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THE WORLDS OF WORDS OF THE *IBIS* TRILOGY
by Amitav Ghosh

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Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, London: John Murray, 2008. 471 pp. (ISBN 978-0-7195-6895-4 hb).

Amitav Ghosh, *River of Smoke*, London: John Murray, 2011. 522 pp. (ISBN 978-0-71956-898-5 hb).

Amitav Ghosh, *Flood of Fire*, London: John Murray, 2015. 616 pp. (ISBN 978-0-7195-6900-5 hb).

When Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* was published in 2008¹ as the first volume of what has by now become the much acclaimed *Ibis* trilogy, a ten-year-long research project, it was clear that a monumental work, and a literary masterpiece of our times was being shaped. The Italian translators, Anna Nadotti and Norman Gobetti, who worked on the manuscript versions, were the first to take the challenge of translating the work into a South-European language. They found themselves confronted with an unexpected surprise. Even to professional translators as they are, accustomed to translating Indian-English authors or cosmopolitan, transnational writers, the linguistic inventiveness of that first volume was certainly a lesson in English linguistics.

What was to become the «Chrestomathy»,² one of the precious documents the outstanding character of Neel compiles in the novel, was also a compendium of guidelines for the translators, who had been advised by the author neither to use a glossary at the end of the novel, nor footnotes, nor italics, for English in its 19th Century varieties had become a new language in the novel (American, French-English, Zubbén language, British English, Bengali, Hinglish). It is a creative language, but real, bizarre but practical, difficult to pronounce but pragmatic. It is also the language out of «A Laskari Dictionary Or Anglo-Indian Vocabulary Of Nautical Terms And Phrases In English And Hindustani (1882)». The translation of the whole trilogy – as has been noticed – is a case study, which deserves special attention in the field of translation theory and practice, and translation studies more generally.³

1. Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, London: John Murray, 2008.

2. See Amitav Ghosh's official website (<http://www.amitavghosh.com/chrestomathy.html>).

3. Alessandro Vescovi, 'Amitav Ghosh e la trilogia dell'*Ibis*. *Diluvio di fuoco*', *L'Indice dei Libri del Mese*, 5 January 2016 (<http://www.lindiceonline.com/letture/narrativa-straniera/ghosh-trilogia-ibis-diluvio-di-fuoco>).

The lascars were sailors who «came from places far apart, and had nothing in common, except the Indian Ocean; among them were Chinese and East Africans, Arabs and Malays, Bengalis and Goans, Tamils and Arakanese. They came in groups of ten or fifteen, each with a leader who spoke on their behalf» (p. 13). Thus, Zachary, the black man from Baltimore, who took sail as a carpenter on board the *Ibis*, has to learn a completely new language from Serang Ali, the head of the lascars: «resum» instead of «rations», «malum» instead of «mate», «serang» for «bosun». And he has to memorize a new shipboard vocabulary. As for syntax then, sentences are not less mysterious to him: «'Serang Ali wife-o hab make die,' came the answer. 'Go topside, to hebbin. By'mby, Serang ali catchi nother piece wife'...» (p. 15).⁴ It is self evident that the trilogy announced itself as one among the best sea epic narratives in the wake of the best American and English literary traditions of Melville and Conrad, but also of the best postcolonial tradition represented, for instance, by Derek Walcott.⁵ The schooner *Ibis* with white-Afro-American Zachary on board is not dissimilar from the schooner *Flight* with «a rusty head sailor with sea-green eyes, that they nickname Shabine, the patois for any red nigger», in the poem by Derek Walcott, «The Schooner *Flight*».⁶

Thus, in a few pages the *Ibis* sails from Baltimore to Cape Town to Calcutta, and the story steers to the mainland in Bihar, India, where a widowed woman, the visionary Deeti, complains because «now, with the sahibs forcing everyone to grow poppy, no one had thatch to spare» (p. 26): «Came the cold weather, the English sahibs would allow little else to be planted; their agents would go from home to home, forcing cash advances on the farmers, making them sign *asámi* contracts. It was impossible to say no to them» (p. 27). In this simple way, and as if indirectly, Ghosh produces criticism and precise accusations towards British imperialism. The plot is set in 1838, the imposition of monocultures, or «cash crops» as they are called, is already common practice of colonial capitalism as well as the basis of – in the specific case, the monopoly of opium cultivation and trade – an Empire of narco-trafficking.

4. Maybe it is not by chance if the Italian writer Paolo Rumiz goes back to a kind of lascari language of the Mediterranean: «Ala nāsi, mola cimu / voga napri, fate fate / Ondre, Mike, File, Zane / u ime Boga, voga voga//», quoting a poem by the Dalmatian poet Joško Božanić, written in a *lingua franca* from the Adria Sea, a language comprehensible to Venetians and to Montenegrins, to fishermen from the Gargano Gulf, to sailors from the island of Curzola. Paolo Rumiz, *Il ciclope*, Milan: Feltrinelli, 2015, p. 80.

5. Similar conclusions were reached by Anna Nadotti, 'Sentire voci, inventare lingue. Le narrazioni di Amitav Ghosh', *Nazione Indiana*, 29 November 2016 (<https://www.nazioneindiana.com/2016/11/29/sentire-voci-inventare-lingue-le-narrazioni-amitav-ghosh>).

6. Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems / Mappa del nuovo mondo*, translations by B. Bianchi and R. Mussapi, with an essay by Joseph Brodsky, Milan: Adelphi, 1987, p. 112.

Deeti will be one of a group of men and women, *coolies*, who sign contracts as indentured labourers to be transported to Mauritius on board the *Ibis*. They compensate for the loss of black African slaves subsequent to abolitionism. On board the *Ibis*, there are also Kalua, a giant of a man who had helped Deeti's flight from what would have been her *sati*, her immolation on her husband's funeral pyre, together with other men and women, and two convicts: a Chinese young man and opium addict, Ah Fatt, and an Indian nobleman, Neel, the Raja of Raskhali, who had experienced the humiliation of having his crime tattooed on his skin, nakedness and body search, beatings and mistreatments in a British penal colony. Both the prison island and the opium factory of Ghazipur are described with the vividness, detailed mimetic realism and historic accuracy of Dickens's or Balzac's best pages, but also as Foucauldian panopticon-like institutions of surveillance and punishment. Yet, the friendship, solidarity and sense of piety which is soon established between the two convicts, in spite of linguistic, social and cultural differences is among the most moving chapters of Ghosh's trilogy. Similarly, the small community of neo-slave-like workers who inhabit the *dabusa* of the ship, including a young French botanist, Paulette, becomes an ideal society of migrants, among whom castes and social differences are abolished, thanks to a voyage that marks the rebirth of these people in a bond of brotherhood and equality that makes them, as Deeti says: «jahaz-bhai and jahaz-bahen to each other; all of us children of the ship» (p. 328); sons and daughters of the maternal womb of the ship, delivering them across the *Kalapani*, the Black Water, to a new life in a new land. «This vessel was the Mother-Father of her new family, a great wooden *mái-báp*, an adoptive ancestor and parent of dynasties yet to come» (p. 328). Indentured labour as an hypocritical form of legal slavery, based on five-year contracts is criticised by Ghosh as one of the immoral colonial practices, for it was based on fraud and false promises to illiterate people, *girmitiyas*, for they signed *girmitis*, agreements, although they could neither read nor write. On the other hand it is viewed as a possibility to erase the caste system and as an opportunity to start a completely new life elsewhere, free from social and religious constraints. The first volume of the trilogy, which denounces how «British rule in India could not be sustained without opium» (p. 106), closes on a mutiny on board, where Kalua, the convicts and three sailors manage to flee after the killing of a guard and both the ship and the lifeboat are caught in a tempest that disperses them. Interestingly, it closes on a surprising note, the journey of enslavement becomes for all the characters a journey of liberation, for Paulette more than once sets herself free through transvestism, first as an Indian woman in spite of her European ancestry, then as a man. The *gomusta*, Baboo Nob Kissim meets his other gendered identity on his voyage and changes sex midway, thanks to a hilarious epiphany that testifies the author's mastery of the comic register. Zachary passes for a white person and erases his racialized identity, thanks to the sea with its symbolic fluidity

and metamorphic power, thanks to the journey which traditionally is also a descent into one's soul, and thanks to the ship-as-mother which delivers the lot to a new life. This experience of rebirth is similar to Wilson Harris's interpretation of the Limbo dance as a rite mimicking the experience of the Middle Passage of the black slaves travelling from Africa to the Caribbean. It had its origins in the overcrowded slave ships, where the dancer transformed himself into a spider-like figure, mimicking the dismemberment of communities, families, relations and, at the same time, the re-combination of the torn limbs in a new life, a new land and a new form. Similarly, the myth of the trickster, the Spider Anansi survived the crossing of the Ocean in the form of legendary fables, that took roots also in the Americas. Thus, the trauma of the passage is overcome and leads to a re-generative life full of creative possibilities.⁷

The first chapter of the second volume of the trilogy, *River of Smoke* (2011),⁸ mirrors the first chapter of the first volume, for Deeti is a protagonist also here. She is now a charismatic leader of her community on Mauritius Island and speaks a French-English patois. This is due to the fact that now her owner/master is a Frenchman, and she speaks a bit like Paulette. She paints scenes from her life and of her family on the walls of a cave, a sort of graffiti or rock-paintings. There, she also establishes a shrine for her *pujas* and asks her son to complete the final picture, in order to leave a trace of the migrants' passage on that land. Most of the other characters have by now reached the doors of the Chinese Empire. Therefore, the language shifts to Chinese-English or pidgin. Most of the British and Indian merchants's ships are stuck at the mouth of the Pearl River, between Hong Kong and Macau, unable to proceed further inland, towards Canton. With this volume the reader is stuck, too. This stasis has the purpose to conjure up China and put it in the foreground as a new geo-political theatre of colonial aggression. Thus, we indulge at the mouth of the river in contemplation of all that China discloses, including its language. Foreigners are not allowed into the interior and foreign women are not admitted even in *Fanqui Town*, the foreign quarter in Canton, where the outposts of Western commercial enterprises are set (the thirteen factories/*hongs*). This is the case with Paulette, the French woman, who travelled on the *Ibis* dressed in a *sari*, and who tended the botanical gardens of Port Louis at Mauritius for a while, disguised as a man, until her identity was revealed and she was invited to take care of a boat-garden by the British botanist Fitcher Penrose. The history of botanical gardens runs parallel to the history of the opium trade, for import of rare plants and flowers to embellish European collections was well on its way. This second volume includes historical characters: major botanists, like Pierre Poivre, Sir Joseph Banks, the scientist who accompa-

7. Wilson Harris, *History, Fable and Myth*, Wellesley: Calaloux, 1995, pp. 159-164.

8. Amitav Ghosh, *River of Smoke*, London: John Murray, 2011.

nied Captain Cook in his explorations and who became curator of the Kew Gardens in England, and Napoleon. The latter, while in exile at St. Elena, receives two merchants on their way from China to Europe and asks to be informed about the British fortunes in the East. Napoleon is quite satisfied when he hears that the British are having troubles in smuggling their opium into China and takes leave from the two visitors by saying: «What an irony it would be if it were opium that stirred China from her sleep» (p. 166). This chapter allows the author to summarise some important facts for the benefit of Napoleon Bonaparte's knowledge, but, actually, for the readers' sake, too: «demand for Chinese tea has grown at such a pace in Britain and in America that it is now the principal source of profit for the East India Company. The taxes on it account for fully one-tenth of Britain's revenues. If one adds to this such goods as silk, porcelain and lacquerware it becomes clear that the European demand for Chinese products is insatiable. [...] there was an immense outpouring of silver from Britain. This indeed was why they started to export Indian opium to China. [...] now the supply can barely keep pace with the demand. It is in principle a clandestine trade» (pp. 164-165).

Similarly, through a narrative stratagem and the insertion of some letters, Paulette – and the reader with her – is informed of what happens in Canton and is even led into the forbidden Chinese gardens. She is at anchor in Macau and, since she is a woman, travelling inland is impossible for her. Luckily, a former Indian friend of hers, the son of a Calcutta famous painter, is now sailing to Canton. When she briefly meets him, she manages to entrust him with some botanical drawings in order to collect information about a mysterious and rare flower. Soon, he starts sending her detailed letters about the life of westerners in the Chinese city of Canton. His letters are very similar – in tone and style – to Marco Polo's accounts: they are full of realistic details and marvel. He tells her about the riots, subsequent to turmoil due to the outlawed opium trade; he describes the factories with their flagpoles (Dutch, English, American...) and the Chamber of Commerce, finally, he describes the life of the city and its shops and markets and buildings. In this way, the reader is taken by hand to Canton through those epistolary chapters.

The figure of the painter becomes crucial at this stage in the plot. He is fond of Italian painters, but he is also an expert in perfect reproductions. His visits to Canton, to the painters' studios which unfold their secrets – the paper scrolls, the stencil technique, the *équipe* work, the thinnest brushes – strike him as an epiphany: «Should my epic painting be a scroll instead? (Of course I would have to find a fitting name for it, since an 'epic scroll' does not sound quite right, does it?) But is it not a stroke of Genius? Events, people, faces, scenes would unroll as they happened: it will be something New and Revolutionary – it could make my reputation and establish me for ever in the Pantheon of Artists» (p. 262).

Perhaps here, the author is speaking through the voice of the painter, creating a metanarrative authorial interrogation. Amitav Ghosh is interrogating himself about the best way of representing his own *Comédie humaine*. His experiments with the historical novel, the epistolary genre, and the film-like alternation of chapters about the parallel lives of the various protagonists – the migrants, the botanists, the painters, the merchants, the soldiers – are meant to be both paintings with an in-depth central perspective reminding of the Renaissance (in the individual chapters) and a Chinese scroll, an epic canvas, a Medieval tapestry as a whole (the three volumes).

The third volume, *Flood of Fire* (2015),⁹ opens once again with Deeti, who receives the letters written by the painter Chinnery, and a canvas, representing the destruction of Canton by an immense fire – an event that is still to happen. The plot moves back to India, to both Bombay and Calcutta, where the wives of the merchants have lived separate lives. Mrs Burnham, for instance, after securing a job as a carpenter to Zachary, who had cleared his name at a trial where he had to answer about the accident occurred on the *Ibis*, makes him the victim of her sexual whims. Thus, the novel acquires a touch of the libertine plot, more typical of 18th Century plays and novels, but also shows how class privilege could allow colonialists to control both the soul and the body of subalterns. Mrs Shireen Bahram, once informed that her husband died in China and left a male son there, although shocked and surprised because of his completely unsuspected double life, is convinced to start on a journey to Macau with the excuse to claim back a reward for her husband's confiscated opium. Kesri, a *sepo*y who had enrolled with the British army, experiences both humiliations and moments of glory in the army. His personal story helps the author to introduce the life in the army into a colonial international context, their uniforms, their hierarchies, their training and barracks life, their pipers and drummers. The language is again a deluge of lexical particularities and informative military jargon. However, Kesri learns about his sister Deeti's sad destiny, the killing of her husband and mother-in-law, her eloping with a lover, all actions that undermine Kesri's reputation. In the meanwhile, in China, after the accidental death of Bahram, Neel, the ex-convict now free, loses his job as *munshi* and becomes official translator and interpreter for Chinese authorities. Thus, his journal takes the place of Chinnery's letters from Canton. The year 1840 opens with news about possible military actions in China by the British, who are determined to ignore the ban on opium trade and to make their way into the interior of the Chinese Empire, in the name of a new divinity: Free Trade. Rumours of war soon spread in India, where the *sepo*ys are on the alert and the colony is meant to sustain major financial and military efforts. The third volume promises action, yet its pace is slowed down by the

9. Amitav Ghosh, *Flood of Fire*, London: John Murray, 2015.

number of characters who produce interlocked as well as separate plots that occupy very short alternate chapters.

While the first volume of the trilogy was about departures (from India), diaspora, family dismemberment (Deeti abandons her daughter, Paulette abandons her adoptive family), and exile, the third volume is about arrivals (in China), attempts at family reunions (fathers and sons, wives and husbands, lovers). In particular, the figure of Zachary, once again sailing on a ship and destined to be a free, independent opium merchant in China, also becomes a catalyst and through his adventures, we as readers meet one by one all the protagonists of the first volume, for the *Ibis* has shaped their life collectively and their individual destinies are for ever intertwined.

The new year 1841 begins with a war. With a relatively small – yet, very powerful – flotilla of warships the British manage to take the Chinese by surprise. Their cannons and firearms easily pulverise bastions, walls and fortresses, while the *sepoys* army surrounds the enemy from behind and slaughter and massacre are thus granted. It is clear that the role of the *sepoys* is fundamental, yet terribly disturbing to the Chinese, who do not understand why the *sepoys* from India are attacking them. The war is also something new in history. The war-lords are not the London politicians, but rather rich and powerful British merchants with financial interests in the possibility of opening the opium market in such a vast territory as China. Now, the *Ibis* is part of the expedition, it transports both opium and soldiers. Thanks to lucky circumstances Zachary is its captain, and he also makes a fortune by selling opium on the Chinese black market. The new Commissioner for the Southern Provinces signs an agreement by which the island of Hong Kong passes under British sovereignty, and huge sums of money are promised as a reward for the opium that had been confiscated to British and Indian merchants. Nevertheless, in the hope to solve the matter through diplomacy, the Chinese authorities only manage to accelerate the British attacks. They are forced into a “flood of fire” that lasts more than one year, and ends under a hurricane that completes the apocalypse of total debacle. Those who do not die under the fire, die because their destiny has been accomplished. The last chapters of this war-novel, with its loaded vocabulary are extremely accurate in historical documentation on war strategies, weapons, military camps, marches, attacks and retreats, deaths and survivals and the horror that accompanied such carnages in colonial history. Among the free merchants, Zachary, who is now one of them, triumphs like a sort of novel Barry Lyndon. He, too, like all the others, is changed the very moment he sets foot on the *Ibis*.

«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 can consume the whole world» (p. 510), these are the prophetic words Baboo Nob Kissim pronounces to explain the First Opium War. An apocalypse put to an end by the Treaty of Nanking (1842): the definitive, formal passage of Hong

Kong to British rule, the opening of five new free ports, the payment of an immense amount of money as compensation to the British, by which China actually paid its own destruction.

What the trilogy accomplishes is to provide both a microscopic and a telescopic view of History, in a nutshell, four years only, yet those years are still crucial to our modernity and our contemporary world. Amitav Ghosh claimed in an interview that if China and India are experiencing their economic expansion only now it is because colonialism had blocked and prevented their development. It has taken more than fifty years to those countries to regain economic and financial independence and prosperity: «Before the British arrived on the scene, India and China controlled half of the world trade. By the time they left both these countries were utterly impoverished, completely destitute, and today we can see – fifty years after colonialism –, that the countries are finally beginning to reclaim the role they had. That alone tells you the nature of damage that they did. It has taken almost sixty years to even begin the recovery».¹⁰

The fascination of Ghosh's narrative monument (the *Ibis* trilogy), made up of short fragments of its chapters, which are extremely readable and enjoyable, lies in the humanity of his characters, and in a language that is unpredictably rich – its secrets are unravelled by Anna Nadotti's article previously quoted – a language that is inventive in its mirroring all jargons, patois, pidgins, idioms, dialects, rhythms and intonations, cries and whispers, voices that we the readers will unlikely forget.

10. Carmen Concilio, 'An Interview with Amitav Ghosh', *Il Tolomeo*, vol. X, n. 2, 2007, pp. 105-108: 107.