Uniquely local? Reading Manjula Padmanabhan’s short story ‘Feast’

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Manjula Padmanabhan’s short story ‘Feast’ (2009) was published in the journal *Tehelka* in 2009, in a volume devoted to original fiction on the theme of excess. In the words of the editor, Tarun J. Tejpal, this theme is pertinent and ‘proved easy […] Look around you. Look at the year gone by. Look at where we are headed.’ The editor quotes Louis MacNeice’s comment that “the world is crazier and more of it than we think, incorrigibly plural’ and concludes that ‘literature is the surest way of understanding an incorrigibly plural world’.¹ In other words, through a fictional exploration of all kinds of surplus, perhaps we will have a better understanding of our constantly changing global world. Excess and an increased understanding of our often strange contemporary world are also central to ‘Feast’, set in India, Salman Rushdie’s ‘elephantine place’, which provides what Amartya Sen calls a ‘veritable feast of viewpoints’.² The story reads as a piece of travel writing and begins with an arrival scene: a suave, well-dressed, Western vampire arrives New Delhi’s Indira Gandhi International Airport, visiting India for the first time, and greatly looking forward to ‘his personal, private bloodfest’ (16).³ He is picked up at the airport by the driver Satish, whom he later consumes with greed and excessive enjoyment. But before this bloodsucking orgy, the vampire has noticed something peculiar. In the encounter with ‘the mass of hot, sweating [Indian] bodies’ (15) he senses an ambiguous scent he cannot identify and classify. It is unpleasant yet intoxicating; it is ‘rich with chemicals, human air-born ejecta, germs, dust particles, scent molecules, pheromones’. The vampire wonders if this desirable yet disgusting scent is ‘uniquely local’ (15).

The question about what is uniquely local is one that haunts the vampire and drives the story forward, and it allows us, as we follow the vampire’s fest and the accompanying quest to answer that question, to contemplate certain ancillary queries about topics such as the local versus global, East versus West, old versus new, excess versus austerity.⁴ The question also reveals how the story allegorises well certain globalising transformations characteristic of life right now. The on-the-surface simple story can be read as an allegory about attempted yet unsuccessful neo-colonialism figured as tourism, where tourism is – literally in this case – a parasitic activity, and about the decline of the West as power structures are shifting in favour of the East.

¹ Tarun J. Tejpal, ‘Free, Fair, Fiction’, *Tehelka Magazine* 6.1 (10 Jan. 2009) 3. (An introduction to the year-end special issue.) The terms excess and plural are used here, I gather, not in a theoretical, philosophical or psychological sense, but rather in a commonsensical way that sees excess and plurality, although of course not conceptually the same, as sharing an emphasis on that which is abundant, extravagant and perhaps too much.
⁴ The idea of the local remains problematic throughout the story and is usually paired with a question mark, as if to underscore its unresolved status.

We are also reminded of the West’s first vampire story, John William Polidori’s *The Vampyre: a Tale* (1819), whose introduction describes the vampire as a figure of superstition, a travelling tale coming from the East and developing in the West after Christianity:

The superstition upon which this tale is founded is very general in the East. Among the Arabians it appears to be common: it did not, however, extend itself to the Greeks until after the establishment of Christianity; and it has only assumed its present form since the division of the Latin and Greek churches; at which time, the idea becoming prevalent, that a Latin body could not corrupt if buried in their territory, it gradually increased, and formed the subject of many wonderful stories, still extant, of the dead rising from their graves, and feeding upon the blood of the young and beautiful. In the West it spread, with some slight variation, all over Hungary, Poland, Austria, and Lorraine, where the belief existed, that vampyres nightly imbibed a certain portion of the blood of their victims.5

This quote is very specific when it comes to location – we can follow the figure through specific geographical areas, as he moves from the East to the West. The tradition of the vampire as a figure that is linked to religion, travel, and excessive and blood-sucking parasitical activities is also central to Padmanabhan’s story, but through her postcolonial and transcultural optics, the familiar tale is given a dizzyingly new spin. It becomes muddled: in India, we read, ‘they have monsters, even one they call “vampire”, [but] there is nothing fixed and definite about them’ (19). So let us first follow in the trail of our vampire-cum-tourist as he makes his way through the masses of Indian people and how he tries to make sense of the for him unusual, and unusually provocative, excess.

The vampire’s second and equally ambivalent encounter with the strange and unfamiliar happens not long after he senses that disgusting yet strangely stirring scent. As he finds himself outside the airport, he notices something that startles him: masses of mosquitoes, those quaint, rival bloodsuckers, who, our vampire muses, ‘in the third world [are] still a force to be reckoned with: carriers of disease, miniscule assassins’ (15). It is still too early for the vampire to see how the power structures are already changing – as the lone vampire he cannot compare with the power of the multitude of mosquitoes. What he has yet to learn is that here in the so-called third world, in the twenty-first century, he is not a force to be reckoned with. His perhaps uniquely local cultural characteristics – his vampirism – are presented as powerless and oddly old-fashioned.6 The mosquitoes, which to him are tiny and quaint, share with the Indian population – in the story figured as the ‘mass of hot, sweating bodies’ and the ‘countless warm bodies lying unguarded in their sleep’ (15) – something the West cannot emulate; sheer numbers, or excess, if you will.

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http://www.gutenberg.org/files/6087/6087-h/6087-h.htm

6 I modify the phrase ‘uniquely local’ with a ‘perhaps’ because the story never really resolves the issue of what and where is the local.


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As he drifts through the streets of New Delhi, disguised in various ways, he tries to understand and make sense of his encounters in this contact zone of the new and strange world. I see New Delhi as a contact zone in the manner described by Mary Louise Pratt, in her exploration of travel literature, as a social space where ‘disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of dominance and subordination’.\(^7\) It is precisely this asymmetry that is so noticeable, both as the ‘social asymmetry, of which the caste system is only one reflection,’ to quote Amartya Sen,\(^8\) but also in rather more unexpected ways, as we shall see. And in this vast metropolis, the unclassified scent continues to haunt the vampire. He tentatively classifies it as innocence. It is the only way of making sense of his experiences as a vampire-tourist exploring the ‘places where the teeming hordes [are] especially dense’ (16). In such places, the contrast to European reserve and sparseness is striking:

Squishy soft bodies pressed against him on all sides with a surprising lack of reserve. He had never before encountered such uninhibited yet anonymous physical contact. In Europe, it was unheard of for strangers, even in the grip of football hysteria or Oktoberfest revelry, to tolerate intimacies on this level. (16)

He discovers that in what he thinks of as their innocence, the masses do not protest against him or try to fight him off when he attacks them. Again, he does not understand why, but he feels that this innocence paves the way for ‘his reign of passion in this new country. His personal, private bloodfest’ (16). The reaction that the vampire sees as innocence could also be figured as what Wikas Swarup in Q & A (2005) thinks of as apathy. He has the landlord of the chawl where the protagonist lives explain to him why the masses tolerate cruelty and suffering: ‘We Indians have this sublime ability to see the pain and misery around us, and yet remain unaffected by it. So, like a proper Mumbaikar, close your eyes, close your ears, close your mouth and you will be happy like me.’\(^9\) Whether innocence or apathy (these words seem to mean more or less the same to the increasingly confused and disturbed protagonist), or something else all together, it makes life easier for the vampire. As a would-be neo-colonial conqueror, he sets out to suck the lifeblood out of what to him is a new nation, to take advantage of the naiveté and artlessness of the local population, who seemingly cannot understand the force of the vampire’s power. However, he soon begins to realise the failure of his new-fangled and parasitic colonising mission, even though he still cannot understand why it leaves him oddly dissatisfied.

So he again ponders that initial question about the allegedly uniquely local or innocent quality of the still unclassified scent. Is it perhaps connected to the climate or the culture: ‘What is the meaning of this unique local taste? Why have I not encountered it before? Is it possible for culture to impart an actual physical fragrance? And if so, why have I never heard of such a thing before?’ (17, italics in

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\(^8\) Sen 34.

\(^9\) Vikas Swarup, Q & A (London: Black Swan, 2006) 84.
original). All of the victims surrender to him with extreme submission and he begins to be slightly unnerved by his easy success. Surely neo-colonialism is not supposed to be that easy? The vampire begins to be homesick for Europe and ‘the familiar, uncomplicated scent he associated with European victims’ (17). He begins to find the strangeness, the extravagance, and the unknown frustrating, and gradually the bloodsucking success coupled with all the unanswered questions begin to corrode his self-confidence and knowing feeling of superiority.

After six months in India, his tourist visa is running out and he still does not understand the abundance of the nation he has been devouring. In this state of anxiety and vulnerability, he meets Cindy, a vampire-gone-native, who acts as a go-between. She is almost the same, but not quite Indian, to twist Homi K. Bhabha’s ideas a little—as a mimic woman, she has reached some kind of understanding of India, yet retained some of her vampire characteristics. In her hybrid position she is not unlike Thomas Babington Macaulay’s ‘class of interpreters’ between the West and the million governed (only in reverse), who, to paraphrase slightly, are a class of people, Western in blood and colour, but Indian in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect.10 This middle-(wo)man can finally answer the question that haunts the story and the vampire.

In her elaborate explanation, Cindy sets up a binary system—between the West and the East, between Europe and India, between monotheism and polytheism, between austerity and excess—in order to enlighten and educate the vampire. She needs to construct this binary in order to try to help the vampire make sense of the mental muddle in which he finds himself. This is Cindy on the western ‘race’ of vampires:

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\text{We’re products of a very specific belief system. I won’t name it, since you’re still too sensitive and all your dark powers, even though they’re forged in opposition to that system, require your absolute belief in it … The belief system we belong to is an austere one. Think about it: one immortal soul, one life on earth, one chance of heaven or hell. Right? … But in order to maintain our powers we must uphold our own belief system … In order to be culture specific monsters we ourselves have got to be true believers. (19)}
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The penny is beginning to drop for our vampire, who listens to Cindy with bated breath. The revelation of vampirism’s complicity with the very forces it is defined in contrast to leaves him speechless. Apparently this is the price for the vampire’s immortality—that (perhaps) uniquely local characteristic of the culture specific monster the vampire learns that he is, in Cindy’s binary. But Cindy, in her in-between situation (perhaps the binary only holds as a ‘pedagogical tool’?) is also qualified to explain the other side of the binary she herself straddles:

10 The original reads: ‘We must at present do our best to form a class that may be interpreters between us and the million whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, in intellect.’ Thomas Babington Macaulay, ‘Minute on Indian education’, The Post-Colonial Studies Reader, eds. Ashcroft et al. (London: Routledge, 1995) 430.

In this culture [i.e. Indian], the rules of faith are completely different. There’s no precise heaven or hell. There’s no immortal soul … no single … uh … divine authority. Instead there are infinite births, infinite deaths, infinite divinities … Just by being here they get recycled … Instead of a single life and a single fate, there’s a ranging torrent of lives and fates, truths and deaths! … And there’s always a chance of better luck next time around! In the next life. The next incarnation. (19)

As a last point in her educational monologue delivered to our by-now dejected and frustrated vampire, Cindy drives the point home, teaching the vampire a lesson about, from a Western perspective perhaps, third-world excess, fertility, surfeit and power, and that what she construes as the uniquely local is intimately linked with surplus. In this polytheistic system, ‘there’s always more where it came from’ since it is a ‘multi-life-multi-chance system’ (19).

But the vampire still does not grasp the complete change in power structures: he cannot understand how, if the Indians succumb to him, he can be their victim. Cindy explains that numbers matter – as indeed the vampire saw at the beginning of the story in his puzzling encounter with the miniature assassins, the rival bloodsucking mosquitoes. Numbers – excess – also help to answer the question about that still-baffling scent. It is not apathy or innocence, not an exotic spice, but lack of fear, because the alleged victims – the Indian population – know that ‘their sheer numbers will prevail’ (19). Cindy explains again: ‘Without active fear to define us, we cease to be monsters. Our powers wane. We begin to die’ (19).

What Cindy here explains is a point Bill Ashcroft elaborates in his discussion of language and power in *Caliban’s Voice* (2009), where he references Michel Foucault’s claim that power is everywhere and that there is no binary opposition between those who have power, and those who do not. Ashcroft suggests that power can be seen as transcultural and that it circulates both through subjects and on them and thus allows for agency where agency is usually not considered.

In ‘Feast’ such transculturation and circulation of power is seen in the deconstruction of the notion of victim. In this reversal of traditional power structures, the West, embodied in our European vampire, is rendered irrelevant and powerless – indeed out-dated. His neo-colonial project fashioned as a touristic ‘reign of passion’ ends in abject failure. He is not a force to be reckoned with. He is nothing, unless he changes, adapts and adopts a new mode of living and a new way of seeing the world.

Our vampire approached India in a typically Western way, as we have seen, equipped with a set of recognisable ideas about the place. India seems to have been part of the vampire’s imagination, constructed as an exotic location, and shaped through the vampire’s fantasy and desire as a mysterious and strange territory. In order to identify the allegorical thrust of the story and the figure of the vampire, we can draw on Amartya Sen’s classification of Western approaches to, or external images of, India. Sen divides these competing versions of India into three overarching categories, which all share the common assumption that there is a vast difference

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between the West and the East. Sen labels the categories thus: the *Exoticist* approach, that sees India as wondrous, different and strange, an attitude that has existed in the imaginations of Europeans for eons; the *Magisterial*, which refers to India during the Raj and sees India as rather primitive and crude, yet still the staging ground for British action, and, finally, the *Curatorial*, that collection of different and disparate attitudes to India which all regard the nation as special and difficult to classify and exhibit.\(^{12}\)

The vampire can be understood as embodying and combining Sen’s exoticist and curatorial approaches, as he makes his way around the mega-city of Delhi, trying to make sense of and indeed classify the strange, different and possibly uniquely local of this part of India. But he also sees India as the staging ground for his blood fest, for his neo-colonial project, and as such, he may even be said to reveal a magisterial bent. Yet, as we have seen, what he cannot understand is that the masses of Indians whom he devours do not put up a fight, as any Western victim would do, at least in his experience. Such behaviour – such local passive resistance agency perhaps – does not make sense and refuses to be neatly labelled in any of the categories with which the vampire approaches India. If the vampire had more knowledge of Indian cultural and political history, he would perhaps have seen a certain similarity between that passive resistance and Sen’s celebration of the argumentative Indian, embodied in a tradition of heterodoxy, reason and argument. The term argumentative encompasses for Sen a set of meanings – to argue, quarrel, discuss, prove, reason, persuade – all of which substantiate that particular tradition that is reflected in such illustrious figures as Tagore, Gandhi, Nehru, Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, and perhaps, on a more grass root level, in the masses whom the vampire encounters, who refuse to act in accordance with an externally imposed script, the script of subaltern victimisation and powerlessness. But the vampire does not posses such sophisticated knowledge it seems, and it is only with the help of a go-between that his rigid attitude is forced to undergo a kind of rewiring and possibly even a complete readjustment of the vampire’s self-understanding.

In order to survive, as it were, in the dazzling new-ness of the third world mega-city, the vampire must become de-territorialised. Or perhaps re-territorialised, considering Pollidori’s point about the vampire tale’s origins in the East, unspecified though that particular location is in his story. The vampire has to abandon the system of European monotheism that produced him; yet he cannot exist outside that system, and remain the same. He must renounce his life script, which has hitherto sustained him well enough, because in the new territory the old life script no longer stands him in good stead. I use life script in the sense that K. Anthony Appiah applies the concept, as descriptive of ‘large collective identities’ that encompass notions of a how ‘a proper person of that kind behaves’; such ‘modes of behaviour’ or ‘loose norms or models’ shape specific kinds of collective identities. Such life scripts, Appiah continues, can be seen as ‘narratives that people can use in shaping their life plans and in telling their life stories.’\(^{13}\) The vampire discovers, as a result of his dialogue with Cindy in the hotel lobby, that the vampire script turns out to be too tight and confining.

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\(^{12}\) Sen 139-160.

for life outside the austere monotheism of the West, and for him as an individual vampire who has left and possibly transcended the known world of the large collective identity of ‘European vampire’. Indeed, if he wants to do justice to his own personal narrative and to survive again, as it were, he has to violate the traditional vampire script, and embrace the superabundance of Indian polytheism. He has to be willing to celebrate what Bill Ashcroft calls ‘one of the most exciting features of cultural globalisation’: ‘the strategic capacity to adopt and adapt a world language … for the purposes of self representation.’\(^\text{14}\) I see language here as a broad category, that includes culture and faith. In other words, the vampire must learn to speak a new language, the potentially liberating language of globalisation.

Although the short story began with an arrival scene, it does not end with a departure scene. That would have been a too austere ending, too minimalist and final. And too conclusive for a story that indulges in excessive question marks – some thirty over the course of five pages. Instead the vampire, less suave and blasé than when we first met him, ponders the possibility of going native, and in the process becoming, as Salman Rushdie would perhaps put it, a translated monster, both losing and gaining something in the process. He has realised that the binary between West and East is not insurmountable, that it can be deconstructed and played around with through the work of the imagination. He has discovered that the disturbing scent of lack of fear can be interpreted as uniquely local, wedded to plurality, but not in an exclusive, nationalistic way. By giving up what he has been taught is his cultural specificity of Western vampirism and embracing what Cindy pictures as the uniquely local abundance of possibilities, he can, if he wants to, embrace the hope with which the story ends, the hope of ‘better luck next time’ in the constant recycling of lives and possibilities (19). If the vampire responds to this possibility, as Cindy seems to have done, he would also swap the old for the new, and in that process of cultural translation, Padmanabhan illuminates the changing power structures that Dipesh Chakrabarty has identified as the provincialising of Europe. But perhaps it is not that easy. For a story that relies on uncertainty and question marks to drive the plot, it also appropriately ends with one. The vampire’s last question reads: ‘Hope for what?’ (19). Cindy’s answer about better luck next time is her answer, and not the vampire’s, and perhaps not the story’s. His journey (physical and mental) and his future remain unresolved.

Chakrabarty suggests that ‘European thought is at once both indispensable and inadequate in helping to think thorough the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations, and provincializing Europe becomes the task of exploring how this thought … may be renewed from and for the margins.’\(^\text{15}\) For Chakrabarty, there is no brutal severance with Europe, but rather a link with the West. This is not unlike Arjun Appadurai’s suggestion that ‘for the former colony, decolonisation is a dialogue with the colonial past, and not a simple dismantling of colonial habits and modes of life.’\(^\text{16}\) This kind of dialogue, which may however be seen by some as a kind of complicity, prepares the way for globalisation and a new kind of modernity, shaped by, if we are

\(^{14}\) Ashcroft, *Caliban’s Voice* 15.


to believe Appadurai, the movement of people and the work of the imagination. By
the work of the imagination – ‘a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity’ –
Appadurai includes the mental work which functions as a link between past, present
and future and between here and there and who you were and what you are becoming.
The imagination is thus a staging ground for action and escape, linked as it is with
motion and migration. 17 Although the story has little to say about the notion of
modernity, the scenario it offers and the allegorical way in which one may read it
lends itself to such popular ideas. If we put our vampire into this schema of globalised
modernity, we can then see how towards the end of the story he seems to become part
of what Appadurai calls an ethnoscape:

the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live:
tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups
and individuals constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect
the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree. 18

Might the ethnoscape also make room for a vampire in transition? Appadurai’s
elaboration on ethnoscapes opens up for just such a thought: ‘As groups migrate,
regroup in new locations, reconstruct their histories, and reconfigure their ethnic
projects, the ethno in ethnography takes on a slippery, nonlocalized quality.’ 19 The
vampire travels to India, a journey which seems to become a kind of migration; he
regroups with Cindy in what is for him personally a new location and he reconstructs
his history and personal project with her help. Via the go-between Cindy, he is given
the possibility to engage in that dialogue between old and new, the West and the East,
being and becoming (Appadurai’s work of the imagination) and this potentially opens
up for a transcultural transformation and liberating de-territorialisation as it reveals
how the ethno – which, according to the Collins English Dictionary refers to race,
people or culture – becomes increasingly slippery, transcultural and translocal.

Whereas the story began with the vampire as a European figure it ends on a less
certain note. Is he still European? Is he becoming Indian? Is that possible within the
narrative confines of this story? What is the uniquely local? The story does not
provide answers in the way that Cindy does, and so we are left with both answers and
questions that we slip and slide between. Cindy’s answers leave room for excess, and
she figures excess as life-giving and full of possibilities for continued growth. The
story, however, does not tell us how the vampire fares in such circumstances!

Indeed, this on-the-surface modest and simple short story is in my playful and
allegorical reading interpreted as a fictional exploration of Rana Dasgupta’s
prediction that ‘the 21st century belongs to the fertile chaos of the third-world
metropolis’ with its ‘alternative vision of modernity’. 20 In ‘maximum cities’ such as
New Delhi we find a ‘fecund ecology’ and ‘a strange and dazzling hypermodernity

17 Appadurai 3, 7.
18 Appadurai 33.
19 Appadurai 48.
http://www.newstatesman.com/200603270031
that bewilders Western understanding’.\textsuperscript{21} It is the same vision Aravind Adiga’s protagonist, the argumentative Indian Balram, in his 2008 novel \textit{The White Tiger}, delineates in his letters to the Premier of China:

> Out of respect for the love of liberty shown by the Chinese people, and also in the belief that the future of the world lies with the yellow man and the brown man now that our erstwhile master, the white-skinned man, has wasted himself through buggery, mobile phone usage, and drug abuse … Don’t waste your money on those American books. They’re so \textit{yesterday}. I am \textit{tomorrow}.

Like Dasgupta’s and Adiga’s tongue-in-cheek predictions, Padmanabhan’s story ‘Feast’ also illustrates memorably how such bewildering excess throws notions of what is uniquely local and culturally specific into crisis, but simultaneously how such transcultural confusion paves the way for new and unexpected ways of living and thinking in the twenty-first century, and for new ways of thinking about globalised living.

\textsuperscript{21} Dasgupta ‘Maximum’. It is interesting to ponder how ideas about excess and fecundity are recycled. Disparaging comments on excess recur time and again in colonial discourses about the (former) colonies, yet at the same time excess is also characteristic of the kind of modernity found in the Caribbean that Paul Gilroy identifies in \textit{The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness} (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1993). Excess is thus a feature of early modernity as well as the specific hypermodernity located in twenty-first century mega-cities in the former colony of India. And in both configurations – early modern excess and hypermodern excess – European descriptions are characterised by a certain scepticism and even distaste, and show a reluctance to embrace the potential creativity inherent in such surplus.