

Linguistic Tropes in Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* Trilogy

Khan Sheehan Shahab & Shruti Rawal

Abstract

The research paper explores Ghosh's employment of language as a tool to understand the classes depicted in the early nineteenth century colonial India in Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* Trilogy. Language plays a prominent role in the Trilogy employed to portray the subjugation of the colonized. The paper has incorporated Spivak's "The theory of the Subalterns" and analysed the linguistic aspects with the help of the study of characters like the fallen King of Rakshali and the free - spirited Paulette Lambert. The paper traces their journey over a course of four years (1838 - 41), showcasing language as an integral part of one's identity and depicting how the possession of linguistic skill privileges one section over the other.

Keywords: Identity; Language; Subaltern.

"Language is power, life and the instrument of culture, the instrument of domination and liberation" (42).

Angela Carter

Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* Trilogy is an epic saga in three volumes, of which *Sea of Poppies* (2008) is the first novel followed by *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015). It is set against the backdrop of Opium Wars in the second quarter of the nineteenth century British India which was marked by the turmoil of the colonial reign. The characters of the Trilogy were set in by Ghosh to highlight the forgotten and "whitewashed" (Mishra 623) segments of history viz., migration of "girmitya" (Indentured Labourers) and the Opium Wars (*Sea of Poppies* 71).

The Trilogy is an amalgamation of fact and fiction, wherein facts like the migration of over a million of Indians to the sugar plantation sites of Britain across the Indian Ocean or as it was better known as "kala pani" (Black Water) was incorporated with the fictitious characters (*Sea of Poppies* 3). The colonial world painted by Ghosh is a vivid replica of the society prevalent in the early nineteenth century replete with varied forms of hybridity, Ghosh, not only represents the racial and class disparity of the colonizer (British) and the colonized (Indians) but amongst the natives as well. This discrimination was carried out on the basis of one's stature or ranking in

the society. Characters of the Trilogy represent people from different backgrounds and origins including races, religions, castes, and classes of life and society. Each of these backgrounds had their own stipulations and code of conduct; practicing a different way of living. They had their own distinct, "personal" histories, and stories to narrate which they wanted to abscond from (Tasnim 11). Deeti – a widow, flees along with her lover Kalua – a low caste oxcart driver, Paulette the young and free spirited daughter of the Late French Botanist Pierre Lambert, Zachary – the second mate of *Ibis*, an American freedman, Neel – wrongly convicted King of Rakshali were a few of the characters who aboard the *Ibis* and try to escape their nightmare like realities.

Ibis, the former "blackbirder" ship carrying "human – cargo" was not only a vessel but had become a catalyst allowing the refuge seeking characters to take up new identities and lives (*Sea of Poppies* 12). And the ocean had become a nation where the indentured labourers had transformed from unknown strangers to a family of kin and established themselves as "ship-siblings" (*Sea of Poppies* 356).

Seeds of civilization gradually paved way for inequality; these segregations gradually rose and spread through the realms of trade and commerce in the form of industrial modernity and imperialistic endeavours which organically grew into colonial domination and colonialism. The sect of populace in favourable position became the 'master', it was when the 'master' started to exploit those working under them, that the underdog becomes the 'subject' in postcolonial context. Difference of such nature, drew distinguishing lines which sometimes was the cause of blood spill. The gradual development of Homo sapiens and the resulting societies formed on the varying cultures and cartographical divisions, aided in the creation of hegemony and subalterns in the society.

The ruling class, while in the process of formation, on the basis of commonalities among its members also marginalized those different from them. The subalterns were treated according to the echelon they were born in. Class and caste systems were not only evident in India, but they prevailed in many European nations as well. Nations were demarcated on the basis of differentiation in either of the two systems i.e., their histories witnessed violence either in the name of caste or class system. The civilians were consequently; separated on the basis of birth in the classes and castes they were born in, such as Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra sections of the society. The social stratification in such civilizations results in a survival replete with hardships for the subalterns, who are casted out of the major social group of the dominating class. It so happens, that often in order to ensure the safety they take refuge by escaping, migrating or adopting new identities for themselves.

Society is divided into the hierarchy of classes in order to keep the society working like a machine. For none of the classes can survive in isolation. Just as Frantz Fanon has presented his thoughts on the psychological stance of both, the colonizers as well as the colonized; where both need the other for a safe and prolonged stay of their own sect. The 'self' requires the presence of the 'other' to thrive by creating a divide reflective of the difference among the two, similarly, the citizens of the upper class need the company of those from the lower, in order to maintain the divide and the existence of the other; for neither can survive without the other. It is a dialect between a 'master' and 'subject,' where the former needs the latter to establish their hegemony in the prevalent society.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of 'Subaltern' as proposed in her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1994), suggests that the oppressed class of the society is in need of a voice of its own, not due to the lack of efforts on the subaltern's part, but because of the structure of colonialism where the power of discourse lies not with the colonized but with the colonizer. This transaction of power among the two, eventually results in the subjugation of the weaker section of the society at the hands of the dominating section. Whether at the hands of the ruling government (i.e. the British), or at the hands of the fellow natives; the colonized is always marginalized. As in Spivak's opinion the subalterns are steadily being silenced through "epistemic violence" (76), by being denied to speak and represent themselves, as in the opinion of the *master* the subaltern subject cannot speak and hence requires to be represented through the *master*. Though many scholars claim that by speaking for the silent subaltern subject Spivak herself commits the same error she critiqued the *master* of.

Class system determines the position of a person on factors like one's social and economic status. Class unlike caste system is not ascribed at birth; rather it is earned and achieved through efforts. It renders people into being categorized under the labels of upper, middle and lower classes respectively. This system is flexible, i.e., it is not closed like the *varna* system. A person's status can be changed with reference to the class they belong in, though permissible yet it is not an easy feat. The character of Raja Neel Rattan Halder, the King of Rakshali, is an evidence of the transition of classes being difficult. Class system has its own conformities which prevent the easy acceptance of a new member in their circle and upper class too had its flaws. One of the flaws being, the vanity that accompanied the class represented by Neel Rattan Halder's character in certain instances in the Trilogy.

Raja Neel Rattan Halder, the King, hailed from the Halder family of the *zemindars* of Rakshali, known for being one of the most land - owning families of Bengal, was in his twenties and had earned the title on his

father's demise two years ago. The Old King had limited efficiency in the English language which meant the task fell onto the young shoulders of Neel. Mr Benjamin Burnham was the founder and co – owner of Burnham Bros., he is also the owner of the *Ibis*. It was in the Old King's business with Mr Burnham that an agreement was made between the two that the Old King became invested in writing Mr Burnham's name over the promissory notes. As in Mr Burnham's opinion it was easier to let Neel's father write his name over the aforementioned notes rather than each note being sent to him from one end of Calcutta to the other to get it endorsed. Neel's engagement in such a task proved his craftsmanship and education in both the native (Bengali) and the colonizer's (English) languages. Neel's expertise in both the languages is also witnessed when he is seen interacting with Englishmen he speaks in fluent standard form of English "Ah, Major Hall! What can I do for you? (*Sea of Poppies* 170). Likewise, he is also observed swiftly and smoothly switching to his native tongue – Bengali, when dealing with the locals and employees of his estate "Yeh kya bat hai?" (*Sea of Poppies* 168).

One of the distinguishing markers of class disparity is the language used by the speaker. As language becomes one of the determining factors indicating the class of both the listener and the speaker in the colonizer's opinion, for those speaking English were considered to be from elite class alone and those speaking their native language were perceived to belong to lower classes of the society. Neel's proficiency in English was appreciated among the natives who could not speak in English language. Because English in the colonial reign had become the spectre of power yielded by the British alone, if the language was spoken by a native of a lower class and who was of no benefit to the coloniser then the native was humiliated and punished by the native speaker of English even if the executer of punishment belonged in the lower ranks of the British society. As was seen in the first instalment of the Trilogy, *Sea of Poppies* (2008), when Neel questioned the British Sergeant in English after entering the prison of Alipore as a convict, he was wrongly convicted for forging Mr Burnham's signature which was contrary to the fact that he was following the customs carried out years prior to his ascension to the throne of Rakshali. It was on being treated in a derogatory manner for speaking in English to the native speakers of the language namely: the British Sergeant, that Neel realizes that English was the colonizer's language which had now become a "powerful weapon" that Neel could use for his benefit (Choudhury 4):

'Sir, can you not afford me the dignity of a reply? Or is it that you do not trust yourself to speak English?' The man's (British Sergeant) eyes flared and Neel saw that he had nettled him, simply by virtue of addressing him his own

tongue – a thing that was evidently counted as an act of intolerable insolence in an Indian convict, a defilement of the language. The knowledge ... that... he still possessed the ability to affront a man whose authority over his person was absolute ... made Neel giddy, exultant, eager to explore this new realm of power... he decided, as in the rest of his life as a convict, he would speak English whenever possible ... starting with this moment, here (*Sea of Poppies* 283).

A convicted Indian speaking English was considered “intolerable insolence... a defilement of the language” not only by the British alone but by the mammon and power – hungry natives like *Subedar* Bhyro Singh as well (*Sea of Poppies* 283). People like the *Subedar* who were on the lowest ladder of a staircase and ranks of the British administrative system were a part of race Sir Thomas Babington Macaulay wanted to craft – a class of people who would have been Indian in their bodily appearances but a British in mind and soul. Macaulay wanted to hatch generations of “mimic” men who would act as translators to make the native masses understand about the benevolent intentions and policies of Britain (Bhabha 87). And these were the people who on witnessing a fellow Indian (whether a convict or not) speaking English would react in a violent, aggressive, and subhuman manner which made one feel pity for the person being treated worse than a “draught animal” (*Sea of Poppies* 338).

On witnessing the former King, who was unrecognizable to him now, being treated in an inhuman manner the gomusta, Baboo Nobb Kissin Pander, too, had vowed to himself that he would attempt to prevent the disgraced King from being humiliated by being treated like cattle at the hands of the shrewd and cruel blows of *Subedar* Bhyro Singh, uncle to Hukam Singh. For he had experienced a sudden change of heart which paved way for Baboo Nobb Kissin’s “maternal stirrings” towards the fallen King, on witnessing the *Subedar* lashing out blows with his *lathi* (stick) at the weak and now downtrodden King for having interacted with Zachary Reid, who at the time was the second mate at *Ibis* (*Sea of Poppies* 388). Because the *Subedar* was of the ideology that convicts like Neel and Ah Fatt should not take the liberties of speaking, and acting in a familiar with others on the ship, though his ideology was influenced by his dislike for both the convicts. These newly found instincts were so powerful that the gomusta had to will himself to stay rooted to the place he stood, or else he might have to intervene himself “between Neel and the *Subedar*’s failing *lathi*” (*Sea of Poppies* 388).

It was Neel’s proficiency in English which had inadvertently become the reason for Neel’s downfall had intentionally become the source of power in the Mimic man’s hand. It was his education which had also become a boon in his survival after his escape from the *Ibis* as it had helped him gain

employment. It was also because Neel knew that he could never return to his native place, to his family as he knew that he was now boycotted among his class and people (McNair 9). Neel's education was a blessing in disguise as it was due to his knowledge and wisdom of languages that he became "munshiji" to Seth Bahram Naurozji Modi (Ah Fatt's father) (*River of Smoke* 130). Neel did not bag the job because he knew Ah Fatt but because he had astounded and impressed Bahram who was intimidated with Neel's proficiency over languages like English, Bengali, Nastalik (Nastaliq), and later Cantonese as well: "'Shahbashmunshiji' he said. 'Phataphatyou are speaking English. You will put me to shame no?' ... 'You can write Nastaliq, also?'" (*River of Smoke* 130). Neel continued to fare well in the new surroundings of China where he befriended Compton, a Chinese, who helped Neel learn Cantonese. Neel had helped Compton in translating and comprehending an article from *Chinese Repository* which earned him a job with Zhong Lou - Si (Compton's teacher), to share his "knowledge of the world" (*Flood of Fire* 84). As Zhong Lou - Si, appointed by Commissioner, had created a bureau where English Journals were translated to gather information about foreigners, their nations and trade, pertaining to opium, in particular. It would have helped Commissioner Lin and the Qing Dynasty by association to prevent the inflow of the poisonous drug in their lands.

Another character to have suffered the effects of class disparity was Ms Paulette Lambert, the seventeen years old daughter of the late Pierre Lambert, a French Botanist. Mr Burnham, a philanthropist, had provided shelter to the orphan Paulette and had become guardians of the young Paulette on her father's demise. Paulette was grateful to them for taking her in, and providing a roof over her head but what made her miserable was trying to mould herself according to the standards set by the Burnhams and the English society around them.

In the words of Pierre Lambert, Paulette was described as a "child of Nature" (*Sea of Poppies* 136), as she was brought up amidst the tranquil innocence of plants far away from the workings of the treachery in the world. This was one of the reasons that Paulette was shocked to the core trying come at the same par as her kind guardians, the Burnhams. She was unaware of the behaviour expected from a young lady of her genteel birth, for all her life she had known the conduct, various kinds and reactions of plants. Nature, for her did not have any hidden motives, it did not differ in bare truth and the implied meanings as humans do. It was probably because of this reason that she was unable to mingle and connect with people in the circles of the Burnhams and was left feeling awkward which was evident in her appearance and her demeanour.

It was not that Paulette had to make an effort to ease herself with the polite class of the society alone but she had to hide her true self from the hired help

of the household as well. Paulette had an upbringing different from what many of her class might have preferred. Due to his involvement in a revolt against his king, Pierre Lambert had left his country, and was ostracized from the English society for his general contradiction of the Omnipresent alongside denying the sanctity of marriage; by pursuing a relation with Jodu's mother. She was the lady who had been an important fix in the Lambert family. As she had been a part of Paulette's life from the moment she had first opened eyes in world, she was the one who fed her milk like she would have done with any of the children who had come from her, because Mrs. Lambert had lost her life soon after she had delivered her daughter due to the unstoppable internal bleeding she suffered in the process. Jodu's mother soon became the wet nurse needed by the infant and was addressed as "Tantima," aunt-mother by Paulette (*Sea of Poppies* 66). The term aunt - mother itself explains the hybrid life led by young Paulette Lambert, though she was born to French parents, yet she was looked after by a Muslim Bengali lady from Indian culture. The first language learnt by a child is usually known as the mother-tongue, but the dialect grasped and spoken by the young Ms. Lambert was neither French, English, nor was it her mother's language, in fact, it was Bengali. The first solid food Putli, a domesticated name in the stead of Paulette, ever tasted was a simple dish of rice and lentil. All of these details are descriptive of the atmosphere Paulette was born in which was free of any discriminations on the basis of language, race, ethnicity, culture and society.

Though Paulette was French by origin, yet Bengali was the first language taught to her by aunt - mother and Jodu which resulted in the presence of waterfront form of intonation in her Bengali. The second language learnt by Paulette was English which bore the same embedded effect of waterfront of Bengal. The waterfront was considered to be the domicile of the lower class of the society.

On boarding the *Ibis* under the guise of an Indian migrating as a "girmitya" (indentured labourer) (*Sea of Poppies* 71), Paulette attempted to modulate her voice and tone which led Neel Rattan Halder to misunderstand Paulette. Neel had mistaken Paulette to be a mistress by the streets (a harlot) as he remembered one of the discussions with Elokeshi, his mistress, which led him to believe that Paulette might have learnt English from her clientele:

Paulette's tongue had betrayed just enough of the waterfront's sibilance for the mystery to be solved. Neel had heard Elokeshi speak of a new class of prostitute(s) who had learnt English from their White clients - no doubt this was one such, on her way to join some island brothel (*Sea of Poppies* 393).

Language had become an effective tool of authority in the British Indian society where kitchen Hindustani another form of English also known as Hinglish was used among the White lady of the house and the class of

people serving these British households in India. This hybrid form of language had become an authoritative language wherein words and phrases from native Indian language were used with English idioms in a sentence. For instance, the language used by Mrs Catherine Burnham, Paulette's benefactor and patron "'Sentiments, my dear Puggly,' she said sternly, 'are for dhobis and dashies'" and "... that's the worst kismet any woman could wish for, even worse than a wordy – wallah!" (*Sea of Poppies* 274; 275). Mrs Catherine Burnham is also witnessed trying to interact with the servants as "The kubber is that there's more than one young missymem who's got a mind to bundo the fellow ... you sly little shaytan!" (*Sea of Poppies* 210).

Apart from the other factors like race, gender, caste, and nationality, language too had become an aspect added in the long list of features liable for the suppression and marginalization of the victims of power and authority. Just as Neel had fallen prey to the bigotry of society, in the same way Paulette, too, had suffered in the name of language prejudice. Paulette had to be mindful of her behaviour and the tongue she chose to speak in front of Mr and Mrs Burnham, Mr Kendalbushe, and the servants of Burnham household. Because speaking with the White Ladies of English domiciliary had developed in a habit of responding only when spoken to in "kitchen – Hindusthani (Hindustani)" as it was thought of as the language of command (*Sea of Poppies* 123). Even if she spoke in their native language – Bengali, they (the servants) ignored her. Though she was not of Indian heritage but of French origin, yet, the help paid her no heed because she spoke a dialect she loved, Bengali. An instance proving the aforementioned statement occurs in the first instalment of the Trilogy, stating that the "khidmutgars would often ignore her if she spoke to them in Bengali" (*Sea of Poppies* 123).

Paulette was not fluent in the colonial language (English) which was the reason for her speaking either in Bengali or in French; the former as it was the language she learnt from her Governess and caretaker, and the latter because various reasons the first is her nation of origin, second because she was well read in the language.

Ghosh employed language as an authoritative tool and parameter on the basis of which the gulf and rift between the classes widened more than ever. As language had become a means of maintaining hegemony and the discriminations among the people in the colonial era increased with a greater force, specifically in a nation as large and as populated as the pre – independent India. India was known for its colourful heritage of diverse cultures, religions, languages, and cuisines since pre – colonial times; adding the culture, languages, delicacies, social code of conduct to the vast mixture not only resulted in an even more vibrant amalgamation but it also provided

the society with more factors to discriminate among its inhabitants irrespective of their gender, caste, class, and race of origin.

Works Cited

- Bhabha, Homi. K. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *Location of Culture*. By Homi. K. Bhabha. Routledge, 1994, pp. 85 - 92, archive.org/details/TheLocationOfCultureBHABHA/page/n1.
- Carter, Angela. *Shaking a Leg: Collected Writings*. Edited by Jenny Uglow, Penguin Books, 1997, epdf.pub/shaking-a-leg-collected-journalism-and-writings.html.
- Choudhury, Murshed Haider. "Amitav Ghosh's Experimentation with Languages and Dialects in Ibis Trilogy." *European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 1 - 8, March 2019, www.eajournals.org/journals/european-journal-of-english-language-and-literature-studies-ejells/vol-7-issue-2-march-2019/amitav-ghoshs-experimentation-with-languages-and-dialects-in-ibis-trilogy/.
- Macaulay, Thomas Babington. "Minute on Education." *Sources of Indian Tradition: Modern India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh*. Edited by Rachel Fell McDermott et al., 3rd ed., vol. 2, Columbia University Press, 2014, pp. 69-72. [PDFDRIVE](http://www.pdfdrive.com/sources-of-indian-traditions-volume-2-modern-india-pakistan-and-bangladesh-e158028193.html), www.pdfdrive.com/sources-of-indian-traditions-volume-2-modern-india-pakistan-and-bangladesh-e158028193.html.
- McNair, John Frederick Adolphus. *Prisoners their own Warders*. 1899. *Project Gutenberg*, 2008, www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/26974.
- Mishra, Rajnish. "Opium, History and Narration in *River of Smoke*." *Novels of Amitav Ghosh: Indian English Novels 2*. Rajnish Mishra, 2016.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Colonial Discourse and Post - Colonial Theory: A Reader*. Edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. Columbia University Press, 1994, pp. 66 - 111, pdfs.semanticscholar.org/872d/f02cd37077be0084903f81f5e4c39b371310.pdf.
- Tasnim, Zakiyah. "A Linguistic Approach to Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies." *International Journal of English Research*, vol. 4, no. 3, May 2018, pp. 11-16, www.englishjournals.com/archives/2018/vol4/issue3/4-2-28.