

# Mapping Local/Global Dichotomy and the Reconstruction of Memory: a Study of Amitabh Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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In the world of retellings and re-imaginings, Postcolonial novelists, playwrights, film makers and artists have taken up the task of creating narratives that focus on the local/global dichotomy and reconstructing memory. Postcolonial revisions not only challenge held narratives but also offer literary reconstructions of political, social, cultural and historical identities. Owing to their inherent heterogeneity, postcolonial literary productions have often actively taken up the written word to right the wrongs of the past and usher in fresh perspectives on the lives, histories, stories, practices, hopes, and dreams of the 'others' of the world, in voices of their own. By doing so, Amitabh Ghosh, like his postcolonial peers from elsewhere, masterfully renegotiates the identity of the mixed-breed from the contemporary social, political, and cultural perspectives in his much acclaimed novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008). By retracing and reclaiming past memories, Ghosh is negotiating the boundaries of the local and the global in the aforementioned text. By mingling the personal histories of the fictional character in his text with the collective history of the nation and the colonial experience, Ghosh declares *Sea of Poppies* as a site of dialogue between the local and the global. The authorial intention is to focus on, to borrow from Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural translation, the interstitial spaces in

memory and history, to somehow, simultaneously challenge and enrich the ambivalence of colonial discourse. To quote from Bhabha,

It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference, that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*(italics original), community interest or cultural values are negotiated. (Bhabha 2)

This paper attempts a postcolonial, poststructural, and postmodern reading of this brilliant novel in order to underscore his multifarious attempts to reconstruct the memories associated with the mixed-breed identity and also on his interplay of the ‘local’ and the ‘global’ traditions in the text.

That *Sea of Poppies*, the first of Ghosh’s Ibis Trilogy, is an ambitious project, is a mere understatement. Ten years into the publication of the text, it is by now quite well documented that the range of topics that Ghosh touches upon in the text under discussion and the largesse of information available on nineteenth century India through the text almost qualifies it to be a historical treatise of some sort. In an interesting article titled “My General Education: “Discovering” Amitav Ghosh,” Sandra L Richards explores in detail the befuddlement one is likely to go through teaching the text in a multicultural, multilingual classroom context where even the language used in the text, even though English, only adds to the perplexity of the reader, at times making the text inaccessible to a certain section of the reading audience, albeit context. What does this systemic linguistic incomprehensibility characterize for the text? Even inside the text, there are many interactions between the characters that highlight the deepening of comprehension as well as cooperation in spite of the fragility of language such as those between Deeti

and Kalua, Zachary and Paulette and Jodu or the one between Neel and Ah Fatt when Neel is lost in memories from his family life– “‘my name is Lei Leong Fatt [...] People call Ah Fatt, Ah Fatt your friend’ (Ghosh342). How does it add to the memory and history of a bygone era and the people that inhabited it as one that is now signified in the text? So as to make sense of this challenge, it might be helpful to bring in Bakhtin and Medvedev into this discussion as they would tell us that:

Every concrete utterance is a social act. [...] Its individual reality is already not that of a physical body, but the reality of a historical phenomenon. [...] The very presence of the utterance is historically and socially significant. This presence passes from natural reality to the category of historical reality. The utterance is not a physical body and not a physical process, but a historical event, albeit an infinitesimal one (BAKHTIN/MEDVEDEV, 1985, p.120, Quoted in Amorim np).

One of the most vital functions of postcolonial literature has been to debunk the stereotypes of the past by reassessing memory and thus reinstating the identities of the social pariahs with dignity and responsibility, at the same time avoiding the creation of a colonial gaze reserved for the marginal of the world as in a circus side-show. Among many other such unusual occurrences inside the text, the establishment of an unusual bond between a former Rajah (a landlord) and an indentured labourer in the text leads the reader to the idea of a more equal world, a world that Rabindranath Tagore, India's most prominent poet till date, imagined to be conceivable. My interest particularly lies in the prospect of fusing the postcolonial Ghosh with Tagore's idea of patriotism to come up

with an understanding of the scope of memory in the construction of nation as it is done in Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*.

Ghosh's narrative begins in the year 1838. If it is assumed that Tagore, born in 1861 and once in his adolescence years in 1871-1878 would hear the story of the *Ibis* from different social sources, would it shape his sense of the world in some way that would bring about his philosophy of nationalism in his later years? This hypothetical question can help us explain how Tagore is a definite influence on Ghosh's narrative. Unlike Rudyard Kipling's idea of a disparate East and West, Tagore believed in the possibility of a world where East and West would co-habit and ensure harmony for all. Neel and Ah Fatt will fail to become friends if they define themselves by their Indian and Chinese nationalities. Contrary to Benedict Anderson's understanding of the nation as an 'imagined community,' Tagore advocated the idea of a polychromatic world where people of all colours, genders, classes and locations will function as one, much like those in Ghosh's Opium Ship *Ibis* where they become a "brotherhood" of their own, their "own village," "own family," "own caste," (Ghosh 314) irrespective of where they come from or how they end up in the ship. As the eccentric assemblage of characters board the ship *Ibis*, their individual memories and histories merge into that of the sea and the ship, as has occurred over centuries with the many communities that marched into the Indian subcontinent for numerous purposes and whereas their metamorphosis continues while on board, this extraordinary congregation often leads to their widening of perspectives. In his book *Nationalism*, Tagore argues that

“A nation, in the sense of the political and economic union of a people, is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organized for a mechanical purpose. Society as such has no ulterior purpose. It is an end in itself. It is a spontaneous self-expression of man as a social being. It is a natural regulation of human relationships, so that men can develop ideals of life in co-operation with one another.” (Tagore 10)

Both Paulette and Zachary have had dichotomous beginnings to their stories; Paulette, though French by birth, is much more at ease with a more pertinently Indian way of life owing to her upbringing by Jodu's mother. Similarly, Zachary would have been deprived of a life of opportunity owing to his quadron mixed-breed origins but once on the ship, *Ibis* changes his possibilities. Even Neel comes to discover a more compassionate side of himself by means of nursing Ah Fatt, an indentured labourer and a Chinese, who Neel would have had no occasion to meet and be touched by, was it not for *Ibis*. It would not be unseemly to emphasize here that Ghosh's characters essentially celebrate their dichotomous selves which could have alternatively resulted in, to borrow Leon Festinger's term, “cognitive dissonance”(Festinger), a disorientation in attitude and behaviour owing to the likely exposure to conflicting beliefs or value systems. There occurs no bafflement in Paulette, Zachary, or Neel and rather a sense of harmony and reconciliation prevails upon them when they come to recognize the expression of their multiple selves, rooted in differing but not disparate, communities. Hereupon, it can be brought to the forefront that Tagore understood India as a “country of communities” (Nandy, S Gopalakrishnan Np) where the westernised idea of nation takes a backseat. According to Tagore, nation and nationalism were mere offshoots of the western concept of capital and mercantile as Ghosh would highlight in *Sea of Poppies*. Illuminated by the

incandescence of diverse Indian traditions of orality and storytelling, Ghosh's epic writing in the novel under discussion thus draws from the local memories of different communities to re-establish an identity for his fictional characters in the global context. Even a character as despicable as Baboo Nob Kissin surprises the reader by arranging refugee camps for the very labourers he would sell off to the Empire for petty personal gains, thus keeping the discussion open to the likelihoods of dichotomy in one's being. This is because Ghosh, like Tagore, intends to emphasize the sustenance of humanity at the core of societies, in spite of the multifarious challenges of everyday life. Ghosh fuses the local and the global as the manifestation of analogous ideas, often violently loaded by the circumstances of memory and history. His comprehension of identity is not restricted to a singular constituent such as language or religion. In a candid discussion on his fictional art with *Verve Man*, Ghosh deliberates:

“When you start rooting identity in language or in any one thing, you create a sense of identity that becomes very exclusionary. Not only is it morally wrong to create that sense of exclusion it's also politically, culturally and economically suicidal.” (Badkar Np)

In this sense, Ghosh is not unlike Tagore, who too, in both his fictional writings such as *GhareBaire* and in his non-fictions such as *Nationalism*, has more often than not reinforced the importance of taking into consideration a multiplicity of factors while assigning categories such as identity to individuals as well as groups. Tagore, like Ghosh would have the readers of *Sea of Poppies* brood over, has also cautioned on the possible dangers of an exclusivist civilization that shuts itself out to certain sections of the world we inhabit (Tagore 49). As Deeti and Kalua, belonging to two different worlds, with

Kalua being an untouchable, in spite of the countless odds that come their way, come together as a couple in *Sea of Poppies*; this is more reminiscent of Tagore's India than any other, a world shaped by contradictions and sometimes, to one's bewilderment, functionally celebratory of an anti-narrative. Such a perplexing narrative is quite unlikely to breathe for long in a precipitously nationalist environment.

As a master manipulator of the historical narrative of early 19<sup>th</sup> century, a time of sudden and strange immigrations, Ghosh creates a world in *Sea of Poppies* as authentic as history books would have us believe. However, by underlining the pluralism of the characters galore in the text under discussion, Ghosh is able to accentuate and acknowledge a possibly more striking and somewhat darker version of history, national or otherwise. Any kind of oversimplification is avoided and no judgements are passed by means of the pluralistic narrative. While the idea of the modern nation, more or less, hinges on homogeneity, Ghosh denies to play along; his narrative scale and scope are more like a mesh of memory, haphazard and incongruous at all times, yet chillingly telling of a chronological past. The colonial past of the subcontinent is only one of the many compulsions that would construct this weave of remembrance. Ghosh's engagement with local memories from a conspicuously difficult time in India's past, such as the episode from the text where Deeti visits the opium factory and is shocked to her core just by witnessing the unbearable process of opium production, leads to the condensation of the complexities of narrative that fuses memory and history, often feeding from each other. In that sense, Ghosh recognizes the power of memory as a relevant tool to craft constructive connections to the past. In the *Sea of Poppies*, amidst the bitterness of the opium war and its willing or unwilling participants, *Ibis* the ship becomes a site of memory, a "*lieux de mémoire*" as Pierre Nora would call it, "where a sense of historical continuity

persists”(Nora 7, emphasis original), whether actual or contrived, that concerns itself with the collective as much as with the individual. In contradiction to Nora’s binary disposition to memory and history, Michael Rothberg in his 2010 “Introduction: Between Memory and Memory: From Lieux de mémoire to Noeuds de mémoire” emphasizes the identity forming tools created by memory. Rothberg argues that “Performances of memory may well have territorializing or identity-forming effects, but those effects will always be contingent and open to resignification” (Rothberg 7).As it occurs in the text under discussion, it might be useful to mention that informed by both their histories as well as their memories, quite a number of characters, whether mixed blood or otherwise, in *Sea of Poppies*, do alter their spatial, physical, geographical, and overall identities during the course of the voyage. Some of these alterations are spontaneous while some others are a consequence of circumstances, as is true for the community of India, forever altered and continually altering by its own lived experience. Amongst his many accomplishments, Tagore is one poet in the world who directly or indirectly contributed to the formulation of the national anthems of at least three modern nation states, i.e., of India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. There can be no better evidence of his faith in the multiplicity of human life than this and there could not have been no better way to celebrate Tagore’s polychromous sense of history than is done by Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies* through his astute depiction of the plot, the narrative and characterization. In conclusion, Ghosh attributes both collective memory and the hegemonic sense of history a site for contestation, a playground for adequate expression of the local interfaced with the global.

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