

## Some Aspects of Language Use in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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### Abstract

The present paper explores the use of language in the Novel "Sea of Poppies" written by Amitav Ghosh, which was published in 2008 and was shortlisted for Man Booker Prize 2008. The present paper explores how the author in the novel depicts the characters using the language which connotes depth and intellectually stimulating plot twists. Moreover, the paper explores how the colonial history of Asia had affected the lives of people and how the present is shaped by that era.

**Key words:** Ibis Trilogy, Sea of Poppies, Attitude, Compounds, Reduplication, Pluralisation, Nonce Words, and Vernacular Language use, Grapholect.

### Introduction

Literary writers have always struck at a seeming connection between fictionally inspired literary creativity and linguistically governed language use. Pearl and Boozer's (2006) study is said to have been the first of its kind which explored the use of language in various novels. They have used the term "conlangs", which, according to them, are used by authors "to give their stories depth and intellectually stimulating plot twists and to address mature themes." Thus, when Serang Ali in *Sea of Poppies* tells Mr. Doughty Zachary Reid that 'Nevva mind: allo same-sem. Malum Zikri sun-sun become pukka gen'l'um. So tell no: catchi wife-o yet?' (16) Or 'He asks: Malum Zikri like milk? Likee ghee? Ever hab stole butter?' (152), it creates a perception of actual language use in real language situation and circumstances, which are both fictional and constructed, conveyed through a character that qualifies pidgin English as a major theme. In *Sea of Poppies* Amitav Ghosh creates this perception through his "consciously crafted style" (Khair 2005: 157). His character's actual language use in real language situation and circumstances constitutes the polyglot community of Ibis, a former slave ship taking a large group of cross-section of people with different nationalities to Mauritius. Thus, the language of *Sea of Poppies* becomes a subject of great interest because of the diversity among the cultural and social backgrounds of the characters. This paper provides an analysis of the language of

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*Sea of Poppies* written by Amitav Ghosh, which was published in 2008 and was shortlisted for Man Booker Prize 2008.

### **Sea of Poppies**

*Sea of Poppies* is the first volume in the Ibis trilogy depicting how the colonial history of Asia had affected the lives of people and how the present is shaped by that era. It is full of political overtones revealing the attitude of the English men towards the native Indians subjugating them in their own land. Colonialism had made a foray into the Indian society and had influenced it culturally and linguistically. SoP is a depiction of the struggle of this socio-cultural aspect of the Indian subaltern society. Ibis, a former slave ship, takes a large group of “girmityas” or “indentured migrants” to Mauritius. The polyglot community of Ibis is made up of people of various nationalities and background. The language of these characters is a mixture of English, Hindi, Bengali and French words. Ghosh has made use of words from Naval Dictionary of Technical Terms, Anglo Indian Vocabulary of Nautical Terms and Phrases in English and Hindustan, and Hobson Jobson’s Glossary. The result is an astonishing mix of ‘sailor pijjin’, Bhojpuri, nonce words, compounds and affixations. It is a mammoth task of juxtaposing pidgin English spoken by Serang Ali, to yet another kind spoken by a French orphan, Paulette Lambart. The other characters are Deeti, an ordinary woman belonging to a village, Mr. Doughty Zachary Reid an American sailor, Neel Rattan an Indian zamindar, and Benjamin Burnham, an opium trader and the new owner of Ibis. It deals with the trade of opium and with the transport of Indian workers. The characters vary in background and use a variety of words making it characteristic of their spoken language. For instance, Zachary Reid has his own style marked with the influx of terms from Indian languages. Paulette speaks charming English interspersed with newly coined expressions which make it very characteristic of her mixed variety, e.g. nervosity (300), correctionments (301), etc.

### **Analysis**

The rich mix of languages spoken on the Ibis becomes interesting. It is also equally challenging to linguistically explore the variety offered here, for instance, where the nabobs are seen to speak Hobson Jobson, while the ‘gomustas’ speak the caricatured Babu English. The lascars on the ship are from a very varied background. The only commonality among them is the Ibis. They are Chinese, East Africans, Arabs, Malays, Bengali, Goans, Tamils, and Arakanese. The lascar company on the ship was led by Serang Ali. The Ibis vocabulary is a typical use of language and it has to be familiarized to all on board. The motley of language spoken by all had to be deciphered and made comprehensible by Zachary Reid, the pilot of the ship. For him it was a new experience to be with the lascars who “had nothing in common except the Indian Ocean; among them were Chinese and East Africans, Arabs and Malays, Bengalis and Goans, Tamils and Arakanese.” (13) He had to familiarize himself with the new set of words and he “was forced to undergo yet another education...” (15) Further, it has been stated

that “...he had to learn to say ‘resum’ instead of ‘rations’, and he had to wrap his tongue around words like ‘dal’, ‘masala’ and ‘achar’. He had to get used to ‘malum’ instead of ‘mate’, ‘serang’ for bo’sun, ‘tindal’ for bosun’s mate, and ‘seacunny’ for helmsman; he had to memorize a new shipboard vocabulary, which sounded a bit like English and yet not: the rigging became ‘ringeen’, ‘avast!’ was ‘bas!’, and the cry of the middle-morning watch went from ‘all’s well’ to ‘alzbcl’. The deck now became the ‘tootuk’ while the masts were ‘dols’; a command became a ‘hookum’ and instead of starboard and larboard, fore and aft, he had to say ‘jamna’ and ‘dawa’, ‘agil’ and ‘peeheil’.” (15-16) Serang Ali said that he belonged to the Arakan side and that his language was on account of his association with the afeem ship from China side. James Doughty, an Englishman formerly from Bengal River Pilot Service “currently bespoke arkati and turnee for Burnham Brothers.” (25) This complexity of language use has been analyzed in terms of compounds, reduplication, pluralisation, nonce words and newly coined expressions and vernacular language use.

### Compounding

Compounding is a process of forming new words from two or more independent words. It is a highly productive word formation process in English. In English, compounds are found among major lexical categories like nouns - waterbed, adjectives - babyfaced, and verbs - stagemanager. The most common among them are noun compounds. Noun compounds may have noun + noun, verb + noun or adjective + noun. Adjective compounds may have noun + adjective, or adjective + adjective. There are certain structural commonalities among compounds. The lexical category of the last member of the compound tends to be the same as that of the compound word. In English, it is generally observed that the second member is the head of the compound with the first being its dependent. Another structural feature of a compound is that it usually has two constituents. In some English compounds the second word is ‘deverbal’ that is, derived from a verb, for example, trendsetter, juicemaker. The following are some of the compounds used in the text:

#### a. Adjective + Noun

Holy + Ganga (1)	proper + puja (1)	high + caste + Rajput (4)
bright + red + sindur (9)	akbari + afeem (29)	Bengali + bajra (39)
real + tamasher (47)	right + shaytan (74)	pucka + young + chap (81)
shanbaff + dhotis (106)	abrawan + muslin (106)	shravan + harvest (156)
budzat + sailors (276)	burrasize + budzat (281)	bloody + bundar (284)
favourite + chokras (313)	old + jharus (318)	angry + galis (454)
fiery + thali (467)	turbaned + Benarasi (42)	dosooti + dhoti (107)
	zerbaft + brocade (107)	

#### b. Noun + Noun

outdoor + chula (5)	wheat + flour + roti (6)	jasmine + breasts (22)
chandu + opium (47)	tottee + connah (48)	nautch + connah (48)
akbari + afeem (29)	poppy + leaf + rotis (97)	officers’ + hookums
(104)		
cotton + gamchas (142)	police + paltan (168)	father + bhongi (190)

burra + khana (206)	twenty + patelis (222)	iced + simkin (249)
jahaz + bhais (355)	jahaz + behans (355)	Sunday + dhansak (378)
English + nabobs (433)	bhongi + crime (445)	toilet + balty (464)
filth + sweeper (476)	leather + chabuk (486)	
c. Noun + Verb :		
mighty + jildee (49)	bandar + baiting (48)	

### Reduplication

It is a morphological process where the root or stem may or may not be repeated exactly in the same manner. The pattern shows a double or multiple occurrence of a sound, syllable, morpheme or word in contrast to its single occurrence. The form of a reduplicated construction is likely to differ in accordance with the type of unit which is reduplicated, in the number of times it is repeated and in its position in a sentence. There are a variety of ways in which reduplicatives are used. In some cases there may simply be sound imitation as in ding dong, bow wow; some are used in a disparaging sense e.g. dilly-dally, wishy-washy. In English reduplication is not a major source of word formation.

Reduplication is used in inflections to convey a grammatical function which may indicate plurality or intensification. It is used in a wide range of languages and dialects with variation in use. Some other terms which are used to suggest a similar phenomenon are cloning, doubling, repetition or tautonym. Reduplication is a phenomenon which is found at the phonological or morphological level. Phonologically, it may manifest itself as the repetition of a sound or a syllable. Morphologically, it may be a repetition of a word, stem or root.

Reduplication may be full or partial. Full reduplication involves a reduplication of the entire word. In partial reduplication, the iterated phonetic segments are usually a sequence of vowels and consonants. There are examples of multiple iteration in some languages where duplicated predicate verbs yield attributes and multiple forms are adverbs. English has a very limited number of different kinds of reduplication, which are:

1. rhyming reduplication: wishy washy, hurly burly
2. exact reduplication: moo moo, bye bye
3. ablaut reduplication: where the first vowel is a high vowel and the reduplicated item is a low vowel, e.g. sing-song, mish-mash.
4. shm- reduplication is prefixes with any reduplicated item, e.g. baby schbaby.
5. comparative reduplication is used with 'and' as in 'He looks bigger and bigger.'

Amitav Ghosh has used some reduplicated items in the text where the words are from Indian languages. The following are some types of reduplications found in the text:

#### a. Semantic Reduplication:

Semantically the repeated word carries the meaning conveyed through the sense of the original word.

'...where they would sometimes shout taunts at her - chudaliya, dainiya - as if one were a witch.' (5)

'He ended by wishing them sukh – shanty, peace and happiness ...'(341)

'look-see'(17)

b. Complete Reduplication (in Hindi):

1. 'Chee –chee? Lip Lap?'(49)

2. '... and all the while murmuring khushi khushi?'(125)

3. 'Look out! Dekho! Dekho! Attention.'(140)

4. 'Better he wailo chop – chop'(151)

5. 'Chal jaldi jaldi khana le'(203)

6. 'I'll do anything I can ... tauba, tauba.'(224)

7. 'Taiyar jagah jagah'(372)

c. Complete Reduplication (in English):

A few instances of complete reduplication in English are seen in cases like:

1. 'Nevva mind : allo same – sem'(16)

2. '...You look – see'(17)

3. 'How can learn sailor pijjin, allo time thinking ladies – ladies?'(191)

4. 'Eat big - big rice.'(191)

5. 'Underneath all is same same.'(212)

Most of these characters who have been found to be using reduplication speak a strange and interesting pidgin. The use of reduplicated items may be on account of a number of reasons. It may be suggestive of reiteration or for emphasis, plurality, intensity or attentuation.

### Pluralisation

Most languages have the category of singular plural, past and present markers. These are usually shown through a morphological process called inflection which is supposed to modify the form of a word by marking the grammatical class to which it belongs. In case of English nouns the inflection marks the pluralisation and in verbs it marks the tenses. The plural affix is seen to be added to derivation, compounding and to simple nouns.

In the text under study the following are some of the ways in which words from Hindi have been pluralized by adding 's'.

ghat+s of Ghazipur (7)	sea shanti+es (15)	barnshooting badmash+es (25)
budzat+s (25)	chillum+s (33)	piyada+s (40)
paik+s (40)	topwala+s (42)	salam+s (42)
light footed tukra+s and tihai+s (43)	khidmudgar+s (47)	dumpoke+s and pillau+s (47)
cursie+s for sahib+s and mem+s (47)	sittringi+es and tuckier+s (47)	conchunee+s (47)
pootli+es (48)	burrakhana+s (48)	sampan+s and agile almadia+s (62)
dhoti+s, langot+s, vest+s (71)	girmitiya+s (71)	burra khana+s (77)
paper Batta+s (94)	five chittack+s of lewah (97)	Persian qanat+s (100)
mali+s, ghaskata+s (101)	Lahori jooti+es (107)	bichanwadar+s (123)
farrash+es (123)	guzzle khana+s (124)	darzee+s, rafoogar+s (124)
khidmudgar+s and khalasi+s (223)		jemadar+s, zenana+s, chillum+s (317)
lota+s, bojha+s (353)		jahaz bhai+s and jahaz bahen+s (356)

love of dadra+s, chaiti+s, barahmasa+s, hori+s, kajri+s (399) maistri+es and silahdar+s (423)

kalpa+s and yuga+s (431)

hokum+s (479)

qaidie+s (484)

These pluralized forms which have been used are mostly part of the text vocabulary and cannot be attributed to any one speaker. Some of the pluralised forms have been used by Burnham, James Doughty and Hukum Singh. Most of the base words in these pluralized forms are obviously nouns. A number of pluralisation shows the trend of pluralizing semantically similar expressions, with or without the use of a conjunction e.g. dumpoke+s and pillau+s (47), khidmudgar+s and khalasi+s (223).

### Nonce words and Newly Coined Expressions:

There has been some evidence that nonces are loan words and there are evidences that they are not. Nonce words are mainly used by bilinguals and not monolinguals. There are certain similarities between nonce words and code switches. Like code switches, nonce words also have spontaneous usages, they are not established, and have no guarantee of recurrence. The following example from the text suggests the spontaneity of usage that can be applied to both nonce words as well as code switches:

1. 'Two dams and an adhela! And you're still standing here like a tree? said Deeti. *Kai sochawa?* Why are you stopping to think? Go, na, *jaldi.*'

In the above example, the underlying words are functioning grammatically by crossing the linguistic boundary. Hence article 'an' is used before the non-English word and 'na' is a tag form used after English verb 'go'.

A number of words have been used in the text by different characters which are newly coined expressions or nonce words. These expressions have been used by Paulette, Zachary and Doughty. Among them it is Paulette who has used most of these terms. The following are some of the nonce words found in the text:

puckrowed (274)	ghungta'd face (472)	chupawing (279)	bandarbaiting (48)
samjaoing (48)	girleys (48)	bastardised Hindusthani (355)	hurremzad (74)
laundrybuzz (74)	white -mustachioed (92)	foozlowing (114)	laundrybuzzing (120)
important eventment (248)	jawaub'd (263)		pleasanting (273)
puckrowed (274)	horizontalized (412)	unbeknownst (452)	nervosity (300)
need no explateratin here (151)	would have pleased (297)	correctionments (301)	
important eventment (248)	essayed often (303)	horizontalised (412)	
puzzlement (443)	honeying up (359)	discuted with myself (297)	
gupping about on your feet (272)	exaggere (248)	discuting with each other (302)	
misremembering (385)	ghungta'd head (428)	bucked about this or that (272)	

These expressions show an attempt at verbalization, for example bandarbaiting, pleasanting, pleased; nominalization, for example puckrowed, bastardised, mustachioed, horizontalised, puzzlement, eventment; backformation, for example exaggere; coinages, for example explateratin, nervosity, discuted.

One may also find a number of expressions which have been coined on the basis of similar expressions frequently used in kinship semantic field. For instance expressions like jahaz bhai and jahaz bahen (356) have parallel kinship terms like chachera bhai, chacheri bahen, mausera bhai and mauseri bahen etc.

### **Vernacular Language Use**

Use of vernacular language is fairly common in the text. Characters in the text frequently use vernacular expressions which are either immediately followed by a careful translation in English or are placed after English expressions. The following are some examples of vernacular language use found in the text:

1. Kam-o-kaj na hoi? 'You think there is no work to be done?' (6)
2. Dekheheba ka hoi? 'You want to see?' (33)
3. Ey Kalua? Ka horahelba? 'Oh Kalua? What're you up to?' (53)
4. Tumahara mard hai? 'Is he your husband?' (98)
5. Ka sochawa? 'What're you thinking? ... Thinking how you saved me today; sochat kit u bachawela...' (179)
6. Dekh mori suratiya 'look at my face.' (194)
7. Sare jindagi aise bhatkatela? 'To wander all your life?' (195)
8. Suraj dikhat awe to rasta mit jawe 'When the sun rises the path will show itself.' (203)
9. Tohar nam pata batav tani 'If you don't identify yourself, how will we know who you are?' (233)
10. 'We're all women here, she said; ham sabhan merharu.' (355)
11. 'Be serious... hase ka ka batba re...?' (448)
12. 'I've seen it all. Sab dekhchukalbani' (472)

### **Conclusion**

The above analysis of language use in *Sea of Poppies* not only suggest the richness of linguistic expressions that have emerged from the cultural contact of a variety of speakers from different background, but also reflect certain stated (or unstated) position of Amitav Ghosh particularly with reference to subalternity. According to Khair, when it comes to the narration of subaltern agency, unlike many others Amitav Ghosh does not use any device of staging the subaltern and his/her English. To quote Khair:

... Amitav Ghosh's language use appears unremarkable. It is, however, a consciously crafted style – developing the tradition of R.K. Narayan's unselfconscious use of the (Indian) English grapholect faintly inflected with necessary Indianisms. What it seeks to do most of all is to avoid staging the subaltern and his/her English. It remains aware of the problematic position of English, and through this awareness avoids appropriating 'India' and the Coolie class from a position of power and Babu privilege. (Khair 2005: 157)

Like *The Calcutta Chromosome*, in *Sea of Poppies* also Amitav Ghosh sticks to the English grapholect. His characters speak Bhojpuri, pidgin, mixed French English variety but the language used by his narrators is not 'staged'. As part of his style he employs several devices for remaining close to the English grapholect. For instance, when the vernacular language is used it is also followed by full translation into English (or English grapholect is used followed by translation in vernacular). Also his use of English plural marker suffixed to the native base is part of his "consciously crafted style" that allows the subaltern to retain his/her agency in the post-colonial text.

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