

NON-FICTION

Scented Worlds

SYEEDA JAGIRDAR

Sharmila sat still in a corner seat of the subway, on her way home, from downtown. The officials in their shining towers had summoned her for a hearing after she had missed two citizenship tests in a row. So she had expected to find herself before a judge. Instead, she was led to a large testing area and handed a citizenship test. It was their way of having one take the test. Silly official people! The whole thing was so-o-o-easy. It disappointed her, as had many other things, since she first arrived. What had she really expected of this land?

The night before, her husband had urged her to study for a surprise test. Her eight-year-old son told her he wanted to his citizenship too. "It's not fair, Mum" he said, "If you fail, I get to fail too!" She had smiled and wondered if he was right.

All around her swirled "smells". Smells that revealed the intricate contents of each colorful individual. A wizened looking woman, in a multi-colored green speckled sari smelled of cumin, turmeric and sambar masala. As Sharmila looked at her, the woman looked away, her eyes, like scurrying little mice. The desi kind of mice. The train stopped at Victoria Park. Sharmila wondered if her husband was going to be late again tonight.

A girl got on. Youngish, South-East Asian looking. Sharmila could barely detect a small about her. She put her nose to the stale subway air and pulled in another waft of air to identify origin. The tangerine smells of Body Shop products mixed with the youthful essence emanating from her skin. She was probably born in Canada, fated to lose desi origins.

A voluptuous blonde slid into the seat next to the Indian girl. She seemed to be around thirty. Barbie doll curves. The kind desi men dream of, but rarely dated. Sharmila once overheard two desi men in a bus, "These angrezi girls spend too much money and they want you to understand them. And variety is what to be seen around with you. The desi variety is definitely better."

This blonde did not seem to be Canadian. This was definitely the sensuous European kind, with an oil-based perfume and a look of utter disdain about her.

All the other women appeared to blend into the background and they looked away from the blonde; the men however stole covetous glances at her. Sharmila wondered if he would glance too, if he were here. The smell of their unrequited desires made the place warm and humid. The subway carriage was suddenly a lush torrid green jungle and the blonde a rare colorful bird of paradise. Sharmila sighed to herself.

The gift, or one could call it, the curse, of her nose. Her nose translated everything she sniffed into words,

images and unearthly visions. Sharmila's family doctor in Toronto thought she might have a mild case of Synaesthesia, a rare neurological peculiarity in which one's sense perceptions blended into each other with startling results. "Not to worry," he had said, "Many painters and writers who have this call it a gift."

Sharmila's station appeared at the end of the dark tunnel. Warden Station. As she walked down, she noticed that everyone was running by her urgently, while she climbed down the steps, one at a time. It was like a scene from a Bollywood movie, in which she was from another time zone, walking in slow motion, while everyone else seemed to be running frantically in search of something. Sharmila seemed to have more milliseconds to experience things around her. Sharmila thought to herself, "O ba ba! What were they running for?" These people were running in search of Time!

As Sharmila pushed open the door at the bottom of the staircase to go to the Warden station parking lot, the Toronto air brought in the warm smell of the breath of her Nani, calling her across the light years from inside her grandfather's bungalow in Sylhet. She was suddenly eight years old again and listening to her Nani, a retired schoolteacher, telling her about the meaning of Time. The tin-roof crackled as the metal contracted in the cold. In the distant dark corners of the ancient forest, a jackal howled to his comrades.

"Come, darling, lie beside me."
"Nani, O Nani!"

Sharmila jumped up on her Nani's lacquer polished four-poster bed, under the cotton mosquito net. Her fair, round-faced Nani ruffled Sharmila's plaited hair with her fragile fingers.

"Nani, what will I look like when I am old? Will I look like you?"

"Darling, Time will beat all of us in the end. The only things that will remain are your faith, patience, good deeds and the way you help other people to find the Truth."

"Like the Buddha?"

"Yes, darling. Like all great men and women such as the Sufi Shahjalal and Mother Teresa in Kolkata." Sharmila hugged her grandmother and went to sleep.



Once, on a cold night, she had come face to face with a homeless person in downtown Toronto. She had been shocked, horrified! The odour of the homeless woman was overpowering. It twisted like an angry cobra through her nostrils, flaring her insides. Suppose she became like one of them. It was too easy, too easy. Suppose her husband lost his job or became disabled? Or even abandoned her? Oh, why was she so afraid of being alone here? She pictured herself on a desolate Canadian winter night:

A Canadian winter night.
A clean sweep of sparkling snow. Grey streets lined in white chalk.
The whispering lingering white fear
The dark silent promise of a terrifying, easy death.
A crystallized white corpse in the morning downtown streets.
It was that easy. It was that easy

Sharmila shuddered. She shook her head to chase the thoughts out, like errant children, out and away from the inner chambers of her mind.

She walked to her closet and looked at her collection of colorful saris. They were her pride and joyous pastime. She loved to touch them, to caress them. The smell of her saris took her back to a time of reading and listening to classics on Nani's gramophone. There were the cotton Kota saris, the Tangaal thread-work saris, the Rajshahi silks, the Mirpur Katans and the ubiquitous Jamdani! She took out a Jamdani sari, eggshell white with crimson touches. Would she be daring and sport a sleeveless blouse with it? What would her husband say? Would he notice this sari on her or would he not? Or would the Toronto tiredness be in his eyes?

Before they came to this country of cold rocks, they would read poetry to each other: soothing Tagore, fiery Nazrul. Now all those poems had become icy dangling modifiers; syntactic structures that were unpronounceable tongue twisters in the northern hemisphere. A long time ago, they would sit on their veranda of their house in Bailey Road and gaze at the full moon. A book of poems would complete this occasion.

It was time for her to start the cooking. Out had come a Bengali cookbook. Her aunt had given her this book when she had got married and set up house. "This is for you, so that your husband doesn't starve to death", they all cared more about her husband than her. No one had ever given him a book about anything. Yesterday, her husband had demanded a desi vegetable dish, so she decided to give it a try. Potoler dolma.

She had gone to the desi shop on the corner of Markham and Eglinton yesterday. The sign proclaimed proudly "HALAL BANGLADESHI, PAKISTANI, INDIAN MEAT SOLD HERE". There

were familiar smells inside the shop: Tibet soap and Tibet vanishing cream, half-burnt samosas, chanachur. She had picked up some fresh coriander leaves and some green chillies.

A few of the vegetables, like the half-dried pumpkin and the coveted potol, lay shriveled up in a corner.

The dish that her husband had demanded was not possible. The vegetables had not been fresh enough. Sharmila hoped nervously that her husband could not mind. So it would be simple Bengali fare. Dal, rice, bhaji, fried fish and of course chilies, the constant without which the meat-eating fiends would howl. "Fish, fish, again fish! O Mummy, I want Bangla curry chicken." How warming, on kulli-cold nights, was Bangla food prepared from scratch. None of those fancy French names, just plain semi-vowels and Bengali fricative consonants thrown in to make it sound pleasurable.

Hot steam was escaping from the frothing Basmati rice on the electric stove. It was almost done. Sharmila still cooked rice the traditional Dadi-Nani way, by letting the rice boil in the water and then straining the starchy water away.

The steam now began to form patterns above the sink. She read the lines of her life in the steam as easily as a fortuneteller reads tealeaves. The change in him had come slowly like the acrid smell of gas seeping from an ancient oven. Even the comfortable husband smell had changed into a scent that she could no longer define.

At first it had been the despair of never finding a job. And then the miracle! A corporate job! But then his eyes changed. At a corporate party, he kept away from her, as if he was almost ashamed of her! He laughed easily with the bleached corporate cougars whose nips and tucks squeaked at every laugh. He looked at her but once, with a certain annoyance at her desi sari.

Pain seeped in as it always did, little by little, in droplets. Fluid, nascent, pungent. It thropped by the throat and scraped away her throat cells. Hurting, she wanted to grip a knife and slit away her pain. Pain also swept in the smell of the homeless woman and fear jabbed her throat. How was she to keep it all together? Her other self? Her family? This new city? As Sharmila washed her warm face at the kitchen sink, she could hear the wind-snow flying at the windowpanes. She hoped that he would not notice her swollen eyes at the dinner table. Her hands shook a little. The steam had now dissipated into domestic ether space.

The rice was done.

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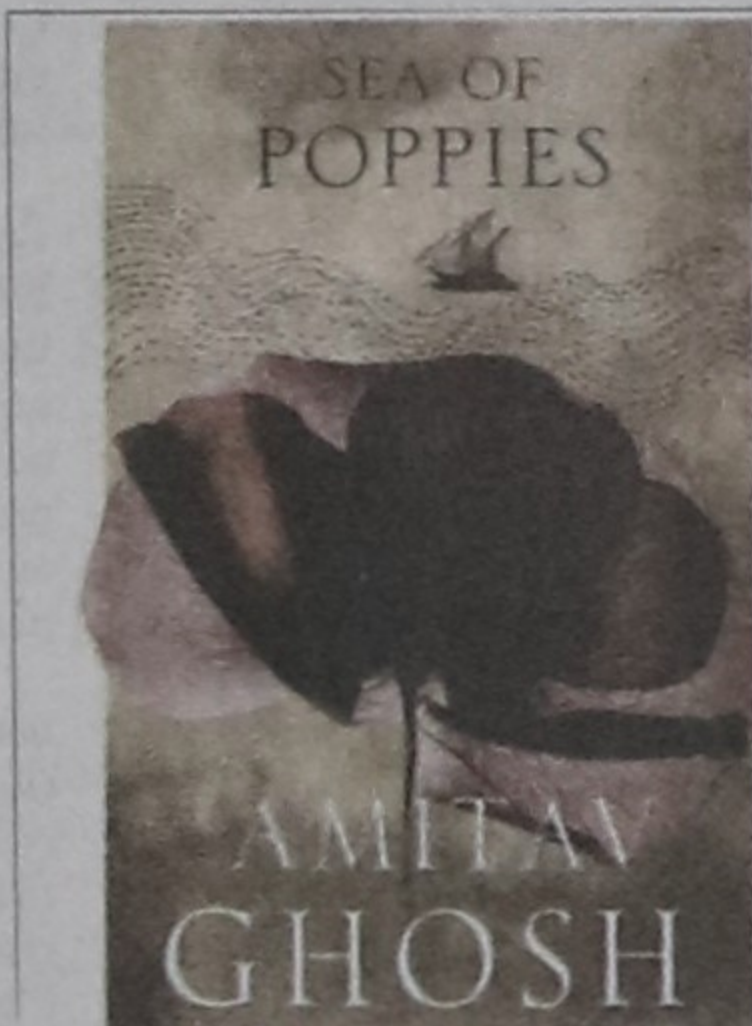
Ship Ahoy!

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

This is it! This is the book that Amitav Ghosh has talked about and read from during his recent visit to Dhaka (*Sea of Poppies*, Delhi: Penguin Viking, 2008). Anyone who has been to Ghosh's talk must remember his immediate response to the warm reception given to him by Independent University, Bangladesh: "I wish my parents were here to see how Dhaka had honoured me!" This remark mediated through a shadowy line combines personal 'desire' with the social aspects of language—an idea which I think is characteristic of almost all of Ghosh's writing.

Sea of Poppies, the first in Ibis trilogy, is no different. It is an engrossing story involving members of the schooner Ibis. The characters are from all over the world: from Bihar to Baltimore, from China to Paris, from London to Rangoon. It is fate (or lack of it) that has turned these characters into ship-siblings, i.e. *jahaj bhai*s and *jahaj bahens*. Their mode of communication is a maritime language that was common among the colonial ships sailing the Indian Ocean. Ghosh, by his own admission, had spent hours in the Greenwich Royal Maritime Museum in London to make sense of lascar language. He relates this pidgin language with the "Tower of Babel" in order to subvert communicative purpose of language that can be a cause of serious (com)-motion. Hence one running theme of the novel is the desire for freedom that this Mauritius-bound ship has to offer for the individuals who, to a great extent, are running away from their own identities. The characters are stowaways who take Ibis to be a bird that will take them away from caste, colour, race, sexual humiliation, judicial jugglery and poverty, and give them a new identity once they reach the shore across the ocean. The ship is thus described as "A great wooden *mari-bap*, an adoptive ancestor and parent of dynasties yet to come." The desire for freedom is so intense that it outweighs the taboos of crossing the black water. One character even thinks that they are on a pilgrimage: "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 be ship-siblings—jahaj bhai and jahaj bahens—to each other. There'll be no difference between us."

It all seems like an Opium-induced Utopian dream. The irony is Ibis used to be a slave ship, and has now become a floating home for indentured labourers. The irony is that the linguistic overtones of the pilgrimage is tinged with the idea that the Ibis appears to be



an intruder from the unthly black water that constantly threatens the holy Ganges. Thus a topsy-turvy ("oolter-poolter" in lascar lingua), world view is presented in which the ship epitomises a new form of slavery—albeit an abstract and notional one. Nevertheless, Ghosh does not present his characters as subjects of colonial gaze or as objects for discovery and subjugation. He simply presents his characters as a wonderful document of human spirit at its most attractive and serious.

Hence, in a trance, Deeti envisages the ship "heading in her way" even though she has never seen a sea-going vessel. She sketches the image of her vision on a mango leaf with sindoor and places it in her shrine that transforms the journey-to-be into a spiritual one. "It was the river itself that had granted Deeti the vision: that the image of the Ibis had been transported upstream, like an electric current, the moment the vessel made contact with the sacred waters". The fact that Deeti was impregnated by her brother-in-law to hide the impotency of her husband and to salvage family honour highlights the presence of unholy in land. The vision can thus be construed as a divine dictum, a supernatural event that sets the tone of the novel.

Thus, the line between micro-cosmos and macro-cosmos is constantly challenged. We are introduced to a mixed-blood American who became the first mate of the Ibis by sheer accident; the only reason he could navigate the ship to the shore was due to the lascar leader Serang Ali who relied more on astronomical knowledge than the technological sextants. Deeti loses her opium addicted husband, and flees the funeral pyre with the help of a gigantic yet simple-minded wester-turned-cart-driver, the untouchable Kalua. Then there is the bankrupt Raja who witnesses the façade of justness of English laws as his property is forfeited and he's sent to Mauritius on exile. The

orphaned French girl Paulette Lambert, wet-nursed by an Indian woman, dresses up as a local woman to join the motley crew. Earlier, she was forced to comply with the pervert desire of a baboo with a fetish for domination.

Set in the nineteenth century, on the eve of the Opium War, *Sea of Poppies* offers a gallery of characters that can be found in any other period-piece. Ghosh even maintains the aura of historical novels that brings him close to Walter Scott. Ghosh's eye for detail (aided no doubt by his training as an anthropologist) makes the novel read as one within the realistic tradition, much like E. M. Forster. Yet in Ghosh, the native characters resist being flatly stereotypical. The further the nineteenth century recedes into history the more it is reproduced in a variety of forms. The overwhelming presence of lascar language may make it difficult for readers, a difficulty perhaps added to by the indiscriminate use of dialects, pidgin languages and Indianisation of English reminds one of Rushdie. However, Ghosh is not writing a metafiction where fiction and facts enjoy a tug of war. Ghosh seems more focused on giving the lascars their due in maritime history than turning them into fantastic characters with political agenda of righting wrongs in history. The primary objective of Ghosh's documentation, it appears, is aimed at demystifying the lascars.

The first mate of Ibis, Zachary Reid, for example, "had thought that lascars were a tribe or nation, like the Cherokee or Sioux; he discovered now that they came from places that were far apart, and had nothing in common, except the Indian Ocean; among them were Chinese and East Africans, Arabs and Malays, Bengalis and Goans, Tamils and Arakanese". Zachary becomes alive to these people and their ability through Serang Ali. Later when Paulette asks, "But tell me Mr. Reid, how is it that you communicate with your lascars? Do they speak English?" Zachary offers a matter-of-fact answer. "They know the commands," said Zachary. "And sometimes, when it's needed, Serang Ali translates."

It is through these scantily-dressed natives we come to know more about the aspirations and frustrations of the

people on the lower decks than the usual white heroes in uniforms from the upper decks who pervade colonial travelogues and naval discourse. The white supremacy is acknowledged, but not without a grain of salt.

Through the bankrupt king, Neel Ratan Halidar, we come to realise that the English had become the new Brahmins. The Judge's pronouncement on the caste system sounds empty when he claims, "But we see no merit whatsoever in the contention that men of high caste should suffer a less severe punishment than any other person, such a principle has never been recognized nor ever will be recognized in English law, the very foundation of

which lies in the belief that all are equal who appear before it."

The myth of equality thus falls flat as Raja Neel Ratan joins the troop of lower caste travellers to work in the sugar plantation in Mauritius. The story ends with a huge storm, and the course of Ibis becomes unclear. Ghosh has suspended the story like shehzade, the madam storyteller in the Arabian Nights in order to leave the reader crave for the second spell of his verbal magic.

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Extract

And the malums? The Kaplan? Where are they?
Not aboard yet, said Rajoo.
This delighted Jodu, for it meant that the lascars had the run of the vessel. Come on, he said to Rajoo, let's look the ship over while we can.

They headed first for the officers' section of the vessel, the peechil-kamre—the after-cabins—which lay directly beneath the quarter-deck: they knew they would never again set foot there, except as topas or mess-boy, and were determined to make the most of it. To get to the peechil-kamre they had to go through one of two companionways that were tucked under the overhang of the quarter-deck: the entrance on the dawa side led to the officers' cabins and the other to the adjoining compartment, which was known as the 'beech-kamra' or midships-cabin. The dawa companionway opened into the cuddy, which was where the officers ate their meals. Looking around it, Jodu was astonished by how carefully everything was made, how every eventually had been thought of and provided for: the table at the centre even had rims around its sides, with little fenced enclosures in the middle, so that nothing could slip or slide when the schooner was rolling. The mates' cabins were on either side of the cuddy, and they were, in companion, somewhat plain, just about large enough to turn around in, with bunks that were not quite long enough for a man to stretch out his legs in comfort.

The Kaplan's stateroom was furthest aft, and there was nothing about this karma that was in the least bit disappointing: it extended along the width of the stern and its wood and brass shone brightly with polish; it seemed grand enough to belong in a Raja's palace. An end of it there was a small, beautifully carved desk, with tiny shelves and an inkwell that was built into the wood; at the other end was a spacious bunk with a polished candle-holder affixed to one side. Jodu threw himself on the mattress and bounced up and down: Oh, if only you were a girl—a Ranee instead of a Rajoo! Can you think what it would be like, on this...?

For a moment they were both lost in their dreams.
One day, sighed Jodu, one day, I'll have a bed like this for myself.
...And I'll be the Faghloor of Maha-chin...

Forward of the after-cabins lay the midships-cabin—the beech-kamra, where the overseers and guards were to be accommodated. This part of the schooner was also relatively comfortable: it was equipped with bunks rather than hammocks, and was fairly well lit, with portholes to let in the daylight and several lamps hanging from the ceiling. Liked the after-cabins, this karma was connected to the main deck by its own companionway and ladder. But the ladder to the midships-cabin had an extension that led even further into the bowels of the vessel, reaching down to the holds, storerooms and isturkhanas where the ships' provisions and spare equipment were stored.

Next to the beech-kamra lay the migrants' part of the ship: the 'ween-deck, known to the lascars as the 'box', or dabusa. It was little changed since the day Jodu first stepped into it: it was still as grim, dark and foul-smelling as he remembered—merely an enclosed floor, with arched beams along the sides—but its chains and ring-bolts were gone and couple of heads and piss-dishes had been added. The dabusa inspired a near-superstitious horror in the crew, and neither Jodu nor Rajoo remained there for long. Shipping up the ladder, they went eagerly to their own kamra, the faja. This was where the most startling change was found to have occurred: the rear part of the compartment had been boxed off to make a cell, with a stout door.

If there's a choke, said Rajoo, it can only mean there'll be convicts on board.
How many?
Who knows?

The chokey's door lay open so they climbed into it. The cell was as cramped as a chicken coop and as airless as a snake-pit: apart from a lidded porthole in its door, it had only one other opening, which was a tiny air duct in the bulwark that separated it from the coolies' dabusa. Jodu found that if he stood on tiptoe, he could put his eye to the air duct. Two months in this hole! He said to Rajoo, With nothing to do but spy on the coolies...

Sharon, the Man of Peace

SHAFIK HIKMAT
(Translated by Kabir Chowdhury)

Sharon, the dogs will, of course, call you
The Man of Peace
By your blessings they fill their stomachs
with human meat
In the senate of the vultures
you will surely get hundred percent vote
in favour of your genocide.
Those vile insects, donning their black jackets,
will accord you a red carpet reception
in the sandy desert land,
for, you have given them as a present
a favourable land, slippery with blood.

Desert vultures fly over your head
flapping their wings
for, you have made them a gift
of hundreds of corpses
and uprooted a whole freedom-loving population
from their homeland.
You have turned Palestine's holy land
into a foul-smelling, vulture-loving, dumping ground
of dead cattle.

Your hand has always been steady
in the act of murdering men,
yes, Sharon, you are a man of peace,
killing numberless men and children
in Sabra-Shatilla-Jenin.
You have presented the Western world the vanquished corpse
of Arab nationalism—
Sharon, a man of peace like you
is a rarity in this world.

Professor Kabir Chowdhury is a prolific translator of novels, short stories and poems.

Picture

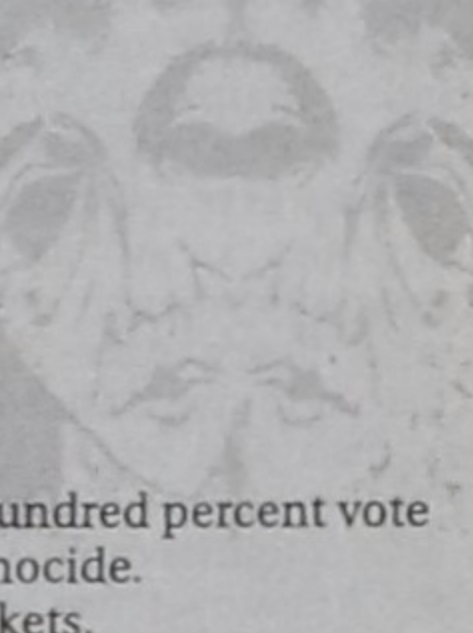
DEBARATI MITRA
(translated by Khademul Islam)

Sunset like copper pots and pans
Slowly the grey settles in beneath
The waters of a scummy ditch,
Country liquor, sweeper colony,
Evenings shaped by formless revelry
Aimless talk, smattering of small shops
As afternoon fog
Bumps in like a herd of unfenced swine.

Leaving all behind I walk a long way off—
In front of me cordwood for the funeral pyre.
Some stray dogs, a madman.
By the river's breast among the pyre folk I sit
Listen to tales; two of them side by side—
Mother and daughter both the same age,
Demon children is the reason why.
Just as on the body of Shiva's sky
Monsoon's rain clouds not the real heavens
So too that mother and daughter—
Think of life and its outcasts in the same way.

Murmurs the waters
To me in the glittering dark.

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.



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