

# About *Jahaz-bhais* and *Jahaz-bahens*: The Politics of a Transnational Family in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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## Abstract

Primarily concerned with the South Asian diaspora in the different regions of the world, Amitav Ghosh has set himself the task of narrating an anti-Hegelian history of the world, incorporating hitherto left-out narratives of ordinary people and their attempts to resist the hegemony of the nation through their own stories and search for identity. Interestingly, it is because of this preoccupation with individuals and his postcolonial instinct to foreground their stories that the *family* has assumed such a central position in all of Ghosh's narratives. For Ghosh, family stories are always important because it is through them that history is experienced. The familial space in Ghosh, however, is not a passive site. Rather, it offers the individual a space that situates his identity away from the confines of the 'restrictively imagined collectivity' of the nation. It is an imagined space where bonds of personal love replace the troubled terrain of the nation with all its discontents. At the same time, this familial space is in no way unproblematic since it too involves power. It is a space to create, expand and protect subjectivities. But most importantly, in the fictional world of Ghosh, it is this nature of home that enables it to be relocated transnationally, beyond the 'shadow lines' of the borders of the home country, in different foreign physical spaces. Ghosh's basic point seems to be that home is everywhere; it only needs to be reinvented. Ghosh's characters are able to combat the diasporic angst through their successful engagement in an irresistible quest for the family in transnational locations. My paper aims to explore Ghosh's latest novel *Sea of Poppies* from this perspective.

## I

In 'Dissemination: Time, Narrative and the Margins' (*The Location of Culture*, 139-70) Bhabha shows that nationalist representations are highly unstable and fragile constructions which can never produce the unity they seek to achieve. In his analysis of nationalist discourse, he speaks of a 'double narrative movement' which problematises nationalist discourse. Bhabha argues that discourse becomes split by an ambivalence similar to the ones that threaten the coherence of colonial discourse. In order to create community out of difference, to convert 'many' into 'one', nationalist discourse engages two contradictory modes of representation, which Bhabha calls the 'pedagogic' and the 'performative.' Consequently, nationalist discourse is split by a disruptive 'double narrative movement'. On the one hand, nationalism is a pedagogic discourse. It claims a fixed origin for the nation and asserts a sense of a continuous history which links its people to their forefathers who too were national subjects. It is 'pedagogical', because it is inflected by the authority, legitimacy and primacy of the nation as the central political and social unit which collects a population into a 'people'. The people thus constitute the *object* of pedagogical discourse.

But Bhabha argues that nationalist discourse is simultaneously 'performative'. He implies that nationalist icons and popular signs (all those representations which help fix its 'norms and limits') must be continuously rehearsed by the people in order to keep secure the sense of 'deep, horizontal comradeship'. A national culture must be endlessly performed; the arbitrary range of symbols which it uses to forge unity require repeated inscription:

The scraps, patches and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a coherent national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects. In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of *writing the nation*. (*LoC*, 145-146 emphasis in the original).

People are, therefore, also *subjects* of nationalist discourses, actively involved in the (re)production of its signs and traditions: they must repeatedly tell the nation's history, perform its rituals, celebrate its great figures and commemorate its anniversaries. Hence, nationalist discourses in their performative aspects function under a different temporality, that of the 'repetitious' and 'recursive.' Because of this tension between the pedagogic and the performative, the nation is split by

what Bhabha terms 'conceptual ambivalence' (*LoC* 146) and between these two positions, a sense of the nation's homogeneous 'people' begins to fragment. What emerges, in fact, in this 'uncanny moment' of the interface between these different identities is a new hybrid identity, which remains perpetually in motion and is open to further change and reinscription. The idea of subjectivity as stable, single and pure is forever demolished.

One of the most prominent identities which constantly intervene and challenge the hegemonizing attempt of the pedagogical grand narrative of the unified nation with its performative micro-narratives is the 'familial'. While nationalist discourse requires essence, origin, unity and coherence, the familial space continuously disrupts this unity by bringing in a jarring note, a difference from within. Failing to exclude these 'different' stories, 'different' experiences, and 'different' histories, the nation's dream of smooth self-generation at the level of the performative is constantly elided. In *Locations of Culture*, Bhabha refers to the 'recesses of domestic space' as 'sites for history's most intricate invasions', because in them the 'borders between home and world become confused, and uncannily, it is here where the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting.' (*LoC*, 9) Thus national history and family-history, national space and familial space, are all interlocked at a moment of tension, the outcome of which is an intriguing hybridity of history and displacement of narratives.

In the first place, the familial space at once provides its members an identity, much more basic, immediate and intimate than any identity the nation can provide. It connotes in our mind a private sphere of shelter, comfort, nurture and protection that contrasts with the chaos and anxiety outside. Ideally, the family protects and lends its status and honour to its members when they venture into the world outside. The family, as a space, helps an individual to assert a subject position that draws its validity and energy from a close contract with an intimate circle of family members, friends and kins. Moreover, while the illiberal aspect of nationalism 'leads to the interpretation of diverse phenomenon through one glossary, thus erasing specificities, setting norms and limits, lopping off tangentials' (Marangoly George, 14) and hence tries to hegemonise, family gives the self-identity necessary for the individual to negotiate the problems faced in the outside world. So the familial space or home fulfills the need for a coherent subjectivity and the desire for origin. Precisely because of this, tendency home is represented as fixed, rooted and stable, and hence people supposedly 'feel at home' within familial space. So, the identity that one receives from one's familial

space is crucial because it alone enables one to resist the nation's tendency to achieve hegemonic, totalitarian control over the individual.

Nevertheless, this very desire to use familial space for consolidation of ego-based subjective identity complicates this space considerably. Going by Bhabha's idea of the differential, one can note that the family itself is a very large space. So the concept of the pedagogic and the performative that Bhabha associates with complexities created by the nation problematises the family equally. Keeping this problem in mind, we must declare that the family is not, a readymade identity, which one can automatically slip into, without complications. The conflict between the pedagogic and the performative caused by the nation is equally noticeable in familial space. It gives birth to a number of micro-narratives for the individual. Through them, the individual self resists the hegemonic desire of the 'family' to mould the identity of its constituent members through its own pedagogic tools. In his book *Smritichhanda*, Sachitanand Vatsyan Agyeya gives us two very important formulations in connection with space and identity: in the first, one is at the center of the space; in the second, space is that in which one is at the centre. The creation, nurturing and protection offered by familial space is an example of the second condition, because, it is an attempt to consolidate the identity of the self through the creation of subjective space. In the first place, the family is an area of conflict as well as support, a scene of violence as well as nurturing. As a psychic space, it witnesses conflicts involving the ego, struggles for power and the desire to dominate, because, these too are common ways to establish subjective identity. The varied bonds of love, fear, power, desire and control that the individual establishes with different members in this familial space, helps him to create, nourish and protect his or her identity.

It is important to note that this will to dominate and consolidate power does not have to involve violence. It may come through love as well. Home is the fundamental territory where all these varied desires is manifested. Finally, one most important micro-narrative that individuals produce is through the creation of innumerable familial bonds made according to their own choice, outside the connection of blood.<sup>1</sup>

So, the familial space is flexible and manifests itself in various forms, following a basic pattern of inclusion/exclusion. Its prime importance lie in the fact that it is not equally available to all — it remains a restricted place that is contested over and embraced as the exclusive domain of a few. The familial space, therefore, redefines and stretches itself again and again, in line with the incessant search of the self for identity. This leads to micro-narratives, often

produced transnationally. Consequently, familial space is in a state of constant flux, and its interface with various other spaces like that of the nation can become complicated.

## II

It was Salman Rushdie who initiated the exploration of the performative micro-narrative of familial space in *Midnight's Children* (1981). Subsequently, the project has been taken up by a number of other Indian novelists. Among them, Amitav Ghosh is by far the most prominent. Particularly concerned with the South Asian diaspora in the different regions of the world, Ghosh has set himself the task of narrating what amounts to an anti-Hegelian history of the world. In the process, he highlights the hitherto left-out narratives of ordinary individuals and the predicament of individuals seen against the backdrop of history and their attempts to resist the hegemony of the nation through stories they tell and their search for identity. Interestingly, it is this context of the preoccupation with individuals and their postcolonial instinct to foreground their stories that the family has assumed such a central position in Ghosh's narratives.

The most fascinating aspect of Ghosh's treatment of this familial space seems to be his ability to recreate it across borders. It is almost as if these borders were porous. Since it is a territory to be created, protected and consolidated as a manifestation of subjective identity, it is no longer limited to the *roots*. It can be relocated transnationally; for example, beyond the 'shadow lines' of the borders of the home country, in different foreign physical spaces, so that it is no more a simple journey away from home/family, but from one home/family to another. Ghosh's basic point of contention seems to be that home is everywhere; it only needs to be reinvented. So, in his fictional world, a transnational 'home' is compatible with the idea of *routes* (and no more limited to roots). Consequently, Ghosh's world is peopled with characters who engage themselves in an irresistible quest for family and are able to invent it in a transnational location. That is how they are able to combat the angst of the diaspora.

From the intimate, relatively small space of *The Hungry Tide* (2004), Ghosh has taken a big leap to the vast, transnational world in his novel, *Sea of Poppies* (2008). In this first part of a trilogy conceived on a vast compass of time and space, Ghosh deals with the problems and politics of the diasporic movement in history in details, more miniscule in intent than has been attempted earlier by most writers. In the process, he explores a host of interesting issues — the sense of loss involved in the state of homelessness, the role of memory in the recreation of

the transnational family, and the truth behind the seductive pleasures of homes, communities and nations.

*Sea of Poppies* is about a voyage on the *Ibis* — a ship that takes coolies, convicts, sailors and officers to Mauritius.<sup>2</sup> The backdrop of the journey — the beginning of the opium war in the early nineteenth century — is important. Much has been written in different forms of literature on the Indigo Plantation, but no Indian writer before Ghosh has focused so intensely on the opium trade of the British in the entire network of China, India, Mauritius, Trinidad and Maldives in the nineteenth century as an offshoot of a colonial power in the process of consolidating its gains. Almost like Dinabandhu Mitra's *Neel Darpan* (1860), this book is an *Opiumdarpan*, as it were, executed with the help of wonderful narrative skills. Ghosh is able to bring together in the novel a motley crew of sailors, convicts, migrants and even lovers gathering from varied corners of the world — from the interiors of Bihar and Bengal and other parts of Asia, and even England and the United States — all of whose lives were intricately linked with the opium trade. The slump in the sale of opium affected the lives of Bhojpuri peasants and factory hands in Gazipur as much as the fortunes of the English merchants and the Bengali Zamindars at one point of history. The *Ibis*, a tall-masted ship, therefore becomes a floating cauldron of different histories, geographies, language and culture. An interesting metaphor of such mingling of incongruent components is Deeti's shrine, which, like any other shrine in a poor/middle class Hindu Indian family, encapsulates a motley assembly:

There was a small alter inside, with statues of Shivji and Bhagwan Ganesh, and framed prints of Ma Durga and Shri Krishna. But the room was a shrine not just to the gods but also to Deeti's personal pantheon, and it contained many tokens of her family and forebears — among them such relics as her dead father's wooden clogs, a necklace of rudraksha beads left to her by her mother, and faded imprints of her grandparents' feet taken on their funeral pyre... (*SoP*, 9).

Among the prominent passengers on board is Neelratan, an educated, polished zamindar of the Rashkhali estate, who, despite his financial problems, is not ready to compromise with his refined taste, or abandon culture, etiquettes or the 'babu' tradition that meant having lots of attendants and mistresses. It was not uncommon that even the most refined of zamindars would fall victim to a colonial game plan and was cheated by the likes of a Mr. Burnham. Neelratan is consequently convicted as a forger and was on the *Ibis*, on his way to be deported to Mauritius. Sarang Ali is one of the most important members of the crew but

with a not-so-remote history of a pirate; Ah Fatt, another inmate, is an opium addict and a convict of Parsi and Chinese descent. Zachary, the second mate of the ship, is the key example of the mixture of race, class, costume and language created by trading in the high seas. He is not at all a 'pucca sahib' (his father is white and his mother is a quadroon). Nor is Paulette, daughter of a French Botanist at the royal Botanical gardens across the river from Kolkata, a pucca memsahib. Born to French parents, she grows up more as a Bengalee having got Jodu's mother, a poor boatman's rustic but efficient wife, as her foster mother. This mixture reminds us at once of Jodu (one of the lesser mortals on the *Ibis*) who is an interesting foil to Paulette. Born to a boatman, he grows up with Paulette in the affluent cosmopolitan ambience of Mr. Lambert's sylvan bungalow. Ghosh does not forget to remind us that Jodu himself never felt at home in his native village where he went back for a brief period of time after the death of Mr. Lambert.

Then there are the 'girmitiyas' — the 'lesser mortals'. Deeti is a poor and oppressed Bhojpuri subaltern who engages our attention in the first part of the novel because of the way she has to give up her hopes of making a decent living due to opium, which she describes as the *shani* (evil) of her life. Engaged in a daily struggle to remain alive by growing and selling poppy seeds, she loses her husband, falls victim to the social and sexual oppression of her in-laws, but is saved by the untouchable Kalua from being a sati, that is to say, a widow destined for immolation, and ultimately finds refuge on the ship. Despite his gigantic physique, Kalua is not able to resist the tyranny of society either, not only because he is poor but also because he is a low caste *chaamar*. Saraju is a midwife who made the mistake of delivering a thakur's son and this caused those high caste people to drive her away from her 'home'. Munia, a low caste *mussahar*, sees her parents and her illegitimate son burn to death before her own eyes. Then there is Dukhane, a married woman, who decides to sail with her husband having had enough of a violently abusive mother-in law. Also, on the deck are Ratna and Champa, whose husbands' lands were contracted to the opium factory, leaving them with nothing for sustenance. Heeru, on the other hand, was deserted by her husband. And then there are the hillsmen from the plateaus of Jharkhand who have brought with them stories of a land in revolt against its new rulers, of villages put to flames by the white man's troops. So, the reader cannot miss the one common luggage that all these marginalized have-nots share among themselves — the luggage of a painful memory of enduring tyranny, suffering, and seemingly endless pain.

What makes the novel more interesting subsequently is the thread that ties all these characters together. All of them want to live even when they are thrown into the most hostile condition of life. Undeterred by tyranny, they engage themselves in a quest for a new home. Through its three sections, the novel tries to narrate the voyage undertaken by these varied people from their original homes where they had been rooted, to their new home as a new family on the *Ibis*. 'Land', 'River' and 'Sea' — the topographic themes of the three sections into which Ghosh divides his tale of migration speaks of unimpeded space — of a journey of deliverance from a claustrophobic setting to a more and more open space. The novel "lurches unsteadily from the despair of marooned lives to the hope of reprieve, from the dull certainties of confinement to fleeting portents of an unborn freedom," as Swapan Chakraborty puts it in a review of the novel<sup>3</sup>. If we follow the narrative closely as the *Ibis* gradually makes its way from Kidderpore to the Bay of Bengal, we will be able to trace the different phases of transition of this shift to a new home and a new family.

Leaving one's homeland, however, despite the pain and subjugation suffered in it, is not easy. The pain, unease, confusion and sense of apprehension that loom large in the initial phase of the journey are remarkable. All sorts of rumors and apprehension grip them:

Up to this point, the migrants had avoided the subject of the Black water — there was no point, after all, in dwelling on the dangers that lay ahead. But now, as they sweated in the steamy heat of the jungle, their fears and apprehensions bubbled over. The pulwar became a cauldron of rumours: it began to be whispered that their rations on the Black Water ship would consist of beef and pork; those who refused to eat would be whipped senseless and the meats would be thrust down their throats. On reaching Mareech, they would be forced to convert to Christianity; they would be made to consume all kinds of forbidden foods, from the sea and the jungle; should they happen to die, their bodies would be ploughed into the soil, like manure, for there was no provision for cremation on that island. The most frightening of the rumours was centered upon the question of why the white men were so insistent on procuring the young and the juvenile, rather than who were wise, knowing, and rich in experience: it was because they were after an oil that was to be found only in the human brain — the coveted *mimiai-kattel*, which was known to be most plentiful among people who had recently reached maturity. The method employed in extracting this substance was to hang the victims upside down, by their ankles, with



small holes bored into their skulls: this allowed the oil to drip the oil slowly into a pan.

So much credence did this rumour accumulate that when at last Calcutta was sighted, there was a great outburst of sorrow, in the hold: looking back now, it seemed as if the journey down the Ganga had given the migrants the last taste of life before the onset of a slow and painful death. (*SoP*, 246-7)

The passage shows how the rumours, ill-founded as they are, grip these people in panic and make their passage more and more rough. The situation turns more difficult as memories of the land make them nostalgic:

But even when removed from view, the island could not be put out of mind: although none of them had set eyes on it before, it was still intimately familiar to most — was it not, after all, the spot where the Ganga rested her feet? Like many other parts of Jambudvipa, it was a place they had visited and revisited time and again, through the epics and Puranas, through myth, song and legend. The knowledge that this was the last they would see of their homeland, created an atmosphere of truculence and uncertainty... Among the women, the talk was of the past, and the little things that they would never see, nor hear, nor smell again: the colour of poppies, spilling across the fields like abir on a rain-drenched Holi... *No matter how hard the times at home may have been, in the ashes of every past there were a few cinders of memory that glowed with warmth — and now, those embers of recollection took on a new life, in the light of which their presence here, in the belly of a ship that was about to be cast into an abyss, seemed incomprehensible, a thing that could not be explained except as a lapse from sanity.* (*SoP*, 397-8 emphases added)

Thus the burden of the past, and the memories of the warmth that sustained different familial bonds they enjoyed in their lives, as well as recollections of myths with which they grew up from their childhood — all these taken together make their diasporic situation acutely painful. In an interview to *The Outlook* on 26 May, 2008, Ghosh confides to Sheela Reddy about how this diasporic pain had been one of the major stimulant behind writing the novel:

I think we have such a distorted idea of our history of the nineteenth century in some ways. When you actually look at the past, it was so different. From writers like Naipaul and so on, we had a picture of what it was like for the Indian migrants after they arrived in places like Mauritius. But for me what was so hard to imagine, so incredibly

poignant, was the moment of departure. What did it mean for them? They were farmers, the most rooted people. The courage it took at that time for a bihaari to set out across the kala pani is something you and I can barely conceive of. I felt so moved by that, such admiration for them in a way that I wanted to write about it. I wanted to think about it in detail, what was it really like, the actual moment of departure when you see everything you know disappearing behind you.

And yet, life, for these characters does not become moribund. This is because the people are on the *Ibis*, itself a trope for movement since it is a ship shifting its nautical position every hour they move forward.

The achievement of the characters, therefore, lies in their successful struggle with memory, in their positive zest for life and readiness to engage in the task of forging a new home, having escaped out of the dungeon like pulwar and the prison cells where they were supposed to have rotted. Characters in the novel such as Deeti, Paullete, Kalua and Nob Kissin, carry a private knowledge of private histories, trying to conceal them by resorting to different kinds of guile. Nevertheless, they fail ultimately to keep their own identity inviolate and mix with others, establishing meaningful relations with others on board, relationships that cut across all boundaries whatsoever. These relationships transform them, as they assume new membership in a new family. Neel, the erstwhile zamindar, is a classic example of such transformation. He naturally begins with a sense of loss:

With departure looming, the images and memories Neel had tried to bar from his mind came flooding back: of Elokeshi, of his home, of his husband-less wife and fatherless child. When he dozed off, it was only to be visited by a nightmare, in which he saw himself as a castaway on the dark void of the ocean, utterly alone, severed from every human mooring. Feeling himself to be drowning, he began to toss his arms, trying to reach towards the light. (SoP, 342)

But then, this man who once was a zamindar and had always relied on his attendants for all his comforts, and who had never even touched food cooked by anyone other than a brahmin, realizes that in order to remain alive, he will have to engage himself in meaningful relationship with others. Caste, riches, and cultural boundary — nothing can sustain him any more — and he must thus willingly engage himself in the task of writing letters for other prisoners. Such transformation in Neel is possible only because gradually he can transform pain to a positive impetus. At the beginning, Neel shudders at the prospect of living alone with Ah Fatt :

Spinning around in disgust, Neel clutched the bars of the cell, calling out after Bishuji: You can't leave me here, have some pity, let me out...  
(*SoP*, 316)

But gradually, he starts taking care of Ah Fatt, who has been reduced to an utterly helpless existence by his addiction to opium. He bathes him, feeds him and takes care of him like a mother:

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 caregivers: that they would come to love him was something he had taken for granted... it occurred to him now to ask himself if this was how it happened: was 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... (*SoP*, 325-326)

The passage marks the beginning of a transition in the Zamindar's mindset. For the first time in his life, he exhibits altruistic responses. By adopting this altruistic role, he forges a familial bond with a stranger, whom he was repulsing at the beginning. A bond is instantly formed out of the sheer will to live between two convicts, proving that all barriers of nationality, culture, economic difference, language can be porous.

The bond is consolidated further by a touching reciprocity shown on the part of Ah Fatt. After the traumatic incident where the first Mate of the ship lured Ah Fatt by the promise of a ball of opium and made him urinate on Neel's body the shock takes both Ah Fatt and Neel to a world of silence:

... although the incident on the fo'c'sle deck had lasted no more than a few minutes, it had hit them with force of flash flood, sweeping away the fragile scaffolding of their friendship and leaving a residue that consisted not just of shame and humiliation, but also of a profound dejection. Once again...they had fallen into uncommunicative silence.  
(*SoP*, 463-4)

But ultimately 'deep communication' is possible between these two convicts outside the conventions of language. In his heart of hearts, Ah Fatt begins to feel for Neel. The bond of love that develops between them gives birth to righteous anger in Ah Fatt. So, towards the end of the novel, when he suddenly attacks the

First Mate brutally to take revenge of the humiliation that the man had heaped once on Ah Fatt and Neel and stabs him to death, it is certainly a transgression of the law but is also a classic case of consolidation of the familial bond.

Aizaz Ahmed makes an important point in his essay "The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality" where in addressing the politics of migrancy, he differentiates between different class formations that compartmentalize different groups of migrants. "Postcoloniality is also, like most things, a matter of class," he observes (Ahmed, 16). One of the greatest achievements of Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies* is his success in breaking down class-barriers. The readiness with which Paulette adapts herself to the girmitiyas on board, points to this achievement. Of all the characters on the move, Paulette is perhaps the one who is most mobile, as she continues to move across the social groups she encounters, from time to time. In the beginning, she also suffers from pain, though her journey is very different from Neel's. For her the beginning of the journey (or an adventure in her case) is not without the pull of memory. But she also overcomes the pain as she takes an active part in pulling all her resources together to bring freedom for the four most prominent figures on the *Ibis*. Right from the beginning of the journey, the readiness with which Paulette mingles with the girmitiyas, sheds off all her past and adapts with the new, is the secret of her successful adventure on the *Ibis*. She, too, goes through a total transformation, as she declares:

"...from now on, and forever afterwards, we will all be ship-siblings-*jahaz-bhais* and *jahaz-bahens* — to each other. There'll be no difference between us." (*SoP*, 356)

This bond again shows how the *ibis* becomes a site of new community-formation — communities composed of lives that had become unfixed from the cultural moorings.

It would be pertinent at this point to invoke Bhabha once again, for in *The Location of Culture*, he suggests new and exciting ways of thinking about identity born from 'the great history of the language and landscapes of migration and diaspora' (*LoC*, 235). Bhabha has in his mind particularly those who inhabit 'border lives' located in the margins of nations, in-between contrary homelands. Borders are crucial because they are important locations where one contemplates moving beyond them. Therefore, they tend to be ambivalent, since 'we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion.' (*LoC*, 1) So for Bhabha, the border is the place where all

these opposites commingle, and a new, shifting complex form of representation emerges, defying any attempt at binary patterning. These 'in-between' spaces, therefore, "provide the terrain of elaborating strategies of selfhood — singular or communal — that initiate new signs of identity." (*LoC*, 1)

In his essay "DissemiNation," Bhabha focuses on the importance of 'performance' as the means by which new, hybrid identities are forged at border locations. Standing at the frontier, according to Bhabha, a migrant intervenes actively in the transmission of cultural inheritance or tradition of both the home and the host land, rather than passively accepting its customs and pedagogical wisdom. He, therefore, becomes an agent of change, and a unique 'subject' is produced from the process of hybridization. This hybrid identity is neither total nor complete in itself, but remains perpetually in motion and open to change and reinscription.

Avtar Brah's idea of 'diaspora space' (209) is also relevant here. According to her, a 'diaspora space' is an intersection of borders where all identities become "juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed, or disavowed; where the permitted and the prohibited perpetually interrogate, and where the accepted and the transgressive imperceptibly mingle even while these syncretic forms may be disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition" (Brah, 208). It is in this new space that we view in the *Ibis* that new families are formed, breaking all existing barriers.

Deeti is another character who enters this new familial space of the *Ibis*. As soon as the journey begins, one notices with wonder how Deeti appoints herself the guardian of all the single women on the ship. She cares for their safety, and admonishes Munia for her frivolity, though she never fails to guard her with her motherly presence. She is the busiest woman on board, ready even to brave the formidable maistries, and even taking the initiative in arranging Heeru's marriage. She eventually becomes the *bhauji* (sister-in-law) to her shipmates, which helps her to overcome the memory of her own daughter, the last tie she had with the land.

By the third book of *Sea of Poppies*, we see a new world taking shape where everybody on board has begun a new life. Pain is definitely not left behind. But keeping up with the starboard and larboard movement of the ship, the people on board lurch from the memory of the land they have left to hope as well as fear of the future. And finally, as their sea-sickness ends with the *Ibis* steadying on the seas, all the characters overcome physical as well as mental pain.

What, then, is the source of the new energy exhibited by those on board the *Ibis*? It is their indomitable spirit to struggle for life. This has been a characteristic exhibited by characters in all previous novels by Ghosh. In the face of new threats all the characters from different economic status, races, cultures and castes, come close as they huddle together in a new emotional space where co-residence rather than blood determines the evolution of the family. And what is it that gives them the necessary push forward? What keeps them alive? It is at this point that a judicious handling of memory becomes necessary. Look at their different sources of sustenance. Neelratan would remain alive for the sake of his wife and child:

...his tears dried on his cheeks and he spread out his arms to pull his wife and son to his chest. Listen to me, he said: I *will* stay alive. I make you this promise: I will. And when this seven years are over, I will return and I will take you both away from this accursed land and we will start new lives in some other place. That is all I ask of you: do not doubt that I will come back, for I will. (*SoP*, 271 emphasis original)

So he is carrying the luggage of memory, which is essentially a fond memory, and which helps him to fight for his and his family's future. For Paulette and the girmitiyas, it is freedom from a tyrannical society that has oppressed them in their own land. In their case, they would prefer amnesia, preferring to travel light, because memory is such a heavy burden for them.

Another very interesting aspect of the novel is how convergence of cultures entails a mix of languages. After all, languages shuffle and mix as much as do class registers, lowly and lordly idioms, whether oral or graphic. From Neelratan's sophisticated tongue to Serang Ali and Jodu to Ah Fatt, we hear a whole farrago of tongues ranging from chaste Bangla to Lascar Pidgin, pointing, once again, to the motley of cultures which they represent. It may be quite interesting to note in this connection the innumerable references to *achar* in the novel: the girmitiyas talk of its different varieties and recipes! This *achar* or chutney can appropriately be read as a symbol of the cultural mingling that takes place in the novel.

So for Ghosh, a new home is possible not out of a sense of loss, but out of the ability to transform all adverse conditions of life into positive energy. Deeti's pregnancy and Heeru's proposal of marriage from Ecka are two of many symbolic events that Ghosh uses to show this indomitable spirit and depict the flow of life en route. Moreover, the construction of this new home is achieved through judicious handling of memory and amnesia. Belonging in any one place involves

both forgetting and remembering — forgetting the painful memory and remembering the fond memory as part of one's luggage as one would carry the favourite photographs of one's ancestors or the family deities. This act of forgetting and remembering becomes the new survival *mantra*. The girmitiyas in *Sea of Poppies* carry with them the fond burden of their marital practice and try to perform all rituals in all possible ways even at the face of all hostilities to make a new home.

Thus at the end, we find a new family created in the *Ibis* en route out of this cultural mingling. And even this is not the ultimate conclusion. At the end, Ghosh has only promised us a new beginning with a more active mingling of cultures when we find four characters embark on a new life based on the hybridity of the *Ibis* in further motion. And most importantly and suggestively they do not even have their small *putlies* (bundles of clothes) this time. This is perhaps Ghosh's answer to *unheimlichkeit*, where the mystery of lived human experience transcends the artificial borders of nation and race.

## Notes

1. Sociologists like Firth Raymond, Jane Hubert and Anthony Forge remind us in *Family and their Relatives* that family is essentially a relative term. It is not

"...simply a term of demarcation of certain categories of kin. It tends to be a *term of affective significance*, and the inclusion or exclusion of kin in 'family' is a mode of classifying people not so much by degrees of consanguinity and affinity as by the effective quality of their relation to ego. In other words 'family' is a really a way of expressing a sense of identity with specified persons who are members of one's kin universe. The kinship relation of the persons specified may vary greatly from one Ego to another and even on different occasions for the same Ego. This sense of identity may have complex components, negative as well as positive, but for a person to be recognized as part of the 'family' means that the relation to him or her is not neutral." (Raymond et al, 92)

2. It would be pertinent to remember in this connection, Paul Gilroy's interesting use of the image of the ship in his influential book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993). While exploring the transnational connection between black people located in and moving between Africa, the Caribbean, America and Britain, Gilroy uses the ship to symbolize the formation of a new community. This ship, according to him, is 'a living, micro-cultural, micro-

political system in motion' (Gilroy, 4) which bears witness to the history of black oppression, but also, the possibility of mingling of diverse ideas and cultural practices enroute. For Gilroy, these transnational routes provide a better way of thinking about black identities in the present than notions of roots and rootedness. The *Ibis* in *Sea of Poppies* is exactly such a ship, where all cultural, economic and racial borders are rendered porous, giving birth to a new hybridity.

3. The review was published in *The Telegraph* (India) on 8 August, 2008.

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