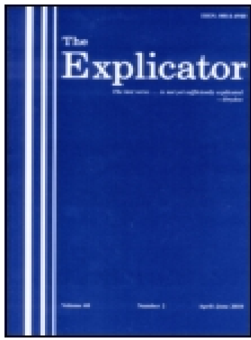

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Amitav Ghosh's SEA OF POPPIES: Speaking Weird English

Keywords: *Asian American historical novel, Asian American literary aesthetics, Asian American literature, Amitav Ghosh, Weird English*

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008), set prior to the first of the Opium Wars (1839–42), demonstrates unique and familiar images of polyculturalism[1] and the making of language, identity, and nation through characterizations and dialogue. Ghosh creates a mythical imagined community that emerges on a ship, the *Ibis*, where traditional hierarchical barriers based on language, gender, ethnicity, and class break down. The vessel is bound for Mauritius, where the human cargo will toil on plantations and/or serve prison sentences. Ghosh incorporates a spectacular blend of diverse forms of English, including nineteenth-century British, American, and Indian Englishes, nautical terms, Hindi-, Urdu-, and Chinese-influenced pidgin English, and the language of the lascars.[2] He posits English as a flexible and innovative language that reveals character through dialogue and unites disparate voices in a community that originates onboard a ship.

The community that begins on the *Ibis* creates a new and complex identity for itself and its members. Paulette, a young Frenchwoman raised by a Bengali nanny, disguises herself as a Brahmin's daughter to stow away and declares: "On a boat, no one can lose caste, and everyone is the same. . . . From now on, and forever afterwards, we will all be ship siblings—*jahazbhais* and *jahazbahen*s—to each other. There'll be no differences between us" (Ghosh 47). The group's spiritual leader, Deeti, embraces the ship itself as an "adoptive ancestor and parent of dynasties yet to come" (347). Individuals will be bound by shared experience rather than

divided by difference. Paulette suggests that there will be an understanding, if not equality, among all people. The voyage generates a new culture of all nations and none, a place of birth, fear, intimacy, and the unknown.

Evelyn Ch'ien's theory of Weird English demonstrates Ghosh's negotiation of the English within the novel. She explains that "weirding" derives from nonnative use of the language, deprives the standard form of its dominance, and allows other languages to enjoy the same status. Further, by weirding English, an author displays the linguistic peculiarities and creative reality of diasporic cultures, even at the price of sacrificing rules, precisely because the structures of standard English are often inadequate to depict palimpsestic forms of expression (Ch'ien 11). Weird English is the language of migrants, sojourners, and wanderers. All affected by English colonialism find themselves imagining new identities through these more liberating forms of English. The use of English may be worrisome and inhibiting, but it is necessary and vital, and the language for the creation of a new community.

Neel, a fallen *zemindar*, has superb mastery of English. This linguistic dexterity intimidates certain British businessmen and leads to his imprisonment. Yet later it opens a way to personal freedom, and he becomes a historian, storyteller, and scribe. Neel's relationship with Ah-Fatt, a Cantonese pidgin English speaker, teaches him love and friendship. In despair over his impending imprisonment, he awakens from a nightmare to hear a voice in the dark: "My name Lei Leong Fatt. . . . People call Ah Fatt. Ah Fatt your friend. Those faltering, childlike words offered more comfort than was in all the poetry Neel had ever read, and more novelty too, because he had never before heard them said—and if he had, they would have been wasted before, because he would not have been able to value them for their worth" (Ghosh 335). Weird English becomes a gateway to humanity and understanding, the language of intimacy and connection. Weird English parallels both the diversity of its speakers and the feelings they experience. The weirding of English creates culture; the variances in the language confirm its beauty, validity, and power. Ghosh espouses this creative form of English as a lingua franca and a language of all people.[3]

Asians and non-Asians navigate in Weird English. In India Weird English is built on the Indian English patois used by longtime English residents. Ghosh helps readers imagine the character's physical appearance, gestures, and emotional outlook based on dialogue. When Indian English is used by a native French speaker, further confusion erupts. Mrs. Burnham, the upper-class white woman in charge of Paulette, extols the virtues of the elderly

suitor, Mr. Kendalbushe: “He’s a *nabob* in his own right—made a mountain of *mohurs* out of the China trade. Ever since he lost his wife every *larkin* in town’s been trying to *bundo* him. I can tell you dear, there’s a *paltan* of *mems* who’d give their last *anna* to be in your *jooties”*[4] (Ghosh 267; italics added). Paulette yearns for more in marriage than financial security: “Surely it is more like a coup de foudre[5]—how do you say in English—like being shot by his bolt?” (Ghosh 269). This statement horrifies Mrs. Burnham, who misinterprets the phrase “shot by his bolt” as a sexual act, and warns Paulette that she should watch her language. Later, when Mrs. Burnham inquires if Paulette is pregnant, she asks, “Puggly, tell me the truth, I conjure you: there isn’t a rootie in the choola, is there?” (Ghosh 270). According to lexicographer James Lambert:

> Ghosh uses an old form that was common in the Army slang of the British in India: rootie. This is from Bengali “ruti,” not Hindi “roti.” . . . The Hindi word for oven is “chulha” (pronounced: choolhaa) . . . it is meant to mean “bun in the oven” . . . the English expression “bun in the oven” is not found before the 1950s. (J. Lambert, e-mail interview, June 8, 2012)

Ghosh translates a twentieth-century English language expression back to nineteenth-century Indian English to great comic effect. He celebrates how a common language enables a “deep, horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 7). The characters test their resilience through the abandonment of one society for another polycultural one. *Sea of Poppies* highlights the possibilities of Weird English: the language enables both the courageous and the lost to reinvent and commune as they head to an unknown future across the vast expanse of black water that carries their histories, fears, and dreams.

Notes

[1]*Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting* (2008) by Vijay Prashad describes a polycultural society as one that offers the flexibility of a shifting and evolving self that adapts and incorporates a wide variety of cultural influences within any singular idea of ethnicity or background.

[2]Lascars are Indian Ocean sailors who may or may not claim Portuguese, Indian, Chinese, African, European, and North American ancestry.

[3]We could argue that Ghosh attributes to Weird English the supposed intentions of the Esperanto language.

[4]*Nabob:* Westerner who went to India and made great wealth there through trade. *Mohurs*: Gold coins, historically about fifteen silver rupees. *Larkin:* Hindi for “girl” is *larki*. *Bundo:* In Hindi *bandho* means “tie it up,” but grammatically here the indicative “to tie up.” Very commonly the English used Hindi imperatives as indicatives or nouns. *Paltan:* An indigenous corruption of the English word *platoon*. *Mems:* Plural of *memsahib*, once exclusively used in connection with European women. *Annas:* Sixteen annas made a rupee before decimalization caught up with subcontinental currencies. *Jooties:* Hindi for shoes would be *juti*. Definitions of *mohurs, mems,*

and *annas* from *Words in Indian English* (1991) by S. Muthiah, a companion to the *Hobson-Jobson Dictionary*; other definitions supplied by James Lambert.

[5]Literally "a bolt of lightning" but used to mean "love at first sight." This was an expression that became popular toward the end of the eighteenth century and has an oblique reference to Zeus (hence lightning) but was popularized by Stendhal in the nineteenth century.

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