

Detouring Translation through Affect: A Study of Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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Abstract

The generative ethos behind the concept of World Literature, a derivative as well as constituent of the project of modernity, is recognised at interfaces of communitarian/individual interactions. Accelerated by globalization, these interfaces are made dynamic by the circulation of people or/and cultural signs. The iterative process of translation and trans-formation at these interfaces create what is called a shared global space. The proposed paper attempts to push the boundaries and explore the possibility of a new mode of articulation, i.e. through affect; being in itself a medium of translation.

*The possibilities of tracing affect as a medium of subject identification/difference is one that challenges this complacent assumption of agency. The Eurocentric dictations of equivalence achieved through consciously self-effacing human subject is often tempered merely by the logic of rationality, if not limited within the realm of ethical consciousness. This logic consequently sweeps the landscape of affective experience to the periphery of critical attention; an experience which has the potential to a dissolve interfaces of bounded signifying systems. The paper will attempt a close study of Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*, tracing the emerging possibility of affect as medium of translation; a category left out in the discourses on World Literature.*

Keywords: Cosmopolitanism, Translation, Affect, Amitav Ghosh.

Contemporary imagination of the world as a shared global space is a remarkable product of the project of modernity. The onset of globalization enabled and continues to enable circuits of human and non-human movements through transnational and intranational networks. Consequently, spaces which are bounded systems of significations, embedded as they are in varying contexts, are variably mobilized. Iterative traversal, translation, and transformation of these significations inform the imagination of a global on the individual or collective consciousness. The category of World Literature is in itself a product of this vision and prompts a movement from the regional to the national and beyond. Therefore, the generative ethos of this category must be looked for at the interfaces of encounters, where translation becomes a tool for and in itself registers the possibility or limitations of such cosmopolitan interactions (Bhabha,).

This paper attempts to chart the possibilities of emergence of a shared space through Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*, published in 2008. *Sea of Poppies*, which is part of Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy*, is set in Nineteenth Century Eastern India. The text has largely been read as dramatizing a cosmopolitan possibility through cross-cultural encounter, in an era of globalization, opium trade, colonialism etc. Not only does the text temporally locates cosmopolitan practices as it existed in the past, but suggests realizable or unrealizable possibilities of the same in a changing era of larger unequal power dynamics. Further, Amitav Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies* rewrites subaltern histories into the metanarrative of cosmopolitan ethos; as written from above. Demonstrating then a model of marginal cosmopolitanism or what Homi Bhabha calls "vernacular cosmopolitanism" which is "cosmopolitan community envisaged in marginality, a border zone" (Bhabha, 192).

Ibis becomes a central trope in Ghosh's narrative of colonial modernity, bringing together a vast array of characters who were otherwise spatially, politically, socially and culturally distanced. It stages various cosmopolitan

moments of encounter, though often at duress, challenging racial, gender and class affiliations of these characters—effecting a mode of cultural translation therein which runs with idioms of transcreation and transformation.

This paper is particularly interested in the human subject's role in translating the self and the other at these interfaces. While articulating notions of cultural translation, Nikos Papastergiadis notes of it as a “sequence that begins with an original moment of encounter, then develops into a process of interpenetration, selection, assemblage and reconfiguration. The process of interaction may not necessarily follow in this precise order” (Papastergiadis, 2). He also adds that it “must be an attendant mode for comprehending and evaluating cultural similarities and differences.” He therefore locates the functionality of the human subject primarily on evaluative, rational and ethical grounds. Interestingly, this position is not dissimilar to the articulations of Martha Nussbaum, from a decade earlier, in her essay “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism”. In what is considered as a seminal essay on cosmopolitan thought, Nussbaum urges for a revisioning of the self as a “citizen of the world”. In the concentric circle model Nussbaum proposes here, one sees a rational subject figured at the center who moves beyond the local to the universal almost readily. This cosmopolitan subject precariously balances the differences and affiliations of the local with the universal, and the will of the subject becomes central to processes of translation, which eventually then precipitates into cognition. The borders below, real or imagined, are pliable to an its erasure by will. Such dictations of equivalence achieved through an ethical, rational and consciously self-effacing subject has eclipsed much of the discussions on cosmopolitan interactions. In the new globalized world order, where objects and bodies are mobilized to close proximity almost contingently, can a willful subject fully determine the act of border crossing? Do dictations of equivalence assume translatability in all cases, without catering in possibilities of unexpected subversion or transformation? One must remember that rationality has predominantly governed the idiom of enlightened western subject in modes of his encounters with the other; privileging therein conscious over unconscious. Consequently, a landscape of affective experiences which has the potential to dissolve interfaces of bounded signifying systems is what that has been swept to the periphery of critical attention.

The privileging of the mind over body in translation studies has undermined the potential of affect. While interfaces of bounded systems of significations can be made porous by willing act of sharing and imbibing, certain critical visceral forces which lie beyond consciousness (note: not irrational) can enable and determine the process of translation. As Gilles Deleuze observes in *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, Spinozan Parallelism not only critiques a tradition of critical thinking which privileges the mind over the body but also prises open unimagined possibilities the body. The body becomes the site of *jouissance*, of *enonciation*, and engaging in a process of *Signifiante* which proposes a loss in signification, as opposed to the metaphysics of presence the western subject engaged in (Kristeva,125). The current paper seeks to interrogate unilateral assumptions of translation through the scope of affect, as is narratively presented Ghosh's work.

The transnational circulation of humans and non-human entities in the narrative converges on to the Ibis, a large schooner which carries indentured slaves through to Mauritius. While the text traverses across varied linguistic and cultural geographies of human experience, what ensues is a series of connections forged not in idioms of rational equivalences but through identification of a shared experience, however differently characters may react to it. Thus a significant and almost subterranean impulse of affect detours the aforementioned geography. The ready distinctions of the global and the local (a binary which the new cosmopolitan ethic or the rhetoric of world literature works with) are not only challenged, but also transcended through affect. These impulses are available to the reader significantly in the initial points of encounters between various characters.

One of the close and long-standing associations in the text is that of Jodu and the French by birth Paulette Lambert. The narration traces Jodu's and Tantima's assimilation into the Lambert family through the initial encounter between Jodu's parents and the the Lamberts. While the newborn Jodu and his parents wait out for the evening storm to calm in river Hooghly, the reader is told that they were woken up by "a clamour of voices" uttering "many words of frantic gibberish", which were but requests to help them cross the river in another language(65). As Ghosh goes on to describe, despite Jodu's father's protestations, it was his mother's affective association with Mrs. Lambert's pregnancy throes that prompts the will to action. The text reads,

"Having recently herself suffered the pains of childbirth, Jodu's mother was touched by the evident distress of the sahib and his mem;. . . one look at the pregnant woman's face was enough to know that she was in great pain." (65).

Here the body, though presented, is not read as a site of cultural significations; effecting a sense of otherness to the colonial subject. Rather, the woman's body emerges as a signifier of pain; one that is posited as recognizable by the sheerness of its body. The text demonstrated an affective interplay which prompts recognition, superseding therein cultural differentials. Interesting in the context is the dichotomy which emerges between logos and affect. Where the linguistic fails, the affective succeeds. In fact, a latter reference in the text shows a similar connection.

As Jodu recollects, his and Paulette's childhood bond weakens when language enters the context. Ghosh writes "But it was neither age nor sahibdom, but a much subtler intrusion that loosened the bonds between the children: at a certain moment Putli began to read, and then there was not enough time in the day for anything else. Jodu on the other hand, lost interest in letters as soon as he learnt to decipher them; his own inclinations had always drawn him towards the water"(68). Interestingly, the colonial subaltern subject is posited as inclined to elemental nature, in opposition to the more culturally inclined imperialist subject. Such opposition, perhaps inadvertently placed, relegates the symbolic as disruption of friendship or association.

Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* posits not only encounters between the imperial and the colonized subject, but also as social differences in geographical proximities. The narrative trajectory of Deeti and Kalua dramatizes such encounters. Deeti and Kalua, occupy different caste positions; the gender and caste differential alienate one from the other in the beginning of the text. However, one of Deeti's encounter with Kalua challenges this alienation. Deeti witnesses Kalua's humiliation at the hands of "the three sport-loving landowners" of Ghazipur in a bright full moon night by the Ganga. Deeti who goes out to collect water from Ganga watches in fear, while hiding in the poppy fields, Kalua's forced but ineffectual copulation with the horse. In his subsequent state of unconsciousness, she "touches" him "both in fear and curiosity"(Ghosh, 57).

Ghosh writes of the incident as :

"Then , while one of them held the horse steady, the others whipped Kalua's naked back until his groin was pressed hard against the animal's rear. Kalua uttered a cry that was almost indistinguishable in tone from the whinnying of the horse. This amused the landlords:

...See, the b'henchod even sounds like a horse. . .

. . . Tetua daba de . . . wring his balls. . .

..Ever since that night of her wedding, Deeti had been haunted by images of her own violation: now, watching from the shelter of the poppy field, she bit the edge of her palm, to keep from) crying out aloud. So it could happen to a man too? Even a powerful giant of a man could be humiliated and destroyed, in a way that far exceeded his body's capacity for pain?" (57)

The excerpt accommodates disparate and differential degrees of affective forces from fear to panic to humiliation to excitement and amusement, each translating the given stimuli into cognition. This cognitive process moves significantly around Kalua. Kalua's body which was previously situated within notions of masculinity, through its gigantic proportions and his caste based occupation, is thoroughly destabilized in this excerpt. As the narrative suggests, in Kalua's moment of distress his cries become indistinguishable from the whinnying of the horses. In this case, not only does the boundary between human and nonhuman blur but Kalua's body in itself becomes simultaneously the object and subject of affectual interplay. Consequently, the onlookers (i.e. Deeti, the landowners and by extension the readers) are invited into the process of understanding, translating and therefore constituting the event, consciously or unconsciously. While the "excited" landowners' response is "laughter", Deeti's response are but muddled up cries. The event for Deeti draws onto identification with her own personal experiences; "images of her own violation" after her wedding night (affect does not operate in isolation). The setting aside of personal experiences next to Kalua's predicament, therefore mediates the event differentially for Deeti. The nature of emotions here moves from sympathy to a degree of empathy. One must therefore alert oneself yet again to the affective coding

which precedes and pre-empts into the translation of other's experience for the self, in this case initiating an active border crossing of gender and caste differentiations which distanced Kalua and Deeti into separate spheres.

Further, an interesting mirroring of this encounter recurs in the narrative, except here the roles have reversed. As Deeti is carried over to the pyre, after Hukam Singh's death, in a state of intoxication, Kalua triumphantly sweeps the crowd aside and rescues her. The reader is not provided with details of the motivations behind Kalua's action but is informed of Kalua's powerlessness at the thoughts of Deeti. Affect here not only motivates action but becomes action itself. Ghosh's tale refigures the body of Kalua, which was formerly the object of Deeti's affection, to a subject effecting action.

The paper here attempted to chart out few of the many encounters in the text which places affect as tying the subject and object into a set of irreconcilable relations. It is however worthwhile to note that this affective potential will later enter into the logic of narrativity. Nonetheless it holds a potential of momentary subversion of logic of rationality and reason. As Brian Massumi suggests while attempting to distinguish between intensity and qualification which is forged by narration:

“This is to say that it (intensity) is not semantically or semiotically ordered. It does not fix distinctions. Instead, it vaguely but insistently connects what is normally indexed as separate. When asked to signify itself, it can only do so in a paradox...intensity would seem to be associated with nonlinear processes: resonance and feedback which momentarily suspend the linear progress of the narrative present from past to future. Intensity is qualifiable as an emotional state, and that state is static-temporal and narrative noise. It is a state of suspense, potentially of disruption. It's like a temporal sink, a hole in time, as we conceive of it and narrativize it” (4-5)

The paper proposes that these disruptions and states of suspension opens up alternate terrains of cognition. However, centrality of the nature of affect and affectual transaction to processes of cultural translation or transcreation is yet to be explored. Here these subterranean impulses not only work at the periphery of cognition but they test the limits of and effect cognition; established so through alternate possibilities. As Homi Bhabha articulates the self and the other occupies spaces of liminality wherein which a continuum of iterative traversals and transformations are effected. If Amitav Ghosh tests these potentials in a largely intellectualized fiction, affect becomes a motivator in poetics of language itself. This potential is filtered in, as Ghosh writes of Deeti in the moments after her abduction, “ She could hear the whispering of the earth and the river, and they were saying to her that she was alive, alive and suddenly it was as if her body was awake to the world as it had never been before, flowing like the river's waves.”(179). Such moments of intimacy precludes exchange of dialogues, and what remains is the use of figurative imageries revolving around the body and elemental association.

Further, as discussed above the significations and the resignifications of the body through affect is a contingent and transgressive mode translation. As Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Greg suggests in “An Inventory of Shimmers”

“Affect is integral to a body’s perpetual becoming, pulled beyond its seeming surface boundedness...With affect a body is as much outside itself as in itself webbed in relations until ultimately such firm distinctions matter” (3).

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