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Representing the Exotic and the Familiar

Politics and perception in literature

EDITED BY
Meenakshi Bharat
and Madhu Grover

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Volume 12

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Table of contents

Series editor's preface	XI
Acknowledgements	XIII
Contributors	XV
Introduction	1
<i>Meenakshi Bharat and Madhu Grover</i>	
FOREWORD	
Literary politics and perception: Moving beyond representation	9
<i>Elleke Boehmer</i>	
Part I. Traversing unfamiliar spaces	
CHAPTER 1	
Magical modernities: The familiar and the exotic on Indian lifestyle TV	17
<i>Tania Lewis</i>	
CHAPTER 2	
Kipling's "wild and strange" India: The "insider" perspective of the short stories	35
<i>Madhu Grover</i>	
CHAPTER 3	
Exoticism and familiarity in Victor Segalen's travel poetry	51
<i>Ian Fookes</i>	
CHAPTER 4	
Cambodia through Western eyes: The exotic, the familiar, and the universal	67
<i>Robert Horne</i>	
CHAPTER 5	
Italian travel narratives on twentieth century China: Alterity, distance and self-identification	79
<i>Linetto Basilone</i>	

CHAPTER 6

- Affect labelling as a means of challenging exotic stereotypes
in readings of Salwa Bakr's "The Golden Chariot" 95
Christa Knellwolf King

CHAPTER 7

- Exoticization of Russia and the Russian people in Polish literature 109
Barbara Sobczak and Monika Wójciak

Part II. Mediating local voices

CHAPTER 8

- The power and powerlessness of the exotic status 127
Devika Brendon

CHAPTER 9

- Challenging taxonomies of the "local" and the "exotic":
The works of Hansda Showvendra Shekhar 139
Vibha S. Chauhan

CHAPTER 10

- Overturning the familiar and the exotic: The fiction of Ranendra
and Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar 155
Namita Sethi

CHAPTER 11

- Translation as the interplay of the familiar and the exotic
in A. K. Ramanujan's *Poems of Love and War* 173
S. Annapoorni

CHAPTER 12

- The exotic and the familiar and translation 189
Mitra Phukan

CHAPTER 13

- A play of the familiar and the exotic through the lens of Madhwacharya's
Bhasha theory: The *Sangraha Ramayana* and its translations 197
Aparna Srinivas and Sunitha S. Rao

CHAPTER 14

- Exoticizing 1984: Trauma, telling and the anti-Sikh pogrom 213
Ritika Singh

Part III. Transcending familiar boundaries

CHAPTER 15

- André Brink's *A Dry White Season* as film: Foreignization and domestication 227
H. P. van Coller and A. van Jaarsveld

CHAPTER 16

- No tiger in the tale: Effacing otherness in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* 241
Suhaile Azavedo

CHAPTER 17

- From exotic to domestic: The other, the native and cultural relativism
 in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* 253
Ansul Rao

CHAPTER 18

- V. S. Naipaul and Jhumpa Lahiri: The politics of identity
 and the performance of exoticism 265
Afrinul Haque Khan

CHAPTER 19

- Turning the exotic into the familiar: Tabish Khair's novels
 and their contemporary cultural and political context 281
Liliana Sikorska

CHAPTER 20

- Coloured exoticism in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* 295
Lekha Roy

CHAPTER 21

- Exotic madness in Caribbean literature: From marginalization
 to empowerment and indigenization 309
Bénédicte Ledent

CHAPTER 22

- Plant/woman encounters in contemporary fairy tale adaptations 323
Daniela Kato

- Bibliography 337

- Author index 357

- General index 361

Series editor's preface

The Fédération Internationale des Langues et Littératures Modernes (FILLM) is UNESCO's ceiling organization for scholarship in the field of languages and literatures. The Federation's main aim is to encourage linguists and literary scholars from all over the world to engage in dialogue.

During the twentieth century, linguistic and literary studies became steadily more professional and specialized, a development which significantly raised the overall standard of research, but which also tended to divide scholars into many separate and often smallish groupings between which communication was rather sporadic. Over the years this became something of a handicap. New ideas and findings were often slow to cross-fertilize.

Given the rapidly globalizing world of the early twenty-first century, the relative lack of contact between scholars in different subject-areas became a more glaring anomaly than ever. Against this background, FILLM decided to set up its own book series, in the hope of fostering a truly international community of scholars within which a rich diversity of interests would be upheld by a common sense of human relevance.

Books appearing under the label of FILLM Studies deal with languages and literatures world-wide, and are written in an English that will be immediately understandable and attractive to any likely reader. Every book presents original findings – including new theoretical, methodological and pedagogical developments – which will be of prime interest to those who are experts in its particular field of discussion, but also seeks to engage readers whose concerns have hitherto lain elsewhere.

Roger D. Sell

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We are happy to acknowledge the agency of the *Fédération Internationale des Langues et Littératures Modernes* (FILLM) in suggesting this volume's germinal notion. In 2017, FILLM held its 27th Triennial Congress in Delhi with "The Familiar and the Exotic" as its main topic of discussion. This resulted in fruitful cross-cultural exchanges which subsequently inspired us to send out a global call for contributions to this challenging theme.

Our sincere thanks go to Margaret Higgonet, President of FILLM, for her moral support and scholarly skills in the collation of the materials submitted.

We would also like to thank Roger D. Sell, Series Editor of FILLM Studies, for his clear-sighted guidance, and for his constant encouragement and support. He made our task of editing widely diverse contributions to an important but problematic topic a lot easier.

Our warmest gratitude is due to Elleke Boehmer for having been our first reader, for helping to identify the critical shape underlying the different ideas ranging across this collection, and for suggesting a direction for their further consolidation.

We thank our contributors for well-researched essays which lend the volume's main topic valuable concretion. We also thank them for ensuring that all copyright materials, both in textual quotations and in reproductions of images, is in accordance with fair use, and based on granted permissions.

Finally, we thank John Benjamins Publishing Company for recognizing the possibilities in the premise of the collection, and for giving us the opportunity to mount our critical concerns. We also applaud their generosity in instituting a prize for the best paper presented at a FILLM Congress, and thank them for conferring the inaugural award on our contributor, Vibha S. Chauhan.

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Introduction

Meenakshi Bharat and Madhu Grover

Edward Said's 1978 proposition of "orientalism," and Graham Huggan's later turn-of-the-century remarks on "the fetishizing process" marking the literatures, languages and cultures of the "non-Western" world as "saleable exotic objects," had highlighted one of the most distinctive characteristics of our multicultural contemporary world.¹ Their emphases, rooted in the overpowering apprehension of the experience of postcoloniality, introduced us to the theorization of the idea of oppositionality. Under the theoretical umbrella of postcolonial binaries, this oppositional categorization had located a very pertinent and deeply disturbing focus in the polarity of the familiar and the exotic. The genesis of the following collection of essays, that treat this now over-used and wearying critical binary, lies in the inescapable and paradoxical recognition of its continuing importance.

Arguably, this binary of the familiar and the exotic has always been crucial in the systematic deployment of similarity and difference in much literature and language. Today, extensive globalization resulting in cultural fragmentation on many new planes has given it renewed currency, with one major split being on the lines of this conflictual binary. The knowledge of this division prior to "postcolonial" binarization, and the creation of this fresh rupture, calls for a re-configuration of the cultural map. This re-mapping becomes even more relevant with reference to the repercussions of these terms on the literatures and languages of the world, two foremost cultural markers. The essays included in this volume attempt just this, seeking to reinvigorate creative and critical perspective on this bifold cultural division.

In a world that has moved on from first encounters with the *exotic*, thrown into shocking relief by an apparently sure grasp over the *familiar*, there is urgent need to critically engage with the subsequent rampant intellectual tourism, the "dilettantism" invoked by Huggan himself.² It is necessary to transcend a focus on the conflicts and the fracturing racial violence identified by this arbitrary cultural

1. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon, 1978. Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, London/New York: Routledge, 2001.

2. Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p. 289.

division that marks the postcolonial ethos. One way to achieve this, we felt, was to return to the fundamental definition of the term *exotic*. Does it connote something unknown, something strange, or that which is just not familiar? Is it a quality that inheres in something, or somebody or some people, or is it simply, as Huggan calls it, “a particular mode of aesthetic perception”?³ Evidently, the insistent imposition of the rubrics of the *familiar* and the *exotic* has had far-reaching, limiting and damning ramifications in defining the postcolonial. In this volume, we are moved by the impulse to go beyond these constricting denotations. We do not desire or intend to dish out yet another trite definition, but rather hope that the ensuing essays will broach the issue from various angles and present new perspectives.

The use and abuse of the *familiar-exotic* binary as a critical formulation for postcolonial studies has also had an arguably unintended effect on the perceptions of the postcolonials. To take just one example: nurtured on an exotic colonial diet of Austen, Bronte, Dickens and Doyle, subcontinental postcolonials experience a gush of familiarity on setting foot on English soil, having visited its urban streets and beautiful countryside vicariously, through the narratives of these writers. The same may be true of an English response to the erstwhile colonies which have been extensively covered in literature. It is this persistent and contiguous apprehension of two apparently opposing attributes within the same entity that we especially wish to explore through the multiperspectival essays included in this volume. Both creative artists and critics, it would seem, have at some point or another, and to a lesser or greater extent, chanced upon this tantalizing parallelism. Therefore, these various contributions take on the idea of this binarization, to push the volume beyond the limitations of the binary by subjecting it to nuanced perception. This will automatically ensure reflection on the way in which perception itself may be complexly situated, where the self becomes both insider and outsider to one or the other category; to the *familiar* or to the *exotic*. This process is intended to enable both the perception and representation to move out of established theoretical strangleholds and allow this collection to test fresh territory, to arrive at fresh perceptions and to propose new insights.

In view of this pursuit of the new and yet relevant enquiry, we have divided this anthology into three sections which approach the exotic and the familiar through (a) travel and encounters, (b) local and microcosmic negotiations, and (c) by stepping outside comfort zones of the familiar. These sub-headings, **Part I, Familiarizing Unfamiliar Spaces**, **Part II, Mediating Local Voices** and **Part III, Transcending Familiar Boundaries** provide us with broad gateways to our critical explorations.

3. Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p. 13.

The essays in **Part I, Familiarizing Unfamiliar Spaces**, test the polarity of the familiar and the exotic in the context of spaces strange to the eyes of outsider-perceivers who attempt to critique and understand them by stepping into these unfamiliar territories. Looking anew at cross-cultural encounters in the contemporary context, we have an Australian cultural theorist who turns her gaze to the Indian Subcontinent; critics from *Down Under* focus on the work of Western travel writers on the Far East, Cambodia and China; an Egyptian writer becomes the subject of scrutiny for a European; and two Polish essayists look at how Russia is perceived in their country.

Everything begins with a journey: outward from a *self* that encounters an *other*. Cultures encounter alternative ones; remote ones, dreamt-of, and thereby exotified, distance and unfamiliarity breeding uncertainties, as also desires. The historical trajectory of journeys that over two millennia have experienced has led to just such a pull; the inadvertent and latent fears of the unknown created the concept of the exotic since most journeys took humans to strange lands beyond the familiar and the everyday.

For obvious reasons, the motif of travel is a continuous, underlying thread lacing the exotic/familiar binary. Following the historical trajectory of journeys across the globe, it is patent that the concept of the exotic was created as a result of forays to strange, unknown lands. But though these travels brought an unforeseen diversity of material into view, they also enjoined the relinquishment of much that was familiar. Travel trails both gains and losses in its wake. Consequently, a large number of essays here deal with the notion of journeys to different geographical, political and cultural spaces, each sortie uncovering different facets of the exotic; each sally forcing a reassessment of the familiar.

Tania Lewis examines the force of the exotic felt paradoxically enough in an everyday context in “Magical modernities: the familiar and the exotic on Indian lifestyle TV” as she delves into the oddities of spiritual and religious experiences on offer in a televisual world. She posits this experience as a non- or perhaps more appropriately post-secular media space that blends the mundane and seemingly familiar realm of daytime TV with the rather more exotic world of spirits, soothsayers and other enchanted systems of knowledge, belief and practices.

Madhu Grover, on the other hand, looks at a Westerner, Kipling, as inhabiting a cusp between a Western imperial perspective, and a sympathetic insider consciousness born of familiarity with the subject people’s “inner” world. Focusing on Kipling’s early Indian stories, Grover argues that Kipling’s contemporary audiences tended to elide the subversive quality produced by certain formal and ideological complexities of the writer’s narrative stances though they savoured this fiction for its exotic glimpses of the “wild and strange” India.

Australian Robert Horne's essay examines the validity of literary-political suspicions of exoticization of Khmer characters and their Cambodian setting against their Western counterparts. Pitching the way writers use Saidian critical tenets to limit Asian subjects against Warraq's claim that they manifest more genuine attempts to understand and create knowledge, Horne explores one hundred years of engagement with Cambodian characters spanning the French colonialist experience of the region, the civil war and Khmer Rouge era, culminating the critical trail with a more recent generation of writers of crime/noir and thrillers that exploit a new image of the grotesque and exotic "other," while also addressing more familiar and local societal issues.

On the same lines, Ian Fookes and Linetto Basilone weigh the perceptions of China in the writings of French poet Victor Segalen and Italian travellers respectively. Basilone's essay "Distance and alterity: Italian travel literature on twentieth century China" examines the fraught alterity of representations of China in the travel narratives of Italian intellectuals such as Mario Appelius, Franco Fortini, Alberto Moravia, Maria Antonietta Macciocchi, and Alberto Arbasino. He follows the relativization of the binaries of self and other, familiar and exotic, resulting from shifts in the political lens through time depicted by writers as they travel through the country. Ian Fookes's lens is more particular as he takes up Victor Segalen's poetry on China and his conception of the exote, a travelling-poet who is defined by his "freedom or autonomy" in relation to the object of his exotic encounter. He sees Segalen's poetry as forcing a re-examination of the concept of "intellectual tourism" as he uses his vision of China to freight an exploration of his aesthetics of Diversity (*Le Divers*), his friendships, and his relation to self.

Christa Knellwolf King's essay re-examines established views of the exotic as a commodification of non-Western literature and argues that these notions of the exotic must be re-defined in order to make space for narratives of cultural crossing that generate tolerance and respect for vilified cultural communities. Her approach is illustrated with examples from *The Golden Chariot*, a novel by the Egyptian writer Salwa Bakr, which describes the inmates of a women's prison in Cairo as likeable characters who are struggling with deeply human difficulties. She argues that works like Bakr's *Golden Chariot* lend themselves well for initiatives in cross-cultural pedagogy because they challenge our expectations about cultural difference.

Literature approaching border zones and allied experiences highlight the tension of competing national and cultural allegiances in the inherent opposition between the familiar and the exotic as in Monika Wojciak and Barbara Sobczak's essay on the Polish-Russian intersection. Taking the example of people living in the vicinity, right across the border, this essay attempts to prove Graham Huggan's thesis that exoticism comes from a particular exotic perception which captures other people, objects and places as strange even though they might be domesticated,

tamed and do not live along some distant frontiers. Basing their analysis on historical experience, the writers of the essay exemplify the mechanisms of exoticization of Russia and Russians in the Polish culture.

All the essays, to various degrees, venture analyses of the obfuscations and obliterations that creep in at the cusp of separate and dissimilar cultural, political, and linguistic spaces. Yet, even within local spaces, encounters proliferate. Even local and familiar human exchanges are intersected and assaulted by the politics of identity. In the first essay in **Part II, Mediating Local Voices**, creative writer and scholar, Devika Brendon, in her essay “The Power and powerlessness of the exotic status” locates her own fraught identity as both Sri Lankan and Australian. She uses this personal complexity to understand the category of the female as “exotic,” problematically represented in a range of literary texts by A. D. Hope, Agatha Christie, Thomas Hardy and Pablo Neruda.

Vibha S. Chauhan on “Challenging taxonomies of the ‘local’ and the ‘exotic’” focuses on the novels and short stories of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, the first indigenous Indian writer in English from the Santhali community. In a bid to interrogate and challenge the widely accepted and settled dichotomies of the local and the exotic, the essay draws on a range of socio-cultural and political markers denoting prejudice, perception and the process of meaning-creation to examine the relationship between power, knowledge, canonization, and social control.

Namita Sethi’s essay “Overturning the familiar and the exotic” uses the polemical writings of both Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar and Ranendra of the Santhal community, to explore the politics of identity in relation to disadvantaged *Adivasi* groups. Despite an era of globalization and postcolonial redressals of power imbalances, these have seen deliberate exoticization and continued exploitation in the name of democratic development by the wider economy and polity in India.

But naturally, the journeys addressed in **Part I, Traversing Unfamiliar Spaces**, will bring different languages face to face with each other, necessitating the act of translation. With each language bringing its own allied culture with it, the gamut of varying perceptions and representations willy-nilly multiplies. As a result, this volume approaches literatures written in various languages of the world. It approaches these through the medium of translation: from one language to another, and even from one art form to another, thus including the issues of adaptation, testing how different art forms perceive and represent the same text.

The difference in the language and culture of the original and that of the translation or the adaptation bring further perspectives and approaches to the representation. The colloquy between multiple languages and linguistic spaces, the coming together of the geographical and cultural East and West is initiated editorially without the obtrusiveness of a single, oppressive frame of reference to

interpret or contain these encounters. Different art forms, diverse genres of writing, in various languages negotiate between indigeneity and immigrant experience, as does Devika Brendon who brings up the sense of her Sri Lankan selfhood in light of French and English writers, or as the fictionist, Mitra Phukan does by exploring her Northeast Indian identity through the medium of the English language. Mitra Phukan, well-known creative writer and translator from Assam, speaks of the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual socio-cultural heterogeneity of India's Northeast region, of which the rest of India has little knowledge. In this context, she holds that translations assume a great importance in understanding and familiarizing of the "exotic," and in making the "familiar" comprehensible.

In a continued conversation on the relevance of language and translations to our overarching theme, in "Reading *Sangraha Ramayana*," Aparna Srinivas and Sunitha Rao analyze the fraught slippage between the literal and spiritual readings of the text. They posit that the Kannada and Hindi versions of these texts are more literal or "familiar," while the original Sanskrit inheres the *Guhya* or "exotic" meanings, accessible only through a more sophisticated and skilled translation process. S. Annapoorni, engaging with questions of aesthetics and hermeneutics, examines the simultaneous process of familiarization and de-familiarization in her analysis of renowned poet A. K. Ramanujam's English translations of four love poems from classical Tamil Sangam texts.

In a compelling leap from ancient love matters to the ugly realities of a violent contemporary world, Ritika Singh's "Exoticizing 1984: Trauma, telling and the anti-Sikh pogrom" seeks to understand the narrativization of collective traumatic memories: what is lost in this translation of past events through familiarity and repetition, and whether the past becomes exotic and othered in the historical matrix of remembering.

In these journeys across territories divided along geographical, political, ethnic, cultural and linguistic lines, how can customary movements be broken through and surpassed? How can known margins be re-drawn? The essays in **Part III, Transcending Familiar Boundaries** take on these exercises. In a novel theoretical turn to this anthology's primary focus, H. P. van Collier and A. van Jaarsveld treat the film version of Andre Brink's *A Dry White Season*, as being akin to the product of a translation, in that the former mediates between two cultures in transforming a source text into a target text. The essay uses translation theory with specific reference to Lawrence Venuti's processes of domestication and foreignization which entail bringing the original culture nearer to home, even while stressing the distance between source and target culture.

Suhaile Azavedo approaches Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* about the fantastic sea journey of Pi, a young emigrant to Canada with a tiger on board his boat. The essay

considers the alterations in his “Indian-ness” when he appropriates the “exotic otherness” of the tiger, paradoxically familiarized by calling him Richard Parker. This effacing of identity becomes an analogy for the transgression of the boundary between racial majorities and minorities, reflecting problems of ethnocultural identity, the consciousness of nationhood and multiculturalism common in immigrant societies.

The interrogation of Western ethnocentrism and the perception of the native as the “other” in Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible* is taken up by Ansul Rao as a political scrutiny of American foreign policies in the Congo. Through the instance of the Price family’s life in a country perceived as exotic by the Western imagination, the novel seems to move towards cultural relativism beyond dividing binaries.

Looking beyond Frantz Fanon’s theorization of diasporic writers exotically othering the past of their ancestral homelands, Afrinul Haque Khan argues that this performance of exoticism in V. S. Naipaul’s *Half-a-Life* and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland* becomes a political strategy. She shows how diasporic writers create their own identities by distancing themselves from their origins and by embracing an “idealized West” in their narratives.

Two of Tabish Khair’s recent novels are examined by Liliana Sikorska as the coming together of the political and the literary, offering an antidote to the new xenophobia emerging from the world climate of terrorism. Khair’s work identifies stereotyped perceptions and misconceptions about cultures as resulting from colonization, the ensuing ethnic conflicts and Western capitalism. Similarly, Lekha Roy sees Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child* as linking the exoticism of the black skin to hegemonic control of the black body, thus precluding transcendence of the category of race for African-Americans. Through the racially fractured psyche of the mixed-race protagonist, the novel dramatizes this body-ego dissonance and a blurring of boundaries between the symbolic and the real, ultimately making the black body an abject reality in a network of covert metaphorical signifiers.

Continuing with the racial and political implications of literary representations, Caribbean literature is seen to be replete with migrant figures that are viewed as both exotic and mad. Bénédicte Ledent’s essay analyzes such exoticization, with its attendant marginalization in such stories written by West Indian authors. Victims of what Graham Huggan has called “a particular mode of aesthetic perception,” the stories depict characters who distinguish themselves by their cultural difference which might inspire initial fascination, yet results in most cases in exploitative commodification, often followed by radical rejection.

Moving beyond humanly constructed barriers, Daniela Kato’s interest in primal trans-species entanglements in the realm of the contemporary fairy tale, takes her from the written word to the domain of the visual arts. Drawing on recent developments in feminism, critical plant studies and bioaesthetics, and anchoring

the discussion in an analysis of the work of multimedia German-Brazilian artist Janaina Tschäpe, this essay explores more fluid notions of subjectivity, sexual difference and interspecies relationality, so as to eradicate these species and gender prejudices – and thereby to make the landscape of the fairy tale hospitable to more balanced interspecies entanglements. In speaking of the broader theoretical gains of such a breaking up of gender identities, Margaret Higonnet suggests that the writer, whether creative author or critic, reveals these concepts as a shifting dance of positions that passes through a mirror into the wonderland of literature and myth. She sees the intricacies of these gestures of articulation, performance, and transformation as providing the complex grounds of an intellectual journey undertaken in this volume.⁴

With this intent of rethinking the categories of the familiar and the exotic, the essays included in this volume aim to highlight the importance of how perceptions have developed and changed over time, and how, correspondingly, the modes of representation have altered. Individually, and as a collection, the essays are meant to weigh the ability of the word, of language, to measure up to the literary representation of the familiar without sinking to the banal, and with the exotic, without becoming esoteric and opaque. All the essays included in this collection focus on literary texts – in the original, in translation or as adaptation. Yet, despite the literature orientation, they inevitably come to study the “word” as the medium of representation; to gauge how the “word” skirts obscurantism and opacity while dealing with the exotic. With all these numerous complicating factors impacting the perception and representation of the exotic/familiar binary, it is time to start taking stock; time to look at the problematic underlying factors. For instance, the discourse of Orientalism is in itself a deeply problematic category for it is the leading contributing factor in the construction of the category of the “exotic;” the first formalization of the critical binary which is at once confoundingly facilitating and fracturing. It emerges that more often than not, the apprehension of Otherness, reinforced by this Oriental/Occidental binarization, augments the sense of separateness, of separation amongst humankind. The theoretical construct somehow ends up in the erasure of the humanitarian principle of linkage, of connection. This volume sets its sights beyond these indicated fractures and constraints. The intention is to approach the binary of the familiar and the exotic for, to use Nikolas Kompridis’s phrase, its “possibility disclosing” ramifications by critiquing both the separations and the prospects of connections.⁵

4. Margaret Higonnet, President, *Fédération Internationale des Langues et Littératures Modernes* (FILLM), in a personal exchange with the editors of this volume.

5. The underlying proposal in Nikolas Kompridis. “Disclosing Possibility: The Past and Future of Critical Theory,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 13, 3, 2005, pp. 325–51.

Foreword

Literary politics and perception: Moving beyond representation

Elleke Boehmer

This collection of essays explores from different angles the history, sociology, and geopolitics of many of our core literary critical and cultural concepts. The volume richly demonstrates a special concern to investigate various refractions of the familiar and the exotic around the world. Additionally, it focuses on the themes of perception and representation and their politics, an especially intriguing aspect of the theme to me, relating to wider interests in perception, cognition, and perspective. Indeed, questions of literary perception, and strategies through which we might emphasize perception *over* representation, may provide significant new ways forward in the literary critical field after many decades of what we might call representation fever. By this, I mean the overwhelming concentration on “representations of” (gender, race, class, hunger, sibling rivalry, anxiety, boredom, difference, etc.) in late 20th-century literary studies. Instead, we might consider literary writing and criticism that discusses it not merely as giving an image or reflection of something more real out there in the world, but rather, as a process of *thinking through* our engagement with the world, as I try to do in some of my new work on postcolonial poetics.¹ In introducing this book of essays I hope to clarify and illustrate this core point further, touching where appropriate on examples from the essays above.

In a nutshell, for this at-once-cognitive-and-imaginative process of *thinking through*, the literary or linguistic artefact operates as an instrument *with which* to think. As then follows, it can also be analyzed in this way: as critics, we ask how the text or artefact helps us to do that thinking through. For any number of the essays we find in this book, literary writing is precisely that, amongst other things: a way of conceptualizing and reflecting upon the important questions of our time as they relate, for example, to migration, stereotyping, exclusion, alterity, translation, the environment, and so on. It is certainly not a mere entertainment, or an

1. Elleke Boehmer, *Postcolonial Poetics: 21st-Century Critical Readings*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

embellishment of more pressing political and economic concerns. Of course, to say this is inevitably to stand up for a certain literary politics, and to subscribe to an interested and involved way of reading. From my point of view, the volume's sub-title could therefore read the "Politics of Perception, and Representation," with the comma providing a special emphasis on the first phrase.

The critical and heuristic shift I am proposing – which some of these essays interestingly anticipate – thus directs attention to the structural, technical and interpretative "how" rather than the themed "what" of literary representation; that is, to the process of reading and reception rather than the so-called political objects that are represented in texts. It is through such a critical and methodological reinvigoration, I believe, that the old and perhaps rather familiar colonial binary of the familiar and the exotic raised in the premise of this volume can not only be addressed, but also queried, probed and perhaps eventually, overturned. It is in this way too, that we shift our concerns away from the topic and agenda-based discussions that have dominated the literary field to date, and through which its politics have been understood. Here, I am thinking of the postcolonial field or sub-field certainly, but also of post-structural, new historical, genetic, and other literary critical fields.

This approach moves our attention back to textual politics, or text-based politics, and so recognizes, radically for the field, that literary writing has, on its own terms, the political power to unsettle and dismay the various exoticizing limitations of the postcolonial or decolonial condition, as does the work of Okri, or Tabish Khair, or Kingsolver, or Bakr, or Ramanujan, for example, all discussed in these pages. It is in this sense that this writing in fact makes its strongest political contribution. And its poetics thus operates as a score or choreography for its politics.

As this suggests, literature and culture matter centrally – and they do, to all the contributors. Happily, this collection of essays is being published in the FILLM series, and FILLM respects and prizes the overarching umbrella structure of UNESCO's CIPSH, which, like it, sets high value on literature and language studies, including research into linguistics, rhetoric, and folk and oral literature. Literature and culture are especially important here because they give embodied form to our unformed and scattered thoughts. In other words once again, when we read or perceive a cultural artefact we work together with it to understand something of its structured thought and, in so doing we also structure our own, while at the same time quickening and refreshing the immediacy of our perceptions.

We see something of this when in the well-known "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Samuel Taylor Coleridge repeats the word "wide" in the line "Alone on a wide, wide sea," for example. The second instance of "wide," as well as accentuating the meaning of the line through repetition, insists on tracing, pointing at, delineating, the width of the horizon, and the vast expanse of the sea as it stretches to meet the sky. The core perception here is kinaesthetic; it is internalized,

movement-based, and subject-centred. Imagine reciting the poem, think of your lips retracing, re-forming the width of that horizon as you say “wide,” and “wide” again, in that line.

In a related way, when, in his creative non-fiction *In an Antique Land*, Amitav Ghosh undertakes a quest for sources, his text, in some sense, carries out that quest. As readers, we observe how it repeatedly goes back on itself, asks about core evidence, and considers how we know what we think we know about the ancient past, as if enacting its own research motions. And the subversive, chatty “nah” segment of Chimamanda Adichie’s *Americanah* title can further be read as announcing *in itself* a new migrant culture of Nigerians in the US. It highlights how they riff on their experience of its at-once-familiarity-and-strangeness.

To proceed along the critical path I am proposing, a refreshed, active approach to reading is paramount. So, too, is an interest in moving beyond now tried and tested ways of doing critical readings post the theoretical turn. That is to say, we move beyond applying this or that idea – exoticism, multiculturalism, alterity – to that text or set of texts, as Victor Segalen attempted *not* to do in China, according to Ian Fookes’ paper. Instead, the suggestion is that we try to read and reread the texts on their own terms. This may demand our also asking certain material questions as to *why* we read what we read: what institutional, critical, and market-driven forces govern our choices? Why, in this collection, for instance, do we find these particular readings of Kingsolver, or Martel, or Khair, and not, say, of Boyd, or Hamid, or Ali Smith, as contemporary writers with shared or related interests? Moreover, how might prize cultures and sales figures inform these choices?

Derek Attridge, cited by Christa Knellwolf King in her reading of Salwa Bakr’s *Golden Chariot*, helpfully introduces us to what he calls “creative reading,” where the literary work provides “a forum for respectful encounters with cultures that differ markedly from those of their readers.” This idea of creative reading as an encounter and re-encounter with a text interestingly threads its way throughout the collection and is applied across a very wide range of “texts,” including fairy stories, multimedia installations, poetry, film, and even life-style television.

Translation too, forms an important link in this chain of reading and re-reading, as many of the essays observe. For example, Mitra Phukan points out that translation can be used to debunk stereotypes of India’s Northeast region, though linguistic unfamiliarity can also put up barriers to a text being translated. Christa Knellwolf King asks how non-Arabic readers read Salwa Bakr’s *Golden Chariot*. Mitra Phukan points out that translation can be used to debunk stereotypes of India’s North-east region, though linguistic unfamiliarity can also put up barriers to a text being translated. H. P. van Collier and A. van Jaarsveld consider how the film adaptation of a literary text can be compared to the process of translation, in that it involves a repeated accommodation of the source text to the target text, and

of domestication to foreignization. Translation can also help reverse the set terms of a debate, especially when it becomes stuck in certain predictable positions. Or, as Aparna Srinivas observes in her reading of four evocative *akam* poems translated by A K Ramanujan from the Classical Tamil *Sangam* tradition, from his anthology *Poems of Love and War*, “translation makes familiar that which is exotic”, while simultaneously enhancing the aesthetic perception of the translated text. It is an enhancement and elaboration that, too, is essentially a process of rereading. Other writers refuse translation, however, as when the Santhali Adivasi writer Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar chooses English for his novel *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*. As Vibha S. Chauhan discusses, this allows Shekhar to resist his work being read according to conventional literary or cultural paradigms of indigeneity, so freeing the vernacular or indigenous “voice.”

The concern with indigeneity and its perception forms a core concern for several contributors, especially as indigenous presences sit athwart widespread literary tendencies to exoticize foreign difference, yet also to domesticate the distant local. These tendencies are explored in all their contradictory complexity throughout. So, a significant number of the essays, all by Indian critics, explore actual representations of Adivasi or Naga life, such as in fictions by Kire or Shekhar. At a transnational level, Afrine Khan considers exotic nostalgia-fuelled constructions of home by diasporic writers like VS Naipaul and Jhumpa Lahiri, for whom home is a category through which to understand both the past and the present, both the culture left behind and the one in which the writers are now located. Ansul Rao, for her part, considers to what extent Barbara Kingsolver compromises her authentic representation of Congolese natives in order to awaken the consciousness of her American readers to the horrors of postcolonial interference on the African continent. Kipling, too, makes an appearance, perhaps predictably in a collection often focussing on the exotic and the familiar in India. Or, as Madhu Grover writes: from Kipling’s insider perspective India was familiar, yet he was able imaginatively to present it as “wild and strange” by identifying with the outsider perspective of his English audience.

All the essays collected here are distinguished not only by their determination to attend to the focus on perception. They also share a concern to read and re-read creatively. They look closely, intensively, committedly, at the issues and themes being investigated, whether that is the exoticization of Russians in Polish literature (Monika Wojciak and Barbara Sobczak), plant-woman encounters in contemporary fairy-tale adaptations (Daniela Kato and Janaina Tschape), or Italian travel narratives on China (Linetto Basilone). This re-reading and looking again avoids mere suspicious reading, with that overriding emphasis on decrypting and untying that governed 1980s literary criticism. Rather, this approach supports eclectic, open-ended reading that finds the exotic in the familiar, and the familiar within

the exotic, buried in all kinds of unexpected and expected places. Reading here is no longer as driven by the sense that the novel or poem is keeping something from us that demands decoding. Rather, this approach gives proper recognition to the power of the word and its operation within a line, a verse, a paragraph and a context. Here, literary form becomes as important as “content” in putting across a message, or in encoding marginal or suppressed knowledge. Overall, therefore, for these essays, criticism is not a tool to take a text apart, but a way of asking how literary writing *as writing* gives insight into our contemporary twenty-first century conditions.

PART I

Traversing unfamiliar spaces

Magical modernities

The familiar and the exotic on Indian lifestyle TV

Tania Lewis

Exploring the endless offerings on morning television in Bangalore, Mumbai or Delhi involves navigating what might seem like a pretty standardized repertoire of news and sports channels, children's shows, cookery shows, soaps, nature documentaries, consumer-advice programmes and lifestyle-magazine shows. On the surface, this experience would appear to be not that different from watching morning television in Europe or the UK, apart from one significant difference, one of the most prominent and popular genres in the morning slot on Indian television is religious programming.

In this essay I use religious and spiritual television, a genre that many households in India engage with on a daily basis, as a way of thinking about the politics of the exotic and the familiar, in particular in relation to the complex and negotiated landscape of “media modernities” that characterize contemporary India. As I discuss below, my use of the concept of “multiple modernities” in relation to media aims to complicate the argument that one can generalize about media modernities in a globalizing era. i.e., that the media landscapes we find in contexts such as India are immediately familiar and able to be mapped in terms of Euro-American theories of contemporary media development. The essay speaks to this theme through taking the reader into a televisual world that challenges such assumptions, a non- or perhaps more appropriately post-secular media space that blends the mundane and seemingly familiar realm of day time TV with the rather more exotic world of spirits, soothsayers and other enchanted systems of knowledge, belief and practices.

In particular, we will be entering this world of the magical and the mundane through the figure of the spiritual guru on Indian lifestyle or life advice television, including popular televisual figures like the yoga guru Baba Ramdev and the family-friendly astrologer Astro Uncle, who provides astrologically-based parental advice. Through deliberately *exotic*-izing Indian television, my concern is not so much with foregrounding the idiosyncrasies of Indian television or suggesting some kind of radical incommensurability between Euro-modern and Indian media

publics. Rather, I want to mobilize the figure of the popular spiritual-lifestyle guru on TV as a way of unsettling some of our core assumptions around media modernities, televisual practices and globalization.

Lifestyle pedagogy and televisual modernities

This essay comes out of findings from a larger study of South-East Asian popular factual television I worked on with Asian cultural studies scholars, Fran Martin and Wanning Sun (funded by the Australian Research Council), which uses lifestyle oriented programming, from travel, consumer advice and parenting shows to lifestyle makeover shows, as a site for examining competing and contested models of modernity, citizenship and civic culture in India, China, Taiwan and Singapore.¹

A growing body of Euro-American scholarship has emphasized the cultural importance of lifestyle television both in its educational role and as a marker of broader shifts in contemporary lifestyle culture.² The rise and rise of lifestyle and self-help discourses in the contemporary moment has been variously interpreted as marking: the triumph of consumer-citizenship;³ the emergence of a psychologized and malleable late modern subject whose identity is seen as a project to be worked on and invested in;⁴ the increasing dominance of middle class norms of taste, cultural capital and lifestyle,⁵ and the growing prominence of feminized modes of identity performance and lifestyle practices in public life.⁶ Another key critical frame has come from Foucauldian scholars who see lifestyle advice as working hand in hand with neoliberal strategies bent on devolving responsibility for once public concerns onto the self-regulating consumer-citizen.⁷

1. See Tania Lewis, Fran Martin & W Sun, "Lifestyling Asia? Shaping modernity and selfhood on life advice programming," *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 15, pp. 537–66, 2007, in Tania Lewis, Fran Martin & W Sun, *Telemodernities: Television, and Transforming Lives in Asia*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016.

2. See Bell & Hollows, 2005; Bonner, 2003; Brunsdon, 2003; Heller, 2007; Hill, 2005; Lewis, 2008; Ouellette & Hay, 2008.

3. See Miller, 2007.

4. See Giddens, 1991; Rose, 1996.

5. Palmer, 2004; Skeggs & Wood, 2009.

6. Brunsdon, 2003; Lury, 2011; Skeggs, 2009.

7. Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Palmer, 2003.

While drawing on the insights of previous Euro-American scholarship, the research we have been conducting on Asian lifestyle TV interrogates and extends these paradigms through a focus on multiple modernities.⁸ Such an approach leads toward renewed attempts to, in Ong's words, "consider how non-Western societies themselves make modernities after their own fashion, in the remaking of rationality, capitalism and the nation in ways that borrow from but also transform Western universalizing forms."⁹ While Holden points to the ways in which popular media forms like television act as conduits for forms of "mediated modernity" across Asia,¹⁰ a multiple modernities approach usefully extends this model by foregrounding how specific geo-cultural locations differentially frame and specify modern processes. If the new popularity of lifestyle TV in Anglophone markets can be linked to broader shifts in the character of late capitalism, a multiple modernities paradigm asks to what extent these developments might be relevant to television cultures in Asia? Indeed, does the notion of lifestyle television actually make sense as a generic category in nations with different televisual traditions and ways of living and consuming? Furthermore, given that the idea of lifestyle itself is arguably a Western concept – emerging out of a specifically European temporal mapping of modernity and industrial capitalism¹¹ – what happens when we transplant such concepts into South-East Asian contexts, marked by a plurality of different cultural and temporal trajectories of modernit(ies)?

As a way of speaking to the multiple modernities thesis, in this essay I have chosen to focus on a very distinctive form of what I am terming here lifestyle expertise – that is, the figure of the spiritual guru on Indian television, with the term "guru" itself suggesting a shifting, culturally complex and globalized form, a "travelling" concept as it were. While religious television has featured on Indian small screens for decades, what I am terming spiritual lifestyle television has only emerged within the past decade, that is, its rise has been concomitant with both

8. See A. M. Athique, *Transnational Audiences For Indian Films' Media and Identity in Asia*, Miri, Media Asia Research Group, 2006; LO-F Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930–1945*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999; Martin, F. & Heinrich, L. eds., *Embodied Modernities: Corporeality, Representation, and Chinese Cultures*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 2006; Ong & Nonini, 1997; L. Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.

9. A. Ong, "Anthropology, China, modernities: the geopolitics of cultural knowledge," in H. Moore, ed., *The Future of Anthropological Knowledge* London and New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 64.

10. See Holden and Scrase, 2006.

11. Lewis, 2011.

the deregulation of the television industry in India in the early 1990s and the wider liberalization of the economy as it moves away from state socialism. Countering the notion that liberalization and secularization go hand in hand, in India the commercial TV landscape has seen a multiplication of spiritual advisors, often offering up, as we shall see, modern and reflexively postcolonial takes on spiritualism and spiritual publics.

Managing fate, fortune and risk: Tele-astrologers

The Indian spiritual TV landscape is inhabited by a huge array of gurus, from fairly down-home figures on provincial cable channels to rather more glitzy gurus on the bigger Hindi general entertainment channels. In this essay, I have divided these gurus into three categories: firstly, magical gurus such as astrologers and *Vaastu* practitioners; secondly, lifestyle and wellbeing gurus on religious cable channels; and thirdly, “enterprising” spiritual figures such as yoga guru Baba Ramdev.

The first set of TV gurus are commercial life advisors who blend spiritualism with questions of fate and fortune. Astrologers, tarot readers, fortune tellers, experts in *vaastu* (the Indian version of *feng shui*), and mystical shamans of all kinds represent a popular feature of Indian programming across news, general entertainment channels as well as cable channels devoted to religious programming. While they draw on a range of belief systems and spiritual traditions, what is common to many of these mystical figures is their claims to offer life solutions and advice for dealing with an increasingly complex, stressful and risky world.¹²

In his book *A God of One's Own* Ulrich Beck argues that we live in a post-secular age in which, far from becoming more secular, religion and spiritualism are on the rise around the world but in forms increasingly tied to individual needs, desires and biographies.¹³ One central role for spiritual advice within this context is to manage and minimize the risks that accompany living in a late modern world, where global and external concerns have increasingly become individualized and where life decisions – from what kind of house to buy and how to manage one's

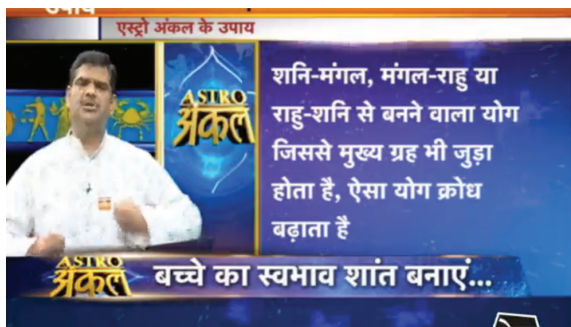
12. *Vedic* astrological charts are drawn up by the family priest for everyone at their birth, placing the planets in 12 different houses, according to their position in the sky at their time of birth. *Vedic* scriptures present a complex and detailed ontology connecting all observable aspects of the universe – the sensorial, vegetal, mineral, aural, linguistic. Each star sign is allocated with certain alphabets that are to be used for names for the newborn, and specific gemstones are prescribed depending on the planetary alignments.

13. U. Beck, 2010.

health to what to eat and to who to marry – are seen as investments in the self as calculable life choices.

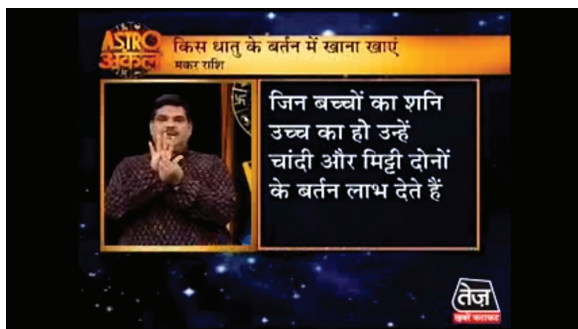
While mystics of all kinds have long played a role in Indian life, their growing popularity speaks to their identification and self-promotion as key figures that can assist with managing the stresses and strains of contemporary Indian life at a time of rapid social change. Figures such as astrologers and other soothsayers increasingly frame their advice and proposed remedies in terms of people's lifestyle choices and investments in the family and the self; however, this advice is not necessarily framed purely in terms of privatized, Beck-ian modes of individual empowerment, i.e. taking control of one's destiny, but rather often involves some degree of *externalization* of risk, of giving one's self over to larger forces whether they be the alignment of the planets or the "science" of *vaastu* architecture and home décor.

On television, fortune tellers or astrologers play a key role as contemporary advisors in risk management. For instance, on the popular show *Astro Uncle* (aired on the major Hindi news channel *Aaj Tak*), an amiable middle-aged man Pawan Sinha (who is apparently not just an astrologer but also a healer, spiritual thinker and a master in meditation skills)¹⁴ offers general astrological advice as well as one-on-one feedback to audience call-ins on matters relating to parent/child relationships.



Pawan Sinha, resident astrologer on *Astro Uncle* uses astrology to give psychological counselling for irritable children. In this episode aired on July 27, 2013 the text in the panel reads “The combination of Saturn-Mars, Mars-Rahu, Rahu-Saturn, in one's planetary alignment makes one prone to anger.”

14. <http://paavanchintandhara.com/> Accessed 2/3/2013.



In this episode (June 30, 2013), *Astro Uncle* claims that the material of the utensil in which the child eats affects their wellbeing. In this shot, parents are advised that children born under the Capricorn sign “whose palms show a high mound of Saturn will benefit from utensils made of silver and pottery.”

On one episode of *Astro Uncle*, the show’s female anchor, introducing the topic for the day in a playful conversational tone, talks about how her friend’s four-year-old daughter is very irritable. Offering a “prediction” with a psychological edge, *Astro Uncle* explains that irritable children will not do well socially or academically and face medical problems with their nervous system later in adult life. Here we are told that the planets *mangal* (Mars) and *rahu*¹⁵ affect irritability and temper and that, while *rahu*’s irritability is seasonal, *mangal*’s irritability makes people too self-absorbed and arrogant, implying an ability to change behaviours and shape personality. The show then features a call-in from a woman who complains that her daughter is very irritable and often gets high fevers. *Astro Uncle*, reading her charts, suggests that since he cannot see a lot of anger in the girl’s constitution (as the moon is in the right place), her fever and irritability may be due to an abdominal or urinary infection. His advice here is both magical and modern – he tells the mother to book the child in for a medical check-up while also adding that the girl must wear a copper bangle and float a copper coin in a river.

In contrast to the very broad appeal of *Astro Uncle*, a range of tarot readers, numerologists and *feng shui* experts offer rather more niche advice to middle to upper middle-class viewers. Live India, a regional Hindi channel, for instance, has a dedicated show on the “ancient science” of *vaastu* called Live *Vaastu* where a suit-wearing expert, Dr Puneet Chawla, who looks more like an architect than a fortune teller, responds to questions about the impact of *vaastu*, that is household

15. *Rahu* and *ketu*, are not actually visible luminaries, but mathematically calculated as shadow planets that cause solar and lunar eclipses.

design and the placement of furnishings and objects, on a variety of life issues from troubled relationships to alcoholism to misbehaving pets.

Featuring anchors in a news-style studio setting, the show sports a news-style split screen with Dr Chawla on one side advising on the topic for the day and answering calls from viewers, while we see a flow of images of luxurious, Western-style home interiors on the right. On one episode, for example, a viewer rings in to the show and explains that, despite his gate and kitchen being in the right place from a *vaastu* perspective, his family had been faring badly. Dr Chawla tells him to get the gate painted in a lighter colour, and to put a mirror in the north side of the house so that it reflects back the energy of his kitchen, located in the southeast part of the house.



In this episode of *Live Vaastu*, Dr Chawla, the star of *Live Vaastu* offers advice on what colours improve the energy of a house. In this clip (solution number five) the audience is told to avoid the colours blue or black.



A segment of *Live Vaastu* where Dr Chawla (compass in hand) visits an audience member's house to do a *vaastu* reading.

This first group of gurus speak to the rise of a privatized, post-secular advice market in India where the resources offered to audiences on these shows draw not only on the conventions of mundane “how to” advice television but also take us into the more exotic para-social world of spirits and *vedic* planetary forces, albeit accessed via decidedly worldly figures such as Astro Uncle and Dr Chawla. In offering people life solutions, these shows present the audience with an unruly blend of beliefs and practices – bringing together notions of calculated risk management and spiritual “science” with decidedly magical ways of thinking and being.

“Meet your better self”: Religious TV, enterprising enchantment and neo-spiritualism

Armed with the sacral power of Hindu religious systems and borrowing techniques from psychology and self-help literature as well as managerial practices in business, spiritualism in its present form concentrates on individual self-making on an unprecedented scale [...]. Within an all-pervading environment which promotes aspirations, spiritual teachings purport to provide the actual tools with which individuals can realize their dreams and goals. Spiritualism thus assembles the essential components of enterprise culture through amalgamation of aspiration and action.¹⁶

In this section I want to turn to a rather more globally recognizable example of spiritual advice on Indian television, lifestyle and wellbeing gurus who combine spiritualism with enterprise and self-help style therapeutic discourse. In her work on enterprise culture in India Nandini Guptoo suggests that Indian citizens are increasingly becoming neo-liberalized, framed as essentially flexible, innovative and resourceful subjects in an era of globalized and immaterial labour.

There is a growing market in India for overtly neo-liberalized forms of lifestyle advice TV that combine Indian spiritualism with a highly psychologized, enterprising notion of selfhood. Though much of this mode of programming is aimed, I would argue, at an elite group of well-travelled, often English-speaking young urban professionals navigating between global and vernacular identities and lifestyles, such a shift can be seen to mark a set of broader social and cultural transformations in identity and sociality in India. Here, we see spiritualism shift from a mode of faith-based belief, to being part of a broader “lifestyle” based on personal choice and

16. N. Guptoo, “Introduction,” in N. Guptoo, ed., *Enterprise Culture in Neoliberal India*, London: Routledge, 2013, p. 16.

self-fulfilment.¹⁷ As a TV executive I interviewed at *NDTV Good Times* in Mumbai put it, “We [our channel] doesn’t have religion at all. We do yoga.”

This neo-spiritual turn has seen the rise of a number of lifestyle channels in India that are not necessarily categorized as religious channels, like *Pragya*, *Careworld* and *Shakti TV*, but which offer spiritually-inflected forms of lifestyle programming – shows on yoga, meditation, psychology, ayurveda and alternative-medicine are interspersed with more secular lifestyle shows, such as cookery, parenting, relationship and beauty shows. *Pragya TV* (*pra* being Sanskrit for “moving forward” and *gyan* meaning “knowledge”), where I interviewed some high-level executives at their head office in Gurgaon near New Delhi, is a particularly interesting case in point.¹⁸ Calling itself a “wellbeing” channel and servicing a young (24–45), educated and aspirational upper middle class market with a 40:60 male: female audience split, the channel’s tagline is “*Aapko milayein behtar aap se*” meaning “Meet your better self,” while the channel’s philosophy espouses a mix of self-development discourse, spiritualism, pop psychology and anti-materialism, somewhat paradoxically combined with high end lifestyle-oriented consumerism and an entrepreneurial edge.



“Wisdom comes with responsibility:” *Pragya TV* website, featuring five categories of life advice videos including beauty, relationships, good living, food (smart kitchen) and living wisely.

Pragya’s range of programming and content reflects this eclectic grab bag of concerns – the channel offers what might be seen as a cosmopolitan blend of neo-spiritualism, self-help and self-improvement (the Creative Director spoke

17. M. Warrier, “Processes of Secularisation in Contemporary India: Guru Faith in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission,” *Modern Asian Studies*. 37:1, 2003, pp. 213–253.

18. See <http://www.pragyatv.com/About-Pragya.aspx>

in the same breath of the teachings of famous 19th century Hindu monk Swami Vivekananda and the US positive thinking guide *The Secret*); as well as lifestyle and consumer tips and information for optimizing every aspect of one's life from parenting and home décor to beauty and health ("to channelize sensibilities, capacities and productivity of individuals" as the website puts it).

Morning programming tends to be focused more on the spiritual end of the channel's programming spectrum; here the schedule includes shows like *Dhyan Pragya* (Meditation Knowledge), *Pragya Prabhat* (Knowledge morning) and *Vichar Sanjivni* (Elixir of Thought), which aim to provide the audience with a kind of psychological/wellness pep-talk to get their day started, with the shows' guests offering a variety of advice on "science of meditation" and "religious teachings."

At the more secular lifestyle-oriented end of the spectrum in the evenings, *Pragya* also offers a number of magazine style infotainment shows, often featuring audience call-ins. *Menz*, for instance, is a studio-based show focused on the stresses of being a man in contemporary India and providing advice on psychological, social and physical wellbeing. *Just for women* is a rather glossier, fast-paced magazine show featuring two glamorous young anchors wearing casual *kurtas* rather than saris. Reflecting the complexity of the channel's neo-spiritual engagement with both "traditional" and secular lifestyle and consumerist culture, the show moves between re-enactments of various lifestyle issues from hypertension to sibling rivalry, followed by interviews of people with lifestyle problems on camera and advice (relevant to the issue at hand) from various experts (usually shot in their place of work). These shows nicely capture the way in which spiritual holism on *Pragya TV* has been refigured as a market-based privatized pursuit where the individual gets to pick and mix from a cornucopia of life skills, knowledge systems and lifestyle products and services.

Pragya's shows epitomize Guptoo's argument that the new spiritualisms in India are increasingly tied to a neo-liberalized notion of enterprise culture. There is considerable debate, however, as to the usefulness of applying a one size fits all model of neoliberalism to India's complex evolving post socialist social and cultural landscape, a landscape marked by a range of mediated social and cultural imaginaries that are in turn shaped in complex ways by class, (the continuing presence of) caste, ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity.

In India, familial and ethnic ties continue to reign supreme while, despite the lifestyle turn on high end spiritual TV, many sections of the population continue to identity with religious faith and affiliation and, as our discussion of tele-astrologers suggests, often hold to magical, externalized conceptions of fate and fortune. Similarly, while channels like *Pragya TV* promote and celebrate forms of self-actualization, the channel's "mission" is not purely "to enable individuals to

meet their better self.” It also aims to “discipline and reform thoughts” and “to empower societies and nations,” indicating that *Pragya*’s notions of holistic wellbeing are characterized by both individual and collective elements in ways which are arguably not just synonymous with the disciplined subjectivities associated with globalized forms of late or neo-liberal forms of governmentality.

Governmentality and beyond: Somatic publics and “magnified” gurus

This third section focusses on just one highly influential spiritual figure Baba Ramdev. Ramdev, a guru who embodies an idiosyncratic blend of “traditionalism,” enterprise and political celebrity offers another interesting lens through which to view India’s media modernity. In their wonderful edited collection on gurus in south-east Asia, Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame talk about the rise of what they call “guru governmentality” as one incarnation of what they term the “multifarious” nature of guru-ness in India.¹⁹ They argue that, in the context of economic liberalization in India and a state moving away from its commitment to socialism that we are seeing the emergence of a kind of organized spiritual philanthropy blossoming in its place. Baba Ramdev and his array of religiously-inflected social development and business ventures in many ways exemplify this new kind of privatized but communitarian post-socialist spiritualism.

Ramdev, who owns a major Hindi spiritual channel, *Aastha TV*, as well as a small Scottish island, is a highly prominent and controversial figure in the media landscape in India and, in our audience interviews was one of the key TV personalities mentioned by households. The Hindi channel, *Aastha TV*, was the first spiritual channel to take the stage in India and continues to be the most popular. On the surface *Aastha*, with its impressive array of small screen “saints and gurus,”²⁰ appears to be a fairly straightforward religious channel albeit with the rather grandiose aim of “providing content, which fulfils the spiritual needs of the worldwide Asian Indian community.”²¹ However, owner Baba Ramdev’s various high profile engagements with the major social, national and political issues of the time, along with his business and technological savvy, mark the increasing role of (multi)mediatized religion, highly marketized forms of spiritualism and religiously-inflected

19. J. Copeman & A. Ikegame, eds., *The Guru in South Asia: New Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, London: Routledge, 2012.

20. See <http://www.aasthatv.com/index.php/saints> for their profiles

21. See <http://www.aasthatv.com/index.php/about-us>

social development and business ventures in India, with channel describing itself as “India’s Leading Socio-Spiritual-Cultural Television Network.”²²



Baba Ramdev as holy man

Baba Ramdev -Yoga for Obesity (Motapa Ke Liye)

#1 Breast Enhance Cream
by Naturalul
572,688 views
5:07

Baba Ramdev - 10 Asanas To Loose Weight - English - Yoga Health Fitness
by Rajshri
402,835 views
11:33
FEATURE

Baba Ramdev -Yoga for Young Womer (Yuvatiyon Ke Liye)
by Rajshri
625,247 views
1:09:09

Baba Ramdev -Yoga for High Blood Pressure (Uchch Rakt Chaap)
by Rajshri
383,322 views
1:01:00

Baba Ramdev - Daily Yoga Aasans- Sunday (Ravivaar)
by Rajshri
117,354 views
1:02:18

Yoga on Youtube: Ramdev as health and fitness guide

In recent years Baba Ramdev has been prominently involved in political and social affairs, taking centre stage in the 2012 anti-corruption campaign in India when he marched to parliament, and voicing highly provocative views on homosexuality and AIDS. At the same time, Ramdev’s guru status is inextricably tied to his success as an entrepreneur in both the religion and wellbeing market – he owns a nationwide Ayurvedic pharmacy network; his claims that all kinds of modern ills (from stress

22. See the Aastha channel’s twitter account: <https://twitter.com/aasthatvchannel/status/992003305315303424?lang=en>

to AIDS) can be treated by yoga and Ayurvedic drugs (preferably bought from his pharmacies) underscore the aptness of Nanda's description of contemporary religion in contemporary India as a "State-Temple-Corporate Complex."²³

Ramdev has also been a very astute media player. As a guru who blends together nationalist fervour with a fairly idiosyncratic take on Hindu doctrines, he is perhaps the most well-known of the current crop of contemporary spiritual guides on Indian television. Coming into prominence with a yoga programme on the *Aastha* channel in 2003, he now has a presence on all major Hindi-language channels (news, religious and GECs). Unlike other babas and gurus, Ramdev has positioned himself as a man of the people, forgoing the status of a divine "god-man," and offering himself up instead as a crusader against the modern pharmaceutical industry (rather controversially calling for a ban on allopathic medicine), and the lifestyle ills of the modern world more broadly. While his teachings are premised on reintroducing ancient *vedic* life principles to the Indian masses, his mode of instruction has been rather more practical than proselytizing. In particular, Ramdev has branded himself first and foremost as a yoga guru; he is best known for popularising yoga among health-conscious Indians through his *yog shivirs* or mass yoga camps, which are attended by thousands of people and began to be televised in 1995.

As the Figure labelled "Yoga on YouTube" above indicates, Ramdev's TV programmes include yoga targeted at specific demographics and lifestyle issues, such as yoga for young women and recommended yoga *asanas* for losing weight. The baba's just-in-time blend of ancient Hindu *vedas* (or knowledge) with a health-oriented brand of yoga then mark a shift to what might be seen as a privatized neo-spiritualism, though tied in the case of Baba Ramdev to broader concepts of the nation's socio-spiritual "health" though linking "civic bodies to the national body politic."²⁴ Clearly such forms of mass exercise and bodily discipline can be seen as contributing to national health at a time when hospitals and state-based health care are becoming increasingly privatized, suggesting that the somatic forms of collectivism generated through the body of Baba Ramdev can be understood in governmental terms, as a form of devolved civic management.

However, as Chakraborty's work suggests there is also a potentially critical post-colonial dimension to the modern spiritual performativity of figures like Ramdev. While his yoga *asanas* and teachings could be seen as building "new and improved" neo-liberal style, Indian citizens, Chakraborty argues that Ramdev "promotes yoga

23. M. Nanda, *The God Market: How Globalization is Making India More Hindu*, New York: NYU Press, 2011.

24. C. Chakraborty, "The Hindu ascetic as fitness instructor: Reviving faith in yoga," *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 24, no. 9, 2007, p. 1174.

as an alternative and effective medicine [...] to biomedicine,”²⁵ and “sees the nation as sapped of its strength by globalization.”²⁶ Here, Chakraborty links Ramdev’s promotion of a kind of embodied or “somatic nationalism” through mass staged performances to an anti-colonial tradition, which can be linked back to popular ascetic nationalists such as Mahatma Gandhi, who questioned the assumptions of the superiority of biomedicine and conducted experiments on himself and his followers in order to develop an indigenous system of health care for the public and to challenge colonial representation of Indians as effete and weak.

There is also another notion of embodiment at work here that also challenges a purely neoliberal or marketized reading of neo-spiritual gurus and religious life-style TV. Copeman and Ikegame use the term “magnified persons” to discuss the ways in which spiritual gurus including figures like Ramdev not only embody an augmented or expanded celebrity persona but also may literally carry with them their former spiritual incarnations.²⁷ This sense of gurus possessing multiple avatars is connoted by the images that often accompany even the most secular and pragmatic of spiritual advisors on television such as the suit-wearing Dr Chawla on *Live Vaastu*. The opening credits of spiritual programmes thus commonly depict the show’s baba or expert using a haloed aesthetic effect which might be seen as the equivalent of a spiritual glamour shot; in the figure below for instance we see Dr Chawla posing for his spiritual close up, along with his spiritual shadow.



An image of Dr Puneet Chawla, the star of *Live Vaastu* taken from the opening titles to the show (the equivalent of a spiritual-religious “glamour shot,” the opening credits of spiritual programmes commonly depict the show’s baba or expert using this kind of starry or haloed aesthetic effect).

25. Chakraborty, 2007, p. 1174.

26. Chakraborty, 2007, p. 1178.

27. Copeman & Ikegame, 2012.

This magnified sense of personhood and embodiment is not solely held by the guru but also by his or her followers, with such gurus often seen as representing “the collective image of their followers,” or a kind of inclusive singularity. Baba Ramdev’s yoga camps for instance can be seen to offer a kind of embodied collectivism that is not just about privatized bodies joined in televisual communion. The somatic publics enacted in and produced through Ramdev’s *asanas* and *pranayama* (breathing) practices as performed in his mass yoga shows are marked by what we might see as an expanded conception of corporeality. The synchronized movements and breathing of Ramdev and his audience – who are at once co-located in the collectivized space of the yoga camp and in the privatized, space of the domestic – is captured as a form of live, event-like TV but where the event and its rituals are conducted by and through the bodies of the audience.

Exoticizing the familiar?: Doing media modernities differently

By secularization I mean a decline in the public, community affirming aspect of religion. The appeal of popular gurus lies not in their ability to propagate religious values based on external authorization, nor in their capacity to forge community solidarities [but] in the freedom of choice they allow their followers; [in] the respect they show for each devotee’s personal autonomy in constructing his/her own highly individualized form of religious faith.²⁸

This quote from Maya Warrier, a UK based religious studies scholar who has written extensively on modern Hindi subject formation and on Hindu publics illustrates nicely some of the key problems or at least the generative tensions faced when attempting to write and think about questions of non- or post secular media modernities in a globalized media context. Firstly, we see the difficulties that come with the importation of concepts inflected with Euro-modern assumptions such as “the secular” and “publics” into alternative spaces of modernity. And secondly, the limitations of one size fits all approaches to contemporary media practices are brought to the fore when working in postcolonial, globalized and arguably post-national spaces such as India. For instance, as Steve Derne notes there is a tendency in Indian scholarship on media and modernity to slip into easy generalizations based on the experiences of rather small middle-class audiences – i.e., the kind of upper middle-class cosmopolitan viewers who might engage with wellbeing cable channels like *Pragya TV*. The Warrier quote above suggests a tendency to generalize from rather *niche* urban middle-class experiences of privatized, lifestyle-oriented spiritualism to the hugely variegated lives of the Indian “public,” more broadly.

28. Warrier, 2003, p. 214.

There is also a tendency to force the somewhat messy communitarian and collectivist dimensions of guru movements into a smooth singular narrative of marketized neo-spiritualism.

I would argue – as a non-India specialist – that conducting research in and writing about such a highly differentiated social and media landscape calls for a way of working that attempts to highlight rather than gloss over the complex and the unfamiliar or “exotic” dimensions of that landscape. Indeed, conducting media research in sites like India, where media increasingly works across multiple scales and where television for instance is becoming both increasingly regionalized and at the same time globally connected, raises questions about doing research in a global setting more broadly. How does one speak in generalizing terms, for instance, in a context of complexity, media abundance and intense value pluralism? As Nick Couldry suggests in his recent book *Media, Society, World*, borrowing from Boltanski and Thevenot, he argues for an understanding of media power as increasingly occurring within a context of “value pluralism, not value coherence.”²⁹ This then, is not to generalize pluralism (or specificity) as itself a universal experience but to trouble normative *a priori* assumptions regarding social and cultural transformations while thinking about media publics *differently* as “an arena of cultural contestation in which modernity can become a diversely appropriated experience.”³⁰

In his classic essay “The Time of History and the Times of Gods,” Dipesh Chakrabarty, talks about the uncanny, singularity of phenomenologies of local spiritual life in India.³¹ In this essay I have been interested in mapping both the idiosyncrasies of Indian neo-spiritualism and through mobilizing a multiple modernities framework, also speaking to the broader implications of Indian post-secularism. This essay takes seriously, for instance, the televisual as a magical space – where imagined publics are shaped by visible and invisible forces – of the state, of spirits, of markets and of gods. It suggests media spaces and practices where agency is individualized *and* collectivized and where public personas can be both living brands and spiritual avatars. The essay thus draws on the spirit of Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe*, in terms of complicating the Euro-American

29. Nick Couldry, *Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Digital Media Practice*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012, p. 62

30. A. Appadurai & C. A. Breckenridge, “Public modernity in India,” In CA Breckenridge, ed., *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995, pp. 4–5.

31. Chakrabarty, D. “The Time of History and the Times of Gods,” in L. Lowe, ed., *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*. Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1997, pp. 35–62.

media categories and concepts we bring to sites such as India i.e., to emphasise to some degree *their* untranslatability and exoticism.³²

At the same time, I would argue for taking Chakrabarty's argument further and suggesting ways in which we might look to Asian television for instance as a marker and harbinger of potential future trends in the space of contemporary media modernities or media publics. With India and China now major global players in the entertainment industry, how might the experiences of these states impact on our thinking about global media processes? How might case studies of modernity tied to specific cultural genealogies offer a useful way of doing modernity differently in ways that attempt to avoid a kind of discursive neo-colonialism, speaking back to and challenging one size fits all theories and going some way at least towards shifting the balance of power in what Aihwa Ong calls "the geopolitics of cultural knowledge."³³

32. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000, 2007.

33. Ong, 1996, 60.

Kipling's "wild and strange" India

The "insider" perspective of the short stories

Madhu Grover

Newer maps for reading Kipling

The fascination that India held in Rudyard Kipling's early life and imagination certainly dimmed in his later English years but a reciprocal hold he has on Indian readers remains uncompromised by changed postcolonial and literary-critical politics. Kipling's works have never found a suitable canonical slot in standard Western anthologies covering nineteenth and twentieth-century English literature, where he features as an extremely marginal presence.¹ Oddly, we might find his stories comfortably book-ended by other indigenous pieces in anthologies of "Indian Literature in English" without any explanations toward issues of ethnicity.² Such unexplained acts of cultural appropriation force us to wonder, "Whose Kipling is he anyway?"

To begin with a question: How do Kipling's texts negotiate between his "taken" political position vis-à-vis Empire, the aesthetic demands of the narratives, and what I tentatively term the claims of the "spiritual sphere"? These latter claims I see as a double consciousness in these texts about the subject people's "inner" world, manifest in certain contradictory colonial impulses of fear and fascination, attraction and revulsion toward India; the country being perceived and represented paradoxically as both utterly familiar and also "wild and strange."³ Kipling's divided loyalties on several political issues and his conscious stance of being someone with an "insider" perspective further complicate the texture of his undisputedly evocative representations of the Anglo-Indian, as well as of the Indian scene.

1. For a random instance, see, "Modern British Literature," *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, 2 volumes, New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

2. Chapter four of Arvind K. Mehrotra, *A History of Indian Literature in English*, London: Hurst & Co., 2003, pp. 70–8, interestingly features a critical piece by Maria Couto on Rudyard Kipling, treated ostensibly as an "Indian" writer.

3. Rudyard Kipling, *Plain Tales from the Hills*, 1890, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987, p. 143. The title of this essay draws the phrase from the same source.

Such a rethinking of the complex relationship between culture and colonialism belongs to the broad field of critical inquiry identified with colonial discourse analysis, which has effectively challenged traditional modes of aesthetic assessment by foregrounding issues of race, nation, empire and ethnicity, apprehended as underpinning literary representations of “other” cultures. Postcolonial studies in the politics of meaning supported by theoretical inputs from outside the “literary” discipline, have clearly seen Kipling’s writings as texts emblematic or symptomatic of key areas of the colonial imagination and perception.⁴ The tendency among some early twentieth-century critics to study Kipling’s work for the “permanent human and moral themes,”⁵ for what was read as his existentialist philosophy of work and action, and for the writer’s craftsmanship, to the occlusion of political questions, was now seen as ideologically “calculated to drain the writings of historical specificity.”⁶ Indeed, against these previous ideological efforts to disentangle the artistic from the political aspects of Kipling’s oeuvre, ostensibly attempted in order to reinforce pressing aesthetic concerns, may quite readily be asserted the near impossibility of doing so, as the frontier between art and politics in Kipling’s writings is never exact.

My strategic reading of Kipling’s writings against the grain, seeks to move beyond both the earlier dehistoricized conventional readings, as well as the latter imputation of the writer’s easy submissiveness to imperialist ideology. There is little point, moreover, in offering a postcolonial reading that remains mired, in what Edward Said calls, the “rhetoric of blame.”⁷ My study seeks to read Kipling’s texts as being documents, enactments, and articulations of a deep crisis in the late-imperial consciousness.

4. Prominent among such readings useful to this essay are Sandra Kemp’s *Kipling’s Hidden Narratives*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1988, Bart Moore-Gilbert’s *Kipling and “Orientalism,”* London & Sydney: Croom Helm, 1986, Benita Parry’s *Delusions and Discoveries: Studies of India in the British Imagination: 1880–1930*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1974, Sara Suleri’s *The Rhetoric of English India*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992, and Zohreh T. Sullivan’s *Narratives of Empire*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

5. J. M. S. Tompkins, *The Art of Rudyard Kipling*, London: Methuen, 1959, p. x.

6. Benita Parry, “The Contents and Discontents of Kipling’s Imperialism,” *New Formation* 6, Winter, 1988: p. 51. Parry critiques the trend of such an apolitical reading “which amplifies Kipling’s address to the crisis of contemporary Western civilization,” and that “by reiterating Kipling’s ideological assumptions, naturalizes the principles of the master culture as universal forms of thought and projects its authorized representations as truths.” Parry, “Contents and Discontents,” pp. 50–51.

7. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, London: Vintage, 1994, p. 19.

While treating these texts as imaginative representations and reconstructions of material reality, this essay attempts to locate those formal slippages that demonstrate that literary texts *both* incorporate contemporary ideologies, *and* are the sites of ideological opposition and struggle. This newer strategic map of reading Kipling leads me to a consideration of those areas of textual experience that exist either beyond officially sanctioned ideologies, or are engaged in dialectical activity with them. Thus, contrary to received perceptions about the writer's seamless imperialistic image, it is possible to read the texts oppositionally. It is possible thus to locate a rather pointed critique of many of the forms of the imperial endeavour in them, which often led to contemporary Anglo-Indian perplexity with, and speculation about, the ideological location of the voice behind his writings.

In this essay, I hope to examine such formal and ideological complexities of Kipling's stories, where his Anglo-Indian characters traverse with deep anxiety this wholly familiar yet utterly strange India. The gothic mode and what Sara Suleri calls "colonial terror" seem evident in the colonizers' extreme anxiety about the unknowability of the occupied territory.⁸ It might be possible to identify, as I hope to do here, within his texts of Empire certain hybrid sites where at times the dramatic force underpinning social and cultural exchange, and at other times the complex positioning of the "implied author," forces the ideology and form in the narrative to pull in opposite directions.⁹ It is these hybrid areas that sometimes manifest the relatively autonomous workings of the aesthetic logic of his writings.

The exotic tale-teller: The culturally "other" Kipling

Kipling's stories about India exercise an almost mythic hold on later readers' imaginations. In his own time, his spectacular portrayals of the Anglo-Indian episode, the native fable, and the British soldier's adventure, "most delicately tickled British curiosity and...patriotism too," and had his metropolitan readership clamouring for "more and more, like *Oliver Twist*."¹⁰ Significantly, Edmund Gosse, the early reviewer just cited, wished to be told "more of what happened, out of the moonlight, in the blackness of Amir Nath's Gully...to see the devils of the East," to have

8. I have made extensive use of the term "colonial terror" from Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India*, p. 1, in my argument.

9. For "implied author," see Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1983, and Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*, Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1990.

10. Edmund Gosse in ed. Roger Lancelyn Green, *Kipling: The Critical Heritage*, New York: Barnes & Noble, 1971, p. 109.

the writer awoken “in us the primitive emotions of curiosity, mystery, and romance in action.”¹¹ The readers’ fascinated and voyeuristic “Orientalist” desire to look upon what Gosse here terms a “new kind of terrible and enchanting peepshow” would have delighted in images of, for instance, the opium den in the story “The Gate of the Hundred Sorrows,”¹² the deadly magic of the love-charm in “The Bisara of Pooree,”¹³ the death-pit in “The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes,”¹⁴ or of Fleete turned were-wolf upon his desecration of the temple of Hanuman in the story “The Mark of the Beast.”¹⁵ His early readers’ excited absorption in the exotic escape-world of romance perhaps distracted them from the potentially ironic subtext of these stories, which latter derives from the writer’s intense familiarity with his material.

Despite his initial six years as an Anglo-Indian child, and his return to the country to write for an Anglo-Indian audience, a predominantly critical, and even at times, a sharply satirical impulse governs his representations of the colonizers. In 1883 at Lahore, he was a “junior in a newspaper office,” “the youngest Englishman” in a station, of some seventy white civilians.¹⁶ Yet, as one who was elected “a member at seventeen [of] the Punjab Club,” Kipling shared cultural space with “picked men at their definite work,” “each talking his own shop.”¹⁷ The budding writer obtained the setting of his anecdotes, valuable technical knowledge and perhaps his first none-too critical early audience from this group. His “insider” stance might derive, therefore, from his emotional investment in the activities of these minor players in the governance of imperial India. There is also the ever-present wider English public six thousand miles away consisting of friends, family, critics, reviewers, and other compatriots whose readership would matter significantly.

Kipling’s observations as a colonial outsider, a witness of the “exotic” and “unreal” Indian scene would excite British “Orientalist” fears and desires relating to the colony. On the other hand, his emotional understanding of an exilic Anglo-Indian existence, with the pathos of separation for the imperial workers from their families and their familiar circumstances, would bring a distant English readership close

11. Gosse, *Kipling: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 107–8.

12. Kipling, *Plain Tales*, pp. 236–241.

13. Kipling, *Plain Tales*, pp. 225–229.

14. Kipling, *The Phantom Rickshaw and other Eerie Tales*, 1892, North Yorkshire: Stratus, 2002, pp. 35–59.

15. Kipling, *Life’s Handicap*, 1891, London: Macmillan, 1982, pp. 240–259.

16. Charles Carrington, *Rudyard Kipling: His Life and Work*, London: Macmillan, 1955, p. 51.

17. Kipling, *Something of Myself*, 1936, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992, p. 58.

to these experiences. Within the same zone of comfort and a great deal of racial complacency for a metropolitan reader would feature his famous presentations of the English at "work" in India, reinforcing the values of duty, discipline, craft, and self-sacrifice that fed the "mythology of Imperialism."¹⁸

Bridging imperial ideologies and native beliefs

In a memorable tribute to the triumph of imperial will and rationality over unruly nature and mythic beliefs, the building and reinforcing of a suspension bridge over Ganga waters is celebrated in the story, "The Bridge Builders" from the volume *The Day's Work*.¹⁹ Yet, the daytime "works" are severely threatened by the "night-time" forces of the indigenous powers, natural and divine, and in a hallucination/dream between sleep and awaking, both the Chief Engineer Findlayson and his assistant, the seasoned "native" sailor Peroo, dream of an assembly and debate of the prominent gods of the Hindu pantheon. This bold imperial work of building a railway bridge over the Ganga continues triumphantly, surviving material obstructions caused by a storm, as also cholera and smallpox epidemics in the village by the bridge-works, riots among "warring castes,"²⁰ and delays and despair caused by official red tape.

Primordial India, however, is shown as more difficult to overcome. Findlayson, the civil engineer in charge of the bridge, and his experienced Indian foreman, Peroo are swept to a small island by a powerful flooding of the river. In a hallucination brought on by the opium they have taken to ward off fever, they dream of an assembly of Hindu gods, materialised in animal forms. This divine meeting has been convened to debate the almost completed Kashi Bridge. Incensed by their chaining of her flood and the destruction of her power, "Mother Gunga" appeals to the higher gods for justice against the "bridge-builders."²¹

The context of the debate over the imperial work, bridges together the material and the spiritual spheres in the gods' views on the social impact of Western development on Indian life and traditions. The text shows Kipling's sensitivity to those sentiments of the indigenous people that are more complexly spun into a wider

18. The phrase is from the title of Jonah Raskin, *The Mythology of Imperialism*, New York: Random House, 1971.

19. Kipling, "The Bridge Builders," *The Day's Work*, 1898, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988, pp. 31–63.

20. Kipling, "The Bridge Builders," p. 32.

21. Kipling, "The Bridge Builders," p. 49.

web of responses to the ostensibly laudable work of the material transformation of India. These mixed responses of the Indian people to the changes introduced by the bridge-builders are significantly represented through the polyphonic quality of the debate, where no single view of the gods is privileged or consistently maintained.

Thus, some of the gods consider this railway bridge and the “fire-carriages” it is to carry as mocking the strength as well as the sanctity of the river;²² as changing the face of the land by bringing up new towns on its banks, and they demand the destruction of the bridge for the insult to Ganga. Some of the gods see material benefits accruing to their people from these newer structures; yet others celebrate the railway as providing the people greater access to their shrines, and envision an increase in the people’s faith and worship by these means. The latter group is, however, reminded by Shiva, the Destroyer that during these very pilgrimages, death smote “thousands in a day and a night, and bound the sickness to the wheels of the fire-carriages, so that it ran from one end of the land to the other.”²³

The most alluring point of view and incidentally the one which takes most account of the practical philosophy of action or *karma* (embodied in the Parrot of this deity) is that of Krishna, the only one to come in human form and speak on behalf of the common people, who must be saved from the consequences of Ganga’s incensed flood. The “Well-beloved” god, “the idol of dreaming maids and of mothers ere their children are born,” is full of concern for his people:

– who lie under the leaf-roofs of the village...the young girls, and the young men who sing to them in the dark...the child that will be born next morn...that which was begotten tonight.... And when all is done, what profit? Tomorrow sees them at work.²⁴

He warns the gods that if the bridge were swept out there would be no profit, as the work would be resumed. Ganesh, the god of material benefits and good fortune assures them that all the new activity around them was “but the shifting of a little dirt”; Krishna too counsels the river to take no account of “this live dirt”; the end of this mutating world will bring them back to the beginning. He significantly connects the emergence of this new age of Western technology and material progress to the impending erosion of the reign of the gods in the hearts of the people:

22. Kipling, “The Bridge Builders,” p. 49.

23. Kipling, “The Bridge Builders,” p. 52.

24. Kipling, “The Bridge Builders,” p. 56.

...the beginning of the end is born already.... As men count the end is far off; but as we who know reckon it is today.²⁵

A still more evocative prophecy is made by Indra, the chief of the gods, the judge of the assembly, who is resplendent in the form of a Black-buck, "such a buck as... might have [been] seen in dreams – a buck with a royal head, ebon back, silver belly, and gleaming straight horns."²⁶ Pointing to the broad, cyclic paradigms of creation, mutation and destruction in the universe, this majestic Buck, restates the Riddle of the Gods:

When Brahm ceases to dream, the Heavens and the Hells and the Earth disappear.... The dreams come and go, and the nature of the dream changes, but still Brahm dreams.... Brahm dreams – and till He wakes the Gods die not.²⁷

The debate in this assembly is inconclusive, as dawn breaks and the gods disappear while Mother Ganga takes "her appointed place in the new imperial geography."²⁸ In the text, however, a kind of dialectic seems to be set up between Indra's vast transcendental vision and Krishna's humane and material perspective of love and life. Krishna's affective vision is one through which Kipling might well have meant to bring home the lesson of the enduring value of indigenous human life to the "bridge-builders" themselves.

There seems to be, moreover, a dual problematic at work here, in so far as the specific activity under fire in this debate is concerned. The arguments of the gods foreground not merely the clash between alien and indigenous cultures but also between old traditions and newer technologies that inevitably introduce change into the lives of the people, and sometimes do not take adequate account of the fragile material hold of the "common folk" on the world.

Thus, Kipling seems to caution these "bridge builders" of Empire about the repercussions of alien interventionist activity involving newer technologies. If the course of imperial action is not to become collisional in constructing the massive, new technological marvels for the colony, they must develop an empathetic relation to the lives of the people of India. Thus, although this allegory reinforces certain ideological imperial interests, Kipling's introduction of a sensitively rendered account of the social discourse of the Indian people, into a text that intends to celebrate the

25. Kipling, "The Bridge Builders," p. 59.

26. Kipling, "The Bridge Builders," p. 49.

27. Kipling, "The Bridge Builders," p. 59.

28. Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 168.

day's imperial work, allows many subtle notes of native *speech* to inflect the *voice* of Empire through the dialectics between the many-layered, hierarchical Hindu pantheon.

Such ideologically dissenting articulations derive force from what I see as the writer's affective responses to the "other" cultures that are suggestive not simply of tolerance and civility, but that evidence cultural sympathy and compassion for the colonized. Kipling's text also allows a subversive native discourse of immutable tradition, irrational belief, and mythic certainties not only space within an imperial geography mapped through technological power, but also describes the white man's hegemonic project as nearly overthrown by the raging force of Mother Ganga, and represents imperial aims as awaiting ratification by Indian gods.

Ironically for the colonizer's self-construction in terms of conscious control and enlightened rationality, the subconscious topography of his self is overridden by the native gods, Krishna, Ganesh, Indra, Kali *et al.*, who only concede momentary power to the historical fact of empire that has brought very recent changes to the land. The text's interpolation of the Hindu philosophy of *Maya*, or of the illusory nature of material reality, undermines the ideological force of imperial structures. The bridge-builders are, however, allowed to save their bridge and ride their "fire-carriages" on its steel sinews but:

Behind everything rose the black frame of the Kashi Bridge – plate by plate, girder by girder, span by span.... but what man knew Mother Gunga's arithmetic?²⁹

The text ends with Peroo's dismissal of his guru in favour of the newly learned philosophy, and with a chastened Findlayson's quasi-spiritual realisation that while he lay dreaming, his bridge is spared by the Ganga, and "there's not a stone shifted anywhere."³⁰

"The Two-sided Man" telling stories of "Mine Own People"

Famously among the Chapter Headings to *Kim* remains Kipling's self-acknowledged awareness of blessedness acquired from his divided sensibility, giving thanks to "Allah Who gave me two/Separate sides to my head."³¹ This kind of extra-fictional authorial stance should not be too simplistically read in continuation with the

29. Kipling, "Bridge Builders," p. 34, p. 44.

30. Kipling, "The Bridge Builders," p. 63.

31. The first and last verses of Kipling's poem, "The Two-sided Man" as Chapter Heading of Chapter 8, *Kim*, 1901, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987, p. 179.

biographical narrative of his Edenic childhood experience of those first six years of his life spent in India. "Kipling," Edward Said says, "not only wrote about India, but was of it," with a tacit assumption that this cultural hybridity was no more than an accident of birth.³² What needs rather to be explored is the authorial and textual dialectic, between the desire for cultural immersion into native myths and idealities, and commitment to an ideologically motivated imperial position, of cultural resistance to "going native." This dialectic is sometimes rendered complex through extra-fictional interpolations meant to represent the writer's cultural dexterity and hybridity. Thus, for instance, the volume, *Life's Handicap* subtitled "*Being Stories of Mine Own People*," carries besides this latter self-conscious assertion of brotherhood with the native subjects of Empire, another discursive emphasis in the form of an epigraph on its title-page:

I met a hundred men on the road to
Delhi and they were all my brothers.³³

Marked as a "Native proverb," it emphasises cultural heterogeneity and homogeneity at the same time. In the "Preface," the frame narrator claims that the tales "have been collected from all places, and all sorts of people," and describes conversations between the author and Gobind, a one-eyed native sage, about the nature of storytelling.³⁴ These discussions centre on the dissimilarity of Indian and Western patterns of narrative and the differing expectations of audiences about the "truth" of narrative.

Cultural difference and the "gulfs of miscomprehension" across which "native and English stare at each other hopelessly," are the obtrusive theme of this discourse between the bardic seer belonging to an oral, mnemonic culture, and the producer of stories as commodity in a literate culture.³⁵ Despite the frame narrator's attempts to represent the Chubára of Gobind as a pastoral retreat where "Mahomedan, Sikh, and Hindu mixed equally under the trees," the present colonial moment is marked as a disruption of this idyllic domain; thus we are told, "he had lived in his time which was before the English came within five hundred miles of Dhunni Bhagat's Chubára."³⁶ Interestingly, the text further describes how Gobind would tell the narrator tales in a voice "most like the rumbling of heavy guns over a

32. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 160.

33. Kipling, "Preface," *Life's Handicap*, p. iii.

34. Kipling, "Preface," *Life's Handicap*, p. xiv.

35. Kipling, "Preface," *Life's Handicap*, p. ix.

36. Kipling, "Preface," *Life's Handicap*, pp. vi–viii.

wooden bridge.”³⁷ Thus, here narrative power is given to native “others” in an idiom that rather reinforces their difference and their present material disempowerment, the latter being underscored by the image of colonial guns. Such formal tensions between narratorial voice and extra-fictional stance add complexity both to the writer’s discourse and to the reader’s perception of aesthetic purpose.

Straddling exotic and familiar territory: Kipling’s cultural boundary-crossings

The matter of cultural crossing-over into native territory lay very close to the personal life of Kipling as a young journalist, on his investigative touring through the heart of Lahore city. Despite his “official” contempt and disgust at the state of sanitation in native quarters recorded in his journalistic writings of the time, his senses and imagination seem fascinated by “other” elements that led him to register powerful personal desire for cultural immersion, into “all manner of odd places” within the native Indian scene.³⁸ In 1886 Kipling wrote to his editor, Edward Kay Robinson that he would happily forego a career in Fleet Street; Lahore was his “own place,” where he could find “heat and smells of oil and spices, and puffs of temple incense, and sweat, and darkness, and dirt and lust and cruelty, and above all, things wonderful and fascinating innumerable.”³⁹

In *Plain Tales from the Hills* Kipling had written that a stone’s throw on either hand from “that well-ordered road we tread” lay the “wild and strange” India, where the tales about “*churel* and ghoul and *Djinn* and sprite” may be heard in this “Oldest Land/ Wherein the Powers of Darkness range.”⁴⁰ The voice that offers this knowledge suggests by its jauntiness, either, that these “Orientalist” tales are not worthy of being taken too seriously, or that, given the presence of a structure of imperial power (the “well-ordered road” segregating civilization from barbarity, native quarter from English Club), this unfamiliar world need not obtrude itself onto white rationalities. However, despite such an overtly nonchalant Anglo-Indian stance, within the stories the indigenous “Powers of Darkness” with their mythic force seem to exercise the colonial mind inordinately.

37. Kipling, “Preface,” *Life’s Handicap*, p. ix.

38. Kipling, *Something of Myself*, p. 64.

39. Thomas Pinney, ed., *The Letters of Rudyard Kipling*, Volume I, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990, p. 127.

40. Kipling, “In the House of Suddhoo,” *Plain Tales*, p. 143.

A certain hybrid form of the fantastic that Kipling and also earlier Anglo-Indian writers employ, might take its provenance from elements of an Oriental tradition of the *Arabian Nights* and other Eastern accounts. Bart Moore-Gilbert suggests that the popularity of a "gothic" tone among these colonial stories can be related in part to "its appearance as a medium to express the sense of estrangement in India, which is so characteristic of the exiled community."⁴¹

Patrick Brantlinger gives this colonial mode of representing these "unknown" societies a firmer generic identity, by calling it "imperial Gothic," and suggests that these stories are often underpinned by a quasi-scientific social and racial Darwinism, with a fascination with those forces of the occult which the advance of civilization was supposed to have overthrown.⁴²

Kipling's conscious ideological perception of a gap between the cultural identities of the colonizer and the colonized also has a problematic discursive relation with his subconscious predisposition in favour of placing that divisive threshold under stress in the stories. Fiction's logic might have an integral relation with the author's anxious aspiration to exist both within an imagined world, a world that nevertheless demands discursive involvement, active participation and the taking up of positions – to belong to that charmed circle of desire – and at the same time remain self-consciously and hence safely distanced from the stress of lived experience; an outsider looking inward. This tension is perhaps what W. H. Auden notices in Kipling's writing and that he refers to as "the anxiety of encirclement from both within and without."⁴³ This kind of "anxiety of encirclement" reveals itself sometimes in fictions that suggest the mutual "implicated-ness" of the two cultures through the actions and words of individuals that undermine difference, by presenting it as similarity. This insight concerning similarity with the "other" may prove at times to be a shocking knowledge, and render the imperial power speechless.

Such a sense of "colonial terror" at images of the "other," visible within the darker recesses of the imperial "self," is registered in a story like "The Mark of the Beast," that depicts the ironic metamorphosis of the "genial and inoffensive" but also drunk Englishman Fleete into a beast, a metonym for the ultimate "other."⁴⁴ In a fit of wilful callousness he grinds out his cigar-butt on the red stone image of the

41. Moore-Gilbert, *Kipling and "Orientalism,"* p. 188.

42. Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830–1914*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993, pp. 227–53.

43. W. H. Auden, "The Poet of the Encirclement," *New Republic* 29, 1943, p. 579 cited by Sandra Kemp & Lisa Lewis, eds. *Writings on writing by Rudyard Kipling*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. xxii.

44. Kipling, "The Mark of the Beast," *Life's Handicap*, pp. 240–259.

Hindu god, Hanuman, and releases the ghastly energy of a whole set of reversals of power and identity; a beast-like silvery leper is unleashed by the temple priests to avenge the insult to the deity, and in a horrific and alternative cross-cultural encounter, Fleete is literally embraced by his scourge, after which the former gradually degenerates to the condition of a beast:

Fleete could not speak, he could only snarl, and his snarls were those of a wolf, not a man. The human spirit must have been giving way all day and have died out with the twilight.⁴⁵

It is here that the imperial text records a paralyzing absence of rational choice, as well as a terrible aphasia. Fleete is rendered speechless by his beastly act, and his aphasia is represented by an orthographic gap in the text; between them, the narrator and Strickland the police officer, recognizing that this was not any longer a doctor's case, resort to extreme measures that ironically mimic the barbarity of the beast, and they torture the silver leper, to make him remove the spell. "This part is not to be printed," says the text.⁴⁶ Thus, through marks of textual elision and signs of formal stress replicating this ambivalent silence, the text registers that horror of the temporary collapse of the imperial, "civilized" self when confronted with the utterly unfamiliar and unknown realm of the counter-culture.

Dumois, the doctor is "unprofessionally shocked" to see such a strange case of "hydrophobia" as Fleete's, and after Strickland's unorthodox exorcizing of the spell, is struck "dumb" at Fleete's inexplicable recovery.⁴⁷ These lacunae of knowledge highlight the blind spots of rational discourse, not only in the paralysis of scientific methodology confronted with the mysterious descent of "civilized" Western persons to the condition of their "others," but also in colonial power's dislocations at the point of its deployment.

Staple Anglo-Indian images, of the physical and mental stresses suffered by the community because of the social conditions peculiar to India, take on a moral and metaphoric force in Kipling's gothic fiction. This force finds dramatic form in psychic and demonic phenomena that produce effects far beyond the simple destructiveness of suicide or murder. In the story "At the End of the Passage" of the same volume, the light of scientific reason and order is represented by the doctor Spurstow, but under-cutting his meticulous treatment of Hummil as a victim of alleged delusions, Kipling introduces indeterminacy, by denying the reader a scientific explanation for Hummil's horrific end. Spurstow is unable to accept the native

45. Kipling, "The Mark of the Beast," p. 251.

46. Kipling, "The Mark of the Beast," p. 256.

47. Kipling, "The Mark of the Beast," p. 257.

servant Chuma's superstitious belief that his master had "descended into the Dark Places" after having "fought with Fear."⁴⁸ Being rational and scientifically-minded, Spurstow takes a photo of the dead man's open eyes but on producing the image later, violently hammers the camera to pieces and tears up the films; he, as well as the text evades the reason for this irrational act except by offering this cryptic epigraph:

There may be Heaven, – there must be Hell,
Meantime, there is our life here. We-ell?⁴⁹

The revealing hesitancy in the last word reflects that colonial uncertainty which inevitably leaves a chasm in these imperial narratives. Is the cause of the breakdown out there, somewhere outside the body and mind of these Anglo-Indians, in the "Dark Places" indigenous to the land where they find themselves trapped, or do its roots lie familiarly so within the colonial self, and in its problematic relationship with its others? That is the question silently raised by all these tales in common through the manner of their telling, thus frequently driven into ideological contradictions through the aesthetic choices made by the author.

However, in some cases the official narrative voice attempts acts of containment to cover up this fault-line by deploying the flexibility of the gothic form that allows the writer to provide rational explanations for the uncanny events. For instance, in "The Return of Imray," while Bahadur Khan, the native servant's belief in the Evil Eye leads to his unrepentant killing of Imray Sahib based on his superstitious logic that, "He said he was a handsome child, and patted him on the head; wherefore my child died,"⁵⁰ Strickland, the English police officer's "Orientalist" cultural understanding leads to his "solution" of the whole mystery of Imray's end in European rationalistic and colonial ideological terms:

Simply and solely through not knowing the nature of the Oriental, and the coincidence of a little seasonal fever...⁵¹

That is Strickland's dismissive yet thoroughly dissatisfying "explanation" from the point of view of the reader for whom the ghostly wanderings of Imray "in the twilight to seek satisfaction" defy all rational codes.⁵²

48. Kipling, "At the End of the Passage," *Life's Handicap*, p. 208.

49. Kipling, "At the End of the Passage," p. 212.

50. Kipling, "The Return of Imray," *Life's Handicap*, p. 274.

51. Kipling, "The Return of Imray," p. 276.

52. Kipling, "The Return of Imray," p. 276.

A resistant reading of such an imperial Gothic story would interpret the anti-teleological nature of such narratives as their refusal to reveal themselves fully to the light of Western reason. Thus, the spectral appearance of Imray in the Western text leaves even the man who knows native ways, Strickland perplexed, unable to fully translate his native knowledge and colonial power into the intuitive psychic “inner” knowledge shared by the Indians and his great deerhound, Tietjens.

Implicit in the imperial text is the hybrid awareness that there exists an inner frontier which resists intrusion by those continuing to represent colonial authority regardless of the many native guises they may adopt. After all, it is only the narratorial authority of the colonially marginal author that may create this overlapping discourse.

In “The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes” too Kipling uses a Gothic form and a more powerful, since more literally rendered, image of the sandpit of the living dead into which Morrowbie Jukes falls; an image that evokes the “colonial terror” suffered by the colonizer in being temporarily exposed to the reversal of hierarchical racial and imperial relations.⁵³ Jukes, a civil engineer is trapped among Indians who had recovered after they had been supposed dead, and now are considered to be neither living nor dead, left to die therefore in that crater by their relatives.

This topographic, and eerily metaphoric, chasm embodies that discursive space that problematizes the ideology of permanence and complete ethnographic knowledge that imperial power relied on, and indicates the possibilities of an “other” area lying beyond its charted operations and its binaries. To protect his received notions of racial-imperial hierarchies, Jukes engages in a futile power-struggle with a Brahmin, Gunga Dass, a current resident of the pit whom he has known formerly. Equally worthless is his attempt at mapping, listing and planning a strategic re-colonization of that territory, and the reversal of political power is complete when he himself recognizes that: “being only a man [not a “heaven-born” now]...I felt hungry and said as much to Gunga Dass, whom I had begun to regard as my natural protector.”⁵⁴ Ironically, despite his erstwhile racial complacency and professional efficiency, he is rescued by his dog-boy, Dunnoo in an anti-climactic and dissatisfying conclusion to this nightmarish tale.

Thematically, all these stories are examples of imperial Gothic and explore situations wherein, the ghostly, the supra-natural or the living-dead act as victimizers of Anglo-Indian officials. While in the grip of this experience these men lose their authority, their sanity, and suffer the colonial nightmare of being swallowed up by the “Powers of Darkness” that Kipling represents as familiar features of this

53. Kipling, “The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes,” *The Phantom Rickshaw*, pp. 35–59.

54. Kipling, “The Strange Ride,” p. 43.

exotic land called India. Using his narratorial self-positioning as an "insider" endowed with a hybrid sensibility, he suggests that the existence of such preternatural phenomena may not be explained by Western rationality. His preference for foregrounding images that resist interpretation and integration within materialist or historical discourses forces the author-function to give up its authority, and opens the texts to potentially subversive meanings.

It is arguable that beneath the surface horror of these stories that demonstrate an overturning of the structures of power from the "normally" recognizable hierarchical pattern of subordinate native and dominant white man lies that master-plot of such reversals, the "Mutiny": that violent historical chapter etched in the memory of the colonizer. Although most of these stories ultimately reinstitute white colonial authority, they also seem to be inscribed by anxieties about a democratized India denying the hierarchic structures of colonial authority. If this anxious knowledge represents a negative allegorical level at which the cultural encounters within these narratives may be read, the other more positive, though still ideologically imperialistic significance that these story events carry, is the importance of intimate familiarity and cultural mediation with the strange and exotic "other;" the value of cultural syncretism.

Exoticism and familiarity in Victor Segalen's travel poetry

Ian Fookes

Just the litany of titles is a marvel. One feels in another world.
What a book whose table of contents opens up such dreams!¹
Remy de Gourmont, 1913

When prominent literary critic Remy de Gourmont received his personal copy of *Stèles* / 古今碑錄 [Gu jin bei lu]² – one of just 81 in a first edition not for public sale – he praised Victor Segalen's collection for its ability to inspire a dream-like vision of China. Written in China between 1911 and 1913, the otherworldly quality of *Stèles* and its ability to transport the reader are hallmarks of a work that is widely recognized as the centrepiece of Segalen's modernist poetics.

It would be tempting to read *Stèles* as an example of “intellectual tourism” or “dilettantism” given the circumstances and style in which *Stèles* was written. However, this paper argues the contrary: When contextualised within Segalen's “aesthetics of diversity,” *Stèles* is clearly rooted in neither “intellectual tourism” nor “dilettantism.” Rather, it reflects the aesthetic project of the *exote* – a type of travelling poet who seeks to live life according to his poetic ideals. Such an aesthetic life, as conceived by Segalen, stands in direct opposition to tourism and dilettantism, thereby offering an alternative, more nuanced and self-aware form of exoticism that Segalen took to be his credo.

1. Marie Dollé and Christian Doumet, *Victor Segalen*, Paris: Editions de l'Herne, 1998, p. 191. Cited from a letter received by Segalen from Remy de Gourmont, dated 8 February, 1913.

« Rien que la litanie des titres de ces poèmes est une merveille. On se sent en un autre monde.
Quel livre que celui dont la table de matières ouvre de tels rêves. »

All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

2. Victor Segalen, *Stèles* / 古今碑錄, translated, edited, and annotated by Timothy Billings and Christopher Bush, with a foreword by Haun Saussy, published in a print edition by Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007.

The intellectual, the dilettante, the amateur, and the *exote*

In his study of the politics underpinning Segalen's poetics, Robert Laliberté discusses how describing the poet as an "intellectual *engagé*" or even an "intellectual" would be anachronistic given that the term "intellectual" only came into usage following the Dreyfus Affair (1894–1906).³ Laliberté's point reminds us that the terms used in current debates concerning cultural appropriation and exoticism have a history that may or may not make them readily applicable to figures from the past.

Segalen wrote and travelled primarily in the period of New Imperialism (1870–1914). However, the full extent of his oeuvre was only "rediscovered" after 1948. Established as a precursor to postcolonial literary theory,⁴ his theorisation of exoticism has since played a role in the rehabilitation and reconsideration of exotic and colonial literature.⁵ This research from the 1980's onwards transformed Segalen into a literary figure that continues to haunt debates concerning the political (in)effectiveness of postcolonial literary critique.⁶

Despite the appearance of anti-colonial gestures in his literary works, Segalen remained embedded in the colonialism of which he was part. His politics remained conservative and his aesthetic concerns predominated. As Marie Dollé neatly concludes in her literary biography of the poet:

To make Segalen a champion of anti-colonialism seems to me a contradiction: he regrets, oh how much, the disastrous influence of the missionaries in Polynesia. He condemns the Western presence in China. Like Levi-Strauss in *Triste Tropiques*, he considers that the levelling of differences, and what he calls entropy, constitute a deadly threat to "Diversity". He shows contempt for the "people" and incontestably sides with the "rulers": Though this does not prevent him from remaining a devoted doctor to the sick, regardless of their origins or colour.⁷

3. Robert Laliberté, *L'Imaginaire Politique de Victor Segalen*, Montréal : Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture, 1989.

4. See Silke Segler-Messner, ed., *Voyages à l'envers: Formes et figures de l'exotisme dans les littératures postcoloniales francophone*, Strasbourg: Presses universitaires de Strasbourg, 2009.

5. Charles Forsdick and David Murphy, *Francophone Postcolonial Studies: A Critical Introduction*, London: Arnold, 2003, p. 54.

6. See Chris Bongie, *Friends and Enemies: The Scribal Politics of Post / colonial culture*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008.

7. Marie Dollé, *Victor Segalen. Le voyageur incertain*, Paris: Éditions Aden, 2008, pp. 343–344. (...) faire de Segalen un champion de l'anti-colonialisme me paraît un contresens : il regrette, ô combien, l'influence désastreuse des missionnaires en Polynésie. Il condamne la présence occidentale en Chine. Comme Lévi-Strauss dans *Triste Tropiques*, il considère

Abdelkhébir Khatibi, in his assessment of Segalen's writings in China, draws a similar conclusion but introduces a key nuance. Although he identifies Segalen with a supercilious orientalist tradition, he also notes how the poet's writings erode the ethnocentrism and self-sufficiency underpinning it. Significantly, Segalen is an ambivalent figure whose writings complicate our understanding of exoticism, colonial literature and orientalism:

In celebrating the landscapes and the sites of China, while identifying himself with Him (the celestial Emperor) he looks down on the people. [...] this exote is an ethno-centrist, an atavistic aristocrat, who makes a return to familiar values and prejudices, and the same tradition of misrecognition and denigration. However, it is a return that one way or another destabilizes that ethnocentrism and that self-sufficient image.⁸

Ambivalence thus remains inseparable from Segalen's travels and his writings, much in the same way as lingering controversy has become a permanent feature of the legacy of Paul Gauguin. The ambivalence associated with both Segalen and Gauguin is no mere coincidence. Historically, Segalen narrowly missed meeting the painter when stationed in French Polynesia from 1902–1903. He subsequently developed his understanding of Gauguin through his friendship with Georges Daniel de Monfried, publishing several articles in the *Mercur de France* on the painter. Gauguin became a mythical figure for Segalen, an exemplar who would become the basis for Segalen's novel *Le Maître-du-Jour*, an unfinished epic reimagining Gauguin as a sublime hero.⁹

In her assessment of the Gauguin's legacy, Maohi poet Chantal Spitz identifies Segalen with Gauguin and indicts them both for effacing her heritage in a colonial whitewash:

que le nivellement, et ce qu'il appelle l'entropie, constituent une menace mortelle pour la « Diversité ». Mais il méprise le « peuple », et se range incontestablement du côté des « chefs ». Ce qui ne l'empêche pas de rester médecin dévoué à ses malades, quelle que soit leur origine ou leur couleur. »

8. Abdelkébir Khatibi, *Figures de l'étranger dans la littérature française : Victor Segalen, Jean Genet, Claude Ollier, Marguerite Duras*, Paris: Denoël, 1987, pp. 52.

« Tout en célébrant les paysages et les sites de la Chine, tout en s'identifiant à Lui (l'Empereur céleste), il méprise ce peuple. ...cet exote est un ethnocentriste, un aristocrate atavique et qui fait retour sur lui-même dans le même cercle de valeurs et de préjugés, la même tradition de méconnaissance et de la dénégation. Cependant, c'est là un retour qui, d'une manière ou d'une autre, déstabilise cet ethnocentrisme et cette image d'autosuffisance. »

9. V. Segalen *Le Maître-du-Jour*, roman inachevé, écrit en 1907–1908, publié dans les *Œuvres complètes [volume 1]* / édition établie et présentée par Henry Bouillier, Paris : Rob Laffont, 1995.

Paul Gauguin. This name with the colonially correct litany of Bougainville Loti Melville Segalen effaced the names of our ancestors chanted by each knot of our *aufau fetii* disqualified today¹⁰

For Spitz, the association of Gauguin and Segalen is derived from both the historical connection and the posthumous influence their respective works have played in shaping the image of Tahitian culture. Importantly, however, in both Khatibi's and Spitz's assessments of Segalen, the figure of an ambivalent and exiled poet or artist remains central.

Inseparable from his association with French colonialism in the Pacific, Gauguin is an archetypal modernist anti-hero: a self-sufficient individual devoted to painting, but an exiled and tormented figure moving searchingly through the landscape. Gauguin is neither an "intellectual" nor a "dilettante" and Segalen admired him for it. Segalen, unlike Gauguin, is more erudite in his approach to Maohi and Chinese cultures, but his dedication to his oeuvre and his avant-garde idealism, which inspires the drive to seek an elsewhere, signal an attitude that belongs to what Segalen called the *exote*. For this reason, Segalen considered Gauguin to be an exemplary figure who is involved, through the realization of his oeuvre, in a more complex relation to Otherness, Self and Diversity (*le divers*).

According to the *Larousse nouveau dictionnaire étymologique*, the term "dilettante" came into French around the middle of the 18th century as a reference to amateur Italian music lovers. The notion of "dilettantism in the 19th century" is also included in the reference, thereby associating the intellectual tourist or dilettante with the figure of the "amateur" and its corollary the "specialist," "expert," or "professional." The term "amateur" derived from the Latin "*amas*" to love, has its own equivocal history, which provides us with a conceptual frame to situate *Stèles* and the poet Segalen himself.

Whilst considering whether Segalen could be considered a "dilettante" by today's standards, it is useful to begin by situating the poet within his own historical context, and in relation to the sense of this term "amateur" as it applied when Segalen was travelling and writing in China during the period of New Imperialism (1880–1914).

In his study of the relationship between science and literature, Vincent Debaene underlines the importance of this period. He points out that the end of the 19th century marks the split between a period in which writers whose concerns were

10. Chantal Spitz, « Héritage et confrontation » Speech given on 6 march 2003. Accessed 2 October 2017. URL: http://www.lehman.cuny.edu/ile.en.ile/paroles/spitz_gauguin.html

« Paul Gauguin. Ce nom avec la litanie colonialement correcte des Bougainville Loti Melville Segalen effacé le nom de nos ancêtres scandé par chacun des nœuds de nos aufau fetii aujourd'hui disqualifiés. »

both scientific and literary were composed within singular composite works and one in which such scientific and literary elements are divided into distinct methodologically determined texts.¹¹

For Debaene, this split gave rise to the phenomenon of the "*deuxième livre*," a kind of literary text produced in parallel to the official reports of ethnographic and anthropological missions. These literary works were characterised by any type of language defined by its disqualification from scientific discourse. In this intellectual climate at the beginning of the 20th century, ethnologists such as Michel Leiris felt compelled to write their "*deuxième livre*" as the language of the scientific report was judged insufficient to adequately capture the full extent of their experiences and/or the supposed object of their mission, the "essence" of the culture they were studying.

The 20th century phenomenon of the *deuxième livre* was indeed the symptom of a deep rupture which had occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century, and which was consolidated and formalized in the 1920's and 1930's. This process can also be traced through the politics surrounding the museum collections housed in Paris between the *Louvre*, the *Trocadero*, and the *Musée de l'Homme*. The institutional politics surrounding the collections and their hierarchical relation to one another had a direct effect on the public and professional perception and appreciation of documents, objects, and representations of other cultures, which had been provided for the past two centuries by missionaries, travellers, writers and artists alike. These figures, henceforth considered to be "amateurs" and therefore, unreliable, found themselves increasingly alienated from the serious business of ethnology, anthropology and sociology which were marked by positivism.

19th century exotic and colonial literature was also repudiated by these sciences for their inaccuracies, lack of method, and the quality of their predominantly female readership. Consequently, the collections and accounts of other cultures, which had previously been provided by missionaries and travellers, poets and painters, were marginalised: steadily dismissed as the work of "amateurs" in need of replacement by more methodologically sound accounts.

As a naval doctor from Brittany, Victor Segalen fell into this category of "amateur" writer. His articles, published in the *Mercure de France*, and his first novel, *Les Immémoriaux* (1907), took the effects of evangelisation on Polynesian culture as a general theme, and were largely met with indifference. As Marie Dollé has noted, Segalen was not part of literary circles in Paris, but was an "amateur" related instead to an alternative network of writers and travellers related through the navy. Prominent literary figures such as Julien Viaud (Pierre Loti), Charles Bargone (Claude Farrère) and Louis Laloy were, like Segalen, officers in a navy which at that

11. Vincent Debaene, *L'Adieu au voyage. L'ethnologie française entre science et littérature*, Paris: Gallimard, 2010.

time constituted a vibrant intellectual milieu. As suggested by pioneering scholars of Segalen's work, Henry Bouillier and Gilles Manceron,¹² this network led Segalen to the Far East, brought him into contact with Paul Claudel, and permitted him to undertake archaeological missions in China.

Our analysis suggests that Segalen was neither an intellectual nor an ethnologist. Though he was trained as an archaeologist, his methods date from an early period of the discipline: Segalen belonged to the end of the long 19th century and was associated with the figure of the amateur, the collector, the missionary and the traveller. His writings belong to a time when scientific and literary interests combined the documentary and the poetic in a way that was systematically phased out following the development of modern universities, museums and other institutions. Thus, from the perspective of the modern university, Segalen could be circumstantially classed as a "dilettante" – understood as a derisive term akin to amateur. However, the story does not end there.

This section has sketched an epistemological shift that devalues precisely the ideals that Segalen embraced. The amateur, the traveller, the collector, and the painter – were figures that inform his understanding of the *exote*, who stands in opposition to the colonial, the professional, and the well-trained expert. For this reason, an analysis of *Stèles* is required to show that Segalen's use of Chinese culture in his poetics goes beyond the superficiality implied by the term "dilettantism".

Stèles / 古今碑錄 [Gu jin bei lu]

Within Segalen's poetic, literary, and archaeological writings *Stèles* is the poet's *chef d'œuvre*. Significantly, as noted by critics in the latter part of the 20th century, such as Henry Bouillier,¹³ and Charles Forsdick,¹⁴ it marks a decisive transition in the evolution of Segalen's oeuvre.

Segalen was a naval doctor whose position enabled him to travel extensively. His first novel, *Les Immémoriaux* (1907) reflects his posting in French Polynesia between 1902 and 1903, and sets the tone for the poet's lifelong engagement with exoticism. As Jennifer Yee has noted, the novel's polyphonic and shifting narrative

12. Gilles Manceron, *Segalen*, Paris: J.-C. Lattès, 1991, pp. 257–268. Also, Henri Bouillier, « Le Détour de la Chine », *Regards, Espaces, Signes*, ed. Eliane Formentelli, Paris: L'Asiathèque, 1978, pp. 95–114.

13. See Henri Bouillier, *Victor Segalen*, Paris: Mercure de France, 1961.

14. See Charles Forsdick, *Victor Segalen and the Aesthetics of Diversity: Journeys between Cultures*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000; Charles Forsdick, and David Murphy, *Francophone Postcolonial Studies: A Critical Introduction*, London: Arnold, 2003.

perspective actively subverts exotic clichés of the Pacific.¹⁵ An extended stay in Ceylon during his return to France from Tahiti enabled Segalen to become acquainted with Hinduism and Buddhism, which subsequently inspired *Siddhârtha* (1978), a libretto presented to Debussy that would eventually lead to collaboration on a different theme; Debussy proposed the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, which ultimately became the libretto, *Orphée-Roi* (1921).

In 1908, having studied Chinese under Arnold Vissière at the *École des langues orientales vivantes* while attending Edouard Chavannes' lectures in archaeology at the *Collège de France*, Segalen passed the requisite exam to be posted as a trainee naval interpreter in Beijing from 1909 to 1911. This training provided him with the base from which he would become a pioneering figure in the golden age of French archaeology in China. Shortly after his arrival, he undertook an inland journey across Western China with Augusto Gilbert de Voisins, before managing to prolong his sojourn by teaching at the Imperial College of Medicine in Tientsin until 1913. The following year Segalen undertook an archaeological mission with Gilbert de Voisins and Jean Lartigue that extended Chavannes' work on statuary in China; research that would eventually inform his epic study *Chine, La Grande Statuaire*. As the sinologist Vadime Essileef has noted and Philippe Postel has more recently confirmed, this work remains a point of reference in sinology from the period.¹⁶ Segalen's monumental account reconstructs the history of statuary in China. It remains, however, a literary text relying on the Segalen's poetic imagination and lyricism, as much as his knowledge of Chinese history and his research conducted in the field. In this regard, *Chine, La Grande Statuaire* provides a synthetic view of the history of China traced through its statuary in a rigorously described work that bridges the gap between the literary and the scientific.

Segalen's second novel, *René Leys* (1922), is set in the months prior to the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911.¹⁷ The story recalls his own experiences, but ironically presents a version of himself as a mediocre novelist aspiring to write a *roman chinois*. *René Leys* anticipates the *nouveau roman* by structuring itself around its own impossibility. Composed of the "notes" for the protagonist's *roman chinois* – the one that he had realized he would never be able to write –, the text explores the friendship with a local insider that led to Segalen's own realizations about exoticism and writing on China.

15. See Jennifer Yee, *Exotic Subversions in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Leeds, England: Legenda; London: In association with Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2008.

16. Philippe Postel, *Victor Segalen et la statuaire chinoise. Archéologie poétique*, Paris: Honoré Champion, 2001.

17. Segalen, *René Leys*, New York: New York Review Books, 1974, first published 1922.

Already convinced that hackneyed clichés of the East had lost all interest as representations prior to his arrival in China, when faced with the advent of republic in 1912, Segalen understood that not only was a new and radical form of exoticism necessary, but the sense of writing a *roman chinois* was increasingly in doubt. The auto-fiction of René Leys thus sets the stage for *Le Fils du Ciel* (1978): Segalen's actual *roman chinois*, in which he attempts to reinvent the exotic sub-genre.

Written in parallel with René Leys and other experimental texts, *Le Fils du Ciel* required research for its intricate construction of numerous political and contextual references relating to the reign of Emperor Guangxu (1875–1908).¹⁸ The radical narrative form, reified prose, erudite intertextuality and highly contextualized story-telling, highlight how *Le Fils du Ciel* is an attempt to revolutionize the *roman chinois*. Segalen believed that the manuscript would become his *chef d'œuvre*, but his novels and stories gathered under the title *Imaginaires*, came to represent a second stage in his aesthetics. That is, dissatisfaction with the genre of the novel and travel writing generally shifted Segalen's interests away from narrative towards allegorical poetry. He eventually left *Le Fils du Ciel* aside for other more pressing and radical projects, most notably, *Stèles* (1912), *Odes* (1926), and *Peintures* (1916).

In fact, within months of his arrival in China, Segalen had already noted his disdain for contemporary writing on China in his journal *Briques et Tuiles* (22 January 1910):

BOOKS ON CHINA

"By which tarantula have they been bitten? "The Chinese soul"! "China in hand", "The Whole of China in three hundred pages"... Let's report these titles in Europe or France and savour just how ridiculous they are! Wisdom of a recluse and the treatises of school teachers [...]

But no! It is a matter of making one see. It's about saying, not what I think of the Chinese, – (Truth be told, I think nothing at all of them) – but what I imagine of themselves; and not in the contrived and dreary form of a "documentary" book, but in the vivid and real form, above all reality, of the work of art.¹⁹

18. Segalen, *Le Fils du Ciel*, Paris: GF Flammarion, 1985.

19. Segalen, *Œuvres complètes I*, ed. Henri Bouillier, Vol. 1, Paris: Robert Laffont, 1995, pp. 941.

« LE LIVRE SUR LA CHINE

De quelle tarentule sont-ils donc piqués! « L'âme chinoise » ! « La Chine en main » ; « Toute la Chine en trois cents pages » ... Reportons ces titres en Europe, à la France, et savourons leur ridicule précis! Esprit de Reclus et traité d'instituteurs! [...] « Mais non! Il s'agit de faire voir. Il s'agit non point de dire ce que je pense, des Chinois, – (je n'en pense à vrai dire rien du tout) – mais ce que j'imagine d'eux-mêmes; et non point sous le simifalot d'un livre « documentaire » mais sous la forme vive et réelle, au-delà de toute réalité, de l'œuvre d'art. Bricks and Tiles, Hankou 22 January 1910 »

This unequivocal rejection of writing a journalistic account of China affirms Segalen's adoption of an aesthetics that subordinates experience to the service of Art, highlighting the poet's rejection of the implicit assumptions that travel writers are committed to representing their journey or that exoticism essentially involves the representation of diverse lands, peoples and customs. This rejection of mimesis in favour of allegory foreshadows the third stage in Segalen's "aesthetics of diversity," in which the poet subordinates narrative to the poetic exploration of allegory in works that produce the effect of an encounter with "diversity," a form of radical alterity that Segalen named, *le Divers*.

A year after writing the above-cited entry in *Briques et Tuiles*, Segalen reaffirmed his commitment to the creation of his poetic vision in a letter (6 January 1911) to Debussy:

Fundamentally, it is neither Europe nor China that I came looking for here; but a vision of China that I have grasped and of which am taking full advantage.²⁰

Stèles embodies this modernist vision through its espousal of allegory and metaphor as preferable to description and documentation. Through the creation of a "Middle-Empire" or *Empire du Milieu*, Segalen initiates a shifting relationship between imperial China and his self. As Timothy Billings and Christopher Bush note in their introduction to the English translation of *Stèles*:

We leave open the question of whether China serves as a metaphor for Segalen's self, or whether the problematic of the Self provides a vocabulary for the encounter with China. Readers will decide for themselves in which direction this transfer is taking place at any given moment and where the shuttling comes to rest, or if it does.²¹

Segalen constructs a poetic vision of China on the material and textual foundations of its dynastic predecessors; the opening stele-poem, "*Sans marque de règne*" – translated as "Without Reign Mark," – depicts an impossible dynasty that exists outside of space and time. Segalen's allegory between China as middle kingdom and China as metaphorical realm of the poet's soul thus allows him to succeed to the "non-position" resulting from the advent of republican China. This bold appropriation is possible due to the poetic quality of Segalen's "dynasty without ascension," in which we must imagine an Emperor who is heir to a throne that only exists as part of a discontinued line of succession.

20. Segalen, *Correspondance I 1893–1912*, Vol. 1, Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2004, pp. 1147.

« Au fond, ce n'est ni l'Europe ni la Chine que je suis venu chercher ici, mais une vision de la Chine. Celle-là, je la tiens et j'y mords à pleines dents. »

21. Timothy Billings and Christopher Bush, "Introduction" in *Stèles* / 古今碑錄 [Gu jin bei lu], Trans. p. 11.

Moreover, by rendering the relationship between signifier and signified unstable, allegory effectively dashes any hope readers may have had of discovering China through Segalen's textual rendering of his experience of it. On the contrary, *Stèles* transports the reader into Segalen's "vision of China" characterized by an unnamed dynasty, where the allegory of the self can only offer oblique glimpses of the poet's innermost realm. In this respect, *Stèles* fulfills Segalen's own criteria for a great work of Art, which he had developed in his notes for an essay on exoticism four years earlier in anticipation of his first voyage to China:

And on the scale of degrees of artifice, of the arts, isn't there a higher level, to say, not crudely one's vision, but by an instantaneous and constant transfer, the echo of one's presence?²²

The power of the stele-poems' titles to conjure a dream-like world is testimony to the effect desired by Segalen's deployment of allegory. Indeed, Remy de Gourmont uses his sense of being in another world as a compliment, and for Segalen, it would have been of the highest order. Poetry transports the reader; not to a representation of a distant country, but to another realm: a poetic vision that affords glimpses into the poet's soul.

The collection of poems is arranged according to an appropriated version of the four directions in Chinese cosmology. Segalen adds a fifth direction, that of the centre, and a section for stele-poems as if encountered "by the wayside." That Segalen explains the history of the stele and the orientation of his stele-poems in a preface to the text neatly illustrates the extent to which the poet positions *Stèles* in close proximity to erudite orientalist scholarship on one hand, and as a counterpoint to poems inspired by visions of Cathay and adorned with *chinoiserie* on the other.

The originality of this appropriation lies most evidently in the identification of each direction with a theme – south facing / imperial decrees, north facing / friendship, oriented / love, occidented / war & heroism, by the wayside / other, centre / Self-Emperor – each of which facilitating the use of a different voices from alternating and shifting perspectives. The polyphonic nature of the poems, the shifting perspectives and the grafting of elements from classical Chinese scholarship, intertextual references to historical figures, dynasties and folk wisdom all combine to create an erudite and lapidary form of prose that Christian Doumet has shown exists at the collision point between eternity preserved in stone and the fleeting instant of writing.²³

22. Segalen, *Œuvres complètes I*, p. 747.

« Et dans l'échelle, par degrés d'artifices, des arts, n'est-ce pas un cran plus haut, de dire crûment sa vision, mais par un transfert instantané, constant, l'écho de sa présence. »

23. See Christian Doumet, *Stèles de Segalen. Le rituel du livre*, Paris: Hachette, 1992, pp. 81–96.

This prose is deceptive, however, as certain poems interpolate readers who are addressed directly. Indeed, as evidenced by “To the One” (*A Celui-là*), certain stele-poems operate as coded communication for intimate friends such as Augusto Gilbert de Voisins, Jean Lartigue, and his wife, Yvonne. Analysis of the correspondence suggests they are figures who are part of a wider allegory. Thus, while the poems may appear to the uninitiated as erudite constructions of poetic and historical interest, the promulgations of the “Emperor” can speak directly to those within Segalen's circle. In effect, the poet has carefully grafted his imaginary onto that of imperial China to create his personal vision, which is at once deeply attentive to intertextual detail and documentation, liberated from the burden of representation of any recognizable China, and doubling as a form of coded communication among his friends. Consequently, Segalen's relationship to China becomes at once distant and textual, intimate and contextual.

Segalen's relationship to his Chinese sources

This complex relationship to Chinese culture and Segalen's experiences in China itself, prompted Henry Bouillier to suggest that China serves as a “detour” by which the poet discovered the forms necessary for the creation of his poetic vision.²⁴ Described as an overstatement by other critics, Bouillier's suggestion points to a deeper issue of more contemporary relevance: Given that Segalen openly assumes the degree and complexity of his appropriation of Chinese imperial culture, and accepts the ambivalence that it creates, *Stèles* forces readers to carefully consider the significance of placing one's experiences at the service of an aesthetic ideal, and the role of cultural appropriation in the context of such an aesthetic project. Significantly, Segalen's ambivalent relationship to China has been both challenged by critics such as Simon Leys,²⁵ and celebrated by poets such as François Cheng.²⁶

When discussing Segalen's relationship to China, Leys criticizes Segalen's aesthetic preoccupations, contrasting his “vision of China” with sinologist Joseph Needham or intrepid traveller and journalist George Morrison.²⁷ This comparison is instructive. Leys suggests that Segalen ought to have related to China as either a modern sinologist, founding author of the *Encyclopedia of China*, or a journalist

24. See Henri Bouillier, « Le Détour de la Chine », pp. 95–114.

25. Simon Leys, *Le Studio d'inutilité*, Paris : Flammarion, 2012.

26. François Cheng, *L'un vers l'autre*, Paris : Albin Michel, 2008.

27. Leys, *Le Studio*, pp. 129–136.

who walked across China dressed as a missionary, that is, a gregarious Australian with a dry sense of humour.

This interest in China's imperial past and his indifference to the Chinese people gives the impression that Segalen was the typical "intellectual tourist," an orientalist preoccupied with scholarly interests who had little time for the local people or intellectuals where he travelled. Indeed, during his stay in Beijing and Tien-tsin between 1910 and 1914, Segalen inhabited a world of expats and foreigners. With respect to his novel *René Leys*, Leys remarks that it is a miraculous and surprising account of his sojourn, one that accidentally reveals the essence of Segalen's relationship to China. Leys disparagingly remarks that Segalen decided that China should be a source of alterity and he made every effort to keep it that way. In fact, according to Leys, Segalen had very little to do with Chinese culture at all:

Segalen, [...] in setting out with the conviction that China was "impenetrable," and that it ought to remain so, condemned himself to a sad impasse.²⁸

By contrast, François Cheng has championed Segalen's deep understanding of classical Chinese culture describing how – as a political exile in Paris – reading Segalen's lyrical description of descending the Huang-ho river, transported him back to his homeland.²⁹ Cheng's praise of Segalen's relationship to China's landscapes, religions and a certain imperial China counters Simon Leys' claim that Segalen had little or no understanding of Chinese culture. On the contrary, Cheng argues that Segalen had a deep understanding of the imperial culture that he translated into his poetics.

Having briefly touched on issues surrounding Segalen's relationship to his Chinese sources, we have suggested that Segalen's engagement with Chinese culture is profoundly influenced by the poet's aesthetics. This engagement does not preclude a profound relationship with the culture and the country. However, as will be discussed in the final part of this paper, it is, in fact, a necessary part of the exote's mode of travel. The argument presented is that Segalen's *exotes* are involved in a process that precludes them from being labelled as tourists or dilettantes in virtue of their pursuit of *le Divers*.

28. Leys, *Le Studio*, p. 130. « Segalen, [...] partant de la conviction que la Chine était « impénétrable » et qu'il était souhaitable qu'elle le demurât, se condamnait d'avance à une triste impasse. »

29. Cheng, *L'un vers l'autre*, pp. 59–68.

The *exote* and *le Divers*

Segalen developed his conception of the *exote* throughout his adult life, keeping notes in his papers for an essay on exoticism. These notes, partially published as *Essai sur l'Exotisme* in 1955 and 1978, enable us to track the evolution of his conception from an inherent quality of individuals to an idealized figure of the Artist.

In 1902, Segalen considers *exotes* simply as “born-travellers”:

That among us in the world are “born travellers” or *exotes*. Those who recognise, by the cold betrayal or dryness of phrases and words, these unforgettable bursts prompted by moments such as this: the moment of exoticism.³⁰

However, this conception develops into an ideal that Segalen constructs through his figuring of the poet in his writing, and the development of his aesthetics of diversity, his understanding of *le Divers*. That is, in parallel to his conceptualisation of the *exote*, Segalen's reflection on the “moment of exoticism” develops from a sensation of otherness to an encounter with alterity. Whereas “born travellers” seek out sensations of difference rooted in diversity as is plainly understood, “diversity” eventually takes on a new meaning for Segalen who theorises on the nature of such exotic encounters in his notes for an essay on exoticism.

For Segalen, *le Divers* is understood as that which emerges from an encounter with otherness that initially engenders an acute sense of connection, but which is then interrupted by the recognition of alterity. *Le Divers* exists as alterity within the Other and arises from the irreconcilable distance that exists between the Other and oneself. In order for this sense of distance to occur, however, the *exote* must have a strong sense of identity:

Exoticism is therefore not the kaleidoscopic state of the tourist and mediocre spectator, but the lively and curious reaction to the shock of a strong individuality against an objectivity, of which it perceives and savours the distance.³¹

30. « Or, il y a parmi le monde, des voyageurs-nés ; des *exotes*. Ceux-là reconnaîtront, sous la trahison froide ou sèche des phrases et des mots, ces inoubliables sursauts donnés par des moments tels que j'ai dit : le moment d'Exotisme. », in Segalen, *Œuvres complètes I*, p. 750. « Or, il y a parmi le monde, des voyageurs-nés ; des *exotes*. Ceux-là reconnaîtront, sous la trahison froide ou sèche des phrases et des mots, ces inoubliables sursauts donnés par des moments tels que j'ai dit : le moment d'Exotisme. »

31. « L'exotisme n'est donc pas cet état kaléidoscopique du touriste et du médiocre spectateur, mais la réaction vive et curieuses au choc d'une individualité forte contre une objectivité dont elle perçoit et déguste la distance. », in Segalen, *Œuvres complètes I*, pp. 750–751.

This process of encounter and withdrawal, connection and alienation is not only enjoyable for the *exote*, but serves as a source of rejuvenation. This experience leads to a greater sensitivity to *le Divers*, understood as the world perceived in its diversity. Such an intensified experience of the world is renewed by encounters with diversity. Accordingly, the *exote* cannot countenance adaptation or assimilation, but must seek the preservation and savouring of differences, to the point that he recognises a fundamental alterity within each individual and, by extension, between genders, societies and cultures:

Exoticism is therefore not an adaptation, nor the perfect understanding of an outside of one's self that one grasps within oneself, but the acute perception of an eternal impenetrability.³²

For Segalen, then, *le Divers* becomes the source of revitalising energy and vitality that drives the *exote* to the pursuit of such encounters.

Significantly, the encounter with *le Divers* is not limited to the geographical world, but is central to an appreciation of works of art that provide an encounter with another artist's vision. A key dimension of the life of the *exote* is therefore the encounter with and appropriation of otherness for the creation of their artistic vision, which, for Segalen, asserts the fundamental right on the part of *exotes* to autonomy vis-à-vis their sources:

It might be that one of the characteristics of the *exote* is to be free, or being free vis-à-vis the object that he describes, at least in this final phase when he has withdrawn from it.³³

Segalen's aesthetics enshrines the freedom of *exotes* to appropriate all aspects of their experience, and in so doing establishes the pre-eminence of the artist's vision over the documentation of the real. This aesthetic position informs Segalen's indifference towards documentary accounts, impressionistic travel writing, modern archaeological or ethnographic studies, and popular forms of exoticism, such as the *roman chinois*. It also underpins his poetic and literary œuvre, understood by Segalen as an antidote to the aforementioned genres.

Segalen adopts an aesthetic position in China that, in the wake of Mallarmé, abandons any social obligation to represent the country where he spent nearly five

32. « L'Exotisme n'est donc pas une adaptation ; il n'est donc pas, non plus, la compréhension parfaite d'un hors soi-même qu'on étreindrait en soi, mais la perception aiguë et immédiate d'une incompréhensibilité éternelle. » in Segalen, *Œuvres complètes I*, p. 751.

33. « Il se peut qu'un des caractères de l'Exote soit la liberté, soit d'être libre vis-à-vis de l'objet qu'il décrit ou ressent, du moins dans cette phase finale, quand il s'en est retiré. » in Segalen, *Œuvres complètes I*, p. 758.

years of his life: this poetic stance consciously situates Segalen in opposition to the modern sinologist and archaeologist, the travel-writer and the journalist. Segalen explicitly rejected the attitude adopted by those advocated by Leys in favour of his own aesthetic stance. In the same gesture, Segalen rejects travellers' impressions and helpful guides to the essence of China and its people.

His is an intensely personal "vision of China," freighted in the appropriation of Imperial Chinese culture, which turns on an allegory between the "Middle Kingdom" of China and a conception of his self as "middle kingdom." The significance of Segalen's stance is that it affirms the aesthetic value of diversity and the primacy of the poetic over the figurative.

Without question, Segalen's stance is an elitist position that regrets the fall of the Qing dynasty and advent of the Republic of China, and although Segalen considers the cult of the emperor to be no more than a beautiful fiction, he also considered the implementation of a modern nation state in China to constitute the impoverishment of the world's imaginary. Republican China was the symptom of entropic forces that would eventually lead to a homogenous world marked by colonial institutions, democracy and popular fiction. In his notes in 1917, Segalen writes that the greatest danger to the earth is entropic forces and that it is up to poets to lead the fight against them:

Diversity is decreasing. That is the greatest danger on earth. It's therefore against this decline that one must struggle, fight, and die perhaps, with beauty.³⁴

The mass market of a globalized system of Western institutions lacking in the socio-cultural distances that underpin diversity within and without the world's culture is Segalen's pessimistic view of the future. Inequality and religious tolerance are valued by Segalen, who saw in such elements of society, the possibility of an encounter with different ways of being in the world. The shock of the encounter with this type of diversity was for some, according to Segalen, the possibility of an encounter with *le Divers*, a moment in which the level of being is surpassed by an encounter with "being" itself. In this regard, Segalen's aesthetic of diversity is a metaphysical stance in relation to the world, a relation that informs an art of living based on the pursuit of an encounter with *le Divers*. This art of living, accessible to the *exote* – understood as those able to appreciate the shock of *le Divers* – is, in fact, a quest that entails the creation of an œuvre that translates the *exote's* vision of the world.

In this precise sense, then, Segalen's "vision of China" forms part of his quest to live as an *exote*, to adopt an aesthetic stance that intensifies his existence and leads to an exaltation in the present. It is a quest conceived of for travelling-poets capable

34. « Le Divers décroît. Là est le grand danger terrestre. C'est donc contre cette déchéance qu'il faut lutter, se battre, mourir peut-être avec beauté. », in Segalen, *Œuvres complètes I*, p. 775.

of savouring the world in its diversity. Thus, when Segalen traverses China taking note of the landscape and the imperial past, his projects for stories, novels, and poems multiplied with each step along the way. For the *exote*, travel is a revitalising experience rivalled only by the process of realising one's vision in one's work. It is in light of this quest, then, that we make the claim that Segalen was never a tourist in China, intellectual or otherwise, as he was focused on the creation of his oeuvre, to the extent that he would sacrifice his closest relations in order to achieve it.

In 1917 in Shanghai, Segalen left China for the last time. In a note, entitled "*Imago Mundi*", the poet describes his attempt to embody the *exote*:

If I place Exoticism at the centre of my vision of the world, if I please myself in seeking it, exalting it, fabricating it where I do not find it, pointing it out to those dignified enough to see it, – to those who are worthy and do not suspect it, it is not only as a resort to aesthetics, but as the fundamental law of sensation, of the exaltation in feeling, and therefore living.³⁵

This credo belongs to neither the "intellectual tourist" nor the "dilettante", but to a travelling poet who understood himself to be an *exote*.

35. « Si je place l'Exotisme au centre de ma vision du monde, si je me complais à le chercher, à l'exalter, à le fabriquer lorsque je ne le trouve pas ; à l'indiquer à ceux qui en sont dignes et l'épient – à ceux qui en sont dignes et ne le soupçonnaient pas – ce n'est point comme unique ressort d'esthétique, mais comme la Loi fondamentale de l'Intensité de la Sensation, de l'exaltation du Sentir, donc de vivre. » in Segalen, *Œuvres complètes I*, p. 774.

Cambodia through Western eyes

The exotic, the familiar, and the universal

Robert Horne

In this essay, I examine literature, mainly in novel form, written about or set in Cambodia in the last hundred years. The essential questions which I address are: does this location exist simply as an exotic background for the adventures of European protagonists; to what extent are Khmer people explored as characters or are they treated as sidekicks, the ingenuous counterpoint to familiar Western hero types; and to what extent is there an attempt to engage on a realistic level with the universal, i.e. with cultural and political themes of real impact to the lives of Cambodian people? To address these questions I examine four important French colonial novels which for various purposes present the rural idyll of Khmer culture as simple and unspoiled, before briefly explaining the extreme image change and the unwanted international notoriety which Cambodia sustained in the Khmer Rouge years of the 1970s. This image reversal to darkness and crime has seen writing markets saturated from the 1980s with exploitative genre literature, much of it featuring hard-boiled European central characters; it is only in the last five years that new voices have begun to examine important issues in Cambodian society.

Discussions have occurred over the last forty years regarding the agenda of Western writers when they address themselves to places like Cambodia. Edward Said placed fiction writers within an Orientalist movement which he claimed would place deliberate limits on Asian environments, creating a false and limited consistency which does not correspond with the “real” Orient. Many of the writers I discuss, whether knowingly or unconsciously, do limit their exotic characters; but for Said this problem of knowledge and power is not a reflection of the writers’ understanding of their subjects, but is more organised than that, close to a conspiracy. In his understanding, fiction writers exploit familiar elitist notions in what he calls “an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control.”¹

1. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Random House, 1978, p. 36.

But Said does, unlike Michel Foucault, believe that some writers can place a “determining imprint” upon a collective body of texts which are otherwise inter-textually conservative, almost pre-determined in bias.² I contend here that fiction writers can embrace their subject with open, appreciative enthusiasms. I discuss the extent to which it is possible for Westerners to write from an intellectually disinterested position, or in other cases even to openly love their exotic subjects.

A prominent critic of Said, Ibn Warraq, has argued that “the golden thread running through Western civilization is rationalism,”³ that writers taking up Asian subjects are more likely to be motivated by a genuine desire to advance knowledge, and that reductionists who accept only the existence of agendas of power (meaning Said, clearly) have difficulty understanding the notion of disinterested intellectual enquiry.⁴

While some of Said’s criticisms may seem unnecessarily binary and all-inclusively vague at a glance, it is reasonable to note his warning that the writer “comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second.”⁵ The production of the exotic within the familiar is in many texts derived from the clear cultural context of the writer. In the opposition of the exotic and the familiar, writers will always be confined by another constraining cultural force, one which Said and Warraq barely consider: publishers and markets. Perhaps this is the extra dimension of intertextuality to what Said called, “the pressures of conventions, predecessors, and rhetorical styles (which) limit ... the principle of ‘creativity.’”⁶

French colonial era

The early part of the twentieth century saw an increase in the level of French colonial interest in its fifty year old Cambodian possession. Scholars began to research folk tales and to factor an awareness of the Theravada Buddhist spirit world into its discussions of Cambodian culture.⁷ A new kind of educated, sympathetic

2. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 23.

3. Ibn Warraq, *Defending The West: A Critique of Edward Said’s Orientalism*, New York: Prometheus Books, 2007, p. 38.

4. Warraq, *Defending The West*, p. 38.

5. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 11.

6. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 13.

7. Courtney Work, “The Persistent Presence of Cambodian Spirits: Contemporary Knowledge Production in Cambodia”, *The Handbook of Contemporary Cambodia*, eds. Catherine Brickell and Simon Springer, Oxford: Routledge Handbooks, 2016.

colonialist began to appear among the ranks of the conservative old school. When Roland Meyer arrived in Cambodia in 1909 at the age of almost twenty he immediately immersed himself in the culture of the Khmer people. His genuine personal fascination and hours of private study resulted in the publication of the first ever book of Khmer language for francophones, in 1912.⁸ By the time he wrote his extraordinary 180,000 word novel *Saramani, Danseuse Khmèr* (1919) Meyer had moved from the French quarter in Phnom Penh to take up residence with the indigenous people. His novel may reflect benchmark themes often encountered in colonial novels,⁹ but it is written from extensive personal experience and provides cascades of detail on Cambodian life at all levels. Meyer examines capitalistic greed, royal decadence and colonial lust, and exposes the appalling living conditions of royal dancers along the way. The impact of this novel on the social world of Phnom Penh was profound, and Meyer was transferred away, to Vientiane, in a move which could not have been beneficial to his career. Meyer is hardly a Saidian conspirator; he risked and lost a great deal to tell his story. However, the character of Saramani herself remains the simple girl unspoiled by civilization, the eternally exotic emblematic Cambodian *apsara* reinvented.

Some of Meyer's themes are taken up in two later novels by his friend George Groslier. One of the first Frenchmen born in Cambodia, in 1887, Groslier was taken to France as a small boy, but the idea of his birthplace remained strong within him. By the time of his return at the age of twenty three he was already a trained artist with successful studies at the Parisian École Beaux Arts. By the time he wrote *The Road of the Strong* in 1926, forty seven of his articles on archaeology and Cambodian arts had already been published in reputable journals, he was a central official figure in the establishment of the Cambodian school of traditional arts as well as the curator of what would become Cambodia's national museum; along the way he had produced the first ever book on Khmer classical dancing. The question remains why such an imposing figure would turn to writing a novel at the age of almost forty. Translator of *Road of the Strong* and expert on Cambodian literature, Henri Copin, says, "unlike expository or scholarly writing, fiction permits a juxtaposition of different, even contradictory, points of view, and can thus reflect the ambiguities of real life."¹⁰ Groslier's novel promotes the view that French

8. Kent Davis, 9 July 2010, Devata.org, *Roland Meyer, Saramani and a Cambodian Love Affair*, para 4.

9. Milton Osborne, *Phnom Penh: A Cultural History*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 99.

10. Henri Copin, "Foreword," George Groslier, *The Road of the Strong: A Romance of Colonial Cambodia*, Holmes Beach, Florida: DatASIA, Inc., 2017.

colonization of Cambodia was an arrangement beneficial to both parties (the boon of road-making is particularly promoted) but Groslier's concurrent purpose seems to be to celebrate the Khmer way of living. Groslier was trying to create an appreciation of Khmer people's lives among his contemporaries and to suggest that French society could learn to be less artificial and rule-bound. Still, the only appearance by a Khmer character is a brief one by the central character's mistress, or *congai*, Vetonea. She adroitly influences her master in her scene but, from the vantage point of many decades later, the reader is dying to know a little more about what she really thinks.

But Groslier takes his themes even further in his second novel *Return to Clay* (1928).¹¹ Here another central Frenchman figure, Claude Rollin, abandons the falsities and vanities of the Western world in an embrace of earthy Khmer simplicities. He turns away from his unflinchingly conservative wife Raymonde to favour a Khmer consort, to his ultimate detriment.¹² As in the Saramani novel of Meyer, there is direct criticism of colonial society which would certainly not fit the Orientalist template promulgated by Said. While Groslier's hero Claude is at war with the mannered and stratified, perhaps even suffocating, French colonial society, there are still characters sympathetic to him as well as those who are not, indicating the presence of dissenters in the society of the time. Groslier's work is a vindication of Warraq's views on the benign nature of much of Western enquiry, but still the internal life of the Khmer women is mostly unexplored. They remain, to their masters at least, what they appear to be. Groslier met with a grisly end to his life, beaten to death by Japanese occupational forces in 1945 under suspicion of passing information to the resistance by radio. He had remained in Cambodia, even under the threat of Japanese invasion, loyal to the two nations he loved.

Groslier's life story also connects with that of André Malraux whose novel *Le Voie Royale* (*The Way of the Kings*) is an even more complex web of contradictions.¹³ The book was derived from Malraux's own adventures stealing statues from the Banteay Srei monuments in northern Cambodia, with the urgent repayment of debts in mind. Malraux paints the Khmer people as animal-skull-worshipping fetishists, on what evidence it is unclear, and famously compared them to a plague of insects; further, the fetish of a woman weeps over the dead "with a sorrow unknown

11. Groslier, *Return to Clay: A Romance of Colonial Cambodia*, Holmes Beach, Florida: DatASIA, Inc., 2014. <http://www.datasia.us/publishing/return-to-clay-a-romance-of-colonial-cambodia/> Accessed 10 April, 2019.

12. Osborne, *Phnom Penh*, p. 100.

13. André Malraux, *The Way of the Kings*, 1930, London: Hesperus Press, 2005.

to civilised people.”¹⁴ Translator Howard Curtis described the novel this way: “none of the ‘native’ characters is established as an individual, and the ‘savage’ tribesmen are depicted as bestial, even subhuman.”¹⁵ Milton Osborne says “the essential setting of the book is ... a half-imagined, half-realistic version of up-country Cambodia.”¹⁶ Curtis observed that Malraux saw no irony in presenting as heroes two men who travel to a foreign country to steal precious artefacts for profit. It was Groslier himself who, as Protector of Antiquities, was primarily responsible for bringing Malraux to justice.¹⁷ While some say Malraux was transformed by his time in Cambodia, going on to establish an anti-colonialist newspaper, it can’t be overlooked that he still saw the quest of an exceptional Western individual seeking fulfilment as overwhelming any moral or political considerations. Edward Said could well have used his novel as evidence of the Orientalist conspirator; in his work the exotic characters remain simplistic background adornments to the deeds and inner lives of the complex Western adventurer heroes. Malraux’s conviction and sentence of three years prison was appealed to a French court where, after public support from famous writers and artists of the day, his sentence was reduced to twelve months and was suspended. He went free after several months house arrest in Phnom Penh and Saigon. Malraux went on to become Minister of Culture in the post-World War II De Gaulle government of France, after fighting bravely in the anti-Nazi Resistance.

These are high works from the colonial canon. The cultural scene shifted in Cambodia in the 1930s when the French finally built their first secondary school, albeit for just a tiny percentage of mandarin class children,¹⁸ and encouraged the writing of novels, essentially to encourage a nationalist agenda aiming to mitigate differences between provinces.¹⁹ But education led to resistance and the nationalist movement came to oppose and exclude the French themselves. Weakened by WWII, the colonialists eventually departed in 1953 and the international image of Cambodia as a rural backwater underwent radical change after the American War in Vietnam spilled violently over the border. American bombing of Cambodia

14. Malraux, *The Way of the Kings*, p. 159,

15. Malraux, *The Way of the Kings*, p. xiv.

16. Osborne, *Phnom Penh*, p. 95.

17. Groslier, *The Road of the Strong*, p. xiv.

18. Joel Brinkley, *Cambodia’s Curse: The Modern History of a Troubled Land*, New York: Public Affairs, 2011, p. 26.

19. Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: Cultivation of a Nation, 1860–1945*, University of Hawai’i Press, 2007, p. 243.

from 1968, and their support of a coup ousting the king in 1970, led to civil war and ultimately to the Maoist agrarian totalitarianism of the Khmer Rouge from 1975 to 1979.^{20,21} The cataclysmic “Pol Pot time,” with its torture prisons and killing fields, and the years of turbulence, corruption and crime which followed the holocaust, took the rural idyll out of the Cambodian image and replaced it with a more commercially exploitable stamp of murder and darkness.

“Genre” fiction: Crime and thriller

Even before the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979, John Le Carré’s, 1977 spy novel *The Honourable Schoolboy*²² featured a tense sixty page section set in Phnom Penh as the Khmer Rouge march to victory in 1975, and established the plot trope of the Western hero solving problems, assisted by colourful and/or damaged Khmer sidekicks. Soon, blockbuster adventure/romance novels followed, featuring more familiar European protagonists and virtually no Cambodian characters, but opening Cambodia in the Western consciousness as an exploitable fiction venue.²³

It can be persuasively argued that the Khmer Rouge time was a result of unwarranted Western political and military intervention; but still, the image of Cambodian darkness which remained has been extensively exploited by Western crime and thriller writers. One of Shamini Flint’s “Inspector Singh Investigates” series, *A Deadly Cambodian Crime Spree* is set around the Khmer Rouge Atrocities Tribunal (formally named “The Extraordinary Chambers of the Courts of Cambodia”).²⁴ There has been a volume of fifteen crime stories called *Phnom Penh Noir*, edited by Christopher G. Moore.²⁵ Of the three stories by Cambodians, the entry by Suong Mak, is the darkest and most violent thing he has ever written. In my interview with this writer in March 2016 he conceded that he had been asked to write something

20. John Tully, *A Short History of Cambodia*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005, pp. 152–170.

21. David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, Colorado: Westview Press, 2008, pp. 249–254.

22. John le Carré, *The Honourable Schoolboy*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977.

23. Loup Durand, *The Angkor Massacre*, New York: Morrow, 1983 and Eric Van Lustbader, *Shan*, US: Fawcett Crest, 1987.

24. Shamini Flint, *A Deadly Cambodian Crime Spree: Inspector Singh Investigates Series*, London: Piatkus, 2011.

25. Christopher G. Moore, *Phnom Penh Noir*, UK: Rakuten, 2012.

very dark, to suit the Western-noir reader demographic of the volume.²⁶ One of Moore's own crime novels *Zero Hour in Phnom Penh* features his detective Vincent Calvino tracing a missing barang in the chaotic days of the United Nations intervention in Cambodia around 1993.²⁷ Adam Hall's *Quiller Salamander* has the hero (Quiller) undertaking a rogue mission inside Cambodia to stop another killing fields.²⁸ Andrew Nette's *Ghost Money* features a Vietnamese-Australian detective looking for a missing Australian in 1996.²⁹ As well as a detective novel, Nette's book is a well-informed look at Cambodia in this historically important year, and includes two Cambodian characters whose back-stories are given considerable exposure. But still we have a writer looking back in history, selecting a dark and corrupt time in Cambodia's history for exploitation.

The theme of Western hero and static Cambodian side characters continues through the thriller field. In K. T. Medina's *White Crocodile* young single mothers begin disappearing from a village near the home of a mythical white croc, while mine clearers from England are being blown up in an apparent murder spree.³⁰ Heroine Tess comes over from England to sort it all out and finds love along the way. The six main characters are European, while the side-issue Cambodians are familiar types: the women are weak-willed victims and the males are either corrupted cops or crooks, or desperate amputees. Douglas Preston's *Impact* is a science fiction thriller in which a CIA agent goes to Cambodia to investigate an unusual meteoroid impact crater.³¹ And in Jeff Long's *The Reckoning* a journalist looking for the remains of American pilots and soldiers stumbles upon an undiscovered ancient Khmer city.³² The most recent entry to this field of writing is the novel *Cambodia Noir* by American journalist Nick Seeley (2016) where an American news cameraman with a haunted past roams from one bottle of booze, joint and fix to the next to find a missing Chinese-American girl, staying one step ahead of heroin-smuggling Triads as he does.³³

26. Robert Horne, *Cambodia in Transition: Family, Culture and the New World*, Doctor of Creative Arts Thesis, Sydney, University of Technology, 2017, p. 304.

27. Moore, *Zero Hour in Phnom Penh*, 1994, Thailand: Heaven Lake Press, 2011.

28. Adam Hall, *Quiller Salamander*, 1985, Dallas, US: BenBella Books, 2004.

29. Andrew Nette, *Ghost Money*, Hong Kong: Crime Wave Press, 2015.

30. K. T. Medina, *White Crocodile*, New York: Mullholland, 2014.

31. Douglas Preston, *Impact*, 2009, New York: A Forge Book, 2010.

32. Jeff Long, *The Reckoning*, 2004, New York: Pocket Books, 2005.

33. Nick Seeley, *Cambodia Noir*, 2016, New York: Scribner, 2017.

It is easy to criticise these novels for failing to develop Asian characters and for exploiting exotic locations, but often they throw light onto Cambodian culture for Western readers. The Shamini Flint volume, for instance, reveals much about the politics behind the Khmer Rouge tribunals and their psychological effect on the Khmer people. The book points to corruption at a high judiciary level and hints at the sense of expectation and disappointment among many of the Khmer people. Many of the *Noir* story writers have personal histories of significant contact with the region and a clear desire to share their insights. Andrew Nette's book features lengthy informative historical and personal diversions. One senses an essential empathy with Cambodia and its people; within a Said-ian construct there exists what Warraq would have thought of as sympathetic rationalism. But still the overbearing theme is the crime-and-darkness Cambodian stereotype of the post-Khmer Rouge era, without question driven by publishers and markets. The money and the markets are in the West so the binary of non-Cambodians solving problems with the assistance of supplementary Cambodian characters holds in most cases.

General fiction

Two novels released in the 1990s begin the first tentative embrace of Cambodian issues. In Margaret Drabble's *The Gates of Ivory* a prominent (fictional Booker prize winning) English fiction writer is drawn to Cambodia in the early 1980s, when the Khmer Rouge were hiding in the jungle after the Vietnamese takeover of 1979.³⁴ The novel includes a well-informed look at the politico-historical situation in those years, but the main focus remains the internal lives of its London-based characters and their past relations with the missing writer. Australian Christopher Koch's prize-winning *Highways to a War* follows a partly fictional Australian photographer through the Vietnam and Cambodian conflicts of the 1960s and 70s.³⁵ While more than half of the story is set in Vietnam and most characters are Europeans, there is one briefly important young Khmer photographer and love interest. She is a headstrong, independent new woman who reveals some traditional Cambodian spirit beliefs, but her impact on this large novel is minimal. Both works feature Cambodian sections, revealing research and authorial interest, but the Khmer characters are sketchy side-issues.

34. Margaret Drabble, *The Gates of Ivory*, Edinburgh: Canongate, 1991.

35. Christopher Koch, *Highways to a War*, New York: Penguin, 1995.

From 2000 I believe literature markets have been impacted by the expansion of Cambodian tourism. An explosion of visits to the temples at Angkor Wat has seen the market tested by writers of historical fiction. Geoff Ryman's *The King's Last Song* engages the reader on at least five time-frames from the days of Angkor, taking in snapshots of modern Cambodia in 1960 and 1990 as well as the "present" in 2004.³⁶ Among the stories woven through is that of Map, who avenges the killing of his parents and thinks about the "floods of ghosts. Cambodia has floods of murder more regular than the Tonle Sap."³⁷ Map is illiterate, a casualty of history and war, almost a symbolic character, arguably a stereotype. Following the success of this novel a spate of epic historical dramas has emerged, located fully in the time of Angkor. *God King of Angkor* by Gregory A. Waldron was followed by John Shors' *Temple of a Thousand Faces* and John Burgess' excellently researched and popular book *A Woman of Angkor*, all working on a certain level of Western public interest in an exotic Cambodian past.³⁸

The 1980s and 90s saw a string of Cambodians publish their harrowing personal Khmer Rouge survival stories in novel-length memoirs, many of which sold well in the West. By the 2000s the Cambodian appetite was sated, but when the flow of books stopped a new Western publishing phenomenon was created. Western writers began a stream of fictionalized survival accounts, written by outsiders, directly targeting non-Cambodian markets. American Patricia McCormick's *Never Fall Down* is a work of fiction based on the life story of an eleven year old boy who survived the Khmer Rouge time by learning to play revolutionary songs.³⁹ Harriette C. Rinaldi's *Four Faces of Truth* contains four fictional perspectives on the Pol Pot time.⁴⁰ Kim Echlin's *The Disappeared* is "an electrifying love story set in the Khmer Rouge killing fields."⁴¹ These are examples of many such sagas which rework grisly aspects of Cambodian history into romance and drama. Prominent Cambodian writer Sok Chanphal said in my personal interview with him in February 2016 that enough has been said, and that Cambodians of the new generation are desperate to move away from the dark image. He feels embarrassed to go into an airport

36. Geoffrey Ryman, *The King's Last Song*, London, Harper Collins, 2006.

37. Ryman, *The King's Last Song*, p. 185.

38. Gregory A. Waldron, *God King of Angkor*, Kindle edn., Asian Literary Classics, 2012; John Shors, *Temple of a Thousand Faces*, New York: Penguin, 2013; John Burgess, *A Woman of Angkor*, Bangkok: River Books, 2013.

39. Patricia McCormick, *Never Fall Down*, New York: HarperCollins, 2012.

40. Harriette C. Rinaldi, *Four Faces of Truth*, Tucson: Fireship Press, 2014.

41. Kim Echlin, *The Disappeared*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 2009, back cover.

bookshop and every volume about Cambodia is focussed on the Khmer Rouge time.⁴² But non-Cambodians keep returning to this field: exploitation which poses as concern, but is wreathed in self-interested exploitation of Cambodians as a kind of grotesque “other,” beyond the exotic. It is likely that Said would have considered this literature a misuse of the privileged position of Western writers and publishers.

But in the very recent past there has begun a trickle of fiction which addresses important issues in modern Cambodian society. Laura Jean McKay’s *Holiday in Cambodia* features nineteen separate snapshot-style stories spreading from 1969 to the present.⁴³ One story highlights the problems of garment workers, another focuses on a nightclub singer in 1968 at the time of the American bombings, elsewhere the dangers of unexploded ordinance are exposed. Some stories are satirical portraits of ex-patriate Europeans, one about Australian holiday makers foolishly endangering themselves and falling into the hands of the Khmer Rouge in the 1980s. The work shows an intimate knowledge of Cambodia and its people, as well as a critical eye for the foibles and motivations of Westerners.

Sue Guiney is an American author who has spent twenty years in Cambodia. Her novel *A Clash of Innocents* is set in a Phnom Penh orphanage and looks at the reasons Western volunteers have for coming to Cambodia to help; some hide a past and some too eagerly embrace the guilt of others.⁴⁴ The most developed Cambodian character is an eighteen-year-old girl who has been adopted by the central American character and must decide on accepting a scholarship to travel to college in the U.S. Guiney’s other novel *Out of the Ruins* looks at cultural aspects of relationships between Westerners and Cambodians and features a Cambodian nurse whose faith in a Western doctor is destroyed after a child-sex incident.⁴⁵

These books involve discussions of real issues and feature Western and Cambodian characters interacting on a realistic level. It is into this section of literature that I contribute my own novel, written as part of my Doctor of Creative Arts thesis. *The Question of Balance* includes five developed Khmer characters, all of whom contribute to a discussion of important issues.⁴⁶ I look at the position of garment workers in the atmosphere of global capitalism which has emerged in

42. Robert Horne, *Cambodia in Transition: Family, Culture and the New World*, Doctor of Creative Arts Thesis, University of Technology, Sydney, 2017, p. 296.

43. Laura Jean McKay, *Holiday in Cambodia*, Carlton: Black Inc., 2013.

44. Sue Guiney, *A Clash of Innocents*, London: Ward Wood, 2010.

45. Guiney, *Out of the Ruins*, London: Ward Wood, 2014.

46. Horne, *The Question of Balance*, Thesis submitted as Doctor of Creative Arts, University of Technology, Sydney, 2017.

Cambodia since the late 1990s.⁴⁷ This feeds an examination of the extraordinary change in the lives of young village women, many of whom must now leave home as teenagers to support their families – a situation unthinkable even twenty years ago. I explore the survival of families under these stresses, at marriage culture, and at the extreme importance of “face” for Cambodian males. New types of personal relationships between Cambodians and Westerners are explored, as is the social problem of former Khmer Rouge cadres living among their erstwhile victims.

Because of its unwilling involvement in the American War in Vietnam and the extraordinary Khmer Rouge era which followed, Cambodia has achieved a prominent place in the minds of people outside that country; this positioning has been exploited by writers. I have mentioned twenty nine volumes of fiction in this brief essay, far more, I contend, than written about any of Cambodia’s neighbours by outsiders. It is little wonder that writers of crime and thriller were attracted to the dangerous image of Cambodia (and this counterpointed with the oppositional stereotype of rural simplicity which preceded it). Their collective efforts could be overviewed as having the intent of a Said-ian conspiracy. But despite their apparently market-driven exploitation of a ready-made image, many of these writers show what Ibn Warraq described as a genuine desire to advance knowledge and to create international empathy. Further, fiction writers are now beginning more serious work on contemporary issues in Cambodia. To what extent markets will embrace these efforts is still largely untested, but it must now be the responsibility of non-Cambodian writers to leave behind the exhausted exotic, the image of darkness and “otherness,” and to engage on a more responsible level with this extraordinary society, emerging as it is from its tragedy into the complex world of international capital.

47. Horne, *Cambodia in Transition*, pp. 7–233.

Italian travel narratives on twentieth century China

Alterity, distance and self-identification

Linetto Basilone

Impressions, allegories, dystopias

In the portrait gallery compiled by Tzvetan Todorov in *On Human Diversity*,¹ there is an interesting typology presented of the modern traveller: the impressionist, the allegorist and the disenchanted. This typology appears useful to describe three different types of experience that Italian intellectuals went through while visiting China during the twentieth century. It also appears to capture the intellectuals' processes of Self-Identification in relation to the specific socio-historical and political dynamics affecting them.

The first chronological paradigm I shall analyse is the Fascist Ventennio (1922–1943). The *modus operandi* of the Italian journalist Mario Appelius, hereby regarded as exemplary of the fascist intellectuals travelling to China in that period, appears analogous to the type of traveller that Todorov defined as impressionist, namely “a highly perfected tourist [...] who takes back home with him not just simple photographic slides or verbal clichés, but painted or written sketches,” and looks for “a framework that matches the experience [that he is] already living,”² which is 1920s fascist Italy.

The allegorist's attitude seems to correspond to the second chronological paradigm analysed, the period 1949–1960. The political sociologist Donatello Santarone refers to Franco Fortini's travel to the Republic of China as an example of allegoric travel,³ explicitly quoting Todorov's definition: “Allegory says one

1. Tzvetan Todorov, *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993.

2. Todorov, *On Human Diversity*, p. 345.

3. Santarone Donatello, “La mediazione letteraria in prospettiva Interculturale: le rappresentazioni della Cina in Alberto Moravia, Franco Fortini e Alberto Arbasino,” in Massimiliano Fiorucci, *Incontri: Spazi e luoghi della mediazione culturale*, Rome: Armando Editore, 2004, p. 50.

thing while implying another, the allegorist speaks of a people in order to discuss something else – a problem of concern to the allegorist himself and his own culture.”⁴ Therefore, when narrating China, the Italian writers Franco Fortini and Carlo Cassola, like the majority of the Italian Intellectuals from the 1950s, narrated the Republic of China in order to discuss post-fascist Italy.

The third chronological paradigm analysed is the period 1978–1985. The Italian writers Alberto Arbasino and Luigi Malerba can be defined as disenchanted travellers, because “after setting out for the ends of the earth, they [all] have discovered that the trip was not necessary, that [they] could learn as much and more by concentrating on the familiar.”⁵ In this regard, Arbasino and Malerba narrated China as an unfamiliar and distant society, and even questioned the existence of the Western idea of China.

By offering a comparison of these three chronologically and ideologically consecutive typologies of representation of China during the twentieth century, this essay regards the above-mentioned Italian intellectuals’ travel narratives as representative of specific “distribution[s] of geopolitical awareness” in travel literature,⁶ referring to space and distance as political and cultural conceptualizations in order to serve precise political and ideological purposes. Therefore, while I emphasize the textual nature of the China in the three paradigms;⁷ I also consider the textuality of such representations as a consequence of political agency in the process of representation and not vice versa.⁸

4. Todorov, *On Human Diversity*, p. 349.

5. Todorov, *On Human Diversity*, p. 350.

6. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon books, 1978, p. 12.

7. See: Erik R. J. Hayot, *Chinese Dreams: Pound, Brecht, Tel Quel*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004; and Erik R. J. Hayot, Haun Saussy and Steven G. Yao, *Sinographies: Writing China*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

8. See: Arif Dirlik, “Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism” in *History and Theory* 35 no. 4, December 1996, pp. 99–118; and Daniel F. Vukovich, *China and Orientalism. Western Knowledge Production and the P. R. C.*, London and New York: Routledge, 2012.

China as a *verminaio* in mid-1920s fascist travel literature

Since the late 1920s, there had been an increasing sensitivity in Italy to the ways in which foreign countries (such as USSR, USA and UK, Germany or Japan), could symbolize different typologies of modernity, as Italian intellectuals sought to enable a specifically fascist model of modernity.⁹ While China was certainly not among the countries to be regarded as a model of development during the Fascist Ventennio, China too was a space of investigation and implementation of the fascist sense of identity and modernity.

The narratives of Italian writers and journalists reporting from China contributed to the creation of the dominant representation of China in the Fascist Ventennio. As sympathizers of the fascist regime, the Italian writers and journalists reporting from China considered in this study all propagandized the fascist ideology and the regime's attitude to foreign politics, inspired by that "state of collective excitement" generating fascism from the ashes of World War I.¹⁰ The most representative and influential authors were Mario Appellius and Roberto Suster, who both travelled to China between 1925–1935 and reported for *Popolo d'Italia*; Arnaldo Cipolla, who visited China in 1921 and in 1930; and Cesco Tommaselli and Raffaele Calzini who reported from China for *Corriere della Sera* in the 1930s.¹¹

Mario Appellius' first reportage upon his arrival in Canton sailing from India, introduced the reader to a magnificent, carnivalistic vision of China, characterized by grotesque and sarcastic tirades that immediately reveal the stand point of the author. Appellius' depiction of Canton was that an incommensurably distant, dreamlike, magical *verminaio* (place teeming with worms), a crazy red, green and orange-colored chessboard, an ants' nest or even a *topaia* (rat's nest):

9. See Emilio Gentile, "Fascism and the Ambivalent Image of the Unites States," *Journal of Contemporary History* 28, no.1, 1993: pp. 7–29; and Charles Burdett, *Journeys through Fascism: Italian Travel Writing between the Wars*, New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007, pp. 182–247.

10. Emilio Gentile, *La Grande Italia: The Myth of the Nation in the 20th Century*, Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2009, p. 147.

11. For a select bibliography on China of the above-mentioned authors: Mario Appellius, *Cina*, Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1926; Mario Appellius, *La crisi di Budda*, Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1935; Mario Appellius, *Al di là della Grande Muraglia*, Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1941; Raffaele Calzini, *Agonia della Cina*, Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1937; Arnaldo Cipolla *Nella grande Cina rivoluzionaria*, Milan: Paravia, 1931; Giovanni Comisso, *Cina-Giappone*, Milan; Rome: Treves-Treccani-Tummiennelli, 1932; Roberto Suster, *La Cina repubblica*, Milan: Edizioni Alpes, 1928; Cesco Tommaselli, *Dalla terra dei draghi al paese dei soviet*, Firenze: Bemporad, 1936.

Il formicolio della folla tutta eguale, tutta vestita uniformemente di giallo e turchino, identica dalle pantofole al taglio della capigliatura, dalla struttura all'espressione dei visi, s'unifica con la sfilata delle case tutte eguali e dai balconi tutti fioriti, delle botteghe tutte dorate e delle insigne mortuarie, dei tetti tutti cornuti e dei Buddha tutti panciuti, dando al passante europeo la sensazione schiacciante e quasi paurosa di una immensità sterminata, di una moltiplicazione all'infinito. Vorrei rompere questa calca che stringe, uscire da queste topaie che soffocano, liberarmi da questo odore di carne sudata che ammorba il respiro, non vedere più tutto questo falso oro che barbaglia e tutta questa carne porcellanata che luccica come squame di pesce, basta, basta ma l'uomo del rickshaw dice che non comprende i miei segni accellera la sua corsa pazzica e più s'affonda nel lubrico verminaio di Canton.¹²

Similarly, the Chinese were described as silent subhuman, zoomorphic creatures. Chinese people were portrayed as a stream of yellow and light blue-like water, a multitude of crawling worms, or a crowd of puppet-like tiny, leaping men dressed in yellow and turquoise: as "Una moltitudine... quattrocento milioni di omuncoli gialli che tumultuano nella loro gabbia millenaria e cercano d'irrompere per le vie del mondo."¹³ With a few exceptions represented by notorious generals, politicians or personalities often interviewed by Italian fascist writers and journalists, Chinese people played a marginal role in their travelogues. As argued by the Italianist Charles Burdett, fascist writers and journalists travelling in the Fascist Ventennio generally "project a stereotypical identity... onto the non-European other."¹⁴ Appelius' rickshaw puller, the uomo-cavallo/man-horse as a servile, slow-witted homunculus, exemplifies the way a Chinese man was looked upon by the fascist authors reporting from China.

12. "The swarming impression of a crowd of identical people, all uniformly dressed in yellow and turquoise, leave the European passer-by with an appalling and almost-frightening sensation of endless immensity and infinite multiplication. It is an identical crowd, from the sleepers to the hairstyles, from the body structure to the facial expressions; and it becomes one with the identical houses and balconies, all the gilded stores and ghastly signs, the horned roofs and pot-bellied buddhas. I want to break free from the pressing mob and get away from these suffocating rats' nests. I want to break loose from the plaguing stench of sweaty flesh. I have had enough of all the fake glittering gold and the porcelain-like skins, shining like fish scales. It is enough! It is enough! But the rickshaw puller says that he does not understand my signs, and instead he increases his insane running, sinking us deeper into Canton's obscene *verminaio*." Mario Appelius, *Cina*, pp. 15–16. All the quotations from the travel narratives discussed here are translated by me from their original Italian versions.

13. "A multitude.... four hundred million tumultuous yellow homunculi trying to break free from their millennial cage into the world," Appelius, *Cina*, p. 17.

14. Charles Burdett, *Journeys through Fascism: Italian Travel Writing between the Wars*, p. 258.

The emphasis on the difference between China, Chinese people, history and culture and Italy, Italian people, history and culture, is a constant feature in Appelius' reportages in China. In his understanding, the origin of such a difference is both racial and behavioral. Appelius' idea of race loosely corresponded to the fascist idea of the term, as the consubstantiation of people, nation and ancestry and embodying the same history, language and tradition.¹⁵ Appelius regarded the Chinese civilization as the result of the continuous interaction between the Chinese race and the Chinese landscape through millennia, in an environment which was self-contained and immune to the external stimuli of Western culture,¹⁶ and arguably shaped in its unique form by autochthonous naturalism and domestic cults rather than by Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism.¹⁷ Appelius configured such a difference as the alterity to the Italian civilization, characterizing the Chinese civilization as completely opposite from it: "Appunto perché hanno camminato in un altro senso sono diversi da noi.... Siamo due umanità che hanno camminato ognuna per proprio conto, arrivando ognuna nel suo raggio d'azione a grandezze e a grandi profondità."¹⁸

On the other hand, Appelius juxtaposed to his representation of China, the image of a great Italy rejuvenated by the WWI conflict and the fascist ideology. Appelius celebrated the uniqueness of the Italian civilization and race and the prominence of the Italian historical and cultural contributions to the development of Western civilization, advocating the – unlikely – imminent centrality of Italy in the development of diplomatic and economic relations with the so-called Eastern civilizations.¹⁹ The praise of fascist ideology, the exaltation of the Italian culture and race, the promotion of Italian economic development in China and the denigration of ideals and policies reputedly antagonistic to fascism, are all characteristics which are accentuated through the negative representation of China and Chinese culture.²⁰ This is central to the process of Self-identification, which brings the racial

15. See Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *La cultura fascista*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000, p. 242.

16. Appelius, *Cina*, p. 216.

17. Appelius, *Cina*, pp. 214–215, and p. 245.

18. "They are different from us precisely because they have been walking in a direction which is different to ours... We are two humanities progressing on our own, and both extending our radius to heights and great depths." Appelius, *Cina*, p. 218.

19. See Laura De Giorgi "In the Shadow of Marco Polo: Writing about China in Fascist Italy" in *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 15, no.4, 2010, pp. 573–89.

20. See Derek Duncan, "Travel and Autobiography. Giovanni Comisso's Memories of the War," in Charles Burdett and Derek Duncan, eds. *Cultural Encounters. European Travel Writing in the 1930s*, New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002, pp. 49–63.

and cultural superiority of the Italian people to the foreground. Such a double movement, uses distance and difference as omnipresent encrypting devices for this representation, together with a “positional superiority.”²¹

The irreconcilably different characteristics of the Chinese as emphasized by Appellius, therefore, all appear to be defined in antithesis to the characteristics reputed to be foundational in fascist Italy. The myth of *Italianità* and the consequential sense of the superiority of the Italian civilization and race, related both to the idea of the conquest of modernity and the national and social regeneration of Italian society after WWI. These, fascism had inherited from the Risorgimento tradition and changed according to its own ideological principles.²² This myth is the main criteria of comparison that the fascist writers and journalists applied in all their narratives.

La Cina è Vicina: The PRC in 1950s leftist Italian travel literature

After the proclamation of the People's Republic of China (1949), China became a necessary social and artistic experience for leftist Italian intellectuals of the second half of the twentieth century. Renowned Italian writers, journalists, politicians, artists and academics travelled to the PRC in order to analyse the specific traits of Maoist society, and turn their experience into narratives for the Italian readership. These intellectuals regarded Maoist China as a progressive and pacifist regime, aimed at promoting the gradual socialization of society through the collectivization of farming land and the conversion of the bourgeois class to working class, as well as the equalization of Chinese women and men's individual, social and political rights and duties. Moreover, they regarded the PRC as the new third pole capable of disrupting the Cold War binary logic of the iron curtain.²³

The most representative and influential Italian Leftist intellectuals writing on China after visiting the country in the 1950s are the politician and journalist Velio

21. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 8.

22. Gentile, *La Grande Italia*, p. 144.

23. Apart from exposing the Italian political and social situation, the travel narratives of the late 1950s reflected on the topics animating the Italian political arena in those years, expressing the intellectual elite's dissatisfaction with the PCI, as well as internal tensions. Such a different approach to the People's Republic of China resonated with the turbulent consequences of the Soviet statesman Nikita Khrushchev's Secret Speech and the Hungarian Uprising for the Italian Intellectuals, as well as their opinions on PCI and PSI directives in relation to the CPSU. As a consequence, the PRC was characterized as an alternative model of development to Stalinist Russia. Note the change in the representations of the PRC after 1956.

Spano, who witnessed the proclamation of the People's Republic of China, and met Mao Zedong; the politicians Piero Calamandrei and Ferruccio Parri who organized two official delegations in collaboration with the Communist Party of China (CPC);²⁴ the writers Franco Fortini, Carlo Cassola, Carlo Bernari and Giancarlo Vigorelli, who participated in the official delegations; and, in addition, the writers and solo travellers Enrico Emanuelli, Curzio Malaparte and Carlo Levi.²⁵

As the sinologist and political scientist Laura De Giorgi remarks, the travel narratives written on Maoist China by Italian intellectuals have been often used as a “spazio discorsivo su cui proiettare preoccupazioni, speranze o riflessioni ancorate più nella realtà italiana che in quella cinese.”²⁶ The primary motivation for the Italian leftist intellectuals' interest in China and Chinese culture and society resided therefore in Italy's – and the Italian leftist intellectuals' own-recent history, as well as in the geopolitical dynamics in which Italy and China were involved. The travel literature on Maoist China produced by the leftist intelligentsia aimed at opposing anti-communism in Europe, and promoting the European working classes.²⁷ At the same time, the above mentioned Italian writers, journalists and politicians travelling to China, were part of a generation of Italians who, after participating in fascist life, identified themselves as communist because “being communist meant above all being pro-soviet and anti-fascist, and these factors were welded together into the

24. As a result of the Calamandrei delegation in September, 1955, the journal *Il Ponte*, directed by Piero Calamandrei himself, published a special issue called “La Cina d'Oggi” in 1956 which contained a selection of essays by Italian, Chinese and international intellectuals, aiming at providing the Italian readership with a new set of cultural, sociological, literary, juridical, and historical information regarding both pre- and post-revolutionary China. See *La Cina d'oggi*, Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1956.

25. Examples of works on China published during the 1950s include: Carlo Bernari, *Il gigante Cina*, Milan: Giacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 1957; Carlo Cassola, *Viaggio in Cina*, Milan: Giacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 1956; Felice Chilanti, *La Cina fa parte del mondo*, Rome: Edizioni Cultura Sociale, 1954; Enrico Emanuelli, *La Cina è vicina*, Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1957; Franco Fortini, *Asia Maggiore*, Milan: Giacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 1956; Carlo Levi, *Il pianeta senza confini. Prose di viaggio*, Rome: Donzelli Editore, 2003; Curzio Malaparte, *Io, in Russia e Cina*, Florence: Vallecchi Editore, 1958; Corrado Pizzinelli *Dietro la grande muraglia*, Milan: ELI, 1956; Velio Spano, *Nella Cina di Mao Ze-Tun*, Milan: Milano-Sera Editrice, 1950; Carlo Vigorelli, *Domande e risposte per la nuova Cina*, Caltanissetta-Rome: Salvatore Sciascia Editore, 1958.

26. “...a discursive space representing [Italy's] own fears and expectations, and a reflection on Italian society rather than Chinese society” Laura De Giorgi “La nascita della « Nuova Cina » sui giornali italiani: le corrispondenze del Corriere della Sera e dell'Unità nel 1949.” *Annali Ca' Foscari* 49, no. 3, 2010: p. 206.

27. See Luca Polese Remaggi, “Pechino 1955. Intellettuali e politici europei alla scoperta della Cina di Mao,” *Mondo Contemporaneo* 6, no.3, 2010, pp. 55–89.

patriotic cause of the liberation of Italy.”²⁸ The travel narratives on China produced by them are, therefore, to be regarded as part of a counter-discourse whose primary objective was to obliterate fascist ideology in post-WWII Italy.²⁹ While providing the Italian readership with data concerning China, Chinese culture, history and politics, the major aim of 1950s leftist intellectuals was, in fact, that of supporting Italy’s social renovation in the spirit of the Italian Resistance and communism.

While the fascist representations of China portray the country as an elsewhere unbridgeable and completely Other to Italy, the leftist travel narratives of 1950s China generally described the country as a familiar, readily accessible location, both logistically and conceptually. Maoist China was depicted as politically and culturally analogous to Italy, and even as emerging from parallel evolutionary paths and therefore as spiritually similar.³⁰ The re-evaluation and reduction of the distance, is particularly visible in the narrativization of China’s spatiality, as well as of its culture. China was narrated as close at hand, as Enrico Emanuelli’s fortunate title argued: “La Cina è vicina.”³¹ Franco Fortini and Carlo Cassola’s first impressions of China, as documented in their travelogues, underscored both China’s physical and cultural alterity and, at the same time, its similarity to Italy. When approaching Beijing’s plains from the air, China appeared to them as a “campionario di cineserie, una pagoda, dei chioschi, un laghetto che tutta l’aria di essere artificiale,”³² and their reaction was that of “stupore di cose già note, già viste, come se avessimo fatto metà del giro del mondo per ritrovarci nella piana di Caserta o di Firenze.”³³ Consequently, Fortini’s description of the Chinese landscape was that of a familiar place:

28. Chris Shore, *Italian Communism. The Escape from Leninism*, London: Pluto Press, 1990, p. 59. See also Laura De Giorgi, “Chinese Brush, Western Canvas: The Travels of Italian Artists and Writers, and the Making of China’s International Cultural Identity in the mid-1950s,” *Modern Asia Studies* 51, no. 1, 2017, pp. 170–193.

29. See Linetto Basilone, “Italian Intellectuals, Their Travelogues and the “New China.” Strategies of Discursive Production of People’s Republic of China in the 1950s,” in Francesco Guardiani, Gaozheng Zhang, and Salvatore Banchieri, *Italy and China: Centuries of Dialogue*, Florence: Cesati Editore, 2017, pp. 273–293.

30. See: *La Cina d’oggi*, p. 72.

31. “China is close at hand.” See Enrico Emanuelli, *La Cina è vicina*, 1957.

32. “A set of chinoiserie with a pagoda, some pavilions and an artificial-looking small lake.” Carlo Cassola, *Viaggio in Cina*, pp. 18–19.

33. “the astonishment of seeing well-known things, as if we had travelled half way round the world to find ourselves in a plateau near Caserta or Florence.” Franco Fortini, *Asia Maggiore*, p. 41.

Il rapporto tra gli alberi e le case dei contadini, la pergola e il pozzo, la bicicletta e la viottola; il colore dei muri, dei visi umani, degli ortaggi; lo spirito dei campi, del granturco; i bambini sulle aie; i ciclisti operai che tornavano dalla città – tutto era un settembre italiano con i suoi fossi, l’ozio prima della cena, il fumo delle casupole, le nubi danzanti di moscerini, la conversazione col casellante del passaggio a livello, il carro di fieno che ingombra la strada, e, diffusa con la luce, la presenza tiepida degli esseri umani per tutta la campagna. Sopra veniva un sobborgo, una fila di capre, una folla che cresceva...”³⁴

And if the Chinese landscape was similar to the Italian landscape, its Chinese peasants were even more familiar because of their similar socio-cultural conditions to those of Italian peasants: “veramente vien fatto di pensare che questi contadini e i nostri si intenderebbero benissimo e subito fra loro, solo che non li dividesse il linguaggio, tanto simili sono i problemi e le loro abitudini.”³⁵ In these narratives, the characterization of the Chinese people is no longer that of subhuman and parasitic characters; they are now regarded sympathetically as akin to, familiarly reminiscent of, the Italian people – they are comrades.

Italy’s socio-political situation is at the basis of Fortini’s belief in the necessity of understanding and experiencing the Chinese revolution. Fortini asserted that when travelling to China, he had taken along with him “il suo paese, l’Italia, ed i problemi del suo paese ad accompagnarlo nei ventiseimila chilometri di viaggio che lo ha portato dalla Siberia alla Mongolia e alla Cina, e dalla Cina all’India.”³⁶ Furthermore, Fortini believed that the experience of the Chinese revolution would have been significant had significance as a possible way out from the Italian Leftist Intellectuals’ frustration over the social development of post-WWII Italian society.³⁷ Fortini therefore argued that Maoist China would show Italian society how to

34. “The ratio between trees and peasants’ houses, pergolas and wells, bikes and paths, the colours of walls, human faces and vegetables; the distribution of fields, the maize; children in the farmyard, wage workers cycling back home from the city – it was all reminiscent of an Italian September day, the ditches, the idleness before dinner, the smoke coming out from small cottages, the dancing clouds of fleas, the conversation with a signalman passing-by, the presence of human beings throughout the countryside; a suburb approaching, and a line of goats, a growing mob...” Fortini, *Asia Maggiore*, p. 42.

35. “You could honestly think that these peasants would get on really well with our peasants right away, if it were not for the language barrier. In fact, their problems and habits are so similar.” Fortini, *Asia Maggiore*, p. 96.

36. “His country, Italy, and his country’s problems for all the twenty-six thousand kilometres of travel that lead him from Siberia to Mongolia, and from China to India,” Fortini, *Asia Maggiore*, p. 29.

37. Fortini, *Asia Maggiore*, pp. 27–28.

“farla finita con gli spettri delle delusioni, dei compromessi, col cerchio del “sempre eguale” che ha imprigionato ormai tre generazioni.”³⁸

Italian leftist intellectuals in the 1950s portrayed China as a spiritually similar civilization, populated by Chinese comrades, partisans and brothers, and sought to reduce the spatial and cultural distance from post-fascist Italy. Through their travel narratives, China became a textual space in which to challenge the fascist discourse on China and portray the proclamation of People’s Republic of China as a major, globally relevant historical event reminiscent of both the Italian Resistance and the European anti-totalitarian movements. Consequently, China became significant in the construction of an Italian political identity alternative to both pre-WWII fascist Italy and post-WWII Christian democratic Italy.

1980s Italian travel narratives from *Maoland*

After the death of Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong in 1976, the PRC faced a period of political and social resettlement which brought years of harsh political controversies internal to the CPC’s leadership, as well as massive changes in both contemporary Chinese society and in China’s geopolitical collocation. Among the most relevant, immediate consequences were the detention (1976) and the trial (1981) of the Gang of Four (Jiang Qing, Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan and Wang Hongwen), who were found guilty of responsibility for the Cultural Revolution; and the power struggle between Hua Guafeng, advocating socialist economic and industrial planning, and Deng Xiaoping promoting the introduction of market-based economic reforms to develop agriculture, industry, scientific and technological research as well as military power.

As part of the Italian Writers’ Association delegation, the writer and journalist Aldo De Jaco, the poets Vittorio Sereni and Mario Luzi, and the writers Alberto Arbasino and Luigi Malerba, visited the People’s Republic of China in October 1981.³⁹ In varying degrees, these authors were all socially and politically engaged, and regarded their artistic productions as sociological and ethical tools for the analysis of the social and political issues besetting Italian society in the 1970s and 1980s. Aldo De Jaco had been part of the leftist intelligentsia as a member of the

38. “Get rid of the ghosts of past delusions, compromises, and the circle of the “always the same” that has paralyzed Italy for three generations.” Fortini, *Asia Maggiore*, p. 34.

39. The travel narratives published by the above mentioned authors are: Alberto Arbasino, “China” in *Transpacific Express*, Milan: Garzanti, 1981, pp. 130–220; De Jaco Aldo, *Nel giardino del cattivo amministratore*, Bari: Levante, 1983; Mario Luzi, *Reportage: un Poemetto seguito dal taccuino di viaggio in Cina 1980*, Milan: All’insegna del Pesce d’Oro, 1984; Luigi Malerba, *Cina Cina*, Cesario di Lecce: Manni Editori, 1985; Vittorio Sereni, *Viaggio in Cina*, Pistoia: Via del Vento, 2004.

PCI since the late 1940s. Sereni and Luzi were part of the older generation of intellectuals who had experienced fascism, albeit not actively involved in the Italian Resistance. Malerba and Arbasino, on the other hand, were part of the Gruppo 63, a literary movement that constituted itself in opposition to the previous generation of intellectuals both in terms of stylistic research and social engagement.⁴⁰ The travel narratives from the latter intellectuals are the most interesting ones.

The travel narratives from these authors, and Arbasino's in particular, both resent the dramatic aftermath of the emancipatory events that culminated in the "Long 1968" and 1977 (also called as the "New 1968") as well as the influence of political violence on Italian intellectuals and their literary productions in those years. In the late 1960s and the late 1980s, Italy went through a period of political violence, which ranged from the Piazza Fontana bombing (December, 1969), the Christian Democratic Party president Aldo Moro's kidnapping and execution (March-May 1978), the bomb explosion at the Bologna railway station (August 1980), to the assassination of academic and senator Roberto Ruffilli (April, 1988). The kidnapping and homicide of Moro in particular, prompted a public debate among prominent intellectuals and writers, such as the poet Eugenio Montale, the writers Italo Calvino, Alberto Moravia, Giorgio Bocca, Leonardo Sciascia, and Alberto Arbasino and the playwright Dario Fo, among others.

The overall representation of China by Malerba and Arbasino is pessimistic and anti-historical. In their narratives, the PRC was unanimously regarded with disenchantment and disbelief. The Cultural Revolution resonated with Orwell's *1984*,⁴¹ and as an "authoritarian and repressive phenomenon just like fascism";⁴² Maoist China itself was as much an autarchic and self-sufficient world as the Italian Fascist Ventennio.⁴³ The Post-Maoist PRC, in particular the Trial of the Gang of Four, was compared to the end of the Fascist Ventennio and the Verona Trial;⁴⁴ the Chinese writers interviewed (Ba Jin, Ding Ling, Mao Dun, Zhou Yang, and others) were compared to the generation of Italian intellectuals who went through the transitional phase between Fascist and Republican Italy (Emilio Cecchi, Giuseppe Ungaretti, Elio Vittorini, Antonio Gramsci, Curzio Malaparte, Alberto Moravia, Corrado Alvaro, Cesare Pavese).⁴⁵

40. Arbasino and Malerba substituted the writers Italo Calvino and Paolo Volponi, who declined the invitation to tour China.

41. Arbasino, "Cina," p. 209.

42. Luigi Malerba, *Il viaggiatore sedentario*, p. 34.

43. Malerba, *Il viaggiatore sedentario*, p. 35.

44. Arbasino, "Cina," p. 200.

45. Arbasino, "Cina," p. 202.

Alberto Arbasino emphasized that the familiarity with and affinity for the Chinese people and culture, which were the cornerstones of the 1950s representation of China by Italian Leftist intellectuals, were only apparent. According to Arbasino, the source of China's alterity resided in its ontological difference from Italy: "i loro segni sono tutti diversi, le loro forme non coincidono" and, therefore, "i nostri strumenti, le nostre chiavi non funzionano né combaciano là" in China.⁴⁶ Therefore, in Arbasino's view, the specific traits of the Chinese civilization were: "Ripetizione, iterazione, serialità e monotonia;"⁴⁷ These characteristics are Chinese society's "costante storica e antropologica: la standardizzazione eterna dell'identico."⁴⁸

At the basis of such incompatibility, there was Arbasino's analysis of China by means of a dichotomic process of self-identification – us (good)/them (bad). Consequently, Arbasino similarly described Pre-Maoist China as a "formicaio/ant's nest" – like Appellius- and Maoist China as a "topaia/rat's nest."⁴⁹ Thus, he characterized Chinese society as a static civilization populated by mentally zoomorphic and puerile figures, and, at the same time, Arbasino denied completely the discourse of 1950s and 1960s Leftist intellectuals, representing Maoist China as a radically different society from pre-Maoist China and as a socialist model development for Italy. The principal discursive device supporting such a representation is the use of distance and alterity to emphasize not only China's distance in time and space from Italy, but the same unreality of Maoist society as presented to the Italian intellectuals. Arbasino's point of view is also clearly visible in the characterization of the Chinese landscape, which he perceived as "medieval and Latin American," and therefore completely other to the Italian landscape:

Usciamo a Canton, fra il Medio Evo e l'America Latina, vegetazione tropicale in città, hibiscus e insalate giganti, alberoni, viali larghi erratici, autobus vecchi, notturne a piedi, negozi senza serramenti per il gran caldo, artigianato per strada sotto portici fatiscanti, fili tesi e pendula a grovigli e masse, costruzioni cominciate e abbandonate, galline, polvere, bambini piccoli come scimmietti attoniti.⁵⁰

46. "Their signs and forms being ultimately different" and therefore "our instruments and keys do not work there." Arbasino, "Cina," p. 130.

47. "Repetition, iteration, seriality and monotony," Arbasino, "Cina," p. 134.

48. Chinese society's "historical and anthropological constant feature is the eternal standardization of the identical," Arbasino, "Cina," p. 134.

49. Arbasino, "Cina," p. 134.

50. "In Canton, we find ourselves somewhere between the Middle Ages and Latin America with tropical vegetation in the city, hibiscus and giant lettuces. Big trees. Erratic, wide meandering avenues. Old buses. Nocturnal walking crowds. Shops with no windows and doors for the heat,

Similarly, Luigi Malerba characterized China as a distant country, radically different from Italy, as well as located on a different chronological horizon.⁵¹ Malerba regarded China as an “orient” urging the Western observer to reconsider his [sic] Eurocentric ideologies;⁵² and, at the same time, a “literary elsewhere,” in which to “depositare le mie invenzioni, favole e mitologie inevase.”⁵³ Furthermore, Malerba argued that his and his fellow travellers’ difficulties in understanding China were due to the past stereotypical representations of China, both as a fairy tale consisting of pagodas, dragons, chinaware and mah-jong, and as a utopian socialist society.⁵⁴ Malerba found the previous generation of Leftist Intellectuals responsible for the latter representation, accusing them of “aver creato una *sindrome cinese*... con maoismi importati frettolosamente e fin troppo lestamente abbandonati.”⁵⁵

Malerba exposed his difficulties in understanding China, and argued that “orizzontarsi in questo universo di segni pazzi e di metafore gentili è impresa disperatissima.”⁵⁶ Consequently, he questioned the very experience of travelling in China and the effective possibility of “knowing” China, concluding that the “China” that he had always imagined until his visit, had, in fact, never existed in reality, because “China” is only a word invented by the European travellers: “Si scopre ancora che i cinesi non conoscono la parola “Cina” e che si potrebbe concludere che la “Cina” non esiste, che è soltanto una parola inventata dagli Europei, un mito geografico, una leggenda, una favola, un luogo immaginario.”⁵⁷

artisans working in the streets beneath porches. Taut wires. Dangling wires. Entangled. In a bundle. Partly constructed abandoned buildings. Chickens. Dust. Tiny children resembling stunned, small monkeys,” Arbasino, “Cina,” p. 166.

51. Malerba, *Il viaggiatore sedentario*, p. 20.

52. Malerba, *Il viaggiatore sedentario*, p. 7.

53. As a literary elsewhere to “deposit my own inventions, fables and outstanding mythologies,” Malerba, *Il viaggiatore sedentario*, p. 15. In 1974, Malerba had already published a collection of short stories inspired by Qin China (221–206 BC). See Luigi Malerba, *Le rose imperiali*, Milan: Bompiani, 1974.

54. Malerba, *Il viaggiatore sedentario*, p. 18.

55. “...having created a “Chinese syndrome” by hastily importing Maoist ideologies and quickly abandoning them right after.” Malerba, *Il viaggiatore sedentario*, p. 18.

56. “Orienting ourselves in such a universe of crazy signs and gentle metaphors is, in fact, a most desperate venture.” Malerba, *Il viaggiatore sedentario*, p. 70.

57. “Then you find out that the Chinese do not know the word “China.” And you conclude that “China” does not exist, that it is only a word invented by the European: a geographic myth, a legend, a fable and an imaginary place.” Malerba, *Il viaggiatore sedentario*, p. 71.

Rather than questioning the existence and truthfulness of the idea of China that the Italian intellectuals were chasing while visiting the PRC as Malerba did, Arbasino, shifted his interest to the focal point of such idea. Arbasino questioned the reason why he himself, as well as his fellow travellers, and the previous generations of Italian (or Western) intellectuals found Maoist China interesting. In his concluding remarks, Arbasino associated Maoist China with Peronist Argentina, defining them as “Maoland” and “Borgesland” to emphasize their unreality, thus concluding that Italian intellectuals liked those societies precisely because of their unreality. Most importantly, such unreal geographies enabled the intellectuals to identify themselves in Maoist China’s alterity:

Maolandia e Borgeslandia sono forse Paesi egualmente privi di Realismo, e magari di Realtà, mormora l’immaginario: abitati e vissuti, piuttosto da allegorie, apologhi, archetipi, allusioni, aneddoti, favole, parabole, simboli, miti, gesti, schemi, emblemi, parvenze, demenze, deliri – non di rado elegantemente strutturati. Perciò ci piacciono.⁵⁸

When referring to the allegoric traveller’s experience of the Otherness, Tzvetan Todorov remarks that the narration of the Otherness (that I refer to in this essay as Alterity to emphasize its polarized, dichotomic nature) results from two antithetical processes which invert the salient features of the intellectuals’ own culture and society, projecting them onto the society and culture of a most remote and least known country, which Todorov defines as the “rule of Herodotus” and “rule of Homer.”⁵⁹ Arguably, the *modus operandi* of the two processes is common to all the Italian writers discussed in this essay. Todorov’s analysis of the function the experience of Other spaces in the work of French intellectuals is, however, quite problematic for two main reasons. Firstly, Todorov’s approach eschews any judgments concerning the reliability of the information provided by the intellectuals on the China-as-Other, because the “allegorist operates on the symbolic, not on the material level.”⁶⁰

58. My imaginary whispers that Maoland and Borgesland are probably countries equally void of any realism, and even reality. [These are] countries inhabited by allegories, apologies, archetypes, allusions, anecdotes, fables, parables, symbols, myths, jests, schemes, emblems, semblances, dementias, deliria – all often elegantly structured. That is why we like them.” Arbasino, “Cina,” p. 220.

59. Todorov, *On Human Diversity*, p. 173 and p. 265.

60. Todorov, *On Human Diversity*, p. 349. Todorov’s symbolic take on otherness is clearly reminiscent of Roland Barthes’ *faraway*: that “somewhere in the world” that the observer/intellectual can chose “not to claim to represent or analyse reality” but to “entertain the idea of an unheard-of symbolic system, one altogether detached from our system” in order to try “to write the history of our own [culture’s] obscurity” and “to search the very fissure of the symbolic.” See Roland Barthes, *The Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard, New York: Strauss and Giroux, 1982, pp. 3–4.

Secondly, and more importantly, Todorov's idea of the allegorist traveller operating on the symbolic and not on the material level, deliberately eschews the agency of the political in the process of representation of the Other space by its observer. However, as discussed here, the relevance of the agency of the political on the representation of China as Italy's alterity is a crucial phenomenon.

In the 1920s, when depicting Chinese society for the Italian readership, the "impressionist" writer Mario Appelius, matches his fascist experience with post-imperial China, and promotes the fascist ideology and Italy's – reputedly – subsequent racial and cultural superiority over China. In the 1950s, the "allegorist" writers Franco Fortini and Carlo Cassola, in fact, narrate the People's Republic of China in order to narrate post-WWII Italian culture and society as well as their nostalgia for the years of the Italian Resistance. In the 1980s, the "disenchanted" writers Arbasino and Malerba narrate China as an unfamiliar, different and distant society, criticizing the political violence of the Cultural Revolution. By so doing, they position themselves against the political violence besetting Italy in the 1970s and early 1980s, as well as criticizing the political activism of the previous generation of Italian leftist intellectuals. Thus it is clear that the representations of China produced in the twentieth century travel narratives discussed here did not – and do not – operate in a political vacuum.

Appelius, Fortini, Cassola, Arbasino and Malerba, based their narratives on the textual aspect and narrated Chinas according to their respective ideas of China and of the world. On the other hand, these authors were all primarily concerned with the political significance of their respective ideas about China. Consequently, they consciously used their travel literature to convey political messages reflecting their own ideological beliefs, as well as the respective fascist, anti-fascist, leftist, and anti-leftist dominant discourses in Italian society.⁶¹

61. Even those intellectuals who decided not to travel to/write on China, such as the Italian writer Italo Calvino, did so under the influence of their political beliefs.

Affect labelling as a means of challenging exotic stereotypes in readings of Salwa Bakr's "The Golden Chariot"

Christa Knellwolf King

The discourse of exoticism first established itself in the 16th century. It is a Western mode of the representation of tropical and Arab locations and their inhabitants which continues to dominate travel writing, documentaries and fictional representations of the non-Western world.¹ As Graham Huggan has argued, it involves an act of commodification that either capitalizes on the sensory appeal of non-Western locations, or it gloats on the sensational potentials of third-world poverty.² Written and multi-media material that falls into the category of the exotic is geared towards satisfying their audiences' desire for sensory gratification. It engenders reductive or indeed hostile stereotypes and deprives the people who inhabit "exotic" location of their human complexity.

One author whose work redresses such reductive responses is the acclaimed Egyptical writer Salwa Bakr. Her novel *The Golden Chariot* offers a local perspective on the experience of inmates of an Egyptian women's prison which enables local and international readers to empathize with members of a vilified community. Approaching the text via the English translation by Dinah Manisty,³ my essay asks how this novel seeks to engender compassion for characters that are closely modelled on the women whom Bakr met when she was imprisoned for political reasons.⁴

1. Cf. Benjamin Schmidt, *Inventing Exoticism: Geography, Globalism, and Europe's Early Modern World*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015.

2. Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, London: Routledge, 2001.

3. Salwa Bakr, *The Golden Chariot*, trans. Dinah Manisty, Cairo: The American University of Cairo Press, 2008, first published, in Arabic, in 1991.

4. Personal communication during a workshop in Hittisau, Austria, August 18–19, 2015.

Of course, the text contains details that are lost on a non-Egyptian reader with detailed local knowledge.⁵ But even though readers from different cultural backgrounds will feel differently about certain elements of the narrative, the important point is that the text does nevertheless trigger emotions. For my practical approach, I will analyze the ways in which the text elicits these emotions, while remaining aware that their precise interpretation is culturally conditioned.

My interpretation of Bakr's novel argues that the text includes subtle changes of perspective, and I suggest that the shift between narrative perspectives can be described as a process of alternating between affective (or emotional) empathy and cognitive empathy, the two different types of empathy which have been described in recent research in the field.⁶ In my discussion of representative passages from the novel, I argue that comprehension of the text requires repeated transitions between empathic identification (affective empathy) and a more reflective type of empathy (cognitive empathy). These perspectival transitions not only disrupt a smooth immersion in the text, but they also make it possible to become aware of the emotions that are elicited by the text. This moment of awareness, I argue, provides the basis for readers to become conscious of their own emotional experience. I engage with recent results in the field of affect labelling to suggest that one important effect of this moment of awareness is to strengthen social bonds and enable moments of compassion. My essay uses Salwa Bakr's novel *The Golden Chariot* as a vehicle to discuss the relevance of these results for the interpretation of literary works.

Experiencing empathy with literary characters

Recent neuroscientific studies have demonstrated that empathy embraces two quite different mental processes. Adam Smith explains that "the term empathy has been used to refer to two related human abilities: mental perspective taking (cognitive

5. For an analysis of Bakr's *Golden Chariot* in its Egyptian context, see Caroline Seymour-Jorn, "A New Language: Salwa Bakr on Depicting Egyptian Women's Worlds," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2002; Rasheed El-Enany, "The Madness of Non-Conformity: Woman Versus Society in the Fiction of Salwa Bakr," *Journal of Arabic Literature*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2006; Salwa Bakr and Barbara Harlow, "In the Golden Chariot Things Will be Better," *boundary 2*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1992; Nadine Sinno, "From Confinement to Creativity: Women's Reconfiguration of the Prison and Mental Asylum in Salwa Bakr's 'The Golden Chariot' and Fadia Faqir's 'Pillars of Salt,'" *Journal of Arabic Literature*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2011.

6. For an overview of the two types of empathy, see Adam Smith, "Cognitive Empathy and Emotional Empathy in Human Behaviour and Evolution," *The Psychological Record*, vol. 56, 2006: pp. 3–21. Note that the terms "affective empathy" and "emotional empathy" are used synonymously in neuroscientific publications.

empathy) and the vicarious sharing of emotion (emotional empathy).⁷ To simplify a very complex field of research: the more basic type of empathy (affective / emotional empathy) can be described as an unconscious act of imitating the emotions of another person, while the second type of empathy (cognitive empathy) can be described as a conscious awareness of having an emotion.

Both types of empathy enhance social interactions in important ways: affective empathy enables the emergence of a sense of collective identity, based on an embodied experience of being able to register the emotions of others; while cognitive empathy “enhances social functioning” on a more conscious level because it “enables humans to understand and predict the behaviour of others in terms of attributed mental states.”⁸ Being able to do so, however, depends on the capacity of first registering, and imitating in one’s own mind, the emotions displayed by others. It is only then that conscious reflection is possible. This is why cognitive empathy does not only allow us to make predictions about the future behaviour of others, but also helps us develop the kinds of relationship that satisfy typically human needs for mutual respect and recognition.

Making predictions about the behaviour that is likely to be shown by others (which is the emphasis of research in the field of theory of mind) is in fact already a consequence of becoming conscious of the emotions experienced by others. Matthew Lieberman’s empirical research has concentrated on this moment of recognition, initially concentrating on what happens when the strong emotions of an experimental subject are labelled by an experimenter. In a ground-breaking empirical study, titled “Putting Feelings into Words,” he studied the results of exposing experimental subjects to visual material that aroused intensely negative emotions. Lieberman initiated a new therapeutic method and associated sub-discipline called affect labelling in order to study the ways in which labelling affective states impacts on their experience. He explains that “affect labelling disrupts the affective responses in the limbic system that would otherwise occur in the presence of negative emotional images.”⁹ In a review essay that comments on a just published,

7. Smith, “Cognitive Empathy,” p. 3. See also Peter K. Jonason and Laura Krause, “The Emotional Deficits Associated with the Dark Triad Traits: Cognitive Empathy, Affective Empathy, and Alexithymia,” *Personality and Individual Differences*, vol. 55, 2013: pp. 532–537.

8. Smith, “Cognitive Empathy,” p. 4. Important aspects of cognitive empathy have already been studied in the sub-discipline of theory of mind, or mind-reading. Compare Mark Turner, *Reading Minds: The Study of English in the Age of Cognitive Science*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991. Limitations of space make it impossible to discuss the differences between theory of mind and cognitive empathy in this essay.

9. Matthew D. Lieberman, Naomi I. Eisenberger, Molly J. Crockett, Sabrina M. Tom, Jennifer H. Pfeifer, and Baldwin M. Way, “Putting Feelings Into Words: Affect Labelling Disrupts Amygdala Activity in Response to Affective Stimuli,” *Psychological Science*, vol. 18, no. 5, 2007: p. 426.

empirical study of the consequences of affect labelling in social media,¹⁰ Lieberman states: “several studies of affect labelling suggest that putting feelings into words has the capacity to dampen down those feelings, especially when the labelled emotional state is negative.”¹¹ A lot of further research is still needed in order to explain what kind of exchange takes place between the person who labels the emotions of another and the person whose emotions are labelled. However, the very recent study, which is based on the analysis of over a billion posts on Twitter, conclusively demonstrates that “affect labelling exerts its effects even when people do not deliberately intend to use it to regulate their emotions nor believe in its efficacy.”¹² While the study makes only tentative assertions about the extent to which the study “can provide new insights into the interaction between language and emotion,”¹³ it clearly shows that the act of expressing an emotional state in language has profound consequences.

The study of the Twitter posts has provided empirical evidence which shows that expressing emotions in language (affect labelling) has a calming effect. But what does this have to do with literary experience? The relevance of the topic becomes apparent, if we recognize that what has been studied under the title of affect labelling is only one part of a much larger process of talking about affective states in language. This is an area of research that is profoundly relevant to literary studies since it is of course one of the most important features of literary stories to “talk about” emotion: stories devote a lot of effort to describing affective states and they also use the entire spectrum of terms that can be used to label the emotional experiences of characters. To illustrate this with an example, Bakr’s novel says about the focalizer of her novel:

Aziza felt annoyed and ashamed of herself – she was even overcome by her sense of embarrassment – whenever she recalled those moments in which she had stood listening to the one offer of marriage she had considered accepting – something she would regret for the rest of her life.¹⁴

This passage labels the affects of a literary character. It enumerates the nuanced emotions experienced by Aziza as she recalls turning down an offer of marriage from a charming and wealthy young man in order to remain the mistress of her

10. Rui Fan, Onur Varol, Ali Varamesh, Alexander Barron, Ingrid A. van de Leemput, Marten Scheffer, and Johan Bollen, “The Minute-Scale Dynamics of Online Emotions Reveal the Effects of Affect Labelling,” *Nature Human Behaviour*, vol. 3, January 2019: pp. 92–100.

11. Matthew D. Lieberman, “Affect Labelling in the Age of Social Media,” *Nature Human Behaviour*, vol. 3, Jan. 2019: p. 20.

12. Fan et al., “Online Emotions,” p. 92.

13. Fan et al., “Online Emotions,” p. 97.

14. Bakr, *The Golden Chariot*, p. 16.

stepfather: she felt annoyed, ashamed, deeply embarrassed, and full of regret. The just quoted passage is introduced by the comment that “[e]ach time Aziza was alone in her large solitary cell [...] she would recall the saga of her extraordinary life.”¹⁵ This means that the text also describes Aziza’s pain indirectly, using terms that imply distress and sadness about her feelings without spelling out that she might be feeling abandoned and on her own. In default of empirical evidence, I will report my own response that the explicitly stated emotions of this paragraph felt a lot less overpowering than the descriptive terms, which corroborates the arguments by Lieberman and Fan that affect labelling has a calming effect.¹⁶

What has become known as affect labelling is the study of emotions expressed in language. It draws attention to emotions, and makes it possible to become aware of having an emotional experience (transforming affective empathy into cognitive empathy). Recent research in affect labelling has raised a lot of new questions about what happens when readers re-produce, or imitate, a particular text world in their own minds. However, it has already been demonstrated that readers empathically participate in the emotions which fictional characters are described to be experiencing: readers lose themselves in descriptions of affective states (affective empathy or immersion) and they position themselves in relation to the emotions that are conveyed through passages that elicit cognitive empathy.¹⁷ When decoding the labels attributed to these emotions, such as “Aziza felt annoyed and ashamed,”¹⁸ readers will also experience the effects of such a moment of affect labelling. So far only the calming effects of affect labelling have been empirically demonstrated, but it is not unreasonable to expect that further effects will be studied and scientifically described, once affect labelling has been recognized as an important aspect of reading.

Douglas E. Noll is the first to develop practical applications of affect labelling. In his work in the field of mediation and conflict resolution, he observed that it is possible to de-escalate angry people in 90 seconds or less, if the emotions experienced by them are reflected back to them, using a “you-statement,” such as “you are angry, frustrated, upset, etc.”¹⁹ Noll developed his own technique of affect labelling

15. Bakr, *The Golden Chariot*, p. 16.

16. Compare Lieberman et al., “Putting Feelings into Words,” and Fan et al., “Online Emotions.”

17. For an account of positioning theory, compare: Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré, “Positioning: The Discursive Production of Selves,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, July 2007. Also compare Christa Knellwolf King, “Multiple Positioning: Responses to Cultural Difference in Readings of Abdulrazak Gurnah’s Novel ‘By the Sea,’” *Style* vol. 53, no. 2, 2019.

18. Bakr, *The Golden Chariot*, p. 16.

19. Douglas E. Noll, *De-Escalate: How to Calm Down an Angry Person in 90 Seconds or Less*, New York: Atria Books, 2017.

in the context of the “Prison of Peace” initiative which he co-founded at Valley State Prison for Women in California, in 2012, and which has since spread to a significant number of high-security prisons for men, as well as other facilities for women.²⁰ The extensive experience collected by Noll and the people he continues to train has shown that affect labelling does not only calm down an angry person, but also greatly improves the capacity for dialogue. Furthermore, he realized that the technique works across boundaries of culture, age, gender, and political conviction.²¹ Noll emphasizes that affect labelling rapidly calms down escalated individuals because it validates their emotions and makes them feel accepted in their full humanity. Beyond the immediate aim of calming down an escalated person, Noll discovered that the process of labelling the emotions experienced by another person engenders a relationship of compassion. When working in an intercultural environment, it is of course important to bear in mind that the precise triggers for fear, anger, joy, sadness, frustration etc, are culturally conditioned, but Noll’s work shows that affect labelling can be practiced across cultural boundaries because it responds to the deeply human need to have our emotions recognized and validated by other human beings.

Reading fictional works similarly invites us to recognize and empathically respond to the emotions ascribed to characters from a vast array of social and cultural backgrounds. Empirical studies of the effects of reading have demonstrated that literary stories, films and theatre are powerful means of expanding the human capacity for compassion.²² In my essay, I revisit this claim in the light of recent descriptions of empathy as a faculty that consists of two distinct but interrelated faculties, suggesting that these subdivisions can shed new light on the long-recognized argument that the comprehension of a literary text involves a process of moving back and forth between immersion and critical reflection.²³ In other words, the

20. For a documentary of the Prison of Peace initiative, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qttBkDyPGWw&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR3DdLdTv89IMvGtC2-fE6ytzURh6GozpCzvqvBMDwvdiOE0EqXigrqRMB0>, accessed February 6, 2019.

21. Personal communications in the context of training as a coach and facilitator with Douglas E. Noll since Nov. 2018. I would like to take this opportunity to thank him for making a number of inspiring suggestions.

22. Compare, for example, Linda A. Deloney and C. James Graham, “Developments: Wit: Using Drama to Teach First-Year Medical Students about Empathy and Compassion,” *Teaching and Learning in Medicine*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2003.

23. That the reading process involves a regular alternation between immersion and critical reflection was already observed by Wolfgang Iser, for example in his essay, “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach,” *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge, 1972, London: Longman, 1988, pp. 212–228.

spontaneous process of sharing emotions is paralleled with affective empathy while the act of conscious reflection is compared with cognitive empathy.

Readers' ability to alternate between immersion and reflection also draws attention to the significance of language, suggesting that the act of encapsulating an emotion in a word or concept is the first step towards having control over it.²⁴ Empirical evidence that supports this conclusion has been supplied by research on "emotional granularity," the possession of a subtly differentiated vocabulary for the description of affective states. It has been shown that mastering a large vocabulary of terms for putting affective states into words improves the ability of experimental subjects to regulate their emotions and feel in control.²⁵ The development of emotional granularity is reinforced in a number of different ways by literary stories, especially by those that devote a lot of effort to the nuanced description of their character's precise state of mind.

Readers share a lot of knowledge about the world with fictional characters; otherwise they would not be able to understand what a particular narrative is about. However, the common ground goes far beyond a staple of cognitive knowledge about cultural conventions, language and the laws of imaginary worlds. For example, emotions are also crucial elements of character descriptions. Moreover, the process of unconsciously absorbing them, on the one hand, and registering them more consciously, on the other hand, plays a crucial role in the experience of literature. For example, we can enter into great intimacy with characters like Aziza because she is described to experience deeply human emotions, and her story is told in a manner that instils empathy in most of her readers.²⁶

Keith Oatley has suggested that "people form relations with fictional characters."²⁷ When we recreate an imaginary world in our minds, our minds do not simply serve as platforms on which characters and scenes are performed, but there is also a certain aspect of the self that participates in the performance. The empirical work conducted by Oatley shows that readers respond to fictional characters as if they were real, even if the hypothesis of reality ("as if") does not morph into

24. For a discussion of the broader context of emotion regulation, compare Lisa Feldman Barrett, *How Emotions are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

25. Compare, for example, Michele M. Tugade, Barbara L. Fredrickson, and Lisa Feldman Barrett, "Psychological Resilience and Positive Emotional Granularity: Examining the Benefits of Positive Emotions on Coping and Health," *Journal of Personality*, vol. 72, no. 6, December 2004.

26. Cf. Patrick Colm Hogan, *The Mind and its Stories: Narrative Universals and Human Emotion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

27. Keith Oatley, "Fiction: Simulation of Social Worlds," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, vol. 20, no. 8, 2016: p. 623.

a belief that they are real. Oatley concludes that readers of fiction have a “deeper identification and understanding of the protagonist” because they have to figure out the emotions experienced by a character at that particular moment.²⁸ In the process of reading, our emotions are called upon and empathy is triggered in multiple ways, precisely because the process of decoding the meanings of the text requires us to move back and forth between empathic immersion and moments of cognitive reflection. The next sections of this essay discuss the relevance of these arguments for the interpretation of Bakr’s novel.

The life story of an Egyptian prisoner

Bakr adopts a third-person singular narrative point of view in order to describe about a dozen inmates of a women’s prison in Cairo. Aziza is the main focalizer of the narrative, and it is her reflections about fellow inmates that initiate an account of the events that caused them to be condemned to imprisonment. It is a series of tragedies that strongly appeals to the readers’ capacity to experience empathy, even though they are told in an unsentimental manner.

The narrative explains that Aziza “first entered the women’s prison just before she reached the age of forty, sentenced to life for killing her stepfather, without any reason that the court could ascertain.”²⁹ It mentions that Aziza inhabits a single cell in “the special block for the elderly and disabled,”³⁰ and it describes a life of deprivation, pervaded by “the sound of crying, the habitual quarrels between the inmates over the bathroom, the fights over food and the perpetual shrieks of rebuke from the warders.”³¹ These details highlight the misery and pain of the situation, evoking an empathic awareness of what it might feel like to witness the daily conflicts between inmates and warders. It is worth noting, however, that the narrative draws attention to the pain, frustration, and sadness of a prisoner’s life, but it does not invite disgust or outrage. While it engenders a sense of how uncomfortable Aziza’s situation is, the narrative describes the prisoners as people who have preserved their human dignity.

The narrative reports Aziza’s thoughts about her own life but it also uses a third-person singular voice to describe crucial events. For example, it describes the moment when Aziza’s stepfather first abused her:

28. Oatley, “Fiction,” p. 621.

29. Bakr, *The Golden Chariot*, p. 7.

30. Bakr, *The Golden Chariot*, p. 4.

31. Bakr, *The Golden Chariot*, p. 3.

After a while she realized that his kisses were different from those he used to give her on her cheek – new sensations overwhelmed her little body which should never have experienced such feelings so young – the little body which had not yet ventured beyond the world of innocence.³²

This passage describes the moment when Aziza was around 10 years old, when her stepfather abused his power and turned her into his mistress. It blends a description of Aziza's own experience – the discomfort that accompanied her realization that something strange was happening – with the observer's statement that "her little body should never have experienced such feelings." To begin with, the focus is on the experience and the emotions of the character, evoking a moment of intense discomfort. When we are told that "she realized that his kisses were different," the text outlines the young girl's inability to know her own feelings at the moment of being abused. When the text uses overt judgemental terms like "should never," and repeats the phrase "the little body" in combination with the term "innocence," it elicits anger and indignation. The perspective which outlines the uncertain emotional response of the young girl is contrasted with a more distant perspective which invites readers to share a sense of moral indignation.

However, there is also a great deal of ambiguity and uncertainty about the evolution of Aziza's emotions in response to receiving a lot of attention from her step-father after he has established her as his mistress. On the level of narrative, the text requires readers to notice that she has seriously contradictory emotions. When she talks about her own role in an abusive relationship that lasted for approximately 30 years, she reveals that her feelings of pride about receiving valuable presents are mingled with sadness, regret and despair about missing out on the opportunity to marry a man of her own age.

The text does not analyse her motivations. It simply tells us that after her step-father forced her to submit sexually, Aziza enters into a tacitly acknowledged ménage-à-trois with him and her blind mother. When she has turned into a young woman, she does not terminate this situation. She ends up killing him, not because she wants to punish him for his incestuous seduction, but because he was about to abandon her and marry another woman after the death of her mother. Or rather, she kills him because she refuses to let him terminate their long-term relationship.

The narrative that describes the reasons for Aziza's imprisonment revolves around her reasons for stabbing her step-father. The narrative informs us that "[b]efore the murder she dreamt up many original ways to kill him in a manner befitting the original man she had loved so long."³³ The narrative voice unambiguously

32. Bakr, *The Golden Chariot*, p. 10.

33. Bakr, *The Golden Chariot*, p. 8.

refers to her act of killing him as “murder,” but it also engenders empathy for her conflicted situation. By describing her continuing loyalty to a man who violated her, the novel outlines a situation of long-standing emotional abuse which caused her a great deal of inner conflict. The narrative perspective enters her inner world when it reports her fantasies of revenge, one of which was to drug him and “then coating him with vast quantities of boiling dark-coloured chocolate until it hardened into an enormous mound of sweetness.”³⁴ This is a fantasy of revenge that seeks to kill him with lethal sweetness, which is reminiscent of the way in which he destroyed her life. As readers, we are invited to witness, or indeed share, the pleasure of her fantasy, but we end up being told that she rejects this idea because it is too scandalous.

A character that uses boiling chocolate as an instrument of murder would in all likelihood have been experienced as an exotic stereotype. In order to avoid such a response, Bakr has her narrator comment: “Aziza did not use any of the inventive plans she had hatched for a beautiful and truly original murder. She dreaded the scandal that would follow if her secret were found out.” The narrator goes on to tell us how she killed him:

So she decided to use the knife since it was the quickest and surest way of achieving what she wanted, and gave her the element of surprise which she herself had experienced that day in the distant past when she was still a little girl with pigtails, a little girl whose childhood fate had snatched from her.³⁵

The explanation of the method which Aziza chooses to kill her step-father reveals that her memory of being violated is still fresh. Her desire to retaliate with a similar act of violent surprise shows that she has not yet got over the experience of being raped. No details of the remembered moment “in the distant past” are given and the passage does not even attribute blame to the perpetrator, but instead states that it was “fate” that had snatched her childhood from her. When the narrative evokes a vivid memory of the child at the moment of being abused, it implies that Aziza’s emotions have not yet been digested and that even as an old woman, Aziza has not got over the humiliation and violence of being abused. This is to say, readers are encouraged to feel compassion for an aging person who still smarts about being betrayed by her step-father.

34. Bakr, *The Golden Chariot*, p. 8.

35. Bakr, *The Golden Chariot*, p. 9.

Defusing the destructive power of stereotypes

The characters of Bakr's *Golden Chariot* could easily be described in a manner that would appeal to the Western taste for sensationalist exoticism. There are prisoners who have murdered their husbands or members of the family, there are drug dealers and prostitutes, there are prisoners who have chosen to be condemned in the stead of somebody else, and there are some who were forced to cover up for a member of the family. There is violence, abuse and corruption. It is such a dismal place that several prisoners have lost their sanity as a result of their suffering. However, Bakr describes her characters in a manner that prevents them from being read as stereotypes. She does so in at least two different ways: first, the life stories of the characters burgeon with deeply human details; and second, Bakr never sentimentalizes the suffering of her characters, but instead makes it possible for her readers to feel empathy for their pain. Bakr is honest and unsentimental in the description of her main character: Aziza is getting old, her teeth are "now filthy, blackened through neglect and continual smoking,"³⁶ and she demonstrates what the novel explicitly calls symptoms of "madness."³⁷ However, Aziza is shown to be a complex character, who possesses selfish traits as well as a capacity for kindness and compassion. She is shown to retain her dignity in the face of the brutalizing circumstances of the prison.

Even though Bakr's language elicits strong emotional responses in her readers, her descriptions discourage responses of contempt or open dislike. She achieves this effect by means of contrasting potentially negative descriptions with a different way of seeing. In the following passage, Aziza reports how she saw a character who provoked her disgust before she had heard her story:

Umm Ragab had a small aged face, full of fine wrinkles, and red hair which was almost light orange from too much dyeing with henna. This thick, frizzly tousled mop of hair made her look as if the eternal flame had settled on her head. However, the way Aziza saw this head was different, and somewhat strange. She felt it resembled a little, rotten melon with decayed skin which had darkened. Perhaps this was due to the vile, putrid smell which clung to Umm Ragab, about which Aziza made rude comments every time she passed or approached her.³⁸

This is the portrait of an old woman who is neglecting personal hygiene. It would be easy to ridicule her either as a comic figure, or her character might be used to

36. Bakr, *The Golden Chariot*, p. 6.

37. Bakr, *The Golden Chariot*, p. 23.

38. Bakr, *The Golden Chariot*, p. 24.

draw a sensational or grotesque picture of the prison as a place of abjection. But this does not happen. Instead of satisfying the readers' taste for the examples of what might be called the ugly exotic, the narrative parallels a more neutral third-person singular voice with an account of how Aziza first saw Umm Ragab. The comment that Umm Ragab "had a small aged face" with "*fine* wrinkles" suggests that there is something delicate about her appearance, in spite of everything. The metaphorical description that her hair looked like the "eternal flame" engenders surprise, but it is not used as a source of mockery. Aziza's originally hostile view of Umm Ragab is reinforced by the image of the "rotten melon" but even this clearly negative comment is not exploited as a moment of disgust. When the text explains that Aziza's view was "somewhat strange," it implies that she might be unfair in her derogatory perception. It is only now that the text mentions Umm Ragab's smell, which is substantiated three pages later with the comment that she "had a pathological aversion to soap and water."³⁹ Rather than being used as a detail to judge her, it corroborates the picture of a complete outcast. Instead of describing her in a way that would elicit contempt, the text encourages us to empathize with her pain, and to feel compassion.

The possibility to feel compassion

Exotic narratives cater for an almost insatiable appetite for otherness. Literary works like Bakr's *Golden Chariot*, by contrast, challenge exoticism and otherness by means of drawing attention to the humanity of the people who inhabit places that are sometimes described as exotic.

Bakr's novel builds bridges between her readers and her characters precisely because she describes them as experiencing deeply human emotions at the same time as she shows them to be firmly grounded in their cultural contexts. When we first encounter Aziza, her life is sustained by her preoccupation with the attempt to find a means of salvation for those who have suffered in the women's prison. The golden chariot is the compensatory fantasy of an old woman who is coming to the end of a life of suffering. Although she sometimes confuses reality and fiction, Aziza demonstrates a great deal of compassion for her fellow prisoners. This is demonstrated most notably by her belief that all her fellow-sufferers should join her in the golden chariot, drawn by winged horses, as a means of escaping from imprisonment.

39. Bakr, *The Golden Chariot*, p. 27.

From the first, Aziza is described as a character who is sensitive to the few elements of beauty that have remained in her deprived life. She is a Muslim believer who derives joy from listening to the “voices of Sheikh Abdel Baset or Mohamet Rifaat chanting beautiful Qur’anic recitations,” and she is described as giving “a deep sigh when the Sheikh came to the comforting words of the Wise and Almighty: ‘For you who are punished there is life, O most wise!’”⁴⁰

Aziza’s fantasy of the golden chariot is a blend between daydreaming and her religiously founded belief in redemption and release from suffering. The narrative finishes by intertwining the description of how her fantasy becomes true with the account of her own death. At first everything goes smoothly but then her pleasure about taking leave of the “inhuman world of that fearful prison” is confounded by the arrival of the prison governor and warders.⁴¹ At this stage, the glitzy atmosphere, which is literally compared to a “superb nightclub,” is blended with the description of how “one clot after another formed in her brain,” initiating her “final struggle with death.” The novel concludes with the following paragraph:

Aziza’s heart began to beat at an alarming rate but she held onto her last breath of life until she was convinced that the women were safely back in the chariot and the windows and doors securely locked. Only then could the white horses lift their hooves and start to fly, with their golden wings, up to heaven.⁴²

Aziza’s fantasy of escape could never have been realized in real life. The blood clots which are forming in her brain make it clear that escape is only available at the moment of death: the ultimate instance of otherness. However, even during her final struggle, Aziza is sustained by her loving attachment and care for the other women. The narrative adopts a surreal point of view when it comments that the white horses can fly up to heaven once the last breath has expired and the fantasy has reached its conclusion.

Although the novel concludes on a positive note, Bakr refrains from sentimentalizing the moment of death. As concerns the world of the prison, there certainly is no closure. Aziza’s death may terminate her role as focalizer of the narrative, but the world of the prison harbours a vast number of additional tales, which could also be embraced by what Caroline Seymour-Jorn describes as Bakr’s masterful use of the Arabesque as a narrative technique.⁴³ Although there is no happy ending, the

40. Bakr, *The Golden Chariot*, pp. 3–4.

41. Bakr, *The Golden Chariot*, p. 193.

42. Bakr, *The Golden Chariot*, p. 193.

43. Seymour-Jorn, “A New Language,” pp. 167–169.

novel finishes on a note of compassion for Aziza and the inmates of the prison in which she spent so many years.

My essay has discussed the ways in which literary works engage with emotions, in order to demonstrate that reading develops important social skills. It has argued that works like Bakr's novel engender affective empathy by showing how a character feels; however, they also enhance cognitive empathy by listing terms that explicitly name the emotions experienced by their characters. The essay has used the latest empirical research from the field of affect labelling, the sub-discipline that has evolved to research the effects of language on the experience of emotions. It has argued that engaging with emotions expressed in language is not only an important part of understanding the meanings of a literary text, but also improves readers' capacity to feel compassion.

Bakr's novel has been discussed as an example of the ways in which literary works alternate between encouraging immersion (affective empathy) and reflective distance (cognitive empathy). The resulting oscillation between "feeling with a character" (affective empathy) and reading the terms that describe how a character like Aziza experiences what is happening (cognitive empathy) subverts the possibility of a smooth identification with this character. A further effect of this is that readers are discouraged from making easy assumptions about the real cultural communities to which fictional characters belong.

My essay has argued that Bakr's subtle description of emotions plays an important role in the subversion of the stereotypes about Egyptian women which are disseminated by exoticizing publications. Bakr's respectful description engenders compassion for the vilified community of prisoners, and it opens up a perspective on how the people on whom her characters are based might think and feel. Of course, it is crucial to remain aware that the reasons for the experience of emotions are culturally conditioned. However, the ability to recognize that emotions are being experienced is a deeply human quality. Even if the precise emotions experienced by members of a different cultural community can only be guessed at, a sense of connectedness and compassion can be established, if readers are open to these emotions and acknowledge them as valid expressions of another human being.

Exoticization of Russia and the Russian people in Polish literature

Barbara Sobczak and Monika Wójciak

Our essay seeks to describe the strategies for exoticizing Russia and Russians in Polish literature in the context of two essential problems from Poland's perspective: firstly, Russia's absence in postcolonial discourse and the reasons for excluding the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union from research into colonialism and its consequences in Eastern Europe and Asia; and secondly, the absence of Polish literature and experience in postcolonial studies, which we believe makes the picture incomplete. Excluding both Russia and the countries annexed by Russia, by whatever means in the last few centuries, has left gaps and blanks on the postcolonial world map.

The absence of Russia in postcolonial discourse and its reasons

This may come as a surprise, considering that postcolonialism seeks to understand and analyze complex phenomena related to colonialism across a wide spectrum of references, including the history of literature, socio-political reality, ethnography, anthropology, religion, and geography. After all, the postcolonial perspective is founded on the belief that the experience and ideas of colonialism have a major impact on the perception of reality, both through literary works created in the Empire and through the creative output of the subordinated nations and communities. In the first case, the imperial context leads to apology or acceptance of colonialism; in the second, it will stimulate resistance or ultimately lead to adjustment.

So why wasn't Russia included in postcolonial studies which were founded at Western European universities? In his seminal work *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said writes:

Russia, however, acquired its imperial territories almost exclusively by adjacence, that is to say, taking territories that are east or south of the actual borders of Russia. Unlike Britain or France, which jumped thousands of miles beyond their own borders to other continents, Russia moved to swallow whatever lands or people stood next to its borders, which in the process kept moving further and further east and south.¹

Obviously, this also applied to the territories west or north of Russian borders. As pointed out by Ewa Thompson, author of the study *Imperial Knowledge* which proved to be a polemic among American postcolonial scholars, the adjacency of the Empire and its colonies, the proximity of conquered territories, and the lack of distance between the metropole and its peripheries had a heavy bearing on the way Russia is perceived.² The Russian Empire, and after 1917 the Soviet Union, extended its territory through wars, annexations and diplomatic manoeuvres, which were essentially equivalent to the overseas conquests of European powers, albeit not devoid of their own specific characteristics. Although the boundary between the metropole and its peripheries may not have been as spectacular as in the case of other colonial powers, the very ideas of conquest and subordination were identical. Thompson also identified two other reasons for leaving Russia out of the postcolonial discourse. One of them is language. The English terms “Russia” and “Russian” do not embrace Russia’s multinational and multicultural nature completely, as Russia sprawls over a large territory and includes different regions, together with their culture, language and identity. Therefore, the English terms are not only misleading, but are also used as an alibi of sorts for the country’s colonial practices.

The second problem is related to the distribution of power and knowledge between the metropole and its peripheries. According to Thompson, Russian colonialism was based purely on power.³ Unlike Western colonial empires, Russia did not offer its cultural heritage or advances in science and technology to the colonies. Moreover, Russia lacked the philosophy to justify its conquests, and created no intellectual “infrastructure” in annexed countries. On the contrary, it was the colonies that brought added value to Russian culture or quite ostentatiously demonstrated and exposed the inferiority of the Russian civilization (mainly through literature).

1. Edward Said, *Kultura i imperializm (Culture and Imperialism)*, trans. by M. Wyrwas-Wiśniewska, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego: Kraków, 2009, p. 8.

2. Ewa Thompson, *Trubadurzy Imperium. Literatura rosyjska i kolonializm (Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism)*, Universitas: Kraków, 2000.

3. Cf. Thompson, *Trubadurzy Imperium*, pp. 23–47.

The attempts to orientalize Russia: A mysterious “Russian soul”

At this point, we should discuss how Russia was and is perceived in the Western world, as this may be the heart of the matter. Said introduces three fundamental notions: namely, imperialism, colonialism and orientalism.⁴ Without any doubt, the first two apply to Russia by all means; however, the third concept is rather problematic. According to Said, the image of people of the Orient was produced by Europeans, who divided the world into “us” and “them.” But is Russia one of “us,” then? Russia’s identity is not absolutely European, and it lacks the unconditional sense of belonging to the cultural community of Western Europe. Since its very beginnings, Russia has been torn between the East and the West, and the Great Schism and two centuries under the Mongolian rule only made matters worse. Until the eighteenth century, Russia had been perceived as a “primitive and barbaric realm,” in the words of European travellers and diplomats who made an attempt at confronting the Russian and Western discourse. They tended to orientalize Russia in order to conquer and subordinate it. The situation changed with Peter the Great’s ascension to the throne, when Russia gained imperial power and became a partner to Western European powers, albeit on special terms. The upshot was that, in the end, Russia has neither been orientalized nor included in the family of European powers. The West failed to impose its own vision of “Russianness”, and as Russia’s political power grew, the Eastern superpower started to negotiate its image with the West and to contribute to the European narrative about Russia. An important part of the Russian self-narrative, embraced by the West in its story about Russia, is the concept of the “Russian soul”. It denotes hospitality, spontaneity, a “no compromise” attitude, the emotional often prevailing over the rational, and a tendency to lean towards despair and melancholy. The “Russian soul” is made up of extremes and paradoxes, which is beyond comprehension for the Westerners. The vision of a mysterious and enigmatic country that is Russia was consistently and effectively forged by Russian writers (including Fyodor Tyutchev, Alexander Pushkin and Leo Tolstoy), thus building a coherent and convincing narrative.

Hence, despite its political reach and dimension, Russia is different from typical empires. Neither is it part of the Orient. Rather, it has forged its own unique story, which was accepted and embraced by the Western world only to some extent. This has led to a certain confusion, which is reflected in contemporary postcolonial discourse. The result of this lack of clarity is that Russia is excluded from this discourse completely.

4. Edward Said presented his theories on imperialism, colonialism and orientalism primarily in his two key publications: *Orientalism*, Pantheon Books: New York, 1978, and *Culture and Imperialism*, Knopf: New York, 1993.

In the introduction to *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said mentions “the rather wide geographical and historical range attempted in this book”.⁵ Indeed, the publication discusses two centuries of the complex colonial and postcolonial relations between the “First World” and “Third World” cultures. This division is preserved in a number of studies published by leading postcolonial theorists, such as Fredric Jameson, who makes the following quite explicit statement in his paper *Modernism and Imperialism*:

Contemporary theorists have been concerned with the internal dynamics of the relationship between First and Third World countries (...), which is now very precisely what the word “imperialism” means for us.⁶

But Russia does not fall into either of those two categories; together with its former satellite states in Europe and Asia, Russia constitutes the “Second World.”

In this essay, we have stressed the need for new cognitive dimensions, as well as the potential offered by new studies which include Russia and countries annexed by Russia in the discourse. Without making any claims, we have highlighted this new opportunity for postcolonial researchers. Studies in relation to and within the “Second World” would fill in the blanks in the discourse, and would justify and describe the phenomenon known as “white colonialism”. Without a doubt, both the Russian Empire and its twentieth-century successor, the Soviet Union, deserve to be taken into account in any contemporary critique of imperialism and its impact on culture.

The absence of Polish literature in postcolonial discourse

The second problem brought up earlier in the introduction is the absence of Poland in postcolonial discourse. We might ask why Ireland is considered a postcolonial state – but not Poland? In *The Captive Mind*, an important and ground-breaking book which was heavily discussed in the West, Czesław Miłosz claims that “those who have been defeated are forgotten forever”.⁷ In her analysis of Miłosz’s work, Clare Cavanagh uses the term “strategic forgetfulness”, which stems from the more or less intentional oversight of certain areas of reflection. According to Cavanagh, this “strategic forgetfulness” makes uneasy even those critics who themselves

5. Said, *Kultura i imperializm*, pp. IX–XXVII.

6. Fredric Jameson, *Modernism and Imperialism*, in Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson and Edward Said, *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990, pp. 47–48.

7. Czesław Miłosz, *Zniewolony umysł*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1989, pp. 228–229.

struggle to rectify the biased, falsified, or unwritten histories of the imperial West.⁸ In the case of Poland, however, attention should be drawn to forgetfulness of a different kind. In the postcolonial discourse on Russia, Poland is also omitted altogether. Therefore, until historical facts are duly acknowledged, Polish experience will never gain the place it deserves in the discourse. These symbiotic interdependencies offer a chance not only for revisiting history, but also scientific conclusions.

The second reason for Poland's absence in postcolonial discourse is discussed by Dariusz Skórczewski in his paper *Teoria-literatura-dyskurs. Pejzaż postkolonialny*. According to the author, the blame is on geopolitics, because when postcolonial studies were established in American and British universities, Poles were still behind the "iron curtain", unaware of the affinity of and analogies between their own experience and the history of nations conquered in other continents.

As Skórczewski puts it,

Our lives were put on hold, as we waited to regain our sovereignty and return to the Western community of free and independent states, which was expected to finally put an end to the long and destructive Russian hegemony. We were not aware that our experience would fit very well within the theoretical models developed by Western academics.⁹

The fact that Poland was largely omitted by researchers is justified by such conclusions, but only partially. There is at least one more factor which determined the state of postcolonial research: namely, the obsolete structure of Slavic studies in the USA, which is based, quite paradoxically, on the imperial model dating back to the 1950s, favouring the centre (or metropole) at the expense of the peripheries (the nations which have lost their sovereignty). This resembles the case of the former British colonies, whose literature was treated marginally in the early 1980s by English literature studies, with a clear bias towards British or American literature while ignoring or even "hijacking" the literary traditions other than "purely" British. By the same token, American Slavic studies, dominated by Russian and Soviet historians and Russian language experts worshipping Pushkin, Tolstoy and the Russian ballet, tend to downplay the importance of Central and Eastern European literatures. This only supports the imperial vision of culture which sees these literatures as lower (and therefore unequal) in status to the "great" Russian literature. As such, American

8. Clare Cavanagh, Clare. "Postcolonial Poland". *Common Knowledge*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2004, pp. 82–92. *Project MUSE*, muse.jhu.edu/article/49555. In Polish "Postkolonialna Polska. Biała plama na mapie współczesnej teorii (Postcolonial Poland: An Empty Space on the Map of Current Theory)", trans. by Tomasz Kunz, *Teksty Drugie*, 2–3, 2003, pp. 61–77.

9. Dariusz Skórczewski, *Teoria-literatura-dyskurs. Pejzaż postkolonialny*, Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2013, p. 5.

Slavic studies do not and cannot engage in a debate with the methodologies proposed by Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak or Leela Gandhi.¹⁰

Let us now take this opportunity to present Poland's side of the story. In the late eighteenth century, Poland was partitioned by three imperial powers – the Russian Empire, the Kingdom of Prussia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. As a result, Poland literally disappeared from the map of Europe for more than one hundred years, existing only in the realm of “imaginative geography,” as Said put it. After the Second World War, Poland found itself directly within the orbit of the Soviet Union. All in all, it lost sovereignty for more than two centuries. As the American Slavist Clare Cavanagh so aptly puts it, it would be difficult to find more impressive postcolonial references.¹¹ To some extent, the exclusion of Poland from postcolonial reflections may be justified. In addition to the circumstances discussed above, we must remember that among the leading authors of postcolonial publications (including Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, and Leela Gandhi),¹² there are no Polish researchers and theorists, neither is Poland nor its experience mentioned in their studies. There is, however, a link between Polish history and postcolonial criticism; namely, Joseph Conrad. Western theorists, and most notably Said, constantly give voice to Conrad by analyzing his work and referring to his experiences. Sadly, in doing so, they either ignore or downplay his Polish roots. Conrad, on the contrary, referred to himself as *homo duplex* and drew on his East European experience in describing the rapid rise of Western empires. Conrad's life and literary works show a destructive mark left by both Eastern and Western empires and, in a purely biographical dimension, a person torn between the East and the West. In *A Note on the Polish Problem*, Conrad shows his country compressed between the barbaric and alien “Russian Slavism” of the imperial East and the superpowers of the rational and civilized West.¹³ What Said sees in *Heart of Darkness*,

10. Said, *Orientalism*; Gayatri C. Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, in Cary Nelson, Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, University of Illinois Press: Urbana, 1988, pp. 271–313; Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Columbia University Press: New York, 1998.

11. Cavanagh, *Postkolonialna Polska*, p. 63.

12. In addition to the above-mentioned works by Said, a number of important publications deserve a mention, including Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak*; Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge: New York and London, 1994; or Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory*. Obviously, this list of names and publications is by no means exhaustive; in this essay we wanted to emphasize the dominance of postcolonial studies covering specific territories and relations.

13. Joseph Conrad, *A Note on the Polish Problem* (*Nota w sprawie polskiej*), trans. Z. Najder, in Joseph Conrad: *Szkice polityczne, Dzieła*, Vol. 28, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy: Warszawa, 1996. The *Note* was written in 1916, when Poland was still partitioned.

Nostromo and *Lord Jim* is Conrad's criticism of Western imperialism.¹⁴ However, he ignores the book *Under Western Eyes*, in which Conrad suggestively predicted the upcoming revolutionary violence in the Russian empire.¹⁵ The book is of great value and makes a strong impression, yet it has never been thoroughly discussed in Western critiques of Conrad's literary work, especially in the context of the matter in question.¹⁶ And, after all, it was Conrad's biography torn between the two worlds that gave him the "double view," which ultimately led to the formulation of a profoundly deep and accurate conclusion: that both the West and the East resisted the temptation of building their empires by resorting to barbaric ways and means. The real pan-European criticism of imperialism based on Conrad's literary work still remains a challenge, and is a challenge worth taking. Most prominent Polish writers shared Conrad's distrust of the idea of imperialism, which has been rooted in the Judeo-Christian civilization since its early days. *Under Western Eyes* is the sum of Conrad's reflections on Russia, its history, modern times, political role, and paradoxes. Banned in communist times in Poland, the book is an inherent part of the broadly defined Polish literature devoted to Russia.

The relationship between Poland (colony) and Russia (colonial power) is different from the relationship between Western empires and their colonies. In addition to the circumstances outlined above, the sense of "national identity" and the constituent elements of both the Russian nation and the nations conquered by Russia play a key role.¹⁷ When Poland fell under the Russian rule, it was a uniform nation;

14. First publication dates: Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*, 1900, *Heart of Darkness*, 1902, *Nostromo*, 1904.

15. *Under Western Eyes* was first published in 1911, having been inspired by the Russian Revolution of 1905. For many years, it was considered anti-Russian and anti-revolutionary, and as such it was banned in Poland by the communist regime. It revolves around the conflict between the authoritarian state and revolutionary rebellion. Notably, Conrad criticized both the authoritarian rule and the chaotic and anarchistic social revolution.

16. The book was discussed or mentioned by authors such as Jeffrey Berman, *Introduction to Conrad and the Russians*, *Conradiana*, 9/3, 1977, pp. 269–74; Edward Crankshaw, "Conrad and Russia", in *Joseph Conrad: A Commemoration*, ed. Norman Sherry, London, 1974, pp. 91–104; David Leon Higdon, "Conrad: Under Western Eyes, and the Mysteries of Revision," *The Review of English Studies*, vol. XXXIX, Issue 154, 1 May 1988, pp. 231–244. References to Conrad's book are also found in the publications of Morton Zabel, Andrew Long, and Nicole M. Rizzuto. However, they do not include any mention of Poland or Polish-Russian relations.

17. As far as the Polish nation is concerned, the essential constituent elements include its history, tradition, language and religion. They bring the society together and form the cornerstones of Poland's uniform culture. No such uniformity or unity exists in Russia; therefore, the defining features of the Russian empire will be quite different. The duality of Poland's experience also comes into play, as at certain points in history it was Poland that colonized eastern territories. Similarly, Russia was also colonized by the Mongolian Empire.

it surrendered to the Russian expansionist forces in a military and political sense, but it resisted the invasion by Russian culture. What is more, as Ewa Thompson claims, the nations conquered by the Russian Empire or annexed by the Soviet Union often were (or at least believed to be) culturally superior to Russia and its culture. This manifests itself also in the literature, with Polish writers often creating a disparaging image of Russia by downplaying its cultural values and playing with stereotypes and generalizations. Poles made an attempt to create their own narrative of Russia, a narrative that exoticizes it in a sense. In this context, however, the notion of exoticization takes on a different meaning, which we will describe below in more detail. It must be mentioned at this point that Polish narrative was driven by a toxic relationship with its hegemon.

Polish-Russian relations and the image of Russia and Russian people

The Polish story about Russia is determined by a wide-ranging, diverse and always emotional array of perceptions and associations. Analysis of literary works reveals a long-standing tendency of reinforcing and maintaining a stereotypical image of Russia and Russians.¹⁸ Irrespective of the historical variables and individual circumstances of different writers, the stereotypical image of a Russian is invariably negative in Poland:

A Russian is our long-time enemy, aggressor, invader, occupant, and oppressor, despotic and brutal at the same time, but also forever enslaved, an Asian who is a far cry from European standards, and more recently a Bolshevik and communist; true, he is often a hospitable, open, honest and cordial person in the real Slavic style, but at the same time a drunk, not up to date, stupid and primitive.¹⁹

Contempt is inherent in the references to Russian stereotypes. Polish identity has always been built in reference to the West, as the embodiment of civilization and culture. Russia, on the other hand, is perceived as the opposite of Western Europe, and differences are more than obvious.²⁰ This negatively perceived “otherness” relates also to the country’s political tradition and social fabric. Russia is an authoritarian and despotic state, run for centuries by tsars, tyrants of the past, and now

18. Andrzej Kępiński, *Lach i Moskal. Z dziejów stereotypów*, Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1990.

19. Bogdan Walczak, *Polska-Rosja przez pryzmat języka*, in: Jerzy Fiečko, ed., *Obraz Polski i Rosji w literaturze polskiej*, Poznań: Wydawnictwo PTPN, 2012, p. 24.

20. Jan S. Bystron, *Dzieje obyczajów w dawnej Polsce. Wiek XVI–XVIII*, Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1976, vol.1, p. 116.

led by Vladimir Putin, the successor of the “superpower” ideology. In Poland, a traditionally democratic country cultivating the ideas of freedom, tolerance and respect for citizens’ rights, Russian despotism has always been considered culturally alien, and it stigmatized both Russia and Russians.²¹

This perception has its origins in the difficult Polish-Russian relations based on centuries of armed conflicts, dating back to the sixteenth century when Russia became Poland’s direct neighbour and when the political and diplomatic relations between the two countries began. Unfortunately, the first contacts between Poland and its new eastern neighbour ushered in the first wars. In the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the Poles formulated their opinion about Russia and Russians as they listened to stories told by soldiers and prisoners of war. Russia earned a reputation of a barbaric, savage and primitive place.²² However, at that point, Russia still posed no direct threat, and its image resulted mainly from the cultural distance and the feeling of superiority and strong affiliation with Western culture. The situation changed after the eighteen-century partitions of Poland (as mentioned earlier), when barbaric practices described by travellers and soldiers soon became an everyday experience for Poles and part and parcel of their lives. Russia was no longer a distant stranger; instead, it had become a close stranger.²³ A similar situation occurred during and after the Second World War, when Poland experienced direct aggression by the invader, and after the war it fell under the Soviet rule for 45 years, in the political, economic and strategic sense. For nearly half a century, more than one and a half million Russian soldiers were stationed in Poland, while the Soviet Union tried to roll out the Soviet system of power and thus to forge a new reality in Poland.

The mechanisms fuelling the stereotypes of Russia and its inhabitants for the past four centuries can also be found in Polish literature. We decided it would be worthwhile to analyze contemporary non-fiction books from that particular angle. Our choice was non-fiction, a “borderline” genre located somewhere between literature and journalism, which, as a rule, seeks to describe reality in an objective and unbiased manner, thereby breaking the stereotypes and looking for new cognitive perspectives. However, our analysis of about a dozen of collections of non-fiction literary works written over the past thirty years (that is, after the fall of the Soviet Union and Poland’s regaining independence), revealed that the image of Russia

21. Katarzyna Meller, *Szesnastowieczne fundamenty stereotypu Moskwy i Moskala. Jezda do Moskwy Jana Kochanowskiego*, in Fiećko, ed., *Obraz Rosji w literaturze polskiej*, 2012, p. 34.

22. Dariusz Chemperek, *Państwo moskiewskie i jego mieszkańcy w literaturze polskiej XVII wieku. Panorama*, in Fiećko, ed., *Obraz Rosji w literaturze polskiej*, p. 41.

23. Kępiński, *Lach i Moskal*, p. 66.

is unfortunately no different in these from the narratives known for centuries; on the contrary, it reproduces old stereotypes and clichés persisting in the collective consciousness, and draws on the popular beliefs (and not factual knowledge) about the country and its inhabitants. Our selection of non-fiction books was based on chronology; the works cited in the essay were written in the period from 1994 (after the fall of the Soviet Union) to 2009 (today's Russia). The motivation of writers, their goals and approaches to describing the Russian reality were another major criterion. Ryszard Kapuściński travelled the length and breadth of Russia between 1967 and 1993 and produced a synthetic view of the downfall of the Soviet empire, but also described the times preceding and following its disintegration. Mariusz Wilk stayed in the Solovetsky Islands, and later near Lake Onega, to describe Russia and its inhabitants from the perspective of a local. Jacek Hugo-Bader's travels were inspired by *A Report from the 21st Century* written in the 1950s by two Russian authors, Mikhail Vasilyev and Sergey Gusev, in which the authors predicted Russia's bright future. Hugo-Bader followed in their footsteps from Moscow to Vladivostok to verify their vision and to see how Russia and its society have actually evolved. Krystyna Kurczab-Redlich and Barbara Włodarczyk lived in Russia for some time; the first was driven by sheer curiosity, the second worked as a journalist and a Polish TV correspondent. Of course, there are many more non-fiction works on Russia by the Poles; however, our short list features the most representative publications, to test our assumptions and research goals.

Below we present the strategies, which we have called "exoticization" on purpose, to substantiate our conclusion.

Exoticization

To start with, we should define "strategy" as the specific approach taken by the originator in the communication process, which emphasizes or modifies certain elements of that process, especially its content and form, in order to achieve certain goals. For the authors of cited works, the goal is to exoticize Russia. Exoticization consists in building an image of the country and its inhabitants that serves to expose everything as extraordinary, peculiar, incomprehensible, and different from what we know. It is achieved by applying specific methods of presentation, which identify and uphold the fundamental disparity between the reporter and the "Other," emphasizing the cultural superiority of the former over the Other.²⁴

24. Cf. Anna Horolets, "Dyskursywne konstruowanie podmiotu wiedzącego w wybranych relacjach z podróży". *Teksty Drugie*, 3, 2012, p. 135.

As mentioned earlier, there is a negative stereotype of Russia in Poland that results from the violence perpetrated by the Russians against the Poles. Despite their comparative political weakness, the Polish people felt that they were morally, intellectually and culturally stronger. They defended themselves mentally by discrediting Russians. Today, even though the political context is different, the narrative bent about Russia has not changed. It mostly shows the country's dark side: the poverty and hardship of everyday life, human failures, alcoholism, and backwardness. In the eyes of Poles, Russia is rural; non-fiction authors know very well that the rich cities of Moscow and Saint Petersburg do exist, but they would rather focus on the peripheries than the centre. If they do describe a city, they will show slums and drug addicts living in stairways rather than science centres.

Exoticization strategies

Selection of information to stress the country's intellectual and cultural backwardness

1. *Stressing that Russians are emotional people, not necessarily intellectuals.* Polish non-fiction books describe Russians as simple people led by traditional folk wisdom. The spotlight is on their sentimental and melancholic nature and hospitality, which is immediately associated with alcohol. Russians are not intellectuals, scientists, writers, inventors or discoverers, but confused human beings, often homeless people, drug addicts, or alcoholics trying to escape the harsh reality of life by drowning their sorrows in liquor. Such people may be looked down on from a safe distance, with a feeling of superiority.

Nowadays in Russia about four million people take drugs as an addiction, the vast majority of them intravenously. At least the same number again are alcoholics. And in Moscow alone paid sexual services are provided by one hundred thousand women.²⁵

When you cross Europe from west to east, it becomes quite clear that people have different drinking patterns depending on which side of the Rhine they live. People in Central Europe (or at least its upper social classes) may have embraced whisky and other Western-style liquors, but the truth is, they still drink vodka. The difference is that Poles would use a small 50g or, say, 100g shot glass, while Russians would use much bigger drinkware. And it is not a joke that Russians have a special genetic makeup that makes them perfectly "immune" to the poison that alcohol essentially is. The story has it that prince Vladimir the Great turned

25. Jacek Hugo-Bader, *White Fever: A Journey to the Frozen Heart of Siberia*, trans. by Antonia Lloyd-Jones, Counterpoint: Berkeley, 2012, p. 79.

to Eastern Orthodox Christianity in 988 because it allowed him to drink as much alcohol as he wished.²⁶

2. *Drawing a picture of Russian spirituality from the perspective of shamanic rituals and eccentric quasi-religious phenomena.* References to shamanism emphasize the archaic nature of Russian religiousness, and the language used to describe shamanic rituals is clearly derogative. Shamanesses are called “wailing old women,” the objects they use in their rituals are “shamanic debris,” and their clothes are “dirty smocks”:

“Why are you so similar to the North American Indian shamans?” I ask Nadyezdha. “The same feather headdresses, drums, rhythms, tunes and ways of singing. And similar rituals.” “It is they who are like us. After all, they come from here. Twelve thousand year ago they set off from central Siberia, crossed the Bering Strait and populated both Americas.”²⁷

The woman (shamaness) performs lots of bizarre acts. She pours milk and vodka into various small containers, strokes a dry snake that is hanging on some deer antlers, rattles her black magic jewellery and keeps bashing me with a strange wooden sceptre with a big tangle of shamanic debris attached to it: bones, fangs, claws, feathers, ribbons, rags, bits of metal and wood.²⁸

Old Vassily brought a newspaper in which an old soothsayer of Arkhangelsk, Vera Zashukhina, a famous fortune-teller and seer known all over the North for her prophecies and miraculous healings, predicted a doomsday for the Solovetsky Islands: “I saw Solovki explode, as in a horrible earthquake, and the sea bottom collapsed, and the sea swallowed the Islands, and a great wall of water came down on Arkhangelsk, and left countless victims and endless mourning”. When asked by the journalist if the disaster could be prevented, she said: “There’s anarchy and wickedness all around us, because people have forgotten God. And even if they mention God’s name, it is just for show, it’s a trend these days”. (...) The newspaper with her prophecy reached the Islands and really stirred things up. Old women talk about it all the time, somebody even came up with a doomsday date. Word has it that the sea will swallow us up in 1999.”²⁹

3. *Highlighting the economic, intellectual and cultural backwardness of the country and its inhabitants.* In that context, the Russian Orthodox Church plays a clearly negative role, as a relic of the past and symbol of backwardness of the East:

26. Krystyna Kurczab-Redlich, *Głową o mur Kremla*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo W. A. B., 2007, p. 44.

27. Hugo-Bader, *White Fever*, p. 142.

28. Hugo-Bader, *White Fever*, p. 143.

29. Mariusz Wilk, *Wilczy notes*, Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo słowo/obraz terytoria, 1998, pp. 132–33.

The only opponent of the anti-AIDS campaign in Russia is the Orthodox Church. It protests against programmes to exchange used needles and syringes for clean ones. (...) The Church believes that by telling young people about condoms you increase the danger of an epidemic, because by doing this you are encouraging them to practise unrestrained sex. In the view of the Orthodox clergy, AIDS is a punishment sent down on homosexuals, drug addicts and prostitutes for their sins.³⁰

It happened on a Good Friday, a couple of years ago... After many days of fasting in the most extreme monastery fashion, there was tension in the congregation – novices, pilgrims and church servers – swelling up day by day, probably caused by hunger and long ceremonies and rituals, in the clouds of incense, reaching a climax of collective ecstasy, in mystical half-hallucinations. (...) As the end of the Fast was drawing near, all were close to the thin line of a dream, at which point monks have visions and see the saints, Virgin Mary or the devil. And so the Good Friday came... The morning mass. The ecstasy was just hysterical! And then suddenly, hatred just erupted – fanatical, ominous. Towards Jews who crucified Him. Oh, the madness, the screaming, the wailing...³¹

Hyperbolization in the description of reality

In Russia, from the perspective of contemporary non-fiction Polish works, nothing is ordinary or “normal.” The picture of Russia is one of extremes: if there is poverty, it is dire; if there is wealth, it is outrageous:

When I stayed in Moscow as the foreign correspondent of Polish Television, I would take my Polish friends on a “tour de boutique” whenever they visited. (...) All my guests were really impressed, both with the product range and the prices. In Warsaw you wouldn’t find a shop where people would pay more than ten thousand PLN for a woollen scarf, and a couple of thousands for a dog vest...³²

Russia is a different story. Behind closed doors, Russians have been long beguiled with stories about the greatness of Russia. Not many people were allowed to go abroad by tsars, none by the communists. They were not given history to learn but rather mythology to believe in. (...) And now you have to fight the myths on so many levels, both trivial and very serious. Foreigners must constantly assure their Russian interlocutors that all they see, eat, hear and experience in Russia is unique, outstanding and second to none. A mere grimace at a table is treated almost as a criminal offence.³³

30. Hugo-Bader, *White Fever*, p. 89.

31. Wilk, *Wilczy notes*, p. 169.

32. Barbara Włodarczyk, *Nie ma jednej Rosji*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2013, p. 37.

33. Kurczab-Redlich, *Głową o mur Kremla*, p. 118.

Using the *locus horridus* (terrible place) topos

Russia is described as a wild, dangerous, savage and unfriendly place. The stronger you are physically and the more weapons you have, the more power you wield. Russia is also a country of wild, intimidating yet fascinating facets of nature as represented by the vast region of Siberia. But Russia is wild not only because of distant Siberia. Even Moscow, the country's capital is wild with its mafia and criminals. This savage country is populated by savage people who are dangerous, gun-wielding and with a strong affiliation with the criminal underground. They shoot, they kill, they racketeer.

In the European part of Russia no-one, including the militia, obeys the law about wearing seat belts, or the one about driving with your lights on at all times. (...) Nor do they ever switch on their lights as long as something is visible (...). The bigger car has priority. And when they change a wheel, they like to burn the ripped tyre – they have a stinking bonfire instead of a warning triangle.³⁴

You can eat on the road at a bar or a cafeteria, but that doesn't mean they have cakes, liqueurs, coffee and tea there – more like chops, borscht, herrings and vodka. (...) They're usually shabby huts, barracks, or oversized kiosks. The further east, the nastier they are. Dirty plastic tablecloths, greasy forks, nowhere to wash your hands, and to relieve yourself you have to go outside.³⁵

Today's Russia is different. There's heavy traffic. Don't push me, you bastard! The more *krutoj* (tough, rich and brutal) one is, the less he gives a damn about the laws, he will just pay the fine and bribe a witness if need be, so he just drives on the sidewalks and against traffic, runs a red light, and – God forbid! – if you scratch his car, then you're done for, because it turns out he is a very important person, or at least his representative or bodyguard.³⁶

Russia is also extremely unfriendly to its own citizens, who are trapped in bureaucratic red-tapism ridden with informal agreements, bribery and absurd rules beyond Western comprehension. For a Westerner, even such a simple task as sending a parcel in Russia may be quite an exotic experience:

I send home a parcel full of personal items so I won't have to pay for excess luggage (...) I take it to the post office, but the clerk tells me to open it, because it's too heavy (...), and in any case she has to check what's inside it. This makes me feel very annoyed (...) One by one, the woman takes my shirts, sweaters, gloves, billycan, (...) flip-flops, and puts each of them on the scales. (...) Then she pushes the pile

34. Hugo-Bader, *White Fever*, pp. 18–19.

35. Hugo-Bader, *White Fever*, p. 21.

36. Mariusz Wilk, *Wołoka*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literacki, 2005, pp. 184–85.

of dirty clothes back through the tiny window, permits me to start packing again and consults a huge book the size of a tombstone. "It is not allowed to send used clothing to Poland," she drawls sadistically. "It's personal clothing, not used!" I try to defend myself. (...) The record covers thirteen pages. I must calculate the value of each item so that the total sum does not exceed 100 dollars, otherwise the costs will be six times higher and the sending procedure three times as complicated. (...) It took me two hours.³⁷

Russian borders are the best example of the absurdity of Russian reality. They are symbolic carriers of an important message: there are enemies outside our borders, so we need to stay alert and ready to fight back.

So, I am at the airport, passport control. A young soldier at the counter, a border trooper. He starts examining my passport. Looking, reading, and most of all – searching for my photograph. Finally, he finds it. He looks at it, then he looks at me, back to the photo and me again. Something's wrong, apparently. Take off your glasses!, he orders. So he looks at the photograph again, then at me, then the photograph, then me, again and again. But when I look at his face I can see that now it's even worse, without my glasses on. I look into his light eyes and he is so focused, he is thinking so hard. I know what he's thinking about. He is looking for an enemy. And you cannot spot an enemy just by looking at their face, no, sir! An enemy wears a mask. So his job is to nail the enemy! This is what he and thousands like him are trained for. There's a hundred of photographs, says the officer, but only one person is a spy. Find the spy and you'll get an extra week of a holiday leave. So the boys are looking and looking, sweat on their faces. An extra week of holidays.³⁸

The strategies of exoticization of Russia by Polish writers are based on careful selection of information and focus on phenomena which may not only surprise somebody raised in the Western culture, but also shock and raise concern.

Even as the process of the exoticization of Russia by Polish writers, in particular non-fiction writers, appropriates established postcolonial strategies and implications, it has different meaning from the one prevalent in "mainstream" postcolonial studies. As we have attempted to demonstrate, the case of Russian colonialism and its colonies is very specific, which resulted from a variety of circumstances.

In reference to the background described in the introduction, we believe that the inclusion of Polish literature in postcolonial discourse would bring certain benefits; namely, the access to certain research tools which were previously unavailable to us. Postcolonial research would give a new and more balanced vocabulary for describing Russia, and would allow the application of different presentation

37. Hugo-Bader, *White Fever*, pp. 203–205.

38. Ryszard Kapuściński, *Imperium*, Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1994, pp. 91–92.

strategies, and break the vicious circle of stereotypes and clichés used in Polish narratives. The analysis of Polish literature from the postcolonial perspective would foster the evolution of Polish identity in the face of, and in opposition to the Other, in the context of colonial subordination to the Other. It would also highlight the links between works of art and imperial social and political discourse manifested in the language and methods of presentation. Finally, it would provide the mechanism for establishing a literature that questions imperial discourse and building a counter-hegemonic discourse.³⁹ Moreover, such studies would have a therapeutic effect, explaining the processes which thus far have been overlooked, misinterpreted or too elusive, and therefore would allow coping with the psychological trauma and cultural consequences of subjugation.

39. Cf. Dariusz Skórczewski, *Postkolonialna Polska – projekt (nie)możliwy*. “*Teksty Drugie*” 2006, 1–2, pp. 111–112.

PART II

Mediating local voices

The power and powerlessness of the exotic status

Devika Brendon

My essay explores representations of the female “exotic” in a range of literary texts by A. D. Hope, Agatha Christie, Thomas Hardy and Pablo Neruda. These representations showcase the dualities inherent in the concept of exoticism, which see a person who is described as such by a beholder frequently being targeted, not only for admiration, at the initial stages of an encounter, but subsequently for exploitation and abuse. What is unknown is a challenge, and attempts are made, and documented in words, to control and dominate those who are perceived to be a threat to the known and the familiar.

My interest in this aspect of this topic is inherent in my own subjective cultural identity, and the way it has developed. I was born in Kandy, in Sri Lanka. When I was almost five, our family left to go to Australia. I grew up in Sydney; but in 2012, I relocated to Sri Lanka. The word “exotic” means something different to me, now that I currently live in a country which was considered “exotic” in the culture in which I grew up. What we perceive as strange is defined by what we feel is familiar, and our lives are defined by shifts between these realms and experiences, as we extend the limits of our known worlds, through travel, direct sensory experience and growth: socially, culturally, physically, intellectually and emotionally.

“Exoticism” exists because of the dualities and paradoxes of our human condition, and its inherent tensions. We see these paradoxes most clearly in our conflicted responses to each other, particularly in times of stress, such as first contact with people with whom we are not familiar, who are strangers to us.

In a review titled “Us and Them,” the reviewer comments that “otherization is a process grounded in basic human emotions, our bias towards pleasure and avoidance of pain. Perceiving others as “others” causes fear, anger or disgust, universal “primitive” responses to threats whose physiological mechanisms are relatively well understood.”¹

1. Steven Rose, “Us and Them”, a review of Kathleen Taylor’s *Cruelty: Human Evil and the Human Brain*, *The Guardian*, 17 April, 2009. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/apr/18/cruelty-kathleen-taylor-book-review> Accessed 10 April, 2019.

I draw your attention to the image we see below, which shows the conflict-
edness of the way women are perceived: as a goddess in shining garments who is
worshipped, and on the other side of the image, and with disturbing simultaneity,
as an unclothed and beaten human woman. The visual juxtaposition of respect
and disrespect, of adoration inspired and harm inflicted, creates a stress which
shows us how necessary it is to reconcile these extremes, within our own minds
and point of view as a viewer of beauty. On the left hand side of the image, we see
the woman as a goddess, holding iconic instruments of power, and adorned with
ornate jewellery. The men in the foreground are positioned in postures of devotion,
worshipping her. She is not being touched. In the image on the right hand side,
the same woman, her body divided by a split screen technique of representation,
is without the protection of clothes: wounded, and her arms held by grabbing,
outstretched multiple hands invading her space and presence. One of the hands is
imposed over her mouth, silencing her.



LC Gupta with Pawan Natekar, January 6 at
1:37am · 4

In the world today, riven with polarised and warring perspectives, otherization
rather than reconciliation is taking place, politically. The concept of the “exotic”
developed from a self-centred world view, which defined oneself, the viewer, as the
model of normalcy, and anything or anyone outside that self-protecting definition
as unusual. The driving impulse to categorise experiences in this way, attested to
by Freud, Jung, Said, Foucault and many other commentators on human nature,
was the desire to control. The strangeness of the other catalyses visceral reactions
in us: we find the “other” chaotic, or unsettling, or disturbing, or intriguing, or
fascinating, or uncontrollable. A whole balancing perspective is left out. We need
to resolve this dilemma, not by suppressing one but by actively engaging the two
perspectives: by recognising that each “other” is familiar to themselves, and that
we ourselves are “other” to them.

The reader of literature begins by recognising for example, that exoticism is
generated by positioning oneself in relation to another. Literary interpretation is

a formalised method of processing the paradoxes that arise as we move to engage with and comprehend whatever is most different from life as we ourselves know it. We create an imaginative space onto which we can project our fantasies, the desires and fears which we keep hidden in the workaday world.



Picture taken of exotic artwork on an everyday

Colombo bus, by Devika Brendon

Being considered “exotic” is both a blessing and a curse. I personally felt not so much praised and admired, but targeted, by being initially designated and defined thus. It took some years for me not to feel merely beheld. I was the only Devika in my area of Sydney. Now that I have relocated to a region seven degrees North of the Equator, I find that there are many Devikas in Sri Lanka and India. I have started to not feel so noticeable. I have realised that my own responses and attitudes to things had been overwhelmed, silenced, suppressed and distorted by the incoming messages of my own visible difference, in Australia.

In the present day, I hope to understand this exoticism better, and more objectively, by looking at some experiences of exoticism in works of literature which are so well known that they are familiar to us. I also present here some relatively unfamiliar texts, in which we will recognise certain aspects of exoticism and how it operates to empower (and disempower) those who are blessed (and cursed) with it.

I chose the following extracts to illustrate the Power & Powerlessness of the Exotic status. If I were to express their content as newspaper headlines, they would read: “A. D. Hope Praises A Divine Image Which Appears In His Kitchen,” “Hercule Poirot Whole Heartedly Appreciates European Countesses,” “Tess’s Beauty Makes Her Stand Out From The Crowd,” and “Chilean Ambassador Rapes The Woman Who Cleans His House.”

These texts are illustrations of how those who occupy the exotic status are singled out for public attention. This attention appears positive, but is, in reality, problematic: people who are called “exotic” are often in fact categorised and diminished

by apparent praise, and actually targeted by what seems to be admiration. The eye of the beholder simultaneously confers both power and powerlessness on the person designated as exotic.

In an illuminating article on “Orientalism and The Study Of The Self and The Other,” it is pointed out that Edward Said, in his book “*Orientalism* demonstrates how the Western literary and cultural canon has otherized... and... misrepresented the Orient;” noting that “The relationship between power and knowledge is essential in postcolonial discourse,” the authors state that the dynamic which operates to exoticize another culture makes the perpetrator “guilty of legitimizing civilising mission, essentialism, expansionism and imperialism and on the other hand, convincing natives of their own inferiority.”²

Noticeably, those described in the following encounters are women, because the nature of womanhood seems to invite accusations and projections of exoticism by men. Unwanted attention and the categorising gaze combine, in an act of interest and curiosity fused with desire and frustrated possessiveness. Men usually “wrote” women, describing and constructing them as the unfamiliar to themselves. So, in a male-constructed world, a woman, both desired and feared, is the most exotic of creatures: seen as not only alluring, but destabilising and disruptive.

The Australian poet A D Hope wrote a poem which was an intriguingly fervent tribute to a voluptuous Indian tree goddess, an image of whom his wife and niece had affixed on the wall in their kitchen, as an aspirational role model for themselves.³ Seeing her form and features every day inspired an endearing reverence in the poet:

Salabhanjika, inmate of my house,
 You have hung for years over the kitchen sink,
 Cut from some brochure about Indian art.
 My wife, my niece, to fortify their vows
 Against the insidious lures of meat and drink
 Pinned you, voluptuous, by their diet chart.
 My own response to your delightful frame,
 Those generous breasts, the bold haunch, the full thighs,
 And rapt face – did it seem to dream or brood
 -Has naturally been not quite the same:
 Symbols of plenty to my masculine eyes,
 Touch, tend and make me flower, I am that tree.

2. S. R. Moosavinia, N. Niazi and Ahmad Ghaforian, “Orientalism and The Study Of The Self and The Other,” *Studies in Literature and Language*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2011, p. 104.

3. A. D. Hope, in *Antechinus: Poems 1975–1980*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1981, pp. 77–78.

The sensual terms in which the poet equates her with the image of a divine pinup girl, her “arms uplifted; her knee bent,” are framed by the balancing symmetry of his structure, and the equanimity of his tone, which is appreciative but respectful. Her beauty is seen as an indication of her capability: “Bring me, Salabhanjika, what your smile/Portends, that miracle of late blossoming.” Significantly, the outward beauty of her form is seen as an expression of the goddess’s regenerative power. The poet, while registering a “come hither” call to engage with what he is seeing, is principally a petitioner: “Since all trees have a deep desire to feel/A woman’s touch, and will give all their store/Of nectar, colour, fragrance, if they should.”

The tone of respect and reverence evident throughout the poem develops through resonant and sequential stages of unfolding revelation. Starting with observation of the goddess as a two-dimensional image, the poet investigates her value in terms of her cultural context: “India, from which you sprung, /Its arts, its past and its unnumbered gods,” rather than remaining at the superficial and objectifying level characteristic of a human sexual predator. He is aware that he sees aspects of her body as “symbols of plenty to my masculine eyes.” He traces his own growth of knowledge in quest of better awareness of the beautiful lady; he understands the legends with which she is associated, and positions himself in relational subservience to her: “The legend charms me, I do not think it true;/And yet I long to put it to the test.” The stream of evocative verbs in the illuminating end-focus of the last line is expressed in the imperative voice, but is an impassioned, sustained supplication to a minor goddess. Despite using the term “haunch,” a term associated with animals such as cattle, to describe her body, he sees her as a spiritualised image of power. His perspective of her charges her with authority. He wishes to touch the divine, here on earth, but expresses his longing as an unfulfillable ideal. The monosyllabic utterance and truncated vowels of “I do not think it true” cuts through the visionary sequences created by the elongated vowel sounds in which he expressed his longing, and the juxtaposition with “Yet I long to put it to the test” uses a discourse marker to demarcate the tension created in him, even as he recognises the distance of the goddess’s sphere of existence from his own.

In Agatha Christie’s Poirot novels, the Belgian background of her detective Hercule Poirot is central to her construction of him as a man profoundly different from the homogenic British, to whom he seems like a “mountebank” and a “jack-anapes.” It is his brilliant brain, his generosity of vision, his tolerance, his empathy, his profound knowledge of human nature, which distinguishes him. But it is his exotic, luxuriant moustaches which characterise him. Christie repeatedly describes Poirot as being attracted to exotic women and this attraction is a sophisticated one. Poirot’s point of view of women is sympathetic, generous, and inclusive.

The young Hungarian Countess Helena Andrenyi in *Murder on the Orient Express* is described as an exotic beauty: with scarlet lips and dark eyes. She speaks English “a leetle” and “her accent is charming”:

She lingered; her eyes watched him curiously. Lovely eyes they were, dark and almond shaped, with very long black lashes that swept the exquisite pallor of her cheeks. Her lips, very scarlet, in the foreign fashion, were parted just a little. She looked exotic, and beautiful.⁴

It is subsequently revealed that this gorgeous young lady is exaggerating her exotic appearance, to disguise her actual identity; but the point is made – exoticism and beauty are equated here, in the author’s narrative syntax, as they are in life.

Christie is aware that what is so visually appealing is easy to fabricate. In one of *The Labours of Hercules*, “The Girdle of Hippolyta,” a female member of a gang of art thieves does a quick change in the toilet of a train, going from looking like an awkward schoolgirl, the unremarkable daughter of a minister of the Church, to looking like “a flashy piece of goods,” appearing as the wife of a man whose passport includes a wife. What were her props?

“Sheer silk stockings, high heeled shoes... a daring little piece of velvet called a hat perched on her curls – and a face – oh yes, a face. Rouge, powder, lipstick, mascara! What is the real face of that quick change artiste really like? Probably only the good God knows!” exclaims Poirot.⁵

Here, exoticism because of the very familiarity of its brand and its constituent aspects and elements, is again seen as a passport and a cover.

Exoticism comes naturally, however, to the Russian countess Vera Rossakoff, who appears unforgettably in Hercule Poirot’s old age, in the short story “The Capture of Cerberus,” as a vision on the escalator in the London Underground. She is the definition of “larger than life”: a person of “full and flamboyant form; her luxuriant henna red hair crowned with a small plastron of straw to which was attached a positive platoon of brilliantly feathered little birds. Exotic furs dripped from her shoulders.”⁶ She is fond of vibrant colours and layered textures, bedecked in jewels and draped in the spoils of war and the trappings of wealth. She is a

4. Agatha Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express*, 1933, 1934, New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1991, p. 67. http://detective.gumer.info/anto/christie_8_2.pdf Accessed 10 April, 2019.

5. Christie, “The Girdle of Hippolyta” in *The Labours of Hercules*, *The Complete Hercule Poirot Short Stories*, HarperCollins, London, 1999, p. 800.

6. Christie, “The Capture of Cerberus,” *The Labours of Hercules*, *The Complete Hercule Poirot Short Stories*, HarperCollins, London, 1999, p. 832.

compendium of desirable aspects: “Chic. Sympathetic. *Spirituelle*... *A femme du monde*.” She also has a tremendously buoyant, vibrant, articulate personality, and “good lungs”: “To be content with what Nature has given you, that is *stupid*! It is also arrogant!”⁷ she endearingly exclaims. She is “a woman in a thousand, a million.”⁸ She offers fascinatingly detailed insight into what she does to keep up appearances:

Though it was something like twenty years since he had seen her last the magic still held. Granted that her makeup now resembled a scene painter’s sunset, with the woman under the makeup well hidden from sight, to Hercule Poirot she still represented the sumptuous and alluring, the flamboyant creature of his fantasy.⁹ Christie observes that: “It is the misfortune of small precise men to hanker after large and flamboyant women. Poirot had never been able to rid himself of the fatal fascination the Countess held for him.”¹⁰

In her first appearance, she is described by Hastings as “a whirlwind in human form... a somewhat disturbing personality... who invaded our privacy, bringing with her a swirl of sables and a hat rampant with slaughtered ospreys.”¹¹ Her energy is full of the life force we generally associate with men. The word “disturbing” and the words “rampant” and “slaughtered” indicate predatory aspects of the Countess. This threat she embodies acts like a magnet on Poirot, who, full of himself, respects the strong personalities of others. She disturbs him, and he likes it. It is notable that, in contrast to several other men in this survey, Poirot’s appreciation focuses on her lungs and not her breasts.

We can see that exoticism means positive things to a broad-minded citizen of the world: a man full of brains as well as ego not only likes a woman who pays attention to him, but enjoys hearing her speak. Poirot and the Countess are, despite their social class differences, allied in their status as exotic foreigners, in London.

In the regional areas of England, however, to other kinds of people, this luxuriance operates as an invitation to become a predator. Particularly if the woman in question (unlike Poirot vis-à-vis his Countesses) is of a lower social class than the man who appreciates her. We see this in Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, from the description of Alec’s first sight of Tess:

7. Christie, “The Capture of Cerberus,” p. 836.

8. Christie, “The Capture of Cerberus,” p. 833.

9. Christie, “The Capture of Cerberus,” p. 833.

10. Christie, “The Capture of Cerberus,” p. 833.

11. Christie, *The Double Clue*, Harper Collins, London, 1999, p. 286. <https://www.harpercollins.com/9780062298256/the-double-clue> Accessed 10 April, 2019.

She had an attribute which amounted to a disadvantage just now; and it was this that caused Alec d'Urberville's eyes to rivet themselves upon her. It was a luxuriance of aspect, a fullness of growth, which made her appear more of a woman than she really was. She had inherited the feature from her mother without the quality it denoted. It had troubled her mind occasionally, till her companions had said that it was a fault which time would cure.¹²

The quality her exotic beauty denotes is clearly an indication of sexuality and sensuality, an invitation to the dance of life. Tess has no shortage of potential partners.

Alec articulates his frustration, when it takes him some time to get her to respond to his meretricious advances: "Good God!" he burst out, "what am I, to be repulsed so by a mere chit like you? For near three mortal months have you trifled with my feelings, eluded me, and snubbed me, and I won't stand it!"¹³ He wants to give her "the kiss of mastery."¹⁴ Her "luxuriance" certainly suggests to him that she is asking for it. This is despite the fact that although "he was inexorable," she indicated her lack of consent by non-reciprocation: "she sat still."¹⁵

It is a familiar saying that beauty exists in the eye of the beholder; but it would be equally true to say that beauty as it confronts us flaunts itself in the face of the beholder. The way the beholder sees beauty speaks volumes about the beholder himself. Our attitude to the exotic is an index of our biases as well as our preferences.

Because of her exotic beauty, Tess for example, in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, appears to a lot of men: to Angel Clare, to Alec d'Urberville, to the Captain of the Immortals, who "sports" with her, as if she is unconsciously appealing to them.

Her full figure, the red ribbon in her hair, and her beautiful eyes, seem to invite their attention. Attention later takes the form of objectification, capture, and assault. She becomes a "wounded name,"¹⁶ a "Maiden No More,"¹⁷ who cannot escape the consequences of her exotic allure. She actually, at one point in her struggles, removes her own eyebrows to stop people commenting on her beautiful face, feeling her beauty to be inviting unwanted and predatory attention.

I began this essay by commenting on the dualism of perception which exoticism reveals in us. In this novel, the dualism is externalised through Hardy's characterisation of Alec and Angel as binary opposites. Angel Clare, a better man than

12. Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Penguin Classics Edition, London, 1998, pp. 42–3.

13. Hardy, *Tess*, p. 70.

14. Hardy, *Tess*, p. 56.

15. Hardy, *Tess*, p. 56.

16. Hardy, *Tess*, p. 5.

17. Hardy, *Tess*, p. 6.

Alec, sees Tess from the start in a more emotional and spiritual way than Alec does. Angel's perception of Tess is subtle, empathic and multidimensional. He wishes to see beyond his own stereotypes and contextually formed perceptions. His view of her is formed by his own spiritual aspirations, and yearnings for something more than the mere material realm.

Unlike Alec, who sees her as a "crumby girl,"¹⁸ to Angel:

Tess seemed to ... exhibit a dignified largeness both of disposition and physique, an almost regnant power, possibly because he knew that ... hardly any woman so well-endowed in person as she was likely to be walking in the open air within the boundaries of his horizon; very few in all England. Fair women are usually asleep at midsummer dawns. She was close at hand, and the rest were nowhere.¹⁹

How very loveable her face was to him. Yet there was nothing ethereal about it; all was real vitality, real warmth, real incarnation. And it was in her mouth that this culminated. Eyes almost as deep and speaking he had seen before, and cheeks perhaps as fair; brows as arched, a chin and throat almost as shapely; her mouth he had seen nothing equal to on the face of the earth. To a young man with the least fire in him that little upward lift in the middle of her red top lip was distracting, infatuating, maddening.... Perfect, he, as a lover, might have called them offhand. But no – they were not perfect. And it was the touch of the imperfect upon the would-be perfect that gave the sweetness, because it was that which gave the humanity.²⁰

In Hardy's representation of Angel Clare, we have, as with A. D. Hope, a man who appreciates the divinity of women. Hardy is explicit about it:

...[S]he impressed him most deeply. She was no longer the milkmaid, but a visionary essence of woman – a whole sex condensed into one typical form. He called her Artemis, Demeter, and other fanciful names half teasingly, which she did not like because she did not understand them. "Call me Tess", she would say askance; and he did.²¹

Here is a girl who can say "No" and a man who can accept it. Tess can say this because she is being approached by a man who is more evolved than most. He sees her sensitive feelings and her qualities of mind, as well as her beauty of body. He sees her as a whole person, and does not seek to separate her from her source, or reduce her to her bodily attributes. She can speak to him, in the imperative voice.

18. Hardy, *Tess*, p. 44.

19. Hardy, *Tess*, p. 130.

20. Hardy, *Tess*, p. 150–1.

21. Hardy, *Tess*, p. 130.

In contrast, Pablo Neruda expresses his own conflictedness as a justification for targeting, an excuse for attacking, what he sees as “other,” in his Memoirs,²² when he describes the sexual assault he himself perpetrated on a Tamil maidservant while he was the Ambassador for Chile, in Sri Lanka in the 1920s and 30s. It is a disturbing incident, which has only relatively recently been seen, as women’s rights and dignity have become more generally respected in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, as the description of an assault. I had been used to hearing of Neruda as a great love poet, and a man who had great sympathy for the poor and oppressed.

What struck me from the first reading is the absolute brazenness of Neruda’s hypocrisy. He praises the unnamed woman’s beauty, and likens her to a goddess, “like the statues of goddesses in the temples of South India.” We know that people worship goddesses; and the respect they have for them as a higher entity means that they do not rape them. It is other human beings they assault; particularly those they consider to be vulnerable, in relation to them. This violent binary opposition in the way beautiful women are seen and treated is brilliantly and unambiguously portrayed in Neruda’s behaviour, preserved in his choice of language, which shows the transition between the two conflated approaches, and their violent outcome. In *I Confess That I Have Lived*, he details the incident:

One morning, I woke earlier than is my custom. I hid in the shadows to watch who passed by. From the back of the house, like a dark statue that walked, the most beautiful woman I had ever seen in Ceylon entered, Tamil race, Pariah caste. She wore a red and gold sari of the cheapest cloth. On her unshod feet were heavy anklets. On each side of her nose shone two tiny red points. They were probably glass, but on her they looked like rubies.

She solemnly approached the toilet without giving me the slightest look, without acknowledging my existence, and disappeared with the sordid receptacle on her head, retreating with her goddess steps. She was so beautiful that despite her humble job, she left me disturbed. As if a wild animal had come out from the jungle, belonging to another existence, a separate world. I called to her with no result.

I then would leave some gift on her path, some silk or fruit. She would pass by without hearing or looking. Her dark beauty turned that miserable trip into the obligatory ceremony of an indifferent queen.

One morning, I decided to go for all, and grabbed her by the wrist and looked her in the face. There was no language I could speak to her. She allowed herself to be led by me smilelessly and soon was naked upon my bed. Her extremely slender waist, full hips, the overflowing cups of her breasts, made her exactly like the

22. Pablo Neruda, *I Confess That I Have Lived*, 1974, cited in Vanessa Vargas Rojas, “Revisiting a Dark Episode in the Life of Pablo Neruda”, *Rebellion*, 4 October, 2015.

<https://zcomm.org/znetarticle/revisiting-a-dark-episode-in-the-life-of-pablo-neruda/>
Accessed 10 April, 2019.

thousands year old sculptures in the south of India. The encounter was like that of a man and a statue. She kept her eyes open throughout, unmoved. She was right to regard me with contempt. The experience was not repeated.²³

He offers tributes, at first. He leaves gifts for her, knowing she is poor. Colourful silk garments! But she ignores them. I get the impression that he was incensed because she ignored him. Returning to Christie's *Orient Express*, it was Countess Andrenyi's alert and intelligent gaze that highlighted her beauty for Poirot. She was not only beheld, she was a beholder in return. She wanted to know what he thought, saying "Why did you ask me that?"²⁴ She verbally connected with him: intelligently, interrogatively and articulately.

In Neruda's case, he is made to feel invisible, and his advances are initially negated. One day, fuelled by both feelings of sexual desire and sociocultural and gendered entitlement, he decides to "go for all." He forces himself upon a silent, passive woman, who, he says, is "like a statue," and he describes the act poetically. Note that he describes her as a goddess "made of stone," a "statue." She was silent throughout the encounter, and kept her eyes open. He states in this extract that "that there was no language in which he could speak to her." Neruda appears not to have understood or cared that silence on the part of a sexual partner who is of a lower socio-political status does not constitute consent.

The article which cites this extract contextualises the incident thus: "In the summer of 1929, when Neruda was named consul of Ceylon at 25 years of age and lived in a bungalow in Wellawatha (sic), in Colombo... He describes how he defecated in a semi-hidden wooden box that appeared clean every morning, obliging him to wake at dawn to discover the mystery and determine what was literally, an obscure act."²⁵

By initially exoticizing her, Neruda gives himself permission to do whatever he likes to her. She becomes an object, in his eyes. Even if his sexual imposition of his imagination, his desire, and his body on her was seen by him as an act of worship, it was not an invocation to a superior deity. It was, in contrast to the reverence expressed by AD Hope, an act of self-worship, a glorification of his virility and forcefulness.

I suggest that her thoughts, her ideas, were not "unknowable" to him. They were actually of no interest to him. His use of the passive voice to sum up the incident is very indicative of this: "The experience was not repeated," is the phrase with which he ends his description. This is literally a throwaway line, indicating dismissal, and

23. Neruda, *I Confess*, in Rojas.

24. Christie, *Murder*, p. 67.

25. Neruda, *I Confess*, in Rojas.

distance. He saw himself as a complex, living being, with a trajectory, a life. He saw her as an object, an incident, along the way.

The power differential between them is revelatory: as a man of 25, as a Chilean Ambassador, as a man in the late 1920s, Neruda had all the power, in this encounter. He was, as his predatory classification of her in the extract shows, fully aware of her relative powerlessness in relation to him: as a woman, as a servant hired to clean his latrine, as a Tamil from the “pariah” caste. Her powerlessness, refracted through the lens of exoticism, excited him. He was able to blame her beauty for exciting his desire, and also use her socio-economic status as a justification for his treatment of her. In a real sense, her exotic beauty is used to excuse his response to it.

In conclusion: the deities we are, we people of colour, we unusual, different, colourful people, should be careful when people pay us compliments on our alluring beauty. It is a short step, easily taken, from being admired – or worshipped – to being mistaken for and treated like a piece of exotica.

In a more generous era, inhabiting the exotic status generally meant being admired. Today, in a world where everyone is under stress, being seen as “different” or “other” can get an exotic person attacked, accused, deported and killed. It is a dangerous position to be in, which requires vigilance on the part of the person beheld.

People, in the end, return home from even the most exotic holiday, back to a less unsettling, exciting and dangerous setting – which they usually prefer. What was initially seen by them as alluring and exotic becomes an experience they once had, and eventually an image on a fridge, and something to be boasted of, in a self-glorifying memoir. Human beings are like that. We reach out for what we see as beautiful because sometimes we feel empty inside, and our disrespectful touch depletes it, and makes it wither on the vine. We must be careful about how we are seen, and how our identities are constructed, and by whom. We must be thoughtful about what, and how, we also in our turn, allow ourselves to see.

Challenging taxonomies of the “local” and the “exotic”

The works of Hansda Showvendra Shekhar

Vibha S. Chauhan

Winner of the John Benjamins Prize for Literary and Linguistic Scholarship¹

Modern man no longer communicates with
the mad man ... the constitution of madness as mental illness
... bears witness to a rupture in a dialogue.
Michel Foucault²

The rupturing of dialogue that Foucault mentions in the above lines presupposes two major ideas. First, that madness is something that may be constituted and if that is possible, then the constitution of its obverse “not/non-madness” is possible as well. The second proposition suggested by the quotation is that one could indeed carry on dialogues across taxonomies that are assumed to be impenetrable, and that seemingly paradoxical constructs are actually much more porous than is generally assumed. This erasure of watertight experiences as well as theories has the potential of reorienting theoretical agendas and expanding the space for the grey and the opaque along with building connections between the obvious and the concealed; mind and matter; exotic and the familiar/real/conventional.

Hansda Showvendra Shekhar’s novel *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey*,³ as well as his short stories navigate various realms of socio-cultural and psychological experiences, often contradictory, making it difficult to locate these within any specific literary or cultural paradigm. The fact of Hansda being a Santhali Adivasi

1. The John Benjamins Prize for Literary and Linguistic Scholarship is awarded, on the recommendation of the *Fédération Internationale des Langues et Littératures Modernes*, to an up-and-coming scholar whose most important scholarly achievements may still be in the future.

2. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard and Jean Khalfa, Berkeley, University of California: Routledge, 1961, p. xxvii.

3. Sowvendra Shekhar Hansda, *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey*, Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2014. Henceforth, *Rupī Baskey*.

(indigenous) writer in English has the potential of unsettling several theoretical assumptions regarding the processes of reading, representation and interpretation. By choosing to write in English, Hansda frees the indigenous “voice” from the whole discourse of aesthetics and the politics of translation. Besides this, he also yanks his narrative out of the familiar discourses of empiricism, realism, nativism, and myth (read as unrealistic/false) to locate it at multiple interfaces of a wide range of mental and physical experiences. It is possible to interpret Hansda’s work within the framework of what Lévi-Strauss calls “deep structures” or the essential shared aspects of cultural practices existing in all communities. Yet, Hansda quite successfully manages to unravel the specific configurations of community codes as well as the wider power structures that ensnare these. In that sense, he may be seen as fusing the two methodologies of the “etic” and the “emic” that address the issue of suitability of methods of observation, research and representation.⁴ The terms etic and emic were coined as two distinctive terms by Kenneth Pike who derived these essentially from the field of linguistics but enriched these as methodological tools for conducting field research. Debates around epistemology of knowledge as well as the extent of its subjectivity/objectivity have gone on since times immemorial and these, in turn, have determined the ways in which knowledge may be grasped, garnered and accumulated. Emic is derived from the term “phonemics” and implies the significance of the “insider’s” perspective, much like the intimate insight and understanding people have of the phonemes⁵ of their own native languages/mother tongues. Etic, on the other hand, has its source in the term “phonetics” which is a much wider and objective term implying the “study and systematic classification of the sounds made in spoken utterance and objective approach to the study of languages.”⁶ The terms, in short, incorporate within themselves, two distinctive methods of approaching, investigating and analysing research problems. Applied to the field of psychology or/and anthropology, especially cultural anthropology, an emic view of culture connotes a keen sensitivity and discernment of socio-cultural experiences that may be missed by a non-member. The situation clearly has both advantages and disadvantages. While it is true that an “insider” or the “insider’s perspective” can enrich research with exhaustive and in-depth information and analysis, the danger of it becoming biased, selective and sometimes, myopic, cannot

4. Refer to the discussion in Conrad Kottak, *Mirror of Humanity*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996, pp. 47–50.

5. Any of the abstract units of the phonetic system of a language that correspond to a set of similar speech sounds (such as the velar \k\ of *cool* and the palatal \k\ of *keel*) which are perceived to be a single distinctive sound in the language. (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/phoneme>). Retrieved on 30 October 2017.

6. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/phonetics>. Retrieved on 30 October, 2017.

be ruled out. It is here that the etic approach comes in as a corrective that works towards an objective collection of facts/interviews/appraisals and their interpretation. The disadvantage here is clearly the high improbability of integrating information and analysis smoothly and imperceptibly with socio-cultural, psychological and ritualistic conventions that may be largely covert, difficult to perceive, and not open to objective scrutiny.

Gramsci suggests that people remain essentially disempowered unless they take control of the cultural, intellectual and moral resources in society and generate the paradigm of the normative. As discussed above, this process naturally incorporates the creation of the “non-normative” that begins to be seen as the binary opposite of the normative. The methodologies of the emic and the etic too, like the concept of binary opposites, are generally perceived as being in conflict with each other. Once again, as discussed above, the etic represents an approach where the researchers enter an unfamiliar community with a set of norms that may conflict with those of the specific group under study which, in turn, gets transformed into a subject and exposed to the “gaze” of an external non-participant. Emic, of course, refers to participant observation of researchers belonging to this group. The acceptance of these conflicting constructs is the starting point from where we need to move on in order to analyse the processes of selection through which one or the other of these assumed binaries becomes the norm. The trajectory, however, is not as direct as it may appear. Socio-economic and cultural relations are multilayered and extremely complex and any attempt to study these often leads to confronting a chaotic mass of ambiguities with their colours running into each other.

The concepts of both the exotic and the familiar too fall within this spectrum of ambiguities and may be approached from many different perspectives like those of class, race, gender and colonialism. Hansda, a member of the Santhal community, a doctor within the government setup, and a writer in English may be seen as belonging either to one, or to more than one, or even to all these constructs, and at the same time transcending all these. The rich hybridity of the situation makes the methodologies of emic and the etic as well as the concept of binary opposite unusable for us if we approach these as frozen, unchanging archetypes. To go back to Gramsci, the main purpose of any investigation is to study and analyse systems/discourses through which existing norms get transformed into cultural hegemony. However, as we come closer to our contemporary times, we find scholars like Derrida questioning the very existence of a stable hegemony or a fixed “centre” that remains unaffected by socio-cultural hybridity. In fact, what we do find happening is the continuous displacement of centres and the creation of new centres. This process of cancellation, displacement and recreation of centres produces an overlap between cultures that gives rise to ambivalences that cannot be pushed into watertight compartments. Thus, there exists a constant flux that shapes and

reshapes different taxonomies, including those of the familiar and the exotic; emic and the etic; as well as psychological and the physical.

Hansda's work represents the existence of this constant flux and movement. However, there also exists a circularity and stasis in his work that echoes the mysterious primordial and transcends many dichotomies. Hansda's location as the "actor-observer" holds the potential of being relatively more free of complicity with what Spivak calls the "other" and co-option into the existing hierarchy of socio-political and cultural empowerment. However, Hansda's writing, like all writing according to Spivak again, is far from "innocent" and to a large extent shifts the focus of investigation from "there" to "here."

This "there" for Spivak is associated with the imposition of Western representation of the colonized. In Hansda's writing this "there" may be expanded to include the "otherness" of culture, the concept that Victor Segalen discusses in his article "Essay on Exoticism" where he connects the exotic with imperialism that shapes not just the economic and the social spheres but also the aesthetic, cultural and the philosophic. Clearly, this once again, inheres within itself, a perception of the normative and that which deviates from it is often commodified and represented as the alluring unfamiliar for consumption of those who engender the normative. The pertinent issue for us here is to investigate where, on this trajectory of the normative and the exotic, can Hansda be located and if his representations of the community at the centre of his narrative coalesce with modes of dominant widespread construction of the same or another similar community, then to what extent do these get assimilated into this presiding framework.

Displacement of centres: Fluidity and welding of textual solidity and the unseen

Hansda's writing actually displaces all centres. *Rupi Baskey* and his story "Desire, Divination, Death" bring together rationality, reason, realism on the same plane as unreason, fantasy and dreams that weld with each other to generate an ethos that does not segregate dream from reality; truth from falsehood; fantasy from reality. The glaring discrimination and displacement in the lived experience of the Adivasi community rubs shoulders with dark fears, superstitions and fantastic beliefs and experiences.

It thus becomes difficult to slot the novel *Rupi Baskey* in any commonplace literary taxonomy. The novel represents three generations of the Baskey family of Kadamdihi village. Kadamdihi, the Santhal village, is firmly located within the geography, protest movements, the historical creation of the state of Jharkhand, and the aspirations and frustrations of its Adivasi inhabitants. "People said that ... the

Ingrej (English) had left and that the sarkar (government) would be run by our own people ... wherever Santhal men and women gathered, they could hear the name of Jaipal Singh. Jaipal Singh was a Munda from Khunti in Ranchi. He had studied at Oxford University and had captained the Indian hockey team which won gold in the 1928 Olympics held in Amsterdam.”⁷ The references to historical persons like Jaipal Singh, along with minute details regarding his education and achievements, positions the text in a very specific historical time and provides the narrative with a factual solidity that makes us accept it as belonging to our own world marked by dates, geographical location, and socio-political experiences. Hansda then goes on to flesh out the struggle for a separate state for Adivasis within India. “Much more exciting than national freedom was the prospect of a separate land for the Hor⁸ people, for the Adivasis.”⁹ This state of Jharkhand (literally meaning “land of bushes”) was sculpted out of the southern part of the much larger state of Bihar on 15 November 2000. This came as the fruition of a long-standing demand and a series of struggles that had gone on for almost fifty years with the Adivasi communities demanding a state of their own, which they believed would be governed by the Adivasis themselves. Processions were organised, plays performed, and songs sung for the creation of this state. One such song is recorded in the novel as well.

Ho Santar Mahlay Munda
Abo jhoto bowak runda.
 (Ho, Santhal, Mahlay and Munda
 We all purr together, like the civer
 Which we call runda)¹⁰

Besides this, the novel mentions many real, historical personages like “Surya Singh Besra ... the founder of the All Jharkhand Students’ Union, more popularly known as AJSU and Shibu Soren of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (Jharkhand Liberation Front) ...”¹¹ The idea that Jharkhand would be reserved for Adivasis attracted many young Adivasi men to the AJSU. How they had all voted so excitedly in the 1952 and 1957 Bihar Assembly elections and how the Jharkhand had won the Gharshila-Baharagora seat both times. But then, there had been the humiliating

7. Hansda, *Rupi Baskey*, pp. 48–49.

8. An indigenous community spread across the states of Jharkhand, Bihar, Odisha, and West Bengal in India. Their highest concentration is in Jharkhand.

9. Hansda, *Rupi Baskey*, p. 48.

10. Hansda, *Rupi Baskey*, p. 49.

11. Shibu Soren was the Chief Minister of Jharkhand twice between 2008 and 2010, though quite briefly both times.

merger of the Jharkhand Party with the Congress, and how Jaipal Singh of the Jharkhand Party faded into oblivion.”¹²

It is in the analysis of the objective facts like the clear mention of the creation of the state of Jharkhand that the etic approach may be applied fruitfully. However, this unambiguous reference to the specific time that frames the story of Rupi does not preclude the continuity and repetitions that constantly recur in the form of myths and community narratives. The text continuously shifts between the outward/objective and the inward/subjective worlds which demands the need for different ways of interrogating its multilayered fabric. A strictly etic approach in this case has the risk of bringing in bias or/and misinterpretation arising out of the a priori socio-cultural assumptions that readers bring to the text which may erroneously judge the extent to which the taxonomies of falsehood and truth, local and exotic may be applied to the intimate socio-cultural and psychological world of the novel. The fact that all these narratives have been orally handed down generations makes these simultaneously resilient to change as well as open to influences and transformations. Rumours and improvisations continuously restructure stories about Rupi’s married home and family but the core content of several stories regarding the drunkenness of Putki, Rupi’s mother-in-law, and Rupi with her inexhaustible energy and strength delivering her first son while planting in the fields, remain constant. In fact, the repeated narration of these stories over generations creates the impression of these stories transcending time and becoming almost mythical. “She (Rupi) was bent over, her fingers in the mud. When she felt the warm fluid from her womb seep down her thighs, she stood up, clutched at her lower back, cried loudly and toppled over into the slush. ... Rupi was carried to the widest aaday between two fields and laid on it. Rupi had such massive healthy limbs that she looked like a felled banyan.”¹³ This co-existence of the specific and the mythical creates an inherent ambivalence which transcends hardened dichotomies.

Hansda constructs the locales of the villages and towns with the pen-strokes of a portrait artist as he describes:

The rice mill ... the ruins of the huge aerodrome which the Allied Forces had built in the forest outside Chakulia ... the wireless tower which the meteorological department had erected atop a hill in Muturkham village near the Kokpara Railway Station ... the railway power substation in Dhalbhumarg, near the overbridge of the highway built during the Sino-Indian war of 1962 ... Ghatshila Railway Station ... the copper factory ... in Rakha ... Galudihi Railway Station ... Subarnarekha River ... the river of gold.¹⁴

12. Hansda, *Rupi Baskey*, pp. 147–48.

13. Hansda, *Rupi Baskey*, p. 4.

14. Hansda, *Rupi Baskey*, pp. 86–88.

A similar temporal and spatial solidity frames Hansda's short story, “The Adivasi Will Not Dance,” which expresses the disillusionment of the Santhals who have been kept out of the trajectory of development in post-independent India. Excluded from the “political participation ... representative forums ... [and] the vocabulary and the institution of rights,”¹⁵ the Santhali narrator reports that:

Only a few of us still have farmland; most of it has been acquired by a mining company. It is a rich company. It is not that we didn't fight the acquisition. While we were fighting, this political leader came, that political leader came ... Apparently to support us. But we lost. And after we lost, everyone left ... but our land did not come back to us ... the papers, the media, everyone blamed our boys... Just because our boys did not have reporter friends, their fight went unseen ... What do we Santhals get in return? Tatters to wear. Barely enough food. Such diseases that we can't breathe properly, we cough blood and forever remain bare bones.¹⁶

The aging narrator's identity as a performer has got gradually eroded. “I used to compose songs,” he says, “I still do and I still maintain a dance troupe. Though it is not a regular one, the kind I had earlier, some fifteen-twenty years ago, when I was younger and full of energy, enthusiasm and hope ... I used to compose songs and set them to music ... At that time, our Santhal Pargana was not broken up into so many districts ... At that time, when I was younger, even Jharkhand had not been broken away from Bihar ... Yet there used to be so much hope ... All that has changed now ... What has our art given us? Displacement, tuberculosis ... Our music, our dance, our songs are sacred to us Santhals. But hunger and poverty has driven us to sell what is sacred to us.”¹⁷ The sacred dance has become entertainment for “the rich Hindus ... [who] are only interested in making us sing and dance at their weddings.”¹⁸ If exotic means to objectify and commodify a subject for its charm of difference, then it is precisely this that has happened to the Santhals and their art. Hansda's narrative unveils the processes of othering, along with exclusion and alienation, working in tandem to explore and establish hierarchies in the mental as well as the physical world.

The story revolves around the President of India, whose “forefathers were all from the Birbhum district next door,”¹⁹ coming to lay the foundation stone of a

15. Neera Chandoke, *State and Civil Society: Explorations in Political Theory*, Delhi: Sage, 1995, p. 9.

16. Sowvendra Shekhar Hansda, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2015, pp. 171–72.

17. Hansda, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, pp. 177–79.

18. Hansda, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, p. 173.

19. Hansda, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, p. 170.

proposed thermal power plant for which inhabitants of eleven villages had to vacate their land. Ironically, the narrator and his troupe are expected to celebrate this event which actually spells disaster for them. The narrator refuses to dance and is mercilessly beaten up by the police. Yet, his refusal to dance is a clear and loud protest against the disempowered existence of his people.

This solidity of physical and temporal detailing at least partially represents what Spivak may have termed as “here.” However, this “here” in Hansda’s writing co-exists with a completely different plane of existence out “there.” *Rupi Baskey* simultaneously creates a world that pushes the connections between self and society to the point where both appear to lose their moorings in geographical location and the temporal moment as the dark unknown explodes over these. The novel centres around the inexplicable transformation that comes over Rupi Baskey as she is metamorphosed from being “the strongest woman in Kadamdihi, who bore her eldest squatting in the middle of a rice paddy, shin deep in slush”²⁰ to a person who is debilitated to the extent of being “crippled by unbearable pain in her back and lower abdomen. She could just about venture out for ablutions. And when she did, Putki and Bishu had to take turns to keep an eye on her so that she didn’t topple over when she squatted.”²¹

Rupi loses her strength slowly but surely after she leaves her village to go and stay in the small provincial town of Nitra where her husband Sido is a school teacher. She lives in a house which already had two families, that of their landlord and his wife, and Sido’s colleague, Bairam and his wife, Gurubari. Rupi is not allowed to have her own kitchen and the cooking is done by Gurubari on the pretext of easing Rupi’s responsibilities. Rupi’s firstborn son Jaipal too is tended, bathed and fed by Gurubari. She is the one who takes control over the men in Rupi’s life. It is then that Rupi begins to feel that “she wasn’t feeling strong any more. Was it the breastfeeding? The overexertion? The anxiety? She just couldn’t understand ... Gurubari’s imperiousness irked Rupi. ... She couldn’t pinpoint the nameless fear she felt ... Rupi found that Gurubari’s claim on Jaipal had increased. Her lethargy returned, and most of the time, she could not even feed Jaipal. It was Gurubari who fed and bathed him ... And the lassitude Rupi felt was such that whether she liked it or not, she had to turn to Gurubari for assistance. As this went on, Rupi began to gradually accept that Gurubari was a better mother than she could ever be ... At moments when her husband should have been with her, he was instead with Gurubari ... Rupi was illiterate and a novice in the ways of the world. But she did understand that Sido belonged to her ... [She] was sick and nagged by the feeling

20. Hansda, *Rupi Baskey*, p. 1.

21. Hansda, *Rupi Baskey*, p. 143.

that she was sharing her husband with another woman.”²² Rupi is taken to many physicians for diagnosis and treatment of her ailment but all of them declare her as being fit and without any physical illness.

Hansda’s texts: Deconstructing hierarchies of the rational and the beyond

The gradual accumulation of details of intensification of the Rupi’s strange ailment creates the impression of it being some kind of a physical phenomenon; a cluster of objective symptoms that generate the hope of recovery through a body of rational, medical knowledge. The etic perspective of the external, medical gaze announcing Rupi’s “real” medical condition as “normal” and “disease-free” is both unconvincing and absurd since she continues to become increasingly worse even visibly. All the same, the insider’s perspective, or the emic view that provides very different ways of understanding the ailment that devastates Rupi through narratives of dark secrets, local ghosts, black magic, and the control of power structures at a totally different register also remains unconvincing even though it indicates towards very different possibilities of understanding her condition.

Given Rupi’s situation, it is possible to deduce her emotional insecurity adversely affecting her mental and physical well-being. If “all is in the mind” as many claim, then Rupi’s accentuated self-contempt and low self-image and “the pangs of insecurity she felt” may be seen as resulting in her extreme physical exhaustion.²³ Hansda offers the option of this interpretation but what he simultaneously does is to locate Rupi’s predicament within a long tradition of belief in the co-existence of the human with many other untamed forces, both good and bad. The possibility of tensions between the seen and the unseen generates the space for multiple interpretations and rationalization to a great extent but the novel quite often also confronts us with events and situations like the ability of human beings, especially the women, to harness the power of evil with its own set of well-defined rules that challenge all limits of interpretation.

While to a large extent, we can rationalize Rupi’s “mysterious ailment”, it does not seem possible to either ignore or account for several other events, “characters” and episodes that are played out “in full view of Kamaldihi.”²⁴ There are gods that represent positive energy but “Sima-Bonga symbolizes the negative forces. It causes disease, infirmity, poverty, doom and, finally, death. In order to keep the village

22. Hansda, *Rupi Baskey*, pp. 107–10.

23. Hansda, *Rupi Baskey*, p. 123.

24. Hansda, *Rupi Baskey*, p. 9.

safe from its evil influence, Sima Bonga, too, must be paid obeisance along with the other deities. And though Sima-Bonga is worshipped only during the Baha and Maak-Moray festivals, and no one prays to it on ordinary days, there are people who tame it. For these people, Sima Bonga takes precedence even over the Father and the Mother or over Karam-Bonga, the deity who looks after families.”²⁵

Sima-Bonga is said to bring easy wealth to those who appease it. Hence it is also called the Dhonkundra-bhoot (Dhonkundra-ghost). It manifests itself as “a small child – or a dwarf no taller than three feet – with large, saucer-like eyes and a small, pinched mouth. White from head to toe, it comes out to play in the night ... However, the Dhonkundra-bhoot extracts a heavy price for its favours. People who maintain it usually suffer strange, incurable illnesses. Some of them – both men and women, but more men than women – become sterile and never sire or bear children. And the children they do have turn out to be weaklings or imbeciles ... it is said that those who appease this bhoot hear its cries all the time and eventually lose their minds. Yet the lure of easy wealth compels people to tame Sima-Bonga.”²⁶ The family that gives into this temptation is that of the “naikay – the bridge between the residents of the village and their gods.”²⁷ The naikay’s wife, and later, his daughter-in-law, are believed to have tamed Sima-Bonga. One could have accepted this as one of the traditional lores of the Dhonkundra-bhoot had it not been actually spotted by two characters in the novel.

A Santhal man who lived two doors away from the Naikay saw, one night, a strange creature in his garden. It was white. Its upper limbs were disproportionately long and its eyes were large and round. It was swinging from the lowermost branch of an edel tree. At first the man thought it was a child. But how could the child reach the branch even though it was the lowermost on the tree? And why would a child be alone in the garden at night?

... The man ... standing under the edel tree ... realized that the night was not silent after all. And he was not alone ... The creature stopped swinging. Then the man noticed its long arms and began to shiver ... when he separated the leaves of the bush, a pair of large eyes with no irises stared back at him; the creature had only two holes to breathe through; and its mouth was so small, it seemed as if the lips had been stitched tight to one another. The curious man almost fell backwards in horror. The creature leaped like it has grown springs under the soles of its feet, jumped towards the naikay’s house and disappeared.²⁸

25. Hansda, *Rupi Baskey*, pp. 26–27.

26. Hansda, *Rupi Baskey*, pp. 26–27.

27. Hansda, *Rupi Baskey*, p. 13.

28. Hansda, *Rupi Baskey*, pp. 35–36.

The other person to encounter the bhoot was Della, the naikay’s daughter, and a close friend of Putki, Rupi’s mother-in-law. One night, Della came out and had just “lifted the hem of her saree and petticoat when the Dhonkundra-bhoot came scampering up, demanding her attention ... Anyone else would have fled ... but Della said sternly, ‘If you don’t let me piss on the ground, I’ll piss in mouth ... How shameless you are! My father has tamed you; I am your sister’ ... the bhoot cried, leaped high, and jumped back inside the naikay’s house.”²⁹

One clear, visible indication of women who worshipped the evil gods was their rolling eyes. The Naikay’s wife, and later, her daughter-in-law, had rolling eyes. It was also believed that when “they gathered on certain konami nights, all barriers of religion and prejudices of community would be forgotten. They would meet in the bamboo thicket outside the village, roam the banks of the Kadamdihi stream, ritually suck the life out of humans and animals, and in the absence of prey, devour human or animal dung” to keep themselves going.³⁰ In fact, it was claimed that the naikay’s liver was found missing when he died because his wife had fed on him to fortify and replenish her witchery.

When Rupi meets Gurubari for the first time she notices that, “Gurubari’s eyes ... were much like those of the naikay’s widow and daughter-in-law in Kadamdihi. Gurubari scanned Rupi from head to toe, from right to left, not pausing even once.”³¹ This introduces the possibility of Gurubari using witchcraft to win over Sido and Jaipal and “ritually” sucking life out of Rupi. And then,

Bairam died on one konami night. It was a simple death; he did not suffer. Of course, it could never be proven, but everyone said that his death was just one more instance of Gurubari’s skill. While several theories about his death were discussed, everyone generally accepted that Bairam had been sacrificed.

Bairam’s death may or may not have been a sacrifice, but it did benefit Gurubari in one way ... Gurubari was made the office attendant in the school Bairam and Sido once attended. Her literacy helped.

After Bairam’s death, Sido spent practically every day in Gurubari’s house in Chakuliya, returning home to Kadamdihi only at night.³²

The possibility of Gurubari getting the job due to her educational qualifications is made so casually that we almost miss it. In our minds, the universe of black magic is already fully constructed due to detailed descriptions of preparation, timing and

29. Hansda, *Rupi Baskey*, pp. 58–59.

30. Hansda, *Rupi Baskey*, p. 32.

31. Hnasda, *Rupi Baskey*, p. 95.

32. Hansda, *Rupi Baskey*, p. 183.

rituals that the novel brings to us. Nonetheless, the writer clearly offers us an empirical, alternative explanation of the reason for Gurubari getting the job in place of her husband. The reader may still decide to ignore the short sentence of three words, “Her literacy helped” but that does not erase out the possibility of a logical explanation that runs counter to the “generally accepted” version of Bairam being “sacrificed” by Gurubari for refuelling her magic and satisfying her ambitions.

A similar attempt at logically explaining Rupi’s dislike of her sister-in-law Dulari, who is believed to be a dahini (witch), is offered by Hansda later in the novel when he tries to analyze “Rupi’s psyche.”³³ Describing an incident when Rupi gets angry with Dulari, Hansda writes,

She (Rupi) wasn’t shouting at Dulari because she wanted to pick a fight. She was just tired of lying around like a corpse, she was tired of being dependent on others, she was tired of not having her husband and first born with her, she was tired of knowing what ailed her but not its cure. She was tired of her disease. Her anger wasn’t directed at Dulari; it was her anger against all women who performed magic.³⁴

The above reasoning represents a combination of what may be called rational with that which lies beyond explanation. The logic of Rupi’s frustration leading on to her losing her temper is quietly absorbed by her anger against “all women who perform magic.” The statement concludes the almost clinical diagnosis, giving it the effect of a final judgement. Still the option of working out an alternate logical method of analysis is made available to us. We see the binaries being accommodated, and the etic and the emic methods intertwined together, to maintain the complexity of the narrative and evading simple methods for understanding the connections between individual psyche and socio-cultural constructs. Thus, though the objective and the subjective, etic and the emic are often perceived as being mutually exclusive, these actually complement each other and may be applied together especially for interpreting texts that lie in the liminal regions of perceived binaries of objective and subjective, reality and illusion, local and exotic. The assumptions of unitary, essential and static meaning must be deconstructed to reach a dynamic understanding of human behaviour and cultural underpinnings.

33. Hansda, *Rupi Baskey*, p. 184.

34. Hansda, *Rupi Baskey*, p. 184.

Beyond the postcolonial: Reading the local and the exotic

Rupi Baskey takes us through the see-saw of the different worlds of the mysterious and the mundane, real and the fantastic, exotic and the familiar, till we come to the incident about Sido's experience with the *ojha* (witch-doctor). Sido takes Rupī to an *ojha* after all doctors fail to diagnose her illness and cure her. The *ojha* takes Sido to an inner room filled with smoke. When Sido's eyes

had adjusted, he could see ... a tall statue of the goddess Kali which stood against the wall. The statue which rose from the floor to the rafters above, seemed like a near-exact representation of how Kali would have looked had she been real. The figure of Kali was black. Black like coal, black like the night, black like the darkness that engulfed the room ... There was a garland of human heads around the deity's neck. The heads somehow seemed real to Sido ... The goddess had huge eyes and a protruding tongue so red that it looked like it had been smeared with real blood ...

“What are you doing here?” the *ojha* screamed at the woman who had suddenly appeared behind Sido. “Where did you come from?” ... The *ojha* stared disbelievingly into Gurbari's face ... She dragged Sido outside.³⁵

The fact of Sido seeing Gurubari's apparition could be explained as an expression of his guilt for his clandestine relationship with her, but the *ojha* seeing it as well, defies all logic as we watch the “fantastic” intervening into the “realistic” in the novel. This fusion also occurs in Hansda's short story “Desire, Divination, Death” where Subhashini sees the apparition of a little boy while she is hurrying back from her job to get to her ailing son with some *jalebis* (a fried Indian sweet) for him. The road was completely still and silent:

No vehicle passed and no one hurried by. Even the animals seemed absent. ... Her tears had dried and her heart was racing. She knew that Misfortune sometimes assumes human form and begs for alms. Anyone compassionate enough to be charitable to Misfortune spends the rest of her life weeping. Then there are the dahinis, the worshippers of the deities of the dark. When a dahini dies, the deities she once worshipped assume the form of a child, an old man or a woman, a sick man; even a cow, goat, or a pig, and look for another devotee.³⁶

The child, however, continues to pester her and plead, “I am very hungry ... my mother told me that she would bring jalebi for me.”³⁷ Subhashini avoids the child and rushes back home only to discover that her son had passed away and in his

35. Hansda, *Rupi Baskey*, pp. 194–95.

36. Hansda, *Rupi Baskey*, pp. 140–41.

37. Hansda, *Rupi Baskey*, p. 141.

last moments was asking for *jalebis*. It is possible to interpret this incident in the story as Hansda's attempt to explore the complex ways in which psychological states may be shaped by mental and physical occurrences or, to read it as representing the fact of impossibility of a complete and thorough investigation of the discourse of disease, fantasy, instincts and premonitions that are spread out far beyond the limits of human comprehension.

However, the incident of Sido's visit to the *ojha* and the *Kali* temple makes it impossible to arrive at any meaningful interpretation. Still, it does not fully hamper the possibility of the incident being shaped by the author's intention. What is, however, difficult to ignore is the fact that the description of the *ojha*, the room and the statue of the goddess *Kali* is reminiscent of many similar descriptions of the goddess in colonial records, diaries and travelogues by British men and women for whom the goddess symbolised "idolatry, barbarism and the sheer otherness of non-Christian religiosity."³⁸ *Kali* as a "richly divine complex figure" is completely undermined,³⁹ through distorted and demonised representation that was often essentialised as possessing all aspects that constructed the vision of India being uncivilised, violent and brutal.

Between these twin discourses of the colonizer and the colonized lies another tier of transference of social/cultural/religious contact and exchange between the animistic Sarna religion of the Santhals and that of the "non-Sarnas" "in the place where Rupī Baskey is set – that is southern Jharkhand and places around Jamshedpur and Ghatsila."⁴⁰ It is thus possible to liberate the entire "*Kali* episode" from the discourse of the postcolonial, to renegotiate the terrain, and to relocate it within the paradigm of the "local" that, however, instead of displacing the colonial, adds another layer to the existing palimpsest. Hansda himself says that in *Rupī Baskey*, he has

...tried to show Goddess *Kali* as someone who is non-Sarna. ... [The] Santhals follow the animist religion Sarna, so *Kali* is not [their] deity. Yet, Sido tried to cure Rupī by taking her to an ... *ojha* who worships *Kali*. Yes, the coming together of *Kali* ... and ... Gurubari – who is most certainly a follower of the Sarna faith – is a mystery as mysterious as Rupī Baskey's mysterious ailment. I prefer to keep that as a mystery, because even I do not have a ready answer to why Sido reacted the way he did at the *ojha's* place, why the *ojha* was terrified by the vision of Gurubari, or why Gurubari claims that *Kali* is her goddess too. Let all these remain a mystery.⁴¹

38. William S. Caine, *Picturesque India: A Handbook for European Travellers*, London: Routledge, 1898, pp. 336–38.

39. Rachell Feill McDermott, Jeffery John Kripal, ed. *Encountering Kali: In the Margins, at the Centre, in the West*, Delhi: Motilal Banrasidass Publishers, 2003, p. 2.

40. Quoted from a written discussion with the writer. Published here with his permission.

41. Quoted from personal discussion with Hansda with his permission.

Thus, we find that Hansda's narrative is replete with the unseen and the fantastic but still remains convincing because it investigates not the “why” but the “how” of these events and incidents. He locates these in the wider discourse that integrates these with intellectual and socio-cultural forces that operate within society and determine the relationship between reason, rationality, unreason and the irrational.

The *Kali* incident, however, appears to be an exception, and leaves us wondering about the possibility of viewing this as some kind of slippage into exoticism that undermines the complexity and mysticism associated with the goddess. The other way to approach the issue could be by putting the onus not on the writer but on the etic or the non-participant, the etic reader, who brings to the text the baggage of doubt that refuses to accept the existence of mysteries that are impossible to unravel. Hansda does combine the etic and the emic approaches and in so doing, challenges our cultural/literary neutrality regarding the exotic. Reading, we must accept, is no more innocent than writing.

Overturning the familiar and the exotic

The fiction of Ranendra and Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar

Namita Sethi

Truly speaking, we don't want to be faceless beings, sir.¹

We are becoming people from nowhere.²

In this essay I attempt to show how two contemporary Indian authors, Ranendra and Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, provide a close encounter with the exotic in their fiction only to overturn the very categories of the familiar and the exotic in what constitute political acts of engagement with the past and present of the Adivasi Santhal community in India.

The Indian writer and the (exotic) representation of the subaltern

A writer attempting to examine and represent cultural difference in India could easily fall into the trap of accessing the historical moment through what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak terms “doublethink” or the “colonialist theory of most efficient information retrieval” in order to speak for the subaltern; when the academic finds that the “personal micrology (of the subjects) is difficult to acquire.”³ The situation is made more complex due to the large number of languages in India, of which the reader might not have any knowledge. Ranendra and Shekhar translate, Santhali and Asuri in the case of these two novels, along with aspects of the embedded cultural specificities of oral cultures, for the English-speaking readership which includes

1. Ranendra, *Lords of the Global Village*, trans. Rajesh Kumar, New Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2017, p. 126.

2. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, *The Adivasi Will not Dance: Stories*, 2015, New Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2017, p. 173.

3. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, New York and London: Routledge, 1987, p. 246.

the Indian reader. As Aijaz Ahmad has argued, “direct knowledge of an “Indian” Literature presumes the knowledge of so many languages that only rare specialists could command them all,” hence the “current trend for English to become the (dominant) language in which the knowledge of Indian literature is produced.”⁴ Graham Huggan quotes these statements of Ahmad to show how Indian literature in English has itself become a kind of translation, a culturally mediated view of India made accessible to the wider English-speaking world.”⁵ The subaltern is someone who lacks access to the hegemonic discourse. The challenge lies in making the subaltern speak in literary representation and to convey that voice without mediation that muddles: mediation that is usually rooted not only in the euro-centric point of view but also that of the dominant culture and hegemonic structures of the postcolonial state (India in the case of these two novels). Not surprisingly, such a representation can only be constructed in a matrix of opposition and conflict with the dominant culture and its discourses, even as it is being consumed by the educated Indian and “foreign” English trained reader who are its target audience. Irony has remained a time-tested tool in the arsenal of writers (across cultures) who aim for satire and reform or for just subverting popular assumptions about the “other.” Yet, as Graham Huggan argues, “ironic self-consciousness and strategically deployed exoticism,”⁶ can become a commercial formula for Indo-Anglican writers to succeed in the neo-colonial marketplace while they simultaneously contest orientalist discourses. This essay attempts to examine the strategies employed by Ranendra and Shekhar in their respective texts, to negotiate these double binds as they play with the sign of the exotic to assign subject positions to characters from the Santhal and Asur communities.

Globalization and the postcolonial period have seen the continued exploitation of the adivasis of India in the name of democratic development by the wider economy and polity. As Ramachandra Guha suggests, while Dalits and Muslims have had some impact in shaping the national discourse on democracy, “the tribals remain not just marginal but invisible.”⁷

The word exotic comes from the Greek word *exotikos* which means foreign, from the root “exo” which in turn means outside. The Santhal Adivasi community finds itself excluded from the grand narrative of development even as it feeds

4. Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, London: Verso, 1992, p. 250.

5. Graham Huggan, *The Post-Colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, London, NY: Routledge, 2001, p. 80.

6. Graham Huggan, *The Post-Colonial Exotic*, p. 80.

7. Ramachandara Guha, “Adivasis, Naxalites and Indian Democracy, *EPW* 11 August 2007. Rpt. Web. 10 April 2017. <http://www.ramachandraguha.in/archives/adivasi-naxalite>

this enterprise as inhabitants of a mineral rich region that has been exploited for the natural wealth it holds. I prefer using the word Adivasi as compared to tribal because the former has connotations of being the first or ancient and native (*adi*) dwellers of the land (*vasi*).

Both Ranendra and Shekhar talk about the marginalization of the Santhal community in the discursive mapping of the term tribal and also the intersections of caste and religion which determine their relative status in the various Indian states in which they find themselves. There are tales within tales of progressive dispossession and endangered linguistic and cultural identity in their fiction. The trope of the exotic enables both writers to revisit the past and the present of their community in striking ways. This process overturns the terms familiar and exotic as the readers are shocked into recognizing the ideological underpinnings of their assumptions. In Ranendra's novel the readers face the disturbing discovery of their own collusion with the exploitative operations of late capitalism in the era of globalization.

The neo-colonial *Lords of the Global Village*

Ranendra's *Lords of the Global Village* re-tells the ancient Hindu myth of the battle between the Gods/Devtas and the Demons/Asurs. The original Hindi novel by Ranendra is called *Global Gaon ke Devta* (2010),⁸ and recasts the modern-day *devtas* as the powerful nexus between mine-owners, land-grabbers, politicians, goons and a dubious Godman: the recognizable face of late capitalism exploiting the impoverished Asur community. The retention of the English word "global" in the Hindi title acts like a sign post, to the Hindi speaking reader, of the ubiquitous forces and insidious processes of globalization (associated here with multinational companies), while the use of the Hindi word "*devta*" (Gods) simultaneously points to the community's/readers' own complicity in these processes and problematizes the term "*devta*" itself with the code of satire operating within the phrase.

The readers are taken on a journey in order to own up to their assumptions about the Asurs who are usually perceived as the other and exotic. This is done through the device of using a narrative voice that the reader can relate to. The narrator, Master Sahib, is an upper caste educated man who lands a job as a science teacher for girls from "primitive" (as described in government documents) tribal families in a far-flung area called Bhaunrapaat, that he refers to as "some damned

8. Ranendra, *Global Gaon Ke Devta* (Hindi), 2016, Delhi: Bhartiya Jnanpith, 2010. Ranendra *Lords of the Global Village: A Novel*, translated from Hindi by Rajesh Kumar, New Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2017. Abbreviated as *Lords* in all following references to the English (translated) text.

miserable place.”⁹ He first attempts to get his posting changed by contacting the local MLA. He does not succeed and it is the image of the MLA’s house in the capital that he dreams of longingly while languishing in Bhaunrapaat, “where barren fields stretch in all directions, dotted with open cast bauxite mines. Craters were left where all the bauxite ore had been excavated; they yawned everywhere-Mother Earth’s face was pitted with smallpox.”¹⁰

The striking image of a defaced mother earth forms the backdrop for introducing the exotic community whose livelihood and resources are drained by the bauxite mines. The author uses irony effectively here because, at first sight, the narrator does not identify his Asur friends and visitors as exotic. The fact that the Asur peon Etwari (who later becomes his lover) did not have “long, pointed claws or blood sucking fangs” but was instead a “svelte, comely woman,”¹¹ comes as a surprise to him, as he sheepishly shares, and in the process challenges, his readers.

Since the expectation of an exotic encounter is set up due to assumptions related to the name that signifies caste, the narrator shares his surprise with his new friend Rumjhum Asur commenting that he found the second name of Rumjhum’s people really astonishing. That Rumjhum is aware of the popular perception about his people and has encountered the charge of being exotic before is evident from his response:

You are right. The word “Asur” reminds you of two things. One is the stories of giants, demons and fiends heard during one’s childhood. What terrible descriptions! Ten to twelve feet tall. Protruding teeth. An assortment of weapons in their hands. Cannibals, devotees of Lord Shiva, brawny, yet able to be slaughtered. The curtain scene of all god-demon struggles is predestined! The other is photographs of loincloth wearing Asur men and bare-breasted women in the 1926, 1946 and 1966 anthropology books. Now you decide Master Sahib, what we are.¹²

The enterprise of exoticization, of othering, of making the other exotic, is here located in two discourses: the mythology of the dominant culture (the term Hindu itself being a contested term in my opinion) and Anthropology. The former is traced to ancient history, the latter is linked squarely to colonial discourse and its pervasiveness in postcolonial India. And the last sentence of the quote seems to invite the reader to think outside these discursive boundaries that limit Asur identity.

9. Ranendra, *Lords*, p. 1.

10. Ranendra, *Lords*, p. 4.

11. Ranendra, *Lords*, p. 9.

12. Ranendra, *Lords*, p. 18.

The text goes one step further and deconstructs the binary of *Sur* (Hindu gods) and *Asur* (perceived as monsters). Rumjhum Asur offers a different etymology for the term Asur and claims that it meant “strong man in Assyrian-Babylonian civilization.”¹³ This is a claim also made by Van Buitenen in his introduction to the Book of the Assembly Hall, *Mahabharata*, when he suggests that Asurs were referred to as Ahurs in ancient Iran and were the equivalent of Gods and in Zarathustra of Iran, daevas are supposedly representative of anti-Gods.¹⁴ He suggests that Mayasur (Maya Asur) who helps build the palace at Indraprastha was Iranian and that Magadha architecture at Pataliputra of 302 BC, as observed by Megasthenes, incorporated the architecture of Persepolis which had been sacked by Alexander. (This is of course in dynamic opposition to the widely held interpretation of the term Asur in India and a writer or critic can be lynched for even suggesting an alternative etymology on any popular media or forum).

Rumjhum Asur also contends that “around 150 shlokas in the Rigveda treat the Asurs as Gods and that these include the gods Mitra, Varun, Agni, Rudra.”¹⁵ He also suggests that the basis of the Asur-Deva conflict was a “fight between the forest-razing cultivator-producers on the one hand, and the iron melters dependent on the sakhua trees on the other.”¹⁶ This argument can be read as positing an economic base for the conflict on which the superstructure of morality and cultural hegemony may be said to rest.

The story of the continued dispossession of the Adivasis and their forests continues under late capitalism. The text borders on sedition and journalism in its re-writing of contemporary history from an activist’s point of view. The literary device of making new myths and re-scripting old ones in an ironic tone aids this endeavour. The author chooses to term the merging of the “high flying global deities and the nation state,”¹⁷ as the Lords of the Global Village. In using a term from the contemporary discourse of globalisation, the author is perhaps aware of the irony that the world reduced to a global village will result in the disappearance of villages as entities. These new Lords of the Global village are located at a remote distance from the “minerals, jungles and other resources of Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh or Jharkhand” viewed from “their sky routes or lenses of satellites, they

13. Ranendra, *Lords*, p. 18.

14. Van Buitenen, trans. & ed. *The Mahabharata: Book 2 The Book of The Assembly Hall*, University of Chicago Press, 1975, p. 8.

15. Ranendra, *Lords*, p. 18.

16. Ranendra, *Lords*, p. 19.

17. Ranendra, *Lords*, p. 141.

are confident that this is their personal property,”¹⁸ as a nation state. When the narrator watches his Asur friends killed by landmines used to stem their protest, he concludes with chilling sarcasm:

The gods of the Global Village were delirious with joy. The battle that had commenced in the Vedic age, the same battle that thousands of Indras had not been able to end, had now been won by the deities of the Global Village. Asur-Birija, Birhor-Korba, the tribal communities, all the aborigines would now be part of the mainstream, the waves of which were leaping up to lap the moon. Winding through the capitals of various states, the swell rushed through Delhi to Washington DC.¹⁹

This comment brings together in an unlikely combination the hegemony of institutionalized religion with the forces of American multinationals: unlikely because both usually define themselves as oppositional discourses and yet collude often. The statement can be read as propaganda, taken to sentimental extremes, demonizing the dominant cultural discourses or as a vituperative literary satire depending on the reader's own subject position.

The cover of the Hindi edition published by Bhartiya Jnanpith displays a fantasy landscape. In the foreground is a flying elephant soaring above a forest in the sky with other mountains bearing wings. The elephant is usually found printed on t-shirts sold to foreign tourists as an emblem of exotic and “incredible” India.²⁰ In the picture on the cover, it also recalls Airavat, the elephant mount of Indra, the king of the *devas*. However, in this picture the elephant carries on its back tourists/Lords dressed in hats that are the same colour as the American flag with a distinct stars and stripes pattern. It brings to mind a new age Indra sporting touristy kitsch: truly an example of painting the familiar as exotic. This picture does not appear on the cover of the English edition published in 2017 which seems to feature a mine with circular patterns reminiscent of Dante's hell, a veritable wasteland. It is interesting to note that the cover of the Hindi edition is far more provocative. Perhaps, it may be speculated that it was thought to be politically seditious and provocative to religious sentiments and was replaced by a relatively demurer cover.

18. Ranendra, *Lords*, p. 142.

19. Ranendra, *Lords*, p. 157.

20. Incredible India (styled as Incredible India) is the name of an international tourism campaign maintained by the government of India since 2002 in order to promote India to a global tourist audience.

Representing adivasi women

The women from the Asur community, viewed as the other in mainstream Hindu mythology (as for example Surpanakha in *The Ramayana* who tries to seduce Rama and Lakshmana), are portrayed as hardworking and cheerful members of the community. From pounding paddy to arranging firewood, cleaning the house and cooking vessels, housework, childcare, taking care of cattle and doing much of the fieldwork: a vast array of tasks is handled by them in the novel, as they laugh and sing while working on an empty stomach. They are compared to the revered deity *Sarna Mai* and Ranendra tells us that “after all, Mother Earth and Sarna Mai were also women.”²¹ The text replaces the demonic stereotype and offers us a representation of a vibrant community where women are treated with respect and dignity and where the very concept of femininity is traditionally constructed as not only life giving and divine but also as inextricably woven with nature and an agrarian economy.

An interesting instance of what Spivak, in her foreword to her translation of “Draupadi”, terms the “Senanayak’s doublethink” or “the clean gap between theory and practice,”²² can be seen in the narrator’s perspective towards his lover Etwari, who initiates a liaison with the narrator. The narrator, Master Sahib, for all his sensitivity to the cause of educating and empowering tribal women, is only able to appreciate her for her exotic looks and her body. He refers to her as the woman with the “amethyst tint” or “Jamuniya” who seems to have cast a charm on him;²³ thus in a way dismissing responsibility for his part in the affair. He loses interest in her as he feels his attraction to her is merely that of a “carnal relationship, nothing else,” whereas he defends his newfound attraction to Lalita as being based on shared interests and accepts her invitation to be her *Sahiya* or exclusive friend.²⁴ Etwari’s love for the narrator is so intense that she saves his life by locking him indoors when she bravely walks to her own death in the landmines set up for the *adivasi* protesters. The narrator epitomizes the same rejection of the female body and sexuality with which he charges the upper caste people. For all his empathy, he too is unable to look beyond the dominant culture’s equation of the tribal women with raw sexuality and as figured as bodies, dissociated from the mind.

Ranendra’s own reverence for and the Asur community’s esteem for women and nature can be seen in his statement that:

21. Ranendra, *Lords*, p. 27.

22. Spivak, *In Other Worlds*, p. 255.

23. Ranendra, *Lords*, p. 65.

24. Ranendra, *Lords*, p. 93.

In this community, women were called *siyani*: worldly-wise, not *janani*. The word “*janani*” (mother) was parochial, binding them to the role of begetters; on the other hand “*siyani*” (wise) symbolized their vast experience and wisdom. The *siyani* women knew in which *taand*, which *don*, to find the black, yellow and white soils for coating the house.²⁵

This elevated status of women as producers in the agrarian economy, is eroded by what the author thinks capitalism brings to the villages, which is an exodus of tribal women to the cities, to Delhi and Kolkota, to work as domestic labour or as prostitutes.

Religion as a tool of cultural imperialism and women's subordination

The text celebrates the inclusivity of the femino-centric tribal religion and its acceptance of difference. The religious identity of the *Asur* community comes under threat from a *Baba* (Godman) who uses religious sentiment to foster networking between the politicians, businessmen, IAS officers and NGOs, to pursue an agenda of cultural policing and ideological subordination of the Adivasis. Lalita, an educated *Asur* woman character in the novel, can see through the changes being brought about by the fraud *Baba* and she points that it is a symptom of a deeper cultural paradigm shift. Referring to the legend that only men from the *Asur* community were duped by the Sing Bonga's (deity) disguise and that the *Asur* women put up resistance and became wise witches, she points out:

We are Nature worshippers. Our Lord. All-Compassionate Mahadeva, is not Langta *Baba*'s god. Our Mahadeva is this hill, this *paat*, which sustains us. Our Sarna Mai suffuses not only the sakhua tree but the flora all around. We include all creatures in our *gotra*. We respect even the smallest insect; we simply don't have the concept of the other.²⁶

In fact, the incident of the Godman Shivdas *Baba* of Koel ashram in the novel, surprisingly pre-empts a real-life exposé of Godman Ram Rahim Singh Ji Insaan, a most exotic specimen of a Godman cum filmmaker who hit the news headlines in India recently (August 2017). The similarities in the *modus operandi* of the fictional *Baba* and the real one caught in Punjab is likely a coincidence but both point towards a malaise in society that craves sensationalism and despotic authority figures. Both the *Babas* built a road from their ashram to the girls' hostels; both exploit blind faith and come up with bizarre formulae to keep their followers

25. Ranendra, *Lords*, p. 28.

26. Ranendra, *Lords*, p. 108.

enthralled and fascinated by a machinery of spectacle making, networking with the media, and offering false promises. The episode in the novel shows how religious sentiment is evoked to perpetuate practices which exploit women and erode their self-worth and communal identity and support systems.

In opposition to these hegemonizing impulses, the novel offers a model of resistance by evoking contemporary figures of resistance and, interestingly, all these heroic figures are women fighting for the rights of Adivasis, human rights or the environment. The novel crosses over into journalism and activism at this point and makes an impassioned appeal linking women with the earth:

Earth is a woman, Nature is a woman, Sarna Mai is a woman; fighting for them, Satyabhama, Irom Sharmila, C. K. Janu, Surekha Dalvi...are all women. Maybe only a woman can understand another woman. Daughters are like Sita-always prepared to unite with the earth. This makes the hunter, the man, superfluous.²⁷

Ranendra offers an eco-feminist model as an alternative to the ravages of capitalism and patriarchy. He cleverly uses the Hindu myth of Sita being the daughter of the earth (who returned to the earth at the end of the *Ramayana*) and turns it on its head by eulogising not Sita's acceptance of the patriarchal code but her connection to the earth and her individual identity that is powerful much like that of the Adivasi women. The binary opposition of man as the hunter/capitalist and woman as victims/eco-warriors is problematic because of its essentializing impulse. Nevertheless, it does help Ranendra establish a connection between women and the environment and celebrate their activism and resistance. Instead of being exotic objects of desire, as portrayed in popular culture (sometimes being reduced to inspiration for "tribal" fashion on the runway), these are empowered and vocal women.

Other models of governance and resistance

According to Manoranjan Mohanty, "the struggle in Adivasi areas is about political power, the power of self-governance, power to control the resources of the region and formulate plans to develop in such a way that they would not only end poverty, create employment and protect the environment and natural resources and their knowledge systems, but one that would negotiate with outside forces, national and international to jointly set up programmes on mutually agreed terms."²⁸ Education

²⁷. Ranendra, *Lords*, p. 139.

²⁸. Mohanty, Manoranjan. "Adivasi Swaraj is the Answer to Violence: Naxalbari and After". *EPW*, Vol. 52, Issue no. 21, 27 May, 2017. Web. Accessed 23 June, 2017. <http://www.epw.in/journal/2017/21/naxalbari-and-after/ativasi-swaraj-answer-violence>

can make the playing field more level by helping generate employment and enabling such negotiations.

The novel gives us many examples of oppression of the tribals and their dissatisfaction with the current institutions. One example is the Patharpaat School, which was built by uprooting more than a hundred Asur families which, though built on Adivasi land, catered to the upper castes and classes while denying admission to tribal children. Rumjhum complains to the narrator that the children of the village will be “nothing more than skilled labourers, peons and clerks from the sham schools,”²⁹ thereby attesting to the discrimination and exploitation perpetuated by the development models of the state.

Apart from education, the other vital issue was the mining-legal and illegal on the *paat*. The novel brings up issues of land grabbing, rampant crime, violation of tribal women by men of other castes and of indiscriminate bauxite mining.

The companies mining companies did not spend a single penny of their profits on the development of the people. They left the mines uncovered which led to stagnation of water which led to people dying of cholera and malaria. The book forays into contemporary history and exposes the claims of companies such as Tata and Shindalco, who, the author claims, have exploited tribal land and lives in their neo-colonial quest for mineral resources. The author complains that even the forest department had always considered the Asurs and other tribals encroachers on its land. The novelist argues that it is the Forest Department which was the real encroacher because: “like the animals and the trees, the men here were the natural inhabitants of the forests.”³⁰

The discourse of environment conservation is used to evict the tribals from their natural habitat. This, according to Ranendra, is part of the whole process whereby tribal cultures are marginalized and eventually erased by cultural hegemony. In a touching letter to the President, that recalls Chief Seathl’s letter,³¹ the character Rumjhum Asur refers to the fact that like the disappearing wolves, the Asur community which is down to “eight to nine thousand asurs” will “become extinct;”³² due to the machinery of exploitation of which the wolf – sanctuary,

29. Ranendra, *Lords*, pp. 20–21.

30. Ranendra, *Lords*, p. 119.

31. A letter attributed to Chief Seattle, which was addressed to President Franklin Pierce in 1855 and is a staple of environmental literature. Though widely anthologised, there is no historical evidence that it was written by Chief Seathl/Seattle. The letter makes a plea for protecting nature as well as the rights of the Native Americans and contrasts the native view of oneness with the land from that of the territorial colonial perspective.

32. Ranendra, *Lords*, p. 126.

being built after displacing Asurs, is a part. The larger state and dominant culture threaten to make this community “faceless beings” whose “identities have been lost.”³³ The letter also recalls a moment of Rumjhum’s encounter with the slum dwellers in Delhi. He recoils in terror from what would seem a familiar urban sight to the reader, but Rumjhum “ran off in horror” when he faces these “nameless” and “faceless beings.”³⁴ This is also a moment when the readers are made to encounter the exotic in everyday familiar circumstances and open their eyes to the dehumanising mechanisms of modern (capitalist) structures. The narrator remarks with indignant sarcasm:

The Americans were generous enough to preserve the literatures and ruins of the Incas, the Mayans, the Aztecs and the Native-Americans in a number of museums. But the self-proclaimed liberal and tolerant Indian culture had spared not even that much space for the Asurs. They existed only as vestiges of myths. They had no literature, no history, no museum, and were not even accorded even the faintest sign of their devastation.³⁵

The Indian state and public is held responsible for the exploitation of natural resources as well as for the erasure of tribal identities in official discourse and the public domain.

Shekhar’s *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar’s collection of stories focuses on the lives of Santhal characters from varying class backgrounds and locations in the mineral rich state of Jharkhand. The narrators of most of these stories are urban, middleclass, educated boys or men for whom the Santhal myths are stories of magic and fantasy though prized as part of a rich heritage. The first story in the collection begins on a note that lulls the urban reader into expecting only the familiar and every day: “Our aunt Panmuni-jhi began to eat regularly in restaurants after moving to Vadodara in 2000.”³⁶ The last story, which is also the title story, of the collection maps how far the reader has travelled through the book, as it begins with the plea of the dispossessed Santhali-musician-farmer: “They pinned me to the ground.

33. Ranendra, *Lords*, p. 126.

34. Ranendra, *Lords*, p. 126.

35. Ranendra, *Lords*, p. 44.

36. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance: Stories*, New Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2015, p. 1. All further references to the this text are abbreviated as Shekhar, *The Adivasi*.

They did not let me speak, they did not let me protest.”³⁷ The truth about the brutal repression of Adivasi protest is revealed casually but forcefully to the reader oblivious or indifferent to the lives of those who live outside big cities in squalid mining towns and dense forests and are only seen as performers dressed in exotic attire on state occasions.

Deconstructing the Adivasi

Shekhar, like Ranendra, uses archetypes and myths to give a fictional representation of actual events involving eviction of the Santhals from their land. To the question of how many Adivasis have lost their homes and lands as a result of conscious state policy, Ramachandra Guha’s reply was that “the answer is too many.”³⁸ In the story “The Adivasi Will Not Dance,” the writer abandons the stance of detachment and irony and gives us a narrative voice full of pain, anger and bewilderment, a voice that is not allowed to continue its tale and is interrupted mid-narrative at the end of the story. The narrator, Mangal Murmu, is an old musician who is arrested as he attempts to address the President. Like Rumjhum Asur’s letter to the Prime Minister, this address too is reminiscent of the Native American Chief Seathl’s letter in its pathos. He protests against the setting up of a thermal power plant that requires people from eleven villages to be evicted. The story was probably inspired by a report published in *The Hindu*, on 1 May 2013,³⁹ of 50 tribal farmers, including six women, being detained by the police in the Sundarpahari police station at Godda. Those farmers, also from eleven villages, were protesting before the President of India against the land acquisition for setting up of a thermal power plant. In Shekhar’s story, in a master stroke of irony, the narrator is expected to sing and dance to celebrate the laying of the foundation stone of the very plant that threatens to displace him. His speech is a stringent criticism of the way the Santhals’ identity is constructed in the wider public discourse:

37. Shekhar, *The Adivasi*, p. 169.

38. Ramachandra Guha, “Adivasis, Naxalites and Indian Democracy, *EPW* 11 August 2007. Rpt. Web. 10 April 2017. <http://www.ramachandraguha.in/archives/adivasi-naxalite>

39. Hansda, Literary Review by Radhika Santhanam, “Hansda Shekhar’s is a no holds barred account of life on the margins”, in *The Hindu*, Nov 12, 2016 <http://www.thehindu.com/books/literary-review/Review-Hansda-Shekhar%E2%80%99s-The-Adivasi-Will-Not-Dance-is-a-no-holds-barred-account-of-life-on-the-margins/article16442867.ece>. Web. Accessed 15 March 2017.

We are like toys – someone presses our “ON” button, or turns a key in our backsides and we Santhals start beating rhythms on our *tamak* and *tumdak*, or start blowing our *tiriyo* while someone snatches away our very dancing grounds.⁴⁰

He criticizes the other communities in Jharkhand (“Bihari, Bangali and Odia”)⁴¹ for claiming that Jharkhand is theirs and that their dance and music is superior to that of the Adivasis and yet they don’t “get their women to sing and dance in the open grounds in the name of Jharkhandi culture:” instead they expect “the onus of singing and dancing is upon the Adivasi alone.”⁴²

The thermal power plant is unlikely to benefit any of the thousands of people it would displace in order to provide electricity to factories and cities, observes the narrator. The critique of state policy is validated by a heart wrenching description of poverty. Hansda presents a graphic portrayal of the blackness that paints everything along the road; the trees and shrubs, the black leaves, the tiles on the roofs, and the narrator laments:

Our children-dark skinned as they are-are forever covered with fine black dust. When they cry, and tears stream down their faces it seems as if a river is cutting across a drought-stricken land. Only our eyes burn red, like embers.⁴³

It is a chilling picture of the coal mine induced heart of darkness to rival Conrad’s tale of colonial exploitation and William Blake’s critique of industrial revolution and its impact on children in his poem “The Chimney Sweeper.” It is a moment that captures the familiar as exotic in order to script a history for those whose voice does not reach the media and the people:

Grab as much land as possible, dig as many mines as possible and extract all the coal. This is how the coal company works. Is this scenario so difficult to understand that the media does not get it?⁴⁴

At this moment the author seems to drop the mask of irony and expresses his indignation in the voice of the narrator who wishes to shake the readers out of their complacency.

As in Ranendra’s novel, the repressive discourses include religious ones. All communities: Hindu, Muslim and Christians are seen as pushing for dominance

40. Shekhar, *The Adivasi*, p. 170.

41. Shekhar, *The Adivasi*, p. 179.

42. Shekhar, *The Adivasi*, p. 179.

43. Shekhar, *The Adivasi*, pp. 174–175.

44. Shekhar, *The Adivasi*, p. 172.

in the name of religion. The narrator sums up his anxiety thus: “We are losing our Sarna faith, our identities, and our roots. We are becoming people from nowhere.”⁴⁵

The concern with erasure of cultural identity is found in many of Shekhar’s stories. Food often becomes a metaphor for ideological conflict. If Mangal Murmu complains that the Adivasis are told to stop eating cow-meat and pig-meat, in the story “They Eat Meat!”⁴⁶ food becomes a metaphor for identity and intolerance for the “other” in this tale, as in a comic description of “disposing the eggshells,”⁴⁷ secretly which becomes a matter of walking on eggshells around people’s sensibilities. It is no surprise that the Santhal family feel at home in Ranchi because as Panmuni Jhi puts it: “No one minds what we eat here,”⁴⁸ unlike in Vadodara which is beset by communal riots in 2002 in the name of purging. Shekhar cleverly tells this tale of tragic riots from a comic perspective starting with the exclamation mark in the title which is symptomatic of the intolerance displayed towards the other (all meat eaters as well as anyone who is different) by the local middle-class population.

By constructing a subjectivity for the drum-beating dancing Adivasi: an image that represents popular stereotypical images of the Adivasi and at the same time representing the secular, urban, educated middleclass characters negotiating popular perceptions about Adivasis, Hansda seems to throw a question at the readers. This is the same question with which Graham Huggan ends his book *The Post-Colonial Exotic*: “So, you find me exotic; and what does that say, my friend about you?”⁴⁹

The trope of prostitution

In Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar’s collection, there are stories about Santhal girls pushed into prostitution as a matter of course, which seem to address a similar (exoticizing) perception about tribal women. The theme of a woman selling her body is a recurring one in his fiction and more often than not these women characters are located at the margins, as the migrant labourer Talamai is in the story “November is the Month of Migrations.”⁵⁰ Like most of the village girls in Shekhar’s fiction she is a school dropout. The girl is solicited at the railway station, quite ironically,

45. Shekhar, *The Adivasi*, p. 173.

46. Shekhar, *The Adivasi*, pp. 1–27.

47. Shekhar, *The Adivasi*, p. 3.

48. Shekhar, *The Adivasi*, p. 27.

49. Huggan, *Post-Colonial Exotic*, p. 264.

50. Shekhar, *The Adivasi*, p. 39.

by a jawan of the Railway Protection force who offers her food in exchange for “some work.”⁵¹ The reader’s expectations are overturned because Talamai receives the offer not because she is ignorant of the nature of the work expected of her, but because it is so common for Santhal women to do this work for food and money at the railway station and for truck drivers. The writer describes this mobile territory of street prostitution in a matter of fact tone without passing any judgement or observation, which makes the ubiquity of it more striking. The description of the sex act is deliberately devoid of any emotions and it is mentioned clinically as “work that does not take much time.”⁵² As the jawan continues to hurt her, Talamai keeps quiet as “she knows the routine. She has to do nothing, only spread her legs and keep quiet.”⁵³ She is described as “still as an inert earthen bowl into which a dark cloud empties itself.”⁵⁴ The powerful image links the Santhal woman with the land she inhabits: both passive recipients of exploitation. The girl’s acceptance of two cold bread pakoras and a paltry sum of fifty rupees drives home the extent of the poverty that afflicts her community. Though her acceptance of her fee and fate is unquestioning, the reader is left deeply disturbed by the narration and Shekhar’s tone of chilling irony. The hypocrisy of *Diku* males (*Diku* is roughly translated as a class of oppressors, usually outsiders, as, for example, landlords in the past) is evident in the policeman’s comments during coitus when he exclaims with an expletive: “you Santhal women are made for this only.”⁵⁵ A socially generated practice is legitimized by branding a whole community as good for one use only, thus perpetuating a stereotype. Giving a glimpse into a moment of ideology formation, the writer uses irony effectively to expose the double standards of society. The act of oppression is shown in the moment of its scripting on the Santhal woman’s body.

“Merely a Whore” is another such story that features a sex-worker as a heroine. It begins as a narrative describing prostitution as a by-product of the arrival of mining and the erosion of a feudal agrarian economy:

It was not as if there were no dancing girls earlier. What Jharna and other dancing girls like her would have to do with just one man, they were forced to do with many men several times a day once the mines began their operations.⁵⁶

51. Shekhar, *The Adivasi*, p. 40.

52. Shekhar, *The Adivasi*, p. 41.

53. Shekhar, *The Adivasi*, p. 41.

54. Shekhar, *The Adivasi*, p. 41.

55. Shekhar, *The Adivasi*, p. 41.

56. Shekhar, *The Adivasi*, p. 144.

In a description meant to shock the reader out of indifference, Shekhar describes the women as eating “out of their sweat and labour, only it is mixed with the semen and sweat of men.”⁵⁷ If the men “dig and explore” within the belly of the earth, mining has brought women “their own abysses – eight feet by eight feet rooms”⁵⁸ In spite of the gloomy circumstances the protagonist Sona is described as a dream whereas “everyone else was merely a whore.”⁵⁹ Shekhar claims that this was a challenging story to write because he wanted to give agency to Sona, the prostitute. Sona is depicted as popular and happy, even taking pride in her work (ethic), till she is abandoned by Nirmal, the client that she loves. Nirmal had already subjected another (child) sex-worker to rape before he meets Sona. He seems mild mannered and sensitive but his violent streak is revealed in his encounters with prostitutes. He shares a sense of entitlement and superiority with the Senanayak of Draupadi. When Sona is brutally (anally) raped by Nirmal, she is reminded that she is after all merely a whore, a fact that the ironic title of the story drives home. Nirmal betrays her because she asks for a kiss as a sign of intimacy; because she dares to dream of love and reciprocity. These two sex workers are subalterns in the Gramscian sense of the word and located perhaps at the margins of the margin. Sona attempts to take charge of her emotional needs but is cruelly reminded of what a client can do to a prostitute even if they have shared emotional intimacy, simply, because he can. The only sympathy she gets is from fellow sex-workers when Nirmal passes her on like an object to his friend. The story manages to create a subject position for her.

Reader responses

It is truly ironic and telling that Shekhar has been trolled on social media (facebook) for these representations that some Santhal readers claim stereotype and objectify tribal women. In my reading of his stories I have tried to show that exactly the opposite is true. Far from being pornographic, these descriptions are horrifying and are an attempt to look behind the masks that exoticize or eroticize such exploitation. The problem arises because a superficial reading misses the satiric literary devices of irony and parody altogether. Hansda was also (temporarily) suspended from the government job he holds in Jharkhand recently for he was perceived as being anti-establishment and it was alleged that, as a government employee, he was not supposed to criticize any government policy. On the other hand, he did receive

57. Shekhar, *The Adivasi*, 144.

58. Shekhar, *The Adivasi*, 144.

59. Shekhar, *The Adivasi*, p. 145.

the Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar in 2015 for this book, which is given by the Indian Academy of Letters (a government body) to outstanding young writers. The two seemingly contradictory responses to his work reflect the ambiguity that characterize readers' responses to his work in India. Perhaps, they are symptoms of the same gap between theory and practice that Spivak alludes to in reading and interpretation (from which point this essay began). Representing and reading the other remains a courageous task, one liable to be read in unpredictable ways or misread altogether or evoking great anxiety in certain consumers and stake holders.

Two writers, two approaches to representing the Santhals

What makes Shekhar's stories and Ranendra's novel so engaging is the interweaving and intersections of multiple factors: religion, caste, class, ethnicity, language and gender that define the Santhal experience. Of course, this also throws light on the complexity of being an Indian negotiating identity in the twenty-first century. Whereas Ranendra's voice is almost always direct in its denunciation of the exploitation and marginalization of the tribals, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar favours both direct address and indirection, playfulness and irony. While Ranendra creates a series of binaries between native Santhal practices and the destruction brought about by capitalism, globalization and the nation state; between technology and ecology, between masculine violence and feminine nurturing and harmony with nature, between mainstream Devatas and marginal Asurs; Shekhar's critique is more complex and multi-layered. Shekhar does not idealize the Santhal community and represents them as equally complicit especially when it comes to the oppression of women.

Both these Santhal writers have shown how the exoticizing drives directed at the Santhal community can be overturned discursively through a process of historical re-appropriation and by re-telling popular myths to challenge misconceptions. They propose a new perspective on Santhal identity to rewrite cultural histories and articulate long standing concerns. In doing so, both Shekhar and Ranendra tread a precarious path both in terms of their relationship with the establishment as well as challenging familiar notions of the dominant culture. The exotic becomes a potent vehicle of resistance in their writing. Ranendra's approach of resurrecting binaries, albeit inverted overturned ones, can be limiting in the long term. The more palimpsestic, multi-layered and multipronged approach of Shekhar seems to be more literary, viable and realistic in its complexity as against Ranendra's more idealized, uncritical and uni-dimensional portrayal of the Santhals. Nevertheless, both have made the exotic familiar and ruffled many feathers in the process.

Translation as the interplay of the familiar and the exotic in A. K. Ramanujan's *Poems of Love and War*

S. Annapoorni

Poetry is what gets lost in translation.

Robert Frost¹

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things
as they are perceived and not as they are known.

Victor Shklovsky²

The aim of translation is to make familiar that which is exotic, while simultaneously enhancing the aesthetic perception of the artifact, which is the translated text. The language of poetry is strange in itself; therefore the translation of poetry either familiarizes or defamiliarizes the exotic elements from the source text in the language of the target text. The process of familiarization increases the readers' understanding of the text, while the process of defamiliarization improves the readers' perception of the text. Contemporary Translation Studies, moving away from the notion of Equivalence, focuses on the process of aesthetic perception. In this context, this essay examines the process of translation as the interplay of the two strategies of familiarization and defamiliarization. Analyzing four specific poems from A. K. Ramanujan's anthology *Poems of Love and War*, the essay posits that translation is the site of the intersection of the exotic and the familiar and that the interplay produces a new, hybrid text.

1. Robert Frost, *Conversations on the Craft of Poetry*, 1959. Tape recording. Cleanth Brooks and Probert Penn Warren with Robert Frost, John Crowe Ransome, Robert Lowell and Theodore Roethke. Often quoted thus but the original is: "I could define poetry this way: it is that which is lost out of both prose and verse in translation."

2. Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique (1917)" in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

What She Said

to her girl friend, when she returned from the hills

Bless you, friend. Listen.

Sweeter than milk

mixed with honey from our gardens

is the leftover water in his land,

low in the waterholes

covered with leaves

and muddled by animals. – *Ainkurunuru*, 203 (Translation by A K Ramanujan)³

The poem is an example of *Akam* poems that present a world of intimate love poetry. It belongs to the tradition of clandestine meeting of lovers, mostly before marriage and is presented as the girl's confession of her tryst to her close friend/confidante, overheard by her mother. The speaker begins with a description of the familiar images of honey and milk to be had at home and moves to a description of the water she drank at her mountain tryst. The water from the mountain waterholes is dirty, shared by the humans and animals; however, for the girl in love, the dirty water from the pool is sweeter than the milk mixed with honey she had tasted since childhood. The translation, with an economy of imagery, conveys the speaker's first sexual experience. She is the waterhole and the animal mudding it is her man. In the poem, the twin spaces of home and hill represent two locations as well as two people (the girl and her man) and two states of being. The poem moves from the familiar, domestic image of the girl's home and mother-figure to the unfamiliar image of the man's country, symbolizing her movement from innocence to experience.

The poem belongs to the anthology commonly referred to as *Sangam* Poetry, re-discovered by U. V. Swaminatha Iyer in Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu in 1883. His discovery and subsequent efforts to collate and annotate the poems brought the corpus within the purview of academic study. Many scholars from around the world have taken up the project including, George Hart, Martha Selby and A. K. Ramanujan in America, Takahashi Takanobu in Japan and Kamil Zvelebil and Herman Tieken in Europe. These scholars have also translated the poems to make them available to new generations of readers. The anthologies that constitute the *Sangam* corpus are *Kurunthokai* (401 short poems), *Natrinaï* (400 poems), *Akanānuru* (400 poems), *Ainkurunuru* (500 short poems), *Kalithokai* (150 poems) which are *Akam* books.⁴

The genre of *Akam* poetry is that of the "inner world" and private life. The word *Akam* refers simultaneously to interior, heart, mind, self, kin, home, family, earth and love poems. "It is characteristic of this poetry and its poetics that the

3. A. K. Ramanujan, *Poems of Love and War*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 231.

4. Elizabeth Rani Segran, "Worlds of Desire: Gender and Sexuality in Classical Tamil Poetry," PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2011, p. 9.

meanings seem to expand and contract in concentric circles, with the concrete physical particular in the center, getting more and more inclusive and abstract as we move outward.”⁵ A. K. Ramanujan suggests that *Akam* more than a poetic classification, represents a particular understanding of the human experience. The *Sangam* anthologies are accompanied by a work on grammar and poetics called *Tholkāpiyam* which lists the three components of *Akam* poems as follows:

On examination, when we list them,
the entities which constitute the poem
are, excelling in order,
mutal, *karu* and *uripporul*.

Mutal means first or principal, and refers to the setting and time in which the activity of the *Akam* poems takes place. Time is divided into two aspects, the time of the year, or season and the time of the day or night. Land refers to the landscape in which the poem is set, referred to as *thinai*. There are five of these: *kurinji* – mountains or hilly regions, *mullai* – forest and pasture land, *marutham* – agricultural lands, *neythal* – lands by the seashore and *pālai* – desert wasteland. *Karu* meaning the nucleus refers to the various elements of flora, fauna which are native to the landscape. *Uri* refers to the distinctive mood that characterizes each landscape. The correspondence between the five *thinai* and their associated moods is as follows:

புணர்தல் – *punarthal* – union is associated with the *kurinji thinai*
பிரிதல் – *pirithal* – separation is associated with the *pālai thinai*
இருத்தல் – *iruthal* – patient waiting is associated with *mullai thinai*
இரங்கல் – *irankal* – anxious waiting, pining is associated with *neythal thinai*
ஊடல் – *utal* – sulking, love quarrels is associated with the *marutham thinai*

The readers' understanding of the poems is facilitated by the *Thurai* or colophons, the notes attached to the *akam* poems. The three elements of *thurai* are the *kootru* (speaker), the *ketpōr* (the listener), *virī* (the specific theme) and the way the message is conveyed by the speaker to the listener. For instance, the words, “What She Said to her girl friend, when she returned from the hills” is a colophon, giving the reader the context to understand the poem. Though the origins of these commentaries are debated, they guide the reader in interpreting the poem.⁶

The poems in the *Akam* tradition are “depersonalized.” The subject, the audience, even the location in the poem is anonymous. The characters in the *akam*

5. Ramanujan, *Poems of Love and War*, p. 241.

6. Kamil Zvelebil, *The Smile of Murugan on Tamil Text of South India*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973, pp. 112–114, <https://archive.org/stream/TheSmileOfMuruganOnTamilLiteratureOfSouthIndia/01>.

poems are never mentioned by name. They are archetypes such as the hero, heroine, girl friend or foster-mother and passer-by. The poet creates these characters or personas who express themselves in conventional contexts that are described in the *Tholkāpiyam*. For example, friends of the heroine may speak only when the heroine is abandoned by her lover, when she helps the couple elope, when she comforts the grieving mother, etc. The energy of *Sangam* poetry lies in the tension between the traditional material represented by conventions and the poet's art of improvisation.

The *akam* poems explore the multiple perceptions of love in conjunction to an "interior" landscape or *thinai* and the following sections analyze how the translations retain and transfer the multiple levels of meaning from the original text into the English language. The technique that aids in this transfer is what Victor Shklovsky defines as defamiliarization.

Defamiliarization in translation

Considered the core concept of Russian Formalism, Defamiliarization is defined as the device for "making strange" an object so as to present it differently to the audience, "...the technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged."⁷ T S Eliot's use of Sanskrit or German words in "The Wasteland" for instance, renders the text more complex and forces the reader to lose passivity and get actively involved in making sense of the poem. Defamiliarization in this instance is in terms of language and it causes the audience to confront the text on a different level, transforming it from something ordinary or practical into something extraordinary, i.e. art. Through the process of defamiliarization, literature calls attention to its techniques and conventions and a perception of its artificiality.

The techniques of defamiliarization in poetry, as presented by Shklovsky, include the use of unique or different languages, metaphors and poetic conventions. However, unlike Mimetic theory, an image in poetry is not a permanent sign for the complexities of life. Its purpose is to create a special perception of the object – it creates a vision of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it, beyond its habitual sense. Defamiliarization then is a complex relationship between the text and the reader. The focus is on the perception of one text in one single language. However, translation involves a movement across two linguistic systems and two

7. Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," p. 16.

texts. This essay is an attempt to read the translation of *Akam* poems using the frame of defamiliarization techniques and the creation of a hybrid text at the intersection of the familiar and the exotic.

Literary translation aims to aid readers to appreciate the exotic features of other cultures and make them familiar with the traits of the cultural “other.” American translation theorist, Laurence Venuti discusses the idea of the familiar and the exotic in translation. According to him, Translation Studies is split between the ideas of domestication and foreignization. Domestication, which emphasizes the readability of the target text, thus brings the source language culture closer to the readers in the target language; foreignization enables the target readers to appreciate the linguistic and cultural differences between the source and target language cultures.⁸ Venuti’s definitions were inspired by the German philosopher and translator, Friedrich Schleiermacher. In a lecture on translation problems in 1813, Schleiermacher argued, “Either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him; or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him.”⁹ This is closely related to the old debate on free and literal translation. While the free-literal dichotomy is linguistically-oriented, the familiar-exotic dichotomy is culturally-oriented.

In translation theory, the two terms “domestication” and “defamiliarization” point to the politics inherent in the act of translation. When the translator erases the cultural specificities of the source text to make it fit easily into the target culture, that is, domestication. When the translator strives against the “reductive homogenization” involved in the process and retains the markers that remind the reader that it comes from another culture, that is, defamiliarization. The application of defamiliarization in translation usually produces linguistic distance between the source text and the translated text. By highlighting the artistic effect recreated by translators, it foregrounds the act of translation and makes visible the role of the translator.¹⁰

8. Laurence Venuti, *The Translation Studies Reader*, London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 340–341.

9. Laurence Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation*, London: Routledge, 1995, pp. 19–20.

10. Meenakshi Mukherjee, “The Practice and Politics of Literary Translation,” *Muse India*, no. 2, April–June 2005, museindia.com/MuseIndiaClient/MuseIndiaUI/Home/ViewContentData?arttype=articles&issid=2&menuid=38

Translation of a Poem into a Poem

It is a commonly held belief that only a poet can translate a poem. In the translation of poetry, more than in any other form of literature, fidelity is an important consideration for a translator. In the instance of Ramanujan's translation of the *Akam* poems, fidelity is beyond the mere linguistic to the cultural aspects of the Source text. In his Translator's Note to *Interior Landscape*, Ramanujan says,

My fidelity has been chiefly to the structure of the poems. This concern has led me away from translating every poem line by line. Rather I have rendered a poem phrase by phrase as each phrase articulates the total poem. I have paid special attention to the image, and their placement. Sometimes I have made explicit typographic approximations to what I thought was the inner form of the poem; broken up lines and arranged them in little blocks and paragraphs, or, arranged them step-wise; I have tried to suggest by the spacing the distance or the closeness of elements in the original syntax.¹¹

When A K Ramanujan translated the *Akam* poems from the Classical Tamil *Sangam* tradition into English, he was undertaking a simultaneous process of familiarization and defamiliarization of the aesthetics of Classical *Sangam* poetry to the reader. The linguistic translation was to bring the ancient and medieval Tamil close to modern English. However, the linguistic translation was informed by the cultural orientation of the translator and the key idea of (de)familiarization which is to extend the aesthetic process. The linguistic equivalent or familiar offered by the translator in the target text makes easier the readers' understanding of the text. However, there are certain things that cannot be automatically perceived by the reader in the translated text, the exotic, which extends their aesthetic process, and exponentially their experience of and engagement with the text. In this context, the combination of familiarization and defamiliarization produces a text that is a hybrid version. The simultaneous valorization of the exotic and the familiar gives rise to what James Holmes refers to as a "meta poem."¹²

The following analysis highlights the process of translation as combining the elements of the exotic and the familiar to produce a hybrid text.

11. A. K. Ramanujan, "Translator's Note," in *The Interior Landscape*, New York: NYRB, 1967. This edition, Delhi: Clarion Books, n. d., p. 11.

12. James Holmes' idea of translation as a form of poetry is discussed in Bijay Kumar Das, *A Handbook of Translation*, New Delhi: Atlantic, 2008, p. 114.

Analysis of the Poems

The poems chosen present a variation on the theme of love – in union, separation, anxious waiting and betrayal. Each poem evokes a particular *thinai* with its attendant *mutal*, *karu* and *uri*. The *mutal* and *karu* are seen as the “objective correlatives” of the human emotion or *uri*.

The first poem is from the *Kurinji* landscape of mountains and hills. It is named after the *kurinji* flower that blooms once in twelve years on the mountain slopes. *Murugan* is the presiding deity of the *kurinji* land, where the mountain people called *kuravas* live with their families in small settlements. Wild rice, millet, and tubers are grown along with sandal wood trees. Honey collection and millet growing are the favoured occupation. Springs and waterfalls abound where in the hills bears, tigers and elephants, monkeys, wild pigs, parrots and peacocks live. The subject of the poems are usually the secret meeting of lovers, when the heroine slips out of the house evading her mother, and the mother suspects that her daughter is up to mischief. The time is daytime or midnight. The clandestine union of lovers is the main sentiment of the landscape.

குறுந்தொகை 3, தேவகுலத்தார், குறிஞ்சித்திணை –
தலைவி சொன்னது, தலைவன் கேட்கும்படியாக
நிலத்தினும் பெரிதே வானினும் உயர்ந்தன்று
நீரினும் ஆரளவின்றே சாரல்
கருங்கோற் குறிஞ்சிப் பூக்கொண்டு
பெருந்தேன் இழைக்கும் நாடனொடு நட்பே.¹³

What She Said

Bigger than earth, certainly,
higher than the sky,
more unfathomable than the waters
is this love for this man

of the mountain slopes
where bees make rich honey
from the flowers of the *kurinci*
that has such black stalks.

Kurunthokai, 3 (Translation by A K Ramanujan)¹⁴

13. The Tamil text is from *Kurunthokai* verse 3 in Vaidhei Herbert's website “Sangam Poems Translated by Vaidhei: Sangam Poetry,” accessed on Feb 26, 2017, <https://sangamtranslationsbyvaidhei.com/ettuthokai-kurunthokai-1-200/>

14. Ramanujan, *Poems of Love and War*, p. 5.

The colophons suggest that the poem belongs to the *Kurinji* landscape and that the writing is attributed to *Thevakulattar*. The lines are spoken by the heroine to her confidante, however, in the presence of the hero who is the actual recipient of the girl's confession. The Tamil poems are generally divided into two parts with the first part, usually longer, dealing with the *mutal* and/or *karu*. In the four-line poem, we see that in the first two lines the earth, the sky, the water, the mountain-slopes are evoked, setting the stage for the third line, which refers to the native element of the black-stalked *kurinji* flowers. The second part, usually shorter, contains the substance/theme of the poem, its essence (*uripporul*). In *Kurunthokai* 3, the human element occurs only in the very last line (*nadan*), and the essential feeling, is the very last word of the whole stanza (*natpe*).

The structure of the Tamil stanza is marked by a terse-ness, a conciseness of images. The inner tension of the poem is built up over the three lines and resolved in the final line. The three elements of the *mutal* – the earth, sky and water are mentioned, to stress the greatness and depth and intensity of the heroine's emotion of love. The *kurinji* flower and the honey bees are the native elements, flora and fauna of the mountain poems. According to some commentaries, the attributes *karunkol* "black-stalked" and *perunthen* "rich honey" belong to so-called *uaicci* or suggestion or inference. The *kurinji* flowers stand for the woman in love, the bees gathering honey from these flowers represent the man's action of gathering sweetness from the sexual union. The comparison is explicit, made overt by the repetition of the – *um* "big(ger) than earth, high(er) than sky" etc. What is compared is the intensity, the depth and greatness of the heroine's love.

The English translation is divided into two stanzas and reverses the process of the Tamil text. The essence of the poem – the depth of the heroine's love is revealed in the first stanza itself. The rest of the poem unfolds the *karu*. The third line in the above poem is a rendering of the Tamil line "deeper than the ocean." By translating it as "more unfathomable than the waters," Ramanujan avoids a clichéd expression. At the same time he uses the line to sum up what is said earlier i.e. the measureless-ness of her love. In the next stanza the native elements of the mountain are concretized in the translation against the suggestion in the Tamil text. The hero is not just a man from the mountains, he is the landscape itself. The *kurinji* flower takes twelve years to bloom, signifying the awakening of the heroine to the pleasures of love. The lovers' union signified by the colophon of *kurinji* is not described but enacted in the "inset" of "the bees making rich honey from the flowers of the *kurinci*." The arrangement and progression of the *mutal*, *karu* and *uri* in the English version also make known the implicit metaphor or *ulluraiuvamai* in the poem.

The translation underlines the familiar aspects of the *Akam* poems which is the multiple perceptions of love, within the exotic, unfamiliar conventions of the *thinai*s. The translation of the poem from Tamil to English is an instance of the

familiarization or domestication technique of translation. However, by retaining the rhythm and essence along with the unique poetic structure of the Tamil text, Ramanujan forces the reader to make sense of the poem by undertaking a study of Tamil poetics. Without knowledge of the unfamiliar poetic conventions of the *Sangam* tradition, the reader will miss out on the nuances of the poem.

The next poem taken for analysis is from *Mullai* or forest and pasture lands. It is named after the jasmine, a flowering plant that grows wild in forest areas, especially in the rainy seasons. The god is *Māyon* (the dark one), trees are *kondrai* and *kāyā* and cattle, deer, rabbits, and wild fowl live there. Wild grain and millet is grown. It is the season of rains and the heroine waits for her man to return from a journey. Some poems in this category describe union. The time is usually evening. The patient waiting by the heroine is the theme of *Mullai*.

குறுந்தொகை 66, கோவர்த்தனார், முல்லைத்திணை –
தோழி தலைவியிடம் சொன்னது
மடவ மன்ற தடவு நிலைக் கொன்றை
கல் பிறங்கு அத்தம் சென்றோர் கூறிய
பருவம் வாரா அளவை நெறிதரக்
கொம்புசேர் கொடி இணர் ஊழ்த்த
வம்ப மாரியைக் கார்என மதித்தே.¹⁵

What her Girl Friend said to her

Those fat cassia trees
are gullible:

the season of rains
that he spoke of
when he went through the stones
of the desert
is not yet here
though these trees
mistaking the untimely rains
have put out
long arrangements of flowers
on their twigs
as if for proper monsoon. *Kurunthokai*, 66 (Translation by A K Ramanujan)¹⁶

The speaker of the poem is the girl friend of the heroine. She consoles the heroine who waits anxiously for the return of the hero. He had promised her that he would return at the start of the rainy season. The heroine points to the *kondrai* /laburnum

15. "Sangam Poems Translated by Vaidhei."

16. Ramanujan, *Poems of Love and War*, p. 70.

trees that have started to bloom, signaling the start of the rainy season and rues the false promise of the man. The girl friend comforts her by pointing out that the trees are mistaken; they have confused unseasonal rains for the monsoon and put out their flowers before time. Therefore, she advises the heroine to remain patient and trust her man to return.

The Tamil text has five lines and begins with a reference to the fat *kondrai* trees that are ignorant. They are the native elements of the *mullai* region and *Tholkappiyam* considers all native elements to form a hierarchy based on sentience. The trees are beings with one sense – that of touch and their ignorance makes them mistake the untimely showers for the real monsoon. The heroine is a being with six senses and should use her mind and believe in her lover. In this instance, the human emotion of grief is not reflected in nature as in an instance of pathetic fallacy. In the Tamil context, the poem is a sign, with the *thinai* or landscape as the signifier and the *uri* or human feelings as the signified. It is only in the *mutal*, *karu* and *uri* taken together that the poem makes sense. Ramanujan believes that the objective landscape of Tamil country becomes the interior landscape of Tamil poetry.¹⁷ It is the essence of human emotion that is all important, with the flora, fauna and the land harmoniously signifying the same.

The English translation follows the same structure, moving from the *karu* and *mutal* to the *uri*. However, it differs on two aspects – the length of the lines and in the metonymical significance of the *kondrai* flowers. Commenting on the translation, Ramanujan avers that “the dense adjective-packed, participle-crowded Tamil poem of four lines may become in my English a piece of ten lines. I have had to choose between transplanting the physical look of Tamil lines and transposing their patterned internal syntax, and I have invariably chosen the latter course.”¹⁸ In English, the lines are longer and the movement from the *karu* to the *uri* is deeper. The irrationality of the tree in bloom signifies the precipitous nature of the girl, quick to suspect her lover’s loyalty. The familiar idea of a girl’s impulse to suspect the man’s constancy is clothed in the exotic image of the cassia tree. It is another instance of the objective landscape referencing the interior landscape.

Ramanujan’s translation into English renders the Tamil text familiar to the target audience. However, the translated text’s metonymical nature makes the language of the everyday seem unique and unfamiliar. It also makes process of perception longer and the reader’s experience of engagement with the text deeper and new. The text that emerges from within the interplay of this process of domestication and foreignization is a primary text.

17. Ramanujan, *Poems of Love and War*, p. 241.

18. Ramanujan, “Translator’s Note,” p. 12.

The *Neyttal* or Seashore landscape captures the anxious waiting of the lovers. The land is overseen by Varunan, the lord of the sea with seagulls and crocodiles and shark being part of the landscape. The *punnai* or laurel flower grows in the region occupied by fisher folk and women selling fish and salt. The time is nightfall and the lovers experience the pangs of separations.

ஐங்குறுநூறு 192, அம்முவனார், நெய்தலத்தினை - தலைவி
தோழியிடம் சொன்னது.
கோடு புலம் கொட்பக் கடல் எழுந்து முழுங்கப்
பாடு இமிழ் பணித்துறையோடு கலம் உகைக்கும்
துறைவன் பிரிந்தென நெகிழ்ந்தன
வீங்கின மாதோ தோழி என்வளையே.¹⁹

What She Said

Friend, his seas swell and roar
making conch shells whirl on the sands.
But fishermen ply their little wooden boats
unafraid of the cold lash of the waves.

Look, my bangles
slip loose as he leaves,
grow tight as he returns,
and they give me away. *Ainkurunuru*, 192 (Translation by A K Ramanujan)²⁰

The speaker of the poem is a girl, confessing her anxiety to her girl friend. The Tamil text, attributed to *Ammuvanaar*, has four lines that begin with a reference to the rough seas that swell and roar, bringing conch shells to the beach. The lord of the port, the hero, spends all his time plying his boats on the cold, rough ocean. The next two lines shift the reader's attention from the hero to his beloved. She confesses to her friend that when he leaves, her bangles slip off and they grow tight as her hands grow fatter. The Tamil text does not mention the return of the hero in so many words. However, it is implied in the image of the swelling hands. The emotions of anxiety and ecstasy in the heroine are implied in the metaphor of the bangles. They slip loose off her hand as she forsakes food and grows thin. They grow tight as she swells with happiness at his safe return. Their growing tight (*veengina*) or slipping off (*negizhthana*) serves as a metaphor for the absence and presence of the lord. The opposition of the swelling and slipping off of the bangles mirrors the rhythmic ebb and flow of the waves on the beach.

19. "Sangam Poems Translated by Vaidhei."

20. Ramanujan, *Poems of Love and War*, p. 34.

The translation foregrounds the presence of the hero from the first line. The seas here are his domain, just as the mountains are the domain of the hero in the *kurinji* poems. His presence makes them swell and roar making conch shell patterns on the beach sands. The heroine is in awe of the fearless fishermen who take their little wooden boats out into the sea ignoring the cold, lashing waves. The implication is that she is in awe of her man too who transforms from the lord of the sea in the Tamil text to one of the many fishermen in the translation. This serves to set the heroine in the company of many wives who wait anxiously for the return of their men, making her emotions a metaphor for all women in this situation.

The bangles remain a metaphor for the man's presence and absence. However, the implication that they proclaim her emotions of anxiety and ecstasy is made explicit in her own words "and they give me away." Unlike the Tamil text, here the man's departure and return are presented as actual events and are not just implied in the bangles' position on her hand or off it. The inset of their slipping off and growing tight articulate both her feelings and his movement into and out of her life. The swell and whirl of the waves leave beautiful conch shells on the shore, but the heroine is blind to their beauty as she waits anxiously for her lord's return.

For readers of the Tamil text, the image of the bangles slipping off the heroine's hand is a cliché (*Pasalai* is the dis-ease she suffers as a result of her separation from her man). In the poems of the *Sangam* tradition, the metaphor of the bangles is a stock phrase and a quick reference for the woman's feelings. It is a sign of familiarization for the native readers. However, in his translation Ramanujan defamiliarizes the idea for the non-native reader. The image of the bangles signifying the heroine's feelings is made unfamiliar. The familiar made exotic and read in the context of the poem produces an objective correlative for the heroine's feelings.

The poems of the *Pālai* or wilderness landscape present the separation of the lovers. Named after the *Pālai* tree which grows in very dry areas and overseen by the goddess *Kotravai*, the region is home to tigers, red foxes, vultures, eagles, pigeons and lizards. *Iruppai*, *omai*, and *ulignai* or cactus trees grow here. *Rēvam*, *kuravam* and *pāthiri* flowers bloom here. In the poems set in this region, the hero sets out across the wilderness to elope with his beloved or to make enough money to marry her on his return. Occasionally the hero is married and undertakes a journey for business purposes, or for some god. The time described is midday and the season is summer.

ஐங்குறுநூறு 324, ஓதலாந்தையார், பாலைத்திணை –
தலைவன் சொன்னது

எரி கவர்ந்து உண்ட என்றாழ் நீள் இடைச்
சிறிது கண்டுப்பினும் காண்குவென்மன்ற
நள்ளென் கங்குல் நளி மனை நெடு நகர்
வேங்கை வென்ற சுணங்கின்
தேம்பாய்கூந்தல் மா அயோளே.²¹

What He Said in the desert

In this long summer wilderness
seized and devoured by wildfire,
if I should shut my eyes
even a wink,
I see
dead of night, a tall house
in a cool yard, and the girl
with freckles
like kino flowers,
hair flowing as with honey,
her skin a young mango leaf.

Ainkurunuru, 324 (Translation by A K Ramanujan)²²

The poem is from the perspective of the man. He is separated from his beloved and finds himself in a sun-burned wilderness. The reason for the separation does not signify; what is of importance is that the separation is agonizing. The man's self is caught between the hot wilderness and his own burning pangs of emotions. The only respite is to close one's eyes and see in the mind's eye the beloved's home and self.

The Tamil text moves from the *mutal* and *karu* to the *uri*, presenting the man in a sun scorched land as he tries to doze in the heat of the day. The act of dozing produces an image of his beloved, a girl, her skin yellowed with turmeric like the *kino* flower, standing in the cool yard of her house in the village. The text juxtaposes two *mutal* and *karu* that belong to two contrasting *thinai*s – *paalai* and *kurinji* – the wilderness at mid-day of the man's world and the home at midnight of girl's world. The *uri* or human emotions suggested across the two places are separation and togetherness. The wilderness is a physical space as well as the inner state of the man, "Where he is, is what he is."²³ The cool yard is a memory of not just the

21. "Sangam Poems Translated by Vaidhei."

22. Ramanujan, *Poems of Love and War*, p. 51.

23. Ramanujan, *Poems of Love and War*, p. 264.

girl's house, but also of their union before this separation. It is the hero's heart that bridges the spatial and temporal distances. This idea is also reinforced in the sexual overtones of the heat of wildfire that consume the man (*yeri kavarnthu unda*). The text suggests that the hero survives the wilderness only because of the memory of his beloved and therefore the last section of the poem details the girl as he remembers her – the familiar *kurinji* images of cool night, honey, kino flowers and the girl herself (*maa-aayole*).

The English translation retains the form of the original, but it also captures a sense of movement. The text presents *paalai* as not a physical space, but a phase in a cycle – the man leaves home to make a living, survives the desert because of the memories of his beloved and comes back home. Ramanujan's translation presents a movement between the outer world of the desert (*puram*) to the inner world of the house (*akam*). It is also a movement between the world of reality of the man – the wilderness he inhabits now, to the world of fantasy – the girl's yard that he traverses in his dreams. Just as the heat of the wilderness is within him, he carries the world of the beloved in his memory.

While the Tamil text presents the twin spaces and states of mind as a juxtaposition of opposition, united by the hero's memory, Ramanujan's translation presents the movement between the worlds and states that is achieved by the hero's act of closing his eyes. It is also a movement from the exotic space of the desert to the familiar space of the girl's home. What traverses the two spaces and realities is the heart of the hero. The translation familiarizes the twin spaces as the two states of mind of the hero (separation and union), while simultaneously defamiliarizing the journey across the dimensions as undertaken only by the hero in his fantasy. The familiarization also occurs in the image of the beloved as a young, unattainable impossibility, recalling the conceits of the Elizabethan sonneteers. The defamiliarization is in the images that recall the beloved as a girl with freckles and a skin-tone that is yellow like the *vengai* flowers and mango leaves, native to India.

As the above analyses demonstrate, Ramanujan's translation of the *Akam* poems is simultaneously a linguistic rendering of the poems from ancient Tamil into modern English and an interpretation of the poems. The commentary that accompanies the translation offers a critical interpretation of the Source Text and the translation becomes a primary text by itself. James Holmes, discussing the dual nature of translation, avers that all translation is an act of critical interpretation. However, he suggests that some verse translations also are acts of poetry in themselves. Ramanujan's translation is at once a meta-literature and a primary literature. Holmes uses the term "meta-poem" to categorize these offerings.²⁴ The unique

24. Edwin Gentzler, *Contemporary Translation Theories*, London: Routledge, 1993, p. 92.

positioning of the translation between the source language culture and target language culture makes it a hybrid text that looks back at the source text and makes familiar the signifying practices of the source culture and it simultaneously looks forward to make visible the possible approaches to reading the target text.

Ramanujan in *Poems of Love and War*, goes beyond inter-lingual semiosis to establish a relationship between the Source Text and the Translated Text “within the framework of signifying practices” inherent in the *Sangam* poetic tradition.²⁵ The translation aids the non-native readers to appreciate the exotic features of Tamil poetics and render them in the familiar linguistic system of English. However, the defamiliarizing techniques of the poetic form along with the metonymical nature of the source text serve to present an aesthetic experience that is fresh and distinctive for the reader. The juxtaposition of the familiar and the exotic within the frame of Ramanujan's text makes it a hybrid text. In the interplay of the two elements a new meta-poem is created that comprises aspects of both the source language and target language cultures and conventions. In this instance, the poetic translation not a loss, we gain a poem.

25. Gentzler, *Contemporary Translation Theories*, p. 92.

The exotic and the familiar and translation

Mitra Phukan

India's Northeast, comprising eight States, is a region whose comparative inaccessibility to regions to its East as well as West ... that is, the rest of India ... has ensured that it has remained "locked in mystery." The quotes are used as a measure of the exoticization to which the region is subject. It is only now that the region is coming into the consciousness of much of the rest of the country.

This phenomenon works both ways. For people within the region, those who live beyond it have remained "outsiders." Not just that, this is a region of huge heterogeneity, with many ethnicities, varied cultural practices, languages, religious systems, and literatures. Within the region, too, there is a lack of knowledge about each other, even though the people concerned may be living cheek-by-jowl inside the same area. Sometimes, from "outside," the inside looks "exotic." At other times, the "inside," while looking familiar, becomes like a mirage, with shifting perspectives that make it look unfamiliar and alien, even to those who live within it.

It is in this scenario that translations assume great importance in understanding and familiarizing the "exotic," and making the "familiar" comprehensible. Aspects of the entire "Insider Outsider" question, and the importance of translations in erasing mistaken perceptions and opinions that sometimes bring endless strife, will be examined here. The perspective will be that of a writer and translator who is writing from observation as well as study, not as an academic. This paper, therefore, will be couched in non-academic terms, though that does not make it any the less valid, not least because the observations are genuine, first hand, and based on lived life within the region.

Till the advent of advanced modes of communication, including those on the ground as well as telecommunication, India's Northeast was an area that was physically inaccessible to many, because of its inhospitable terrain. A land of thick forests teeming with wildlife, high mountains and vast, swift flowing rivers, it has, till recently been extremely difficult to penetrate this region from outside. As a result of this isolation, the region is home to more than 220 ethnic groups, all with their own unique cultures that include cuisines, weaves, tongues, music, dance, beliefs and much else. Since even adjacent villages were often cut off from each

other by unfordable rivers and dense forests, these developed in isolation, leading to a heterogeneity that is sometimes difficult to comprehend. Besides, influences from the outside world were few and far between, resulting in the different cultures developing in ways that were often unique to that area, or even that village.

Today, with rapid strides made by telecommunications, the rest of the world can easily be accessed through various mediums, including screens of different kinds. Besides, air and road travel is easier, and people from the region do travel outside, on work, for education, or for leisure. This means several things. One is that gradually, the cultures of this region, in all their glorious heterogeneity, can now be accessed by the outside world. And it must be mentioned here that “outside” here can, and often does, mean “outside” the State, or the area, or even the village.

The eight States of this region, in spite of their geographical proximity, are often strangers to each other. The cultures of Meghalaya and Nagaland and Mizoram, for instance, may remain opaque and incomprehensible to the people of Assam, and vice versa. Indeed much of the region was guilty of having an insular mindset, which has resulted in suspicions of “outsiders,” suspicions which sit ill with the contemporary global reality of migrations, both temporary and permanent.

At this stage of the process of “opening up” there can be a tendency to “exotize,” since not much is known, in general, by and of the “inside” by the “outside,” and vice versa. Indeed, this “insider-outsider” syndrome, the “Othering” that is so common in the dynamics within the region, is very much a part of the way people see each other even today. There are specific words in the tongues of the region that denote the suspicion that the “Outsider” generates, for instance, “*Dkhar*” in Khasi, meaning somebody who is from Outside. And the word “*Bohiragoto*,” which was such a catchword during the Assam Agitation of the late seventies meaning again, “Outsider.”¹ The very use of this word evoked strong emotions at the time.

However, because the region is only now opening up to the rest of the world, aspects of its culture remain unfamiliar, and exotic. There is the cuisine of the region, which, with its influences from South East Asia and Tibet sometimes seem strange to people from the rest of the country. This incomprehensibility can sometimes, sadly, result in misunderstanding. It is a fact that many young people, who go out of the region for work, or study, find it difficult to find places to stay in the metro cities, Delhi for example. The landlords often complain about the “strong and strange” smells coming out of the tenants’ kitchens, though all that these people are doing is just maybe cooking their own cuisine, with dried fish, perhaps, or the pungent bamboo shoot. These “exotic” ingredients are not welcomed by the landlords for the most part because of their unfamiliar aromas.

1. The Assam Agitation (1979–1985) was a mass movement by the indigenous people of Assam, a State in India’s Northeast region, to protect their homeland from the illegal influx of foreigners, primarily from Bangladesh.

And it works both ways, too, with the cuisine of parts of the rest of India evoking incomprehension in people from the region who go out to study, or work.

There are other aspects of the culture of the region that seem exotic to others. There are the tribal dances which are showcased in the various festivals and programmes organized in good faith by Government agencies, for instance. These dances, so beautiful and meaningful within the context of the festivals and environments in which they are performed, evoke, sometimes, a kind of patronizing attitude that is painful. There is the music, so different from the folk music of the rest of the country. This is because the influences that have shaped this music, as also its languages and indeed many other aspects of culture, are different from the ones that have shaped the music and languages elsewhere in the country. Melodic influences of the regions of East and South East Asia have, through centuries old migrations, contributed to the “different” texture of the music itself. Several languages of this region, such as Bodo, Deuri, Meitiei, and others are derived from Sino Tibetan roots, though they are very different from each other. Khasi is an Austroasiatic language.

There is also the physical appearance of many of the people of India’s Northeast, which differs from that of the mainland in facial features, colouring, and physique. The migrations, over the centuries, from lands to the East of this region have made this an anthropologist’s dream, but, perhaps, an administrator’s nightmare. This contributes to the “exoticizing” of the land and its people, in numerous ways.

Understanding implies, to begin with, familiarity. In a country as diverse as ours, it is only now that the various regions, the various states, are beginning to arrive at a hazy understanding of each other. There are modes of “translations” which go beyond translating from one language to another, though that, too, is very important. There are also those translations that decipher from one medium into another, and which help hugely to build bridges between cultures, languages, and ultimately, the people that make up this vast and diverse land that is India.

One of the most difficult areas of translation is that of aspects of the large portions of the literature of this region which are in oral form. The myths and legends of this land are retold in recountings that defy putting down into written form. The richness of the verbal narration is different each time it is retold, not just by different story tellers, but by the same people themselves. The different verbal emphases, the gestures, the atmosphere around a fire, say, on a dark and cold night, add meaning in ways that a mere writing down of the story will never be able to achieve. The retellings are enriched also by things such as audience responses and participation, which make each individual act of storytelling a unique one.

The transference of these oral literatures into a written one, therefore, can only hope to replicate just a part of the whole oral narrative experience. This transference is a translation, though the language used may be the same. It is a translation from one form to another. But the written accounts, in comparison to the oral ones,

can only be skeletons, a “bare bones” retelling, without the tonal inflections, the gestures, the little dance like steps, the changing facial nuances that add so much meaning to it all.

The best that can be done, of course, the best way to “translate” these oral literatures, is to record them through videography and other technical modes. True, this too has its flaws, but it is better than nothing. Spontaneity is often lost in front of the camera. But the need to do these translations acquires urgency in contemporary times because the story tellers, the shamans and the village elders who can remember and recount them, are now dwindling in number. With the advent of literacy, the written word is replacing the oral narrative, and the skills required for the latter are vanishing. The need for a particular kind of memory is something writing makes redundant, without taking into account that this oral retelling is a different genre altogether. This is the difficulty that translations from the oral to the written, even within the same language, have to traverse.

There is also the question of *what* to translate. This is a primary question that confronts translators before they even put a single word down, whether they are setting out to translate fiction, poetry, or non-fiction. It is, to an extent, a personal choice, but not fully. One usually takes up a text for translation because, primarily, one loves the story or the poem, or the non-fiction. This is also usually true even if it is a commissioned translation, for one does not usually agree to translate if there is no engagement at an intellectual and/or emotional level between the translator and the work that is to be translated.

However, it must be recognized that basically, it is a political decision. One’s likes and dislikes are, inevitably, shaped by numerous influences across the years of one’s life. Why one likes a particular author, or a particular point of view put forward by an author, is a complex question. But the choices that are made to translate a particular work, to the exclusion of others, also serves as a pointer. Translators, building bridges across cultures, seek to familiarize the exotic, in terms of practices, relationships, and indeed much else, to the readers of the target language. From the first word, first sentence, to the last, it is a balancing act that translators do. How much of the culture of the source language to put in without sounding like a tract, an anthropological treatise? How much can the translator assume that readers of the target language will understand? Besides expertise in the two languages involved, the translator needs to have also a deep understanding of both the cultures, so that what would otherwise remain exotica, can be made familiar.

For instance, in Assamese, when one refers to one’s father’s brother’s son, it is as “brother,” the word being “*Kokaideu*” or perhaps “*Dada*,” and “*Bhaiti*,” depending on whether the person is older or younger. This relationship is considered to be as close as that between siblings. But when translating into English, it has to be “cousin,” because “brother” obviously has totally different connotations. And yet,

the particular cultural context where a cousin is the same as a brother will have to be made familiar, somehow, to the reader of the translation, without impeding the flow of the story, or the poem, as the case may be.

When choosing *what* to translate, the question also comes in: will this work reinforce stereotypes when read by those of another culture? For instance, India's Northeast is perceived, even now, to be an "exotic" land, idyllic, with its people living in forests, in "charmingly primitive" conditions. Or else, the perception is that it is a place where there is much violence and conflict. As with all perceptions, much of these do have an element of truth in them, but it's only an element. The saving grace here is that given the richness of fiction of, for example, States such as Manipur, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, or the poetry of Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram and Sikkim, this stereotyping will probably not take place, given the layered nature of the writings coming out of here. Even so, the danger remains, especially in these days when conflict, in all its various forms, is so endemic to this region. Low intensity wars, as they are called euphemistically, happening here will naturally find a reflection in the works of the writers and poets. Translators will find it difficult to totally avoid this pitfall, of stereotyping when choosing meaningful works to translate. Perhaps the way out is to have a large number of works being translated, so that the cultural heterogeneity that is part, not just of the region, but also of each State, is reflected to a greater extent in the translations.

Literary translation becomes a political act in several more ways. The translator builds the bridge, but also decides, to a great extent, *what* will cross that bridge. Everything, from the choice of words, the use or otherwise of glossaries, the extent of the use of local terms, the description of customs and traditions of the culture of the source language, is a choice for the translator, who determines, with each word used, exactly what idea, what nuance, will cross over on that bridge.

Take the use of relationship terms again, for instance. There was a tendency, some decades ago, to "make things easier" for the reader in the target language by denoting these relationships with generic words in that language. So, for instance, "*Khura*," which, in Assamese, is father's younger brother. Also, it can be father's younger cousin, even a distant one, or even a person unrelated to one's father at all, and is therefore an honorific, a respectful way of addressing someone senior. These days, translators use the term "*Khura*," after contextualizing the word in the text itself. Because there is a recognition that the term "Uncle" is, in a way, a kind of subservience, a kowtowing, if you will, to the language being translated into, that is, in this case, English. This applies to all the rich variety of relationship terms in our languages, which denote an important cultural trait, and which the use of the words "Uncle" or "Aunty", for instance, will obliterate.

This applies even when the translation is being done between the languages of the region itself. For instance, an Assamese story translated into Hindi or Bangla

(also important languages in the region) would need to use these same Assamese relationship terms, though perhaps the temptation to use Bangla and Hindi words would be greater, for reasons of more familiarity with the languages.

The difficulties of translating prose are huge enough, but when attempts are made to translate the poetry of the region, it becomes much more so. The allusive Assamese poem of, say, Lakshminath Bezbaroa, which is now the State Anthem of Assam, is as firmly rooted in the spirit of the land as it is universal in theme. This rootedness, and allusiveness to a particular kind of “Assamese-ness,” if you will, makes it extremely difficult to translate. It is soaked in the spirit of the land, Assam. And this is also what makes it “exotic” when translated into other languages, though the effort is always to build bridges that will make it familiar, and ultimately, as well loved by readers in the target language as they are in the source language.

O mor apunar dex,
 O mor sikuni dex,
 Enokhon xuwola, enokhon xuphola
 Enekhon moromor dex. ...
 O mor upoja thai
 O mor Oxomi Ai,
 Sai lou ebar mukhoni tomar,
 Hepah more polowa nai.

 O my dearest land,
 O my enthralling land,
 Such a honeyed, such an abundant,
 Such a well beloved land....
 O the land of my birth,
 O Assam, my beloved mother,
 Give me, once more, a glimpse of your face
 My heart's desire is not yet fulfilled....

There are also distinctions and dissimilarities of other kinds that make a language, and through language, a culture and a people, seem different, and exotic. One of these has to do with pronunciation, and intonation. Some of the languages of this region, for example Mizo, are tonal. Differences in pitch and pitch contours make the meanings different. These tonal variations may seem incomprehensible to somebody who hears the language for the first time. And in any case, attempts to translate these oral differences into other languages can only be attempts, after all.

Another aspect of language that seems exotic to those who are not familiar with a particular one, is in the pronunciation. In Assamese, for instance, we have the sound that is denoted by “x,” which is a voiceless velar fricative. This sound adds a different dimension to the spoken language, since it is not heard all that frequently, in other Indian languages. This voiceless velar fricative, the way it is pronounced,

may seem to be a small, even trivial aspect of the language. And yet, to those who listen to its frequent occurrence when the language is spoken, it can be something that is dauntingly different, and “exotic.”

It is not only through literature, and literary translations, of course, that the exotic is made familiar. The process of translation occurs across many mediums. To take the example of cuisine, for instance, many items of food from different cultures seem exotic to those who are not familiar with them. For instance, in Assam, silkworm pupae are considered a delicacy when they are stir fried with greens and herbs. Many palates could be unfamiliar with the alkaline taste of “*khaar*,” for instance, which is a typical dish in much of Assam. True, one does not need the help of a translator in order to familiarize oneself with this exotic taste. And yet, once one has got used to the taste, at perhaps the second or third time around, one always looks around for a person who can explain how this alkaline taste was created. Or, in the case of the pupae, one always wants to know more about the process of collecting and cooking them. The person who does the explaining, who can sometimes be the chef, or the wait-staff, or the housewife who has cooked the meal, therefore functions as a cultural translator, who familiarizes the “outsider” with what seemed, at first, exotic to her.

A heartening phenomenon that is happening today is the fact that quite a few restaurants offering food from different areas of India’s Northeast have come up across the country, and within the region itself. Naga food is available in several of the metro cities of the country, and is also, concurrently, very popular in the different states of the region itself, including Assam. This was not the case earlier. The exotic, the unfamiliar, is being made familiar and even popularized in this way.

This applies to many other aspects of the whole that is culture, as well. For instance, the weaves of this region have designs and patterns that have significance beyond the aesthetic, merely. The colours of scarves and wraps often signify tribal affiliations. The stylized patterns woven into the Assamese *mekhela sadors* signify aspects of nature. In important ways, these are “languages.” Without the efforts of a person explaining these, they remain incomprehensibly exotic to the outsider.

For writers who work originally in a language not part of the local language groups, there is a tightrope to be negotiated. Writing originally in English, from Assam, means that much of the material is “local,” and has probably never been communicated in this language, English, before. Some kind of explanation, and contextualization within the text, is required. For no matter what one says about writing for an “outside” readership, the fact remains that with a language such as English, the assumption is that people who are not familiar with this particular culture, will read it. Even within the region, a person from, say Mizoram, reading a book written by an Assamese originally in English is likely to need some kind of contextualization if the full understanding of the different layers is to be savoured.

And yet, there is always the question of balance. Writing in Assamese for an Assamese readership would not mean having to contextualize, for instance the festival of Bihu, its songs, dances and significance. But inevitably, some explanation, and description, has to be woven into the narrative for it to make sense to these readers of a text originally written in English. But how much is required, how much is too much? How much tilts the narrative into exoticization, how much is necessary in order for it to make sense to the reader? These are questions that plague a writer every time she attempts to make a cultural transference, in a work that is written originally in a language not from the region.

This transference, and need to strike a balance, looms as a daunting task when, for instance, the subject matter itself is little known even to people within the region. So, for instance, if one writes of the Xattriya dancers, their lives, even those who write in Assamese would need to contextualize the narrative, though of course to a lesser extent than if it was written in English.

The thing about working as a translator is that till now, there is no real methodology in place, especially for those source and target languages where serious translations are only now taking place. As things are today, most translators work mostly by instinct, which is honed through a thorough knowledge of the languages and cultures involved.

The region known as India's Northeast is a land of shifting boundaries, with languages that were once part of daily discourse now belonging to another State, or another country, even. Yet the writers of a previous generation use these languages frequently, shifting effortlessly from one to the other. This presents the difficulty of having different languages in the same text. We in this country of multiple tongues routinely use them in our daily life. When the translator attempts to translate this into another language, there is the difficulty of sacrificing the texture, and making it all a homogeneous text. Also, to constantly aver, for instance, "He said in Assamese," "She replied in Bodo," takes away from the narrative flow, and in any case makes no sense to the reader in the target language. And of course there is the trap that lies in wait for the unwary translator, who, in her attempt to texturize her text, is instead ambushed into exoticizing it.

Incomprehension can, and often does, lead to misunderstandings and fractious discord. In our multicultural land, the exotic is often a cloak that makes people wary of the Outsider that they perceive it clothes. By building bridges that familiarize the exotic to others, translators, whether literary or otherwise, are bringing the Outsider inside, and making cultures around the world comprehensible to as many people as possible.

A play of the familiar and the exotic through the lens of Madhwacharya's Bhasha theory

The *Sangraha Ramayana* and its translations

Aparna Srinivas and Sunitha S. Rao

Language and literature are cultural markers that carry the weight of the tension between the familiar and the exotic. Colonialism spawned the idea of the Occident being familiar and the Orient being exotic. Postcolonialism, Poststructuralism, Deconstruction, etc. look at familiarity and exoticism, not between the East and the West but within language itself. Language delivers the familiar, but the meanings drawn from the familiar language become exotic. Can exoticism and familiarity be recognised in what Claude Lévi-Strauss has termed the universal structures of the mind and its particular language?¹ This is the context in which the essay looks at the epic *Ramayana*.

In India and South Asia, the *Ramayana* is universal in its appeal and existence. It has been endlessly retold in several languages, depicted in comic books, relayed through the media and enacted in performances. Retellings thus become significant markers of the exotic – the stance it takes determines the meaning to be read from it. Does the *Ramayana* have a particular language to convey its meaning; are there particular uses of language to convey a particular meaning? Madhwacharya recognises this and therefore his *Bhasha* theory focuses on the word, the number and kinds of meanings it can throw out depending on the spiritual maturity of the reader.

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have been referred to as *itihaasas* or histories in that they recall the doings of man. Philosophers, thinkers and the followers of the Bhakti tradition have accorded it great value in terms of gaining lessons in *adhyatma* or spiritual value. The reading of and listening to the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are considered acts which help in attaining spiritual worth or *punya*. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have been appropriated and retold in several regions by different communities for their own ends. They are adaptable and

1. Claude Lévi-Strauss's conceptualization in his *Structural Anthropology*, Translated from the French by Claire Jacobson and Brooke, New York: Grundfest Schoepf Basic Books Inc., 1963.

can relate to the high philosophers and to the common village folk who enact the stories during festivals can relate to them. Philosophers and commentators have used the story to explicate their readings. In these retellings, the incidents from the *Ramayana* form a sort of pool of ideas (langue) from which each culture uses the plot, characters and the landscape in a particular way to highlight political, social or religious beliefs of that region (parole). Sometimes the stories are used to affirm the social hierarchies and sometimes to resist those hierarchies.²

The *Ramayana* is both exotic and familiar at the same time. It is exotic because the focus of each retelling is different and it is familiar because the basic story line and characters remain the same. Recounting the Srivaishnava interpretation of the *Ramayana*, Patricia Y. Mumme says:

What is immediately striking is that...they focus on a few relatively obscure events in the Rama story, which, when interpreted allegorically, lend support to their soteriological (footnote) doctrines.³

Here the allegorical reading or the “right” reading becomes the exotic meaning. This essay compares select verses and episodes of the Valmiki *Ramayana* and the *Sangraha Ramayana* by Narayana Panditacharya, using Madhwacharya’s *Mahabharata Tatparya Nirnaya* as a theoretical base.

The 12th and the 13th century in Indian history are significant as it was a period of religious conflict and upheaval. Hinduism began to face competition from Jainism, Buddhism and Islam. Hindu philosophers felt the need to rethink the practice of religion making it one that the common man could identify and engage with, and yet retain the esoteric parts of it for the practitioners who wished to explore further. Thus the *Bhakti* movement gained significance. The epics became ideal vehicles to convey complex philosophical concepts and the three great Acharyas utilised them to propound their philosophies.

Though Georges Mounin says that there are aspects of personal experience that cannot be communicated; it was never left at that.⁴ Madhwacharya, with respect to the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, imposed his meaning or interpretation to

2. Paula Richman, ed. *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/Oxford: University of California Press, E-Book, 1991, p. 13.

3. Patricia Y. Mumme, “Ramayana Exegesis in Tenkalai Srivaishnavism,” in Paula Richman, ed., *Many Ramayanas*, p. 211. Soteriological means theology dealing with salvation. “Soteriological” Merriam Webster Collegiate Dictionary accessed on 15 Feb 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/soteriological>.

4. Georges Mounin, *Semiotic Praxis: Studies in Pertinence and in the Means of Expression and Communication*, Trans. Catherine Tihanyi, Maia and Bruce Wise, New York: Plenum Press, 1985, p. xvi.

justify his theory of Salvation, the nature of God and the relationship between man and God. The stories remained the same, but the meanings became different and purposeful. To establish his school of thought, *Dwaita*, he literally read against the grain of the age old canon of *Sanatana Dharma*. The familiar was made use of, to convey a new or exotic reading of the epics to establish the new school. Here, in this context, the story is familiar but the meaning is exotic.

Patricia Mumme says that the Srivaishanava Tenkalai *acharyas* focussed on the allegorical meaning of the incidents.⁵ Madhwacharya took this type of reading one step further into the realm of language. For him the use of certain words and the grammatical structure of the sentences were important for interpretation. Etymology and context were important in meaning making. With this emphasis on “deep reading” the familiar texts were made to take on an exotic meaning. He devised his *Bhasha* theory for such a purpose.

Psychoanalytic and Poststructural methods of reading come very close to his conception. Yet he differs from them as will be seen. The reader reads according to what he sees in the text. The act of reading is a close interaction between the reader and the text and the meaning so gained is to be found in the mind of the reader. The text may be staid and familiar but in order to understand the real nature of the world and the nature of God, it had to take on exotic or meanings that were unconventional. The *sattvic* or the evolved reader with true *jnana* uncovers the *guhya* meaning or the exotic meaning with the help of the Guru or spiritual master. Both *jnana* and *bhakti* or a true feeling of devotion to God is needed to get the exotic or the *guhya* meaning.⁶

Sankaracharya and Ramanujacharya

In response to the growing popularity of Buddhism and Jainism, several philosophies were propounded that made it easy for the common man to understand the Vedas and their import in daily life. Chief among these great philosophers were Sankaracharya who propagated the Advaita school of thought during the 8th century CE, Ramanujacharya who taught the Vishishtadvaita philosophy in the 11th century CE and Madhwacharya who spoke of *Dwaita* in the 13th century CE. They each had their distinct interpretations of the Vedas, the Upanishads and other scriptures.

5. Mumme, “Ramayana Exegesis,” in *Many Ramayanas*, p. 211.

6. K. T. Pandurangi, “Essentials of Gitabhasya and Gitatattva of Sri Madhwacharya” accessed on February 13, 2019, <http://www.tatvavada.org/eng/works/pdf/egbgt.pdf>

Madhwacharya

Madhwacharya's innate beliefs, profound knowledge of the ancient texts, the epics and his own experience of the divine led him to preach a new philosophy – *Dwaita* (Dualism). He was born in a village called Pajaka, near Udupi on the west coast of Karnataka. Hagiographers recount several miraculous incidents in his life to prove his divinity. For Madhwacharya the world was real, and Vishnu was the only compassionate and all powerful deity. Every other being was second to him in greatness, including his consort Lakshmi. Vishnu made everybody who they were.⁷ In his conception of the world, Vishnu is the Almighty and Brahma, the creator, and Vayu, controller of the breath, are his greatest devotees. Hari is *sarvottam*, supreme and Vayu is *jivottam* or the greatest of the living souls. He named his philosophy *Tattvavada*. A collection of 37 works by him explain in terse yet elegant form his ideas about philosophy, the nature of the soul and its relationship to God and the path to *moksha* or Salvation.⁸ Madhwacharya's commentary on the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* is called the *Mahabharata Tatparyanirnaya*. It expounds the *Dwaita* philosophy through the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*.

Madhwacharya's students

Madhwacharya's school of philosophy attracted many dedicated students. Some of them were from present day Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh. They set up *mathas* or monasteries to propagate and spread the principles of the philosophy. In Udupi, Madhwacharya established the Krishna temple. He also established eight monasteries or the *ashthamathas* to worship Krishna. Amongst his prominent students from the Udupi region was Trivikrama Panditacharya, who wrote several works and composed several hymns propagating the belief of his guru. His son, Narayana Panditacharya, too composed several works in praise of Vishnu and Madhwacharya. Of significance to this essay is Narayana Panditacharya's work, the *Sangraha Ramayana*.⁹

7. C. M. Padmanabhar, *Life and Teachings of Sri Madhvachariar*, 1909, Bombay: C. A. Pattabiraman and C. A. P. Vittal, 1983, p. 118.

8. B. N. K. Sharma, *History of the Dvaita School of Vedanta and Its Literature*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1961, p. 84.

9. Sharma, *History of the Dvaita School*, pp. 79, 213, 216, 220.

Madhwacharya and the *Ramayana*

The Valmiki *Ramayana* is a story that has *rasa* (aesthetic impression), literary merit *bhava* (human emotion) and *adhyatma* (spiritual value). Naryana Panditacharya's *Sangraha Ramayana* retains much of the *rasa*, *bhava* and *adhyatma* of the Valmiki *Ramayana*. It is primarily a piece of literature, but he has made certain changes to the narrative to bring out and emphasise the Madhwa aspect of *Bhakti*. This is the only literary text to demonstrate Madhwacharya's philosophy to the common people. His work, *Sangraha Ramayana* is a *sangraha* or collation of different versions of the *Ramayana*. This is yet another important contribution to the *Ramayana* lore.¹⁰

The place of *Ramayana* in Hinduism

The *Ramayana*, is an important text for Hindus. It is not just an epic; it is the *Adi Kavya*, the first poetic or literary work to ever be written. Bannanje Govindacharya in his Kannada work, *Valmiki Kanda Ramayana* mentions that the first verse of the Valmiki *Ramayana* was indeed one of the earliest poetic verses to ever have been written. He writes of how Valmiki's *shoka* sorrow about the death of the Krauncha bird inspired a *sloka*, a verse, different in rhythm and feet, compared to the eight feet *anushtup chandas* (metre) found in Vedic literature.¹¹ The epiphany was expressed in language or was transferred from the realm of personal experience to that of language, then becoming part of culture.

According to Madhwacharya the language in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* was by nature familiar and exotic at the same time. He expounded in the *Mahabharata Tatparyanirnaya* that:

भाषास्तु त्रिविधास्तत्र मया वै संप्रदर्शिता: ॥१२४॥¹²

Three kinds of language (interpretation) have been indicated by me.¹³

10. Narayana Panditacharya, *Sangraha Ramayana*, vol 1, researched and ed. Bannanje Govindacharya, Udupi: Sri Pejawara Adokshaja Mutt, Jagatguru Madhwacharya Mahasamsthanam, 2015, 2 vols, p. 18.

11. Bannanje Govindacharya, *Valmiki Kanda Ramayana*, Udupi: Ishavasya Pratishthana, 1999, p. 18.

12. bhAShAstu trividhAstatramayAvaishaMpradarshitAH

13. K. T. Pandurangi, trans, *Mahabharata Tatparyanirnaya*, By Madhwacharya, Tiruchanur: Sriman Madhwa Siddhantonnahini Sabha, 1993, p. 120.

उक्तो यो महिमा विष्णोः स तूक्तो हि समाधिना ।
शौवदर्शनमालम्ब्य कचिच्छैवी कथोदिता ॥१२५॥¹⁴

That by which the greatness of Vishnu has been stated has been indicated by *Samadhi* language. Following in some places the treatises relating to Shiva, the stories of Shiva have been narrated in *Darshana* language.¹⁵

समाधिभाषयोक्तं यत्तत् सर्वं ग्राह्यमेव हि ।
अविरुद्धं समाधेस्तु दर्शनोक्तं च गृह्यते ॥१२६॥¹⁶

All that has been conveyed by *Samadhi* language must indeed be accepted. What has been conveyed by *Darshana* language, if not in conflict with that conveyed by *Samadhi* language, must also be accepted. That is called *Darshana* language.¹⁷

आद्यन्तयोर्विरुद्धं यद्दर्शने तदुदाहृतम् ।
दर्शनान्तरं सिद्धं च गृह्यभाषाऽन्यथा भवेत् ॥१२७॥¹⁸

The *Guhya* language (subterranean language) is that which conveys the reverse of what is said.^{19,20}

This *Bhasha* theory suggested by Madhwacharya must be kept in mind while reading the *itihaasas*. Select verses of the *Sangraha Ramayana* are studied here to examine the *Bhasha* theory. The three levels of *Bhasha*, i.e. reading and interpretation, to be used to interpret the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are the *Samadhi*, *Darshana* and the *Guhya*. According to the *Bhasha* theory, the aspect of the epic which clearly depict the supremacy of Vishnu, without a doubt, is called *Samadhi bhasha*. The parts of the story which according to him, seemed to show aspects of other existing beliefs like that of the supremacy of Shiva is known as *Darshana bhasha*. The language or word that does not give up its meaning easily and is dismissed

14. uktoyomahimAviShNoHsatUkto hi samAdhinA |
shaivadarshanamAlamvyakvachichChaivIkathoditA ||125||

15. Pandurangi, *Mahabharata Tatparyanirnaya*, p. xx.

16. samAdhibhAShayoktaMyattatasarvaMgrAhyameva hi|
aviruddhaMsamAdhestudarshanoktaM cha gRRihyate ||126||

17. Pandurangi, *Mahabharata Tatparyanirnaya*, p. xx.

18. AdyantayorviruddhaMyaddarshanetadudAhRRitam|
darshanAntaraMsidhdhAM cha guhyabhAShA.anyathAbhavet||127||

19. Pandurangi, *Mahabharata Tatparyanirnaya*, p. xx.

20. Gururajah Rao, trans. Chapters 1–8, “Mahabharata Tatparyanirnaya” by Madhwacharya, maintained by A. Harindranath, accessed on October 30, 2017, <http://mahabharata-resources.org/mbtntrans/mbtntrans.html>.

as insignificant by an ignorant person is known as *Guhya bhasha*. These are expounded in the *Mahabharata Tatparyanirnaya*.^{21,22}

The *Darshana bhasha* becomes the majoritarian or familiar way of reading and the *Guhya* is the deep or exotic reading that needs an intense engagement with the text to understand its real import. The *Samadhi bhasha* is the bridge between the two. In Madhwacharya's system of the three *bhashas* the sign is the same, i.e. the text. However, the referent or the object referred to depends on the interpretant or the one reading the sign. One needs a Guru to be able to interpret the *Guhya* or the exotic meanings of the familiar texts. This is where Madhwacharya's *Bhasha* theory finds closest resonances to Derrida's concept of *différance*. The *Bhasha* theory, in a sense, goes beyond Derrida's concept when he emphasises the omnipotence and omnipresence of Vishnu in every word and its meaning.

The *Ramayana* – comparison of texts

In the Valmiki *Ramayana* the incidents which seem illogical and difficult to reconcile are the meeting of Rama and Parsurama, the killing of Vali and the abduction of Sita, among others. In the meeting between Rama and Parsurama, one *avatara* of Vishnu meets and challenges the other. How is this to be understood? Can Vishnu take on two forms at the same time? What does it say about the nature or the *guna* of Vishnu? If Vishnu is equally present in both forms, why does it appear as though, one is defeating the other? Valmiki alludes to the uniqueness of the episode, yet the manner it is alluded to in the *Sangraha Ramayana* calls for recourse to the *Bhasha* theory. The surface meaning or the familiar meanings are insufficient to explain the event. Once the *Bhasha* theory is applied the nature and meaning of the incident becomes exotic.

Meeting of Rama and Parsurama

Parsurama and Rama are *avataras* of Vishnu. Parsurama was an earlier *avatara* taken by Vishnu to subdue the *ksatriyas* or the caste of warriors. Rama was the *avatara* taken to demonstrate the conduct of an ideal man.

21. Pandurangi, *Mahabharata Tatparyanirnaya*, p. 20.

22. Vyasanakere Prabhanjanacharya, ed. *Mahabharata Tatparyanirnaya* by Madhwacharya, vol 5, Bangalore: Sri Vyasa Madhwa Seva Pratishthana, 1999, 6 Vols, p. 48.

After the marriage of Sita and Rama, where he had broken a bow of Shiva, the family with Sage Vasistha were on their journey to Ayodhya, when they are accosted by Parsurama. Dasaratha and others are anxious about this encounter. Rama is at once defensive and draws out his bow in a show of aggression.

Points to be remembered while reading the texts are that Parsurama was using the second bow of Shiva. He has it because he is an *avatara* of Vishnu. Parsurama has sheltered in his chest the *asura* Atula. Atula had been granted a boon by Brahma that he could reside within Vishnu and that he would not be killed unless Vishnu was defeated in battle. Atula thought that since no one could ever defeat Vishnu, he could live forever.

Valmiki only refers to the encounter between Parsurama and Rama. There is no reference to the bow being held by Parsurama or the fact that Atula resided in him. However, there are other hints in the use of words from which an alert reader can gather the real import of the incident.

In the Valmiki *Ramayana* the *slokas* that allude to the encounter are the 11th and the 12th verse of the 76th *sarga* or chapter of “Balakanda.”²³ Here, Valmiki tells us that as Rama fixed the arrow to his bow, Parsurama was rendered immobile. It seems that Rama is stronger than Parsurama. How can that be as they are both *avatars* of Vishnu?

जडीकृतेतदालोकेरामेवरधनुर्धरे ।
निर्वीर्योजामदग्न्यो असौरमोराममुदक्षत ॥ १-७६-११²⁴

Then, when Rama is ready to take aim with the arrow on that inscrutable longbow, and when the worlds are being rendered as insentient, then that Rama of Jamadagni is rendered vigour-less and he stared up at Rama of Dasaratha.²⁵

तेजोभिः हतवीर्यत्वात्जामदग्न्योजडीकृतः ।
रामम्कमलपत्राक्षम्नन्दम्नन्दमुवाचह ॥ १-७६-१२²⁶

Rama of Jamadagni is calloused as his vitality is subdued by the radiance of that lotus-petal eyed Rama of Dasaratha, and he spoke to Rama of Dasaratha, slowly and softly.²⁷

23. The “Kanda” refers to a particular section of the *Ramayana*.

24. jaDiikRitetadaalokeraamevardhanurdhare ।
nirviiryojamaadagnyoasauramoraamamudaikSat ॥ 1-76-11

25. Valmiki *Ramayana*, Ed. and Trans., Desiraju Hanumanta Rao and K. M. K. Murthy, accessed on October 30, 2017, www.valmikiramayana.net, 1998-2008.

26. tejobhiHhataviiryatvaatjaamadag.hnyojaDiikR^itaH ।
raamam kamala patraakShammandammandamuvaca ha ॥ 1-76-12

27. Valmiki *Ramayana*, www.valmikiramayana.net.

According to Madhwacharya's *Mahabharata Tatparyanirnaya*, Vishnu is all powerful. We can make no distinctions between God and his attributes. All his *avatars* are of equal power and qualities,²⁸ and he can manifest himself in as many forms as possible at the same time. Yet there is no diminishing in the power and quality of the forms. Then Rama defeating Parsurama contradicts this dictum. This, then, is a demonstration of the *Darshana bhasha* where seemingly one *avatara* is weaker than the other.

In the *Sangraha Ramayana* we need to consult verses 55, 56 and 57, sarga 8 of "Balakanda", which begins with the earlier meeting between Shiva and Vishnu:

चापरत्ने उभे राम लब्ध्वा हरिहरौ पुरा।
जगत्पती जगत् ताभ्यां जियतुः ससुरासुरम् ॥५५॥²⁹
ओजोजिज्ञासया देवैः प्रार्थितौ प्रार्थितप्रदौ।
दवौ युद्धाय सन्नद्धौ तस्थतुस्तौ धनुर्द्धरौ ॥५६॥³⁰

The Gods who wanted to witness the superiority of Vishnu, playfully asked Vishnu and Shiva to stage a fight to display Vishnu's greatness.

अहङ्कारमयं शर्वं हुङ्कारेणैव केशवः।
क्षणेन स्तम्भयामास गरुडः पन्नगं यथा ॥५७॥³¹

Vishnu rendered Shiva immobile just by the exhalation of his breath, like the eagle Garuda renders the snake immobile (translated by us).³²

Here Naryana Panditacharya uses the *Samadhi Bhasha* as he states clearly that the duel between Shiva and Vishnu was undertaken to demonstrate the superiority of Vishnu to the world.³³ There is no doubt that Vishnu won, as he is the controller of both Brahma and Shiva. So he defeated Shiva with just an exhalation of his breath. In verse 57, Naryana Panditacharya uses the name *Keshava* to refer to Vishnu. There is a reason he uses this particular name. The letter *Ka* refers to Brahma and *Isha* refers to Shiva. The word *Keshava* refers to one who animates both Brahma and Shiva.³⁴

28. Padmanabhachar, *Life and Teachings of Sri Madhvachariar*, 27.

29. chAparatneubherAmalabdhvAhariharaupurA|
jagatpatIjagattAbhyAMjigyatuHsasurAsuram ||55||

30. ojojigyAsayAdevaiHprAtthirtauprArtthitapradau
davauyuddhAyasannaddhautasthatustaudhanurddharau||56||

31. aha~NkAramayaMsharvaMhu~NkAreNaivakeshavaH|
kShaNenasatambhayAmAsagaruDaHpannagaMyathA||57||

32. Narayana Panditacharya *Sangraha Ramayana*, 186.

33. *Samidhi Bhasha*, verses 55 and 56.

34. Narayana Panditacharya, *Sangraha Ramayana*, p. 186.

Bannanje gives the resolution of the word *Keshava* which is a *samas*, a compound word, as the one who animates the *ahamkaratatva* of the mind and is therefore the in-dweller of Shiva. It is no surprise that Vishnu can control Shiva with just a breath.³⁵ Clearly the verses extol the supremacy of Vishnu. In verse 57 the use of the word *Keshava* makes the language *Guhya*, exotic. Shiva, here, is the controller of the mind and the ego (*ahamkara*). Yet, he too is controlled by Vishnu. How much more powerful is this God Vishnu? In the Valmiki *Ramayana* the word used to refer to Vishnu is Vishnu itself.

The *Mahabharata Tatparyanirnaya* recalls this incident in Chapter 4, verses 43 to 49 i.e. 7 *shlokas*.³⁶ Here in each verse Vishnu is referred to by different names, viz. Ramapati, Hari, Janardhana and Ramesh. The word *Keshava* is not used here. It is Narayana Panditacharya's use of the *Guhya* that enables the reader to understand the real meaning behind the episode.

In the Valmiki *Ramayana* we see the use of the word *Apratima* in the verses 16 and 18 and 20. The word *Apratima* meaning "unequalled" is used to describe the "matchless" *tapas* or penance of Parsurama in verse 16, the "unrivalled" strength of Rama in verse 18 and the arrow itself in verse 20. Verse 17 tells us that Vishnu is always undefeated in any encounter. This is *Samadhi bhasha*:

लोकाः तु अप्रतिमा राम निर्जिताः तपसा मया |
जहि तान् शर मुख्येन मा भूत् कालस्य पर्ययः || १-७६-१६१६³⁷

But I triumphed over matchless realms of heavens with my ascesis, oh, Rama, you may hash them up with that irreversible arrow... let there be no time-lag....³⁸

एते सुर गणाः सर्वे निरीक्षन्ते समागताः |
त्वाम् अप्रतिम कर्माणम् अप्रतिद्वन्द्वम् आहवे || १-७६-१८³⁹

All of these gods who have come collectively are beholding you and your next move, for you are an unequalled one in your achievements and to whom there is no counter-dueller in conflicts....⁴⁰

35. Narayana Panditacharya, *Sangraha Ramayana*, p. 186.

36. Prabhanjanacharya, *Mahabharata Tatparyanirnaya*, p. 76.

37. lokaaHtuapratimaaraamanirjitaaHtapasaamayaa |
jahitaansharamukhyenamaabhuutkaalasyaparyayaH || 1-76-16

38. Valmiki *Ramayana*, www.valmikiramayana.net.

39. etesuragaNaaHsarveniriikShantesamaagataaH |
tvaamapratimakarmaaNamapratidvandvamaahave || 1-76-18

40. Valmiki *Ramayana*, www.valmikiramayana.net.

शरम् अप्रतिमम् राम मोक्तुम् अर्हसि सु व्रत ।
शर मोक्षे गमिष्यामि महेन्द्रम् पर्वतोत्तमम् ॥ १-७६-२०⁴¹

It will be apt of you to unloose that unsurpassed arrow, oh, Rama, as you have ethical commitment to wipe out demons as I wiped out menacing kings, and should you unloosen that arrow now I wish to depart to the ethereal mountain Mt. Mahendra, a point of no return for me... So said Parsu Rama to Dasaratha Rama.⁴²

Bannanje Govindacharya in his *Valmiki Kanda Ramayana* tells us that the use of the word *Apratima* is a clue for the readers to consult another story mentioned in the *Mahabharata Tatparyanirnaya* and the *Sangraha Ramayana*. Here Valmiki is using both *Darshana* and *Guhya*. A superficial or familiar reading would give us only the qualities of Parsurama, Rama and the arrow.⁴³

In verse 69, *Sangraha Ramayana*, the author recalls the story of the *asura* Atula:

कारणान्तरतो राम स्वेच्छयाऽन्तः कृतं मया ।
तपोमयं लोकमयं महेष्वा तं हरासुरम् ॥६९॥⁴⁴

Due to reasons stated earlier Rama killed the *asura* (Atula) who had spread his influence on the world through his penance (translated by us).⁴⁵

Vishnu, in all his omniscience came up with this situation of Rama calling Rama to battle. In verse 54 we have the *Darsana bhasha*, where we have the young and brave Rama calling out to Parsurama directly to find out why they have been accosted.

जामदग्न्य प्रसीदेति वसिष्ठाद्यैर्द्विजोत्तमैः ।
पूजितो राममासाद्य रामो धिरमभाषत ॥५४॥⁴⁶

Sage Vashsishta greeted Parsurama pleasingly and Rama boldly called out to Parsurama (translated by us).⁴⁷

It is also *Guhya*, as the knowledgeable ones know that it is simply a display by Vishnu. There is no difference in the forms. In the *Valmiki Ramayana* the whole

41. sharamapratimamraamamoktumar.hhasisuvrata |
sharamokShegamiShyaamimahendraparvatottamam || 1-76-20

42. Valmiki *Ramayana*, www.valmikiramayana.net.

43. Govindacharya, *Valmiki Kanda Ramayana*, p. 119.

44. kArANAntaratorAmasvechChayA.antaHkRRitaMmayA|
tapomayaMlokamayaMmaheShvAtaMharAsuram||69||

45. Narayana Panditacharya, *Sangraha Ramayana*, p. 190.

46. jAmadagnyaprasIdetivasiShThAdyairdvijottamaiH|
pUjitorAmamAsAdyarAmodhiramabhAShata ||54||

47. Narayana Panditacharya, *Sangraha Ramayana*, p. 190.

encounter between Rama and Parsurama encompasses three whole *sargas* or chapters. In the *Sangraha Ramayana* it is from verse 50 to verse 72, i.e. twenty three verses. Rama fits an arrow to the bow and has to let it loose on a plausible target.

Going back to verse 69 *Sangraha Ramayana*, while alluding to the story of Atula, it also tells us that Rama aimed the arrow not at Parsurama but at Atula. Parsurama had ordered Atula to leave his body and as soon as he came out, Atula was killed by Rama's arrow. So, though it seemed that Parsurama was defeated by Rama in battle, it was but an enactment to kill Atula. This is the *Guhya*, secret or exotic meaning to that seemingly innocuous or *Darshana* meaning of Rama defeating Parsurama in battle. The verse also lends itself to a *Samadhi* reading as Rama kills Atula with the same felicity that Vishnu paralysed Shiva (like Garuda renders immobile the snakes).

In verses 66 and 67, *Sangraha Ramayana* we see the use of *Samadhi bhasha* as the supremacy of Vishnu is stated unequivocally. In verse 66 Rama strings the bow and nocks the arrow with a sweet smile on his face. In verse 67 the Devas come to the sky to watch the wonderful exhibition that Vishnu in the form of the Ramas was putting up to defeat the *asura* Atula. It is of interest to the reader that there is absolutely no direct reference to this story in the Valmiki Ramayana, except for the clue of the use of the word *Apratima*.

However, in the *Mahabharata Tatparyanirnaya* the story of Atula is explained clearly with the intent of reconciling his reading with that of Valmiki. In the verses 55 to 60, the story of Atula is plainly retold. It also clearly states that Vishnu could not contradict the word of his *bhakta*, Brahma but at the same time the pretence of being defeated by Atula had to be enacted. So it is said that Rama killed the penance of Parsurama, when in fact he was killing the *asura*. *Mahabharata Tatparyanirnaya*, is the text that unravels the *Guhya* meanings or exotic meanings. It is employed to unravel the three *Bhashas* in the Valmiki *Ramayana* and the *Sangraha Ramayana*. The *Sangraha Ramayana*, being a bridge text displays some instances of the use the *Bhashas* and in other instances, it is self-explanatory. One needs to pay attention to the fact that Narayana Panditacharya has used the word *Keshava* with a specific, *Guhya* or exotic meaning in mind.

These are but a few examples of the extrication of the spiritual content of such a familiar text. The text *Sangraha Ramayana* abounds in many more instances where *Guhya bhasha* (exotic readings) delight the enlightened reader.

Translations

In an attempt to convey the *Sangraha Ramayana* to a larger audience, translations of this text have been undertaken by Madhwa scholars. One name of note is of Bannanje Govindacharya. In his preface to the Kannada rendering of Narayana Panditacharya's *Sangraha Ramayana* called *Sri Narayana Panditacharyara Sangraha Ramayana: Kannadada Kannadiyalli Sangraha Ramayana*, he says he would describe his work as based on the original rather than a translation, as he has left out sections which are better understood in Sanskrit. Despite this, one cannot take away from the Kannada text its richness of language, beauty of description and faithful adherence to the source text. The aim of writing the book is to provide at a glance the story of Rama as described by Narayana Panditacharya. Bannanje in his work has tried to capture the essence of the original; hence he calls it a "*Bhava-anuvada*".⁴⁸

The Kannada work is in prose and the author, therefore, has compressed many verses into one compact paragraph. For example, he narrates the events from verse 70–72 of the 8th *Sarga* of the "Balakanda" that describes the killing of the *asura* Atula, Parsurama's acceptance of Rama as an *avatar* of Vishnu, and his subsequent departure to Mahendradweepa, in one long sentence!⁴⁹ While the reader gets to learn the events as described in the original, he misses the nuances of meaning and play on words that Narayana Panditacharya employed in his work.

Another aspect that gets lost in translation is the spiritual interpretation of the words used. As mentioned earlier, the *Guhya bhasha*, reveals its layers of exotic meanings only after one grapples long and hard with every word in the text. The reader is expected to have read widely, have a thorough knowledge of the vocabulary, etymology and *chandas* (metre) of the language, and be aware of the spiritual meanings one can draw from the words. To expect such felicity with the language from a lay reader is asking too much. The role of a Guru is that of a guide who helps the reader to a deeper understanding of the text and a more profound appreciation of the spiritual message. The use of the word *Keshava* is a case in point. The name of Vishnu, "Hari" is used and a lot of other interpretations are missed out. It requires an exponent in Sanskrit to delve into the etymology of the word to bring out the exotic meaning latent in the structure of the word.

48. Bannanje Govindacharya. *Sri Narayana Panditacharyara Sangraha Ramayana : Kannadada Kannadiyalli*, Udipi: Ishavasya Pratishthana, 1999, p. 4.

49. Govindacharya. *Sri Narayana Panditacharyara Sangraha Ramayana : Kannadada Kannadiyalli*, p. 25.

The Kannada elucidation of the confrontation of Parsurama and Rama serves the purpose of the *Samadhi bhasha* effectively in its proclamation of the greatness and superiority of Lord Vishnu over all beings. The author has creatively applied the *Darshana bhasha* too. The *Guhya bhasha* or the exotic meaning in the episode, i.e. the quality of Lord Vishnu to be omnipresent and yet free from the Trigunas (*sattva*, *tamas* and *rajas*) that bind man to earth, also renders him powerful enough to be able to manifest the *trigunas* in Himself at will, not in just one form but in many,⁵⁰ in this case, two forms – that of Parsurama and Rama, is not demonstrated.

At once, this meeting becomes more potent, as it is not a clash between the Lord and the *Ahamkaratattva* represented by Shiva where Shiva is immobilized with just a breath from Vishnu, but a meeting of the two forms of the same entity. It gains significance in that it hints at a number of interpretations – one, to celebrate the omnipresence and omnipotence of Vishnu, second to highlight the beginning of Rama's *avatar*, and third, the killing of the *asura* Atula to show that Vishnu is indestructible and invincible.

All of these *Guhya* readings are available through an in-depth study of the Sanskrit version. The Kannada version provides the story line only. The scene where Parsurama pretends to be defeated by Rama so that the *asura* Atula can be killed is one example. The fears expressed by Dasaratha to Vasista in verses 48 and 49 and later to Parsurama in verses 61, 62 and 63 is another example. On the surface, it seems to question the efficacy of Vishnu's prowess but in truth it highlights his superior strength.⁵¹

Thus, any attempt at translating a text, while keeping the story or exoskeleton of the original intact cannot preserve or recreate its heart. This is especially true of the spiritual reading of texts. The *Guhya bhasha*, a crucial tool in understanding of spiritual meanings of texts cannot be employed in the translated version. The author himself has avoided any such attempt.

A reading of Prof. N. Nagappa's translation of Bannanje's Kannada *Sangraha Ramayana*, called *Narayana Panditacharyaji Ka Sangraha Ramayana*, makes one doubly aware of this loss in translation as this text is twice removed from the Sanskrit original. It is, however, a faithful translation of Bannanje's work. The book allows a reader access to Bannanje's work in Hindi. It carries almost no stamp of originality of the translator in his use of the target language. Instead it adheres so closely to the source text it seems to be written to celebrate Bannanje's work than to bring forth the life of Rama and the glory of Vishnu. Therefore a search

50. Govindacharya, *Valmiki Kanda Ramayana*, p. 117.

51. Govindacharya, *Sri Narayana Panditacharyara Sangraha Ramayana : Kannadada Kannadi-yalli*, pp. 24–25.

for spiritual meaning through the meaning and structure of the target language seems pointless.⁵²

One cannot, however, dismiss such texts as they are works of the labour of love and devotion, one to the Lord and another to one's Guru, a spiritual guide to the path of Salvation. These texts enkindle in the reader a thirst for a deeper reading of the text. The incompleteness of the reading experience goads the dedicated student to approach the source text and source language with humility and devotion to apprehend the intricacies of an exotic language through so familiar a story to continue his quest for true knowledge or *jnana*.

The Kannada and Hindi versions of the *Sangraha Ramayana* are then instances of inter-lingual translations with no attempt to recreate or add anything new to the story, to change the point of view or even to convey any of the messages of Madhwacharya. The *Mahabharata Tatparyanirnaya*, while it is not a translation offers a system of reading and understanding the story commensurate with his worldview. The *Sangraha Ramayana* is an intra-lingual rendering of the Valmiki *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata Tatparyanirnaya*. Some parts of the story are highlighted and some others are just mentioned in passing. However, it does carry the echoes and the shadows of the *Bhasha* theory of Madhwacharya.

Madhwacharya makes no distinction in the importance of the different parts of the Vedas, *itihaasas* and *puranas*. It is what you read into it that matters. A text is really in the hand of the readers. Reader read their interpretation of the text. And in this interpretation Madhwacharya demonstrates the Derridean concept of the meaning of a text always being in play. However, for Madhwacharya the text is in play so long as the play denotes the supremacy of Vishnu. This here, is a difference from the deconstruction theories and the structuralist theories, as for him every sign denotes Vishnu. All words and their meaning start and end with Vishnu.⁵³

However, in the Kannada rendering or the Hindi rendering one does not get a sense of this underplay of the meaning of Vishnu of every word and sound. There is no self-consciousness about the translation; we are not dealing with a new text but are aware of the texts' dependence on the Sanskrit original. There is no self-reflexivity. There is only the awareness that the text must reach an audience who should go back to the original Sanskrit. The importance of the teacher is also highlighted. The Kannada and Hindi versions come to be mere summaries or guides, and an avid reader must approach the teacher with the Sanskrit text to wrest the *Guhya* or exotic meanings.

52. N. Nagappa, *Narayana Panditacharyaji Ka Sangraha Ramayana*, Udupi: Ishavasya Pratishtana, 2008, pp. 25–26.

53. Padmanabhachar, *Life and Teachings of Sri Madhvachariar*, p. 126.

The idea of untranslatability is thus highlighted. “According to Derrida, one never writes in just one language, but is always already writing in multiple languages, composing new meanings while eradicating others. Even “correct” translations conceal, and even exact replication carries different meanings.”⁵⁴ It is perhaps this fear that has discouraged translators from attempting to incorporate exotic (*Guhya*) meaning in their works. This is an interesting starting point for explorations into interpretation of other works to recompense for the paucity of material on the *Bhasha* theory of Madhwacharya. Perhaps Vishnu is the real and exotic interlocutor between words and their familiar meaning as far as Madhwacharya is concerned.

Paula Richman has vouched for the diversity and richness of the *Ramayana* tradition in South India and South Asia. But the *Mahabharata Tatparyanirnaya* and the *Sangraha Ramayana* are not mentioned in Paula Richman’s collection. Madhwacharya and his student Narayana Panditacharya wrote their versions of the *Ramayana* to establish the *Dwaita* School of philosophy. Madhwacharya propounded his *Bhasha* theory entering the realm of word, text and meaning to establish his school of thought and Narayana Panditacharya made use of it to convey the exotic meaning of a familiar text. In doing so, not only was a new school of philosophy established but a new version of the *Ramayana* was also added to the already existing rich tradition displaying an exotic dimension to so familiar a text as the *Ramayana*.

54. Edwin Gentzler, *Contemporary Translation Theories*, New Delhi: Viva Books, 2010, p. 164.

Exoticizing 1984

Trauma, telling, and the anti-Sikh pogrom

Ritika Singh

The past is never dead. It's not even past.

William Faulkner¹

October 31, 1984: The sequence of events remains as vivid as ever.

Khushwant Singh²

Traumatic past as exotic

The exotic and the familiar operate within a spectrum of meaning. The etymology of the word “exotic” from the Greek word *exotikos* traces the exotic as something foreign, originating from the *exo* – the outside. The exotic emerges from beyond the horizons of the familiar therefore is strange and outlandish. To define the exotic then requires a realization of the familiar. The “familiar” from the Latin word *familiaris* is “domestic, private, belonging to a family, of a household.” belonging to the realm of one’s *familia* or family. It is akin to oneself while the mysterious exotic is the other. The dualism between the two functions on an oppositional conceptualization. However, this polar dichotomy negates the symbiotic relationship between the two because of their function and placement within the same spectrum. This paper seeks to understand this relationship within the domain of trauma theory and theoretically locate the familiar and the exotic within the topography of a traumatized mind.

In doing so, the exotic is conceptualized as trauma that is forcefully injected from the *exo* – the outside – and corrupts the familiar. A traumatic experience causes a disruption that results in a catastrophic reaction. A degree of shock and suddenness emerges from the subject’s unpreparedness to face such an experience.

1. William Faulkner, *Requiem for A Nun*, London: Random House, 2013, p. 85.

2. Khushwant Singh, “Oh, That Other Hindu Riot of Passage,” *Outlook India*, November 15, 2004. <https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/oh-that-other-hindu-riot-of-passage/225692>

What makes the traumatic event traumatic in the first place? The event may not be equally traumatic for all, or for some, may not be traumatic at all. In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, one of the founding works of trauma theory, Cathy Caruth argues that trauma lies in the reception of an event:

The pathology consists...solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event.³

The repeated possession of the victim links Caruth's idea to Freud's concept of repetition compulsion. In *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), Freud and Breuer declared that "[P]sychical trauma – or more precisely the memory of the trauma – acts like a foreign body which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work..."⁴ Trauma is understood as a splinter that makes itself consciously felt as the un-assimilated. In the mind-scape of a survivor or witness, pathogenic traumatic memories become exotic as these are not known or even knowable. The traumatic event skips the level of consciousness at the time of occurrence, and recedes deeper down into the psyche of a survivor who "bear[s] witness to a past that was never fully experienced as it occurred."⁵ This inherent contradiction of experiencing yet never-fully experiencing ushers in the paradoxical nature of trauma. The struggle to be exorcised of the possession by a past yet being unable to access it is ultimately futile. The impossibility of completely understanding a traumatic event makes the victim vulnerable to being possessed by it. The traumatic past cannot be accessed and is resistant to familiarization and easy assimilation. In this resistance, it is strange, mysterious, and placed in a different inaccessible and therefore, "exotic" locale of the mind.

Consequently, the traumatic past is exoticized in that it becomes a space of alterity – an alien land within the mind, a different geographical locale. However, this alterity is an active construction through contemplation. Grappling with what had happened, the event must be reconstructed by a victim who becomes a living vessel of that history to come to terms with it. Collective memories work to create a form of mnemohistory, an account of history mediated through memory.⁶

3. Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore: JHU Press, 1995, p. 4.

4. Josef Breuer, Sigmund Freud, and James Strachey. *Studies on Hysteria*, New York: Basic Books, 2000, p. 6.

5. Caruth, *Trauma*, p. 8.

6. Marek Tamm, "History as Cultural Memory: Mnemohistory and the Construction of the Estonian Nation," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 39, no. 4, December 2008, p. 501,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01629770802468865>

Therefore, the past is itself a cultural creation of the present. The role of the present in shaping the past, changes its definition from the past as a *gone-event* to the past as an *ongoing-event*. In *The Time Cure: Overcoming PTSD with the New Psychology of Time Perspective*, Philip Zimbardo et. al. highlight that:

No matter what time it is in our part of the world, in our head we live in a mix of three subjective psychological time zones: the past (what was), the present (what is), and the future (what will be). Each of these time zones is coloured and further divided by our cultural biases; our spiritual beliefs; and a myriad of hopes and dreams, memories, and life experiences. Inevitably, each of us has a slightly different mix of temporal biases in our psychological makeup...People from any time perspective can be knocked into past negative or present hedonistic orientations by trauma...For PTSD clients, the negative past is everything.⁷

All three tenses are present in the mind. It is the positive balance of the three that is sought. The assumed temporal gap between the past and the present can be put to scrutiny since it is the present that shapes the past, the past is then a thing of the present. A linear chronological link between the two fails to take this into account. The past is a narrative that is always in active construction and history is a form of memory and it is “appropriate to treat history as a mode of remembering, as a mnemonic practice.”⁸

So, remembering and reconstructing the past is in a way, a construction of exoticism; it is traumatic in that it is constructed as the other. Narrating trauma is the process of dealing with its mystical strangeness, a familiarization of the mystery of trauma – it is this that informs the inherent *aporia* of trauma narratives. The need to tell and retell is to keep the memory alive, to let the next generation know of the nature of experience, and for victims to connect through their testimonies of witnessing, sharing that burden of knowledge. The experience is not assimilated into the everyday to the point of erasure. With repetition, it continues to be felt and placed as the other that punctures the normative.

Thus, trauma narratives engage in a double telling: they tell of an experience that is known yet unknown, constantly oscillating between familiarity and strangeness. In this narration of the traumatic past, the familiar quotidian becomes punctuated by the strangeness of that traumatic experience where it is identified and placed as foreign within the familiar. In *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (2007), Veena Das reveals the dialectical relationship between an event and the everyday. The familiarity of the everyday allows an understanding of

7. Philip Zimbardo, Richard Sword, and Rosemary Sword, *The Time Cure: Overcoming PTSD with the New Psychology of Time Perspective Therapy*, California: John Wiley & Sons, 2012, p. 32.

8. Tamm, “Cultural Memory”, p. 500.

the extraordinary nature of the past event. Further, Das highlights that the ordinary and the eventful have blurry, shadow lines of division and distinction:

Again, to say that the extreme violence was continuous with everyday life is not to say that it was the same, but rather that the everyday provided the grounds from which the event could be grown.⁹

The past is both familiar and exotic because of its complicated relationship with the everyday; with language and narration; and with knowledge and power. From this perspective therefore, the past is a familiar-exotic locale, a fertile ground for voices with witness accounts giving access to this hybrid liminal place. Veena Das seems to indicate this very idea when she says:

[I]t seems to me that notions of ghostly repetitions, spectral presences, and all those tropes that have become sedimented into our ordinary language from trauma theory are often evoked too soon – as if the processes that constitute the way everyday life is engaged in the present have little to say on how violence is produced or lived with. If the process of naming the violence presents a challenge, it is because such naming has large political stakes, and not only because language falters in the face of violence.¹⁰

The traumatic event coexists with the everyday and as Veena Das asserts, it is a resumption of the familiar rhythms of the quotidian that provides grounds for recovery:

There is no pretence here at some grand project of recovery but simply the question of how everyday tasks of surviving – having a roof over your head, being able to send your children to school, being able to do the work of the everyday without constant fear of being attacked – could be accomplished. I found that the making of the self was located, not in the shadow of some ghostly past, but in the context of making the everyday inhabitable.¹¹

A return to the familiar rhythm of life is a crucial part of recovery. Mundane tasks like cooking, bathing, sending off the children to school become difficult yet important to return to after a traumatic event. This ability to “descend into the ordinary” is to return to the comfortable space of familiarity that which dialectically exists with the traumatic. Lodged from the outside, partially assimilated into the everyday as its other, disrupting it, yet providing it meaning, the traumatic “exotic” past thus comes in contact with “familiar.” The spectrum marking the degrees of difference between the familiar and the exotic clarifies that the strange may be understood through the familiar.

9. Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*, London: University of California Press, 2007, pp. 149–205.

10. Das, *Life and Words*, p. 205.

11. Das, *Life and Words*, p. 216.

Politics of remembering 1984

The 1984 anti-Sikh Delhi pogrom provides a theoretical and contextual framework for this paradigm. On 31st October 1984, the then Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, was assassinated by her two Sikh bodyguards. The three days that followed saw selective targeting of the community of Sikhs. The Orwellian dystopia voiced in the innumerable accounts of trauma bears witness to the killing of around 3000 Sikh men and endless accounts of rape and trauma. In the case of the 1984 occurrences, the Sikhs were first identified as the other and it can be argued that the three days stemmed from the creation of an other that marked the birth of the consciousness of a Sikh minority. Uma Chakravarti in *The Delhi Riots* recalls the pogrom as “the making of a minority.”¹² Khushwant Singh in his essay “On the ‘84 Riots” remembers how he “never believed that I had to be one [Indian] or the other [Sikh]. I was both an Indian and a Sikh and proud of being so.”¹³ The realization of one’s Sikh identity is a recurring motif in these accounts. Emblems of this identity¹⁴ – the kesh (hair), turban, salwar-kameez now consciously come to be marked as identifiers for the self and the other depending upon one’s subscription to these representational symbols:

Final denouement began with the first signature – forcible cutting of hair and beard and “untying” of the turban. This was essentially an attack on the symbol of *satsang* or congregation because by donning the headgear, one became part of a larger community...

Vehicles of Sikhs started being stopped and their turbans were removed and set on fire. By the evening time mobs collected at several places had started stopping transport vehicles also scooters, motor-cycles and cars either driven by Sikhs or in which Sikhs were found travelling. The initial shout of condemnation of Sikhs began to take a serious turn.¹⁵

The attack on the Sikh community by the non-Sikhs is thus based on the identification of the Sikhs as the “other,” a “stranger” to the household; a perverted exotic “other,” as one who does not belong to one’s *familia* or one’s imagined community.

12. Uma Chakravarti and Nandita Haksar, *The Delhi Riots: Three Days in the Life of a Nation*, New Delhi: Lancer International, 1987, p. 34.

13. Khushwant Singh quoted in Vikram Kapur, 1984: *In Memory and Imagination – Personal Essays and Stories on the 1984 Anti-Sikh Riots*, New Delhi: Amaryllis, 2016, p. 93.

14. The five Ks – Kesh (uncut hair), Kara (a steel bracelet), Kanga (a wooden comb), Kaccha (cotton underwear) and Kirpan (steel sword) – are physical symbols worn by Sikhs as visible emblems of belonging to the community and date from the creation of the Khalsa Panth by the founder, Guru Gobind Singh in 1699.

15. Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, *Sikhs: The Untold Agony of 1984*, New Delhi: Westland, 2015, p. 30.

Therefore, the community is targeted as an exotic other and 1984 is the traumatic event that consequently resulted from this othering. As argued earlier, since trauma is an exotic entity in the mind, its strangeness is narrated in witness accounts that construct the past as exoticized, reconstructed repeatedly as the exotic in the private and public matrix of remembering. However, it is important to retain, through narration, the strangeness of the traumatic past so that it continues to resist political forgetting. The exoticization of the past is a political act to negate amnesia. As long as the traumatic event exceeds the realm of knowing and understanding, and as long as it exists alongside and within the familiar; and finally, as long as it resists becoming “too familiar,” it can negate public amnesia and reveal politics of remembering.

One such instance where the politics of remembering is revealed is through the nomenclature ascribed to the anti-Sikh pogrom of 1984. There is a dominant metanarrative that constructs 1984 as a riot – the result of an unorganized, chaotic frenzy of a maniac mob. The pogrom is taught to be remembered as a riot. For example, a newspaper headline is a narrative, a stor(y)ing of the event for the public where 1984 is stored and storied through a construction. On 3rd March 2017, a leading English daily (*The Times of India*) reporting the reopening of 1984 cases summarized the pogrom as an episode when “3,000 people were killed, mostly in Delhi, in the anti-Sikh riots that broke out following the assassination of then PM Indira Gandhi on October 31, 1984.”¹⁶ On 19th November 1984, two weeks after the pogrom, in a public speech Rajiv Gandhi declared that:

*Some riots took place in the country following the murder of Indira Ji. We know the people were angry and for a few days it seems India had been shaken. But, when a mighty tree falls, it is only natural that the earth around it shakes.*¹⁷ [emphasis added]

Alongside this metanarrative exist narratives of 1984 in public consciousness that question this nomenclature. In *I Accuse...: The Anti-Sikh Violence of 1984*, Jarnail Singh asserts that:

16. “SIT Reopens 1984 Case against Sajjan Kumar – Times of India”. *The Times of India*, March 3, 2017, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chandigarh/sit-reopens-1984-case-against-sajjan-kumar/articleshow/57438037.cms>.

17. “Thirty Three Years after the Sikh Riots, There is Still No Closure for the Victims.” *Hindustan Times*, November 1, 2017, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/thirty-three-years-after-the-sikh-riots-there-is-still-no-closure-for-the-victims/story-aecIaNsrb5NMAWfgWMBVdJ.html>.

The events following Indira Gandhi's assassination were not riots, though that is what they are commonly called. Riots break out between two factions in confrontation with each other and both suffer damage in greater or lesser degree. This violence was well organized. An estimated 5000 Sikhs died across the country, but there is no record of even one member of the mob being killed or charged.¹⁸

One discourse constructs 1984 as a riot that absolves the state of its responsibility to protect its citizens and the other, by victims or the "exotic" other, attempts to challenge that narrative itself. In the introduction to *Kultar's Mime* – a play based on the 1984 riots, Uma Chakravarti reiterates that "[i]t's like an undercurrent in the life of Delhi. You get into a cab or go to a certain kind of gathering and say, 'Where were you when 1984 happened?' and people will tell you their stories."¹⁹ The willingness of people to tell their stories is an affirmation of the act of survival and a political reminder of a past rooted in pain. Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay in *Sikhs: The Untold Agony of 1984*, acknowledges that "[t]he survivors of 1984 are used to strangers asking them uncomfortable questions, adept in retelling personal accounts, depending on the seeker."²⁰

The survivors are adept in retelling, but every time the trauma is retold, its traumatic nature is reaffirmed. And, perhaps it is retold not to make it familiar but to retain its unfamiliarity – its *exoticness*. It can be argued that this is because if there is a politics of remembering, there is a politics of narration. Familiarization may give way to forgetting and as Jarnail Singh argues in *I Accuse...: The Anti-Sikh Violence of 1984* that "[f]orgetting is not a solution. One learns from history but does not forget it; indeed, one should learn from history so that those mistakes are not repeated."²¹ Witness accounts formulate a counter narrative where the carnage is often described as a mediated and organized systemic attack. The modus operandi of the killings, the use of voters' list to identify Sikh houses in the city and the role of the state machinery in perpetuating violence is a common thread in these accounts. The accounts re-define the three days as a "pogrom" – a Russian term for an organized massacre. Public memory is the site for a battle of commemoration linked to a Foucauldian understanding of knowledge and power. In the historical

18. Jarnail Singh, *I Accuse...: The Anti-Sikh Violence of 1984*, New Delhi: Penguin Random House India, 2011, p. 25.

19. Sarbpreet Singh and J. Mehr Kaur, *Kultar's Mime: Stories of Sikh Children who Survived the 1984 Delhi Massacre*, 1 edition, Delhi: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016, p. 15.

20. Mukhopadhyay, *Sikhs*, p. ix.

21. Khushwant Singh, *I Accuse*, p. 35.

matrix of remembering, these accounts recount the trauma to resist othering of their voices.

Apart from being counter narratives, another social function of these is to receive cultural justice and operate as reminders of the pending status of justice and this becomes the political purpose of constructing the past as an exotic other since it serves as a reminder of pain and due justice. On 15th January 2017, “The Wall of Truth” or the “1984 Sikh Genocide Memorial” – a site of commemoration with names of victims of 1984 was opened to the public. Constructed by the Delhi Sikh Gurudwara Management Committee (DSGMC) as a reminder of injustice towards the victims. The wall is less than a kilometre from the Parliament of India – a building that symbolizes the Indian democracy. It serves as a reminder of a time when the democratic mettle defining the nation was fractured. The fact is that legal justice has still not been received. 1984 cases are still circulating in courts. In March 2017, the High Court ordered a retrial of five cases and in August 2017, the Supreme Court set up a supervisory body to assess the hasty disposal of 199 cases by the Special Investigation Team formulated in 2015 for the task of delivering justice to the victims. On 24th December 2014, Jagdish Tytler, a Congress leader accused by witnesses of instigating a mob resulting in the death of three people on 1st November 1984, was given a clean chit by the Central Bureau of Investigation. When legal justice is delayed and denied, these witness accounts serve as reminders of its pending status and seek cultural justice in public consciousness. In *Oh, That Other Hindu Riot of Passage*, Khushwant Singh states that:

The dark months of alienation are over; the new dawn promises blue skies and sunshine for the minorities with only one black cloud remaining to be blown away – a fair deal to families of victims of the anti-Sikh violence of 1984. It was the most horrendous crime committed on a mass scale since we became an independent nation. Its perpetrators must be punished because crimes unpunished generate more criminals.²²

In “Why not a Collective Cry for Justice,” Humra Quraishi asserts that a collective demand for justice is required:

Why should the Sikh community alone demand justice for all that was destroyed and demolished during the 1984 riots? Let us raise a collective voice. We, the people of this country, should collectively demand justice for each and every riot victim in this country, irrespective of his or her community.²³

22. Khushwant Singh, “Oh, That Other Hindu Riot of Passage,” *Outlook*, 15 November, 2004. <https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/oh-that-other-hindu-riot-of-passage/225692>

23. Humra Quraishi in Vikram Kapur, *1984: In Memory and Imagination – Personal Essays and Stories on the 1984 Anti-Sikh Riots*, New Delhi: Amaryliss, 2016, p. 95.

The collective of the nation is reminded of the need to demand justice for victims and trauma narratives of 1984 endeavour to raise consciousness in the public. In *1984: In Memory and Imagination* (2017), Khushwant Singh exclaims that “I witnessed the anti-Sikh riots here in New Delhi and saw for myself the police doing nothing to arrest or even control the rioters...justice is still waiting for the victims’ families.”²⁴ In the discourse of justice, these accounts not only work as counter-narratives to official state promoted versions of the past demanding a revision of the mainstream version but have this social function to perform. In “Writing Survival,” Pramod K. Nayar argues that these narratives create a foundation for human rights beyond the judicial-legal discourse by situating it in the cultural.²⁵ By operating as reminders for justice, these witness accounts remind the *familia* of the nation of the repercussions of the violent targeting one its community as the exotic other and the need to come together to demand justice as a nation. The humanitarian request of the collective voicing of wounds is to make the nation join in in this demand of justice. To go beyond the immediate circulation of these stories amongst those directly affected to everyone who forms a part of the larger community or family of the nation. To demonstrate that the targeting of a community has left a scar on the idea of India as a secular nation. This must be bandaged collectively.

(Un)familiar violence of 1984

1984 is not the only violent episode that the India as a nation has witnessed. The violence and bloodshed of the 1947 Partition of India, 1984 of Delhi or the 1992 of Bombay, the 2002 of Gujarat, is familiar as it has happened before, yet each requires a unique nuanced understanding because of contextual difference. Familiar accounts of trauma are connected in the historical consciousness of a nation’s public memory where violence is punctuated intermittently. On a larger scale, in this consciousness of a nation communal episodes of violence can be seen as off-shoots, divergences, and momentary disruptions in the day to day functioning of the nation that reveal familiar accounts of trauma. Similar episodes of violence that preceded 1984 are linked in the reconstruction of the past and place it within a spectrum of the familiar. Phanda Singh, an ‘84 victim and first-hand witness of both the Indian Partition and the pogrom remembers

24. Khushwant Singh quoted in Vikram Kapur, *1984*, p. 89.

25. Pramod Nayar, “Writing Survival: Narratives from the Anti-Sikh Pogrom, India 1984”, in Om Prakash Dwivedi, ed., *The Other India: Narratives of Terror, Communalism and Violence*, Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2013, pp. 14–26.

...the partition very clearly and described it vividly, as if he was talking about a recent event in his life. He sees his life as one long struggle for survival, marked by endless migration which appeared to have ended finally in Trilokpuri. Following the riots, in which he lost two of his adult sons, he has moved once more and he now lives in Tilak Vihar where he runs a small tea shop.²⁶

Witness accounts of 1984 often go back to the violence of the 1947 Partition of India, the two episodes of bloodshed in Indian history being linked by a thread of familiarity of the victim with inherent violence, bloodshed, and trauma. In the mental labyrinth, memory does not create isolated locales of experiences but constructs bridges of understanding. The spectrum marking the degrees of difference between the familiar and the exotic clarifies that the strange may be understood through the familiar. Therefore, the violence of 1984 does not fall into the realm of the absolute unfamiliar. In *Sikhs: The Untold Agony of 1984*, Surjit Kaur, a survivor, “recollect[s] similar tales of violence narrated by her parents and others who had escaped the communal fury in 1947 and made it from Rawalpindi to distant Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh.”²⁷ In *The Delhi Riots: Three Days in the Life of a Nation*, Uma Chakravarti highlights that:

The impact of the November Carnage on many Sikhs has been such that not only is 1947 a reference point, a kind of backdrop to the events of 1984 and to their understanding of it, but through the events of '84 their understanding of the past itself has changed.²⁸

The narratives of '84 and '47 are intertwined as an implication of the active associative agency of the mind. The mind crosses similar traumatic experiences on its map, then connects them with a dotted line.

This connection is where the singularity of one's experience finds familiarity in another's accounts to create a collective. Collective memory braids together familiar accounts of trauma. This allows the witness to go beyond the experience of one's self to find solidarity and affinity with others. The “I” expands into a collective by locating familiar accounts of trauma to form a community. It is this formation of a collective, a community that allows a subaltern to speak. To form that subaltern requires a coming together through sharing of similar narratives. If another's story reverberates in a familiar way with one's own, an affinity is created. This affinity leads to the formation of a collective that shares its experiences to reveal the impact of a traumatic event on that very collective. It gives it strength, adding to its

26. Chakravarti and Haksar, *Delhi Riots*, p. 72.

27. Mukhopadhyay, *Sikhs*, p. 62.

28. Chakravarti and Haksar, *Delhi Riots*, p. 19.

resistive potential against its negation. Collectively, these accounts highlight the impact of trauma on a community of people and their emotional response to the traumatic past.

Therefore, these narratives reverberate with strong emotions of anger, resentment and hurt to create “emphatic unsettlement” in the reader and listener. Dominick LaCapra, in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, defines “emphatic unsettlement” as a virtual experience where one puts oneself in the position of an other without discounting the difference between oneself and the other.²⁹ This reveals another paradox of remembering. The listener or the reader should retain that Lacanian gap between the self and the other to avoid being traumatized by the possible communicable pathogenic quality of trauma. Trauma is made familiar or known but not completely and from a distance.

To do so, these narratives must resist political and forced silencing of trauma and witness accounts of the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom then, provide a lens to study the politics of silencing. Perhaps, there is politics in operation behind what is left unsaid. Talking to child witnesses of 1984, Veena Das reveals that this silence could be forced upon the subject:

I soon realized that in our one-hour commute, children were beginning to offer comments or little bits of information about the riots. Often the memory was provoked either by the sudden recognition of a space where a parent had been killed, or by watching someone perform an activity in which a member of the family had once been engaged. The children who had seemed dumb within the colony suddenly found language pouring out of their mouths. It is possible that groups of children had discussed these events among themselves but had been discouraged by adults from discussing them; or perhaps they found an assurance from my presence, so that these memories could, indeed, be narrated.³⁰

The inability to speak about a traumatic event has been taken for granted as the defining characteristic of trauma narratives. This assumption ignores the distinction between the inability to talk and the unwillingness to do so. In the former, traumatic memory produces a passive subject with no agency and authority over recall while in the latter, the subject has agency to deny its articulation. Silence may entail agency and as such, can be a choice and its centre may not be a lack or an inability of the victim to give voice to wounds. The Diagnostic Statistics Manual-V Post Traumatic Stress Disorder criterion of an “inability to recall an important

29. Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Baltimore: JHU Press, 2014, p. 78.

30. Das, *Life and Words*, p. 201.

aspect of the trauma,”³¹ too misses out this point and is being challenged. Richard McNally’s *Remembering Trauma*,³² and “Debunking Myths about Trauma and Memory,”³³ question some of the founding precepts of the field. McNally highlights the inherent contradictions in the field’s basic premises wherein repetition syndrome and traumatic amnesia are two syndromes that are sought in narratives as proof of the presence of trauma. The argument levied by traumatic amnesia theorists is that the mind guards itself through forgetfulness and that amnesia is a method of self-defence. However, the subject continues to be possessed by the past as the event resurfaces when the guards of consciousness are down. McNally argues that the ability of a traumatic memory to incite reactions exemplifies that the event is *not* lost in the abyss of unconsciousness of the mind and it makes itself consciously felt as traumatic – as something that does not belong in that mindscape and therefore, is foreign.

Literary studies of trauma narratives have been engrossed in locating silences asserting that the event, its strangeness, and impact cannot be articulated in language. The search has been for gaps in trauma narratives with a focus on what the words conceal rather than how and what they reveal. Therefore, textual evidence of trauma needs to go beyond a study of narrative fragmentations and concealments. The redefinition of trauma as describable and not-always-unspeakable offers a new model to read witness accounts of 1984. Since the traumatic past of the pogrom is exoticized through narration, as argued earlier, and narration negates silencing to make the past both known and unknown, with repetition over time, the telling becomes familiar, but the traumatic experience remains foreign. The traumatic past of ‘84 is an exotic foreign entity in the mind which is not familiarized with narration or time and is not meant to either since narration is not always geared towards familiarization and assimilation into the realm of the *familiaris* possibly leading to a silencing of its memory. Trauma of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots oscillates between the two – the familiar and the unfamiliar; belonging and othering; silencing and telling; comfort and discomfort; the event and the everyday. The uncomfortable nature of the oscillation between the two ends of the spectrum makes it pulsate with life.

31. Centre for Substance Abuse Treatment, *Appendix E: DSM-IV-TR Criteria for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder*. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, US, 2009, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK83241/>.

32. Richard J. McNally, “Debunking Myths about Trauma and Memory”, *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry, Revue Canadienne De Psychiatrie* 50, no.13, November 2005: pp. 817 – 822, <https://doi.org/10.1177/070674370505001302>.

33. Richard J. McNally, *Remembering Trauma*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005, pp. 1–27.

PART III

Transcending familiar boundaries

André Brink's *A Dry White Season* as film

Foreignization and domestication¹

H. P. van Collier and A. van Jaarsveld

In this essay the process of translation is equated to the film version of a novel. Both processes encompass the transformation of a source text to a target text, and in a sense is mediation between two cultures. In the introductory part, relevant theory pertaining to translation is briefly discussed with specific reference to the processes of domestication and foreignization as in Lawrence Venuti, which entail bringing the original culture nearer to home or, on the other hand, stressing the distance between source and target culture. We will also focus on the idea of manipulation to highlight the manipulating aspects of the source text, to align it with the target text's readers' or in the case of a film, spectators' expectations as suggested by Gideon Toury. Last but not least, we will discuss the *skopos* of translating/film-rendering. Hans J. Vermeer's *skopos* theory views translation as a process with an aim, and with what Christiane Nord calls "loyalty" to the source text's author, the target reader and the person responsible for the translational brief. In the latter part of this essay the case is made out that both the source and the target audience will experience strong foreignization, for different reasons, due to the abundance of exotic elements.²

Translation is always a form of interpretation and thus a hermeneutical process whereby a Source text is transformed into a Target text for a specific target audience. In almost all theories pertaining to translation, this process is seen as the

1. Euzhan Palcy, dir., *A Dry White Season*, 1989.

2. Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, London & New York: Routledge, 1995; Gideon Toury, "Literatuur in vertaling – Systeem en norm: voor een doelgerichte aanpak van de literaire vertaling," in *Vertaalwetenschap. Literatuur, wetenschap, vertaling en vertalen*, eds. André Lefevere & R. Vandeauwera, Leuven: Uitgeverij Acco, 1979, pp. 32–52; Hans J. Vermeer, "Skopos and Commission in Translational Action," in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti, Oxon: Routledge, 2004, pp. 227–238; Vermeer, *Skopos and Translation Commission*, Heidelberg: Heidelberg Universität Press, 1989; Vermeer, *A Skopos Theory of Translation (Some Arguments for and Against)*, TEXTconTEXT Heidelberg: Heidelberg Universität Press, 1996; Nord, *Translating As a Purposeful Activity, Functionalist Approaches Explained*, Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2001.

transmitting of meaning and this implies that translators purposefully place themselves somewhere in a spectrum between the source culture and target culture.³

Translational approaches: A short overview

Equivalence theories

Linguistic approaches came to the fore in the aftermath of World War II. The so-called Leipzig-school favoured a scientific approach to translation in its endeavour to propagate equivalence between Source text and Target text. One of the most important equivalence theorists was Eugene Nida who focussed primarily on the translation of the Bible and favoured a more pragmatic approach as absolute equivalence proved to be a fallacy.

Systemic approaches

The poly-system theory of Itamar Even-Zohar especially had an impact on what often is called a cultural shift. In this approach, the target text is favoured and the central point of departure was that translation is always manipulation of the source text; therefore they are often referred to as the Manipulation School. In this *descriptive* (and not *normative*) approach, the emphasis was on the *result* of translation, which was seen as a *process*. Later theories like the *Skopos*-theory was heavily indebted to their views.^{4,5}

According to André Lefevere, translation is never a neutral act but one of power play. A strong system tends to domesticate and a weak one will usually opt for foreignization.⁶

3. See Jacobus A. Naudé, "Vertaalkunde vandag: 'n Oorsig," *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe* 41, no. 3, 2001, pp. 177–194. See Mary Snell-Hornby, *Translation Studies. An Integrated Approach*, Revised Edition, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1988/1995.

4. Itamar Even-Zohar, "The 'Literary System,'" *Poetics Today* 11, no. 1, Spring 1990, pp. 27–44.

5. See Francis Ferguson, "Oedipus Rex: the tragic rhythm of action (1949)," in *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism. A Reader* ed. David Lodge, London: Longman, 1973, pp. 402–420.

See Toury, "Literatuur in vertaling – Systeem en norm: voor een doelgerichte aanpak van de literaire vertaling," pp. 32–52.

6. André Lefevere and R. Vandaeuwera, *Vertaalwetenschap. Literatuur, wetenschap, vertaling en vertalen* Leuven: Uitgeverij Acco, 1979, pp. 32–52. These concepts will be explained in due course.

Translation as mediation between cultures: The concepts *domestication* and *foreignization*

Translation is an intra-cultural act that mediates between cultures. Culture is described by Mary Snell-Hornby as all socially conditioned aspects of human existence.⁷ *Domestication* and *Foreignization* are terms of the American translational theorist, Venuti. In essence domestication implies that in translation the Source text is brought into line with the linguistic and cultural values of the target audience; foreignization on the other hand implies the opposite: the linguistic and cultural “otherness” or strangeness of the Source text is emphasized, “sending the reader abroad.”⁸

“Skopos”-theory

The *Skopos*-theory as proposed by Vermeer has been one of the most influential theories in translational studies.⁹ His theories later form the cornerstone of those of Christiane Nord who makes a distinction between *intention* and *function*. Translation entails the production of “a text in a target setting for a target purpose and target addressees in target circumstances.”¹⁰ Because every act has an *objective* (*skopos* is the Greek word for objective), the same should hold for translation. It is thus the *skopos* of a translation that will decide whether domestication or foreignization will be paramount or even if there will be a combination of both. “What it does *not* mean is that a good translation should *ipso facto* conform or adapt to target-culture behaviour or expectations, although the concept is often misunderstood in this way.”¹¹

Vermeer’s definition of culture is important: “a culture is the entire setting of norms and conventions that a member of society must know in order to be ‘like everybody’ – or to be able to be different from everybody.”¹² This is in line with

7. Snell-Hornby, *Translation Studies. An Integrated Approach*, pp. 246–258.

8. Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation*, p. 20.

9. Vermeer, “Skopos and Commission in Translational Action,” pp. 227–238.

10. Nord, *Translating As a Purposeful Activity, Functionalist Approaches Explained*, 12. See also Wenfren Yang, “Brief study on Domestication and Foreignization in Translation,” *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* 111, no. 1, March 2010: pp. 77–80.

11. Nord, *Translating As a Purposeful Activity, Functionalist Approaches Explained*, p. 29.

12. Vermeer, *Skopos and Translation Commission*, p. 28.

the views of Stuart Hall and the concept *repertoire* of Even-Zohar.^{13,14} Translation thus entails the comparison of cultures.¹⁵ When the film rendition of a novel is seen as a form of translation, it also implies a choice between domestication and foreignization. In terms of Eugene Nida the director of the film should know both the source and target culture “since words [and in actual fact all actions, cultural signs and deictic patterns in films] only have meaning in terms of the culture in which they function.”^{16,17}

Both approaches have pros and cons: domestication enhances communication, but often implies that cultures (and historical eras, peoples and their beliefs) are always the same anywhere. Foreignization, on the other hand, strengthens the belief that there are unbridgeable differences between cultures, historical eras, peoples and their beliefs. This is even worse when exotic elements come into play. Exoticism is often called the charm of the unfamiliar; yet emphasizes “otherness” which creates a distance between source and target cultures.¹⁸ The real challenge in translating practices is to stress the concept of historical and cultural “relativism”. This implies that the own time, space and culture should not be seen as normative and as a touchstone. This is the reason why Venuti was much more focussed on foreignization, because he judged domestication as ethnocentric reduction whereby Anglo-American cultural values was indeed the touchstone.¹⁹

13. Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, London: Thousand Oaks, 1997, p. 2.

14. Even-Zohar, “The ‘Literary System,’” pp. 27–44.

15. Xiayan Du, “A Brief Introduction of Skopos Theory,” *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 2, no. 10. 2012, pp. 2189–2193.

16. Eugene Nida, *Language and Culture-Contexts in Translation*, Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2001, p. 82.

17. Yang, “Brief Study on Domestication and Foreignization in Translation,” pp. 77–80.

18. The increase in the translation of Afrikaans books into Dutch in the past few decades can often be attributed to “exotic” elements in the Afrikaans texts, e.g. reference to exotic special element, autochthonous languages and cultures, etc.

19. Jeremy Munday, *Introducing Translational Studies: Theories and Applications*, London & New York: Routledge, 2001, p. 146. Cited by: Yang, “Brief study on Domestication and Foreignization in Translation,” pp. 77–80.

Film as a distinctive medium

Film is a distinctive and hybrid medium especially as far as narration is concerned.²⁰ According to Mieke Bal there is narration on two levels: images and sound. This representation of a story implies a temporality: the true narrative comes about by a form of “editing” in which time, space and causality are the key elements.²¹ Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco, Michel Foucault have shown that it is almost impossible to replicate a novel into a film.²² In Brian McFarlane’s *Novel to Film* the film rendition of a novel is seen as a complicated process; it is an “interplay between the “transfer” of “narrative” (story, setting, character) and the “adaptation” of “enunciation” (plot, tone, point of view).”²³ McFarlane in turn is indebted to Patrick Cattrysse who stated that translation could not be seen solely as linguistic transference, but must include a contextualised semiotic perspective.²⁴

Due to a cultural turn in the seventies of the twentieth century, there was a resultant focus on social, cultural and historical relationships.²⁵ This also resulted in films like the British anti-apartheid film *A World Apart* and the French film about a Caribbean sugar-cane worker *La Rue Cases-Nègres* (*Sugar Cane Alley*), by the American director, Euzhan Palcy who also directed *A Dry White Season*.²⁶

20. Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the theory of Narrative*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997, p. 46.

21. Peter Verstraten, *Handboek Filmnarratologie*, Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2006, p. 24.

22. Roland Barthes, S. Z., trans. Richard Miller, Oxford: Blackwell, 1974.

Jacques Derrida, ‘White Mythology,’ *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, pp. 209–229.

Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977.

23. Brian McFarlane, *Novel to film: An introduction to the theory of Adaptation*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1996, pp. 19–20.

24. Patrick Cattrysse, “Film (Adaptation) as Translation: some Methodological Proposals,” *Target* 4, no.1, 1992, pp. 53–70.

25. Yang, “Brief study on Domestication and Foreignization in Translation,” pp. 77–80.

26. Chris Menges, dir., *A World Apart*, 1988; Euzhan Palcy, dir., *La Rue Cases-Nègres*, 1983.

A Dry White Season: Skopos, manipulation, domestication and foreignization

Skopos

Story: *A Dry White Season*, originally published in the Afrikaans version, *'n Droë Wit Seisoen*, is one of the most successful political novels by André P. Brink, a South African author who was one of the most well-known Afrikaans authors in an international context.²⁷ It is a novel about an a-political teacher Ben du Toit, an average man, who against his will, becomes involved in the mysterious death of his servant Gordon. This death is apparently a suicide but in fact he was killed by the security police. Ben's involvement in this whole process leads to a confrontation with the authorities and results in a process of alienation and degradation. In the process, he loses his wife, his job and eventually even his life.

Translation

The "translational brief" in the case of the filming of *A Dry White Season* is self-induced due to the fact that Palcy, the scriptwriter is also the director of the film.

Born and bred on the French Caribbean Island, Martinique, Palcy was the first black female who succeeded in directing a film of a mainstream film studio (MGM). Her *skopos* with the filming of Brink's novel is clear. According to an interview in Screen Africa, she strives to give a voice to the victims of the universal black struggle; the recreation of a novel firmly imbedded in the South African (source) culture with a film intended for an American/International target audience/culture from a clear political standpoint.²⁸ This *skopos* dictates manipulative, domesticative and foreignization techniques whereby the *skopos* is transformed into cinematographic language.

27. André P. Brink, *'n Droë Wit Seisoen*, Kaapstad: Human & Rousseau, 1979.

28. SCREENAFRICA, "Euzhan Palcy's *A Dry White Season*' has SA premiere at DIFF on Mandela Day," *Film News*, July 21, 2015, p. 10.

Manipulation, domestication and foreignization

Manipulation in the main has to do with distortion, elimination and adding of elements of the novel in the film version. Even extra textual elements (like the identity of the director and actors) have a manipulative effect because they create a "horizon of expectation."²⁹ The name of the author "Brink" would also clearly have an effect on audiences (the expectation of a political novel/film) though South African audiences would clearly be more informed. Since 1973 with the banning of his book, *Looking on Darkness*, public persona and vehement opposition to Apartheid, censorship, etc., Brink was a household name even in an international context.³⁰ Palty also made a name for herself with her film *Sugar Cane Alley*.

Jürgen Prochnow, who plays a role in *A Dry White Season* (that of captain Stolz) is a German-born actor who won international fame in the film, *Das Boot*.³¹ In the film version of *A Dry White Season* (as in the original novel), certain apartheid-practices are compared to Nazi atrocities. This link is stressed by Prochnow's German accent and his portrayal of his character, typical of stereotyped versions of Nazi's in Hollywood-films. Marlon Brando, another actor in the film was also well known as a political activist at the time of filming. Kelley Lacher states that "the role of a cynical South African lawyer is pivotal to the movie and Palty knew she needed to cast somebody powerful, somebody with charisma and somebody with the right politics."³²

Mise-en-scène-elements as manipulative, domesticative or as elements of foreignization: A semiotic interpretation within a cinematographic sign system

Mise-en-scène-elements are key factors in the manipulation process especially as far as the target audience is concerned. When applied to the cinema, *mise-en-scène* refers to everything that appears before the camera and its arrangement composition:

29. See Susan Sniader Lanser, *The Narrative Act. Point of view in prose fiction*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991, pp. 129–146.

See Hendrik Petrus Van Coller, *Tussenkoms*, Pretoria: HAUM-Literêr, 1990, p. 53.

30. Brink, *Looking on Darkness*, London: Vintage, 1973.

31. Wolfgang Peterson, dir., *Das Boot*, 1981.

32. Kelley I. J. Lacher, "Euzhan Palty has a face the camera loves but finds the view better behind the lens," <https://people.com/archive/euzhan-palty-has-a-face-the-camera-loves-but-finds-the-view-better-behind-the-lens-vol-32-no-16/>

sets, props, actors, costumes, and lighting. It describes the design aspects of a theatre or film production, which essentially means “visual theme” or “telling a story;” both in visually artful ways through storyboarding, cinematography and set design, and in poetically artful ways through direction. What should be remembered though is that certain techniques will have opposing effects on the source (South African) and target (American) cultures.

The choice of actors

With the exception of three actors, all of the major actors in *A Dry White Season* are non-South Africans and the majority of them are actors from American Block busters with an exotic flavour for South African audiences. Donald Sutherland as Ben du Toit, is a Canadian actor, Janet Suzeman as Ben’s wife, Susan, is a South African-born, British actress and cousin of the South African political activist and politician, Helen Suzeman. Jürgen Prochnow is a German-born actor, Susan Sarandon (Melanie Bruwer), Marlon Brando as Ian McKenzie, Leonard Maguire (Bruwer) and Susannah Harker (Suzette du Toit) – the latter two British actors. Even Zakes Mokae as Stanley Makhaya, was a South African-born actor but rose to international stardom with his role in *Blood Knot* and with Matthew Broderick in the television version of *Master Harold and the Boys*.^{33,34} The three characters Gordon Ngubene, his wife Emily as well as Julius are played by South African actors Winston Ntshona, Thoko Ntshinga and John Kani, respectively. For the target audience all the Hollywood or international actors are domesticating, whilst the South African actors create a form of foreignization.

Acting style

All the black actors speak flawless English with hardly a trace of an accent (even when Gordon and his wife communicate in private), whereby they are domesticated for the target audience. All the White (South African) characters (with the exception of Ben and his wife) speak in an exaggerated fashion; sometimes even in a comical pseudo-German. They are thereby foreignized stressing their “otherness.”

33. Athol Fugard, playwright, *Blood Knot*, 1964

34. Fugard, TV Series, *Master Harold and the Boys*, 1985.

The novel and the film

According to the author, Brink, *A Dry White Season* is not in the main a product of his imagination but based on true events, especially the death of the Black Consciousness-activist, Stephen Biko.³⁵ The novel is in essence related to the detective novel (and to its matrix, the tragedy).³⁶ But also to its matrix the tragedy and the downfall of the protagonist is inevitable. Thus, the novel is an appeal to the reader to accept nothing at face value; there are more questions than answers.³⁷ This clearly explains why Palcy chose this novel to be filmed. Brink's message is clearly aimed at South African audiences in the first instance: a plea for liberation of Blacks, but also aimed at the Afrikaner himself by a "conscious inspection of dissidence as a defining attribute of Afrikanerdom."³⁸ Yet, Ben du Toit as an Everyman also alludes to any person. The appeal is thus to everyone to have empathy with the oppressed.

Many elements of the novel are deleted in the film or changed.³⁹ One of the most important changes is in the depiction of the Jewish solicitor, Dan Levinson, an athletic and tanned character who is characterised as selfish, money grabbing and cowardly. In the novel he is a flawed person, clearly in cahoots with government agents, he flees from the country and later makes up a fictional account of "heroic" departure. In the film, however, he is transformed into the non-Jewish, McKenzie, the epitome of a selfless hero, portrayed in an almost typical Hollywood fashion as a cynical lawyer by Marlon Brando. In the film, this minor character in

35. Stephen Bantu Biko (18 December 1946 – 12 September 1977) was a South African anti-apartheid activist. Ideologically an African nationalist and African socialist, he was at the forefront of a grassroots anti-apartheid campaign known as the Black Consciousness Movement during the late 1960s and 1970s. Biko is regarded as the father of Black Consciousness and a martyr of the anti-apartheid movement. He is treated with great respect in South Africa and a 2004 poll ranked him as history's thirteenth greatest South African. During his lifetime he attracted criticism from various fronts. The governing National Party alleged that he hated whites, while various anti-apartheid activists accused him of sexism, and African racial nationalists criticised his friendships with whites and his united front with Coloureds and Indians.

36. See Francis Fergusson, "Oedipus Rex: The Tragic Rhythm of Action," in *The Idea of Theatre: A Study of Ten Plays, The Art of Drama in Changing Perspective*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1949, pp. 402–420.

37. Thys Human, "André P. Brink (1935–2015)," in *Perspektief en profiel. 'n Afrikaanse literatuurgeskiedenis. Part 1*, ed. H. P. van Coller (Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers, 2015, pp. 431–489.

38. Isidore Diala, "André P. Brink: An aesthetics of response," *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* 42, no. 1, June 2005, pp. 5–30.

39. See Hendrik Petrus Van Coller and A. Van Jaarsveld, "Die filmweergawe van André P Brink se roman *A Dry White Season* as vorm van vertaling," *Stilet* 29, no. 2, September 2017, pp. 95–115.

the novel becomes one of the major characters. Apparently, Palcy did not want to shift the blame for Apartheid onto anybody's shoulders except that of Afrikaners and especially not on those of the archetypical scapegoat, the Jew.

Afrikaners and Afrikaans as their language are the main satirical objects in this film and they are stigmatized (and stereotyped) in several ways. When the white policemen shout in Afrikaans at the black protesters, the camera image is in the direction of the protesters as if the viewer is placed in confrontation with the protesters together with the policemen. Authenticating images and dialogue are used as a kind of binding text to constantly present the contrast between Afrikaner repression and black vulnerability. Visually, the aforementioned is very successfully portrayed by the black protesters brandishing their posters in full camera images as if the viewers are looking through the camera and thus become part of the events themselves.

The idea of the Afrikaner as suppressor is cinematographically strengthened by the close-ups of black people who, when talking to white characters, are filmed from a higher position to deliberately suggest a visual inferiority. Together with their physical subordination their dialogue also deliberately becomes subordinate when speaking with white characters in the words: "asseblief my basie (Please my Boss)", "Ja Baas (Yes Boss)". This stigmatization of the Afrikaner by means of manipulating techniques contributes greatly to the way in which the target culture's perception of the Afrikaner is formed.

Space as manipulation

In this film, space is utilised as one of the major stigmatization techniques: black characters being attacked by the police versus white characters relaxing in the sun. A scene that clearly depicts the white South Africa, is the scene in which a white character, among others, points out that: "Blacks lead double lives – one you see and one you do not," while a black servant serves drinks to her white employers without her even being noticed.

The ongoing staccato exchange between shots of black and white neighbourhoods that are not highlighted by smooth sequences of close and distant images, but stacked with clean fractions on top of each other, is a manipulative way of highlighting the economic differences between black and white in the film. Images of black townships focus on riots, fires, crime and poverty while images of white neighbourhoods focus on wealth, peaceful co-existence, big houses and lush green lawns, untouched by the violence. Then a helicopter flies by over the white neighbourhood and as a prophet of doom, links white neighbourhoods in a visual way with the smouldering townships. This demonstrates cinematographically the fact that even white people are not immune to crises, violence and crime.

In the manipulation and juxtaposition of spaces, it is only the heroes like Ben who can bridge the void between these spaces, like the typical hero in fairy tales.⁴⁰ An example is Ben's visit to the then inaccessible black township, Soweto, and the almost taboo embrace between Ben, a *white* man and Emily (Gordon's wife) a *black* woman, after the court case. Yet space is also used as an authenticating technique and to emphasize foreignization. Probably the most important exaggeration in the film lies in the portrayal of the ordinary man. In the novel, Ben is portrayed as an ordinary man who does not excel at anything, but also does not want to excel at anything: a sort of "Everyman," with a dream of one day performing a great act. In the movie, Ben, however, is elevated to a heroic figure. He is a Transvaal rugby fly half and on his green jacket, the Springbok emblem is clearly visible. When Ben and his wife are spoken to by the South African police, they are invariably addressed in the English dialogue as "meneer (sir)" and "mevrouw (ma'am)" Du Toit. The fact that they do speak English can be seen as a deliberate domesticating element for the American target culture. Within this English dialogue, Palcy also gives the viewer certain authenticating markers in this particular form of address, to keep the target culture consistently aware of the fact that the characters are in fact white Afrikaners. This confirms with regard to the target culture, their (the Afrikaner's) distinctiveness and singles them out as "Afrikaners" without any obstacles in linguistic communication.

A Dry White Season was not filmed locally. Scenes were filmed in the Pinewood Studios in Buckinghamshire, England and in Zimbabwe. Even though this film is produced as an American film and affirms Palcy's subjective message, it attempts to place the content within an easy interpretable South African context for the purpose of the target culture. The authentication strategy being used here is incorporating well-known images within the South African context such as the school grounds, learners in uniform, an old farmhouse with big lawns, images of the townships, clubs for black men in the townships and footage of black riots with regards to Bantu education. It deliberately introduces the American target culture to unknown viewers, so that they can participate more easily in the interpretation of the given, how subjective that might sound. In its "exoticism", it stresses the "otherness" of the South African culture.

40. See Jurij Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, trans. Ronald Vroom, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1977.

Direct environment

Parallelism is used in the film to portray the diversity of South Africans by means of juxtapositioning. Examples include the opposing images of a black father and son, and a white father and son talking about the political reality in which they find themselves; the scene between Gordon and his son on the issue of demonstrations and uprising against education in Afrikaans and then the scene between Ben and his son on the dilemma of choices which they have to make. It creates an intimate and subjective true reflection of the turbulent and uncertain South African conflicting realities of the time that one can only fully experience and understand from the perspective of the source culture.

The South African environment is one in which, in a unique way, rugby and soccer become semiotic signs within a specific context. In the opening scene, a black and a white child are playing rugby with a soccer ball. This image is one of the most authenticating images in the film. Without any dialogue, commentary is delivered on the interplay of cultural values, the discomfort of diversity, an effort at reconciliation and perhaps creating a new land somewhere on a lawn in South Africa. These signs are clearly only to be understood from within a South African context. On a different level, this game also represents something of the "viable" idyllic racial harmony. Because the two different games with their own distinctive rules merge in this scene, it suggests that this is also a possibility for Black and White.

It says, in fact, much more than the comments of the *Washington Post*'s Rita Kemsley: "*A Dry White Season* is political cinema so deeply felt it attains a moral grace. A bitter medicine, a painful reminder, it grieves for South Africa as it recounts the atrocities of apartheid. Yes, it is a story already told on a grander scale, but never with such fervour."⁴¹ From the context of the American target culture, this scene can only succeed when audiences can interpret this semiotic sign, since it operates as a form of alienation for possible decodings by the target culture seeing that in America the same semiotic value cannot be attached to these specific signs as in the South African context. The opening scene can very well be considered successful if it is rather seen as a mechanism of authentication to create a kind of awareness in terms of the target culture for the unique South African reality. A translation or processing of cultural premises evidently has an enormous implication for the identification and interpretation of possible semiotic signs and representation of cultures (in this case the South African source culture) as well as the dominant counterpart (the American target culture). Cinematograph aspects also play a significant role in the temporal development of the translation.

41. Rita Kemsley, "*A Dry White Season*," *Washington Post*, September 6, 1989, p. 5.

Superposition and background projection

These two techniques illustrate especially the impact of different cultural references and how they can lead to domesticative as well as in other cases alienating interpretations. A good example is the visit of Gordon's wife, Emily to Ben outside his classroom during a normal school day. Such a scene where a black woman visits a white teacher on the school grounds is unrealistic in the South African context at that specific historical time, but nothing unusual in the American context. It is therefore domesticative in terms of the target culture. Alienation in terms of the American target culture can also be the case, for example, when the principal informs Ben that he is fired. Visible in the background is a photo of John Vorster. With regard to the source culture it is clearly a form of domestication but for the uninformed American target culture, authenticating and even alienating. The photograph of Minister Vorster is used by Palcy as a form of background projection. This process of manipulation works as follows: For the source culture and informed members of the target culture, it becomes a semiotic sign for which a specific code is needed to decode it – this kind of viewer knows the person, John Vorster, knows that John Vorster square (where all the tortures and “suicides” in the book as well as in the film took place) is named after him, knows that he was a former Minister of Justice and knew that he was the prime minister under whose leadership all the uprisings, also described in the book, took place.

Another scene that operates alienatingly upon an American target culture is the scene where Ben looks out from his classroom onto the school grounds, where Gordon is working. This is a well-known South African image confirming the authority of white employers by the specific camera angle. The downward angle of the camera from the classroom on a second floor to the rugby field at ground level, emphasizes the superior ranked white teacher over the black workers on the field.

Sound

The famous American composer, Dave Grusin, who has been responsible for many soundtracks in the US commercial film industry (inter alia for *The Graduate*, later also, *On Golden Pond*, and *Tootsie*) was responsible for the soundtrack of this film.⁴² He made use of the riveting rhythmic sing-along tunes of the South African group Ladysmith Black Mambazo and the trumpet sounds of the South African Hugh Masekela, hereby creating an exotic sound as a form of foreignization for the

42. Mike Nicholls, dir., *The Graduate*, 1967; Mark Rydell, dir., *On Golden Pond*, 1981; Sydney Pollack, dir., *Tootsie*, 1982.

American target audience. Strangely enough when the CD with the soundtrack of *A Dry White Season*, which has 15 tracks from the soundtrack, was released, the music of Masekela and Ladysmith Black Mambazo was omitted. Thereby this soundtrack has essentially been domesticated. The use of exotic elements in the film and not in the later released CD can be ascribed to the fact that the film relies heavily on its authenticating (foreignizing and eroticizing) elements to put across its meaning.

Film can be a very influential and powerful medium through which certain values, ideas and information can be transferred. Different cultures compared, (not only verbally), but also audio-visually, since the film medium is a poly-semiotic medium that conveys meaning through various channels, such as image, dialogue, music and many more. Items which are traditionally culture specific, have the tendency to be presented in mysterious ways in order to accomplish certain domesticating or alienating effects. At the final evaluation, it is important to be reminded of Ton Naaijken's warning that in judging translations one should refrain from a non-negotiable (prescriptive) evaluation and that an evaluation should rather be a descriptive one.⁴³ There is considered to be no universal or "good-for-all" mode by which film translation/processing should be done. Translated material can be domesticated or alienated in different degrees and find its place somewhere on the domestication-alienation continuum. Arguably, there will always be a subjective interpretation of narratives by virtue of the fact that there will always be the existence of multiple cultural domains as well as manipulation of source or target text/culture. The question that a person is left with is: How does one judge this film in the light of the theories used? If there is a source text approach, as in the current new Afrikaans Bible Translation, the film will be judged on the basis of its fidelity to the novel. When a target text approach is followed, as in the *Skopos* theory, the end justifies the means, while a more relativistic approach, like that of Naaijken, also provides options for different translation approaches. It is clear that Palcy's strategy in the main is to alienate negative characters in the film especially the – Afrikaners – as the villains by the technique of foreignization. Almost all the positive characters (Ben and his wife, Melanie the journalist and McKenzie the lawyer) are domesticated for the American target audience. One can thus conclude that it is a successful film rendition because the *perlocution* (John Austin, 1962) that Brink aspires towards, namely indignation on the one hand and strong empathy on the other hand, are retained by the film producer Palcy, in her clear target text approach.⁴⁴

43. Ton Naaijken, "Vertaalkritiek," reading, Zomercursus Literair Vertalen, Utrecht and Antwerpen, pp. 24–31 Augustus, 2000.

44. John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1962.

No tiger in the tale

Effacing otherness in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*

Suhaile Azavedo

Writing an exotic India in the ancient past and the multicultural present

In ancient times, tales about India streamed through to the West and found their way into early narratives, some as “incredible fables along with some accurate historical information.”¹ Greek historians, Herodotus and Ctesias, knew of India and wrote, “most of the extravagant stories and grotesque legends about India.”² Megasthenes’ lost work *Indika* written about B.C. 300, was the earliest known Western personal account of India, ever since which there has been much writing on India. The secular and religious narratives of travel and exploration by early writers focused on a land so different that their primary exercise was of recording. Christian missionaries, A.D. 883 onwards, account for the earliest writings in English, on India before the age of empire. The British Raj fashioned other types of writing on India – the wonder of the Orientalist and the historical romance. Pre- and post-independence literature had wider concerns with both foreigners and Indians writing out the struggle of independence, the aftermath of partition and nation-building. Exile and migratory writing focused on the Indian outside of India, the first-generation diaspora’s writings of migrant experience grew into subsequent generations’ discovery of the self through the discovery of India. The common feature in most of this writing was the presence of what Graham Huggan calls an “othered” India, “India...as a spectacle; as alternating object of horror and fascination; as romantic nostalgia; as forbidden space of cross-cultural desire....”³

1. Ram Chandra Prasad, *Early English Travellers in India: A Study in the Travel Literature of the Elizabethan and Jacobean Periods with Particular Reference to India*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishing, 1980, p. xxi.

2. Prasad, *Early English Travellers in India*, p. xxii.

3. Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, London: Routledge, 2002, p. 81. In the book, he refers to exoticism as the system that constructs “otherness.” He advances exoticism as “a particular mode of aesthetic *perception* – one which renders people, object and

Post globalization and liberalization, the surge in Indian economy saw a concomitant surge in the presence of India in the world. Since the last decades of the twentieth-century Indian writing in English and a globally appropriated India in English writing has received more attention than ever. The first question which arises in regard to this is: in today's globalized world, transcultural and transnational, where India is so visible and accessible, do the representations still focus on an "othered" India? And if so, what response does the now-familiar exoticness elicit? Why does it matter?

Present-day concerns of multiculturalism and Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*

Brexit, Trump's presidency and the rise of neo-nationalism in an increasingly divided world signals the end of the idea of the world as a global village, possibly leaving in its wake more differences than before. Trump's executive order, January 2017, barring refugees and people from seven Muslim-majority countries sparked worldwide outrage. Trending on Twitter, shortly after, was Canadian Prime Minister's tweet:⁴



Justin Trudeau @JustinTrudeau · 19h

To those fleeing persecution, terror & war,
Canadians will welcome you, regardless of
your faith. Diversity is our strength
#WelcomeToCanada

20K 354K 605K

Canadian writer Stephen Marche had stated earlier, in November 2016, "Canada is most open to the world at the exact moment the world has closed,"⁵ but had also cautioned of the promise by the Conservative Party of Canada to endorse Trump's position on immigration in the next election campaign. The day following Trudeau's

places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery." Huggan, p. 13.

4. Trudeau, Justin (@JustinTrudeau).2017. "To those fleeing persecution, terror & war, Canadians will welcome you, regardless of your faith. Diversity is our strength #WelcomeToCanada" Twitter, – Jan 29, 2017, 1:50 AM. <https://twitter.com/JustinTrudeau/status/82543846026576281>

5. The article is titled "Canada in the Age of Donald Trump / What it means to be the last country on Earth that believes in multiculturalism" by Stephen Marche <https://thewalrus.ca/canada-in-the-age-of-donald-trump/>

tweet saw an attack on a mosque, killing six people, in Quebec. Xenophobia and ethnocentrism seem to have suddenly become Canadian contentions as well, challenging its inclusivity. However, this turn-about, “writing on the wall,” has been there for the reading for decades. As early as in 2001, Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi* pointed to the concerns of multiculturalism, anticipating both its failure and the growth of neo-racism.

Life of Pi, a migrant story in flashback about a 1960s India and Indian, is a work of calculated exoticness. Often read as an allegorical fable, it traces the incredible experiences of an Indian boy, Piscine Molitor Patel, “Pi,” migrating from India to Canada. The first section offers a backstory to the origins of a very Indian boy (his family, his zoo, his animals, his religious syncretism, his philosophic bent of mind), steeped in Indian idiosyncrasies which then proceed to seep from him through the story. The second section, which makes the bulk of the book, “is an astounding story of courage and endurance in the face of extraordinarily difficult and tragic circumstances.”⁶ While migrating to Canada on board an ill-fated Japanese cargo ship, TsimTsim, Pi loses his family. Shipwrecked and a castaway, he spends 227 days adrift on a lifeboat allegedly with a Royal Bengal tiger. This section describes in detail how Pi deals with the crisis, and how he adapts and changes to cope with it. The third section of the novel, records Pi’s rescue, the disappearance of Richard Parker – the tiger – and the investigation by the Japanese Shipping Ministry. A slim sketch of Pi’s life after his rehabilitation, in Canada, is offered through the novel – of his accomplishments, new home, and family. It is in the third section while being probed by the Japanese investigators, who disbelieve his tiger-tale, that Pi offers his second story, which recommends the allegorical nature of the first and asks the now famous question “which is the better story...?”⁷

Ralph Ellison in *Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity* (1953) states:

Perhaps the ideal approach to the work of literature would be one allowing for insight into the deepest psychological motives of the writer at the same time that it examined all external sociological factors operating within a given milieu. For while objectively a social reality, the work of art is, in its genesis, a projection of a deeply personal process, and any approach that ignores the personal at the expense of the social is necessarily incomplete.⁸

6. Yann Martel, *Life of Pi*, Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd, 2002, p. 319.

7. Martel, *Life of Pi*, p. 317.

8. Ralph Ellison, “Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity (1953)” *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, edited by Angelyn Mitchell, Duke University Press, 1994, p. 136.

Laura Wright, in “*Wilderness Into Civilized Shapes*”: *Reading the Post Colonial Environment*, notes the subject positions of both Canada and Yann Martel and records an interview by Sabine Sielke, titled “The Empathetic Imagination” where Martel is asked, “if he considers himself a ‘citizen of the world.’”⁹ “Such a question,” says Wright, “is not surprising given Martel’s transnational identity: he was born in Spain to Canadian parents and has lived among other places, in Alaska, British Columbia, Costa Rica, France, and Mexico.”¹⁰ Wright remarks on a bio-note on the author which states, “...when he is not living somewhere else, he lives in Montreal.”¹¹ Wright observes, “Martel defies clear national affiliation” and has, “been marketed as a citizen of the world.”¹² However, Martel in answer to Sielke’s question states, “No. I’m Canadian. I don’t believe there are citizens of the world. Everyone is from somewhere, rooted in a particular culture. We’re also citizens of the languages we speak. Some people speak many languages – I speak three, I’m a citizen of English, French and Spanish – but no one speaks World. World is not a language.”¹³ This is problematic. What is to be made of an overt national allegiance in a nation that publically prides itself as multicultural? A notable point here is that despite his Indian-ness Pi’s language is devoid of Indianisms.

Canadian ethnocultural diversity and representation in *Life of Pi*: Who speaks?

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* state, “A minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language.”¹⁴ In *Life of Pi*, however, to use the major-minor binaries in the politics of “deterritorialization”¹⁵ – a major constructs a minor’s

9. Laura Wright, “*Wilderness Into Civilized Shapes*”: *Reading the Postcolonial Environment*, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010, p. 66.

10. Wright, pp. 66–67.

11. Wright, pp. 66–67.

12. Wright, pp. 66–67.

13. Wright, pp. 66–67.

14. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. 47. <http://projectlamar.com/media/dgkafka.pdf>.

15. Adrian Parr, *The Deleuze Dictionary Revised Edition, Philosophical Dictionaries Series*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010, p. 69. In the book, Parr states the ways in which Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “deterritorialization” can be defined in their several works – ‘a coming undone’ in *Anti-Oedipus*; ‘the cutting edge of an assemblage’ in *A Thousand Plateaus*; a literary deterritorialization that mutates content, forcing enunciations and expressions to

politics in the major language. Whose perspective, then, has been adopted? Is it the perspective of an Indian on migration? Or is it that of an Indo – Canadian on immigration? Or of a Canadian on immigrants? As such, this is more than just a story of an Indian migrant's experience. It is also an exploration of particular perspectives and politics at a particular moment in Canadian history, specifically the late 1990s and early 2000s in Canada.

James Clifford, in his introduction to *The Predicament of Culture*, states:

In cities on six continents foreign population have come to stay – mixing in but often in partial, specific fashions. The “exotic” is uncannily close.... One no longer leaves home confident of finding something radically new, another time or space. Difference is encountered in the adjoining neighbourhood... “Cultural” difference is no longer a stable exotic otherness.¹⁶

The Canadian demographic statistics on the ethnocultural diversity in Canada (2008) states that “by 2017, more than one Canadian in five might be foreign-born,”¹⁷ and that from 1986 to 2006, the immigrant population rose from 3.9 million to 6.2 million. The largest visible minority groups, the report states, are the Chinese and the South Asians. The Chinese immigrant population in the 2001 Census numbered more than 1 million, making it the most visible minority group in Canada. The South Asians ranked second, with people of African origin following in the third position. West Asians, Koreans, and Arabs followed.

The literature of immigrants in Canada records much racism against Indian immigrants. John Fenton in *Transplanting Religious Traditions: Asian Indians in America* studies Canadian prejudice against Asians. The primary factor underpinning the prejudice, studies suggest, is Canadian ethnocentrism – high sensitivity to racial and cultural differences on the part of the dominant English and French population, reinforced by stereotypes and misperceptions of South Asians. An Indian-Canadian woman, the book records, states, “...in Canada, if you're an Indian, you are seen as an East Indian and not as an individual. And...you are seen as having this baggage of stereotypes.”¹⁸

‘disarticulate’ in the book on Kafka; deterritorialization as a physical, mental or spiritual process in *What is philosophy?*

16. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988, p. 14.

17. Canadian Demographic Statistics at <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/91-003-x/2007001/4129904-eng.htm> covers the demographic and ethnocultural composition of the population.

18. John Y Fenton, *Transplanting Religious Traditions: Asian Indians in America*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1988, pp. 23–24. In the book, Fenton cites a study by Buchignani, Indra, and Srivastava that offered several reasons for Canadian prejudice against Asians.

How do the statistics inform Martel's story? As per demographic statistics, at the time when Martel was writing *Life of Pi*, Chinese immigrants were more visible than South Asian immigrants in Canada. Why then did Martel's protagonist have to be an Indian?¹⁹ Why could he not have been any other "visible minority" listed in the reckoner – Chinese, African, Filipino, Latin American, Southeast Asian, Arab, West Asian, Korean, or Japanese? Moreover, the ethnocultural portrait of Canada in 2010, listed 1,355,653 Indians at 3.86% of the Canadian population. This brings us to the problem of locating the source of the Indian in *Life of Pi*. Is Pi based on a "Canadian" Indian or is he an "Indian" Indian, and as such is there a difference? Despite Pi's unique experiences, Yann Martel has created a very typical character, there is nothing unrecognizable about Pi, he is the flawless stereotype of an Indian.

Being and becoming, disruption and transformation: An alternative reading of *Life of Pi*

Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* establishes a link between stereotype and fetishism, "fetishism is always a play or vacillation between archaic affirmations of wholeness/similarity... and the anxiety associated with lack or difference...it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it."²⁰ The characterization of Pi as a middle-class Anglophone Indian, typical in manners and privileges, with fitting ethnic markers of caste, religion, language, culture, philosophy right down to vegetarianism make him an instantly recognizable prototype. There is not an Indian or foreigner familiar with India, who would not recognize the Indian-ness of Pi. Character controversies and crises, as with religion in the beginning and vegetarianism at the end, indicate that the characterization is more a critique than a celebration. Further, even as he is typecast, a disavowal of his Indian-ness begins early in the text in the obfuscation of his name Piscine Molitor Patel, its consequent modification to Pi, and in his religious syncretism, unusual for its time. Martel, seemingly, began to modify the Indian even before the starting point of his journey. By the time Pi reached the finishing line, the original Indian was altered:

I covered the fish's head with the blanket and turned the hatchet around...The idea of beating a soft, living head with a hammer was simply too much. I put the hatchet down...Tears flowing down my cheeks, I egged myself on until I heard a

19. The original question has been raised by Laura Wright, "But the reader might easily ask why Martel's protagonist needs to be non-Western in general; and Indian in particular." Wright, p. 66.

20. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 1994, London: Routledge, 2012, pp. 106 – 107.

cracking sound and I no longer felt any life fighting in my hands...I wept heartily over this poor little deceased soul. It was the first sentient being I had ever killed. I was now a killer...After that it was easier...²¹

Pi then, in a little time, goes “from weeping over the muffled killing of a flying fish to gleefully bludgeoning to death a dorado,” explicating that... “[b]utchering a turtle was hard work. My first one was a small hawksbill. It was its blood that tempted me, the “good, nutritious, salt-free drink” promised by the survival manual,”²² and finally Pi could unrestrainedly bring a hatchet down on the turtle’s neck, gashing it: “Bright red blood shot out. I grabbed the beaker and collected about three hundred millilitres...[t]he blood I managed to collect gave off no particular smell. I took a sip. It tasted warm and animal...I drank the blood to the last drop.”²³

The transformation that the character of Pi undergoes, the undoing of his Indian-ness, calls for a more serious consideration of the disavowal, for, at the heart of it lies the undoing of oppositionality and the destabilizing of binaries of similarity and difference, acceptance and rejection, and the familiar and the exotic. The disavowal begins with the appropriation of another’s identity as one’s own, of Richard Parker’s. Out at sea, Pi and *his* tiger lived in mutual dependence. While many read this as a cosmic connection between animals, humans and the universe, there is yet another connection between Pi and the tiger, one that ties him to his country and culture. The Indian tiger, a symbol of strength and fearlessness, the national animal of India, associated with many Hindu deities, is both revered and feared. Pi’s tiger likewise, is strong, fearless, revered, and feared but bears a similar, telling obfuscation in its Western name, Richard Parker. Laura Wright points out:

The use of animal as a metaphor for subjected groups of individuals is prevalent in literature that explicates the plight of the oppressed, a fact that supports a reading of the animal body as the locus of oppositional thinking, the foundational example of all subsequent forms of human othering.²⁴

Richard Parker, everything that Pi is not, appears a neurotic projection of anglicized desires onto a very strong Indian self. There is something simultaneously vulnerable and aggressive in Pi’s engagement with this tiger figure, for it leads to a constant negotiating and reconstructing of his own identity. The attempt to reconstruction fails, suggested in the disappearance of the tiger at the end of the tale.

21. Martel, *Life of Pi*, p. 183

22. Martel, *Life of Pi*, p. 200

23. Martel, *Life of Pi*, p. 201

24. Wright, p. 15

This process of becoming and unbecoming, of compressing and expanding aspects of identity/culture is the central leitmotif of the journey. Functioning as a kind of rite of passage, the journey is where the challenges, personal and cultural – of language, religion, family, and food, are negotiated. If Richard Parker is symbolic of the person Pi wishes to be, the mystical ocean is kind of conjuring of the place to which he wishes to go. Marlene Goldman in *Rewriting Apocalypse in Canadian Fiction* cites Graham Huggan:

In *Territorial Disputes*, Graham Huggan observes that contemporary Canadian writers seem less interested in “evoking a sense of place than in expressing a kind of placelessness through which the notion of a fixed identity, are resisted ...the self...becomes a transitory, contingent and fluid phenomenon.”²⁵

The ocean, as a re-contextualization of place, collapses nations and boundaries into a blank fluid space and allows for the shift, in Pi, from being inside his identity and culture to outside, enabling a disruption, transformation and a recasting of an ethnic identity into a more free-flowing altered form, most notably vegetarian to meat-eater.

The fluidity of the ocean, in the story, had the quality of functioning as a malleable medium where all the issues floating opened up into different possible worlds and different possible identities. Pi, however, is marked by a lack of agency; he can choose neither world nor identity. His trauma and lamentation outline his states of despair, impotence, and nihilism. Adrift in the ocean between countries, cultures, and traditions, the conflicts result in the abnegation of ideologies and the purgation of ethnicity – an undesired transformation.

The tiger disappears as the castaway comes to land, seeming to indicate Pi’s realization that he has to give up his Indian-ness. It is not by chance that he offers a choice in stories to the Japanese investigators; it is a carefully constructed offer to suppress the exotic for the familiar, to make for a fit into the new culture without challenging or disrupting it. The choice offered and exercised between the two versions surmise the dialectics between the familiar and the exotic. The rejection of Pi’s fantastic story is a rejection of his Indian-ness. Which is, in a way, to say that cultural difference is not a thing to be averred but one to be avoided.

25. Marlene Goldman, *Rewriting Apocalypse in Canadian Fiction*, Montreal: McGill-Queen’s Press, 2005, p. 165.

Effacing identity: Deculturation into schisms and liminality

Faye V. Harrison in *Unraveling "Race" for the Twenty-First Century* writes:

the world as "global village"...is not set against an idyllic background...[w]ithin this global community we also find a heightening of differences and a deepening of identity politics, often along life-threatening lines of conflict.²⁶

She cites Jonathan Freidman who maintains that this pattern of deepening differentiation arises from economic fragmentation along with the cultural, creating a crisis of identity exhibited in "the weakening of former national identities and the emergence of new identities..."²⁷ Bio-determinist conceptions of race, says Harrison, emphasized natural and biological differences, but the newer perspectives on race, "Neo-Racisms,"²⁸ are couched in a language of culture, ethnicity, and nationalism.

Etienne Balibar, in *Is There a 'Neo-Racism'?* notes the upsurge of racist movements and policies as new racism, "of the era of 'decolonization', of the reversal of population movements between old colonies...and the division of humanity within a single political space."²⁹ He writes, "It is a racism whose dominant theme is not biological heredity but the insurmountability of cultural differences, a racism which, at first sight, does not postulate the superiority of certain groups or peoples in relation to others but 'only' the harmfulness of abolishing frontiers, the incompatibility of life-styles and traditions."³⁰

26. Faye. V Harrison, "Unraveling "Race" for the Twenty-First Century." *Exotic No More: Anthropology on the Front Lines*, edited by Jeremy MacClancy, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010, pp. 149–150.

27. Harrison, *Exotic No More*, pp. 149–150.

28. Gabriella Lazaridis, *Security, Insecurity and Migration in Europe*, London: Routledge, 2016, p. 222. In this book, she discusses "What is new in 'new racism'?" Listing various similar and overlapping coinages, Lazaridis states "'New Racism' as baptized by Barker (Barker, 1981), defined also as 'neo-racism' (Doty, 2003, Spears, 1999, Balibar, 1991), 'differentiated racism' (Taguieff, 1990), 'Euro-racism' (Sivanandan, 1990; Webber, 1991), 'xeno-racism' (Sivanandan, 1990; Fekete, 2001) 'cultural racism' (Fanon, 1967; Gilroy, 1987) and lately, in the context of the 'war on terror', 'anti-Muslim racism' (Kundnani, 2007) does not mean the banishment of older forms of racist practices: rather 'new racism' implies that current racist discourses are being dominated by the so-called 'insurmountability' of cultural differences."

29. Etienne Balibar, "Is There a 'Neo-Racism'?" *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein, Verso, 1991, p. 21.

30. Balibar, "Is There a 'Neo-Racism'?" p. 21.

The schisms of the familiar and the exotic, come into play differently in the age of 'Neo-Racism', as noted in sections of Pi's after story which exhibit both the "crisis of identity" and the "insurmountability of cultural differences:"

The first time I went to an Indian restaurant in Canada I used my fingers. The waiter looked at me critically and said, "Fresh off the boat, are you?" I blanched. My fingers, which a second before had been taste buds savouring the food a little ahead of my mouth, became dirty under his gaze. They froze like criminals caught in the act. I didn't dare lick them. I wiped them guiltily on my napkin. He had no idea how deeply those words wounded me. They were like nails being driven into my flesh. I picked up the knife and fork. I had hardly ever used such instruments. My hands trembled. My sambar lost its taste.³¹

And again:

He shows me family memorabilia. Wedding photos first. A Hindu wedding with Canada prominently on the edges. A younger him, a younger her. They went to Niagara Falls for their honeymoon. Had a lovely time. Smiles to prove it. We move back in time. Photos from his student days at U of T: with friends; in front of St. Mike's; in his room; during Diwali on Gerrard Street; reading at St. Basil's Church dressed in a white gown; wearing another kind of white gown in a lab of the zoology department; on graduation day. A smile every time, but his eyes tell another story.³²

Pi's Bengal tiger becomes "Moccasin" the cat, a significant analogy that shows the extent to which a migrant goes to ensconce his original into the trappings of an alternate culture. The futility of the exercise is an inescapable truth: the whittling away of the exotic and the overlaying of the familiar yet keep the "other" marginalized. Effacing "otherness" is in most migrant societies considered "acting white,"³³ the liminal space of acceptance and rejection, a racial wasteland where you are damned if you do and doomed if you do not.

This effacing of identity to assimilate, to transgress the boundary between racial majorities and minorities, seemingly a benign exercise is not without disturbing outcomes – the outgrowth of a "stable" majority monoculture, the natural corollary to which is the disappearance of minority cultures i.e. the loss of cultural and linguistic diversity; consequently, this leads to a double-bind – a covert consciousness

31. Martel, *Life of Pi*, p. 7.

32. Martel, *Life of Pi*, p. 86.

33. Charles A. Gallagher and Cameron D Lippard, editors, "Acting White." *Race and Racism in the United States: An Encyclopedia of the American Mosaic*, Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2014, p. 15. The encyclopaedia offers a definition for 'acting white' as the internalizing 'of social messages about the inferiority of their own race and act like white people.'

of the ever-present pressure to deculturize against the awareness that one can never completely unlearn the culture of origins – akin to W. E. B. Du Bois condition of double consciousness.³⁴ “I Am Not I,” Juan Ramón Jiménez’s poem, translated by Robert Bly, keenly expresses this:

I am not I.
 I am this one
 walking beside me whom I do not see,
 whom at times I manage to visit,
 and whom at other times I forget;
 who remains calm and silent while I talk,
 and forgives, gently, when I hate,
 who walks where I am not,
 who will remain standing when I die.³⁵

The deculturation, thus, is never absolute, the disembodied “exotic” is never wholly expended by the familiar; the being remains, ruptured forever, in despondent liminality.

34. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1903/2014, p. 7. In this historically acclaimed book Du Bois outlines his compelling idea of double-consciousness as, “... a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

35. Robert Bly: “I Am Not I” by Juan Ramón Jiménez, from *Lorca and Jimenez: Selected Poems*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1973, p. 77. https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Juan_Ramón_Jiménez

From exotic to domestic

The other, the native and cultural relativism in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*

Ansul Rao

Home is where all justice begins.
Kingsolver in *Small Wonder*¹

Home is one of the focal points in Barbara Kingsolver's writings; another one is the homeland. In *The Poisonwood Bible*, both come under sharp scrutiny. Published in 1998, *The Poisonwood Bible* is considered Kingsolver's best-known novel. Set mostly in the Congo and overtly political in theme, the novel is a scathing censure of American international politics. According to Kingsolver, her interest in "cultural imperialism and postcolonial history" gave her the impetus to write this novel.² She calls the political events of the newly independent Congo "one of the most important political parables of a century."³ Her desire was to have a "moral conversation" which is the main reason behind using multiple narrators.⁴

The story in the novel begins in 1959, one year before the Congo gained independence from the Belgians. The story is spread over more than thirty years and is narrated by five female characters. Nathan Price, an American Baptist preacher, arrives from Bethlehem, Georgia, with his family in a remote village, Kilanga, in the Congo to fill the vacant missionary position there. He is accompanied by his wife Orleanna and their four daughters: the eldest, Rachel, is fifteen; the twins, Leah and Adah, are fourteen; and the youngest, Ruth May, is five years old. Nathan Price is an arrogant white supremacist. He is downright racist and tyrannical in his behaviour towards his wife and daughters. His character represents the combination of patriarchal and colonial mind-set responsible for the subjugation of

1. Barbara Kingsolver, "Household World," *Small Wonder: Essays*, London: Faber and Faber, 2003, p. 201.

2. Barbara Kingsolver, "FAQ," *kingsolver.com*, accessed August 9, 2017, <http://www.kingsolver.com/faq/previous-books.html>.

3. Kingsolver, "FAQ," *kingsolver.com*, 2017.

4. Kingsolver, "FAQ," *kingsolver.com*, 2017.

women and colonized countries. He firmly believes that the natives are inferior human beings in dire need of Salvation. Though Adah declares, "Our Father speaks for all of us," Nathan is not given any voice in the novel.⁵ Orleanna and her four daughters narrate the stories. Orleanna's narratives are reflective and retrospective as she comments on the past events from America. The girls' narratives describe the events as they unfold from 1959 till sometime in the 90s. The whole family was in Kilanga till 17 January 1961. After Ruth May's death, Orleanna leaves Kilanga with her remaining daughters but manages to take only Adah back to America. Leah is left in the care of Anatole in a small town, Bulungu, as she is critically ill with malaria. Leah later marries Anatole and stays in the Congo, only visiting America a few times. Rachel leaves with the mercenary pilot, Axelroot and after spending a few years in South Africa with him, leaves him and relocates to Brazzaville in the French Congo. From her second husband, she inherits a hotel and remains a racist like her father. Adah who had been suffering from hemiplegia since birth gets cured and studies medicine in America. Instead of becoming a doctor she chooses to research African viruses. As far as the native characters are concerned, none of them narrates any part in the story.

Encountering exotic; challenging homeland

The main concern in this essay is to analyse Kingsolver's representation of the natives to explore her depiction of alterity. This depiction is not without complexities as she is trying to represent the oppressed Congolese so as to awaken American consciousness to the horrors that were unleashed upon the unsuspecting African nation to bring material success to America. How plausible can the representation of the natives be in such an exercise and how much scope does it leave to render an honest account of the encounter between two different cultures? Susan Strehle states that the novel focuses on the "exceptionalist national ideology in the American home, together with the passivity that enables it." She further states that "through allegory, the novel narrates the logic that sustains an imperialist mission to impose American doctrine on other lands."⁶ But reading the novel as an allegory reduces the natives as tools to further the image of brutally oppressed, colonized and misunderstood people.

Right from the time of its publication *The Poisonwood Bible* has been compared with *Heart of Darkness*. Heloise Meire reads it as a feminist response to Conrad's

5. Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, London: Faber and Faber, 2013, p. 37.

6. Susan Strehle, "Chosen People: American Exceptionalism in Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 49, no. 4, July 2008, p. 415. <https://doi.org/10.3200/crit.49.4.413-429>.

book and concurs that it also remains “a critique of the West rather than a voice for the Congolese.”⁷ But for Kingsolver, darkness resides in the attitude of the Western World which sees African nations as a commodity. She writes, “The story of the CIA-backed coup in the Congo in 1960 struck me as the heart of darkness in a nutshell.”⁸ Kingsolver shows that imperialism and racism work in tandem, giving legitimacy to each other. Feroza Jassuwalla considers *The Poisonwood Bible* as “metaphorically” postcolonial work due to the “empathetic and sympathetic connection to the land and its people.” She focuses on Leah’s growth as “a trope for the suffering of Africa.”⁹ William Purcell, on the other hand, argues that Kingsolver reduces Africa to “an undifferentiated cultural monolith,”¹⁰ and only inverts the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer, and thus, remains fixed in the “colonial binary.”¹¹ Yet by choosing five narrators, who are themselves oppressed by patriarchy, Kingsolver opens the door to listen to multiple voices. So does her focus on Kikongo, a language with words having multiple meanings. Kingsolver, a white American writer, cannot speak as a native and she does not attempt to do so. As a result, the voices of the natives come to us filtered by the opinions of the American narrators. But liberal use of Kikongo in the novel gives the dialogues unique features. The title of the novel comes from Nathan’s mistake in understanding Kikongo. Adah satirically comments:

“*Tata Jesus is Bangala!*” declares the Reverend every Sunday at the end of his sermon. More and more, mistrusting his interpreters, he tries to speak in Kikongo. He throws back his head and shouts these words to the sky, while his lambs sit scratching themselves in wonder. *Bangala* means something precious and dear. But the way he pronounces it, it means the poisonwood tree. Praise the Lord, hallelujah, my friends! For Jesus will make you itch like nobody’s business.¹²

7. Heloise Meire, “Women, a Dark Continent? *The Poisonwood Bible* as a Feminist Response to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” in *Seeds of Change*, ed. Priscilla Leder, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2010, p. 80.

8. Barbara Kingsolver, “Barbara Kingsolver on *The Poisonwood Bible* - Guardian Bok Club,” *Guardian*, 11 May 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/may/11/book-club-barbara-kingsolver-Poisonwood>.

9. Feroza Jussawalla, “Reading and Teaching Barbara Kingsolver’s *Poisonwood Bible* as Postcolonial,” *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses*, no. 16, 16 Nov. 2003, pp. 8–9. <https://doi.org/10.14198/raei.2003.16.12>.

10. William F. Purcell, “Is Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible* a ‘PostColonial’ Novel?” *Illuminazioni*, no. 20, April-June 2012, p. 36, <http://www.compu.unime.it/illuminazioni/numero20/2.pdf>.

11. Purcell, p. 47.

12. Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 312.

Discussing *The Poisonwood Bible*, Mary Jean DeMarr calls Africa “the central subject, the setting, and, essentially, a character in the plot.”¹³ She goes on to discuss how Africa changed the Prices. She calls Kingsolver’s depiction of Africa as “a continent which is seductive and which, while being corrupted by the colonial powers, may also corrupt the agents of those powers.”¹⁴ But Africa corrupts only those who are already corrupt in their hearts. Nathan, Axelroot, Underdowns, and natives like Mobutu are corrupted by the Western world. Leah, Adah, and Orleana become enlightened by the African influence. By associating with the Congo, they have also become “others” in America. All of them keep their otherness intact in different ways.

Exoticism, otherness, and trope of disability

Mentioning that exoticism is “a particular mode of aesthetic perception,” Graham Huggan describes it “as a kind of semiotic circuit that oscillates between the opposite poles of strangeness and familiarity. Within this circuit, the strange and the familiar, as well as the relation between them, may be recoded to serve different, even contradictory, political needs and ends.”¹⁵ Kingsolver’s treatment of the Congo and its people can be studied as use of exoticism to serve her own particular political ends. At the beginning of their stay, the Price girls find the Congo exotic, inscrutable, inexplicable, and mysterious. But later on the two of them understand that it is such because of its culture and history. The Congolese need understanding and not sermons about their inhumanity, as Nathan Price does right after his arrival in Kilanga passing judgment on the nakedness and darkness that he sees in the villagers who have prepared a feast to welcome his family.

Kingsolver employs an effective strategy of preserving the exotic and discarding it according to the demand of her purpose. She uses the domestic world of the Americans as well as the Congolese to generate resemblances and differences between the two cultures. One fine example of the dismantling of the exotic myth occurs at the beginning of the Price family’s stay in Kilanga. Nathan’s attempts to grow an American garden to teach the villagers civilized ways of feeding themselves fall flat on the soil of Kilanga. Critics have discussed this incident as symbolic of Africa’s resistance to the Western will. But this incident is used by Kingsolver to destabilize the myth of exoticism. The first native, the Price family becomes familiar

13. Mary Jean DeMarr, *Barbara Kingsolver: A Critical Companion*, Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1999, p. 119.

14. DeMarr, *Barbara Kingsolver: A Critical Companion*, p. 122.

15. Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001, p. 13.

with, is Mama Tataba, their helper in the household. She advises Nathan about the dangers of touching the poisonwood tree and dissuades him from making a flat garden. Contrary to Nathan's vehement sermonizing, she conveys her opinions in a few words in English. Not attempting to understand what she meant, Nathan explains her peculiar behaviour to Leah saying, "[O]ur world is filled with mystery."¹⁶ This notion of mysterious Africa does not hold for long and reveals itself the very next day when Nathan gets a terrible rash by touching the poisonwood tree. Nathan's attempts to tame the African soil to show the villagers how to grow crops fail miserably, as the American plants do not bear fruits there. There are no suitable pollinators. His garden was to be his first "African miracle," but it fails.¹⁷ Nathan fails, partly because he was unable to understand the wisdom that was present in the form of Mama Tataba in his own house. Not able to tolerate Nathan's arrogance Mama Tataba leaves the Price family. This event works as a premonition that Nathan's mission will not succeed as he is not willing to understand the human aspect of the village and continues to see it as a vessel of the doomed souls he is destined to save. The departure of Mama Tataba also becomes a turning point in Orleana's life as the responsibility of feeding her family now falls completely on her. The domain of the kitchen and food being extremely different from what she was used to, she begins a journey of understanding the natives' lives from a very close range.

Initially, the girls stay inside. Slowly out of boredom they start communicating with the village children. One remarkable thing they notice about the villagers is that many of them suffer from different kinds of disabilities, but unlike in America the villagers do not hold it against the person. This fact touches Adah deeply. Having a crooked body, she has always felt "other" in the white world that values perfection in body. In Kilanga she feels normal and whole. Representation of disability in the novel makes the natives "other" and familiar at the same time. Adah learns to see herself as she is and not as a punishment inflicted by God. The disability also separates the two worlds of the Prices and the Congolese distinctly by bringing to the surface the horrors of the colonial domination over the Congo. The main reason of disability other than accidents and diseases was colonial suppression which used physical dismemberment as punishment for less productive native workers. The trope of disability is used simultaneously to narrate the oppression of the imperial rule and to reflect the narrators' growing sense of their own agency in voicing their opinions in a household where they are asked to adhere strictly to the prescribed norms of female roles. When the Belgians set the date for the Congo's Independence, the Underdowns come to Kilanga to inform Nathan about

16. Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 47.

17. Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 42.

the same, and to ask them to make preparation for their departure. In response to Mr. Underdown's claim that the Belgians ruled "with a fatherly hand," Orleanna retorts, "There's men right here in this village with tales to make your hair stand on end. One old fellow got his hand whacked off up at Coquilhatville, and ran away while he was still spurting blood!" In answer to Nathan's questioning look she continues, "I talk to their wives."¹⁸ Thus, the disability of the villagers brings out the horrific side of this clash of cultures. It also implies the need for an empathetic understanding of the "others". Nathan can only associate a broken body to the darkness of a broken soul whereas Orleanna conjectures, "Well, maybe they take a different view of their bodies."¹⁹ Orleanna is ready to understand the difference.

An imperfect body had already made Adah an "other" in America. Even after getting cured she identifies herself with her hemiplegic self. She says, "The arrogance of the able-bodied is staggering. Yes, maybe we'd like to be able to get places quickly, and carry things in both hands, but only because we have to keep up with the rest of you, or get *The Verse*."²⁰ Her conscious awareness of her otherness is like the Congolese resistance to the white culture. The Congo seems lacking or imperfect when judged by the standards of Western material development. Adah goes to the Congo feeling as "other" and comes back with an awareness that helps her look at the Congo as "other" which should not lose itself in the image of the West. While Adah keeps this "other" inside her, Leah faces it on an everyday basis. As a white woman in the Congo she finds acceptance only as Anatole's wife, and when they come to America, she finds Anatole and her children being treated as "primitives, or freaks."²¹ She cannot stay in America exposing her family to "a life where their beauty will blossom and wither in darkness."²²

Depiction of fictional native characters

Kingsolver portrays the natives as the "others" having their own reality. She does not reduce them to merely an antithesis of the Western culture. When the Price women have to struggle for their survival in Kilanga, they start to lean on the methods employed by the natives. As they begin to understand the natives better, they become more and more aware of the inadequacy of their own predetermined notions of right and wrong which ultimately leads them to relinquish the ideologies imposed

18. Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 189.

19. Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 61.

20. Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 559.

21. Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 531.

22. Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 531.

on them by their patriarchal and imperial father, religion and country. The narrators observe and interact with the villagers and form opinions about them, and about their cultural beliefs. But we do not see the villagers interacting among themselves about their own issues. We do see some distinct individuals drawn by the narrators' descriptions; their wisdom and follies; their routines and dilemmas, but in the broad purpose of the novel's political concerns, they nearly get reduced to one-sided flat characters meant to operate as collective. The contrast between the goodness of the natives and the evil of the whites works perfectly to establish the level of exploitation that they suffer at the hands of the foreign occupiers. But Kingsolver's attention to details makes the village a lively place. Almost every native character is given a unique personality. Every native character challenges the notions taken for granted by the Americans. Tata Boanda's sweater makes Leah wonder about the Western binary of male and female clothing. The chief wears glasses without any lenses, which renders him ridiculous in the eyes of the Americans and thus, they fail to see the wisdom in his manners at that time. Mama Mwanza shows that disability is not a hindrance as she is shown leading a normal life despite her disability.

Leah's first real friend in Kilanga, Pascal, opens the world of the village life before her. This nine-year-old boy teaches her the names of various things in Kikongo, tells her what to avoid, and among other things about the weather. Pascal is not for long in the story, but he helps Leah in questioning something that she had taken for granted, such as the idea of childhood. His company opens her eyes to the cultural differences between their worlds; the Americans play "Mother May I?" and "Hide and Seek" while the Congolese children play "Find Food" and "Build a House." She muses, "I could see that the whole idea and business of Childhood was nothing guaranteed. It seemed to me, in fact, like something more or less invented by white people and stuck onto the front end of grown-up life like a frill on a dress."²³ Twelve-year-old Nelson is also an important character. His arrangement with the Price family shows the idea of the Congolese communities that the members of the community survive by exchanging what they have to offer. The Prices offer a house full of books and a basket of eggs in a week, and Nelson does some housework for them. He is invaluable as he also explains "the many daily mysteries of Kilanga."²⁴ He introduces them to the concept of the *muntu* and the spirituality of the natives.

Among the adult villagers, two people clearly influence the destiny of the Price family: the village chief, Tata Ndu, and the young school teacher, Anatole Ngemba. The chief is an impressive man with a lot of influence over the villagers. He does not like Nathan's preaching about the false gods and wants his people to worship their ancient gods. He is a just and kind man but does not want to be disconnected

23. Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, pp. 130–131.

24. Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 250.

from his cultural roots. Instead of attempting to establish a dialogue with the chief, Nathan decides he would not “bend his will, in any way, to Africa.”²⁵ The chief conveys his displeasure very politely through Anatole over Nathan’s attempts to convert the people. But true to his white supremacist nature Nathan takes great offence to this advice. Anatole explains to Nathan Price some of the truth about the church-going people, “The people of your congregation are mostly what we call in Kikongo the *Lenzuka*. People who have shamed themselves or had very bad luck or something like that.... So they are interested to try making sacrifices to your Jesus.” He further adds, “Tata Ndu is happy for you to draw the bad-luck people away.... So the village’s spirit protectors will not notice them so much. But he worries you are trying to lure too many of the others into following corrupt ways.”²⁶ Thus, Tata Ndu appears to care genuinely for the welfare of the villagers. Anatole could have helped Nathan a lot in understanding the natives and their faith, but Nathan believes in his own superiority too much to listen to any native.

The rivalry between Nathan and Tata Ndu accelerates and culminates in the elections being held for acceptance of Christ by the villagers. In the Congolese communities, decisions are taken by discussing the matter and reaching a consensus. But the Western idea of democracy is corrupting their balanced approach to life. While calling for an election to decide the fate of Jesus in Kilanga, Tata Ndu retorts to Nathan’s objections, “The program of Jesus and the program of elections. You say these things are good. You cannot say now they are *not* good.”²⁷ Unsurprisingly, Jesus loses by a good margin. The irony is not lost. Democracy tears apart the peace of the village community finally, resulting in tragic consequences for the Price family. Suffering from near starvation during the famine the chief decides to hold a collective hunt. The whole village had to partake in it. Leah, who has become adept at using the bow and arrow, wants to hunt like men. She is encouraged by Nelson and Anatole. The villagers oppose it. Despite Anatole’s objections, the chief holds elections to decide the matter. Some villagers want to spite the chief and some Nathan, and thus, the majority ends up voting in favour of Leah. The hunt was supposed to be a feast with the community eating together, but it turns into a fracas. Leah kills an antelope which is also claimed by the chief’s son. Their fight escalates, and soon people turn against each other. The “sharing of plenty” was meant to be a celebration but instead turns into a “war of insults and rage.”²⁸ The fabric of the community shatters in Kilanga and results in the tragic death of Ruth May by snake

25. Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 111.

26. Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, pp. 146–7.

27. Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 378.

28. Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, pp. 403–4.

bite. The deadly green mamba was placed in the chicken house of the Price family by the witch doctor of the village as a punishment for enraging the ancient gods. Along with this event, another event of larger ramification is juxtaposed. With the intervention of the American government, the elected Prime Minister is murdered, and the Congo is forced into a despotic regime.

Kingsolver's main strength lies in creating plausible people and lively places. It cannot be denied that Kingsolver's native characters appear idealized, but they are made memorable by sketching fine details about them. Anatole is the only native character who is present throughout the novel. He is also an outsider in Kilanga. He suffers insults for helping the whites. He is the voice of reason in the novel. He is a revolutionary deeply saddened by the political events in his country caused by outside interference. His calm and thoughtful temperament is a stark contrast to the mania of Nathan on the one hand, and his rationale thinking to the superstitious nature of the Congolese on the other. He saves Adah during the ant-attack and nurses Leah back to health when she falls ill. His presence fills Leah with hope and faith at a time when her faith in her father and her religion starts to falter. While escaping the ant-attack in a boat, her disillusioned mind is not able to make sense of the turn her life is taking. She is horrified that she ran away leaving Adah to be eaten alive by the ants. It seems that Africa can indeed overpower one and fling them into insanity. However, Anatole quietly restores her peace by giving her some sound advice, "The world can always give you reasons. No rain, not enough for the ants to eat.... *Nsongonya* are always moving anyway, it is their nature."²⁹ He explains the ferocity of nature and the hatred of the Congolese towards the white people with one analogy, "Congolese people are not so different from Congolese ants.... When they are pushed down long enough they will rise up. If they bite you, they are trying to fix things in the only way they know."³⁰ Anatole's intellect could have been used to provide an in-depth analysis of the Congo's socio-political matters. He is crucial in transforming Leah. Through his eyes, she sees a very different homeland and rejects it vehemently. He represents the young, talented Congolese who could have contributed to the betterment of their country and people.

A feast stands on both sides of the Price family's stay in Kilanga. Both the feasts are symbolic of the cultural encounter between the natives and the white people. The first feast symbolizes the communal spirit of the natives before the arrival of the Western culture. Though the natives welcome the foreigners, the latter only deride them and their culture. The last feast shows the corrupting influence of Western culture. The interference of the foreign elements makes the natives disillusioned.

29. Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 351.

30. Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 352.

The greed for larger individual shares replaces the communal spirit of sharing. This feast becomes a microcosm of the internal political strife of the Congo. The American intervention in the politics of the Congo throws the country into chaos and destroys any chance it might have had of freedom.

Depiction of historical native characters

Other than the fictional characters, two native historical figures are also described in the novel: the first elected Prime Minister of the independent Congo, Patrice Lumumba, and Joseph Mobutu, who was instrumental in overthrowing Lumumba within a year after independence. Mobutu does not appear in person in the novel, but he is mentioned and condemned as a ruthless tyrant. His greed for wealth and power is described as the main reason for corruption and injustice in the Congo. After living for many years in the Congo, Leah observes, "How can I begin to describe the complexities of life here in a country whose leadership sets the standard for absolute corruption?"³¹ Mobutu changes the names of all the cities in a move to erase the colonial legacy. He also changes the country's name to Zaire. Ironically, Anatole says about him, "He is not even African now."³² In the last untitled section of the novel which is apparently narrated by Ruth May's spirit, Mobutu's death is mentioned. Both Lumumba and Mobutu are portrayed like mythical figures: the former as an embodiment of goodness and the latter of pure evil. Patrice Lumumba appears in the novel on the day of the country's independence. Leah, who attends the Independence Day ceremony with her father, describes Lumumba's speech, "When he stood up to speak, everyone's mouth shut.... Even the birds seemed taken aback. Patrice Lumumba raised his left hand up and seemed to grow ten feet tall, right there and then."³³ And when the Congo is finally rid of Mobutu's rule:

After thirty-five years the man Mobutu has run away in the night. Thirty-five years of sleep like death, and now the murdered land draws a breath, moves its fingers, takes up life through its rivers and forests.... The animals open their mouths and utter joyful, astonishing words. The enslaved parrot Methuselah, whose flesh has been devoured now by many generations of predators, is forcing his declaration of independence through the mouths of leopards and civet cats.³⁴

31. Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 511.

32. Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 515.

33. Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 207.

34. Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, pp. 610–11.

By describing the two main political figures of the independent Congo in such terms, Kingsolver turns its modern history into a story of mythical significance. Lumumba's speech sows the seeds of political awakening in Leah. He was the shining beacon of hope for the Congo. But the Americans get Lumumba assassinated and establish Mobutu's rule. The American government's complete disregard for the fate of the Congolese originates from the Western world's flawed perception of Africa, as Adah puts it, "All the eyes of America know what a Congolese looks like. Skin and bones dancing, lips upcurled like oyster shells, a no-count man with a femur in his hair."³⁵ This ethnocentric attitude of the Americans robs a nation of its freedom. Kingsolver sets out to question the image of Africa in the American mind-set. But it is not easy to discard deep-rooted notions. As Adah puts it, "Illusions mistaken for truth are the pavement under our feet. They are what we call civilization."³⁶ To perceive the Congo with all its truths is a mammoth task. Kingsolver is certainly aware of this fact, and it reverberates in the novel now and then. While holding elections for Jesus, the chief tells Nathan:

You believe we are *mwana*, your children, who knew nothing until you came here. Tata Price, I am an old man who learned from other old men. I could tell you the name of the great chief who instructed my father, and all the ones before him, but you would have to know how to sit down and listen. There are one hundred twenty-two. Since the time of our *mankulu* we have made our laws without help from white man.³⁷

At another time Brother Fowles explains to the Price women that in order to connect with the Congolese one must understand the multicultural and multilingual aspect of the Congo. He says, "And that means to get one good connection made, you have to understand the Kituba, the Lingala, the Bembe, Kunyi, Vili, Ndingi, and the bleeding talking drums."³⁸

In the last section of the novel "Song of the Three Children," Leah's section focuses on the history of pre-colonial Congo. Leah's desire to fully connect with the Congo makes her dream of the time when there was no influence from the white world. She thinks the white men must have been appalled by the lack of trading practices familiar to the Western world. She reflects, "In spite of poetry and beautiful clothes, such people were not fully human – were *primitive*; that's a word the

35. Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 200.

36. Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 602.

37. Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 379.

38. Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 287.

Portuguese must have used, to salve their conscience for what was to come.”³⁹ She spends a lifetime in trying to understand the Congo and its people and wondering about her own place in it. She gains knowledge from the natives but is not in a condition to present an insight into the soul of the Congo. With all her intentions, she can only remain a learner: “To be here without doing everything wrong requires a new agriculture, a new sort of planning, a new religion. I am the un-missionary, as Adah would say, beginning each day on my knees, asking to be converted. *Forgive me, Africa, according to the multitudes of thy mercies.*”⁴⁰

The Poisonwood Bible strongly indicts imperialism and ethnocentrism by disputing the Western world’s perception of the African nations and cultures. Bred S. Born argues that Kingsolver uses Africa merely as a setting. He says, “Ironically, while this novel indicts Western colonialism generally and American foreign policy particularly... Kingsolver’s liberal sentiment is ultimately not interested in Africa itself, but rather in making Africa the scenic locale for the expression of its own liberal sentiment.”⁴¹ But the novel does bring ethnocentric attitude face to face with its drastic consequences. It advocates in no unclear terms that cultural relativism is the way to understand a multicultural society. Cultural relativism can make us empathetic towards other cultures. One such moment occurs in the novel when the remaining three sisters reunite and visit the Palaces of Abomey. Rachel is shocked by “wife murdering and slave bones in the walls.”⁴² But Leah’s response is thoughtful, “we couldn’t possibly understand what their social milieu was before the Portuguese came.”⁴³ She further adds that “what’s right or wrong for us” cannot be the same for all culture.⁴⁴ To accept the differences is to learn, to adapt, and to evolve. Kingsolver gives Africa the “human factor” which according to Achebe, was withheld by Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*.⁴⁵

39. Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 590.

40. Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 594.

41. Brad S. Born, “Kingsolver’s Gospel for Africa: (Western White Female) Heart of Goodness.” *Mennonite Life* 56, no. 1, March 2001. <http://www.ml.bethelks.edu/issue/vol-56-no-1/article/Kingsolver-gospel-for-africa-western-white-female/>.

42. Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 555.

43. Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 555.

44. Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, p. 556.

45. Chinua Achebe, “An Image of Africa.” *The Massachusetts Review* 18, no. 4, 1977, p. 788. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25088813>.

V. S. Naipaul and Jhumpa Lahiri

The politics of identity and the performance of exoticism

Afrinul Haque Khan

Frantz Fanon, in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, presents a critique of the tendencies attending the literary enterprises of the “colonized intellectuals.” He writes, “The colonized intellectual who returns to his people through works of art behaves in fact like a foreigner... the ideas he expresses, the preoccupations that haunt him are in no way related to the daily lot of the men and women of his country.”¹ The “colonized intellectual,” according to Fanon, is “mesmerized” by “mummified fragments,” sticks to “tradition,” or revives “neglected traditions.”² Fanon’s theorizations regarding the colonized intellectual’s penchant for “the past” or for “the detritus of social thought, external appearances, relics, and knowledge frozen in time,”³ provides a framework for a postcolonialist re-interpretation of the politics and poetics of diaspora, and opens up possibilities of subjecting to critique the discourses of diasporas that owe their origin to ex/de-colonized nations but occupy their space at the Western metropolitan centres. When these writers return to their ancestral homeland through their texts, “they turn,” to borrow Fanon’s words, “paradoxically enough to the past,”⁴ and portray its history, culture and landscape as exotic. In other words, their ancestral homeland resurfaces in their texts as an “exotic realm,”⁵ or as an “exotic other place,”⁶ “fixed in the zones of dependency and peripherality.”⁷

1. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Trans. Richard Philcox, New York: Grove Press, 2004, p. 160.

2. Fanon, *The Wretched*, p. 160.

3. Fanon, *The Wretched*, p. 161.

4. Fanon, *The Wretched*, p. 160.

5. See Roger Célestin, *From Cannibals to Radicals: Figures and Limits of Exoticism*, Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, p. 8.

6. Célestin, *From Cannibals*, p. 95.

7. Edward W. Said, “Representing the Colonized: Anthropology’s Interlocutors,” *Critical Inquiry*, Winter 1989, p. 207.

For postcolonial theorists and critics, such an “exoticized” representation of the homeland in the narratives of the diaspora, has several implications/connotations. It signifies, as Bluma Goldstein says, “an anguished longing to return to the homeland,”⁸ or it implies, as Graham Huggan puts it, “a commodification of cultural difference.”⁹ This is a strategy, I argue, employed by diasporic writers like V. S. Naipaul and Jhumpa Lahiri, who occupy their space at the metropolitan centres, to emphasize their otherness from those whom they construe as the “exotic other(s),”¹⁰ and affirm their allegiance to, what Roger Célestin terms as, an “idealized West.”¹¹ In the present essay I explore how identity for the diasporic writer, is produced through the performance of exoticism, which aims at creating “stereotypes or fixed images” of the homeland in diasporic narratives like Naipaul’s *Half a Life* and Lahiri’s *The Lowland*. The identity of the diasporic writer, in other words, exists in and through “the Other” who is represented as exotic. Taken in this sense, exoticism denotes a politics of representation which functions through a deliberate positioning of “the Other” in a specific cultural and historical milieu. And since, as Stuart Hall says, “practices of representation always implicate the positions from which we speak or write,”¹² space and language may be seen as having fundamental importance in the diasporic writers’ project of articulating, creating and nurturing points of identification and differences. I also examine how space and language are factors which are not only instrumental to the diasporic writer’s realization of claims to centrality but are inextricably linked with and immanent to their politics of identity.

I locate Naipaul’s and Lahiri’s performance of exoticism in their texts within the discourses of power, the primary mode in and through which the postcolonial diasporic writers have articulated themselves and constructed their images and identities. I focus on the interplay of language and space in order to query the ways in which the postcolonial diasporic writers like Jhumpa Lahiri and V. S. Naipaul have represented the culture and history of their ancestral homeland to play out an

8. Bluma Goldstein, A Politics and Poetics of Diaspora in *Diasporas and Exiles: Varieties of Jewish Identity*, ed. Howard Wettstein, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, p. 75.

9. Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the margins*, 2001, London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis, 2003, p. vii.

10. Huggan uses the term “exotic other” (p. 18) in his influential work, *The Postcolonial Exotic* to show how the “mystification of the cultural other; fetishization of cultural difference” (p. 262) reveals the “workings of commodification (p. 264). I have used its plural form to take into account the exoticized representation of all those nations and cultures that were “off-centre.”

11. Célestin, *From Cannibals*, p. 180.

12. See Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’ in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, Ed. Jonathan Rutherford, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1999, p. 222.

identity which is essentially different, in its occupation of space and relationship to power, from that of the “peripheral others.”¹³

Exoticism as a mode of representation

Célestin, in his seminal work, *From Cannibals to Radicals* makes a distinction between the “exotic” and “exoticism.” According to him:

“Exotic” implies the existence of (different) cultures; “exoticism” requires the presence of (individual) identities... To find something “exotic” does not require individuation, does not entail a demarcation from one’s own culture, from Home... “Exoticism,” however, signals a subjective distantiating, a break; this is why it has often been perceived as an escape, or at least as escapist... a potential means of leaving or escaping Home... Yet it is also a mode of representation; this is why the subject who would practice exoticism can never really leave Home, since Home is also audience, just as this subject can never really go Home again once the exotic has become part of his (self-constituting) experience.¹⁴

Célestin’s redefinition of the term “exoticism” does not end here. To make his stance clear, he adds, “rather than representing a relinquishing of or an escape from local culture, from Home... exoticism becomes... the means for certain writers to negotiate (discursive) position and (subjective) space vis-a-vis this culture and vis-a-vis the exotic simultaneously.”¹⁵

While Célestin regards exoticism as “a mode of representation”, for Huggan it is “a particular mode of aesthetic *perception* – one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness.”¹⁶ Célestin’s arguments, it is important to note here, “effect a *displacement* of what is usually meant by ‘exoticism.’” It divests the term “exoticism” of its traditional meaning and usage which signifies “a lyrical celebration of things tropical or oriental.”¹⁷ Rather, he perceives it as “a mode of representation,” or as “an analytical tool” to explore “a more generic representation of otherness” in “Western and postcolonial literature.”¹⁸

13. Young, Robert J. C., *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, 1995, London: Routledge/ Taylor & Francis, 2005, p. 56.

14. Célestin, *From Cannibals*, p. 2.

15. Célestin, *From Cannibals*, p. 3.

16. Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p. 13.

17. Célestin, *From Cannibals*, p. 3.

18. Célestin, *From Cannibals*, p. 5.

Representation based identity politics

Drawing on Célestin's arguments, I examine the techniques which postcolonial diasporic writers like V. S. Naipaul and Jhumpa Lahiri employ to perform exoticism in their narratives. To develop my arguments further, I invoke here Gayatri Spivak's comments from her famous essay, "The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives" where she contends how "Europe had consolidated itself as a sovereign subject by defining its colonies as "Others," even as it constituted them, for purposes of administration and the expansion of markets, into programmed near-images of that very sovereign self." This "consolidation of Europe as 'sovereign subject,'" she further argues, has led to "the 'worlding' of what is today called 'the Third World.'"¹⁹ So, according to Spivak, Europe's sovereignty could only be made possible through the "othering" of the erstwhile colonies. The "mechanism of othering,"²⁰ that is used for the position of power, comes into play at the very outset of Naipaul's narrative in *Half a Life*, and takes the form of Willie Chandran's query to his father, why his middle name was Somerset, resulting in his father's response that he was named after a "great English writer."²¹ This is a strategy, I contend, used by the writers to emphasize their otherness from the assumptions and systems of reference of the ancestral culture which necessitates a representation based on the devaluation of the ancestral culture by creating the image of the native as someone who seems to be ashamed of his lineage and hence takes great pride in the adoption of a Western name. Such a mode of representation, which aims at constructing stereotypical images of the natives as inferior people who accepted "their lower ranking in colonial order of things" and felt privileged in emulating the "superior, civilized order of the British colonizers" is symptomatic of the postcolonial diasporic writer's imperialist tendencies which operate, to quote McLeod, "by persuading people to internalize its logic and speak its language, to perpetuate the values and assumptions of the colonizers as regards the ways they perceive and represent the world."²² The text is replete with instances of such imperialist tendencies, which position India as "the Other" of the West, made eminently visible in the spaces revealing the details of Indian life, culture, tradition and history. The entire first chapter titled "A Visit from

19. Gayatri C. Spivak, "The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives", *History and Theory*, 24: 3, 1985, p. 247.

20. See Asha Varadharajan, *Exotic Parodies: Subjectivity in Adorno, Said, and Spivak*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995, p. 129.

21. V. S. Naipaul, *Half a Life*, London: Picador, 2001, p. 1.

22. John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000, p. 18.

Somerset Maugham” seems to be a fictional concretization of Naipaul’s imperialist beliefs regarding India. Naipaul deliberately chooses 1930s, a period in colonial India, as the background to postulate his theories of Indian philosophy, religion, culture and history. His narrative places his characters and their actions within a stylized setting which is now so far in the past of contemporary India that it seems to be artificially constructed and as exotic for the Indian readers as for its Western readers. India emerges in the text, as “a place that is elsewhere...existing in another temporality and space,”²³ or as a land, to use Said’s words, of “exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes,”²⁴ which is accessed by the European writers to collect material for their novels. William Somerset Maugham, the English writer after whom Willie Chandran, the protagonist is named, comes “to India to get material for a novel about spirituality.”²⁵ Maugham’s travel book contains a lot “about the temple and the crowds and the clothes they were wearing, and the gifts of coconut and flour and rice they had brought, and the afternoon light on the old stones of the courtyard.”²⁶ Such a perception of India as a land which is accessed or visited by the foreigners on account of its antiquity, reflects a mode of exoticism, which according to Harry Harootunian, is “entirely committed to spatializing territories into fixed, static, and unchanging landscapes that existed in temporalities outside of modernity: vast, ethnographic museums of alien cultures and peoples....”²⁷

Such a mode of representation is integral to Naipaul’s politics of identity. It is a “performatively oriented” ploy,²⁸ which serves for him a dual purpose – first, it allows him a distance from the subject position of “the Other” that he assigns to the people of India, and take an elitist position with the imperial West; second, it helps him, to quote Huggan, in “the exhibitionistic deployment of exoticist clichés” in his narrative.²⁹ So the rich Indian culture steeped in traditions of spirituality and religiosity is endowed with exotic connotations through the insertion of Willie’s father’s exaggerated narrative regarding his ancestors- a priestly community of skin and bones, bare footed, bare-backed mendicants, living in the temples and

23. Harry Harootunian, “Foreword” in Victor Segalen, *Essay on Exoticism: An Aesthetics of Diversity*, translated and edited, Yaël Rachel Schlick, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2002, p. xi.

24. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 1978. New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1979, p. 1.

25. Naipaul, *Half a Life*, p. 1.

26. Naipaul, *Half a Life*, p. 3.

27. Harootunian, “Foreword” in *Essay on Exoticism*, p. ix.

28. Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p. 151.

29. Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p. 93.

surviving on “the alms of the poorest of the poor.”³⁰ His narrative transposes the text in time and space to create a deliberately exoticized Indian past, which has little or no reference to the real world or to the historical context. An important aspect of Naipaul’s performative ploy is his description of the outward appearance and dress mannerism to establish the “cultural otherness” of native Indians. Given below is a passage from the text, describing the physical features and appearance of Willie’s mother, which is particularly illuminating and relevant in this regard:

She was small and coarse featured, almost tribal in appearance, noticeably black with two big pop teeth that showed very white. She wore colours that were sometimes very bright and sometimes very muddy, seeming to run into the blackness of her skin.³¹

Encoded in the above description is the colonialist agenda of imposing on the colonized, what Fanon terms as, “the fact of blackness,” which according to him is associated with inferiority, darkness and sin as he asserts in his influential work, *Black Skin, White Masks*:

*In Europe, the black man is the symbol of Evil...*one talks of shadows, when one is dirty one is black – whether one is thinking of physical dirtiness or of moral dirtiness. It would be astonishing...to see the vast number of expressions that make the black man the equivalent of sin. In Europe, whether concretely or symbolically, the black man stands for the bad side of the character... Blackness, darkness, shadow, shades, night, the labyrinths of the earth, abysmal depths, blacken someone’s reputation.³²

Naipaul’s emphasis on the coarse features, tribal appearance and the black complexion of Willie’s mother clearly illustrates that the diasporic writer’s perception and representation of the native people- as primitive, backward, and exotic- is in keeping with, to quote Huggan once again, “white stereotypical perceptions of an exotic cultural other.”³³ In fact, Naipaul appropriates as “exotic other” every detail that he represents about India to produce an identity that serves to consolidate his position at the metropolitan centre of power, and which relies for its constitution and sustenance on what Spivak terms as, “the ‘worlding’ of what is today called ‘the Third World.’”³⁴ India is, therefore, presented as “a dark continent of sorts,”

30. Naipaul, *Half a Life*, p. 3.

31. Naipaul, *Half a Life*, p. 11.

32. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1952, London: Pluto Press, 2008, pp. 145–46.

33. Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p. 95.

34. Spivak, “The Rani of Sirmur,” p. 247.

its culture is “reduced to artefacts” and its people to objects.³⁵ Varma says in this connection:

The “objectified” people then thrive only as exotica; their historic role becomes that of the observed; everything external about them – and nothing of intrinsic value – is collated, classified and investigated. They finally end up as caricatures, divorced from their own cultural milieu and perpetually alien.³⁶

Not only the country, its culture and people are exoticized, but also its history and the sentiments of the people who created that history. Naipaul’s narrative, as mentioned earlier, takes the readers to the pre-Independent, Gandhian age when Gandhi and his philosophy had become the order of the day and people throughout the country were sacrificing their lives for the nation at the call of the Mahatma. Naipaul’s representation, once again, seems to be driven by his obligation to satisfy his “exoticist predilections.”³⁷ Downplaying the importance of the Indian freedom movement, he exoticizes the sacrifices and patriotic sentiments of millions of people who participated in the freedom struggle, and so he shows Willie’s father, a “man of high caste,” taking upon himself the call of the Mahatma, and sacrifice his life, a “lasting kind of sacrifice, something the Mahatma would have approved of.”³⁸ To carry out the sacrifice, he makes him marry “the lowest person,” a fellow college student of “backward caste,”³⁹ having “black feet,” “big teeth” and “dark skin.”⁴⁰ This sacrifice, Willie’s father confesses to Willie, remains with him throughout his life, like “a shame,” “a little unhappiness,” “an incurable illness,” “corrupting all his moments, all his little triumphs.”⁴¹ Naipaul’s obsession with what Stuart Hall terms “dominant regimes of representation,”⁴² thus, leads him not only to a neglect of Indian history and a denial of actual historical experience, but also to a perpetuation of the imperialist project of belittling, devaluing and even negating the history and culture of

35. I have taken the term from Raymond Williams’s *Culture and Society 1780–1950*, New York: Anchor Books, 1960, p. 343, where he asserts that “a culture can never be reduced to its artefacts while it is being lived.”

36. Pavan K. Varma, *Becoming Indian: The Unfinished Revolution of Culture and Identity*, New Delhi: Allen Lane, 2010, p. 141.

37. Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p. 72.

38. Naipaul, *Half a Life*, p. 10.

39. Naipaul, *Half a Life*, p. 11.

40. Naipaul, *Half a Life*, p. 17.

41. Naipaul, *Half a Life*, p. 33.

42. Hall, *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, p. 225.

previously colonized people. This recalls Ngũgĩ's assertions regarding the colonialist agenda of exercising control over the mental universe of the colonized through "the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people's culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature."⁴³ Fanon also expresses a similar view of the colonizer's aim in *The Wretched of the Earth*:

The denial of a national reality... the marginalization of ... their customs by colonial society, expropriation... all contributed to this cultural obliteration. no longer content with the objective nonexistence of the conquered nation and culture. Every effort is made to make the colonized confess the inferiority of their culture, now reduced to a set of instinctive responses, to acknowledge the unreality of their nation....⁴⁴

Fanon further argues that under such a situation, the behaviour of the colonized intellectual differs from the rest of the masses as he "hurls himself frantically into the frenzied acquisition of the occupier's culture, making sure he denigrates his national culture, or else confines himself to making a detailed, methodical, zealous, and rapidly sterile inventory of it."⁴⁵

Naipaul's deliberate exoticisation of the people, history and culture of his ancestral homeland is, thus, integral to his politics of identity and originates in his desire to identify with the forces of power—namely the hegemonic West, and hence, can be viewed as an exercise in the "service of power."⁴⁶ For Naipaul, as Said acknowledges, "the status of colonized people has been fixed in zones of dependency and peripherality, stigmatized in the designation of underdeveloped, less developed, developing states, ruled by a superior, developed, or metropolitan colonizer who was theoretically posited as a categorically antithetical overlord."⁴⁷ He therefore represents them as exotic, quaint and antique in his fiction, and uses his representation as a tool to produce an identity that has an affiliation with the West.

India continues to be exoticized in the narratives of postcolonial diasporic writers like Naipaul and Jhumpa Lahiri. Exoticism, I reiterate, is not considered here "in its traditional usage, a lyrical celebration of things tropical or Oriental;"⁴⁸ rather, it

43. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, 1987, Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1994, p. 16.

44. Fanon, *The Wretched*, pp. 170–71.

45. Fanon, *The Wretched*, p. 171.

46. I have taken the term from Andre Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, London: Routledge, 1992, p. vii.

47. Said, "Representing the Colonized", p. 207.

48. Célestin, *From Cannibals*, p. 3.

is used here to signify a mode of representation, a “performatively oriented” ploy for framing an identity, based on “the more generic representation of otherness” of the history and culture of the ancestral homeland in postcolonial diasporic texts.⁴⁹ The phenomenon of otherness, Alfred Schutz argues in his essay on otherness, “involves two or more parties that do not share the assumptions crucial to functioning within their particular systems of reference... otherness often involves exclusion and rejection, but at the same time it is integral to the construction of a people’s identity and group self-consciousness.”⁵⁰ Lahiri’s *The Lowland* is yet another exercise in what Huggan terms “representation-based identity politics.”⁵¹ Stewart and Strathern contend that “landscape is one of the means of conceptualising history and identity” of a people.⁵² This explains why Lahiri opens her narrative with the description of a decaying and stagnant landscape:

East of the Tolly Club...A warren of narrow lanes and modest middle-class homes...Behind them was a lowland.... The flooded plain was thick with water hyacinth. The floating weed grew aggressively.... Simple huts stood here and there along the periphery. The poor waded in to forage for what was edible. In autumn egrets arrived, their white feathers darkened from the city’s soot, waiting motionless for their prey...So many times Subhash and Udayan had walked across the lowland.... Breathing the dank air. Certain creatures laid eggs that were able to endure the dry season. Others survived by burying themselves in mud, simulating death, waiting for the return of rain.⁵³

Lahiri’s opening description of Kolkata as a decaying city sets the tone of her exoticist narrative and shows how the diasporic writer, located at the centre, viewed the native people and their landscape, and represented them in their fiction, as backward, exotic and primitive. At the base of such a representation of the ancestral homeland by the author lies the colonial belief that India was a “sunken civilization that only their rule could hope to salvage.”⁵⁴ In *History at the Limits of World-History*, Ranajit Guha provides the historical context necessary for understanding the far reaching ramifications of such beliefs and how it influenced the

49. Célestin, *From Cannibals*, p. 5.

50. Rozbicki & Ndege, “Introduction,” *Cross Cultural History and the Domestication of Otherness*, eds. Michal J. Rozbicki and George O. Ndege, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 1.

51. Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p. 249.

52. Stewart & Strathern, “Introduction,” *Landscape, Memory and History: Anthropological Perspectives*, eds. Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern, Sterling VA: Pluto Press, 2003, p. 12.

53. Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Lowland*, Noida: Random House, 2013, p. 3.

54. Varma, *Becoming Indian*, p. 48.

diasporic perception and representation of the homeland in their narratives. He argues that the propagation of such beliefs had enabled the colonizers to convert the Indian past “into material for its edifices of colonialist knowledge.” He further notes that English historical literature used in Indian schools and universities resulted in “history written by Indians themselves in faithful imitation of the Western statist model... What is discarded is not only the pasts these so-called history-less people live by in their everyday existence but also the modes adopted by their languages to integrate these pasts in the prose of their respective worlds.”⁵⁵

Appropriation of language for the production of identity

Ranajit Guha’s assertions illuminate how literature served as space where knowledge was produced in the service of colonialist appropriation and the language which produced that literature served as the tool through which a “hierarchical structure” was “perpetuated.”⁵⁶ Needless to say, theorists and writers alike have commented on the appropriation of language by the colonizers “for imposing control and effecting exclusion.”⁵⁷ In Ngūgĩ’s view, “It was language which held captive” “the cultures,” “values,” and the “minds of the colonized”⁵⁸ and made them “see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement” and it made them want to “distance themselves from that wasteland.”⁵⁹ In his seminal work, *Orientalism*, Said is even more candid and analytical in his assertions regarding the Western stereotyping of “the Orient” through language. He says:

In any instance of at least written language, there is no such thing as a delivered presence, but a *re-presence*, or a representation. The value, efficacy, strength, apparent veracity of a written statement about the Orient therefore relies very little, and cannot instrumentally depend, on the Orient as such. On the contrary, the written statement is a presence to the reader by virtue of its having excluded, displaced, made supererogatory any such *real thing* as “the Orient”... that Orientalism makes

55. Ranajit Guha, *History at the Limits of World-History*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, pp. 44–45.

56. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literature*, London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis, 2002, p. 7.

57. Anindyo Roy, *Civility and Empire: Literature and culture in British India, 1822–1922*, New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis, 2005, p. i.

58. Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*, London: James Currey, 1995, p. 49.

59. Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Decolonizing the Mind*, p. 3.

sense at all depends more on the West than on the Orient, and this sense is directly indebted to various Western techniques of representation that make the Orient visible, clear, “there” in discourse about it.⁶⁰

Said’s analysis makes it clear how “the Orient” or the “exotic other” is constructed, to quote Robert Young, “in a representation that is then transmitted from text to text,”⁶¹ demonstrating “a consistent discursive register of particular perceptions, vocabularies and modes of representation... extending across the humanities and social sciences – from travel accounts to history, from literature to racial theory, from economics to autobiography, from philosophy to linguistics.” Young further notes, that all these texts share a “consistent colonial ideology in their language” and “subject matter” to develop “a form of knowledge” that was simultaneously deployed and utilized in “a structure of power, namely colonial domination.”⁶²

Said’s theorization as well as Young’s commentary is extremely pertinent to our comprehending the diasporic writers’ politics of representation vis-à-vis their tendencies to exoticize the ancestral motherland in their narratives in order to establish, how such a representation is “closely tied up with both identity and knowledge,”⁶³ and eventually with the acquisition of power for, according to Foucault, there is no “knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations.”⁶⁴ Both Naipaul and Lahiri take recourse to the Western mode of representation and reconstruct as “exotic other” their ancestral homeland. Lahiri’s emphasis on the representation of otherness and difference is clearly illustrated in the text as Subhash, Lahiri’s protagonist from India, describes his first impression of Rhode Island:

But he was no longer in Tollygunge. He had stepped out of it. The difference was so extreme that he could not accommodate the two places together in his mind. In this enormous new country, there seemed to be nowhere for the old to reside.

Lahiri’s orientalist gaze perceives/represents even an urban Indian locale as an old, exotic, and faraway place which cannot be accommodated in the new world. Her obligation to satisfy metropolitan expectations leads her to portray India as “the

60. Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 21–22.

61. Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2001, p. 388.

62. Young, *Postcolonialism*, pp. 387–88.

63. See Stuart Hall, “Introduction,” *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall, 1997, London: Sage, 2003, p. 5.

64. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: Vintage Books, 1995, p. 27.

Other” of the West in her narrative which, in turn, becomes the performative basis for the constitution of an identity that has affiliation with the metropolis. Equally significant in this exoticizing process is the depiction of Indian customs and rituals, for according to Geertz, “all meanings about the ‘other’ can be captured mainly in the ‘thick descriptions’ of rituals and customs.”⁶⁵ Given below is an extract from *The Lowland* describing the rituals performed by an Indian widow after her husband’s death which provides an excellent example of the unabashed exoticism performed by the author in the text:

For ten days after his death there were rules to follow. She did not wash her clothes or wear slippers or comb her hair...The vermillion was washed clean from her hair, the iron bangle removed from her wrist...She was given white sarees to wear in place of coloured ones, so that she resembled the other widows in the family. Women three times her age.⁶⁶

The vermillion, the iron bangle, sarees, names of festivals like Durgo Pujo and the performance of culture-specific rituals are not only the signifiers of exotic otherness of the natives but also the technique through which the author places their traditions, culture and society in a distant time and place. Jacques Rancière says in this connection that a work of art is “political insofar as it frames not only works or monuments, but also a specific space-time sensorium, as this sensorium defines ways of being together or being apart, of being inside or outside, in front of or in the middle of, etc.”⁶⁷ So the above passage, while displaying the exotic cultural difference of the Indians through the representation of age old Indian customs and rituals which have no relevance for modern Indians, places the Indian culture in some distant “exotic realm” and moves the author, apart from and outside this realm, to a centre which is essentially hegemonic in its tendencies.

Harry Harootunian, quoting Victor Segalen observes that “exoticism” is about going back in time, in history.⁶⁸ Perhaps this explains why Lahiri goes back in time to construct her narrative around the Naxalite movement, a rebellion that took place in the 1960s and 1970s against the landowners and the government in India.

65. See Sunil Bhatia, *American Karma: Race, Culture and Identity in the Indian Diaspora*, New York: New York University Press, 2007, p. 46.

66. Lahiri, *The Lowland*, pp. 107–8.

67. Jacques Rancière is quoted by Benjamin Wihstutz, “Introduction,” *Performance and the Politics of Space: Theatre and Topology*, eds. Erika Fischer-Lichte and Benjamin Wihstutz, New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis, 2013, p. 5, to explain how “a politics of art need not be bound to political content.”

68. Harootunian, *Foreword in Essay on Exoticism*, p. xiii.

Given below, is an extract from the text, explaining the origin and agenda of the movement:

In 1967... they started hearing about Naxalbari...groups of sharecroppers began retaliating... this time their tactics were militant. Armed with primitive weapons, carrying red flags, shouting Long Live Mao Tse-tung...On Lenin's birthday, April 22, 1969, a third communist party was launched in Calcutta. The members called themselves Naxalites, in honor of what had happened at Naxalbari... The chief task of the new party was to organize the peasantry. The tactic would be guerilla warfare. The enemy was the Indian state.⁶⁹

Guerilla warfare, primitive weapons and militant tactics are expressions in the above description which situate a specific period of Indian history in a primitive and exotic space and time. The representation of history, thus, remains integral to the performance of exoticism by the diasporic writers, for according to Célestin, exoticism is "an aesthetization of history." He says, "History – that is, its presence or absence – becomes the factor that determines whether a given text is exoticizing or not."⁷⁰

Stuart Hall says that "we all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always 'in context,' positioned."⁷¹ Located at the Western metropolitan centre of power, both Naipaul and Lahiri function within the Western systems of knowledge and reconstruct the people, history and culture of their ancestral homeland conforming to the categories of knowledge of the West to forge an identity which is in league with the West. Taking the West as the point of reference, both these writers court identification with metropolitan culture and perceive and represent the history, culture, traditions and rituals of their ancestral homeland as strange/different/exotic. The act of representing the otherness of the homeland becomes, in effect, the act of forging identification with the West and subsequently with positions of power and authority. Taken in this sense, the production of identity, for the diasporic writer, becomes "transferential" as, to quote Homi Bhabha's words which he uses in another context in *Nation and Narration*, "[I]t is constituted through the locus of the Other which suggests... that the agency of identification is never pure or holistic but always constituted in a process of substitution, displacement or projection."⁷²

69. Lahiri, *The Lowland*, pp. 20–33.

70. Célestin, *From Cannibals to Radicals*, p. 171.

71. Hall, *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, p. 222.

72. Homi K. Bhabha, 'Dessimination: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation' in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha, London: Routledge, 1990, p. 313.

Hence, the identity of the diasporic writer is made possible and is sustained through “the locus of the Other” where the substitution/ displacement/ projection of the exotic characteristics on “the Other” defines the identity of the diasporic writer. Such a performative representation of the exotic otherness of the culture, history and people of the ancestral homeland in the narratives of diaspora serve to bolster their hegemonic status at the Western metropolitan centre, and hence, may be viewed as an enactment of the performances by which these writers play out their identities and realign their power relations in their narratives. Exoticism, as discussed earlier, thus, emerges as a “representation-based identity politics,”⁷³ a “transformative performance,”⁷⁴ revealing the constitution of an identity which is essentially different, in its occupation of space and relationship to power, from that of the “exotic other(s),” as Turner says, “self is presented through the performance of roles, through performance that breaks roles, and through declaring to a given public that one has undergone a transformation of state or status.”⁷⁵

Both Naipaul and Lahiri, like Fanon’s “colonized intellectual” seem to be “mesmerized” by “mummified fragments,” and hence stick to or revive, “traditions” which are no more in use or practice, in contemporary India. Their “penchant for past” or for the “dead traditions” makes them travel in time and history, to construct in their narratives, an “inventory” of “inert, already invalidated” customs, traditions and culture.⁷⁶ Behind the performance of exoticism in their narratives lies their desire for identification with the metropolitan culture, to be perceived and recognized as an ally of the dominant West. Taken in this sense, their narratives emerge as prominent sites for the production of an identity which is dependent on their performance of exoticism as a means to emphasize their difference/otherness from the systems of reference of their ancestral culture. According to Marx, “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness.”⁷⁷ Programmed in the school of Western systems of knowledge, both Naipaul and Lahiri view the path ahead only as determined by the colonial masters and structure their discourses conforming to

73. Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p. 249.

74. See Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance*, New York: PAJ Publications, 1987, p. 75. Turner cites Ronald Grimes to define the term ritual as “transformative performance.”

75. Turner, *The Anthropology*, p. 81.

76. Fanon, *The Wretched*, p. 160.

77. Marx cited in Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780–1950*, New York: Anchor Books, 1960, p. 284, to illustrate how Marx’s observations have proved to be “fruitful and important.”

the needs “conducive to maintenance of domination.”⁷⁸ By aligning themselves with the Western theoretical enterprise of “othering” the non-West, they carve out an identity which has an affiliation with the hegemonic West. Representing the points of difference of the “exotic other,” hence becomes a means for the diasporic writer, I conclude, of constructing points of identification with the imperial/dominant culture. In other words, both of them perform exoticism as their *rites de passage* to assert positions of power, hegemony and authority or to attain, what Ngũgĩ terms as “colonial elitedom.”⁷⁹

78. Ryan cited in Roy, *Civility and Empire*, p. 95.

79. See Ngũgĩ, *Decolonizing the Mind*, p. 12. He uses the term to show how the holder of English language was privileged, given credit cards, and how English was the “magic formula to colonial elitedom.”

Turning the exotic into the familiar

Tabish Khair's novels and their contemporary cultural and political context

Liliana Sikorska

Tabish Khair, a poet, novelist, literary critic and professor of English literature, is one of the principal voices in contemporary literary as well as political scene. Khair grew up and was educated in India in a (secularized) Muslim family. He has never seen religion as an important factor in a writer's life, yet in today's world, more often than not, he presents himself as a Muslim. On December 23, 2011, he posted "A Christmas poem for 2011" on his facebook page. The poem reads:

Walking to "Bethlehem" today I found
The bodies of three wise men by the road.
Around the lifeless neck of each was bound
A placard: "Nigger," "Immigrant," two said;
The third, "I shot the bastard; I was bored."
Their precious gifts were gone; their wisdom dead.

Searching for "the promised place,"¹ the speaker is not aided by a star, or the inhabitants of the land, and in the end finds Bethlehem "bombed to bits". Khair, a "cultural" Muslim, as he says about himself – a non-believer brought up in the Islamic tradition – inverts the message of Christmas, of peace, prosperity and the promise of the renewal of life so familiar in Western cultures. For Christians, Christmas is a holy day conveying hope for humanity's redemption. Notwithstanding the dogmatic divisions within the Christian Church, Christ's nativity is always celebrated as a holiday of togetherness and forgiveness, uniting various factions through goodwill and charitable acts towards others. Khair's message, however, is that of devastation. The contemporary world fails to see the guiding star, nor does it abide by the wisdom of the Three Kings. The three wise men are killed, and their bodies become those of the immigrants whom we, the Westerners, literally and metaphorically push to the side of the road, the margin of our world; meanwhile Bethlehem, the city sacred to Jews,

1. Tabish Khair, "A Christmas Poem for 2011."

Christians and Muslims alike, is demolished. The last image offered in the poem is that of something, perhaps the Cross, being “dragged uphill.” In this way Khair fuses the representations of the Nativity and the Crucifixion. Coupled with the dead bodies from the initial verses, the poem exudes a profound sense of dejection. At the beginning of 2017, such hopelessness had a strikingly prophetic meaning, as it had been only a couple of weeks before, in December 2016, when the Christmas market in Berlin was attacked by an ISIS terrorist. The readily proclaimed “war on terror” remains an ongoing enterprise in which, however, it is sometimes difficult to discern between friend and foe. For Khair, it does not matter who does violence to whom. What matters is the wreaking of havoc as well as the destruction of harmony and peace making security all the more illusory, a luxury not everyone can afford. For us, the news is still shocking; we are righteously outraged – we vow to fight terrorism – yet the impact of each and every attack after 9/11 and 7/7 decreases. In the world we live in, each ensuing tragedy immunizes us against the next one. If we pray, we do not pray for the tragedies not to happen anymore; we pray for them to happen elsewhere, which seems to be the saddest legacy of our age. Terror and death have become all too familiar occurrences in contemporary life, and so are the suspicions and speculations concerning strangers, the ones we do not want among us. This is how the new xenophobia is being born, and this is what is addressed in the two novels by Tabish Kair: *How to Fight Islamist Terror From the Missionary Position*,² which tackles the issue of conjectures regarding others, and *(Just Another) Jihadi Jane*,³ narrating the problems of (non-) belonging. The novels depict characters whose moral choices the West has always struggled to understand; the former revolves around misconceptions concerning the public life of a devout Muslim who quite unsurprisingly becomes taken for a terrorist; the latter is the monologue of a young woman who, while trying to remain a devout Muslim, becomes an unwilling jihadist, a female reluctant fundamentalist. “When the planes are birds of prey,” Khair writes in a poem entitled “Prayer,”⁴ everything we think we know about the world is turned upside down. The present paper discusses the reversal, or rather the exchange, of the exotic for the familiar as crafted by the author in the above mentioned novels.

2. Tabish Khair, *How to Fight Islamist Terror from a Missionary Position*, 2012, London: Corsair, 2014.

3. Tabish Khair, *Just Another Jihadi Jane*, London: Penguin, 2016.

4. Tabish Khair, *Man of Glass*, New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2010, p. 54.

Political contexts of terrorism, past and contemporary

As has been noted by researchers dealing with the origins of terrorist movements, contemporary terrorism is largely the by-product of Western capitalism, born together with the creation of the grand 19th century empires and their ensuing ethnic conflicts. Late nineteenth and early twentieth century anarchist movements, so aptly described by Joseph Conrad in his *Secret Agent* (1907), were the culmination of century-old struggles on many different fronts, where aggression seemed indispensable. At the onset of such actions, an Italian republican extremist, Carlo Pisane (1818–1857), claimed that violence was necessary to draw attention to the cause. Paradoxically, he saw a didactic purpose in violence – the more spectacular, the better.⁵ Current research on the social and psychological aspects of terrorism frequently returns to its 19th century origins, linking the ideological basis of terrorist behavior with its international context, exemplified by the post WWII hostilities at two major hot-spots: the on-going guerilla war in Palestine,⁶ and the terrorist attacks in Northern Ireland. Negative stereotyping and state sponsored brutality against racial and religious minority groups and their resulting group bonding are the dominant features of the twentieth century ethnic conflict, which, rather than being referred to as “the clash of civilizations,” Soeters terms “the clash of stereotypes.”⁷ This idea, in fact, reminds one of Vamik Volkan’s earlier statements concerning the human need to have enemies and allies, with the former functioning as “external stabilizers.”⁸

The already mentioned 9/11 and 7/7 attacks brought the religious conflict back into focus. Once having been figures of exotic unreality, the terrorist, the suicide bomber, the Islamist become the characters who in their mundane existence are nevertheless terrifying. What happened in the “kingdoms far, far away” in the second half of the 20th century has been happening close to home at the beginning of the 21st. The war in Syria and the resultant mass immigration to the European

5. Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, p. 5.

6. For more on the connection between the Israeli – Palestinian conflict and Al-Qaeda, see Alfred Gertainy, *The Terrorist Conjunction. The United States, the Israeli Pletinian Conflict and Al-Qa’ida*, London: Praeger Security International, 2007.

7. Joseph L. Soeters, *Ethnic Conflict and Terrorism. The Origins and Dynamics of Civil Wars*, London: Routledge, 2005. The “clashes” are analyzed by Dancygier through contemporary socio-political theories connected with various constituencies in which the population is mainly of immigrants. Her investigation is also connected with the way in which various countries grant citizenship rights to immigrants, see Raphaela Dancygier, *Immigration and Conflict in Europe*, Cambridge: University Press, 2010, p. 110.

8. Vamik Volkan, *The Need to have Enemies and Allies. From Clinical Practice to International Relationships*, Northvale, New Jersey and London: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1988, p. ix.

Union made us think that once again our borders are threatened. The “immigration crisis” brought to light new European demons. Whereas the old ones, in Norman Cohn’s delineation, were the heretics, magicians and witches,⁹ the new ones have been epitomized as darker skinned immigrants,¹⁰ whose presence amongst us can be both the cause for mixophilia as well as mixophobia.¹¹ Interestingly, as one of the characters in the novel (Ravi) observes, all faculty members – and this is the truth universally acknowledged – love multicultural literature:

It reminds them of their grandparents in the colonies. Of course, they love Rushdie and Naipaul. Naipaul, Kureishi, Rushdie: why these guys are so Indian they even speak with an English accent! That’s why people like us should write novels, yaar; imagine your colleagues wriggling in their desire to be open and their subterranean terror of us pilfering their bread-and-butter tongue, and that too in our consciously roti-and-ghee accent.¹²

Symbolically, the new European demon has brought about pollution, the “dirt” in Mary Douglas’ classic explanation.¹³ As if to illustrate Elleke Boehmer’s claim that “postcolonial literature is marked by experiences of cultural exclusion and division under the empire,”¹⁴ in the poem entitled “Immigrant” Khair writes about immigration as a deeply painful experience (“It hurts to walk on new legs:/The curse of consonants, the wobble of vowels,” which can never be “a fair trade”) and he lets his character Karim in *How to Fight Islamist Terror*, be misjudged only because he is loyal, religious and secretive,¹⁵ and that is enough to generate suspicion. According to the writer, there are three factors whose amalgamation created both the old and the new xenophobia: they are fear,¹⁶ difference, and contact/the border.¹⁷ These attributes in our brave new (collective) world are the cause of anxiety and suspicion.

9. Norman Cohn, *Europe’s Inner Demons. The Demonisation of Christians in Medieval Christendom*, London: Totterdown Books, 2005.

10. Khair, *How to Fight*, p. 79.

11. Zygmunt Bauman, *Strangers at our Door*, London: Polity, 2016, p. 9.

12. Khair, *How to Fight*, p. 44.

13. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, London: Routledge, 2002.

14. Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 3.

15. Tabish Khair, *Man of Glass*, p. 66. The poem is based on H. C. Andersen’s ‘The Little Mermaid’.

16. Fear is also one of the dominant weapons of terrorism. Interestingly, Altheide points to the links between terrorism and the politics of fear when alluding to “politically infused fear.” David L. Altheide, *Terrorism and the Politics of Fear*, Lanham and New York: Altamira Press, 2006, pp. 4–7.

17. Tabish Khair in *The New Xenophobia*, Oxford and New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 25, claims that “no stranger is a pure stranger.” He challenges the common perception that Muslims are new to Europe while in fact Bosnian Muslims have lived in Europe for centuries.

As has been frequently stressed, the academic fascination with multiculturalism does not, however, change the fact that the current criticism has both monsterized and familiarized the figure of the immigrant, the stranger.¹⁸ Khair argues that “[t]he stranger’s body, once defined as out of place and a threat (a monster, a vampire, an impurity, a contagion), can be easily eradicated; actually that is the only option left to anyone who wants to survive.”¹⁹ His assertion is akin to what Julia Kristeva in her seminal work *Strangers to Ourselves* highlights: strangeness gives us a sense of discomfort and difference; the stranger, the foreigner “... is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder.”²⁰ Comparably to Khair, Kristeva links the negative space associated with the “foreigner” with the birth of nationalism and eventually totalitarianism. Present-day Europe conceptualizes the immigrant as an entity threatening to destabilize our way of life while failing to recognize that our lack of security arises due to internal (growing crime rate due to greater polarization of wealth and poverty) as much as external factors (migrants with different religious backgrounds); hence the paradox of the stranger who can only be accepted if we accept the “strangers in ourselves.”

Western perceptions of Muslims

Such preoccupations are shown in Khair’s *How to Fight Islamist Terror from a Missionary Position*, where the narrator observes the growing “fascist face of Islamism” to which his friend responds that, unlike fascism, Islamism did not threaten ethnic or nationalist cleansing. Still, “Islam, like any other religion or even an atheistic ideology like communism, could be put to fascist uses, and [he points out] that many Islamic fundamentalists – with their mobs and chanting, their whips and executions, their insistence on absolute obedience – behaved very much like

In the novel, Karim’s former tenants were from Yugoslavia. For more on the contacts with Islam in the Anglo-Saxon world, see Caroline Scarfe Beckett, *Anglo-Saxon Perceptions of the Islamic World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

18. For more on the Gothic images of race, see H. L. Malchow, *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth Century Britain*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996. Malchow’s study analyzes the interconnectedness between the developing discipline of racialism, the study of races and nineteenth century racism. Similar arguments one can find in Tabish Khair’s, *The Gothic, Postcolonialism and Otherness*, London: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2015.

19. Khair, *The New Xenophobia*, p. 19.

20. Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press 1991, p. 1.

fascists.”²¹ The novel brings to light prejudices and suppositions connected with the Western perception of a Muslim man. The narrator is acutely aware that “[i]f you have a Muslim name, you have to be wary of some contexts.”²² Uncharacteristically, the portrait of an intensely religious man is created not by a Westerner but by two men who come from the Indian subcontinent. The unnamed narrator, a relatively young Pakistani man living in Denmark working at the Århus University, finds himself in search of a place to live because of his divorce, and by sheer coincidence he and his university friend, Ravi (a Hindu), decide to share an apartment with an older Muslim man, a taxi driver, Karim.²³ “At forty-five, Karim was more than a decade older than us. He had a full flowing beard, speckled with grey. Like Ravi he was an Indian; like me he was a Muslim. Unlike me, he believed in God and his prophets, especially the last one; unlike Ravi, he did not get worked up about what the West had been doing to all the rest....”²⁴ Despite Ravi’s social talents in eliciting information from people, throughout the story he is not able to find out much about Karim. It is months later when Karim discloses that he was a student in Cairo and had a B. A. “in Islamic jurisprudence and Arabic,” there he got married but never carries any photos of his wife as it is against his religion.²⁵ Such revelations, coupled with Karim’s hosting of a Quran reading group with his lodgers functioning as guarantors that he would never be alone with a woman to whom he is not related, make him if not an Islamic fundamentalist, at least a figure of mistrust. Ravi’s and the narrator’s doubts, being the major constituent of their growing anxiety concerning Karim’s activities, are intensified through the image of Karim’s closed doors. His pristine private space stands for his inner cleanliness for the seclusion of the religious loner who isolates himself from the outside world to preserve his way of life in an increasingly hostile ambience. He never partakes in any of the “pleasures” of the life of his lodgers subsumed in nights out, drinking and dining in mixed company.

21. Khair, *How to Fight*, p. 131.

22. Khair, *How to Fight*, p. 173.

23. The apartment consisted of two bedrooms and the living room, and housed three men. When Ravi remarked that they were in the humanities but not gay, Karim responded by slapping himself on both cheeks and says “Allah forbid.” (Khair, *How to Fight*, p. 7). Still, the novel does not shun the issue of homosexuality as it contains the story of Great Claus and Little Claus (the two gay men, one of them lived with his wife, Pernille), who are friends with Karim and his lodgers. (Khair, *How to Fight*, p. 38). The three men share an apartment, but they do not share a life. As Karim says “What you do in your rooms is between you and Allah. But not a drop in my room, if you call me your brother. In my room, I pray” (Khair, *How to Fight*, p. 9).

24. Khair, *How to Fight*, p. 4.

25. Khair, *How to Fight*, p. 58, p. 59.

Regardless of his orthodoxy, instead of picking a fight about the interpretation of the Quran, Karim admits that he is not a worldly-wise person despite his hard won postgraduate degree. His belief is strengthened not through poverty and misfortune as the Westerners customarily assume, but through his empathy. He has "... seen the good suffer and the righteous forsaken" and "selfishness and wickedness triumph in this world." And this is a good enough reason for the existence of a hell along with a heaven!²⁶ Karim contends Ravi's declaration that we bear our own hell, and remains a religious introvert, the very opposite of Ravi, a Westernized secularized extrovert who nevertheless has retained some of his "Orientalism," like paying for his friends outings even if he himself did not have a lot of money. For the narrator, Ravi's extravagance is understandable but Karim's austerity is not. Although the narrator confesses that Ravi had never shared his own "mistrust of Karim's narrow religiosity,"²⁷ both the narrator and Ravi create a portrait of Karim from what it is they do not know and construct a story out of his absences:

It was Friday afternoons and evenings that he kept free: for his weekly trip to the mosque, which was a room in a private house When he was not working, he was usually home, reading some commentary on the Quran, praying, telling his blue-speckled-with-black beads or watching TV in his room. He would tidy up regularly, even offering to tidy up our rooms if we were around. Cleanliness was a mantra with him.²⁸

Purity for Karim also meant that he would never let his lodgers touch the Koran as both of them were physically and spiritually unclean. Yet, when Ravi wants to learn how to pray like a Muslim, Karim agrees to instruct him, and the narrator wryly recalls that the conversion of an infidel can be treated as "the secret side-door to paradise." Besides, Karim's traditional views are exposed when he fervently defends the Shar'ia law court's commanding the execution by beheading of the Pakistani Christian: "Anyone who insults the Prophet, peace be upon him, should be killed."²⁹ The above mentioned utterance stands for one of the few occasions when Karim voices his opinions. The fact that Karim never joins in their "sessions of complaining" against the West, his reticence, is seen in his muted responses to the difficult international situation arising from the internal conflicts in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Even though Karim reads the internet pages in English, Urdu and Arabic, the only comments he offers are generalities like "It

26. Khair, *How to Fight*, p. 25.

27. Khair, *How to Fight*, p. 176.

28. Khair, *How to Fight*, pp. 31–32.

29. Khair, *How to Fight*, p. 135.

is better today,'” or “‘It is a bit worse, I think.’”³⁰ Khair notices the misconception of Karim’s preoccupations as the essence of the contemporary distrust towards the stranger. This extremely private, almost reclusive figure, becomes an object of guesswork. Not unlike the characters in the gothic novel, in the eyes of his lodgers he is transformed into the mysterious evil one. The puzzling phone calls – which the narrator identifies as ones by “someone who was doing the *tabligh* trying to preach the virtues of the Quran” make the narrator uneasy,³¹ and so does Karim’s temporary disappearance at the time of the attack on the Danish cartoonist, known as the Danish Axe Plot. As a result of his absence, the two lodgers wrongly accuse and report him to the police. Predictably, Karim is not part of an Al Qaeda cell; his hasty departure was on account of his ailing wife who was 23 years older and suffering from Alzheimer’s disease.³²

The suppositions and the mystery foreground the attraction of the (non-existent) terrorist theme of the novel stressing the reversal of the familiar and the exotic. As it transpires, the novel is crafted as a well-made drama, with all the elements fitting the puzzle in the last part, all loose ends tied. It is divulged that it was Ibrahim, the Somali husband of the young Bosnian (“Yugoslavian”) woman Asja – whose family were Karim’s former lodgers – who was responsible for the abortive Axe Plot.³³ The striking title of the novel is a result of Khair’s reading of two earlier novels by a Canadian and a Caribbean writer, Dany Lafferrière (b. 1953) and Sam Selvon (1923–1994), respectively. As the writer puts it “... I never met either of them – except through their books. The dedication was for their books, *How To Make Love to a Negro without Getting Tired* (*Comment faire l’amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer*, 1985, translated into English 1987, LS) and *The Lonely Londoners*, respectively (1956, LS), as I felt that in terms of subject matter (immigrants in Europe) and humour, my novel was of a similar type.”³⁴ It is the character of Ravi who introduces the playful tone to serious matters. He frequently parodies the language of the overly devout Muslims. In a note to the narrator, he refers to Karim’s absence as his “Hegira.” He is painfully aware of the typecasts through which the Pakistani man is seen; nevertheless, he is not afraid to use the stereotypes as “conversation starters” in his picking up of women. Accordingly, he tells one of them:

30. Both lodgers talk politics almost all the time “Ravi and I had opinions; we were members of democratic chat groups, we signed Avaz petitions, our Facebooks were cluttered with radical quotations.” Khair, *How to Fight*, p. 57.

31. Khair, *How to Fight*, p. 18.

32. Khair, *How to Fight*, p. 165.

33. Khair, *How to Fight*, p. 169.

34. (an e-mail of February 6th 2017).

“... we all know how it is ... in Pak: veiled mother, bearded father, married at the age of fifteen, son divided between his halal mentality and the desire to make it in the pork-eating West, unwilling to acknowledge his religious background in public and relinquish it in private”³⁵

The above mentioned predicament of Muslim men caters to the representation of the believers through their aggressive masculine ethos. Intent on destroying Western hedonistic lifestyles, but craving the freedom the West embodies, the fighters for the Islamic State exemplify the internal conflicts between the religious and the secular attitudes. Accordingly, Khair’s *Jihadi Jane* offers a seemingly stereotypical portrait of a Muslim insurgent, but more importantly, the novel touches the existing problem, that of the second generation immigrants torn between tradition and modernity.³⁶ It is a version of “my daughter the fanatic,” the “coming of age” or “rites of passage” novel, but this is not its main value as a narrative – even if, at first glance, it is yet another text about the maturation of the homegrown teenage terrorist (in the style of John Updike’s *The Terrorist*, 2006, or an earlier novel, Doris Lessing’s *The Good Terrorist*, 1985),³⁷ who instead of a normal teenage rebellion goes to the Middle East to join the holy war. Shunning the widespread negative fascination with terrorism, the novel illustrates the mechanisms which radicalize young Western female Muslims by depicting the journey of the two girls – Jamilla (the narrator) and Ameena her school friend – to and from radical Islam. Jamilla declares that the name is fake and yet she mentions her history teacher calling her “Jamie”: “I hated being called Jamie ... but evidently Europeans cannot stop

35. Khair, *How to Fight*, p. 89. The situation described is, of course, not true, as the narrator’s parents met at the university (and so did Khair’s parents). Hanif Kureishi’s short story under the working title “Nowhere” may serve as a warning against all too easy typecasting: “My town in my country was destroyed. I fled and travelled here to the land where the Enlightenment originated, to the democracy where I became a nigger overnight. The foreigner has been suspect from the beginning of time. But let us not forget: we are all potential foreigners. One day you too could be turned over from the white side of life to the black. It takes a moment. Others will notice you do not belong; they will fear you.” (2017, an unpublished short story, used by permission of the author).

36. “In *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position*, I wrote in a humorous way mostly about the prejudices facing a religious Muslim man. In *Jihadi Jane* I addressed the prejudices of religious Muslims. Both had to be addressed: the prejudices against Muslims and the prejudices of Muslims. Too many people, on all sides, Muslims and non-Muslims, see only one side of this equation. Hence, these two novels” (an e-mail of February 2, 2017).

37. For more on the relationship between novelists and terrorists, see Margaret Scanlan, *Plotting Terror. Novelists and Terrorists in Contemporary Fiction*, Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2001.

themselves from giving new names to people and places,”³⁸ the statement echoing all the accusations of negative “Orientalism” poignantly expressed by Edward Said.³⁹

Jamilla’s point of view builds the structure of the novel; the plot is fashioned as a long interview/confession of Jamilla, seduced by the internet campaigning of a woman named Hejjiye, and enlisted to become a jihadi. Hejjiye was a very skillful manipulator, her internet postings portrayed the struggle as an “honorable” adventure, while her cat photos added a homely feel to her life in Syria. “How can you not love a cat lover?” Jamilla thought.⁴⁰ Contemporary critical sources concerning terrorism all stress the role of the internet and media in the Middle Eastern revolutions. For Keeble “[m]ilitary strategy becomes essentially a media event: an entertainment, a spectacle.”⁴¹ Likewise, Boehmer’s and Morton’s reflections on terror and the postcolonial draw attention to the ways in which terror functions as a spectacle in today’s world, being written by the discourses of politics and journalism.⁴² Having watched the jihad online, the two main characters join the war effort in Syria. Each of them has slightly different reasons for doing so. Ameenah, a plain girl who loses her English boyfriend despite their sexual trysts, is the first one to espouse the ideology of ISIS, intent on fighting to spread *Dar al-Islam*. Jamilla, in contrast, wants to preserve the purity of her faith. She aspires to remain a believer in the face of an almost Swiftian re-reading of the religious dogmas of those around her,⁴³ beginning with her brother Mohammad, who not only reviles the Western lifestyle (while living in England) but would condemn “almost all of the other Muslims who did not believe and practice the faith like we did....”⁴⁴ Jamilla disagrees with the reductive, fanatical orthodoxy: “I still believe in Allah, don’t misunderstand me, but I do not think Allah is a fashion designer. He observes people’s hearts, not their clothes. This is not what Abba believed; this is not what my big brother, Mohammad

38. Khair, *Jihadi Jane*, p. 8.

39. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1978, London: Penguin, 1995.

40. Khair, *Jihadi Jane*, p. 59.

41. Richard Keeble, *Secret State. Silent Press. New Militarism, the Gulf and the Modern Image of Warfare*, London: University of Luton Press, 1997, p. 8.

42. Elleke Boehmer and Stephen Morton, “Introduction: Terror and the Postcolonial” in *Terror and the Postcolonial*, eds. Elleke Boehmer and Stephen Morton, 2010, London: Wiley Blackwell, 2015, pp. 1–23.

43. Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of a Tub* published originally in 1704.

44. Khair, *Jihadi Jane*, pp. 33–34. Hejjiye talks about the lands of war *Dar-al-Harb* “by which Hejjiye meant almost all the lands outside the Islamic State, because Daesh did not consider most Muslims, let alone non-Muslims, to be practicing the right faith.” Khair, *Jihadi Jane*, p. 109.

believes.”⁴⁵ And in a way, she is voicing what the nameless narrator of *How to fight the Islamist Terror* had also noticed, that the narrow literal reading of the Quran was used to justify “beheadings or the veiling of women.”⁴⁶

Unlike the eponymous hero of Hanif Kureishi’s seminal short story “My Son the Fanatic” who grew up in a mixed, secularized family,⁴⁷ Jamilla comes from the religious “brown working class,” and grows up amongst the inhabitants of the famous London Tower Hamlets. “The so-called brown working class moved in. It was not the brown drinking class though; it was mostly the Muslim working class. The smell of vomit and beer disappeared. The syringes and condoms disappeared. The graffiti got multilingual. All the rest stayed as it was.”⁴⁸ It is not Jamilla but Ameena, who resembles the conflicted characters from Kureishi’s fiction;⁴⁹ brought up in the West, the parents of the characters being the first generation of British Muslims, they want to blend in and live secular well-to-do lives. Their children, however, feel rootless. Ameena’s parents are divorced; her father is a banker with a new family. Jamilla’s father is a taxi driver, a Muslim *pater familias* who takes his son to the mosque, but tells his daughter to pray at home. While Ameena’s mother has a job, Jamilla’s mother never leaves the apartment. She speaks no English and never contradicts “Abba or Mohammad.”⁵⁰ Jamilla also accepts that following her father’s death her brother becomes the head of the family, and his word is the law; otherwise Jamilla does not seem to have any emotional bonds with her brother. Nor does she have the sense of belonging to a youth group in her school; such utter exclusion results in her ensuing alienation. In sociology, we recognize that the processes of inclusion and exclusion are necessary in the forming of social-identity, yet social ostracism can very easily lead to retaliation.⁵¹

45. Khair, *Jihadi Jane*, p. 7. An earlier novel, David Caute’s *Fatima’s Scarf* (1998), shows that the drive towards fundamentalism is not simply a response to exclusion. It might be worth noting that the original purpose of veiling was to make women inconspicuous, while now the veiled woman in the West is the most visible. The issue of veiling as protection is also mentioned in Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*, London: Penguin, 2017, pp. 15–16.

46. Khair, *Jihadi Jane*, p. 187.

47. Hanif Kureishi, *Love in a Blue Time*, London: Simon and Schuster, 1997, pp. 119–131.

48. Khair, *Jihadi Jane*, p. 3.

49. See, for example, *The Black Album*, London: Faber and Faber, 1995, and the story of Shahid’s struggle to be British but also to maintain his Muslim identity.

50. Khair, *Jihadi Jane*, p. 11.

51. See Dominic Abrams, et al., eds, *The Social Psychology of Inclusion and Exclusion*, Psychology Press: New York, 2005.

The feeling of non-belonging, however, is not obliterated even when both girls join Hejjiye's group. What they hoped to create was a new family structure, to substitute for their own malfunctioning ones. Despite the close-knit group work, the orphanage in Syria does not become their refuge. It becomes their prison, where orphaned girls are divided into two groups: the pretty ones who are used as wives of the jihadis, and the less attractive ones that become suicide bombers.⁵² *Dar-al-Islam* might be the land of the (forcibly) pure, but it is certainly not the land of the free. Khair's novel thus clarifies what one can find in works such as Silke's on the psychological profiling of terrorists, and Strindberg and Wårn concerning the processes of radicalization.⁵³

Identity-anxiety and conflict among immigrants

There are many different reasons that make young people join radical movements, with the processes connected with marginalization being a significant one. The new generation of British Muslims is motivated by a desire to possess more clearly defined individual identities and is against compulsory assimilation, internalized self-rejection, and social conformity – forces at the root of the contemporary conflict between Islam and Christianity, the East and West. Khair's novel explores such drives in relation to young Muslim women, who experience not only the hostility in their peer groups but also misapprehension within their families. Whereas Jamilla is a pretty and smart but withdrawn and virtuous girl, Ameena is plain, promiscuous and much less gifted. When her grades deteriorate and an affair with a boy she likes comes to an end, Ameena finds religion.⁵⁴ At first, she sees wearing a scarf as adding to the feminine mystique. Later, she becomes a frequent visitor to the mosque. Ameena's metamorphosis into a practicing traditional Muslim woman with all the paraphernalia of the fundamentalists – the books, the clothes, the niqab – is an outward manifestation of her internal conflicts escalating because of her dislike of her father's new marriage and her mother's secular (sinful?) life. "The ghost of hurt that I had detected in Ameena's liquid eyes would change shape and harden into anger and resentment."⁵⁵ Daphne Grace notices that the ideology

52. Khair, *Jihadi Jane*, p. 129.

53. Andrew Silke, ed., *Terrorists, Victims and Society. Psychological Perspectives on Terrorism and its Consequences*, Chichester: Atrium, 2006. Anders Strindberg and Mats Wårn, *Islamism. Religion, Radicalization, and Resistance*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011.

54. Because she is no longer a virgin before her marriage to an older jihadi in Syria, before their escape, she buys artificial hymens on-line. Jamilla worries about "the capacity of a made-in-China hymen to deceive a jihadi," Khair, *Jihadi Jane*, p. 106.

55. Khair, *Jihadi Jane*, p. 33.

behind veiling is far more complex than a simple, or rather simplistic expression of Muslim orthodoxy, which modern Europe exoticizes. In the English speaking countries, but even more so in the French Muslim diaspora, the veil can be a symbol of the struggle for freedom against the perception of the oppressiveness of the entire tradition.⁵⁶ For Muslim women “living “between worlds” in Britain or elsewhere, the veil becomes a symbol of their religious identity as well as providing a practical means of protection against unwanted harassment;”⁵⁷ concurrently, the veil and its visible presence in European cities, signifies the exchange of the exotic and the familiar. Nevertheless, in Khair’s novel the young women see themselves as racial and religious outcasts, failing to recognize that the real or imagined estrangement is as much the result of growing up as it is the problem of the maladjustment of second generation immigrants.

A different type of bitterness is felt by Jamilla who, despite her good grades and prospects for a university education, learns that her family were not averse to the idea of higher education, “they were simply indifferent.”⁵⁸ What is even more foreseeable is when an offer for marriage comes, the family goes to meet the potential groom, and Jamilla hears the young man’s mother remark casually: “...‘girls want to study these days ... a year into your marriage all that nonsense gets forgotten. I know what I am talking about. I had a BA degree when I got married, and now I do not even remember where I put my certificates.’”⁵⁹ Here, by articulating the dilemmas of the young, Khair seems to be adhering to the common conviction of Islam being a counter-modernity force enslaving women and ensnaring men. Yet, Jamilla is neither sure about the university education, nor about marriage. Torn between loyalty and obedience and the need for independence, in spite of her legal claims to one third of the flat, according to Islamic law, and voting rights, according to British law, she feels abandoned and dispossessed by both systems.

The novel first appeared in India under the title *Jihadi Jane*. The English edition has the title *Just Another Jihadi Jane*.⁶⁰ The change is significant since it points to the

56. Daphne Grace, *The Woman in the Muslin Mask*, Sterling, Virginia: Pluto Press, 2004, p. 29.

57. Grace, *The Woman*, p. 3.

58. Khair, *Jihadi Jane*, 2016, p. 65.

59. Khair, *Jihadi Jane*, p. 77. The question of marriage is also pertinent in Ameena’s story as she decides to marry the older abusive Hassan, is maltreated, and finally severely beaten, and to atone for her sins against Jamilla becomes a suicide bomber, but not to further the cause of jihad but to enable Jamilla and two prisoners, two Kurdish women, an escape. Ameena’s sacrifice is not in the name of jihad but in the name of friendship.

60. *Jihadi Jane* begins with a motto from Tony Harrison’s “V” (1985) a long poem about dividing the world: “These Vs are all the verses of life...the unending violence of US and THEM ... Hindu/Sikh, soul/body, heart v. mind/East/West, male/female, and the ground/ these features are

continual aggression. As a “coming of age” novel, it is also a meditation on freedom and imprisonment, a cultural and religious inquiry into one of the most crucial quandaries of today’s world: “...[C]an one really believe if there is no freedom to disbelieve?”⁶¹ The question is both a commentary on Islam as well as on our own blind beliefs in our way of life, our reading of politics, our own perceptions of reality as being the only right ones. In both novels, the exotic otherness seems to be accepted, assimilated and smoothed, like English Indian cuisine, or the English Indian mysticism in the style of Kureishi’s *Buddha of Suburbia*.⁶² Khair seems to challenge the notion of our ever knowing the other person, the stranger: “[w]e cannot really understand the happiness of other people. Or their sorrow.”⁶³

Khair’s character’s utterance seems to be in accord with the words of the recently deceased sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1925–2017), who emphasized that “strangers cause anxiety precisely because of being “strange” – and so fearsomely unpredictable ... we know much too little to be able to read properly their gambits and compose our fitting responses.”⁶⁴ It is only now, in the 21st century, that we understand and recognize this “unknowability.” Throughout the centuries, however, European colonial discourses created what Elleke Boehmer terms “that which is unfamiliar and extraneous to a dominant subjectivity, the opposite or negative against which an authority is defined.”⁶⁵ Both novels in question illustrate this claim. Tabish Khair does not advocate writing creatively about topical issues. Still, he stresses “... that one can write well only about concerns that are vital to oneself. As such, even though Islamism is a topical matter, it is also a vital concern to me – as a human being, as a thinking person interested in religions, and as someone born and brought up as a Muslim. I could not ignore it. I felt driven to write about it.”⁶⁶ Turning the exotic into the familiar is not a way out of the contemporary predicament of “culture clashes” and Khair’s writing does not suggest a solution. Nonetheless, his novels can be seen as akin to the medieval *specula*, they are edifying mirrors for the modern world.

fought out on. Man, resigned/ to hope from his future what his past never found.” Tony Harrison, *Collected Poems*, London: Viking, 2007, p. 266.

61. Khair, *Jihadi Jane*, p. 200.

62. Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, London: Faber and Faber, 1990.

63. Khair, *Jihadi Jane*, p. 47.

64. Zygmunt Bauman, *Strangers at Our Door*, London: Polity, 2016, p. 8.

65. Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, p. 21.

66. An e-mail of February 2, 2017.

Coloured exoticism in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*¹

Lekha Roy

The emergence of the exotic

The idea of the exotic has its origins in colonial representations of the native. According to Edward Said, exoticizing the Other was a way to limit (Oriental) reality to its representation; the Orient, said Said, constituted for the West “one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other.”² In such representations, there is an attempt to limit knowledge of the Other, and hence identity, to the represented ideal. This essay analyzes one such ideal, beauty, as a white hegemonic tool aimed at limiting knowledge of the African-American to the physical body, thus making the colour of the skin the most potent signifier of identity. Traditionally, as a white ideal building on the binary of the body/spirit, beauty symbolized (white) transcendence.³ Limiting knowledge of the African-Americans to the body would effectively deny them all access to the spirit, thus sealing off identity into a closed racialized domain. In the 1960s, the slogan “Black is Beautiful” attempted to appropriate this white idea to symbolize the binary opposite, black, as beautiful.⁴ However, countering the ideal within the same system of binaries that fostered it had the paradoxical effect of exoticizing Blackness through defamiliarization and strengthening the idea of the black body as the locus of identity.

Building on Said's contention that exoticizing the Other was a way of reducing identity to the hegemonic framework of the constructed, recent contributions to the discourse on race have focused on the representation of the black body as either exotic or reviled, in both cases connoting Black as the extreme Other on the spectrum

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1. Toni Morrison, *God Help the Child*, London: Chatto and Windus, 2015.
 2. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Penguin Books, 1995, p. 1.
 3. Lekha Roy and Rano Ringo, “Interrogating Racialized Perceptions in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *God Help the Child*,” *Dialog* 29, Spring 2016, p. 66.
 4. The phrase is believed to have been coined by John S. Rock, an African-American abolitionist.

of colours. Towards the end of the twentieth century, critics like Stuart Hall asserted that race was a “discursive construct” perpetrated through “floating” cultural signifiers,⁵ stressing the need to dismantle binaries to free the term of its linguistic and cultural origins. Frantz Fanon’s idea of “epidermalized” embodiment,⁶ and Richard Dyer’s theory of black embodiment,⁷ reinforced the idea of race as constructed and perpetrated through signifiers. In 2009, Toni Morrison stated that race had assumed a “metaphysical necessity” in the twentieth century,⁸ stressing the impossibility of escaping “racially inflected language” that carried the force of imagery.⁹ Her latest novel, *God Help the Child*, written in 2015, is an addition to the critical commentary on race as a “‘perspectival’ construct,”¹⁰ encoded in symbols that link the exoticism of the black skin to hegemonic control of the black body through connotations that preclude the possibility of transcendence for African-Americans.

God Help the Child deconstructs the racist ideology that fostered the myth of beauty, wherein the semantic antinomy of a phrase coined to emphasize ethnocentric identity in the sixties paradoxically traps the twenty-first century African-American in an “aspirational spiral” signifying the attainment of an impossible (white) ideal.¹¹ “Black is beautiful” was a slogan initially aimed at fostering pride in Blackness, but it assumed cultural opacity without destabilising racial hierarchies. As a result, the attempt to defamiliarize Blackness by linking it with the white ideal of beauty only resulted in exoticizing it, limiting racial identity to the colour of the skin. Morrison’s novel critiques beauty as a learned construct, delineating the process whereby it is given the force of reality through a metalanguage that enforces marginality by making colour codes symbolic of the familiar/exotic. In the novel, Morrison traces the journey of the protagonist, Bride, from the childhood trauma of filial rejection and social learning that pushes her Blackness into a space of abjection, through a period where she attempts to reclaim social space by sheathing her Blackness in white norms, to a final journey of healing where the exotic and the familiar

5. Stuart Hall, “Race, the Floating Signifier: Featuring Stuart Hall,” *Media Education Foundation*, 1996, <http://www.mediaed.org/transcripts/Stuart-Hall-Race-the-Floating-Signifier-Transcript.pdf>.

6. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam, Markman, Pluto Press, 1986, p. 110.

7. Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture*, New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 23.

8. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, New York: Vintage Books, 1992, p. 64.

9. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, p. 13.

10. Roy and Ringo, “Interrogating,” p. 65.

11. Roy and Ringo, “Interrogating,” p. 73.

merge to create racial self-acceptance. The novel is a comment on miscegenation and how the association of the black and the beautiful exacerbates the complexity of the Du Boisian “double consciousness” to racialize both social affiliation and self-acceptance.¹² At this level, Bride’s miscegenated (black) self is “othered” through association with the exotic, and the binaries of familiar/exotic, beauty/ugliness, are translated at the basic level of the colour of the skin.

Representing the exotic: The racialized exotic as a body of knowledge

The word “race” by itself does not indicate space, time or location. On its own, it exists as a neutral entity connoting anthropological divisions based on physical features. Representations of race, however, are rarely devoid of associations in the memory with colonization and slavery. While the focus has shifted from biological difference, race remains a social imperative functioning through a system of signification. Dyer observes, “Since race in itself – insofar as it is anything in itself – refers to some intrinsically insignificant geographical/physical differences between people, it is the imagery of race that is in play.”¹³ In its representations, racial identity links itself primarily with the colour of the skin. Even as the concept of race is accepted as a socio-political construct, it, much like the Orient, is a very real force in shaping identities. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is at the level of representation that the argument is given the force of reality. It is here that race marks itself as a binary, subscribing to the whiteness of the familiar norm, or the colour of the exotic Other. In its representations, the role of racial dichotomy is similar to the construction of the Orient as a body of knowledge.

Said contended that “ideas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied.”¹⁴ Race, like the Orient, was not just an innocuous creation devoid of connotations; on the contrary, it was realized through and for the functioning of a complex hegemony. Howard Winant discusses racial configurations in the post-Civil Rights era in the United States, contending that racial formation in the United States “centres on the idea of racial *projects*,” wherein “the key element in racial formation is the link between signification and structure, between what race *means* in a particular discursive practice and how, based upon

12. W. E. B. Du Bois, “Strivings of the Negro People,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 80, no. 478, 1897, p. 194.

13. Dyer, *White*, p. 1.

14. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 5.

such interpretations, social structures are racially organized.”¹⁵ An important area of signification is colour coding, part of what Winant terms “subtextual or ‘coded’ racial signifiers.”¹⁶ Dyer contends that the idea of colour as a racialized symbol for identity construction had its roots in normative Whiteness. He states: “White discourse implacably reduces the non-white subject to being a function of the white subject, not allowing her/him space or autonomy, permitting neither the recognition of similarities nor the acceptance of differences except as a means of knowing the white self.”¹⁷ Such norms served hegemonic racialization by linguistically caging the black man into his body by making the term “coloured” a signifier of racial identity. The dimensions of the black self, thus, existed as, and were limited to, binary opposites of dimensions of the white self. While Whiteness occupied the centre in all such dimensions, Blackness perforce existed at the margins.

It was in an attempt to write back to the centre that the phrase “Black is Beautiful” was coined in the 1960s, and the Black Power movement built on it till it attained mythic dimensions. Pride in Black arts and culture, as well as an emphasis on difference, formed a closed system that treated identity as an essentialist, ethnocentric system of binaries that precluded all but the very “black.” In her novel written half a century after this call to roots, Morrison re-examines what it means to be black and beautiful in a racialized world where the modernist system of binaries uses difference as a hegemonic tool to push the marginalized further from the centre by using a linguistic device that connotes white ideals. According to Saussurean linguistics,¹⁸ both the key terms in the phrase – “black” and “beautiful” – have meaning only in relation to their binary opposites. Thus, while it tries to engage the aesthetic dimensions of black life, the phrase validates the notion of “black” as a significant Other in a modernist system of binaries, creating a spatial domain based on racial difference. Further, “beautiful” can be defined only in terms of its binary opposition to “ugly,” a term that had traditionally connoted black physical features, thus placing present identity in direct opposition to the past.

15. Howard Winant, *Racial Conditions: Politics, Theory, Comparisons*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994, p. 4.

16. Winant, *Racial Conditions*, p. 19.

17. Dyer, *White*, p. 13.

18. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris, London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Racializing the social: Socializing race

In her study of Whiteness as a normalizing force, Cynthia Levine-Rasky calls race “a consequence of power relations,” defining racialization as “a process in which ‘race’ is attributed to a population of people, facilitating the practice of racism against them.”¹⁹ She studies Whiteness as a social characteristic that works “through processes of normalization by silently imposing itself as the standard by which social difference is known.”²⁰ Dyer says: “Black people can be reduced (in white culture) to their bodies and thus to race, but white people are something else that is realised in and yet is not reducible to the corporeal, or racial.”²¹ A restrictive embodiment coupled with a sense of being ugly, perpetrated through images that portrayed white physical features as the norm for beauty, served to undermine black identity as corporeal and inferior. It was against this restrictive covenant that the idea of “Black is Beautiful” sought to instil a sense of pride in Blackness as a symbol of beauty. Marked by a visible return to African roots in appearance, it celebrated the very features that had marked the race as “ugly.” However, the term “beautiful” made the body the ideal even as the linguistic sign itself retained traces of its racialized associations to the past. This, according to Morrison, acted as a double trap, forcing black people to subscribe to a hegemonic embodiment and creating an impossible aspirational spiral that would only lead to a *cul-de-sac*.

Language plays a vital role in the formulation of signifying labels that aid visual encapsulation of the hierarchical order as a valid proposition. As a force in socialization, language both shapes and is shaped by discursive practice. Linguistic signifiers build on historical associations that often define learned behaviour. In her Nobel lecture, Morrison emphasized language as a definitive force that shapes reality. She says, “The vitality of language lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined, and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers [...] It arcs toward the place where meaning may lie.”²² This makes it a potent force in not just describing racial reality but in creating it as well. Morrison’s novel emphasizes the role of linguistic and visual signifiers in making Blackness an exotic proposition based on the categorizing of identity as either “white” or “black,” normalizing one as a closed and privileged category and the other, by its very nature of difference, marginalized.

19. Cynthia Levine-Rasky, “Whiteness: Normalization and the Everyday Practice of Power,” in *Power and Everyday Practices*, eds. Deborah Brock, Rebecca Raby, and Mark P. Thomas, Toronto: Nelson Education, 2012, p. 90.

20. Levine-Rasky, “Whiteness,” p. 93.

21. Dyer, *White*, p. 14.

22. Morrison, “Nobel Lecture (December 7, 1993),” in *Dreaming Out Loud: African American Novelists at Work*, ed. Horace A. Porter, University of Iowa Press, 2015, p. 214.

Such norms served hegemonic racialization by linguistically caging the black man into his body by making the term “coloured” a signifier of racial identity. When Bride’s mother, Sweetness, unable to accept having a dark-skinned child, says, “I don’t care how many times she changes her name. Her color is a cross she will always carry,”²³ she is subscribing to the abjection that Blackness connotes for the light-skinned mixed race individual.

Emphasizing the reason for the dilemma brought about by the one-drop rule, and the reason for people of mixed race ancestry negating miscegenation as a historical reality in the twenty-first century, the novel begins with a comment on Blackness as a “pejorative socio-political and historical referent.”²⁴ The complete delinking of the object from the self is visible in Sweetness’s first words on seeing her black-skinned baby: “It’s not my fault. So you can’t blame me. I didn’t do it and have no idea how it happened.”²⁵ Herself passing as white, Sweetness is horrified at the black skin of the daughter she has just given birth to, knowing well the consequences of this racial incongruence which is sure to invite social acrimony. Morrison explodes the myth of the post-racial even as she emphasizes the role of memory in racialized identity construction, stating that race is a learned construct made real by social learning that begins at birth and categorizes the self, based on modernist binaries. As Sweetness contemplates the reality of having a black-skinned daughter, rejection overpowers all other emotions, and from this moment on Lula Ann’s identity will be circumscribed by the colour of her skin. Thus, for Lula Ann, who ironically names herself Bride in adulthood, the social learning of being a “lesser” person begins at the moment her appearance causes her mother’s marriage to fall apart.²⁶ The term “coloured” becomes an identifier that dictates all her social interactions and relationships right from birth, as the novel begins with an image of colour filling every crevice:

It didn’t take more than an hour after they pulled her out from between my legs to realize something was wrong. Really wrong. She was so black she scared me. Midnight black, Sudanese black. I’m light-skinned, with good hair, what we call high yellow, and so is Lula Ann’s father. Ain’t nobody in my family anywhere near that colour. Tar is the closest I can think of [....] Her colour is a cross she will always carry.²⁷

23. Morrison, *God Help*, p. 7.

24. Benjamin Aigbe Okonofua, “‘I Am Blacker Than You’: Theorizing Conflict Between African Immigrants and African Americans in the United States,” *SAGE Open* 3, no. 3, 2013, p. 5. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244013499162>.

25. Morrison, *God Help*, p. 3.

26. Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, London: Vintage, 1995, p. 57.

27. Morrison, *God Help*, pp. 3–7.

Thus, Bride's blackness is traumatic not just for her but also for her white-skinned mother, Sweetness, who must bear the burden of her daughter's black skin as proof of African-American ancestry, leaving her in a transracial area marked by social and emotional isolation. The novel comments on the stereotype of natal isolation that was a feature of slavery, and of how Sweetness tries to fight against it by not abandoning Bride; however, she can never bring herself to touch her black-skinned daughter or shower affection on her, believing that Bride needs to be trained for the hardships the colour of her skin will make her lot in life: "I had to be strict, very strict. Lula Ann needed to learn how to behave, how to keep her head down and not to make trouble."²⁸ For Sweetness, Lula Ann represents the unfamiliar Other who has pushed her mother further along towards the abject, on the spectrum of colour coded identifiers.

Tracing identity construction to social learning filtered through visual and linguistic codes, Omi and Winant signify the "set of interpretive codes and racial meanings which operate in the interactions of daily life" by the term "racial etiquette."²⁹ These codes are structured within the racialized system that defines the normative. Roy and Ringo state that "the presence/absence of these coded norms is shown to mark the presence/absence of the 'beautiful,' an adjectival construct that entraps black identity in a vicious cycle of embodiment."³⁰ The image of the colour black, with its connotative associations with slavery, marks it as a signifier of embodiment that exists in opposition to "the degree to which whiteness aspires to *dis*-embodiedness."³¹ Beginning at birth, it entraps the black child in the body, wherein identity functions through a Du Boisian double consciousness that makes the black child both revile Blackness and aspire to white norms of beauty and success. The learning of racial etiquette is much stronger in Sweetness's case, racist encounters, especially the one of being abandoned by her husband for giving birth to a black-skinned daughter, corroborating her own social learning.

Imprisoned in the body, both Sweetness and Bride find themselves trapped in an area of racial ambiguity. Both are subject to the norms dictating social acceptance according to the one-drop rule. Since these norms limit black identity to the corporeal, it is at the level of the body that Bride seeks to become beautiful, moving to the other end of the spectrum, denying her black origins while emphasizing her coloured self as exotic. Thus, while her mother accepts her Blackness, accepting her marginalized status, Bride rejects hers, subscribing to the white normative by

28. Morrison, *God Help*, p. 7.

29. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, eds. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 6.

30. Roy and Ringo, "Interrogating," p. 67.

31. Dyer, *White*, p. 39.

sheathing her Blackness in a covering of white clothes. She, however, only succeeds in further exoticizing her Blackness, pandering to white norms of beauty while being further entrapped in her black skin. It is a vicious cycle that can only culminate in a fractured identity contingent on racialized imagery:

I let the name-calling, the bullying travel like poison, like lethal viruses through my veins, with no antibiotic available. Which, actually, was a good thing now I think of it, because I built up immunity so tough that not being a “nigger girl” was all I needed to win. I became a deep dark beauty who doesn’t need Botox for kissable lips or tanning spas to hide a deathlike pallor. And I don’t need silicon in my butt. I sold my elegant blackness to all those childhood ghosts and now they pay me for it.³²

However, even as Bride negates her “nigger” origins as pejorative, she unconsciously subscribes to the slogan “Black is Beautiful.” Half a century after the phrase was coined, to underline a cultural movement aimed at dispelling the popular notion of the black body as inherently ugly, Morrison deconstructs the notion of black beauty as a white myth antithetical to black identity, and aimed at fostering the dichotomy of a fragmented psyche. Thus, even as Bride panders to white ideals of stereotyped black beauty, selling her Blackness as an exotic exterior to an inherently white psyche, her black skin both restricts her access to the closed white category and precludes any possibility of her ever being able to escape the embodiment that white norms prescribe for her. Success at the material level further reinforces this corporeal frame of existence, and the more exotic she seems, the further alienated she is from her Blackness.

Truth is contextual; in the case of the coloured self, however, truth is filtered through linguistic and visual signifiers which function as racial identifiers constructing reality through imagery. These identifiers repress all memory of the suppressed part of the psyche, precluding acceptance. Thus, even as Bride sheathes her black skin in a covering of white clothes, social learning and racial self-abjection persist. Black and white co-exist, but only on the surface. The memory of her mother’s rejection and her craving for her approval to the extent of being pushed to commit perjury in childhood haunt Bride even in her adult life. Thus, even as the wounds are sheathed in a metaphoric and literal covering of Whiteness, an uncomfortable association with the past lingers in the memory. The result is a deeper exoticizing of the black body and a greater disjunct between self-image and social affiliation.

Bride’s problem reflects Du Bois’s assertion that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.”³³ It also reveals David A. Hollinger’s

32. Morrison, *God Help*, p. 57.

33. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903, Penguin Publishing Group, 1996, p. xi.

contention that the solution lies in a postethnic crossing-over across this line to form voluntary “affiliations” as illusory.³⁴ As long as identities subscribe to racialized hierarchical domains that do not admit of cultural porosity, the crossing-over would result in a fractured identity. On the surface, Bride is part of the American Dream, a successful twenty-three-year-old African-American woman leading a luxurious life, but the initial social learning of being a lesser being filters all her experiences. This is evident in her inability to relate to her lover on equal terms – Bride says that he “made her feel safe, colonized somehow.”³⁵ The paradoxical safety that is associated with colonization is drawn from the prescriptive denial of cultural porosity born of social learning. This results in a hegemonic subscription to the normative, the negation of physical and cultural miscegenation resulting in a fractured identity. At this level, Bride floats on the surface of the self, the exotic surface a safe but illusory haven of denial. Exorcizing the scars would need Bride to remove the white sheath that exoticizes her and delve into the familiar area of her skin to confront the reality of her Blackness. The resultant opening up of the psyche to a postmodern celebration of the fissures in the self would lead to an acceptance of the multiracial dimensions of miscegenated identity.

Miscegenation: The idea of the exotic as sheath

Bride's dilemma derived from the politics of identity construction that governed all mixed race individuals in America. An insistence on racial purity was part of the modernist system of binaries, paradoxically insisting on (im)pure trajectories of identity formation for those with mixed race ancestry, classifying anyone with a drop of African blood as African-American, hence black. Blackness thus contradicted the very premise of impurity by rejecting its white constituent. Assessing the possibility of the negation of race as an identifier in influencing identity formation as a myth, Winant says, “Rather than suggesting that race is a problem to be solved, I argue [...] that race is a condition of individual and collective identity, a permanent, though tremendously flexible, element of social structure.”³⁶ Levine-Rasky states, however, that race goes beyond formal structures to permeate all interactions: “Racism is not only manifest at the level of social structures and institutions; it also involves exclusion at the level of everyday interactions.”³⁷ In the case of

34. David A. Hollinger, *Postethnic America*. New York: Basic Books, 1995, p. 7.

35. Morrison, *God Help*, p. 78.

36. Winant, *Racial Conditions*, p. xiii.

37. Levine-Rasky, “Whiteness,” p. 90.

miscegenation, it allows for affiliation to only one side of the colour line, thus suppressing all trace of the Other. This results in a fractured psyche, wherein identity is circumscribed within prescriptive identifiers. Pushing the miscegenated self into an area of definitive Blackness results in an identity crisis wherein the individual is unable to either separate the abject from the self, nor accept it as part of oneself, resulting in what Winant terms “a microsociological crisis of interpretation.”³⁸ This is what happens when Bride attempts to sheathe her Blackness in an exotic covering of Whiteness. Her inability to accept her racial origins might have helped her become part of the American Dream, but it extracts tremendous psychological costs in the form of a fractured psyche, a reality she is forced to confront in the aftermath of Booker leaving her: “I’m scared. Something bad is happening to me. I feel like I’m melting away. I can’t explain it to you but I do know when it started. It began after he said, ‘You not the woman I want.’”³⁹ The sheath exoticizes through emphasis on difference, but also points to the rupture between the external world and the inner self.

Unknown to Bride, Booker’s exit forces her to commence on a metaphorical journey of self-discovery and healing. For the first time, she attempts to fight rejection and to foray into the unknown to find its causes. It is a journey that will transcend the spatio-temporal dimensions of her world, denoting a space free from the hegemonizing forces that govern identity formation, thus allowing a reformulation of images in the memory as the individual psyche opens up to the unfamiliar. Morrison follows Alice Walker’s theory of trauma and healing when she creates the conditions necessary for Bride to throw off the sheath of Whiteness and familiarize herself with the exoticism of the underlying Blackness. Walker says, “The world cannot be healed in the abstract [...] healing begins where the wound was made.”⁴⁰ Morrison realizes that Bride needs to go back to the site of trauma to counter the social learning that projected her black self as “lesser.” This healing can only take place in a spatio-temporal domain separated from the seemingly post-racial present that Bride inhabits. The suppressed trauma demands resolution, and the fight with Booker becomes the catalyst for the metaphorical journey where Bride regresses to her childhood body (symbolizing the site of trauma) to revisit the site in memory where a reformulation of images must take place to initiate healing. Decapacitated by an accident in a remote place, the time spent with Rain, a white girl who was also abandoned in childhood, allows her space where the hegemonic structures of the

38. Winant, *Racial Conditions*, p. 17.

39. Morrison, *God Help*, p. 8.

40. Alice Walker, *The Way Forward Is with a Broken Heart*, New York: Random House, 2000, p. 200.

real world do not permeate consciousness. The bond formed with the white child represents a psychological crossing-over across boundaries of colour and becomes the vehicle for release; finally bridging the two halves of the miscegenated self. It is only after the fragmented psyche is healed that the self begins to function without racialized filters, no longer trapped by the exoticism of black skin.

Conclusion

God Help the Child asserts Morrison's views on the ubiquity of race in the twenty-first century. Race at the beginning of the century has reassumed centrality in what Levine-Rasky calls a "regime of truth."⁴¹ Corroborating Omi and Winant's assertion that "race will *always* be at the centre of the American experience,"⁴² Morrison's latest novel rearticulates and reiterates the hegemonic nature of the modernist binaries that limit identity to white/black, familiar/exotic, transcendent/embodied. Realizing that merely countering race, the "floating signifier,"⁴³ or appropriating the (racialized) normative would be ineffectual, she calls for the dismantling of the binaries that have historically defined racial domains as opaque and sealed off from each other. Bride's journey of healing emphasizes the traumatic effect of the social learning that limits existence for the African-American to a closed area that then filters experience in all areas of social existence. Booker understands that Bride has sealed off part of herself, saying:

*Her imagination is impeccable the way it cuts and scrapes the bone never touching the marrow where that dirty feeling is thrumming like a fiddle for fear its strings will break and screech the loss of its tune since for her permanent ignorance is so much better than the quick of life.*⁴⁴

Booker's words underline his comprehension of the futility of attempting to assimilate by rejecting racial identity. Race, he knows, might be historically contingent, but it is an ever-present trope in the dynamics of identity construction. He echoes Winant's assertion that "race remains a fundamental organizing principle, a way of knowing and interpreting the social world [...] it is deeply fused with the power, order, and indeed the meaning systems of every society in which it operates."⁴⁵

41. Levine-Rasky, "Whiteness," p. 93.

42. Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, p. 5.

43. Hall, "Race."

44. Morrison, *God Help*, p. 149.

45. Winant, *Racial Conditions*, p. 2.

Thus, any attempt to negate its presence when corroborated by visible identifiers defined by the (white) normative, would only serve to exoticize and defamiliarize it, and by implication part of the Self:

*You accepted like a beast of burden the whip of a stranger's curse and the mindless menace it holds along with the scar it leaves as a definition you spend your life refuting although that hateful word is only a slim line drawn on a shore and quickly dissolved in a seaworld any moment when an equally mindless wave fondles it like the accidental touch of a finger on a clarinet stop that the musician converts into silence in order to let the true note ring out loud.*⁴⁶

Booker's words encapsulate not only Bride's dilemma, but also the trauma of slavery and miscegenation that lives on as a scar for African-Americans. Any attempt to refute the trauma only pushes the miscegenated self into greater denial about aspects of the self that throb as suppressed wounds hindering the healthy functioning of the psyche. From overt segregation, race has built on binaries to function through the psychological dichotomy of the familiar/exotic. Familiarizing the exotic would need a reformulation of the socio-political dynamics of the proposition, and this can begin only with acceptance:

*You should take heartbreak of whatever kind seriously with the courage to let it blaze and burn like the pulsing star it is unable or unwilling to be soothed into pathetic self-blame because its explosive brilliance rings justifiably loud like the din of a tympani [...] Bride shook her head. She had counted on her looks for so long – how well beauty worked. She had not known its shallowness or her own cowardice – the vital lesson Sweetness taught and nailed to her spine to curve it.*⁴⁷

As Bride finally understands the shallow nature of an exotic beauty that works to keep the African-American caged in his skin, the reader is reminded of Said's contention about "the nexus of knowledge and power creating 'the Oriental' and in a sense obliterating him as a human being."⁴⁸ Moving from the sphere of domination to that of hegemony, the dynamics of racial configuration has changed so that its role as a very real force that shapes ideals remains consistent. Proving Winant's assertion of the functionality of racial projects hegemonizing identity to create a hierarchical structure that's inherently racialized, Morrison proves the utility of the myth that ironically traces its roots to the reaction against the white notion of black as ugly. Fifty years down the line, the same idea has metamorphosed into an aspirational spiral aimed at trapping African-Americans in their bodies.

46. Morrison, *God Help*, pp. 149–50.

47. Morrison, *God Help*, p. 151.

48. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 27.

Thus imagined, *God Help the Child* can be viewed as an anti-racial text that attempts to dismember the racialization of identity and the denial of miscegenation by identifying signifiers that hegemonize by exoticizing the familiar, making the black body an area of abjection. Stating that “the act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse is itself a racial act,”⁴⁹ Morrison counters the racial through the racial, striking at the roots of post-racial colour-blindness by portraying the politics of silence on matters surrounding race as a debilitating part of the vicious cycle that shapes racialized identities. The novel addresses the progressive complexity of the politics of race in America as it codes racial dichotomy into systems of socialization. It is the sensibility of race in individual frames that is shown to lend it credence, and ultimately the force of reality. Using the philosophical as a vehicle in a metaphorical tale of the dynamics involved in identity construction, Morrison rearticulates the dialogue on race through a deconstruction of ethnic purity and the traumatic othering of the self that defamiliarizes and exoticizes its familiar folds.

49. Morrison, *Playing*, p. 46.

Exotic madness in Caribbean literature

From marginalization to empowerment and indigenization

Bénédicte Ledent

Caribbean women migrants and exotic madness

In this essay, I focus on the connection between exoticism and madness in the context of the Caribbean diaspora, and examine the responses to this intriguing association that have been offered by selected writers from the Anglophone Caribbean.¹ It is a given that West Indian literature is replete with migrant figures – usually women – who are viewed by the host population when they go abroad as exotic but also, by virtue of this distinct difference, as suspect, or indeed, dysfunctional and possibly mad. The apparent otherness of their behaviour or life choices is constructed in their new homes in the West as evidence of some form of mental imbalance. Such fictional characters are victims of what Graham Huggan has called “a particular mode of aesthetic *perception*,”² and distinguish themselves by their difference, whether cultural or ethnic. To the relatively homogeneous communities into which they might be seen to intrude, they can inspire initial fascination, but also doubt as to their purpose and ability to fit in. Such suspicion often leads to instances of exploitative commodification that can be followed by radical rejection. The iconic literary example of this is to be found in Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*,³ a novel in which the Dominican writer gives a voice and a story to the white creole from Jamaica who is famously locked up in the attic of Thornfield Hall in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*.⁴ In Rhys’s prequel to the English classic, Antoinette, renamed

1. I would like to thank both Evelyn O’Callaghan and Daria Tunca for commenting on draft versions of this essay.

2. Graham Huggan, *The Post-Colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001, p. 13. Italics in original.

3. Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 1966, London: Penguin, 2000.

4. Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 1847, London: Penguin, 2006.

Bertha by her English husband, is perceived by him as a “stranger who did not think or feel as [he] did”⁵ and by extension as an irrational being, “a mad girl,”⁶ a “lunatic.”⁷ Antoinette is as menacing to him as the mysterious exotic landscape of her native Caribbean, which justifies her incarceration in her husband’s eyes. But Rhys provides her readers with “the other side” of the story as well,⁸ giving Antoinette the possibility of regaining some of her dignity, as she dreams of setting fire to the English mansion where she is held prisoner. She is presumed to eventually do so before jumping to her death. Another similar story is that of mixed-race, Jamaican Ella O’Grady, in Erna Brodber’s *Myal*, whose assumed exotic background is exploited by her American husband Selwyn to put on the “biggest coon show ever,”⁹ a form of zombification or “spirit thievery” that partakes in Ella’s breakdown and mental disruption,¹⁰ but which she finally escapes thanks to the healing powers of a group of Myalists. Finally, a comparable narrative of exotic othering coupled with issues of mental health is Kei Miller’s novel *The Last Warner Woman*, whose Jamaican protagonist, Adamine, is sectioned in England because of her strange behaviour as a warner, i.e. as a person who prophesies catastrophes. It is almost, the narrator tells us, as if “being of West Indian origin was sufficient cause for madness.”¹¹

Challenging exoticization

After this brief, initial assessment of how complex and varied the configuration of “exotic madness” is in Caribbean literature, I wish to concentrate on specific texts that further demonstrate how the marginalization resulting from the exoticization of Caribbean migrants has been addressed and challenged by West Indian authors. The above mentioned texts by Rhys, Brodber and Miller can be said to have restored the humanity of their migrant protagonists mostly by giving readers a more intimate access to these characters’ often traumatic back stories, which works to undermine the prejudices regarding their mental states. But there are additional, often concomitant, ways for writers of achieving such subversion, and I

5. Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 58.

6. Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 110.

7. Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 106.

8. Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 82.

9. Erna Brodber, *Myal*, London: New Beacon, 1988, p. 80.

10. Brodber, *Myal*, p. 83.

11. Kei Miller, *The Last Warner Woman*, London: Phoenix, 2010, p. 156.

will address two of them here. Some have endowed their characters with an ability to take advantage of their exotic label in the narrative itself and so achieve some form of empowerment, however ambiguous or temporary this agency might turn out to be. Others have implemented a less visible, yet more subtle and therefore more radical, calling into question of the process of categorization presiding over the labelling of migrant others that goes through an indigenization of their assumed exotic madness. Even if there are possible overlaps between these two treatments of the allegedly mad migrant, I will concentrate in the former case on two short stories, Dionne Brand's "Blossom, Priestess of Oya, Goddess of Winds, Storms, and Waterfalls,"¹² and Jean Rhys's "Let Them Call It Jazz,"¹³ (1962), and in the latter on Caryl Phillips's novel *The Lost Child* (2015).¹⁴

Achieving empowerment in stories by Dionne Brand and Jean Rhys

Brand's story provides yet another version of the marginalization of the migrant others whose anger is, in the words Johanna X. K. Garvey, "perceived by observers in terms of 'madness.'" Yet there is a special twist this time as the protagonist's rage eventually turns into a concrete "form of resistance for a Black female subject rendered voiceless."¹⁵ The story focuses on Blossom, a Trinidadian migrant in Toronto, who is financially exploited by white Canadians as a domestic servant but also by her faithless Caribbean husband, whom she supports. When she vehemently and even violently reacts to her boss's attempt to touch her, by throwing the family's laundry in the swimming pool and trying to strangle the inconsiderate doctor for whom she works, she is unsurprisingly labelled as "crazy."¹⁶ She is, in other words, categorized as the black other incapable of anything else but rage, which is seen as the ultimate expression of a lack of intrinsic level-headedness that native Canadians are supposed to naturally possess. However, Blossom transcends this vicious circle of suffering when she starts speaking in tongues, and lets herself be possessed by the spirit of the Yoruba goddess-warrior Oya.

12. Dionne Brand, "Blossom, Priestess of Oya, Goddess of Winds, Storms, and Waterfalls," in *Sans Souci and Other Stories*, Toronto: Women's Press, 1989, pp. 31–42.

13. Jean Rhys, "Let Them Call it Jazz," in her *Tales of the Wide Caribbean: A New Collection of Short Stories*, London: Heinemann, n.d., pp. 164–180.

14. Caryl Phillips, *The Lost Child*, London: Oneworld, 2015.

15. Johanna X. K. Garvey, "'The Place She Miss': Exile, Memory, and Resistance in Dionne Brand's Fiction," *Callaloo* 26.2, Spring 2003, pp. 486–503, p. 489.

16. Brand, "Blossom, Priestess of Oya, Goddess of Winds, Storms, and Waterfalls," p. 33.

Through this transformation, she apparently performs the madness that she has been accused of but also acquires “the power to see and the power to fight; [...] the power to feel pain and the power to heal.”¹⁷ It is by choosing to embrace her supposed exotic alienness, as an “obeah woman,”¹⁸ and by living up to some of the clichés that Canadians, but also her husband, entertain about her as an irrational being that Blossom manages to achieve the agency that her host society refused her when she was a good immigrant, when she was trying to comply with the Canadian way of life. This interpretation, which relies on the idea that the traumatized individuals can perform the mental deviance they are charged with, has been rightly questioned by some scholars, for it starts from the rational premise that the spirit possession undergone by Blossom is merely the individual acting of a part, and not an actual spiritual transformation with collective dimensions. Developing this argument, Marlene Goldman, for example, insists on viewing Blossom’s behaviour as an effective challenge to “Western norms of subjectivity.”¹⁹ It is therefore important, as Kathleen J. Renk asserts, to consider that “Blossom attains a visionary state where the imposed boundaries between species, time, and dualities dissolve,”²⁰ an alternative vision of the world which destabilizes the very concept of madness and which, as we will see later, is taken even further in Phillips’s *The Lost Child*.

Jean Rhys’s heroine Selina in “Let Them Call It Jazz” experiences a form of ostracization similar to Blossom’s when her loud voice and her singing make her appear deranged in the eyes of her self-righteous English neighbours and cause her first arrest for “drunk and disorderly” conduct.²¹ The couple next door watch her constantly, the husband staring at her “as if [she is a] wild animal let loose.”²² As a mixed-race Martinican, Selina stands out in the allegedly respectable London neighbourhood where, in the 1950s, she is lent a flat by the mysterious Mr Sims, who, the story implies, has a sexual interest in her. When she throws a stone at her prissy neighbours’ window after they accuse her of shameless behaviour, of “[making] dreadful noise at night and [using] abominable language, and [dancing]

17. Brand, “Blossom, Priestess of Oya, Goddess of Winds, Storms, and Waterfalls,” p. 40.

18. Brand, “Blossom, Priestess of Oya, Goddess of Winds, Storms, and Waterfalls,” p. 41.

19. Marlene Goldman, “Spirit Possession and the Transformation of Space in the Fiction of Dionne Brand,” *Topia* 34, Fall 2015, pp. 141–156. <https://topia.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/topia/article/view/40307>

20. Kathleen J. Renk, “‘Her Words Are Like Fire’: The Storytelling Magic of Dionne Brand,” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 27.4, October 1996, pp. 97–111.

21. Rhys, “Let Them Call it Jazz,” p. 171.

22. Rhys, “Let Them Call it Jazz,” p. 167.

in obscene fashion,”²³ Selina is taken to court and then sent to Holloway prison, an ominous building that encapsulates the conceptual straightjacket that the so-called exotic subject is trapped in. There she learns a song, which a man later hears her sing at a party and finally sells, presumably to a recording label, after “jazzing [the tune] up,”²⁴ suggesting that music is more likely to be popular if it catches the attention of listeners who crave for exoticism, which is ironically fake in this case. Selina is only given £ 5 from the transaction, and is thus obviously exploited, yet she comes to terms with her feelings of dispossession because she now understands how English people function, and she is now better able to cope in a society where mendacity and greed prevail, as shown by the adaptation and sale of her song. As Lucy Wilson has argued, Selina is definitely a resilient character. Unlike Rhys’s white protagonists, who tend to be passive hence powerless, she indeed seems to “thrive on adversity and to draw strength from [her] opposition to the prevailing power structures.”²⁵

Both stories are told in a form of non-standard English that indexes Blossom’s and Selina’s cultural background but which also gives us a more direct access to their supposedly deranged minds. If Brand’s text is nevertheless told in a more distant third person narrative, Rhys’s is exclusively focalized through Selina, so much so that one critic has spoken of this story as an example of Rhys’s paranoid narrative, where “we are witness to the interior monologue of an individual who tries desperately, and unsuccessfully, to control the way others perceive her.”²⁶ So, if the variety of English that the two protagonists speak reinforces their otherness in their environment, it is also empowering in the sense that it contributes to asserting their human selves in the face of the prejudice they have to endure, which somehow turns their exotic status on its head. For by familiarizing themselves with their stories readers are indeed directed to view these women as human beings first, and not as enigmatic strangers. Blossom and Selina navigate between two different sets of norms, their own and that of the metropolis, which might be represented by the police forces that in each story intervene to put an end to the exotic’s disturbing goings-on. Yet both women are forced to construct a new, diasporic and syncretic consciousness in order to survive. Do they compromise in doing so? Do they triumph? The stories are not conclusive in this regard. What

23. Rhys, “Let Them Call it Jazz,” p. 174.

24. Rhys, “Let Them Call it Jazz,” p. 180.

25. Lucy Wilson, “‘Women Must Have Spunks’: Jean Rhys’s West Indian Outcasts,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 32.3, Autumn 1986, pp. 439–448, p. 440.

26. Lauren Elkin, “Getting the Story Across: Jean Rhys’s Paranoid Narrative,” *Journal of Narrative Theory* 46.1, Winter 2016, pp. 70–96, p. 76.

is certain, however, is that, in spite of different locations and time periods, their narratives are still based on a form of dualistic opposition between the Caribbean migrant, perceived as strange and therefore mad, and the surrounding supposedly 'decent' world where they have settled, a separation exemplified in "Let Them Call It Jazz" by the hedge that divides Selina's yard from that of her virtuous English neighbours. While these two texts go some way towards dismantling the system whereby these women are regarded as outlandish and mysterious, and therefore mentally challenged, the narratives still rely for their effect on a cultural binary of sorts that presents the world of the newcomer and that of the host society as separate and almost mutually exclusive.

Indigenizing exotic madness

I now turn to Caryl Phillips's *The Lost Child* (2015), and consider how its combined representation of strangeness, difference and mental imbalance differs from the texts previously discussed. Like them, it suggests that the psychic problems of the migrant are to be regarded, as J. Michael Dash proposes, more as a "state of extreme consciousness" than "a form of pathological behaviour"²⁷ – a view which promotes a compassionate understanding of the impact that displacement and the confrontation with another culture can have on individual psyches. Yet, I would like to argue that Phillips's characterization is likely to prove more subversive, even if it does not seem to confer direct agency to its characters as in the other texts mentioned so far. For, instead of relying on the exotic vs familiar binary, Phillips's novel profoundly destabilizes this duality and thereby generates a more complex reading of the mad exotic figure, one which overcomes the division between self and other, very much like the two literary texts, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*,²⁸ and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, with which Phillips's 2015 fiction openly dialogizes, as we will see in more detail later. In the meantime, it is interesting to note the relevance to Phillips's text of Carine Mardorossian's discussion of *Wuthering Heights* in terms of a "radical reconfiguration of difference."²⁹ As a novel "preoccupied with the disruption of nor-

27. J. Michael Dash, "The Madman at the Crossroads: Delirium and Dislocation in Caribbean Literature," *Profession*, MLA, 2002, pp. 37–43, p. 41.

28. Emile Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 1847, London: Penguin, 2003.

29. Carine M. Mardorossian, "Racial Vagaries in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*," in her *Reclaiming Difference: Caribbean Women Rewrite Postcolonialism*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008, pp. 91–113.

mative social values,”³⁰ notably to the way it represents Heathcliff’s and Catherine’s unstable racial identities, this English classic indeed offers an “alternative model of identification” that “challenges not only the separation of identity-based interpretations but also the simplified binaries of black/white and self/other through which we traditionally conceptualize the category of racial difference.”³¹ The “relational paradigm”³² conceptualized by Mardorossian, whereby man-made categories are “meaningful only in relation to one another,”³³ could also be made to apply to other identitarian taxonomies, such as the distinction between madness and sanity.

In view of this, it is intriguing to consider that Phillips’s exploration of perceived and “real” mental states in *The Lost Child* not only deals with an obviously displaced and traumatized individual of Caribbean origin – a woman who suffers from migrant alienation and from the trauma that she had to endure as a slave transported to the Americas then to England. The novel also zooms in on two women of English descent, who are “at home” in their native land and thus supposedly more rooted. Yet, their painful life trajectories bring them very close to the mental destabilization of the exotic outsider born in the tropics, in spite of very different backgrounds. Far from suggesting, as James Clifford did in the late 1980s, that “We are all Caribbeans now in our urban archipelagos,”³⁴ and thereby trivializing the suffering of the Caribbean slave figure, Phillips’s subtle literary rapprochement between the two sets of mentally disturbed characters rather results for the reader in a more complex understanding of their respective situations. By showing the puzzling similarities between the mental disorders of so-called outsiders and so-called insiders – what I would call “indigenizing the mad exotic” – Phillips does not flatten out the differences resulting in the cultural appropriation of the exotic margin by the normative centre, but rather performs a kind of empathy-inducing cultural integration whereby so-called madness is no longer regarded as exclusively extraneous to England, as typical of the foreign other, but as something which is fully part of it, which is, one might say, indigenous to it. Given that the mad ideology behind the slave trade and colonial slavery was very much a product of England, one could even say here that madness has inevitably come home.

30. Mardorossian, “Racial Vagaries,” p. 92.

31. Mardorossian, “Racial Vagaries,” p. 93.

32. Mardorossian, “Racial Vagaries,” p. 93.

33. Mardorossian, “Racial Vagaries,” p. 93.

34. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988, p. 173. I owe this reference to Alison Donnell, *Twentieth-Century Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History*, London: Routledge, 2006, p. 84.

Phillips's previous fiction has often relied on juxtaposing radically different people and suggesting to the reader that they actually share much more than meets the eye, if only their common status as outsiders, literal in some cases and figurative in others. This is, for example, the case in *Higher Ground* and in *The Nature of Blood*,³⁵ where Phillips builds tentative bridges between characters of the Black and Jewish diasporas to denounce the pervasive and age-long ostracism suffered by the two diasporic groups.³⁶ In *The Lost Child* Phillips again intimately connects people who are apparently worlds apart: an eighteenth-century Caribbean female slave living in England on the one hand and, on the other, two women from the north of England, one living in the nineteenth and the other in the twentieth century, who all experience terrible losses and rejection, suffer mentally as a result and are perceived as deranged.

It is not the first time that Phillips has paired members of the African diaspora with English women from the north of England to suggest existential similarities between them, coming as they do from regions that are marginal in comparison to the colonial metropolis. In his 1991 novel *Cambridge*, he associated Cambridge, an educated African slave on a Caribbean plantation with Emily, the absentee planter's English daughter, both radically changed by their crossing of the Atlantic.³⁷ And in *A Distant Shore* Phillips brought together Solomon, an African asylum-seeker, and Dorothy, the psychologically distressed northern Englishwoman who, at the end of the novel, finds herself in a psychiatric hospital – also an asylum, but mental this time.³⁸ What makes *The Lost Child* stand out, however, is that the web of connections that binds Phillips's characters (who are additionally not contemporaneous, unlike *Cambridge* and *A Distant Shore*) is made denser than ever before, notably including numerous thematic, lexical and literary reverberations relating to “madness,” as will be shown later. All these links intimate that northern England too has its own strange, mad, exotic denizens, who are as lost and distracted as their Caribbean or African counterparts, to the point of becoming in some circumstances

35. Caryl Phillips, *Higher Ground*, London: Penguin, 1989, and *The Nature of Blood*, London: Bloomsbury, 1997.

36. It might be worthwhile to remember that this approach owed Phillips charges of misappropriating the suffering of the Jewish diaspora (see Hilary Mantel, “Black is not Jewish,” *Literary Review*, 224, 1 February 1997, p. 39) while some critics, such as Stef Craps, argued that these accusations do not hold if one looks into the way Phillips resists easy empathy (see Stef Craps, “Linking Legacies of Loss: Traumatic Histories and Cross-Cultural Empathy in Caryl Phillips's *Higher Ground* and *The Nature of Blood*,” in *Caryl Phillips: Writing in the Key of Life*, ed. by Bénédictte Ledent and Daria Tunca, Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2012, pp. 155–172).

37. Caryl Phillips, *Cambridge*, London: Bloomsbury, 1991.

38. Caryl Phillips, *A Distant Shore*, London: Secker and Warburg, 2003.

almost interchangeable with them. Interestingly, the multiple resonances between the various characters of *The Lost Child* cannot but echo Catherine Earnshaw's passionate, almost schizophrenic statements "I *am* Heathcliff,"³⁹ and "he's more myself than I am,"⁴⁰ two of the most famous quotations from *Wuthering Heights*, a classic with which *The Lost Child* dialogizes, as already suggested.

Making the exotic familiar in Caryl Phillips's *The Lost Child*

The Lost Child is a rich, complex, fractured text which can be read from many different angles. In what follows, I will concentrate on how the trope of "madness" is used in the novel to bring to the fore compelling correspondences between the characters and, in that way, convey how intricately interconnected they are, which is Phillips's way of making the exotic familiar. The three women characters at the heart of this novel are, as mentioned, a nameless Caribbean woman, who was a slave in the West Indies and at the time of narration lives a destitute life in eighteenth-century Liverpool, where she had a child by an English gentleman who very much resembles Mr Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights*. Called "Crazy Woman" by Liverpoolians at the end of her life,⁴¹ she dies in dire circumstances, an exotic in the streets of the English slave port where she, at some stage, prostitutes herself, then begs with her young son, whom we assume to be the future Heathcliff. The second woman is Emily Brontë herself, also depicted in the final days of her life. We see her on her death bed, haunted by her dead brother Branwell, a failed artist who has ended up a drunkard and whom she confuses in her ravings with another outsider, the "boy who came from the moors,"⁴² the Heathcliff character from her own fiction.⁴³

The final part of that tryptic is Monica Johnson, a woman from Leeds who meets a Caribbean student in Oxford in the late 1950s, marries him, tries to raise her two mixed-race sons on her own and spirals into a fatal depression. Bound by their invisibility and powerlessness in a male-dominated world and by their ability to live "in two worlds"⁴⁴ – harsh reality on the one hand and their own mental

39. Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 82. Italics in original.

40. Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 81.

41. Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 3.

42. Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 105.

43. Note that this conflation between Branwell and Heathcliff, as two outsider figures, echoes the parallels between Monica and Heathcliff's nameless mother.

44. Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 112.

landscape on the other – these three women see their lives forever marred by similar catastrophes that shape their ostracization, including enslavement and abuse at the hand of a slave trader for the first (the Caribbean woman), a dysfunctional family life for the second (Emily Brontë), acute loneliness and child loss for the third (Monica), with possibly a suspicion of incest for the last two, all circumstances which in themselves could very well be read as the source of their traumatized reflections.

If these three characters share comparable experiences in spite of their different origins and backgrounds, it is quite interesting to look more closely at the way that their mental states are conveyed and realize that the vocabulary or the images used to describe the two English women's psychological predicaments in many cases suggest the type of alienation and segregation that one would more automatically associate with the mental problems of the rootless Caribbean one, whose death is evoked as "Another journey, another crossing."⁴⁵ Emily Brontë's hallucinations, for example, are depicted in terms of displacement, as her "[*wandering*] in her mind out onto the moors."⁴⁶ This association between Emily's mental drifting and physical movement might not be that surprising if one considers Emily's Irish migrant background and the fact that, like her famous sister Charlotte, she might have "journeying in [her] blood,"⁴⁷ as suggested by the two sisters' stay in Belgium for several months. Monica's family, with a father who is a headmaster and a rather submissive mother, is more conventional and situated than Emily's and cannot be easily described as displaced, even if she betrays some form of restlessness in her daily life, moving between Leeds, Oxford, a town on the south coast of England and London through her narrative. Her drifting into despair and her feeling of unbelonging and isolation are nevertheless also worded in terms that evoke the dislocation and the outsidership suffered by Caribbean migrants in England more than the mental crisis of a middle-class English girl. Like Emily, Monica displays an "often flighty state of mind"⁴⁸ and a "proclivity to wander in her head."⁴⁹ When she leaves her husband in London to go back to her native north, she views her departure as "a fresh start,"⁵⁰ which somehow echoes the motivation of many post-war West Indian migrants to England. On her arrival at Leeds station, her children and

45. Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 12.

46. Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 105. Italics mine.

47. Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 99.

48. Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 27.

49. Phillips, *The Lost Child*, pp. 27–28.

50. Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 51.

herself are perceived by her judgmental father as “huddled together on the platform like evacuees, and all that was missing were their name tags,”⁵¹ a description which suggests yet another type of migration, that which occurred during the Second World War, but also Monica’s essential separateness from the local population and her lack of secure identity, encapsulated here in the missing name tags. Later when she is on her own in London, trying “to keep [herself] to [herself],”⁵² and her mental state deteriorates, she complains that her younger co-workers start “telling [her] that [her] face didn’t fit and calling [her] all the names under the sun”⁵³ and remembers how her colleague back in Leeds “treated [her] like a leper.”⁵⁴ These examples of racial and social exclusion very much recall situations faced by many foreign newcomers to any Western metropolis, who are, like Monica, paradoxically victim of facial discrimination and of a simultaneous form of invisibility.⁵⁵

What do these clues suggest? Perhaps that through her marriage to a Caribbean man and the birth of her two mixed-race children – that is by transgressing established social norms in terms of race and class – Monica has vicariously become a member of the West Indian diaspora? In this, she very much recalls the English woman Joyce in Phillips’s novel *Crossing the River*, who, following her marriage to a black GI with whom she has had a son, finally becomes associated with the children of the African father who had sold his own children into slavery and is recognized by him as one of his offspring.⁵⁶ The familiarity of Monica’s plight for readers acquainted with novels of migration to England, and to Europe, for that matter, might also indicate that the experience of mentally ill patients has parallels with the alienation associated with the painful aspects of the exotic migrant condition in the so-called heart of the Empire. Phillips has already suggested such a convergence through other diasporic characters, for example the Jewish Pole Irina in *Higher Ground* and more recently the West Indian Earl in *In the Falling Snow*,⁵⁷ whose gruelling experience of twentieth-century England includes their being sectioned to a mental home. White, middle-class Monica, too, ends up in such a place in *The Lost Child* yet the novel intimates that, contrary to the title of the section of the novel depicting her lonely stay in London and her descent into

51. Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 54.

52. Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 214.

53. Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 214.

54. Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 226.

55. Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 215. “I could see the people, but they couldn’t see me”.

56. Caryl Phillips, *Crossing the River*, London: Bloomsbury, 1993.

57. Caryl Phillips, *In the Falling Snow*, London: Harvill Secker, 2009.

psychological hell, she is not “Alone,”⁵⁸ but that she shares her fate with many racial and social others whose belonging to England has been denied to them because of their assumed apartness. As in *Wuthering Heights*, this destabilization of categories implies, to quote Mardorossian, that “Far from being sites of stable and essentialized difference, class, gender and race are thus revealed as inseparable complexes of social meanings that expose the symbolic nature of race and challenge the concept’s yoking to the body. Race, in other words, is revealed as a product of language rather than of ‘visible’ racial otherness.”⁵⁹

Taxonomic instability and the Jean Rhys connection

One could speak of the same taxonomic instability in relation to mental health in *The Lost Child* and a major source of illumination in this case, aside from the work of Emily Brontë, is that of Jean Rhys, for whose Caribbean heroines England, as explained earlier, is synonymous with rejection, ostracization and mental disorder, in the same way as it is for Monica and to some extent for Emily. It is impossible to fully develop here the intertextual parallels that exist between the writing of Rhys and that of Phillips, especially in matters of mental states, and explore their relevance to what I call Phillips’s indigenization of exotic madness in *The Lost Child*. Phillips’s latest novel, *A View of the Empire at Sunset*, which retraces Rhys’s own life, might offer compelling material in this regard.⁶⁰ Still, there are many other examples that can testify to the closeness between Rhys’s (often avowedly autobiographical) displaced, presumably exotic heroines, and Phillips’s native yet deranged women.

The first area of intertextuality that is worth exploring is the strong similitude between the eighth chapter of *The Lost Child*, entitled “Alone,” which, as already mentioned, focuses on Monica’s breakdown after the murder of one of her sons, and Rhys’s “Let Them Call It Jazz.” Not only do the two first-person narratives share the same paranoid tone, but they also contain several quite similar scenes. For example, exactly like Selina, Monica is at one stage accommodated in an empty flat by a man that she has met by chance, and her behaviour, in this case sunbathing in her

58. Phillips, *The Lost Child*, “Alone,” pp. 211–237.

59. Mardorossian, “Racial Vagaries,” p. 108.

60. Caryl Phillips, *A View of the Empire at Sunset*, London: Vintage, 2018. On intertextual connections between Rhys and Phillips, see Bénédicte Ledent, “‘There is always the other side, always’: Britain, the Caribbean and the Ghost of Jean Rhys in Caryl Phillips’s Writing,” *Wasafiri* 34, 2019, pp. 61–66.

underwear, annoys the sanctimonious neighbours who finally call the police and have her arrested for disturbance and sent to a psychiatric hospital. Both women drink heavily too, to drown their sorrow and loneliness, and they share the same body language when they speak at their court case: while Selina can “hear [herself] talking loud and [...] see [her] hands wave in the air,”⁶¹ Monica realizes that “[her] arms are flying about in front of [her] face and [she is] still talking.”⁶² But the two women do not cope in the same way with their experience of confinement: if Selina is strengthened by it, Monica finally commits suicide. While these echoes of “Let Them Call It Jazz” in *The Lost Child* have been read as “a form of literary parent-hood” that compensates for the novel’s general sense of familial disruption,⁶³ it is also important to view them as part of Phillips’s attempt to familiarize the mad exotic and to show the irrelevance of any systems of othering, whether they refer to race or to the mental vulnerability that is often attached to it.

If Monica reminds us of Selina, she is also strongly reminiscent of Antoinette in Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a novel which goes some way towards indigenizing exotic madness too in the sense that it shows Rochester as being as susceptible as Antoinette to a form of psychological derangement. The links between Rhys’s and Phillips’s novels might be tenuous at first sight, yet they do surface, notably through references to the iconic mad woman in the attic, a figure that binds *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre*, and who can also be found at several places in *The Lost Child*: Heathcliff’s unnamed mother lives in a “bleak attic room;”⁶⁴ Monica’s student room in Oxford is also located in the attic,⁶⁵ and in London she first lives in a rented “tiny attic room,”⁶⁶ then she moves to another flat with an upstairs neighbour who is described as a “crazy woman.”⁶⁷ In addition to these clues, Monica also ends up confined in a mental hospital, where she is under the supervision of various Grace Poole figures. Interestingly, in this place she realizes that “There’s no

61. Rhys, “Let Them Call it Jazz,” p. 175.

62. Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 232.

63. Bénédicte Ledent and Evelyn O’Callaghan, “Caryl Phillips’ *The Lost Child*: A Story of Loss and Connection,” *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 48.3&4, July-October 2017, pp. 229–247, p. 229. On the links with “Let Them Call It Jazz,” see also Giovanna Buonnano, “Exploring Literary Voices in *The Lost Child*,” *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 40.1, Autumn 2017, pp. 95–104, p. 102.

64. Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 7. It is described as a “foul-smelling attic room” in Mr. Earnshaw’s narrative, p. 249.

65. Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 16.

66. Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 214.

67. Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 221.

mirror,”⁶⁸ which makes her unable to fully recognize herself – very much like Rhys’s Caribbean madwoman in the English attic who similarly deplores that “There is no looking-glass here.”⁶⁹

In those circumstances, it seems that it is the mirror of fiction, which makes insider and outsider reflect each other, which makes the self face the other, that offers perhaps the best way of familiarizing the mad exotic and promoting a form of understanding that overcomes racial, cultural, class, temporal and geographic differences. In this case, it is not so much the characters who are empowered, as is the case in the stories by Brand and Rhys discussed at the beginning of this piece, but the readers themselves, who understand better the limitations of what Mardorossian has called “narratives of alterity.”⁷⁰ Phillips’s integrative approach conveyed in what could be called “narratives of similarity” is perhaps what is most needed today, at a time when millions of people can remain indifferent to the predicament of their fellow human beings simply because they think they have nothing in common with them.

68. Phillips, *The Lost Child*, p. 236.

69. Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 117.

70. Mardorossian, “Racial Vagaries,” p. 102.

Plant/woman encounters in contemporary fairy-tale adaptations

Daniela Kato

Rethinking contemporary fairy-tale collisions for a phytocentrism to come

Perhaps more than any other contemporary cultural form, the fairy-tale adaptation is a privileged site for questioning the boundaries between the familiar and the exotic at multiple levels. “Adaptation” is used in a broad sense here, to refer to the ways that contemporary works of literature and art revise and reimagine conventional expectations of fairy-tale representations. According to fairy-tale scholar Cristina Bacchilega, adaptation can no longer be regarded as a literature-centred practice involving the exclusive connection between two texts at a time. Adaptation is a transformative practice that weaves multiple texts with one another, translating them across media, genres and languages in a much broader intertextual dialogue. And such dialogue unfolds amidst the materiality of culture and its asymmetrical power dynamics, meaning that it goes well beyond the comparison of multiple versions of recognizable fairy tales to address as well ideas of womanhood, motherhood, marriage, nuclear family, and so on, across a range of critical discourses and everyday practices.¹

Contemporary visual artists in particular are drawn to the polymorphic qualities and possibilities of fairy tales, often finding in them a doorway into complex, dark issues of our time. As Jack Zipes explains, in a globalized world that appears to have gone haywire, the idyllic and escapist impulses that were prevalent in artistic renderings of fairy-tale realms from the nineteenth century through the 1960s are no longer tenable.² Ever since, this perception of a world out of joint has led visual

1. Cristina Bacchilega, *Fairy Tales Transformed? Twenty-First Century Adaptations and the Politics of Wonder*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013, pp. 1–30.

2. Jack Zipes, “Fairy-Tale Collisions” in *Fairy Tales, Monsters, and the Genetic Imagination*, ed. Mark W. Scala, Nashville, TN: Frist Center for the Visual Arts and Vanderbilt University Press, 2012, p. 13.

artists to create all sorts of dystopian, grotesque, macabre, and comic configurations that Zipes fittingly calls “fairy-tale collisions,” because:

Their works collide with past fairy-tale conventions by engendering extraordinary imaginative narratives through images that compel viewers to question whether it is possible to lead a fairy-tale life in a rapidly changing world that appears to champion ugliness and brutality over beauty and kindness.³

One of the aspects of our contemporary world that has been eliciting compelling responses from these artists is the relationship human beings establish with other-than-human forms of life. Indeed, through all its ever-shifting configurations in time and across cultures, the fairy tale remains deeply enmeshed in material worlds that connect human beings with animals, plants and fungi in an array of aesthetic and affective configurations. Hence eco-ethical questions regarding how we think of, speak about, and act towards these forms of life cannot but engage visual artists interested in the fairy-tale imagination.

Fairy-tale scholars, too, have begun reflecting on these environmental concerns, in line with the radical decentring of human subjectivity and the concomitant breakdown of the human/animal boundary that is taking place across the sciences and the humanities, particularly in the emergent interdiscipline of posthumanist animal studies.⁴ Against common perceptions that more traditional fairy-tale narratives tended to marginalize animals as mere ciphers symbolizing human values and experiences, such scholars have begun reimagining alternative “contact zones” for human-animal exchanges in the fairy tale. Thus, Lewis Seifert has drawn attention to the frequent motif of metamorphosis (animal to human or human to animal) in fairy tales as a way of challenging the divide between the human and the nonhuman: “tales of metamorphosis necessarily delineate what it means to be human and nonhuman through the experience of hybridity, whereby a character finds himself or herself between species.”⁵ Much in the same vein, Lucile Desblache has argued that contemporary fairy-tale re-creations “introduce literary beasts as

3. Zipes, “Fairy-Tale Collisions,” p. 13. For an equally illuminating overview of the manifold approaches to the fairy-tale imagination by contemporary artists working across multiple media, see Amanda Slack-Smith, “Contemporary Art” in *The Routledge Companion to Media and Fairy-Tale Cultures*, eds. Pauline Greenhill, Jill Terry Rudy, Naomi Hamer and Lauren Bosc, New York: Routledge, 2018, pp. 492–499.

4. See, for example, Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species and Posthumanist Theory*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

5. Lewis Seifert, “Animal-Human Hybridity in d’Aulnoy’s ‘Babiole’ and ‘Prince Wild Boar,’” *Marvels & Tales* 25, no.2, 2011, p. 245.

powerful agents of intra- and interspecies relationships [that] whisper in our ear imaginative ways of relating to different beings in non-hierarchical ways.”⁶

Also importantly, fairy-tale scholars have underscored the gender ramifications of these interspecies entanglements. In her study *From Dog Bridegroom to Wolf Girl*, Mayako Murai shows how contemporary women visual artists such as Konoike Tomoko address the human-animal boundary by boldly reappropriating for women an animality that goes beyond the male-oriented, overly eroticised (and often misogynistic) images that have characterized such interface in many fairy-tale traditions and in mainstream cultural products at large.⁷ These creative reappropriations challenge not only normative sexualities and their deleterious dualisms but also the very boundaries between species.

And yet, such analyses remain firmly zoocentric (that is, animal-centred). The far-reaching ecological and gender implications of interspecies relationships have not as yet been extended to the consideration of plant life in the fairy tale. This omission is somewhat surprising, if we consider that anxieties surrounding the behaviour of plants have been around at least since Charles Darwin’s characterization of them as active participants in plant-pollinator relations gave birth to what Jim Endersby identifies as a distinct literary subgenre concerned with deceptive and seductive plants.⁸ Catriona Sandilands even claims that such plant horror stories form a tradition “in which botanical monstrosities of one sort or another invert the accustomed Euro-Western hierarchies of life to wreak havoc on the human beings who are supposed to be safely at the top of the cosmic pile.”⁹

To be sure, much has been written on the significance of forests and woods as privileged settings and theme setters for fairy stories. In *Gossip from the Forest*, Sara Maitland discusses the manifold ways in which forests have shaped our fairy-tale imagination, by evoking “a sense of enchantment and magic, which is at the same

6. Lucile Desblache, “Animal leaders and helpers: from the classical tales of Charles Perrault to the postmodern fables of Angela Carter and Patrick Chamoiseau,” *Journal of Romance Studies* 11, no. 2, Summer 2011, p. 85. For a recent appraisal of the role of animals in fairy tales, see Pauline Greenhill and Leah Claire Allen, “Animal Studies” in *The Routledge Companion to Media and Fairy-Tale Cultures*, eds. Pauline Greenhill, Jill Terry Rudy, Naomi Hamer and Lauren Bosc, New York: Routledge, 2018, pp. 225–234.

7. Mayako Murai, *From Dog Bridegroom to Wolf Girl: Contemporary Fairy-Tale Adaptations in Conversation with the West*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015, pp. 121–140.

8. Jim Endersby, “Deceived by Orchids: Sex, Science, Fiction, and Darwin.” *British Journal for the History of Science* 49, no. 2, 2016, pp. 205–229.

9. Catriona Sandilands, “Fear of a Queer Plant?” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 23, no. 3, 2017, p. 421.

time fraught with fear.”¹⁰ Her analysis is, however, unwittingly anthropocentric, in that it focuses mostly on the forest as a mere backdrop against which to test human conduct and disclose the human self; the non-human inhabitants of the forest are featured mostly as providers of magical assistance. Everything revolves around human nature, with other “natures” orbiting it in more or less distant ellipses, to paraphrase plant philosopher Michael Marder.¹¹ Similarly, Zipes’s study of the enchanted forest in the Grimms’ fairy tales, though acknowledging the forest “as the supreme authority on earth and often the great provider,” winds up by reducing its significance solely to human interests.¹² The forest is, in his view, “the singular place that belongs to all the people... [It] allows for a change in the protagonist’s destiny and enables the social type to distinguish him or herself.”¹³ Hence fairy-tale scholarship, in a curious inversion of the proverbial saying, has tended to see the forest but not the trees – nor the flowers and the undergrowth, for that matter. In this regard, it is of a piece with the long-standing Western traditions descending from Aristotle’s philosophy and Christian theology, which have relegated plants “to the background against which the real action of the world plays out.”¹⁴

In *The Vegetative Soul*, Elaine Miller contends that even feminist studies have largely failed to escape this persistent hierarchical dualism valuing the activity of animal beings over the putative passivity of vegetal beings.¹⁵ Carla Hustak and Natasha Myers ascribe this to our tendency to privilege “‘the encounter value’ of organisms that humans can ‘hold in regard,’ that is, those animals with whom we can lock eyes,” suggesting that the “extensive, distributed, and entangling” bodies of plants unsettle us.¹⁶ Against such tendency, Miller argues that plants constitute a productive site for rethinking feminine subjectivity and disturbing the abovementioned deleterious active/passive dichotomy, in which the male is coded active and the female passive.

10. Sara Maitland, *Gossip from the Forest: The Tangled Roots of Our Forests and Fairy Tales*, London: Granta, 2012, p. 10.

11. Michael Marder, “For a Phytocentrism to Come,” *Environmental Philosophy* 11.2, Fall 2014, p. 241.

12. Jack Zipes, *The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to the Modern World*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, p. 65.

13. Zipes, *The Brothers Grimm*, p. 79.

14. Carla Hustak and Natasha Myers, “Involuntary Momentum: Affective Ecologies and the Sciences of Plant/Insect Encounters,” *difference: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 15.3, 2012, p. 80. See also Matthew Hall, *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany*, New York: SUNY Press, 2011, and Giovanni Aloï, “Introduction: Botanical Speculations” in *Botanical Speculations: Plants in Contemporary Art*, ed. Giovanni Aloï, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018, p. xix.

15. Elaine P. Miller, *The Vegetative Soul: From Philosophy of Nature to Subjectivity in the Feminine*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002, pp. 188–200.

16. Hustak and Myers, “Involuntary Momentum,” pp. 80–81.

And in Miller's view, the idea of efflorescence proposed by the feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray provides a fitting starting point for this project of restructuring "the feminine imaginary (thereby effecting the possibility of a feminine subjectivity) by way of reworking the symbols of nature."¹⁷

Irigaray's philosophical outlook on corporeity stamped by sexual difference and attuned to the vegetal rhythms of the earth in our life as well as to an array of non-Western philosophical traditions may seem hopelessly old-fashioned in the light of contemporary feminisms and their focus on identity politics. Indeed, Irigaray's insistence that the biological fact of internal sexual organs in women and external ones in men shapes their culturally mediated approaches to the world – including how they grow and cultivate their subjectivities – is diametrically opposed to the emphasis on the social construction of gender now prevalent in feminist theorizations.

In what follows, however, I shall contend that Irigaray's conceptualization allows for a radical work of *de-exoticization* not just of feminine existence but also of vegetal one that has far-reaching ecological implications. More to the point of this essay, Irigaray transforms the negative association of woman with plants into a positive possibility that is especially pertinent to contemporary fairy-tale collisions inflected by gender and species in the work of women artists. But before moving on to illustrate this argument in the next section, let me briefly explain some of Irigaray's key ideas.

In *I Love to You*, Irigaray overturns the negative association between woman and plant by evoking pre-patriarchal cultures where goddesses were associated with the world of vegetation:

One might well wonder if women are closer to the vegetable world than to the animal world, as was claimed by certain ancient philosophers, and particularly by female cultures, although, it is true, in different ways. Could it be that in this proximity there lies an accurate explanation of her relation to passivity? Woman's receptivity would not be restricted to her relation to man alone but would extend to the natural economy, especially the cosmic one, with which her equilibrium and growth are more closely associated. Her so-called passivity would not then be part of an active/passive pair of opposites but would signify a different economy, a different relation to nature and to the self that would amount to attentiveness and to *fidelity* rather than *passivity*. A matter, therefore, not of pure receptivity but of a movement of growth that never ultimately estranges itself from corporeal existence in a natural milieu. In which case, becoming is not cut off from life or its placing. It is not extrapolated from the living nor founded in a dead character. It remains attentive to growth: physiological, spiritual, relational.¹⁸

17. Miller, *The Vegetative Soul*, p. 190.

18. Luce Irigaray, *I Love to You: Philosophy in the Feminine*, trans. Alison Martin, London: Routledge, 1991, p. 95.

As Miller remarks, even though Irigaray associates growth and the feminine with nature in the way these figures have traditionally been brought together, for Irigaray nature is not something fixed, attached to a sex; it is “part of hierarchized system... that is legitimized by virtue of being presented as natural and inevitable. And such legitimization includes “an occlusion of the bodily and its intimate relationship to the spiritual.”¹⁹ It is precisely such relationship that Irigaray wishes to restore, by reconnecting woman and plant through the idea of “attentive fidelity.” A plant’s growth is faithful to its milieu to the extent that it is always rooted in a place; at the same time though, the plant grows by being attentive to the world’s fluctuations and seasonal rotations, to the comings and goings of other creatures, as well as by straining towards the sky, which it enriches with oxygen. Herein is, for Irigaray, a model of fidelity we should aspire to learn. It is a fidelity pledged, not to the masculine atomistic and appropriative subject of Western metaphysics – which engendered the man of scientific and imperial exploration – “but to the entire world, toward which [the plant’s] diffuse and receptive attention is turned.”²⁰

When compared to animals, plants have, in addition, a nonoppositional nature that in Irigaray’s reading spells perseverance and tenacity shorn of confrontation. This non-oppositionality is shown in the plants’ very plasticity – their form – which is why their indeterminate growth is always a growing *with* and a flowering *with* the other.²¹ Irigaray:

[The flower] sways with the wind, without rigidity. It also evolves within itself; it grows, blossoms, grows back. Some of them, those I find most engaging, open with the rising sun and close up in the evening. There are flowers for every season. The most hardy among them, those least cultivated by man, come forth while preserving their roots; they are constantly moving between the appearance of their forms and their earth’s resources.²²

Ideas of metamorphosis and fluidity are thus at the heart of such ways of connecting feminine and plant existence – and they are, too, at the heart of the artworks I will be discussing in the next section. Teasing out the significance of these connections for a more phytocentric approach to fairy-tale collisions is the task I propose to undertake.

19. Miller, *The Vegetative Soul*, p. 190.

20. Michael Marder, *The Philosopher’s Plant: An Intellectual Herbarium*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2014, p. 223.

21. Marder, *The Philosopher’s Plant*, p. 219.

22. Irigaray, *I Love to You*, p. 25.

“The fairy tale is in everything I do.” Janaina Tschäpe’s botanical hybrids in *Melanotropics*²³

The works of multimedia German-Brazilian artist Janaina Tschäpe (Germany, 1973–) are among the most original and provocative contemporary approaches to fairy-tale inspired woman-plant hybrids. Although their quirky, lush images do not contain explicit references to well-known fairy tales, they do re-create fairy-tale-like creatures and atmospheres. In their intermedial orientation, these works correspond closely to a sub-category of fairy-tale collisions that Jack Zipes describes as “conflicted mosaics:” photographs, films, paintings, and performances “that draw on an assortment of fairy-tale fragments to evoke a sense of wonder if not bafflement.”²⁴ In Tschäpe’s artworks, this sense of wonder is often created through the presence of disconcerting crossbreeds between plants and women inhabiting a variety of land- and sea-scape configurations.

The artist’s multilayered visual narratives establish dialogues with a vast array of cultural intertexts, ranging from the Nymphs of Greek mythology to the Germanic imagination of the gothic forest. No less significantly, Tschäpe draws as well on the vast repository of mythic projections and fantasies visited upon the Amazon rainforest by First-World explorers, builders of empire, naturalists and Romantics in the nineteenth century, which Susanna Hecht and Alexander Cockburn so compellingly detail in their study *The Fate of the Forest*.²⁵

Curator Ricardo Sardenberg has aptly described Tschäpe’s work as evocative of the *Victoria regia*, an aquatic plant that is common in the Amazon and constitutes the largest of the *Nymphaeaceae* family of water lilies. Its large circular leaves with folded edges float on the water and its flower tends to open at night.²⁶ In European mythologies, the water lily is a flower that transgresses metaphysical categorization by fusing the vegetal, the human, and the divine, in its etymological association with both the Greek nature goddesses, *nymphae*, and the Greek term *nymphê*, meaning “a bride,” which contributed to the formation of the Latin verb *nûbere*, “to take in marriage.”²⁷ In the Amazon, the flower has populated indigenous legends, such as this one recounted by Sardenberg:

23. Janaina Tschäpe cited in Angela Kingston, “Six Artists and the Fairy Tale,” in *Fairy Tale: Contemporary Art and Enchantment*, Walsall: The New Art Gallery Walsall, 2007, p. 81.

24. Zipes, “Fairy-Tale Collisions,” p. 14.

25. Susanna Hecht and Alexander Cockburn, *The Fate of the Forest: Developers, Destroyers, and Defenders of the Amazon*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010, esp. pp. 1–15.

26. Ricardo Sardenberg, “Janaina Tschäpe and the Pirlimpimpim Dust” in *Janaina Tschäpe: Melanotropics*, St. Louis, MO: Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, 2006, pp. 21–22.

27. Marder, *The Philosopher’s Plant*, p. 216.

A little girl loved the moon and the stars so much that she believed that someday the moon would come to get her and change her into a star. One night the girl bent over a river to admire the sky full of stars reflected in the water, which hypnotized her. Diving into the water, the little girl turned into a *Victoria regia*.²⁸

This blossoming of the feminine in a watery milieu – the symbol of metamorphosis par excellence – would resonate, no doubt, with Luce Irigaray. It stands in stark contrast with Irigaray's counter-hero and counter-flower, Narcissus (the daffodil), which is the very negation of vegetal growth in attentive care for the other.²⁹

Janaina Tschäpe brought together some of her most significant woman-plant hybrids in a 2006 exhibition at the Contemporary Art Museum of St. Louis, USA, which she suggestively titled *Melantropics*. The exhibition consists mostly of performance-based photographs and videos featuring female models clad in lavish biomorphic costumes made of various colourful fabrics, with rampant, out-of-scale latex appendages and growths suggesting magical or perhaps even invasive alien origins – the kind of hybrid, pod-like creatures that inhabit fairy tales and other fantasy worlds. The evidence of human anatomy is barely observable in these figures: hair covers faces, and the existing limbs are either hidden under the bulbous armatures or blended with tails and tentacles. The creatures linger quietly in verdant botanical settings, in an uncertain status of suspension. What we see intimates stories that may have happened or are about to happen. As curator Andrea Green puts it, “the photographs seem to be fragments of a larger whole, possibly film stills from a science fiction movie or documentation of a newly discovered species.”³⁰

The very title of the exhibition is full of significance. *Melantropics* combines the words melancholy and tropics, and, according to Green, it refers to the epidemic of melancholy that occurred in Brazil toward the end of the nineteenth century, in response to the radical social and economic changes brought about by industrialization and the influence of European Romantic ideas.³¹ But the title evokes as well Claude Lévi-Strauss's famed elegiac travel memoir *Tristes Tropiques*, a self-reflexive critique of the West's thirst for the exotic and the irrevocable damage its colonial legacy has inflicted:

28. Sardenberg, “Janaina Tschäpe and the Pirlimpimpim Dust,” pp. 21–22.

29. Marder, *The Philosopher's Plant*, p. 221.

30. Andrea Green, “Melantropics” in *Janaina Tschäpe: Melantropics*, St. Louis, MO: Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, 2006, p. 10.

31. Green, “Melantropics,” p. 9. This topic is discussed in greater depth in Moacyr Scliar, *Saturno nos Trópicos: A Melancolia Europeia Chega ao Brasil* (Saturn in the tropics: European melancholy arrives in Brazil), São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2003.



Figure 1. Janaina Tschäpe, *Glandulitera Maris*, 2005. Glossy C-print. Courtesy of the artist.

There is nothing to be done about it now; civilization has ceased to be that delicate flower which was preserved and painstakingly cultivated in one or two sheltered areas of a soil rich in wild species which may have seemed menacing because of the vigour of their growth, but which nevertheless made it possible to vary and revitalize the cultivated stock.³²

In *Melantropics*, Tschäpe gives flesh to this ferocious, transformative fecundity of nature in which enchantment and danger are inextricably linked and ever present. Many of the works gathered for this exhibition were produced during Tschäpe's extended residency at the Missouri Botanical Gardens in St. Louis between 2005 and 2006. Besides being a world-renowned garden, the place is also an international research centre, with a focus on tropical species. In a sequence of photographs in *Melantropics*, the artist gently mocks the Linnaean classificatory – and thus appropriative – frenzy that has long motivated botanical gardens, in a manner reminiscent of Edward Lear's nonsense botany in the Victorian age. Tschäpe appends her

32. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman, New York: Athenaeum, 1974, p. 38.

pseudo-Latin Linnaean designations to a variety of woman-flower configurations, such as the *Glandulitera Maris* reproduced above (Figure 1).

Yet, in common with other visual artists that variously draw on the fairy-tale imagination – such as Paula Rego, Kiki Smith, Sarah Moon, and Amy Stein, to name only a few – there is a darker side to her work. Indeed, some of her images evoke figures of the aforementioned “plant horror,” which Dawn Keetley defines as that which “marks humans’ dread of the ‘wildness’ of vegetal nature – its untameability, its pointless excess, its uncontrollable growth.” Plants, Keetley elaborates, “embody an inscrutable silence, an implacable strangeness, which human culture has, from the beginning, set out to tame.”³³ While such narratives have been around since time immemorial, they took on particular intensity in the wake of Charles Darwin’s studies on the astonishing devices that plants – especially orchids – use to lure and conscript insect pollinators. As pointed out in the previous section, this gave birth to a whole new Victorian literary genre concerned with seductive, deceptive and ultimately rapacious feminine botanical monstrosities that go about indifferently destroying men, ruthlessly dislodging them from the top of the cosmic pile.³⁴

Such botanical monstrosities also found their way into countless visual artistic depictions of fairy-tale scenes, ranging from the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites – Edward Burne-Jones’s series *The Legend of Briar Rose* (1885–1890) is a case in point – to Disney fairy-tale film productions. Who does not remember the haunted forest scene in the 1937 film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, in which gnarled trees with the hands and faces of old witches assail a panic-stricken Snow White? Another disturbing dimension of these visual fairy-tale representations, particularly those indebted to the classic European tradition, is their insistence in subduing the potential of certain plants regarded as particularly lurid to unsettle human beings. Thus, for example, the Brother Grimm’s *Rapunzel* is a tale that begins with a woman’s excessive appetite for a plant: rapunzel, precisely. Rampion, as the plant is also known, is an autogamous plant; if it is not fertilized with the help of insects, it can split a column within the plant to fertilise itself. The split column will curl like braids or coils on a maiden’s head, and this will bring the female stigmatic tissue into contact with the male pollen on the exterior surface of the column. Interestingly though, in most versions of the story the lurid side of vegetal proliferation is suppressed and given a more acceptable symbolic figuration, namely through what fairy-tale scholar Marina Warner suggestively calls “the language of

33. Dawn Keetley, “Introduction: Six Theses on Plant Horror, or, Why are Plants Horrifying?” in *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film*, eds. Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 2.

34. Endersby, “Deceived by Orchids,” pp. 205–229.

hair.”³⁵ Walter Crane’s famed illustration of Rapunzel, with its caption “O Rapunzel, Rapunzel! Let down thine hair” (c. 1880), is a striking example of this kind of figurative intervention.

Janaina Tschäpe’s *Glandulitera Maris* (Figure 1) provides a no less striking visual narrative that runs counter to such repressive figurations and their underlying gender and species prejudices. By fusing plant and woman in a new and unabashedly sexual configuration, it evokes, to my mind, Luce Irigaray’s aforementioned idea of *efflorescence*: a metamorphic, fluid and indefinite form of individuation that radically differs from the atomistic and appropriative subjectivity that engendered the man of scientific and imperial exploration.

And yet, Tschäpe’s work is equally in tune with the work of women scholars such as Elizabeth Grosz and the late Deborah Bird Rose.³⁶ They are part of a new constellation of feminist scholars that is enlivening the environmental humanities through an engagement with biology and, notably, with a revised Darwin. Their engagement is generating ways of thinking attuned to affect and creativity in interspecies intimacies that form an antithesis to, on the one hand, the ways of thinking of Darwinian hardliners who see in such intimacies nothing but biological deception and exploitation of the insect by the plant; and, on the other hand, such new ways of thinking also constitute an antithesis to the misconceptions that have underpinned the aforementioned artistic representations of plant horror associating rapacious plants with feminine behaviour.

In her beautifully elegiac essay, Rose proposes a whole new approach to aesthetics that not only illuminates Tschäpe’s conjoining of woman and plant in her botanical hybrids but also has far-reaching implications for a rethinking of art from a phyto-centric perspective:

I use the term “aesthetic” in a nontechnical way to discuss things that appeal to the senses, things that evoke or capture feelings and responses. I want to think of aesthetics, in part, in angiosperm terms, that is, in terms of lures that both entice one’s attention and offer rewards.³⁷

Both Grosz and Rose emphasize the notion that the aesthetic impulse is profoundly *trans*-species: the orchestration of desire, the impulse to attract that makes trees

35. Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and their Tellers*, London: Vintage, 1995, pp. 374–375.

36. Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011, and Deborah Bird Rose “Shimmer: When All You Love is Being Trashed” in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, eds. Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt, Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 2017, G51–G61.

37. Rose, “Shimmer: When All You Love is Being Trashed,” G53.



Figure 2. Janaina Tschäpe, *Veratrtrum Bulbosus*, 2006. Glossy C-print. Courtesy of the artist.

erupt into perfume and flowers, and birds into music and colour, is the way of life in all its forms. Hence human artistic drives are seen as having a fundamental connection to animality and vegetality, as they, too, are based in strategies of excess, display, intensification. And, most importantly, recognising that our artistic drives are something that we share with other species cannot but be ethically charged, in that such recognition does away with the hitherto dominant view that hails art as the quintessential manifestation of human (or perhaps masculine?) exceptionalism and as the privileged outlet for the exoticization of nature. In her recent book *Choreographies of the Living* (2018), Carrie Rohman compellingly summarizes this innovative way of thinking, when she points out that artistic practice is not “a rarefied product of human advancement, genius or handiwork,” but rather something that “has its roots in the excesses of evolution and in the showy extravagance of sexual selection, where qualities and forces are elaborated in the name of attraction, innovation, and a becoming-other.”³⁸

38. Carrie Rohman, *Choreographies of the Living: Bioaesthetics in Literature, Art, and Performance*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 9.

The phytocentric aesthetic configurations in Janaina Tschäpe's *Melantropics* enact such qualities and forces through highly suggestive but also *playful* displays of sexual attractors: colours, puffery, and engorgement (Figure 2). These attractors show, in addition, that forms of bodily intensification – in nature as well as in art – do not hinge on notions of sexuality as biologically determined or rigidly heteronormative, but rather as fluid processes of becoming that bring all creatures into the shared experience of being part of a vibrant and vibrating world.

Drawing on Rohman's proposal for a bioaesthetics, I would say, in closing, that Tschäpe's botanical hybrids *de-humanise* art by "creaturizing" aesthetics, that is, by imagining intricate ways in which species may shape themselves in ever-surprising combinations and patterns – beyond the limiting, divisive configurations of the familiar and the exotic.³⁹ Such *creaturely* bioaesthetics compels us to reimagine alternative fairy-tale collisions in contemporary art that, whilst not forgetful of how out of joint our world is, also remind us that a renewed sense of wonder is still within reach.

39. Rohman, *Choreographies of the Living*, p. 13.

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Author index

A

Adichie, Chimamanda 11
 Ahmad, Aijaz 156
 Appelius, Mario 79, 81–84,
 90, 93
 Arbasino, Alberto 4, 80,
 89–90, 92–93
 Auden, W. H. 45

B

Bacchilega, Cristina 323
 Bakr, Salwa 4, 11, 95, 96, 98,
 102–108
 Bal, Mieke 231
 Balibar, Etienne 249
 Barthes, Roland 231
 Bauman, Zygmunt 294
 Beck, Ulrich 20, 21
 Bezbaroa, Lakshminath 194
 Bhabha, Homi 114, 246, 277
 Biko, Stephen 235
 Billings, Timothy 59
 Bocca, Giorgio 89
 Bouillier, Henry 56, 61
 Brand, Dionne 311, 322
 Brantlinger, Patrick 45
 Breuer, Josef 214
 Brink, André 6, 227, 232, 233,
 235, 240
 Brodber, Erna 310
 Brontë, Charlotte 2, 309, 317
 Brontë, Emily 318, 320
 Burdett, Charles 82
 Burgess, John 75
 Burne-Jones, Edward 332
 Bush, Christopher 59
 Calamandrei, Piero 85
 Calvino, Italo 89
 Caruth, Cathy 214
 Cassola, Carlo 85, 93
 Cattrysse, Patrick 231
 Cavanagh, Clare 112, 114

Célestin, Roger 266, 267
 Chakrabarty, Dipesh 32
 Chakravarti, Uma 217, 219, 222
 Chanphal, Sok 75
 Cheng, François 61, 62
 Christie, Agatha 5, 127, 131–133,
 137
 Cipolla, Arnaldo 81
 Claudel, Paul 56
 Clifford, James 245, 315
 Coleridge, Samuel Taylor 10
 Conrad, Joseph 114, 115, 264,
 283
 Copeman, Jacob 27, 30
 Copin, Henri 69
 Couldry, Nick 32
 Ctesias 241
 Curtis, Howard 71

D

Darwin, Charles 333
 Das, Veena 215, 216, 223
 Giorgi, Laura De 85
 de Gourmont, Remy 51, 60
 Debaene, Vincent 54, 55
 Debussy, Claude 57
 Deleuze, Gilles and Félix
 Guattari 244
 DeMarr, Mary Jean 256
 Derne, Steve 31
 Derrida, Jacques 140, 203,
 212, 231
 Desblache, Lucile 324
 Dollé, Marie 52, 55
 Douglas, Mary 284
 Doumet, Christian 60
 Drabble, Margaret 74
 Du Bois, W. E. B. 231, 277, 301,
 302
 Dyer, Richard 296, 297, 298,
 299

E

Echlin, Kim 75
 Eco, Umberto 231
 Ellison, Ralph 243
 Emanuelli, Enrico 85, 86
 Essileef, Vadime 57
 Even-Zohar 228, 230

F

Fanon, Frantz 7, 265, 268, 270,
 272, 296
 Faulkner, William 213
 Flint, Shamini 72, 74
 Fo, Dario 89
 Forsdick, Charles 56
 Fortini, Franco 4, 80, 85–88, 93
 Foucault, Michel 18, 68, 128,
 139, 219, 231, 275
 Freud, Sigmund 128, 214

G

Gandhi, Leela 114
 Garvey, Johanna X. K. 311
 Gauguin, Paul 53, 54
 Ghosh, Amitav 11
 Goldman, Marlene 248, 312
 Gosse, Edmund 37, 38
 Govindacharya, Bannanje
 201, 206, 207, 209
 Grace, Daphne 292
 Gramsci, Antonio 89, 121, 141
 Green, Andrea 329
 Groslier, George 69, 70, 71
 Grosz, Elizabeth 323
 Grusin, Dave 239
 Guha, Ramachandra 156
 Guha, Ranajit 273, 274
 Guiney, Sue 76
 Guptoo, Nandini 24, 26
 Gusev, Sergey 118

H

- Hall, Adam 73
 Hall, Stuart 230, 266, 271, 277, 296
 Hansda Shekhar, Showvendra 5, 12, 139–153, 155, 165–171
 Hardy, Thomas 5, 127, 133–134
 Harootunian, Harry 269, 276
 Harrison, Faye V. 249
 Hart, George 174
 Hecht, Susan and Alexander Cockburn 329
 Herodotus 92, 241
 Hollinger, David A. 302
 Holmes, James 178, 186
 Hope, A. D. 5, 127, 129, 135
 Huggan, Graham 1, 2, 4, 7, 95, 156, 168, 241, 248, 256, 266, 267, 269, 270, 273, 309
 Hugo-Bader, Jacek 118
 Hustak, Carla 326

I

- Ikegame, Aya 27
 Irigaray, Luce 327, 330, 333
 Iyer, U. V. Swaminatha 174

J

- Jaco, Aldo De 88
 Jameson, Fredric 112
 Jiménez, Juan Ramón 251

K

- Kapuściński, Ryszard 118
 Kemsley, Rita 238
 Khair, Tabish 281, 282, 284–294
 Khatibi, Abdelkhebir 53, 54
 Kingsolver, Barbara 253–264
 Kipling, Rudyard 3, 12, 35–49
 Koch, Christopher 74
 Kompridis, Nikolas 8
 Kristeva, Julia 285
 Kurczab-Redlich, Krystyna 118
 Kureishi, Hanif 284

L

- LaCapra, Dominick 223
 Lafférière, Dany 288
 Lahiri, Jhumpa 265, 266, 272, 273, 275–279
 Laliberté, Robert 52

- Le Carré, John 72
 Lear, Edward 331
 Lefevère, André 228
 Leiris, Michel 55
 Lessing, Doris 289
 Levi, Carlo 85
 Levine-Rasky, Cynthia 299, 303, 305
 Lévi-Strauss, Claude 52, 140, 197, 330
 Leys, Simon 61, 62, 65
 Lieberman, Matthew 97, 98, 99
 Long, Jeff 73
 Luzi, Mario 88, 89

M

- Maitland, Sara 325
 Mak, Suong 72
 Makhaya, Stephen 234
 Malerba, Luigi 80, 88, 89, 91–93
 Mallarmé, Stéphane 64
 Malraux, André 70, 71
 Manceron, Gilles 56
 Manisty, Dinah 95
 Marche, Stephen 242
 Marder, Michael 326
 Mardorossian, Carine 314, 315, 320, 322

- Martel, Yann 6, 11, 241–244, 246–247
 Martin, Fran 18
 Marx, Karl 278
 Masekela, Hugh 239
 Maugham, William Somerset 269
 McCormick, Patricia 75
 McFarlane, Brian 231
 McKay, Laura Jean 76
 McLeod, John 268
 McNally, Richard 224
 Medina, K. T. 73
 Megasthenes 159, 241
 Meyer, Roland 69, 70
 Miller, Elaine 326, 327, 328
 Miller, Kei 310
 Miłosz, Czesław 112
 Mohanty, Manoranjan 163
 Montale, Eugenio 89
 Moore, Christopher G. 72, 73
 Moore-Gilbert, Bart 45

- Moravia, Alberto 4, 89
 Morrison, George 61
 Morrison, Toni 296, 298, 299, 300–307
 Mounin, Georges 198
 Mukhopadhyay, Nilanjan 219
 Mumme, Patricia Y. 198, 199
 Murai, Mayako 325
 Myers, Natasha 326

N

- Naaijken, Jon 240
 Nagappa, N. 210–211
 Naipaul, V.S. 265–272, 275, 277, 278, 284
 Needham, Joseph 61
 Neruda, Pablo 5, 127, 136–138
 Nette, Andrew 73, 74
 Ngūgĩ, wa Thiong'o 272, 274
 Nida, Eugene 228, 230
 Noll, Douglas E. 99, 100
 Nord, Christiane 227, 229

O

- Oatley, Keith 101, 102
 Ong, Aiwai 33
 Osborne, Milton 71

P

- Palcy, Euzhan 231–233, 235–237, 239, 240
 Panditacharya, Narayana 198, 200, 205, 208, 209, 212
 Phillips, Caryl 311, 312, 314–322
 Pike, Kenneth 140
 Piscane, Carlo 283
 Postel, Philippe 57
 Preston, Douglas 73
 Prochnow, Jürgen 233, 234
 Purcell, William 255
 Pushkin, Alexander 111, 113

Q

- Quraishi, Humra 220

R

- Ramanujacharya 199
 Ramanujan, A. K. 10, 12, 174, 175, 178–185
 Rancière, Jacques 276

Ranendra 155–167, 171
 Renk, Kathleen J. 312
 Rhys, Jean 309–314, 320–322
 Rinaldi, Harriette C. 75
 Robinson, Edward Kay 44
 Rohman, Carrie 334, 335
 Rose, Deborah Bird 323
 Ryman, Geoff 75

S

Said, Edward 1, 36, 43, 67, 109,
 112, 114, 130, 290, 295
 Santarone, Donatello 79
 Sardenberg, Ricardo 329
 Saussure, Ferdinand 298
 Schleiermacher, Friedrich 177
 Schutz, Alfred 273
 Sciascia, Leonardo 89
 Seeley, Nick 73
 Segalen, Victor 51–66, 142, 276
 Segler-Messner, Silke 292
 Seifert, Lewis 324
 Selby, Martha 174
 Selvon, Sam 188
 Seymour-Jorn, Caroline 107
 Shklovsky, Victor 173, 176
 Shors, John 75
 Sielke, Sabine 244
 Singh, Jarnail 218, 219

Singh, Khushwant 213, 217,
 220, 221
 Skórczewski, Dariusz 113
 Smith, Adam 96
 Spano, Velio 85
 Spitz, Chantal 53, 54
 Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty
 114, 134, 142, 146, 155, 161, 171,
 268, 270
 Suleri, Sara 37
 Sun, Wanning 18
 Suster, Roberto 81

T

Takanobu, Takahashi 174
 Thompson, Ewa 110, 116
 Tieken, Herman 174
 Todorov, Tzvetan 79, 92
 Tolstoy, Leo 111, 113
 Tommaselli, Cescio 81
 Toury, Gideon 227
 Trivikrama Panditacharya 200
 Tschäpe, Janaina 8, 12, 329–331,
 333–335
 Turner, Victor 278
 Tyutchev, Fyodor 111

U

Updike, John 299

V

Valmiki 181, 198, 201, 203, 204,
 206, 207, 208, 210, 211
 Vasilyev, Mikhail 118
 Venuti, Lawrence 6, 177, 227,
 229, 230
 Vermeer, Hans J. 227, 229
 Vissiere, Arnold 57
 Vokan, Vamik 283

W

Waldron, Gregory A. 75
 Walker, Alice 304
 Warner, Marina 332
 Warraq, Ibn 4, 68, 70, 74, 77
 Warrior, Maya 31
 Wilk, Mariusz 118
 Winant, Howard 297
 Włodarczyk, Barbara 118
 Wright, Laura 244, 247

Y

Yee, Jennifer 56
 Young, Robert 275

Z

Zimbardo, Philip 215
 Zipes, Jack 323, 324, 329
 Zvelebil, Kamil 174

General index

A

- Adaptation/s 5, 8, 11, 12, 64,
231, 313, 323
- Adivasis 143, 159, 162, 163, 166–168
- Affect/affective 41, 42, 96–101,
108, 324, 333
- African-American 7, 295, 296,
301, 303, 305, 306
- Afrikaner/s/dom 235–37, 240
- Akam* 12, 174–178, 180, 186
- Alienation 64, 145, 220, 232,
238–240, 291, 315, 318, 319
- Alterity 4, 9, 11, 59, 62–64, 79,
83, 86, 90, 92, 93, 214, 254, 322
- Anglo-Indian 36–38, 44, 45–8
- Anglophone 19, 246, 309
- Anti-Sikh pogrom 6, 213, 218,
223
- Asur 156–162, 164

B

- Bhasha theory 197, 199, 202,
203, 211–212
- Binary/binarization 1–3, 8, 10,
68, 74, 84, 134, 136, 141, 159,
163, 255, 259, 295, 297, 298, 314
- Bioaesthetics 7, 335
- Bio-determinist 249
- Black/Blackness 7, 147, 149, 151,
167, 232, 234–240, 243, 270,
271, 295–307, 311, 315, 316, 319
- Buddhism 57, 83, 198, 199

C

- Colony/ies/colonial/Colonization/
colonized/colonialism/
colonialist 2, 10, 30, 35–38,
41, 43–49, 52–56, 65, 68–71,
110–112, 115, 123, 124, 141, 152,
158, 167, 197, 223, 253, 255–257,
262, 264, 268–269, 272–273,
275, 278, 279, 294, 295, 315,
316, 330

- Colour/coloured 52, 138, 295–
298, 300, 301, 304, 305, 307
- Commodification 4, 7, 95,
266, 309
- Communist/ism 85, 86, 115,
116, 121, 277, 285
- Congo/lese 7, 253–8, 260–264
- Culture/cultural 1, 3, 5, 7,
9–12, 18, 19, 24, 26, 28, 32, 33,
35–38, 42–47, 49, 52, 54–56,
61, 62, 65–69, 71, 74, 76, 77,
80, 83–90, 92, 93, 96, 100,
101, 108–113, 116–120, 123, 124,
127, 128, 130, 131, 139–142, 150,
152, 153, 155–160, 162–165, 167,
168, 171, 177, 178, 187, 189–198,
201, 215, 220, 221, 227–232,
237–243, 244–251, 255, 256,
258–261, 264–273, 276–279,
281, 284, 294, 296, 298, 299,
302, 303, 309, 313, 314, 322,
323, 325, 329, 332

D

- Decolonial 10
- Deculturation 249, 251
- De-exoticization 327
- Defamiliarization 173, 176–178,
186, 295
- Destabilization 315, 320
- Deterritorialization 245
- Diaspora/diasporic 7, 12, 265,
266, 268, 270, 272–275, 277–
279, 293, 309, 313, 316, 319
- Dilettante/dilettantism 1, 51,
52, 54, 56, 66
- Domestic/domesticative/
domestication 6, 12, 31, 83,
162, 174, 177, 181, 182, 214, 227,
229, 230, 232, 233, 239, 240,
253, 256, 311
- Dwaita* 199, 200, 212

E

- Eco-ethical 324
- Efflorescence 327, 333
- Emic 140–142, 147, 150
- Empathy 74, 77, 96, 97, 99, 101,
102, 104, 105, 108, 131, 161, 235,
240, 287, 315
- Empire/Imperial/ism 3, 35–39,
41–43, 45–48, 57, 59, 60, 62,
65, 66, 93, 109–116, 118, 124,
241, 259, 269, 279, 284, 319,
320, 328, 333
- Equivalence theories 228
- Ethnicity 35, 36, 171, 248, 249
- Ethnocentric/Ethnocentrism/
Ethnocultural 7, 53, 230,
243–246, 263, 264, 296, 298
- Etic 140–142, 144, 150, 153
- Exotic/exoticism/exoticization/
exoticizing/exoticize/exote
1–13, 17, 24, 31–33, 38, 44, 49,
51–60, 63, 64, 66–69, 71, 74–7,
95, 104–106, 108, 109, 122,
127–134, 137–139, 141, 142, 144,
145, 150, 151, 153, 155–158, 160–
163, 165–168, 171, 173, 177, 178,
180, 182, 184, 186–199, 201,
203, 206, 208–222, 224, 227,
230, 234, 237, 239–241, 245,
247, 248, 250, 251, 254–256,
265–273, 275–279, 281–283,
288, 293–297, 299, 301–307,
309–317, 319–323, 330, 335

F

- Fairy tales 237, 323–325, 329,
330
- Familiar/ity/ized/ization/
unfamiliar/ity 1–6, 8–10, 12,
17, 31, 32, 35, 37, 38, 44, 46–49,
53, 67, 68, 72, 73, 80, 86, 87,
90, 127–130, 132, 134, 140–142,
151, 155, 157, 160, 165, 167, 171,

173, 174, 176–178, 180–199,
201, 203, 207, 208, 211–216,
218, 219, 221–224, 230, 242,
246–248, 250, 251, 256, 257,
263, 281, 282, 285, 288, 293,
294, 296, 297, 301, 303–307,
313, 314, 317, 319, 321–323, 335
Fascism 81, 83, 84, 89, 285
Feminism 7, 327
Fetish/izing/ization 1, 70, 246
Film/s 6, 11, 47, 100, 227, 230–
240, 329, 330, 332
Foreign/er/s/ization 6, 12, 62,
71, 81, 121, 132, 133, 156, 160,
177, 182, 213–215, 224, 227–230,
232–234, 237, 239–241, 245,
246, 259, 261, 264, 265, 269,
285, 315, 319
Fundamentalist 282, 286

G

Global/globalize/d/globalization
5, 18–20, 24, 27, 30–33, 65, 76,
156, 157, 159, 160, 171, 190, 242,
249, 323
Gulhya 6, 199, 202, 203, 206–212
Guru 17–20, 27–29, 31, 32, 42,
199, 200, 203, 209, 211

H

Hindu/s/ism 24, 26, 29, 31, 39,
42, 43, 46, 57, 145, 157–159, 161,
163, 166, 167, 198, 201, 220,
247, 250, 286
Hollywood 233–235
Home/homeland 6, 12, 20, 21,
23, 26, 41, 73, 77, 79, 122, 138,
144, 149, 151, 168, 169, 170, 174,
184–186, 227, 243, 245, 253,
254, 267, 283, 287, 291, 315, 319
Hybrid/hybridity 37, 43, 45, 48,
49, 141, 173, 177, 178, 187, 216,
231, 330, 324

I

Identity/identities/Identification/
identitarian 5–8, 18, 21, 24,
26, 45, 46, 60, 63, 79, 81–83,
88, 90, 96, 97, 102, 108, 110,
111, 115, 116, 124, 127, 132, 138,
145, 157, 158, 162, 163, 165, 166,

168, 171, 217, 233, 238, 244,
247–250, 265–279, 285, 291–
293, 295–307, 315, 319, 327
Indian Literature in English
35, 156
Indian/ism/ness/Anglo-Indian
3, 5–7, 12, 17, 19–21, 24, 27, 29,
31, 32, 35, 37–46, 48, 130, 143,
151, 155–157, 165, 171, 198, 217,
220–222, 241–248, 250, 268–
271, 274–277, 284, 286, 294
Indigenization 309, 311, 320
Insider 2, 3, 12, 35, 38, 49, 57,
140, 147, 189, 190, 315, 322
Intellectual tourism 1, 4, 51
Intermedial 329
Islam/ic/ism/ist/Muslim 107,
167, 198, 242, 281–283, 285,
286, 287, 289–294

J

Jihad/ist 282, 290, 292
Jnana 199, 211
Judeo-Christian 115

K

Khmer Rouge 4, 67, 72, 74–77
Kikongo 255, 259, 260

L

le divers 4, 54, 59, 62–65
Liberalization 20, 27, 242
Liminal/ity 150, 216, 249–251

M

Madness 105, 121, 139, 309–312,
314–317, 320, 321
Marginalization 7, 157, 171, 272,
292, 309–311
Media 3, 17–19, 27, 29–33, 95,
98, 145, 159, 163, 167, 170, 197,
290, 323
Memory/Mnemohistory 49,
104, 185, 186, 192, 214, 215, 219,
221–224, 297, 300, 302, 304
Migrant/Migration/Immigrant
7, 11, 168, 241, 243, 245, 246,
250, 282, 284, 285, 288, 289,
292, 293, 309–311, 314, 315,
318, 319

Multicultural/ism 1, 7, 11, 242,
243, 110, 196, 241, 244, 263,
264, 284, 285
Muntu 259
Mystic/s/ism 20, 21, 121, 215,
153, 248, 294

N

Narrative/narrator 3, 32, 37,
43, 44, 46, 47, 56, 58, 59, 96,
101–104, 106, 107, 111, 116, 119,
132, 140, 142–146, 150, 153,
156–158, 160, 161, 164–169,
191, 192, 196, 201, 215, 218, 219,
224, 231, 268–271, 273, 276,
285–289, 291, 310, 311, 313,
318, 333
Nation/national/nationalist/
nationalism/post-national/
neo-nationalism 4, 19, 27,
29–31, 36, 65, 69–71, 73, 83, 84,
109, 113, 115, 116, 143, 156, 159,
160, 163, 171, 220–222, 235,
241, 242, 244, 247–249, 254,
255, 263–265, 271, 272, 277, 285
Native 7, 12, 37, 39, 42–44,
46–49, 71, 130, 140, 157, 165,
166, 171, 175, 180, 182, 184, 186,
187, 251, 252, 254–262, 264,
268, 270, 273, 276, 295, 310,
311, 315, 318, 320
Neo-spiritualism 24, 25, 29, 32
New Imperialism 52, 54
Nigger 281, 302
Northeast 6, 11, 189, 191, 193,
195, 196

O

Occident 8, 60, 197
Oppositionality 1, 247, 328
Oral/ly 10, 43, 144, 155, 191,
192, 194
Orient/Orientalism/Orientalist/
orientalize 1, 8, 38, 44, 45,
47, 53, 57, 60, 62, 67, 68, 70, 71,
91, 111, 130, 156, 197, 241, 267,
272, 274, 275, 287, 290, 295,
297, 306
Other/ed/Othering/Otherness
3, 4, 6–8, 36, 37, 42, 44, 45–49,
54, 55, 60, 63, 64, 76, 77, 82,

86, 90, 92, 93, 106, 107, 116,
118, 124, 127, 128, 130, 136, 138,
142, 145, 152, 156–158, 161, 162,
168, 171, 177, 190, 191, 196, 213,
215–221, 223, 224, 229, 230,
234, 237, 241, 242, 245, 247, 250,
254, 256–258, 265–270, 273,
275–279, 294, 295, 297, 298,
301, 307, 314, 309–311, 313–315,
320, 321, 326, 328, 330, 334
Outsider 2, 3, 12, 38, 45, 189,
190, 195, 196, 261, 315, 317, 322

P

Patriarchy 163, 255
Perception 2, 5, 7–10, 12, 36,
44, 45, 55, 64, 106, 110, 117,
134, 135, 142, 158, 168, 174, 176,
182, 193, 236, 256, 263, 264,
267, 269, 270, 274, 286, 293,
309, 323
Perform/ance/s/performative/
ly/Performativity 7, 8, 18,
29–31, 101, 143, 150, 191, 197,
221, 223, 266, 268–270, 273,
276–279, 312, 329, 330
Phyto-centric 328, 333, 335
Postcolonial/Poscolonialism/
Postcoloniality/decolonial
1, 2, 5, 9, 10, 12, 35, 36, 52,
109–114, 123, 124, 130, 151, 152,
197, 255, 266–268, 272, 273,
284, 290
Postmodern 303
Power/powerlessness 5, 10, 13,
24, 32, 33, 39, 42, 44–46, 48,
49, 67, 68, 88, 103, 105, 110, 111,
115, 117, 122, 127–131, 138, 140,
147, 163, 205, 216, 219, 228,
262, 266–268, 270, 272, 275,
277–279, 297–299, 305, 306,
312, 313, 317, 323

R

Race/Racial/Racial Otherness/
Racism/Racist/Racialization/
Neo-Racism/s 7, 9, 36, 39,
45, 48, 83, 84, 93, 136, 141, 238,
243, 245, 249, 250, 253, 254,
255, 275, 283, 293, 295–307,
310, 312, 315, 317, 319–321

Radical/Radicalization 7, 17, 58,
59, 71, 289, 292, 309, 311, 314,
324, 327, 330
Representation/s/al 2, 4, 5,
7–10, 12, 30, 35–38, 55, 58–61,
80, 81, 83, 84, 86, 89–91, 93,
95, 127, 128, 135, 140, 142, 152,
155, 156, 161, 166, 170, 217, 231,
238, 242, 244, 254, 257, 266,
267–278, 282, 289, 295, 297,
314, 323, 332, 333
Ritual/s/ritualistic 31, 120, 121,
141, 149, 150, 276, 277
Rupture 1, 55, 139, 304

S

Samadhi 202, 203, 205, 206,
208, 210
Santhal/i 5, 12, 139–143, 145,
148, 152, 155–157, 165–171
Sarna 152, 161–163, 168
Secular/ize/ized/post-secular
3, 17, 20, 24–26, 30–32, 168,
221, 241, 289, 291, 292
Sexuality 134, 161, 335
Shamanism 120
Similar/similarity 1, 45, 86–88,
104, 117, 120, 142, 162, 222,
246, 247, 288, 297, 298, 312,
315, 316, 318, 320, 322
Skopos 228, 229, 232, 240
Slavery 297, 301, 306, 315, 319
Stereotype/s/Stereotyp/ical/ing
9, 11, 74, 75, 77, 91, 95, 104,
105, 108, 116–119, 124, 135,
161, 168–170, 193, 245, 246,
266, 268, 270, 274, 283, 288,
289, 301
Storytelling 43, 58, 191
Strangeness 11, 128, 215, 218,
224, 229, 256, 285, 314, 332
Subversion 108, 310

T

Taoism 83
Theravada Buddhist 68
The Times of India 218
Translation 5, 6, 8, 11, 12, 59,
95, 140, 156, 161, 173–187, 189,
191–193, 195, 196, 209–211,
227–232, 238, 240

Trauma/trauma theory 124,
213–224, 248, 296, 304, 306,
315
Travel/travel literature, narratives/
traveller/s 2–4, 12, 18, 19, 24,
51–56, 58, 59, 61–66, 71, 76,
79–93, 95, 111, 117, 118, 127, 190,
241, 269, 275, 278, 330
Tribal 71, 156, 157, 160–166, 168,
170, 171, 191, 270

V

Vaastu 20–23, 30
Vedas/Vedic 24, 29, 160, 199,
201, 211
Vegetal 326, 327, 329, 330, 332

W

Washington Post, The 238
West Indian 7, 309, 310, 318, 319
Western/Western traditions/
non-Western/ Eastern 1, 3,
4, 7, 19, 23, 35, 39, 40, 43, 45,
46, 48, 49, 52, 57, 65, 67, 68,
70–77, 80, 83, 91, 92, 95, 105,
109–111, 113–117, 119, 120, 122,
123, 130, 142, 241, 247, 255, 256,
258–261, 263–269, 274, 275,
277–279, 281, 283, 285–287,
289, 290, 312, 319, 325–328
White/ness 38, 42, 44, 49, 112,
148, 234, 236–240, 250, 257–
261, 263, 270, 289, 295–306,
309, 311, 313, 315, 319
Worlding 268, 270

X

Xenophobia 7, 243, 282, 284

Y

Yoga/yog shivirs 17, 20, 25,
28–31

Z

Zarathustra 159
Zoocentric 325

The multicultural world of today is often said to be marked by a certain kind of exoticization: a “fetishizing process”, as Graham Huggan has called it, which separates a “first world” from a “third world”, the Occident from the Orient. The essays collected here re-assess this tendency, not least by focusing on the kinds of intellectual tourism and dilettantism to which it has given rise. The wider context of these analyses is a postcolonial scenario where literatures and languages can move from the “exotic” to the comparatively “familiar” space of contemporary writings; where an exotic mythos can live on into the familiar present; and where certain perceptions and representations of peoples, of literatures, and of languages have turned exoticization and familiarization into global modes of mass-cultural consumption. Especially by exploring the liminalities *between* different cultures, this collection manages to trace both the history and the politics of exoticist representation and, in so doing, to make a significant critical intervention.



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