1. Patrick White and Late Modernity

This essay contends that the Australian novelist Patrick White (1912-1990) presents, in his novel The Solid Mandala (1966), a prototypical evocation of late modernity that indicates precisely why and how it was different from the neoliberal and postmodern era that succeeded it. Late modernity is currently emerging as a historical period, though still a nascent and contested one. Robert Hassan speaks of the 1950-1970 era as a period which, in its ‘Fordist’ mode of production maintained a certain conformity yet held off the commoditisation of later neoliberalism’s ‘network-driven capitalism’.¹ This anchors the sense of ‘late modernity,’ that will operate in this essay, though my sense of the period also follows on definitions of the term established, in very different contexts, by Edward Lucie-Smith and Tyrus Miller.²

Late modernity as understood in this piece is composed of two key aspects. One is the dominance of the innovative, labyrinthine Modernist aesthetics developed in the previous generation – the generation born in the late nineteenth century, that of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and, most important for White’s text, T.S. Eliot – and inherited by the second-generation modernists, writers like White who were born in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The other is the political predominance of welfare state models and a strong public sector that provided significant employment. These two aspects are contrasted with the era of neoliberalism of the postmodern era (roughly 1970 and after) that in this light is seen not just as an issue of certain conservative, free-market political parties gaining electoral dominance in the Anglophone world, but as aligned with models of what Zygmunt Bauman has called ‘liquid modernity’ and Ulrich Beck has labelled ‘risk society’.³ Late modernity, as defined here, is that era which precedes liquid modernity and risk society and which proffers at least an ideal of social security and egalitarianism that the later formulations lack.

It is not claimed that the fictional styles of the two eras emanated from the socio-political orientation in a vulgar, base-superstructure manner; but it is contended that there can be meaningful and heuristic homologies between the two, as J.M. Bernstein has suggested in his phrase ‘rationalized modernity’.⁴ Of course, to historicise late modernity presents a paradox. To historicise a mentality that claimed history no longer mattered, is more of a challenge than to historicise a period like Romanticism, which already admits history in its self-construction. In turn, the very method of historicisation is an effect of a postmodern viewpoint, and in a sense is a

token of the epistemological irrecuperability of the late modernity it at least effectively seeks to reclaim. This is one of the many cognitive quandaries with which the twenty-first-century examination of late modernity – and of Patrick White’s fictions of it – must contend.

These issues of periodisation indeed present many pitfalls. When dealing with the near past, people of different generations have different perspectives upon not only the nature of the near past but its degree of proximity; the very idea of a near past implies some people still living for which that past is still a part of active memory and therefore not securely ‘the past’ as it is for younger people; therefore, not only has there not been time for there to be a consensus about the period, but not everybody may have the perceptual distance to see it as a period. Moreover, although this essay will proceed from the assumption that the social welfare policies of the 1950-1970 era are, in general terms, desirable ones in social and moral terms, inevitably no constitution of temporality can be either totally utopian or totally elegiac. Although this essay will contend that White’s suburban, Sarsaparilla fiction, largely written in and set in the 1960s, reflects certain virtues of its period, it cannot be denied that the succeeding period had virtues not only for Australia and the world but for White himself. Even as, in the 1970s and 1980s, a more free-market attitude towards economics began to gain prominence, so did more open attitudes towards homosexuality and a greater sympathy towards multiculturalism, important for White and this novel because of the themes of Judaism and homosexuality seen therein and analysed in part three of this essay.

Moreover, there are certain aspects of periodisation specific to Australia that come into play here. During the entire 1950-70 period of late modernity, Australia was governed by the conservative policies of the Anglophile (Sir) Robert Menzies and his successors. Moreover, this era is often perceived as one of cultural ossification and stasis, broken only by the liberating plunge taken by the poetic generation of ‘68. The more sophisticated and globally connected Australia of the following era might seem to many to be the product of an almost totally beneficial change from the more cloistered and peripheral atmosphere of the earlier time.

None of this is untrue, though under Menzies’s premiership Australia – the ‘Lucky Country’ in Donald Horne’s famous phrase – maintained a considerable welfare state in ways surely not endorsed by twenty-first century inheritors of his partisan mantle. But this essay, in line with the recent transnational turn in Australian studies, asks the reader to see the specific changes in Australia as not just national in portent but as part of a larger global turn from a paradigm largely centred on the welfare state and the public sector providing employment to a paradigm governed by (to use Beck’s term) ‘risk society’. In ‘risk society,’ the paradigmatic class is composed of people subject to risks beyond their control (and not controlled for them by the state), people whom Guy Standing and Gerald Raunig have labelled ‘the precariat’. Moreover, neoliberalism is here seen not just as a specific public policy platform of certain partisan interests, which can be ignored by the litterateur at their convenience, but as an all-pervasive mode that affects wholesale existing mentalities and states of cognition. It is this essay’s contention that Waldo Brown and his brother

Arthur, the co-protagonists of *The Solid Mandala*, are people who, in the late modern paradigm, however tormented and limited their lives are in individual terms, are provided a firm social foundation by their polity, and that this is an important factor in comprehending the novel and their place in it. The Browns are not part of ‘the precariat’ in White’s novel because there is not yet any precariat. Indeed, the lack of risk in their lives, their plodding routine, is one of the factors that particularly frustrated the would-be self-dramatist in Waldo.

When White wrote his major fiction, he could not have anticipated the late twentieth-century rise of a revitalised capitalism and rhetoric of unfettered globalisation that we have come to call neoliberalism. Yet in writing of his own time, with necessary ignorance of the future, White was startlingly able (for a writer so often discussed as private, hermetic, or deliberately cut off from society) to diagnose its characteristic features. White’s sense of his own era, late modernity, is shown in *The Solid Mandala*.

Waldo Brown, the frustrated writer, ‘spiteful intellectual’, and all-around sadist in *The Solid Mandala*, is in an intellectual position not far from what late modernity (here meaning the period roughly from 1945 to 1960) imagined itself as being.7 Equipped with all the intellectual resources in the world, working in a Library that with its capital L and its lack of geographic inflection (*The Library*, not ‘The Mitchell Library’ or ‘The Sydney Municipal Library’) could as well be Jorge Luis Borges’s Library of Babel, or André Malraux’s *musée imaginaire*.8 Waldo, qua his being a librarian, can see everything, but cannot innovate himself; he is an *idiot savant* who manages to hold down a marginal job in a secure but constricted environment, a cognitive equivalent of the novel’s dominant thoroughfare – Terminus Road, where, as Brigid Rooney puts it, ‘beginnings turn into ends, and ends turn into beginnings.’9

*The Solid Mandala*, even before Arthur’s presumed incarceration in a lunatic asylum after his killing of his brother, is rife with images of imprisonment and enclosure. Waldo prizes his ‘rock crystal’ temperament (*SM* 81).10 Arthur ‘chokes’ (*SM* 135) his love for Mrs Poulter because of society’s expectations. Waldo feels he and Arthur cannot ‘escape’ (*SM* 77) from each other. The library itself is a kind of prison. The ‘Zeitgeist’ to which the observer-figure Mrs Poulter is contrasted at the novel’s end is a Max Weber-style ‘iron cage’, a rationalistic enmeshment in which society as a whole functions seamlessly yet any dialectic of further development is held at a standstill. After 1970, postmodernity and then neoliberalism reauthorized agency, so that what was in an odd way the comforting paralysis of late modernity seems to have snapped. As David Harvey puts it, after that point even ostensibly progressive nongovernmental organisations were ‘actively neoliberal, engaging in

7 See David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life* (New York: Viking, 1990) 469 (henceforth abbreviated as PW). Though Miller’s *Late Modernism* uses the literary term ‘modernism’ and not the periodic term ‘modernity’, and addresses a slightly earlier period than is the focus here, Miller’s sense of the mode as encompassing both anticlimax and reconsideration is very close to that expounded herein, as is the earlier study of Lucie-Smith.

8 Charles Caramello shows the privileged role of libraries in late modern self-referential fiction – spurred on of course by Borges himself being a librarian.


privatisation of state welfare functions'.\textsuperscript{11} Global capitalism, the desiccation of the welfare state and the very idea of a social welfare economy, may be only one aspect of a postmodern climate which has also seen important advances in gender and sexual equality, multicultural empowerment, and the questioning of Eurocentrism – all objectives White, as seen in his late anti-nuclear and pro-Aboriginal political activism, would have favoured.

Yet the world White portrays in his books, however satirically, also reflects an assumption that social welfare systems and publicly funded institutions relying on tax-generated revenue would function as a background to his characters’ lives, visionary or sceptical, innocent or calculating, dreamers or plodders. Gelder and Salzman describe White as a ‘Left-liberal’\textsuperscript{12} White assumed reflexively, as did everyone who lived in advanced Western democracies in his era, that there would be a mixed economy between the public and private sectors. Someone like Waldo could work in a public institution, in a facility run for the benefit of all of society and financed by publicly generated tax revenue. White may have, as his biographer David Marr suggests, have had contempt of such ‘public servant scribblers’ as Waldo instilled in him by his mother, Ruth Withycombe, from an early age, but, both in Ruth’s era and her son’s, the public sector was able to employ people who were given enough of a sense of a station in life to have literary aspirations, however misplaced. The latter-day precariat inevitably finds the ground here less stable. Certainly, in the era of liquid modernity and risk society, this assumption was imperilled, and a novelist writing forty or fifty years later could not assume that their characters could find work in such a publicly financed facility, as so many of them had their budgets eliminated and their very rationale questioned in light of neoliberal assumptions that only enterprises which sought or generate profit were worthwhile.

This political context, ironically, may make today’s world more able to comprehend this novel than its original audience. \textit{The Solid Mandala} was in White’s view perhaps his ‘best book’.\textsuperscript{13} It was the only one of his books that White consistently ranked highly that was published in the central phase of his career, from 1950 to 1975. But \textit{The Solid Mandala} has not been one of his most popular books, during its time or afterward. Laurence Steven is representative when he calls it a ‘lesser work’.\textsuperscript{14} Many who do not share Steven’s explicitly moral perspective have explicitly or tacitly echoed this judgment. Its critical reception has bogged down in an overly dyadic consideration of the two twin brothers: Waldo bad, Arthur good. This is manifestly right on the most literal level. No reader will find Waldo more sympathetic than Arthur.

But a purely dyadic reading is limiting when it comes to deeper interpretive issues. David Tacey’s 1988 book pierced through many of the pieties surrounding the Brown brothers’ dyad, but at the cost of rejecting the book \textit{in toto} and seeing it as insincere. Tacey indeed castigated White as a sham artist.\textsuperscript{15} But Tacey had the

\textsuperscript{11} David Harvey, \textit{The Enigma of Capital And the Crisis of Capitalism} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 253.
\textsuperscript{14} Laurence Steven, \textit{Dissociation and Wholeness in Patrick White’s Fiction} (Waterloo, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989) 12.
\textsuperscript{15} David Tacey, \textit{Fiction and the Unconscious} (Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1988).
percipience to see that Waldo and Arthur are not just opposed, but conjoined. This is especially true in the way, the socioeconomic circumstances in which they lived together as bachelor brothers through two World Wars and their aftermath. Waldo and Arthur, with all their eccentricities and limitations, manage to eke out lives amid the cloistral banality of Sarsaparilla. The final tragedy is delayed until they are old, until they have lived lives of pathos and deprivation but also real integrity. Waldo and Arthur would have had a different fate as members of the precariat in the go-go metropolises of risk society. In the novel’s plot-level, Waldo represses Arthur. On a meta-level, though, both Arthur and Waldo are simultaneously oppressed and secured by the overall social matrix.

It may well be advisable to read beyond the binary in which Arthur is privileged, and Waldo is denigrated. For one thing, White put so much of himself and his literary situation into Waldo. White made clear that, in Bernadette Brennan’s words, he ‘empathized with outcasts’ (RPW 23), and would not want any one of his own characters bullied or denigrated by critics beyond what they deserve (which in Waldo’s case is admittedly quite a bit); for another, because the contrast between the bad rationalist and the good but damaged sensitive soul is a staple of modernist fiction. For yet another because, though Waldo may tyrannise Arthur in their immediate fraternal relationship, their plight is as much their culture’s as their own.16

It is especially important not to moralise in a binary way in The Solid Mandala where the dual protagonists are, after all, twins. The situation the two Brown brothers have in common is worth as much attention as what separates them. Both siblings are part of the same environment. Their very status as twins means they share a great deal, not just as polarities of archetypal yin and yang but as two very different people embedded, as so many modern subjects were, in the same social context. White’s attitude towards the sterility of Sarsaparilla is both ironic and elegiac. Sarsaparilla is a limited community made tolerable by its very banality, its renunciation of instability, which is at once the constriction of late modernity and the humane realisation of its positive values. Just as late modernity decided the past is nothing worth knowing about, the era of neoliberalism and postmodernity have decided much the same about late modernity, which may be as hard to grasp in its sinew for us as the worlds of Tennyson and Shakespeare were for Waldo in his status as a librarian posing as a literary artist.

Nathanael O’Reilly’s reconsideration of White’s stance towards suburbia prudently sees White as largely anti-suburban.17 Yet it is, O’Reilly argues, White himself who, with George Johnston, effectively founds the Australian tradition of writing about suburbia that eventually incorporates more positive portraits. O’Reilly complicates Simon During’s awareness of the suburban aspect of White by suggesting it was something the author already knew, and did not have to be unearthed in him by external critical analysis.18 Brigid Rooney’s resituating of White in intellectual history succeeds in situating him politically without being reductive or burdening him with too much contextual baggage. Rooney feels that White showed ‘palpable empathy’

17 Nathanael O’Reilly, Between the City and the Bush: Suburbia in Contemporary Australian Fiction, Dissertation, Western Michigan University, 2008.
for the ‘most repressed suburbanites’. 19 Rooney goes on to say that White, in contrast to many of the stereotypes of him, ‘presented himself as someone who valued, identified with, and cared about the ordinary person.’ 20 But his self-portrait in The Solid Mandala seems the furthest extreme from this. Waldo, White states in Flaws in the Glass, is ‘myself at my coldest and worst.’ 21 When a writer makes this sort of admission so manifestly it is striking, but it also most likely denotes there is something more there. That several who knew White described him in this period – before the Nobel Prize, and before his political activism and breaks with most of his closest friends had made him into a very different social entity – as essentially a kind and generous person: not in the least a Waldo. 22 White’s portrayal of himself as a monster has in it an element of theatricality. One might add that this self-castigation of the artist is very late modern, we think of Nabokov’s sense of himself as the parasitic critic Charles Kinbote (and John Shade/Kinbote as a dyad is very much an Arthur/Waldo) or Robert Lowell’s searing self-excavation in ‘The Dolphin.’ This scepticism about the artist is a token of late modernity’s both stifling and enabling attitude towards creativity.

The worlds of both Waldo and his creator, on their different levels, are a combination, perhaps made possible by what A. A. Phillips called ‘the cultural cringe’, of Victorian decorum and propriety with late modern welfare-state egalitarianism. Waldo’s copying out of Tennyson represents late modernity’s sense of working with, and reusing, received paradigms, a sense of the simultaneous exhaustion of creativity and fear of the idea of original creativity somehow incipiently totalitarian. The literary exhaustion and self-irony of the artist was on one level a real response to cultural trauma, on another a deliberate restraint, a shying away from the grandiose and self-confident.

White’s reputation declined after his death partially due to certain circumstances peculiar to himself. Among these was his late public acknowledgment of his own sexuality – and the late development of an Australia in which these aspects of himself could be revealed to the public. 23 Yet, even more, White’s reputation generally declined when late modernity’s reputation declined, and is showing signs of arising now that late modernity is doing the same. It may seem contradictory to say that late modernity is at once irretrievably past and rising to salience. But a period can only come into view when it is concluded. A period’s obsolescence and its historical allure are part of the same moment of awareness, even if largely practised by different constituencies with diverging ideological sympathies. A look back at late modernity can undo neoliberalism’s claims to decisive hegemony.

20 Rooney 38.
22 Personal communication: Vivian Smith, 13 January 2010.
23 In Andrew Clark’s profile of White for New York Times Book Review, although White refers to his own ‘sexual ambivalence,’ Manoly Lascaris is not mentioned, while White’s dogs, a clear parallel to Waldo’s and Arthur’s, are. (‘The Private Patrick White,’ New York Times Book Review, 27 April 1980, 8) That this reticence occurred even after the publication of, and during the promotion of, the avowedly queer Twyborn Affair (1979) shows that it was not until Flaws in the Glass (1981) that White was absolutely declarative about his sexuality and relationships.
This is being seen in twenty-first century work such as that of the British poet Sean O’Brien, with its evocation of the period of the welfare state as decisively in the past. The emergent historicity of late modernity is even more complicated in light of how the very supersession of late modernity was enacted by the postmodern turn to historical settings as constitutive of meaning. This turn is seen even in White’s later historical novel, *A Fringe of Leaves*, and much more overtly in the historical cast of Australian fictions of the next generation such as those of Peter Carey and Roger McDonald. Late modernity bypassed this historical turn. It preferred circularities, obscurities, evocations, and discernments.24

This equation is necessarily double-sided. It cannot be denied that, as seen in White’s own post-1973 work as well as that of other novelists, a revived sense of historical possibility was liberating and opened a door beyond the (ironically, in light of White’s 1958 denunciation of dun-coloured realism) dun-coloured limitations of Sarsaparilla and its late modern present. One of the reasons late modernity has traditionally been so threatening to the postmodern, and, tacitly, to the neoliberal is, as Borges put it in ‘The Library of Babel,’ the certainty that ‘everything has been written annuls us, or renders us phantasmal.’25 Both Waldo and Arthur wish to write a Greek tragedy. Yet neither can ever do so. Waldo has never seen one (a reflection perhaps of the lingering cultural marginality of White’s modernist Sydney). Arthur is so simple as to misunderstand tragedy as any sort of life-and-death, and does not realise that his circumstances are tragic and his brother’s even more so. Overt references to tragedy are not foregrounded. But it is precisely because they are not foregrounded (true also in their father’s reading of Dostoyevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*, which might predict his sons’ fate), that the Brown twins are not aware of the tragic conditions of their lives, that the narrative in which they are encased is late modern and not postmodern.

Postmodernism, or the fictions that flourished in liquid modernity and risk society, tended to involve alternative or anterior discourses that got the writer out of the late modern predicament where ‘there was no personal problem, no world problem, whose eloquent solution did not exist – somewhere in some hexagon’.26 Borges’s paradigm for this late modern pre-emption of all new knowledge was the institution in which Waldo works – the Library.

2. Waldo, Librarianship, and the Welfare State
White’s portrait of Waldo-the-librarian should be considered against what was, by all evidence, his keen interest in libraries, his respect for the values for which they stood and his frequent use of them, and his reliance on those who worked in them – both the Mitchell Library of the State Library of New South Wales (the first library where Waldo works, see PW 450), and the University of Sydney’s Fisher Library report that White was rather frequently in touch with librarians over various reference matters, and, in a pre-digital age, relied on Sydney libraries for research. That White chose to live in metropolitan Sydney meant both that he wanted to be close to amenities such as large research libraries and that he respected the fact that Sydney had developed

24 Of course, White had used historical settings before, as in *Voss*, but here the thrust was symbolic, epistemological, and national, whereas in *A Fringe of Leaves* the perspective was much closer to the self-conscious, historiographic, and reanimative torque of postmodern historical fiction.
26 Borges 150.
these institutions up to an international standard.\textsuperscript{27} This does not mean to say that Patrick White thought all libraries were good, and \textit{ergo} Waldo himself good. Certainly White many times over showed contempt for researchers and academics. But White’s practical interest in libraries does mean we have to re-evaluate the almost automatic assumption among White critics that Waldo’s employment as a librarian means he is a failed artist, a frustrated creator, and that librarians in White’s view are ‘only’ custodians of knowledge, inferior to creators of it. As mentioned before, the trope of the library in the avant-garde productions of late modernity assumes a privileged role. What has been stressed less is how the comprehensiveness of the late modern library in which all knowledge is contained can be likened to the social network of the mid-twentieth-century welfare state, which strove to guarantee equality for all even at the perceived cost of flattening, or insufficiently highlighting, the exceptional.\textsuperscript{28}

The Mitchell Library holds Patrick White’s typewriter – a generic typewriter, of the pre- (short-lived) electric typewriter age. Darren Wershler puts it well when he says, ‘typewriting symbolized all that was antithetical to poetry; it was cold, mechanical, awkward. Now, however … we believe that typewriting is poetry: precise, clean, elegant in its minimalism.’\textsuperscript{29} White’s typewriter, once a generic contemporary implement, becomes with the passage of time and the onrush of new technologies not just a period-piece but iconic of a period, of a style of thought and the mode of transcription that traced it. The Mitchell also houses Patrick White’s desk – capacious yet functional, unadorned by curlicues or frippery, geometric, containing nothing about it that would mark it out as ‘a writer’s desk’. Its top is made of linoleum, a substance particularly and uniquely trendy in the mid-twentieth-century, seeming at that time the latest thing, a less vulnerable, perishable alternative to wood or glass.\textsuperscript{30} One might imagine a less roomy version serving Waldo quite well at the Municipal Library. With a functional, utilitarian white lamp, and with the combination of circular and rectilinear design in the drawers, the desk embodies an adaptation of modernism into the everyday and dependable that was at the heart of what characterized late modernity. Waldo indeed combines two aspects of the twentieth century – an at times anti-humanist, hard-edged mandarinism and a dependence on government funding for employment – which were not often endorsed by the same people, although critics such as Michael Szalay have made suggestive connections between modernism and the welfare state.\textsuperscript{31} White himself, indeed, in his

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{27} John Beston, ‘Patrick White,’ in Nicholas Birns and Rebecca McNeer, eds, \textit{A Companion to Australian Literature Since 1900} (Rochester: Camden House, 2007) 251, says that \textit{The Solid Mandala} is only one of four White novels set totally in metropolitan Sydney. Its Australian setting was sufficiently firm to garner it the Miles Franklin Award.
\item \textsuperscript{28} For a look at Australian library history in the years of the novel’s setting, see J.W. Metcalfe, and W.B. Rayward, \textit{Developing a Profession of Librarianship in Australia}, (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1995). For all the recent interest in the history of the book, publishing history, and distant reading, a sense of libraries as an institution is still somewhat lacking in Australian literary history, especially in the mid-twentieth-century period.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Darren Wershler, \textit{The Iron Whim: A Fragmented History of Typewriting} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007) 8.
\item \textsuperscript{30} I am grateful to Shirley Walker and the staff of the Mitchell Library for permitting me to see the desk when it was not on public display, 13 January 2010.
\end{itemize}

Nicholas Birns. \textit{The Solid Mandala} and Patrick White’s Late Modernity. \textit{Transnational Literature} Vol. 4 no. 1, November 2011.
later years, as a writer who both maintained an affinity to the symbolic and mythic aspects of high modernism yet moved increasingly and visibly to the left politically, was himself a connecting strand between the truncated aestheticism of modernism and the systemic administrative structure of the modern state. Waldo’s life, in both its vocational and artistic dimensions, is at the hub of the twentieth century’s associational forms.

Waldo’s literary aspirations are not mocked as romantic. They are sturdily ascetic and disillusioned in the late-modern mode. Waldo does not use the word ‘silvery’ of his brother’s grey hair ‘out of respect for literature and truth’ (SM 27) in the same way a poet growing up on Eliot and Pound and Hopkins would not. But this hard-edged, anti-subjective asceticism is also, by the time he employs it, a middlebrow truism just as much as late-Victorian sentimentalism had been. It also represents Waldo’s own frustration and rage at his felt mediocrity. As David Tacey puts it, ‘inspiration does not come, or he refuses to allow it to emerge.’ Because Waldo is circumscribed, everybody else must be circumscribed. Aspiration, inventiveness, ingenuity, is not allowed. The world must stand in a kind of static, if secure, gridlock. The name Terminus Road suggests this, as do many representative images in the book, such as ‘regimented boxes which now stand where the trees are cut down’ (SM 148) and the scene where ‘the old men were still fascinated with what they knew, though often overwhelmed by it’ (SM 48). These no-way-out images signal the stasis that characterises this era. Neoliberalism is a dialectical riposte to this complacency. The risk it foregrounds tries to revive a sense of openness in the postmodern subject. But, if late-modernist stasis limits Waldo, postmodern risk has the potential to swallow them entirely. Waldo and Terminus Road are yoked in a context or reinforcing mediocrity. But Waldo can, albeit at an often-miserable emotional level, exist there.

Waldo is a failed artist enmeshed in the mediocrity of his age. But how different is this from White’s successful artists who, at least imaginatively, contend and sometimes prevail over that mediocrity? Waldo’s hatred for everybody is not that far from The Vivisector. In this novel, White presents an artistic mentality that is a deromanticised, ruthless sense of the artist, an artist who takes from rather than gives to the community, is not full of Wordsworthian bounty. But in The Vivisector we are meant to understand that these are sacrifices of his/her own character the artist must make to produce good art. Waldo is not represented as making good art. Instead this Sydney librarian catalogued and envied those who did, such as T. S. Eliot. This is a persistent phenomenon in late modern fiction. Nabokov meant to preveniently mock everyone who reads Pale Fire as being like Kinbote. Yet so many of its readers identified with Shade, who the novel has, in effect, told them they cannot be. Late modern novels tend to emphasise people disconnected from any purpose, leading marginal or half-understood lives, people who like Waldo or Kinbote or Samuel

33 Perhaps we will come closer to understanding Patrick White if we adequately historicise him. The field of Patrick White studies is perhaps the only part of the academic humanities world where Fredric R. Jameson’s admirable injunction to always historicise was not heard; perhaps, belatedly, and admittedly out of sync with the fate of historicism in the broader academic world in the 2000s, an audition of it in terms of White studies may prove heuristic.
34 I am grateful to Peter Mathews for suggestions on this point.

Nicholas Birns. The Solid Mandala and Patrick White’s Late Modernity. Transnational Literature Vol. 4 no. 1, November 2011.
Beckett’s Molloy are indefeasibly outside of their own lives. It takes a certain amount of searing self-knowledge for author and/or reader to recognise themselves in these portraits.

This self-exposure contrasts with the contextual reassurance offered by the enmeshment in historical and political identities that characterises postmodern writers, from Salman Rushdie to Thomas Pynchon to Australian novelists of the generation succeeding White, such as Peter Carey and, in a more realistic vein, Roger McDonald. In turn, though, one can assemble a perhaps slightly jerry-built set of Australian writers who fit a late modern framework, such as Randolph Stow or Elizabeth Harrower, but who, in novels such as Tourmaline (1963) or The Watch Tower (1966; suggested by White as an alternative for the Miles Franklin Award that Mandala won) also feature characters who, whether through prophecy or marginality, manifest charisma. The early Thea Astley might also come in here, especially in following White’s ability to set books in Australia while ‘breaking away successfully from Australian imagery’. In The Acolyte (1972) Astley is curiously sceptical about charismatic appeals in a way analogous to a Harrower who sees no charismatic alternative at all to a cruelly material world or the White of Solid Mandala who sees charisma as boxed in by the stifling security of late-modern paralysis. The poetry of Francis Webb, whose self-aware, denuded, histrionic-parodic late romanticism, especially as recently elucidated by Toby Davidson and Bernadette Brennan, is a far more eloquent parallel to Waldo Brown’s, also fits into this sort of paradigm. From another angle, so does the modernist architecture of Harry Seidler, often attacked for the seeming hostility of his Europe-influenced modernism to Australian tradition, but whose many building designs provided the foundation for a distinctly Sydney modernist idiom. All Australian writing of this period does not fit the paradigm, of course. Some is still overtly nationalistic in a way that sidesteps the question of modernity. Furthermore, the consciously classicising poetry of A.D. Hope, the overtly religious verse of James McAuley and Vincent Buckley, and the fictions of the young Thomas Keneally who, though writing with the example of White in mind, already saw history as a field on inquiry in a way that a late modern paradigm would not. But this congeries of writers – the Sarsaparilla-era White, Stow, Harrower, early Astley, Webb – presents a suggestive, even if not determinative, conjunction.

And this conjunction was paralleled by not just the material socioeconomic conditions – a redistributive welfare state – but a particular set of assumptions about normality and eccentricity that were endemic to that period. It might be asked why Waldo Brown is so much a figure of this era, why such a nasty yet withal admirably idiosyncratic figure could not huddle beneath the glittering arcades of neoliberalism much as, in allegorical and fantastic form, similar figures to do in the work of a neo-Marxist like China Miéville. One might answer with the Michel Foucault of Les mots et les choses that the normativities and eccentricities of a given era or episteme are cognitively yoked. Somebody like Waldo might have been an outsider, but was the sort of outsider enabled by the systematic ironies and formal circularities of the modernist-welfare state era, whose homologies have been limned by critics such as

---

35 As treatments like that of P. M. St. Pierre, Janet Frame: Semiotics and Biosemiotics in Her Early Fiction (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011) have argued, the early work of Janet Frame, if the entire dynamic were extended to New Zealand, could well be included within this rubric.
36 Lucie-Smith 142.

Michael Szalay. Thus Waldo’s pain, and that he inflicts on others, is implicated and sinuously authorised by the presiding institutional mentality of his era. Waldo was miserable, tormented and tormenting. But he at least had a job in a respectable institution, an entity devoted to knowledge and learning, a library supported by the state. Waldo did not excel there. He did not make friends there. He was neither nurtured by others nor nurtured them there. But he held down a job and coped with his disappointments and limitations for the greater portion of a lifetime. His identity is enmeshed in the overall social matrix.

Waldo was not, as depicted by White, a part of what was later termed the precariat. He was not, in his employment or financial situation, subjected to the risks of an ever-churning, relentlessly mobile global neo-capitalism with no sense either of the responsibility to provide public benefices like libraries or to provide the employment offered by such non-profit institutions. Arthur also has, for most of his life, a stable if unglamorous context. Arthur was ‘inclined to use’ (White 1966: 270) the library too, as a patron, not an employee. Through this use, he found inspiration and comfort there. Arthur is taken care of and is able to function in the world. Arthur is not institutionalised. He lives among people with whom he can at least seek satisfying relationships. What if there was no library, if an information science centre, a series of Internet terminals, replaced it with the few remaining book depositories possessing offering shortened and intermittent hours? What if Waldo himself had no option but to work at a department store or convenience store, being the kind of dignified man the customer always sees at such places, and wonders why he does not have a better job? What if Arthur were institutionalised in a mental hospital not at sixty-five but at twenty, put in a place itself no doubt underfunded by tax cuts and budget cuts, suffering from a waning sense that the weakest in society should be cared for, that the comfort of the mentally ill is not the highest priority of liquid modernity, of risk society? J.D. Scott, who reviewed the book for the New York Times Book Review on February 13, 1966, called the Browns ‘lower-middle-class’ and ‘not well-educated’ and says they live ‘obscure, limited, sad-seeming lives.’

But at least they have something. Would risk society offer them anything more than does the welfare state?

What Andrew McCann sees as the colonial aspects of suburbia in White – annealing time – also, though, anneal the forces of inequality that the socioeconomic equations of late modernity held temporarily in check. The very circularity of The Solid Mandala is late-modern. One can come in at any moment and be somewhere in the middle of the narrative. There is egalitarianism to it. This circularity furthermore renders it hard for the society to reject anyone, to leave someone abjectly outside the circle. Waldo leaves the first library in a huff, and his departure is welcome to those who work with him. But he finds a job at another one. Not with the highest recommendations. But a job is a job. The library is a place that takes in Waldo in. It

---


keeps him off the street. This is necessary because Waldo, though better off at
keeping up the appearance of ‘normality’ than Arthur, is at his core as unable to
function in ‘the real world’ as is his twin, and is to boot without his twin’s endearing
vulnerability. But White pities him for it. For the sundering of inspiration from
manifest circumstances is, in White’s implied view, the condition of the renunciation
of cognitive unity that late modernity is forced – and forces itself – to make.

3. Judaism, Homosexuality, Twinship: Cultural Contradictions of Late
Modernity
Yet White’s novel also concerns another aspect of late modernity. This is the
situation of social and sexual minorities, and particularly the nature of identity in an
egalitarian society that has not yet fully come to terms with difference, and a world
whose acknowledgment of the Holocaust has not overcome the obduracy of lingering
anti-Semitic prejudice. Waldo and Arthur are, jointly, the rejected suitor of the
Jewish-Australian woman, Dulcie Feinstein. The key word here is jointly. This is
masked by what is manifestly Dulcie’s disdain of Waldo (who she meets as a
teenager) after he has shown her his inability to love, and her contrasting affection for
and encouragement of Arthur. Arthur secretly sees Dulcie even after she has rejected
Waldo and married her fellow practising Jew, the carpet-dealer Leonard Saporta.
Saporta is himself very much a lower middle class yet economically viable figure
characteristic of late modernity. He is a man who owns his own independent small
business and offers his customers personal service. The novel means to depict him
positively, and the happiness of the Saporta household is an important exception to
Simon During’s assertion that White thought ‘modern society – especially in its
Australian form – was too dependent on the modern heterosexual family, and on life
as lived in family houses.’

Yet as happy as the Saporta marriage is, and as much as the
Saportas find the contentment within late modernity that has eluded Waldo and
Arthur, memories of the Brown twins linger. Dulcie names her second son by Saporta
‘Arthur’, which fact she reveals to Waldo in their devastating ‘Encounter’ on Pitt
Street. By naming the baby Arthur, the Saportas reveal their admiration for Arthur
Brown’s sensitivity and talent and their scorn for Waldo’s brutality and lack of
feeling. There is a religious aspect here. The Saportas are represented as observant
Jews, and their shared religious practice anchors their stable and happy marriage. But
the presence of Arthur in their lives also adds an extramural, esoteric, mystical aspect
to their faith – what the reader of Riders in the Chariot might call a Himmelfarb-Strand.

‘Saporta’ is a Sephardic name present in thirteenth-century Spain, as is, in the
Jewish community there, the first name ‘Dulcie’. It should be pointed out that,
unlike Dulcie’s maiden name, Feinstein, a German-Yiddish, Ashkenazic surname
immediately recognizable as ‘Jewish,’ only those with special knowledge would read

39 During 49.
40 Pitt Street is also where the weeping man in Les Murray’s ‘An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow’
hurries along ‘evading believers’. Murray, The Vernacular Republic (Sydney: Angus and Robertson,
1976) 30.
74; Menachem M. Breyer, The Jewish Woman in Rabbinical Literature (Jersey City: KTAV, 2003)
104.
‘Saporta’ as Jewish. Indeed ‘Saporta’ would be more likely be seen as Spanish or Italian. Any surname ending in an ‘o’ or an ‘a’ is often seen by the English-speaking or lay public as Spanish or Italian, as of the Latin, Roman Catholic Mediterranean or its diasporas. This is a fate that sometimes occurs even with the Irish name Costello, the Scottish name Pattullo, the Welsh name Latta and so on. By using ‘Saporta,’ White is linking the Saportas to a tradition of Mediterranean mysticism that also perhaps faintly evokes the Greek Orthodox Christianity of White’s partner Manoly Lascaris, conclusively established by the account of Vrasidas Karalis – whose defined faith White could not share, but which he admired. A similar admiration is shown for the Saportas’ Judaism, there they are not the ‘free-thinking Jews’ whom T.S. Eliot (whose ‘Waste Land’ is alluded to en passant in the title Waldo’s unfinished late-modern Bildungsroman entitled Tiresias A Youngish Man) thought it ‘undesirable’ to stock the ideal commonwealth with, though White would not have minded the latter either, as is shown in his positive if tragic portrait of Dulcie’s optimistic, secular, ‘neat-and-tidy rationalist’ father (SM 148). Both the Saportas’ Judaism and Lascaris’s Greek Orthodoxy and Byzantine ancestry stem from a Mediterranean world that, as Roberto Dainotto points out, was marginalised by a later centring of ‘European’ identity in northern Europe, away from the contact zone of the Mediterranean where divisions between East and West were not so secure.

Thus the child Arthur Saporta combines the mythic majesty of the legendary Celtic King with the hybridity and métissage of the Mediterranean (African-Asian-European) oikoumene. The younger Arthur takes the Brown twin dyad and renders it multicultural in the next generation. Yet that is only some of the valence of the Saportas’ second child being named ‘Arthur.’ Part of what Dulcie is admitting in naming the male baby ‘Arthur’ – part of the embarrassment she feels in saying this in front of both her husband and Waldo on Pitt Street – is that ‘Arthur’ as a name alludes, yes, not to Waldo, but to a male contemporary of Dulcie’s other than Leonard Saporta.

Despite the happiness of her marriage, Dulcie’s sense of what is available in life among the opposite sex is not totally exhausted by Saporta’s presence. Indeed, not only Arthur but also Waldo has been acknowledged in her relationship with Saporta. That the younger Arthur is the second Saporta child bolsters the idea of twinship. On the narrative level, Dulcie only knows Arthur because she knows Waldo. On the structural level, we know Arthur and Waldo are two aspects of one mandala. As Carolyn Bliss puts it, we know that Waldo knows Arthur is ‘part of himself’. Indeed, the readerly preference for Arthur over Waldo, the discovery we think we make from seeing the two brothers tell their stories sequentially one after another – that Arthur is a saint and Waldo a monster –, is just the reading the Saportas give, even though Arthur makes it clear he thinks of Dulcie as much and in the same manner as Waldo does.

This is, once again, not to defend Waldo per se. He is elitist, wants to avoid contact with humanity, and is self-deluded. Yet Waldo does genuinely aspire to be

---

42 Vrasidas Karalis, Recollections of Mr Manoly Lascaris (Blackheath: Brandl and Schlesinger, 2008).
45 Carolyn Bliss, Patrick White and the Paradox of the Fortunate Fall (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986) 115.

someone who could love and marry Dulcie, even if that aspiration is revealed to be self-delusion. Waldo hopes, when he courts Dulcie, that marriage to her will enable him to write ‘the novel of psychological relationships in a family’ (SM 142), a wry comment not only on those critics who castigated White himself for not doing so but an assertion that Waldo wishes to escape from his immurement in the non-reproductive, sterile ironies of late modernity – the same ironies that protect and secure his limited life. Waldo is a prisoner of his own paradoxes, and encourages identification as much as contempt. This can only, inevitably, go a short way.

As Gordon Collier points out, even though Waldo treats Dulcie as the great love of his life and her marriage to Leonard Saporta – and the mortifying encounter with the married Saportas in Pitt Street – as the symbolic epitome of all his unfulfillment, he was nonetheless never particularly that nice to Dulcie when he knew her. Indeed, as Collier asserts, Waldo has rejected her ‘mentally on covertly anti-Semitic grounds’.46 White, by comparison, is notably philo-Semitic. This is perhaps the largest overt difference between himself and his bitter self-portrait as Waldo. Waldo would like to look on mid-century egalitarianism from a superior, cultured, haute-bourgeois vantage point. He has, though, neither the money, the ancestry, nor the social status to do this. In this, he is very different from Miss Hare in Riders, whose sense of superiority to those around her and conviction that she has been slighted by the world is ballasted by her spirituality and the sense of difference it gives her. Waldo wants to be like this, but cannot. He is too flawed. But the pathos of his wanting to be such a person excites our empathy, if not necessarily our aspiration, enough to make us wonder what sort of social tableau might sustain such a figure through most of a life.47

In so many ways, The Solid Mandala is the hidden twin to Riders in the Chariot. It is about the discontented who are not visionaries, and just as Waldo is an inverted negative of Miss Hare so is Leonard Saporta (and so are the entire Feinstein family) that of Himmelfarb – Saporta, an unashamed but unsecularised Jew is a median-point between Rosetree and Himmelfarb, the two Jews in Riders. Saporta, much like Joyce’s Leopold Bloom but unlike Himmelfarb, is not an outsider just because he is a Jew. He is an ordinary, law-abiding citizen of an Anglophone commonwealth. Yet Saporta is also the ordinary analogue of Himmelfarb, the same way Waldo is of Miss Hare. Neither Saporta nor his one-time rival for Dulcie’s affections are tzaddikim. They are closer to antitypical Jewish identities such as the nebbish or the schlemiel – the person who is nobody special. Or that society says is nobody special.

Gregory Graham-Smith has recently focused on the queer valences of the Browns’ twinship, the way they do not represent an androgynous symbolic unity but ‘the transgressive and resistant agency of social and sexual knowledge’ (RPW 178). Despite White’s own admission that the twins’ relationship was patterned in a sense after his own with Manoly Lascaris, and despite another sense in which the Browns are two aspects of the artist himself, the thwarted heterosexual aspirations of the duet towards Dulcie Feinstein Saporta show an alignment between Judaism and

---

47 This is not to say that the novel is not patterned and symbolic like so many of White’s, but it does so in the service of a realistic, not a metaphysical, tableau.
homosexuality – as invisible minorities either singled out for persecution or mocked for their lack of social centrality and vigour in a racially and sexually essentialist society. Both Judaism and homosexuality also offer concrete non-normative identities that are not dependent on an esoteric sense of being special for distinction. But society’s estimation of their mediocrity may only be a mode of defence against the potential instability they introduce. George Steiner has said ‘Judaism and homosexuality (most intensely where they overlap, as in the case of a Proust or a Wittgenstein) can be seen to have been the two main generators of the entire fabric and savour of urban modernity’.

The Saportas’ highly familial and heteronormative practice of Judaism – away from any sense of rootless cosmopolitanism or bohemian experimentation that might seem to align it with the stereotypical traits of gay life at the time – seems very different than the twins’ implied or allegorized homosexuality (viz. Marr’s terming of Waldo as a ‘closeted homosexual’, PW 449). Yet both Judaism and homosexuality constitute corners of minority practice that flourish even within the standardising mesh of late modernity. In era of liquid modernity and risk society, with its greater tolerance for identity politics and the emphasis on minority rights as the chief vehicle of resistance that went hand in hand for better or for worse, the relationship might have seemed more obvious. The change of the proletariat into the precariat did have the side effect of increasing diversity. But White is demonstrating that late modernity as well as postmodernity had its own sort of diversity. Furthermore, White uses the symbolic potential of naming to show how even the standardised but withal reassuring world of the welfare state can reach out to other possibilities, even if they are marginalised.

‘Waldo’ as a name in the twentieth century may have sounded parodic and unglamorous (PW 449 reveals White took the name from a fellow undergraduate at Cambridge who he despised); but the name has far deeper roots than this, going further back even than the middle name of Ralph Waldo Emerson, or Waldo Farber in Olive Schreiner’s The Story of an African Farm (1883) which White knew and respected, and which supplied the epigraph to The Aunt’s Story. Going back further, Peter Waldo, the late twelfth century southern French heretic, championed an asceticism that challenged the opulence of Catholic conformity, and the church classified him and his followers as heretics like the Albigensians. Waldo’s name-antecedent springs up at the same time, and just across the Pyrenees, from Saporta’s. These speculative tracings are not intended as mere quellenforschungen or trivia. They are indications of how late modernity at once hinders access to the past by boxing it up in the reliable circularity of the library but also permitting, through its striated mesh, some hints of historicity and reference. These hints are all the more valuable for being hints and not full-fledged substrates, as they would be in postmodern historical fiction such as Carey’s or McDonald’s. The sources of the names in the book are nuggets to be found in the library, not sustaining or animating bases for a larger and, for better or for worse, more transformative cognition. But, even as nuggets, they resonate meaningfully in the Library’s framework of knowledge.

---

48 George Steiner, George Steiner at the New Yorker ed. Robert Boyers (New York: New Directions, 2009) 34.

As a late modern public librarian, Waldo Brown is at once master and captive of the printed book, processor of knowledge yet also captive of it. This is yet another proof that Arthur is right when he says of his twin brother: ‘perhaps Waldo needs defending – from himself and others.’ (SM 229). Waldo Brown and Leonard Saporta can now be seen as not entirely inferior to the admirable Arthur. So can we see The Solid Mandala as a book that testifies to a time when technology and egalitarianism could, however uneasily, coexist. White was a fiercely idiosyncratic writer whose personal trajectory and beliefs coloured much of his creative output. Yet White was also a man of his time, a time he can be placed in now in the wake of both the greater insight upon the past that an acknowledged historicity can bestow. Waldo had a miserable life and made others miserable. But he had a place in society more secure than that of the twenty-first century precariat. This sense of social security is consequential when assessing the moral and political reverberations of Patrick White’s achievement.
I. Introduction

By common consent, Raja Rao (1908-2006) is one of ‘the founding fathers’ of the Indian fiction in English, the other two being Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) and R.K. Narayan (1906-2001). Unlike the other two, Rao is famous for his spiritualism and deep-seated respect for caste hierarchy. Although he came in close contact with Western culture, it cannot be said (of him) that he developed a positive attitude to it. He is, in fact, a cultural chauvinist insofar as the construction of Indian cultural/national identity is concerned. For him, the decisive marker of the Indian nation is Hinduism. A robust egalitarianism enables Anand to imagine the community of the nation across caste and class divides; yet he too is hesitant to do the same with regard to the communal and gender divides. Rao is even more parochial than Anand in that his ‘imagined community’ tends to be a replica of the age-old structure of Indian society. Keeping all the different hierarchies in place, the status quo is zealously maintained in Kanthapura (1938) and the handful of novels that Rao wrote after India had achieved political independence in 1947. In what follows, focusing on the treatment of (Indian) Muslims in the novel, I analyse Kanthapura, one of the most

1 This article is dedicated to the fond memory of my dear father, Md. Mujtaba Hossain, who passed away in July 2011. I would like to thank Rick Hosking and the anonymous reviewers of this essay whose insightful criticisms have gone a long way towards shaping the argument I have sought to construct in it. Slightly altered, the title of this article is from Partha Chatterjee, The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993). I have extensively drawn on Chatterjee here.

2 Raja Rao, Kanthapura (1938; New York: New Directions, 1963) 181. Subsequent references are to this edition. Incidentally, E.M. Forster chose to represent Hindu culture/India by the temple and Muslim culture/India by the mosque, that is, by places of worship of the two communities in his 1924 novel A Passage to India. In contrast, British culture/India is represented in the novel by the club, a secular place. For all his liberal humanism, Forster tended to see the religious/spiritual India as the Other of the secular West. For a biting critique of Forster and his novel, see Edward W. Said, Culture and Imperialism (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993) 241-8.


4 In a sense, Rao is also a cultural syncretist, building bridges between East and West, especially in his second novel The Serpent and the Rope. But my point here is that he is ideologically committed to the rich Indian (read Aryan/Hindu) culture of the long past. Like Rao, Anand could never have written, ‘Brahmin is he who knows Brahman.’ The tall brahminic claim is from The Serpent and the Rope (London: John Murray, 1960) 7. Subsequent references are to this edition.

5 In my view, both Anand and Rao are ‘mythmakers’ insofar as the construction of the nation is concerned, for both are selective, though not to the same degree. Both are capable of creating the ‘myth’ of an inclusive Indian nation. The now-famous expression ‘imagined community’ is from Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, rev. ed. (London and New York: Verso, 1983).
celebrated Indian English novels dealing with the Indian national movement of the 1930s, to delineate its communal figuration of the nation.\footnote{The (Hindu) nationalist intelligentsia tended to treat Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism as deviations of Hinduism. That is, these faiths were not as decidedly (construed as) the Others of Hinduism as Islam has always been and perhaps is even today.}

II. Imagining the (Indian) nation

Nations are, as Benedict Anderson has so incisively suggested, ‘imagined communities,’ that is, ‘cultural artefacts.’\footnote{Anderson 4.} For Anderson, the discursive reality of the nation precedes its political reality. That is to say, before the nation comes into being politically, it has to be imagined as such. If so, where does this imaginative construction take place? One of the two sites Anderson identifies for such construction to come about is the (realist) novel, the other being the newspaper (both products of what Anderson calls ‘print-capitalism’): ‘For these forms provided the technical means for “re-presenting” the kind [sic] of imagined community that is the nation.’\footnote{Anderson 25.}

How far is Anderson pertinent to an anticolonial national formation such as India? Partha Chatterjee, to cite the best known case, has strong reservations about Anderson’s claim (as Chatterjee puts it) that the historical experience of nationalism in Western Europe, in the Americas, and in Russia had supplied for all subsequent nationalisms a set of modular forms from which nationalist elites in Asia and Africa had chosen the ones they liked.\footnote{Chatterjee 4-5. Chatterjee is by far the most incisive postcolonial critic of Anderson.}

For Chatterjee:

The most powerful as well as the most creative results of the nationalist imagination in Asia and Africa are posited not on an identity but rather on a difference [sic] with the “modular” forms of the national society propagated by the modern West.\footnote{Chatterjee 5.}

Hence agreeing with Anderson amounts to, according to Chatterjee, ‘reducing the experience of anticolonial nationalism to a caricature of itself.’\footnote{Chatterjee 5.} Yet Chatterjee concedes what one may consider one of Anderson’s key arguments: ‘Anderson is entirely correct in his suggestion that it is “print-capitalism” which provides the new institutional space for the development of the modern “national” language.’\footnote{Chatterjee 7.}

One is, in effect, led back to where one started from, that is, Anderson. However differently anticolonial nationalism defines itself, in choosing both to locate and assert its very difference in the domain of culture rather than politics (politics being the domain where difference is to be challenged, to be on a par with the coloniser), as Chatterjee has shown to have been the case in the context of Indian

nationalism, it makes the same use of (print) culture as its adversary, for the use of culture as a means to a political end is itself a bourgeois practice, first seen during the rise of the bourgeoisie in Europe.\(^\text{13}\) Insofar as the leadership of Indian nationalism came from the new, English-educated, urban-based Indian bourgeoisie, ‘spawned and nurtured by colonialism itself,’ as Ranajit Guha puts it, culture had to be its site as well as articulation of difference.\(^\text{14}\)

If Anderson and Chatterjee engage in a dialogue as to how the nation is imagined across a range of cultural and historical formations, Fredric Jameson and Aijaz Ahmad engage in another, regarding the figuration of the nation in the so-called third-world literature. As is well known, Jameson shook up the placid world of academic criticism by his essay ‘Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism.’ Jameson postulates:

Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic – necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society [sic].\(^\text{15}\)

Critics have identified numerous shortcomings of this ‘sweeping hypothesis,’ as Jameson himself characterises it.\(^\text{16}\) They are too well known to bear repetition. As with Anderson, I will limit myself to the most publicised critique of Jameson, the one by Ahmad. Of the many examples of ‘positivist reductionism’ enumerated by Ahmad in his devastating riposte, the one most pertinent to the present discussion has to do with the homogenisation by Jameson of ‘nationalism itself’ as if it were ‘some unitary thing with some predetermined essence and value.’\(^\text{17}\) ‘There are hundreds of nationalisms in Asia and Africa; some are progressive, others are not,’ Ahmad reminds Jameson.\(^\text{18}\) What Ahmad says can be developed further: not only are any two (third-world) nationalisms distinct from each other; each is a complex phenomenon on its own right, marked by tensions, contradictions, and ambivalences of its own.

Ironically, by downplaying its complexity, Jameson divests nationalism of its historical character at a time when it is being explored with far greater rigour and vigour than ever before.\(^\text{19}\) The tensions informing ‘the nation-concept’ are precisely what constitute its appeal to contemporary theorists.\(^\text{20}\) As Tom Nairn contends, ‘it is

\(^\text{13}\) In her study of *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987), Nancy Armstrong has forcefully argued the point in a feminist context.


\(^\text{16}\) Jameson 69.


\(^\text{18}\) Ahmad 102.

\(^\text{19}\) The knowledge that Jameson is a major Marxist cultural theorist gives the irony an extra edge.

\(^\text{20}\) I have taken the term from Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 2005) 4. In her book (Stories), Boehmer offers a powerful argument as to why nationalism is still relevant to the postcolonial world. The recent theoretical interest in nationalism derives its impetus from the general distrust of ‘grand
an exact (not a rhetorical) statement about nationalism to say that it is by nature ambivalent.\textsuperscript{21}

If the ambivalent figure of the nation is a problem of its transitional history, its conceptual indeterminacy, its wavering between vocabularies, then what effect does this have on narratives and discourses that signify a sense of ‘nationness’?

asks Homi Bhabha.\textsuperscript{22} The closest Bhabha comes to answering the question is to suggest that ‘the constitutive contradictions of the national text are discontinuous and “interruptive”.’\textsuperscript{23} To put it plainly, the ‘conceptual indeterminacy’ of nationalist ideology translates into narrative/discursive ambivalence, which is why narratives/discourses of the nation can never happen to be free from (obvious) contradictions. Of the many contradictions of Indian nationalism informing Kanthapura, the one I will be primarily concerned with in this essay is its communal construction of Indian national identity: the conflation of Indianness with Hinduism, ‘a nationalist imagination dreaming up the nation-state of the future as a Hindu Samrajya or a Ramrajya.’\textsuperscript{24}

III. The historical context of Kanthapura

Never before was colonial India so full of political activity as from the time of the introduction of the Ilbert Bill in February 1883.\textsuperscript{25} Newer and newer trends emerged, sometimes modifying the older ones, at other times rejecting them altogether. It is both imperative and instructive to read Kanthapura in the context of these developments in Indian politics. Only then one is able to understand the exclusionary nature of its conceptualisation of the Indian nation. In what follows, I attempt to provide a broad overview of Indian national politics from the time of the partition of Bengal in 1905 to its culmination in the Quit India movement in 1942. The focus is consistently on the complex and evolving contours of Hindu-Muslim relationship.

Some of the noteworthy developments in the arena of Indian national politics in the first decade of the twentieth century are: first, the partition of Bengal in 1905 and the Swadeshi movement (1905-8) it gave birth to (incidentally, Swadeshi was the first openly militant anti-British nationalist movement of the twentieth century); secondly, the birth of the All-India Muslim League in 1906; thirdly, the Swadeshi riots of 1906-7; fourthly, the split of the Indian National Congress in 1907 into moderates and extremists; and, finally, the Indian Councils Act of 1909, which gave the Muslims of British India a separate electorate. So the overall picture of the period can be summarised as one of conflicts and tensions, of disintegration, of ‘things fall[ing] apart.’

\textsuperscript{23} Bhabha, ‘Introduction’ 5.
\textsuperscript{24} Guha 62.
\textsuperscript{25} The Indian National Congress was formed in 1885.
It can be safely proposed that British-Indian relationship following the Ilbert Bill was in the main one of collision. The steady corrosion of British-Indian relations at the time may lead one to expect to see a greater cohesion among different Indian communities, especially between Hindus and Muslims. Contrary to expectation, however, an unprecedented hostility obtained between the two communities, despite some genuine efforts to bring them closer together. Needless to say, the frequency of communal riots with which the nineteenth century ended is its most eloquent testimony.

To be fair, both sides were to blame, if not to the same degree. Mutual distrust grew because one had begun to pursue a revivalist agenda for some time now, while the other turned more and more towards a separatist politics, both more or less communal in character. In other words, the paths of the two communities had begun to diverge. The action of the one provided an excuse for the (re)action of the other. To borrow from Salman Rushdie, the obnoxious politics of blame had been born,\(^{26}\) ‘It became customary for both Hindu and Muslim newspapers,’ writes Abdul Hamid, ‘not only to accuse individuals but also to cast aspersions on the other community. The signs of approaching strife were unmistakable.’\(^{27}\) The enlightened white *sahibs* knew all too well how to exploit these dark situations best.

In India, the last quarter of the nineteenth century saw two distinct tendencies growing up simultaneously: on the one hand, after decades of hostility and indifference towards Western education and culture, Muslims took to reformism in the same spirit as the Hindus had done half a century ago; on the other hand, the Hindus turned away from social reformism to religious revivalism.\(^{28}\) As the century wore on, Hindu revivalism gathered momentum, engulfing the whole of India. More specifically, Bengal (the power base of the British at the time), Bombay (then the Presidency of Bombay, now the Province of Maharashtra with Mumbai as its capital), and Punjab became major centres of Hindu revivalism.

A whole range of (patriotic) activities were undertaken to highlight the superiority of Indian (read Hindu) civilisation over all the other civilisations of the world – both past and present. The *materialist* West was deliberately contrasted with the *spiritualist* East. To highlight the spiritual heritage of India, the sacred texts of Hinduism such as the Vedas and the *Gita* were elaborately commented upon.\(^{29}\) In the heat of the argument, some even went on to claim for Hinduism the status of the ‘only true and universal faith.’\(^{30}\) As part of a larger programme to invest Hinduism with

---


\(^{27}\) Abdul Hamid, *Muslim Separatism in India: A Brief Survey: 1858-1947* (n.p.: Oxford UP, 1967) 48. Given the Paki(stan) bias of Hamid, one may ask with no use of irony whether he himself has learnt anything from the history of Hindu-Muslim ‘strife’ he is talking about.

\(^{28}\) The Muslim apathy to westernisation has come to be questioned. Scholars now hold that Muslim response to Western education was far from homogeneous. Hence to claim that a North Indian Muslim was as averse to the benefits of British culture as a Bengal(i) Muslim is no more than an oversimplification. See Peter Hardy, *The Muslims of British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1972).

\(^{29}\) In one sense, the uses of these texts were also secular for they were to serve the national movement. For a discussion of the nationalist appropriation(s) of Hindu sacred texts (especially the *Gita*), see Josna E. Rege, *Colonial Karma: Self, Action, and Nation in the Indian English Novel* (Hampshire and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) 1-21.

historicity, a number of biographies of Sri Krishna appeared in Indian languages, implanting him as the ‘ideal hero’ in Indian (Hindu) consciousness. The Aryan ancestry of the Hindus was emphasised in order to infuse them with a sense of racial pride. As if to consolidate it further, heroes from the historical past, especially those who had successfully resisted the waves of Muslim invasion, were reinstated in public memory, with the (sometimes oblique, sometimes obvious) message to re-enact those heroic deeds of the past to rid India of her present-day subjugation. Bengalis revived the memories of Pratapaditya and Sitaram; Maharashtrians, of Shivaji; and Punjabis, of Ranjit Singh. In each of these centres of Hindu revivalism, in short, there flourished a number of pro-Hindu organisations (whose pseudo-religious activities often led to communal riots), an array of Hindu utsavas (festivals) and melas (fairs), a spate of new journals, and a body of literary works based on history, whose revivalist gospel charged Hindu India with new life but threatened Muslim India with doom. The revivalist clamour of the day was loud enough to drown the old voices of harmony, moderation and reformism for a while.

How did the Muslims react to the revivalist craze of the day? The story of the Muslims of British India begins with the Great Rebellion of 1857. Rightly or wrongly, it was the Muslims who were held responsible for what the British tend(ed) to call the Mutiny. ‘In the British view,’ writes Thomas Metcalf, ‘it was Muslim intrigue and Muslim leadership that converted a sepoy mutiny into a political conspiracy, aimed at the extinction of the British Raj.’ For most of the third quarter of the nineteenth century, therefore, the Muslim community was in murky waters, held in contempt and distrust by the colonial masters. On the other hand, the Muslim perception was one of disillusionment. Consequently, the most vital task before the leaders of the Muslim community after 1857 was to repair Anglo-Muslim relations, to bring about, in the words of Peter Hardy, ‘rapprochement between Islam and the nineteenth-century Western-dominated world.’ They decided on a two-part programme: to establish in the eyes of the white rulers of India that they were allies not enemies of white rule and, for the first part of the programme to bear fruit, to reconcile themselves and the community they represented to Western education and culture, which in turn entailed dispelling the strong anti-British sentiments of the community. After the memories of 1857 had grown a little paler, the British policy was also geared to promoting the new secular ambitions of the Muslims. At the turn of the century, the British were so openly committed to safeguarding Muslim rights and interests as to invite charges of partiality from the Hindus.

So Hindus and Muslims were not the only actors on the Indian political scene at the time under discussion here. Right at the centre were the British, desperately looking for a new ally to meet the extremist challenge of the Swadeshi years. Soon

---

32 Tripathi 73-74.
33 The Muslim intelligentsia invariably saw Hindu revivalism as a threat to the existence of Muslim community in India.
35 Hardy 104.
36 When the Congress split in 1907, the Swadeshi movement had already moved into its extremist phase and was to enter the terrorist phase soon.
an opportunity offered itself. Towards the end of 1906, when (Hindu) India was still simmering with resentment over the partition of Bengal, Lord Minto, the first twentieth-century liberal Viceroy of India, received a thirty-five-member Muslim delegation. In his reply to the address presented by the delegation, Minto submitted that he was as ‘firmly convinced’ as they ‘that any electoral representation in India would be doomed to mischievous failure which aimed at granting a personal enfranchisement regardless of the beliefs and traditions of the communities composing the population of this continent.’ The ‘political rights and interests of [the Muslims] as a community will be safeguarded,’ he assured them, ‘by any administrative re-organization with which I am concerned.’ Not surprisingly, in the space of barely a quarter of a year, the All-India Muslim League was founded.

The next decade – that is, the 1910s – was a quieter one, insofar as nationalist agitation in India is concerned. The main reason was the First World War. With the advent of the War, the political climate in India began to cool down, with the political parties competing with one another to put on show how loyal they were to the British Raj. By contrast, nationalist activities geared up abroad, especially in North America where through the weekly paper *The Ghadar* ‘the entire nationalist critique of colonialism ... was carried, in a powerful and simple form, to the mass of Indian immigrants.’ At home, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Annie Besant started the Home Rule movement based in Bombay and Madras respectively. As the name of the movement suggests, the demand was self-government for India on the lines of the white colonies after the War was over. The two most remarkable events of the decade were the appearance of Gandhi in 1915 on the Indian political scene and the Lucknow Pact of 1916. The former would have a long-term impact on national politics in general and Hindu-Muslim relationship in particular: Gandhi would relentlessly work for Hindu-Muslim amity till the very end of his life, consistently earning undue criticism from almost all vested quarters in the process. The latter – the pact between the Congress and the League – would reconcile the interests of the two communities for a while but would soon fall apart. The issue of separate electorate would again prove a bone of contention.

For the national leadership in India, the second decade of the twentieth century was one of steady disillusionment. The ‘great expectations’ that they had entertained during the War did not materialise when it was over. They had expected that Britain would grant India self-rule in return of her huge contribution to the overall War effort. But the leaders of both Hindu and Muslim communities were soon to be disillusioned. If the Government of India Act of 1919 disappointed them all, the British attitude to Turkey angered the Indian Muslims in particular. It was clear from the Treaty of Sevres signed in May 1920 that the Ottoman Empire was already a thing of the past. The anger led to the resurgence of what has come to be known as the Khilafat movement. Although the movement concerned the Muslims of India who looked upon the Caliph of Turkey as the spiritual head of Muslims all over the world, Gandhi chose not only to align himself with it but also to become, along with the two Ali

---

37 Lord Minto quoted in Hardy 155.
38 Minto cited in Tripathi 163. The Muslims of British India were finally awarded separate electorate by the Indian Councils Act of 1909.
brothers, its moral and political anchor. By getting himself involved in the Khilafat movement, Gandhi was able to turn it into, in the words of B.R. Nanda, 'a rallying cry for Hindu-Muslim unity.'

If such developments as the Rowlatt Bills, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, the Khilafat and Non-cooperation movement brought the Hindus and Indian Muslims together for a while, other developments in the late 1920s worked to pull them apart, creating in the process a chasm that would continue to widen and would eventually pave the way for the decisive entry, spread and consolidation of communalism in Indian national politics, culminating in the partition of India. Chief among them was the appointment of the all-White Simon Commission, so called after the name of its chairman. The primary task of the Commission was to decide 'whether India was ready for further constitutional progress and on which lines.' The formation of the Commission without a single Indian member on it was enough to provoke opposition from the various nationalist fronts operating at that time. The consequence was either total boycott of the Commission by most of them or cold indifference to it by the rest. Ironically, the boycott did not result in a positive outcome. That is to say, it failed to generate a greater understanding between the different political parties claiming to represent the different communities of India. Instead, each decided to pursue its own parochial interests, in the process divesting the Congress of the legitimacy of its claim to represent all Indians. From now onward, two distinct but inter-related tendencies would run parallel in Indian national politics: one would emphasise the fight against the colonial rule; the other, the conflict of interests of the different communities of India.

In 1928, the political parties of India jointly issued what has come to be known as the Nehru Report, after the name of Motilal Nehru (father of Jawaharlal Nehru). The Report was an answer to the British ‘challenge’ that the Indians were incapable of devising ‘a concrete scheme of constitutional reforms which [would have] the support of wide sections of Indian political opinion.’ Since it was an outcome of joint efforts, the Report ‘rejected the principle of separate communal electorates on which previous constitutional reforms had been based.’ Both sections of the Muslim League – the one that had refused to have anything to do with the Congress and the other led by Mohammad Ali Jinnah that had agreed to cooperate with the Congress – saw in the rejection of ‘the principle of separate communal electorates’ a threat to Muslim interests. To protect Muslim interests, Jinnah came up with his famous ‘Fourteen Points’ which the Congress could not accept because accepting them would mean, the Congress leadership thought, weakening the spirit of nationalism on the one hand and strengthening that of communalism on the other. There was another side to the issue too. Hindu communalism had also become a force too strong not to be taken cognizance of. Hindu communal parties such as the Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) were out now to safeguard Hindu interests. The Communal Award of 1932 was thus an inverse recognition of Indian nationalism having become communal in character, for even the Congress did

---

41 Chandra et al. 260.  
42 Chandra et al. 263.  
43 Chandra et al. 263.
not raise any protest against it. Just as the colonial government could no longer deny the force of Indian nationalism of the day, Indian nationalism could no more hide its communal character.

Within the Congress, the leadership passed from Gandhi to Nehru and his ilk who embraced a Marxist-socialist politics, rejecting the kind of politics that Gandhi stood for. The socialist focus of the new Congress leadership meant that from now on (the causes of) class conflicts would receive far greater importance than (those of) the communal ones. Of all the national agendas, the problems of peasants and workers became the number one agenda for the Congress. The question of Hindu-Muslim unity was no longer the central issue. Under the Government of India Act of 1935, the Congress went into provincial elections in 1937, won a majority in most of the provinces and formed government in them. Interestingly, during its twenty-eight-month-long rule, the Congress did little to improve Hindu-Muslim relations but everything to redress the plight of the working classes. The Congress provincial governments resigned in October 1939, and in the din and bustle of the Second World War that had started in September 1939, the Hindu-Muslim issue was almost forgotten.

So during the decades between the 1900s and the 1930s, Indian politics had become a site of conflictive interests and Indian nationalism a constellation of parochial nationalisms. In the hullabaloo of Hindu revivalism and Muslim separatism, Indian nationalism could no longer remain Indian nationalism, pure and simple. With the two main communities looking askance at each other, it could only be either Hindu or Muslim nationalism, one informed by revivalist and the other by separatist ideology. Yet here and there a lone voice, albeit subdued, could be heard, urging moderation, sanity, and tolerance; projecting an Indian identity free from considerations of caste, class, or creed; and thus inviting fellow Indians to accept the cultural plurality that is India. If Rabindranath Tagore is one such voice, Gandhi is no doubt another. But the Rao of Kanthapura is certainly not such a voice.

IV. The nation and its fragments in Kanthapura
In erasing the Hindu-Muslim question from its construction of the nation, Kanthapura participates in parochial nationalism, a type of nationalism that takes care of the interests of one particular community (the Hindus) and ignores those of the Others. The nationalist imagination that goes into the making of the novel is all the more dangerous in that it chooses to pit itself against one of the Indian minorities (that is, the Indian Muslims) and cast them as the Other of the nation, instead of confronting the real Other (British rule) face to face. In line with mainstream nationalist discourse, Kanthapura forms national identity on the basis of Hinduism. In this formulation, to be an Indian is to be, first of all, a Hindu. Exclusion on the basis of community/religion is, however, not the only exclusion. There are some others along lines of gender, class, caste and age. These multiple exclusions from the figuration of the national subject have been, and continue to be, vigorously contested not only in the (historical) fiction but also in other literary genres of the post-independence period. Scholarly discourses too have questioned what Josna Rege phrases as ‘the success of the nationalist synthesis.’

Rege 81.
In her provocative study, *Myths of the Nation: National Identity and Literary Representation*, Rumina Sethi reads *Kanthapura*, one of the classic texts of the Indian national movement, in terms of its selective (because of class and gender biases) figuration of Indian national identity. According to Sethi, Rao is ‘ahistorical’ (and the charge is a serious one) in his ‘representation of the contemporary politics of the 1930s.’

Sethi substantiates her case by way of showing how Rao uses Gandhian ideology in his novel: now upholding, now downplaying, that is, using it to serve his own ideological purpose (ideology appropriating ideology). Conceding that Gandhian philosophy is full of ‘contradictions,’ caught as it is between ‘fixity and resistance,’ Sethi argues that *Kanthapura* derives its tensions not so much from these Gandhian contradictions as ‘from the way in which they have been written into the novel.’

In other words, Rao appropriates Gandhian thought so as to cover up his ‘implicit bias towards brahminism which can be seen as a feature of chauvinist Hinduism employed by revivalist nationalists.’ Through a detailed analysis of the treatment of the two ‘fragments’ of the nation – peasants and women – Sethi is able to demonstrate the exclusionary character of the nation Rao constructs in his novel. Deploying a new critical idiom that came into prominence in the wake of (postcolonial) cultural studies in the late 1980s, *Myths of the Nation* is one of those rare works on Indian English fiction that have persistently stressed, contrary to the dominant critical trend of the time, the need ‘to pose a series of interruptions in one’s conceptualization of a homogeneous cultural identity.’

My approach to *Kanthapura* is both a continuation and an expansion of what Sethi has done in her outstanding work. Although Sethi is aware of the exclusion of minorities (especially Indian Muslims) from the projected nation of *Kanthapura*, she does not pay (in fact, does not choose to pay) these ‘fragments’ of the nation the amount of attention they really deserve. In my opinion, the question of exclusion/inclusion of the (Indian) Muslims in the novel is as important as the other two exclusions. For Rao would not have been able to write *Kanthapura* at all, or at least not the way in which he did, if he had not chosen to treat the (Indian) Muslims the way in which he has treated them in it.

*Kanthapura* is set in the (early) 1930s, incontrovertibly one of the most challenging decades in the history of Indian nationalism, marked by the increasing impact of the Gandhian programme of civil disobedience. Responding to the call of M.K. Gandhi to join the programme, a small community living in the village of Kanthapura – which is, according to C.D. Narasimhaiah, ‘[a]n unmistakable South Indian village’ – gets involved in the national struggle for independence under the leadership of Moorthy, the Gandhi of Kanthapura.

In the process, the villagers lose everything (they had). Still they remain hopeful that today or tomorrow ‘he will bring us Swaraj, the Mahatma. And we shall all be happy.’

---

46 Sethi 72. The phrase ‘fixity and resistance’ is the title of the final chapter in Sethi.
47 Sethi 72.
48 Sethi is using the term ‘fragments’ in the sense Chatterjee has used it in his brilliant study of the exclusionary politics of Indian nationalism, *Nation*. I use it in the same sense here.
49 Sethi 110.
note of triumphant optimism, *Kanthapura* is typical of nationalist (historical) fiction. This optimism is indicative of the approach of nationalist historical fiction to the past it deals with: it is neither nostalgic nor critical as revivalist historical fiction tends to be. It is resolutely focused on the future. Elleke Boehmer has drawn attention to the contrastive moods of ‘idealistc hope of renewal’ and of ‘pessimism of late imperial culture’ characterising the literatures of the period when *Kanthapura* was published (that is, early twentieth century): the former marking the literatures of peripheral colonies, while the latter, those of the colonial centres.52

Both M.K. Naik and Narasimhaiah commend *Kanthapura* for its ‘authentic’ portrayal of life in rural India.53 If one accepts rural India as Hindu India, there will be nothing to take issue with. If otherwise, there will possibly be no end of reservations. Even though Narasimhaiah seems more perceptive than Naik in noticing ‘socio-economic divisions’ in Kanthapura (the village, and, significantly, not in *Kanthapura*, the text), he does not pause to tease out the implications of these divisions in terms of caste/class hierarchy and the power relations they assume.54 Kanthapura has ‘a complex structure’ because ‘it is there in the village, has always been there, in this land of villages.’55 By refusing to question socio-economic reality and its reverberations in the daily life of the people concerned, Narasimhaiah accepts no discrepancy between reality/history and its discursive/novelistic representation. In simple terms, Narasimhaiah does not read culture/literature in terms of the ideology it is embedded in or seeks to project. Yet he is not totally unaware that all art is selective. Explaining why Rao does not ‘individualize’ non-brahmin characters, Narasimhaiah argues ‘it is obviously because he doesn’t like to crowd his canvas.’56 As if to apologise for Rao, he adds: ‘But even then he would not dismiss [them] without a thought for he has felt for them in their wretchedness.’57 Not surprisingly, it does not strike Narasimhaiah that the national ‘canvas’ of *Kanthapura* is absolutely free of Muslim presence.58 Nor is there representation of any other community in it. The national ‘canvas’ of *Kanthapura* is crowded only with Hindus, just as the village of the title is an exclusively Hindu village. The only Muslim character in the novel is the policeman Badè Khan, the (surrogate?) villain, who comes from outside. He is not a Kanthapurian and is thus disqualified to be an Indian. For, on an allegorical plane, Kanthapura is India or, as one critic puts it, ‘pre-independence India in miniature.’59

---

54 Narasimhaiah 39.
55 Narasimhaiah 39.
56 Narasimhaiah 40.
57 Narasimhaiah 40.
58 Here is John B. Alphonso Karkala, ‘Myth, Matrix and Meaning in Literature and in Raja Rao’s Novel, *Kanthapura,*’ *Perspectives on Raja Rao,* ed. K.K. Sharma (Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1980) 76: ‘Raja Rao does not use th[e] Judaeo-Christian-Islamic myth of the unknown and unknowable. Instead, to make his tale of modern India more meaningful, he goes deep down into the roots of continuing Indian cultural tradition, and draws out from the most ancient of mythic conceptions.’ Like Naik and Narasimhaiah, Karkala also fails to see through the politics of representation (in his case it is the Indian/Hindu myths deployed by Rao) in *Kanthapura*.
59 Suresh Nath, ‘Gandhi and Raja Rao’ in Sharma 58.
One is able to form, I contend, a fairly accurate idea of the nation Rao intends to construct in *Kanthapura* from a consideration of the way in which the very first chapter of the novel is structured. In fact, it is possible to read it as the ideological blueprint of the entire novel as far as imagining the (Indian) nation is concerned. The chapter is composed of five small units of unequal length: three basically descriptive units followed by two mainly narrative ones. The first one introduces Kanthapura, the village of the title and also the scene of narrative action; gives its precise geographical location; and ends with an invocation to Kenchamma, the local goddess.\(^{60}\) The ritual of beginning an (individual/collective) activity by invoking gods/goddesses is a standard Hindu practice (the equivalent Islamic/Muslim practice is to recite a certain verse from the *Qur’an*). Readers are thus positioned as to what to expect in what follows. They are about to enter a Hindu world which is strategically given the name of ‘Bharatha’ in the final unit in which ‘Gandhiji’ appears.\(^{61}\) Brahmins enjoy the topmost position in the Hindu social order. Accordingly, some of the prominent brahmin men and women of Kanthapura are introduced in the second unit, technically the first unit describing the population of the village. It is not without significance that the smallest unit is the third one which deals with the non-brahmin population of the village: pariahs, potters, *sudras*, weavers, and so on. This confinement of non-brahmin Hindus to a comparatively narrower narrative space is in my view emblematic of the marginal position they actually occupy in a society dominated by the brahmins. With the third unit, the description of Kanthapura and its (Hindu) population ends. One is thus left in no doubt that in Kanthapura there is not a single man or woman belonging to a faith other than Hinduism. In short, Kanthapura is a Hindu village.

The story begins to unfold in the fourth unit which is technically the first narrative unit. Three years back from the time of actual narration, the protagonist of the novel, Moorthy, discovers ‘a half-sunk linga,’ which is then housed in a temple hastily built for that purpose, triggering off a series of Hindu festivities culminating in *Harikathas*.\(^{62}\) It is through one of these *Harikathas* (which forms the second half of the fifth unit) that Gandhi enters the small and as yet unpoliticised psyche/world of (Hindu) Kanthapura. The chapter/unit ends with the last-moment entry of the policeman Badè Khan, who is sent by the colonial government to live in Kanthapura so that he can closely monitor the impact of Gandhian politics on the Kanthapurians.

Now, if Kanthapura is India and all its inhabitants are Hindus, the message is clear: the Indian nation-in-the-making is a nation of Hindus, with brahmins and non-brahmins joyfully (though not equally) appropriating ‘the nation-space’ between themselves.\(^{63}\) Despite being the last of all the characters to enter Kanthapura, Badè Khan and, by extension, the community he belongs to might have become at least one of the many ‘fragments’ of the nation, if Rao had willed so, one must add. In choosing

---

\(^{60}\) As a postcolonial concern, geography/space is no less crucial than history/time. As Said has argued: ‘The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course.’ *Culture* xiii.

\(^{61}\) Rao, *Kanthapura* 10. The name of Bharatha links India to its Aryan/Hindu past, Bharatha being the name of Lord Rama’s younger brother in the epic *Ramayana*. Incidentally, it is also the official Sanskrit name of India.


\(^{63}\) The term is from Homi K. Bhabha, ‘DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation’ in Bhabha 294.

Badè Khan to embody the evil – the narrator describes it as ‘the serpent of the foreign rule’ – against which Gandhi has been expressly sent by Brahma, ‘God of Gods,’ to wage war, Rao recoils from allowing him/them even that minority status. Although inspired by the kind of politics Gandhi stood for, in its execution *Kanthapura* is both an unhealthy appropriation and an unpleasant distortion of history in that whereas Gandhi had relentlessly worked for Hindu-Muslim harmony to the very end of his life, the author of *Kanthapura* seems to work for a completely opposite outcome. Why else should he have chosen a Muslim character to play the villain in a work whose primary concern is to imagine the Indian nation? With the Congress already in power in 1937, could it be that in 1938, the year of publication of *Kanthapura*, the question of Hindu-Muslim unity was no longer so crucial a vector in the calculus of anticolonial national struggle as it had been even a decade earlier.

At least three very powerful objections can be raised against what I have so far said about Rao and his novel. First, it can be argued that Badè Khan is not the only villain in *Kanthapura*. There are other (Hindu) characters as well in the novel who are depicted in as negative a light as Badè Khan. That is to say, to choose to single out the villainy of Badè Khan is a distortion in itself. Secondly, it is possible to argue that Badè Khan is not meant to represent the Muslim community of India. To take him as such – that is, as a representative Muslim character – is to misinterpret authorial intent. As a member of the colonial police force, he is rather part of the colonial government against which the villagers of Kanthapura inspired by Gandhi and his followers are struggling. If anything, then, Badè Khan should be seen as standing for one of the repressive apparatuses of the colonial state. And finally, the treatment of Badè Khan at the hands of the villagers, it can be further argued, has nothing communal in it. Even if he had been a Hindu, there would have been no difference. In those heady days of anticolonial national struggle, whosoever had acted on behalf of the British would have been treated likewise by the Indians. In other words, the villagers of Kanthapura treat Badè Khan as a villain not because he is a Muslim but because he is a collaborator who works for the perpetuation of colonial hegemony rather than its end. For to serve the ‘small alien minority’ of white sahibs in any capacity (and Badè Khan is no less than a policeman) is to betray the vast majority of Indians.

Although powerful, these objections are not hard to refute. In what follows, I attempt to construct a counter-argument, mainly focusing on the portrayal of the villainous characters in the novel. As to the first and third objections, it is true that

---

64 Rao, *Kanthapura* 12, 11.
65 In his English weekly *Young India* of 29 May 1924: 182, for example, Gandhi had written: ‘For me the only question for solution before the country is the Hindu-Muslim question ... I see no way of achieving anything in this afflicted country without a lasting heart-unity between the Hindus and the Mussalmans.’ For a clear exposition of how Gandhi came to regard Hindu-Muslim unity as ‘the greatest question’ in the context of Indian national movement, see Judith Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1990) 140-44 and 185-89. See also S. Abid Husain, *Gandhi ji and Communal Unity* (New Delhi: Orient Longmans, 1969).
66 See Judith Brown, *Modern India. The Origins of an Asian Democracy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994) 293-316. For the new leadership who took charge of the national movement after Gandhi, the question of Hindu-Muslim unity did not seem to carry as much weight as it had for Gandhi.
Kanthapura does have villains other than Badè Khan, but it is also true that they are treated **differentially**. The two characters who have no truck with what they call ‘Gandhi business’ and are bold enough to say so are the priest-turned-moneylender-cum-landowner Bhatta and the Swami, a rather shadowy figure.\(^{68}\) Both work together (in the name of religion) to foil the success of ‘Gandhi business’ by all means. Bhatta plays an underhand role in the arrest of Moorthy, while it is the Swami who is to blame for the death of his mother. Yet neither Bhatta nor the Swami appears to be as despicable to the villagers of Kanthapura as Badè Khan who is after all on duty there. Bhatta is more fortunate than the Swami in that he is never supposed to have anything to do with the white masters. When the pariah women set his house on fire, it is not because he is finally identified with what Badè Khan has come to represent (that is, the repression of the colonial state) but because his high interest rate has ruined most of them. The narrator explains:

Well done, well done; it is not for nothing Bhatta lent us money at 18 per cent and 20 per cent interest, and made us bleed … he has starved our stomachs and killed our children … Well done, well done.\(^{69}\)

In addition, there is a clear tendency both in the author and the narrator to play down the wickedness of both. The narrator is explicit about why Bhatta has become what he is now. In his case, the two sources of corruption are his frequent visits to the city and love of money. Previously, the reader is informed, ‘Bhatta was a fine fellow for all that. With his smiles and his holy ashes, we said he would one day own the whole village.’\(^{70}\) So Bhatta is not a born criminal. Since his aberration is temporary, there is every possibility of his coming back to the path of virtue. The possibility is translated into reality when Rao sends (a supposedly repentant) Bhatta on a pilgrimage to Kashi immediately after the arrest of Moorthy, though the narrator remains a little sceptical about its final outcome.

A slightly different strategy is employed to make light of the foul play of the Swami. Although it is no secret that ‘the Swami is a Government man,’ the (open) secret is in circulation only in the city.\(^{71}\) Thus the authority of the Swami as the spiritual leader of his community, though challenged in the city, remains secure in the orbit of Kanthapura. Rangamma, who is ‘no village kid,’ is chosen ‘the third member’ of ‘the Congress panchayat committee of Kanthapura,’ and herself organises a **Sevika Sangha** – that is, an association of female volunteers – has real difficulty to come to terms with the idea that Gandhi wants caste-system to go.\(^{72}\) She cannot accept that Gandhi has approved of ‘all this pollution’ resulting from ‘the confusion of castes.’\(^{73}\)

---

\(^{68}\) Rao, Kanthapura 26.

\(^{69}\) Rao, Kanthapura 153. The extract shows the extent to which Gandhian ideology has been able to penetrate the psyche of the Kanthapurians. There can be no doubt that the narrator savours the burning of the house with obvious relish, revealing in the process an attitude which can by no means be called Gandhian. Gandhi wanted his followers to extend love in exchange of hatred, an ideal encapsulated in his notion of **ahimsa** (non-violence). In the Gandhian scheme of things, **ahimsa** occupies as important a place as **satyagraha**.

\(^{70}\) Rao, Kanthapura 20.

\(^{71}\) Rao, Kanthapura 89.

\(^{72}\) Rao, Kanthapura 28, 75, 76, 105.

\(^{73}\) Rao, Kanthapura 27.
By doubting the Gandhian stand on the caste question, Rangamma is in effect endorsing, though not as forcefully as Bhatta, the authority of the Swami in such matters. Even Moorthy who suffers considerably as a consequence of his excommunication by the Swami does not characterise him as a villain. In comparison, Badè Khan is not so fortunate. He remains a villain from the moment of his entry into Kanthapura to the very end. Except for one indeterminate moment when he comes to join the bhajan that Moorthy asks Rangamma to organise after his fast, Badè Khan is never allowed to betray a single redeeming feature. The recurrent use of animal imagery in the characterisation of Badè Khan is in effect a refusal to grant him humanity. He ‘growl[s],’ ‘prowl[s],’ is a ‘bearded monkey,’ a ‘bearded goat,’ a ‘dog,’ and so on. Badè Khan is further divested of humanity by way of metonyms/synecdoches: often he is no more than ‘a beard, a lathi, and a row of metal buttons.’

The second objection that there is nothing communal in the characterisation of Badè Khan is also easily refuted. In his depiction of Badè Khan, Rao is prejudicial, subscribing to the stereotypes of the (Indian) Muslims generated by colonial discourse, a tendency from which his portrayal of Hindu characters is remarkably free. Moorthy, for example, is a man of action. Instead of being resigned to fate, he takes responsibility for what he himself does as well as what others do under his leadership. His decision to ‘fast for three days’ after the disastrous outcome of the first skirmish is a result of his realisation that ‘much violence ha[s] been done because of him.’ This image of a responsible Indian/Hindu is the obverse of what one comes across in colonial discourse (for example, in the short stories of Rudyard Kipling). In contrast, true to the colonial image of Indian Muslims, Badè Khan is given both to sensuality and violence. As if to emphasise how strong these (Muslim) proclivities

---

74 Other characters are also compared to animals. But the comparison works to stress some positive aspect of the character concerned. For example, Moorthy is compared with ‘a noble cow.’ Rao, Kanthapura 5.
75 Rao, Kanthapura 13, 19, 59, 60, 69.
77 Both images are to be found in A Passage to India, the classic Anglo-Indian text. Dr Aziz and Dr Panna Lal are both stereotypes. One is an image of Islamic/Muslim militancy and sensuality, while the other is one of Indian/Hindu clumsiness and irresponsibility. For a perceptive discussion of Muslim stereotypes in Anglo-Indian fiction, see Benazir Durdana, Muslim India in Anglo-Indian Fiction (DHaka: writers.ink, 2008), particularly Chapter 4: ‘Dehumanization of Muslim Characters.’ According to Durdana, Anglo-Indian fiction is full of ‘stereotypes of the amoral, libidinous and violent Muslim.’ 11. Of the three characteristics of amorality, lust and aggression, Badè Khan is deficit in none, though the last two are perhaps more pronounced in his character(isation) than the first. See also Mushirul Hasan, Legacy of a Divided Nation: India’s Muslims since Independence (London: Hurst & Company, 1997) 25-36 and Edward W. Said, Orientalism (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).
78 In his vision of the Mahatma, Moorthy is repeatedly exhorted to act: to seek truth, to forgo foreign cloth and university (that is, English education), and to work for ‘the dumb millions of the villages.’ Rao, Kanthapura 34.
79 Rao, Kanthapura 61.
80 See note 77 above.
are, they are made to come to the fore on the very day of Khan’s arrival in Kanthapura. The narrator reports:

At the temple square he [Badè Khan] gave such a reeling kick to the one-eared cur that it went groaning through the Potters’ street, groaning and barking through the Potters’ street and the Pariah street, till all the dogs began to bark, and all the cocks began to crow, and a donkey somewhere raised a fine welcoming bray.\footnote{Rao, Kanthapura 15.}

There is certainly a touch of humour in the effect of the kick on the other animals. However, contrary to what humour frequently does, here it does not work to lessen the culpability of the agent of violence, for it is an act of heedless violence: together the scene (a place of Hindu worship) and the victim (a mute animal and ‘one-eared’ at that) of violence deprive the humour of its intended effect. In fact, it is held back at the precise moment from what it might have achieved in terms of comic relief, and then turned on its head instead. In the process, humour becomes black humour. After all, who would welcome an animal, if not its own species? It is not for nothing that there is such a preponderance of animal imagery in the portrayal of Badè Khan. If it were humour pure and simple, Rao would not allow his narrator to talk about the lechery of Badè Khan immediately after she has so artfully captured his propensity for violence.

With nowhere to live in Kanthapura, Badè Khan goes ‘straight’ to the nearby Skeffington Coffee Estate where the owner of the Estate (a European) gives him a hut to live in.\footnote{Rao, Kanthapura 15.} No sooner has the problem of accommodation been fixed, Khan goes out and procures ‘a Pariah woman among the lonely ones.’\footnote{Rao, Kanthapura 15.} The woman ‘[brings] along her clay pots and her mats and her brooms,’ and makes the best use of each of these items: in addition to doing cleaning and cooking for Khan, she gives him ‘a very warmful [sic] bed’ as well.\footnote{Rao, Kanthapura 15.} One may still remain doubtful if Rao is really working with the colonial stereotypes of Indian Muslims, for to generalise from a single example is always suspect. But doubt gives place to conviction when ‘a young Badè Khan’ comes to join ‘the bearded one.’\footnote{Rao, Kanthapura 117.} Khan the junior repeats what Khan the senior has done previously: ‘he too [takes] a hut and a woman and settle[s] down in the Skeffington Coffee Estate.’\footnote{Rao, Kanthapura 117.} Lechery is a Muslim monopoly in Kanthapura!

The communal element in the portrayal of Badè Khan is too marked to be missed. Of all his physical features, none is as frequently singled out as his beard. The recurrence of the feature is so obtrusive that one must pause to think out its possible significance. One must pause to ask, ‘What is extraordinary about the beard of Badè Khan, an ordinary policeman?’ It is extraordinary only in the sense that it is one of the most visible markers of a (pious) Muslim in the Indian subcontinent. Symbolically, the beard of a Muslim is taken to be as sacred as the holy thread of a (brahmin) Hindu. To jeer at a Muslim’s beard would generate as great an outrage as to laugh at a

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{81} Rao, Kanthapura 15. \textsuperscript{82} Rao, Kanthapura 15. \textsuperscript{83} Rao, Kanthapura 15. \textsuperscript{84} Rao, Kanthapura 15. \textsuperscript{85} Rao, Kanthapura 117. \textsuperscript{86} Rao, Kanthapura 117.}
(brāhmin) Hindu’s sacred thread. In both cases, the insult is likely to be judged on a communal rather than personal level. On most occasions in Kanthapura, Badè Khan is insulted with specific reference to his beard. In due course, the tendency degenerates into a crude equation: to defy Badè Khan is to pick at his beard. In the very first scuffle between the Gandhians (the nationalist force headed by Moorthi) and the non-Gandhians (the anti-nationalist colonial force led by Badè Khan), both parties engage in ‘a battle of oaths,’ hurling obscenities at each other, whose targets remain unspecified. The only exception is Badè Khan who is identified by no other means but by his beard: ‘Oh, you bearded monkey.’ Eventually the parties come to blows:

Badè Khan swings round and–bang!–his lathi has hit Moorthy and his hands are on Moorthy’s tuft, and Rachanna and Madanna cry out, ‘At him!’ and they all fall on Badè Khan and tearing away the lathi, bang it on his head. And the maistri comes to pull them off and whips them, and the women fall on the maistri and tear his hair, while Moorthy cries out, ‘No beatings, sisters. No beatings, in the name of the Mahatma.’ But the women are fierce and they will tear the beard from Badè Khan’s face.

How may one explain why the women choose to tear the maistri’s hair but Badè Khan’s beard? Is there really nothing communal in it? In attracting the violence of the non-violent Gandhians, the beard of Badè Khan becomes a site more of communal violence than of anticolonial national struggle. The sub-text of communal prejudice gets exposed here.

It is important to note that Kanthapura, though written between 1929 and 1933, was actually published in 1938. As can be seen from the discussion of the historical context of the novel above, by then the political situation in India had greatly changed. Of the new developments, the most remarkable one was the rapidly shifting positions of rulers and ruled in terms of political power, a phenomenon more true of the Congress than of any other political party of the time. By virtue of being already in power in the majority of provinces of British India (seven out of eleven) in 1937, the Congress could legitimately claim itself to be the voice of all India. It was thus in a position to define, if not dictate, the terms of negotiation with its colonial counterpart. At a time when Indian nationalism was clearly the more legitimate political force than its imperial opponent, what need could there possibly be for Rao to choose a dark-skinned Muslim instead of a fair-skinned sahib as the villain of Kanthapura, a novel much celebrated for its depiction of anticolonial national

87 It is true that Hindu ascetics and gurus also keep a (long) beard. But they do so in order to create a halo of otherworldliness about themselves. For a Hindu, to keep a beard is not a religious obligation. By contrast, a Muslim grows a beard as part of his commitment to the sunnah. Put simply, the Arabic term sunnah means what the Prophet of Islam said and did. In Islam, following sunnah is no less important than following the Qur’an. In terms of religious significance, a Muslim’s beard is possibly comparable to the Five Ks of the Sikhs: kēs (uncut hair), kangha (small comb), karā (circular iron bracelet), kirpān (dagger), kacchā (special undergarment).
88 Rao, Kanthapura 59.
89 Rao, Kanthapura 59.
90 Rao, Kanthapura 59. Emphasis added.
91 See note 66 above.
struggle in the Indian context? At the turn of the nineteenth century when Indian nationalism was just beginning to make itself felt at an all-India level for the first time in the history of India, it was apt that its exponents judiciously avoided direct confrontation with the most formidable imperial power in modern history. For several decades after its birth in 1885, for example, the Congress practiced what historians have sardonically called the politics of petitions and prayers, that is, a moderate form of negotiation. In the arena of culture, the articulations of nationalism were as muted. In order to articulate its call for national regeneration, revivalist historical fiction (mostly written at the turn of the nineteenth century) had to combine allegory with romance, apparently undermining historicity only to bring about (for the nation) the moment of its entry into history. (That moment arrives in nationalist historical fiction.) Evidently the times of Kanthapura were very different from those of revivalist historical fiction in both Britain and India. Even though the Second World War, which would ultimately cause the dissolution of the European empires, was just looming on the horizon, Britain, shattered by the trauma of the First World War and shaken by the economic depression of the 1930s, was more or less in a subdued mood both at home and in her colonies where the tendency to resort to repression could still be seen every now and then. The Government of India Act of 1935 is an eloquent testimony to the fact that Britain was indeed in a mood of conciliation in India.

Yet the author of Kanthapura is hesitant to call a spade a spade when there is apparently no need for it! If it did not arise from an overt need for narrative improvisation, one cannot but ask, then what else could possibly have led Rao to deflect white villainy onto brown skin in Kanthapura? Why does the novel have a Muslim villain at all? Badè Khan is, in the final analysis, an inverse projection of what R.K. Ramaswamy, the narrator-protagonist in The Serpent and the Rope, terms ‘Brahminic autocracy.’ In simple terms, ‘Brahminic autocracy’ is what Sethi has called ‘chauvinist Hinduism,’ coupled with upper-caste male/patriarchal prejudices. It has four basic components. First, Hinduism is far superior to any other religion of the world, including even those born of Hinduism itself (e.g. Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism). While the other religions (especially the monotheistic ones such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) seek God, Hinduism alone seeks Truth. Secondly, Truth is not readily available to all Hindus. Only the brahmans have a privileged access to it. Thirdly, Truth has a masculine face. And finally, Hindus are the only legitimate inhabitants of India. Rao is proud of his Aryan ancestors but seems oblivious of the fact that the Aryans themselves were outsiders. For Rao the arrival of the Aryans in India is not a source of irritation, while it is in the case of Others, especially the Muslims.

One may argue that the Rao of Kanthapura is not the Rao of The Serpent and the Rope, if only because the two novels are separated by a period of more than two decades. True, but it is equally true that the Rao of the first novel is also the Rao of the second in embryo. If The Serpent and the Rope is a full-blown illustration of

---

93 The Serpent and the Rope came out in 1960 and won the Shahitya Akademi Award of the year.
94 Rao offers an interesting contrast to Rabindranath Tagore. Unlike Tagore, who moved from the lyricism of earlier years to the prose of later years, from the ivory tower of art to the sordid reality of life, from individual longing to collective belonging, from escape to engagement, Rao moves the other way round, from politics to metaphysics, from a half-hearted dalliance with Marxism to a full-fledged
‘Brahminic autocracy,’ its intimations are unmistakable in Kanthapura, especially in its conceptualisation of the Indian nation. 95 It is perfectly in tune with the later development of Rao that the nation in Kanthapura is selective in terms of caste/class, community, and gender. While the ‘fragments’ of the nation Sethi deals with – peasants and women – have at least been recognised as ‘fragments,’ the community of Indian Muslims is not (deemed authentic enough to be) even a ‘fragment’ of the nation Rao envisions in his novel. If the absence of Muslim men and women in the village of Kanthapura is one proof of the exclusionary logic informing the imagining of the nation in Kanthapura, the vilification of Badè Khan, the only Muslim character of any consequence in the novel, is another.

IV. Conclusion
In Inventing India: A History of India in English-Language Fiction, Ralph Crane discusses Rao’s Kanthapura along with E.M. Forster’s A Passage to India and Ruth Prawer Jhabvala’s Heat and Dust in a chapter significantly titled ‘Bridges.’ 96 The grouping is premised on two assumptions. First, the historical period of all the three novels is more or less the same. Secondly, together they offer a comprehensive view of the then India. If Forster’s India is predominantly British, Rao’s is primarily ‘Indian,’ while Jhabvala’s is perhaps both. As Crane reads them, all the three novels are concerned with building bridges (hence the title of the chapter): A Passage to India and Heat and Dust between East and West, while Kanthapura between ‘the various Indian communities.’ 97 Given the communal configuration of the Indian nation-in-the-making in Kanthapura, it is difficult to accept the conclusion Crane draws about the novel. To be true to the spirit of the work in question, one has to admit that the India in Kanthapura is not ‘Indian India’ but Hindu India and that it builds bridges not between ‘the various Indian communities’ but between the various Hindu castes. The nation in Kanthapura is a nation of Hindus, not of Indians.

dedication to Vedanta, from a brief affection for Gandhian ideology to a lasting attachment to whatever Gandhi opposed in Hinduism such as ‘Brahminic autocracy.’ In short, while Tagore grows in humanism and liberalism, Rao in chauvinism and parochialism.

95 K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar gets it right when he argues that ‘Kanthapura, The Serpent and the Rope, and The Cat and Shakespeare make a trilogy, and present a steady progression in Raja Rao’s own sādhanā.’ ‘Literature as Sadhana: A Note on Raja Rao’s The Cat and Shakespeare,’ in Sharma 108.


97 Crane 99.

Herkus Kunčius’ Novel *The Ornament* as a Postmodernist Analysis of Contemporary Lithuanian Society

Diana Jovaišienė

From 1945 up to the restoration of the State of Lithuania in 1990, Lithuanian writers were restricted by Soviet ideological rules. As the country regained independence, Western European literature and literary theory became easily accessible so that it was obvious how far Lithuanian literature had been distanced from newer Western traditions. Gradually, with heavy borrowing from Western examples, new themes and styles of writing emerged, ranging from more mainstream genres of popular literature aimed at commercial success to more serious fiction, characterised by a great deal of intellectualism and aesthetic experimentation.

Contemporary Lithuanian writers have now found themselves able to reject the styles and themes that had been thrust on them by the conventions of socialist realism, while topics that were previously forbidden, including the explicit presentation of violence, sex, sexual minorities, and the aesthetics of brutality, are now eagerly explored. Furthermore, Lithuanian historical events and cultural identity issues are being read in new ways. Many younger writers have embraced postmodernist techniques, using fragmentation and a narrative that lacks continuity. In these novels the contemporary narrators or characters express themselves boldly, no longer feeling any need to serve the political regime; typically, they treat Lithuanian society, even if it is now independent, with a strong degree of irony, an irony which is also self-directed. The individuals depicted in these novels are often frustrated; their unfulfilled expectations result in cynical, grotesque and absurd situations.

Postmodernist techniques probably appeal to many of these writers because they are suited to dealing with social and cultural realities that are also chaotic, change rapidly and offend older Lithuanian beliefs and values.

Herkus Kunčius (born 1965) is one of the best-known of Lithuanian postmodernist authors. The dominant theme in his work is the degradation and devaluation of moral and values in contemporary Lithuanian society. By means of irony and parody, he demythologises the Lithuanian national cultural values that are now being re-formulated and officially propagated, as well as satirising the Lithuanian intelligentsia and elite. Instead, he gives his own interpretations of Lithuanian national icons and symbols. For his explorations of post-Soviet Lithuanian realities, Kunčius uses an abundance of experiments with form and postmodernist strategies, such as intertextuality, montage, fragmented composition and the combination of different genres.

Kunčius grew up in a family of artists: both his parents were soloists in the Kaunas Musical Theatre, and he himself completed a diploma in art history and theory at the Vilnius Art Academy in 1990. Afterwards he worked as an editor for literary magazines. He made his debut as a writer in one of these journals, *Metai*, in 1996, the same year that he published his first novel, *Ir dugnas visada priglaus* (*The Ground Will Always Give Shelter*). He is an exceptionally productive writer, having created two collections of short stories, plays for children and adults, and a number of novels, including *Matka Pitka* (*Matka Pitka*, 1998), *Barbarai šventykloje* (*Barbarians*...
In a Temple, 2001), Ornamentas (The Ornament, 2002), Gaidžių milžinkapis (The Tumulus of Roosters, 2004) and Lietuvis Vilniauje (A Lithuanian in Vilnius, 2011). At present, after long visits to Tbilisi, he is writing a book about Georgia.

In the Lithuanian cultural scene, as with many writers of what can be called elite literature, Kunčius’ position is ambiguous. In one sense, he is a very successful writer: a member of the Lithuanian Writers’ Union, he has no difficulties having his works published and has won many literary awards. On the other hand, the larger reading public does not find his novels attractive. Only one thousand copies are printed, which means that he earns very little from his writing. The disillusioning sense that higher culture is no longer valued in a free market system is evident in his work.

The Ornament (2002), which has been chosen for discussion in this paper, is a postmodernist novel full of self-irony. The main character is GinTarasas, an amber artist, whose name translates as a pun on ‘gintaras’, ‘amber’. The novel has a strange narrative line describing how the hero takes a girl’s jewelled medallion at a dance and accidentally swallows it. He eventually returns it to her, but the jewel is missing. At the same time, he has been going to a dentist and needs gold to have a crown made. Now it turns out that jewels are growing on his teeth, which tempts one of his dentists, a Mr Rostropovič, to steal and smuggle them abroad. However, much of the novel is composed of disconnected character monologues, scenes of erratic actions, descriptions of momentary sensations and pseudo-scholarly material on amber and other things.

This analysis first discusses the postmodernist structuring of the novel; then it looks at the novelist’s use of intertextuality in sub-titles that have little or no connection to the contents of sections. Further, the way in which the respected figure of Mstislav Rostropovich is transformed is examined. Another major example of ironic transformation is the way that a Lithuanian national symbol, amber, is treated. Finally, the notion of the carnivalesque is applied to some episodes in the novel.

The Ornament is not a long novel, only 211 pages, but it is divided by sub-titles into twelve sections of lengths varying from less than one page, like “Paskutinės įkvėpimai” or ‘The Last Inspiration’, which is only one-third of a page, while the Conclusion is just one sentence long, to 68 pages (‘Daug vandens nutekėjo’, ‘Many waters have flowed’). In addition, the longer sections are divided into sub-sections, also with their own titles. Visually, Kunčius puts lecture material that is pseudo-scientific (about the history of amber, for example) in italics, distinguishing it from dialogues, narrative and reflections by characters.

The structural principle of The Ornament is similar to that of montage: except for the narrative of swallowing the medallion, which appears and disappears, the different sections and sub-sections are not arranged in any obvious order. In addition, as a result of combining several literary genres and formats, the novel becomes fragmentary and discontinuous. The author plays with such genres, such as the scientific article (‘The whole truth about construction materials’), a play (‘MANY WATERS HAVE FLOWED’), a pastoral (‘Pastoral’), a chant (‘Chant’), a journal (‘From a country priest’s journal’), a lullaby (‘Lullaby’), a will (‘A piece from Anya’s will’), a lecture (‘Humanism and origin of supernatural. A lecture’), and a poem in couplets (‘Pope’s couplets from a prayer-book published in Regensburg in 1945’).
The text is assembled from mosaic pieces so that logical links, correlations and sequences of events are often hard to follow or are completely lost.

Such narrative fragments compel the reader to focus on momentary sensations experienced while reading, so that the sequential plot line becomes less important than these fleeting sensory perceptions. The Canadian cultural critic Marshall McLuhan asks a rhetorical question: ‘Is it not evident that the moment that sequence yields to the simultaneous, one is in the world of the structure and of configuration?’

This kind of confusion starts with the first pages of the novel, when the narrator expresses his despair in trying to find suitable words for the beginning of The Ornament: ‘Desperation. All efforts to find the necessary words – fruitless. This drives me mad’. (‘Desperacija. Pastangos rasti reikalingus žodžius – bevaisės. Tai mane nervina.’) (emphasis in original) Instead, the reader is offered a number of false beginnings, as the narrator rejects opening sentences imitating Romain Gary, Le Clezio, Henry Miller and Vladimir Nabokov. It is intriguing when he, still undecided how to begin, presents a surprise: the text, he states that he will start from the ending: ‘to save time, I’m just going to jump straight to the end’ (‘taupydamas laiką, šoku tiesiai į pabaigą’) (7; emphasis in original), where there is a ‘big, white, fresh scented, monumental urinal at the bottom of the page’ (‘baltas, gaiviai kvepiantis, monumentalus pisuaras puslapio apačioje’)(7; emphasis in original). Nevertheless, as it turns out, this image is not connected to the real story that follows, either. The narrator makes up his mind how he should have begun the novel only at the very end of the text:

I should have begun like this: In the faraway village of Yarbub, Abou Nasif became a father, when Zuleikha gave birth to two sons – Nabhan and Ashkhat.

O pradėti vertėjo taip: Tolimame Jarbubo kaime Abhu Nasifas susilaukė sūnų Nabghano ir Ashchato, kuriuos pagimdė Zuleicha. (211; emphasis in original)

Again, this has nothing to do with the story of GinTarasas or Lithuania: it seems to deny that what the reader has read has any significance.

Apart from reversing the places of the beginning and ending, the writer seems to be doing the same with many parts of this novel. As they try to make sense of the text, the readers imagine the author sitting at his computer, experimenting with the text by moving its elements around. The possibilities of modern media allow doing this instantly and the number of versions of created texts is enormous, especially when the text has as many sub-sections as The Ornament. Nothing would change if the allegedly historical facts about amber or Pope’s couplets were moved to a different place in the text. These are still just fragments, while the real point of the work seems to remain playing with associations.

Such a writing style can be described as a game in which the writer plays with text fragments. McLuhan describes art not only as a game, but also as ‘an extension of

---

2 Herkus Kunčius, The Ornament (Vilnius: Charibdė, 2002) 7. Further references to this novel will be included in parentheses within the text.
human awareness in contrived and conventional patterns. He suggests that what we felt or saw in one situation can be experienced in a completely new one. A familiar experience is transferred to new forms and contexts, highlighting bland ordinary realities. In this way, different elements of a text that seemingly have no relation can highlight those aspects of others that are invisible at first glance. Only through their interactions does the reader see the points that are essential to the meaning of the novel. The reader has to slow down frequently, perhaps even to stop and think about the meaning of one transition or another. For example, does the ironic piece ‘He. The end of a spiritual circuit’, about a would-be saint, affect the main story? It is a story within a story. Many of the texts are so distanced from each other that readers are completely free to interpret them and play with personal associations.

From the perspective of composition, the novel does not conform to the concept of a traditional novel. Readers will most likely be disappointed if they expect a coherent structure, clear plot twists, or a light, pleasant reading experience. However, the absence of meaning can also be meaningful, if the reader is intrigued, drawn into the text, and encouraged to reflect creatively.

The reader’s creative engagement in the text is also encouraged by the writer’s use of such forms of transtextuality as architectuality, metatextuality, intertextuality, paratextuality, and hypertextuality, as defined by Gérard Genette. Architextuality is apparent in Kunčius’ combination of different literary forms, such as the pastoral, journal, discourse, lecture, lullaby, soap opera, scientific article, and a poem in couplets. Metatextuality appears in the narrator’s reflections on possible beginnings and endings for the novel, as has already been discussed. Furthermore, the novel uses numerous quotes from Nabokov, Hesse, Miller, Gary and Le Clézio. In this way, the text, which is very specifically Lithuanian in many ways, reaches out beyond Lithuanian culture at the same time. Chapter titles often rely on paratextuality; for instance, many refer to well-known writers or works from Western European culture: ‘A dream: Strindberg’s nightmare (colorific)’ (“Sapnas: Strindbergo košmaras (spalvotas)"), Strindberg’s subconsciousness, nightmares, dreams); ‘The pleasure of the text’ (‘Teksto malonumas”, an allusion to Roland Barthes ‘The pleasure of the text’); ‘To Caesar what is Caesar’s’ ("Kas Ciesoriaus Ciesoriui”, a reference to the Bible); ‘The same Kafka’ ("Tas pats Kafka", a reference to the writer Kafka); ‘The Flying Dutchman’ (an allusion to “Skrajojantis Olandas”, a legend and an opera about a cursed ship); ‘Schindler’s List’ (“Shindlerio sąrašas”, a well known film); ‘The truth is out there’ (“Tiesa slypi kažkur anapus”, the phrase familiar from the TV series ‘The X-Files’); and ‘Everything you wanted to know but did not dare to ask’ (“Viskas apie tai, ką norėjote sužinoti, bet nedrįsote paklausti”, a popular book about sex).

There are other references which are clear to Lithuanian readers but would probably mean little or nothing to an English reader: for example, ‘Lolek and Bolek: searching for the future tense’ (“Liolekas ir Bolekas: būsimojo laiko ieškant”, characters from Polish animated cartoons), ‘Guilty without guilt’ (“Be kaltės kalti”, a drama by the Russian dramatist Alexandr Ostrovsky); ‘Nobody wanted to die’ (“Niekas nenorėjo mirti”, a Lithuanian film by director Vytautas Žalakevičius, set after the Second World War); and ‘My nights are brighter than your days’ (“Mano

3 McLuhan 241.
naktys šviesesnės už jūsų dienas”), a version of the title of an erotic Polish novel and film). Although these titles often have no obvious connection to the contents of the chapters they name, their inclusion is an ironic commentary on the enthusiastic absorption of various influences, especially the fashionable Western ones in the period since 1990.

Sometimes, Kunčius’ text engages into a more aggressive relationship with the other texts it exploits. For instance, at one point a character exclaims: ‘Take me and... Take me. Once more! Take me!!! Take me... God, it hurts!’ (“Imkit mane ir ... Paimkit. Dar kartą! Imkit!!! Imkit... Dieve, kaip skauda!”) (75; emphasis in original). The Lithuanian reader will certainly recognize the first three words ‘Take me and….‘ (“Imkit mane ir…” as the opening words from the preface of the first printed Lithuanian book, the Catechism by Martynas Mažvydas, dating to 1547, which begins ‘Take me and read me…” (“Imkit mane ir skaitykit…”). This is part of the Lithuanian national canon, taught in schools and often referred to. In this way, Kunčius provocatively parodies one of the icons of Lithuanian national pride, which for Lithuanners represents the birth of Lithuanian literature and culture.

The most striking example of Kunčius’ attacks on symbols and figures that have a positive association in current Lithuanian nationalism is his satiric use of the name of the famous Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, known also as an active advocate of human rights. Rostropovich has had close ties with Lithuania since 1991, when he organised a fund-raising concert in Spain to support Lithuanian independence, proclaiming on that occasion, ‘Everything connected to Lithuania is dear to me.’ He has paid many visits to Lithuania and since 2003 his charitable fund, Pagalba Lietuvos vaikams (Help for Lithuanian children), works in two directions, providing financial support for children suffering from leukemia and other major diseases, and also funding children with exceptional talents in music, studies or sport. Rostropovich has received more than one national award, including being made a member of the order of the Lithuanian Grand Duke Gediminas in 1995.5

In Kunčius’ novel, however, a character named Professor Mstislav Rostropovich features as a prominent and internationally acclaimed odontologist, proclaimed the Person of 2000, and a university professor, known, however, for his lewd and abusive behavior with the students. Kunčius’ Rostropovich, who is a major character in the narrative, is portrayed not as a courteous, pleasant man going out of his way to help Lithuania regain its position in the free world, but as an alcoholic and manipulative sexual pervert. In one episode, during an examination, the professor locks a female student in the room and starts harassing her:

He needs to unwind, so he unbuttons his clothes and starts showing a tattoo of a jolly dolphin on his private parts.

Jam būtina atsipalaiduoti, todėl jis atsisagsto ir rodo linksmo delfino tatuiruotę intymioje vietoje. (134)

---

5www.bernardinai.lt/archyvas/straipsnis/19291+Rostropovi%C4%8Dius+pagalba+leukemija&cd=3&hl=lt&ct=clnk&gl=lt

Here Rostropovich’s attitude that he can do what he wants is a parody of the cellist Rostropovich as an advocate of freedom. Using his name, Kunčius has a chance to explore the often irresponsible contemporary Lithuanian understanding of personal liberation. Presumably he has chosen the musician for the shock value of this satire; perhaps his own family background in classical music was of significance in this choice.

In The Ornament the much-revered Lithuanian figure of the intellectual is presented as morally ambivalent the figure of the odontologist. The specific object of the writer’s parody is academia and its idealisation. In the novel, Mstislav Rostropovich imitates and simulates his role as a professor. The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard defines simulation as a false depiction of reality that is meant to deceive someone. In our present-day reality, where we become simulants, and simulacrums, Baudrillard analyses the state of education and institutions and reveals their crisis. He claims that ‘The exchange of signs (of knowledge, of culture) in the university between ‘teachers’ and the ‘taught’ has for some time been nothing but a doubled collusion of bitterness and indifference.’ (“Universitete pasikeitimas (žiniojimo, kultūros) ženkla tarp “mokytojų” ir “mokomųjų” jau kurį laiką tėra tam tikras susitarimas, kurį lydi abejingumo kartėlis.”) Even though Baudrillard admits that such a ‘decaying’ university can cause great harm, he does not advise reforming it, but incites its death to further ‘the decay of all society’ (“visos visuomenės puvimą”).

Kunčius also parodies the system of oral examinations, still common in some Lithuanian universities, in a scene in which Professor Rostropovich reluctantly listens to a student’s ‘gibberish’ on dental hygiene, while dreaming about some rest and relaxation (133, 134). A female student is forced to have sex to pass an examination as Rostropovich cares more about satisfying his appetites than about educating students. What the students get from his teaching is also questionable:

Professor Rostropovich has heard some interesting statements from the examinees: the mouth is the prison of speech; a tooth for a tooth – push another one forward.

ir kokių tik naujienų profesorius Rostropovičius neišgirdo iš gzaminuojamųjų: burna – burnos kalėjimas, dantis už dantį – atkišk kitą. (133)

Students become apathetic, since the professor looks uninterested, while examinations are dull formalities, although unavoidable. The author ironises the harassment at the university with a suggestive phrase: ‘The workload at the university is really very unbearable’ (“Isties nepakeliami krūviai universitete”) (134).

Professor Rostropovich also enjoys such pleasures as drinking enormous quantities of champagne and hard liquor, as well as illegally inhaling ether and helium and taking cocaine. His behaviour is not that of a sane mind: at one point in the narrative he plans a murder and readers are told that he has already murdered his previous wives and children; he also commits acts of violence against his neighbours.

---

7 Baudrillard 172.
Sexually his behavior is very provocative: he masturbates in front of other people, proposes that they measure their sex organs, and begs others to sexually satisfy him. His vulgarity and aggressiveness undermine the traditional Lithuanian belief in their cultural and intellectual elite.

In this heavily satirical portrait, Kunčius questions and demystifies the concept of intellectualism and breaks stereotypes. By using irony, he disturbances the hierarchy of values that became commonplace throughout Lithuanian cultural history, especially in regard to the importance of higher education and the role of intellectuals in preserving Lithuanianism. The Professor’s erudite and intellectual features are contrasted with his weaknesses, cruelty, or even animalism. The author’s ambivalent portrayal of the intelligentsia through this figure is often disturbing and thought-provoking.

In a similar way Kunčius takes amber, the dominant image/motif in The Ornament and a Lithuanian national symbol, and presents it in a variety of grotesque situations. The novel abounds in allegedly historical facts about the amber, inserted apparently at random. The main character’s name, GinTarasas, is a formation of two words with very different meanings: ‘GinTaras’ meaning amber, and ‘Tarasas’, a Slavic name, possibly a reference to the novel Taras Bulba (1835) by Nikolai Gogol, about a Cossack colonel who fought for the freedom of his country in the seventeenth century. Gogol’s novel romanticises Cossack battles, and Taras Bulba is seen as a symbol of freedom. Through this intertextual reference, the protagonist and narrator of Kunčius’ novel is endowed with dual implications: he becomes a representative of a Lithuanian symbol with an ironic allusion to a freedom fighter.

Roland Barthes states that a symbol has substance and carries significance, whereas the significant does not possess these qualities on its own. In the case of amber as a symbol, it acquires significance only through its association of the significant and the significate: ‘amber-rock’ and ‘symbol of Lithuania’. But in Kunčius’ novel this significance is demythologised. Instead of continuing the romantic tradition in which amber is poetically referred to as ‘the tears of the Baltic sea’ (“Baltijos jūros ašarų”) (177, 178) and valued as a national icon, amber is described through vulgar references to the color of urine. Kunčius reveals how, for a contemporary consumer society, it has become a mere commodity, writing sarcastically:

_Amber – a noble substance, often the colour of urine, valued for centuries by travelers, jewellers, collectors and the locals. It fascinates and cures. Oh, how much we would lose, if amber vanished from our life! If there were no more amber necklaces, prosthetics, teeth and nails! The world would be so miserable!

_Gintaras – tai tauri, neretai šlapimo spalvos medžiaga, nuo seno vertinama keliautojų, juvelyrų, kolekcionierų, muziejininkų bei vietinių žmonių. Gintaras žavi, keri, gydo. Kiek daug netektume, jei mūsų gyvenime nebūtų gintaro! Jei nebūtų gintarinių karolių, protezų, dantų, nagų! Koks nykus būtų pasaulis! (30; emphasis in original)

8 Roland Barthes, Teksto malonumas (Vilnius: Vaga, 1991) 86.
Kunčius emphasises the utilitarian function of amber. He writes about the history of smuggling amber: ‘It is known that Roman merchants used to hide amber not only in their noses, mouths and ears, but also in their anuses, to avoid customs’ (‘Yra žinoma, kad romėnų prekijai, vengdami muitų, gintarą vežė slėpdami jį ne tik nosies, burnos, ausų ėrtmėse, bet ir išeinamosiose’)(35; emphasis in original), and tells a supposedly real contemporary story about a man from Spain, who hid a piece of amber that weighed around fifteen kilograms in his body. For catching the smuggler, the head of the customs office receives amber earrings, which obviously are of no use to him. This is an ironic way of looking at amber, which is only of monetary value to contemporary Lithuanians.

Continuing his attack on consumerism, the narrator also invents an amber mosaic picture of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Gates of Dawn. A real icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Gates of Dawn in Vilnius has been worshipped for centuries; it is not an amber mosaic, but the reference would be very clear to every Lithuanian. Indeed, in the streets of the Old Town surrounding the shrine, different kitschy pictures using amber are sold to tourists. In the novel during a papal visit to Vilnius, the Mosaic is said to be given to Pope John Paul II, but, the narrator admits, ‘no one will be praying to it in Vatican’ (“kuriai niekas Vatikano saugyklose nesimels”) (55; emphasis in original). Displaced to another country and context, like most such gifts, it will be placed in a storage room and forgotten as merely another meaningless souvenir. The dual Lithuanian symbols, ‘The Blessed Virgin Mary of the Gates of Dawn’ and ‘Amber’, are made to seem irrelevant and unremarkable. In this case, the chapter title ‘The Fate of the Substance’ suggests that amber is nothing more than an everyday object which loses its sacred value in a foreign territory. There is a double demythologisation here: that of the Christian symbol Blessed Virgin Mary of the Gates of Dawn, and of amber, the Lithuanian gold. This passage shows that amber has become just a worthless ‘substance’, a ‘rock’ to a foreigner. The utilitarian function of the amber is emphasised, instead of its sacral conception.

In a very provocative scene the novel takes a highly respected figure of contemporary Lithuanian life, the President of Lithuania, showing him behaving with great disrespect towards the national symbol, referring to it bluntly as a nuisance: ‘The President is clapping particularly loudly, and shouting that he hates amber and amber souvenirs; there is an abundance of which not only at his home, but at the presidential palace as well’ (“Ypač energingai ploja Pezidentas, kuris šaukę nekenčiąs gintarų ir suvenyrų, kurių apstu ne tik jo namuose, bet ir jo vadovaujamame institucijoje”) (177; emphasis in original). Coming from the political head of Lithuania, this negative attitude towards amber as a Lithuanian symbol expresses Kunčius’ opinion that amber, like many iconic objects in Lithuanian culture, is becoming simply another product in a consumer-oriented society.

This scene with the president of the country is only one in a novel which is full of bizarre, abnormal and indeed carnivalesque situations. Mikhail Bakhtin sees the carnival, a sum of the various festivities of the carnival type, as a ‘syncretic pageantry of a ritualistic sort’ (“sinkretine vaizdine apeiginio pobūdžio forma”) transferred in written texts to a literary language. According to Bakhtin, ‘carnivalesque is life drawn out of its usual rut, it is to some extent ‘life turned inside out’ (“gyvenimas

---

9 Mikhail Bachtin, Dostojevskio poetikos problemos (Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 1996) 143.

atvirkščiai”), ‘the reverse side of the world’ (“pasaulis priešingai”).\(^\text{10}\) The usual laws, prohibitions, and restrictions are rejected, while the distance between the people and their rulers disappears and the hierarchic barriers vanish. In Bakhtin’s theory the carnivalesque is a liberating experience, but in The Ornament the strongest feeling aroused by such scenes is more of chaos and disorder.

At the centre of the novel is the festively ambivalent figure of GinTarasas. Looking from the perspective of everyday logic, GinTarasas’ actions and experiences are strange and unusually eccentric: he gets along perfectly well with his lover Dora’s husband, Professor Rostropovich, and does not feel any anger towards his tormentors and extortionists. Even stranger is his behaviour with the medallion, which he swallows at a dance, saying in excuse: ‘I didn’t mean to swallow it’, although it is not normal to take a pendant off someone’s neck and put it into his mouth. He does other bizarre things, like trying to locate gold in his home, even though he did not hide it there. Often his actions are disgusting, like searching for a jewel and a golden dental crown in his faeces.

In the novel the most vivid carnival elements unfold at an eccentric masquerade-orgy attended by the country’s elite, composed of judges, doctors, teachers, members of parliament, lawyers and others. This masquerade-orgy takes place in the famous Amber Museum in the seaside resort of Palanga because it’s convenient; the museum is in a beautiful estate with fine buildings and gardens. To entertain themselves, the participants are trying cocaine, inhaling helium, and even shooting at the museum exhibits; they also engage in hunting down the swans in a wildlife sanctuary and fish in the nearby Curonian Lagoon, using electric shock. The Amber Museum here is a form of the carnival plaza, where people from all social classes, from the President of Lithuania to GinTarasas, an ordinary amber craftsman, mingle with ease. Traditional values related to moral and cultural behaviour are devalued. A particularly vivid episode is that of people gaily shooting at unique exhibits of large pieces of amber that have inclusions, trapped insects and plants in them: ‘The high society is intrigued…[…]… The do-gooder of the world is squirming, doesn’t want to defend the amber – tears of the Baltic sea – anymore’ (“Aukštuomenė intriguota…<…>… Pasaulio teisuliš miustosi, nebennori gintarų – Baltijos jūros ašarų”) (177, 178). During the ball, one ‘do-gooder’, who tries to protect the amber exhibits at which others are shooting, is killed. Simultaneously, the dentist Dora gives birth to twins, but neither of these occurrences causes surprise or alarm. The juxtaposition of birth and death in the novel reflects the emotional essence of the carnivalesque, though in an extreme and satirical way. The text strategy chosen by Kunčius is to use elements of the carnivalesque that allow presenting serious topics about Lithuanian values and culture today in an ironic way.

The masquerade at the Amber Museum is a parody of pompous and extravagant banquets and parties held by the contemporary Lithuanian elite, which are regularly reported in magazines and other media, creating the strong feeling that a new power group has formed since the collapse of the Soviet Union. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘Parodying is the creation of a decrowning double; it is that same ‘world turned inside out’ (“Parodijavimas – tai nuvainikuojančio antrininko

\(^{10}\) Bakhtin 144.
An ironic view of the pastimes of the intelligentsia and the newly formed elite, often going as far as vandalism against treasured cultural institutions, prompts readers to revise their formerly idealistic conceptions of what post-Soviet Lithuanian society would be like.

In The Ornament, Herkus Kunčius radically, sometimes even drastically, erases traditional meanings and suggests new implications for them. However, it would be wrong to state that the novel is completely distanced from traditional values: as in many satirical and ironical works, the notions of proper moral behaviour are culturally present in the reader’s mind, as a context against which the characters’ eccentric behavior can be evaluated. The text stimulates the reader to take a look at Lithuanian identity from a different perspective, and reconsider traditional values in the face of the challenges experienced by contemporary Lithuanian society.

The postmodernist construction of the text and ironic manner of writing in The Ornament allow the writer to produce a satirical image of post-Soviet Lithuania. His experiments with the text offer a new angle, a new form of perception for his readers, in which reality is de-mythologised and meanings associated with national identity are re-composed. The extreme self-directed irony highlights failed hopes and expectations, but also encourages Lithuanian readers to laugh at themselves as opposed to blaming the Soviet past or the influence of current Western culture.

---

11 Bachtin 150.
Typically in fiction, an immigrant character who possesses or develops a transnational identity throughout the course of a literary work is a character with an almost trickster-like ability for adaption. Sometimes a few hard intercultural lessons must be learned, but eventually the character fluidly moulds to the new culture, speaks several languages, celebrates traditions, and behaves like a native in two or more cultural environments. As Sucheng Chan states in the preface to *Chinese Americans and the Politics of Race and Culture*, ‘they revel in their in-betweeness, their hybridity, their flexible citizenship. They are free to shuttle, like astronauts, around the globe.’ Such characters epitomise the ideal, transnational protagonist. Of course, there is the occasional slip up, like Moon Orchid in *The Woman Warrior* who goes crazy from culture shock, but most characters in the end achieve a transnational flexibility. Not so with the characters in Ha Jin’s *A Good Fall*. Because of poverty, discrimination, lack of education and exploitation, many of Ha Jin’s characters fall under the category of immigrants Sucheng Chan refers to as transmigrants. Chan writes, ‘The main beneficiaries of transnationalism are well educated and, in many instances, rich individuals who can work and invest wherever the best opportunities may be found.’ Such people contrast with other migrants, ‘transmigrants: contract workers and people without legal travel documents … who are driven by poverty to risk their lives in order to earn a living outside their countries of origin … necessity, rather than liberty, is the driving force.’

In *A Good Fall* (2009), Ha Jin’s newest collection of short stories, Chinese immigrants who have travelled to, or have long resided in, the Chinatown of Flushing, New York, find the underbelly of transnationalism. Ha Jin’s characters are often poor transmigrants who discover that they continue to be tied to China in restricting ways they did not anticipate, and also realise that they might never be accepted, because of their race and in spite of their successes, as fully American. In some cases, they make extreme attempts to assimilate by physically breaking themselves in order to conform to U.S. notions of what constitutes an American identity. The downside of transnationalism, however, not only affects the transmigrants, but also some of the wealthier, well-educated immigrants whom readers would normally expect to develop a successful and versatile transnational identity.

*A Good Fall* consists of twelve short stories – all set in Flushing, New York. The multiethnic character of Flushing metaphorically parallels the transitional stage of the main characters, all immigrants from China, as they live in the in-between space of having left China, yet not yet having entered mainstream American society. Although not every story ends in despair (a notable exception would be ‘A Composer and His Parakeets’), and some even end on a slightly positive note because of the

---

2 Chan xii.

possibility of a love relationship (such as ‘The House Behind a Weeping Cherry’), on the whole, the characters suffer hardships and become disillusioned with the promise of America. Life in Flushing does not bring the material wealth or the freedom from obligations in China some immigrants are expecting; the new environment imposes its own harsh limitations that often, through crisis, mould a new, and sometimes unwanted, transnational identity for the immigrant.

As an ‘in-between’ place that is located in the U.S. but populated by immigrants who still have ties to their home countries, prefer to eat their home country cuisines, and speak their native languages, Flushing provides an apt setting for Ha Jin’s characters who are in various states of transition from being Chinese to becoming Chinese Americans. As Sheng-mei Ma states in The Deathly Embrace: Orientalism and Asian American Identity, ‘Chinatown, a Western invention embraced by the minority for survival, is the closest a Chinese American can get to China.’³ Many of the characters have names that indicate an American identity coupled with a Chinese heritage, such as Dan Feng, Eileen Min or Elbert Chang, but sometimes Chinese American characters, especially wives or girlfriends, are only given English first names such as Connie, Gina, Sherry or Cindy. These characters with English only names, as one might expect, are often more involved with American culture than those who retain their Chinese names, sometimes to the point where they have rejected their Chinese sensibility, and, consequently, clash with recent immigrants or family visitors from China.

Some characters find comfort in the familiarity of Flushing’s Chinatown, finding in Flushing a sense of inclusion that buffers them from the more frightening cultural differences of New York City. Wanping, a young man in ‘The House Behind a Weeping Cherry,’ rents a room in a brothel. When asked by his landlady to drive prostitutes to their appointments, Wanping replies: ‘All right, I can drive them around in the evenings, but only in Queens and Brooklyn. Manhattan’s too scary.’⁴ Dan Feng, a real estate agent in ‘The Beauty,’ finds in Flushing a connection with China while looking down from his office window at the ‘fruit and vegetable stands under awnings. The sight reminded him of a closing market fair when people were leaving’ (25). Later on in the story, Dan shows a town house to a couple who miss the comfort and familiarity of Chinese food, ‘an old Taiwanese couple who planned to move to Flushing from Switzerland because they could find genuine Chinese food here’ (32). And Dave Hong, a young man hired to tutor a teenage girl in ‘Choice,’ describes the comforting transnational character of the city and the familiarity of its Chinese aspects:

There were more pedestrians in downtown Flushing since the summer started, many of them foreign tourists or visitors from the suburban towns who came to shop or to dine in the small restaurants offering the foods of their left-behind homes. The store signs, most bearing Chinese characters, reminded me of a bustling shopping district in Shenyang. So many immigrants live and work here that you needn’t speak English to get around. (50)

⁴ Ha Jin, A Good Fall: Stories (New York: Pantheon Books, 2009) 197. Further references to this work will be included in parentheses in the text.
The Chinatown in Flushing, for some of the immigrant characters who wander through it, represents a concrete manifestation of their desires for the familiarity of home, while still offering the hope for a new life that comes with residing in the U.S.

Since Flushing offers comfort and a sense of inclusion to some newly arrived Chinese immigrants, some choose never to leave. However, others realise that to participate to a greater extent socially, and even more importantly, financially, in the U.S., they need to leave Flushing’s urban center. Thus Flushing is not only transnational, but also the population is largely transitory, moving in and out of the city. Dave Hong, the young tutor, realises this fact about Flushing:

It was difficult to date someone in Flushing, especially if you wanted a long-term, serious relationship, because most people would work here in the daytime and then return home. Those living here didn’t plan to stay for long. It was as if their current residences were merely a transitory step to someplace else. (54)

So while Flushing may provide an instant feeling of almost being at home in China, the monetary and other life-style possibilities (real and imaginary) that lure an immigrant to the United States are not, for many immigrants, ultimately achievable in Chinatown. While some do manage to get their start in businesses in Chinatown, once they have the finances needed, they expand to other more affluent areas.

As one might expect, immigrants to the U.S. continue to have ties to their homeland cultures. Him Mark Lai states in *Chinese American Transnational Politics*, ‘When immigrants settle abroad, they generally maintain an interest in homeland affairs and often retain some cultural, economic, social, and even political ties.’ Often an immigrant will leave China even if his or her situation in China is not one of hardship, because of the lure of wealth to be found in the U.S. Xiaojian Zhao in her article on immigrants to New York from the Changle region of China, relates the story of a twenty-six-year-old restaurant worker in New York City, explaining why he decided to immigrate:

At that time everyone thought America was the place to get rich. My situation was not bad at home; I had an iron rice-bowl – a job paid by the city government. But my prospects were not so good. … My mother never said that I had to leave, but she kept on telling me so and so had left and so and so had found a job in the United States. For my own future and the future of my family, I decided that going to America would be the best thing to do.6

Zhao also reports that though wages may at first seem sumptuous to newly arrived immigrants, living in the U.S. is costly: ‘they also learned that it was hard to save if they wanted a comfortable place to live.’7

Sometimes the ties to those back home prove to be more inhibiting than comforting. A negative, often unwanted aspect of a transnational identity is the inability to avoid

---

7 Zhao 223.
obligations to those still in China, even as one is struggling to survive in the United States. Obligations to those back home can limit an immigrant character’s choices, keeping him or her in thrall to an unpleasant, possibly even illegal job in order to satisfy the money demands that come from those back home. For the fictional immigrants in Ha Jin’s Flushing, New York, life is hard – harder in some cases then it was back in China. In the opening story, ‘The Bane of the Internet,’ a young woman who has immigrated to the U.S. is hounded through e-mail by her sister who still lives in China and wants to buy a car – an expensive foreign car at that. The woman, who commutes daily from Brooklyn to Flushing for work cannot afford a car for herself, or even a down payment on an apartment.

My family always assumes that I can pick up cash right and left here. No matter how hard I explain, they can’t see how awful my job at a sushi house is. I waitress ten hours a day, seven days a week. My legs are swollen when I punch out at ten p.m. I might never be able to buy an apartment at all. I’m eager to leave my job and start something of my own – a snack bar or a nail salon or a video store. I must save every penny. (5)

In spite of immigrating to the U.S., the young woman retains unwanted ties to China, as she has not succeeded in escaping obligations to those left back home.

A garment worker, Wanping, who as mentioned earlier lives in a brothel, works during the day ironing clothing to be delivered in Manhattan. He wonders how his American dream landed him in his present situation: ‘Who would have thought I’d land in a sweatshop? My parents’ last letter urged me again to go to college. But I couldn’t pass the TOEFL’ (198). Wanping’s brother, still living in China, has just been admitted to veterinary school, and Wanping, as his parents expect of him, has to send three thousand dollars for his brother’s tuition: ‘If only I had learned a trade before coming to the United States, like plumbing, or home renovation, or Qigong. Any job would have been better than ironing clothes’ (198). Wanping is all too aware that although he is expected to send money to his brother, as a veterinarian, his brother’s life will likely be more fulfilling than his own. Like the young woman in ‘The Bane of the Internet,’ in spite of immigrating to the U.S., Wanping retains unwanted obligatory ties to China.

Wanping’s three female roommates, however, face even more hardship than the restaurant or garment industry employees. They work as prostitutes to make enough money for their room and board and to pay off those that helped them get to the U.S. One of the prostitutes, Huong, an ethnically Chinese woman from Vietnam, is badly abused after Wanping drops her off at a hotel to meet a john:

On arrival she had found two men in the suite. They dragged her in before she could back out, and worked her so hard that she felt as if her legs no longer belonged to her. She had to take off her high heels to walk back to the car. She wept all the way home. She was sick the next day but wouldn’t go to a clinic, as she had no health insurance. (203)

Huong wants to quit prostitution, but her parents still control her, even in the U.S. ‘I often dream of going back, but my parents won’t let me. They say that my little brother will join me here eventually. They only want me to send them more money. If only I could jump ship’
In the stories in *A Good Fall*, several characters figuratively sell themselves to succeed in U.S. society, but Huong literally sells her body. The physical abuse she endures serves as a synecdoche for the physical and emotional pain suffered by unwary, poor immigrants at the hands of those who would exploit them. Sucheng Chan addresses these inequalities between economic classes as they affect immigrants, stating, ‘The paradox inherent in transnationalism is that its celebratory stance camouflages underlying realities of immense exploitation, severe suffering, and gross violations of human rights.’

Besides her parents’ insistence that she stay in the U.S., Huong still owes money to the Croc, the Chinese gangster who brought her to the U.S. from Vietnam: ‘I have to pay the Croc two thousand dollars a month. There’s no other way I can make that kind of money. … My parents paid up their fifteen percent in Vietnam, but I still have eighteen thousand to pay’ (215). Huong worries that if she does not pay her debt, harm will come to her family in Vietnam.

According to Xiaojian Zhao in ‘The “Spirit of Changle”: Constructing a Chinese Identity in New York,’ Huong’s large debt to those who smuggled her into the U.S. is not unusual: ‘It cost in U.S. currency about $20,000 per person in the late 1980s and $30,000 in the early 1990s to be smuggled into the United States. By 2004, the price had risen to $80,000, a 300 percent increase over twenty years.’ The agents who assist Chinese immigrants with entering the U.S. illegally, such as the Croc, are referred to as snakeheads (*shetou*). In *The Lucky Ones*, a book on the formation of Chinese America, Mae Ngai writes about a notorious snakehead who smuggled illegal immigrants into Queens, New York, who is now serving thirty-five years in prison: ‘One of the most famous snakeheads is a woman named Cheng Chui-Ping, a Fujianese immigrant in New York’s Chinatown who reportedly amassed $40 million from smuggling immigrants into the United States in the 1980s and 1990s.’

Other characters in *A Good Fall* also worry about harm coming to their families back in China because of actions they commit in the United States. In ‘The Beauty,’ for example, Dan threatens to make public Fooming’s membership in the Communist Party, an accusation that would cause Fooming to be deported. Fooming begs Dan not to expose him, claiming he would renounce the Communist Party, as Dan has, but ‘for fear of ruining his sibling’s lives in China’ (48). For many characters, obligations to those left in China reach forcefully into their American lives and keep them trapped in oppressive circumstances with little hope for a brighter future.

In ‘Temporary Love,’ we find another story about reinventing oneself and trying to break away from obligations to those in China. Lina and Panbin are immigrants living in Flushing while their spouses both still live in China. They form a living arrangement they refer to as ‘a wartime couple,’ a relationship ‘referring to those men and women who, unable to bring their spouses to America, cohabit for the time being to comfort each other and also to reduce living expenses’ (175). In spite of being married to other people, Lina and Panbin sleep together and live as a married couple, taking advantage of the fact that they are unknowns in the U.S. and no one knows or seems to care about their business. Although Lina

---

8 Chan xii.
9 Zhao 221.
accepts that they will have to separate once their spouses arrive, Panbin falls in love with Lina and wants her to divorce her husband, although he is unwilling to divorce his wife because of his son. Although Lina is also fond of Panbin, she has a more practical approach to the responsibilities of marriage: ‘What we’ve done is wrong, and we ought to mend our ways, the sooner the better. … I must take my heart back and tame it before Zuming comes. … This has little to do with love. I’ll try to be a good wife to him’ (179). When Zuming arrives, Lina finds out that he knows all about her living with Panbin, and Panbin’s wife learns of the affair as well. They both underestimated the transnational reach of gossip. Panbin’s wife divorces him, but when Lina considers going back to Panbin, he wants nothing more to do with her. He blames their break-up on Lina’s excessive, in his opinion, concern over relatives back in China: ‘From now on I won’t date a Chinese woman again. Just sick of it – every Chinese has so much baggage of the past, too heavy for me to share and carry. I want to live freely and fearlessly with nothing to do with the past’ (193). To avoid such a problem happening again, Panbin intends to start a relationship with a Ukrainian woman he has met on the internet. Panbin fails to realise that one’s past is an inherent part of who one is. Although an individual can change the country in which he or she lives, the immigrant’s identity is transnational, and ties to the home country will always remain – some comforting, others vexing. As the young woman in ‘The Bane of the Internet’ discovers, family ties can reach across long distances: ‘I used to believe that in the United States you could always reshape your relationships with the people back home – you could restart your life on your own terms. But the Internet has spoiled everything – my family is able to get hold of me whenever they like. They might as well live nearby’ (5-6).

The restaurant and garment industries provide jobs for newly arrived immigrants because they only need to speak Chinese and, in restaurants, they are familiar with the cuisine. But, because the workers have few alternative options, working conditions are harsh and wages are low. With little opportunity to better their circumstances, these backbreaking jobs all too often reflect the immigrants’ broken hopes, especially when they encounter discrimination based not only on race, but also on class. Hongfan Wang in ‘Shame’ was advised by his professor to see New York if he ‘wanted to understand America’ (121). As Hongfan works delivering material to sweatshops and finished goods to upscale stores in Manhattan, he gets a good glimpse at the class structure of the urban U.S. As Hongfan discovers, the poor garment laborers work under difficult conditions, yet painstakingly care for the finished garments so they will be in optimum condition for consumption by the rich. Hongfan’s delivery schedule clearly illustrates the exclusion of the poor from the ‘good life’ and serves as an analogy to the broader inequalities in the economic class structure of the U.S.

A few characters in A Good Fall do well financially and socially, especially if they have learned English, and would not be considered transmigrants. But, even English and a good job are no guarantees of success in the U.S., because a character cannot distance him or herself from a Chinese identity. Being visibly Chinese in a race-conscious society can forever peg a character as a ‘foreigner,’ no matter how long the character and his or her ancestors have resided in the U.S. Rusheng Tang, an English professor up for tenure in the story ‘An English Professor,’ nearly suffers a mental collapse when he realises he signed his letter to the department tenure committee, ‘Respectly yours’ (140). Rusheng obsesses over his error:

People wouldn’t treat it as a mere typo or slip. It was a glaring solecism that indicated...
his incompetence in English. If he were in science or sociology or even comparative literature, the consequences of the mistake would have been less dire. But for an English professor, this was unforgivable, regardless of his sophisticated use of various methodologies to analyze a literary text. (140)

The implication of ‘An English Professor’ is that no matter what his or her accomplishments, a Chinese immigrant can never escape the perception of his or her ‘otherness,’ a perception that perpetually connects him or her with China. At any moment he or she could be tripped up by a simple mistake — one that would not be made by a native speaker — and a minor infraction of language or decorum could lead to disaster. Even Rusheng Tang’s name serves to underscore his omnipresent Chinese identity and perpetuates the stereotype of a Chinese American as still locked into an exotic and foreign past. His last name, Tang, calls to mind the name of the classic Chinese Tang dynasty (618-906 A.D.), one of traditional China’s most glorious periods, and his first name, Rusheng, at least as a homophone, indicates a student of Confucianism. So in spite of his efforts to excel in American society, Rusheng remains marked as ‘foreign’ by his language mistakes, his physiology, and his historic name.

Dan Feng, the real estate agent in ‘The Beauty,’ demonstrates how prosperity can mould an assimilated identity that separates one from his or her Chineseness. Dan sees himself as completely Americanised, but he has drawn from some of the worst traits in American culture. He puts great value in physical beauty and looks down on the Chinese immigrants living in Flushing. He is materialistic and dreams of getting a home in Forest Hills, an upscale residential area.

Although quite thoroughly Americanised, aspects of China intrude upon Dan’s life in ways that even he does not realise. His wife, Gina, is known as a beauty in the community. To his chagrin, however, their daughter, Jasmine, is homely, which leads Dan to consider that his daughter may not be his: ‘Their baby was homely, with thin eyes and a wide mouth, and took after neither Gina nor himself. Gina was tall and lissome, having a straight nose, double-lidded eyes, a delicate mouth, and silken skin’ (28). Although Gina is of Chinese heritage, some of her ‘good-looking’ features resemble Caucasian traits, especially the straight nose and double-lidded eyes. Possibly her daughter Jasmine might have been considered homely even if she were born in China, but unfortunately, looked at with the Caucasian standard of beauty her parents admire, she cannot help but fall short.

The real problem with Jasmine, however, seems to be that her looks remind her father of his Chinese heritage, which he has come to see as ugly. He wants to avoid connection with his heritage and, therefore, imagines that his wife has been unfaithful and the child has no connection with him. For Dan, Jasmine is a ‘racial shadow,’ defined by Sau-ling Cynthia Wong as a phenomenon that occurs in Asian American literature when a highly assimilated American-born Asian is troubled by a version of himself/herself that serves as a reminder of disowned Asian descent. The racial shadow draws out mixed feelings of revulsion and sympathy from the protagonist, usually compelling a painful reassessment of the behavioral code which has thus far appeared to augur full acceptance into American society. 11

Although Dan was not born in the U.S., the ‘racial shadow’ phenomenon fits his relationship to his daughter. When Dan discovers that his wife has had plastic surgery in order to look the way she does, he must accept that Jasmine is his, and in turn, that he is still of Chinese heritage regardless of how Americanised he has become. Dan’s daughter forces upon him an unwanted transnational identity, whereas Dan would prefer to be accepted as fully mainstream American.

After the crisis of discovering his wife’s secret, life returns somewhat back to normal, but Dan’s acceptance of his heritage is still reluctant, as shown by the fact that he can no longer fully accept his wife because of her original ‘homely’ features, nor his daughter because of her appearance. He stays away from home more, and finds pleasure instead with the female masseuses in the bathhouse. Dan has attempted to fulfill U.S. society’s expectation of assimilation into the mainstream, but at a high cost. He has had to distance himself from his own wife and daughter, because they symbolically embody the Chineseness he himself has sought to erase.

Although Dan’s reinvention of himself as an American takes assimilation to the extreme, other characters, even more drastically, reinvent themselves when they come to the U.S. by physically cutting or breaking themselves. Dan’s wife, Gina, literally reforms herself physically by undergoing plastic surgery to make her look more appealing according to a Caucasian standard of beauty. She also changes her name in order to distance herself from her past. When Dan accuses her of deceiving herself, she answers, ‘No. I love my beauty. It’s the best thing America gave me’ (45). Explaining her name change, she says, ‘I felt I became a new person and wanted to start afresh’ (46).

The grandchildren in ‘Children as Enemies,’ also seek to change their names, wanting to seem more American. They complain the English-speaking children cannot pronounce their names. The boy, Qigan, says, ‘Lots of them call me “Chicken”… If I didn’t come from China, I’d say “Chicken” too.’ The girl, Hua, complains, ‘Nobody can say it right and some call me “Wow”’ (77). The ridicule has caused a crisis in the children’s lives, and they seek to resolve the dilemma by changing their names in hopes of changing themselves enough to gain acceptance by their peers. Qigan becomes ‘Matt’ and Hua becomes ‘Flora,’ much to their grandparents’ dismay. Although the parents accept the new names, and even help the children rename themselves, the grandparents, quite accurately, see the change as a rejection of them and of their heritage.

The reader might criticise Dan and Gina in ‘The Beauty’ or the grandchildren in ‘Children as Enemies’ for turning their backs on their Chinese heritage, but their attitudes must be viewed against the backdrop of a U.S. society that has a history of, and continues to, look upon Chinese Americans as unassimilable foreigners. In Chinese American Transnational Politics, Him Mark Lai writes about historical discriminatory laws in the United States aimed at cutting-off or severely restricting Chinese immigration:

The Chinese in America encountered white racism soon after they first arrived in California in large numbers. Local, state, and federal governments also demonstrated unwillingness to accept Chinese people as equal partners in American society through the passage of discriminatory laws. In 1882 this hostility culminated in the passage of the first Chinese Exclusion Act. For the next sixty-one years, Chinese faced highly restrictive entry conditions and, regardless of social class and place of birth, were
often subjected to prejudice and discrimination in America.\textsuperscript{12}

Although there has been fundamental change in racist attitudes against the Chinese in the United States since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, attitudes toward Chinese Americans still put them in an untenable position. As Andrea Louie writes in her chapter titled ‘Searching for Roots in Contemporary China and Chinese America,’ ‘On the one hand, the assimilation model prescribes that Chinese Americans must identify strongly with their U.S. roots; on the other hand, racial politics codes them as perpetual foreigners.’\textsuperscript{13} Louie continues this line of analysis in her book, \textit{Chineseness across Borders: Renegotiating Chinese Identities in China and the United States}. In this book she not only reiterates that ‘American-born Chinese Americans are defined within U.S. society through their Chineseness,’ and that ‘they are cast as perpetual foreigners,’ but also makes the case that ‘achieving status as a true “American” is attached to racial and class background in addition to legal citizenship.’\textsuperscript{14} Therefore, in conjunction with race, social class plays a significant role in the type of transnational identity an immigrant will be able to form, because class also influences how other citizens of the U.S. view Chinese immigrants, or even long-time Chinese American citizens, in regard to belonging within American society. The current Multicultural trends in the U.S. further complicate the issue of a Chinese American defining him or herself as ‘American’ by demanding that Chinese Americans not only fully embrace being American, but, contrarily, ‘they are [also] expected to have and display their Chinese “culture” in this era of multiculturalism.’\textsuperscript{15} The effect of these contrary expectations puts both Chinese immigrants and Chinese American citizens into an identity quandary:

Chinese American culture is defined within U.S. multicultural politics as a form of inherent and immutable difference from U.S. mainstream culture, whatever that might be. Chinese immigrants have been portrayed as unassimilable and incapable of being democratic or civilized. They have thus been marginalized and excluded from mainstream American society and its political, economic, and cultural realms. An emphasis on such inherent differences is used to criticize Chinese Americans as ‘less American,’ while at the same time forcing them to adhere to China and Chinese culture, about which they know little.\textsuperscript{16}

While most of the stories in \textit{A Good Fall} chronicle the hardships of life for immigrants in the U.S., perhaps worst off in the collection of characters is Ganchin, the protagonist of the title story ‘A Good Fall.’ Ganchin, a monk from a Gaolin Temple in China, works as a kung fu instructor in a temple in Flushing. Despite working at the temple for more than two years, Ganchin has never been paid his salary. He becomes sick, and the temple head, Master Zong, fires him for no longer being able to perform his job. When he asks Zong for his money, Zong replies, ‘We’ve provided lodging and board for you. This is New York,

\textsuperscript{12} Lai 52.
\textsuperscript{15} Louie, \textit{Chineseness} 24.
\textsuperscript{16} Louie, Searching 203.
where everything is expensive. As a matter of fact, we paid you a lot more than fifteen hundred a month' (222). Zong also retains Ganchin’s passport, saying, ‘I can’t let you have your papers if you stay on illegally. From now on you’re on your own, and you must move out tomorrow. I don’t care where you go. Your visa has expired and you’re already an illegal alien, a lawbreaker’ (222). Too ashamed to return home without money, Ganchin is stuck without means and with no place to go.

Ganchin reinvents himself out of necessity and, ultimately, by accident. His changes are at first gradual. After being kicked out of the temple by Master Zong and left destitute, he talks to his friend, Cindy, an American born Chinese. Cindy asks Ganchin, ‘Why not return to this earthly life?’ (224). Ganchin, unable to consider any occupation other than being a monk, replies, ‘But I’ve never worked outside a temple and don’t have any skill. I’m useless here.’ Cindy suggests that he continue teaching martial arts outside of the temple, but Ganchin says, ‘for that I’ll have to know some English, won’t I?’ (225). He is unable at this early stage in his misfortune to conceive of changing himself. Slowly, though, he begins to make compromises necessary for his survival. He begins to eat meat and seafood, because ‘it was hard to remain vegetarian when he had no idea where he would have his next meal,’ and he has to rely on leftovers his friend brings him from a restaurant (227). Although Cindy seems overly optimistic about the U.S., as her Americanised name would imply, she continues to encourage Ganchin to change: ‘You can always change. This is America, where it’s never too late to turn over a new page. … Except for the Indians, nobody’s really a native in the United States. You mustn’t think of yourself as a stranger – this country belongs to you if you live and work here’ (231). More realistic than Cindy, Ganchin resents the lies he was told about the opportunities he would find in America without revealing the hardships. He resolves that if he ever returned to China ‘he would tell the truth – the American type of success was not for everyone. You must learn how to sell yourself there and must change yourself to live a new life’ (232).

As a result of his desperate situation, Ganchin makes the decision to commit suicide. In an airport bathroom, after escaping an attempt by Master Zong to deport him against his will, Ganchin throws his monk robe into a trash can. He leaves a message for Master Zong at the temple, telling him to ‘say prayers and make offerings for my soul tomorrow morning before sunrise,’ indicating his intent to kill himself (235). He attempts suicide by jumping off of a five-story building:

He started running, up and up, until he hurled himself into the air. As he was falling facedown, somehow all the years of training in martial arts at once possessed him. His body instinctively adjusted itself and even his arms spread out, swinging to ensure that he wouldn’t hurt himself fatally. With a thump his feet landed on the ground. ‘Ow!’ he yelled, thunderstruck that he had just cheated death. A tearing pain shot up from his left thigh while his right leg twitched. (238-39)

Doctors, media people, charities, lawyers and politicians all rush to Ganchin’s aid, suing the temple and turning Ganchin into a celebrity. His attorney, Mr. Mah, ironically states, ‘This is America … a land ruled by law, and nobody is entitled to abuse others with impunity’ (240). This statement is only true for Ganchin, of course, after he becomes a known celebrity. As a poor, destitute and abused illegal immigrant, Ganchin was on his own. Now because of his fame, Ganchin will avoid deportation, be granted asylum, and perhaps marry a citizen. He

will be rich. Ganchin has accidently found a way to ‘sell himself.’ The disturbing conclusion, however, indicates that in order to succeed in mainstream America, Ganchin does not just have to change; he has to break himself, literally smash up who he used to be. He survives the fall with help from his Chinese martial arts skills (as he briefly plays the role of a stereotypical Chinese hero), and he sells his story.

The story of Ganchin and the evil Master Zong at first seems to fall into an Orientalist pattern of portraying the Chinese. Sheng-mei Ma in *The Deathly Embrace* comments on such portrayals, writing, ‘Such comic strips as *Flash Gordon* and *Terry and the Pirates*, featuring contradictions of the evil Fu Manchu and the farcical, virtuous Charlie Chan…set up the naked prototype of Orientalist embrace: demonisation and domestication of the other.’

While the story ‘A Good Fall’ does demonise Master Zong, and Ganchin is eventually ‘domesticated,’ what stands out most in the story is the hypocrisy of American society in first ignoring the plight of the exploited immigrant, and then profiting from the immigrant’s story, selling it as a lucrative commodity.

A transnational identity, as has been shown, is not the panacea for fictional characters in a globalised world. While some, with high levels of education and resources, do become well-adapted, flexible, bicultural citizens, many flounder both financially and culturally. Those who are poor and uneducated can become trapped, overburdened by obligations to those back in China, thus proving easy targets for exploitation. Those who do reinvent themselves, become bicultural, and pursue financial well being, find that even apparent success does not guarantee full acceptance within U.S. society – leading some to try drastic physical alterations in order to assimilate. Despite developing a transnational identity, many successful immigrants, such as Dan Feng and Professor Tang, live with the fear that at any moment he or she could be exposed as the unassimilable ‘other.’

---

17 Ma xx.
Alexander Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock* is a legend of the rape of a woman named Belinda. But with this there is entwined another story of rape, that is, the ravishing of the British Empire, the metaphorical female. Whereas the real female figure is active in the epic, the metaphorical female is passively present in its gorgeous setting, laden with the prizes of the imperial excursions during the first phase of the British Empire. As Belinda becomes an object of desire because of her ornamented locks, so does the British Empire, the female land-body, because of her precious treasures. This indicates that to the patriarchy and its by-product, imperialism, female – whether it is real or metaphorical – is the object to be desired and possessed. And as the objects of that masculine desire woman and the Empire have the same doom – rape. The paper, accordingly, argues that the ornamented locks of Belinda and the treasures from the Empire function as synecdoche and the seizure of the locks means brutal violation of the Empire. Consequently Belinda and the Empire become interchangeable, and this identical identity offers a rereading of the epic as a model for patriarchal and colonial dominance.

The term ‘lock’ in *The Rape of the Lock*, since its inception, has been bearing a bundle of meanings to many critics, as Murray Cohen describes in his ‘Versions of the Lock: Readers of *The Rape of the Lock*’: ‘For less limiting readers, the lock signifies a symbol of the war of the sexes, and the poem represents either Belinda’s husband seeking or continuing coquetry. Critics have seen the lock as a sign of “immoderate female pride,” a totemic object, a soft and sensuous symbol of a golden world, a fertility symbol, an immortalized star envied by all belles; and interpreted the poem as a version of the fortunate fall, a “vision of a world emporium,” a diverting attack on the vices of private life.’

I am interpreting the lock as the supplies from the Empire equivocating Belinda and the Empire in three ways. Firstly, treating the seized and possessed materials through colonisation, present in the backdrop of the poem, as a synecdoche like the synecdoche lock; secondly, using the famous trope of genderisation of the far-flung attractive lands as feminine in the colonial relationship; finally, through the politics of representation camouflaged in the Game of Ombre episode. In consequence Belinda becomes an emblem of the colonised and controlled

---

1. The poem quoted is cited from ‘Firth Things First: Problems of a Feminist Approach to African Literature’ by Kirsten Holst Petersen, published in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft et al (London and New York: Routledge, 2003). It indicates the similarity of the condition of women both in West, governed by male authority, and in the colonised world, ruled by the colonisers. Here it refers to the similarity of Belinda and The Empire, the metaphorical female, expressed in the words ‘you’ and ‘I’ respectively.
world suffering under an oppressive superior power. I have divided my discussion into two parts. Firstly I will highlight the setting, taking into account the history of the First British Empire, and then focus on the resemblance between patriarchal and imperial thoughts. In the second part, I will support my analysis with reference to the text.

Part I
The epic is set against the backdrop of London metropolis ‘made of gauze and silver spangles’, in William Hazlitt’s phrase. Here everything is shining, shimmering and glittering. Both private and public life – the huge decorated mansion of Belinda, the barge on the Thames and the court Hampton – are full of the trappings of an extravagant and comfortable way of life. Like G. Wilson Knight, We feel that this society is ‘eminently desirable’ and the description wafts us away to the world of Belinda. At first we intrude into the belle’s palace where she is enjoying a peaceful, sound sleep. It is a palace with ‘Queen Anne’ features which include enormous sash-windows with large glass panes, broad panels, and high-roofed well-ventilated rooms and separate attached dressing parlour. In terms of interior design, there are blue and white jars in paneled recesses, a tall grandfather clock with lacquered work against the wall, lacquered furniture such as chests, cabinets, tables, screens to prevent heat from the fireplace, a soft bed with downy pillows and curtains around the bed enclosing it as a separate realm, ‘numerous wax-lights in bright order’ to ‘blaze, (3: 168)’ wooden work in Mahogany, finer furniture with cabriole and long mirrors in the dressing room. Hampton Court is also a huge palace with ‘majestic frame’ (3: 3) surrounded by the Thames River and meadows with flowers all the year round. Here we see the use of china porcelain crockery, shining spoons, ‘altars of Japan’ (3: 107) – that is, small, lacquered tables – silver lamp, ‘silver spouts’ (3: 109)– that is, kettles – ‘rich china vessels’ (3: 159), a watch with silver sound, and ‘the glittering forfex’ (3: 147) in ‘shining case’ (3: 128) for both daily necessity and decorative purposes.

We also witness Belinda in her luxurious personal beauty parlour doing her ‘sacred rites of pride’ (1: 128). This episode provides information about the manner of Belinda’s grooming. Yet the whole poem here and there alludes to her precious ornaments and cosmetics. She is revealed as the product of her cosmetics. Then she wears a white gown ‘consisted of a bodice and skirt joined together, with the skirt open in front to reveal’ the silk or brocade or damask or satin petticoat, and ‘a sparkling cross’ (2: 7) on her breast. She is now before ‘unnumbered treasures’ (1: 129) that are captured in silver vases. This world of ‘cosmetic powers’ (1: 124) is an arena of caskets, vials, and boxes. They contain perfumes, lotions, gel, pomatum,

---

patches, rouge, lipsticks, ivory and tortoise shell combs and jewellery for every part of the body such as pins, pendant, brooches, necklace, bodkins, rings, earrings. The most attractive part of her beauty is her locks which are decorated with ‘shining ringlets’ gracefully hanging over her ‘smooth ivory neck’ (2: 22).

The young men of this world are also smart and fashionable, wearing clothes of silk and linen, having adornments like wigs, coronets, rings, swords and canes, and are habituated to taking snuff and tobacco.

Then comes the matter of drinking, which makes the rich life of the rich richest. We experience aural, visual and tactile sensations visualizing coffee as ‘the grateful liquor’ which is coming out of the ‘silver spout’ (3: 109) with smoky tide into the China cup. Liquid chocolate is frothing like a trembling sea, and tea is served in between the serious discussion of state affairs. These liquors add grandeur to the dazzling life of Pope’s poetic world where every day is for beautification, each hour is for ceremony and each minute is for gossiping, flirtation and social hullabalo. But Pope, in spite of his fascination with this world, remained unsure about the nature of his epic: ‘People who would rather it were let alone laugh at it, and seem heartily merry, at the same time that they are uneasy. ’Tis a sort of writing very like tickling’. Richard Kroll very recently in his ‘Pope and Drugs: The Pharmacology of The Rape of the Lock’ pinpoints this indecisiveness, arguing that Pope both celebrates and criticises his poem’s consumerist society. ‘It is a society his poem does not totemize but views dialectically.’ This makes me pause and think about the epic, and to say, with a slight modification of Laura Claridge’s words, ‘As a postcolonial reader, I should have trouble enjoying The Rape of the Lock,’ (my emphasis).

This stunning enrichment of the setting of Rape provokes us to take into account a particular history of the world, that of today’s third world which became the whiteman’s burden because of its ‘wealth, sweetness, glory’ and ‘cultural backwardness’. As postcolonial criticism weighs up history in evaluating any literary texts, I am using the history of the First British Empire as ‘the central reference point’ in my analysis of the setting of the poem and thereafter. Moreover, in the reading and realisation of late seventeenth-and eighteenth-century literature, the history of imperialism must be reflected on. Suvir Kaul in his Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Postcolonial Studies says: ‘these literary texts are a wonderful archive for any analysis of the connections between the idea of 'English Literature' (that is, a national literature), nation-formation and the making of the British Empire.’ Laura Brown in her Alexander Pope claims that Pope’s work is not only

---

related to history, but ‘History is Pope’s poetry, in the sense that these poems construct a version of history for their age’.\textsuperscript{15}

The First British Empire began to shape from the late fifteenth century, reaches its height in the mid-eighteenth century and ended with the Industrial Revolution and the war of American Independence. It was protectionist in strategy with objectives such as a balanced business policy leading to future monopoly, forceful control and gathering of precious materials and production, backing up of home industry, and rivalry with the other competing imperial powers such as Spain, Holland and France. During the Elizabethan and Jacobean period imperial enterprise included patronisation and encouragement of the raiding of the Spanish ships, establishment of the settlement in North America and formation of trading companies to do business in the Levant, Turkey, Morocco and the East Indies. Oliver Cromwell gave it impetus through his ‘Western Design’, adding Jamaica, Barbados, and Montserrat to England’s possessions., And after the formation of Great Britain in the eighteenth century, consolidating Scotland, Ireland, Wales and England, the Empire became robust and vigorous under the aegis of the military force.\textsuperscript{16} Consequently, during the reign of Queen Anne, England was on the way to prosperity with ‘a healthy national life in which town and country, agriculture, industry, and commerce were harmonious parts of a single economic system.’\textsuperscript{17} London was the centre of this trade, as Richard Kroll argues, since the Englishmen regarded the world trade as their prerogative. Using Harveian theory of the body natural, in which the heart as centre circulates the blood all through the body, commercial philosophy used to explain London as the heart, the Thames the artery, England the body politic, and trade the blood. And this trade established ‘One commonwealth,’ the healthy Empire which ‘shall no Limits know, / But like the Sea in boundless Circles flow.’\textsuperscript{18} This economic stability that caused England to move unknowingly towards the Industrial Revolution. Hobsbawm claims that if Britain had not possessed the colonies, the Industrial Revolution could not have occurred, because its home market had less to offer in comparison with the offerings of the Empire.\textsuperscript{19} In The Spectator no.69, Joseph Addison expresses the same notion in this way:

\begin{quote}
If we consider our own Country in its natural Prospect, without any of Benefits and Advantages of Commerce, what a barren uncomfortable spot of Earth falls to our Share! Natural Historians tell us, that no Fruit grows originally among us, […] Our ships are laden with the Harvest of every Climate: Our Tables are stored with spices, and oils and Wines: Our Rooms are filled with Pyramids of China, and adorned with the Workmanship of Japan: […] Nature indeed furnishes us with the bare Necessaries of Life, but Traffic gives us a Variety of what is Useful, and at the same time supplies us with everything that is Convenient and Ornamental.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[16] Kaul 15-18.
\item[17] Trevelyan 309.
\item[19] Quoted in Ashcroft et al 125.
\item[20] Quoted in Kaul 91.
\end{footnotes}

Umme Salma. ‘Woman and the Empire in Alexander Pope’s The Rape of the Lock: a rereading.’ 
\textit{Transnational Literature} Vol. 4 no. 1, November 2011.
\url{http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html}
So it can be assumed that the Empire was the Treasure Island that ‘has long produced great treasures of foods, minerals and other natural resources. That is why the Europeans went through all the trouble to steal and plunder them.’

Most of the cosmetics, jewellery, comfort items and drinks we encounter in the setting of the Rape come from the Empire. England was changing perceptibly with its ‘splendid bazaar’ overseas due to the Atlantic and the Asian routes – ‘to have your finger on the national pulse was to feel a domestic diastole as well as an international systole.’ The first English ship with a cargo of Indian textiles, spices and indigo sailed from Surat in 1615. Because of the lack of demand for coarse English cloth in the tropical countries, the Company in the reign of Elizabeth I started bringing home huge amounts of silver and gold after every voyage by selling the coins of England. Accordingly, by 1621 the company exported £100000 bullion and imported wares worth five times that from the Orient. The country consumed only a quarter of them and the remaining was sold at a higher price in foreign countries. The textile industry in Bengal supplied cotton and muslin which met worldwide demands for raw silks and cheap, light-weight fabrics for dresses and furnishings. Suvin Kaul says in the one hand there was an outpouring of travelogues, poems, and fictions about the Empire, and on the other, valuable foreign imports quickly changed the vogue, fashion and taste of the English. Chinese aesthetics and chinoiserie changed the decoration of homes and gardens. ‘Spices from India and south-east Asia, tea from China, chocolate from America, and sugar from Caribbean plantations flavoured tastes; imported cottons, calico, silks and textile dyes altered clothing; rum and tobacco offered addictive pleasures.’

A catalogue of foreign commodities – specifically that for female consumption – comes from J. Jocelyn in 1718: ‘salt-petre, Indigo, Muslins, Cotton-Yarn, Cotton-Wool, Ereny-Yarn, Florett-Yarn, Herba Taffaties, Herba Longees and Callicoes, besides Diamonds, Drugs and Spices.’ And the ‘Antiquity and Honorableness of the Practice of Merchandise’ (1744), a mercantilist sermon of the period, compares England to the biblical trade centre of Tyre, where ‘fleets brought…all the useful and rare commodities of the then known world…silver, iron, tin, lead, brass, slaves, horses, mules, ivory, ebony, emeralds, purple, embroidery, fine linen,… precious cloaths, lambs, rams, goats, spices, precious stones, gold, blue cloaths and rich apparel.’ Michael Parenti also highlights this process of expropriation of the natural resources of the Empire in this way:

first, the colonizers extracted gold, silver, furs, silks and spices, then flax, hemp, timber, molasses, sugar, rum, rubber, tobacco, calico, cocoa, cotton, copper, coal, palm oil, tin, iron, ivory, ebony, and later on, oil, zinc, manganese, mercury, platinum, cobalt, bauxite, aluminum, and uranium. Not

21Parenti 4.
22 James Joyce, Dublinders (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956) 32.
23Kaul 108
24Kaul 14.
25Quoted in Brown 11.
26Quoted in Brown 11.
to be overlooked is that most hellish of all expropriations: the abduction of millions of human beings into slave labour.  

The liquors along with tobacco, of which the characters in the epic are fond, were known in Pope’s contemporary world as the ‘exotic liquors or opiates.’ Some addressed coffee as the ‘“Turkish Enchantress” as dark as the styx.’ In spite of the presence of a dialectic attitude towards these as to their harmful affect as drugs on the nation, Englishmen welcomed the supply of the East India Company from the East:

Trade, which connects each distant shore, […]
Add Chinese Tea to crown their boards;
Coffee of Moca, which bestows
Tranquility and calm repose;
And the black Indian bev’ride fam’d,
Ambrosia by the Spaniard nam’d.  

G.M. Trevelyan also expresses his joy at having these drinks in England: ‘Thanks to the East India Company’s great ships, not only tea but coffee was now a usual drink at least among the wealthier classes.’ Though Defoe, as well as many thinkers, viewed these foreign substances with suspicion, concerned at their promotion of vice and luxury in society, he acknowledged them as ‘the capital Branches of the Nations Commerce.’ Moreover, snuff was supplied by the capture of Spanish ships by bold English pirates. Thus ‘by the time of Queen Anne, the East Indian trade had materially altered the drink, the habits of social intercourse, the dress, and the artistic taste of the well-to-do classes among her subjects.’ It is clear that the setting of the poem is very significant as a bearer of the marks of imperial mercantile exploitation.

After the focus on the historical reality, I will focus on some homogeneous characteristics of patriarchy and imperialism reflected in the existing patriarchy of the Rape. John McLeod in his Beginning Postcolonialism defines patriarchy as ‘those systems – political, material and imaginative – which invest power in men and marginalize women.’ Like it, Imperialism is a supremacist, androcentric ideology that makes the vision of the world as desired by males normal and universal. It is a world ‘For “big and little boys”’ because it was built up by white men on masculine ideals, for testing masculinity and to inspire the ‘manly man’. Both define women and the colonised subjects through the intrusive male gaze and thus generate a binary between us and the other where ‘all that was not white and not male’ becomes ‘feminine’. With reference to the scientific findings such as the low-weighted brain, deficient brain structure, and child-like soft skull woman, is described as lacking and

References:
27 Parenti 4.
28 Kroll 9.
29 Trevelyan 339.
30 Kroll 15.
31 Trevelyan 233.
33 Boehmer 71.
34 Boehmer 74.

inferior to white men and equal to the lower races such as animals and blacks.  
Whereas women were instinctive, white men were rational – ‘the leading exemplum 
of scientific humanity’ […] who is the ‘Master of himself […]’ and to whose 
‘categories of knowledge’ alone the world fits.  
Thus women and the colonised are 
represented as innocent, child-like, effeminate, irrational, secondary, weak, seductive, 
wild and part of nature. Hence they become fragmented personalities as they can only 
form ideas about their selfhood from a world view provided by men. Moreover, in 
spite of resistance by women and the colonised, patriarchy and imperialism continue 
assuming different names and vision. The Rape presents such a patriarchal society 
which marginalises Belinda and indicates the homogeneity of Belinda and the British 
Empire.

Part II
I have argued that the Empire is passively, not actively, present in the setting. This 
passivity and shadowy presence are evident in the display of goods and materials 
different lands, because in the Rape there is not a single word directly speaking 
of Asia, America or Africa. We know only about the china cup, altar of Japan, ‘[…] 
the gems of India, the perfumes of Arabia,’ spotted and white combs of ‘tortoiseshell 
and ivory from Africa’ and so on.  
These are the goods which stand for those 
continents symbolically, and thus they are some parts which refer to the whole 
Empire. In this way the names of the materials are functioning as synecdoche as the 
lock as a part refers to Belinda, the whole. Moreover the role that is played by the 
ornamented lock of Belinda and the attractive riches of the far-off countries are the 
same in respect of the beauty-attraction-possession formula of the patriarchal society. 
In the epic beautiful Belinda is defined by an intrusive male gaze. She is a naturally 
beautiful woman, ‘A heavenly image in the glass appears’ (1: 125). This naturalness 
is changed to ‘an awful beauty’ (1: 139) through her excessive use of cosmetics and 
ornaments by ‘the long labours of the toilet’ (3: 24). The society collects from all over 
the world all the items of beautification which increase at every touch her beauty, ‘the 
fair each moment rises in her charms’ (1: 14). She is ‘decked with all that land and sea 
afford (5:11),’ that means ‘the spoils of mercantile expansion’.  
Because of her 
exploitation of ‘the glittering spoil’ (1:132) in her make-up, she becomes unparalleled 
rival of all beautiful natural and artificial objects like sun or the painted vessel. She is 
the true type of Rousseau’s idea of the ideal women – ‘beautiful, innocent, and silly’ 
sacrificing her understanding and ‘likens Narcissus who wasted away gazing at his 
own image in a pool until he becomes a “fragile flower”.’  
Our poet in the very 
beginning of the epic raises a question about the motivation of the young beaux 
behind their assault on the ladies: ‘what strange motive, O Goddess! could compel /A 
well-bred lord to assault a gentle belle?’ (1:7).After the details of Belinda’s beauty he 
legitimises the temptation of beauty as natural, at first generally and then specifically.

36 Boehmer 77. 
37 Brown 9. 
38 Brown 9. 
39 Naomi Jayne Garner, ““Seeing through a Glass Darkly”: Wollstonecraft and the Confinements of 

Umme Salma. ‘Woman and the Empire in Alexander Pope’s The Rape of the Lock: a 
rereading.’ 
Transnational Literature Vol. 4 no. 1, November 2011. 
He says, ‘This nymph’ ‘Nourished two locks’ to bring ‘the destruction of mankind’ (2: 19-20). Whoever sees these maze-like locks falls into the trap of love like slaves. It is such powerful trap that can ensnare ‘man’s imperial race’ (2: 27) with ‘mighty hearts’ (2: 24). Now Pope goes for the particularisation of the Baron’s case that is no exception:

The adventurous Baron the bright locks admired,
He saw, he wished and to the prize aspired.
Resolved to win, he meditates the way,
By force to ravish, or by fraud betray. (2: 29-32)

Therefore ‘why has she cherished the lock at all? [...] “to the destruction of mankind”. Pope suggests that the Baron may even be the victim rather than the aggressor’. Hence beauty in woman is the valuable prize which forces the Baron to desire its possession as personal property. For this reason we see him declaring ‘the glorious prize is mine!’ (3: 162) and expressing his desire to wear the lock in his ring as long as he is alive. So we can deduce from all discussion that beauty compels man to assault woman and woman should accept this subordination to steel, symbolizing man’s strength and valour, as historical and universal:

Steel could the labour of the Gods destroy,
And strike to dust the imperial towers of Troy; [...]
What wonder then, fair nymph! Thy hairs should feel,
The conquering force of unresisted Steel? (3: 173-8)

Consequently Belinda should accept it calmly and gently. Because ‘female sexuality is a material property over which man has a natural claim [...] To shine for man’s sake – or to reflect his light – is woman’s trial on earth.” She accepts it, internalising the rules set for woman in her society. Her mental submission to the patriarchy is apparent, after all moralisation of her activities, when she is saying: ‘Oh, hadst thou, cruel! been content to seize/Hairs less in sight, or any hairs but these!’ (4: 175-6). By adorning in such a way with the glittering spoil she herself becomes a glittering spoil, an object of male desire, an essence captured into the casket of the masculine domination. And here is the identification of the lock with the supplies from the colonies and Belinda with the Empire. Ellen Pollak writes:

As a ‘vessel’ carrying all ‘the glitt’ring Spoil’ of the world, she herself is identified with that world and like nature, is to be conquered, ransacked, and possessed by commercial man…at once the bearer of ornament and an ornament herself.42

40Cleanth Brooks, ‘The Case of Miss Arabella Fermor,’ in Hunt 143.
42Pollack 78.

Umme Salma. ‘Woman and the Empire in Alexander Pope’s The Rape of the Lock: a rereading.’
_Transnational Literature_ Vol. 4 no. 1, November 2011.
Thus Belinda’s beauty bears the seed of her destruction as the treasures of the lands lured the imperial races to seize, expropriate and own them. Arthur Brittan explains this phenomenon: ‘That is making a woman an object of desire places her in physically and politically subordinate position, like that of an exploited country in the hands of its colonizer.’\(^{43}\) Thus Belinda equates with the overseas colonised country.

This synecdoche turns to metaphor when we go for the genderisation trope—the Empire as feminine—in colonial discourses. Kadiatu Kanneh in ‘Feminism and the Colonial Body’ writes: ‘The feminizing of colonized territory is, of course, a trope in colonial thought.’\(^{44}\) Gilbert and Tompkins also argue: ‘There is a metaphorical link between woman and land, a powerful trope in imperial discourse.’\(^{45}\) In fact the association of the geographic region with the feminine traits is a classical trend. Dr. Valerie Rumbold’s arguments in her lecture ‘The Reason of this Preference: Sleeping, Flowing and Freezing in Pope’s Dunciad’ can be cited as evidence here. The Northern Arctic region, where Moeotis sleeps and the Tanais freezes, is associated with a ‘dubious female cults and moon divinities’ by the Roman poets such as Virgil, Ovid, Horace, Seneca and Statius due to the terrifying bloodthirstiness and cruelty of women there.\(^{46}\) However, from the very beginning of imperialism the attraction and allure of the far-off countries drew comparisons with the unresisted attractions of woman. It was simultaneously the joy of having relationship with and dominance over the unknown virgins. Ever since the discoveries of the new lands all over the world, the colony is portrayed as a woman. The Flemish painter and printmaker Joannes Stradanus portrays Amerigo Vespucci after his discovery of America in the late sixteenth-century. In the engraving Vespucci, holding a banner with the Southern Cross in one hand and a mariner’s astrolabe on the other, staring at America, who is a naked woman half rising from a hammock. The frontispiece of the first great sixteenth-century atlas, the Theatrum Orbis Terrarum (1570), depicts America as a woman waiting to be penetrated. The accompanying lines are:

> the one you see on the lower ground is called AMERICA, whom bold Vespucci recently voyaging across the sea seized by force, holding the nymph in the embrace of gentle love. Unmindful of herself, unmindful of her pure chastity, she sits with her body all naked, except that a feather headdress binds her hair, a jewel adorns the forehead, and bells are around her shapely calves.\(^{47}\)

---


\(^{44}\)Kadiatu Kanneh, ‘Feminism and the Colonial Body’ in Ashcroft et al, 346.

\(^{45}\)Quoted in Susan Philip, ‘Dismantling Gendered Nationalism in Kee Thuan Chye’s We Could **** You, Mr Birch,’ Asiatic 2.1 (June 2008) 86.


\(^{47}\)Loomba 76, 77.
In the same way, in *King Solomon’s Mines* H. Rider Haggard shows metaphorically, ‘The treasure map the male party follows takes the form of an inverted female body, running from Sheba’s Breasts to the Three Witches, a cave hiding the treasures of the mines.’48 Sir Walter Raleigh during his voyage to Guiana describes the colony as a virgin ready to lose her maidenhead. With his narrative he attached a poem by George Chapman, ‘De Guiana’, where he depicts Guiana as a submissive Amazonian lady ‘whose rich feet are mines of golde,’ [...] and who ‘Stands on her tip-toes at fair England looking,’ making signs of submission. John Donne does the same thing in his ‘To His Mistris Going to Bed’ drawing analogy between lover and beloved and colonial interactions. He, addressing the beloved as ‘o my America!my new-found land/My kingdom […] /My Myne of precious stones,’ seeks her permission to make love with her.49

This genderisation takes us to the centrally significant word ‘rape,’ originated from the Latin *rapere*, ‘to seize’. It is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘the crime of forcing [somebody] to have sex with you, especially using violence,’ and ‘(literary) the act of destroying or spoiling an area in a way that seems unnecessary’. In the *Rape* the word refers denotatively to the snipping of the lock of Belinda by the adventurous peer the Baron and connotatively to the actual rape of Belinda as Belinda’s lock is ‘the symbol of her chastity’.50 As the materials and goods present in the setting signify the Empire as synecdoche, the capture of these goods signifies metaphorically the ‘rape’ of the colony by the master rapist. Shreya Bhattachrji in her article ‘Sex and Empire Building in the Fiction of Chinua Achebe’ clarifies:

Colonial romance is thus built on brutal rape. The female body symbolizes conquered colonial space. Women and land are interchangeable terrain for the active deployment of colonial power. While America and Africa appear naked and ripe for colonial discovery, possession, plunder, and conquest, Asia appears heavily draped often veiled …

The colony is thus the very docile, the very-willing-to-be dominated, the very willing-to-be-appropriated prey of the male colonist, the master rapist. Sexual and colonial relationships thus become analogous. Riches promised by the colony signify both the joys of the female body and its status as legitimate object of male possession.51

Thus the Empire is present in the *Rape* and the story entwines with it this story of the rape of the Empire which foreshadows the rape of Belinda. And this proves that as the objects of masculine desire these two feminine counterparts have the same fate and they are suffering in the hand of the brutal homosocial masculine power – patriarchy and imperialism.

---

48 Conor Reid, “‘We Are Men, Thou and I’: Defining Masculinity in H. Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* and *She.*” *Journal of Postgraduate Studies*, 6 (2007): 14.

49 Loomba 72,78

50 Pollak 79.


The final aspect of the equation of Belinda and the Empire is the Game of Ombre episode. This episode is a remorseless presentation of imperial representational politics. Actually the representational thought discloses itself in the very beginning of the epic. Ariel says:

If e’er one vision touch thy infant thought […]
Some secret truths, from learned pride concealed
To maids alone and children reveal’d:
What, though no credit doubting wits may give?
The fair and innocent shall still believe. (1: 29, 37-40)

The question that arises from this equation of the maid and children and fair and innocent is ‘Do the fair believe in the sylphs because they are still children?’ The answer to this question lies in the women-as-inferior doctrine of the male-centred society. Heike Wrenn in her ‘The Woman in Modernism’ asserts:

For centuries, women were defined by men; […] Male philosophers and social theorists were the ones who identified woman with disorder, savagery, chaos, unreason and the excluded ‘other’.

The image of woman that started with Eve, as originated from the rib of Adam and the temptress who tempted him to eat the forbidden fruit, continued in different form until the twentieth century. Plato, Aristotle, Galen, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Freud, Allan McGirgig, Carl Vogt, Charles Darwin all in one way or other defined woman with various non-affirmative adjectives, socially, culturally and scientifically. To them women are childish, silly, passive, less evolved, weak, stupid, cool, lustful and less receptive of education and environmental influence:

Darwin argued that the ‘adult female’ in most species resembled the young of both sexes,’ and his contemporary anthropologist Allan McGirgig ‘concluded that [...] physically, mentally, and morally, woman is a kind of adult child.’

Carl Vogt, a Geneva professor, went further arguing that “the child, the female, and the senile White” all had the intellectual features and personality of the “grown up Negro”, and that in intellect and personality the female was similar to both infants and the “lower” races. Though the scientific explanation was yet to come in Pope’s time, in the eighteenth century it was strongly believed that woman was ‘a beautiful romantic animal’ and could never be equal to men intellectually. So there was in all spheres the arrangement to keep ‘woman in the power and service of man’.

---

52 Brooks 142.
54 Jerry Bergman, ‘The History of the Teaching of Human Female Inferiority in Darwinism,’ Answers in Genesis 21 (July 2004) 3-5.
55 Quoted in Bergman 4.
56 Landa 180.

this view of women and the colonised we can say that Pope’s poem suggests that Belinda is equivalent to a child in the first place, and then to the non-Europeans. Such degrading thoughts about women cannot be regarded as unusual or calumnious on Pope’s part because in his sketch of the presiding Goddess Dulness in his *Dunciad*, ‘the mysterious and potentially sinister female cults’ of the Northern Arctic region and its coldness, referring to ‘lack of creativity’, are foreshadowed.\(^5\)

In the Game of Ombre the images and portraits on the cards draw parallels between Belinda and the non-Europeans, and point to her powerlessness and the Baron’s strength. Though the game is a three-hand play, Pope has turned it to ‘the conventional epic duel, “a straight fight between Belinda and the Baron.”’\(^5\) It is a game using forty cards removing the tens, nines and eights. Each player holds nine cards while other thirteen are laid as discards on the table. When the play starts we see Belinda’s cards – the Matadores, which are, Spadillo, Manillio, and Basto and the King of Spades. Pope is depicting her cards:

Now move to War her Sable *Matadores,*
In Show like Leaders of the swarthy *Moors.* (3: 47-8).

The army of Belinda is peopled by the moors, the African race, like Othello, the Moor. They are sable or swarthy skinned, that is, black-skinned or brunet. Obviously it is the skin colour of the non-western people. Her fifth card is ‘the club’s black tyrant’ with ‘haughty mien and barbarous pride’ (3: 69-70) defeated by the Baron’s ‘warlike Amazon,’ that is, the Queen of Spades (3: 67). This biological specificity creates racial ideologies in colonial interactions which cannot be overlooked in the *Rape*. Carl Linnaeus in the division between *Homo sapiens* and *homo monstrous* shows:

c. European. Fair, sanguine, brawny; hair yellow, brown, flowing; eyes blue; gentle, acute, inventive. Covered with close vestments. Governed by laws.
e. Africans. Black, phlegmatic, relaxed. Hair black, frizzled; skin silky; nose flat, lips tumid; crafty, indolent, negligent. Anoints himself with grease Governed by caprice.\(^6\)

Other cards of the Baron are diamonds – king, queen and knave. Pope describes the massacre of this army:

Thus when dispers’d a routed Army runs,
Of Asia’s Troops, and Africk’s Sable Sons,
With like Confusion different Nations fly,
In various habits and of various Dye,

---

\(^5\) Rumbold 437-8.

Quoted in Loomba 115.
The pierc’d Battalions dis-united fall,
In Heaps on Heaps; one Fate o’erwhelms them all. (3: 81-6)

These lines clarify the representation of the Baron as the super European power, the West, the Occident, and the White before which Belinda, the countries Asia and Africa, the East, the Orient, the Black and Brown are like chaff. It is their destiny to be overwhelmed by the attack of the Imperial power. Yet the weak Belinda wins the battle. But this victory is not a permanent one. W. K. Wimsatt Jr. says, ‘And here is the prefiguration of the actual downfall [...]’. The Baron has other weapons – ‘the glitt’ring Forfex’ – and if he loses the tour of Ombre, he wins the canto. And this downfall comes in the next episode in the ravishing of the heroine’s lock with this engine.

Belinda is now destitute and dishonoured, having lost her lock. Yet she builds up a resistance against this oppression of the male, identified by Pope as ‘the unequal fight to try’ (5: 77). But her resistance does not work. The war between sexes does not return to her what has been looted. Instead the lock turns into a Stella, a part of the universe. This metamorphosis is nothing but the expression of the consolidation of the male dominance. It is also a technique to squeeze support from the oppressed hegemically. It is an attempt to convince the woman that to be raped is nothing to take into account. This is actually an ‘upward rise’ and a blessing – her name will be inscribed in the cosmos among other heavenly bodies. Similarly the imperialists considered their coming to the Empire and reformatting of it a blessing as ‘Britain had a divine or civilizational mandate to assume global authority or even dominance.’ Their rape of their natural resources was not something that counted. They came and cured the backwardness of the colonised, and the latter is now developing socially, culturally and economically. Thus the metamorphosis of the lock can be read as the strategy for the continuation of the colonial control so far.

In the above way The Rape of the Lock can be reread as ‘a model for colonial domination’ through ‘the patriarchal relation.’ The imperial goods in the setting function as synecdoche to liken the colonies in the British Empire to Belinda’s lock, and the plunder of those riches equates the rape of the female landscape by the colonizers to the rape of Belinda, the female body-scape. Thus Belinda becomes a symbol of the colonised and controlled world – humiliated and appropriated.

---

61Wimsatt 143.
62Kaul7.
63Loomba 161.

Review Essay:


Dorothy Driver

This book of interviews is part of a research project on ‘Trauma, Memory and Narrative and the Contemporary South African Novel’ currently being undertaken by members of the University of Vienna’s Department of English. In early 2009 two senior researchers, Ewald Mengel and Michela Borgaza, along with a PhD candidate, Karin Orentes, met with seventeen creative writers, social workers and academics in the Western Cape, South Africa, in order to investigate these figures’ understanding of trauma and the part that South African narrative might play in the healing of trauma. Their interest also included the possible healing effects of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1995-1998; TRC), as well as the contemporary situation generally in South Africa, and particularly the degree to which its so-called culture of violence can be laid at the feet of apartheid.

The book is in three sections. In the first, ‘Interviews with South African Authors’, are included interviews with André Brink, Zoë Wicomb, Sindiwe Magona, Susan Mann, and Maxine Case, all of whom have national – and, in the first three instances, international – reputations as writers of fiction. The first two, Brink and Wicomb, also have academic careers behind them. Magona and Case have kept away from academia. Magona is a well-known figure on the literary scene and until recently worked in the New York Department of Public Information, a far cry from her first employment, in South Africa, as a domestic worker. All five writers can be said to have written about trauma – their characters are South African, after all – although it is only Susan Mann who devotes a novel primarily and rigorously to the question of trauma and the possibility – or in this case the impossibility – of its healing.

The second section includes three interviews with what are called ‘South African psychologists’. The first of these is with figures employed at the Cape Town Trauma Centre (social workers, in some cases, rather than qualified psychologists). They speak with considerable interest of the three kinds of trauma they are called on to assist with: the political trauma that the TRC first addressed (torture, disappearance of family members, forced betrayals, and so on); the present-day domestic and community violence against women and children which is seen as traumatic in itself but also as perpetrated by those traumatised in the past; and the trauma experienced by migrants from other African countries seeking refuge in South Africa, whose traumatised condition in their countries of origin is now exacerbated by the inhospitable responses dealt them by resentful, envious or traumatised South Africans. The other two interviewees in this section are well known South African academic psychologists who have researched and written in the field of trauma studies, Don Foster and Ashraf Kagee, both of whose theorisations of trauma make important contributions to this book.

The third and longest section, ‘Interviews with South African Academics’, opens with Alex Boraine, who became nationally and internationally well-known as deputy chair of the TRC. The second interview is with Neville Alexander, imprisoned from 1963 to 1974 on Robben Island, at the same time as Nelson Mandela and many of the...
key African National Congress figures. Both these interviews stand as significant analyses of the current social situation and as suggestions about future political directions. Happily, neither is pessimistic in the long view, although Boraine has radically revised his initial optimism about the TRC’s reconciliatory effects. Boraine speaks of the ongoing governmental incapacity to reap advantage from the country’s cultural pluralism, but invests his hope in the ‘young vibrant minds’ (145) he encounters when he speaks at universities. Alexander invests his in the rural youth and the township youth, and looks forward to the forging of a union of South African states similar to the European Union, and – like Boraine – to a time when the country will utilise the resources offered by all of its various races. Both of them see in the TRC a model of stock-taking that other countries should imitate. Boraine confronts head-on the question of consistency in world justice, where no one – not even those who give orders to drop bombs (his examples are the bombing of Dresden and Japan) – should be let off the requirement to account publicly for their actions in full acknowledgement (the implication is) of the human suffering caused. Alexander suggests that it become standard procedure for countries to look back on their past practice, and to do so every generation or so.

There follows a dual interview with Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela and Chris van der Merwe. The former is an academic psychologist and one of the TRC commissioners; she is – something like Boraine – an international advocate for truth commissions, and – controversially, especially among black South African youth and rural people, for reconciliation. Chris van der Merwe is an academic literary critic who teamed up with Gobodo-Madikizela in order to research the possibilities of healing trauma through narrative. The last three interviews are with two university academics, Annie Gagiano and Sam Radithlalo, and one ‘freelance academic’ (an editor, primarily), Helen Moffett, all of whom trained primarily as literary critics. Gagiano speaks particularly interestingly of a novel by the exile South African writer Bessie Head (1937-1986) called A Question of Power, and thus – like Mann, though from a different perspective – focuses on the representation of trauma.

On the whole, then, the interviewees constitute a well-informed and interestingly varied group, though they are not necessarily representative of all the creative writers, social workers and academics engaged in the broad field of trauma in South Africa: that is, of those who write creatively about trauma, or who pursue academic trauma studies, or who are involved with helping patients recover from trauma. For one thing, they draw only on people living in or (in one case) visiting the Cape Town area. This was no doubt justified logistically, but it is not theoretically justifiable.

Although this review will on the whole be positive, let me at this point say that it is not difficult to point to the shortcomings of the publication. Both senior researchers are, like the PhD student, foreign to South Africa, and the interviews were initially conducted simply for the purposes of ‘background’ to their research. Their self-positioning as information-gatherers, conducting interviews intended to help them define in their later research their key concepts – trauma and healing, most specifically – means that they allow the interviews to discuss the general South African situation, both past and present, and the development of their own careers and thinking, as well as the concepts they are exploring. The interviews therefore are often not well-focused and can even be somewhat meandering. They all appear to have been conducted verbally, and
rather than being cut and trimmed, have had their orality preserved. This not only means that we sometimes witness conversational dead-ends but also that we are at times subjected to discussion interviewers might have preferred to delete, and even on one occasion to a failure by the editors to correct one interviewee’s erroneous remark that ‘one in three women can expect to be raped in her lifetime’ (229). Since numerous women are raped more than once, the ratio is in fact considerably lower. Of course, unedited interviews do offer certain pleasures, and readers can always fast-forward by speed reading or skipping. Thus, while the topics at hand – trauma and its possible healing through narrative – are sometimes not advanced by the discussion, the wide-ranging conversations have other uses, and it is hard finally to disagree with the editors’ justification of the publication on the basis that the interviews, ‘of interest to a larger readership’, will ‘provide fascinating insights into the present condition of the South African soul, the country’s hopes and anxieties, and the state of a nation that is still struggling with the burden of the past’ (vii).

Somewhat touchingly, the editors betray their own uncertainty about the project when they say they hope the interviews will ‘be read critically, and sometimes even between the lines’ (xiii). But what is thought-provoking about the book as a whole is not reading between the lines so much as comparing the different takes on trauma, writing and healing between one interviewee and another. The differences that occasionally surface between an interviewer and his or her interviewee are also interesting. For example, Raditlhalo and Wicomb (both of whom are black) find it necessary to remind these white European outsiders of the situation in South Africa regarding literacy and illiteracy, and one is left to wonder what it will mean to the research project as a whole if it continues to speak of the novel as healing in a society where many of the traumatised are not able to read and write. Thought-provoking, too, are the widely divergent views expressed by the interviewees on the nature of trauma and on literature’s capacity to heal. Raditlhalo and Wicomb, to return to these figures, may agree on the primary importance of literacy, but they disagree on the matter of healing; indeed, Wicomb finds the assumption of healing naïve. Few of the interviewees do actually take up a positive position on the healing power of art (Brink and Magona are two other exceptions), and, while one of the academic psychologists is equivocal (this is Gobodo-Madikizela), the other two represented in this book speak strongly about how difficult it is to proclaim ‘cure’ even after years of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy (Foster), and about how both writing and reading can bring on the recurrence of trauma, if they are not carefully monitored (Kagee).

Also instructive is the divergence between the interviewees in relation to sexual violence. In the final interview, provocatively entitled ‘Gender is a Matter of Life and Death’, Moffett suggests that we see South Africa’s transition as a shift from an ‘institutionalised, infrastructural violence of apartheid’ to an ‘institutionalised, almost structurally shaped patriarchal violence’ (228). But the book allows us to set against this theory Brink’s recognition of the ‘twisted and tortured childhood’ (17) that white Afrikaner families produced as part of the patriarchal bedrock of apartheid. As a child Brink witnessed domestic violence perpetrated by white masters not only upon black servants but also upon the white women in their own homes. Both these views are given additional substance when one reads in other interviews about the recursions of trauma, where the one-time victim readily adopts the position of the victimiser. Foster speaks none of these interviews about the process of healing. But the book allows us to see how the two can be brought together.

compellingly, and chillingly, of the sense of bodily ‘entitlement’ held by those caught up in ‘a kind of … gang masculinity’ (118-19), which helps explain sexual and other forms of violence.

At the forefront of most of the interviewees’ minds is the profoundly unequal society South Africa has continued to be, despite the demise of apartheid and the establishment of the country’s first democracy, and running through many of the interviews is an insistent question about the rootedness of present-day conditions in the apartheid past. A general view is that the benefits of the TRC were limited, and its narrative capacity to reconcile and heal was, at worst, illusory and at best, merely the start of a long process. Alexander’s invaluable interview offers the most nuanced critique, a critique that may turn out to be particularly useful for the interviewers’ research project: getting the two opposing sides into dialogue, says Alexander, was a stage-managed affair, and before it could occur there had first to be an utterly changed power structure. Mutatis mutandis, perhaps, for the healing power of narrative: the contexts in which stories are told need at least as much attention as the stories themselves.

The upshot of the interviewees’ discussion about the distinctiveness of South African conditions is that the editors in their introduction offer a definition of trauma different from the currently accepted one, what they call the ‘Western’ model. This Western model is provided in the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, usually known simply as DSM-IV (it is in its fourth edition). Here trauma is defined as a specific event, and is distinguished from stress through the victim’s reaction: fight or flight, in the case of stress, and, in the case of trauma, a terror and helplessness so radical that some kind of biological rewiring takes place, giving rise to what the DSM-IV calls alterations of consciousness. So, in their introduction, which is in effect a product of the interviews, the editors speak usefully of trauma South African-style as two kinds, the first of which is not strictly speaking an event, but rather a ‘continuous traumatic stress syndrome’, and the second of which is not a singular event but ‘multiple events that constantly entrench themselves in the lives of the more disadvantaged’ (x, emphases in original). The first kind of trauma – where there is a continual psychic and/or physical re-emergence of affect at what might seem to be the slightest reminder of earlier conditions – opens up a question that keeps entering the interviews about whether literature (reading it, or writing it) might be re-traumatising instead of healing. The other kind of trauma refers to the fact that many South Africans are compelled to live their entire lives as a series or overlapping set of traumatic events, one after or on top of the other, with no occasion for relief. The healing power of narrative seems far from such a situation.

One interviewee (Foster) seems to me to pinpoint yet another way of seeing trauma, and – as in the case of Alexander’s comment about the power structures that contextualise dialogue – seems also to offer a possible direction in trauma studies and the potential (or not) of narrative to heal. Dissidents who were tortured by the Special Branch, notes Foster, could turn to no authority, not even a medical clinic, without suffering further persecution. The entire social order was hostile to such figures, who were perceived above all as a social threat rather than as human beings in need. This comment might also serve metaphorically as a cautionary note for the researchers, this time about the ambiguously healing powers of language and of story-telling. Or to put it
another way, again using an insight from Foster as a (possible) metaphor for writing, if one of the self-healing strategies of the traumatized victim is to adopt the discourse of the victimiser, at least in part, what might this tell us about the kind of literature that is said to be healing? This is not to suggest that narrative or literature or language itself constitutes an oppressive system, or nothing but an oppressive system, but simply to suggest that in their research the three researchers might subject the term ‘healing’ to the same degree of scrutiny as occurs with the term ‘trauma’.

The difficulty of the task faced by these three editors in their research project is also pointed to by Gobodo-Madikizela’s interesting (if seemingly impossible) attempt to reconcile the thinking of Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman. Although Gobodo-Madikizela does not put it this way, Caruth in her book *Unclaimed Experience* sees trauma as a non-event, as something which cannot be spoken of as having been experienced at all, since the self under trauma – if one can even use the term ‘self’ here – is not operating at that moment as what one might call an experiencing self. To have an experience is to know it as an experience; to stand outside the experience in some way. Caruth’s implication is that if one talks about the trauma one has suffered, one is actually only talking about one’s retrospective representation of the trauma. In contrast, Herman feels able to speak of the way that narrative deals with trauma, empowering the traumatized victim, although she recognizes the need for a zone of safety for the storyteller as well as the essential connection between the biological, psychological, social and political dimensions of trauma. (Her works are not listed in the chapter’s Works Cited, but would include *Trauma and Recovery*, first published in 1992.) But Gobodo-Madikizela seems to me to be having profound difficulty about reconciling these two very different thinkers. For one thing, although she does (in fairness) note that truth, like healing, is to be thought of always as a goal, and perhaps never achieved, she nonetheless speaks somewhat blithely of the possibility of learning ‘the truth from narrative’ (180). The editors seem to be on a similar track, and to be up against similar difficulties. They voice their antagonism to or at least hesitancy about postmodernism, even of post-structuralism. And they hold on to narrative as having an ordering function, but then without asking questions about how it might perhaps even rewire the mind, to use the DSM-IV terminology. But we are led to such questions, I believe, by the statements made by Alexander, Boraine, Foster and others about the very world order which we inhabit – about the whole sweep of history that has brought us, and not just South Africa, to a crisis point. Perhaps the more productive route for the researchers would be not to launch into questions about narrative and healing without first being open to the variety of cultural representations of trauma, the different formal choices, including generic choices, and the different linguistic registers selected for the somatic and psychic references. To an extent, the interviews with Mann and Gagiano offer such a lead. Only with that kind of open-mindedness, I think, which is of course an extreme intellectual vulnerability, could one start to address those fundamental questions: What language does one need to speak in order to feel, or to be proclaimed as, healed? What has to be repressed?
Amy T. Matthews won the 2010 Adelaide Festival Award for Best Unpublished Manuscript for *End of the Night Girl* (Wakefield Press, 2011), a novel about an Adelaide waitress haunted by the Holocaust. *TNL* editor Gillian Dooley spoke to her about the challenges of writing on this immense, vexed subject.

GD ‘There is no equivalence’ – *End of the Night Girl* seems to invite criticism for its use of the Holocaust, while at the same time providing a response, or series of responses, to that kind of criticism. How do you negotiate that tension?

ATM When I started this project I felt like I was walking on people’s graves. I felt a great sense of anxiety about whether I had any right to fictionalise the Holocaust. Every time I sat down I had a little voice in my head criticising every word I wrote, accusing me of voyeurism, appropriation, historical inaccuracy, moral vacuity. So I put the anxiety into the book. For me, it was the only ethical choice. In essence *End of the Night Girl* is a novel about the ethics of fictionalising the Holocaust.

GD Your novel also raises questions about the nature of fiction – how the creative process works, all the ethical issues about ‘stealing stories from dead people’ and playing god, but I was particularly struck by the fact that you didn’t feel you had to provide answers to those questions. Was it difficult to maintain that moral ambiguity?

ATM It wasn’t difficult because I’m not sure there are answers to any of those questions. The book engages with some enormous moral and philosophical questions and for years I wrestled with them and, as a result, wrestled with writing the book. I felt free when Nick Jose said to me: ‘You only have to raise the questions; you don’t have to answer them.’ The act of questioning is enormously important. We’re fixated on answers and quick information these days, but unanswerable questions are useful too; we need them to open up territory we’re not always comfortable entering.

And in the case of moral questions there’s not always one clear answer. Different people have different ways of understanding and coming to peace with this idea of ‘stealing stories from dead people’ and I was always fascinated by how other writers approached the material. Some, like Jonathan Safran Foer with *Everything is Illuminated*, were inspirational but there were others that outraged me, where I felt the author had crossed the line and appropriated mass suffering for cheap narrative purposes. I found Inga Clendinnen’s *Reading the Holocaust* was a touchstone during the writing of *End of the Night Girl*; she explores the moral questions of appropriation in a way that made sense of the anxiety I was feeling about my own work.

GD The Holocaust narrative is at a remove from you – it’s actually Molly’s story. Is there a difference, writing metafictionally like that? Was it different writing about Gienia and writing about Molly?

---

1 A shorter version of this interview was published in the *Adelaide Review* September 2011.
All of Gienia’s story was written first; I think there were two or three scenes written late in the process, but for the most part her story was finished before Molly’s was even started. Molly was much harder to find than Gienia. I started her story dozens of times without success. No matter what I did I couldn’t find her voice. And then one day, out of the blue, she just showed up. It was absolute subconscious writing. She arrived on the page, psychologically fully-formed, and the words just poured out of me. Her story ended up being written in a matter of weeks. She just took charge.

Once I had the two stories, the hard work started. The next drafts were about how the stories would be contrasted and it was a bit like doing a jigsaw puzzle. I knew as I was writing that the two stories would be juxtaposed but it took me four or five drafts of the novel before I realised that Molly was writing Gienia’s story. Which changed everything. Being able to play with meta-fictional and self-reflexive techniques meant I could open up all of those ethical questions which had been plaguing me.

Molly isn’t a proud author. At one stage she describes her story as a tumour – the writing almost seems like a sickness. Is that just a fictional construct? What does writing mean to you?

That’s a complete fictional construct. The image of her writing as cancerous was so I could draw out the idea of the material affecting her, and of the act of writing in her case as being an act of transgression. Writing is a joy for me. Not always, sometimes you’re so stymied you want to throw the computer at the wall, but for the most part I do it because I enjoy it. There’s no greater feeling on earth than when I’m in flow and a story is working. This is not to say it’s not hard work, because it is, novels eat up years of your life. But you couldn’t sacrifice the time and the energy, squeezing it around paid work and family commitments, if there wasn’t the pay off. And for me the pay off is joy.

It’s not just a Holocaust novel, of course, it’s an Adelaide novel, and the workplace – the restaurant – is sharply observed, clearly something you know about from personal experience?

I spent most of my twenties working in hospitality. My family has owned Jolley’s Boathouse since I was eleven, so I spent a lot of my life there. Like a lot of people, I funded my studenthood by waiting tables. On many levels it was a great experience: it conquered my shyness, taught me about food and wine, and introduced me to some fascinating people. But I have to admit that after a while I hated it with a passion. You learn a lot about human nature when you’re a waiter and a lot of it is depressing. People – both customers and workmates – can be awful to you over the most trivial things. I quit waiting forever one day when a man yelled at me about a side-salad. He was red-faced and furious and out to humiliate me because of a salad. I remember thinking ‘life’s too short for this’ and I quit and never went back to waiting tables – that was almost ten years ago. That kind of behaviour in some ways made sense of the Holocaust for me. Because how many times have you heard someone ask in bewilderment ‘How could they do something like that?’ and yet I’d go to work and be cursed at and humiliated over a bowl of lettuce leaves. There is no equivalence, but those moments always struck me like a warning. Some people revel in having power over other people; or they’re liable to forget that...
you’re a human being at all.

One of the best quotes I ever read was from Dave Barry: ‘If your date is nice to you and rude to the waiter, then they’re not a nice person.’

GD I think one thing that impressed me most about the novel was its restraint. OK, there are some unpleasant characters, Chef’s a bit of a bastard, but he’s not unlikeable. No-one’s there just to make a point.

ATM No, he has his own motivations for what he does and Molly doesn’t quite have access to them. He’s clearly having marital problems and chefs are under enormous pressure in terms of work hours and performance. Particularly in high end restaurants where the food they produce is essentially art.

I was always fascinated by the fact that a chef could bully you during your shift (to the point I’ve had things thrown at me) and then sit down for a knock off drink and chat to you like you were the best of friends. Which sometimes you are. I think there’s a tenderness to Molly and Chef’s relationship which is quite touching, even though he can be abusive at other times. People are complex and I don’t believe in good and evil, even in the face of the Holocaust. I think we’re all capable of both kinds of acts and the danger is in making anyone ‘other’.

GD You teach creative writing at Adelaide University? What can be taught in creative writing courses, and what can’t?

ATM Last year at Writers’ Week Irvine Welsh said the most brilliant thing I’d ever heard: ‘Writing isn’t teachable, but it is learnable.’ That sums up my feelings about teaching Creative Writing. All art processes are individual and in the end as a writer you’re alone with your computer (or your pen and paper). Only you can write your work. But I do believe in learning, in surrounding yourself with other writers, going to seminars and festivals, reading constantly, and having discussions about craft and process. I think attending the university is a way of ‘hot-housing’ your process because of the rich exchange of information and the fact that you’re taken seriously as a writer (by yourself as well as others). Talent is never something which can be taught, but craft can. Just like the other creative arts – Music, Dance, Drama, Visual Arts – we can spend time thinking about the tools we use; in our case these are tools such as point of view, characterisation, setting, dialogue etc. But what university courses do also, particularly at post-graduate level, is introduce writers to theory: narrative theory, theories of representation, theories of language and meaning, political theory, genre theory. Hemingway said that we’re working in an art form where everyone is an apprentice and no one is a master; the learning is continual and university courses are just another avenue of learning.

GD Who have you learnt from, as a writer?

ATM I have always been a voracious reader and I think first and foremost that’s where you learn as a writer. All good writers are readers. But on a personal level I’ve been fortunate enough to have met many brilliant writers at the University of Adelaide and through the South Australian Romance Authors. The talent in Adelaide beggars belief. But the three key people I have to thank, who mentored me early on and still inspire me, were my mentors at the
This is your first published novel, but are there others?

It took a long time for *End of the Night Girl* to get published, which was to its benefit, as it needed the time to season and I kept tweaking it over the years. But during the time I was tweaking I also wrote four more books. I write literary fiction under my own name and historical romance under a pseudonym. I’m hopeful those books will find a home soon too. I’m always writing something. I just finished my latest book in July, and launched immediately into researching the next one while that one sits for a while, waiting to be re-worked.

How important was it to you to win the Festival award in 2010? Are these competitions helpful to authors, and to literary culture?

I can’t stress how important awards like the Festival award are, and hats off to Arts SA and Wakefield Press for that award, which has launched many great local authors. It’s hard to get published if your work is even slightly outside of the box. I had many agents and editors really like the book but they didn’t think they could market it because it’s not an easy one to categorise. An editor once said to me, a little despairingly, ‘why don’t you write a nice simple book next time and send that to me?’ But I don’t write simple books; I’m not interested in writing simple books. If it weren’t for this award, I think I’d still be struggling to get published.

I’m really passionate about writing about Adelaide; we’re under-represented in literature. Why don’t we mythologise and fictionalise our own landscape? Undergraduate students are always telling me that they don’t read books set in Australia because they’re boring, and I think that’s so sad. We need more good books set in an Australian (and South Australian) context because these are the spaces where we explore the issues important to us. How can we work through our anxieties, problems, and examine our own culture, without local art?
'The Globalisation of Ideas and Thoughts is a Supremely Hopeful Development':
An Interview with Altaf Tyrewala

Sandra L.M. Rota

Born in 1977, Altaf Tyrewala lives in Mumbai. He studied advertising and marketing in New York and graduated in 1995, before returning to Mumbai in 1999 to work on his debut novel *No God In Sight*. Published in 2005, the novel gives voice to some of the eighteen million people that today crowd Mumbai. Tyrewala’s short stories have been included in several Indian and international anthologies.

**SANDRA L M OROTA**: Let’s start with the purpose behind *No God In Sight*: what was, if any, the image or representation of Bombay that you wanted to convey? And what was, again if any, the urgency that made you write that novel?

**ALTAF TYREWALA**: The novel came about organically. When I returned from New York after my graduation, I just wanted to write a novel. I did not know how, I did not know what I wanted to say. I began working in the e-learning industry as a copywriter and instructional designer. I suppose many factors eventually locked in. I was experiencing Mumbai as a working adult. I was realising things about myself and my background that I had not thought of before. And there was my growing tiredness with words thanks to the textual excesses of the Internet. I finally found my groove with the abortionist’s monologue. I wrote that story at work, between scripting storyboards for some American client. The fictional monologue allowed me to step out of my cocooned middle-class world-view and place myself in the minds and situations of personalities far removed from me. That is how *No God In Sight* really came about, as an attempt to go beyond myself.

**SR**: Contemporary accounts of Bombay mostly tell of a bleak, dangerous city, polluted in many ways and thorn by religious hatred and corruption. Your novel partly conveys the impression of a depressed city, which is all quite reasonable given the developments after Ayodhya. However, can you give me some positive aspects of Bombay? Something of the city that has not changed in spite of all or something that gives you hope for the future?

**AT**: That is a difficult question to answer at this point of time. As a nation, India has almost fetishised change. Nothing is remaining untouched: the landscape, the culture, language, food habits, personal relationships, financial habits, nothing. We see proof of this most visibly in India’s cities. Mumbai is no exception. Everything has suddenly been tagged with a deadline. Decades-old buildings, centuries-old neighbourhoods, names of streets, even relatively new malls are not exempt from the desire to update, upgrade or rebuild. This lends the city a very precarious, tentative feel. In a sense, I consider it my good fortune that I wrote about the city just before this mad rush to change caught on. I sympathise with writers and artists trying to make sense of the city right now. Right now there is not telling what kind of city Mumbai will turn out to be. I suppose we will get our answer a decade or so later.

Sandra L.M. Rota. ‘The Globalisation of Ideas and Thoughts is a Supremely Hopeful Development’: An Interview with Altaf Tyrewala.
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 4 no. 1, November 2011.
SR: Do you think Bombay has changed from being a city whose structure was that of many nearby villages to a metropolis whose grid is defined by ghetto-quarters? Would that explain the solitude of your characters?
AT: Until now, Mumbai used to be both: a city with urban ghetto-quarters as well as gaothans, or village clusters. But now the latter are slowly being eradicated and the city is being turned over entirely to the anonymous urban grid. The solitude of my characters is more a reflection of my own reticence, rather than some wider comment on the alienating urban environment in which they exist. Because of its vigorous communal ghettosiation – where people of the same religious communities cluster together, even in ultra-modern skyscrapers – the city continues to have strong neighbourhood vibes. You cannot just start living anywhere you want. You have to be vetted first, by the real estate agent, the property owner, the society office, the local police station, and if you happen to belong to the wrong community or cast, then the doors will slam shut on you.

SR: Do you have any favourite place in Bombay, where you like spending your time or going for a walk?
AT: John Baptista Garden in Mazagaon. There is something about the city’s eastern sea-board that makes me very nostalgic about its past. Maybe it is because the oldest parts of the city lie along its eastern coast, including the Bombay port. If there is one part of the city that has still remained relatively unchanged, it would be this part.

SR: Nowadays a metropolis is the emblematic lieu of globalization where differences are erased. Do you think that after its metropolitan turn, Bombay is now on its way to become more similar to other big cities like New York and London and more distant from its surrounding Indian context? I have the impression that this is what happens to those cities that take on the characteristics of a metropolis, they stand out as points on the globe that have more in common with each other than with their environment.
AT: What is the surrounding Indian context? I have not seen one in all my years of travel outside of Mumbai. People are the same whether they are in the village or in the city. I do not know if it is a mark of sophistication or of backwardness, but I have seen the same hankering for money and power wherever I have gone in India. Even the poshest skyscraper complex in Mumbai will function like a village, with a few people snooping around in everyone’s business and the residents who run the society office treating the place like their own personal kingdom.

SR: Has your work ever been described in terms of ‘postcolonial”? How did or would you relate to that?
AT: No, I have never seen my work being described this way. But I do not particularly care for jargon of any sort.

SR: At Turin Book Fair 2010, it was interesting to hear you say that you love Bombay and New York in the same way and that when you stay in either city you start missing the other after a while, so that the ideal would be to have the two cities superimposed and connected by a door. It made me think that one aspect that distinguishes previous ‘hybrid’ writers from later generations is their approach to
issues of belonging: in an equal condition of bilinguism, bi- or multi-culturalism, double nationality or citizenship, the former felt this condition as problematic and struggled to find a synthesis whose conclusion was that they could only inhabit, and belong to, ‘countries of the mind’; the latter, on the contrary, do not seem to be affected by such anxiety, not in the same degree at least, and seem well at ease in this condition, making the best out of it. What, do you think, has changed?

AT: No, one is never at ease with this rootlessness. I actually find myself very anxious about the space and geography I inhabit. I am very aware of the way space affects my thoughts, my moods and output. I have been living in Boston for the past six months. I am going to spend the next year in Berlin. But this international life is not something I would have opted for, if belonging to India and living there was not such an uphill task. Over the past several years I searched high and low in Mumbai and its surrounding towns and villages for a suitable place to call home. I probably would have compromised if I had not had any other option. But since I did have an option to live abroad, I could not see myself living in places without electricity, water supply, sewage, or pliable roads. I could tolerate all that when I was younger. But as one grows older, one just does not have the patience for the absence of basic amenities. Whether or not I go back to live in India, I will always remain aware of the ways in which my own nation failed to fulfil my most basic expectations, not least the freedom of free and fearless expression.

SR: For the same reason, do you think that, while previous ‘hybrid’ writers were at times called ‘postcolonial’, ‘expatriate’, ‘diasporic’, later-generation writers may better respond to definitions like ‘metropolitan’, ‘cosmopolitan’, ‘non-resident’ or ‘globalization’ writers? Would these terms (partly) describe you?

AT: Yes, I suppose all the latter terms could describe me. Also, ‘homeless’ and ‘nomadic’.

SR: How do you relate to issues of globalisation? Is your attitude to its effects and potential in terms of culture mainly negative or positive?

AT: I belong to the strata of society that enjoys the spoils of globalisation. I would be a hypocrite if I decried it too vehemently. I enjoy the malls, the chain bookstores, coffee-shops, and American-style highways. India is too old a culture to be swept away entirely. It has assimilated global influences quite successfully in the past, and I do not see why things will be any different this time around. Having just lived in the U.S. for the past six months, I can see what havoc globalization has wreaked in that nation, with jobs being outsourced without care for the earning capabilities of the American middle-class. If one defines globalisation purely in terms of consumerism, then obviously it is a catastrophic development for the world. However, there is also the globalisation of ideas and thoughts, and in that sense it is a supremely hopeful development.

SR: Are you working on anything in particular at the moment?

AT: Several things. I am almost wrapping up Mumbai Noir, a collection of crime fiction short stories that I am editing for Akashic Books. The thirteen contributors have done an excellent job at capturing the city’s underbelly and I think Mumbai Noir
will make the city proud.

I am also working on a longish prose-poem of sorts.

**SR:** I have one last question, which springs out of a consideration: you call the city ‘Mumbai’, while other writers I have talked to stick to ‘Bombay’. Is there any reason for you using that toponym, apart from its being the official name of the city, which would be quite reasonable enough in itself. A linguistic preference, a particular feeling for the name, or else?

**AT:** Sandra, I use ‘Mumbai’ out of a sense of helpless acceptance. It is a sort of self-punishment, to remind myself not to take recourse in any fantasies of the past. No matter how much we may lament it, ‘Bombay’ is gone for good. I know many people who continue to call the city by its old name, and I just consider it a very futile sort of rebellion against hard facts.
**Author Introduction**

Dubbed ‘Bengal’s earliest and boldest feminist writer’, and one who worked throughout her life to remove what she called the ‘purdah of ignorance’, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was born in 1880 as Rokeya, or Roku, in Pairaband, a small village in British India which now lies in the district of Rangpur, in the north of present-day Bangladesh. Her father, Zahiruddin Mohammad Abu Ali Saber, was a rich landlord, believed to have been intelligent and progressive in certain ways but extremely tradition-bound when it came to the education of women. Therefore, although he himself had learnt seven languages, including Bengali, Hindi and English, and sent his two sons by first marriage to the prestigious St. Xavier’s College in Calcutta for education, he never sent his three daughters by his same wife – Karimunnessa, Rokeya and Humaira – to school. Hence, Rokeya never had the opportunity for any formal education in her life. More importantly, although she and her elder sister Karimunnessa showed an extraordinary fascination for Bengali language and literature from childhood, the family was inimical to it, since it was customary for middle-class Bengali Muslims in those days to consider Urdu as their lingua franca, and to frown upon Bengali as the language of non-Muslims. However, defying custom, Rokeya persisted in learning both Bengali and English, mainly from her eldest brother Ibrahim Saber, who used to tutor her secretly at night after the family, and especially their father, had gone to sleep.

At the age of sixteen, Rokeya was married to Khan Bahadur Syed Sakhwat Hossain, a civil servant who was born in Bhagalpur, Bihar, and educated in Patna, Calcutta and London. Sakhwat Hossain was thirty-eight years old and a widower, yet her brother, Ibrahim Saber, who had met Sakhawat and was favourably impressed by his liberal outlook, persuaded the family to marry Rokeya to him. Their marriage was relatively happy, as Sakhawat became an ardent supporter of Rokeya’s interests in writing and women’s education. He always encouraged the ever-too-willing Rokeya to write instead of being merely a dutiful and obedient housewife, and was indeed

---

4 Zahiruddin Mohammad Abu Ali Saber had four wives, one of them a European. Rokeya’s mother was his first wife, and as Ray explains, ‘One of the wives was childless, the other three had between them nine sons and six daughters’ (17).
also proud of her writing. It is believed that after Sakhawat had read Rokeya’s most famous piece of work, ‘Sultana’s Dream,’ a witty utopian fantasy in which men are confined to the murdana (men’s quarters) and women have taken over the running of the country, he proudly remarked that the story was ‘a terrible revenge’ on men. 5 Rokeya acknowledges her husband’s positive contributions to her writing career, for having encouraged her to articulate her unorthodox ideas and to even publish them, by saying, ‘If my dear husband had not been so supportive, I might never have written or published anything.’6

Sakhawat was equally supportive of his young wife’s interest in women’s education. Therefore, in addition to her lawful share of inheritance, he set aside ten thousand rupees for her to set up a school for girls after his death. Sakhawat suffered from acute diabetes and succumbed to the disease in 1909, making Rokeya a widow within thirteen years of her marriage. They had two children but unfortunately both of them died in childhood: ‘Twice, I became a mother, but the joy of holding my babies to my breast was short-lived. One left me at the age of five months; the other died when it was four months old,’ Rokeya writes in tragic sorrow.7

Rokeya started the school in her husband’s hometown, Bhagalpur, five months after his death. However, a quarrel with her stepdaughter over property forced her to close down the school and move to Calcutta permanently, where she set up a school, again in her husband’s name, in 1911. The school, which is still in existence, is considered one of the earliest schools for Muslim girls in the Bengal Presidency. Rokeya had to work very hard, and against many odds, to make the school successful. Firstly, she was brought up in seclusion and had never been to school herself; obviously, therefore, she had no experience in teaching or in school administration. For the first few days, she couldn’t even imagine how one teacher could teach several students at the same time. But Rokeya had no lack of determination and a strength of will that could move mountains. To acquire the techniques of teaching and running of school administration, she frequented the Brahmo and Hindu schools in the vicinity and acquainted herself with their principles. Her main difficulty was, of course, convincing parents to send their daughters to her school. Although Hindus were relatively more advanced in women’s education and had as many as 2,238 schools for girls in the Bengal Presidency by 1891,8 Muslims were more tradition-bound, fearful that women’s education would violate the purdah convention and therefore challenge the fabric of Islam. Rokeya went from door to door to explain to her people that education and self-assertion of women was important for the community to move forward; and she succeeded in her mission, albeit slowly, so that the school continued to grow. She began with only eight students, but by the time of her death in 1932, it

5 Quoted in Women Writing 340.
8 Hossain, Sultana’s Dream ed. Jahan 45.
had developed into a full-fledged high school, offering courses in all the regular subjects as well as providing vocational training to girls so that they could be financially self-reliant, instead of becoming dependent on their husbands after their marriage.

However, Rokeya was not only a writer and educationist but also a feminist activist. She realised that it was important to organise the women to counter tradition and opposition from influential men. Only a collective effort could alter the fate of women, and create enough opinion in favour of women’s education and their social and economic independence. With this view, she started the Bengal chapter of Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam (Muslim Women’s Association) in 1916. Its activities were, Roushan Jahan explains, ‘related directly to disadvantaged poor women. It offered financial assistance to poor widows, rescued and sheltered battered wives, helped poor families to marry their daughters, and above all helped poor women to achieve literacy.’ Its members were sent to the various slums in Calcutta to give basic education to the poor and destitute women, Muslim and Hindu. Rokeya visited women from house to house to motivate them to join her association and increase the membership, at the risk of inviting verbal abuse from the people with conventional and parochial outlooks. But, given her abiding dedication and courage of conviction, she again came out successful.

Although Rokeya was brought up in a strict purdah convention and in an Islamic cultural milieu, and although her primary calling in life was to educate and emancipate the Bengali Muslim women from a vicious circle of ignorance and oppression, she was never sectarian in outlook. In her essay, ‘Sugrihini’ [The Good Housewife], she categorically wrote:

We ought to remember that we are not merely Hindus or Muslims; Parsis or Christians; Bengalis, Madrasis, Marwaris or Punjabis; we are all Indians. We are first Indians, and Muslims or Sikhs afterwards. A good housewife will cultivate this truth in her family. This will gradually eradicate narrow selfishness, hatred and prejudice and turn her home into a shrine; help the members of her family to grow spiritually.

In a dedicatory note to her novel Padmarag [Ruby], she also gave an anecdotal example from her brother, to whom the novel is dedicated, to reaffirm her non-sectarian, inclusive outlook:

A religious person once went to a dervish to learn about meditation. The dervish said, ‘Come, I’ll take you to my guru.’ This guru who was a

---

9 Hossain, Sultana’s Dream ed. Jahan 42.
Hindu, said, ‘What will I teach? Come, I’ll take you to my guru.’ His guru was, again, a Muslim dervish. When the disciple asked the dervish about this free mingling among the Hindu and Muslim priests, the dervish replied, ‘Religion is like a three-storied building. In the lowest floor there are many quarters for Brahmmins, Kshatriyas and other castes among Hindus; Shi’ites, Sunnis, Shafis, Hanafis and other sects among Muslims; and, likewise, for Roman Catholics, Protestants etc. among Christians. If you come to the second floor, you will find all the Muslims in one room, all the Hindus in room, etc. When you reach the third floor, you will notice there is only one room; there is no religious segregation on this floor; everyone belongs to the same human community and worships one God. In a sense no differences exist here, and everything dwells in one Allah only.’

This vision of religious harmony and reciprocity is particularly important as Rokeya lived through the turbulent years of Hindu-Muslim riots, in the wake of the partition of Bengal in 1905 and Gandhi’s swaraj movement which was aimed at dismantling the British Raj, but which in a strange way often fomented mutual hatred among Hindus and Muslims, leading to violent bloodbaths.

Rokeya’s writings about the emancipation of women, her relentless wish to educate and restore Muslim women to their rightful place in society, and her defiant activism all drew tremendous hostility from the orthodox segment of the society. Many of her contemporaries were merciless in their criticism of her, and some did not even spare her the humiliation of slander. She was described ‘a shameless woman, a misanthrope, a radical misguided by the proselytizing propaganda of Christian missionaries, and a sexist.’

One critic complained that to Rokeya, ‘everything Indian is bad and everything Euro-American good.’ Many even alleged ‘that her companions were prostitutes and the scum of society. Some branded her a woman of loose morals.’

However, Rokeya had her fair share of admirers as well. Congratulating her for her courage, long sacrifice and devotion, Sarojini Naidu (a leading writer and nationalist leader of the time) wrote to her in a personal letter from her sickbed in 1916, ‘I am writing this letter only to let you know how much this sister of yours admires your vision and contribution to the society. … When I see a sister, Hindu or Muslim, stepping forward to serve the nation, in the way you have done, I feel tremendously proud.’ Likewise, in a tribute to Rokeya five years after her death,
Mohitlal Majumder, a prominent Bengali writer and critic, wrote, ‘The spirit, intellect and conscience of the Bengali Muslim society has found its expression in a female icon…. It is rare to find her equal even in the Hindu community.’

Rokeya has left behind four volumes of work – *Motichur* (Sweet Globules), Part I (1908); *Motichur*, Part II (1921); *Padmarag* (Ruby; 1924); and *Aborodhbashini* (The Secluded Ones; 1928) – as well as many other letters, essays, stories and poems which were not collected in her lifetime. The essay, ‘Strijatir Abanati,’ which has been translated below, was first published in 1903, as ‘Alankar na Badge of Slavery’ [Jewellery, or Badge of Slavery], in *Mahila*, a monthly magazine edited by Girish Chandra Sen, the first translator of the Qur’an into Bengali. It was later included in the first volume of *Motichur*. The essay is written in a serious yet playful tone, in which Rokeya takes a swipe at the men for their oppression of women and for perpetuating women’s cycle of subjugation and ignorance; but she is equally critical of the women for colluding in their victimisation, through blind submission to tradition and excessive love for ignorance and indolence.

***************

---

16 Hassan 12; my translation.

Woman’s Downfall
Dear female readers, have you ever thought about the condition of your misfortune? What are we in this civilised world of the twentieth century? Slaves! I hear slavery as a trade has disappeared from this world, but has our servitude ended? No. There are reasons why we are still in bondage.

It’s true that nobody knows the history of the primitive times, and yet it seems that in the ancient age when civilisation didn’t exist, when social ties didn’t prevail, our situation was not like it is now. For some unknown reason, as one half of mankind (male) continued to flourish in different aspects of life, the other half (female) failed to keep up with the pace and so, instead of becoming the companions or partners of men, they ended up as their bondmaids.

Can any of you explain the cause of such world-wide degradation of women? Perhaps lack of opportunities is the main reason for it. Unable to get on, the female sex had pulled back from all affairs of life and, considering them to be weak and inefficient, men began extending a helping hand to them. Gradually, the more the womenfolk received support from men, the more incompetent they became. We can very well be likened to the beggars of this land. The more that the wealthy give alms with a religious mission, the greater the number of low-life beggars that are on the rise. Eventually, begging has become a profession for the indolent. They are now no longer ashamed of taking alms.

Likewise, with the loss of our dignity, we feel no trepidation in taking favours from men. Therefore, we have become slaves of indolence and, by extension, of men. Slowly, even our minds have become enslaved. Being serfs for centuries, we have now become used to our serfdom. In this way, our higher mental faculties of self-reliance and courage, having been nipped in the bud over and again for lack of cultivation, have probably stopped sprouting altogether. Consequently, men have found it appropriate to suggest: ‘The five worst maladies that afflict the female mind are: indocility, discontent, slander, jealousy and silliness … such is the stupidity of her character, that it is incumbent on her, in every particular, to distrust herself and to obey her husband’ (Japan, the Land of the Rising Sun).

Then there are those who say, ‘Exaggerations and lies are accessories of the female tongue.’ Some consider us foolish and others, unreasonable. Because of such flaws in us, they have begun to consider us as inferior. But that is quite natural. Let me give you an example. Sons-in-law are much loved in our country; even a witch loves her son-in-law, and yet a son-in-law who moves in with his parents-in-law is not viewed with affection. Thus, when we lost our ability to differentiate between freedom and captivity, progress and stagnation, slowly, from being landlords and

---

1 Some of us might think that it’s God’s wish that women should live in the subjugation of men. He first created man, and later, to serve him, He created woman. Here, however, we will not discuss views of any of the scriptures but only express what we understand from common sense. That is to say, I am only voicing my own opinion.
masters of the house, man, in stages, ended up being our lord and proprietor. And, gradually, we have become like one of their domesticated animals, or some kind of a prized property.

With the inception of civilisation and various societal relationships, all regulations in the community were formulated according to the wishes of their leaders. That is customary. ‘Might is right.’ Now I ask, who is to blame for our downfall?

And our most cherished jewelleries are the markers of our slavery. Now it is no doubt used to enhance our beauty but, in the view of many respectable and important people, ornaments were originally badges of slavery. Therefore, we see prisoners wearing iron shackles while we, being objects of affection, wear fetters made of gold or silver, i.e. anklets. Their handcuffs are made of steel; our handcuffs are gold and silver bangles. Needless to say, iron bangles are also not excluded. Our bejewelled chokers are perhaps modelled after the dog collar. Horses, elephants and other animals are bound in iron chains; likewise, embellishing our necks with gold-chains.

2 ‘Although the Japanese wife is considered only the first servant of her husband, she is usually addressed in the house as the honourable mistress. … acquaintance with European customs has awakened among the more educated classes in Japan a desire to raise the position of women’ (Japan, the Land of the Rising Sun).

Some women may object to the use of the word ‘slave.’ But let me ask, ‘What does the word ‘husband’ mean?’ If one who gives charity is called a ‘giver,’ the person who receives it must be described as a ‘receiver’; likewise, if we describe one as ‘husband, lord, master,’ what else can we call the other but ‘slave?’ If you claim that wives have dedicated themselves to the service of their husbands from love, then of course nobody can complain against such selfless devotion. But haven’t men also taken a similar vow of support and service to their family from a bondage of love? Even when the poorest of workers receives his meagre wage after a day’s work in starvation and goes to the market, he doesn’t waste money on titbits to feed himself. Instead, he buys a little grocery with it and hands it over to his wife. When the wife serves the husband with a handful of rice after cooking it, the poor fellow is happy with it. What a remarkable self-sacrifice! And yet why does society describe married men as ‘husbands’ rather than ‘love-devotees?’ I remember one more important point here. Those privileged wives who feel offended by the word ‘slave’ and often cite the examples of Sita and Savitri, don’t they know that there are one or more aristocratic classes within the Hindu community who buy young girls at a price for marrying? One who is purchased with money, what else you could call her but a ‘slave’? In this context, some may of course point to the practice of grooms bargaining on their academic qualifications but, generally, there is no instance of male spouses being sold. Importantly, it is the groom’s degrees that are sold but not the groom himself. But this argument doesn’t apply in the case of brides because eight to twelve year old girls hardly have any distinctive attributes or academic qualifications that could fetch a price. In other words, it is the girls themselves who are being sold. Once I raised this issue in a conversation with an upper-class Brahmin woman and asked her, ‘Why do they have to buy girls, can’t they find brides in their own community?’ In reply the woman said, ‘Of course they can. But that is their custom. Someone will pay dowry to marry another’s sister, and another will give dowry to marry his sister.’

Our objective here was not to point out a particular class of people or a specific vice, but to counter the false arguments of the adversaries I had to give this example from one of the Slaves, alias the Lady. I regret doing it, but one’s duty comes first.

3 A well-known religious scholar from the north, Mr Zakaullah, has said, ‘A nose-ring is an embodiment of the harness.’

---

we think we are wearing ornaments. A cow-owner perforates the nose of a bullock to put the harness; our masters in this country have made us wear a nose-ring set with a pendant. That nose-ring is the symbol of the master’s being and presence. Thus, you see, sisters, your most precious ornaments are nothing but testimony to your slavery. And notice the irony of it; the more a woman wears the badges of slavery, the more she is revered in society.

There is so much eagerness in the female race for this jewellery as if the happiness and prosperity of their whole life depends on it. Thus poorer housewives, unable to afford gold or silver bracelets, fulfil their enslaved lives by wearing glass bangles. The widow who has lost the right to wear bangles is wretched like none other on earth. What boundless grace of habit! Because we are accustomed to slavery, we even love and admire the jewellery that marks our servitude. In spite of the fact that opium is unpleasant in taste, it is a fond object for the opium-addict. No matter how harmful intoxicating drugs are for the body, the addictive person doesn’t want to get rid of it. Similarly, bearing marks of slavery on our body, we feel proud of ourselves and swell with self-esteem and delight.

For what I have said about jewellery, some of our sisters might think that I am acting as an emissary of men. That is, I am adroitly creating disgust for ornaments in sisters to save their husbands’ money from jewellers. But that is not the case. I only want to act as your voice. If the objective of jewellery is to squander men’s money, then there are many ways of doing it. Let me mention one or two for you here.

Put that stone-studded choker around the neck of your pet dog. When you go out for a ride on a horse-drawn carriage, you could deck your horse with your invaluable necklace. Your bangles and bracelets could be used as rings for your drawing room curtains. That would be a proper way of being extravagant with your male partner’s money, who now passes as your master. The primary aim of jewellery is nothing but to demonstrate wealth. Demonstrate it in this way. Why should you bear the marks of slavery on your own body? If you make the right use of jewellery in this way, people might at first dismiss you as a crazy person, but you might as well ignore that.

In this cursed society, what good has been achieved without pain? Even the noble Galileo was condemned to a mental institution for claiming ‘the earth moves around the sun.’ Which honest person has been able to express his/her views without trouble? That’s why I say, don’t pay heed to social gossip. No good word or action in this world is appreciated at the time of its occurrence.

In reality, jewellery is nothing but an insignia of slavery. But if, instead of taking it as a symbol of servitude, one considers it as a method of adornment, would that be less humiliating? Isn’t the attempt to augment one’s physical charm an expression of mental weakness? Men see it as a sign of defeat. While disputing on a subject they often assert, ‘If I can’t prove my words I’ll wear a bangle.’ To inspire the men, the celebrated poet Saadi once said, ‘Oh, valiant men! Try to attain victory; do

---

4 Wearing jewellery and squandering money in the ways I have mentioned are no different. But I hope, instead of wasting it, spending it in the right way will be considered logical.
not put yourself in the attire of women.’ They feel belittled wearing our dress. Let’s see what that dress is. The material we use is almost similar to that used by men. Is there much difference in the size of a loincloth and a sari? Countries where men wear trousers, women also wear the same. We hear of ladies’ jackets but also of men’s jackets. But perhaps the expression ‘woman’s blouse’ implies feminine weaknesses rather than a garment.

Men often claim that they are shielding us from all harm with the armour of their utmost love, and threaten that we’ll never get similar affection from the rest of society. We are also swinging along, heaving, bobbing and dissolving in that affection. In fact, their compassion is the source of our ruin. By cooping us up in their emotional cage, men have deprived us from the light of knowledge and unadulterated air, which is causing our slow death. They also claim, ‘We’ll bring everything for them with joy to make them happy – why should they have to endure sorrow while we are still around?’ We thank these people for such generous thoughts, but brother, this wretched world is not merely a delightful fancy of poets – it is intricate, wicked and evil. Reality is not poetry:

This life is not poetry or fiction,  
Nor is it a theatre, but a habitat of reality.

There lies the trouble. Otherwise, with your grace, we would have no want. Taking after your imagination, maidens of Bengal could have increasingly become slender, delicate, overwhelmingly timid, etc., until in an aerial body they would dissolve into the sky like steam. But the real situation is not so pleasant. Thus, I wish to humbly plead: ‘Do us this favour, do not do any favour to us.’

As a matter of fact, many objects get destroyed from excessive care. When a dress is painstakingly put away in a confined place for too long, it becomes a provision for termites. The poet has aptly said:

    Why did the lamp extinguish?  
    I covered it with zealous care  
    Waiting up all night,  
    So has the lamp snuffed out.

Thus, it is apparent that careful and earnest attention is the source of our utter ruin.

Being constantly protected from the dangers and difficulties of society, we have lost our courage, confidence and will altogether. Renouncing self-reliance, we have become totally dependent on our husbands. When we are faced with the slightest of difficulties, we rush into the house and start wailing at the highest pitch. Honourable brothers, again, who doesn’t know about the way you taunt us about our whimpering.
And we suffer that humiliation in silence. When I think of the way we have become so miserably timid, I feel that I am almost suffocating in revulsion and shame.  

Let alone a tiger or a bear, we are terrified at the sight of a cockroach or a leech. Some of us would even swoon at its sight. A nine or ten year old boy can intimidate all the women in the family with a leech trapped in a bottle and amuse himself. The women continue to scream and run and the boy chases them with the bottle in hand laughing. Haven’t you seen such a ridiculous sight? I have, and I feel mortified in disgust and shame at the thought of it. Frankly, I felt amused too at the time, but now as I think about it I feel enraged. Alas! At whose feet have we sacrificed all our physical strength and mental courage? And we don’t even have the power to reflect on this dreadfully deplorable situation.

I have given an example of cowardice; now let me give you an example of physical weakness. We have become such insensate, inanimate objects that we are no better than mere drawing-room ornaments for men. Dear female reader, have you ever seen an inert thing in the form of a daughter-in-law in a rich Muslim family from Bihar? Allow me to depict the replica of this newlywed woman. The female race would have been duly honoured if she had been placed on display at a famous museum. In a dark room, there are only two doors, one of which is closed and the other open. Therefore, sunlight or fresh air (for the sake of purdah?) is barred from

---

5 The other day (dated 19th April) I saw in an Urdu newspaper that the Turkish women have appealed the following in a petition to the Sultan: ‘We have nothing to do except to remain confined within four walls. Let us be given at least so much education that we could protect our houses and the city with the right weapons during a war.’ They have listed the following advantages in support of their petition:

1. The main advantage is that many soldiers employed in protecting the city during a war will reduce the number of soldiers in the battlefield. The harm arising from it will not happen in future (because women will protect the city).
2. Children will be familiar with the science of war from childhood, and both parents being soldiers will ensure that the offspring will not be timid or cowardly.
3. They will design a special type of uniform which will cover the whole face and body, except the nose and eyes.
4. It has been decided in honour of the purdah system that, for the first three years at least, male soldiers in every family will train their female relatives. After that, the trained female soldiers will go around from house to house to train the other women in art of war. Those women have also mentioned in their petition: ‘We’ll not trouble the government with the cost of making the uniforms. We only expect them to give us rifles and other weapons.’ Let’s see how the honourable Sultan responds to the petition.

Whether this report is true or not, the newspaper is responsible for it. However, we believe that such aspiration is not impossible in Turkish women. It is recorded in history that they have participated in war in the past. If we look up any book on the Muslim society we’ll find (that while in war), ‘Joygun the daughter of the emperor became a war prisoner and so did many Arab mounted soldiers’ etc.

I ask how those societal leaders in our country who are shocked at the suggestion of having female clerks, and cannot imagine women doing anything involving physical work except to dress up dolls and make wreaths with flowers, will respond if they hear about this proposal of introducing female warriors. Won’t they collapse?

entering the room. In that little room, there is a plain rectangular bedstead decorated with red paper cuttings, and the girl that you see sitting on it, inanimate but bedecked with all types of gold jewellery, her lips ruddy from chewing betel leaf and a beatific smile spreading over her face; she is the bride (that is, the señora’s daughter-in-law). Her body is covered with ornaments worth Rupees 10, 240. I find it necessary to spell out here how many grams of gold is present in each part of her body.

1. On the head (tiara), half seer (440 grams).
2. Ears (earrings), a little more than quarter of a seer (275 grams).
3. Neck (necklace), one and half seers (1320 grams).
4. Soft upper arm (armlet), almost two seers (1760 grams).
5. Waist (waist ornament like a scorpion), almost three-quarters of a seer (715 grams).
6. Ankles (anklets), exactly 3 seers (2640 grams) of heavy gold.

The nose-ring suspended from the bride’s nose is four inches in radius. Her wretched linen salwar, pleated and thickly layered with various gold and silver threads as well as spangles is drooping from its own weight. And the miserable newlywed is tired under the sheer mass of her salwar and the double-folded wrapper covering the upper part of her body.

It is impossible to move about with a load of eight seers of gold on her body. Therefore, what else can the hapless newlywed be except a listless object? She has a constant headache, and there are three-fold reasons for it: (1) Her hair has been combed too tightly and smoothly into plaits and onto her scalp, (2) there is a load of jewellery on the hairdo, (3) half of her head as well as the eyebrows are covered with silver sequins fastened with glue. Her forehead is speckled with variegated astral designs. Her body is an insensate mass; her mind is even more obtuse.

Living life in such a drab, objectified state is a mere mockery. For, the woman’s health is wasted from lack of any physical activity. Her feet get wearied, exhausted and sore walking from one room to another. Her hands are utterly useless. Dyspepsia and lack of appetite are her constant companions. If there is no spirit in the body, there is also no spirit in the mind. Her head and heart are both perpetually weak. Everyone will understand how difficult it is to live in that condition of a forever sick person.

What do you gather when you come across an image like that? What we learn from our own experiences and those of others is the real religious teaching. Sometimes, lessons from the simple experiences of life are superior to bookish knowledge. What the brilliant Newton learnt from the sight of a falling apple was not available in any book in those days. By thinking about this newlywed woman I too have been able to depict this picture of the social condition of our land. Anyway, I felt

---

6 The radius of some nose-rings is six inches and their circumference more or less nineteen inches. They weigh about fifty-eight grams.
very sorry for that bride and thought, ‘unlucky woman, her present and afterlife, both are ruined.’ If God asks whether she has made proper use of her head, heart and eyes, what will she answer? I then asked one of the girls in the house, ‘I see you doing nothing involving physical effort, how will you explain this to God?’ She replied, ‘You are right,’ and added that she doesn’t waste her time but goes out for strolls frequently. I said, ‘Loitering is not exercise. Run for about half an hour every day.’ The use of the word ‘run’ made her laugh boisterously. I felt hurt and thought, ‘Goodness gracious, she has misunderstood me.’ They have even lost their capacity to appreciate new knowledge. There is little hope for our advancement; the only remaining hope now is the Saviour.

Just as the sunlight cannot permeate our bedrooms, similarly the light of knowledge cannot penetrate the chamber of our mind. This is because there are no suitable schools or colleges for girls. Men can study as much as they want, but will the gates of our ambrosia treasury of knowledge ever fully open? If a noble-minded, liberal person approaches to raise us by the hand, then thousands will create resistance.

It is not possible for a single individual to advance against a barrier mounted by thousands of people. That is why, no sooner than a little ray of hope begins to radiate, it vanishes again into the darkness of eternal despair. Most of the people have some kind of superstition against women’s education; that’s why the moment they hear of ‘female edification’ they think of all the evils of education and shudder from an imaginary horror. Society doesn’t hesitate to forgive all the errors of an uneducated woman, but even if a woman with a little education makes no mistake, the society will multiply an assumed mistake by her and, blaming it on her schooling, cry in a collective voice, ‘Halleluiah to the female enlightenment.’

Just about everyone nowadays thinks of education as a gateway to professional life. Yet since for women to pursue a professional career is inconceivable, the majority of the people believe therefore that female education is inconsequential.

For the sake of futile argument, some local Christians might suggest that woman’s appetite for knowledge is the root cause of man’s downfall as in Genesis it is mentioned that both Adam and Eve were ousted from the Garden of Eden because the primal mother Eve ate the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge.

Anyway, the purpose of education is not to blindly imitate a community or a race. It is to develop the innate faculties of the individual, attributed by God, through cultivation. Proper use of these qualities is incumbent upon us, and their dissipation is a vice. God has given us hands, legs, eyes, ears, imagination and the power to think. If we strengthen our hands and legs through exercise, do good deeds with our hands, observe attentively with our eyes, listen carefully with our ears, and learn to make our

---

7 On the other hand, European Christians believe that Eve was cursed indubitably, but Jesus Christ came and redeemed woman from that scourge. They say, ‘Through woman came curse and sin; and through women came blessing and salvation.’ Man is not the father of Jesus, but woman have been honoured with the status of his motherhood.
thinking ability more sophisticated through reflection, then that is true education. We do not consider the pursuit of academic degrees as real education. Let me give you an example of the flowering and enhancement of visual powers.

A scientifically trained eye sees charming and beauteous objects where an untrained eye sees only clay and dust. The earth that we trample on with contempt, taking it as mere soil, mud, sand and coal dust – scientists will, on analysis, find there four kinds of valuable items. For example, cultured sand results in opal; modified clay can be used in making porcelain or sapphire, and processed coal can make diamond. From water we get vapour and mist. So you see, sisters. Where an illiterate eye sees clay, an enlightened eye sees ruby and diamond. We keep such priceless eyes forever blind; how will we answer for it to God?

Imagine that you have given a scouring-brush to your maid and said, ‘Go and keep my house clean with it.’ Taking it as a charitable gift, the maid wraps it in an embroidered pillowcase and puts it away in a high place, and never uses it. In the meantime, your house becomes uninhabitable from accumulated rubbish. Then when you take an account of your maid’s work, how will you respond to the atrocious state of your house? Would you be happy if the maid had kept the house clean by using the scouring-brush, or would you be content with her admiration for it?

Our conscience is making us aware of our degradation; now it is our duty to make an effort to move forward. We ourselves should initiate opening the door to our progress. Elsewhere I have said, ‘the only remaining hope is the Saviour.’ But we should remember that unless we raise our hand for help, even the Saviour will not come to our aid. God helps those that help themselves. Therefore, unless we think for ourselves, no one else will think for us. Even if they do, it will not be altogether propitious for us.

Many people think that since women live on the income of men, they must therefore accept their authority. This is generally true. Perhaps woman, first being incapacitated of physical work, was obliged to subsist on the wealth of another. That’s why they also had to capitulate. But now, since woman’s soul has also been enslaved, we see families where poor women earn their livelihood by menial labour and support the husband as well as the children, yet there, too, the effete man acts as the patriarch. Again, a man who has no income of his own but marries an heiress of considerable wealth; he too lords it over his wife. And the wife does not object to his lordship. The reason for it is that woman’s higher faculties being stymied for a long time, her body, soul, head and heart have all become accustomed to slavery. Now there is nothing called autonomy and strength in her soul, or even the desire to accomplish them. So I want to say, ‘Rise, oh sisters, rise.’

I know that it is not easy to rise at the beginning. I know too that society will create a huge fuss about it. I know that Indian Muslims will be inclined to ‘slaughter’ us (i.e. condemn us to capital punishment) and Hindus will drag us to the funeral pyre.

---

8 The cry for freedom that we hear occasionally from women of some sections of the Bengali community is not true freedom; they are hollow words only.
or to a fire of eternal affliction.\(^9\) (I also know that our sisters have no intention to rise.) But rise we must for the sake of society. Haven’t I said that nothing meaningful can be achieved without effort? Stepping out of the prison Galileo said, ‘But nevertheless the earth does move.’ Likewise, we’ll have to endure many afflictions and strife. Let me give you an example of the Parsi women in this context. The following two passages have been translated from an Urdu newspaper.

The Parsi women have undergone a significant change in the last fifty years. The Western civilisation that they have acquired now, they were not even familiar with it in the past. Like the Muslim women, they too lived in purdah (i.e., zenana). They couldn’t carry an umbrella to protect against sun or rain. If they suffered excessive heat of the sun, they had to use their own shoes as a sunshade. They had to sit behind a curtain even inside a carriage. They were not allowed to speak with their husbands in the presence of other men. But now the Parsi women have renounced purdah. They can ride around in a carriage without having to cover their face. They can speak freely with other men. They can run their own businesses (mostly shopkeeping). At first, when a few men allowed their wives to step out of purdah, there was an outcry everywhere. Hoary wise men declared, ‘Doomsday is looming.’

Well, the world has not ended yet! That’s why I say, let’s all move forward collectively to attain our freedom; the dust of anger will settle with time. By freedom we mean nothing but a successful life, like the men.

The question may arise, how to reclaim the lost jewel? What will make us the deserving daughters of the land? Firstly, we must have the will and an unwavering resolve to work alongside the men in all affairs of life. We should also have a firm conviction that we were not born as slaves.

We’ll do all we have to in order to attain equality\(^{10}\) with the men. If earning a livelihood freely brings our freedom, then we’ll do that. If need be, we’ll begin by becoming clerks and then magistrates, barristers-at-law, judges; we’ll work in every profession. Fifty years from now, we’ll have a lady viceroy in the country who will turn all the women into ‘empresses.’ Why shouldn’t we be gainfully employed? What do we lack – hands, legs, intellect? The labour that we expend in household work at our ‘master’s’ house, can’t we run an independent business with that?\(^{11}\)

---

\(^9\) The reasonable men in society may not impose a death-sentence on us, but the unreasonable ones (who do not care for logic) will surely arrange for brooms and ice-bags.

\(^{10}\) I am talking of equality with men only to explain the kind of success we want. What else could I compare it with? Man’s achievement is the ideal for our progress. The kind of balance there should be between a son and a daughter in a family is what we want. Because man is society’s son and we are the daughter. We are not saying that you should deck your daughter with a turban like the one on your son’s head. Rather, we suggest that the care and expenditure incurred in making the son’s turban should also be undertaken in preparing the head-scarf of the daughter.

\(^{11}\) But why should we have to get into agriculture? Why should a landlord carry the plough while the peasant subjects are still there? Can’t we do any other kind of lofty work except for being royalty? Clerks and so forth have been mentioned only as examples. As in the description of Eden, we have to say, there is no winter, no summer, but only an eternal spring prevailing there. In the paradise garden,
If we can’t get employed in professional work, we’ll take up farming. Why do we have to agonise over the lack of eligible men in India for having nubile daughters? Groom them to enter professional life and let them earn their own livelihood. No doubt, in the professional world man’s labour is worth more, and woman’s work is considered cheap. If a woman does the same work done by an unlettered man, she will get only half his salary. A manservant’s monthly pay is three rupees, and a maidservant’s is two rupees. However, there are instances where women receive higher wages than men.

If we say that we are weak, ignorant, dull-witted women, who is to blame for it? Ourselves! We do not nurture our intellect, so it has lost its vigour. Now we will reinvigorate it through cultivation. The hands that have become delicate from lack of exertion, can’t we make them strong again through utilisation? Let’s try to foster knowledge once more and see whether this dull head becomes sharp again.

In conclusion, let me emphasise that we make up half of society. How will society move forward if we remain inert? If we tie up one leg of a person, how far can he go hobbling? The interests of men and women are not different, but the same. Whatever their aim or purpose in life is, so is ours. A child needs both the parents equally. We ought to have such qualities in us so that we can walk side by side with men in both the material and spiritual spheres of life. Firstly, they moved ahead on the path to progress at an accelerated pace, and we stayed behind. Now reaching that advanced state, they realise that their soul-mate is not there alongside and so they have become lonely. Therefore, they are feeling obliged to take a step backward. In societies where men have advanced, taking with them their significant other, people there are reaching towards the pinnacle of civilisation. Our obligation is to abjure being a terrible burden on society and become the companions, co-workers and lovers of men and support them in whatever way we can. Surely, we were not born to live the life of a feckless mannequin.

I trust that our worthy sisters will examine this issue, and even if not rebel, at least ruminate on it deeply.

diamond flowers blossom on the small winding tendrils of emerald. Likewise, to convey our ambition, if we do not give the example of lady-viceroy, what other metaphor could I use? Let me add that the idea of having female clerks doesn’t seem as shocking in other countries as it does in Bengal. In America, there is no lack of female clerks, female lawyers and so forth. And there was a time when in the Muslim communities in other countries there was no scarcity of female poets, female philosophers, female historians, female scientists, female orators, female doctors, female politicians, etc. Only in the Bengali Muslim community we do not have such jewels of women.
Fiji without Snorkelling: A Report from the First Fiji Literary Festival
Gillian Dooley

In the balmy days of early October, one hundred or so people met at the Namaka campus of Fiji National University for Fiji’s first Literary Festival, ‘Creativity across Communities: Imagining and Imagining the Pacific’. Fiji has three universities, the well-established University of the South Pacific, the newer University of Fiji, founded in 2005 and the new kid on the block, Fiji National University, formed only last year from a merger of a variety of institutions. All three universities cooperated to organise this festival. UniFiji’s Professor Satendra Nandan, pioneer of Fijian literature in English, chaired the organising committee, which included his wife, Associate Professor Jyoti Nandan, also of UniFiji, well known short-story writer Professor Subramani from FNU, and Professor Sudesh Mishra from USP.

Presenters hailed from all three institutions as well, with a scattering of overseas visitors – returning expats among them. There were prominent novelists, poets, academics, students, teachers, critics, artists, dancers and musicians, creating a glorious week of cultural and intellectual exchanges on everything from soccer to Mahatma Gandhi, from the future of Fiji Hindi to the history of Rotuman migrants to Torres Strait.

It was wonderful to hear from the people with established international reputations: readings from Fiji’s best and brightest, like performance poet Daren Kamali, and poet and academic Sudesh Mishra (not to mention his scintillating daughter Mira, aged eight), brilliant lectures by scholars of the calibre of ANU’s Dr Debjani Ganguly and former Fijian High Court judge Nahzat Shameem, and an absorbing talk by painter and poet John Pule. But it was perhaps even more exciting to witness the blossoming scholars of Fiji seizing this rare opportunity of presenting their research and writing with flair and confidence, and fielding questions from leading academics with poise and grace.

The festival – really both a conference and a festival – covered six crammed days, with social occasions every night, often with entertainment from local performers. A highlight for me was the male voice chamber choir, from the Lautoka Campus of FNU, which sang at the final dinner: wonderful strength and subtlety in the performance of music of the Pacific Islands – just thrilling. Add to that the delight of reuniting with old friends and meeting new ones, animated conversations continuing well into the night with the gentle tropical rain falling outside the open window.

I know the First Fiji Literary Festival is intended to be the first of many. I’m sure there will be a second next year, and I hope that more international visitors will be tempted, as I was this year and I surely will be again, to come and see that Fiji has a great deal more to offer than snorkelling, golf and cruises.

Transnational Literature Vol. 4 no. 1, November 2011.