

Maritime Transmodernities and The Ibis Trilogy

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The Indian Ocean and The Transmodern Novel¹

A focus upon the sea and the ocean makes us recognize that land-based figurations of modernity, nationalism, and belonging have some clear features that are common across cultures and time. Territoriality, whether we think of it in terms of the nation-state or of ethnic genealogies, is framed by fixed boundaries, which then present us with numerous problems that come out of the policing and enforcing of such boundaries. In general, the nation-state has been the unit of measure for territorial or land-based forms of community, a fact that becomes central to a consideration of the novel, which as György Lukács has argued, is tied intimately to the re-presentation of the national as a natural state of organized civil society.² Land is *the habitus*, as Pierre Bourdieu might say, as it gives to our world an unquestioned order, a repository of premises and practices that produces and reproduces the frameworks of our social thought and behaviour. Terracentric thinking, thus, renders the ocean as an-other space, to be conquered in much the same way as land is brought under control and made into one of the founding principles of civilization. In this essay, I want to theorize for the purposes of literary studies a structuralist reading of the ocean and oceanic space as offering some much-needed corrective to the fixities and impermeabilities of land-based territorialities. I also want to examine the special case of Amitav Ghosh's novels, especially his fictional work loosely called the Ibis Trilogy, as instantiating the kind of critique of land-based territorialities that postcolonial studies has, in the main, failed to do, embroiled as this discourse is in dismantling empires as territorial constructs.

As the work of noted geographer Jean-Marie Kowalski on Greco-Roman maritime cultures shows, terrestrial or land-based figurations of sociality provide an array of terms by which certain kinds of modernity have become dominant: land-based nationalism, for instance, is vital to understanding the idea of "empire" in the last two centuries in particular, even as we must face the contradictions inherent in the earth's planetary make-up. About 71% of the earth's surface is made up of water and only 29% by land, and the oceans hold about 96.5% of all of earth's water. Terracentrism has been the basis for much conventional historiography, and even when water or waterbased social formations have featured in the

historiographic imagination, they have done so in ways only ancillary to terracentric histories of colonial or imperial expansion. Maritime histories, e.g., have primarily tended to be histories of naval warfare or of metropolitan activities involving trade and commerce rather than, say, of coast-to-coast or littoral exchanges. In an excellent essay on Michael Pearson's pioneering work and thought on the Indian Ocean, the historian Rila Mukherjee makes useful distinctions between the terms "coastal," "littoral," and "territorial," allowing one to understand "waterscape" as not merely an extension of the premises and forms by which "landscape" is visualized, understood, and worked upon, but as comprising effectively, in fact, a challenge to terracentric ways of thinking. Pearson's work on the "amphibious societies" of the marge, beach, and ressac paves the way, in Mukherjee's assessment, to seeing the intersectionality of histories of the Indian Ocean, and that in fact, "the Indian Ocean was not just India's ocean" ("Maritime-Aquatic" 57). Indeed, the littoral provides an important way to rethink histories of waterbased socialities, especially in relation to a spate of Anglophone novels that have arisen in the last five decades, including Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* and those by writers Nathacha Appanah, Abdulrazak Gurnah,³ M. G. Vassanji, Khal Torabully, among others.⁴ Of course, much vernacular writing of South Asia has been intimately connected to waterscapes and littoral cultures, a point that is richly explored by Sanjeev Sanyal in his recent book, *The Ocean of Churn: How the Indian Ocean shaped Human History* (2016), in which he examines the centrality of the oceanic and the peninsular in understanding transnational communities beyond the borders of the nation-state.

In this essay, I want to respond to the call made most recently by geographers and historians "to re-centre our historical imagination and envisage new spatialities when attempting a water history" (Mukherjee "Escape" 93-4). To look at the sea and its littoral and coastal cultures in this way is to also emphasize and closely re-imagine the sea as a non-static space, or a space of deep and extensive mobilities. Michael Pearson, with regard to the Indian Ocean basin, suggests that we rethink the ways in which the rim of the Indian Ocean touches the lives and cultures of many nations, creating a rich history of cross-cultural exchange that predates European imperialism. Pearson writes in his influential book *The Indian Ocean*:

For most of us today the sea has little practical significance. This is very recent. ... In the past, the sea was much more central in our minds, connecting people and goods all over the world, inspiring great literature. ... Rather than look out at the oceans from the land, as so many earlier books have done, a history of an ocean has to reverse this angle and look from the sea to the land and most obviously to the coast ... A history of an ocean needs to be amphibious, moving easily between land and sea. (1-10)

The Indian Ocean, thus, presents a transnational space, a domain that offers, as Isabel Hofmeyr argues, “rich possibilities for working beyond the templates of the nation-state and area studies. Importantly, the Indian Ocean makes visible a range of lateral networks that fall within the Third World or Global South. It is hence of particular relevance to those pursuing post-area studies scholarship” (“The Complicating Sea” 584). Such an approach paves the way for what David Bodenhamer has called, “a rethinking about waterbodies as space [that] has changed our historical and spatial imagination in a major way” (102).

In a long essay on sea power, “India and the Indian Ocean,” published by the Archaeological Survey of India in 1945, K. M. Panikkar, the Malayalam writer, historian, and diplomat, had rued the ignoring of the history of India’s oceanic geography and its impact upon the commercial and cultural life of the country in favour of a largely Gangetic or mountain-based view of territorial integrity. And although a full appraisal of the waterbased historiography of the Indian Ocean and its impact upon literature is outside the scope of this essay, I do want to posit that the rise and changing shapes of historical cartography are central to the ways in which Asians themselves viewed the Indian Ocean as space. Pivotal to an understanding of the history of oceanic knowledge and control are Arab mapping of the Indian Ocean, the Korean Kangnido map of 1402, Zheng He’s fifteenth-century trade maps, Javanese sea charts and Piri Reis’ maps in the sixteenth-century book *Kitab-i-Bahriye* that show an awareness of the Indian Ocean as an evolving, changing, and constantly adaptive *Lebenswelt*. What would it be like to have the twenty-first-century novel respond to such a call for representing translocality situated not in land, but on water, originating not from the promulgating impulses of European expansionism but harking back to an even more tenuous historical imagination reminding us that what often gets understood as stable or pure cultures have always been cultures in contact, in adaptation? Indeed, as I will argue, to do so is to destabilize the very ground, quite literally, upon which the postcolonial novel stands in order to mount its powerful critique of capitalist/colonialist/militarist modernity, but not without being itself imbricated in those very forces that have gone into its formation. It is a crisis of and for the postcolonial imagination whose stirrings could be seen in some of the earliest meditations of its most influential thinkers (Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* and *Beginnings*, Gayatri Spivak in *In Other Asias*, Aijaz Ahmed in *In Theory*, Neil Lazarus in *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, among others).

With its particular focus on the Anthropocene and the unprecedented mainstream focus upon environmental catastrophes and human responsibility for global warming, the twenty-first century has brought into tumult many of the unspoken and unchallenged givens of twentieth-century global, industrial modernity. The role of literature in light of

growing environmental awareness and a rising apocalyptic tenor to much of the global scientific discourse on climate change has taken on a new kind of urgency, evidence for which can be mapped by literary critics with a variety of narratological tools that help in tracking the changing settings, characters, plots, and *telos* of the novel. As I will show, in the work of a rising generation of writers from across the world, the novel has increasingly turned to historical events and their reimagining in ways that complicate the form of historical fiction, one of the most influential modes of writing that postcolonial-postmodern writers championed, especially in the last five decades of the twentieth century. The changed *habitus* and emphasis of the twenty-first century can be seen in the South Asian Anglophone tradition (in both resident and diasporic writers, to varying degrees) even as a field like Indian Ocean Literatures opens South Asia up to seeing consonances in writings from far-flung corners of the world not only impacted by the shared legacies of British colonialism but also tied by older networks of trade, exchange, and traffic. This has yielded what I would like to call “the transmodern novel” whose departures from (and continuities with) the standard operating procedures, as it were, of the postcolonial novel are instructive. In general, the transmodern novel involves what anthropologist Clifford Geertz termed “thick description,” which prioritizes context over character; situated and often contradictory heteroglossia and polyglossia over omniscient or autonomous telling; a tendency towards representing “transregional” (Ho 887) cultures⁵ which are often portrayed as linguistically polymorphous or Creolephone (Lionnet 300), this latter aspect bringing numerous kinds of pressures upon the novel’s anglophony; a focus on littoral and oceanic networks, in which the ocean features not merely as a vehicle for the transmission of cultures and ideas but as the very field anchoring a whole other sensibility or ethos; and the use of metafictional shifting and mobile idioms of languages- and cultures-*in-contact* to form a layered *récit* of telling. Many of these features are borrowed, of course, from the intersecting literary registers of postmodernism and postcolonialism, but with significant departures and intensifications, and as Françoise Lionnet argues quite correctly, these novels transform into “*littérature mondialisante* rather than *littérature-monde*—that is, as *world-forming* literature rather than world literature” (288; emphases in the original). For a student of the Indian Ocean, such departures become especially relevant in light of how oceanic literature “acquires visibility as an autonomous category of world literature” (Adejunmobi 1247).

I would aver here that the transmodern novel is not bound by a unified agenda or a formally spelled-out common program. Indeed, if one compares for analysis only the Anglophone and Francophone traditions via a contrapuntal reading of Amitav Ghosh and Abdulrazak Gurnah, on the one hand, and J.-M.G. Le Clezio, on the other (all writers with a

substantial corpus of writing focused on the Indian Ocean), one finds differing emphases and visions. This is a point underscored by Geetha Ganapathy-Doré in her essay “An Inland Paradise” on Francophone Indian Ocean writings in this issue, and by Lionnet as well, who writes,

[w]hile the ways in which Le Clézio and Ghosh engage with notions of exile, odyssey, and alterity are dissimilar, their creative goals converge in a shared critique of European colonial dominance and predatory globalization, in a passion for cross-cultural dialogue, and in their genuine concern for environmental justice. Although these themes have appealed to a broad and sympathetic readership as receptive to their imaginative recreation of the past as it is curious about their personal journeys across cultures, continents, and archipelagos, Ghosh’s approach to dialogue and exchange is, in the end, far more optimistic than Le Clézio’s, who tends to represent the outcome of mixing and métissage in the melancholy mode of failure and impossibility. (289)

Gurnah’s approach is perhaps on the spectrum of transmodern novels closer to Le Clézio in its melancholy and philosophical “difficulty” (as Datta perceptively argues) than Ghosh, but together, these writers can be said to be creating significant departures in form and content from the postcolonial novel, departures that can be rewardingly read from the frameworks provided by the transmodern.

In such a light, tracking the trajectory of a writer like Amitav Ghosh can prove especially rewarding. Ghosh notes in his 2012 essay “Confessions of a Xenophile” that as early as 1992, when he published *In An Antique Land*, a book that came out of his doctoral research in Egypt, the spirit guiding that book “represented an attempt to restore and recommence the exchanges and conversations that had been interrupted by the long centuries of European imperial dominance, [conversations that] linked Yemen and China, Indonesia and East Africa— and most significant for me, India and the Middle East.” As Isabel Hofmeyr has argued, *Antique Land* returns to “these interrupted conversations whose geography is largely coterminous with the Indian Ocean. The book dramatizes these themes by contrasting the ancient cosmopolitanism of the Indian Ocean world with the narrowness of the modern nation-state. This contrast also serves to underline the layered and contradictory forms of sovereignty and belonging that characterizes many Indian Ocean littoral zones, drawn outward by older networks of transnational trade and inward by the demands of the postcolonial nation-state” (“The Complicating Sea” 585).

To rethink global historical connections from the perspective of waterbased exchanges is also, in fact, to challenge the primacy of Eurocentric modernity as our lens for understanding and interpreting parts of the world that came under European rule and cultural contact. In this regard, we may find of value the idea of “transmodernity” as theorized by Latin American philosopher, Enrique Dussel, who uses it to demarcate

European modernity as one variant of a larger, global modernity, the enunciation of which both predates and exceeds the ambit of Eurocentrism. Once we understand that “massive exteriority,” as Dussel puts it, that exists apart from (although never fully outside of) European modernity, we take upon ourselves the imperative to think of “the history of the World-System” as composed of cultural moments emerging simultaneously from different parts of the world (“World-System” 168). Transmodernity, for Dussel, offers a counter to the metanarrative of modernity that is seen to originate in Europe. The idea signifies the global networks within which European modernity became possible, and in Linda Martín Alcoff’s words, it “displaces the linear and geographically enclosed timeline of Europe’s myth of autogenesis with a planetary spatialization that includes principal players from all parts of the globe. The idea of the transmodern is thus designed in part to retell the story of Europe itself by recasting the story of world history without a centered formation either in Europe or anywhere” (63). Presented this way, the idea of the transmodern, Linda Martín Alcoff explains, projects inclusivity and solidarity: it is more inclusive of multiple modernities without signifying these under the sign of the same (Dussel, *Invention* 45) and it “offers solidarity in place of hierarchy, a solidarity even extended to [but not originating with] European modernity” (63).

Dussel dismisses postmodernism’s claims to radicality by arguing that it is “just the latest moment of Western modernity” (“World-System” 221) and one that continues to export the core-periphery model to large parts of the world not centered by Europe. If the modern is a word that is available to all cultures, then what does “global” mean when we discuss “global modernity”? Indeed, what kind of literature or history or political science is possible when we look at the world *non-Eurocentrically*? Dussel tells us that to think non-Eurocentrically is to respond to the call for truly radical thinking, “to be able [for instance] to imagine that the Industrial Revolution was *Europe’s* response to a ‘vacuum’ in the East Asian market, especially China and Hindustan” (“World-System” 175). Indeed, this is what Ghosh attempts in the Ibis Trilogy where he presents a historiography of European presence in the East but from the historical vantage-point of Indo-Chinese interactions. In the novels of the Trilogy, Sri Lanka, Burma, Indonesia, and Melaka are understood as comprising the “western maritimes of the Chinese market” (“World-System” 175). Read in this way, the Trilogy can be understood as offering up a veritably libidinal representation of multiple worlds in contact: familial, national, and transnational histories activate and are in turn galvanized by a panoply of global trade networks. While there has been much work on silk and spices and the historical routes of travel generated by the trade in these precious goods, Ghosh turns his focus to opium in order to imagine a world-stage for this material that once redrew the map of the world in

fundamental ways. In a 2008 interview, after *Sea of Poppies* was published, Ghosh contends, “[i]t is strange that they [the opium wars] are so neglected because they really laid the foundations of the modern world, you know. The Opium Wars created some of the most important cities of the modern world—Hong Kong, Shanghai, Singapore” (“Amitav Ghosh on the Opium Wars”).

By turning his attention to a topic whose full ramifications are not clearly understood within India, and by focusing upon China, often understood in mainstream Indian publics as an “unpredictable neighbour,” Ghosh shifts the ground for Anglophone postcolonial studies. This is an important move, not because there have not been previous engagements with China and Southeast Asia in the literatures, but because such engagements have been sporadic, limited often to travel narratives, and not amounting to a corpus of inter-regional literary traditions that could be considered on its own terms. Hofmeyr writes: “[o]ne important theme in Indian Ocean scholarship has been a revision of older ways of thinking about diaspora that tend to single out only one group for analysis. Not only does such method reproduce older racial categories of empire as already formed stabilities (Indian, African, Chinese), it privileges movement outward — from India to Africa, Fiji, or the Caribbean. What the reverse flows might be, or what such outward flows mean for politics back on the mainland, are themes that have only recently started to attract attention” (“The Complicating Sea” 587). I want to argue that the Ibis Trilogy, indeed, follows the “reverse flows” of trans-modernities, presenting us an example of what one might broadly call “the transmodern novel” (rather than the postcolonial novel) and indeed, in contradistinction to the terracentrism of postcolonialism, the Trilogy offers us new ways of decentering the focus upon land by a refocusing upon the sea or on water-histories in re-membling the narratives of our interconnected pasts. This presents a whole set of challenges for the novelist who doubles up, as Ghosh often does, as historian, archivist, translator, anthropologist, linguist, etymologist, and scholar of cultural and materialist studies. For the reader too, as I will argue, it is a challenge for the critical imagination.

The Ibis Trilogy and Asian Transmodernities

In brief, the Trilogy consists of three novels: *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), and *Flood of Fire* (2015). It is anchored in the constantly shifting, but intimately tied, transoceanic fortunes of the monumental East India Company as it dumps its opium in China, on the one hand, and on the other, of the numerous small lives of the *girmitiyas* or indentured labourers, lascars, and zamindars who find themselves caught in the overwhelming currents of imperial commerce. Set in the first half of the

nineteenth century, the trilogy gets its name from the ship *Ibis*, on board of which most of the main characters meet for the first time. The *Ibis* starts from Calcutta carrying indentured servants and convicts headed for Mauritius, but is waylaid by a storm and faces mutiny. Two other ships are caught in the same storm—the *Anahita*, a vessel carrying opium to Canton, and the *Redruth*, which is on a botanical expedition, also to Canton. The historical setting of the Opium Wars with China provides the trilogy with its catastrophic backdrop against which the intersecting stories of various characters from diverse parts of the Indian Ocean are told. A spectrum of characters animates the novels: these include British officers and their wives and families, peasants and landowners from the Indo-Gangetic belt, Parsi entrepreneurs, Cantonese boat people, a Cornish botanist, and a mulatto sailor, among many others. Central to this superabundance of characters is Ghosh's portrayal of a range of tongues and dialects spoken around the Indian Ocean, a *mélange* of voices in Bihari, Bengali, Chinese, and English to numerous pidgins and variants spoken by lascars, boatpeople, fisherfolk, inland citizens, and so on. Ghosh portrays the complex ways in which micro- and macro-histories intersect, often in terms of spectacular and destructive conflict as in the case of the Opium War that devastates the lives of the characters, but also in terms of forging new communities that redraw traditional notions of origins and belonging. In *Flood of Fire*, the tense and fractious pressure of transmodern forces upon the quotidian lives of individuals is brought forth in a memorable passage conveyed in the voice of the ex-zamindar, Neel Rattan Halder:

Thinking about it later he understood that a battle was a distillation of time: many years of preparation and decades of innovation and change were squeezed into a clash of very short duration. And when it was over the impact radiated backwards and forwards through time, determining the future and even, in a sense, changing the past, or at least the general understanding of it. It astonished him that he had not recognized before the terrible power that was contained within these wrinkles in time – a power that could mould the lives of those who came afterwards for generation after generation. (388)

And yet these grand forces of history do not completely crush individual stories of love, grief, madness, and compassion, and each of the three novels also fleshes out these universal themes in distinctive ways.

In the figure of the “half-race” Zachary Reid, arguably the central character of *Flood of Fire*, Ghosh reposites the classic Conradian (anti-)hero on a Cartesian quest for self-realization. The Englishman Burnham exhorts Zachary to follow his dreams and gives him a glorious lineage: “Blessed are those, Reid, whom God chooses to be present at such moments in history! Think of Columbus, Cortez and Clive! Is there any greater or more satisfying endeavour for a young man than to expand his own fortunes while extending God's dominion?” (283). 300 pages

later, Zachary has transformed from urchin to merchant, in the process destroying individual lives and playing a part in a political drama far greater than he could have anticipated:

‘I have become what you wanted, Mrs. Burnham,’ he said. ‘You wanted me to be a man of the times, did you not? And that is what I am now; I am a man who wants more and more and more; a man who does not know the meaning of ‘enough.’ Anyone who tries to thwart my desires is the enemy of my liberty and must expect to be treated as such. (582)

The rise of Zachary Reid parallels the rupture of older, more ancient forms of Indo-Chinese trade and commerce and, in turn, participates in the British colonial expansionism that was the Opium War. But this classic colonial arc is not the only one of the Trilogy. Indeed, the novels achieve a largeness of vision as Ghosh allows Zachary’s daemonic, colonial *Bildungsroman* to co-exist with other narratives of more creative and fulfilling cross-cultural contact. These include the traffic in medicinal and aesthetic plants and the exchange of artistic styles and practices, both forms of cross-cultural contact providing the basis for two important subplots of the novels. Furthermore, characters such as Zadig Bey and Shireen, Paulette and Neel, and Baburao and Asha, who endeavour towards “a plural mode of being beyond ascribed cultural codes or regional affiliations” (Poddar 17) indicate a restorative possibility for imagining a transmodern literary perspective that exceeds and defies the Eurocentric arc. It is through such characters who are sensitised to various cultures that Ghosh gestures towards the prospect of an alternative and truly radical crosscultural practice, although as one remains aware, such practice is constrained (but *not* always already!) within larger political and pecuniary transnational forces.

Although it is Zachary who emerges, scathed and battered by the loss of love despite the brute triumph of commerce, it is to the figure of Neel that the Trilogy owes its intellectually radical core. To understand Zachary, one has to go back, as the novel posits, to “Columbus, Cortez and Clive”; to understand Neel, one has to recall such figures as Satyacharan, Bibhutibhushan’s protagonist in *Aranyak*, or Ravi in O. V. Vijayan’s *Legends of Khasak*, and to perhaps such liminal figures as Leonard Woolf, the young colonial officer spending a formative seven years in Ceylon, and writing his remarkable novel *The Village in the Jungle* in his English home in 1913. These are, then, characters of and in history in whose “gradual cultural and ontological evolution” (Poddar 17), a deeper, transformative understanding of interlacing worldviews can be seen in its very process of formation.

With the Trilogy, Ghosh also reflects upon the two metrics of change— scale and velocity – that force us today to rethink the very scope and nature of postcolonial studies as a field intersecting with emergent

global concerns such as the anthropocene, a theme that has been Ghosh's focus in his most recent nonfictional work, *The Great Derangement*. In the Ibis trilogy, a massive corpus of intersecting tales between myriad characters in India and China, set in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we find precisely the exploration of a fractured and fractious transmodernity. By making the opium trade a fulcrum for his Sinocentric historiographic narratives, Ghosh redraws the map for South Asian Studies, looking eastwards (for a change) in search of a richer, more complex understanding of the interconnected cultural history of the world's two largest communities. It will not be possible, I want to argue, to ignore the ways in which Ghosh provides, for Anglophone literatures, an important counterpoint to the kind of urban, diasporic postcoloniality offered by Salman Rushdie and the writers that came after *Midnight's Children*. Where Rushdie came to be at the centre of a powerful, metropolitan turn in post-1947 Indian writing, Ghosh, Rushdie's contemporary, can be seen as suggesting a different focus: one that has taken Ghosh into the villages of India and the non-West, half-real, half-imagined, like Lusibari in *The Hungry Tide*, which Ghosh reimagines not as a fossil of epistemological time, but as "the threshold of a teeming subcontinent" (*The Hungry Tide* 50). While Rushdie has been involved, as it were, with the absences of grand Time, Ghosh has been interested in advocating for the *presence* of such liminal and now increasingly endangered spaces as the small villages of the Sundarbans or the Maghreb. I will not belabour the contrast between the two writers any further, but it seems to me deeply ironic and problematic that we often see both writers put within the same category of the postcolonial-postmodern.⁶

So, what happens when we take the modern out of a predetermined linearity and think of it as a global whole, in Dussel's memorable image, "like a heart, with its diastole and systole, whose first palpitation is situated in the East" ("World-System" 175)? In a moment of rare optimism, Dussel argues that we can separate globality from globalization, the former a positive force that can allow "all humanity to enter almost instantaneously into contact with its historical occurrence," and the latter "a world strategy instrumentally controlled by transnational corporations and the central metropolitan states" ("World-System" 186). For us in literary and cultural studies too, it is possible to recalibrate Europe's timelines of modernism-postmodernism for a richer, fuller understanding of modernities within regional universal cultures which have had their own "creative-scientific moments of 'enlightenment'" (Dussel "World-System" 167).⁷ In contrast to this view of Europe's modernity which provincializes the rest of world, Dussel suggests the need to follow the trajectories of a trans-modernity which he defines in contradistinction to postmodernity, in a passage worth citing in full:

[T]he concept of “post”-modernity ... indicates that there is a process that emerges “from *within*” modernity and reveals a state of crisis within globalization. “Trans”-modernity, in contrast, demands a whole new interpretation of modernity in order to include moments that were never incorporated into the European version. Subsuming the best of globalized European and North American modernity, “trans”-modernity affirms “from *without*” the essential components of modernity’s own excluded cultures in order to develop a new civilization for the twenty-first century..... The emergence of other cultures, until now depreciated and unvalued, from beyond the horizon of European modernity is thus not a miracle arising out of nothingness, but rather a return by these cultures to their status as actors in the history of the World-System. Although western culture is globalizing— on a certain technical, economic, political, and military level— this does not efface other moments of enormous creativity on the same levels, moments that affirm from their “exteriority” other cultures that are alive, resistant, and growing.” (“World-System” 168)

In general, though, Dussel’s focus remains on terracentric models of continental contact although he has argued more recently that his thinking has changed a great deal since his earliest work on the theme of transmodernity.⁸ There is, thus, a need to recalibrate transmodernity for maritime or waterbased historiographies and literary traditions in order to challenge some of the central tenets that undergird postcolonial studies, specifically, and world Anglophone studies, in general. While the Trilogy focuses on Western expansionism in the east in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it is also painstaking in its portrayal of the parallel proliferation of non-European globalized networks that connected South Asia with China and its Southeast Asian markets. Mukherjee suggests much the same, in tune methodologically with Dussel’s exhortation for a re-scaled understanding of the global, when she writes: “[t]he Eurocentric viewpoint that 1500 marked a major turning point in the history of the world, an era of ‘European discoveries’ leading to European military, economic, and political domination in the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Ocean worlds is being increasingly challenged for the Indian Ocean world. . . Europeans did not invent a new maritime politics for the Indian Ocean but sought to continue older practices from the Mediterranean and, later, from the West Indies” (“Maritime—Aquatic” 69-70). Without these correctives, as Sanjukta Poddar remarks, “all forms of global trade, modernity and cosmopolitanism are reduced to being purely European constructs” (3).

Hofmeyr claims that the Indian Ocean is the “home to failed diaspora [and migrants] who move but do not embark on projects of cultural memory and constructing homelands” (18). A closely textual reading of Ghosh’s novels in the Trilogy uncovers precisely such “failed diasporas.” Poddar identifies in the novels of the Trilogy three key transnational networks: the movement of subalterns who were part of the Indian Ocean travel routes; the triangular opium trade between India, China, and Britain (particularly in the early eighteenth century); and the possibilities of

exchange of flora and art (3). Intertwined with these networks are the intricate genealogies that Ghosh draws of a range of people creating the kind of thick, sedimented description that Antoinette Burton and Tony Ballantyne read as Ghosh's achievement in writing "a history of the world from below" (7).

One of the fundamental ways in which Ghosh makes the very language of the novel reflect the theme of cross-cultural contact is by taking recourse to a stylistic device often employed by historiographers and lexicographers: the catalogue or the list. The list becomes in the Trilogy an essential building block for portraying worlds in contact, but it also puts duress upon the novel as a form as pages are devoted to such lists, forcing the reader into a kind of immersion that is as necessary as it is exhausting. There are lists of agricultural and maritime implements, different clans and linguistic groups, loan-words in various kinds of patois and creole, and of different kinds of flora encountered in new lands and new seas. The books burst with lists, catalogues teeming with information, an iridescent heterotopia of motley phenomena brought together in a world-market where currencies circulate as mercurially as do dialects, cargoes, family names, and human hearts. The apotheosis of the catalogue or list is to be found in two paratexts that Ghosh constructs for the novels. The first of these is to be found as an addendum to *Sea of Poppies*. It is called *The Ibis Chrestomathy*, a compendium of words kept by Neel Rattan Halder, the once-wealthy zamindar who becomes one of the many indentured slaves being taken to Mauritius on *the Ibis*. *The Chrestomathy*, we learn, collects—and in its own way, therefore, legitimizes—the words of the *girmityas*, or the indentured labourers, "migrants who have sailed from eastern waters towards the chilly shores of the English language..." and specifically, those words "that have a claim to naturalization within the English language" (*Sea* 473). Like Borges' Chinese Encyclopedia, the *Chrestomathy* "is also, in its very nature, a continuing dialogue...not so much a key to language as an astrological chart, crafted by a man who was obsessed with the destiny of words" (*Sea* 473).

The second paratext is the tongue-in-cheek epilogue where Ghosh's narrator records his debt of gratitude to the archives and "virtual library" kept up by the characters Neel and Raju. In classic metafictional style, Ghosh lists these archival materials that range from papers relating to the Treaty of Nanking to "little jack-chits" and other marginalia, presenting a veritable bibliography for his novelistic retelling as well as compressing time in self-reflexive ways. The list as archive is a central device for Ghosh in assembling vast but provisional unities among the multiple languages spoken by the characters. By doing so, Ghosh creates a complex and layered *récit* of transmodern cultural lives that resonates with Ali Behdad's caveat against the overwhelming focus in studies of

globalization upon neologisms, differences, and disjunctures at the theoretical cost of exploring continuities. I quote Behdad:

The literature on globalization privileges the phenomena of change and novelty over those of repetition and restructuring, undermining thus the mimetically mediated nature of paradigm shifts and the interconnectedness of social orders. While technological advances have dramatically altered the velocity of global flow, the general structures of economic and political power do not differ that radically from their colonial counterparts. (69)

Still, I would argue that it is a matter of performing critical balance here. Ghosh's novelistic strategy in the Ibis Trilogy comprises of a cautious balance of departures and continuities: on the one hand, with his focus upon India, China, and Southeast Asia, he paves the way for the decentering of the overwhelming focus in postcolonial studies upon Eurocentric modernities and their diasporic offshoots. Such studies also invariably remain land-centric where the nation-state is imagined as *terra firma*, a figure for the tangible goal of homeland. In *Antique Land* as well as in other works, such as *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh has shown his penchant for questioning the limits of home as land by expanding notions of home to the sea and the ocean. In my reading, such a decentering of land-based imaginaries of community or nation allows Ghosh to revive the link to the lives and stories of those millions of immigrants to various non-European parts of the world from where it is possible to trenchantly question the stubborn core-periphery model of much postcolonial theorizing. The exploration and portrayal of transmodernities in Ghosh's Trilogy take on an explicitly linguistic edge, refocusing discussions of postcolonial identities via the prism of languages of contact, transaction, commerce, and culture.

In an essay published in the *American Historical Review*, Gaurav Desai has argued that scholars of oceanic exchanges and maritime spaces have complained that for the vast majority of ocean-based critical writings, the ocean remains either a metaphor (as in "global flows," "free-floating signifiers," and "fluid identities") or instead an empty space to be traversed in the interest of getting from one landmass to the other: "[t]he actual materiality of the sea—its wetness, its depth, its ecologies, and the material conditions of those who come into direct contact with it, such as the seamen who labor on the ships—is often not at the center of scholarly interest" (1533). Desai cites Philip Steinberg's critique of Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* to note that the actual ocean is often absent from Gilroy's analysis: "[the ocean] is used to reference the Middle Passage which in turn is used to reference contemporary flows, and by the time one connects this chain of references the actual materiality of the Atlantic is long forgotten. Venturing into Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* one never gets wet" (1534). Indeed, the reminder of what Gilroy's work *fails* to do is a

reminder of the implicit and explicit terracentrism of much reactionary postcolonial theory, allowing Desai to suggest that “one of the major contributions of Ghosh’s trilogy is to insist on that wetness” (4). In Desai’s careful reading of the Ibis Trilogy, “the ocean ... is more than a metaphor” (1534), a point that is in concert with my larger argument that we need to find a different framework (than the postcolonial) for understanding what Ghosh is doing in the Trilogy and then, to read him in tandem with several other writers of the Indian Ocean as providing a structurally and methodologically distinct archive of transmodern literary and cultural interests.

Read this way, we see how the Trilogy insists upon a view of globality, in Dussel’s terms, that predates the British empire, insisting upon its own historical past that provides continuities in terms of shared political and economic concerns, as well as cross-pollinating artistic and literary traditions. Indeed, Ghosh’s writings do not foreground the kind of “language anxiety” that is constitutive of the established postcolonial novel in English. Think of Raja Rao’s famous statement in his Foreword to the now canonical *Kanthapura* that he had attempted in the novel to “convey in a language not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own.” In fact, the novels subvert the omniscient narrator’s monological English in a different way: with a profusion of dialects and creoles, so much so that as one borrowing from Lionnet might say, the Trilogy forces the reader to become “Creolephone.” Again, his interest in maritime routes provides a displacement of the spotlight upon postcolonial geopolitics to one on fragile ecosystems and rural borderlands as in *The Hungry Tide* and on the oceans in the Ibis Trilogy, where water presents, as William Boelhower puts it, “a space of dispersion, conjunction, distribution, contingency, heterogeneity, and of intersecting and stratified lines and images—in short, a field of strategic possibilities in which the Oceanic order holds all together in a common but highly fluid space” (92-93).

Ghosh and Bengal: Transmodernities and Inland Connections

So far, I have suggested that to understand Ghosh’s place as a twenty-first century Indian writer, one has to understand in terms of *an intellectual and imaginative genealogy* such works as the 1992 *In an Antique Land*, the 2004 *The Hungry Tide* focused on the Sundarbans, and the decade-long Ibis Trilogy where the sea functions as the *locus vivendi* of a whole interregional ethos that goes beyond national and cultural boundaries, the customary focus of the standard postcolonial novel. But I want to also suggest that Ghosh’s works owe an equally significant intellectual debt to his specifically Bengali cultural and literary heritage, which is enmeshed with the Nehruvian vision of socialism and democratic federalism that

emerged from out of India's encounter with Enlightenment values of secular rationality and humanist thinking. This kind of critical situatedness distinguishes Ghosh considerably from a figure like Rushdie (who one would be hard put to tether to/ affix within any particular autochthonous vernacular Indian literary tradition) and in this final section, I want to suggest that the Bengali world of letters, and especially a *bhadralok* literary sensibility, provides an important gloss to the transmodernities Ghosh explores in the Ibis Trilogy. Tied to issues surrounding the representation of non-terracentric and oceanic transmodernity are such global concerns as "what is cosmopolitanism?" and "what are the links connecting cosmopolitanism to travel, history, and text?" For an understanding of Ghosh as a *Bengali* writer of English, the challenges are many and a full examination is outside the purview of this essay.⁹ What might be germane for understanding the peculiar kind of transmodernity that marks Ghosh's works is a genealogical assessment also of Ghosh's place in the tradition of Bengali literature, especially the Bengali novel, whose peculiar formation took place in the crucible of Bengal's own unique cultural renaissance in the nineteenth century, a process whose own transmodern features provide a vital, "inland" historical counterpart to the oceanic that I have so far discussed as one of the formative forces behind Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy.

In his essay, "Beyond the Subaltern Syndrome: Amitav Ghosh and the Crisis of the *Bhadrasamaj*," Makarand Paranjape suggests a reading of Ghosh's works on two axes: on the horizontal axis going back to V. S. Naipaul, whose influence Ghosh has acknowledged elsewhere, and Salman Rushdie, whose postmodern fictional techniques are amply evident in works such as *The Circle of Reason*, and on the vertical axis, which Paranjape claims is "more significant," he traces "'a direct line of descent'" from Rabindranath Tagore, whose famous story 'Kshudrit Pashaan' Ghosh has re-translated, [to] Satyajit Ray to whom [Ghosh] pays moving homage" (359-60). This is an important appraisal of Ghosh, and Paranjape is right in drawing attention to these inter-textualities and inter-referentialities as constitutive of Ghosh's place within Indian literatures in general and the Bengali literary tradition in particular. I would add to this list—on the vertical axis—two more names. The first is the great nineteenth-century Bengali satirist and man of letters, Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838-1894), whose novel *Rajmohan's Wife* is the first known Indian novel in English, and whose style has had a vital influence upon Ghosh's own writings, as Ghosh attests to in his essay "The Testimony of my Grandfather's Bookcase." The other is Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay (1894-1950), whose novel *Aranyak (Of the Forest)* composed between 1937 and 1939 can be read as a vital intertext to, if not quite a precursor of, a novel like *The Hungry Tide*.

Paranjape reads Ghosh's novels as attempts to "escape" the emblematic crisis of the *bhadrasamaj*, the Bengali "genteel class" often credited with the nineteenth-century cultural renaissance that changed the face of Bengali literature, music, art, and politics. For Paranjape, the crisis of the declining position and identity of the *bhadrasamaj* finds evocative representation in Ghosh's novels where, he argues, instead of confronting the crises head on, as Ghosh's predecessors did, Ghosh evades the issue, either by not allowing it to develop fully or by escaping into coincidence, "doubling," or romanticism. Paranjape asks: "Is the recuperation of lost pasts or subaltern histories a sufficient antidote to the crisis of the *bhadrasamaj*...? Does the retreat from such crises into either narratives of exodus, however hopeful, or romanticized celebrations of a failed experiment such as the 'Dalit nation' at Morichjhapi [the plot of *The Hungry Tide*] signify a shift in both the self-confidence and the priorities of the *bhadrasamaj*, whose product and representative Ghosh continues to be?" (359) I am not convinced of the emphatically causal turn in the final clause above, but I am certain that Paranjape misses the bus when he argues that the "doubling" of local, national identitarian politics (say, "the emblematic crisis" of the *bhadralok* or of Dalit representation) with a globalized, transmodern perspective indicates an "evasion" or "escape" from the former into the latter (359). This is a reading that is entirely actualized by the internal logic of postcoloniality and its inability to zoom out, as it were, to a scale that can dynamically move between the terracentric and the oceanic, the national and the littoral, the inland and the peninsular, and ultimately, the postcolonial and the transmodern, and still be attuned to the asymmetries of epistemologies.

Such a reading exemplifies, in fact, the charge of scalar incongruity that Nirvana Tanoukhi accurately identifies as a crisis of *form* often seen as characteristic of specifically Anglophone postcolonial works: as she puts it, "the postcolonial novel, it would seem, lacks the serenity that comes with provincialism" (605). It is also the kind of reading that shows how prefabricated reading frames, which have become standard in postcolonial studies, will struggle with novels like those that make up the Ibis Trilogy. Indeed, the tendency to miss the heuristic binaries that engender "doubling" as a formal *strategy* in the Trilogy could be signifiatory of larger, relational practices and movements is itself a failure of the critical imagination. Paranjape's inability/refusal to fit Ghosh's plurilectic engagement with the oceanic within the established categories of the postcolonial finds its discursive opposite in the work of Sugata Bose, who in his insightful and detailed reading of the poetic and diary records of Rabindranath Tagore's oceanic journey to and tour of the Malay peninsula in July 1927, sums up Tagore's oceanic writings as evincing "a form of universalism subtly different from an abstract globalism" (234). Bose's reading is in tune with the "productive..."

universalisms” (Hofmeyr, “The Complicating Sea” 585) that the Indian Ocean makes possible, universalisms that need not be read as fungible with “westernisms” of the variety that (quite rightly) impels much reactionary postcolonial critique but also traps such critique (as, for instance, in the case of Parajape’s reading) in an *ab initio* hermeneutics of suspicion of *all* forms of transmodern and transnational activity.

The three novels of the Ibis Trilogy powerfully register and represent intercultural and historical change in terms of scale and velocity, but the fulcrum of such change is presented as the intersection of *Asian* transmodern hydropolitics, as it were, in contact and conflict with European coloniality, and *not the latter only in isolation*. For such a project, Ghosh must be seen synchronically with Anglophone writers like Nirad C. Chaudhuri, Naipaul, Rushdie, and Lahiri, as well as diachronically with Bengali writers as Bankim, Tagore, and Bibhutibhushan, among others. While a full review of the latter is outside the scope of this essay, I want to alert the reader to this important way of interpreting Ghosh’s Ibis Trilogy, in particular, as a set of novels that presents a diorama of centuries-old connections of historical cross-currents between the Bay of Bengal (and the historical formation of its inland literary and cultural traditions) and the expansive breadths and depths of the Indian Ocean (and the various islands and archipelagoes to which India and Indians have always been connected). A view of Ghosh’s novels only in light of an Anglophone postcolonial novelistic tradition runs the risk of presentism and of shrinking the many intersecting literary traditions of India to the Anglophone and the metropolitan whose imperatives, while important, are not the only explanatory or analytical frame for his writings. A broader, deeper view that understands the place of Ghosh’s writings in the specifically Bengali and culturally translocal vernacular traditions of India brings forward important continuities with many other writers not part of the *au courant* postcolonial or postmodern. Such a “doubling” in approach—which Paranjape laments but which I support as part of what Vilashini Cooppan calls “globalized reading” (32)—provides for the reader of the novels in the Ibis Trilogy the lineaments of a truly transmodern reading practice.

In Cooppan’s words, “globalized reading” is a mode of analysis that seeks “to create not an alternative canon so much as to change the prevalent positioning of the canonical and the non-canonical as one another’s opposites” (32). Such a reading practice, Cooppan suggests, looks to forge and foreground lateral relationships of influence and adaptation, in order to displace “the hegemonic sense of ‘world’ as fictive universality in favour of a vision of many worlds, individually distinct and variously connected” (32). Christoph Senft has also argued for “a transmodern analysis” of texts by which he means a sensitivity to exploring “how different historical realities are constructed, supported, or

destabilized in literature, how history as a concept is interpreted and textually implemented, the kinds of different, and in particular, non-hegemonic epistemological standpoints that are established, and how cultural specificities are discussed...” (4). Both Cooppan and Senft call for a broadly transmodern approach to reading literatures of the world (albeit under different names) but neither of them actively addresses precisely those ways in which the literary imaginatively transforms and transfigures the historiographic. Senft, in fact, argues problematically that “literature can, and should, be regarded as transmodern historiography...” (4), a position that neglects those important and unique ways by which creative writers operate in the very formation (and not only the representation) of their views in and of the world. While the literary can be a companion in the reparative and redressive agendas of transmodern historiography, it is a problematic reduction and diminishment of literature’s affective and transformative capacities to consider its role as merely companionate. Central, in fact, to the immersive, submersive qualities of the transmodern oceanic novel is the reader’s own absorption into the world that Ghosh conjures up in the *Ibis* Trilogy. It is a mode of reading that the *Ibis* Trilogy inspires and I am in agreement here with Rita Felski that immersion and absorption ought to be among our core responses to the literary.

Combined with this complex genealogical approach, we need a heightened sensitivity to Ghosh’s fecund use of India’s Sinocentric history that requires significant and scrupulous modifications to a Eurocentric critical methodology, one that reframes the conventional moves of postcolonial theory with deeper, longer, more intricate understandings of transoceanic and transmodern timescales. The novel in the twenty-first century is most attuned to rupturing what has become fossilized and derivative in our understanding of modernity in the Third World. Bakhtin’s earliest enthusiastic insights into the novel and its subversive potential remain strongly with us even in the new century, I would argue, precisely because the transmodern novel presents a capaciousness particularly well-suited for the pointillist representation of heterogeneous, multitemporal, and polymorphic perspectives on the history of the encounter between the east and the west. In Dussel’s words, “[i]n order to create something new, one must have a new word that bursts in from the *exteriority*. This *exteriority* is the people itself which, despite being oppressed by the system, is totally foreign to it” (“Transmodernity and Interculturality” 33). On *the Ibis*, as the tales of numerous characters tumble forth in the calamitous journey, Ghosh imaginatively configures in the interlacing and admixture of the personal and the historical, the territorial and the oceanic, the national and the regional, that tremendous power of *exteriority* that Dussel proposes as the material wellspring of infinite historical energy fuelling the “World-System” itself.

The Ibis Trilogy is ultimately an exploration of the very form of the postcolonial novel, wrenched out of its Eurocentric home and thrust, translated onto a whirligig transmodern world-stage. Ghosh recuperates for postcolonial readers an era, a space, and a scale for revisiting such terms as globalization and cosmopolitanism, erroneously assumed to be recent phenomena. As Akhil Gupta notes of the Indian Ocean trade network between the seventh and fifteenth centuries (before the disruptive arrival of the Portuguese):

Not only did these networks lead to an incredible exchange of ideas, technologies and goods, they also brought people from different lands into contact with each other, often for extended periods of time. This created centers of cosmopolitanism that, in their extensiveness and reach, were comparable, and perhaps even more intensive, than anything we can observe in the world today—at a very different moment of globalization (8).

The Trilogy instantiates the inadequacy of purely economic explanatory frames for understanding global networks of exchange, whose logics were often exploitative, but not always and already so, and offers instead a counter-balancing approach to unearth and imagine, at different scalar levels, distinctive models of global contact. In Ghosh's hands, the historical novel repurposes some of the key premises of postcolonial studies, especially with regard to the place of European colonialism in shaping the destinies of South Asia. By focusing on the opium wars, Ghosh taps into older, residual histories of contact between India and China, a move that allows his novels to also re-member the historical role of Calcutta, not always the Paris of the East, as the capital of the drug trade in the nineteenth century. Such a move urges critics and scholars to also engage with what is specifically Bengali in Ghosh's figuration of interrupted cosmopolitanisms. This is not simply a question of charting two separate genealogical or methodological courses that animate Ghosh's writings, but a conceptual and literary challenge to see how these disparate scales come together, as in a complex helix, to represent transmodern lives caught at vital moments of history-making.

For a richer appreciation of the Ibis Trilogy (a decade-long venture in terms of the publication years alone), one must understand as significant Ghosh's distance from the postcolonial-postmodern combine, as it were, as well as retrieve what is specifically anti-terracentric and trenchantly transmodern in his literary re-conceptualization of the interconnected history of the Indian Ocean's rim. For this, Ghosh uses tools that are archival, conceptual, and speculative, imbuing the larger discussion on planetarity that is taking place among contemporary historians of the world with the novelist's imaginative re-figuration of the significance of oceanic regional and transnational histories of the world. In so doing, Ghosh invites readers of the transmodern novel to ask along with the

geographers and biologists of the world (and not only the conquerors and the colonizers) what it means to live and share in what we believe to be the most miraculous place in the known universe.

Notes

1. For this essay, I owe a debt of gratitude to Suddhaseel Sen, Linda Hutcheon, Esther de Bruijn, Sumit Chakrabarti, Supriya Chaudhuri, the British Library and the libraries of Presidency University and Vishwa Bharati University. Generous funding from the FRPDF program at Presidency University enabled my travel and research for this essay.
2. The history of the nation-state is a topic of much scholarly debate. In this essay, I marshal the nation-state as a representation of territoriality which is specifically land-based and has historically tended to combine (the often conflicting functions of) national identity and political autonomy. Such a working definition allows one, in fact, to bring to the fore “a rich vein of scholarship on the Indian Ocean as a zone of universalisms that stretch into the colonial era” (Hofmeyr, “The Complicating Sea” 585).
3. On Gurnah, see Datta’s essay, “Swahili Transmodernity” and on Appanah, see Ganapthy-Doré’s “An Inland Paradise” in this issue.
4. Lindsay Lloyd-Smith and Eric Tagliacozzo have argued, “‘water’ becomes a medium and metaphor for navigating social relations. This happens both within and between communities. It is no exaggeration, therefore, to say that waterscapes, both real and imaginary, are integral to [...] identity-formation, and to ‘being in the world’” (238).
5. See Mulholland’s essay “Outpost aesthetics” in this issue for an incisive reading of “thick transregionalism” as useful for recuperating and re-envisioning “a distinct Asian anglophony” (Mulholland).
6. See Chaudhuri for an incisive reading of the many distinctions between the literary imaginaries of Rushdie and Ghosh.
7. Relevant here to recall, for example, is the Kerala school of mathematicians and astronomers whose work on trigonometric expansions predates European invention of calculus by at least a century (see Joseph). Dussel also adduces the work of André Gunder Frank, who in his *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (1996), shows that “great universal cultures flourished until the nineteenth century, totally independent of modern Europe” (“World-System” 169).

8. See “Transmodernity and Interculturality,” where Dussel explains the “radical modification” of his theory of cultural development resulting from reconsidering “contact zones” (such as the Indian Ocean) in light of André Gunder Frank’s theory of the “five thousand year world-system” (37).

9. (Only?) four of Ghosh’s works have been translated into Bangla, among which are *Bhatir Desh* (*The Hungry Tide*) and a collection of essays *Bhrami Bismaye* (*I Wander in Wonder*, titled so after a song by Rabindranath) that came out in 2001. Ghosh has himself been forthcoming on his self-formation as a writer via Bengali literary forebears, especially “in shaping the imaginary universe of my childhood and youth” (Ghosh “Satyajit Ray” 5). In this vision of “a line of descent,” Ghosh recalls Satyajit Ray, tellingly, as “a rivet in an unbroken chain of aesthetic and intellectual effort that stretches back to the mid-nineteenth century—a chain in which I too am, I hope, a small link” (6).

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