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Transplanting Seeds in Diasporic Literature: Michael Ondaatje's *The Cat's Table* and Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke*

This paper examines the notion of transplantation on the literal level and as a metaphor, geographies of displacement being illustrated by the metaphor of botany. Ondaatje and Ghosh literally revisit the word “diaspora,” the scattering of seeds, through a reassessment of botany, and the power and money interests which underlie the discovery and commerce of plant species. Ghosh’s rewriting of History furthermore unveils the collusion between scientific, aesthetic, commercial and political interests at the core of imperialism, and the displacement of people, cultures, languages it entails.

The displacement of populations in the context of the British Empire often was the direct consequence of colonial occupation and administration, and was generally due to forced circumstances: slavery, political, religious or economic emigration, indentured labour, the spoliation of land, the transportation of prisoners or convicts. The dis-location it entailed, as suggested by the prefix,¹ was at once geographical, physical, cultural and psychological – the separation from place (both geographical and social), the tearing apart from one’s community and home, a sense of alienation and exile which diasporic people often try to reconstruct or preserve through memory, language and tradition. As Salman Rushdie explains in *Imaginary Homelands*: “It’s my present that is foreign, [...] the past is home albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time” (9). But as Rushdie further contends, this is our common lot; we are all exiles from home, from a childhood we imagine, yearn for, try to remember and reconfigure: “It may be argued that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity. But the writer who is out of country and even out of language may experience this loss in an intensified form” (12). In Ondaatje’s latest novel, *The Cat’s Table*,² and Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke*,³ the first two novels of the *Ibis* trilogy, such geographies of displacement are illustrated by the metaphor of botany, *i.e.* the motif of uprootedness, transplantation for both people and plant species. Geography, *-graphiein*, or the writing of the earth, is here taken literally, and figuratively, and the aim of this essay is to analyse how displacement is “written,” “inscribed” on the surface of the earth, and of the page; how displacement is actually displaced metaphorically. By focusing on transplantation, I would like to see whether this loss can be a gain, as Homi Bhabha (*Nation* 291), Salman Rushdie with his notion of crosspollination (*Imaginary Homelands*), or Jacques Hassoun (*Les contrebandiers*) think, and if displacement necessarily means dismemberment, mourning, or reconstruction.⁴ To answer this question, I will examine how Ondaatje and Ghosh literally revisit the word “diaspora,” the scattering of seeds, through a reassessment of botany, and the power and money interests which underlie it.

1. “Dis-” signifies a sense of undoing, “turning out of place,” “tearing asunder, depriving,” *Oxford English Dictionary*.

2. The abbreviation *CT* will now be used to introduce page references.

3. The abbreviations *SP* and *RS* will now be used to introduce page references.

4. For further developments on this issue see Delmas and Dodeman.

The issue of displacement is at the core of Michael Ondaatje's fiction, framed by the imaginary recreation of and departure from home, in an inverted chronological and geographical order. In *Running in the Family* (1982), the narrator goes back to Sri Lanka, re/members, *i.e.* pieces together, the dis/membered fragments of his family history which he recreates in a comic and carnivalesque manner. In *The Cat's Table*, his latest novel, through the use of a first-person narrative persona, Mynah or Michael, he revisits his departure for England as an eleven-year-old child severed from his native island, Sri Lanka, in a nostalgic manner tinged with magic realism as the journey becomes a "rite of passage," an "adventure" (CT 72) among weird characters.⁵ In this novel hovering between memoir, autobiography, and fiction as the author's note claims, the separation from home may be illustrated by the shift in the personal pronouns, since the first-person narrator refers to himself as "he," and the sense of estrangement it entails: "I try to imagine who the boy on the ship was. Perhaps a sense of self is not even there [...] as if he has been smuggled away accidentally, with no knowledge of the act, into the future" (CT 5).

In *The Cat's Table*, Michael, the Ondaatje narrative persona, later tells his own children the story of his journey to England; in spite of the desire to transmit his story (while transmission for Jacques Hassoun is turned towards the future and is reconstructive⁶), it conveys the same sense of loss and lack as can be found in some of his poems: the synesthetic remembrance of a garden at dawn, the chorus of birds and insects, the sound and smell of rain, the childhood memories of Narayan and Gunepala in Boralesgamuwa. The sense of place is conveyed by sensory perception and the musicality of place names – Bambalapitiya or the Pettah market (CT 77), Nuwara Eliya, Galle, Jaffna *etc.* –, places which are revisited in *Running in the Family* and turn the homeland into an imaginary cartography.

The servant's name, Narayan, although coincidental, evokes the Indian author (quoted on page 76) and the creation of place in his Malgudi novels through the portrait of a community, habits, and "well-defined encounters" (CT 76). These encounters are to be opposed to chance encounters with strangers on board the ship taking the boy to England which alter the course of Michael's life and also contribute to the construction of his identity. The motif of the journey, or passage, combines with the image of roots, but also with those of grafting and hybridization as metaphors for place and displacement, or, as the title of James Clifford's seminal work suggests, roots and routes.

Intertextuality in *The Cat's Table* is, for that matter, revealing: it hovers between Narayan and Joseph Conrad, *i.e.* the motifs of place and exile, illustrating the narrator's departure from home; the East is "seen from a small boat" as the epigraph, a quote from "Youth," shows.⁷ *The Cat's Table* (also a metonym for the ship and a nexus in the eponymous novel) represents an in-between place, between past and present, childhood

5. As shown by the references to astrology and magic, and by the presence of characters who seem like figures in a pack of cards: M. Mazappa's "extraterrestrial songs," Miss Lasqueti, a theatrical company and a magician, "The Hyderabad Mind," a Baron thief, Niemeyer the criminal and his daughter Asuntha the acrobat, Hector De Silva the man with rabies and the ayurvedic.

6. For Jacques Hassoun, transmission is not a mere transposition of the past, but it enables the subject to undertake a journey, "not a circular journey around a petrified enclave," but a journey which leads to an open space like "a delta where heterogeneous cultures are linked up and invigorate one another" (100-1, my translation). Yet *Running in the Family* and *The Cat's Table* clearly evoke a circular journey "around [the] petrified enclave" of memory and nostalgia as "grandeur had not been added to my life but had been taken away" (CT 72).

7. "This is how I see the East [...] I see it always from a small boat" (Conrad 35).

and maturity as the rite of passage shows:⁸ the initiatory journey is illustrated by “geography,” namely place and text, both the Suez Canal (the passage between the East and Europe, celebrated by Walt Whitman and E. M. Forster) and the reference to Conrad’s initiatory novella “Youth.”

Displacement, however, is not only geographical; it has to do with imaginative recreation. Sri Lanka is an island to which the author keeps returning, in *Anil’s Ghost*, and his *Collected Poems*, which are haunted by the loss of language, the loss of his father, and his *ayah*. Furthermore, Ondaatje’s work is traversed by the motifs of separation (*Divisadero*), division, exile and diasporic experience, due to war (*The English Patient*) and emigration (*In the Skin of a Lion*). The theme of dismemberment, of tearing asunder, is highlighted in all his novels by the motifs of cuts, wounds, mutilation, bomb attacks, and explosives, amplified in *In the Skin of a Lion* through intertextual references to another novel by Conrad (*The Secret Agent*).

Ondaatje’s fictional and poetic work perfectly delineates geographies of displacement on the level of plot (emigration, war or civil war, family feud), through displaced characters travelling in the diegetic zone of the fictional space between India, Canada, Europe, Sri Lanka, the USA. The construction of identity is also associated with mapping: for the young boy Patrick in *In the Skin of a Lion*, opening an atlas and looking for the name of the place he lives in; or for the young boy in *The Cat’s Table* whose parents have divorced, and who “will continue to be busy in the evolving map of this world” (CT 34).

Building up and mapping place in an ever-changing world are not only a metaphor for identity construction. To illustrate the fact that cartography cannot be separated from power interests, Ondaatje uses a recurrent trope in his novels, that of “choreographies,” a metaphor for both the configuration of the novel and “choreographies of power” to which the characters are submitted. On the poetic level in his novels, “*geographiein*” entails generic displacements (writing based on tropes borrowed from music and painting), nomadic writing, but we may wonder whether generic, poetic de- and reterritorialisation are not, to a certain extent, counterbalanced by the nostalgic circularity of his work.

The *Oronsay*, the ship taking the boy and his two friends to England, is a microcosm, full of people, stories, and anecdotes, seen from the perspective of the child observer, Michael/Mynah, who slips from one deck to another, through portholes into cabins to help a thief enter the room, like Kim, the eponymous hero of Kipling’s novel, often referred to in *The English Patient*, although the intertextual reference in *The Cat’s Table* is to *The Jungle Books* (CT 115).⁹ The journey from East to West evokes and revisits Kipling’s poem, “The Ballad of East and West,” and also is a rite of passage for the three boys. Displacement across the ocean is echoed by movements on board compared to a “quadrille,”¹⁰ a simile which evokes the metaphor of choreography mentioned above. The ship, which is an imaginary, mythopoietic world, becomes a metafictional representation of literary creation: “If anyone wished to capture the daily movements

8. Based on encounters with the world of adults, sexual awakening, the discovery of death, and “a more complicated idea of Fate” (CT 151).

9. Another possible implicit reference to Kipling (“The Mark of the Beast”) is the episode of Sir Hector Da Silva’s death on board, twice bitten by a dog and according to the ayurvedic attending to him, the victim of a spell put on him by a Buddhist priest in Colombo. Lines from a Kipling poem are quoted during Da Silva’s funeral (CT 173).

10. “All these haphazard patterns of movement became as predictable as the steps of a quadrille” (CT 108).

on our ship, the most accurate method might be to create a series of time-lapse criss-crossings, depicted in different colours, to reflect the daily loitering” (CT 108). Seeing from a distance and choreography are recurrent metafictional representations of point of view and narration in Ondaatje’s novels, as shown by older Michael’s vision of thunderstorms in Canada: “I wake up believing I am in mid-air, at the height of the tall pines above the river, watching the approaching lightning, and hearing behind it the arrival of its thunder. It is only from such a height that you see the great choreography and danger of storms” (CT 122). The image is emblematic of the writer’s position, “in mid air” between the hand and the page, opening up an infinite creative space.¹¹ Displacement obviously entails up-rootedness, and in *The Cat’s Table*, ships and botany are tropes (at once metonyms and metaphors) for displacement and transplantation, two associations also made by Amitav Ghosh in his own novels. In *The Cat’s Table*, the ship is a diasporic trope, all the more so as it carries a garden deep in its hold. As the etymology suggests, “diaspora” comes from the Greek *speirein*, the sowing of seeds. The owner, Larry Daniels, born to a Burgher family, is a botanist from Kandy, where the Royal Botanical Garden, Peradeniya, is located.¹² If Larry Daniel’s purpose is to export plant species, the aim of the Botanical Garden was to introduce new, useful plant species into Sri Lanka, like coffee, and later tea, for obvious economic purposes.¹³ The ships the boy sees in a print he is shown of a Greek trireme are emblematic of the link between science and conquest: “It fought the enemies of Athens and brought back unknown fruits and crops, new sciences, architecture, even democracy” (CT 38).¹⁴ A hint at “the thousands of workers who died from cholera during [the] construction of [the Suez canal]” (CT 173) so that Europeans could have a more direct route to the East underlines the cost of progress and the reality of commerce.

The *Oronsay* carries local, medicinal plants to England. Michael reports Larry’s explanations about their use and origins, and Larry actually draws a map of displaced plant species from the Cameroons, the Azores, New Guinea (CT 68). His map evokes ancient maps that used to indicate countries in emblematic terms. The medicinal plants, used in ayurvedic medicine and given to Hector Da Silva, a character suffering from rabies, come from several places, like Nepal, and derive from “village magic, astrology, and botanical charts in spidery handwriting” (CT 92). Larry also imitates palm postures “from all over the world, [...] how they stood and how they swayed, depending on heritage or breed, how they should bend in the wind in their submissiveness” (CT 67) or resist the wind. The imitation and the description in anthropological terms, as well as the cartography of plant species, cast light on the geographies of both human and vegetable displacement.

11. “It was as if he had walked under the millimetre of haze just above the inked fibres of a map, that pure zone between land and chart between distances and legend between nature and the storyteller” (*English Patient* 246).

12. If the royal garden dates back to 1371 CE when the Kandyan Kingdom was ruled by King Wickramabahu, the botanical garden was created by Alexander Moon in 1821 and further developed in 1843 with plants brought from Kew Garden.

13. “The primary intention of the British colonial government was to introduce coffee plant, and a number of other tropical flora of economic value, such as the Rubber tree, to Sri Lanka. [...] Plants brought from Kew Gardens in London were planted here. The Royal Botanic Garden played a major supportive role in establishing the Tea industry in Sri Lanka in the late 1820’s.” <http://lankaexotic.hubpages.com/hub/Botanic-Gardens-Peradeniya#>, accessed 19 April 2014. Paradoxically, it is onboard the *Oronsay* that Michael has his last cup of good, Colombo tea, associated with home, and afterwards “[he] would not drink tea for years” (CT 112).

14. The same association between science and power is exposed and denounced by Kip, an Indian subaltern working for and betrayed by the Allied Forces, in his diatribe against White, Western power in *The English Patient* (283).

Botany, a scientific field of research from the eighteenth century onward, was furthermore closely related to slavery during the colonial period; bread fruit was exported from Polynesia to the West Indies to feed slaves at a cheap price. Botany was at the core of triangular commerce (slavery, sugar and tea plantations, exports of plant species). After the abolition of slavery, Tamil coolies were sent from South India to Sri Lanka to work as indentured labourers on tea plantations. Roads and a railway track were built from Nuwera Eliya in the mountains to bring tea leaves to Colombo harbor more easily and more quickly, thus relating “progress” to commercial and financial interests, and the colonial exploitation of a cheap imported workforce.

However, more than the image of negative displacement associated with botany, and the economic, historical context underlying it, botany becomes, in *The Cat's Table*, a metaphor for fertilization. An exchange of seeds, recalling Rushdie's notion of cross-pollination, takes place at the Cat's Table which becomes a metonym for all the chance encounters with strangers that alter and enrich Michael's or anyone's life: “It would always be strangers like them, at the various Cats' Tables of my life, who would alter me” (CT 270). The exchange of seeds enables “cross-fertilization” as the narrator indicates when the ship stops at Suez: “Who knows what was exchanged that night, and what cross-fertilisation occurred as the legal papers of entrance and exit were signed and passed back down to land, while we entered and left the brief and temporary world of El Suweis” (CT 178).

The ship thus becomes a place of gathering,¹⁵ exemplifying Bhabha's “gathering of seeds,”

of exiles and émigrés and refugees, gathering on the edge of “foreign” cultures; gathering at the frontiers; gathering in the ghettos or cafés of city centres; gathering in the half-life, half-light of foreign tongues, or in the uncanny fluency of another's language; gathering the signs of approval and acceptance, degrees, discourses, disciplines; gathering the memories of underdevelopment, of other worlds lived retroactively; gathering the past in ritual of revival; gathering the present. (*Nation* 291)

The scattering and gathering of seeds is also at the core of Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke*, which trace geographies of displacement down the Ganges to the Sundarbans, from Calcutta to Mauritius, Singapore and Canton. The journey is illustrated by the structure of *Sea of Poppies*, divided as it is into “Land,” “River,” and “Sea,” and the first two parts of *River of Smoke*, “Islands,” and “Canton.” If Ondaatje's *Cat's Table* is an initiatory novel of displacement focusing on a child's *Bildung*, Ghosh's two novels are much larger in scope: the first two volumes of five hundred pages or so of the epic trilogy relate the emigration of a great number of characters, each introducing a web of other characters and embedded stories – and digressions are, for that matter, a type of inner, textual displacement. All the characters, scattered throughout northern India at first, converge on board a ship, the *Ibis*, anchored in the Delta of the Ganges,

15. The gathering for Michael later takes place at Ramadhin's funeral, one of his two companions from Colombo on board the *Oronsay* who never recovered from the loss of home. Michael then re-enters his community, “a capsule of our youth” (CT 186), and later marries Massi, Ramadhin's sister, whereas for Cassius, their other friend and fellow traveller, the memory of displacement is itself displaced into paintings of the Suez episode, seen by Michael at his friend's exhibition. Fonseka's letter of condolences sent to Ramadhin's bereaved family rewrites the episodes of Aden and the crossing of the Red Sea. It interestingly delineates old and new “geographies of displacement,” old pre-Islamic trade routes, and more recent imperial routes: “He wrote about how [...] Aden had been one of the thirteen great pre-Islamic cities; how there was an ancestry of famous Muslim geographers who'd lived there before the age of gunpowder empires” (CT 198).

bound for Mauritius, before they are dispersed again all over the Indian Ocean in the second volume. They are all connected to the opium trade, be they British, American or Parsi traders, Bengali investors, ship owners and sailors, addicts, direct and indirect victims.

The novels superimpose two maps: the map tracing the routes of the characters' displacement throughout the Indian Ocean, and the cartography of British power, trade and money interests in the colonial, economic context of nineteenth-century capitalism and free trade, more precisely in 1838 and 1839, just before the Opium War with China. Through his epic of displaced people and the numerous stories of subalterns revisiting official British History on the Opium War, Ghosh ironically shows what the routes of free trade entailed: the transportation of indentured labourers, coolies, prisoners, runaways from India to Mauritius, then Canton, Singapore, on board a former slave ship; the second mate, Zachary Reid, from Baltimore, is the son of a former Black slave and her White American master. The coolies (or indentured *Girmitiyas*¹⁶) are bound for Mauritius, whose plantation owners are in need of a new, cheap labour force after the abolition of slavery, recalling the history of Tamils in Sri Lanka. The first ironic association made by Ghosh is obviously between free trade, displacement and slavery.

Transportation is also associated with transplantation, on the literal level (the exporting of seeds) and as a metaphor for the displacement of people. The commercial exchange of "seeds," which concerns poppies grown in India and sold by British merchants to China, coolies, and botanical species imported from China to Kew Gardens, ironically revisits the etymology of the word "diaspora." The scattering of people in Ghosh's novels is a direct consequence of the triangular commerce of opium involving money interests in Great Britain, producers and merchants in British India and customers in China. Traders justify the export of opium for economic reasons, the importing of silk and tea being too great "a drain of silver from Britain and her colonies" (*SP* 117).

The gathering dissemination calls forth according to Bhabha (*Nation* 291) is explored by Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies* as the *Ibis*, the ship transporting the characters to Mauritius, is a melting pot, literally, through the multi-ethnic food cooked on board, and metaphorically. The ship is obviously a "third space" (Bhabha, *Location* 37), a place in which cultures and languages meet, gather, intersect. For Baboo Nob Kissin, the *Ghomusta* in charge of the coolies, the ship is a "vehicle of transformation" (*SP* 440).¹⁷ Zachary Reid, "being neither of the quarter deck nor of the fo'c'tle [is] the link between the two parts of the ship" (*SP* 13); like Deeti, or Paulette, he acts as a mediator. The ship is a metonym for the in-betweenness of cultural encounters, as different castes, classes, religions, and origins mix, and all become "ship siblings" (*SP* 373). It is exemplified by the Lascars who "had nothing in common except the Indian Ocean": "among them were Chinese and East African, Arabs and Malays, Bengalis and Goans, Tamils and Arakanese" (*SP* 14). Their language, Lascari, is a mix of different languages (*SP* 16) and its heterogeneity and hybridity evoke Glissant's concept of the "Tout- Monde," the creation of a language which contains all languages. This is also illustrated by Deeti's

16. *Girmitiyas* because "their names were entered on 'girimits' – agreements written on pieces of paper. The silver that was paid for them went to their families, and they were taken away, never to be seen again: they vanished, as if into the netherworld" (*SP* 75).

17. Baboo Nob Kissin believes he is about to be "inhabited" internally by the womanly presence of his aunt, Taramony.

language, Bhojpuri, which is the language of displacement for Neel, the Rajah sent into exile by the British and a prisoner on board: “of all the tongues spoken between the Ganges and the Indus, there was none that was its equal in the expression of the nuances of love, longing and separation – of the plight of those who leave and those who stay at home” (SP 416).

The other syncretic and linguistic place of gathering is the shrine built by Deeti in a cave in Mauritius, where many of the characters – those who will later be known as “la fami Colver” – ultimately converge, bringing their language, a mix of Bhojpuri and Creole, along with them (RS 4). Deeti’s shrine contains the pictures of all the people she met on board the *Ibis*, which is also represented. During the passage, Deeti, who is pregnant, arranges matches, and symbolically bears the seeds of other lives and stories, which she preserves and transmits once in Mauritius. Both novels open with the motif of Deeti’s shrine which then regularly reappears in the narrative. Because of its inchoative associations, it is a symbolic promise of regeneration and reconstruction of severed bonds.¹⁸ It is a way for the characters to re/member – *i.e.* both remember and reconstruct – the past, like the Temple Baboo Bob Kissim imagines before leaving Calcutta (SP 208). Such a syncretic place and ritual of revival, celebrated by shared meals, makes transmission possible:¹⁹ the stories of transportation are told over and over again, they are turned into legends – Kalua’s escape, the storm, Deeti’s destiny (RS 20) –, and act as the founding myth of a diaspora, by remembering an original place “back there” (RS 6) and displacing it “here.”

However, the positive image of social, cultural and linguistic syncretism is debunked by the representation of the ocean. If the delta of the Ganges is an opening (as suggested by Hassoun’s image of transmission as “a delta where heterogeneous cultures are linked up and invigorate one another” 100-1), the ship also is a prison ship, the coolies’ future in Mauritius is bleak, and the delta opens onto the Kala-Pani, the Netherworld to which the characters are sent. The mythic representation of the Ocean serves the parallel Ghosh makes with the historical precedent of the black Atlantic: the *Ibis* is a former slave ship, Zachary is the son of a former Black slave, and the slaves thrown overboard when crossing the Atlantic find an echo in the coolies jumping ship in fear of “the Black Water.”

But in *River of Smoke* the gathering also ironically takes place in the merchants’ quarters (factories or *Hongs*) in Canton, the commercial and financial hub which organises the “sowing of (poppy) seeds” throughout China, and which is also a European and American microcosm responsible for the scattering of people on a global scale. Ghosh revisits official history from another, postcolonial standpoint by presenting the perspective of subalterns and of the Chinese government on the Opium War, and by drawing parallels with the present, global situation. For instance, he underlines the detrimental effects of the cultivation of opium in India, which has replaced local crops and wheat, *dal*, and vegetables, “forcing cash advances on the farmers, making them sign *asami* contracts,” with the owner “never letting you off” (SP 30-1). This is strangely reminiscent of the contemporary, neocolonial context, with today’s Indian farmers buying

18. Like the *Ibis*, which is for Deeti “a great wooden *mái-báp*, an adoptive ancestor and parent of dynasties yet to come” (SP 373).

19. “They would speak of it to their children and their children’s children, who would return to it over generations, to remember and to recall their ancestors” (SP 208).

seeds from a notorious American company, being unable to pay them off, and committing suicide.

Ghosh also shows the collusion between knowledge and power, science (botany) and commerce, in nineteenth-century Europe, and this collusion is illustrated by the journey of the three ships, and their different cargoes: The *Ibis* (coolies), the *Anahita* (opium) and the *Redruth* (plant specimens). What is original in Ghosh's novels is the parallel he makes between the opium trade and the scientific and aesthetic interest in botany, between "flowers and opium, opium and flowers" (RS 564). Botany is not an innocent activity or hobby. If Lambert, the French assistant-curator of Calcutta's botanical garden and Paulette, his daughter, seem to be motivated solely by the advancement of learning and their passion for plants, for naming²⁰ and collecting flowers, and for applying Linnaeus's system of classification "in the innocent tranquility of the Botanical gardens" (SP 143), the other botanist Paulette meets and works with, Mr. Penrose, a plant-hunter, "had made a great deal of money through the marketing of seeds" (RS 37). His sole interest is "thrift and profit," investment and "return," as the organization on board the *Redruth* shows (RS 82). Mercantile and financial interests underlie the discovery, export and transplantation of plant species, all of which are part and parcel of a single geography of free trade linking London, Calcutta, and Canton, and as regards botany: Kew Gardens (the curator of which was Joseph Banks, the President of the Royal Geographical Society), Calcutta Royal Botanical garden, Pamplemousses Botanical Gardens in Mauritius, Chinese botanical gardens in Canton, and with Ondaatje, we could add Peradeniya Gardens in Kandy – a "veritable empire of scientific institutions" (RS 106).

Such mercantile interests are masked, however, by the aesthetic value of flowers in *River of Smoke*: not only are they beautiful, do they ornate gardens in China and Europe, they are also represented, painted, reproduced when they cannot be transported. Paulette, working for Mr. Penrose, is looking for the Golden Camellia (*camelia sinensis* being the Chinese shrub grown to produce tea and whose colour, associated with profit, is revealing), only known through a painting, and which turns out to be a hoax. Her innocent quest for the mysterious painter and purloined painting actually highlights the mercantile aspect of painting, through the recurrent reference to the price painters hope to get for their portraits or pictures. Art, botanical gardens are human creations and part of a "traffic," like opium, the "traffic" of which "is the creature of the East India Company" (RS 565).

Examining the commerce and transplantation of seeds in the literal and metaphorical sense, through a web of images, linguistic hybridity, crosspollination and textual fertilisation, Ghosh rewrites History by unveiling the collusion between scientific, aesthetic, commercial and political interests at the core of imperialism, and the displacement of people, cultures, and languages it entails. Opium was "among the most precious jewels in Queen Victoria's crown," (SP 95) and by showing that the opium factory of Ghazipur is "an institution steeped in Anglican piety" (SP 95), that opium is synonymous with "this age or progress and liberty," Ghosh's novels add moral condemnation to his historical vision.

20. The "*Latania commersonii*" named after Paulette's grand-uncle and grand-aunt, both botanists in Mauritius (SP 262), "*Acanthus lambertii*" named by her father and "*Ceriops roxburgiana* identified by the horrible Mr. Roxburgh" (SP 397) or the bougainvillea, bearing the explorer's name (SP 268).

Even if Ghosh's novels have an undeniable ideological value by the ethical standpoint they adopt, they are not political treatises. The interest of the epic lies in the storytelling: in the creation of a web of interconnected characters delineated through their past stories and present adventures, origins and languages, like a Babel-like botanical garden which mixes plant species of different origins; in his nomadic writing which travels back and forth in time and place, between several characters, in every chapter, deconstructing Linnaeus's system of classification and using displacement (digressions, letters, multiple points of view and voices) as a mode of writing. The "epic painting" Robin the painter has in mind could be a metaphor for Ghosh's mode of representation; yet the metafictional displacement best illustrating the unravelling of the novel, and the deconstruction of perspective is the Chinese scroll, "unfold[ing] in front of you, from top to bottom, like a story – you would see it like it happened; it would unroll before your gaze as if you were walking through it. [...] Should my epic painting be a scroll instead?" (RS 296).

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