

# In Queer Territory: Exploring the “IBIS” As a Space of Trans-Subjectivity in “Sea Of Poppies”

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## ABSTRACT

This research paper aims to examine the novel “Sea of Poppies” by Amitav Ghosh which is a part of the “Ibis Trilogy.” The novel brings together people from different backgrounds, caste, gender and cultures, forcing them to cross boundaries of society and self. The “Ibis” becomes a moving territory where characters are able to form identities transcending rigid norms. The paper particularly aims to explore trans-subjectivity through the character of Baboo Nob Kissin Pander as the eponymous ship becomes a space of liminality and gender fluidity wherein traditional identities and binaries of man and woman collapse. It specifically underscores the spiritual dimension of “queerness” as elaborated by Ghosh, an underexplored terrain in queer studies. By examining moments of transformation and fluidity, the paper highlights how Baboo Nob Kissin Pander emerges as a maternal figure, blending divine femininity with masculinity, thus creating an alternative identity and claiming new ways of being.

**Keywords:-** Identity, Queer, Queer Theory, Judith Butler, Amitav Ghosh

## I. INTRODUCTION

Queer theory emerged in the 1990s from the broader academic discipline of queer studies and concerns itself with a critical study of the “queer”, i.e those who challenge traditional rigid notions of sex and gender. It aims to deconstruct repressive structures surrounding identity and sexuality, particularly on the grounds of heteronormativity. Michael Warner writes that heteronormativity is the “culture's assurance” or rather, “insistence” that “humanity and heterosexuality are synonymous” (13) Queer theory, however, insists on adopting a flexible and fluid approach towards human identity and relationships rather than attempting to box it in what society terms to be “normal.” The term “queer” has been used to refer to the members of the LGBTQ+ community and emphasizes a rejection of heteronormative structures. However, the use of the term “queer” which means “unusual” or “peculiar” has been seen as problematic, as some embrace the term while others view it as derogatory.

Queer studies are still a largely developing field in Indian society which considers homosexuality and alternative identities to be unnatural and unimaginable. The transgender community in India (referred to as “Hijras”) is believed to have divine origins during the time of the Ramayana. It is

believed that “Rama bestowed upon them the authority to offer blessings on significant occasions such as childbirth, marriage, and inaugural functions” after being “impressed by their unwavering loyalty”. (Ashraf, *et al* 582) However, the community continues to face hardships and stigmatization and people regard them mostly out of spiritual reverence, fear or superstitious beliefs, rather than a genuine sense of acceptance. However, many ancient Hindu scriptures describe identities and relationships that fall outside of the spectrum of the “normal” and are even considered to be divine and spiritual largely because of their attribution to reverential figures and deities. Vishnu-Puran mentions Lord Vishnu taking up the form of the beautiful Mohini, who enchants the asuras in order to keep the divine nectar Amrit from them. Ancient texts mention the story of the divine union between Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu (in the form of Mohini) which resulted in the birth of Lord Ayappa. According to Sanyal and Maiti, “the Kama Sutra, by Vatsyana, clearly describes third-gender men assuming both masculine and feminine identities.” (51) Sanyal and Maiti explain that such identities and union could only be “legitimized” through “divine intervention” and would not be otherwise “socially accepted.” (52) There have also been clear depictions of queer sexual acts on the

walls of ancient Temples, which reflect that these activities have existed in India since ancient times. Thus, despite the present mentality, “non-procreative sexual practice, a form of non-normative or queer deviation from prescribed sexual practice is represented within ancient India.” (Dasgupta 654)

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

“Sea of Poppies” is the first book in the “Ibis Trilogy” by Amitav Ghosh and it focusses largely on the eponymous ship as a site of intersection of cultures, languages and even genders. Many characters in the novel undergo transformation, albeit in different contexts. Ghosh’s book is described as “a panorama of different cultures, attitudes and belief systems colliding with each other, or at least circling suspiciously around each other.” (Bhushan 140) The novel has been studied extensively on account of its historical and postcolonial aspects, its depiction of culture and language, class divisions, race divisions, and its treatment of women. Jouzaee and Jamili talk about the double colonization of women in the novel and how they “tolerate the pressures both by the colonial power and by the patriarchal system in society.” (1524-1525) Zandi and Barekat explore the effects of colonization and opium trade on the natives as well as the environment. Sabine Lauret focusses on the migrancy of the characters and concludes that the reader is the ultimate migrant in this novel. (55) However, Nicole Tharia explores an interesting angle of the character of Baboo Nob Kissin Pander, particularly with his “cross-dressing” (12) becoming a force of transformation for several characters in the novel, such as Paulette and Neel Rattan Halder. Baboo Nobkrishno Panda, or, as the Anglicized version of his name goes, Baboo Nob Kissin Pander, is an Indian Bengali gomusta or accountant working for Mr. Benjamin Burnham, a British merchant and businessman involved in the opium trade in colonial Calcutta. Ghosh continually plays with the idea of deception of appearances in the novel. Many characters in the novel take on alternative and often deceptive roles with respect to their culture, languages, race and even gender. This research aims to study the spiritual transformation of Pander from the lens of queer theory. It underscores how the Ibis becomes the vessel for his experience of trans-

subjectivity and how Ghosh impactfully blends the spiritual aspect of “queerness” as explored in ancient Hindu scriptures with notions propounded by modern queer theorists.

## **III. EARLY INFLUENCES ON NOB KISSIN PANDER**

Baboo Nob Kissin Pander had spent much of his childhood in the town of Nabadwip. His family’s temple was dedicated to the mystic saint Chaitanya Mahaprabhu who was a devotee of Lord Krishna. According to ancient texts, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu was believed to be a sacred incarnation of both Radha and Krishna in one body. Nob Kissin was in line to become the temple’s custodian after his uncle, however, the course of his life took a turn following the sickness of his uncle. Nob Kissin’s uncle, upon realizing that his days were limited, entrusted him with the responsibility of escorting his young widow Taramony to an ashram in the holy city of Brindavan, where she would live out her days of widowhood. He would then assume his temple duties. However, this was the beginning stage of Pander’s spiritual transformation. After spending a lot of time with his aunt, who was only a few years older to him, he realized her “extraordinary spiritual accomplishment” (Ghosh 161) She was “a devotee of a kind that he has never encountered before: one who spoke of the Lotus-Eyed Lord as if she had personally experienced the grace of his presence.” (161) Despite his brahmacharya, he found himself deeply drawn towards Taramony. However, his love for her was not lustful or bounding, it was a spiritual form of love which transcended the physical body and was the source of liberation from “his earthly desires.” (162) This divine love is reminiscent of the love between Radha and Krishna which is a union of the souls and does not require consummation for fulfillment. Pander compares himself to Radha and Taramony to Krishna, the object of his worship, which along with a religious significance also carries a queer signification. He portrays himself as a woman worshipping her beloved from a distance. Upon her insistence, he learnt English and started working as a gomusta to make money for the building of their temple. His devotion towards her became a source of limitless strength, tolerance and resistance. He

followed her instructions and remains her devout devotee till her death and after. Their connection, which transcended her death, forms the primary basis for Pander's transformation.

#### **IV. BEGINNING OF THE TRANSFORMATION**

When Taramony was dying, Nob Kissin insisted on dying with her, however, Taramony explained that he had a larger mission to play in the world. She assured him that he will not be alone and that his "body will be the vessel" (165) for her return. She said, "There will come a day when my spirit will manifest itself in you.....you will become Taramony." (165) Thus, the two would achieve a "perfect union", "united by Krishna's love." (165) This union is not physical or sexual, but pure and sacred. For nearly ten years, he waited for a sign of his union with her. This sign finally manifested in the form of his discovery of Zachary Reid's ethnicity. He connected Reid's blackness to the possibility of him being an incarnation of Lord Krishna. This, again, carries a hidden queer signification as Pander, in the form of Ma Taramony, takes the role of Radha, while Zachary takes the role of her beloved Krishna. On an impulse, he wore a saffron-coloured alkhalia (loose gown) that Taramony had liked to wear, and opened his hair loose. Upon gazing at himself in the mirror, he sensed his body being "suffused by another presence." (167) He heard Taramony's voice and became certain that "the Ibis was to take him to the place where his temple would be built." (167) This shows that the Ibis would become the site of the completion of his spiritual queer embodiment. As Nob Kissin points out later that it was at the door of Zachary's cabin in the ship that he had first received the signal, "It was here, he remembered, in this very place, that the start of his transfiguration had been signalled, by the sound of a flute." (503)

Ghosh depicts the gradual feminization of Nob Kissin as he experiences both internal as well as external changes. He says, "Bosoms are burgeoning, hair is lengthening. New modalities are definitely coming to the fore. How old clothes will accommodate?" (442) Just like Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Nob Kissin's spiritual rebirth merges his masculine energies with

the cosmic feminine energies of Ma Taramony. It is also reminiscent of the Ardhnarineshwara- a divine form combining the spiritual energies of both Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati. It is an androgynous form which shows the inseparability of the male and the female. The changes in his body were quite visible to himself as well as others. When Paulette Lambert decided to meet Nob Kissin in order to execute her plan to board the Ibis, she could not recognize him easily; "The gomusta was so changed, with his long, shoulder-length hair, that he was nearly gone before she recognized him: even the way he walked seemed different, with smaller steps and swaying hips." (334) This reflects the views of Judith Butler who explains in Chapter 3 of "Gender Trouble" that body is not fixed, but a variable boundary capable of generating new identities and meanings. When Mr. Burnham first observed Nob Kissin after his transformation, he could not help but utter, "What on earth has become of you? You look so strangely womanish." (212) To this, Nob Kissin replied, "It is all outward appearance only- just illusions. Underneath all is same-same." (212) This queer critique, in the form of a philosophical and spiritual perspective, echoes Judith Butler's notions on gender. According to Butler, gender is simply a performance, the repetition of certain actions which deems one as male or female. (Gender Trouble, ch. 1)

#### **V. ACCEPTANCE AND COMPLETION OF THE TRANSFORMATION**

Nob Kissin also developed a maternal fondness for Neel Rattan Halder, whom he had previously disliked on account of the caste-snobbery in the Halder family. He believed him to be the adopted child of Ma Taramony, who had asserted a strong presence inside him. Out of motherly love, he hoarded food for Neel in a strip of cloth tied around his chest. He came and sat in front of Neel and Ah Fatt in a cross-legged position, in a posture "like that of a wet-nurse cupping a pair of sore and milk-heavy breasts." (463) There is rich symbolization in the scene. Ghosh compares the act of a mother nursing a child with the nutritious milk from her breasts to the act of Nob Kissin lovingly feeding Neel with the nutritious food hoarded inside his bosom. Ghosh presents femininity as a performance of maternal acts, once again

reflecting Butler's views on gender. He handed over the keys to Neel which would lead to his freedom, and got a confirmation of the presence of his guruma inside him, as Neel said, "Yes, she is there. I see her—a mother incarnate: her time has come...." (503) This can be confirmed as the final step of Nob Kissin's transformation as the child had recognized the presence of his adoptive mother in him, though it cannot be said with certainty whether Neel was speaking the truth or not. However, this was irrelevant for Nob Kissin, as for him, it was symbolic of an acceptance of his alternative identity. He could feel the complete manifestation of Taramony inside him then, which caused a state of divine ecstasy in him. He felt himself to be "the key that could unlock the cages that imprisoned everyone, all these beings who were ensnared by the illusory differences of the world." (503) Nob Kissin realizes true happiness only after embracing and accepting his true identity. It can be said that Ghosh considers a character like Baboo Nob Kissin Pander to be a beacon of light, orchestrating a metamorphosis not just in the characters but also in the Indian society, which was pervaded by the English viewpoint on sex and sexuality. Pander's behaviour is viewed as erratic or confusing by the Victorian Englishman while the Indian Neel, despite being from an orthodox Hindu family and a staunch follower of beliefs, undergoes an inward transformation on the Ibis and is able to look beyond the exteriors and focus on the generosity, rather than the identity of the individual.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The Ibis becomes a space where all established notions of culture, language, gender, and sex are collapsed. For Nob Kissin Pander, the Ibis becomes a space of reclaiming his spiritual identity that goes beyond his physical identity as a male gomusta, and thus, a vessel of his trans-subjective experience. Through Baboo Nob Kissin Pander, Ghosh crafts a character that transcends the rigid binaries of male and female and challenges the limitations of the body, gender and sexuality. Pander, by infusing a spiritual dimension into his self-awakening, also resists the boundaries between the self and the divine. The spiritual queerness rejects the colonial and patriarchal notions on gender and sexuality, which

connects homosexuality to perverse behaviour. His sacred self-awakening and his subsequent role in the transforming journeys of the other characters ultimately encourages human beings to acknowledge and view the divine good in others, by looking beyond the divisions of race, class, culture, and gender.

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