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Love and Figure/Ground: Reading Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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In *Sea of Poppies* (2008) Amitav Ghosh sets the individualist love ethic of the great tradition of the western novel into dialogue with traditions of Indian culture¹ that emphasize the generalizing force of love. The plot of the novel generates a reciprocal critique between character and “life-force,” between individual happiness and communal energy. As the two views of love meet in *Sea of Poppies*, each carries a history of its articulations in the modern novel. Their encounter locates the novel in the fictional force-field first articulated by Salman Rushdie and raises a question of genre: how to read *Sea of Poppies* as it interrogates the scope and force of love. *Sea of Poppies* not only creates a hybrid language of love appropriate to its representation of the power of love across social, class, caste, cultural, and national divides but also accommodates a multiplicity of selves, endowing this multiplicity with the power to disrupt colonial hegemony.

The linguistic difficulties of bridging different cultural practices with many historical and ideological points of contact have generated critical responses which emphasize different aspects of these cultural practices; several important essays direct the reader to the ways in which *Sea of Poppies* engages multiple languages, dialects, and cultures deployed by characters and narrator.² They contextualize Ghosh's fiction as a historical novel, and thus recall the reader to the question central to that genre and convention: how to negotiate a multicultural, multi-temporal labyrinth.

Furthermore, the novel also leads the reader through a learning process. Just as children acquire language, so little by little the reader begins to understand the expressions and terms of the many languages of the characters in the novel. The reader in effect re-enacts the experience of

¹ One example of Indian theories of love, the “rasa theory . . . formulated by Bharata,” focuses on aesthetic experience (Raveh 1). In psychoanalytic terms many of these traditions might be called “oceanic” (Freud 1962: 11–12ff).

² Throughout the essay I draw on the insights of Lise Guilhamon (2011) and Shao-Pin Luo (2013).

the American sailor with whom we move through the novel: when we meet Zachary Reid as his ship enters the harbor, the English pilot scolds him for not understanding the phrases swirling around him. With Reid we will learn the fateful meanings they communicate. Even the glossary at the end of the novel does not translate the words and phrases but rather talks around them, even here immersing us in the ambient “chutnification” of English (see Kothari and Snell). With Zachary, we join the conversation, turning the dialogic convention of the Victorian novel into a multilingual polyphony of a colonized subcontinent.

When Zachary and Paulette, the novel’s version of Romantic lovers, embrace in this contemporary fiction set in India in 1838, the dialogue between different views of love likewise unfolds into a many-sided, multilingual conversation. The sweep of the action moves the double plot of the Victorian novel, with its upstairs/downstairs class-centered armature (think, for example, of Dickens and George Eliot) into a wider geographical and spatial arena of multiple classes, ethnicities, and layers of meaning and experience. Yet, like a Victorian novel, *Sea of Poppies* insists on a definite historical setting of the action: we are at a turning point in the history of the English Empire of opium — at once drug, international business, inducer of fantasy, and medical mainstay — which is being forced on a China that has outlawed the poppy. Opium, the social, political, and economic center of this world, appears to sweep all other considerations before it. Powered by capitalism and imperial greed, opium so transforms the ecology that even the birds are intoxicated — a powerful image characteristic of the social and cultural critique of the Victorian novel (Baumgarten 54–56). When we begin to hear echoes of *rasa*, the classic Indian aesthetic theory, of the third century amid the sociological evocation of family and feudal habits in *Sea of Poppies*, the encounter of Zachary and Paulette opens the palimpsest of Indian time and space, and what appears to be a historical novel becomes a fusion of many art forms with the synesthetic effect of modernist opera.

Hybrid Languages — of Empire and of Love

In *Sea of Poppies* as in its Victorian counterparts the storm of love re-makes identities: the novel choreographs collisions across cultural, social, and class boundaries that undermine stable social arrangements. Ghosh’s novel traces the force that love exerts on psyche, society, and

social place, as does, for instance, *Our Mutual Friend*.³ And as in that literary tradition, the views of love central to *Sea of Poppies* are contextualized both by aesthetic principles and socio-economic contexts — here central Indian aesthetic practices and the transformations generated by capitalism, globalization, industrialization, imperialism, and the powerful new technologies of western culture. In Ghosh's novel these come to a focus in the opium trade that is transforming lives, communities, and cultures.

The potential for cross-over encounters like Zachary and Paulette's inheres in the linguistic jumble of *Empire*. Ghosh's novel generates a "synergism inherent in the deployment of many different languages and many different cultural discourses simultaneously," as he deploys "the relationships between different linguistic-historical idioms" (Jelen et al. 12). And it is worth noting that, as Noam Cook has commented in a personal communication, much of the vocabulary of opium addiction — intoxication, swooning — is also akin to the language of love. *Sea of Poppies* elicits the power of the jumble of multilingualism to interfere in the structural arrangement of colonial power relations. The stability needed to continue the hegemonic plunder of the colony is undermined by the hybridity of the language and the linguistic condition needed for exploitation; stasis is disrupted by dynamic situations that erupt in the conspiracies of the characters and the overall fictional plot.

Reading Ghosh's contemporary version of the comic epic in prose, we encounter characters as participants in and bearers of the play of hybrid languages shaped by commercial, cultural, and sexual exchange between British and American English, French, Hindi, and Bhojpuri. Different languages can ring in the same utterance, such as "Now there was another chuckmuck sight for you! Rows of cursies for the sahibs and mems to sit on. Sittringies and tuckers for the natives. . . . Oh, that old loocher knew how to put on a nautch all right!"(46) The ribald lingo of lascar sailors mixes with English political discourse, French patois, and American conversation. Reading slows down, as context and the heady rhythms of Ghosh's language set us on a quest for understanding, helped but also prolonged by "The Ibis Chrestomathy," an appended glossary.

This free-form talk, like the acting out of sexual desire in the novel, not only expresses the experience of its sailors, wives, mothers, and nabobs; it also moves seamlessly into and out of the language of myth. One

³ See H. M. Daleski's analyses (in particular, 1970 and 1984) of the role of love in 19th-century fiction.

of the novel's central characters, Baboo Nob Kissin, believes that he is gradually changing from a man into a woman and becoming the avatar of the woman who was his spiritual mentor. He also thinks that Zachary, the "metif" American second mate of the *Ibis*, is an incarnation of Krishna, sent to guide him out of Calcutta, the setting of most of *Sea of Poppies*, into which we move after the preliminary stay in the stunningly evoked countryside near Ghazipur, one of the central opium growing and production sites.

The novel conjures up the long history of "the incessant movements of the peoples, commerce, and empires which have traversed the Indian Ocean since antiquity; and the lives of men and women with little power, whose stories, framed against the grand narratives of history, invite other ways of thinking about the past, culture, and identity."⁴ Imagine," Alan Cheuse comments in 2008, on National Public Radio, "if Charles Dickens had signed on for a voyage with the *Pequod*, and you get some idea of what Amitav Ghosh's sprawling new historical novel *Sea of Poppies* has in store." This new "crowded, multilingual, culturally polyphonic" (Ghosh 1992: 34) human swirl brought about by the opium trade and the British imperial adventure generates a narrative at once historical and presciently present; the resulting cultural and psychic jumble is rendered with deft local detail deployed through and against the background of linguistic multifariousness.

Janet Maslin echoes other reviewers who focus on "the language barrier" that the novel presents in noting that *Sea of Poppies* is written in "thick, polyglot jargon that is made more or less self-explanatory by its context but still gives the book a mischievous linguistic fascination." She clinches her point with a quotation: "Wasn't a man in town who could put on a burrah-khana like he did. Sheeshmull blazing with shammers and candles. Paltans of bearers and khidmutgars. Demijohns of French lollshrub and carboys of iced simkin. And the karibat!" (Ghosh 2008: 46) Many such passages, Maslin notes, "have a cryptically obscene ring": they also slow down the reading process, invite the reader to consult the appended lexicon, and connect particular turns of phrase with the characters who use them, as if the novel were a musical, even operatic, performance.

The book "deliberately entangles its readers in a thicket of playful language," and that language "is a virtual character" in the novel. Ghosh

⁴Anupama Arora notes that "the novel offers a narrative of and about movement, border-crossings, and heterogeneous encounters" (21).

in effect reclaims and reconstructs lost languages (Guilhamon 67–69) as he draws on “sources like a 19th century article on Bhojpuri folk songs, a study of Bhojpuri Traditions in Mauritius (at a time when Mauritius was a British penal colony) and *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases, and of Kindred Terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical and Discursive*” (Maslin). This playing with language recalls Dickens’s fun in inventing fictional titles for Gad’s Hill, and, a century later, Borges’s fascination with arcane lore that leads us to the origins of linguistic practices and their subsequent historical elaborations. As in Rushdie’s novelistic practice, Ghosh’s characters can begin a sentence in one language, “swoop through a second and even a third, and then swing back round to the first” (Raveh 9).

The resulting defamiliarization of language, with its strangeness and almost-comprehensible legibility guides the reader into the effort to speak the words s/he is reading. Like some of the characters, the reader — in effect learning the languages — navigates the polyphonic situation by pronouncing these words, creating what Shao-Pin Luo calls “vernacular cosmopolitanism” (378). The silent reading process turns musical, produces synergy: the words become visible in their experiential power. Raveh’s insight that “Rushdie depicts poetry as the most essential use of language, and music or sound as the essence of existence” is applicable to Ghosh too, especially since “it is implied that music is an alchemical elixir which has the capacity of transforming concrete into abstract, limitedness into spaciousness” (Raveh 11). Contemporary neurological studies confirm this power of music by charting the hundreds of receptors in the brain attuned to it, which links it to the power of touch.

The reader — like the romantic leads of the novel, Zachary and Paulette as well as Kalua and Deeti — learns the meanings of these defamiliarized words as s/he uses them. (It is, after all, an epic situation into which they and we are thrust in the middle of the action.) Consider how Paulette learns the benefits of marrying not for love but for fortune, from the colonial perspective:

“‘Oh Madame,’ said Paulette, weeping freely now, ‘but are not the things of this world mere dross when weighed against love?’

‘Love?’ said Mrs Burnham, in mounting astonishment. ‘What on earth are you bucking about? My dear Puggly, with your prospects, you can’t be letting your shokes run away with you. I know the judge is not as young as he might be, but he’s certainly not past giving you a butcha or two before he slips into his dotage. And after that, dear, there’s nothing a mem needs that can’t be cured by a long bath and a couple of cushy-girls. Believe me,

Puggly, there's a lot to be said for men of that age. No badmashee at all hours of the night, for one thing. I can tell you, dear, there's nothing more annoying than to be puckrowed just when you're looking forward to a sip of laudanum and a nice long sleep." (268)

Multilingualism reflects the love jumble of the novel, as it invites a rethinking of the past, of culture, and identities. It takes the reader out of her linguistic comfort-zone and reframes the boundaries of the languages of fiction in the exploration of literary form.⁵ Echoing the terms of Walter Scott's historical fictions as he revises them, Ghosh puts the reader on a quest for resolution: are we in a dialectical or a dialogical discourse? What is the figure, what the ground in this exploration?

We are in the world of the carnivalesque, here, played out in relation to the two love-traditions that Ghosh deploys. The narrative flips the "oceanic" love traditions of Indian culture and the western love couples against and over each other: the reader does not know which is primary, which secondary, which causes the cross-over, which is the effect. The esthetic and the ethical converge, and the result is "the form of content" that characterizes "carnavalesque works" and the "deployment of motifs" that stage the "two main carnival topoi, reversals and boundary-blurring" (Toker 12). Ghosh's opium plot and love plot(s) also flip over. What begins with opium as prime mover of events in the Empire — as the figure that defines possibility — turns into the ground of love and turns love into the figure that generates actions and events.

The carnivalesque mode inflects and transforms the epic and the historical novel, which inhabit Ghosh's novel, as it charts the "switching" from contained to "open communal spaces" (Toker 11).⁶ The multilingualism of this novel situates character and reader in the space-time of an Einsteinian narrative: linguistic positioning, which is carefully noted in the narrative, articulates the multiple possibilities of identity. Characters who live in more than one language simultaneously, express thereby the possibility of seizing opportunities and thus making inner freedom an

⁵ Multilingualism plays a similar role in the fiction of Bharati Mukherjee.

⁶ See the discussion of horizontal and vertical axes: "on the vertical axis, everyday hierarchical social order is turned, temporarily, upside down"; on the "horizontal axis, the carnival is defined as a show during which the spectators merge with the participants." Furthermore, "merging and switching" occurs, "when people who usually stay in separate social compartments do not so much exchange places as enter into free and familiar contact with each other" (Toker 11). Also see chapter six for the discussion of *Daniel Deronda*, and *passim* the comments on "open spaces."

outward, objective possibility. Their identities are “fields of diverse energies” (Cheadle 212) which the carnivalesque mode makes possible for them and the reader. Rasa theory as deployed by Rushdie turns particular situations into sources of transpersonal, universal emotion: the “hybrid, chutneyfied language . . . has the capacity” to reach and reveal not a metaphysical realm but an “openness here and now: that is about ‘freeing one’s conceptual imagination from the unconscious constraints of one’s own conceptual tradition’” (Raveh 10).

Carnavalesque Plot and the Voyage into the Open

Paulette’s question “Are not the things of this world mere dross when weighed against love?” makes explicit the issues posed in a range of events across the trajectory of the plot. Her words have a revolutionary ring (do they not echo Gandhi’s views?) that can undermine the colonial order. They continue the changes occasioned by love initiated when the lower-caste Kalua, the ox-cart driver giant of a man, rescues Deeti from the funeral pyre on which she is expected to immolate herself along with her dead husband. These actions set into motion a chain of events that disrupt the expectations generated by place, empire, and caste. Instead of remaining imprisoned in their environment, runaway lovers bond with other outcasts; ultimately, the power of the opium empire to enslave them is thwarted as they push into the open.

Their love leads them out of the traditional world of caste and class into the open sea and beyond, as they head to Mauritius. Now the new experiences they encounter will generate historical possibilities that they will learn to seize and make the most of. The imprisoned Rajah Neel, who will be joining them on this voyage, learns from his warder what may befall him: “it is the custom here, when a new prisoner arrives, for him to be allotted to one or other of the jemadars, according to his origins and his character. But with someone such as yourself this does not apply because the sentence you have been given will tear you forever from the ties that bind others.” Neel’s will be a different destiny: “When you step on that ship, to go across the Black Water, you and your fellow transportees will become a brotherhood of your own: you will be your own village, your own family, your own caste. That is why it is the custom here for such men as you to live apart, in their own cells, separate from the rest” (308).

Against the dominance of colonial power, that rules by pitting one group against another and relies on opium addiction to isolate individuals and break off historic leaders from their traditional communities, Neel will discover how to wield the healing power of caring: he helps his fellow prisoner Aafat the afeemkhor (Ah Fatt, the Chinese opium addict) overcome his addiction. Neel, the swaddled Rajah, now cleans the befouled Ah Fatt, washes him, and cares for him. So doing, Neel discovers that caring for someone is generative of knowing; at a key moment he begins to talk to Ah Fatt.⁷ They develop a language of their own that generates the bonding of friendship, based, ironically, on the English terms they both know, as well as on other linguistic traditions.

Identity, Self-Love, and Transformation

Their relationship defines the conflict between opium and love. It unpacks the ways in which opium destroys the individual's identity by making it impossible for him to love himself, thus undoing one side of that powerful algorithm that runs throughout western culture since its formulation in the Hebrew Bible: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. In an unpublished essay, "Of Love and Knowledge," Sir Geoffrey Vickers calls our attention to its concluding term: what, he asks, is involved in "loving thyself?" And in emphasizing the force of the neglected term of self-love, he notes that unless there is love of self it is not possible to love the neighbor.⁸

This is more than a psychological statement, his phrasing reminds us. The impact of the psychic situation articulated by the Biblical algorithm is like a stone thrown into water: the waves of love of self and of neigh-

⁷ Knowing, here, recalls the moment when the Jewish people accept the covenant with God — "we will do and we will hear" (Exodus 24:7). My thanks to Noam Cook for this insight.

⁸ I thank Noam Cook for sharing this essay of his mentor. Also see Vickers 1984: 104n2: "Curiously little attention has been paid to the fact that to a Jewish exponent of religious law some three thousand years ago it seemed natural to take 'love of self' as an exemplar for love of neighbor and almost to imply that it was a necessary counterpart. I can find no meaning for this kind of self-love except acceptance of self and of responsibility for self — for one's whole self and correspondingly for inescapable membership of the whole society. A happy people where such assumptions could be made! It is a far cry from our own in which love of self is regarded as a defect, however natural, barring the individual from achieving a desirable but supposedly unnatural 'love' of neighbour."

bor ripple outward to infinity. The Biblical phrase “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” makes identity dynamic, interpersonal, and intersubjective. Instead of love and loving as a privatizing experience, this principle functions as a revolutionary force to build and rebuild community, over and against the imperial destruction of traditional kinship bonds. In its presence, love cannot remain merely a private experience. Unlike the advice Paulette gets about how to arrange your days and nights to maximize comfort and personal pleasure, with laudanum, the opium derivative, to lull you into easeful sleep, Neel discovers what it means to love himself by the act of caring for Ah Fatt, his opium-addicted neighbor.

By the end of the novel both Neel and Ah Fatt will escape the prison ship along with three other outcasts. So doing they bond outside caste and class boundaries, and articulate a brotherhood of the oppressed, as they seek a more just social order. The love that binds them is a version at once of the individual love ethic of the west that grows from the Biblical injunction *and* of the all-encompassing love traditions of ancient India. Even more, it is an experience born out of practice, and then acknowledged for its value⁹:

To take care of another human being — this was something Neel had never before thought of doing, not even with his own son, let alone a man of his own age, a foreigner. All he knew of nurture was the tenderness that had been lavished on him by his own care-givers: that they would come to love him was something he had taken for granted — yet knowing his own feelings for them to be in no way equivalent, he had often wondered how that attachment was born. It occurred to him now to ask himself if this was how it happened. (319)

Neel’s practical action generates an experience that results in new, transformative knowledge: “[w]as it possible that the mere fact of using one’s hands and investing one’s attention in someone other than oneself, created a pride and tenderness that had nothing whatever to do with the response of the object of one’s care — just as a craftsman’s love for his

⁹For the relation between practice, experience, and knowledge see Hendrik Wagenaar and S. D. Noam Cook 2011. It is “practice that always precedes and gives rise to knowledge and context, not the other way round. Indeed, we wish to characterize knowledge as part of an epistemic dimension of practice, and context as the element of its social and physical worlds” (193). Practice “necessarily stakes place within an eternally unfolding present. We take this present not simply as the temporal dimension of the case, but as a feature of the ontological setting within which practice occurs and knowledge and context are generated, evoked and deployed” (206). Also see S. D. Noam Cook and Hendrik Wagenaar 2012.

handiwork is in no way diminished by the fact of it being unreciprocated?" (319) Ghosh here touches on the aura of the crafted art object, which is brought into being by an action, *a doing* we might say, whose impact continues like the ripples of a stone thrown into water, brimming out on human relationships.

The image of the craftsman's love of his handiwork, with which this paragraph concludes, takes this love, nourished by both western and Indian traditions, towards meaning- and world-making. Loving his neighbor, Neel discovers that he is worthy of loving himself: both sides of the algorithm emerge to profound and powerful effect in the subsequent unfolding of the plot of the novel.

Music, Love, Multiplicities of Identities

The intimacy and tenderness that Neel expresses inform the Bhojpuri songs that the women sing at critical moments of the journey. Neel "had allowed the language to wither in his head, yet, unbeknownst to him, it had been kept alive — and it was only now, in listening to Deeti's songs, that he recognized that the secret source of its nourishment was music." These songs are performative, even ritual, experiences. Singing, the women endow the words with the changing rhythm of their breathing. Neel suddenly understands what it has meant that "he had always had a great love of dadras, chaitis, barahmasas, horis, kajris — songs such as Deeti was singing. Listening to her now, he knew why Bhojpuri was the language of this music: because of all the tongues spoken between the Ganges and the Indus, there was none that was its equal in the expression of the nuances of love, longing, and separation — of the plight of those who leave and those who stay at home" (389).

Learning new hybrid languages and discovering new meanings in polyphonic cultures is a central theme in *Sea of Poppies*. Both sets of lovers discover the hybrid languages of love. And Paulette and Zachary discover the need to articulate their potential intimacies in those new terms. Once, as she was reading the story of Paul and Virginie, "growing up in exile on an island, where an innocent childhood attachment had grown into an abiding passion,"¹⁰ her step-brother Jodu had found her crying over the novel. Jodu "greeted the melancholy tale with guffaws

¹⁰ An influential novel by Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, *Paul et Virginie* was first published in 1787. The novel's title characters, friends since birth, fall in love. Their story takes place on the island of Mauritius.

of laughter,” and Paulette “shouted at him, telling him that it was he who was the fool, and a weakling too, because he would never have the courage to follow the dictates of his heart” (431). Indeed, the power of love, of romantic passion, suddenly reveals to Paulette the extent of her connection to Zachary: “She saw now how miraculously wrong she had been in some of her judgments of him: if there was anyone on the *Ibis* who could match her in the multiplicity of her selves, then it was none other than Zachary. It was as if some divine authority had sent a messenger to let her know that her soul was twinned with his” (430–31).

Reading fiction has helped Paulette to arrive at this epiphany. Reading *Sea of Poppies* may replicate this effect. The plot leads to the entanglement of the lovers in the problematic of the multiplicity of selves; it brings them together in an embrace and a conversation, and release, through which they sort out their many selves and choose being, in the words of Matthew Arnold’s *Dover Beach* “true to one another” despite the obstacles of ideologies and affiliations.

The situation is punctuated by an encounter with Rajah Neel that takes place as his escape plan is put into action. He too has been transformed by the power of love, though not romantic love; he is no longer the coddled heir of lands and people but an adventurer seizing a desperate opportunity.

Rather than worrying which one of their selves is authentic, the Indian context makes the acceptance of multiplicity possible. The exchange between Neel and Paulette reveals the possibilities opened up by the polyphonic cultural experience of the lovers and the outcasts. “If anyone could succeed in this delicate mission it is none other than you,” Neel tells her. “Your performance so far has been so fine, so true, as not to be an impersonation at all. I would never have thought my eye, or my ear, could have been thus deceived — and that too, by a firangin, a Frenchwoman” (483).

Paulette’s response leads to the dénouement of the plot, as she moves forward in the effort to help Neel, Kalua, Ah Fatt, Jodu, and the lascar leader of the sailors, Serang Ali, escape. So doing she will endorse the value of their multiple identities, as she now asks Neel, the deposed Rajah, to acknowledge hers: “But I am none of those things, Mr Halder,” protested Paulette. “There is nothing untrue about the person who stands here. Is it forbidden for a human being to manifest themselves in many different aspects?” Neel’s response defines their relationship: “Evidently not. I hope very much, Miss Lambert, that we will meet again somewhere, and in happier circumstances” (483).

Paulette's response alerts Neel and with him the reader to the cultural force of their Indian context: "I hope so too, Mr Halder. And when we do, I trust you will call me Paulette — or Putli, as Jodu does. But should you wish to call me Pugli, that too is not an identity that I would disown" (ibid.). Naming herself with the native pronunciation, including the colonial version (Pugli), and putting her full parental family's designation, Paulette, before him, she realizes that he will accept her many selves.

Neel accepts her request. "And I, Miss Paulette, would ask you to call me Neel — except that if we do meet again, I suspect I will have had to change my name" (483).

We are reminded that Baboo Nob Kissin has taken Zachary for an embodiment of Krishna, and that the Ibis is moving on a journey of transformation for all its passengers. It is a voyage that will test the characters' ability to love their neighbors as they discover what it means to love, in the Biblical phrasing, "thyself" — oneself complete with all the facets of one's identity.¹¹ And that is the moment when the reader is released from the paradox of Figure/Ground.

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¹¹ For traditional Jewish discussions of this theme see Rothenberg 94-113.

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