

# BLURRED IDENTITIES AND TRANSNATIONAL SEXUALITY IN AMITAV GHOSH AND SALMAN RUSHDIE'S RECENT FICTION

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**Abstract:** Postcolonial literature has always been interested in exploring what is double, ambiguous, multiform, and migrant. Amitav Ghosh and Salman Rushdie have notoriously dealt with those topics in their novels, such as in their most celebrated *The Shadow Lines* (1988) and *The Satanic Verses* (1988). The postcolonial theory of 1980s pervades their masterpieces, especially considering scholars' focus on the costs of the blurring global phenomena on migrant processes. Tejander Kaur has properly underlined how diaspora experience of the 1980s "has assumed newer and vibrant dimensions. The experience of migrancy and Diaspora also engenders various problems and facts of journeys and relocation in new lands e.g. displacement, up-rootedness, discrimination, alienation, marginalization crisis in identity, cultural conflicts, yearning for home and homeland etc." (Kaur 2008, p. 8). Moreover, Victoria Arana has accurately added that migrants "sought to affirm their personal process of renegotiation, their cultural diversity, and the denial of rigid borders between black and white" (Arana 2005, p. 237). Those prerogatives have been the seeds of a harsh debate begun in 1987 among postcolonial scholars and novelists to point out the inadequateness of the term "Black" and of similar notions, "terms that mask the 'constructedness' of much more complex racial and ethnic identities" (236). Nowadays those same identities have undergone another significant change due to the collapse of historicism and of the centre-periphery dichotomy, as well as to the spread of globalization. In their more recent production – especially in *Sea of Poppies* (2008) and *The Golden House* (2017) – both Ghosh and Rushdie investigate the influence of such phenomena on migrant identity by observing and narrating multiple processes of erection of blurred identities in a changing world. The Golden family in Rushdie's text and Ghosh's *coolies* on the vessel *Ibis* are groups of migrant people who do not hesitate to abandon their beliefs for a "rebirth" in a new host land. By looking for new belongings in foreign lands – else/nowhere places which do not assure to welcome them – migrants from the Asian continent wish to disengage from their past lives and worlds thanks to the acquisition of a new identity, a goal achieved at the expense of deep inner conflicts. The characters of Dionysus Golden and Baboo Nob Kissin are epitomes of that condition. They both embody the difficulties and aspirations of their communities; moreover, in the middle of their migrant journey, they also experience a personal "migration" towards a new gender identity which should lead them to a sort of "reincarnation" into a spiritual – but also a physical and actual – femininity. Gender and migrant identities thus escape from the traditional and usually accepted definitions which see XXI-century young migrants like Dionysus and the respectable *gomusta* of colonial India like Nob Kissin as prototypical emblems of virility. Therefore, in their novels, Ghosh and Rushdie deal with transgender, transnational, and transcultural movements: the vicissitudes of the characters twist and turn through two multicultural microcosms – contemporary New York and the vessel of the East Indian Company *Ibis* – which are temporally distant, but strongly convergent.

**Keywords:** migrant routes/roots, blurred identities, transnational sexuality, postcolonial literature.

## 1. Introduction: seeds of innovative migrant identities from 1980s

Postcolonial literature has always been interested in exploring what is double, ambiguous, multiform, and migrant. The interest in those themes is still deeply alive in the inspiring imagination of two of the finest authors of contemporary postcolonial literature, Amitav Ghosh and Salman Rushdie. In two of their latest works, *Sea of Poppies* (2008) and *The Golden House* (2017), Ghosh and Rushdie describe transgender, transnational, and transcultural movements in two temporally distant, but strongly convergent, multicultural microcosms: contemporary New York and the *Ibis*, a vessel involved in the trades among China, the North India, and the Bay of Bengal on the eve of the first Opium War at the beginning of XIX century. The thought-provoking challenge of connecting those two distant worlds can be carried out thanks to the spatiotemporal continuum created by the two authors, since the themes investigated in Ghosh's scenario can reconduct to Rushdie's more recent setting.

Amitav Ghosh and Salman Rushdie have always dealt with topics of blurred identities and migration in their novels. Their well-celebrated *The Shadow Lines* (1988) and *The Satanic Verses* (1988), for instance, had firstly taken into consideration the condition of trespassing boundaries, both from a private and a public point of view. Ghosh's first work tackles the problem and the consequences of the Indian Partition. In this context, concepts of border, home, and space include intercultural nuances, history of movements, trespassing, and travels. These same topics are often discussed in postmodern geography, also from a postcolonial perspective (Sharma 2013, p. 12), especially considering the strong connection existing between postcolonial literature and spatial literary studies, as recently highlighted also by Dustin Crowley (2020, p. 201). The same perspective has been exploited by Rushdie in the well-known narration of *The Satanic Verses*, where the Anglo-Indian author has gone in depth into the rich connection existing between the movements of migrant subjects and the ambiguities of the same migrant condition, constantly shaped by different environments, people, and situations. Rushdie has also added a corporeal meaning to that condition by introducing the idea according to which the precarity of the migrant existence might be accompanied by the multiformity of the body. "We are not obliged to explain Our nature to you [...] Whether We be multiform, plural, representing the union-by-hybridization of such opposites as *Oopar* and *Neechay* [i.e. Up and Down in Hindi], or whether We be pure, stark, extreme, will not be resolved here" (Rushdie 1988, p. 319), says the divine apparition to Gibreel Farishta in *The Satanic Verses*, thus underlining the double and multiform nature connected to the migrant condition. The suggestion of a connection between the diasporic hybrid identity and a bodily ambivalence is notoriously given by Rushdie also through Saladin Chamcha's remarkable transformation from a human being into a devilish animal (Rushdie 1988).

The postcolonial climate of 1980s, especially concerning the British literary scenario, pervades Ghosh and Rushdie's topics and narrative style. This is particularly true considering the academic and literary discussions about the implications of the blurring phenomenon of migration on the global system. Tejander Kaur has properly underlined how the debate on Diaspora Studies in the 1980s was revigorated by the spread of globalization:

After the economic and political shifts following the new economic order and polarizations across continents and since the spread of the phenomenon of globalization practically to all societies and nation states, Diaspora experience has assumed newer and vibrant dimensions. The experience of migrancy and Diaspora also engenders various problems and facts of journeys and relocation in new lands e.g. displacement, up-rootedness, discrimination, alienation, marginalization crisis in identity, cultural conflicts, yearning for home and homeland etc. (Kaur 2008, p. 8)

Moreover, Victoria Arana has accurately added that migrants "sought to affirm their personal process of renegotiation, their cultural diversity, and the denial of rigid borders between black and white" (Arana 2005, p. 237). Among those fundamental prerogatives, issues of permeability of old and new borders, interchangeability between different personal and national identities, as well as a redefinition of the migrant perspective have been the seeds of a harsh debate begun in 1987 among postcolonial scholars and novelists to point out the inadequateness of the term "Black" and of similar notions, "terms that mask the 'constructedness' of much more complex racial and ethnic identities" (*Ivi*, p. 236). In other words, from 1980s onwards, we have been witnessing to an epochal change in terms of definition of personal and national identities, with a general tendency towards the blurring boundaries which define contemporary personalities. Nowadays, every notion of identity seems to have lost its original meaning with the provincialization of Europe. In particular, Chakrabarty points out that,

To provincialise Europe was precisely to find out how and in what sense European ideas that were universal were also, at one and the same time, drawn from very particular intellectual and historical traditions that could not claim any universal validity. It was to ask a question about how thought

was related to place. Can thought transcend places of origin? Or do places leave their imprint on thought in such a way as to call into question the idea of purely abstract categories? (Chakrabarty 2000, p. xiii).

Stereotypes about identity and race are exactly that type of abstract European cultural constructions Chakrabarty wishes to call into question and remove. Starting from those considerations, it is possible to infer that a new spatiality and connections among countries in the current global system are actually leaving their imprint on people (and migrant) identities, as well as on their literary representation, calling into question the previous forms of national belonging. So, if in the 1980s the public identity of the British nation was “modified and updated” by the development of literary writings (Arana 2005, p. 232), nowadays this same identity has undergone another significant change due to the collapse of historicism and of the centre-periphery dichotomy – the former by implying the end of the hegemony of time over space (Chakrabarty 2000, p. 3), the latter by underlining an innovative global and borderless perspective on flows of migrancy. This condition should support the creation of new global citizenships, far from the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion constructed by the cultural elements of reference of the old nation-states. This complex process is obviously still in its starting phase; however, it seems that the future tendency will be to consider space as an including and dynamic element, wherein globalization will not create cultural homogeneity and uniformity, but the construction of solid transnational networks. In fact, according to Tim Youngs, “it may not be possible to experience a ‘new’ place in a unique way in our era of digital copies, simulations, and travel impressions and recommendations that predetermine our paths [...]. This global familiarity arguably influences the constitution of the self” (Youngs 2019, p. 415).

Amitav Ghosh and Salman Rushdie have actively contributed to the debate thanks to their own novels. They have deeply examined the renegotiation of personal processes of identity creation, as well as implications to the cultural changes in a global era. Following travel and migrant literature’s paradigms, Ghosh and Rushdie have managed to describe the sense of alienation, the identity crisis, and the necessity of finding a home for contemporary migrants, never forgetting to highlight the early signs of renegotiation of their personal narrations.

## **2. Looking for redefined identities in a muddled world in *Sea of Poppies* and *The Golden House***

In *Sea of Poppies* and *The Golden House*, both Ghosh and Rushdie observe and narrate multiple processes of erection of blurred identities in a migrant changing world. The Golden family in Rushdie’s text and Ghosh’s *coolies* on the vessel *Ibis* are groups of migrant people who do not hesitate to abandon their certainties for a “rebirth” in a new host-land. By looking for new belongings in foreign lands, migrants introduced by Ghosh and Rushdie aspire to a rebirth thanks to the acquisition of a new identity, a goal achieved at the expense of deep inner conflicts. At the heart of *Sea of Poppies*, Amitav Ghosh narrates different blurred existences on board of the colonial trading ship *Ibis*. Its destiny is a tumultuous voyage across the Indian Ocean in 1838, shortly before the outbreak of the Opium War in China. In a time of colonial upheaval – mainly due to the actions of some foreign traders (primarily British) who had been illegally exporting opium from India to China since the XVIII century (Fay 1997, p. 153) causing the so-called Opium War –, a variegated company of Indians and westerners meet on board of *Ibis*: from a bankrupt *raja* to a widowed tribeswoman, from a mulatto American freedman to a free-spirited French orphan. As their old family ties have been washed away, they begin to see themselves as *jahaj-bhais*, i.e. ship-brothers. The sweep of this historical adventure connects different times and spaces, by presenting a research for homes, identities,

and lives which follows familiar paradigms of travel literature. As a result, the characters experience a veritable “rebirth” through a journey into themselves. Ghosh, like Salman Rushdie, introduces words from the Indian languages, and from the various creoles, pidgins, and slangs that have arisen in India and the Asian seaports since the XVIII century, thus managing to bridge furtherly the past and the present in this unceasing search for “roots” achieved through “routes”. In fact, Ghosh’s protagonists are lost people looking for a place to call home or, at least, for a safe harbour where they feel protected and safe. That condition connects past and contemporary migrant fates, and it is the actual *fil rouge* linking diasporic people on the *Ibis* and the Golden family described by Rushdie.

Resolving and reinventing one self’s life is at the core of *The Golden House* indeed. Nero Golden and his three sons are escaping from India after the death of Nero’s wife. “They would escape,” the narrator René says, “from the historical into the personal, and in the New World the personal would be all they sought and all they expected, to be detached and individual and alone, each of them to make his own agreement with the everyday, outside history, outside time, in private” (Rushdie 2017, p. 31). But the USA, their host-land, is more a contaminated land than a place of rebirth, rich of abuses, scandals, and corruption, like the homeland they are trying to leave (*Ivi*, 147). So, it is difficult for them to start anew there. The story told by Rushdie soon turns from being a path of supposed freedom to a tragic outcome, also from the standpoint of the characters’ identity formation. Rushdie’s archetypal themes are all present: historical decline, summarised in the expression “cowardly times” (*Ivi*, p. 16) used to describe our present days and which recalls the “fag-end of an age” in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (Rushdie 1995, p. 352); migration, metamorphosis, and the question of how new ideas come into the world, which are the central questions of *The Satanic Verses*; and the inexorable grip of history. In *Midnight’s Children*, the protagonist Saleem observes that most of what matters in a person’s life happens for a “coming doom” (Rushdie 1981, p. 135). In *The Golden House* too, fate follows and influences the protagonists’ lives, sometimes chastising them. Nero Golden and his sons cannot escape from the crimes and murders which characterised their Indian life; and at the same time, Nero’s younger son Dyonisus will not escape from his personal identity crisis which, however, will lead him to a kind of final freedom. Indeed, the central issue definitely connecting Ghosh and Rushdie’s investigations into the migrant nature of all times is the “transnational sexuality” experienced in their novels by Baboo Nob Kissin and Dyonisus Golden, intended as the circulation of, and connections between, sexual discourses, practices, and subjectivities among and across national contexts (Chow, Texler, Tan 2011). Ghosh and Rushdie exploit it as a sort of metaphor able to summarise the uncertainties of blurred migrant identities, the drama of the diasporic condition, but also their aspiration to freedom.

### **3. Towards a freer renegotiation of migrants’ identity: Baboo Nob Kissin and D. Golden’s transnational sexuality**

In *Sea of Poppies*, Baboo Nob Kissin is a respectable *gomusta* in the XIX century colonial world, an Indian agent of the East Indian Company employed to sign bonds and trade goods for the British merchants. He should be an emblem of virility and puissance because of his role in the most powerful trading corporation of the Empire, but he gradually ends up embodying a trans-national and trans-gender identity which defines him more as a female being than a symbol of masculinity. Rushdie’s Dyonisus too, also known as D., embraces a new identity by donning his stepmother’s clothes and believing in the possibility of being whatever he wants in the American “New World”, a sort of unfettered realm where migrant’s dreams come true. According to the common imagery connected to contemporary young migrants – and to the diasporic world in general –, people like Nob Kissin and D. should be willing to accept a life

of sweat and difficulties and to face rough experiences in the host land. However, both Ghosh and Rushdie intend to go beyond such a cliché by assigning to their characters a deep femininity, exemplifying, at the same time, the changing conditions of the contemporary world. As a result, they both play with the sexuality and gender identity of their characters. Over recent decades, many scholars have viewed sexuality as being constructed through global contacts and cross-national learnings (see: Blackwood 2005; Grewal and Kaplan 2001; Puar 2001). This is also due the effects of modern globalization: transnational processes, such as “diasporic movements, job flows, the accessing of global mass media, and the flow of capital across states and organizations, connect people and cultures all across the world” (Ghosh 2019, p. 550) thus helping people to learn about different sexual cultures. However, according to the general standpoint, Indian people are allowed to practice “uniquely” standard forms of sexuality, also in their diasporic communities (e.g. Gopinath 2005). Amitav Ghosh and Salman Rushdie put into question such a schema by portraying courageous examples of revolt against gender-defined roles in two different moments of the Indian diaspora: the XIX century colonial system and contemporary migration.

Amitav Ghosh has apparently a more difficult task: the colonial system of the enclave of Hong Kong in China could not allow its agents to freely live their identity. Hong Kong was widely regarded as a colonial enclave in which “the lash and the rattan were used far more frequently than in any other part of the world” (Dikötter 2004, p. 11). The violent environment transformed the enclave into a place of forced reformation, where liberties and self-expressions were quite completely denied. In this context, Nob Kissin is described as “strangely womanish” (Ghosh 2008, p. 212) by his British employer Mr. Burnham who finds him quite eccentric with his adornments and precious jewels because “God made them [man and woman] both as they were, Baboon, and there’s nothing illusory about either” (*Ivi*, p. 213). Mr. Burnham’s standpoint embodies the oversimple way of considering questions of gender and identity in the (post)colonial environment, especially in the South Asian context. As Vanita and Kidwai have demonstrated, this is due to a “shame culture” in Indian society, which ensures that individuals’ reputation is intricately tied to their family’s reputation (2008, p. 198-199). It means that “any behaviour considered socially deviant committed by an individual [...] often tarnish the reputation of the family to which the individual is affiliated” (Ghosh 2019, p. 551-552). In *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh rejects and reverses such a stereotype; Nob Kissin has a quite common family story, characterised by the great influence of his uncle and aunt on his life. His womanish physical transformation at the end of the novel is, therefore, described more as an act of love for, and faith in, the spirit of his dead aunt Ma Taramony than as a proper trans-sexuality. Moreover, even though Nob is not looking for an actual change of gender, (s)he aspires to a spiritual and religious path of rebirth which recalls the Hindu tradition of reincarnation linked to the “unsatisfactoriness of existence”, according to which Hinduists will face a rebirth to be repaid or punished for their own actions in life (Obeyesekere 2006, p. 2). Therefore, as Tara Leverton states, Nob Kissin certainly works to destabilize western constructions of masculinity at sea (2014, p. 33); however, his act of revolt against defined roles is quite softened if compared to Dionisus Golden’s experience of transnational sexuality in *The Golden House*.

In Rushdie’s novel, D. is described since the beginning as an “androgynous, man-womanish” (Rushdie 2017, p. 86), easily comparable to the God from which he takes the name, “an outsider [...] That this was the pseudonym the youngest child of Nero Golden chose for himself in the classical-renaming game reveals that he knew something about himself before he knew it, so to speak” (*Ivi*, p. 86). His arrival in the multicultural and cosmopolitan environment of the migrant city *par excellence*, New York, helps him to embrace his identity as a sort of response and reaction to the same migrant process. For both Nob and D., the sexuality they live in their transnational migrant contexts is the final step of a suffered journey of rebirth from a spiritual, mental, and physical point of view. In Rushdie’s contemporary

world, however, unlike what happens to Nob, D. receives a clear sign of refusal from his family, as well as from the “open-minded” western society, thus deepening the common sense of personal and social malaise migrants often have to deal with. Despite the apparent help of his girlfriend, who inserts him into the MoI – the Museum of Identity – and pushes him to “find himself”, Dyonisus ultimately does not manage to find his own balance. Rushdie narrates his character’s crisis in a quite moving way, by criticising the obsession for identity which chastises the contemporary society. The author suggests that, more than helping diasporic people to express themselves, the interferences into their personal sphere may cause the implosion of their personalities, instigating migrants to violence. In this light, religion and spirituality cannot help, since “God is dead and identity fills the vacuum” (*Ivi*, p. 97), as D.’s girlfriend Riya affirms, thus implicating a relation to spirituality which is completely opposite to Nob Kissin’s condition. In *Sea of Poppies*, the *gomusta*’s transformation actually recalls a genuine necessity and a mystic homage to his family ties, while Rushdie mocks and denounces those who begin an identity research just to answer to their voids.

Moreover, Nob perceives the transformation of his body as something which “betoken the coming of a great earthquake or upheaval”, but this awareness does not frighten him, it is a sense of “expectation [...] driving the *gomusta* finally to make his way agil” (Ghosh 2008, p. 387) as if he could finally feel free and lighter. From this moment onwards, he is capable of “maternal stirrings” and “womanly love” (*Ivi*, p. 388), so palpable within him that “his outer body felt increasingly like the spent wrappings of a cocoon, destined soon to fall away from the new being that was gestating within” (*Ivi*, p. 423). Nob’s identity transformation is reaching its climax, since “every day offered some fresh sign of the growing fullness of the womanly presence inside him” (*Ibidem*); and even though Amitav Ghosh never depicts Baboo Nob Kissin’s interior “presence” as a real desire of gender change for the *gomusta*, at the same time it is possible to link his new feelings to a female sensibility or a “new avatar” (*Ivi*, p. 442) of his own personality with “new clothes” because “Height, weight, privates, all must be changing, no, when there is an alteration in externalities? Myself, I have had to buy many new clothings. [...] New modalities are definitely coming to the fore. How old clothes will accommodate?” (*Ibidem*). This is a definitive affirmation of identity for Nob who seeks to express his new emotions in a constructive way.

Unfortunately, D.’s situation in the American “Golden House” of his father is not as fruitful. Although his identity crisis is genuine, he eventually seems quite forced into his new transnational sexuality which seems to be more a reaction to the trauma of migration than an authentic necessity. The times and places of the two novels are different, indeed; and what bears down on D.’s fate is not his state of oppression – typical of earlier Rushdie’s characters too – but the violence of his non-action, as if he is unable to react to his own condition. D. seems quite confused by the plethora of adjectives and acronyms which currently describe different identity conditions: “*gender fluid, bigender, agender, trans* with an asterisk: *trans\**, the difference between *woman* and *female*, *gender non-conforming, genderqueer, nonbinary*, and, from Native American culture, *two-spirit*” (Rushdie 2017, p. 98). In an attempt to help him, his girlfriend Riya pushes D. towards a state of psychological malaise and, subsequently, to commit suicide. Therefore, Baboo Nob Kissin and D. Golden live two hugely different experiences connected to their migrant sexualities, and the dissimilarity is due to their different relationship to their own communities. On the one hand, the *gomusta* is deeply integrated into his social fabric; on the other hand, D. struggles to be accepted into the cosmopolitan New York, a deeply changing world, in spite of his friends’ mediations. According to Rushdie, this is the difference between “choosing” one’s own path of freedom on the one hand, and “discovering” it for a veritable “necessity” (2017, p. 144) on the other hand, and it represents the different migrant paths of Baboo Nob Kissin and D. Golden.

## 4. Conclusions

The gender transformations and experiences of transnational sexualities narrated by Ghosh and Rushdie are exploited to describe blurred identities in a cosmopolitan world. Baboo Nob Kissin and D. Golden's conditions are epitomes of different ways of asking for the possibility of expressing themselves from multiple facets, far from the common stereotypes which trap migrants into a viral prototype of masculinity. In this light, the two characters need innovative microcosms which set their personalities free. Both New York and the *Ibis* symbolise different kinds of homes for the Indian migrants of all times; as Binayak Roy claims, the narrative of *Sea of Poppies* "creates a transnational space above the narrow confines of a singular culture, nation, territory and community, a free space (in a world without binaries) which is supposed to be above all temporal or spatial constraints" (2016, p. 47). The same condition is expressed in Rushdie's New York, a veritable "transnation", as asserts Ashcroft, an "'in-between' space, which contains no one definitive people, nation or even community, but is everywhere" (2008, p. 5). The migrant process is the perfect context to express such a condition, since "To be plural, to be multiform, is a singular thing, rich, unusual, [...]. To be forced into narrow definitions is a falsehood" (Rushdie 2017, p. 355), as both Amitav Ghosh and Salman Rushdie have managed to demonstrate in their enriching works. Moreover, from a decolonial political standpoint, in the world would coexist many other worlds, and this condition announces the pluriverse (Mignolo 2011, p. 245). The ontology of the pluriverse could not be obtained without the epistemology of pluriversity. As Walter Mignolo points out, "pluriversality becomes the decolonial way of dealing with forms of knowledge and meaning exceeding the limited regulations of epistemology and hermeneutics" (2018, p. 91). Microcosms like the *Ibis* and the city of New York are epitomes of a pluriversal world, being both an attempt to depict including and dynamic environments and a possibility to set us free to think decolonially about the pluriversality of the world rather than its universality. That condition enables to escape from narrow identity definitions, thus pushing the novels' characters to embark on migrant routes and deep identity investigations which are temporally distant but strongly convergent in a global and multifaceted world-system.

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