



# *Sea of Poppies* and the Possibilities of Mistranslation

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There is a scene in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* where Serang Ali, a Rohingya seaman en route from the Americas to China on the *Ibis*, is called in to translate for the ship's second mate, Zachary Reed, a freed black man from Baltimore passing as white to his English superiors. He is questioning Jodhu, a Bengali boy who has recently been taken on as a lowly crewmember, about Paulette, the daughter of a French botanist who settled in Calcutta some years before. Jodhu's mother was Paulette's wet nurse, and the two grew up, the narrator tells us, "head to head at her breast."<sup>1</sup> Zachary has recently met Paulette and fallen in love, which is apparent to everyone but Zachary himself. Serang Ali, recognizing Zachary's true heritage and seeing his future success as a subversive form of revenge on the racist British shipping magnates who employ them, is determined not to allow his boss to sacrifice said future for the vagaries of the heart.



Serang Ali translates Jodhu's story: a heart-wrenching tale of the dramatic death of Paulette's mother in his family's boat as they attempted to ferry her across the river to get medical help; his own mother's devotion to Paulette; the unusually intimate relationship between Jodhu's mother and Paulette's father; Paulette's unconventional upbringing outside of the strict morals and manners of the British Raj; Paulette's father's generous and profligate nature; his death and Paulette's subsequent destitution; and her eventual adoption by Mr. Burnham, the owner of the ship on whose decks they now stand. Here is Serang Ali's retelling:

Launder say father-blongi-she go hebbin. That bugger do too muchi tree-pijjin. Allo time pickin plant. Inside pocket hab no cash. After he go hebbin cow-chilo catchi number-two-father, Mr Burnham. Now she too muchi happy inside. Eat big-big rice. Better Malum Zikri forgetting she. How can learn sailor-pijjin, allo time thinking ladies-ladies? More better keep busy with laund'ry till marriage time.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps you do not quite understand what Serang Ali is saying in this passage? Not to worry—as it turns out, Zachary doesn't, either. In a sense, that is the point of Ghosh's book, which is full of moments of inadequate or outright mistranslation. Ghosh, in addition to a novelist, is an anthropologist and student of linguistics, and he puts his knowledge to compelling use in this, the first book in his *Ibis* trilogy. *Sea of Poppies* revels in the beauty and contradiction of languages' particularities and their hybridity, in their geographic locatedness and their propensity to travel and morph, and in their speakers' and readers' aspirations to be understood and our inevitable failure to be comprehended. And through all this translation and mistranslation, the story proceeds anyway.



The novel is set in the early years of the 19th century (1838, to be precise) in a port city—not just *a* port city, but in some ways *the* port city—Calcutta, one of the major hubs of the capitalist enterprise known as the British Empire. Port cities are, by nature, sites of intersection: of bodies, trade routes, economies, cultures, and, above all, of languages. The characters we encounter are all connected in some way to a ship, the *Ibis*, on a journey spanning the globe. It has recently completed a long haul from the Americas, where it transported slave laborers (slavery still legal there) and gathered cotton in return; to England, where it swapped out that cotton for other commodities; around the coast of the African continent, where it picked up more goods and “indentured labor” (a category only in its merest technicalities different from slave labor, allowing the business of empire to continue despite Britain’s outlawing of slavery itself); to Mauritius, where it dropped off said “indentured labor” to work on plantations; to Calcutta, where its owner is based. The hope is that it will eventually go on to China carrying opium, the main currency of Britain’s colonial adventures that was at that moment under threat by the Chinese who recognized it as a form of colonial violence, but not before making another run to Mauritius to deliver Indian “indentured laborers,” sold into servitude to pay off the debts accrued through the harsh economic exploitation of their British overlords.

The lascars on the *Ibis*—a motley crew of sailors who hopped on at various points in the journey—hail from all parts of the globe. As Zachary slowly realizes as he acculturates to life onboard, “they came from places that were far apart, and had nothing in common, except the Indian Ocean.”<sup>3</sup> They learned to communicate with each other in Lascari, a hybrid language produced out of a funky stew, a “motley tongue, spoken nowhere but on the water, whose words were as varied as the port’s traffic, an anarchic medley of Portuguese calaluzes and Kerala pattimars, Arab booms and Bengal paunch-ways, Malay proas and Tamil



catamarans, Hindusthani pulwars and English snows—yet beneath the surface of this farrago of sound, meaning flowed as freely as the currents beneath the crowded press of boats.”<sup>4</sup> It is a language, in other words, not tied to land or country but to movement, migration, trade routes, and the space between.

Other characters in the book share this experience of linguistic flow—and occasional stoppage—for different reasons. These include a French woman who is more comfortable in Hindi than in English, and who is isolated both because her mother tongue is so rarely spoken in this place and because she is seldom allowed to converse in Hindi due to social expectations of “memsahibs.” Even those characters unambiguously located in a linguistic milieu experience a sense of dislocation, as they interact with an increasingly diverse population as they travel closer and closer to the city of Calcutta; South Asian peasants go unheard both because of their varied, rustic dialects and because of their caste or class status.

But it is significant that the Englishmen and women in the narrative are as difficult to understand as anyone else—this book does not make a joke of people’s inability to speak “proper English.” Rather, it sets its sights on the narrative possibilities and comic effect of the incomprehensibility, and even impossibility, of a so-called common language, or of finding any linguistic middle ground. The British superiors—the ship’s officers, the owners of the shipping companies, the colonial officials and businessmen—many of whom were born and bred in the colonies, may be indifferently educated, but do not at all lack the pretensions of their race on that account. They are also no easier to understand than the lascars or the locals. Their dialect is liberally sprinkled with a coarse and misformed Hindi—the result not just of mangled grammar, but also because of the eccentricities of transliteration between incompatible alphabets. Their form of English is full of vocabulary and idioms that the contemporary reader will find hard to parse. The irony, as Ghosh



pointed out in an interview in 2008, is that most of the words that cause us to stumble appear in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as the record of a time in which English was much more open to Asian influence than it is now.<sup>5</sup>

Even Zachary Reed, speaking American English, is at a loss at times as to how to navigate this linguistic territory. In this passage, he gets a dressing down by Mr. Doughtry, the British captain, for not knowing the meaning of a word:

This naive, if well-meant, remark earned Zachary a firm dressing down: it was about time, the pilot said, that he, Zachary, stopped behaving like a right gudda— “that’s a donkey in case you were wondering.” This was India, where it didn’t serve for a sahib to be taken for a clodpoll of a griffin: if he wasn’t a fly to what was going on, it’d be all dickey with him, mighty jildee. This was no Baltimore— this was a jungle here, with biscobras in the grass and wanderoots in the trees. If he, Zachary, wasn’t to be diddled and taken for a flat, he would have to learn to gubbrow the natives with a word or two of the zubben.

Since this admonishment was delivered in the strict but indulgent tone of a mentor, Zachary plucked up the courage to ask what “the zubben” was, at which the pilot breathed a patient sigh: “The zubben, dear boy, is the flash lingo of the East. It’s easy enough to jin if you put your head to it. . . . But mind your Oordoo and Hindee doesn’t sound too good: don’t want the world to think you’ve gone native.”<sup>6</sup>

A financially ruined local raja speaks what is, to our ears, a perfect form of the Queen’s English, but even this doesn’t ensure that he is understood. One of the running jokes in the novel is that any time he refers to major European intellectuals, his colonial counterparts have no idea who he’s talking about, mistaking them for local members of the British community.



“You must not imagine, sir,” he said to Mr Burnham, “that I am an ignorant native, to be spoken to like a child. If I may say so, your youthful Queen has no more loyal subject than myself, and none who is more keenly aware of the rights that are enjoyed by the people of Britain. Indeed I am thoroughly familiar, I might add, with the writings of Mr Hume, Mr Locke, and Mr Hobbes.”

“Please do not speak to me, sir,” said Mr Burnham, in the chilly tone of a man who wishes to snub a name-dropper, “of Mr Hume and Mr Locke. For I would have you know that I have been acquainted with them since they served on the Bengal Board of Revenue. I too have read every word they’ve written—even their report on sanitation. And as for Mr Hobbes, why I do believe I dined with him at my club just the other day.”

“Fine fellow, Hobbes,” Mr Doughty broke in suddenly. “Got a seat on the Municipal Council now, if I’m not mistaken. Went pig-sticking with him once. The shikarees scared up an old sow and a brood of piglets. Came charging at us! Scared the Nick’s knackers out of the horses. Old Hobbes was tossed—right on a little suckling. Dead on the spot. The piglet I mean. Hobbes was unscathed. Damnedest thing I ever saw. Made a fine roast too. Piglet I mean.”<sup>7</sup>

Some of the funniest moments in the novel occur, strangely enough, not through malapropism but because two people understand a word they’re both using perfectly—even if each one means something very different in their use. Such is the case when Mrs. Burnham, the British memsahib who is Paulette’s temporary guardian, interrogates the young Frenchwoman on the nature of her association with Zachary Reed:

Suddenly, as her suspicions deepened, the BeeBee [Mrs. Burnham] cut herself short and clamped her hands on her





mouth. “Oh! dear, dear Puggly [Paulette]—tell me—you haven’t...? ...you haven’t... No! Tell me it isn’t so!”

“What, Madame?” said Paulette, in puzzlement.

The BeeBee’s voice sank to a whisper. “You haven’t compromised yourself, Puggly dear, have you? No. I will not credit it.”

“Compromise, Madame?” Paulette proudly raised her chin and squared her shoulders. “In matters of the heart, Madame, I do not believe that half-measures and compromises are possible. Does not love demand that we give our all?”<sup>8</sup>

In the face of all this linguistic (not to mention cultural) confusion, Ghosh refuses to translate for the reader.<sup>9</sup> We are thrown, just as these characters are, into a confusing *mélange* of meaning, and left to make our way through the narrative.

*And make our way we do.* That is what strikes me as so remarkable about *Sea of Poppies*: the fact that despite, and sometimes even because of, this constant misunderstanding, the story progresses, and characters fumble their way through the world. Time passes, history is made, unmade, remade. The book asks us to imagine ourselves in a world with only the merest wisp of a common language—an English that has been forced by its speakers in myriad directions and has been infiltrated by many other tongues, thanks to colonialism and trade. It ends with an uprising, an explosive event that is impelled by incomplete understandings, but that opens a space for future entanglements, movements, actions, and encounters.



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Translation is a practice that strives for an impossibility, a chimera of perfect understanding across the chasm of language, ideology, and culture. One undertakes it knowing that it will always be a failed project, that some notions are simply untranslatable, that even if one finds the perfect words to express a foreign notion, that notion will not lose its foreignness entirely. But still we persist, in our belief that translation is necessary for understanding, understanding is a prerequisite for empathy, and empathy is an antidote to cruelty. To make our world more fair and just, we must be able to fathom each other fully—our ability to be kind is predicated on our ability to relate to those on whom we bestow that kindness. We imagine that a productive collectivity only emerges from a shared language, or at least from an inability to translate near-seamlessly between languages.

The problem, of course, is that I don't want to have to wait until people understand me for them to treat me as fully human, and vice versa. And I don't want to believe that a sort of coming together—a consensus—has to emerge before we carry on with the task of dismantling the aspects of our lived experiences that are untenable, violent, and inhumane. But even more than that, I don't want to lose the beauty inherent in misunderstanding—in the incompatibility of two systems of sign making, in the glitches that occur when words and thoughts and ideas don't match up, when new ideas are formed out of the ashes of mistaken readings and stubborn, even perverse, resistance to comprehension.

Harold Bloom, in his classic work of literary theory, *The Anxiety of Influence*, described the way younger poets opened a creative space for themselves through a process of *misprision*—a willful misreading of the poetry of their elders.<sup>10</sup> In a sense, Bloom was recognizing the way that mistranslation, misreading,



and misunderstanding are not just failed attempts to translate, read, or understand, but, indeed, can be *generative* and *creative* acts—acts which make new forms of enunciation, new languages, possible.

Communication through the thicket of mistranslation is an act of generosity. It is a declaration that I value your speech without it having to be on my terms. It is a recognition that I will never fully understand what you are saying, because I do not share your experience, linguistic or otherwise. It is a willingness to grasp what I can know, and live with what I cannot. It is too bad, in fact, that those of us who speak a common language are lulled into thinking that we know each other—too bad that we do not have a constant reminder of the vast distances between us, no matter our linguistic proximity. Because justice, kindness, and fairness, to my mind, are based not on understanding each other, but on finding each other's humanity despite our incapacity to understand.

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This ethics—a call to the collective—is a notion that underpins *The Translator's Silence* (2012) by Raqs Media Collective, one of the works in *Traduttore, Traditore* (p.138). This work stages incomprehension rather than understanding, by juxtaposing languages (English, Bengali, and Urdu/Hindustani) in ways that visually and linguistically suggest translation as a form of palimpsest, not as a conversion of one language to another, but an unreadable accumulation of signs. In an interview with the scholar Avishek Ganguly, we see how this plays out through the gift of a refusal to translate.

Avishek Ganguly: What if the ability to read the language of the original, as a way of knowing the enemy, transforms into the occasion for inviting the companionship of the stranger?

Jebeesh Bagchi (Raqs Media Collective): [. . .] I remember



there was a certain degree of confusion about that when it was shown here, because it seemed that at most only two of those three languages could be comprehensible to our audience.

Shuddha Sengupta (Raqs Media Collective): [. . .] When people ask us, “How am I supposed to know what the other languages are saying?” our response is always, “Find someone who can read it for you.”... So the work involves the search for someone who can read a poem to you in a language you don’t understand. That person is usually someone you don’t know.<sup>11</sup>

In one of the most moving passages of Ghosh’s novel, he illuminates the capacity of languages—borne of and circulated through systems of global exchange, empire building and wealth extraction, and migration—to transport even the most freedom-bound people across time and space, not just in their own minds but as part of a collective project of world-building. Neel Rattan Halder is a rich landowner and minor raja who has been convicted of forgery in a sham trial and is being sent as punishment to work in the plantations of Mauritius, a journey that will cause him to lose caste, lose face, and most of all lose his liberty. On the way there, he asks a fellow prisoner, a Chinese man named Ah Fatt, about his origins.

“Where’s *your* home, Ah Fatt? Tell me about it. Is it in a village?

“Not village.” Ah Fatt scratched his chin. “My home very big place. Guangzhou. English call Canton.”

“Tell me. Tell me everything.”

Hou-hou...

Thus it happened that while the *Ibis* was still on the Hooghly, Neel was being transported across the continent,



to Canton—and it was this other journey, more vivid than his own, that kept his sanity intact through the first part of the voyage: no one but Ah Fatt, no one he had ever known, could have provided him with the escape he needed, into a realm that was wholly unfamiliar, utterly unlike his own.

It was not because of Ah Fatt's fluency that Neel's vision of Canton became so vivid as to make it real: in fact, the opposite was true, for the genius of Ah Fatt's descriptions lay in their elisions, so that to listen to him *was a venture of collaboration, in which the things that were spoken of came gradually to be transformed into artefacts of a shared imagining.*<sup>12</sup>

Ah Fatt's description takes several pages of the novel, morphing from a personal recollection into its own narrative, one that is dissociated from any particular storyteller. It becomes something quite distinct—a novel within a novel, one that sets the stage, quite literally, for the next installment in Ghosh's trilogy, *River of Smoke*, which will take place in Guangzhou. The collaborative project of understanding each other across the chasms of incomprehension, then, is not a barrier to narrative drive, to the unfolding of lives and events, but a necessary prerequisite. For what is fiction but a matter of friction, of troubling our journeys in ways that are both delightful and harrowing? And what, for that matter, is life or politics, but that same thicket of bewildering signs that we experience, alone and together, out of which we make our fragile and contingent worlds?

1 Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009), 69

2 Ibid., 201.

3 Ibid., 13..



- 4 Ibid., 108.
- 5 Amitav Ghosh, "Caste, Colonialism, and a *Sea of Poppies*," interview by Jacki Lyden, *All Things Considered*, November 9, 2008, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=96713674>.
- 6 Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 50.
- 7 Ibid., 123–24.
- 8 Ibid., 287–88.
- 9 A "Chrestomathy," written in the form of a treatise by the ruined raja, with translations of many of the more opaque terms in the novel, has been on the author's website since the book's publication in 2008, but did not appear in the original edition. It is written as the (fictional) subaltern's counterpart to the so-called *Hobson-Jobson*, otherwise known as *The Anglo-Indian Dictionary*, the encyclopedic 1886 tome compiled by Henry Yule and Arthur Coke Burnell, on which Ghosh and other writers (including Salman Rushdie) have relied.
- 10 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), passim.
- 11 Raqs Media Collective, "Invoking the Translator: A Conversation with Raqs Media Collective," interview by Avishek Ganguly, *Public Books*, August 8, 2016, <http://www.publicbooks.org/invoking-the-translatora-conversation-with-raqs-media-collective/>.
- 12 Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 390–91. Emphasis added.