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Prostitution and Personhood: A Reading of Naguib Mahfouz’s
The Thief and the Dogs
Sophia I. Akhuemokhan and H. Oby Okolocha

Introduction
The prostitute is a recurrent and diversified figure in the novels of Naguib Mahfouz. There are top-notch prostitutes, such as the celebrated singers Madame Zubayda and Jalila in Palace Walk. There are the more modest semi-professionals, such as Tahiya, whose seamy career as an actress in Wedding Song cannot totally exclude an element of procuring. Again, there are the retired matrons – Mariana in Miramer, who runs a small but lucrative pension house; and the aforementioned Jalila, who re-surfaces in Sugar Street as the elderly proprietress of a brothel. At the other extreme are the young girls, the newly-initiated bent on making a fortune out of the trade, examples being the lute-player Zanuba in Palace Walk, and Hamida in Midaq Alley. And then, again, there is Nur, the jaded, warm-hearted, and endearing heroine of The Thief and the Dogs.

Nur is a particularly engaging character because her unfortunate circumstances have not diminished her compassion. Her achievement in this respect is underscored by the fact that she is constantly placed side by side with another socially-challenged individual, Said, who allows his circumstances to brutalise him. Said is a thief, and a murderer. Both himself and Nur see the worst that their fellow citizens have to offer, but while his moral fibre warps significantly in the process, hers remains comparatively even. The narrative traces a fascinating parallel between the two outlaws and their response to exploitation, but ultimately it is Nur, the minor character, that seems to make the major impact. The Thief and the Dogs is what its title implies – the story of a thief and treachery (symbolised by the dogs), but on a deeper note it is a story of a prostitute and benevolence, an account of an unforgettable woman who somehow manages to retain her ‘personhood’.

Personhood can perhaps be most easily defined as the sense of individuality, or ‘self’. The concept of personhood to be utilised in the forthcoming discussion is borrowed from the feminist lawyer, Margaret Jane Radin.1 Radin points out that the original concept has undergone modification over the years. As first advanced by the philosopher, Immanuel Kant, it involves a clear distinction between the things internal to a person (constituting the ‘self’, or the subject), and the things external to a person (constituting the ‘other’, or the object).2 The Kantian ‘I’ is a single consciousness comprising two faculties of cognition: ‘the outer sense of the five bodily [senses] [and]… the inner sense, which is the soul.’3 The outer sense and the inner sense together respond to independent entities of nature or morality governed by ‘rules and laws’.4 The independent rule-governed entity is the object, or the ‘thing-in-itself’.

2 Quoted in Radin 403.
4 Kant 29:753, 117.

Radin observes that contemporary philosophers no longer take the subject/object dichotomy to be as clear-cut as Kant posited, but his theory still provides the foundation for valid discourse on the things that make up the ‘essential’ person, in the sense of the substantive and inalienable attributes of the person, and following from that, the things that either promote or destroy a positive sense of self. She focuses on three overlapping aspects of personhood which she delineates ‘freedom,’ ‘identity,’ and ‘contextuality’:

_{The freedom aspect of personhood focuses on will, or the power to choose for oneself.}_ In order to be autonomous individuals, we must at least be able to act for ourselves through free will in relation to the environment of things and other people. _The identity aspect of personhood focuses on the integrity and continuity of the self required for individuation._ In order to have a unique individual identity, we must have selves that are integrated and continuous over time. _The contextuality aspect of personhood focuses on the necessity of self-constitution in relation to the environment of things and other people._ In order to be differentiated human persons, unique individuals, we must have relationships with the social and natural world.\(^5\)

In summary, personhood embraces a freedom to choose for oneself, a sense of continuity and integration, and relationships with the external world. Radin maintains that where these three aspects are nurtured, personhood can flourish despite seemingly debilitating odds. Further, based on her notion of personhood as exceeding sheer subjectivity, she ranks prostitution as one of the odds in which ‘self’ may not necessarily be harmed. Radin’s thesis is complex and geared towards an analysis of commodification, but it can readily be adapted to a reading of Nur in _The Thief and the Dogs_. Mahfouz purposely calls her ‘Nur’, meaning ‘light’ in Egyptian, a name calculated to convey his appreciation of her inherent worth as well as compare her favourably with the bulk of Egypt’s presumably respectable inhabitants. In respectable circles Nur is considered smutty, a proverbial ‘soiled dove’. Further, in the world of wantons she is not on a level with refined playgirls like Firdaus, who we will examine later. Nevertheless, Mahfouz creates Nur through images of light: as a match flickering along a dark hallway;\(^6\) a beam shining in under a closed door (96); a brightly illuminated apartment window overlooking a graveyard (107); fluorescence ‘filling the room’ (134). Her person makes a difference. Indeed, Mahfouz’s grasp of personhood is a key to understanding his liberal position in one of the most heated debates in contemporary scholarly circles; viz, the extent to which selling sexual services is or is not destructive of a woman’s probity.

The literary critic, Raymond Stock, notes that Mahfouz’s topic ‘has always been mankind’s fate, depicted (with rare exceptions), in scenes from his native Egypt.’\(^7\) In the sixty or so books Mahfouz has written, mankind’s fate is a regular preoccupation, regardless of whether he is writing in the realistic mode, as evidenced in _The Cairo Triologies_, or in the symbolic mode, as in _The Thief and the Dogs_. Farida Abu Haidar concurs with Stock but narrows down Mahfouz’s preoccupation from mankind

\(^5\) Radin 408, emphasis added.

\(^6\) Naguib Mahfouz, _The Thief and the Dogs_, trans. Trevor le Gassick, and M.M. Badawi (Anchor, 1984) 84. Further references to this book will be included in parentheses in the text.


comprehensively to women specifically. Abu Haidar is struck by Mahfouz’s sensitivity when handling female characters, in particular those who have fallen below society’s expectations. His approach to prostitution, for instance, is unusually dispassionate for an Egyptian writer of his era in that he admits that women alone are not the offenders: ‘As far as [Mahfouz] is concerned, prostitution is a broad term which can also apply to men demeaning themselves to those wielding power over them.’ Mahfouz realises that (traditional) prostitution may be no more harmful to personal integrity than other forms of compromise.

Abu Haidar alludes to the ‘malaise’ affecting Mahfouz’s prostitute-ridden cosmos. Edward Said speaks of ‘Mahfouz’s dark tapestry of the world.’ Both comments highlight the social colour the author tirelessly attacks. Said continues: ‘Just as [Mahfouz’s] realistic novels were an indictment of the social conditions prevailing in Egypt before 1952, the novels of the sixties contained much that was overtly critical of that period.’ The novels of the 1960s in fact begin with The Thief and the Dogs (published in 1961), which is unwavering in its theme of social indictment but marks a change so radical in the author’s style that Said avers it is ‘in a way like switching from a Dickens or a Balzac to a Graham Greene or a William Golding.’ The new spotlight is on ‘the inner working of the individual’s mind,’ ‘evocative vocabulary and imagery,’ and ‘free indirect speech’ features which add psychological symbolism to the conventional social exposé. Although Mahfouz is nowhere explicit, he plainly has firm opinions on what it means for an individual to be socially and psychologically healthy, and health is not dependent upon deference to sexual taboos:

according to Mahfouz’s moral code, those who only seek their own individual salvation are damned. … Characters who are saved in Mahfouz’s work are only those with altruistic motives, those who show concern for others and demonstrate a kind of awareness of their particular predicament being part of a more general one.

In our estimation, Nur is such a character. We count her among the few with altruistic motives and an awareness of the general nature of her peculiar sad predicament. In addition, she is the sole character that sustains these qualities in the teeth of prolonged abuse. This does not imply that we deem her a model citizen, or that Mahfouz deems her to be such, but simply that both the critics and the author concede that her profession does not negate the reality of her moral stamina. The narrator says her devotion to Said is ‘like a nightingale singing to a rock’ (60). The simile is a reminder that resilience and beauty can indwell the frailest of beings. Undoubtedly, something holds together in the frail Nur that snaps in her rock-hard partner, Said. By examining the former in terms of Radin’s theory of identity and contextuality, and drawing comparisons with Said...

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9 Abu Haidar 232.
11 Said 8.
12 Said 7.
13 Said 8.
14 Said 8.

intermittently, we have located the inner resources of this singular prostitute and find that Mahfouz persistently affirms her personhood.

Identity

The identity aspect of personhood focuses on the integrity and continuity of the self required for individuation. In order to have a unique, individual identity, we must have selves that are integrated and continuous over time.15

The argument may be simplified thus. Identity rests largely on an integrated and continuous consciousness. Where integration and continuity are cultivated, the self is more likely to have a correct perception of its own uniqueness, and, conversely, where they are lacking the perception of the self will suffer. In effect, identity is pre-eminently a matter of mental cohesion. It is the attribute of a mind that correctly appraises and accepts what it is, and knows where it is coming from. This is an important argument in assessing Nur and ladies in her camp. It indicates that the activities of the physical body may affect identity, but they cannot unilaterally dictate it. It is systems of mental activity that more accurately determine personhood. This line of thought informs Mahfouz’s presentation of Nur. She has both mental continuity and mental integration, and they enable her to regard herself in fairly positive terms, despite her infraction of social norms.

Prostitution is not a profession that readily encourages a positive identity. In fiction as well as in reality, it is frequently physically and mentally degrading; more so in a third world context. Mahfouz does not attempt to glamorise the vocation. He introduces Nur to the reader through the eyes of Said, a protagonist with typically male prejudices, who registers with scarcely concealed contempt her emaciated frame, her extravagant make-up, and her skimpy skin-tight clothing. She is thirty years old, the same age as Said, incidentally, but in far worse physical condition. While he is described as being slim and strong and simmering with excess energy, she is described in language designed to stress a premature decline – she is ‘tired’ (85), ‘hovering on the brink’ (87), ‘ageing’ (95), ‘worn out’ (126). Mahfouz spares his reader the superfluous details as to how she arrived at this state of atrophy. We see her as her flat-mate, Said, sees her, and that is strictly after working hours. The routine is that she goes out at dusk and returns in the small hours of the morning, smelling of wine and the combined sweat of herself and her customers. She then showers, eats, and collapses into a dead sleep which does little to improve her physical state since she wakes up with ‘her hair disheveled, looking unrested and run down’ (89). The monotony is broken on a certain evening when she comes home and vomits until she is drained, having been beaten by some young boys who refused to pay for her services. Without any form of civil redress, she stretches out helplessly on the sofa, sick, weeping, and overwhelmed by pain and despair.

Nur is not an abnormality. Mahfouz’s prostitutes are, without exception, subject to decay and injury. The example that comes closest to Nur in the area of utter wretchedness is Atiya in Sugar Street. For Atiya, a divorcée with two children to support, vomiting is a regular feature on the timetable. In her own case it is provoked by the

15 Radin 408.

copious amounts of alcohol required to get her through a heavy night’s work. When saturated, she is apt to ‘become rowdy, twitch, weep, and throw up.’¹⁶

In some ways, the above are stereotypes of weary streetwalkers, which makes every sign of a positive identity the more arresting. Atiya, for example, considers Kamal, the protagonist of *Sugar Street*, her favourite customer, and prides herself on providing him with snacks at her own expense, which they share together in a cordial manner before lovemaking. Nur is a more illuminating case study because the narrative permits the reader a glimpse into her childhood, and thereafter establishes the links between childhood and adulthood that prove to be so crucial in the chain of a balanced human identity. The glimpse discloses her skill in incorporating the values of a sheltered rural past into the humiliating realities of the present. The inner Nur is conspicuously love, faith, and laughter; items of her childhood person that she has carried over into maturity and adjusted to her city circumstances and her new city ‘self’. The following scene is among the most penetrating with respect to identity:

Nur drank until she could hardly sit up. Her real name was Shalabiyya, she confessed. Then she told him tales of the old days in Balayana, of her childhood amid the quiet waters, of her youth and how she’d run away. ‘And my father was the umda,’ she said proudly, ‘the village headman.’

‘You mean the umda’s servant!’ [Said said.] She frowned, but he went on: ‘Well, that’s what you told me first.’

Nur laughed so heartily that Said could see bits of parsley caught in her teeth. ‘Did I really say that?’ she asked. (115-16)

Her exaggeration notwithstanding, it is evident that her memories are coordinated and benign. She was not born on the streets but within the reputable structure of the family and the community. A reader acquainted with the premium Mahfouz places on a home background will know that this is devised as a major advantage for any of his characters, and for Nur the home is the plausible realm for the cultivation of the values that are continued and integrated into her full personhood. The dominant value, perhaps unimaginatively on the author’s side, is a largeness of heart which he usually reproduces as ‘love’. It becomes a defining trait of the adult Nur: ‘Is there anything more important than love?’ she queries Said (87-8). Nonetheless, in foregrounding love the author is not trite. He does not concentrate on the euphoric emotion of the soap opera but on Nur’s undaunted compassion and esteem for others, which is not too common in a scenario where extortion is the order of the day. At times Nur’s compassion is decidedly sentimental; her fondness for dogs, for instance. At times it is more exuberant – she loves life, both in the sense of reveling in it, and in the sense of revering its sanctity. The first time Said takes life she is distraught upon discovering it: ‘She broke down in front of him. “You’ve killed someone!” she said, letting out the words with a wail of despair. “How terrible! Didn’t I plead with you?”’ (110). The second time she is even more pathetic: ‘Her eyes were dead tired, her lower lip drooped and her shoulders slumped. [Said] knew in an instant what the trouble was; she’d heard about his latest exploit and it


had shocked her deeply’ (134). The two illustrations above hint at the type of love that distinguishes Nur most often. It is just sacrifice, an offering of herself and her resources unreservedly to the destitute thankless Said.

Another element of Nur’s continuous and integrated self is optimism. Assuming the inner Nur is a ‘natural self’, i.e. that which contains intuitive traits of personality, then her confidence in a better future, a good God, and even the promises of fortune tellers, is natural. The optimism in Nur emerges as constant laughter. It is to her credit that, although there are episodes in which she exhibits melancholy or lawlessness, she is never permanently embittered. On the contrary, she is as much associated with merriment as she is with tears, and in fact makes her debut by means of the sound of laughter carried across an evening breeze: ‘As [Tarzan and Said] passed the open doorway, they heard a woman’s laughter ringing outside. Tarzan chuckled. “It’s Nur, remember her?”’ (59-60). It is deliberate on Mahfouz’s part that before he allows his readers to view Nur’s worn-out body, and draw the relevant conclusions as to her business, he acquaints them with her buoyant spirit. It communicates the idea that she is first and foremost a woman of personality, and only after that a woman of the town.

In substance, as different as Nur’s childhood and adulthood turn out to be, she succeeds in uniting them. Love, faith, home, and family combine in a system of private principles she doggedly carries forward from the past to the present. In accordance, without bias to how she uses her body, her consciousness is sufficiently modulated to permit a legitimate identity. She has the potential to see herself as a unique individual, and she does so. She considers herself alone to be the calibre of woman suited to the tastes of a crime king.

Nur has identity, a mandatory ingredient for a positive sense of self. Her accomplishment can be better evaluated if the reader stops to ponder on Said. Like Nur, he has a family background, probably more solid than her own, but his consciousness is not integrated and a series of grave anomalies stem from this. The ugliest is a disturbing kind of split in his psyche. The split is not in the typical Jekyll and Hyde style, whereby the individual is two persons in one, but in an unnatural demarcation between Said the man (the ex-convict), and Said the boy. The advantage of a home background has been noted, but had a home background in isolation been the foothold of a stable identity then it would have saved Said the way it saves Nur. It does not, and this emphasises the import of continuity in personhood.

Said is raised by affectionate and pious parents whose solitary entertainment is attending prayer meetings. When they die, their adolescent son is thrown on a pitiless world, but neither the early death of his parents nor the callous world can be held liable for Said’s personality crisis. The problem is his broken identity. He betrays it himself when he admits his perverse belief that he is ‘compelled to forget everything good in life’ (94). ‘Everything good’ embraces ‘all the good feelings that ever were’ (95), which are predominantly his childhood and adolescent attachments. ‘Everything good’ equally has to do with the good things of life before his four-year jail sentence. The sentence yawns like a gulf between ‘the n’ and ‘now’. ‘Then’, four years ago, he was the prosperous overseer of a crime network. Unluckily for him, he was sold out to the police by his wife and an underling in his syndicate called Ilish. They were having an affair behind his back and wanted to dispose of him. ‘Now’, four years later, he leaves jail with nothing but vengeance on his program. From the first step to the last, he tries to consolidate in his
mind what he was and what he has vindictively become, but the reality is that the pieces barely held together in the past and now they have become jagged beyond reconciliation. By no effort can he integrate the Said of yesteryears – an idealist with spiritual and revolutionary inclinations – into the present malignant design. Rather, he opts to live each day in blind and murderous confusion, with segments of his bygone experience – especially as they relate to his youth and boyhood – conveniently plucked out. In this imprudent manner he willfully dismembers his consciousness, which has already been cut precariously in two by his imprisonment. He selects only the hurtful portions of his awareness and, because he cannot integrate them, he clumsily runs them parallel in his mind to produce a distorted ‘Said’.

His experiment terminates when he is shot by police in a corner of a cemetery. Preceding this, he has killed two innocent people and lost Nur, and his ex-wife has taken their five-year-old daughter and fled. He dies without a regret for himself or anyone else, showing incontestably that he is not a candidate for an individual with a positive sense of self.

**Contextuality**

The contextuality aspect of personhood focuses on the necessity of self-constitution in relation to the environment of things and other people. In order to be differentiated human persons, unique individuals, we must have relationships with the social and natural world. Radin proceeds to list several particulars central to these relationships and therefore to the individual’s self-constitution, including the individual’s politics, religion, family, moral commitments, altruism, friendships, wisdom, and work. She clearly views self as encompassing more than the ‘subject’ aspect of Kant’s traditional subject/object divide. Subject, in fact, is affiliated to object in that the former is constituted in relation to the latter. However, this is not the most exciting prospect Radin’s theory holds for our study of Nur. Infinitely more exciting than the philosophising on subject and object is the elementary precept that work is but one of multiple factors that qualify an individual for uniqueness. It means that prostitutes are not automatically ruled out. Granted that the relationship between the prostitute and her work is the major factor that may be self-negating, and her other relationships affirm her probity and prestige, then her personhood will still be secure.

In the aspect of contextuality as well as in the aspect of identity, Mahfouz defends Nur’s personhood. A truth that arises from reading *The Thief and the Dogs* is that relationships centering on moral commitments, altruism, and friendship constitute vastly more of the innate Nur than her relationship to her work. Her work is her occupation; altruism and friendship lie at her soul. Bearing in mind her inglorious circumstances, she has surprising rapport with the social world. For example, at the beginning of the text she is conducting a flourishing relationship on moral commitments, altruism, and friendship constitute vastly more of the innate Nur than her relationship to her work. Her work is her occupation; altruism and friendship lie at her soul. Bearing in mind her inglorious circumstances, she has surprising rapport with the social world. For example, at the beginning of the text she is conducting a flourishing relationship with the heir of a wealthy industrialist. Later in the text, her laughter signals harmony between herself and her confederates in crime, and still later she proves adept at mixing with law-abiding citizens and ferreting out information to carry home to Said. A tiny but eloquent detail of her relations with society

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Radin 408


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is that she pays her rent when it falls due. Indeed, the only relationship in which she consistently records defeat does not pertain to her work at all, but to Said. And because her relationship with him carries the utmost weight – Radin calls it a ‘primary relationship’ (412) – it follows that it is the definitive element as far as her personhood is concerned. Consequently, the distress created in her life by her work cannot match the distress created by Said’s behaviour, and the sense of failure emanating from being a harlot is not as acute as that emanating from his rebuffs. The narrative demonstrates repeatedly that he, and not her work, is the cardinal threat to her positive sense of self because her connection to him is paramount.

To evaluate Nur as a person purely on her occupation would be to assume that she is a prostitute, period. It would equally suggest that she could not function dutifully in a domestic set-up; a claim which Nur herself would vigorously refute. She sees no reason why husband and family cannot co-exist with marketing her favours, and despite the probable awkwardness of this arrangement the notion of contextuality accommodates it. Contextuality implies that the individual’s work is a fraction of her personhood, and prone to either amplification or relegation according to individual temperament. As Radin speculates: ‘to think … that the value of a person’s moral commitments is commensurate … with those of another or that the “same” person remains when her moral commitments are subtracted is to do violence to our deepest understanding of what it means to be human’. 18 Moral commitments are supreme to Nur. Theoretically, she has the disposition to be an adequate, if imperfect, wife and mother.

It might amuse some readers to learn that whereas the transition from a pick-up to a legally wedded wife is a promotion in Nur’s thinking, it is the opposite in the minds of others. A case in point is Firdaus, famed courtesan and protagonist of Nawal El Saadawi’s novel, Woman at Point Zero. Firdaus declares caustically: ‘A woman’s life is always miserable. A prostitute, however, is a little better off.’ 19 Unlike Nur, Firdaus is educated, and she has made her own deductions about the supposed bliss of wedlock. They reflect solemn dialectics: ‘That men force women to sell their bodies at a price, and that the lowest paid body is that of a wife.’ Accordingly, a vocation she entered under duress she keeps by choice and on the grounds of logic: ‘Because I was intelligent, I preferred to be a free prostitute rather than an enslaved wife.’ 20

Firdaus’s stand is extreme, but it draws attention to a vital sphere in the dialogue on prostitution and personhood, which is that selling sexual services may not be the direst fate that can befall a woman. There are manifold ways in which a woman’s integrity can be infringed, and it is the woman – not the law, or ethics, or other patriarchal constructs – that determines the seriousness of the infringement. Again Radin makes a keen-sighted contribution to this point:

If we think respect for persons warrants prohibiting a mother from selling something personal [like her body] to obtain food for her starving children, we do not respect her personhood more by forcing her to let them starve instead … [Such prohibition] would be forcing the mother to endure a devastating loss in her

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18 Radin 409.
20 El Saadawi 91.

primary relationship (with her children) rather than in the secondary one (with the
dpersonal thing) she is willing to sacrifice to protect the primary one.21

As Radin makes plain, it is a question of which relationships hold sway in the
individual’s self-constitution. We earlier mentioned that work is a subordinate element in
Nur’s personhood, and that love is superordinate. Firdaus is close to the other polar axis
since she has cast off love and finds fulfillment in her power over men. For Firdaus, a
victim of wife-battering, prostitution is not self-negating. Rather, the trauma of the
marital relationship is altogether more blighting to the female ego than walking the
streets. She charges her customers up to three thousand pounds per encounter and asserts,
‘not for a single moment did I have any doubts about my own integrity and honour as a
woman.’22 In opposition to Mahfouz’s trust in the redemptive influence of the marriage
institution, Firdaus finds that it bears out the feminist description as ‘the claustrophobic
and asphyxiating ambience of male dominance, dictatorship and terrorism.’23

Mahfouz’s most discreet comment on Nur’s personhood is her name, ‘Nur.’
‘Light’ reflects her unquenchable spirit, and the fact that she is Said’s last ray of hope in
his otherwise hopeless predicament. In addition, it is the author’s verdict on the self-
righteous pretensions of Egyptian society. He elects a prostitute as a beacon in a
community where judges and gentlefolk abide, which says much about his attitude to
both the prostitute and the community. And amusingly enough, where prostitution is
concerned, hoodlums are as guilty of self-righteousness as aristocrats. An object lesson is
Said, whose contemptuous assessment of Nur was remarked in a prior section of this
essay. His disdain is shared to a degree by Tarzan, a smuggler and arms-dealer, who
announces the arrival of the ageing and ill-attired Nur in the following ironic manner:
‘“As you can see,” Tarzan said for her with a smile, “she’s all light, like her name”’ (61).
Tarzan is being patronizing, but Mahfouz is making a statement and, as before, he
underlines it by comparison with Said. Nur’s symbolic affinity to light is contrasted with
Said’s affinity to darkness, and her victory in upholding social relationships is
accentuated by his incompetence.

In the aspect of contextuality, Said’s personhood is founded on the lonely and
unpleasant particular of his work. Banditry is the isolated context in which he relates to
the social and natural world. When, in his dream, the Sheikh asks him for his identity
card, Said hands him a gun. The gesture signifies that his work is his self, and that any
affront to this specific relationship is an affront to his total being. The excessive weight
he places on his figure as a thief is the root of his vendetta against Ilish and Rauf,
formerly his accomplices in crime. Between the two of them, Ilish and Rauf have robbed
Said of his wife, his daughter, his loot, his place in the criminal kingdom, his moral
justification for stealing, and four precious years of freedom. This is severe provocation
on its own, but for Said, who conceives of himself as a robber among robbers, it is like
drawing blood. He responds to the agony in a fashion corresponding to the value he
attaches to his relationship with his work — by destroying every other relationship in a bid
to protect the primary one. Love, family, politics, moral commitments, wisdom, and
ultimately life itself, go down the drain as he battles to re-assert his personhood in the

21 Radin 412.
22 El Saadawi 91.

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only realm that he feels makes him a person. The narrative reiterates over and over that his aspiration to uniqueness lies in his vocation.

**Conclusion**
Nur retains her personhood in the dual areas of identity and contextuality. She acknowledges both what she was and what she is, and, ignoring the tension, strives to keep the two in some sort of relevancy. This is the secret of her moderate success in the aspect of identity. Her success in the aspect of contextuality flows indirectly from this. Because she relates to the world as much more than a prostitute, her work cannot obliterate her sense of distinctiveness or prevent her from pursuing viable goals. Her work hinges on her physical features — on the fact that she is a woman — but her distinctiveness is not in her womanhood, but in her personhood. The difference is straightforward in her mind, and there is no ambiguity as to the things that are integral to her personhood and the things that are external to it. Love is integral and sex is external, hence her love is always a precious gift but her body is open to hire. This may not be ideal, but it is the way it works for Nur. And it goes to show that factors conventionally reckoned to have a tremendous impact upon the woman’s abstract self, such as physical intimacy, may not actually carry undue weight. Those of Radin’s persuasion, stretching the argument to its limit, would claim that since sex is alienable to Nur’s self it can also be legitimately monetised.

Nur is an assimilation of paradoxes which are summed up in the two pictures that so vividly represent her: on the exterior, a creature visibly giving way at the seams, but underneath an unexpectedly whole and steady individual. Her antithesis is Said, who is compact in appearance but fragmented within. She is a call-girl, he is a burglar: they are one in felony but emblematic of two very different personalities. Obviously, Nur elicits the greater sympathy. Mahfouz does not advocate her lifestyle or the legalising of sexual services, but in his scale of accountability a woman who sells her body is no more guilty of an aberration than a politician, like Rauf, who sells his conscience. It is the woman’s ill luck that society judges her on harsher premises. *The Thief and the Dogs* causes the reader to give a second thought to the contention that it is society’s condemnation of prostitution, as against the act of prostitution itself, that is the real enemy of the woman’s emotional and psychological well-being. In Nur’s case, paradoxically, her profession proves to be the acid test of the very character that some would insist she lacks. Nur is among the lowest in Mahfouz’s caste of fictional call-girls, and yet among the most memorable in terms of personality. We take her as evidence of his conviction that prostitution and probity are not always mutually exclusive.
We are living in an age of increasing interconnectedness, where political borders and cultural edges tend to blur and growing numbers of people throughout all layers of society are ‘on the move’ across the planet, experiencing the effects of dislocation, deterritorialisation and cross-cultural acculturation. Even though their numbers are still relatively limited, their mobility patterns and strategies are impacting on societies at large and call for new social, political and lifestyle configurations and conceptualizations. Hence the growing influence of views and approaches related to transnationalism, neocosmopolitanism in its rooted/situated/vernacular variants, flexible citizenship, neonomadism, transculturalism that are trying to grasp and theorise the dynamic nature of our global modernity:

Modernity may no longer be approached as a dialogue internal to Europe or EuroAmerica, but is a global discourse in which many participate, producing different formulations of the modern as lived and envisaged within their local social environments.

Within a more specific literary context, I am theorising that this socio-cultural scenario is also giving birth to a new generation of culturally mobile writers, whom I call ‘transcultural writers’. That is, imaginative writers who, by choice or by life circumstances, experience cultural dislocation, live transnational experiences, cultivate bilingual/pluri-lingual proficiency, physically immerse themselves in multiple cultures/geographies/territories, expose themselves to diversity and nurture plural, flexible identities. While moving physically across the globe and across different


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cultures, they find themselves less and less trapped in the traditional migrant/exile syndrome and become more apt instead to embrace the opportunities and the freedom that diversity and mobility bestow upon them. It is thanks to this specific status, I argue, that these mobile writers have found themselves at the forefront in capturing and expressing an emerging transcultural sensitivity – ‘the freedom of every person to live on the border of one’s “inborn” culture or beyond it’ – that appears better suited to the needs of a rapidly globalising society. In this way, not only do they contribute to the development of a transcultural literature able to ‘transcend the borders of a single culture in its choice of topic,’ vision and scope, but they also promote a wider global literary perspective.

In this article, I explore how the identity and cultural metamorphosis inherent in the ‘dispatriation’ process (the transcultural process that may be triggered by moving – physically, virtually and imaginatively – outside one’s cultural and homeland borders) allows these writers to adopt new creative modes through a transcultural lens, ‘a perspective in which all cultures look decentered in relation to all other cultures, including one’s own.’ It is through this process, I argue, that internationally renowned writers such as Pico Iyer, Alberto Manguel, Amin Maalouf, Michael Ondaatje, Ilija Trojanow, Brian Castro have acquired their transcultural mindset, developed their orientation towards the world at large and showed us the path towards a transcultural attitude/mode of being. To develop my case, I also draw on interviews with some of the quoted authors.

I would like to open a parenthesis here to explain why, within a comparative literary discourse, I prefer to call these writers transcultural rather than transnational, cosmopolitan or inter-cultural. Transnationalism is generally related to the study of the processes and the effects of transnational migrations on subjectivity, social identity formation and the creation of new ‘transnational social spaces’ rather than expressing a cultural attitude and a philosophical approach towards what Peter Burke calls the ‘new global cultural order’. The term cosmopolitan, on the other hand, is highly charged and over time it has acquired a strong political connotation, to the extent that Pheng Chea and Bruce Robbins prefer to use the term ‘cosmopolitics’. What’s more, cosmopolitanism is a political ideology highly contested: the seemingly covert ‘neo-

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8 Epstein, Transculture 334.
11 In this particular case, I quote from interviews with authors Ilija Trojanow and Inez Baranay conducted in 2011 as part of the research for my current PhD thesis at the University of South Australia, which includes also in-depth interviews with writers Brian Castro, Alberto Manguel and Tim Parks.
imperialist’ ideology of capitalist globalisation\textsuperscript{16} and a ‘utopian over-idealization of the cosmopolitan virtues of Northern states’\textsuperscript{17} for some, the despicable resurgence of Western universalist attitudes for others\textsuperscript{18} or the expression of an elitist, postmodern existence for some others.\textsuperscript{19} I also deliberately avoid the terms ‘cross-cultural’ and ‘inter-cultural’, that still stem from the epistemological framework of national cultures, where cultures are seen as separate, well-defined entities instead of metamorphic, confluential and intermingling processes.\textsuperscript{20}

Transcultural thought as an alternative cultural discourse

This study expressly focuses on a specific and extremely narrow segment of the mobile global population, that is those middle-class progressive creative intellectuals among the so-called ‘knowledge workers’\textsuperscript{21} or, in Ulf Hannerz’s lexicon, people with ‘decontextualized cultural capital’\textsuperscript{22} who are privileged enough – by census, educational background, life opportunities/circumstances, creative/expressive abilities – to benefit from and get the most out of their transnational life-patterns and imaginations. These are individuals who, moreover, have been particularly affected by their multiple displacements and have developed an acute sensibility towards a cosmopolitan consciousness.

We are all aware that, as Doreen Massey argues, not everyone is able to equally benefit from the mobility and intensified communication flows generated by late capitalism.\textsuperscript{23} Why should we thus concentrate on the study of such a tiny portion of the intellectual elite? Because it is this self-reflexive and highly knowledgeable (sensitised) upper-crust, I argue, that can more radically express the alternative discourse to the still dominant common views that gravitate around the two main master narratives of our contemporary, which posit the centrality of culture – and of cultural values and meanings – at their ideological core. On one side we are witnessing all over the world, in a pure assimilationist or realist logic, a renewed virulence of nationalist stances and ethnic/religious revanchisms (where one culture, often celebrating the values of integrity and purity, aspires to or strives to remain dominant over the others or to impose its own particularism); on the other, we have the paladins of multiculturalism, and the risks inherent in cultural ghettoisation and extreme conflictuality. As Beck points out:

\begin{quote}


\textsuperscript{20} Ilija Trojanow and R. Ranjit Hoskoté, \textit{Kampfabsage. Kulturen bekampfen sich nicht – sie fliessen zusammen} (Munchen: Karl Blessing, 2007). The still unpublished English translation, ‘No confluence no culture’, was kindly provided by the authors.

\textsuperscript{21} The term was initially coined by Peter Drucker in his book, \textit{Landmarks of Tomorrow} (New York: Harper & Row, 1959).

\textsuperscript{22} Ulf Hannerz, ‘Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture,’ \textit{Theory Culture Society} 7 (1990) 246.


\end{quote}
Among the … paradoxes of multiculturalism is that it emphatically rejects the essentialism of national homogeneity when defending minority rights, yet it itself easily falls into the trap of essentialism. … Multiculturalist moralism shuts its eyes to the potential for violence which has long since been shown to result from giving free rein to ethnic identities.24

Transcultural writers seem to be tuned into a different wavelength and thus are able to capture the first still embryonic, still incoherent, still mostly unexpressed or intercepted symptoms (signals) of a different emerging cultural mood/mode. In other words, these writers are developing an alternative discourse that in any case is perceived by both mainstream parts (let us call them the assimilationist and the multiculturalist stances) as destabilising the perceived status quo.

This disruption is being felt even within a pure literary context, where we have well established, and to a certain extent opposing, categorisations: on one side, mainstream national/autochthonous writers and on the other side migrant (alternatively called postcolonial, multicultural or diasporic) writers. Tertium non datur, no third (possibility) is given. In both cases, cultural specificity and stressed essentialised difference (in ethnic/national/racial/religious/territorial/linguistic terms) seem to be the epicentre of social and political organisation (and control), at the level both of the nation-state and of the state of literature. Paraphrasing Aihwa Ong when explaining why she chose the term transnationality instead of globalisation to capture ‘the horizontal and relational nature of the contemporary economic, social, and cultural processes that stream across spaces,’ we might as well say that ‘transcultural’ (more than the term inter-cultural or cross-cultural) denotes the ‘transversal, the translocal, and the transgressive aspects of contemporary behaviour and imagination’ triggered by the changed and changing dynamics of cultural production and identity building.25

These writers have not necessarily set their mind to diffuse an internationalist ethos. Rather, they may feel more compelled than others to express/uphold the responsibility of the intellectuals’ public role and the effects of their creative production on the wide spectrum of cultural discourses.

The resistance to closure, the insistence on permanent openness, partiality, and provisionality so evident in many contemporary cultural and political projects might be seen as part of this commitment to opening multiple paths to the future so as not to foreclose it in advance … Such an investigation has even been called one of the most urgent ethical projects that cultural workers can undertake in our altered world.26

As Henry Louis Gates Jr has underlined, in a world more interconnected than ever ‘the responsibilities and obligations we share remain matters of volatile debate.’27

25 Ong 4.
Nonetheless, challenging both visions of ‘clashing civilizations’\(^\text{28}\) with its apparently irreconcilable divides on one side and complete cultural relativism on the other, transcultural writers are disposed to reclaim, together with such transcultural theorists as Wolfgang Welsch\(^\text{29}\) and Mikhail Epstein,\(^\text{30}\) an inclusive vision of culture/s, which stresses the power of confluences, overlappings and interactions rather than that of polarities.

Transcultural theories have been deployed and engaged since 1940, when the Cuban scholar Fernando Ortiz\(^\text{31}\) coined the term ‘transculturation’ to describe the process of mutual – even if asymmetrical – cultural influences and fusions between so called ‘peripheral’ and colonising cultures. The concept of transculturation has been further developed, within a postcolonial framework, by Mary Louise Pratt in her seminal text, *Imperial Eyes*.\(^\text{32}\) In this article, I mainly refer to the conceptualisations of ‘transculturality’ and ‘transculture’ respectively devised by Welsch (1999, 2009) and Epstein (1995, 2009), which in my opinion overcome the binaries of dominant versus subordinate cultures inherent in the original concept of transculturation.\(^\text{33}\)

For this very reason, the transcultural thought and mode of analysis is gaining increasing currency especially among those scholars and writers who feel the need to supersede the perceived existing limits of – though without denying their innovatory inputs – postcolonial (and multicultural) approaches. These being now seen too attached either to an excessively essentialised vision of national/ethnic identities or to a polarising mode based on the classical dichotomies of colonised versus coloniser, dominant versus subordinate:\(^\text{34}\)

Lo sventramento della nozione tradizionale di cultura, non più da intendersi come entità omogenea, e l’idea di fitta interconnessione e continua trasformazione generata dai concetti di transculturalità e transculturalismo aprono nuovi orizzonti teorici e nuovi percorsi di ricerca, facilitando il nostro sforzo di superare i limiti delle letterature viste in termini nazionali o regionali e


\(^{33}\) See in this regard also the article by Hanne Holden Rønning, ‘Literary Transculturations and Modernity: Some Reflections’, *Transnational Literature*, 4.1, November 2011.


In this light, the transcultural perspective may prove to be a viable alternative concept especially when dealing with works that might be inscribed within the wide family of the ‘literature of mobility’. This literature includes those works of fiction particularly affected and shaped by migratory flows, exploratory/travelling drives, diasporic/exile conditions, expatriate statuses, postcolonial experiences, transnational movements, and, more recently, by the multiple trajectories of global nomads. Alternatively called new nomads or neonomads, global nomads are postnational subjects whose mobility creates non-linear, seldom unpredictable flows of movement and who inhabit spaces (countries) through an alternative and alternating pattern of temporary deterritorialisations and reterritorialisations; this way, they tend to feel (better, ‘are’) at home in more than one country, in more than one place, expressing that kind of attitude that Henry James first described when coining the term ‘dispatriation’, by that meaning ‘a kind of detachment in viewpoint of, not severance of interest in, the birthland’.

The transcultural mode of being and the process of ‘creative dispatriation’

In referring to the transcultural condition peculiar to certain writers, the terms transcultural and transculturalism (especially in comparison to multiculturalism and postcolonialism) are here used drawing mainly on Epstein’s theorizations and views of ‘transculture’ as a mode of cultural individual development and transformation, namely ‘a mode of being experienced at the crossroads of cultures’. It is clear that the transcultural path tends to be highly personalised and inventive/original – there does not exist a common pattern, a common recipe, a common way of being transcultural – and that a transcultural constitution, that is the ability to negotiate between different cultural identities, depends on the specific individual capabilities/attitudes and experiential backgrounds. Nonetheless, the transcultural path allows a process of transformation – a metamorphosis – that even if played at an individual level can have a collective resonance. The concept of what can alternatively be described as a process of ‘self-culturation’ (the self-service of cultures for the formation of one’s own cultural identity) echoes also Frank Schulze-Engler’s understanding of Welsch’s transculturality, with its open notion of cultural identity:

35 ‘The demolition of the traditional notion of culture, not meant anymore as an homogeneous entity, and the idea of thick interconnectedness and ongoing transformation generated by the concepts of transculturality and transculturalism open new theoretical horizons and new research paths, easing our effort to overcome the limits of literatures seen in national or regional terms and at the same time offering an alternative to the dichotomic paradigm of postcolonialism.’ Sabrina Brancato, ‘Transcultural Perspectives in Caribbean Poetry,’ Transcultural English Studies ed. Schulze-Engler and Helff, author’s translation.


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Theories of ‘intercultural’ communication … create the very problem they set out to solve: they posit ‘cultures’ as separate entities and people as ‘belonging’ to these separate entities, thereby failing to acknowledge the fact that in an increasingly interconnected world, cultures are increasingly intertwined and people often constitute their cultural identities by drawing on more than one culture.\(^{40}\)

Cultural transformations and interactions have always been part of human history but what we are facing now is an exponential growth in their dynamics and practices. As already stated, some writers have positioned themselves – by chance, by life circumstances, by intellectual curiosity or by sheer determination – at the forefront of contemporary transcultural encounters emerging from biographies and lifestyles that are no longer located in relatively stable/fixed cultural frameworks and where individuals find themselves to be negotiating, compromising (or in conflict with) several cultures on a daily basis, affecting their cultural dispositions and imaginations. These transcultural writers, highly sensitised towards the processes of cultural mediation, confluence and transformation, and whose readers are often marked by the same kind of cultural complexity and heterogeneity, seem to be living in a dimension without any fixed borders or whose geographic, cultural, national or homeland boundaries and allegiances are self-identified, self-chosen, and possibly impermanent, constantly recontextualised. In this regard, they might also be considered as dispatrie, postnational beings belonging to the community of ‘global souls’\(^{41}\) or neonomadic people on the move across the planet or through the frontier-less digital realm of micro- and macro-(symbolic) communications.

Even when declaring allegiance to one place, we seem to be always moving away from it … Nationalities, ethnicities, tribal, and religious filiations imply geographical and political definitions of some kind, and yet, partly because of our nomad nature and partly due to the fluctuations of history, our geography is less grounded in a physical than in a phantom landscape. Home is always an imaginary place.\(^{42}\)

For the same reason, a writer in the Arabic and French language like Amin Maalouf, born in Lebanon, Christian rather than Muslim (and Malachite rather than Maronite), when asked about his identity and allegiance (that is, whether he feels “more” French or “more” Lebanese’), is compelled to answer: ‘Both! … I am poised between two countries, two or three languages and several cultural traditions’.\(^{43}\) It is not a subtraction (or denying) game, but an inclusive one: the notion that reduces identity to one single affiliation (…) encourages people to adopt an attitude that is

\(^{40}\) Schulze-Engler, ‘Introduction,’ Transcultural English Studies, xii.
\(^{43}\) Amin Maalouf, In the Name of Identity (New York: Penguin, 2000) 1.
partial, sectarian, intolerant, domineering, sometimes suicidal, and frequently changes them into killers or supporters of killers.\textsuperscript{44}

In an interview with Bulgarian writer Ilija Trojanow, who grew up in Kenya and Germany, spent several years in India and South Africa before moving to Vienna, the author of \textit{The Collector of Worlds} stressed the importance of the dispatriation process in attaining a transcultural mindframe:

For that to be true – and I understand what you mean – I think we should assume that the [transcultural] author you describe would have to be in himself a sense of where he comes from, a sense of origin, of order and of a new world. I’m sure there are many like that; when I look at them this definition usually describes a very clear-cut kind of persona, who has had an immigral or transformational transnational experience (either the family came from somewhere else, or they reached another place) and a lot of the dynamics of his narrative are centred around these experiences.\textsuperscript{45}

For these writers dispatriation does not have any negative connotation except the dissociation from the nationalistic idea of \textit{patria}, the fatherland. As Italian writer Enrico Palandri, who lived for many years in England, puts it:

\textit{ci sarà sempre più gente che trova naturale spostarsi e che non percepisce più il ‘dispatrione’ come una crisi d'identità nazionale … Se si pensa al mondo antico, al Medioevo, al nostro Rinascimento o all'Illuminismo, si potrebbe pensare che è proprio nell'epoca racchiusa tra Leopardi e Meneghello che si dà dispatrio; che in fondo prima dei romantici questa unità di lingua, cultura e geografia cui facciamo risalire l'idea di identità nazionale era incomprensibile e che forse domani non ci riguarderà più. Quale idea di spatrio o dispatrio c'è in Da Ponte, Casanova o Goldoni? In Shakespeare o persino in Milton? In Rabelais, Rousseau o Voltaire? In Ovid o in Marziale? … è piuttosto Foscolo, imbevuto di ideali nazionalisti, a chiamarlo esilio nel sonetto autobiografico A Zacinto.}\textsuperscript{46}

Especially when associated with the adjective ‘creative’, dispatriation represents the assertion of the writer’s freedom from the ties of cultural affiliations and national traditions as well from all those traumatic and distressing feelings (nostalgia,

\textsuperscript{44} Maalouf 30.
\textsuperscript{45} Trojanow, Interview.
\textsuperscript{46} There will ever be more and more people who find natural to move and who do not perceive any longer “dispatriation” as a national identity crisis … If we look at the ancient world, at the Middle Ages, at our Renaissance or at the Age of Enlightenment, we might think that it is exactly in the era between Leopardi and Meneghello that we have dispatriation; that, after all, before the Romantics this unity of language, culture and geography from which we trace back the idea of national identity was incomprehensible and that perhaps tomorrow will not concern us any more. What idea of dispatriation is there in Da Ponte, Casanova or Goldoni? In Shakespeare or even in Milton? In Rabelais, Rousseau or Voltaire? In Ovid or in Martial? … It is rather Foscolo, imbued with nationalist ideals, to call it exile in his autobiographical sonnet, A Zacinto.’ Enrico Palandri, ‘Seminario itinerante di Enrico Palandri,’ Bordeaux, 20 marzo 2005. The abstract of the conference was published in \textit{Bollettino '900} 1-2: 2007, <http://www3.unibo.it/boll900/numeri/2007-i/> (13\textsuperscript{th} April 2010), author’s translation.

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This generation of transcultural writers shares the fact that its creative dispatriation may have been acquired more or less consciously. Only now that this condition starts to be theorised and systematised, to the point of becoming a topic of academic research, we might perhaps expect that other (younger) writers might grow an interest in experimenting transculture by consciously dispatriating themselves, in order to use dispatriation as a creative tool. ‘At what point is such a tool sought?’ asked Australian author of Hungarian origins Inez Baranay during our interview:

It seems to me that dispatriation is the condition into which I was born, the condition I had to understand to make sense of my self in the world. Quite likely its gift has been a complexity of vision. And that has inevitably informed my writing. My dispatriation became a creative dispatriation when it began to inform the creative work: now one might understand it, in hindsight, as a tool.

What distinguishes these writers from their precursors and ‘cousins’ under the wider ‘genus’ of the literature of mobility is expressly their relaxed, nomadic attitude when facing issues linked to displacement, rootlessness, nationality, cultural allegiance, and identity. Unlike in the past, these contemporary transcultural authors are not at odds with their destabilized, decentred selves. On the contrary, they aim at being culturally and/or geographically dislocated, or ‘dispatriated’, in order to gain a new perspective: on the world, on different cultures, on humanity and, ultimately, on themselves. They are not any more writers ‘out of place’ but ‘in place’, wherever they happen to be: ‘Someone like me, I figured, could (for worse as much as better) fit in everywhere,’ admits Pico Iyer.

47 What we get is however an extraordinary experience of how different forms of dispatriation might reveal us a new meaningful worldisation of contemporary literature, the one that makes universally essential to identify ourselves with and get to build a new identity through new territories, languages and cultures. Franca Sinopoli and Silvia Tatti, I Confini Della Scrittura: Il Dispatrio Nei Testi Letterari (Isernia: Cosmo Iannone Editore, 2005) 15, author’s translation.
48 Baranay, Interview.
49 Iyer, 258.

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languages that I know. I wear them depending on where I am,’ remarks Trojanow.\textsuperscript{50} And by adapting they spur their creativity along a path which is not yet set or clear-cut, but which tends to attract along its bends and straight stretches writers and readers who share certain life-patterns, experiences, views and sensibilities. In the opinion of Hong Kong-born Australian writer Brian Castro:

Hybridity, a mixture of forms, a mixture of character types and ethnicities, is what I bring to writing. It is what the ‘I’ is. A proliferation of selves. A juxtaposing of differences. \textit{I am not only Portuguese, English, Chinese and French, but I am writing myself out of crippling essentialist categorisations, out of the control exerted over multiplicities} (emphais in original).\textsuperscript{57}

\textbf{Transcultural sense of identity}

If dispatatire transcultural writers show us what it means to live with a multiple sense of belonging, made of plural affiliations and a somewhat dispersed sense of allegiance (and of place/home), where the borders of a single nation are transcended in favour of a planetary view of humanity (and community),\textsuperscript{52} they also show us a new direction, a new solution to the eternal problem of identity. That is, the development and acquisition of a plural, flexible, metamorphical identity, with multiple states of belonging.

Mi chiedono delle mie radici. Ma io non sono un albero. Credo che il concetto di radici sia sopravvalutato. L'identità è piuttosto qualcosa di dinamico, è un concetto fluido, anche se molti ragionano soltanto in termini di appartenenza.\textsuperscript{53}

On the same wavelength, Alberto Manguel, born in Argentina and raised in Israel before wandering the globe, becoming a Canadian citizen and then moving to live in France, writes: Our identity, and the time and place in which we exist, are fluid and transient, like water.\textsuperscript{54}

To a certain extent, the cultural essence (or identity) is now represented by the paradoxical (or simply narrative) coherence of a transformational and constantly dynamic process of becoming, with its multiple entries and lines of flight. As Ellen Berry and Epstein point out, ‘the goal becomes to “mutate” beyond any singular or

\textsuperscript{50} Trojanow, Interview.


\textsuperscript{52} In this attitude transcultural writers are not dissimilar to the competent and ‘genuine’ cosmopolitans described by Hannerz (1990), for whom cosmopolitanism more than a charged political ideology or ideal is ‘first of all an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other. It is an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity. To become acquainted with more cultures is … to view them as art works.’ Ulf Hannerz, ‘Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture,’ \textit{Theory Culture Society} 7 (1990) 239.


\textsuperscript{54} Alberto Manguel, \textit{A Reader on Reading} (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010) 42.

bounded mode of cultural identity – even a hybridized identity – in order to “become transcultural”.  

If expatriate/migrant writers were still concerned with the main question of ‘how to traverse, intellectually and emotionally, the distance between a familiar “here” and an alien “there”’, transcultural writers have already traversed that space, they have already incorporated the stranger within themselves, they have already accepted or restored their inner Other. It is expressly upon these cultural crossings that their creative works are built; their novels are literary expressions of what it means to understand the nuances in cultural transactions and cultural transformations.

If I appear so keen on calling them transcultural, it is because in my view these mobile writers distance themselves and go beyond the politically and culturally constructed categories of the ‘migrant writer’, ‘ethnic writer’, ‘multicultural writer’, ‘Commonwealth writer’, ‘Writer of New literatures in English’ or ‘francophone writer’ that dominated the critical discourse of the late twentieth century. ‘So many of us at Binger were pressed to answer unanswerable questions about our identity and our work, did we feel more this or more that, where did we really belong, that kind of thing’, recounts Baranay recalling her last stay in Amsterdam as a participant in the Writers Program at Binger Film Lab, ‘Here I was among hyphenates and hybrids, and some of us now refused the available categories.’ It must be noted that transcultural writers hardly adhere to conventional forms of categorisation and, as Habel notes, even the hyphenated stratagem usually does not work with them:

Indeed, a focus on diaspora and globalisation rules out simplistic hyphenations suggested by terms like ‘Asian-American’ or ‘Asian-Canadian’, and this problem in itself is a point of discussion for many authors… acknowledging, analysing and even encouraging a diversity which disputes not only binaries such as East/West, but even the dominance of terms such as ‘diaspora’ and the easy hyphenations which pigeonhole authors, texts, and ultimately individuals.

Salman Rushdie, who could be inscribed within a transcultural discourse despite his having being alternatively and indiscriminately defined by critics and scholars as a migrant/exile/diasporic/postcolonial writer, commented as well on his annoyance about his invariably being ethnically labelled:

In my own case, I have constantly been asked whether I am British, or Indian. The formulation ‘Indian-born British writer’ has been invented to explain me. But … my new book deals with Pakistan. So what now? ‘British resident Indo-Pakistani writer?’ You see the folly of trying to contain writers inside passports. One of the most absurd aspects of this quest for national authenticity is that … it

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55 Berry, Nomadic Desires 130.
58 Chad Habel, review of the book China Fictions/English language: Literary Essays in Diaspora, Memory, Story edited by A. Robert Lee (Rodopi, 2008), Transnational Literature, 2.2 (May 2010).
is completely fallacious to suppose that there is such a thing as a pure, unalloyed tradition from which to draw.\footnote{59}

Rushdie’s viewpoint is shared by Castro:

I was referred to as a Chinese author, an Asian-Australian, a foreigner who didn’t subscribe to the Australian ethos, whatever that meant, and finally, … misplacing the facts, as an Australian-born Chinese. It is interesting to see how the cross-cultural writer in other societies has also had to go through this frustrating assimilation. Salman Rushdie is sometimes an English writer but mostly an English-Indian writer or a writer from India who writes in English.\footnote{60}

It must be noted that Rushdie had also explicitly refused to be categorised under the post imperial umbrella of the ‘Commonwealth literature’, a term that in his view ‘is not used simply to describe … but also ‘to divide’: ‘At best,’ he wrote, ‘what is called “Commonwealth literature” is positioned below English literature “proper”– it places Engl. Lit. at the centre and the rest of the world at the periphery’.\footnote{61} Pascale Casanova as well has deplored those British critics who, ignoring the ambiguity implicit in the notion of Commonwealth literature, did not take into consideration (or merely overlooked) Rushdie’s refusal ‘to be treated as a post imperial product, [he] was one of the first to repudiate the geopolitical assumptions of the new British taxonomy’ and were instead ready to annex him under the British aegis in an act of literary misappropriation driven by the new postcolonial ‘vogue for exoticism’.\footnote{62}

Within the wider and more neutral realm of transculture writers can finally ‘share a fundamental critique of narrow identitarian labeling’.\footnote{63} Any category is constructed but at least, despite the limitations inherent in any categorization, the one relating to transculture tries to overcome the ethnic, national, cultural, imperial or religious boundaries imposed by previous categorizations. Though this remark is most valid for those writers of mobility active in the realm of Anglophone literature (being the most widely diffused), it applies as well to any other transcultural writer writing in any other language whose work adheres to the contemporary canon of world literature. Moreover, this approach allows us to re-read through a new lens, as Claudia Esposito’s study on Maghreb francophone writers shows us, those transnational authors who, despite having been alternatively labeled as migrant, exile, diasporic, ethnic or refugee, ‘operate outside the confines of a nation and consequently address questions of multiple forms of cultural, political, sexual and existential belonging’.\footnote{64}

If these transcultural writers tend to get rid of their ethnic and national categorizations, it is specifically because these categories are not dissimilar from those


pre-existing, essentialised constructions of genre, race, class, sexuality, family relation or other such biographical classifications that have been defied and refused by the postmodern literary discourse and in an age where, as anthropologist Michael Herzfeld claims, ‘just about every other category has been deconstructed and reconstructed, or at least has self-destructed’.\textsuperscript{65} This is how Baranay, who first published most of her works in Australia (while her last two novels were published first in India), addresses this issue:

What’s happened is that the multicultural in Ozlit has been given its own territory, its own separate colour in the mosaic. When \textit{the mosaic not the melting pot} became the slogan it was the 1980s and multiculturalism was the intellectual, sociological and social-engineering fashion \ldots Then I declined the advice: ‘Write about your family, go find your roots, write about the old country with communism coming to an end and your life in the new country.’ \ldots Multiculturalism in Australian writing has become a useful term to identify migrant narratives and the explorations of identity related to that. It’s as if Australian writing is divided into the multicultural and the mainstream.\textsuperscript{66}

Though being themselves cosmopolitans and polyglots, explicitly disregarding political, national or linguistic affiliations in their search for literary autonomy, transcultural writers are not international writers in the way Casanova envisions and defines them in the worldwide reality of the literary space (her so-called World Republic of letters) – that is, writers who ‘draw upon \ldots [a] transnational repertoire of literary techniques in order to escape being imprisoned in national tradition’.\textsuperscript{67} They are instead writers who work at an international or transnational level with a manifested, transcultural penchant – that is a specific lens, a peculiar way of adopting cultures, interfering with them, letting themselves be transformed by them and, ultimately, imaginatively writing about them. In this way they have started developing the modes and tropes of a concomitant emerging transcultural literature.

\textbf{Conclusion}

In our rapidly globalising world, cultures, as well as societies and identities, tend to be more fluid and intermingled, less irreducibly different and less ‘territorially fixed’ than in the past.\textsuperscript{68} Especially now, when cosmopolitan issues and pluralistic sensibilities – driven by transnational and transcommunal experiences – tend to become more relevant\textsuperscript{69}. It is within this emerging social context that a new generation of mobile writers, on the move across cultural and national boundaries, has started expressing a

\textsuperscript{67}Casanova 327. Casanova also wrote that international writers are ‘cosmopolitans and polyglots who, owing to their knowledge of the revolutions that have taken place in the freest territories of the literary world, attempt to introduce new norms’ (110-111).
\textsuperscript{68}Schulze-Engler, ‘Theoretical Perspectives’ 27.

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‘transcultural’ sensibility and mode of being, fostered by ‘the process of self-distancing, self-estrangement, and self criticism of one’s own cultural identities and assumptions’. In this article, I argue that the main element that distinguishes these early ‘transcultural writers’ from their precursors and/or ‘cousin species’ (migrant/exile/diasporic/postcolonial writers) – albeit all belonging to the wider ‘genus’ of ‘the literature of mobility’ – is their relaxed, neonomadic attitude when facing issues linked to identity, nationality, rootlessness and dislocation. It is an attitude that reflects itself also in their creative outputs, which can already be inscribed within the realm of ‘transcultural literature’, a literature able to ‘transcend the borders of a single culture in its choice of topic’, vision and scope, thus contributing to promote a wider global literary perspective.71

More than the stylistic solutions, which can belong to different literary genres and approaches, it is the intentions and the cultural dispositions of transcultural authors while writing their works of fiction that mostly count and should be taken into consideration when (at least initially) dealing with transcultural literature. It is by expressly analysing the lived experience of creative dispatiation, I argue, that we can also better understand the nature and the content of transcultural literary outputs – more attuned to current cosmopolitan and pluralistic sensibilities. It is not just a question of literary definitions and genres. It is instead a question of changing mindsets, different cultural approaches, heterogeneous identities, deterritorialising dynamics and, subsequently, of emerging new imaginaries that are being created in the process, through the active interaction between transcultural writers and transcultural readers. As Dominic Sachsenmaier points out, ‘In the near future, it will be a major intellectual, political and also economic challenge to harmonize claims to diversity with global commonalities and responsibilities’.72 Hence, the significance of a transcultural ‘transforming’ approach and experience, enhanced by (or simply conveyed through) its literary expressions, that instead of heightening conflicts and culture clashes promotes the value of ‘confluence’,73 fruitful encounters and mutual respect; dismantling boundaries instead of erecting new barriers, encouraging a new sense of communality. As Welsch prompts us: We can transcend the narrowness of traditional, monocultural ideas and constraints, we can develop an increasingly transcultural understanding of ourselves.74

70 Berry and Epstein, ‘In Place of a Conclusion’ 307.
71 Pettersson, Introduction 1.
73 cf. Ilija Trojanow and Ranjit Hoskote, Kampfabsages. Kulturen bekämpfen sich nicht – sie fließen zusammen (Munich: Karl Blessing Verlag, 2007). ‘Confluences. Cultures don't clash – they merge’; the unpublished translation in English was kindly made available by the authors.
74 Welsch, Transculturality 201.

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Savage Nature and Noble Spirit in Han Sŏrya’s Wolves: A North Korean Morality Tale
Alzo David-West

Introduction
Wolves (Sŭngnyangi) by Han Sŏrya is a canonical North Korean novelette that debuted in 1951 during the Korean War of 1950 to 1953, establishing major narrative conventions, motifs, and tropes in the North Korean national form of socialist realism. Notably, the work was republished in the state cultural journals Korean Literature (Chosŏn munhak), Youth Literature (Ch’ŏngnyŏn munhak), and Thousand-Li Horse (Ch’ŏllima) in August 2003, one year after the rightwing Bush administration designated North Korea a member of the so-called ‘axis of evil’ and five months after the United States invasion of Iraq. Since Wolves appeared in American translation in 1994, there has been a general tendency among commentators writing in English to dismiss the work as crude propaganda.1 There is, for example, the interpretation that the narrative constitutes the ‘main anti-American tale’ of North Korea and that it is a ‘fiercely ethnocentric mix of anti-American and anti-Christian propaganda’ that disabuses hope for a ‘social’ storyline because of its racist character portrayals, remote fairy-tale setting, and an allegedly trivial incident that motivates the plot – a small Korean child is beaten into a coma by a missionary’s teenage son over an old rubber ball. Moreover, the plot is said to be ‘simple’; the protagonists represent no ‘particular ideology or social class’ and need ‘no special explanation’; and the story ‘is not about the [Korean] war but about missionary child-killers,’ about ‘murderous U.S. missionaries in colonial Korea.’2 Narratological analysis, however, taken in conjunction with North Korean criticism of Wolves for North Korean readers, reveals that there is more to the novelette than racism, anti-Christianism, and anti-Americanism. There is a colonial-class dimension to the literary characters; there is a

1 See Sŏrya Han, ‘Jackals,’ Han Sŏrya and North Korean Literature: The Failure of Socialist Realism in the DPRK, by Brian Myers (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University East Asia Program, 1994) 157–88. Further references to the novelette will be included in parentheses in the main text. One should note that ‘Jackals’ is a mistranslation and refers to an animal that is not indigenous to Northeast Asia, but to Africa, Southern Asia, and Southern Europe. Sŭngnyangi means ‘dhole’ (Cuon alpinus), ‘Korean wolf’, or ‘wild dog’ As for Han Sŏrya and North Korean Literature, it must be said that this is not a strictly literary study, but a biography of a North Korean writer, with disparaging and theoretically unsophisticated discussion of his fiction. Myers takes a Soviet Russocentric approach, reduces North Korean literature to the life and literary output of one author, and makes the absolute claim that socialist realism failed in North Korea. That claim is disproven with empirical evidence in Tatiana Gabroussenko, Soldiers on the Cultural Front: Developments in the Early History of North Korean Literature and Literary Policy (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010). Gabroussenko’s study, which has a predominantly biographical and political focus, is also disparaging of North Korean literature. See Alzo David-West, ‘North Korean Literature and “Theoretical Problems of Literary Studies”: Tatiana Gabroussenko’s Soldiers on the Cultural Front,’ Journal of Asian and African Studies, 47.2 (April 2012) 236-49.


fundamental set of moral conflicts that operate as shaping principles; and the story relates to the Korean War through the structure of allegory.

Realism and Allegorism
Wolves is a difficult story to approach for a number of reasons. To begin with, it is not written for non-North Korean readers; it is a postcolonial-Gorkian narrative inspired by Maxim Gorky’s sentimental didactic novel Mother (Mat, 1907); and it is ideologically self-conscious.\(^3\) The story is also told by a semi-omniscent, partial, and intrusive narrator, who takes sides in the storytelling, reacts, and uses partisan language and insults, for example, ‘Japanese oppressors’ and ‘judo bastards’ when describing the brutal Japanese colonial response to the 1 March 1919 independence movement in Korea (168, 169). An additional complication is that of realism, not socialist realism, which is a Stalinist policy method, but literary realism, the ‘representational form’.\(^4\) Wolves is not a work of realism, as that term has generally come to be understood in the Western literary tradition, descending from nineteenth-century European and Russian literature. Han’s story is not written in the ‘grand style’ realism of Balzac, Dickens, Hugo, and Stendhal, with tendencies of ‘naturalist empiricism’;\(^5\) the work is not compatible with the realism of Dostoevsky, which portrays ‘all the depths of the human soul’ with ‘objectively realistic, sober, prosaic depiction’;\(^6\) nor is this a case of the ‘sincere, explicit realism’ of Tolstoy, a ‘complete realism’ or ‘naive realism’ that removes veils.\(^7\)

One who engages Wolves expecting a realism that renders an externally or internally ‘objective and exact portrayal of life’ will be placing extraneous demands on the text.\(^8\) North Korean literature is peculiar and possesses its own historically determined mythos, modes, and genres, proper discussion of which requires a specialised study that surveys the entire North Korean literary field inductively and without bias. Such a survey naturally lies outside the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say that there is a system to North Korean socialist realist literature, and the values within that system have to be accepted, through a ‘willing suspension of disbelief for

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5 Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1984) 52


8 The phrase is from Voronsky 107.

the moment,’ to understand the national narratives.\(^{9}\) Suspension of this sort is not a form of unreasoning trust, but a rational critical procedure to avoid prejudiced reading, to avoid excluding and protesting in analysis of the narrative data. ‘[W]e must suspend the ideas and attitudes that shape our personality before we can experience the unfamiliar world of the literary text’ in order to be ‘open to the immediate experience of the text,’ says Wolfgang Iser.\(^{10}\) Representation of objects (things, processes, people, experiences, feelings) within a lifelike range of plausibility (verisimilitude) is not the structural aim of a work like Wolves, which utilises tendentiously exaggerated portrayals, moral condemnations, virtuous and vicious characters, and the grotesque. This is a novelette about abstract principles and conflicts that are selected and translated into archetypical characters that have a metaphorical relation to empirical reality. Han Sŏrya’s Wolves, in other words, is a morality tale that combines sentimentalism, realism, and nationalist allegorism.\(^{11}\)

On the grotesque, Han makes decisive use of animal and demonic imagery in the physiognomy of his villains. While it has been previously claimed that there is no precedent in Soviet Stalinist socialist realism for the use of ‘lupine and vulpine imagery’ to underscore the ‘predatory nature’ of enemies,\(^{12}\) it is known that the ‘fantastic grotesque’ of the Soviet 1920s – which combines the planes of the real and fantastic – exploited animalism, dehumanisation, and satire. That is seen in the work of the pre-socialist realist poet and playwright Vladimir Mayakovsky, who marks the

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\(^{11}\) The term ‘nationalist allegorism’ is from ‘nationalist allegory’ and used in the following sense: (1) an idealist symbolic mode that is religious-moralistic, that mystically apotheosises, idolises, and projects a lost sense of wholeness or being into the nation-state in the epoch of finance capital, speaks to emotions, and does not aesthetically re-embodify the real historical world; (2) an idealist symbolic mode that translates the experience of collective national trauma into a postcolonial literature, that combines adapted and locally developed socialist realist themes with indigenous iconographies, and manipulates familiar archetypes with material from the level of conscious human life; (3) an idealist symbolic mode that renders a metaphysical story-world with an ethos based on political nationalism; that is homiletic, moralistic, and sentimental, with appeals to emotion, faith, and spontaneity; and with abstract ideas, imperatives, and virtues that are personified. See Alzo David-West, ‘Nationalist Allegory in North Korea: The Revolutionary Opera Sea of Blood,’ North Korean Review 2.2 (Fall 2006) 75-87; Alzo David-West, ‘Archetypal Themes in North Korean Literature: Working Notes on Problems and Possibilities,’ Jung Journal 5.1 (2011) 65-80; and Alzo David-West, ‘Reading Sea of Blood through Bertolt Brecht’s The Mother: North Korean “Revolutionary Opera” and Nationalist Allegory,’ Asian Journal of Literature, Culture and Society 5.2 (October 2011) 1-24.

\(^{12}\) Myers 95-6.

beginning of Soviet literature.\textsuperscript{13} Mayakovsky, whom Stalin canonised in 1935 after the writer’s suicide in 1930, was read in North Korea, and his portrait, as documented in Kim Il Sung’s \textit{Juche} speech of 1955, was hung in elementary schools.\textsuperscript{14} Notably, in a 1959 discussion on Han’s \textit{Wolves} and other writings, North Korean critic Han Chŏng-mo cited Mayakovksy on the utility of laughter, indicating appropriation of the Soviet grotesque in North Korean fiction: ‘Mayakovsky wrote the following about laughter: “Oh, comrades, through laughter let us learn. [Let us learn] to hate the enemy until the end.”’\textsuperscript{15} Although the fantastic grotesque underwent a particularly sharp decline in Soviet literature from the 1930s to mid-1950s, following Stalin’s proclamation of socialist realism through Andrei Zhdanov in 1934, it was not absent. Moreover, animalism, dehumanisation, and satire were common in Stalin-era journalism, political discourse, and visual art, especially in caricature, denigrating external and internal enemies.

Some figurative and metaphorical representations of enemies in Stalin’s time included apes, bloodsuckers, carrion, chickens, demons (with claws, fangs, and hooves), dogs, flies, garbage, germs, parasites, pigs, rats, snakes, spiders, and wolves. Soviet socialist realist literature, unlike other party-state media, may have been bound to more conservative codes of non-attenuated resemblance in portrayal; however, pejoratives such as ‘beastly’ (\textit{zyerskii}) and ‘wolfish’ (\textit{volchii}) appeared on the individual level in practically any work dealing with ‘enemies of the people’.\textsuperscript{16} The

\textsuperscript{13}Svetlana le Fleming explains that Mayakovsky’s fantastic grotesque exploits the following: absurdity, aloignism, animalism, artificiality, caricature, dehumanisation, didacticism, distortion, exaggeration, hyperbole, incompatibility, and satire, as well as the comic, the ridiculous, the serious, the tragic, and the ugly. See Svetlana le Fleming, ‘Aspects of the Fantastic Grotesque in the Works of V. Mayakovsky, M. Bulgakov and E. Schwartz,’ MA thesis, Durham University, 1974, Durham University, http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/785/1/36\_Aspects\_of\_the\_Fantastic\_Grotesque.pdf?DDD36 (accessed 28 March 2012).


\textsuperscript{15}Chŏng-mo Han, ‘Tanp’yŏn Sŏngnyangi wa Han Sŏrya-ŭi ch’angjak esŏ-ŭi p’ungjajŏk t’ŭkjing’ [Satirical Features in the Novelette \textit{Wolves} and Han Sorya’s Works], \textit{Han Sŏrya-ŭi ch’angjak yöngu [A Study of Han Sŏrya’s Works]}, [Pyongyang]: Chosŏn chakga tongmaeng ch’ulp’ansa, (1959) 325-6. Myers 100, cites Han’s reference to Mayakovsky, speaks of ‘the grotesque’, not laughter, and dismisses it as ‘rejected decades ago by Soviet literary theorists.’


wolf image predates the rise of Stalin and Stalinism, though, and can be found in Lenin in 1921 referring to the ‘imperialist wolf’ with ‘claws and teeth’ preying on a feminized Soviet Russia.\(^1\)\(^7\) Stalin had also spoken in 1918 of the ‘voracious appetite of the imperialist wolves’ and said the following in 1923, in terms that sound remarkably North Korean:

We are surrounded by enemies – that is evident to everybody. The imperialist wolves who surround us are wide awake. Not a moment passes without our enemies trying to capture some gap through which to crawl and do us damage.\(^1\)\(^8\)

North Korea appropriated such images into its national form of socialist realism, as the social culture was intensively Sovietised/Stalinised from 1945 to 1950 – the period of Soviet Army liberation, three-year occupation, and satellitisation – until the mid-1950s.\(^1\)\(^9\)

What is the North Korean view of Wolves? An instructive piece of official criticism for North Korean readers may be found in party writer Yun Se-p’yông’s August 1960 Korean Literature essay ‘Han Sol-ya and His Literature,’ which says the following:

In his short story ‘Sung-nyang,’ he [Han] exposed the savage nature of [the] monstrous murderers of American imperialism.\(^2\)\(^0\) […] Han Sol-ya exposed the true character of human hatred and the barbaric conduct of the cruel aggressive enemies of American imperialism. And, at the same time, he confronted the enemy with the moral characteristics of the noble spirit of the Korean people for their love of mankind and peace. Han Sol-ya artistically

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\(^2\)\(^0\)Yun 23; emphasis added.


Defined the *inviolability* of the Korean people. In ‘Sung-nyagi’ the author accuses the tyrannical inhuman cruelty of the cunning American missionary who calls out, ‘Oh, Lord,’ in the name of the holy cross in Korea; and by contrasting the missionary with Su-kil and his mother’s virtuous and admirable character.21

Despite what may seem to be a biased tone, this criticism is notable because it is a form of thematic criticism that identifies a fundamental *thematic conflict* and a set of attendant *moral conflicts* that find expression in *character conflict* in Han Sŏrya’s classic novelette. These conflict structures may be delineated more clearly in diagram form (Fig. 1).

![Thematic Conflict Diagram](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic Conflict</th>
<th>Moral Conflict</th>
<th>Character Conflict</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Imperialism</td>
<td>Korean People</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savage nature</td>
<td>Noble spirit</td>
<td>American Missionary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbaric conduct</td>
<td>Moral characteristics</td>
<td>Korean Mother/Sugil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human hatred</td>
<td>Love of humanity and peace</td>
<td>Tyrannical inhuman cruelty</td>
</tr>
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Fig. 1. Levels of thematic, moral, and character conflict in Han Sŏrya’s *Wolves*.

Although it has been alleged that *Wolves* is a ‘racist’ work and specifically racist against Caucasians, Yun’s criticism for North Korean readers shows that racism — a master-slave ideology of biological superiority and inferiority — is not a thematic concern as far as the Korean side of the narrative conflict is concerned.22 The

21Yun 24; emphasis added.
22One must distinguish between racism and race-thinking in the North Korean context. A general survey of (North) Korean Central News Agency articles, for instance, reveals that racism (倭種別) and racial discrimination (種別差別) are seen as crimes (犯行) that are bound up with aggression (犯行), annihilation (犯行), colonialism (殖民地), domination (統治), imperialism (帝国主義), and oppression (統治). Racism is also associated with Hitler and fascism (ヒトラー or 豊裕). When North Korean media celebrate the idea of a ‘homogenous ethnic-racial state’ (同族國家) and reject the ‘multiethnic, multiracial society’ (多民族国家), that is not understood as racism in North Korea, but as expressive of the ‘idea of ethnic-racial self-determination’ (同族自決). Since Korea was an oppressed nation subject to colonial and colonial-fascist rule under Imperial Japan from 1910 to 1945, North Korea regards itself as a past and present victim of racism and racial discrimination, espousing in turn the defensive, reactive notion of ‘Korean ethnic-race firstism’ (朝鮮民族先發理念). Despite the strong presence of ethnic-racial pride (民族主義) in North Korea, which Kim Il Sung endorsed in the *Juche* speech of 1955, the regime accepts the fact that most countries in the world are ‘multiethnic-racial states’ (多民族國家) and pursues a non-racially selective foreign policy open to international and diplomatic relations with countries in Africa, America, Asia, Europe, and Oceania. Notably, Kim Jong Il said in 1997 that ‘all countries and all ethnic-races are completely equal and self-mastering’ (民族平等主义, 純粹平等主義) and that all peoples have ‘excellence’
reference to the ‘inviolability of the Korean people’ is also less of a racist invocation than it is an ethnonationalist, patriotic, and self-defensist one that identifies grand moral principles of the good with the ethnic nation, which confronts ‘American imperialism’, a super-national system of finance-capitalist domination. Importantly, the said inviolability does not mean incorruptibility. Koreans can be morally corrupt, and there are Korean characters in the novelette who fall on the immoral side of ‘American imperialism’. It is also telling that, in Wolves, it is not the narrator or protagonists who are racist, but the American missionary and his family. They call people of African descent ‘niggers’ and outside God’s reach and also associate Koreans with filth, ignorance, and savagery, while claiming some Koreans can be saved. The recorded history of colonialism and evangelism has no shortage of such hypocritical social types. While that experience may provide some objective, extra-literary background to the story, Yun’s criticism indicates that the central problems of Wolves are moral ones and that Han’s protagonists and antagonists are not so much characters as they are allegorical personifications, decisively embodying the essential contending forces of ‘savage nature’ and ‘noble spirit’.

Social Setting and Plot Demography
Wolves is divided into six parts that can be summarised as follows: (1) A little Korean boy named Sugil claims a rubber ball in a puddle by a cowshed in a colonial-era missionary compound; (2) an American reverend’s teenage son named Simon declares theft and violently attacks the small Korean child; (3) Sugil’s single mother accosts the reverend, her employer, for justice, but the man feigns ignorance; (4) the reverend’s wife Mary admits Sugil into the mission hospital as a personal safety measure; (5) Sugil is quarantined for allegedly contracting a contagious disease, murdered, and cremated; and (6) Sugil’s mother breaks into the reverend’s house and demands Simon’s life, after which she is beaten, tied up, and arrested. From a reader’s perspective, this is an unpleasant and upsetting story. A mother’s only child is killed, an only son for that matter, which is a great calamity in Korean culture, and those who are responsible get away with it. But that is not all. The story casts the impression that Americans and Christians are, at bottom, a self-serving and immoral people, that only Koreans are good. One feels a strong nationalistic and didactic intention in the storytelling, and that, especially for an outside readership, can discourage a fully sympathetic reading. From a critic’s perspective, things are more complicated.

An examination of the social setting and plot demography of *Wolves* reveals the presence of class distinctions among Han’s characters. While there is no bourgeois *ruling class* (owners of capital) depicted in the story, there is a foreign/native *middle class* (landowners and professionals) and a *working class* (wage earners and poor villagers). The nationalist allegory does not simply oppose these two social classes. *Wolves* subsumes them and their intra-class layers into a coloniser-colonised dialectic, and characters from both social groups exist within the coloniser/negative field and the colonised/positive field (Fig. 2). But this apparent element of realism turns out to be a ‘semblance of realism,’ since all the foreign (American and Japanese) characters are allegorically placed in the coloniser/negative field. One also notices that the poorer the Korean characters are, the more they tend to be included in the colonised/positive field. Case in point is the contrast between the missionary hospital workers (e.g. doorman, guard, janitor, orderly, and nurses), who are all morally compromised, unlike workers who labour around the missionary’s house and elsewhere (e.g. chore woman, factory worker, odd-jobs man, and locals in the surrounding village), who are ungullible and uncompromised.

![Fig. 2. Class, coloniser-colonised dialectic, and positive-negative fields in Wolves.](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coloniser/Negative Field</th>
<th>Colonised/Positive Field</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreign/Native middle class</td>
<td>Compromised native workers</td>
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Similarly, among the middle class, one finds former missionary hospital doctors with private practices who are profit-minded and double as usurers, whereas a patriotic-minded doctor is the son of a ‘penurious carpenter’ and treats underground activists and the gravely ill for free (168, 175). The moral conflict structures, coloniser-colonised dialectic, and positive-negative fields dramatically manifest in the plot demography as follows: There is a racially and nationally proud American reverend, a twenty-year resident of Korea, who has established a comfortable colonial dominion for himself, his heavyset wife Mary, and their fifteen-year-old son Simon. They live in a ‘white house’ amid a grove on a hill; own land, a cow, and a cowshed with adjoining boys’ quarters; and are part of a foreign-native missionary community with brick houses, a church, hospital, and school fenced off with barbed wire. Working for the reverend’s family as a cow milker, cowshed cleaner, fruit picker, and launderer is an aggrieved but tough Korean mother, the uneducated widow of a peasant union activist, and her pre-elementary-school-age son Sugil, who come from a farming village. They live next to the cowshed. Outside the compound is a squalid local village with impoverished Koreans and their children living in ‘rock huts’.

Here is a situation in which class, ideological, and national contradictions are ensured: a compound of well-to-do foreigners and natives living in but outside Korea, encapsulated and cut off from the life of the poor multitude. The words of the narrator after Simon’s deadly beating of Sugil, who claimed the teen’s abandoned ball, captures the great social and moral divide: ‘This was the kind of thing that could have
been committed by people who *never consider the consequences of their actions, let alone assume responsibility for them*’ (168; emphasis added). Indeed, growing up in a privileged colonial-style community and in a racist Christian family, Simon stands above the natives around him and compares them to Satanic ‘blacks,’ whom he has been taught he has a right to beat. (The story appears to be set in around the 1930s.) The teenager is never punished for his wrong, which his father witnessed with little concern and comes to deny ever happened. Still, the boy’s actions induce great fear in the reverend and his wife once the locals become aware of the incident. That fear is exacerbated when a strange Korean man, the factory worker Yi Tonggŏn, visits Sugil’s mother and the unconscious child. The American family’s dread is seen in Mary’s thoughts when she prayerfully visits the boys’ quarters:

> For an instant, disconnected images rose in her mind. She saw an iron hammer, a kitchen knife, the shovel in the stable, the rake and the pickaxe in the storage room ... then she saw all these things in the hands of Sugil’s mother and Tonggŏn as they set upon her. (171)

Terrified as to what may follow if Sugil is seen by a local physician, Mary admits the child to the mission hospital. Yet she does not confess to Simon’s attack, nor does she intend to see Sugil get better, which would guarantee her son’s incrimination and, in her mind, lead to a massacre. That is a possibility she and her husband connect to how the Korean ‘savages’ stood up against the Japanese colonial government in 1919, displaying mass fearlessness before death, something the reverend had observed in disbelief. The family thus conspires with the hospital director Mrs Mack to infect Sugil with a bacterium and cremate his body. After Sugil ails at the mission hospital for two weeks, he is mysteriously quarantined; his mother is denied access to him; and he eventually dies. All the mother’s attempts to beseech the help of Korean hospital staff fall on deaf ears. One hospital pharmacist declares, ‘Americans don’t lie’, for these progressive people build hospitals and schools and bring doctors and preachers to Korea. The narrator says, ‘All the Koreans who worked in the hospital, all of them, were Korean in name only. Inside they were no different from Americans. They seemed to her like people from a *completely different world*’ (181; emphasis added). In other words, the hearts and minds of the Korean hospital staff are colonised.

**Shifting into Allegorism**

The semblance of realism in the social setting and plot demography of *Wolves* is accompanied by occasional and sharp dramatic shifts into allegorism. For one unacquainted with the hybrid form of the novelette, it will come across as ‘riddled with mixed metaphors (usually of the bestial variety), logical inconsistencies, long stretches of tautologous dialogue and confusingly abrupt transitions’.\(^{23}\) It might also be regarded as ‘questionable’ whether the work ‘succeeds even as melodrama’. And if nineteenth-century British realism is the standard of judgment, one could say, ‘Han is

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\(^{23}\) Myers 157.
no Dickens, and thus cannot prevent the juxtaposition of heroes and grotesquely lampooned villains from imbuing the entire story, the central tragedy included, with a surreal quality. But these comparisons are not helpful. Wolves embodies a quite different literary tradition — one that does not combine naturalist empiricism, caricature, the comic, the popular, and the serious in works designed for a market of English middle-class family readers — and it is addressable to cultural, historical, and political problems that are unique to the (North) Korean situation. The novelette has its own objective form, which unites sentimentalism, realism, and allegorism, and it is necessary to accept that form without imposing value-judgments on it.

That, of course, is difficult to do, and maybe more so for the American reader or critic, since Wolves is tendentious literary fiction, portrays a group of Americans as racist and fanatic, and is designed to generate strong emotions against the American presence in Korea. This, however, is not a story about Americans per se, but a response to the Korean War, during which the US and UN military intervention led to a full-scale invasion of North Korea after the Korean People’s Army was driven from the South. While the war is an extra-literary factor, it conditions the novelette, and it is apparent that Wolves is a metaphorical translation of the Korean War experience. One such metaphor is discernible toward the closing, when the mother confronts the missionary family at their home over dinner. The reverend attempts to exorcise her from the premises, ‘Out, devil!’ and she screams:

Devil? You son of a bitch, you kill someone for taking a ball you’ve thrown away. You bastards get out! Who gave you the right to come to another country and kill innocent people? This is our Korean land, Korean land ... do you think all Koreans have died? (185; italics in original)

The US invasion and national self-defence imagery is palpable. But at the same time, the social setting and plot demography of the text, not to mention Yun Se-p’yo’ng’s 1960 criticism for North Korean readers, indicate that there are fundamental concerns in Wolves that go beyond the war, allegorised moral concerns about ‘savage nature’ and ‘noble spirit’, hatred and love, vice and virtue, wealth and poverty, and colonialism and independence.

Allegory operates throughout Wolves; however, it is particularly evident in the fifth part of the novelette, where the vices of Han Sŏrya’s psychomachia (battle of the soul) are most sharply delineated. The antagonists emerge as purer allegorical personifications in the opening dialogue between the reverend, his wife Mary, and the mission hospital director Mrs Mack. Plotting the murder of the ailing Sugil, the reverend says to the director:

‘You are an American. For what have we Americans come to Korea to work, for what do we bestow God’s grace on Koreans?’

‘For America,’ said his foxlike wife, picking up where he had left off, ‘for the American people.’

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24Myers 97-8.


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‘And what is the life of one Korean child when weighed against the glory of the American people? I tell you, why concern yourself any more with a life that even God knows nothing about?’

‘One discarded by God is like a flea-bitten beggar,’ chimed in his wife once more. (176)

After the reverend admonishes Mrs Mack that the ‘ignorant’ Korean people are brave and can smuggle the child from the hospital under cover of night, Mary adds:

‘Where’s your American wisdom? You mustn’t be contaminated by their ignorance. American wisdom, bravery and virtue are vital’ (176). Subsequently, the reverend suggests diagnosing Sugil with a ‘contagious disease’ and quarantining him. When Mrs Mack says that was her thought, she is praised:

‘Gooooo. Spoken like a true American. We need our own American virtues, not Korean virtues or any others for that matter.’ […] Not only that: we have to demand our virtues from others. And if it hasn’t got a contagious disease, then we must give it an injection of bacillae and make it a contagious disease.’

‘Let’s just say it is for the sake of the American people –,’ put in his wife again. (177; italics in original)

Mary emphasises that the child’s death must be within an hour, and Mrs Mack confirms that lethal injections are available at the hospital. This leads to an expression of relief:

‘Good. I should hope so. The victory of the American people and its virtues requires more than just churches. God also gives us bullets, airplanes and warships. What do you think the bibles are, that we missionaries carry, or our doctor’s syringes?’

The director said nothing.

‘They are weapons for America and its people,’ answered his wife with another twitch of her mouth. (177)

Afterwards, the director states she will completely dispose of Sugil’s body, which meets with the reverend’s approval: ‘Ah! Right, right. Americans are wise. The day when America rules the world is nigh. May you be imbued with the glory of the American people’ (178). He orders a cremation of the corpse and ends the dialogue with a malicious prayer:

‘God our Father!’ cried the missionary. ‘Bestow glory on the American people. Aaamen.’

‘Bestow fortune on Director Mack. Aaamen,’ prayed his wife, as if to supplement her husband’s prayer. (178)

This is a very significant set of passages from a literary point of view. They do not qualify as literal, natural, or reported speech and cannot be properly read as

such. Here, the reverend and his wife are no longer people, nor even Christians. They are personified vices, who serve the destructive forces of darkness and domination. They are devils. Along with the allegorical symbolism, one also sees that the personifications stand as representatives for a demonic ‘American imperialism’, and noticeable in the dialogue are metonyms for the Korean War (airplanes, bullets, and warships) and their metaphorical translation (bibles and syringes), all in relation to the great imperialistic demon that threatens to devour ‘Koreans’ and destroy ‘Korean virtues’. The reader has entered the world of the mythic, and Yun Se-p’yŏng’s criticism turns out to be quite appropriate. That the object is ‘American imperialism’ (super-national dominationism) and not Americans themselves, Christians, or even Caucasians is verifiable by critically distilling the above dialogue down to its core strategic references to America and virtue:

We Americans
For America
Glory of the American people

American wisdom
American wisdom, bravery and virtue

American virtues
Demand our virtues
For the sake of the American people

Victory of the American people and its virtues
For America and its people

Americans are wise
When America rules the world is nigh
Glory of the American people

Bestow glory on the American people.

Through this distillation, which can stand as an ultranationalist or fascistic free-verse poem, the voices of the personified vices become a single, unified incantation of American imperialist oppression, whose demonic content is ‘savage nature’, ‘barbaric conduct’, and ‘human hatred’, three things that find their practical expression in the ‘tyrannical inhuman cruelty’ of the heartless and racist antagonists in Wolves. Symbolically consistent with the allegory is the image of the reverend, Mary, and Simon in part six of the novelette. The narrator describes the three as chimera-like creatures – a wolf with the beak of an eagle, a she-fox with a serpentine stomach and jutting teats, and a slippery wolf cub – and calls them ‘demons’. The mother, too, who has now broken into the reverend’s home after piecing together the awful crime, sees the family’s ‘six sunken eyes’ as ‘open graves’ (184). She cries hysterically for the return of her dead son and demands Simon’s life in retribution, making the

chimera and demon imagery psychologically congruent from the standpoint of character. When a trembling Mary says, ‘The devil has gotten hold of you’, the disheveled and despairing Korean woman replies, ‘The devil? You want to see a devil, just draw some water and look at your reflection’ (185). A great moral violation has occurred.

**Neo-Confucian Subtexts and Dreams**

As a building has a foundation upon which its frame and parts are constructed, a piece of literature also has an underlying structure that allows the work to stand and function. Unlike a building, however, the foundation of a literary text is not physical material below ground level, but something inferred from the symbolic action and conflict on the ‘surface’ of the text. The conceptual foundation of the literary text is a structure of ideas: a theoretical substructure, a subtext of authorial and meta-authorial first principles with extra-literary conditions. The moral conflict structures in *Wolves* suggest a Neo-Confucian subtext. That is probable since Neo-Confucianism was the ideology of the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910) and since North Korea did not abandon its Neo-Confucian heritage after the Soviet Army liberation in 1945 and founding of the state in 1948. One, indeed, finds that the influential ideas of Korean Neo-Confucians such as T’oegye (1507–1570), Yulgok (1563–1584), and Tasan (1737–1805) have an enduring, even if officially de-emphasised, presence in the ideological and moral discourse of North Korea. Korean Neo-Confucianism, which consists of interpretations of the Chinese Neo-Confucianism of Chu Hsi, is a philosophy centered on morality, human beings, and virtue, three things that are incarnated in Han Sŏrya’s novelette.

The fundamental moral structure of *Wolves* compares to the Neo-Confucian notion of the fundamental moral structure of the universe. As morality is a shaping principle in Neo-Confucian metaphysics, so too does that principle find expression in the thematic, moral, and character conflict of the North Korean narrative. The moral-literary correspondence may be an unconscious one – that is, if the moral ideas are deeply internalised in the psychology of society; become a ‘normal’ part of social character, behaviour, conduct, and conventions; and are acted on spontaneously. Even though Neo-Confucianism in North Korea may be removed from its social basis in the feudal Chosŏn era, the moral philosophy achieves an independent historical life in the form of tradition, something that dictates normative relations. These are relations of how things should be, how things are supposed to harmonise with the fundamental moral principle (*li*). Social expressions of Neo-Confucian morality are found, for example, in normative acts of benevolence, courtesy, education, devotion, filial piety,

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27 On the assimilation of Tasan in North Korea, see Alzo David-West, ‘Between Confucianism and Marxism-Leninism: Juche and the Case of Chŏng Tasan,’ *Korean Studies* 35 (2011) 93-121.

self-control, self-cultivation, social justice, and the striving to organise society as a ‘virtuocracy’. These acts, of course, are highly contradictory in the extra-literary world, but things are different in literature.

In a moralistic and allegorical narrative like Wolves, which is not an imitation of real life, there is nothing wrong if virtuous characters should act virtuously, and vicious characters should act viciously. That is needed for the moral self-cultivation of the North Korean reader. Neo-Confucianism as an ideological conditioning factor and a literary subtext cannot be neglected in the novelette. Even though the Neo-Confucian tradition manifests peculiarly within a system of national-Stalinism in North Korea, the tradition is still there. In North Korean literature, the tradition is found in the hybrid synthesis of Neo-Confucian didacticism and national-Stalinist socialist realism. What are some cases in Wolves that constitute the traditional Neo-Confucian ‘noble spirit’ the ‘Korean people’ are supposed to strive after? There are at least eleven inviolable principles that appear symbolically: (1) Commitment to honesty and justice, (2) Anger and rage against injustice, (3) Retribution for unconscionable wrongs, (4) Responsibility for one’s actions, (5) Perseverance in pursuing goals, (6) Father as guide and authority, (7) Motherhood and mother’s love as sacred, (8) Welfare and education of children before oneself, (9) Thrift and moderation in wealth, (10) Charity and goodwill for the sick, and (11) Ethnic identity and patriotism.

These principles are threatened, compromised, and violated under colonialism and imperialism in Wolves, and it is the task of Han’s virtuous Korean mother to defend the grand principles. Her friend, the factory worker Yi Tonggŏn, serves a similar function as a secondary character and positive hero. Of the eleven principles, the seventh is notable because it puts a prerogative on motherhood that supersedes any presumed supernatural force or agency. That is evident in the earlier-mentioned scene in Wolves when the mother calls to the mission hospital pharmacist, a Korean man, to help her find her mysteriously quarantined son. Before the man tells her that Americans do not lie, their exchange goes as follows:

After listening indifferently to her trembling voice, he said in a prayer-like tone: ‘Being entrusted to Americans is like being entrusted to God.’

30 Ethnonationalism and patriotism are not traditional Neo-Confucian ideas, but were assimilated into Neo-Confucianism in the twentieth century as a reaction to Japanese colonial rule in Korea (1910–1945). On Neo-Confucianism, nationalism, and patriotism, see Jang-Tae Kum, Confucianism and Korean Thoughts (Seoul: Jimoonbang Publishing Company, 2000), pp. 221–243. See also Gi-Wook Shin, Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, and Legacy (Stanford: University of California Press, 2006).

‘But sir! What do you mean entrusted to God?!’ If anything, the pharmacist’s words only unsettled her more. How could even the greatest god compare with a boy’s mother? (181)

The appeal and the indifference to the supernatural are dissonant for two basic reasons. On the subtextual level, Neo-Confucianism gives high priority to secular human affairs and to motherhood as an institution that produces successful sons.\(^{31}\) Also, on the character level, Koreans are morally obligated to recognise the importance of mothers in their social culture. The hospital staff, as the narrator later says, are ‘Korean in name only’ and ‘like people from a completely different world’ because they abandon normative Korean sociopsychological behaviour in Korea. This brings one to the problem of dreams.

Narratologically, Han’s semi-omniscient narrator is able to enter the minds of his characters and report their thoughts, memories, experiences, and dreams. This is material that gives additional structure to the narrative, but it is not deployed as primary material. Nevertheless, the fact that psycho-narratological elements are contained in Wolves means that they, like all aspects of literature, are significant. The material is there for a reason and means something. How does the dream material, specifically, relate to the surface text and subtext of the narrative? Whereas those two layers consist of empirical relations and ideal relations, the dreams in Wolves are deep relations and an in-between deep text that meaningfully links surface text and subtext.\(^{32}\) Here, a brief distinction must be made: To dream in literature is not the same as to dream in real life. While both are stories, one is an applied literary technique, and the other is a physiologically induced mental activity. The secondary or tertiary dream narratives in Wolves do not affect the unfolding of the plot, but they do underscore the profound moral crisis that is occurring in the story, since dreams have a special place in Korean culture; allow the reader to enter the inner life of the one character who dreams, the mother; and function as foreshadowing devices. Two brief but important dream sequences are seen in the fourth and fifth parts of Wolves, occurring in moments after which the anxiety-ridden mother has been deprived of sufficient sleep. After the unconscious Sugil is admitted to the mission hospital, the mother sits worriedly by his bedside for several days when the following occurs:

\(^{31}\) On motherhood in Neo-Confucianism, see Hae Joang Cho, ‘Male Dominance and Mother Power: The Two Sides of Confucian Patriarchy in South Korea,’ Asian Women 2 (1996) 77-104.

\(^{32}\) The terms ‘surface text’, ‘deep text’ and ‘subtext’ are in general use in literary studies and applied differently by different authors. Terry Eagleton, for example, speaks of a ‘secret sub-text’ to a ‘surface text’, describing the former as deep, invisible, and systematic, with a ‘hidden logic’ and ‘rarely apparent on the surface’. See The English Novel: An Introduction (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005) 293. Other scholars refer to ‘surface text’ and ‘sub-text’ as primary and secondary levels or as explicit and implicit texts. Others still have called the ‘sub-text’ a palimpsest that informs a superimposed ‘surface text’. The ‘sub-text’ has also been termed a hypogram, from the Greek hupo (under) and gramma (thing written).
One day, leaning against the cold radiator, she managed to rest her tired eyes for a while. Half awake, she felt as if she was holding something in her arms. Certain that it was Sugil, she tightened her embrace. Then she realized it was an icy boulder. Death! The consciousness of it suddenly sent a horrid fear down her spine. In vain she tried to cast off this feeling. Just then she was jogged by a pitiful cry from somewhere. (174)

Sugil awakes, but he drifts in and out of consciousness for about two weeks until the mother sees Tonggŏn, who helps arrange an appointment for her son with the patriotic Korean physician Dr. Yu. But it is then that Sugil is suddenly quarantined, and the mother’s turn to the Korean hospital staff proves futile. When Tonggŏn agrees to visit the hospital director with her the next evening, another dream experience manifests:

After almost an entire day and night without sleep, she was finally able to close her eyes at dawn and doze off for a bit. No sooner had she done so, she began to dream. She was being chased by a terrifying thief. She tried to flee but was unable to run. After struggling for a while she saw the thief before her eyes. But suddenly someone took a sharp dagger and went and stabbed the son of a bitch. It was a welcome sight indeed. She was sure the rescuer was her husband, but when she looked closer she saw it was Tonggŏn. She woke, stretching herself with a deep sigh of relief. Now she could hear the sound of a nightingale from somewhere. ‘What does today have in store?’ She thought, with a tightening of her heart. (181)

That morning, however, a hospital worker visits the mother and says her child has died, bringing to literary reality what was foreshadowed in the first dream. But the dreams are not limited to foreshadowing. They represent the thoughts and feelings of the mother in the midst of her dilemma, and they have metaphorical and moral significance. The dreams form a different psycho-narratological existence in the narrative. Part of the deep text, they are structurally closer to the ideal and metaphysical relations of the subtext.

What are some of the symbols in the dreams? In the first, they are an embrace, a son, an icy boulder, and death. In the second, they are a chase, a thief, a rescuer, and a dagger. These symbols summon two distinctive feelings in the mother: fear and relief. Of interest is how the psycho-narratological elements relate to the other textual layers and articulate moral concerns, as Wolves is a morality tale. The deep text in both dreams reveals their essential continuity and reflects the normative Neo-Confucian subtext, expressing the striving for motherhood, the striving for justice, and the striving for the father. Both are also dreams about death, and it is notable that Sugil does not return in the second one. Moreover, the thief the mother sees is never particularised, underlining the broad metaphorical significance of the figure, who can be colonialism, imperialism, the hospital, and the cold death that claims Sugil. Before the first dream sequence is told, the narrator explains that Sugil will be unable to follow in his deceased peasant unionist father’s footsteps. The mother’s grief is described as follows: ‘She could no longer see or hear anything; she was blind
and deaf to the outside world. Guns, knives, and the sound of cannonfire formed one
lament in her dreams’ (174). These are not literal ‘dreams’ but desires, and it is
noteworthy that the knife imagery is reincarnated in the dream world.

Although the mother is physically defeated at the end of Wolves, the Neo-
Confucian subtext and dreams reveal a great moral victory, for the fundamental moral
principle (li) is greater than physical reality (chi), and the mother substantiates the
noble in ‘human nature’. Still, it is the guiding presence of the father that enables
her victory. The mother’s anticolonial activist husband, who died in prison, always
admonished her to make all necessary sacrifices for their son and his education. That
is why she took the job at the missionary compound, so that Sugil could attend the
mission elementary school. The voice of the father is a stimulus to action,
commitment, and direction, and his patricentric authority finds further expression in
the worker Yi Tonggŏn, who served in prison with the father. Tonggŏn becomes
a symbolic father and is the first person the mother turns to in times of difficulty. When
the mother dreams of Sugil’s death, she is also dreaming of the death of the father and
his erasure from the moral universe, which is the greatest horror. But the husband
later returns as a rescuer with a dagger: Tonggŏn. The father is not dead. Morally, he
is still very alive. That brings prophetic significance to the mother’s last words: ‘But
you just wait. […] Not all Koreans have died (187).

Previous criticism of Wolves that neglects allegory, plot demographics, the
Neo-Confucian subtext, and the deep text of dreams has resulted in impressionistic
and superficial claims: This is ‘not a war story,’ but a form of ‘moralist and
ethnocentric social criticism’ and an ‘openly racist work’ with the ‘lack of a
socioeconomic dimension.’ Han makes ‘halfhearted nods at [Soviet] socialist realist
convention’, but is tempted by ‘tearful histrionics’, is ‘beyond himself with rage’, ‘seems to lose all control of his craft’, and writes in an ‘overheated style’ that involves
‘[p]age after page of unadulterated, shriek-filled dialogue’ with ‘racial overtones’ and
‘ethnocentric elements’ that lead to the ‘equation of ethnic and moral categories’. The story has a ‘surreal quality’, ‘bizarre world’, and ‘incongruous Kafkaesque ring’,
 juxtaposing ‘conventional heroes and grotesquely lampooned villains’ and glorifying
a protagonist who embodies ‘ethnic aversion to the white race’. Lastly, the ‘tragic
ending’ evokes ‘literary pessimism’, and the mother’s final words ‘sound downright

33 Yulgok explains that ‘human nature’ consists of ‘humanity, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and
fidelity’. Tasan adds that ‘human nature’ is only potentially good and that the substantiation
of goodness requires the triumph of ‘moral nature’ over ‘physical inclinations’. See Michael C. Kalton, et
al, The Four-Seven Debate: An Annotated Translation of the Most Famous Controversy in Neo-
Confucian Thought (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994) 134; and Mark Selton, Chŏng
Yagyong: Korea’s Challenge to Orthodox Neo-Confucianism (Albany: State University of New York
Press, 1997) 86.
34 Yulgok says: ‘With the father as stimulus, there is the movement of filial piety, with the ruler as
stimulus, there is the movement of loyalty, with the elder brother as stimulus, there is the movement of
reverence’. See Kalton 133.
36 Myers 97, 98, 99, 100, 101.
37 Myers 97, 98, 99.

Alzo David-West. Savage Nature and Noble Spirit in Han Sŏrya’s Wolves: A North Korean
pathetic’. The problem here is the substitution of condemnations, polemics, speculations, and value-judgments for serious literary criticism, whose axioms and postulates must grow out of the literary work.

Conclusion
Han Sŏrya’s Wolves is a difficult text that needs to be approached with critical distance, dispassion, and detachment. Narratological analysis of the work and its internal evidences, without the intrusion of too many extra-literary factors, reveals that the classic of North Korean socialist realism is more complicated than it presents itself in a reader’s perspective. The novelette, to be sure, is imbued with an ethnonationalist ethos and mythos, and in the phenomenology of reading it is possible for the nationalist allegories and semblance of realism to be blurred, resulting in super-generalised views of real people based on the chimeras and grotesques in the story. While that may qualify as racism for some non-North Korean readers (an audience for whom the text is not intended), examination of narrative elements in Wolves in conjunction with official criticism for North Koreans indicates that the story is to be read in an antiracist way that opposes the ‘human hatred’ of ‘US imperialism’ with the ‘love of mankind and peace’ of the ‘Korean people’. The basis for this reading is the writing of the tale after US and UN military forces entered North Korea during the Korean War, resulting in a catastrophic national trauma that is symbolically remanifested in the struggle of a widowed Korean mother and the death of her small son, her only son, Sugil. Narratologically, Wolves is a hybrid of genres; the story is an allegory of the battle against ‘savage nature’, invasion, imperialism, and colonialism; and the good are Korean proletarians, patriots, and mothers under the guiding imperatives of the father, who does not need to be physically present. Wolves is also a postcolonial self-cultivation narrative, drawing from the normative Neo-Confucian tradition, and in the context of the Korean War, which has not formally concluded, teaches the North Korean reader that the inviolable Korean ‘noble spirit’, which can be lost in some Koreans, is not extinguished by violent death or painful deprivation. The ending of this story is not pessimistic; it is moralistic and inciting to nationalist self-defensive action.

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38 Myers 100, 101.
39 Frye 6.
Salman Rushdie’s work has epitomised diasporic writing since the publication of *Midnight’s Children* (1981). It is arguable that the question of what constitutes the identity of an immigrant in an already existing diaspora is first fully articulated in *The Satanic Verses* (1988). However, Rushdie tackles the questions typical for diasporic individuals and communities already in *Midnight’s Children*. The novel indeed takes place in the subcontinent, but it was written at the time when Rushdie was conceretedly negotiating the terms of his own identity in relation to his double cultural heritage. His character, Saleem Sinai, is something of an immigrant when he moves to Pakistan, but then when he goes back to Bombay, the sense of being-out-of-place remains. The most pertinent question for him seems to be that of authentic identity. At the same time, as a writer in diaspora, Rushdie seems influenced by variegated European philosophies on selfhood and identity, in particular some Existentialist thought that constituted a part of a certain Zeitgeist in the 1960s and 1970s.  

*Midnight’s Children* indeed explores the issue of authenticity in the culturally and historically specific setting of post-Partition Bombay, but the influences from European culture are hardly negligible. The novel puts in dialogue subcontinental nativism or communalism and Existentialism’s discourse on authenticity. The nativist drive in his social sphere defines authenticity in terms of untarnished cultural identity located in the past. Existentialist thought on authenticity, which is of course out-of-place in India but nevertheless present in the novel, starts with the individual and stresses the importance of a divorce from inherited identities that are crucial for communalists. Accepting neither of these in their entirety, Saleem produces an understanding of authentic identity that is in part a divorce from the past, but he also takes a direction away from individualism. Authenticity becomes the process of individual change within heterogeneous communities.

**Perplexed by Purpose**  
The historical crises of the postcolonial Indian nation in part make Saleem anguished, fearing ‘above all things … absurdity’. As a way of coping with his angst, he tries to look for authentic meaning in the past. He recounts over sixty years of family and national history as if the redeemed past will heal his shattered sense of purpose. At the same time as he tries to historicise himself, he struggles to articulate and communicate his individual freedom and authenticity. While he seeks historical validation, he writes in retrospect with an ironic sting, which seems to suggest to his intended readers (his son Aadam, Padma, and indeed the entire India) that no such validation is possible, and that he is trying to articulate

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a more authentic meaning in the Existentialist sense of the word, as something new, something acquired rather than inherited.

Being thrown or having-fallen into the complex history of post-Independence India, Saleem and his midnight’s children reflect the ‘conflict in socio-cultural heritages’ (325) of India. Indeed, ‘their heads were full of all the usual things, fathers mothers money food land possessions fame power God’ (290). Despite their extraordinary abilities, they remain ingrained in what Sartre called bad faith: ‘urchins spoke like old men with beards … yes, certainly … because children are the vessels into which adults pour their poison’ (325).

Taking a negative stance against inherited cultural determinants of identity, Saleem structures his story in a certain way to show he can do something about what he has been made of: ‘From ayah to Widow, I’ve been the sort of person to whom things have been done, but Saleem Sinai, perennial victim, persists in seeing himself as protagonist’ (301). While the notion of a ‘protagonist’ predicates Saleem on a literary discourse – the metanarrative points out that he is a character in a story – it appears to mean someone who is the main player in his life, who is active and not merely reactive. Being-a-protagonist for Saleem entails an active-literal mode of being: ‘all actions of mine which directly – literally – affected, or altered the course of, seminal historical events’ (302). Initially, he shows how he builds up his identity by internalising certain institutions and experiences (family, class, nation etc.). Then he comes to exteriorise and re-exteriorise what has been put into him, until he bites the hands that have been spoon-feeding him and rewrites family history. The revision of family history is most important because ancestry is frequently also the metaphor for political oppression of the fathers/mothers of the nation. According to Matt Kimmich, what Saleem challenges is not the existence of parents/authors/originators, but rather the ‘naturalized notion that meaning flows unidirectionally’ from such authors.3 Saleem opposes the idea that one is ‘authentic only due to purity of descent,’ and that ‘authenticity is … an inherent quality’.4 Indeed, upon hearing that Saleem’s mother is a Hindu, and his father an Englishman, Padma bursts out, ‘An Anglo? … What are you telling me? You are an Anglo-Indian? Your name is not your own?’ (148). Rather than speaking of Methwold and Vanita, Padma immediately jumps to the abstract terms, evoking the conflict between the English and the Hindu (symbolic of the colonial authority and the exploited native land). She sees Saleem as the traitor to his ‘true’ filial ties, which he reverses by claiming, ‘I have had more mothers than most mothers have children; giving birth to parents has been one of my stranger talents – a form of reverse fertility beyond the control of contraception’ (308). The plurality of mothers and fathers signals his aversion to filial ties, but also to other models of affiliation as a marker of authenticity, such as nation. Saleem’s plural (a)ffiliation is contrasted to Ahmed’s invention of ancestry, which Neil ten Kortenaar finds ‘harmful because it is nostalgic and self-glorifying and serves to “obliterate all traces of reality”’.5

4 Kimmich 32.
Saleem’s genealogy too contorts reality, but it opposes the legitimating of status through genealogy (as when he produces the simulacra of blood).

To Conform or not to Conform, that is the Question
Saleem first distinguishes between two possible courses of action, conformity (bad faith) and non-conformity. Saleem is mostly intent on qualifying different religious (and also to an extent secular) faiths in terms of bad faith, which is a way of living in an unreflective manner, doing things because one does so. As an infant, Saleem was unable to open and close his eyes instinctively, and had to be instructed by his ‘two-headed mother,’ Amina/Mary (158). Mary said, ‘He is a good obedient child and he will get the hang of it for sure’ (159).6 When in Pakistan, he says, ‘my new fellow citizens [in Karachi] exuded the flat boiled odours of acquiescence, which were depressing to a nose which had smelt … the highly-spiced nonconformity of Bombay’ (391). By pitting the acquiescence of the Karachi population against the non-conformity of Bombay, Saleem foregrounds his conflict with the need which Rushdie himself calls ‘communalism’,7 and which arose, as Gareth Griffiths explains, in response to the colonisers’ dominance. Indeed, communalism employed the rhetoric of authenticity to give substance to its politics of resistance. As a strategy of resistance, it was a gesture of non-conformity, but speaking from a postcolonial context, Saleem objects to the authoritative qualification of this authenticity, which strongly informs other politicised ideas such as race, ethnicity, culture, religion, nation and class. While postcolonial nativism can be understood as a re-assertion of non-Western meanings, values and cultural practices as the means of decolonization, the novel deviates from the coloniser/colonised binary, and focuses on variegated communalist conflicts. Advocated as immanent or intrinsic to the given community, communalist essentialism is a political product without a real communal consensus, just as Saleem’s individual meaning is determined by political and religious figures: ‘Soothsayers have prophesied me, newspapers celebrated my arrival, politicos ratified my authenticity. I was left entirely without say in the matter’ (7). For this reason Saleem loves Bombay’s ever-hybridising crowd, the people who barter both beliefs and everyday practices.

Since he eventually articulates authenticity in terms of non-conformity, Saleem has an anxiety attack when his sister, Brass Monkey, starts ‘learning prayers in Arabic and saying them at prescribed times’ and becomes a ‘public property,’ ‘Pakistan’s Angel’, “The Voice of the Nation”, the “Bulbul-e-Din” or nightingale-of-the-faith … the whole country’s favourite daughter (398). Even Bombay, which is first presented as a plural place, is threatened by conformity during the state of Emergency: ‘Sanjay volunteers, doing their bit for society … but then I realized no, not volunteers, because all the men had the same curly hair and lips-like-women’s-labia, and the elegant ladies were all identical, too, their

6 He echoes Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s discourse on totalitarianism: ‘When an infant first opens his eyes he ought to see the fatherland, and up to the day of his death he should see nothing else…. When he is solitary, he is nothing; when he has ceased to have a fatherland, he no longer exists; and if he isn’t dead, he’s worse than dead’ (The Government of Poland IV trans. Willmoore Kendall [Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1985] 966).


features corresponding precisely to those of Sanjay’s Menaka … the ruling dynasty of India had learned how to replicate itself’ (546). The cloning of bodies is suggestive of an embodiment of ideology. It is like a modern version of incarnation only each soul is the same, or rather, there is none. While the cloning may seem exaggerated, it reflects Saleem’s fears of anything that leads to individual appropriation: ‘I am the sum total of everything that went before me of all I have been done, of anything done-to-me’ (488).

Saleem’s enemy Shiva – who indeed cuts himself loose from his circumstances of birth – helps the government eliminate all those deviant, marginal, hybrid elements that either directly oppose the power, or whose very existence poses a symbolic threat. Although these powers put him in his untoward situation in the first place, he still plays in their court. Saleem, on the other hand, may not be as powerful, but his sense of authenticity drives him to at least try and think beyond the given frameworks. An interesting gesture is that of his production of fathers and mothers. He is affected by all of them and he affects them and changes them, and in the end he leaves them all. What seems to be an inability to commit to any political and religious paradigms is actually a refusal to opt for and fully commit to anything that has been offered to him. He stays with his family in Pakistan and has contact with Zia-ul-Haqq, he lives with the Communists for a while, he marries a witch, and he works as a dog during the war. He always acknowledges all the given choices, but desires a third option, a third pill, to use an image from The Matrix. While Saleem often laments that he has no choice, he keeps confirming and articulating his freedom by moving between fathers and rulers. Shiva, on the other hand, exercises his freedom by choosing between fathers and rulers. Saleem’s autobiographical writing is an exercise in self-reflexivity, which in turn seems always to be oriented towards self-formation. Jung Su calls Saleem’s basic strategy ‘cultural eclecticism’, which she qualifies as an intentional ‘mockery of the idea of authenticity’.

An eclectic selects from the world-repository of culture whatever appears usable for the immediate gain, a gesture that Rushdie claims to be ‘a hallmark of the Indian tradition’. Saleem’s

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8 This argument resembles Sartre’s claim, ‘a man is nothing but a series of enterprises, and ... the sum, organization, and aggregate of the relations that constitute such enterprises’. (Existentialism is a Humanism [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007] 38).
10 Jung Su 61.
11 Rushdie, Imaginary 68.
is a far more ironic eclecticism, the collecting in order to refute and transform, rather than endorse and preserve. When he uses cultural references, and tries to fit modern individuals into mythical narratives, and creates ties to several political and religious movements, he makes an immense hodgepodge of everything without committing to anything. He behaves like that which Søren Kierkegaard calls a ‘fuimus’, someone who looks back at the past as an old man lying about it or inventing it in order to overcome surging existential anguish. Saleem expresses his freedom in exaggerated mimicry/mockery of different beliefs, filiations and political affiliations. Take his hearing-voices for an example, which he interprets in terms of his Judeo-Christian-Islamic heritage: ‘like Musa or Moses, like Muhammad the Penultimate, I heard voices on a hill’ (207). Yet, the voices turn out to be more mundane. His mimicry of the religious discourse seems an act of conformity, but it turns to be more mockery than imitation. This mockery seems aimed at his parents’ assumed bad faith. When he then reinterprets his mind as the radio, he draws attention to the ways in which radio has had a specific function for the ideological constitution of the nation. The nation is too large and too diverse to produce a kind of communion and intimacy of its members that we ascribe to smaller traditional communities. In a large state, as Theodor Adorno has argued, the radio serves to reach the people at large in such a way that they notice none of the innumerable technical intermediations; the voice that announces resounds in the home, as though he were present and knew each individual.

A national consciousness is a false consciousness. When Saleem claims he actually brings all the singular voices to presence for each other in a communion or at least a perfect parliament, he shows that the one who commands the communal space is also the mediator. His mediation is even viler than the radio propaganda during the Indo-Pakistani war, because the children are given the false impression that they are actually present rather than represented. In a sense, he qualifies his brain as the crystallised space of bad faith, but he breaks the illusion and reveals that he has been manipulating the mental forum to exclude Shiva, control dialogue and barter thought. He told them he wanted them to be free, but his liberalism turned out to be authoritative.

Theoretically speaking, although mimicry has been Homi Bhabha’s hallmark, it seems fruitful to remember Sartre’s figure of a waiter who does everything too much in order to conform to a certain stereotype or a role. Assuming that the waiter is aware he is acting in bad faith, then for Sartre he is even more inauthentic because he denies the facticity of his freedom. However, by accentuating every gesture of waiter-ness, the man draws attention to this particular social behaviour. The exaggerated conformity breaks the transparency of this role. Sartre’s image captures social action in bad faith, which is akin to the behaviour of postcolonial subjects such as Saleem’s family in their practice of

English customs. The question is, is mimicry honest conformity, or mockery? In *Midnight’s Children*, it is especially the histrionic aspects of Saleem’s behaviour that alert the readers that his mimicry is anything but serious conformity. For Bhabha, any ‘desire to emerge as “authentic” through mimicry – through a process of writing and repetition – is the final irony of partial representation.’ Since ‘authentic’ here has its essentialist valence, Bhabha means to say that the irony implied in mimicry shows that the imitation does not constitute authenticity, and that it does not hide another true self that is only obscured by the mask of imitation. In order to better understand Saleem’s mimicry, we can compare it to colonial mimetic desire, the kind of imitation or copypasting that nationalism denies in the name of authenticity. The implied paradox here is that the nation itself is a foreign model, always ‘imperso-nation,’ as Sumita S. Chakravarty has argued. Saleem’s family become ersatz Englishmen to the point that his father turns white. Just as for a nationalist such imitation entails a betrayal of the true self, Existential authenticity too stands in conflict with role-playing, imitation, parroting (as in Aadam’s Mecca-turned parroting, and Ahmed’s ersatz bulbul which is in fact a parrot). For Kortenaar, Saleem seems to produce an ‘irreverent twist on Marx’s bitter phrase from The Eighteenth Brumaire [that mimicry is the inevitable fate of the middle-classes]’ in order to ‘deflate the vaunted power of the European original.’ Indeed, Saleem says, ‘it would be fair to say that Europe repeats itself, in India, as farce’ (235).

The key to Saleem’s stance is his thematisation and exaggeration of mimicry, which allow ‘the mimic to stand outside his performance’. Everything he does may only be a performance, but it is possible to understand performance as a creative impulse, rather than mere copypasting. Saleem’s mimicry is not only ambiguous mimesis, but also poiesis. Such gestures, comparable to the famous scene from *The Satanic Verses* where Jibreel is not sure whether he is an angel or a devil, is practically a dramatisation of Sartre’s claim about the responsibility in singular choices: ‘If a voice speaks to me, it is always I who must decide whether or not this is the voice of an angel.’ Although the voice of an angel or a god seems binding, the individual must take responsibility for his or her belief. Kortenaar suggests, although ‘the mere fact of choice is not truly action, the self-awareness induced by the recognition that one has, in fact, chosen, is the kind of experience which underpins action.’ The reader too must choose, and even use creativity.

**Desire for Community**

Emphasising the anti-individualist effects of communalism, *Midnight’s Children* seems to endorse introspection as the primary option for individuals caught up in violent historical circumstances. However, after the exhaustion of paradigms of

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17 Kortenaar 170.
18 Kortenaar 171.
19 Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism* 26.
20 Kortenaar 45.

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filiation and affiliation, as well as individualism, Saleem’s narrative pushes us into a rethinking of both individuality and community. There are at least three instances in which Saleem is isolated and focused on his selfhood: his solitary writing in the factory, his seclusion in the tower, and his amnesiac existence during the war. Yet it is in these instances that he foregrounds the importance of community.

To begin with, Saleem assumes the posture of a loner whose social ties have been severed and who confines himself to his writing. Even though he is writing his memoir, he shares his authorship (of his selfhood), with Padma, who forms with him a community of two (unorthodox) lovers. The very articulation of his authentic selfhood becomes open to negotiation with this one-woman audience who is not subordinated to him, but the essential interlocutor. She joins in, as Kimmich has argued, ‘the creation of meaning, becoming a co-author … of Saleem himself.’ She leaks into him. She breaks his artistic illusions of grandeur and brings him down to the facticity of life.

The emphasis on both the negativity of communalism and the necessity of community is obvious in his comic treatment of Buddha-hood in the passages about his amnesia:

I am stripped of past present memory time and love … I am empty and free, because all the Saleems go pouring out of me … free now … restored to innocence and purity by a tumbling piece of the moon, wiped clean as a wooden washing-chest, brained (just as prophesied) by my mother’s silver spittoon. (436)

Here, the point of Buddhist struggle is reduced to a quite de-spiritualised experience of worldlessness. While ‘free’, ‘pure’, and ‘innocent’ seem to point towards some form of Romantic shedding of social skins, the problem is that in this mode zero Saleem is not quite free, or pure, or innocent. He becomes a dehumanised being, a dog that lends his nose to the service of the army. He is ‘a brinjal … a vegetable’ (446). He is totally cut from his past history, and his heritage can give him no status. If this is an extreme purity then it deprives him of both personality and community. The amnesia is devastating for his sense of self. The constant slippage between ‘I’ and ‘he’ shows his trouble with placing himself in the world: ‘he (or I) had been cleansed of the whole business … I, or he, accepted the fate … emptied of history, the buddha learned the arts of submission, and did only what was required of him. To sum up: I became a citizen of Pakistan’ (445). As I stressed earlier, a model citizen of Pakistan is for him someone who acts in bad faith. Even the ultra-obedient soldiers find him extreme. While the army were ‘dedicated to “rooting out”’ the ‘rejection of past-and-family,’ which was ‘subversive behaviour’ (447), Saleem’s detachment from past-and-family is not subversive at all. They rename him ‘buddha’ (Urdu for old man). In other words, he does not resemble Buddha, ‘he-who-achieved-enlightenment-under-the-bodhi-tree,’ and was capable of ‘not-living-in-the-world as well as living in it’ (445). Buddha’s act of being-dead-to-the-world could be an

21 Kimmich 82.

example of authentic action that shaped history, whereas Saleem is a victim of an accident (a melodramatic gimmick from Bombay talkies). Eventually, snakebite cures Saleem’s amnesia, ‘reclaiming everything, all of it, all lost histories, all the myriad complex processes that go to make a man’ (464). Then, he says, ‘my old life was waiting to reclaim me. … What you were is forever who you are’ (468). This pessimistic statement sounds as if he is giving in to the enormous pressure of his complex past. Yet, while this burden is not desirable, the total opposite is even less so, because he loses all sense of being, freedom, action, and articulation.

As a child, Saleem withdraws to the privacy in the womblike space of a washing-chest, where he is ‘concealed from the demands of parents and history’ (198). Since a total cut from the world does not elicit authenticity, such an isolated character, as Maurice Blanchot claimed, ‘is the individual, and the individual is only an abstraction, existence as it is represented by the weak minded conception of everyday liberalism.’ It is in the tower that Saleem enters the minds of all Indians and meets the other children. His movement inward eventually becomes an ecstasy of his self. By this I mean that his selfhood, albeit seemingly introspective, arise through community, through exposing himself to others, through sharing himself with others and letting them ‘enter’ him. His communication with the children gives him a sense of sharing and bonding. Their dispersion and vast variety of abnormalities (or supra-normality) make him think about a new kind of community. With an out-of-character awareness of European individualism, he wonders whether ‘collectivity [must be] opposed to singularity’ (325). He envisions a ‘sort of loose federation of equals, all points of view given free expression’ (280), and everyone is allowed his or her abnormality, which becomes the ground for their community.

Saleem sees the M.C.C. as the potential third principle that is supposed to stand against old ideological principles:

Do not let this happen! Do not permit the endless duality of masses-and-classes, capital-and-labour, them-and-us to come between us! We … must be a third principle, we must be the force which drives between the horns of the dilemma, for only by being other, by being new, can we fulfil the promise of our birth. (323)

Besides the immediate echo of Nehru’s ‘Speech to Bandung Conference Political Committee’ from 1955, Saleem comes to desire the third principle, but not in terms of national alliances. Instead, he seeks a principle that is also not a principle. The ‘loose federation’ suggests a community that does not formulate a fixed set of principles that will be the glue to its unity. Such a community seems

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24 Rushdie quotes Robi Chatterjee as saying, ‘We don’t need glue … India isn’t going to fall apart…. It is this nationalism business that is the danger’ (Imaginary 32).
idealistic, but as Kimmich points out it only starts to ‘fall apart when Saleem denies Shiva a voice’ and thus ‘silences an unwanted, uncomfortable, potentially disruptive voice and enforces a certain hierarchy’,25 when he starts disregarding the children’s differences and wants to find their common essence. The very failure of M.C.C. draws attention to the ways in which older understandings of both individuality and community contribute to this dissolution. Saleem wants them to be a third thing, but his understanding of community is based on both local communitarian models and the new national ideals with a prominent allegorical leader at the top. Without creative reworking of the old forms of communing, the visionary childhood is nipped in the bud. The MCC community never takes the next step. Saleem, as aware of the potential and the promise of his MCC, becomes a migrant in search for community, but he never manages to attach himself to any given social formation, especially not the nation (the community of all communities).

Another problem may be, to use Blanchot’s argument, ‘theoretically and historically there are only communities of small numbers.’26 Small communities seem to imply communion and even the fusion of the individuals into ‘a supra-individuality’.27 It becomes hard to conceive of a community without the immanence of its members to each other. Nation practically implies the lack of such immanence of equal and connected minds. The midnight’s children can have that through the parliament of Saleem’s brain, but they remain disembodied in an abstract space, reduced to minds without materiality. Indeed, as Blanchot put it, even

the community of equals, which puts its members to the test of an unknown inequality, is such that it does not subordinate the one to the other, but makes them accessible to what is inaccessible in this new relationship of responsibility.28

This equality, as an aspect of community, is not here a matter of social law, a constitution. It is not merely the equality in the distribution of wealth, rights and obligations, but an equal taking of responsibility for the inequality that may be the other face of equality itself, and of freedom.

By entering and leaving several already defined communities, Saleem seems to propose the possibility of bonding and sharing across any number of lines, the possibility of coming together on several plains, of intersecting communities that are articulated through migration. He undermines, to use Jean-Luc Nancy’s discourse on community, all attempts at objectifying and producing a common being that can be traced in ‘sites, persons, buildings, discourses, institutions, symbols; in short, in subjects’.29 The dissolutions of new forms of community in the novel seem to suggest that communities shaped with singular

25 Kimmich 53.
26 Blanchot 6.
27 Blanchot 7.
28 Blanchot 17.

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authenticity in view cannot persist, because any struggle for communal or national life entails an inevitable loss of singularity. Alternative communities – based in a more dynamic, fluid, heterogeneous understanding – form and dissolve. Each individual participates in, gives form and allegiances to several communities rather than reducing communal bonding to one race, nation, leader, bloodline or class. Participation in multiple communities can elicit growth of both responsibility and common good though neither of these becomes dogmatised within the parameters of traditional alignments. There is value in dissoluble communities. I do not mean unstable or fragmentary. To deem a certain community unstable is to posit it against supposedly stable traditional communities, which is an illusion in itself. Dissolution is not necessarily negative. Communal bonding that rejects traditional models can indeed develop in ways hard to anticipate because the processes of personal becoming imply choices and creativity, and also because this creativity takes place in varied social contexts.

In a sense, it is possible to imagine community as a resistance to the common substance and immanence, and towards the kind of sharing and caring that leaves community open to its alterity and plurality. Indeed, as Nancy put it, it is ‘the immanence of man to man, or it is man, taken absolutely, considered as the immanent being par excellence, that constitutes the stumbling block to a thinking of community’. The appropriation into communal essence is death. Yet, there must be community because any ‘fully realized person of individualistic or communistic humanism is the dead person’.

To be dead here is to be appropriated into the immanent life of the community-as-society, whereas the loss of such immanence and communion in/of death opens community to its alterity. The loss of communion vis-à-vis a common being gives rise to relation, plural singularity, communication, and sharing. To rethink community does not only entail dismissal of the communalist models, the fascist dream of absolute communion, or even wholesale abandoning of modern individualism. It is in part to see how community escapes becoming an object or even a subject, and how it tries out our thinking and acting.

30 Nancy 3.
31 Nancy 13.
Anonymity and Signature as a Productive Practice: Ingeborg Bachmann and Jacques Derrida
Sayaka Oki

Introduction
Ingeborg Bachmann is an Austrian author whose last novel *Malina* was published in 1971. She began working on *Malina* in 1966-7, and the novel forms part of the trilogy ‘Ways of death’. *Malina* is a complex novel. The story is set in Vienna and presents three protagonists: the first-person narrator who is an anonymous woman, her lover Ivan and her doppelganger and male alter-ego Malina. Remarkably, the female narrator does not reveal her name until the end of the novel, whereas the male figures Ivan and Malina are referred to by their names throughout the story. Therefore, the question arises: why does the narrator remain anonymous?

In the feminist research on Bachmann’s work, the anonymity of the female narrator in *Malina* is predominantly interpreted as a difficulty of building female subjectivity within a patriarchal society. The novel describes the patriarchal society after the World War Two, where the image of the victimised daughters persists. The memories of the victim appear in the nightmares of the narrator, and the abused daughters are compared with the Jews. The female narrator as the embodiment of femininity suffers from these traumata of the war. Some feminist interpreters of Bachmann’s *Malina* regard the female narrator as hysteric. Hysteria is examined in psychology as a typically women’s disease, disorganisation of language being one of its symptoms when a woman cannot build her own identity because of deficiency in language. Viewed as a patient, the female narrator suffers from traumata that originate in the gender-related power structure and in the memories of the World War. She talks about her traumata to the male character Malina, who accords with the symbolic order. The female anonymity represents here an imaginary ‘other’ who has lost her identity because the symbolic order refers to an established subject and femininity has no representation in the symbolic.

Hence, on the one hand, anonymity can be viewed as an example of the lost subjectivity, in contrast to the dominance of the social-symbolic reality; yet, on the other hand, as this article argues, anonymity also represents a poetic practice. In other words, it rejects the violence of naming, which is described by Derrida’s theory as the violence of arche-writing.

The novel *Malina* is constructed in a complex way: the female narrator has certain hysteric symptoms, but along with that she appears as an author who is planning to write a book. While writing letters she formulates her ideas, in the end

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3 Kauer.

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establishing a unique form of writing with two specific features: her letters are anonymous and bear a conspicuous signature. To make it clear: the narrator is nameless and signs herself ‘An unknown woman’. It is obvious that she gives up her name in order to avoid the violence of arche-writing and that in her project of writing letters her anonymity is connected with the signature. This article examines namelessness as a literary device and analyses the issue of anonymity and signature in the light of Derrida’s theory.

Writing and Absence of the Subject
Jacques Derrida’s concept of pharmakon shows that his writing contains binary oppositions such as speech/writing, life/death, father/son, master/servant, first/second, soul/body, inside/outside, good/evil, seriousness/play, day/night, sun/moon etc. He attempts to overcome such a hierarchy by investigating whether one value also includes elements of another – inferior – value, and vice versa. For instance, in Plato’s Pharmacy Derrida deconstructs the metaphysical structure of the hierarchy, in which writing proves to be similar to the pharmakon, which has two different effects: it can cure the disease but it can also make the illness worse. At the same time, the ambivalent meaning of the words medicine and/or poison has its origin in the old Greek rite of the pharmakos.

In Athens the pharmakos ceremony was held for cleansing after a misfortune or a disaster. Pharmakos relates to a sacrifice or, to be more precise, to a scapegoat, an uncontrollable evil which has to be banished from the city.

The (rite of the) pharmakos was a purification of this sort of old. If a calamity overtook the city by the wrath of God, whether it were famine or pestilence or any other mischief, they led forth as though to a sacrifice the most unsightly of them all as a purification and a remedy to the suffering city.

This practice was carried out in particular in Athens during the Thargelia festival up to the fifth century. Two men, one representing men and the other women, were selected as pharmakos. Since the evil or a disaster had originated from outside the Agora, the sacrifice in this rite was sent from the inside of the city to the outside. The sacrifice embodied the ambivalence: on the one hand, the evil (poison) itself, which should have been exiled from the city, since it was believed to have brought misfortune to the city, and, on the other hand, the remedy to treat the city’s ailment. This ambivalence of pharmakos, where the sacrifice was viewed as a cause of the misfortune and at the same time as a healing medicine, is discussed in Derrida’s concept of writing.

Writing implies violence: it slips out of control of the writer in contrast to speech, ‘logos’. Oral speech, ‘logos’, appears trustworthy because it is produced directly by the speaker and its meaning can be explained by the speaker, who is the

5 Derrida describes a binary opposition as never ‘the confrontation of two terms’ but always connected with power producing ‘a hierarchy and the order of a subordination’ in it. See Jacques Derrida, Limited Inc (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988) 21.
7 Derrida, Dissemination 133.
‘subject’ and who guarantees the effectiveness and lucidity of communication. Therefore, oral messages reach the recipient exactly as the subject has intended. In contrast, writing produces a distance in space and time between its subject (author) and its object (text); when the message reaches the recipient, the subject is not present. But writing without a telos – a destination – is ‘errant’. Thus, in writing, the authority of the subject is being destroyed because the subject is the one who produces a statement. As soon as the utterance is put in written words, it ‘kills’ its producer – its subject.

Derrida described features of writing with words like ‘liquid’ and ‘bastard’ because in the absence of the subject writing can flow from one reader to another like a liquid and, therefore, the identity of writing is not clear, not singular. The violence of writing is in focus of Derrida’s work right at the beginning, for example in the scene in Phaedrus: the leaves of writing attract Socrates, who never wanted to leave the city and who nevertheless travelled to the countryside near the river Ilissus. Socrates, a non-writing philosopher, symbolises interiority, whereas outside the city he is called ‘a foreigner’. So Socrates discards his own principle of living inside the city because the leaves of writing happened to arouse his interest. The poisonous effect of pharmakos becomes obvious: it is based on ‘the going or leading astray’, on the subject getting lost.

The Violence of Arche-Writing and Proper Names
Since the violence of writing would ‘kill’ the subject or the intention of the subject, writing generates its meaning in the absence of the subject. This violent aspect of writing – the violence of arche-writing – can already be observed at the moment when an infant is given its name. Naming was one of the very first human activities, which appeared as a means to distinguish one person from another. Due to the absence of a subject, writing meanders and leads the reader away from the writer’s intention; this property of writing is manifested in the violence of naming and is defined as arche-writing. A name differentiates one person from others and gives him or her an identity but does not function as the identification of the whole personality because that cannot be expressed in one single word. Although it is true that socially a name functions as an identifying trait of a person, it fails to describe the person’s uniqueness. The name aims to capture the personality in a description that can be seen as a violent aspect of writing. The anonymity of the female narrator in Malina can be interpreted in this context as a productive practice to avoid the violence of proper names. The narrator is a woman and she recognises the violent source of arche-writing, so her intention to stay anonymous can be interpreted as a female strategy to overcome violence.

In one of his main works – Of Grammatology – Derrida gives an example of arche-violence analysing Lévi-Strauss’ anthropological investigation of the case of the Nambikwara, an indigenous people of the Brazilian Amazon (Tristes Tropiques).

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8 Derrida, Dissemination 143.
9 Derrida, Dissemination 152.
10 Derrida, Dissemination 148.
11 Derrida, Dissemination 70.
12 Derrida, Dissemination 71.
The Nambikwara people are strictly prohibited from using proper names. Although each of the Nambikwara is given a proper name at birth, in practice these names are not used in their group. Instead, people address each other either using Portuguese names or sobriquets. The social system has been retained here since the Nambikwara use oral communication and do not have the knowledge of writing. When Lévi-Strauss arrived at the village of the Nambikwara, he witnessed a fight between two girls. One of them then approached the ethnologist and whispered to him the proper name of her adversary in order to take revenge.

Lévi-Strauss recognised the source of violence when the ethnologist, that is himself, had interfered with their law, which stipulates the concealment of the proper name;

but it is the anthropological eruption which breaks the secret of the proper names and the innocent complicity governing the play of young girls. It is the anthropologist who violates a virginal space so accurately connoted by the scene of a game and a game played by little girls.\(^\text{13}\)

Since the anthropologist introduced the alphabet into the society of the Nambikwara, the anthropologist can be equated with the function of writing. The chief of the tribe learned about communication through writing first when the anthropologist came on a visit to his village. As the people of Nambikwara had not acknowledged or had avoided writing, they reckoned his activity of learning the alphabet as a betrayal of their law and expelled the chief of the tribe from the group. If writing is understood as a crisis coming from the outside and the primary oral culture of the Nambikwara represents an innocent world, then Lévi-Strauss’ concept is based on a binary opposition: he judged the cultural traditions of the Nambikwara related to speech and the ‘do not know how to write’ as ‘good’,\(^\text{14}\) and categorised writing, which shows a discord, as bad.

Derrida criticised this binarism.\(^\text{15}\) He insisted that naming already comprises violence. The arche-violence occurs since naming categorises a person within a social system or within a class. Therefore, the name eliminates the intrinsic value of a person. Derrida defined the name and the practice of naming as arche-writing because the first act of a human is to give the name to the newly born child and that means that the name of the infant is for the first time registered within the social system.

There was in fact a first violence to be named. To name, to give names that it will on occasion be forbidden to pronounce, such is the original violence of language which consists in inscribing within a difference, in classifying, in suspending the vocative absolute. To think the unique within the system, to inscribe it there, such is the gesture of the arche-writing: arche-violence, loss of the proper, of absolute proximity, of self-presence, in truth the loss of what has never taken place, of a self-presence which has never been given but only

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\(^\text{15}\) Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 135.
dreamed of and always already split, repeated, incapable of appearing to itself except in its own disappearance.\textsuperscript{16}

The violence of writing starts from the moment of naming. The violence of arche-writing strips the named person of the personality and of the uniqueness.

\textbf{Anonymity of the Female Narrator}

Bachmann’s novel \textit{Malina} deals with this problem of the proper name. The main character in the novel, the female narrator, does not refer to her proper name until the end of the novel, so in all scenes she remains anonymous. She lives with her male partner and her doppelganger Malina in Vienna and appears to be a well-known author. In the first chapter ‘Happy with Ivan’, the female narrator is writing a novel – referred to as ‘a beautiful book’ – for her lover Ivan. However, the question arises of why she conceals her name. From the feminist perspective this anonymity indicates that, in contrast to the male characters, the female protagonist does not have her own independent position within the patriarchal society depicted in the novel. The protagonist is constantly substituted by the position of the ‘other’, who is subjected to the symbolic order.\textsuperscript{17} Hence, the anonymity can be read, on the one hand, as a manifestation of the lost subjectivity of a woman in contrast to the symbolic order. For this reason, naming and anonymity symbolise the gender-dominated balance of power between men and women. The feminist study by Inge Röhnhelt published in 1990 regarded the female narrator in \textit{Malina} as a hysteric, particularly due to her deficiency in the coherent articulation and thought, which can be analysed in the psychological context.\textsuperscript{18} The vulnerable female narrator struggles in her specific hysteric way with the problem of identity.

On the other hand, the female anonymity provides a poetic dimension related to the rejection of the proper name. This article interprets the phenomenon of rejecting the name as a productive practice: being an author herself, the female protagonist is aware of the arche-violence of writing and avoids placing herself into a social classification, in particular when she communicates with others. In her novel, Bachmann depicts a paradoxical poetic character that can be interpreted both as a hysteric and as a writer.

The last scene of the novel describes how the female narrator disappears into the wall and only Malina, the doppelganger of the female narrator, stays in the room. The novel ends with the words ‘It was murder’ (225). This last scene can be interpreted as follows: in order to regain her subject, the nameless narrator as the embodiment of the femininity joins the symbolic order of her doppelganger Malina. Obviously, this movement into the symbolic order is related to power. So even if the balance of power between the symbolic order and the femininity becomes evident at the end of the novel, the refusal to take a name can be interpreted the following way:

\textsuperscript{16} Derrida, \textit{Of Grammatology} 112.


\textsuperscript{18} Röhnhelt.

the main character wants to reject violence. Derrida calls it ‘the battle of proper names’, which has a destructive power.

The avoidance of the proper name can be discussed in more detail referring to Bachmann’s fourth lecture at the University of Frankfurt known as Frankfurter Vorlesungen (1959-60), entitled Der Umgang mit Namen. In this lecture Bachmann acknowledged that names of characters and places that appear in fiction and names of people in real life should be distinguished in terms of how important it is to understand and sense both a person and an object. In literature, the connection between name and identity is closer. Plots unfold not only through characters, but also through places and locations: without these descriptions, whether fictive or not, a written text does not appear as a poetic space because in literature a unique poetic map is created through names, i.e. proper names. Fictitious characters demonstrate a close connection to their names. Bachmann argues that we as readers habitually recognise characters by their names and follow twists of the plot with the help of names, so we think we know the characters already from knowing their names.19 However, Bachmann pointed out another aspect – the despair of naming – using the example of William Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury. Since a proper name does not describe the whole identity and the uniqueness of a person, the names of characters in the novel are being constantly changed or varied. Instead of attaching a single proper name to a particular character, the uniqueness of a particular character ought to be constituted newly in every scene in which the character appears. For this reason the author refuses to give him or her only one proper name,

because we are not supposed to recognize the characters from their names. The names are supposed to act like a trap. But rather, we shall recognize them through a totally different thing. ... More important than paying attention to names is to be mindful of the contexts in which the names are mentioned. This could be in the context of a flower, a honeysuckle, a sold grassland, a marriage announcement. We suddenly discover that we gain ground only in such a way. Otherwise, people are hidden from us forever. And they want to hide because there is a reason, a mystery, which frightens away the names.20

Bachmann’s female main character in Malina proves that the name in literature is not the only possibility to describe the uniqueness of a person. At first, the protagonist is nameless; however, depending on various contexts, her identity becomes more ‘fluid’. Depending on the scene, she symbolises either a part of her doppelganger Malina or that of her lover Ivan.21 Similarly, the female narrator is hidden behind the mask of the princess in the legend The Mysteries of the Princess of Kagran inserted into the novel Malina.22

20 Bachmann, ‘Er Umgang’ 252.
22 Schmaus 162.

The violence of naming is also dealt with in a passage in which the female narrator wants to write a letter to ‘Herr Ganz’:

What then began to bother me, and continues to bother me, is your name. Today I have to make an effort to write down your name once again, and hearing it from others immediately gives me a headache. When I cannot avoid thinking about you I purposely think of you as ‘Herr Genz’ or ‘Herr Gans’, there have been times when I’ve tried ‘Ginz’ but the best escape still remains ‘Herr Gonz’ because it’s not too far removed from your real name but can, with a little Viennese coloring, make it just a little silly. (65-6)

She is unable to articulate his name and frequently changes the vowels and the consonants – ‘Ganz’, ‘Genz’, ‘Gans’, ‘Ginz’ and ‘Gonz’ – which marks the dissolution of the definitive meaning or of the name itself. The narrator repetitively uses various forms of address such as ‘Herr Schönhthal’, ‘Herr Ganz’, ‘Herr Hartleben’ or ‘Lily’ because the letters are written over many times. Noteworthy, in the end they are not sent to the intended recipients. The repetition of the signature is substantial since a sign or a mark is able to create several contexts. Derrida considered this function of a mark, especially that of a signature, to be the fundamental effect of writing.

Another letter in Malina deals with the difficulty of writing a name. The following quote shows that addressing a letter and inserting a particular name implies a moment of violence and that a signature functions as a repetitive mark.

Dear Sir:
I could never pronounce your first name. You have often reproached me for this. But that is not the reason why the thought of a meeting is unpleasant for me. Back then I could have spared myself this name, because the occasion so permitted, I couldn’t bring myself to do this and I discovered that this inability to pronounce certain names or even to suffer excessively because of them does not stem from the names themselves but has to do with the initial, original mistrust of a person, unjustified in the beginning, but eventually, one day, always justified. ... I was once acquainted with Herr Ganz. My only request is that you at least trouble yourself to use the same courtesy.
Vienna, ...

Sincerely,
An unknown woman (66-7)

The rejection of naming which appears as a blank ‘Dear Sir...’ suggests that the uniqueness of the subject cannot be expressed only through one single name without a context. In the protagonist’s perception, the name ‘Ganz’ is connected with the distrust of that person. For this reason she is not able to utter his name.

Repeating of the Signature ‘An Unknown Woman’ and the Meaning of Contexts
As the above quotation shows, the first-person narrator signs herself ‘An unknown woman’. This unique way of signing demonstrates that her anonymity turns into a

‘Anonymity and Signature as a Productive Practice: Ingeborg Bachmann and Jacques Derrida.’ Sayaka Oki.
Transnational Literature Vol. 4 no. 2, May 2012.
specific sign. In my view, the narrator rejects the violence of arche-writing by avoiding the proper name, because being a well-known author she has a certain sensitivity to the violence of arche-writing, which according to Derrida begins with naming – in other words, with registering the subject within the social hierarchy. This specific form of signature in the letter is highly significant since it allows the narrator to identify herself as anonymous. This signature appears in all other letters, so every time it is put in a variety of new contexts. Recalling Bachmann’s theoretical work and particularly her lecture ‘Der Umgang mit Namen’ at the University of Frankfurt, the varied contexts in which the subject appears are more important than the definitive meaning of a proper name in the literary work because new contexts generate new meanings of a word. The signature ‘An unknown woman’ appears every time in a new context – in new letters – and thus produces many different meanings.

Derrida emphasised that in comparison with the spoken language a written sign produces several meanings, for example when signing letters or other documents, because writing is based on the actual or on the empirical non-presence of the writing subject, that is of the signer. The signature is removed through the possibility of repetition or, in Derrida’s words, through ‘iterability’ in other contexts or in different situations. For example, even though the same signature can be used for different purposes, e.g. in different letters, each letter contains a different message and context, but the signature is nevertheless set every time alike. If the signature possesses a code, which implies ‘iterability’, it can be used in many different circumstances.

Effects of signature are the most common thing in the world. But the condition of possibility of those effects is simultaneously, once again, the condition of their impossibility, of the impossibility of their rigorous purity. In order to function, that is, to be readable, a signature must have a repeatable, iterable, imitable form; it must be able to be detached from the present and singular intention of its production.

Derrida’s thinking attempts to overcome the opposition of metaphysical concepts that always appear in terms of subordination, which shows the balance of power.

The female narrator in the novel Malina develops her own strategy to overcome the violence of arche-writing by staying anonymous: her original signature ‘An unknown woman’ is repeated in different letters, so that it functions as an iterable mark that generates its meanings autonomously, especially given the absence of the subject. Thus the absence of the subject is emphasised through the unique expression ‘An unknown woman’. The letters in Malina are mostly torn up and almost never sent. In Malina, the female narrator remains anonymous both when she is writing letters and when she is speaking on the phone to her lover Ivan. Hence, only her voice makes it clear who is calling. Instead of guaranteeing one definitive meaning of the proper name, which can produce a power relation, the female narrator attempts to

23 Derrida, Limited Inc 20.
24 Derrida, Limited Inc 11.

describe her personality in many different contexts using her own signature. For this purpose, the potential of iterability or repeating is of special importance.

Conclusion
Derrida’s deconstructive view on writing attempts to overcome the binary oppositions connected to power. In this context, writing is regarded as a pharmakon, which symbolises not a single value but two ambivalent values at the same time: medicine and/or poison. The poisonous effect of writing becomes evident as soon as writing gets apart from the intention of the subject after it has been put on paper. The authority of the subject is thereby ‘killed’ since the writing does not belong to the subject anymore. Hence writing is based on the absence of the subject.

This violent moment first appears as arche-violence of naming because a proper name cannot describe the uniqueness of the person, that is of the subject, but rather registers the person within a social hierarchy. Bachmann’s novel Malina brings up this problem of the proper name: the female narrator does not use her proper name; moreover, she stays anonymous. This article has interpreted the anonymity of the female narrator as a productive practice since she as a well-known author acknowledges the meaning of arche-violence in naming and therefore attempts to avoid giving a definitive meaning with the proper name.

However, the concept of anonymity in this literary project is not the only way to overcome the power related to the proper name. The project is expanded generating different meanings by putting a sign or a mark in varied contexts. According to Bachmann’s theoretical work ‘Der Umgang mit Namen’, the contexts are more important than the proper name of the character, because the contexts produce new literary meanings beyond a definitive meaning. The novel Malina reflects this concept in relation to the expression of the female narrator. Writing letters, the female narrator uses her unique signature, ‘An unknown woman’, which is repeated in every letter, that is, in a new context every time. In this respect, Derrida’s definition of ‘iterability’ becomes important here, because the positive function of the proper name can be found in repetition that is achieved with a signature. If a signer repeats his or her signature, this sign generates several new contexts that reflect the plurality of meanings. To summarise, the anonymity of the female narrator is interpreted in this article as having the potential to overcome the power-related hierarchy in the socio-symbolic reality in the novel. The letters written by the anonymous narrator demonstrate the function of the literary way of generating meanings by using a signature.
Male Beauty in the Eye of the Beholder? Guys, Guises and Disguise in Patrick White’s *The Twyborn Affair*
Jean-François Vernay

*The Twyborn Affair* (1979) critically confronts the politics of sex while revealing the author’s private inner world. Patrick White’s last novel but one adumbrates the representation of traditionally invisible alternative models of sexuality in literature which, according to Robert Dessaix, have been given topicality in the 1980s and 1990s due to a loosening of sexual repression.¹ The themes of homosexuality and transvestism which White tackled earlier in his fiction are now the cynosure of all eyes and fused with identity concerns, even though the author did not intend his novel to be a piece of queer activism.²

*The Twyborn Affair* is quintessentially a social comedy verging on the comedy of errors in which the traditional gendered dichotomy is subverted in order to blur clear-cut distinctions between what is meant to be masculine and feminine. This essay will explore the themes of literary representation, psychology, seduction, gender deconstruction, sexual identity and the politics of ambiguity in relation to male beauty in the novel.

**The Genesis of *The Twyborn Affair*: Reality in a New Guise.**

The starting point for *The Twyborn Affair* is the portrait of Herbert Dyce-Murphy, an English gentleman transvestite, which White saw in the Victorian National Gallery (Melbourne). Later, his friend Barry Jones, who pointed to the subject in the painting, reported to him a conversation between Herbert and his mother Mrs Murphy:

‘Are you my son, Herbert?’ Mrs Murphy had asked this familiar figure in a dress.
‘No, but I am your daughter, Edith.’
‘I’m so glad. I always wanted a daughter.’ (PWAL 545)

¹ In the 1970s, Australian society gradually came to an acceptance of same-sex desire: homosexuality have been decriminalised throughout the various states in fits and starts from 1975 till 1997, starting in South Australia and reaching completion in Tasmania. See Bryce Fraser & Ann Atkinson (eds.), *People of Australia: Key Events in Population, Society, the Environment* (NSW: Macquarie University, 1998) 195, 216.
² Judging from David Marr’s official biography, the discreet White has never been interested in queer activism and never got involved in the Gay Rights Movement. ‘The first demonstrations for homosexual rights began in Australia in 1971. White never marched. His advice to those who suggested he take part was to get off the streets and get on with their lives. Homosexuality was lived not debated by him. … White was contemptuous of those who pretended not to be homosexual. He made no secret of it, nor did he make declarations. As he gossiped about everyone in the most precise detail, so he gossiped about homosexuals, but his own sexuality was not a topic for general discussion at Martin Road. His house was never a homosexual enclave and he scorned those who lived in a coterie of queens. Yet for all this he and Manoly Lacaris were the best-known homosexual couple in the country’ David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life* (Sydney: Random House, 1991) 526 (henceforth abbreviated as PWAL).
All the core ingredients which are central to White’s introspective novel – namely, gender-bending, disguise and homosexual references – are contained in this donnée. From then on, *The Twyborn Affair* became the ‘Murphy novel’ which was commenced in early 1977 and completed by the end of the following year. The author regarded *The Twyborn Affair* as one of his four best novels and the most autobiographical of all his novels at that. As he explained to Manning Clark, ‘All my novels have been to some extent autobiographical, but the present one is more explicit than the others. There are still plenty of disguises of course, otherwise it would be the kind of humdrum documentary expected by Australians’ (PWL 506). Being his most personal book in which his homosexuality is fully explored, *The Twyborn Affair* can be construed as the author’s coming out, since White thought it was best to talk embarrassing things out rather than having other people expose them. The publication of *The Twyborn Affair* even prompted him to write his heretical autobiography entitled *Flaws in The Glass* (1981) in which he is even more outspoken about his sexual inclinations. In a letter to Graham Greene, White even predicted when writing this ‘abrasive novel’ that it ‘will probably earn me complete social ostracism in Australia’ (PWL 506). When *The Twyborn Affair* appeared in November 1979, he was proved wrong. The critical reception of the novel was a complete success, benefiting from commendable reviews and good sales (PWL 522).

In order to document this novel of multiple identities, White returned to the Monaro to capture the landscape of his early jackarooing days back in 1930. The biographical lineaments which one classically finds in fiction are scattered throughout the book. For instance, White’s exploration of the South of France and his visit to the Parc Hôtel in Hyères were disguised in his fiction as the Golsons’ Grand Hôtel Splendide des Ligures in Saint Mayeul. In addition, he has incorporated Greek history as a homage paid to his long-life partner Manoly Lascaris, with whom he shared over forty years of elective affinities. What is more, the erotic scene as observed by Monsieur Pelletier takes its source in White’s childhood when water was associated with sexual boyishness. As the novelist recalls bathing with his companions,

> water played a leading part in my developing sexuality. I was always throwing off my clothes to bathe. ... We continued joking, to hold more serious thoughts at bay, while we plunged, turning on our backs after surfacing, spouting water, exposing our sex, lolling or erect, diving again to swim beneath the archways

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3 David Marr, ed., *Patrick White. Letters* (Sydney: Random House, 1994) 488. This reference will henceforth be abbreviated as PWL.

4 The fact that White chose not to speak to his reading public about his sexuality in explicit terms until the publication of *The Twyborn Affair* is an apt illustration of Robert Dessai’s historicising statement about the 1970s in Australia: ‘In the wake of the liberalisation of laws on homosexuality in most Australian States, the rolling back of virtually all censorship restrictions, ... the arrival of Black Wattle Press in Sydney (specialising in publishing gay writing for a gay readership), the flourishing of the Sydney Mardi Gras and the introduction of courses in gay studies on several Australian campuses, writing on gay and lesbian topics has proliferated’ (Dessai 16). As Brigid Rooney points out in *Literary Activists*, ‘homosexuality was not for public view in the 1950s, and Marr’s biography records the local “fiction” of the two bachelors, business partners, living together at Dogwoods’ (Rooney 40).
made by open legs, ribs and flanks slithering against other forms in the fishy school, as a flamingo moon rose above the ashen crowns of surrounding trees.5

The element of water is crucial here in terms of sexual and Freudian imagery, being as much a male symbol of fertility as a matrix of sorts. Psychological realism in The Twyborn Affair is not only achieved through recalling and drawing on actual personal experiences but also by having recourse to projection. White’s commentators have noted that while the bulk of his characters expressed fragmented aspects of his self, Eddie was the most complete expression of himself. Even though Patrick White wanted to steer clear of Freudian psychoanalysis,6 he seems to be in tune with the Freudian axiom according to which the psychological novel is the result of the writer’s habit to split his ego and project fragments of his own self onto the various characters:7 ‘I see myself not so much a homosexual as a mind possessed by the spirit of man or woman according to actual situations or the characters I become in my writing’ (FG 81). In other words, White slips into the shoes of his imaginary figures to accommodate to an androgynous mind. In his Nobel Prize address, he confessed that ‘my flawed self has only ever felt intensely alive in the fictions I create.’8 Fiction thus becomes a means to overcompensate the cracks in life which can hardly be papered over. In this particular light, White appears as a puppeteer toying with his fictitious creatures, an idea which seems to fall in with Susan Lever’s conclusion. She explains:

In The Twyborn Affair White exposes his role as novelist, as the one who dresses his characters in one sex or the other, as the voyeur who watches them suffer, or the brothel keeper who creates roles for them to play. Despite his claims to transsexual understanding, White’s vision remains masculine, but in this novel he allows his readers to recognise his role as the master of his characters’ sex and sexuality.9

She is not only right in seeing White as sharing the same part as his literary creations but also as a kind of demiurge playing over his model theatre. Like children role-playing while projecting their minds and emotions onto their toys, Patrick White impersonates his male and female characters so that his ‘flawed self’ may finally retrieve original unity and a sense of completion by imaginatively embodying both sexes at once.

6 In a letter to Tom Maschler, White confesses: ‘Perhaps I am too ignorant of the technicalities of psychoanalysis to appreciate it all. In any case, psychoanalysis is a dark cave into which I’d never venture for fear of leaving something important behind’ (PWL 416).
7 In ‘Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming’, Freud believed in the capacity of psychological novelists, who cared to go through self-observation, to split up their ego ‘into many parts-ego’, with those parts being projected onto several characters – characters he generically termed ‘heroes’. These parts-ego could be seen to epitomise the ‘conflicting currents’ of the writer’s mental life.
8 Paul Brennan and Christine Flynn, eds., Patrick White Speaks (Sydney: Primavera Press, 1989) 42.
This mental androgyny scattered throughout the text in a multifaceted protagonist may account for the fact that most critics found it difficult to wring meanings out of *The Twyborn Affair*. Besides, the destabilising effect of having a character impersonating a young woman (is it just cross-dressing or transvestism?) and then a young jackaroo who purports to be a Lieutenant and then the Madam of a London brothel, all point to ‘a queer unity’ in this most bizarre novel which challenges masculinity and segues into fantasy.

The Challenge of Masculinity and the Concept of Male Beauty.

Let us take a closer look at the publisher’s blurb on the back cover of the 1995 Vintage edition, in which *The Twyborn Affair* is wrapped up in the following nutshell:

Eddie Twyborn is bisexual and beautiful, the son of a Judge and a drunken mother. With his androgynous hero – Eudoxia/ Eddie/ Eadith Twyborn – and through his search for identity, for self-affirmation and love in its many forms, Patrick White takes us on a journey into the ambiguous landscapes, sexual, psychological and spiritual, of the human condition.

The adjective ‘beautiful’ could as much be the fruit of the publisher’s subjectivity as it could refer to the narrator’s comment on Eddie’s beauty halfway through the novel: ‘She smiled at their son. She may have wished to touch him, but something she could not have defined frightened her into resisting the impulse. Perhaps it was his good looks. Handsome men were inclined to intimidate Eadie Twyborn.’ Apart from this excerpt, in which the omniscient narrator mainly tries to account for Eadie’s attraction to her son, nowhere is it explicitly stated in the book that Eddie is an Adonis. To be sure, the literary representation of beauty would essentially rely on White’s characterisation skills. But if his protagonist is indeed repeatedly associated with lust and perceived as being ‘different’ on more than one occasion, readers are never given a detailed physical description of Eddie’s purportedly good looks. Very much like most of the sex scenes in the novel, Eddie’s male beauty is mostly understated and implicit rather than thrown in the face of readers. In short, male beauty is neither presented as being objectively inherent to the protagonist nor to be found in White’s subjective representation of E.

The chief reason why Eddie’s male beauty underpins *The Twyborn Affair* without being pinpointed through a cluster of focalisers in an attempt to acknowledge her/his beauty through consensual judgement is that Patrick White could not foster some form of ambiguity and play on sexual indeterminacy without shying away from depictions of his protagonist’s masculinity. It is quite significant that in the Aristide Pelletier episode (TA 72-6), the first (homo)erotic scene in the book, Eudoxia’s naked figure – shorn of any guise – remains unmistakably ambiguous:

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10 See Noel Macainsh, ‘A Queer Unity – Patrick White’s *The Twyborn Affair*,’ *Southerly* (43.2: June 1983), 143-54.
Whether the stranger, a naked one at that, was a man or a woman, Monsieur Pelletier could not be sure: there were enough *folles Anglaises* along the Coast to make it a woman; there were plenty of romantic Englishmen and pederasti-poets to provide a possible alternative. The equivocal nature of the scene made Monsieur Pelletier shiver worse than ever. (TA 73)

Beauty fails to be gendered in this context and, regardless of what sex the indistinct model belongs to, Monsieur Pelletier projects his Romantic yearnings onto Eudoxia by reifying her/him into a work of art reminiscent of the quintessential beauty epitomised by Greek or Renaissance statuary. The underlying logic behind this analogy is that the best way not to define a subject is to turn her/him into an object:

There stood the person poised on a rock above the sea. Because a romantic, Monsieur Pelletier saw the naked flesh as white marble, or perhaps ivory overlaid with the palest gold leaf, though if in possession of telescope or binoculars, he might have had to admit to its being a dirty grey in keeping with the tonal landscape. (TA 73)

The scene is steeped in uncertainty and so is Monsieur Pelletier who, after a short spell, still cannot determine the swimmer’s gender in the innermost recesses of his soul as he is equally assertive that the figure is a man, or else a woman (‘must be a man’/ ‘could only be a woman’).

It was still impossible for the watcher to decide whether the hair, illuminated by sudden slicks of light, was that of a *folle Anglaise* or *pédéraste romantique*, but in whatever form, the swimmer was making for the open sea, thrashing from side to side with strong, sure, professional strokes. It must be a man, Monsieur Pelletier decided, and yet there was a certain poetry of movement, a softness of light surrounding the swimmer, that seduced him into concluding it could only be a woman. (TA 73-4)

White makes it clear that the gender of the desired person is of little importance when it comes to lust. Sexual tension has overwhelmed Aristide Pelletier to such an extent that he must release it through a pleasure-seeking interlude of autoeroticism.

Whether the swimmer were the young wife of the crazy Greek or some unknown woman or youth, neither physical passion, nor even a burst of lust, could enter into a relationship which presented itself as a tremulous abstraction, and which must remain remote from his actual life. In one sense disgusting, his regrettable act of masturbation seemed to express a common malaise, his own and that of the swimmer headed for the open sea, as well as a world despair gathering in the sea-damp newspapers. (TA 76)

Broaching the concept of male beauty in a novel when the protagonist is precisely shunning any clear-cut gender definition of himself/herself appears to be a near impossible task. As a psychological tripartite novel, *The Twyborn Affair* shows
the progress of an ambiguous gender-bender character, bearing a new name for each part of her/his life. The protagonist – the son of Judge Edward Twyborn and his spouse Eadie – is first Eudoxia, the sexual partner of an ageing Greek man, then Eddie Twyborn going through bisexual experiences and finally Eadith Trist, the madam of a London brothel. Despite these multiple identities, Eudoxia, Eddie and Eadith are one and the same person born to the world as masculine. So even if Eudoxia is clearly acknowledged as a female in the narrative, referred to by other people and herself as ‘Madame Vatatzes’, ‘Angelos’ ‘charming wife’, ‘the hetaira’, ‘Empress Eudoxia in name’ in Section One and appears as a ‘madam’ in Section Three, we shall still refer to her male beauty in terms of biological identity.

Male beauty might be defined as a set of inner and/or outer qualities inherent to a biological man which provides the male or female beholder with an experience of visual delight which may result in some form of appeal. Inner qualities may involve immanent features like personality, grace, charm, elegance and intelligence while outer qualities imply physical criteria such as youthfulness, symmetry, complexion and health. The first section of *The Twyborn Affair* opens on Joan Sewell and E. Boyd (Curly) Golson, a wealthy Australian couple who end up on the Côte d’Azur intending to meet up with Joanie’s friend, the flamboyant fellow-Australian Eudoxia Vatatzes. Eudoxia, in her/his mid twenties, is the partner of the decadent widower and sexagenarian Angelos Vatatzes whom she/he met for the first time in Marseille. While any old man might be attracted to a twenty-five-year-old partner – youthfulness being one of the criteria of outer beauty – it is difficult to see how the reciprocity works out. But while Eudoxia asks herself ‘Why am I besotted on this elderly, dotty, in many ways tiresome Greek?’ (TA 23), she ascribes their mutual homosexual attraction to her/his being trapped in a mirror relationship:

> I can only think it’s because we have been made for each other, that our minds as well as our bodies fit, every bump to every cranny, and quirk to quirk. If I hate him at times it’s because I hate myself. If I love him more deeply than I love E. it’s because I know this other creature too well, and cannot rely entirely on him or her. (TA 23)

E, in this excerpt, stands for Eudoxia who seems to have a split perception of her own self which points to some kind of identity muddle from the outset of *The Twyborn Affair*. Even though there is rich psychoanalytic territory to be explored here in terms of psychosis\(^\text{12}\) and Eddie’s intensely close relationship with her/his mother Eadie,\(^\text{13}\) I shall not dwell on what remains beyond the remit of this essay. However, it gradually becomes apparent as the book unfolds that Eddie shares many similarities with her/his mother, among which an inclination for cross-dressing. Eddie’s rejection of masculinity through disguise, even though she/he asserts himself as male gendered in

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\(^\text{12}\) Patrick White took an even greater interest in split personality and psychosis with his last novel dealing with schizophrenia. *Memoirs of Many in One* (1986) was published under the pen name of Alex Xenophon Demirjan Gray, an (imaginary) Greek female author whose novel Patrick White would have edited.

\(^\text{13}\) Incidentally, Eddie and Eadith are onomastically speaking near anagrams of Eadie with whom the protagonist is literally equated in the narrative on page 150.

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the narrative – ‘I’m a boy’ (TA 182), claims Eddie Twyborn to Mrs Tyrell – can be explained by the fact that Eadie has ‘always wanted a daughter’ (TA 423), a desire which Mrs Tyrell has intuitively sensed when she replies: ‘Bet yer mum would’ve been glad of a girl’ (TA 182). All things considered, it seems that Eddie’s ambiguous mindset has been shaped by what has been expected of him. It ensues that the concept of identity – in which beauty would be factored – comes in the form of a social positioning co-dependent on the perception of others.

**Beauty Is In the Eye of the Beholder.**

‘Beauty is in the eye of the beholder’ does not appear as a proper quote in the novel, although Eudoxia touches on its essence when telling Angelos, with (homo)sexual innuendoes reminiscent of a Shakespearian style, ‘My body’s what you make of it’ (TA 30). This proverbial phrase on beauty has captured a sense of wisdom that turns the tables on the relationship between beholder and beheld object. Male beauty as a concept will be more stable when assessed in the eyes of the beholder (given that the beholder has a fair idea of his definition of male beauty) than if it is meant to be encapsulated in a specific male body (for people’s opinions would range from alleged beauty to the lack of it). In a heterosexual situation, male beauty would logically be informative of a woman’s conception of male aesthetics. But what happens if the male model like Eddie Twyborn has cross-dressed himself as in Section One of the novel? In this excerpt, the female beholder is Joan Golson, Curly Golson’s wife, who has lesbian tendencies. In a letter to Eddie’s mother, Joan confesses her crush on Eudoxia and hints at her past affair with Eadie Twyborn. Speaking of Eudoxia, she says:

> She is in any case a radiant creature such as you before anyone, darling, would appreciate. On meeting ‘Eudoxia’ I could have eloped with her, as you too, Eadie, would have wanted, had you been here. We might have made an à trois, as they say! I would have been jealous. I would not really have wanted to share our bed of squalor with anyone else, after escaping from husbands, prudence, the past, into some northern town of damp sheets, iron bedsteads, bug-riddled walls. To lie with this divine creature, breast to breast, mouth to mouth, on the common coverlet, listening to the activity on the street below, flowing by gaslight over the wet cobbles. (TA 128)

It is interesting to observe that in a classic heterosexual situation, White has chosen to subvert the female/male attraction into a lesbian relationship. Therefore, Mrs Golson’s crush on Eudoxia cannot be informative of male beauty canons because she is only interested in the feminine aspect of the young Vatatzes.

When it comes to gay relationships, male beauty should logically be as much an eye-opener on the aesthetics of the beholder as on the canons of male beauty, in terms of literary representation. But the Angelos/Eudoxia relationship is expressed rather in terms of sexual desire than in terms of aesthetics. If I wouldn’t go as far as to

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14 It might be worth noting that Joan, when she sends a letter to her friend Eadie (Eddie’s mother) is unaware that her other friend Eudoxia (Eddie) is Eadie’s son, who she has not seen for many years.

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veer round to Susan Lever’s opinion arguing for a ‘pattern of voyeurism’\(^{15}\) in *The Twyborn Affair*. I still agree with the fact that visual perception is a strong component of the book. There is no denying that desire could well be aroused through the visual stimulation of aesthetic beauty, but Angelos Vatatzes’ ‘predatory eye’ (TA 24) in this instance is more likely to be construed as a giveaway of his sexual appetite for Eudoxia, which could be a matter of pheromones for all that. From the outset of the novel, readers are told through one of Eudoxia’s epistolary interior monologues that she attracts concupiscent thoughts from both sexes:

A aware of Madame Réboa’s plan, the whole of Les Sailles watched us with the complacent expressions of initiates: the postmistress, the baker’s wife, Monsieur Pelletier in his newspaper kiosk, even the fishermen mending their nets. Am I absurd? Perhaps I am. I must accept it when people stare at me. Angelos says, ‘They are planning what they will do with you, Eudoxia, after dark, when they can enjoy the freedom of their thoughts.’ (TA 27)

It is noteworthy that desire in both aforementioned cases is read through other people’s eyes and never expressed through the eyes and minds of the beholder. Therefore, Angelos’ reported lust for Eudoxia could well be an expression of Eudoxia’s secret wish to be desired and Angelos mediating the desire of other people might just be a projection of his own desire for Eudoxia. In the event that a man appeals to both male and female beholders, would it imply that gay men and straight women share the same aesthetics of the male body? Would both of them seek and value the same things in a partner? Unfortunately, *The Twyborn Affair* has no answer to provide because it is not Eddie Twyborn’s masculinity which appeals to Marcia Lushington and Don Prowse in Section Two. Marcia, the sexually unfulfilled wife is taking a vested interest in an extramarital affair with Eddie, but not because of Eddie’s manly qualities, rather because of his feminine aspect:

He buckled his belt, which to some extent increased his masculine assurance, but it was not this masculine self that Marcia was making her appeal. He was won over by a voice wooing him back into childhood, the pervasive warmth of a no longer sexual, but protective body, cajoling him into morning embraces in a bed disarrayed by a male, reviving memories of toast, chilblains, rising bread, scented plums, cats curled on sheets of mountain violets, hibiscus trumpets furling into sticky phallices in Sydney gardens, his mother whom he should have loved but didn’t, the girl Marian he should have married but from whom he had escaped, from the ivied prison of a tennis court, leaving her to bear the children who were her right and fate, the seed of some socially acceptable, decent, boring man. (TA 222)

\(^{15}\) Lever 199. The bathing episode in which Eudoxia is taking a plunge at the beach under the discreet surveillance of Monsieur Pelletier is the main voyeuristic scene of the novel. It came under the close scrutiny of Claire Patin in ‘Poésie et poétique du récit: sur un passage de *The Twyborn Affair* de Patrick White’, *Commonwealth* 13: 2 (1991) 104-8.

Likewise when, further on in the narrative, Prowse makes a pass at Eddie, male beauty is irrelevant. Don Prowse is rather attracted to Eddie’s feminine traits. As he argues before he plays the masculine part in this homosexual affair, ‘I reckon I recognised you, Eddie, the day you jumped in – into the river – and started flashing yer tail at us. I reckon I recognised a fuckun queen’ (TA 284). The roles will be switched in a companion scene in which Eddie will take a more active part in their sexual intercourse.

Eddie Twyborn’s feminine compassion which had moved him to tenderness for a pitiable man was shocked into what was less lust than a desire for male revenge. He plunged deep into this passive yet quaking carcase offered up as a sacrifice. He bit into the damp nape of a taut neck. Hair sprouting from the shoulders, he twisted by merciless handfuls as he dragged his body back and forth, lacerated by his own vengeance. (TA 296)

This bisexual experience can be interpreted as Eddie’s exploration of sexuality which his tantalising sex appeal serves to facilitate.

The situation is further complicated when Eddie Twyborn becomes Eadith Trist, the notorious madam of a sophisticated London brothel. In this new instalment, male beauty becomes irrelevant because the protagonist has assumed a new guise – that of a woman – all the while sustaining an unflinching power of seduction. Does the protagonist’s beauty transcend gender identity or is desire totally unrelated to beauty? This twin question may be left unanswered because The Twyborn Affair provides no clear answer in this respect. In the third section, when we meet E in a new guise, sex is no longer an issue. Rather, it is lived vicariously through the ‘sexploitation’ of the girls on the premises. All the while repressing her own desire and rejecting the advances of suitors such as Rod Gravenor, Eadith is in charge of orchestrating and staging desire for her bawds: ‘Their clothes she chose herself, and she made it a rule that clients should not see their prospects naked in the public rooms; nakedness, she felt, discourages desire, though many would have dismissed her view as morbid idiosyncrasy’ (TA 324). At this stage, Eadith has morphed into a Jungian archetype, the unattainable virgin and the whore, as one of the characters points out: ‘You know, Eadith, I believe you have a savage nymphomaniac inside you, and a stern puritan holding her back’ (TA 344). This third part paves the way for the sublimation of Eros, with the protagonist epitomising the symbolic rose of courtly love, which is beautiful, loveable, and desirable, but ungraspable because of its prickly stem. Her name, Trist – which might have been spelt ‘tryst’, for want of a less conspicuous allusion – involves a kind of mock Romanticism disclaimer but also fittingly points to the dynamics of prolonged desire through the refusal to surrender to the lust of her suitors who are attracted to Eadith’s femininity.

Deconstructing Gender and Redefining the Canons of Male Beauty.

White’s unflattering portrayal of women in his works has set him up for charges of misogyny,16 a misunderstanding he tries to clear up in his autobiography Flaws in The

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16 See for example, David Tacey, Patrick White: Fiction and the Unconscious (Melbourne: OUP, 1988) 233. ‘In White the misogynist strain is rife, and woman is experienced as an enemy and threat to
Glass: ‘In life I have known far more admirable women than admirable men. … Of course my women are flawed because they are also human beings, as I am, which is why I’m writing this book’ (FG 252). One gathers from his answer that White’s conception of double gendered masculinity, which stems from Freudian theories17 and Jungian contrasexual archetypes, highlights his sense of man’s incompleteness. It takes only a small step from this observation to redefining the canons of male beauty and seeing man’s perfection as embracing the full gamut of human emotions and roles through double gendered physical and psychological responses. As David Marr puts it,

White was one of those homosexuals who see themselves as part woman and part man: not so much a woman as to be effeminate, but enough to understand and share feminine virtues. He admired in others signs of his own ambivalence: men of unexpected gentleness, and women with masculine strength. (PWAL 581)

And ‘ambivalence’ in this context should be taken as a byword for disguise. In other words, White advocates feminine virtues in the guise of male bodies which he perceives as some form of superiority over those who would be less rounded in terms of personality. In his own words,

In fact sexuality refreshes and strengthens through its ambivalence, if unconsciously – even in Australia – and defines a nation’s temperament. As I see it, the little that is subtle in the Australian character comes from the masculine principle in its women, the feminine in its men. Hence the reason Australian women generally appear stronger than their men. Alas, the feminine element in the men is not strong enough to make them more interesting. (FG 154-5)

White’s first queer18 protagonist equally sharing feminine and masculine sensibilities reflects his own ambiguous mindset. The protean character E – E for enigmatic, Eudoxia, Eddie, or Eadith – struggles against prejudiced minds to set free ‘the woman in a man and the man in a woman’ (TA 360). Onomastically speaking, the young Twyborn is obviously twice born, first as a man and later as a woman, Eudoxia – which is in his eyes, and as his name indicates, the ‘good norm’, the perfect blend which sustains mobile and volatile identities in terms of gender and sexuality. The trouble is, where White craves fluctuation, nuances, ambiguities and complexity, society begs for binary systems, dichotomous solutions, and single gender-marked consciousness. There is a need for masculine reinforcement, and this takes the form of homosexuality, Australia’s most recent, genital version of mateship. Mates and gays both require masculine support; both are engaged in emotional flight from the feminine.’

17 Freud has it that psychosexual identity is obtained through the expansion of one side of our bisexual natures which is achieved by the shaping force of a deterministic childhood environment.

18 As Leo Bersani contends, ‘queer has a double advantage: it repeats, with pride, a pejorative straight word for homosexual even as it unloads the term’s homosexual referent. For oppressed groups to accept the queer label is to identify themselves as being actively at odds with a male-dominated, white, capitalistic, heterosexist culture.’ Leo Bersani, Homos (London: Harvard University Press, 1995) 71.
identities. This is the reason why the psychological complexity which the novelist tries to achieve fails to make itself conspicuous in the verbal constructions of the narrative:

Eudoxia/Eddie/Eadith (E.) Twyborn’s body may be seen as participating in a binary language structure, where it must be either male or female and where both elements cannot be expressed at the same time. In this way, the novel addresses the problem of embodiment on two levels: E’s several changes of sexual identity insist that E.’s body can never fully represent E. while the novel’s self reflexive strategies suggest that reality slips away from language. 19

Born in a male body, E. faces the Soma sêma predicament. 20 His female identities (Eudoxia/ Eadith) are a sure means of deconstructing gender, of neither belonging to the male or female group, and of eluding classifications. As John Colmer puts it, even though ‘dressed as a man, Eddie’s sense of identity is still uncertain and ambiguous. 21 Besides, like drag, the protagonist’s female identities might also be proof in a very Butlerian fashion that gender is essentially performative. 22

Conclusion

The Twyborn Affair is proof that male beauty in literature can be either classically represented through a detailed description of a man which accords with the traditionally accepted canons of male outer and inner beauty or implied through the universal sex appeal of a character such as Eudoxia/ Eddie/ Eadith. But can male beauty be discussed when masculinity is unstable and challenged by its polar opposite gender? Can a set of commonalities be found in people’s perception of beauty in the event that male beauty is assessed in the eye of the beholder? Eddie Twyborn’s gender-bending, bisexuality and ever-shifting nature do not enable readers to pin down the representation of his elusive male beauty. Having said this, E’s ambiguity points to a modern concept of male beauty epitomised in a mix of feminised and manly traits – a concept lately advertised as ‘metrosexual’. White might have been well ahead of his times in this respect. The indecision of choice has left him with an abiding interest in the politics of ambiguity that informs The Twyborn Affair and champions sexual indeterminacy.

19 Lever 98.
20 Not in the classical spiritual sense, but in a very down-to-earth physical way. In other words, the protagonist might just be the epitome of anima muliebris in corpore virili inclusa, which is Latin for ‘the woman imprisoned within the male body’ (Bersani 132).

Reflections apropos of Two Australian Books on Shakespeare
Joost Daalder

Kate Flaherty, *Ours As We Play It: Australia Plays Shakespeare* (UWA Publishing, 2011)
Philippa Kelly, *The King and I* (Continuum, 2011)

Both of these books are written from an Australian perspective, being significantly, deeply, and explicitly based on the authors’ experiences with Shakespeare. They offer an exploration of material which is perhaps particularly of interest to those of us who live in Australia, but which, I dare predict, is also accessible and significant to those living elsewhere. Neither author is parochial in outlook, and each writes, at least implicitly, with an international audience in mind. As well, they leave us in no doubt that Shakespeare’s impact on them has been that of a transnational author.

In writing about these books I shall, more than I normally do, also offer material of my own, explaining in part why I see the books the way I do, and not least because I am interested in the issues raised by the authors from both an Australian and also – perhaps especially – a wider perspective. My views are not necessarily as objective as those of simply a reviewer. This is not only an academic review, but also a somewhat more personal essay.

I should like to state initially that the two books are both, in my view, very good, and I wish to emphasise this because I shall nonetheless here and there be found to dissent rather strongly from what I have read. I start with Flaherty’s book because she is concerned with Shakespearean plays as approached by others, particularly in performance. Her interest is quite markedly in Australian views of Shakespeare as distinct from non-Australian ones, but she does speak about Shakespearean play scripts and performances thereof as matters outside herself. Her response is ultimately more pronouncedly to Shakespeare’s texts and less internalised than is that of Philippa Kelly’s to *King Lear*. Kelly does in part enable us to see *King Lear* as others might also see it, but she offers a book which is primarily of interest to us for the way she describes how the play has impacted on, and been viewed by *her*, in her own life in Australia, even though she also more widely relates it to Australian events and attitudes. Kelly’s is a significant departure from the more conventional external tradition of responding to Shakespeare within which, in her own way, Flaherty operates.

Before I consider these books in some detail I feel I should – by way of declaring my hand – say something about my own attitude, as someone born and bred in the Netherlands, but who is, no doubt, in relation to Shakespeare more Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Celtic in outlook than Dutch. My adult life since the age of eighteen has been devoted to the study of English, and there has not been a year since 1957 in which I have not been somehow in close contact with Shakespeare through reading or seeing his plays, and generally in an English-speaking environment (the UK, New Zealand, and – mostly – Australia). As a student of Shakespeare I must clearly state that I am an ‘oldie’, and I confess that as such I bring a good deal of what others may see as ‘baggage’ with me, of which I am, however, not ashamed. I am still among those who believe that, if we talk about, or perform, Shakespeare, we have above all a primary duty to attend very specifically and thoroughly to what William Shakespeare

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Joost Daalder wrote, and I consider that there is such a thing as a specific author visible within his corpus. Thus, those professing to concern themselves with this author as critics and theatre directors should, in my view, attempt to do justice to this author and what they may work out to be his implied intentions and attitudes. (I say this in full awareness of the existence of the ‘death-of-the-author’ view: I do not share that, believing that authors are personalities who intentionally shape, and often in quite a distinctive, analysable way, what they create.)

I do not object to fantasies, in criticism or on the stage, based on what Shakespeare can be transformed into, but I feel we should be very clear about what we perceive – or indeed can clearly see to be – Shakespeare on the one hand, and transformations of Shakespeare on the other. I know I am somewhat out of fashion in believing in this to me all-important distinction, although more so, I feel, among specialist academics or theatre practitioners than the vast majority of, say, undergraduate students and most other people who enjoy reading and/or watching Shakespeare. Those, I believe, see themselves as primarily getting close to that author rather than caring about the creative efforts of others to turn Shakespeare’s works into something they plainly are not. I admit, of course, that there are difficulties in interpreting Shakespeare, but there is still a major difference in grappling with that attempt on the one hand and what amount to significant transformations on the other.

There are two developments that I particularly regret having had to observe during my professional lifetime: (a) the way Shakespearean drama has often become, in reading and when performed, the target of purely theoretical or ideological approaches, and (b) the fact (as I see it) that in productions the text has been treated with less and less respect, and that an emphasis on all sorts of extraneous material in settings and so on has become more pronounced. I believe that (b) is in part logically connected with (a), but also has been fed by an insatiable appetite on the part of producers to try and produce something which would stamp their production as novel (‘innovative’ is often a favoured word) or unique. Again, I am aware that in saying this I am speaking in a way which is currently old-fashioned among professionals, although, again, I believe that many ‘ordinary’ readers and viewers continue to see matters the way I do, whether young or old.

In this essay I am at least initially as much concerned with performance as with the way Shakespeare is or might be read. This results from the fact that the book closest to Shakespeare’s texts and interpretations of the two under consideration, namely Flaherty’s, discusses his theatrical work very much in terms of performance. As the UWA Press Media Release puts it, ‘By closely examining Shakespeare’s plays as they’ve never been studied before – performed by Australian theatre companies in contemporary Australia – the author, Kate Flaherty, argues that Shakespeare’s plays cannot help but resonate with local concerns.’ It is, moreover, clear from her book as a whole that she believes that Australian performances also should in some significant way be obviously Australian. I disagree strongly with her assumptions, though that is not to express any hostility towards them. It might be nice, indeed, if somehow we could readily ‘translate’ Shakespeare’s plays into something Australian rather than British, as that might bring out Shakespeare’s universality and timelessness yet more readily than if he gets performed as an English author writing four centuries ago.

But we might ask ourselves: how necessary is it to Australianise Shakespeare in performance, on the stage, rather than to leave it to the audience to work out what, in his work as an English writer from long ago, might specifically be of value for
Australians? Further, could it somehow be actually damaging, both to the author and to the audience, to present a play as Australian which remains automatically, as a text, English (and from the past) even if we were to make it look part-Australian (and contemporary)? What I have in mind here is not that we must show some sort of colonial respect for Shakespeare simply because he is English and as such superior: rather, that if we feel we can reasonably access (in translation) Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* or Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler* without any effort to Australianise such plays on the stage, the same might surely apply to Shakespeare.

Let me give an example of a performance of *King Lear* which I was lucky enough to see in London in the late 1990s and which I believe would to the non-British members in the audience – including people from entirely different cultural backgrounds – have seemed hardly less understandable, important, and enjoyable than it was to those who could trace their ancestry in Britain back to Shakespeare’s time, and I would even include those who were specialists in Renaissance drama (like myself, though I am not British). The production which was so much lauded at the time, and remains I am sure as highly regarded now as it was then, was the one featuring Ian Holm as Lear. My memory of what I saw is that of Holm and his fellow players (to use the Elizabethan word) acting – by using their voices and their bodies – not relying on eccentricities in their clothing (which I do not recall), on technically clever use of lights, sound effects, a notable stage, settings, or props. Human bodies with voices carried the play – virtually nothing else. To refresh my memory of what others thought at the time, I have just read the fine critic Benedict Nightingale’s review, published in *The New York Times* on 4 May 1997. Nightingale writes about the play extensively and with awe, but he, too, was obviously overwhelmed by the acting, and he fully concentrates on that. My wife Truus, also, found the performance astonishingly good, and free from so many things that have interfered with our enjoyment of other *Lears* (and other Shakespeare plays) which we have watched.

Of course, one remains aware that the play is set in the past, and that it was written by an Englishman, also in the past. The England of the past is not Australia of the present, but Australians, I am very confident, would have enjoyed and understood the play as much as others, including most British people today (who are often hardly better informed about Elizabethan times or the English language than other speakers of English). Geographically, too, we are a long distance away from Britain, but again this would not have handicapped Australians seeing Holm and his fellows perform *Lear*.

Why is this? Why does Shakespeare speak so much to people globally and at all times? It is not a fiction to say that he does: the facts speak for themselves. After all, if in recent decades it was at some point possible to see eleven different productions of *Hamlet* in Tokyo, all at the same time, this must mean that the now so often questioned notion that Shakespeare is for everyone and for every time is likely to be quite correct. And that must also mean that what speaks to others, anywhere and at any time, is within Shakespeare, though conveyed by him to others in such a way that we can identify with it as important and engaging in a fairly direct manner even if – at all times, including his own – Shakespeare was and is at the same time complex. Indeed, I would argue that the very complexity of the author is one reason for his ongoing and universal popularity. *Should* Hamlet kill his uncle? Hamlet himself believes he should and eventually he does, though impetuously rather than with self-control. But, although ostensibly, even in his monologues, Hamlet rebukes himself for
not acting, there is something inside him – with which many can identify, whatever it may be – that makes him procrastinate. Shakespeare never really lets us know (and may not feel that human nature allows us to know) why someone in his position might hesitate and find reasons for inaction. Matters like these remain eternally and globally fascinating.

Another reason why Shakespeare transcends limitations is that he is often called on to support some fashionable ideology, yet his texts resists such attempts, because Shakespeare is not an ideologue himself. For example, The Tempest is now often read, and performed, as though Prospero is an evil imperialist patriarch and Caliban merely his victim, as some sort of noble savage. Yet in the play itself Caliban is described as the son of a witch. This does not seem to bother many people today, but anyone who regards rape as a peculiarly heinous crime, and most of us do, should surely not fail to observe that Shakespeare presents Caliban as a would-be rapist, which some explain as due to his believing in free love. The fact is that increasingly rape is seen as evil, and thus would go down as a black mark against Caliban. Shakespeare’s point, it seems to me, is that human behaviour requires a framework broad enough to deal intelligently with the good and the bad that can be found in a great many humans, including both Prospero and Caliban. Shakespeare, I believe, challenges ideology per se, and makes us question things rather than construct facile answers. Despite this, I also believe that the author enables us to make distinctions between bad and good conduct which seem to be very broadly shared by most people. For example, Lear very unjustly disinherit his youngest daughter, but that does not mean that we must see the suffering inflicted upon him by his other daughters as somehow other than evil on their part. It is only during – usually fairly short – periods of fanaticism that audiences will lose their sense of perspective. I remember going through a brief phase as a teacher when it was difficult – considered by some as sexist – to argue that Lady Macbeth, Goneril and Regan are evil women: but even then their supposedly good qualities were not universally recognised, and the signs are that today this view is less enthusiastically maintained.

Flaherty does an excellent job in describing a number of contemporary (or at least recent) Australian productions of Hamlet, As You Like It, and A Midsummer Night’s Dream. She provides sufficient detail, with sufficient clarity, to enable one to imagine a performance that one has not seen, which is greatly to her credit. She also manages to make the various experiments sound interesting. So, at the very least, I would see her book as a most welcome record of theatrical history.

Where we part company is in our appreciation, at least in part, of what those productions offer us as renditions of Shakespeare’s play scripts. To me the Lear performed by Holm and his fellow actors was a great success because the acting was of such a quality, and there were so few distractions to interfere with one’s concentration as a spectator, that I was totally absorbed by what I saw, and mentally dwelled for a few hours in the world which I think Shakespeare asked me to inhabit. One felt involved in the human story shown, which seemed utterly real, and was hardly aware that one was in a theatre. To me, and I would maintain this is still true for most audiences, what mattered was that, as Coleridge recommended in 1817. I could easily and willingly believe that what I saw and experienced was real. To the extent that the performance asked me to supply certain elements not shown on stage in my imagination (typical of Shakespeare) I found that easy to do, nor was my attention disrupted by various elements that broke the spell cast over me.

Shakespeare, as I firmly believe and as contemporary observations suggest, practised the art of illusion, as, until Brecht invented what the English-speaking world usually calls ‘the alienation effect’, performance of plays axiomatically endeavoured to do. There was (and usually still is today) a silent contract between those putting on plays and those watching them to the effect that we are all entering into a world different from the reality immediately around us, and into which we are mentally transported.

It is the acting which will, in this situation, make or break the performance. Such things as settings may occasionally help, but very often they add little or indeed are a distraction. The Holm Lear was to all intents and purposes dependent on acting alone. And I think that the evidence is that Shakespeare’s theatre had little need of anything else during his own time. Even a change of scene was usually only very summarily indicated. Thus, we are, as an audience, informed by words that we have been imaginatively transported into the Forest of Arden in As You Like It when the banished Duke Senior says: ‘Are not these woods / More free from peril than the envious court?’1 The Forest of Arden was and is part of the locale where Shakespeare grew up. Even today, the audience would realise that it needs to envisage (that is, to imagine) a forest, and an English one at that: it does not need to be given anything actually to see in order to do so. Flaherty makes a similar observation when she mentions (107) that at the beginning of another scene Rosalind says ‘Well, this is the Forest of Arden’ (2.4.11). Flaherty sees the statement as an example of ‘the performative potential of language’, as indeed it is: many stage directions in Renaissance drama are provided by the actors within their speeches. Even so, much of what she discusses is concerned with theatrical settings, and in particular Australian ones.

In a film, it is possible to take the audience with one, imaginatively, by placing the actors in a real forest. In the theatre, except when a play is performed within a forest-like setting, it is hardly possible to use something tangible which will as easily suit the purpose, and many efforts at naturalism are actually counter-productive. The kind of productions which Flaherty refers to, and which are typically contemporary (not necessarily peculiarly ‘Australian’, by the way) can to my mind legitimately be accused of wilfully introducing a context which is not that of a forest. Rather, we are asked to see something unlike it which is ‘innovative’, and which tells us more about the production than the play. Thus Flaherty describes what happened in a production of the Sydney Theatre Company, 1996, where the audience was directed from the COURT (indicated by a sign) to the forest:

The blue silk of the court backdrop disappeared into a trap in the stage to reveal a jumbled array of giant, tarnished-gold letters on a concentric double revolve. Despite the lazy tilt of the ‘F’ across the ‘O’, the ‘FOREST OF ARDEN’ was discernable [sic] in autumnal disarray .... In the centre a small ensemble accompanied jazz singer Kerrie Biddell in her sultry number: ‘Under the Greenwood Tree’. Biddell’s ‘Come hither, come hither, come hither’ was a direct invitation to the audience who applauded the striking fluid transition. (104)

1 2.1.3-4; I refer, as does Flaherty, to the Norton Shakespeare.
One can see how a contemporary audience might be impressed by the sheer theatricality of all this, but I would argue, despite the view of commentators to the contrary, that little of this helps us to experience the world which Shakespeare’s words create. Indeed, some praised the staging because it was not Shakespearean:

This textual Forest of Arden is decidedly autumnal – no green world here. It starts out red, a jazz cellar which could be in another wing of the Duke’s Palace. There is at first no sense that the exiles have fled the court at all. They have simply found a more congenial part of it. In the modern world there is no duality between the city and the forest. (105-6).

There is, of course, a duality between the city and the forest in the modern world. And in all respects we are still close enough to Shakespeare, not least in a country like Australia, to produce something far simpler, and far more faithful to his play than this. Of course, for those who have already seen a production closer to the original play it may be interesting and entertaining to play about with the script and produce something quite different as a variation on it, but then we should be clear about what we are doing, i.e. that we are not pretending to present something Shakespearean. The technical experiment described by Flaherty is one which Shakespeare does not need, and which makes us move, imaginatively, into some kind of strangely heterogeneous fanciful world which is a hybrid: a Shakespearean text placed in an environment where Elizabethan English can only come across as an archaic oddity. In reading about this sort of thing I am reminded of the idiocy of the production of Richard III which showed towards the end a battle with tanks and the king even so exclaiming that he would willingly swap his kingdom for a horse. All imaginative unity and coherence gets lost in such muddled productions.

Company B, in a 1999 production of As You Like It, came closer to the Shakespearean play, from what I read in Flaherty’s account. It showed a stage floor which ‘appeared as a sunlit lawn, scattered with eucalyptus leaves’ (110). The eucalyptus leaves were no doubt intended to Australanise the forest, but what seems to me more concerning was that ‘in the final scenes, the spatial identity of this Arden was confirmed as being closer to a suburban backyard than a wilderness’ (112). From a Shakespearean viewpoint this again was simply wrong, and ultimately damaging to the play. It is part of the very structure of As You Like It that within the Forest of Arden the characters experience something profoundly different from what they bring with them from the court: their new environment tests them, and in general alters them significantly more than the atmosphere of an Australian backyard would. A backyard may supply some of the comfort of pastoral which for one thing Arden provides, but it is not importantly transformative, as Arden is in Shakespeare’s play. Flaherty writes: ‘Much was made of this playful closure and many reviewers saw it as an explicit stamp of the production’s Australian identity’ (112); and it appears that the presence of an Australian identity, just as such, was seen as a good thing. I would argue that where that identity readily fits in with what the play offers it is innocuous (possibly advantageous though hardly needed); but where it clashes with the world of the play we can well do without it, and surely should.

This is perhaps the moment to face the most important point of all: Shakespeare is universal and timeless because, although he wrote plays as an Englishman around 1600, his human insight was such that anywhere and at any time audiences can extract

from him what matters to them without having to distort his world by explicitly making it, for example, twentieth-century and Australian. He does not need that kind of help to make him accessible and important. Others, I know, will profoundly disagree with my position, and of course they have every right to do so.

Enough about this particular matter, and I move on to the matter of role-playing. The main difficulties in this area over the last few decades have been due to a misunderstanding of the nature of Shakespeare’s plays as somehow creating a strong sense of metatheatre, and, as part of this, also an alienation effect. Metatheatre, of which Flaherty appears to see many signs, is automatically assumed to exist where Shakespeare’s plays make us think of the existence of play-acting, as though we are bound, in that event, to reflect immediately upon the on-stage action as acting only – not part of a world of make-believe which, during the performance, we accept as real. But there is a profound illogicality behind this assumption. *Hamlet* (a play which Flaherty discusses) shows us, in the play-within-the-play, the work of what are emphatically declared to be professional actors (‘players’) who are not to be confused with the actors who carry the main action of the play (*Hamlet*). The play-within-the-play is offered as a deliberate construct, something we are meant to be aware of as acted out, and on Hamlet’s – the producer’s – instructions. As Shakespeare is offering a contrast between the playlet and the play, without which we could not understand proceedings, the effect is that the characters whom we believe to be real, such as Hamlet and Claudius, become the more convincing as a result of their not being part of what is offered deliberately as artificial.

Another major – perhaps the major – factor in creating what has been a fashionable interest in supposed metatheatrical or alienation effects is the confusion which has bedevilled the interpretation of boy actors in the Elizabethan theatre. The misunderstanding of their role is to an extent understandable. One of its sources is no doubt that generations of audiences have tended to believe that Shakespeare’s women, such as Rosalind, remain recognisably women when they appear in male disguise. Almost all modern audiences confronted with cross-dressing in Shakespeare have this form of dressing (a female disguised as a male) in mind, and indeed are not confronted with the opposite. There is, undeniably, a considerable difficulty arising from this situation. If one cannot, as a member of the audience, accept as male what one sees to be a woman in disguise, even as a male just in the eyes of other characters on stage, the theatrical art of Shakespeare – the art of theatrical illusion – no longer has validity. The spell is broken. From this, it is only a small step towards the belief, which is now very widespread and visibly shared by Flaherty, that audiences who saw boy actors at work when disguised as women would inevitably have been incapable of thinking of them as – within the play – women, not in any sense men.

This is a sad stage of affairs. With the pernicious impact of Brecht’s ‘alienation effect’ (be aware that what you see is acting) as an added factor, it is now often seen as a mark of sophistication not to believe that in Shakespeare’s time a boy who acted the part of a woman on stage was simply regarded as, within the play, a woman, and nothing else. The emphasis today is on the desirability of seeing gender disguise of any kind as automatically drawing attention to two genders, at all times. Yet there is no evidence whatever that Shakespeare’s audiences did not and could not engage in willing suspension of disbelief when seeing a male actor performing the part of a female. References to performances do not indicate any such problem. Indeed, there is the famous instance of Henry Jackson, who, having seen *Othello* performed in 1610,
wrote about Desdemona, ‘She [sic — this is said about a male actor] acted the matter very well, in her death moved us still more greatly; when lying in bed she implored the pity of those watching with her countenance alone.’ This reaction, I feel, must have been representative. If the audience did not think of Desdemona as a woman, the character could not possibly have been tragic, and the play would have been some sort of hideous farce.

I am hopeful that a better understanding of gender issues in relation to role-playing is beginning to emerge, but so far Flaherty and I seem to be poles apart on this issue. One of the Rosalinds she discusses is the one in Cheek by Jowl’s 1991 performance of As You Like It, which I recall seeing in Adelaide at the time. Although the company was not, of course, Australian, I think it is legitimate enough that Flaherty should comment on its production, as she is concerned with the development of various presentations of Rosalind in modern Australia, and the emphatically all-male cast of Cheek by Jowl made quite an impact. Flaherty writes that the production ‘completely eliminated the female presence. Paradoxically, this production was seen as both restorative of Elizabethan staging traditions and as offering a challenge to contemporary notions of gender identity’ (130). Certainly, it did result from, and produced, a degree of confusion. The cast was all male, and I presume that that fact was seen by some as restoring Elizabethan staging traditions. It was nothing of the sort, however. Those acting the parts of women were, even though dressed as such, recognisably male. In Shakespeare’s time, they would have been male, but would to the audience have been entirely convincing as females. It was not difficult for a young Elizabethan male, and particularly with appropriate clothes, to be seen as a female, and notably if the actor specialised in such roles, as happened. We have the nearest modern (ongoing) living presence of such a tradition in the Japanese Kabuki all-male theatre, where the onnagata (female impersonators) play the parts of women with astounding virtuosity and are found entirely credible in their roles as females.

Thus I believe that much discussion about gender matters in Flaherty’s book (but not more so there than in many other studies) is misguided and beside the point. I do not say this to criticise Flaherty in particular, but a general current outlook on an important theatrical matter. We should realise that in Elizabethan times the fact that the actors were males is unimportant: they were doing a particular theatrical job. We should, instead, concentrate on what happens on stage. When we see Rosalind on stage initially, she is simply a woman. When, however, she disguises herself as Ganymede, the audience is aware of the fact that it is watching a female character impersonating a man, and we thus in that sense can simultaneously think of her as to us both female (in reality, as a character) and a male (in a role which carries weight and interest). Several of Shakespeare’s most admirable and appealing female characters seem to have been thought of, by him, as capable of covering a range of qualities which we conventionally think of as male and female, and Shakespeare’s positive contribution to consideration of gender lies notably in his making us aware that women show themselves remarkably capable of being male in their capacities when offered the opportunity to do so. The question as to whether the role of Rosalind is played by a male or female actor is in essence immaterial: we are not asked to reflect on that when we watch the play.

Before I move on to consider Kelly’s The King and I, I should like to stress that I found Flaherty often particularly gratifying on Hamlet. That play is always greatly admired in Australia, and she discusses with great acumen several different
productions. She also identifies as Australian something which is indeed so: a peculiar kind of gauche macho mentality, which she relates to the Anzac tradition, warfare, and the Australian enthusiasm for sports. She sees Hamlet, particularly recent Hamlets in Australia, as providing an antidote to this tradition, and although I do not think that there is necessarily anything deeply and specially Australian in the way Australian actors perform Hamlet as a character, she does explain to me why the play appeals not only to women but also to Australian males of a non-macho kind. Her discussion of these matters seemed to me remarkably good, and despite my disagreements with her on some vital matters I respect her work greatly. There is a great deal more of worth in the book which I have no space for discussing.

Philippa Kelly’s The King and I deals with the impact King Lear has made on her life and how she views the play. She is of course also interested in how the play is best performed, and it has to be said that her account of three productions in which Australia’s most famous Shakespeare director and actor, John Bell, played the main part, confirms much of what I have said above. The first time Bell acted the part, for the Nimrod Theatre production in 1984, he was restricted by the nature of the production (not directed by him), about which he later said: ‘If you start with rubble, you don’t have anything much to give away. The production didn’t really have anywhere to go’ (86-7). The production started with ‘the rubble of warfare’ and, as one spectator commented, ‘I got no sense of Lear’s painful journey out of self-preoccupation’ (86). In short, the extraneous elements of the production hemmed in the main actor of the play, who could not show how during its action Lear psychologically develops – going through an ‘arc’, as Kelly calls it, which to her and me, and surely most people, provides much (perhaps most) of the value and interest of the play. But worse was to come in the 1998 production by Barrie Kosky: here all sorts of directorial interference utterly dislocated the audience from what the play actually says. What was seen was, as I would put it, ‘Kosky’s fantasy on King Lear’, rather than anything showing respect for or understanding of Shakespeare’s text. Needless to say, again Bell could not flourish in this environment, in which he was actively directed to play a role of someone very different from the Lear of Shakespeare’s play. Yet in 2010 – in a production by the Bell Shakespeare Company itself which I have unfortunately not myself seen – and in which Bell could present to his audience what many would agree to be something close to Shakespeare’s Lear, the emphasis was strongly on Lear as a character of considerable complexity developing throughout the play, and on human relations and interactions in general (91-4). Of course one good reason why this was possible was that the emphasis was, as in Holm’s English performance, on good acting (speaking and moving) – not on distracting directorial interference. The key point I want to make, I should stress, is not one against Australian productions specifically, but on those, including Australian ones, which place the emphasis on the wrong things.

To Kelly the importance of King Lear as a statement – or rather a work of art – presenting human situations, actions, thoughts, feelings, and relationships is obviously paramount and has been from the first time when she first encountered it as a teenager in 1976. While guided by an excellent teacher, and no doubt helped by seeing a televised version of the play, it would be true to say, from what I read, that the play immediately made a deep intrinsic and personal impact on her because of her own receptivity to it. This is probably in no small measure a matter of character: from Kelly’s account of her life in relation to Lear it is clear that hers is a deeply serious
nature, which is prepared to – indeed derives satisfaction from – literature dealing with the depth of human experience, with suffering, with hope amidst suffering, with loyalty, love, and human relations generally. It is, I think, appropriate for me to mention what I infer from her book about her as a person, for this is not just, or even primarily, an analytical, objective book about Lear, but a much more personal statement. That being the case, the value of what she says is automatically in part established, in the reader’s mind, by whether or not the reader is prepared to be interested in, and to have some sympathy for, her as a person. I do, from what I read, and so apparently do many of her readers, for during 2011 the book was not printed once but twice, and readers have formulated some very enthusiastic responses.

The importance of the book lies, for me, not just in its own individual merits, but also in what it attempts to do as part of a new kind of writing on Shakespeare, and as a welcome swing away, not so much from the ‘close reading’ approach which I grew fond of as a student and still enjoy, but notably from what I see as the dark period of a criticism overwhelmed by theory and ideology which gradually developed an impact during the late 1970s, the 1980s, and notably the 1990s – although already in 1993 some very potent criticism of it appeared.\(^2\) Kelly’s book is part of a refreshing new series Shakespeare Now!, edited by Ewan Fernie and Simon Palfrey for Continuum in London, in which a number of titles have already appeared. I strongly sympathise with the ideals of the editors, which in a way take me back to the time when I first enjoyed Shakespeare as a young man. Academic fashions come and go, and although predominantly I still feel out of fashion, I believe also that of late fashion has certainly been coming my way again. The editors plead ‘above all for aesthetic immediacy’, saying that the books which they champion ‘speak directly from that fundamental experience of losing and remaking yourself in art’ (xi). Surveying generally much of what has been written in recent decades they note (and I rejoice):

In recent years there has been a move away from ‘theory’ in literary studies: an aversion to its obscure jargon and complacent self-regard: a sense that its tricks were too easily rehearsed and that the whole game has become one of diminishing returns. This has further encouraged a retreat into the supposed safety of historicism. (xiv)

As part of the preoccupation with theory, or indeed historicism, we have also seen an emphasis on very predictable ideological stances, according to which it became commonplace for commentators to attack, almost invariably, any character in a play who had (or was claimed to have) a patriarchal role, and to argue that there was nothing wrong with Lady Macbeth, Goneril, Regan, or for that matter any female character, – all in a very simplistic and one-sided mode of regard. Above all, careful study of a play itself became a casualty: as Ferney and Palfrey put it: ‘Often “the play” is somehow assumed, a known and given thing that is not really worth exploring’ (xiv).

For Kelly, by contrast, a play like Lear is worth exploring again and again, and I would agree with her that one never tires of it and one continues to be fascinated and nourished by the experience one encounters, whether it strikes one as the same as

before, or as something that suddenly turns out to be different (something one had not seen, or judged wrongly).

A new element in criticism like hers is that it is far more subjective than what has been customary, but this – although it should not become the only possible approach – lends considerable interest to reading and thinking about Lear in her company. I should add, by way of caveat, that I do not think that her approach is always equally effective. Let me give one example, here, of what I think is a success of the subjective approach and one which I think is a failure. Early on, in speaking about her youth, Kelly tells us that her mother worked in ‘the Bailey Henderson, the pharmacy department of a mental hospital in Toowoomba’ (8). This was (tellingly, for those of us who read Renaissance literature) based on the Hospital of St Mary of Bethlehem (Bedlam) near London. Kelly mentions some of the suffering which occurred there, explaining that people could be put in mental hospitals for all kinds of things that are unthinkable now. She also explains how caring an attitude her mother had to the patients (9). Proceeding logically, in associative fashion, she writes how this made her observe ‘the bias against age, against nature, against madness; people shivering together, the rejects of the earth’ – all of which, I can immediately see, we also find in King Lear. So she can very naturally write: ‘It was in 1976, some years into my mother’s sojourns at the Bailey, that I first experienced another place of lost identity, another place of emotion played out in a largely uncaring universe’ (10), thus logically taking us to her first encounter with the play.

I think this connection between Kelly’s perception of a mental hospital on the one hand and of King Lear on the other is illuminating. It is entirely understandable why, not least in a child’s mind, but also that of older people, Lear would make one think of patients in a mental hospital (particularly a crude one), and indeed, also, why someone with knowledge of such a place of suffering and insensitivity would readily think of that when presented with the world of Lear.

By contrast I am not impressed by Kelly’s attempt to compare Lear and Gough Whitlam. Whitlam was dismissed as Prime Minister of Australia, with his government, by Queen Elizabeth’s representative, Sir John Kerr, on 11 November 1975. There is no clear connection between Whitlam’s situation and Lear’s which I can see or which Kelly presents. Rather, she sees a similarity in character:

The figure of Lear nudges at my memory as I look back at this scene and the characters involved. Whitlam’s is the first image that comes to mind – this vastly tall politician with an equally towering wife, a charismatic pair who symbolized the rollicking free spirit of Australian leadership. (18)

I see no significant resemblance whatever – going even by Kelly’s own words – between Lear and this Australian politician. Things are not made much better when she says a little later that Whitlam had ‘too much hubris and too much decency to see’ (19) what Kerr was up to and relates Whitlam to Lear in these terms. It is a vague and unhelpful comparison at best, and not least when the two figures are compared in terms of the context in which they find themselves and what happens to them afterwards. There is a big difference, I feel, between throwing light on Lear through mentioning natural analogies between things seen or experienced in one’s own life and the play on the one hand, and dragging in unnatural ones on the other: the Whitlam–Lear comparison seems to me to be in the latter category and actually

detrimental to a reader’s understanding of Lear rather than useful to it.

But no book is likely to be perfect, and there is far more that is truly good than bad in this one. I was surprised to see the names of Cate Blanchett and Baz Luhrmann misspelled on page 84, but, far more importantly, I enjoyed reading about Kelly’s experience as a teacher at the Australian Defence Force Academy where she managed to encourage her students to enlarge their human experience (a good thing for a soldier as well as anyone else) by commenting on Lear; and I was also particularly moved by what she writes about Mullawah, the women’s prison in Sydney (26ff). This place of banishment, often of loss of dignity and suffering, obviously does bring us close to the experience of Lear and his small band of fellows out on the heath. In particular, it also helps us to become aware, like Lear, of our humanity at a very basic level, and of our interconnectedness as humans. Kelly describes in touching terms her uncertainty about whether she should accept a drink of water from a cup offered by one of the inmates of the prison. Although frightened about possible infection, her fellow feeling wins out, and she drinks.

In Chapter 3, I found Kelly very convincing on the role of the Fool in the play, and interesting as well as relevant in her discussion of playing the Fool as a characteristic within Australian society. From my own observations, I think her view of this component in Australian life is quite accurate and it is actually very valuable to see such information supplied, as it helps both Australians and others to understand why people in this nation seem to have such a good understanding of a character like the Fool, and in general of anything that deflates pretence, helps us to see reality, and thus – in a case like Lear – to gain insight into ourselves as well as others. The book is especially worthwhile because it not only makes Lear reflect on Australia, but also Australia on Lear. For anyone living in this country and interested in both Lear and Australia it is indeed necessary to see matters in both directions.

What I shall all in all remember the most about this fine book, however, is the depth of its understanding of Lear as a play, and perhaps especially of Lear as a faulty but tragic and deep character. At the root of it all is not only the quality of King Lear as a play but also the impressive way in which Kelly responds to it with her whole being.

Both books show us how Shakespeare deeply matters in Australia as elsewhere, and, as well, that Australian writers contribute significantly to study of him.
‘Finding a Place for Falstaff’ at the MCG – the theme and the location both have a creative resonance in my life. The first Shakespearean play I read in my first year English Honours class at Delhi University was Henry IV, Part I. No Indian or Australian writer was ever mentioned by the lecturers, who then thought English Literature was what was written in England only. Writers like R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and Nirad Chaudhuri had written quite a lot, as had their political leaders, Gandhi and Nehru. Indian academics had a huge literary complex, if not a cultural cringe.

Imperial England had a profound impact on the Indian psyche despite the fact that the epic struggle for Indian independence lasted almost a hundred years: from 1857 to 1947. Even the vivisection of the sub-continent – the great imperial crime – did not wean Macaulay’s minute men and women from the literary productions of England. It takes longer to decolonise our mind and imagination – longer than colonial encounters of the closest kind.

So we read that literature and played the most colonial game of all – cricket. And thereby hangs many a tale and thwarted centuries. And I’d gone from Nadi to New Delhi, still in my teens, crossing both the Pacific and Indian oceans.

I, therefore, wish to confine my presentation to my knowledge of India in ‘Reading Asia’, the vast and varied continent with all the bluff and bluster of Falstaff. Reading Asia is possible; but understanding Asia is well-nigh impossible. But according to Adidas, which presumably gets its shoes made in Asia, Impossible is Nothing.

Australia, fortunately, has advantages: its location, its geography and history, its openness now to new ideas and its unique position as a bridge between the philosophy that shaped Europe and North America’s democratic institutions, including the education systems, and the passions of Asia. Despite the fact of the tyranny of distance, coupled with the tyranny of difference, the Indian Ocean touched the shores of the island continent. Contemporary Australia is very different from the Australia I touched on my way to New Delhi via Sydney from Nadi.

One of the first significant realisations of this settler colony was that it is geography more than history that is likely to determine the national destiny; second, that in Australia culture and consciousness had to undergo not only a sea-change, but a hemispheric transformation; North America did not undergo such cataclysmic climatic change.

Asia, as we know, is the most multiplex concept: it contains two-thirds of the seven billion people on our planet; its philosophical and religious foundations are ancient and myriad; India alone has more religions, people, voters, philosophies, customs, fashions, languages, cuisines than perhaps the combined complexity of Europe, the US, and Australia. And if Aravind Adiga, who studied in Australia, is to
be believed in *The White Tiger*, Balram Halawai has to kiss 36 million Hindu gods plus three Christian and one Muslim god. He is naturally overwhelmed and finally finds his salvation in the murder of his employer. Divine multiplicity is the truth; not the monolith of monotheism. There are, as Hamlet says, more things in heaven and earth than in your philosophy.

No nation, I think, is more ‘democratic’ than independent India: where else would you have a bullock cart on the same road as your latest four-wheel drive; or could one man’s fasting force a Prime Minister to recall parliament. In this ‘functioning anarchy’ for an outsider, there’s an intricate pattern of relationship behind palimpsest veils; there’s also the abject poverty, the extravaganza of Bollywood, the vulgarity of the rich. It is also democratic in the sense that in a nation of sacredness – from cows to rivers – there’s hardly anything that is genuinely sacred; and corruption is spread like gravy on the tablecloth: as Orwell puts it: ‘Even the millionaire suffers from a vague sense of guilt, like a dog eating a stolen leg of mutton’.  

Mawkish, monkish religiosity should not be mistaken for spirituality: Arundhdati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* and her collections of essays strike at the roots of this reality.

So how does one introduce *Reading Asia*, with India in mind? We can begin with texts in English Literature: E.M. Forster – *A Passage to India* is still my favourite novel on India; George Orwell, who deplored poverty and hated privilege, wrote *Burmese Days* and his essays ‘Shooting an Elephant’ or ‘A Hanging’ could offer an opening; Rudyard Kipling and even Paul Scott have possibilities.

Another way is to see in Australian writing the presence of India. Many Australian writers have journeyed into the interior landscapes of India through their writing: Patrick White’s *Happy Valley* (1939) has an epigraph from Gandhi, *The Tree of Man* has a lot of the Hindu view of life in it; *The Solid Mandalas* is more seeped in the *Gita* than T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. Janette Turner Hospital’s *The Ivory Swing*, Christopher Koch’s novel, *Across the Sea Wall*, journals like *Meanjin*, *Overland*, *Westerly* and *Transnational Literature*; editors and scholars such as Bruce Bennett, Dennis Haskell, Syd Harrex and Vijay Mishra; Alison Broinowski’s two remarkable books, *The Yellow Lady* and *About Face*; David Walker’s *Anxious Nation*; Nicholas Jose; and David Malouf all take us into other landscapes beyond India.

And the most powerful and accessible way of ‘Reading Asia’ (read India here) is to read the Australian diasporic writers who write in Australia while their imagination and experience is often tethered to their memory of the land of their ancestors, who migrated to Australia from war-torn societies: from Bangladesh, Vietnam, China, Japan, Korea, Indonesia, the Philippines: there’s literature here born out of brutal and brutalising regimes. And they traverse more than two worlds of generational griefs and human glory, including wars: Brain Castro, Melinda Bobis, Adib Khan and several new and exciting voices enriching the Australian variousness.

In ‘Reading Asia’ it’s not only the genre of fiction but travelogues and life-writing that make a fascinating reading. Apart from the autobiographies of Gandhi...

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and Nehru, there’s Dom Moraes’ *My Father’s Son* and *Never at Home*; V.S. Naipaul’s *An Area of Darkness* and *India: A Wounded Civilization* and his Islamic journeys in *Beyond Belief*; Salman Rushdie’s striking essays in *Imaginary Homelands* and *Step Across This Line*. These books are written with contemporary cosmopolitan imagination by writers who have lived and loved both in the East and the West. And they are writers who appeal to readers for their style and substance and emerging structures of reality, and their imaginative power to make us live in worlds beyond our immediate selves: to seek out the writer in the writing, to rediscover the truth of the land in its fictions.

Often I tell my students: you should know at least one national writer and one from another nation; rather, get to know your country and at least one more. This is one way of mapping and reading a country different from one’s country of birth. And crossing boundaries. Ideas, unlike refugees, cannot be kept out and the imagination of a nation is shaped by the multitudinous verisimilitude of living.

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My own journey into Australia bears out, for me, at least what literature can do.

It is a personal journey: I crave your indulgence. My first journey outside Viti Levu, the island of my birth, was five decades ago to Sydney by Pan Am; from Sydney to Bombay by a P&O Liner, *Strathmaver*. My destination then was Delhi. I was still in my teens.

Earlier, Patrick White had travelled to London by the P&O liner *Strathmore*, but had returned to Sydney at the age of forty-six to write fiction. In April 1958, White published his remarkably personal and passionate essay ‘The Prodigal Son’. And it is the thinking in that essay that I wish to intertwine with my thoughts here.

White had written: ‘the reasons why anybody is an expatriate, or why another chooses to return home, are such personal ones that the question can only be answered in a personal way.’² White had returned, to the scenes of his childhood, to the stimulus of time remembered. By 1958 he’d crafted in Australia two classic novels: *The Tree of Man* and *Voss*.

In December 1987, aged around forty-six, with my wife Jyoti, I was leaving Fiji for Canberra with two coups behind me, two suitcases in front, and $200 in my pocket. My two daughters were with me. I was going to see Rohan, my son, at the ANU. White says he was brought up on the maxim: ‘Only the British can be right’. I grew up on the dictum: Fiji was our one and only home. Then suddenly to become homeless in your homeland.

I spent 18 years in Canberra, that often derided national capital. There was a Great Emptiness in my heart, not in the landscape which White had made me love despite the sometimes sordid and cruel experiences of White Australia written on the bark of the ghostly gum trees and between the blue waves of the Pacific.

I had some extraordinary advantages: I’d spent my most formative student years in Delhi. I’d fallen in love and married my college sweetheart. I’d taught in two

famous public schools: the Delhi Public and Doon, also in Delhi. Vikram Seth survived my teaching during 1963-4. A brief stint as a trainee journalist on the *The Statesman* in New Delhi gave me a lifelong desire to be a scribe of sorts. And, of course, I’d been lucky enough to study for my doctoral degree Patrick White’s fiction in Canberra, from May 1974. *The Vivisector* remains my favourite fiction on the life of an artist.

Because of these two experiences of love in New Delhi and Canberra, I was able to survive the holocaust of my heart in May 1987. The fall of island politicians is rather compellingly described in V.S. Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men*. I could have gone to New Delhi and become, as White says of London, an intellectual, that most sterile of beings, leading a parasitic and pointless existence. Or like Ralph Singh in *The Mimic Men*, in his forties living in a quaint hotel in a London suburb, hiding behind a pillar to look at Lady Stella.

During the Blitz White experienced the first sensations of rootlessness. I was born around the time of the London Blitz. But I had no idea of the banality of evil. The two Fijian coups in 1987 almost fifty years later were, for me, the first sign of ethnic evil. I was deeply, deeply affected by this betrayal by more than the Colonel of the Royal Military Forces of Fiji, with special connections at Duntroon. Even the Queen of Fiji didn’t care for us – she was persuaded not to see the ousted Prime Minister Dr Timoci Bavadra. And he had taken his oath of allegiance in Her Majesty’s name. My friend, the Vuniwai-healer, died betrayed and broken. The Colonel got the twenty-one gun salute in the Australian Federal Parliament and a round of golf with our Gareth Evans.

Luckily I came to Canberra. The city gave me a new life – the life of the mind – teaching and healing, reading and writing, and hoeing my own garden. My family grew up; often I walked by Lake Burley Griffin. Griffin is buried in Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh; from the ancient vicinity of that most multicultural city, my maternal and paternal grandparents had migrated to the Fiji Islands. They had never seen a sea-wave or a ship. For generations they had not gone beyond a few miles from their habitus of mud and mythology. They had been transported to Fiji, under the indenture system, to work on the sugar plantations owned by the CSR Company of Australia.

Today my son is married to a young lady from near Tamworth – her ancestors came in the First Fleet. Jyoti and I have three grandchildren: Hannah Maya, Arjun Sebastian, and Kallan Akash. What would their identities be? Their destinations? Their transit visas? What roots will clutch at their hearts? What fragments will they shore against their sorrows? What texts will they be taught? As teachers we have to ask these questions, for therein lie the richest journeys we make. Patrick White’s writings gave me the resilience and strength of spirit in exile.

The final point I wish to make is what Martha C. Nussbaum explores in her book *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*. The aim of ‘Reading Asia’ is not being Asian literate; it is far more exciting and exhilarating: to be able to understand ‘what is involved in imagining the situation of someone different from
oneself, to be concerned with the good of other people, this is the most creative challenge in the classroom; but it cannot be for pragmatic reasons alone. It has to develop in our own society a compassionate, empathetic literary imagination for the greater common good, not simply for manufactured goods.

Literature and Literary Imagination, as Mr Gradgrind in Dickens *Hard Times* realises, are subversive. It is disturbing in a way other subjects are not. It disturbs and deconstructs conventional pieties and confronts one’s own thoughts and values. In any society where utilitarian values have a hold on the political, intellectual and moral life, where benefits and cost analysis dominate, the complex and inscrutable forces that shape our lives are often not given equal value. Literature deals with the lethal ordinariness of life but sometimes shows the extraordinary – how our thoughts are formed and deformed by our obsession with race, religion, gender and ideology; but it can suddenly sharpen our vision of justice and happiness.

‘Finding a Place for Falstaff’, I feel, is to know something of the humanity of Shakespeare; and once you are touched by that magic you’ll understand that Shakespeare was not a little Englander: his imagination was open to stories from all over and he opened our imaginations to other worlds. Perhaps today no nation offers more meaningful opportunities than this island continent, of Falstaffian proportions with a sense of abundance and abandon.

If I had to choose between Falstaff and King Henry V, I would choose Falstaff!

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Tributes to Professor Bruce Bennett
From Members of the Transnational Literature Boards

From Rick Hosking, Flinders University

It will sadden many teachers and scholars around the world to hear about the death of Professor Bruce Bennett, who taught for many years at the University of Western Australia and then at the University of New South Wales in the Australian Defence Forces Academy in Canberra. Former Rhodes Scholar, teacher and researcher in Australian and postcolonial literatures, Bruce was a major figure in the Australian university scene: for many years he was a senior and influential member of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature. He also played a major role in developing Australian Studies in India, with years of service on the Australia-India Council and on IASA, the Indian Association for the Study of Australia.

I remember Bruce in particular as a good friend of Flinders University: he attended many of our conferences, he encouraged us to undertake research in regional literary cultures, he was a passionate supporter of non-Melbourne Australian-Rules football teams. He was a kind man, good-humoured and genuinely collegial. We will all miss him.

From Dr R.K. Dhawan, University of Delhi

The demise of Professor Bruce Bennett last week has saddened us all. Professor Bennett taught at the University of Western Australia from 1968 to 1992, and the University of NSW, Canberra from 1993 until his retirement. He wrote and edited numerous books on Australian Literature, culture and society. He specialised in Australian Diasporic Writing. He was Chair of Austlit Board from its beginnings to 2004.

He was a great friend of India and visited several Indian universities. His death is a personal loss to me. I was introduced to Australian literary scenario by Prof Bennett. In 1991, he invited me and Vikram Seth to an international conference at UWA. I stayed at his residence for one night before the conference event. I shall always cherish the moments I spent with him.

India has lost a friend. Our heartfelt sympathies to his wife and family.

From Kirpal Singh, Singapore Management University

The Connector & Bridge-Builder: The late Bruce Bennett

I first met Bruce Bennett when he was invited by my (then) English Department at the University of Singapore as a Lever-Hulme Fellow. We got on from the very first. His wife Trish and he himself were amicable, amiable and quite a delight at almost all occasions – whether a serious Lecture he was
giving as obligation of his Fellowship or a strictly private dinner where the gathering was mostly friends.

As the years wore on, Bruce and I became quite close. He even stayed at my home en route to other destinations (yes – there was a time when Kirpal’s home was known to many Aussies as the ‘half-way house’) at least a couple of times. When Bruce was so inclined, he would be what the gamblers call ‘on a roll’. It was wonderful to have him around – for sheer diplomacy and for an extensive network, Bruce was hard to beat, especially when it came to academics/scholars working in Australian Literature.

He was also very good at ideas for conferences: several conferences which today are quite well-known brewed over chats and discussions with BB around. He had the knack for coming up with very catchy titles for such events and he was generous in sharing these with all around him.

Then we found ourselves growing old. Bruce moved to Canberra and I moved away from the old University (by now called NUS) to Nanyang and then to SMU, where I now am. Though I did try and invite him to SMU he was already unwell and so we never had the privilege of having him here. I did, though, succeed, in getting him to Nanyang-though, by then, he was not able to linger, as time, he felt, was not on his side.

Bruce accomplished more than most in the field of Australian and New Literatures. Though we often had disagreements, I never doubted his ability to deliver once agreement was reached on any project, conference, seminar, book etc.

And as I write these words, I recall what he said to me when we last met in Malaysia: ‘Kirpal, sometimes life does not work to our advantage but we must push on.’ And he pushed on, despite the pain and the suffering. He tried his best not to inflict us with his private burden but always had that winsome smile that anyone who has known him will attest to.

As we accept our loss, let us remember those words: sometimes life does not work to our advantage but we must push on. Yes, Bruce, we must, old friend.
Stephen Lawrence: South Australian poet

Personal recollections – In Memoriam, April 2012.

Kate Deller-Evans

Under the greenwood tree
Who loves to lie with me,
And turn his merry note
Unto the sweet bird’s throat,
Come hither, come hither, come hither:
Here shall he see
No enemy
But winter and rough weather.
As You Like It 2.5.1

‘You know what awaits, don’t you,’ I stated rather than asked Stephen when he submitted his Masters degree in English Literature at Flinders University. It was the early 1990s and we were both students of Shakespeare when the bottom fell out of academic pathways for graduates. Despite our experience tutoring, tenure tracks appeared unattainable. So he took the challenge, enrolling in a teaching qualification at the University of Adelaide. There he signed me up to take elective ‘The Writing Process’ with poet and children’s author, Peter McFarlane. We three ended the year co-editing the resultant anthology, Slice: University Readings (1994), which for many graduating teachers was their first step in publishing creative work. Martha Sumrada (then Veigli) recalls Stephen’s ‘wonderful mix of eloquence and insight’ (pers. comm. 2012). Right from the start, he was an educator and author generous with his time, dedication, and support of fledgling writers. Fellow student in the course, Ivan Rehorek (aka Avalanche) recalls ignoring the rest of the curriculum in favour of the writing group. It was Stephen who organised our visit to Adelaide’s most famous poetry venue. He insisted we each brave it and perform a poem out loud.

It should be no surprise that after only his first few attendances at Friendly Street Poets monthly meetings, in 1995 Stephen was tapped on the shoulder by Penelope Curtin, Literature Officer for Arts SA, and asked to stand for its committee. He served faithfully and continued for the rest of his life as a staunch supporter and contributor to the organisation. Adelaide poet Deb Matthews-Zott remembers:

Stephen and I were co-editors of the Friendly Street anthology Beating Time in a Gothic Space, No. 23, the last Friendly Street anthology of the 20th century. So we spent a lot of time working together during 1999 and I have fond memories of how well we worked together on the collection, meeting in each others’ homes, taking photographs for the back cover in the Botanical Gardens, and surprisingly agreeing on most of the editorial choices.
Stephen was also an inaugural member of the poetry group I started in 1995 – A Passion of Poets (a group that still meets today, although the membership has shifted over time). ‘Circuitboard’ is the poem I selected for the 1999
anthology and I think it captures the nature of Stephen’s work very well, and shows something of Stephen himself.¹

CIRCUITBOARD

    The charge
    Of thought
    And intellect
Passes through structured ether, receiving

    The glow
    Of instant,
Experience,
In return for the intensity of the outlay.

    The ghost
    Of awareness,
The mind’s electricity,
Traces varying pathways across the board.

    The mindfield
    Of each reader,
Each reading,
Determines the quality of induction.

    The oceans
    Of electrons
Catch and swirl
Consciousness in their eddies and flux.

    The current
    Lights up
What it touches,
Illuminating one route each time through

    The maze
    Of the grid,
And passes out,
Changed from when it entered.

from Friendly Street Reader No. 23

Stephen Lawrence’s first collection was published that same year in an anthology borne of the early Passion of Poets group, Sleeping Under a Grand Piano: Ten South

¹ Pers. comm. 30 April 2012)
Australian Poets (Ginninderra Press, 1999). Australian poet Geoff Page says in his Editor’s Note to that book that the poems of Stephen Lawrence display ‘a satirical edge’. Stephen’s next collection was in Friendly Street New Poets 3 along with collections by Louise Nicholas and Richard Hillman (Wakefield Press, 1997). ‘Her Mother’s Arms’ could be described as a verse novelette in the voice of a young female medical student. It was quickly followed the subsequent year with his first solo collection (also with the Friendly Street/Wakefield Press collaboration) Beasts Labial, which as Deb Matthews-Zott notes ‘is also a must read’.

After a number of years teaching, Stephen migrated his career into writing professionally within the South Australian government’s Equal Opportunity Commission. Yet he continued writing and publishing fiction and poetry, winning and being shortlisted for dozens of Australian literary awards. He achieved publication internationally in Romania through fellow Passion of Poets member, University of South Australia academic, Dr Ioana Petrescu, and he was also published across North America and in Denmark.

Poet and Flinders University academic Steve Evans worked at various times with Stephen on the Arts SA Judging Panel for the John Bray Poetry Award. He recognised Stephen’s skills ‘in identifying foibles in human behaviour nevertheless through the warmth of observation’. 2 Steve sought out his poems for inclusion in the journal for which he is Literary Editor, the London-based AAAJ (Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal) for the ‘Literature and Insights’ section.

As he could do in his collection How Not to Kill Government Leaders (Wakefield Press, 2002), Stephen Lawrence was speaking to an audience that recognised not just the jargon but the unwritten rules and protocols of professional behaviour, especially in communication, which was his forte, that could so easily be sent-up. He was able to foreground the silliness but also to appreciate the fundamental compassion, especially given some people’s seriousness about its use. His work found ready readers in the journal where with bureaucratic monologue he could lampoon business speak.

That ability can be found in his takes on government process, too, such as in Friendly Street’s 2006 November Poem of the Month, ‘The Legislative Assembly’:

Thank you, Mr Acting Speaker
I am aware of Standing Order 67.
I am aware that Standing Order 67
warns against members repeating
repeating sentiments already expressed
at the risk that they may be ordered
to resume their seats on the ground
on the ground of repetition.
However, the Acting Speaker will be aware

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2 pers. comm. April 2012.

Stephen Lawrence: South Australian poet.’ Kate Deller-Evans.
that at the time he took the point of order
I was responding to an interjection – …. 

Despite protestations in Stephen’s early poem ‘This is the only poem that I shall write about a train’ his fourth poetry collection was with Picaro Press in September 2008 (#80) and was entitled The Culture of Trains. In 2009, with Gillian Britton, Stephen co-edited the quirky anthology Small City Tales of Strangeness and Beauty (Wakefield Press) (reviewed by Deb Matthews-Zott in Transnational Literature May 2009). Stephen was productive and his poems won all sorts of competitions, such as the inaugural RiAus Monthly Science Poetry prize for ‘Every Feeling’ in 2011. In addition to writing, he voraciously read and reviewed and judged. One of his more recent judging duties was to choose Robyn Cadwallader’s 2010 Single Poet manuscript i painted unafraid and subsequently launch the collection. While taking up a scholarship to study a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide he became poetry editor of Wet Ink magazine there. In the writers’ memorial to Stephen on 29 April, fellow doctoral graduate and reviewing colleague, Heather Taylor Johnson paid tribute to his prowess and insightful fearlessness when reviewing even the greats of the Australian literary scene, including his idolised Les Murray, the poet he was thrilled to have met the month before at Adelaide Writers’ Week 2012.

Stephen’s true vocation as a poet was evident to his teacher at Flinders University all those years ago. Joost Daalder recalls supervising Stephen’s MA on Shakespeare:

He’d hand up drafts for me to look at and scribble comments on. Obviously this involved also my turning over each sheet. Every sheet had a poem, or snatches of poems, on the back. They struck me as remarkably good and professional. Each poem of course had a slash through it, as I was meant to read the thesis, not the poems. Competent though Stephen’s thesis work was, the poems were more exciting to me, even though I did not realise they were his. Eventually I asked him whose they were, and he told me the truth … I was very pleased and impressed, and greatly encouraged him to go on writing poems!3

Stephen Lawrence’s final collection of poems is the creative work ‘A Spiritual Problem is a Chemical Problem’ within his dissertation ‘A Poetic of Disunity: Selves and Silence’, which is available online.4 ‘My lasting impression of Stephen was that of a dry, acerbic wit, coupled with a charming smile. This would light up the room.’ Stephen’s creative and professional writing had attracted admiration across the country. Australia has lost a distinct and fine voice in the passing of Stephen Lawrence, aged only 54. He is survived by the loves of his life, his wife Celine and children, Georgia and Joseph.


This poem, from his thesis manuscript was also Friendly Street Poem of the Month August 2010. I read it at his writers’ memorial gathering.

WHAT QUANTUM GRAVITY LOOKS LIKE

Time keeps everything from happening at once.
Countless dimensions will be needed to survive the four we’re lost in.

The universe duplicates every time we look.

Time does not exist; there is only more likely and less likely.

There is not single now, now. And there never was.

We feel a river. In reality there is only the ocean.

With thanks to all those who supplied comments for this piece - KDE
Farewell to Associate Professor Richard Hosking, 27 April 2012:
Transcript of Address by PhD Candidate
Adrian Thurnwald

When I met Rick I was sitting, in defiance of municipal orders, astride the gun Zam-Zammah on her brick platform opposite the old Ajaib-Gher – the Wonder House, as the natives call the Lahore Museum. ‘Little friend of all the World’ they called me, back then, and I’m one hundred per cent certain they weren’t being ironic.

So I jumped down from the great gun – they say whoever holds that gun holds the Punjab – because, though I thought I knew all castes, I spied a man the likes of whom I had never seen before: nearly six feet high, lush and snowy hair, full white moustache like that of Fook Shing, the Chinese bootmaker in the bazaar. I learned shortly that his name in the tongue of his own people was Rick.

‘Ah,’ I thought then and there. ‘This man must be my Lama.’

My Lama spoke at length about journeys to unimagined places and of wisdom I had never known. Myself, being a rough boy of the bazaar, could not fathom this existence of his. My Lama seemed to lead a life almost completely detached from the Wheel of Things, the life of materialism and suffering I saw around me, and he was on a quest to find the River of the Arrow, where he said his own spiritual journey would be complete.

I accompanied this Lama for a time, becoming his Chela, and we travelled together down the Grand Undergraduate Road.

But the spiritual life was not the only one for me. When, journeying with my Lama, I also agreed to carry messages back and forth for a British officer, I became swept up in what is known as ‘The Great Game’. I was trained in spying and political intrigue for the British Empire, and in undertaking further missions I became separated from my Lama. I remember one of my early tasks. I was sent to Austria-Hungary, because I believe the men of the Tsar had interests there. To tell the story of my first mission I shall refer to correspondence I kept at the time, as I believe those letters lend a greater sense of immediacy.

3 May
Dear Mina,
Since I was sent to conclude that business in Transylvania I have had a most terrible time. The land seems truly bewitched. Thankfuly at least the train deposited me on schedule at the Transylvania train station at 8:35 PM. But I tell you; my host the count is a most unsettling man. He towers before me, clad in black from head to foot, without a single speck of colour about him anywhere. I am sure he is watching me as I creep about his mouldering house. Has he locked me within this castle of his? I cannot be sure. I swear I looked out the window last night to see him crawling vertically up a wall.

5 May,
Dear Mina,
It is with trembling hands I write an account of the horror I endured today, and I begin to doubt my own senses. That selfsame count of whom I spoke before caught me
trying the door, hoping to get out. He had his gypsies catch and bind me, and while I was unable to move he touched me on the cheek once with a hand more dead than living. As I lay tied in his study he knelt down beside me, and whispered into my ear the most bone-chilling words I have ever had the misfortune to hear:

Our Andy's gone to battle now
'Gainst Drought, the red marauder;
Our Andy's gone with cattle now
Across the Queensland border.

He's left us in dejection now,
Our thoughts with him are roving;
It's dull on this selection now,
Since Andy went a-droving.

I was paralysed with terror, and for a time the conviction of my helplessness overwhelmed all other feelings, but then I conjectured to the count that Banjo Paterson’s ‘In Defence of the Bush’ was a far superior poem to Lawson’s ‘The City Bushman’, and, while the count was driven mad by his own passionate proselytising, I slipped from my bonds and escaped. I ran, not daring to even glance back, and I was so swift my colourful scarf came loose from my neck and wafted behind me onto the branch of a pine, blowing gently in the breeze in that lonely forest, until a small bird plucked at the woolen threads and made a nest for its hatchlings — no, that didn’t really happen; I just put that in because I know that errors in point of view are one of Rick’s pet peeves.

Fleeing from the count I also stopped for a spot of fishing to help me overcome my vampire trauma.

The weight of my pack was heavy on my shoulders. It was a good weight. I opened my pack and found my jar of grasshoppers. They were good grasshoppers. They were black. They were good black grasshoppers. I felt manly. I felt good and manly. I put one grasshopper on my hook. The hook felt good between my fingers. I felt manly with the hook between my fingers. With these grasshoppers I hoped to catch a fish. I hoped to catch a good, manly

Fleeing from the count I also stopped for a spot of fishing to help me overcome my vampire trauma.

Anyway, I spent several years playing the Great Game, and then, unexpectedly, I crossed paths with my Lama again, in the mountains of Tibet. The river he sought, the river of enlightenment that would finally free him from the bonds of the earth, was, he said, on the plains, but he had become distracted. People always called upon him, and drawn back by the ties of the world, he had found himself wandering a little, for the last time, amongst the stones.

My Lama greeted me by calling out ‘Sahib’.
‘I am not a Sahib,’ I said. ‘I am thy chela.’

I marvelled to see my Lama again. He was a man with knowledge as wide and varied as the Punjab, his understanding of the holy texts as broad as all the world. He was a man who could teach without seeming to teach. Where again would we see his like, once he had freed himself from his earthly bonds?

And what of me? Was I to follow my Lama towards enlightenment, or was I to
return to the Great Game? The decision was mine. I watched my Lama growing smaller as he walked down the mountainside to the plains, where his river lay.

Not knowing my own fate, trapped halfway between the heavens and the earth, I sat, cross-legged and, under my breath, I wished my Lama the best of luck.

‘The best of luck,’ I repeated. ‘I wish you the best of luck in finding your river.’

*Special thanks to Ernest Hemingway, Rudyard Kipling, Henry Lawson, Banjo Patterson and Bram Stoker.*