

# “Navigating Colonial Waters: The *ibis* as imperial architecture in Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*”.

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**Abstract:** Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* (2008) positions the schooner *ibis* as a central site where the mechanics of nineteenth-century empire become visible. This article argues that the ship functions as a floating microcosm of colonial power. Where the opium trade and the indenture system simultaneously dissolve traditional caste identities and reinforce imperial hierarchies of race and class. Through close reading of key shipboard episodes involving Deeti, Zachary, and the lascars, the paper demonstrates how Ghosh uses the voyage to expose the human cost of colonial commerce. The analysis suggests that the *ibis* is not merely a setting but an active instrument of empire, revealing how colonial waters reconfigured identity and labour in ways that resonate with contemporary patterns of global migration.

**Keywords:** Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, Colonialism, Opium trade, Indenture, *Ibis*, Maritime Literature.

**Introduction:** The nineteenth-century sailing ship occupies a charged place in colonial literature, operating as both vehicle and symbol of imperial expansion. In Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* (2008), the schooner *ibis* becomes the central stage where the economic and human mechanisms of empire intersect. Originally built for the opium trade between India and China, the vessel is repurposed to transport indentured labours to Mauritius, forcing a collision between commerce, coercion, and caste on a single floating space. Critics have examined Ghosh’s treatment of language and diaspora in the novel, yet less attention has been paid to how the physical ship itself functions as an active instrument of colonial power. This paper argues that the *ibis* operates as a microcosm of empire in *Sea of Poppies*, a site where traditional identities are simultaneously dissolved and imperial hierarchies are reinforced through the regulation of space, labour, and language. By reading the ship as colonial architecture rather than neutral setting, the voyage reveals how colonial waters reconfigured social relations in ways that continue to shape contemporary migration and global inequality.

**Research Methodology:** This study employs a textual analysis approach grounded in Post colonial theory to examine the representation of colonial space in Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* (2008). The primary text was subjected to close reading, with particular attention to descriptions of the ship *ibis*, its spatial organization, and the interactions among its multinational crew and passengers. Key passages relating to the vessel’s construction, hierarchical divisions, linguistic practices, and cargo were selected for detailed analysis to demonstrate how the ship functions as a microcosm of imperial systems.

The theoretical framework draws on Micheal Foucault’s concepts of heterotopia and Mary Louise Patt’s notion of the “Contact Zone” to interpret the *ibis* as a site where colonial power is both enacted and contested. These concepts provide a lens for analysing how physical space aboard the ship regulates identity, labour, and authority under empire.

Secondary sources include peer-reviewed articles and book chapters on Ghosh's *ibis* trilogy, colonial maritime history, and nineteenth century indenture. Scholarly criticism was used to situate the novel within existing debates on Post colonial literature and to support the interpretations of the ship as colonial architecture.

### **Results: 1. The ship as constructed imperial infrastructure:**

The novel presents the *ibis* as a product of intersecting colonial networks rather than a neutral vessel. Descriptions of its origin establish that imperial power operates through material production. The ship's "check history" and multinational construction demonstrate that colonial infrastructure depends on labour systems that cross national boundaries. This positions the *ibis* as a pre-existing site of empire before the main narrative begins.

### **2. Spatial organization as enforced hierarchy:**

Close reading of shipboard scenes shows that physical space on the *ibis* reproduce imperial social order. The division between officer's cabins and the forecabin creates a vertical mapping of race and class. Movement between this zone is regulated by rank, indicating that colonial authority is maintained through architectural control. The deck thus functions as a compressed version of colonial society.

### **3. Language and labour as mechanism of control:**

The analysis finds that command structures aboard the *ibis* rely on a manufactured lingua franca. The use of lascar pidgin for orders shows how colonialism generates new forms of communication to manage a heterogeneous workforce. This linguistic system combined with the ship's primary functions of transporting opium and indentured labourers, confirms that the vessel operates to convert human being into colonial commodities.

Discussions: The findings demonstrate that Ghosh's representation of the *ibis* extends beyond setting to functions as a deliberate mapping of colonial power. The ship's constructions through transnational labour networks indicates that empire operates not only through military force but through the production of infrastructure that precedes and enables exploitations. This challenges readings that treat the *ibis* primarily as a space of subaltern agency.

While Anupama Arora that the novel's lascar pidgin creates a "demonstrate linguistics space" (Arora 2015, 112), the present analysis suggests that the language instead serves command and control. The pidgin emerges from the need to manage a coerced workforce, indicating that linguistic hybridity aboard the *ibis* remains subordinated to colonial labour demands. Thus, the ship does not dissolve hierarchy so much as reconfigure it under new conditions.

Similarly, critical emphasis on the *ibis* as a site of diasporic formations must be balanced against its role as a technology of displacement. The physical division of deck space and the ship's dual functions as opium carrier and transport for indentured labours reveal that mobility here is state directed rather than liberatory.

Reading the vessel as colonial architecture therefore reframes the novel's opening voyage: it's less an escape from land-based caste than as extension of imperial regulations onto water.

These implications extend beyond literary analysis. By materializing colonial process within the contained space of a ship, *Sea of Poppies* offers a model for understanding how contemporary global systems continue to regulate migration and labour through controlled transit Zanes. The *ibis* thus anticipates modern forms of confined mobility, from detention centre to cargo vessels, where sovereignty operates through spatial management.

**Conclusion:** This study has demonstrated that the *ibis* in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* functions as colonial architecture rather than neutral setting. Through its multinational construction, spatial division, and regulated language of command, the ship materializes the system of labour, hierarchy, and control that define nineteenth-century empire. The analysis of the vessel's physical and social organization reveals that colonial power operates through infrastructure and mobility, converting the ocean into a managed territory of imperial expansion.

By reading the *ibis* as a microcosm of empire, the novel challenges interpretations that emphasize only hybridity or diasporic agency aboard the ship. The evidence indicates that moments of cross-cultural contact remain structured by colonial demands for opium and indentured labour. Consequently, *Sea of Poppies* presents the voyage not as liberation from land-based constraints but as an extension of those constraints into maritime space.

The significance of this reading extends beyond the *ibis* trilogy. Understanding the ship as a technology of colonial regulations provides a framework for examining how contemporary forms of transit continue to govern migration and labour through confinement and surveillance. Future research could extend this spatial analysis to other vessels in colonial literature to trace how maritime setting reproduce or resists imperial systems across different historical contexts.

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