffic, triangulated between London, Calcutta, and Canton. Set in 1839, Ghosh's novel again casts a variety of characters into the waterways of Victorian imperial exploits, right in the prelude to the First Opium War (1839-1842). To the already familiar characters Deeti, Paulette, Ah Fatt, and Neel, who have a varying presence throughout the narration, Ghosh introduces three new characters whose perspectives further enlarge Ghosh's Victorian Indian Ocean world: Bahram Moddie, a Parsi merchant – and Ah Fatt's father – who takes Neel as *linkister* (translator) and *munshi* (finance manager) and whose interests in China are split between his imperilled trade in opium and his illicit Chinese lover Chi-Mei; Fitcher Penrose, a Cornish botanist and plant-hunter who takes Paulette as an assistant in his mercantilist quest for a Chinese mythical flower, the Golden Camellia; and Robin Chinnery, an Anglo-Chinese homosexual painter, bastard son to the Canton-based English painter George Chinnery and Paulette's childhood friend, whose letters to Paulette vividly describe life in Canton.

If the *Ibis* was the reference ship-chronotope in *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke* extends the trilogy's geography of ships into two additional vessels: the *Anahita*, Bahram's opium-loaded ship sailing from Calcutta to Canton, and the *Redruth*, Fitcher's vessel fitted for transporting plant specimens. As Catherine Delmas (2016) points out, the journeys of the *Ibis*, *Anahita,* and *Redruth*, transporting coolies, opium, and plants respectively, illustrate the collusion of power, science, and trade in Victorian maritime imperialism.[1] As if to underscore the links between

the three vessels, and between their characters on board, Ghosh appropriates the elemental forces of the Indian Ocean; for the same storm that closes *Sea of Poppies* and which enables Neel, Ah Fatt, Serang Ali, and Kalua to escape the *Ibis* on a boat, also strikes the *Anahita* and the *Redruth*, the former having its opium cargo ruined near Singapore and the latter arriving in Port Louis, Mauritius, two days after the *Ibis*.

Before *River of Smoke* moves the focus to nineteenth-century Canton, the first two chapters in the narration give an account of the outcome of *Sea of Poppies* and its characters: the fugitives from the *Ibis* survive the storm and arrive in Great Nicobar island, where they knock two planks out of the boat and throw it back to the sea so that they are taken for dead and "written off."[2] In the meantime, Zachary has been arrested as responsible for the fugitives' escape whereas Paulette heads for Pamplemousses Botanical Garden in Mauritius where she runs into Fitcher Penrose. Regarding Deeti, the opening's flash-forward decades after the arrival of the *Ibis* in Mauritius illustrates her as the matriarch of a family clan, "La Fami Colver," made up of Deeti's children and grandchildren.[3]

The most remarkable maritime topography at the opening of the novel is Deeti's shrine or "Deetiji's Memory-Temple," a pictorial memorial already referred to in the first instalment of the trilogy recording the life and times of the trilogy's protagonists.[4] Deeti's description of the mural in the shrine to her descendants, which I quote in what follows, reveals the strength of the indissoluble ties generated by the *Ibis*:

> Vwala! that one there with the three eyebrows? That's Jodu, the lascar - he'd grown up with your Tantinn Paulette and was like a brother to her. And that over there, with the turban around his head, is Serang Ali - a master-mariner if ever there was one and as clever as a gran-koko. And those two there, they were convicts, on their way to serve time in Mauritius - the one on the left, his fathe was a big Seth from Bombay but his mother was Chinese, so we called him Cheeni, although his name was Ah Fatt. As for the other one, that's none other than your Neel-mawsa, the uncle who loves to tell stories.

> It was only then that the tip of her cane would move on to the towering figure of Maddow Colver who was depicted standing upright, in the middle of the boat. Alone among the five fugitives he was depicted with his face turned backwards, as though he were looking towards the Ibis in order to bid farewell to his wife and his unborn child – Deeti herself, in other words with a hugely swollen belly.[5]

As can be inferred from Deeti's storytelling quoted above, Ghosh is mobilising the trope of the 'family' to refer to a cluster of people from different nations, castes, and ethnicities firmly united by boundless historical circumstances rather than by consanguineous ties. A passage in *Flood of Fire* (2015) – which I analyse in chapter 5 – records a diary entry by Neel which also makes note of the pervasive links of what occurred on the *Ibis*: "The shared secret of our escape from the Ibis has become a link between who we were then and who we are now, between past and present. It is *a bond more powerful even than ties of family and friendship*."[6] Amitav Ghosh scholarship has repeatedly noted that the author's use of the metaphor of the family constitutes his move away from the category of the nation. The idea that families can actually encompass different nations and cut across imposed artificial borders was already explored by Ghosh in *The Shadow Line*s (1988), a novel that narrates the life and times of two British and Indian families against the historical backdrop of the Partition of India (1947) and the Pakistan-Bangladesh Partition (1971). Ghosh himself has explicitly stated his scepticism about the centrality of the nation in 'Third World' narrations. As he tellingly claimed in an interview:

> It is precisely the First World novel that is most commonly about nations and nation building. Consider for instance, the peculiar obsession with 'Englishness' that runs through so much of nineteenth- and twentieth-century British writing … In countries like India the nation is still too young and too tenuous an institution to have acquired this axiomatic status.[7]

Accordingly, Deeti's shrine can be seen as a symbolical and artistic configuration typifying Ghosh's move away from nationalistic accounts of the trope of the

family. The closely-knit network of transnational and transcultural relationships engendered by the *Ibis* exceeds the unit of the nation to encompass the whole matrix of the Indian Ocean.

The shrine is located on a cliff in a secluded area of Mauritius and is regularly visited by the aged Deeti and her offspring, as well as other coolies' descendants, who perform communal rituals to keep their sense of fellowship. These sections in the novel are Ghosh's brief contribution to narrations about plantation geographies populated by former African slaves and newly arrived coolies which, as Nandini Dhar (2017) points out, are the domain of diasporic authors such as David Dabydeen.[8] Ghosh's account of the Mauritian creolisation of Deeti and her coolie fellows under their French master, a former soldier in the Napoleonic wars, is in tune with more familiar plantation geographies such as the Caribbean or South Africa and fruitfully positions, Deloughrey (2007) points out, "plantation creolization ... in a tidalectic engagement with transoceanic diaspora."[9]

Deeti and the rest of the coolies live in the remotest part of the island, Baie du Morne. The description of the cliffy Morne (colonial French for 'hill') juxtaposes, just like the first instalment's account of the *Ibis*, the histories of slavery and indenture:

> The mountain was a place of sinister reputation, where hundreds, perhaps thousands of people were known to have died. Back in the days of slavery the Morne's inaccessibility had made it an attractive place of refuge for escaped slaves, who had settled there in considerable numbers. This community of fugitives – or marrons as they were known in Kreol – had lasted until shortly after 1834, when slavery was outlawed in Mauritius ... In the coolie lines, when the wind was heard to howl upon the mountains, the sound was to be the keening of the dead, and such was the fear it evoked that no one would willingly set foot upon those slopes.[10]

The representation of this maritime enclave enables a reading of the landscape as an archive, the cliffs beings saturated with the memories and experiences of former slaves. It is no wonder that Deeti selects exactly this spot to build her shrine, just where the Morne is topped by a flat ledge sheltered by a rocky ceiling

which is referred to as the "Chowkey" by the Colver family. In affinity with the *Ibis* in *Sea of Poppies*, Deeti's 'Memory Temple' can be read as a palimpsest, its pictorial representations of the coolie's predicaments being re-inscribed upon the spectral traces of the former slaves inhabiting the hill.

The painting which stands out in the shrine is dominated by a portrayal of the typhoon under which the *Ibis* fugitives escaped: "stretching all the way across the frame ... it was represented as a gigantic serpent, coiling inwards from the outside, going around and around in circles of diminishing size, and ending in a single enormous eye."[11] According to Deeti's account, during the storm she was

> picked up and whirled away into the sky, by a force that was none other than the storm itself ... It was as if the tufaan [typhoon] had chosen her to be its confidant, freezing the passage of time, and lending her the vision of its own eye; for the duration of that moment, she had been able to see everything that fell within that whirling circle of wind.[12]

It is Neel who later confirms Deeti's magical vision, stating that "1838, the year of that storm, was when a scientist first suggested that hurricanes might be composed of winds rotating around a still centre – an eye, in other words."[13] Ghosh's singular narration of the pictorial description of the shrine in general and the storm in particular has an important implication for the novel's postcolonial agenda: Deeti's creation of the shrine, itself a by-product of her rural *Inndustan* and her wall decorations and paintings – "being unlettered, it was the only way she could keep track of her memories"[14] – signals the novel's recovery of illiterate memorial practices as alternative modes of remembrance to the Western archive.

Similarly, Deeti's fabulous account of the storm exemplifies a postcolonial reclaiming of myth against Western rationalism, Neel's thereafter scientific reference artfully reconciling the diasporic subject's mythology with science. This can be read alongside what has been deemed Ghosh's most innovative work, *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996). This novel hangs on the historical figure of Ronald Ross, the British doctor who was awarded the 1902 Nobel Prize for medicine for his

research into the transmission of malaria. Dr Ross's scientific research is narrated against a group of Indian natives who perform a mystical non-Western science to anonymously assist the British surgeon in his scientific discoveries. In parallel to Deeti's mythical vision about the eye of hurricanes, *The Calcutta Chromosome* deconstructs Eurocentric visions about science, knowledge, and progress by juxtaposing them with non-Western forms of knowledge and science. According to Véronique Bragard (2008), postcolonial writers' "return to myth and not history is probably the result of a skepticism towards historical discourses and a wish to revive a tradition of oral tales."[15] In this sense, Bragard (2008) states, "memory and art are called for to fill a gap and attempt to express not facts and events, but visions and sufferings."[16]

Ghosh's account of the storm and its representation in the shrine can be considered then as an originating myth for the dispossessed protagonists who are enmeshed in the sea whirlpool of Victorian imperialism. Neel's enthrallment with the idea of storms revolving around an eye captures the alternatively destructive and regenerative forces of the sea:

> He had read about it in a journal and had been astonished and captivated by the image it conjured up - of a gigantic oculus, at the far end of a great, spinning telescope, examining everything it passed over, upending some things, and leaving others unscathed; looking for new possibilities, creating fresh beginnings, rewriting destinies and throwing together people who would never have met.[17]

This sublime-inflected description of the elemental forces of the sea is transferred into the legends around the typhoon and its storm-casted protagonists, joining the diasporic subjects in their shared predicaments and their negotiation between "Back There" and here.[18] To underline the watery inception of the coolies' collectivity, Ghosh records how years later another cyclone crumbles the 'Chowkey' and the shrine is symbolically swept by an avalanche into the sea, back to the womb which generated the communion between the migrants.[19]

After providing a glimpse of Mauritian plantation geography in the initial chapters, Ghosh moves the focus back to Asia for the rest of the narration. Ghosh's minute historical reconstruction of the nineteenth-century South China coast and the crisscrossing of European and Asian merchants around its waters has garnered the author the consideration of "superb microhistorian" (Frost 2016).[20] The narration provides scenes alternatively set in a variety of islands and littoral topographies around the South China Sea and the Pearl River, including Paulette's botanical explorations of the by then sparsely populated island of Hong Kong and European opium merchants' anchoring in Lintin Island to smuggle the illegal drug into the Pearl River.

Significantly, Ghosh's narration is keen to point out the fluid multiculturalism of the maritime region around the Island of Hong Kong before the irruption and consolidation of British imperial monoculture after the First Opium War. Recalling his trade journeys to China in the old days, Bahram states that Malacca (today's Malaysia) was one of his favourite calling ports, highlighting "the severe Dutch buildings, the Chinese temples, the whitewashed Portuguese church, the Arab souq [marketplace], and the galis [alleys] where the long-settled Gujarati families lived."[21] The importance of this port where "Malays, Chinese, Gujaratis, and Arabs had lived elbow to elbow with the descendants of the old Portuguese and Dutch families" is overtaken by the newly set trading town of Singapore by the British, "designed as to set the 'white town' carefully apart from the rest of the settlement, with the Chinese, Malays and Indians each being assigned their own neighbourhoods."[22] This ghettoisation of Singapore trading port illustrates both the disruptive and homogenising effects of British imperialism – and the fraud of its civilising mission and its Orientalist discourse – and a reclamation of the multiculturalism of the Indian Ocean geography prior to the consolidation of British hegemony in the area.

If the first part of the novel, entitled "Islands," vividly portrays the maritime world of trade and migration around the South China Sea, the second volume, "Canton," transports the action further into the interior of the Pearl River towards the epicentre of nineteenth-century foreign trade with China, the foreign enclave (or Fanqui-Town) in Canton. Ghosh provides a masterly and immersive description of the Thirteen Factories of Fanqui-Town as well as its docks, alleys, boats, and consulates. In the early nineteenth century, access to the walled city of Canton was totally forbidden to foreigners. The Foreign quarter, or Fanqui-Town, in Canton – 'Fanqui' was the Chinese for 'foreigner' – was an enclave annexed to Canton where foreign merchants conducted their trading operations. The well-known Thirteen Factories (or Hongs) in Fanqui-Town provided lodging and offices to foreign merchants trading with the Chinese. As Zadig Bey, Bahram's close friend, explains, the word 'factory' is not related to manufacturing in this context but "comes from a word that was first used by the Venetians and then by the Portuguese, in Goa. The word is *feitoria* and it refers merely to a place where agents and factors reside and do business."[23] Ghosh's rendition of Fanqui-Town provides an example of what Mark R. Frost (2016) has called "'thick' historical description, which provides a total picture of a place and its time, the landscape, the clothes, the languages"[24] – or as Amitav Ghosh (2012b) has wondered, "what was it like to be present in that place, in that week, on that day?"[25]

Additionally, Ghosh exhibits a capacity to reconstruct the voices and personalities from every social stratum in Canton, including European and Asian merchants, Chinese authorities, local boat-people, compradors, smugglers, painters, and botanists. Ghosh's wide narrative purview is certainly reminiscent of Victorian realism. In Sneha Kar Chaudhuri's words, River of Smoke "resembles a typical Victorian canonical novel in terms of its broadness of scope, which attempts to encompass a complete social and intellectual reality."[26] Similarly, Mark R. Frost notes, "reviewers have frequently noted that in the Ibis Trilogy the author becomes a Victorian novelist. Whether consciously or subconsciously, Ghosh appropriates the

genre of the Victorian novel [and its omniscient perspective] to write against the greedy empire that produced it."[27]

The multicultural social life in Canton's foreign enclave is narrated through the eyes of Neel, in his frequent walks around the factories and the *maidan* (main square) as well as through the painter Robin Chinnery's letters to his childhood friend Paulette. Robin, George Chinnery's illegitimate Anglo-Chinese son, has promised to assist Paulette and Fitcher in their quest for the *golden camellia* by locating the Cantonese painter who created the only existing reproduction of the mythical flower. As Robin forwards his research advances in his epistles, he provides detailed impressions of the enclave's social life, channelling Ghosh's all-encompassing knowledge about nineteenth-century Canton.[28] Not surprisingly Robin uses maritime imagery to convey the cosmopolitan character of the foreign enclave: "In a way *Fanqui-town is like a ship at sea*, with hundreds - no, thousands - of men living crammed together in a little sliver of a space. I do believe there is no place like it on earth, so small and yet so varied, where people from the far corners of the earth must live, elbow to elbow, for six months of the year."[29]

The singularity of Fanqui-Town has been emphatically expressed by Ghosh elsewhere:

> The settings of the Ibis Trilogy are unfamiliar to most of us, their material background even more so. This is particularly true of the foreign enclave in Canton, which was visually and otherwise an admixture of an extraordinary range of influences, styles, and tastes. Even experienced travelers were astonished by its uniqueness, its unfamiliarity.[30]

In the novel, this 'unfamiliarity' is noted by both foreign and Chinese traders' reactions to artworks and reproductions of the enclave by Cantonese artists. As Robin recounts in his letters, Mr Chinnery's scorn for Canton painters is shared by Chinese connoisseurs. Contrary to great Chinese painters, Canton painters come from humble families and their reproductions of Fanqui-Town and the Thirteen

Factories are sold as souvenirs both to European and Chinese merchants and visitors. Robin describes the artworks of one of those Cantonese painters, Mr Guan – or Lamqua – as follows:

> In glass-fronted cases lay dozens of paintings, all made in the studio: pictures of everything that might interest visitors, both Chinese and foreign – for just as foreigners want pictures of Fanqui-town because it looks to them so indescribably Celestial, so too do the Chinese covet them because the same sight is in their eyes utterly Alien.[31]

As suggested by Robin, the artworks and representations of Fanqui-Town produced by Cantonese artists arise the curiosity of both foreigners and Chinese merchants who populate the foreign enclave. To use Mary Louise Pratt's term again, Fanqui-Town is therefore constructed in *River of Smoke* as a contact zone which dissolves national and ethnic parameters, rendering the categories of *foreignness* and *nativeness* ultimately ambivalent and fluid.

A particularly remarkable aspect of Fanqui-Town is that many of its inhabitants are from India, coming from disparate places in the Indian subcontinent such as Sindh, Goa, Bombay, Malabar, Madras, Coringa, Calcutta, or Sylhet.[32] Interestingly, Chinese locals in Canton refer to this miscellaneous group of Hindustanis having different castes, languages, religions, and customs as "Achhas" and their factory is accordingly termed the 'Achha Hong.' Robin refers sardonically to this misperception:

> No matter whether a man is from Karachi or Chittagong, the lads will swarm after him, with their hands outstretched, shouting: 'Achha! Achha! Gimme cumshaw [tip]!' They seem to be persuaded that the Achhas are all from one country – is it not the most diverting notion? There is even a factory that is spoken of as the 'Achha Hong' - of course it has no flag of its own.[33]

Neel is similarly struck by the notion that Indians from all over the subcontinent share roof, routines, and meals within the Achha Hong, "as if the inmates were the inhabitants of a new country, a yet unmade Achhashtan."[34] For, as Neel observes, the Achhas were

> a motley gathering of men from distant parts of the Indian subcontinent and they spoke between them more than a dozen different languages; some were from areas under British or Portuguese rule, and others hailed from states governed by Nawabs or Nizams, Rajas or Rawals; amongst them there were Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Parsis and also a few who, back at home, would have been excluded by all. Had they not left the subcontinent their paths would never have crossed and few of them would ever have met or spoken with each other, far less thought of eating a meal together.[35]

As Neel keenly observes, the paradox regarding the bonds established between the Achhas lies in the fact that those bonds were not produced out of self-respect but rather out of a "sense of shared shame" because of their involvement in the opium traffic.[36] Ghosh is clearly pointing out here India and Indian merchants' complicity in the opium industry, making nineteenth-century Indian elites implicated in the effects of the 'black mud' trade on India and its subaltern inhabitants.

Nevertheless, I also read Ghosh's account of the Achha merchants in Canton as a community forerunning the Indian independence movement in the second half of the Victorian era and the final unification of India under a country in 1947. Judith M. Brown has pointed out the significance of the English language for the unity and flourishing of India after 1947, attributing such flourishing to "socially privileged Indians who studied in England ... – particularly in the expanding civil service, the legal system and the educational system – [becoming] an elite who had already participated in the running of a modern state.[37] The Achha community in Canton can be read therefore as a proto-Indian nation in which its individuals share bonds, ambitions, and agendas prior to the rise of a unified Indian identity and the Indian independence movement led by English-educated Indian elites.

The most remarkable of the Achha merchants is Bahram Moddie, a Parsi opium merchant who has been deemed as Ghosh's finest character in the whole trilogy, "an enthralling hero, of Dickensian vitality and pathos."[38] Bahram illustrates a particularly underrepresented figure within nineteenth-century South-Asian

politics that embodies the ethical entanglements of empire, opium, and overseas trade as well as India's role in the opium trade. Born in a humble family with no fortune or prospects, Bahram gets engaged to Shireenbai, the daughter of a powerful Bombay family who owns a successful shipyard firm, Mistrie & Sons. Inverting the patrilocal character of nineteenth-century Indian marriage relations, Bahram moves to live with Shireenbai and enters the business of his in-laws. Determined to prove his worth, Bahram persuades the Mistries to get involved in the opium trade, exhibiting a discourse which predates the contours of contemporary capitalism and the law of supply and demand:

> Look at the world around us; look at how it is changing. Today the biggest profits don't come from selling useful things: quite the opposite. The profits come from selling things that are not of any real use ... Opium is just like that. It is completely useless unless you're sick, but still people want it.[39]

Bahram's embracing of capitalist thinking proves economically successful and he manages to find a place within the British-dominated opium industry, gaining the respect of his British peers and amassing a substantial fortune for Mistries & Sons. It is not only Bahram's economic ambitions that drive him to Canton but also his illicit love affair with Chi-Mei, a Chinese boat-woman and mother of their son Ah Fatt. Their intercultural liaison, seemingly motivated by Bahram's loneliness in Canton as well as by Shireenbai's "shy, retiring," widow-like and melancholic behaviour, challenges the boundaries of language, nationality and ethnicity and provide a significant crux in Bahram's torn character between his legal family in Bombay and his Canton-based progeny, between his unstable impersonation of the Victorian capitalist merchant and the ravages of the opium industry both in India and China.[40]

As Bahram's opium cargo is significantly ruined after the storm strikes the *Anahita* and the Chinese authorities step in to put an end to the illegal opium trade, Bahram faces ruin and desperately tries to smuggle his opium, becoming himself an addict and dying a broken man by accidentally drowning next to his ship out of

opium-induced hallucinations. Bahram's complex position within the trade and power relations of the novel illustrates what Mark R. Frost, following Sugata Bose, terms the "intermediary capital."[41] A similar example in Ghosh's oeuvre which serves as an obvious precedent for Bahram is the character of Rajkumar in *The Glass Palace.* Rajkumar's engagement in the teak trade facilitates his rags-to-riches rise from impoverished Indian to successful businessman at the expense of the exploitation of British-occupied Burma's forest resources. His position certainly typifies the complicity of the Indian subject in the British Empire's mercenary operations. Likewise, Bahram enjoys a privileged status among Indian Parsi merchants over the bulk of impecunious Indians, but in Canton-based British-dominated opium trade his colonial origin places him inevitably in a helpless middle position between British and Chinese imperial powers as the war between the two seems imminent. As Zadig Bey tellingly points out to his friend, "Bahram-bhai, you are not an American or an Englishman. You don't have any warships behind you. If the Chamber had to surrender you or Dent [an English merchant], who do you think they would pick?"[42] The irony of Bahram's uncomfortable position in Fanqui-Town lies in the fact that he is both a profiteer and a victim of the opium trade and colonial structures more broadly. The complexity of Bahram's (and India's) involvement in the opium trade also problematises Victorian imperial and transoceanic relations as based simply around the dichotomies centre/periphery and coloniser/colonised.

Opium is by far the most remarkable commodity articulating the characters' personal and commercial relations in the novel – and in the *Ibis* series as a whole. However, Ghosh complements his portrayal of the workings of free trade under another travelling good: plant specimens. Fitcher Penrose is a Cornish botanist and plant-hunter in charge of a nursery, Penrose & Sons, based in Falmouth. An expert in Chinese botanical exportations, Penrose has fitted his vessel, the *Redruth*, for transporting plants across the oceans. The description of the *Redruth* reveals a vessel perfectly designed for its purposes: its decks are packed with Wardian cases, or

"miniature greenhouses" safely tied down with cables and food leftovers are dumped in a huge barrel hanging over the stern to grow compost.[43]

However honourable may seem the scientific and aesthetic pursual of plants in the name of science – particularly in comparison with the destructive opium trade – Ghosh quickly demonstrates that botany is similarly implicated in the mercantilist texture of free trade. As Catherine Delmas points out, the transoceanic transportation of plant specimens in the novel reveals "a single geography of free trade linking London, Calcutta, and Canton," specifically Kew Gardens, Calcutta Royal Botanical garden and the Chinese botanical gardens in Canton.[44] This maritime mapping of the geography of Victorian botanical trade evidently parallels the pattern of the opium trade illustrated in *Sea of Poppies* that I outlined in the previous chapter. Robin underlines this collusion between opium and flowers in his last letter to Paulette, where he claims "Flowers and opium, opium and flowers! It is odd to think that this city [Canton], which has absorbed so much of the world's evil, has given, in return, so much beauty."[45] The beauty alluded to by Robin, that is, the aesthetic patina of the botany trade under the cloak of science serves to shroud its implication within Victorian cash economy and capitalist asymmetrical exchange.

Following the previous line of reasoning, Fitcher Penrose represents just another agent of Victorian imperialism. His quest for plant specimens is solely motivated by a mercantilist drive and his naturalist activities consist basically of plundering Chinese botanical treasures for their western consumption, revealing just another strand of Victorian imperial trade. As Paulette observes, Penrose is "someone who looked upon Nature as an assortment of puzzles, many of which, if properly resolved, could provide rich sources of profit."[46] Penrose's exploitation of Asian nature resources is illustrated in the *Redruth*, in which "every element of her functioning was determined by the twin motives of thrift and profit."[47] Additionally, as Kanika Batra observes, Penrose's Asian plant specimens have not been collected from Chinese natural spots but just acquired from nurseries in Canton and Macau to be brought to Britain and make a profit out of them.[48]

Penrose's vision on nature contrasts sharply with Paulette and her father's, for whom "the love of Nature had been a kind of religion, a form of spiritual striving."[49] Since foreign women are not allowed in Canton, Paulette cannot accompany Penrose in their quest for the golden Camellia and she must content herself with developing her botanical interests by exploring Hong Kong, following her father's call to "apprehend the vital energies that constitute the Spirit of the Earth."[50] As Chaudhuri aptly summarises, "Paulette and Penrose are polar opposites in terms of their attitude to Nature: the former represents nineteenth-century French naturalistic idealism, the latter conventional bourgeois practicality and utilitarianism."[51]

Paulette's position and role within *River of Smoke* also brings to light a marked drive to retrieve repressed gender perspectives. Chaudhuri claims that the novel illustrates "Ghosh's particular neo-Victorian emphasis on the lost and suppressed narratives of women like Dheeti and Paulette, whose micro-histories have been previously overlooked by a male-oriented history of the opium trade."[52] In the case of Paulette, her spirited personality and determination to follow her scientific ambitions lead her frequently to engage in gender inversion. On the *Ibis* arrival in Mauritius, she manages to get out the vessel disguised as a sailor, wearing Zachary Reid's clothes and on her first encounter with Fitcher she is also dressed as a boy, curating Mauritian Pamplemousses Botanical gardens undetected. [53]

Similarly, during her botanical activities and explorations in Hong Kong, Paulette uses male shirts and trousers to ride a horse comfortably on a Chinese saddle around the island's hilly and wild terrains, much to the dismay of Fitcher.[54] It is only Robin Chinnery, whose homosexual relationship to Jacqua also represents a challenge to nineteenth-century heteronormative culture, who finds appealing Paulette's cross-dressing behaviour, "entranced by the vision ... of you [Paulette] galloping across Hong Kong dressed in your beau's clothes."[55] Paulette represents a mode of unorthodox nineteenth-century femininity which defies Victorian gender conventions.

It seems no surprise that Paulette feels captivated by the sight of Chinese *shach'uans* (sand-ships) around Hong Kong and Lintin Islands; as Paulette is struck to see, and in contrast to the *Ibis* and the *Redruth*, these vessels are anything but "'manned' – for her crew included several women whose duties were no different from those of the men. And no matter whether male or female, none of the crew would put up with barked orders and peremptory hookums [commands]."[56] Similarly, Bahram's illicit lover Chi-Mei is one of the local boat-women who sail the waters around Canton. According to the novel, "the boat-women of Canton were utterly unlike their land-bound sisters: their feet were unbound and often bare ...they rowed boats, hawked goods, and went about their work with just as much gusto, if not more, than their menfolk."[57] Ghosh populates then his maritime narration with different minor and major female characters to illustrate their modes of living on the water as alternative models of womanhood to those of conventional nineteenth-century femininity.

A further parallel between *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke* is their shared engagement in revealing the linguistic cross-fertilisation which characterised maritime life around the Indian Ocean. In *River of Smoke*, the first instance of cross-language interaction that we encounter in the novel is provided in the novel's brief account of Deeti and her life in Mauritius. Deeti speaks a variety of Mauritian Kreole sedimented with traces from her rural Bhojpuri. Her mode of expression is an engaging and unprecedentedly hybrid idiom, as it shows the following excerpt in which Deeti narrates the *Ibis* fugitives' escape during the storm:

> Bon-dye! she would cry; are you a fol dogla or what? Don't be ridikil: the whole thing, from start to fini took just a few minits, and all that time, it was nothing but jaldi-jaldi, a hopeless golmal, tus in dezord. It was a mirak, believe me, that the five managed to get away.[58]

Deeti's Kreole idiom, besides being another shining example of the productive interplay between the *local* and the *global* in Indian-Ocean diasporic subjects, illustrates the linguistic aftereffects of the uprootedness of overseas indenture. The transmigration of Deeti's Indian background and language towards increasingly

hybrid systems influenced by Mauritian culture signals the inception of the diasporic condition out of change, transition, and movement.

Nevertheless, Ghosh's linguistic commentary on the cosmopolitanism of the Indian Ocean is actually focused on the friction between English and Chinese. Opium traders in Canton communicate in a mixture of English, Portuguese, and Hindustani which constitutes the Cantonese pidgin sounding throughout the narration. Neel notices so in his job as *linkister* and *munshi* for Bahram. Neel's employer uses an idiom "which often came pouring out in braided torrents of speech, each rushing stream being silted with the sediment of many tongues – Gujarati, Hindusthani, English, pidgin, Cantonese."[59]

In a significant passage, Ghosh uses Zadig Bey and Bahram's voices to illustrate the supremacy of Cantonese Pidgin for Indian and Chinese traders and the markedly South-Asian aspect of Cantonese trading relations. When asked about their knowledge of Chinese, Bahram and Zadig Bey answer:

> No, they said, they spoke no Chinese, because the common language of trade in southern China was a kind of patois – or, as some called it 'pidgin', which meant merely 'business' and was thus well suited to describe a tongue which was used mainly to address matters of trade. Even though many Chinese spoke English with ease and fluency, they would not negotiate in it, believing that it put them at a disadvantage in relation to Europeans. In pidgin they reposed far greater trust, for the grammar was the same as that of Cantonese, while the words were mainly English, Portuguese and Hindusthani.[60]

The integration of European, Chinese, and Indian languages within Cantonese pidgin again highlights Ghosh's narrative strategy to illustrate the cosmopolitanism of Indian Ocean waterworlds. However, the preference of Cantonese pidgin as a reliable idiom for Chinese and Indian traders challenges the hegemony of European culture in nineteenth-century South-Asian trade relations, specifically Anglocentric ideas of English as a privileged means of communication.

Vedita Cowaloosur has interestingly read this challenge to Anglocentricity in the nineteenth century as Ghosh staking

> a claim regarding the increasing roles of China and India (then as well as now?) in an equation where Europe had previously dominated ... suggesting that the collaboration of south–south powers is perhaps more reassuring than a system in which European and American Anglocentric hegemons prevail.[61]

Cowaloosur then goes on to argue that Ghosh's resurrection of Cantonese pidgin as an idiom consciously chosen by nineteenth-century Indian and Chinese traders comments "on the desirability for stronger alliances between Indian and Chinese power structures, especially in the current climate in which India and China are perceived as being cut-throat competitors for ascending to the status of global super-power."[62] These transoceanic alliances between non-European peoples and places are underscored by Indo-Chinese love relations narrated throughout *River of Smoke*, in particular those between Bahram and Chi-Mei and between the Anglo-Indian Robin Chinnery and the Chinese artist Jacqua. Ghosh's drive to narrate Indo-Chinese trade and love relations constitutes a creative challenge to the Anglocentric hegemony in global relations, illustrating, in Shao-Pin Luo's (2013) words, "an effort to 'provincialize Europe'."[63] In this sense, *River of Smoke* reconstructs a nineteenth-century Pan-Asian perspective on Indian Ocean relations by illustrating idioms, relations, and spaces that escaped the control and hegemony of Victorian imperialism.

In relation to the previous line of reasoning, a final aspect of *River of Smoke* which is worth perusing is the narration's engagement with globalization and world history. I have already argued that *River of Smoke* records the watery trajectories of subjects, ideas, and commodities around the Indian Ocean and beyond. Just like the first instalment in the trilogy, the novel exhibits indeed a drive to unearth an era of proto-globalization in the Victorian period, illustrating Victorian maritime routes as navigated by opium and plants as well as by Europeans and Asians. Nevertheless, a particularly interesting contribution to accounts of world history and globalization

in the novel is the narration's portrayal of interconnections between Africa and Asia in the pre-colonial period.

The novel achieves this through the character of Zadig Bey, Bahram's colleague and close friend. Zadig is an Armenian watchmaker and trader but his family has been settled in Egypt for centuries. Settled in the Jewish and Christian quarters of Old Cairo, Zadig's ancestors were trading for centuries with different locations in Africa, Asia, and the Far East. This heritage has turned Zadig into a cosmopolitan subject, fluent in several languages, with deep affinities for South-Asian culture but usually dressed in European clothes and professing the Christian religion. His African ancestry situates him however within an 'Afrasian imagination', to use Gaurav Desai's term. Desai follows the wake of recent Indian Ocean scholarship which seeks to reintegrate the African continent into the analytical matrix of the Indian Ocean as well as to situate African studies not only in relation to the West but also to the East, focusing particularly on the African diaspora in India. Desai intends to ask how "African ideas and cultural practices [have] traveled to the East not only through the travels of Indian and European traders and sailors but perhaps more importantly through the African diaspora itself."[64]

The character of Zadig Bey seems modelled after Ghosh's path-breaking travelogue *In an Antique Land* (1993). Zadig and his long ancestry of Egyptian traders around the Indian Ocean seems Ghosh's fictional contribution to the main thesis of his influential travelogue and that I already suggested above: there certainly existed a fertile and global maritime trading network between Africa, India, and the Middle East in the pre-modern period which did not necessitate from European empires' maritime lanes or technology. Ghosh seeks to retrieve these transoceanic connections engendered by what he has called 'xenophilia', or "the love of the Other, the affinity for strangers": His concern lies in reconstructing a tissue of cosmopolitanisms interrupted by European colonialism, a community of people from Africa and Asia who, even during the apex of the Empire in the nineteenth century, "sought

each other out, wrote letters to each other, and stayed in each other's homes while traveling."[65]

The Egyptian character also channels the novel's portrayal of connections between Atlantic and Indian Ocean cultures. In one of the most imaginative sections of the novel, Ghosh narrates a fictional encounter between Bahram, Zadig Bey, and Napoleon Bonaparte. Bahram and Zadig are on their way to London on board the HCS *Cuffnells* in 1816 when they learn, sailing past Cape Town, that the French Emperor has been exiled to the Atlantic island of St Helena, their next calling port. The presence of the former Emperor on the island provokes varying reactions to the passengers of the *Cuffnells*. In the case of Zadig, the figure of Napoleon stirs his youth memories: he recalls the horror of the invasion of Egypt by Bonaparte when he was a young boy of fifteen living in Old Cairo and the consequences of such invasion, among them his knowledge of French.[66] Zadig's reaction contrasts sharply with that of Bahram who, being at the time unwitting about European politics, is not particularly affected by the presence of the Emperor.

The construction of the ship as *contact zone* become evident in Ghosh's description of the *Cuffnells*. Zadig and Bahram's cabins lie deep in the belly of the ship so that they share their meals and their spare time with the serangs, tindals, and minor officers.[67] However, the geography of the shipspace as devised by Ghosh allows Bahram and Zadig to step face to face with European passengers face to face, with whom "they would exchange bows and curtseys, salaams and greetings ... these ceremonies ... being emphasized by the contrast in their costumes.[68] Significantly, as Zadig and Bahram stroll below the quarter-deck, they can overhear European couples conversing about Napoleon, to whom they qualify as "a veritable bugbear" or "the Creature who agitated the world," among other epithets.[69] Lalan K. Singh has interestingly read this episode in the novel as "a metaphorical representation of western historiography with its sense of privilege and difference."[70] I prefer to read the geography of the *Cuffnells* as a metaphor for the situatedness of historical

experience and fact when placed in a global frame. The episode that follows the ship's arrival on St. Helena supports this view, as I explain in what follows.

As Napoleon learns about the presence of a Parsi and an Armenian on board the *Cuffnells*, he requests to have an interview with them. The rendezvous between Bonaparte, Bahram, and Zadig represents a truly transcultural encounter between distant watery domains. Since Napoleon and Bahram only speak French and Hindusthani respectively, Zadig acts as a translator, triangulating the Emperor's and Bahram's words, and by extension the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean waterworlds. The interview soon turns into a discussion about the moral implications of the opium trade, the Chinese government's reaction to the violation of its anti-drug legislation, and west-east relations in general. In what seems an obvious contemporary reference to the growing power of China, Napoleon claims that "it is better that China remains asleep, for the world is sure to tremble when she awakes."[71] – he adds later with sarcasm that "what an irony it would be if it were opium that stirred China from her sleep."[72] Even more significantly, Bahram and Zadig inform Napoleon, to the emperor's surprise, about the subordinate status of the English language in business relations in Canton and about Chinese disinterest in English products. Their account of commercial relations in early nineteenth-century Asia significantly diverges from the superior status granted to British Imperialism in western historiography. This entails that adopting a global perspective as the one adopted in the triangular conversation between Napoleon, Zadig and Bahram illustrates the volatility of actors and facts at play in historiography when alternative versions of world history are incorporated into the main narrative.

Napoleon's prophetic commentary on the confrontation between Western and Eastern powers serves as an overture to the final chapters of the novel, which record the confrontation in the first months of 1839 between Canton-based British merchants and Commissioner Lin, appointed by the Chinese authorities to put an end to the smuggling of opium, and which would eventually lead to the First Opium

War. In these chapters, Ghosh provides a postcolonial revision of the prelude to the Opium War and Anglo-Chinese relations, portraying the intrigues and tensions between Canton's foreign merchants and Chinese authorities, and reproducing the voices of true historical traders and Chinese authorities. Ghosh has interestingly claimed that the dense documentation regarding the happenings in Canton during these months reveals a picture of the situation "powered to a great degree by interpersonal relationships and conflicts."[73]

Whereas the Manchu Empire attacks the opium trade out of the defence of its laws and its foreign policy, merchants in the East India Company pursue their greedy personal interests under the banner of Free Trade, the principles of which serve to cloak the unlawfulness and destruction of the opium trade. Ghosh shows the hypocrisy of the principles of Free Trade when Bahram talks about his in-laws' involvement in the successful shipbuilding business in Bombay, responsible at the time for vessels that exceeded in quality to ships built in Portsmouth or Liverpool: "they [British] talk of Free Trade when it suits them – but they made sure that the rules were changed so that the Company and the Royal Navy could no longer order ships from us [Mistries]. Then they created new laws which made it much more expensive to use India-built ships in the overseas trade."[74] This ambivalence between Free Trade and stark state protectionism reveals the strikingly unequal and duplicitous character of Sino-British relations in the early Victorian period.

As Chaudhuri suggests, *River of Smoke* presages "twentieth- and twenty-first-century diaspora, globalization, multiculturalism and their attendant dangers, such as drug-trafficking, continuing economic exploitation, and armed conflict over resources."[75] Indeed the diachronic character of the novel is marked by the obvious parallels between its narration of the prelude to the First Opium War as a crux in the history of nineteenth-century global trade and current political conflicts arising out of neo-liberal policies and globalization, including Western military interventions under gunboat diplomacy. The novel therefore reveals the continuities of the rhetoric of Free Trade and Victorian imperialism in the ideology of neo-liberalism

and globalization today, revealing the impending Opium Wars – that I will analyse in the next chapter – as a conflict which determined to a great extent current West-East relations.

NOTES

[1] Delmas (2016, 26).

[2] Ghosh (2011, 23).

[3] Ibid., 3.

[4] Ibid., 8.

[5] Ibid., 15.

[6] Ghosh (2015, 288).

[7] Quoted in Hawley (2005, 10).

[8] Dhar (2017, 8-9).

[9] Deloughrey (2007, 65).

[10] Ghosh (2011, 10-11).

[11] Ibid., 20.

[12] Ibid., 17.

[13] Ibid., 21.

[14] Ibid., 10.

[15] Bragard (2008, 92). An explanatory case is that of African literatures, that witnessed a transference of traditional oral forms to its posterior written literature, although it should be pointed out that modern African literatures are to a large extent the product of the European irruption into the African continent. See Vivanco (2017, 21).

[16] Bragard (2008, 97).

[17] Ghosh (2011, 21).

[18] Ibid., 9.

[19] Ibid., 8.

[20] Frost (2016, 1539).

[21] Ghosh (2011, 65).

[22] Ibid., 67.

[23] Ibid., 184.

[24] Frost (2016, 1538).

[25] Ghosh (2012b).

[26] Chaudhuri (2011, 132).

[27] Frost (2016, 1542). Similarly, John C. Hawley has referred to Ghosh's pre-Ibis literary production as 'Dickensian' because of the "proliferation of characters whose lives engage us and who take us to some richly imagined places and times" (Hawley 2005, 1).

[28] An early review of the novel criticised negatively the abundance of contextual information about Canton included in Robin's epistolary encounters with Paulette: "Robin's unfiltered monologues allow Ghosh to indulge his encyclopedic tendencies while blaming it on his character; his long-winded missives to Paulette spare no detail, let no back-story slip away untold. Ghosh often appears uncertain of how much of the Indian context he needs to explain to Western readers": Atlas (2011).

[29] Ghosh (2011, 197). My emphasis.

[30] Ghosh (2016, 1557).

[31] Ghosh (2011, 264).

[32] Ibid., 197.

[33] Ibid., 197.

[34] Ibid., 204.

[35] Ibid., 204-205.

[36] Ibid., 205.

[37] Brown (2013, 117-118).

[38] Grande (2011, 38). See also Frost (2016, 1543).

[39] Ghosh (2011, 53-54).

[40] Ibid., 51.

[41] Frost (2016, 1543).

[42] Ghosh (2011, 519).

[43] Ibid., 81.

[44] Delmas (2016, 26).

[45] Ghosh (2011, 564).

[46] Ibid., 83.

[47] Ibid., 82.

[48] Batra (2013, 326).

[49] Ghosh (2011, 83).

[50] Ibid., 84.

[51] Chaudhuri (2011, 137).

[52] Ibid., 138.

[53] Ghosh (2011, 62).

[54] Ibid., 290.

[55] Ibid., 299-300.

[56] Ibid., 498.

[57] Ibid., 72.

[58] Ibid., 16.

[59] Ibid., 235.

[60] Ibid., 183.

[61] Cowaloosur (2015, 9).

[62] Ibid., 9.

[63] Luo (2013, 378).

[64] Desai (2013, 7).

[65] Ghosh (2012a). Ghosh uses the term 'xenophilia' after Leela Gandhi's *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism and the Politics of Friendship* (2005).

[66] Ghosh (2011, 162).

[67] Ibid., 164-165.

[68] Ibid., 164.

[69] Ibid., 164-165.

[70] Singh (2016, 194).

[71] Ghosh (2011, 169).

[72] Ibid., 186.

[73] Ghosh (2016, 1556).

[74] Ghosh (2011, 476).

[75] Chaudhuri (2011, 142).

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Chapter 5. Of Buchas, Opium Wars, and the *Kali Yuga*: Amitav Ghosh's *Flood of Fire* (2015)

The culmination to the *Ibis* trilogy came out in 2015 with the publication of *Flood of Fire*. The novel records the escalation of violence between Britain and China which led to the First Opium War (1839-1842). The narration opens right at the close of *River of Smoke*: After Commissioner Lin forces Canton foreign traders to surrender and destroy their opium cargoes, merchants from the East India Company persuade the British government to send an expeditionary force to China to compel the Eastern country to lift the trade bans on opium, open its ports to foreign trade and pay reparations to the opium smugglers for the destroyed cargoes. W. Travis Hanes and Frank Sanello establish a scathing and hypothetical analogy to illustrate Victorian Britain's coerced and military introduction of opium into China:

> Imagine this scenario: the Medellin cocaine cartel of Colombia mounts a successful military offensive against the United States, then forces the U.S. to legalize cocaine and allow the cartel to import the drug into five major American cities, unsupervised and untaxed by the U.S. The American government also agrees to let the drug lords govern all Colombian citizens who operate in these cities, plus the U.S. has to pay war reparations of $100 billion – the Colombians' cost of waging the war to import cocaine into America.[1]

That is analogously what happened between Britain and China during the First Opium War, an event that rarely surfaces in the contemporary British imagination. To China, however, the First Opium War, together with the Second Opium War (1856-1860) and the ensuing unequal trade treaties imposed on the Eastern country make up what the Chinese today call the 'century of humiliation'.[2] Many Chinese historians, some critics argue, tellingly state that modern Chinese history begins after the end of the First Opium War.[3]

As in the first two instalments in the *Ibis* series, *Flood of Fire* presents a series of characters, some of them already familiar to the reader, ensnared in powerful historical circumstances, and whose individual narratives gently intersect and converge: Kesri Singh, Deeti's brother, is a sepoy in the Bengal Native Infantry who

agrees to join the overseas campaign against the Chinese after his white superior and friend Captain Mee; Shireen Modi, Bahram's wife, is now a widow who defies her Parsi family by travelling to China to demand reparations for her late husband's investments in opium. To these new – or previously referred to – characters, Ghosh adds the narrations of familiar characters, specifically Neel, who is still fleeing English justice and is now servicing the Chinese authorities against their war against Britain, and Zachary Reid, who gets engaged both in a passionate relationship with Mrs Burnham and in the opium trade and capitalism.

Ghosh demonstrates again his skills as 'microhistorian' in his descriptions of the minutiae of nineteenth-century India and China. Besides the author's already familiar renditions of maritime spots such as islands, ships, and littoral areas, according to Mark R. Frost "the outstanding descriptive set piece in *Flood of Fire* (2015) ... is [Ghosh's] reconstruction of a mobile city: an East India Company army and its camp followers on the march."[4] The novel's account of the mobility of the Sepoy army and its ambulant encampment through the colonized Indian subcontinent and across the South China Sea – which can very well be compared with other set descriptions in *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke* such as the coolie depots, Alipore Jail, Ghazipur Opium Factory, and Fanqui-Town – illustrates Ghosh's description and observation skills. These sections in the novel are narrated through Kesri Singh, Deeti's brother and an East India Company sepoy whose superior is the brother of Deeti's late husband. When news of Deeti's escape from her sati with Kalua reach the Sepoy *paltan* (platoon), Kesri faces ostracism and decides to join a voluntary overseas campaign in China, the one leading to the First Opium War.

Kesri's perspective as an Indian soldier in the sepoy army is instrumentalised by Ghosh to rail against the unequal treatment undergone by the sepoys in the British army. As the narration evinces, sepoys are paid less than British soldiers, live in separate barracks, are never risen to positions of authority, are sent to overseas campaigns with inferior weapons, and are compelled to travel to China in badly-fitted

vessels.[5] This colonial institutional racism suffered by Indian soldiers, which would reach its apex in the mid-Victorian period with the Indian Mutiny (1857), facilitates, significantly, a challenge to the strict Indian caste system, particularly while at sea. As Kesri points out prior to the sea journey from Calcutta to China

> He himself was now sharing a room with four naiks, and within a week he felt he knew them better than he had ever known his subordinates. They were from different places – Awadh, Mithila, Bhojpur and the mountains – and of different castes as well: Brahmin, Rajput, Aheer, Kurmi and a few others. At the start some of them grumbled about eating together, but Kesri was quick to dhamkao [rebuke] the complaints out of them. Didn't they know that they would have to travel on transport ships? Didn't they understand that on ships it was impossible to carry on as if they were back in a village?[6]

Ghosh again constructs nineteenth-century maritime mobility, for all its insertion within colonial structures of power, as a catalyst for transcultural solidarities. The strict hierarchies of the colonial army and the inequalities established between white soldiers and sepoys do not prevent the latter from developing close connections with their *butchas* (children). As the novel illustrates in the relation between Kesri and Captain Mee, sepoys were in charge of raising' young white soldiers in the battalion, training them in the ways of the Indian army or nursing them when ill, despite the sepoys' services were forgotten when white soldiers were promoted.[7] Sepoys and their butchas are illustrated then to develop strong affinities for each other despite the racist hierarchies that encircle them. As Gaurav Desai points out, the bonds between sepoys and butchas (and between Kesri and Captain Mee particularly) "reflect the ways in which individuals negotiate the sometimes constraining and at other times enabling societal structures in which they find themselves."[8]

Shireen Modi is one of the most memorable characters in *Flood of Fire* and signals Ghosh's commitment to reconstruct subaltern female perspectives on sea travel in the nineteenth century. Shireen, Bahram's wife, is the daughter of a powerful Parsi family in Bombay and as was already indicated in *River of Smoke*, she

represents a usually invisible figure in classical maritime literature: the merchant's or seaman's wife left behind at home. In contradistinction to the other widow in the trilogy, the Hindu Deeti, Shireen's Parsi background and well-off family makes her widowhood radically different. The death of Bahram in Hong Kong has left her in an uncomfortable position though: the embargo on the opium enacted by Commissioner Lin entails that Bahram has left huge debts behind and the *Anahita* has been purchased by Benjamin Burnham. As rumours of the British expedition to China reach Bombay, other Parsi merchants, Shireen's brothers claim, are willing to travel to China in support of Britain to demand reparations. Shireen understands the implications of this: "that things would have been different if she and Bahram had had a son to represent their interests."[9] To complicate things, Shireen learns from Zadig Bey about Ah Fatt (Freddie), Bahram's illegitimate son in China.

Ghosh elaborates Shireen's narration as a tale of female liberation. Against her family's wishes and risking her reputation and position within Bombay's Parsi society, Shireen decides to travel to China to visit her husband's grave and his illegitimate son Ah Fatt and to represent Bahram's interests in the event of China being compelled to pay compensation for the destroyed opium cargoes. Challenging the scandal for a Parsi widow to travel alone, Shireen defies her family's opposition, much encouraged by Zadig Bey: "'Bibiji! European women travel in ships all the time. You are educated, you speak English, you are the daughter of Seth Rustamjee Mistrie who built some of the finest ships to sail the ocean. Why should it be difficult for you to go?'"[10] Shireen's determination and Zadig Bey's assistance lead her to embark on an overseas journey to China, which reveals, again, the liberating force of maritime mobility:

> The mere fact of having a purpose to work towards energized her as nothing had done in many years. The very textures and colours of the world around her seemed to change and things that had been of little concern to her before – like business, finance and politics – suddenly seemed to be of absorbing interest. It was as if a gale had parted the purdahs that

> curtained her world, blowing away many decades' worth of dust and cobwebs.[11]

Further on Shireen's empowerment is sardonically illustrated when she teases her brothers about her having better 'sea legs' and never suffering from seasickness when they used to go on sailing trips as children.[12] Ghosh's portrayal of Shireen is a stimulating fictional contribution to female perspectives on the sea and rivals the author's depiction of the other two relevant female characters in the trilogy, Deeti and Paulette.

Early in the novel Shireen is presented as a dutiful widow with a strict moral sense. However, as Shireen gets on board towards China, the narration soon gives account of the transformative potential of sea travel on identity. When she is suggested by Rosa, her travelling companion, to wear a dress instead of a sari due to the bitterly cold winters in the south China coast and the fact that "at sea dresses are easier to manage than saris," Shireen gets dismayed at the prospect of breaking Parsi rules for widowhood, which demanded widows to wear only white saris: "in trying to envision herself in a dress, Shireen realised that the journey ahead would entail much more than just a change of location: in order to arrive at her destination she would have to become a different person."[13] The impact of maritime mobility on Shireen's self is equally perceived by Zadig Bey, who claims: "I didn't expect to find you looking so much at home here – walking around without a veil, dressed like a memsahib and smiling at everyone.'"[14] Shireen's cosmopolitan conversion is further cemented by her gradual engagement and eventual marriage to Zadig Bey.

Shireen's transformation features a form of privileged cosmopolitanism which seems at odds with Ghosh's emphasis in forms of *coerced* cosmopolitanism illustrated by Paulette and Deeti in the trilogy. Her privileged status within Parsi society and her financial stability despite Bahram's debts are marked facilitators for her embarking on an overseas journey to claim Bahram's lost profits in the opium trade – profits, let us recall, built upon the growing impoverishment of Indian

peasants and the increasing addiction of Chinese population to opium. We could point out, however, a commendable outcome of Shireen's cosmopolitan transcendence of her strict Parsi background: the acceptance of Freddie (Ah Fatt) as Bahram's legitimate son. Her moving encounter with Freddie in Hong Kong and their joint visit to Bahram's grave on the island constitutes an act of transoceanic solidarity and acknowledges, in Mihir Bose's views, "the rights of half-Chinese illegitimate children as a result of overseas trade routes."[15]

Mrs Burnham reappears in *Flood of Fire* as the other outstanding female character in the narration due to her illicit, sexual, and passionate relationship with Zachary Reid and the revelation that Captain Mee and she were lovers in their youth. After Zachary Reid has been acquitted of the charges of mutiny aboard the *Ibis*, he is employed by the Burhams as a *mystery* (carpenter) to refurbish a boathouse. Mrs Burnham's liaison with Reid starts with her attempts at instructing him in the perils of masturbation after she furtively observes him shirtless while working on the boathouse. Their posterior sexual encounters soon turn into a hilarious attack on Victorian sexual repression in which nineteenth-century ideas of prudery and morality are displaced to nineteenth-century colonized India. The repressive character inherent in the surreptitious nature of Mrs Burnham and Reid's sexual relations and her rampant crusade against Reid's onanist 'condition' serve as a counterpoint to Reid's reminiscences of mariners' unrepressed sexual behaviour at sea:

> Certainly no one who had ever slept in a fo'c'sle could fail to notice the fusillades that shook every hammock from time to time. More than once had he been bumped in the nose because of an overly energetic bout of musketry in the hammock above. Just as he himself was sometimes shouted at, he'd learnt to shout: 'Will you stop polishing your pistol up there? Take your shot and be done with it.'[16]

The unorthodox character of Zachary and Mrs Burnham' sexual liaison is cloaked under nautical-inflected sexual euphemisms which are used by Mrs Burnham in the name of propriety – this, together with her insistence on them addressing each other as Mr Reid and Mrs Burnham even while in bed, is read with comic

distance by the reader.[17] Their sexual affair soon acquires farcical undertones, as the narration capitalizes on the inconsistency between Mrs Burnham's obsession with propriety and a morally upright behaviour and public language and her uninhibited sexuality during her sexual trysts with the young sailor. Interestingly, Mrs Burnham's seduction of Zachary parallels her oblique luring him into the imperial cast of mind. In her farewell to Zachary before setting sail for China with her husband, Mrs Burnham exhorts him "to become a man of the times … If you succeed the whole world will be at your feet."[18] By the time Zachary meets Mrs Burnham again in China, once converted into opium trader, he will echo her words to signal his savage transformation into an insatiable capitalist.

Up to this point in the *Ibis* trilogy, Ghosh has articulated the novels around a constructive, albeit ambivalently, notion of the oceanic space. I have argued that the Indian Ocean waterworlds envisaged by Ghosh, although they are an extension of Victorian land-based imperialism, facilitate nevertheless the fluidity of racial, cultural, and sexual hierarchies. *Flood of Fire*, because of its significant focus on Britain's military expedition against China in 1839, involves a significant departure in the literary-historical construction of the ocean developed up to now in the trilogy; this third instalment sets up the ocean as a locus for the projection of military power.

As soon as the British expedition reaches past the South China Sea, the novel maps the Pearl River estuary through the gradual military advancement of British and Indian soldiers upriver. At this point, the narration turns into an escalating succession of battle close-ups involving carnage of soldiers, destruction of land fortifications, and warships engaged in cannonball exchanges. The naval and military superiority of the British army begets an unbalanced human and material cost on the Chinese side, as is witnessed by Neel and Jodu in the British attack on Chuenpee. As they observe in horror the mass of burnt bodies washed ashore into the channel, they notice that "not one of the British ships, so far as they could see, had suffered

the slightest damage. The speed with which it happened was as astounding as the one-sidedness of the destruction."[19]

An embodiment of Britain's superior technology in naval war is the novel's introduction of the *Nemesis*, an ironclad steam warship that was determinant in the British victory over the Chinese. The 660-ton *Nemesis* set sail from Liverpool to China in 1839 and was the first steam-powered ship to reach the Indian Ocean.[20] The novel's description of the vessel deserves to be quoted in full:

> The *Nemesis* was made almost entirely of metal; there was so much iron on her that a special device had to be fitted on her compass to correct the deflection. Her two massive paddle-wheels were powered by engines of one hundred and twenty horsepower which daily devoured eleven tons of coal ... Her armaments too were such as to induce awe: she carried two thirty-twopound pivot guns, capable of shooting shell or canister, five brass six-pounders, and ten iron swivels; in addition there was a tube on the bridge between her paddle-wheels, for the launching of Congreve rockets. It was thought by many ... that the *Nemesis* would forever change the nature of naval warfare: she was expected to serve as a secret weapon, striking terror into the Chinese.[21]

The *Nemesis* embodies the transference of British land-based iron industry and steam power onto the sea. The insatiable appetite for coal demanded by the engines of this terror-inducing vessel, which can be said to metaphorically evoke the excesses of consumption engendered by global capitalism, constructs a vision of the seascape increasingly mechanised and militarised. Monstrous and ominous in its undertones, the description of the *Nemesis*, slightly reminiscent of the description of the steam tug at the opening of Conrad's "The Nigger of the Narcissus", illustrates the Indian Ocean as invaded by Western naval technology, signalling the transition from the age of sail to the age of steam as well as an irruption into the peaceful and multicultural Indian Ocean waterworlds of boats, sampans, and junks illustrated throughout the trilogy.

The novel's account of the First Opium War is articulated around subtle insights into Sino-Indian and Sino-British relations in the Victorian era. Indeed, one

of the strong points of the novel, Alice Albinia has argued, is the balanced juxtaposition of Western, Indian, and Chinese perspectives on the Opium Wars.[22] The relationships between China and the Indian subcontinent in the nineteenth century have long been overshadowed by far wider debates regarding West-East relations. *Flood of Fire* plunges into discussions on the nature of Indo-Chinese understanding during the Victorian Age, unearthing the experiences of Indian sepoys in overseas campaigns in China as well as India's role in the First Opium War.

The character of Kesri Singh epitomises Indian's uncomfortable position of India in the confrontation between Britain and China and within the dynamics of Victorian imperialism. The opening chapters in the novel narrate in retrospect a young Kesri joining the East India Company army against his father's wishes.[23] Deluded by spurious notions of honour and equality, Kesri joins the Bengal Native Infantry and gets engaged throughout his military career in instructing other sepoys. When the first British offensives against the Chinese start, Kesri observes proudly his unit of sepoys overcoming Chinese forces: "As he watched them, sulkily falling back into line, a great pride filled Kesri's heart: he realized that he would never know a love as deep as that which bound him to this unit, which was largely his own creation, the culmination of his life's work."[24]

Nevertheless, it does not take long for Kesri to realise that he, and the rest of the sepoys, are merely a tool of the British Empire to secure its metropolitan interests. As the conflict escalates into a virulent attack against Chinese locals defending their villages, Kesri recognises the futility of his involvement in the conflict. After killing a Chinese soldier in battle, not only does he discern that the Chinese "fight for their land, their homes, their families, their customs, everything they hold dear" but also that "he had never known what it was to fight in that way ... for something that was your own; something that tied to your fathers and mothers and those who had gone before them."[25]

Facing that uncomfortable truth, the young sepoy realises that the Chinese's defence of their villages matches exactly what he would have done in India; this prompts him to develop a growing sympathy for the enemy, which points again to Ghosh's call for Indo-Chinese cooperation and collaboration in the past as well as today. Kesri's gradual realisation that sepoys in British overseas military campaigns are little more than "hired murderers" implicated in "actions [that] would have to be answered for in many lives yet to come" can be read additionally as reflecting the dilemma of Western soldiers involved in military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan today.[26]

Neel is another character who encapsulates India's complex position in Victorian transoceanic imperialism. As Commissioner Lin forces an embargo on British and Indian merchants' opium cargoes, Neel finds that Hong Kong is being gradually occupied by British forces. Still fleeing English justice for the crime of forgery wrongfully charged on him, Neel "can never be comfortable around the British flag" so he escapes Hong Kong and comes back to Canton, "deeper into China ... safe from Britannia's all-seeing eye and all-grasping hand."[27] Neel's friendship with Compton, a Chinese owning a print-shop in Canton, leads the English-speaking runaway Raja to collaborate with Commissioner Lin and Chinese authorities to compile information about British-ruled India. Ghosh's portrayal of Chinese court officials in collaboration with Neel learning about the 'foreign enemy' to dominate him constitutes an instance of reverse Orientalism and appropriation of knowledge as power. This is corroborated by Travis W. Hanes and Frank Sanello, who claim that Commissioner Lin and his court officials engaged in reading Emer de Vattel's *The Law of Nations* (1758), Algernon Thelwall's *The Iniquities of the Opium Trade with China* (1839), or the English-language journal *The Canton Press* in the months before the impending Opium War.[28]

Nevertheless, what Ghosh intends to illustrate in his portrayal of Neel collaborating with Chinese forces against the British Empire is that loyalty, just like

identity, can be in a constant state of flux, particularly for Indian subjects enmeshed in the convoluted Victorian imperial operations. Neel in particular feels wronged both by English justice and his Indian caste-fellows who did not stand for him when he was jailed and now consider him a pariah. This leads him to develop a dismal and deterritorialised view on language when he nostalgically thinks of his English education in Daniel Defoe, Jonathan Swift, and William Shakespeare:

> It is madness to think that knowing a language and reading a few books can create allegiances between people. Thoughts, books, ideas, words – if anything, they make you more alone, because they destroy whatever instinctive loyalties you may once have possessed.[29]

Just like Kesri's service to the East India Company army, Neel's position as an agent on the Chinese side is not free from constrictions. Facing the growing British offensive assisted by Indian forces in the Pearl River, Chinese authorities start distributing notices to encourage the capture of 'enemy aliens.' Nevertheless, as Chinese officials claim, "not all foreigners fell under this head: Portuguese, Americans and some others were exempted. The notices were targeted solely at British subjects, which included Parsi merchants as well as Indian soldiers and sepoys."[30] That Parsis and Indians are included within the category of "British subjects" for the Chinese demonstrates the fluctuating character of the label 'alien.' The articulations between sameness and difference from a Chinese point of view produce alternative categories which overlap the persona of Neel. When Compton rants against the 'black-alien soldiers' for their effective service to the British army in sea battles, Neel's loyalty again fluctuates between his commitment to his service to China and his fellow Indians' military prowess:

> Neel took a perverse satisfaction in Compton's words for he had tried often, always unavailingly, to alter his friend's low opinion of the fighting qualities of Indian troops. Committed though Neel was to the Chinese cause, he was aware now of a keen sense of pride in his compatriots' performance that day.[31]

However, Compton's grief-stricken statement to Neel, "why are your countrymen killing our people when there is no enmity between us?" seems more indicative of Ghosh's construction of Sino-Indian relations in the period.[32] Not only are Kesri's and Neel's wavering allegiances to the British and Chinese sides meant to illustrate the complex position of India in the Opium Wars, but also Victorian imperialism is illustrated as hindering Indo-Chinese understanding.

As late as 1902, after the 'century of humiliation' in which Indian soldiers assisted several Western expeditions against China, there exist reports of Indian subalterns pointing out kinships and affinities between India and China, as well as of the latter's plight in dealing with Western powers throughout the nineteenth century.[33] Thakur Gadhadhar Singh's memoir *Thirteen Months in China: The China War* (1902), for example, records a first-person account of the Boxer Uprising (1899-1901) and the international expedition sent to suppress the rebellion.[34] Gadhadhar Singh was an Indian soldier who participated in such international incursion under a Euro-American-Japanese coalition and a telling point he raises in his memoir is the commonality between India and China as two countries facing the colonial aggression from Western powers.[35] Following the previous line of reasoning, Ghosh's construction of the characters of Kesri and Neel as contradictorily implicated in the Opium Wars seems to point again to a Pan-Asian collaboration between India and China.

In parallel to nineteenth-century India and its citizens being narrated as embroiled amid the confrontation between two great empires, Ghosh constructs Western and Eastern characters and their intercultural relations in terms of their enmeshment in the maritime battles surrounding them: the British Captain Mee – who is revealed to be half Indian – develops a strong and sincere connection with Kesri; Mrs. Burnham and Shireen, despite their cultural differences, establish an earnest female-female friendship amid the patriarchal structures of Victorian imperialism; and Zachary and Serang Ali develop tender bonds for Raju, Neel's son, who

reappears in a subplot involving a reunion between father and son after Neel's transportation. The intercultural bonds developed between Western and Eastern characters illustrate the ways in which individuals sidestep and subvert the oppressing sexist and racist structures of Victorian imperialism in which they find themselves implicated.

The *Ibis* trilogy, but more specifically *Flood of Fire*, takes a decisive step towards retrieving the memory of the Opium Wars in the West. In contraposition to China, where the Opium Wars, as we have argued, are associated with the nineteenth century as the 'century of humiliation' in Chinese collective memory, the Opium Wars do not hold a prominent position in the European or British historical imagination. A telling indication of contemporary British ignorance – or historical amnesia – about the Opium Wars was the fact that in November 2010, David Cameron and a group of British ministers wore Remembrance Day poppy buttonholes at an official state visit to China, forgetting about the indexical associations between the poppy and opium.[36] Despite the erasure of the opium question in the British historical imagination, the First Opium War, whose opening is recorded in *Flood of Fire*, is increasingly being read as a crux in West-East relations. As I have already argued, Ghosh has read the opium trade in the nineteenth century as the very foundation of the British Empire, free markets, and capitalism.[37] One of the most finely crafted ironies in *Flood of Fire* is that the British Empire's desperate and gun-driven attempt to maintain the opium trade at the beginning of the Victorian era is cloaked under a messianic discourse about the benefits of Free Trade deployed by Victorian merchants, as illustrated by a Free trader in the novel:

> If there was any country on earth ... that stood in breach of these doctrines it was China, with its subservience to authority and its minute control of everyday matters. Only with the destruction of their present institutions, only with the abandonment of their ways and customs, could the people of this benighted realm hope to achieve harmony and happiness. This indeed was the historic destiny of Free-Traders like themselves ... Of all the lessons the West could teach them, this was the most important. And

> inasmuch as traders like themselves were helping the Chinese to learn this lesson, they were their friends, not their enemies.[38]

The hypocrisy lying in Victorian Free traders' defence of military intervention in China is evident: the British Empire's dependence on the opium industry and the trade imbalance between Britain and China prior to the First Opium War are disguised under a zealous undertaking to bring the liberties of Free Trade to Chinese people. In this sense, Ghosh's *Flood of Fire* explores "the spin Europeans put on their empire-building that in acquiring other people lands, and subjugating them, they were not just motivated by profit but fulfilling a higher, selfless, moral mission to liberate and uplift these people from their wretched existence."[39] Additionally, as Marie-Luise Kohlke observes, the novel's portrayal of Victorian Free Traders' mercantile militarism and moralistic discourse on China's trade policy turns further ironic from a contemporary point of view, as Britain today is greatly dependent on Chinese investment and it has been largely surpassed by China as a global economic power.[40]

The novel's reconstruction of the First Opium War does not content itself with providing a critique of the excesses of Victorian Free Trade and looking forward to the postmodern future to cast an ironic look on Britain's dependence on Chinese markets. Ghosh also integrates *Flood of Fire* within current debates on globalization, international relations, and neo-liberalism. The novel's balanced account of British, Indian, and Chinese perspectives on the opium traffic are revealing about the First Opium War as a crux in global relations but it is especially Ghosh's account of the Chinese point of view that is driven towards a more comprehensive understanding of today's West-East relations.

Traditional conceptions of imperial China have constructed the eastern country as a nation fundamentally self-isolated from other nations. As Dilip K. Basu has claimed, "the centrality of the cultural construction of 'all-under-Heaven' and the 'Middle Kingdom' and the inferior status of outsiders as 'barbarians' ... are now

accepted as 'givens' in most mainstream works on China, whether these are written by Chinese, Japanese, or Western scholars."[41] Imperial China considered itself the Middle Kingdom after the belief that civilisation and humanity had developed around the country. Accordingly, the Emperor was deemed as the Son of Heaven and Chinese authorities expected foreign traders arriving in China to pay tribute to the Emperor.[42] This arguable self-conceited view on the nation, which was not dissimilar from Britain's belief in the civilising mission and the destiny of the 'superior' English race, has been determining Sino-Western relations since the beginning of the First Opium War until today. Nevertheless, I argue that *Flood of Fire*, in the wake of recent and more nuanced historiography on imperial China and its relations with the West, reconsiders that monolithic view on nineteenth-century China at least in two aspects: the unearthing of a more fluid vision of Sino-Western interactions and a linguistic reconsideration of Victorian Britain's creation of knowledge about China.

Regarding imperial China's relations with the West, the novel certainly concedes as true the notion that official circles in China were uninterested in 'overseas matters', a vision that seems to match both the traditional conception of the sea as beyond nation and society and the Orientalist discourse on Imperial China's arguable isolationism. Nevertheless, through the novel's portrayal of Commissioner Lin and Compton, Ghosh seeks to demonstrate that there certainly existed an underlying cluster of Chinese scholars who looked beyond China towards the world overseas:

> According to Compton, the principal subject of Zhong Lou-si's studies – overseas matters – has generally been regarded as unimportant and even disreputable in official circles. And the fact that he does not hesitate to seek out sailors, shipowners, merchants, emigrants and the like is considered unseemly by many of his peers: those are classes of men that officialdom has traditionally regarded as untrustworthy. For all these reasons Zhong Lou-si's work was long overlooked.[43]

A disciple of Zhong Lou-Si, Compton's life has been equally determined by the inflow of overseas collectives:

> Compton is not from the kind of family that generally produces scholars and officials: he is the son of a ship-chandler and has grown up on the Pearl River, in close proximity to foreign sailors and businessmen: it was they who had taught him English; it was from them too that he learnt about the world overseas; they also gave him his English name.[44]

The novel seems to narrate these intercultural encounters between Zhong Lou-Si, Compton, and foreign sailors and traders as a potential model for China and Britain to acquire mutual knowledge and accordingly contribute to a reciprocal understanding between both powers and discard monolithic notions about each other. Scholars such as Phil C. W. Chan have argued against statements on imperial China's isolation from overseas nations by affirming that "European diplomatic and religious missions had been received by China's imperial court since the sixteenth century."[45] Song-Chuan Chen more specifically claims that "before the 1830s, the British acquired their conceptual framework of China mainly through the writings of Jesuit missionaries from continental Europe, which depicted China as a peaceable country to be admired and imitated."[46] Compton's and Lou-Si's cosmopolitan visions about the world 'beyond the sea' can be read therefore as individual acts of resistance to sovereign states' official views on foreign relations.

Such individual drives towards mutual communication and understanding between Chinese and foreigners were obviously overpowered by what Song-Chuan Chen has called the "Warlike party", comprised of Canton merchants who persuaded the British government to send the expeditionary force that started the First Opium War.[47] These merchants allied themselves with imperial discourses of civilisation to construct a distorted image of China – highlighting the country's arguable tyranny, hermeticism, and Sinocentrism – that displaced previous knowledge about the eastern country in Europe. The notion of the 'Middle Kingdom' and the tribute system in the relations between the Chinese Emperor and foreign traders were certainly capitalised by Canton traders to justify military intervention, but in reality, as Michael Keevak has pointed out, such laws of homage and tribute were mainly symbolic, involving mere cultural practices and protocols of respect, politeness and

'kowtow' (bow down) to run foreign relations and bridge the gap between radically different cultures.[48] Additionally, Matthew W. Mosca claims, the purpose of the Sinocentric system of tribute in the Chinese empire "was less to manipulate actual foreign conditions to China's economic or military advantage, than to give domestic audiences proof that foreigners acknowledged and submitted to the emperor's power."[49]

Flood of Fire also reconsiders Sino-British relations in the Victorian era from a linguistic point of view. I have already stated that British missionaries in China produced knowledge about the Qing dynasty for the west. To these missionaries, we might add British diplomats and officials from the East India Company, such as Sir George Staunton and P.P Thoms, who were among the first British officials who learnt Chinese and tried to produce genuine knowledge about the eastern country for Victorian Britain.[50] As I have already pointed out, Canton merchants and Free Traders displaced previous knowledge about China in the west in order to justify the military intervention in the First Opium War, and they did so by manipulating the most obvious obstacle for Sino-British understanding: language. The narration's portrayal of Neel's assistance to Compton and Chinese authorities illustrates the creation of knowledge as a crucial strategy in the clash of empires. Neel's linguistic versatility and research skills find a clear precursor in the multilingual character of Kanai in *The Hungry Tide* (2004), a novel which coalesces with the *Ibis* trilogy in their joint attention to textuality and language as a bridge for transcultural understanding but also as a weapon to exert what Spivak famously termed 'epistemic violence'.[51] As Neel observes about Compton and their shared task of translating English documents into Chinese:

> It is as if language itself has become a battleground, with words serving as weapons. [Compton] sometimes explodes with indignation while reading British translations of official Chinese documents: Look, Ah Neel, look! Look how they have changed the meaning of what was said![52]

According to Compton, English translators' most flagrant distortion of language lies in their translation of the Chinese character *yi*, which had been translated as 'foreigner' until the years preceding the First Opium War:

> This character has always been used to refer to people who are not from the Central States: what it means, in other words, is 'foreigner'. Apparently this was not disputed until recently – Americans and Englishmen were quite content to translate *yi* as 'foreigner'. But of late some of their translators have begun to insist that *yi* means 'barbarian'. It has repeatedly been pointed out to them that the word has been applied to many revered and famous people in China.[53]

The historian Dilip K. Basu has provided authoritative evidence on the (mis)translation of *yi* in Anglo-Chinese official interactions: he has analysed the records of official correspondence between Chinese authorities and British supercargoes in Canton between 1760 and 1810 – written in Chinese – and the resulting examination indicates that the term *yi* was the ordinary term to refer to Europeans in the records, whether used by Britons or Chinese, and that it was never translated as 'barbarian' in the English parallel records.[54]

According to Basu, "the translation of the term Yi as 'barbarian' not only is problematic but also completely occludes the political context in which the word was authorized to receive its currently accepted coherent form of construction and representation."[55] Such context alluded to by Basu is obviously the First Opium War and the Canton lobbyists who persuaded the British government to force opium into China at gunpoint. The mistranslation of *yi* as 'barbarian' not only served to justify military intervention in China but it has had deep reverberations in western cultural constructions of China, especially those which repeatedly highlight Sinocentrism. Even today, there are historiographical works that denote ignorance about the translation history of the term *yi* and about nineteenth-century China's perspectives on foreigners. For instance, in the recent *Embassies to China: Diplomacy and Cultural Encounters before the Opium War*s (2017), Michael Keevak sweepingly asserts that "the Chinese ... assumed [a] haughty self-conception that placed themselves at the

center of the world and rendered everyone else a *barbarian outsider.*"[56] Keevak seems to betray here unawareness on the term *yi* and its impact on European historiography about nineteenth-century China.

As a result of the previous discussion of Sino-British relations in the Victorian period, it can be argued that *Flood of Fire* constructs the First Opium War and the ensuing Treaty of Nanjing (1842) – which officially put an end to the war – as a fulcrum event that, to a significant extent, forged west-east relations and China's foreign policy today. Among other economic claims, the Treaty forced Chinese authorities to open four ports for trade in addition to the one in Canton and to pay economic compensation to the British government for the confiscated opium and the costs of the war. Additionally, this treaty sanctioned the cession of the island of Hong Kong to the British Empire. This treaty was effective until the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration (1984), which marked the end of British rule in China and culminated with the handing over of Hong Kong to China in 1997.[57] Given the remarkable aftereffects of the Treaty of Nanjing, it has been claimed that the First Opium War is the most obvious starting point for the study of modern China and seems crucial to understand contemporary China's perspectives on international law.[58] In this sense, Phil C.W. Chan points out:

> International law is an amalgam of the past, present, and future ... not only because the vast majority of rules, principles, and norms of international law, including those codified in treaties, have come into being through decades, if not centuries, of deviation, crystallization and consolidation, but also because the past, and one's perspectives of the past, underlie, inform and explain a state's perspectives of a particular order or particular norms or values and its approaches to the perspectives and actions of other states.[59]

In Jürgen Osterhammel's view, the previous line of reasoning provides a rationale for the fact that the 'century of humiliation' and the semi-colonial status to which China was reduced by European powers during the Victorian era remains a basic corollary in Chinese Communist Faith.[60]

The narration's commentary on Sino-British relations then and today is not the only aspect in which the novel evinces its twenty-first-century relevance. *Flood of Fire* also illustrates its diachronic purchase by invoking in the readers' minds the unrelenting advance of neo-liberalism and capitalism in contemporary globalization. Ghosh's finest example of global thinking appears near the blazing conclusion of the novel, as the *Nemesis* is forcing its way up the Pearl River and the Chinese are close to capitulating. In one of the most memorable passages in the novel, Kesri and the Bengal sepoy volunteers stand in their transport vessel gaping at the British navy's bombarding of Tiger's Mouth, as Baboo Nob Kissin appears on deck, dressed in a saffron robe and surrounded in a heavenly light. Presented as a prophetic figure, Nob Kissin looks at the columns of smoke rising in the Chinese forts and addresses Kesri:

> What you are seeing is the start of the *pralaya* – the beginning of the world's end ... Do you not know that we are in Kaliyuga, the epoch of apocalypse? You should rejoice that you are here today, fighting for the Angrez. It is the destiny of the English to bring about the world's end; they are but the instruments of the will of the gods.[61]

If Baboo Nob Kissin's fatal omen and his reference to the Kaliyuga – in Sanskrit knowledge, the age of devastation and vice preceding the final destruction of the earth – is not enough to conjure up the excesses and the self-destructive character of contemporary capitalism in the readers' minds, Nob Kissin then points to the steaming *Nemesis* and states:

> See, these fires that you see today, you know what they are? They are just kindling. They have been lit in order to awaken the demons of greed that are hidden in all human beings. That is why the English have come to China and to Hindustan: these two lands are so populous that if their greed is aroused they will consume the whole world.[62]

In light of Nob Kissin's words, Victorian imperialism has ingrained capitalist greed in China and India so that they may rise someday, devour the world and bring about the destruction of the world, "for only when this world ends will a better one be born."[63] This apocalyptic notion of the Opium question entails a commentary

on the emerging global economies of India and China today – which are known, together with Brazil and Russia, as the 'BRIC' group in economic circles[64] – and the rise of Victorian capitalism as a harbinger for the growing neo-liberalism both in the west and the east. Interestingly, Julia Adeney Thomas has read the passages quoted above in light of a "convergence of East and West ... both regions [being] responsible for the world's destruction."[65]

Baboo Nob Kissin's prophetic voice therefore anticipates a global landscape in which both East and West will become participants in the exploitation of world resources at the expense of the underprivileged. This collapse of the categories 'West' and 'East' is further cemented if one brings to mind the role global corporations, geopolitics, and economic interests play in triggering today's warfare – as Compton points out, "this is what happens when merchants and traders begin to run wars."[66]

If Baboo Nob Kissin's apparition and prophetic speech to the sepoys presages modern-day excesses of neo-liberalism and the rise of consumer economy in Asia, so does the character of Zachary Reid and his startling evolution throughout the novel. Newly acquitted from the crime of mutiny at the opening of *Flood of Fire*, throughout the narration he moves up from ship carpenter at the Burnham residence to ship's captain and opium trader, somehow following the steps of his employer Mr Burnham. In Marie-Luise Kohlke's words, "Zachary becomes co-opted into Victorian ideology and death-dealing perfidy, so that his imperialist adventure story rapidly degenerates into a neo-Victorian 'Rake's Progress' and far from moral *Bildungsroman*."[67]

Zachary's progression from poor mixed-race sailor to Victorian pro-war businessman is propelled by a hungry pursuit of money, power, and prestige, somehow mirroring Kesri's development in reverse. Out of his sexual affair with Mrs

Burnham, Zachary's immersion in the Burhams' world of wealth, luxury and authority kindles the young mariner's ambition to become an opium trader:

> I'm sick of that shit – sailing, risking your life every day, never having any money in your pocket. I don't want to be one of the deserving poor any more ... I want to be rich ... I want to have silk sheets and soft pillows and fine food ... I want to own ships and not work on them ... I want to live in Mr Burnham's world.[68]

The powerful lure of material pursuit experienced by Zachary, emphasised by the repetition of 'want', is instrumentalised by Baboo Nob Kissin, who, seeking to fulfil Ma Taramoni's prediction of the age of apocalypse, devises a plan to transform Zachary "from an ingenuous, good-natured boy, into a perfect embodiment of the Kali-yuga."[69] Nob Kissin's strategy is no other than "unshackling the demon of greed that lurks in every human heart" by instructing Zachary in the selling of opium.[70] The turning point in Zachary's character arc occurs on his first visit to the Opium Exchange bazaar, "a place in which people traded in something unseen and unknown: the prices that opium would fetch in the future, near or distant."[71] Ghosh is obviously trying to evoke the world of speculation in contemporary stock markets and signalling the opium exchange as an obvious precedent of today's market capitalism. Advised by Baboo Nob Kissin, Zachary invests all his savings in the opium market and that night he envisages his coins "out there in the world, forging their own destiny, making secret assignations, colliding with others of their kind – seducing, buying, spending, breeding, multiplying."[72]

Zachary's revelling in the promising circulation of his money marks not only his entry into the cash economy but also the breaking of a process of corruption fuelled by a growing appetite for benefit. This will lead him to blackmail Captain Mee into agreeing on a business contract to Burnham Bros by threatening to reveal the captain's former affair with Mrs Burnham, to betray Ah Fatt to the opium tycoon Lenny Chang, Ah Fatt's former boss, and to indirectly inducing Mrs Burnham to commit suicide after coercing her into having another sexual encounter. As Zachary

bitterly claims to Mrs Burnham in their last encounter, he has become "a man of the times ... a man who wants more and more and more; a man who does not know the meaning of "enough". Anyone who tries to thwart my desires is the enemy of my liberty and must expect to be treated as such."[73] Zachary's degeneration represents the rise of capitalism at its most extreme and provides the novel's most powerful account of the corrupting effects of material accumulation. Interestingly, opium becomes here a signifier of addition not to the drug itself, but the amassing of wealth derived from opium selling. This dichotomy between the drug and the benefit derived from it is already invoked by Bahram Moddie in *River of Smoke* when he states: "A lotus cannot bloom unless its roots are planted in the mud ... Opium is not important in itself: it is just mud—it is what grows out of it that is important."[74] Zachary's opium-fuelled figurative addition to money implies a significant departure from *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke*, in which opium was narrated in terms of its destructive power on the colonized addict (Hukam Singh and Ah Fatt in particular). In *Flood of Fire*, conversely, opium is displaced towards the colonizer/trader to metaphorically illustrate capitalist pursuit as an addiction as devastating as the drug itself.

The prominent position of Zachary throughout the *Ibis* series as well as his character development can be said to epitomise, in Gaurav Desai's words, "the linkages between vast oceanic worlds."[75] As I argued in Chapter 3, *Sea of Poppies* mobilises the character of Zachary as a signifier of the transoceanic connections between Atlantic and Indian Ocean waterworlds, and this is further underscored by the character's implication in the Indian-Ocean opium industry in *Flood of Fire*. Considering the geographical displacement experienced by Zachary throughout the narration, I want to take the previous argument further to argue that Zachary's rise from inexperienced sailor to Free trader, following Mr Burnham's steps, typifies the United States as taking over Britain's imperial role in the globe. The closing chapter of the novel suggests so when different European, American, and Indian merchants gather for the first auction of land of Hong Kong. Significantly, the largest tract of

land on the island is bought by Mr Burnham and Zachary under the firm Burnham and Reid.

Their commercial collaboration under the creation of this firm suggests Zachary as the natural inheritor of Mr Burnham's Free Trade thinking, illustrating the young ex-sailor as a surrogate for US imperialism. If this is not enough for the reader to perceive Ghosh's global thinking, the narration further reveals that the firm Burnham and Reid will be collaborating closely with Leonard Chan, the Chinese tycoon responsible for Ah Fatt's death. In a gesture symbolising the consolidation of capitalism, "taking Zachary's wrist in his right hand and Mr Chan's in his left, Mr Burnham hoisted up their arms and held them aloft in triumph."[76] The triad Burnham-Reid-Chan, or rather Britain-US-China, prefigures multinational relations today, with the United States and China as obvious recipients of Victorian Britain's imperial position of power around the globe.

Ghosh's final account of transoceanic commercial relations between Burnham, Reid, and Chan over the exploitation of others can be said to contravene the trilogy's construction of maritime connectivity as enabling liberation for the subaltern. However, the very last paragraphs of the novel transport us back to Mauritius and Deeti's shrine to close the trilogy on a positive note. A special chamber in the shrine tells about an event that happens in parallel to the land auction at Hong Kong and the presentation of Burnham and Reid's firm. That event, known to the Colvers as 'the Escape', involves Serang Ali, Jodu, Neel, Raju, Kesri, and Maddow Colver escaping on the *Ibis* while merchants are bidding for strips of land in Hong Kong. This group of subalterns' escape to the sea articulates Ghosh's literary account of the individual acts of resistance which underlie the dominant structures of Victorian imperialism and, in passing, the author's contribution to the repertoire of liberating fantasies of maritime literature.

NOTES

[1] Hanes and Sanello (2002, xi).

[2] Chan (2014, 878).

[3] Ain (2016, 202).

[4] Frost (2016, 1539).

[5] Ghosh, (2015, 46, 226, 279-80, 406).

[6] Ibid., 229.

[7] Ibid., 25-26.

[8] Desai (2016, 1532).

[9] Ghosh, (2015, 43).

[10] Ibid., 187.

[11] Ibid., 216-217.

[12] Ibid., 238.

[13] Ibid., 267.

[14] Ibid., 301.

[15] Bose (2015).

[16] Ghosh (2015, 63).

[17] Ibid., 208-210.

[18] Ibid., 245.

[19] Ibid., 476.

[20] Hanes and Sanello (2002, 115).

[21] Ghosh, (2015, 403). In the novel, Neel claims Congreve rockets referred to in this paragraph to be "a refinement of a weapon that was invented in India", particularly by Sultan Haider Ali of Mysore and his heir Tipu during their wars against the East India Company in the late eighteenth century. Later on, Neel claims, the London-based inventor Mr. William Congreve appropriated and improved the weapon and it was used in the War of 1812 and in the Napoleonic Wars: Ghosh (2015, 334). There has been much debate on the actual origin and development of Congreve rockets. Scholars have discussed the rockets' debatable English or Indian origins, the use of rockets in English and Indian warfare before the eighteenth century or the circumstances surrounding William Congreve's development of his eponymous invention. See Werrett (2012, 601-602).

[22] Albinia (2015).

[23] Ghosh (2015, 93-95)

[24] Ibid., 386-387.

[25] Ibid., 472.

[26] Ibid., 505. For a contemporary first-person account about the troubled feelings experienced by soldiers sent to overseas wars – e.g. Iraq, Afghanistan or Syria – see Glenton (2016).

[27] Ghosh (2015, 180).

[28] Hanes and Sanello (2002, 85-86).

[29] Ghosh (2015, 83).

[30] Ibid., 378.

[31] Ibid., 387.

[32] Ibid., 478.

[33] For an overview of Indian subalterns' perspectives on China, see Yang (2006), (2007) and (2015).

[34] The Boxer Uprising (1899-1901) was a violent rebellion against Western imperialism and Christian missionary activity in China. The uprising was led by the Yihequan (known in the West as 'Boxers'), a group of rural men skilled in martial arts. Usually overshadowed by the contemporaneous Second Boer War (1899-1902) in historiography, the Boxer Uprising had a dramatic effect from a global point of view: it triggered an Eight-Nation allied intervention in 1900 that has been considered "the first multinational intervention in the name of 'civilization'": Bickers (2007, 12).

[35] I rely on Anand A. Yang's account of Gadhadhar Singh's memoir. See Yang (2007, 50).

[36] White (2010).

[37] Ghosh (2012, 35).

[38] Ghosh (2015, 376).

[39] Bose (2015).

[40] Kohlke (2017, 80).

[41] Basu (2014, 929).

[42] Hanes and Sanello (2002, 14).

[43] Ghosh (2015, 191).

[44] Ibid., 191-192.

[45] Chan (2014, 863).

[46] Chen (2017, 3).

[47] Ibid., 2-3.

[48] Keevak (2017, 10). British disdain for Chinese etiquette had already been exhibited almost a century prior to the First Opium Wars when in 1793 Britain sent her first envoy to China, Lord George Macartney, and he refused to 'kowtow' to the Chinese Emperor, a Mandarin custom that was respected by all nations doing business with China at the time. See Hanes and Sanello (2002, 13).

[49] Mosca (2013, 5).

[50] Basu (2014, 932-934).

[51] Spivak (1994, 66-67).

[52] Ghosh (2015, 190).

[53] Ibid., 190.

[54] Basu (2014, 930-931).

[55] Ibid., 929.

[56] Keevak (2017, 2).

[57] Wong (2018, 309-311).

[58] Chang (1970, ix).

[59] Chan (2014, 859).

[60] Osterhammel (1986, 290).

[61] Ghosh (2015, 509).

[62] Ibid., 509.

[63] Ibid,. 510.

[64] Goh (2012, 341).

[65] Thomas (2016, 937).

[66] Ghosh (2015, 479).

[67] Kohlke (2017, 82).

[68] Ghosh (2015, 258).

[69] Ibid., 606.

[70] Ibid., 258.

[71] Ibid., 271.

[72] Ibid., 273.

[73] Ibid., 582.

[74] Ghosh (2011, 475).

[75] Desai (2016, 1533).

[76] Ghosh (2015, 606).

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Chapter 6. Conclusion

At the opening of this book, I looked at Hong Kong's 2019-2020 protests and the ex-British colony's lingering colonial trauma and unsettled postcoloniality in connection to the growing polarization that is afflicting contemporary politics and its global players, who seem more preoccupied with the redrawing of cultural and national boundaries than with the creation of bridges of transcultural understanding. By this point, I hope to have demonstrated, via my analysis of Ghosh's imaginative reconstruction of Indian Ocean intercultural connections in the *Ibis* trilogy, the political possibilities of fluid boundaries and pluriorigins to counteract the parochialism of the nation-state. As far-right political parties are increasingly gathering support and conservative governments are anchoring their policies in the building of walls, the patrolling of borders, the dissolution of links, and the hatred for the Other, devising models of transcultural understanding seems an urgent issue against jingoistic and stale concerns over national identity. In relation to the potential troubles lying ahead after Brexit in Europe, the American diplomat George Mitchell – the architect of the Good Friday Agreement in Ireland that put an end to the Northern Ireland conflict – already expressed his concerns over hard national borders:

> The open Border has meant people travelling back and forth, a degree of social interaction, of commerce, of people working together. If you reinstate a hard border ... stereotyping resumes, demonisation resumes, and people turn inward as opposed to outward, and they lose the benefits that come from open borders ... There could be serious trouble ahead. No society is immune from the regressive forces that are part of every problem.[1]

In light of Mitchell's words, I argue that the manifold transcultural encounters across maritime borders analysed throughout this work may serve as a powerful reminder of the transformative potential of oceanic encounters and liquid boundaries to enable transcultural collaboration and wellbeing. For example, *Sea of Poppies* constructs the voyage from Calcutta to Mauritius as liquefying the strict Indian caste system, as *girmitiyas* engage in close interactions under the coercion of nineteenth-century indentureship; or the foreign enclave in littoral nineteenth-century Canton, as narrated in *River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire*, engenders cultural and

linguistic models of hybridity which escape the contamination of Victorian imperialism. The social construction of the ocean as exhibited in the *Ibis* trilogy features as an arena for transgression, transformation, and change. The transformative effects of such oceanic encounters may be seen as temporally limited by the maritime settings in which they take place, but they surely suggest the promise of a challenge to imperial notions of language, nationality, and gender once the migratory subaltern subjects leave the oceanic sphere and have to conform to land-based rules.

The interstitial character of the manifold maritime topographies examined in the novels under analysis – ships, ports, islands, littoral cities – promotes a model of literary-cultural analysis focused on the transition and the passage; this situates this *Ibis* trilogy in intersection with postcolonial concerns about diaspora, hybridity, and historical specificity. Regarding the latter, Ghosh's take on the maritime novel, because of the genre's privileging of the maritime crossing over the imperial centre and colonial peripheries, neutralises the contentious question of the historical specificity in postcolonial criticism, illustrating imperial sea lanes as vectors for the dissemination of local colonial cultures. The novels under analysis reveal therefore the global and oceanic dimension of postcolonial cultures around the globe in the nineteenth century without reducing the literary-cultural analysis to a shared and unnuanced history of postcoloniality, concurring with the author's declared mistrust of the term 'postcolonial.'[2] This is the case of *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke*, particularly of the character of Deeti, whose rural Bhojpuri language and culture navigate on the *Ibis* across the Indian Ocean and find their way into Kreole Mauritian culture.

Another crux in postcolonial criticism is that of the opposition between pre-colonial purity and postcolonial sincreticity as antagonistic roadmaps for the political project of decolonization. Amitav Ghosh convincingly manages to retrospectively reconstruct and re-imagine the pre-colonial Indian Ocean and its tissue of interrupted cosmopolitanisms, as well as the trade and cultural flow between India,

China, and Africa before the intrusion of Western colonialism, in tune with the historical excavation on the Indian Ocean which is being carried out in current historiography and cultural criticism. Simultaneously, the *Ibis* trilogy orients such historical reconstruction of the pre-colonial Indian Ocean to signal the potential possibilities of political and commercial collaborations *within* the East – as well as South-South links more broadly – at present and in the future to dismantle the hegemony of Western capitalism and construct West-East relations on a more symmetrical basis. The recent rise of India and China as global economic players as well as the growing increase of South-South trade and transactions in the last decades[3] indicate that the Indian Ocean is a pivotal space of interaction to visualise the present and future patterns of globalisation. By situating the narration in an under-analysed period of the history of the Indian Ocean – the early and mid-nineteenth century – the *Ibis* trilogy may cement Ghosh's position of a trailblazer in Indian Ocean scholarship by teasing out the continuities and discontinuities between different stages of capitalist globalisation in that oceanic area. In that sense, one of the central claims of this book is that the trilogy's exploration of the dynamics of mid-nineteenth century Free Trade in the run-up to the First Opium War – as illustrated especially in *River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire* – prefigures the trajectories of current neo-liberal capitalist globalisation.

The reclamations of both postcolonial hybridity and pre-colonial purity can be considered as legitimate literary strategies for 'decolonising the mind', to use Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's well-known phrase, although I argue that acknowledging the hybridity of postcolonial cultures and recuperating hybrid models of culture in the past – the Indo-Chinese Ah Fatt in the trilogy being a case in point – seem more powerful approaches to face the challenges currently arising in an ever-globalised and changing world. In tune with perspectives on decolonization which uphold postcolonial hybridity and syncreticity, cultural theorists on migration have qualified diaspora as a concept that promotes anti-essentialist views on culture. For instance, Stuart Hall defines the diaspora experience as characterised

> not by essence and purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' that lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.[4]

Similarly, Iain Chambers, following Aihwa Ong, has illustrated the concept of diaspora around the concept of 'flexible citizenship' to argue that diasporic identities are "articulated across the hyphen, the transition, the bridge or passage between, rather than firmly located in any one culture, place or position ... This interrogates the understanding of culture as a site of belonging with the idea of culture as a process of transition and becoming."[5] Accordingly, sea fiction in general and the *Ibis* trilogy in particular underscores the hybridity, syncretism, and difference that inhere within maritime diasporic identities to reassess the fixity of origins and reveal diaspora as an in-between experience that is productively anti-Maniquean and holds a privileged position to explore the deficiencies of both origin and destination, metropolis and periphery.

Among the manifold maritime topographies dealt with throughout the primary texts under analysis, the ship obviously stands out as a fundamental location in sea fiction. I have analysed the shipspaces narrated in the trilogy, namely the *Ibis*, the *Anahita,* and the *Redruth*, as mediators of lived experiences and as locations that shape and negotiate transcultural relations. Following Foucault, I have mainly pursued a reading of the ship as heterotopia – although I have occasionally deployed Bhabha's Third Space and Pratt's contact zone as alternative critical readings of the ship. The ship as heterotopia exhibits its contradictory nature: it is an object deeply embedded in the hegemony of Western capitalism – and therefore featured as an instrument for colonization, imperial conquest, and the projection of power – but it is simultaneously and potentially a hotbed of resistance and political transformation.

Accordingly, as I have illustrated in my analysis, the ship as narrated in the trilogy emerges as the genesis of hybridity, cosmopolitanism, and diasporic identity.

As Peter Linebaugh has pointed out, "the ship remained perhaps the most important conduit of Pan-African communication before the appearance of the long-playing record."[6] For example, for African-American ex-slaves and free blacks crisscrossing the Atlantic in the nineteenth century the ship represented the core of their pan-Atlantic identity and their political project of liberation. Similarly, indentured workers in nineteenth-century Asia resignified their identities on board the ships bound for Mauritius, South Africa, and the Caribbean, revealing their experiences on board as narrations of hybridity 'in the making'. In this last case, by narrating these trans-oceanic voyages, the *Ibis* trilogy contributes to illustrate the inception of Asian-oriented models of hybridity – in the personas of Caribbean, Mauritian, or South-African people with Asian ancestry – that are typically effaced in literary-cultural analyses of those regions. Therefore, the ship-chronotopes analysed in this work illustrate instances of destruction and oppression but also regeneration and rebirth, which coalesces with heterotopias as being embedded in hegemonic structures but featuring simultaneously as "spaces of alternate ordering."[7]

From a postcolonial point of view, the novels analysed in this work illustrate postmodern concerns which are of considerable significance for the postcolonial agenda, such as the mistrust of the western historiographical archive, the deconstruction of the sovereign subject, or the subversion of grand narratives exclusively articulated around a centre/periphery axis. Moreover, the maritime standpoint adopted in my analysis metaphorically suggests postmodern concerns about the literary representation of the colonial past: the literary sea – and its tropes of circulation and permanent movement – evokes the dredging of submerged and silenced stories, the transformation of diasporic identity and the fluidity of national and cultural boundaries. Nevertheless, Amitav Ghosh remarkably avoids the formal fragmentary style which typically characterises postmodern novels and returns to the certainties of realism. In this sense, the *Ibis* trilogy and its broad scope and careful attention to every level in different social realities of the Indian subcontinent in the nineteenth century – descriptions of the North-Indian peasantry in *Sea of Poppies*,

the reconstruction of Canton in *River of Smoke*, or the rendition of the mobile East Indian Company army in *Flood of Fire* are three cases in point – places Ghosh's trilogy in parallel with the Victorian literary canon, as some of the author's critics have suggested.[8] The trilogy, then, returns to traditional forms of narration and re-appropriates the nineteenth-century realist tradition as an authoritative strategy to fill in the gaps of western historiography.

The oceanic space as represented in the trilogy provides an alternative interstitial space from where to visualise the tidal vectors which characterised maritime migration in the nineteenth century. This suggests that Ghosh aspires to the objectivity and accuracy of historiography, against traditional postmodernism which typically denies the very possibility of accessing history. The novels under analysis, as revisionist historical narrations, imaginatively and creatively restore the past by foregrounding the historical referent – Ghosh's resurrection of South-Asian lost idioms and cultural practices occluded by Western historiography being the most remarkable instance.

At the same time, Ghosh's literary-historical excavation into the expansion of Victorian imperialism in the Indian Ocean sets Western historiography in transnational relations with non-Anglophone locations, and hence he makes his novels participant in recent critical debates on the global position of nineteenth-century studies. In tune with recent trends in Victorian studies that are resituating Victorian literature within nineteenth-century world literature, Ghosh imaginatively narrates Victorian culture as permeable to foreign cultures within and beyond the reach of the British Empire and points to a global memory of the Opium Wars which incorporates the suffering and grievances of China and the troubled position of India.[9] Ghosh acts as a *linkister* by situating his *Ibis* series in dialogue with non-Anglophone archives and this way evading the biases of monolingualism which are attributable to Western historiography.

The aforementioned global and multilingual historiographical ambitions of the trilogy tie in with Elizabeth Ho's call to adopt an inter-imperial approach in contemporary narrations of the nineteenth century, or in her words, to transform "the global memory of the nineteenth century past into an inter-imperial zone."[10] Further critical incursions into the *Ibis* trilogy may very well benefit from this inter-imperial template to configure less Eurocentric visions of globality and modernity. The contribution of this book in that critical direction has consisted of signalling the trilogy's narration of the continuities between the regimes of the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans – particularly by means of a sustained analysis of the character of Zachary Reid throughout the trilogy, among other elements – to stress the necessity of integrating the politics of the Indian Ocean into the 'Oceanic turn' and to delineate less *Atlanto-centric* insights into modernity and globalization.

Throughout this work, I have sustained an analysis of the *Ibis* trilogy in relation to broader aspects of globalisation, cosmopolitanism, modernity, and capitalism. The oceanic subjects who inhabit the novels under analysis evince the complexities of modernity in a century that witnessed the unfolding of globalisation. For Indian Ocean subalterns the irruption of modernity entailed the implication of the Indian subcontinent in a capitalist cash economy. Western imperialism as represented by Ghosh mirrors the paradoxes of contemporary globalisation, which is still built upon mobility and cultural exchange but also on inequality and exploitation. The oceanic (re)turns narrated by Ghosh illustrate the diachronic character of the trilogy, which allows for a critical and creative juxtaposition of the nineteenth-century past with the globalised present, highlighting the continuities as well as the dissimilarities between the two. The trilogy may hopefully serve as a powerful reminder of the insidious conflation of cultural imperialism and capitalism which, in a manner that is not very dissimilar from the nineteenth-century 'civilising mission' and with the complicit collaboration between Western governments and multinational corporations, keeps articulating global relations on an asymmetrical basis – be it through the deployment of cheap labour to satisfy the hungry demands of

Western economies or through the appropriation of mineral resources under the pretence of fighting global terrorism. In turn, I have argued that the Indian Ocean stories analysed above suggest a modulation in perceptions towards cosmopolitan subjects and the globe. The cosmopolitan experiences in these stories are narrated not from privileged perspectives but by subaltern subjects who are 'all at sea' as well as coerced and exploited by the Victorian imperialist machinery. In this sense, my literary-cultural analysis has been motivated by the idea that it is possible to set the experiences of these dispossessed collectives under a single umbrella and in relation to each other in the context of oceanic history, following Ghosh's recurrent interest in the relations among different colonised groups within the complexities of imperial dynamics. The affinities and connections among these subaltern subjects underline the markedly transoceanic perspective of the *Ibis* trilogy. By applying the 'Oceanic turn' and maritime criticism to the analysis of Ghosh's fiction and situating the analysis in debates on capitalism, globalisation, and immigration, I have sought to point out that there is much to gain in considering contemporary maritime novels to make sense of the inequities of contemporary globalisation and neo-liberal policies. Above all, I hope to have demonstrated that the ocean still roars with unmapped histories of family loss, slavery, dislocated subjects, and drowning bodies whose voices, gasping in the foam, have been suffocated by the waves of colonial oppression.

NOTES

[1] See O'Carroll (2018).

[2] Kumar (2007, 105).

[3] Speaking in 2007, Isabel Hofmeyr claimed that South-South trade was growing around 11 per cent a year – faster than any other trade exchange in the globe (Hofmeyr 2007, 3).

[4] Hall (1994, 396).

[5] Chambers (1996, 53).

[6] Linebaugh (1982, 119).

[7] Hetherington (2003, viii).

[8] See Chaudhuri (2011, 132) and Frost (2016, 1542).

[9] Goodlad (2010, 399).

[10] Ho (2019, 3).

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