

**“Ship-Siblings”:  
Globalisation, Neoliberal Aesthetics, and Neo-Victorian Form  
in Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies***

*Eddy Kent*

(University of Alberta, Canada)

**Abstract:**

The history of globalisation and its attendant crises including capital flight, the decline of manufacturing in developed regions, environmental degradation, reduced labour standards, and extreme economic inequality are sometimes seen to be so complex as to defy coherent representation. While postmodernism has been considered as one response to the disaggregation of society under these pressures, the neo-Victorian aesthetic provides an alternative. This article studies how Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea Of Poppies* (2008) exploits the genre of neo-Victorian fiction, representing an earlier stage of globalisation in order to provide a critique of its unresolved legacy in the neoliberal present.

**Keywords:** capitalism, cosmopolitanism, exploitation, Amitav Ghosh, globalisation, imperialism, neoliberalism, neo-Victorian fiction, opium, *Sea of Poppies*.

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I am going to start by telling a familiar story. It’s about a poor black boy from Baltimore who finds his opportunity for upward mobility in the drugs trade, a choice that results in his entanglement within an international network of human traffickers, pimps, corrupt politicians, property developers, and judges. This is not a plot lifted from a season of David Simon’s HBO-series *The Wire* (2002-08), but a précis of Amitav Ghosh’s novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008), whose narrative unfolds over six months in 1838, around the events leading up to the Sino-British conflict that became known as the First Opium War. I invoke Simon’s critically-acclaimed series deliberately here in relation to Ghosh’s postcolonial novel in order to emphasise the interpenetration of past and present that characterises a certain mode of neo-Victorian fiction. In the case of *Sea of Poppies*, that mode enables a twenty-first century author to contest the neoliberal hegemony of his present, by complicating our historical understanding of its

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origins. This article explores the potential that the neo-Victorian form opens up for ideology critique in the present. As I will argue, *Sea of Poppies* is a novel about globalisation that leverages its imaginative reproduction of the past to examine more carefully the story of capitalism. In my analysis, I will consider how the aesthetics of twenty-first-century neoliberalism are mapped onto a story ostensibly about Victorian free-trade imperialism. My purpose is to show how, by dramatising the fates of subjects caught up against their will in the turbulence of a world reshaped by global capital, Ghosh's novel *historicises* globalisation, reminding readers of its ongoing legacy of exclusion and exploitation. At the same time, the novel also, through the neo-Victorian form, articulates a tactics of resistance to the hegemonic mode of global capital.

The history of globalisation – which for many is the history of the neoliberal present – is popularly told in two stages.<sup>1</sup> It usually begins somewhere around the 1944 Bretton Woods negotiations between world leaders to imagine the shape of the postwar global economy. Bretton Woods laid the groundwork for regulating international trade and development, an attempt to ward off another Great Depression through international governance, including the creation of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The second stage narrates the breakdown of the Bretton Woods regime in the 1970s, under assault by the Chicago school of neoliberal economic theory, leading to three decades of financial globalisation characterised by deregulation. The subsequent crises of these policy decisions – including capital flight, the decline of manufacturing in developed regions, 'white flight' from urban centres,<sup>2</sup> environmental degradation, reduced labour standards, off-shore tax evasion, and extreme economic inequality – are sometimes seen to be simultaneously so complex, and so deeply sedimented in our everyday practice as to defy coherent representation. While postmodernism has been considered as one aesthetic response to the disaggregation of society under these pressures, other artists and creators have looked backward to the nineteenth century in their search for an aesthetic capable of managing such sprawling networks of signification.

Consider, for example, how David Simon's television series *The Wire* has been called 'Victorian' in form and style for the way it represents social realism in twenty-first-century Baltimore, Maryland, USA through its

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multiple plot lines, narrative perspectives, and serialised form. According to John Sutherland:

In *The Wire* they seem to have re-discovered the art of Victorian serialisation. If you read a novel like *Vanity Fair* or *Dombey and Son* in the 1840s, it was a two-year experience. With *The Wire*, you have that same kind of long engagement with a narrative – a sense of going somewhere. (qtd. in Low 2010)

Alex Schulman explains that long-form television series like *The Wire* or *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) are “contemporary exemplars of critical adulation plus demotic popularity”, which find their cultural referents in “the nineteenth-century social novel, with the adjective ‘Dickensian’ coming up regularly” (Schulman 2012: 25). Indeed, to call *The Wire* Dickensian became something of a cliché, and by the fifth season, the show’s writers themselves were nodding self-consciously to the connection. In that season’s sixth episode a crass newspaper editor instructs his reporter not to investigate a specific incident, but to capture instead in panorama a whole social crisis – in this case, “the nature of homelessness” (Mann 2008: 9:33-9:53) – in the mode of Charles Dickens. Interviewed by *Vice* magazine, Simon himself explained, “it was fun goofing on the Dickens comparison because I understood what they meant by Dickensian when they said it. You get this sort of scope of society through the classes, the way Dickens would play with that in his novels” (qtd. in Pearson 2009). Likewise, viewers were eager to explore the show’s Victorian characteristics. Self-described “first-time authors and ersatz Victorian scholars” Joy DeLyria and Sean Michael Robinson have since pushed this connection to its unnatural end through their faux-discovery of *The Wire* as an unremembered illustrated Victorian novel by the impishly named H. B. Ogden. DeLyria and Robinson satirically imagine the series as a “Victorian masterpiece [which] has been forgotten and ignored by scholars and popular culture alike” (Robinson 2011). Despite their varying degrees of sincerity, the argument put forward by Sutherland, Schulman, DeLyria, Robinson, and many others is that this quintessentially Victorian form remains an effective way to narrate the social complexities of the present.<sup>3</sup>

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If *The Wire* adapts the past to narrate the present, then Amitav Ghosh's *Sea Of Poppies* performs the inverse gesture, returning to the past in order to gain a different perspective on the present. Ghosh's novel already occupies a special place in the emerging scholarly field of neo-Victorian studies because of its inclusion in Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn's field-defining work *Neo-Victorianism* (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010). But whereas Heilmann and Llewellyn propose to link the novel's linguistic and cultural hybridity to developments in postcolonial theory in the Anglo-American academy, my intention is to pursue a materialist critique. That is to say, I take Ghosh's novel not simply as one that challenges our received view of nineteenth-century imperial history, but also one that uses that challenge to provoke questions about our current predicament. After all, the narrative thrust of this novel is to demonstrate how victims of globalisation – the individuals whose established identities, whose traditional way of life and *habitus* have been destroyed by the commodity logic of capitalism – might adapt and find opportunities for new and in some cases even better lives under capital's reign. Organising my argument around concepts of cosmopolitanism and abjection, I want to situate *Sea of Poppies* as a neo-Victorian text that represents an earlier stage of globalisation in order to provide a critique of its unresolved legacy in the neoliberal present.<sup>4</sup>

In his 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', Gilles Deleuze wonders if it is perhaps a mistake to think that, in resisting capitalism, our options are limited to submission and protest. Surveying the transition from disciplinary societies to societies of control, Deleuze concludes that there is no sense in complaining about which regime we operate under. The fact is that there is always a regime. In each of them, we find "liberating and enslaving forces confront[ing] each other" (Deleuze 1992: 4). As such, when we recognise a regime change, Deleuze counsels, there "is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons" (Deleuze 1992: 4). It is this Deleuzian spirit, looking for new weapons upon the emergence of a new order, rather than looking for an alternative to that order, that Ghosh conveys from his Victorian precariat to their voiceless comrades in the twenty-first century, those whom Alain Badiou defines as "present in the world but absent from its meaning and decisions about its future" (Badiou 2012: 56).

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### 1. Historicisation and Neo-Victorian Form

The phenomenon of neo-Victorian fiction coincides with a transition in scholarship. As John Kucich explains, the historicist project that dominated literary studies in the 1980s, especially in the area of Victorian studies, has developed in two directions, “synchronic and diachronic”, that now constitute a “theoretical fault line” (Kucich 2011: 58). Synchronic historicism strives to recover the past or, at least, to describe what Raymond Williams would call a structure of feeling operative at a given historical moment.<sup>5</sup> The intentions of synchronic projects, Kucich argues, are to produce “a thickened history of [a] period’s literary and social intersections” (Kucich 2011: 62). Diachronic historicism, on the other hand, seeks to make more explicit the connection between past and present, to find in a historical moment an episode in our transition to modern culture. In doing so, studies pursuing a diachronic historicism aim to recover “unrealised critical possibilities” (Kucich 2011: 63), extending the cultural significance of a text beyond the immediate moment of its production.

The term neo-Victorian is capacious, and for some applies to any contemporary writing set in, or re-imagining, the Victorian period. However, in their attempt to map the field, Heilmann and Llewellyn seek a more precise definition. Seeing the recent flourishing of neo-Victorian texts that have been written in the shadow of postmodernism, Heilmann and Llewellyn argue that to be neo-Victorian is to be “*self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4, original emphasis). This helpfully focuses the field around texts that *actively* engage Victorian literature and culture, rather than the larger group of texts that use the nineteenth century as a backdrop. Positioning neo-Victorianism against texts which are “inherently conservative because they lack imaginative re-engagement with the period, and instead recycle and deliver a stereotypical and unnuanced reading of the Victorians and their literature and culture” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 6), Heilmann and Llewellyn do not equate neo-Victorianism with progressive but rather with critical perspectives. In this, they identify both an ethical and an aesthetic imperative as constitutive features of neo-Victorian form. Elsewhere, Llewellyn offers clarification, explaining that neo-Victorian texts are “processes of writing that act *out* the results of reading the Victorians and their literary productions”, offering their own readers a “way *into* the Victorian” (Llewellyn 2008: 168, added

emphasis). The Janus face of neo-Victorian fiction, moving simultaneously into and out of the Victorian period, suggests that these texts reside right on the theoretical fault line that Kucich sees opening up as historicism diverges between synchronic and diachronic approaches.

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea Of Poppies* exemplifies the kinds of productive critique made possible for the writer conscious of this fault line. In its effort to reconstruct the complex details of the opium supply chain in the 1830s and the conditions of labour at various stages of that supply chain, *Sea of Poppies* is synchronic. In an interview with Jai Arjun Singh, Ghosh himself has supported the accidental, almost providential myth of his recovery of a lost tale:

*It was just pure luck* – I was looking in the British Library one day, looking at their archives and collections, and suddenly I found this very rare book, published in the 1860s in Calcutta (though I'm sure it doesn't exist in Calcutta anymore). It was called "Notes on an Opium Factory" and it was written by the superintendent of the Ghazipur Opium Factory. He wrote it as a kind of tourist guide – he wanted to attract British tourists to the place, and he described the place in great detail! Nothing in that passage in my book is made up – nothing about the factory, that is; Deeti of course is a fictional character. You won't believe how amazing it was to learn about how the opium was processed: the directors of the East India Company, sitting in London, would send directions about how every ball of opium had to have so many chittacks, how there had to be just so many leaves [...] it was a completely industrialised process. We talk about Henry Ford rationalising the industrial process, but these guys were doing it much earlier. (qtd. in Singh 2008, added emphasis)

In positioning "these guys" as the forerunners of Henry Ford, however, Ghosh situates the East India Company at the origins of rationalised industrialism, an argument that discloses the diachronic intention of his novel.

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It is unsurprising, then, that Heilmann and Llewellyn regard *Sea of Poppies*, along with Laura Fish’s *Strange Music* (2008), Kate Pullinger’s *Mistress of Nothing* (2009), and Ahdaf Soueif’s *The Map of Love* (1999), as belonging to a subgenre of “postcolonial neo-Victorianism” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 69). Taken together, these texts “scrutinise Victorian attitudes to race and empire through the shared themes of racial violence and slavery”, the less laudable aspects of this period of rapid ‘progress’ that were “sanctioned and maintained by imperialist imperatives of Christian religion and the politics of colonial occupation and judicial oppression” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 68). Unfortunately, however, the critics unnecessarily limit the scope of their analysis, arguing that *Sea of Poppies* and related texts “illustrate neo-Victorianism’s creative challenge to the critical theory concepts of hybridity and the silence of the subaltern” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 69). This is a severely restrictive bracketing of postcolonial neo-Victorianism, if its only utility is to engage postcolonial theory. Elizabeth Ho, alternatively, argues that our memories of Victorian imperialism – what she calls our attempts to “remember or misremember the nineteenth century” (Ho 2012: 5) – are crucial to many artists’ attempts to engage with Empire today. As Ho sees it, “the return to the Victorian in the present offers a highly visible, highly aestheticised code for confronting empire again and anew” (Ho 2012: 5). Indeed, it is hard to imagine *Sea of Poppies* was written only to challenge, creatively or otherwise, the critical theory of diasporic Bengali intellectuals whose work has theoretical currency in the Western academy.<sup>6</sup>

The argument, then, is that *Sea of Poppies* is not only a novel about imperial discourses of the past; it is about the durability of imperialism itself. The novel positions the empire as a consequence of expanding trade networks; Empire arrives belatedly, to regulate and establish norms within capitalism’s paradigm. For those interested in neo-Victorian texts, *Sea of Poppies* becomes exemplary for at least two reasons. First, and most obviously, through its creative engagement with history, it allows the articulation of perspectives not readily available in material archives. It complicates, productively, our twenty-first-century understanding of a controversial moment in imperial history, emphasising the economic base that underpinned and in many cases actually drove imperial policy and the wars of expansion. Second, and perhaps more importantly, *Sea of Poppies* continuously recalls the political and economic instabilities of our present. It

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is here that I follow Llewellyn's optimism about the usefulness of neo-Victorianism. Neo-Victorian fictions like *Sea of Poppies* cannot only represent the past, but they can also produce a set of options and tactics as we attempt to grapple with the comparable problems of the present. Llewellyn calls this "opening up aspects of our present to a relationship with the Victorian past" in ways that offer new possibilities for thinking about the historical and political contingencies that have yielded our present circumstances (Llewellyn 2008: 171). In this case, as Ghosh luxuriously re-imagines the complexities of the international opium supply chain, the origins of our globalised world are demystified. Elizabeth Ho goes even further than this, claiming that *Sea of Poppies* produces "a version of the Victorian past accountable to international contracted labour originating in India, China and Africa" (Ho 2012: 184). In any case, my argument rests on the claim that *Sea of Poppies* reveals a Victorian world that is already distinctly globalised.<sup>7</sup> By adopting the neo-Victorian genre, Ghosh acquires an alternative venue to imagine ways of resisting the hegemony that continues to manage those networks of commodity exchange today.

## 2. **Britannia Rule the Waves: Neo-Victorian Ethics and Aesthetics**

*Sea of Poppies* is more than synchronic: a novel that returns imaginatively to the Victorian period in order to represent one (or in the case of this novel, many) of that period's previously silent voices. It is also diachronic: a novel that leverages its imaginative reproduction of the past to provide a new view of the present. In *Sea of Poppies*, the object of appropriation is the global subject. Ghosh encourages his readers to see the similarities of the nineteenth and twenty-first century global economies, and to read the novel's suffering characters as avatars of contemporary injustice. In this novel, the aesthetics of twenty-first-century global capital shape Ghosh's critique of Victorian free-trade imperialism. My purpose is to explain how the author exploits the negative effect of commodification – its tendency to flatten difference – to produce a positive post-national and post-racial community among a few of globalisation's precariat. In other words, by the end of Ghosh's novel, the variously displaced characters – the collateral damage of an expanding global market for opium – find themselves in solidarity though the only common bond between them is the very fact of their displacement.



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As the novel opens, we witness the English East India Company terraforming the Indian landscape, replacing food crops with the monocultural production of opium geared toward the international export market. This radical dismantling of India’s traditional internal economy, Ghosh’s narrator explains, is a function of Britain’s demand for the luxury of Chinese tea. Some background is useful here. The Chinese were uninterested in British manufactured goods, leaving the British able only to trade their limited supply of gold and silver bullion for the tea. The risks to the national economy were severe, but by the 1820s, the East India Company had found a solution in opium and set about creating a market in China for Indian-produced opium. In defiance of a Chinese ban on the importation of the drug, the Company built elaborate transportation networks to exploit both the grey and black markets. Historian Gregory Blue cites H.B. Morse’s report that, within thirty years, the Company’s aggressive drug pushing increased opium exports to China from 4,000 chests annually in 1800-1810 to 30,000 chests annually in 1830-40 (Blue 2000: 36).

*Sea of Poppies* chronicles and decodes this history. Early in the novel, Neel Rattan Halder, the Hindu landowner, asks Mr Burnham, the English opium merchant, whether the trade is necessary. Burnham offers a lesson in supply-and-demand, explaining that despite Britain’s ravenous demand for Chinese tea, neither Chinese merchants nor consumers have any interest in trading for Britain’s manufactured goods (Ghosh 2008: 103). The consequence was that Britain was forced to trade directly in gold and silver, putting significant strain on the nation’s limited bullion reserves. Neel, who “had imagined that the traffic in opium enjoyed official approval in China” (Ghosh 2008: 104) and who had presumed that the Chinese are naturally inclined toward opium consumption, stands corrected and learns that both the demand and market for opium were manufactured by British interests as a way to correct this imbalance of international trade. Burnham’s colleague, Doughty, explains that as recently as a thirty years ago, “there was just a trickle of opium going in[to China]” because the average Chinese consumer wasn’t interested in using it (Ghosh 2008: 103).

“[I]t wasn’t easy to get him to take opium. No sir – to give credit where it’s due, you would have to say that the yen for opium would still be limited to their twice-born if not for the

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perseverance of English and American merchants.’ (Ghosh 2008: 103)

In this conversation, Neel, the recipient of an expensive English education, stands in for the majority of Ghosh’s audience, the recipients of an imperial historiography – and its postcolonial critique – that tends to shroud the motive forces for imperial expansion within the garb of national chauvinism or the duty to spread civilisation.

Doughty’s paternalistic use of a medical metaphor, depicting the Chinese consumer as an obstinate child who refuses to take the medicine that is ‘good’ for him, and his euphemistic summary of military aggression as entrepreneurial perseverance typify the arguments put forward by the Anglo-Indian opium merchant capitalists in this novel. They remind readers that the myth of a virtuous empire often arrives *ex post facto*. Rhetoric of liberation and progress is routinely alloyed to the opium trade. Burnham explains how “[t]he war, when it comes, will not be for opium. It will be for a principle: for freedom – for the freedom of trade and for the freedom of the Chinese people” (Ghosh 2008: 106). Likewise, his reasoning continues, “opium is [India’s] greatest blessing”, since the British merchants’ need for opium as a fungible commodity means that Britain will remain in India for the foreseeable future, supplying “the lasting advantages of British influence” to residents of the subcontinent (Ghosh 2008: 106). Quite literally, imperialism is a secondary outcome of market demands, as Burnham explains:

‘British rule in India could not be sustained without opium [...] let us not pretend otherwise. You are no doubt aware that in some years, the Company’s annual gains from opium are almost equal to the entire revenue of [...] the United States? Do you imagine that British rule would be possible in this impoverished land if it were not for this source of wealth?’ (Ghosh 2008: 106)

Not only is Britain’s empire dependent upon the opium trade, Burnham, continues, but so too is the metropolis, as he rattles off all the drug’s uses in the domestic economy: for doctors as an anaesthetic; for children as gripe water; and for ladies, including “our beloved Queen”, as laudanum (Ghosh

2008: 107). In sum, “one might even say that it is opium that has made this age of industry and progress possible” (Ghosh 2008: 107). Here Ghosh picks up on a familiar theme in Victorian literature – whether the shipmen in Alfred Tennyson’s ‘The Lotos-Eaters’ (1832) or the factory workers in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848) – that opium’s soporific effects relieve the unreasonable pressures put on bodies and psyches by the turbulent changes effected by the industrial revolution. As Burnham observes, without opium, London would be “thronged with coughing, sleepless, incontinent multitudes” (Ghosh 2008: 107). Ghosh’s critical engagement with history foregrounds opium as the motive force for globalisation, and the British nation appears to be its greatest addict, reliant upon it not only for its balance of trade, for the revenues to maintain its empire, and for modern conveniences, but also for domestic political stability; opium calms what might otherwise be discontented Londoners.

It is tempting to suggest that, by this representation of the nineteenth-century global economy, Ghosh is encouraging readers to make explicit connections to the present and, in particular, the links between the violent history of opium and our current source of wealth, namely oil, which both imbricates and enables today’s globalised material culture and its attached geopolitics. In 2008, the United States and its allies were five years into their second war with Iraq, Gulf War II, dubbed ‘Operation Iraqi Freedom’ and clothed in the rhetorical fig leaves of extending democracy to victims of tyranny. Some of that war’s critics pointed to Iraq’s massive oil reserves as the true motive for intervention and occupation; so too did some of its advocates, including U.S. Senator (and subsequently Secretary of Defence from 2013-2015 under President Barack Obama) Chuck Hagel:

‘People say we’re not fighting for oil. Of course we are,’ said the Republican Senator from Nebraska Chuck Hagel to law students of Catholic University last September [2007]. ‘They talk about America’s national interest. What the hell do you think they’re talking about? We’re not there for figs.’ (qtd. in Kristol 2013)

Fifteen years earlier, in the wake of Gulf War I, Ghosh wrote an essay about literature’s ability to illuminate the relationship between commodities and social worlds. In ‘Petrofictions’ (1992), Ghosh laments the absence of

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fictions that adequately represent what he calls “the Oil Encounter”, despite oil’s “economic and strategic value as well as its ability to create far-flung cultural encounters” (Ghosh 2005: 138). He suggests this lacuna is a consequence of the fact that “[t]o a great many Americans, oil smells bad. It reeks of unavoidable overseas entanglements, a worrisome foreign dependency, economic uncertainty, risky and expensive military enterprises” (Ghosh 2005: 139). But, more importantly, he also identifies a serious lack of information: “neither [writers] nor anyone else really knows anything at all about the human experiences that surround the production of oil” because of “strict regimes of corporate secrecy” and “the physical and demographic separation of oil installations and their workers from the indigenous population” (Ghosh 2005: 140). Even the mighty novel, Ghosh argues, seems incapable of representing such a complex, shadowy industry upon which our modern lives depend absolutely. He concludes simply “that we do not yet possess the form that can give the Oil Encounter a literary expression” (Ghosh 2005: 142). Considering the argument in ‘Petrofictions’ alongside the world articulated by Burnham to the naïve Neel, it is tempting to suggest that the neo-Victorian form provides a good place to start, mapping the topography of our twenty-first century petroculture onto the Victorian sea of poppies.

### **3. Flotsam and Jetsam – The Victorian Precariat**

Alongside its attention to the drugs trafficked across the *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh’s novel maps the trajectories of people, including that African-American boy from Baltimore, who are drawn from what I, developing a concept advanced by the economist Guy Standing, call the Victorian precariat. Standing coins the term precariat – an etymological fusion of precarity and proletariat – to describe individuals living without fixed addresses or professions, whose precarity is a function of major economic turbulence (Standing 2011: 7-13). I would suggest that this term usefully describes the main characters in Ghosh’s novel – including Deeti, the widow of an opium factory worker; Kalua, the low-caste Dalit; Paulette, the orphan of French botanists; Ah Fatt a Chinese opium addict; Neel, the disgraced Bengali nobleman; and Nob, the Bengali agent employed by Burnham’s firm – for whom the nineteenth-century opium industry is at once the cause of their dispossession and their opportunity to re-construct their identities.

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Previous scholars have identified the emerging solidarity among this unlikely collection of individuals as the key to understanding Ghosh’s neo-Victorian critique. However, most have been keen to do so within the vocabulary of postcolonial theory and criticism. Heilmann and Llewellyn, for example, characterise them as “the ‘subaltern’ group and those who throw in their lot with them, such as Paulette, Zachary and Nob” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 74); Ho prefers to describe the group as a “diasporic tapestry” undergoing the “trauma of migration” (Ho 2012: 184). These decisions certainly yield valuable conclusions about Ghosh’s novel, but since these terms are so widely used within the realm of postcolonial studies, they deployment here risks obscuring the material (and economic) specificity of this text.

By highlighting the economic, rather than the discursive or racial forces at the root of this group’s mobility, the term ‘precariat’ more aptly describes the members of the community-in-formation than either ‘subaltern’ or ‘diasporic.’ Economic precarity explains *how* all these characters find themselves in Calcutta, waiting to board a Baltimore schooner called *The Ibis*. Some will be prisoners; others indentured workers; but in the commercial logic of the opium industry, all these characters are commodities, cargo that can be bought cheaply and sold dearly through circulation on the trading network. In case we miss the point – that humans are as easily rendered commodities as any manufactured good – Ghosh conceives of the *Ibis* as a converted slave ship, now being retrofitted to traffic opium and humans alike. In fact, Mr Burnham informs Zachary that the *Ibis* will not be shipping opium quite yet because the Chinese have been “making trouble” and “until such time as they can be made to understand the benefits of Free Trade” the vessel will continue to operate as a slaver, a declaration which understandably discomforts the African-American Zachary Reid (Ghosh 2008: 73). Burnham works to allay those concerns, indulging in his characteristically pharisaical logic by justifying human trafficking as the handmaid of freedom:

‘[T]he Africa trade was the greatest exercise in freedom since God led the children of Israel out of Egypt. Consider, Reid, the situation of a so-called slave in the Carolinas – is he not more free than his brethren in Africa, groaning under the rule of some dark tyrant?’ (Ghosh 2008: 73)

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Readers of the novel, who know that Burnham has mistaken Zachary for a white man and “a pukka kind of chap” (Ghosh 2008: 73), will make their own moral judgments of such reasoning and, in doing so, perform the kind of nascent critique of imperial discourse prompted by neo-Victorian fiction. In so doing, those same readers might also dimly recollect the rhetoric of their own age, when apologists for outsourcing defend low wages as being ‘progressive’ insofar as the wages that workers receive inside the multinational corporation’s overseas factory are higher than those the workers would otherwise receive in underdeveloped economies.

In fact, one of the most remarkable passages in the novel depicts the visit to the Sudder Opium Factory, where Deeti witnesses the multi-stage industrial transformation of the harvested poppy into uniform packages of opium ready for export. This scene demonstrates the relentless ingenuity of capitalism: unable to find a market in either India or China for factory goods made in Britain, the British have brought the factory-system to India and applied it to opium production. For Deeti, the uneducated wife of a poor farmer, the factory represents the techno-sublime, where the “assemblers’ hands moved with dizzying speed,” thanks to a “finely honed” system of runners delivering “precise measures of each ingredient to each seat, [so] that the assemblers’ hands never had cause to falter” (Ghosh 2008: 89). Amazed by the complexity, she reaches for the only metaphor in her symbolic system capable of making this scene sensible, calling the factory “a temple” and likening its orderly workers to Brahmins at a feast (Ghosh 2008: 89). The reader of Ghosh’s neo-Victorian fiction, however, is encouraged to make different connections, noticing workers for whom routine piece-work has consummated their reification under industrial capital. Even Deeti observes that while the assembly-line workers’ eyes were “vacant [and] glazed,” the system “managed to keep moving” (Ghosh 2008: 87). When her husband explains “that the measure for every ingredient was precisely laid down by the Company’s directors in faraway London” (Ghosh 2008: 89), the reader might see the opium factory as the precursor for manufacturing under the direction of the multinational corporation, where an executive working at corporate headquarters in a global city designs a process that takes place in the global periphery, where regulations are few, taxes and wages are low, and lives are cheap.

The application of the industrial process to opium production, as Doughty notes, has happened “almost within living memory” (Ghosh 2008:

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107), and already its consequences on the indigenous economy and ways of life are manifold. Deeti recalls agricultural practices of “the old days”, where poppy production was a small part of a more diversified harvest. She remembers “all the work it took to grow poppies”, which meant there was little incentive to harvest more than “a patch or two”, while devoting the majority of their fields to “more useful crops” like lentils and vegetables (Ghosh 2008: 27). With the East India Company’s “appetite for opium” increasing exponentially, farmers were pressured into monoculture by the English agents:

It was impossible to say no to them: if you refused, they would leave their silver hidden in your house [...]. It was no use telling the white magistrate that you hadn’t accepted the money and your thumbprint was forged: he earned commissions on the opium and would never let you off. (Ghosh 2008: 27)

This description of the open collusion between State and Capital – made easy in the colonial sphere where the East India Company operated both as sovereign and merchant – shows the forcible ejection of colonial subjects out of their traditional livelihoods and their placement within a cash economy, where each year “your earnings would come to no more than three-and-a-half sicca rupees, just about enough to pay off your advance” (Ghosh 2008: 27). In short, they have entered modernity and become proletarian.

While providing this macroeconomic history of India’s forcible transition into modernity under the regime of English colonialism, Ghosh’s novel focuses on characters who are its casualties: the flotsam and jetsam of the opium trade. By the end of the novel, these characters are brought by circumstances beyond their control into relation with each other. None have chosen their respective paths; they each have been driven by the opium industry: Deeti, the widow whose escape from *sati* both saves her life and guarantees her exile from her community’s symbolic order; Neel, the Hindu landowner who is cheated out of his family estate by a corrupt and racist judiciary, and who is then tattooed and forcibly defiled; Paulette, the French orphan with a scientific mind who flees the patriarchal tyranny of her Anglo-Indian custodians; even the upwardly mobile Zachary Reid, whose

“great eagerness” to learn the sailor’s trade, is animated by the structural racism that prevents the “son of a Maryland freedwoman” and a white man from making a home in his American homeland (Ghosh 2008: 11, 10). *Sea of Poppies* relates a particular kind of victimhood shared by those who have been made cosmopolitan against their will.

This condition is nowhere more evident than in the case of Neel, the Bengali nobleman who is accused falsely of forgery by an unscrupulous English opium trader, but is nevertheless convicted, stripped of his title and his property, and sentenced to be transported to the Mauritius Islands for seven years of hard labour. Brought into prison in Calcutta, he surrenders both his clothes and his dignity as his jailors abuse his body and his faith, all while a representative of British justice looks on, doing nothing:

The touch of the orderly’s fingers had a feel that Neel could never have imagined between two human beings – neither intimate nor angry – it was the disinterested touch of mastery, of purchase or conquest; it was as if his body had passed into possession of a new owner, who was taking stock of it as a man might inspect a house he had recently acquired. (Ghosh 2008: 266)

Neel’s predicament here is one of abjection, as theorised by Julia Kristeva, – of being “radically excluded”, thrust out, and “disturb[ing] identity, system, order” (Kristeva 1982: 2, 4). Assigned his prisoner’s uniform – the marker of his new subjecthood – Neel cannot even dress himself. Naked, his dignity and his rationality collapse, as he is reduced to making obscene gestures “with a lunatic’s abandonment” (Ghosh 2008: 267-268).

In a description that captures the ways in which a subject, following its abjection, endures its reintegration into a new system of meaning, Ghosh’s narrator explains that Neel now “felt no shame at all, nor any other form of responsibility for his body; it was as if he had vacated his own flesh in the process of yielding it to the tenancy of the prison” (Ghosh 2008: 267-268). All his life, Neel has scrupulously observed the dietary and social rules of his high-caste status. Now he finds himself sharing a cell with an opium addict, who is caked in mud, faeces, and vomit. Neel calls this man, Ah Fatt, “the incarnate embodiment of his loathings” (Ghosh 2008: 297). Yet, as one of the older inmates in Alipore Prison explains to him, he, Ah



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Fatt, and their fellow transportees “will become a brotherhood of your own: you will be your own village, your own family, your own caste” (Ghosh 2008: 290). Though Neel receives this prison wisdom as a threat, one that confirms his abjection, the novel’s plot suggests an alternative.

While Neel is still in prison, awaiting transportation to the *Ibis* which will carry him to a prison colony, the novel’s other main characters are assembling at the dock, meeting each other for the first time. Initially, the complexities of India’s caste system combined with the racial chauvinism of European imperialism prevent these characters from acting together. For the Hindus among them, the prospect of crossing the ocean, the Black Water, is the ultimate violation of caste. However, all are bound for the Mauritius Islands, some as prisoners, some as indentured workers, some as asylum seekers, some as shiphands. And so, at the same time of Neel’s degradation in the detention camp, two of the principal characters, thus far strangers to each other, have the following exchange: Deeti, who is disguised because her family want her dead, asks Paulette, who is disguised to escape her foster family, whether she is afraid that, by crossing the Black Water, she will lose caste. (Ghosh 2008: 328). Paulette replies:

‘On a boat of pilgrims, no one can lose caste and everyone is the same [...]. From now on and forever afterwards, we will all be ship-siblings – jaházbhais and jaházbahens – to each other. There’ll be no differences between us.’ (Ghosh 2008: 328)

Unlike the taunt of Neel’s prison counsellor, Paulette’s speech is received with something resembling a Deleuzian pragmatism. As it shifts from abjection and into association, away from the past and toward the future – her proposal argues that a new social group might emerge contingently, provisionally out of the turmoil. That pragmatism sweeps her campmates off their feet:

The answer was so daring, so ingenious, as fairly to rob the women of their breath. Not in a lifetime of thinking, Deeti knew, would she have stumbled upon an answer so complete, so satisfactory. In the glow of the moment, she did something she would have never done otherwise: she reached out to

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take the stranger's hand in her own. Instantly, in emulation of her gesture, every other woman reached out too, to share in this common communion of touch. (Ghosh 2008: 328)

Since, with the exception of Zachary Reid, none of the characters performs recognised forms of labour within the opium industry, it is difficult to think of these characters as a class. Yet, the condition of inclusion within the community here is expressed not in terms of race, religion, nation, or gender, but of a common experience of mobility and rootlessness.

This suggests that we might provisionally consider the characters as cosmopolitan, albeit not in the celebratory way usually associated with the concept.<sup>8</sup> We often think of cosmopolitanism in positive terms, one of the legacies of Enlightenment thought, a marker of inclusivity, sophistication, mobility, and worldliness. Kant famously called it the path to a perpetual peace (Kant 1983: 119). Yet, however much truth lies in this optimism, we cannot ignore cosmopolitanism's negative aspect. Lauren Goodlad and Julia Wright engage its "complex history" in nineteenth-century culture and show how it was used as a "pejorative" in order to represent anxieties about threats to national identity and security (Goodlad and Wright 2007). Examples in this vein include literary characters like Wilkie Collins' Count Fosco or Anthony Trollope's Augustus Melmotte. More relevant to Ghosh's novel is the reminder offered by Sheldon Pollock, Homi Bhabha, Carol Breckenridge, and Dipesh Chakrabarty that "cosmopolitans themselves are often the victims of modernity, failed by capitalism's upward mobility and bereft of [the] comforts and customs of national belonging" (Pollock et al. 2000: 582). In short, as the British pop group Genesis put it: "It's no fun / being an illegal alien" (Banks et al. 1984).

My argument is that we should think of the characters in *Sea of Poppies* as a group of abject cosmopolitans, of people who have been pushed beyond borders against their will, and who have *taken advantage* of their common experience to form a new, heterogeneous, displaced, international community. I need to make clear here that *Sea of Poppies* does not reproduce the ideology of the liberal novel, where characters entrepreneurially take advantage of social turbulence to carve out for themselves some version of a good and happy life – think of David Copperfield or Esther Summerson. There are still obvious problems with Ghosh's imagination of a cosmopolitan community, including especially the

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fact that it is the white European, Paulette, who takes the intellectual and spiritual initiative in her speech about ship-siblings that binds together the flotsam and jetsam. Moreover, it is not clear that coming-together improves the *material* conditions of these characters. Ghosh’s novel closes with no clean resolution; the abject cosmopolitans are left with a radically uncertain future, aboard a ship in a storm headed nowhere.

To go back to the Deleuzian rhetoric of weaponry, the only weapon these characters have acquired is a new disposition, one that is cosmopolitan in scope. Neel, for example, begins to wash, clean, and rehabilitate his junkie cellmate; these are acts of proximity and care which, the narrator explains, “Neel had never thought of doing, not even for his own son, let alone a man of his own age, a foreigner” (Ghosh 2008: 300). In return, Ah Fatt gives Neel his story, a tale whose geographic alterity is exaggerated by the fact of Ah Fatt’s limited English. Notably, it is precisely this alterity that makes the story so valuable to Neel, allowing his mind to transcend the misery of his present condition. Thus, while geographically rooted, literally incarcerated and about to be transported to a prison colony, Ah Fatt’s story:

transported [Neel] across the continent, to Canton – and it was this other journey, more vivid than his own, that kept his sanity intact through the first part of their voyage: no one but Ah Fatt, no one he had ever known, could have provided him with the escape he needed, into a realm that was wholly unfamiliar, utterly unlike his own. (Ghosh 2008: 345)

In her analysis of this scene, Ho argues that Neel receives more than temporary succour for his psychological trauma. His humanitarian, even Samaritan, gesture, sets in motion a relation of reciprocity that produces “the most intimate of friendships” (Ho 2012: 185). Ho draws our attention to Ghosh’s use of the word “collaboration” as the narrator explains how meaning is produced between characters separated by a linguistic gulf:

[T]he genius of Ah Fatt’s descriptions lay in their elisions, so that to listen to him was a venture in collaboration, in which the things that were spoken of came gradually to be transformed into artefacts of a shared imagining. (Ghosh 2008: 345)

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We can discern much from this observation: that meaning is found in elisions; that elisions compel the auditor to collaborate in the authorship of meaning. Certainly, to begin to think he might see with another's eyes is significant for a character like Neel, whose abjection in the prison, remember, led him to renounce "any other form of responsibility for his body" (Ghosh 2008: 268). But there's no reason to stop there. We are all well-schooled enough in postmodernism to know that we have to pay careful attention when a writer writes about the telling of a tale. In discussing the collaboration between Neel and Ah Fatt, one of many that occurs on board the *Ibis* between abject cosmopolitans, Ghosh is surely reaching out, implicating us, as readers and consumers of this novel. We cannot help but acknowledge our imperfect knowledge of the Victorian opium trade. We might also acknowledge that Ghosh is prompting us to initiate a critical conversation between the past and the present, to use that collaboration as a way to militate against the offensive, even traumatic effects of capitalism in the present.

In the *Sea of Poppies*, the globalisation of communication and transportation networks does not signal the advent of the politically-conscious multitude that opium production has so far, according to Burnham, repressed. Indeed, the gradual coalescence of these abject individuals into a social group reveals the extent to which *Sea of Poppies* is not a liberal bourgeois Victorian novel. We do not, following the arguments made by scholars of the novel like Ian Watt and Nancy Armstrong, find ourselves in imaginative sympathy as we observe the emergence of a sovereign liberal subject amid a social body.<sup>9</sup> This novel defies such convention. There is no single subject at the end of this novel, but a group of people who are beginning to think, act, and feel together, in collaboration with each other, and using such resources as they find at their disposal. By historicising the development of opium's trading networks and the uneven movement of commodities and people along them, Ghosh's novel reminds us that the accidental blossoming of alternative socialities remains absolutely precarious, doomed if others (including here the readers) refuse to acknowledge their duty of care, their responsibilities for other bodies and other histories.

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**Notes**

- 1 See, for example, the narratives offered by Stiglitz (2002: 10-15), Hardt and Negri (2000: 266-67), or Skidelsky (2005: 15, 19-25).
- 2 The term “white flight” was coined by sociologists to describe the transformation of urban space in the United States beginning in the mid-twentieth century, when affluent citizens moved out of city centres and into sub- and ex-urban spaces. For discussions of white flight, see Grozdins (1958), Frey (1979), and Kruse (2007). Though primarily an economic phenomenon, the historical conjunction of race and class in the United States explains the use of the term “white.” The term has since been applied to other geographies in the developed and developing world.
- 3 Matthew Kaiser offers a detailed description of “the surprisingly resilient foundation of Victorian literary tropes” which support *The Wire* (Kaiser 2011: 46).
- 4 In linking cosmopolitanism and abjection, I am drawing on the work of Terri Tomsy, who describes the “abject cosmopolitan” as “a subject that is radically and reluctantly politicized through their experience of abjection.” Tomsy’s research on prisoners held in Guantanamo—individuals who have been forcibly rendered across borders—suggests a process of radical detachment and reattachment where individuals leverage their experience of abjection in order to make claims of wider attachment among the world community (Tomsy 2013).
- 5 See Chapter 9 of Williams’ *Marxism and Literature* (1977).
- 6 Heilmann and Llewellyn’s use of Homi Bhabha is particularly curious given Ghosh’s sustained interest in the material conditions that *produce* hybrid subjects over and against either discursive or linguistic hybridity championed by Bhabha.
- 7 Sneha Kar Chaudhuri’s makes a similar, and diachronic, argument in her review of the second novel in Ghosh’s trilogy, describing *River of Smoke* (2011) as “presaging twentieth- and twenty-first-century diaspora, globalisation, multiculturalism and their attendant dangers, such as drug-trafficking, continuing economic exploitation, and armed conflict over resources” (Chaudhuri 2011: 142).
- 8 The celebration of cosmopolitanism as a “project” that can improve the world takes two forms: cosmopolitanism “from above” and “from below.” For discussions of cosmopolitanism as an ethico-political ideal, see Held (1995) or Habermas (2001). For considerations of cosmopolitanism from below, that is, as a moral project emerging out of ordinary lives acting in response to the

facts of their world citizenship, see Werbner (1999), Cheah (2006), or Kurasawa (2007).

- 9 See Watt's *Rise of the Novel* (1957) and Armstrong's *How Novels Think* (2005).

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