

## Between the *Peechil-kamra* and the *Dabusa*: Mapping Worldbuilding and Heterotopic Space on Board the *Ibis* in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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### Abstract

With the steady rise in the exploration of the idea of worldbuilding, studies have extensively researched the production and consumption of fantasy worlds created by animation studios like Disney and Studio Ghibli. However, the idea of worldbuilding remains inadequately studied in the context of South Asian fiction. This paper aims to engage with the thematic ramifications of ideas such as subcreation and worldbuilding by critically examining *Sea of Poppies* (2008), the first novel in Amitav Ghosh's "Ibis" trilogy. The prevalent scholarship on this novel has largely romanticised the creation of the ship-community of *jahaj-bhais* and *jahaj-bahens* which was forged through the bond of *jahaji-nata* and have argued how, in the process of subcreating a world for themselves, the characters "transgress the accepted boundaries of race, gender, and caste" and free themselves from the artificial barriers and divisions prevalent on land. However, such a reading privileges the perspective of a few major characters such as Deeti and Paulette, while denying the multiple layers and hierarchies that permeate the physical space of the ship. Taking this as a point of departure, this paper explores through the eyes of a minor character, Jodu, how the dominant utopic narrative of *jahaji-nata* of Paulette and others may be challenged from within the heterotopic world of the *Ibis*. By reinforcing the structural inequities of our everyday lives in the subcreated world of the *Ibis*, Ghosh's textual imagination constantly subverts the dominant perspective while holding the two worlds in precarious equilibrium.

**Keywords:** *Sea of Poppies* (2008), subcreation, worldbuilding, ideological utopia, heterotopic world

There has been an unprecedented rise in the study of worldbuilding, chiefly due to the flowering of subcreation studies as an academic field in the last few years. The pioneering efforts of scholars like Mark Woolf, Jeff Vandermeer, and Marta Boni have paved the way for refreshingly new perspectives in the field. As Boni argues, "Worlds—as imaginary territories and perennial, collectively built, semiotic realms—are necessary for the understanding of media creation and for the interpretive processes it stimulates" (Boni 9, Introduction). These imaginary worlds, which are essentially the result of a process of subcreation, open up vast opportunities of inquiry into the complex, multi-layered processes of production and consumption. Scholars have fortified this field, bringing in perspectives from literature, media studies, cultural studies, sociology, and economics. In this

article we engage with the phenomenon of worldbuilding in *Sea of Poppies*, the first novel of Amitav Ghosh's "Ibis" trilogy, from the perspective of heterotopic space.

Dan Forest and Justin Horton discuss worldbuilding in terms of space. While Forest brings in Mikhail Bakhtin and his concept of heteroglossia to analyse "world building as a practice that is defined by this very tension between the authoritative desire to unify on the one hand and the hybrid, constructed nature of 'heteroglot' utterances on the other" (381), Horton refers to Noel Burch's demarcation of concrete and imaginary space. Although Horton's main emphasis is on cinematic space and the interplay of sound and image with reference to cinematic space, his theorisation can be applied to literature as well. This article is based on the theorisation by Forest and Horton to reveal an interesting process of worldbuilding in the Foucauldian heterotopic space of the ship, the *Ibis*, in Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008).

Ghosh is an India-born writer who is renowned for his fiction and non-fiction. His notable works of fiction include *Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), *Flood of Fire* (2015), and *Gun Island* (2019). Among his non-fiction works, *In an Antique Land* (1992), *Dancing in Cambodia and at Large in Burma* (1998), *The Imam and the Indian* (2002), and *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) are well-known. He was honoured with the Sahitya Akademi Award for the novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988). His 2008 novel *Sea of Poppies* was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and *River of Smoke* (2011) was shortlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize. The government of India conferred a Padma Shri, the fourth highest civilian award, upon him in 2007. With the conferral of the 54th Jnanpith Award in December 2018, Ghosh became the first Indian writer in English to have been chosen for this honour.

The three novels *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), and *Flood of Fire* (2015) constitute the "Ibis" trilogy, a story set in the first half of the nineteenth century. With the historical background of the transport of indentured labourers from the Indian subcontinent to the British owned sugarcane plantations of Mauritius and the Opium trade between India and China, the trilogy boasts of a sweeping scope as well as a grand scale. The trilogy gets its name from the name of the ship, *Ibis*, on which most of the characters meet each other for the first time in the story. Starting its voyage from Calcutta, the *Ibis* heads for Mauritius with a motley crowd of indentured labourers and convicts. Midway on the Indian Ocean, it is caught in a storm and a crew mutiny. As a result of these events, only some passengers reach Mauritius, while the rest disembark at Canton in China. Those who reach China get embroiled in the First Opium War, where the British defeated the Chinese.

There has been an increasing amount of scholarship on the works of Amitav Ghosh in general, and the “Ibis” trilogy in particular. The massive setting and scale of the narrative, with a motley group of characters ranging from Bihari peasants to Parsi businessmen to Cantonese boat-people, add to the appeal of the trilogy. In the dominant narrative of the trilogy, the formation of the ship-community of *jahaj-bhais* and *jahaj-bahens* by forging the bond of *jahaji-nata* has been romanticised as though the ship community was a utopia free from the artificial barriers and divisions of land. In *Sea of Poppies* (2008), Paulette says:

On a boat of pilgrims, no one can lose caste and everyone is the same. It’s like taking a boat to the temple of Jagannath in Puri. From now on, and forever afterwards, we shall all be ship-siblings: *jahaj-bhais* and *jahaj-bahens*. There’ll be no differences between us. (Ghosh 356)

The established readings and criticisms of this trilogy, by critics like Rudrani Gangopadhyay, Maroua Touil and Devyani Agrawal echo Paulette’s observation quoted above. They consider the ship community as an ideological utopia and immaculate paradise. Rudrani Gangopadhyay, in her article “Finding Oneself on Board the *Ibis* in Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*” (2017), quotes Maroua Touil and explains her point thus:

“The displacement the characters undergo triggered a new sense of belonging” (Touil 2015, 521). The way to find this place of belonging is to transgress the accepted boundaries of race, gender, and caste that have victimized much of the crew of *Ibis*. Since these boundaries exist on land, it is only natural that the reshaping of their identities would occur on water, where no lines can be drawn and rivers and oceans merge. (Gangopadhyay 59)

Both Touil and Gangopadhyay focus on the characters’ transcending the artificial barriers of class, caste, gender and race in their journey on board the *Ibis*. Such a transcension becomes possible as their displacement from land allows them to re-fashion their identities on water. In other words, the ship helped them to reshape their identities and “emerge as new selves” (Touil 519). Along similar lines, Devyani Agrawal talks about the psychological remaking of self, getting rid of the baggage of caste, class and racial identities (Agrawal 2016). All three critics subscribe to the romanticised tradition of understanding the in-between space of the ship on waters as a utopia which is free from the hierarchies, barriers, and exploitation of land. However, this might be a rather simplistic reading of an otherwise complex and nuanced tale, as it elides the subtle politics of hierarchies and divisions on board the *Ibis*. We may argue, on the lines of critics like Dan Forest and Justin Horton, that the romanticised imaginary space on the concrete space of the ship becomes a field of ‘heteroglot utterances’ which more than reveal and perpetuate the hierarchies and barriers present on land. By exploring the ways of

marginalisation in that ideological utopia, this paper destabilises the popular understanding and projects the text as one which allows for subversion through heteroglot utterances from within. In the following section of this article, we will discuss the concept of space from the perspective of scholars like Michel Foucault and Doreen Massey, followed by an analysis of the novel on the basis of our theoretical understanding.

The concept of space is an interesting area of inquiry for scholars. Spaces exert tremendous influence on the lives of individuals, and in the process of enacting their selves, individuals in turn negotiate with the power dynamics associated with particular places, thereby creating a space of their own. The ways and means they employ to achieve this require critical attention. In addition to it, an inquiry into the nature of performative space gives an interesting dimension to such studies. In this article, we will employ space theories already developed by Michel Foucault and Doreen Massey and explore how these may help to articulate an alternative understanding of Ghosh's text outside of the dominant idyllic vision. While Foucault is known for his discussion on utopia and heterotopia, Massey's theorisation of space-time in intersection with societal power relations is crucial to our cognition of hierarchies in a text populated by a multi-racial, multi-lingual crowd.

Michel Foucault, in his essay "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopia"(1984), differentiates between utopia and heterotopia as follows:

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. (Foucault 3-4)

Foucault, in his definition, shows how the concept of heterotopia challenges the very idea of utopia. Heterotopias are "counter-sites", a parallel existence of multi-layered significance. They are real sites that are 'simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted' across cultures at different points of time. Foucault goes on to describe the principles of heterotopia. Here, he points to the relation of heterotopias with other spaces and observes that they have a role to expose either the miseries of real life or an unreal, perfect, illusory life. Citing the example of the boat and the ship, Foucault opines that "the ship is the heterotopia par excellence" (9), as it is the perfect illusion of the progress of humankind.

Doreen Massey's theorisation of space has linked the concept to factors like geographical place, time, social relations, institutionalised power dynamics, etc. In her words:

'The spatial' then, it is argued here, can be seen as constructed out of the multiplicity of social relations across all spatial scales [...] It is a way of thinking in terms of the ever-shifting geometry of social/power relations, and it forces into view the real multiplicities of space-time...The spatial is both open to, and a necessary element in, politics in the broadest sense of the word. (Massey 4)

Massey's words highlight the impossibility of understanding space in isolation from history and politics in their widest implications. She also talks about how the same place at different points of space-time becomes significantly different for individuals.

Drawing on both Foucault and Massey, we understand how spaces are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted in the ever-shifting geometry of social/power relations across all societies and cultures. The space of the mighty *Ibis* is also no exception to this. However, what this paper would argue is that the space on board the *Ibis* is not Foucault's "heterotopia par excellence". Rather, it is a space marked by strict divisions on the basis of race, caste, class, gender, etc. Here, individuals, in the process of enacting their selves, negotiate the power dynamics associated with particular places, thereby creating a world of their own. Conversely, the space also exerts its influence upon the individual, making it a two-way process with a simultaneous demarcation and politics of confined spaces on board the *Ibis* in *Sea of Poppies* (2008).

The very first pages of the trilogy give us an evocative description of the ship, through the visions of Deeti and Zachary.

The *Ibis* was a schooner of old-fashioned appearance, neither lean, nor flush-decked like the clippers [...] She had a short quarter-deck. A risen fo'c'sle, with a fo'c'sle-deck between the bows, and a deckhouse amidships, that served as a galley and cabin for the bo'suns and stewards. With her cluttered main deck and her broad beam, the *Ibis* was sometimes taken for a schooner-rigged barque by old sailors...There was something unusually graceful about the *Ibis*'s yacht-like rigging, with her sail aligned along her length rather than across the line of her hull...she might put someone in mind of a white-winged bird in flight: other tall-masted ships, with their stacked loads of square canvas, seemed almost ungainly in comparison. (Ghosh 11)

This is indeed a majestic portrayal of the ship, which is provided as the dominant narrative vision as seen through the eyes of the major characters Deeti and Zachary. As the story progresses, we see this grand portrayal being upheld by characters like Paulette. In her words, the journey on the ship becomes a pilgrimage, which severs all territorial bindings of hierarchies, divisions and barriers and instead refashions a new identity of *jahaji-nata* (the bond of the ship) in the *jahaj-bhais* and *jahaj-bahens* (ship-siblings). As mentioned earlier in this article, most critics subscribe to this supposed authorial endorsement of the major characters' perspective. In fact, there is a parallel subversion of this perspective, which Ghosh offers through the vision of a minor character named Jodu.

Jodu is the son of Paulette's ayah. We first meet him in *Sea of Poppies* (2008), and he reappears in the last book of the trilogy, *Flood of Fire* (2015), where he becomes a prisoner convicted for the opium trade in Guangzhou under Zhong Lou-si. Paulette regards Jodu as her foster-brother and best friend. It is through his eyes that we first get a detailed description of the interior of the mighty *Ibis*. More importantly, we become aware of how physical space is demarcated and hierarchical divisions are created on the grand and majestic ship.

Looking around it, Jodu was astonished by how carefully everything was made, how every eventuality had been thought of and provided for: the table at the centre even had rims around its sides, with little fenced enclosures in the middle, so that nothing could slip or slide when the schooner was rolling. (Ghosh 318)

Baffled by such magnificence, Jodu understood that there was a stark difference in the spaces allotted to the different cabin and crew members of the *Ibis*. In contrast to the rimmed table, "the mates' cabins...were, in comparison, somewhat plain, just about large enough to turn around in, with bunks that were not quite long enough for a man to stretch out his legs in comfort" (Ghosh 318). In contrast to the mates' narrow cabins, the officers' section or the *peechil-kamra* was a spacious affair. It lay directly beneath the quarter-deck. To get to it, they had to go through one of the two companionways that were tucked under the overhang of the quarter deck. The entrance on the *dawa* side led to the officers' cabin and the other to the adjoining compartment, which was known as the *beech-kamra* or midships cabin. The *dawa* companionway opened into the cuddy, which was where the officers ate their meals.

Jodu's astonishment further intensified when he reached the Captain's room. He describes it as:

The Kaptan's stateroom was furthest aft, and there was nothing about this *kamra* that was in the least bit disappointing: it extended along the width of the stern and its wood and brass shone

brightly with polish; it seemed grand enough to belong in a Raja's palace. At one end of it there was a small beautifully carved desk, with tiny shelves and an inkwell that was built into the wood; at the other end was a spacious bunk with a polished candle-holder affixed to one side.

(Ghosh 318)

The officers' section or Captain's stateroom were places which Jodu could have for himself only in his dreams. He himself observed that he would never again set foot there, except as a *topas* or mess-boy. Being a *lascar* or an Indian sailor he would never have access to the comforts of luxurious spaces like that of the *peechil-kamra* or the Captain's stateroom.

Jodu's navigation to the midships cabin or *beech-kamra* reveals to us a space which was occupied by the overseers and guards of the schooner. This part was also relatively comfortable. It was equipped with bunks rather than hammocks, and was fairly well lit, with portholes to let in the daylight and several lamps hanging from the ceiling. But in terms of the cabin and crew members of the ship, the most uncomfortable and cramped up space was that reserved for *lascars* like Jodu, called the *fana*. His description of the *fana* is interesting for readers, as it reveals the dynamics of performance in such cramped-up spaces.

The *fana* was airless, hot and dark, with no source of lighting except a single oil-lamp hanging on a hook; in the glow of the sputtering flame, it seemed to Jodu that he had tumbled into some musty cave that was densely festooned with cobwebs — for everywhere he looked there was a webbing of hammocks, hanging in double rows, suspended by wooden beams [...] In height, it was not quite as tall as a full-grown man, yet the hammocks were hung one above another, no more than sixteen regulation inches apart, so that every man's nose was inches away from a solid barrier: either the ceiling or an arse.

Strange to think that these hanging beds were called 'jhulis', as if they were swings, like those given to brides or infants; to hear the word said was to imagine yourself being rocked gently to sleep by a ship's motion — but to see them strung up in front of you, like nets in a pond, was to know that your dreaming hours would be spent squirming like a trapped fish, fighting for space to breathe. (Ghosh 186)

It is striking to note that such scarcity of space amidst the webbing of hammocks is underplayed by the use of the word *jhuli*. This word, which can be roughly translated into swing, cradle or hammock, can be read as a ship-lingo which seeks to soften or give comfort (at least, superficially) to the otherwise harsh existence on

board the ship. The connotative softness of the word *jhuli* gives it a feminine touch and contrasts it against the strength and prowess of the full-grown male bodies of the *lascars* who struggle for fresh air and space in the cramped up quarters of the *fana*. Again, in the cited passage, there is an attempt at equating the feminine with the infantile when the narrative describes the lascars dreaming amidst the webbing of hammocks or *jhulis*. If not in reality, then in dream, a sea-toughened lascar could dream of apparently ‘delicate things’ like a newly-wed bride swinging in all her glory or an infant gradually falling asleep in a rocking cradle.

Moving away from the cabin and crew members, we find two separate segments earmarked for the migrants and convicts, respectively. Although much constricted in comparison to the previously discussed spaces, the migrants’ quarter was slightly better than the convicts’ snake-pit.

Next to the *beech-kamra* lay the migrants’ part of the ship: the ‘tween-deck, known to the lascars as the ‘box’, or *dabusa*. It was little changed since the day Jodu first stepped into it: it was still as grim, dark and foul-smelling as he remembered – merely an enclosed floor, and arched beams along the sides – but its chains and ring-bolts were gone and a couple of heads and piss-dales had been added. (Ghosh 319)

The “grim, dark and foul-smelling” *dabusa* stood as testimony to the multitude of migrants that were transported across the perilous waters of the Indian Ocean. Every inch of that confined space reminded one of the vagaries of such journeys, irrespective of whether they were brought on by compulsion or individual choice. A solely romanticised reading of a truly liberating journey in the lines of Paulette’s imagined pilgrimage would defeat the purpose of our study. We, therefore, need a more critical engagement with the demarcation of spaces here with special emphasis on their performance based on class, caste and gender distinctions as well as privileges.

The rear part of the *dabusa* was boxed off to make a cell, with a stout door. This was the convicts’ quarters and life here was at the worst possible. “The cell was as cramped as a chicken coop and as airless as a snake-pit: apart from a lidded porthole in its door, it had only one other opening, which was a tiny air duct in the bulwark that separated it from the coolies’ *dabusa*” (Ghosh 320).

As the living conditions deteriorate with descending hierarchy of the crew members, migrants, and convicts, the questions of having access to food and material resources and of division of work surface. When Steward Pinto and his mess-boys were serving roast lamb, mint sauce and boiled potatoes in the officers’ cuddy, the migrants were only given rice, dal and lime pickle. Again, while the Captain had all the luxuries of life, the migrants were denied even the basic needs such as candles and lamps to dispel the darkness of night. Although



the overseers reasoned that to keep those burning would only increase the risk of fire, everyone understood that the ulterior motive was to cut down expenses on oil and candles.

With no flame lit and the hatch secured, such light as there was came from cracks in the timber and the openings of the piss-dales. The leaden gloom, combined with the mid-day heat and the fetid stench of hundreds of enclosed bodies, gave the un stirred air a weight like that of sewage: it took an effort even to draw breath. (Ghosh 370)

In such a noxious enclosure, it became a luxury to get a breath of fresh air on the deck or a few mugs of water to bathe. About once each day, the convicts would be released from their cell and given time to empty their shared toilet bucket and to wash their bodies. Then, they would be taken above and given a few minutes' exercise, consisting, usually, of a turn or two around the main deck. But this last part of the convicts' routine was the most humiliating for them. Subedar Bhyro Singh took pleasure in inflicting pain on them by pretending that they were a pair of plough-oxen and he a farmer tilling a field. The subedar would loop their chains around their necks in such a way that they were forced to stoop as they walked. Then shaking their fetters like reins, he would make a clicking, tongue-rolling noise as he drove them along, occasionally slicing at their legs with his *lathi* or stick. While driving them around the deck, he would shout expletives for the amusement of the *silahdars* and *maistries* or would rap them on the genitals and laugh, “Aho, keep going...don't weep for your balls now...tears won't bring them back...What's the matter? Aren't you hijras, you two? There's no pleasure or pain between your legs' ” (Ghosh 384). It is as if his masculinity is soothed by denying them the signifier of their male anatomy. Thus, Subedar Bhyro Singh's masculine arrogance is heightened by the imagined castration of the two convicts. Again, by enacting a scene of farming with the two convicts as a pair of bulls, the Subedar reduces them to emasculated beasts of burden, only to be exploited for their physical strength. This scene reminds us of another instance in the novel where the village ox-man, Kalua, was forcefully mated with a horse when the zamindars lost a bet on him. Just like Subedar Bhyro Singh, the zamindar brothers augmented their masculine arrogance by denying humanity to Kalua and then subjecting his body to abject violence. In both the instances, we see the common thread whereby denying humanity to a character reduces him into an animal-like state. The convicts' animal-like, deplorable condition became a boost to the Subedar's authority, reinforcing his masculinity.

In terms of division of work and workplaces, while the convicts were engaged in picking and rolling oakum, the womenfolk were engaged in work like sewing, washing clothes and tending to the livestock of the ship's provisions, to be consumed by the officers, guards and overseers. This segregation of work and workplaces

between the menfolk and womenfolk on the ship underlines the inherent segregation of gendered spaces, a term used by Daphne Spain in her book, *Gendered Spaces* (1992). In her words:

Spatial arrangements between the sexes are socially created, and when they provide access to valued knowledge for men, while reducing access to that knowledge for women, the organization of space may perpetuate status difference [...] To quote geographer Doreen Massey. ‘It is not that the spatial is socially constructed, the social is spatially constructed too’.  
(Spain 294)

By drawing on her predecessor Doreen Massey, Daphne Spain highlights the unequal status accorded to men and women by virtue of the nature of their work as well as workplaces. With such an unequal arrangement, the mighty schooner *Ibis* became a model of stark discrimination. The textual details lay bare how the officers lived on the sweat and blood of the migrants as well as the convicts and yet denied them the basic amenities of life. For example, while the officers, guards and overseers feasted on the meat of the livestock that were tended by the women migrants of the ship, the latter were denied even two square meals a day.

It is in this hierarchical space that Jodu’s perspective provides an alternative prism for the reader. Although a minor character – even a subaltern – in the trilogy, Jodu’s observation has a profound impact on our understanding of space on the *Ibis*. Through his vision, we discover the glaring differences and hierarchies present in the physical space of the ship. We understand how these hierarchies privilege a section of people over the others, thereby confining some to the margins. The instance of the officers feasting on the livestock tended by the women migrants will stand as a perpetual reminder of exploitation and marginalisation prevalent in the glorified space of the ship. Jodu’s observation therefore destabilises Paulette’s utopia. In other words, through the heteroglot utterances of minor characters like Jodu, the novel offers a critique of the myth of the construction of a collective that is far superior to real life. That is, Paulette’s ideological utopia, constructed through the cultivation of *jahaji-nata* among the *jahaj-bhais* and *jahaj-bahens*, is just another representation of the complex hierarchies, divisions and performance politics of land. Thus, a subversive reading of the dominant narrative of Paulette through Jodu’s prism finally offers us a vision, in which Ghosh carefully lays bare, in all its minute detail and intricacy, the internal logic of structural inequities that even the floating world of the *Ibis* cannot leave behind. It indicates that the process of worldbuilding which is glorified by Paulette and echoed by most critics collapses against the miniature world of hierarchies, divisions, and differences created on board the *Ibis*. Consequently,

through the subtle working of Ghosh's narrative universe, we are made to question and reconsider the redemptive nature of the worldbuilding in the subcreated world of the *Ibis*.

From the above discussion, we can conclude that there is a stark demarcation of space on board the *Ibis*. This demarcation is marked by a prominent division of gender and class, along with class privileges, division of labour, living conditions and access to material resources. If we consider the Captain and his crew members to be on the highest rung, the other workers of the ship occupy the second rung, the migrants the third and the convicts are placed at the lowest level of the ship's hierarchy. This hierarchy further carries with it oppressive forces of colonial exploitation, hegemonic domination and masculine arrogance. The Subedar is an epitome of such power. The inhuman treatment meted out to the two convicts annihilates the imagination of the space on board the *Ibis* as an immaculate paradise and instead underscores a living hell. Moreover, the attempt on the part of the narrator to reimagine the scarcity of space by terming the webbing of hammocks in the scant space of the deck as *jhulis* disturbs our understanding on the lines of Paulette's imagined pilgrimage and subsequent romanticisation. The journey of crossing the Indian Ocean, on board the *Ibis*, therefore becomes a testimony not of a worldbuilding which is characterised by the barrier-less refashioning of the migrants' identity, but of a re-enactment of the exploitative politics of land. Through the discrimination explicit in the act of worldbuilding on board the ship, we realise that we are looking at a miniature version of our own world itself and not some redemptive utopia which is free from all territorial baggage.

Thus, our reading of the material or physical space of the ship subverts the romanticised reading of a classless utopia and instead posits it as a reincarnation of the exploitative politics of land. The space on board the *Ibis* is not Foucault's "heterotopia par excellence"; rather, it is a space marked by strict divisions of race, caste, class, gender, etc. The journey itself becomes a corroboration of the multiple layers of oppressive structures. While Paulette idealises the utopian bond of the *jahaji nata*, Jodu highlights the differences and hierarchies in the physical space of the ship. In other words, the novel offers a critique of the myth of constructing a collective that is far superior to real life, by allowing for the tension between the authoritative desire to unify on the one hand and the hybrid, constructed nature of heteroglot utterances on the other. A subversive reading of the dominant narrative of Paulette through Jodu's prism finally offers us a vision, in which Ghosh carefully reveals, in minute detail and all its intricacy, the internal logic of structural inequities that even the floating world of the *Ibis* does not transcend. Thus, by reinforcing the structural inequities of our everyday lives in the subcreated world of the *Ibis*, Ghosh's textual imagination constantly subverts the dominant perspective while holding the two worlds in precarious equilibrium.

## Notes

1. *Peechil kamra*, *beech kamra* and *dabusa* are different hierarchically organised residential quarters of the ship.
2. *Jahaj-bhais* and *jahaj-bahens* literally translate to ship-brothers and ship-sisters. The bond between the ship-siblings is referred to as *jahaji-nata* by Paulette.
3. *Lascars* were the sailors or militiamen, chiefly from South Asia, who were employed on European ships from the sixteenth century until the middle of the twentieth century. In Ghosh's novel, Jodu is a *lascar* from India.
4. *Jhulis* refer to the hammocks used by the *lascars* to sleep or take rest.

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