

Wondering and Wandering Through Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

Co-Creating Ourselves in a Literary Niche

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['Postcolonial'] completely misrepresents the focus of the work I do.. Colonialism is not what interests me. ... I don't see myself as political...and I don't think it's particularly interesting to write about politics.... I find it hard to read contemporary fiction. ... [T]he relationship between the writer and the public has become, especially in postmodern writing, very, very distanced. ... I find myself listening for that other form of address, that intimacy which writing creates. That form of [rhetorical] communion [between writer and reader].

—Amitav Ghosh, *Interview with Neluka Silva and Alex Tickell*, Kunapipi

How does reading fiction affect our brains? Paul Armstrong, a literary scholar and neuroscientist, delineates a dynamic, intersubjective, neurophenomenological model for understanding how narrative enlivens stories in the brain. He describes reading as a reciprocal, mutually formative process of interacting marked by a perpetual (re)turn to the text, world, and individual.¹ G. Gabrielle Starr, another literary scholar and neuroscientist, exemplifies this recursive process in a situated model of reading. Drawing from the field of psychology, Starr depicts the brain as a “landscape,” or niche environment, with salient, open-ended properties, or *affordances*, that (re)constitute the cognitive

¹ Paul Armstrong, *How Literature Plays with the Brain* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 130.

ecosystem.² Central to the conception of affordance is the understanding that organisms are (re)created by the world in which they live; therefore, an affordance is “both physical and psychical, yet neither. ... It is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behavior... [it] points both ways.”³ In simplest terms, a niche is “a set of affordances.”⁴ Starr extends this definition to fiction. When literary conventions, seeded in narration, imagery, and metaphor, are reconceptualized as affordances, inside a storyworld, what was once “static” and “constraining” emerges as an open, co-creative process that stimulates interactions between the reader and text.⁵ For example, a “sharp drop” conveys fear and injury to readers through imagery and metaphor, whereas a caesura in a poem or a comma in a phrase affords readers a breath and a moment to reflect.⁶

Literature also presents readers with opportunities to traverse lived and imaginary worlds. According to Amitav Ghosh, author and anthropologist, historical fiction can be an effective “mode of inquiry” because the “capaciousness of a novel” is suited to “recreating the roundedness of experience.”⁷ Although Ghosh is most often identified as a postcolonial and postmodern writer, the author rejects these characterizations.⁸ He sees his task as “addressing questions of emotions and affect...intimacy and the individual...through the eyes of [his] characters...as faithfully as possible.”⁹ Conjoining literary theory and neuroscientific research, I will explore what Ghosh believes is overlooked and fundamental to his oeuvre: “forming a rhetorical communion” with literary affordances that mediate (inter)actions between the reader and the text.¹⁰ To do so, I will interpret passages from Ghosh’s novel, *Sea of Poppies*, set in the 1830s prior to the First Opium War, which

² G. Gabrielle Starr, “Cognitive Literary Criticism” in *A Companion to Literary Theory* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2018), 409.

³ James J. Gibson, *Ecological Approach to Visual Perception: Classic Edition* (New York: Psychology Press, 2014), 121.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁵ Paul Armstrong, *Stories and the Brain: The Neuroscience of Narrative* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), 42.

⁶ Starr, “Cognitive Literary Criticism,” 409.

⁷ Amitav Ghosh, “Storytelling and the Spectrum of the Past” in *The American Historical Review* 121, no. 5 (2016): 1556, 1557.

⁸ Nekula Silva and Alex Tickell, “Amitav Ghosh in an Interview with Nekula Silva and Alex Tickell” in *Kunapipi* 19, no. 3 (1997): 171, 177.

⁹ Ghosh, “Storytelling,” 1559-60.

¹⁰ Silva, “Interview,” 177.

voices the stories of marginalized characters sailing from Calcutta to Mauritius on a decommissioned slave ship. Examining modes of narration, sensory imagery, and metaphor, I argue that these literary affordances (re)make reading into a co-creative process which binds the reader to the text through embodied response and exchange of meaning. Echoing Starr and Ghosh, the complementary relationship between the reader and the storyworld is paramount and cannot be denied.

Modes of Narration

I feel a very deep sense of connection and gratitude [to Bengali writers].... To me, the novel is important because it's such a complete form of utterance. It allows you to represent your utterance in all its nuances, in all its representative possibilities, in all its expressive possibilities in a way that nothing else can.

—Amitav Ghosh, *Interview with Zanganeh Lila Azam, Guernica*

Quite unexpectedly, within minutes of cracking open *Sea of Poppies*, I was compelled to download an audio version and set off on an audible journey. I felt as if I were in Mr. Ghosh's classroom listening to a polyphony of voices in a storytelling circle. As a teacher, I frequently observe young children moving between actual worlds and storyworlds during read-alouds. By the second page, they are squealing with delight, blurting retorts, hollering questions, and proclaiming injustices as they rock, bob, sway, and freeze, with eyes wide open. I, too, had a similar experience with *Sea of Poppies*. I was, at once, curious, absorbed, and entertained. I wonder, "How did Ghosh accomplish this narrative feat?"

Historian and literary critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr. offers an answer. In his analysis of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Gates explicates how authors amplify Black voices with "speakerly texts" that "emulate the phonemic, grammatical, and lexical patterns of actual speech."¹¹ To facilitate this narrative mode, nested within the framework, characters use direct speech, voiced, orally as well as textually, and parodied in a present-tense vernacular, while an omniscient narrator who moves seamlessly from one character's

¹¹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 181.

unarticulated thoughts to another's, adopts standard English that vacillates between tenses.¹² The result is a rhetorical strategy that produces the illusion of oral narration.¹³ Amidst the brief intervals when readers struggle to decipher the idiomatic wordplay on the page, a space opens for voices to echo inside their minds, and the storytelling world fuses with the written composition. Similar to a child during a read-aloud, this seemingly live interaction generates an actuality in the minds of listeners while engendering an existential relationship between the in-text speakers and the audience.¹⁴

Ghosh mimics Hurston's narrative mode throughout *Sea of Poppies*. For example, in the opening pages, Zachary Reid, "the [twenty-year-old] son of a Maryland freedwoman" who boards the *Ibis* to escape slavery's grip in the United States, is introduced to Serang Ali, the most competent seaman on the schooner.¹⁵ In this passage, Ghosh connects orality with literary narrativity in a polyvocal performance. Set against the standardized English of a trustworthy narrator, the unique speech styles, registers, and idioms of Zachary Reid and Serang Ali stage a dramatic effect in the reader's mind.

Although startled at first, Zachary soon found himself speaking to the serang with an unaccustomed ease: it was as if his oddly patterned speech had unloosened his own tongue. "Serang Ali, where are you from?" he asked.

"Serang Ali blongi Rohingya—from Arakani-side."

"And where'd you learn that kinda talk?"

"Afeem ship," came the answer. "China-side, Yankee gen'l'um all tim tok so-fashion. Also Mich'man like Malum Zikri...."

A week later, Serang Ali accosted Zachary again: "Malum Zikri! Captain-bugger blongi poo-shoo-foo. He hab got plenty sick...."¹⁶

¹² *Ibid.*, xxv-xxvi.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 181.

¹⁴ Walter Ong, "The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction," in *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 90, no. 1 (1975): 10.

¹⁵ Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2008): 10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

Ghosh braids direct and free indirect speech with a narrator's voice to incarnate a continuous and natural flow of language. In the direct strings, characters speak candidly to each other and the audience, with utterances bracketed by quotation marks, thus amplifying Zachary's and Serang Ali's thoughts without the interference of an intermediary narrator.¹⁷ By adopting conversational code-switching, Serang Ali's and Zachary's subjectivities remain distinct. This syntactical maneuvering upends standard English in favor of a multilingual patois that centers marginalized characters in the story circle.¹⁸ Meanwhile, the protean narrator explicitly communicates feelings (e.g., "ease") and (re)actions (e.g., "startled") so that readers may participate in the characters' thoughts while also observing them as they are enacted.¹⁹ Finally, the omniscient narrator delivers summaries to bridge time.

Ghosh's voluble style renders an audible effect that invites and privileges a multi-layered voiced and unvoiced "ventriloquism."²⁰ Readers have the doubled and split experience of being inside and outside a character's consciousness in a text that divulges inner thoughts through the narrator as well as directly through spoken dialogue.²¹ The narrator frames, articulates, and mirrors Zachary's, as well as the reader's, linguistic encounter, diegetically voicing, "Although startled at first, Zachary soon found himself speaking with an unaccustomed ease: it was as if his oddly patterned speech had loosened his own tongue." Ghosh then establishes an opportunity to practice "that kinda talk" when the lascar replies to Zachary's question about his place of origin: "Serang Ali blongi Rohingya—from Arkani-side." With a sleight of hand, Ghosh asks the reader, who is also new to Serang Ali's idiom, to think, learn, and voice the lascar's language alongside Zachary, in real-time, thus forcing readers to alter their behavior in accordance with the characters.

In neuroscientific terms, Armstrong explains this "doubling" phenomenon as "thinking the thoughts of someone else as if they were your own...the 'real me' I bring to the work doubled with the

¹⁷ Murari Prasad, "Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*: Re-Reading Its Craft and Concerns" in *Asiatic 2*, no. 1 (2008): 76.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁹ Armstrong, *Stories*, 156.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 155.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 156.

'alien me.'"²² Experiments have conclusively shown that the doubling effect activates the motor cortex as well as affective regions of the brain.²³ Per Armstrong's claim, with each written and oral utterance, readers may become increasingly invested in the characters' lives and engrossed in the storyworld. Moreover, by sharing the labor of the linguistic exchange, readers are cajoled into new ways of listening and communicating. As Gates asserts and as Ghosh demonstrates, from a "telling form of language" in a first-person narrative, simultaneously revoiced by the reader, emanates "a singular longing and utterance, consolidated and rendered integral...for a transcendent...narrative."²⁴ Ghosh's storytelling structure obliges the audience to share attention with the characters; once readers are entangled in the fictive landscape, they cannot escape the narrative framework.

Sensory Imagery

I wanted to see [the past] through certain experiences. In other words, I wanted to inhabit the moment...to be able to see it, experience it through one's senses, to eat its foods, breathe its smells, rest one's eyes on its sights. It is precisely this roundedness of experiences that makes historical fiction a distinctive "mode of inquiry."

—Amitav Ghosh, "Storytelling and the Spectrum of the Past," *The American Historical Review*

Ghosh compares history and storytelling to "two trees grafted upon each other as seedlings."²⁵ In his view, historical monographs, constrained by research protocols, do not animate, as fiction may, the multifaceted lives of characters. The work of the historian is to lay the foundation for the novel as a "mode of inquiry," in realist detail, that communicates a "differently configured landscape of experience."²⁶ He distinguishes Ghosh-the-historian from Ghosh-the-author; the historian locates and depicts "the river," whereas the author elaborates the "fish's point of view and the many

²² Dwanica Greaves, "04 Inside the Mind: Paul Armstrong" in *Seisma*, 18 June 2022.

²³ Armstrong, *Stories*, 157.

²⁴ Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, 183.

²⁵ Ghosh, "Storytelling," 1552.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1556, 1563.

directions the fish swims in.”²⁷ To enable readers to “effortlessly absorb unfamiliar pasts,” Ghosh writes “thick descriptions” that transmit images of place as well as of states of mind and body.²⁸ Consequently, readers are able to “*inhabit* the moment” as a means of *perceiving* the past through the characters.²⁹

The novelist’s role in describing “the many directions a fish swims” is especially germane to *Sea of Poppies*.³⁰ Neuroscientists have demonstrated that motion coordinates sensory perception. Armstrong defines this relationship as the action–perception circuit, a process in which the brain and body respond, “in an endless circular embrace,” to “linguistically staged configurations of action.”³¹ Simply put, linguistic associations with action words manifest phenomenologically while reading. Experiments have verified that imagining movement summons the same cognitive mechanisms as performing the action.³² Specifically, while reading motor imagery, motor commands to muscles are only partially blocked, thus leaving motoneurons open and ready to fire.³³ Exposure to action-based literary figuration affords readers “embodied, cortical responses” which correlate to real-world perceptual experiences.³⁴

Neurological research confirms that the employment of action mobilizes “as if” sensory domains while reading.³⁵ To further clarify the “as-if” feedback loop, action, sensation, and perception are inextricably tied to comprehension.³⁶ Brain-imaging studies elucidate this scientific fact. On MRI scans, specific words light cortical areas associated with sensory perception.³⁷ For instance, words attributed to odors (e.g., citrus) stimulate olfactory sensors in the brain, and words that semantically correlate to sounds (e.g.,

²⁷ Mark Frost, “Amitav Ghosh and the Art of Thick Description: History in the Ibis Trilogy” in *The American Historical Review* 121, no. 5 (2016): 1538

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1538.

²⁹ Ghosh, “Storytelling,” 1557.

³⁰ Frost, 1538.

³¹ Armstrong, *Stories*, 106

³² *Ibid.*, 113.

³³ *Ibid.*, 113.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 114.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 112.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 112.

drum) ignite the superior temporal auditory area.³⁸ Similarly, words that connote action trigger motor areas of the cortex.³⁹ Starr links the action–perception circuit to “imagery of motion.”⁴⁰ As Starr attests, people imagine motion in conjunction with other sensations, giving rise to multisensory imagery that “invokes and interrelates...different perceptual areas...vision, sound, touch, and even smell.”⁴¹ Additionally, (un)pleasant sensory images facilitate perceptions that engage readers’ memories and prior knowledge to evoke “felt” emotional responses.⁴²

Ghosh employs “multisensory imagery of motion” throughout *Sea of Poppies*.⁴³ During an early scene in the book, the protagonist, Deeti, and her daughter, Kabutri, arrive at the Sudder Opium Factory in a cart driven by Kalua, to pick up her ailing husband. This introduction foretells the death of Deeti’s husband, Hukum Singh, an opium addict and crippled factory laborer, who overdoses at the East India Company. The scene unfolds slowly and deliberately, trapping the audience inside the sensory nightmare. Ghosh writes:

It was late in the afternoon when at last Kalua’s cart came within view of its destination: the Sudder Opium Factory.... The factory was immense: its premises covered forty-five acres. ...[i]t was among the most precious jewels in Queen Victoria’s crown. On the contrary, a miasma of lethargy seemed always to hang over the factory’s surroundings. The monkeys that lived around it, for instance...never chattered or fought or stole from passers-by; when they came down from the trees it was to lap at the open sewers that drained the factory’s effluents; after having sated their cravings, they would climb back into the branches to resume their stupefied scrutiny of the Ganga and its currents.

³⁸ Ibid., 112.

³⁹ Ibid., 112.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 115.

⁴¹ Ibid., 115-16.

⁴² G. Gabrielle Starr, *Feeling Beauty: The Neuroscience of Aesthetic Experience* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013): 18, 19, 92, 93.

⁴³ Ibid., 91.

Kalua's cart rumbled slowly past the factory's outer compound: this was a complex of some sixteen enormous godowns. ... The fortifications here were formidable, and the guards particularly sharp-eyed....

As Kalua's cart rolled on, towards the factory's main compound, Deeti and Kabutri sneezed; soon, Kalua and the oxen were sniffing too, for they had now drawn abreast of the godowns where farmers disposed of their 'poppy trash.' ... Rare was the passer-by who could brave this mist without exploding into a paroxysm of sneezes and sniffles.⁴⁴

In this sensorial rendering of the wretched landscape Ghosh's marginalized characters traverse, readers hear the ox-cart rumbling toward the factory, smell sewage floating in the Ganga river, watch dazed monkeys climb trees, and feel vapors wafting off "poppy trash." As a means of heightening the reader's affective response, Ghosh juxtaposes images of awe and lethargy to convey peril. The reader-as-onlooker, next to Deeti in Kalua's cart, is alarmed when "coming within view" of the "immense" factory and senses imminent danger from the armed watchmen. The "sharp-eyed guards" embody a threatening and vigilant colonial system that represses laborers and farmers, typified in images of discarded trash. The deadening effects of the "miasma," exposed in the depiction of stupefied monkeys, intensify a feeling of lethargy that permeates the setting while poppy dust "hanging over" the factory grounds suggests a pervasive and inescapable blight. A deafening silence is punctuated by sounds of rolling carts and river currents that ferry wastewater and sickened farmers deeper into the torment and closer to the "formidable fortifications" safeguarding the seat of power. Against the backdrop of a ramshackle cart, the "compound" intimidates, signifying a paralyzing individual encounter with a repressive system. A "complex of sixteen enormous godowns" conjures images of tombs gorged with decomposing laborers' bodies buried underneath the precious "jewels of Queen Victoria's crown": opium. A sensory reading of the passage translates the debilitating physical lethargy and delirium that afflicts intoxicated monkeys, addicted laborers, and

⁴⁴ Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 88-9.

impoverished farmers. Readers are choked by the suffering unearthed in Ghosh's layers of thick description. The imbalance of wealth and power, as well as the threat to health and safety, is on full display for all to witness and experience, thus implicating the oppressive British colonial system that overwhelms and subdues its marginalized subjects.

Neuroscientists have studied the causal effect of mental imagery. Findings confirm that thick descriptions can impact emotions. According to Armstrong, mirrored reactions are pronounced in scenes that portray strong emotions, pain, or disgust.⁴⁵ In *Sea of Poppies*, readers travel with Deeti inside the bowels of the Sudder Opium Factory where she must recover her husband before he dies. The haunting passage reads like the opening of a Gothic tale.

A small troop of uniformed burkundazes was on duty at the gate. ... When she went up to [the sirdar] and murmured Hukam Singh's name, he knew exactly why she had come. Your husband's condition isn't good, he said. ... Get him home quickly. ... But where to go? Deeti said to the sirdar, in alarm. How will I find my way? ... With her sari draped over her face, Deeti stepped in and made her way past columns of stacked poppy-flower rotis. ... not another woman to be seen. ... Yet it still took an age to reach the far door and here she stood blinded for a moment, in the bright sunlight. Facing her was a doorway, leading into another immense iron-roofed structure...—it was the largest building she had ever seen. She walked in, murmuring a prayer, and was brought again to a halt by the sight ahead: the space in front of her was so vast that her head began to spin and she had to steady herself by leaning against a wall. ... Now once again Deeti was taken aback by the space ahead, but this time not because of the vastness of the dimensions, but rather the opposite—it was like a dim tunnel, lit only by a few small holes in the wall. The air inside was hot and

⁴⁵ Armstrong, *Stories*, 157.

fetid...a reek so powerful that she had to pinch her nose to keep herself from gagging. No sooner had she steadied herself, than her eyes were met by a startling sight—a host of dark, legless torsos was circling around and around, like some enslaved tribe of demons...stirring the dark ooze with their feet.⁴⁶

A sense of foreboding and paranoia imbues the scene. Every step of the journey evokes a rising tension. Apace with Deeti, readers enter into a world hidden in a forest, behind the walls of a mammoth “ruin” with colorless “turrets that housed squads of sentries...manned by a great number of peons and armed burkundazes.”⁴⁷ In contrast, the factory superintendent resides in a “sprawling bungalow surrounded by a colourful garden, planted with many varieties of ornamental poppy.”⁴⁸ The sinister entry to the fortress denotes the first of multiple psychological and physical boundaries Deeti must cross, alone, as an outcast female in distress, amidst the all-male hierarchy of the East India Company. The mise-en-scène reminds readers, and the protagonist, that they are defenseless in the face of colonial power. A threat of violence persists in and subdues a grim setting.

A Gothic aesthetic in which characters negotiate ruinous, claustrophobic spaces haunted by ghosts works to actualize a frightening atmosphere. Suspense in narratives is interwoven with processes of prediction that trigger questions in the reader’s mind.⁴⁹ In the opening frame, an insurmountable barrier is revealed: Deeti’s husband is on the brink of death. The sidar directs Deeti to “Get him home quickly.” The staccato rhythm registers an urgency in the reader and records the dissonance on the page. Deeti replies, as the reader simultaneously questions, “But where to go? How will I [she] find my [her] way?” The short responses to a potentially consequential event signal Deeti’s growing anxiety and her woeful anticipation of the future. Deeti’s, and the reader’s, menacing odyssey through the circuitous

⁴⁶ Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 90-3.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁴⁹ Moritz Lenhe, Philipp Engel, Martin Rohrmeier, Winfried Menninghaus, Arthur Jacobs and Stefan Koelsch, “Reading Suspenseful Literary Text Activates Brain Areas Related to Social Cognition and Predictive Inference” in *PLOS ONE* 10, no. 5, (2015).

sentences and tunnels begins. Along the way, surprises startle Deeti, and she must quickly adapt. She is blinded by a ray of sunlight, contrasting the dark and dank dungeon in which she will soon find herself. She halts, an abrupt punctuation in the passage, presumably shocked by what she sees. She stops to murmur a prayer, a sign that uncertainty looms. Then, she spins, disoriented and unsteady from a debilitating stench of decay, seizing her in a momentary madness. Suddenly, the vast corridor narrows into a “dim,” suffocating tunnel resembling a cell. Under the spell of the noxious fumes, Deeti is jolted by a “vision” of “ghouls” circumambulating inside a vat of “dark ooze.”⁵⁰ In spaces that confine, exploit, and dominate, with language and gestures that transmit fear, the author paints a phantasmic scene nobody can escape. The compound becomes a closed-off microcosm of colonial power and subjugation. Ghosh’s strategic deployment of imagery conceptualizes Gothic as a rhetorical form that imbricates readers in a terrifying colonial project.

The ubiquitous saying “on the edge of your seat” reflects the reader’s state while perched at the threshold of the Sudder Opium Factory. Neuroscientific studies confirm that suspense stimulates brain regions associated with mentalizing and predictive inference.⁵¹ As characters anticipate and overcome obstacles, readers are invited to imagine their plight while empathizing with them.⁵² Emotional intensity, afforded by a storyworld brimming with suspenseful descriptions, builds a momentum that forces readers through the Gothic scene.⁵³ In another study that investigated the *fiction feeling hypothesis*, scientists measured neural activity while reading fear-inducing narratives. The results concluded that negative, arousing, or suspenseful content engages the affective empathy network which, subsequently, activates an immersive reading experience.⁵⁴ MRI scans showed that reader absorption ratings were significantly higher for fear-inducing than neutral passages, especially when images of pain and distress were

⁵⁰ Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 92-3.

⁵¹ Lenhe.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Chun-Ting Hsu, Conrad Markus and Arthur Jacobs, “Fiction Feelings in Harry Potter Haemodynamic Response in the Mid-Cingulate Cortex Correlates with Immersive Reading Experience” in *NeuroReport* 25, no. 17 (2014): 1, 4.

displayed.⁵⁵ The study proved that immersive reading, characterized by “a deep concentration that feels effortless,” is not necessarily pleasurable; rather, gratification is derived from being entangled in the lives of the characters and co-experiencing their emotional load.⁵⁶

Barbara Fredrickson, a scholar and researcher in the field of psychology, defines gratification in terms of “interest.” Her research verifies that positive emotions, such as “interest,” produce long-term flourishing that “broadens and builds” a person’s thought–action repertoire; hence, whenever readers feel “interest,” they are motivated to explore new information and novel experiences.⁵⁷ These personal assets, which may be accrued while reading, are “durable.”⁵⁸ Even more than plot or narration, Ghosh’s strategic use of multisensory imagery tethers readers to a world that is “absent and implied,” effortlessly and for the duration.⁵⁹ In this case, using thick descriptions that convey the horrors of colonialism, Ghosh pushes Deeti, and readers, to the brink of Hell, staring into the vacant eyes of “dark, legless torsos.” In a full circle moment, they rhetorically ask, “But where to go?”

Metaphor

[W]earing improvised costumes and performing in a theater filled beyond its capacity. The crowd wept. It was a kind of rebirth...a moment when the grief of survival became indistinguishable from the joy of living.

—Amitav Ghosh, *Dancing in Cambodia and At Large in Burma*

Schema, or mental models built from our memories and prior experiences, play a critical role in organizing the information we use to interpret and interact in the world. These non-linear,

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵⁶ Moniek Kuijpers, Frank Hakemulder, Ed Tan and Miruna Doicaru, “Exploring Absorbing Reading Experiences” in *Scientific Study of Literature* 4, no. 1 (2014): 91, 93.

⁵⁷ Barbara Fredrickson, “The Role of Positive Emotions in Positive Psychology: The Broaden and Build Theory of Positive Emotions” in *American Psychologist* 56, no. 3 (2001): 218, 219.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁵⁹ Elaine Auyoung, *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Literary Studies*, edited by Lisa Zunshine (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 583.

dynamic, and intersecting mental frameworks empower us to efficiently connect ideas.⁶⁰ Schema precede language and derive from somatic encounters with the physical world, notably through motion.⁶¹ From schema, metaphor is born. Metaphor draws on schema, across sensory–motor and other cognitive domains, to construct and share meaning so we may quickly “feel truth” and grasp abstract concepts.⁶² The recruitment of metaphor affords us the opportunity to (re)create and engage in complex mental simulations referred to in language.⁶³ These mental enactments, grounded in physical experience, help to orient and guide our real-world (inter)actions.⁶⁴ The somatic function of metaphor is particularly vital for non-experts who may have limited means of accessing and assimilating information.⁶⁵ MRI studies verify that engagement with sensory metaphor serves a dual purpose: (1) to expand readers' conceptual schema and (2) to aid readers in developing abstract representations that can be flexibly applied to new situations.⁶⁶ In short, metaphors (re)frame our thinking which, in turn, (re)forms our actions and experiences.

Ghosh extends a conceptual metaphor of dance in *Sea of Poppies* to convey liberation in and through a gender-fluid character, Baboo Nob Kissin, a celibate Vaishnavite and clerk in a transcendent relationship with Taramony, his widowed aunt and religious preceptor who acts as his intermediary with Krishna. In so doing, Ghosh destabilizes Western assumptions of secular queerness with a union that blurs and transgresses sexual, religious, familial, and romantic boundaries to occupy a liminal space where she is *his* Krishna, and *he* is her Radha.^{67,68} On her deathbed, Taramony vows to actualize their spiritual, sexual, and corporal

⁶⁰ Starr, “Cognitive Literary Criticism,” 413.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 411.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 412.

⁶³ Armstrong, *Stories*, 125.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁶⁵ Starr, “Cognitive Literary Criticism,” 412.

⁶⁶ Naja Jamrozik, Marguerite McQuire, Eileen Cardillo and Anjan Chatterjee, “Metaphor: Bridging Embodiment to Abstraction” in *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 23, no. 4 (2016): 1086.

⁶⁷ Krishna - a major (male) Hindu god, a human incarnation of the god Vishnu. Radha is his lover.

⁶⁸ Tara Leverton, “Gender Dysphoria and Gendered Diaspora: Love, Sex and Empire in Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*” in *English Studies in Africa* 57, no. 2 (2014): 33; Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 159.

union, stating, “[P]repare yourself—for your body will be the vessel for my return. There will come a day when my spirit will manifest in you...and the two of us, united in Krishna’s love, will achieve the most perfect union—you will become Taramony. ... There will be signs. ... A day will come when I will pour myself into you.”⁶⁹ Following Taramony’s pledge, while sailing on the *Ibis*, Baboo Nob Kassin begins to experience a corporal transformation into a woman.

In the final pages of *Sea of Poppies*, Taramony’s promise to Baboo Nob Kassin is realized while dancing. During a brief appeal to Paulette, a French orphan who grew up in India and disguises herself as an Indian laborer aboard the *Ibis*, Baboo Nob Kassin announces his impending metamorphosis, stating, “You cannot see? ... You are blind or what? Bosoms are burgeoning, hair is lengthening. New modalities are definitely coming to the fore.”⁷⁰ The initial transfiguration is signaled, somatically, by changes in Baboo Nob Kassin’s corpus. Shortly thereafter, he performs a dance to incarnate a new self that embodies his spiritual mentor, Ma Taramony. Baboo Nob Kassin begins:

Do you see her now? In my eyes? Ma Taramony?
Is she here? Within me? ... The gomusta...
wrapped his arms around himself: now that the
last shreds of his former being were to be
discarded, he was aware of a strange affection, a
tenderness for the body that had long been his.
...Wait, he whispered. ... Now that Taramony’s
presence was fully manifest in him, it was as if he
had become the key that could unlock the cages
that imprisoned everyone, all these beings who
were ensnared by illusory differences in this world.
It was the fullness of this insight that carried
him...ecstatic in the possession of his new self. ...
He paused... to listen for a flute. ... It was
here...in this very place, that the start of his
transfiguration had been fully signaled, by the
sound of a flute: everything had come full circle
now. ... [H]e began to turn around and around;
the ship was dancing with him too, the deck

⁶⁹ Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 162.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 430.

heaving to the rhythm of his whirling footsteps.
Seized by the transcendent, blissful joy of pure
ananda, he closed his eyes.⁷¹

In this scene, dance translates deviant acts into a mode of deliverance from a repressive terrestrial reality and serves as the medium through which bodily, romantic, and divine love may merge to attain ecstasy. Baboo Nob Kassin initiates a dialogue with words and counters with gestures. Movement affords the Vaishnavite a “new modality,” outside a linguistic framework, to convey emancipation, enacted in a joyfully embodied (re)volution. Baboo Nob Kassin embraces their core, welcoming themselves into the world. The sound of a flute awakens their body and “whirling footsteps” effectuates their rapture. The passage opens with “as if” imagery of motion in which the acolyte “shreds” and “discards” their former self and culminates with Baboo Nob Kassin “turning around and around,” in unison with a “heaving” ship, until they are “seized” by a transcendent joy. Per Armstrong, scientific studies affirm that “as if” simulations, synergistically arising from the body and brain, activate motor areas “almost to the same extent as executed actions.”⁷² Correspondingly, brain scans indicate that literal depictions of hand/arm, foot/leg, and mouth movements, replete in Ghosh’s portrayal of Baboo Nob Kassin’s transfiguration (e.g., “wrapped arms around,” “whispered,” and “whirling footsteps”), as well as action phrases (e.g., “unlock the cages”), increase excitability in the premotor cortex, providing readers with occasions to perceive Baboo Nob Kassin’s rebirth.⁷³ In sum, the motor system, “modulated by the motor component of the verb...preserved in fictive and metaphorical motion sentences,” sparks Armstrong’s action-perception circuit, thereby evoking cortical responses in readers.⁷⁴ This complex cognitive process continually logs and integrates perceptual, motoric, and affective input into “multimodal neural convergence zones” that store traces, or “long-term memory simulators,” which enable readers to elicit mental representations.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Ibid., 488-9.

⁷² Armstrong, *Stories*, 113.

⁷³ Ibid., 127.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 113, 127.

⁷⁵ Casasanto, Daniel, and Tom Gijssels, “What Makes a Metaphor an Embodied Metaphor?” in *Linguistics Vanguard* 1, no. 1 (2015): 328.

Constructing text into metaphor influences the way readers' bodies and brains relate and respond to the (story)world. Ghosh's dance metaphor interrelates and coordinates schema so that readers may revise, shift, and widen their network of understanding to include changes in: (1) *posture*: body pose, emotional state, and behavioral attitude; (2) *position*: proposition, point-of-view, corporal arrangement, area occupied by an object, situation that confers advantage, and social rank; (3) *place*: physical environment or space, step in a sequence, appropriate moment, vacated position, social scale, public square, and state of mind; as well as (4) *momentum*: impetus, motion, strength, and force.⁷⁶ Subsequently, readers' conceptualization of dance is transformed from a fixed art form to a dynamic, liberating force capable of (re)making and (re)empowering the individual. During this totalizing act, Baboo Nob Kassin personifies loving resistance and demonstrates for readers, "ensnared" in societal hierarchies that seek to contain bodies, genders, and castes, the potency of movement to transgress boundaries. Ghosh's dancer reminds readers that metaphors are fundamentally conceptual and may be (re)mapped onto bodies through experience. Moreover, by bringing bodies into play, Ghosh enables readers to connect concrete knowledge with abstractions as a means of "feel[ing] truth."⁷⁷

* * *

*But it was not long before he entered gleefully into
the spirit of my own wonderment, and soon enough
he even began to manufacture little surprises of his
own for our mutual delectation.*

—Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land:
History in the Guise of a Traveler's Tale*

Wonder fashions the imagination. It is both an emotion and an experience. It is astonishment in a wide-eyed seven-year-old during a read-aloud. It is the unanswerable "Why?" It is a mouth agape with anticipation. It is the startled body when a "THUMP!" sounds. Wonder (re)connects us to ourselves and the world in a

⁷⁶ *The Merriam Webster Dictionary*, s.v. "posture", "position", "place", "momentum," <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary>.

⁷⁷ Starr, "Cognitive Literary Criticism," 412.

Confluence

homecoming and a departure. In *Sea of Poppies*, readers wonder and wander alongside characters to discover and envision new landscapes. Ghosh constitutes a dynamic cognitive niche with modes of narration that join readers and characters in thought and dialogue, crafts thick sensory descriptions in which readers may perceive opportunities for (inter)action, and deploys metaphor to *move* meaning between the storyworld and the reader. Finally, Ghosh looks to the past to navigate a path forward; while on this quest, he forges a (comm)union between the storytellers and the audience. Perhaps most important, Ghosh gifts his readers “child’s eyes” to explore enlarged geographical and mental horizons.