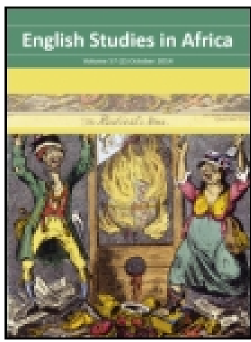

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GENDER DYSPHORIA AND GENDERED DIASPORA: LOVE, SEX AND EMPIRE IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *SEA OF POPPIES*

Tara Leverton

Abstract

A central element of Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* is the manifestation of gender at sea, which distorts dualistic notions of domestic and commercial spheres of influence. The centrepiece of Ghosh's novel – a ship – seems initially presented as a predominately masculine and heteronormative space, but for the presence of a few Indian passengers *en route* to Mauritius. However, an examination of the social dynamics on board the *Ibis* reveals that both passengers and crew are engaged in a variety of attempts to utilize and express their gender and sexuality in ways that undermine the hegemonic narrative described by Celia Freeman, in which the sphere of international commerce is 'masculinized'; for example, the manner in which members of the crew use gendered items of clothing to navigate their way around the enforcements of normativity, and create spaces in which gender and sexual fluidity are possible. The liminal, multicultural world of the sailboat opens up queer possibilities inaccessible on land due to the prevailing impositions of empire. Taking into account Jesse Ransley's claim that 'the gendering of the maritime sphere as male, and the construction of male versus female ... is modern, Western and dualistic', I argue that *Sea of Poppies* is concerned with the ways that love, sexuality and gender effectively shape international politics and trade. Ghosh's depiction of the way romantic love operates within the world of nineteenth century maritime trade – specifically with regard to the character Baboo Nob Kissin – works at once to destabilize Western constructions of masculinity at sea, and to undermine assumptions of an innately secular Western queerness – assumptions Jasbir Puar dubs 'homonationalism', and denounces for their role in twisting the ideals of LGBT liberation to further the goals of empire.

Keywords: sea, ships, gender, queer, clothing, imperialism

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It is common nowadays to hear 'diversity' being spoken of as though it were some thrilling new invention. But it is unlikely that there were ever any more diverse collections of people – albeit only men – than the crews of merchant ships in the age of sail. (Ghosh, 'Of Fanas and Forecastles' 57)

Amitav Ghosh had good reasons to configure the *Ibis* as the focal point of his historical novel, *Sea of Poppies* (2008). Apart from his professed fondness for sailing ships – describing them in 'Of Fanas and Forecastles' as 'perhaps the most beautiful, more environmentally benign machine the world has ever known' (58) – the *Ibis* comprises a site of intersection of the socio-political, cultural and religious lines of the nineteenth century opium trade.

While women are represented as being integral to regional economies which propel Ghosh's cast from one port to the next, the *Ibis* is a male-dominated space; one that presents a microcosm of the social ties that bound people across the nineteenth-century Indian Ocean. On board, political and financial power resides signally in the hands of, as Ghosh notes, 'only men'. The *Ibis*'s small contingent of women arrives as part of the ship's live cargo, cast amidst an overwhelming majority of male sailors and transportees. They form a close-knit group, made up largely of those who have been marginalized by their own communities: Munia, a rape victim whose house was burnt down after she became pregnant; Heeru, whose husband abandoned her; Paulette, an orphaned French girl with dim prospects; and Deeti, a rape victim married to a deceased opium addict, on the run with her unwedded lover.

In 1988, Joan Wallach Scott addressed the absence of gender from history, noting that 'the radical potential of women's history comes in the writing of histories that focus on women's experiences and analyze the ways in which politics construct gender and gender constructs politics' (27). Articulating this potential is one of the signal concerns of the novel; despite their making up a small fraction of the cast, Ghosh chooses repeatedly to emphasize his women's narratives, showcasing their impact on the world below deck and behind the scenes. A key contention of this article is that *Sea of Poppies*, while ostensibly centred on the grand political schemes of the regions and nations complicit in or victims of the opium trade, is more invested in the possibilities presented by a hidden network of familial, social and romantic bonds. These are bonds that connect those characters on whom the trade simultaneously relies, and who it strips of power; those whose stories have historically been imagined peripheral to the interests of international politics and economics. In pursuance of this displacement, Ghosh describes the senior officers and merchants on the *Ibis* expiring in a series of unfortunate events and the carpenter of mixed race, Zachary, being swiftly promoted to second mate. Similarly, the story of an Indian opium addict, ex-soldier and employee of an opium factory is supplanted by the story of his wife and her lover, an impoverished cart driver and rape victim; figures who seem, at first, to have far less obvious relevance to the story of the opium trade.

The second contention of this paper is that the novel presents contemporary Western interpretations of the normative, masculine world of the sailing ship in order to dismantle and subvert them. Women granted agency, gender confusion, cross-dressing, domestic power dynamics, non-binarism and queerness churn beneath the narrative's surface, repeatedly reinforcing Scott's point that 'even those excluded from participation in politics are defined by them' – and more, that the political sphere of the nineteenth century opium trade was wholly dependent on those it sought to exclude. (24)

In 'Making Waves', which investigates the erasure of gender from maritime history, Stephen Maynard argues it has been 'written as though sailors existed entirely apart from women, family and households'. 'The current [revisionist] trend is to recognize that gender history encompasses

more than the history of women by acknowledging that men too are gendered beings' (146). Ghosh's awareness of the role of the domestic, not merely existing within but supporting the matrix of power generated by the colonial-mercantile system, is exemplified by the significance he attributes to households in his text. Deeti's husband's farm, the businessman Burnham's mansion, and the Raja of Raskhali's palatial estate form the three poles between which the *Ibis* slingshots – the Indian farmers supply the raw product that fuels the opium trade, the British compel them to do so and receive the benefits from continued commercial relations with China, and the wealthy rajas stabilise the exploitative system, while failing to see how the colonial-mercantile project endangers their own survival.

How does Ghosh depict the interaction between these domestic and broader commercial spheres of influence? How does the novel's representation of romantic love as instigating mobility contrast to opium's accepted role as a 'killer of desire'? These questions are best considered in the context of the ways in which the novel depicts love, sexuality and gender as effectively shaping international politics and trade. In unsettling logocentric binaries, the text queers the traditions of representation, taking aim at tropes otherwise inscribe the universal validity of a Western system of gender dynamics.

Deeti's Story: Love as Strategy, Family as Weapon

Celia Freeman's 'Is Local: Global as Feminine: Masculine?' argues that that the discourse of globalization has become gendered, with 'masculinized' macronarratives of economy and politics contrasting against 'feminized' micronarratives of culture and ethnography. She contends that 'not only do global processes enact themselves on local ground but local processes and small-scale actors might be seen as the very fabric of globalisation' (1009). The project of examining the role of women in the text must be prefaced by two acknowledgements. The first is of Ghosh's depiction of the way in which micronarratives, the 'grassroots-level' actors and their stories, inform and shape the journey of the *Ibis* from one port to another. The second is of his implicit response, in Freeman's terms, to 'the erasure of gender as integral to social and economic dimensions of globalisation when framed at the macro of "grand theory" level', and the resultant masculinization of international trade. (1008) It is helpful, in this regard, to consider the character and narrative of Deeti.

Despite her distance from the nexus of trade and politics that governs the first half of the novel, Deeti and her shrine serve as a common thread throughout Ghosh's narrative, linking disparate characters' spirituality before they are brought together by material concerns. Deeti's farm and family are the first example in which we see 'local forms of globalization' represented 'not merely as effects, but also as constitutive ingredients' of the global economic system' (1013). Her story begins on her husband's poppy farm, the primary stage in the manufacture of opium. Through her, we see the effect of international trade on family life within her small community; not simply the personal effects of opium upon her marriage and the paternity of her child, conceived of rape after Deeti imbibes opium. We also witness the food shortages brought about by the forced replacement of staple crops by opium, and the consequent economic dependency on British landlords imposed upon Indian farmers (Ghosh 27). When her husband collapses at work, Deeti is forced to travel to the Sudder Opium Factory, where her poppy seeds are refined into a form that can be transported and sold in China. She undertakes a nightmarish tour through the bowels of the factory, as Ghosh details each step of the refinement process and the toll each takes upon the bodies of the factory's employees (88, 87, 89). When her husband

dies, and she is rescued from his funeral pyre by the cart-driver Kalua, their search for a new life brings them into contact with the reality of India's unemployment crisis (187).

Deeti's capacity to navigate the world of commercial enterprise and expose its intimate links to the domestic realm becomes a useful method for survival on board the *Ibis.* Trapped below deck amongst strangers, one of Deeti's first decisions is to establish a makeshift household by identifying everyone on board the vessel as family (217). She takes responsibility for forging social bonds among the women passengers, via an exchange of histories, recipes and stories of marital woe, earning the name *Bhauji* – 'big sister' (223, 395). She takes it upon herself to organize a proper marriage proposal, and then a proper marriage, for Heeru (404). When a fellow passenger's body is in danger of being unceremoniously dropped into the sea, she rallies support for a more appropriate funeral (381). Finding herself bereft of her land-bound shrine, she begins a new one, upon the ship's wooden walls, forming a new ancestry from the people she meets aboard the *Ibis* (363).

The significance of Deeti's actions can be seen in light of Jesse Ransley's indictment of maritime archaeology, which she critiques in terms similar to those Freeman raises in her examination of what she perceives to be masculinized global macronarratives of politics and finance:

> …our narrative is also one of power. So, we exclude the everydayness of boats, everyday relationships with the water and seafaring action. The narrative of struggle, of battle, does not support the seamlessness of some maritime cultures, the quiet, inclusive relationships between people, land, water and boats. (627)

Deeti's championing the everyday aboard the *Ibis*, simulating land-bound domesticity, may seem odd at first given that Deeti is, herself, originally from a notably atypical family within her community. At the beginning of the novel, she is found managing her household affairs without a husband, and is mother to only one, female child, fathered by another man. Despite this unconventional domesticity, she is able to muster the social resources necessary to create cohesion amongst the disparate and embittered passengers of the *Ibis.*

In *Sea of Poppies,* the social ties of family are useful and powerful tools for survival; but only in cases in which the family in question is of one's own creation. When Munia is taken away following the discovery of her affair, it is Deeti who rallies the other passengers to protest, on the grounds that the sailors have taken one of 'our girls' away (433). Power is discovered and consolidated through solidarity, which is found in 'family' – but not biological family. Rather, family offers a repertoire of roles and practices. This is exemplified by Neel's relationship with the Chinese opium addict, Ah Fatt, into whose proximity he is forced following his arrest, and for whose health he becomes responsible. As he tends to the sick Ah Fatt, he reflects upon the nature of personal investment, realizing that he has come to know his charge more intimately than he has ever known his own child, whom he loves, but in whose development he had little involvement (300).

Costumes, Clothing and Class aboard the *Ibis*

Margorie Garber provides insight into the historical phenomenon of cross-dressing at sea, particularly aboard British ships. She draws upon Kirk and Heath's 1984 *Men in Frocks* to describe the common practice of nautical drag shows and the acceptance, even celebration, of

'sea queens' throughout the twentieth century. Describing the extent to which 'the association of sailors and cross-dressing seems to have struck a chord with a more popular and widespread audience', she gestures towards the ubiquitous use of the cross-dressing motif to invoke the maritime in 1940s Hollywood musical comedies (57). It is in her contention that 'the comic treatment of gender crossing in *South Pacific* [for example] is in part a displacement of anxieties about the transgressing of racial boundaries' (58). The two are also articulated in *The Sea of Poppies*.

Firstly, we should note the emphasis Ghosh places on clothing, uniforms and costumes throughout the text. The *Ibis* is a vessel designed to serve the purposes of the colonial market forces that criss-crossed the Indian Ocean, forces that styled themselves as assuredly masculine. Yet even in the general absence of women, when Deeti alights and recreates a version of mobile homestead, the sense of the ship as a masculine commercial entity is subverted.

When the lascar crew is recruited, Zachary scrutinises their clothes:

> Some paraded around in drawstring knickers, while others wore sarongs that flapped around their scrawny legs like petticoats, so that at times the deck looked like the parlour of a honeyhouse. (13)

Not only does the lascar crew perform a version of the feminine, but – constituted by Zachary's gaze – there is a strong sense that they interpose a spectre of femininity into a realm he had previously construed as quintessentially masculine. Later, when Zachary is about to alight at Port Louis, he learns that;

> …among the lascars there were many who boasted of skills apart from sailoring – among them a kussab who had once worked as a 'dress-boy' for a ship-owner; a steward who was also a darzee and earned extra money by sewing an mending clothes; and a topas who had learnt barbering and served as the crew's balwar'. (17)

Elements of the domestic, of self-care and of ornamentation, not only have a place aboard the ship; they are vitally important to Zachary's safety. Serang Ali points out to Zachary the importance of clothes as a status symbol, and even more, as a shield against the possibility of being shanghaied and sold as a slave when he alights at Port Louis (17). Clothes, and changing clothes, are significant aboard the *Ibis,* in contributing to the performance of identity. Clothes confer status; they reflect and articulate character in ways that are distinct from their semiotic import on land. With the dead bosun's clothes and Serang Ali's fine watch, Zachary transitions from a promoted carpenter to a man of stature; a proper sahib.

What other examples of personal navigation are evident in the novel? In what other ways are models of the family (heteronormative or not) used to steer through the perils of the colonial Indian Ocean? Ransley notes that:

> If ever there was a sub-discipline of archaeology blithely and unquestioningly constructing the world, past and present, in terms of contemporary, Western notions of male and female, it is maritime archaeology…If 'queering' is questioning the dominant narrative, then the narrative of maritime archaeology, drawing on Western, modern constructions of gender, as well as the gendering of maritime activity as male, is ripe for queering…'. (622)

Regarding the practicalities and connotations of sexuality at sea, however, Maynard cautions that 'answers to even the most basic questions are still lacking; on the existence of same-gender sexual activity at sea, for example, opinions are all over the map' (149). Ghosh uses a metonymic logic to imply the existence of a world that remains opaque at this historical distance. The studies that exist of sexuality at sea focus on the British maritime world, and very little has been written about lascar sociality and sexuality. What, for example, is the significance of lascar's referring to their ship by a masculine pronoun, and 'referring to the vessels' masts as their manhood'? (171). Maynard advises caution when discussing the categorization of alternative sexualities at sea, particular given that sailors who embarked on sexual relations with their shipmates were unlikely to perceive themselves as belonging to a sexual minority at a time 'when when sodomy was viewed not as a homosexual act nor as a sign of a homosexual identity but rather as a sin capable of being committed by any person' (152).

That said, Maynard allows that;

> …the seamen's cramped living quarters created a densely communal social life. It was also a world which existed apart from dominant land-based institutions of family, church and state. Add to this Rediker's description of seamen's life as one perpetually in motion and one begins to see the possibility of a cultural and material world in which gender and sexual relations were fluid. (150)

The fluidity of sex, sexuality and gender upon the Indian Ocean are frequently alluded to over the course of the novel. This should not be understood as simply a carnivalesque liberation. Ghosh is cognisant of the sanctions that were pursuant on sexual relations aboard a lascar-crewed ship. In 'Of Fanas', he cites the case of Abdul Rhyme, found guilty in 1649 of relations with fellow crewman John Durrant:

> Several witnesses testified that the relationship was consensual, but in the eyes of the ship's captain this served only to deepen the gravity of the offence since it implied that the English boy had willingly entered into a liaison with a 'Hindoosthan peon'. The accused were both sentenced to forty lashes and it was specified that their wounds were to be rubbed with salt…'. (58)

Ghosh, rather than simply reiterating the sense of sanctioned lascar sexuality, is concerned to show the ways in which the ship's crew and passengers navigate their way around the enforcements of normativity and create spaces in which gender and sexual fluidity are possible.

Paulette and Baboo Nob Kissin: The Queerness of Empire

There are three figures in the text for whom cross-dressing and gender fluidity are key. The bosun's mate, Mamdoo, with the aid of kohl and brass rings, habitually adopts the persona of a 'silver-heeled dancer' named Ghaseeti (174). Paulette, the French ingénue whose fascination with the sea and infatuation with Zachary prompt her to stow away aboard the *Ibis,* seriously considers infiltrating the ship disguised as a lascar. Lastly, Baboo Nob Kissin, the Vaishnavite and *gomusta*, whose relationship to gender and sexuality are unique in the text; I shall return to the last shortly.

In James Buchan's review of the novel in *The Guardian*, one particular criticism of Ghosh's novel is the portrayal of Zachary and Paulette's romantic liaisons. Buchan notes that, 'confined by the manners of Jane Austen, these young people simply cannot get going. Ghosh loses patience – and in comes a cutlass-heaving lascar or a farting Sahib' (n.p.). I would suggest, however, that this seeming lack of chemistry and charm in Paulette and Zachary's courtship can be read as a deliberate and subversive narrative manoeuvre on Ghosh's part. We need first to understand the milieu about which Ghosh is writing. As observed by Garber and Maynard, gender ambiguity, sexuality and varying modes of presentation have long been central facets of Western sailing narratives. Isaac Land, in his analysis of the ubiquitous figure of the cross-dressing female sailor in the British broadside ballad, notes that:

> The songs appeared under many different titles, according to the whims of the various broadside publishers, but most recounted a highly generic story with just a few deviations. The story begins with a male lover's departure. In some variants, such as 'Lovely Nancy', he chooses to go to sea and the lovesick heroine fears for his safety. More often, he does not wish to go to sea, but the heroine's wealthy father sends the press gang to abduct him in order to prevent their wedding. Most songs about women warriors, including the best-selling 'Bristol Bridegroom', follow this version. An alternate plot ('The Faithless Captain') involves a pregnant heroine who voyages in disguise but then gives birth on the ship in front of the man who abandoned her, and the assembled crew. Across all of these versions, the heroine does the same things; she dresses like a sailor, passes as a male aboard ship for an extended period of time without discovery, and excels in all her duties, especially during storms and battles. Typically, she serves as a seaman, though in a few versions, she saves the day as a surgeon's mate, a cook, or a servant. Upon discovery, her accomplishments are recognised by the captain and crew, and her valour is rewarded in some form. Her imposture is never punished, and most of the songs supply a happy ending to the romance as well, either with a wedding to her grateful and admiring male lover, or, in some versions, to a captain that she has dazzled with her exploits'. (66–7)

This recurrent plot in nautical literature has proved rich ground for contemporary queer theorists, despite the fact that, typically, in the course of these stories, the rigidity and polarity of the imperial gender system are asserted and legitimated. The daring heroine paradoxically reaffirms gender normativity through her performance of masculinity. And inevitably, once the heroine is discovered, her sexual identity is reaffirmed in a display of triumphant heterosexuality.

Up to a point, Ghosh's story follows this pattern. Paulette knows that her romance with Zachary will be imperilled by external forces, her adoptive family among them, and contemplates disguising herself as a lascar in order to facilitate their elopement. However, the tale then veers radically off-course. After meeting harsh resistance from Zachary, Paulette abandons male dress; instead, she elects to cross-dress into another culture, rather than another gender, sneaking aboard disguised as one of Deeti's companions. Here the novel gestures towards the larger reality of the interaction of contemporary queerness and imperialism.

As surmised by Nikita Dhawan, in *The Empire Prays Back: Religion, Secularity and Queer Critique*, in recent decades mainstream Western LGBTQ activists have been criticized by activists based in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. These critiques are manifold and complex, but are generally rooted in the contention that the goals and methodologies of Western LGBTQ liberation movements have become implicated in what theorist Jasbir Puar has termed

'homonationalism'. A common charge is that, in attempting to further the cause of 'gay rights' in nations in which the social structures surrounding sexuality do not function as they do in Western nations, Western activists are participating in a neo-imperialist project. This can take the form of characterizing all traditional religious institutions as monolithically anti-queer, assuming that the Western understanding of sex and gender are universal. It can also highlight sexuality while ignoring other, more crucial factors in the oppression of non-white, non-Western LGBTQ parties. Puar posits the practice of 'pinkwashing', an example of which is 'Israel's promotion of a LGTBQ-friendly image to reframe the occupation of Palestine in terms of civilizational narratives measured by (sexual) modernity' (337).

Ghosh's depiction of the cultural positioning of 'queerness' in *Sea of Poppies* is particularly salient in light of cultural theorist, Tyler Carson's, contention that 'the unbelonging of a racial-queer other is an essential facet of homonationalism' (2). Ghosh's novel explores a world in which nineteenth-century European notions of gender and sex are present but not universal, nor universally understood and accepted. In traditional Western queer maritime narratives, along the lines of Paulette's fantasizing about the life of her glamorous cross-dressing aunt, their disruptive potential evaporates in the face of reality. Such narratives are far less helpful to Paulette in her quest for love and freedom, but do facilitate her integration into a community of Indian women aboard the *Ibis*.

Moreover, race and culture are inextricably woven into the way romance operates in the novel. While arguing with the sailor Jodu about his romantic interest in Munia, Mamdoo mutters that the dalliances for which Ghaseeti is renowned amongst the crew carry 'different' connotations from those entailed in a Muslim's flirting with a Hindu (384). Kathleen Davis notes Zachary's line of thought when trying to process Paulette's earlier presentation in bonnet and lace with the sari she wears at the moment of their second conversation, and the clothes she plans to adopt for purposes of infiltrating the *Ibis*' crew:

> …to think of that girl dressed in a sarong and head cloth, clinging barefoot to the ratlines … that would be like imagining himself to be in love with a lascar; he would be like a man who'd gone sweet on an ape. (302)

Nowhere is Ghosh's subversion of traditional seafaring 'queer' narratives more evident than in the fact that the ultimate gender insurrectionist comes not in the form of a spiritedly heterosexual white woman, but a corporeally chaste, deeply traditional businessman. While Paulette verbalises the text's attitude to the performative aspects of gender and sexuality – 'Is it forbidden for a human being to manifest themselves in many different aspects?' – it is Baboo Nob Kissin, the Vaishnavite who defies the 'binary narrative' that Ransley finds endemic in maritime archaeology, a narrative which she contends 'cannot support the dynamism of some relationships between people, land and water and the meanings groups construct' (627).

Baboo Nob Kissin's position within the matrix of gender, sexuality and commerce entangles him in the lives of almost every person aboard the *Ibis*. Consequently, he provides a useful point of intersection, at the nexus of several interlocking spheres of influence. To Paulette, he is a family friend, and an ally of her deceased father. To Burnham, he is an underling, whose mercantile talents come to the fore when he suggests the transport of migrant labourers. To Deeti and Kalua, he is responsible for the establishment of the camp in which they reside before boarding the *Ibis*. To Zachary, he is an unwanted hanger-on and devotee. Through his acquaintance with Elokeshi, Neel's lover, he is directly and gleefully responsible for Neel's downfall.

Because he not only occupies, but influences and, in some instances, reorganizes several spheres concomitantly – commercial, religious, domestic – he is also deeply contradictory. He is man of commerce who renounces worldly things; who plots to accumulate money, for the purposes of establishing a temple to honour a god in whose service he is obliged to forego the accumulation of wealth. He employs the profane in the service of the sacred. To Paulette, he notes, 'I may be a man of commerce in your eyes, Miss – and in this age of evil, who is not?' (125). He drifts through the text unanchored by the familial ties and social expectations that mould Deeti's progress, aware of but uninvested in his employer's upcoming war, avoiding the pitfalls that come as a result of insufficient power or the hubris of those who fail fully to grasp the magnitude of the threat colonial rule poses to personal security. Despite being diametrically opposed to Burnham in terms of their attitudes toward material wealth, Baboo Nob Kissin notes how nice it is to work for a 'reasonable man' (125).

His core motivation is the creation of a temple to Krishna, prompting him to integrate himself into the world of commerce. His initial relationship with Krishna is facilitated by his mentor, Ma Taramony. A *brahmachari*, or virginal celibate when he meets her, 'well past the usual age of marriage', he embarks upon a relationship with his her in which the transient boundaries between sexual lust, religious fervour, familial fondness and romantic affection are blurred into near-invisibility. Trained to turn his mind from carnal ruminations,

> …he understood that his feeling for his aunt was but a profane version of what she herself felt for the divine lover of her visions; he understood also that only her tutelage could cure him of his bond to his earthly desires. (145)

Contradicting his desire to be purged of bodily profanity, Baboo Nob Kissin's link to Krishna is birthed in romantic love for his aunt. When asked if he is willing to live celibate for the sake of his love for her, Kissin replies that Taramony is already celibate herself, 'with Krishna' – implicitly positioning her relationship with the divine as romantic (149). Romantic love, thus, becomes a conduit through which he can communicate with the divine; the divine, in turn, becomes a medium through which romantic love and bodily love can be expressed without a breach of celibacy.

Consequently, for the acolyte and for Taramony, there is no way of disentangling bodily from divine love. The divine does not only influence the expression of their love for one another; it is a tangible force, the third member of their relationship. Accordingly, Kissin's first sighting of Zachary, whom he decides to regard as a reincarnation of Krishna, is dominated by sexual/romantic imagery. Zachary's attractive features are 'not unbecoming of an emissary of the Slayer of Milkmaids Hearts'; his shirt is yellow, 'of the same colour as the clothes in which the Joyful Lord was known to disport himself with the Lovelorn girls of Brindavan?'; his shirt is sweat-stained, 'as Careless Krishna's was said to be after the fatigue of tumultuous love-making' (134).

This would be central to a queer reading of the text which takes account of the prominent line of thought in contemporary Western LGBTQ activism: that queerness, if not diametrically opposed to religion, is certainly incompatible with the principles by which the devout are guided. Social anthropologist Dr Sima Shakhsari, in her article 'Queering the Qu'ran?' (2012) in the Arab Studies Institute's *Jadaliyya*, scrutinises the treatment of religion – specifically, of Islam – by secular LGBTQ activists. She argues that 'the rigid binary of secular and religious is a fiction that ignores the reality of people's everyday practices, making any in-between position impossible and unspeakable'. Further,

> ... ‘queer’ has come to mean ridding oneself of religious ‘prejudice’ to be ‘free-thinking’, and to be secular. If the religion-tolerant non-religious ‘queer’ takes pride in the greatness of liberal secularism’s ‘freedom of speech’, while politely smiling at the religious other to be respectful according to the norms of American multiculturalism, the ‘politically-incorrect’ queer takes an in-your-face approach to assert her/his secularism in the name of ‘freedom of speech’. (n.p.)

By contrast, in *Sea of Poppies*, the incorporation of the divine into the fleshly in the love story of Taramony and Kissin opens a space in which the social constructions of gender can be interrogated. In response to Kissin’s confession of love, Taramony states that ‘Krishna was her only man’. He replies that she shall be *his* Krishna, and *he* shall be her Radha (149). When Taramony dies, she promises him that,

> ...my spirit will manifest itself in you, and then the two of us, united by Krishna’s love, will achieve the most perfect union – you will become Taramony… there will be signs… you must follow them wherever they lead, even if they take you across the sea. (152)

The divine will not only facilitate their love, but will enable them to experience the ultimate in bodily intimacy; the total assimilation of Baboo Nob Kissin’s body into Taramony’s. Romantic love and religious purity are both prerequisites for this disruption in the enforcement of gender binarism; and this disruption, as we shall see in a moment, is correlated with international mobility.

Before long, Baboo Nob Kissin’s body changes to accommodate Taramony’s influence. As he insists to Paulette, ‘bosoms are burgeoning, hair is lengthening. New modalities are definitely coming to the fore’ (406). Zachary notes that ‘his shape… had acquired a curious, matronly fullness, and when he swept his shoulder-length hair off his face, it was with the practised gesture of a stout dowager’ (334). Matronliness and motherhood are recurring themes in descriptions of the *gomusta*’s adapting flesh. He considers his transformation of Neel from a ‘self-indulgent sensualist’ into a wary, haggard prisoner as ‘midwifing the birth of a new existence’ (356). Upon entering Neel’s small cell, he is ‘forced into a posture like that of a wet-nurse cupping a pair of sore and milk-heavy breasts’ (425). While trying on Taramony’s dress, Kissin feels his mentor’s spirit flow into him, and hears her voice, informing him that the *Ibis* will transport him to the land in which their temple is to be built (153). Here his journey through the matrix of gender and commerce comes full circle. The building of the temple, in honour of Krishna, is the reason for Baboo Nob Kissin’s voyage, and for his dragging the other characters in his wake; Baboo Nob Kissin’s becoming Taramony sets the voyage in motion; pure romantic love brings about a disruption in the matrix of binary gender; and Krishna is the means through which pure romantic love can be achieved. The divine is incarnated through romantic love and sexual lust, and divine will is expressed through trade and commerce.

Kissin’s becoming Taramony not only runs parallel to, but aids the progression of his business affairs, and, thus, the progression of international trade. He notes that his transformation is leading to his perceiving the world in ‘new, unexpected ways’ (181). As an example of the ‘blinding insights’ that accompany his taking Taramony’s spirit into his body, he recalls how, ‘while travelling in a boat, up Tolly’s Nullah, his eye fell upon a wooden shack, on a stretch of mangrove-covered wasteland’. ‘As if in a dream’, he perceives the creation of the camp

where Deeti and her compatriots will be housed before they are transported across the sea (181). His divine vision enables him to conjure into being another link in the chain of international commerce, but at the same time, he perceives it as a domestic space, a space of temples and cooking, a space which migrants will describe to their children, 'who would return to it over generations, to remember and recall their ancestors' (182).

Positioned against the backdrop of Kissin and Taramony's complex, contradictory romance, it is hardly surprising that Paulette and Zachary's own comes off as tepid and predictable. One could argue that what James Buchan, in his *The Guardian* review, perceives to be the novel's weakest point is, in fact, one of its more ambitious projects; the construction of a transoceanic counter narrative to mainstream queer readings of ships and sailors, and a deliberate undoing of the established Western cross-dressing sailor plot.

Lastly, when told by Burnham that his appearance is 'womanish', Kissin replies: 'Oh no, sir… it is outwards appearance only – just illusions. Underneath it is all same-same'. 'Man and woman?' contends Burnham. 'God made them both as they were, baboon, there's nothing illusory about either, nor is there anything in between.' Baboo Nob Kissin replies, 'Exactly, sir. That is what I am also saying; on this point no concession can be made. Unreasonable demands must be strenuously opposed' (196, 197).

This passage exemplifies the many-layered nature of the novel's depiction of gender. The imperialist Burnham references the Christian god to back up his insistence on the binary nature of gender. Baboo Nob Kissin agrees. But it is impossible to determine whether he is agreeing with Burnham's essentialist worldview, with the assessment that the colonial god does, indeed, rely on a mutually opposing man/woman binary, or with the point that there is nothing 'in between' man and woman, in the sense that gender identities do not exist as a midpoint between two gender poles. The question is made all the more mysterious by Kissin's tendency to use linguistic confusion to advance or elaborate his own interpretation of events (as exemplified by his earlier interaction with Zachary and Serang Ali). Kissin chooses to answer the question by implying that 'demands' are being imposed upon him. These demands are not the authoritative voice of the imperialist gender binary, but the demands of the invisible Taramony, her bond to Krishna, and her prophesised temple.

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