

Making the Sea: Aquatic Presence and the Materialization of the Maritime Mobility in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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Abstract

Migration studies increasingly recognizes the role of mobility infrastructures in shaping migratory experiences, yet less attention has been paid to the process through which a maritime regime of mobility is progressively materialized across different spatial stages. This article examines Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008) to explore this process through the concept of aquatic presence/absence. Framed by an interdisciplinary framework synthesizing migration studies and mobility studies, the article argues that the novel constructs the changing presence of the aquatic through the progressive materialization of a maritime regime of mobility. In the first part of the novel, Land, aquatic presence takes three modalities: aquatic vision, aquatic infrastructure, and aquatic operation. River, the second part, shows how the dispersed conditions of maritime mobility are transformed into actual organized movement. Riverine space becomes materially involved in the circulation of commodities and migrants, while the voyage becomes an early stage in the material realization of the emerging maritime regime through the colonial transportation of opium and indentured laborers. At the same time, riverine mobility begins to reorganize social relations by weakening terrestrial affiliations and creating conditions for new forms of collective association. The third part, Sea, reveals the completion of the maritime regime of mobility as the Ibis enters the open sea and crosses Kala Pani. This completion is demonstrated through the weakening of terrestrial belonging, the establishment of maritime sovereignty, and the physiological and temporal transformation of migrant bodies. Thus, Land, River, and Sea should not be understood as three separate forms of movement but as successive moments in the

formation of a single maritime regime of mobility. The contribution of the study lies, first, in extending mobility studies by showing how a mobility regime is progressively assembled through the articulation of infrastructure, circulation, spatial organization, governance, embodied practice, and temporality; and second, in demonstrating how literary narrative can make the historical and material formation of such a regime visible through its spatial organization. In this reading, aquatic presence/absence is not a simple binary but a changing condition produced through the materialization of mobility: the aquatic moves from imagined horizon to dispersed infrastructure, organized riverine circulation, and finally a fully operative maritime regime that transforms migrant existence.

Keywords: Indian Ocean, the Maritime Regime of Mobility, Mobility Studies, Migration Studies, *Sea of Poppies*.

Introduction

Intervening through a mobility lens, the present research argues that migration is shaped not only by migrants themselves but also by the infrastructures, technologies, and mobility regimes through which movement becomes possible. Within this context, the Indian Ocean occupies a particularly significant position as a historical space connecting trade, labor recruitment, and maritime mobility. Under the nineteenth-century imperial maritime regime of mobility, the ocean appears not merely as a geographical setting but as a material infrastructure of circulation that actively participates in historical and cultural formations.

Ghosh reconstructs nineteenth-century maritime circulation in relation to indentured migration not merely within the Indian Ocean world but also through its extension into inland spaces. *Sea of Poppies* narrates the materialization of maritime mobility through the interconnection of aquatic and non-aquatic spaces, gradually tracing how the conditions for oceanic movement are assembled before the migrants reach the sea. Existing scholarship on Ghosh's novel has productively examined diaspora, memory, identity, cosmopolitanism, and transnational community, while scholarship on maritime mobility has established the importance of circulation, infrastructure, and mobility systems. Yet these approaches tend to address maritime movement as an already constituted condition rather than examining how the material and institutional conditions

of maritime mobility are progressively assembled into a regime across different spatial stages of the narrative. Consequently, the relationship between the changing material presence of the aquatic and the progressive formation of a maritime mobility regime remains insufficiently examined. This study addresses this problem by tracing the formation of one maritime regime across the novel's movement from land through river to sea, rather than treating these spaces as separate settings or forms of movement. Its central intervention is to demonstrate that maritime mobility becomes progressively materialized through dispersed economic, infrastructural, riverine, and oceanic conditions, and that its completion produces corresponding transformations in migrant existence.

The synthetic framework of the study permits an interdisciplinary approach that brings literary mobility studies into dialogue with migration and maritime studies in order to examine how mobility is materially and socially organized within the fictional world. To do so, the concept of aquatic presence/absence is employed not as a binary distinction between the presence and absence of the sea, but as a means of tracing the changing material modalities through which the aquatic becomes progressively present in the novel. The study, therefore, examines how the aquatic moves from anticipation and infrastructural orientation on land, through materialized riverine circulation, to the fully operative maritime regime of the sea. Accordingly, the article asks, firstly, how *Sea of Poppies* constructs the changing presence of the aquatic through the progressive materialization of a maritime regime of mobility; secondly, how this regime is progressively constituted through the novel's movement from land through river to sea; and thirdly, what transformations in migrant existence accompany its completion as an autonomous maritime regime.

Literature Review

Scholarship on oceanic space has challenged the assumption that the sea becomes significant only when it is directly represented as geographical space. Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993) remains one of the foundational works for understanding the relationship between mobility, oceans, and cultural formation. Challenging nation-centered approaches to culture, Gilroy conceptualizes ships as "mobile elements" that

connect otherwise distant locations and create transoceanic social formations (17). For Gilroy, ships function as material means of circulation and as symbolic spaces where new collective identities emerge. Similarly, Steve Mentz (2020) demonstrates that changing technologies of movement - from sailing ships to modern transportation systems - have transformed the cultural prominence of oceanic mobility itself, revealing the historical contingency of aquatic experience and representation. This study examines in detail how a particular maritime mobility system is progressively assembled across different spatial and infrastructural conditions before reaching its fully operative oceanic form.

Mobility studies provides the central framework for shifting attention from movement itself toward the systems, relations, and practices that make movement possible. John Urry (2007) conceptualizes mobility through interconnected systems and infrastructures that organize the circulation of people, commodities, information, and capital. His approach is particularly useful for understanding mobility as dependent upon material and institutional arrangements rather than reducible to physical displacement. Tim Cresswell (2010) further distinguishes movement from mobility by conceptualizing mobility as socially produced motion embedded in relations of power, representation, and embodied experience. Mimi Sheller (2018) extends this relational understanding by bringing migration, infrastructure, borders, political subjectivity, and circulation into a common analytical field. Peter Adey (2017), meanwhile, demonstrates how mobilities transform the spaces through which they occur and emphasizes the bodily and temporal dimensions of mobile experience. Taken together, these approaches make it possible to conceptualize maritime mobility not simply as movement across water but as an organized configuration of infrastructure, circulation, spatial control, embodied practice, and temporal regulation. Yet these studies primarily examine mobility as a social and material system or as an embodied experience, rather than tracing how such a system is progressively constituted within a literary narrative across interconnected spatial stages. The present study builds on their insights by bringing these dimensions together to examine how *Sea of Poppies* represents the gradual materialization of a maritime mobility regime from land through river to sea.

Scholarship on Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* has extensively explored the social, cultural, and historical formations generated through the novel's maritime world. Binayak Roy (2016), for example, examines transnational space and the emergence of new forms of community aboard the Ibis, while Shao-Pin Luo (2013) reads the novel through vernacular cosmopolitanism and the linguistic interactions that enable new identities. Sabine Lauret (2011) approaches the novel through diaspora, globalization, and cultural hybridity, emphasizing the role of the Indian Ocean in the transformation of migrancy. Clare Anderson (2009) situates indentured migration within histories of transportation and emphasizes the rupture and dislocation produced by transportation, while Nandini Dhar (2017) foregrounds the limited choices available to indentured migrants within the material and epistemic violence of nineteenth-century imperial capitalism. More recent maritime scholarship has moved closer to the concern of the present study. Juan-José Martín-González (2021), for instance, explicitly examines the impact of maritime mobility on migrant protagonists and reads the Ibis as a space in which racial, caste, and cultural boundaries are transformed. Charne Lavery (2023) likewise approaches *Sea of Poppies* through historical oceanic mobility, focusing on the Indian Ocean world and the lascari language that emerges from maritime labor and movement.

These studies demonstrate the richness of existing scholarship on maritime movement in *Sea of Poppies*, but they approach the problem primarily through what maritime circulation produces: transnational community, cosmopolitan identity, linguistic exchange, cultural hybridity, migrant psychology, or diasporic formation. What remains less examined is how the conditions of maritime mobility themselves are progressively assembled within the novel. In particular, existing approaches tend to treat maritime mobility as an already operative condition once the characters encounter the ship or the ocean, rather than tracing its material formation across the novel's movement from land through river to sea. Such an approach also leaves underexamined the relationship between this progressive materialization and the changing presence of the aquatic. In *Sea of Poppies*, the sea is not simply absent before the characters reach it or present once they embark. Rather, its presence is progressively produced through agricultural production, colonial commerce, labor recruitment, riverine transportation, shipboard organization, and finally oceanic circulation. The present study therefore brings

scholarship on aquatic space, mobility studies, and *Sea of Poppies* into dialogue in order to examine how maritime mobility becomes a material regime within the novel and, in the process, transforms the changing presence of the aquatic from anticipation to infrastructure and ultimately to fully operative maritime space.

Theoretical Framework

To organize its conceptual core, this study benefits from literary mobility studies and migration theory and literature. As an interdisciplinary research, it synthesizes concepts from these fields to theorize a historical approach tracing the transformation of migratory mobility and experience. To do so, the concept of aquatic presence/absence is employed as a means through which the changing forms of a maritime regime of mobility—from the sea as an anticipated and imagined presence to its material and operative presence—is explored in Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*. However, this transition is not understood as a linear movement from terrestrial absence to oceanic presence. Rather, aquatic mobility operates through overlapping forms of presence and absence across land, river, and sea. In this sense, the article follows Tim Cresswell's understanding of mobility not as movement itself but as movement produced through historically specific relations of power (2010, 3). The ocean may be physically absent while remaining imaginatively, economically, and infrastructurally present; conversely, its material presence at sea does not replace earlier forms of attachment but reorganizes through mobility identities, memories, and social relations. Whereas maritime circulation signifies movement and connection, the maritime regime of mobility, in this study, is understood as a historically specific mode of existence organized around maritime movement, in which terrestrial identities, social relations, temporal rhythms, and forms of authority are suspended, reorganized, or selectively reactivated through the operational demands of the ship, until its decline is marked by the emergence of new terrestrial orders. Water in migration narratives functions not merely as symbolic scenery but as a historically contingent infrastructure through which empire, displacement, and mobility are materially organized. Cresswell's distinction between movement and mobility further clarifies this understanding. While movement refers to the abstract fact of displacement from one location to another, mobility emerges only when that movement is organized through

particular social relations, institutional arrangements, and structures of power (2010, 3). Following Cresswell (2010), mobility in this study is understood not simply as physical movement but as the interaction of movement, representation, and embodied practice. Maritime mobility in *Sea of Poppies*, therefore, refers simultaneously to the material circulation of people across aquatic space, the meanings through which that movement is understood, and the bodily and social experiences produced through participation in the maritime regime. Thus, maritime mobility in this study does not simply denote movement across water but the historically specific organization of movement through commercial networks, labor systems, environmental conditions, and colonial governance.

Building on this distinction, maritime modernity foregrounds the infrastructural role of the ocean in transforming movement into historically organized mobility through imperial circulation, colonial expansion, commercial traffic, and forced migration. Gilroy argues that ships throughout the nineteenth century functioned as “mobile elements” connecting shifting Atlantic spaces and should be “thought of as cultural and political units” rather than merely as symbols of oceanic trade (1993, 17). Such maritime infrastructures are historically specific formations of mobility. Taking a historical lens towards modern mobility systems, Urry argues that mobility systems are historically contingent formations (2007, 13), while the sailing ship became a dominant mobility technology throughout the nineteenth century. As “a place of unparalleled displacement” (Smallwood 2007, 37), the sailing ship, operating as a transit infrastructure for slavery and indentured migration, becomes a site of embodied oceanic passage. It functions as a mobile abode accommodating compressed bodies, recasting identities, putting displacement into motion, and generating modernity through violence (Mentz 2020, 37). Furthermore, in this study, maritime infrastructure is understood not merely as the physical apparatus of maritime movement—ships, ports, waterways, and navigation—but as the wider material, economic, institutional, and labor networks through which maritime circulation becomes possible and is organized. This infrastructure extends inland, connecting agricultural production, commercial systems, colonial administration, and labor recruitment to the movement of commodities and people across the sea. *Sea of Poppies* can therefore be read as tracing the uneven formation of a maritime regime whose presence exceeds the physical boundaries of the ocean. The maritime regime is

already embedded in inland agricultural, riverine, commercial, and colonial infrastructures before the oceanic passage begins. The organized mobility of people and commodities toward the ocean thus reveals the maritime not as a separate stage following terrestrial and riverine mobility, but as a historically expanding formation whose infrastructures, imaginaries, and disciplinary mechanisms reach into the hinterland and reorganize social life before, during, and beyond the oceanic voyage.

Methodologically speaking, this study examines how the maritime regime of mobility is progressively materialized across the movement from land through river to sea in *Sea of Poppies*, and how this process transforms the presence of the aquatic within the novel. To do so, it synthesizes concepts from mobility studies and migration studies to establish a conceptual foundation for examining mobility as a material, institutional, and embodied process rather than as movement between geographical locations. Rather than treating the sea primarily as a symbolic or representational space, the study approaches aquatic and non-aquatic spaces as interconnected sites through which the maritime regime of mobility is progressively organized. Accordingly, land, river, and sea are examined not as separate spatial settings but as successive stages in the formation of a maritime regime whose infrastructures, operational logics, and social relations extend across them. Through close reading of *Sea of Poppies*, the study traces how maritime mobility is anticipated and infrastructurally embedded on land, materially organized through riverine circulation, and finally concentrated and completed aboard the Ibis at sea. The analysis further examines how the completion of this regime transforms migrant existence through the reorganization of social belonging, maritime sovereignty, bodily experience, and temporal rhythms. In this way, close reading is used to demonstrate how the progressive materialization of maritime mobility simultaneously transforms the material and imaginative presence of the aquatic in the novel.

The Maritime Before the Sea: Anticipation, Infrastructure, and Mobility

Sea of Poppies (2008) is a literary narrative of nineteenth-century imperialism through the gradual establishment of a maritime regime of mobility in the Indian Ocean world. Through three parts Land, River, and Sea, the novel foregrounds the displacement of a diverse group of characters—indentured laborers, convicts, sailors, traders, and fugitives—by

tracing their converging movements from the Indian inland towards the Ibis, a sailing ship departing from Calcutta for Mauritius. As the narrative moves from land through the Ganges and towards Kala Pani (the Black Sea), the aquatic environment gradually shifts from an aquatic anticipation, to aquatic approach, and finally to aquatic presence; a process through which mobility is organized. The maritime infrastructure that emerges through this transition does not merely transport displaced bodies across the ocean but temporarily reorganizes their identities, social relations, temporal rhythms, and forms of authority. The Indian Ocean, therefore, operates not merely as the geographical setting of the novel but as the material medium through which a temporary maritime regime of mobility is established, transforming the lives and relations of those aboard the Ibis and leaving its effects beyond the duration of the voyage.

In the beginning of *Sea of Poppies*, the aquatic is present as a vision although the narrative unfolds entirely within inland space. Ghosh introduces the maritime regime as an anticipated horizon whose first manifestation is imaginative rather than material. The narrator observes, “The vision of a tall-masted ship, at sail on the ocean, came to Deeti on an otherwise ordinary day, but she knew instantly that the apparition was a sign of destiny, for she had never seen such a vessel before, not even in a dream” (Ghosh 2008, 3). Geographically absent from Deeti’s immediate world, the sea already exists in her imagination as an unknown destination and a space into which the narrative will eventually move. Invoking maritime mobility, the vision of the Ibis destines the birth of a new life in sharp contrast with the terrestrial life Deeti is living. Later on when for the first time she encounters the Ibis in reality, Deeti comes to know “why the image of the vessel had been revealed to her that day [...]: it was because her new self, her new life, had been gestating all this while in the belly of this creature” (Ghosh 2008, 348). No longer functioning merely as transportation, the Ibis becomes a womb through which she is born into the world of diaspora. The maritime mobility is already producing identity while still remaining materially absent. The significance of this vision lies precisely in the fact that it precedes every actual act of movement. Before Deeti sees the ocean, before she encounters the Ibis, and before any physical displacement takes place, the ship already reorients her future. As Hana Teichler observes, the apparition promises mobility by offering Deeti an escape from the fate awaiting her on land and the possibility of beginning

another life among the indentured migrants (2024, 842). Yet the vision does more than anticipate geographical movement. As Isabel Hofmeyr (2007) argues, oceans should be understood not merely as geographical expanses but as spaces in which histories, futures, and human relations are imagined across movement. Read in this light, Deeti's vision establishes the maritime regime as a future-oriented condition of becoming whose first presence is imaginative rather than spatial. The ocean is therefore not simply postponed until the voyage begins; it enters the novel as an anticipated aquatic presence whose imaginative force begins transforming migrant subjectivity while it is still geographically absent. In this sense, the maritime regime first appears not as a condition of movement but as a condition of anticipation, in which the imagined possibility of oceanic mobility begins reorganizing the migrant's horizon of existence before the first physical step toward the sea has been taken.

If Deeti's anticipation of maritime mobility reveals the first modality of aquatic presence, the second modality emerges through the inland infrastructures that already organize maritime circulation. Here, the sea is absent as geography, yet materially present through colonial systems of production, administration, and labor recruitment that orient the village toward oceanic commerce. In the first part of *Sea of Poppies*, the maritime regime already operates through inland infrastructures that reorganize agriculture, labor, commerce, and colonial administration. Immediately after the scene of Deeti's vision, Ghosh shifts the setting to the landscape of poppy fields which already are an infrastructure of oceanic circulation. Through a description of the beauty of the fields of poppy cultivation surrounding Ganges as "twin glaciers, both its banks being blanketed by thick drifts of white-petalled flowers" (Ghosh 2008, 3), the reader gradually understands that these fields are not natural scenery but colonial production, revealing how the rural world is already reorganized by imperial commerce. The opening description deliberately aestheticizes the landscape before revealing its economic function. The poppy fields initially appear as part of the natural rhythm of the Gangetic plain, yet this pastoral image conceals a highly regulated colonial economy. Ghosh thus stages the maritime regime through an apparent absence: the ocean remains invisible, but its commercial logic has already transformed the ecology and temporality of rural life. Deeti's life, like other villagers, is dependent on the opium she grows on the farm and

sells it to Sudder Opium Factory. The imperial opium factory forces the villagers to only cultivate opium. "Come the cold weather, the English sahibs would allow little else to be planted; their agents would go from home to home, forcing cash advances on the farmers, making them sign asdmi contracts" (Ghosh 2008, 28-29). Indicating the infrastructural presence of the maritime regime, the factory is "so situated as to have easy access to the river" (Ghosh 2008, 88). Having been processed and packed in the opium factory, "thus would the drug travel the seas" to be sold in "distant Maha-Chin" (Ghosh 2008, 95).

The same infrastructure that moves commodities across the Indian Ocean also organizes the circulation of labor. As the opium economy creates imperial commercial routes, plantation capitalism simultaneously generates a demand for mobile workers capable of sustaining those colonial enterprises. On her way from Baltimore to Calcutta, the *Ibis* stops at Mauritius where Zachary meets the plantation owner who gives Zachary a letter requesting for new workers on plantation farms. He says, "Tell Mr Burnham that I need men. Now that we may no longer have slaves in Mauritius, I must have coolies, or I am doomed" (Ghosh 2008, 95). In response to request for coolies, Mr Burnham makes the *Ibis* prepared for the transference of indentured workers to Mauritius. The maritime regime circulates not only bodies but also the economic demands, information, and administrative decisions that organize their movement. González argues that the novel situates opium production and indenture within a transoceanic framework in which inland colonial economies are inseparable from oceanic circulation (2021). This supports reading the Ghazipur poppy fields not merely as agricultural landscapes but as inland nodes of a maritime infrastructure extending from the Ganges to the Indian Ocean. Maritime circulation becomes materially present inland through colonial infrastructures of production, labour recruitment, and commercial administration, long before the migrants encounter the sea physically. As John Urry argues, mobilities should be understood as "economic, social and political practices, infrastructures and ideologies that all involve, entail or curtail various kinds of movement" (2007, 18). Read in this light, the poppy fields, the opium factory, and the recruitment of indentured laborers are not merely background conditions for maritime movement but integral components of the mobility system itself. The ocean is therefore materially present long before the narrative reaches the shoreline

because its infrastructures have already reorganized inland production, labor, and colonial administration.

Ghosh complicates aquatic presence in the first part of *Sea of Poppies*, Land, through a third modality of aquatic presence. Whereas Deeti encounters the ocean as an imagined future, Zachary enters the narrative as a subject whose identity has already been produced through maritime circulation. His knowledge about the historical transformation of maritime capitalism extends when he is informed of the history of the Ibis. “One thing Zachary did know about the Ibis was that she had been built to serve as a ‘blackbirder’, for transporting slaves [...] As with many another slave-ship, the schooner’s new owner had acquired her [...] for the export of opium” (Ghosh 2008, 11). Before Zachary himself becomes mobile, the novel presents the Ibis as a historical archive of imperial circulation. The vessel carries within its material history successive regimes of forced mobility—from the Atlantic slave trade to the opium economy of the Indian Ocean. The changing history of the Ibis exemplifies what Peter Adey describes as the “multifaceted and incredibly contingent” politics of mobility (2017, 166), in which movement is continually reorganized through shifting political and economic configurations rather than functioning as a neutral act of transportation. Besides, Zachary’s work on the board of the Ibis moves him from Baltimore to Patagonia, Cape of Good Hope, and Calcutta. “By the time the Ibis dropped anchor at the mouth of the Hooghly River, eleven months had passed since her departure from Baltimore” (Ghosh 2008, 24). Although the novel begins geographically on Indian land, Zachary arrives already shaped by Atlantic mobility, Cape route, and the Indian Ocean. Thus the maritime precedes the narrative’s apparent beginning.

As a further evidence indicating the operational function of the maritime mobility in the terrestrial part of the novel, Zachary’s promotion as crew member of the Ibis is revealing. The narrator explains that “in the course of a single voyage [...] he vaulted from the merest novice sailor [...] from carpenter to second-in-command” (Ghosh 2008, 15). His promotion demands to learn the Indian Ocean’s board language: “The rigging became the ‘ringeen’, ‘avast!’ was ‘bas!’, and the cry of the middle-morning watch went from ‘all’s well’ to ‘alzbel’”. The deck now became the ‘tootuk’ while the masts were ‘dols’ a command

became a 'hookum' and instead of starboard and larboard, fore and aft, he had to say 'jamna' and 'dawa', 'agil' and 'pee chil'" (Ghosh 2008, 15). His linguistic education aboard the Ibis exemplifies Shao-Pin Luo's argument that the vernacular cosmopolitanism of the Ibis becomes "an agency for transformation" (2013, 390). Oceanic mobility transforms Zachary not simply by transporting him across oceans but by reconstituting his social position and shipboard vocabulary. Maritime movement is therefore revealed as a productive regime rather than a neutral means of transportation.

Riverine Mobility Becoming Maritime

Having established that the maritime regime is already anticipated, infrastructurally embedded, and globally operative before the migrants reach the sea, the novel proceeds to demonstrate its social consequences. Maritime mobility does not merely transport people across aquatic space; it interlinks imperial commerce, labor, governance, and social organization through an integrated regime of circulation. In this sense, the Ibis voyage is not just sailing across river, anchoring at ports, moving through Kala Pani and the Indian Ocean to disembark indentured migrant in Mauritius, but it functions as a mobile node in an imperial economic system. The novel shows how maritime mobility, slavery, and opium trade are interdependent to remain effective and profitable respectively. In fact, Ibis "had been built to serve as a 'blackbirder', for transporting slaves" (Ghosh 2008, 11); with abolishing slavery, "the schooner's new owner had acquired her with an eye to fitting her for a different trade: the export of opium" (11). Urry explains, "Systems make possible movement: they provide 'spaces of anticipation' that the journey can be made, that the message will get through, that the parcel will arrive (2007, 13).

The shift from the slave trade to the opium economy reconfigures the function, personnel, and routes of the Ibis while preserving its role as an instrument of imperial circulation. Aquatic presence is not confined to the sea itself but includes the riverine networks through which colonial mobility operates. The scene of opium fleet, commanded by two Englishmen, sailing along the Ganges exposes how maritime mobility reorganizes the material conditions of the shore:

Despite the line of guards around the ghat, a crowd soon assembled to gape at the fleet, their attention being drawn particularly to the two largest patelis. [...].

From time to time, prodded by lathis and spears, the crowd would be forced to part, clearing a path for those of the local zemindars and notabilities who wished to offer their salams to the two young assistants. Some were sent away without being granted an audience, but a few were accorded a brief reception, on board. (Ghosh 2008, 218)

The fleet does not simply arrive at the shore; it reorganizes the social relations that become possible around it. As soon as the opium fleet arrives a new political and social hierarchy is established around the shore. Mobility systems are not neutral channels of movement. They create social orders, power relations, and forms of visibility. The opium economy is not a background context but an active mobility engine. *Sea of Poppies* shows how “the English sahibs” compel the rural farmers to grow poppies, allowing “little else to be planted” (Ghosh 2008, 29). Accordingly, the opium trade generates recruitment networks for indentured labor and links inland India to global maritime routes. Hence, commodity circulation, labor circulation, and maritime circulation become inseparable in shaping the social relations that emerge within the maritime mobility regime.

Unlike the first part of *Sea of Poppies*, where the maritime regime exists primarily as anticipation and infrastructure extending toward the sea, in the second part, River, voyage becomes the early stage of material realization of the emerging maritime regime of mobility. As Cresswell argues, movement becomes mobility only when displacement is understood within “contexts of power” rather than as the abstract act of moving from one location to another (2010, 3). The pulwar illustrates precisely this transition. The migrants are no longer simply moving along the Ganges; their movement is reorganized through labor, surveillance, confinement, and hierarchical control. The pulwar does not simply transport migrants along the Ganges. It materializes the maritime regime by transforming movement into an organized system of labor, confinement, hierarchy, and emerging social relations. The maritime regime is no longer anticipated, rather, it becomes materially operative. At first, maritime mobility emerges through its dependence on environmental forces. “The migrants had been on the Ganga only a few days when the monsoons came sweeping up the river and deluged them with a thunderous downpour [...] When the winds died and the showers stopped, the vessel would make use of its

complement of twenty long-handled oars, the manpower being supplied by the migrants themselves” (Ghosh 2008, 227). Here, the river is already functioning as a maritime infrastructure through which the migrants are being incorporated into a system of organized circulation. The use of migrants as manpower for rowing reveals how their bodies become part of the infrastructure that moves them. Besides, the pulwar reveals that the logic of the maritime regime is already being enacted within riverine mobility: “only the oarsmen, the crew and the overseers were allowed on deck—everyone else was expected to remain in the hold below” (Ghosh 2008, 227). There is here a spatial organization that will become even more consequential on the Ibis: mobility is accompanied by differentiated access to space. Those who control movement occupy the deck and those who are being moved are confined below; creating a temporary hierarchy of movement, control, visibility, and confinement.

A further function of the maritime regime of mobility is shown in operation when the hold is described “like a floating storage shed” (Ghosh 2008, 227), turning the vessel into a space where migrant bodies are reorganized according to the requirements of circulation. Deeti's entrance into the hold, as her first experience of maritime movement, sharply contrasts with her aquatic vision at the outset of the novel. She does not encounter the river first, rather, she encounters the human space produced by riverine mobility: “When her eyes had grown accustomed to the gloom [of the hold], she saw that she had descended into the middle of a packed assembly: several dozen men were gathered around her, some squatting on their haunches, some lying curled on mats, and some sitting with their backs against the hull” (Ghosh 2008, 228). The transition from aquatic absence to aquatic presence does not entail a simple movement from imagination to direct perception. As Deeti enters the riverine mobility system, water becomes materially present through a vessel whose internal organization simultaneously conceals and is regulated by the aquatic environment. Instead of functioning as a passive setting, the river becomes materially present through the spatial organization of the vessel itself, supporting Steinberg and Peters' (2015) understanding of aquatic environments as dynamic spaces produced through movement, material practice, and social relations rather than merely geographical location. Accordingly, Deeti encounters the river not as a geographical location but as a lived mobility. In Cresswell's formulation, mobility

functions as the “dynamic equivalent of place”, a meaningful spatial experience rather than an abstract movement between locations (2010, 3–4). The river therefore becomes present through the embodied conditions of the voyage rather than through scenic description. The maritime regime does not begin when the Ibis enters the ocean. Its infrastructures and organizing logics are already distributed across inland and riverine spaces. What the oceanic passage aboard the Ibis does is not simply initiate maritime mobility but concentrate, intensify, and transform these dispersed infrastructures into a distinct temporary mode of existence.

The most profound consequence of this expanding maritime regime is not geographical movement but social reorganization. Having already reshaped agricultural production and colonial labor networks inland, maritime mobility proceeds to dismantle the terrestrial structures of caste, village, and kinship that regulate everyday life. In *Sea of Poppies*, the maritime regime of mobility and its effects are not confined to the Indian Ocean’s littorals, rather it extends to the inlands to initiate movement. The novel deliberately begins before embarkation in order to show that maritime mobility starts on land. The migrant characters are depicted in their terrestrial communities where the rules of caste, class, and religion are firmly established: Deeti is a high-caste rural woman, Kalua an untouchable, Neel a Raja, and Paulette a French. Aboard the Ibis, anchored at the final point from which the native shore remains visible, the migrants are driven into provocations since their land social structure is collapsing: “In their villages they would have had relatives, friends, and neighbors to step between them, but here there were no elders to settle disputes, and no tribes of kinsfolk to hold a man back from going for another’s throat” (Ghosh 2008, 387). As an effect of mobility, the ship becomes what Homi Bhabha calls an ‘intervening space’ (1996, 198), a liminal site in which established cultural formations are suspended without being entirely erased. Disconnected with the territorial and social structures that regulate life on land, the migrants aboard the Ibis find inherited affiliations of caste, village, and kinship progressively destabilized while new, contingent forms of association begin to emerge. Maritime mobility therefore operates not merely as geographical movement but as a process of social reconfiguration, dismantling inherited forms of organization and creating the conditions for new collective identities.

Maritime mobility regime does not merely move people across non-aquatic and aquatic spaces, it places them within a shared movement and confinement creating new affiliations. In *Sea of Poppies*, the social vacuum produced through maritime mobility by weakening the land-based social relations is filled with a new formation of relations informed with maritime circulation. “From now on, and forever afterwards, we will all be ship-siblings—*jahdzbhais* and *jahaxbahens*—to each other. There’ll be no differences between us” (Ghosh 2008, 348). While Ghosh’s scholarship has paid critical attention to the various possible interpretations of this line as diasporic kinship (Mishra 1996), vernacular cosmopolitanism (Luo 2013), affective community formed in a transnational space (Roy 2016), they pay less attention to the mobility regime that makes such relations possible in the first place. These studies explain what Jahaji kinship is; this study explains how maritime mobility makes it possible. In fact, shared mobility itself becomes the basis of kinship. Recent scholarship has also questioned the tendency to romanticize the Ibis as a socially egalitarian community. Focusing on Jodu’s perspective, Kashyap and Medhi (2021) argue that the ship reproduces many of the hierarchical divisions that characterize terrestrial society and should therefore be understood as a “miniature version” of the colonial world rather than as a utopian alternative. Such a reading does not contradict the present argument. Rather, it confirms that maritime mobility reorganizes social relations without necessarily abolishing existing structures of authority. The mobility regime produces new forms of collective affiliation while simultaneously preserving, modifying, and redistributing relations of power. In other words, in the hold of the Ibis village kinship loses its organizing authority while maritime kinship gradually emerges as an alternative basis of social affiliation. In this sense, maritime mobility acquires a subversive dimension. Discussing the political implications of mobile formations, Urry observes that mobility systems may generate alternative social relations that evade or challenge dominant structures of governance (Sheller 2018, 43). Within the confined yet mobile space of the Ibis, caste distinctions and village-based identities are partially suspended, allowing new relations and solidarities to emerge through shared movement and confinement. Hence, it is through the same maritime reconfiguration of social relations that the marriage ceremony of Deeti (a high-caste woman) and Kalua (an untouchable) is made possible; the union would have been impossible within the terrestrial caste order. Yet the expanding

maritime regime reorganizes not only colonial economy but also the social relations through which everyday life is lived. Furthermore, the migrants' collective ceremonies, prayers, songs, and shared participation in ritual life reinforce the emerging maritime kinship. Maritime mobility, therefore, operates negatively before it operates positively: it first weakens inherited social structures and only afterwards enables the partial emergence of new collective affiliations.

The Maritime Regime Becoming Oceanic

As historians of Indian Ocean migration have observed, Kala Pani has long been understood in South Asian cultural memory as more than a sea crossing. It signifies a profound physical and spiritual dislocation, involving the suspension of former attachments and the loss of established forms of belonging (Bates and Carter 2021, 55). At the same time, they argue that the literary representation of Kala Pani increasingly transforms this negative rupture into the possibility of a new social existence, where the loss of caste and territorial belonging paradoxically creates the conditions for new forms of identity and affiliation (55–56). Ghosh mobilizes precisely this historical and cultural significance at the moment the Ibis enters the open sea. When the Ibis crosses Kala Pani, it does not initiate maritime mobility; rather, the crossing completes the maritime regime of mobility that has been progressively assembled across land and river. Once the Ibis enters the open sea, terrestrial authorities—including caste, village, kinship, and territorial law—have already begun to dissolve, while the ship starts to function as an autonomous mobility regime governed by its own operational, social, and institutional logic. Agitated by the sudden movement of the vessel, the girmitiyas rush to get out of the locked dabusa. At this moment, Neel despairingly shouts at them, “There is no escape, no turning back” (Ghosh 2008, 362). “Now the migrants began to absorb the finality of what was under way: yes, they were moving, they were afloat, heading towards the void of the Black Water; neither death nor birth was as fearsome a passage as this, neither being experienced in full consciousness” (Ghosh 2008, 362-63). Neel’s statement indicates the existential reality of crossing Kala Pani where terrestrial belonging collapses. From the perspective of literary mobility studies, this scene demonstrates that maritime mobility is not simply transportation across an aquatic space but a regime of irreversible

transformation. The crossing reorganizes identity, social belonging, religious practice, and temporal consciousness simultaneously. The Ibis becomes the material infrastructure through which maritime mobility converts terrestrial subjects into migrants entering into the diasporic world.

If Kala Pani completes the maritime regime of mobility, what does govern life once terrestrial authority has been left behind? Maritime sovereignty, to answer briefly. The Ibis ceases to be merely a vehicle of transportation and begins to operate as an autonomous regime governed by its own institutional logic. Migrants' movements on board are now regulated through maritime discipline, surveillance, spatial organization, and operational authority rather than by the social structures of the land. As Renisa Mawani argues, once ships lost sight of land, they became "highly structured through law and time," where captains maintained order through "the law of the sea," transforming vessels into "colonial-legal laboratories" in which "rules of order, and regimes of violence were projected, implemented, disputed, and eventually extended to land" (2018, 22). Ghosh dramatizes precisely this transformation in *Sea of Poppies*. The novel introduces this transformation immediately after the crossing into the open sea. The girmitiyas are no longer permitted to move freely according to their own needs or desires; every movement is reorganized according to the operational requirements of the voyage. As the Ibis anchors near Hooghly Point for the night, "Not till darkness had swallowed the surrounding banks were the girmitiyas allowed on deck; until then the gratings of the hatchway were kept firmly closed" (Ghosh 2008, 363). Their access to the deck is therefore determined not by personal choice but by the calculations of the vessel's officers, who fear that "the shore might present an irresistible temptation" (Ghosh 2008, 363). Even after darkness falls, surveillance remains constant. The maistries "did not relax their vigilance", every migrant is kept "under watch", and even those assigned to prepare food are "kept under guard" (Ghosh 2008, 363–64). The migrants are allowed on deck only in small groups before being "herded back into the dabusa" as soon as their meal is finished (Ghosh 2008, 364). Mobility, therefore, is not suspended aboard the Ibis; it is continuously regulated. The completed maritime regime governs not only where the migrants travel but also when they move, where they may appear, and how long they may remain visible within the ship's spatial order.

Maritime sovereignty culminates when Captain Chillingworth summons all the girmityas onto the deck of the Ibis to announce the establishment of maritime governance. Standing on the quarter-deck while the migrants are enclosed below him by “a ring of lascars, maistries and silahdars” (Ghosh 2008, 392), the Captain publicly declares the transition from terrestrial to maritime sovereignty: “The difference is that the laws of the land have no hold on the water. At sea there is another law, and you should know that on this vessel I am its sole maker” (Ghosh 2008, 393). Kala Pani is thus no longer presented merely as a geographical crossing but as a juridical threshold. The passage explicitly contrasts two sovereign orders: the authority of the land ends where the authority of the sea begins. The Captain’s announcement that “I am your fate, your providence, your lawgiver” (Ghosh 2008, 393) transforms the Ibis into a self-contained political space whose legitimacy no longer derives from territorial jurisdiction but from maritime command. Significantly, he does not abolish hierarchy but reconstructs it within the ship itself, appointing Subedar Bhyro Singh as the migrants’ “mai-bāp” while presenting himself as the ultimate source of authority (Ghosh 2008, 393). As Preet Aulakh observes, Captain Chillingworth’s proclamation does not simply replace the law of the land with the law of the sea. Rather, it recreates maritime authority through the very hierarchical structures that had governed terrestrial society, particularly by requiring the migrants to obey Subedar Bhyro Singh “as they would their own zemindars”, thereby exposing the collusion between colonial and customary forms of authority (Aulakh 2019, 18). Yet, the significance of this scene extends beyond the continuity of legal hierarchies. What changes is the jurisdiction within which these hierarchies now operate. Their authority is no longer guaranteed by village, caste, or territory, but by the autonomous maritime regime that the Captain explicitly declares aboard the Ibis. The ship therefore does not simply reproduce terrestrial authority; it reorganizes it within a new sovereign order constituted through maritime mobility. The noose and the whip become the visible instruments through which this new sovereignty is enforced, while obedience is redefined as the fundamental condition of life at sea. As Paulette realizes, the migrants are not merely leaving India; “they were entering a state of existence in which their waking hours would be ruled by the noose and the whip” (Ghosh 2008, 394). The completion of the

maritime regime therefore coincides with the explicit articulation of a new sovereign order whose jurisdiction is defined not by territory but by mobility itself.

Physiologically speaking, the completion of the maritime regime of mobility begins to unsettle territorial embodiment. The migrants cannot simply carry their land-based bodily experience into the ocean; their bodies have to adapt, submit, and transform. That is, the maritime regime operates corporeally. The embodied maritime mobility on the *Ibis* becomes felt when she “ran into swells and gusts that set her to a frolicsome pitching” (Ghosh 2008, 396). Consequently, many of the migrants are “reduced to a state of infantile helplessness [...] As the vessel plunged and climbed, more and more of the migrants lost the use of their legs, emptying their stomachs where they lay” (Ghosh 2008, 396). Unlike the river, which transported migrants through familiar landscapes while preserving recognizable rhythms of life, the sea immediately attacks the body. The narrative emphasizes that “many were reduced to a state of infantile helplessness” (Ghosh 2008, 396), suggesting a regression from adult autonomy to complete dependency. The migrants lose control over the most basic bodily functions—standing, eating, vomiting, and even breathing safely. The sea equalizes not through law or ideology but through the body’s universal vulnerability. Hierarchies of caste, gender, and village become temporarily irrelevant before the overwhelming materiality of motion. This bodily disruption can be understood through Adey’s phenomenological account of mobility, in which the mobile body becomes “direct intermediary between subject and world” (2017, 177). Therefore, mobility is experienced before it becomes an object of conscious reflection. The migrants’ seasickness represents precisely such a precognitive encounter with the maritime environment: before the sea can become a familiar space of movement, it is registered through the body’s loss of balance, control, and bodily autonomy.

The completion of the maritime regime is marked also by the internalization of maritime temporality within the body. In fact, maritime mobility reaches its fullest realization when the body’s own rhythms become synchronized with the temporal organization of the ship. The narrator, in *Sea of Poppies*, describes the internalization of maritime temporality in Zachary’s body thus:

For Zachary, the single most disorienting aspect of life at sea was the peculiar cycle of sleep that resulted from the unvarying rhythm of watch-on-watch. With four hours on and four hours off—except for the dogwatches of dawn and dusk—he often found that he had to rouse himself exactly when he was sleeping most soundly. [...] While asleep, his hearing would shut out any noise that might disturb or distract—shouts and hookums, the sea and the wind. Yet, his ears would still keep count of the chimes of the ship's bell, so that even in his deepest slumber, he was never unaware of how much time was left before his next spell on deck. (Ghosh 2008, 466-67).

The ship does not simply determine where Zachary moves. It determines also when he work, rests, wakes, and sleeps. So, maritime mobility has become a temporal regime. The ship's operational time does not accommodate the body's natural or accustomed rhythm. There is a conflict between bodily time and ship time. In other words, if Kala Pani disrupts territorial belonging, watch-on-watch disrupts terrestrial/bodily temporality. The maritime regime progressively detaches the migrant from the rhythms associated with life on land. In "his deepest slumbers", Zachary's body remains synchronized with the ship time and aware of "his next spell on deck" (Ghosh 2008, 467). The maritime temporality has been so deeply internalized in him that it extends its function into his sleep time so that "his ears would still keep count of the chimes of the ship's bell" (Ghosh 2008, 467). Hence, maritime temporality is not simply the chronological organization of shipboard life. It becomes embodied through repeated exposure to the operational rhythms of maritime mobility. Adey's discussion of mobility through Bourdieu's notion of habitus help conceptualize this process. As Adey explains bodily practices can become internalized through repetition, forming dispositions that regulate bodily movement and practice without requiring conscious direction (2017, 180). Zachary's experience illustrates such a transformation. The watch-on-watch system is initially imposed upon him as an external organization of shipboard labor and time; through repetition, however, its rhythms become incorporated into his bodily disposition. His body learns to sleep, wake, and anticipate movement according to the temporal demands of the vessel. Most significantly, his ears continue to count the ship's bells even when consciousness has withdrawn into sleep. Maritime temporality has therefore moved from an external institutional schedule to an

embodied temporal disposition. The maritime regime, in this sense, does not merely organize the migrant's movement through space; it gradually reorganizes the bodily rhythms through which that movement is experienced.

Conclusion

Ghosh's treatment of the aquatic goes beyond the binary of presence and absence, complicating the concept through a process in which the aquatic moves from anticipation and infrastructural presence to the full materialization of the maritime regime of mobility throughout *Sea of Poppies*. The first part of the novel, *Land*, represents the aquatic paradoxically as both absent and present. Ghosh introduces the maritime regime as an anticipated horizon whose first manifestation is imaginative rather than material. Meanwhile, a second modality of the aquatic emerges through the inland infrastructures that already organize maritime circulation. Here, the sea is absent as geography yet materially present through colonial systems of production, administration, and labour recruitment that orient the village toward oceanic commerce. A further complication of the concept occurs through a third modality of aquatic presence. Zachary's transoceanic trajectory finally exposes the aquatic in its fully operative form, as a global mobility system connecting the Atlantic, the Cape route, and the Indian Ocean. In the second part of the novel, *River*, these dispersed conditions of maritime mobility are transformed into actual organized movement. Riverine space becomes materially involved in the circulation of commodities and migrants, while the voyage becomes an early stage in the material realization of the emerging maritime regime through the colonial transportation of opium and indentured labourers. At the same time, riverine mobility begins to reorganize social relations by weakening terrestrial affiliations and creating the conditions for new forms of collective association. In the concluding part of the novel, *Sea*, the maritime mobility becomes fully materialized as an autonomous regime. When the Ibis crosses Kala Pani, it does not initiate maritime mobility; rather, the crossing completes the maritime regime of mobility that has been progressively assembled across land and river. This completion is demonstrated through the collapse of terrestrial belonging, the establishment of maritime sovereignty, and the physiological transformation of migrant bodies. Thus, *Land*, *River*, and *Sea* should not be understood as three separate stages or forms of movement,

but as successive moments in the formation of a single maritime regime: Land establishes its dispersed economic, agricultural, labour, and infrastructural conditions; River transforms these conditions into organized movement; and Sea concentrates and completes them aboard the Ibis. The progression from land through river to sea, therefore, gives the novel a historical and material logic of mobility in which the aquatic gradually changes from an anticipated horizon and dispersed infrastructure into a fully operative regime that reorganizes the migrants' social and embodied existence.

The changing presence of the aquatic is inseparable from the changing organization of maritime mobility. The ocean becomes fully present not simply because the characters reach it, but because the material, institutional, social, corporeal, and temporal conditions necessary for maritime mobility have been progressively assembled into a regime. In this respect, the article contributes to mobility studies by shifting attention from mobility as movement within an already constituted system to the processes through which such a system is materially and socially formed. *Sea of Poppies* demonstrates that mobility does not begin at the moment of embarkation or with the crossing of an oceanic threshold; rather, it is produced through the gradual articulation of infrastructures, routes, labour systems, vessels, regulatory practices, bodily adaptations, and temporal rhythms. Land, river, and sea are, thus, not successive spaces through which an already existing mobility simply passes, but interconnected stages in the formation and consolidation of a maritime mobility regime. This article's contribution to literary mobility studies lies in showing how this progressive materialization can become a principle of literary representation: Ghosh's narrative makes the formation of maritime mobility historically and materially visible by allowing its conditions to emerge gradually across the novel's spatial and narrative progression. Therefore, mobility becomes not merely the subject represented by the novel but a structuring process through which the changing presence of the aquatic, the transformation of migrant existence, and the historical organization of imperial circulation become intelligible.

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