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224/236 Watworth Road, London SE17 1JE
Tel: 020-7708 2113 Fax: 020-7701 4489
e-mail: IPCB2000@aol.com

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LITERARY REVIEW

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FICTION

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JOHN THIEME

925
ALL IN THE SAME BOAT

SEA OF POPPIES

★

By Amitav Ghosh

(John Murray 480pp £18.99)

ALL OF AMITAV GHOSH's writing to date has traced connections across cultures. *Sea of Poppies*, the first part of what promises to be the great trilogy of Empire as seen from the vantage point of characters who, for the most part, were exploited by its transactions, is no exception. The novel is set during the period when the economy of Bengal and the poppy fields along the banks of the Ganges were dominated by the East India Company's monopoly of trade in Indian-grown opium, and there are hints of the wars of the South China Seas to come. But this is only part of the book's rich tapestry. The human story of this aspect of imperial commerce is intertwined with that of another tangled and shameful chapter in British history. The novel takes place at the moment in the late 1830s when, shortly after Emancipation, the plantations of the Caribbean, Mauritius and Fiji needed a new labour force and the system of indentureship came into being, with 'coolies' signing 'girmits' (agreements) to cross the black waters. In so doing, they lost both caste and many of the certitudes of their former lives; but at the same time, the novel suggests, they brought new diasporic communities into being. Ghosh shows these beginning to take shape during the first part of their voyage to their new lives.

Two of the novel's three sections depict the routes by which a varied cast of characters come to be migrants on, appropriately, a former slaving-ship, the *Ibis*, which will take them to *Mareech-dip* (Mauritius) along with its motley crew and two convicts who are being transported to the island's penal settlement: a bankrupt raja and a half-Chinese, half-Parsi opium addict. It is a novel of multiple, chameleonic identities, and none more so than a 'mulatto' American freedman, Zachary Reid, who is assumed to be white and becomes the second mate on the *Ibis*, and Paulette Lambert, a French orphan who disguises herself to become one of the migrant women on the boat. Both have hidden their real selves; at the same time both take on new identities through a process of elision and transformation. The shipboard setting in the final third of the novel makes literal what has been implied from the outset: they are 'all in the same boat', both as pawns in the grand

narratives of Empire and as human beings who transcend such roles through their common humanity. Ghosh, as always, proposes a very particular, non-Western form of humanism, a belief in commonalities that exist across 'race', class and culture. Political imperatives determine many of the relationships in the novel, but for the most part fail to quench the force of individual human emotions – memories and desires, disappointments and aspirations.

The novel itself has a similar modus operandi. It both shows the extent to which personal lives are shaped by larger political forces and demonstrates the inadequacy of viewing individuals through such prisms. Ghosh's success as a historical novelist owes much to the distinctiveness of each of his characters and his gift for contingent storytelling. These are underpinned by a mass of researched, specialist information, which brings a bygone era and vanished experiences to life through vividly realised detail. Along the way, and seemingly incidentally, we get a taxonomy of the various types of opium and their effects, a compellingly believable account of what life in both mid nineteenth-century Calcutta and its rural hinterland might have been like, and a welter of maritime detail. Ultimately, though, all of this is subordinate to the power of the story.

The novel's dialogue is as detailed and varied as its specialist detail. It includes 'pidgin' ('Malum Zikri one big piece pukka sahib now'), Paulette's Frenchified English ('he was quite boulevered'), an English that mimics particular Indian inflections ('So then must be true what everyone is telling') and a range of seafaring registers ('what'll you bet me that I can talk one o'em into pumping ship on t'other'). At times Ghosh's linguistic virtuosity runs the risk of descending into stereotyping – his nautical slang has a touch of the 'Shiver me timbers' about it – but his inventiveness as a storyteller and creator of characters persuades us to suspend any possible disbelief and simply relish the book's Babel of voices.

The seaboard sections rival those in Melville and Conrad, but the scenes ashore are equally gripping and one leaves this long page-turner wishing it could continue. One waits eagerly for its sequels. *Sea of Poppies* is a tremendous novel, and if Amitav Ghosh can sustain its brilliance in the two remaining parts, his 'Ibis' trilogy will surely come to be regarded as one of the masterpieces of twenty-first-century fiction.

To order this book at £15.19, see LR Bookshop on page 22



Ghosh: gripping