

# THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING TREACHEROUS

Betrayals in Amitav Ghosh's *Flood of Fire*

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Pier Paolo PICIUCCO

**ABSTRACT** • The possible link in the parallel stories that overlap in the elaborate plot of *Flood of Fire* (2015) by Amitav Ghosh may be identified in the repeated actions of betrayal, occurring as a part of a sentimental, military, or ideological conspiracy and involving all the protagonists of the narratives. Far from evaluating them as immoral, however, the narrator seems to go to great lengths to demonstrate that, although this recurrent switching-of-sides at the moment causes stress and pain to many characters, these actions invariably prove to be the only fitting solutions to major problems in the long term. This expedient is used by Ghosh in order to validate the prominent theory in Cultural Studies that identities are constantly modified and treacherous attitudes are inevitable.

**KEYWORDS** • Identity; Journeys; Amitav Ghosh; Colonialism; *Flood of Fire*.

## 1. Cases of Betrayal

Amitav Ghosh's recent *Flood of Fire* is a multi-plot novel that weaves stories with history drawing the reader's attention to the culmination of the Opium Wars in China in 1842. It is a remarkable work of fiction indeed and, although the practice of intertwining various narrations may be said to have been one of the novelist's major distinguishing traits over the years, its sweeping narrative has again surprised his readers and left many among his reviewers filled with admiration: Wendy Smith writes that it "recalls the great 19<sup>th</sup>-century novels in its capacious portrait of the diverse array of classes and customs that make up a particular society," (Smith, *L.A. Times*), whereas Laila Lalami claims that it is "a fictional journey both physical and temporal." (Lalami, *N.Y. Times*). If Allan Massie ventures to tag it "an adventure novel full of feeling," (Messie, *Scotsman*), Alice Albinia calls it the "gigantic third novel in Amitav Ghosh's extraordinary *Ibis* trilogy," (Albinia, *The Financial Times*), while Amar Farooqui labels it a "literary work of epic proportions" (Farooqui, *The Indian Express*). Whatever the perspective of the reader, one cannot but agree with James Kidd when he stresses that from the writer's point of view this must have been "an ambitious undertaking" (Kidd, *The National—Arts and Life*).

A very skilled author, Amitav Ghosh has not only mastered how to connect the four central characters' stories—should one call them protagonists?—but he has managed to place them on the main stage of 19<sup>th</sup>-century colonial history that brought Britain to claim possession of the emerging Hong Kong and to impose the trade of opium on China under the pretext of free trade. Ghosh seems to be in his element when he has the opportunity to switch his far-ranging view from a wide perspective embracing major historical events to an observation of apparently unimportant episodes so full of minor details affecting characters who, in many circumstances, may initially

seem to be so far away from historical events. Few other writers are as successful as he is in combining so effectively macro- with micro-histories. Faithful to his tradition, the Bengali writer also conducts an ideological discourse with a considerable number of key themes freely unleashed from his agenda: among other important topics, *Flood of Fire* in fact also examines the dynamics of colonialism, critiques nationalism as well as caste-class-race divisions and focuses its attention on the way in which journeys enforce negotiations on social rules for the creation of a new kind of identity. The writer's position in defence of the masses that become hostage to the economic interests of a restricted group of privileged individuals is crystal-clear: in a wider perspective, therefore, the colonial powers' perpetration of the sale of opium through their merchants is presented as a betrayal of humanity.

No reader can underestimate the weight of morality in this novel, if only because moral discourses also dominate the scene when minor episodes fall under the novelist's lens: subterfuge, vendetta, blackmail, ambiguity and disloyalty in fact alternatively spice the stories of all the characters and make them so appealing and unexpected. In particular, the moral issue that, more than any other, creates a network of stable correspondences across the stories of all the characters in the novel is betrayal. *Flood of Fire* may also be easily summarised as a narrative involving all betraying (and betrayed) creatures. In reviewing the novel Laila Lalami rightly underscores that "inevitably, questions of loyalty and betrayal arise, and none find easy answers" (Lalami, *N.Y. Times*). Untrustworthy actions occur as a part of a sentimental, sexual, military or ideological plotting with the protagonists being either determined or hesitant in carrying out the action.

Zachary Reid and Mrs Burnham, to start with, become the hot protagonists of an extramarital relationship that brings the wealthy lady to satisfy her (not so well-) hidden cravings with the young stud while her husband is away on business. This appears to be a clear case of a sexual betrayal that the social gap between the two lovers contributes to feeding. However, before surrendering to their mutual physical desires, they seem to find some appropriate justifications for their actions: by comparing the scanty pieces of news in their possession, Zachary comes to know that the girl he is fond of, Miss Paulette, had possibly been involved with Mr Burnham, whereas Mrs Burnham becomes aware that her husband was infatuated with the young girl. After this discovery, she cannot exactly explain her adulterous behaviour as a moral action, but she gives the impression that she adjusts her perspective in such a way that she may see it as an appropriate redress of a wrong received. Nor is Mrs Burnham's infringement of the holy laws of marriage an isolated case in *Flood of Fire*. Long journeys always create the propitious conditions in the plot for a repetition of an adulterous relationship: and, needless to say, long journeys abound in this plot. A case in point occurs to Shireen Modi who, after becoming a widow, painfully learns that while in China her late husband had started an affair with a local woman and had fathered a son, of whom he had fondly taken care over the years. She is gradually told this story by a close friend of her dead consort, Mr Zadig Bey who, incidentally, had had an apparently similar experience in his life with an original family (and wife) in Cairo and an additional family, and a "common-law wife," (Ghosh 2015: 302) in Colombo. Nevertheless, the narrator amusingly—or paradoxically—seems very careful to stress that "Zadig Bey was a man of his word" (Ghosh 2015: 300). Tolerant and open-minded, when dealing with characters indulging in a sentimental unfaithfulness, Amitav Ghosh directs his view to a vast champion of humankind, respectable gentlemen included.

However, volte-faces do not only involve sentimental relationships, since Ghosh's characters also widely indulge in such practices on an ideological level throughout the plot. In plain words, attachment to the very place of origin appears very ambivalent. Neel Rattan Halder, the former zamindar and Jodu, the young lasciar fugitive from the *Ibis*, seem to have a Hobson's choice in this matter. Both Indians are forced to start a new phase of their lives in China, because that is the country that guarantees them freedom. Their personal situation is further complicated by the po-

litical scenario, since at present they live in a country that is almost at war with the British Empire: however, the matter is much less straightforward than this, since most of the soldiers fighting for East India Company are Indians. The paradox is that while the Chinese are called on to fight against England on a theoretical level, they are in actual fact engaged against Indian soldiers. Within this somewhat confusing context, Neel and Jodu receive an offer to stay on and work in China from the local authorities, and it is interesting to examine their reaction as soon as they consider the chance of being engaged by a country ready to fight against their own compatriots. Their case seems the more remarkable in view of the fact that they have different temperaments. Neel receives the proposal from Compton, who turns out to be Zhong Lou-si's emissary: "I suddenly realized that I could not answer Compton without picking sides, which is alien to my nature," (Ghosh 2015: 83) is his comment. His natural aversion to being committed to any form of duty in the long term speaks volumes. On the other hand, Jodu bargains the conditions of his and his men's new allegiance with the Chinese and, once he is promised that their requests will be met, he guarantees that the Chinese need not worry about their fidelity: "if they agree to all of this then they need not fear for our loyalty. We are men of our word and we would never be disloyal to the hand that provides our salt" (Ghosh 2015: 265). Even though the conditions in which the characters find themselves acting vary, in some cases considerably, it may be interesting to stress that in many situations they happen, or are forced to shift their loyalties during the plot.

In *Flood of Fire*, however, people are not only forced to oppose their country of origin when they live abroad, like Neel and Jodu do. The story of Kesri's military career, the havildar who may be considered the quintessence of loyalty in the course of the plot and defined as "perhaps the most engaging character in the novel," (Messie, *The Scotsman*) is significant in this sense, with the narrator offering the reader many revealing details about his conscription. Briefly, the recruiter Bhyro Singh had addressed Kesri's father, Ram Singh, seeking approval, yet his full hesitation to have a son fighting for the "Company Bahadur" (Ghosh 2015: 68) had become evident at that stage. In the meanwhile, Kesri's brother Bhim had decided to enrol with the Mughal army in Delhi but, sensing his brother's disappointment for missing the chance, he had helped Kesri to secretly reach the recruiter at night-time and enrol for the "Angrez firangis," (Ghosh 2015: 69) unnoticed by his father. By so doing, Kesri betrays his father's will and opts to fight for an army potentially hostile to that of his brother. Indeed, the fever of betrayal entangles everyone in *Flood of Fire*: no one seems safe from it, and even the ships shift loyalty. It is eloquent enough that the most powerful Chinese warship is the *Cambridge*, a Liverpool-built vessel that the Chinese secretly managed to buy from the original British owner and use against the British-colonial fleet during the battle at the Tiger's Mouth.

To all these situations, where betrayals are called into question at various levels, we also need to add another case that stands apart from the previous paradigm. I am referring to Zachary Reid who, at the end of the novel, discloses Freddy's real identity to Lenny Chan, causing him to be victim of a fatal ambush on the beach of Hong Kong very soon afterwards. Although the two were friends before, the revealing of Freddy's important secret is closely connected to Reid's expanding business. Thus, a person's life is evidently intended as currency for a deal. However, this case of betrayal is not like the others previously discussed because of its different moral implications. In fact, Amitav Ghosh seems to create a perspective with autonomous rules from where we may aptly evaluate the moral effects of all actions of betrayal in the plot. More explicitly, I claim that the narrator seems to go to great lengths to demonstrate that, while the recurrent switching-of-sides at the moment causes stress and pain to many characters—including those who start the process—, these deeds invariably prove to be the only solutions to major problems, on condition that the practice be assessed further on in time. The narrating voice indeed insists on providing evidence that disloyalty in *Flood of Fire* may appear to be immoral only when the consequences

are evaluated in the short term. Again, with the remarkable exception of Zachary's betrayal of Freddy, all other treacherous episodes in *Flood of Fire* attest in the long run to have a sort of a far-sighted and judicious intrinsic quality that seems to be in clear contrast with the moral implications that the same action entails at the moment it is carried out. I will try to illustrate this theory briefly with some examples. Seth Bahram Mistri's unfaithfulness to his wife Shireen, for instance, although the origin of suffering for the widow at the time she learns about it, grows to be the spark that starts her on a new liberating path, because of her initial financial need and her emotional compulsion to meet her husband's illegitimate son in China. Paradoxically then, her life is restored by her husband's unfaithfulness. By the same token, Shireen is treading a tightrope at the time she is widowed. Every single move that she makes alarms her for the possible ethical consequences that these actions involve: she is deterred by her fear of betraying her family, her daughters, the memory of her husband, as well as her culture, but nonetheless her prudent engagement allows her to have a sharp prediction of the moral range assigned to her limited movements. Despite more or less secretly contravening the traditional rules of ethical behaviour in society, she manages to make all the appropriate actions that gradually lead her towards emancipation and that will also be understood and accepted by those people whose judgement she initially fears to alienate. Kesri's decision to join the army of the British East India Company, is another case in point: despite some preliminary hesitations, it allows him to undertake the military career that he so cherished. Moreover, the narrator also proves that further in time—and after the havildar has sent home a large part of his income—his family will gratefully approve of his methods. As a rule, in *Flood of Fire* dreams and aspirations are regularly thwarted by ambiguous situations and the continuous fear of betrayal of the subjects involved: in most cases, therefore, characters find themselves in circumstances not at all in keeping with their first expectations and are required instead to cope with them. In other words, when they betray—or, when they have the feeling of betraying—it is not so much because they choose, but rather because they are forced to walk that line. Therefore, it is in this context that Amitav Ghosh counters the assumed rhetoric of conventional morality. In addition, a change of allegiance or partnership in *Flood of Fire* should also be seen in keeping with the dominant principle of constant transformation, whereby stasis is always swept aside, as I will now discuss in the second part of this paper.

## 2. Where Betrayals Proliferate

An analysis of the particular context in which these acts of betrayal appear to be challenging the prevailing notions of moral principles is no less intriguing than a study of these acts per se. Furthermore, this study is intended to complement the first part of the essay, by providing explanations of the motivations leading the characters to be constantly engaged in betraying actions.

Most of the novel's action develops on board the various ships: *Ibis*, *Hind*, *Anahita*, *Cambridge*, *Cuffnells*, *Mor*, *Enterprize* and *Nemesis*, not to mention a number of other minor ships that become engaged in the Opium War. My intention here is not so much to focus my discourse on the importance of the final naval battle—which according to the title itself would seem central—but rather on the weight apportioned to movement in relation to a fixed place. After all, it is on board the ships—not only in static locales—that the characters of *Flood of Fire* meet, plot, trade, quarrel, walk, fall in love, become friends, declare themselves, have sex, fight and die. Of course, throughout the plot we are made aware that feelings and attachments of all sorts are most likely to be expected in relation to a moving set—a ship, in this case—rather than to land, or a country. A clear demonstration of this assumption becomes visible, for instance, when Zachary and Paulette reach the conclusion that “the bond of the *Ibis* was like a living thing.” (Ghosh 2015: 439) For Ghosh, connections to ships are stronger than connections to places, which is transparent enough

and one must credit Chitra Sankaran with an incisive insight when she claims that “Ghosh’s entire novelistic career seems devoted to challenging borders of every kind and in each subsequent novel this central theme is relentlessly reworked from differing angles and using different tools” (Sankaran 2012: xxiv).

If, then, I had to relate my point to the title of the work, I would certainly refer to the importance of water that maintains a connection between the material of Ghosh’s entire trilogy. In this sense, I must register my full agreement with Ziya Us Salam as he observes: “*Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke* and now *Flood of Fire*; the water is certainly not calm, quiet or tranquil for the much-feted author” (Us Salam, *The Hindu*). Indeed the fluid element is the thematic icon that anchors the trilogy and that, especially in its metaphorical significance, contributes to emphasising the importance of change, transience, alternation, volatility and, ultimately, continuous modification: Santwana Haldar positions change at the heart of the narrative when she writes that “no single character is given heroic status, or even specific importance. Importance is given on the changing scenario” (Haldar 2016: 209). As a consequence, a situation that is constantly under the effect of altering agents contributes to destabilizing and disorienting people by introducing elements of imbalance and stress. In this context, we may easily understand how the dynamics of change disrupt the politics of fixed allegiances and may also present betrayal as the logical consequence. At various points in the plot, the narrator stresses how constant modifications force the various characters into constant readjustments and compromises, but Compton’s remark to Neel towards the end of the novel seems particularly effective and poignant to my argument: “What else can I do, Ah Neel? Everything has changed. To survive I too will have to change” (Ghosh 2015: 533). Trapped inside a rapidly changing flooding history, the characters of *Flood of Fire* have few-to-no alternatives to committing themselves to a betraying action when their intervention is required. It is in this unsettling perspective that we should place Neel’s passionate and somewhat melodramatic invocation against the idealistic morality of steady and loyal connections, a case in which we may imagine that Ghosh makes Neel his own mouthpiece:

It is madness to think that knowing a language and reading a few books can create allegiances between people. Thoughts, books, ideas, words—if anything, they make you more alone, because they destroy whatever instinctive loyalties you may once have possessed. And to whom, in any case, do I owe my loyalties? Certainly not to the zamindars of Bengal, none of whom raised a finger for me when I was carted off to jail. Nor to the caste of my birth, which now sees me as a pariah, fallen and defiled. To my father then, whose profligacy ensured my ruin? Or perhaps to the British, who if they knew that I was still alive, would hunt me to the ends of the earth? (Ghosh 2015: 83)

This seems to be on the same wavelength as Homi Bhabha’s contention that “cultures are never unitary in themselves, nor simply dualistic in relation of Self to Other” (Bhabha 1994: 35-36).

In order to enhance the dynamic movement of his narrative, Ghosh adopts the strategy of emphasising the importance and the influence of the journey, an element that Chitra Sankaran recognizes as “a frequent one in Ghosh’s writings” (Sankaran 2012: xix). What the novelist does in this crucial phase is to work (and re-work) on the notions of a personal identity belonging to an individual who is often travelling from one place to another: the effect is that the traditional referents establishing connections to a motherland are critically challenged and/or questioned. In fact, Ghosh’s characters—regardless of their gender, race, caste, class, and willing or not—move mostly from one destination to another rather than putting down roots in one place. Consequently, the dynamics of journeying not only strongly affect their chronicles but also—and most importantly—their sense of identity: Ghosh’s fictional voice in fact narrates stories from a vantage point that in turn refers to the theories of postcolonial studies, postmodernism, cultural studies and di-

asporic writing in order to re-design and widen the perspectives for the newly-created identity. *Flood of Fire* by Amitav Ghosh, described by Ziya Us Salam as “a man who has penned lakhs of words on displacement and departure” (Us Salam, *The Hindu*), may be said to perfectly represent the idea of Stuart Hall’s theory regarding “the post-modern subject, conceptualized as having no fixed, essential, or permanent identity. Identity becomes a “moveable feast” formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us.” (Hall 1996a: 598)

At this juncture, we should point out that also another novel supporting the view of post-modern (as well as postcolonial) identities created en route, Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*, repeatedly centres on betrayals. This seems to be a characteristic of the postmodern subject who, endowed with a dynamic individuality, does not associate his own identity with the cultural referents of the place of origin only, but enriches his self with elements belonging to cultural practices derived from the places he has lived in, and in some cases from the places that he has only visited. Differently from the traditional subject’s case, whose model of identity was static and provided the answer to the question “Where are you from?”, he identifies himself with a potential transformation, since his identity should be interpreted as an answer to the question “Who can I be?” (see Hall 1996b: 5) It is therefore essential to relate this considerable switch of perspective to the agency of travelling, positioned at the core of the dynamic process. Of course, one cannot leave the debate around postcolonialism out of the frame, since Homi Bhabha has widely discussed the contradictions inherent in colonial discourse while relating on ambivalence. Now, Amitav Ghosh and Michael Ondaatje are both postmodern and postcolonial writers, whose ideological perspectives benefit from a twin cultural imprint and have become particularly sensitive to cases where the constant need to transform an identity may be enhanced by an ambivalent touch. In their case, the practice is to be seen as an existential necessity and never as a moral attitude and this may also explain why characters such as Seth Bahram Mistri in *Flood of Fire* and Hana in *The English Patient*, although in some ways contravening social rules and moral codes, are hardly considered immoral.

In *Flood of Fire* identities are (also) shaped by journeys and in a good number of situations the reader may notice how this rule finds a practical demonstration. To set the discourse in perspective, one may start by arguing that Ghosh’s novel is a colourful bazaar illustrating the ups and downs encountered by various characters who undergo minor or major transformations: since we always find all these characters on the move, it becomes quite natural for us to associate the revolutions in their nature with their movements. Shireen Modi is one of those characters whose transformations<sup>1</sup> are most sensitively followed by the narrator who, before disclosing the details of her change, in a straightforward way (and with an ironic tone) explains that her evolution is consequent to her surrendering to the logics of travelling. This is the description of what happens to her mind when, once widowed, she faces the responsibility of defending herself and her family’s interest:

For several successive nights, Shireen woke with a jolt, in the small hours, her nerves fluttering, her heart racing. It seemed incredible that all the obstacles that had loomed so large in her mind had dis-

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<sup>1</sup> Because of her remarkable change from the beginning to the end of the novel, Shireen Modi has created polarized reactions in reviewers: whereas Amar Farooqui claims that “(t)he rapid transformation of Shireen is a trifle unconvincing—from her adoption of European-style clothes to the ease with which she is able to handle the opposition to her growing proximity to Zadig Bey,” Allan Massie praises her for being “(o)ne of the novel’s other remarkable characters.”

appeared; that she was now free to go to China—she, Shireen, mother of Behroze and Shernaz, a grandmother who had lived in the same house all her life and had never travelled beyond Surat! She had never quite believed that the wall she was pushing against would ever give way, and now that it had, she felt that she was toppling over. (Ghosh 2015: 266)

It may be interesting to note that also when Shireen is introduced to (the man who will later become) her new suitor, Zadig Bey, his identity is greatly influenced by his habit of travelling: “Zadig Bey had grown up in Egypt, Bahram had told her: he was an Armenian Christian, a clock-maker who travelled widely in connection with his trade” (Ghosh 2015: 74). Therefore, when one considers that “the journey is immensely liberating for [Shireen]” (Farooqui, *Indian Express*), one can easily understand how journey and gender are interrelated in this novel. A confirmation that female emancipation and journey walk hand in hand becomes evident when we read about Deeti, described in this way from her brother’s point of view: “Deeti had indeed run away with another man: his little sister, who had never travelled even so far as Patna had set off to escape to an island across the black water” (Ghosh 2015: 348). Hence journeys bring liberation to women, even if at the cost of breaking the rules of society, including remaining faithful to their husbands (or their husbands’ memories).

The link between identity and journey, however, transcends the limits of gender, as one may expect in a novel by Ghosh. All characters change in the course of the plot and all of them are also constantly engaged in travelling. Possibly, they change because they travel and—possibly—travelling enriches them because it widens their views, and frees them. In a parallel way, a lack of journeying, as has become evident in the two previous cases of the female characters, results in a loss of opportunities: a sense of constraint and entrapment always hovers over those who cannot or choose not to travel. In the whole literary production by Amitav Ghosh, this has seemed a constant trajectory that has shaped the lives and the destinies of many protagonists (and not) in his novels. A case in point here may be Taranathji, a Tibetan monk and a minor character in *Flood of Fire*, described by the narrator as a wise old man: it seems particularly intriguing to stress that his wisdom is connected with his travelling experience, as the following passage suggests:

Taranathji is almost eighty now, and he has travelled very widely. At the time of the Qing dynasty’s Gurkha wars, he served as a translator for the Chinese commander, the Manchu General Fukanggan; he spent many years in the retinue of the last Panchen Lama, serving as his interpreter when the British sent a Naga sadhu, Purangir, as an emissary to Tibet. He has disputed theological matters with Russian Orthodox priests and has preached in the lamaseries of northern Mongolia. The mountains, deserts and plains that lie sprawled across this vast continent are like rivers and seas to him: he has crossed them many times. He has travelled to Beijing, with the Panchen Lama; he was even present at one of his meetings with the Qianlong Emperor. (Ghosh 2015: 136)

The association of change and journey becomes particularly visible in *Flood of Fire* when the reader considers how the characters’ names undergo different modifications during the plot. It seems relevant to stress that the narrator shows that variations of names basically occur because people travel and because they shift their perspectives. In other words, Ghosh’s novel stresses how movements do not only occur in actual space, but also up and down the social ladder. In addition, journeys force different cultures to mix and one of the logical results is that the assortment of different customs may generate doubts and disorientation about a person’s identity. Fascinated by the phenomenon of travelling cultures, Amitav Ghosh cyclically returns to this principle with the intent of focussing his attention on the fact that also identities travel, along with human beings. In one situation, for instance, Neel Rattan Halder finds himself under the cross-interrogation of a very restrained Zhong Lou-si who simply spends hours asking him questions, so that the addressee wonders if the Chinese is curious to know something about a famous officer or wants to check the

former Raja's trustworthiness instead. Bizarrely enough, one of the questions solicited regards the identity of one of England's most famous generals: "Was Sir Arthur Wellesley the same man as the Duke of Wellington?" (Ghosh 2015: 240). Of course, this question may also have amusing undertones, if we ascribe it to Zhong Lou-si's ignorance of the decorated Field Marshal, but the narrator in *Flood of Fire* seems to enjoy playing with characters having twin (or multiple!) names up to the extent that we may consider *Flood of Fire* a happy hunting-ground for similar cases.

Mrs Burnham's case is a good starting point for a close examination of a personal identity strictly related to the social position she occupies, especially when one considers the ways in which men address her. Zachary Reid, although the protagonist of an "enthusiastic sexual liaison" (Clark, *The Guardian*) with the woman, is firmly required to keep on addressing her as Mrs Burnham, thereby originating an ironical situation. However, in the course of the plot he is often paralleled to Captain Mee, her ideal companion, a man who was also her boyfriend in her youth. Careless of the conventions, and still involved with her, the English officer calls her Cathy. If these are the ways in which two Western men address her, the narrator is also very careful to create the appropriate context in which an Oriental man should speak to the lady and display how colonialism creates borders between colonizers and the colonized that influence the notions of a personal identity: in line with this demand, we therefore find the Indian havildar Kesri addressing her as "Cathy-mem" or "Cathy Memsah'b." In the following passage, we have the opportunity to evaluate how the Indian officer cannot bring himself to change his mode of address to the lady, despite receiving a mild invitation to do so:

Maaf karna—forgive me, Cathy-mem, he said, for not recognizing you. But you look different somehow. She laughed. Aap bhi—you too have changed, Kesri Singh, except for your eyes. That was why I recognized you, even though so much time has passed. It must be twenty years or more, said Kesri. That is true. I am 'Mrs Burnham' now—and you, I see, are a havildar? Yes, Cathy-mem. And how is your father, the Jarnail-sahib? (Ghosh 2015: 417)

Mrs Burnham's is not the only identity undergoing modifications significantly exposed by a change of the name in this novel. Zachary Reid, "the book's most intriguing character" (Messie, *Scotsman*), takes up a new identity after his original name of Malum Zikri was too easily associated with the murder on board of the *Ibis*. However, he is recognized by Freddy, another fugitive from the *Ibis*, who provokes him in these terms: "'No, no, Mr Reid. On another ship we met, long ago, lah. Maybe will help you remember, eh, if I call you 'Malum Zikri?'" (Ghosh 2015: 327) Anyway, since Freddy himself is not free from the habit of switching identity—in the course of the plot he is alternatively referred to as Freddy, Ah-Fatt, Framjee, Ephraim Lee and Freddy Lee—his biting question only has the effect of returning to him like a boomerang, when later on Reid discloses Freddy's identity in a situation that will prove fatal for him. Further cases in point are Deeti, also called Ditty, Paulette, Pugli and Putli and Lynchong, Lenny Chan.

The fictional world in which Amitav Ghosh sets *Flood of Fire*—along with the rest of his novels—is therefore highly responsive to changes, travelling and dynamic social forces of all kinds, all of them strongly affecting identities. This imprint, while displaying a symptomatic ideological positioning, also shows a personal, autobiographical trait on the part of the Bengali novelist. In one of the reviews to the novel, James Kidd rightly highlights that "Ghosh clearly caught the globetrotting bug, moving to England in the late 1970s to begin a doctorate in social anthropology at Oxford University" (Kidd, *The National – Arts and Life*) on a research carried out in Egypt and that later paved his way to a career in American Universities: for a number of years he also said he lived for six months a year in New York and six months in Calcutta. He has often cherished his twin formation, made of a Bengali and an English cultural identity: "I feel very grateful that I have this sort of double perspective upon my world and our world. As I grow older, I feel



more and more that I want to be able to hold on to that perspective and preserve some aspect of it.” (Sankaran 2012: 5)

Seen from this perspective, his frame of mind seems to be in tune with that of the literary creatures that crowd his fictional world. The rules introduced by globalisation become neatly visible in his stories and it is exactly in this perspective that a new process of liberation paves the way for betrayals, whether on a sentimental, military or ideological level. As a consequence, much effort is made by the novelist in order to create stories about betraying characters whose actions prove to have been appropriate choices in the long run. This is not exactly equivalent to re-writing morality, but when Ghosh’s characters cannot even remain faithful to their own names from the beginning to the end of the plot, how can one expect them to remain faithful to a culture, or a place?

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**PIER PAOLO PICIUCCO** • is an Associate Professor at the Department of Foreign Languages at the University of Turin, where he teaches English Literature, as well as Translation Studies. He took a Ph.D. from the University of Bologna in 1999, working on contemporary Indian fiction in English. His areas of research mainly include postcolonial literatures, with a marked preference for Indian fiction, and postmodern fiction; these are the two main fields on which he has concentrated his analysis over the years. His monograph, *The Two Souls*, is a theory on Black South African Theatre during the Apartheid Era and it is a study on the negotiations and compromises which gave rise to a totally marginalized form of art. He has also edited 7 books on Indian literature, and is the author of more than 40 articles.

**E-MAIL** • pierpaolo.piciucco@unito.it