

On the Boundaries of Water

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One way of approaching *Sea of Poppies* is to resolve its richly tessellated surface into sets of themes or tropes. Proceeding in this manner, one might register and explore the novel's keen interest in:

1. **Caste and class dynamics:** Neel staunchly believes in equality (he counts Buddha as being among his “egalitarian lineage”), yet viscerally struggles to bring himself to come into contact with anything associated with a lower caste; British colonizers take advantage of existing caste sentiments to, de facto, assume the role of the “new brahmins;” Deeti would have trouble entering Kalua’s neighborhood because of caste differences; Zikri Malum struggles to adjust to his new responsibilities as he rises the social ladder.
2. **Gender dynamics and gender fluidity:** Deeti would rather become a sati than lose her land to and be forced to move in with her brother-in-law; Paulette struggles to gain access to the Ibis in order to avoid the fate cast upon her by her gender (assault by Burnham, forced into marriage with judge to avoid shame of her “pregnancy”); Baboo proudly proclaims that any differences between the sexes is illusory and strives to embody Taramony (461); Momdoo Tindal’s female alter-ego, shown off in spectacles for the crew’s entertainment (383).
3. **Bodies and embodiment:** bodies are objects of desire and of abuse; they’re commodified and ravaged by wars and drugs.
4. **Visions** (Deeti’s vision of the ibis), **omens** (Zikri as krishna, cat darting off boat), **dreams, altered consciousness** (opium)
5. **Contact and exchange across cultures:** differences between families in the same cultural sphere (the migrant women discover they all cook differently), across religions, between natives foreigners, urbanites and rural folk, sailors and landlubbers, etc.
6. **Imperialism and empire:** the British don’t live up to the ideals they claim to be promulgating to their subjects.

I argue, however, that the novel undermines the essentializing, categorical logic underlying such approaches; it offers us a way of viewing both the novel and the world itself as capable of accommodating radical difference without thereby dissolving into nonsense.

There is a set of concerns that has both hermeneutic and, in many cases, ontic priority to the ones listed above; these seemingly disparate facets of the novel all rest on the common foundation of language. Linguistic structures enable the representation of imaginary objects, codify and enforce power structures, and embody lived differences.

The various idiolects utilized by the characters in the novel richly texture their backgrounds and personalities. Identity is constituted by language even among the characters themselves; names contain the sum of one's "moorings in the world" (217) while rendering foreigners unassimilably opaque (101). Almost all of the characters in the novel have multiple names (nicknames, mispronunciations, etc.), and the names themselves often have double meanings (Zikri, Neel, Kalua, Pugli, etc.). Even as they provide a basis for familiarity, names separate characters not only from each other but also from different aspects of themselves.

Much of the action in the narrative is predicated on words:

1. The word "black" next to Zachary's name on the ship's manifest
2. Neel's act of forgery
3. Mr. Burnham's willing misuse of the biblical "chastisement," and Paulette's imagined pregnancy occasioned by a misunderstanding of her being "foireuse."

The narrative thrust of these words promotes them from mere descriptions of the world to substantive objects in their own right—J. L. Austin's performative utterances on steroids.

The novel persistently points to the profound political implications of language; Mr. Doughty's "hindee oordoo" cleaves communities apart from their common hindustani and sets the stage for modern communal violence. Neel deludes himself into thinking that the difference between his former role as a zamindar and the role the jail jemadars (289) play is more than just one of pronunciation. One's fluency in particular languages or accents can earn respect or disrepute (as in the case of the "rustic accents" of the migrants).

As a medium for both articulating difference and forging bonds between people, language not only materially underlies social relations but also offers a microcosm in which social problems can be rephrased and explored. Reconciling, for instance, Justice Kendalbushe's insistence on equality before the law (221) with his condoning of Mr. Burnham's illegal activities under the belief that "there is always a price... for doing good" (242) can be accomplished by rephrasing the paradox as a particular problem with language. Either

1. The judge is a hypocrite and his words are mismatched with his actions (i.e. he is a bad person with a "pretense of virtue"), or

2. He's promoting a second order value (promulgating equality) at the expense of his first-order commitment to equality itself—i.e. he's fallen into a metalinguistic regress.

The judge is forced into a paradox in his attempt to reduce difference (spread “civilization”). Ghosh offers a way out by recasting “equality” not as a state in which difference is minimized or managed under a single overarching conceptual framework, but rather as one predicated by the explosive magnification of difference.

That difference is ineradicable in the novel is articulated in the episode in which the women, discussing how they cook simple dishes, find not only that they all do it slightly differently, but indeed that they had imagined no other way to do it (223). In offering surprising (sometimes controversial) etymologies for common English words, the *Chrestomathy* shows us the extent to which language is constitutively self-estranging. It even becomes difficult to define what a language is in the novel.

1. Lascari vs. “we make ourselves understood” (238)
2. Paulette's phonetic pronunciation of French
3. Jodu's boat metaphor English

“Language” as such splinters into a set of shared communicative strategies. Ghosh emphasizes this point in a series of meta-commentaries:

1. Meaning flows under the surface for Zachary, even if the individual words aren't grasped (96)
2. Genius of Ah Fatt's elisions (345)
3. *Chrestomathy*