

# Piracy

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Kunhali Marakkars from the Malabar coast in India are known locally for their extensive naval battles against the Portuguese *Estado da Índia* in the sixteenth century. From the 1520s until 1599, many members of the family took up arms against the Portuguese not only along the Malabar and Konkan coasts, but also across Coromandel and Gujarat coasts. The Portuguese authorities consistently identified them as corsairs and pirates to be eliminated, while the local rulers of Calicut appointed them as admirals and honored them with titles and gifts. Despite an anticlimactic turn in which the Portuguese and the Calicut rulers united against them, European sources continued to describe the Marakkars across centuries as corsairs and pirates of Malabar, while they remained venerated by local communities as pioneers who resisted European intrusions and defended their land and sea.<sup>1</sup> Even more, in recognition of their struggle for the country, the postcolonial Indian Navy commemorated their legacy with a memorial erected in Calicut and named an establishment in Mumbai as INS Kunhali.

These contrasting makings of heroes and corsairs out of the same people encapsulate the conundrum of piracy in the Indian Ocean. Piracy has a unique trajectory in premodern oceanic history, as it does not present as clear a picture as one might imagine. Such layered perspectives on piracy, beyond blanket generalizations, are captured in *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi* by Shannon Chakraborty, which tells the story of the titular character set across the northwestern Indian Ocean in the mid-twelfth century.

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1. On the different takes on Kunhali Marakkars, see O. K. Nambiar, *The Kunjalis: Admirals of Calicut* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1963); K.K.N. Kurup, ed. *India's Naval Traditions (The Role of Kunhali Marakkars)* (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 1997); cf. M.N. Pearson, "Corruption and Corsairs in Sixteenth-Century Western India: A Functional Analysis," in *The Age of Partnership: Europeans in Asia before Dominion*, ed. Blair B. Kling and M. N. Pearson, (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1979), 15-42.

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Amina al-Sirafi is introduced on the first page as a smuggler and pirate, but after reading almost five hundred pages of the novel, it remains unclear how she qualifies as a pirate, what exact actions made her one, or what precisely she smuggled during her maritime career. A central question looms throughout: who is actually a pirate, and does Amina al-Sirafi qualify as one, despite her repeated admissions or confessions? The ambiguity surrounding her qualifications consistently caught my attention.

This issue is significant because smuggling and piracy in the Indian Ocean are much more nuanced than criminal theft. From the outset, we should acknowledge that the definition of piracy has always been elusive, not only in the premodern Indian Ocean but even in the twenty-first century. International law still lacks a consensus on this, and piracy thus remains a vernacular term with limited legal implications.<sup>2</sup> If this ambiguity persists today, definitions and implications were equally oblique during Amina al-Sirafi's lifetime in the twelfth century. Despite the Roman law concept of piracy as a crime against humanity, with pirates deemed *hostis humani generis* (enemies of all mankind), most ancient and medieval societies did not uniformly adopt this view. Different states, institutions, nations, jurists, and lawyers devised their own definitions, often driven by political and economic interests. These definitions rarely gained universal acceptance, especially in the Indian Ocean context where the dominant idea was that the sea belonged to no state. Therefore, a given state's interpretations of piracy were not accepted by all the vessels sailing oceanic waters.

A nation's warriors were pirates to others, and vice versa. Even more, the so-called pirates were at times a useful group within the professional maritime world, offering their services as mercenary security forces to states, princes, merchants, and sailors. The novel highlights this dynamic: "The merchants and princes who rain curses upon our heads are often the very same ones who hire us to protect their ships, smuggle them through customs, and steal from their competitors."<sup>3</sup> Protection services formed a significant source of pirates' income, with tax evasion and theft being secondary pursuits. Even today, despite advancements in tax laws, tax evasion remains a skill mastered by the wealthy. It becomes problematic within national boundaries, but in international contexts, it is less so—hence the proliferation of tax havens where the rich secure their "loot." The Indian Ocean, as an international space beyond nation-states, historically defied rigid classifications, making piracy even more nebulous.

Chakraborty's portrayal of Amina al-Sirafi invites readers to question the very idea of piracy: its vernacular usage, concept, and practice. *The qualifiers used throughout the book to describe the central character offer important clues.* The narrative itself has a rather complicated approach to her activities and career. It offers explanations for how she became a pirate. Although the novelist claims Amina comes from "a long line of sea raiders" like the Malabari pirates who adopted piracy as a caste profession over centuries, it was actually her grandfather who first embraced this path.<sup>4</sup> He was a pearl diver from Oman

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2. Sebastian Prange, "A Trade of No Dishonor: Piracy, Commerce, and Community in the Western Indian Ocean, Twelfth to Sixteenth Century," *The American Historical Review* 116, no. 5 (2011): 1269–93, at 1270–71.

3. Shannon Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi* (New York: Harper Voyager, 2023), 83.

4. Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*, 114.

who abandoned that trade for piracy. Her father, an orphan turned pirate, hailed from Sur in Oman, but he found the geographical title Sirafi after Siraf in Persia attractive, and he used it as his last name.

Amina has been retired for about a decade, living peacefully with her mother and daughter off the shores of Salalah in Oman. However, circumstances force her to return to the sea in search of the daughter of one of her former crew members. No longer a pirate, she takes on the role of a good Samaritan compelled to rescue a teenage girl while also safeguarding her own daughter from peril along the journey. Yet this is only part of the narrative, as her identity, shaped by her former profession, continues to surface throughout her travels, prompting various descriptors and qualifiers in the book.

Much of the story is constructed through Amina's own words, as seen in both the introduction and conclusion, making her self-descriptions a key focus. Additionally, the scribe, who is transcribing and shaping the tale, offers some qualifiers. Taken together, the novel presents multiple layers: how she identifies herself, how friends, relatives, and admirers perceive her, and how foes or conscriptors discredit her.

Amina's self-descriptions range from neutral to regretful. She introduces herself as "a sailor" and "someone who knows too well the price of magic."<sup>5</sup> However, she feels self-pity and expresses penitence for her life as a pirate: "I am a criminal with no political loyalties"; "I'm a sinner very much relying on the 'Most Merciful' aspect of my Lord. I'm a former *pirate*"; "I am a pirate. A smuggler. I care for money alone"; and "*me*—a criminal, a sinner, a foul-mouthed middle-aged woman."<sup>6</sup> She also refers to herself as "some supposed lady pirate" and "a retired bandit."<sup>7</sup>

Her foes and conscriptors (such as Salima and Falco) weaponize her regret and remorse to degrade or exploit her. For instance, Falco tells her: "Some say you are a heinous witch, others a siren who uses her beauty to lure honorable men into sin."<sup>8</sup> Salima attempts to insult her by calling her "a thief and a murderess who has slept with sailors in every port from Aden to Kilwa."<sup>9</sup> A Malabar pirate in Socotra brands her as the "Sea Witch of Sur, the Harlot of Horse Thieves," while a Mombasa pirate refers to her as "one extremely untrustworthy woman."<sup>10</sup>

However, not everyone shares these negative perceptions. The scribe in the novel, to whom Amina dictates her story, identifies her early on as "more than a pirate" and "more than a witch," but as "a legend."<sup>11</sup> The scribe further elaborates on her as "a nakhuda [...] who sailed with a cunning crew all over the great Indian Ocean, dashing after magical treasures and talismans, outwitting cruel sorcerers, and battling incomprehensibly powerful

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5. Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*, 8, 13.

6. Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*, 44, 154, 264, 434.

7. Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*, 28, 32.

8. Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*, 272.

9. Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*, 144.

10. Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*, 399.

11. Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*, 3.

creatures from legend.”<sup>12</sup> Her non-human husband, Raksh, describes her as an “explorer,” asserting: “You may be a pirate now, nakhuda, but it is neither crime nor gold that makes your heart beat. You are an explorer.”<sup>13</sup> Dunya, the kidnapped/runaway girl, tells her: “My father said you were the bravest and cleverest person he’d ever met, an adventurer like Sindbad the Sailor.”<sup>14</sup> Raksh introduces her to the peris as “one of the most talented sea captains in her world.”<sup>15</sup> Amina herself contemplates this duality: “Setting down my adventures, my stories, and getting acclaim not as a thief but as a traveler. An explorer like the great chroniclers of our age. Someone honorable and venerated.”<sup>16</sup>

Positive descriptors emerge even from her foes. Falco, despite being an antihero, confesses: “I must admit I am glad to find you what you obviously are ... a warrior.” He also quotes another person who described her as “an adventurer, an explorer—the most extraordinary person he had met in a very long time.”<sup>17</sup>

Despite all these multiple layers and nuances, the book conveys the central idea that piracy is a crime and a sin. Yet the narrative grapples with whether Amina herself considered her actions criminal or merely adventurous. Her occasional self-perception as an explorer and adventurer contrasts with the overarching framing of herself (and piracy) as criminal and sinful. This unresolved tension might reflect literary genres that transform villains into heroes, questioning what truly constitutes criminality. Amina is consistently addressed as nakhuda and Captain al-Sirafi, underscoring her role as a ship captain rather than a conventional pirate. Perhaps future instalments in the series will reveal more about her elusive past or what qualifies her as a pirate in terms of her intentions and actions.

For now, let us conclude by noting that, indeed, the definition of piracy is elusive—even when one confesses to being a pirate (though how many pirates in history have ever done so!). In defining piracy or labeling someone a pirate, the question is: what collective and social motivations and actions are we weighing, and are we not passing subjective moral judgments rather than objective, rational, or legal ones? In other words, what renders piracy sinful is not only the actions involved—such as theft and violence—but also the motivations. While some motivations can indeed be universally ill, others may be rooted in the pursuit of a greater good for a community—especially when that community is suddenly confronted by cannons and weapons along routes they once traveled freely, as happened when the Portuguese turned their guns on the Malabar, including Kunhali Marakkars.

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12. Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*, 468.

13. Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*, 264.

14. Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*, 302.

15. Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*, 388.

16. Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*, 266.

17. Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*, 272, 276.