CHAPTER 12

"Spoken Nowhere but on the Water": Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* and Lost-and-Found Languages of the Indian Ocean World

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Introduction

Margaret Cohen, in *The Novel and the Sea*, describes sea fiction as a "travelling genre," a new kind of fiction that was both based on maritime travel and which itself travelled across the seas and centuries (2010, 8). But sea fiction travels mostly, in this analysis, across the north Atlantic and the English Channel and stalls somewhere before the twentieth century when the memory of the craft of sailing and sea travel fades out of the cultural imagination (14). However, several writers from the former British colonies—to which these and other genres certainly traveled—have revisited and revived sea fiction in recent years. Amitav Ghosh's oeuvre plays a major role in this contemporary flourishing of narratives of maritime mobility and imperial immobilities, and serves as a key example of the ways

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in which the genre has traveled south and east, away from the north Atlantic of its Eurocentered origins to the Indian Ocean as a recuperated region of South-South exchange.

This region, traversed across a number of novels and covering a variety of periods in Ghosh's oeuvre, also lends new facets to the genre of sea fiction. His oeuvre is filled with maritime journeys that stretch from Durban to Aden to the Andaman Islands to Calcutta to Canton, as Anshuman Mondal in his comprehensive *Amitav Ghosh*, among others, has described (Mondal 2007; Hofmeyr 2010; Desai 2004, 2010; Chambers 2011). These itineraries map a largely forgotten maritime world: as Ghosh himself suggests in an interview, "it really has become my project, the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean, imagining it, giving it life, filling it in" (Boehmer and Mondal 2012, 7). This filling-in is important, as canonical works of sea fiction—by Melville, Cooper, Conrad, Marryat, and so on—are full of gaps where alternative maritime publics and geographies are concerned. In some ways, a more capacious vision of a nineteenth-century oceanic world had to wait for the postcolonial historical sea fiction of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as I argue also elsewhere (Lavery 2020, 2021).

The turn to Indian Ocean mobilities in Ghosh's work is overdetermined. As he describes in a published correspondence with subaltern historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, he seeks to find a "way of not writing about the nation (or other restrictively imagined collectivities)" (Ghosh and Chakrabarty 2002, 147)—framing a desire to move beyond the restrictions not only of imperially imposed borders but also the "national allegories" of the postcolonial writer (Jameson 1986). Rather than postnational globalization, however, whose referent is an undifferentiated globe, Ghosh turns to the site-specificity and regionalism of the Indian Ocean (see Alpers and Ray 2007; Chaudhuri 2009). Moreover, his work in keeping with the characteristics of sea fiction is interested in the dynamics and peculiarities of shipboard life. As maritime studies, or what is sometimes called the "new thalassology" (Vink 2007) and more recently the "blue humanities" (Gillis 2013) gain ground, it is worth reading Ghosh's ocean-going themes not just as allegories of land-based processes but as descriptive of the sea's uniqueness, including its world of work (Cohen 2010, 14). In considering ways of grounding—or rather floating—these questions, this chapter looks at the interlinked representation of language and space in the novel *Sea of Poppies*, a novel in which, as the narrator states, many of the characters have "nothing in common, except the Indian Ocean" (Ghosh 2008, 12). I argue that the maritime world of the novel is

evoked through its representation of sailor speech, just as the representation of a recreated lingua franca is inflected by the narration of shipboard life.

Sea of Poppies evokes a maritime world through its reinvention of a maritime language, *laskari,* the dialect spoken by sailors from across the Indian Ocean region. Ghosh both describes as well as performs the mixed, oceanic nature of the lascar dialect, providing spatial and historical context while also employing the language in that description. For instance, *laskari* is described in this paragraph, as a “motley tongue, spoken nowhere but on the water,” while also being deployed in that description:

> From the silmagoors who sat on the ghats, sewing sails, Jodu had learnt the names of each piece of canvas, in English and in Laskari—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. (108)

The many “foreign” words produce a reading experience which is unfamiliar and densely aural, a “farrago of sound” (2008, 108). Through the extended metaphor, the diversity of words used to name the various ships is mimetically reflected by the variety of the ships themselves, and the various *laskari* names—calaluzes, pattimars, booms, paunch-ways, proas and catamarans” (108)—are, in turn, reflected by the hodgepodge of boats. Yet, as the paragraph concludes, despite the heterogeneity of sound, “meaning flowed as freely as the currents beneath the crowded press of boats.” The wording suggests a fluidity and connectedness that underlies disconnected multilingualism.

Laskari

In the foreword to an early collection on Indian Ocean studies, Ghosh writes that “the Indian Ocean is not merely a theoretical or geographical construct but a human reality, constituted by a dense (and underexplored) network of human connections” (2010a, ix). To a large extent, over the course of his diverse oeuvre, Ghosh represents the Indian Ocean world as a palimpsest of overlain networks: networks of arms, marriage, oil, ships,

planes, prisoners, trade, friends, information, medical personnel, drugs, and smuggling. This representation is notably consistent with Indian Ocean historiography, which envisions the Indian Ocean as a widely networked social space.[1] Cohen argues that, "our ability to perceive the importance of the maritime frontier may be an example of … a constellation between an earlier era of intensive globalization and our own" (2010, 14). Similarly, Ghosh's interest in that frontier derives not only from a neglected history but also the fact that Indian Ocean histories of intensive, early globalization might inform our understanding of contemporary global and planetary interconnection particularly across the Global South (Vink 2007; Pearson 2003, 2010).

While criticism on Ghosh has focused largely on his postcoloniality—such as his relationship to the subaltern studies historical project, his writing of travel and borderlines, and his work's relationship to the Rushdiean genealogy of Indian literature (see Mondal 2007; Khair 2003; Hawley 2005)—his self-conscious rootedness in an Indian Ocean literary space should also be placed within an incipient tradition of Indian Ocean writing in English. Writers who form part of this small but important group include M.G. Vassanji, V.S. Naipaul, Romesh Gunesekera, Michael Ondaatje, Abdulrazak Gurnah, and Lindsey Collen, as described in my *Writing Ocean Worlds* (2021). In *Sea of Poppies*, the most significant of these networked elements connecting and constituting the Indian Ocean world is the collection of words and languages that travel across and knit together its distant shores. This linguistic connectedness is exemplified by the lingua franca developed in the context of the sailing ship.

Of course, this is in the context of a radically multilingual space, the problem of which is explicitly described in *Sea of Poppies*. Pugli speaks Bengali, French, Latin, and English, but when adopted by a colonial household must only speak "kitchen Hindusthani" (Ghosh 2008, 379); Neel finds it strange that she speaks Bengali when her fellow-travelers speak Bhojpuri, and attributes her knowledge of English to probable prostitution; she wonders, in turn, of Neel and Ah Fatt, "what language might they share, this skeletal Easterner and this tattooed criminal?"

[1] The network trope is apparent in the history of the region and more widely. C. A. Bayly (2004) employs networks in order to comprehend the scope of global history, and Indian Ocean history in particular has recently been viewed in this way, for instance, Milo Kearney's *The Indian Ocean in World History* (2004) and particularly Ray and Alpers's *Cross Currents and Community Networks* (2007).

(379). The close confines of the ship, on which the characters all eventually gather, exaggerates rather than diminishes the diversity of languages. The ship comes to resemble a miniature Babel (just as Herman Melville describes, for instance, in *Redburn* [1850]). Still, given that ships were successfully run with "*laskari* forces from all over"—the term referred indifferently to Arabs, South Asians, Malays, East Africans, Filipinos, and Chinese—their workers had to be able to communicate (Ghosh 2010b, 6, 16).

The linguistic inventiveness of *Sea of Poppies* derives from, conjures up, and is a response to the problem of portraying a multilingual environment. For historian Michael Pearson, the early modern Indian Ocean was radically multilingual, a problem that had to be dealt with in order to conduct the distinctive long-distance yet face-to-face Indian Ocean trade. As he describes, "Communication was difficult because there was a real gallimaufry of people around the littoral of the Indian Ocean. Even in one particular location, and referring to one group, we find the sort of cosmopolitanism which meant linguistic brokers were essential" (Pearson 2010, 32). Pearson here posits a solution to the problem in the form of linguistic brokers, such as the numerous Portuguese and French attendants who served the Sultan Bahadur Shah of Gujarat in the 1530s. A century later, 5000 Portuguese renegades populated the eastern Indian Ocean littoral. These men, he suggests, working outside the formal structure of the *Estado*, "were absorbed into the warp and weft of peddling trade in the Indian Ocean and obviously had to learn the appropriate languages (35). In his much earlier novel, *In an Antique Land*, Ghosh posits a different linguistic option: "a trading argot, or an elaborated pidgin language" (Ghosh 1998, 280).

In *Sea of Poppies,* Ghosh goes on to fictionally elaborate that pidgin language, creating the solution to radical multilingualism that he had earlier proposed. The resulting fictolinguistic experiment draws on considerable historical research, and can be described still as a novel written in English because in fact many of the apparent neologisms are drawn from the unabridged *Oxford English Dictionary*. These terms were in turn drawn—for both the dictionary and the novel—from the *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases, and of Kindred Terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical and Discursive*, a colonial glossary that was absorbed in its entirety into the earliest versions of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Ghosh's novel functions almost as a resurrection of the playful, slang-infused vocabulary of that idiosyncratic

dictionary (Yule and Burnell),[2] preceded famously by Salman Rushdie and Rudyard Kipling, among others (Mishra 388). However, in depicting the sailor's dialect, Ghosh also drew heavily on Thomas Roebuck's *A Laskari Dictionary Or Anglo-Indian Vocabulary Of Nautical Terms And Phrases In English And Hindustani* (Ghosh 2010b, 6), a dictionary first compiled in 1811 and published under this title in 1882. However, as Ghosh notes in "Of Fanás and Forecastles: The Indian Ocean and Some Lost Languages of the Age of Sail," the language it recorded was already centuries old (Ghosh 2010b, 16).

The difficulty of navigating a multilingual environment, not only for trade but for representation, is reflected by the novel's reception and its own onward linguistic travel. For one thing, the novel itself has been almost untranslatable. Ghosh, on his blog, records the novel's Russian translator asking for translations of several words—including "sheeshmull," "shammer," and the sentence "[d]o you never think of nothing but knob-knockin and gamahoochie?"—concluding with the slightly gleeful "I wonder how that came out in Russian…" (Ghosh 2011b). This is an exaggerated version of a common problem in approaching the novel, which was highlighted by a number of early reviews. For example, Gaiutra Bahadur points out that, the "characters are often incomprehensible to one another, which makes for occasional comedy, but too often they're also incomprehensible to his readers" (2014).

In "Untranslatables," Emily Apter suggests that a variety of terms have grown up to designate non-national blocs of culture: "imagined communities, parastates, translingualism, diaspora, majimboism, postcolonial deterritorialization, silicon cities, circum-Atlantic, the global south, and so on" (Apter 2008, 583). While these terms go some way toward bringing specificity to global designations, she suggests that they nevertheless fail in the project of ensuring that literary study is sufficiently specific and grounded, so as to avoid reproducing neoimperialist cartographies. A language and translation-focused model of literary history and comparative literature goes some way toward addressing such concerns—because languages, in their plurilingual composition and meandering histories, highlight trajectories that are not necessarily imperial; and, in particular are peppered with untranslatables that mark difference and disconnection.

[2] From a lecture given by Kate Teltscher to the University of Oxford Postcolonial Seminar, November 2010, entitled, "The Floating Lexicon: Amitav Ghosh, Hobson-Jobson and the *OED*." See also Teltscher 2011.

While translation is more explicitly discussed in *The Hungry Tide,* in *Sea of Poppies* translation is both textually and paratextually performed (Rollason 2005).

Possibly in response to the confusion of readers and translators, Ghosh later placed a glossary, described as a "chrestomathy," not in the novel itself but on his official website. The glossary is fictionalized as the work of Neel and his unnamed descendants, the "Ibis Chrestomathy" (2011a), a list of words with their derivations, predictions for their survival into the future, and whimsical definitions. The title is significant because it pursues the historicizing impetus of the novel. A chrestomathy, unlike a glossary, is diachronic, a collection of passages designed to show development in style or meaning. Ghosh situates the words on the same plane as characters, in the "present author's" introduction to the chrestomathy: "Words! Neel was of the view that words, no less than people, are endowed with lives and destinies of their own. Why then were there no astrologers to calculate their kismet and pronounce upon their fate?" Words in this view have life stories like those of fictional characters. If Apter's *Against World Literature* tests the hypothesis that translation and untranslatability are constitutive of world literature, then *Sea of Poppies*, in its deployment of lascar language, conducts a similar, literary rather than critical, experiment (Apter 2014, 16).

Lost Languages of the World of Work

Ghosh situates *laskari* as the lingua franca of the Indian Ocean—a language born not of a nation but of the sea and of work. It is this emphasis on a language of work in an environment of mobility that links the novel to an older tradition of sea fiction, although with significant differences. As Cohen suggests, the work of the novel and the work of the sea are connected partly through their overlapping attitude to language. In describing the correspondence between maritime, ship-centered literature and the world of work—what Conrad calls 'craft'—Cohen points out the significance of "plain style," a convention of mariner's journals and the language of work at sea, that carried over into the realist novel.

In *Sea of Poppies,* Zachary Reid, who enters the Indian Ocean trade from the Atlantic side, introduces the novel's *laskari* sailor speech in its early pages. Zachary's ship, the *Ibis*, has a disastrous voyage to Cape Town, fraught with illness and ill-luck, so that no one but lascar crews will consider signing on. The new, lively lascar crew forces Zachary, a novice sailor who has just learned the art of sailing, "to undergo yet another

education," re-learning anew all the names for shipboard parts and procedures. The narrator includes a long list of substitutions: "'malum' instead of mate, 'serang' for bosun, 'tindal' for bosun's mate, and 'seacunny' for helmsman" (Ghosh 2008, 14). This "new shipboard vocabulary, which sounded a bit like English and yet not" (14) forms the inflection point between the familiar Atlantic world and the unfamiliar Indian Ocean, and his induction into the new oceanic realm is figured as first and foremost a linguistic transition (Crane 2012).

As this suggests, in *Sea of Poppies*, language and ships are inextricably linked. In his essay "Of Fanás and Forecastles," Ghosh writes: "[W]hat really sets a sailing ship apart from other machines is that its functioning is critically dependent on language: underlying the intricate web of its riggings, is an unseen net of words" (2010b, 20). Similarly for Conrad, the language of the sea can be precisely compared to its instruments, so that words match parts of the ship and its operations with exactitude; such that "an anchor is a forged piece of iron, admirably adapted to its end, and technical language is an instrument wrought into perfection by ages of experience, a flawless thing for its purpose" (Conrad 1921, 20–21). Just as Ghosh highlights the metaphoric and practical overlap between language and ships, Conrad portrays sailor speech as a tool of the craft of sailing, of the same substantive importance as the iron-forged anchor.

Conrad serves as an example, then, of this older tradition of sea fiction.[3] Michael Greaney notes that many of Conrad's speech communities are multilingual; incidentally, in many ways the same multilingual environment of the Indian Ocean world that Ghosh depicts. However, it seems as though Conrad's fiction presupposes a radical translatability: "Conrad regarded English as the *lingua franca* of every corner of the earth; and

[3] Despite their mutual interest in sailing ships and Indian Ocean spaces, Ghosh abjures Conradian influence. The refusal is based on an ethics of representation, which fits with Ghosh's recuperative ethic of historical recovery (Desai 2004; Ghosh and Chakrabarty 2002). More specifically, he argues that the problem is not the invisibility of figures such as lascars in Conrad's work, but their inaudibility: "[N]ever does the lascar in Conrad have a voice except as some sort of maligned presence. To me, that's a failure of imagination" (Boehmer and Mondal 2012, 32). Rarely do 'native' speakers speak in Conrad's fiction, which often has recourse rather to suggestive description of the sound-patterning of foreign speech rather than its direct record (Moutet 2006). Ghosh's fiction might be thought of as motivated by a desire to do better than Conrad, with his "failure of imagination" (Boehmer and Mondal 2012, 32).

even when English is not spoken, other languages are readily translatable into English" (Greaney 2002, 19). In contrast, Ghosh disrupts a cohesive and easily comprehensible English, in ways that provide for a far more frictive reading experience. Plain style is almost the opposite of what Ghosh achieves in his evocations of sailor speech in *Sea of Poppies,* which are characterized by excess, frequent ornamentation and tautology, and humor. For instance, the speech of James Doughty, a ship's pilot and the first Anglo-Indian speaker that Zachary encounters upon entering the Hooghly, is guilty of what the leader of the lascars, Serang Ali, describes as "too muchi dumbcowing":

> Cocking his head, Zachary caught the echo of a voice booming down the gangway: 'Damn my eyes if I ever saw such a caffle of barnshooting badmashes! A chowdering of your chutes is what you budzats need. What do you think you're doing, toying with your tatters and luffing your laurels while I stand here in the sun?' (Ghosh 2008, 25)

Excess is immediately apparent in the use of both "badmash" and "budzat," identified as versions of the same word—meaning, politely, "rascal"—as well as the quantity of alliteration. While it is of course easy to understand the gist of what has been said, many of the meanings are likely to evade the reader, producing a disturbing mix of untranslatable opacity and comprehensibility.

Both Ghosh and Conrad, from their different perspectives, lament the loss of sea-language. In *The Mirror of the Sea,* Conrad describes this loss in poignant terms: "the special call of an art which has passed away is never reproduced. It is as utterly gone out of the world as the song of a destroyed wild bird" (Conrad 1921, 47). Ghosh's lament is expressed in similar conservationist terms: the loss of lascar language, as one among many forgotten languages, is figured as an extinction event. While Conrad laments a language of craft, Ghosh appears to descry the loss of a language of connectedness. Both authors therefore employ ecological language, but while Conrad expresses these sentiments in the manner of a eulogy, Ghosh often does so in the manner of comedy. His writing revels in salty language (in both senses), and is replete with puns and innuendos. However, this comedic tone functions in a manner that is both entertaining and critical, masking an overweening melancholy. As he writes in an interview about the novel, "I had to make it funny to make it bearable for myself, otherwise I wouldn't have survived it" (Boehmer and Mondal 2012, 35).

Conclusion

Sea of Poppies participates in fleshing out the idea of literary worldliness. It constructs an Indian Ocean literary world in conjunction with a fictive language, in the manner perhaps closest to that described by Eric Hayot in *On Literary Worlds.* In response to the confusion about terminologies of worldliness, Hayot draws on an older sense of that phrase, as in “the world of the novel”: “Worldedness emerges most often from the collective expression—or *im*pression of the work as a whole. … World-creation happens consciously, but also in the ideological ‘unconscious’ of the work, not as an expression of what the work does not know, but of what it knows most deeply” (2012, 50). By linking the plain style of “craft” that characterized sea fiction’s contribution to the novel with a sailing language of the Indian Ocean, the novel contributes to the “world-creation” of a southern maritime mobility (see also Mackenthun in this volume).

In addition, recognizing the reflexivity involved in the production of space involves the impingement of a particular space and history on the form of the novel. As Franco Moretti suggests, “[T]ake a form, follow it from space to space, and study the reasons for its transformations” (2005, 90). Representing the Indian Ocean poses a narrative challenge, partly due, as has been suggested, to its scale and inevitably multilingual nature. In a review of Abdul Rahman Munif’s *Cities of Salt*, “Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel,” Ghosh describes the paucity of literature on the oil trade, which economically dominated the twentieth century, as compared to the many great works that commemorate the similarly dominant spice trade of an earlier period. He argues that one of the reasons for this silence is that the conventional form of the novel struggles to accommodate multilingual, heterogeneous, and transnational contexts, and suggests that the cause lies not in the differentially storied qualities of the trade, but in the nature of the storytelling (Ghosh 2005, 138):

> In the end, perhaps, it is the craft of writing itself—or rather writing as we know it today—that is responsible for the muteness of the Oil Encounter. The experiences that oil has generated run counter to many of the historical imperatives that have shaped writing over the past couple of centuries and given it its distinctive forms. The territory of oil is bafflingly multilingual, for example, while the novel, with its conventions of naturalistic dialogue, is most at home within monolingual speech communities (within nation-states, in other words). (2005, 140)

The same can certainly be said for the oceanic context, even more bafflingly multilingual. Ocean space, its multilingualism and resulting untranslatability, is a goad to experimentation in both linguistic forms and literary geographies.

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