Can the Subaltern Speak through Postcolonial Historical Fiction?: A Study of Amitav
Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy*

Gauri Jhangiani
New Delhi, India

A Thesis Presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of Master of Arts

Department of English

University of Virginia

April 15, 2023

Table of Contents

Introduction

In her seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak draws attention to and explicates the nuances of the intellectual production of materialist history. Spivak examines a two-fold silencing involved in writing colonial history—one at the level of the world and the other at the level of the nation. At the level of the world, she critiques the work of French social theorists such as Deleuze and Foucault, who in writing about labour in the West generalise it to the East, ignoring differential societal conditions in postcolonial Asia and Africa. She claims they make Others of former colonies in ways similar to imperial ideology, terming their actions as epistemic violence. The second silencing Spivak mentions is conducted by 'native' intellectuals in postcolonial nations who, when constructing national histories, centre them on the elite to the detriment of the lives of the people at large. Spivak's object of interest ultimately is the subaltern—an individual made an Other twice and so completely silenced by the archive. Spivak's provocative question—can the subaltern speak?—therefore, serves as a metonym that encompasses layers of systemic oppression inherent within the colonial archive and the postcolonial reading of the archive.

To explore Spivak's question further, it is necessary to unpack the various ways in which imperialist ideology pervades in postcolonial writing of history. Archival research of colonial periods is notoriously difficult for two reasons—the archive either does not exist or if it does, it is largely in the form of colonial government records. Government records are contentious sources as while they are meticulously written notes on policy and events, they are rarely neutral in their recording of history. In their book, *Sources and Methods in Histories of Colonialism: Approaching the Imperial Archive,* Kirsty Reid and Fiona Paisley note the relation between knowledge and power implicit in these records:

> …it has shown that colonial states were above all 'information states' intent upon
>
> gathering knowledge about peoples and places in order to better conquer, govern and

rule them…it has revealed that rather than passively reflecting power, imperial and

colonial archives were actively constitutive of it. More than capturing some external

actuality, they created the very subjects on which they claimed to report. (2).

Colonial archives, therefore, invite a paranoid reading; they cannot be trusted. The

information stored within them must be read in the context of their role in both supporting

and shaping imperialist ideology. The most consistent figure within the archive is ultimately

its all-pervasive distant audience—the central government in the colonising nation who mines

it for information. The presence of the imperial subject in the archive is also at the mercy of

the colonial official contributing to it, bestowing upon the archive the power to make or erase

'natives' from history. In his book, *Autobiography of an Archive*, the historian Nicholas Dirks

notes how the archive, thus, poses a challenge to those attempting to read it through a

postcolonial lens:

> In a way, the ethnographic imperative described in my own historical pursuits reflect
>
> the contradictions inherent in any postcolonial history: encountering, on the one hand,
>
> the power and reach of imperial control over the past and, on the other, the conditions
>
> and fissures that created spaces both for the anthropological histories I have tried to
>
> write and the subaltern and minority histories that have been fundamental to all
>
> struggles for new political outcomes (49).

Dirks points to a necessary reframing that takes place when writing postcolonial history—in

which those doing the work of recovery must separate the archive from its colonial audience

to re-produce it for a postcolonial one. To read the colonial archive within a postcolonial

framework is to actively search for a history of 'native subjects' buried beneath the surface of

imperial writing, and to simultaneously highlight the structures of ideology influencing the

archive that aid in this suppression.

However, even in constructing a postcolonial reading from the archive, imperial ideology continues to haunt the process of writing. Sarah Maza writes about the development of historical writing in the nineteenth century as being Eurocentric. She notes that because professional scholarship of history developed in Europe and America in university departments, journals, and professional organisations "those regions did indeed dominate most of the world's peoples, and that moment's supremacy was read back into humanities past" (77). Therefore, imperialism, being the dominant ideology at the time of the development of historical writing, affected its formation. This caused both initial scholarship and archive to produce historical narratives strongly influenced by colonial thought. To write the history of former colonies, thus, involves extensive scrutiny of the dominance of imperial Europe over the work. In what Maza terms as world history, academics actively work from their present moment to decentralise the hegemony of Europe from history. Postcolonial history does this in two ways—"the first by pulling back and inviting us to take an intellectual perspective that de-centres the West, the second by zooming in to take in local, unexpected instantiations of what it means to be 'modern'" (Maza 82). However, as Spivak's study of the subaltern indicates, this too is not a satisfactory method. Postcolonial history involves countering imperial hegemony that exists in its very production. However, this begs the question, can the writing of postcolonial history be conducted through methods that are not rooted in imperial origins? A possible solution lies in postcolonial historical fiction.

Postcolonial historical fiction, by virtue of not being bound to modes of historical writing, can engage with history in a different way. Dirks notes that "Historians may make their own history, but they cannot make it as they choose" (49). However, this is not the cases with postcolonial historical fiction; the genre can build from details in the archive to produce creative narratives that are still rooted in historical accuracy. Moreover, in cases where the archive is particularly sparse, postcolonial historical fiction can intervene to fill in the gaps.

In this context, postcolonial historical fiction has the potential to address silences that emerge both in the archive itself and Otherization that Spivak notes as occurring in the process of academic historical writing.

Within postcolonial historical fiction, a particularly promising candidate to study how storytelling can intervene in the archival gap is the Indian author, Amitav Ghosh. As a former anthropologist, Ghosh possesses much of the same training as those ingrained in historical writing in university departments but made a conscious choice to depart from academia. Yet throughout his body of work, he has remained deeply interested in questions of historical storytelling and the archive. Ghosh's process has also involved extensive secondary research and visits to archives around the world. Moreover, his books have earned vast praise from historians for their attention to historical detail, with the American Historical Review even holding a conference dedicated to discussing his work as historical materials. The questions Ghosh asks are different from a historian's and so offer a new perspective:

> There is another significant respect in which the novelist's relation to the past is radically different from that of most historians. The historian's work could not begin without an idea of a recoverable past. Historians necessarily have a sense of responsibility to this past, and this contributes in no small measure to the vital importance of what they do. But I, as a novelist, see this past through the eyes of my characters; my responsibility is to them; my task is to try to re-create their experience as faithfully as possible (Ghosh, "Storytelling and the Spectre of the Past" 1558-1559)

The difference in the task of a historian and a novelist allows Ghosh to bring the past alive through recreations of historical spaces and actors in his texts. He makes an especially appropriate candidate to engage with Spivak's question given his conscious addressal of archival silences through his writing of history. In an interview with Elleke Boehmer and

Anshuman Mondal, Ghosh says of the archive: "There are silences that you cannot hope to fill by research alone. They are never going to speak back to you because that is what Indian history is, at least popular Indian history, just this gigantic silence" ("Networks and Traces" 32). Here, Ghosh acknowledges that to write about colonial history is to confront silences.

Ghosh engages with the "gigantic silence" of Indian history particularly well in the *Ibis Trilogy*, a book series focused on the period leading up to the Opium Wars of the nineteenth century ("Networks and Traces" 32). It centres history on a vast number of people who would have played a significant role in the opium trade—from the English traders in Canton, to the ordinarily silenced Indian opium pickers in the Indo-Gangetic plain. The trilogy works to create a comprehensive view of the opium trade that exposes its various facets, including its relation to colonialism, capitalism, cultural interaction, and indentured labour, making it an appropriate work to examine the position of the subaltern within these structures. This thesis, therefore, seeks to explore how Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy*, as a significant work of historical fiction, engages with the issue of subaltern silencing and the archival gap. Moreover, it will extend to assess the suitability of postcolonial historical fiction overall in engaging with issues of epistemic violence that plague historical writing. I begin by elaborating on Spivak's argument in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and then introduce the characteristics of the historical novel and the postcolonial historical novel, explaining how these forms engage with writing history. Following this, I argue that Ghosh engages with representation of the subaltern in three ways—firstly, through creating and providing details to historical lives in ways that engage with multiple forms of subalternity; secondly, through examining language and the subaltern, both in terms of exposing the impact of colonial re-naming as a structure of power over subaltern people, as well as how subaltern speech operates in the series; and thirdly, through the creation of alternate archives in the text that decentre the importance of the colonial archive to become the primary sources of the lives of

the colonised. I move on to examine potential issues with Ghosh's writing of the subaltern, and by extension, the complexities of historical writing as serving as sources of history. I conclude that postcolonial historical fiction can ultimately serve as a significant contribution to addressing the ongoing issue of the archival gap.

Chapter 1: Spivak and the Subaltern

In order to understand how Ghosh responds to Spivak's question—can the subaltern speak?—it is necessary to explore how Spivak structures her argument. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" has been a staple of postcolonial theory for its ability to highlight not only how history is produced by imperialist frameworks, but also how the intellectual construction of history continues to be complicit in the creation of the Other. Spivak operates from two main perspectives—Marxism and feminism. The result is a particular interest in the female subaltern, who Spivak notes is perceived as being elusive and silent. Such women are often considered as 'unreadable' by academics when attempting to study them in the archive, yet Spivak proposes they actually do speak, but are unheard. In examining women considered to be outside the modes of production of capitalist society, Spivak draws attention to the larger problematic intellectual frameworks involved in the writing of history.

Spivak notes that in the 1980s, the discourse of theory was around the subject. While the subject was framed as having no particular geo-political determinations, its defining characteristics can situate it within the societies of the West. Spivak argues that these theories were applied to societies across the world, centring the critique of the subject completely in Western discourse. Spivak elucidates this further by using a conversation between two prominent French poststructuralists, Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. Spivak is particularly interested in poststructuralism given its focus on networks of power and desire and the emphasis on examining the Other. However, Spivak points out that in their conversation, Foucault and Deleuze surprisingly ignore the role of ideology in society.

Spivak notes problematic aspects in their discussion of the subject, particularly the subject-in-revolution that frames the conversation. They approach the subject-in-revolution through Maoism, but do not distinguish this as being different from any other kind of Eurocentric Communism. Similarly, when making references to the workers' struggle,

Spivak objects to their lack of attention to its nuances in the context of global capitalism. If

the subject operates within the ideology of the nation-state, the conditions of the subject vary

with change in nation-state. Yet there is no such distinction made for international division of

labour. Spivak discusses the consequence of this as follows:

> Ignoring the international division of labor, rendering "Asia" (and on occasion
>
> "Africa") transparent (unless the subject is ostensibly the "Third World");
>
> reestablishing the legal subject of socialized capital—these are problems as common to
>
> much poststructuralist as to "regular" theory. (The invocation of "woman" is as
>
> problematic in the current conjuncture.) Why should such occlusions be sanctioned in
>
> precisely those intellectuals who are our best prophets of heterogeneity and the Other?
>
> (24).

Here, Spivak's mention of Asia and Africa is significant as she argues ideology in these

locations should be of concern to poststructuralists. By not paying attention to the nuances of

the conditions of labour between the West and the East, they become complicit in silencing

these societies. Similarly, Spivak also goes on to examine other areas in which Deleuze and

Foucault do not consider the impact of ideology in Eastern societies. For example, Deleuze's

notion of power associated with the workers' struggle is located in the desire to blow up

power, however, this desire is never contextualized and is wrongly applied globally.

Spivak further elucidates other problems in Deleuze and Foucault's conversation,

such as choosing to separate the action of theory from the action of practice. Spivak argues

that producing theory itself is an action and claiming that there is no link between theory and

action has negative implications for representation of people that takes place through theory.

She claims that representation operates in two different ways:

Two senses of representation are being run together: representation as "speaking for,"

as in politics, and representation as "re-presentation," as in art or philosophy. Since

theory is also only "action," the theoretician does not represent (speak for) the

oppressed group. Indeed, the subject is not seen as a representative consciousness (one

re-presenting reality adequately). These two senses of representation—within state

formation and the law, on the one hand, and in subject-predication, on the other—are

related but irreducibly discontinuous. To cover over the discontinuity with an analogy

that is presented as a proof reflects again a paradoxical subject-privileging. (Spivak 28)

Deleuze ultimately dismisses theory's ability to represent reality, yet here Spivak points out

that if representation through theory and representation through politics are considered

separate, it results in the creation of a generic subject in theory that is considered to be

applicable in all regions. This once again ignores the hegemonic power of Europe implicit in

such an indistinction. Spivak further pushes the issue of representation by resorting to Marx,

who she claims has a more nuanced perspective by considering the possibility of a subject

who is divided. In Marxist terminology, representation and re-presentation are framed against

hegemonic power: "vertreten" refers to political representation of the subject and "darstellen"

refers to the re-presentation of the subject in the economic context by hegemonic power

(Spivak 33). Spivak claims that ultimately the relationship between hegemony in politics

represented by nation-state alliances and hegemony in economics through global capitalism

operates on such a scale that it is difficult to account for its functioning at a microlevel.

However, Spivak advocates that rather than focusing on power and desire, theory should

attempt to examine the two forms of representation, and ultimately the two forms of

oppression they bring, as nuancing the notion of the subject. Spivak proposes that the

intellectual must consider economic representation and political representation as related:

"…a possibility of political practice for the intellectual would be to put the economic 'under

erasure,' to see the economic factor as irreducible as it reinscribes the social text, even as it is erased…" (Spivak 35).

In her critique of Western intellectuals, Spivak characterises erasures in the archive through the lens of Foucault's notion of the episteme, in which certain rules determine which forms of knowledge can be considered legitimate. Spivak frames her issue through the notion of epistemic violence, which can be understood as a violence of structures which create the marginalisation of certain groups and individuals. Spivak believes that the imperialist narrative of events has created epistemic violence against the colonies by considering the knowledge of the Other as inferior: "...disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientify" (35). Epistemic violence is considered to be the subtext of imperialism. Here, the knowledge of the Other is posited as "subjugated knowledge" that has been suppressed to establish imperialist knowledge as normative (Spivak 35). Ultimately, Spivak questions if amid epistemic violence caused by the First World, the Third World subaltern can be allowed to speak. She ultimately argues no, and, in fact, notes a further occurrence of epistemic violence at the national level in the Third World.

The notion of epistemic violence gets further complicated when considering it within academia. The imperialist narrative enables the First World intellectual to become the primary source of the culture of the Third World Other, which alienates the Other from its own forms of knowledge. Another further form of alienation involves 'informers' from the culture of the Third World Other, who tend to be the postcolonial elite rather than the subaltern and so frame history from an elite point of view. Spivak cites Ranajit Guha, who claims that the historiography of nationalism in India is defined by the "bourgeois- nationalist elite," who are postcolonial subjects not belonging to the subaltern, but by virtue of their

nationality are given the authority to represent them (38).The "politics of the people," that is, the politics of the subaltern are considered different from that of the elite and so are underrepresented (Spivak 38). Furthermore, through epistemic violence and subjugation of knowledge, Spivak indicates the elite restrict the subaltern's access to a discourse that allows them to speak.

To examine subaltern studies and the idea of the politics of the people more closely, it is crucial to turn to Guha's formative essay of subaltern studies, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India." In the piece, Guha examines the same split in writing the history of India as Spivak does—between "colonialist elitism" and "bourgeois-nationalist elitism" (Guha 403). He indicates elite historiography put forth the narrative that Indian nationalism was a learning process for the elite as they tried to get involved in politics and integrate themselves into the cultural processes of the colonial complex. Moreover, the struggle for Indian Independence is framed as the elite leading the country away from subjugation towards freedom. This historiography ignores the contributions of the people. Subaltern politics, according to Guha, ultimately derives from the productive labour and exploitation of the peasants and workers. The politics of the people, Guha claims, revolved around "horizontal" mobilisation involving forging political alliances laterally across class, and were put into action through peasant uprisings. The subaltern often collaborated with the elite too, but due to lack of cohesive leadership did not develop into the main nationalist movement. Ultimately, the elite's historiography fails to capture Indian nationalism accurately through ignoring these contributions of the subaltern.

In this context, Spivak in her argument makes reference to Guha's notion of a stratification grid of subaltern identity. This grid operates on "identity-in-differential," charting out colonial social production as different groups:

The classification falls into: "dominant foreign groups," and "dominant indigenous

groups at the all-India and at the regional and local levels" representing the elite; and

"[t]he social groups and elements included in the [the terms "people" and "subaltern

classes"] represent[ing] *the demographic difference between the total Indian population*

and all those whom we have described as the "elite." (Spivak 38-39)

This grid helps to define the subaltern as one whose identity lies in several differences, which

make it incorrect for the intellectual to define them in a singular way. While Spivak

appreciates this grid and claims it has merit, she nevertheless faults subaltern studies for

focusing too intently on the buffer group between the people and the macro-level groups in

the world, that is, the group comprising of the 'native' elite rather than the subaltern.

However, from this grid, Spivak further questions how one can touch the consciousness of

the people in examining their politics and history.

Given Spivak's interest in the subaltern woman, she incorporates the perspectives of

feminism into her discussion. Spivak elucidates how within the epistemic violence committed

against the subaltern, there are additional levels of silencing with regard to the female

subaltern; the female subaltern particularly has to contend with the ideological construction

of gender within colonial production. She cites Sarah Kofman to indicate that women are

considered objects of hysteria and that this is even worse among subaltern women of the

Third World in the context of the "masculine-imperialist ideological formation" (Spivak 48).

Yet Spivak is not optimistic about US feminism being able to intervene to ensure the

subaltern woman is heard and, therefore, proposes engaging in the act of measuring silence to

gage the subaltern woman's ability to speak. She ultimately offers a single sentence to sum

up colonial and gender relations simultaneously: "White men are saving brown women from

brown men" (Spivak 48). This sentence works through an example she gives of the silencing

of subaltern women in the context of the British ban of the Hindu practice of *sati,* in which a woman immolates herself on the funeral pyre of her husband. The project of "White men are saving brown women from brown men" is ultimately another problem in the imperialist framework that further removes subaltern women from accessing discourse due to epistemic violence (Spivak 48).

Spivak chooses *sati* as an example given its position as an ideological battleground between British "social mission" and Indian consideration of the ritual as a "reward" (56). *Sati* was abolished by the British allegedly to protect Indian women from men who forced them to commit the act. In contrast, the sentence proposed by Indian nativist sentiment is that "the woman wanted to die" (50). However, between both of these ideologies, the voice of the woman herself is never brought to the fore. Spivak notes that the woman becomes a fault line for male patriarchal conflict: "Whether this observation is correct or not, what interests me is that the protection of woman (today the "third-world woman") becomes a signifier for the establishment of a good society (now a good planet) which must, at such inaugurative moments, transgress mere legality, or equity of legal policy" (50-51). The idea of protecting the woman, therefore, led to the redefinition of ritual legally into crime and moved a practice in the private domain to the public domain, but never allowed the woman to speak about her own experience. Spivak also supports her argument by giving an example of her own relative, Bhubaneshwari Bhaduri, who while not strictly a subaltern woman, attempted to speak through her body, but was unheard even by her own family. Bhaduri was a freedom fighter and had to commit a political assassination but could not go through with it and so hanged herself instead. Her family's immediate assumption was that she killed herself due to a pregnancy caused by an illicit love affair. Yet Bhaduri took care to commit suicide while menstruating in order to definitively prove she was not pregnant. Therefore, Bhaduri

attempted to turn her body into writing, but was silenced by her own family for generations. Spivak illustrates through the misreading of the act of suicide of a menstruating (and therefore, not pregnant) woman as a love affair, that even when the subaltern woman speaks, the lack of inclusivity in discourse leaves room for misinterpretation. This ultimately causes her to claim that the subaltern could not speak. Spivak concludes the essay with three main points. Firstly, simply being from a postcolonial nation or an ethnic minority is not enough to be considered subaltern. Secondly, whenever a subaltern individual interacts with societal structures and institutions they are put into a hegemonic relation with it. Thirdly, effacement in disclosure emerges through the emotions of the political activist conducting the research.

Spivak's essay has been a staple of postcolonial theory for correctly reading the complexities embedded in archival research and the continuous epistemic violence that one has to wade through to attempt to retrieve the voice of the subaltern. Her question of how the subaltern can speak is still largely unanswered despite multiple attempts to address it. However, postcolonial historical fiction, in its engagement with the issues of the archive, can perhaps be a potential solution. In this context, examining the work of Amitav Ghosh, who has been described as someone whose "…narratives tend to gravitate towards the perspectives of the 'subalterns'…" is useful (Mondal 32). He is known for engaging with the perspective of subaltern people not just in the *Ibis Trilogy*, but also other significant texts in his body of work such as *The Hungry Tide.* However, at the same time, Ghosh emerges as belonging to the native elite when examining Spivak's essay as a means of interpreting the structure of the Indian literary canon[1]. The Indian literary canon emerged with the aim of defining a sense of national identity and as Makarand R. Paranjape puts it, "a work of art

---

[1] The Indian literary canon is broadly understood to be divided into the Indian English novel and the vernacular novel. The Indian English novel consists of novels written by largely American or English authors of Indian origin, such as Salman Rushdie, as well as those authored by writers in India, such as Amitav Ghosh.

which expresses the consciousness of an emerging Indian collectivity" (9). The Indian

English novel specifically utilises the language of the coloniser to push back against the

imperialist, epistemic violence that imposed it to establish a literary canon. However, its

authors belong exclusively to the elite and, in fact, perhaps become akin to Spivak's "native

informants," who as postcolonial individuals have the authority to speak of Indians at large,

including the subaltern. Therefore, keeping both Ghosh's interest in exploring the subaltern

as well as his social position in mind, the following sections will assess how Ghosh responds

to the issue of depicting the subaltern to speak in the *Ibis Trilogy*.

Chapter 2: The Postcolonial Historical Novel

In order to understand how the genre of postcolonial historical fiction operates, it is

necessary to study its formation and evolution over time, particularly from its origin in the

historical novel. In this section, some primary traits of the historical novel and the

postcolonial historical novel, will be explored before examining how Ghosh engages with

these features to address the archival gap.

A seminal figure in the study of the historical fiction is Georg Lukács whose text, *The*

Historical Novel, serves as the basis for current influential theories. Using the novels of

Walter Scott, Lukács lays out some primary characteristics of the historical novel. The

historical novel's focus is on the "the social and historical motives which led men to think,

feel and act just as they did in historical reality," indicating that the relationships between

individuals in history is key (Lukács 42). Lukács traces the origins of the historical fiction

novel as being in the nineteenth century. According to him, novels prior to that opted to write

about specific moments in their own place and time. With the French Revolution and the

Enlightenment in Europe, the structure of society was undergoing change, prompting

contemplation on the notion of history. Additionally, the rise of capitalism during this period

caused an accelerated progress of humanity. This led to a deeper reflection on the historical

condition which in literature became the historical novel. History is seen as representative of

popular life and the historical novel studies the impact of "material and psychological"

changes in society on people's lives (Lukács 49). The historical novel uses its characters to

portray struggles and moments in history. Lukács focuses on two specific kinds of

characters—the middling protagonist and those who represent a blend of social and historical

forces. The characters related to socio-historical forces represent large-scale potential

changes at an institutional level, while the middling protagonist serves as a mediation

between these forces by being an indicator of the path the society ultimately chooses. The

historical novel also ultimately explains the interaction between history from "above" and "below" (Lukács 49). The "above" is the more general "historical tendencies" or the larger political-historical picture framing the novel, while the "below" is the part of the novel reflecting the popular through "historical antagonisms," which are character dynamics influenced by the historical narrative being told (Lukács 49). In the historical novel, the "below" is seen as the material basis and artistic explanation for what happens "above," indicating that the "below" is where the historical novel can contribute to the telling of history (Lukács 49).

Lukács' writing, while admittedly creating a Eurocentric base for the historical novel, has merit in the shaping of the postcolonial historical novel. The basic principle of the historical novel—to reflect human progress—in the postcolonial historical novel is applied to examining change in the societies of former colonies resulting from colonialism. Hamish Dalley's article on the postcolonial novel highlights a few aspects of the genre. Dalley iterates that the historical novel can be read in the context of its plausibility as a narrative of history, a critical facet to consider when it is combined with a postcolonial perspective. He argues that postcolonial criticism has focused on the postmodern style and technique in postcolonial historical novels, but has not considered them in relation to their realist descriptions of history which it ideally should do. Realism and postcolonialism have been seen as antithetical, however, to do so ignores the postcolonial author's commitment to realism in their writing. Dalley proposes that realism should be understood as an ethos that impacts literary production of the postcolonial novel. He emphasises a "commitment to plausibility" in which he asserts that realism in the postcolonial historical novel should be read as an engagement with the past (Dalley 57). Dalley also uses Lukács' ideas on characters and their relation to socio-historical forces to add to his notion of plausibility. He proposes

that the postcolonial historical novel, through its focus on structures such as gender and race, can complicate characterisation:

> The significance of such a reading is reflected in the obvious tension between these Lukácsian norms and the political imperatives of much postcolonial writing. I suggest that this tension could be treated as a problematic for critical analysis, which could focus on how gender and race structure the postcolonial historical novel at an aesthetic, as well as overtly thematic level. We might hypothesize that as novels adopt different characterological structures—focalization through a female character, for example— this deviation from the generic norm would produce simultaneously formal and ideological consequences, which would resonate differently depending on the text's historical entanglements. (Dalley 61)

Here, different societal conditions applied to the conventions of the historical novel create layers of historical, ideological and textual interpretation. Writing a postcolonial historical novel involves deep engagement with both the characteristics of the historical novel and the structures that define postcolonial societies.

Dalley also radically proposes that realism in the postcolonial historical novel be read as an allegory. He explains this by using Ian Baucom's concept of typification and the notion of singularity. Typification has roots in the Atlantic slave trade, in which commercial objects were reduced from their individual worth to types when estimating their speculative value. In the realist novel, characters are also considered as types: "Baucom presents the realist novel as the aesthetic correlate of this epistemology, for its characters are 'the type of someone or something that does not exist as this or that, but only as such, only in the aggregate or abstract.'" (Dalley 63). Therefore, as a type, a character can become a reading of aspects of a society, such as class. However, considering the roots of typification in the Atlantic slave

trade, typification can also be seen as a form of epistemic violence, which then extends to concept of character types as well. This led to the emergence of the notion of singularity as a way to resist epistemic violence: "…singularity as 'that which defies the generalizing impulse of the sociological imagination,' a limit-concept that marks the point at which representation becomes "'opaque to the generalities inherent in language.'" (Dalley 64). Singularity involves refusing categorisation of the kind in typification. Dalley takes these two concepts to propose realism in the postcolonial historical novel be read as a dialectic between typification and singularity, as there are constantly objects that resist typification even when creating a realist mode of history. Furthermore, he proposes this dialectic be read as allegorical: "I argue that we can understand this kind of allegory not as a unidirectional process of interpretation in which the reader ascends from the literal object to its ideal referent, but rather as a back-and-forth movement across the conceptual divide." (Dalley 66). Allegory here encompasses the dialectic between typification and singularity to create a realist reading of history in the novel. Therefore, to Dalley, the postcolonial historical novel is shaped by its commitment to realism, which is denoted through its characters, who as representatives of both aspects of typification and singularity, can be read more easily through the means of an allegory.

While Dalley's definition of the postcolonial historical novel is seen as being comprehensive, an additional characteristic provided by Greg Forter nuances it further. He claims the aim of the postcolonial historical novel is not simply about depicting the events in history. In its examination of the past, it does the work of considering the postcolonial future as well:

> Within yet counterposing its orientation toward the past, the genre imagines alternative ways of conceptualizing the postcolonial future. It seeks to recover from the historical past new resources for the radical imagination. It retrieves from the dustbin of history

the inassimilable, heterogeneous traces of stories that resist our dominant

historiography—the counterstories of aspiration and solidarity that the colonial and

neo-colonial projects have occluded, repressed, and sought to write out of the historical

record. (Forter 5)

Forter's emphasis here is on the act of retrieval from the archive to create a new story of

resistance. However, in doing so the materials and narratives that are chosen and placed

within the story of the postcolonial historical novel are those that are deemed important to the

postcolonial future, which is the moment the author writes from. The postcolonial author

must, therefore, aim to create a narrative that is aware of archival challenges and work

actively to counter them.

With the characteristics of the historical novel and the postcolonial historical novel,

we turn to examine how these operate in Ghosh's work and can be used to draw attention to

the issue of the archival gap. In the *Ibis Trilogy*, Ghosh creates a history of the period

preceding the Opium Wars. His story begins at a micro-level with a woman in a village but

spans out to encompass several figures of different class, gender, and nationality who

ultimately are all interlinked through the macro-history of opium. The characters themselves

and their individual journeys can be seen as history from below, whereas the larger narrative

of colonialism and capitalism framed by opium can be seen as history from above. Ghosh

also does this in a realist mode, in which there are identifiable historical types, such as the

explicitly colonialist British figures like Mr. Burnham, a British trader, but at the same time

there are figures whose typification is difficult, such as Serang Ali and the lascars, a rag-tag

group of sailors from across the world. Therefore, the tension between typification and

singularity Dalley speaks of comes through in the series.

Ghosh's particular strength is in using the historical and postcolonial historical novel's trait of examining history through individuals to create characters who would ordinarily be dismissed by the archive. Here, he incorporates Forter's notion of the view of the postcolonial past from the future through his consideration of the archival gap, an issue in present postcolonialism. Within the viewpoint of a realist history from below, Ghosh's characters consist of people from different strata of historical society. The historian, Antoinette Burton, notes this:

> The sprawling narratives we breathlessly follow in *Sea of Poppies* crisscross distances small and large, throwing all kinds of people together, cheek by jowl, in their wake. Deeti, Zachary, Serang Ali—these are characters that historians interested in the "small stories" of global connection know are notoriously hard to get at because of the paucity of sources, and especially the paucity of those that allow us some access to the inner lives of "coolies," ship hands, and the like. (75)

Burton, here, draws on Ghosh's ability to create narratives of "inner lives," fleshing out historically silenced voices in the context of their time period. For example, Ghosh particularly pays attention to the lives of indentured labour, whose lives are poorly documented. Ghosh himself mentions this in an interview "…it's absolutely astonishing that across the entire nineteenth century, as millions and millions of Indians are being whisked off here and there around the world, you don't find a written trace of these movements, there's not a pen diary, nothing no ordinary migrant who has explained themselves on paper or created any kind of traces" (Ghosh, "Networks and Traces" 31). Therefore, to create such characters to convey history not only fits into the tradition of the historical novel and postcolonial historical novel, but also pays particular attention to narratives concealed under the epistemic violence of the archive. Further sections explore how Ghosh, through his

detailing of characters' lives, the hierarchies enforced on them, the languages they speak, and the alternate forms of archive they develop, uses the form of the historical novel, in its focus on history from below and realism, to develop a comprehensive and inclusive picture of the history of opium.

Chapter 3: People of the Past

"For me, research is just background, just the icing on the cake: basically a novel has to be about the people. And with this again I think it is the people who will be at its centre." (Ghosh, "Amitav Ghosh in Conversation" 139)

Amitav Ghosh centres his story on individuals whose lives are all touched by opium. The choice to focus on people is unique to his position as a writer; unlike academic writing, he is not bound to focusing on history purely in terms of facts and trends. Ghosh himself explains this in a piece titled "Storytelling and the Spectre of the Past," in which he discusses the difference between the two forms of constructing history:

> The historian's work could not begin without an idea of a recoverable past. Historians necessarily have a sense of responsibility to this past…
>
> But I, as a novelist, see this past through the eyes of my characters; my responsibility is to them; my task is to try to re-create their experience as faithfully as possible. This means that I can ignore certain kinds of material. I do not, for example, have to attend closely to secular trends in, say, cotton prices over a hundred-year period. I do, however, have to pay close attention to sudden fluctuations in value, and I have to try to figure out how a character would have responded to them. (Ghosh 1559).

Ghosh articulates here that his work as a novelist is concerned with historical fact, but is not consumed by it, instead using it to support the depiction of the characters. By centring his understanding of history on people and by using the creative freedom of a writer, Ghosh is able to write in detail about the lives of individuals who may ordinarily have been buried by the archive or have a sparse presence in it. He is particularly well-positioned to flesh out subaltern voices and create realistic portrayals of their day-to-day experiences during

historical events. Therefore, the act of recreation postcolonial historical fiction performs is a potential way of unearthing the subaltern's presence in history.

One way in which Ghosh significantly creates details of subaltern lives is by depicting them in the context of societal structures. Greg Forter claims that the postcolonial historical novel considers the spread and impact of capitalist colonialism to be sprawling and represents this through "critical maps of colonialism that are global in their reach" (2). These maps enable postcolonial thought around history to apply to not only land spaces, but the Atlantic World as well. Through the *Ibis Trilogy*, this is what Ghosh does with opium; he envisions it as a global capitalist-colonialist network that operates across various locations on both land and sea. In addition to this, there are societal constructions of class, gender, caste, and race that operate over each of these locations differently. The characters are, therefore, situated in the story as navigating various social and economic structures, with their levels of subalternity and importance in history becoming apparent through their interactions with them. This positioning of the characters operates against epistemic violence, in which the detail of such lives in the context of their societies is buried. Simply by creating narratives centred on people's positions in society and its implication on their daily lives, Ghosh can create an opportunity for the historical subaltern to become visible. Like Spivak's reading of the body of Bhubaneshwari Bhaduri, Ghosh inscribes in his narratives details of subaltern lives that can be read and understood as shedding light on their history.

In thinking particularly about Ghosh's explication of the history of opium through details of people's lives, it is necessary to examine the role opium plays in their social and economic position. To do this, it is useful to consider the concept of Ranajit Guha's grid mentioned in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Each of the characters are placed on the grid in relation to the same markers of subalternity Guha denotes, such as caste, class and gender,

however, within the structures of history, the grid also must accommodate for the character's economic contribution to the opium trade. Depending on their involvement in opium, the character has more or less power within the other configurations of society. This also denotes the character's importance within the history of the Opium Wars. As archetypes of real historical people, to situate these characters within the network of opium is to also use them to indicate the different ways in which opium has been co-opted as a colonial commodity. To illustrate this, I turn to the earliest descriptions of two characters in the *Trilogy*, Deeti and Bahram Modi, both of whom are introduced in the context of their relation to opium, which also sheds light on other social factors impacting their lives and, consequently, their relationship to subalternity.

Deeti is the first character to be introduced in the *Ibis Trilogy*. It is crucial to note that given the identity-in-differential aspect of subalternity, Deeti's identity as an Indian woman in a colonial patriarchal setting places her within a specific level of gendered and racial subalternity. Later, she is also considered of lower caste and class for marrying a lower caste man and becoming an indentured labour. However, at the beginning of the story, which is considered here, she is upper caste, which while providing her a certain amount of privilege, creates gendered expectations that constrict her mobility and ability to participate in society.

Deeti's geographical location at the beginning of the story is a village in the hinterlands of the Indo-Gangetic plain, situating the opening of the narrative of opium not at the level of a larger history, but literally in the hut of a gendered, colonised subject. Ghosh starts his introduction of Deeti by placing her within the domestic space:

The village in which Deeti lived was on the outskirts of the town of Ghazipur, some fifty miles east of Benares. Like all her neighbours, Deeti was preoccupied with the lateness of her poppy crop: that day, she rose early and went through the motions of her

daily routine, laying out a freshly washed dhoti and kameez for Hukam Singh, her

husband, and preparing the rotis and achar he would eat at midday. Once his meal had

been wrapped and packed, she broke off to pay a quick visit to her shrine room: later,

after she'd bathed and changed, Deeti would do a proper puja, with flowers and

offerings; now, being clothed still in her night-time sari, she merely stopped at the door,

to join her hands in a brief genuflection. (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 3-4).

In this opening, we learn a few things about Deeti: she lives in a village, seems to be a

housewife, lays out clothes and makes food for her husband, and prays. However, within this

information, there is a brief remark made about her poppy crop. This gives the effect that

Deeti's domestic life is primary to her, but at the same time the poppy crop remains at the

back of her mind. The significance of the poppy crop being late is itself linked to the larger

colonial project of exploitation, in which the villagers are forced to grow poppies for the

factory at Ghazipur, which is explained later. At this point in the story though, the narrative is

centred on Deeti with the poppy being secondary.

However, as Ghosh goes on to elaborate on the very same elements of her domestic

space mentioned in the passage above, we are made privy to how poppies and opium have

actually infiltrated several aspects of her life:

Darkening as they toasted, the petals began to cling together so that in a minute or two

they looked exactly like the round wheat-flour rotis Deeti had packed for her husband's

midday meal. And 'roti' was indeed the name by which these poppy-petal wrappers

were known although their purpose was entirely different from that of their namesake:

they were to be sold to the Sudder Opium Factory, in Ghazipur, where they would be

used to line the earthenware containers in which opium was packed.

Kabutri, in the meanwhile, had kneaded some atta and rolled out a few real rotis. Deeti

cooked them quickly, before poking out the fire: the rotis were put aside, to be eaten

later with yesterday's leftovers – a dish of stale alu-posth, potatoes cooked in poppy-

seed paste… After massaging poppy-seed oil into Kabutri's hair and her own, Deeti

draped her spare sari over her shoulder and led her daughter towards the water, across

the field. (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 6-7)

Following the previous passage Deeti exits the house to go to the field and gather poppy

petals. On re-entering the house, she now performs almost all the same tasks as she did

before, however, they are now centred around the poppy. Deeti makes rotis, just as she did

for her husband, but the 'roti' produced is now in service of the opium trade. "Roti" is a

colonial product that encroaches the domestic space; it imposes itself over the domestic

roti—erasing a significant means of sustenance with new forms of survival dependent purely

on one's ability to contribute to opium production (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 6). The actual roti

she eats too is meant to be consumed with a dish made with poppy seeds, yet it is significant

to note that they poppy here is used for non-colonial purposes. The poppy-seed oil, she puts

on her daughter's hair too has a similar effect. It suggests a usage of poppy in the domestic

life of the colonised that continues despite vast commercialisation of the plant for the opium

trade. By mentioning it here, Ghosh does the work of recovering the importance of the poppy

to the daily lives of Indians a colonial archive on opium would otherwise bury. However,

what is crucial is that by encountering opium in its pre-commercial form as poppy and by

using poppy petals within her domestic space to make a small contribution to making opium

that is not even within a factory, Deeti is placed at a distance from opium production.

Therefore, within the history of opium this places her at the lowest level in terms of ability to

contribute to the colonial opium structure that creates power. If examining her position in

terms of Guha's stratification grid, she is a woman within a societal structure that confines

her in terms of gender and race. However, she also experiences another level of subalternity within the colonial opium industrial structure. Here, in highlighting her position and still discussing her home life, Ghosh is able to use Deeti to examine the impact of opium on subaltern life. In giving us a glimpse into Deeti's home life, Ghosh is able to create a means for the subaltern to be known. In turn, this adds nuance to the story of opium as it examines it from below through an individual. By writing Deeti's story, Ghosh emphasises two aspects of writing history—that opium shapes the position of individuals, but at the same time in exploring the lives of subaltern people in the context of opium, they are able to contribute to the story of opium.

In contrast with Deeti, another character whose social position is determined by opium is introduced differently based on ability to contribute to opium production. Based on the real-life opulent Parsi merchant, Jamshetji Jijibhoy, Bahram Modi is deeply involved in the trade of opium between India and China. Modi has enough power amassed through trade that he is given access to certain spaces such as the Canton Chamber of Commerce which is a largely European space. In comparison to Deeti, Modi's identity as a man allows him freedom of movement which enables him to make a life for himself in the opium trade. Modi, is, therefore, the kind of elite Indian figure who would emerge from an archive, yet, there are undoubtedly other layers of epistemic violence that undermine his powerful position. As a writer, Ghosh is able to add complexity to him through examining the precariousness of his power given that it hinges on opium. This is evident from his introduction.

Bahram Modi first appears in the second book, *River of Smoke*, aboard his ship, the *Anahita*, which is transporting opium. The ship encounters a storm, which poses a threat to the massive amount of opium being transported. It is in the midst of this storm that Bahram Modi takes stock of his cargo:

Nothing like this had ever happened to Bahram before: he had ridden out many a storm, without having a consignment of opium run amuck as it had now. He liked to think of himself as a careful man and in the course of thirty-odd years in the China trade, he had evolved his own procedures for stacking the chests in which the drug was packed. The opium in the hold was of two kinds: about two-thirds of it was 'Malwa', from western India - a product that was sold in the shape of small, round cakes, much like certain kinds of jaggery. These were shipped without any protective covering, other than a wrapping of leaves and a light dusting of poppy 'trash'. The rest of the shipment consisted of 'Bengal' opium, which had more durable packaging, with each cake of the drug being fitted inside a hard-shelled clay container, of about the shape and size of a cannonball… breakages were rare, and damage, when it occurred, was generally caused by seepage and damp. To prevent this, Bahram generally left some space between the rows so that air could circulate freely between the chests.

Over the years, Bahram's procedures had proved their worth: through decades of travelling between India and China he had never, in the course of a single voyage, had to write off more than a chest or two of his cargo. (Ghosh, *River of Smoke* 28-29)

In this passage, rather than highlight details about Modi's life, his introduction is placed within the context of his cargo. The different types of opium and the amount of it suggest a certain level of wealth and a keen awareness on Modi's part of their varying economic values, which is the facet of a good trader. However, the emphasis on the cargo's packaging, particularly given its failure to protect the opium, suggests a tenuousness in Modi's control over it, and, in turn, his own economic position.

Modi's journey does not start with economic wealth and, in fact, he is made to prove his right to belong in the rich family he marries into through the opium trade. His success is

such that in Canton, he is chosen to represent all the Indian traders in the Canton Chamber of Commerce, allowing him to gain a position economically equivalent to White European and American traders. All of this proves Modi's high position on Guha's grid of stratification. Yet to lose his opium, is to lose his status. To introduce Modi in the midst of a possible loss of opium suggests a nuance on Ghosh's part to the life of an Indian trader. The historian Mark Frost addresses Modi's contribution to the text and the story of opium as a reminder to the reader of the complexity he adds to the opium narrative:

> Through Bahram, he conjures into life the whole world of what Sugata Bose has termed "intermediary capital"—and once again, through Bahram's tragic end, he reminds us of its human cost. In the process, and again revealing a brilliant eye for detail, he moves us on from what has been a rather simple story of masters, servants, and slaves to a more complex examination of the collaboration and the complicity on which the edifice of an opium-fueled British Empire rested. (Frost 1543)

Ghosh's focus on Modi highlights an unspoken risk of opium trading—that for Indians, earning a fortune from opium involved crossing boundaries of class and even race. As the historian Clare Anderson notes, the accumulation of wealth was not easy and without its own risks: "To be sure, some Indians became rich, but their success is rendered ambivalent as it is set against histories of imperial loss: of health, family, and home" (1526). By centring narratives on people like Modi, Ghosh can counter erasure by the archive to show how opium created and enabled social structures and how people's interaction with opium within these structures varied. Modi is not simply a static upper-class character, but one whose destiny hinges on opium, highlighting that the structure of opium enables upward social mobility and even acceptance for racialised minorities, but can equally escalate a downfall. Through Bahram Modi, the structures of opium buried by epistemic violence become clearer.

Through his writing, Ghosh is able to interact with archival silences and subalternity by shifting the focus of history onto individuals. This centring of history from below highlights how opium infiltrates multiple levels of colonial society and impacts people differentially. The introductions of Deeti and Bahram Modi serve that purpose well. Deeti, who is perhaps the closest the text gets to the example of the subaltern woman Spivak indicates, is given voice in the text as an individual with a nuanced life. As Mukti Lakhi Mangharam notes, Deeti also embodies aspects of Dalley's realist dialectic:

> Deeti is a particularly effective choice for this dialectic between typification and singularity because in her case both reinforce the other; her abstract position as the poor oppressed woman lends force to the specificity of her embodiment of the victimizing nexus between colonial capitalism and nineteenth-century Hindu patriarchy. This interplay between the general and concrete intensifies the reader's empathy for her and contempt for the structures that oppress her (821).

Here, Mangharam draws attention to the various social positions that shape Deeti's narrative and the reader's opinion of her. By focusing on details of her life, she, and by extension women like her, are seen as individuals who exists within a larger socio-historical context. Such a figure would ordinarily be silenced by both Hindu society and colonial oppression, as Spivak notes with Bhubaneshwari Bhaduri, yet by telling us about Deeti's life and her position within the opium structure, Ghosh is able to give her a voice beyond the archive. Similarly, the introduction of Bahram Modi serves as another example of the impact of epistemic violence on the colonial archive. Even if such a figure is likely to be present within the archive, there are other layers of silencing that occur particularly in the face of a capitalist-colonialist history. The postcolonial historical novel, through these characters, creates representation akin to Marxist darstellan Spivak mentions by exploring the hegemony

of the opium economic structure on its subjects. By having a story in which Deeti and Modi can exist simultaneously, and both be considered as figures silenced in varying ways, Ghosh is able to give nuance to the historical archive and the practise of historical writing. As a writer not bound to pure fact, he can centre his narratives on people as historical archetypes, placing the story of opium in the hands of those who were impacted most by it—the colonised.

Chapter 4: Language and the Subaltern

"I became very interested in linguistic anthropology and especially in sociolinguistics. These interests have also stayed with me and have greatly enriched my novels." (Ghosh, "Anthropology and Fiction: An Interview with Amitav Ghosh" 541).

A crucial facet of Ghosh's works is his ability to experiment with language in the telling of history. His focus on language in the *Ibis Trilogy* works through the act of recovery. which operates in two instances. The first is through exposing the relationship between language and power through a hierarchy established by colonial re-naming. Colonial re-naming in the archive is a form of epistemic violence in which there is superimposition of certain derogatory names on subaltern subjects over their actual ones. By paying attention to the way this operates, Ghosh is able to unearth colonial exploitation that occurs through language. Ghosh is also able to intervene in the structure of colonial re-naming, by examining the potential of characters to re-name themselves. The second is through writing the language of the subaltern to indicate how their language is representative of their history. In the *Ibis Trilogy* while the text itself is in English, it is interspersed with various languages the characters speak depending on the region they are from—Hindi, Bengali, Bhojpuri, Chinese— as well as a mix of hybrid languages, such as the pidgin language spoken in Canton that emerges from intermixing through trade, and the anglicised Hindi words used by the British. By highlighting such mixed languages, Ghosh is able to add dimension to the way people, and particularly subaltern people, in the past would have spoken and, in doing so, indicate their histories. In examining each of these modes of historical recovery through language, Ghosh uses language in relation to his characters to focus on fleshing out further details buried by archival epistemic violence.

What's in a Name: The Epistemic Violence of Colonial Re-naming

In her seminal essay "To Name is to Possess," Jamaica Kincaid says of the violence of colonial re-naming: "This naming of things is so crucial to possession—a spiritual padlock with the key irretrievably thrown away—that it is a murder, an erasing…" (122). Kincaid's attention to names as possession here indicates that names, much like objects, have use value. To re-name, is therefore, to erase that value, providing the re-namer to possess power over the individual they re-name. In terms of people in the *Ibis Trilogy,* their use value comes from their ability to contribute to the structure of opium. If considered, 'useless,' characters suffer derogatory nicknames and permanent re-naming. Names are given in accordance with stature in colonial society and importance to opium, which Ghosh exposes through the framing of British characters with honorific titles such as "Burra Sahib," while Indian characters even with high status are given offensive nicknames such as "Rascally-Roger" for "Raja of Raskhali" and "Baboon" for "Baba" (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 25, 46, 161). Racism through naming is a means through which colonial power and capitalistic power can be collectively demonstrated as well as define labour relations.

In this context, Ghosh explores the silencing of a specific character of mixed heritage through naming—Lei Leong Fatt, also known as Freddie[2] Moddie and Framjee Pestonjee Moddie. This character is the Chinese-Parsi son of Bahram Modi, a Parsi merchant, and a Cantonese boatwoman, Chi Mei and has travelled across the world. His background and multiple names indicate multiplicity brought about by intermixing of culture, language, and social class through trade. However, at the same time, due to the colonial preference for well-defined notions of race and culture, his mixed racial identity is often seen as a detriment, rendering him subaltern in colonial society. Additionally, in an act of further epistemic

---

[2] Ghosh sometimes also spells this as Freddy, but Freddie seems to be more commonly mentioned in the text so it has been used here.

violence, colonial society is able to eventually succeed in reducing him to a static singular identity—that of an opium addict—through naming.

When we are first introduced to him in *Sea of Poppies,* his name is Ah Fatt, a bastardised version of his Chinese name and the Hindi word "aafat," meaning calamity or disaster (Ghosh 310). The reason he is given this name is to indicate his position as an opium addict; he earns disdain for being a wastrel unable to contribute productively to the opium trade. However, the exploitative nature of the opium trade creates a paradox here—by being a 'useless' opium addict, he cannot obtain power in the opium trade, but at the same time serves it as a devoted consumer. Ah Fatt is described as being a constant, unavoidable burden for his cellmate, Neel Rattan Halder: "From now on, you will never be able to escape this Aafat…He is all you have, your caste, your family, your friend; neither brother nor wife nor son will ever be as close to you as he will…he is your fate, your destiny" (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 310). The rechristening of Lei Leong Fatt as Ah Fatt, therefore, degrades him in terms of the colonial order. Ghosh's attention to this interplay and alteration of names denotes an acknowledgement of the subjugation such a character faces. The burial of Lei Leong Fatt's real name re-enforces his degraded status of imprisonment and addiction in favour of Ah Fatt, the name most closely associated with opium.

Ah Fatt's opium addiction also causes him to be referred to by another term as well—'afeemkhor'—the Hindi word for an opium eater. The term 'afeemkhor,' represents a large-scale act of epistemic violence as it refers to refers to all opium addicts. It is intended to erase a person's history and define them purely through addiction to opium. While 'afeemkhor' translates to opium eater, it is notable that the usage of the term denotes being a wastrel specifically in relation to colonised people and varies from the European use of the word. In

his article "Opium Addiction and Modern Subjectivity," Keith McMahon notes the difference in the historical perception of a European opium addict and a Chinese opium addict:

> The opium smoker as figure of modern subjectivity assumes but also undermines the contest between master cultures, that is, the 'antediluvian' Chinese (to use Thomas De Quincey's word) and their thousands of years of continuity versus the newly energized Euro-West with its breakthrough Kantian rationalism and its capitalist democracy. Such a framework unavoidably produces capitalism as the apparent evolutionary victor. In short, capitalism becomes a world system that dominates all local systems by forcing them to become its agents. (McMahon 166)

Here, McMahon emphasises that in the European context, opium smoking is viewed as beneficial to the shaping of an individual through engagement with capitalism, turning them into a product of modernity and enlightenment rationality. In comparison, the Chinese opium smoker is seen as lacking progress for not participating in capitalism in the same way. The non-European 'afeemkhor' is considered a person who is stupefied, and one "who sat always as if in a dream, staring at the sky with dull, dead eyes" (Ghosh 33 *Sea of Poppies*).

While the imposed static identity of the 'afeemkhor' denotes reducing Ah Fatt to being defined by a singular trait, Ghosh's attempt to counter this is to bring the focus back to the character's multiplicity. As the series progresses, Ghosh further uses Ah Fatt's change in circumstance through his own actions to indicate the possibility of reclamation of his identity. At the end of the first book, he escapes the Ibis ship and the imprisonment awaiting him in the Mauritius and simultaneously recovers from his opium addiction. Following this, his name changes; in *River of Smoke* as Ah Fatt's father, Bahram Modi, begins to make reference to him, he uses the name 'Freddie.' By the third novel, the name Ah Fatt is not even used in the third person narrative of the text, as 'Freddie' sticks. The change from Ah Fatt to Freddie

is particularly significant in terms of Freddie's position in the story. Once he recovers from addiction, he becomes defined by his wealthy father who can contribute to the opium structure, and so is known as Freddie Moddie, a Parsi name. Even as this name is used, other names also pop up in the course of the narrative, for example, a past life in Singapore reveals the name Freddie Lee. The name Lei Leong Fatt, also referred to briefly is associated with the character's mother and childhood. These names indicate that several identities and histories can exist simultaneously within this character, none of them subjugating the others.

By highlighting the implications of the multiple changes in the character's name, Ghosh exposes how colonial re-naming can result in a form of epistemic violence and how re-naming one's self can be powerful. Indicating how the character is re-named Ah Fatt at the low point of addiction draws attention to the degradation and subjugation of colonised subjects. However, at the same time, Ghosh also provides a means for countering this epistemic violence by focusing on the re-naming the character does himself and his existence as an individual with multiple identities. By choosing to go by Freddie, the character indicates the position he would like to choose in defining himself. In re-naming himself, this character, as a subaltern individual, is able to assert himself. This enables his narrative to be understood as recovering the nuances of epistemic violence of colonial re-naming and explaining ways in which such violence can be countered in focusing on the importance of the names that were buried.

While Freddie Moddie is an indicator of how colonial re-naming occurs at an individual level, Ghosh uses the indentured passengers aboard the Ibis ship to consider how this functions at the level of a group. The condition of being indentured itself is an important part of historical epistemic violence as it reduces an individual to being part of an indistinguishable collective of subjugated labour. The ship, as a creation of capitalist and

commercial interests of the opium trade, aids in the transformation of people looking to escape certain fates of caste, class and/or gender into the homogenous group of "girmitiyas" or "coolies" (Ghosh *Sea of Poppies* 276). This term imposes a collective background as well over individual stories:

> They [girmitiyas] were so called because, in exchange for money, their names were entered on 'girmits' – agreements written on pieces of paper. The silver that was paid for them went to their families, and they were taken away, never to be seen again: they vanished, as if into the netherworld. (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 70-71)

"Girmitiyas" are, therefore, people purely defined by capitalism; they cease to be human once their names are sold into labour (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 70). This is particularly enabled by tools of writing, such as the "girmit" or registers noting passage of indentured people, that mark the change from individual to property (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 70). This is the case with Deeti's lower-caste second husband, Kalua, who attempts to escape with her aboard the Ibis:

> Deeti, standing beside her husband, heard him whisper the name, not as if it were his own but as if it belonged to someone else, a person other than himself… it was as much his own now as his skin, or his eyes, or his hair – Maddow Colver… While many would choose to recast their origins, inventing grand and fanciful lineages for themselves, there would always remain a few who clung steadfastly to the truth: which was that those hallowed names were the result of the stumbling tongue of a harried gomusta, and the faulty hearing of an English pilot... (Ghosh 278)

Here, Kalua is transformed into "Maddow Colver," a name assigned to him indicating his position aboard the ship (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 278). His own disorientation at this renaming

seems to pass quickly, however, as Ghosh indicates, renaming of an individual redefines an entire bloodline, erasing Kalua's past completely and irretrievably defining his future. In fact, following this moment he is permanently referred to as Maddow Colver throughout the trilogy. Ghosh's conscious choice to use the imposed name following this moment draws attention to the repercussions of this act of epistemic violence against a subaltern individual. As a historical archetype, Kalua's transformation into Maddow is, therefore, representative of thousands of indentured labourers who lost their names and histories through colonial records.

As with Freddie Moddie, Ghosh's act of recovery of history involves not only exposing the circumstances that led to forced colonial re-naming, but also in indicating resistance to it though the subversive act of re-naming one's self. In *Sea of Poppies,* this reclamation occurs in the least likely place—the Ibis itself. In *The Poetics of Relation,* in the context of slavery, Eduord Glissant describes the slave-bearing ship as being a womb: "This boat is a womb, a womb abyss. It generates the clamor of your protests; it also produces all the coming unanimity. Although you are alone in this suffering, you share in the unknown with others whom you have yet to know." (6). The slave ship is, therefore, a space in which relations between people are formed in the separation from their homeland. The Ibis houses a class of disempowered people called "girmitiyas" in the oppressive conditions of the hold, yet at the same time, those within that space find it conducive to developing the self-identification of "jahaz-bhais" and "jahazbahens," meaning brothers and sisters of the ship (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 70, 348). Through these names, they not only forge a connection that implies their relation to the ship and the ugly reason for being aboard it, but also create familial bonds highlighting a shared experience, which humanises them from their enforced position as possessions. Renaming themselves keeps alive the dream of a new life despite the

probable horrors that await them at the end of the journey; one can forget the troubles of their

past and look to the future:

> Yes, said Deeti, from now on, there are no differences between us; we are jahaz-bhai
>
> and jahazbahen to each other; all of us children of the ship…it was because her new
>
> self, her new life, had been gestating all this while in the belly of this creature, this
>
> vessel that was the Mother-Father of her new family, a great wooden mái-báp, an
>
> adoptive ancestor and parent of dynasties yet to come: here she was, the Ibis. (Ghosh,
>
> *Sea of Poppies* 348)

The recreation of the Ibis as the "Mother-Father" that houses Deeti in its "belly" once again

evokes its womb-like qualities to enable the re-birth of individual identities (Ghosh, *Sea of*

Poppies 348). Within the space of the ship, Deeti is able to reinvent herself in multiple ways

through naming—first through choosing to be identified by her full name, "Aditi," implying a

wholeness she did not have before, and secondly through her position as "Bhauji" (sister-in-

law), a title of respect giving her power within the familial bonds forged between the

indentured (Ghosh 229, 239). Similarly, within the space of the ship, Paulette, a French

orphan, is able to take control of the derogatory name given to her by her British adoptive

family—"Puggly" (mad)—and transform it into a term of affection (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*

243). The change in spelling from "Puggly" to "Pugli" in the text is particularly significant

given that the former is a colonial British spelling and the latter a spelling in Hindi written in

English, signifying a reclamation of her nickname and her own definition of herself (Ghosh,

Sea of Poppies 243, 347).

      In the context of colonial epistemic violence, taking away the power to name one's

self degrades their very being. Colonial re-naming epitomises the condition of being

colonised and having a lack of control over one's own life. In highlighting the history of

colonial re-naming, Ghosh draws attention to to the erasure that exists below the surface of imposed names and collective identities in the colonial archive. Moreover, by creating situations for characters representative of historically buried figures to reclaim their names, he allows for the re-shaping of the historical narrative of colonial re-naming to include active resistance to the epistemic violence of the act. In producing a postcolonial chronology of colonial re-naming—the history before naming, the aggressive act of naming, and the act of re-naming and recovering—Ghosh creates depth to subaltern lives by illustrating the physical and epistemic violence they suffered at the hands of colonial power and the colonial archive.

Lascari Language: Intermixed Languages of Trade

Ghosh's focus on historical recovery through language considers how the usage of different tongues can contain layers of history within them. In an examination of the so-called bastardisation of language that developed through colonial interaction, Ghosh is able to shed light on how intermixing of people of different cultural backgrounds affected language. For example, in the text's commercial space of Canton, a pidgin mix of languages including English and Chinese is spoken which indicates its history of trade. Ghosh even elucidates the impact of language on British individuals in India, through characters like Mr Doughty, who speaks English with anglicised Hindi words interspersed in his language, for example, using "kubber" for khabar (news) and "cuzzanah" for khazana (treasure) (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 47). This speech is perfectly natural in the context of Doughty's life in India, highlighting how the language of the coloniser can be affected by interaction with the colonised. In terms of considering ways in which the subaltern specifically play with language, the lascars, who are hired sailors, are ideal examples to examine in the text. They are described as people being "…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" (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 13). The nature of their work is mercenary,

indicating a lascar can be picked up from anywhere, hence, bringing a new language with

him. Their linguistic identities, therefore, collide to create a new lascari language that is

rooted in multiplicity and has historical depth.

The archival traces of the actual lascari language lie in Ghosh's real-life finding of a

lascar diary in the course of his research for the trilogy:

> The more I got drawn into the idea of the sail ship, the more evident it became to me
>
> that the sail ship as a technology could not function without a common, comprehensible
>
> language…. I felt sure that there was a dictionary somewhere…Sure enough, I found
>
> this laskari dictionary which was written in 1812, printed in Calcutta by Thomas
>
> Roebuck…And literally I found it because I knew it must exist, like intuiting the
>
> existence of a black hole. (Ghosh, "Networks and Traces" 33)

In this interview, Ghosh describes the joy of unearthing an actual historical source that sheds

light on a buried language. Yet at the same time this also draws attention to the archival

burial of an 'improper' language that could only be unearthed through the mode of active

recovery of history that Ghosh undertakes. In his writing of the lascars, Ghosh works to

counter this burial by creating lascari speech and integrating it into the history of the opium

trade in the *Ibis Trilogy*. Furthermore, he also wrote a non-fiction piece on the history of the

lascar language, emphasising the potential of linguistic diversity to trace history. Ghosh notes

that the lascars were, in fact, the first migrants to travel across the world, yet were

collectively described only as being "native," making them indistinguishable from any other

colonised subjects (Ghosh, "Of Fanas and Forecastles" 57, 58). However, the usage of the

term "lascar" itself denotes multiplicity and to use it makes their intermixed identity

undeniable:

The lascars were a richly cosmopolitan group is beyond question. Yet, no matter whether they were from south Asia, east Africa, the Arabian coast or the Malay archipelago, these sailors were lumped together once they steeped on board. Words often create their own reality: it is easy to imagine that living in the cramped bowels of sailing ships, coping with conditions of extreme danger and difficulty, men from every edge of the Indian ocean came to share in an experience…(Ghosh, "Of Fanas and Forecastles" 57)

As Ghosh notes, the language of the lascars reflects intimate details of their lives. Their backgrounds, interaction and intermixing into a cosmopolitan group can all be derived from their speech, a fact that Ghosh is aware of in his construction of them as people in the *Ibis Trilogy* from the information in the lascari dictionary. By recreating the lascars' speech, he creates a literal moment of subaltern speech, as well as gestures to the deeper context of their history that underlies their words.

A moment of prominent reflection on the lascars' language in the text comes when Zachary Reid, an American, is brought aboard the Ibis ship, whose crew consists of lascars. As an outsider, Zachary notes traits of the lascars as well as oddities of their language:

Having been put in charge of the ship's stores Zachary had to familiarize himself with a new set of provisions…he had to learn to say 'resum' instead of 'rations', and he had to wrap his tongue around words like 'dal', 'masala' and 'achar'. He had to get used to 'malum' instead of mate, 'serang' for bosun, '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 a 'hookum' and instead of

starboard and larboard, fore and aft, he had to say 'jamna' and 'dawa', 'agil' and 'peechil'.

…But on the third, Zachary came on deck at dawn to be greeted with a cheerful: 'Chin-

chin Malum Zikri! You catchi chow-chow? Wat dam t'ing hab got inside?'

Although startled at first, Zachary soon found himself speaking to the serang with an

unaccustomed ease: it was as if his oddly patterned speech had unloosed his own

tongue. (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 15-16)

Here, Zachary's experience of learning about the lascars and their language mimics the

readers' introduction to them as well. Both the reader and Zachary are thrown into a pre-

existing lascari language and forced to adapt. However, writing about them in this way

centres the narrative on the lascars, indicating that their 'odd' speech defines certain traits

about their lives. In his article, "Amitav Ghosh and the Art of Thick Description," Mark

Frost, a historian, describes the effect of the creation of lascar language on the text:

At first the author might be accused of showing off too much of the intense research

that has enabled him to re- produce such a linguistic array, of letting his "scaffolding"

push through the novel's carefully woven fabric. However, when the initial

lexicographical fireworks subside and the plot moves forward, such voices become less

jarring, more an expected part of the world with which the reader is becoming familiar.

(Frost 1540)

Frost emphasises how the writing of the lascars' speech adds to the worldbuilding in the

novel. By bringing them to life in this way, their speech is normalised, countering the

colonial perception that their speech might be considered 'unnatural' and bastardised. By

extension, the normalisation of their speech enables them as a people to be considered legitimate, recovering them from beneath the term of 'native.'

Ultimately, the combination of multiple languages into one lascari language indicates a history of the interaction and linguistic influence that develops through the opium trade. Sabine Lauret-Taft draws attention to the role of languages to convey history in the *Ibis Trilogy* using the concept of Édouard Glissant's theory of creolisation of languages:

> In that sense, the narrative itself is Creole, according to Édouard Glissant's theory of relation. He argues that the result of creolization cannot be predicted. Ghosh's narrative brings together languages, and their intertwining is always unique. In this endeavour, it seems that Ghosh addresses the globalization of languages. As Lise Guilhamon points out, he is trying "to trace the story of early 'global' languages which can perhaps be seen as forerunners of the deterritorialized englishes of today. (65)

The creolisation that Taft describes here is Glissant's fifth relation between languages, or the relationship of tangency, in which languages are created through mixing. She emphasises that through creolisation, Ghosh traces the global history of languages itself. From his present context of postcolonialism, Ghosh is able to use intermixing of languages in the past to recover history and shift the focus from the archival limit of words in a dictionary to the people who spoke them instead. Through the lascars, Ghosh indicates the complexities of subaltern speech that colonial imposition of a singular language attempts to bury.

Chapter 5: Alternative Archives

"Archives are shaped by the eye of the beholder; the same materials will yield different impressions to a historian and a novelist, depending on what they are looking for. The point, however, is that they are both looking for something." (Ghosh, "Storytelling and the Spectrum of the Past" 1556)

As demonstrated so far, Ghosh's project with the *Ibis Trilogy* has been to recreate history through the eyes of individuals by elaborating on their lives. As is evident in his description of his creative process, he must study the archive with a specific set of questions:

> Much may have been written about a well-known episode, yet in trying to visualize it, a novelist may be forced to comb afresh through contemporary letters, records, and pictures. This is because some of the issues that need to be addressed in order to create a scene are of the following order: What was so-and-so wearing when such-and-such happened? What was the time of day? What was the weather like? (Ghosh, "Storytelling and the Spectrum of the Past" 1558).

Here, Ghosh emphasises that in constructing a history, accuracy to detail is crucial. However, ultimately for histories of events in the colonial era, such as the opium trade, the source most consistently available to consult for facts is the colonial archive. To resist the colonial archive's hegemony over historical writing, Ghosh de-centres it by making his primary source for the *Ibis Trilogy* comprehensive archives created by the colonised. Such archives can counter the epistemic violence inflicted by the colonial archive by focusing on history from the point of view of those who are subjugated. However, given that such archives do not exist, as an author, Ghosh's solution is to write them into being. In the text, Ghosh creates multiple archival sources, such as Robin Chinnery's letters that relay events in

Canton to Paulette, and newspaper articles from the Calcutta Gazette, yet there are two major

archives that underlie the construction of history within the text. The first is the archive of

Neel Rattan Halder that serves as the main source of the trilogy. It also includes the *Ibis*

Chrestomathy, a list of words that resembles a glossary but instead trace the history of

language, which it considers an "astrological chart" (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 501). The second

archive is Deeti's altar to the Ibis, which encompasses her own history aboard the ship and

after disembarking, as well as those of other former passengers. In this section, each of these

further will be explored further.

In the epilogue of the final novel in the series, *Flood of Fire,* the author details the

archive he consulted:

> In embarking on the task of writing a history of the Ibis community, the author had
>
> hoped to include an account of the materials on which his narrative is largely founded:
>
> that is to say Neel's archive, by which is meant not only his notes and jottings but also
>
> the extensive collection of books, pictures and documents that he accumulated during
>
> the years in which he ran a printshop in Shanghai, in partnership with Compton (Liang
>
> Kuei- ch'uan). (Ghosh, *Flood of Fire* 608)

The account Ghosh describes is a goldmine—containing intimate notes, a diary, and books of

a person who lived and travelled between India and China during the period preceding the

First Opium War. It also details this individual's encounters with a variety of people in his

positions as a Raja, a prisoner, and a secretary. However, this archive does not actually exist.

In fact, the archive Ghosh refers to—that of Neel Rattan Halder and his son Raju—is of his

own creation, as are the authors of it. Here, Ghosh as a novelist, is able to intervene and

create an archive where there is none. Moreover, the nature of the archive he creates is anti-

colonial—it is framed as being a meticulous and comprehensive archive of events related to

the Opium Wars through the eyes of a colonised subject, de-centring the primacy the colonial archive holds as a source of history for this time period.

In constructing the contents of Neel's archive, Ghosh frames real texts from the colonial archive he consulted as being part of Neel's collection, reorienting the existing archive into the viewpoint of the colonised. Ghosh also enables intervention in the colonial archive by describing Neel's comments on real colonial records, such as his response to the Treaty of Nanking which marked the end of the First Opium War:

> Neel succeeded in acquiring a copy, at great expense, but it roused him to such a passion that he proceeded to deface it by scribbling comments in the margins, and by underlining certain passages – for example the provision that abolished the old Co-Hong trading system. A clause that attracted his special ire was that which required the British and Chinese governments to henceforth deal with each other on a 'footing of equality' through direct exchanges between their appointed representatives. Neel notes sardonically that, as so often when Westerners use words like 'equality', this clause was clearly intended to mean exactly the opposite of what it said: that it would be the British who would now dictate the terms of the relationship. He notes similarly, alongside the clause that required China to compensate the British for the costs and injuries of their invasion: 'So it was the Chinese who had to pay for the catastrophe that had befallen their country!' (Ghosh, *Flood of Fire* 609)

Here, Neel's annotations serve as creating a conversation with historical events. His comments provide an opportunity for him, as a person who experienced this history, to correct the narrative of the colonial archive, presenting an alternate viewpoint of events. This destabilises the colonial archive's power over defining history. Moreover, the choice of using Neel to counter the hegemony of colonial documents is effective considering that his story involves being jailed on false charges of forgery. His comments on the document highlight

the deceptive wording in the treaty, enabling him to not only serve as a truthful voice for exposing it, but also to simultaneously remind readers of the unjust claim made against him for manipulating words by colonial authorities. By "defacing" a historical document, Neel literally writes over the colonial narrative, centring the experience of the colonised person in the telling of history (Ghosh, *Flood of Fire* 609).

Neel's archive becomes particularly significant for the presentation of a specific document at the end of *Sea of Poppies* —the Ibis Chrestomathy, which orients history around words. Ghosh creates a framing device in which this collection of words has been gathered by Neel in the course of his travels and has been continuously updated and added to by his descendants, including the narrator of the text himself. The Chrestomathy claims to trace the lineage and fate of words, comparing it to the destiny of people aboard the Ibis as both are coopted into new lives shaped by colonial conditions: "…it is devoted to a select number among the many migrants who have sailed from eastern waters towards the chilly shores of the English language. It is, in other words, a chart of the fortunes of a shipload of girmitiyas: this perhaps is why Neel named it after the Ibis" (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 501). Moreover, the Chrestomathy's aim is to examine the destiny of these words in terms of their naturalisation into the English language. This is carried out by comparing them to "a complete and authoritative lexicon of the English language" titled the Oracle, which is revealed to be the Oxford English Dictionary (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 501). By framing the Oracle as the ultimate authority of the English language, the Chrestomathy, therefore, highlights words that appeared in the colonial archive or were altered or buried by it, indicating subjugation of knowledge through the hegemony of colonial language. However, in presenting the Chrestomathy here as an archive that pre-dates the Oracle, Ghosh presents it as a recovered archive of the colonised. Moreover, given that the actual Chrestomathy is comprised of Ghosh's research from multiple dictionaries of colonial language, by creating it as an archive

of a colonised person and his descendants, Ghosh re-orients these words as being part of the experiences and history of the colonised.

In his essay, "Fugitive archives," Kritish Rajbhandari describes Ghosh's project with the Chrestomathy as treating "…linguistic hybridity at a metafictional level: it stages the movement of words between different linguistic registers revealing the link between language and history, specifically the history of mobilities in the Indian Ocean" (192). This indicates that the Chrestomathy can ultimately offer itself as an archive centred on the linguistic fluidity of the Indian ocean that came about through trade. As Ghosh himself claims people who lived in the Indian ocean region at the time of the Opium Wars "…did indeed populate the "floating worlds" of the eastern seas at that time. This was, of course, not only a richly multilingual universe but also one in which almost every character would have had a complicated linguistic identity" (Ghosh, "Speaking of Babel: The Risks and Rewards of Writing about Polyglot Societies" 294). Therefore, through the Chrestomathy, we get an insight into how the history of language of the colonised can reveal details about identity that may otherwise be lost due to the hegemony of English in colonial society and archive. Moreover, given that the Chrestomathy is described as a "continuous dialogue," it suggests that it can be an unending source of history that links the past and the present without the intervention of the colonial archive (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 502).

In addition to Neel's overarching archive that frames the *Ibis Trilogy*, there is another smaller archive that makes an appearance in the second book, *River of Smoke*—Deeti's shrine, also referred to as "Deetiji's Memory-Temple" (Ghosh 8). This shrine, located in a rock formation is visited once a year by La Fami Colver, the descendants of Deeti and Maddow Colver, the man formally known as Kalua. Unlike Hindu shrines that would have Gods or Goddesses, Deeti's shrine is notable for recording moments of importance to her life. Deeti and Kalua are separated at the end of *Sea of Poppies* as Kalua escapes from the Ibis

along with Neel, Ah Fatt, Jodu and Serang Ali, while Deeti, heavily pregnant, is left on the ship. *River of Smoke* immediately begins with La Fami Colver and Deeti, who is elderly now, and indicates that the two were not able to meet again. To commemorate the loss of her husband, Deeti draws images of Kalua as well as a large depiction of the moment of their separation on the ship which she calls "The Parting" (Ghosh, *River of Smoke* 13). Memorialisation, therefore, translates into physical recording of lives and stories. Through her drawing, Deeti begins to build an archive of her journey and that of her family, for whose history "the Parting" is significant (Ghosh, *River of Smoke* 13). As the text notes, the emphasis on drawing is specifically important given that Deeti cannot write: "…drawing was not just a consolation, but also her principal means of remembrance: being unlettered, it was the only way she could keep track of her memories" (Ghosh, *River of Smoke* 10). Drawing, here, serves as an alternate means of historical documentation. Moreover, when the family carries out their yearly pilgrimage to the shrine, stories about Kalua and the other passengers on the Ibis are also narrated, making oral history a part of interacting with this archive. Therefore, while Deeti's memory-temple may be presented as being the complete opposite of an archive consisting of official documentation on stacks of paper, given its ability to capture historical events, her inscriptions and stories can be considered as legitimate as a written source of history.

Another way in which Deeti's archive is different from the colonial archive is its focus on collective writing of history. When Deeti first finds the shrine, it shows signs of previous human inhabitancy, including drawings. Therefore, for her to add her memories to it indicates a contribution to a pre-existing archive without disturbing it, as opposed to a colonial archive which asserts its authority through erasure. This notion of contribution also expands beyond Deeti as she invites other visitors from the Ibis to create their own documentation of their shared history, making it a collective archive:

…You are one of our original jahaz-bhais and this is our memory-temple. Everyone

who has been here has added to it - Malum Zikri, Paulette, Jodu. It is your turn now.

Neel could think of no way to say no. All right, he said. I'll try.

He had never been much of a draughtsman, but he took the lump of charcoal from her

and set hesitantly to work. (Ghosh, *River of Smoke* 26)

In this passage, Deeti indicates that aside from Neel, Zachary Reid, Paulette, and Jodu have also seen the memory temple and contributed to it in some way. The Ibis, therefore, marks a moment of significant change and transformation for each of the characters. Deeti's archive serves as testament to its role in their lives and their respective paths by commemorating it through creating an archive of the ongoing history of its passengers.

Deeti's memory temple, therefore, serves as a serious contender for exploring voices of the subaltern through historical fiction. As an archive, it denotes subaltern perspectives in several ways—it allows for documentation considering lack of education, it notes the history of subjugated individuals, and it is ongoing and so continues to record further experiences. While not featured prominently in scholarship, the memory temple should be noted for its re-imagining of an anticolonial, subaltern archive.

In the *Ibis Trilogy*, both Deeti's and Neel's archive, are significant for showing alternate means of recording history. Both are notably works of families, decentring history from colonial authority to place it in the hands of colonised people and their descendants. Kritish Rajbhandari, in his essay, proposes through the *Ibis Trilogy*, Ghosh performs a kind of historical writing he terms as "anarchival drift" (189). This practice involves "…rewriting the past that incorporates without assimilating the archival sources, reintroducing historical context—that is, the historical, cultural, and geographical specificity of the Indian Ocean—to

undermine the transparency of the archives and question the translatability of the past"

(Rajbhandari 189). Anarchival drift, given its refocusing of historical context away from

archives to the ocean, is, therefore, a significant way to describe Ghosh's project here. Both

Neel and Deeti's archives aim to explore the history of the Ibis and its impact on individuals.

Using the Ibis, a ship symbolic of capitalist trade and indenture, to become the origin point

for historical lives, creates a new way of understanding history.

Chapter 6: The Challenges of Creating Subaltern Representation through Postcolonial Historical Fiction

The question driving this paper, has been to explore how literature can be used to respond to the question of representation of the subaltern, and specifically, how the work of Amitav Ghosh tries to do this. Ghosh makes a relevant case as to historical fiction's ability to contribute to this issue by centring the narratives around exploring historical lives in context, playing with language and naming, and creating alternate archives. Yet at the same time, when assessing if Ghosh is able to answer Spivak's question, there are still some aspects left to consider. As Greg Forter suggests, overall there is a delicate balance involved in the writing of historical fiction with respect to subaltern voices:

> These are forms designed to acknowledge the simultaneous difficulty and necessity of historical recovery; they mark a rejection of any unmediated, total "restoration" of the historically occluded, but also a refusal to capitulate to the reverse essentialism by which history's victims simply "are" mute, and those whose voices resist full recovery must remain forever silenced. The modernist strand of this genre engages in a more challenging labor: it takes the imaginative risk of giving voice to what Morrison calls "the disremembered dead" *in full knowledge* of that project's "impossibility." (Forter 11).

Forter notes how in the process of writing historical fiction, the writer must take on the project of historical recovery with full acknowledgement that this involves the pressure of giving voice to those who are silenced. This involves engaging in creative experiments that may still fall short. The *Ibis Trilogy,* in its expansive nature engages deeply with the project of subaltern recovery, particularly through the creation of characters whose subalternity

changes in the course of the narrative, such as Neel and Deeti, yet at the same time, there are

moments in which this project falters.

An instance in the *Ibis Trilogy*, in which the success of recovering the voice of the

subaltern waivers is in the text's treatment of Deeti. As noted in an earlier section of the

paper, Deeti's story in *Sea of Poppies,* portrays a nuanced version of a colonised woman's

life during the years leading up to the Opium War. Through her husband's life as an opium

factory worker and opium addict, we are given an insight into the impact of the opium trade

at the village level of the colony. Deeti's ultimate escape from her life in the village with

Kalua provides a rich backstory on the circumstances that would lead one to choose a life of

indenture. Yet when the text next picks up on Deeti in *River of Smoke,* she has lived out most

of her life and has a large family. There is very little detail of her life as an indentured

labourer:

> Back in those days, Deeti was a coolie, working on a newly cleared plantation on the
>
> other side of the Baie du Morne. Her master was a Frenchman, a former soldier who
>
> had been wounded in the Napoleonic Wars and was ill both in mind and body: it was he
>
> who had brought Deeti and eight of her shipmates from the Ibis, to this far corner of the
>
> island to serve out their indenture. (Ghosh, *River of Smoke* 10)

This description explains very little about Deeti's actual experiences as an indentured

labourer, and, in fact, potentially ends up creating a silence around it. Considering *Sea of*

Poppies', focus on individuals bound for indentured labour in the Ibis, to not elaborate on the

end of their journey is unusual. To overlook the issue of indenture ends up erasing the

experience of a subaltern person who is subjected to it. Furthermore, following the chapters

on La Fami Colver, Deeti does not appear in the series again except as being alluded to by

other characters, such as her brother, Kesri Singh, and her husband, Maddow Colver. This

suggests that following her indenture, her plotline is deemed irrelevant to the rest of the story of opium and so ends prematurely. This unexplained decision, for which there is lack of scholarly criticism as well, somewhat undermines the project of creating such a character as a subaltern voice.

In his critique of Ghosh's works, Mukurand Paranajape draws attention to a potential issue in Ghosh's works that perhaps may explain the decision to reduce Deeti's role in the trilogy. Paranjape expresses dissatisfaction with the conclusions Ghosh moves towards in his historical fiction:

> But my departure from Mondal becomes more significant when I locate the essential problem in Ghosh's work not so much as his loss of faith in the grand narrative of the nation or his resorting to a sort of subalternist fiction to counter it….Nor, indeed, is it that the recurrent themes of his work…do not, in the end, add up to a "coherent and sustained intellectual project with a core set of themes" (Mondal, 2007: 38). It is somewhere else, which Mondal hints at but does not follow up: "many of the key moments in Ghosh's texts involve the foregrounding of an ethical situation which remains unresolved" (2007: 174). In Ghosh, the central conflict, whether personal or ethical, continues to lurk beneath the surface. It is never brought fully into relief. (Paranjape 364)

Paranjape's essay acknowledges that Ghosh's fiction does tremendous work in terms of asking ethical questions about identity and history, yet does not necessarily provide any satisfactory answers. Paranjape claims "…these ethical concerns are merely tabled in Ghosh's texts, without being central either to plot or the development of the characters. Individuals confront moral dilemmas and ambiguities, then move on without attempting necessarily to resolve them…" (366). He suggests a lack of resolution undermines the story,

as indicated by the text's treatment of Deeti. In creating a character like Deeti, there is possible representation of a historical subaltern voice, yet there is no definitive resolution as to how to ensure it continues or is given a suitable end, even as other plotlines may take primacy in the story. Instead, the effect is that we are only given a glimpse into her life before she is rendered unimportant. Therefore, taking on the task of ensuring the subaltern is given voice can be difficult.

Flaws in the *Ibis Trilogy* indicate that the project of historical fiction cannot fully provide a solution to the issue of subaltern speech and the archive. Yet at the same time, Ghosh's contribution to the issue of the archive is undeniable, making it unadvisable to dismiss his work, or indeed that of historical fiction, as attempting to address subaltern speech. Ultimately, the question Spivak poses is difficult, however, through the arguments made in this thesis, historical fiction has proven to have advantages over academic historical writing, making it a space with potential for exploring the ongoing question of how to ensure the subaltern is able to speak.

Conclusion

In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak draws attention to the variety of challenges involved in the writing of subaltern history. Her focus particularly on the issue of epistemic violence, examines its occurrence both at the international level of historical writing through lack of attention to the nuances of the 'Third World' and at the national level through the elite's ignorance of the subaltern. The ultimate result is that Spivak claims the subaltern cannot speak, and considering the influence this question continues to have over postcolonial history and criticism, there has been no definitive way to completely change her answer. Yet historical fiction, through its freedom from the constraints of formal historical writing, offers a significant alternative form of depicting historical subaltern lives. It is particularly effective in decentring the colonial archive's primacy as a source of history and, in being outside the conventions of academic writing, it can separate itself from the ideological hegemonies that may be prevalent in disciplines such as history and anthropology. These characteristics enable the genre to create a comprehensive picture of historical events through focus on the lives of individuals who may have little to no presence in the colonial archive. This is not to say that historical fiction is the solution to Spivak's question, but that it can serve as a notable contribution to an ongoing issue of how to write history.

The *Ibis Trilogy* specifically is a suitable example of examining how historical fiction can be used as an alternative form of exploring history given its unique attention to combining facets of research and fiction. Alessandro Vescovi defines Ghosh's works as being "research novels" that use fiction as a form of exploring research questions (192):

> Furthermore, in these novels, not only does Ghosh give life to historical narrations, he also publishes the results of his own research through the medium of fiction. Research and fiction are here mutually supportive, so that their relation resembles that of form and content in a poem. (Vescovi 194)

Vescovi's analysis indicates that Ghosh's fiction can be considered a serious alternative form of historical writing. It focuses on problems that frame constructions of history, such as the issue of the archive but expresses them through stories. In the *Ibis Trilogy*, the overarching plot centres history on individuals, and in writing detailed accounts of their lives attempts to counter archival silence. Additionally, play with language highlights hierarchies and the impact of migration on colonial society. The ultimate creation of alternate forms of documenting history is a direct response to the archival gap, rejecting its centrality to writing history by instead granting legitimacy to archive of the colonised, even as these archives themselves are part of the fiction. The exploration of the archival issue in several ways, such as those detailed above, all exist simultaneously in one story causing Gaurav Desai to refer to Ghosh as a "linkister," using a term existing in *Sea of Poppies*:

> In positing Ghosh the novelist as a "linkister," then, I follow not the Oracle's (or the OED's) etymology of the term as a corruption of the word "linguister," but rather Neel's own preference for reading it as "a colloquial extension of the word 'link'" (Sea of Poppies, 533). For Ghosh has been concerned with linking and the processes of delinking throughout his writing career….Ghosh has been our master linkister for some time now. The Ibis Trilogy further secures this standing, urging us to make links that few of us have made before….fiction can often do the work of raising public consciousness more effectively than textbook histories. (1532-33)

Desai's term of "linkister" highlights Ghosh's attention to multiple issues such as caste, class, gender and colonial dynamics that were at play during the Opium Wars, creating a layered view of history that digs beneath epistemic violence to unearth multiple silenced voices and integrate them into the telling of events (1532). Here, Ghosh is given credit for being able to weave several threads together to create an extensive history through a popular form, making

fiction a considerable way to respond to the same questions surrounding history that plague

historians (1532).

However, as seen through the sudden vanish of Deeti from the trilogy, historical

fiction is not perfect and cannot fully resolve the issue of the archive in writing history.

Moreover, as a member of the national elite, when considering Spivak's perspective, there

should be a certain scepticism of Ghosh's writing of subaltern people. However, this is not to

dismiss his work, but to indicate that historical fiction can serve as a springboard for further

questions that ultimately lead to the development of a definitive way of writing postcolonial

history. There are still multiple issues related to the archival gap to be explored, such as the

centrality of the colonial archive in historical writing at all, given its history of epistemic

violence, and the impact of oral histories or non-written histories on historical writing of the

subaltern. In the face of Spivak's question, which to attempt to address means understanding

its inherent impossibility, postcolonial historical fiction should be considered a step forward

in terms of making historical writing more inclusive.

Works Cited

Anderson, Clare. "Empire and Exile: Reflections On the Ibis Trilogy." *American Historical Review*, vol. 121, no. 5, 2016, pp. 1523 - 1530.

Burton, Antoinette. "Amitav Ghosh's World Histories from Below." *History of the Present*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2012, pp. 71–77.

Dalley, Hamish. "Postcolonialism and the Historical Novel: Epistemologies of Contemporary Realism." *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2014, pp. 51–67.

Dirks, Nicholas B.. *Autobiography of an Archive: A Scholar's Passage to India*. Columbia University Press, 2015.

Desai, Gaurav. "The Novelist as Linkister." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 121, no. 5, 2016, pp. 1531–36.

Forter, Greg. *Critique and Utopia In Postcolonial Historical Fiction: Atlantic and Other Worlds*. Oxford University Press, 2019.

Frost, Mark R.. "Amitav Ghosh and the Art of Thick Description: History In the Ibis Trilogy." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 121, no. 5, 2016, pp. 1537 - 1544.

Ghosh, Amitav. "Amitav Ghosh in Conversation." Interview with Alessandro Vescovi. *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature,* vol. 40, no. 4, 2009, pp. 129-141.

---. "ANTHROPOLOGY AND FICTION: An Interview with Amitav Ghosh." Interview with Damien Stankiewicz. *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2012, pp. 535 - 534.

---. "Of Fanas and Forecastles: The Indian Ocean and Some Lost Languages of the Age of Sail." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 43, no. 25, 2008, pp. 56–62.

---. *Flood of Fire.* Penguin Books India, 2015.

---."Networks and Traces: An Interview with Amitav Ghosh." Interview with Elleke Boehmer and Anshuman A. Mondal. *Wasafiri,* vol. 27, no. 2, 2012, pp. 30-35.

---. *Sea of Poppies.* Picador, 2009.

---. "Speaking of Babel: The Risks and Rewards of Writing about Polyglot Societies."

Comparative Literature, vol. 72, no.3, 2020, pp. 283–298.

---. "Storytelling and the Spectrum of the Past." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 121,

no. 5, 2016, pp. 1552 – 1565.

---. *River of Smoke.* Penguin Books India, 2011.

Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing, University of Michigan

Press, 1997.

Guha, Ranajit. "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India."

Postcolonialisms: An Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism, edited by Gaurav

Desai and Supriya Nair, Rutgers University Press, 2005, pp. 403-409.

Kincaid, Jamaica. "To Name is to Possess." *My Garden (book)*. Farrar Straus Giroux, 1999,

pp. 114-124.

Lauret-Taft, Sabine. "Chapter 3 The Commerce of Languages in Amitav Ghosh's River of

Smoke". *Amitav Ghosh's Culture Chromosome: Anthropology, Epistemology, Ethics

and Space*, edited by Asis De and Alessandro Vescovi, Brill, 2021, pp. 58-72.

Lukács, Georg. *The Historical Novel*. Translated by Hannah Mitchell and Stanley Mitchell.

Merlin Press, 1978.

Mangharam, Mukti Lakhi. "Grounds for Comparison: The Historical Novel and the Making

of the Modern World System." *ELH,* vol. 86, no. 3, 2019, pp. 805-833.

Maza, Sarah C.. *Thinking About History*. The University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Paranjape, Marakand R. *Another Canon: Indian Texts and Traditions in English.* London:

Anthem Press, 2009.

---. "Beyond the subaltern syndrome: Amitav Ghosh and the crisis of the bhadrasamaj." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2012, pp. 357–374.

Mcmahon, Keith. "Opium Smoking and Modern Subjectivity." *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2005, pp. 165 - 180.

Rajbhandari, Kritish. "Fugitive Archives: Translation, Sea, and History In Indian Ocean Fiction." *Comparative Literature*, vol. 74, no. 2, 2022, pp. 186 - 201.

Reid, Kirsty, and Fiona Paisley, editors. *Sources and Methods In Histories of Colonialism: Approaching the Imperial Archive*. Routledge, 2017.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "'Can the Subaltern Speak?': Revised Edition, from the 'History' Chapter of Critique of Postcolonial Reason." *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*, edited by Rosalind C. Morris, Columbia University Press, 2010, pp. 21–78.

Vescovi, Alessandro. "Voicing Unspoken Histories. Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies as Research Novel." *History and Narration: Looking back from the Twentieth Century*, edited by Marialuisa Bignami, Francesca Orestano and Alessandro Vescovi, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011, pp. 190-209.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for everyone who has supported me along my journey through graduate school and I would like to take this space to thank some people in particular.

Thank you to my advisors—Professor Nasrin Olla, for helping me in the Spring semester and for the guidance and feedback that provided the structure for this thesis, and Professor Mary Kuhn, for teaching the initial material that got me interested in Amitav Ghosh and for her support to this thesis in the Fall semester. Thank you also to Professor Debjani Ganguly for helping me with identifying materials and sources on the historical novel.

Thank you also to all the other professors whose courses have enriched my time here at UVa—Professor Alison Booth, Professor Emily Ogden, Professor Caroline Rody, Professor Susan Fraiman, and Professor Clare Kinney.

Thank you to my family for your unending support and encouragement—Mama, Papa, Priya Maasi, Vijay Uncle, and Nana. A special thanks to my brother, Sachin, for his help in planning an effective writing schedule.

Thank you to all of the friends who have supported me along the way. Particular thanks to Eugenie and Frank for the millions of study sessions at Clemons and following dinners that enabled this thesis to be written. I am also grateful to Viola, Hyeona, and Anran. Thank you also to my friends afar—Nishka, Sabah and Chandeno.