

## Editors' Note:



“We are in love with tomorrow...”

- Mahmoud Darwish, “A State of Siege”

The first issue is now and ready and running. And we hope, that this will be the first of many more to come. It has been a whirlwind of a journey these last few months. The journey has been a difficult one, but it has been enriching and hopefully very rewarding. Not only has it widened the horizons of our knowledge of the already Protean dynamics of Postcolonialism, it has also made us look into and explore areas which somehow had been shoved under the more general interrogations in the realms of Diaspora studies, nation and nationalism, ideas of race, roots and routes. The maiden edition of our journal features articles which have delved into issues like the portrayal of the Syrian Revolution on Social Media, on the plight of women in the Middle East and the problematics of queer identity and even the question of whether Iranian Writing In English can be brought under the rubric of Postcolonial Literature. The team of Postcolonial Interventions was absolutely thrilled with the response that it received from scholars and academics the world over, specially from the Middle East and Africa. We are thankful to the contributors for being patient with us, for answering every query, every little doubt readily and without the slightest irritation. We are equally grateful to the members of our editorial board who have extremely cooperative and diligent and of course our respected Advisers for their invaluable guidance.

Maybe the process could have been smoother, maybe with less glitches. But this being the inaugural issue, we are sure that we could be forgiven for a few shortcomings. We are looking to set high standards, to carve a niche in the academic world and hopefully our

interrogations and explorations into the constantly evolving world of Postcolonial studies would add something academically and intellectually stimulating to the critical discourse to pique the interest of researchers and scholars across the world so that we may together broaden the horizons. This journal a strictly non- profit academic forum and we will strive to only get better with the future issues. This is a journey and a dream driven as much by the fierce urgency of now as by the audacity of hope. A mighty thank you to all. Walk with us. Dream with us. Believe with us.



**Stephanie Polsky:**

**Reversal of Fortunes: Tracking Capital and  
Empire through the Neocolonial Geographies  
of East London**

**Postcolonial Interventions: An Interdisciplinary  
Journal of Postcolonial Studies**

## ABSTRACT:

During the Victorian era the Royal Docks emerged as the hub of Britain's imperial trade, the final destination as it were for the plundered wealth of Empire. It had closed in the 1960s when the Empire dissolved. Recently it has been earmarked for commercial redevelopment by Mayor Boris Johnson to become nothing less than London's third financial district, and likely its most powerful in the twenty-first century. Accommodated there presumably will be an equally powerful class of global individual whose lauded occupancy signals the future of commercial expansion, wherein luxury emerges alongside technology and industry as the drivers of cultural and economic progress. The borough of Newham, where the Royal Docks are situated, is the most ethnically diverse borough in London with white Britons composing only 17 percent of the population. The budget priority for Newham Council is to subsidise private developers to construct blocks of luxury flats, and as a result they are effectively promoting the abandonment and demolition of social housing schemes that formerly served the needs of the multiethnic area's working classes. Once they are forced out of the borough based on this lack of housing, it is anticipated that prominent foreign property buyers and investors from Russia, China and the Gulf will come to occupy it in their place. This situation is creating a kind of diasporic hierarchy within the Royal Docks where once more it becomes the destination of flight capital homed toward London.

**Keywords:** *London Olympics 2012, Newham, Regeneration, Migration, Diaspora*

During the Victorian era London's Royal Docks emerged as the hub of Britain's imperial trade, the final destination as it were for the plundered wealth of Empire. It had closed in the 1960s when the Empire formally dissolved. Recently, it has been earmarked for commercial redevelopment by Mayor Boris Johnson to become nothing less than London's "third financial district" and likely its most powerful in the twenty-first century (Pickford and Hammond). Accommodated there presumably will be an equally powerful class of global individual whose lauded occupancy signals the future of commercial expansion wherein luxury emerges alongside technology and industry as the drivers of cultural and economic progress. The ambition of Mayor Boris Johnson "to squeeze out every drop of potential" from this debt-burdened London borough, comes in anticipation of the arrival of prominent foreign buyers and investors from Russia, China and the Gulf drawn into the area by the prestige associated with London's great imperial past ("Mayor and Chancellor Announce Commitment"). The regeneration of East London as a preferred destination for flight capital from the world's emerging economies "says a great deal about the rugged persistence of the Empire in the postmodern, post-imperial imagination as a financial beacon for plundered wealth" (Mirsa).

The borough of Newham, where the Royal Docks are situated, is the most ethnically diverse borough in London with white Britons composing only 17 percent of the population (Mackintosh). It is also London's poorest borough where few wish to put down permanent roots. Rather it is a place of transit and transience, little more than a step on a journey elsewhere for its overwhelmingly poor inhabitants striving to better their situations. Newham suffers from a shortage of decent public housing which is frequently regarded as an 'immigration issue.' However, the intolerable living conditions in which many of its working class residents are forced to dwell comes as a direct result of the radical shift in Newham

Council's budget priority. It has gone from formerly serving the needs of the area's most economically vulnerable inhabitants to subsidising private developers to construct blocks of luxury flats which effectively required the abandonment and demolition of social housing schemes that once plentifully existed in the borough. This local government policy decision reflects a more general upsurge in disregard for the fortunes of working class and economic migrant communities throughout Britain. At the same time there has been a spectacular resurgence of admiration for the aristocracy in the popular imagination, the likes of which have not been seen since Britain stood at the height of its imperial power in the late Victorian era. Similar to that era, we are witnessing a powerful aggrandizement of finance capitalism where the rentier class positions itself to determine domestic tastes by "stirring appetites for grandeur and intriguing lives," set amidst subterranean basement extensions in Kensington and Chelsea and newly built luxury urban high rises in Tower Hamlets and Newham (Mirsa). Over the past two decades such elites have taken on an international cast largely made up of Britain's former colonial and semi-colonial subjects who remain besotted with an English aristocratic culture "which rather tellingly is as much part of Britain's national brand now as it was in the 1890s" (Mirsa). Something remarkably similar is happening in the recent attempts to raise Britain's post-imperial status through the 2002 Queen's Golden Jubilee procession, the staging of 2012 Olympics games, the post-games construction of an Olympic neighbourhood, and the forthcoming construction of the Olympicopolis complex. All of these events feature as evidence of Britain's attempt to re-launch itself as economically viable cultural and geographical franchise within a framework of postcolonial global capitalism.

Once able to convincingly dominate a global geography founded upon fundamental divisions of race, class and ethnicity, Britain remains able to generate frames of reference that make way for new orders of power to emerge in her wake that are established along similar lines of

selective belonging, structural inequality, free market fundamentalism and territorial invasion. This trajectory has its beginnings in 1952 when Queen Elizabeth first came to the throne in Britain when there was a national desire to convey a continued imperial mastery. Then the country seemed, if anything, socialist in its political and popular bearing and yet we can trace the reappearance of a Victorian imperialist impulse as the Queen became Head of the Commonwealth and Queen to seven independent Commonwealth countries: the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Pakistan and Ceylon. Attendant to the revival of that impulse in the twenty-first century is Britain's willingness to act as a handmaiden to the rise of a new Chinese empire, in much the same way as it did for the Americans and Middle Eastern oil sheikhs in the previous century. It is unclear whether the current makeup of Londoners is prepared however for this latest bout of an imperial reversal of fortunes, or whether indeed its population can withstand the resulting pronounced inequality and economic instability without incurring widespread popular revolt.

What we are witnessing today is a complete reversal of Britain's historic relationship with member states of its formal and informal commercial Empire. Whereas Britain's imperial dominance in world trade once enabled it to effectively control the economies of numerous nation states, today, an indebted, weakened postcolonial Britain has to submit to the financial imperialism of its former territories. Sovereign nations such as Qatar, Dubai, and China are vying to purchase its landholdings and infrastructure regarding its commercial assets, as though they were on display in a massive retail emporium. What the Government likes to describe as an investment is in reality an increasing surrender of ownership of the territory of the country to the designs and aspirations of elite foreign capital. London, as an abiding locus of wealth still manages to uniquely beguile "the dreams of men, the seed of commonwealth, the germs of empires" (Hunt).

Despite the fact that Empire is long gone and the last ships left the Royal Docks in the 1980s, Chinese real-estate developer Advanced Business Park plans to retrofit the original ingress of Britain's colonial wealth, the Royal Albert Dock, to become the European headquarters of China's twenty-first century commercial empire. A similar logic around where to situate one's imperial returns may have prevailed in The Bank of China's decision to position its luxurious new offices around the old Royal Exchange, a mere stone's throw away from where "the East India Company once asset-stripped the Empire" (Wilkinson). Further evidence of this can be witnessed in London's second post-imperial financial district, Canary Wharf which is "now resourced by Eastern sovereign wealth funds with China Investment Corporation (CIC) owning the third-largest stake in the wharf's landlord, Songbird Estates" (Wilkinson). Chinese investors have also recently taken part ownership of one of London's defining icons, the black cab, which is now manufactured "by Manganese Bronze, which is part-owned by Geely, a Shanghai-based car-maker" (Hunt). It would seem that even the once preferred mode of transportation of London's gentlemanly capitalists now requires foreign investment to sustain its grandiose connotation.

Most literal of all of China's projects to re-substantiate London's imperial geography is the ZhongRong Group's plan to rebuild the Crystal Palace on the very same parkland on Sydenham Hill where it burned down in 1936. The edifice which housed the Great Exhibition of 1851 in many ways functioned as a structural precursor to the department store where people would congregate to window shop and to gaze upon marvels of contemporary design and technology made available as the product of Britain's expanding imperial might. The emerging Chinese commercial empire of the twenty-first century will no doubt aim to achieve a similar purpose following the structure's heavily symbolic rebuilding.



The English no longer hold the centre of those dealings, but rather now form part of the multitude of semi-aristocratic hirelings prepared to apply their knowledge and networks to shelter and aid these ultra high net worth individuals. Drawn from Britain's premier educational institutions including Eton, Harrow, Oxford and Cambridge; these children of the Establishment, now graciously apply their knowledge and networks to portray a cosmopolitan London for the pleasure of international elites. On the other end of the financial spectrum, Britain positions itself to draw in the global proletariat left destitute and displaced in the wake of the massive flight of capital from their homelands; a condition made possible by the dubious financial transactions of their class superiors who ironically, one might say, also chose to come here to better their fortunes. Britain's indigenous working classes for their part are forced to compete with these poor recent arrivals for race to the bottom wages. Such are the effects of disaster capitalism, when paired with what Jules Boykoff has termed "celebration capitalism" (Boykoff 3). In the years leading up to the financial crisis of 2008, celebration capitalism was on something of a spending spree. During that time, corporate cohorts actively courted "state actors as partners, pushing us towards [an] economics rooted in so-called public-private partnerships" (3). All too often these public-private partnerships were grossly unbalanced: "the public paid and the private profited" (3). There are obvious risks associated with perpetuating such a model and when disaster struck, it was public money that came to secure the fortunes of these corporations at the expense of fiscal budgets.

Politicians around the world soon found that they could use the global financial crisis to push through policies that they would not dream of under normal political conditions. Britain was no exception. In 2010, the new Conservative lead Coalition

government called for a range of economic sobrieties to be imposed upon the general public, that cohered with “the dictates of neoliberalism” which required “the privatisation of public services, the further deregulation of industry and the massive reduction of state welfare expenditure in the name of fiscal exigency” (Boykoff 6) At the beginning few were fully cognisant of how such austerity measures would generate widespread social trauma and give license to the evisceration of the state;” thereby forcing British society to adhere to the principles of “free-market fundamentalism” (6). Public-private partners thrived under this new economic directive, even as and perhaps because, the average individual faltered.

Britain’s hosting of the Olympics in 2012 ushered in yet another series of lucrative private-public partnerships. This time around they would seek to capitalise off of the recent economic catastrophe. The public were told by that the games would bring much needed international revenue into the whole of the country and in particular, stimulate urban regeneration in the poorest parts of London. The games were also sold as a global celebration wherein ‘Team Great Britain’, as its host, would have pride of place. Various forms of propaganda would emerge to convince the British public that they could engage in this event regardless of their regional location, political persuasion or social class. Everyone could unite together to contribute symbolically to London 2012 as ‘Games Makers’, displaying themselves wherever they dwelt as honourable members of a still great nation. If Britain could achieve observable success on the world stage in this, its latest cultural franchise, it was believed that it could gain access to any number of international commercial opportunities in the wake of the games.

What is happening in London’s Olympic neighbourhood is not something limited to the local area. Across the capital “property that was once seized from rich landlords

and distributed to the poor is now being taken from the poor and being passed onto developers and enterprising local governments” (Broudehoux 97-98). Londoners are promised a new dazzling city, poised to emerge from behind the cranes and construction fences that presently dominate its landscape. In the case of Newham, the spectacular buzz around this new Eastern metropolis has largely succeeded in diverting public attention from the human costs being extracted in its wake. As whole communities are being sacrificed to serve individualist desires, little attention is being paid to the long-term implications of this predatory form of capitalism, nor the brutality inherent to its progression.

Historically, it has been the case that “violence is required to build the new urban world on the wreckage of the old” (Harvey 33). In the nineteenth century such a process was referred to as slum clearance. Today that same process is euphemistically referred to as “urban regeneration”. In both eras, housing reformers and entrepreneurs have made sweeping promises that their designs will vastly improve the quality of life for poor residents and rid their neighbourhoods of unseemly social elements through their development schemes. In practise, they have ripped down substandard housing before providing adequate replacements for the poor, with the foreseeable result of displacing scores of local residents, or forcing them into conditions of further overcrowding within the dwellings that remain. In the nineteenth century the acceleration of these schemes were devoted to any number of functions apart from the improvement of low-income housing stock. Slum clearance in effect meant the demolition of hundreds of homes. This wide scale destruction was undertaken in tandem with the construction “of railways, docks, warehouses, and office blocks” all of which competed for valuable urban space (Allen 118). “Demolition of housing was especially concentrated in the City of London, where throughout the century commercial interests were literally gaining more and more ground” (118).

In a similar fashion to what we are experiencing now, it made little difference to the poor if their homes were demolished at the hands of local reformers or private developers. Neither party were particularly concerned with providing “replacement housing while new buildings were being erected” (Landow). They “usually left replacement housing to investors, who had to make a return on their funds, and “the new homes often ended up too costly for the poor and housed those higher up the economic scale” (Landow). This pattern of urban redevelopment “has given rise to numerous conflicts over the capture of valuable land from low-income populations that may have lived there for many years” (Harvey 34). In the twenty-first century, this paradigm of what David Harvey refers to as “accumulation by dispossession” has taken on a slightly different cast, insofar as the architects of modern day slum clearance need a spectacular event like the Olympics, to function as “a hegemonic device to reconfigure the rights, spatial relations and self-determination of the city’s working class, [and] to reconstitute for whom and for what purpose the city exists” (Kumar).

Unlike any other event, the Olympics provided the necessary justification, to “fast track the dispossession of the poor and marginalised as part of the larger machinations of capital accumulation” devoted to transforming London into one vast gated community for the rich (Kumar). Boris Johnson, following New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg to the letter, has been consistently reshaping London along lines favourable to “transnational capitalist-class elements, and promoting the city as an optimal location for high-value businesses and a fantastic destination for tourists” (Harvey 38). The most sought after class of such individuals are drawn “from a small political and economic elite who are in a position to shape cities more and more after their own desires” (38).

The realisation of that ambition can be observed in the transformation of the Olympic Park itself, into a post-fordist style Disneyland, wherein Britain can display its wealth of culture, knowledge and commercial acumen in a style reminiscent of its Victorian imperial zenith. Any number of extraordinary developments heralds the era's re-enlivenment. Boris Johnson claims his plans to transform the Olympic sites into the centre of a cultural district modelled on "Albertopolis" in Kensington; the "Olympicopolis," were founded upon "a 'simple' idea, which drew on the 'extraordinary foresight' of Britain's Victorian ancestors" (Parker and Warrell). That extraordinary foresight was of course purely and predatorily commercial in nature. The great contemporary emporiums to be featured in the new "Olympicopolis" complex include the Victoria & Albert Museum, University College London, Sadler's Wells and the Smithsonian Institution. The Olympicopolis complex will be part-funded by a "£141 million contribution from the Treasury" and part-funded through foreign investment, much of it derived from the proceeds of slavery and oil (Pickford). Those tasked with the actual construction and upkeep of the commercially transformed Olympic Park are likely to be subject to zero-hours contracts, poverty-level wages, and substandard accommodation. This is perhaps where the typical Newham resident figures into realising its ultimate design.

### **Docking Fortunes**

The Royal Docks were constructed from 1870 to 1914 amidst a previous age "that saw finance triumph over industry as the country's pre-eminent economic interest, setting the scene for the accelerating inequality and plutocracy that would reach its apogee in the finance-led boom of the Edwardian era" (Misra). The mass migration of the 1880s would critically underpin the cosmopolitanism of that imperial era, as poor Jews from Eastern

Europe made the dilapidated sublets of the East End their home, in polar opposition to the financial elites that made theirs in the elaborate red-brick baroque mansion-houses of the West End. These economically and racially founded Victorian geographies stubbornly persisted well into the twentieth century in London. “The modern history of European capital cities is a story of competition and exchange” and in this respect London is no exception (Gilbert and Driver 23). In the late nineteenth century, Royal Docks were as much as seat of imperial power as was the City of London. The 1899 edition of Baedeker’s guide to London promoted the docks as an unmissable spectacle, the “centre from which the commerce of England radiates all over the globe” (Gilbert and Driver 30). What was reflected back to England was no less than the livelihoods of thousands of its working-class people. For many the Royal Docks constituted their first glimpse of London. It would shortly thereafter constitute their new workplace through its many casual job opportunities proffered to those prepared to toil for their suppers. While the docks drew modest numbers of workers from rural England and Wales, the mainstay of the workforce was comprised of not quite white enough Jewish and Irish immigrants, who together made up the bulk of the working and informal labouring classes in East London during the Victorian colonial period. The docks also attracted workers from much farther afield their local appearance exhibiting the reach of the Empire. Individuals from India, China, Malaysia, West Africa, Somalia and Yemen all made their way here with the desire to improve their prospects by relocating to this, the world’s industrial Mecca.

The Docks would begin to lose their industrial pride of place after World War One, as the shipping and rail industries declined bringing mass unemployment to the surrounding area of Newham and later a mass exodus of its residents to more thriving areas of the capital. World War Two further compromised the area when the Germans heavily

bombed it, devastating the southern part of the borough. In the post-war period a wave of new immigrants came into Newham from Asia and the Caribbean, who were recruited to help with London's post-War reconstruction. In recent years it has continued to attract immigrants from these areas as well as parts of Africa, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. Newham bears within itself the fundamental dimensions of its imperial history whose after-life can be sensed everywhere in the present borough, influencing contemporary economic realities, racial politics and cultural formations that are deeply resonant with its complicated, pluralistic past.

At present Newham finds itself at the epicentre of post-Olympic-related development. Throughout the borough, "a construction programme is under way on a scale that has not been seen in the capital since the aftermath of the Luftwaffe-inflicted bomb damage of World War Two. Including the on-going Thames Gateway project and developments around the Royal Docks, over 40,000 new homes are scheduled to be completed in Newham by the end of the current decade" (Fussey et al 272). Few of these new homes will be pegged as affordable housing; such commitments have been "repeatedly downgraded since the initial announcement that these would be situated within the post-Games Olympic Village" (272). The emphasis instead will be firmly on the sale of expensive flats and attracting affluent outsiders to take advantage of its new and plentiful venues of consumption.

These new high end enclaves in the Olympic neighbourhood, replete with their security fortified signature developments, contrast sharply with Newham's other housing trend, the rapid proliferation of "supersheds" dwellings; "gerry-built constructions housing migrant labourers" (Fussey et al 272). Newham is primarily a residential area consisting of

Victorian terraced housing interspersed with higher density post-War social housing. The pressure for cheap private rental accommodation in Newham has led to a return of Victorian conditions of poor sanitation and dangerous overcrowding.

The living conditions experienced by both types of local residents bear the mark of the entrepreneurial city where residential enclosures mirror the new values of a neoliberal symbolic economy that envelops them, which privileges wealth and censures poverty. The Olympic neighbourhood therefore in some sense must be built as an island within an island, whose elevated status in the form of exclusive residential, cultural and retail developments, sustains itself through the buffering of its borders to keep out the appearance of an otherwise dangerously imagined periphery. Anna Minton refers to this environment as one of “extreme capitalism which produces a divided landscape of privately owned, disconnected, high security gated enclaves, side by side with enclaves of poverty which remain untouched by the wealth around them. The stark segregation and highly visible differences create a climate of fear and mistrust between people, which together with the undemocratic nature of these new private places, erodes civil society” (xii).

The stated ambition of London’s Olympic games was to enact a lasting regional legacy, rather than solely promote an international competition. The contours of that legacy quickly come to light when we examine what took place before, during and after, the previous Olympic games held in Beijing in 2008. Soon after winning the right to stage the Games, the Chinese government set up public private partnerships to fund construction of the venues, with the understanding that despite the use of taxpayer’s money, the facilities would be fully privatised and commercialised after the Games. From the onset of construction it was explicitly understood that these venues would be built to serve profit driven post-Olympic



functions. What had previously been public land was to be repurposed, not for the benefit of the general public, but rather to service the needs of China's emerging bourgeoisie. Conversely, the legacy of the 2008 Games in Beijing for the average Chinese citizen has been one of "tax increases, inflation, soaring rents, and an enormous debt that could undermine future welfare investments. As in previous Olympic cities, the benefits from public investment will likely be enjoyed by private entrepreneurs, while Olympic costs, both social and financial, will be born by those at the bottom of the economic ladder" (Broudehoux 91).

Just as was witnessed in Beijing, Newham's new affluence is being generated at "the direct expense of the poor, as local governments evict residents and endeavour to "sell off their land for private development projects" (Broudehoux 94). This was the case when University College London initially wanted to establish a satellite campus on the former Olympic site, which would have "required the demolition of a 23-acre council estate known as 'Carpenters' on the edge of the park" (Parker and Warrell). The university was prepared to offer Newham council £1bn to buy the estate. During the struggle to obtain the estate local government officials portrayed Newham's longstanding residents as socially backward, and unduly hostile to the redevelopment of their community. Nonetheless, it was their sustained, vocal opposition campaign against the plans of both the council and the university that eventually scuppered the deal.

These residents had won a battle. The war, however, threatens to usher in much more radical, irreversible changes to hasten the exile of Newham's poorer inhabitants. Successive neoliberal governments, both Labour and Conservative, have proudly displayed their aversion to both intervention and regulation of the housing market, and thus have perpetuated the asymmetry of this war. Under their authority, property developers have been

given a free hand to distort the concept of affordable housing, which has in recent years come to be defined as 80% of the going market rate. They have also successfully lobbied for the “Right to Buy” to be extended to housing association properties in order to attract their desired clientele of financially solvent young professionals; to showcase as it were their preferred brand of ‘diversity’. The average rent for a two-bedroom flat in Newham in 2014 was £1,497 (Bloomfield and Gray). The maximum local housing allowance for a two-bedroom flat in Newham is at present £918 ([www.newham.gov.uk](http://www.newham.gov.uk)). For the 40% of Newham’s residents claiming housing benefit this further move to marketise housing in the area essentially equates with their eviction as even so-called affordable rents skyrocket beyond their means. This phenomenon, now commonly referred to as ‘social cleansing,’ offers few avenues of resistance as social polarisation becomes increasingly normative. Newham council’s mantra for the borough is “A Place to Live Work and Stay,” and yet, it was fully prepared to uproot residents from their homes, schools, jobs and services in favour of the import of a well-healed transient student population drawn from the ranks of the global bourgeoisie. Scores of imported dreamscapes are now being rapidly constructed to allow them to isolate these affluent would-be inhabitants from the harsh economic realities of the surrounding area. At the same time, Newham’s local reputation for class and ethnic diversity furnishes them with the opportunity to partake in an “imagined cosmopolitanism” (Broudehoux 96).

What we are witnessing today is a type of urban neocolonialism wherein a plutocratic global diaspora brings its capital and class privilege with them to establish a settler sovereignty on site, displacing and dispossessing the indigenous sovereignty they have encountered. These new arrivals have little interest in articulating to the existing society but rather concern themselves with creating their own, separate sovereignty within the local

territories they encounter. This process is undertaken largely through elaborate settlement construction, which literally entails a demolition of what came before it. The confiscation of publicly owned lands is fundamental to this process, which is engineered to make sure that indigenous peoples find they have no right of place inside settler societies and their surrounding infrastructures, which are now held in the domain of private ownership.

Patrick Wolfe writes that “settler colonialism destroys to replace” and insists that expropriation in settler colonial contexts, is “a structure, not an event” (388). This power of sovereignty is what distinguishes these settlers from other classes of migrants to the degree that they are able to economically displace the native population. “The geographical spread of gentrification over the last twenty years has been reminiscent of earlier waves of colonialism and mercantile expansion, itself predicated on gaps in development on the national scale” (Atkinson and Bridge 2). At the neighbourhood level, “the poor and vulnerable often experience gentrification as a process of colonisation by the more privileged classes”, who have come to occupy the position of a colonial elite as they set up residence in desirable central metropolitan locations (Atkinson and Bridge 2). Gentrification itself may be understood as a response to the radical unevenness of the global labour market, the unprecedented liquidity of global finance and the profound insecurities of identity brought about through the acceleration of capital flows.

This has generated a situation where “the new-found victims of employment restructuring instigated some years back” suddenly find themselves competing against the cosmopolitan professional class for territory (Atkinson and Bridge 8). New neighbourhoods are rapidly being developed for the express purpose of providing these elite professionals with an innate sense of kinship and security. They enable their inhabitants to “exist insulated

from local poverty, wider systemic inequalities and public squalor and shielded in the company of ‘like-minded people’ (Atkinson and Bridge 8). This model of gentrification is the physical manifestation of a neoliberal economics. At one level, it facilitates the rising rents, evictions, demolition and cut-rate sale of council and housing association owned properties that in tandem to one another efficiently expel “working class communities from large swaths of London’s inner core” (Seymour). At another, it helps “the privileged negotiate the necessarily precarious nature of unmitigated capitalism” toward safe harbour in exclusive residential enclaves offering a universal homogeneity of services and a desirable urban ‘feel’ (Seymour).

Neoliberal economics thrive by embracing the appearance of cosmopolitan global elites, while eliding that of the poor and marginalised. The diasporic class made proper to this environment must necessarily be one that is comfortable residing within a permanent celebratory space and one that thrives in an atmosphere of extravagant consumption. As such these cosmopolitan global elites find themselves exclusively poised to govern a post-Olympic landscape. Through their seemingly unlimited capital they are able to acquire “the rights of citizenship” whilst at the same time comfortably dwell within this transnational built environment. Through acquisition they are able at once to establish their selective belonging and to be exceptionally served by the capital space. “The uneasy juxtaposition between those served by ‘capital space’ and those either servile to, or shunned by, its over-determining consumerist logics suggests that London 2012 contributed to on-going processes,” through which those native to Britain, as well as transient migrant populations, must be brutally distinguished from one another according to their ability, or lack thereof, to contribute to the nation’s fortunes (Manley and Silk 365).

## Portending Victorian Futures

On 9 May 2002, the London borough of Newham had cause to host a remarkable occasion: Queen Elizabeth's Golden Jubilee. During her procession through the borough an audience of predominantly Asian and Afro-Caribbean onlookers were greeted by the appearance of a gigantic 10-foot high mechanical elephant, which was positioned at the forefront of the Asian carnival held in her honour, replete with Bollywood band. The Queen followed behind the elephant, discreetly transported in the royal car. It was noted by *The Telegraph*, that the crowd assembled was composed of "people of all races and creeds" united in the act of "waving the Union flag" as a mark of their allegiance to the crown (Davies). "Thousands" of such loyal individuals lined Green Street, which the Telegraph proudly acknowledged as "the Oxford Street of Asian fashion" (Davies). What was carefully omitted from the description of its surrounding was the borough of Newham itself, which acts as home to one of the most ethnically diverse communities in Europe, as well as one of its most economically deprived.

The focus was not on furthering their viable progress, but that of a huge tower on wheels paraded before them, "from which red roses were strewn across the road - the Indian equivalent of red carpet treatment" put on not for their ethnically rich community's elevation, but rather to smooth the way for a consummately British monarch to proceed (Davies). Adding further to this hierarchical and geographical confusion of the event, was the appearance of not one but two local mayors, "the ceremonial mayor, Sukhdev Singh Marway, whose term of office [would end] shortly, and Newham's first directly elected Mayor, Sir Robin Wales", who was elected just days prior to this event (Davies).

The focus on the elephant at the 2002 celebration, as the centrepiece of the borough's carnivalesque demonstrations on behalf of the Queen, was meant to draw attention to the idea that there is a fundamental connection between loyalty to the monarchy, and acquiescence to imperialism. Newham's ceremonial mayor Sukhdev Singh Marway, attributed the event's positive reception to the fact that "“many of our people came from other Commonwealth countries, so the monarchy means something to them”" (Koenigsburger 4). Equally, it may be argued, that the continued relevance of the monarchy, functions as an endorsement of postcolonial Britain's enduring global power.

If monarchy continues to capture the attention of a multiethnic, postcolonial crowd drawn into contemporary Britain, it does so in part through the lure of a distant and exotic representation of British imperialism, drawing on a vast variety of material dating back centuries to stimulate their imaginations. The mechanics at play, in choosing that elephant in the room to lead the charge of this parade, is replete with such knowledge. It is perhaps most directly evocative of the three Durbars of the British Raj held in 1877, 1903 and 1911 in Delhi, the former capital of the deposed Mughal empire. "Each of these durbars marked an important occasion of British history, assembling all sixty to seventy princes from different parts of India to pay homage to the occasion being celebrated. In doing so the durbar sought to establish direct connections between the [London] metropole and the [Indian] periphery through what was considered a form of spectacle particularly appealing to the Indians" (Rajamannar 163).

Instituted by the Viceroy of India - Lytton, Curzon and Hardinge - the Durbars were the first examples of the inscription of the Raj in a celebratory history, which served to legitimate Britain's colonial presence. "In the late 1850s, the British held many durbars,

inventing titles and bestowing gifts, monetary rewards and land in return for allegiance during the Munity of 1857-1858” (Codell 1). The first durbar in 1877 was intended to celebrate the Queen’s new role as Empress of India, and perhaps equally significantly “to bring closure to residual feelings and tensions remaining from the 1857-58 Mutiny” (Codell 1). In her research, Julie Codell makes a case that durbars “anticipated modern fascist rallies in their scale and staging of imperial politics” (1). Their success as a compelling format was questionable, because the durbars were reactive and provisional in their arrangement. While on one hand “each viceroy faced new problems that provoked” the laying on of these “ceremonial accommodations,” in the end these increasingly lavish spectacles, became the source of a growing resentment amongst the ruled over population; one that over time incited resistance and triggered the advent of organized forms of resistance evident in the rise of “Indian nationalism and Muslim politicization” (Codell 6).

When the first durbar was staged in India in 1877, the Viceroy of India, Lord Lytton, grasped the considerable political and cultural capital to be gained through its undertaking. In a letter then to the Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli he wrote vividly of the powerful sensual impact the event was intended to have upon the governed Indian population: ““I am afraid I may have seemed fussy or frivolous about the decorative details of the Delhi assemblage... The decorative details of an Indian pageant are like those part of the animal which are of no use at for the butcher’s meat, and are even unfit for scientific dissection, but from what augurs draw the omens that move armies and influence princes”” (Barringer 172). Portended there was the mark of the permanence of British rule and the wealth of the British Empire, which could afford to be profligate in its public display. Even the poor and illiterate could read the signs presented here of the presence of their new handlers.

Lytton's choice of metaphor was one of significant connotation insofar as the durbars as well as other ceremonial occasions sought to prominently highlight the animal presence within the British Empire, their appearance whether presented in tact or dismembered into their body parts formed part of the ordinary iconography of imperial domination. The "countless heads, horns, antlers, and skins that served as decorations, as well as the furs and feathers used to embellish the human form, also functioned as an important means through which the human enacted its control of other species, dismembering them and fashioning them for use" (Rajamannar 165). This could be perceived as a metaphor for the administration of British India, as something defined by its ostensible purity of intent, and in a manner that implied ease and plenitude. Therefore the aesthetic of superfluity that came to be associated with the trophies and fashion accessories common to British rule bore, not simply the marks of luxury, but also of raw power. The Britons constant display of the animal body for human use was there to carry a larger message to the Indian people, one of home domination.

The elephant was the largest and most prominent of all the beasts in England's extensive cache of imperial trophies and emblems. It "had strong associations first with India and then with Africa, the most important imperial landscapes described by mid- and late Victorian exhibitionary maps of the world" (Koenigsberger 9). In the twenty-first century version of the durbar this mighty imperial beast has been transformed from flesh to metal, but is no less a potent symbol. Rather its post-imperial embodiment speaks of the need for its defensive redeployment in light of the fact that so much red had disappeared from the globe, and Britain herself re-orientated in the mid twentieth century to accommodate the load of newer imperial masters. This new model of elephant therefore stands in for a dual



enunciation, of the sturdy older establishment whose power and brilliance still manages its hold over a global imaginary, and its regal authority that expands and consolidates its symbolic importance even as the Commonwealth matures. That commonality of wealth refers not only the inheritance of English language, but also equally a set of symbols and traditions that continue to flatter a geographically diverse rule, despite the fact that her various people's sociopolitical and cultural integration has seldom been achieved in this United Kingdom.

The Queen's Golden Jubilee, however is not for contemplating the geopolitical significance of their immediate appearance, but rather for celebrating Elizabeth herself, whose curious semi-visibility on this marginal stage, uncomfortably reveals the appearance of other recent insufficiencies; including the loss of English influence in the cultural and political mechanisms of statecraft, which for Britain were always tightly bound up with its overseas holdings; in particular from the late nineteenth century onwards. Unbounded from these holdings a lesser vehicle has emerged through which to carry out the duties of English life. Following the Second World War, there has been a long process of disintegration for this most unnatural of creatures, the British Empire, whose final resting place must be marked, naturally, by a ceremonious homecoming.

Those subjects hailing from her former colonies will be the last to gain their psychic independence from the notion of a resplendent Empire, while those born here are forced to grapple with a more intimate feeling of estrangement from the concept of a Great Britain, in which their cultural capital is always made to compete against the backdrop of a fundamental division. Such a division is born of an account of Englishness that seldom pertains in its contemporary political and popular cultural landscapes. Those that dwell in the shadow of the Queen now do so amidst a disintegrating United Kingdom, the line of fracture

between competing national loyalties, can only be temporarily blurred through framing the Golden Jubilee as an event central to Englishness.

The Golden Jubilee itself marks out a concern that a certain form of Englishness is itself an endangered species of rule were it ever to lose honour in the world. The Queen herself is often perceived as a curious rarefied figure, whose exemplary appearance could only be 'Made in Britain' her formidable image cast largely, though not exclusively, for export abroad. She stands as an emblem of the imperial past, in which an elephantine Great Britain stood as the gravitational centerpiece of an empire. Pointedly observed as an integrated and indissoluble whole, such an England is mighty enough to persist across the twenty-first century. It has a memory formidable enough to still be able to drive imperial attitudes and generate frames of reference in the political and cultural environment of a postcolonial, contemporary London cityscape. The "splendidly bearded and turbaned figures" that gather around her in Newham on route to all of this enable the Queen to arrive in the style she has become accustomed to, allowing her to be forgiven by the adoring, multiethnic crowd for the prevalence of an official version of white imperialism, used ostentatiously to craft the hallmarks of this contemporary occasion. As for the black Britons around her, their function as a group is to once again act in passive admiration of the vainglorious appearance of the main spectacle. They are nonetheless crucial in furnishing the human and financial capital for many regally inspired futures to come awkwardly played out through imperial distortion.

### **Retooling the Imperial Brand**

The opening ceremony of the Olympics depicted the development of a teenage relationship between two mixed-race protagonists, Frankie and June, displayed as emblematic of Britain's contemporary era of inclusive 'multiculturalist nationalism'; an enlightened tolerance of otherness based on the notion of shared belonging and a togetherness situated along the lines of a common language and cultural identity. This portrayal carefully omits the tensions, ambiguities and antagonisms of a multi-ethnic, postcolonial British society. Rather, this budding romance between cultures is represented as one being embarked upon without struggle or contestation, or indeed, without reference to colonisation, or empire. We as the audience are led to believe this celebratory activity is taking place in an ordinary house, the kind in which most British people live, despite conditions on the ground just outside the stadium, which disrupt this staging of a unified nation. All this pageantry is staged in order to send the message to those from a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds that their participation in a legitimate British way of life "is predicated on the rejection of one's extremist ideas, swearing loyalty to a defined set of national values and mythologies, tests of values acquisition, and erasure of one's own experience and history in favour of the public celebration of [a common] national history" (Manley and Silk 367). Indeed, they must aspire to live in ordinary households that are conspicuously free of cultural opposition and insensible to the nation's structural inequalities.

In order to comfortably inhabit such quarters, these individuals must be willing to ignore their spatial concentration into certain areas of the country. They must pay no attention to the social injustices meted out upon them, such as disproportionate levels of unemployment, as a consequence of racism, class antagonisms and gender politics. They must dissociate from their feelings of cultural alienation, denying its negative impact on their health as well as spurring the disproportionate rates of poverty and drug abuse present in their

communities, constituting a local surrounding that might rationally contribute to feelings of disillusionment and resentment. Phenomenon such as “Islamophobia”, differential immigration statuses and the concomitant restrictions of rights, links between foreign and domestic policy” that overwhelmingly have their basis in Britain’s imperial past, similarly must go unacknowledged to readily gain enclosure (Manley and Silk 367). Through this arrangement, Britain is able to “quite literally rework people already categorised as available for exploitation under colonial economies” and re-interpolate them as post-colonial British subjects and citizens (Jacobs 24).

Even so, these diasporic communities continue to maintain distant investments within the context of their British homes. More often than not their sense of belonging is constituted through multiple nationalities that present them with competing loyalties at the individual and community level. This imprecise locality sits anxiously amongst an old, nostalgic mapping of a Greater Britain. As a consequence of this, “xenophobic fears and gentler fantasies of a sure imperial might manifest as a politics of racism, domination and displacement, which is not enacted on a distance shore but within the borders of a nation home” (Jacobs 24). It is only amidst such an atmosphere that the Royal Docks can appear as an island unto itself, a newly formed colony conjured up to exclusively contain a population of rich, multiethnic economic migrants within some luxury version of a territorial settlement. “The CGI projections for what the area might look like feature – as always – white people drinking coffee at outdoor tables, talking on mobile phones, sheltering in the shade of trees” (Hancox). It would seem that even “the pixelated ghosts of future commercial expansion” bear within themselves these past imperial, racialised hierarchies of belonging (Hancox).

The cachet of London's imperial brand is at an all time high as the wheel of Empire turns eastwards in the twenty-first century. As the former metropole of the world, London now functions as a global entity that at once protects a system of entrenched private privilege largely built on the spoils of its former Empire, and simultaneously promotes the transfer of the nation's commercial resources into the hands of a global elite of nouveau riche billionaires. The regeneration of the Royal Docks heralds the triumph of international capital and the gross expansion of related neocolonial emissaries; including banks, security agencies and multinational corporations. There is little that is productive about this reworking of Newham's housing landscape, as its poorer residents increasingly find themselves in a position of local exile within London's new rentier economy, which has warped the fabric of the city to bend to its will.

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**Samir Dayal:**

**Amygdala, or Coming through Trauma**

**Postcolonial Interventions: An Interdisciplinary  
Journal of Postcolonial Studies**

### **ABSTRACT:**

Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000) charts Anil Tissera's return to her homeland after 15 years in the West, reprises a trope prominent in the literature and cinema of diasporic experience: the return "home" of the estranged or alienated diasporic South Asian. Contextualizing Anil's story by framing it against Sri Lanka's traumatic triangulated war between government forces and two competing rebel factions, Ondaatje brings together the problematics of "trauma" and "nation" to frame the arc of Anil's self-discovery and simultaneously to explore the potential for a specific—ans psychoanalytically inflected--*postcolonial aesthetic* response to the trauma of the nation, both collectively and individually. This essay then is a case study that studies a fictional representation of real political events to argue for the continued relevance of the subdiscipline of postcolonial studies, against rumors of its obsolescence.

**Keywords:** *trauma, politics, aesthetics, postcolonial studies, psychoanalysis*

Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000) charts Anil Tissera's return to her homeland after 15 years in the West. Anil's story reprises a trope prominent in the literature and cinema of diasporic experience: the return of the estranged or alienated diasporic South Asian. Ondaatje himself acknowledges that this theme was the germ of the book.<sup>1</sup> Yet Ondaatje's novel does a turn on the trope, complicating attendant notions of return-home, of "belonging," by contextualizing and framing the story against Sri Lanka's traumatic triangulated war between Sinhala government forces (ideologically supported by the nation's Buddhist community) and two competing rebel factions, the Muslims in the Eastern province and the Liberation Tigers for Tamil Eelam (LTTE) (Uyangoda 67; Raheem 1). This is by no means the universally accepted framing of the Civil War: Sri Lankan social anthropologist S.J. Tambiah represents the conflict as largely a *two-sided* civil war, between Sinhala and Tamil factions, bringing to head tensions fomented by the experience of colonialism (Tambiah 7,11, 14). What is indisputable is that British colonial policy between 1920 and 1931 split Tamil identity into three regional identities. The Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) in the post-1948 (postcolonial) period through the 1970s sought to reunite these fragmented identities and others, including Tamil-speaking Muslims, while Sinhala nationalism perpetuated colonial divide-and-rule policies, interpreting to its own advantage the political implications of the island's name-change from Ceylon to Sri Lanka in 1972. It was not *just* a matter of competing "interpretations" of new political realities. The new constitution of 1972, at least according to one perspective, severely circumscribed Tamil claims to citizenship and meaningful belonging, which were concretized in the Vadukkodai Resolution of 1976 (Ismail, "Constituting Nation" 239). The figure of the anticipated Tamil Eelam (state) was produced by the Tamil subject's abjection by and within the dominant postcolonial nation-state.

In the novel the categories “trauma” and “nation” come together as the historicizing context for Anil’s self-discovery and for the potential aesthetic healing of the traumatized nation. The novel was published before a compromise was negotiated among the main opposing parties and before the Sri Lankan army defeated the LTTE in 2009. Nonetheless it ought to be contextualized against the present actuality of the Sinhala-dominated nation as well as the proleptic or prosthetic figure of the anticipated Tamil nation. This essay argues for the continued relevance of contemporary postcolonial studies, refuting the rumors of the purported death of postcolonialism as a discipline. It considers this novel as a case study of a postcolonial society at a politically traumatic moment, yet argues that novels are less political tracts than explorations of the psychic (including traumatic) experience of individual subjects. While the essay highlights the postcolonial context of the narrative, it also focalizes other categories of cultural study: gender, ethnicity, and national identity. My approach is also psychoanalytically inflected, especially in its account of trauma as that which resists aesthetic representation. The postcolonial analysis I argue for is thus intersectional, framing the overarching question: What is an appropriate and effective response to trauma, not only at the level of society (ethicopolitically), but also at the level of the individual subject (psychically)? What does it mean to “come through” trauma?

## **TRAUMA AND THE NATION**

Trauma theory has been an important focus of contemporary cultural studies. But “nation” too has been a shibboleth of postcolonial studies and this category underscores the need for sensitivity to collective *political* trauma. *Anil’s Ghost* must be contextualized within the complex trajectory of the nation’s postcolonial history. But as I will argue below, the focus of the

narrative is on the experience of its individual characters. The novel may not promise an enduring political resolution. What it does demonstrate is the necessity of an aesthetic response; and, as I argue in what follows, this aesthetic response has an ethicopolitical dimension. It is not that a social or political resolution to the conflict was impossible to imagine or that this novel's failure to present such a resolution is a flaw. Rather, what warrants attention is Ondaatje's suggestion that an aesthetic and ethicopolitical response to trauma, whether political or personal, has a special urgency and spectral currency, perhaps even healing power.

An aesthetic and ethicopolitical response to the Sri Lankan political trauma can be most effectively framed within a specifically *postcolonial perspective*, capable of representing postcolonial Sri Lankan experience in the light of contemporary theoretical developments, providing fresh insights into—or productively complicating—critical issues of representation. If there has been much talk recently about the waning of postcolonial studies, this essay suggests that contemporary theoretical paradigms such as trauma theory and psychoanalytically informed ethicopolitical discourse — brought to bear on aesthetic representations such as novels — can offer new and more adequate understandings of the complicated social and political history of postcolonial societies such as Sri Lanka.

To highlight “aesthetic representation” is not to emphasize the cultivation of taste for its own sake, the refinement of perception or a fetishization of aesthetic qualities (color, form, taste, and mass) or the conditions of production of artworks. Rather the emphasis is on restoring the capacity for feeling, literally *aesthesis*, what Theodor Adorno might have projected as the social and cultural function of art within a late high modern conceptualization – a progressive response to the depredations of the modern world. Artworks separate themselves from “empirical reality (Adorno 7).” They call attention to their own construction, their “makability” (39). They offer

alternative pathways of imagining wholeness (45); they are not beholden to a utilitarian calculus of functionality (89). They resist ideological or propagandistic deployment (335-337).

Ondaatje undertakes an aesthetic challenge Adorno could have endorsed: representing traumatized selves, imagining their return to wholeness through the offices of the work of art. Literary representation becomes *writing cure*, coextensive with the “talking cure” of psychoanalysis, approximating through literary figuration what trauma forecloses, “capturing” trauma and in this act of capitation “decapitating” the monstrous Thing, or traumatic kernel (*das Ding*). It is apposite to recall Walter Benjamin’s analogous argument that while the aestheticization of politics is a recipe for fascism, the regeneration of the aesthetic sensibility preserves one’s humanity in the face of political or other trauma (Buck-Moss 124). This is not a denial of the political, but a repair of experience cauterized by traumatizing political events. Radhika Coomaraswamy is thus right to defend the novel against Ismail’s critique, insisting on the difference between Buddhist humanism and Buddhist chauvinism. Coomaraswamy observes that Ondaatje’s hope is for a “Buddhist humanism that in some ways radically challenges the very dominant forms represented in Ismail’s critique.” (29)

Postcolonial nationalist rhetoric often, and sometimes despite its programmatic ambitions, produces a threnody of “failure.” Ironically, this motif is traceable even in governmental or bureaucratic narratives in South Asia, a case in point being Jawaharlal Nehru’s “tryst with destiny” speech, delivered on August 14, 1947, as India was on the cusp of independence from Britain. Nehru spoke of this as a rare moment of the emergence of the nation’s “soul,” subtending the end of an era and the beginning of a new South Asian age; yet the official narrative has had to concede that fifty years since, that destiny is haunted by the specter

of failure, contradicting the promise tendered by Nehru. Other admissions of such “failure” include the Sri Lankan Prime Minister Chandrika Kumaratunga’s address to her nation on its fiftieth Independence anniversary; as she acknowledged, “We have failed to realize the dreams of our freedom fighters to build a strong and united nation” (qtd. in Krishna vii)<sup>2</sup>. That political failure converges with the traumatic convulsion of civil war in Sri Lanka, mirroring recent conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, Chechnya, Rwanda, Kashmir, not to mention Africa and in the Middle East.<sup>3</sup> These too are admitted failures of nations or other political collectivities to cohere, failures to overcome or heal fissile political trauma.

What novels can do is dramatize how such convergent trauma is recapitulated at the level of the individual; and it is precisely in the context of the neocolonial and neoliberal (and newly militarized) discourse and practices in contemporary Sri Lanka that postcolonial studies can offer unaccustomed, or *suppressed*, perspectives, including the perspective of the losers: the victims, the vanquished. This is essentially an anti-imperialist agenda, and Ondaatje’s novel highlights the anti-communalist, anti-hierarchical and resistant possibilities, attentive both to the psychic life of those who suffer and the ethical dilemmas confronting those who seek to represent and bring justice to them. Thus the novel, I suggest, highlights the lineaments of an *emancipatory and ethicopolitical aesthetics*, a way (to adapt the title of another work by Ondaatje) of “coming through slaughter.”

## TRAUMA AND THE POLITICAL

The novel’s major characters, including the protagonist Anil, her colleague Sarath, his brother Gamini, Ananda, and Palipana, are in large measure defined by political trauma, presented in this novel as an unfolding catastrophe, and they are proxies for a collective



experience. Yet fiction's primary domain is the *individual* psyche. Kai Erikson notes that it is the individual's reaction to traumatic events, and not what he or she *is* that gives events "whatever traumatic quality they can be said to have" (184). Trauma may be inscribed on the body—and it may manifest as affective response, cathexis. These embodied effects help to define who or what the subject *is* in their historical context or social milieu. Trauma, then, has a paradoxical, duplex nature. As Erikson acknowledges, "trauma damages the texture of community," (190) yet functions as a community-unifying trait: shared trauma retrospectively constituted as cause.

This is not to say the traumatized subject is exhaustively determined by the retrospectively constituted "cause" of trauma: of course trauma can never be the total measure of the person. Yet ironically, it is the collective (national) trauma—a seemingly interminable state of emergency or exception—that facilitates Anil's accession to a sense of belonging.<sup>4</sup> Though born in Sri Lanka, Anil had left as a scholarship student to study in the U.K. and then the United States, ultimately becoming a forensic pathologist. She is sent back to Sri Lanka in that capacity by the United Nations as part of a human rights team investigating the violence in the civil war in the 1980s. She is assigned a collaborator, the anthropologist Sarath Diasena, who she suspects is also her government minder (28-29). Together they discover and work to identify the remains of a victim of a suspected political assassination. They provisionally name him "Sailor" and hope also to name the killers and bring them to justice under international law. *Naming*, in these and in other respects, emerges as a diacritic of the narrative.

Ondaatje draws criticism from Qadri Ismail for failing to name which side he supports – the government, the southern insurgents, or the northern guerrillas.<sup>5</sup> *Anil's Ghost* arguably repeats what Achille Mbembe (writing of Africa) diagnoses as an Euro-American gesture of

depriving the non-West of a proper name, rendering it “radically other, as all that the West is not”; in a “grotesque dramatization,” the non-West is represented as discomposed—as “a great, soft, fantastic body . . . powerless, engaged in rampant self-destruction,” “stupid and mad,” always irrational, its political imagination “incomprehensible, pathological, and abnormal. War is seen as all-pervasive” (Mbembe, 11, 8). Critiquing this fantasy of a black “deathworld” suffused by *das Ding*, Mbembe’s own very different project is to pose an ethical counterpoint – to give Africa back its name, its identity outside of the deathworld imposed on it by imperial depredation. In the context of Indian subaltern studies, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan undertakes a similar project of renaming or redescription, reframing death itself as a demand to be named, acknowledged, as the contingency of “disclosure rather than as attribute in and for subalternity” (qtd. in Chakravorty 554). As I show below, Anil’s name and the identity of “Anil’s ghost” are even more central to the story.

In Ismail’s view, Ondaatje fails to imagine an ethical counterpoint to the neo-orientalizing of the non-West as an irrational zone of death and trauma. Ismail also criticizes the “absence of minorities” in the novel: although the protagonist is female, there is a palpable underrepresentation of women’s voices—so that it is almost possible to read Anil’s masculine name contrapuntally as an ironic commentary on the category of the feminine (Ismail, “Flippant Gesture” 26). There are no Muslims, no Burghers in the novel; among the “cardinal actants,” all of whom are Sinhala, there is only “one proletarian” who receives significant attention (24). Ismail objects that if we combine Ondaatje’s concern exclusively with or for *Sinhala* places and people, Sri Lanka “begins to seem” very much like the nation-state imagined by Sinhala nationalism (Ibid 24). The novel devalues Sri Lankan *Tamil* grievances against the dominant Buddhist Sinhala. It “takes the side” of the Janata Vimukti Peramuna (JVP), a “Sinhala racist

party” against the LTTE on “inconsistent” grounds (Ibid 27).<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, Ondaatje does fail to trace this unrest back to the 1950s and to a series of Sinhala government pogroms to suppress Tamil aspirations (Ismail, “Constituting” 220).

Yet a politically correct representation of Tamils would hardly certify the novel’s excellence. *Pace* Ismail, my argument then is that even when a novel or film explicitly takes a stand in representing political trauma as its subject, its success or failure cannot be measured by the yardstick of its politics alone. What is important is the quality of attention to ideas, themes and characters, and my own discussion of Ondaatje emphasizes these ideational and aesthetic dimensions. We must ask not just whose side Ondaatje is on, but also *how* he presents ideas, human actions, *habitus*, and ethical dilemmas.

In Ondaatje’s novel, ethicopolitical questions are structurally and thematically pivotal. Mrinalini Chakravorty writes that by foregrounding violent death as a staple of the postcolony, novels such as *Anil’s Ghost* implicate us as readers in a host of assumptions entailed in seeing the postcolony as an archive of death. Chakravorty conceptualizes politically motivated killings of civilians such as Sailor as collective postcolonial crypts: the “presence of [such] collective crypts reforms the ethics of trauma so that it is no longer an experience limited to the singular human subject privileged by human rights discourses in the West. Instead, the figure of the dead subaltern . . . stands at the crossroads of life understood in terms of an imperfect balance between singular and collective experiences of trauma in the postcolony” (543).

But such reckoning, I argue, must be articulated with other dimensions, particularly ethicopolitical framings of trauma. Sarath and Anil, in particular, cannot be assimilated into collectivized subalternity, even if, like a latterday tragic figure, Sailor “stands” at the crossroads of postcolonial history. Anil is a liminal figure: this is her handicap but also an index of her

ambivalent or ambiguous status as postcolonial subject. While she is clearly conscientious, her investigation is susceptible to being compromised by “universalist” internationalism, tainted by Eurocentrism.<sup>7</sup> She is aware her final report “would be . . . filed in Geneva, but no one could ever give meaning to it.” Yet she is idealistic enough to believe “that meaning allowed a person a door to escape grief and fear” for she understood “that those . . . slammed and stained by violence lost the power of language and logic” (55). Her appeal as a protagonist owes something to the self-reflexivity with which she assumes the moral responsibility to redress injustice. Anil’s own ethicopolitical agency is inflected by her openness to the other, to extimacy. As the novel progresses we see that she learns that while distancing herself from the trauma in order to comment on it is valuable, the act of bearing witness requires learning to reduce distance, be alive to the trauma, gradually drawing closer in spirit to those who must live in—and attempt to “come through”—trauma, and so re-construct their identities in the *au-delà*, the imagined beyond of trauma.

Anil is conscious that in her role as a UN forensic anthropologist the ethicopolitical task of representing and reporting *seems* bloodless, abstract “reconstruction” and imagination. In fact, for sufferers as well as for those who seek to “represent” them or attend to them, political trauma is often cathected onto the body and insinuates itself into the psyche. Traumatized, tortured, disfigured, rendered liminal or emergent, the body becomes the locus for the (re-)presentation or cathexis of the trauma. The physician Gamini’s body, for instance, seems to be cathected with individual but also shared trauma, even as he cares for patients. The first time Anil sees him, he appears totally sleep-deprived, less a doctor than a patient himself: if Gamini had “a few free hours he avoided the doctors’ dormitory and [lay] on one of the empty [hospital] beds, so that even if he could not sleep he was surrounded by something he would find nowhere

else in the country” (119). Living among the damaged and the dying, Gamini is almost a zombie, becoming psychically indistinguishable from them. His traumatized symptomatology testifies to a breakdown of the symbolic universe, so that the “real” breaks through. This Lacanian formulation resonates with Georges Bataille’s account of the “moment when the ordered and reserved . . . lose themselves for ends that cannot be subordinated to anything one can account for”--the moment when “life starts” (Bataille 28). Yet this is what makes Gamini “sympathetic.” Paradoxically it is in the Emergency Room, among the wounded and dying, that Gamini’s “life starts”: he discovers ethical purpose, emerges as an ethical subject in putting others before himself, for which he will pay the ultimate price. For him it is not political ideology, ethnicity or country that anchors identification. Trauma becomes for him the “efficient cause” of an authentic existence, just as it will for Sarath and Anil.

The very surfeit of violence Anil finds in reports and folders that listed “disappearances and killings” is traumatizing: “The last thing she wished to return to every day was this. And every day she returned to it.” The traumatic effect is compounded by the fact that perpetrators and victims, causes and effects, are surreally confused in “the shadows of war and politics” where political enemies cut business deals (42-43). Ondaatje’s novel is replete with accounts of the ubiquitous slaughter (accounts drawn largely from a 1992 Amnesty International report) (McClennan and Slaughter 1-19):

There had been continual emergency from 1983 onwards, racial attacks and political killings. The terrorism of the separatist guerrilla groups, who were fighting for a homeland in the north. The insurrection of the insurgents in the south, against the government. The counterterrorism of the special forces against both of them. The

disposal of bodies by fire. The disposal of bodies in rivers or the sea. The hiding and then reburial of corpses” (42-43).

Bodies are dropped out of helicopters into the sea. Sirissa, a young woman who had enjoyed her innocent sexual power over a group of teenage boys one morning encounters their heads mounted on stakes along a bridge on the way to their school (174-175). Daily Anil learns of racially motivated assault, killings or disappearances, “fragments of collected information revealing the last sighting of a son, a younger brother, a father . . . of hour, location, apparel, the activity. . . . Going for a bath. Talking to a friend . . . .” (41-42). Ananda Udugama expresses his trauma by trying to cut his own throat (195-196).

Neither public institutions nor the private space of the home offer respite or protection against trauma in this extended state of emergency. A possible exception is the hospital: “In these times of crisis junior staff members did the work of orthopaedic surgeons. . . .all versions of trauma, all versions of burns, surrounded the trainees” (126). Ondaatje’s emphasis on the chaos and the psychic *effects* of this traumatic situation belies Ismail’s accusation that Ondaatje fudges the question of which side he actually favours. For the force of the novel’s narrative lies in its dramatization of ethicopolitical aesthetics, situated in a postcolonial context and framed *as a problem of psychic experience*. Confronted with pervasive trauma, Anil “remembers the almond knot,” the amygdala, which “governs everything”: “How we behave and make decisions, how we seek out safe marriages, how we build houses that we make secure” (135). Politically motivated violence is everywhere: it is the way the trauma is *registered* in social and psychic life that engages Ondaatje. Yet trauma is not operative solely at the conscious level of external reality.

Limning the different levels of a stratified self of modern subjectivity, William Connolly defines the “modern theory” of the subject’s constitution, with its levels of “unconscious, preconscious, conscious and self-conscious activity, and its convoluted relays among passions, interests, wishes, responsibility and guilt, locates within the self conflicts which Hobbes and Rousseau distributed across regimes (Connolly 57-58).” Connolly might find in *Anil’s Ghost* such a modern (specifically postcolonial) “siting” of conflict within the psyche. It is not only or even primarily Anil in whom political trauma is refracted. Witness the “shock of the [political] murder of [Lakma’s] parents,” a trauma that “had touched everything within her, driving both her verbal and her motor ability into infancy. . . . She wanted nothing more to invade her” (103). The question is whether she, and by extension the nation, can move through melancholia to a state of mourning, no longer disavowing the loss of the loved object. As Chakravorty puts it, the “generative relation between collective melancholia and linguistic expression that anchors *Anil’s Ghost* may be understood by considering the formation of psychic crypts” (548) discussed by Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok. The melancholic subject maintains a “secret tomb” within, nurturing but not properly mourning the lost object buried, as though disavowing its death; equally, as Abraham suggests, the agent of the encrypting is haunted by the phantom that “returns to haunt” as a “witness to the existence of the dead buried within the other” (546-47) — in Anil’s case within Sailor.<sup>8</sup>

Ondaatje’s narrator emphasizes that “the darkest Greek tragedies were innocent compared with what was happening here. Heads on stakes. Skeletons dug out of a cocoa pit” (11); political ideology or genre is of less concern than trauma’s effects. The interesting problem is not whether trauma conforms to its original association chez Freud with fantasy (which constructs a mental image), nor even to the prototype of a sudden, unbearable experience (which

frustrates any attempt to make a mental image), but rather whether the novel can present a compelling fictionalized—aesthetic—“re-presentation” or testimonial of the impact of some epochal, horizon-altering set of actual events in which a culture’s history is articulated with the collective *and* individual unconscious. Such a question motivates E. Ann Kaplan’s exploration of melodrama’s generic relation to collective trauma: “in what senses can one speak of ‘cultural trauma’? What analogies might be possible between forms of individual and of cultural trauma?” (202) She suggests that “trauma can be approached (if not known) only through its figuration by either its victim, by those witnessing it, or by artists undertaking its telling” (204). That figuration is the aesthetic problematic driving Ondaatje’s novel.

In the case specifically of the Indian Subcontinent, a postcolonial studies approach remains valuable, given the Subcontinent’s colonial history. Indeed many other novelists of South Asian descent (both Subcontinental and diasporic), have sought to “figure” political trauma, particularly the Partition: Khushwant Singh, Bapsi Sidhwa, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, and Shashi Tharoor. Yet aesthetic representation of trauma renders these novelists vulnerable to the charge of aestheticizing an “essentially” unsymbolizable experience. What can figuration really do in the aftermath of trauma? Is the subject-effect produced through narrativization inauthentic? Ondaatje has been reproached for aestheticizing Buddhism, officially sanctioned by the majority Sinhala government. His is a burgher perspective, critics allege. However, if Ondaatje’s perspective is less political than *aesthetic* and *humanistic*, perhaps figuration may furnish opportunities for therapeutic or analytic reflection upon trauma’s forms and psychic effects, rather than to discount, displace or “master” trauma.

This relinquishment of the fantasy of mastery is encoded in the story of archaeologist Palipana’s self-excommunication from his scientific community. Palipana had apparently



“choreographed the arc of his career in order to attempt this one trick on the world. Though perhaps it was more than a trick . . . ; perhaps for him it was not a false step but the step to another reality, the last stage of a long, truthful dance,” when “the unprovable truth emerged” (81, 83). Trauma’s defining unrepresentability makes the artwork a privileged site of its belated *re-presentation*, its recuperation in a different, retrospective form. “Trauma” in the medical profession denotes primarily bodily trauma; psychic trauma is relegated often to the margin—witness the woefully inadequate coverage offered for PTSD among war veterans. Some commentators nominate the Jewish Holocaust as the Ur-site of trauma in the twentieth century; yet I would argue for a broader interpretation for trauma studies in postcolonial literary and cultural studies, mindful of the category’s often unprincipled proliferation.<sup>9</sup>

The analytic value of “trauma” has in recent years been reduced from overuse and overgeneralization. Kai Erikson recommends the term should not be interpreted as an all-purpose cause (e.g., a body blow) but as specific effect—a determinate injury, reaction, or particular response to a cause (183-85). By definition, trauma resists symbolization, especially when extreme; it can be apprehended only retrospectively. The trajectory of any understanding is always inverse, from effect to cause (that is, the cause is reconstructed after the effect is analyzed). Erikson’s recommendation thus accords well with the Freudian and Lacanian understanding that trauma can only be cognitively grasped retroactively (*Nachträglichkeit*). Though trauma resists solicitation into the order of meaning (representation), its ramifications and aftermath can be explored in the *après-coup*: literature and other art forms can memorialize trauma, provide a testimonial to it, or, as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub suggest, bear witness to it (Felman and Laub 4, 85, 109). This entails the recognition, Cathy Caruth observes, that “there is no single approach to listening to the many different traumatic experiences and histories

we encounter, and . . . the irreducible specificity of traumatic stories requires in its turn the varied responses—responses of knowing and of acting—of literature, film, psychiatry, neurobiology, sociology, and political and social activism” (Caruth, *Trauma*, ix). As for history, Caruth says, “[t]he traumatized . . . carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (Caruth, *Trauma*, 5).

Such a psychoanalytically informed interpretation of trauma enriches an understanding of the psychic dimensions of Ondaatje’s novel, beyond its aesthetic, “structural,” discursive, ethicopolitical, and ideological facets. What the art work records is the “*structure of [trauma’s] 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” (Caruth, *Trauma*, 4). Thus literature is a non-representational representation of the traumatic experience, though admittedly it can also become trauma’s crypt, marking the spot or stain of the trauma without opening it up to analysis or apprehension, thus seeming to foreclose or disavow it. Can this psychoanalytic framing counter the charge of exploiting or commodifying “trauma” while presenting it as the frame for presenting a story, even if that story is about ethicopolitical justice—is Ondaatje capitalizing on the “drama” of trauma—sensationalizing and aestheticizing it—to make his narrative more intriguing? (Radstone 191). Ismail criticizes Ondaatje for not being scrupulously accurate about the facts—for dehistoricizing the political conflict; is he guilty of obfuscating his political commitments and being biased towards Western “universalist” humanist and bourgeois liberal doctrines of human rights? I would defend Ondaatje’s novel on both counts because he foregrounds the *psychic* effects of political trauma to bring them to consciousness, and simultaneously fictionalizes (aestheticizes) Sri Lanka’s political history to explore—and *illustrate*—how the postcolonial Sri Lankan subject can “come through” trauma via *the*

*aesthetic*, attentive to the demands of psychic life and alive to ethicopolitical imperatives, and thus regenerate the “beloved” *postcolonial* community of those denied larger communion with society. To judge the novel exclusively on grounds of ideological commitment, therefore, is to reduce it to manifesto. Sailor’s death is a “non-representative” representation of the death of many others such as the parents of twelve-year-old Lakma, who was so traumatized by witnessing the political murder of her parents that she falls mute. Identity here is negative belonging, referring to a sameness (*idem*, “identity”) constituted by difference. My premise is that a work that turns on individual or collective traumatic experience qualifies as minor literature, as Deleuze describes it: *Anil’s Ghost* is a “minor” *postcolonial* text, and is therefore not apolitical. But it also represents trauma as the crucible of an emergent postcolonial identity. It, in other words, is a case study for the continued relevance of postcolonial studies.

Ondaatje presents everyday life in postcolonial Sri Lanka as suffused with a “casual sense of massacre” (283). The nation of Sri Lanka must “come through” this political trauma. In one of her most impassioned conversations with Sarath, Anil scolds him: “some government forces have possibly murdered innocent people. . . . You as an archaeologist should believe in the truth of history. . . . ‘One village can speak for many villages. One victim can speak for many victims.’ Remember? I thought you represented more than you do” (275). This is a succinct account of how Anil sees her own mission—to be the agent of a rewriting, a recounting of “history” that would allow the healing, making whole, of the nation through such re-presentation of “one village,” “one victim” (275).

The author is more interested in his main characters as individuals, but the collective simultaneously impinges on every monadic individual too. The characters mentioned are all

solitaries whose isolation points to the absence of a nurturing community. Traumatized postcolonial national identity is constituted differently from universal (abstract) citizenship precisely in so far as it is anchored in a community contingent upon particular, politically caused suffering. A novelist writing about the Sri Lankan situation cannot evade the responsibility to reference the Tamils' political aspiration to emerge from abject/object status to subject status, or to use another register, from subject to agent, to emerge fully from mere "national" into postcolonial citizen/ subject. *Anil's Ghost* remains suggestive in pointing to the abstract not-yet: a micro-community of the nation's subalterns which remains only potential, a utopian negation of exclusion as such the isolation (a kind of negative state) and atomization of the individual characters Anil, Sarath, Gamini, Ananda, Sirissa, Lakma and Palipana. To put it generally: such works of aesthetic representation are to be appreciated precisely for what I would call a specific *postcolonial potentiality*. This potentiality is in a crucial respect what defines the *postcolonial* project as a minoritarian discourse: the utopian telos is by definition an unachieved "post."

For some, however, this political framing for the novel is too facile or convenient, gratuitously adding drama to a psychological narrative; the author's access to a political framing might even seem to be scaffolding for a shaky ideology of bourgeois individualism. For others, it is something more than a mere reactionary apologia for the official government story about the trauma, not exactly a "counter-history."<sup>10</sup> Ondaatje's staging of the link between trauma at the level of the community and trauma at the level of the individual can be appreciated as an attempt to render some of the affective dimensions—some of the pain of living in a traumatized time and place—which are "traditionally excise[d] and exorcise[d]" from history (Kumar 202). Ondaatje's novel can also be read as an attempt to reticulate the public and the private spheres.

While Anil is fixated on deploying a human rights discourse to indict the government, the middle-class brothers Gamini and Sarath, speak “of how much they loved their country [despite their great suffering in the political crossfire]. In spite of everything. No Westerner would understand the love they had for the place” (285). While Anil can only imagine constructing a “juridically and scientifically coherent” narrative as indictment, anchored to the case of a single “representative” individual (Sailor), Palipana understands that the truth is “unprovable” and will need to be routed via “an illegal story,” an “eccentric” (dissident) accession to what is foreclosed by the trauma of multiple, countless, victims, including not only Sailor but also Lakma and her parents, Sirissa, Sarath, and others (Chakravorty 546). Palipana “began to see as truth things that could only be guessed at. In no way did this feel to him like forgery or falsification” (83). Perhaps this is also the meaning of his Tiresias-like blindness. What he sees is not amenable to vision. It is one man’s truth but it goes beyond one man, vision beyond vision—always “past the last post,” just as the postcolonial is in one sense always *au-delà*, beyond.

Anil is no faceless bureaucrat; she is emotionally sensitive to the trauma to which she is in a sense being asked to testify. Ondaatje thus poses to the reader the special circumstances of personal and political trauma in reading the already fraught narrative of the protagonist. Anil must grapple with questions such as whether belonging to a national polity (citizenship) is a political and ethical prerequisite for the license to criticize its human rights record, whether she can be unbiased as a U.N. human rights investigator in her erstwhile “home” country, and whether her cosmopolitan perspective (and by extension Ondaatje’s) constitutes a specifically *postcolonial* alienation.

She also faces more general ethicopolitical doubts about her loyalties, her emotional/affective commitments, about what she might be willing to sacrifice. These

complicate her interactions with the people who live in the “field” she is investigating. When pressed about her “background,” the best she can manage is to say (with unwitting irony) is: “I live here . . . [i]n the West” (36). She insists, “This isn’t just ‘another job’! I decided to come back. I wanted to come back” (200), but it is clear that when she finishes her job she will leave Sri Lanka. The novel identifies no “home” for Anil to return to, no one waiting for her. Anil’s parents were killed in a car crash, after she left Sri Lanka, and she had not wanted to return after that. “Anil was glad to be alone. There was a scattering of relatives in Colombo, but she had not contacted them to let them know she was returning. . . . After she had left Sri Lanka at eighteen, her only real connection was the new sarong her parents sent her every Christmas (which she dutifully wore), and news clippings of swim meets.” (10). As a U.N. employee she is also “non-governmental,” unattached to any nation. She is a *post-colonial cosmopolitan*, in every sense of the term, including the negative sense of being deracinated, beyond the borders of the nation.

Political trauma here must be read symptomatically, as an epochal and transformative social or political event re-constructed in the *après-coup*, and read retrospectively (as “past” or as already having commenced, if continuing) in the discursive present as a symptom, often cathected in a subject’s body or as a performative subject-effect. Anil too takes on, in her body, the pain of a past she has tried, both consciously and unconsciously, to forget. Yet it is a past to which she returns, to reimagine her “home country” as a nation where human rights might take root, and then to re-inhabit this reimagined nation as a nationless citizen-- paradoxically postcolonial Sri Lankan *and* cosmopolitan.

Accordingly, two premises undergird my argument. First, Ondaatje adopts a tentative nominalism: while being sensitive to *collective* trauma, and acknowledging grand liberal humanist or universalist abstractions about human rights, privileges concrete *individual*

experience. Second, aesthetic and ethical concerns are as important as political commitments in evaluating modes of representation in postcolonial self-fashioning.<sup>11</sup> No literary work is merely a mirror of the trauma it seeks to re-present. Thus the novel is a case study in the continued value of postcolonial studies as an approach to aesthetic, historical, ethical, and sociopolitical questions for contemporary culture, particularly in the Subcontinent.

## AESTHETICS AND TRAUMA

The political or class biases of an author or filmmaker are relevant, yet they cannot be the only or most important criteria for aesthetic assessment. Ondaatje's novel is an aesthetic or cultural artifact and not a political tract. He is interested primarily in exploring the ethical and aesthetic challenges of representation; local, social problems and cultural life; key problematics of liberal humanism, and political trauma in postcolonial society. He deserves to be read on these terms. Far from being isolated from Sri Lankan politics, Ondaatje explores the premise that a lasting alternative to the internecine conflicts between dominant Sinhala and Tamils will never be discovered through "taking sides" but through an aesthetic and ethical regeneration of the subject—through the emergence from the anaesthesia of trauma into a re-aestheticizing of the everyday. Coming through political trauma and its consequent anaesthesia of everyday experience require an aesthetic transcendence—re-aesthesis.

Ondaatje's novel propagates a *particular* aesthesis, an ethicopolitical approach that is not hermetic, ahistoricized. The political "real world" and its ethicopolitical quandaries are not evacuated from the novel's world; for instance, Sarath makes the difficult choice of dedicating his life to the truth Anil wants to ascertain and report: he arranges for Anil to retrieve her evidence and escape from what has become an impossible situation for her, at the cost of his own

life. This act is as authentically ethical as any political manifesto. I cannot agree with Ismail's assessment that Sarath is "the least sympathetic actant" ("Flippant" 28) of the book. Sarath's sacrifice underscores the vicissitudes of perspectival justice in a situation of political and social trauma—or at least Anil's difficulty with sorting these out. Anil may not have been able to decipher until the very end "whose side" Sarath is on. This is her problem rather than his.

*Anil's Ghost* is not a "war novel" any more than *The English Patient* is a war novel. Ondaatje's interest is in the imprint of political trauma on the subject, on the social "climate of uncertainty," the "scarring psychosis"; in Sri Lanka, Ondaatje writes, "Death, loss, was 'unfinished,' so you could not walk through it" (56). As in Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*, however, the socio-political agony is less the focus of the author's attention than its consequences for sociality and subjectivity. In both Rushdie and Ondaatje the emphasis on the challenges the subject faces as agent and citizen constitutes a profound engagement with socially responsive sociability. It is a mark of the maturity of a literature, whether minor or major, that it is informed by a social or political vision. Ondaatje's interest in the aesthetic dimension, then, is appropriate and responsible.

## THE NAME: AESTHESIS AND AUTOPOEISIS

Anil has embarked on a journey to reclaim her identity as a South Asian—but also as a woman. This is in part a reclamation of a desire that she can call her own. In psychoanalytic terms, it is a requirement for access to subjectivity. It is significant that Ondaatje has elected to make his protagonist female and then confect a subplot that rationalizes and even heroizes, as a kind of feminist "conscientization," her fierce refusal to relinquish the masculine name



(misnomer?) “Anil” to her brother.<sup>12</sup> Anil’s misappropriation of a gender-inappropriate name causes an upheaval in her family (67-68). It is the unused middle name of her brother, for which she “pays” him a hundred rupees and a pen set along with a tin of cigarettes and “a sexual favour he had demanded in the last hours of the impasse” (67-68). But the deal does not obscure the “category” (epistemic) violence encoded in her act of catachrestical auto-nomination. At sixteen, she was so angry and tense that she was taken by her parents to consult an astrologer who in his wisdom (though ignorant of the provenance of the name through a history of “involved commerce”) came up with the suggestion that if her name could be feminized by the addition of an e, to spell a more demure “Anile,” her attitude of fury would be ameliorated. But she holds fast to her masculine name. Her act of self-naming is a symbolic negation of sexual difference, a symbolic refiguring of a phantasmatic negation of sexual difference, and prelude to her auto-nomination. This microhistory of Anil’s self-naming is paralleled by other significant problematizations of identity-conferral: the naming of Anil’s “ghost,” the identification of “Sailor,” the conferral of whole identity to a Buddha statue, Palipana’s deliberate obfuscation of the truth are all thematic indices of Ondaatje’s preoccupation with the epistemological question of naming and of identification.

The task of aesthetic representation of trauma entails a deictic function: the challenge of “*deiktus*” highlights the problematic of naming in cases where the traumatic or monstrous thing can only be pointed to by the name, but not assimilated: this is what confers ghostliness or monstrosity, Derrida suggests.<sup>13</sup> Anil comments that her ex-husband did not adequately separate (“name”) the private and the public: this breakdown of inside and outside is “the central quality of a monster” (143). The challenge of naming applies also to her own identitarian struggles in a context where “naming” (naming Sailor, characterizing the trauma of Sri Lanka) defines her

mission. Anil's *inability to name* thus reveals an epistemic preoccupation: when a being enters into be-ing, it lacks a name—it is in a moment of emergence or *aletheia*--and reminds us of the dynamics of “monstrance” and monstrosity. As such it is beyond the pale, monstrous, *Unheimlich* roughly translated as, ghostly. Anil's ghost is both Sailor (in need of a name) and her own shadow self, somewhere between diaspora and returnee (also in need of a name, an anchor of being); but she is also Sailor's ghost, his representative. Anil also discovers or constructs a mirroring professional task in Sri Lanka: she *assumes* an ethical duty to name the dead man she discovers. “To give him a name would name the rest” (56). And until the body gets a proper name he has the name Sailor, result of an elaborate in-joke, which is nevertheless not an arbitrary and insensitive reaction to the larger social trauma to which the dead body is a witness.<sup>14</sup>

Anil shares with many postcolonial subjects this need for autopoiesis: in postcolonial societies and in the novel it is a key issue. After all one of the depredations of the Subcontinental colonial experience (and of the neocolonial reconstitution of hegemony) in places such as Sri Lanka, was the undermining of the colonized or ethnically marginalized body and psyche. Naming thus becomes an “ethical” act in both senses--of identity construction and moral citizenship. It is in this connection that it is most productive to raise the question provoked by the book's title: Who is “Anil's Ghost”? There are several possible answers to this eponymic puzzle. Sailor is the most obvious candidate for “Anil's ghost”--a subaltern subject metonymically representing (standing in for, *darstellen*, in Gayatri Spivak's formulation) victims of political conflict; Anil wants to agitate for the political representation (*vertreten*) of such victims: she is also Sailor's ghostly mirror-image (Spivak, *Other Asias* 78).

Thus the novel elevates *naming* into an ethical micro-project in the novel. Anil's self-reinvention (invention is also discovery, in the classical rhetorical sense of *inventio*) of her own name can be read as a staging of Anil's emergence from alienation and her attempt to achieve a coherent subjectivity. Her struggle to remake herself is echoed by the subnational struggles for group identity: the LTTE bid for a homeland in the north, the separatists' struggles in the south, and the Sinhala government's bid to maintain the status quo. The novel is replete with the agony of internal splitting of national identity just as it explores an abyssal of subjectivity, not only in Anil's case but also variously for Palipana, Dr. Corea, Ananda, and Gamini. They all confront questions of proper names, about property in one's name as symptoms of political trauma: Who is Sri Lankan? To whom does Sri Lanka belong?

Gamini, in particular, embodies in microcosm the nation's convulsive suffering, even as he is a kind of shamanic healer of traumas, collapsing literal and "mythological" roles as doctor. Witnessing and administering to the trauma of others, reduced to a near-apathetic stupor, Gamini exemplifies Caruth's point that "survival itself . . . can be a crisis" (Caruth 9). Witnessing is for Gamini an ethical duty in a conflict where every party is simultaneously perpetrator and victim. Like Anil, Gamini is a solitary in the sense that Felman speaks about, citing Paul Celan's remark that "[t]o bear witness is to *bear the solitude* of a responsibility, and to *bear the responsibility*, precisely, of that solitude" (qtd. in Felman 3). Gamini "witnesses" by *attending to* the victims of the civil war—in both the medical sense and in the sense of witnessing. He manages his own painful solitude (or reinscribes it more deeply as anomie, exclusion from society, social namelessness) by anaesthetizing himself with drugs, fast food from a stall in the open-air market, and dreamless slumber in a hospital bed. He is homeless and loveless, like Anil, if in a more banal, literal sense (215). Gamini apparently has sublimated any libidinal energies to work

(227), like Anil who “fell in love with working at night, and sometimes couldn’t bear to leave the lab” (145) and like Sarath too, who “hid his life in his work” (278). Anil is left with only her laboratory, Sarath only the “warm rock” of statues “cut into a human shape” that he would embrace (279), and Gamini only his hospital.

Sarath too is a solitary, who “since the death of his wife . . . had never found the old road back into the world” (277). Mirroring Anil’s ethicopolitical liminality, he functions as Anil’s foil. Yet she is as suspicious of him as the government, which assigns him as her minder, is of Anil. By contrast with Anil’s avowedly humanitarian work, Sarath’s is presumptively a comprador stance. But it also represents a principled check against a facile universalist, modernist discourse of human rights, propagated by the U.N. For Sarath, Anil’s expatriate-cosmopolitan perspective makes it doubtful that she can maintain a proper parallax between universal principles of justice and local complexities and culturally specific norms; while it constitutes appropriate critical distance for her role as human rights investigator, it also produces grounds for its deconstruction. Indeed, he calls her out on her presumptive bias: “You know, I’d believe your arguments more if you lived here,” Sarath tells Anil, advising against “false empathy and blame” (45). Anil risks performing another Western neocolonialist repetition, for “Sarath had seen truth broken into suitable pieces and used by the foreign press alongside irrelevant photographs. A flippant gesture towards Asia that might lead . . . to new vengeance and slaughter. . . As an archaeologist Sarath believed in truth as a principle. . . he would have given his life for the truth if the truth were of any use” (156-7).

## THE STATUS OF THE PAST

What then is the value of the past for Anil, and for her others, her ghosts and her “host” nation that is also her home nation? History is trans-substantiated for Ondaatje’s main characters. It is a pre-text for staging the emergence of the self as a historicized (“modern”) product of a fantasmatic response to trauma. Ondaatje’s narrative procedure is an enchainment of the present to the past. But the past is at once forgotten actively, in Nietzsche’s sense, and *re-membered*, not so much given present meaning but cathected in present bodies.

Anil attempts actively to forget her individual past: but it is always already inscribed and re-membered in the fact of her diasporic and professional alienation. It is her insertion into the traumatic present of Sri Lanka, exemplarily a moment of “danger” in which—to recall Benjamin’s memorable locution--the past “flashes up,” (Benjamin 225) that calls into question her credibility as human rights mediator. Anil’s return to Sri Lanka is not just the return of a prodigal expatriate, in a pattern familiar to the point of cliché in the discourse of diaspora: it is an adventure in ethicopolitical self-recovery and self-rediscovery: a reimagining in situ of an ethical project to reform Sri Lanka as more hospitable to the rule of moral and human rights law.

Anil emerges only gradually from her alienated perspective into imaginative communion/community, with the traumatized Sri Lankans. She earns a difficult friendship with Sarath and especially Ananda, whose grief reduces her to sympathetic tears. “She was *with* Sarath and Ananda, *citizenized* by their friendship—the two of them in the car, the two of them in the hospital while a stranger attempted to save Ananda” (200; emphases added). The problematic of this overdetermined *citizenship* appears most vividly when, for the first time, Anil provides a report on her findings to the government, although she is denied access to her skeleton, her intended primary exhibit. She expresses hope that the State will be compelled by some universal moral scruple to heed her testimony about the body of Sailor, whose spoor she has been following. Her

testimony is premised on a theory of justice through representation. Although no mindless optimist, Anil seems to want to will Sri Lanka into moral probity and procedural justice. Her appeal, based on an ethical faith in humanist ideals, projects the quixotic hope that the State will become just. But what is important is that Anil herself is transformed into an ethical subject:

She was supposed to give her report with no real evidence. It had been a way to discredit her whole investigation. . . . Sarath in the back row, unseen by her, listened to her quiet explanations, her surefootedness, her absolute calm and refusal to be emotional or angry. It was a lawyer's argument and, more important, a citizen's evidence; she was no longer just a foreign authority. Then he heard her say, "I think you murdered hundreds of us. *Hundreds of us*. Sarath thought to himself. Fifteen years away and she is finally *us*. [271-72; emphases original]

Anil here intuits what Caruth suggests are key lessons of trauma: that "one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another," and that "trauma may lead . . . to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound" (8). Even though Anil becomes flustered enough to resort to the reflex that she represents not the Sri Lankan government but an "international organization"—a mistake that smacks of the universalist pretensions underlying many unwelcome penetrations of sovereign Third World nations--Sarath recognizes that her motives are now no longer *alienated* in the debilitating sense. He sacrifices himself to her enterprise, moved by her identification with the traumatized community to which she has finally committed herself though it can no longer be her home. How much this affective pivot does for her political (com-)mission remains uncertain, but ethically it is indeed a

momentous pivot, perhaps — as far as Anil herself is concerned — even the novel's ethicopolitical center of gravity.

Physically returning to the “homeland,” Anil finds that she can no longer “own” it. It never was hers except as ethnic matrix: ethnic background can never be totally determinative of identity, only one among much identification. It is this performative dimension that Amartya Sen captures in *Reason before Identity*, arguing for plural “identities.” Yet “identity” may be the wrong category, may lead us down false ontological defiles. Reason indeed must come before identity; cleaving to a voluntaristic notion of “invention” of identities, Sen renounces a transcendental faith in identities as ontic ground of subjectivity. Because they are inventions, “identifications” are fungible. Anil learns to identify as “us”—forging a community with her others, even her “ghosts,” making their past her own, without “owning” it.

It is certainly Anil's ethical *duty to leave*, to bear witness from afar (in both senses of “witness”), to tell Sailor's story through distanciated narration precisely because it cannot be told and received in country: there is too much trauma, too much noise for the fragile narrative of human dignity to register. Sailor occupies the place from which “the plea from the other to be heard” is voiced, precisely by virtue of Sailor's actual voice having been extinguished. The novel thus promulgates a cosmopolitan ethics counterposed to Bruce Robbins' notion of cosmopolitan compassion as—ironically—accessible even through the bombsight (Robbins 2, 11). It suggests the need for humility among South Asian cosmopolitans who presume to comment on the territorial politics of the countries of their “origin.” If cosmopolitan compassion is an ideal within one construction of universalist modernity, postmodernity and postcoloniality trouble such grand narratives.

## CONCLUSION: AESTHESIS AS NON-REPRESENTATIVE REPRESENTATION

As a specifically postcolonial narrative, *Anil's Ghost* presents an interestingly ironic conclusion. It brings to fruition the promise that out of horrific political trauma will emerge healing—etymologically, returning to wholeness. In Anil's case healing entails being restored to her human connection with others without "identity" with them, not being alienated from them while managing to attain a necessary distancing as a U.N. human rights investigator. This underscores Ondaatje's cosmopolitan (feminist?) humanism. Anil's ethicopolitical struggle stages the emergence of a postcolonial South Asian subject bearing within herself the spectral other as constitutive of her own identity. For in this struggle inheres the simultaneous intimacy and otherness—intersubjectivity, extimacy—of Anil's "ghosts."

Anil's self-regeneration cannot be a solipsistic aesthesis; rather it is a kind of attending to the other—this is the rediscovered truth of civil society presented here. Speaking of the novel, Ondaatje remarked that "[t]here are various versions of the truth. . . . Truth, at the wrong time, can be dangerous. That's a conflict for Anil, who's used to the more Western sense of holding truth above anything else" (Weich n.p.). According to Buddhism, it is through suffering that we must come to salvation, be restored to wholeness (Loy 12). Trauma is a particular exceptional instance of the *dukkha* that Buddhism sees as the universal and enduring condition of being human. The Buddhist conception of authentic selfhood adds a profound resonance to the perspective I am advancing, that trauma is ironically the matrix of the emergence of the subject. Lakma, arguably, approximates such a Buddhist aesthetic in coming to terms with her melancholia, when upon Palipana's death she carves into a rock at the water's edge "one of the first things he had said to her, which she had held on to like a raft in her years of fear" (107). The "yard-long" sentence remains "encrypted" within the novel, never revealed to the reader.



Ondaatje understands the labor of aesthetic representation as a protection against the encroachment of monstrosity, and of the self's *embêtement*. It is the act of giving significance to the world, even its pain. This of course is also the credo of the novelist himself, as artificer of the fiction that gives power and meaning to blind political trauma

Ultimately it is Ananda and not Anil whose story encapsulates Ondaatje's sense of what it might mean to *come through trauma*. For Ananda, healing entails coming to wholeness through the religio-aesthetic ceremony of the "netramangala." Earlier, Ananda had been commissioned to sculpt Sailor's face: what he reconstructs is not the "actual" face of the dead man. It is however, a "real" representation of what he "wanted to be true," an "invention" (303). In sculpting the face, he wanted to represent an aspect of his dead wife, Sirissa: "a calm Ananda had known in his wife, a peacefulness he wanted for any victim" (187)—what he was representing was not a real person at all but a nonrepresentative re-presentation, a Sirissa no longer traumatized, and therefore most serene (the name Sirissa, denoting the *vakai* tree, is almost a truncated version of "serenissima," which would be a name for someone in possession of wholeness and health, unlike the actual Sirissa). If non-representative representation is framed as ethical act, we might construe Ananda's *mis*-representation as an act of compassionate love *and distanciation*. If he lends an idealized form, a face, to Sailor's skull, Ananda's *aesthesis* is more than an adjunct to Anil's efforts: it offers an analog. Admittedly, there is a sentimental, even selfish quotient in this willful (mis- or non-)re-presentation. But all re-presentations of this kind are bound to be misrepresentations, because the real person's animating spirit, his or her life, can never be faithfully captured—call it anima or soul. The truth is not mimetically representable any more than the real trauma is representable. The truth Ananda wants to capture is not of the order of mimesis, but of an ethical/ aesthetic/ erotic order, a different way of being

intersubjectively tied to another and of discovering or inventing (*inventio*) identity through sameness and difference. It is an insight that makes the invisible or no-longer-to-be-seen, visible again: artistic insight recoded and refracted as willed blindness.

In a sense Ananda almost approaches the status of the homo sacer delineated by Giorgio Agamben: “the originary figure of life taken into the sovereign ban [who] preserves the memory of the originary exclusion through which the political dimension was first constituted” (83). The emphasis of the novel is on preserving memory through aesthesis, a championing of aesthetic affect as a defense against the corrosive and deadening effects of politics—but without quite being ignorant or inattentive to the political. Ultimately the aesthetic and the political cannot be separated. Ananda’s implicit demand is that Anil and Sarath see in this deliberate misrepresentation the truth of ethical recognition of the other (or the other’s pain, loss, or damage) as love: seeing not with the eyes but from the heart, turning the trauma of death into what Derrida might call the gift of death, “received from the other, from the one who, in absolute transcendence, sees me without my seeing, holds me in his hands while remaining inaccessible” (Derrida, *Gift of Death* 41).

Importantly, this gift is simultaneously an access to responsibility in being seen without seeing the source of the gaze, being submitted to a visual regime. Sarath at one point speculates that, given that “[p]atterns of death always surrounded him,” in his work “he felt he was somehow the link between the mortality of flesh and bone and the immortality of an image on rock, or even, more strangely, its immortality as a result of faith or an idea” and that seeing was an important element in the apprehension of death, for it was as if “parting or death or disappearance were simply the elimination of sight in the onlooker” (278). It is not irrelevant then that *Anil’s Ghost* dramatizes a profound doubleness in Ananda—simultaneously a “re-

membering” (*anamnesis*) or reconstruction of the actuality (the present) and a *forgetting* of the presentness-of-the-past, of trauma, so as to enable healing. Ananda’s story in particular demonstrates how the traumatized *can* move beyond trauma through aestheticized representation (*aesthesis*). While my title makes an oblique reference to an earlier book by Ondaatje, *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), *Anil’s Ghost* explores what it might mean not only to survive, to come through trauma, but also to regenerate the postcolonial self through an ethically-oriented aesthesis, repairing the psyche not only by the current civil war but by the long depredations that condition contemporary postcolonial subjectivity in the Subcontinent.

Ananda’s importance to this narrative is indicated by the fact that it is given to him to perform an overdetermined aesthetic/ritualistic act that closes the novel: in a kind of ecstasy (*ekstasis*, standing beside/ outside of oneself), Ananda, true to his name, which suggests another meaning of “ecstasy,” paints the eyes of a Buddha statue to “finish” it as a religio-aesthetic object, conferring upon the sightless statue the power of superhuman vision. Ananda’s task as artificer charged with painting Buddha’s eyes is to capture the “real” divine power of those eyes even as it registers the belief that “no human eye can meet the Buddha’s during the process of creation” (99). The task would be accomplished at the “evolving moment when the eyes, reflected in the mirror, would see him, fall into him. The first and last look given to someone so close. After this hour the statue would be able to witness figures only from a great distance” (306).

Ondaatje presents here an iconic image of giving life, of regeneration that is the only hope of coming through trauma. The ceremony is explained by Sarath’s erstwhile mentor Palipana, the discredited sage-like epigraphist and historian, who can “reconstruct[ ] eras simply by looking at runes” and “re-create scenes from just paint fragments”:

Netra means ‘eye.’ It [the mangala] is a ritual of the eyes. A special artist is needed to paint eyes on a holy figure [such as a Buddha statue]. It is always the last thing done. It is what gives the image life. Like a fuse. The eyes are a fuse. It has to happen before a statue or a painting in a vihara can become a holy thing. (96-97)

This netramangala may seem an odd conclusion to a story about trauma. What insight is coded into this ritual of blindness emerging into powerful sight?

To answer this question we might recall Benjamin’s idea that trauma entails the degradation of affect and of everyday experience itself; Ondaatje’s novel provides stark if imagined testimonial to this deadening of affect and of daily life. For Benjamin, the only way beyond trauma is a reconditioning of the consciousness, “innervation”—a reinvigoration of the aesthetic sensibility. The aesthetic is the answer to the anaesthesia precipitated by trauma.

The novel comes to rest (rather than resolution) with the labors of the prototypical aesthetic artificer in the novel, Ananda. This conclusion is the only possible one for Ondaatje because history and politics have offered nothing better. It is not just a fortuitous coincidence perhaps that Benjamin too saw in Buddhist asceticism—meditation, prayer, yoga—a fount for the regeneration of the human (Benjamin, “One-Way Street”, 444-488). This is what Benjamin meant in stressing “innervation” not in the Freudian sense of “efferent” flows along the neural passages but in the “two-way street” that Miriam Hansen has developed (Hansen 315, 319).

When the Buddha’s eyes were finished, Ananda “looked at the eyes that had once belonged to a god. . . . As an artificer now he did not celebrate the greatness of a faith. But he knew if he did not remain an artificer he would become a demon. The war around him was to do

with demons, specters of retaliation” (304). His job done, Ananda turns away, and so turns from trauma (a kind of ascesis): this becomes a cryptic figure for the regeneration of the South Asian subject—an aesthetic figure for an ideal that at the time of the novel’s writing seemed unavailable in Sri Lanka. This is another turn on the trope of the insight that comes through a blinding revelation and because it is so enigmatic it may not even be within our grasp. Thus once again like the trauma itself it may be just beyond representation even in fiction but not therefore less appealing as an aspirational ideal, a potential or emergent way of being in the world. Ondaatje’s novel offers an aesthetic exploration of trauma, its effects, and possible responses. In so doing it highlights the need for a specifically South Asianist postcolonial framing of attendant historical, representational, narratological and political issues: as such it furnishes a case study for the ongoing relevance of postcolonial studies.

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In an interview with David Weich, Ondaatje said that the “the image of someone returning to a country they'd once been a part of, now finding themselves a stranger in that place. That's Anil's path. She grows up in Sri Lanka, goes and gets educated abroad, and through fate or chance gets brought back by the human rights Commission to investigate war crimes. That story of the returning stranger seems very central to our time. That was the starting point.”

<sup>2</sup> There was of course also success. Contemporary historians such as Atul Kohli are sometimes criticized for not acknowledging that India has been experiencing a “growing crisis of governability” (see Gordon 157). Yet Kohli has edited a collection of essays on the very premise that there is a case to be made for the formal success of procedural democracy in India. My argument is that this success does not necessarily guarantee that ordinary citizens have recourse to social goods and institutions. See Kohli 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Krishna writes that what might be called the political trauma of LTTE secessionism in Sri Lanka is “proof . . . that majoritarian [Sinhala] overcentralization produces both irredentist violence and precisely what it fears most—namely, partition or secession. The desire for Eelam emerges as a direct consequence of the very imagination that animates most nationalists in South Asia” (242).

<sup>4</sup> If, as Gyan Pandey writes, the trauma narratives of Partition constitute a “secondary” narrative, shadowing the primary narrative of the Independence struggle (30), then the fictional narrative of *Anil's Ghost* is a tertiary narrative, founded on the premise that the phenomenon of trauma at the heart of the struggle for political sovereignty cannot be comprehended without an understanding of the psychic dimension of those who suffer under it. As Chakrabarty argues, the standard Enlightenment account of the subject-citizen [see Mahmood Mamdani and Uday Singh Mehta], as developed in Adam Smith or Hume, “did not provide for individual subjectivities. Human nature for them was as universal as the biological human body” (129).

<sup>5</sup> Qadri Ismail, “A Flippant Gesture.” I am grateful to Robert Cruz and Neloufer de Mel for conversation about this question of Ondaatje's political perspective.

<sup>6</sup> There are competing characterizations of the JVP. For instance the party of rebels has been described as an “ultra-left organization dominated by educated youths, unemployed or disadvantageously employed” (Tambiah 14).

<sup>7</sup> See Qadri Ismail, *Abiding by Sri Lanka* for a Sri Lankan perspective on Human rights discourse that makes universalist and Eurocentric “pronouncements” about the country, esp. 41-3.

<sup>8</sup> See Abraham and Torok 89; and Jacques Derrida’s Foreword to Abraham and Torok, xiii, xiv, xxxvi.

<sup>9</sup> It is in contemporary cultural studies that we see clearest evidence of what Andreas Huyssen terms “the globalization paradox” in relation to the presumed singularity of the Holocaust as emblematic trauma (24).

<sup>10</sup> Kumar 202.

<sup>11</sup> For an example of this less evident representational mode, one could turn to Romesh Gunasekera’s novel, *Reef*.

<sup>12</sup> Many have remarked Ondaatje’s play on gender. Kevin Patrick Mahoney, writes that “[h]ere Ondaatje seems to be dealing with the ancient binary opposition of the West as rational and the East as irrational, with Anil embodying the values of the West, and Sarath embodying those of the East. Yet there’s also a binary opposition which has the West as powerful male and the East as cowering female. Ondaatje seems to have swapped the genders here, since Anil is most assuredly female (she claims she longs for the privacy of the West, but delights bathing in open air showers).”

<sup>13</sup> See Derrida, Interview with Giovanna Borradori. N.p.

<sup>14</sup> Levity as a response to trauma is of course something Anil at least has long experience with, ever since she was a student of Forensics, part of the Fuck Yorick School of Forensics, her cohort of archaeologists, who “snuffed out death with music and craziness” and formed a community precisely around trauma, since they “couldn’t miss death, it was in every texture and cell around them” (147). Ondaatje elaborates the way in which Anil and Gamini find release only in ecstatic escape from the quotidian: she while dancing and doing backflips by herself (181), and he in his operating theater called “Emergency” (223).



**Mahesh Sharma:**

**Deconstructing the Ethical and the Political in  
Postcolonial Hospitality**

**Postcolonial Interventions: An Interdisciplinary  
Journal of Postcolonial Studies**

**ABSTRACT:**

The present condition of globalization has created a unique predicament for the postcolonial society. Those who were once colonized have come face to face with their colonizers resulting in making a new postcolonial dyad of guest/host. Hospitality provides for the possibility of coexistence and assimilation. But this is possible only if we leave the question of identity aside, rather than latching on to it. Assimilation is a fundamental need for society today, which will create a community and it is also desirable in a community. Deconstruction of hospitality is an absolute aporia as two things try to function together – the unconditional hospitality which is sought by asylum seekers, refugees, and former colonized peoples, and on the other hand the risk and internal conflicts that hospitality carries with it, that of a risk to its own citizens. The flow of people into the host country is inescapably restrained and limited at the political and subjective levels. There is a double bind in hospitality – one which acknowledges risks and the other which is vigilant. An ethics of negotiation is necessary to reach the limits of a normative unconditional hospitality.

Derrida's deconstructionist approach to hospitality creates an aporia within the concept of hospitality. The stranger, the host, the immigrant, the asylum seeker, the refugee all need to be in a balance, which is the condition of possibility for unconditional hospitality. For Derrida, hospitality should be unconditional which is to say nothing should come in the way of taking the decision of inviting or accepting the guest. The present paper discusses the notion of Derrida's hostipitality (hostility + hospitality) to understand the contemporary postcolonial condition of conviviality.

**Keywords-** *Guest/Host, Colonizer/Colonized, Hostipitality, Derrida, Cosmopolitanism, Postcolonial Discourse*

The common definition of hospitality is the relationship the host has with the guest, which includes welcoming the guest or stranger and treating him as equal. Care and providing for his/her needs are part of the practice. Hospitality to a stranger is different from welcoming a friend or a family member where the person does not necessarily need to be welcomed – here the other feels part of the host and can live with the host freely, without constraints. As Derrida points out, “all ethics of hospitality are not the same ... there is no culture or social bond without a principle of hospitality” (Principles of Hospitality 6). The practice of hospitality changes with socio-cultural practices. The guest feels that he is a stranger from the moment of hospitality, when he does not know what to do next. He feels other even when the host tries to assimilate him. Julian Pitt-Rivers further explains “as a newcomer he will never know from the outset how to behave towards individual personalities... but to fulfill the role of guest he must at least understand the conventions which relate to hospitality and which define the behaviour expected of him” (The Law of Hospitality 504). Derrida’s concept of ‘hostipitality’ (hostility + hospitality) captures the essence of the agonistic pluralist approach among various poles which maintain such a relation (of ‘hostipitality’) without claiming superiority (*On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*). Kant argues that the principle of ‘hospitality’, “the right of a stranger not to be treated with hostility when he arrives on someone else’s territory” (Kant, *Political Writings* 105), plays an important factor in propagating the Kantian cosmopolitan space where perpetual peace will prevail through the practice of “principles of justice among free and democratic people” (135). Derrida’s concepts of the singular and the universal nevertheless make the understanding of hospitality in today’s world politics easier. I go on to show that friendship is an essential criterion of an ethics of hospitality as defined by Derrida, and how in postcolonial hospitality the unconditional has to be even more present in the practical politics of border crossing. I will finally deal with hospitality as cosmopolitanism, in which the notion of responsibility is deeply rooted. The ethics of

hospitality is explained through these different terms, which are normative preconditions that can guide politics towards being ethical in the cosmopolitan scenario, at least theoretically, even if it cannot be practiced as such.

Deconstruction deals with writing as well as with metaphysics. The linguistic “turn” from the traditional conception of language towards metaphysics changed the structural configuration of the Western tradition and challenged logocentrism. Derrida defines deconstruction as “hospitality to the other” (*Interruptions* 4), reinforcing the latter as a traditional concept where the host (the innkeeper) waits for whoever passes by his home and needs a shelter, whether it is an animal, human or God, and gives it without questioning. (This practice in today’s world order seems impossible due to multiple problems such as immigration, increase in the number of asylum seekers and illegal refugees).

### **Guest-Host Dichotomy**

The guest-host relationship can be extended beyond humans alone – it can be between humans and animals, and between humans and God. This latter is the traditional concept of hospitality where the guest, whoever it is, must be welcomed, because the guest might be ‘God in disguise’. Therefore, in some traditions such as in India, guests are treated like God – *atithidevobhava*. The host must go beyond the limit to fulfill the needs of the guest, treating the Other as oneself. This is why the Other can never remain the Other, he becomes part of the Self. As Derrida would say, the Other must collapse into the same (2000, 2001). This is the mystery that lies at the root of hospitality – the host confronts the unknown stranger who is mysterious. The ambiguity of their positions can either culminate in hostility or hospitality, and this depends on the status of each individually. For the former not to take place, the host and guest can never be equal. If this is the



case, the latter (hospitality) in Derrida's conception can never take place because the ethics of hospitality function when it is unconditional, where the host and the guest are one and the same.

This practice of hospitality has several problems, one of which is the possibility of the host becoming hostage. There are several ways in which this is possible. Firstly, the law of hospitality presumes that the host has to take care of the guest and fulfill all his needs. In this case, the host becomes hostage to the law of hospitality where he cannot escape it; at the same time, he also becomes hostage to the guest whom he also has to obey. Secondly, the host becomes hostage when the guest crosses his limits and space as a guest and starts demanding and dominating over the host. In both cases the "host" is both the host and the hostage, but at different levels.

The law of hospitality is to be dealt with, in contrast to codes of hospitality as seen in different cultures. There are natural laws of hospitality that are derived from sociological necessities. For example, the host must not be insulted, usurped, or infringed upon, for otherwise rivalry ensues. The guest must always remain within his limits, failing which hospitality is transformed into hostility. For this not to take place, the guest must always remain the Other and follow the rules of the host, and they must live together as two distinct categories. Unlike what Derrida says, I think that the host must live autonomously as a subjective self and not give him/herself to the guest. For Derrida, although these are two distinct entities, they must live as one with unconditional hospitality – where the Other is treated as the same without negotiating the priority of the host (2000, 2005). Although his approach is ethical and takes hospitality to its ultimate im-possibility, there are some problems which it can lead to, especially in world politics. (I use the term im-possible with a hyphen to distinguish it from impossible without a hyphen, to show that the former may lead to a possibility, whereas for the latter there is no possibility.)

There is also a third condition to the host-guest relationship, as in the case of the U.S., which is known as a country of immigrants. The citizens of the U.S were formerly guests who pushed out

the indigenous people of that land and claimed to have discovered it, and therefore viewed it as belonging to them. In this case, the indigenous people who should have been the host as they inhabited that territory could not do so. Although the ‘host’ and the ‘guest’ were present there, they did not have the relation determined by the laws of hospitality – a major issue in the ethics of hospitality. In such situations, can settler countries like the U.S ever be the host to citizens from another country? Do they hold the same status as, say in Japan or U.K, or any other country which are not settler countries? Is their “hospitality” different from that of the rest? To answer these politically charged questions, the concept of the responsibility that one feels for another is important. Not only must it function at the political level but also at the ethical level.

In *The Origins of Responsibility*, François Raffoul rightly says that there have been new perspectives on ethics with the proliferation of a philosophical outlook towards ethics rather than a view of it as a practical discipline. For an ethics of hospitality to take place in everyday politics, it is essential to study ethics first in a normative body: “There is no need to ‘add’ an ethics as an applied discipline to an ontology which would then have been presupposed as unethical” (3). Unlike Raffoul, the normative framework built by theorists such as Derrida, Levinas, Heidegger, Nancy and others on ethics believe that it is essential for ethics to be present in the politics of hospitality. Although for Derrida as well as for Raffoul this approach would be unethical, Derrida says that it is this impossibility of the ethics which they suggest is the basis for creating a possibility for the application of ethics: “ethical judgment ... becomes only possible from such groundlessness” (6). Although practically it seems impossible, there is a need for terms such as hospitality, responsibility, ethics, politics, international relations, immigration, etc. to be theorized, and such a background must be created so that there is a “possible” created within the “im-possible”.

In an attempt to go beyond the general conception of the politics and ethics of hospitality, recent studies have focused on subjects as different as the host and the guest in relation to the Self

and the Other, deconstruction as hospitality, friendship as essential to hospitality, the role of the community in this dialectics, the position of the postcolonial subject face-to-face with his former colonisers, and the function of hospitality in a global scenario like cosmopolitanism. While some researchers have dealt with hospitality from a realist perspective, others have sought to show how hospitality is aporetic and (im)possible. Mireille Rosello (2001) suggests that ideally, the definition of hospitality should change according to the “type of journey”, but this is not actually the case. While the laws of hospitality are the same for all, there have been instances in history where one community was privileged over the other; where hospitality should have been a mutual benevolence, there has been a suspicion in the relation between the host and the guest.

In extensive studies of aporia in hospitality, theorists such as Derrida, Mark W. Westmoreland and others have supported the necessity of unconditional hospitality as a condition of possibility for a global community. The need for practicing Derrida’s unconditional hospitality is developed by Judith Still (2010) from an interdisciplinary framework which is key to her work in which sexual difference is one of the strands in the study of hospitality. What is of interest in her work is her influence on postcolonial studies in the complex relations between France and Algeria. Unlike Derrida who demands a balance and situates his work in pure theory. Still her work *Derrida and Hospitality: Theory and Practice* puts forth an empirical framework which gives her writing and interpretation more flexibility and scope. In discussing the issue of hospitality in sexual difference, she incorporates the works of other women like Helene Cixous and Judith Butler. Nevertheless, she does not consider discussing the issues of those who have written on colonization and who have fought with their people for independence such as Albert Memmi, who has also extensively written on the issue of hospitality and assimilation.

Her chapter on friendship, which she develops from Derrida’s essay “Politics of Friendship”, traces friendship as a sexual relation, unlike Derrida who has an obsessive demand that the friend is

the same as the Self. Going back in the line of the Western philosophical tradition, Aristotle states that good legislation is directed by friendship rather than by justice, and is beyond any code of law. Friendship is the first law of community without which no government or law can exist. While Derrida states that friendship is a detached practice and exists in death, where there is no distinction between the Self and the friend, Giorgio Agamben conceives of friendship as a first step towards alterity, an experience which makes 'oneself' exist without being reduced to the 'same'. The friend makes you discover yourself at the same time as putting your identity into question, which Agamben says is friendship's greatest gift. This perspective is essential in relating oneself to the Other and to the community.

Hospitality in general and cosmopolitan ethics in particular is considered from the standpoint of a universal democracy – a universality which impinges on the freedom and rights of humanism. This approach has several problems, including among others the denial of individuality or singularity. Derrida's perspective on hospitality is derived from the works of Kant on cosmopolitan rights, which although seemingly universal, are limited to the rights of visitors in the European context. What Derrida does is to seek hospitality in the post-Enlightenment era, going beyond these limits, moving towards cosmopolitanism, where the stranger or foreigner is unconditionally welcomed, where the Other remains his/herself without collapsing into the Self. This approach makes assimilation easier and Derrida's ethics of hospitality is seen from a position of singularity rather than multiplicity (*Politics of Friendship* 23).

It is from this perspective that Derrida speaks about a "democracy to come" (*Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*). A basic normative framework is necessary and is a precondition for future cosmopolitan justice, and the initiative taken up by intellectuals, writers, and those men and women who have the potential to voice their opinion for a world unity –cosmopolitanism – is a step towards this apparently utopic conception. Nevertheless, this seemingly messy and confusing process of

hospitality and what Derrida calls a “ville-refuge” is essential to attain the international rights which all human beings possess (*On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* 18). A new state politics is sought.

From the normative notion of hospitality as propounded by Derrida, one can derive that in today’s world order; unconditional hospitality is not just possible but is a necessary precondition for a better global reason to function. Take the example of Sweden’s migration and asylum policy, which gave asylum seekers the right to live in Sweden on humanitarian grounds; it has been questioned after the May 2013 riots between the indigenous people and refugees due to lack of integration despite the government’s efforts. This is an (im)possibility of unconditional hospitality; that is to say, border crossing must be limited and all those who are part of this limit must be welcomed unconditionally. After a person has been permitted to cross borders, he must be treated as equal to the indigenous people without constraints.

The ethics of hospitality is possible only in the presence of a politics of hospitality. Without the latter, the former cannot exist. How can the ethics of hospitality take place if there is no politics? What is the politics of hospitality? What role does ethics play in the political practice of hospitality? To answer these questions, we need to turn to Derrida’s approach to hospitality to see what kind of hospitality is necessary for an ethical politics of hospitality. Derrida’s ethics of hospitality will create the possibility for a better world politics.

Derrida’s deconstructionist approach to hospitality creates an aporia within the concept of hospitality. The stranger, the host, the immigrant, the asylum seeker, the refugee all need to be in a balance, which is the condition of possibility for unconditional hospitality. For Derrida, hospitality should be unconditional which is to say nothing should come in the way of taking the decision of inviting or accepting the guest. The guest knows he is waiting for someone but does not know who it is. “He [the host] waits without waiting. He waits without knowing whom he awaits” (“Hostipitality”, 10). The stranger remains a stranger until he is named as such. If somebody is called a stranger, there

is already a relation between the two – the host and the stranger – and therefore s/he is not a stranger any more. He becomes either a friend or an enemy or simply an existing entity. Aporia lies within the concept of the “known stranger” and the “unknown stranger”. The principle of hospitality demands welcoming the “stranger” without limits. But there is a problem in welcoming, in letting the stranger into one’s home, for with the unconditional welcome there is a possibility that one’s home will be threatened by the newcomer.

Unconditional hospitality is not bound by any laws or code of conduct and the person who arrives lives as freely as does the indigenous, and therefore both the host and the newcomer lose their status. Hospitality necessitates the presence of a host and the visitor, but in the case of unconditional hospitality they do not exist. Unconditional hospitality therefore defies the laws of hospitality as the host does not anymore remain the host. It is hospitality which both passively resists and welcomes the guest in different forms.

For hospitality to be possible, the host as well as the Other need to be present and the host must maintain the status of the patron of the household. This Other, in the case of unconditional hospitality, can always be a threat for the host as both become equals and the Other can take over the host and begin to rule the home. Therefore hostility comes along with hospitality to safeguard the home, a concept for which Derrida coined the term “hostipitality”, wherein both the words ‘hospitality’ and ‘hostility’ exist simultaneously.

In a recent incident in Italy, three Italian girls were fined for wearing swimsuits on a beach in Italy (which is their own country) in front of some Saudi Arabian tourist. This action of the girls hurt the Muslim religious sentiments and a case was filed against them with the help of the Sharia Law, wherein the court of Italy equated them to prostitutes and the girls were fined a sum of \$3,500 each ([www.jewsnews.co.il](http://www.jewsnews.co.il)). Do visitors have the right to file such cases in their visiting country because of cultural difference? Here we see that it is due to religious intolerance that the Muslim visitors over-

stepped their rights and the permission that was given to them by the Italian government, and accused three girls who were well within their cultural practices. What is more surprising is that the court in Italy took sides with these visitors and condemned the girls. Why did the government not take sides with their own people in spite of being well aware of their cultural practices? This is one of the cases (amongst others) where hospitality has bred hostility between the guest and the host. Can stopping Muslim visitors entering into their country be a solution for problems like this? Or must the host country continue having visitors because of the basic rights people have of visiting another country? There can be no one answer to such kinds of problems.

Conditions and laws for immigration are obligatory to maintain the structure of a nation. The politics of hospitality in border crossing are maintained by contracts such as the passport, immigration laws and laws of citizenship. These terms are generally conceived as purely political and are practiced for beneficial and selfish reasons. Today the world demands hospitality as responsibility on ethical grounds. Nations are seeking an ethics which can function beyond nationalism, which Derrida seems to comprehend and conceptualize as unconditional hospitality. Calling a person an immigrant, a refugee etc. is already fixing an identity and putting a law and a specific understanding of and towards the other into place. These names are given only after the status of the other is known through questioning and then categorized. There are several barriers to this politics, one of which is language. Comprehension is not always possible across nations due to differences in language, but translation can erase this lack, and it is thus necessary for hospitality ("Hostipitality" 6).

### **Understanding the Postcolonial Hospitality**

Does the notion of hospitality change in postcolonial context? Does it set aside the host-guest relationship because of the history of colonial violence? It is different from the hospitality which I have explained above, because this hospitality is preceded by a history of violence, terror, torture and

years of colonization. In this section, I attempt to show that the hosts owe their former colonies an unconditional hospitality, as they have been wrongly treated, violently taken over and disowned from their identities as a people. Derrida in *Of Hospitality* seeks to answer the question ‘where does hospitality begin?’ Answering this question in the postcolonial context rather than in the general framework of hospitality, I think postcolonial hospitality begins from the beginning of the process of colonization.

The future host and the guest had a relation even before entering into these categories. Rosello in her book *Postcolonial Hospitality* demonstrates the representation of hospitality in France and in African colonies especially in Algeria. What dominates the concept of the host and the guest is a sense of nationalism. She questions the oblivion of the settler colonies and the former empire by stating that the settlers have forgotten what they have taken from the indigenous people who used to live in that territory before. She also discusses why some forms of hospitality are privileged over the other and explains the different conflicts existing between hospitalities, where some are considered dangerous, illegal or irresponsible. She explores how language is the cause of inhospitality to migrants. The undecidability in Derrida’s work or rather in works that use deconstructive practices are often considered irresponsible.

One of the major points which Rosello fails to discuss is that hospitality comes with the responsibility the host has to feel responsible towards its former colonies. In this case hospitality might be comparatively more restrained due to the fear of revenge and the former colonies’ fight for justice. But in practice the contrary should be right, where the host should do anything they can in order to pay back for their misdeeds.

Language plays an essential role in postcolonial hospitality. Taking the example of France and its colonies especially Algeria, the latter have adopted, or more correctly, French has been imposed upon them as an official language. In this case, hospitality may be considered as coming



from the other side – that is Algeria has been hospitable to France by using French which can be understood by those living in France. Using a language that does not belong to them in order to communicate with the other can be perceived as lending a hand to the stranger and making communication possible, unlike the methods used by the host (France) where translation is necessary to understand one another.

Labeling is and has always been an essential part of immigration policies, where the identity of the immigrant is first questioned and then judged by the host, and only then a decision is taken. Is judging the future immigrant only on the basis of name, religion, language and history ethical? By doing this, isn't there an imposition of the identity of the potential immigrant's fellow companions (who might have done something wrong in the past) on the person who is being questioned? Immigration from former colonies, says Ben Jelloun, necessitates both rights and duties and must be done within the legal framework, which I believe negates ethics as responsibility. In this situation an ethics of (unconditional) hospitality should be preceded by an ethics of responsibility. At the same time, Derrida's umbrella term hostipitality, which is also always present in this situation leaves open the condition of possibility for attacking the host and taking over his position.

Refugees and homeless people seek a different politics of international border crossing which goes beyond the interest of the host country, the city or the nation-state. Taking the case of Algeria and its former colonizer in today's world order, we see that during and after colonization there have been a lot of people crossing borders between these two countries – they were either forced into it, or did it willfully. Nevertheless, they have been separated from their roots and have had to adopt another mode of life. In the case of the French living in Algeria, the question of them offering hospitality to others does not arise because they have settled in Algeria forcefully, without having been invited, and have taken over the Algerians. They therefore cannot call Algeria their home into which they can

invite someone. To maintain hospitality, the person has to be first the host and own or possess the house. Without this the question of hospitality does not arise.

Deconstruction of hospitality is an absolute aporia as two things try to function together – the unconditional hospitality which is sought by asylum seekers, refugees, and formerly colonized peoples, and on the other hand the risk and internal conflicts that hospitality carries with it, that of a risk to its own citizens. The flow of people into the host country is inescapably restrained and limited at the political and subjective levels. There is a double bind in hospitality – one which acknowledges risks and the other which is vigilant. An ethics of negotiation is necessary to reach the limits of a normative unconditional hospitality.

In the end, the tension in Derrida's thought centers on the issue of normativity. On the one hand, a genuine decision cannot depend upon established norms; every decision must be ultimately haunted by undecidability. On the other hand, unconditional hospitality appears as a law, it forcefully puts into question conditional laws of hospitality; it works to create a new cosmo-politics; and yet unconditional hospitality, like justice, is not a law (a 'thing') but rather a call or claim (Bonney 80).

Aporia does not stop an action; rather it forces one to respond to unconditional hospitality at the same time acknowledging the risk. Derrida used three phrases concerning hospitality, which are: *ethics is hospitality*, *ethics as hospitality* and *politics of hospitality*. The "is" in the first phrase makes it unconditional and universal, while the other two are conditional, contingent and complementary. "While Levinas was deeply concerned by the political realities of life, his thinking of hospitality remains silent about the way in which the ethical promise it makes can be translated into politics" (Still 19)

Hospitality provides for the possibility of coexistence and assimilation. But this is possible only if we leave the question of identity aside, rather than latching on to it. Assimilation is a fundamental need for society today, which will create a community and it is also desirable in a

community. Like Derrida, for Albert Memmi also, identity must be put aside in order to understand the possibility for hospitality. This will ensure that encounters without oppositions take place. Each must recognize the other as being part of oneself. The colonizer who leaves the colony does not take everything along. Part of it is left behind which the colonized must accept. They must also accept that their identity, community, society have changed and been modified by the foreigners, and do not have to completely reject them. What they have left behind is not necessarily something bad – it can be secured to their advantage. If the colonized do not accept the remains of colonization, it will be a “self-destructive reaction to colonialism” (Memmi 208). There is also a change in language, but for Derrida this is not a big issue; he says in *Monolingualism of the Other* that all languages, cultures are hybrid and are not pure (8). They are always influenced by others around. Difference should be left aside for assimilation and hospitality.

Israel-Pelletier suggests that colonizers and colonized, host and guest have been in contact with each other for a long time and several exchanges have taken place (“Assimilation, Hospitality, and the politics of Identity in Albert Memmi”). Due to this there are more similarities than differences and thus no need of asserting one’s power and sovereignty. Just as Derrida asserts that language does not belong only to oneself and is a mix, for Memmi it is the same with identity which is not pure. Power politics, as much as it creates differences and gives a sense of nationalism, is also necessary to keep communities together.

Absolute hospitality frees you from sovereignty and the boundaries of law and politics. Both Derrida and Memmi agree that this approach is unrealistic but this seems the only way to get ethics and politics to function together. They believe that politics can never become ethical, but it is surrounded by it and there is a constant conflict between them. Nevertheless politics should not be left on its own. Although both hold a similar stand towards ethics and politics, they have different perspectives on hospitality. While Derrida talks about absolute hospitality as an ethical urgency, for

Memmi, hospitality like assimilation is a strategy for a different mode of thought of binary thinking of subjects. For him, being attached to singularity can be dangerous for assimilation and therefore for hospitality.

A thorough understanding of postcolonial subjectivity is needed to determine the tension between ethics and politics as well as the notion of guest and host. If we have to bring this deconstructive philosophy out of the closet, we all will have to develop a normative consciousness where the Other will always be respected as part of the Self.

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**Sami H Atassi:**

**Social Media, Revolution, and  
Postcolonialism: Visualizing the Syrian  
Revolution via Social Media**

**Postcolonial Interventions: An Interdisciplinary  
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**ABSTRACT:**

Despite the fact that social media has played such a momentous role in fueling the Arab Spring, no study has attempted to concentrate on social media within postcolonial discourse, which is likely due to the recency of these events and the lack of postcolonial scholarship on the cultural influence of social media. Reading primarily from Edward Said's *Covering Islam* (1981), Melanie McAlister's *Epic Encounters* (2001), and Slavoj Žižek's commentary on the Syrian Revolution, my goal in this paper is to start the process of analyzing and situating the mechanisms of social media within the discourse of postcolonial studies. Moreover, the first section of this paper functions as a theoretical basis of how social media can shape revolutionary subjects and subjectivities. Hence, the second section shows how these Syrian subjects utilized social media as the space for their revolution of images within the postcolonial context. As a result of historical circumstances, the final section will turn to the abrupt manifestation of ISIS and explore the implications of their presence in Syria and, more importantly for this analysis, their re-presentations in mainstream media that have increasingly overshadowed the revolutionary cause.

**Keywords:** *Social media, revolution, postcolonialism, Syria, ISIS*

On October 19, 2009, extraordinary news struck the globe, garnering more attention than the swine flue epidemic or the war in Afghanistan. Sent by an out-of-work dot-com executive named Robin Sloan, the “pentagigatweet” (the five billionth tweet on Twitter) made the headlines of mainstream news agencies around the world (Keats 92). Though this news may seem as useless as most of the twittering on Twitter, reports on the pentagigatweet tell volumes about the state of mass media. If we are to take Melanie McAlister’s suggestion and read “visual media [...] as history,” then these reports on the pentagigatweet mark a shift in the way mass media represents images and produces cultures across disparate borders (244). Moreover, the television—once the center of mass media—has been replaced by computers, laptops, tablets, smart phones, and the like. And if Edward Said was right in arguing that “it [media] is the culture,” then it would seem that these mainstream media outlets were nailing their own coffins with every print in the press (*Covering Islam* 52). In other words, news of Sloan’s pentagigatweet made the cultural transition clear: an actor as engaged as the television during the Vietnam War, the Iranian Hostage Crisis, and the Gulf War, social media has become the center of mass media, presenting and re-presenting ideas, images, and events transpiring on local and global scales. Today, citizens of the postindustrial world—“switching center[s] for all networks of influence”—scroll through social media and see the news, whether they had originally intended to or not (Baudrillard 133). It would not be much of a surprise if a large portion of the online community read the news about Sloan’s pentagigatweet via Twitter.

One year following news of the pentagigatweet, news on the Arab Spring swept the pages of mainstream and social media. From the Arab world to the Western world, revolutionaries and activists of the Arab Spring called for political change in the rule of local governments, which included those of Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Syria to name a few.

While images of demonstrations, marches, rallies, and strikes played pivotal roles in spreading awareness of and gaining (or not gaining) support for each revolution, the effective use of social media made the Arab Spring unlike any other revolution in human history. In a sense, with the systematic use of social media to catalyze a revolutionary sentiment and to develop a nationalist consciousness in each country, the Arab Spring is the first *revolution of images*. Turning to social media as an outlet for revolutionary, anti-hegemonic discourse is not surprising, especially if we look at Twitter's mission statement: "To give everyone the power to create and share ideas and information instantly, without barriers" ("About Twitter" 2014). Certainly, this statement would just encourage most to continue their pointless babble, but for the Arab world, which has been "learning *about itself*" by means of images, histories, and information manufactured in the West," this spoke to those who knew and were reminded that their sociopolitical system was nowhere near democratic (*Covering Islam* 56). To show the world that they too believe in sharing ideas without barriers, that they are not what mainstream media made them out to be, local activists in the Arab Spring began writing stories on Facebook and uploading images on Twitter as their form of civil resistance against local oppressions and global re-presentations of Middle Eastern societies.

Despite the fact that social media has played such a momentous role in fueling the Arab Spring, no study has attempted to place social media within postcolonial discourses, which is likely due to the recency of these events and the lack of scholarship on the cultural influence of social media. Relying primarily on Edward Said's *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (1981, 1997), Melanie McAlister's *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and the U.S. Interest in the Middle East, 1945-2000* (2001), Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* (1961), and Slavoj Žižek's recent commentary on the Syrian

Revolution, my goal in this paper is to start the process of analyzing and situating the mechanisms of social media within the discourses of postcolonial studies. Furthermore, I have chosen the Syrian Revolution as my subject of analysis for a number of reasons: (1) from the beginning of the Syrian Revolution to today, social media has been utilized by activists inside and outside of Syria, (2) the Syrian Revolution has been made so noticeable as a result of the mass genocide and exodus caused by state-terrorism and civil war, (3) and the sudden presence of the terrorist organization the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS/ISIL/IS) has reinvigorated Manichean dialogues of “Islam versus non-Islam,” “East versus West,” “civilization versus barbarianism,” and so on. The first section of this paper functions as a theoretical basis of how social media has shaped revolutionary subjects and subjectivities. Hence, the second section shows how these Syrian subjects utilize social media as the space for their revolution of images within the postcolonial context. As a result of historical circumstances, the final section will turn to the abrupt manifestation of ISIS and their war of images and explore the implications of their presence in Syria and, more importantly for this analysis, their re-presentations in mainstream media that have increasingly overshadowed the revolutionary cause. To quickly note, my use of labels throughout this paper is in no way an attempt to reduce the variety and complexity of human interests and experiences in times of revolution. As Said suggests, we must look at labels as having an identifying function and a function that produces much more complex meanings (*Covering Islam* 10). The different coalitions of revolutionary fighters in Syria (labeled by Western media as either “moderate” or “al-Qaida-linked”) and the doublespeak acronyms for the Islamic State (ISIS, ISIL, and IS) attest to this.

## Revolutionary Subjects and Subjectivities Online

Social media is one of the resources I depend on daily. How and why I use different social media for respective purposes not only reflects my interests and who I am to friends and strangers, but also shapes and reshapes my subjectivity through practice, re-presentation, posts, and reposts—in short, (com)posts. My use of the term (com)post is intended to reflect the nature of post-criticism as Gregory Ulmer defines it: “the saprophyte, [...] feeding off the decay of tradition” (106). In the context of social media, new posts on my page live off of old posts, etc. Moreover, through social media, the meaning of my identity has become “a message to be encoded and decoded,” but what I encode as my self is never exactly decoded as the same self I had previously encoded—so I encode more (Hayles 79). On the other side of the transference, the way the receiver decodes my self seems nothing beyond a reflection of the viewer’s self in terms of what I originally encoded. To use Said’s phrase, social media are online “communities of interpretation” where people are “creating and revealing themselves and their interpretations as a very central feature of their existence” (Said 45). Although Said coined this expression to show how identity formation and knowledge production have been constructed through information provided by the media, the application of the term today can be quite useful. (Com)posts on social media are nothing more than diverse forms of “received interpretations” that provide the subjects with the terms of making meaning for themselves and their online communities (Said 46). Therefore, if social media is constituted by the technologies of television, radio, newspaper, film, mass communication, and more, then it would seem social media is the “cultural apparatus” *par excellence*, providing the subjects of communication with the “communal core of interpretation” (Said 47). Undoubtedly, there are varieties and differences in what is (com)posted, as there are varieties and differences within mainstream media, but there



remains certain rules, conventions, and images that shape the (com)posted material. Controlled by capitalist dynamics on every level, social media allows subjects, like myself, to construct and (com)post their selves and their interests through these very dynamics.

One of the major paradoxes regarding social media is the perception that one is free to share information to the world without any restrictions. If this were true, Twitter would not have a limit of 140 characters for each (com)post. Like culture, language, and nature, different types of social media are dictated by rules and understood through conventions that have been fashioned and passed down by other people. As Jean-François Lyotard predicted, electronic databanks and communication technologies will be “‘nature’ for postmodern man” (51). Nevertheless, as nature has shown us (rather, as we have shown nature), rules and conventions can be followed and challenged in the process of liberating the potentiality to create ostensibly new ideas and materials that may affect the surrounding environment for better or worse. In the time that McAlister wrote *Epic Encounters*, it was clear to Americans and much of the Western world that “[p]articipation in watching and shopping did not *reflect* experience, it *was* the experience” (241). Prior to social media, news on television reported the facts of the world as they were happening, while individual experiences were shared from person to person on a local scale. Social media has begun liberating the popular narrative from the re-presentation of images and stories that have become fixed, canonical, and binding. Watching television involves nothing beyond watching what everyone else is given to see; (com)posting on social media has involved the exhibition of local experiences, as well as the re-presentation of mainstream narratives. The liberating potential comes from this divide. While there exists respective rules for each site of social media, (com)posting stories and images that question and challenge the mainstream narratives is the first step to liberating the social consciousness and modifying the “communal

core of interpretations” (*Covering Islam* 47). In his essay “Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies” (1982), Said listed two tasks that must be undertaken in order to challenge and claim the discourse and vision fabricated by “a tiny handful of large and powerful oligarchies:” (1) “use the visual faculty [...] to restore the nonsequential energy of lived historical memory and subjectivity as fundamental components of meaning in representation” and (2) open “the culture to experiences of the Other which have remained ‘outside’” (157, 158). For once, the subaltern can speak (or tweet) to outside communities through the digital face of the world.

Initiating positive social and political progress involves a number of complex factors under unexpected historical conditions. Social media has become one of these factors in time. Increasingly, the words “politics” and “social media” are being uttered within different types of discussions. As Gary Chapman notes, technologies like social media are not neutral, but possess “political characters” that are shaped by its users (318). By demystifying the neutrality of social media, Chapman believes this is the first step to “reasserting our aspirations for a better future, organizing the political power necessary for implementation of those values, and then reconfiguring technology to reflect our aspirations” (318). Today, we see these processes taking place in various forms in both the East and the West. In the Arab Spring, activists planned and organized rallies and marches that were sporadically printed on headlines and incessantly uploaded on social media. In America, since the end of 2014, there has been a similar process, as Black Lives Matter activists fighting racial and social injustice have marched the streets in protest against the number of police officers who have killed African-Americans with impunity. What follows on social media is the development of the social consciousness regarding the particular sociopolitical revolt. No longer the television retelling the same story with different characters, users of social media are (com)posting their own images, ideas, experiences, and

responses that support, challenge, shape, and reshape the canonical illustrations of mass media superimposed on current events. As a result of this instantaneous flow of communication, the world's information is no longer controlled by the handful of oligarchs; instead, individual subjects online are shaping and providing the knowledge that will circulate through the networks of interpretation. The same technologies that have had such an impact on the sciences are now in the hands of the public who continue to revolutionize the way events, images, and individuals are projected to others. With social media replacing the supremacy of mass media, the masses now have an explicit role in developing the cultural apparatus. No longer shall mainstream media position itself "as the voice or [...] conscience of the People" (Hardt, Negri 311). For now, social media is the means by which the people can speak for themselves.

Because social media—like any other medium of discourse—has the ability to (re)produce knowledge and manipulate desire, there is reason to be concerned with its future form of disciplinization. In Foucauldian terms, the (com)posts on social media can be viewed as "a new regime of discourses," where different types of individuals speak on different matters from different points of view in order to obtain different results (*History of Sexuality* 27). In other words, sites of social media radiate discourses so that people become more aware of certain topics over others. Along with the body and word of the individual, accounts on social media have become objects of knowledge. Soon enough, the administrators, funders, programmers, and other professionals of social media websites will more heavily depend on the way people use social media in the process of shaping systems of social, political, and economic control. Like the body itself, the body of social media will fall in "the grip of very strict powers" imposing constraints, prohibitions, and obligations on its users (*Discipline and Punish* 136). Social media has been transforming into a mechanism for training citizens on what they should and should not

publically say, do, see, or know online. This machinery of control thus functions as a database of digital conduct where the website is the examination, the users provide the data for analysis, and the professionals police the content through algorithms and individual reports. For example, the Egyptian government has been known for monitoring the Internet activity on websites like gayegypt.com in order to impede gay Egyptian men from identifying their same-sex sexual practices with “the Western identity of gayness and the publicness that these gay-identified men seek” (Massad 382). In blaming this “deviance” on the new Western imposition, the Egyptian government is condemning and pursuing those who openly identify as “gay” through social and public activities that have become accepted in Western societies and online communities. Ironically, it seems the United States Department of Defense (DoD) has learned from the revolutions and the totalitarian surveillance societies in the Middle East. The DoD’s multi-million dollar “Minerva Research Initiative” examines the (com)posts on social media networks in order “to identify individuals mobilized in a social contagion and when they become mobilized” (Ahmed 2014). Increasingly, the sense of negative liberty will fade in relation to the practice of (com)posting on social media; over time, the utilization of social media ought to be mutually perceived as a positive liberty that has the potential to challenge the rules and conventions of the systems of social control.

### **(Com)posting and Visualizing the Syrian Revolution on Social Media**

If it were not for social media, the Syrian Revolution would have had the same fate, for better or worse, as what is now known as the 1982 Hama Massacre. Because the media in Syria at that time was strictly controlled by the Baath party regime, information about the events—besides the details shared in private circles—naturally followed the mainstream narrative: the authoritarian president of Syria, Hafez al-Assad, was saving the fate of Syria by exterminating

the plague of the Islamic Brotherhood. It is not surprising that media outlets around the world readily accepted this story, since Islamic terrorism was on the verge of replacing Communism as *the* international threat. As President Reagan declared in his inaugural address in January 1981, “‘terrorism’ would replace ‘human rights’ as [America’s] primary foreign policy concern” (McAlister 199). Hafez al-Assad used the televised narrative to authorize the violent suppression of what Syrians today would refer to as a social rebellion that was utterly stamped and silenced from history. We know very little about this episode beyond speculation and myth, and Said admits to this in his critique of the fear mongering narrative of “‘the return to Islam’” (*Covering Islam* 65). The Muslim Brotherhood, according to Said, is one of the many “political actualities” that informed and corresponded with Western media’s reports on the threat of Islam; in turn, the truth of the matter has been buried under two layers of revolutionary rubble (65). Because international information about the outside world was configured and produced by mainstream media, the only narrative of the Hama Massacre that resonates with today’s viewers is that tens of thousands of Syrians died as a result of the Muslim Brotherhood. Unfortunately, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o lamented the neglected incidents of the tortures at Hola, “[t]here were many horrors whose knowledge never went beyond the location of their commission” (17). However, a careful juxtaposition of those circumstances with today’s social activity could uncover a lost history of sociopolitical revolution.

Today, the Syrian government, ruled by Hafez al-Assad’s son, Bashar al-Assad, continues the tradition of labeling dissidents as Islamic fundamentalists or terrorists (Erich 72). In short, the Syrian Revolution sparked as a result of the arresting and torturing of 15 Syrian boys between the ages of 10 and 15 who, on March 6, 2011, spray-painted messages calling for the fall of Bashar al-Assad’s regime: “‘As-Shaab / Yoreed / Eskaat el nizam!’: ‘The people /

want / to topple the regime!’” (“How Schoolboys Began the Syrian Revolution” 2011). While older generations of Syrians had grown accustomed to the totalitarian state, the new generation saw the stories of their relatives manifesting before their eyes. With the flames of the Arab Spring already spread into Syria, the “spectacular measures” taken by the authorities, as Fanon wrote on the Algerian Revolution, did “not make the people draw back” (71). Aware of the representations of the Western press in the twenty-first century, thousands of Syrians took to the streets with banners and smart phones to call for the release of the boys, to engage in non-violent protests, and to show the world what they felt had to be seen. On that Friday, regime forces killed nearly 100 protestors across the country. The next day, at least nine were killed at the funerals for those who were gunned down on Friday. With the Daraa Massacre the following Monday, it seemed Bashar al-Assad wanted the Syrians to take up arms—and that is exactly what he intended. Assad learned from his father and the Western press that he could justify his actions if the propagandistic image of gun-wielding Arabs were to characterize the protesters (predominately Sunni Muslims), which would contaminate the revolution with the re-presented image of the media’s trope of militarized Sunni Muslims. As the brutality of the regime forces persisted, the protesters eventually took up arms, calling for national freedom.

A comparison between the Syrian Revolution and Fanon’s statement on the role of Western imperialism during the process of decolonization may shed light on the complexity of the West’s role in the Syrian Revolution. According to Fanon, “[b]oth capitalism and imperialism are convinced that the struggle against racialism and the movements toward national freedom are purely and simply directed by remote control, fomented from the outside” (80). In the case of the nascent stages of the Syrian Revolution, primarily Turkey and Saudi Arabia supported the struggle toward national freedom, but the resources they provided the Syrians were

not enough to turn the tables, since Bashar al-Assad's regime was backed by Russia, Iran, and China. The fomenting of mass media attempted to eclipse the images surfacing on social media, with intellectual commentators, like Slavoj Žižek, reductively stating—before ISIS ever manifested—that the Syrian Revolution was “drowned in the mess of fundamentalist groups” (“Syria Is a Pseudo-struggle” 2013). It is no wonder that Western heads of imperialism have been convinced that revolutionary struggles are controlled from the outside, since that is precisely what they have been attempting to do by re-presenting the Arab world in their own interests. Because the rebellious Syrians have been well aware of this, they have turned to the West, (com)posting images and videos on various social media platforms to spread global awareness and request for international support. For Žižek to reduce the Syrian Revolution to the idea of “a pseudo-struggle” is to ignore and silence the Syrians' call for Western aid. However, if Western powers did oblige by providing Syrians with adequate support to liberate Syria from the Baath party regime, then the imperial narrative would be contested: this movement toward national freedom *would not* be “purely and simply directed by remote control” (80). For this reason, among many others, the local images, videos, and stories shared on social media were repetitively questioned by mainstream media for their validity and were replaced by the counter-narrative, or mainstream narrative, that the aid to Syrian revolutionaries would end up in the hands of the enemy of the globe: the violent Islamic fundamentalists who seek to destroy the West.

If “representation of the event *was* the event,” then foreign audiences watching the Syrian Revolution unfold have been faced with deciding which representation they should believe to be the true event (McAlister 241). On the one hand, social media have been the spaces for (com)posting unverifiable images taken by individual Syrians within Syria; mainstream media,

on the other hand, has been taking events and (com)posts from Syria, questioning them, and then reformulating them into the familiar narrative that best fits the publishers' interests. Though the (com)posts on social media rarely parallel with the narratives told by mainstream media, we should read both narratives for what they are and where they come from. For instance, images of the revolutionary banners produced in the Idleb countryside, which have infiltrated the pages of mainstream media, are written in Arabic and English in order to reach local and Western audiences in the aim to skewer Bashar al-Assad and, now, ISIS (see Figure 1). Raed Fares and Ahmad Jalal are the local Syrians behind these productions, creating banners, images, and videos that are soon (com)posted on Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr to name a few (Karam 2014). What Said referred to as the "rhetoric of power" is now being utilized in Idleb and across Syria to produce, not "an illusion of benevolence," but an image of anti-despotism and anti-imperialism within the grassroots of the revolutionary setting (*Culture and Imperialism* xvii). By utilizing the power of representation through social media, the online Syrian activist has "discover[ed] reality and transform[ed] it into the pattern of his customs, [...] and into his plan for freedom" (Fanon 58). Furthermore, he has encouraged and allowed the global audience to go "beyond what is commonly available to newsmen and newswomen" working outside of the society they are covering (*Covering Islam* 107).

However, to reestablish political interests within the region, mainstream media has worked to negate the revolution in the same way that the Iranian Revolution (or Islamic Revolution) had been dismissed by America in 1979 (*Covering Islam* 101).





Figure 1. Following the news of actor Robin William's death, the artists and activists from Idlib, Syria created and (com)posted a banner displaying one of William's lines during his role as the Genie in Disney's *Aladdin* (1992). Banner and photo by the activists of *Occupied Liberated Kafranbel*.

The severe ambiguity in most reports from mainstream media outlets is a reflection of how the "oligarchs" want mass audiences to visualize the Syrian Revolution: it is a terribly ambiguous international crisis. While this is true, the reports do not address the social, political, or economic realities inside and outside of the borders of Syria. After drowning the audience in the redundant catalogue of information, the journalist's report quickly turns to the anxiety that if the West were

to supply the Syrian revolutionaries with weapons, then they would inevitably fall in the hands of radical Muslims. Rather than analyze or report the sociopolitical circumstances being played out in the region, these articles rehash the same argument for why the West should not support the revolution: as Žižek put it, there is no “strong radical-emancipatory opposition” that the West can trust (“Syria” 2013). So the question arises, why does the West not help this opposition become strong enough to win the revolution? Coming full circle, it is because of radical Islam, which has become the canonized symbol of the Middle East for Western audiences in the past decades. Because of the threat of Islam, we can assume mainstream media cannot afford to spend time on understanding what the term “moderate rebels” entails and must focus that attention on the principal threats and foreign interests of the West. It is up to the viewer to differentiate between the imperialistic narrative and the truth of the matter. An online search followed by swift scrolls through different pages of social media will show who these “moderates” are: the Idleb community speaking to the world, the White Helmets digging through blocks of concrete, musicians like LaTlateh recording and producing politically-charged lyrics, reporters like James Foley sacrificing their lives, the Syrians recording barrel bombs falling from the sky. . .

### **The Virtual Reality of ISIS/ISIL/IS**

In a response to the 9/11 attacks, Žižek reflected on the cognitive effect of viewing the catastrophic images on television, re-presenting the “ruin of all space, shattered glass and toppling masonry,” as James Joyce illustrated nearly a century before in *Ulysses* (1922) (22). In the same way that Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom are psychosomatically disrupted by this fantastic image of destruction, viewers re-viewing the collapse of the Twin Towers were experiencing what Žižek had expressed: “It is not that reality entered our image; the image entered and shattered our reality” (“Welcome to the Desert of the Real” 386). Not referring to

Joyce, Žižek asked, where did we already see the same thing over and over again? In short, the amalgamation of re-presentations shaped and projected by the cultural apparatus. While most Americans, hopefully, learned that such events should happen in neither America nor anywhere else in the world, the propaganda of mainstream media echoed the Bush administration's declaration of the Global War on Terrorism. As a result, even the traditional Left in America and Europe has come to understand 9/11 (and its consequences) "as a battle between fundamentalism and democracy," or as Žižek defined it as active nihilists (Islamic radicals) versus passive nihilists (Western consumerists) ("Welcome" 387). While Žižek's interpretation is quite provocative, Spivak's commentary on the consequences of 9/11 center on its postcolonial effects. She has claimed that cities and countries, following the historical moment of 9/11, are being "transformed from space to data" (74). As social media has shown us, there is no denying this fact. Moreover, it is the "multitude" in social media who possess the potential in "confronting Empire head-on like the net(work) that brought down Agamemnon" (Spivak 75). Even Žižek admitted that this "vast network of social units [...] is the principal gain of the Arab Spring" ("Syria is a Pseudo-struggle" 2013). Unfortunately, Žižek went nowhere beyond analyzing this achievement so that he could return to the mainstream narrative and conclude that the Syrian Revolution is bound to fail because of the "strong presence of al-Qaida in the shadows" ("Syria" 2013).

Fostered in the prisons of Syria and Iraq, ISIS surfaced on the pages of mainstream media at the close of 2013. No longer the story of the fight to liberate Syria, the Syrian Revolution was further obscured by the re-presentation of ISIS on mainstream media. The very acronym "ISIL" ("Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant," which Obama has been using to denominate the group) is an attempt to remove Syria from the picture. As we have seen through 9/11, the Iranian

Hostage Crisis, and the Munich massacre during the 1972 Olympics, reports on terrorist activities have given those activities their desired legitimacy (McAlister 221). Richard Jackson's definition of the term "terrorism" is instrumental in analyzing the causes of terrorism beyond the narrative of radical Islamic fundamentalism: "Terrorism is violence or its threat intended as a symbolically communicative act in which direct victims of the action are instrumentalized as a means of creating a psychological effect of intimidation and fear in a target audience for a political objective" (Sinclair, Antonius 15). Hence, the purposes of terrorist acts are not the acts themselves, but are a means of achieving some other end, which is to manipulate the behavior of their target audience. By broadcasting and re-presenting the images of ISIS, mainstream media is fulfilling the aims of ISIS: to anger, disgust, scare, and confuse Western audiences, which in turn legitimizes terrorist activities through their very re-presentation in mainstream media. Audiences know to worry about ISIS because they have been told to do so by the "experts." However, instead of believing in the next war on the basis of "*essential values of justice*" (the antithesis of Islamic fundamentalism), viewers must interpret these reports in the frame of Jackson's definition of terrorism (Hardt, Negri 18). By allowing the re-presentations of ISIS to overshadow the lived experience of individuals suffering in the region, there can be no progress towards understanding the causes of ISIS's manifestation: the destabilization of the region due to the lack of international support for the Syrian Revolution, not to mention the aftermath of imperialist intervention in Iraq.



Figure 2. Moments before he beheads U.S. journalist James Foley, “Jihadi John” warns Obama against plotting against ISIS, or else he will take the lives of more Americans. Still image from video uploaded on YouTube. Courtesy of *New York Daily News*.

To come closer to an understanding of the crisis in Syria and Iraq, images like that of “Jihadi John” (see Figure 2) must be read through the history of Western interests and military interventions in the Middle East and in conjunction with the images and videos uploaded online by locals experiencing the event being visualized. It is not surprising that Western newspapers eagerly report beheadings in the Middle East, but we cannot allow the trope of decollation and radicalized Islam to evacuate history from lived experiences and geopolitical networks by reducing historical events to a narrative that separates Islam from the West, the civilized from the barbarians (Janes 10).

While the American imperium has occupied the center stage in world politics, the Arab Muslim and his/her world have been viewed as the major concern of the international community. With American media outlets using the re-presentations of ISIS to overshadow the images and stories shared by locals in Syria, the sociopolitical milieu of Syria is being reduced to the problem of radicalized Islam. As the Syrian revolutionaries continue to contend, ISIS did not materialize from ideologies of Islam, but was the result of regional conflict and geopolitical economies. In addition, rather than the ideologies of Islam, it was individual terrorists who disregarded international law by claiming control of lands with borders nearly as volatile as they had been after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. If we follow Néstor García Conclini's assertion and view borders "as 'laboratories of the global,'" we can see how the formation of ISIS across the borders of Syria and Iraq is a challenge against the capitalist way of being "by contesting the 'pattern of the world' that establishes the conditions for capital's flourish and regular crises" (Mezzadra, Neilson 62, 59). On one hand, the international community continues to recognize the border between the modern states of Iraq and Syria; on the other hand, members of ISIS are the only individuals who have vocalized their disregard for the Iraq-Syria border. Collaborative research on this contested borderland region will show how processes of capitalist creation and destruction heavily depend on the features of the processes of remaking and re-marking nation-state borders. Knowledge of who and what is percolating through these porous borders is necessary for visualizing the sociopolitical reality of the region, as well as for providing insight into how the current geographic destruction and reformulation of Iraq and Syria will shape the way these borders are (re)drawn in the years to come. The same can be said regarding the information that penetrates borders through online activity on social media. (Com)posts on social media express the variegated knowledges that bear on particular borders being negotiated. By



tracing the way re-presentations from social and mainstream media have crossed these borders, light can be shed on the subjectivities that come into being through such processes. It is not surprising that news of America's initial airstrikes in Syria came from the live-tweets of an individual witnessing these strikes in Syria. If the Muslim Arab is the central figure of the mainstream narrative of international conflict, then online firewalls must be kept to a minimum in order to allow these subjects to represent and share their lived experiences to the global community.

Certainly, we should be ambivalent about the Western attacks against ISIS, while also veering away from the rhetoric of Islamophobia. Differentiating between the web propaganda of ISIS—which Western media continuously re-presents—and the shared experiences of Syrian locals is not difficult. It is our responsibility, I believe, to focus our attention on the lives of the Syrian revolutionaries who continue to endure, rather than prove Žižek's claim that Western civilization is "an apathetic creature [Nietzsche's Last Man] with no great passion or commitment" ("ISIS is a Disgrace to True Fundamentalism" 2014). Rather than viewing the re-presentations of ISIS and then uselessly denigrating their fundamentalist claims in the same terms as the "experts" of Islam, we must develop a more rigorous and inclusive methodology to "'problem-solving' approaches in the study of 'terrorism'" by envisioning the subject "at a human level with the purpose of [...] 'humanizing the other'" (Gunning 363, 378). It is important to remember that the members of ISIS are political subjects and not merely the embodied shades of radicalized Islam. As for the Syrian revolutionaries, they will continue to (com)post their experiences to the world (like any other Westerner on social media), and it is up to the mass audiences to see and listen to what the Syrians have to say about themselves and what they refer to as their home. It is possible that by not releasing images of Osama bin Laden's

body, Obama curtailed the viral “war of images” during the Iraq War (Nicholas Mirzoeff 113). Nevertheless, this does not nullify the need for activity in visualizing the events unfolding in Syria through the Syrians’ revolution of images. What Spivak wanted to see was a “radical anticolonial hybrid space in the metropolis for the public sphere” (81). Today, that space is the cyberscape of social media and it ought to remain that way. For this reason, I agree with Alan Lui’s push for collaboration between the digital humanists and cultural critics—particularly postcolonial scholars—in addressing the concerns of individuals who are in social, economic, and political need (502). This type of “new interpretive and scholarly enterprise” that Said envisioned can work to “reduce the effects of imperialist shackles on thought and human relations” (*Orientalism* 352). Before the data is lost, as we have realized by the history of the Hama Massacre, activists, scholars, writers, and the like must collaborate with the goal of visualizing and sharing these nonsequential experiences of reality.

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**Denijal Jegić:**

**Transnational Subalternity and Black-  
Palestinian Poetics of Solidarity**

**Postcolonial Interventions: An Interdisciplinary  
Journal of Postcolonial Studies**

**ABSTRACT:**

Following a recent surge in state violence experienced by African-Americans and Palestinians, both groups have repeatedly expressed their solidarity with each other, informed by the analogy of their subjugation and by the connectivity of the hegemonic systems that produce their respective subalternity. Transcending national categories, Black and Palestinian activists are currently engaging in creative expressions of solidarity and resistance from US-American to Palestinian and Israeli localities. African-Americans and Palestinians often appear to be 'othered' targets of racist politics that deem their marginalized communities as faceless, situating them at the antipode of the white, Western self. As inadequately visible subalterns in (post)colonial public spheres, their plight often remains insufficiently acknowledged. Manifestations of solidarity within a broader decolonial aesthetics bear the potential to both reveal human rights violations and to formulate a transnational resistance. The aim of this research is to examine current and historic statements of solidarity and to analyze the creation of a transnational imagined community as a result of mutual Black-Palestinian re-mappings of colonial racism. The use of a transmedia activism - as manifested in social media, open letters, flashmobs, and performances - as a mean of mutual recognition and counter-narration directly attacks the ethnocentric empire, when activists reveal myths and ideologies by taking their personal state-sponsored struggle out of its national and ethnic context in order to compare it to other spaces of subjugation.

**Keywords:** *African-American; Palestinian; media; subalternity; transnational*

## Introduction

American poet June Jordan once wrote, "I was born a black woman and now, I am become a Palestinian," ("Moving Towards Home") implying commonalities in the experience of subalternity among African Americans and Palestinians, which are correspondingly vocalized in Palestinian American poet Suheir Hammad's work *Born Palestinian Born Black*. Hammad feels "validated" by the the "transformation ... rebirth, ... understanding of humanity" (13) that she encounters in Jordan's literature. Adverse junctures of racialized subalternity induce both authors to transcend national or racial limitations of identity and to situate themselves within a more extensive category of humanity. The potential of altering one's national identity stems from transnational linkings of subalternity. As both authors' biographic narrations of oppression exceed geographic, historical, and political classifications, their de-colonial aesthetics, i.e. efforts at expressing (post-)colonial anxiety and countering colonialism, suggest a transnational connection of oppressed people(s).

The simultaneous occurrence of state violence against Blacks and Palestinians in the US and Israel/Palestine in the summer of 2014 and both minority groups' subsequent heightened transmedia exchange led to a reaffirmation of the solidarity between Blacks and Palestinians, based on a perceived similarity of their respective subalternity, which this article seeks to further explicate. This paper will read historic and contemporary Black declarations of solidarity with the Palestinian people as de-colonial aesthetics. Discussing the creation of counter-imaginings through the cultural politics of empathy, this paper claims that continuous political events and iniquitous socio-economic conditions accentuate the apprehension of the Palestinian marginalization, exclusion, and removal

among African American activists. It aims at displaying how activism offers extraterritorial spaces of dialogue where subaltern voices are finally received.

### **From Ferguson to Nazareth : A Transnational Solidarity**

Activists from Dream Defenders and the Black Lives Matter movement organized a creative protest in Nazareth in 2015, proclaiming Black solidarity with Palestine and promoting participation in the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel. Engaging in spoken, sung, and rapped verses of poetic solidarity, the activists exclaimed, "Palestine to Ferguson, end the occupations! Ferguson to Palestine, we fight to free our nations!" (Dream Defenders, *Solidarity*) Their transmedia manifestation moves from recitation of poetic verses to communal chanting, singing, and dancing, culminating in the performance of collective physical embracing, accompanied by drum acoustics. Collectively affirming "they know that we will win," the encouragement develops into a group hug, at the center of which the participants bilingually voice "free Palestine" in Arabic and "Black lives matter" in English (ibid.).

The manifestation in Nazareth protests the disavowal of basic human rights for Palestinians, while suggesting a harmonious parallel between the hegemony's production of subalternity within both Palestinian and Black American populations. The material or prosthetic witnessing of subaltern suffering seems to re-affirm the awareness of one's own subalternity. Immanuel Kant's discussion on *Perpetual Peace* within the frames of cosmopolitanism discerns a transnationalization in the perception of suffering, advocating the desirability of "a law of world citizenship" since "the narrower or wider community of the peoples of the earth has developed so far that a violation of rights in one place is felt throughout the world" ("Perpetual Peace", Mount Holyoke College). Contemporary



African-American and Palestinian expressions of mutual solidarity are informed by both groups' reciprocal awareness of subalternity as they thoroughly illustrate crucial empathy towards the other's subjugation. Protesting various realizations of state violence, Black solidarity with Palestine reveals an always already present distance of being Black and being Palestinian from the mainstream public sphere, and goes beyond merely suggesting spaces of comparison.

Contemporary affirmations of solidarity between the two minorities experienced a revival during and after the summer of 2014, following US and Israeli enunciations of hegemony, in which both the United States and Palestine became localities of repressive state violence. Israel's war against Gaza and the aggregation of police violence against black individuals in the US - metonymically often represented by the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson and triggered by the acquittal of white police officer George Zimmerman in 2013 - alluded to a shared structure of subalternity that became visible in African American articulations of solidarity with Palestine.

### **Palestinian Subalternity**

Deprecated by Israel's colonization, the Palestinians' existence as a nation faces ubiquitous obstacles. Palestinians - most of whom are stateless refugees - appear suspect "almost by definition" (Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity* 5) in their restricted ability to cross international borders, serving as "a source of anxiety to governments and their security authorities" (ibid. 4). Palestinians remain colonial subjects to a European-styled white settler-colonial project; or, as Masalha implies, Palestinians in Israel and occupied Palestine are excluded by an ethnocratic elite democracy (*The Palestine Nakba* 45). Accordingly, being Palestinian becomes non-belonging.

In Gaza in particular, and in Palestine in general, the encounter between colonized subjects and Western hegemony is observable in structural state violence. Othered at least since the Balfour Declaration of 1917, and dispossessed since the Nakba of 1948, the experience of ethnic cleansing has historically constituted the very existence of the Palestinian people (cf. Pappé; cf. Palumbo). The Nakba (Arabic for 'catastrophe') refers to the events commencing around 1948, when between 750,000 and 1 million Palestinians were expelled by Zionist - and later Israeli - military forces, which, as Chomsky claims, "carried out extensive terror against Arab civilians," (28) and perpetuated a systematic ethnic cleansing of Palestine (cf. Pappé). Gershon Shafir characterizes the early Zionist colonization in Palestine as similar to European colonialism, arguing that it "established an economy based on white labour which together with the forced removal or the destruction of the native population allowed the settlers to regain the sense of cultural and ethnic homogeneity that is identified with a European concept of nationality." (84). The propagation of Palestine as a "land without people for a people without land" (Masalha, *Politics of Denial* 12), accompanied by a dehumanization of the native population, helped rhetorically legitimize the colonization. Judith Butler claims that Israel's sovereignty depends upon "permanent strategies of expulsion and containment" that define its colonial relation to the Palestinians (211).

The absence of the Nakba from Western historiography further perpetuates the marginalization of the Palestinian people. As mainstream narratives tend to ignore the disparity in power relations between the colonized Palestinians and the colonizing Israeli state apparatus, discourses on Palestine/Israel remain informed by a staunch Orientalism, in which "[t]errorism is invariably on the Palestinian, defence on the Israeli, side of the moral ledger," (Said, "Last Taboo" 46) while "[t]he general picture is that Israel is so

surrounded by rock-throwing barbarians that even the missiles, tanks and helicopter gunships used to 'defend' Israelis from them are warding off what is essentially an invasive force" (ibid. 45). Thus, Israel's access to political, ideological, and historiographic hegemony helps maintain Palestinian subalternity. Consequently, Palestinianness can be defined by the omnipresent and continuous character of the Nakba that reiteratively defines the realities Palestinian people inhabit in the present. As Rosemary Sayigh argues, "the suffering caused by the Nakba has to be understood in terms of a *continuing* state of rightlessness, with all the varieties of abuse and violence that rightlessness exposes people to" (56, emphasis in the original).

Amnesty International's assessment of the situation in Israel/Palestine outlines the continuity of the Nakba:

Israeli forces committed war crimes and human rights violations during a 50-day military offensive in the Gaza Strip that killed over 1,500 civilians, including 539 children, wounded thousands more civilians, and caused massive civilian displacement and destruction of property and vital services. Israel maintained its air, sea and land blockade of Gaza, imposing collective punishment on its approximately 1.8 million inhabitants and stoking the humanitarian crisis. In the West Bank, Israeli forces carried out unlawful killings of Palestinian protesters, including children, and maintained an array of oppressive restrictions on Palestinians' freedom of movement while continuing to promote illegal settlements and allow Israeli settlers to attack Palestinians and destroy their property with near total impunity. Israeli forces detained thousands of Palestinians, some of whom reported being tortured, and held around 500 administrative detainees without trial. ... Israeli forces

destroyed thousands of civilian homes and internally displaced around 110,000 Palestinians, as well as severing power generation and water supplies, and damaging other civil infrastructure ("Amnesty International Report 2014/15. Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories").

The plight in Palestine/Israel suggests that Palestinian people can be killed with impunity. Within clearly defined power relations, the Israeli state apparatus is exploiting the Palestinian subaltern for a continuous (re-)production of the Nakba. According to Max Blumenthal, the 2014 developments in Palestine/Israel were accompanied by several open calls by politicians, university professors, and military personnel for a genocide of the Palestinian people (5-13). Negative visibility for Palestinians and the desire for forced disappearance of the Palestinian body appear foundational to Israeli existence.

### **The Hashtag Solidarity**

The Palestinian subaltern narrative gained significant attention from African American activists who established a comparison between Ferguson and Gaza as localities of violence in 2014. The magnitude of both the events in Gaza and in Ferguson gained global attention primarily through social media, which helped spread personal narratives and audio-visual material transnationally. Omitted in Western media, Palestinians seized Twitter and Facebook to disclose their political realities. The function of hashtags on Twitter, i.e. the hyper-linking of a personal message to a key word, enabled an agile exchange between protesters in US localities like Ferguson and individuals from Palestine. One tweet directed from #Ferguson to #Gaza exclaimed, "We are being occupied" (Glawe). Another tweet asked, "[w]ill we rise up like the people of Gaza?" (Nazzal).

Simultaneously, a Palestinian hashtagged #Ferguson with a picture of an individual holding a billboard which declares that "[t]he Palestinian people know what it means to be shot while unarmed because of your ethnicity" (Nazza).

The solidarity between African American and Palestinian individuals developed into a dialogue of ideas on how to protect oneself from the police state. One individual from the West Bank advised African American activists to "[not] keep much distance from the police, if you're close to them they can't tear gas," connecting this statement with a hashtag "to #Ferguson from #Palestine" (Abu Khalil). Another tweet recommended that protesters in Ferguson "always make sure to run against the wind/ to keep calm when you're teargassed, the pain will pass, don't rub your eyes!" hashtagging "#Ferguson Solidarity" (Barghouti). Breaking offline limitations of mobility and access to information, social media makes visible the alliance of two marginalized minorities who perform an alternative movement as they remain subjugated through geo-political reality and excluded from political participation.

### **African American Subalternity**

The identification of African Americans with the Palestinian plight points to structures of vulnerability in the US. While this article does not intend to draw a comparative human rights analysis, it is nevertheless inevitable to link the deficits of human rights experienced by both populations and to claim that just like the Palestinian body, the African American body suffers from state violence.

Amnesty International indicates a worsening of human rights conditions in the US, claiming that in 2014, at least 35 people died from consequences of police violence ("Amnesty International Report 2014/15. United States of America"), whereas other

sources ("Killed By Police") document the killing of over 1,100 individuals by US law enforcement officers. In the aftermath of the shooting of Michael Brown and the subsequent emergence of protests in Ferguson, "the use of heavy-duty riot gear and military-grade weapons and equipment to police the demonstrations served to intimidate protesters who were exercising their right to peaceful assembly while the use of rubber bullets, tear gas and other aggressive dispersal tactics was not warranted." Outlining the wave of police violence against African Americans, Amnesty International proclaims the "need for a review of standards on the use of force in the USA" ("Amnesty International Report 2014/15. United States of America").

Michelle Alexander argues that the Jim Crow laws enforcing racial segregation in the southern US have been replaced by the systematic mass incarceration of Black populations in the US as a "legalized discrimination" (1) and system of control that "permanently locks a huge percentage of the African-American community out of the mainstream society and economy". Alexander elaborates that while the current "system of racialized social control" purports to be colorblind, it operates "as a tightly networked system of laws, policies, customs, and institutions that operate collectively to ensure the subordinate status of a group defined largely by race," and produces, as Alexander conceptualizes it, an "undercaste" for those permanently "barred by law and custom from mainstream society" (13).

Although there might be structural differences in the dimensions of subjugation experienced by African Americans and Palestinians (such as the access to de jure citizenship and basic rights), both groups suffer from inequality and systematic discrimination, while they continue to be victims of state violence that is crucially noticeable in socio-economic negligence, high incarceration, and systematic exclusion.

Both groups remain racialized, othered targets of racist politics that more often than not regard their existence as unwanted.

### **Statements of Solidarity**

While current post-Gaza/Ferguson expressions of social activism empathically associate both populations' sufferings, the formation of an Afro-Arab political imaginary is not a recent phenomenon. The dynamic relations between African American and Palestinian activism and liberation struggles have been visible throughout the second half of the 20th century, since representatives from within the movement for black freedom in the US regularly explored the similarities of their struggle with the situation of Arabs in Palestine/Israel, providing dense support for the Palestinian liberation movement. Malcolm X, who traveled to the Middle East and met with the PLO, took a strong stance against Zionism's treatment of the Palestinians. The SNCC declared firm solidarity with Palestine following the 1967 war. Huey Newton, co-founder of the Black Panther Party, staunchly disavowed perpetual attacks of US-Israeli imperialism against Palestinians. Often, the situation in Palestine/Israel was considered a struggle against white, American imperialism.

In a key moment of transnational solidarity, African American activists published an open letter in the New York Times in 1970, articulating an intimate understanding of the Palestinian suffering: "We, the Black American signatories of this advertisement are in complete solidarity with our Palestinian brothers and sisters, who like us, are struggling for self-determination and an end to racist oppression." Positioning African Americans as subalterns, the statement opens up a comparison between struggles in the US and Palestine, crucially identifying the State of Israel as "the outpost of American imperialism in the

Middle East," and severely criticizing Zionism's "reactionary racist" ideology, Israeli settler-colonialism, and US-Israeli aid to international colonialism and imperialism. Accordingly, the statement remaps the "Palestinian revolution" onto an internationalist anti-imperialist struggle, as "part of the anti-colonial revolution" throughout third world localities, suggesting that Palestinians and Blacks partake in a wider, transborder struggle. Palestine then appears as a universal symbol of global resistance against imperialism and colonialism in general. The transnationalization of the Palestinian resistance is decisively depicted by a comparison of the exploitation experienced by African Americans, Native Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Chicanos, which "is similar to the exploitation of Palestinian Arabs and Oriental Jews" by Israel. Thereby, the statement draws attention to Israel's discrimination against Sephardim and Mizrahim Jews, whom the statement locates within its transnational imagery. The open letter concludes by expressing a capitalized exigency of counter-imperialist resistance, formulating a transnational solidarity: "We call for Afro-American Solidarity with the Palestinian people's struggle for national liberation and to regain their all of their stolen land" (Committee of Black Americans for Truth about the Middle-East, "An Appeal by Black Americans").

The statement's connection of subalternity is amplified by the disclosure of the inherent linking of the hegemonic systems that generate conditions of subalternity. The link between the two groups' suffering is mirrored in the geo-political conjunction of the US and Israel. Alex Lubin argues that Palestine has been a laboratory for the US-Israeli security industry in regards to urban combat, surveillance and partitioning. Accordingly, a transnational economy of policing and security technology has spanned wars on drugs, crime and terrorism in the post-9/11 era. Lubin claims that the US-Israeli experience in Palestine "has shaped Israel's approach to the 'problem' of Palestinians *and* the US's



approach to the 'problem' of the urban black poor" ("Disappearing Frontiers"). Consequently, both Palestinians and Black Americans appear as surplus populations that are categorically defined through their deaths.

Beyond being viewed solely as a US-proxy, Israel's strong support for the apartheid regime in South Africa played a major role in African Americans' alienation from Israel. As Robert Newby outlines, "one facet of this imperialist struggle which leads to support of the Arab cause by Black Americans is the apparent link between Israel and the Union of South Africa. Since Black Americans continue to oppose the racist regime of South Africa, any friend of South Africa is likely to be an enemy of Afro-Americans" (57). The Zionist colonial project was regularly scrutinized as an extension of US colonialism and imperialism. Weisbord and Stein argue that "African-Americans and Arabs have a natural bond in that they see White America (and its Zionist counterpart) as their common oppressor" (91).

The exploration of the authoritative US-Israeli link and its historically present analogy is constitutive of the recent "Black Solidarity Statement with Palestine" published in August 2015, in which Black activists, artists, scholars, writers, and political prisoners offer their "reaffirmed solidarity with the Palestinian struggle and commitment to the liberation of Palestine's land and people," "wholeheartedly endorse" the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement against Israel, and urge the recognition of the Palestinian struggle for liberation "as a key matter of our time" (Black Solidarity with Palestine, "2015 Statement").

The introduction to the statement frames African Americans and Palestinians - thoroughly expressed in a collective first person plural - as victims of "terror." Suggesting that the heightening of subjugation results in a strengthening of solidarity, the statement is

underlined with many different hyperlinks to research on political events and previous demonstrations of solidarity. After admonishing Israel for its 2014 war, in the light of which the signatories "remain heartbroken," and historically contextualizing the "denial of Palestinian humanity and sovereignty" with the Nakba and current legalized discrimination, the statement's discussion of occupation, refugees, and the denial of rights culminates in the visibility of "connections between the situation of Palestinians and Black people." The physical containment of both populations is highlighted when "Israel's widespread use of detention and imprisonment against Palestinians" is correlated to the mass incarceration of Black people in the US. The justification of lethal force against both groups - expressed as "us" - by soldiers, police, and courts serves as the center of a comparison which eventually materializes into a link, as the signatories "have witnessed police and soldiers from the two countries train side-by-side." The statement affirms that Israel's maltreatment of Palestinians "would be impossible without the US defending Israel" ideologically and financially (ibid.).

While emphasizing a Black-Palestinian imaginary, the statement recognizes the extension of subalternity beyond this bond. By denouncing Israel's brutal treatment of its African population, the statement calls for a unified action against anti-Blackness, white supremacy, and Zionism, and eventually encourages activists to take action through transnational conversations in a "joint struggle against capitalism, colonialism, imperialism, and the various racisms embedded in and around our societies" (ibid.).

### **Media, Hegemony, and Empire**

Protesting inadequate visibility in the mainstream public sphere, the Black Solidarity Statement with Palestine outlines that "US and Israeli officials and media criminalize our

existence, portray violence against us as 'isolated incidents,' and call our resistance 'illegitimate' or 'terrorism.' These narratives ignore decades and centuries of anti-Palestinian and anti-Black violence that have always been at the core of Israel and the US" (ibid.). The exclusion of minority groups from the ethnocentric core is often perpetuated through media representations which serve to protect and expand the ethnocentric empire. As Said showed, tactical rules in the media landscape "serve efficiently to reduce an unmanageable reality into 'news' or 'stories,'" (*Covering Islam* 49) thereby producing simplified, homogeneous concepts of complex phenomena.

A marginalization of undesired populations is aided by linguistic means which naturalize ideological myths into alleged historical facts. As "myth hides nothing," but rather functions "to distort, not to make disappear" (Barthes 121), the peculiar use of signifier and signified presents ideologies as "a kind of knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, decisions" (ibid. 117). The distortion of language through corruption of thought characterizes much of US discourse on the Middle East, evoking concepts of "terrorism" and "security" in reference to Palestine (cf. Khalidi, *Brokers of Deceit* 120). Concurrently, propaganda has created an narrative of the "gallant Zionists" who are "like us," in opposition to "a mass of undifferentiated natives with whom it was impossible for 'us' to identify" (Said, "Introduction" 5). The linguistic subjugation of Palestinians serves the perpetuation and simultaneous concealing of the Nakba.

### **Beyond Afro-Palestinian Alliances**

Current forms of social activism extend far beyond the Afro-Arab bond. 2014 saw multicultural crowds engaging in peace marches, when US localities witnessed "a spectrum of skin tone, Arabic and English accents, young and old, white youth, white

progressive Jews, Mexican-Americans and Arabs throwing their collective fist to the sky" (Powers, "The War over the War"). With its decade-long continuity and increasing visibility, the Palestinian plight is supported not just by African American activists. The connectivity of the struggles of Indigenous Americans and Palestinians with settler-colonialism was foundational to the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association's (NAISA) academic boycott of Israel which symbolized a resistance to "the colonization and domination of Indigenous lands via settler state structures throughout the world" ("Declaration of Support"). As Kēhaulani Kauanui argues, the links between settler colonialism in the US and Israel are "not merely analogous," but rather "shaped from many of the same material and symbolic forces." Hence, a US condemnation of Israel would call into question the entire US American project" ("Substantive Erasures").

Furthermore, the Black-Palestinian resistance is increasingly assisted by many Jewish American organizations, such as Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), which "supports peace activists in Palestine and Israel, and works in broad coalition with other Jewish, Arab American, faith-based, peace and social justice organizations" ("Mission Statement"), and thus opposes Israel's hegemonic narrative. While the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) actively seeks to silence critics of Israel by disavowing comparisons between Ferguson and Palestine, which they consider as "assaulting the good name of the State of Israel," (Jacobson, "Don't Compare Ferguson and Palestine") and by countering the comparisons with a general condemnation of Palestinians, JVP openly reveals Israel's interest in domination. Seeing the use of Islamophobia as an instrument for US-Israeli hegemony, JVP argues that "unwavering support of Israeli policies contributes to the characterization of Muslims and all Arabs as the 'enemy' and to the perpetuation of Islamophobia," which appears significant for "building and sustaining public and U.S. government backing for

Israel," and state-sponsored "anti-Palestinian policies adopted and promoted by the US government" ("Network Against Islamophobia"). Concurrently, JVP's activism against anti-Muslim and racist hate speech, state surveillance, racial profiling, and institutionalized racism, is largely informed by the connection of anti-Black and anti-Palestinian sentiment.

Participation in transnational solidarity also encompasses those populations which had formerly been ostracized. Following the 2014 events in Palestine/Israel, 327 Jewish Holocaust survivors and their descendants voiced their alarm over the "extreme, racist dehumanization of Palestinians in Israeli society," in an open letter, relating the Palestinians' suffering to the genocide the Jews had experienced, and "unequivocally condemn[ing] the massacre of Palestinians in Gaza and the ongoing occupation and colonization of historic Palestine." Drawing the explicit link between the hegemonic power of the US and Israel, the signatories blame the US "for providing Israel with the funding to carry out the attack, and Western states more generally for using their diplomatic muscle to protect Israel from condemnation." The statement juxtaposes US and Israeli official failures with the responsibilities of all humans, humanizes Palestinians, and warns that "[g]enocide begins with the silence of the world," and appealing to a collectivity of humankind: "We must raise our collective voices and use our collective power to bring about an end to all forms of racism, including the ongoing genocide of Palestinian people." The plight of the Palestinian people is transnationalized, when the statement demands that "[n]ever again must mean never again for anyone!" ("Jewish Survivors and Descendants of Survivors") This writing represents a strong manifestation of transnational solidarity cultivated by a de-nationalized and de-racialized understanding of subjugation and based on historical comparisons. It displays the possibility to grasp subalternity as a transracial and transnational concept as well as a site for potential dialogue.

### **Toward a Theory on Transnational Subalternity**

In these manifestations, 'African-American' and 'Palestinian' are constructed as two different categories of subalternity. Lubin suggests that a certain interchangeability of both groups' experiences underlies articulations of solidarity:

African American and Palestinian activists . . . do engage in cultural politics that articulate a shared structure of feeling, in which the everyday realities of police brutality, drug wars, racialization and state violence in urban black communities in the United States and in Arab cities in Israel/Palestine are compared. Palestinian and African-American claims that blackness and Palestinianness are interchangeable rests [sic] on a politics of translation, in which Arab Americans locate themselves in a long history of antiblack racialization in the United States and black Americans see the Israeli occupation as an extension of U.S. racial capitalism (*Geographies*, 162).

One can see the alliance between African Americans and Palestinians as a transnational imagined community of sentiment which takes place in a de-territorialized space. While in Benedict Anderson's work, a community is imagined through arbitrariness in visual representation in print capitalism, such as in the linking of events on a newspaper front page through calendrical coincidence (24), subaltern groups at the margins of the white empire might evoke another form of imagined community. The linkage of events in this case is not a coincidence but rather in radical analogy and inter-relation to each other. In Anderson's theory, the simultaneous popular consumption of a newspaper equals a mass ceremony in which each consumer is aware of the existence of other consumers, i.e.

members of the same community, while the novel and the newspaper represent the imagined community, i.e. the nation. (25) In the case of subaltern populations, the mainstream newspaper does not fulfill the same purpose. If the hegemonic media narrative is replaced by alternative subaltern narration, one could delink a society's subalterns from its imagined community.

Instead, a community could be imagined by subalterns through their participation in and exchange through social media - the whole idea of which is based on an exclusion from the imagined community and consequently the apprehension of the othered as part of a transnational community. Social media allows Palestinians, who often live under curfews and in isolation, to articulate their colonial anxieties and to relate to the suffering of other groups, such as African Americans. The use of social media increasingly helps revert the marginalized victims' facelessness that was attributed to them by mass media and allows them to literally share their suffering with audiences worldwide, simultaneously objecting news narratives.

As discussed, Kant suggested a transnationalization in the perception of suffering. While the Black-Palestinian narrative does not materially create a world citizenship, one might still ask whether the expression of empathy as a result of mutual recognition that results from the visibility of rights violations, could serve as a base for a subaltern citizenship, i.e. a citizenship detached from a nation-state? I suggest an expansion of Kant's paradigm to accommodate the possibilities of inter-affiliation that are granted through social activism. This form of community is not grounded in a homogeneous nation or nation-state, but rather in the socio-economic and political circumstances experienced by subalterns in relation to the hegemony.

The Afro-Palestinian context can serve as an example of solidarity among citizens

and non-citizens within a de-nationalized, transnational sphere. If the belonging to one's political state apparatus of residence (in this case the US, Israel or the Occupied Territories) is defined through the distance of one's identity from the state apparatus, that citizenship itself appears fragile. The possibility that African American individuals in Ferguson identify with Palestinians from Gaza rather than with non-black Americans represents a natural alliance of subalterns that exceeds political contexts. As Ayalet Shachar illustrates, birthright citizenship (which represents the most common form of citizenship acquisition) "does more than demarcate a form of belonging. It also distributes voice and opportunity in a vastly unequal manner" (11). Accordingly, the arbitrariness of the locus of birth defines the access of individuals to power and knowledge. Yet, in each system of citizenship itself, there exist inequalities because, as Leti Volpp outlines, "[c]itizenship is constituted through the exclusion of cultural others; the cultural other creates the citizen through contrast and negation" (585). Palestinians and African Americans are holders of fragile citizenship or no citizenship at all. Butler differentiates Palestinians as the second-class quasi-citizen in Israel, the subject of colonial occupation in occupied Palestine, and the exile, claiming that Israel's urge to maintain a demographic advantage presupposes active minoritization and dispossession and necessitates the continuing practices of settler colonialism (213). Thus, Palestinians do not possess nation-state citizenship. Whereas African Americans enjoy access to formal citizenship, that does not protect them from structural inequalities. Steven Salaita opposes US citizenship to race, claiming that "American national identity has never been static, but its one constant is assimilation not into citizenship but into whiteness" (77).

The possibilities of a cosmopolitan citizenship then agitate against the state-sponsored hijacking of possibilities, and the limiting of subalternity within national,



historic, and temporal boundaries. As Michelle Alexander observes, "[t]he popular narrative that emphasizes the death of slavery and Jim Crow and celebrates the nation's 'triumph over race' with the election of Barack Obama, is dangerously misguided" (11). She argues that the prevailing colorblind public consensus has eventually fabricated a new caste system as it ignores the ways in which race still matters (12). The hegemonic production of un/favorable and un/mournable groups aims at perpetuating an exclusiveness of historic crimes and suffering, such as apartheid and other forms of racial supremacy.

Momentously, the analyzed articulations of solidarity indicate the creation of an inter-affiliation that provides for a de-territorialized alliance of subalterns, which appears to be dissociated from a particular national state apparatus, and can thus be conceptualized as a transnational subalternity. One can then suggest that Black Americans and Palestinians enter an imagined community of cosmopolitan citizenship. Although both groups' access to citizenship rights differs significantly, with African-Americans being entitled to US citizenship and the vast majority of Palestinians remaining stateless or/and diasporic, the activists' Kantian awareness of the violation of rights implicates a fragility of the relation between citizenship and nationality.

The historicization and nationalization of struggles often attempted by Western state apparatuses implies a state-sponsored desirability of containing intra-national struggles in time and space. The larger context of the transnational alliance of hegemony, such as the US-Israeli bond, remains absent from the mainstream, for the sake of viewing racial struggles and/or decolonial ones within the national context exclusively. Teaching African-American author Alice Walker in the literature classroom is a widespread practice. However, when established artists, such as Walker, speak out in solidarity with the Palestinian struggle, and even when they compare the Palestinian subalternity to their own,

their efforts remain largely ignored in the mainstream public sphere, including corporate media and academia. According to Walker, the way the Palestinians are treated "is so reminiscent of the way black people were treated in the South when [she] was growing up." Walker argues:

And that is how they're supposed to move around, for the most part. And the unfairness of it is so much like the South. It's so much like the South of, you know, I don't know, 50 years ago, really, and actually more brutal, because in Palestine so many more people are wounded, shot, killed, imprisoned. You know, there are thousands of Palestinians in prison virtually for no reason (Harris-Gershon).

Yet, the mainstream remains largely oblivious to prominent expressions of empathy and comparison. One victim is always better than several. A victim in history is always better than a victim in the present.

Activism among transnational subalterns, however, poses a significant threat to the hegemonic production of racial supremacy and subordination. The transnational Boycott, Divest, Sanction (BDS) Movement, based on the Palestinian civil society's appeal to the global civil society to help overcome the oppression of the Palestinians, claims to be "inspired by the struggle of South Africans against apartheid" and to agitate "in the spirit of international solidarity, moral consistency and resistance to injustice and oppression", while recognizing that "people of conscience in the international community have historically shouldered the moral responsibility to fight injustice" ("Palestinian Civil Society Call for BDS"). Consequently, the BDS movement is largely perceived as a threat by those whose existence is based on the very perpetuation of subalternity. Hillary Clinton

finds it important "to make countering BDS a priority." In an open letter designed in an Orientalist manner that paints Israel as an alleged sole democracy in the Middle East, Clinton emotionally expresses her personal admiration for Israel, demonizes any possible opposition, evokes a situation of alleged omnipresent anti-semitism, and seems disturbed by comparisons of Israeli state violence with the former apartheid regime in South Africa ("Letter to Haim Saban"). Clinton finds herself among several supporters of the Israeli colonial project who aim at silencing resistance, which again potentially produces new forms of subalternity and perhaps a radicalization of both hegemony and activism.

## **Conclusion**

The transmedia manifestations of activism analyzed above create an extraterritoriality for the formulation of agency, resistance, and liberation struggles among subalterns who are removed from the mainstream public sphere and positioned as an antipode to the white Western empire. The African American solidarity movement with Palestine takes struggles such as colonialism, slavery, apartheid, and occupation (which seem foundational to the contemporary perpetuation of racial politics) out of their ghettoed contexts and maps them onto transnational dimensions, transcending ethno-national categories of identification imposed by hegemony, and providing the politically voiceless with active and passive possibilities to participate and create counter-imaginings. Comparing the segregation in occupied Palestine to the historical apartheid in the southern United States, Angela Davis articulates the necessity to "expand and deepen our solidarities with the people of Palestine. People of all genders and sexualities" (Barrows-Friedman, "Angela Davis: 'Support BDS, and Palestine Will Be Free'").

When individuals and collectives from different marginalized groups declare their

solidarity with others who seem to be placed within similar spaces of subalternity, the concept of subalternity itself becomes transnationalized through the very expression of solidarity which counters the ideology of a racialized white-dominated empire. Through a comparative perspective, solidarity makes visible the criminalization of populations by the state apparatus and allows for a denationalized view of a group's suffering.

This article showed the dynamic forms of African American and other articulations of solidarity with Palestine that can be understood as an imagined community through a de-colonial poetics of liberation. This article also suggested that alliances built on the framework of transnational subalternity can and occasionally do pose a danger to the white-majority state apparatus. In situations where intra-national race relations are vulnerable, other subalterns become a primary source of socio-economic identification through transnational links. While the (self-)perception of groups like Palestinians and African Americans as collective subalterns might be evident, their inter-relation to other groups' suffering and their declaration of proximity to and identification with the others' suffering lead to an awareness of a transnational subalternity that creates meaning and reformulates resistance, allowing Blacks to become Palestinians and vice versa due to similar experiences of (post-)colonial subjugation.

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**Sara Faradji:**

**Journeys to the Middle: An Analysis of  
Liminality within 20th Century Middle  
Eastern Literature and Scholarship**

**Postcolonial Interventions: An Interdisciplinary  
Journal of Postcolonial Studies**

### ABSTRACT:

In 1978, Edward Said published *Orientalism*, a postcolonial critique of Western representations of the “Orient,” or the Middle East. Since then, literary and cultural scholars have considered new ways of approaching the field of Middle Eastern studies. Some of this scholarship addresses the precarious nature of the Middle East as an identifiable, cross-continental region, yet few have attempted to connect the themes of fractured identity within Middle Eastern literature to the ambiguous nature of the Middle East as a geographical region and focus of scholarship.

In my analysis, I explore the ways in which Middle Eastern literature is postcolonial, in addition to how the fragmented or liminal identities of Middle Eastern characters can highlight the imagined realities and representations of the Middle East. Through literary critiques of *Season of Migration to the North*, written in 1966 by Tayeb Salih and *Snow*, written in 2004 by Orhan Pamuk, I argue that select Middle Eastern novels, despite their differences in national origins, underscore common themes found in postcolonial scholarship. These novels present issues that reinforce the multiregional nature of postcolonial themes, as well as the way in which the regional category of the Middle East is problematic for those inhabiting the region, and geopolitically strategic for those living outside of it. In this way, I demonstrate how modern and contemporary literature can reflect, complicate, and reshape representations of the Middle East.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial, Migration, Middle East, Double consciousness, Hybrid

In 1978, Edward W. Said published *Orientalism*, a postcolonial critique of Western discursive representations of the “Orient,” or the Middle East. Since then, scholars have considered new ways of approaching the field of Middle Eastern studies. Abbas Amanat addresses the precarious nature of the Middle East as a cross-continental, geopolitical region in his introduction to *Is There a Middle East?* (2011), while anthropologist Saba Mahmood explores the possibilities of an alternative, Islamic form of feminism in *Politics of Piety* (2004). Nonetheless, few critics have attempted to connect the themes of fractured identity within postmodern Middle Eastern literary texts to the ambiguous nature of the Middle East as a geographical region and focus of scholarship. Lisa Suhair Majaj begins such a project in “Arab-Americans and the Meaning of Race.” She considers the literary motifs and social problems emerging from the irony that the U.S. government classifies Arab-Americans as “white,” despite their continual portrayal as a racial “Other” to white Americans (320). I share a comparable concern for the fragmented or liminal cultural identities that are apparent in Middle Eastern literary works such as *Sugar Street* (1957) by Naguib Mahfouz, *Moth Smoke* by Mohsin Hamid (2000), and *Persepolis* (2003) by Marjane Satrapi. This thematic trend has prompted my questioning of how Middle Eastern literature fits within the discipline of postcolonial studies. In my analysis, I examine the ways that Middle Eastern literature is postcolonial, in addition to how the liminal identities of Middle Eastern characters can unearth the imagined representations of the Middle East. Through comparative literary critiques of *Season of Migration to the North* (1966) by Tayeb Salih and *Snow* (2002) by Orhan Pamuk, I argue that select 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Middle Eastern novels, despite their differences in national origins, can reflect similar attempts to underscore common themes and tropes found in multi-regional postcolonial literatures. In calling attention to ideas such as the double consciousness of the indigenous writer

with a Western education, the psychosis of the migrant struggling to assimilate, and the subjugation of indigenous women, these novels present issues that reinforce the multiregional nature of postcolonial themes, as well as the way that the regional category of the Middle East is problematic for those inhabiting the region and geopolitically strategic for those living outside of it. Through this approach, I demonstrate how contemporary literature can reflect, complicate, and reshape discursive representations of the Middle East, both culturally and geopolitically.

### **Who, What, and Where are the Postcolonial?**

Postcolonial scholarship is a diverse field that emerged as an academic specialization in the Western world during the late 1970s (Lazarus 1). Simply put, scholars in this field examine colonial discourses, as well as national cultures and literatures that have grown following the post-World War II historical events of decolonization (Ray, “Postscript” 574; Schwarz 6). More specifically, postcolonialism is concerned with “forces of oppression and coercive domination that operate in the contemporary world” (Young, *Postcolonialism* 11). Postcolonial theory not only uncovers such oppressive forces, but also considers the resistance to them within discussions of the politics of nationalism, class, race, sexuality, gender, and exile in Third World countries as well as diasporic communities within First World cities (Tiffin vii; Bhabha 175). Seminal postcolonial works that explore these oppressive and resistive forces include Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), a critique of the Western World’s essentialist view of the Middle East; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak” (1988), an essay on the refusal and inability of a privileged person to consider the viewpoints of a subaltern woman; and Homi K. Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* (1994), which emphasizes a deconstructive approach to

understanding the construct of the nation through a focus on de-centered, hybridized spaces and individuals. Because postcolonial studies is not housed exclusively within a particular discipline, and literature deemed postcolonial may be written by authors from a variety of regions, it is difficult to determine what constitutes the postcolonial today. Although much of postcolonial literature and scholarship focuses on modern social conflicts in South Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, cultural concepts central to the discipline, such as alterity, hybridity, subalternity, imperialism, are also explored in the colonial, post-colonial, and non-colonial contexts of nations within the Americas, East Asia, Central Eurasia, and the Middle East (Schwarz 8; Childs and Williams 10; Adams 6). Canonical postcolonial works like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), and Jamaica Kincaid's *My Brother* (1997) share significant thematic commonalities with novels produced in nations that are not typically associated with the postcolonial—such as Sigrid Nunez's *A Feather on the Breath of God* (1995) and Tariq Ali's *The Stone Woman* (2000). With this in mind, the contemporary understanding of postcolonial literature is changing. For instance, Ella Shohat states that the linguistic nature of the term “postcolonial,” with its inclusion of the word “post,” potentially inhibits the field's inclusiveness of works on contemporary issues of “neocoloniality” and the persistence of First World hegemony after colonial independence (Shohat 104). I support her call for a “flexible yet critical” (112) usage of the term, and I argue for a similar application of the term “Middle East.”

Like the word, “postcolonial,” the conception of the “Middle East” is difficult to describe because it spans across multiple continents, states, colonial histories, religions, and languages. In a similar way that Edward Said characterizes the Orient as “the stage on which the whole East is confined [by the West]” (Said 63), Magda M. Al-Nowaihi argues that “[t]he very appellation [of

the Middle East] is a creation of colonialism, for this region is ‘Middle’ simply because the point of reference, in more than one way, is Europe” (Al-Nowaihi 283). On the one hand, the Eurocentric, geopolitically strategic categorization of the Middle East as a conflict-ridden, Islamic, traditionalist, and exoticized region ignores the diverse histories of cultural borrowings and ongoing interactions among people of different countries and faiths within the region (Asad 10). On the other hand, the diverse literature emerging from the region may help theorists to further critique and deconstruct the concept of the Middle East. In this vein, two scholars who are revisiting discursive, deconstructed representations of the Middle East are Ali Behdad and Juliet Williams. They argue that the highly essentializing critiques of the Middle East by Westerners, as well as expatriates from the Middle East who critique the lack of secularism in their home countries, are contributing to what they call a discourse of “neo-Orientalism.” Unlike Edward Said’s classic conception of Orientalism, this new, supplementary mode underscores how practices such as the wearing the veil have become *topos-obligés* that contribute to “a kind of doxa about the Middle East and Muslims that is disseminated, thanks to new technologies of communication, throughout the world” (Behdad and Williams 293). With this in mind, looking at works of modern and contemporary literature in the Middle East and its diaspora through a postcolonial lens can allow scholars to consider how the imagined clash of civilizations between the Western and Islamic worlds becomes internalized, inverted, and parodied by select characters living in nations where discourses of modernity (both Oriental and neo-Oriental in nature) become tools of violence and stigmatization.

In order to emphasize the intersectionality between postcolonial and Middle Eastern literature, I will support my argument with comparative literary critiques of *Season of Migration to the North* (1966) by Tayeb Salih and *Snow* (2002) by Orhan Pamuk. Situated in 1960s Sudan

and at turn-of-the-millennium Turkey, respectively, these novels depict national and cultural contentions in distinct countries and time periods. Yet, I would argue that they represent modern, postcolonial narratives of the Middle East. One could say that *Season of Migration to the North* is not a Middle Eastern novel because the Sudan is in Africa, or that *Snow* is not a postcolonial work because Turkey was never a colony. However, I believe that the novels' almost parallel explorations of alterity, Westernized education, identity conflict, non-belonging, migration, modernity, and secularism reflect central issues to postcolonial scholarship and illustrate the liminal nature of the people, nations, and societies within the contested region of the Middle East.

### **Doublespeak and Double Consciousness: Knowledge as Power and Debilitation**

In *Season of Migration to the North* and *Snow*, the respective narrators as well as protagonists represent Arab or Middle Eastern subjects who experience a similar sense of double-consciousness upon their returns home from prolonged stays in Europe. With their Western knowledge comes power, but this power both strengthens and weakens them in different contexts. To contextualize this, W.E.B. Du Bois first articulated the conception of the double-consciousness of the African-American in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). He argues that the African-American faces a split between his black identity and his American one, and his double-consciousness results from “[the] 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” (3). Decades later, Frantz Fanon of Martinique described a similar way in which black men, specifically Africans, exhibited this nature of doubleness not only on a racial and national level, but also on an intellectual one. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), he writes, “The black man has

two dimensions. One with his fellows, the other with the white man [...] The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter—that is, he will come closer to being a real human being—in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language” (17-18). Thus, as the black man gains the power to communicate in a Western language, he also becomes more aware of the West’s persistent ill regard for his blackness. Unlike the white man, the black man faces prejudiced reminders that his intellect is in spite of his race (116).

This ontological experience of doubleness pervades postcolonial theory and literature. According to Ato Quayson, a primary concern of the postcolonial figure is “the double vision that a peripheral existence in the world engenders” (Quayson 96). Having a peripheral identity is synonymous with being an Other, which Robert Young claims is the cultural stereotype of existing “outside modernity, outside the West” (Young, “Postcolonial Remains” 36). Because people of numerous racial and national origins are considered Others in postcolonial societies, this feeling of double-consciousness is becoming more apparent in global literature. Much like Fanon argued, the characters in many postcolonial novels recognize their double-consciousness through language—during their conversations with people who perceive them as a cultural Other. For example, in *My Brother*, Jamaica Kincaid explains that while visiting her brother in Antigua after her years of living in the U.S., they could no longer understand each other’s English. Not wholly lamenting this fact that she is neither fully Antiguan nor fully American, however, she states, “I could not have become a writer living among the people I know best” (162). Derek Walcott similarly conveys his divided allegiance between his African ancestral origins and his appreciation of the English language in the poem, “A Far Cry from Africa” (1930). He writes: “I who have cursed/The drunken officer of British rule, how choose/Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?” (26-30). This desire for Western knowledge and



simultaneous loss of cultural identity underscores the dilemma for the postcolonial Other. Such problems of double-consciousness and conflicting loyalties dominate Middle Eastern novels as well, especially in *Season* and *Snow*.

In *Season of Migration to the North*, the unnamed narrator is initially attracted to the West when he pursues an English literature degree in London and a career in the modernized Sudanese capital, Khartoum. Upon returning home to his Sudanese village seven years later, when the novel begins, he starts to realize his sense of double-consciousness. During a gathering with the villagers, everyone began asking him questions, such as, “Were the people there [in Europe] like us or were they different?” and “Was life expensive or cheap?” (Salih 4). He downplays any major cultural differences and responds that Europeans are not that different from the villagers—they work in professions ranging from farming to medicine, and they have families with good morals and traditions. He further claims that he wishes he could have gone into further detail, but in his conceit he feared the villagers would not be able to comprehend him. Thus, he questions his cultural and intellectual position in relation to the villagers, as a result of his education in the West. The narrator’s newfound knowledge of Western literature and culture, viewed in juxtaposition with his humble past in a rural Sudanese village, illustrates his sense of double-consciousness.

Despite his initial longing to return to the comforts of the village, the narrator soon becomes intrigued by his mysterious foil and figure of foreshadowing, Mustafa Sa’eed. Placed into a highly developed education system in Khartoum by chance, thanks to a uniformed man with a unique turban called a “hat,” Mustafa was lured by the Western Other at an early age. After the headmaster’s encouragement, he moves to Cairo in order to take advantage of the education offered there. He characterizes the city as “a desert laid out in blue-green, calling me,

calling me” (Salih 24). In this metaphor, the arid environment of the Middle East is transformed into a beautiful mirage when he becomes introduced to the West. Upon his later move to study economics at Oxford in London, he further begins to understand his sense of double-consciousness, for he represents “the handsome black man courted in Bohemian circles” and “a show-piece exhibited by members of the aristocracy” (Salih 48). In this way, one can juxtapose the narrator’s return home from Europe to an onslaught of cultural questions with Mustafa’s experiences as a young man faced with the intrigue of the West, as well as the West’s understanding of him as a Middle Eastern Other. For both the narrator and Mustafa, their knowledge of English marks them as Others in the eyes of the Sudanese villagers and London elites, neither of whom would expect someone from the Sudan to be so competent in the language. Thus, Tayeb Salih demonstrates how the weapon of the Western language initially tantalizes the characters with the mirage of the West, only to later fracture their senses of cultural identity.

In *Snow*, Orhan Pamuk also explores how a Middle Eastern person feels a sense of double-consciousness after living in Europe for several years. The third-person narrator, Orhan, tells the story of Ka, a poet from Istanbul who travels to the impoverished city of Kars, Turkey after twelve years of political exile in Frankfurt, Germany. Like Mustafa, Ka becomes intrigued by the luring promise of the Western world at a young age. As Orhan states, “Ka loved Turgenev and his elegant novels, and like the Russian writer Ka too had tired of his own country’s never-ending troubles and came to despise his backwardness” (Pamuk 31). Thus, although Istanbul at the turn-of-the-millennium is relatively modernized, Ka nonetheless feels that the uneducated, fundamentalist masses outside of the capital city dominate Turkey’s political and cultural scenes. However, after his twelve-year stay in Germany, where he became frustrated by his decline

toward a “worthless nobody” (Pamuk 103) social status, Ka longs to return to Turkey, where he at least once belonged to the intelligentsia. Rather than go back to his former home in Istanbul, he travels to Kars. According to Orhan, this journey represents “an attempt to step outside the boundaries of his middle-class childhood, to venture at long last into the other world beyond” (Pamuk 18). Viewed in this way, Ka’s initial desire to embody the Western Other eventually becomes an unobtainable mirage. Now, he hopes to explore the mysteries of a pious, poverty-stricken, town near the Armenian border.

When Ka begins speaking with the townspeople of Kars, he discovers that he is too much of an Other to blend in with the locals. Portraying himself as a journalist, he claims that the reason for his arrival is to investigate the Muslim girls’ suicides in the wake of the state’s decision to ban women from publicly wearing headscarves. While engaging with a local about this issue, the narrator notes that this person “was happy to see that a well-read, educated gentleman like Ka had taken the trouble to travel all the way [to Kars] to find out more about his city’s problems” (Pamuk 6). Although Ka and the people of Kars are both from the same country and share a common language, the villagers treat him differently because he has had a taste of the West. Ka later meets his antagonist, a Muslim political radical known as Blue, who says to him, “You belong in the Istanbul bourgeoisie. Anyone can tell, just by looking at your skin and the way you hold yourself” (Pamuk 74). In instances like these, Ka realizes that he is an outsider in Kars because of his appearance and mannerisms. Unable to escape his sense of double-consciousness while in Germany, he only feels it more strongly in a small town within his home country.

The development of their language skills in Western cities and education systems enables the protagonists and narrators of *Season* and *Snow* to tell their respective stories. Through a

Foucauldian line of reasoning, these characters become literary examples of how Middle Eastern subjects, like African, Caribbean, or even American ones, may develop their powers of language after being disciplined into docile and productive beings through modernized institutional practices (Foucault 137). In these particular novels, moreover, the knowledge the Middle Eastern protagonists gain from their Western education becomes a double-edged weapon that, while affording them temporary successes in scholarship, ultimately leads to their downfalls.

### **Melancholic Migration: The Un-Making of Hybrid Subjects**

In postcolonial studies, as well as in *Season of Migration to the North* and *Snow*, one can connect the theme of double-consciousness with Homi Bhabha's theory of ambivalence. Bhabha adapts the term from Freud, who explains ambivalence thus: "The individual [unconsciously] wants to carry out this action (the act of touching) [...] but he may not carry it out, and he even abominates it" (Freud, "Taboo and the Ambivalence of Emotions"). For Bhabha, ambivalence underlies the colonial dynamic of desire and repulsion for the postcolonial Other (and vice versa). In *The Location of Culture*, he states that the ambivalent colonial power "repeatedly turns from *mimicry*—a difference that is almost nothing but not quite—to *menace*—a difference that is almost total but not quite" (91; emphases original). This makes sense in the context of *Season* and *Snow*, for the respective protagonists mimic the mannerisms and language of the Western Other—becoming what Bhabha calls "almost [...] but not quite" (Bhabha 89) the Westerner. Therefore, their cultural identities remain split and confused. In the process, the simultaneous forces of attraction and repulsion between the depicted Western and non-Western subjects lead to violent, destructive consequences for both sides of the binary. This phenomenon is evident in contemporary postcolonial novels such as Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011). The cosmopolitan

protagonist, Julius, continually tries to create new threads in his life story in order to forget the brutal self he left behind in his home country of Nigeria. Yet, he finds himself slipping in casual instances, such as when he stubbornly refuses to respond cordially to a New York cab driver who acknowledges him as “brother.” Julius thinks, “I was in no mood for people who tried to lay claims on me” (Cole 40). Ever the mimic, however, Julius later greets a Moroccan shopkeeper living in Brussels as “brother” (Cole 102). Met with a puzzled response, Julius quickly regrets this decision. These awkward occurrences reveal his struggle to negotiate cultural understandings as he cultivates a self through mimicry. After Moji, a woman he raped in Nigeria, confronts him in New York about his past cruelty and persistent ambivalence, Julius considers suicide. Such a contemplation, which is recurrent in postcolonial literature, demonstrates how ambivalence in Bhabha’s context enhances the postcolonial migrant’s depravity and despair.

Due to the idea that the colonial discursive mentality keeps the Other spatially, temporally, and culturally distant from the Western subject, Bhabha argues that the postcolonial subject must exist within a “third space—where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences” (218). While one might conceive of the third space as a productive, hybrid cultural melting pot, this illusion is challenged as a result of the ambivalence invading the space. The enactment of cultural identity from the third space “displaces the narrative of the Western nation which Benedict Anderson [...] describes as being written in homogenous, serial time” (Bhabha 37). Thus, the postcolonial migrant who travels to the West (and back to a village, in the cases of *Season* and *Snow*) faces the challenge of being unable to achieve the fantasies of cultural superiority and homogenization they had envisioned.

Sara Ahmed additionally qualifies the postcolonial migrant’s dissatisfaction with the ambivalent nature of always being an Other. Borrowing from Freud’s definition of melancholia

as the “[pathological] reaction to the real loss of a love object” (Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia” 250), which can “reinforce an already existing ambivalence” (251) toward that object, she argues that “[t]he melancholic migrant holds onto the unhappy objects of differences, such as the turban [...] Such differences [...] become sore points or blockage points, where the smooth passage of communication stops” (Ahmed, “Multiculturalism and the Promise of Happiness” 133). With this in mind, I argue that the protagonists of *Season* and *Snow* are Middle Eastern melancholic migrants. They strive for Westernization at the cost of relinquishing parts of their indigenous selves. Unhappy with the third space in which they dwell, where they cannot achieve their fantasies, they become ambivalent about their roles as mere mimics and perennial Others.

As evidenced by his efforts to start a family in the village and hide most traces of his European experiences, Mustafa Sa’ed seeks to neglect his Western self. He hopes that his two sons “grow up imbued with the air of this village, its smells and colors and history” (Salih 55), even though he himself has been tainted through his pursuance of the mirage of the West. Midway through the novel, after an unknown time has passed since his first meeting with the narrator, Mustafa disappears from the village. He leaves behind a letter asking that the narrator take care of his children and “spare them the pangs of wanderlust” (Salih 54). He also hints as to why he cannot function in the village or elsewhere in the world when he writes, “Rationally I know what is right: my attempt at living in this village [...] But mysterious things in my soul and in my blood impel me towards faraway parts that loom up before me and cannot be ignored” (Salih 56). Thus, Mustafa leaves the village and the world, partially due to his inability to feel a sense of secure belonging or make peace with himself after his experiences in the West.

Despite Mustafa's interesting personal history of migrations, his occupation of a third space hinders his ability to tell this story. The narrator discovers this when looking through Mustafa's notorious, darkened room, where he had hidden European literature and any other traces of his past in Europe. Perhaps this was a place where he could dwell by himself, but his isolation only fed into his paranoia and inability to speak about his experiences. The narrator sees that Mustafa has a notebook called "*My Life Story* by Mustafa Sa'ed," with a dedication to "those who see with one eye, speak with one tongue and see things as either black or white, either Eastern or Western" (Salih 125). Inside the book, however, there are only blank pages. It is as though Mustafa feels that he is the only one who fulfills the requirements of this dedication. Despite his acute knowledge of different languages, he cannot find the words to describe his life story. In the West, he is an exoticized, Middle Eastern showpiece. In the village, people barely converse with him and cannot relate to his experiences as a migrant. From his third space, there is no middle ground from where he can speak.

Like Mustafa, Ka also cannot find a place of belonging or security. He spent years of displeasure in Frankfurt, explaining to an old friend, "The thing that saved me was not learning German. My body rejected the language, so I was able to preserve my purity and soul" (Pamuk 33). In this way, as Mustafa also suggests after spending some time in Europe, Western culture and language resemble tantalizing mirages that eventually become corrupting powers to be avoided. Although he comes to Turkey with a mission that is nostalgic as well as purposeful, Ka seldom meets people that he can trust or identify. Not long after his arrival to the snow-covered town, he comes to view Kars as rather distinctive from his hometown of Istanbul. As Orhan indicates, "[N]o longer was he returned to a place where he could enjoy the middle-class life he missed too much even to visit in his dreams. Instead, the snow spoke to him of hopelessness and

misery” (Pamuk 9). People in Kars regard Ka as an outsider, not just because of his Western mannerisms, but also because he is a secular, non-practicing Muslim. The Muslim radical, Blue, bluntly tells Ka how he and others in the community perceive him: “You don’t belong to this country; you’re not even a Turk anymore” (Pamuk 327). It is perhaps with these thoughts in mind that Ka decides to leave Kars and return to Frankfurt.

Although the reader does not have a full sense of what Ka’s life in Europe was like until the end of the novel, Orhan states that Ka gave English lessons to Turkish migrants when he first arrived in Germany years ago. However, once he was officially declared a political exile and awarded asylum benefits, he socially removed himself almost entirely from the Turkish migrant community, in part because “[h]is fellow exiles had found Ka too remote and too bourgeois” (Pamuk 256). From his third space, Ka struggles to make and maintain relationships due to cultural differences—even within a hybrid environment. In tracing Ka’s final steps in the Turkish community of Frankfurt where he resided, just before his murder by unidentified assassins, Orhan searches Ka’s home to find a possible motive for the crime, as well as Ka’s notebook of poems about Kars. He finds no traces of this book and supports the belief that the assassins, possibly connected to Blue, have confiscated it. Ka’s thoughts as a hybrid migrant, like Mustafa’s, cannot be read or understood by anyone else.

Mustafa and Ka explore their identifications as cultural Others after migrating throughout urban and rural spaces in the Middle East, as well as in European cities. One result of these migrations is that the characters cannot definitively identify themselves, even though the people they encounter may want to pigeonhole them as Arab or Western. This failure to embody cohesive, homogenized identities forces them into melancholia. Sara Ahmed argues that “[t]o read others as melancholic would be to read their attachments as death-wishes, as attachments to



things that are already dead” (Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* 141). Ka and Mustafa eventually find themselves attached to the non-Western selves that they can no longer regain as a result of their chase for the Western illusion of self-betterment. Regardless of what actually led to their deaths, their melancholy and ambivalence toward their hybrid states killed their spirits.

### **Pray or Prey: Women as Tradition, Desire, and Nation**

In addition to developing a sense of double-consciousness and occupying a third space, the protagonists of *Season* and *Snow* pursue strong desires for women who are their cultural Others. Mustafa and Ka treat the females they respectively romance as objects of desire, conquest, exoticism, and traditionalism. The women in these novels become more than women, but arguably less than human, as they represent bodily territories to be physically and intellectually excavated by male power. In his attempt to know and conquer the indigenous woman, the liminal migrant becomes a new type of colonial power. This power struggle, coupled with the paranoia of isolation within the third space, ultimately incapacitates the protagonists.

In *Season*, women in the Sudanese village are viewed primarily as symbols of cultural tradition and childbearing. Someone who recurrently emphasizes this is Wad Reyys, a villager who marries a new bride every year and has his sights set on Mustafa’s widow. He tells the narrator, “The nonsense you learn at school won’t wash with us here. In this village the men are guardians of the women” (Salih 82). Further, Wad compares the role of women in the village to their role in other parts of the Middle East, saying, “The Nigerians, the Egyptians, and the Arabs of Syria, aren’t they Moslems like us? But they’re people who know what’s what and leave their women as God created them. As for us, we dock them like you do animals” (Salih 68). It is evident that in this rural Sudanese village, women maintain their traditional Muslim roles, even

though Muslim women in other Middle Eastern cities and countries may expand or alter their understandings of these roles. Perhaps it is with this dichotomy in mind that Mustafa has such violent and complicated relationships with women.

Edward Said states that the European invented image of the Orient is characterized by “romance, exotic beings, [and] haunting memories and landscapes” (Said 1). In *Season*, Salih assesses this romanticizing of the Other, but he reverses the traditional cultural roles by identifying the explorer or conqueror as the Middle East and the typified Other as the West. Once Mustafa comes to fully comprehend the ideas of Western culture and the Western perception of his indigenous culture, he begins to formulate his personality and language in a way that entices European women into his bedroom. He epitomizes his seduction of Ann Hammond, who Mustafa calls “easy prey” (Salih 27), with the statement, “She would tell me that in my eyes she saw the shimmer of mirages in hot deserts [...] And I would tell her that in the blueness of her eyes I saw the faraway shoreless seas of the North” (Salih 120-1). This blue sea mirage metaphor that initially attracted Mustafa to the West comes into play again during his conquest of Europeans like Ann. The fact that many of these women end up dead, reportedly by means of suicide, demonstrates how the sensual language of the Other inevitably become too insufferable for the Othered (and, in Mustafa’s case, Western) women to bear.

These plays on Oriental tropes are not pleasurable for Mustafa in the long run, because the metaphors of blue sea mirages soon turns into metaphors of warfare and disease. In his conquest for Jean Morris, who married him yet constantly rebelled against his luring seductions, Mustafa describes how he would “stay awake all night warring with bow and sword and spear and arrows” (Salih 29). Mustafa effectively manipulates his double-consciousness to violently conquer the Other, using his bedroom as an extended metaphor of the colonial seduction and

violent entrapment of the colonized through the use of deceptive language. However, after Jean Morris lures him into stabbing her to death, it is evident that the colonial game becomes too much for Mustafa. After all, it is not long after this incident that he moves to the Sudanese village and marries a local. Following his damaging, convoluted experiences as both the colonized and colonizer; the traditional Muslim woman becomes a symbol of temporary stability for him.

Modern secular legislations in Europe and the Middle East, such as the banning of the headscarf, have prompted questions about the role of Muslim women. *Snow* is largely about Ka's migratory struggles, but the stories of Turkish women foreground the novel. He listens to numerous local opinions about the Muslim women's suicide incidents, such as the ex-mayor's feeling that "the streets of Kars are filled with young women in head scarves [...] And because they've been barred from their classes for flaunting this symbol of political Islam, they've begun committing suicide" (Pamuk 21). One woman he meets who wears a headscarf, on the other hand, tells Ka that the suicides represent more than religious devotion and fragility; they are also attempts for women to control their own bodies. Through these conversations, one learns how the politicization of the headscarf issue has led to the polarization and isolation of headscarf-wearing Muslim women in Kars, who were once in the cultural majority in the city before the ban.

What has become obvious in Turkey is that secular laws like headscarf bans are causing political tensions to mount, especially in small cities like Kars. In the novel, a radical Muslim murders the director of the local Institute of Education, due to his enforcing of the headscarf ban and possible indirect contribution to a girl's suicide. People begin referring to this incident as a reflection of dated yet persistent modernity vs. traditionalism and secular vs. religious

fundamentalism debates. For example, a revolutionary actor-playwright tells Ka, “If we don’t let the army and the state deal with these dangerous fanatics, we’ll end up back in the Middle Ages...traveling the doomed path already traveled by so many tribal nations in Asia and the Middle East” (Pamuk 203). In this sense, the political and cultural battles of Orientalism are being waged on and on behalf of the bodies of Middle Eastern women.

It is in this heightened political environment that Ka travels to Kars, not only to find a sense of home and investigate the suicides, but also to reconnect with Ipek, a newly divorced woman he had once desired. Upon realizing that Muhtar, her pitiful ex-husband, is still in love with her, Orhan remarks, “Ka feared that both of them longed for Ipek as a symbol of escape from [a] defeatist state of mind” (Pamuk 52). Thus, the characters’ desire for Ipek—a beautiful, working-class woman in Kars—stems less from love than it does from a need for stability in a time of political and personal distress. Further, when Ka first makes love to Ipek, he treats her in a way that, judging by the narrator’s imagination, somewhat parallels Mustafa’s violent, colonizing lovemaking. As Orhan describes it, “[I]t was not Ipek herself who was arousing Ka but a pornographic image [...] Ka worried that Ipek was not as fragile as he wanted her to be. This is why he pulled her hair to cause her pain, why he took pleasure from her pain [...] to the accompaniment of an internal music sound track as deep as it was primitive” (Pamuk 249). Ka thus seeks a sexual experience that is in one instance Middle Eastern and in another Western, in which Ipek is fragile as well as erotic. His desire for Ipek, beyond an escapist fantasy, is a violent conquest for the meek, oppressed, female Other.

For Mustafa and Ka, the Otherted women of the Middle East and the West become more than desires. They are enactments of nations and regions. As Sangeeta Ray indicates in *En-Gendering India*, “Generally, tradition is a hard thing to let go of, and more significant, even if

men had to adapt because they were part of the ephemeral public life, women could always be counted on to affirm the continuity of tradition” (Ray 1). As long as national leaders and writers continue to privilege (or debase) women as uncontaminated upholders of traditional national culture, the discourse of the nation prevails. In *Midnight’s Children*, for example, Indian male characters fall for women who are covered by a perforated sheet. These women represent traditionalism and modesty, and it is because they are only viewable in segments that they become so intriguing. Despite the fact that the protagonist, Saleem Sinai, feels that women were essential to his upbringing, one sees that he and many men in the novel foolishly make the mistakes of “loving in fragments” (Rushdie 40), only to later become heartbroken.

The women in *Season* and *Snow* are also, in a sense, loved in fragments. They are not typified as human beings, but rather as uncharted territories, collectible Oriental (or Western) mementos, and symbols of either religion or secularism. Through the descriptions of the women, one learns less about them and more about the men’s journeys, as well as polarized male imaginings of women. Although Mustafa and Ka entertain their own respective hybrid states, the women remain geographically and culturally positioned—only to be Othered in the male imagination. In this sense, while the male protagonists explore the possibilities of a more cosmopolitan Middle East, their adventures are at the expense of, and to an extent put to an end by, the stationary women who come to culturally represent the Middle East, the West, England, and Turkey.

### **Conclusions: The Impact of Literature on Regional Scholarship and Debates**

*Season of Migration* and *Snow* both underscore postcolonial themes, while also providing useful narratives for scholarship on the Middle East. Salih reveals the stigmatizing, violent, and

isolating results of Orientalism, while Pamuk implies a similar warning for the contemporary lawmakers and citizens spreading neo-Oriental messages. In this way, these works precede and build upon the thematic subjects that have become valuable to postcolonial literature and theory. Reflecting on these works in the contemporary era, when some argue that the postcolonial is becoming transnational and parts of Africa, Asia, and borderline Europe may comprise the Middle East, one can begin to think more critically about the liminal nature of various subjects—from postcolonial scholarship as a whole to localized individuals like the Middle Eastern migrant and the subaltern woman.

By reading and analyzing texts like *Season* and *Snow*, one can better comprehend how the region of the Middle East was invented by the Western mind for strategic, politicized purposes. Although Mustafa had never seen a turban until he was a child and studied diligently in Cairo and in London, he is nonetheless positioned as an exotic, Arab showpiece. Despite the varieties of cultures and religions in Turkey, the image of the headscarf becomes a sudden threat to secular government officials who desire for Turkey to be included within the European Union. Many of the struggles in these novels, as in real life, reflect the largely invented battles between the East and West, or, more specifically, between the Middle East and Europe. Salih and Pamuk critique the violent, dangerous nature of colonial and Orientalist discourse; contemporary scholars of postcolonial and Middle Eastern studies can use these works to better understand and critique the liminal nature of their academic disciplines today.

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**Sarah Kent:**

**Affective Alienation: Diasporic Melancholia  
in Warsan Shire's "Home"**

**Postcolonial Interventions: An Interdisciplinary  
Journal of Postcolonial Studies**

**ABSTRACT:**

In violent and visceral imagery, Warsan Shire's poem, "Home," documents the diasporic melancholia at the heart of losing a space and place of home. In conversation with Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* and Sigmund Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," my paper examines the melancholic orientation of home as a radical political tool for unearthing the concealment of colonial histories. As Freud's seminal text argues, mourning lapses into an unhealthy state of melancholia when the subject holds on to the object of loss. For the melancholy migrant, the object of loss is home. I argue that through deploying home as an unhappy object, Shire offers a vital reminder of the complex power relations which inform and determine mobility, diaspora, and dispossession. Her poem illustrates how the affective afterlives of diaspora shape the concept of home as an unhappy object which "embody the persistence of histories that cannot be wished away by happiness" (Ahmed 159). Shires' poem becomes a generative and productive site for a movement, not towards healing, but towards affective alienation in which the reader bears witness to the trauma, xenophobia, and pain that diasporic subjects experience. By exposing home as an object of migrant melancholia, Shire's poem announces a radical and politically charged unhappiness with the persistence of racist and colonial ideology.

**Keywords:** *diaspora, melancholia, home, affect*

With the haunting legacies of colonialism, home is a central topic of postcolonial thought and discourse as postcolonial subjects grapple with the aftermath of displacement, diaspora, and migration. Home operates on multiple levels, both as a physical space and as an imagined place of domestic, familial, and national belonging. To be *unhomed*, then, is to be disconnected from a sense of belonging through the socio-cultural processes of inclusion and exclusion. Employing violent and visceral imagery, Somali-British poet Warsan Shire documents in her poem “Home” the diasporic melancholia at the heart of losing a space and place of belonging, especially for refugees and people suffering from forced migration. Through her poem, she offers an intervention and reorientation of the social constructions of home to not only be situated as a domestic space, but also as a site of legal, social, cultural, and political discourse. Home, for Shire’s speaker, is a site of melancholy. She voices how the home—affectively, materially, and symbolically—becomes a place of pain, chaos, and anxiety, reversing dominant understandings of home as a happy object. In conversation with Sara Ahmed’s *The Promise of Happiness* and Sigmund Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia,” Shire’s poem examines the melancholic orientation of home as a radical political tool for unearthing the concealment of colonial histories. By demarcating home as an unhappy sphere, Shire offers a vital reminder of the complex power relations which inform and determine mobility, diaspora, and dispossession. Home is not universally safe, but is radically re-shaped by relations of history, power, and violence. The poem illustrates how the affective afterlives of diaspora shape the concept of home as an unhappy space that “embod[ies] the persistence of histories that cannot be wished away by happiness” (*Promise* 159). While colonial ideology suggests an entitlement to space, Shire

reorients the reader towards an understanding of home as inherently precarious in order to generate a radical and politically charged unhappiness with the persistence of colonial ideology.

Shire attends to the anxieties of contemporary diasporas by revealing how leaving home, whether forcibly or by choice, forecloses the possibility of ever feeling at-home. Avtar Brah argues that “‘home’ is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of ‘origin’” (188-9). The diasporic desire for home stems from a lack, an intense longing for a space and place of belonging that cannot be retrieved. Thus *unhomed*, the diasporic subject is forced to negotiate with a sense of belonging that is not tied to a space and place, affectively alienating them and causing them to face a sense of vulnerability. Pointing to the vulnerability of being *unhomed*, Chandra Mohanty and Biddy Martin state,

Being home’ refers to the place where one lives within familiar, safe, protected boundaries; ‘not being home’ is a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself. (90)

For Shire’s speaker, home is an instigator of trauma, one that instills and perpetuates endless mourning and is, hauntingly, both present and absent. In her poem, home is an undeniably unsafe and violent space, manifesting as “the mouth of a shark” (75) and the “barrel of the gun” (76). Contradicting all normative expectations of how home should look and feel, Shire exposes the anxiety tied to home for diasporic populations. Her poem explores the implications of being

*unhomed* as synonymous with being unsafe and vulnerable to systems of power and violence that circulate in the contemporary, global world. Home, in its social construction as a happy object, is sentimentalized as a place of safety and comfort. Yet for the speaker, home is a place of turmoil that induces flight and lapses into a site of melancholia.

As Freud suggests in his text “Mourning and Melancholia,”

Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on. In some people the same influences produce melancholia instead of mourning” (243).

Freud argues that mourning lapses into an unhealthy state of melancholia when the subject holds on to the object of loss. For the melancholy migrant, the object of loss is home. Freud asserts that “In melancholia the relation to the object is no simple one; it is complicated by the conflict due to ambivalence” (256); as Shire suggests, home becomes a site of tension precisely because it operates through ambivalence. The speaker voices her desire to return home, but simultaneously recognizes that home is a site of danger and violence: “i want to go home,/ but home is the mouth of a shark” (74-5). The home is both a space and place of desire and a site of fear; while home should be a safe space, it becomes inherently unsafe for diasporic subjects precisely because of political violence, in both the host country and the country of origin, and attendant dehumanization. Infused with the discourse of ambivalence, Shire suggests that home is not a universally safe space, nor is it a site of entitlement. For the privileged subject who has never experienced the affects of displacement, home is an undeniably happy object, one that reflects

domestic safety, familial belonging, and national attachment. But owing to their ambivalent relationship to home, diasporic subjects are reoriented towards the object of home as a site of melancholia.

Ahmed argues that “melancholics would be affect aliens in how they love: their love becomes a failure to get over loss, which keeps them facing the wrong way” (*Promise* 141). In her poem, Shire suggests that mourning for home lapses into melancholia precisely because of the persistent machinations of coloniality that dehumanize diasporic populations and render their bodies vulnerable to violence. Being *unhomed* is a dehumanizing trauma, one which cannot be resolved, and which necessitates an endless mourning for the space and place of home. With regard to melancholia, Ahmed asserts that “Suffering becomes a way of holding on to a lost object” (*Promise* 142), a sentiment which the speaker carries throughout the poem. The speaker endures the weight of unhappiness and melancholic memory, instigating a radical exposure of the amnesia tied to colonial histories. The poem, dedicated to the trauma of diasporic subjects, transforms suffering into a political act of unveiling home as a space and place of precarity.

The figure of the melancholy migrant is a product of affective exchange. Ahmed states that “We can understand the spectrality of [the melancholic migrant] if we consider how histories of empire have been narrated in terms of happiness. The migrant who remembers other, more painful aspects of such histories threatens to expose too much” (*Promise* 148). Through “Home,” Shire enacts this painful remembrance of histories that hegemonic forces attempt to silence. Her poem announces bodies that are subjected to pain, while simultaneously pointing to global ethical complaisance for the lives of migrants. Speaking of the silencing of migrant narratives, Ahmed argues that for the migrant, the supposed duty is to only voice certain stories of arrival



(*Promise* 158); to voice other stories is to disrupt the hegemonic facade of national happiness. Ahmed asserts that, “the melancholic migrant’s fixation with injury is read as an obstacle not only to his own happiness but also to the happiness of the generation to come, and even to national happiness” (*Promise* 144). “Home” is radically political precisely because it refuses to participate in the dutiful happiness of migrant narratives. In view of histories of multidimensional violence, Shire identifies home as an unhealable wound, one that defies assimilation into a happy narrative of migrancy precisely because it is a history that cannot be resolved. The poem functions as a declaration of unhappiness with hegemonic discourse that silences melancholy migrants and the persistence of ethical complaisance; Shire demands attention for the migrant body in pain.

She does this by initially instigating a reflection for the reader’s own privileged assumptions about home as a safe space. The speaker states, “you have to understand,/ that no one puts their children in a boat/ unless the water is safer than the land” (23-5). Through deploying the second person, the speaker directly commands the reader to bear witness. The poem invites the reader to participate in the mourning of home, an act that draws attention to those whose lives are disavowed by the present world order. Addressing the subjects of grief, mourning, and humanity, Judith Butler poses the question, “Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, What *makes for a grievable life*?” (20). By bringing diasporic others into emotional proximity with the reader, Shire places the question of home as part of Butler’s question of the process of humanizing, interrogating what makes us care about some displaced populations and not others. By directly referring to the reader in second person, Shire’s speaker demands the recognition of humanity for diasporic subjects.

“Home” returns us to the vulnerability of individuals and collectives by writing the body in pain. Shire attends to the violence that initiates diasporic journeys by alluding to the horrific physical torment that migrants endure to escape the dangers of home. Her speaker focuses on the body in pain to radically expose the level of violence that one experiences when leaving home. The imagery is uncannily visceral: “no one burns their palms/ under trains” (26-7), “no one crawls under fences/ no one wants to be beaten” (33-34). The sexual violence and discussions of rape in the poem further reflect the vulnerability of migrant bodies: “because prison is safer/ than a city of fire/ and one prison guard/ in the night/ is better than a truckload/ of men who look like your father” (40-5). Referencing the physical pain and emotional turmoil of leaving home, the speaker laments that “no one could take it/ no one could stomach it/ no one skin would be tough enough” (46-8). Deploying the body in pain, the speaker draws attention to the vulnerability of bodies and the precarity of life. By emphasizing the body in pain, Shire’s speaker argues that migration is not always a choice, but a matter of survival, stating that leaving home is “not something you ever thought of doing/ until the blade burnt threats into/ your neck” (15-7). She further emphasizes that “you only leave home/ when home won’t let you stay” (10-11) and “no one leaves home unless home chases you” (12).

Shire confronts the social misconception that diasporic populations only migrate out of a desire for new homes and demands a recognition that survival provides the momentum for leaving home. In the final lines of the poem, the home speaks for itself, asserting, “run away from me now/ i don’t know what i’ve become/ but i know that anywhere/ is safer than here” (94-7). The home’s recognition that it has lapsed into a dangerous space points to the ambivalence of home

for diasporic subjects; while home is a “mythic place of desire” (Brah 188), it is a site of no return. As home has become a dangerous place, the only course of action is to flee.

Through displacement, those who are *unhomed* are faced with the challenges of negotiating with a sense of belonging and are subject to the processes of inclusion and exclusion of the societies in which they arrive. Within the normative imagination, Ahmed states that home “becomes associated with stasis, boundaries, identity and fixity. Home is implicitly constructed as a purified space of belonging” (*Strange* 87). Shire pushes back against dominant understandings of home as intrinsic to identity by questioning what happens to subjecthood when diasporic subjects are *unhomed*. Pointing to the entwinement of the concepts of home and belonging, Brah argues that home “is centrally about our political and personal struggles over the social regulation of ‘belonging’” (Brah 89). Home, as a site of familiarity, informs and determines the sphere of belonging for a community. When the diasporic subject leaves home, identity and community become sites of turmoil. Ahmed gestures towards the social construction of the migrant body as that which does not belong, stating that “migrants are often constructed as strangers. In such a construction, the strangers are the ones who, in leaving the home of their nation, are the bodies out of place in the everyday world they inhabit and in the communities in which they come to live” (*Strange* 78). Shire’s speaker exposes the abjection that she faces as a “strange body” by explicitly voicing the racist discourse she experiences: “go home blacks/ refugees/ dirty immigrants/ asylum seekers/ sucking our country dry/ niggers with their hands out/ they smell strange/ savage/ messed up their country and now they want/ to mess ours up” (49-58).

Through the operation of distinguishing some bodies from others, racist discourse establishes the boundaries and borders of bodies and communities. The hatred for the migrant bodies reflects what Ahmed terms “affective economies” that “align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space” (“Affective” 119). Racism operates through adhesion and cohesion, binding some figures together to create a collective while operating to exclude others. The proximity of the migrant’s body within the borders of the nation provokes anxiety and fear for those with the privilege of feeling at-home. Determined to be out of place, the foreign body is determined to be unassimilable with the communal sphere of belonging. Addressing the abjection associated with migrancy, Ahmed states, “The threat of contamination posed by strange bodies is precisely that those bodies already exceed the place in which they come to be encountered as such” (*Stranger* 53). Through the discourse of abjection, Shire reveals the normative understandings of migrants as the dangerous ‘others’ that pose the threat of invasion and corruption of the nation. Operating on a metonymic slide, the foreign bodies are read as an invasion of the body of the nation causing the bodies of migrants to be aligned with hatred because of the perceived contamination of the pure, national sphere of belonging. The hatred that Shire exposes reveals how migrant bodies are tied to the threat of loss; they are a reminder that home is precarious. The language fettered to migrant bodies further points to the power relations that operate through difference; migrants are “savage,” “dirty,” and smell “strange.” Infused with abjection, this language works to differentiate the migrant body as unlike the bodies within the nation. The politics of fear and hate are intrinsically bound up with the anxiety around spatial and bodily boundaries causing a perpetual anxiety of invasion. The foreign body thus becomes associated with that which is abject; their body poses a threat of contamination to the supposedly pure, homogenous space of the community.

By explicitly voicing the language of hatred tied to the migrant body, Shire's speaker reveals the representational violence that she is subjected to because she has been *unhomed*. Yet the speaker endures this violence because "the insults are easier/ to swallow/ than rubble/ than bone/ than your child body/ in pieces" (68-73); she further asserts, "how do the words/ the dirty looks/ roll off your backs/ maybe because the blow is softer/ than a limb torn off" (59-64). With survival as a priority, the violence of racist discourse is far safer than the physical violence that the speaker would experience if she refused to leave home. Without the "purified space of belonging" of home, diasporic subjects are faced with alienation, racial and cultural tension, and representational violence.

Such populations become affect aliens, which Ahmed defines as "those who are alienated by virtue of how they are affected by the world or how they affect others in the world" (*Promise* 164). The melancholy migrant as an 'affect alien' experiences alienation precisely because he/she is identified as a strange body within the new borders that he/she inhabits. Through the affective economies of exchange, the migrant's body is tied to not-belonging because of the differentiation between those who are at-home and those who are *unhomed*. Gesturing towards the affect of belonging, Ahmed states "To be alienated from happiness is to recognize not only that you are the one who is out of place but also that you cannot make yourself be in place, that you cannot make yourself belong 'anywhere'" (*Promise* 156). The object of loss for the melancholy migrant is irretrievable; once the diasporic subject has left a politically volatile, threatening home, neither are they ever able to return, nor are they able to reorient themselves towards home as an object of happiness. Shire's speaker laments "only tearing up your passport

in an airport toilets/ sobbing as each mouthful of paper/ made it clear that you wouldn't be going back" (20-2). The speaker directly mourns the loss of home with the object of the passport, which operates as a metonymy for belonging; by destroying the passport, the speaker acknowledges that home is a place of no return. Butler suggests that "one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever" (Butler 21). The diasporic subject's mourning of home asserts that once home is lost, it is irretrievable, both as an imagined space of safety and a physical place of domesticity.

Although diasporic subjects of forced migration experience alienation because of their melancholic orientation towards home, Shire suggests that new systems of belonging can be forged through affective communities. Using a multiplicity of voices and narratives, Shire instigates a communal mourning for the lost object of home. The speaker expresses that the "the whole city running as well" (4) to escape the violence emanating from home. Her poem is crowded with bodies in flight and in the throws of violence: "your neighbors running faster than you/ breath bloody in their throats/ the boy you went to school with/ who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin factory/ is holding a gun bigger than his body" (5-9). Shire establishes the magnitude of diaspora by describing multiple bodies in pain; losing home is not a singularity, but a communal experience for subjects who are haunted by a history of exploitation, dispossession, and dehumanization

Through the communal mourning of home, Shire's poem establishes an affective community for melancholic migrants, creating a new site for affects of belonging. In regards to the creation of communities, Ahmed argues that the orientation of subjects towards lost objects

can provide the foundation for membership in a community (*Promise* 141). Using multiple narratives of diasporic suffering, Shire reveals the creation of a community between those who have lost the object of home and are now aligned with home as a site of melancholia. The sharing of melancholic narratives of home opens up the possibility for new spheres of belonging to be forged for affect aliens who are disoriented from happy objects. The communal expression of grief also reveals “the thrall in which our relations with others hold us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control” (Butler 23). Communal mourning offers an ethical space for the recognition of precarious lives. By grieving the lost object of home, Shire demands the recognition of humanity, pushing back against dominant discourse that dehumanizes refugee populations through a language of abjection.

In Shire’s poem, trauma is both a subject and a vehicle for understanding the entwinement of home with loss, mourning, and violence. Paul Gilroy encourages the explorations of violence perpetrated by colonial ideology, stating, “we need to ask how an increased familiarity with the bloodstained workings of racism...might be made to yield lessons that could be applied more generally, in the demanding contemporary settings of multicultural social relations” (4). By unearthing the melancholia of diasporic populations as intrinsically tied to histories of oppression, racism, and displacement, Shire generates a productive site for affective alienation. She forces readers to bear witness to a migrant melancholia that is informed and determined by specific histories of power and politics. For such refugees, home becomes a site of endless mourning that is radically active and rooted in the present moment. “Home” does

not enact the grieving for home as a movement towards healing, but as a reminder of the precarity of home; once home is lost, it is irretrievable and instigates a perpetual mourning for a space and place of belonging and safety. Through the production of a site of melancholy, Shire generates a community based on ethical recognition of the precarity of life. Her exposure of the damage perpetuated by racist ideology refuses to allow the lives of melancholy migrants to go *unnamed* and *ungrieved*. Her insistence on not healing opens up the possibility for a community to be founded on trauma.

For the diasporic subject in Shire's poem, affective alienation becomes a productive and radical site of empowerment. As Ahmed suggests, "Consciousness of alienation involves both recognition of suffering and recognition of what produces that suffering. To become conscious of alienation is to become conscious of how one's being has been stolen" (*Promise* 167). By employing the discourse of melancholia, Shire's speaker becomes conscious of her alienation from the dominant sphere of belonging, but also of the networks of power that inform and determine her exclusion. Ahmed posits that to become conscious of affective alienation is revolutionary in nature, precisely because the subject recognizes that dominant power relations have *made* them an affect alien (*Promise* 168). As a revolutionary affect alien, Shire's speaker experiences estrangement by "feeling at odds with the world, or feeling that the world is odd" (*Promise* 168). Speaking to the revolutionary affect alien, Ahmed argues that "You do not flow; you are stressed; you experience the world as a form of resistance in coming to resist a world" (*Promise* 169). By being in tension with the world and its power relations, Shire exposes the global complaisance of diasporic suffering. Addressing the ethics of recognizing life as precarious, Butler insists that "Suffering can yield an experience of humility, of vulnerability, of



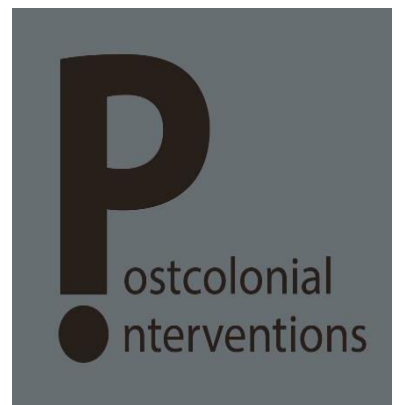
impressionability, and dependence, and these can become resources, if we do not ‘resolve’ them too quickly” (150). Living in a state of melancholia, Shire’s diasporic subject does not let her suffering be resolved. She highlights the dehumanizing suffering that migrants experience, pointing to the precariousness of the human life, while simultaneously invoking melancholia as a tool to provoke ethical outrage in the reader, one that is “distinctively, for an Other, in the name of an Other” (Butler 150).

Shire’s poem “Home” is a call for action on the urgent topic of global migration, diaspora, and the systems of power that inform and determine the inclusion and exclusion of certain bodies. Pushing back against the normative demand for migrants to remain silent, Shire deploys melancholia as a tool to expose global indifference towards the precarious lives of diasporic populations. Wrestling with the fear at the heart of losing home, Shire’s speaker voices the precarity of life for migrant subjects and reorients the reader towards an ethical understanding of the causes of diaspora; many migrant subjects do not leave home by choice, but out of necessity and a desire for survival. Shire critiques the dominant discourse that is infused with xenophobia and exposes the racism, fear, and hatred that torment migrant subjects. “Home” prompts an ethical outrage for the marginalization, oppression, and violence that is targeted towards those who are *unhomed*. Shire’s poem effects an intervention regarding the dehumanization of migrants through unearthing the melancholia invoked by the dispossession of home.

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Sarah Kent is....



**Helmi Ben Meriem:**

**Queer Politics in Abdellah Taia's  
"Moroccan Slave"**

**Postcolonial Interventions: An Interdisciplinary  
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**ABSTRACT:**

This paper examines the politics of being queer in a cross-cultural context in Abdellah Taia's short story "Moroccan Slave". 'Queer politics' will be read in two manners: first, as the politics of being queer for both Moroccans and Americans; second, as the perplexing politics of gay relationships. The aim of this paper is to shed light on the complex nature that engulfs certain gay relationships which have cross-cultural, religious, and age boundaries.

The following questions will be answered with specific reference to Taia's story: What link might exist between cross-national gay relationships and the issue of colonialism? Is there a need for the 'colonized,' in the conventional meaning of the term, to escape the father figure? Where does love stop and become a desire for absorbing the Other's body? How does nationality affect the dynamics of a gay relationship? Who is the 'slave,' the so-called 'dominated inferior' in Taia's story and in such relationships? How does language affect the two parties of the relationship? What are the implications of desiring to learn the language of the 'Other'?

**Keywords:** *Abdellah Taia, Queer politics, Colonialism, West/East, dialectics of desire.*

“There's something about colonization in this text... [. . .] Love as a colonization (a happy one?)... It's about American colonialism too... And a little bit of rebellion, but not in the Western way... And there's (like always with me) this question: Who is the real slave?”

(Taia, “Personal Communication with Abdellah Taia”)

Abdellah Taia, born in Morocco in 1973, is the first Arab author to come out as gay, which resulted in a self-imposed exile to France in 2006. He has written to date nine books in French and one short story in English entitled “Moroccan Slave”<sup>1</sup>. His works are heavily imprinted with the questions of homosexual desire and love within Muslim and Arab countries.

“Moroccan Slave” is a first person narrative told from the perspective of a Moroccan man about his relationship with an older American man; whom he met in Café Maure in Rabat. The Moroccan man, whose name is not disclosed, is a PhD student of French literature in Paris; the American has just moved to Paris and is on a vacation in Morocco. The aim of this paper is to study queer politics as implemented in the story; the title uses the word ‘queer’ in its two meanings: gay and strange. Thus, the paper will be centered on two main ideas: first the politics of being queer and Arab, and second the political environment at the turn of millennium and the West/East gay relationships.

The issue of queer identity in the Arab world has been at the core of many studies by both Arabs and non-Arabs. In his book *Desiring Arabs*, Palestinian American author Joseph Massad tries to locate the ways in which Arabs have depicted their homosexual identity; in

*Unspeakable Love: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Middle East*, British journalist Brian Whitaker gives a detailed reading of the meaning and challenges of being Arab gay or lesbian. The main difference between these two works lies in the methodology adopted by each author: while Massad draws on the literature by Arabs from the nineteenth century, Whitaker focuses on literature by Arabs but mainly on blogs, online stories, and newspaper articles etc.

In *Unspeakable Love*, “Moroccan Slave” is described as “tap[ping] the familiar theme of Arab-Western relationships but it is not the usual tale of sexual exploitation” (99). In an age of increasing tourism to the Arab world, the zone of contact between the West and the Arab world has been growing steadily. One of the major points of intersection is what has been termed as ‘gay sex tourism’, in which Arabs are depicted as being sexually driven. What is surprising in Taia’s story is the move away from such clichés to a side that is usually unseen: a stable love relationship between gay men, one who belongs to the West, the other to the Arab world. “Moroccan Slave” represents a highly charged interaction between the West and the Arab world; it puts into question, as will be detailed later, many assumptions held by both Westerners and Arabs on queer identity in a multi-cultural situation.

In much writings on the subject, of which many have been autobiographical, the interaction between the two gay spectrums has been defined in two different manners: on the one hand the gay Arabs as exotic and erotic and on the other hand, the benevolent Westerner. Two good examples of these two categories are Robert Tewdwr Moss’s travel account *Cleopatra’s Wedding Present: Travels through Syria* and Joseph Geraci’s novel *Deaf Mute Boy*.

On the one hand, in Moss’s book, a Palestinian man named Jihad, described as “alive, warm” (166), is associated, in continuation of a long-established tradition, with vividness and

life as the desired Arab. Jihad, as the aftermath of a fight, has a scar on his chest, which is perceived by Moss “like a crooked smile twisting beneath his nipple” (166); the physical injury and torment is glorified and valued because it is symbolic of strength and survival amid wound and suffering. Jihad’s smile-like scar makes him more desirable for it is a sign of both masculinity, since it is the result of a fight, and of determination, because Jihad’s wound was transformed into a smile symbolic of life.

On the other hand, in Geraci’s book, Maurice, whose life partner Edmund is sick, goes to Sousse in Tunisia for a conference, where he meets Nidhal, who is both deaf and mute. This is not a tale of a sexual relationship between an American professor and a Tunisian boy, but this is rather the familiar story of the Westerner’s desire to be the savior of the distressed third-world citizens. In a clear statement Henri, a friend of Maurice, states: “I am afraid you have Arab fever. It’s a well known reaction. Of the Westerner to Muslim countries”<sup>II</sup> (153); Arab fever is both a fascination with the Arab world and a desire to put into effect the White Man’s burden of helping Nidhal. Nonetheless, even in Geraci’s novel, the image of the overly sexualized Arab man is never absent; for instance, the body of Chedli—another Tunisian man— is related to “nipples [that] [a]re large, rough, hard [. . .] [his] hard cock weighed heavy in his hands, warm, slick [and his]lips were large, moist, his tongue long and pointed”(169); this is intensified by what Chedli himself says afterwards: “Of course, Maurice, I come right over and fuck you in any time you want. . .I am a good fuck. . .Many people tell me this. Men and women. They all want me” (169). The Arab man is both sexualized by himself and by others; the Arab man is desired by all—as Chedli states—including non-Arabs, which creates a very complex dialectic of desire. The Arab man has been for a long time perceived as the site of the West’s desire for an image of manhood



reminiscent of the past; this has resulted in the Arab man's identification with that image and the desire to conform to it and be addressed as such.

The question that arises here is: is there a possibility to escape either negative perception of the gay Arab man? In other words, to what extent can the gay Arab man create a new image of himself? What are the effects of the new millennium on West/Arab relationships? What are the effects of differences in languages on queer relationships? Is the gay Arab man able to escape the 'father figure' in the Westerner? And finally, who is the slave in "Moroccan Slave"? Is it the one who wants to be the slave? Is not that freedom and not slavery? Is "Moroccan Slave" presenting a new image of the gay Arab man—free in a self-motivated slavery?

One of the most basic questions that needs to be addressed is related to the meaning of the expression "queer Arab"; for the purpose of this paper, we will opt for the word 'queer' rather than 'gay', because the former is more inclusive than the latter and it indicates the struggle with the normative society. The expression 'queer Arab' brings into existence two distinctive notions: queer identity and Arab identity; the expression itself challenges the persistent claim that queers do not exist in the Arab world. This expression also highlights the necessity to reclaim a total lost identity for queers and a partial lost identity for the Arab community.

In the "Moroccan slave", Abdellah Taia is not trying to make queerness normal by just addressing it; the story is deeper than a simple claim for normalcy. In her article "On the Very Possibility for a Queer Theory," Claire Colebrook states that there is a need to escape linking queer theory with a desire to be normal; queer theory should be "concerned more with the intuition of the essences than with the critical distance from the natural attitude" (12).

Queer theory should not be an attempt to construct another form of normalcy; it should rather construct a queer identity that is self-defined rather than a replica of an already existing one. Taia's story is not concerned with the question of "radical inclusivity" (Wilcox 89), that is, the need to find queerness in every aspect of life, religion, and literature etc; it is actually concerned with presenting an image of the queer Arab man in relation to himself and to the West—that is, a search for freedom from Westerners' preconceptions in the very act of the self-imposed enslavement of the Moroccan man.

The very title of the short story is problematic; "Moroccan Slave" is suggestive of two opposite matters. On the one hand, 'slave' is reminiscent of a certain assumption held by the European colonizers about the Arab world, which stresses the receptiveness of the colonized Arab to slavery. The title sets a link between the Moroccan and slavery similar to the way it was at the time of European colonization of the Arab world and the world in general. Actually, the Arab man, as any other colonized man, was seen as "insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values" (Fanon 6); therefore, he was only perceived as being inferior to the 'civilized' European man making his enslavement a matter of 'educating' and 'civilizing' him.

On the other hand, the title of the story brings in a different problematic issue: the nature of the sexual act and the sexual roles held by either the Westerner or the Arab. In his article "Homosexuality and Islam," Moroccan author Khalid Duran argues that "Morocco has become a favorite playground for European gay men" (qtd. in Massad 176); indeed, since the early fifties Morocco has been pictured as the place where, as an American gay cult soap opera indicates, "easy-going sex with gorgeous underage youths" is most available (qtd. in Wait 53). This image has been the source of growing sex tourism to Morocco; nonetheless, Duran argues that only passive gay Moroccan men would qualify as queer (qtd. in Massad

176). He goes further as to argue that active Moroccan men are suffering from “emergency homosexuality”, that is, the men’s availability for sexual relationships unlike women who are not available. All of this has resulted in an image of Morocco and the Arab world in general as a sexual paradise characterized mainly by active queer or non-queer men. Indeed, a passage from the story shows this image of the availability of men in Morocco:

In my mind we are still there drinking our first Moroccan tea, discovering each other and looking for a cheap hotel in the old city, the Medina, where we could make love intensely, a place where to offer myself to him, my body, my soul and to go completely naked inside him. (Taia n.p.)

The image here is that of infatuation at first sight; they just drank their first cup of tea together when they were looking for a place to make love in. This situation is of sex tourism where foreigners and Moroccans make contact and search for a cheap hotel for sexual pleasures; but, this sexual encounter develops into a long-term relationship, which suggests that one cannot generalize about relationships, East/West dialectics, or anything else related to the topic.

Some of the aforementioned details suggest that the Moroccan man, who describes himself as a “slave in the name of love” (n.p.), will be the active partner in the relationship with the American. Indeed, this is accurate as evident from the following two instances from the story: “Marlon take me with you . . . *in you*” and “to go completely naked *inside him*” (n.p., my italics). This puts the relationship between the Moroccan and the American men within the traditional sexual roles allocated to both the Arab and the Westerner. Nonetheless, this very distribution of sexual acts is in contradiction with Duran’s assumption about ‘who can be labeled queer’. The Moroccan man is the active and not the passive partner; he does not fit into Duran’s paradigm of queerness. Another element of perplexity needs to be

highlighted; the Moroccan man argues that his partner “is not gay. He is just in love with a boy. There is a difference of course” (n.p.). Such a statement again makes the reader wonder about how such a relationship may be understood in light of the complex net of identities it involves.

This relationship involves a homosexual Moroccan man and a non-homosexual American man. So what do we call such a relationship? Does it qualify as a queer relationship? Is a queer relationship defined by the sexual orientation and act of its adherents or by the bond that exists between them? Indeed, the type of relationship presented in the story gets even more complex as we realize that Marlon has had “[o]ne big love affair with... a woman: he was 26 years old, they have lived together for 10 years” (n.p.); in addition to that the Moroccan man is “his first gay love” (n.p.). The two quotations seem to be in contradiction for how can a man be non-queer and also be in a queer relationship? Is the American man experiencing an “emergency homosexuality”? Or is he bisexual, which makes the notion ‘queer’ inapplicable? These questions have no answer because the story is a first person narrative; we only read what the Moroccan man says and wants to reveal. Furthermore, the American man is “mysterious” and hides much about his life from the Moroccan man; indeed, the story is so vague and ambiguous at times that it is not easy to read it without speculations and assumptions.

Nonetheless, cannot we look at this relationship outside the traditional categories? Is there a possibility for a colonial reading of the story? Can the American man be seen as the missing father figure? How would that affect the notion of ‘slavery’ in the relationship?

The story starts with a very confusing statement: “He monopolizes me. I gave him control of my daily life” (n.p.). The first part of the statement stresses that the American is in

control of the relationship, whereas the second part indicates that slavery was given and not enforced. The Moroccan man has abdicated his power and allocated it into the hands of the American; this is not the typical pattern of enslavement, where the Westerner enslaves those he thinks are inferior to him. But is not it in contradiction with the status of slavery? Actually, as French thinker Michel Foucault indicates, “power is exercised only over free subjects” (“Subject” 790)—in other words, freedom is a requisite of any power relation between two or more individuals. The Moroccan man of the story is only the slave because he is free; he is the slave also because he wants to be. The Moroccan presents a new image that is not conventional; in the colonial era, Arabs resisted enslavement in any form and rejected the idea of being inferior to the Westerner demanding equal rights. However, the story presents a new type of Moroccan man who desires to be enslaved by the Westerner. But why would the Moroccan self-impose the status of slavery upon himself?

Throughout the story, the father of the Moroccan man is never mentioned, whereas the mother is described in one paragraph:

I was thinking of my mother M'Barka: she didn't want me to leave Morocco. She had her plans about my future life, about my job, my house, and even about my wife and my children. I love M'Barka. I read somewhere that to be an adult one must be far as possible from one's mother. (n.p.)

The mother is described as a controlling one who desires to map every detail of her son's life including his marriage. This passage presents certain facts that the son afterwards rejects such as not-leaving Morocco, and marrying a woman. This passage nevertheless presents a complex relationship between the mother and the son, which is about love and revolt. Indeed, this type of relationship between mother and son has been the subject of several novels

including D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913) or another work by Taia, *Infidels* (2012). The Moroccan man in the story associates adulthood with escaping the mother, which becomes synonymous of maturity, freedom and self-realization. The escape chosen by the Moroccan man lies in Marlon: "I always thought of myself as a child. Somebody else's child. First M'Barka's. And now of Marlon's" (n.p.). One can explain the choice of Marlon by the Moroccan's desire and need to escape a controlling mother through a relationship with a man; it can be also read as an attempt to connect with an image of a father figure evocative of the real father, who is absent in the story.

The Moroccan man represents Marlon as "a man, a real man, big, so big, giant, white, bleu [sic] eyes, black hair, no moustache" (n.p.). This description is intriguing regarding the question of desiring Arabs; here, we are making use of the title of Massad's book, which can mean either 'Arabs who initiate the desiring process' or 'Arabs who are the objects of desire'. The description of Marlon situates the Moroccan man at the first application of the double sense. There is a clear fascination with the image of the Westerner in terms related to the color of the eyes, the skin, and the hair, and also in terms related to the stature and physique of Marlon. Traditionally the Arab man was the object of desire and was objectified as being merely a body in relation to color and physique; but in the story we witness a shift in the dialectics of the subject/object of desire. The Moroccan man becomes the subject of desire and objectifies the American; he is fascinated by the American, making the latter the desired Other. This shift is of major significance because it puts the Westerner in the position usually reserved for the Arab; it also empowers the Moroccan because he is voicing himself as a subject not an object of desire.

The shift in the dialectics of object/subject of desire—combined with the self-imposed slavery, which has been discussed earlier as a sign of freedom—enables the Moroccan man to

be the master and not the slave in the relationship. The Moroccan, consciously or unconsciously, fits into one of the most widespread conceptualizations of Arab-Westerner queer relationships. As Duran argues:

Gays seeking active partners in North African countries usually do not realize that their local lovers are often motivated by a hostile attitude towards them as citizens of nations that had once been colonial masters. To sodomize a westerner provides a kind of psychological relief [. . .] to take it out on their oppressors. (qtd. in Massad 177)

The active partner in a queer relationship occupies the top of the hierarchy in the relationship; indeed, the English word for active is 'top' whereas the word for passive is 'bottom'. The sexual act, taken in a context of ex-colonized/ex-colonizer, is inflected with the dynamic of the ex-colonized trying to colonize the body of the ex-colonizer. Penetrating the Westerner becomes the site of retribution for penetrating the motherland: Africa, Asia, and the Americas. This attitude of vengeance coupled with the shift in the desiring dialectics entraps the Westerner in the position of being reduced to a mere body that is exploited. As a matter of fact, the first part of Duran's argument is absent in Taia's text; the Moroccan does not want to avenge himself or his people. This situates the relationship between the Moroccan and the American on another level. Still, the Moroccan man's expenses, including house, food, and clothes etc., are paid for by the American; this could and could not be seen as part of a revenge mechanism, in which the Westerner pays the Arab for being sexually exploited (Massad 177). This is but an assumption on our part since the story operates on many levels, leaving itself open to many speculations by readers.

Although this might seem to encapsulate the whole spectrum of power, desire, and history in this queer relationship, “Moroccan Slave” is challenging because it presents two versions of the same relationship recounted by the Moroccan man. The Moroccan, in a volitional action, acts as and pretends to be the slave, so to speak, of the American; but, he also presents himself as a ‘real’ and genuine slave of the American. On several occasions, the American becomes the master in this relationship, controlling every aspect of the life of the Moroccan; instances of this can be found in the following statements from the story:

I have no choice.

He is my master.

I [Moroccan man] am his slave. (n.p.)

Marlon also asserts in two instances that the Moroccan would only go to Paris to stay with him; there is stress on the exclusivity of the Moroccan in relation to Marlon. The Moroccan is entirely possessed by Marlon; he is also excluded from interacting with others and the outside world: he only communicates with Marlon, so far as the story is concerned. The Moroccan loses his freedom of decision; he cannot choose anymore because Marlon has made all the choices for and on behalf of him.

The exclusive and excluding nature of the relationship between the Moroccan and the American takes on many forms in which the Moroccan is restricted to one space, that of the Parisian apartment. This flat is described as being “his [Marlon] place” (n.p.) which is suggestive of the fact that the Moroccan exists in a space already constructed to accommodate the needs and desires of Marlon. The image we get of the life of the Moroccan is evocative of the traditional adage about women that reads “a women’s place is in the kitchen and the



bedroom” (qtd. in O’Dell, 62); similar to the women described in the proverb, the life of the Moroccan is limited to these spaces:

I do all I have to do before his return at 7:00 pm. I prepare his favorite tagines and arrange everything in the apartment. Everything clean, in its place. He is happier that way. So we can eat Moroccan food, drink mint tea and make love for a long time in peace. (n.p.)

This description is centered on three major activities: cooking, cleaning, and making love. The diction used clarifies even more the nature of the relationship; the Moroccan does what he *has to do*, which is indicative of an obligation. Seven in the evening becomes the point where the Moroccan’s day is scrutinized in terms of what has and has not been accomplished; the image is similar to the image of the master inspecting the work of his/her slaves. Indeed, the American has asked the Moroccan man, earlier in the story in Morocco, to learn from his mother how to make tea because “[he, Marlon] really like[s] it and [he] want[s] [The Moroccan] to prepare it” (n.p.). This indicates how the life of the Moroccan was constructed for him from the first meeting in Tangiers; the American has “monopolize[d]” (n.p.) the life of the Moroccan to its finest elements. Eating food is followed by making love “for a long time in peace” (n.p.), which highlights the limited range of activities the Moroccan is allowed to do. It also reinforces the idea that the American is the master and the Moroccan is the slave. This Master/Slave relationship is imprinted with a fear of not pleasing the American: “I don’t like him angry; I’m scared when he gives me a bad look sometimes” (n.p.). The Moroccan’s fear makes him constantly self-censoring in relation to his actions and sayings.

One of the most captivating images used in the story to illustrate how the American is the master is when Marlon is associated with Marlon Brando and The Moroccan is associated

with Nina Simone. How does the association between Marlon and Marlon Brando reinforce the idea that Marlon is the master?

Marlon Brando, an American actor born in 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1924, in Omaha, Nebraska shot into limelight with *A Streetcar Named Desire*, a rendition of Tennessee William's 1947 play. Earlier, we have explained how the Moroccan is fascinated by and desires Westerners; the desire intensifies with the link set between Marlon and Marlon Brando. Marlon is described as being "a man, a real man" (n.p.) parallel to the image evoked by Brando: "Marlon Brando and his gang, clad in black leather, expressed a rather crude manliness, which symbolizes an aggressive readiness to assert their own youthful needs and desires [. . .] if necessary even with violence" (Richard 300).

The image Marlon Brando presents is that of rebellion, manliness, and youthfulness, which attracts a wide range of individuals for a variety of reasons; one can speculate that the Moroccan is captivated by Brando because the latter represents what the average Moroccan man lacks whether innately or out of social restrictions. Marlon, the American partner, is seen in accordance with this macho image of Marlon Brando. The Moroccan is always afraid of any unhappiness that he may cause in the American because in his mind Marlon is associated with manliness and mastery unlike him. According to Linda Williams, "Marlon Brando [was] the quintessential American male sex symbol of the late fifties and early sixties" (114). In a analogous way, the Moroccan states, Marlon "is irresistible . . . Big . . . So present in my eyes" (n.p.). Both Marlons are representations of manliness and authority; this association between mastery and Marlon is intensified by an image present in the story.

In four different instances, the Moroccan partner associates himself to African American singer Nina Simone, may be because both are either partially or completely

Africans, stating that she is “the only person with whom [he] can speak clearly about [his] love, without shame, without regrets” (n.p.). The Moroccan man quotes some of Simone’s songs to illustrate his relationship with the American; using an expression from “Don’t Explain”, he makes a clear link between himself and a state of slavery:

You’re my joy and you’re my pain?

My life is yours, love

Don’t Explain

All my thoughts are for you

For I’m so completely yours. (Simone)

This song from which the Moroccan quotes “I am so completely yours” is a song that depicts an image of women that has been heavily criticized by feminists; the song is the story of a woman, who welcomes her partner despite the fact he is cheating on her. The speaker in the song is a woman, who does not want to look at the lipstick traces on her partner’s clothes or neck; she would rather forgive her partner for his cheating than to lose him. The Moroccan sets an analogy between the way he welcomes Marlon and the way the speaker in the song welcomes her partner; there is, of course, no indication that Marlon is cheating on the Moroccan. Still, the deployment of this particular image by the Moroccan to illustrate Marlon’s inspection of the flat every evening is suggestive of his vulnerability and weakness against Marlon, which again puts Marlon at the position of the master. Indeed, the very association of Marlon with Marlon Brando and the Moroccan with Nina Simone shows the distribution of power in this relationship; Brando is symbolic of manliness whereas Simone is symbolic of defeat and acceptance of emotional abuse and the creation of art out of it.

Trying to understand the relationship between the Moroccan and the American presents another challenge: language politics, more specifically, queer language politics. Language plays a significant role in shaping the relationship that encompasses the Moroccan and the American since they do not share the same mother tongue. The Moroccan's mother tongue is Arabic, but he is a PhD student of French literature, making French his second language; the American's mother tongue is English and he does speak basic French. From the start of the relationship, the American wants to control linguistically the Moroccan:

[Ma]-Yes. Why don't you speak English?

[Mo]-Oh! I have learnt it at the Lycée, but I have forgotten everything... everything. Now I am concentrating my whole energy only on French... because I am going to Paris.

[Ma]-Good! In Paris you should start learning English again... seriously... you'll need it, I'm sure!

[Mo]-With who?

[Ma]-With me... only with me! (n.p.)

Marlon, who has come to Paris a year before meeting the Moroccan, insists on using only English when travelling in Morocco. The fact that he wonders why the Moroccan does not speak English can be read as an American pride in their language and an expectation by Americans that others speak English. In a study by the American Department of Education, statistics have shown that only 18% of Americans speak another language other than English compared to 53% in European countries who speak another language in addition to their mother tongue (Ghaffari 35); this tendency not to learn another language has been attributed

to a “vainglorious conten[tment] [. . .] because English is a ‘lingua franca’” (Ghaffari 35). Moreover, English is seen by some monolingual educators as the language of “rational discourse” (Walker 171) and English has been associated with sciences, discoveries, and advancement. The Moroccan’s learning English is seen as a necessity by the American, which suggests the presence of the idea that English must be spoken by all; the Moroccan accepts this postulation and “learn[s] English alone everyday” (n.p.).

Several key questions surface here: What are the effects of language politics in the master/slave dialectic? What is the role of language in this queer relationship? But how can language help to decipher the master/slave relationship which is central to “Moroccan Slave”? In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that “discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it” (101); language produces power in the act of enunciation but also in the very nature of language. Each language is different from other languages, because each language is unique to its environment. In *Language and Culture*, Claire Kramsch argues that “language is the principal means whereby we conduct our social lives. When it is used in contexts of communication, it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways” (3). The relationship depicted in “Moroccan Slave” involves a speaker of Arabic and a speaker of English; each language is the product of its environment and culture, which are to a great extent different. Thus, the choice of a particular language to be used in the relationship is not as simple as it might be; using English in a cross-language relationship carries with it some significant implications. Marlon asks his Moroccan partner to learn English and to come live with him in Paris; but why does not Marlon learn Arabic? Why does the Moroccan need to speak Marlon’s language? One might wonder if—whether it is the American or the Moroccan who learns the other’s language—it will just have the same effects on both Marlon and the Moroccan. One might also wonder why Marlon does not want to use French to communicate

with his partner, when he is able to “speak French, not fluently but with a charming and virile accent” (n.p.). French is a neutral language for both of them and is not the mother tongue of neither of them, despite the fact that French is widespread in Morocco because of the French colonization. French would seem to be one of the best languages to be used in this relationship. So how do we understand the use of English? One can argue that Marlon is trying to locate his Moroccan partner within the American paradigm of values, customs, and ways of thinking among others; language is a tool in power relations enabling Marlon to indoctrinate his Moroccan partner in and via language. Marlon is further empowered as the master in this relationship by making English the language of communication; the Moroccan is thus enslaved in the very act of speaking and enunciating his feelings, desires, and needs. We can argue that using any language, whether English, Arabic, or French, is about “meet[ing] your life with your own words, own rhythm, inspiration and voice” (Taia n.p.). As a result, the Moroccan’s voicing of himself in English does not truly enable him to voice himself because of the very nature of language.

Nonetheless, the Moroccan sees his learning English in terms unrelated to mastery/slavery issues. He argues that:

[He] want[s] to tell Marlon everything about [himself], [his] feelings, [his] country, [his] home town, [his] body, [his] skin . . . [He] want[s] to be capable to understand all his [Marlon] words. He is from another world- a world far away. (n.p.)

The Moroccan does not think of learning English in terms of a mastery/slavery dialectic but rather in terms of enabling him to better communicate with Marlon. The Moroccan sees English as a medium of communication; he does not relate it to any power matters. He feels

that English becomes a necessity for him because he has entered the English world when meeting Marlon. “Moroccan Slave” is a complex story that defies being simplified and limited to one idea as will be further developed in the following part about the Arabic language.

The impact of language in the relationship between Marlon and the Moroccan gets more complicated at the end of the story. Marlon tells his Moroccan partner: “I want you to teach me Arabic . . . I want to hear your voice in Arabic” (n.p.). Here, Marlon desires learning Arabic because, like the Moroccan with English, learning Arabic would allow him to enter the world of the Moroccan, hear him and communicate with him in his mother tongue. Arabic becomes a bridge that connects two individuals; the Moroccan will “be his [Marlon’s] professor” (n.p.) teaching him Arabic. This would empower the Moroccan because he will be the one holding knowledge unlike Marlon, since language, as argued earlier, is a tool in power relations. What is more important in Marlon’s learning English, however, is the timing chosen to learn Arabic: “We start today September 11. The first lesson” (n.p.). It is the date that is symbolically intriguing. September 11 is evocative of the attacks on several sites in the USA by Al-Qaeda. What are the implications of such timing in relation to language and East/West queer politics?

In his book *Unspeakable Love*, Whitaker argues that Marlon’s desire to learn Arabic is “a twist that suggests their idyllic life cannot last” (99). Learning Arabic can be seen in two ways. In a post-September 11, Arabic became a sign of terrorism and violence. Deepa Iyer states that “in the mass hysteria since September 11, speaking in Arabic or languages that may be mistaken as Arabic has been enough in many cases to justify the investigation, detention, and deportation of individuals” (qtd. in Shtanki 73). Arabic was associated with hostility and its speakers were defined as either terrorists or potential terrorists. Here, we are making

another assumption about the story: that it deals with events taking place after the attacks of September in the United States of America. Thus, if we work within this assumption, a basic but vital question comes to the foreground: Why would Marlon wish to learn Arabic if Arabic is associated with terrorism and violent behavior?

The answer is not as simple as it might seem; one may argue that the desire to learn Arabic is unrelated to the aforementioned date, and that it is just coincidental. But one may also argue that the desire to learn Arabic is linked to a desire to understand its speakers; as Leo Van Lier argues, learning another language can be linked to a “utilitarian” aim: “Currently, the tragic events of September 11, 2001, have led to an increase in the interest in studying Arabic. In some cases this may be with the goal of understanding Islamic peoples better” (52). The utilitarian aim of learning Arabic can be summed up in the desire to better grasp the complexity of the Arab and Muslim worlds. In voicing himself in Arabic, the Moroccan is more authentic and genuine in depicting his feelings and thoughts than he would be in English or French. Nonetheless, when Marlon learns Arabic, the relationship that encompasses him and the Moroccan may not last because of the Moroccan’s ease in expressing himself in Arabic. Learning Arabic is a twist in the pleasant and peaceful existing relationship as Whitaker observes earlier; one may think that learning Arabic may start as a way to understand the other but may end as a medium to see beyond the facade English creates and carries in the Moroccan partner.

In brief, studying the image of slave/master in Taia’s “Moroccan Slave” cannot reduce the story to restricting ideas, which do not embrace the entirety of the story and the relationship it depicts. The relationship depicted shows that East/West queer relationships cannot be seen as either tales of pure sexual exploitations or tales of the benevolent Westerner father figure. “Moroccan Slave” elaborates on queer politics, that is the intersection between



being queer and cultural, political, and social environments; the story shows that the conventional view of sex roles in sexual encounters between Westerners and Arabs cannot sum up the wide spectrum of possible forms of relationships. The master/slave dialectics is never stable; it rather fluctuates depending on several factors, on the perspective taken, and on the general environment, among others. This dialectic cannot be fully understood without drawing the lines that construct queer identity in every case: assumptions, preconceptions, political atmosphere, the colonizer/colonized dialectic, and language inter alia. Language has been an essential part in the construction of a special and unique relationship that transcends generational, age, cultural, and religious gaps; furthermore, language has been proven to be both a tool to foster and advance the relationship but also to control the relationship by either partner.

To sum up, “Moroccan Slave” is not totally open to interpretations because it shows less than what it hides; Abdellah Taia’s story presents two queers in their totality, which at times is contradictory even conflicting but most importantly genuine and covering all layers of personality—visible and concealed.

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<sup>1</sup> "Moroccan Slave" is published by the Bard College online in an unnumbered version.

<sup>2</sup> Henri seems to confuse being an Arab with being a Muslim. Indeed, Arabs can be Muslims, Christians, Jewish, and Baha'i among others; also, a Muslim can be Arab, Chinese, Persian, Turkish, Indian, and European among others.

**Sanaz Fotouhi**

**Alternative Readings: Approaching  
Iranian Writing in English as Postcolonial  
Literature**

**Postcolonial Interventions: An Interdisciplinary  
Journal in Postcolonial Studies**

**ABSTRACT:**

This paper draws on various readings of colonial and post-colonial theories to approach diasporic Iranian literature in English through a post-colonial framework. It examines the development of this literature in response to domineering and hegemonic forces within and beyond Iran, and highlights the techniques that some writers engage with as a means to re-frame and rewrite certain discourses of representation. In specific pays attention to the way certain writers reconstruct and re-imagine representation through engagement and rewriting of history, discursive and physical transgression and elements of magic realism. This paper situates the importance of this literature within the larger framework in which it is emerging, arguing for its perpetual social and political impact in the way Iran are seen and see themselves now and in the future in the West.

**Keywords:** *Iranian literature, Post-colonial literatures, History, Magic Realism, Iranian women*

## Introduction

When it comes to naming colonized nations and consequently postcolonial literatures, Iran is probably not one that would immediately spring to mind. This is, however, if we were to define a colonized society in the traditional sense of physical and political occupation of a country by another. In this case, then Iran has never been colonized. But as we know colonial forces (and postcolonial reactions) do not necessarily equate a bloody conquest and years of occupation. However, as history has proven, colonialism can also mean an imposition of power through ideological and political influences. This form of colonialism does not necessarily always come from external forces and its meaning can be extended to also include internal and forceful impositions of dominant ideologies over groups of people. In explaining this approach to colonialism (and consequently postcolonial reactions) Elleke Boehmer's definition is useful: "colonialism [is] not different from other kinds of authority, religious or political, in claiming a monopoly on definitions in order to control a [. . .] reality" (35). From this perspective, then the Iranian nation, with a history of foreign ideological influences that affected its internal operation, as well as a series of domestic policies that have continuously claimed forceful monopolies on its people to control certain realities and the way Iranian history is recorded and projected, as will be contextualized in this paper, can be seen as having a certain kind of imposing colonial history.

Consequently, some cultural products emerging in response to this could also be read as postcolonial responses, where again, the definition of the term postcolonial does not equate the traditional definition of it as "after colonialism". Rather, here it reflects the multiple meanings of the term, specifically resonating Homi Bhabha's argument that "post" does not indicate "sequentiality [. . .] or polarity" (1). Here, as he defines it, post indicates "moving beyond" to resist the attempt at totalitarian forms of social expression. It is from the junction

of Boehmer's definition of colonialism and Bhabha's interpretation of "post" as beyond in postcolonialism that this paper argues that certain literatures emerging from Iran could be approached through a postcolonial framework. Given that the study of all Iranian literature in this way would be impossible, this study is limited to examining literary productions by the members of the Iranian diaspora, specifically works produced in English, over the last thirty-five years.

Although there is a vast body of diasporic Persian literature, this paper has been limited to examining writing only in English because of the significance of this linguistic choice. English, as we will see, provides writers not only with the means to overcome power imbalances and silences in Iran, but also the ability to engage with and respond to some of the imposing Western forces and literary representations that have historically reflected certain powerfully stereotypical images of Iran and Iranians around the globe. As the rest of the paper would demonstrate, the representation of Iran and the Iranians in the West (particularly in America and expressed in English) has usually been marred by two opposing historically and politically drawn images of pre-revolutionary exoticism of Persia or its post-revolutionary representations as terrorist and religiously fanatic. These two dominantly popular types of representations have not only historically imposed certain stereotypical understandings, silencing the voices and experiences of many in the West, but also hampered and affected the visibility, integration and assimilation of the Iranian diaspora into their host communities.

It is, therefore, in the above context that this paper argues that the unifying and totalitarian pre- and post-revolutionary regimes of Iran, and some dominant pre and post revolutionary representations of Iran and Iranians in the West, could be seen as quasi-colonial and oppressive forces that have rendered many Iranians marginal both in Iran and abroad and

therefore aspects of their literature may be seen as postcolonial responses to these representations. This paper, therefore, examines specific literary techniques such as engagement with and re-writing of certain elements of history, narrative and physical transgressions of characters, and magic realism, that Iranian writers in English use in order to give voice to silenced experiences and to re-write and re-construct certain dominant representations. The main emphasis here is an analysis of how these techniques are dismantling imposing and already existing representations in order to project desired reflections of the multiplicities of Iranian experiences in Iran and abroad.

### **Responding to the Iranian Past:**

In looking at Iranian history, one could argue that generally, there is a certain kind of homogeneity in how facts and events are reflected, recorded and represented. As Nasrin Rahimieh observes, “...the construction of Iranian national identity has insisted upon the erasure and elision of gender, language and ethnicity” (38). This is reflected in narratives of Iranian history where voices of ethnic and religious minorities, alternative political parties, and women have nearly always been silenced by the ruling political regimes, and remained outside the mainstream discourse of historical representation, seldom publicly acknowledged. The dominant Iranian perspective of history, as seen in history books, is often told from the mainstream male perspective, politically and ideologically aligned with the government of the time, and recorded and presented in a way to ensure the appearance of a continuous hegemonic and sustained narrative of the Iranian nation.

This means that in dominant narratives of Iranian history, many alternative histories and experiences have been left out and not represented. Consequently, for those not represented there is lack of a sustained sense of historical identity. This is because as theorists such as Stuart Hall believe identities are “constituted within, not outside



representation”, and “we must understand [identities] as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies” (4). From this perspective, one could argue that by not being allowed to be publicly and historically acknowledged and represented, many Iranians including people of ethnic and religious minority backgrounds, women and those with alternative political ideologies, have not been given the possibility to fully realise their own sense of identity and historic sensibility within Iran. Consequently, this lack of public historical acknowledgement and representation, has not allowed for many to be historically “legitimised”. For “what it means to have a history,” according to Bill Ashcroft “is the same as what it means to have a legitimate existence: history and legitimation go hand in hand” (*Transformation* 83). What this means is that the unifying and exclusive historical narratives of Iran, like colonial forces, have not factored the multiplicity of histories in the grand narrative of history and incorporated them only “at its edges”, within a “marginal reality”( *Transformation* 92).

It is in response to this lack of historical existence and hegemonic historical narratives that engagement with history through literature could be seen as a postcolonial apparatus. By engaging with history, as we will see, Iranian writers in English appear to be tapping into, rewriting, and challenging dominant historical narratives, to introduce neglected multiplicities of Iranian experiences and to bring them from the margins to the centre. As such, like postcolonial writers, they not only challenge certain elements of dominant narratives of history, but also the “the master discourse of history” (“Remembering” 709). One way that this strategy operates, according to Ashcroft, is by “interpolat[ing] the master discourse of [...] history, engaging it on its own terms” (“Remembering” 709). And one of the functions of interpolating history is “to subvert the unquestioned status of the “scientific record” by reinscribing the “rhetoric” of events,” (*Transformation* 92) by injecting, inserting

and interrupting history with marginal voices and narratives. These narratives, consequently, offer alternative versions and reconstruct history.

This kind of interpolation of grand narratives of history can be seen as a recurring underlying theme, manifested in various ways, throughout the body of diasporic Iranian writing in English. We come across numerous works that tap into and narrate specific historical periods from untold perspectives and through previously silenced voices. In *Paper: Dreams of a Scribe* (2004), for instance, Bahiyyih Nakhjavani, a Baha'i Iranian writer, takes us back into the unrecorded world of a scribe in 19<sup>th</sup> century Persia as he tries to find the perfect paper to write his perfect work. Similarly Anita Amirrezvani in *Blood of Flowers* (2007) recounts the untold history of a little rug-maker girl during the time of Shah Abbas (1571 – 1629). Amirrezvani follows a similar theme in *Equal of the Sun* (2013) recounting the fictional story of a Princess in the 1570s, Pari Khanoom, from the perspective of a beloved servant. Told from the completely unheard voice of the servant about a woman whose story would not have been told in history books to begin with, the book interjects and interpolates the grand narrative of Iranian history, offering a completely new perspective of that period of time from what has been historically recorded.

While Amirrezvani takes us deep back in time, others engage with more contemporary historical periods. In *The Age of Orphans* (2010), for example, Laleh Khadivi explores several decades of alternative Iranian history of the Kurdish minority by following the marginal perspective of an orphan boy to adulthood. As the book begins, the unnamed narrator loses his father and is taken away from his land forcefully and renamed Reza Khourdi by those in charge – Reza after the Shah and Khourdi after his tribe. Through his story, his struggles against the Shah, the search for a sense of identity taken away when he

was renamed, and his position leading up to the revolution, we encounter an alternative view of Iranian history from the rarely seen Kurdish perspective.

Throughout recent Iranian history, even prior to the revolution, those who expressed alternative political views or hinted at discontent often faced harsh punishments and were quickly removed by government forces. This is why engagement with some of those unacknowledged political activists and their histories, which have been almost completely wiped out of the mainstream pages of recent Iranian history, is one of the recurring themes of Iranian writing in English. *In Rooftops of Tehran* (2009), for instance, Mahbod Seraji brings to life characters who follow in the footsteps of revolutionaries, and whose stories would never have been told otherwise. As the book begins in early 1970s, Pasha a 17-year-old is in love with Zari, the girl next door. But, she is about to get married to another young man, a friend of Pasha's, nicknamed Doctor. Unfortunately Doctor, a political activist, is jailed and eventually executed by the Shah's secret police. His family finds out about his death only when the police contact them to ask for the price of the bullet used for his execution. Following an emotional outcry, Pasha tells us how Doctor and others like him are altogether wiped out from the pages of history:

No one will ever know the price of the bullet that killed Doctor. His parents are forbidden to speak of it. The stone on his grave must be left blank except for his name. [...] Doctor will not be issued a death certificate, and all documents pertaining to his birth will also be destroyed. As far as the world is concerned, Doctor never existed.

(143)

Pasha's outburst foregrounds the government's systematic erasure of political activists from Iranian history pages.

*In the Walled Garden* (2003), by Anahita Firouz, too, offers a glimpse of untold histories of political struggles and class differences in pre-revolutionary Iran. Set on the brink of the revolution it tells the story of a near love affair between Mahastee, an independent and glamorous aristocratic woman, and her childhood sweetheart, Reza, the son of their gardener, now a defiant political activist against the Shah. Through this relationship the novel reveals and foregrounds the complexity of Iranian society and history through the narratives of two marginalized characters. By highlighting their almost opposing struggles, the novel offers a different alternative kind of history of the revolution: from the perspective of an aristocratic woman and a Marxist revolutionary – both of whose voices and experiences are usually left out of the history of the revolution in Iran.

Although the writers named above, and others, interpolate history by foregrounding alternative historical perspectives, their narratives still operate within the framework of a recognisable sequence of historical events. While this interpolation is transformative it still operates and gives prominence to frameworks of dominant narratives that had marginalized them to begin with. This means that despite introducing alternative histories and voices, they are still bound by the teleology and chronology of recognisable dominant accounts. To use Ashcroft's words, they still fall victim to the "trap of the empirical narrative which privileges certain species of "facts."" (*Transformation* 88)

One author, Gina Nahai, is aware of this, and has dedicated her career to transforming history by offering an incompatible and contesting narrative, compared to the dominant teleology of events. Of her novels so far, three revolve around the lives of Jewish women and their histories in Iran. What distinguishes her work, however, is her approach to the representation of history. In *Cry of the Peacock* (1991), for instance, Nahai traces the matrilineal history of a group of Jewish women in the ghettos of Iran through 200 years

leading to the revolution. But, instead of narrating their stories through known linear dominant discourses of Iranian history, she rewrites events as we know them to highlight and foreground the underrepresented Jewish experience.

For centuries, Iranian Jews, both in their actual and historical existence, have been marginalised. While confined to their own quarters until Reza Shah's reign, they are also only marginally present in history books. Nahai draws on their collective memory and experiences to create a historical novel that reflects the lived history of Iranian Jews. Based on oral history, the novel defies the linearity and teleology of historical events as we know it. Instead it constructs a new kind of history woven of myths and unrecorded memories. It invents a mythical history of Iranian Jews through the story of Esther the Soothsayer, and her granddaughter Peacock, who lives for over a hundred years. We see Persian Kings come and go, and the regimes change. But all of these events that are usually dominant in the narratives of Iranian history are now peripheral, and highlighted only if they contribute to the flow of life and history of the ghetto, or if those from the ghetto contribute to what is happening outside. This approach, the foregrounding of alternative histories, makes the novel a site for contesting Iranian history against dominant discourses. As such it has "the potential to become the way in which the past is understood" (*Transformation* 89). It can be read as legitimizing Jewish Iranian historical identity as it provides them with a site of "struggle for authority over the past," (Ashcroft, *Transformation* 98) by transforming the teleology of Iranian history as we have believed it, interpolating the very narrativity of history.

These narratives, by transforming dominant accounts of history and offering alternative voices, could be read as transgressing and moving into what Homi Bhabha describes as the realm of "the beyond" in postcolonial narrativity. Here, as he describes it, the beyond "is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past", but a movement in

“transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion” (2). According to Bhabha’s definition, in this movement there is “a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the “beyond”: an exploratory, restless movement” (2). As he says, “it is the move away from the singularities of “class” or “gender” as primary conceptual and organizational categories, [that] has resulted in an awareness of the subject positions – of race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation – that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world” (2). Here, to move beyond singularities, however, there is a need to think “beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences” (1).

While rewriting and reframing historical narratives has been one way Iranian writers are writing into the realm of the beyond, outside of singular and dominant forms of representation, this is often only made possible through a physical movement or a journey that literally moves characters outside the physical, national and cultural borders that had limited their sense of self to begin with. Here, the very concept of going on a journey itself is important since it is, according to Dagninio “often seen to symbolize the pursuit and achievement of a sense of personal identity,” (65) something that Iranian women, specially, were historically not given a chance to do. The journey in literature, traditionally, also “seems to follow the paradigms of a masculine identity formation” (65). In Iranian literary tradition especially, for instance in Sufi poetry and early nationalistic literature, the journey is almost always about a man who embarks on a trip, leaving the women behind. Taking the particularly masculine form of the journey in Iranian literature, and the physical limitations that had bound a woman’s sense of identity within Iranian society, the journey in Iranian writing in English operates on two levels to allow Iranian women, especially, to transgress and move beyond, recount and reconstruct dominant narratives that had defined their sense of

self. On one level it allows for women to physically transgress borders that had defined their sense of identity and dictated the nature of their relationships to others. On another level, by adapting the very formula that had hampered Iranian women's sense of identity, the journey becomes part of what Boehmer identifies as "subversion by imitation [as] [. . .] an important mode of resistance" (174) in postcolonial discourse.

This is why the journey is a prominent theme in numerous novels by Iranian women writers. For example, in Gina Nahai's *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*, which revolves around the conflicted relationship between the Jewish woman Roxanna and her daughter Lili, it is only through Roxanna's journey outside of the Jewish ghetto, and beyond Tehran and Iran, that she can reconstruct her own sense of identity beyond what was defined by the society. In Nahid Rachlin's *Foreigner* (1979), the main protagonist Feri finds her own sense of self by travelling to America, and then back to Iran. Similarly in *The Fortune Catcher* (1997), it is Layla's travel back and forth between Iran and America that provides her with an understanding of her own sense of freedom and identity. In all these narratives the women first overcome limitations of movement imposed upon them by embarking on a journey as a means to go beyond other limiting forces that had defined their sense of identity. Only consequently can they gradually break through and transgress other layers of oppressions, definitions and fears, giving them the space to grow and reconstruct their sense of self in their own terms, often in a new environment beyond the borders of Iran.

Sometimes, however, these physical journeys and transgressions beyond cannot be easily undertaken since numerous restrictions have formed too many impenetrable barriers. Consequently, transgressions beyond are sometimes made possible only by the intervention of some sort of metaphysical force, such as magic, that offer a break to the realist conventions of expression and existence. In fact, in some cases, the women's very physical or ontological

survival depends on the interference of such forces. In explaining the importance of magic in the work of Iranian women writers, Wendy Faris' "Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction" is extremely informative. Faris defines magic realism as a genre that "combines realism and the fantastic in such a way that magical elements grow organically out of the reality portrayed" (163). She goes on to "invoke Scheherazade's children as its standard bearers because they might be imagined as 'replenished' postmodern narrators, born of the often death-charged atmosphere of high modernist fiction, but able some-how to pass beyond it" (165). According to Faris, "Scheherazade's children are all postmodern story tellers [who] may need magic to battle death, a death more depersonalized even than the one their mother faced from King Shahriyar; they inherit the literary memory, if not the actual experience, of death camps and totalitarian regimes, as well as the proverbial death of fiction itself" (164). Faris, however, argues that, while Scheherazade is "concerned with epistemological questions, with figuring out how to extend her store of knowledge to stave off her death, her children need strategies for a different, narrative, kind of survival". She believes that although these children have "come into being as epistemological objects", if they are to survive, they "must go forward as subjects, crossing into the ontological domain" (166). They must find their own voices; they have to "contend with their own narrative existence [. . .] they must invent their fictional identities for themselves" (166). But as Faris argues, these narrators need to invent their own ways to surpass the crushing forces of their past, things that realism and male-dominated realist modes of narrative would not let them do so. This is why, she argues, these narrators need magic to secure their survival. Although Faris focuses on Latin American, Caribbean and Indian writing, her argument can be applied to some of the writings of diasporic Iranian writers in English. This is not only because Scheherazade's Persian background and Iranian women's responses today make this parallel more relevant and appealing but also because many of these women also need magic to help



them cross over into the ontological domain, sometimes even just to live as subjects of their own stories.

One example of this is demonstrated in Nahai's *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*, (from here referred to as *Moonlight*). Although the main plot revolves around Lili as she tries to find her mother, Roxanna, who had opened wings and flown away from their house in Tehran, *Moonlight* is a story that spans generations of conflict between Jewish Iranian mothers and daughters, and the society in which they live, as it follows their transgressive journey from the ghettos of Tehran into eventual exile. Even though narrated polyphonically through the voices of Roxanna, Lili and Miriam, this is not enough to guarantee their survival. It is, however, only magic that saves their lives and ensures their reunion. It is Roxanna's magical ability to fly that contributes to her epistemological and ontological survival. Had it not been for her ability to suddenly grow wings and fly she would have died as a child at the hands of her own mother who, believing her to be cursed, had thrown her off the roof. It is also the possibility of flight that allows her to escape her marriage, and to transcend the boundaries of Iranian society in which, as her husband claims, "no woman can get beyond a city's borders without her husband's permission" (Nahai 143). It is magic that also eventually takes her to Turkey through a difficult journey and into America. It is again magic that leads to her eventual reunion with her daughter in America who had searched all her life for her mother. As Roxanna settles in America magically her frail body gradually fills up with a mysterious liquid, and when doctors are tending to her, her family accidentally discovers her and informs Lili. After she is bedridden with this liquid, Roxanna is forced to silently listen to all the untold and secret stories that Lili is being told by her sister Miriam. The liquid, Miriam tells Lili, is made of sorrow and guilt, which can only be released through a magical ritual performed by Lili. Following the ritual Roxanna begins to shed tears, releasing the guilt and

gaining the ability to speak. As the result of this, for the first time, she starts to tell her own version of things and heals her damaged relationship with her daughter.

The significance of magic realism as a kind of postcolonial resistance is clearly reflected in Nahai's novel. As Stephen Slemon puts it, magic realism "carries a residuum of resistance towards the imperial centre and to its totalizing systems of generic classification" (x). This resistance is formed as it focuses on what Theo D'Haen calls the "excentric", by "speaking from the margins, from a place "other" than "the" or "a" centre," (195) by "a voluntary act of breaking away from the discourse perceived as central" (196). In this narrative, it is magic that allows for Roxanna's physical and narrative transgression as a marginal Iranian Jewish woman to having a voice as the central character of the novel.

On a larger scale, vis-à-vis traditional Iranian literature, magic realism operates in a similar way, as a kind of resistance towards the realism of unitary and coherent narrative forms of patriarchal Iranian literature in which women often had very little presence. Like Scheherzade's daughters, for these women to survive and to be heard, they need magic to breach the boundaries of realist Iranian literature. Magic provides them with a unique discursive space in which Iranian women writers can express themselves and their foremothers according to their own needs, beyond the borders of Iran that had limited their movement, as "subjects, and protagonists of their own reality rather than objects and antagonists in the Father's drama" (Wenzel 59).

### **Going Beyond Iran:**

Embarking on a journey and resettling beyond the borders of Iran, even if with the aid of magic, however, is not enough for some of these characters to completely break free, or ensure their survival. Often, in their new setting, especially in America, many Iranians find

themselves within a different set of already established and historically defined descriptions and frameworks associated with them. This is why Iranian writing in English as much as being a response to the dominant narratives of Iranian history in Iran, is also in dialogue with representations of Iran and Iranians in the West.

If we look at the representations of Iran in the West, the sense of historical non-legitimation that existed in Iran resonated even beyond the borders. This is mainly because the Iranian diaspora, in addition to dealing with the perils of migration and exile and resettlement, also faced the burden of contradictory images, pre and post-revolution, which have historically informed popular Western representations of Iran and Iranians. As Lila Azam Zanganeh puts it, Iran has been present in Western literature since antiquity: “[W]hether as a haven of exotic sensuality or a stronghold of fanatic religiosity, Iran has, since ancient times, inflamed the popular imagination” (xi).

Images of pre-revolutionary Iran, flourished in the Western mind through dated explorer travelogues and tourist accounts, and fictional narratives, often emphasized its exotic atmosphere. Put another way, the representation of Iran throughout Western history often resonates with Edward Said’s definition of the Orient in Orientalism, as a land that “had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscape, [and] remarkable experiences” (1). Descriptions of Persia (as it was known up to 1935) were often depicted by male narrators through stereotypical and effusive elaborations of it as “a pleasant dream,” (Amory 1) with “the most cheerful people in the world” (Ibid). In these accounts, however, despite florid descriptions, there is still reflected a sense of Western superiority, lacking the agency and presences of locals altogether. This is especially evident in the depiction of the condition of women, who occupied a separate territory, out of the Western male narrators’ reach and understanding, and remained a mystery. Western writers, who were

both “fascinated and repelled by the veil” and by the situation of women, created the assumption and convention that “veiled women were necessarily more oppressed, more passive, more ignorant than unveiled women” (Mabro 3). This historically constructed image, led to “exaggerated statements about the imprisoned existence of women in “the Orient”” (Mabro 3). These accounts of pre-revolutionary Persia, often emphasizing its exoticism, presented a historically stereotypical image of the country, creating a dominant narrative that silenced the individual histories and voices of the locals.

However, the exotic image of Persia changed dramatically after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. While the forced re-veiling of women reinforced some already-existing negative images, it was the American hostage crisis that led to the emergence of strong anti-Iran, and negative attitudes in the West. The crisis, which began in November 1979 when a number of Americans were taken hostage at the American embassy in Tehran and kept for over a year, unfolded a nightly media drama for the American public. This constructed a negative perception of Iran and Iranians as they were portrayed as “non-rational”, “hungry for martyrdom”, and “unwilling to compromise” (Mobasher 119). Public interest on this issue gave rise to many popular narratives that resonated and reaffirmed these negative beliefs and representations. For example, amongst other similar narratives, it was during this time that accounts such as Betty Mahmoody’s *Not Without My Daughter* (1987), which recounts the seemingly true story of an American woman held captive in Iran by her Iranian husband soon after the revolution and during the war, became extremely popular and contributed to the already negative Western popular imagination of Iran. Consequently, amidst these post-revolutionary representations, the exoticism of Persia was soon replaced with images of Iran as a demonic, inaccessible, anti-American dystopia with escalating numbers of human rights violations. While the non-stop coverage of the hostage crisis played an especially important role in the construction of an anti-Iranian attitude during that time in history, it resonated far

into the future, continuing to affect how Iran and Iranians are seen and represented in the West even today.

This meant that when Iranians migrated to the West, especially soon after the revolution and into America, they entered a society where their sense of identity was already dictated by a kind of dominantly historically informed representation based on either a sense of exoticism or negative religious fanaticism. As a result, many Iranians were faced with dealing with a new sense of identity crisis, one that stemmed from open discrimination in their new home. This is why for many diasporic Iranian writers, writing, especially in English, has also become a means through which they are regaining and reconstructing the dominant historically imposed representation to regain their sense of identity in the West. Here the use of the English language becomes especially important, acting as a postcolonial apparatus, as a means to tap into and re-construct dominant historical narratives that have informed the Iranian sense of identity in the West. This is because language and how it is used can be far more than a mere tool for communication. In many cases, language could be seen as an imposition by domineering forces, “a strategy of cultural hegemony” (“Remembering” 708) that is often exclusive and “impose[s] a way of talking about the world that privilege[s] certain kinds of distinction and representations and debase[s] others” (*Caliban* 3). It is for this reason that for postcolonial writers and others resist dominant forms of expression or language and experiment as to how it can be adapted as a vehicle for resistance and challenge. This is also why in postcolonial resistance, “colonial languages have been not only instruments of oppression but also instruments of radical resistance and transformation” (*Caliban* 3).

Consequently, to write in English becomes a conscious decision for employing the dominant language, appropriating it to “make it do a different cultural work” (*Caliban* 4). For

many diasporic Iranian writers, as well, to write in English is a conscious strategy that allows them to speak against the oppressive historical forces, both of their host as well as their home countries. In relation to Iran, accounts of Iranian history have, almost always, been written by male members of society and through a dominant language which has caused many silences, particularly for women and those of minority backgrounds. Beyond Iran, however, especially in America, things were not too different as they found themselves in a culture where the dominant historical narratives (told in English) had already limited and constructed hegemonic views of Iran and Iranians. This is where their engagement and choice to write in English becomes a strategy that not only offers them a new language with which to write beyond the limitations they faced in Iran, but also the means to adapt the dominant language of their host country to resist and transform it to make it do something different.

One author who makes a point to demonstrate this is Roya Hakakian, a Jewish Iranian woman, who tells us why she chose to write about her experiences of the revolution and of leaving Iran, in English. In the opening pages of her memoir *Journey from the Land of No* (2004) she tells us that when as a journalist, she received a call asking her to write about student clashes in Iran in 1999, she found herself “embittered by [her] history”, unable to write objectively about it. She writes an apologetic email confessing “the past and the events that followed the revolution had biased me forever,” (13) and that she was not the best candidate for this piece. Instead of accepting her apology she gets a response: “tell me about them” (13). However, she initially finds recalling and sharing memories of Iran extremely difficult as she feels that she does not have the right language for self-expression. But, through encouragement, she gradually finds English as the new medium for recounting her untellable story. She says:

To write in Persian would be daunting. Instead of re-examining the

memories, I feared that in Persian, I might begin to relive them. Persian could summon the teenager at sea. English sheltered the adult survivor, safely inside a lighthouse. I did not know how to use the language of the censors to speak against them; to use the very language by which I had been denied so much as a Jew, a woman, a secular citizen, and a young poet. [...]. The irrevocable journey I had made was not the physical one, out of Iran. It was the journey from “no,” from the perpetual denials. And what I had painstakingly arrived at, greater than even the new land, was a new language, the vessel of my flight to vast possibilities. (15)

It is English, this new-found language, free from the constraints of Persian and its associations, that gives her the possibility to recount and reconstruct her history in her new setting. Here, Hakakian’s narrative in English becomes the means for her to represent her own neglected experiences against a history that had denied her any space in the grand narrative of events as a Jewish teenage girl. In addition, her choice to write in English gives her the opportunity to also have a voice within her diasporic community, one that had also denied her any space for expression as a Jewish Iranian woman living under the historically constructed labels of exotic/terrorist. In fact, Hakakian tells us of a fear that had prevented her from recounting her story had been the biases of her potential audience:

...who came in two kinds: the misinformed, who think of Iran as a backward nation of Arabs, veiled and turbaned, living on the periphery of oases [ . . . ]; and the misguided, who believed the Shah’s regime was a puppet government run by the CIA, and who think that Ayatollah Khomeini and his clerical cabal are an authentic, home-grown answer

to an unwarranted U.S. meddling (11).

However, when Hakakian realises that English provides her a voice with which she can speak about her experiences within her diasporic community, she taps into the system and takes hold of the very language which had historically denied her story. This linguistic appropriation interpolates the dominant narratives of history by offering alternative versions of known accounts from the perspective of a young girl, much different to the stereotypical and dominant narratives that had framed the way she was viewed. This interpolation transforms the historically imposed beliefs of her “misguided” and “misinformed” acquaintances and potential readers. Reviewers and reader were also quick to pick up on this. As Irene Wanner writes in a review of the book “This book does us the service of removing some of the region’s mythical stereotypes [...] and illuminating a real contemporary culture we would do well to know better” (2004).

Stories like Hakakian’s, and others like hers, by using English as the new medium of expression, interpolate the grand narratives of Iranian history, by foregrounding marginal voices and experiences, and giving them a sense of historical existence both in Iran and abroad. This in turn not only gives them, but also those who identify with them, a sense of historical belonging, and legitimises their experiences. This sense of legitimisation provides the opportunity for many to assert themselves in their new diasporic setting, as well as against the historically stereotypical portrayals of Iranians in the West as exotics and terrorists. This is because historical legitimisation, and interpolation of history by offering alternative and human perspectives, shatters stereotypes. As Anahita Firouz tells us of responses of non-Iranian readers to her book *In the Walled Garden* on her website:

...they didn’t know that the Iran in this novel existed. Because of how Iran is shown in the media, they think it is all angry fists raised in the air. But I am getting [...]



feedback from the readers who say they like walking into this other world before the revolution” (<http://www.anahitafirouz.com>).

Positive responses such as this, of which there are too many for the scope of this paper, demonstrate the importance and impact of these narratives in shattering stereotypes and offering alternative perspectives of Iranian history that are full of individual human experiences.

The employment of English, especially where it taps into and draws on certain literary strategies that are already in line with postcolonial resistances, such as the use of magic realism, adds another layer of complication to the way their works can be read. Magic realism, on which this paper touched earlier, in particular, plays another important role in establishing the position of Iranian writers at large within the arena of world literatures in English. As Theo D’haen argues, magic realism can be a means of accessing the “main body of ‘western’ literature for authors not sharing in, or not writing from the perspective of, the privileged centers of this literature for reasons of language, class, race, or gender, and yet avoiding epigonism by avoiding the adoption of views of the hegemonic forces together with their discourse” (96). From this perspective, the Iranian engagement with magic realism, which according to Faris, “seems to provide [. . .] a revitalizing force that comes often from the “peripheral” regions of the Western culture – Latin America and the Caribbean, India, [and] Eastern Europe,” (165), has not only contributed to a resistance, but also the construction of a new discourse for Anglophone Iranian literature where it can now be in a dialogue with and as part of this newly found centre, in the same manner that Gabriel Garcia Marquez contributed to Latin American literature and Salman Rushdie to Indian and Pakistani literature.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, one can argue that by tapping into the derelict private and collective histories of their homeland and going beyond it through literature, and by “rethink[ing] the very codes and norms that consign them, as woman and other, to the margins,” (Rahimieh 2002, 241) and by foregrounding alternative narratives, Iranian writers in English are offering new possibilities of existence in the realm of ‘the beyond’. These seemingly postcolonial acts of literary resistance and transgressions, as demonstrated, can offer new possibilities of expression on different levels that can reflect into the real world and eventually provide an alternative space. Although this paper does not have the space to explore this concept further, these literatures, can have a profound effect on challenging and reframing the way Iranians are seen and see themselves, both in their home and host countries. Giving them a sense of legitimisation in relation to their homeland, these narratives can give them the confidence and the historical grounding to rewrite and overcome dominant narratives in their host cultures, consequently making for smoother integration, and assimilation in their new homes. After all, as Ashcroft tells us, “it is by narrative, by stories we tell, that we have a world” and it is through “narrative[s], that we may have a conception of a radically changeable world” (“Critical utopias” 418).

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## Contributors —In Order of Appearance

**Dr. Stephanie Polsky** is an interdisciplinary writer/academic whose work focuses on contemporary culture, political economy, and cultural identity. She has lectured at Goldsmiths College, Winchester School of Art, University of Greenwich, and Regent's University London. Zer0 Books published her latest book 'Ignoble Displacement: Dispossessed Capital in Neo-Dickensian London' in September 2015.

**Dr. Samir Dayal** (English & Media, Bentley University) authored *Dream Machine: Realism and Fantasy in Hindi Cinema, Resisting Modernity: Counternarratives of Nation and Modernity*; coedited *Global Babel: Interdisciplinarity, Transnationalism and the Discourses of Globalization*; edited Julia Kristeva's *Crisis of the European Subject*; and is writing on information regimes in India.

**Dr. Mahesh Sharma** is an independent research scholar. He has earned his PhD from the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad. He has published several research articles and chapters in the various national and international journals. His area of interest includes Postcolonial Theory, Arab Spring, Literary Theory and Criticism, Indian Literature in English and Vernacular Cosmopolitanism.

**Sami H. Atassi** is a doctoral candidate in Literature at Indiana University Bloomington. Sami received his BA in Arts in Humanities from the University of Texas at Dallas in 2012. In 2014, Sami received his MA in English/American Literature and Graduate Certificate in Empire Studies at the University of Houston. For his doctoral dissertation, Sami is exploring relations between comedy and terror produced during capitalist exchanges in Antebellum American literature.

**Denijal Jegić** is a doctoral candidate at the Institute for Transnational American Studies (Mainz). He studied at JGU (Mainz), York U (Toronto) and LAU (Beirut) and obtained an M.A. in American Studies in 2014. His research examines the dynamics of transnational subalternity, with a focus on Palestinian de-colonial aesthetics.

**Sara Faradji** is a second-year English PhD student at the University of Maryland. Her primary research interests include postcolonial studies, 20<sup>th</sup> century literature, transnationalism, and African diaspora studies. In her current project, she is exploring the growing significance of cultural "Afropolitanism" in contemporary world literature.

**Sarah Kent** is a Master's student at the University of Calgary, studying the intersections of postcolonialism and contemporary British literature. Her thesis focuses on alterity and belonging in the works of Helen Oyeyemi as a way to think through ethical engagement. Her research also spans trauma studies and affect theory.

**Helmi Ben Meriem** is currently a doctoral student at the University of Sousse working on Somali author Nuruddin Farah under the supervision of American mystery writer Edward Sklepowich. He is also the Anglophone writer of unpublished works of fiction including two novels, a collection of poetry and a collection of short stories.

**Dr. Sanaz Fotouhi** is an Australian-Iranian scholar with an interest on diasporic Iranian writing in English. Her latest book *The Literature of the Iranian Diaspora: Meaning and Identity* was published with IB Tauris in 2015. She holds a PhD from the University of New South Wales, and a BA and MPhil from the University of Hong Kong.