

Oceanic Narratives: Maritime Spaces in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008), the first novel of the *Ibis Trilogy*, signifies the Indian Ocean as a historicised and active space in colonial enterprise. Leaving the expansion factor aside, the novel focuses on maritime trade in terms of exchange, exploitation and resistance. This research paper discusses how Ghosh utilises a voyage of the ship *Ibis*, which was used as a slave ship before being turned into an opium cargo ship, as a metaphor for the empire. The paper uses an interdisciplinary approach to analyse how the ocean can be seen as a narrative and metaphoric agency through the prisms of postcolonial history, transoceanic studies, and the Blue Humanities.

Ghosh depicts the Indian Ocean as the source of cultural hybridity and historical trauma, revealing Eurocentric oceanic traditions and inserting the subaltern voices, multilingual discourse and native knowledge. The variety of passengers on the *Ibis* includes peasants, convicts, lascars, and colonialists find themselves in a space that brings together strict caste and racial divisions; the sea is a space of transformation, where rigid caste, class, and racial boundaries are blurred. Presenting the themes of forced migration and colonial capitalism and the non-stagnancy of identity, Ghosh, in his oceanic narrative, reinvents imperial history through a non-Western prism where the sea can no longer be referred to as a void but as an active agent of the global entanglements and human survival.

Keywords: Indian Ocean, maritime spaces, indenture, opium trade, postcolonialism, oceanic narrative, subaltern voices.

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Introduction

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008), the first novel in the *Ibis Trilogy*, shifts the Indian Ocean narrative that redefines colonial history through maritime space, focusing on the voyage of the ship *Ibis* as the centrepiece of a historical story. The novel is set in the 1830s along the Ganges, Calcutta, and across the Indian Ocean during the era of the opium trade and indenture schemes, and it reveals how colonial capitalism and indenture systems operate. The story unfolds on the ship and along the port routes. The *Ibis* symbolises imperial violence and the subaltern reinvention of spaces. It was once a slave ship, then an opium ship, and ultimately a vessel for transporting labour.

This paper explores maritime spaces as narrative, ecological, linguistic, and political terrains. Drawing on Foucault's work on heterotopia, DeLoughrey's oceanic studies, Crane's transoceanic comparative analysis, and ecocritical theory, it discusses three key themes: (1) The *Ibis* as the microcosm of the empire and a space where new solidarity movements emerged, (2) the sea as a liminal space enabling

the transformation of identity, and (3) the port as a site of encounter and mixing of different groups, as well as conflicted colonial commerce. These watery spaces amplify subaltern voices, lascars, girmitiyas, convicts, and offer an oceanic narrative that emphasises mobility, hybridity, and resistance.

Objectives

- Analyse how *Sea of Poppies* represents the Indian Ocean as a site of historical, cultural, and ecological significance.
- Examine the ship as a heterotopic and creolised space, fostering new identities while reflecting colonial hierarchies.
- Explore the novel's linguistic hybridity and its role in portraying vernacular cosmopolitanism.
- Investigate the intersections of maritime capitalism, colonial expansion, and environmental transformation.

Review of Literature

- **Blue Humanities and Oceanic Turn:** Steve Mentz (2015) emphasises the sea as an active agent in human history, advocating for an "oceanic turn" in literary studies. It also aligns with Ghosh's detailed portrayal of maritime environments.
- **Postcolonial Maritime Studies:** Isabel Hofmeyr (2007) situates the Indian Ocean as a network of circulation and exchange, complicating Eurocentric maritime histories. Ghosh's novel echoes this framework by foregrounding diverse seafaring communities.
- **Heterotopia and Ship Space:** Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia (1986) positions the ship as a floating piece of space, simultaneously connected to and separate from the world. Critics such as Hema Chari (2014) have applied this to the *Ibis*, noting its symbolic function as both a prison and a site of liberation.
- **Language and Creolisation:** Scholars like Rita Kothari (2013) have examined Ghosh's use of Laskari and nautical jargon as a form of linguistic resistance against colonial homogenisation.
- **Environmental Perspectives:** Rob Nixon's "slow violence" (2011) framework helps to read the novel's subtle environmental undertones, particularly in its depiction of opium cultivation's ecological toll.

Materials and Methods

This research adopts a qualitative textual analysis approach, drawing on close reading of *Sea of Poppies* in conjunction with theoretical perspectives from:

- Blue Humanities (Steve Mentz, Philip Steinberg) for oceanic ecocriticism.
- Postcolonial Theory (Edward Said, Homi Bhabha) for examining colonial and diasporic identities.
- Heterotopia Theory (Michel Foucault) for spatial analysis of the ship.
- Primary material: *Sea of Poppies* (Amitav Ghosh, 2008).

Discussion.

1. The *Ibis* as Microcosm of Empire and Emergent Community

The *Ibis* appears in *Sea of Poppies* as a heterotopic space, a floating microcosm that both enforces colonial hierarchies and fosters unexpected solidarities. As Foucault's concept suggests, a heterotopia mirrors and subverts societal norms (Foucault 1986). The ship's spatial stratification is stark; officers and European passengers inhabit upper decks, while indentured labourers, convicts, and lascars are relegated below decks or in crowded holds. The language Ghosh uses, labourers herded together like livestock, evokes oppressive commodification.

Deeti, a high-caste widow fleeing sati, is confined to the hold, as is Kalua, a Chamar cart driver wrongly accused of violence. Over time, shared suffering transcends caste taboos, and caste distinctions diminish

in the face of survival and community building. As Shao Pin Luo observes, migrants aboard the Ibis form a "special and secret bond" and come to see themselves as their village and caste jahazbahais and jahazbahens.

This emerging sense of solidarity is vividly illustrated by Deeti's metaphor of the ship as a "great wooden mái-báp," symbolising a new family structure. The Ibis serves as a vessel for identity change. Neel, formerly a zamindar, is demoted to a convict, developing humility and a sense of connection with other labourers; Paulette, a French orphan in disguise, abandons her colonial identity to blend into lower caste migrant communities. These changes are rooted in being aboard this floating heterotopia, where land-based hierarchies are overturned by oceanic mobility.

Additionally, the ship's structure reinforces colonial control, with the hierarchy aboard reflecting the empire's spatial organisation. However, it also allows subversion. Jodu, the lascar child, is beaten for speaking to female migrants, yet this incident sparks collective resistance. Serang Ali leads a planned mutiny, and Neel and Ah Fatt join an escape. By the novel's end, those marginalised aboard escape in the longboat toward Singapore, leaving others to continue to Mauritius. The Ibis thus encapsulates both imperial violence and emerging resistance.

The Ibis serves as both a container and a crucible; it holds the empire's logic while fostering alliances that challenge it, creating a narrative space solely maritime.

2. The Sea as Space of Fluidity and Identity Transformation

The novel repeatedly portrays the Indian Ocean as a transformative space where identity, history, and power are challenged and reshaped. Unlike land-focused histories, Ghosh emphasises the sea, especially the "Black Water" (kala pani), as a symbolic medium of rupture and rebirth.

Racial and social ambiguity. Zachary Reid, the mixed-race American sailor passing as white, navigates complex racial hierarchies aboard the Ibis. The sea offers both cover and challenges; he gains status as second mate partly because of Serang Ali's trust despite being of slave descent. Zachary's oceanic mobility enables him to perform whiteness ambiguously, destabilising land-based racial categories in maritime settings.

Cultural and caste crossing. Deeti's crossing of Kala Pani marks her transition from upper-caste widow to indentured labourer and potential familial matriarch in diaspora settings. Crossing the sea dissolves caste impurity anxieties; caste norms are suspended by the necessities of travel, leading to new solidarities. The sea thus becomes a site of caste deterritorialisation.

Narrative connectivity. The Ibis voyage links the Ganga poppy fields, Calcutta's opium trade centres, and Mauritius plantation economies, spanning across Indian Ocean worlds. Ghosh writes that characters aboard share nothing except the Indian Ocean itself (Ghosh 2008, 12). This oceanic connection allows narratives that go beyond colonial teleology, focused on capital and land conquest. Subaltern voices, lascars, indentured labourers, and convicts are highlighted in maritime narrative arcs.

As Elizabeth DeLoughrey argues, oceanic spaces challenge the terrestrial focus of postcolonial studies by highlighting movement, exchange, and connectivity (DeLoughrey 2007). *Sea of Poppies* demonstrates this by illustrating how identity is fluid aboard ships and how oceanic mobility fosters new diasporic connections beyond geographic origins.

Temporal fluidity. The sea disrupts linear time; storms, currents, and shipboard delays catalyse crisis and contingency. The novel ends with the Ibis in mid-ocean amid a storm, mutiny underway, relationships unravelled, and fates undetermined. This open temporality epitomises oceanic narrative possibilities. The sea remains unresolved, mirroring the unsettled trajectories of postcolonial identities.

Ghosh's depiction of the sea aligns with oceanic studies that reconceptualise maritime space not as static but as generative, a space where identity is contested, histories intersect, and meaning is fluid.

3. Ports as Liminal Zones of Encounter and Exchange

Ports in *Sea of Poppies* serve as threshold spaces, bridging land and sea, empire and diaspora, oppression and possibility. Calcutta and Mauritius are shown as hubs where colonial power, trade, and culture meet.

Calcutta. As the departure port, Calcutta concentrates the machinery of the opium trade. Ghosh describes it as "thick with the commerce of empire"; the city is a staging ground for indenture, opium commerce, and legal coercion. Neel's trial for forgery, orchestrated by Burnham and the colonial court, takes place prior to embarkation. Legal mechanisms in the port city produce forced migration. Calcutta also exposes characters to linguistic and cultural hybridity. Ghosh introduces lascars from various linguistic backgrounds, English-speaking clerks, Bhojpuri peasants, Bengali elites, and Chinese convicts; the port's energy and multilingualism shape relationships before they set sail. Ship slang like *Laskari* is learned along the docks, described as a "motley tongue, spoken nowhere but on the water", yet tied to port geography.

Mauritius. The narrative ends before arrival, Mauritius is portrayed as both a refuge and a plantation nightmare. For labourers, it represents a new beginning; for many, it is a continuation of exploitation in unfamiliar territory. The port becomes a staging ground for enforced servitude under new colonial rulers. Ghosh's depiction of ports reflects John Mack's concept of the "maritime cultural landscape," highlighting how ports act as liminal spaces and cultural contact zones. They mediate migrations, enforce labour regimes, and promote linguistic and architectural hybridity.

Transitions of labour regimes. The *Ibis*'s shift from slave ship to indenture ship is consummated at port, and the machinery of colonial transitions is enacted through dockside transformations. In ports, agents like Gomustas record names. Zachary's name becomes "Maddow Colver", illustrating how official procedures distort identity. Names, caste, and class are arbitrarily assigned or erased at the port, a testament to colonial control over identity flows.

Memory and erasure. Ports serve both to remember and to forget. They remind characters of past lives, such as Neel's ancestral home and Deeti's village, but also initiate new erasures, including forced renaming, permanent exile, and generational memory loss. Port spaces thus embody the paradox of diaspora, emplacement, and displacement coexist.

By attending to port spaces, the novel expands maritime narrative beyond the ship and the sea to include infrastructures of empire, legal, linguistic, and commercial. It examines how they help construct colonial and diasporic worlds.

4. Ecological and Subaltern Perspectives

While much critical attention has focused on the social and cultural dimensions of maritime spaces, *Sea of Poppies* provides an ecological critique of colonial systems. The riverine and maritime ecologies are intertwined with human suffering.

Poppy monoculture. Ghosh depicts the Ghazipur landscape as overwhelmed by opium flowers, with white petals covering the banks of the Ganges ("twin glaciers"), displacing food crops and village life. Mari and Arora frame this as ecological imperialism, where colonial agricultural policies devastate both human communities and ecosystems. Indigenous societies, flora, and fauna are uprooted; starvation and migration follow.

Maritime eco-violence. The sea is also a victim of commodification. Ships like the *Ibis* transport toxic cargo and human suffering. Storms, cramped decks, death, and disease aboard the vessel reveal the sea as a site of environmental and bodily trauma. These are forms of "slow violence" (Nixon 2011) that develop gradually and invisibly yet profoundly. Ghosh's narrative documents these violences by highlighting the embarkation, illness, and deaths of migrants in a detailed microcosm.

Gendered ecology. Deeti's connection to both land and sea emphasises ecofeminist themes; she gains agency through nature but also endures ecological loss. Diaz Llabrés and Jiménez Rodríguez note how female bodies in the novel are intertwined with ecology and oppression, especially under colonial systems.

These ecological dimensions broaden the concept of maritime space beyond storytelling to environmental responsibility, illustrating how colonial trade alters landscapes both on land and at sea, and influences emerging diasporic ecologies.

Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* redefines colonial history through a vibrant maritime lens. The Ibis, the sea, and the ports are not mere backgrounds; they are living spaces that influence, shape, and transform identities, memories, and futures. In these oceanic zones, Ghosh deconstructs land-based hierarchies and explores narrative possibilities for subaltern agency, linguistic hybridity, hybrid identity, and ecological critique.

By placing the sea at the heart of the novel's narrative structure, Ghosh advances oceanic studies and specifically the Blue Humanities, which highlight the importance of water in shaping human history. His maritime narrative challenges postcolonial historiography by emphasising mobility, connectivity, and transoceanic solidarities over national or territorial boundaries.

Sea of Poppies invites readers to envision history not as rooted in static boundaries, but as currents of movement, human, material, linguistic, and ecological, that ripple across oceans. The maritime spaces of the Indian Ocean become archives of resistance, trauma, solidarity, and possibility. Ghosh's oceanic narrative does more than recount history; it enacts history fluid, contested, and open to reinvention.

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