

## Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* (John Murray, 2009)

Say one is booked into cattle class and flying from Sydney to LA/SF, or Europe. Many hours of congested travel lie ahead and one can be reasonably certain that a few babies will be on the plane, sharing the same aisle or the one ahead. In unison or in turn, they will be cacophonous. In preparation for this 'long march', you wish to buy a 'decent read' at the airport bookshop. It is full of 'International Best Sellers.' Of course, you are not so easily deceived for, as a seasoned traveller, you have had your share of detective stories, heroes saving the planet singlehandedly from ruin of one sort or the other, romance/sci fi/fantasy novels. What is left to buy and read?

Three Indian writers have produced a new style of writing recently. One is Vikas Swarup of *Q & A* fame, which has been reissued as *The Slumdog Millionaire* after the movie became a multiple Oscar winner; there is also Swarup's more recent one, *Six Suspects*. Of course, one can choose the winner of the 2008 Man Booker prize, *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga. Finally, there is the *Sea of Poppies* by Amitav Ghosh, also short listed for the Man Booker last year. Of the four, I recommend that you buy the last one, for it is impossible to put it down once you start. In fact, at the end, one is rather angry with Ghosh for he leaves you feeling that the second part of *The Ibis* trilogy should have been ready at the same time as the first, *Sea of Poppies*. However, Ghosh need not worry.

We know that the *Sea of Poppies* is the first part of *The Ibis* trilogy, and it is such an accomplished act of storytelling that it is sure to become one of the masterpieces of the twenty-first century fiction, if the second and third parts are just as good. While the *Sea of Poppies* is more than 500 pages long, it relies on a handful of characters only: Deeti, soon to become a widow – for her husband, Hukam Singh, is an opium addict and dying; her daughter, Kabutri, conceived by an opium induced rape committed on Deeti by her husband's younger brother, Chandan Singh; this act of violence is condoned by the husband, Hukam Singh, as well as his uncle Subedar Bhyro Singh.

While Deeti and Kabutri are eking out their living growing poppies in a village near Ghazipur, some 50 km east of Benares (Varanasi), great events are unfolding in Calcutta where Deeti, unknown to her, is headed. Of course, we know that Deeti will eventually return to her village, for she has already drawn the picture of a two-masted vessel with unfurled sails on the walls of her shrine where, on her return, she will record the brilliance of the gaze of Zachary Reid.

When the story begins, illegal opium trade between India and China is going on and one of the big exporters is Mr Burnham, of Burnham Bros. in Calcutta, and he buys the *Ibis* in 1837 to refit it for hauling opium. Zachary Reid joins it as a carpenter in Baltimore for this purpose, and is officially listed as 'Black.' However, Reid is a mulatto and a son of a freed black woman and can pass off easily as a white man. Before the ship gets to Cape of Good Hope, the second mate dies, and Reid takes on his job and bids for his clothes as well. In South Africa, the entire crew desert the ship for it had become intolerable to stay on it, and the Captain hires a bunch of Lascars, led by Serang Ali, to take the ship to Calcutta. When the Captain dies during this voyage, Reid's responsibilities increase. He is taught by Serang Ali to dress like a

proper gentleman before the ship reaches port, and when Mr Burnham himself arrives to look at his ship, he admires Reid's outfit, and appoints him as the second mate thinking that Reid is white. Not surprisingly, Serang Ali hisses, 'What I tell you? Malum Zikri no pukka rai-sahib now?' Here, and elsewhere, Ghosh interweaves a babel of pidgin, Bhojpuri, French and comical English, entertaining the reader with his mastery.

Reid is left to supervise the vast alterations to the ship which is no longer required to transport opium for, in 1838, the Chinese Emperor is less than enthusiastic about the drug trade. Instead, the *Ibis* will be converted to carry a large group of 'indentured migrants' to Mauritius in its hold under the deck. The passengers include coolies who want to escape from the poverty and misery at home, several convicts, a British captain, Chillingworth, the first mate Crowle, the second mate Reid, the Lascars and Indian troops to maintain order.

The reliance of the Indian agricultural class on growing opium in the nineteenth century is not new. Records show that the Mughal emperors derived a substantial part of their income from levying tax on opium, in 1601 ships chartered by Elizabeth I carried opium to sell it to the masses, in 1700 the Dutch began selling it to China and in 1750, the British East India Company assumed control of opium growing in Bihar and Bengal. The dominant trade between India and China became opium, and the Company encouraged many growers to abandon their traditional crops and switch to poppies. The recent shortage in food supply created by growing biofuels had its precedent in Bihar and Bengal where the farmer could get high on a drug, but had nothing to eat.

Faced with a loss of income from the drug trade, Burnham makes a margin call on an incompetent Raja Neel Raskhali and turns him into a pauper, as well as inventing some documents which cause the Raja to fight a case of forgery. The latter is convicted and finds himself on *Ibis*. Deeti loses her husband and is about to be set alight on the funeral pyre to be forced to commit Sati, when an untouchable and a mountain of a man, Kalua, springs to her aid and frees her. Then, he pushes himself with her onto a raft and they go down the Ganges to Calcutta, after making a brief contact with Deeti's daughter Kabutri, living with an aunt. They decide to join the *Ibis* as coolies and wait for it to sail.

In between waiting for the ship to be repaired, Reid is invited to the Burnhams' for dinner along with a few notables who all agree that war with China is necessary to preserve the opium trade. Not involved in this discussion, Reid has a long chat with the pretty Paulette Lambert, an orphan living with the Burnhams. She explores the possibility of sailing on the *Ibis* and is thwarted by Reid who cannot see how a cultured young woman like her can fit in. Paulette may be naïve; she is not stupid, for she knows that Mr Burnham's desire to improve her knowledge of the Scriptures by reading to her is a ploy to receive a severe beating on his bare buttocks, since he is a 'sinner.' That is, Paulette can expect to be turfed out if Mrs Burnham suspects that her husband is finding it difficult to sit down. However, fate intervenes, for soon after the dinner, Paulette finds that Justice Kendalbushe wishes to marry her. So she decides to run away and joins the *Ibis* disguising herself in a sari.

The tension of the last chapter leaves one gasping for breath. And, why is not the second part of the trilogy at hand? What will happen to Deeti, and the budding romance between Paulette and Reid? With the first mate dead and an opium addicted captain, can Reid get the ship to Mauritius?

Ghosh is in a class of his own, and with the *Sea of Poppies* added to his lustrous oeuvre, his reputation as a writer is well and truly established. In the 530 pages, there is hardly a word out of place, all of the improbable incidents both on land and at sea meld together, the patois makes sense and the future awaits.

**Raja Huilgol**