Chapter Eight

Articulating the Marginal

The *Ibis* Trilogy

Strange, the impact of History, the grip it has on us, yet it was nothing but words. Accidental accretions for the most part, leaving most of the story out. We have not yet begun to explore the true power of the Word, I thought. What if we broke all the rules, played games with the evidence, manipulated language itself, made History a partisan ally? — Robert Coover, *Public Burning*

We have many realities. Our problem is that we don't accept that there are many realities. – Gunter Grass in conversation with Salman Rushdie

The paradox of Enlightenment humanism was that, in positing a universal, human subject as the agent of history, it provided an alibi for imperial expansion as an engine of modernization, progress and civilization. — Jeannie Im, *Modernity in Translation*

Enlightenment empiricism puts a premium on the achievement of "reality" to get a reliable fix on the world which is "there to be observed". Deconstructive consciousness challenges this traditional paradigm at every turn whether in terms of its epistemology or explanatory narrative form. With the decline of the over-arching metanarrative, postmodern philosophy awards an increasing importance to language, narrative and discourse. It believes that there is no "real" world "out there" to be described, but a plethora of competing narratives, constructs and representations. Since experiences of the world can be articulated only through language, an apparently objective, impartial representation is a will-o'-the wisp because the cultural and political assumptions of the articulator inevitably erode into it. The continuity between lived experience and its corresponding narrative representation thus severed, narrative as a mode of historical explanation is inadequate. Since language is an ideologically contaminated medium, truth is linked to the "statements of power, which produce and sustain it" (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 131-132). Demolishing history's dependence on the reciprocal correspondence between evidence and the "reality effect" of "objective" history, Barthes, in his seminal essay "The Discourse of History", strikes at the edifice of

history's epistemology. Although history is "justified by the principles of 'rational' exposition", argues Barthes, "does this form of narration really differ [...] from imaginary narration, as we find it in the epic, the novel, and the drama" (7)? Unsurprisingly, Barthes's "rhetorical analysis of historical narrative", observes Stephen Bann, "cannot grant to history, *a priori*, the mythic status which differentiates it from fiction" (3).

Narrative for Ricoeur is mimetic of human action. Establishing a healthy hermeneutic circle between narrative and life, he demonstrates that not only history and fiction have things in common, but are also interweaved in the narrative experiences of life: "on the one hand, history in some way makes use of fiction to refigure time and, on the other hand, fiction makes use of history for the same ends" (*Time and Narrative*, 181). While history makes intense use of the narrative tradition of emplotment, it also involves something at the level of refiguration which Ricoeur calls "the representative function of the historical imagination" (*Time and Narrative*, 186). Hence a given series of events can be observed as tragic or comic and so on which explains the equal appeal of history books as that of novels. Most importantly, history has the sanctimonious task of conveying the horror, typical of fiction, of epoch-making events. Hence the interweaving of fiction with history to form a narrative. If fiction is thus interwoven in history, then, as a corollary, history is also interwoven in fiction. "Fictional narrative", argues Ricoeur, "is quasi-historical to the extent that the unreal events that it relates are past facts for the narrative voice that addresses itself to the reader. It is in this that they resemble past events and that fiction resembles history"(*Time and Narrative*, 190). The past that the fictional world conjures is a "quasi-past", a probable past, a past that "might have been". The past, far from being a fixed monolith, is open-ended; consequently, there are multiple narratives about the same events, the same past. Persevering with this argument, Hayden White concludes that "there is no such thing as a *single* correct view of any object under study but [...] there are many correct views, each requiring its own style of representation" (47).

Literary narrative provides a new perspective of looking at the historical past, often questioning the credibility of the historical representation. By way of questioning what Hayden White calls history's tropic prefiguration, the prominence given to key historical figures, the erasure of subaltern individuals or

communities, literature foregrounds the role of narrative in constructing one's understanding of the world and meaning and truth. A postcolonial writer, in his/her critical re-interpretation of the historical archive, creates a hybrid text that combines historical evidences and imaginative reconstructions, historical as well as invented characters. With this interplay, history is stripped off its objective quality. That literary texts have been widely recognized as essential materials for historical study is evident in Spivak's endorsement of Foucault's suggestion that "to make visible the unseen can also mean a change of level, addressing oneself to a layer of material which hitherto had no pertinence for history and which had not been recognized as having any moral, aesthetic or historical value" ("Can the Subaltern Speak?", 27-28).

[I]

Amitav Ghosh's projected *Ibis* trilogy is a comprehensive historical research about the mid-nineteenth century opium wars between China and the Western powers led by Britain. The European powers, cloaking their greed by the rubrics of free trade and internationalization of commerce, attempted to open the Chinese markets to the vicious opium trade. The first book of the trilogy, *Sea of Poppies* depicts the politics of subjugation of the West and the efforts at resistance of the East in an inclusive diachronic version of history which incorporates the unheroic wretched of the earth. It chronicles the lives of a motley group of people who, after many upheavals, board the *Ibis*. The schooner, formerly a slave carrier between Africa and America, now transports indentured, colonial labourers, the girmitiyas, to new colonies. The fictional lives of these characters are embedded in the historical backdrop of the early nineteenth century colonized Indian subcontinent when the zamindari system of land ownership was imposed. While the zamindar possessed the exclusive right to collect taxes from land, the poor Indian peasant was forced to cultivate cash crops like opium instead of the staple wheat to increase the Empire's revenue. By focusing on a wide range of characters with diverse social and economic backgrounds, the narrative explores oppression at various levels. Deeti, her opium addicted husband Hukam Singh and their farming community are forced producers of poppy on their own land. By

remaining half-starved and living in a dilapidated thatched house they are compelled to provide the raw materials to the swelling lucrative opium trade of the British. Hukam Singh was a sepoy in a British regiment but lost his job because of a leg injury. He now works at the Sudder Opium Factory in Ghazipur. The narrative vividly evokes the brutal working conditions in the factory when Deeti, summoned to take home her ailing husband, visits it. She witnesses the startling spectacle of "a host of dark, legless torsos [...] circling around and around, like some enslaved tribe of demons" (*Sea of Poppies*, 94). The dehumanizing condition of the employees makes Deeti groggy:

> they were bare-bodied men, sunk waist-deep in tanks of opium, tramping round and round to soften the sludge. Their eyes were vacant, glazed, and yet somehow they managed to keep moving, as slow as ants in honey, tramping, treading [...]. These seated men had more the look of ghouls than any living thing she had ever seen: their eyes glowing red in the dark and they appeared completely naked. (*SP*, 95)

The white overseers who maintained discipline in the factory are "almost as frightening", armed with "fearsome instruments: metal scoops, glass ladles and long-ladled rakes" (*SP*, 95). Even children are dragged in this infernal environment and any minor offence often invites the brutal assault of the "cane-wielding overseers" on the native offender whose "howls and shrieks went echoing through the vast, chilly chamber" (*SP*, 96). Hukam Singh's prolonged illness exposes Deeti to the aggressive advances of her male in-laws. Already in the past, induced by opium, she was raped by her husband's younger brother Chandan Singh on her bridal bed. What is worse, this violent act is condoned by her husband, his uncle Subedar Bhyro Singh and her mother-in-law. With her husband's subsequent death, her land is confiscated and sheis repressed by traditional male authority. Since "the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant", the subaltern colonial widow who "has no history and cannot speak, [...] is even more deeply in shadow" (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?",28). Marginalized and powerless, the silenced Deeti chooses to self-immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre. Reflecting on the "voiceless, hopeless" plight of Indian women, Josephine Butler sympathetically remarks that "their helplessness appeals to the heart, in somewhat the same way in which the helplessness and suffering of a dumb animal does, under the knife of a vivisector" (cited in Burton, 144). The narrative vividly presents the barbarity of the Hindu

practice of "sati" as Deeti, "in a resplendent white sari" (*SP*, 177), is drawn towards the fire: "Half dragged and half carried, she was brought to the pyre and made to sit cross-legged on it, beside her husband's corpse. Now there was an outbreak of chanting as heaps of kindling were piled around her, and doused with ghee and oil to ready them for the fire" (*SP*, 177). Deliverance comes through transcendence. The impoverished "high-caste" Hindu widow is rescued by the gigantic untouchable Kalua whose identity is circumscribed by calcified social segregation. Kalua and Deeti's intermeshing of caste and sexuality validates their transgressive claim. A couple of years back Deeti had surreptitiously witnessed Kalua's torture and humiliation by three sport-loving landowners of Ghazipur. As he lay "unconscious in the sand, naked and smeared in dung" (*SP*, 57), Deeti "in defiance of the world's unseen presence" (*SP*, 58), nursed Kalua's wounds. Physical intimacy with this untouchable rouses her flaming passion which burns all her humanity. His powerful physique which lay "peacefully inert", "the softness of mere flesh", her awareness of his breathing, "a faint stirring and swelling" (*SP*, 58) mesmerize her with the prospect of a fulfilling sexual liaison. As the final realm of pleasure and truth, sexuality is the zone of experience where an individual achieves self-realization. Accordingly, Deeti "suddenly" wakes into a "reality" as she "sat with her hand resting intimately upon the most untouchable part of this man" (*SP*, 58-59). By asserting her biological desire for Kalua, Deeti subverts the hierarchies of class and caste. She also undermines the male tendency to dominate by initiating the sexual act. Deeti frequently revisited the scene in her memory, "sharpening the details and refreshing certain particulars" (*SP*, 59). Having given up all hope for a return to life, Kalua's rescue act provides her a "rebirth", "her next life": "she had shed the body of the old Deeti, with the burden of its karma; she had paid the price her stars had demanded of her, and was free now to create a new destiny as she willed, with whom she chose" (*SP*, 178). The two elope and marry but are haunted by fears of certain capture and inevitable death. With nowhere to go, the couple register as indentured labourers, 'girmitiyas", and board the *Ibis* to migrate to "Mareech", i.e. Mauritius.

While British colonial expansionism couples with capitalist aggrandizement to seize political powers in India, it also opens up wonderful private opportunities for native entrepreneurs. The narrative traces the dynamics of collaboration and complicity of these local capitalists. Raja Neel Rattan and his

late father reap the financial rewards for appeasing the colonizers in their business dealings. While the vast majority of Indian peasants were plunged into penury by brutal administrative machinery, the nobility lived lavishly, immersed in delicacies, wine, music and concubines. Despite their complicity, British officials like Doughty looked at these Indian elites with a sneer of disdain and described the late Raja of Rsakhali quite contemptuously: "'Rascally Roger'", "'lordly nigger'", "'Best kind of native – kept himself busy with his shrub and his nautch-girls and his tumashers'" (*SP*, 47). As for the heir, the "'little chuckeroo, [...] a right strut-noddy'" is "'no more like the old man than stink-wood is like mahogany'" (*SP*, 48). Customary of a native ruler, Neel Rattan arranges for an elaborate banquet on his budgerow for Mr. Burnham, the business magnate, and his entourage. Food does serve as a register of cultural dynamics as E.N. Anderson enunciates: "Food communicates class, ethnic group, lifestyle affiliation, and other social positions" (124). Neel Rattan's minute scrutiny of the banquet table and preparations for the occasion presents his thoroughly Anglicized sense of identity. Typical of a colonial mimic man occupying a hybrid cultural space, the Western educated native swells in pride to display not only his exotic cuisine but also his internalization of colonial culture and his allegiance to the crown. Resenting that he is "'an ignorant native'" (*SP*, 118), Neel Rattan vehemently asserts to his British guests that "'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'" (*SP*, 118). What is more he is thoroughly familiar with the writings of Hume, Locke and Hobbes. However, Neel Rattan's showcasing his Western etiquette and knowledge does not suggest that his Westernized "self" has supplanted his Indian identity. Later in the narrative when Neel languishes in Alipore Jail and is gradually adapts to the gruesome prison conditions, he nauseates at the meal dished out to him because it is prepared by hands of unknown caste: "The intensity of his body's resistance amazed him: for the fact was that he did not believe in caste, or so at least he had said, many, many times, to his friends and anyone else who would listen" (*SP*, 267). Neel was proud of his egalitarianism, the spirit of which was drawn both from Western liberal ideas and the Indian reformers who had battled against rigid caste divisions. But the codes of cultural hierarchies and binarisms have been so deeply embedded in Neel's psyche that they now swell up from the unconscious and catch him

unawares. Truly, ideology goes to the heart of personal identity, of how one conceives himself as subject in the world. Far from being a "set of doctrines". Ideology, believes Eagleton, "signifies the way men live out their roles in class-society, the values, ideas and images which tie them by their social functions and so prevent them from a true knowledge of society as a whole" (16-17). Neel Rattan's empirical identity is conceived as a "performance, a duty and nothing more; one of the many little enactments that were required by the demands of social existence, by samsara" (*SP*, 267). Since it is based on role-playing, it is not "real", it is "just an illusion" (*SP*, 267). The garb of his social self is now seriously threatened by his own deeply ingrained cultural matrix. The hiatus between the conscious and the unconscious selves and the compelling recognition of what is his "own" trouble his mind and shape his dreams: "That night his dreams were plagued by a vision of himself, transformed into a moulting cobra, a snake that was struggling to free itself of its outworn skin" (*SP*, 268). Despite internalizating Western philosophy and exaggeratedly imitating colonial culture, manners and tastes, he cannot strip off the traces of his own cultural legacies.

European colonialism was a lucrative politico-commercial enterprise inextricably tied with capitalism. Exploring the relationship between the ideology of imperialism and its functioning through the practice of colonialism, Denis Judd argues that "no one can doubt that the desire for profitable trade, plunder and enrichment was the primary force that led to the establishment of the imperial structure" (3). The British imperialists inculcated the specious rhetoric of free trade and the internationalization of commerce which would create wealth for all nations to shroud their mercenary motives. The British East India Company gave over the opium trade to ruthless private merchants who exported opium to China and encouraged local farmers to abandon traditional crops for poppies. Such was the revenue generated by opium trade that within a short time it became the bedrock of British rule in India. Furthermore, the most important chemicals needed for industries, modern medicines or surgeries in England were extracted from opium. The British government was in no position to stop this steady flow of profit from this commercial enterprise. Hence they refused to recognize China's anti-opium laws and intended to open up Chinese markets. The extent to which an imperialist's ethics can be corroded by his profit-making urge can be judged from the rhetoric of Mr. Burnham, a tycoon who amasses enormous wealth by opium-

trade. To conceal his greed, he laces his finely cloaked argument with a touch of ideology: "'The war, when it comes, will not be for opium. It will be for a principle: for freedom – for the freedom of trade and for the freedom of the Chinese people. Free Trade is a right conferred on Man by God, and its principles apply as much to opium as to any other article of trade'" (*SP*, 115). Tearing to shreds all conventional codes of self-defense, Burnham equates his blatant imperial expansionism with divine will: "'Jesus-Christ is Free Trade and Free Trade is Jesus Christ'" (*SP*, 116). In his influential book *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, Partha Chatterjee explains that European nationalism is "part of the same historical process which saw the rise of industrialism and democracy" and "nationalism represents the attempt to actualize in political terms the universal urge for liberty and progress" (2). There is, however, a conflict right at the heart of nationalism which Chatterjee terms the "liberal dilemma": nationalism may promise liberty and universal suffrage to the colonizers but undemocratic forms of government and domination to the colonized. The concept of the Western nations as representing the best of human civilization becomes a way of legitimating colonial expansion. A perfect illustration of the imperialist's duplicity is the ship captain Mr. Doughty's invocation of humanism to justify the war with China: "'There is no other recourse. Indeed, humanity demands it. We need only think of the poor Indian peasant – what will become of him if his opium can't be sold in China? [...] they'll perish by the crore'" (*SP*, 260). This sophistry of the colonizer to pass off imperial aggrandizement under the rubric of humanism is severely repudiated by Tony Davies who considers this equation as an "ideological smokescreen for the oppressive mystifications of modern society and culture, the marginalization and oppression of the multitudes of human beings in whose name it pretends to speak" (5). What Doughty omits from his discourse, for the sake of convenience, is the fact that it was the British themselves who imposed opium cultivation on the poor Indian peasant. That this imperial commercial operation is least bothered about official legislation is emphasized by Burnham: "'Parliament will not know of the war until it is over. [...] if such matters were left to Parliament there would *be* no Empire'" (*SP*, 118). The intricate connection between religion and imperialism to demonstrate the differences between the civilized and the barbaric native worlds comes through in Justice Kendalbushe's quasi-religious assertion that "'a war is necessary if China is to be opened up to

God's word'" (*SP*, 260). This "illusory or fraudulent pretensions" (Davies, 36) of humanism is indicted by Davies who brings in Nietzschean anti-humanism to unravel the "coercive theology that lurks inside the 'religion of humanity' and other such schemes of secular Salvationism, and the tendency of such schemes to conceal quite disreputable motivations beneath their professions of universal altruism" (36). At the other end of this powerful oppressive machinery who recoils from the specious rhetoric of the imperial demi-gods and revolts against their pretensions is Captain Chillingworth who questions the benefit of the war with China: "'I am not sure whose good you mean, theirs or ours'" (*SP*, 262). Denouncing the tenets of imperialist ideology, he confronts his superiors with the truth that they are "'no different from the Pharaohs or the Mongols: the difference is only that when we kill people we feel compelled to pretend that it is for some higher cause. It is this pretence of virtue, I promise you that will never be forgiven by history'" (*SP*, 262). Though Captain Chillingworth perpetuates imperial ideologies in his profession, he feels alienated from the empire that is oppressive and evil. His self-awakening echoes George Orwell's who felt haunted by "an intolerable sense of guilt", resenting "the dirty work of empire" and firmly convinced "that imperialism was an evil thing and the sooner I chucked up my job and got out of it the better" (3). His new realization and paralyzing loss of freedom borders on the phenomenon of anxiety and signals an abrupt break with the continuity of exploitation, a "negation of continuity" (42) as Kierkegaard put it. While a handful of individuals like Chillingworth do not feel at home in the empire, the annexation policies of the colonial administration continue unabated. Burnham skillfully weaves an intricate web of deceit and forges documents in Neel Rattan Halder's name to dethrone him. The prince turns into a pauper and languishes in Alipore Jail; Burnham seizes control of the Raskhali estate. Neel's trial at court exposes how blatant racism vitiated even the operation of the rule of law in British India. The putative racial superiority of the British and the racial inferiority of the Indians and hence their incorrigibility justify the former's conferring of "'the benefits of civilization'" (*SP*, 235) as Justice Kendalbushe proclaims. Realizing the infamous double standard of the imperial judicial system, the helpless Neel understands that the Englishmen "Mr. Burnham and his ilk" are "exempt from the law as it applies to others: it was they who had become the

world's new Brahmins" (*SP*, 239). Imperialist politics strengthened by an unimpeachable rule of law paves the path for complete British domination.

While Deeti is marginalized by a feudal and patriarchal society and Neel Rattan is trapped by imperial deceit, Paulette is exposed to a subjugation of a different kind. Just as Deeti is ostracized from mainstream society, Paulette's widowed father, the French botanist Pierre Lambert, is occluded from the English society in Calcutta because of British snobbery and intercultural rivalry. Lambert's isolation is compounded by his iconoclasm: he denied God's existence and the sanctity of marriage. Mrs. Lambert's death at child-birth places Paulette in Jodu's mother's arms and thus her marginalized identity becomes amorphous as she meanders through the in-between spaces of cultural contact zones at times resulting in complete assimilation: "the first language she learnt was Bengali. And the first solid food she ate was a rice-and-dal khichri cooked by Jodu's mother. In the matter of clothing she far preferred saris to pinafores" (*SP*, 67). "Putli", meaning a doll, becomes the domesticated version of "Paulette", and her nurse becomes ""Tantima' – aunt-mother"" (*SP*, 66). The rich "confusion of tongues that was to characterize her upbringing" (*SP*, 66) provides her a linguistic fluidity that enables her to escape any straitjacketing within any particular cultural frame of reference. Pertinent to the issue is Raymond Hickey's observation that "nativeness is not a question of choice or assessment by others, but a result of early language acquisition" (507). The freedom which Paulette enjoys as a "native", signified by her bare feet roaming, is curbed when the Burnhams decide to adopt and "civilize" her. "Colonialism minus a civilizational mission" asserts Ashis Nandy, "is no colonialism at all" (11). The Burnhams attempt to acculturate Paulette by urging her to accept British social and domestic norms and cognitive categories. Their strong disregard for botany forbids Paulette to instruct the Burnhams' daughter Annabel in botany, philosophy or Latin. "Self-appointed moral guardians of society declared" observes Patricia Fara, "that they wanted to protect young women from the corrupting influence of botanical education" (12). Nowhere is the Burnham's civilizing zeal more vigorous than in the religious domain. What they vehemently demand of Paulette is "regular churchgoing, good behaviour and a willingness to open herself to religious instruction" (*SP*, 130). By imposing Biblical sermons on the poor girl, Burnham establishes British supremacism and the cultural inferiority of the "Other". Richard Congreve, Bishop of Oxford,

believed that "God has entrusted India to us to hold it for him, and we have no right to give it up" (cited in Rao, 26). That the British strongly believed that they were performing a divine mission and that the Bible was well manipulated for imperial missions is neatly summed up by Nicholas B. Dirks:

> Indeed, by the late nineteenth century, Christian triumphalism was folded into a new kind of imperial nationalism, in which the rule of the world by Britain was sanctioned both by history and faith. [...] Missionary rhetoric was used to celebrate the accomplishments of empire rather than the message of Christ. (76)

Consequently "colonialism encouraged the colonizers to impute to themselves magical feelings of omnipotence and permanence" (Nandy, 35). Such is Burnham's desire to structure Paulette's consciousness and determine the parameters of her existence that he forces her to marry the widowed Justice Kendalbushe. But despite Kendalbushe's intense desire to marry her and Mrs. Burnham's reiterations that marrying him would be "'a prodigious stroke of kismet'" (*SP*, 273), Paulette refuses the proposal where her sentiments are not involved. Rejecting the bliss of domesticity and material comfort she decides to determine her own destiny. Inspired by her botanist grand-aunt Madame Commerson who travelled all round the world in male disguise, Paulette flees the ideological trappings of the Burnhams and, helped by Baboo Nob Kissin's improvisations, boards the *Ibis*. Disguised as a "*bamni*, a Brahman's daughter" (*SP*, 355-356) she soon establishes a deep communion with the other women on board and proves that Jodu's and Zachary's doubts about her ability to endure the strains of a marine journey were only misgivings. Such is Paulette's skill in the acts of masquerading that Zachary wonders that she has "so perfected the arts of impersonation" that they have become "the core" of her "soul" (*SP*, 500-501). Paulette has surreptitiously penetrated into Zachary's closely guarded secret that he is a "black" American, a "mulatto", and is convinced that in terms of "the multiplicity of [...] selves" (*SP*, 443) they are on the same register. She thrusts at Zachary her profound realization that despite the fragmentary pluralism of one's empirical being there is an underlying unifying substratum: "'Whatever there is within us – whether good, or bad, or neither – its existence will continue uninterrupted, will it not, no matter what the drape of our clothes, or the colour of our skin?'" (*SP*,501). Paulette's enunciation celebrates the unity beneath a plethora of selves and deviates from the poststructural contention that identity is

nomadic, endlessly wandering or deferred. Her contention has its philosophical grounding in Schopenhauer's validation of the *will* which gives "unity and sequence to consciousness" (139), which "alone is unalterable and absolutely identical, and has brought forth consciousness for its own ends. It is therefore the will that gives its unity and holds all its representations and ideas together, accompanying them, as it were, like a continuous ground-bass" (140). Furthermore, "it is *the will* alone that is permanent and unchangeable in consciousness, [...] the true and ultimate point of unity of consciousness, and the bond of all its functions and acts" (140). Thus assured of her own being she interrogates Neel Rattan whether it is "forbidden for a human being to manifest themselves in many different aspects" (*SP*, 497). Paulette's reworking of the binarism between the self and the other enables her to enter into an inter-racial, inter-religious "siblingship" (*SP*, 381) with Jodu and inter-cultural exchange of hearts with Zachary. Transcending all barriers she creates a reciprocal relationship with her fellow travelers on the *Ibis* and "in a tone of unalloyed certainty" dissolves the self's alienation from the other: "'On a boat of pilgrims, no one can lose caste and everyone is the same: it's like taking a boat to the temple of Jagannath, in Puri. From now on, and forever afterwards, we will all be ship-siblings – *jaház-bhais* and *jaház-bahens* – to each other. There'll be no differences between us'" (*SP*, 356). Paulette's rhetoric of communitarianism is based on an "understanding of subjectivity, one that values mutial dependency, reliance, appreciation, and trust between the Self and the Other" (Lin, 11). This indeed is a "paradigmatic reconsideration of the status of the Other in our understanding of who we are – our self, identity, and individuality" (Lin, 1). The self's being "with" the other is an integral part of the ethical relationship with the other. This "'withness'", conceptualizes Margaret Chatterjee, "covers up the essential difference that there is between people, although we are endowed with the capacity of bridging that distance by embarking on the project of being 'towards' the other" (220).

Zachary Reid, the *Ibis*'s second mata and a "mulatto" from Boston, displays like Paulette multiple identities to conceal his authentic self. The son of a Maryland freedwoman, Zachary suppresses his mixed parentage from his British employees fearing discrimination. His ambiguous racial status dissolves the barriers between the Western naval officers and the subaltern lascars. Such is

Zachary's bonhomie with the lascar leader Serang Ali that he feels startled at the "unaccustomed ease" in which he communicates with them in their pidgin language "as if his oddly patterned speech had unloosed his own tongue" (*SP*, 16). An adept sailor and an experienced man of the world, Serang Ali emphasizes the importance of performance in business transactions to the greenhorn Zachary. This reminds the reader of the relation between Saya John and Rajkumar in *The Glass Palace*. Serang Ali transforms Zachary's identity to such an extent that the latter occupies a hybrid cultural space beyond recognition. Serang Ali insists that Zachary must wear "'propa clothes'" to be "'one big piece pukka sahib'" (*SP*, 50) to unsettle the structure of colonial dominance. The hybrid identity of the colonial mimic man "as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha, 86) is, in Bhabha's thinking, a mode of anti-colonial resistance because it not only "ruptures" the entire colonial discourse but also "becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a 'partial' presence" (86). As an "incomplete" and "virtual" (86) imitation, mimicry is a play between equivalence and excess and hence both reassuringly similar and terrifying, "resemblance and menace" (86). Zachary realized that his performance of a Westernized colonial identity, as a "'Free Mariner'" meant so much to the serang: "For Serang Ali and his men Zachary was almost one of themselves, while yet being endowed with the power to undertake an impersonation that was unthinkable for any of them; it was as much for their own sakes as for his that they wanted to see him succeed" (*SP*, 50). Furthermore, the old serang looks up to Zachary as a substitute for his deceased son-in-law Adam Danby and pours all his affections on the "mulatto". Such is the intimate attachment between the old lascar and the young mate that the strange assortment of peculiar words which forms the lascari language can never be an obstacle in their relationship. In fact, "beneath the surface of this farrago of sound", their emotions "flowed as freely as the currents beneath the crowded press of boats" (*SP*, 104). Disrespecting all racial and cultural boundaries, Zachary strongly endorses the principle of posthumanism which enables "two people from worlds apart to find themselves linked by a tie of pure sympathy, a feeling that owed nothing to the rules and expectations of others" (*SP*, 439). It is this empathic bond between the self and the other which impels Zachary and Jodu to rescue each other when in distress in the waters. His

ambiguous inter-racial position enables him to understand Paulette's predicament much better than anybody else, an understanding that gradually matures into love.

The relationship between the self and the other is a fluid one which takes on various dimensions according to the peculiarity of the circumstances. Far from being reduced into a passive target of scrutiny, the self and the other enter into a reciprocal relationship as active agents. This open-ended dialogue is exemplified in the aristocrat Neel's conversion of the chronic opium addict Ah Fatt in prison and their subsequent intimacy. The fastidious Neel was very conscious about the purity of his "body" that "bordered almost on the occult" (*SP*, 198). He inherited this strict observance of the rituals of cleanliness and purification from his mother "for whom bodily defilement was a preoccupation that permitted neither peace nor rest" (*SP*, 199). Given to cleanse his "dribbling, leaking, spewing cell-mate" (*SP*, 322), Neel is initially reluctant to part with his ingrained convictions but by being open and responsive to the loathsome Ah Fatt he "could feel the intimations of an irreversible alteration" (*SP*, 323). Alterity, i.e. the unknowable and unreachable nature of the other, cannot be attained, but it can be approached and negotiated. Admittedly, to "know the other is both to discover the other and to discover the self" (Margaret Chatterjee, 222): "In a way, he was none other than the man he had ever been, Neel Rattan Halder, but he was different too" (*SP*, 323). The more Neel knows Ah Fatt through physical intimacy the more he learns to treat him as a person possessing value, an end in himself. The act of generosity designates to the other a world which was hitherto the self's sole possession. "The loss of the world of the self", contends Doukhan in analyzing Levinas's philosophy, "thus gives rise to a hospitality of the other within that world. The self's exile allows for a welcoming of the other" (243). This welcoming stance generates a profound sense of transcendence and erases all possible difference between the self and the other: "Having spent a few days in the same space, Neel had already begun to feel that he was somehow implicated in his cell-mate's plight: it was as if their common destination had made their shame and honour a shared burden" (*SP*, 325). Thus through generosity the world of the self widens to welcome the dimension of the other; the self's homeland has become a haven for the other, "subjectivity" is presented "as welcoming the Other, as hospitality" (Levinas, 27). This initiates Neel's profound empathic bond with Ah Fatt which is further intensified when he listens captivated to Ah Fat's life-story. In a self-reflexive stance the narrator

muses on the impact of the narrative on its audience and the latter's engagement with it as Neel is captivated by Ah Fatt's recollections of his life in Canton:

> 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 shared imagining. (*SP*, 375)

The act of interpretation demands the reader's active participation because it is he who excavates the gaps and silences in the narrative. For Tabish Khair reading is "an act of digging" (15) and identifying the "superfluous omissions and not-meant-to-be-noticed silences" (14) in the text. Far from being a passive receptor, the reader is an active co-creator and interpreter who not only "stays on the surface of the text", but is "an active thinker and interpreter. She attends to the text, but she also accomplishes and takes charge to an extent" (15). Neel is very much the active collaborator the narrator wants his readers to be.

The huddling together of a varied cast of characters on the Ibis allows the narrative the space to explore the processes of identity formation. "There are two meanings of the word 'subject'", believes Foucault, "subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to one's own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge" ("The Subject and Power", 212). The "I" is subject to forces and effects both within and without, subject to others "by control or dependence" (212) from even before his/her birth. Being a subject has specifically to do with language: "You cannot be an 'I' without having a proper name [...]. We are born into language, we are born – more precisely –into patriarchal language, into being identified by a patronym, by a paternal proper name" (Bennett and Royle, 126). The chameleonic Paulette's multifaceted identity is signified by the various names by which she is known – Putli, Puggly and finally Putleshwari on the *Ibis*. As argued earlier, she is compelled by social circumstances to don on new avatars and by sequences of elisions and transformations her subjectivity is always in the making and remaking. Toril Moi notes that Beauvoir's central thesis in *The Second Sex* is that "'[o]ne is not born a woman; one becomes one'" (92). Paulette's multilayered identity validates Catherine Belsey's notion of "cultural construction of identity" (593) and her focus on "process" and possibilities for change therein: "The subject [...] is the site of contradiction, and is consequently

perpetually in the process of construction, thrown into crisis by alterations in language and in the social formation, capable of change. And in the fact that the subject is a *process* lies the possibility of transformation" (597). Incidentally, it is in the course of her role-playing that Paulette realizes that notwithstanding the fragmented, fluid nature of her social self she cannot disengage herself from what is deeply embedded in her:

> Now, watching the familiar foliage slip by, Paulette's eyes filled with tears: these were more than plants to her, they were the companions of her earliest childhood and their shoots seemed almost to be her own, plunged deep into this soil; no matter where she went or for how long, she knew that nothing would ever tie her to a place as did these childhood roots. (*SP*, 381)

Evidently, while the empirical subject is always in a process of becoming, it is the substrate that stands as the permanent background of one's being.

A victim of a patriarchal and feudal society, subjugated by caste divisions, the repressed Deeti is forced to leave her daughter behind and flees with Kalua. She is the Other relegated to "sad necessities of signification" (Butler, 174) by the "violence of exclusion" (Butler, 174). A mute sufferer on land, Deeti's rhetoric of resistance is audible on board when she demands the venerable rites for a deceased coppersmith from Ballia and not "throw him away like the skin of a peeled onion": "Just a little *izzat*; some respect [...] it's not right to treat us like this" (*SP*, 414). Deeti's graduation to a defiant rebel to reclaim the dignity of a dead man unifies the girmitiyas against the oppressive crew who confer upon her the title "Bhauji": "it was as if she had been appointed the matron of the dabusa by common consent" (*SP*, 430). Earlier, of course, Deeti introduced herself to the women on board as "Aditi" which was "her proper, given name" (*SP*, 233). Kalua's swapping of his father's name with his own fashions his new identity which is the result of an error in spelling on the authority's part: "Maddow Colver". One does not choose but is endowed with a forename and Kalua's repeating his new given name highlights the way in which one is *subject* to names. The name which at first seemed to belong to someone else, "a person other than himself" (*SP*, 284), ceases to be unfamiliar after repetitions: "it was as much his own now as his skin, or his eyes, or his hair – Maddow Colver" (*SP*, 284). What it signifies is the idea that questions of personal or individual identity are indissociably bound up with language even if in Kalua's case his new name is "the

result of the stumbling tongue of a harried gomusta, and the faulty hearing of an English pilot who was a little more than half-seas over" (*SP*, 285). Ghosh demonstrates the poststructural contention that the human subject is necessarily decentered as well as reveals the pivotal role of the substratum thereby straddling both currents of thought.

Despite their feeling of commonality, the female immigrants on board get a sense of their distinctive identity through the stories they tell about themselves. The catalogue of subaltern tales that Ghosh ascribes to these Third World women is a record of their wretched lives on land – Munia's immature amorous experiences and the destruction of their family, the tortures and abuses of Dookhanee's oppressive mother-in-law, the two sisters Ratna and Champa's starvation after their husbands' lands were seized by the opium factory, Heeru's desertion by her husband. Each narrative not only crafts a self but by being located in a material world also explores the socio-economic matrices that govern their lives. The interplay between experience and expression is a dynamic one. It is grounded in the phenomenological assumption that entities are given meaning through being experienced and the idea that narrative is a vital resource to bring experiences to conscious awareness. The recollection of experiences through references to significant places in their lives – "the great cattle mela of Sonepur" (*SP*, 242), the poppy fields in Ghazipur –evoke for the listeners particular times and circumstances. As a narrative is apprehended, it gives rise to the selves that apprehend them. "Narrative is radical", believes Toni Morrison, "creating us at the very moment it is being created" (cited in Blair, 11). As it reaches out to tap a pre-existing identity, the narrative constructs a "fluid, evolving identity in the making":

> Spinning out their telling through choice of words, degree of elaboration, attribution of causality and sequentiality, and the foregrounding and backgrounding of emotions, circumstances, and behaviour, narrators build novel understandings of themselves-in-the world. In this manner, selves evolve in the time frame of a single telling as well as in the course of the many tellings that eventually compose a life." (Ochs and Capps, 23)

The story of Heeru's separation from her husband was "told so many times that they all felt as though they had lived through it themselves" (*SP*, 242). Being discursive constructions of the past, these narratives are symbolic strategies of addressing their present predicament. Stories negotiate the past and its meaning

and also seek ways of moving forward. They elucidate a community's understanding of itself. What is more, the act of narration invites the listener into a "matrice of ideas" (Merleau-Ponty, 77) beyond his own sedimented notions of self. Ah Fatt's graphic presentation of his past to Neel invites Neel to "a venture of collaboration", an act of "a shared imagining" (*SP*, 375): "In listening and prompting, Neel began to feel that he could almost see with Ah Fatt's eyes: there it was, the city that conceived and nurtured this new half of himself" (*SP*, 375-376). The world of the text and the world of the reader interpenetrate each other through a "fusion of horizons", through "refiguration": the "active re-organization of our being-in-the-world performed by the reader following the invitation of the text to become the reader of ourself" (Ricoeur, "Intellectual Autobiography",47). Reminiscent of Ricoeur's constant reference to Gadamer's "fusion of horizons", Merleau-Ponty asserts that narrative/narration carries "the speaker and hearer into a common universe by drawing both toward a new signification through their power to designate in excess of their accepted definition" (75). Narration, emplotment, reading/listening is, therefore, mediums in quest for an answer to the elusive question "Who am I?"

If the rhetoric of posthumanism and narratology resolve the binarism between the Self and the Other, their animosity is revealed in the brutal torture of the immigrants by the English mates and their Indian henchmen. To consolidate the colonial regime, The British realized the vital importance of the anthropologization of colonial knowledge to understand and control its subjects, and to represent and legitimate its own mission. Ethnographic knowledge could enable the colonial administrative machinery to devise "new ways to claim the loyalty of subjects on the basis of custom and culture, and [...] to delineate the autonomous and proper domains of religion and custom" (Dirks, 77). The British first mate Crowle explicitly states this intricate policy of domination to Zachary when he protects against the natives' physical torture:

> [...] there is an unspoken pact between the white man and the natives who sustains his power in Hindoosthan – it is that in matters of marriage and procreation, like must be with like, and each must keep to their own, The day the natives lose faith in us, as the guarantors of the order of castes – that will be the day, gentlemen, that will doom our rule. This is the inviolable principle on which our authority is based. (*SP*, 482)

When the budding romance between Jodu, the Muslim lascar and Munia, a Hindu indentured labourer is detected, Crowle connives with the subedar Bhyro Singh to inflict flogging on the poor young lascar to reduce him to a "carcass" (*SP*, 471). Things get worse when to settle an old personal grudge against the low-caste Kalua, Bhyro Singh has him imprisoned and sadistically enjoys the spectacle of Kalua's whipping unto death. Kalua is flogged on the deck and all the migrants are forced to witness his execution to "share in the experience of the pain" (*SP*, 486). What they enjoy is the rise of a native agonist against the combined powers of imperialism and native feudalism. The blood smeared Kalua, calculating the drumbeat and the subedar's paces of the whip-lash, makes such a sudden improvisation, that the whip coils around Bhyro Singh's neck and he lies dead on the deck. The victim emerges victorious, momentarily though, as Crowle soon announces Kalua's death sentence.

Zachary's mettle as an individual is severely tested when the first mate and his adversary Crowle confronts him with his closely guarded racial identity. Armed with the crew-list of the *Ibis*, Crowle tries to blackmail Zachary and rope him in his desire to overthrow Chillingworth and supplant him as the ship's captain. Zachary has been a persistent critic of Crowle's malicious designs against the native immigrants and the crew all through but now the ground seems to slip beneath his feet since he feels "amazed to think that something so slight, so innocuous could be invested with so much authority" (*SP*, 508). Unfazed in this critical juncture, Zachary holds on to his integrity and challenges the imposing first mate: "'I'm sorry but this deal o' yours won't work for me. It may look to you that this piece of paper has turned me inside out, but in truth it's changed nothing. I was born with my freedom and I ain't looking to give any o' it away'" (*SP*, 508). Crowle has uncovered Zachary's racial identity, Zachary knows his anarchic motives. When Crowle attempts to finish Zachary off, he is brutally stabbed by the half-Chinese convict Ah Fatt. The opium-addict convict not only avenges his humiliation at the hands of Crowle but also restores Neel's faith in him as a resurgent individual. Ah Fatt's Indian father Bahram insisted his son to learn boxing because he wanted him to learn things that an Englishman must know. Bahram's emphasis on physicality seems to stem from his celebration of "Ksatriyahood as true Indianness" and his nationalistic zeal to "beat the colonizers at their own game and to regain self-esteem as Indians" (Nandy, 52). Physically

effete throughout the novel, Ah Fatt asserts his individuality at the end by eliminating the British First Mate. The four convicts – Jodu, Neel, Ah Fatt and Kalua – escape in a boat steered by Serang Ali. They are criminals in the eyes of the law but when judged within the framework of personal accountability each is a transgressor asserting his individuality. By taking into account not only the hard facts but also exploring the emotions, thoughts and actions of these seemingly ordinary individuals Ghosh weaves an inclusive historical narrative, an imaginative microhistory which lies embedded in the macrohistory of the imperial project. Evidently what Ghosh tries to reconcile are the "analytical" histories utilizing the rational categories of modern historical thought and the "affective" histories which account for the plural ways of being-in-the-world. After all, history and fiction, as modes of narrative, mediate "the world for the purpose of introducing meaning" (E.L. Doctorow, cited in Hutcheon, 112).

[II]

Sea of Poppies ends with the escape of the convicts from the *Ibis* which is in the grip of a fierce cyclone in the Bay of Bengal. *River of Smoke* begins in the wind-swept cliffs of Mauritius with "La Fami Colver", Deeti's clan, marching in ritual procession to her "Memory Temple". The repressed, exploited young woman from a remote Indian village establishes a matrilineal community in Mauritius after serving out her indenture along with eight of her shipmates. With the creation of an indentured community of "ship-siblings from the *Ibis*" (*RS*, 11), culture flows between national boundaries undermining the modern narrative of a homogeneous nation. A product of this intercultural negotiation is the "strange mixture of Bhojpuri and Kreol" that becomes Deeti's "personal idiom of expression" (*RS*, 4). Hybridity and fluidity of movement thus lead to the rise of a global imaginary characterized by heterogeneity as the nation becomes an open cultural site.

Deeti's semi-mystical experience interweaves the beginning of both *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke*. In the first novel, she has an instinctive foreknowledge that her vision of a tall-masted ship on the ocean is a "sign of destiny" (*SP*, 3). In the sequel, she insists that it was not chance but destiny that

led her to the site of her hidden shrine in Mauritius. Deeti's prescient drawing of the *Ibis* on a green mango leaf amazes her daughter Kabutri and even puzzles herself with the "sureness of her intuition" (*SP*, 9). Her sketch is so authentic that the narrator comments in a proleptic aside that "[l]ater, even seasoned sailors would admit that her drawing was an uncannily evocative rendition of its subject" (*SP*, 10). The unlettered Deeti transcends the "island boundaries of the individual" and enters into a "symbiotic communion with [...] some higher entity, real or imaginary, of which the self is felt to be a part" (Koestler, 119-120). This explains Deeti's extra-sensory perception, "a condition which Piaget called 'proto-plasmic' or 'symbiotic' consciousness, and which may be at the origin of that 'oceanic feeling' which the artist and the mystic strive to recapture on a higher level of development, at a higher turn of the spiral" (Koestler, 120). Significantly Deeti's creation of her private universe takes place in the inner sanctum of her puja room. Her pursuit of art reaches its high point in Mauritius where she paints the walls of the cavern later known as "Deetiji's 'Memory-Temple' – *Deetiji-ka-smriti-mandir*" (*River of Smoke*, 8). Deeti thus continues the indigenous traditions of art she learned from her grandmother in her native village Madhubani, famous for its gorgeously painted walls and decorations. Unrepressed by her patriarchal in-laws, she relentlessly pursued her art in her inner shrine, her private domain. In Mauritius too, she had carved out her "'puja room'", "a small hollow in the rock, hidden away at the back" (*RS*, 7). The members of Deeti's indentured community dispersed within the island and abroad would mobilize once in a year to make elaborate preparations for their annual pilgrimage to Deeti's Memory Temple. This Temple becomes a cultural strategy of identity formation. Robbed of a past, a history, a culture, the descendants of Deeti's clan have developed a culture that draws its energy from displacement, heterogeneity, syncreticity. The saga of the patriarch Kalua's deliverance from the *Ibis*, given a mythical dimension by Deeti's paintings, is an event oft recounted by the Colver clan. This narrative is to them what "the story of the watchful geese was to ancient Rome – an instance when Fate had conspired with Nature to give them a sign that theirs was no ordinary destiny" (*RS*, 13). This "*prophetic vision of the past*" (Ashcroft, "Globalization, the Transnation and Utopia", 17, italics original) which through repetition becomes a part of everyday life is a strategic attempt to trace the origins of the family's history and to recover some pure cultural identity. It is also

designed to resist the master discourse of imperial History. The mode of this resistance is the operation of "productive memory" because "memory circumvents the striated space of history and reinfuses the present with a sense of potentiality" (Ashcroft, "Globalization, the Transnation and Utopia", 17). Deeti's uninterrupted pursuit of her art in a foreign space illustrates Ghosh's non-normative concept of the South Asian Diaspora which is oriented around an ability to recreate a culture in diverse locations. Furthermore, Deeti's experience accords well with Cliford's observations that "women in diaspora remain attached to, and empowered by, a 'home' culture and a tradition" (*Routes*, 259). For Deeti, drawing is her "principal means of remembrance: being unlettered, it was the only way she could keep track of her memories" (*RS*, 10). Ashcroft's observations on "the productive and significatory operation of memory" are pertinent to the context: "Memory is that medium in which utopia can either dissolve into nostalgia or become the mode of transformation." Moreover, memory is "the smooth space that flows through and around the striated space of history, the space of a nation state and all structures of fixed identity" ("Globalization, the Transnation and Utopia", 22). Deeti thus carves out her own strategies of survival in an alien land as culture becomes transnational.

The architecture of Deeti's temple resembles the architecture of the World Mountain. The inner core, the ur-temple, the ultimate darkness is the anonymous region of the subconscious, the amoral primal forces. The external world of the ego, of consciousness and history is connected by the "narrow", "tilted fissure" (*RS*, 7). In her unwavering quest to create her private universe, Deeti transforms the caverns scattered with "ossified human dung, rendered odourless by age" (*RS*, 12) into a realm of beauty and congeniality. Stimulated by the creative inspiration, Deeti breaks through the barriers of the insulated, separative ego, and ventures out into the boundless collective unconscious which explains her mystical trance on the *Ibis*. In a moment of self-transcendence, she develops the superhuman capacity to detach the spirit from the flesh and hence asserts that "the winds had lofted her to a height from which she could look down and observe all that was happening below – not in fear and panic, but in unruffled calm" (*RS*, 16). As her imagination leads her along unsuspected ways, she bears Iris Murdoch's thesis out: "Love of beauty and desire to create inspire us to activities which increase our grasp of the real" (59). Naturally, Deeti is privileged to look beyond phenomena

into the noumenon which underlies her claim that "the tufaan had chosen her to be its confidante, freezing the passage of time, and lending her the vision of its own eye" (*RS*, 16). From the vantage point of her non-empirical self she surveys the world around her and transcripts that into art. The state of instinctive seizure in which she could exist and enjoy the essence of things seemed to bring about in her "a curious Time-shift" so that she appeared to herself "to stand and stare at them in some timeless region" (Priestley, 287). Coming down to the empirical plane, Deeti can conjecture that her extra-sensory perception lasted for "a matter of a few seconds" (*RS*, 17). Deeti's assertion and her revelation in her painting that the storm which befell the *Ibis* was "wrapped around an eye" (*RS*, 20) predates the scientist's discovery that hurricanes can be created by winds rotating round a still centre or an "eye". For Neel it was a mystery that how could it be possible then that Deeti, "an illiterate, frightened young woman, had been granted this insight? And that too at a time when only a handful of the world's most advanced scientists knew of it" (*RS*, 21)? Deeti thus belongs to the elusive band of initiates in Ghosh's oeuvre – Shombhu Debnath in *The Circle of Reason*, Mangala in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Fokir in *The Hungry Tide* – who with their extra-sensory perceptions erode Enlightenment's empirical rationalism.

Sea of Poppies focuses on the transportation of Indian indentured labourers to Mauritius and exposes imperial machinations to wrest control of Indian economy. *River of Smoke* traces the complex chain of events leading to the outbreak of the Opium War in 1839 between China and England. The immoral trading practices of the West in general and the British in particular bred deceit, hypocrisy, and exploitation. The rhetoric of the democratizing powers of Free Trade under the pretext of which they carried out their nefarious activities animates *River of Smoke* as it did in its prequel. The extent to which Britain's illicit opium trade with China served as British colonialism's financial engine is evident from the Chamber of Commerce's influential member John Slade's observation that the Empire "'reaps an annual revenue of five million pounds and involves the most vital interests of the mercantile, manufacturing, shipping and maritime interests of the United Kingdom'" (*RS*, 517). Not unsurprisingly, in the several consecutive meetings of the foreign opium merchants, English entrepreneurs pass themselves off as "crusaders in the cause of Free Trade" (*RS*, 244). Like Captain Chillingworth in the first part, Mr. Charles King, "one of the

few true Christians" (*RS*, 219), is disillusioned with this vicious opium trade and exposes the Britishers' duplicity. Though they endlessly affirm to bring Freedom and Religion to China, they resort to "the most absurd subterfuges" (*RS*, 354) which breed corruption as hundreds of Chinese officials are bribed to safeguard the safe passage of opium. When he urged in a public resolution to refrain from a trade that is "fraught with evils, commercial, political, social and moral" and desires to establish "true Christian amelioration" (*RS*, 387), his plea is instantly rejected. The European belief that free trade and the internationalisation of commerce would create wealth for all nations and produce a new peaceful world order is contested by the Chinese authority which reject the idea that trade could elevate human society. The newly appointed Commissioner of Canton Lin Zexu surprises foreign merchants by announcing that the opium trade was over and orders them to surrender their stock. Consequently, a "good" and "honest" Commissioner, the "best officer in country" (*RS*, 267), "an incorruptible public servant [...] a scholar and an intellectual" (*RS*, 424) is disparaged by the British as a "madman or monster", who with the ordering of two executions has "scant regard for human life"(*RS*, 463). The unfazed Lin demands the protesting British to hand over the prominent opium trader Lancelot Dent. In a calculated move, Captain Elliot, the crown official appointed to look after British interests in Canton, decides to concede to Lin's emphatic ways. Sooner than later, the British decide to assemble expeditionary forces on the Chinese shores to open up Chinese markets to opium trade. Defying the dictates of the Chinese Emperor, the British attempt to conceal their greed in a nicely cloaked evangelical language: "It is the work of another, invisible, omnipotent: it is the hand of freedom, of the market, of the spirit of liberty itself, which is none other than the breath of God" (*RS*, 463). The war between China and Britain that this opium trade ignites does not simply stem from cultural difference or conflicting claims over territory but from the capitalist ideology of the realpolitik. The sovereign thinking of a third-world nation is dissolved into some ubiquitous yet absolutist space of empire and the invisible hand of some supra-state or super capital.

The problem of the Chinese administration is further complicated by the complicit involvement of Indian and Chinese merchants profiteering from British imperialism. The narrative traces the rags-to-riches success story of one such collaborator, the Parsi Bahram Modi, sympathises with his professional struggles

and personal dilemmas and his sad demise. Goaded by his struggle for one-upmanship with his in-laws, Bahram establishes one of the largest and most consistent profitable export divisions in Bombay and resists the British monopoly of opium business in India. An ordinary Parsi boy with no prospects for advancement, Bahram's fortunes open up when the foremost Parsi businessmen of the city Seth Rustomjee Pestonjee Mistrie is compelled by circumstances to marry his daughter Shireenbai with Bahram. The "penniless provincial" (*RS*, 49) is looked upon by his in-laws as an intruder who aimed to dispossess them off their inheritance. Eager to climb up the ladder and quit his rustic background, the ambitious Bahram, fully aware of the latest openings in trade, persuades his father-in-law to depart from the firm's practices and begins to export opium illegally to China. The calculative Bahram knew quite well that the export trade between western India and China was steadily on the rise and offered all kinds of opportunities, "not just of profit but also of travels, escape and excitement" (*RS*, 50). Far from acknowledging his unscrupulous nature, he feels pride in his clever opportunism which his father-in-law failed to take up thereby ruining his business. As for him, Bahram's entrepreneurial success provides him an honourable entry into the English dominated Chamber of Commerce which makes him swell in "proprietorial pride" because "after all these years it still thrilled him to think that he was as much a part of this scene as any foreigner could ever hope to be" (*RS*, 231). In the beginning of the narrative, Bahram's ship the *Anahita*, financed by his in-laws, carries not only "the most expensive cargo that Bahram had ever shipped" but also "possibly the single most valuable cargo that had ever been carried out of the Indian subcontinent" (*RS*, 45). A businessman of "exceptional ability and vision", "a kind of genius" (*RS*, 224), Bahram is confident that in spite of the Chinese Emperor's edicts prohibiting opium trade the "Mandarins will not tolerate any change – or else where they will get cumshaw? [...] Those bahn-chahts are the biggest smokers of all" (*RS*, 230). His knowledge about the Chinese demand for opium makes him assert to Napoleon that although it is "in principle a clandestine race", it is "difficult to put an end to it for many officials, petty and grand, benefit from it" which makes them "find ways around the laws" (*RS*, 174). Even the British merchants attribute the overwhelming success of the trade to the "marvellous degree of imbecility, avarice, conceit, and obstinacy" (*RS*, 420) of the Chinese race. That this discourse smells of Western arrogance is hinted at by none

other than Napoleon himself when he prophetically states that "[w]hat an irony it would be if it were the opium that stirred China from her sleep" (*RS*, 174).

Bahram's frequent travels from Bombay to Canton provide the narrative the opportunity to explore the in-between spaces, the Derridean interstices, through which an individual crosses the borders between ethnicity and transnationality. For Parsis in the Indian diaspora, the fact of being a Parsi Zoroastrian marks his/her racial and religious identity followed by the nationalist and the wider transnational identities. Far from cancelling each other out, in Bahram's case, they complement one another. Since too much focus on ethnicity leads to fetishisation and essentialisation of identity, the mobile, hybrid Parsi self operates in ever-widening circles of being and belonging: "Where it concerned matters of belief Parsis had clung faithfully to the old ways, [...] but in other respects thay had borrowed freely from the customs and usages of their neighbours" (*RS*, 170). When he meets Napoleon Bahram's "adaptation in outward appearance" is balanced by "the preservation of an inner distinctiveness" (*RS*, 170) which enables him to extol the teachings of the prophet Zarathrustra. Bahram thus resolves the dialectic of the home and the world as enunciated by Partha Chatterjee: "The world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents one's inner spiritual self, one's true identity" (*The Nation and its Fragments*, 120). Resolving the conflicting spaces of the home and the world within his self, Bahram retains the spiritual distinctiveness of his culture and can make all the "compromises and adjustments necessary to adapt [...] to the requirements of a modern world" (Chatterjee, 120) without losing his true identity. In the alien space of the Manchu Empire, however, Bahram discovers his alter ego: "In Canton, stripped of the multiple wrappings of home, family, community, obligation and decorum, Bahram had experienced the emergence of a new persona one that had been previously dormant within him: he had become Barry Moddie" (*RS*, 52). The name of an individual connotes his fixity in family, nation and ethnicity. "The Name", observes Ashcroft, "stands for the illusion of an irreducible identity that locates *this particular* subject, *this particular* subjectivity and no other" ("Globalization, the Transnation and Utopia", 21). The absence of a name or the renaming of a diasporic subject is "the point of potentiality" at which he can be recognized as "cut adrift, absent from the nation or launched into the possibility of new life" (Ashcroft, "Globalization, the

Transnation and Utopia", 20). While Barrie Moddie is "confident, forceful, gregarious, hospitable, boisterous and enormously successful" in Canton, when he returns to Bombay his "other" self would be shrouded and "Barry would become Bahram again, a quietly devoted husband, living uncomplainingly within the constraints of a large joint family" (*RS*, 52). Bahram's multiple subject positions aptly demonstrate Amartya Sen's contention that "identities are robustly plural, and that the importance of one identity need not obliterate the importance of others". Furthermore, an individual has to make choices about "what relative importance to attach, in a particular context, to the divergent loyalties and priorities that may compete for precedence" (18). Ghosh thus veers away from the postmodern stance that identity is nomadic, endlessly wandering or deferred. He seems to be more at home with Stuart Hall's idea that positioning is central to any idea of identity which is "not necessarily armour-plated against other identities" not "wholly defined by exclusion" ("Minimal Selves", 46), and endorses the idea of "'unities'-in-difference" ("Minimal Selves", 45).

While the "shy, retiring", "dutiful" yet "unenthusiastic" (*RS*, 48) widow-like demeanour of Bahram's legal wife Shireenbai constricted his emotions, his endearing "lob-pidgin" (74) sessions with the widowed boat-girl Chi-mei opens up a new dimension in his personality. Their illicit romance transcends ethnic, linguistic, cultural and national boundaries. Bahram's emotional attachments with Chi-mei and their only son Ah Fatt alias Freddy are much stronger than his family in India. At the beginning of the narrative, Bahram is distraught by the news of Chi Mei's death and their son's disappearance. When destiny brings Freddy back to Bahram's life, the "spontaneous and affectionate" (*RS*, 143) father reinvents his being: "It was as though he were living, for the first time, the life he aspired to – in which he was a patriarch in his own right, passing on his wisdom and experience to his son" (*RS*, 143). Ah Fatt, however, does not acknowledge Bahram's love for him, and is "often unresponsive, and sometimes even resentful" (*RS*, 143) of his father's gestures. Such is the extent of the son's animosity towards his father that Ah Fatt considers Bahram to be selfish in his complaints to Neel: "'For Father 'Freddy' like pet dog. That why he pat and hug and squeeze. Father care only for himself; no one else'" (*RS*, 144). A zamindar in the past and now an employee in Bahram's firm, Neel never even thought of considering his father's illegitimate children as his half-siblings. Hence, he recognizes and

reiterates to Ah Fatt that Bahram's conduct towards his illegitimate family is "not just unusual but quite exceptional for a man of his circumstances" (*RS*, 144). It pleased Neel to find that that gradually Ah Fatt feels "exhilarated" to be at the "centre of his father's attention" (*RS*, 144).

Bahram's successes as an opium merchant are balanced by his failures as the fruits of his labour prove to be elusive. He suffers a huge financial setback because the storm in the sea damages both his ship the *Anahita* and the massive cargo of opium. Arriving in Canton's Fanqui-town or Foreign Enclave, the helpless Bahram fails to dispose off his cargo because of the stand-off between the adamant Chinese authority and the British enforcers of Free Trade. His situation becomes nore complicated when an arrest warrant is issued against his name. The gifted entrepreneur with a luxurious lifestyle feels tormented with the idea that the Chinese security are scrutinizing him at every nook and corner of Canton: "Everywhere he looked, eyes seemed to be following him: although he strode along as fast as he could, the two-minute walk seemed to last an hour" (*RS*, 494). The most decisive blow is struck when the British, in a strategic move, decide to surrender their stock of opium to the Chinese. Bahram, who proclaimed to be ""the most loyal of the Queen's subjects"" (*RS*, 453) is shattered with a "sense of betrayal" (*RS*, 518) because the entire edifice of his sense of the world and his place in it proves to be an illusion. With his debts rising high and prospects for the future receding, Bahram takes shelter in his private world of dreams about his lost Chinese lover which culminates in his hallucinatory suicide in the Pearl River: "she seemed to be looking up from under the water's surface, smiling at him, beckoning with a finger" (*RS*, 546). Bahram is a helpless individual at the mercy of the broad sweeps of politics and history. His self-defence to Napoleon when asked about the ethics of opium-trade reveals how Bahram negotiates with his sense of self and evaluates his position in the wake of capitalist ideology: "Opium is like the wind or the tides: it is outside my power to affect its course. A man is neither good nor evil because he sails his ship upon the wind. It is his conduct towards those around him – his friends, his family, his servants – by which he must be judged. This is the creed I live by" (*RS*, 175). By focusing on the trials and tribulations of a character caught against the whirlwinds of forces beyond his control, the narrative portrays "a broad and many-sided picture of the everyday life of the people" (Lukács, 39). The narrative thus weaves a balance between

"analytical" and "affective" histories which emphasize plural ways of being in the world.

Sea of Poppies explored the destruction of indigenous agricultural practices when the native peasants were forced by the colonizers to cultivate opium. This ecological imperialism was aggravated by the transportation of a pauperized pool of landless labourers to Mauritius. This led to the development of the capitalist world economy with its open plunder of the periphery for the benefit of the centre. *River of Smoke* presents another aspect of this pillage of peripheral natural resources through the British naturalist Frederick 'Fitcher' Penrose's money-making ambitions to extract rare Third World flora and fauna and sell them in the West. His imperialistic greed considers China as a country "singularly blessed in its botanical riches, being endowed not only with some of the most beautiful and medicinally useful plants in existence, but also with many that were of immense commercial value" (*RS*, 101). Penrose's ship the *Redruth*, which had revolutionized the business of transporting plants across the seas, is a mobile world of greenery. Inspired by the twin impulses of thrift and profit, the sparse and angular *Redruth* is "an extension of Fitcher's very being" (*RS*, 75). Displaying a nurseryman's great diligence in not wasting even a single drop of water, the frugal Penrose's mode of living contrasts sharply with Bahram's affluence on the *Anahita*. Penrose's utilitarian attitude towards the natural world is the exact counterpoint of Paulette's sensitivity towards it. The young Frenchwoman, who joins Penrose after their fortuitous meeting in Mauritius, is dismayed at his cruelty towards marine creatures. When a breathing porpoise is hauled up from the *Redruth*'s fishing lines, instead of setting it free Penrose slaughters it and uses its fat. A practical bourgeois, he looked upon Nature as an "assortment of puzzles" which after a proper solution could provide "rich sources of profit" (*RS*, 78). Penrose thus embodies the reductionist principles of Enlightenment rationalism which attempted to master nature conceived as an enormous, soulless mechanism. Denouncing this fragmented, mechanical worldview, Plumwood equates it with the rise of capitalism "which needed to turn nature into a market commodity and resource without significant moral or social constraint" (111). Rejecting Penrose's claims of human mastery and possession of nature, the idealistic Paulette imbibed her father Pierre Lambert's naturalistic outlook that the love of Nature is a "kind of religion, a form of spiritual striving". An advocate of a holistic and organic

Man-Nature relationship, Lambert believed that "in trying to comprehend the inner vitality of each species, human beings could transcend the mundane world and its artificial divisions" (*RS*, 78). In terms of their antithetical attitude towards Nature, Penrose and the Lamberts work out a nicely framed dialectic.

What motivates Penrose's adventures in China is the quest for the Holy Grail of Chinese nature, the rare flower known as the Golden Camellia. His knowledge of this coveted species derives from the commercially popular Chinese illustrations of exotic flora which were shipped to Britain along with the botanical collections. While Penrose is obsessed with his single-minded business to possess the flower, Paulette is more curious to know about the provenance of the illustration of the Golden Camellia. Prevented from entering Canton because of Chinese laws forbidding the presence of foreign women, her only source of knowledge about Canton is her childhood friend Robin Chinnery. Reunited after a prolonged separation, Robin, the son of the painter George Chinnery, promises to find the rare flower for Paulette. Granted "a privileged point of vantage" (*RS*, 370) and thereby serving as the narrator's alter ego, Robin in his heavily descriptive letters to Paulette vividly represents Canton's multicultural world. The pre-colonial world that Robin creates in his letters challenges the contemporary notions about cosmopolitanism being a postmodern phenomenon. He discovers a nuanced world when thousands of Achhas (the Cantonese word for Hindusthanis), Arabs, Persians and Africans lived together in Canton. The guardian deity of the city is goddess Kuan-yin, a "bhikkuni" from Hindusthan. Buddhists from Hindusthan had lived in Canton for centuries, the most famous of them being a Kashmiri monk called Dharamyasa. The most famous of Buddhist missionaries, the Bodhidharma, came to Canton from south India. The syncretism of this rich medieval culture is embodied in the architecture of a mosque, one of the oldest in the world built in the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad himself. It is "a most remarkable structure, no different, in outward appearance, from a Chinese temple – all except for the minaret, which is like that of any dargah in Bengal" (*RS*, 377). By recovering traces of this primitive world, Robin journeys forward in space but backwards in time. The new rules of dominance and autonomy which the British brought with them to Canton during the Opium trade failed to alter the older structures of cultural solidarity. The narrator's observations on this issue corroborate Robin's views on medieval multiculturalism and trans-racial

togetherness: "The ties of trust and goodwill that bound the Hongists to the fanquis were all the stronger for having been forged across apparently unbridgeable gaps of language, loyalty and belonging" (*RS*, 346). Despite the vicious nature of the Opium trade, by erasing boundaries between people it enforced cultural diversity. Indians from "Sindh and Goa, Bombay and Malabar, Madras and the Coringa hills, Calcutta and Sylhet" (*RS*, 185) flocked together to create the "Achha" community of Canton. Muslims, Christians, Hindus and Parsis from India, whose paths never crossed in the subcontinent enjoyed an inexplicable "mysterious commonality" (*RS*, 193) which was thrust upon them. They stand united against "every variety of foreign devil" (*RS*, 185): the British are scoffed as the "I-says" and the French jeered as the "Merdes" (*RS*, 185). Neel is quite correct in his observation that "Fungtai Hong was a world in itself, with its own foods and words, rituals and routines: it was as if the inmates were the first inhabitants of a new country, a yet unmade Achhasthan" (*RS*, 192).

A corollary of this rich hybrid world is the exhilarating carnivalesque mix of languages, sonorous yet at times confusing. The English language in *Sea of Poppies* is interspersed with Indian terms from Bengali or Bhojpuri, as well as scattered French. When the narrative ventures out in sea along with the *Ibis*, it enters into the intricate world of Laskari language. The Laskari language was a rich cosmopolitan language, the language of command or sailing ships drawn from the English, Malay, Hindusthani, Chinese, Malayalam and the entire Babel of languages spoken on board. An eclectic web, the laskari language has a labyrinthine network which can be a puzzle to a newcomer as Zachary discovers:

> 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 the 'ringeen', 'avast!' was 'bas!', and the cry of the middle-morning watch went from 'all's well' to 'alzbel'. The deck now became the 'tootuk' while the masts were 'dols'; a command became the a 'hookum' and instead of starboard and larboard, fore and aft, he had to sya 'jamna' and 'dawa', 'agil' and 'peechil'. (*SP*, 15-16)

The Laskari language, Ghosh observes is more like a "technical" and "specialized jargon" ("Networks and Traces", 34). The steady linguistic flow of this "unseen net of words" is the prime reason for the efficient functioning of the ship: "To work a sailship efficiently, dozens of men must respond simultaneously to a single

command" (Ghosh, "Of Fana's and Forecastles, 58). This lively melangue of tongues brings to mind Alu's "khichri of words" (*Circle of Reason*, 279) with which he communicates with the immigrant community in al-Ghazira. By foregrounding the remarkable vibrancy of the Laskari language the narrative celebrates the unsung lives of this mobile community and their lingua franca. The Lascars were the first Afro-Asians to participate freely in a globalized workspace, the first extensive travellers to settle in Europe, the first to adapt to a scheduled work culture and emergent new technologies. The Laskars were thus "in every sense the forerunners of today's migratory computer technicians, nurses, high-tech workers, and so on" (Ghosh, "Of Fana's and Forecastles, 58). The *Ibis* thus becomes a floating world with its own lexicon.

Amitav Ghosh's linguistic virtuosity takes a kaleidoscopic dimension in *River of Smoke*. The narrative opens in Mauritius and its first few pages are peppered with words from Mauritian creole and the Bhojpuri dialect of the Indian settler girmitiyas: "pus-pus", "palki", "bonoys", 'belsers", "bowjis", "salas", "sakubays", "bandobast", "gardmanzes", etc. By investing his narrative with native unfamiliar words and expressions, Ghosh imparts a sense of time and place to the multilingual universe of the Indian Ocean where one is "always surrounded by languages you don't understand" (Ghosh, "Untitled Books", 3). In a world where drug-peddlers become heroes, women disguise themselves as men, an ex-convict Indian landlord becomes a munshi, identities are endlessly reshaped, European, Indian and East Asian languages continuously interact with each other. The narrative shifts from thr indentured Indian labourers in Mauritius to the Indian mercantile community huddled in the "Achha Hong" complex in Canton. The phrase "Achha Hong" itself is a hybrid coinage. "Achha" is the Cantonese term for Indians; "Hong" is the Chinese word for trading house. The International Standard English of the third person narrative voice is sprinkled with words and phrases from the non-English linguistic world. The "Achhas", themselves a "motley gathering" from distinct parts of the Indian subcontinent, 'spoke between them more than a dozen different languages" (*RS*, 192). Bahram hears voices of the Chulia boatmen "talking, shouting and singing in Tamil, Telegu and Oriya" (*RS*, 63), Neel experiences employees hailing from disparate communities from the Bombay hinterlands conversing in "Gujarati, Marathi, Kachhi and Konkani" (*RS*, 313). Cantonese, Chinese, Portuguese, French, English, Mauritiun creole

languages seep into one another to create the hybrid pidgin language of the business community. Words like "chai" came from Cantonese, while the Portuguese word "falto" meaning fraudulent or false spoken by Bahram's efficient Portuguese manager Vico becomes *phaltu* on Achha tongues (*RS*, 192). A language with a peculiar syntax, pidgin has a peculiar sensibility of its own. While the grammar was that of the Cantonese, the words were mainly English, Portuguese and Hindusthani. The charming musical rhythm of Chi-mei's "sing-song" pidgin is noticeable when she expresses her sympathy for Bahram "'Mister Barry trouble have got? Blongi sad inside'" (*RS*, 70). The poetic and direct nature of this mode of communication is quite evident in Punhyqua's warnings to Bahram about the new governor Lin: "'Mr. Moddie, Lin Zexu, he savvy allo [...] Allo, allow. He have got too muchi spy. He sabbi how cargo come, who bringee, where it go. Allo he savvy. If he come Governor Canton too muchi bad day for trade" (*RS*, 291). Expressions such as these can only be understood by deducting the sense from the context. For the British, however, pidgin is an uncomfortable domain and they depend on "linkisters" i.e. three-way interpreters between Chinese hosts, pidgin and the English community. While discussing grave issues such as the Letters of the High Commissioner Lin the musical lilt of pidgin is supplanted by official English where translators play a key role. Exhilarated by this carnivalesque linguistic "chutneyfication", Neel plans a book on the multi-lingual commercial world of southern China whose proposed title is "*The Celestial Chrestomathy, Comprising A Complete Guide To and Glossary Of The Language Of Commerce in Southern China*" (*RS*, 272). Neel's *Chrestomathy*, a lexicon of English, Cantonese and pidgin, is inspired by his "providential" meeting with his "kindred spirit" (*RS*, 271) Liang-Kuei-Ch'uan, a printer and translator also known as Compton. As the compiler of this multilingual glossary Neel acts as the novelist's fictional double because *The Ibis Chrestomathy* has been published on Ghosh's website in 2008 when *Sea of Poppies* was published. The assertion that "words [...] no less than people, are endowed with lives and destinies of their own" (*The Ibis Chrestomathy*) is as much Neel's as his creator's. This linguistic hybridization is, no doubt, a corollary of multiculturalism. But to celebrate this multilingualism as a product of intermeshing of cultures is to overlook the strategies of resistance of South Asian colonized countries. By seizing the language of the centre i.e. English and re-positioning it in a discourse

suited to the colonized space, post-colonial literature writes back by the dual processes of "abrogation" and "appropriation" as Ashcroft explains:

> The first, the abrogation or denial of the privilege of 'English' involves a rejection of the metropolitan power over the means of communication. The second, the appropriation and reconstitution of the language of the centre, the process of capturing and remoulding the language to new usages, marks a separation from the site of colonial privilege. (*The Empire Writes Back*, 37)

By dislocating British English and introducing new cultural patterns into it, a postcolonial writer localizes it for creative use thereby producing a variety of "englishes". "To conquer English", declares Rushdie, "may be to complete the process of making ourselves free" (*Imaginary Homelands*, 17). By employing the strategies of code-switching and vernacular transcription, Ghosh abrogates the Standard English thereby strengthening his anticolonial stance.

The hybrid world of Achha Hong which Robin celebrates in his letters to Paulette is ravished by the brutal public executions of Punhyqua and Allow which predate the opium wars. These are followed by the bombardment of Canton by British and French gunships and the destruction of the thirteen foreign factories by the enraged mob which changed the place beyond recognition. Robin's premonition of the destruction of this incredible place inspired him to paint it on his canvas in July, 1839, seventeen years before the event took place. He also unearthed the secret that the plant called the Golden Camellia was nothing but a fictitious element, a moneyspinning "*HOAX*" (RS, 536) invented by a gentleman named William Kerr. What startles a sensitive artist like Robin is the riddle that a city "which has absorbed so much of the world's evil, has given, in return, so much beauty" (*RS*, 536) in the form of multitudes of flowers. An artist who sketches from life, which he finds "a great deal more rewarding" (*RS*, 352), comments on the nature of his art as an "epic scroll" which self-consciously draws attention to the nature of the narrative itself as a representation: "Events, people, faces, scenes would unroll as they happened: it will be something New and Revolutionary" (*RS*, 280). What is more, his "epic tableau" (*RS*, 215) is so wide that it as all-inclusive: "there are so many people here who simply *cannot* be left out" (*RS*, 215, italics original). The narrative's celebration of the micro-narratives of subaltern individuals and communities enables it to repudiate the imperial "forces of evil" which "celebrate their triumphal march through history" (*RS*,

553). Robin's paintings are the only surviving documents that testify to the existence of the rich multicultural world of 19th century Canton. Quite truly, the first two parts of the *Ibis Trilogy* are a diachronic version of history which re-interprets the imperial archives.