

KESRI SINGH: THE FIGHT FOR IDENTITY BETWEEN DIVERGENT AND HEGEMONIC WARRIOR MASCULINITIES IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *FLOOD OF FIRE*.

ABSTRACT

L'importanza dei *men's studies* nel panorama accademico ha condotto a ulteriori ricerche riguardo le identità letterarie non solo delle donne, ma anche degli uomini. La *Ibis Trilogy* di Amitav Ghosh offre nuovi spunti in tal senso rappresentando diverse maschilità *queer*. È da questa prospettiva che l'articolo analizza l'identità non conforme di Kesri Singh. In primo luogo, vengono confrontate la maschilità imposta socialmente e quella divergente del protagonista. In secondo luogo, si delineano le strategie impiegate dal personaggio per preservare la sua integrità fisica e psicologica in un contesto tossico. In virtù della solida impostazione storica dei romanzi, vengono forniti cenni storici sulle peculiarità dell'ambiente patriarcale nel quale si evolve il protagonista. Le discriminazioni razziali e di colonialismo sono altresì esaminate secondo una prospettiva femminista intersezionale. Si proverà dunque l'esistenza di un discorso sull'identità di genere maschile narrativamente rilevante nella *Ibis Trilogy*, il quale riflette la critica opposizione di Ghosh verso il colonialismo occidentale e la divisione delle caste in India. Inoltre, verrà sottolineato l'uso del discorso di genere maschile come strumento di manipolazione per rinsaldare il colonialismo e il classismo. Infine, si dimostrerà l'esistenza di una riflessione sulla maschilità quale concetto non univoco, bensì sfaccettato e oggetto di una continua negoziazione nel suo significato. Le premesse portano in ultima analisi a una sua più ampia definizione, arricchita di nuove e significative prospettive sull'argomento.

The increasing prominence of men's studies in the academic panorama has allowed for further investigation not only on women's, but also on men's literary identities. The *Ibis Trilogy* by Amitav Ghosh offers new insights on the subject by staging several queer masculinities. The present essay analyses the non-conforming identity of Kesri Singh from the perspective of men's studies. Firstly, the essay compares and contrasts the socially imposed masculinity with Kesri's divergent one. Secondly, it highlights the strategy deployed by the warrior in order to protect his psychological and physical integrity in a toxic environment. Given the strong historical background of the novels, references are provided to account for the patriarchal context in which Kesri develops. Further sources of discrimination such as race and class are also explored, according to an intersectional feminist approach. Thus, it will be proved that a male gender related discourse covers ample narrative space in the *Trilogy*; it also reflects the critical opposition by Ghosh to the Western colonialism and Indian caste division. Moreover, it will be exposed the manipulative use of the male gender as an instrument to enforce colonialism and classism. Therefore, the *Trilogy* presents masculinity as a highly debatable, multifaceted notion which undergoes a negotiation in

meaning throughout the novels. This premise leads to a broader definition of the concept, which provides a new, significant viewpoint on the subject.

INTRODUCTION

In this essay I intend to tackle a niche in the field of gender studies applied to English literature, namely the social and political significance of divergent male characters. In particular, my analysis focuses on the *Ibis Trilogy* by Amitav Ghosh. The viewpoint of men's studies offers a valuable contribution to a better understanding of the novels. Relationships of power fall within the scope of Ghosh's analysis, which focuses mainly on capitalist exploitation, colonization and racial discrimination. However, as Joan W. Scott points out,¹ gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power. It is the aprioristic construction of the sexes' binarism that lays its foundations, and its meaning: to question or alter any aspects of such a construction threatens the entire social system. Therefore, a critical assessment of the *Trilogy* cannot be complete without an investigation on characters' relation to gender and, specifically, the deviance from and the resistance against the oppression of the hegemonic masculinity, for it proves to be the primary discourse in support of racism, classism and casteism. Hence, it is of utmost importance to the field of postcolonial studies to obtain a deeper understanding of such structuring of male gender identities. Nonetheless, it could be argued that a similar perspective fails the original purpose of women's studies, that represent a major branch of gender studies; they were born with the specific aim of putting women and femininity at the centre of the social, political and academic research. However, it must be noted that «information about women is necessarily information about men, the one implies the study of the other [...]» and that «This usage [of the word *gender*] rejects the interpretative utility of the idea of separate spheres, maintaining that to study women in isolation perpetuates the fiction that [...] the experience of one sex has little or nothing to do with the other».² Furthermore, the rebellion of female protagonists has already been addressed in the novels, while that of

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SCOTT 1986, pp. 1067-1073.

² Ivi, pp. 1056-1073.

male characters is still widely overlooked. Therefore, for literary criticism to have a comprehensive view on the *Trilogy*, it is pivotal to question the concepts of masculinity and its different expressions.

The analysis carried out in this essay is comparative. Firstly, I have selected the most relevant scenes. The focus is placed on situations in which the protagonist's masculinity is questioned, threatened, downplayed, dismissed or criticised by his social environment. Secondly, by deconstructing the peers' judgement, it is possible to define the prototypical manhood of the specific social and ethnic group. Thirdly, historical research has been carried out to identify the gendered expression of the male dominant group of power, the hegemonic masculinity. Its main traits emerge from dialogues, understatement, accusations, silence, public ostracism, socially approved acts of verbal and physical violence. Due to the substantial number of male characters in the *Trilogy*, I have decided to focus exclusively on Kesri Singh. Two reasons support this choice. First, the protagonist's story offers an extended narrative space, which presents an extensive linguistic corpus. Secondly, the character's masculinity has paramount importance in Ghosh's antimilitarist poetics and his anti-racist, classist, and colonialist instances.

MASCULINITY, MANHOOD OR MANLINESS? A DEFINITION

The question of specific linguistic terminology should be addressed before proceeding with the analysis. The key lexicon items that are commonly used when considering the male gender are four: *masculinity*, *manhood*, *manliness* and *virility*. The first embraces all the different socio-cultural expressions a person can adopt to perform his belonging to that gender, thus including non-binary, intersex and transgender people; therefore, it is preferable to opt for its plural form *masculinities*.³ Moreover, the notion is not tainted by any kind of negative or positive nuances. On the other hand, *manhood* refers to all the culturally related characteristics that society presents as «naturally occurring in males», such as physical strength, rationality, and the lack of emotional intelligence. In that sense, *manhood* and *manliness* come to define the same set of characteristics. However, they are not quite perfect synonyms. Exactly as it happens with *masculinity*, *manhood* is deprived of the admiring, nostalgic allure which impregnates *manliness*.⁴ I shall make recourse to *manhood* simply as a reference to the abovementioned cultural mindset. Finally, *virility* appears to be rather linked to the male body's reproductive function, which is not the issue this essay intends to explore.

Therefore, this essay refers to male identities as *masculinities*. However, I intend to avoid all the predetermined assessment on masculinity; any normative evaluation implies the existence of a «true and natural», culturally, socially and historically invariable expression of gender. On the contrary, gender has no inherent meaning; it is rather

³ REESER 2010, pp. 10-13.

⁴ Cfr. s.v. *Manliness*, in *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/manliness> (last access: October 2022).

a cultural construction of sex.⁵ Raewyn Connell confirms its ontoformative element:⁶ actions in a specific cultural and historical period serve as a limitation to the performance of masculinity and femininity. The concreteness of the body, its presence and its actions, result in relational and social interactions which limit its agency. In the light of this concept, gender appears as a social practice;⁷ hence, the existence of allegedly «natural» facets in gender is discarded. In compliance with gender studies guidelines, *manhood* will be used to address the social construction of masculinity from a critical viewpoint. On the other hand, given its implicit violently repressive and homologating instances toward divergent masculinities, *manliness* will not be used in this paper.

Stating that gender is a byproduct of socio-cultural phenomena means that its definition changes as society and culture do. Thus, masculinity as a permanent, coherent and unshakable notion is dismantled. In other words, there is no right way to interpret masculinity anymore; every performance is valid per se. For this reason, it can be asserted that masculinity is a plural concept; it embodies multiple forms to express the male gender. This viewpoint is widely accepted in men's studies.⁸ This plurality has often suffered the homologation imposed by the hegemonic masculinity, as it happens in the *Trilogy*. Many of the characters' conflicts against their social environment are to be tracked down to the need to express their true identity, which is often met with brutal repression. Connell's definition of hegemonic masculinity is crucial to a better understanding of such dynamics:

Hegemonic masculinity was understood as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of roles expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue. [...] it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it.⁹

Apart from the «complicit masculinities» (i.e., those approving of the hegemonic viewpoint, despite not fully embodying its values), all the other interpretations of the male gender are rejected as non-conforming. Being able to impose a prototypical model of man is directly linked to the position of power held by a community, often rooted in racial, sexual and economic exploitation over other masculinities. In other words, power is rooted in gender and gender is the expression of power, intended as the ability to enforce a categorization of human beings in a hierarchy of value and meaning.¹⁰ This partially explains the violence unleashed against marginalized or otherwise subaltern identities – like those of homosexuals.¹¹

The masculinities proposed in the novels are surely divergent from the norms. Their uniqueness stems from the determination to reject hegemonic masculinity and protect

⁵ SCOTT 1986; REESER 2010; LETT 2014, pp. 9-12.

⁶ CONNELL 1996, pp. 62-64.

⁷ Ivi, p. 64.

⁸ CONNELL 1996, p. 67; WHITEHEAD 2002, pp. 33-34.

⁹ CONNELL – MESSERSCHMIDT 2005, pp. 829-859.

¹⁰ LUGONES 2010.

¹¹ CONNELL 1996, p. 69.

their subversive interpretation of the male gender, embarking on a quest for a more authentic identity. Kesri Singh is an emblematic example of this narrative. He has to face a dramatic decision; forgetting his needs and conforming to the expectations weighing on them, or fighting to protect his identity at risk of his life. It is evident that being part of a patriarchal system and not abiding by its law puts men in a dangerous position. Nonetheless, Kesri persists, exactly as Neel, Bahram, and Zachary, even though the quest for identity is not always carried out deliberately and consciously. Unlike Neel and Bahram, who indeed experience a sudden epiphany about their journey, Zachary and Kesri act under the pressure of social and psychological dynamics unknown to them – namely racism and colonialism.

It may be argued that a deliberate questioning of masculinity and gender would not fit into the historical period embraced by the novels. This is indeed true. However, it must be noted that similar considerations do not develop within the *Trilogy*; they are rather hinted at by the plot. It is the reader who, armed with the twenty-first century understanding of the subject, is capable of analysing the underlying patterns and coming to the due conclusion. The characters are excluded from the dialogue that the author establishes with the reader; the former consciously conveys through the plot a message addressed to the latter. Hence, the most meaningful events in the *Ibis Trilogy* are meant to prompt a wider reflection on the contemporary debate about gender. This claim is further supported by the choice to give ample narrative space to subaltern masculinities, which, in the 19th century, would have been silenced. Finally, it would be a mistake to frame the subtle tensions in the expression of masculinity as a contemporary problem only. The absence of the appropriate terminology and cultural structure to address the problem does not erase the suffering of men of past ages that gender constraints provoked. Nor does it imply that society was utterly unaware of its problematic role.¹² Consequently, analysis will take into account the notion of masculinity as it was intended in its historical, geographical and social specificity.

PATRIARCHY: A DEFINITION

The concept of patriarchy has been investigated at length from sociological, anthropological, and gender perspectives, and this is not the place to recall its genealogy. However, I intend to highlight the elusiveness of this concept; many definitions have been provided, but there is no complete academic consensus regarding its characteristics. Patriarchy is a multifaceted phenomenon that acquires different traits according to the historical and geographical contexts in which it develops. It appears almost impossible to come up with a non-problematic, non-questionable and universally valid definition. Thus, in this essay, patriarchy will be examined within the scope of its specific relation with masculinity.

¹² McLAREN 1999.

Patriarchy is a socio-cultural and political expression in which «the male dominates the female, and the older dominates the younger»¹³ and «whose [...] power dynamics [...] derive both from the relationships of production among classes and from the sexual hierarchical relationships in society».¹⁴ It is not gender alone that originates oppression; age, ethnicity, caste, and class participate in it, too. Therefore, it is crucial to take into account all the intersectional dimensions of discrimination that lie at the core of this system.¹⁵ This premise allows the critique to shed light on an often dismissed element: the massive presence of men among the subordinated subjects. Conversely, hegemonic masculinities are at the top of the pyramid of power, using their privileged position to impose a «true manhood» – a direct expression of their values – to censure other typologies of masculinity. Despite presenting cultural related specificities, common elements can be found in many patriarchal systems, namely, the mandatory heterosexuality and its consequent homophobia; domination over women and the correlated misogyny; a hierarchical structure of society based on violence against subjugated subalterns.¹⁶ These traits are so embedded in the social texture that they often go unnoticed, or are celebrated as positive and «normal». Hence, it will prove fundamental to actively point out such patterns in many of the novels' scenarios so as to reveal the otherwise invisible tensions – and violence – that animate the construction of masculinity.

THE ETHICAL REFUSAL: AGAINST THE GLORIFICATION OF VIOLENCE

Gandhian principles, namely *Swaraj*, *Sarvodaya* and *Ahimsa*, are central to Ghosh's poetics. It is worth mentioning the definition of the latter, for it assumes considerable importance in the *Ibis Trilogy* and in Kesri's quest for identity:

Ahimsa [...] means non-killing. [...] It really means that you may not offend anybody; you may not harbor an uncharitable thought, even in connection with one who may consider himself to be your enemy. For one who follows this doctrine there is no room for the enemy [...] and there is no room for violence even for the sake of your country [...]¹⁷

From a Gandhian perspective, the ultimate goal and the means through which it is reached coincide.¹⁸ This concept targets violence and the values that stem from it, namely colonialist repression, exploitation, privilege and casteism.¹⁹ In spite of the Gandhian roots of Ghosh's poetics, his novels present an array of violent actions, from humiliations to homicide, from rape to battles, in which the privileged often manage

¹³ MILLETT 1971, pp. 24-25.

¹⁴ EISENSTEIN 1979, p. 22.

¹⁵ MURRAY 1995.

¹⁶ CONNELL 1996.

¹⁷ GANDHI, 1921, p. 96.

¹⁸ GANDHI, 1997, pp. 80-81.

¹⁹ JEFFRESS 2003, pp. 98-99.

to subjugate the subalterns. Such scenes appear to reenact exactly those dynamics of power that Gandhi condemns. The discrepancy is accounted for by the ethical stand Ghosh takes towards those scenes. The author has expressed his dissatisfaction with the contemporary glorification of violence in Western culture on many occasions; hence the need for a more ethical literature to influence reality and counterbalance the «aesthetic of indifference».²⁰ In an interview, he affirmed:

Obviously, I have reconstructed such revocations in a style and in a form that could express violence, without validating and approving it. I intended to demystify violence through writing, transferring Gandhi's ideas into literature.²¹

Therefore, it is necessary to take a critical look at the precise stylistic approach Ghosh deploys. The lexicon is raw, focused on details that highlight the pain, dirt, thirst, fatigue, wounds that war brings along.²² The syntax is conceived to create a harsh contrast between the joyful, glorifying discourse celebrating the Army's victory and the horrifying atrocities committed by soldiers:

Plastered against the light-coloured stone of the walls, in bright, bloody splashes, were clumps of tissue and fragments of bone. Here and there splattered brains could be seen dribbling down like smashed egg-yolks. [...] In a corner, over a heap of corpses, hung a hastily scribbled sign, in English. 'What does it say?' Kesri asked. The marine grinned, wiping his face with the back of his hand. 'One of our sarjeants put it up. It says: "This is the road to glory."²³

Nor does Ghosh make distinctions among casualties; dead soldiers are described by omitting their nationality, for they are equally considered victims of the insensible cruelty of warfare: «Of the burning fire-boat nothing remained but a few, flaming pieces of wood. Around the wreckage, the water was churning with flailing limbs and bobbing heads».²⁴ Kesri's point of view is of singular importance in this sense, for it provides a non-Western, meaningful insight into the everyday ménage of the troops, deprived of any mystification or embellishment.

However, it is worth noting that violence – in the form of beatings, humiliation, psychological vexation and rape – occurs frequently in contexts that do not describe strictly warfare scenarios. In addition, institutional violence, namely the conjunct of oppressive practices that a community employs to maintain the *status quo*, seems to involve a higher percentage of men in comparison to female characters.

It could be argued that the phenomenon is a byproduct of the massive presence of male characters in the *Trilogy*. However, this stance does not account for the disproportionate violence usually targeted at women in patriarchal societies. In this sense, it is interesting to compare the description of Kalua's and Deeti's violations. Although she suffers a sexual assault by her brother-in-law and uncountable rape threats, these

²⁰ GHOSH 1995.

²¹ McEWAN 1991, p. 232 (translated by the author).

²² GHOSH 2016, pp. 467-470, pp. 566-567.

²³ Ivi, 471.

²⁴ Ivi, 151.

scenes are merely alluded to – or averted at the last moment, as it happens with her encounter with Bhyro Singh on the *Ibis*. Conversely, Kalua’s violation is rendered in all its details, as well as his whipping on the ship. Beatings and rape against women are hinted at, but seldom staged. Another hypothesis appears more convincing; the author makes a deliberate choice to avoid camouflaging the systemic violence that pervades the relationships among men in the patriarchal society. Ghosh compensates for an underrepresentation of the phenomenon, which often goes unnoticed and is believed to be a “normal” aspect of interactions between men. It must also be considered that the presence of subaltern masculinities dramatically increases the chances of being the target of social repression, as stated in the previous paragraph.

KESRI SINGH

Kesri is particularly representative of the divergent masculinities’ quest for a new identity in the *Trilogy*. His resistance surfaces both in his family and in the Army. Family is one of the social clusters where patriarchal dynamics have the highest incidence. Kesri’s family aligns with several traits of patriarchy too, as described in *Flood of Fire*:²⁵ the obedience to the *pater familias* – the oldest male – has to be absolute; gender and age are axes of control – sons and daughters are assigned respectively to the public and private spheres, which become gendered spaces – at the disposal of the domineering father’s desires. For instance, as the firstborn son, Kesri is traditionally destined to inherit the family’s wealth and dedicate his life to agriculture. Conversely, his younger brother Bhim must embrace the military career, for he is the son of a prestigious soldier. In this system, parents are the gatekeepers of the established order, responsible for the alignment of their offspring with the local customs. Disobedience is not tolerated under any circumstance. Ram Singh silences any verbal confrontation with violence – the third sign that reveals the existence of a patriarchal structure – beating his sons with sticks.²⁶ The rebellious temperament of the protagonist emerges from the very beginning of *Flood of Fire*: «To talk back to him [Kesri’s father] was to invite a hiding with a lath. This did not deter Kesri from speaking his mind, and he received many a beating for his defiance».²⁷ Domestic violence does not constitute a detriment to Kesri’s aspirations; however, it does shape his rebellious attitude. He understands that an open, direct opposition to his social environment would be met with more brutality and would possibly fail. Hence the need to find a discreet, silent stratagem to honour his most authentic self, while eluding the parents’ punishment.

²⁵ GHOSH 2016, pp. 48-56.

²⁶ Ivi, p. 50.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

AN HONOURABLE WARRIOR

In *Flood of Fire*, a tug-of-war takes place between different ethical and unethical Hindu warrior masculinities; in this panorama, Kesri's martial masculinity emerges as evidently alternative, peculiar, and uncompromising. Long before rebelling, he embraced a profoundly religious, Hindu notion of warfare. The *Naga sadhus* put the stress on a spiritual, more than physical, interpretation of masculinity – a concept that Kesri quickly absorbs. The ascetic warriors regularly monitor the physiological phenomena of the body, including digestion and erotic impulse. A pupil must be able to «prevent the loss, accidental or intentional, of his vital fluids».²⁸ Hence, the construction of the warrior Hindu masculinity is based on celibacy, i.e., *Brahmacharya*. As Carl Olson points out,²⁹ abstinence allows men to retain the heat generated by the sexual act, which strengthens both the body and the spirit. The high level of self-control that chastity requires is deemed to have the power to cleanse the mind, inducing a state similar to the ascetic *tapas* one. While experiencing this condition, the subject can contact the divinities, reach the pitch of cosmic knowledge and, as a consequence, he becomes able to contemplate the *Brahman*. Given the emphasis placed on celibacy, it can be concluded that the concept has a martial and, at the same time, mystical-religious significance. Kesri's masculinity fully adheres to the model exposed. He is chaste, dominates his body and his mind alike, has a strong sense of duty and integrity; he is an honourable warrior.

However, this interpretation of masculinity extends further than the religious domain, acquiring decolonizing stances;³⁰ the more so if compared to the common, yet ethically shady, Hindu warrior masculinity represented by Bhyro and Hukam Singh. As soldiers in the East Indian Company, they have sacrificed their religion, the loyalty to their people and their *dharma* for the sake of their economic benefit, becoming the subservient and complicit masculinities the *sahibs* need to enforce colonial domination. This aspect does not elude Ram Singh, who points it out in a dialogue with Bhyro Singh about the *dharma* of the Kshatriya's. To correctly comply with the caste's duties, a soldier must choose his company carefully. Many elements must be taken into account: first, the Army should serve the local population's interests and fight for its people. Bhyro Singh dismisses the Hindu Dharbanga Raj company for this reason, stating that: «They are vassals of the white *sahibs*; to work for them would be even worse than joining the English Company's Army».³¹ Serving the interests of the colonialist exploiters would throw dishonour on a warrior. Ram adds more details to the despicable behaviour of the Army: the East Indian Company is forcing recruits to join in. Being deprived of the freedom to follow his *dharma* as he wished was humiliating beyond measure for a professional soldier. Besides, the English fighting style is not compatible with the ancient, traditional warrior code. Military discipline has com-

²⁸ Ivi, p. 56.

²⁹ OLSON 2010, p. 289-292.

³⁰ This aspect will be addressed specifically in the last paragraphs.

³¹ GHOSH 2016, p. 52.

pletely blotted out the concept of glory; the Army has no champions, no heroes, no bright uniforms. Victory itself was often achieved by corrupting the enemy's generals, or via cunning deceptions. Thus, it can be deduced that the duty of a warrior was to undertake heroic actions that would cover his family with honour, according to the antique code of combat.³² Victory and defeat should look alike to the soldier, for the ultimate goal of a Kshatriya was to abide by his *dharma*, as the *Bhagavad Gita*³³ preaches. The religious subversive meaning of ethical Hindu warrior masculinity is completely lost on Byhro and Hukam Singh, who are focused on a physical rather than spiritual interpretation of warfare. Thus, they actively participate in the colonisation of their own country and pose a threat to the integrity of Kesri's identity.

However, the clash with *sahibs'* warrior masculinities is even stronger. Before proceeding, it is worth pointing out the remarkable difference between what can be broadly called Western and Indian masculinities. As I have explained in the previous paragraph, the Hindu religion decouples the performance of the male gender from procreation, as it happens in other cultures. This praise of self-control is to be found in the figure of the English gentleman too, but with substantial implications. In 19th century England, the birth rate among poor people was rampant, and an effective birth control system was desperately needed. The Malthusian upper classes united the Protestant approval for a stricter sexual discipline with the celebration of a «rational» manhood; to be a «true (gentle)man» implied being so sensible as to have a firm grasp on emotions and instincts.³⁴ This way, the Western society figured out how to discourage procreation, strengthen gender boundaries and assert a new typology of manhood at the same time. It is worth highlighting that many similarities are to be found in the Western medical treaties and in the *Naga sadhus* philosophy about the dispersal of seed as a weakness inducing condition.

If chastity enhanced manhood qualities, then Hindu warriors should have dominated over the Western ones thanks to their self-control. However, they were often discarded as second-hand soldiers, and considered weaker, irrational, feminine.³⁵ Threatened by the Otherness, the English hegemonic masculinity resorts to the dismissal of the Hindu masculinity to maintain the pyramid of power unchallenged and to assert its dominance over natives.³⁶ Although he is not able to directly expose the flaws of this mainstream narrative, Kesri takes a critical stand against the supposed meritocracy of Western warfare. By refusing to cooperate according to the complicit male role as the *havildar* of the B unit, he – a subaltern – affirms the dignity and validity of his divergent identity, rejecting in disdain the imposition of a colonial, hegemonic, unethical warrior masculinity.

³² Ivi, p. 53.

³³ FRANCI 2012, pp. 115-117.

³⁴ McLAREN 1999.

³⁵ SINHA 1995.

³⁶ WRITER 1989.

IN THE ARMY

Regarding Kesri's military career, three are the fundamental steps in which significant clashes between different martial masculinities occur: his experience as a recruit, his life as a Pacheesi's *havildar* and as a *havildar* of the Unit B. After joining the East Indian Company Army – his first act of rebellion – his quest for identity faces some obstacles. His new social environment is possibly even worse than the domestic one. The Army is a traditional patriarchal structure; the more so in the specific case of the Pacheesi unit. Here, at the top of the social pyramid, lies Subedar Nirbhay Singh. Not only is he the captain and the most expert of all the *sepoys*; he is also the head of one of the most far-reaching Hindu families in the north of India. Through a carefully planned strategy, he has managed to marry his relatives into all the other influential families with connections in the Army.³⁷ His age, experience and position make him the ultimate personification of patriarchy. Violence, complicity and connivance with hegemonic masculinities are once again the cohesive element by which hierarchy is strengthened. Promotions are subjected to the biased approval of the highest chiefs in command, who would take into consideration the petitioner's familiar connections before his merits. Hence, not to swear allegiance to the manhood's values – martial prowess, domination over women and children, entitlement to sex and sex as domination, obedience to patriarchs – results in marginalization, which consequently leads to the exposure to whimsical backlashes of violence. The dangers this situation poses to the physical integrity of men are more than enough to secure their compliance with the norms.

To the contrary, Kesri adopts an ambivalent attitude. On the one hand, he makes use of all his spiritual strength to defend his dignity. His refusal to be submissive to Hukam Singh is met with an unprecedented hard beating that the warrior faces with unwavering stoicism. Hence, Hukam resorts to psychological vexation, humiliation and caste-related insults. As stated in the first paragraphs, such complicit masculinities often deploy an array of techniques to ensure their privileged position in society, one being the enforcement of classist discrimination.³⁸ Kesri is sneered at for his dark complexion, a feature traditionally associated with inferior castes. Every failed attempt to bend the protagonist's will take the abuses on a higher level: the recruit is required to wash his boss's clothes. The warrior's defiance is now clear and flagrant as he openly refuses to obey Hukam Singh's orders. Bhyro Singh breaks down his resistance thanks to a severe beating with a *lath*, insults and the final humiliation of forcing the young boy to wash out his own blood from the stick.³⁹ The recruit's martial endurance of this

³⁷ GHOSH 2016, pp. 3-4.

³⁸ It is worth reminding that complicit masculinities differ from hegemonic ones in one pivotal element: they lack the power to impose their own version of masculinity as the prototypical model others must adhere to. In fact, complicit masculinities mimic with subalterns the relationship of power and abuse they willingly submitted themselves to in the first place, in order to be granted power over more marginalised identities.

³⁹ GHOSH 2016, pp. 94-95.

brutal aggression impresses so much the sadistic Singh that they develop some sort of respect for his audacity.⁴⁰ These episodes are meaningful examples of Kesri's rebellion, his spiritual integrity and, at the same time, the social reception of his identity.

On the other hand, Kesri understands that his rebellion must necessarily accept compromise. The power of the Army and of its hegemonic masculinity extends far beyond that of native patriarchs. The Anglo-Indian society has preserved the hierarchical structure of the Indian society to exploit it for its own benefit. Their approval of the sexist and classist instances is an instrument to reinforce domination over natives, but under no circumstances does it imply that these two hegemonic masculinities are equal. Therefore, the Indian patriarchs become complicit masculinities, for they abide by the rules imposed by the English colonisers. Many examples support this claim. The military propaganda insists on depicting the Western white male as the ideal, ultimate personification of soldierly qualities. The English highest officers establish non-negotiable rules of conduct, which are in complete contrast with the protagonist's values. The military conscription medical examination is the first example. The boy is forced to undress in front of the doctor and the nurses, the latter posing a threat to his chastity.⁴¹ The subsequent commotion is the result of a cultural misunderstanding; from the English viewpoint, Kesri's reaction is classified as an obstacle to the fast-paced process of recruitment. Moreover, the warrior's modesty comes completely unexpected, for it does not coincide with the stereotypical depiction of the colonised masculinities. Indians, among other populations, were believed to tend to nakedness, a sign of their savage attitude.⁴² Kesri is beaten as a punishment and his genitals are exposed to the onlookers by Bhyro Singh's complicit masculinity. The warrior's masculinity – modest and chaste, but also fierce and brave – has to compromise to the Army's diktats:

For Kesri the significance of this incident was not diminished by the discovery that many recruits had suffered similar, and even worse, humiliations at the hands of NCOs. One of the lessons he took from it was that every soldier had two wars to fight: one against enemies on the outside and the other against adversaries on the inside. The first fight was fought with guns, swords and brawn; the second with cunning, patience and guile.⁴³

In this sense, Kesri's rebellion will shift from exterior, blatant lack of deference to a more interior spiritual independence from the values of the Army, which are in contrast with his *dharma*. Since the situation is prohibitive, Kesri formally abandons the way of the *Naga sadhus*. To what extent this statement is true is yet to be proven: throughout *Flood of Fire*, the protagonist's actions will reveal on many occasions his loyalty to his first teachers and their model of martial masculinity.

⁴⁰ Ivi, p. 95.

⁴¹ Ivi, pp. 111-112.

⁴² LUGONES 2010, p. 743.

⁴³ GHOSH 2016, p. 112.

CONVENTIONS AND DESIRE: KESRI, HIS WIFE, AND GULABI

In this first step of his career, Kesri gets to know Gulabi, a prostitute in the Company's bazar.⁴⁴ Their encounter takes place consistently with the divergent masculinity of the soldier. It is not Kesri who actively pursues the pleasure of the brothel; it is the prostitute who invites him in, overthrowing the traditional gender assigned roles in sexual dynamics. Kesri is scared, embarrassed and tormented by the clash between his desire to yield to Gulabi's erotic proposal and his chastity.⁴⁵ His final surrender to the woman's charm is paired by admonitions that warn him about the punishment that this illicit pleasure will bring along: «In his head there was an insistent voice of warning, telling him that to discard the disciplines of wrestling would come at a cost; some day he would pay a steep price for his pleasure».⁴⁶ Even in this apparently non-essential sentence, his masculinity stands out in comparison with that of Gulabi's clients. The martial hegemonic masculinity would not include any sense of guilt or shame in having sex, particularly with a prostitute. It was rather predatory, as Bhryo Singh exemplifies well.

Divergence is found in every step of their sexual encounter. The woman approaches Kesri and proceeds to undress him, in the hope of reestablishing mainstream gendered roles. However, his recent traumatic experience – as Bhyro Singh humiliated him by stripping him stark naked and exposing him to the eyes of his comrades – added to his moral dilemma and the lack of experience reinforce his freezing passivity. That the manhood performed in the sexual sphere is expected to be very different is further stressed by the puzzled frown of Gulabi.⁴⁷ The thought of a soldier being a virgin is so unlikely that it takes her quite some time to realise it:

She smiled bemusedly: it was as if she had never before encountered a man who did not know what to do, and was hard put to believe that such a species existed. Her face grew serious [...] *Pahli baar?* First time? He was about to lie, but then he saw that she was not asking in a belittling way, but only because it had not occurred to her that a man, a *sepo*y, could be confused and uncertain in these matters.⁴⁸

Gulabi's difficulties in coming to the right conclusions confirms Kesri's unconventionality. The passage allows inferring the qualities that composed manhood, particularly that of soldiers: a *sepo*y must be sexually active and experienced, self-confident, and well versed in concealing insecurities and vulnerability. Even though such stereotypes are never openly addressed, they are so embedded in the social texture that they induce shame in Kesri to the point that he resorts to lies. It is worth noting that the unusual encounter questions also the femininity of the marginalized figure of the

⁴⁴ Ivi, pp. 112-113.

⁴⁵ Ivi, pp. 113-115.

⁴⁶ Ivi, p. 113.

⁴⁷ Ivi, pp. 113-114.

⁴⁸ Ivi p. 114.

prostitute. Although she has worked in the brothel for many years, Gulabi is taken aback by the intensity of her relationship with Kesri:

At some time they both realized that they would never again be able to recapture the amazement and wonder of this moment – and even for her, who had already grown accustomed to being with men, his discovering hunger came as a surprise, so that she seemed to see her own body in a new light. At a certain moment she found, to her shock, that she was naked – she would tell him later that she had never been in such a state with a man before...⁴⁹

The sexual relations Gulabi is accustomed to were often mere transactions which implied only strictly necessary undressing. Yet, her nakedness is charged with a broader metaphorical meaning. Gulabi is so captured by the eroticism of their encounters that she experiences the unprecedented vulnerability that comes with pleasure. Paradoxically, the scene depicted by Ghosh represents the loss of virginity not only for Kesri, but for Gulabi too. By that, she becomes an unconventional prostitute to the eyes of her social environment: she would be sneered at, or despised, if her colleagues were to know that Gulabi had established a relationship with a client. It can be concluded that, for women, surveillance on divergent identities was not any less strict than that placed on men. In this passage, the author seems to shed doubts on the actual meaning of received notions such as virginity and intimacy, highlighting their multifaceted nature.

By contrast, Kesri's partnership with his wife shines for its mediocrity. Firstly, the relationship does not appear to be of primary importance in the soldier's life. It is worth noting that the woman's and their four children's names are never mentioned. The only exception occurs when the protagonist celebrates with the comrades the birth of his first son, Shakmara Singh.⁵⁰ His paternal experience occupies no longer than a couple of lines in *Flood of Fire*. Not even on the brink of death does he think of his family.⁵¹ This is partly due to the unsatisfactory life Kesri leads when he comes back home. His clan's welcome is so warm and sincere that he considers the idea of retiring; sharing the domestic space with his relatives quickly changes his mind. The marriage suffers from vague intimacy related complications, that are exacerbated by the comparison to his *liaison* with Gulabi; back in his village, his moral and sexual behavior is strictly policed by the community. The situation is made even worse by the lack of consent to getting married. Kesri feels no urge to find a wife and resorts to it as a way to win back his father's approval. In addition, the bride and groom do not share the desire of living together, not to mention having sexual intercourse. The spouses barely know each other and find it difficult to negotiate their everyday life. The patriarchal sexual control over bodies, rooted in the tradition of arranged marriages, blatantly fails to address the needs of the couple. In the case of Kesri, it is not only eroticism that is lacking in their *ménage*. The emotional exchange is non-existent and fades in comparison to the loving attitude that arises spontaneously between the soldier and the prostitute.

⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 115.

⁵⁰ Ivi, p. 127.

⁵¹ Ivi, pp. 591-592.

Kesri and Gulabi create a sphere of deep intimacy that is not uniquely sexual: «No one knew his injuries as well as she did. Her touch was so deft that she could make the sensitive edges of old scars pulsate with feeling».⁵² The «physical transactions» – as their encounters are called – appear to be a more appropriate definition for the sexual relations with his wife, which are only meant to produce an heir. Kesri's final decision to desert the Army and come back to *Brahmacharya* – a vow broken solely because of Gulabi – shows how little consideration he has for his wife, whose presence or wishes are not taken into account at all.

Since Kesri's rebellious attitude is renowned, his placid acceptance of the union is rather surprising; the more so is his intention to live up to their expectations and prove a dutiful husband.⁵³ In fact, there are several reasons to justify this changed attitude. First, the soldier wishes to concede to his parents' desire to appease their anger. His identity is rooted in his career more than in his private life; hence, it is easier for him to sacrifice the latter in favour of the former. Moreover, he already has a satisfying love story with Gulabi to nourish his emotional needs, which is also conveniently more at hand than the one with his wife. Thus, he arranges his return to the patriarchal family without sacrificing the pivotal elements of his identity. The protagonist is aware of the outrage his rebellion represented for the *pater familias* and, by submitting himself to his will, he seemingly accepts his role in the patriarchal frame. Finally, the warrior is perfectly aware of the marriage market dynamics: he and his wife are deemed valuable because of her family's wealth and connections, and his rank in the Army.

As it has been proved in this section, the patriarchal agenda does not address men's needs in an effective way. To the contrary, their emotional, physical and psychological peculiarities are left unattended and, in the best scenario, they find satisfaction elsewhere, outside the oppressive limits imposed by patriarchy. In this sense, Kesri proves to be a cunning juggler who modulates the social pressure on his identity to his advantage.

AS THE HAVILDAR AMONG THE PACHEESI: KESRI AND DEETI

Kesri's relations with comrades and subordinates are the prominent aspect of his second career step as an officer of the Native Bengal Infantry. His charge provides the reader with a unique perspective on the patriarchal pyramid of power. As a *havildar*, he owes obedience to the higher officers; on the other hand, he is granted extensive power over lower-ranked soldiers as long as he assumes the role of the gatekeeper. The complicity with the established order is rewarded through a biased repartition of charges, money and privilege; family bonds are actively used to keep in check divergent masculinities. A glaring example of this assessment can be found in the description of Kesri's unit.⁵⁴ The patriarch Nirbhay Singh is the heir of the powerful Rajput

⁵² Ivi, pp. 179-180.

⁵³ Ivi, pp. 126-127.

⁵⁴ Ivi, pp. 3-4.

family, whose members have served in the Army as officers for decades. He himself inherited his position from his brother Bhyro, and many *sepoys* benefitted from their link with this clan to be promoted. The Pacheesi unit is yet another enactment of the patriarchal system.

Nonetheless, to comply with its rules comes at a price. The interconnected web in which soldiers are placed makes it almost impossible to disobey the direct commands of males who are, at the same time, the highest officers, the oldest relatives in the clan and their benefactors. This aspect emerges in relation to the marriage proposal presented by Hukam Singh to Kesri's sister, Deeti.⁵⁵ To support their petition, Bhyro and his nephew resort to all kinds of patriarchal discourses. First, Deeti is depicted as an object that will soon expire – due to her age and her diminished chances of getting pregnant – and which should get married with the utmost urgency. If the feminine figure is built around motherhood – thus strengthening the boundaries between genders – men are described for their role as breadwinners. Hukam Singh's physical prowess and his fertility are never questioned, even though they are indeed fundamental in procreation. What appears to matter is his position in the Opium Factory of Benares and the acres he owns. It is the continuous, unquestioned patriarchal discourse among men that sustains this gendered division of space.⁵⁶ The last claim deals with the immediate promotion that would be allotted to Kesri after the wedding. Note that the woman is once again objectified and exchanged as a commodity to strengthen alliance among men, which is the base of patriarchy intended as «[...] a set of social relations between men [...] which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women».⁵⁷ Patriarchy is based on the exploitation of women's work in favour of the *pater familias*. The marriage contract is equalled to a labour contract, in which sexual, reproductive caretaking work is carried out as a compensation for the livelihood provided by the husband. In this case, the list of those who benefit from it includes not only Hukam, but also Kesri, who becomes a *havildar* thanks to the marriage of Deeti.

Interdependence among men is indeed the ultimate goal of Bhyro and Hukam Singh. It quickly dawns on Kesri that the marriage proposal is but a way to secure the subjugation of his rebellious masculinity. Since they are his senior officers and the Singh clan would probably condemn him to ostracism and downgrading in case he declined the offer, he accepts his role as Deeti's owner. Nonetheless, Kesri's wrongdoing clashes with the moral integrity of the Hindu warrior; consequently, a strong sense of guilt emerges upon receiving the news that the wedding had been consummated.⁵⁸ He forces himself into believing that Deeti is content with her status, in spite of all the evidence proving the opposite. His compromise regarding honour, integrity and dignity

⁵⁵ Ivi, pp. 143-144.

⁵⁶ It is interesting to note that such division is disrupted as soon as female characters are involved. Deeti, Shireen and Paulette operate an appropriation of public space both by disguising themselves and by openly asserting their right to interact with the world beyond the domesticity of their house.

⁵⁷ HARTMANN 1979, p. 11.

⁵⁸ GHOSH 2016, p. 145.

are growing extremely demanding. Kesri's identity is torn between the need to fulfil his ambitions and the model of warrior he aspires to. Although far from being over, his quest for identity already contains the seed of doubt that will later bloom into the flower of desertion.

This argument is further supported by the blatant opposition that Kesri performs to the hegemonic masculinity's requests during his confrontation with Nirbhay Singh, after Deeti's elopement.⁵⁹ The community is crystal clear about the attitude they expect from a man in his position. A subaltern identity, a woman, has dared to defy the established order by auto-determining her life and sexuality. Kesri, who plays the role of the male guardian, has to act accordingly and deliver her to the Singh clan, i.e., condemn her to death. Since the *havildar* shows reticence in obeying the orders, the patriarch makes use of an extended array of manipulative strategies to bend Kesri's will to his own. Firstly, the warrior is humiliated by being forced to stand in the presence of lower-ranked soldiers. Secondly, Nirbhay delivers a speech on the public shame that taints Kesri's and his family's face, which can be only washed away by Deeti's blood. The *subedar* does not fail to mention the parental links that tie the warrior's will to his, and all the promotions he has benefitted from thanks to his patronage. The true nature of the «generous marriage proposal» is finally exposed as an instrument to blackmail Kesri. The admission of Chandan Singh to the military audience is to be interpreted as a further attempt to threaten the *havildar*: the verbal abuse directed against Deeti is but a first taste of the physical violence the Singh clan is eager to unleash on the siblings. To conclude, the *subedar* operates a social and psychological violence on Kesri by ostracising, downgrading and making him an outcast within the Pacheesi Unit.

The conflict also represents a tug of war between two opposite interpretations of the Hindu warrior identity. The *subedar* is a corrupt mercenary, a power-hungry tyrant, subjugated to the English hegemonic masculinity. On the contrary, Kesri is no complacent soldier, which undermines the stability of the pyramid of power. The protagonist disobeys Nirbhay's direct order because he refuses both his role in the patriarchal frame and his martial manhood. However, the acceptance of the marriage proposal has tainted his moral integrity, for his career is based on Deeti's sacrifice. Hence, the loss of the rank of *havildar* is accepted as a purifying penitence for his cowardice and egoism:

Yet he felt no rancour towards her. He had only himself to blame, he knew, not just for having cherished a vain hope, but also for sacrificing Deeti to his own ambitions and sending her into the family of Subedar Bhyro Singh, knowing full well what those people were made of. If Deeti had willed this retribution on him, he would not have blamed her.⁶⁰

Besides, the protagonist has sensed that the Deeti's punishment is not meant to restore their honour; the Singhs require of him a demonstration of complete devotion to the patriarch that goes far beyond familiar bonds: «they [men] also are united in their shared relationship of dominance over their women; they are dependent on each

⁵⁹ Ivi, pp. 170-174.

⁶⁰ Ivi, p. 179-180.

other to maintain that domination».⁶¹ To serve a spiritually corrupted clan would taint Kesri's Kshatriya's *dharma*; given the Singh clan's power, his rebellion becomes even more intimate and totally enclosed in what could be called ante litteram Gandhian non-cooperation.

KESRI AS A HAVILDAR IN THE B UNIT: A DISHONOURABLE WARRIOR

As *havildar* of the B Unit, Kesri displays his concept of leadership, thus marking a significant distance from the model posed by the Singhs. Initially, the difference appears thin to the eye, since even he resorts to brutality as a measure to suppress discontent. Kesri enjoys the benefits that his rank offers; the absence of familiar and caste constraints makes him prone to punish rebellious soldiers with acts of physical violence.⁶² He openly regrets the times when the whip was still admitted to maintain discipline, albeit he never resorts to it in a sadistic frenzy like Bhyro Singh; it is rather the ultimate ploy by which he restores order.

Since he rose through the ranks, Kesri benefits from the almost complete domination over subaltern males, which functions as compensation for his compliance with the patriarchal rules, i.e., for embracing a complicit masculinity. Nonetheless, the marriage of convenience between Kesri and the Army soon deepens rifts over the concept of leadership and martial honour. Although the *havildar* is accustomed to the harsh disciplining of soldiers, his conscience does not approve of the Army's management of warfare, in which troops are mistreated and exploited. Conversely, he behaves as a father figure toward his men, which involves both punishing and looking after them on the battlefield. Thus, Kesri is able to embody a version of the complicit masculinity more in line with his core values.

The first disagreements arise a few weeks before the departure to China. After the briefing with the English officers, the first thought that haunts Kesri is how to protect his troop from a long voyage by sea, which poses a cultural problem for the *sepoys*. Hastily and carelessly delivered, the news sparks fears among the soldiers, thus provoking a sudden rise in self-inflicted injuries.⁶³ The consequent investigation finds one of the soldiers guilty of mutilating himself in order to be discharged with honour before sailing to China. The trial is predetermined, though: Kesri and Mee want to «make an example of this man to prevent an outbreak of self-inflicted wounds».⁶⁴ They both consciously opt for the most severe of the sentences (seven-years of hard labour). Although this punishment is in line with the military law, it is rather evident that the penal code has been interpreted to the benefit of the Army, whose stability cannot be undermined on the very brink of an international conflict. The complicity of Kesri is due to his strong sense of responsibility and duty, which does not approve of coward-

⁶¹ HARTMAN 1979, p. 11.

⁶² GHOSH 2016, p. 228.

⁶³ Ivi, p. 254.

⁶⁴ Ivi, p. 254.

ice; an ethical stand that is promptly shaken to the core by two young deserters. Their beating is far more brutal,⁶⁵ and his decision to force their comrades to execute their death sentence appears sadistic. The reason for this inexplicable unleashing of violence is to be tracked down to the painful moral dilemma the recruits pose to Kesri. The *havildar* feels the duty to protect his soldiers from the menace that deserters represent on the battlefield – not to mention the riots that a mutiny would bring along. Hence, their execution is inevitable. Nevertheless, he would rather not punish them at all. Firstly, his role as a fatherly figure has created emotional bonds with every man in his Unit, which represents his ideal creation, almost a son to the protagonist's eyes.⁶⁶ Secondly, the boys' claims make Kesri feel abashed, for they are supported by solid evidence. The *havildar* himself shares their concerns regarding the quality of the Unit B equipment, the provisions and their salary. The arguments are founded and impede any dismissal of their worries to the point that Kesri would have gladly overlooked their flight, had they not been so naïve as to be caught straight away. Their foolishness forces the warrior into a predicament, since he cannot refuse to execute a death penalty that is due, according to the Army's law, but that is in complete contrast with his ethical convictions. Kesri is forced to carefully reconsider his hypocritical behaviour, which mirrors his superiors, the English officers who consciously condemn honourable *sepoys* to death because of their corruption. Unable to silence his guilty-ridden conscience, the protagonist punishes himself for the infraction of his moral code by forcing himself to lead the firing squad in person. The corpses will haunt Kesri's dreams, accusing him of being a *nakli gora* – a «white-faker».⁶⁷

Kesri's tormented conscience finds consolation in the care of his troops. His unconventional loving attitude is expressed by a variety of precautions meant to preserve the welfare of the *sepoys*, widely overlooked by the *sahibs*. The warrior strives to convey optimism to the sceptical and scared soldiers while dictating his last letter home;⁶⁸ he dispels false rumours regarding the supernatural powers of Chinese soldiers by diverting their minds with his tales of martial prowess;⁶⁹ while stationed on an inhospitable island for months, Kesri organises a wrestling club and takes part in it to keep their spirits up.⁷⁰ The *havildar* is not any less committed on the battlefield. As it is often highlighted, his chief aim is to deliver his troopers safe and sound to their families.⁷¹ For this reason, he is very solicitous in assisting the recruits upon their first battle, instructing a young soldier on how to diminish the clangour of the bullets hitting the helmet.⁷² Even in the most dramatic moment of the fight, when Kesri himself

⁶⁵ Ivi, pp. 286-288.

⁶⁶ Ivi, pp. 383-384, 386.

⁶⁷ Ivi, pp. 406-407.

⁶⁸ Ivi, p. 305.

⁶⁹ Ivi, p. 253.

⁷⁰ Ivi, p. 368.

⁷¹ Ivi, p. 318.

⁷² Ivi, pp. 385-386.

is afraid, he selflessly encourages a veteran in a terrified paralysis to react – lest he is executed for cowardice:

It would fall to Kesri to report him to Captain Mee; there would be a court martial and the man would probably be shot for cowardice – and he, Havildar Kesri Singh, would be as much to blame as the man himself, for it was his job, his duty, his karma, to protect his men as best he could, even from themselves.⁷³

This passage clearly states the strong sense of responsibility that Kesri feels weighting on his shoulders. His relationship with his subalterns is affectionate, paternal, empathic. The B Unit is his own creation, as are the bonds that unite all the *sepoys*. The *havildar* has trained, educated and protected all of them; his sense of paternity is best performed toward his troop rather than to his children:

Kesri ran after them, brandishing his sword and shouting dreadful threats [...] yet in his heart, he was glad that their initiation into combat had happened in this way, in a minor skirmish rather than a pitched battle. As he watched them, sulkily falling back into line, a great pride filled Kesri's heart: he realized that he would never know a love as deep as that which bound him to this unit, which was largely his own creation, the culmination of his life's work.⁷⁴

Unlike Bhyro and Hukam Singh, he wants to know every soldier, his story, and his family. Another significant example is offered by the death of Dicky. The *havildar* will entrust Kalua to take care of a devastated Raju; this is but an excuse to cry upon the orphan's death without having the Unit witness it. Although Kesri was pressured into paternity by his family, he is able to compromise with an otherwise undefeatable organisation to create a niche where his masculinity can express itself according to his own values. Exactly in that niche is to be found the subversive potential the character bears.

KESRI AND MR MEE

Not only does Kesri perform paternity in relation to his soldiers; he is also a father figure for his superior officer, captain Mee. Thus, Kesri is entrusted with the tutoring of the *butcha*.⁷⁵ His caregiving includes every aspect of military life in the Army. He watches over Mee when he is sick, drunk or wounded, often as a result of a brawl at the officers' club. Mee's character is of no help, for he is prone to brawling, gambling and fornication. Nonetheless, Kesri never averts his eyes from him, like a father would do. Operating in the background – the *havildar* is indeed a grey eminence – he goes the extra mile to preserve the *butcha*'s reputation. For instance, he emends Mee's imprudent behaviour with Miss Catherine⁷⁶ by hushing the servants' gossip about their

⁷³ Ivi, pp. 559-560.

⁷⁴ Ivi, pp. 386-387.

⁷⁵ Ivi, pp. 25-26.

⁷⁶ Ivi, pp. 199-205.

liaison, hiding the love letters the officer carelessly left in plain sight and finally noticing the couple in advance about the arrival of Catherine's servants, sparing them the humiliation of being caught discomposed.

The relationship between Kesri and Mee reaches peaks of intimacy that are peculiar, yet not reciprocal, due to the racial divide. Nonetheless, the presence of the warrior in moments of utmost vulnerability strengthens their bond to the point that a mutual understanding can dispense with verbal communication. Kesri's fatherly attitude is best conveyed by actions. Recurrent are the moments of unspoken yet intimate understanding,⁷⁷ also conveyed by demeanour: «nothing was said between them, nor it was necessary».⁷⁸ On the surface, both officers comply with the social expectations weighing on them in the eyes of the military society: however, even in this case, Kesri is able to elude the norms. The warrior cannot share his meals with Mee publicly, but the captain himself asks for his company when there is no social vigilance. Nor can he exchange personal information with his superior:

Even though Kesri and Captain Mee knew each other very well, they both understood that their relationship was undergirded by a scaffolding of lines that could not be crossed. Kesri would never of his own accord have ventured to ask the adjutant why his fellow officers had congratulated him.⁷⁹

Yet, they both strive to find some time alone to share news. Even on the verge of death, Mee proves to prefer his Hindu friend over his English comrades by allotting him his share of the spoils of war, which were meant to pay back his debts. It can be argued that their friendship is based on a range of similarities that unite the two characters, being that both have to endure some form of classist or racial discrimination. Kesri is subjected to the hegemonic masculinity because he is a native, while Mee is marginalised for his lower middle-class origins. As I have highlighted previously, the patriarchal society is not meritocratic and tends to present rigid divisions meant to favour a specific privileged group. Mee is denied any advancement in career within the military hierarchy, while Kesri is held back by his ethnicity and caste. The presence of the *havildar* as a silent spectator offers an insight on the humiliations that allegedly «inferior» masculinities are subjected to – even though they present almost all the qualities manhood requires.⁸⁰ Mee is white, English, heterosexual; yet his humble origins gain him the contempt of his peers and the interdiction from an upper class clubs in Calcutta.⁸¹ The depiction of the Anglo-Indian community casts serious doubts on the allegedly meritocratic traits of the Western society and on its flaunted superiority over the caste-based Hindu one.

⁷⁷ GHOSH 2016, p. 198.

⁷⁸ Ivi p. 204, 599.

⁷⁹ Ivi, p. 27.

⁸⁰ It shall not be forgotten that, likewise it happened with natives' masculinities, those of inferior social classes were delegitimated by means of a feminisation of their main traits (WRITER 1989; LUHRMANN 1994; SINHA 1995; McLAREN 1999; SRAMEK 2006-2007; LETT 2014).

⁸¹ Ivi, p. 199.

In terms of integrity, there are some discrepancies between Mee and Kesri's warrior masculinities. As officers, they are both selfless leaders who care for their troops. However, the rational and self-controlled English martial manhood is poorly represented by Mee, who abandons himself to any kind of excess, namely alcohol, gambling and sex. On the other hand, the despised Hindu martial masculinity has forged Kesri to be a better representative of the Western martial manhood than the English soldiers themselves; he is brave, rational and chaste. Had the Army been a meritocratic system as it was claimed, the protagonist would have rightfully escalated the military ranks. At this stage of his career, however, the *havildar* is painfully aware of the corrupted nature of the Army patriarchal organisation; as in many other circumstances, he opts to partially compromise with its rules in order to survive. Conversely, Mee's inflexible morality clashes with the hegemonic masculinity's interests – represented by a transfigured, morally corrupt Zachary – and leads him to death.

RACIAL BARRIERS IN THE ARMY

Kesri's ethical warrior masculinity struggles to serve his *dharma* properly and respect his oath of loyalty to the Army at the same time, which is due to the blatant iniquity tainting this institution. This is particularly evident during the B Unit deployment in China. The Bengal Native Infantry takes advantage of the subaltern condition of *sepoys* to the point of jeopardising their survival. As the deserters correctly pointed out, they are equipped with low-quality guns;⁸² provisions are rotten or infested by vermin; not to mention the salary gap between English and Indian soldiers⁸³ and the systematic bullying of the natives' unit by British troops. During a flu outbreak, the Cameronians accuse the Indians of spreading the contagion.⁸⁴ Often, Mee decides to play the role of the complicit male:

But just as Kesri was issuing instructions to the tent-pitchers, Colour-Sarjeant Orr of the Cameronians appeared: 'Who the hell said you coolies could settle your black arses here?' He pointed to the tents of the 37th Madras: 'You belong back there with the Ram-sammies.' Kesri tried to hold his ground but was outranked and heavily outnumbered. When Captain Mee himself took the other side, saying, 'I'm sorry, havildar, you'll have to move,' he had to give in. The Cameronians' taunts rang in Kesri's ears as he walked away. '[...] let that be a lesson to you, boy [...]' '[...] and you'd better be sure we don't see any of your nigger-snot back here!'⁸⁵

Even more outrageous is the episode of the plundering of a Chinese village: the English division assaults and rapes civilians, while drunk on duty. Kesri's *sepoys* report their illicit behaviour to the highest in rank, only to end up being accused of it and being condemned to death. Captain Mee admits the existence of a racist bias: «Well I'm sure I don't need to tell you, havildar,' he said, 'that in situations like these it's al-

⁸² Ivi, pp. 278-280.

⁸³ Ivi, pp. 286-287.

⁸⁴ Ivi, pp. 566-567.

⁸⁵ Ivi, pp. 551-552.

ways easier to blame *sepoys*. [...] And in this instance it's a Madras havildar's word against an English corporal's'. There was no need to say any more». ⁸⁶ In the light of these events, it is fundamental to remember the argument between Ram and Bhyro Singh about the compliance of the Kshatriya's *dharma* in the East Indian Company; the admonitions of the *havildar*'s father – the personification of the ancient Hindu martial traditions – prove to be founded.

Compared to the image of the fierce Hindu armies of the past, as handed down by tradition, the English one stands out for its moral decay. Generals and officers are utterly incompetent, ignorant and prone to corruption. The A Unit is ordered to install on an island that was a notorious collective burial mound, thus spreading a malady that kills half of the soldiers. ⁸⁷ The uniforms prove insufficient in the Chinese weather; ships transporting the troops often sink because of their precarious conditions. ⁸⁸ The siege of Canton is so poorly designed that it allows the local population to almost take over in a clash that ultimately causes the amputation of the *havildar*'s leg. Confronted by the evidence, Kesri's tolerance toward rampant abuse, disrespect and unethical behaviour reaches a point of no return.

THE STRENGTH OF THE HINDU WARRIOR

The comparison and contrast between the Western and Indian warrior masculinities is not new to the Hindu cultural panorama and it has often been converted into a vector of anticolonial instances. During the Hindu Renaissance, several authors elaborated a conscious redefinition of the Hindu warrior iconography to cast a critical eye on the stereotypical narration around this persona. ⁸⁹ Swami Vivekananda and Bankimchandra Chatterjee were pivotal in shaping the ascetic-warrior character, which Ghosh has overtly condensed into Kesri.

Although coeval authors like Savarkar highlight the martial imprinting of the *sadhus* masculinity, Vivekananda opts to give relevance to its ethical-religious component, thus defining the core values of a *muscular spirituality* as opposed to the English *muscular Christianity*. ⁹⁰ Vivekananda stated that religion is the fundamental framework of India: «Not politics nor military power, not commercial supremacy nor mechanical genius furnishes India with that backbone, but religion; and religion alone is all that we have and mean to have. Spirituality has been always in India». ⁹¹ The prerogative over the religious domain poses the Indian masculinity as superior to the Western one, which is indeed wealthier and more powerful, but also corrupted to the core by its materialism. ⁹² Vivekananda subverts the Western civilization's hegemonic masculinity in order

⁸⁶ Ivi, pp. 575-576.

⁸⁷ Ivi, pp. 404-405.

⁸⁸ Ivi, p. 406.

⁸⁹ BANERJEE 2005, p.48.

⁹⁰ Ivi, p. 58.

⁹¹ Ivi, p. 61.

⁹² Ivi, pp. 62-63.

to offer a new paradigmatic manhood that is imbued with colonised populations' values and principles. Therefore, the construction of a different gender interpretation is part of a broader act of resistance against colonial domination.⁹³ It is worth noting that this construction still relies on a gender binarism that reinforces stereotypical notions about sexes: thus, creating a stereotyped warrior figure.⁹⁴ The men who present traits typically associated with femininity are despised and considered as enemies of their homeland. What may have eluded Vivekananda is that this categorization heavily depends on the colonialist vision of genders and natives. By supporting such an opinion, Vivekananda enforces the Western hegemonic masculinity's stereotype that describes the Hindu ones as effeminate, in the attempt to neutralise the menace of their otherness.⁹⁵

Bankimchandra Chatterjee proposes a more radical redefinition. In *Anandamath*, physical prowess is left aside in favour of spirituality and abstinence from worldly temptations, which provides the warrior with mental clarity. The ascetic attitude toward warfare is reflected in Ghosh's *Trilogy*. As a *havildar* explains to Kesri, the English soldiers numb their senses with alcohol to enhance the blood-thirsty frenzy. Conversely, the Hindu warriors' ingestion of ganja, hashish, bhang or maajun is meant to calm the mind and enhance self-control.⁹⁶ It is interesting to note that Kesri's critical vision on the East Indian Company Army blooms after the decision to embrace again the *Brahmacharya*; his lucid mind seems to gradually awake from the numbness that had concealed the Army's corruption. Carl Olson comments that this status equates to the adoption of a liminal identity that refuses any collocation in society.⁹⁷ In the light of this theory, Kesri's *Brahmacharya* signals the entrance in a liminal phase in the *havildar*'s identity quest that opens up the possibility to redefine it as that of a warrior, not a mercenary, thus preparing him for the last step as a deserter.

Considering the various Indian interpretations of the warfare so far illustrated, it can be concluded that Ghosh has indeed been inspired by those concepts to build the character of Kesri, but in an unequal measure. The epic warriors by Bankimchandra are preferred to those by Vivekananda, whose embedded glorification of violence constitutes a severe detriment for their reception to the poetics of Ghosh. It also may be supposed that the desertion of Kesri metaphorically resembles the author's repudiation of the suffering and desolation that war represents.

KESRI'S DESERTION

Kesri's initial enthusiasm turns to scepticism at first, to dissatisfaction later on, and finally ends up in treason. The final blow to his loyalty to the Army is delivered by the enemies. Chinese warriors appear superior to the English and Indian ones, for they

⁹³ LUGONES 2010.

⁹⁴ BANERJEE, pp. 59-60.

⁹⁵ Ivi, pp. 62-63.

⁹⁶ GHOSH 2016, p. 277.

⁹⁷ OLSON 2010, p. 292.

fight to death or commit suicide to save their honour. While the victorious troops ravage the corpses in an ecstatic killing spree, the Chinese soldiers demonstrate bravery and composure upon their impending death.⁹⁸ The martial firmness of the opponents reflects back a distorted image of the *havildar*, who is unable to reckon himself in the B Unit anymore. In an intense emotional encounter, Kesri lethally wounds a commander in whose eyes the protagonist finds the need to protect his homeland, a feeling unknown to him, a mercenary.⁹⁹ In a vain attempt to defend his identity, the protagonist blames the victims for their insensible actions that make him feel like a hitman.¹⁰⁰ The situation is worsened by the innocence of the Chinese people, who have inflicted no harm to his country. As Kesri knows well, killing without a justified cause goes against Kshatriya's rules.¹⁰¹ The protagonist has betrayed the interest of his people, the teachings of the *Naga sadhus*, his *dharma*, his father's sacrifice at Assaye and all the honourable ancestors who fought to protect his country. Hence, the Opium War is a *kutayuddha* – an unrighteous war.¹⁰² The sudden horror sizes the *havildar* and it is echoed by an astonished, anaphoric «what was it for?»¹⁰³ The manhood preached by the hegemonic masculinity reveals its deceiving nature as the English soldiers abandon themselves to savage brutality,¹⁰⁴ which culminates in the affront to the victims, piled up under a sign stating «this is the road to glory».¹⁰⁵ The poised, self-disciplined Hindu martial masculinity has no place in the Army.

THE GANDHIAN ELEMENT IN GHOSH'S POETICS

In order to better understand the liminal phase through which Kesri's quest for identity comes to an end, it is pivotal to consider the influence of Gandhian principles, namely *Swaraj*, *Sarvodaya* and *Ahimsa*, on Ghosh's poetics. The first addresses the problem of complete autonomy from the colonisers' domination. As the Mahatma points out, the reproduction of British values, narrative codes about Indians, and the exploitative production system perpetuates the imperialistic dynamics that subjugated the country. As a consequence, decolonization must involve society at all levels, with particular attention to those natives who colluded with the oppressors.¹⁰⁶ In the novels, for ex-

⁹⁸ GHOSH 2016, p. 470.

⁹⁹ Ivi, pp. 470-472.

¹⁰⁰ Ivi, pp. 503-506.

¹⁰¹ Kshatriyas' moral code approves only of *dharmayuddha*, the righteous war. To comply with the soldier's *dharma*, a conflict must have a solid moral background (for instance, when the kingdom is threatened by invaders or usurpers) (ROY 2016, pp. 28-33). This is evidently not the case of the First Opium War.

¹⁰² Ivi, pp. 28-33.

¹⁰³ GHOSH 2016, pp. 505-506.

¹⁰⁴ It is worth noting the ironic dismantling of the Western martial racist and colonialist propaganda as the author proceeds to describe the inhuman blood-thirsty frenzy of the English troops through Kesri's lucid viewpoint.

¹⁰⁵ GHOSH 2016, p. 470.

¹⁰⁶ JEFFERESS 2002-2003.

ample, Bhyro and Hukam Singh target Kesri for his dark complexion and his outcast status – since he joined the Army without his father’s approval. Through these characters, Ghosh establishes a continuity with Gandhi’s discourse, as it poses relevant questions to contemporary India. Privilege and inequality still vex the country in different forms, to which the author opposes the concept of *Sarvodaya* – a new organisation of society based on equality and cooperation to ensure the wellbeing of all its members.¹⁰⁷ Social transformation necessarily stems from individual conscience, which should reject materialism and the hierarchical power structures of the society.¹⁰⁸ Kesri partially represents this idea in his ultimate rebellion against the Army; exactly as India should do according to Gandhi, he re-discovers his identity by betraying his pledge to the colonisers and embraces the religious core of the Hindu identity. English materialism is corrupting the nation like it corrupted Kesri’s *Brahmacharya* in the first place.¹⁰⁹

It is my deliberate opinion that India is being ground down not under the English heel but under that of modern civilization. Religion is dear to me, and my first complaint is that India is becoming irreligious [...]. We are turning away from God.¹¹⁰

Notably, God stands for ethics and spirituality, the base for a new government centred on *Sarvodaya*.¹¹¹ Hence, religion appears as the answer to the rampant spread of Western materialism and, at the same time, the very source of Indian independence, as stated in *Hind Swaraj*.¹¹²

THE HONOURABLE HINDU WARRIOR

The ethical tensions within the character of Kesri reach a critical point, for the *havidar* struggles between the need to amend the mistake of joining the Army, and the impossibility of breaking his oath of loyalty. His growing discomfort seeks relief in figures of the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavad Gita*: King Shalya, Dronacharya, Bishma Pitamaha do comply with their *dharma*, for they are righteous warriors forced to fight on behalf of evil due to an unbreakable promise.¹¹³ However, not even the history of Arjuna is relevant to him anymore.¹¹⁴ Kesri’s experience of warfare causes a detachment from his culture: honour, *dharma* and *dharmayuddha* fade in comparison to the slaughter he has witnessed. Not even the divine mission of Baboo Nob Kissin offers justification for the ongoing massacres. In this sense, Kesri comes to personify Ghosh’s

¹⁰⁷ JEFFERESS 2003 pp. 89-91.

¹⁰⁸ Ivi, pp. 89-91.

¹⁰⁹ GANDHI 1997.

¹¹⁰ GANDHI, 1910, p. 27.

¹¹¹ GANDHI 1921, pp. 11-13.

¹¹² Ivi, pp. 145-146.

¹¹³ GHOSH 2016, pp. 505-506.

¹¹⁴ ROY 2012, p. 32.

Gandhian nonviolent opinions on war and his refusal of any cultural discourse intended to mystify its inhumanity.

Kesri's last moral scruple – the dishonour of desertion – disappears upon hearing of Mee's suicide. The protagonist has suffered the amputation of a leg due to the English generals' poor planification of the siege; Mee takes his own life since his inflexible ethical principles cannot accept the blackmail Zachary is forcing upon him. The epiphany reveals to the *havildar* how unfitting his spiritual strength is in such a corrupted context, and how undeserving of sacrifices the Army is. It can be concluded that Kesri's desertion does not stem from a failure of his ethical principles, it is rather the ultimate assertion of them. The identity quest is over: Kesri reclaims his unconventionally chaste, rational, fierce, honourable, caring, Hindu warrior masculinity, deserting a life of unethical compromise at the service of hegemonic masculinity, his ultimate rebellion.

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