

Narratives of hybridity: Third space in the Ibis Trilogy

Gé Speelman

Protestant Theological University, The Netherlands
ge.speelman@outlook.com

Abstract

Many nineteenth-century European authors have written novels in which the colonization process played a background role. Much rarer are contemporary literary reflections by colonized people. In an attempt at reconstruction of their points of view, present-day author Amitav Ghosh tries to give the colonized people voice in his historical novels. In his Ibis trilogy, he makes “the subaltern speak”¹ in a diversity of voices. In this rendering of the narrative of emerging colonialism from the viewpoint of subalterns, Ghosh pays special attention to situations of hybridity that are created by the colonial master-narrative. “Hybridity” is a concept that was developed by Homi Bhabha.² In this article, I want to investigate how hybridity functions in the Ibis trilogy of Ghosh, especially in his novel *Sea of Poppies*, and whether hybridity, according to Ghosh, creates a liberating alternative discourse to deal with the traumas of colonialism.

Keywords

Hybridity; liminality; third space; colonialism; mission; pilgrimage

Amitav Ghosh and the other cosmopolitanism

In 2012, the Indian writer Amitav Ghosh gave a lecture to an Egyptian audience in which he goes back to the period he spent in a village in Egypt in the early 80s, when he was an anthropology student. He shares the

-
- 1 Gayatri Spivak, “The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives.” *History and Theory* 24, no. 3 (1985): 247–272.
 - 2 Homi Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817.” *Critical Enquiry* (Autumn 1985): 144–165.

hilarious moments when he was trying to speak Egyptian and the language mishaps between him and his hosts.³ Underneath these misunderstandings however, he discovers unexpected areas of common ground. For instance, the fascination of his Egyptian fellaheen friends for Bollywood movies, and the fact that all water pumps in the surrounding area are Indian made. Globalisation processes are a natural part of the lives of these farmers, yet these globalization processes do not only fit in with the rhetoric and practices of dominant Western political and economic power. The globalization Ghosh sees at work, he explains to his audience, is the result of the spirit of decolonisation that brought about the non-alignment movement of Nehru, Nkruma, Nasr and Suharto. He says:

Yet it is also worth remembering that the Non-Aligned Movement as such was merely the institutional aspect of something that was much broader, wider, and more powerful: this, as I said before, was the post-war ethos of decolonization, which was a political impulse that had deep historical roots and powerful cultural resonances. In the field of culture, among other things, it represented an attempt to restore and recommence the exchanges and conversations that had been interrupted by the long centuries of European imperial dominance. (...)

These interruptions were precisely that – temporary breakages – the conversations never really ceased. Even in the 19th century, the high noon of Empire, people from Africa, Asia and elsewhere, sought each other out, wrote letters to each other, and stayed in each other's homes while traveling.⁴

The oeuvre of Ghosh is devoted to what he calls 'xenophilia', the feeling of connectedness that can arise between strangers. This is, according to Ghosh, a common human trait, even more strongly present in those who do not belong to the privileged casts. His books are an attempt to show the world through xenophilic, but non-privileged eyes. Here, he comes

3 Amitav Ghosh: Confessions of a Xenophile. [Online]. Available: <http://www.amitavghosh.com/essays/xenophile.html>

4 Ghosh, "Confessions of a Xenophile."

close to what Kwame Anthony Appiah calls cosmopolitanism.⁵ In his book *Cosmopolitanism* Appiah distinguishes two trends: one is the idea that “we” have obligations to others who are not members of our communities on the basis of our common humanity.⁶ The other is that we do not only take into account the value of “human life” but also of specific human lives in their own context.⁷ This means that cosmopolitanism always has two strands: universal concern *and* respect for legitimate difference. These two concerns often clash. What is good and true, our values, are at the basis of our being human. These values are again both universal and specific. Appiah makes the point that both ethical universals and specific human experiences are often transmitted not in the form of laws, but of *stories*. “We would not recognize a community as human if it had no stories.”⁸

Amitav Ghosh is a storyteller, both in his non-fictional and his fictional work. His extensive oeuvre is an attempt to tell the story of colonialism, seen through the eyes of the colonized. Ghosh’s simultaneous emphasis on both humankind’s diversity and universality is very close to what Patrick Colm Hogan calls “particularist universalism”.⁹ In order to bring both particularity and universality about, the protagonists in Ghosh’s novels are not prototypes of a certain class, ethnicity, or religion. They can always be characterized as in some ways hybrid creatures. They never fit into the neatly designed boxes of race, gender, or culture. Indeed, they are the exemplary representatives of what Bhabha calls hybridity. This is certainly the case in his magnum opus, the *Ibis* trilogy, that consists of three novels: *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015).

The design of the *Ibis* Trilogy

Ghosh started writing the *Ibis* novels out of a fascination for the Indian diaspora, created by the use of contract laborers in the plantations of colonial

5 Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a world of strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company 2006).

6 *Ibid.*, XV

7 *Ibid.*, XV

8 *Ibid.*, 29

9 Quoted in Tuomas Huttunen, “Narration and silence in the works of Amitav Ghosh.” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 38, no. 2 (2000): 28-43.

powers. Contract labour brought people from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh to places like Jamaica, Surinam, Fiji and Mauritius. The Indian diaspora, meant to serve colonial purposes, thus created a type of “cosmopolitanism” from underneath.

In the *Ibis* trilogy, four ships play a role. The first is the *Ibis*. In part one, *Sea of Poppies*, this ship is used to transport Indian contract laborers from Calcutta to Mauritius. The second ship, the *Anahita*, is designed as a trading ship for the opium trade from Bombay to Canton. The third ship, the *Redruth*, brings rare plants from East to West and the other way around. In the third book, as a culmination, a fourth ship, the *Hind*, is a transportation ship bringing Anglo-Indian troops to Canton to fight a war against the Chinese. The four ships represent the ways in which the colonial project connects different regions in the world.

The background of the novel is the First Opium War (1839-1842). The First Opium War evolved around the banning of all trade in opium by the Chinese government. The British were the major stakeholders in this trade; they had built up a system of opium factories in their part of India, and derived great profits from it. The war ended in a British victory. From 1842 on, the Chinese were forced to admit foreign traders to their soil, and to allow free trade in opium.

Ghosh brings in the perspectives of widely diverse protagonists who are in some way involved in the events that led up to this war. The first book, *Sea of Poppies*, describes the genesis and development of the community of the crew and passengers of the *Ibis*. The second part, *River of Smoke*, concentrates on the community of English and American traders, Parsis from Bombay, Chinese middlemen, and Indian interpreters from Bengal in Franqui town, the small enclave just outside Canton that is reserved by the Chinese government for foreign traders. In the third book, *Flood of Fire*, the community of English officers, Rajput soldiers and their camp followers in the British-Indian army are one of the foci. The opium war brought the colonial project of the British into a next stage: from the colonial phase where trading as an exchange of goods was at the centre to a high capitalistic stage where cash crops were the motor. The trilogy describes the impact of these developments on the Indian countryside, the Chinese city of Canton (including the rural island of Hongkong nearby),

the outlying areas for cash crops like Mauritius, and Indian urban areas like Bombay and Calcutta. The narrative is clear about the cost of human suffering by the subalterns and the high-flown justifications given by the British representatives of power. In that sense, Ghosh is certainly partisan. But, as the novels deal with the relationships between colonizers and colonized, they also have to address the less clear positions between the lines, in short, the hybrid situations created by colonialism.

Homi Bhabha on hybridity and third space

In his famous essay of 1986, “Signs taken for wonders”,¹⁰ Homi Bhabha opens with a description of Christian identity formation in the early colonial context. He quotes extensively from an article in the *Missionary Register*, edited by the Church Missionary Society, of January 1818.

The article deals with the meeting in 1817 of a “native” missionary, Anund Messeh, with a group of people under a tree just outside Delhi.¹¹ The missionary article describes how they tell him that they have read a translation in Hindustani of the Gospel that has been dealt out to them at the Pilgrimage to Hardwar six years previously. They are sure this book comes from God. Anund Messeh explains that the English Sahibs are the ones through whom God has sent this book to them, which triggers the reply: “Oh no, that cannot be, for they eat flesh!” In the missionary account of the meeting, the conversation partners of Anund Messeh tell him they have decided to break free from “the tyrannical authority of the Brahmins” as they have, through their reading of the new book, developed an indifference to caste distinctions. They claim that for the time being, they have to return to their harvest, but they may meet again next year. And they are prepared to be baptised then, but they would never take the Eucharist from the hand of meat-eating Englishmen.

Bhabha comments on this narrative in two ways. In the first place, he highlights the role of the “native missionary”, Anund Messeh. He characterizes the way this man communicates the Gospel as “lifeless

10 Bhabha: “Signs Taken for Wonders.”

11 *Missionary Register*, January 1818 (quoted by Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonders,” 145).

repetition of chapter and verse”.¹² Messeh is in the eyes of Bhabha the product of the missionary strategy to teach English in Mission schools so that “should any of them be converted, accustomed as they are to the language, manners and climate of the country, they might soon be prepared to be of great usefulness in the cause of religion.”¹³ Anund Messeh is, in other words, an example of a go-between who serves purposes that are useful in the eyes of colonial authorities. Although at the beginning of the colonisation process, British government representatives were resisting missionary pressure to provide English education for the colonized, there were other Government voices later on that advocated the training of a class of native “Teachers, Translators and Compilers of useful works for the masses.”¹⁴ Such ambassadors of the English language and manners would of course never really “belong” to the civilisation of their masters, and yet they would mirror the values that seemed so supreme and unassailable for these masters.

Another comment of Bhabha is devoted to the way the anonymous interlocutors of Anund Messeh, according to the article in the *Missionary Register*, twist and bend the conversation they have about the Gospel in order to highlight their own point of view, their own interests. Reading between the lines, Bhabha concludes that these visitors to the Hardwar pilgrimage seem to have drawn their own conclusions from their reading of the Gospel. They seem to be unwilling to accept the English as the source of the word of God, and they seem to respond evasively to Messeh’s suggestion

12 Possibly, Homi Bhabha fell into the trap of borrowing the dominant gaze for his representation of the protagonists in the article in the *Missionary Register*, depriving them of the agency they did have. For a very different perspective on both the pilgrims and Anund Messeh, see: Bill Bell, “Signs Taken for Wonders: An Anecdote Taken from History.” *New Literary History* 43, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 309-329. Bill Bell discovers that the group of pilgrims, who remain anonymous in the article of Bhabha, are in fact a religious group called Saadhs. They are followers of Jogi Das and broke away in 1658 from mainstream Brahmanism. Possibly under the influence of Portuguese missionaries, the teachings of Jogi Das involved belief in one God, monogamy, and a complete rejection of all caste distinctions. Far from being ignorant natives who had to defend their Hindu heritage by a sly civility, these people may have been more active agents who discovered an affinity with the Gospel handed to them at the Hardwar pilgrimage.

13 *Missionary Register*, May 1817, p. 187 (quoted by Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonders”).

14 Thomas Babington MacCauley, “Minute on Education” (1835), quoted in Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonders,” p. 148.

that they could be baptized and receive the Eucharist. “maybe we meet next year”, could be interpreted as a polite refusal. And yet, the effect of this “English book” is such that the connection with one aspect of their culture, the authority of the Brahmins, seems to have been undermined.

Both the performance of Anund Messeh and that of his conversation partners show typical aspects of what Bhabha calls hybridity. What does Bhabha mean by “hybridity”? Colonial authority itself is hybrid and not pure and absolute, because, as he asserts, the native “talks back”, gives his own twist to the message of the missionaries, and this is already an incipient diminishment of its normativity. Despite essentialist claims for the purity of their culture, the colonial masters prove themselves constantly to be ambivalent. In order to gain authority, there must be an assumed consensus about the rules. But at the same time, in order to gain and preserve power, the rules have to constantly be broken.

And on another level, ambiguity seeps in when the colonial subject is assumed to be totally different, has to be so, whereas at the same time, the colonial subject has to be taught to share the blessings of colonial civilisation, has to be encouraged to get acquainted with English culture. The result being the emergence of something new in the world. Where the power of colonial forces is being slyly challenged and undermined, and where new alliances are being forged between subalterns.

For Bhabha, hybridity offers a challenge for collective identities that try to set up authority by claiming unanimity, unbrokenness, purity. Between the dominant colonial power that tries to rely on such a narrative of purity, and the subservient ethnicities and cultures, there is a third space “in between the designations of identity”, and he adds that “this interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy”.¹⁵

The writings of Bhabha have led to a spate of postcolonial books and articles celebrating the powers of hybridity. Seen as the possibility to break through the dichotomy of master and slave, hybridity is indeed something to celebrate. Postcolonial literary deconstruction, and form of “subaltern” literature attempts to “talk back” and redefine the colonial narrative. It

15 Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 4.

also tries to create narratives beyond the dichotomy of “perpetrators” and “victims”, a dichotomy that manages to conserve the master narrative of colonial rule. If the colonized are nothing but helpless victims, how could they ever get a voice of their own? If the categories that were shaping the colonial narratives, allocating subject populations to nicely delineated compartments and keeping people imprisoned in their ethnic and cultural niches, maintain their hold on present-day narratives, how to escape from the stranglehold of a history told by the victors? The need for narratives, both fictional and non-fictional problematizing the dominant accounts of colonial relationships, and therefore the need to look beyond the received categories ascribing power exclusively to one category of people is evident.

The question is, does this project of celebrating hybridity deal thoroughly enough with the unequal power relations under which the hybridising of individuals and cultures takes place? After all, hybrids are often written about in a derogatory fashion. This was certainly the case at the height of colonial power in the Nineteenth Century. Children of ethnically mixed parentage were called “half-breeds”, “bastards”, and sexual relationships between colonizers and colonized were only tolerated when they were not seen as a “true” marriage. Is the celebration of hybridity indeed a way forward? What powers decide who is a hybrid and who is not? What are the workings of hybrid people, languages, and cultural customs? Do they really enable changes in the dominant culture or are they merely scratching the surface? Are the effects of translations from one context to the other gauged deeply enough?

As an author who engages deeply with hybridity, Ghosh addresses these questions through his narrative work. I want to analyse the first book of Ghosh’s trilogy, *Sea of Poppies*, trying to trace the use he makes of hybridity, in order to find out how the interplay of structures of power and hybrid counter-power interact. Can readers of these novels develop a postcolonial awareness without losing sight of the heritage of colonialism, that goes on to manifest itself in the enduring power imbalances in today’s world?

The company aboard the Ibis

The Ibis, a former slave-ship, has been bought by Benjamin Burnham, a prosperous English businessman residing in Calcutta. Burnham wants to employ it for the transport of opium from Calcutta to Canton. When the Ibis sets sail from its home port Baltimore, its crew consists of the captain, two mates and nineteen sailors, and of twenty-year-old Zachary Reid who has been hired as the ship's carpenter. Reid is a "coloured" boy. His father was the master of his enslaved mother. Both he and his mother have been freed at their masters'/fathers' death.

On the trip to Calcutta, the ship meets with many mishaps and by the time they reach Cape Town, the few crew members who are left abandon ship, so that the captain is forced to hire a band of lascars. The lascars are described as a very mixed and hybrid group of sailors. They "(...) had nothing in common, except the Indian Ocean; among them were Chinese and East Africans, Arabs and Malays, Bengalis and Goans, Tamils and Arakanese."

By lack of other officers, Zachary Reid is promoted to the position of first mate or "malum" in lascar speech, and he becomes "Malum Zikry" (from Zachary). When the captain also dies during the trip to Mauritius, Reid has the run of the ship in close cooperation with the leader of the lascars, Serang Ali (a Rohingya from Arakan).

By the time they arrive in Calcutta, the ship's owner Benjamin Burnham decides to use the Ibis first for the transport of a group of contract laborers who are shipped from India to the Island of Mauritius to work on the sugar plantations there. The plantations have lost their personnel after the abolition of the slave trade. As a former slave ship, the Ibis is eminently useful for the transport of a large bulk of people. On board there are also two prisoners who have to serve a sentence of penal forced labour. Zachary Reid/Malum Zikry becomes the second mate on this trip from Calcutta to Mauritius.

An important storyline in the book concerns Deeti, a Rajput¹⁶ woman from Uttar Pradesh who works in the poppy fields that provide the British

16 Rajputs are a class of warriors that often served in the British colonial army as sepoy. Some of them were wealthy landowners. Deeti is from a relatively well-off family, but

factory in the neighbourhood of the city of Ghazipur with the material for the production of opium. Deeti still remembers the time when poppies were a small by-product in a corner of the fields where wheat and lentils were the main harvest; the poppies could then be employed to create traditional medicines for headaches and fevers. Now, all she sees around her are poppies. The farmers are forced by their debtors to produce unending cash crops of poppies. These debtors are mainly the local landlords, the zamindars, but they are in turn urged on by their British creditors. Deeti's husband, who works at the opium factory, has become an addict. When he dies, Deeti escapes from a prospect of being burned on his funeral pile as a Sati. In her escape, she is guided by another villager, Kalua, a *Chamar*¹⁷ who becomes her lover. They decide to sign up as contract workers and end up aboard the *Ibis* in a motley company of other "Girmityas"¹⁸ from all over Northern India.

On board with them is Neel Rattan Halder, the former Raja of Raskali who has been sentenced to forced labour in a manipulated trial with his former business partner Benjamin Burnham. During the trial, Halder has not only lost his fortune and prestige, but he has also been handled as a common criminal and had to mix with people of lower casts. The Raja, who is a great lover of English literature, has undergone countless humiliations, but decides to devote himself for the duration of the trip to the care for his fellow prisoner, a Chinese who goes under the name of Ah Fatt, from Canton, who is an opium addict.

Another passenger aboard the *Ibis* is the general manager, or *Gomusta*, of the ship owner Mr. Burnham. He is known as the Baboo¹⁹ Nob Kissin' Pander. The Baboo is a Krishna devotee. He is certain that the Dark Lord Krishna is about to reveal himself to him, and this surmise is confirmed when he discovers in the original list of the personnel of the *Ibis* the

her fortune is diminished because of the addiction of her husband.

- 17 Chamars are also known as Dalits. They have no caste and have to live in special sections of the village, and any contact with high-caste Rajput women is out of the question.
- 18 "Girmit" is derived from the English word "agreement". People who have signed an agreement to work on plantations outside India are known as "girmityas".
- 19 Baboo (also spelled Babu) is an honorary title, equivalent to "gentleman". It is also used for clerks in the colonial time who knew the English language.

annotation “black” behind the name of Zachary Reid. Zachary must be another disguise of the Black Lord, the divine Krishna, who in his *Leelah*²⁰ plays with the perceptions of people. The Baboo removes the ship’s record from the archives, so that nobody is aware of Zachary’s “blackness”, and he decides to go along with the ship to Mauritius in order to see how Krishna is going to involve himself into the salvation of the world.

The one protagonist on board of the *Ibis* who could be said to be completely “European” in Nineteenth-Century eyes is Paulette Lambert, who grew up in the botanical gardens of Calcutta, where her father was the head gardener. Paul Lambert had previously fled France under Napoleon because of his revolutionary ideas, and he has raised his daughter with a mix of Voltaire, Rousseau, and botany. The other half of her education Paulette got from her foster mother (her mother died when she was born), a Bengali fisherman’s wife, and her Bengali foster brother Jodu. Although Paulette is fluent in Bengali and in French, her English is errant and hesitant. After the death of her father, she ends up in the household of Benjamin Burnham, but she flees from his advances with the help of her “brother” Jodu, and she decides to join the *Girmityas* to find her fathers’ associate in Mauritius. Dressed in a sari and with her *Ghungta*²¹ before her face, she cannot be distinguished from the other women on board. She assumes the identity of “Putleshwari”, a Brahmin girl going to Mauritius in order to get married. On board, she meets to her surprise with her stepbrother Jodu who has finally realised his dream to become a real lascar, and signs up with the crew of Serang Ali, so that he can keep an eye on his “sister”.

In the trip to Mauritius, the ship’s crew is completed by the addition of a new English captain, Mr. Chillingworth and a first mate notorious for his cruelty, Mr. Crowle. Besides, there is a company of *Maistries*, order keepers, under the leadership of the Rajput soldier Byro Singh. They have to keep the contract labourers in check in case they rebel against their fate or their treatment. Most of the *Maistries* are former sepoy, soldiers in the

20 *Leelah* means “play”. It is a term used by Bhakti devotees to indicate that God creates what s/he creates out of pure joy. It can also indicate the different shapes the godhead takes in order to participate in his/her creation.

21 A face veil, worn by high-caste Indian women in the Nineteenth Century. Now only used in the wedding ceremony.

Anglo-Indian army; they represent the complicity of local forces with the colonial project.

This is the company that sets off from Calcutta in order to cross the “Black Seas” into the unknown country of Mareech,²² that may or may not be -in the imagination of the contract workers on board- equal to the Underworld.

Hybridity in the narrative of the Ibis: ethnicity, gender, language

There are many areas of hybridity in the narrative. I will briefly touch upon three of them: ethnicity, which is closely connected to status, gender, and sexual orientation and language.

Ethnic hybridity

From the onset of the narrative, Ghosh creates confusion about the meaning of ethnicity. Is it to do with genetic codes or with cultural codes? How to classify the ethnicity for instance of Zachary Reid, who discovers that in the new situation nobody is aware of his “blackness”, and who suffers agonies in his fear that he will be found out and exposed as a fraud? This fact alone is astounding. If “blackness” is only a category on paper (without knowing, none of the people surrounding him can see that Zachary is black), then what is the meaning of blackness?

Paulette feels attracted to Zachary but is rebuffed by him until she is confronted with his mixed background- then he is not so different from her. Although Paulette has a French-born father and mother, she feels torn between ethnicities because of her upbringing together with her brother Jodu, and Bengali is closer to her heart than French, let alone English. Another ethnically hybrid person is the Cantonese prisoner Ah Fatt, who is the son of a Parsi merchant and a Cantonese mother who belongs to the boat people along the Pearl River. In part two of the trilogy, *River of Smoke*, his ethnicity, and that of other sons of absentee fathers is one of the major themes. Here, Ghosh shows that a mixed parentage can be a curse as well as a blessing. Informal marriages, fathers who hesitate to own their offspring,

22 The name given to Mauritius by the Girmityas.

create identity struggles with their sons. They yearn for recognition, but instead they have to hide their true selves.

The company aboard the Ibis is in short, in many respects a prime example of ethnic hybridity. Hardly any of the protagonists can brag of their “purity” of descent, and those who can (like Neel Rattan Halder, Paulette and Deeti) have lately undergone a thorough declassification. In fact, most inhabitants of the Ibis have undergone an upheaval in their status. The colonial project has caused a new sort of mixity, where a former Raja is sent to a penal colony and the outcast Kalua becomes the partner of Deeti, a high-caste Rajput woman- both have to be evasive about their past to their shipmates. A sign of that mixed state is the fact that almost all of the protagonists have assumed new names when they set foot on the deck of the Ibis.

This confusion of status and ethnicity is causing a great amount of unrest among the Girmityas. How could they share a narrow space with people of so many different casts? Deeti is discussing this with Paulette/ Putleshwari.

Aren't you afraid, she (Deeti) said, of losing caste? Of crossing the Black Water, and being on board with so many sorts of people? “Not at all”, the girl replied, in a tone of unalloyed certainty. “On a boat of pilgrims, no one can lose caste and everyone is the same: it is like taking a boat to the temple of Jagannath, in Puri. From now on, and forever afterwards, we will all be ship-siblings – *jahazbhais* and *jahazbahens*- to each other. There'll be no differences between us.”²³

Gender hybridity

In the past, his fellow devotee to Krishna, his guru mother Ma Taramonee, had promised Baboo Nob Kissin' that he would become a real *Gopi*, a female lover of Krishna, at the time when the Dark Lord would manifest himself in this world.²⁴ On setting out for the journey with the Ibis, Nob Kissin' puts on the wide saffron robe that his female guru Ma Taramoni always used to wear and he lets down his long hair, as a sign of his advanced state

23 Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* (Great Britain: John Murray, 2009), 372.

24 In the devotion for Krishna, all devotees, both men and women, put themselves in the position of the Lord Krishna's female lovers, the *Gopis*. Krishna devotion is therefore connected to the striving to “feminize” the soul.

of devotion for Krishna. Thus, het takes the outward signs of femininity in his journey to unification with his Lord.

The Baboo is not the only one on board who does not fit neatly in the categories of gender and sexual orientation. One member of the lascar crew, Mamdoo-tindal (a Shia from Lucknow) dresses up in a sari and changes overnight in an enchanting dancer, Ghaseeti-begum.²⁵

A third person who defies the dominant concepts of sexual purity is the English first mate, the cruel Mr. Crowley. He hides his strong attraction towards Zachary Reed under a pattern of bullying him, as he suffers from his “aberrant” sexuality and tries to suppress it.

Hybridity in language

The Ibis trilogy is a celebration of the creativity that arises from the mixing of languages- new concepts can be found, but also the babel of different things is a source of unending misunderstandings.²⁶ The readers of the book are often puzzled by the different pidgin languages²⁷ employed by the protagonists, as there are no explaining footnotes. Therefore, the readers are submitted to the same confusion and ambiguity that the protagonists sometimes experience. They have to interpret as best as they can.

The language of the lascars is a miracle in that it creates a mix of many other languages and yet is understandable to all. If this were not possible, the sailing of the ship could not be accomplished. The captain and mates give their orders in English, which is immediately translated by the Serang into the lascar pidgin.²⁸ When Zachary has to command the ship on the

25 *Sea of Poppies*, 199

26 John Kerzer, “Amitav Ghosh’s zubben: Confluence of Languages in the Ibis Trilogy.” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 54, no. 2 (2018):187–199.

27 The term “pidgin” is derived from the Chinese pronunciation of the English “business”; this term was employed in the context of Anglo-Chinese contacts in the early Nineteenth Century. “Pidgin” means a trading “language” making use of a simplified grammar and employing words from different languages. The Anglo-Chinese pidgin employs mostly English words but uses the Chinese grammatical structures as a frame.

28 Ghosh comments on the miracle of the double language - English and Pidgin - that enabled the ships sailing the Indian Ocean to stay afloat: “But what really sets a sail ship apart from other machines is that its functioning is critically dependant on language: underlying the intricate web of its rigging, is an unseen net of words without which the articulation of the whole would not be possible. [... A] sail ship is precisely a vast,

journey to Calcutta due to the sickness of the captain, he tries to steer a course to the harbour of Mauritius, Port Louis. Serang Ali soon puts him to rights about his ability to command:

What for malum Zikri make big dam bobbery'n so muchee buk-buk and big-big hookuming? Malum Zikri still learn-pijjin. No sabbi ship-pijjin. No can see Serang Ali too muchi smart-bugger inside? Takee ship Por'Lwee-side three days, look-see.²⁹

Communication is possible through the very babel of voices. It is not perfect communication: there are as many misunderstandings and errors as flashes of recognition and real understanding in the conversations of the Babylonian crew of the Ibis.

In contrast to the inhabitants of the Ibis, the English protagonists mostly know only English and some kitchen Hindustani. Because the English do not know the real languages of their subjects, an unending number of translators, linksters, munshi's, shroffs, and gomusta's fill the pages of the novel. The English colonizers can only rule by the mediation of middlemen.³⁰ This dependency on translation by these hybrid middlemen might put the colonizers at a disadvantage, were it not so that they see their very ignorance as a source of superiority. Theirs is the language of authority, but it is an authority not necessarily accompanied by any deep knowledge of their subjects. In their system of values, not their ignorance of Bhojpuri, Bengali, Chinese or any of the countless languages in their empire is to be deplored, but the lack of command of the proper English of the others. After all, people like Baboo No Kissin' do not speak "the Queen's English". And yet, perfect English will not enable their subjects to be the equals of their masters. Even a faultless English speaker like Raja Neel Rattan Halder finds out that his extensive knowledge of Shakespeare and the Romantic poets, his love for English culture, does not safeguard him from humiliation and rejection.

floating lexicon, with thousands of named parts – not just every rope, but every gasket, leech and pin has its own name." <http://amitavghosh.com/blog/?p=5219>

29 *Sea of Poppies*, 18

30 Kerzer, "Amitav Ghosh's zubben."

The Ibis as a third space: the notion of pilgrimage

For the travellers on board of the Ibis, their stay on board is both frightening and entrancing. They enter a new world, as they embark on a journey with an uncertain outcome. And in this small space between two worlds, new social constructions seem to become possible. As Paulette explains to Deeti, they are in a state of pilgrimage, and during their journey social differences start to fade.

The limbo that is represented by the Ibis can be compared to what Victor and Edith Turner write about the liminal stage during a pilgrimage.³¹ Turner compares the pilgrim's journey to a form of initiation. Like an initiand, the pilgrim moves between two worlds, two realities.³² Between these worlds, both pilgrim and initiand go through a rite de passage, and both are in a liminal stage. This stage is characterized by the experience of *communitas*, where participants are intensely related to others of the group, and where prescribed roles are to a great extent falling away. The *communitas* is one of association rather than of ascribed status.³³

Turner remarks that there is a difference between initiation rituals and pilgrimages within the more global religious traditions, however. Initiation rituals take place in small local communities and prepare initiands for a future role within the confines of such a community, whereas pilgrimages temporarily bring together people from very different backgrounds, who are seen as representatives of the whole of humankind. On pilgrimages, one meets the culturally other, with whom one shares the same orientation towards the goal, the sanctuary. Thus, the liminal stage does not prepare for a future stable position with defined roles for all participants, but for a future in which there is space for new social and relational constellations and changes.

The travellers aboard the *Ibis* share the temporary *communitas* of pilgrims; their social status and traditional ties are temporarily in abeyance. Yet such a *communitas* should not be idealized. It does not lead to a perfect brother-

31 Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (2nd ed., New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

32 *Ibid.*, 8.

33 *Ibid.*, 13.

and sisterhood of the pilgrims. The liminal stage of pilgrims does not prevent their journey from being full of struggles and dangers. According to Turner, there are always fractures and ambivalences, because the pilgrim has to deal with both the profane and the sacred side of the journey. Pilgrims have to deal with the weather, negotiate with shopkeepers, try to book the right hotels. They have to make do with the sacred in profane and sometimes difficult contexts.³⁴

The small community on board of the *Ibis* is not an idyll. There are the masteries, who keep order on behalf of their English masters. At one point in the story their leader, Byro Singh, unmaskes the newly assumed identity of Deeti and punishes her violation of Rajput honour by trying to kill her husband, Kalua. The violent first mate, mister Crowley, who takes pleasure in humiliating the prisoners, is a constant reminder of the absolute power of the English commanders of the ship.

The liminal stage is in other words a brief encounter of “non-aligned forces”, but it is set in a narrative frame in which opium, its circulation, and its use for the advancement of British power is the driving force. In this broader narrative, it is clear that every protagonist finds his or her space on a stage that is set by colonialism. Here, the hierarchies of defining power confine their space of action. They are, in other words, seen through colonial eyes as “the other”. Those who, like Baboo Nob Kissin’, have considerable freedom of movement, are still dependent on their British masters. They are the middlemen, who are always also complicit cogs in the great opium game.

Seen in this light, the *Ibis* is not a realised Utopia. Can it then become a heterotopia, a third space in the sense of Bhabha? In some sense the *Ibis* is indeed a place betwixt and between, where new meanings are given to received words and concepts. Yet this third space does not in the end transform the first and second spaces of colonial authority and suppressed subalterns. Ghosh in no way denies the devastation brought about by colonialism.

Hybridity is not the solution to colonial thinking. But it does open a space, where the cracks and the gaps, the multiplicity of positions of both colonizers and colonized can be contemplated. Apart from a few British,

34 Ibid., 22.

Benjamin Burnham the Calcutta trader being a prime example, most of the protagonists are neither completely good nor completely bad. And their complexity is the very basis for hope that other stories may be told, another form of community can be found in the end. By complexifying the grand narrative of the Opium Wars, the cracks in that narrative become visible.

Conclusion

The concept of hybridity launched by Homi Bhabha opens up the possibility to retell the narrative of colonial history in ways and manners that defy the master narrative of a triumphant civilising mission by English, Christian masters over their ignorant subjects. It breaks through neat categories of identity and opens up spaces for the untold smaller narratives. The cracks and inconsistencies of that narrative are made visible, and this is in itself undermining its absolute authority. The counter power of these narratives does not lead to an annulment of the master narrative, however.

The name of the ship *Ibis* could not be chosen more appropriately. In Egypt, the Ibis is the representative of the God Toth, who is the god of magic, writing, wisdom, and knowledge, but who was also identified as Hermes, known for his deception disguise.³⁵

On the *Ibis*, a sea-change takes place for most of the protagonists. They discover new stories, new selves, and the possibility of a new future. For them, the hybridity they experience can be liberating. They are not helpless victims of history. Some of them are able to acquire a freedom they did not have before. One example is Rajput Deethi, who leaves the land where she suffered behind her to build a new life on board of the ship that sails across the Dark Waters.

[She] did not feel herself to be living in the same sense as before: a curious feeling, of joy mixed with resignation, crept into her heart, for it was as if she really had died and been delivered again in rebirth, to her next life: she had shed the body of the old Deeti ...

35 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toth>.

and was free now to create a new destiny as she willed, with whom she chose.³⁶

On the water, where rivers and oceans merge and float into each other, new identities can be forged, new freedoms found.

But this freedom does not annul the loss of freedom for the larger populations of the Indian subcontinent and of China. Within the larger frame of the unfolding British empire, hybridity is not a gift that leads to ultimate liberation. The protagonists experience their own hybridity and that of others as a way to acquire a certain freedom, but it is a freedom against the background of new unimaginable forms of slavery yet to come. And yet, the *Ibis* trilogy celebrates the cosmopolitanism from underneath, the xenophilia of the non-aligned. It tries to see history from their point of view. It is the narrative that missiologists have learned to value as “conversations across boundaries”.

Bibliography

- Appiah, Kwame Anthony 2006. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a world of strangers*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company 2006.
- Bell, Bill 2012. “Signs Taken for Wonders: An Anecdote Taken from History.” *New Literary History* 43, no. 2 (Spring): 309-329
- Bhabha, Homi K. 1985. “Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817.” *Critical Enquiry* (Autumn): 144-165.
- Bhabha, Homi K. 2004. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Ghosh, Amitav 2009. *Sea of Poppies*. Great Britain: John Murray.
- Ghosh, Amitav 2022. “Confessions of a Xenophile”. [Online]. Available: <http://www.amitavghosh.com/essays/xenophile.html>.
- Huttunen, Tuomas 2000. “Narration and silence in the works of Amitav Ghosh.” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 38, no. 2: 28-43.

36 *Sea of Poppies*, 178.

- Kerzer, John. "Amitav Ghosh's *zubben*: Confluence of Languages in the Ibis Trilogy." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 54, no. 2 (2018):187–199.
- Spivak, Gayatri 1985. "The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives." *History and Theory*. 24, no. 3: 247–272.
- Turner, Victor and Turner, Edith. 2011. *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*. 2nd ed., New York: Columbia University Press.