

# Postcolonial Interventions

*Struggles — Sutures — Selves*

**POSTCOLONIAL INTERVENTIONS**  
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**STRUGGLES – SUTURES – SELVES**

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**EDITOR'S NOTE**

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ABIN CHAKRABORTY

In a review of Gurinder Chadha's 2017 release, *Viceroy's House*, Fatima Bhutto remarks,

*Viceroy's House* betrays the profound inferiority complex that plagues colonised people, a trauma as severe as the physical assaults and violence done to the land and bodies of subjugated people. It is exactly this kind of thinking that infected those who rioted and murdered their compatriots—a sense of fully absorbing the coloniser's claims of racial, moral and civilisational superiority. How else to explain the damage to the colonised psyche, whose imagination is so deeply corroded that it can believe that white skins are superior to brown skins, that the British are greater than Indians, that one religion prevails over another? It is in accepting these tragic untruths that nations are crippled with a paralysing fear of others and sincere loathing of the self. (*The Guardian*, 03 March 2017)

Bhutto's remarks and her anguished response to the film signify the abiding relevance of postcolonialism and the need to generate effective counter-discourses which are as much applicable to people in the West as they are to the people of the formerly colonised countries. We find ourselves at a particular historical juncture where racial hatred against non-white communities, particularly Muslims and migrants, rages in various parts of the West, even as other parts of Asia or Africa plunge into different forms of sectarian violence. India, in particular, is witnessing a rabid surge of majoritarian fanaticism which is principally fuelled by the typically Eurocentric notion of a nation consisting of one race, one culture, one language and one religion. It is almost as if the experiment of forging for ourselves a nation-state that could harmoniously integrate differences is being abandoned in favour of a discredited European model because our imagination and affective solidarities have run dry. As a result, we see the nation plunging into a widespread network of division, hatred and violence where the mere choice of meat can lead to the loss of one's life. If postcolonialism is about strategic interventions in the name of our future then it falls on us to mount discursive and material challenges against the dominant discourses coloured by seepage from colonial history to override the manifold adversities of the present.

The current issue of *Postcolonial Interventions* decides to take up this responsibility through its various contributions which focus on the diverse avenues through which postcolonial agency manifests itself. Beginning with Krishna Sen's erudite exploration of travelogues by Rabindranath Tagore and others which subvert the power-relations of colonial travelogues and sketch the outlines of an alternate modernity, the issue encompasses within itself a wide range of discussions and interventions that include ecocriticism, diasporic negotiations, Arab nationalism, representations of women in Chinese literature or notions of cosmopolitanism and refugees. One theme that runs through these papers is the idea of resistance, often in acknowledgement of adverse material circumstances that provoke resistant actions, at times desperate, but also governed by emancipatory aspirations. This is particularly true of Mengyao Liu's paper on the representation of rural women in the novels of Ding Ling which explores both the adversities to which Chinese women were often subjected, especially in the wake of Japanese colonialism and the representational complexities that have circumscribed their subjectivities in various contexts.

Such gendered considerations are also the subject of Sandra Cox's exploration of the works of Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri, where she particularly focuses on feminist refashioning of selves and identities in a global context of transcultural negotiations

brought about migratory movements. Her paper foregrounds the ways in which fiction offers a challenge to preconceived notions about Bengali and Indian marriages and identities even as it analyses the productions of female subjective spaces in a global context. This global context also plays a particularly significant role in Soni Wadhwa's discussions of the city as a site of cosmopolitan negotiations which at times filters or entirely bypasses the pressures of the national. Based on the fictive world of Rushdie and the configurations of several key theorists, the paper explores the significance of the cosmopolitan city and the unique values it is capable of generating – values that are particularly significant in an increasingly xenophobic age where movements across borders of different kind are viewed with growing suspicion and even hatred. Alternate values are also proposed through Puspa Damai's analysis of arboreal articulations in Mahashweta Devi's fiction where she locates a kind of rhizomatic activism of grass and plants which interrogates the ideological assumptions of both colonial discourses and hegemonic nationalisms that function by erasing the voices and agency of indigenous communities. What emerges in the process is a kind of subaltern utopianism, a term which the author cautiously eschews, that remains strikingly relevant. But utopian gleams are necessarily offset by predicaments of the present and Tasnim Qutait's analysis of patrilineal nationalism in Arab countries astutely uncovers the various pitfalls

and sloughs of disillusionment that bar our path to any promised land. But recognising the pitfalls too is an important critical enterprise which prepares us for the future. This task is also carried on by the paper of Fouad Mami which simultaneously explores the possibilities of agency and critique through the space of digital media.

The aim of these intermingled critical explorations is to further enhance our consciousness of the multidimensional challenges of the present, both material and discursive. At the same time, such endeavours are also part of a larger network of critical thinking which is vital for the cultural, affective and imaginative well-being of humanity as a whole which remains imperilled by the networks of empire, capital and racial and religious fanaticism. As educational systems around the world, especially humanities and social sciences, face the onslaught of instrumental rationality and experience an attendant colonisation of lifeworlds, in Habermas' terms, it is all the more essential for us to keep alive the horizons of critical thought which must not be conquered by utilitarian logic of one kind or another. With the cooperation of our contributors and authors, we too hope to keep such horizons visible for the foreseeable future.



# PROVINCIALIZING ENGLAND: VICTORIAN DOMESTICITY AND THE COLONIAL GAZE

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KRISHNA SEN

“Man ... should not merely realize the fact of differences .... Travelling reaches its best truth when through it we extend our spiritual ownership in return for our gift of sympathy” – so said Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) in ‘Illuminated Travel Literature’ (716), his 1925 English review of Count Hermann Keyserling’s *Travel Diary of a Philosopher*. Tagore’s own extensive travel narratives about his journeys across the globe (not yet translated into English from the original Bengali) are luminous examples of empathetic travel informed by lively intellectual curiosity about unfamiliar cultures. The rubric of travel writing generally suggests colonizing movements from West to East: this essay will focus on travelogues by Tagore and others that subvert such power relations as they move from East to West.

The template of imperial travel was very different from Tagore’s ideal of cultural interchange. Said has famously defined this template – “European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient ... during the post-Enlightenment period” (Said 3). Greenblatt (1991) shows how this discursive (and actual) domination in terms of othering and marginalization extended to the whole of the non-West from as far back as the early modern period. Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992) embeds the reductive Western gaze in the very title, privileges “a Eurocentric form of global, or as I call it, planetary consciousness” (5), explores how “travel and exploration writing produced the ‘rest of the world’ for the European reader” (5-6; emphasis in the original), and defines ‘transculturation’ as the overdetermined cultural transformation experienced by the colonized as they interact with the colonizer in the “contact zone” (6). For Pratt the fixed poles of these contact zones are the Western “traveler” and the non-Western “travelee” (7). Clearly, there is no space within this axiomatic frame for the travelee to turn traveller, or for the gazer to become a gazer. The compendious *Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* (2002) has only two cursory references (without detailed analysis) to Olaudah Equiano and Dean Mahomed as “non-Europeans sufficiently Anglicised” to write travel narratives (254-5; emphasis added), and does not, even for the record, mention any other non-European travelogue.

By contrast, Tim Youngs includes two non-Western travel accounts in his 2006 edited volume on nineteenth century travel writing, asserting that “It would be wrong to think of nineteenth-century travel only in terms of an outward movement away from Britain” (13). This is a welcome recognition of what Michael H. Fisher felicitously terms the “counterflows” (Fisher 2004) of colonial travel from East to West. A major segment of this reverse travel in the imperial era originated from the Indian subcontinent. Fisher (2007) notes, “Indian men and women have been traveling to England and settling there since about 1600, roughly as long as Englishmen have been sailing to India. Most historians of England, India and colonialism, however, tend to neglect accounts of and by Indian travelers” (153). But not all Indian travellers became partially acculturated settlers, and, as will be seen below, visitors from the colonial margin subjected the metropolitan centre to exacting scrutiny.

The two earliest Indian travelogues on Britain were in Persian (the court language of the Mughals) by court functionaries travelling on official business. Mirza Sheikh I'tesamuddin (1730-1800) wrote *The Wonders of Vilayet: Being the Memoir originally in Persian of a Visit to France and Britain in 1765* ('Vilayet' is Persian for England). Mirza Abu Taleb Khan (1752-1896) composed *Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan in Asia, Africa and Europe* (1799-1803), written by himself in

the Persian language (2 Volumes). These two volumes were translated by Charles Stewart in 1810 and 1814 respectively, while James Edward Alexander published an abridged English version of *The Wonders of Vilayet* in 1827. But two nineteenth-century Urdu travelogues by Yusuf Khan Kambalposh (c. 1830-90), *The Journey of Yusuf Khan Kambalposh to the Land of the Englishmen* (1847) and *How Strange is England* (1873), were translated only in 2014 by Mushirul Hasan and Nishat Zaidi. A large corpus of Bengali travelogues to England still remains untranslated. The earliest English travelogue on Britain from India was by the Armenian immigrant Joseph Emin (1726-1809), *Life and Adventures of Joseph Emin, an Armenian, Written in English by Himself* (1792). But the first Indian author of an English travelogue on Britain was Sake (i.e. Sheikh) Dean Mahomed (1759-1851), *The Travels of Dean Mahomed, A Native of Patna in Bengal* (1794). Within a half century there were more English narratives, such as those by Ardesear Cursetjee in 1840, Jehangir Nowroji and Hirjibhoy Merwanji in 1841, and Munshi Mohanlal in 1846. Post-1857, English and vernacular travel texts proliferated, including English accounts by renowned figures like Gandhi and Nehru.

There is, however, a marked difference in travelogues from the Company era, and those from the post-1857 colonial era when the subcontinent was ruled directly from England till its independence in 1947. The Com-

pany era is often described as pre-colonial, but this is not entirely accurate. The British East India Company wielded enormous power from around 1757, and its Governors-General directly or indirectly controlled large swathes of upper India through a colonial-type administration, until the formal inception of the 'British Raj' in 1858. This is no mere historical quibble. The greater attraction of England over other European destinations for Indians was directly linked to the British East India Company's ascendancy over the French, Dutch, Portuguese and Danish East India Companies. Yet Company-era voyagers lacked the prior mental map of England that oriented their colonial successors.

This dichotomy can be illustrated by comparing I'tesamuddin's *Vilayet* or *Abu Taleb Khan's Travels* with the earliest of Tagore's several accounts of England. Both courtiers hailed from a highly developed Indo-Persian Islamic culture, but had little knowledge of "Firinghee nations" (i.e. Europe; *Vilayet* 87). I'tesamuddin performs fascinating acts of reverse cultural translation as he encounters unfamiliar Western ways. A devout Muslim whose religion forbids imaging of the Divine, he constructs the West as the idol-worshipping Other: "The Portuguese built a fort in Balagarh [modern Bandel near Calcutta] [...] Together with the fort [...] the Portuguese built a church where they began worshiping idols of Christ, Mary and various Christian saints" (*ibid.* 23).

On reaching 'Vilayet' he piquantly glocalizes England, as when he appropriates the University of Oxford within his own socio-cultural field, with astronomy sliding into astrology:

Oxford ... is the seat of an ancient madrassah [i.e. Islamic school] ... One of the libraries contained many superb statues and pictures ... purchased from abroad, some for as much as ten to twenty thousand rupees.... The English hold artists in such high regard that they are prepared to pay lakhs of rupees for a painting or a drawing ... I also saw an astrolabe ... with astrological markings, with whose help it is possible to determine auspicious times (*ibid.* 71, 72, 75).

Abu Taleb Khan inverts the imperial binary of cosmopolitan West/provincial East when he remarks that England is "placed in a corner of the globe where there is no coming and going of foreigners" whereas "in Asia ... people of various nations dwell in the same city" (264). Tagore first stayed in England as a student at University College, London, for several months in 1878 when he was just seventeen. His copious correspondence with family and friends back home was later collected as *Europe Probashir Patra (Letters from a Sojourner in Europe, 1881)*. The young poet's bubbling excitement clearly derives from his exposure to Western texts while still in India:

I had imagined the British Isles to be so compact and the English people to be so enlightened that, before I came

here, I thought that England would reverberate from one end to another with Tennyson's sonorous strains; I felt that wherever I went in this tiny island, Gladstone's powerful oratory, Max Müller's Vedic wisdom, Tyndall's scientific maxims, Carlyle's wondrous utterances, Renan's political philosophy, would be ringing in my ears. I imagined English people, young and old, as relishing nothing but intellectual pleasures. (*Sojourner* 242-3; my translation).

So while I'tesamuddin and Abu Taleb reduce England to their own terms, the young Tagore takes England apparently on England's terms.

How did Tagore know England even before he went there? Gauri Viswanathan (1981) attributed this to "the ideology of British education" in India (11). Viswanathan is referring to Lord Macaulay's controversial 'Minute on Indian Education' (1835) that sought to imbricate Indians within Europe's "planetary consciousness" (Ibid). By replacing traditional Sanskrit and Persian scholarship with an English-based Anglocentric educational curriculum, Macaulay attempted to fashion "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinion, in morals, and in intellect [who] may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern" (116-17). The policy was widely enforced post-1857, and with it the British Government created a cadre of English-speaking, Western-oriented, urbanized professional Indians cutting across caste barriers,

who were dependent on the colonial administration for their livelihood and social standing. This completely new social formation, an upwardly mobile Indian middle class based on education and merit rather than on caste and inherited wealth, had little in common with the traditional orders of the feudal rich and rural poor. As Krishna Sen notes, English was "its point of entry into what is known in the West as the 'Civil Society' and it looked to England to structure its evolving social codes" (126). Journeying to England was a rite of passage for this aspiring (and sometimes deracinated) bourgeoisie. And like Tagore, they all carried a hyperreal imaginary of England mediated by English books.

It is precisely here that a historic interface occurs between empire and Victorian domesticity. Visiting England provided colonial Indians with a singular opportunity to meet the people they called 'Britishers' on a fairly equal footing, bearing in mind the gulf that separated 'natives' from 'sahibs' (i.e. Britons) back in the colony (one need only recall the hauteur of several English characters in Forster's *A Passage to India* and Orwell's *Burmese Days*). Everyday scenes and occurrences, the conduct of acquaintances and strangers - these were the realities to be measured against the hyperreal imaginary. So for all that metropolitan London overwhelmed these visitors with its magnificence, what they recorded most assiduously were the lives and mores, very different from their own, of ordinary

Victorians, people like themselves. Simonti Sen quotes in her own translation from an anonymous 1880s Bengali travelogue: “We have a special relationship with the city [London]; therefore ... we are not merely interested in her sights – we wanted to closely observe the manners, morals, social conditions, ethics, education and intelligence of her people” (93). Is this not the travelee becoming the traveller, and the gazee a gazer?

Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay (2002) dismisses these travelogues as mere colonial mimicry, arguing that both secular travel writing (as opposed to pilgrimage narratives) and the individualized perspective dating from Europe’s early modern era were colonial imports into India. But leading nineteenth-century Bengali litterateur Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894) had already anticipated and countered such historicist critiques. In his English essay, “Confessions of a Young Bengal” (1872), he had indeed admitted: “The very idea that external life is a worthy subject of the attention of a rational being, except in its connection with religion, is, amongst ourselves, unmistakably of English origin” (43). Yet Bankim (who famously indigenized the novel, a Western form) also highlighted the cultural translatability of the “travelling genre” and the situated autonomy of the colonial gaze in his 1873 Bengali review of Romesh Chunder Dutt’s English travelogue, *Three Years in Europe, 1868-1871*:

A volume like this is extremely necessary. Knowledge of English has enabled us to learn much about England from English books ... But English books and epistles are composed by English men. They depict England as it appears to English eyes. They do not portray England as it would appear to our eyes.... Monsieur Taine has published a book on England written from his own French perspective. By reading it, we apprehend how dissimilar a Frenchman’s perception of England is from an Englishman’s.... So if a Frenchman’s England is so divergent, then it is easy to imagine how very different a Bengali’s view of England might be. (444; my translation)

The titles of some late nineteenth-century Indian travelogues in English foreground this counterdiscursive positioning of the centre (rather than the margin) as the object of inspection—Behramji M. Malabari’s *Indian Eye on English Life, or Rambles of a Pilgrim Reformer* (1891), Rev. T.B. Pandian’s *England to an Indian Eye, or Pictures from an Indian Camera* (1897), G. Parameswaran Pillai’s *London and Paris through Indian Spectacles* (1897). Fisher (2006) observes: “Indians were beginning to ‘reverse the gaze’ of Orientalism and analyze Britain based on their own direct observations [...]” (90). It is interesting that Antoinette Burton says of her three voyagers “Like [Pandita] Ramabai’s and [Cornelia] Sorabjee’s correspondence, Malabari’s narrative [...] is a kind of ethnographic text, offering yet another close reading of English civilization, and especially of London life, in the late-Victorian period” (5). It may seem strange to speak of ethnographic work by

colonized Others, since nineteenth-century ethnography is usually associated with the totalizing of Asian and African cultures by the magisterial European gaze. Like many contemporary Indian visitors, Behramji Malabari (1853-1912) differentiates between the courteous Englishman at home and the churlish Englishman in the colony (67-9), but he goes further and nuances the issue of ethnographic ‘knowledge’ of the metropolis by boldly assuming parity for the periphery. While “contrasting the New Civilization [of the West] with the Old [of the East]” (*Indian Eye* vii), he neither extols nor excoriates his colonial masters, the people of Victorian England, but proposes “a friendly conversation, in open council, with Englishmen on the one hand and Indians on the other” (vii). This postulate for an affable intercourse subtly undermines the ground of empire: “We should be treated as equals ... you must not give us less than our due; and pray do not give us more either ... [and] the same equal treatment in the case of the nation as in the case of individuals” (65).

Hailing from Bombay, Malabari was a journalist, newspaper editor, and leading activist for women’s emancipation in India (fittingly, *The Indian Eye* is dedicated “To the Women of England in Grateful Remembrance of 1890”). His first-person narrative conflates the viewing I/eye, staging the colonial viewer as subject, and portraying Victorian England, his object of inquiry, with humour, irony and pathos:

What strikes an Asiatic most, on getting out at Victoria Station, is the noise and bustle about him. Every man and woman ... seems to be full of life.... I happened to have read a good deal about this, but what I actually see here exceeds my anticipation.

And yet the eye, if it can observe well, may detect a good deal of suffering among the gay or busy crowd. Here is some fashionable cad nearly driving over a fragile old woman. She rushes trembling to the constable’s side. There goes a knot of boy-sweepers, running about between carriages and even under them, in order to keep the ground clean. You could hardly expect greater agility from mice or squirrels.... Few respectable women, I find, will venture out into some of these streets towards evening ... so great is the rush therein of the unworthy ones of their sex ... The back parts of not a few streets seem to be given up to a Godless population, foreign and English. A large percentage of this, I should think, represents virtue first betrayed, and then crowded out, by vice. (27-29)

He is quick to note the dark underside of empire—acute poverty underlying “the keen pursuit of pleasure or business” (30):

Poor as India is, I thank God she knows not much of the poverty to which parts of Great Britain have been accustomed ... Men and women living in a chronic state of emaciation, till they can hardly be recognised as human, picking up food that even animals will turn away from ... It is in winter, more than six months of the year, that you see the poverty of England at its worst.... And side by side with such heart-rending scenes of misery, one

sees gorgeously dressed luxury flaunting in the streets, dragged along by horses better fed and better looked after than many a human family in the same neighbourhood. (80-81)

He is disturbed by public displays of drunkenness among both men and women:

Water is about the last thing the average Britisher thinks of for a beverage.... He must have something stronger, you know.... Mr. and Mrs. John Bull take a drop because it is so cold, then because they are so tired, or grieving, or disappointed. The habit grows on many till the victims are reduced to a state verging on lunacy. (50)

Malabari is sympathetic towards the impecunious “organ-grinders” (235) and good-natured about the impudent “street arabs of London ... dirty unkempt little urchins” (237) who mock his Indian attire. But he has nothing but censure for fashionable cads and flaunting luxury: “It is the present that we live in, the self that we live for.... If this be your English culture of the nineteenth century, let us remain ignorant in India ... [and] worship her stone-gods.... The worship of self is the worst form of idolatry” (75). He is equally disillusioned after attending debates on India in the Houses of Parliament—“In this huge struggle for success which typifies the political life of England, what chance is there for her far-off Dependency? God help India!” (225).

Yet there are many aspects of the New Civilization that Malabari cannot but prefer to the Old—“Everything speaks of freedom for them [women] here—they have free movement and a free voice. Woman is a presence and a power in Europe. In Asia, woman is a vague entity, a nebulous birth absorbed in the shadow of artificial sexuality” (22). A natural corollary is the difference between domesticity in England and India:

The life in a decent English home is a life of equality among all the members. This means openness and mutual confidence. Wife and husband are one at home ... The children stand in the same position with the parents as the latter stand to each other. ... All this is different in India (62).

Most of Chapter III (62 ff.) demonstrates how domestic equality and the constructive role of the English mother in bringing up her children to be self-reliant and enterprising (both unlike India) constitute the bedrock of English modernity. Ironically, England also exposes Malabari’s innate Indian conservatism. This champion of women’s rights is patently uneasy about unescorted women out of doors (27-28), flirtation in public (232), and especially working wives (73) whom he holds responsible for broken homes! There is no question, however, about his deep appreciation for England, which he does not hesitate to proclaim: “damp, dirty, noisy London” is “Mecca ... Medina ... Persepolis ... Buddha-Gaya ... Benares ... Jerusalem” (2) for the

colonial visitor because of the plethora of illuminating experiences it offers—“Great in varieties, great in contrarieties ... I sit entranced, watching thy divergent forces” (245).

Malabari’s refusal to be trapped within the colonizer/colonized binary, his sardonic self-portrayal as an ingenuous provincial beating his “native tom-tom” (245) in the seat of empire, and his witty and sophisticated observations in polished English, scarcely fit the stereotype of the aborigine awaiting the gift of Western civilization. A large number of nineteenth-century Indian voyagers to England were, in fact, neither aides nor employees of ‘sahibs,’ but independent travellers prosperous enough to afford the long sea voyage as first class cabin passengers, very often to take higher degrees at prestigious universities.

Several commentators identify these people solely as “the Anglicised Indian service elite” (Fisher 2006: 90). But this is to forget those enlightened Indians unaffected by Macaulay’s educational reforms who had close links with England unlike I’tesamuddin and Abu Taleb Khan. One thinks of men like the social and religious reformer Rammohun Roy (1772-1833) and reformer and business tycoon Dwarkanath Tagore (1794-1846; grandfather of Rabindranath). Both began by serving the British East India Company before fashioning spectacular careers of their own. Both men, especially

Rammohun, were significant participants, even before they went to England, in transnational networks of intellectual exchange that impacted England as well as India through the burgeoning print culture: Lynn Zastoupil records this important non-imperial interface between centre and margin in her provocatively titled *Rammohun Roy and the Making of Victorian Britain* (2010). Rammohun was in England between 1830 and 1833; Dwarkanath visited twice in the 1840s using his personal steam ship. Both were greatly respected. Dwarkanath dined with Queen Victoria (later also with King Louis Philippe of France); Rammohun’s close friend, the Utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham, proposed his name for Britain’s House of Commons, but the idea was ahead of its time (Zastoupil 152). Cosmopolitan friendships between liberal Britons and educated Indians, running parallel with colonial oppression and racism, culminated in the election of Dadabhai Naoroji (1825-1917), a Bombay businessman with major investments in Britain and a co-founder in 1885 of the Indian National Congress that fought for India’s independence, as the first Asian Member of England’s House of Commons (1892-1895), after successfully campaigning as a Liberal Party candidate from the London borough of Central Finchley. These complex and contrasting personal/political trajectories in the England-India relationship explain how Malabari or Rabindranath Tagore could assume positions of equality with their British counterparts despite com-

ing from the colony. Nobel laureate Tagore's galaxy of close friends included the most illustrious authors, artists and intellectuals of late Victorian England. Similarly Indian English novelist Mulk Raj Anand's 1920s memoir, *Conversations in Bloomsbury*, chronicles his affable relationship with eminent British Modernists.

Rabindranath Tagore visited England six times between 1878 and 1930. These experiences are recorded in four Bengali prose works—two travelogues, *Letters from a Sojourner in Europe* (*Europe Probashir Patra*, 1881) and *Diary of a Traveller in Europe* (*Europe Jatrir Diary* Parts I & II, 1891 & 1893), and two memoirs, *Memories of My Life* (*Jibansnriti*, 1912) and *Treasures of the Road* (*Pather Sanchoy*, 1912). As the earlier quotation from *Sojourner* indicates, Tagore's initial ideas about England were filtered through its literature. This is reiterated ten years later in *Diary of a Traveller* (so it must have been a deep-seated sentiment) when he wryly apostrophizes London:

Alright, I admit that you are a great city in a great country, your power and wealth are unlimited.... But it is impossible to find here those whom I met daily through your literature. And then one labours under the illusion that one will encounter these 'friends' in the highways and byways of London. But here I find only Englishmen, all foreign to me ... (Diary 400; my translation)

The teenager of *Sojourner* is amazed that "Dr. P, who is very educated, knows only that a poet called Shelley was born in his country, but he heard for the first time from me that Shelley wrote a play called *Cenci* and a poem called *Epipsychedion!*" (*Sojourner* 246; my translation). In fact, like several contemporaries who had also imagined the English as a race apart, he is taken aback by the humdrum nature of Victorian life:

I have been sadly disillusioned. The women are busy with dress and fashion, the men with their work, and life goes on as usual—the only excitement from time to time is over politics.... There are wine shops galore. Whenever I go out I spot masses of shoe stores, tailors, butchers, toy shops, but alas, very few book shops—and this never ceases to astonish me. (ibid. 242-3, 245; my translation)

To Tagore, London is all swirling crowds, inordinate haste, and rushing motorcars and trains (ibid. 244-5), and this worship of speed startles him on every visit: "The motor car is a new phenomenon here.... With what gusto the English people manipulate time and space! ... The slightest error is fatal" (*Treasures of the Road* 901-2; my translation). Like Malabari, he is the butt of jeering street-arabs ("Jack, look at the blackies! [in English]" [*Sojourner* 252]), and is aghast at the pollution from London's innumerable belching chimneys (ibid. 323). Like Malabari, again, he is shocked by the widespread poverty that is harshest in winter (ibid. 258-9), and by the hardship of life in England: "I have

never seen such a struggle for survival anywhere else. ... Here only the ‘fittest survive’ [in English]” (ibid. 245; my translation). Some of his best memories of London are the National Gallery (ibid. 397), the theatre (ibid. 399), Gladstone and O’Donnell declaiming in the House of Commons (ibid. 255-6), and also that even the very poor were very honest (*Memories* 78).

The brash young observer of Sojourner is caustic about upper-class Victorian women:

Though women here are free, their ultimate goal is marriage, and basically this is not very different from India. They may get a good education unlike our girls, but they are also polished up to become good housewives. When a girl reaches the age of marriage, she is dressed up like a shiny doll to make an effective display in the shop window of the marriage market, and at the balls and parties. There is nothing as sad as being an ‘old maid’ [in English] (ibid. 299; my translation)

However, he readily concedes that “the class of women known as ‘old maids’ [in English] are extremely conscious of their social responsibilities. Temperance meeting, Working Men’s Society [in English] etc. - in all such clamorous organisations they may be seen busy in the background” (ibid. 243; my translation). As opposed to the “fashionable dolls,” the “house-keeper,” “nurse,” “governess” and “housemaid” (all in English) work tirelessly in wealthy homes. Tagore is surprised

(coming from a hot country where baths are essential) that “a chief task [of the household help] is filling baths, as bathing is becoming fashionable in England” (ibid. 297; my translation). But middle class housewives without such help have many chores, and the narrator especially compliments their spotless kitchens and domestic economy (ibid. 299-300).

Like Malabari, Tagore is impressed by the equality of husband and wife in English homes. And young as he is, he offers a shrewd judgment on the truism that Englishmen were different in England and in India—“They [most ‘sahibs’] do not come from polite, that is, really good families.... English people from good families have beautiful minds” (ibid. 258-9; my translation). For Tagore, the prime example of beautiful English minds is the family he lodges with in London:

Mr. K, Mrs. K, their four daughters, two sons, three maids, myself and Toby the dog make up this household.... Mr. K is a doctor.... His conduct is as amiable as his appearance is pleasant.... Mrs K. genuinely cares about me. She scolds me if I go out without enough warm clothes. She coaxes me to eat more if she thinks I am not eating well. The English are terrified of coughs and colds. If I even cough twice, she stops my daily bath, rustles up mountains of medicines, and insists on a hot footbath at bedtime.... After breakfast Mrs. K supervises the housework till almost one thirty, assisted by the eldest Miss K.... The second daughter, Miss J, dusts the furniture while the housemaid sweeps the floor.... The

third daughter, Miss A, does all the mending. Now Miss J is relaxing by the fire, reading Green's History of the English People [in English].... After dinner we retire to the drawing room at seven. Sometimes they request me to sing English songs which I have learned from Miss A, while she plays the piano. Then we take turns to read out from books, some days till 11.30-12.00 at night.... The youngest daughter, Ethel, is very fond of me. She calls me 'Uncle Arthur' [in English].... The other day Miss N told me that the Misses J and A had been horrified that an Indian was coming to stay in their home.... The day I was to arrive they went away to a relative's house and didn't come back for a week. ... Anyway, I am very happy here now. Everyone is a good friend, and Ethel won't stay away a minute from her 'Uncle Arthur.' (*Sojourner* 333-7; my translation)

These warm words of appreciation conclude the *Sojourner*.

*The Diary* covers several European destinations. It has less of the quicksilver observation of the first-time traveller, and is more of a philosophical meditation on the possibility of universal human values in a world fractured by colonialism. Yet Tagore has lost none of his sharp wit. He now responds differently to the tumult of London, with an impish reversal of terminology—"London is cacophonous to us, but not to the 'natives' [in Bengali, with single quotes] of London" (*Diary* 401; my translation). But what Tagore really took back from Victorian England was not just memories, but Britain's

strong intellectual tradition of humanist and liberal thought (*Treasures* 905-921), qualities that he inculcated in his ashrama-school at Santiniketan that is now Visva Bharati University. A feminine perspective on Victorian domesticity would provide an interesting contrast. By the late nineteenth century some Indian women were accompanying their husbands to England. The well-educated Tagore wives and daughters were great travellers, coming as they did from a liberal and affluent family. The lady who spent most time in England (about two and a half years from 1874) was Jnadanandini Devi, wife of Rabindranath's older brother Satyendranath who successfully cleared the tough British Civil Service examination. In *Bilater Katha* (*About Vilayet*; 'Bilat' is the Bengali pronunciation of Persian 'Vilayet'), her reminiscences as transcribed by her daughter, we find the following vignette about the solicitude of ordinary English people: "Miss Donkin, the English lady, helped me a lot during the sickness of my children. She [...] was always going around helping others. When the condition of the children became very serious, she even rushed out in her nightdress to call the doctor" (Mandal 98).

One of the most detailed narratives about England from a feminine viewpoint is *A Bengali Lady in England* (*Englandey Bangamahila*, 1885) by Mrs. Krishnabhabini Das (1862-1919), who spent thirteen years in England with her husband from 1876 to 1889. Her life there

was comfortable. London was still an affordable city—for 25 shillings a week, inclusive of all meals provided by the landlady, one could rent a beautifully furnished apartment in a respectable neighbourhood (40). Mrs. Das' first impression of London is not of crowds or cars but of myriads of brightly-lit shops brimming with tempting goods (39). The second strong impression is of Sunday mornings when the ceaseless traffic is still, all the church bells ring in unison, and well-dressed groups walk to Mass, “mostly women ... the young girls strutting in their finery since they go to church also in search of husbands ... but needless to say, this is no day of rest for housemaids” (46; my translation). Most unfortunately, however, “wine shops vastly outnumber churches.... Women as well as men prostrate themselves before the Goddess of Liquor with horrifying abandon” (90; my translation).

As a homemaker herself, Mrs. Das has a sharp eye for the details of domesticity. Chapter 18 describes the daily household routines in wealthy, middle-class and working-class homes. Mrs. Das especially itemises meals in detail. In well-to-do homes live-in cooks spend hours preparing elaborate menus, but food gets scantier with the income. She is intrigued by local customs: “There is a strange system of knocking on the door in English households. Friends must knock three to four times. Tradesmen and postmen knock twice. Domestic servants should only knock once. This way

the people inside know exactly who to expect when they open the door” (137; my translation). Like her male counterparts she regrets the absence in India of some English domestic practices. “Here the man devotes himself to earning his living ... the woman is the real queen of the household.... Unlike India, women appear freely before male guests.... Less affluent women actually work outside the home in stores, offices and schools.... Women here are not like the British wives in India who are luxury-loving, lazy and haughty” (73-5; my translation). She appreciates the after-dinner custom of the whole family congregating in the drawing room for music, reading and conversation, and laments: “How unfortunate that in India, men segregate themselves from the women and children and never share these warm family moments together” (136; my translation). And like all Indian visitors Mrs. Das especially commends the English traits of industry and enterprise: “English men are hardy and self-reliant and try to inculcate these qualities in their sons. Unlike Indian families where sons are always indulged and spoilt, an English father will encourage his son to earn his own living and not depend on the father” (53; my translation). England has its flaws too: “Wealth is the Englishman’s God.... Their class system is as virulent as India’s caste system. Rich families will not associate with poor families.... They are not too eager to help even relatives in distress. They usually treat their servants well and give them enough to eat, but never dine or chat

with them" (48-50; my translation; emphasis added). Nevertheless, Mrs. Das is ecstatic about the position of English women: "I cannot tell you how delighted I feel to see scores of girls going to school and college, even up to their twenties, just like the boys. They are allowed to go out alone.... They even go to gymnasiums like the boys. This makes them strong and independent, but less graceful than Indian women.... I believe that if Hindu ladies were given so much freedom, they would be no less efficient than English women" (75, 78; my translation). Indeed, after returning to India, Mrs Das dedicated herself to the upliftment of Bengali women —her gift to them from England.

The travellers discussed here demonstrate the diversity of the counterflow from India—I'tesamuddin and Abu Taleb Khan were Muslims of Persian descent, Malabari was a Gujarati Parsee and a Zoroastrian, the Tagores were Bengalis of the Brahmo Samaj, and Mrs. Das was a Bengali Hindu. None of them spoke from the position of the inferior Other. However, not all Indian travellers reacted in the same way. Bhikhu Parekh has identified four types of colonial Indian responses to England—"traditionalists" who abjured everything Western in their Anglophobia, "critical traditionalists" who adopted a few Western elements, "modernists" who worshipped everything Western in their Anglophilia, and "critical modernists" who advocated a creative synthesis of India and the West (Parekh 42-3). The

Indian counterflow had its share of Parekh's uncritical Anglophile "modernists." Simonti Sen (107) cites Calcutta's Trailokyanath Mukherjee who virtually endorsed the "Orientalist typology" of progressive West/retrograde East in his 1889 English travelogue, *A Visit to Europe*. Malabari, Tagore and Mrs. Das critique both England and India while recommending a productive fusion of both cultures, and 'provincializing' or indigenizing the metropolis by appropriating it within their own epistemology of reverse transculturation. The act of provincializing problematizes colonial binaries. Thus Jyotirmala Devi, a Bengali woman student in 1920s London who fictionalized her experiences in Bengali short stories, shows a young Bengali lodger fondly calling her elderly English landlady, "mother" (115): all older women are customarily regarded as mother-figures and addressed as "mother" in Bengal.

'Provincializing' as a trope for colonial agency is taken from Dipesh Chakrabarty's influential book, *Provincializing Europe* (2000). Chakrabarty contends that "The project of provincializing Europe ... is to write into the history of modernity, the ambivalences, contradictions" (43) of peripheral reception. The premise, shared by many Asian historians, is that colonial margins domesticated (and not transplanted) monologic Eurocentric modernity, evolving local modernities with multiple temporalities and valences. Jinhua Dai's translated Foreword to Xiaomei Chen's *Occidentalism*

(1995) rejects “a single [Western] cultural logic such as modernization” for post-Mao China, opting for “an alternative modernization” instead (ix). Partha Chatterjee (1999) rebuts Benedict Anderson’s model of nation-building, claiming that “The real space of modern life is a heterotopia” (131). Ultimately, the interface between Victorian domesticity and the colonial gaze did not operate along any single axis, either of Pratt’s hierarchies or of Tagore’s reciprocity, but along a spectrum of positive and negative axes emanating from a variety of intellectual and ideological locations, and creating a complex ecosystem of intersecting cultures.

## Notes

1. Pioneering work from the 1980s onwards by Rozina Visram (1986, 1987), Antoinette Burton (1998) and Fisher himself has extended the frontiers of colonial travel studies, though their discussions solely focused non-Western narratives in English. However, it is their initiative that encouraged explorations of counterflow narratives in non-Western languages by scholars like Simonti Sen (2004) and Alam and Subrahmanyam (2007).

2. The reverse transculturation of Britain by its Indian migrants over the centuries has been recorded in two major interdisciplinary projects sponsored by England’s Arts and Humanities Research Council, “Making Britain: South Asian Visions of Home and Abroad” (2007-10) and

“Indian British Connections” (2011-12).

3. ‘Lakh’ is 100,000.

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# ARBOREAL ARTICULATIONS: TREES, PLANTS AND THE POSSIBILITY OF LANGUAGE IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S FICTION

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PUSPA DAMAI

“We are tired of trees,” say Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, adding that we “should stop believing in trees, roots and radicles” for “[t]hey have made us suffer too much (15).” Deleuze and Guattari are neither indifferent to the environment nor are they unaware of the insistence of suffering in human life. They have written extensively about the ethics and aesthetics of ecosophy (*The Three Ecologies* 41), and the masochist pain of the body without organs, “the unproductive, the sterile, the unengendered, the unconsumable” body with death as its motor (*Anti-Oedipus* 8). If pain, suffering and death constitute the essential “affect” of a body without organs, then why do these thinkers equate trees to death and suffering, and believe that we must find a different system of belief in which trees, roots and radicles hold no sacro-sanctity? How have trees made us suffer? What in trees

inflicts pain on us? Why do the philosophers sound ecophobic to blame trees instead of the destructive political ideologies and technological inventions leading to disasters and tragedies such as the atom bomb, Chernobyl, colonialism, and the Holocaust for being the “root” cause of suffering?

Deleuze and Guattari’s intriguing correlation between trees and suffering results from their identification of a few key problematic ideological features in an arborescent culture. Those features include hierarchy, rootedness, repetition reaffirming the origin, and sameness at the expense of difference, which in turn lead the philosophers to equate arborescence to imperialism. Linguistics – one of the sciences shoring up the ideology of arborescence – is linked up with “Oedipus” and characterized as imperialism. Ferdinand de Saussure’s concept of the sign speaks the language of an “Oriental despot” in which “the signifier is elevated to the concept corresponding to the acoustic image,” which eventually in a self-serving manner “recomposes [the transcendental sovereignty of] the signifier” (*Anti-Oedipus* 207). Instead of promising meaning, Saussure’s signifier lays a trap to enchain the speaker in the familial prison house of language. Against this self-referential, rooted, despotic and torturous voice of an arborescent signifier, Deleuze and Guattari posit a rhizomatic activism of grass and plants.

If trees represent imperialism, then why do many postcolonial societies deem trees as sacred signifiers of their struggle for freedom? Why do historians consider Gandhi’s vegetarianism, nature cure and his ecologically informed pro-village politics to be the moral force behind India’s movement for independence? Is Deleuze and Guattari’s binary of trees and plants analytically ineffective to illustrate the opposition between imperialism and postcoloniality? Is their theory out of sync with history, and potentially useless in marshaling a politics of freedom and decolonization?

One may also ask: is there something missing from postcolonial politics of nationalism and Gandhian politics of “villageism” and vegetarianism? In what ways, if any, does Deleuze and Guattari’s theory enable us to intervene into and refuel the conspicuously fallible and faltering movement of postcoloniality? We have already seen the gains and promises of critiquing “post-colonial reason” from a subalternist position in Gayatri Spivak’s works. Yet Spivak’s critique and method [like other “human-centered” “postcolonial criticism” (Huggan 702)] remain essentially anthropocentric. How would a critique of postcolonially rooted nationalism look from a non-anthropocentric point of view which engages not with the culture, the consciousness and the voice of the subalterns, but with their land and the issue of survival through, and co-existence, with trees and plants? I argue that Mahasweta Devi’s works

enable us to wage this critique by at once exposing the colonialist identification of natives with wilderness and critiquing the nationalist exclusion and marginalization of indigenous population and outcastes.

Against the self-enclosed and torturous space of an arborescent prison-house which excludes difference through hierarchy and genealogical tracing, rhizomorphous grass and plants “connect any point to any other point,” thereby opening “multiple entryways and exits” and enabling us to live “politically . . . with all the forces of his or her desire” (*A Thousand* 21, 13). Trees cause the death of politics; plants make politics possible. Trees torture like oriental despots, or Western colonialists and imperialists; plants unleash an intense politics of decolonization. Though “Deleuze does not ‘directly speak’ with the thinkers and writers of the postcolony,” he, with Guattari, provides a very complicated theoretical map for outlining an anti-imperialist politics and rhizomatic and post-colonial activism (Bignall and Patton 1).

It would be erroneous to assume that the binary between trees and plants or arborescence and rhizomes parallels the opposition between imperialism and post-colonialism. Deleuze and Guattari clarify that trees also function as rhizomes, such as Buddha’s tree of knowledge. But the juxtaposition of Western arborescence and Eastern rhizomes ends right there, for *A Thousand*

*Plateaus* introduce a plateau in-between, which is not only “always in the middle” (21), a “multiplicity” (22,) but it also constitutes a fold which contains other folds within, for a “fold is always folded within a fold” (*The Fold* 6). This rhizomatic map of “history” allows the philosophers to explode the binary of Western colonialism/imperialism and Eastern “nativism” by locating a fold within the colonized society. *A Thousand Plateaus* invokes “the double-headed figure of the Rex and flamen, Raj and Brahman [sic], Romulus and Numa, Varuna and Mitra, the despot and the legislator” (351). This figure helps them draw a parallel between the Raj (colonizer) and the Brahmin (colonized), revealing a fold within, consisting of other “natives” and nomads excluded from the sovereign double-headedness of the Raj and the Brahmin. Devi’s literary works and her political engagement are “grounded” on this fold, which provides the location of what can be termed as her grass-roots activism.

In comparison to Deleuze and Guattari’s nomads dwelling on the fold or the plateaus, Devi’s indigenes are more rooted, and their culture more arborescent. Her grass-roots activism resists colonialist depiction and displacement of natives as wild savages and their continuous internal colonization within a postcolonial society. Moving beyond Deleuze and Guattari’s perceptive binary of trees and plants, Devi simultaneously reveals the suffering caused by trees and makes trees

and plants witnesses of that suffering. In juxtaposing imperial or colonialist arborescence and anti-colonial grass-roots activism in which trees and plants function as agents, Devi lends a voice to the suffering of those heard neither by the Raj nor by the Brahmins. She imagines a politics of “arboreal articulation” or grass-roots activism in which trees and plants are at once the voice of indigenous or tribal suffering, the agents witnessing that suffering, and the house of refuge for those who suffer. The question for her is not to reconcile “the Northern environmentalisms of the rich and the Southern environmentalisms of the poor” (Huggan and Tiffin 2); more important is to question both post-colonial theory and eco-criticism from within. Devi’s eco-political enunciations reveal what according to some theorists is the primary goal of all eco-criticism: to be able to “talk about how differently various human groups conceptualize and relate to their environments” (Mukherjee 81).

In an interview with Spivak, Devi reveals that “India belonged to [tribals] long before the incursion of the Aryan speaking people. *The Ramayana* . . . seems to contain evidence of how they were oppressed, evicted from their homeland” (ix). If *The Ramayana* contains the testimony of tribal oppression and destruction by the Aryan speaking people, then imperialism in India neither started with the arrival of the British nor did it end with their departure. If the epics are the measures

of India’s ongoing colonialism, they really reach epic proportion in their depiction of the bloodshed and cruelty inflicted upon non-Aryan tribals.

Unlike Deleuze and Guattari, Devi refuses to confine her analysis of colonialism to the binary of trees and plants. Unlike the philosophers – who believe that trees only represent the imperial politics of hierarchy, pain and suffering – the arboreal politics in Devi represents survival itself. Forest is not only a means of tribal livelihood which provides them “with food, shelter, timber and hunting,” it is a being to ask forgiveness of. The Sobors, Devi notes, “will beg forgiveness if they are forced to fell a tree: You are a friend. I do this because my wife doesn’t have any food” (Devi and Spivak x). The tribals do not humanize a tree, rather they believe that a tree is worth more than a human being. Devi reports that once a tribal told her: “I need five rupees a day to buy rice. Ask me to fell a tree, I’ll do it unwillingly, but I will do it. Ask me to chop off a head, I’ll do it” (Devi and Spivak xviii-xix).

Devi’s identification of tribal transvaluation of values in relation to humans and forest differs from Deleuze’s ontological understanding in *Difference and Repetition*, which defines being as univocity, “a single voice of Being which includes all its modes, including the most diverse, the most varied, the most differentiated . . . said in a single and same sense of everything of

which it is said, but that of which it is said differs: it is said of difference itself" (36). Whereas Deleuze's ontological univocity contains diversity without losing its univocal sameness, Devi's hierarchical "ahumanism" puts trees before humans to unsettle ontology by articulating difference through the voice of the other. Devi's tribal conceptualizes Being not as univocity but as the voice of the other: the forest consisting of its trees, plants, flowers, roots, radicles, and rhizomes.

Theorizing about the voice of the other, Cathy Caruth recalls Tasso's *Jerusalem Liberated* in which, after killing his beloved Clorinda, Tancred wanders repentant into a strange, magical forest. When he slashes a tree with his sword, blood streams from the trunk and through the cut he hears Clorinda's voice, complaining that he has wounded her again. For Caruth, Tasso's tale reveals more than suffering's uncanny repetition. She believes that the story foregrounds "the moving and sorrowful voice that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released *through the wound*" (2). While moving beyond Freud's theory of the repetition compulsion by adding the dimension of the voice Caruth overlooks a key component: the wound of the victim is not only the origin of the voice, the wounded victim is also a tree. What remains unclaimed, uncanny and unknowable in the testimony of the voice is that it comes from a tree. The articulation of Clorinda's suffering is made possible by the split or wound on the tree, a wound

which at once divides and connects the tree and the victim. This "wounded" and split voice of the forest which allows and enables the tribes in Devi's works to express their suffering is what I call arboreal articulation or grass-roots activism.

This becoming-tree-of-a-human-being represents an event of enunciation. Yet this event cannot be characterized as ecolinguistics. Describing the interdependence of language and environment, Edward Sapir asserts that the vocabulary of a language, together with its morphology and phonetic system, "clearly reflects the physical and social environment of its speakers" (228). Ecolinguistics for Greg Garrard identifies "examples of rhetoric" or tropes such as pollution (6). Alwin Fill believes that ecolinguistics "began with a metaphor" (43), and it "transfers concepts and methods from biological ecology to the study of language" (44). Devi's arboreal linguistic act, however, exceeds the limits of reflection, rhetoricity or metaphoricity inasmuch as this articulation is a performative event that seeks to blur the boundaries between a tree and a human being; it is an event in which one's wounds give expression to the other's suffering.

### **Articulation as becoming-tree-of-a-child**

Devi's novella *The Armenian Champa Tree* takes us to 18th century colonial Calcutta ruled de facto by a

crafty landlord and a corrupt *kapalik*. On the other side of this imperial triumvirate are the Bunos. The Bunos for the Raj are a tribe of dacoits to be severely punished under the law; Janaki Singh, the landlord makes them easy targets for his greed and guile. The ascetic *kapaliks* threaten the very existence of the tribe with devious demands for animal and human sacrifice. As these autocratic authorities steady their unsparing political grip on the town, Devi follows a young Buno boy, Mato, who puts his own life at stake in order to save his pet goat, Arjun, from being sacrificed at the bidding of a *kapalik*. The juvenile protagonist and perspective enable Devi to contrast innocence and injustice and to demonstrate how absurd and inconsequential Mato's life, his affections, and the very existence of the Buno tribe might have looked to the figures of authority. At the outset of the story Devi notes:

You have not read about these things any where. Not everything is written down in books. No book contains the story of Mato of the Buno quarters, of his goat Arjun, and of the old padri sahib of the church. Though not written down, it is all true. An old pundit once asked me, "Who says these are true?" This pundit does not believe in anything that is not written in books or palm-leaf manuscripts or inscribed on stone. (3)

Devi's unearthing of narratives not heard before puts the Bunos back on the map of Calcutta, a map which is being drawn and redrawn by East India Company, the

landlords and the Tantriks. The map, which reminds of Deleuze and Guattari's conflation of the Raj and the Brahmin, threatens to entirely erase the indigenous Bunos. Putting them back on the map would be impossible without the help of trees and plants. Not only that many areas of Calcutta back then were covered by "swamps, woodlands [and] marshy jungles" (2), but also that without the forest, the Bunos have no other means of survival.

Mato's mother (a deep black-skinned woman nicknamed Tigress) reminds her tribe that "[t]his jungle is our savior. Mind you, it is this jungle which has sustained us through the endless famine" (9-10). Mato is still breathing because a village "kabiraj" (apothecary) treated his congenital heart defect with herbal concoctions. Mato's haedine playmate, "an abandoned and vagabond goat," (like the Bunos themselves in the power equations of 18th century colonial India), is named Arjun, a character from *The Mahabharata* who spent thirteen years of exile in the forest. Arjun also is a herbal tree used in Ayurveda to treat cardiac ailments. Saving the goat for Mato equals to saving himself. Arjun, whose capering shenanigans provoke the wrath of a *kapalik* who demands the goat to be sacrificed, can be saved only by escaping to and through the forest. The culmination of Mato's line of flight is the titular Armenian Champa tree itself:

Mato knows where he has to go now. The town of Behrampur is four miles away. There is an Armenian church there. In the garden of the Armenian Church, masses of tiny champa flowers bloom. Drawn by the champa blossoms, Mato has gone there countless times. Mato knows the priest of the church; he has seen him often, from a distance. If he could only enter the church compound, there would be nothing to fear. (23)

Deleuze and Guattari equate trees to suffering and pain; in Devi, trees provide escape and refuge. The philosophers believe that only plants offer the multiple and rhizomatic entry- and exit-ways for escape; Devi documents an arboreal multiplicity irreducible to any structures and unbendable by any hierarchies. While trees (e.g. Nose-Cut Off) directly assist Mato in hiding from his pursuers, the Armenian Champa functions as his *kalpavriksha* – a mythical tree capable of fulfilling one's wishes. By locating the champa tree inside a church, Devi hints at the issue of conversion for the tribes. What draws Mato to the church is not necessarily Christianity, but the idea that the champa tree would be his *kalpavriksha*. While still fleeing from the villagers in a mad pursuit of him due to the fact that a successful capture of the fugitive will land a bounty worth one solid gold coin from Janaki Singh, Mato visualizes the “wondrous champa flowers,” and how he would walk on the “soft green grass” once he reaches the church (38). Mato's flight goes exactly according to his plan, except that while escaping from his pursuers

he was also running towards his own demise; in saving Arjun from being “butchered” by the kapalik, Mato would not be able to save his own life. When the town expanded, concludes Devi's narrator, flowers continue to blossom in the champa tree. They blossom now as well. At times, on wintry nights, when the fog merges with the full moon to create a shadowy atmosphere, they say that the tree looks like a small boy. The boy kneels with folded hands [as if he still had Arjun in his embrace], his face raised upwards. At times the tree looks like an old *padri*. As if he is standing silently with his head bent, and his hand resting upon somebody's head. (51-52) In this becoming-tree-of the child or becoming-child of the tree, Mato, like the Sobor, saves a tree at the cost of his own life.

*A Thousand Plateaus* argues that “the tree has dominated Western reality and all of Western thought;” in contrast, the “East presents a different figure: a relation to the steppe and the garden . . . rather than forest and field; cultivation of tubers by fragmentation of the individual; a casting aside or bracketing of animal raising, which is confined to closed spaces or pushed out on to the steppes of the nomads” (18). In creating this neat binary between the East and the West, the tree and the plants, structures and rhizomes, the book articulates the difference between suffering or imperialism and desire and freedom. Yet its emphasis on non-segmentarity and immanence leads it to confuse coloni-

alism with freedom. If the “rhizome is made only of lines” as a way of relating to “the animal, the vegetal, the world, politics, things natural and artificial” (21), those lines also lead to America’s “ever-receding limit, its shifting and displaced frontiers” (19). If the rhizomatic lines are a unique way of relating to all things natural and artificial, those very intensities blur the lines distinguishing freedom from settler colonialism. In contrast to the rhizomatic lines transmitting only short term memory and anti-genealogy, Devi’s fiction invokes the memory of a Buno youth from the forgotten history of (post)colonial India. By referring to a multiplicity of trees, plants and herbs, and to equally polyvalent ways of relating to trees, animals and the world prevalent among indigenous tribes, Devi points to a politics of arboreal articulation which attends to difference. Instead of confining herself to a neat binary, in *The Armenian Champa Tree* as well as elsewhere, Devi invokes a subtle and unique form of “grassroots activism” grounded on a long history of “eco-political” activism in India, a politics which may be divided into five major stages: mythical, medical, nationalist, ecological and Indigenous.

### Eco-politics in India

The mythical stage of India’s eco-political activism has two main branches: the Vedic and Puranic narratives

foregrounding the eminence of trees, plants and forest in the universe; and the Scriptural sanctions on the division of *ashramas* of human life on the basis of one’s proximity to forest. Many scholars studying ancient India cite the *Rgveda*: “what was the wood, what the tree . . . from which they fashioned forth the earth and heaven” (Kumar 13). Some scholars have referred to “the “asvattha” tree whose leaves are the Vedas” (Jain 33). Following this Vedic arborescence is the myth of the *kalpavriksha* or *kalpataru* or *kalpalata* or *kalpadrum* – the wish-fulfilling tree, which emerged from the oceanic depths during a game of churning between gods and demons. This mythical tree fulfils one’s wishes; it enables one to have desires or wishes, and the nature of the tree is as mercurial and varied as people’s wishes. Though it was originally all golden, it may take the form of a tree (*vriksha*) or a plant (*taru*) or a vine (*lata*) or the wood (*drum*), a shape-shifting arborescence which confounds any attempt to distinguish between trees and plants. The multifarious *kalpavriksha* represents the very articulation of desires and wishes; and as many poets and critics have noted, it also signifies the politics of false promises made by corrupt politicians. In a poem titled “*Kalpavriksha*,” Ramdaras Mishra lambastes the politicians who promise anything to voters during election without intending to fulfill any of their commitments. Mishra writes: “This is the Capital [of India]/Where you would not be denied even heaven” (qtd. in Yadav161, translation mine).

The second branch of the mythical eco-politics is the Hindu division of human life into four-stages or ashramas: *brahmacharya* (celibate apprenticeship); *grihastha* (householding); *vanaprastha* (forest-dwelling) and *sanyas* (renunciation). Forest-dwelling is a bridge between the worldly life of house-holding and the ultimate goal of *moksha* through renunciation. These stages are applicable to the “twice born” only, as the other side of this four-fold classification of life and society – *varnashram* (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra) – would exclude anyone other than the first three “castes” from the religious order of life. Is Hinduism’s appropriation of *vanaprastha* for the twice-born a colonial move to claim the land and resources of the tribal and the indigenous? According this biopolitical administration of life, tribes undoubtedly forfeit their right of access to the forest.

The second stage of eco-political activism in India is Ayurveda – the science of long life or survival. As Francis Zimmermann observes, in India “the jungle is a medical concept,” therefore inextricable from the fact of surviving (ix). Zimmermann believes that Ayurveda brings “the stars, the waters, the earth, the plants, the fauna” together; and is “beyond our power of knowledge” (9). Critics have noted that “the recovery of Ayurvedic essence is linked to a recovery of Indian culture,” thereby relating Ayurveda to Independence and decolonization (Langford 2). Its “ethnomedical” status

has also led some to deploy it as a means to return to a Hindu science, a “corollary of Hindu nationalism in the 1890s” (Chaturvedi 142-43).

Nationalism or India’s movement against colonialism constitutes the third stage of eco-politics in India. One of the undisputed players of this movement, Mahatma Gandhi, has been characterized by his followers as “a practicing ecological yogi” (Khosoo and Moolakattu 7). While some doubt that Gandhi ever was an environmentalist as he “was first and foremost a social reformer,” and for him “[h]uman rights came before ideologies about nature” (Tomalin 81); many scholars believe that Gandhi’s vision of swaraj or self-determination is based on his critique of Western industrialism. Gandhi’s anti-colonialist movement is informed by his vision of an “ideal Indian village,” an environmentalist utopia fueled by “local self-reliance, a clean and hygienic environment, the collective management and use of those gifts of nature so necessary for human life; water and pasture” (Guha 50). They often cite Gandhi’s impatient response to a correspondent who believes that it is impossible to ignore “Western influences,” or “modern civilization.” Gandhi responds that “[T]he correspondent forgets that to make India like England and America is to find some other races and places of the earth for exploitation” (Gandhi 348). Seen from Devi’s perspective, however, Gandhi’s nativist alternative would seem to have succeeded in just doing

what it warns against: finding tribes and their forests for exploitation.

The ecological phase of India's eco-politics is perhaps the most diverse as it concerns many aspects of modernization, technology, biodiversity, capitalism and globalization. This phase is not just the most vocal, but also the most global. One of the leading voices of this movement is Vandana Shiva, whose works bring together ancient ecological practices and modern scientific rationale for environmentalism. Opposing the ideologies of taking "the planet as private property," and the world as "a global super- market," Shiva proposes the concept of "the planet as a commons" (2). However, Shiva's "earth democracy" confines itself to "sharing" of resources, for she believes that we "are the food we eat, the water we drink, the air we breathe" and "reclaiming democratic control over our food and water" is "our necessary project of freedom" (5). Shiva has next to nothing to offer to people who do not have much to eat, namely the tribes in Devi's works.

Indigenous ecopolitics is grassroots activism. The Gandhians and the subalternists also masquerade their ecopolitics as indigenous. Some argue that "Gandhi encouraged indigenous capability and local self-reliance" (Khoshoo and Moolakattu 8). Others conflate peasants and indigenous tribes in their bid to outline "the ecological landscape of resistance" through "the

management of forest" in the context of the Chipko movement of Uttarakhand (*The Unquiet Earth* 6). Devi's works depict the grassroots activism of a "nomadic" indigeneity, thereby generating a critique not only of colonialism, but of its nativist fold, eco-colonization of the tribes by both the Raj and the Brahmins.

### **Grassroots Activism and articulation of sovereignty in *Jungle ke Davedar* and other stories:**

In *Dewana, Khoimala, and the Holy Bunyan Tree*, Devi narrates the story of Khoimala, a poor Brahmin girl, and her outcaste admirer, Golak, who loses his mental balance due to his inability to openly express his feelings about her. Unlike Deleuze and Guattari, who equated the Raj and the Brahmins in their critique of imperialism, Devi discovers yet another fold within the term "Brahmin" – class (poverty) and gender (women). When Golak teases Khoimala about her being a Brahmin and poor, the narrator points out that since "Hastings was the Governor General," Calcutta was growing fast with people traveling and requiring boatmen's services, thereby making "Golak and his kind . . . moneyed people;" as a result, "the boatmen were better off than the Brahmin" (15).

As a knot in the imperial triumvirate, colonial governorship in Calcutta is directly responsible for the ex-

pansion of the municipality, poverty of the Brahmins and the economic ascendancy of the boatmen. Devi introduces another fold here – no matter how much better off Golak is economically, culturally he cannot think or talk about his love for Khoimala. Khoimala's mother – who describes herself as “an animal marked for sacrifice” (26) – marries Khoimala off to an elderly landlord. Terrified by the thought of his love for Khoimala, Golak goes to see the holy tree and pleads: “Thakurbot, I have believed in you since I've been a boy. Hung garlands of champa from your branches during Rathayatra . . . You are god. Sanatan Thakur says holy men have sat in your shade . . . Now please make me forget Kaitari [Khoimala]” (35).

Thakurbot or the tree of god is divine as much as it represents the mythical *kalpavriksha* capable of fulfilling the devotees' wishes or better enabling them to acknowledge their own latent desires. The *kalpavriksha* is also like kabiraj endowed with the curative properties to heal illnesses both physical and psychological in people both great and small. The tree is the only being or space (besides Ascharya, the storyteller, who first told them the story of a man who lost his sanity for love) common and accessible to both Golak and Khoimla. Thakurbot makes them openly articulate their bodily needs for each other. The map of their desire and its “incriminating” divulgence run through the multiple and rhizomatic lines extending back to the

mythical period itself. Golak continues visiting the tree to fulfill his wishes to forget Khoimala and not lapse into insanity due to his inability to reveal his love for her. Khoimala also visits the tree in order to pray that Golak not leave her to go to sea.

Khoimala did not have too many occasions in her life to express her opinion. She was too young when her marriage was arranged – “she did not understand what happened” (31) – by her mother and grandfather to a man several times her age. Her conjugal fate was decided by her sadhu (ascetic) grandfather and her landlord husband (both of whom described by another character as “monsters”). While the grandfather was only interested in the food and the money the marriage would bring him, Nilmoni, her would be husband, was interested in the land and the coconut trees he was inheriting due to his marriage to Khoimala. He only asks – “how often the coconut trees bore fruit” for his “withered body now contained nothing but greed” (31). Visiting the tree to pray for her mother's life and for the company of Golak are perhaps her only volitional acts. During one of the visits to the tree, she asks:

“Golak, what do you tell the holy tree?”

“What do you?”

“Golak, please don't go to the ocean!” Each word a wrench, as though her very heart was breaking into piec-

es. Yet she felt that never again would she have a chance to speak to him this way.

“Will you be sad if I go to sea, Kaitari”? She nodded. What was there to be ashamed of? Holy tree, you are the guardian of my modesty. I must tell it to him, now. (42)

No sooner had her husband died than his children from other marriages decided to “burn her alive” with his dead body (67). Golak, himself on the brink of a complete mental breakdown, comes to her rescue. As they flee from the people trying to capture and commit Golak to a brutal mental asylum and to burn Khoimala alive because she is a widow now, she implores: “Golak, take me with you!” (73). The endless line of flight fulfils their wishes; Khoimala comes close to self-determination, to making a decision herself even though that decision entails death.

*Jungel Ke Davedar* [*The Inheritors of the Forest*] is a revised and expanded Hindi edition of Mahasweta Devi’s Bengali novel – *Aranyer Adhikar* [*The Rights of the Forest*] published in serial form in *The Betar Jagat* in 1975. Devi was awarded India’s *Sahitya Academy Prize* for this novel. In this novel, Devi revisits the little known events of the 1890s’ Munda movement in which the Munda tribe of Bihar’s Chota Nagpur region waged a war of “Abua Disun” (self rule) both against the British and the non-tribal landlords known as Babu or Diku (outsiders). The Munda warriors led by

Birsa Munda, (1975-1901) known to his followers as *Bhagawan Birsa* [God Birsa] or *Dharati Aba* [father of the earth], waged a mass revolt or uprising [*ulgulan*] for two years in Ranchi and Khunti against the missionaries, the police, and the outsiders. After the killing of a few policemen and destruction of property in the area, Birsa and his followers, the “Birsais” retreated to the forest of Dumbari Hill, where they were surrounded and fired upon by two company of army led by the Superintendent of Police, Commissioner, and Deputy Commissioner. The death toll of the Mundas was high (about 400), even though the accurate number was debated. Birsa Munda was captured and sent to jail, where he died a suspicious death. The narrator of Devi’s novel comments about Birsa’s realization that history is written from the perspective of the victors:

The sahibs have not always won, not all battles. Santhals, Kohls, Kharuwas, and Sardars won a few battles; the ones they lost have proved that only victors are included in history books; the defeat is planted like rice plants in the blood of the vanquished, and in their unemployment, hunger and exploitation. The names of the defeated make way into the songs of the vanquished, into their insipid and coarse meals, the naked and discolored skin of their children and the bloated stomachs of the Munda mothers. (224)

Devi’s grassroots activism rests not only in invoking the songs of the defeated Mundas, but also in unearthing the history of their displacement and destitution,

their hunger and exploitation sowed like rice plants in their body. The image of planting as a way of coping with and expressing injustices of history makes Jungle ke Davedar Devi's most direct and eco-politically effective arboreal articulation.

Early on in the novel, Birsa's father Sugana Munda explains how the Mundas lost their rights over the forest, their homeland:

I, Sugana Munda, cannot recall the day when my ancestors Chota and Nagu came to this virgin land to settle. They took the virginity of the land and established the settlement of the Mundaris. I cannot recall when they named this land, this rich and resourceful nation inhabited by bears, boars and tigers, and covered by the jungle of *shal, gazar, sidha and shisham* trees, Chota Nagpur, after themselves.

Though a direct descendent of the founders, I, Sugana Munda, wander aimlessly around like an abject beggar clad only in tatters and without even a grain of wild grass in my stomach. Wouldn't I be better off if I were a bird gleaning its feed from the field! (44)

Sugana cannot put a fixed date on the Mundas' loss of the rights of the forest. The process of their dispossession was systematic and unrelenting the origin and cause of which was not just the arrival of Europeans. Nor does it resemble the settler colonial societies. As Birsa points out – "With the Mundas, everyone acts

as if they were masters [*diku*] or sahebs of the tribals" (73).

In contrast to the simplistic binary of European colonizers and non-European colonized, Birsa resorts to a language of the forest to distinguish his people from both European colonizers and their "native" counterparts, thereby revealing a fold which goes unnoticed in India's documentation of colonization or its glorification of independence. As Sali, one of the Birsais in the novel notes, "the Munda equals a forest dweller, therefore a savage. A Munda's life is for Dikus; for the Munda works in Dikus' farmland to grow rice and mustard for them, who in turn will invade and occupy the forest; destroy and dismantle the Mundas' sacred villages and their places of worships in order to establish their own deities" (140).

The forest not only distinguishes the Mundas from Dikus by negation or erasure; i.e. by foregrounding the loss of the forest (e.g. the plant of rice embossed in the psyche and body of a Munda, because that is a staple the Mundas can only dream about for they can only afford grains from wild grass); the forest also flows in the "black blood" of the tribals. Even as a child, what made Birsa different was his knowledge of the mystery of the jungle. In an important section of the novel just before his advent as "god" or "*Dharati Aba*" (father of the earth), Birsa retreats to the forest to contemplate

his next move against occupation of tribal land. Suddenly he hears a voice coming from “the forest flowing in his veins”:

“Ah, I have been desecrated!  
 “I will purify you!  
 “Behold, Dikus and Sahibs have repeatedly assaulted me!  
 “I will avenge your assault! . . .  
 “Nobody hears me lament.  
 “I do, mother.  
 “Nobody looks out for me . . .  
 “Where are you located, mother?  
 “In your heart, in your blood! . . . Yes, and will forever flow there my Aba! Just look closely.

“Birsa looked at his blood! Yes, indeed, his body is the land of Chota Nagpur and his blood is the river upon the banks of which is his mother, the forest, naked like a Mundari belle.” (88)

Birsa’s “ulgulan” (revolution) is not an attempt to go back to the forest as it existed before colonization; it is rather an attempt to flow. “Flowing” is how *Anti-Oedipus* would define “desire;” and desire is revolution. Desire implies “the revolutionary investment,” (378) which, like death, constitutes an unpredictable flow escaping any axiomatics of decoding. Deleuze and Guattari would interpret Birsa’s desire as “territorial,” in which the *socius* remains the body of the Earth or

the body of the Despot, who seeks to channel flows of desires before the body of the Money takes over. For them, only “capitalism, through its process of production, produces an awesome schizophrenic accumulation of energy or charge” (34). Birsa’s voice of the forest would be a predictable invocation of territoriality or a Despot’s attempt to create a *socius*. In contrast to this, Devi endows him with a deterritorializing unpredictability.

After leaving the mission school, Birsa tries to reclaim the jungle legally by filing an application to the Forest Department; but when he gets to the Department, the imperial bureaucrats ridicule him by questioning his credentials. Birsa responds by waving his application for the rights of the forest. The clerks couldn’t believe that a Munda can utter a word such as “application,” and can speak for his and his tribe’s “rights.” They again taunt him: “Swim across the ocean to London, where the Queen resides [and ask her for your rights]; she is already trembling with fear of the Mundas” (83). When the legal avenue closes, Birsa plans his initial attack on the Christmas Eve of 1895. Relating the history of the event and Birsa’s planning of the *ulgulan*, Suresh Singh notes that the Deputy Commissioner of Ranchi had sent out spies to find out about the Mundas’ plans, but to no avail. The rebels thought that “if they succeeded ‘in striking a blow,’ ‘the bulk of the people all over Chotanagpur would be really on their side.’ They

believed that ‘Government’ mistook their real aim” (Singh 96).

Birsa’s revolutionary flow is unpredictable due to its eclectic nature borrowed from Christianity and Hinduism. Instead of going back to the tribal rituals and worship of *Sibonga* practiced by the Mundas, he desecrated their burial site by exhuming the bodies and selling the valuables buried with the dead. He announces that the ancient tribal religion cannot make the Munda’s happy (*Jungle* 86). Instead he declared himself *Dharti Aba* or God by comparing himself to Jesus and Krishna. The stormy night on which Birsa assumed the role of God, “the lightening seared the sky; the elephants trumpeted, tigers roared, and Birsa looked up to the heaven and declared – ‘Everything is mine. The jungle is mine; and I am the father of the earth’” (89).

Birsa’s declaration poses a challenge for the British when they arrest him; even their torture cannot break him. The British failure to destroy his ideology would imply that Birsa indeed was God. After his death, the Birsaitis would refuse to believe that he was dead: “God does not die; revolution does not end” (28). Karmi, Birsa’s mother, would express her fear about Birsa’s difference by remarking that “even though she carried him in her womb, and gave birth to him, he remained a stranger” (43). Neighbors would compare him to Krishna and his mesmerizing magic over both humans

and animals, which would lead Sugana to exasperatingly entreat him “to be just like others” (44).

By starting the novel with Birsa’s death in the prison, and then by going back to his childhood and narrating the history of the movement up to the point of his arrest, Devi seems to corroborate the fact that indeed Birsa is God, therefore, he and his movement keep on coming back to life. Like Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the Body without Organs, or “opening the body to connections that presuppose an entire assemblage, circuits conjunctions, levels and thresholds, passages and distributions of intensity” (*A Thousand* 160), Birsa becomes a body connected to lines and flows representing revolutionary desire. Deleuze and Guattari interestingly compare the gaiety and ecstasy of the BwO or revolutionary desire to Krishna (*A Thousand* 151). But unlike Devi’s depiction of Birsa as *kalpavriksha*, the wish-fulfilling tree of life and desire, and his recognition of sovereign rights over and with the forest, Deleuze and Guattari’s flows do not lead to tribal sovereignty; in fact the philosophers would equate sovereignty to slavery and colonialism (*Anti-oedipus* 265).

Trees and plants enable Mahasweta Devi to locate and devise a language in which her characters articulate a grassroots activism against the ongoing colonization of indigenous tribes and outcastes. By blurring the ontological boundary between humans and plants, and by

making her subjects speak to, for and with plants and trees, Devi proposes an eco-politics of arboreal articulation through which she critiques postcolonial nationalism and anthropocentric “subalternism” in order to envision strategies of survival for indigenous people and their worlds.

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# LOVING SOMEONE YOU DON'T KNOW: TRANSCULTURATION, SEX AND MARRIAGE IN THE FICTION OF JHUMPA LAHIRI AND BHARATI MUKHERJEE

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Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee are both writers known for crafting female characters who navigate the complexities of gender in the U.S.-Bengali diaspora. Those female characters' abilities to succeed in their navigations are often complicated by heteroromantic relationships, like marriage and extra-marital affairs. The pressures of orientalism and female objectification render those relationships, and the social meanings assigned to them, crucial to the identity politics implicit in both authors' work.

The line from which the title of this article comes appears in Lahiri's short story "Sexy," which features close-third person narration centered on an Anglo-American woman, Miranda, who has become the mistress of a Bengali man named Dev. Because of her relationship

with one of her co-workers, Miranda is conscripted to babysit Rohin, the seven-year-old son of the friend of Miranda's aforementioned co-worker; that friend of a co-worker is filing for divorce because of her husband's infidelity. After Rohin insists that Miranda put on a cocktail dress he finds in her closet, he tells her that she is "sexy." Miranda, who is equally flattered and dismayed, asks the little boy what he thinks that word means. In response, he tells her "It means loving someone you don't know. . . . That's what my father did. He sat next to someone he didn't know—someone sexy, and now he loves her instead of my mother" (*Interpreter of Maladies* 108). In this piece of dialogue, Lahiri tacitly argues that even in relationships where women have the agency to choose their lovers (as Miranda had selected Dev when she approached him at a department store) the level of intimate knowledge that lovers may have of each other cannot be easily determined, or even predicted, by the power differentials that culture, gender, national origin or ethnic identity might cause to manifest in these relationships.

In "Sexy" and in much of her other fiction, Lahiri asks her readers to consider how the diasporic conditions of these kinds of romantic attachments might demand a radical reconsideration of love, sex and marriage. Lahiri often writes about how affective bonds between men and women—love, as Rohin puts it—are distinct from familiarity—knowledge, or the lack thereof. For

many of her female characters, diaspora introduces increasingly more complex connections between desire and identity. This is also true of the characterization of women in Mukherjee's fiction. These writers destabilize the assumption that any singular set of cultural traditions may produce more stable, healthy, or satisfying attachments than any other, and thus directly counters narratives about female subjectivity inherent in cosmopolitan readings of their works.

Writings by Lahiri and Mukherjee show a wide range of effects that different heteroromantic relationships have upon the female characters, which implicitly questions some assumptions of Western feminist literary criticism. For example, Monisha Pasupathi, notes that much of the behavioral research conducted in the United States about arranged marriage labors under the assumption that choice is always empowering or that passivity is always oppressive. Rather than adopt that assumption, or the equally troubling one that cultural relativism allows readers to simply avoid the ambiguities that intersections of ethnicity, class and gender may produce in a text, Mukherjee and Lahiri produce a diverse set of characters whose stories reflect what Pasupathi's own research shows:

... the practices of arranging marriage do not necessarily lead to the oppression of women. In fact, arranged marriages are but one of many practices that require Western feminism to confront and resolve issues of cultural

variability and heterogeneity in their striving for gender equality. Without such confrontation, Western feminism will remain Western, at best ineffective in achieving its aims for benefiting women worldwide and at worst clumsily harmful. Unlike other culturally particularized rituals involving women . . . arranged marriages do not inherently require that women are injured or oppressed. (202)

Mukherjee and Lahiri craft female characters who are injured and oppressed by the choices provided to them in diasporic spaces, but each also imagines female characters who are bolstered and empowered by those same choices. What emerges from reading these texts together is an intersectional feminism that values women's abilities to adopt the cultural and marital practices that work best for the situations in which they, their partners and families find themselves.

Entry into diaspora is occasionally undertaken through heteroromantic attachment; consider the cliché of the "green card marriage" so prevalent in literary and popular culture. Some of Mukherjee's and Lahiri's characters immigrate through marriage; others test the adaptability of Bengali marital customs in increasingly Americanized contexts, and still others attempt to negotiate their own identities from within intercultural relationships. Miranda's affair with Dev, and the fetishization of Bengali culture that she derives pleasure from before identifying so strongly with Rohin's moth-

er in the denouement, is its own sort of postcolonial encounter that makes desire, sex and marriage part and parcel of the ways identity is established. "Sexy" is only one example of how Lahiri and Mukherjee challenge Western feminist assumptions about the politics of nation and coupling. For additional examples of this sort of challenge, readers can look to two collections of short stories—Mukherjee's *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988) and Lahiri's *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999)—and two novels—Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989) and Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003). In each of these pieces of fiction, the writers demonstrate how feminist theory and practice might be reimagined to better respond to the challenges of diaspora and to recognize the value of transcultural exchange.

Mukherjee and Lahiri write varied representations of heterosexual courtship and marriage between Bengali-American wives and their husbands. As each of the wives imagined by Mukherjee and Lahiri adjusts to life in the diaspora, she must cope not only with the challenges of living in a transcultural space as a hyphenated Indian-American, but also with the ethnosexual pressures that shape her identity as a woman. Amit Shankar Saha has argued that for new immigrants "the crisis of hyphenated existence—being Indian and U.S.-American at the same time—needs to be reconciled so as to define" a stable self (2). In Mukherjee's and Lahiri's fiction, this process of reconciliation and

identity-formation is doubly complicated by the fact that marriage may be a conduit for entrance into that hyphenated state. As an institution that requires spouses to redefine themselves as a social unit rather than as separate individuals, which also is historically unequal in both U.S.-American culture and in Bengali culture, marriage becomes a kind of fulcrum upon which gender and ethnicity are tenuously balanced.

The confluence of ethnic and gendered structures of oppression can confound attempts by Bengali-American wives to reconcile identity within a diasporic space because of competing narratives about the meanings of gender according to the host and indigenous cultures. As sociologist Joan Nagel has noted,

Ethnic boundaries are also sexual boundaries—erotic intersections where people make intimate connections across ethnic, racial or national borders. The borderlands that lie at the intersections of ethnic boundaries are 'ethnosexual frontiers that are surveilled and supervised, patrolled and policed, regulated and restricted, but that are constantly penetrated by individuals forging links with ethnic 'others.'(113)

The ways that boundaries between Bengali and American identities are constructed in these works of fiction can often become conflated with the ways in which sexual boundaries between men and women set up particular power structures. Because the borderlands

Nagel frames are metaphorically staged between potential romantic partners, the extent to which the diasporic space marks transgressions against that border necessarily shapes the surveillance, supervision, patrolling, policing, regulation and restriction with which each couple must cope. American contexts for understanding what it means to be a wife are occasionally at odds with Bengali expectations for the behavior of married women. A closer look at how Mukherjee and Lahiri write about Bengali-American marriage may help to identify and explain the broader criticism of national identity and institutional sexism in each writer's corpus. Reading across Lahiri's and Mukherjee's portrayals of girlfriends, brides, wives, mistresses, and widows makes it possible to draw some conclusions about how these two writers complicate reductive notions of gender parity and cultural difference by writing seemingly contradictory characterizations of women living in the Indo-American diaspora.

One example of these sorts of contradictions might be between arranged and chosen marriages. Lahiri's *The Namesake* portrays a highly successful arranged marriage, while Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* shows readers some of the challenges of a chosen marriage. A comparative analysis of these novels produces grounds for better understanding how women's choices can be limited or expanded through cultural systems that allow (or require) their parents to broker matches for

them independent of their input and/or consent. *The Namesake* tracks the courtship, marriage and subsequent immigration to the U.S. of Ashima Bhaduri and Ashoke Ganguli. Ashoke is the third suitor to whom Ashima's parents have presented her, and the first who does not reject Ashima; the couple meet only once before their wedding. In fact, Lahiri writes

It was only after the betrothal that [Ashima] learned his name. One week later the invitations were printed, and two weeks after she was adorned and adjusted by countless aunts . . . three days and eight thousand miles away in Cambridge[, Massachusetts] she has come to know him (9-10).

In this passage, Ashima is constructed as an object manipulated by her parents, and those innumerable aunts, who does not even know what she must consent to for marriage and immigration, until after that consent is irrevocably given and she finds herself alone with her new husband far from her home. Because Lahiri's diction stresses the shortness of time—three days—and the greatness of distance—eight thousand miles—Ashima's swift displacement to become a companion to a man who's name she has only just learned could lead readers (especially those who are already inclined to accept a Western feminist narrative about arranged marriage) to believe that Ashima is victimized by this system of parental arrangement.

However (in a gesture that seems to undercut that Western feminist narrative), Lahiri gives very little dialogue to Mr. Bhaduri, Ashima's father, and instead depicts Ashima's mother as central to contriving her daughter's marriage to Ashoke. Lahiri writes that Ashima is "amused by her mother's salesmanship" (7) when she overhears her lauding Ashima's skill as a cook and knitter to Ashoke's father. In spite of the fact that Mrs. Bhaduri seems to hold some sway in deciding her daughter's fate, the marriage is not in any way attributable to Ashima's own agency; in fact, readers are told that she is "nineteen, in the middle of her studies and in no rush to be a bride" when she is promised to a man she has never met (7). In the novel, there is much ambiguity about Ashima's marriage. While in these early chapters of *The Namesake* the absence of choice is troubling, those chapters are necessary exposition for the later plot points that reveal how Ashima comes to forge her own identity through the shared experience with Ashoke of being displaced through marriage. This thematic shift is particularly clear in the denouement, when Ashima, newly widowed, returns to Bengal and, once there, is honored and accepted without any pressures to give up her independence or to step into the sometimes pitiable role of a Hindu widow, which is, in large part, the result of her American identity—she is excepted from participating in a more "traditional" Bengali widowhood.

During and immediately after Ashima's wedding, the absence of even the right to refuse consent to her parents' choice marks Lahiri's representation of courtship with her husband as quite distinct from the Mukherjee's crafting of her protagonist's marriage in *The Tiger's Daughter*. In direct contrast to Ashima and Ashoke stand Tara Banerjee and David Cartwright, who occupy the narrative center of that novel. Tara, a doctoral candidate and the daughter of a wealthy industrialist in Calcutta, meets and marries David, an American and a would-be writer, while she is studying in New York. She neither informs her parents of her intent to marry him, nor does she ask their permission to do so. Unlike Mrs. Bhaduri's orchestration of Ashima's marriage to Ashoke, Mrs. Banerjee is both chagrined and angered by her daughter's decision to choose her own husband, which becomes very clear during the couple's first visit to India. Mukherjee comments upon her protagonist's fears that her father and the Hindu pantheon have renounced their previous love for her, but the narration is most concerned with the anxiety Tara feels about her mother's disapproval of her chosen match. Mukherjee writes,

Perhaps [Tara's] mother, sitting severely before God on a tiny rug no longer loved her [daughter] either. After all Tara had willfully abandoned her caste by marrying a foreigner. Perhaps her mother was offended that she, no longer a real Brahmin, was constantly in and out of this sacred room, dripping like a crow (50).

This goes beyond the boundaries of the Banerjee family and extends into Tara's identity in a national context. The use of the crow as a metaphor is apt—the black swathed carrion eaters are not only unclean, but may be a reference to the Bengali Dalit tradition in which those “untouchables” at the bottom of the caste hierarchy are also tasked with removing the bodies of the dead. The fact that Tara compares herself to a carrion bird, which itself disposes of dead animals, as she describes her feeling of intrusion in her mother's religious space, seems to present readers with the consequences of Tara's choice in specifically Bengali imagery. She has not just taken a husband. She has traded her religious and national identity for the right to make an independent choice about who that husband will be.

In addition to using this kind of imagery, Mukherjee crafts an interior monologue for Tara that clearly links her marriage to her outsider status—“In India she felt she was not married to a person but to a foreigner and this foreignness was a burden” (62). The fact that Tara chooses her own husband, and that she chooses from outside her caste and surname is inscribed in the text as a willful act of self-displacement. In the middle of the novel, after her marriage to David, that willfulness may be a means by which Tara more directly claims the independence that Ashima grows into in her widowhood. However, in the end of *The Tiger's Daughter* Tara must grapple with the cultural continuity that

she has lost. The refusal of an arranged marriage here becomes tantamount to a renunciation of Bengali culture and Brahmin caste; while the acceptance of an arranged one in *The Namesake* is seen as allegiance to the same, even when both kinds of marriages result in migration away from the homeland into the diaspora. The possibilities that are presented by returning to Bengal are marked in each novel in ways that reveal that distinction further. While Ashima is welcomed, explicitly accommodated in her difference; Tara is tolerated, tacitly judged for hers.

Critics have, of course, commented before on the different reactions each of these characters has to returning to India after living in the U.S. Rajib Bhaumik notes that “Tara endeavors to reconcile two diametrically opposite worlds, but like Mukherjee's other female protagonists, she is torn between her two socio-cultural identities, between her anchoring in an alien soil and her nostalgia for India, her home country (n.pag.).” However, Jyoti Rana notes that Ashima feels no such tearing and instead integrates her feelings of belonging in India with her experiences in the U.S. by “creat[ing] a close knit web of immigrants, who share a common language and culture. It is [the Ganguli's] enculturation and rooting in India that provides them peace in their host land. (420)” This displacement from the homeland seems less linked to the experience of living abroad than it is to the continuity of cultural practices

and interpersonal relationships, which are maintained, in part, through shared marital customs. This is not the sum total of the measures of acculturation through marriage in works by Lahiri and Mukherjee, each of whom will treat the question in her short fiction, nor is it simple to measure the degree to which the fictional accounting of marital arrangements correlate with sociological data on diasporic marriage with respect to women's rights.

In an attempt to determine the effect of arranged marriage on women's opportunities, Pasupathi considers a broad cross-section of studies of arranged marriage and women's social positions; the conclusions she draws as part of that synthetic analysis suggest that

[a]rranged marriages can be viewed as part of a system of inequities, with movement toward self-determination in marriage a route to improving other inequalities. Unfortunately, changes in marriage practices do not always result in improvements in other aspects of women's status . . . increasing freedom in choosing a marriage partner may not be accompanied by improvements in women's status overall. It might be less important to take a stand against arranged marriage and more important to take a stand against inequitable educational and career opportunities. (230-231)

By choosing to craft more complex characters whose marital situations are not as easily parsed as the assumption that greater choice will produce greater op-

portunity, both Mukherjee and Lahiri would seem to concur. Because Ashoke encourages Ashima to pursue a career as a public librarian, and because Ashima has access to a social network of other women living in the Bengali-American diaspora, her opportunities for improving her status are unconstrained by her arranged marriage. On the other hand, Tara's isolation and alienation from her family and culture seem to place barriers in the way of her ability to negotiate the hyphenated existence that Saha finds is complicated by life in the diaspora. The social acceptance of the choices of young women may be the paramount concern here, rather than the ability to make those choices independently. Both Lahiri and Mukherjee seem to support such a conclusion in their thematic treatments of marriage. The portrayals of marriage in their fiction seem to shift the kinds of questions it is necessary for feminist critics to pose about inequity in arranged marriages. Rather than focusing exclusively on bridal choice, the novels consider broader social systems that account for the liberatory potential of each character.

*The Tiger's Wife* and *The Namesake* explore the ways that weddings might alter national identity or gender equality for first generation Bengali-American women, but in their short fiction both writers also explore the marriage practices of second generation Bengali-Americans. In particular, Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize-winning collection of short fiction *The Inter-*

*preter of Maladies*, in which “Sexy” is also published, presents readers with several permutations of arranged and chosen marriages in the diaspora. The first story in the collection, “A Temporary Matter,” follows two second-generation Bengali-Americans, Shukumar and his wife Shoba, through the dissolution of their marriage after the stillbirth of a child. The couple is depicted as unhappy, perhaps owing to their different methods of grieving after their shared loss, or perhaps because they were simply not well-matched. The ambiguity about these two causes is not easily resolved with the textual evidence Lahiri provides, which in and of itself suggests that she may well intend that subtextual ambivalence about causation.

Shukumar and Shoba come together under circumstances that might only be described as transcultural. They date before becoming engaged; Shukumar even recounts their first interaction, wherein he forgot to tip the waiter because he was distracted by the “funny feeling [he] might marry [her]” (52). The two were introduced by “a group of Bengali poets giving a recital” who, upon the urging of Shukumar and Shoba’s families, had arranged for the couple to be seated “side-by-side on folding wooden chairs” (24). The way that Lahiri has other Bengalis, all of whom are also living in the diaspora, collaborate on the arrangement with the couples’ parents is evidence of a transcultural courtship tradition that is neither wholly Bengali nor typically

American. The match is not arranged by two fathers in negotiation, conferring only with their wives and their sons but not their daughters; nor is it a romantic and impetuous choice made without any consultation with parents or community. Shoba and Shukumar’s marriage seems to be set-up and self-selected in equal parts. This transcultural mix of parental choice and bridal choice makes drawing conclusions about the effect of that system on the success or failure of that marriage doubly difficult. By refusing to correlate the divorce with either system of marriage, Lahiri gestures towards a more complex view of how Shoba’s identity as a second-generation Bengali-American woman is only one part of the explanation. The rest of that explanation may well be linked to the fact that she is organized and controlled, while Shukumar is messy and emotional, or that she has a stable salaried job while Shukumar is making little progress on the dissertation he is writing while she is at work, or that both their parents seem to be too far off to support them during their time of grief. In crafting these myriad reasons that the couple are unsuccessful at reconciling, Lahiri seems to communicate a profound ambiguity about using cultural traditions of courtship as a deterministic measure of the happiness and healthiness of a marriage or the authenticity and continuity of an ethnic identity.

A similar ambivalence is also to be found later in the collection, where readers will encounter the story

“This Blessed House” and be introduced to another second generation Bengali-American couple, Twinkle and her husband Sanjeev, who yield to “the urging of their matchmakers” (112), friends of both their parents who had “arranged the occasion at which Twinkle and Sanjeev were introduced” (113) four months ago. In the narrative present they are moving into their first home together as newlyweds. At first Sanjeev is dismayed that Twinkle is not more domestic. He comes home from work to find her reading magazines in bed or chatting on the phone to her friends in California, when he notes that there are boxes that want unpacking, an attic to sweep, paint to retouch, all of which he hopes she will undertake. Later, he comes to find her gregarious nature and odd passions—for drinking too much whiskey, dancing the tango in front of strangers, and wowing his co-workers with her effervescence and charm—distinctly more valuable than the qualities he had hoped to find in a traditional Bengali bride. His early disappointment is presented as an antecedent to his pleasure at their more equitable arrangement, which is also difficult to establish as causally related to the circumstances of their marriage.

In these two stories, Lahiri complicates the doubled dichotomies of diasporic marriage (either arranged or chosen, either happy or unhappy) by demonstrating that shared national origin is not always enough to draw a husband and wife close to one another. In

fact, by disrupting the expected parity of gender roles in both couples (Shukumar does all the cooking while Shoba works full time and Twinkle refuses to be made responsible for the keeping of the house), Lahiri seems to be suggesting that individual differences are of more account than categorical definitions of culture and gender that can, perhaps, be predicted using data about courtship rituals. This too seems to align with the research on transcultural and romantic coupling in the social sciences; Pasupathi also notes that the studies she looks at reveal a closer correlation between women’s opportunities and class than women’s opportunities and arranged or chosen marriages. What Lahiri and Mukherjee may be presenting, then, is a deliberative call to disrupt the expectation that systems stressing women’s marital choices necessarily provide women with the most opportunity.

Both writers craft narratives about women of Bengali descent living in the U.S. for whom a traditional marriage of either cultural variety—chosen or arranged—is not an acceptable alternative. In *The Namesake*, Ashima’s son Gogol marries Moushumi, a Bengali-American woman with whom he had a short lived antipathy in childhood. Their first date after their reintroduction as adults is arranged by their mothers in the same transcultural mix of Bengali matchmaking and American dating that can be seen in “A Temporary Matter” and “This Blessed House.” However, unlike the universally

troubling issue of infant mortality that divides Shoba from Shukumar or the happy abandonment of expectations that brings Sanjeev comfort with Twinkle, the failure of this marriage does seem to have its roots in the acculturated differences between first and second generation Bengali women. Several chapters before her marriage to Gogol dissolves because of Moushumi's infidelity, Lahiri's narrator reveals the starkness of that difference by noting that Moushumi pities her mother's dependence and values her own "capability of being on her own" (247):

Along with the Sanskrit marriage vows [Moushumi] repeated at her wedding shed privately vowed she'd never grow fully dependent on her husband, as her mother has. For even after thirty-two years abroad, in England and now America, her mother does not know how to drive, does not have a job, does not know the difference between a checking and a savings account. And yet she is a perfectly intelligent woman, was an honors student in philology at Presidency College before she was married off at twenty-two. (247)

For Moushumi, the only way to escape this maternal script is to try marriage her mother's way, and thus prove it to be fully unworkable for her. Even at the moment of her vows to Gogol she seems to be looking for ways to undermine that commitment. For instance, she applies for a postdoctoral fellowship in Paris just before their wedding and, when she receives the ac-

ceptance letter, declines the fellowship and resents Gogol without ever discussing it with him. This choice, as well as a dozen other small and unspoken resentments, allow Moushumi to sabotage the relationship in order to prove to herself and to her mother that a shared culture of origin is not the stuff that a life together must be made of. In this instance, Lahiri seems to craft another mix of arranged and chosen. Although Gogol's and Moushumi's mothers are pleased by the arrangement and have set up the initial date (an act that may be the source of Moushumi's inevitable rejection of the match), the fact remains that their courtship is never negotiated by any of their parents until after they are engaged, and the relationship is one they clearly chose together. In spite of that free and equal choice, this marriage is far less successful than those in *Interpreter of Maladies*. Moushumi is displeased by the same conditions that produce happiness for Twinkle and discord for Shoba. One of the key insights that may be offered by considering these narratives together is that ways in which spouse are selected may have little to do with the success of a relationship. What does seem to be an important predictor of marital harmony, is the extent to which the female characters are able to integrate their ethnic identities with their genders in both of the cultural systems they must inhabit because of the pressures of a diasporic identity. Twinkle and Ashima have community and self-knowledge and a means of deriving esteem outside their husbands; it

may be argued that the rage the Banerjees feel toward Tara and the self-isolation that is the subtext of Moushumi's rejection of Gogol are symptoms of an extended disjoining of cultural identity with these character's experiences as explicitly gendered subjects.

The character who may provide the best evidence for the claim in these works of fiction is the titular protagonist written about by Mukherjee in her novel *Jasmine*. *Jasmine* is a character who is crafted as an alternative to both sets of culturally produced courtship norms. Mukherjee writes about a woman who has a series of monogamous relationships that each are a sort of stepping stone in a transcultural transformation; every time the protagonist takes a new lover, she also takes a new name. The titular character, born Jyoti in Hasnapur-na, a small village in East Bengal, has three particularly important couplings. The first is a traditional arranged marriage to a man named Prakash who renames her *Jasmine*. After his death she immigrates, without documents, to the United States where she becomes the live-in nanny to an American girl named Duff, and the lover to Duff's married father, Taylor, who renames her *Jase*. When that relationship sours, *Jase* moves to Iowa and begins living with *Bud*, an older man who runs the bank she works in, and she is again renamed by her lover, who calls her *Jane*. Much has been made of this repeated renaming in the published criticism on the novel. For example, Erin Khue Ninh argues that

the novel is an allegory of *Vanity Fair*, with Thackeray's consideration of social climbing reimagined as an exercise in border crossing:

Jasmine's path in the United States [is] a linear trajectory from foreigner to American, from border to heartland, and on toward multiculturalism. [ . . . H]owever, it seems impossible to ignore the novel's less teleological scripts concerning the roles into which the heroine is cast: undocumented transnational migrant worker, domestic servant, caretaker, sex worker, and mail-order bride. Considering that she arguably navigates not one but all of these key positions of the third-world woman in her sequence of employment and relationships in the United States, *Jasmine*'s resumé suggests less her successful assimilation than her perpetual liminality. In her, the novel prefigures the current discourse around global migration, labor, and family for the Asian female foreign body (146).

Alternatively, K. S. Dhivya and K. Ravindran argue that the process of adopting several names is a way of manifesting a kind of self-actualization; they write "in *Jasmine* the life of Jyothi is glorified by herself and her inner consciousness[,] which makes her act according to her own wish. Mukherjee's novel reaches the theme of fulfillment within the inner self at the final moment" (65). Whether because of her own ability to exercise choice or because of the diasporic pressures to assimilate, it is clear that the hypersexualization of the character's body shapes each of these depictions

of Bengali-American women's marital behavior as important to the narrative about women's liberation through transculturation. Mukherjee's depictions of her protagonist in what is, perhaps, her most widely-read and certainly most critically-discussed novel, are profoundly ambivalent about the nature of female subjectivity in a transnational context. Because it is so different from Lahiri's ambivalence in the two stories from *Interpreter of Maladies*, Jasmine's resistance to the dominant script of marital behavior is perhaps less facile than Moushumi's. For Ninh, the novel *Jasmine* has radically destabilizing potential because it reveals the ways in which "first-world patriarchy" has been bolstered by global capitalism; Jasmine is a character who embodies "the importation of foreign reproductive labor" as the direct result of the empowerment of American women. Ninh supports this argument by suggesting that Jasmine's perpetual liminality is an economic necessity because "Western women may no longer be purchased at the same depressed rates" as immigrants may be (157). When read in tandem with the rest of Lahiri and Mukherjee's work on this topic, however, the conflation of marriage, sexual exploitation, and domestic labor is more difficult to square with notions of self-actualization through choice. It is undeniably true that Jasmine comes to accept that her identity must be shaped in response to the needs and expectations of her male partners, which seems to produce a set of conditions under which self-actualiza-

tion is impossible. Rather than crafting a set of copies of Jasmine that reaffirm this impossibility as a structurally extendable truth, Lahiri's and Mukherjee's later fiction complicates the narrative Ninh constructs by providing textual evidence of female subjectivity that emerges from marital relationships with men. That subjectivity is contingent upon those relationships being reconfigured by women through the negotiation of the tensions between ethnic and gendered identity. For instance, Ashima is able to successfully self-actualize from within an arranged marriage because Ashoke does not prevent her from using the diasporic space to open up a negotiation about the roles of husband and wife in Bengali and American culture. The facts that he helps raise their children—Gogol and Sonia—and that she is well-educated and works outside the home in a job that is intellectually fulfilling show that these kinds of negotiations can be successful for some women. That may then suggest that Ashima's daughter-in-law's inability to reconcile her complex feelings about her cultural origins limit her ability to see her own marriage to Ashima's son as similarly flexible.

The notion that a transcultural understanding of heterosexual relationships may be of particular use to women is perhaps hardest to pin down in the works by Mukherjee and Lahiri that treat pairings of Bengali-American men and non-Bengali American women or, conversely of Bengali-American women with

non-Bengali-American men. Much of Mukherjee's fiction is inspired by her own experiences as the Bengali wife of an American man, the poet Clark Blaise, with whom she immigrated to Canada, then Iowa and finally California; most notably the two wrote a text together called *Days and Nights in Calcutta* and from which most of the content of *The Tiger's Daughter* is fictionalized. Lahiri has been quite private about her marriage to Alberto Vourvoulias-Bush, who is not Bengali, but her writing includes many characters in transcultural relationships—for instance, Gogol has two long term girlfriends—Ruth and Maxine, both Anglo-American—before marrying Moushumi.

Lahiri and Mukherjee have crafted fiction that is populated by cosmopolitan characters who defy the typically binary understandings of globalization implicit in many postcolonial theoretical models. In doing so, their representations of Bengali-American women often seem to bridge a gap between cosmopolitanist assumptions (that Western cultural traditions are inherently more developed and therefore more egalitarian than non-Western cultural traditions) and transculturalist edicts (which suggest that a synthesis of cultural traditions is not only beneficial but inevitable). On the one hand the term "cosmopolitan" seems to indicate that cultural difference is homogenized by acculturation, that immigrants are "Americanized" and lose their culture due to pressures within diasporic con-

texts. Timothy Brennan has even argued that cosmopolitanism is the "way in which American patriotism is today being expressed" (682). On the other hand, cosmopolitan perspectives might be understood to maintain rather than resolve tensions between cultural differences that force individuals and their increasingly global communities to reject the limitations of nation as a means of determining identity, thereby undermining nationalism conceptually as well as practically. As Elizabeth Jackson has noted, "[i]t is possible to have a culturally open disposition and to imagine the world as one community while remaining rooted in one's homeland; conversely, it is also possible to retain a limiting sense of national and cultural affiliation while traveling and even living all over the world" (109). Mukherjee and Lahiri characterize women in their works of fiction in ways that mark any categorical notion of national allegiance or cultural purity as an impossibility in a world in which the diaspora is everyplace and no-place. The histories of displacement and migration which frame post-partition Bengali life in particular are rendered as the implicit context of the transnational experiences those characters have, which are radically diverse. Additionally, because national origin is but one facet of identity, which intersects with and is affected by so many other facets, any strong theory that makes deterministic claims about the ways that one set of cultural traditions liberates women as another set constrains them is doomed to suffer continual exceptions. Jackson goes on to point out that:

[T]he specificities of individual experience and the complexities of interpersonal interaction within a global framework encourages a vision of human beings as individuals rather than members of nations or other exclusionary communities. Such a vision implies an ethical imperative for individuals to think beyond the boundaries of self, community and nation in their interactions with others. (115)

Reading across this corpus of texts by two diasporic women writing about the lived experiences of other imagined diasporic women allows that vision to be understood in its manifold iterations. There are instances where cultural difference and gendered oppression line up neatly so that claims about the constraints of Hindu values upon Bengali women are supportable through a wealth of evidence. However, there are just as many instances when the norms of Western culture disempower and even victimize women in ways that Bengali culture would not, or when issues of gendered oppression seems to cross national and cultural borders crafting more common critiques of transnational misogyny than of culturally-specific codes about women's behavior in the institution of marriage. The fiction simultaneously obfuscates and reveals the complex processes of transculturation, because identity-formation after displacement is doubly troubled by gendered and cultural identities that are altered or recontextualized through sex and marriage, as Bengali and American women are regularly socially redefined by their

sexual behavior and romantic attachments. Reading this fiction encourages a more nuanced consideration of how displacement confounds the notions of identity produced by a longstanding legacy of feminist thought about sex and marriage. In depicting Bengali marriage in the diaspora as both a conduit of transnational movement and as dynamic, multifaceted and varied in its adherence to cultural norms, Mukherjee and Lahiri confront preconceptions about Indian identity and gender politics, and explore the particular pressures the diaspora brings to bear upon women's abilities to produce for themselves an identity that occupies an individual subjective space in an increasingly globalized society.

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# THE COSMOPOLITAN CITY AND ITS GESTURE OF REFUGE

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SONI WADHWA

Mélange , hotch potch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world.

– Salman Rushdie, “In Good Faith” in *Imaginary Homelands*

Rushdie’s answer to the question he raised in *The Satanic Verses* about newness extends the idea of exile to understand it as a universal phenomenon, ‘a metaphor for all humanity’ and as the defining characteristic of one’s identity. His answer to the question about how newness enters the world turns the idea of newness into a situation that sneaks into one’s identity, because we are all immersed in exile. While moving on, and the resolve to move on, are significant gestures on the part of the individual, they do not reflect upon

the societies and institutions that continue to estrange writers, intellectuals or artists for thinking and acting differently. Perhaps, the cities of refuge as concepts, institutions and spaces could change that. This paper deals with a moment in what kinds of resolving, reconciliatory strategies the society and the writers per se have come up with in the increasing number of scenarios of persecution of intellectuals, artists, writers, and journalists. The specific text that this paper takes as its starting point is Derrida’s essay ‘On Cosmopolitanism’, an address to the International Parliament of Writers at Strasbourg in 1996. The short essay deals with the question of cosmopolitanism, rooted in the idea of tolerance, co-existence and refuge. But it also opens up greater references to the concept of theological (Judaistic) origins and the contemporary problems surrounding it.

In the essay ‘On Cosmopolitanism’, Derrida raises the question of cosmopolitanism vis-à-vis cities of refuge, an idea rooted in *The Old Testament*, which refers to the protection of those who escaped the vengeance of the people for unintentional manslaughter. It makes provision for six cities, neither too large nor too small to shelter those who accidentally killed someone and were now in danger of being attacked by the kin of the dead. Derrida takes this religious diktat, (as indeed do the International Parliament of Writers and other political institutions like the League of Nations and after

that deal with refuge, and asylum rights and institutions), and talks about the possibilities of making it applicable in contemporary reality. In such an established context, Derrida calls for a need to address the specificity of different situations covered under it: the exiled, the deported, the stateless, or the displaced. He also calls for the need to rethink the modalities of membership thus granted to such individuals in the cities of refuge at one level and the need to rethink the sovereignty of such cities within the space of the nation-state, without which the duty of hospitality and the right to hospitality cannot be reformed. Derrida says, “If we look to the city, rather than to the state, it is because we have given up hope that the state might create a new image for the city” (6). This opens up the need to bestow greater powers to the being of the cities – more rights, greater sovereignty, something on the lines of a different politics of the city. With the constant interference of the state, the power and the right to grant asylum to the victims of persecution get hugely compromised. For instance, in certain situations, the person seeking the asylum has got to be financially independent and not expect economic benefits from the relocation. The cities, Derrida says, need to thrive and generate scope for network of places and language to ensure the safety of the asylum seekers. Instead, they tend to be interfered with by the electoral, political and police forces under the pretext of fighting ‘illegal’ migration, or migration for economic reasons. Not only

that, the cities of refuge are called so because the term connotes an ethic of hospitality – a tautological expression for Derrida because for him, ethics is hospitality. The idea is to welcome each and every one in need in the thus-created sanctuary. The debates surrounding such unconditional, ethical grant of hospitality date back to Kantian philosophy, which leaves some scope for limitations and state interference in the issue. The cities of refuge in the contemporary scenario are thus spaces of flourishing of new order of law and democracy.

Derrida’s essay leads towards larger question of urbanization of asylum, of cosmopolitanism, and of geography of freedom. What is this peculiar rhetoric of the city? How does it come into being in praxis of urbanization?

The question of the city and of its existence have become a given. That is a distance quite farther from the time when the Baudelairean handling of the city as an aesthetic object was something of a novelty and needed to be theorized upon. The urbanization of the question of dwelling, especially for those who are forced to move from one place to the other in the hope of living, is the intensely predicated upon a phenomenology of the concept of living. That a new politics of living together is being inscribed on the face of the city is a challenging tenet to think about. It is also the basic

ground for the democracy to come through the institution of cities of refuge.

This idea of the cosmopolitan city ought to be seen as a centre operating on the project of open borders. The cities of refuge figure in the discussion of the issue of migration as a solution to the problem. It is the cosmopolitan connections around these spaces that emerge around mid-twentieth century to address the increasingly growing and visible figure of the exile.

There are many angles to the discussion of the practice and possibilities of cosmopolitanism—the development of the cosmopolitan city transcending the concept of the nation-state, the coming of the “Stranger” and the ways in which his or her presence is handled, and the impossible possibility of unconditional hospitality, for instance. In theoretical discourses, cosmopolitanism and the city get foregrounded in discussions of hospitality and forgiveness.

What does the cosmopolitan city constitute? What are its problems? How does it address the practice of democracy? To begin with, the city works as a microscopic model of a democratic nation-state. Various studies in urban sociology point towards the relevance of cities in contemporary times. For one, they are microcosmic of world culture. Ulf Hannerz in ‘Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture’ explores the connections

between cosmopolitans, locals, cosmopolitans as intellectuals and world culture and remarks, “People like the cosmopolitans have a special part in bringing about a degree of coherence . . . If there were only locals in the world, world culture would be no more than the sum of its separate parts” (249). As sites of coherence, such cities help bring a sense of continuity and stability to the understanding of urban experience.

As a twentieth century phenomenon intertwined with globalization, ‘cosmopolitanization’ is a phenomenon emerging out of mobility. So with its roots in the mythical cities of refuge, the idea of cosmopolitanism has come a long way from providing refuge to the half-guilty and half-innocent man-slaughterer to exile in general to the phenomenon of moving for occupational or other purposes. Thus these liberal cities, as they are sometimes called, become sites of world culture characterized by huge diversity across social and cultural phenomena. Ulrich Beck goes on to define cosmopolitanization as “internal globalization, globalization from within national societies” (17). In the process, it introduces the cities to everyday conflicts and differences in consciousness and identities. For Beck, it thus becomes “a methodological concept which helps to overcome methodological nationalism and to build a frame of reference to analyse the new social conflicts, dynamics and structures of Second Modernity” (18). Cosmopolitanism thus has the potential

to demonstrate and engage with dialogic imagination, transcending beyond singular perspective of the nation. Beck says:

The national perspective is a monologic imagination, which excludes the otherness of the other. The cosmopolitan perspective is an alternative imagination, an imagination of alternative ways of life and rationalities, which include the otherness of the other. It puts the negotiation of contradictory cultural experiences into the centre of activities: in the political, the economic, the scientific and the social (18).

The origins and practice of unconditional hospitality existed in primitive societies because of the presence of nomadic way of life; with the shift to settling down and belonging to one place, offering or withholding hospitality became a choice. New questions became pertinent about the identity of the foreigner, his/her/its intentions. These questions were not posed by the foreigner; on the contrary, the foreigner was these questions – he embodied them. Rooted in the perspective of modernity and the city is also the difference of the need for cosmopolitanism today:

The cosmopolitanism of our times does not spring from the capitalized “virtues” of Rationality, Universality, and Progress; nor is it embodied in the myth of the nation writ large in the figure of the citizen of the world. Cosmopolitans today are often the victims of modernity, failed by capitalism’s upward mobility, and bereft of those

comforts and customs of national belonging. Refugees, peoples of the diaspora, and migrants and exiles represent the spirit of the cosmopolitan community. Too often, in the West, these peoples are grouped together in a vocabulary of victimage and come to be recognized as constituting the “problem” of multiculturalism to which late liberalism extends its generous promise of a pluralist existence (Pollock et al. 582).

The changed modernity, the changed political scenario and the phenomenon of globalization call for a different kind of cosmopolitanism. Sassen’s concept of the ‘glocal’ is very useful here. Its uniqueness also lies in the way it manages the idea of location in the concept of the glocal, in the way it handles “home and non-place, a nowhere place” (Beck 31). This nowhereness combined with the technology of the Internet and mobile phones situates the city better in the dialogic imagination mentioned earlier: “A cosmopolitan sociology should investigate not only presence and absence, but also ‘imagined presence’ . . . . Dialogic imaginations presuppose, among others, imagined presence of geographically distant others and worlds” (Beck 31). Such an understanding helps fashion a discerning view of the strategic advantages of the use of the city as a site of refuge. These kinds of sociological interventions in the study of the operation of cosmopolitanism foreground the particular nature of the city as a peculiar location of being. The way the city lends itself to the treatment of the heterotopic plane of a non-place or a place of

absence makes it an invigorating study of the cosmopolitan space. Thomas Claviez makes an interesting intervention in this idea of non-place by asking if such a place of Derrida's unconditional hospitality can ever possibly exist or "does such an idea of hospitality represent a genuine utopia: a u-topos, a nonplace, in which, by definition, nothing can "take place"?" (Claviez 3) It is interesting to note that discussions of place invariably invite the haunting of utopias and non-places. The existence of a place, of something 'taking place' is intertwined with nothing 'taking place'. Claviez's is an interesting take on Foucault's heterotopia – he talks about a "heter-u-topia" that allows for such a simultaneity of differences to (co)exist. This heter-u-topia need not be a place of loss of identity and orientation; it need not even be an actual geographical location; it could be a space in thought itself, which comes with the larger possibility and responsibility of sheltering the other within one's self since exile is the first experience of humanity, especially as beginning with the alienation under capitalism. The encounter with alterity is rooted in the very rubric of sociality: "... hospitality is no longer a private gesture but an issue for a whole society anxious to close its frontiers to illegal immigrants and refugees, the solicitants of this world" (Dufourmantelle 13). The non-place that Claviez suggests gets reflected in Anne Dufourmantelle's thought: "To think is to invite, to offer a shelter to the other within ourselves, the other as the possibility to be(come) our-

selves" (Dufourmantelle 13-14). Applied in this sense, Derrida's radical, unconditional hospitality "denotes an almost mystical experience, a borderline concept" (Dufourmantelle 16). In its existence and execution in the space of thought, there is a greater potential for the cosmopolis to materialize: "... should we not rightfully expect from political utopia a "placelessness" which opens the possibility of a human (cosmo)polis?" (19).

Yet there is another way of looking at the presence and absence of cosmopolitanism, at the ways in which the city deals with the presence of the stranger in the city. With a streak of phenomenology in their work, some sociologists have theorized the ways in which the society tries to look at the ('invasive', 'invading' – perceived to be so) being of the stranger, the 'problem' of the stranger. Zygmunt Bauman writes eloquently about the 'making and unmaking of strangers' : "All societies produce strangers; but each kind of society produces its own kind of strangers, and produces them in its own inimitable way" (Bauman 17). He records the coming of the Stranger as having an effect similar to the coming of an earthquake in that it unsettles and disrupts the value of order in a society and its ethic of ordering. His ways of being, in their difference, highlight the assumptions of the locals as assumptions and he thus turns everything – every practice, every norm in thought and deed – into a question. He thus takes away the givenness of the locals' world and takes away

the very idea of the routine from them: “Strangers are no longer routine, and thus the routine ways of keeping a thing pure do not suffice. In a world constantly on the move the anxiety which condensed into the fear of strangers saturates the totality of daily life – fills every nook and cranny of the human condition” (Bauman 11). Because they disrupt the locals’ routine, the society seeks different ways of getting rid of them. This riddance is a continuous process and not a one-time situation.

In a way, the Strangers are not just the exiles or the displaced – they are just about anyone who does not feel at home in the city. In Adorno, the two coincide as seen in his critique of (American) society – it is not merely the case that he misses being in Germany and does not fit in America; he is also not at home in the violence of modernity in its consumerist and capitalist scenario. In other words, he is ‘cognitively ambivalent’: “In the harmonious, rational order about to be built there was no room – there could be no room – for ‘neither-nors’, for the sitting astride, for the cognitively ambivalent” (Bauman 18). The Strangers’ is a crisis in identity formation, discussed hugely in the context of roots, home, belongingness and hybridity in the literature and the criticism of the diaspora but what Bauman’s perspective makes a case for is the qualification of anyone feeling uprooted in the ever-present and ubiquitous state of “either-or” and includes everyone partaking of the

‘neither-nor’ position. The “self-perpetuating uncertainty” (Bauman 25) defines the being of the Strangers. If they give up the ambivalence of their situation and become agents of exoticism by selling a different cuisine, or by “promising unusual, exciting experiences to the taste-buds, [by] sell[ing] curious-looking, mysterious objects suitable as talking points at the next party, [by] offer[ing] services other people would not stoop or deign to offer or [by] dangl[ing] morsels of wisdom refreshingly different from the routine and boring” (Bauman 28), they participate in the either-or process of consumerist illusion of choice and thus no longer remain threatening or inimical to the locals. Since that is not the case in every situation, the modern city faces a greater question – how to live with alterity, for the Strangers are not a temporary inconvenience but a daily encounter: “At one pole, strangehood (and difference in general) will go on being constructed as the source of pleasurable experience and aesthetic satisfaction; at the other, as the terrifying incarnation of the unstoppable rising sliminess of the human condition – as the effigy for all future ritual burning of its horrors” (Bauman 34). The city then needs to invent a different kind of ‘life politics’ to deal with this difference.

Martha Nussbaum’s answer to the question of cosmopolitanism involves the idea of a moral imagination. Her idea of loneliness experienced by the Stranger is contiguous with the cognitive ambivalence of Bau-

man's Stranger but locates it in the figure of the citizen of the world and defines it vis-à-vis the patriot: "Becoming a citizen of the world is often a lonely business. It is, as Diogenes said, a kind of exile – from the comfort of local truths, from the warm, nestling feeling of patriotism, from the absorbing drama of pride in oneself and one's own" (Nussbaum 15). For her, feeling beyond patriotism, thinking beyond the nation, thinking and practising cosmopolitanism is being an exile. Like Bauman (and Adorno, and Said), Nussbaum universalizes the experience of the exile. It broadens the need to implement cosmopolitanism not just in relation with the actual others but also at the level of emotion. In the concept of Kwame Anthony Appiah's rooted cosmopolitanism: "Cosmopolitanism and patriotism, unlike nationalism, are sentiments more than ideologies" (Appiah 23). The contrast with nationalism brings us again to Sassen's de-nationalizing the nation and Beck's notion of (world) cultures: "Culture ... is a (power-riden) negotiation of differences that always transcends – and historically always has transcended – national boundaries, and thus steadfastly subverts the homogeneity that a national(istic) concept of culture implies" (Claviez 2). So the nation-state is again, in Thomas Claviez's argument, not a very fruitful way of approaching cosmopolitanism, and hence Derrida's suggestion of greater empowerment for the cities and the need to think beyond the nation, towards the city.

Eduardo Mendieta has another very intriguing orientation and on that basis, he predicts a totally different future. In "Invisible cities: A phenomenology of globalization from below", he looks at the contemporary world as existing in the collapse of the matrix of time and space and argues for the need to invent new matrixes to deal with new ways of being in the city – those of exiles, the displaced peoples or even cyber-nomads. This different urbanization implies "that otherness is not going to be a mere metaphysical, or even phenomenological category and concern. *Under the reign of the city: Otherness has become quotidian and practical*" (17, emphasis original). If the project of the cosmopolitan city in general, and not just the concept of the isolated cities of refuge, has to resolve the issue of the Stranger, the Foreigner or the Other, it needs to recognize its encounter with the Otherness in its real practical, everyday manifestation. Mendieta keeps emphasizing "... the routinization and de-metaphysicalization of otherness brought about by the hyper-urbanization of humanity" (19, emphasis original) and points towards the radical nature of the presence of otherness when he says, "Either everyone will be a stranger, or no one will be because we will all be strangers in a city of strangers" (20). This is a very innovative way of approaching the persistent need to build and encourage the practice of cosmopolitanism in the cities, especially in our age of de-nationalizing the national. Cities are the sites of unbundling of the

state thus are the new sites for the unbundling of a new life politics. The mini-nations found within the cities in the form of small Italys, Chinas, Japans add to the need to surpass the nation and focus on the local in the city, creating new cultures: “These places are where the centripetal and centrifugal forces of homogenization and heterogenization interact to produce new cultural formations” (22). In this quotidian experience of exile, “*the condition of modernity after an extended experience with modernity*” (103, emphasis original), as Peter Wagner puts it in his book *Theorizing Modernity*, one is forced to think about exile as an all-pervading condition, one that calls for thinking, experiencing, practising, and asking for resolving at multiple levels – individual, social, historical and philosophical. The exiled writer is only one example; the consciousness and the living of the precariousness of the situation of being forced to go away, and to be away perhaps haunt everyone in the similar manner:

To lose this place, in particular if one was or felt expelled rather than going voluntarily, has often been described as the loss of a kind of ontological security, of the confidence of the availability of the world as it was. In particular, the human condition threatened to be robbed of its existential temporality. Once the safety of that which is given was gone, that which was and that which can be could no longer be relied upon either (Wagner 103).

With this universal shattering of confidence, with the way the germ of doubt has penetrated the ontological

security of our lives, we increasingly get to see how pervasive (dis)location is in the times of modernity.

As Chris Rumford points out, “cosmopolitanism can provide us with the requisite conceptual toolbox with which to understand the novel spaces and borders emerging in Europe” (1). As a politics and practice of space, it makes for an interesting intervention in the way living in the cities, and interfering with living in the cities is debated today. More than jargon, it is a concept of hope, a “possibility of new ways of conceptualising spaces and borders” (2). What cities can take away from the concept is a set of qualities, preferences and practices that speak volumes about what it means to live together in ‘spaces of wonder’, a concept that Rumford uses to discuss opportunities and spaces that are interpreted in terms of threat and fear and are attempted to be controlled in the aftermath of 9/11.

Donald makes an attempt to discuss and contextualize cosmopolitan space and the need for it in our times when we find ourselves in a situation of being thrown together and poses this question: “How can we stropy strangers live together without doing each other too much violence?” (147). His is the most lucid account of the question of cosmopolitanism, the need to deliberate on its praxis and the ways in which it can materialize in urban culture. At first, his thoughts might sound very commonsensical: “What makes living together

possible is rational deliberation . . . . It seems pretty self-evident that if we strangers are to live together in at least reasonably peaceful coexistence, then we need to talk about matters of mutual interest, and it seems sensible to seek non-violent ways of negotiating conflicts" (152). It is very refreshing to find such an insight amidst all the jargon about different names of modernity and various kinds of cosmopolitanism. It is one thing to look for answers to the questions of (lack of) cosmopolitanism in institutional implementation or to ask for separate cities of refuge. (The demand for the cities of refuge for the persecuted writers is of course valid as discussed in the context of Derrida's essay.) It is another to engage with it at a personal level, in individual ways. The discussion here is about the larger practice of cosmopolitanism among the publics, regarding the ways in which strangers, aliens, foreigners, and migrants are perceived. In their potential of disrupting democratic rubric, these conflicts have a straight-forward answer: "if you are interested in the formation of a democratic culture, then you have to understand and take seriously the texture and rhythms of living together: its spatial manifestations, its disjunctural temporalities, its ordinariness and its social complexity, as well as its political consequences" (Donald 151-2). And what are these "spatial manifestations", "disjunctural consequences" and "political consequences"? The first could be the ways in which the city opens and unfolds into its streets, and its transport amenities, places of

recreations like parks and sites of buying and selling from the grocer's shop to the shopping malls – the locations that Simmel spoke of as demanding the activity of the eye. The "disjunctural temporalities" that Donald refers to could be the contrast that the migrant or the exile specifically lives and lives in, in the way she experiences time in her new location. The "ordinariness" and "social complexity" of living together consists in the way we share our disjunctural temporalities and the anxieties and the insecurities around it. The political consequences emerge when each of these conditions are shared and understood successfully and 'in good faith' as Rushdie (in the essay of the same name) puts it: "What it requires is a moment of good will; a moment in which we may all accept that the other parties are acting, have acted, in good faith" (395). In fact, the disjunctures that Donald talks about echo Rushdie's words from *The Satanic Verses*: "The modern city . . . is the locus classicus of incompatible realities. Lives that have no business mingling with one another sit side by side upon the omnibus. One universe, on a zebra crossing, is caught for an instant, blinking like a rabbit, in the headlamps of a motor-vehicle in which an entirely alien and contradictory continuum is to be found" (ch. 2). Donald draws from Rushdie, his novel and his defence of the novel in order to underline his idea of cosmopolitanism and the ways in which it can be a part of lived reality:

Gone is any idea of transcendent identity. Gone too is an ideal of virtuous citizenship. In the offing may be a thicker description of the openness to unassimilable difference, and so also a concern with the mundane, pragmatic but sometimes life-or-death arts of living in the city. These skills shade into and out of the virtues made possible by the great adventure of the city: politeness as well as politics, civility as well as citizenship, the stoicism of urbanity, the creative openness of cosmopolitanism (171).

The answer is bafflingly simple: “politeness as well as politics, civility as well as citizenship, the stoicism of urbanity, the creative openness of cosmopolitanism” (Donald 170). These are the conditions that entail the act of seeking refuge and giving it, more so in the way they can be extended to every human being because they are not exclusive to writers and intellectuals. The whole world is the diaspora world; the whole world is the migrant world. As the quotidian condition of exile comes to be seen as the universal condition, Rushdie puts it eloquently: “If *The Satanic Verses* is anything, it is a migrant’s-eye view of uprooting, disjunction and metamorphosis (slow or rapid, painful or pleasurable) that is the migrant condition, and from which, I believe, can be derived a metaphor for all humanity” (394). As “a metaphor for all humanity”, it calls for a set of life skills that conjure a way of negotiating conflicts, of being together, of being a little less “noisy neighbours” (the title of the chapter in Donald’s *Imagining*

*the Modern City*). To go back to Donald in order to situate cosmopolitanism and the conditions for the possibility of a cosmopolitan city:

The arts of living in the city are more demanding, more diverse, and more ingenious ... they require a variety of skills: reading the signs in the street; adapting to different ways of life right on your doorstep; learning tolerance and responsibility – or at least, as Simmel taught us, indifference – towards others and otherness; showing respect, or self-preservation, in not intruding on other people’s space; exploiting the etiquette of the street; picking up new rules when you migrate to a foreign city. It is through this rougher urbanity, rather than the nice disciples of ‘civil deportment’, that the modern urban self is routinely formed (168).

In *The Satanic Verses* that Rushdie created and that critics of cosmopolitanism have used to theorize about what it means to be cosmopolitan and what it means to create a cosmopolitan city, there is a celebration of the exile, in the newness it generates, in the newness it brings to light:

*The Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. .... *The Satanic Verses* is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining. It is a love-song to our mongrel selves (Rushdie 394).

To be a mongrel and to recognize it one's own self and identity are requisites for the creation of the city of refuge, the cosmopolitan city, and any city. It is a gesture that we as modern, urban inhabitants owe to each other, and to the great city that we see as places of dwelling, and as places that we live in and leave. It is a turn that global cities would need to take in order to generate and sustain spaces of cosmopolitanism. The solution of looking at cosmopolitanism as a way of reading the city, not merely for the sake of incorporating the stranger, but also for generating better environments for the thriving of cultures is, to some extent, a strategy for turning every city into a city of refuge. In its encounter and co-habitation with otherness, the city would acquire a new dimension of looking at things – conscious and at home along with those not at home, be it the flâneur observing the city, or the exile constantly on the move.

The cosmopolitan space – a 'mongrel' site of hybridity, fusion and conjoinings – stands for the ethic of hospitality assumed in the cities of refuge or the cosmopolitan cities, and since exile is both the 'outside world' and 'inside world', it is assumed in all the cities. Rushdie's and Donald's contribution to the possibilities that can let a cosmopolitan city emerge come from the same streak, from the recognition that one's identity may be a given absolute, but what we do with it and how we invent it and choose to invent it contributes hugely to

the recognition and application of the life skills that help us deal with the so-called noisy neighbours. The cosmopolitan city in its encouragement of such values becomes the space for the exile, writer or not. It becomes a site of the in-between or the third space in its encompassing of here and there.

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# "LIKE HIS FATHER BEFORE HIM": PATRILINEALITY AND NATIONALISM IN THE WORK OF HISHAM MATAR, JAMAL MAHJOUR AND ROBIN YASSIN-KASSAB

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TASNIM QUTAIT

Hisham Matar's autobiographical text *The Return: Fathers, Sons and the Land in Between* (2016) is framed by a return to Libya in the wake of the 2011 uprisings, continuing a search for answers about the disappearance of his father in 1990. The "land in between" in the title captures Matar's ambivalence towards "the land my father loved more than anything else" (42), as he describes himself as "reluctant to give Libya any more than it has already taken" (2). In a passage that highlights the distance between these positions, Matar describes how his father was asked to refrain from putting himself at risk by openly criticising Gaddafi. He notes that "[t]he disagreement ... placed the nation against the intimate reality of a family" (42). This setting of nation against family captures the divide between the state and the private sphere of the home,

even as the danger of political defiance highlights the vulnerability of the home to the violence of the state. The violent intrusion of the state into the home reveals not only the contingency of a protected private sphere, but the illusion of a homeland belonging to its people. This passage thus sets the father's vision of what Libya could become against the reality of what it is.

Matar, in addition to his autobiographical writings, has written two novels focusing on the relationship between fathers and sons and the "land in between." Although, Matar has been careful to emphasise that his novels are not autobiographical, his fictional texts are very much concerned with a triad of fathers, sons, and "the land in between" examined in his memoir *The Return*. In this triad, the father is more than a symbolic representative of the nation. Rather, I argue that the sense of being "in between" which Matar is concerned with also relates more broadly to a sense of distance from the post-independence generation, and to the growing awareness of the discontinuities between an emancipatory national project and the reality of state violence. In this article, I consider the implications of the relationship between fathers, sons and the land "in between" as a recurring plot in Arab British fiction. I examine Matar's two novels, *In the Country of Men* (2006) and *The Anatomy of a Disappearance* (2011), alongside Jamal Mahjoub's *Travelling with Djinns* (2003) and Robin Yassin-Kassab's *The Road*

to *Damascus* (2008). Matar, Yassin-Kassab and Mahjoub are three writers settled in Britain and writing in English with family backgrounds in Libya, Syria and Sudan respectively. In each of their texts, the protagonist searches for a connection with an always distant father, aspiring to his level of patriotism. However, in attempting to follow in their father's footsteps, the sons discover both the failures of their fathers and the limitations of the patriarchal, postcolonial nation-state.

Discussing his second novel, Matar notes that he is

[F]ascinated with the structure of the family ... One of the questions that *Anatomy of a Disappearance* is asking is, is it possible to ever know your parent ... But also ... how do you tell the story or the reality of existing in this very peculiar political atmosphere? ("Reluctant Spokesman").

The link between the two questions—between the unknowability of the parent (here the father) and the peculiarity of the post-colonial Arab nation-state—does more than underline the connection between the family unit and the nation. As Anne McClintock writes, "[n]ations are frequently figured through the iconography of familial and domestic space. The term nation derives from *natio*: to be born" (357). This paradigm focuses on the gendering of the nation through the family allegory. In the texts that I examine here, the focus on the son's failure to inherit the father's legacy

raises questions about the patriarchal frameworks of the nation-state as well as the ideals of nationalism and patriotism. Mediated through father-son relationships which shift between idealisation and disillusionment, the texts open up a space where the patrilineal and patriarchal structures of the postcolonial nation-state are disrupted.

The gendering of the nation that takes place through the legitimating metaphor of the nuclear family includes the representation of the leader as the father of the nation. In his influential work *Neopatriarchy* (1988), Hisham Sharabi discusses the central feature of the modern Arab state as "the dominance of the Father (patriarch), the center around which the national and natural family are organised" (7). The cultivation and manipulation of the idea of the national family through the utilisation of the "metaphor of state leader as father" involves a naturalisation of power imbalances that depends on an acceptance of patriarchal authority (Joseph 348). The idea of the family as a microcosm of Arab society offers an understandable framework, though it reduces the connection between authoritarian structures to the cultural and tends to ignore the social and political.

In her study of fathers and sons in modern Arab literature, Dalya Cohen-Mor notes that "[t]he father-son relationship is predominantly portrayed as conflicted in

Arab fiction" (qtd. in Preville). Examining this antagonism reveals how representations of filial relationships often intersect with the failures of decolonization. For example, in Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's novel *al-Baith 'an Walid Mas'ud* (1978, *The Search for Walid Masoud*, 2000), a family history of resistance is represented in terms of a broken patrilineal legacy. The novel centres on the search for Walid, a Palestinian political activist, writer and symbol for nationalist struggle. As Samah Selim suggests, the text "initiate[s] a journey through the psychic and political landscape of a quixotic Arab modernity that is, like the novel's central character, intensely present and yet irretrievably lost" (89). One of Walid's friends, Amer, represents this loss as a severance from what seem to be the futile struggles of previous generations in Iraq. He "refuses to look back at the past, to his country's history", relating the trajectories of national history to a patrilineal heritage he feels alienated from:

[t]o him all history started with his grandfather, when he was fighting the Ottomans during the last years of the nineteenth century, then continued with the British occupation of Iraq, when his father distinguished himself as a national fighter, sustained by the dream that every time he was jailed or placed under house arrest his country came closer to the day of liberation. But liberation remained a dream. From the time Amer crossed over into his forties, he felt his immediate history had been severed from him. (Jabra 140)

In this passage, Amer's identification with the nation is dependent upon what Diane King calls "lineal masculinity" where "collective memory is masculinised and codified as male achievement transmitted through patrilinees" (328). While his forebears work towards nationalist goals, Amer's severance from this heritage, living "for the present, for the present alone," reflects an awareness of his failure to continue their nationalist legacy (Jabra 146). Thus, Jabra presents the failures of decolonisation as inextricable from Amer's failure to continue the male intergenerational legacy of resistance. In the Anglophone novels that I will now turn to, this sense of distance from the nation and the attempt to affirm connection to homeland is further undercut by the discontinuities of exile. The novels reconstruct national history from both a spatial and temporal distance, with protagonists who themselves experience the dislocation of exile, as well the discontinuities of the nation itself, as contrasted against the myths of local and/or pan-Arab nationalism.

In Matar's debut novel *In the Country of Men*, the narrator Suleiman recalls his childhood in Libya, specifically recounting the months leading up to his father's arrest in 1979, and his own gradual awareness of his father's dissident activities. Christopher Micklenthwait describes the novel as an exploration of "the mechanisms of state power in a violent hyper-vigilant postcolonial dictatorship" through the child narrator's

perspective on the surveillance, show trials and public executions of a police state (174). The novel depicts the way in which Suleiman is drawn into betraying his best friend, and later informing on his father to the friendly security man patrolling outside the family home. As Nouri Gana notes, Matar's novels convey "the power of the state apparatuses to penetrate the lives of Libyans and extend its rule over them with their own consent and collaboration" (20). This is captured in an early scene where Suleiman watches Moosa, one of his father's friends, hang up a portrait of Muammar Gaddafi to ward off suspicion and then pretend to salute the "[t]he benefactor, the father of the nation, the guide" as he "punched his fist, chanting El Fateh, El Fateh, El Fateh" (160-161). In identifying the dictator as "[t]he benefactor, the father of the nation," Moosa mocks the regime's assumption of paternal authority. Notably, this portrait of the Guide replaces the portrait of Suleiman's father, Faraj. The scene thus dramatises the antagonistic parallels between the father and "the father of the nation" (160). Throughout the novel, Suleiman yearns to connect with his "aloof" father, even as he becomes aware that Faraj's activities are endangering the family. When Suleiman's mother attempts to burn Faraj's political books, Suleiman saves one of them, leading to Faraj's arrest years later when he takes the book to work and reads from it to his colleagues. Suleiman's ambivalent feelings about his father are captured towards the end of the novel, when he concludes

that there was "an element of intrigue and madness in the way Father had behaved" (237).

Matar's second novel, *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, also centres on the relationship between father and son in the context of political struggle, but this time in a nameless country seemingly based on Iraq. At the beginning of *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, the young narrator Nuri el-Alfi lives with his father Kamal, an "ex-minister and leading dissident" in exile in Egypt (106). The novel is a coming-of-age story centred on a son's struggle for intimacy with his father, a struggle extended indefinitely following the father's abduction. Reading about his father's political activities, Nuri imagines himself living a similar life, a life given significance by political goals: "I, too, wanted secret meetings in Geneva, allies in Paris with whom I had watched history march and worked to change its course" (Matar, *Anatomy* 90). The son seeks to inherit the father's ideological convictions and work, in this case conjoined to a romanticised idea of espionage and being an agent of historical change.

While Matar's novels are narrated from the point of view of child protagonists, Robin Yassin-Kassab's novel *The Road from Damascus* opens with the protagonist Sami Traifi returning to Damascus to "discover his roots". Initially, Sami aspires to emulate his father Mustafa, sure that "as his father had before him, he

would write books about Arabic poetry" (14). Sami aspires to be "like his father. But better than his father. Leaping forth from the giant's shoulders, he'd go further" (32). After his father's death, however, he realises that he was "an academic only because his father had been ... [m]aking him in his own eyes not much of a man – unsettled, out of place, unexplained" (35). The narrative charts the protagonist Sami's ideological transformation as he tries to convince himself that "there were paths other than the one his father had trodden ... other, valid paths" (10). As with Matar's texts, the son looks back on the failures of the nationalist ideals of his parents' generation, as he "stopped believing his own myth" (Kassab 87).

In Mahjoub's *Travelling with Djinns* (2003), the father-son dyad frames the protagonist's struggles with his sense of nationhood. A journalist living in Britain, Yasin is on a road trip across Europe with his young son Leo, the narrative of this journey becoming intertwined with flashbacks exploring Yasin's relationship to his own father, a dissident journalist ideologically driven by Afro-Arab nationalism. Yasin remembers that:

[t]here was a centre of gravity to my father's life. ... The books, the piles of newspapers cuttings, the maps, the photographs of African statesmen on the walls – Nkrumah, Kaunda, Nasser ... The fate of the country gave his life meaning – the absurd conviction that the curious

collection of ethnicities, races and creeds fenced in together by colonial rule could be turned into a cohesive nation. (90)

For the journalist Yasin, "the absurd conviction" that Sudan could become a cohesive nation is belied by the current political stagnation, and the failure to achieve the aspirations of anti-colonial movements. Yasin sees his father as representing the disappearing generation who had witnessed "those halcyon days, with independence in sight" (104). He had lived to see that "[i]t had all gone terribly wrong. The great age of national independence had proved to be nothing more than a neocolonial mirage" (140). In Mahjoub's novel, the politics of the independent generation seem to have no place in the current reality of Sudan. Yasin realises that "the ideals [his father] had founded his adult life on, from the dark pre-independence days ... all of it was gone, defunct, old hat. And so, in a manner of speaking, was he" (137-8). He reflects that those who fought for a "nation of equals ... were now just a gang of toothless old grumps who mumbled nostalgically about things nobody remembered" (138). At the end of the novel, Yasin's father has joined the ranks of "the exiled journalists from Baghdad and Damascus, the poets from Lebanon" (325). Through this trajectory, Mahjoub dramatises the failure of the grand narrative of Arab nationalism from the perspective of the son who feels disconnected from this narrative (228).

Mahjoub raises this generational disconnection as a shared dilemma in an interview with actor Alexander Siddig, where they discuss what “link[s] the two of [them], both born in the 1960s, the children of Sudanese fathers and English mothers” (“The Accidental Arab”) A In this conversation, Siddig describes his character Ibn Khaldun in the British drama series Spooks as “trying to take a snapshot of this guy before he disappears. He was my father. He was your father. He was the father of all the generations that had a liberal upbringing” (“Accidental Arab”). Agreeing with this characterisation, Mahjoub adds:

He’s also the archetype of old Arab nationalism, the intelligentsia who became marginalised, the technocrats of Nasser’s early ambitions. But they were deemed a threat, and the West feared them. So did Nasser, who imprisoned them. They left a void that was eventually filled by political Islam. (“Accidental Arab”)

Both Siddig and Mahjoub mourn the “disappearance” of the nationalist generation and attempt in their work to represent them. In this sense, the disappearance of the father comes to reflect the disappearance of a generation for whom commitment to a nationalist cause was possible. In each of the texts, the sons’ severance from the past, and from the nationalist project, is sharpened by the tensions of the father-son relationship.

In Mahjoub’s novel, Yasin feels guilty about his inability to continue the father’s legacy. Even as a child he-

knows that he will be unable to carry on his father’s work, reflecting that “[o]ne day ... I would inherit all these heaps of paper and books and would be incapable of carrying on where he left off” (91). That Yasin sees his father’s work as a personal burden and that he does not feel qualified for both amplifies the idealisation of that work and sharpens his criticism of the naïveté of the nationalist generation.

In both the novels of Matar, the narrative is similarly framed by the son’s awareness of his failure to continue his father’s cause, contrasting a nationalist sense of purpose with his own unsettled identity and exilic perspective. As Kamal’s friend Taleb tells Nuri in *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, “he wanted someone to inherit it all” (62). The use of the word ‘inheritance’ again presents the obligation to continue in the nationalist struggle in terms of familial legacy. Having ultimately failed to commit himself politically, Nuri describes feeling “guilty ... at having lost [his father], not knowing how to find him or take his place. Every day I let my father down” (108). Here, the ambivalence about taking the father’s place becomes a political indictment as well as a personal failure. The dynamic of inheritance presents the national project as a failure to carry on a father’s legacy, giving an emotional impact to the characters’ conflicted feelings towards their countries of origin.

In both Matar and Mahjoub’s novels, then, the protagonists’ conflicted relationship with their dissident

fathers is accompanied by the recognition that they are unable to “inherit” their nationalist work. The same notion of inheritance also appears in Robin Yassin-Kassab’s *The Road from Damascus*, though here the son transitions from feeling he has failed to continue his father’s work, to questioning his father’s Arab nationalism, eventually coming to “the realisation that the condition of being an Arab was impotence … not the idea he’d inherited” (90).

Framing Arab failure in masculinist terms, this anxiety of “impotence” in Sami’s words is a recurring rhetorical trope in the works of Arab writers. Lebanese writer Etel Adnan, for example, speaks of a region “castrated by underdevelopment and occupation” (12). Similarly, in his indictment of Arab nostalgia for the golden age, journalist Samir Kassir speaks of “the feeling of impotence” which is “coupled with a civic powerlessness … all the more overwhelming because the Arab unconscious filters it through nostalgia for a forgotten but still fantasised-about glory” (27-8). The language of patrilineal inheritance here highlights the masculinism with which the idea of nationalism is forged. Masculine and national identities become intertwined, with the masculine ideal representing a parallel to the idealised notion of the homeland. Reflecting this intertwining, these novels emphasise how the protagonists initially construct their sense of self through attempting to model themselves on their father’s example.

However, as the protagonists mature, they confront the gap between these masculine and national ideals, and the violent realities which are gradually revealed to them.

Both the novels of Matar explore familial bonds in a context where, as he puts it, “private life is infiltrated regularly by these regimes” (“Reluctant Spokesman”). The narratives dramatise what Homi Bhabha describes as the “unhomely” intrusion where “the intimate recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions,” where “the border between home and world becomes confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting” (141). Bhabha defines the unhomely as “the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the-home-in-the-world” stemming from “the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world in an unhallowed place” (141). In these novels, the protagonists’ growing feeling of estrangement develops through their uncovering of secrets that come to light to destabilise the sanctity of the home, tarnishing their “inherited” ideals.

In *The Road from Damascus*, Sami realises early on that “there was a secret here which [he] alone had not penetrated”, though it takes him the course of the novel to understand the full story of his father’s direct

implication in the Syrian regime's suppression of the 1980s rebellion (5). As a secular nationalist, Sami's father Mustafa supported the Ba'athist dictatorship over their opposition, the Muslim Brotherhood, during the armed conflict. Sami recalls what Mustafa has to say about the government's suppression of the Hama uprising in 1982 : "[i]n the face of the Brother's fanaticism, the government stood unwaveringly firm. Sami's father, Mustafa, safe in London, had explained it to him" (3). The narrative Sami inherits is then challenged when he meets his maternal family in Damascus, and understands that they have suffered as a result of the regime's brutality. While Sami accepts in principle the death of tens of thousands, he is unable to deal with the revelation that his father had informed on his uncle, who spent twenty-two years in a Syrian jail and was mentally disturbed after his release. The justifications his father had given him for supporting a secular police state seemed valid until Sami is forced to confront the human cost to his own relatives, through a betrayal that undermines the national family myth. This discovery turns Sami's former idealisation of his father into disillusionment. As Sami's mother Nur tells him, "[n]obody should tell anybody that their father was a traitor" (342), pointing out that personal ties should trump loyalty to the regime, something her husband had failed to respect. In this novel then, the anxiety of inheriting parental legacies is inextricable from the guilt by association that in part motivates Sami's cri-

tique of his father's politics on moral grounds, and his later rejection of nationalist frameworks.

In Matar's *In The Country of Men*, there is a similar transition away from an initial hero-worship of the distant father. In a central scene, Suleiman becomes implicated in Faraj's political activities after he watches the televised interrogation of Ustath Rashid, his father's close friend. During the interrogation, he hears a question about "Bu Suleiman" (father of Suleiman): "[i]t was strange to hear Baba's name on television ... [t]he voice reread the name, this time inserting "Bu Suleiman" into Baba's name, which ... made me feel implicated, dragged by my name into something I knew nothing about" (114). Following this interrogation, Faraj is arrested and tortured to the extent that Suleiman is initially unable to recognise him when he is released. This traumatic scene, where the son sees the father as a stranger, symbolically represents the estrangement Suleiman experiences as he comes to understand that Faraj was released because he had given the names of his co-conspirators. While Suleiman does not fully understand this betrayal as a child, the older narrator who looks back on these events is aware of the implications of Faraj's actions. In this sense, the impact of violence at the level of the family parallels the sense of alienation from the nation.

In Matar's second novel *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, the father's name is again central, as Nuri becomes aw-

are of Kamal's political activities by "search[ing] the indexes" of his father's books: "[i]t was not until [he] encountered [his] father's name—Kamal Pasha el-Alfi—that [he] realised what [he] was looking for" (66). Again, the father's name represents the intersection of political and personal. In these scenes, histories of violence intrude suddenly into the protagonist's life: as Nuri reflects, "[he] read these things about [his] father before [he] could understand what they meant" (26). The uncovering of the father's political role, which explains his later abduction and disappearance is paralleled by the eventual revelation that the family's servant, Naima, is in fact Nuri's birth mother. As the nation-as-family myth is based on the notion "that the nation, like the family, has a single point of origin", the revelation of mistaken origins and unclear lineages undermines that analogy (Puri 133). Significantly, the period of Naima's arrival into the family is narrated together with the repercussions of the event that exiles them: "[e]ighteen months after my parents employed Naima, our king was dragged to the courtyard of the palace and shot in the head" (58). This one sentence, we later understand, conjoins the beginning of the unhomely "secret" in the family (the fact that Naima, the maid, is Nuri's real mother) and the violence that prevents them from returning home. In both Matar's texts then, the confrontation with the father's name involves the son's discovering or acknowledging the cost of his nationalist agenda, and coming to a realisation

about the gap between his father's avowed principles and his actions. As the protagonists become aware of their implication in their fathers' choices and the moral failings of their worldview, they gradually become disillusioned from the nationalist cause.

In Mahjoub's novel, though to a lesser extent, the protagonist Yasin's admiration for his father's nationalist work is similarly tempered by doubts about his father's teachings. As a reporter during the first Gulf War, witnessing the backlash against Arabs drives Yasin to reconsider his views of British journalism, inherited from his father: "[f]or the first time in my life I began to wonder about the integrity of the British press, which I had always been lead to believe was second to none (my father of course)" (95). The betrayals of the press here are connected not only to the shock of the war on leftist sensibilities, but also to Yasin's unease about his father's conflicted ideology. As Yasin realises, his father's "claims of Afrocentric allegiance only went so far" covering "a thick, chalky streak of Anglophilic" (103). His sister Yasmina is more forthright in her rejection of her father's "high ideas about western civilization" which she describes as "[c]ultural slavery [...] The big postcolonial trap" (166). Once a fan of Olivia Newton-John, she is described as becoming "Malcolm X in drag," dressing "in the drab greys of a Muslim feminist of the late twentieth century; emancipated and devout in one breath," resorting to an Islamist pol-

itics that opposes that of her secular nationalist father (138). In Mahjoub's novel, ultimately, the nationalist father's teachings and dreams are rejected by both his children, though the narrator Yasin is almost equally critical of his own confused politics, and especially of his sister's Islamism. The result is that Yasin's father realises that he has not been able to convey "those principles he had tried to instill in his children ... telling [them] about the great leaders" of the anti-colonial era (137). This attempt to "instill" nationalist ideals captures the ideological locus of the family as a crucial site for the formation and enactment of national identity.

In Matar's *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, the father similarly attempts to instruct his son in his duties towards the nation. In an early scene, Nuri recalls witnessing his parents arguing, his mother Ihsan objecting to the idea that Nuri should inherit Kamal's project:

"Don't transfer the weight of the past onto your son," she once told him.

"You can't live outside history," he argued. "We have nothing to be ashamed of. On the contrary."

After a long pause she responded, "Who said anything about shame? It's longing that I want to spare him. Longing and the burden of your hopes." (26)

Nuri recalls that his mother shielded him from his father's "secret work". With hindsight, he sees his father's "daydreaming" as out of joint with his parental role: "as

if he were the boy obliged to share a meal with adults, as if he were the son and I the father" (8). This role reversal, where the father is imagined as the son, not only unsettles the ideals of fatherhood, but disrupts the binary constructions which uphold the model of the nuclear patriarchal family. As the father, Kamal, is represented as naïve and childish, the ideals of fatherhood are revealed as a precarious performance.

It is not only in this novel that the protagonists' image of their father as a nationalist hero are disrupted along these lines. In very similar terms, Suleiman's mother Najwa in Matar's first novel *In the Country of Men* describes her husband and his colleagues as irresponsible "children playing with fire" (95), and critiques her husband's "crazy dreams" (80). Similarly, in *The Road from Damascus*, Sami's mother Nur describes her husband's hopes of a socialist nationalist utopia as "Mustafa's day-dream" (245). Towards the end of the novel, Nur explains Mustafa's single-minded belief in the pan-Arab narrative, telling Sami that "[his] father had dreams" (340) about what Syria could one day become:

He thought it was only a matter of time until everyone would work in an office, productive eight-hour days, and go home in the evening to read novels or go to the cinema to watch art films. He thought everyone would own a car and a house to fit a nuclear family ... Progress, so-called ... they made the country a prison to do it ... He thought ther'd be one Arab nation. One Arab nation from the

Ocean to the Gulf. What we have now is everything but. We have everything smaller and everything bigger. Little sects and ethnicities, little nationalisms and big Islamism. But no Arab nation. (340)

In the phrase “they made the country a prison”, Nur locates the failure of Mustafa’s project in its repressive demands for conformity as a path towards progress. The fact that Nur “veer[s] from he to they, from Mustafa to the Ba’ath Party,” suggests an overlap between the state’s repressive structures and the family crises (340). This overlap ultimately undercuts notions of the nation and family as stable anchors, moving away from an idealised vision of nationhood towards the development of a more complex view of both personal and national histories.

In these four novels, the protagonists’ relationships with their father are not only conflicted, but intertwined with their sense of connection to the nation, and with their coming to terms with the past. The novels dramatise both a sense of estrangement from a repressive regime and the creation of a diasporic identity which acknowledges the protagonist’s distance from his parent’s homeland. The struggle to make sense of complicated national and personal histories is never resolved; instead the protagonists attempt to create a new identity after accepting the exiled outsider’s vantage point.

In Mahjoub’s novel, Yasin eventually finds reassurance in the idea that he and his son “are part of that vast, nameless body of mongrel humanity ... there is nothing odd about us really in that chaotic tumble ... Nothing odd about us at all” (173). The repetitions however suggest an attempt to convince, to revise the understanding of identity through territory. Throughout the novel, Mahjoub subverts the notion that as James Clifford puts it, “[d]welling [...] [is] the local ground of collective life, travel a supplement; roots always precede routes.” Instead, the journey reveals that displacement is “as constitutive of cultural meaning rather than as their simple transfer or extension” (Clifford 3). Yasin attempts to reframe Europe as a space where displacement is as inscribed as territoriality: “[t]he face of this continent is scarred by the passage of people ... A history of transgression, of frontiers and border lines being crossed and recrossed” (Mahjoub 173). Here, the notion of a history bound to origins and roots is replaced with the routes that people have traversed. However, there is never any sense of resolution to the question Yasin returns to throughout the novel: “am I just running away?” (86). Undercutting the notion of roots might ease the restrictive trappings of national belonging, but it raises the question of whether such distancing is simply an escape from the complex issues of postcolonial nationhood.

The same emphasis on revoking the notion of origins is expressed in *The Road from Damascus*, in Sami’s re-

alisation that “[t]he roots are shallow and mythical, we all come from everywhere at once, and we are floating creatures” (38). Towards the end of the novel, Sami is left without an ideological narrative to make sense of his life. After 9/11, having abandoned the nationalist framework that made sense of the world, he is left with no frame of reference: “What was happening? Sami couldn’t tell. He had not scale to measure the event. Nothing inherited from [his father] Mustafa. No nationalist way of judging. No Qabbani verses to help him” (315). Having acknowledged the inevitable break with the past does not resolve the search for belonging. The novel ends with this tension between seeking a stable sense of identity and acknowledging the shallowness of roots, with Sami left asking, “what is he now?” (340). At this point, after the revelation about the imprisonment of his uncle Faris, Sami has abandoned his nationalist agenda. In a sense, the novel comes full circle from the early scenes when Sami’s aunt tells him that Faris’ imprisonment was a reduction to “Mr Nobody”, as the guards make him “write his name, his family’s name, and his address” and then ritually burn the paper “because he had no name or family or address any longer, nothing to write down” (6-7). At the end, it is Sami rather than Faris who is “Mr Nobody,” at a loss to define his identity:

For what is he now? Not much any more. Not Mustafa’s son, nor Marwan’s son-in-law, not an academic. Not a

member of the eternal Arab nation. So what, then? He’s Nur’s son. Muntaha’s husband. But to define himself as other people’s attributes – it isn’t much. (340)

This trajectory away from nationalist ideology is followed by other characters in the novel, including Marwan al-Haj, Sami’s father-in-law. Once a “secular and romantic” would-be poet, who “believed he was a model citizen of the new Iraq”, Marwan is imprisoned and then exiled (71). Moving in the “wide-ranging circuits of Arab London,” Marwan becomes more insular, going to the mosque to foster a sense of alternative community (79). Marwan’s increasing conservatism and withdrawal from his family leaves Mustafa’s son, Ammar, feeling as distanced from his father as Sami does: “Ammar wasn’t sure what was wrong … Except that he had no country. Except that he was orphaned. Except that there was nothing for him to love. Except the endless gaping depths of space separating him from his father” (142). This passage rehearses the themes that recur in these four texts dealing with patrilineality and nationalism: for each of the protagonists, the sense of “space separating him from his father” is intimately related to his sense that he has “no country” (142). To return to Matar’s *In the Country of Men*, “the country of men” signifies not only the opposite of a country of law, but also an induction into a society where men are both beneficiaries of and victimised by the patriarchal autocratic system.

At the conclusion of *Anatomy*, Nuri has returned from England to Egypt, the country where he and his father had last lived together in exile, and in the final lines, is trying on his father's clothes, and then replacing them to await his return: "[t]his might still fit him. I returned it to its place" (246). These lines capture the condition of being suspended in the past, in the limbo that is the psychological shadow of a disappearance, without the finality of bereavement. Metaphorically, this suspension of temporality, the inability to come to terms with an undetermined fate, is in all four novels extended to the exile's relationship to the lost homeland, the unhealable rift that makes belonging always contingent.

As we have seen, all the novels I have discussed have endings which offer little sense of resolution, concluding with their protagonists coming to a full realisation of the impossibility of return. In *The Return*, Matar weighs the arguments of those who try to "cure [themselves] of [their] country" and those who returned: "[r]eturn and you will face the absence or the defacement of what you treasured ... Leave and your connections to the source will be severed ... What do you do when you cannot leave and cannot return?" (Ch. 1, location 58). As Yasin reflects in *Travelling with Djinns*, "coming back was not just a matter of physically returning, there were other adjustments to be made, gaps that had to be compensated for. You are no longer one person ... but two – both of them strangers" (204). This recog-

nition of otherness within the self captures the conflict that recur in these novels, between political engagement and personal fulfilment, between the instabilities of diasporic identity and the weight of an inculcated sense of obligation to the country of origin, between the father figure's high-minded teachings and his moral failings.

This article has traced similarities in the way three Arab British authors depict the relationship between fathers and sons as central to the national project. The negotiations of nationhood through the lens of filial relationships in these texts interweaves the political and the personal to analyse the predicament of the region for an international audience. The novels showcase the "unhomely" intrusions that collapse the illusion of a private sphere of the home and the dream of the homeland, rewriting the plot of the national story to include the intra-national violence excluded from official representations of the national imagination. The rendering of the "land in between" is thus ambivalent and contradictory, represented both as an idealised space with emancipatory potential and as a narrow and claustrophobic site of violence and control. The novels explore the failings of a post-independence generation who have dedicated their lives to national project, and the ways in which the second generation desperately want to believe in this project, even as they find it deeply problematic, and ultimately unviable. At

the end, both the fathers and their sons are alienated from the national cause, and exiled from the homeland itself. Thus, in Yassin-Kassab's novel, the protagonist describes himself "[a]rrowing westwards like his father before him." The very next few words however are "he thought of the past". This double movement of "arrowing westwards" while remembering foregrounds the inability to fully leave behind the complexities of national narrative, the nation remaining "in between" (12).

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# DE-STEREOTYPING AFRICAN REALITIES THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *AMERICANAH* AND BELKACEM MEGHZOUCHENE'S *SOPHIA IN THE WHITE CITY*

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FOUAD MAMI

## Introduction

Heavy media, often known as corporate or traditional media, according to both Adichie and Meghzouchene, has done a considerable damage to both Africa and its people. Inaccurate and gross generalizations of African realities can be easily qualified as crude stereotyping and downright essentializations. Despite the fact that in most cases colonial powers have retreated and African nation states have been formed, corporate Western media still approach African realities with stereotypical gazes. An example of this category of narrative delineates African individuals as too naïve to be engaged in nation-building and unthinkingly succumb to the lure of extended stays in the global north. Hence, Africans are all potential émigrés, whose hearts and minds

stay insensitive to nationalistic aspirations of social betterment and economic progress. These two authors are keen to decry the nefarious effects of heavy media and meanwhile explore the potential of social media, like Facebook and blogs hoping it can serve as a counter measure against heavy and traditional media.

Given this stance, the two texts do not share a number of characteristics and aspects. Adichie's comes as her fourth major publication, while Meghzouchene's is his first. One is authored by a woman and the other by a man. This latter is an Algerian author and his work has been celebrated as the first Algerian novel in English. Algeria had been a French colony for 132 years, and with more than half a century of independence now, there exists a deeply entrenched and established tendency in Algeria to write fiction in French, not English. Therefore, the fact that Meghzouchene decides to write in English underlines his awareness of the need to reach not only British or American audiences but world-wide readership. This again contributes to the de-stereotyping agenda that Algerians and Algerian realities are often portrayed in either French or Arabic. Such demarcation from traditionally-enmeshed linguistic means of expression relates to the author's dissatisfaction with easy and categorical classifications of peoples and their experiences. While Meghzouchene's character never has a metropolitan experience, Adichie's Ifemelu is a returnee from America. This detail is

significant as a rare example of a Nigerian's experience of not migration, but return.

The two texts share nevertheless the vivaciousness of the principal characters. Both Ifemelu and Ramice are two identifiable people. They are economically independent and successful. They do not recourse to the comfort of either corporate business or the safety often sought in salaried government positions. Both are comfortable with the liberal jobs they have themselves created: one runs a blog, the other, an e-magazine. While Ifemelu works alone, Ramice has a team and charges to pay. Their exemplariness proves that with a certain amount of will and intelligence entrepreneurial activity can be still a viable option for African youth. The thriving of their individual passions and their talent in making this passion sell remind aspiring African migrants that a life opportunity can still be located in an ever-closing global economy shaping late capitalism. Defying the strictures of their respective local markets, and their ability to expand beyond mere survival is a mindset which the present article finds worthy of pursuit. For both authors do not seek to simply say that material gains and cutting a margin is still possible. On the contrary, the two novelists seek to banalize the idea of success through their characters' resilience. Remarkably, opportunity and cutting a margin happens to be in social media: the sector probably the least expected to render either personal or com-

munal rewards. Probably, both in Nigeria and Algeria social media has not been taken seriously in the sense that ordinary Africans in these countries still approach social media as mainly entertainment. The narrator of *Sophia in the White City* explains that Algerians actually swarm to newly founded cybercafés only to grab whatever opportunities (fake or genuine) they can to flee their country. As the paper explains, such counter-productive costs of social media do not downplay the fact that the authors chosen for the scope of this study insist on painting a different picture about life and reality in either Nigeria or Algeria through social media. Aware of the possibility of a relapse, the principal characters gain the wealth and status they subsequently enjoy through hard labor and creative passion. As role models, their careers seek to galvanize other members of their respective communities into constructive actions. Once this is massively considered, Africa can step as an actor in its own fate and start putting an end to lethargy and self-blame.

### **Reviewing *Americanah* and *Sophia in the White City***

One needs to underline the fact that both novels have received scanty critical attention. Apart from critical appraisals in reviews, the inhibitive impact of the media industry and how it continues to shake Africans'

trust in themselves remains largely untouched in full-length studies. The present study proceeds by means of the following questions: What kind or genre of social media do the two novels deploy? How are they used? Towards which end are they triggered? And, to what extent one is certain that the type of social media considered for action never boomerangs?

For purposes of exploring how media is deployed in the two selected texts by Adichie and Meghzouchene, one notes that each author refers to social media in his or her own terms. While Ifemelu prefers to replicate her American blogging skills in Nigeria, Ramice who does not enjoy a life-experience in the metropolis starts as an editor-in-chief of French-language weekly on-line magazine: *Hebdo-Sciences*. Instead of hitting walls in the manner of 'a hittist' who in the Algerian colloquy refers to graduates who long after the end of their formal studies remain jobless, like thousands of Algerian graduates or elaborating on the brain-drain syndrome which actually marks Africa, Ramice opens his own cyber café and soon starts a scientific e-magazine that keeps abreast of news of discoveries and innovations in three major sections: archaeology and anthropology together; physics, astronomy and chemistry comprise the second section; the bio sciences and medicine the third. In spite of the bureaucratic hurdles, Ramice fights teeth and nail to find his own business. The narrator reports: "But the hard truth was

that one must have gone through the teeth and fangs of awful bureaucratic meanders to make things struck. Connections mattered too much. A vitality in Algeria. And Ramice was not an exception to eke out his own living. Damn it." (3) The refrain 'Damn it' repeatedly peppers the text, suggesting how suffocated Ramice often is with the bureaucracy and the state officials' sabotaging reflexes.

Adichie's Ifemelu, too, takes matters in hand, and instead of behaving like other Americanahs by pretentiously complaining about difficulties of readjustment to life in Nigeria and missing some cherished consumerist amenities decides to critically account for moral and social degeneration among rank and file Nigerians. She too chooses an aesthetically appealing place to live in; she uses its panoramic view as a background picture in her blog named: The Small Redemptions of Lagos. Mark that the word 'small' insinuates that besides the massive chaos and ugliness, patches of beauty are still left and redemptions, however small, are nevertheless possible. Such a socially reformist conception of art and society in general and fiction writing in particular, however lofty and inspiring, does not appeal to the sensibilities of certain critics, one of whom is Ashleigh Harries. The latter observes that as far as literary form is concerned, Adichie's and others' "body of writing is capitulating to a notion of literary form ... is not in dialogue with African everyday life and as such

eliminates Africa as one of the sites upon which form is (globally) contingent." (Harris, 4) However creative writing programmes sponsored by U.S. universities cannot have the last word on form. Indeed, while this reviewer may or may not have a point in advancing his defense for authentic conceptions of African works of art, an editorial piece like this one risks missing the point in search of formal perfection that is often reduced to essentialisms.

### Metaphors versus Historical Depth

Probably one observation regarding literary technique in Adichie's *Americanah* and Meghzouchene's *Sophia in the White City* is the consistent evasion of metaphors either in character development or in setting construction. Readers notice that the authors are tacitly not comfortable with and cannot trust the elastic meanings that everyone seems to draw when flooding an artwork with parables, fables, symbols and allegories. For to consistently carry on their distrust of metaphor, they have recourse to lengthy but close historical accounts, all aiming to lift whatever confusion readers might encounter while following the progress of the principal characters as these characters work towards their successive and appealing careers. Technically considered, the setting of Adichie's novel is quite simple: the major character, Ifemelu, has finally decided to move back to

Nigeria after a thirteen-years-stay in the United States. Readers meet her first on her way to a hair salon outside Princeton, part of her eventual return to Nigeria. As she is braiding her hair, each moment at the salon brings reminiscences and details from her high school years in Lagos down to flashes from her early stay in the U.S., all the way till she becomes an Americanah, a returnee. The merits of Adichie's technique are better articulated in the following account of Walter Benjamin's technique: "Benjamin's [and by extension, Adichie's] images functioned like switches, arresting the fleeting phenomena and starting thought in motion or, alternately, shocking through a standstill and setting the reified objects in motion by causing them to lose their second nature familiarity." (Buck-Morss, 102) Despite its simplicity, the surprising and disturbing qualities of the plot ensure an exemplary interaction with readers as they fully acknowledge, appreciate and supply erstwhile missing details pertaining to Ifemelu's life before, during and after her experience in America. Similarly, Meghzouchene leaves readers with no opportunity for guess work about Ramice Taslent, the principal character. The young novelist sets a story in limited time and space frameworks. All the actions of the story take place within less than a fortnight between late October to mid-November 2006, and almost all are located in Algiers, nicknamed the white city. Sophia's scheduled visit to join her father who represents a German science publisher in Algiers'

book fair and subsequent stay in the North African city punctuates the entire drama in the novel. After a brief sketching of Ramice's typical day and brief background before he starts his internet space and hitting on the idea of *Hebdo-Sciences*, the author tactfully evokes the 1990s (otherwise known as the black decade in Algeria). Ramice is portrayed as a former conscripted army soldier who fought terrorists in the mountains of Cheria, and whose brothers in arms fell as victims. The reference to 1990s shows Meghzouchene's infatuation with Yasmina Khadra's fiction, an Algerian novelist using French as his medium of expression, and who too worked in the army during the bloody nineties before he eventually left for a career in fiction writing. References of this sort do consolidate elements of passion and resilience in Ramice. Anybody who overcomes odds of such magnitudes and returns alive from what can be considered as the Algerian Vietnam is an exception, not the common. Still exceptional is Ramice as he declines the glamour of fleeing to France on the pretense of pursuing an academic career like his former classmate, Yacine Ledjeni.

This desire to leave the country, based on the unchecked assumption that life elsewhere must be better than that in the country, without inspecting the root causes of suffering in one's own society, is something that the novel repeatedly explores:

Nabil [Ramince's Cybercafé manager] managed to deal with nocturnal Internet surfers who rushed in by scores after day work or study, predominately youngsters who, short of unyielding visas, would look up and down the Internet chatting portals in hope of a winning bargain (8).

These lines illustrate how Algerian youth vindicate their frustrations in social media. The latter is rarely used for research or cultural exchange, but instead as a means that apparently guarantees their entry tickets to Europe or the Americas. Though this mindset can be traced to an age long before the discovery of Internet, Internet and the social media in particular have fueled this perception as applications like Skype and Facebook have become more and more democratized. Aware of the fact that social media can exacerbate the problems facing Algeria, the author shows that as a two-edged stick, Internet can be deployed for constructive purposes like galvanizing consciousnesses to a more active resistance against instrumentalized reason.

Meanwhile, there lies undeniably an ironic twist about title 'Americanah'. To begin with, the wording is drawn from a famous American novel with more or less the same title: *Americana* (1971), by Don DeLillo. The letter 'h' which Adichie adds only accentuates Adichie's exploration of DeLillo's theme which is how the media inflames already festering issues in a given society. The difference between the two works however is that

while DeLillo satisfies himself with exploring how media does a lot of damage than good, Adichie exceeds in providing an alternative and procures a solution. Hence the word 'Americanah' which is a metaphor widely circulating in Lagos about Nigerian returnees from England, but mostly from America. The irony about Americanahs is that they are individuals who often cover their personal shortcomings and frustrations with endless nostalgic musings about amenities and services they claim they miss in Lagos. Yet this metaphoric layer of understanding does not apply to Ifemelu as she is not a typical Americanah. Every aspect of her life choices so exuberantly detailed throughout the novel contradicts the solid yet pretentious convictions of the rest of Americanahs. She complains both of Lagos and of America, but not in the way typical Lagosian Americanahs do; her complaints are not effusive nostalgia feeding on an abashed ego aspiring for notice and recognition. Hers, though, are critical views that are historically grounded and not easily digested by either Americans or fellow Nigerians. The content of blogs she writes does not even attempt to cater to the egos of her respective audiences. Instead, her writing finds the egos of the audiences of CNN or NBA ridiculed; therefore, it assesses such egos as inhibitive and destructive, and through its illuminating insights tries to break free and subvert this destructive drive. Only in this connection the metaphor is distrusted and displaced in favour of in-depth historical accounts.

Now, what makes Ifemelu critical of both Nigeria and America is the intended (never accidental) lack of depth in abundant portrayals of realities and historical experiences of Africa and Africans, and whose cost is the perpetuation of reification. For Ifemelu, the media industry reduces historical experiences and sells targeted audiences a false and shallow notion of self. As a matter of fact, clichés and stereotypes keep people (Nigerians and Americans) unauthentic about themselves and the lives they are confronted with. The fact that Ifemelu has been a communication major at university and lands a job in the hearts of the media industry fits in with the purpose and trajectory of the narrative. Similarly, her encounters with blogs and websites like [HAPPYKINKYNAPPY.COM](http://HAPPYKINKYNAPPY.COM) (a website that offers useful tips to do African American women's hair) is an early incentive in her subsequent campaign. Indeed, most of the cultural commentaries Adichie draws in this novel originate from observations about hair. Hair in Americanah stands as an extended metaphor that demarcates two different cultures and mindsets, but the demarcation is never processed with the purpose of erecting closures. The hustle and bustle inside the hair salon where readers meet the central character for the first time can be considered a reflection of the power of the media industry and its role in shaping sensibilities and tastes. As readers we are confronted with a number of ups and downs in Ifemelu's life before she is finally reconciled with her Afro hair. "I have natural

kinky hair. Worn in cornrows, Afros, braids. No, it's not political. No, I am not an artist or poet or singer. Not an earth mother either. I just don't want relaxers in my hair—there are enough sources of cancers in my life as it is" (297).

An element that must not be downplayed is that in order to be taken seriously for a job interview and thus cast a professional look, Ifemelu had to indulge in a lot of chemicals in terms of moisturizers. After some months into this denaturalizing situation, Ifemelu decides to call off this pretention and goes back to her original appearance.

For three days, she called in sick. Finally she went to work, her hair a very short, overly combed and overly oiled Afro. "You look different," her co-workers said, all of them a little tentative. "Does it mean anything? Like, something political?" (211)

Ifemelu's eventual reconciliation with her Afro style is in fact a reconciliation with nature, her nature. This is not easily appreciated by media-hypnotized coworkers. Adichie portrays this shift within Ifemelu as a kind of a leap of faith, probably living up to the origins of her name Ifemelunamma meaning: 'made-in-good-times' or 'beautifully made'. (69) The ingrained allusion to beauty delineates the aesthetic formula which Adichie highlights and proposes as her cultural model. Afro-hair becomes a culturally charged symbol that be-

trays Ifemelu's dissatisfaction with the global media as it publicizes the Western paradigm of women's beauty as a norm that fits all women regardless of origin.

Other instances of denaturalization caused by media abound, but none of them offer are so significant. Early on in the novel, Ifemelu observes that for her secondary school boyfriend Obinze Maduewesi, a statement like: "You look like a black American was his ultimate compliment...Manhattan was his zenith. He often said 'It's not as if this is Manhattan' or 'Go to Manhattan and see how things are" (67) Like many of his Nigerian peers, this young secondary school student has been raised to think that only American fiction is true fiction, speak only American English in earnest, not only for the sake of appearing smart and sophisticated, but presumably as second nature. Emenike, another classmate of Ifemelu and Obinze, upon another classmate's—Kayode—return from a trip to Switzerland "...bent down to caress Kayode's shoes, saying 'I want to touch them because they have touched snow". (65) Ifemelu prefers her father speaking Igbo because "...his mannered English bothered her as she got older, because it was costume, his shield against insecurity." (47) At one occasion, Ifemelu is astonished at Obinze being familiar with some Igbo proverbs: "Many guys won't even speak Igbo, not to mention knowing proverbs" (62) The early part of the narrative details how the newly Nigerian rich try to beat each other in

choosing foreign schools operating in Lagos because the Nigerian school system is not deemed to be as professional and competitive. Offended and bored with such pretensions, Obinze ridicules Kosi and her patronizing friend in a party when the topic of his daughter's schooling was broached upon: "Didn't we all go to primary school that taught Nigerian curriculum?" The women looked at him; their puzzled expressions implied that he could not possibly be serious. And in some ways, he was not." (29)

Euphemisms of this sort are indicative of how far Nigerians are caught not only in egoistic and dead-end pretensions, but far worse in the reification of their collective consciousness. Exposure to denaturalizing media industry deliberately demeans and ridicules one's sense of being by systematically endearing ordinary Nigerians to foreign schools, books, tastes and styles of life. Even Obinze's obsession with America and his presumed need to leave for America is initially nursed, even fueled with the amount of Hollywood films he watched, the books he read and the magazines he glossed over. One needs to account for the amount of damage taking its toll on Obinze, the second major character in the novel, in the excerpt below:

It had always been America, only America. A longing nurtured and nursed over many years. The advertisement on NTA for Andrew Checking Out, which he

had watched as a child, had given shape to his longings. 'Men, I'm checkin' out,' the character Andrew had said, staring cockily at the camera. 'No good roads, no light, no water. Men, you can't even get a bottle of soft drink!' While Andrew was checking out, General Buhari's soldiers were flogging adults in the streets, lecturers were striking for better pay, and his mother had decided that he could no longer have Fanta whenever he wanted but only on Sundays, with permission. (232)

Not only does the narrator draw on the central character's dissatisfaction with classical forms of films, shows and women magazines, but goes further to locate the ways in which this media shapes a parallel or alternate reality for ordinary Nigerian youth of whom Obinze is but an example. Ever since childhood, Obinze has been conditioned to exteriorize his disappointments with the cost of staying forever blind from finding out the reasons for the absence of simple pleasures like Fanta. Hence his constant but unaware borrowing from the ad's character: 'Men, I'm chekin' out'. Of course his mother's pampering has a hand into his not seeing why Nigeria denies him a simple joy like a bottle of Fanta, but the advertisements, the books and the magazines he has been exposed to and consumed throughout his formative years all amount to his accute experience of reification. This reification translates into the deliberate distanciation from one's immediate (Nigerian) historical setting and an awkward identification with an alien and unwelcoming context. The least provocation

in terms of shortage, crisis or any other mundane inconvenience becomes for young men like him a justified call for 'I'm checkin' out': an extended metaphor uncovering how young men deserve a better place and better standards (not because they have worked to deserve these places and standards, but merely as an inherent right) than what already exists, drawing an ahistorical and unfair comparison between two countries: Nigerian and America. With a visa application rejected, Obinze lives a pathetic life until his mother forges a UK visa application. After three and a half years, he is deported, and even with his taking part in the national game and the sudden wealth years later, Obinze keeps an apathetic attitude visa-à-vis life because of his misguided childhood and media-induced longings.

Meghzouchene's narrative also provides ample evidence of how media, mainly Algeria's state TV, agitates stymied Algerians to leave their country for good. Half through the novel, readers find Ramice Taslent together with Sophia and his old friend Abd al-Halim attending a press conference by Algeria's renown literary giant Yasmina Khadra, in 'the Literary Café', part of the cultural activities of Algiers' book fair that year. The three were all excited and satisfied with Khadra's erudite answers. Later that day, Ramice and Abd al-Halim expect a decent journalistic coverage in the evening news. To their disappointment, the TV airs little images of the writer with no words. Ramice's comment is

that this is "sheer ostracism in his [Khadra's] country he so loves". Subsequently "he [Ramice] changed channel in distaste of the infinite affront." (71) Such unprofessional, intelligence-insulting and even suffocating TV contents make Algerians seize the event of the book fair not as an opportunity to boost their knowledge and expand on their culture, but simply as a way to vindicate their frustrations vis-à-vis women. With huge crowds of Algerians visiting the different foreign stands of the fair, Sophia is duped to think that this reflects a population eager for culture and learning. Ramice quickly corrects her: "Don't be astonished, Sophia. Algerians are the world's most curious people vis-à-vis foreigners. Above and beyond, they've got bags of frustrations about women." (27) Denied of a chance to visit these foreign countries, representatives of international publishers become natural targets for inquisitive and curious Algerians, not necessarily because Algerians admire the content presented in the stands. The day Ramice shows Sophia his cyberspace and editorial office, nearly all clients stood aghast as they could not conceal their sick admiration of the German beauty. The narrator keenly observes that "The Internet surfers present that afternoon unglued their eyes from the monitors to set them on the blonde who had walked past them. Curiosity. Always Algerians' killing curiosity" (31). One notes that the context in which Ramice refers to Algerians' curiosity is vilification. Denied of visas, a European or American in flesh and blood

walking down the streets of Algiers becomes the materialization of all the frustrations amassed from years of watching Hollywood films. Nabil, Ramice's Cybercafé manager, is no exception and his reaction is representative of a large section of uncultured Algerian youth, who in the absence of informative and inspirational media shows and programmes slip into moral degeneration:

As Ramice and Sophia drew nearer, Nabil feigned ignoring the German female. Her perfume drifted to his nostrils, making his heart beat at high speed... Nabil could not resist licking with his eyes, stealthily, the German beauty as she gave him her back when stepping out of the cybercafé. (35)

A pathological response like this one indicates how alienated he is and by extension how degraded the moral standards of large sections of Algerian youth have become. Obviously, this is not a naive indictment on the part of Meghzouchene on the youth of his country, as much as an indictment of the state media coverage. Indeed, this kind of media keeps Algerians intimidated with shiny facades and encourages naïve yearning for foreign countries as the ultimate dream of their empty and vilified lives.

The distinction between the two novels is that Meghzouchene's principal character makes his mission the banalization of scientific news (disseminating the

state of art in the sciences), while Adichie's finds daring ways of uncovering Nigerians' alienation from themselves. From the outside, both can be seen as working towards different ends, but when considering the inner dynamic of each narrative, we realise that both share a keen interest in carrying out campaigns of inspiring, self-trusting and impressive intelligence. Both show that the new heroes of Africa do not succumb to the survivalist strategies dictated by either local or global pressures. Both can be leaders, independent in their judgments and course of action, but still humane with no toxicity towards anyone around in their lives.

Most critical reviewers of *Americanah* (since the novel has not been studied in full length academic articles or book chapters yet) point to the fact that the major preoccupation of the text is racism. More precisely, reviewers point out how America is prejudiced against Africans and how the color line is still a dividing issue in the United States today. However, the niche which the present study claims to have established is that in as much as racism is highlighted in the novel, Adichie's principal foci lie rather in the economy of race. The problem of race, according to the author, is exacerbated by the ways in which media covers stories pertaining to race. Put differently, the portrayal of race as carried on in heavy media impairs not only African Americans but even new arrivals from Africa: Nigerians, Kenyans, Ugandans, Malians, Senegalese etc. Centuries of rac-

ist conditioning has engendered a stale culture of race where both 'whites' and 'blacks' equally become its victims. Characters and the situations in which these characters are enmeshed in leaves readers with little doubt as to the role which the stereotyping and prejudice-generating machinery of the media plays. Differently put, the role which the media plays is but one variation of reified consciousness that keeps connections and relationships always tense and stranded. The successful blog Ifemelu keeps can be better approached as a living manifestation of Adorno's non-identitarian dialectics heralded in *Negative Dialectics*. Through her two blogs (both the American and the Nigerian one), Adichie demonstrates how social media can be mobilized in the task of resisting the inhibitive forces of racialised cultural modernity. When consistently and brilliantly deployed, social media make conscious people realize that consumption, global capitalism and racism cannot be embraced as fate.

### **Can Social Media be Truly Subversive? Potentials versus Limitations**

In *Americanah*, the idea of starting blogs and thus making use of social media is genuine and does not follow an already prescribed pattern or trend as Ifemelu's need for expression is urgent and unpretentious. Her U.S. job in press editing, press releases and the

copy editing of press releases functions as a necessary background experience and helps her subsequently to locate what is missing in the business of corporate media. When her white boyfriend Curt complains of the racist innuendoes which he presumably finds in *Essence* magazine as it features only black women, Ifemelu insists they go to the bookstore where they "took down copies of the different women's magazines from the display shelf" (294). What follows next is an erudite argument about how unfair and racist these magazines can be, and the need for a counter and alternative pattern to the approach and the conception of female beauty.

She spread the magazines on the table, some on top of the others. 'Look, all of them are white women. This one is supposed to be Hispanic, we know this because they wrote two Spanish words here, but she looks exactly like this white woman, no difference in her skin tone and hair and features. Now, I'm going to flip through, page by page, and you tell me how many black women you see.... So three black women in may be two thousand pages of women's magazines and all of them are biracial or racially ambiguous, so they could also be Indian or Puerto Rican or something. Not one of them dark. Not one of them looks like me, so I can't get clues for make up from these magazines. (295)

What is rather impressive in this exchange is Ifemelu's exceptional capacity for synthesis. Not everybody is able to deconstruct large details with far-reaching

hints and allusions, and at the same time remain capable of retaining a personal opinion that is well informed and meticulously articulated. Even the courage to say it loudly and clearly to liberal Americans at the risk of appearing eccentric must not be undermined. A day after this exchange, Ifemelu sends one of her former Kenyan classmates, Wambui, an email about what she thinks that fuels the problem of race in America. Indeed, it is this former classmate who encourages her to start a blog as her opinions are widely relevant and can be helpful to large audiences. It is worth noting that the idea of the blog is to begin a reversal of the status quo, the one tightly observed by corporate media. Remarkably, it has all started from this accurate articulation of how women with kinky hair can be left with no clues for make up by conventional magazines. Breaking the monopoly over beauty as strictly defined by white media and locating alternatives of non-white beauty seems to be Ifemelu's initial step in stipulating a decent outlook for African women. This is already subversive of the capitalist outlook that exercises exclusion through its media. As put by Ifemelu, it does not need a lot of intelligence to see that black women are not considered worthy of attention: in short, they apparently do not qualify for inclusion within the concept of beauty as defined by corporate media. Through their careful choice of words—like, everyone and curly—their deliberate evasion of tips for kinky hair, these magazines commit primarily an aesthetic violation

amounting to racism, however minor or insignificant this may look. As the text explains:

In America, racism exists but racists are all gone. Racists belong to the past. ... Here's the thing: the manifestations of racism has changed but the language has not. ... Or maybe it's time to just scrap the word "racist." Find something new. Like Radical Disorder Syndrome. And we could have different categories of sufferers of this syndrome: mild, medium, and acute. (315)

Overall, there is an emphasis on the deeply entrenched culture of racism that is aggravated by the media. For apart from having lucid details about the functioning of racism in the United States—having racism as a solidly integrated culture that goes unnoticed, and hence largely unquestioned—there lies the element of sarcasm in suggesting a purely medical treatment. 'Radical Disorder Syndrome' derides mainstream American tendency for scientific categorization of a problem of such dividing consequences. Certainly racism cannot be seriously approached from the perspective of medical attention. Instead, it is the culture that needs to be revisited and reversed, and in order for this to happen social media has to be implicated in such dynamic.

Near the end of *Sophia in the White City*, Ramice declares before Sophia what can be considered his 'I-have-a-dream' speech: "I have a dream of making science information a treasure endeared for by Alge-

rians" (138). Of course this testimony echoes Martin Luther King, the African American civil rights leader. While some readers may find these echoes to be unnecessary effusions of needless romantic sensibilities that downplay the seriousness of the novel, still others can put things in contexts and see why science stories of inventions and achievements of dreams when largely disseminated can indeed animate a sense of pride and mission to despaired and suffocated Algerians.

Again, Ramice insists on his dream in spite of his constant recourse to swearing. While requests for bribes exacerbate Ramice's plans, his determination never wanes. As noted earlier, terms like 'Damn it' are frequently interjected in the text to indicate how sensitive he is to state officials' indifference to his magazine. Further, the term also gives authenticity to Ramice's sufferings. Algerians with no connections complain of the devices which crooked officials deploy in order to win bribes:

But the hard truth was that one must have gone through the teeth and fangs of awful bureaucratic meanders to make things stuck. Connections mattered too much. A vitality in Algeria. And Ramice was not an exception to eke out his own living. Damn it. (3)

These are mounting difficulties of exceptional magnitude and they are aggravated by the homogenizing representations in the media. Sophia affirms,

To Europeans, the Maghreb is all the same; geographically, historically, culturally, and politically. Due perhaps to the fact that they just visit it for a short period of time. If they were to stay longer, differences would emerge clear-cut as to Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Mauritania and Libya. (19)

An infuriated Ramice also adds,

Some mongrels and no-hopers beyond the Mediterranean and the Atlantic would turn a blind eye to last decade's hecatombs of innocent Algerians. They would jibber along the way of butcheries. Daily butcheries. Until 9/11 blasted their burlesque faces out of calculated hibernation of the sense of right and wrong. They realized that terrorism wasn't Algeria-only matter. Global terror is the vocabulary they now use... (19)

The coverage of the Western media according to Meghzouchene is rarely analytical. Fatalist accounts desperately try to sell the idea that acts of butchery are ingrained in the Algerians' genes and chromosomes. The overall impact is often adding salt to injury. Differently put, though sometimes informative, the portrayal cannot be helpful in the task of nation building. It robs Algerians of the right to dream. This last is a necessary incentive to start constructive work. In this sense readers can see how Ramice's scientific magazine can switch Algerians to the beautiful and more intimidating side of their country. Social media lessens some of Ramice's burdens and helps him massively inspire

Algerians in being agents of their own fate, thus obliging media industry in the long run to draw a positive outlook.

This is true for Ifemelu in Adichie's text as well. With her subsequent return to Nigeria, Ifemelu seeks a job first at a women's magazine known as *Zoe*. Beside the fact that this experience offers more or less similar conclusions as to the inhibitive costs of corporate media, it nevertheless sheds light on other layers as to why commitment to social media is compulsory for pumping new blood in a country such as Nigeria. As she soon understands, *Zoe* is caught in a diatribe competition with *Glass*. Each seeks the expansion of readership and advertisements to beat one another. Ifemelu's approach is that as far as their content is concerned both are vapid and commercially not business savvy at all. There is no creative passion either in conception or in the editing process of each. Both feature interviews with supposedly successful ladies, but under Ifemelu's critical gaze that personal success is simply mired in corruption and fraud. The ladies featured are reported successful simply because their husbands are intricately involved in the national politic-economic order. They are wives of army generals, general managers of leading national banks; they are over pretentious and Ifemelu is often suffocated with their religious overtones. By the time she learns that these women actually pay (not give donations to the magazine in which

they figure) the editor in order to be featured, Ifemelu decides to leave the magazine for good. In addition, her new reconciliation with Lagos leaves Ifemelu ample time to seriously think of working independently by starting her blog. She starts it under the title: 'The Small Redemptions of Lagos'. The religious overtones of the blog title: 'redemptions' cater to the pretentious religious culture shaping life in contemporary Nigeria. The awkward beginnings do not stop her from adjusting to her new setting and improving afterward. The word 'Redemptions' also suggests that there is no intention on the part of Ifemelu to seek unwelcome attention that can backfire or raise unnecessary alarms of megalomaniac officers.

### Are Academics Intellectuals? The Modern Intellectual as a Cultural Worker

If social media can alleviate, however partly, the inhibitive cost of corporate media the authors feel entitled to explain why only a few people are involved in the corrective work of social media. Why academics, for example, cannot seize the potential which this alternative media offers? Towards this end, Adichie distinguished between academics and cultural workers. Some of the comments Ifemelu draws help readers understand Adichie's position regarding U.S. black academics: "They wanted to stop child labor in Africa. They would

not buy clothes made by underpaid workers in Asia. They looked at the world with an impractical, luminous earnestness that moved her, but never convinced her" (313-4). It is interesting to note that Blaine, the African American Yale professor of political sciences and Ifemelu's boyfriend does not take Ifemelu's blog very seriously. In his self-righteous zeal for books and films that 'push the boundaries', he could not perceive what boundaries her blog is breaking. The narrative, however, keeps on reporting the blog's success: commentaries, advertisements and even donations. Ifemelu also gets some remunerations and she gets regular invitations for talks at diversity workshops throughout the U.S., and live radio interactions with listeners. One indication of her blog's success is that she resigns from her well-paying job at the press editing and supports herself entirely from the blog. Without his self-righteousness, Blaine and his group of literati would have been more receptive and less critical of Ifemelu's efforts. The African American academics' colleagues are but a varied extension of Blaine's personality and state of mind: their misguided sense of righteousness and child-like earnestness are part of the cost of the culture of racism; overall they cannot be part for a catalyst for a major change. To take one example, Nathan, Blaine's Literature Professor colleague, complacently states that he does not read any fiction published after 1930, because according to him taste simply relapses ever since then. Later that day, Ifemelu announces to Blaine her

verdict "academics were not intellectuals, they were not serious, they built their solid tents of specialized knowledge and stayed securely in them." (323-4)

Only Boubacar, the newly arrived Senegalese professor at Yale, stands atypical from this category of impractical academics. He insists Ifemelu to apply for the Princeton fellowship and recognizes the propitious change she is trying to establish, suggesting "it is the only way to change conversation [about race]" (340). Because of such openness and readiness to step aside from the ivory tower, Boubacar can be qualified as an organic intellectual in the Gramscian sense. Adichie hints at the fact that probably Boubacar's upbringing, his experiences of Francophone culture and recent arrival in the densely racist U.S. culture made him a truly cultural worker. He is immune to racism and not entirely consumed by the racist culture in the way African American academics are.

Meghzouchene's Ramice is also an exception. Indeed, the exemplariness of Ramice when considering the Algerian case is undoubtedly vital for Meghzouchene's cultural project in the novel. Ramice has been conceived by the author as a fictional variation who comes against a background marred in lethargy, self-blame and violence. In line with his 'I-have-a-dream' philosophy, Ramice is too preoccupied with the good work for his community: "While his fellow men strived to

go abroad and got arranged marriages in order to settle legally in Europe or the Americas as 'husbands' of permanently resident wives, Ramice saw the inverse scenario taking stage for him" (12). Indeed, it is Sophia who arrives in Algiers, not him travelling to Berlin, seeking his love and care. Remarkably, Sophia confesses her love for him twice, yet he prefers to take his time and weigh things. Though he has sincere feelings for her, he is never in a hurry. Readers finish the novel, yet Ramice has neither confessed, nor is his thinking of Sophia taking a toll on his time or efforts. The magazine remains on the top list of his priorities. This is so because Ramice's type of intellectuality works toward cultural regeneration as outlined in the following statements:

The magazine he had given to was a labor of love. The Algerian media landscape had been inundated by opaque politics, limping sports and domestic tabloids. Not a single public-focused science magazine did exist. Ramice was itching for pioneering such an enterprise in Algeria. (85-6)

Given the entire pathetic cultural climate, finding the Algerian parallel to major American and European science publications is no a small step at all. Indeed, it is this spirit that compels Sophia to tell her father: "His keen talk about Algeria underscores his love to his homeland. He isn't the sort of guys who would endanger their lives to cross the Mediterranean Sea and

live therefore underground in Europe" (23). While Sophia underlines Ramice's exceptionality as an individual, her father situates that same exceptionality in its exact historical context. Algeria, according to Gerd Weize cannot be constructed with dollars only from the oil and gas industry. Almost every forward-looking community needs, before engineers, architects and doctors, loving, earnest and dedicated people who generate hope and give people a dream for a better possibility. Indeed, every aspect about Ramice suggests that he as a character is conceived in direct opposition to the prevailing image of Algerian youth in Western, mainly French media. See how aspects of Ramice's intellectuality can cure the damaging consequences of the harrowing experience of 1990s Algeria:

The new situation that all Algerians had to face after 1992 putsch was the sudden irruption of political violence into their lives. The outbreak of guerrilla activities coupled with the arbitrariness of state policies weakened and destroyed long-standing formal and informal social and political arrangements. People came to believe that political violence was the main engine of change and that they had no choice but to take part in this necessary evil if they wanted to remedy the social, economic and political inequalities that affected them. This 'democratisation' of violence also reinforced the perception of the state as a 'predatory' one and of the guerrillas as organised criminality. (Volpi, 93)

Indeed, the beauty of Meghzouchene's narrative is that capacity of transcending the violence dissipated in the everyday culture. *Sophia in the White City* reappropriates that violent culture in the Ramice's resolute ethical choices. The merit of a text of this quality is the readers' capacity to locate instances of individuality that resist despite all odds the encroaching forces of instrumental rationality. Other people in Ramice's shoes would not think twice before moving to France or elsewhere as life in Algeria is indeed troublesome. Therefore, resisting the temptation to leave it all at that and escape with Sophia, shows an intellectual of exceptional quality and undying spirit.

## Conclusion

Through their tactful and masterful use of social media, both authors illustrate that resisting global forces of capitalism, within their limited local contexts, is indeed possible. The capacity of the principal characters in both novels in drawing their own synthesis, despite the stereotyping reflexes that mark their respective cultures, demonstrates that resistance is tenable. Ifemelu's blogs and Ramice's e-magazine, together with their rising audiences are living instantiations of the much needed work characterised as deanaestheticisation of people's consciousness. The two novels incite the need to bypass prejudiced media portrayals as such portray-

als are less constructive and more antagonizing. Narratives, like Adichie and Meghzouchene's are needed not only by Africans, but Westerners as well. In suggesting that there is some human activity of interest and value carried on in either Algeria or Nigeria; that here too men and women think, work and laugh and fail, but ultimately succeed, African youth may have the incentive to stop postponing their legitimate dreams of the life they dream until they settle in either Europe or the United States. Similarly, giving Africans some of their stolen centres back can encourage non Africans, and mainly Westerners, to respect Africans and co-operate with them more on equal grounds. Everyone can observe that Sophia's relationship with Ramice in Meghzouchene's novel is tensionless and easy. However distant such representation may be, in the face of the adverse conditions of current reality, it does not impeach the two novelists' right to dream and envisage a better world.

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# MATERIAL FOR STORIES: THE EMBODYING RURAL WOMAN IN THE FICTION OF DING LING

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MENGYAO LIU

It is no accident that analyses of the rural woman under colonialism frequently invoke embodiment in their discussions of imperial violence. A look back at the history of feminist thought reminds us that the development of “body politics,” centering issues of reproductive health and domestic violence, profoundly reshaped the direction of the women’s movement in the twentieth century in the West. But the idea of the body in the context of rural non-Western women, occupying what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak terms “a violent aporia between subject and object status,” (“Can the Subaltern Speak”, 306), foregrounds a host of other considerations, particularly concerning the extent of imperial determinations. Given Spivak’s conclusions in the essay from which that excerpt originates, that the subaltern woman cannot speak or be heard through a

logocentric colonial lens, the concern then becomes how this figure should be read. On the page, her body anchors and makes translatable societal ills through a metaphoric language: sun-beaten skin, scars old and new, bound feet etc. Just as the “body politics” turn in the rhetoric of the women’s movement was rooted in real and pressing concerns, such descriptions of the subaltern woman indeed demonstrate the ongoing struggle for her humanity. However, these two directions of corporeal reference differ in the degree to which the women in question are afforded agency in framing themselves. In the case of the subaltern woman, reading her embodiment as definitively representative of colonial victimhood or violence invariably elucidates what Anirban Das terms the “primacy of the present” (141). In other words, the subjecthood of the subaltern woman constitutes a channel through which the critical reader comprehends patriarchal and colonial domination. While this type of encounter is not without substance, it is limited by the assumption that the reader can know for certain, interpreting through a necessarily colonial lens, what her body means.

### **Figuring the Rural Woman in the Modern Chinese Imaginary**

Taking into consideration the radical and liberatory shifts in collective subjectivity emerging out of an-

ti-colonial nationalist movements, it is evident that embodiment in literature does not inherently reify imperial hierarchies. Indeed, the genre of *Bildung* as a mechanism for effecting sociopolitical change profoundly structured popular opposition to colonial power throughout the twentieth century. In the modern Chinese imagination, however, the body has often stood for nation with a rigidity that remains bound by colonial parameters. May Fourth intellectuals, in particular, utilized metaphors of the body to convey the need for China’s cultural transformation on a national scale. Their conception of China as a nation, enfeebled by tradition and resembling a man nearing his death, galvanized efforts towards modernization. Postulating along highly racialized lines, May Fourth writers devoured the work of evolutionary biologists and eugenicists as they came to terms with a sense of national humiliation, stemming from how Chinese people were viewed on the global stage. The narrative arc of a diseased body encumbered by tradition restoring itself back to health served to simultaneously individualize the stakes of imperial domination through the universality of embodiment and bind Chinese people together as parts of a whole. While this metaphor was crucial in the formation of a more coherent Chinese identity during a tremendously fragmentary period in history, the binary construction of the national body is circuited throughout with the colonial hierarchies it seeks to overthrow. As Jing Tsu puts it, the “Chinese identity is

no longer premised on positivity but recast as a defect (110-11). Defining progress as surpassing defect, it is important to explicate the purposes different bodies served in the framing of Chinese modernity.

The intersections of the national body and the gendered body cohere along precise lines in the Chinese imagination of this period in the figure of the New Woman. May Fourth intellectuals forwarded a radical agenda for women's advancement in society, influenced heavily by Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Drawing from Nora Helmer, the play's protagonist who leaves her family to discover herself outside of the confines of marriage, a number of male authors advocated for women's social autonomy outside of the family unit in their fiction and other writings. Measured according to the logic of Eurocentric colonialism, however, which assigned qualities associated with femininity to the Chinese race as a whole during this period, the empowered women in May Fourth fiction were written as more of an attempt to broadcast the strength of China as a nation rather than elevate the status of Chinese women. Two of the most notable examples of this are Lu Xun's *Regret for the Past* and Mao Dun's *Creation*, both of which narrate the intellectual renaissance of young women as they rebuke the impositions of domesticity and patriarchy. These portrayals channeled twentieth-century white feminism in their specific valorization of a cosmopolitan, independent woman that was, in Ping Zhu's

phrasing, "predicated on the same linear temporality as evolutionary theories on race and gender: Western women represented the projected future of Chinese women" (33) The protagonists of *Regret for the Past* and *Creation*, as well as a number of other women protagonists of May Fourth fictions, were made to be Chinese women insofar as they could demonstrate Ibsen's Nora as "the projected future" in the national context. Placed against the backdrop of the lived experiences of Chinese women at the time, particularly considering those that lived outside of urban areas, the New Woman was a figment of colonial mimicry. The fixation with modernizing Chinese women in Nora's image has been characterized as "Occidentalism" in its construction of an idealized national model. But when read in a more encompassing colonial framework, it reflects, in Maria Lugones's terms, "the cognitive production of modernity that has understood race as gendered and gender as raced in particularly differential ways for Europeans/whites and colonized/nonwhite peoples" ("Heterosexualism" 196).

Inevitably, as Rey Chow argues, this imperative to write the modern Chinese woman into existence "thus produces as its 'other' an unenlightened, traditional China, which becomes associated with the metaphors of decadence, darkness, and death" (92). Indeed, May Fourth fiction exhibits a profound lack of sympathy for the figure of the rural woman, whose subjectivity

is made so peripheral in the colonial imagination that she is hardly a consideration in their groundbreaking visions of modern China. Such elusiveness makes her manifestation in Xianglin's wife, a secondary character in Lu Xun's *New Years Sacrifice*, more valuable than stories that center on a female protagonist from this period. Xianglin's wife, whose lack of a name immediately separates her from the model women in the other stories, unsettles the intellectual narrator with her superstitious inquiries about death and the afterlife. Widowed twice and reduced to begging in her village, she is written to represent everything defective about the atavism and poverty of traditional China. After her death in the story, the narrator proceeds to convince himself of his distance from the oppressive conditions that shaped her existence. Xianglin's wife as an allegorical creature in this story conveys the layered hierarchies that formed the social ecology of rural China. It is the bodily function of her death rather than her voiced existential uncertainty that permits the narrator to critically deliberate in the short story's final moments. Far from the agential New Woman, Xianglin's wife concretizes the coding of colonized women as "animals in the deep sense of 'without gender,' sexually marked as female but without the characteristics of [Western] femininity" (Chow 202). Even in contemporary analyses of this character, she is described as a ghost or a memory that propels the narrator's own affective development, all of which is rooted in her social

location extending beyond gender. The chasm between the narrator's modern subjectivity and her own renders her, in many respects, incomprehensible.

### **Ding Ling as Translator & The Construction of Subalternity**

It is from this bifurcated understanding of female embodiment during the late Republican period as a young, modern subject or dissipating relic that Ding Ling emerged as a writer. Throughout the wavelength of her intellectual development, she intervened in larger overarching ideological attempts to decenter the notion of womanhood in national fiction. In her earlier writings, often characterized as emblematic of May Fourth feminism in their depiction of educated urban women, she in fact presents a decidedly discordant image of the modern Chinese woman compared to the New Woman trope of her male counterparts. As Tani Barlow discusses, the female protagonists of *Miss Sophia's Diary* and *Yecao* are more reminiscent of Emma Bovary in their melancholic ambivalence towards the emotional taxes of romance in the shadow of cultural imperialism. Following the Yan'an decade, Ding Ling endeavored into explicitly left-wing fiction in line with socialist demands for cultural rustication. In these National Defense narratives, she describes lives of rural women living under the patriarchal authority structures of Chinese villages and the brutality of Japanese

colonial rule. Though she wrote prolifically for Party publications, Ding Ling did not valorize rural life, especially for her female subjects. During this period, she frequently explored issues of rape and sexual violence in the Chinese village. In stories such as “Affair in East Village” and “New Faith”, she demonstrated how women who lived through trauma are physically marked as sexual or political commodities in their communities, regardless of how they understand themselves. The women, through their bodies, serve as metonymic linkages between the nation, family, and sexuality. In both of those stories, narrations of rape mobilize men to join the Communist military ranks, which ostensibly strengthens a Party that supports gender equality. However, rather than emphasizing that eventual outcome, Ding Ling illustrated the conceptual precariousness and personal cost of being narrowly interpreted as a victimized, damaged body.

Some critics have characterized Ding Ling’s approach in writing about rural women as distant and detached, as she described her own alienation from femininity in personal essays, which set her apart from the subjects in her fiction. Notably, she refers to the “weakness” of women in her oft-cited “Thoughts on March 8”, with “weakness” denoting women’s sexual desires and emotional passivity. Following Barlow’s argument that Ding Ling’s mentioning of women’s visible “weakness” actually stood as an indictment of how men’s

“weaknesses” were often obfuscated by ideological posturing, it is important to understand Ding Ling’s awareness of her power as a writer and the accountability to subaltern women as part and parcel of that role. As much time as she spent in villages as a Communist Party representative, Ding Ling crucially did not identify herself as a rural woman, in addition to making clear distinctions between female cadres and village women in her fiction. This reflects her position not as detached, but rather as a “good cosmopolitan intellectual,” in the wording of Boaventura De Sousa Santos, in the sense that she carried out the translation of subaltern women’s experiences through the “contact zone” of her writing. De Sousa Santos continues, “The work of translation becomes crucial to define, in each concrete and historical moment or context, which constellations of non-hegemonic practices carry more counter-hegemonic potential” (51). In contrast to May Fourth intellectuals that coveted Westernization, Chinese socialists upheld rustication as an anti-colonial nationalist paradigm, demonstrating a dedication to “non-hegemonic practices” in their championing of peasants and calls for a more egalitarian society. In her role as a translator of subaltern women’s experiences specifically, Ding Ling further constellated this socialist cultural nexus by introducing the patriarchal and colonially inflected structuring of village life into the conversation. The struggles of rural women, textually constituted in translation of their experiences, estab-

lished decolonization as not simply a reversion to the countryside in opposition to forces of colonial modernity, but a process of both reclamation and advancement that was subject to revision.

To understand Ding Ling as a translator of rural women both within and against the larger cultural and intellectual movement towards anti-colonial Chinese nationalism, it is important to define her relationship to the subjects of her writing. As De Sousa Santos discusses, “translation is the procedure we are left with to give meaning to the world after it lost the automatic meaning and direction that western modernity claimed to have conferred on it by planning history, society, and nature” (52). The late Republican and socialist periods during which Ding Ling was active were certainly eras that contended with the loss of “automatic meaning” assigned by colonial force. But is not enough to simply include rural women in the nationalist fiction of the period if that portrayal still followed the “direction that western modernity claimed to have conferred on it,” which is to say, characterizing the body of the colonized woman as one-dimensionally defective. In a 1954 essay about the ethics of socialist realist writing, Ding Ling further details the process of “giving meaning” to the people outside of colonially demarcated society: “You absolutely cannot ... cultivate such people to extract their stories.... [Writers] must create inside a flow of true emotion. A reciprocal motion of love between

the [rural woman] and the writer ensures accuracy and literary quality beyond formula or formalism” (qtd. in Barlow, 233). The emotional current that underpins representing rural women outside of “conferred” figures brings to mind Sara Ahmed’s “politics that is premised on closer encounters...[which] assumes that ‘action’ and ‘activism’ cannot be separated out from other forms of work: whether that work is about the differentiation of tasks (globalisation as labour), ways of speaking (to others, with others), and even ways of being in the world” (180). In her depictions of rural women, Ding Ling works to unravel the rigidities of colonial constructions not just in providing a more accurate depiction of a multifaceted subaltern character, but also in forging a reciprocal and emotional mode of interaction between writer and subject. This perspective illuminates the extent to which translation is indeed a “procedure” rather than a singular motion away from Western modernity. The notion that Ding Ling puts forth by centering the rural woman is radical in its suggestion that the object of colonial violence could narrate herself. We should ask, then, not what the rural Chinese woman’s body conveys, but how she can be spoken about and listened to.

### **III. The Indeterminate Woman-in-Nationalism in New Faith**

Perhaps one of the most powerful organizing ideas Chinese fiction during the late Republican and early

socialist period is that of far-reaching sociopolitical possibility. While the fiction of this period reflects upon the histories of particular bodies, they constellate into a vision of modern China that is oriented towards materializing what was once impossible. It is interesting, then, to compare Xianglin's wife and the grandmother who recounts her life under Japanese colonial occupation in New Faith in their figurings of the rural Chinese woman. Compared to the brevity of Xianglin's wife's interjections, the grandmother's vivid account of her life as a "comfort woman" occupies half of New Faith. Throughout her telling, she transforms from an enfeebled relative to an unhinged preacher to a nationalist rallying cry. Just as the embodying rural woman is multiple, so too should be our reading of her history. A particularly useful model for this sort of approach is Emma Pérez's conscious "emplotment" in writing history. In her discussion of the colonial imaginary, she notes that the discursive composition of history involves an unconscious emplotting on part of the historian, usually in accordance with dominant narratives. She then puts forth a method of countering: "I am wondering what will happen if emplotment becomes a conscious act as we write the events that become our official stories...as I create a [history] in which I can believe" (27). In a similar vein, Ding Ling scripted the rural woman both as she existed in the boundaries of her surroundings and as she could be, pushing back against the patriarchal norms that did not disappear

under socialism. Indeterminacy goes against the grain in the overarching nationalist narratives of the period in which, as Pérez notes in the context of the Mexican postcolonial nationalist movement, "women's purpose was discursively constructed as they became symbolic representations for a nationalist cause" (33). In other words, the standard for what constitutes resistance or reinvention for the woman-in-nationalism must necessarily suit her circumstances. In this context, the indeterminacy of the grandmother underscores an identity both within and outside a singular symbolic representation of nationalism.

At the end of the story, the Women's Association invites her to give a "speech" at their International Women's Day celebration. Crucially, she responds, "Speech? She didn't understand the word 'speech' and just grunted glumly" (*Selected Writings* 295). Her lack of understanding speaks not to ignorance, primarily, but to the fundamental impossibility of the colonial/modern language of nationalism to automatically articulate her lived experiences. Although she eventually speaks out and empowers other women with her testimony at the Women's Day celebration, the narration's detailing of her indeterminate oscillation between various tropes demonstrates why she would not understand her own personal history as relevant to this rally at the outset. In her introduction to the translation of this story, Barlow notes that the grandmother "does not recognize

‘woman’ as a universal, inhering, real social category. Her sense of self is richly kin defined...until the young women of the Party drop by to solicit her help at a rally, she does not think to identify herself with other women” (Barlow, ‘Introduction’ to “New Faith”, 281). As an act of translation between the lived experience of subaltern women into readable text, Ding Ling’s inclusion of the grandmother’s life before the rally indicates that the history of colonial violence is indeed “all grounded in a peopled memory” (Lugones, “Decolonial Feminism” 754). Segments of that memory certainly function within an anti-colonial nationalist narrative, but it cannot all be encapsulated in a single discursive construction of rural womanhood, particularly when the rural woman herself understands her social location as many things other than “woman” as a social category. This dynamic evinces what Lugones characterizes as “the lived tension of languaging – of moving between ways of living in language” (“Decolonial Feminism” 750-51) in the case of the subaltern woman. When the grandmother’s embodied experience is phrased in the terms of a political speech, there are aspects of her life not captured by the symbol that she becomes. Reflecting upon gatherings such as this that were held across China during this period, this story takes part in the ongoing decolonial process of complicating the representation of women under colonialism.

After the grandmother recounts her experiences to the crowd at the International Women’s Day celebration

in New Faith, the crowd applauds her when she calls for a “fight to the end!” (*Selected Writings* 297) against the Japanese. But such a singular response could not possibly address the inhumanity of the sexual violence enacted upon her. The grandmother, as well as other rural Chinese woman portrayed in Ding Ling’s fiction of this period, presents an unfathomable and diffuse subjectivity. While she articulates her experiences in their entirety, her listeners in the story filter them through their narrow understandings of body-as-nation, as established by the rhetoric of this period. Consequently, what follows this line of thinking is retaliation against individual bodily harm in the form of nationalist insurgency. This presents somewhat of a quandary for contemporary academic readers of Ding Ling. In reading the rural Chinese woman, we must resist the sort of demystifying determinations that reinscribe the conditions for her objectification. The reader, then, must work to displace these bodily renderings through engaging with the rural Chinese woman as “inaccessible blankness circumscribed by an interpretable text” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?”, 292). In other words, the direction of interpretive inquiry in this context must abdicate its definitive approach and instead be conducted towards blankness, inconsistency, and the sort of impenetrability that destabilizes foregone conclusions. From there, the reader may begin to unravel imperialist rigidities by starting from what is left empty.

## Refusing Embodiment in *When I Was in Xia Village*

Following its publication in 1941, Ding Ling received a great deal of criticism for “When I Was in Xia Village” on account of its portrayal of a woman seeking social redress in the face of recalcitrant village beliefs surrounding sexual violence. The central figure of the story is a rural woman named Zhenzhen who returns to her village after having contracted a sexually transmitted disease from Japanese soldiers. While she eventually decides to join the Communist encampment at Yan'an at the end of the story, the story condemns the linking of a woman’s sexual chastity to the degree to which she contributes to the broader socialist mission. In that way, it conflicted with the model woman in the Communist imagination as either virginal or strictly maternal. The narration is precise in its framing of Zhenzhen’s equivocation in response to her ostracization. She does not waver when it comes to asserting her agency or admitting her personal history. Rather, her ambivalence stems from a refusal to affirm any of the judgments of the other villagers, shaped by their own perceptions of what a woman’s body means when marked with the violence of colonialism. In Barlow’s introduction to this story, she describes this story as examining “the conjuncture of women and literary representation – to what effect, on whose terms, under what inscription of femininity, for what eventual

political good?” (36). As mentioned before, much of Ding Ling’s fiction during this period was indeed written under the auspices of incorporating the identity of woman into the focal point of nation. But as contemporary readers, we must take into account the implications of postcolonial feminist critique, Ding Ling’s penchant towards complicating conceptions of femininity throughout her literary career, and the purposeful boundaries of the text itself.

Although Zhenzhen is the story’s central character, the events of “When I Was in Xia Village” do not unfold from her perspective. The narrator is a female cadre sent to Xia Village to observe village life in a setting outside of her post at the Political Department. She first learns of Zhenzhen through a member of the local Peasant’s Salvation Association. Before the narrator even comes into contact with Zhenzhen, her preconceptions are inundated by the gossip of the villagers, who linger upon the state of her body after living under Japanese occupation in their conversations. As the narrator purchases her breakfast, the store owner speculates, “I hear her disease has even taken her nose.” Another villager adds, “Yesterday, they told me she walks with a limp” (303). Their fixation upon visible disfigurement reflects the bodily dichotomies established by the May Fourth writers that assembled the parameters of nationalist thinking. In accordance with that paradigm, Zhenzhen’s afflicted female body stands in for

the disruptive menace of Japanese colonialism upon the Chinese nation. It is notable, then, that when the narrator finally meets Zhenzhen, she observes “no outward sign of her disease. Her complexion was ruddy. Her voice was clear” (308). Her showing no “outward sign” of course does not indicate that the villagers were incorrect in their assumptions, but instead raises the issue of distinguishing between an embodied idea and the body itself. The need for Zhenzhen to confirm her disease to the narrator underscores how an interpreter arrives at certainty through language, as opposed to observable physical delineations. Furthermore, that Zhenzhen appears to the narrator so differently from how she is described by the villagers illustrates the irreducible multiplicity of the rural woman.

It is in the narrator’s conversations with Zhenzhen that the metaphoricity of the body begins to unravel the concrete judgments of the other villagers. Although it moors the imaginations of the villagers to a site of defectiveness under colonialism, Zhenzhen’s body as text fragments those readings when she assumes the role of subject. Describing her return to the village, she remarks, “As far as the people of this village are concerned, I’m an outsider. ... Nobody treats me the way they used to. Have I changed? I’ve thought about this a great deal, and I don’t think I’ve changed at all” (308). In strikingly simple language, Zhenzhen destabilizes the foundational assumption of her representation:

that colonial violence has damaged her body so deeply that she is a different person, or more object than person. But in her statement of “I don’t think I’ve changed at all,” she alludes to how her embodied suffering does not fragment her so much as bring to the surface a collective fragmentation in the structure of feeling of the village. In her narrated embodiment, Zhenzhen translates the disruption of colonial intrusion, but also denies its immutability. She refuses to explicate in rational terms, perhaps in part because there is not yet language or consciousness within the boundaries of the village to articulate the way that she feels. While their bewilderment towards her attests to the latitude of colonial power and that it complements the norms of the patrilineal Chinese village, Zhenzhen’s imagination of herself is a pathlight that faintly illumines a possibility that is, for the most part, still obscured.

At once, the problematic of embodiment pivots from the body being read to the role of the reader, or in Spivak’s terms, “the importance of the intellectual” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 290). Importance, in this sense, indicates that the intellectual reader is positioned in and informed by an encompassing imperial hierarchy, rather than serving as an objective conduit. In other words, we are not absolved of complicity through cognizance. Dismissing that role, in turn, enacts epistemic and material violence upon these spoken-for subjectivities. Taken together, Spivak demands that “the critic’s

institutional responsibility” (300) must involve relinquishing the authority in which imperialist representations of the subaltern traffic. In her conversation with Xia Dabao, the narrator of “When I Was in Xia Village” conveys how the institutional responsibility of ceding objective authority does not vacate critical engagement with the subaltern woman, but rather scrutinizes the systems that code her body. Given her position as a cadre visiting the village, the narrator performs the role of an intellectual critic. Xia Dabao voices his construction of Zhenzhen to her seeking confirmation, but she rightly interrogates his preconceptions. In Xia Dabao’s opinion, Zhenzhen must hate him because if he had been a wealthier man when her parents were arranging her marriage, they could have gotten married. Instead, she attempted to escape the arrangement they presented and ended up a captive of the Japanese soldiers. Following the patriarchal circuiting of traditional marriage that does not assign the bride any agency in the matter, the blame would fall on Xia Dabao. But rather than acquiesce to what is understood to be an accepted truth, the narrator resists: “‘No,’ I replied, searching my memory. ‘She has never shown me that she hates anyone.’ This was not a lie. … ‘Why should she hate you?’” (313). By setting the terms of interpretation to privilege what Zhenzhen herself expresses, the narrator does not definitively speak for her, but also works to undermine the logic of Xia Dabao’s assumptions. In asking why she “should” hate him, the narrator is also asking why that schema should structure his thinking.

The embodying subaltern woman does not make so much as she unmakes. As the narrator’s conversation with Xia Dabao establishes, acknowledging that her body is impossible to know fundamentally changes the direction of inquiry. For Xia Dabao, this is a disruptive process that results in his careening off into the forest, muttering to himself. For those complicit in the systems that discursively enclose the subaltern woman, it is difficult to come to terms with all the ways in which those metrics do not hold up to scrutiny. Addressing that concern, the ending of “When I Was in Xia Village” presents a more optimistic side to standing on unstable ground. Informing the narrator of her decision to travel to Yan’an, Zhenzhen once again speaks powerfully and simply: “I will be able to start life fresh. … Some have called me young, inexperienced, and bad-tempered. I don’t dispute it. There are some things that I just have to keep to myself” (314). Her statement is plain in its diction and does not reveal much about her plans, but that very orientation towards possibility comprises a decolonial act in and of itself. As Lugones discusses, “From the fractured locus, the movement succeeds in retaining creative ways of thinking, behaving, and relating that are antithetical to the logic of capital. Subject, relations, ground, and possibilities are continually transformed, incarnating a weave from the fractured locus that constitutes a creative, peopled recreation” (Lugones 755). In response, the narrator contemplates, “I felt that what she had said was really

worth examining. There was nothing for me to do but express approval of her plan" (315). For the narrator, as well as the intellectual reader, this politics requires a responsibility to the subaltern woman. This obligation takes the form of a dedicated confidence in what she speaks, rather than her embodiment, as being "really worth examining." Indeed, it is not the act of reading but a process of coming-to-know without the need for a particular guarantee that characterizes this relationship.

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