A Posthumanist Response to Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

This essay discerns and develops the various strands of a posthumanist approach to the nexus of colonialism, imperialism and Enlightenment humanism in Amitav Ghosh's novel, Sea of Poppies. By fictitiously depicting the politics of subjugation and resistance of an earlier era, Ghosh draws attention to the long-reaching historical consequences of such legacies in contemporary ex-colonies, and subtly hints at the troubling parallels between colonial and new-colonial times.

By Shalini Jain

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008), the first book of a proposed *Ibis* trilogy, was received with both critical and popular acclaim, and was a nominee for the Man Booker prize the same year. *The New York Review of Books* describes it as "a rollicking tale, or rather collection of tales—politically forceful, historically fascinating, and rarely subtle" (Schine). Its exuberance of sub-stories, its polyglot, linguistic mélange of languages and dialects, and an historically accurate rendition of the maritime milieu of the colonial Indian subcontinent two centuries ago, all merge to create a work of art that successfully transports readers to a bygone era. But it is immediately apparent that Ghosh intends to convey much more than a "rollicking" tale, and beyond the narrative action of an epic historic story, he tackles the weighty subject of British colonial subjugations and resistances in its various forms in the Indian subcontinent.

Primarily centering the story in mid-nineteenth century India, Ghosh records the political and socio-economic conditions that led to the mass migration of impoverished Indian peasants as indentured laborers to the Mauritius islands. Employing many of the conventions of the historic novel, which Georg Lukacs describes as invoking "certain crises in the personal destinies of a number of human beings [that] coincide and interweave within the determining context of an historic crisis" (qtd. in Cooppan 41), the author recreates a vivid world, peopled by characters of different cultural and economic backgrounds, and through their interactions with colonial and elite native powers, exposes the nexus of colonialism, imperialism, and enlightenment humanism that was, in far-reaching ways, responsible for much of the perpetration of political, economic and social injustices in the Indian sub-continent during imperial rule.

A brief review of British imperialism in the Indian subcontinent would contextualize the historical conditions that animate Ghosh's narrative. Entering the subcontinent as the Honorable East India Trading Company in 1708, the British soon took advantage of the in-fighting between the various independent states that made up erstwhile India, and by 1757 AD were ruling large parts of present day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Burma (Edwardes 10). During approximately two hundred years of imperial rule, a range of economic, social, physical and political subjectivations were enforced upon the native populations, which resulted in seismic changes in their traditional occupations and livelihood. British policies in the Indian subcontinent resulted in the transformation from the prevailing feudal system to a *zamindari* system of land ownership, where the tax collector or *zamindar* became the proprietor of the land (to the detriment of the peasant), agricultural production was forced to change from staple wheat, pulses and other food items to the cultivation of cash crops (most notably opium, the drug whose exports bought huge profits to the Empire), and natives were barred from political rights or offices, to mention only a few of the most important consequences of colonization. As author, historian and anthropologist Ghosh affirms: "All the empirical facts show you that British rule was a disaster for India. Before the British came twenty five per cent of the world trade originated in India. By the time they left it was less than one per cent" (Ghosh).

This essay, though, does not offer a detailed analysis of imperialism's processes and consequences, ill or beneficial. What it does is focus attention on Ghosh's treatment of the politically, socially and economically turbulent period of Indian history during the first of the Opium Wars of the nineteenth century, as is fictionally depicted in *Sea of Poppies*. Using this historical backdrop, I highlight Ghosh's explicit linking of imperialistic politics and self-serving humanist discourses. Second, I examine the posthumanist responses he offers to the overwhelming power of such hegemonies, concentrating on the interpersonal aspects of this philosophy that promotes mutual respect, acceptance and tolerance between humans, and contest imperial

and native aristocracy's efforts to preserve caste distinctions and maintain hierarchies in social structures. Lastly, I draw parallels between the socio-economic situations described of an era that is at least two centuries old, and examine why it is relevant to us even now, we who live in a politically free but highly interconnected and globalized world, and the lessons such engagements might have for modern readers.

Ghosh's narrative, while exposing various colonial methods of subjectivations and demonstrating the spirited instances of resistance, also equally importantly takes on the task of critiqueing extant Indian social and traditional powers, which were often blatantly patriarchal, feudal and anti-feminist in nature. I propose that Ghosh's response to colonialism is then not only a rejection of its dominant ideologies, but also a powerful propagation of a posthumanist philosophy, which advocates the renegotiation of Enlightenment humanist power relations. Included in this renegotiation are the long-standing privileges afforded to Caucasians over Asians, Africans and other indigenous peoples, the superiority of men over women, of the individual 'I' over the Other, to enumerate only some of its most important binaries. Further, Ghosh attacks traditional religious dogmas and beliefs that continually drive wedges between people, preventing unity and reducing their power in the face of oppression. Finally, what makes the novel relevant today is the contemporary economic, political and social parallels it forces us to consider, and warns of the inherent dangers of our current attitudes that shape the existing climate of (covert) economic imperialism, racism, suspicion and intolerance pervading many communities and countries across the globe.

Sea of Poppies – The Story

Sea of Poppies chronicles the fictional lives of a diverse group of Indian, British, American, French, Arakan and Chinese characters, whose destinies all converge on the *Ibis*, a schooner that was formerly a slave carrier between Africa and America, and now, fittingly, transports indentured laborers from colonized countries to new colonies. In epic style, the story revolves around several main characters: Kalua, an untouchable man from a socially 'lower' class, rescues Deeti, an impoverished, 'high-caste' Hindu widow, from her husband's funeral pyre. The two elope and marry, but now have to seek safety from the fury of her dead husband's relatives. Sensing certain capture (and death) if they were to remain in the vicinity, the two sign on as indentured laborers en route to Mauritius aboard a schooner. Here they encounter Zachary Reid, the *Ibis*'s foreman, who is a mulatto from Boston, who has concealed his mixed race status from his British employers, fearing discrimination and loss of livelihood. Paulette, a runaway orphan French girl escaping from her British foster family, also seeks refuge aboard the Ibis. Jodu is a Muslim lascar in the ship, whose romantic entanglements with a Hindu girl Munia, on her way to Mauritius, bring down the wrath of religious bigots on the ship. Neel Rattan is an impoverished Hindu *raja*, a victim of British power politics, who faces a penal servitude of seven years in Mauritius.

The lives of these fictional characters converge aboard the *Ibis*, and the first novel of this trilogy ends on a dramatic note of suspense and excitement, as these victims of colonial brutalities fashion a daring mid-sea escape from the ship, and are now poised in great danger, with half of them trapped on board, and the remaining adrift on a raft amidst a stormy ocean. This range of characters from diverse backgrounds is a literary device Ghosh employs to highlight the many forms of subjugation common under imperial rule in India, and also explore the various types of resistance put forth by men and women who are victims of political and economic hegemonies.

Forms of Colonial Subjectivations

Portrayed in the novel are the various forms of colonial subjection, mainly physical, economic, political, religious, judicial and social. Cathleen Schine's description of the novel as "rarely subtle" is certainly to the point; one can view Ghosh's choice of characters as almost pointedly allegorical or symbolic: Deeti, the poor woman who is a victim of sexual, economic and social subjugations, driven to attempt *sati*; Neel, the pleasure-loving native *raja*, lost in the world of poetry, western philosophy and *nautch-girls*; Burnham and Doughty, the Englishmen with a ruthless streak for power and profit, etc. But what enriches each of his characters is Ghosh's attention to detail in crafting a unique personality for each of them. This is achieved to a great extent by the individualized idiom of speech attributed with great verbal felicity to every character, from the creolized jargon of the lascars, to the Queen's English spoken by the western-educated *raja*, to the broken English, French and Bengali spoken by Paulette. This rich mélange of tongues used with seamless ease (if sometimes unintelligible to non-native speakers), "creates a vivid sense of living voices as well as the linguistic resourcefulness of people in diaspora" (Chew). More importantly, although the characters initially appear as prototypes of the victimized natives, as the plot advances, they each individually show a tremendous sense of individuality, resource and

resilience in the face of personal adversity, and overcome the dangers of stereotypy.

Economic subjugations

Deeti and her addict husband Hukam Singh effectively portray the economic forms of colonial subjection imposed upon them by the British trading company. Forced to stop growing wheat, cereal and pulses, which have been staple food items in the Indian subcontinent for centuries, Deeti and her farming community are now producers of poppies, which are used by the British factories to extract opium for a lucrative global export trade. She now becomes a symbol of the laborer caught up, as Karl Marx puts it, in the "transformation of feudal exploitation into capitalist exploitation" (*Capital* 787).

The poppy functions as a metaphor at many opposing levels: as the creator and palliative agent of physical misery, as the cause of agricultural collapse, but also the sole means of eking out a livelihood under the British rule, and as the incentive for trade and war. While explicitly implicating the imperial powers for agricultural subjugations, Ghosh also clearly exposes the role of the native *rajas*, who enjoy the financial rewards of complicity in this exercise. This is evident in the initial portrayal of Neel Rattan and his late father's business dealings with the colonizers. Deeti occupies the lowest end of the hugely profitable opium production machinery, living in an inadequately thatched hut with little food to eat, with Raja Neel Rattan, the hereditary *zamindar* or head of the vast Rashkali estate, occupies the middle tier of profits, which are reaped most of all by the British merchant, Mr. Burnham. The great divide between the lives of indigenous natives like Deeti and Neel is evident; while both are subject to the power of the British, it was the peasant who lived a subsistent life, while the nobility enjoyed a lavish life of good food, music and entertainment, as long as they remained on the right side of the imperial powers.

Extending this play of hierarchy between the powerful British merchant vis-à-vis his Indian partner the *raja*, imperial superiority is maintained in this business relationship too: when a dispute arises between the two, the English magistrate promptly sentences the Indian *raja* despite clear indications of the British merchant's forgery. So complete was the hold on the native peasants and nobility alike that there was little viable option for them to attempt any resistance, physical or judicial. Migrating to another country (albeit under a British power) seems the only available course, with the lure of a harmonious, class-less society being enough inducement for taking the drastic risk of crossing the Andaman Sea, or Black Waters, and being condemned by society by a loss of caste. Those who preferred to stay had also to contend with the extreme physical hardships of working in opium factories, where their senses where slowly eroded of their powers under the soporific influence of the drug.

Physical subjugations

Various forms of physical subjectivations formed a major part of the colonial machinery for maintaining discipline amongst the colonized workers. In *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh draws upon a gamut of torture and punishment devices used by the British. A description of the conditions prevalent in the Ghazipur Opium factory reveals the inhuman working conditions of its employees, as witnessed by Deeti, who is summoned to take her sick husband home from work:

> Her eyes were met by a startling sight – a host of dark, legless torsos was circling around and around, like some enslaved tribe of demons… they were bare-bodied men, sunk waist-deep in tanks of opium, tramping round and round to soften the sludge. Their eyes were vacant, glazed, and yet somehow they managed to keep moving, as slow as ants in honey, tramping, treading … these seated men had more the look of ghouls than any living thing she had ever seen: their eyes glowed in the dark, and they appeared completely naked. (95)

Keeping watch and maintaining discipline over these workers were the white officers "armed with fearsome instruments: metal scoops, glass ladles and long-handled rakes" (95). Even children were not spared from working in this opium-filled environment, and their punishments were as harsh as those for adults: "suddenly one of them indeed dropped their ball [of opium] sending it crashing to the floor, where it burst open, splattering its gummy contents everywhere. Instantly the offender was set upon by cane-wielding overseers and his howls and shrieks went echoing through the vast, chilly chamber" (96).

Judicial subjugations

Hukam Singh's illness and subsequent death does not result in any financial compensation from his factory. Ghosh now sketches what was a common scenario for impoverished widows: the rapacious village moneylender, and the explicit sexual innuendos of male relatives. Deeti's resistance to her complete loss of agency and domination by social pressures takes an extreme turn when she decides death is preferable to her living conditions. In selecting her mode of suicide, Ghosh exposes the ancient Hindu practice of 'sati' or self-immolation by a widow on her husband's funeral pyre. Despite the barbarity of such a practice, there is no British legal protection offered in the form of police forces to stop Deeti from committing such an atrocity. While British law is enforced to reap profit by subjugating the natives as in the case of Neel Rattan, it is conspicuously absent in preventing social atrocities,

giving the lie to the veneer of British imperial policies disguised as civilizing endeavors[1]. Radhika Singha, in her book *A Despotism of Law: Crime and Justice in Early Colonial India*, remarks on this uneasy British transition from a trading house interested solely in profit-making, to an imperial power forced to deal with social conditions of a foreign culture: "In the early years of company dominion it [law-making] was expounded with a Burkean rhetoric of reconciliation with the 'laws and customs of the people'. (Singha ix).

This imperial indifference is further reinforced when the foreman Bhyro Singh seeks permission for sixty lashes of the whip to be inflicted on Kalua for his elopement with Deeti, and his wish is granted by the British captain of the *Ibis*, in the full knowledge that Kalua would certainly die before the flogging came to an end. Commenting on the banishment of severe kinds of corporal punishment in France, Michel Foucault exposes Britain's reluctance to implement the same in the mid-nineteenth century: "The great spectacle of physical punishment … the theatrical representation of pain" (*Discipline and Punish* 14) disappeared at the beginning of the nineteenth century in France, and "The age of sobriety had begun." (14). But not in England, because "one of the countries most loath to see the disappearance of the public execution … because she [England] did not wish to diminish the rigor of her penal laws during the great social disturbances of the years 1780-1820." Thus Kalua becomes the victim of the combined hegemonies of British imperial power and native abhorrence for inter-caste unity.

Social subjugations

Ghosh critiques the structure of traditional Hindu society here, with its rigidity against inter-caste marriages, the professed superiority of the high-caste over the low caste, and exposes the multiple layers of subjugation prevalent in society. The subedar's free reign to inflict unendurable pain on the body of the 'transgressor' reflects the laxity given to the upper class natives when faced by resistance by the lower classes. Singha points out how this only serves to perpetuate patriarchal and feudal systems of power in society: "The judicial credibility given to male narratives of 'shame and disgrace', 'sudden anger' and 'great provocation' as a mitigating factor, readmitted patriarchal prerogatives under the aegis of rule of law" (123). Against this overriding concern to maintain class divisions, the victim was powerless to raise his/her voice. Zachary's disbelief at this extreme form of punishment (flogging and execution) echoes the gross injustice of this feudal judgment. It was immaterial that Deeti willingly married Kalua, what mattered was that her male relatives avenge themselves for the sake of their family honor.

Religious subjugations

Also victim to this rigidity of caste and religious structures is the romance between Jodu, the Muslim lascar, and Munia, a Hindu indentured laborer on board the *Ibis*. When their frequent flirting comes to light, Jodu is savagely beaten up for taking liberties with a Hindu girl, although she was a willing party to their light-hearted relationship. Joining forces with the outraged Hindu foreman in the savage beating is the British first mate, Crowle, who really had nothing to spur his anger except personal dislike. Sadistically happy to inflict pain on a native, he teams up with the foreman to reduce Jodu to a "carcass" (471). Singha links these methods of enforcing domination by asserting that "[C]olonizers constructed their knowledge of indigenous tradition in ways which conformed and extended relations of domination and subordination" (Preface xi). Instinctively teaming up with the higher caste subedar, Crowle is guilty of not only of inflicting senseless cruelty, but also physically enforcing subordination among the lower caste natives when they resist unjust subjugation by their social superiors.

The Nexus of Imperialism, Capitalism and Humanism

Although *Sea of Poppies* follows many of the stylistic features of the epic novel, with its host of characters, numerous sub-tales, unremitting dramatic action and suspense, burgeoning romances, and broad comedy, Ghosh's powerful indictment of colonial and native repressions and questionable ideals is explicit throughout the novel. This is evident in the speeches he attributes to Mr. Burnham, Mr. Doughty and Justice Kendall in particular, when they hold forth on the divine right of the British to begin waging the Opium Wars against China between 1839-1860.

To each of the above imperialists, Ghosh attributes the 'official' pretext for mounting an attack: Mr. Burnham, the wealthy merchant who profits enormously by the sale of opium, declares: "No one dislikes war more than I do – indeed I abhor it. But it cannot be denied that there are times when war is not merely just and necessary, but also humane. In China, that time has come: nothing else will do" (260). In another conversation with Neel Rattan, he privately admits that the only reason they are going to war with China is that the British cannot do without importing Chinese tea and silks, but the Chinese are not interested in British products, so forcing opium on them is a way

[1] It was as a result of the strenuous efforts of the Indian intellectual and social reformer Raja Ram Mohun Roy to abolish this cruel practice that saw the outlawing of *sati* in 1829.

to redress the imbalance of trades between the two countries. Cloaked in what is now familiar war jargon, Burnham describes this offence as: "The war, when it comes, will not be opium. It will be for a principle: for freedom – for the freedom of trade and for the freedom of the Chinese people. Free Trade is a right conferred on Man by God, and its principles apply as much to opium as to any other article of trade" (115). Rising to a crescendo of spuriousness, he proclaims: Jesus Christ is Free Trade and Free Trade is Jesus Christ" (116). This specious rhetoric is exposed for what it really is by Tony Davies, in his book *Humanism*, who sees through the symbiotic connection between this brand of humanism and imperialism:

On one side, humanism is saluted as the philosophical champion of human freedom and dignity … on the other, it has been denounced as an ideological smokescreen for the oppressive mystifications of modern society and culture, the marginalization and oppression of the multitudes of human beings in whose name it pretends to speak" (5). By yoking the freedom of the Chinese people with the availability of the opium drug, Burnham unwittingly lays bare the empty rhetoric of the imperialists, whose moral judgment is completely clouded by the vision of mercenary profits. Ghosh's indictment of an opium war approximately two hundred years ago finds a compelling echo in the contemporary state of Afghanistan, infamously notable for its drug production capacity, while being torn apart physically, politically and economically by western and native vested interests.

This satirical display is further reinforced by Mr. Doughty, the captain of the ship, who relishes the prospect of going to war, and uses the excuse of the plight of the Indian farmer as justification: "Indeed, humanity demands it. We need only think of the poor Indian peasant – what will become of him if his opium can't be sold in China? Bloody hurremzads can hardly eat now: they'll perish by the crore" (260). He has conveniently glossed over the fact that it was the British who forced the Indian peasants to abandon cultivating their staple food crops and start producing opium for Britain's benefit. Adding a quasi-religious tone to his justification, Justice Kendalbushe gravely adds: "a war is necessary if China is to be opened up to God's word." (260). The speciousness of these justifications is further bought to light by Davies, who draws attention to Nietzsche, one of the earliest philosophers who saw through "the illusory or fraudulent pretensions of much nineteenth century humanism" (36) and the "the tendency of such schemes [of secular Salvationism] to conceal quite disreputable motivations … beneath their professions of universal altruism" (36).

Challenging these sophisms is the lone voice of Captain Chillingworth, who denounces the "good" (262) that will come out of such a martial engagement. Cutting across the plethora of imperialist viewpoints, he sees the truth as it really is: "men do what their power permits them to do. We are no different from the Pharaohs or the Mongols: the difference is only that when we kill people we feel compelled to pretend that it is for some higher cause. It is this pretence of virtue, I promise you, that will never be forgiven by history" (262). His blunt pronouncement exposes the "self-serving pretensions" (Davies 37) of humanism's tenets, even while he perpetuates them in his profession.

In her doctoral dissertation, *The Rhetoric of Posthumanism: A Study of Four Twentieth-Century International Novels* (1998), Lidan Lin calls attention to the powerful nexus between the growing powers of imperialism, capitalism and the principles of enlightenment humanism which nourished the appetite for western powers who, combined together, gained dominance over eighty percent of the world's land area between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. While enlightenment humanist philosophy stressed on the importance of reason, rationale and the spirit of scientific enquiry, it also encouraged a unilateral, western view of what constituted progress, civilization, and truth. Reinforcing Lin's assertions is Jeannie Im, who points out: "The paradox of Enlightenment humanism was that, in positing a universal, human subject as the agent of history, it provided an alibi for imperial expansion as an engine of modernization, progress, and civilization" (*Modernity in Translation,* abstract). Ghosh's engagement with the historical era of the nineteenth century then serves to show the obverse side of the principles of humanism. More interestingly, his posthumanist responses to such injustices and inequalities foreground his broadminded, all-encompassing vision, and also gives his narrative much of the zest and interest that arises from clashes between forces of domination and subjection. I will now make evident the particular strand of posthumanist philosophy I see so clearly in Ghosh's work.

Principles of Posthumanism

The term posthumanism has many diverse dimensions, ranging from the complex and volatile interpersonal relationships amongst humans (with its attendant prevailing inequalities along the lines of gender, color, race, and class), to our struggle for dominance over the forces of nature, to the increasing reliance of humans on technology in the form of information science and medical advancements, to mention only the most prominent aspects. Relevant to this essay is the importance posthumanists place on a reexamination of

humanism's conception of man's privileged position as the center of the universe, the long-standing hierarchy of man above woman, white man above black. Also under scrutiny are the long-standing beliefs that Western style capitalism is the only beneficial form of production and livelihood the world over, and the right for self-advancement, even at the cost of infringing on the rights of others, is morally and economically justified. A posthumanist reexamination exposes these beliefs as fundamentally exploitative, and open to the charge of perpetuating financial inequalities, creating new social hierarchies and neglecting the marginalized.

Here lies the relevance and validity of posthumanism, and its deep implications for current discourses in postcolonialism, feminism, psychology, environmental conservation studies, and sociology. Posthumanism posits that the individual, taken in isolation, is incomplete in himself/herself, and needs the Other, be it human, nature or technology, to form a composite whole. Evaluated against established humanistic values, this approach is certainly radical, but has gained currency from many esteemed philosophers, writers, feminists and economists over the last couple of centuries. Prominent past and present advocates of posthumanism from a variety of fields include Karl Marx, Mikhail Bakhtin, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Robert Pepperell, Donna Haraway and Judith Butler. Supporting this approach are movements like feminism, animal rights advocacy, environmentalism and anti-slavery, which seek to redress earlier partialities and injustices[2].

In this context, it is interesting to note how Ghosh's victimized characters in *Sea of Poppies* repeatedly challenge the dominating powers by embracing posthumanist principles of human equality, irrespective of class, caste or nationality, and the reduced emphasis on the individual 'I', which is a prerequisite for an acceptance of the Other. Reviewing the novel for *The Independent*, John Thieme draws attention to this philosophy of Ghosh, although he stops short of labeling it posthumanism: "As always, [Ghosh] proposes a very particular, non-Western form of humanism, a belief in commonalities that exist across "race", class and culture" (Thieme). He does not elaborate what constitutes a non-Western form of humanism, but in my opinion, this vision or belief is clearly posthumanist, one that consistently promotes a philosophy based on an "understanding of subjectivity, one that values mutual dependency, reliance, appreciation, and trust between the Self and the Other" (Lin 11). This is evident in several incidents in *Sea of Poppies.*

The narrative has various descriptions of cruelty and violence perpetrated by British imperial forces as well as the upper-class *zamindars*, which not record and remind us of the injustices of the past, but also serve as an opportunity for his characters to instinctively counteract each violation with a selfless act of generosity, sensitivity or courage by a friend or well-wisher of the victim. Kalua's forced act of bestiality with the horse, perpetuated by the angry and drunk zamindars, is witnessed by Deeti, and at considerable risk of person, she overcomes the ingrained sense of her superior caste status, cleans him, covering his nakedness with some leaves. This gesture to help a leather-worker, sexually humiliated by wealthy *zamindars* for sport, draws attention to both the bestial nature of the wealthy who don't hesitate to use the body of a fellow human for their own drunken amusement, but also portrays the spontaneous and sensitive reaction of a woman who witnesses this act of violation. Deeti's simple effort is the result of her conquering her fear of "retribution" (58) for touching a man of inferior status. Her simple act to restore the dignity of a bruised Kalua is laudable in its empathy. This instinctive support for a human in distress is also portrayed in the many instances when Zachary and Jodu come to each other's rescue, even risking lives in the process. Both transcend racial and class barriers and prejudices to simply reach out to help a fellow human in extreme distress, with no self-interest at heart.

Further complicating a simple white man versus black man binary, Ghosh invokes the grey area between whites and blacks, the mulatto. While ostensibly white, Zachary's actually a mulatto, and his mixed parentage is a secret from the white owners of the *Ibis*. Ghosh's description of Zachary's lineage, as the offspring of a white plantation owner and his sexually subjugated black slave, widens the circle of economic and sexual subjugations that were (and to an extent, still are) prevalent in countries and continents around the world, including America and Africa. Even Paulette, the French orphan, despite her white background, is subjugated by her English foster family. Having being born and bought up in Bengal, Paulette is more Indian than French in her choice of attire and language, but this is forbidden by Mrs. Burnham, who endeavors to transform her back to being a 'memsahib' or white woman. English-French relations were heavily invested with political and cultural rivalries, and the faraway residents of Bengal enforced these with the same vigor as the native English and French. Paulette's widowed

[2] I am indebted to Lidan Lin's thesis *The Rhetoric of Posthumanism in Four Twentieth Century International Novels* for this succinct exposition of posthumanist values.

father, Mr. Lambert, is ostracized from white society in Calcutta as a direct result of this snobbery. His relationship with an Indian woman (Jodu's mother) is not accepted by the elite society of whites, and the Lambert family is isolated from western society. Ghosh's depictions of the global prevalence of systems of class and race segregation and assumed superiority thus affect almost every character in his work.

Ghosh's posthumanist values are also apparent in his feminist treatment of the main women characters in the novel. While initially Deeti, Paulette and Munia are portrayed as victims of a patriarchal and feudal society (both native and western), all three women show courage and resilience in times of adversity, refusing to accept the existing status quo of second-class citizens with no agency. Having been rescued from the funeral pyre by the heroic action of Kalua, Deeti acknowledges her feelings and respect for him, and upon her initiative, they marry in a simple ceremony to commemorate the sacredness of their union. Their marriage is thus a resistance to the prevailing caste divisions between them, and an assertion to lead their lives based on their own feelings of love and equality, as opposed to subjugation to tradition and custom. Repressed by social mores in her village, Deeti could not even reveal her face to Kalua, and had to keep it hidden by the folds of her sari whenever they interacted. Now she revels in the freedom of acknowledging him as her husband, and the poignant description of their marriage ceremony, with two garlands made of wild flowers, reflects the beauty and truth of their own union.

Paulette, reduced to "Pugli" (meaning mad in Hindi) by her foster family, is also a laudable heroine of an epic adventure. Escaping a forcefully proposed marriage with an old British Judge who constantly corrects her religious and social deficiencies, she shows incredible resource by choosing to run away from her foster home. Disguising herself as an Indian indentured woman, she gains access to the Ibis and is ready to set sail to Mauritius, in the footsteps of her grand aunt who did likewise a century ago. Despite Jodu's and Zachary's reservations regarding a white woman's ability to withstand the rigorous labors of a schooner, she proves herself competent at masquerading as a laborer, and even forms deep bonds with the other women in the ship. Rejecting the marriage offer made by Justice Kendalbushe, ostensibly because she's a "clean slate and willing to learn" (273), Paulette refuses to let her dependent circumstances reduce her to accepting a proposal made without her sentiments being engaged. On moral grounds, she turns down worldly advice from Mrs. Burnham to marry the old judge for his money, and enjoy life after his imminent death. Independent and capable of looking after herself, she decides to forego the material security provided by the Burnhams, and takes the risk of finding her own place in the world.

Munia, the Hindu girl who finds herself on board the Ibis after a failed romance with a slick city-dweller who fools her gullible heart, is nevertheless ready to embrace love again, and her relationship with Jodu begins to flourish even in the cramped and difficult conditions aboard the ship. Ghosh portrays the *joie de vivre* of young love, as the couple defies age-old religious and social strictures, and continue meeting and enjoying one another's company, paying no heed to the warnings and words of caution they receive from their shipmates. Unfortunately this harmless flirting though soon takes an ugly turn as the enraged Hindu foreman and the Christian first mate Crowle join forces to crush their romance, and Jodu gets severely beaten in the process.

In all three depictions, Ghosh endorses the intelligence, courage and resilience of women, poorly educated and financially dependent, who resist patriarchal demands to become subservient accomplices in a male-dominated society, and invests them with the agency to make independent choices. Commenting upon the humanistic practice of overlooking feminine power and agency, Judith Butler, in her seminal work *Bodies That Matter*, describes the woman as the Other, the outside, often relegated to "sad necessities of signification" (174). Posthumanism endeavors to rework existing humanistic boundaries and simple binaries by overcoming this "violence of exclusion" (174). Ghosh does his part in reclaiming feminine might by giving his heroines the courage to make their own choices, even at the cost of upsetting the patriarchal society they inhabit.

Another important dimension of posthumanist philosophy is the acknowledgement and acceptance of the 'Other', which centuries of humanistic individualism has suppressed. According to Lin, posthumanists have adopted humanism's fundamental ideals of secularism and rationalism, but the ideal of individualism, pushed to extremes by key humanist intellectuals and thinkers, has had very problematic consequences. A significant point of departure from humanism occurs in posthumanism's recognition of the problems created by the excessive attention and importance accorded to the development of individualism by influential figures like Descartes, Rousseau and Hegel, which has resulted in the human's increasing alienation from fellow humans. As Lin states, "one of the fundamental tenets of posthumanism is a paradigmatic reconsideration of the status of the Other in our understanding of who we are – our self, identity, and individuality" (1).

In *Sea of Poppies*, Neel's transformation from a self-indulgent aristocrat to a man who single-handedly converts a fellow convict, Ah Fatt, from an out-of-control addict to a sober and clean man exemplifies the immeasurably positive changes which an engagement with the Other can produce within the "I". Initially almost afraid to change from an extremely fastidious and caste-conscious *raja*, Neel is reluctant to part with his old ways: "the risk involved seemed unimaginably great, for he knew he would cease to be the man he had been a short while before" (323). Conquering the self-construct of 'I' as a separate and superior creature from the rest of his prison-mates, and Ah Fatt in particular, Neel's journey is a difficult one, but one that he makes with painstaking effort. He is forced to confront his own personal convictions, and finds they are at odds with his professed ones: "the fact was that he did not believe in caste, or so at least he had said, many many times, to his friends and anyone else who would listen" (267). But his body gives the lie to his superficial idealism, convulsing with "stomach-clenching revulsion" (268) even at the thought of eating a meal cooked by unknown hands. With supreme will power and effort, he accepts the change that is thrust upon him, and reaches out a helping hand to Ah Fatt, going as far as physically washing and cleaning him, and in the process forging a deep friendship that will undergo many endurance tests ahead. This is a poignant example of the way Ghosh advocates a paradigmatic shift in cross-caste relationships in a traditionally rigid and stratified society.

Pondering over his own transformation, Neel asks himself: "was it possible that the mere fact of using one's hands and investing one's attention in someone other that oneself, created a pride and tenderness that had nothing to do whatever with the response of the object of one's care – just as a craftsman's love for his handiwork is in no way diminished by the fact of it being unreciprocated?" (326) For the first time, he pauses to consider the amount of attention he has received at the hands of his servants and subordinates, who have over the years willingly given of their care, and acknowledges their dedication to serving him without a thought of any emotional reciprocation. This reflection on human bonding is evidence of his transformation from a self-absorbed aristocrat into a convict who has the mental strength to accept adversity, and translate idealistic beliefs into real contact, care and communication with the Other. By overcoming physical, class, national and religious biases, Neel is no longer the same man he was, indeed he is transformed into a more compassionate and sensitive person, one who has succeeded in transcending his own deeply-ingrained limitations of identity and perception.

Reading Sea of Poppies in the Present Climate

While thus far I have focused on the posthumanist responses of Ghosh as rendered in a fictional work set nearly two hundred years ago, there are important parallels to many of the attitudes and situations in the modern world we inhabit that are directly linked to the earlier milieu depicted by him, and make this work relevant even today. The apathetic response by the British Ghazipur Opium factory to Hukam Singh's death in *Sea of Poppies* is not so different from the incomprehensible apathy to the thousands of victims of the Bhopal gas Tragedy, when deadly gas leaks from a factory run by the Indian subsidiary of an American multinational gas company resulted in thousands of deaths, but the perpetrators were let off scot-free. What little compensation was finally offered to the victims came decades too late, and ultimately provided no real respite.

Jodu and Munia in the novel are subjected to severe physical abuse for the crime of talking to each other, but two centuries later, inter-religious couples in many parts of the world still face stiff opposition to their union from religious bigots and fundamentalists. So-called 'honor killings' still continue to plague many parts of the world today.

Deeti and her farming community are forced to grow opium for the benefit of lucrative profits enjoyed by the British trading company, a situation that remains the same in places like Afghanistan and Burma, which rank at the top of opium production in the world but at the bottom for human rights and quality of living of its own citizens.

While this list could go on interminably, my point here is to emphasize the central role literature plays not only in recording and reminding us of history's lessons, but also awakening and sharpening our responses to the power relations at play everyday in our immediate environment. Ghosh clearly would like his cosmopolitan readers to see these current scenarios as a disturbing legacy of the past, which continues to haunt us in political, economic and social spheres today. Posthumanist perspectives encourage us to resist traditional binaries of man and woman, white man and colored man, reason and emotion, when these are vested by power hierarchies that constantly undermine one under the influence of the other.

In an interview with Michelle Caskell, Ghosh elaborates on the aspects that make this work of fiction valuable for him: "For me, the value of the novel, as a form, is that it is able to incorporate elements of every aspect of life - history, natural history, rhetoric, politics, beliefs, religion, family, love, sexuality. … the novel is a meta-form that transcends the boundaries that circumscribe other kinds of writing, rendering meaningless the usual

workaday distinctions between historian, journalist, anthropologist etc" (Ghosh). By portraying the intersections between politics, tradition, history and gender equations, and demonstrating the dignity and equality inherent in a posthumanist philosophy towards these social constructs, *Sea of Poppies* transcends the narrow straitjacket of the postcolonial novel. And delivered in his "rollicking" style, *Sea of Poppies* becomes a vehicle that transports us not only to the past, but also shows the way to a more posthmanist future.

Shalini Jain is currently a PhD Candidate with the National University of Singapore. Her research centers on postcolonial ecocritical issues in contemporary South Asian fiction. Specifically she looks at how the physical environment plays a performative and moral role in depicting environmental dilemmas in the novels of Amitav Ghosh, Nadeem Aslam, Romesh Gunesekera and Mahaswetha Devi.

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