

“Apparently Unbridgeable Gaps of Language”: Amitav Ghosh’s *River of Smoke* and an Emerging Global English?

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River of Smoke, Amitav Ghosh’s seventh novel and the second part of his ongoing “Ibis Trilogy” following *Sea of Poppies* (2008), was published in 2011. As a novel, it may be considered a highly engaging read: an extremely fine piece of writing and a piercing analysis of its chosen theme, namely the interaction between Indian and Chinese communities in an early-nineteenth-century context of waxing British imperialism in Asia, embodied in the lead-up to the “Opium Wars” that broke out in 1839. It is no doubt not by chance that one of the most distinguished active practitioners of Indian Writing in English (IWE) should have chosen past Sino-Indian relations as the focal point of a major work, at a time when the economic and political rise of the India-China dyad is constantly evoked in the media of a faltering West. However, precisely *because* Ghosh’s book is the second part of a trilogy, I do not wish to venture at this moment as a literary critic on a detailed analysis of its subject-matter. Part two of any trilogy, as the inside wing of the triptych, has a particularly delicate status, since it points in two directions, back to a first part which already exists and forward to a third and crowning part which as yet lives only in the author’s mind. The critic may thus be particularly liable to wrong guesses and missed connections. My own sensation on the evidence of *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke* is that the finished trilogy will be strong and solid enough to warrant Amitav Ghosh a Nobel nomination, but on quality issues too, one is best advised not to stick one’s neck out over a work that is only two-thirds complete. Indeed, the recent interviews collected on Ghosh’s official website - www.amitavghosh.com – have him suggesting he may even end up writing sequels to the trilogy, extending his characters’ life-stories to the length of a Harry Potter-like saga. Thus, admirable though one may find Ghosh’s writing, characterisation and historical range and sweep in this his latest novel, I shall, rather than offering a review or critical essay, target the brief comments that follow on a specific (and isolable) aspect of the book, namely its – in many ways daring and even groundbreaking - *use of language*.

Sea of Poppies already ventured into linguistic experimentation, with its English peppered with Indian terms from Bengali or Bhojpuri. *River of Smoke* now takes language complexity further, reflecting the kaleidoscopic multiplicity of its characters’ mutable identities. Indeed, on a personal level, Ghosh has told an interviewer that his research for the novel included learning Cantonese. The narrative opens in Mauritius and shifts to a China where a key object of focus is an Indian community, that clustered around the “Achha Hong” mercantile complex in Canton. The name is itself a significant hybrid coinage, “achha”, the Hindusthani/Hindi term meaning “all right”, being also a general Chinese designation for an Indian, and “hong” a Chinese word for trading house. On the way, the text’s matricial English emerges as profoundly affected by interaction with Mauritian creole, Cantonese and pidgin, and a variety of Indian languages. Multilingualism rules: the Indians of the Hong (to their Chinese hosts, apparently all the same) “spoke between them more than a dozen different languages”, exhibiting a linguistic diversity running counter to the “commonalities” forced on them by all being subcontinentals in China (Ghosh 2011, 181). In such a context, where European, Indian and East Asian languages are in both conflict and symbiosis, the most adaptable characters prove to be those most linguistically versatile: notably Bahram, the Gujarati Parsi trader, and Neel, the Bengali ex-maharajah-turned-convict from *Sea of Poppies* who ends up working for him. Both can function in non-Indian languages, Bahram in fluent

pidgin and approximate English, Neel in the Queen's English and, as his time in Canton advances, increasingly in pidgin too.

I use the word « matricial » deliberately to describe the book's English, for the matrix of this novel is provided by a third-person, extradiegetic narratorial voice that speaks the International Standard English of our day. At the same time, that matricial English is frequently, though not invariably, sprinkled with words and phrases from Asian languages. Meanwhile, where dialogue occurs between the characters, and where those characters are Indian or Chinese, it is often in either a visibly Indianised English or in a tongue that strictly speaking is not English at all, namely the totally transformed “English” – lexically simplified and hybridated, syntactically manhandled and adapted to a Chinese context – that is called pidgin and which served as a lingua franca, for commercial and practical purposes, between Chinese and non-Chinese, whether or not the latter were native speakers of English. The grammar, we are told, is Cantonese, the vocabulary a mixture of English, Portuguese and Hindusthani.

Ghosh's text is marked by a general and pervasive awareness of language issues and by a sense of the complexities of multilingualism and the interaction of languages: Indian tongues - Neel's Bengali, Bahram's Gujarati, and the then Indian lingua franca Hindusthani, but also “Tamil, Telugu and Oriya” (60) and “Marathi, Kachhi and Konkani” (292); Cantonese Chinese; Portuguese, French, English; Mauritian creole; and the hybrid that is pidgin. The Portuguese presence runs strong in Canton, thanks to the proximity of Macao and the presence of Goan émigrés, and terms from that European language seep into the day-to-day lexicon of Indians, Chinese and English (“‘falto’, for example, meaning fraudulent or false, ... became *phaltu* on Achha tongues” - 180).

Translation and interpretation – already present as a theme in Ghosh's earlier novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004), where the protagonist Kanai ran a translation/interpretation agency – loom large, and, to his credit, in the new novel Ghosh manages something which not all novelists do, i.e., in his narratorial voice, not to mix up the two processes of translation (written) and interpretation (oral): or, where “translator” appears it may, according to context, mean either translator proper or translator/interpreter, but certainly Ghosh does not in this book lapse into the crude, oral-oriented solecism of using “translator” naively to signify interpreter and nothing else. Indeed, “linkister”, meaning a three-way interpreter between Chinese, pidgin and English (163), appears in Ghosh's pages as a specialist term. His English-speaking trader community in Canton is reliant on its translators/interpreters for all rigorous communication with its Chinese hosts, the halfway house of pidgin not always being enough, and certainly not with the imperial authorities (“In the no-man's land between the two groups stood the translators ... this being a matter of life and death they had decided to use translators instead of speaking pidgin” – 448).

Neel takes his linguistic curiosity far enough to become the imputed compiler of the *Chrestomathy*, a lexicon of English, Cantonese and pidgin, inspired in this by the printer and translator Liang Kuei-Ch'uan (alias Compton), a Cantonese who has himself produced a “glossary of the Canton jargon” whose Chinese title translates as “The-Red-Haired-People's-Buying-and-Selling-Common-Ghost-Language” (252). Neel's own compilation is a fictional double of the multilingual glossary (between English and a variety of Asian tongues) for *Sea of Poppies* which has been on Ghosh's website since 2008 (though not in the book) – and whose updating to include *River of Smoke* readers may perhaps hope for in the near future (Ghosh calls it the *Ibis Chrestomathy*, thus implicating the whole trilogy). Ghosh's interest in

lexicography is also evident from his very favourable mention, in a note to the website glossary, of *Hobson-Jobson*, otherwise known as *The Anglo-Indian Dictionary*, the encyclopaedic dictionary from 1886 compiled by Henry Yule and A.C. Burrell which Ghosh, like Salman Rushdie before him, sees not as a suspect colonial relic but as a treasure-trove of still-valid lexical lore.

The weaving of Indian terms into an English syntactic matrix is particularly notable in the novel in certain especially culture-specific registers, of which we may cite, firstly, the culinary. At a Canton kitchen-boat eatery offering Indian fare:

Everything was cooked in reassuringly familiar ways, with real masalas and recognizable oils, and the rice was never outlandishly soft or sticky: there was usually a biryani or a fish pulao, some daals, some green bhaajis, and a chicken curry and tawa-fried fish. Occasionally – and these were considered blessed days – there would be pakoras and puris (303).

Here, a British or other non-Indian reader used to eating in Indian restaurants will recognise certain terms – “masalas”, “biryani”, “daals”, “pulao”, “bhaajis”, “pakoras” (all standard menu items today), but “puris” are less likely to be encountered outside India, and “tawa” (a type of frying-pan) may raise eyebrows.

A second significantly recurring register is the sartorial. Dressing for a business dinner,

Bahram ... chose a knee-length white jama of Dacca cotton; it was discreetly ornamented with white jamdani brocade, and the neck and cuffs were lined with bands of green silk. Instead of pairing this with the usual salwar or pajamas, Bahram settled on a pair of black Acehnese leggings, shot through with silver thread. The weather being still quite warm he picked, as an outer garment, a cream-coloured cotton choga embroidered with silver-gilt *karchobi* work. The ensemble was completed by a turban of pure malmal muslin (216).

This register, less immediately transferable than the culinary, is more likely to baffle the non-Indian reader, but remains reasonably accessible. The reader from outside may not recognise “jama”, “jamdani”, “choga” or “malmal”, but “turban” and “pajamas” are universally known lexical borrowings in European languages in general, and those with some knowledge of India may recognise “salwar” (loose-fitting trousers). “Acehnese”, meanwhile, referring not to anywhere in India but to Aceh, in what is now Indonesia, points up the hybridated dimension of Asian culture, its ultimate irreducibility to watertight notions of origin. Those terms not directly understood by the non-Indian reader may be assimilated on a level less of denotation than of connotation, signifying a general “Indianness”. This strategy of connoting that-which-is-Indian through lexical items is, in fact, recurrently used in the novel: thus, Bahram’s working space in the Achha Hong is always his “daftar”, not his office, and Neel not his secretary but his “munshi” (or in the vocative, “munshiji”).

On a rather different tack, the dialogue passages in pidgin stretch the reader with an alien syntax all but unrecognisable to native English sensibilities, as in a long conversation in that idiom between Bahram and his Chinese acquaintance Ah-Lau or Allow. Thus, Bahram addresses his visitor: “So talkee me ... Sittee, sittee here. Allow, what thing wanchi? Tell maski, chop-chop. No time have got”, and the latter replies: “Allow have ear-hear Mister Barry have come China-side with plenty, plenty big cargo. Is, is not true? Mister Barry have, no have plenty cargo, ah?”, and continues: “Galaw, Mister Barry talkee allo is inside his heart: what-thing he thinki do with cargo? This-time cannot do-pidgin in Canton. Cannot sell. Mister Barry savvy, no-savvy ah?” (244). Here, “pidgin” means “business” (not the

language), and “savvy”, from the Portuguese verb “saber”, means “know”. In the long conversation of which this interchange is part, most readers, be they native speakers of English or indeed not, will not understand everything and will have to deduce part of the sense from context.

If *River of Smoke* represents Amitav Ghosh’s newest contribution to IWE’s expanding shelf, it may nonetheless be predicted that some critics will ask, polemically, whether this novel is finally in English at all – and even deny that it is. Some will no doubt praise the book as marking a transition from hegemonic English to a more equitable, hybrid “Globish”. If such claims are made, though, there will be some exaggeration in play, and legitimate comment will require a degree of nuance respecting the text as a whole. The fact is that, despite the diverse acts of making-strange directed by Ghosh on English, there are also sequences in the novel, some of them long, where, the dialogue being exclusively between members of Canton’s English community and the subject-matter reflecting their concerns, both narrator and characters practise an unmodified, if at times nineteenth-century, International Standard English.

A parallel may be suggested here with another epic novel by an IWE maestro, Vikram Chandra’s *Sacred Games* (2006) - which comparably sprinkles a matricial English with words and expressions from a variety of Indian languages, and for which, too, the author has placed a glossary on his website (www.vikramchandra.com) while refraining from including that aid in the book proper. Ghosh and Chandra, conscious wordsmiths the two of them, may both be seen as working towards, not a replacement but certainly a redefinition of the English language in the emerging Asian context.

One further linguistic aspect of *River of Smoke* deserves mention, and that is its future translation into other languages, European or Asian (the Italian version was already scheduled for autumn 2011). The translator into whatever tongue will obviously start out from the presumption of the book being in English (a pragmatic point surely in favour of that position), but will be confronted with evident difficulties in the face of its linguistic hybridations. The Indian lexical items can no doubt simply be retained, possibly italicised and/or glossed, but how in French or Spanish to convey the strangeness and non-Englishness of the dialogues in pidgin? Nonetheless, the task, though difficult, will surely not be insurmountable, and the future existence of successful translations may, indeed, help shed light on the precise nature of this novel’s experiments with language.

Meanwhile, Ghosh’s novel is not IWE’s first encounter with Chinese culture. The young Vikram Seth studied Chinese in Nanjing, translated a triad of Chinese poets into English, and wrote *From Heaven Lake* (1983), a travel book about China and Tibet; Aravind Adiga’s Booker-winning *The White Tiger* (2008) is structured as a series of letters to the Chinese Prime Minister. It will not be surprising if in the near future Indian writers turn their attention more frequently towards their neighbour and fellow rising power. *River of Smoke* may be seen as a particularly significant instance of the IWE novel mutating from the postcolonial into the global. In the present geopolitical context, it is especially worthy of note that Ghosh in his new novel employs an English modified under Chinese as well as Indian influence, its historical setting in no way obviating the significance of this aspect for our times. The author has done remarkable work in his research for this novel, even considering the language dimension alone: indeed, it is the result of more work than one person could do, and in his closing acknowledgments to those who have helped him with “details of fact and language” (511), Ghosh recognises that a book like this is also the outcome of a collective endeavour.

River of Smoke, while it neither supersedes nor abolishes International Standard English (with Ghosh as with Chandra, to redefine is not to abandon), certainly goes at least part of the way towards substantially *modifying* it. The second part of Ghosh's trilogy is not only an absorbing and rewarding work of fiction: it is also an exploration of communication across linguistic and cultural barriers, across what the text itself calls "apparently unbridgeable gaps of language" (323). At the same time, it sends out a challenge to complacently Anglocentric notions of English as a global language, and offers a foretaste of possible mutations to linguistic power-structures, with the resurgence of India and China in a newly multipolar world.

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