

---

**MARITIME CRITICISM FOR TODAY'S WORLD: A REVIEW OF JUAN-JOSÉ MARTÍN-GONZÁLEZ, *TRANSOCEANIC PERSPECTIVES IN AMITAV GHOSH'S IBIS TRILOGY***

MARIA-SABINA DRAGA ALEXANDRU  
University of Bucharest  
[sabina.draga.alexandru@lils.unibuc.ro](mailto:sabina.draga.alexandru@lils.unibuc.ro)

Received: 23-03-2022

Accepted: 25-03-2022



Juan-José Martín-González's book *Transoceanic Perspectives in Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy* is an inspired example of the recent convergence of maritime criticism with postcolonial studies, which responds to the growing interest in Amitav Ghosh's fiction of the Indian Ocean and also does justice to Ghosh's uniquely original voice in the vast panorama of contemporary global literature in English. The book celebrates the oceanic turn in criticism and the rise of maritime fiction responding to the increasingly fluid world that we live in. With the exception of a few scholars whose contributions are quoted in the book (Crane 2011, Machado 2016, Lauret 2001 and Mohan 2019), little has been written about the connection between Ghosh's trilogy and maritime criticism, as the author shows (7). Consequently, this comes as a necessary addition to both Ghosh scholarship and to Oceanic studies, proposing an attentive, close reading-based critical response to one of the most important directions in Ghosh's fiction and showing that his neo-Victorian trilogy traces the emergence of a proto-globalising process in the tumultuous Indian Ocean negotiations of the late nineteenth century Opium Wars.

The book is structured in four chapters, preceded by an Introduction and followed by a Conclusion. Martín-González makes inspiring references to refugee stories from the very beginning of the book, which, of course, supports the larger connection with seas and oceans, as well as with Ghosh's commitment to displaced people. It also brings up issues familiar to the contemporary reader, for whom refugees have recently been frequent actors on the global stage. If Chapter 2 is highly theoretical, focusing on the "Oceanic turn" and the Indian Ocean in order to position the ensuing close readings within this framework and the historical background of nineteenth-century maritime culture, the following three chapters are each dedicated to one particular novel of the *Ibis* trilogy. The novels are unpacked in a passionate close reading that spells out the complex historical background for the reader,

who will thus be introduced and irremediably attracted to the almost legendary intricacies of Victorian Indian Ocean commerce and conflicts happening around opium.

Martín-González's approach operates under the assumption that an oceanic lens should prove highly productive for a writer like Amitav Ghosh, whose cosmopolitanism and diasporic consciousness have often been pointed out by critics. The praise for the book, coming from Tabish Khair, Felicity Hand, Charlotte Mathieson and Florian Stadler (see the blurb on the back cover) is in agreement about insisting on the pertinence of a transoceanic approach to Ghosh. This is the more so as the book aims at reading the nineteenth century in Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy as "an era of proto-globalisation" (1), a lens through which aspects of recent politics are also implicitly tackled. With its rewriting of some of the historical episodes of the late Victorian age, the trilogy, in its fictionalized historical account with touches of historiographic metafiction, proposes one plausible narrative about the roots of globalization.

Martín-González reads Ghosh's engaging, but also thoroughly documented, trilogy with professionalism, but also with enthusiasm, celebrating his conviction that "Ghosh's literary production is an apt object of study to reflect on the arbitrariness of borders" (3) and that it aims at writing an alternative history of colonization of the Indian Ocean, with India as "epicentre" (4). Ghosh's commitment to the keen study of individual psychologies in connection to the grand narrative of history – figures such as "the border-crosser, the migrant or the refugee" (5) – is part of this alternative history, as it offers instances of hearing the voices of the formerly marginalized colonized people, with their backgrounds, beliefs and the concrete circumstances of their daily lives. Ghosh is approached as a major contemporary global author writing in English and one of the major exponents of "sea fiction" (1), the object of "the upsurge of maritime criticism in critical theory" (2). His trilogy provides valuable insights into the formation of diasporas in the Indian Ocean and into the process of globalization, using the maritime environment to complete Ghosh's older project (since *The Shadow Lines*, 1988) to transcend rigid national and cultural boundaries and to expose the arbitrariness and constructedness of all borders. The present book highlights the ways in which a maritime perspective places concerns over national and cultural boundaries in a more revealing light. While Ghosh's voice rises critically to expose the ills of Victorian imperialism, the role played by anonymous individuals in the process is highlighted in conjunction with the permeability of the fiction/historiography divide and the lasting legacy of colonialism.

An impressive theoretical apparatus is built around the "Oceanic turn" in theory in chapter 2, in conjunction with relevant nineteenth century historical details, to be used with concrete, Indian Ocean-oriented reference in Martín-González's further readings of the *Ibis* trilogy. The author of the present study announces the main theoretical subjects of his analysis: the formation of diasporic identities and

their privileged positions in fluid spaces; the ship as heterotopia/ contact zone where transculturation often occurs, in the light of Mary Louise Pratt's theory (2008); sea fiction in/and the Nineteenth Century. The oceanic turn, a fluid, dynamic direction of the more general spatial turn in recent cultural theory, voices the impending need to change the traditional way of writing history from a sedentary point of view. Such a change also responds to the opening up of a space for the subaltern voices of colonized people to be heard. There are two main generic characters in Ghosh's trilogy that populate this interplay of theoretical concepts, the lascar and the indentured labourer, whose psychology is explored in detail along the trajectories of individual characters.

From the author's vast engagement with multiple theoretical standpoints, it is important to mention his choice of Deleuze and Guattari's (2005) plea for a nomadic perspective on the world (a Nomadology, the opposite of history), useful in understanding Ghosh's deconstruction of the legacy of European imperialism in its transoceanic outposts in the Indian Ocean. Martín-González further cites Anupama Mohan (2019) in support of his disagreement with the terracentrism of postcolonial studies, when in fact colonial empires were largely built through seafaring. Mohan's essay "Maritime Transmodernities and the *Ibis* Trilogy" (2019) adds to the author's plea for a more dynamic reading of postcolonialism, a cause that Ghosh's writing serves well. Thus, Martín-González agrees with Mohan's call "to abandon the terracentrism of postcolonial studies and to go beyond the strict and barren category of the nation—which are after all two main corollaries of oceanic studies". Yet, he rejects Mohan's preference of transmodernity over postcolonialism in her choice of a lens through which to read the trilogy and argues for the importance of the postcolonial in any endeavour to replace a colonial Eurocentric understanding of modernity by a global one (7).

Paul Gilroy's assumptions in *The Black Atlantic* are added to this perspective, in an attempt to do justice to the intention of a diasporic cosmopolitan writer such as Ghosh to dismantle the legacy of European imperialism, but also to decentralize knowledge and to give its rightful place to the ocean. The oceanic space – formerly unacknowledged in land-oriented traditional history, which deemed it void and meaningless – symbolically makes it possible to reposition categories such as racial, cultural and national boundaries in a more fluid, dynamic and consequently progressive light. As he prepares to launch on a detailed analysis of Ghosh's trilogy, Martín-González states his theoretical goal, which is ultimately an anti-imperialist, globalizing one:

I want to situate Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy as a contribution to sea fiction that seeks to deconstruct the legacy of European imperialism in its transoceanic outposts, particularly in the Indian Ocean basin. In turn, this work argues that the *Ibis* trilogy situates Indian ocean cultures at the crux of critical debates on cosmopolitanism and globalisation (9).

The three chapters of actual analysis follow the trajectory of Ghosh's own fictional argument in the trilogy. Their biggest strength is the detailed close reading proposed and so the accuracy of the analysis of Amitav Ghosh's tripartite project. Chapter 3, "Of *Coolies*, Lascars and the *Kala Pani*: Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008)" focuses on the image of these emblematic characters of the context described. The author problematizes the invention of indentureship that followed the abolition of slavery, actually replacing slavery with an almost equivalent institution whose memory remains connected to the Victorian opium traffic. Martín-González's transoceanic reading of *Sea of Poppies* in this chapter points out important connections between the opium trade and indentureship, as well as the impact of a reconceptualization of identity as mobile, rather than connected to the land, onto the characters' psychologies and identities. The author celebrates Ghosh's flexible view on race, caste, language and culture on the *Ibis*, a contact zone of mobility that casts a positive light on the traditionally negative concept of *Kala Pani* – the Hindu crossing of the black waters that led to loss of caste. The chapter shows how, on the *Ibis*, a wealth of characters experience various changes of perspective that make them appear as remarkably modern-minded people. They are all grouped around Deeti, the most spectacular of them all in her choice of leaving her caste peasant status behind in order to proudly embrace her partner's untouchable status. But, as the author shows, this is Ghosh's pretext to examine the interconnections between the opium trade and the other, related trade in indentured labourers. Even though she experiences indentureship herself, Deeti goes through a personal process of freeing and opening of her mind and perspective, reflected in the progress towards fluidity signalled by the titles of the three parts of the novel: *Land*, *River* and *Sea*. Through Deeti, indentureship and the condition of women in Hindu society are compared, with the former being arguably preferable to the degrees of bondage presupposed by the latter.

Martín-González analyses in detail Ghosh's fictionalization of historical detail and of Victorian colonial economy (to be taken from production to commerce in Chapter 4, dedicated to *River of Smoke*), which pushed the cultivation of opium poppies for bigger profit to the detriment of other agricultural traditions in the area. All of this is filtered through the minds of his modern-minded characters who are in themselves living commentaries for the contemporary reader. In support of his interpretation of the *Ibis* trilogy as an epic of proto-globalization, Martín-González insists, in his detailed close reading, on Ghosh's mind-opening connections between indentureship, slavery, caste and gender. Deeti's embracing of Kalua's untouchability upon being saved from *sati* by him, Neel's initiation into more generous humanity as he loses caste and status, Paulette's self-empowering travesti, Baboo Nob Kissin's even bolder transvestism through receiving the spirit of Ma Taramoni or Zachary Reid's connection to "Atlantic epistemologies of race" and to the "transoceanic transactions between the Atlantic and Indian

Oceans” (83) are all part of the same modern-minded fluidification of rigid categories of which Ghosh’s bigger project consists.

In Chapter 4, “Of Hongs, Achhas and Fanqui-Town: Amitav Ghosh’s *River of Smoke* (2011)”, as Ghosh’s oceanic focus moves to the east, to the South China Sea (with Mauritius, the end point of the *Ibis* in *Sea of Poppies* also in the picture), Martín-González argues that the novel’s ambition is to build “a nineteenth-century Pan-Asian perspective on Indian Ocean relations by illustrating alternative models of cultural hybridity” (103), microhistories of the South China coast. This widening of the scope of the Indian Ocean world as depicted in *Sea of Poppies* from the production of opium to the actual trade and from India to China also brings about a trio of ships – the *Ibis*, the *Anahita* and the *Redruth* – on whose decks we see a much more complicated system of power and production relations unfolding. This scene of thriving colonial capitalism revolving around Canton has its counterpart in the just as thriving domesticity of Deeti’s Mauritian home, where she has become a matriarch and the keeper of a shrine, a symbol of her own struggle for freedom. The author points out colourful instances of the local creole languages and Ghosh’s implicit invitation to read the landscape as a historical archive (in tune to the commitment to space exploration of which the ocean is also part). The reader is exposed to the rich multiculturalism of the area, with diverse populations interacting across the Indian Ocean and speaking a whole variety of languages that also mix and mingle and with the artistic Fanqui-town, for instance, as yet another “contact zone which dissolves national and ethnic parameters, rendering the categories of *foreignness* and *nativeness* ultimately ambivalent and fluid” (111). Some of the many characters in *Sea of Poppies* (such as Deeti, Paulette and Neel) return in the two subsequent novels. They evolve along personal paths, subchapters and ramifications of the bigger story, which, with its depiction of the beginnings of global trade and the part played by the West in it, feeds into today’s story of globalization.

In Chapter 5, “Of Buchas, Opium Wars and the *Kali Yuga*: Amitav Ghosh’s *Flood of Fire* (2015)”, the focus is the First Opium War between Britain and China (1839–1942), with the “sea space as a vector for the projection of power” (127). Martín-González points out Ghosh’s masterful handling of the interaction between historical fact and its fictional reflection, showing how Ghosh places his reader face to face with the historical sepoy army, through Kesri, Deeti’s brother, indirectly affected by his sister’s choices. Through them, indirect reference is made to the Indian independence movement, suggesting that the historical time when the plot is set is, generally, one of important progress. Family relations and inter-human solidarities intermingle with connectivities across social categories and lines of trade, with glimpses into the political and linguistic aspects of the Sino-British relations in the Victorian age. Opium is a kind of symbolical main character in the trilogy, a general signifier of addiction, excessive behaviour and both licit and illicit trading, a transhistorical constant that reaches beyond the Victorian age, bearing

rich relevance to our present. In this sense, Martín-González always reminds his reader that Ghosh's neo-Victorian work, while doing justice to the historical period tackled, is always very much about the present.

The book's conclusion is written on a note that capitalizes on the trilogy's success in confronting and finally counterbalancing postcolonial terracentrism, a concept that the author disagrees with, as he claims from the very beginning. To him, Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy marks a success of sea fiction, which can be beneficially read through the lens of maritime criticism and which, like maritime criticism, pleads for an opening up of rigid categories that divide people, towards an understanding of history and society as a continuum. He argues convincingly that *Ibis* successfully lends itself to a "diachronic reading between Indian Ocean transoceanic connections in the nineteenth century and the globalised neo-liberal present" (153). The tidy structuring of this lively, inspired book, with each chapter preceded by an abstract and keywords and followed by its own bibliography rather than having one general bibliography at the end of the work as a whole makes the argument clear and easy to follow, whilst the author's skillful writing style makes the book a very pleasant read, highly recommended to academic audiences interested in Amitav Ghosh, postcolonialism, maritime criticism, neo-Victorianism or, simply, in good contemporary literature in English.

## WORKS CITED

- CRANE, JACOB (2011), "Beyond the Cape: Amitav Ghosh, Frederick Douglass and the Limits of the Black Atlantic", *Postcolonial Text*, 6 (4): 1-16.
- DELEUZE, GILLES & FÉLIX GUATTARI (2005), *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* [1987] trans Brian Massumi, UP Minnesota Press.
- GHOSH, AMITAV, *The Shadow Lines*, Ravi Dayal Publishers, 1988.
- LAURET, SABINE (2011), "Re-mapping the Indian Ocean in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*", *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, 34 (1): 55-65. <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.7870>
- MACHADO, PEDRO (2016), "Views from Other Boats: On Amitav Ghosh's Indian Ocean Worlds", *The American Historical Review* 121 (5): 1545-1551.
- MARTÍN-GONZÁLEZ, JUAN-JOSÉ (2021), *Transoceanic Perspectives in Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy*, (*Maritime Literature and Culture* series), Palgrave Macmillan.
- MOHAN, ANUPAMA (2019), "Maritime Transmodernities and the *Ibis* Trilogy", *Postcolonial Text*, 14 (3): 1-24.
- PRATT, MARY LOUISE (2008), *Imperial Eyes Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Routledge.

**MARIA-SABINA DRAGA ALEXANDRU** is Associate Professor of American Studies and postcolonialism at the University of Bucharest. She holds a PhD in philosophy (the aesthetics of postmodernism) from the University of Bucharest (2000) and a PhD in English (contemporary Indian fiction in English) from the University of East Anglia (2007). Her research interests are: contemporary Indian fiction in English, global writing in English and narrative knowledge in the global age, minority cultures in the media, gender studies, postcolonialism and postcommunism. She has published articles in journals such as *The Journal of Commonwealth Studies*, *Comparative Literature Studies*, *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, *Indialogs*, *Angles* and others. Her latest books are *Performance and Performativity in Contemporary Indian Fiction in English* (Brill, 2015) and *Religious Narratives in Contemporary Culture: Between Cultural Memory and Transmediality* (co-edited with Dragoş Manea, Brill, 2021).