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**Writing Protest Obliquely: Articulating the Burden of a Nation in Chinua Achebe’s Anthills of the Savannah**  
Niyi Akingbe

**Introduction**

When examining a sub-category of literature such as protest literature, it is easy to forget the fact that such categorisation often tends to overstress the distinctions that supposedly obtain between it and other sub-categories. As Irving Howe rightly observes, ‘we are hardly speaking of genres at all when we employ such loose terms as the political or psychological novel, since these do not mark any fundamental distinctions of literary form’.

In order to properly situate categorisations like these, it must first be realised that the differences which establish them are actually more subtle than they first appear to be.

In his foreword to *American Protest Literature*, John Stauffer states:

> I define protest literature broadly to mean the uses of language to transform the self and change society. By language I refer not only to words, but to visual art, music, and film. Protest literature functions as a catalyst, guide or mirror of social change. It not only critiques some aspect of society, but also suggests, either implicitly or explicitly, a solution to society’s ills.

Protest literature may be defined as a sub-category of literature in which the works espouse protest explicitly, either as a major theme, a recurring motif, an overarching metaphor, or as a structuring device. It is a literature which is characterised by the existence of a clearly-defined viewpoint, strong moral convictions, an often-strident tone, a pronounced sense of outrage, a clear perception of the issues at stake, and a usually optimistic belief in the ultimate triumph of justice.

Protest literature does not necessarily utilise techniques which are radically different from those of other categories of literature. However, they often combine such techniques in such a way as to produce effects that are peculiar to the sub-category. The techniques might include a strong emphasis on realism, the use of defamiliarisation strategies, the liberal deployment of satire, irony and paradox, the utilisation of anti-heroic characters, as well as unique methods of plot construction, structure and narrative perspective. Its effects can include pity, anger, disgust and awareness.

Because the main aim of protest literature is that of increasing the awareness of the audience, many works within this sub-category use techniques of demystification that are designed to unsettle long-held assumptions and attitudes in the audience. As identified by the Russian formalist critic Victor Shklovsky, such techniques are grounded upon the capacity of art to delimit reality by disrupting the ‘automatism of perception in several ways. Some protest writers use the technique of ‘seeing things out of their normal context’; others deploy unexpected symbols and

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imagery, and the use of archaisms or dialect forms in the language of poetry. Bertolt Brecht’s alienation theory of alienation effect, in which he tried to deny his audience the usual immersion in and identification with what was being enacted, is also used by writers of protest literature.

Ideology is of particular importance in protest literature. The strong standpoints that are prominent in protest literature are often enhanced by the espousal of ideological viewpoints. Marxism and socialism in particular have significantly informed the radical outlook of many works of protest literature. Ideology helps protest writers to offer a coherent understanding of the issues they portray, and enables them to combine such understanding with a clear vision of the way in which they can be effectively resolved. However, there is sometimes a tendency to subordinate all aspects of particular social conditions to the dictates of the preferred ideology, even where they are not seen to be completely appropriate. Some protest writers may not espouse a particular ideology, preferring instead to work in a tradition of liberal humanism whose focus is more on the moral dimensions of the issues rather than the furtherance of a specific political agenda. The advantage of this approach is that it avoids the pitfalls of political ideology and can therefore be more closely attuned to the peculiarities of specific issues. On the other hand, such approaches may lack the clear focus and comprehensiveness of an outlook that characterises more ideological approaches.

One of the ways in which protest literature can be understood is by assessing its aims, its features and its techniques. Regardless of differences of culture, time and place, all protest literature seeks a three-fold objective: to testify, to indict and to seek redress. In testifying, protest literature consciously aims to remember and commemorate acts of injustice perpetrated against particular persons or groups. The act of remembering to honour those who suffered, celebrates those who endured, and enables future generations to have a proper understanding of their roots. The act of indictment is a central purpose of protest literature, and in doing so, it exposes those implicated in acts of oppression and injustice, identifies, analyses and characterises the acts of oppression of which they are guilty, as well as outlining the social, political and economic factors which facilitate such oppression. It is a crucial aspect of the goals of protest literature to symbolically and literally ‘name’ injustice and its perpetrators so that they stand condemned by all right-thinking people. In seeking redress, protest literature seeks to end the injustices it portrays, as well as the punishment of perpetrators and the provision of restitution to the victims. Such restitution is often physical and psychological because it seeks to comprehensively repair the damage inflicted upon individuals, institutions and society as a whole over a sustained period of time.

This essay examines how Achebe, in furtherance of his desire to reconfigure the very notion of protest in *Anthills of the Savannah*, dismisses the tactic of overt protest as a blunt instrument likely to do as much harm as good, and chooses oblique and indirect forms of protest which seek to achieve the same ends in a more subtle manner. The essay will further evaluate the various techniques adopted to illustrate

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protest by Achebe in the novel. The essay establishes that the very techniques being discussed in the novel represent an important aspect of Achebe’s indirect strategy, as can be seen in their non-conventional approach to the portrayal of germane social issues. In addition to them, however, there are ways in which Achebe specifically undertakes to carry out indirect forms of protest in the novel. Achebe in *Anthills of the Savannah* prefers a deep ethical change in society in place of a revolutionary political transformation by avoiding the adoption of a particular political system as a means of resolving social issues for several reasons: a desire to avoid lapsing into propaganda, a belief that ideological rigidity hinders rather than facilitates the resolution of social ills, and a lack of faith in the viability of the more radical ideologies to achieve social, political and economic advancement. He demonstrated this when he satirised the radical ideology, as underscored by Ikem Osodi’s condemnation of the exuberance of trade unionism in his speech at the Bassa University.5

*Anthills of the Savannah* satirises military dictatorship and its attendant aberrations in post-colonial Africa. The novel has its setting in a fictional country called Kangan, which is undoubtedly Nigeria. *Anthills of the Savannah* depicts his Excellency, Sam, a Sandhurst trained soldier who is the Head of State of Kangan Republic, as power drunk and insensitive to the social and political needs of the people of Kangan. The novel focuses on the tragedy of dictatorship and misrule typified by Sam’s military administration as narrated by the three friends: Ikem, Chris and Beatrice who are also associates of Sam. The narratives of the trio underline failure of the military to provide good governance which could connect the rulers with the governed, but it rather brutalises and subjugates ‘the poor and dispossessed’ (141) of the Kangan republic. The novel opens with the dramatisation of the military authority’s intolerance for decorum in public sphere:

> You’re wasting everybody’s time, Mr. Commissioner for Information.  
> I will not go to Abazon. Finish! Kabisa! Any other business?  
> As your Excellency wishes. But ...  
> But me no buts, Mr. Oriko! The matter is closed, I said. (1)

The image of the military portrayed in the above exchange is that of arrogance and outright disregard for democratic governance ethos. This underscores the antithetical relationship between democracy and military rule as succinctly captured by Claude Ake,

the military and democracy are in dialectical opposition ... The military demands submission, democracy enjoins participation; one is a tool of violence, the other a means of consensus building for peaceful co-existence.6

Achebe’s unique approach to protest is shaped by his long-standing discomfort with conventional or insufficiently examined approaches to the delineation of social issues in literature. As Gikandi asserts, his ideological standpoints are characterised by a persistent unwillingness to follow the well-trodden path: ‘ideology as process and

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5 Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1988) 153. Further references to this work will be included in parentheses in the text.  

critique, rather than product and dogma, is the key to understanding Achebe’s narrative strategies.7

One of the most significant ways in which Achebe portrays oblique forms of protest in Anthills of the Savannah is by highlighting paradoxes which reside at the heart of protest. He shows that not all protest is protest, and conversely, that it is possible to protest without protesting. A prominent example of the former is the national cabinet whose obsequious protests are simply intended to maintain their positions of high office: His Excellency’s statement about returning to the barracks is ‘boldly interrupted by the Commissioner for Justice and the Attorney-General and then by everybody else with an assortment of protests’ (4-5). In his speech to the students at the University of Bassa, Ikem exposes a cross-section of social classes and professional groups whose ‘protests’ are in fact self-centred displays of greed and selfishness: corrupt civil servants, materialistic trade unionists and over-indulged students. When any of these groups wishes to protect its selfish interests, it calls such activities ‘protest’.

Unlike those groups, there are individuals who are able to engage in protest without actually appearing to be protesting. A prominent example of such is Mad Medico. A foul-mouthed Briton whose sanity is widely in doubt, his real name is John Kent. He is a hospital administrator who is notorious for bizarre acts which repeatedly get him into trouble with the authorities. Mad Medico ‘has a strange mania for graffiti’ (55) which he indulges by putting up signs that make offensive comments about ongoing situations. His graffiti somewhat appear to be protest, especially since they are often couched in terms that are designed to give maximum offence, both to those they are aimed at, as well as conventional notions of morality. Yet they are themselves borne out of moral outrage at the deficiencies of society, an outrage that is further underlined by the fact that Mad Medico is a foreigner, who ostensibly should not be as concerned about Kangan affairs as the indigenes.

Another example of protesting without appearing to protest can be seen at the end of the novel where a naming ceremony is conducted which defies all known traditional norms. A naming ceremony is traditionally conducted in Africa by the men folk, with the accompaniment of alcohol and kolanut. But its conduct in the novel is devoid of alcohol, kolanut, and the ceremony is coordinated by a woman, who gives the baby a male name. This ostensibly portends a protest against the excesses of male domination in a traditional African society, a protest against an unambiguous role accorded the menfolk by the traditional African cultural milieu. Taken together, the various components that make up this strange naming ceremony represent a comprehensive repudiation of the oppressiveness and injustice that have led to such widespread misery and suffering. Yet none of the participants believes they are doing anything extraordinary, much less engaging in protest of any sort. The true import of this action is pointed out by the old man who was supposed to do the naming: ‘in you young people our world has met its match. Yes! You have put the world where it should sit’ (27). Indeed, Anthills of the Savannah is full of people and groups who protest without appearing to do so. The novel is replete with taxi-drivers, house helps and other citizens of comparatively low social status who unconsciously express an unspoken opposition to the intolerable conditions under which they live, whether it is

by battling for space in traffic jams, declining to work on Saturdays, or by displaying insights that are unknown to the supposedly better-educated elite. In fact, it is the educated elite who are the main target of such anti-protests because they seem to require shaking out of an incredible complacency which renders them blind, deaf and dumb to the terrible conditions all around them.

Adewale Maja-Pearce claims that Anthills of the Savannah does not seek an answer to why African governments such as that in charge of the Republic of Kangan treat their citizens with so much contempt, and why the citizens themselves actually seem to expect to be treated in such a high-handed manner, instead of resolutely opposing it:

If successive leaders are able to shirk their responsibilities and turn themselves into Life Presidents the better to brutalize the society further, it is only because the brutalized themselves collude in the endeavour.\(^8\)

In a similar vein, Bernth Lindfors states that ‘one of the central questions raised in the course of the narrative – “What must a people do to appease an embittered history?” – remains unanswered’.\(^9\) Many of the novel’s characters, Maja-Pearce says, are guilty of a ‘ naïve romanticism’\(^10\) that they seem to think is a shortcoming to be found only in the so-called masses: Ikem and Beatrice, in particular, are guilty of making romantic analyses of the problems facing society. However, when Anthills of the Savannah is considered from the perspective of protest, it will be seen that what Maja-Pearce sees as romanticism is actually an aspect of the tortuous path these characters must follow as they gradually overcome deficiencies in their own personalities and come to realise the true nature of the problems confronting them, and the consequent need to protest strenuously against those deficiencies. In other words, it is one of the literary strategies adopted by Achebe in portraying protest in the novel.

**Community of Protest**

The paradoxes which shape protest in Anthills of the Savannah are further highlighted by the way in which Achebe ensures that no person or group has a monopoly on protest. This is done by portraying ways in which protesters are protested against. As has been earlier pointed out, the novel’s main characters all protest the state of their society, but they also protest against one another: Ikem protests what he sees as the arrogant behaviour of Chris; Chris protests Ikem’s apparent lack of regard for constituted authority; Beatrice protests Ikem’s patronising attitudes to women, as well as Mad Medico’s irreverent references to His Excellency. Even Captain Abdul Medani of the dreaded State Research Council protests the repressiveness of the state he is supposed to safeguard by alerting those it is hunting. Achebe seems to be saying that protest is so ubiquitous and multifaceted that nobody can claim to be more worthy of it than others. Instead of focusing on the people who protest, he prefers to emphasise the situations which trigger protest and investigate the peculiar

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\(^10\) Maja-Pearce 166.
combination of circumstance, personality and temperament that determine how individuals and groups respond to such situations.

**Reversing the Trajectory of Protest**

Related to this is Achebe’s strategy of revising the conventional trajectory of protest as outward-focused and targeted at others, to making it inward-focused, targeting oneself. He believes that all protest is founded on the individual’s own sense of right and wrong, and that the inner person is just as likely to be affected by protest as much as the external persons or groups it is ostensibly aimed at.

Like most writers in Africa, Achebe labours under the weight of huge popular expectations. It is widely believed that literary writings must offer practical solutions to social problems if they are to be considered relevant. Njabulo S. Ndebele states:

> One accusation that has often been levelled at writers, particularly in those countries hungry for radical change, is that many of them have not offered solutions to the problems they may have graphically revealed. It seems … this accusation has been based on a set of premises by which the nature of the relationship between art and society could never be adequately disclosed. More often than not, the accusation has been presented on the demand that artists produce works that will incite people to political action, something which, most people will agree, is strictly speaking, the task of the professional propagandist.\(^{11}\)

The burden of relevance becomes even heavier when critics like Kemi Kuku argue that increasingly intractable difficulties in Nigerian society have caused the country’s authors to become overtly revolutionary in their work:

> Recently, the Nigerian writer has assumed a new role which is that of a revolutionary. The social, political and economic situation has necessitated a more revolutionary approach to criticism. Having played the role of moralist, saviour and prophet of doom to no avail, the Nigerian writer has decided to initiate the direction towards which the people should move.\(^{12}\)

It is clear that Kuku is talking about revolutions of the sort usually seen in Marxist rhetoric.

While it can be conceded that many Nigerian writers will have adapted their work to meet the new realities of the contemporary situation, it is doubtful that Achebe could be properly classified in such a ‘revolutionary’ group. He is interested in revolution, but it is more of a deep ethical change rather than a political transformation.

In *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe does this by conflating protest and moral or personal growth. Several characters are seen to experience increased psychological


or emotional maturity as the novel progresses. Chris, Ikem and Beatrice are prime examples of this tendency. Although none of them is satisfied with what is going on in their country, they all remain within their comfort zones, content to complain about how things are not as they should be. Protest serves to take them into the new areas of experience which they must encounter in order to concretely act on the basis of their feelings and attitudes, and by so doing achieve emotional and psychological growth.

This process is particularly profound in Chris, whose increasing awareness and maturity Achebe is especially careful to chart. At the beginning of the novel, he is so emotionally removed from national affairs that he is virtually alienated. By his own admission, the main emotion that animates him is ‘Pure, unadulterated indifference’ (4). As the novel goes on, however, he is shaken out of this self-protective indifference by a series of incidents which leave him with no other choice than to openly protest the injustice and oppression he can no longer pretend not to see. His stance on contemporary affairs is repeatedly challenged by Ikem, Beatrice and Mad Medico, but the turning-point is the arbitrary suspension of Ikem. When he confronts His Excellency over the matter, it is obvious that his studied indifference has disappeared and has been replaced by a passionate intensity even he never knew he possessed. This is seen in the firmness with which he defies the Head of State: ‘Well, Your Excellency, for once I am turning you down. I will not carry out this instruction and I hereby tender my resignation’ (144). Ikem’s murder finally opens his eyes to the true nature of the regime he is serving and spurs him to outright defiance. As he flees Bassa, Chris finds himself in situations that continually remind him of how ignorant and unaware he had been before. He learns first-hand the paradox that ‘to be big man no hard but to be poor man no be small thing (194), as one of his helpers puts it; he is ‘stunned’ (200) by the unimpeachable logic that makes it impossible for him to use insecticide in a poor home where it is unknown. Ultimately, Chris is ‘fully reconciled to his new condition as a wide-eyed newcomer to the way of Kangan’ (201) because he understands that it is an essential part of the ‘transformation … of the man he was’ (204).

Ikem undergoes a similar process of change. Although it naturally differs from that of Chris in scope and intensity, it is still reflective of an increased emotional maturity that emerges in direct proportion to his capacity for protest. As the crusading editor of the leading national daily, the National Gazette, it appears that he already possesses all the necessary credentials to be a leading protest figure, but he recognises that he does not fully understand the problem, to say nothing of having all the answers. For example, he does not understand the popularity of public executions among the ordinary people, even though it is the very same people he claims to be fighting for. He wonders at the ‘insistence by the oppressed that his oppression be performed in style’ (139), and concludes that contradictions like these are ‘a basic human feeling that may only be alleviated by a good spread of general political experience’ (139).

Despite his sympathy and striving for analytical clarity, however, Ikem still has much to learn. For one thing, he is not as high-minded or enlightened as he likes to think. His wish to get rid of his girlfriend Elewa in the middle of the night because of his preference for being alone in his own bed betrays a selfishness that is at odds with his supposed sympathy for the downtrodden. His insistence on writing crusading editorials which have scored ‘many bull’s-eyes’ (38) is a silent demonstration of an
intellectual arrogance that is often a weakness of socially-committed professionals. These shortcomings are exposed when Beatrice accuses him of a gender bias which is all the more chauvinistic because he is genuinely unaware of it. He is shocked when she tells him that ‘he has no clear role for women in his political thinking’ (91), relegating them to the well-worn role of passive lamenters of their deceased menfolk. This appears to mark a significant phase in his self-development because, as he tells Beatrice, ‘Your charge has forced me to sit down and contemplate the nature of oppression – how flexible it must learn to be, how many faces it must learn to wear if it is to succeed again and again’ (97).

Ikem’s new awareness of new perspectives is enhanced by his meeting with the delegates from his home region of Abazon, especially its leader, whose old-fashioned wisdom and dignity serve to remind him of the special responsibilities imposed on writers as repositories of communal memory. After he is suspended for writing an editorial on the delegation, the unusual calm with which he accepts his predicament is indicative of his emotional growth: Beatrice ‘had expected him to come in bristling with combativeness instead of which he seemed composed, even serene’ (146). Further evidence of this personal growth is seen in his lecture at the University of Bassa in which he seeks a more interactive experience than he could have ever got from his crusading editorials: ‘Dialogues are infinitely more interesting than monologues’ (154) he tells his audience. The interactive session is a fitting act of protest by a person who had previously theorised that the nation’s problems stemmed from ‘the failure of our leaders to re-establish vital inner links … with the bruised heart that throbs painfully at the core of the nation’s being’ (141).

Of the novel’s three main characters, it is Beatrice who has to make the longest journey to achieve personal growth because, unlike Chris and Ikem, she must pass through cultural and spiritual phases, as well as emotional and intellectual stages. Also, as a woman, she has to confront the additional bias of ingrained gender stereotype prevalent in African social milieu, a deficiency that even enlightened individuals like Chris and Ikem are susceptible to. Ironically, she has a greater awareness than either Chris or Ikem, even though she is not as intensely involved in national affairs as they are. She sees the destructiveness of the rivalry between them and her apprehensive prediction, ‘I can see plenty of trouble ahead for the two of you’ (65), turns out to be prescient in light of the tragedies that subsequently occur. Her desire to resolve their difficulties contrasts favourably with the stubbornness of the two men.

As a person requiring emotional growth, Beatrice is not without her own faults, however. Initially, she is far less self-aware than either Chris or Ikem, and her naïveté often expresses itself in sexual jealousy, such as can be seen in her undignified behaviour at the Presidential Lodge. Like other members of the Kangan elite, she is content to remain within a comfortable sphere of privileged existence and enjoy the benefits conferred on her by her social status, even when she knows that not all is well with the country. Her journey to self-realisation begins with her desire to heal the dysfunctional relationship between Chris and Ikem. From this, she focuses on the problematic dualisms that shape her own life: between Beatrice the civil servant and Nwanyibuife the priestess; between honouring the dead and succouring the living; between memory and prophecy; between past and present. Because her focus is on repairing damaged relationships, Beatrice needs to understand others, especially the
ways in which protest illuminates the hopes and fears of others. But she must understand herself first, and that is where her journey of personal growth really begins. She goes back in her memory to reclaim aspects of her personality which had been hidden from her by Christianity and western education. She comes to terms with her affection and solidarity with her abused mother, as well as her repressed feelings of hatred for her tyrannical father. In addition, she re-establishes contact with the vital essence of her traditional culture, and by so doing, comes to fully understand her priestly calling which had hitherto manifested itself as a barely-understood undercurrent in her life.

When he first meets her, Chris perceives her as ‘peaceful but very strong. Very, very strong’ (63-4); as she develops, this strength moves from being a hidden quality to an outward manifestation of her personality. As she comes into greater awareness of herself and her role, her pronouncements carry the weight of unerring prophecy:

I see trouble building up for us. It will get to Ikem first … He will be the precursor to make straight the way. But after him it will be you. We are all in it, Ikem, you, me and even Him. The thing is no longer a joke. (115)

Like Chris and Ikem, her protest is shaken out of its elitist context when she comes face-to-face with the grinding poverty and widespread deprivation that the majority of citizens are forced to endure: when she visits the fugitive Chris where he is hiding, she discovers that ‘she was selfishly putting out a poor family’ (197). After the deaths of Chris and Ikem, Beatrice is the one who ensures that their memories are not forgotten, and makes certain that all subsequent relationships she enters into are founded upon mutual trust and genuine respect: she becomes ‘a captain whose leadership was sharpened more and more by sensitivity to the peculiar needs of her company’ (229).

**Literary Technique**

Achebe’s desire to highlight the paradox of protest can be seen through the literary technique he deploys in the novel. The plot sequence is heavily fragmented, with several instances of prolepsis (flashforwards) and analepsis (flashbacks) which enable the reader to obtain a multi-dimensional perspective of the action, thereby enabling him to understand the passions individual characters bring to the issues they care about. The narrative mode shifts between first and third person, with the consequence that a uniquely ‘inside-out, outside-in’ perspective is established which offers an insight into both the public personas that individual characters present to the world, as well as the ambiguous and complicated personalities that lie behind the public façade. When these modes of narration are complemented by the free indirect discourse utilised by the author, the result is a densely-woven narrative which incorporates a multitude of perspectives that engage one another in a contestation that actually approximates protest itself.

Achebe’s deadly seriousness about the profoundly significant issues which engage him is paradoxically given expression in a generally light-hearted manner of writing. The novel is replete with a variety of forms of humour, including clever wordplay, brazen ribaldry and the communally-enjoyed anecdotes that delineate the
joys, follies and tragedies of contemporary life. Achebe utilises these to deepen the purpose of protest beyond the restrictions of a particular political or socio-economic issue. These devices enable Achebe to endow protest with a timelessness and depth which reinforce its importance in human society. It is as if Kangan’s situation is so dire that it has become an ironic joke, a country where one has to laugh to keep from crying. From the perspective of protest, such humour actually reinforces the moral outrage of those who protest, since it underscores the psychological resilience which underpins all protest.

In this regard, it is not surprising that many of the novel’s most ferocious and committed protesters are also its most humorous: Ikem, Beatrice and Mad Medico. Their capacity for laughter is indicative also of an ability to laugh at a system that is so paranoid about its own safety that it prescribes public executions as a form of mass entertainment. The regime’s distinct humourlessness is evident in its minions, like the ‘hard-faced orderly’ (20) and the ‘vaguely disagreeable’ (76) director of the repressive State Research Council who directly serve it. His Excellency himself (53) is an actor that has become so obsessed with putting up an impressive performance that he has virtually lost his humanity, and with it, his capacity to laugh at himself. His poor attempts at humour are distorted by the obsequious and sycophantic audience to whom they are addressed. In contrast, it is the victims of oppression and misrule, the ordinary folk, who are most attuned to humour. The novel resounds with the unforced and unassuming laughter of the so-called downtrodden as they courageously respond to the ironies and discordances of life. Ikem is surprised at the ‘voluminous folds of … laughter’ and concludes that the ‘poor man can forget what his humour is about and become altogether too humorous in his suffering’ (40), but Ikem’s notion of ‘suffering and smiling’ is too crude to account for the rage that also seethes among the poor, and which is as palpable as their seeming uncomplicated good humour.

Anger in Anthills of the Savannah is mediated by the need to maintain self-control so that it does not degenerate into uncontrollable chaos which would serve no purpose. Although most conventional portrayals of protest view anger as the most suitable emotion for its expression, Achebe’s more sophisticated approach means that it is carefully sublimated and channeled into safer or more productive channels: it therefore manifests as Chris’s studied indifference at cabinet meetings, Ikem’s wilful desire to annoy the high and mighty of Kangan’s establishment, Beatrice’s retreats into her priestess persona, and Mad Medico’s ironic graffiti. Even the humour earlier discussed is in some ways representative of a communal desire to dissipate energy before it attains dangerous levels. Anger is ever-present, nonetheless. It is as ubiquitous as the landscape, and as such, is never far from everybody’s minds, least of all the rulers who have the greatest cause to fear it. This dread can be seen in the way in which a panicked His Excellency abandons his carefully-cultivated aura of self-assurance at the noise of a visiting delegation from Abazon outside the Council Chamber:

the world surges into the alien climate of the Council Chamber on a violent wave of heat and the sounds of a chanting multitude. And His Excellency rushes back into the room at the same time, leaving the huge doors swinging.

‘What is going on?’ he demands frantically. (9)
He has reason to be afraid. Kangan is a country which has run out of excuses, and the resultant vacuum can easily result in an explosion of popular outrage. The ‘concealed weapon’ of rage that Ikem is unable to detect in the crowds at the public execution is unrecognisable because it is far more widely dispersed and camouflaged than he realises. It manifests itself in a myriad variety of ways: the meaningless battles for a few inches of space in traffic jams; the senseless venom of the soldier who compares a human’s life to a dog’s; the frenzied rage of the ‘red-eyed sergeant’ (176) who searches Beatrice’s flat. The importance of protest lies in its ability to take such fragmented and often self-destructive displays of anger and turn rage into outrage by focusing them in the appropriate manner. It is a task that the novel’s three main characters take up in their different ways. After falling out with the regime with which they have had such a troubled relationship, both Chris and Ikem devote themselves to open protest consciously designed to serve as rallying-points for widespread dissatisfaction and discontent. As Ikem tells Chris, ‘The very worst prescription for a suspended editor is silence’ (148). Chris, too, understands that anger is put to the best use when it is given a voice: ‘It was clear that Major Samsonite Ossai and his boss were adopting a quiet line. Therefore he must embark on a massive publicizing of the abduction’ (168).

Humour, anger and other motifs of protest are expressed through an imagery that is designed to complement the novel’s thematic preoccupations. *Anthills of the Savannah* deploys a great deal of sun and water imagery which are in line with its overall environmentalist ethos. The sun is a recurrent image. His Excellency’s sudden amiability is described as ‘The fiery sun retires temporarily behind a cloud’ (3). Ikem’s ‘Hymn to the Sun’ portrays the sun as an instrument of divine vengeance whose impact on flora, fauna and humanity alike is catastrophic. Both manifestations of the sun as unchecked power and environmental disaster are combined in the grim report from an Abazon elder that ‘all the water bore-holes they are digging in your area are to be closed so that you will know what it means to offend the sun’ (127). Water is another prominent image in the novel. Often manifesting as rainfall and rivers, the novel’s water imagery seems to offer an antidote to the harshness of the sun. Beatrice, the novel’s most redemptive character, is portrayed as a priestess of Idemili, a lake goddess, even though she dreaded being drenched by rain as a child. The third major image in the novel is that of darkness. Sometimes represented as night or as a lack of vision, darkness as an existential reality abounds in the novel. Ikem takes Elewa down ‘unlit stairs’ (36) and the taxi she uses does not have functioning interior lights.

These images combine with others to offer a collage of visual, tactile, olfactory and other physical sensations of protest, and thus enable it to transcend the limitations of an abstract concept and attain the visceral experiences of everyday reality. The novel’s sun imagery, for example, represents a complex arena for the issue of protest because it is symbolic of both the issues that are protested, as well as the way in which they can be protested against. In the novel’s context, the sun wreaks environmental havoc, but it is that same situation that inspires agitation for change. The Abazon delegation’s visit to the Presidential Palace is a good example of this: their region has been devastated by a prolonged drought, a situation which is worsened by their refusal to vote for His Excellency in a referendum proposing an

extension to his rule. Their visit is actually meant to show solidarity with him, but the authorities are convinced that it is a demonstration. In other words, the sun imagery reinforces the ubiquitous, atmospheric nature of the protest phenomenon as being driven by a dynamic that inevitably brings oppressors and victims into inevitable confrontation with one another, regardless of what they try to do to avoid it.

Folkloric Elements
An important part of the way in which Achebe reconfigures the concept of protest by eliminating many of the unexamined assumptions that often accompany conventional perceptions of it is through his use of myth, folktale and proverbs to illuminate the issue of protest. His use of folkloric elements and the wisdom drawn from patently indigenous sources demonstrates his realisation that a major part of Africa’s problems come from the disconnect between traditional and foreign cultures. In fact, Frantz Fanon claims that the repudiation of such estrangement is a revolutionary act, in other words, a profound act of protest:

Intellectual alienation is a creation of middle-class society. What I call middle-class society is any society that becomes rigidified in pre-determined forms, forbidding all evolution, all gains, all progress, all discovery. I call middle-class a closed society in which life has no taste, in which the air is tainted, in which ideas and men are corrupt. And I think that a man who takes a stand against this death is in a sense a revolutionary.13

In Anthills of the Savannah, the active repudiation of the conventional postulations of radical rhetoric and its associated behaviour is accompanied by what may be called a corresponding indigenisation of the concept of protest by relocating it within the context of indigenous wisdom and traditional social mores. There is the myth of power, the folktale of the tortoise that is about to die, as well as a host of proverbs that bring out the resilience and insightfulness of the indigenous ethnic groups of Kangan. The folktale of the tortoise is particularly instructive. By inscribing marks of struggle on the ground in such a way that they outlive him, the tortoise demonstrates an important understanding of the principles which underpin all protest, namely, the fact that it is the nature of one’s response to oppression that matters, rather than the extent and scope of oppression itself. Something similar can be found in the folk wisdom inherent in the Abazon elder’s disquisition on the nature and role of the storyteller, which he suggests are superior to those of the warrior because he alone has the ability to endow the story with an existential significance that transcends whatever issue gave rise to it in the first place. When this is applied to protest, there are obvious parallels that can be seen. Like the storyteller, the protester is engaged in an activity whose import reaches far beyond the local issues that caused it; in a similar manner, the protester is not in control of his subject-matter – it is the subject-matter which actually controls him. Just as the storyteller is a visionary whose eyes are privileged to view aspects of reality that are unseen by others, so is the protester animated by ideals that are far beyond the capacity of non-protesters to imagine. The implications of comparisons like these find resonance on two levels. Within the novel, storytellers

like Chris, Ikem and Beatrice are encumbered by this moral-visionary burden and compelled to follow its dictates whether they like it or not. All three take on the roles of storytellers: Chris is Commissioner for Information, Ikem is a newspaper editor, Beatrice has the task of gathering their memories together and setting them down both for testimonial and record purposes. Outside the novel, Achebe seems to be reasserting his long-held opinion that writers have a duty to serve as the conscience and guide of society, and as such are duty-bound to protest those aspects that are not in the long-term interests of the people.

In a similar manner to the vignettes discussed earlier, proverbs, saws and other pithy statements are an aspect of the novel’s folkloric element, and serve to locate protest within the matrix of indigenous experience. Bernt Lindfors underscores the importance of proverbs in Achebe’s work when he says,

proverbs are used to sound and reiterate major themes, to sharpen characterization, to clarify conflict, and to focus on the values of the society Achebe is portraying. By studying the proverbs in a novel, we gain insight into the moral issues with which that novel deals.

By indigenising understandings of attitudes to protest in *Anthills of the Savannah*, proverbs show that social class, education and gender do not inhibit a people’s ability to realise the constraints that have conspired to condemn them to a debilitating existence, nor do they restrict their ability to make caustic comments about the unacceptability of such a situation.

These sayings are scattered throughout the novel, and come mainly from its older, more traditional-minded characters such as the leader of the Abazon delegation and Elewa’s uncle. Like most proverbs, these sayings distil attitudes to life and living that have been comprehensively tested by experience. For example, ‘Every man has what is his; do not bypass him to enter his compound’ (123) testifies to the unshakeable logic that certain rights and possessions are inalienable, and therefore cannot be taken away by anybody, no matter how powerful. From the perspective of protest, such a saying has obvious associations: when rights that are inalienable are taken away, protest becomes a natural response, and its inevitability transcends the parochial limitations of race, ethnicity and social class. Similarly, ‘the cock that crows in the morning belongs to one household but his voice is the property of the neighbourhood’ (122) engages the issue of protest on two levels: the illogicality of attempting to claim individual control of a people’s outrage at injustice, and the fact that all individuals respond to the same social stimuli whether they like it or not, and are therefore fated to share the same fate for that reason. Elewa’s uncle self-righteously asks her mother, ‘what is the use of bending your neck at me like the chicken to the pot when its real enemy is not the pot in which it cooks, nor even the fire which cooks it but the knife?’ (226). This admonition is a reminder that the act of protest is useless if it fails to identify the real culprits.

It appears that Achebe’s purpose is to re-orient the mindset of those who seem to believe that protest is purely a modern phenomenon, engaged in only by educated citizens of a particular ideological bent. The mere fact that the most potent sayings are uttered by apparently uneducated individuals is a clear indication that an understanding of the motivations for protest are far from unknown, even in Kangan where the masses appear to be compliant and docile. It is little wonder that early on in the novel, His Excellency demands plain speaking and asks the loquacious Professor Okong to ‘cut out the proverbs’ (19). In addition to the obvious danger of such a widespread repository of traditional knowledge that could threaten his rule, authoritarian rulers like the President of Kangan fear the suppleness of proverbs: unlike a newspaper, they cannot be ‘occupied’ by security agents or closed down.

**Textuality of Protest**

*Anthills of the Savannah* is in itself a veritable record of various forms of protest. Its ability to recall, re-enact and distil the significance of the various overt and implicit manifestations of protest helps to establish their importance by simultaneously situating them within the specific context of their time and highlighting their timelessness and universality. At a general level, this seemingly paradoxical duality can be seen in the novel’s setting in the fictional nation of Kangan, and the corresponding creation of imaginary ethnic groups, environmental issues, political and other cleavages which, though plausible, never occurred in real life. Yet Kangan is recognisably Nigerian: even though the ethnic groups which comprise the country have been given different names, the Abazon, for example, are recognisably Igbo. Their indigenes have Igbo names, speak Igbo and act according to Igbo codes of conduct. By being simultaneously Nigerian and non-Nigerian, Achebe is able to achieve the difficult feat of utilising the emotional intensity that familiarity generates, while benefitting from the aesthetic distance and objectivity that the use of a fictional setting confers. Considered from the specific perspective of protest, such balancing enables the novel to situate issues of protest within an incontestably realistic context without succumbing to the second-guessing that such a contextualisation would inevitably inspire.

**Memory**

*Anthills of the Savannah* is essentially a work of sustained recall and recollection. By the time it starts, all the events recounted have taken place, with the various occurrences being pieced together by Beatrice, who avails herself of the use of Chris’s journal and Ikem’s poetry. As a record, the novel is essentially a testimony, testifying to the actions and inactions of individuals that led to the present situation. In this regard, it is no surprise that Chris and Ikem are designated First Witness and Second Witness respectively. Given the sycophancy, the oppressiveness and the conspiracy of silence under which the whole nation labours, such acts of witnessing are virtual acts of protest. They defy the elaborate system of repression put in place by the government and assert the inalienable right of the citizenry to have a say in the way in which they are ruled. The fact that these acts of defiance are undertaken by the Commissioner for Information and the editor of the government-owned newspaper, who should ordinarily be an integral part of the repressive order, only underlines the audacious courage of their actions. It is also significant that the main target of their
opposition happens to be a person who is a childhood friend of both of them. Indeed, it is ironic that a significant aspect of their acts of remembrance is their recollection of their carefree schooldays together. It is no coincidence that the devious Professor Okong and the Attorney-General refer to His Excellency’s old friendship with Chris and Ikem in their attempts to discredit them while ingratiating themselves with the president.

Beatrice’s recollections take place at two levels, reflecting her need to properly understand herself before she can begin to understand the events unfolding before her. In this light, it can be seen that the self-knowledge and self-awareness that remembering inspires are vital to the emergence of protest: before a person can express outrage at something perceived to be wrong, that person must first be sure of his own position. Recollection is also vital in establishing the credentials of those who protest in the novel, as well as the infamy of those against whom they are protesting. Beatrice’s recollections of Chris and Ikem are celebrations of the lives of the two men, and are clearly demonstrative of their courage, humanity and patriotism. This third-party perspective, as it were, helps to provide a fuller picture of their activist credentials, more than their own actions would have done, and therefore solidifies their status as genuine protesters who are only interested in the progress of their country and its people. In contrast are the recollections of His Excellency by Chris, Ikem and Mad Medico. The very fact that all three characters wistfully recall the decent man they had known in the past is a damning indictment of how far His Excellency has fallen. For a person who ‘had a wholesome kind of innocence about him’ (59), and who had ‘a kind of spiritual purity (65), the power-drunk megalomaniac that he has become is nothing short of tragedy. This is why it can be argued that Chris and Ikem oppose him so resolutely: they are mourning the end of innocence, as well as fighting against tyranny and injustice. It is also significant in this regard that individuals who are incapable of protest have severely circumscribed memories: Professor Okong no longer dared to remember’ (17) that His Excellency ‘had not so long ago been politically almost in statu pupillari to him’ (17); His Excellency warns the Attorney-General against recalling a confidential discussion they have just had: ‘… you must forget that we ever talked about it’ (24).

The Contestation of Meanings

In considering the nature of protest in *Anthills of the Savannah*, it is apparent that Achebe considers all protest as essentially the contestation of meanings. The disagreements between His Excellency and people like Chris, Ikem, Beatrice and the others over the direction of Kangan stem from their differing perceptions of how the country can best make progress: the former believe in an authoritarian, top-down approach because they feel they have all the answers; the latter argue that such an approach has failed, and must give way to more inclusive approaches that take the ordinary citizen into greater consideration.

The novel is replete with disagreements and arguments to such an extent that the narrative is a virtual war of wills. The book opens with Chris and His Excellency, with their eyes combatively locked in a dangerous outward manifestation of a personality clash. Ikem engages a taxi-driver in a grim battle for a few inches of space in a traffic jam, and argues with Elewa over the necessity of her going home in the dead of night; Chris and Ikem argue over the latter’s editorial comments. Beatrice

‘Writing Protest Obliquely: Articulating the Burden of a Nation in Chinua Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah*,’ Niyi Akingbe.

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engages a female American journalist over her seemingly inappropriate behaviour towards His Excellency, and quarrels with Chris over his seeming lack of concern for her wellbeing. Ikem has a brush with a traffic policeman over alleged illegal parking. Ikem turns his lecture at the university into a dialogue so that he and his audience can ‘exchange a few blows’ (154).

These disagreements run the gamut from the trivial to the very serious, but what unites them is the way in which they all involve a struggle over meanings. Individuals come into conflict with one another based on their perceived understanding of an issue, and it is the contesting interpretations that are the basis of protest. This is the reason why it is Chris and Ikem, who can claim to understand His Excellency better than anyone else, are the ones who ultimately oppose him so implacably. Throughout the novel, both men, along with Mad Medico, try to draw upon what they know about His Excellency in an effort to understand how he has become the person he now is. On his part, His Excellency feels betrayed by his old friends: ‘He said he was deeply wounded that we, his oldest friends, found it possible to abandon him and allow him to be disgraced’, Chris reports (147).

Part of the contestation of meanings in the novel takes place at the level of social class and occupation. Ikem’s stubborn desire to maintain a low profile in spite of his enviable status as editor of a major newspaper is seen by himself as a rejection of the crass materialism of Kangan society and a demonstration of his determination to remain true to himself, but the taxi-driver he has an encounter with re-interprets it as the unedifying miserliness of a man who is too selfish to give employment to those who desperately need it. Perhaps the most explicit argument over meanings is that triggered by the murderous soldier who nearly runs over a trader in the market:

‘Does he mean that after killing me he will go and kill a dog?’
And the others joined in the laughter.
‘No, he means that to kill you is like to kill a dog.’
‘So therefore you na dog … Na dog born you.’
But the victim stuck to his far more imaginative interpretation. ‘No,’ he said again. ‘If I kill you I kill dog means that after he kill me he will go home and kill his dog.’ (48)

It is interesting that this disagreement takes place at a secondary level, namely that of exactly what the soldier meant by his contemptuous retort, rather than questioning the propriety of the soldier’s behaviour. Achebe seems to be making the point that since protest is essentially about the contestation of meanings, the meanings that are open to such contestation should be properly identified so that the resultant contestations are not misdirected or meaningless.

Achebe’s concern with the importance attached to meanings can be seen in the profusion of wordplay, such as ‘Mandinga uls (38); mischievous double entredes which combine the innocuous and the ribald, such as Chris’s unwitting advice to Beatrice to ‘keep all options open’(73) on her visit to the Presidential Retreat; and the reversal of apparently stable meanings, such as Ikem’s ‘impending coup d’etat … against this audience and its stereotype notions of struggle’ (153).
Conclusion
This paper has significantly established that in Chinua Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah*, protest cannot be limited by notions of whether it is political, or overtly aggressive, or aimed at achieving radical social change. Instead of looking exclusively at its content, protest is portrayed by its intention, namely whether or not it is at variance with an existing or proposed state of affairs. The paper has further explicated that protest in the novel, manifested as any verbal or non-verbal means by which an individual or a group expresses disagreement with or support for an existing state of affairs in all or part of a given society. Protest as a mode of expression in the novel has been established by the paper as not just a means of ventilating grievances, but is also an arena for the clash of opposing views because it compels those on all sides of a given issue to consciously articulate and propagate the ideas that form the basis of the issues they are protesting for or against.

When *Anthills of the Savannah* is considered in relation to the issue of protest, it will be seen that the novel has demonstrated the ambivalence, ambiguity and complexity that is the hallmark of the most memorable literary approaches to the phenomenon of protest. Such features can be seen even in the very title of the book, *Anthills of the Savannah*. The clearest reference to it in the text is found in the following quotation:

> The trees had become hydra-headed bronze statues so ancient that only blunt residual features remained on their faces, like *anthills surviving to tell the new grass of the savannah about last year’s bush fires.* (31; emphasis added)

As described by Achebe, anthills are ‘survivors’ whose very presence is supposed to bear testimony to the occurrence of traumatic events in the past. In other words, the landscape is itself attesting to the presence of suffering and distress. From this perspectives, therefore, anthills typify, a reminder, a testimony, and by extension, an objection and a gesture of defiance. In essence, anthills are symbolic and literal manifestations of protest. Characters in the novel use protest to define themselves as individuals in opposition to the dictates of a repressively militarised society, to obtain access to rights hitherto denied them, to indicate the possibilities of change and progress. *Anthills of the Savannah*, seems to represent a fitting culmination of a lifetime of literary commitment, weaving together as it does many of the diverse strands of his earlier novels and turning them into a comprehensive and far-reaching examination of a people’s response to societal challenges.
The Reluctant Fundamentalist: The Re-territorialisation of the Encounter between America and its Muslim ‘Other(s)’
Nath Aldalala‘a

The Reluctant Fundamentalist by Mohsin Hamid is a novel that explores several issues related to the relationship between America and the Islamic world in the contexts of post 9/11. In this politicised climate of intensified nationalistic attitudes characterised by fear and suspicion of the ‘other’, Hamid’s novel foregrounds the acrimonious encounter between America and its Muslim other(s). The text seeks to reverse the dominant rhetoric of the West, and create a space that allows the Muslim ‘other’ a chance to speak; a gesture that also illustrates the process of disillusionment. The novel accomplishes these manoeuvres through the literary trope of migration, whereby a story of exile and return becomes a vehicle for new understandings as the homeland is revalorised. The novel’s dialogic form further complicates this narrative through its use of a confessional mode coupled with the suspense of a political thriller. The novel’s significance within a body of fiction that addresses the contingencies of 9/11 lies in how its engagement with contemporary political and ideological tensions re-positions the dynamics of the encounter. Its success is achieved through its embedding of a political critique within a series of dialogues that reproduce the conversational realism of a chance ‘encounter’ between a Pakistani and an American in a Lahore teashop.

Hamid’s novel takes a rather pessimistic view of global affairs and of the relationship between the two opposing positions it sets out: within the text America and the Islamic world seem caught up in a pervasive mood that mobilises a re-consideration of national and cultural boundaries. As Pakistan is the ground on which the confrontation is ultimately played out, it suggests a movement from the centre to the margin – from America to Pakistan – unsettling the conventional global hierarchies of power. In the tense climate of the contemporary world the protagonist, Changez, drinks tea with an anonymous American visitor, to whom he narrates his experience of living in the U.S. During his time there he becomes a successful business analyst in a New York company after graduating from Princeton, and enjoys the trappings of his capitalist and materialistic lifestyle. The sense of home and belonging experienced by the migrant are complicated in the novel by specific political events which lead the protagonist to a wider examination of his relationship with his adopted home and its place in the world. His unrequited love of Erica, who becomes increasingly introverted and consumed by the mythology she constructs around her dead lover, is a further allegory of this relationship and representative of America’s withdrawal and self-protective policies in the post 9/11 climate. Following his denunciation of America, Changez returns to Pakistan to become a university lecturer and his attitude towards his former adopted home becomes increasingly hostile. The return of Changez to his home nation symbolically reasserts Pakistan as a locus of belonging. The gesture endorses Pakistan’s cultural and intellectual boundaries. The novel subtly maps out some of the problems that Pakistan faces, whether economic, social or political, yet the narrative is balanced by images of a nation rich in its own culture and vitally aware of its own recent history since
partition. Moreover, the author’s perceptive insights into American society, and its embrace of aggressive capitalism, position him to evaluate the imbalances in the encounter. In Hamid’s portrayal of the encounter America is unusually vulnerable.

The attacks on the Twin Towers prompted America to construct its own de-territorialised ‘other’, thus replacing an inherited or recycled figure of European imperialist discourse. The escalation in aggression towards strangers marks a sinister turn in America’s foreign policies and in its posturing of national protection. The novel demonstrates how, in a globalised world of late capitalism and transnational movement, the mechanisms and reproductions of the West’s others cannot be seen to merely reinvigorate the preceding centuries of colonialism. Yet there is a sense of irony latent in this contemporary construction of the ‘other’ by the U.S., as it is in fact a figure that emanates from the same originary spaces. Therefore in the novel the landscape seems simultaneously to have changed and to be static. As the novel stages this paradox it challenges its readers to examine the anxieties and tensions emergent in both the Islamic world and in the West. Hamid’s exploration of identity and multicultural integration leads to an acknowledgement of the ever-present underbelly of nationalism. My reading of the novel pays attention to the narrator’s evolving cultural and political sensitivities and how voice is conflicted and/or projected by particular intersections of historical circumstances and global and local modernities. The form of the dramatic monologue provides an apt vehicle for voicing the ironic awareness of the transnational subject with his experience of both exile and return.

**Narrative Constructions and Conflicted Voice(s)**

The author’s choice of narrative strategy is effective in its exploitation of the dialogic qualities of the novel and in its capacity to examine political and cultural boundaries. The opening paragraphs of the novel reveal the tensions embedded in the personal narrative of the central character and in the wider political context into which it is inserted. Dramatic immediacy is asserted in the opening line, when the first person voice kindly accosts the anonymous American visitor, ‘Excuse me, sir, but may I be of assistance?’ Yet, this affable politeness is immediately qualified in the next phrase, ‘Ah, I see I have alarmed you’. This second utterance registers a set of circumstances whereby both characters are alert to a sense of danger, and the narrator/host is increasingly complicit in heightening that feeling in the American visitor. The narrator identifies the American by what he terms as his bearing, and a sense of unease is conveyed when he questions what the visitor could be seeking in this part of the city, at this time of day. The bathos in his presumption that it could only be ‘the quest for the perfect cup of tea’ is possibly intended to misguide the visitor, and the reader. Yet, his teasing question ‘Have I guessed correctly?’ is unsettling. The disturbing nature of this chitchat is amplified as the politics of the situation emerge. In the latter part of the novel, as the tension is rising, Changez says to his guest:

> When you sit in that fashion, sir [...] a bulge manifests itself through the lightweight fabric of your suit, precisely at that point parallel to the sternum where the undercover security agents of our country – and indeed, one

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1Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2007) 1. Subsequent references to this text will be included in parentheses in the text.
This mixture of an assumed naïveté with worldliness echoes the courtesies of diplomatic rhetoric underpinned with threats of aggression – the hallmarks of international relations. Again, the cynical game of claim and disingenuous counterclaim is performed with the further retort, ‘I am certain that in your case it is merely the outline of one of the travel wallets’ (139). While both characters are wary of the other, Changez is able to appear in command of the situation owing to the territory in which the two men are situated. From this position of control, the narrative then settles down into Changez’s account of being the migrant ‘other’ in America.

Consequently, through the dialogue between the first person Pakistani narrator/speaker and the unnamed American listener, the novel explores, simultaneously, the parameters and contradictions of global politics and the conflicted voice of modernity. Hamid transfers questions about the boundaries of political encounter to the context of literature when he comments that he ‘never really understood the boundaries between genres’ nor had he ever ‘really understood the boundary between the roles of character and reader’. To this end the author involves the reader in the text as a politicised character. If, as might be assumed, the American listener to the first-person narrator occupies a similar subject position to that of the implied reader, the author presents the text as a form of ‘writing back’ to the dominant discourse. Yet the text is deliberately ambiguous here as the reader may identify with either character – or oscillate between the two – as the motives of each become increasingly suspect as night falls. Hamid’s use of the first-person narrator, with its inherent suggestion of unreliability, is further unsettled by being constructed through the mode of the dramatic monologue, a form in which the speaker frequently reveals more about himself than he intended while implicating the reader in moral judgements. This use of a first-person narrative disrupts the conventional sympathetic relationship between narrator and reader as it strikes a tone of intimacy and is also increasingly alienating as the reader is led into imagining a political thriller in which each character is plotting the extermination of the other.

The narrative strategy is a clever and complex device through which the intersection of political interests overlaps with human stories and allows a seemingly confessional narrative to develop into a political thriller. This grants the reader a freedom to explore alternative voices in an era when dominant political and cultural discourses impinge upon textual interpretation. To do so, Hamid successfully exploits the strategy of the dramatic monologue. The nineteenth-century poet Robert Browning developed the form to explore the controversial or taboo voices of disreputable bishops, promiscuous and lustful Renaissance monks and murderous dukes. Here the author applies this strategy in a consideration of the real world of contemporary global politics through the fictional voice of an ambivalent character

Assumes, of all countries – tend to favour wearing an armpit holster for their sidearm. (139)
caught up in competing discursive structures. It is also possibly an expedient move in light of the issues of authenticity and representation frequently attached to postcolonial writers. As Salman Rushdie discussed in his essay ‘Minority Literatures in a Multi-Cultural Society’, postcolonial and migrant writers working and publishing in the West are strongly identified with their subject matter and are frequently over-burdened with being ‘representative’ of particular groups, communities or nations. The novel displays an awareness of this when Changez reflects on his immediate response to the attacks on the Twin Towers. Watching TV news while posted to a job in Manila, Changez remembers that ‘I smiled. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased’ (72). The confessional mode mediated through the presence of a specific listener also distances the reader from the central character. Yet the protagonist’s own recognition of his perplexing response as inappropriate implicitly registers the difference between a political reaction to the symbolic representation and empathy with the human tragedy. Such moments call for a more nuanced context in which to understand alternative voices.

Thus the first-person narrator implicates the reader in the text. This is resonant through the increasing confidence of the first person speaker, and the effect is complicated by the subject position of the reader. The potency and seductive quality of the speaker becomes clear at the time of his job interview with Jim, the manager at the New York firm Underwood Samson. During this dialogue the reader becomes aware of the imbrications of the slightly sinister first-person narrator/speaker, and his identity as the apolitical, aspirational immigrant, Changez. It is here, for the first time in the novel, the name of the anonymous speaker is revealed. This is some time after the narrative strategy has been established, and the consequent staging of certain expectations in the dialogic encounter between America and its Muslim ‘other’. While the revelation of the speaker’s name suggests a particular identity, as Pakistani and by association a Muslim, the text also draws attention to a commonality in relationships between other non-western nations with the U.S. superpower. Changez’s conflicted relationship with America is demonstrated by his experience of working for Samson Underwood and the episode when he meets the Chilean publishing chief, Juan-Bautista (150-152) is especially illuminating in this respect.

During his trip to Chile certain subconscious reformulations of experience and perception take place to reshape his vision and connection with the world following the events of 9/11. During this visit he becomes more attentive to the exacerbation of the ongoing animosity between Pakistan and India and the ‘tit-for-tat’ tests of ballistic missiles. The capital cities of each nation are being visited by foreign dignitaries in an effort to stem the rising hostility of the rhetoric between Delhi and Islamabad, but Changez’s comment to the American conveys his critical insight:

I wondered, sir, about your country’s role in all this: surely, with American bases already established in Pakistan for the conduct of the Afghanistan campaign, all America would have to do would be to inform India that an attack on Pakistan would be treated as an attack on any American ally and

would be responded to by the overwhelming force of America’s military.

(143)

He accuses America’s strict stance of neutrality as being an act of favouritism towards the larger, and at that particular moment, the more belligerent of the two nations. By juxtaposing U.S. foreign policy with the narrator’s trip to South America, Hamid makes covert parallels with other political and military interventions undertaken by the world’s dominant economic and political superpower.

By interweaving the personal with the political the author illustrates how world events impact at the cultural level. Changez’s observations about Valparaiso strike a chord with his reminiscences about his family and home. The melancholic and faded grandeur of the city, economically marginalised by the opening of the Panama Canal, is compared with Lahore. Changez invokes an evocative maxim from his native language, that ‘the ruins proclaim the building was beautiful’ (144). Earlier in the novel Changez describes the economic and social dislocations that have taken place in Pakistan since the time of Independence. He notes the decline of currency in relation to the rising power of the dollar, and the related impoverishment of the professional classes. With these observations he draws comparisons between the pragmatic efficiency of America and the social structures of traditional cultures. It is while musing on this he sees beyond the inflexible boundaries of capitalist fundamentals to the wider implications of its hard-nosed ideology.

The experience in Chile is the catalyst that mobilises a transformation in Changez. Having arrived in Valparaiso to determine the asset value of an old publishing company, run by the elderly Juan-Bautista, Changez becomes sensitive to the social and cultural effects of his profession. He understands the prospective buyer of the publishing firm will not want to subsidise the loss-making literary division from the profits of the lucrative trade arm of the company. Changez witnesses a conversation between his boss and the publishing chief which is particularly illuminating. Juan-Bautista asks, ‘What do you know of books?’ to which Jim replies ‘I’ve valued a dozen publishers over two decades’ (141). The older man retorts this means he knows about finance, not about books. Juan Bautista is perceptively aware of Changez’s changing understanding of the world, instigated by an increasing sense of dislocation since 9/11. In a subsequent conversation between Juan-Bautista and Changez, the old man reminds him of the janissaries – the Christian boys recruited by the Ottomans to fight against their own civilisations. The introspective mood of Changez leads to a realisation that he is a native informant, or rather a modern day janissary (151). In this moment of epiphany Changez questions the fundamentals of aggressive capitalism in which he participates, and thus becomes ambiguously, a reluctant fundamentalist. Notably, when recalling his conversation with Juan Bautista, Changez, for the first time, makes an appeal for the American to believe him that contrasts with the confidence and control in general throughout his narrative. The urgency in this appeal to the American that follows his account of Juan-Bautista suggests a broader critique of America can be discerned from the nature of its conflict with the Muslim world:

But your expression, sir, tells me that you think something is amiss. Did this conversation really happen, you ask? For that matter, did this so-called Juan-
Bautista even exist? I assure you, sir: you can trust me. I am not in the habit of inventing untruths! And moreover, even if I were, there is no reason why this incident would be more likely to be false than any of the others I have related to you. (151-52)

This is a pivotal moment in the conversation between Changez and the American, and in effect, the scope of fiction is registered as their dialogue mimics cultural (mis)understandings and the processes of international relations. His affirmation ‘I assure you, sir, you can trust me’ is an acknowledgement of the nervous mistrust by the U.S. government and its anxieties about being dependent on such ‘friendships’. Thus, the changing characteristic of the narrative voice between the autonomous ‘I’ of the novel’s opening, and the disclosure of the more hybrid identity of Changez the migrant is illustrative of the text’s movement between the collective voices of a real world of contemporary politics and the singularity of human experience represented in fiction. This narrative strategy enacts a reality in which there is a compulsion to take one side or the other in the war on terror. Therefore the mapping of voice through the novel transcends the individual story to engage with the wider implications and global inter-connections. As such, the first person persona provides a spatial framework for this. The claim by the speaker that he is ‘a lover of America’(1) is in fact a condemnation of it. It is more the case that he had once been an admirer of America at the beginning of his story, but the migrant has travelled far from that position by the close of the narrative. The awakening sense of cultural pride is further imprinted when he tells his guest that he was ‘a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine and was perhaps even colluding to ensure that my own country faced the threat of war’(152). During this part of the conversation the American becomes increasingly unsettled but he remains hostage as a passive listener. The reflective character of Changez is reconfigured as the agential voice of a speaker cynically aware of a political climate that demands signing up to one side or the other. The possibility of occupying a liminal space is erased by the dogma of the war on terror. A return to the opening sections of the novel supports this. The anonymous American is portrayed as a type, and perhaps, then, a particular paradigm. As noted, he has a certain bearing, and thus his individuality is erased by a collective identity. Changez says, ‘It was your bearing that allowed me to identify you, and I do not mean that as an insult, for I see your face has hardened, but merely as an observation’ (2). This foregrounding of the American as a particular stereotypical figure, sitting opposite to that of another – a Pakistani man with a beard – poses many questions about image, representation and reception. The novel responds to the questions it raises by exploring how particular discursive positions are constructed, shaped and authenticated in relation to the ‘war on terror’. That is, how one might become a fundamentalist – reluctantly!

**Staging Stereotypes**

The novel sets out to illustrate the reproductions and inflections of the popular stereotypes associated with Islam and Muslim culture, but it also insists on a more nuanced understanding of the geopolitics of Pakistan’s position. This is staged by the narrator’s evolution from the migrant figure in pursuit of the American dream to that of politicised Muslim. The opening scenes demonstrate the performativity of identity.
The moderate Muslim narrator playfully contends that a bearded man is not essentially a signifier of radical Islamic tendencies. When first meeting his American interlocutor the narrator says, ‘Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America’ (1). Further on, the American’s attention is drawn towards another man, one with a beard worn longer than the narrator’s. At various stages in the novel the narrator acknowledges the presence of this bearded man, suggesting to the reader that the American’s eyes are nervously fixated on him (22-6). Thus, the novel opens with a paradox and a discrepancy between image and sentiment, or signifier and signified. For the American, and perhaps the Western reader influenced by popular media, the wearing of a beard does not sit in harmony with a confessed love of America. Coupled with the ambiguous and ambivalent title of the novel, the reader may be unsettled by this apparently moderate voice. Yet, on closer reading the beard does in effect become a signifier of a politicised Muslim. A consistency between image and substance is especially pertinent when the bearded man is in an encounter with an American. Here the formal complexity of the novel projects the ambiguity of the situation. The novel seeks to neutralise the image of a bearded man and distinguish it from that of a terrorist while also sustaining the tension inherent in the meeting between this Muslim figure and an agent of America. It is notable from the tone of the speaker’s declaration of his love for America that the relationship is one way affair, as there is no such equivalent affection by America towards its ‘other(s)’. The American is in Lahore solely for the purpose of his singular ‘mission’, in contrast, the protagonist describes his enthusiastic embrace of American life. The present encounter between these two polarised characters is intensified by and channelled through the prism of 9/11. Furthermore, the repetition of the word ‘experience’ early in the novel acquires a slightly sinister edge that prompts the reader to question the intentions of the first person speaker as he assumes a position of power within the relationship, most notably evident in his continual sly acknowledgements of the American’s discomfort and unease:

You prefer that seat, with your back so close to the wall? Very well, although you will benefit less from the intermittent breeze, which, when it does blow, makes these warm afternoons more pleasant. And will you remove your jacket? So formal! Now that is not typical of Americans, at least not in my experience. And my experience is substantial: I spent four and half years in your country. (2-3)

By choosing to sit with his back to the wall the American displays nervousness, but he also appears vigilant and completely self-protective. His guardedness is emphasised by his reluctance to take off his jacket as that would indeed make him more comfortable in the heat of the Lahore summer. There is a teasing irony in the narrator’s remarks that such formality is unusual in an American. Through such narrative gestures Hamid examines the dynamic between a superpower and its unfamiliar handmaid. Post 9/11 tension already permeates the narrative as the reader will be alert to the sense of alienation felt by the American visitor and his vulnerability, underlined by his distance from the military powers occupying neighbouring Afghanistan. As the novel progresses, the previous clarity of the power dynamic becomes blurred. The tension between the two men is illustrated by the
narrator’s suspicion that there may be a firearm loosely disguised in the American’s jacket.

The speaker’s voice acquires a more overt sense of national culture as he describes his education at Princeton and his time in New York. Later, in conversation with Erica’s father, he bridles at the comments about how the elite in Pakistan have raped the nation and its serious problems with fundamentalism (55). Although it is ‘a summary with some knowledge’ Changez also notes the ‘typically American undercurrent of condescension’ that ‘struck a negative chord’ (55). His descriptions are especially insightful when juxtaposed with acknowledgements of the American’s anxiety about the presence of the other bearded man: ‘You seem worried. Do not be; this burly fellow is merely our waiter’ (5). Changez takes a morbid delight in asserting and undermining the assumed political and cultural stereotypical perceptions of his Western guest: ‘Ah, our tea has arrived! Do not look so suspicious. I assure you, sir, nothing untoward will happen to you, not even a runny stomach’ (11). These repeated assurances to the American establish a curious inverse of the political relationship between America and Pakistan. It seems here that the Pakistani now commands a position of authority over the American, and offers guarantees for his safety. This subversion of the conditionality of the war on terror is unsettling to America and the West, as conventional battle lines are now indistinct or non-existent. The conflict is actually grounded on a de-territorialised space in which the ‘dominant’ powers have to learn to decode the signs and actions of the enigmatic ‘other’. The enemy has become difficult to discern and the calls by the government of George W. Bush for the world’s nations to be with them or against them seem rather inept.

If the novel is read within the context of the macro-politics of the immediate post-9/11 world, then further understandings of the power dynamic between the Pakistani narrator and his American listener can be inferred. Ever since Pakistan found itself thrust onto the world stage it has become a nation with an increasingly conflicted voice, which is replicated by the personal journey of novel’s narrator. Embroiled in the U.S. plans to avenge the attacks on their homeland, the ensuing rhetoric fostered a political narrative informed by fiction, and in turn fiction became inevitably political. The encounter between America and its Muslim-Pakistani ‘other’ was initiated immediately after 11 September 2001. At the political level Pakistan found itself in a position that has some parallels with the discursive positioning of Changez. Writing in his memoir, *In the Line of Fire*, Perves Musharraf describes how on 12 September 2001 he was called away from an important meeting by an urgent phone call from the U.S Secretary of State, Colin Powell:

Powell was quite candid: ‘You are either with us or against us.’ I took this as blatant ultimatum. […] our director general of Inter Services Intelligence […] told me on the phone about his meeting with the U.S. deputy secretary of state, Richard Armitage. In what has to be the most undiplomatical statement ever made, Armitage added to what Colin Powell had said to me and told the director general not only that we had to decide whether we were with America or with the terrorists, but that if we chose the terrorists, then we should be prepared to be bombed back to the Stone Age.⁴

Following this ‘diplomatic’ confrontation between the world’s leaders in the days after 9/11, significant roles were to be established in a long term encounter between America and its ‘others’ characterised as the ‘war on terror’ – or what Musharraf called the ‘war against shadows’. Pakistan has since become the focus of political analysts and literary writers, and the line between the two became hazy. Yet Hamid’s novel seeks to deconstruct stereotypical representations of Pakistani society that are frequently reductive and unhelpful by providing a more complex insight. Implicit in Hamid’s novel is an understanding of Pakistan’s significance to world affairs and to the traditions of literary representation. Within the sphere of international relations, Pakistan must be recognised for having the fastest-growing nuclear program, and most of Al-Qaeda’s leaders are believed to be hiding in Pakistan, as the recent killing of Osama bin Laden suggests. Thus, Pakistan is a strategic ally in the United States’ war on terror. With reference to literary representation, attention has turned to Pakistan’s role in shaping world politics and how this impacts on cultural and political landscapes. Claire Chambers observes that:

Pakistani writers, most of them living or educated in the West, currently feature prominently in the international literary scene as award winners or nominees, best-selling authors, festival speakers and, increasingly, topics for research students and critics. The success, borne out by multiple prize awards or nominations, of such novels as Nadeem Aslam’s Maps for Lost Lovers, Mohsin Hamid’s The Reluctant Fundamentalist, Mohammed Hanif’s A Case of Exploring Mangoes […] has led to bidding wars and high advances for US-educated writers Ali Sethi and Daniyal Mueenuddin.

These writers explore the issues that locate Pakistan at the centre of world politics, while for others a reference to Pakistan has become synonymous with terror and threat. Writers such as Martin Amis and Salman Rushdie both single out Pakistan as a hub of terrorism. Amis states in his 2007 article ‘9/11 and the Cult of Death’ that Islamism has been with us for the lion’s share of a century. He further notes the ‘Muslim Brotherhood was founded in 1928, and within a decade there was an offshoot in what would soon become Pakistan’. Salman Rushdie’s blunt disavowal of Pakistan is indicative of the malignant rhetoric that often masquerades as informed analysis:

\[\text{References}\]

3Musharraf199.


5Musharraf’s memoirs explain in detail the advantages and disadvantages for Pakistan of joining America in the ‘War on Terror’. Musharraf explains his reasons behind his critical decision to join this war.


Pakistan sucks, especially if you are used to India, which is a rich complicated open society full of colours and smells and excess You cross the frontier into Pakistan, which used to be the same place Now, in a cultural sense, you feel a kind of airlessness, people are not allowed to say what they think, they aren’t allowed to do what they like, women and men are segregated, there is a gigantic drug culture because it is one of the world’s major producers of opium and heroine, there is an exploding AIDS problem which is not looked at because Muslims of course do not get AIDS, there is a highly gangsterised urban society, there is political corruption on both the civilian and military side, there is economic corruption [...] there is enormous regional dislike, everybody hates the Northwest frontier, where they are fundamentalists and pro-Taliban, it sucks.10

Rushdie in effect classifies Pakistan as a culture-in-deficit in which Islam is the central problem. This view may be contrasted with those mooted in novels such as The Reluctant Fundamentalist that examine the sovereignty of Pakistan and its unique nationalist socio-culture. In the novel Pakistan is a setting of re-territorialisation, and it is also treated as an autonomous space, that is, an independent, colourful cultural setting, as much as the India Rushdie argues for. The education of Changez and the descriptions of his family background provide a glimpse into the history of Pakistan since Partition. These insights also reveal a far more sophisticated and multi-layered image of Pakistan than that depicted by the likes of Amis. While Hamid conveys this image, he also cleverly exploits the pertinent stereotypes, as the Lahore setting for this monologue intensifies the possibilities for tension and mistrust in the encounter. As the politics of this local power dynamic are resonant of the global anxieties, Hamid’s text may be cited as a cross-cultural meeting place that seeks to redress cultural prejudice.

As Musharraf states in his memoirs, Pakistan’s financial survival is dependent on the U.S. and since the 9/11 attacks the U.S. has provided billions of dollars in aid. Implicit in this agreement is the notion that Pakistan is proactive in the fight against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Also implicit is an understanding that America determines the terms of the encounter between the two. At this juncture morality becomes clouded, or problematised, by the competing claims of economics and socio-culture. Hamid’s novel attempts a complex understanding of this through the presentation of a successful, educated Pakistani figure, who has been a beneficiary of American socio-economics. The Reluctant Fundamentalist provides an alternative vision to the first wave of fictional responses to 9/11. Anglo-American writers such as Martin Amis, Ian McEwan and Don DeLillo have commented on the difficulty of writing fiction as a means of engaging with or understanding 9/11.11 Yet when they do eventually turn to this their creative energy is frequently focused on the domestic and the impact that such events have within the narrow confines of their own nationalist culture. This


generally involves the oblique ‘othering’ of Muslim culture. Pankaj Mishra voices a concern about Anglo-American literature that reveals an increasing recognition of its own fragility and vulnerability. Often overlooked, or un-voiced, is the notion that 9/11 also crystallised feelings of discontent and humiliation experienced by those in the non-western world. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* attends to these imbrications of history, politics and economics from an alternative viewpoint. As the novel charts the milieu of American wealth and privilege, of which Changez is a beneficiary, rather than the marginalised migrant suffering economic and racial discrimination, it complicates the relationship between the West and the Muslim world. Thus an exploration of the competing ideologies and the social and political practices which impact on the inner life of individuals is effectively dramatised. Through this, Hamid’s narrative seeks to privilege the Pakistani narrator, and his identity as a Princeton-educated graduate destabilises the arguments that call on stereotyped invocations of Muslim people and culture. This gesture makes a significant contribution to the debate about the role of literature in understandings of major cultural and political events which reshape and re-define the world.

**Re-assertion of National and Cultural Boundaries**

This interplay of stereotypes examines the nature and implications of national and cultural boundaries. In Chapter Two the narrator refers to a group of girls walking past the teashop in Lahore wearing jeans sparkled with paint. Changez comments on how they are attractive in their jeans – as much as the girls ‘sitting at the table beside ours, in their traditional dress’ (16). These observations point out the diversity and cohesion in Pakistani society - whether the girls are in jeans or in their national dress, they are integrated within the socio-cultural environment and attest to a blending of tradition and modernity. Such scenes also thwart the misperceptions of the West. The intent gaze of the American conveys a bemused curiosity as the image disturbs the preconceptions of his national culture. Furthermore, Changez draws the attention of his American guest to the institution of the National College of Arts – a motif of culture and modernity – housed not far from where they were sitting. Its presence is a contrast to the claustrophobic setting of the traditional market place, quintessentially conceived as a labyrinth of passageways frequented by bearded men who appear to spend their time plotting against democracy and other imposed Western modernities.

Such ambivalence is illustrated in Changez’s question to the American that perhaps he left behind a lover – male or female. His question, affecting an open tolerance of Western sensibilities is perhaps a veiled insult to the American. Yet, it also invokes Orientalist notions of sexual deviancy prevalent in the mysterious East. To counter the possible inferences in his question, Changez immediately announces that he left behind a woman, Erica, when he returned to Pakistan. There is a double layer of symbolism manifest in the name of his lover. Erica is a feminised version of a masculine name, and it is also a rupturing, or fragment, of Am/Erica. As a result of the stilted love affair with Erica, emotionally a part of Changez remains forever in America. The unrequited love signifies his share, or stake, in the nation – as Erica appears to present a particular dimension of his encounter with America. She is a symbol of American womanhood, as well as an articulation of the American dream.

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Erica is wealthy and beautiful, and has ambitions of being a writer, but her desire is fixated on the mythology she has created around her dead lover. The significance of this as a literary motif is that America is intoxicated by its own historical myths of nation. The author suggests the need for this excavation of a mythological past is exacerbated immediately following 9/11: a gesture that is evident in the strident patriotism that emerged. This nationalism performs a re-territorialisation of American sensibilities after 9/11, and is notable in Changez’s increasing sense of inhospitality by those around him. When he returns from Manila soon after the September attacks his run-in with the immigration officer is indicative of the sudden and sharp change in the relationship between America and its ‘others’.

The novel explores the possibility of unsettling the traditional power dynamic through the return of Changez to Pakistan, and also in its departure from the conventions of post 9/11 fiction. Peter Morey has commented on how the first response by fictional works to 9/11 often took two particular forms: ‘either a “trauma narrative”, that is, the attempt to trace the psychological scarring and the mental realignments of characters caught up in the Twin Towers attacks’. The alternative consisted of semi-fictionalised ‘Muslim misery memories’ which ‘often served to underscore the injustices of Islamic rule and justify neoconservative interventionism.’

The Muslim Pakistani protagonist here is increasingly inhospitable to his American guest, but any impulse toward fundamentalism is undermined by his assertion of cultural pride on nationalist, rather than religious, grounds.

The Encounter: America vs. Muslim ‘Others’
Throughout the text Changez makes numerous comparisons between the two worlds as nostalgia for Pakistan increases alongside the ‘impending destruction of [his] personal American dream’ (92). Although the narrator recognises the danger of nostalgia and an inclination to exaggerate (21), the ultimate purpose of the gesture is to provide a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse. Changez tells his visitor ‘I am, after all, telling you a history’ but, as an American especially should understand ‘it is the thrust of one’s narrative that counts, not the accuracy of one’s details’ (118). Since 9/11, the relationship between America and the Islamic world has become defined more conclusively by the war on terror – as an encounter between the West and its ‘others’ that appears limitless and endless. Hamid affirms this understanding when he describes how his concept of the novel was changed by 9/11 from being the personal story of migrant experience to a consideration of the geo-politics that dominates international relationships.

In a move which re-sites the staging of American anxieties in the setting of Pakistan the author re-establishes the latter as a space of belonging for the migrant. Yet, the residues of the encounter are embedded within the constitution of identity. Furthermore, Changez confirms how he is forever bound to America through his experience when he states, ‘I had returned to Pakistan, but my inhabitation of your country had not entirely ceased’ (172). Remarkably, this continued sense of occupation seems grounded on language rather than on any physical or material aspects. Changez states:


Nath Aldalala’a. The Reluctant Fundamentalist: The Re-territorialisation of the Encounter between America and its Muslim ‘Other(s)’, Transnational Literature Vol. 5 no. 1, November 2012.
I remained emotionally entwined with Erica, and I brought something of her with me to Lahore – or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I lost something of myself to her that I was unable to locate in the city of my birth (172).

The ‘logic’ of loss here is one of permanency. The speaker suggests that any reconciliation and reconstruction of this relationship is unattainable. Yet language remains the property of Changez and here he uses a poetic register that departs from the dominant cynical tone of his narrative. His lament for a time when the permeability of cultural boundaries seemed possible merely foregrounds the impossibility of peace in the shadow of the war on terror:

Often, for example, I would rise at dawn without having slept an instant. During the preceding hours, Erica and I would have lived an entire day together. We would have woken in my bedroom and breakfasted with my parents; [...] we would have sat on our scooter and driven to campus [...] and I would have been both amused and annoyed by the stares she received from the students passing by, because I would not have known how much those stares owed to her beauty and how much to her foreignness. (172-73)

The story being told by Changez captures the ebb and flow of (im)possibility. An encounter between America and its Muslim ‘other’ does indeed take place, and that is the possible. However, the rhetoric of what ‘would have been’ conveyed by the distancing device of poetically rendered dreams of love and harmony can signify only impossibility. It is this movement in the narrative – exile, return, reflection – that conveys the novel’s particular insights. Changez’s daydreams of breakfast with his parents and their approval of a marriage to his American lover – a positive transgression of cultural expectation – signifies an encounter of possibility. While, ironically, at the macro level Pakistan plays the role of reluctant bride in an arranged marriage, recent times have illustrated that the political relationship between the U.S. and Pakistani governments is one in which there is a necessary, but unenthusiastic intercourse between the two. The concluding vision of the novel is one that registers the reverberations of this encounter between America and its construction of the ‘other’. Tension and uncertainty prevails.

Navigating Transition: Freedom, Limitation and the Post-colonial Persona in Michael Ondaatje’s *The Cat’s Table*

Alaa Alghamdi

Introduction

Michael Ondaatje’s latest work, *The Cat’s Table*, offers a distinct iteration of the postcolonial and liminal subject in surroundings defined by the plurality of the postmodern voice and the emergent experience of the self. The central device is simple: set in 1953, immigration from Sri Lanka to England is slowed down to a twenty-one-day sea voyage to allow the character to remain in a state of transition, ‘betwixt and between’ worlds, for a longer and more sustained period than would be commonplace today. It is a long enough transition period for the vessel to become, in and of itself, a distinct and microcosmic world in which ordinary rules are suspended. Ondaatje’s narration is subjective even while it embraces a wide plurality of voices, presenting not the melding of these personas into a functional or dysfunctional, coherent or fractured whole, but offering, instead, a true kaleidoscope, indicating clearly that the cat’s table, the venue for those least honored and least regarded, may indeed be the place to look if one hopes to capture diversity. It is within this space that Ondaatje offers an innovative exploration of the liminal subject, a bold development relative to both his own previous literary work and prevalent assumptions that are made regarding the liminal subject in the colonial or postcolonial setting.

Liminality describes the position of the subject who is undergoing a transition between two realities or states; thus, the sense of the liminal is an ‘interstitial or in-between space, a threshold area’.¹ It is this sense of standing on the ‘threshold’ between realities, able to enter (or exit) both or all, which distinguishes the idea of liminality from the related term, ‘limit’. Indeed, liminality exists at the limits – at the border between one cultural world and another. Yet the very fact that it exists at the limits means that the liminal position is not necessarily limited; rather, the position is positively defined by the separation from (and later re-integration into) the broader culture. By the same token, there is a subtle but important distinction between the liminal and marginal subject, although both occupy the space at the limits of social norms. Liminality as first conceptualized by Arnold Van Gennep in 1909 is a ritualistic pattern of behaviour which occurs when an important transition or threshold is reached and crossed. Van Gennep identified three stages of such transition: separation from the larger society, the liminal or in-between period, and eventual re-assimilation into the society.² Victor Turner further developed the idea of liminality and expanded its application and scope. Prominent in Turner’s work is the awareness of liminality as a creative and liberating process. It is a period during which one remakes oneself, or is remade through temporal, spatial or symbolic passage. It was Turner who delineated the differences between liminal characters, marginal characters and outsiders, although in practice there can be some ambiguity or overlap in this regard. Turner states: ‘Marginals like liminars are also betwixt and between, but


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*Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 1, November 2012.
Unlike ritual liminsars they have no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity."³

In order to be sufficiently sustained that it may be observed, liminality must be carefully delineated, either temporally, spatially, or both. Auge talks about ‘transitional places’ such as airport or hotels as ‘transit through “non-space”’; this may be what Ondaatje creates through the device of the sea voyage between continents and cultures.⁴ The ship forms the ideal in-between space, all the more so because, as mentioned, the historical period and the mode of transportation dictate that the transitional stage is expanded or stretched out to a period of several weeks. Likewise, Ondaatje’s selection of a protagonist provides another opportunity for examination of the liminal state. Van Gennep identified coming of age rituals as a liminal period, and the boy’s somewhat precocious independence aboard the ship suggest a passage between childhood and a more independent state that encompasses a degree of agency. He is, in fact, not in the liminal period between childhood and adulthood, but between childhood and adolescence, a passage that is less often examined but perhaps no less dramatic. Van Gennep suggests that the liminal ritual of passage is often fraught with danger – there may even be uncertainty as to whether the subject will survive it – and this sense of danger and uncertainty, also, is carried through in Ondaatje’s novel. Of course, both the passage itself and the danger involved extend beyond Michael; other characters simultaneously experience their own versions of it, whether through a transition to adulthood, to death, or to an otherwise newly-defined state of being. These echoes confirm the protagonist’s own transitional state.

*The Cat’s Table* opens up to us as we begin to examine these various expressions of liminality and the ways in which they converge with marginalisation or limitation. Being relegated to the ‘cat’s table’ clearly denotes social marginalisation; yet this is just one element of the numinous zone that the young boy occupies and which will, at the other end of things, the conclusion of his journey, eject him into a new version of society which he must, from this point, inhabit. At the same time, the floating world of *The Cat’s Table* offers us a sensual, multi-dimensional picture of postcolonial and postmodern identities. Michael is on a voyage between East and West, and the author is always cognisant of the cultural and colonial connotations of this movement. Yet the character is seemingly unconcerned with otherness and limitations imposed by prejudices of the larger culture. His drifting location, for all its necessarily transitory nature, becomes a fully actualised realm in which this boy and his closest companions operate. The ship becomes ‘place’, the twenty-one-day journey becomes ‘time’, at once all of either element that the protagonist needs to know, and, simultaneously, none of it.

Ondaatje’s protagonist is thus poised at an in-between age, when one has gained mastery over the concerns of childhood and is still on the cusp of adult concerns, aware of them but not captured by them. Emily Hancock stated that a girl at the age of nine is a fully formed person, only to be subjected to fragmentation and an eclipsing of her former clarity and sense of self once she reaches puberty.⁵ The same might be said of the eleven-year-old boy that Ondaatje here evokes. Michael has

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clarity of purpose and is not at all compromised in his interactions with any of the variety of people that surround him. With his two companions, he prepares to master the ship. Michael, Cassius and Ramadhin roam free, unencumbered by supervision and only mildly inconvenienced by the official rules of life aboard the ship. They are determined only to learn what is going on and to leave their imprint upon it. Following their shared and independently conceived agenda, they set challenges and tasks for one another, such as smoking an entire cane chair by the time the journey is over. They begin immediately to tell time by the activities of the strangers around them, which appear as inevitable and opaque as forces of nature.

The boys’ apparent autonomy and clarity of purpose is called into question, reminding us of the co-existence of marginality and liminality and the fact that liminality itself is and must be unstable ground. The pre-adolescent character is a walking paradox whose voice and perceptions shape the ‘world’ that the ship provides. He is master of his own life aboard the ship, while at the same time, socially, he has no power at all, being at the mercy of the movement of that drifting and fluctuating locale and all the characters within it and outside of it – those who sent him and those who will receive him at the other end – and of the dubious hospitality that is offered to him at the ‘cat’s table’. Dissonance between shifting worldviews is introduced with the voice of the adult narrator; for example, whereas the child Michael tells us at the beginning that his city, Colombo, is immediately ‘invisible’ to him in comparison to the brighter light of the ship,6 adult Michael, wiser and more considered, speaks of having been profoundly impoverished by his move, as ‘grandeur had not been added to my life but had been taken away’ (35). This is a remarkable statement given the description of the ship that precedes it. While the Michael and his companions are, in some manner, ‘safe’ on the ship, lulled to sleep by its engines, they are also, at every moment, in jeopardy. They both know it and do not know it. As Van Gennep points out, both power and danger characterise this juncture between existing and newly established identities.

The postcolonial subject must surpass others in mastery of a location and milieu that is at once knowable – a new world to be explored and made one’s own – and unknowable, causing the subject to depend on arbitrary and opaque signposts to piece together meaning. The postcolonial subject is forced into a new world, perhaps knowing only much later how much it is that he has lost, because adhering too closely to it might have stopped him from making that all-important step. Here again, we see the similarity between the marginal and liminal positions. The postcolonial subject contemplates and enacts a change which will put him, in a sense, at odds with the identity and orientation of the larger community. The liminal subject makes the passage and eventually rejoins the world, but the world he rejoins may be a drastically altered one. Or, it may be that a provisional sense of permanence is established within the transitory state.

To a degree, liminality is both defined and determined by its outcome, re-assimilation into the society, but it is an outcome that by necessity ends the period of liminality and the identity associated with it. It would seem, then, that the liminal subject (or liminar, to borrow Turner’s term) must always be aware of his eventual re-

6 Michael Ondaatje, The Cat’s Table (New York: McClelland & Stewart, 2011) 3. Subsequent references to this book will be included in the text in parentheses.
assimilation into society. However, we must questions whether that awareness, in and of itself, limits the liminal subject’s experience of otherness, and whether, conversely, there are subjects who define themselves through sustained belonging in a community that expresses and embodies that in-between state. Turner himself extensively observed the modern ‘communitas movements’ and their tendency to ‘try to create a communitas and a style of life that is permanently contained within liminality. ... Instead of the liminal being a passage, it seemed to be coming to be regarded as a state.‘\(^7\) However, it would appear that these attempts at making permanent what is otherwise transitory may be self-limiting. The belonging to a coherent group, on the one hand, and the persistent separation from mainstream society on the other would appear to erode or diminish claims of liminality.

Aside from the fact that the ship itself, as a means of movement which prolongs transition and turns it into a norm, is an ideal container for the liminal subject, the rules of engagement that underlie the character’s existence on the ship are in fact ideal conditions for liminality. First, the subjection of the boys to scrutiny and social rules is limited because of their low social position. Michael explains that being of ‘no social importance ... persuaded us into an accurate belief that we were invisible to officials such as the Purser and the Head Steward, and the Captain’ (10). Moreover, because of the transitory nature of their floating world, Michael notes that ‘whatever we did had no possibility of permanence’ — there was, therefore, no inherent limitation to prohibit them from doing it (80). Another character, Michael’s cousin Emily, whose process mirrors his own in many ways, experiences similar freedom based on her lack of guidance, and the narrator states: ‘There was no secure map that Emily could rely on, so I suppose she invented herself’ (11). There was, moreover, a break from past identity, the very ‘separation’ that is the first stage in Van Gennep’s process of liminality and transition: Michael’s companion Cassius asks that the boys ‘keep our backgrounds to ourselves’ (40).

The juxtaposition between eastern and western cultures is richly represented, a constant presence, yet it is not permitted to become a defining principle. Michaels’ friends are Ramadhin and Cassius, the latter representing the founding power of the West, the former the representative of Indian culture. Lest the association be missed, Ondaatje’s narrator alludes to the foundations of western culture and politics when discussing Cassius: ‘There was a gentle democracy in Cassius. In retrospect, he was only against the power of Caesar’ (40). Striking as the East/West delineations are, Ondaatje often seems to introduce them primarily in order to dispel their assumed power. The boys’ names are indeed based on eastern and western cultural identities, yes, but at Cassius’ insistence they have left their backgrounds behind and they exist in harmony with one another. We see this good-natured dismissal of the division between East and West in another instance, too. Sir Hector, suffering from rabies, has the means to choose between traditional ayurvedic herbal remedies and English doctors. While choosing the latter, he does retain the services of ‘one Moratuwa ayurvedic’ (67). However, the combined and competitive powers of western and eastern science are not sufficient to save him from an event so random that it is justifiably considered a curse; moreover, in death, his title, indicating his position within a set cultural context, dissipates. Michael’s own name appears to hail from the

\(^7\) Turner 261
west, but well into the narrative we learn that he has a second name, a shipboard name, ‘Mynah’ – appropriately enough, the mynah is a bird of passage hailing from Southeast Asia. The name change aptly represents Michael’s status as a ‘liminal’, and the use of the name later in life (in his letter to Cassius) establishes the fact that a permanent change of identity has occurred.

Dissociation from a fixed locale and identity becomes the norm aboard the ship, and perhaps it is this element, in and of itself, that profoundly changes the position of the liminal subject and opens up creative possibilities. In any case, Ondaatje’s characters seem immune to the angst that often pervades the postcolonial position. Chelva Kanaganayakam identifies an ‘anxiety’ in being postcolonial that has emerged in literature and public consciousness: early in the postcolonial era there was an assumption of commonality; but if one takes Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* in the 1980s as a point of departure, ‘new modes that respond to complex anxieties’ have been one result. ‘Anxiety’ here refers to ... a fear of the unknown, or ... a loss of absolute certainties. According to Kanaganayakam, writers respond to these limiting, rather than liminal, circumstances through awareness of the self as opposed to the other, so that ‘one is either inside the whale or outside of it’. According to this critic, Ondaatje has always been one of the writers who resist this dualism. For example, in *Anil’s Ghost* Ondaatje employed ‘multiple perspectives are inserted into the text deliberately to pre-empt political bias [and] multiple narratives destabilize the notion of a univocal narrative voice’, working within structures primarily for the purpose of interrogating and overthrowing them. In *The Cat’s Table*, however, Ondaatje takes one step beyond this, considering what happens past the point of destabilised identities. At the same time and perhaps not coincidentally, a sense of fixed geographic place is lost. When *Anil’s Ghost* was published, some critics commented on the fact that Ondaatje had finally written a novel about Sri Lanka. But here, Sri Lanka so quickly becomes ‘invisible’ and the passage, the ship, is far more real.

In this arena of liminality, Michael co-exists with a cast of characters, some familiar to him already, some foreign and bizarre, who become his world, right or wrong. There is both injustice and benevolence. The forces of nature, including both violent storms and the pleasure that is to be taken from movement of the ship through ocean, are experienced and survived by this character. The role of those who are in charge of him, before, during and after, becomes remote and reduced. All that matters is the character’s own ability to function, to cope, to get by, and in doing so, to add to the fullness of his own understanding. As mentioned, this is an experience that will stay with him throughout his life, other experiences projecting outward from this primary passage. After all, the liminal character is born not once but twice, the second birth being the precisely this passage, this geographic movement, which alters him fundamentally, making him into something he would not otherwise have been. He is continuously being born into a new life, but, as we shall see, the sense of a mystical

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8 Kanaganayakam 44
9 Kanaganayakam 44
10 Kanaganayakam 47
transition occurs most particularly during one memorable night, when the ship passes through the Suez Canal.

Up until that time, the ship provides the context for a linear, progressive transition that the characters set out to master. Throughout the voyage, Michael’s initial impression holds and is transferred to the reader – that life aboard this floating city is more vivid and in some sense more real than any other place. Colombo immediately becomes invisible; England, when finally glimpsed, is a poor, pale, rural place, and prior to that point does not even exist in the imagination. Aden, their first and last direct foray into the Middle East, is the place where the boys acquire haircuts and a dog, while Emily, disguised as a young man, spends time ‘carrying things’ (105). In short, it lives up to no one’s expectations, and the company returns rather sheepishly to the ship to resume what has become their ‘real’ life.

One questions the result of the journey which is defined by transition but somehow continuously transcends it by becoming a semi-stable basis for liminal identity and experience. Helpfully, Ondaatje provides a direct answer, spelling it out lyrically. The transitional journey is, for the liminal subject, a repositioning of the heart. It cannot go on forever; sooner or later, everybody has to go ‘into the world’; every child had to grow up; the rules of that larger life reassert themselves, or we move into their zone once more, and carry on. But the heart is changed – the person is changed – by that transition between places. Michael explains:

I once had a friend whose heart ‘moved’ after a traumatic incident that he refused to recognize. It was only a few years later, while he was being checked out by his doctor for some minor ailment, that this physical shift was discovered. And I wondered then, when he told me this, how many of us have a moved heart that shies away to a different angle, a millimeter or even less from the place where it first existed, some repositioning unknown to us. Emily. Myself. Perhaps even Cassius. How have our emotions glanced off rather than directly faced others ever since, resulting in simple unawareness or in some cases cold-blooded self-sufficiency that was damaging to us? Is this what has left us, still uncertain, at a Cat’s Table, looking back, looking back, searching out those we journeyed with or were formed by, even now? (258)

This more complex description of the results of a ‘moved heart’, beating perfectly well but forever at a skewed angle, belies to some degree Michael and Emily’s statement to one another, a few pages earlier, that each of them belongs nowhere (250-1). The latter is, perhaps, the easy conclusion, but Michael’s own narration leads us to doubt that it is true. The characters on board the boat form a society, reaching out to each other throughout the years and distance and aided in their quest by small pieces of shared information impossible for anyone else to know, such as Michael’s shipboard name, unknown to anyone at either end of his passage, which later becomes like a talisman by which those who were on that journey can recognise one another. It is not so much that they belong nowhere; it is the fact that the place where they do belong, which always bends them toward itself, is itself both selective and transitory.

Like the man whose heart changed position by a traumatic event, unacknowledged, the narrator’s heart is re-positioned by a prolonged ‘event’ lasting...
twenty-one days, and only occasionally traumatic. However, in this case, it is both acknowledged and recognised. Indeed, this novel represents Ondaatje’s effort to do so. In it, we have a unique expression of what the liminal postcolonial subject feels, who he is, and what he does. He exists within a place of transition where belonging can be forged through participation, where social barriers exist as an echo or shadow, where subjects come in contact with one another through a kaleidoscope of interactions and impressions, and where sometimes there is, magically, access to *everything*, every room, every form of riches, if one is small, flexible and brave enough to fit through a grate. It is a place where not even the protection of a noble title and the best medicine of East and West can protect against seemingly random fate. It is a place where everything is in motion, and it carries the liminal subject from one world all the way to the next, acutely aware of the transitions, but cushioned within a place of his own that both masters space and is subject to it.

The passage through the Suez Canal is related with more intensity than any other event in the novel. The sentences become short and chopped; the language is highly sensory, as though the intention is to burn an impression upon the reader’s mind. The narrator himself leaves the intensity of the scene to discuss a shadow of it that radiates, years later, like a ripple in a pond – adult Cassius’ exhibition of paintings in which he perfectly records the visual impressions of that night. The narrative transition from the night itself to the exhibition of paintings, decades later, and the perfect echoing of the one in the other, reminds one of looking away from the a bright light only to retain a visual imprint within one’s eye. The eye itself, sufficiently dazzled, becomes like a camera, containing the ghost of a vision.

The passage through the canal is the epicenter of the journey, the most ‘vivid memory’ (128) and for good reason; essentially, it is the passage between East and West, the inevitable movement of the postcolonial immigrant subject. The narrowness of the canal, the impinging of the land and its activities on the otherwise sovereign entity of the ship – these factors contribute to the drama of the moment, the sense that an event is unfolding. It is the innermost passage within a passage. The sense of the event is built by the allusion to it right before it occurs in the narrative: ‘Another teatime lecture was given … to prepare us for the Suez Canal’ (126). On the following page, a short statement is given a paragraph of its own, both ominous and promising, set off from the rest of the text:

> It was the night we never slept. (127)

The passage through the canal is like a birth that must be attended by an expert, an Arab harbour pilot whose expertise is undertaking this delicate journey. This man, Ondaatje tells us, walks through the ship as though he owns it, ignoring all existing and established authority, which, seemingly, has ceased to be authoritative. Once again, like the ship journey itself, this is a passage in which different rules apply. Intense, fragmented images follow, like kaleidoscopic fragments of a life. The boys shout to the workers on shore; they smell Arabic food, a welcome change after the European food they had been eating aboard ship. Someone throws them an orange: ‘An orange from the desert!’ Michael marvels (129).

The impressions of the crossing are chaotic and random; in contrast, however, the crossing itself is both tightly orchestrated and mystical. The narrator tells us:
Radio contact had been at work for more than a day so that we would enter, as we had to, at the very moment of midnight’ (129). One wonders, naturally, whether this is entirely feasible; the tight scheduling of the passage is of course very likely, but ‘the very moment of midnight’ seems more akin to a spell or incantation. It is repeated at the conclusion of the passage: ‘This was the reason our arrival at El Suweis had been carefully timed to begin at midnight – in order that we would reach Port Said in daylight’ (130). Is this, one wonders, a sufficient explanation for insistence upon that rather gothic delineation of time, ‘the very moment of midnight’? Would an approximation of midnight not have been as effective in ensuring that the boat reached Port Said in daylight? Whether it is an accurate reporting or, as it seems, in impressionistic one, it is symbolically fitting. Midnight is a quintessentially liminal time, the passage between one day and another, the time when realities collide. This is, indeed, exactly what occurs. Ondaatje goes first to the logical and successful conclusion of that passage – ‘we entered the Mediterranean with our eyes wide open’ (130) – and only later, after averting his gaze from the event itself and focusing on its echo, Cassius’ art exhibition, does he find, through the clear vision of hindsight, a more complex and much more elegiac expression of the moment. Just as they were moving forward, necessarily, they were also inevitably looking back at everything they were leaving behind:

I was back on the railing, watching, which was where Cassius was emotionally, when he was doing these paintings. Good-bye, we were saying to all of them. Good-bye. (132)

In that good-bye, one senses the leaving not only of the people on the docks whom the boys momentarily and randomly glimpsed, but an entire culture and continent. At least, this is what their geographical position implies. Yet, the explanation is improbable; Ondaatje has sufficiently broken down any semblance of sentimentality regarding eastern and western identities to argue against this proposition. Perhaps, instead, the boys are saying ‘good-bye’ to that magical moment of transition – to liminality itself. As mentioned at the outset, liminality must be a self-limiting, tightly circumscribed period. The transition between the eastern and western worlds must be undertaken by the liminal postcolonial subject, and transition itself becomes a temporary positioning that must eventually be left. It is, as Van Gennep and Turner state, a perilous time – Michael and Cassius are perched precariously on the ship’s rails, in danger of falling, at which point, the narrator relates, not only their positioning but their very lives and selves would change: ‘We could have fallen and lost our ship and begun another fate – as paupers or princes’ (129). The moment of transition, that line between one reality and another, carries with it the threat not of physical harm or non-survival (although that might be a logical consequence of falling off the ship) but of unwittingly falling into, and belonging thereafter to, a different world and life. Of course, this threat is ironic because that whole nature of the passage dooms one to it, at any rate. One cannot pass through this passage and remain the same. Perhaps the liminal subject is one who avoids ‘losing his ship’ for as long as possible.

In the end, what are we to conclude about the liminal self as depicted in The Cat’s Table? Van Gennep described it as a ‘life crisis’ and a rite of passage. The
liminal subject is vulnerable but powerful. He is able to slip in between the cracks where others cannot. He infiltrates. It is not correct to say that no rules apply to him, but the ones that do are sometimes random and unexpected. Michael is able to find his way into any cabin; the boys smuggle in the dog that brings about the death of the most powerful man on board the ship. And yet the crossing of class boundaries takes persistent effort and cunning.

In a sense, Ondaatje is standing up for this lost, transitory, liminal self, whose life (despite his eventual re-assimilation) is defined not wholly by one set of cultural norms or another, but by the movement between them, which becomes its own ‘place’, temporarily more real than any other. The author implies that the existence of the liminal self is phenomenological, as defined by Maurice Merleau-Ponty; it comes into being only through doing and experience, and is influenced both by appearance and empirical fact, but cannot be entirely accounted for by either.\(^\text{12}\) Standing still, that self barely exists, which is not to say that the core persona behind that liminal self would cease to exist. However, he would become subject to the cultural norms that affect people in various fixed locales; he would fit into them, or fail to. He may be marginalised; he would begin once more to be defined by limitations and the need to overcome them. The experience of being without such a fixed locale is, Ondaatje implies, one that is worth knowing and considering. It is an occurrence that can forever alter the position of the heart. And it is a self that is worth sitting on the rail and saying good-bye, good-bye to when one sees it slipping away.


‘Theorizing in Narrative Form’: Premonitions of Orientalism and Racist Love in Bing Xin’s ‘The Photograph’

King-Kok Cheung

Introduction

Long before the proliferation of international adoption in the United States, Chinese author Bing Xin [冰心] published ‘The Photograph’ (1934), a story about an American expatriate who adopts a Chinese girl. The story reflects transcultural and interracial dynamics and heralds many of the theoretical insights later promulgated by postcolonial scholars and Asian American critics. Bing Xin (pen name for Xie Wanying [谢婉莹], 1900-1999) began her literary career around the time of the May Fourth Movement (1919) and earned her Master’s degree from Wellesley College in 1926. Though one of the most esteemed Chinese authors of the twentieth century, she is hardly discussed transnationally. ‘The Photograph’ – published during a period in China (1917-1937) labelled by Shu-mei Shih as ‘semi-colonial,’ when many Chinese writers subscribed to a form of Orientalism that ‘particularized Chinese culture as the locus of the past and endorsed the universal validity of Western culture’ – carries a subtle critique of Orientalism and cultural imperialism. Its configuration of transpacific contact crosses the boundaries of Chinese, Chinese American, ethnographic, and postcolonialist studies; problematises both American colonialist assumptions and Chinese traditional values; and impugns culturalist approaches to transracial adoption.

‘The Photograph’ charts an unusual East-West encounter through a detailed psychological portrait of Madam Simpson, an American who has spent twenty-eight years in China. Retiring from her post as a music teacher in a missionary school, she adopts an eight-year-old named Shuzhen after the death of Mister Wang – the girl’s father and Madam’s Chinese tutor. When Shuzhen is eighteen, Madam takes her to New England where they meet Reverend Li and his son Tianxi; a friendship and a nascent romance develop between the two young Chinese. Upon seeing a snapshot of Shuzhen taken by Tianxi, Madam abruptly announces her intention to return to China. Bing Xin narrates the story in third person, presenting two-thirds of it through the lens of the white expatriate; but the author shifts to an omniscient point of view after Madam and Shuzhen move to New England. Madam comes across at first as cosmopolitan and compassionate; unlike her missionary compatriots in New England.

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2 Bing Xin, ‘The Photograph,’ in The Photograph trans. Jeff Book (Beijing: Panda Books, 1992) 234-35; subsequent citations are from Book’s translation (unless otherwise stated) and are given in the text.


‘Theorizing in Narrative Form’: Premonitions of Orientalism and Racist Love in Bing Xin’s ‘The Photograph’. King-Kok Cheung.

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who consider China as outlandish, she prefers this country to the United States. Reading between the lines, especially in light of the perplexing ending, however, the reader can discern troublesome undercurrents of Orientalist patronage and maternal possessiveness on the part of Madam, and of self-repression and internalized stereotyping on the part of Shuzhen.

The story exemplifies Edward Said’s well-known pronouncement in *Orientalism*:

> When one uses categories like Oriental and Western as both the starting and the end points of analysis ... the result is usually to polarize the distinction – the Oriental becomes more Oriental, the Westerner more Western – and limit the human encounter between different cultures, traditions, and societies. In short, from its earliest modern history to the present, Orientalism as a form of thought for dealing with the foreign has typically shown the altogether regrettable tendency of any knowledge based on such hard-and-fast distinctions ... to channel thought into a West or an East compartment.⁴

Since Said’s seminal study about the tendentiousness of bifurcating peoples as Orientals and Occidentals, numerous interventions about the various strands of colonialist legacies have emerged. Chinese scholars who have examined the ambivalent portrayal of Madam Simpson in ‘The Photograph’ have nevertheless overlooked the postcolonialist insights embedded in the story.⁵ This essay demonstrates how the Chinese author – like the black female writers invoked by Barbara Christian – has engaged in ‘theorizing ... in narrative forms.’⁶

**Commodification as Chinoiserie and as Affective Labor**

In *Embracing the East*, Mari Yoshihara notes that the most prevalent Orientalist conception between 1870s and 1940s was an association of the powerful West with virile masculinity and of the subordinate East with passive femininity and ‘premodern simplicity, naturalness, tradition’:

> In the age of industrialization, commercialization, and urbanization, many Americans were anxious to assert and maintain the ideas and values considered to be lost in modern society, such as purity and sincerity. As Americans discovered such qualities in Asian arts and artifacts, they believed

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that the production, use, and display of Asian-style goods would represent and promote their moral and cultural refinement.  

Such consumption and display, Yoshihara observes, reinforced white, middle-class women’s place in Victorian domesticity ‘while cloaking the gender and racial ideologies inherent in such practices.’ Madam, notwithstanding her extensive sojourn abroad, exhibits the same nostalgia for a pre-modern tradition when she is back in the United States – which she deems less refined than China. When every seven years she returns to her New England home it no longer feels like home to her, and she is annoyed by the uncouth American youth who ‘would quickly show their lack of interest or respect, and on occasions would even laugh and sneer at her.’ At such times she would retreat into herself with ‘thoughts, fond thoughts, of another place far to the east, where she truly felt at home … [where] she had raised the quiet and virtuous Shuzhen’ (235).

This polarisation of the United States and China – especially the association of verbal restraint with Eastern virtue – places Madam squarely in the company of American Orientalists. Throughout the story she along with other Americans constantly equates Chinese virtue with reticence: ‘The girl had a certain quality and character that simply could not be found in Western girls. She possessed a quiet depth’ (241). Frank Chin et al., the editors of Aiiieeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers, specifically impute the Western association of Asian virtue with silence to ‘racist love.’ Although the editors have in mind the stereotypes imposed on Asian Americans, their observations are equally applicable to American perceptions of the Chinese:

One measure of the success of white racism is the silence of that [minority] race and the amount of white energy necessary to maintain or increase that silence. … The stereotype operates as a model of behavior. … The successful operation of the stereotype results in the neutralization of the subject race as a social, creative, and cultural force. … Given fear of white hostility and the white threat to the survival of the subject minority, it follows that embracing the acceptable stereotype is an expedient tactic of survival.  

According to Chin et al., the American nation state extols Asians who are quiet and submissive to white authority and reproves other racial minorities – particularly African Americans – who challenge its supremacy. Furthermore, this maintenance of racial hierarchy requires ethnic collusion, a point also made by Arif Dirlik when he

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8 Yoshihara 26.
10 Frank Chin et al. xxv-xxvii.
observes that Orientalism requires ‘the complicity of [Asians] in endowing it with plausibility.’ Madam may not be consciously typecasting Shuzhen any more than Shuzhen is wittingly adhering to an ethnic cliché, yet the reiteration of the adoptee’s commendable reserve strikes a disquieting note. Since the white mother is the benefactor, the orphan may have inhabited the lauded stereotype as ‘an expedient tactic of survival.’

The dynamics in the adoptive relationship appears invidious not only in the older woman’s equation of Shuzhen’s taciturnity with Eastern mystique but also in her objectification of the youngster, who is recurrently compared with exotic flora:

One summer day, like a dainty willow blossom borne on a summer breeze, Shuzhen fell gently into the courtyard of her heart. … The girl was as frail as a willow blossom, thin, sickly, and pale. But there was something about this young thing that so contrasted with the dark and lifeless atmosphere around her that Madam Simpson could not forget the little girl. (237, 239; my emphasis)

According to Yoshihara, American catalogues of East Asian merchandise around the turn of the twentieth century contain ‘photographs and illustrations not only of items being sold – such as ivory carvings, embroideries, porcelains … but also of landscapes, people, and various images of the “Orient.”’: In Madam’s mind Shuzhen likewise blends with Chinese sceneries and curios. The white woman, whose ‘life was stagnating like a pond in summer with no source water and no outlet’ (237), adopts ‘this young thing’, notably, on a Christmas Eve:

Shuzhen sat in front of the fireplace beside Madam Simpson. In the light of the blazing fire the older woman looked into the gaunt and timid face and those deep-set black eyes: there was something so mysterious, so desolate in this tiny thing. Madam Simpson slowly reached out and touched the hand of the girl. … And then, as she clung to the tiny hand in the warm glow of the parlor fireplace, she slowly began to sense that it was not just the hand of a little girl that she was holding; she was now grasping Mister Wang’s poetry, Mrs Wang’s exquisite embroidery; she was holding the very essence of Eastern womanhood, all the silent mystery of ancient China. (240; my emphasis)

One can hardly find a more telling illustration of Orientalism. Instead of embracing Shuzhen in flesh and blood, Madam regards ‘this tiny thing’ as an exotic Christmas present – a mysterious ‘package’ of Chinoiserie, the very embodiment of aesthetic Orientalism. Bing Xin magnifies Madam’s fetishisation of traditional China by using, whenever she enters the expatriate’s mind, stylised poetic similes such as ‘a dainty willow blossom borne on a summer breeze’ and ‘a stream in a meadow’ in contrast to her unadorned presentation of Shuzhen’s thoughts, or of the conversation between Shuzhen and Tianxi.


12 Yoshihara 31.
To Madam, Shuzhen is China doll incarnate. She therefore does not seem overly concerned with the adoptee’s emotional wellbeing, though she is fully aware of the child’s physical, verbal, and emotional inhibition:

And so for the next ten years Shuzhen grew up at the side of Madam Simpson. The girl was like a stream in a meadow, its slow water too deep to gurgle, too placid to be heard. Although well cared for, Shuzhen remained a short and skinny girl, and her face was always a sad, pale shade. She never showed sorrow, never showed joy. She answered when spoken to, but no more, and she went around the house as silently as if she were on tiptoes. (241)

This depiction reminds one of a timeless tableau rather than of a growing teenager. Considering that the girl is constantly beside Madam, her reserve may have emanated from a sense of unremitting parental surveillance. Madam nevertheless finds the hushed yet solicitous presence to be a solace. The care she bestows on Shuzhen is required manifold by the daughter who plays the role of a scrupulous handmaiden, ever mindful of her adoptive mother’s needs and mutely active in the background.

Whenever Madam Simpson was sick, the lass would quietly and meticulously take care of the older woman with gentleness and genuine feeling. Whenever Madam Simpson would look up from her bed, Shuzhen was always sitting at her side. … ‘You’re like an angel sent from Heaven!’ Madam Simpson would always want to say, but as she looked into that ashen face and sorrowful eyes, she would hold back her words. (241)

Shuzhen is in effect performing what David L. Eng terms ‘affective labor.’ Calling attention to ‘the racialization of intimacy in our global age,’ particularly to the widespread adoption of Chinese girls by American citizens, Eng cautions: ‘we need to consider how the stereotype of the hard-working, agreeable, and passive Asian girl, ever eager to please, works to smooth over political problems, economic disparities, and cultural differences.’ Madam embraces the stock image and takes for granted the adoptee’s constant vigil. She seems content as long as the rueful teenager ‘serves’ as her guardian angel. Not once does she attempt to find out the cause of the youngster’s timidity or plumb the depth of her sadness. Shuzhen later confides to young Tianxi: ‘Since my father died, I have always felt no one understands me in my silence’ (253).

It is not that an emotional bond is absent between the adoptive mother and the child. Yet what connects the two is not mutual understanding but forlorn co-dependence:

Both of them felt like outcasts in the world, lonely fragments that fit only into each other. The sense of loss and loneliness brought them closer together that day [after sweeping Mister Wang’s tomb during Qing Ming Festival]. As they walked home, Shuzhen could feel herself being bathed in the motherly love

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and compassion that Madam Simpson had for her. They never went out much; Madam Simpson slowly lost contact with most of her friends, and she even lost interest in collecting antiques. Her life was now centered on this fair and delicate willow blossom, Shuzhen. (242)

Madam’s fondness for the child is clearly due in part to their similar personality: gentle, reticent, withdrawn, despondent, and self-conscious. The fact that the two share these attributes suggests that they are, pace Madam, not exclusive Chinese traits, not the epitome of Eastern womanhood. Her maternal devotion, however palpable in the passage above, is undercut by her acquisitiveness and possessiveness, and her unwitting exploitation of the adoptee. Qiu Yanping [邱艳萍] and Li Baiqing [李柏青] notice that Madam stops keeping a dog and collecting antiques soon after the adoption, as though ‘Shuzhen were merely “a little dog” and an “antique” to allay her loneliness.’ Qiu and Li, however, stop short of linking such fungibility with what has come to be associated with Orientalism.14

Especially unsettling is the American mother’s fear of losing her daughter to marriage:

There was something in that thought that froze her heart. … Loneliness, a chilling sadness overwhelmed her … she trembled … and pushed that terrifying thought out of her mind. ... However, if anyone should broach the subject of Shuzhen’s marriage, Madam Simpson would simply smile smugly, and with practiced tact change the subject. (242, 243)

The translation ‘terrifying’ fails to capture the sense of the original Chinese expression ‘buxiang [不祥],’15 meaning inauspicious or ominous. Few mothers would look upon the prospect of a daughter’s marriage so adversely. Madam is clearly perturbed by its consequence – of her being left alone. Her selfishness in wishing Shuzhen to remain with her forever is a far cry from maternal love but is completely in line with her commodification of Shuzhen as antique, pet, and handmaiden.

**Racist Love and Racist Hate**

The asymmetrical relationship is even more pronounced after Shuzhen accompanies Madam to New England, where the American mother is occasionally ‘asked to speak at the church on the present situation in China’ while the Chinese daughter ‘would quietly sit and listen’: ‘Everyone thought [Shuzhen] was adorable. Her quiet and respectful disposition was especially admired by the older women who showered the girl with little gifts’ (245). Madam is venerated as an authority on China; Shuzhen, as the demure Oriental. The white woman fits the profile of what Dirlik calls ‘Sinified Westerner’ whose ““Orientalization” was what qualified [her] to speak for the Orient,’ while Shuzhen emblematises ‘self-Orientalization.’16 The church ladies’

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14 Qiu and Li 27.
16 Dirlik 110, 111.
eleemosynary attitude, along with Madam’s ‘matronizing’ behavior, also brings to mind what Stacilee Ford terms ‘maternal exceptionalism,’ denoting American women ‘who drew on their national and gender identities, particularly their “feminine” roles as mothers and/or nurturers, to claim a certain authority’ in Asia.17

Like Shuzhen, Tianxi, too, chafes under white patronage. Instead of holding his tongue, he voices his frustrations with American missionaries’ proprietary stance toward the Chinese:

Last year the church sent Father here to study more theology, and they also have supplied me with a very generous stipend so I can come and attend classes. The sad part is that I would prefer to study art, but because of the conditions set up by the church, I must attend classes on theology. They want to make me into a pastor … but I have no desire to wear a black robe and stand behind a pulpit all my life! (251)

The missionaries’ derailment of Tianxi’s secular aspiration coincides with Madam’s insidious control of Shuzhen’s character and comportment. Both young persons have been recipients of white beneficence with invisible strings attached. Tianxi receives a missionary stipend to study theology at the expense of pursuing his own interest; he is expected to serve the church in return for the evangelical assistance. Similarly, Shuzhen is expected to repay Madam’s kindness to the extent of curtailing her own independence, personal growth, and pursuit of happiness.

Through Tianxi – who decries the ethnographic gaze of the American missionaries and questions their presumption of cultural superiority and their supposition that Cathay can be easily encapsulated and known (specifically through him as a participant-observer) – Bing Xin anticipates Said’s critique of a reductive colonialist epistemology and its attendant hierarchy:

To speak at the church and have people come up to me afterwards and ask questions about China scares me to death. From my scant twenty years of life, what do I know about four thousand years of Chinese history and what it means to us today? The very idea of doing that annoys me. … What rattles me even more is when people say that China had no culture before the coming of Christianity. At the seminary they … call me a ‘model Chinese youth.’ Some of the educators who have been in China … like to take me with them on their fundraising campaigns. … [They] introduce me to the audience with something like, ‘Just look at the kind of Chinese youth our education there has produced!’ Isn’t that just the way a circus man shows his trained monkey to the crowds? … If there is anything praiseworthy about me, it is no thanks to these people! (251)

Tianxi’s scathing comments about condescending Christian educators prefigure not only Said’s arguments but also those of the editors of Aiiiiieeeeee! concerning ‘racist love,’ of Dominika Ferens concerning white gaze, and of Asian Americanists (such as

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‘Theorizing in Narrative Form’: Premonitions of Orientalism and Racist Love in Bing Xin’s ‘The Photograph’. King-Kok Cheung. 
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 1, November 2012. 
Victor Bascara and David Palumbo-Liu) concerning the dubious construct of the ‘Asian American model minority’.18

In accordance with ‘racist love’ and ‘racist hate’ – European American approbation of tractable racial minorities and condemnation of dissidents from white sovereignty – the American missionaries at the turn of the twentieth century took pride in the Chinese who accepted Christianity and denounced as heathens those who adhered to ancestral worship. Tianxi complains that even Chinese Christians are being subject to the white gaze, paraded as trophies of evangelical triumph. His description of the farewell ceremony for a missionary about to leave for China further reveals American revulsion against indigenous Chinese culture: ‘The missionary candidate … says a final sad but stirring farewell, and everyone shows the person the utmost respect and pity as if the fellow was heading for some disease-infested jungle full of savages!’ (252).

This negative association of China with malaise and barbarism seems diametrically opposite to the assessment of Madam, who holds a highly romanticised view of the culture – so much so that she has virtually made the country her home. She so prefers respectful Chinese youth to their boisterous American counterparts that she scrupulously cultivates a pure Chinese specimen:

Everyone praised Madam Simpson for how she raised Shuzhen: for the ten years that she took care of her in China, Shuzhen remained entirely Chinese in looks, action, and spirit. She never wore Western clothes. Except when with folks who could not understand Chinese, Madam Simpson never spoke to the girl in English. If any of the boys from the school came to their house for an occasional party, Shuzhen would timidly stay at the Madam’s side and would never enter into the games or bantering. Even when she passed the candied fruit or other refreshments, she would always keep her eyes modestly downcast and speak in a whisper. (243)

Madam’s Sinophile attitude may seem a welcome exception to American missionary vilification of China. But I would suggest that the two apparently opposed tendencies are fundamentally related. In ensuring that Shuzhen abides by her notion of a Chinese paragon, the adoptive mother is no less self-serving and guilty of stereotyping than her compatriots. The racist love she showers on Shuzhen is the obverse of the racist hate of her countrymen who openly revile Chinese culture. Shuzhen’s Chineseness is being inculcated not through interaction with other Chinese but by being sequestered and confined to ‘Madam’s side,’ under the maternal assumption that the ‘get-togethers … most young people enjoy so much were uncomfortable times for Shuzhen, and she never liked them’ (243). Once removed from Madam’s watchful eye, however, Shuzhen relishes the companionship of her peers (especially Tianxi) in New England. Thus one must interpret the young woman’s alleged preference for solitude as a concession to parental wishes, to the alien mother’s ‘Chinese’ upbringing of her.

Contesting Epistemologies
In *Cold War Orientalism* Christina Klein distinguishes between European texts about Asia published before World War II, which generally depict Asians as racially inferior, and postwar American texts that tend to espouse ‘racial tolerance and inclusion’ and serve as ‘the official ideology undergirding postwar expansion.’ She continues: ‘in forging emotionally satisfying bonds across the divides of difference … the sentimental could serve as an instrument for exercising power.’ 19 Although ‘The Photograph’ was published before World War II, it brings out the two forms of Orientalism expounded by Klein – the one dismissing Asians as inferior and the other demonstrating white sympathy. Of specific relevance is her point about the ‘double-edged’ power of sympathy in interracial adoption. Adjudging the example of the Welcome House, an adoption agency that Pearl Buck launched in 1949 ‘to find families for Asian and part-Asian children born in the United States whom other agencies refused to handle,’ Klein connects adoption across racial boundaries with Cold War Orientalism:

The white mother that figured so prominently in postwar middlebrow culture … possessed a complex genealogy. … The figure of the white parent to the nonwhite child has long worked as a trope for representing the ostensibly ‘natural’ relations of hierarchy and domination. The infantilization of racialized Others and marginalized social groups has been a standard rhetorical means of legitimating unequal power relations. 20

Madam, in keeping Shuzhen under her constrictive custody, is a precursor to the postwar middlebrow white mother. Her possessiveness, already perceptible in China where she would brush aside any thoughts of Shuzhen’s marriage, becomes glaring in New England when she comes across Tianxi’s photo of Shuzhen:

Madam Simpson suddenly froze in shock!

In the background was the thick, gnarled bough of an old oak, its branches adorned with new leaves, at the bottom was a lush green lawn, and in the middle was Shuzhen. Her hands were on a picnic basket that she was opening … her face reflected all the young woman’s spirit, personality, and joy. Her perfect smile revealed her beautiful white teeth, and in her eyes there was a vitality that Madam Simpson had never seen in the girl for the ten years she had known her!

Madam Simpson trembled slightly. A deep and dark feeling suddenly seized her. It was not fear, nor was it anger, it was not even remorse. … She clutched the photograph tightly as she stared at it. (257)

In the Chinese original Shuzhen’s expression in the photograph signifies more than ‘vitality’: ‘her face flushed with coyness; her radiant smile suffused with rapture and


20 Klein 175.

awash with tenderness [满脸的娇羞，满脸的笑，惊喜的笑，含情的笑]’. The original leaves little doubt that Shuzhen is in love with Tianxi. Madam, who catches through the photo her first glimpse of Shuzhen’s passion, spirit, and womanhood, is startled by the development. Because of her vested interest in keeping the adoptee primly Chinese, she is dumbfounded by the incongruous double.

The reader, on the other hand, has learned of the girl coming to life before, when alone with Tianxi after meeting him at dinner. Upon listening to his tirade against American missionaries, she feels galvanised by his presence – which she likens to ‘an illuminating light so warm and powerful that it penetrated and enveloped her very soul. As she looked into Tianxi’s face, his cheeks burning and eyes blazing with passion for the truth he spoke, tears began to well up in her eyes’ (252). Tianxi’s impassioned speech obviously strikes a deep chord in Shuzhen, who perhaps for the first time realises the extent to which she has been stifled by her adoptive mother. Unlike Madam, who has persisted in seeing Shuzhen as the embodiment of ancient Chinese art, Tianxi ‘could immediately sense in her the “new China” … a dynamic and progressive China’ (253). Whether Tianxi’s perception is any more accurate than Madam’s, the discrepancy suggests that the image of an impassive daughter is largely a maternal fantasy, perhaps perpetuated by the role Shuzhen has felt compelled to play beside Madam.

Far from being relieved and pleased by the photo, which displays a sensuous and vibrant young lady, Madam is devastated. Her bewilderment may be diagnosed as a form of ‘Orientalist melancholia,’ a term coined by Rey Chow to describe those white sinologists who censure contemporary Chinese writers for not living up to time-honored Chinese literary criteria: ‘But this moralistic indictment of the other’s infidelity masks a more fundamental anxiety … that the Chinese past which [the sinologist] has undertaken to penetrate is evaporating and that the sinologist himself is the abandoned subject … [that] the historical relation between the “first world” and the “third world” is reversed.’ Madam experiences a comparable ‘dis-orientation’ brought on by the stark new impression of the Chinese lass she has presumed to ‘know’ so well hitherto. She feels destabilised by another subjectivity, displaced by an alternate epistemology.

**Subversion of the Master’s Tool**

The eponymous photograph recalls, albeit with a subaltern twist, Susan Sontag’s observations: ‘The most grandiose result of the photographic enterprise is to give us the sense that we can hold the whole world in our heads – as an anthology of images. … It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and, therefore, like power … it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed.’ Photography in Sontag’s formulation sustains the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. Bing Xin’s title similarly alerts readers to particular ways of seeing. Most of the narrative sketches are mediated by Madam’s limited perspective, filtered through her Orientalist lens. In making Tianxi

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21 冰心 [Bing Xin], ‘相片’ [‘The Photograph’] 405; my English translation.
the photographer in the story, the author wrests the authority from Madam and enables the reader to detect optical distortions and oblique angles in her framing of the Chinese characters, particularly Shuzhen’s. If photography is often made to serve possessive colonialist ends, Bing Xin – by using Tianxi’s image to contest Madam’s construction of the deadpan Chinese girl – shows it is possible to use the master’s tool to deconstruct the master’s predatory vision.

Tianxi’s photo unhinges Madam because her icon has summarily fallen under what James Clifford calls “endangered authenticities.”24 She may even feel betrayed or deceived by Shuzhen’s Oriental veneer that she herself has so painstakingly varnished. Moreover, her response inverts another one of Sontag’s premises: ‘All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability … to contact or lay claim to another reality.’25 Instead of allowing Madam to participate in another person’s mutability or to lay claim to another reality, the sight of her daughter exuding ‘the fragrance of youth’ trains the affrighted eyes on her own wizened complexion and signs of mortality: ‘She looked across the room at the mirror on her vanity. Her hair was disheveled … and her face was ashen white. She peered at her own bloodshot eyes, and at the wrinkled face’ (259). Previously, Madam has used the adjective ‘ashen’ to describe Shuzhen; now the relation between the ‘first world’ and the ‘third world’ (to echo Chow) and between subject and object is reversed.

The photograph unleashes the greatest fear of Madam all along: the adoptee’s marriage. Though she does not explicitly attribute her consternation to that dreaded scenario, her convulsive reaction upon viewing the photo recalls her earlier turmoil at the thought of Shuzhen’s marriage: ‘there was something in that thought that froze her heart … She trembled … and pushed that terrifying thought out of her mind’ (242). In both instances she ‘froze’ and ‘trembled.’ The photo evidently telescopes in her mind’s eye the looming possibility of losing Shuzhen to Tianxi, and this time she cannot simply push away the thought. The tightness with which she clutches the photo reveals her nervousness about losing both cognitive and physical grasp of the adoptee and her determination to hold on to Shuzhen.

The photo was taken during an excursion in Madam’s absence. Being ill, she could not join the young people for the outing: ‘She was going to ask Shuzhen to stay home and take care of her, but afraid the girl’s presence would be missed too much by the others, and because she assumed that Shuzhen would not go alone anyway, she said half-heartedly that the girl should go on ahead with them’ (258). Her inner thoughts disclose her manipulative proclivity and her limited understanding of the adoptee for, to her surprise, Shuzhen ‘smiled and told the group she would join them, and they all ran down the porch steps and disappeared in the car’ (258). The youth’s readiness to leave Madam behind puts one in mind of Zora Neale Hurston’s folktale ‘Member Youse a Nigger’ in which the white master counts on his slave John to stay with his ‘loving’ family after emancipation. Yet John is more than happy to leave: ‘le Massa kept callin’ ‘im and his voice was pitiful. But John kept right on steppin’ to

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25 Sontag 15.
Canada. 26 Shuzhen may feel grateful enough to Madam, but she too wishes to be liberated from her white matron.

In New England Shuzhen has become an evolved fledgling eager to take wing. Her inhibition hitherto has been to a large degree conditioned by Madam rather than being intrinsic to her Chinese character. By the same token, her transformation into an outgoing woman can be credited to the influence of Tianxi as well as to the American ways to which both of them have been exposed. Tianxi encourages Shuzhen to mingle with American youth and to consider attending college in the United States. The idea of an American college education for Shuzhen had in fact occurred to Madam, but shortly after seeing the photograph she changes her mind and announces what becomes the tale’s clincher: ‘I’m thinking, daughter, about returning to China’ (259). Not ‘daughter’ but ‘haizi [孩子]’ or ‘child’ is the vocative used in the Chinese original. Since one does not leave a child to fend for herself in a foreign country, Madam undoubtedly intends to return to China with Shuzhen.

Taking Shuzhen back just when she is blooming, falling in love, and exploring life on her own makes little sense. But it seems Madam is bent on nipping adulthood and courtship in the bud. Presumably she thinks that once back in China and away from Tianxi, the adoptee will resume her wonted role as the shadowy presence that remains by her mother’s side out of filial piety. Despite good intentions in adopting Shuzhen, Madam bears the colonialist mark in tagging the adoptee as an Other and as a dependent who should repay maternal care with lifelong servitude. Shuzhen’s response to Madam’s announcement is withheld from the reader. She may decide to stay against her adoptive mother’s wishes, or Tianxi may decide to go back to China with her and both of them may put romantic love before filial debt. Since the story was published at a historical juncture in China when Western influence was spreading rapidly and when the received code of conduct was being challenged, the opened ending leaves ample room for each reader’s imagination.

Published decades before Said’s Orientalism and the Aiiieeeee! anthology, ‘The Photograph’ already contains kernels of these later theoretical deliberations. Bing Xin is far ahead of her time in divulging the colonialist mindset of Madam beneath her admiration of Chinese culture and her affection for Shuzhen, and in roundly censuring, via Tianxi, the supercilious missionary gaze prior to World War II. ‘Defining Asia’ over the course of the nineteenth century, Ferens points out, ‘was largely the province of missionaries and lay travelers.’ 27 ‘The Photograph’ provides an early literary glimpse of how New England missionaries sought to garner ethnographic knowledge and of how they operated in accordance with preconceived notions of the Orient. Tianxi’s advice to Shuzhen to learn about another culture by making American acquaintances suggests a much more viable way to know the ‘other’; while he also generalises about the West (‘I have always respected Westerners’ courage and zest for life. I very rarely find an American young person perpetually somber and pensive like we are’ [253-53]), his observations are derived from everyday human encounters and not from ethnography. The white mother, despite spending decades in China, has chosen to admire the culture in the form of

27 Ferens 19.
ancient art and, soon after the adoption, to occlude herself and her child from associating with living Chinese.

The story thus deprecates reductive ways of knowing and illuminates Said’s dictum that “the line separating Occident from Orient … is less a fact of nature than it is a fact of human production.” Bing Xin blurs the line by indicating that Madam and Shuzhen share many attributes as introverts; that the adoptive mother sees the adoptee as embodying pre-modern Cathay while Tianxi regards her as epitomising new China; that Madam and her missionary compatriots hold divergent views of China as the cradle of civilisation and as a hotbed of barbarians, respectively; that Tianxi’s impressions of outgoing Americans hardly apply to Madam. These contradictory clues all go to show the need for intersubjective knowledge transcending binary oppositions.

‘The Photograph’ as Sinophone Chinese American Literature

This narrative also collapses the distinction between Chinese and Asian American writing. Its crisscrossing of three strands of Orientalism – Madam Simpson’s racist love, the American missionaries’ imperialist disdain, and Shuzhen’s enactment of the ‘model minority’ stereotype – foreshadows many of the key themes elaborated by Chin et al. in the introduction to Aiiiiieee! In portraying the loneliness of a white woman in China and the alienation of Chinese youth in the United States, the story traces the thorny process of migration and acculturation across nations. The pang of double exile suffered by Madam in China and the United States resonates with the experiences of many early Asian immigrant characters, including the protagonist in Younghill Kang’s East Goes West (1937), the farmer in Bienvenido Santos’s ‘Scent of Apples’ (1955), and the Vietnamese cook in Monique Truong’s The Book of Salt (2003). The sense of displacement felt by Shuzhen and Tianxi in New England parallels that of Sui Sin Far/Edith Eaton in her autobiographical ‘Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian’ (1909); yet ‘The Photograph’ contrasts significantly with Far’s short story ‘Pat and Pan’ (1912), in which the race of the adoptive mother and child is transposed and in which the author, as Cynthia Callahan observes, uses the transracial adoption to ‘critique the assimilationist agenda of religious missionaries.’ The objectification of Shuzhen and Tianxi further brings to mind the titular protagonist Sakura Jiro in Onoto Watanna/Winnifred Eaton’s ‘The Loves of

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Sakura Jiro and the Three Headed Maid’ (1903), in which a Japanese immigrant must earn his keep in the New World by making a voyeuristic spectacle of himself.  

‘The Photograph’ bears especially close resemblance to Ruthanne Lum McCunn’s biographical novel Wooden Fish Songs (1995), which depicts the adulterated love of Fanny (a white woman) for her adopted Chinese son Lue Gim Gong (1858-1925). The two adoptive mothers hold much in common. Fanny regards Lue as her ‘creation’ and treats him both as a ‘field Negro’ who tends her orchard and a ‘house Negro’ who attends her sick bed. Madam fashions Shuzhen according to her own Orientalist conceit and expects unconditional gratitude. The only difference is that Fanny takes credit for Lue’s Christian demeanour whereas Madam ascribes Shuzhen’s sedateness to Eastern femininity. Given the many overlapping concerns between ‘The Photograph’ and the Asian American texts, it merits consideration as Chinese American literature alongside Anglophone works (that already fall within this rubric) by Chinese nationals such as Chiang Yee, Lin Yutang, Wu Ting Fang, and Yung Wing. Most of the other pre-World War II authors mentioned focus on the experience of Chinese in the United States; Bing Xin alone evokes the reverse odyssey of an American woman in China.

In its dual critique of American Orientalism and Chinese patriarchal familialism, the story aligns perfectly with Asian American literature. Wu Bing (in fact a daughter of Bing Xin), pioneering scholar of Asian American literature in China and founder of the Chinese American Literature Research Center in Beijing, has published an essay entitled ‘Reading Chinese American Literature to Learn about America, China, and Chinese America.’ ‘The Photograph’ sheds light on all three terrains through its depiction of Christians in New England, Americans in pre-World War II China, and Chinese in America. Wu’s appraisal of Chinese American literature as ‘introspection literature’ for readers in China and specifically her reservation about Chinese filial obligation apply to the narrative as well, given its ambivalence toward traditional values. Unlike Qiu and Li, who hold up Shuzhen as the exemplar of two positive aspects of Chinese culture – the traditional virtues of Old China and the progressive virtues of New China – I believe Bing Xin beckons us to look critically at the conventional inculcation of reticence, filial duty, and disproportionate gratitude.

34 Bing Xin – being an author who spent substantial time in the United States and who (at least in this story) depicted Asians in the New World – fits the comprehensive definition of Asian American author proposed by myself and Stan Yogi; see King-Kok Cheung and Stan Yogi, eds., Asian American Literature: An Annotated Bibliography (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1998) v-vi.
36 Qiu and Li 22.
These values, defamiliarised through Madam Simpson’s Western eyes, take on a troubling light, allowing the author to make insinuations against American Orientalism and conventional Chinese feminine ideal simultaneously. In reinforcing the ‘Eastern’ virtue of reticence and in believing that Shuzhen will remain forever obliging after returning to China, Madam is not simply blinkered by her stereotypical vision. Other than her dread of losing Suchen through marriage, her familistic notions – perhaps just as inimical to a youngster’s self-development – are not so different from those of traditional Chinese parents. Shuzhen herself, before encountering Tianxi, has been conforming not only to maternal expectations but also to patriarchal protocols for Chinese women. In sitting quietly in the New England congregation while Madam lectures on China, thereby conferring on the American woman the exclusive power to speak for the Other, she is an accomplice in abetting Orientalist representation and bolstering cultural hegemony. Although Tianxi also balks at representing his homeland to an American audience, his reluctance stems from his sound reasoning that any generalisations about this vast country inevitably fall short. Furthermore, his vision of ‘new China’ – lively, passionate, and expressive, as captured in his snapshot of Shuzhen – affords an appealing alternative to the timid willowy figure enshrined in traditional Chinese paintings and cherished by Madam.

International Adoption
The assignation, preservation, and reinscription of traditional values have far-reaching repercussions today on account of widespread inter-country adoption. Klein contends that transracial adoption of Asian orphans during the Cold War era was not merely a private affair but a ‘social practice’ fraught with political ramifications. The interracial adoption in ‘The Photograph,’ arguably a precedent to Klein’s Cold War examples, offers a sobering contribution to on-going debates over the viability of various cultural approaches to raising adoptees whose racial and national origins differ from the adoptive parents’. In cases of Chinese girls with European American families, in particular, adoptive parents face the choice of whether to bring up the adoptee according to conventional Chinese values or according to their own customs and beliefs. Vincent J. Cheng, who argues that issues surrounding transracial and inter-country adoption are ‘important reflections of Western cultural attitudes toward cultural identity and authenticity,’ communicates his misgivings about the popular ‘heritage industry’ putatively designed to help Chinese adoptees in the United States to learn about their culture:

Such choices are not likely or frequently to be made … on the basis of actual lived experience, but rather on the basis of cultural stereotypes … resulting most frequently (and unconsciously) in Orientalisms and fetishizations of an exoticized otherness, evocations of an exoticized but dead past, or exercises in what … Renato Rosaldo has so aptly coined ‘imperialist nostalgia.’ … We would not apply the same dynamics of authenticity when there is no racial difference involved, that is, with white babies.

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37 Klein 174.
Racial difference, compounded by personal preference, accounts for Madam’s calculated attempt to shield Shuzhen from Western heritage. By refraining from speaking English to her and from teaching her about American culture, Madam deprives the adoptee of a valuable bilingual and bicultural upbringing. It is Tianxi, vehement critic of Western missionaries, who nevertheless stresses the importance of crosscultural interchange: ‘I believe we ought to use our time abroad … to travel,’ he tells Shuzhen. ‘I have always respected Westerners’ courage and zest for life. … I really think you ought to join them sometime; it would really broaden your horizon’ (254). In the end, Madam’s nostalgic, culturalist projection of the adoptee morphs into Tianxi’s rendition of a vivacious Shuzhen embodying ‘New China’ – a rendering that is surely no less authentically Chinese during and after the iconoclastic May Fourth era (a period from about 1919 to 1926) that witnessed the erosion of Confucian culture and the ascendancy of western ideals.\footnote{In Wang Ning’s words, “the May 4\textsuperscript{th} Movement began the process of Chinese modernity, in which Western cultural trends and academic thoughts flooded into China, destroying the mechanism of China’s long-lasting nationalism,” in “(Re)Considering Chinese American Literature: Toward Rewriting Literary History in a Global Age,” Amerasia Journal 38.2 (2012) xvii.} Though published well before adoption across racial lines began to gain currency, this early transnational tale is one of the first to evince the hazards of essentialising and fetishising adoptees and regarding them as cultural acquisitions.

**Conclusion**

Bing Xin is perhaps the first Chinese writer to reverse the Orientalist gaze by creating a story around an American woman. According to the historian David Roediger,\footnote{David R. Roediger, ed. *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White* (New York: Schoken Books, 1998) 4.} White writers have long been positioned as the leading and most dispassionate investigators of the lives, values, and abilities of people of color. … Writers of color … are cast as providing insight, often presumed to be highly subjective, of what it is like to be a ‘minority.’\footnote{Palumbo-Liu 59.}

From this vantage point – and extending it to the Pacific Rim context – Bing Xin’s experimental appropriation of white authority is nothing short of insurgent. Just as the eponymous photograph inverts the colonialis拟 relationship noted by Sontag, the narrative confounds established Orientalist hierarchy. Madam regards her Chinese ward as an ethnographic subject, but she herself is simultaneously subjected to the probing gaze of the Chinese author.

Far more nuanced than the one-dimensional maternal perception, however, is Bing Xin’s portrayal of Madam, whose psychological complexity rivals that of Megan Davis, the white female protagonist in *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933) directed by Frank Capra.\footnote{The film is based on a novel with the same title by Grace Zaring Stone (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1930).} Palumbo-Liu notes that Megan, an expatriate romantically drawn to but culturally repulsed by the Chinese general, vacillates ‘between wanting to escape from Yen and wishing to convert him to Christianity.’\footnote{Palumbo-Liu 59.} Madam’s attitude toward
China is no less vexed. Her decision to stay in the country attests to her feminist independence and her willingness to become assimilated into an alien culture. Yet her attempt to preserve the adoptee as China doll betrays her ‘Orientalist melancholia’ and ‘imperialist nostalgia.’

Unlike ethnocentric Chinese or American writers, Bing Xin delicately balances chiasmic registers in the story. On the political level the author’s sympathies are with the young Chinese against the American Orientalist ideology embodied by Madam and the New England missionaries. On the psychological level the dynamic is reversed: the narrative champions American individualism and self-development over identification with family and nation. On this level Madam’s attraction to China is no more peculiar than Shuzhen’s growing fascination with the United States, and the author depicts the white recluse’s predicament feelingly. Although I have focused on interracial politics to emphasise the author’s foresight regarding Orientalism, the nuanced sketch of Madam – a perspicacious character study of an ageing woman who has chosen to remain single and to spend most of her life in an Other world – warrants no less investigation. To borrow Dirlik’s words, Madam exemplifies ‘the Orientalist [who] is “Orientalized” … in the very process of entering the “Orient” intellectually and sentimentally.’

Viewing ‘The Photograph’ with the hindsight of postcolonialist and Asian American studies allows us to see the prescient author in a subversive light. The literary audacity whereby Bing Xin arrogates to herself white ‘authority’, her artistic finesse in delineating the dynamics of interracial adoption, and her sensitivity in attending to the political and psychological dimensions of the narrative continue to radiate across borders and centuries. At a time when most Chinese writers leveled their critique at Chinese feudalism and looked up to the West as a source of salvation, Bing Xin homed in on the hierarchical relationship between the United States and China and cautioned against imperialist perils. She conveyed the difference, back in 1934, between Orientalism and a newly evolving Chinese culture, and between Eurocentrism and universality.

43 Dirlik 119. I thank Ferens for prodding this dual construal of Madam.

In June of 1889, while travelling through the South Seas, Robert Louis Stevenson wrote to his friend Sidney Colvin that, ‘the Pacific is a strange place, the nineteenth century only exists there in spots; all round, it is a no man’s land of the ages, a stir-about of epochs and races, barbarisms and civilisations, virtues and crimes.’\(^1\) Indeed, as Stevenson’s writing intersects with the reality of the colonial experience in the South Pacific, his adventures present a complex depiction of villainy which functions as an ideological subversion of contemporary trends in Victorian adventure narrative. While some of his South Seas fiction – particularly ‘The Beach of Falesá’ (1892)\(^2\) – has to some extent been critiqued in this light,\(^3\) there remains a need for more specific consideration of this work within the broader context of nineteenth-century adventure narrative. This essay therefore explores Stevenson’s employment of particularly colonial constructions of the villain trope through a close reading of his 1894 novel The Ebb-Tide, with a focus on how the text portrays villainy as an interconnected matrix of ordinary vice and extra-ordinary evil, which unite to create a nightmarish experience for its characters. By interposing more or less ‘standard’ types of Victorian adventure villains alongside average human beings – including, at times, the adventurers themselves – with a capacity for treachery, Stevenson complicates the moral dynamics surrounding one of the mode’s most essential topoi, thus leading to a new appreciation of his interaction with colonial narrative discourse. In turn, this contributes to the author’s more extensive re-casting of an adventure aesthetics for a modern audience.

As is so frequently the case with adventure narrative, the dialectical component of Stevenson’s work crystallises into sundry villains – some more, some less atrocious in their behaviour. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to assume that these villains are illusory bogles; for Stevenson, with his unremitting preoccupation with moral quandaries, evil comprises a very real element of the world, and one which is often best expressed – from a fictional perspective – through embodiment in villainous characters. Indeed, from a theoretical as well as a practical point of view, Stevenson allows the evil associated with villains to inhabit a tangible place within narrative. He observes, ‘the sum of the contemporary knowledge or ignorance of good and evil is, in large measure, the handiwork of those who write.’\(^4\) Hence, not only

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\(^3\) See, for example: Menikoff, Barry, Robert Louis Stevenson and ‘The Beach of Falesá’: A Study in Victorian Publishing with the Original Text (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984).


should the writer ‘tell of the kind and wholesome and beautiful elements of our life; he should tell unsparingly of the evil and sorrow of the present.’

According to Stevenson, evil fulfils both functional and morally exploratory purposes within narrative, affording the necessary foils to propel story as well as providing a forum for ethical inquiry. In order to accomplish this, he frequently appropriates certain tropic features of Victorian adventure. As Margaret Bruzelius notes, ‘the tension of [Victorian] adventure stems partly from the attraction between the demonic male and the hero. The progress of the hero is reflected by his engagement with, and final rejection of, the solipsistic and profoundly enticing claim to absolute authority made by the demonic male.’ This ‘demonic male’ is clearly a staple of Stevenson’s oeuvre, ranging from an extremely mild, almost comic, scoundrel embodied by Kidnapped’s Alan Breck Stewart, to the genial-but-deadly Long John Silver in Treasure Island to The Master of Ballantrae’s seductively malevolent James Durie and the shrewd cruelty of The Ebb-Tide’s John Attwater. These villains typically possess formidable personalities, which threaten to overwhelm their analogous adventure protagonists. Despite the fact that, as Bruzelius points out, Victorian ‘adventure always finally banishes these figures as outsiders, it nevertheless represents them as seductive, beautiful, and endlessly, if fruitlessly, energetic.’ This essay investigates manifestations of villainy in Attwater, the primary villain of The Ebb-Tide, in order to demonstrate how in Stevenson’s fiction the idea of villainy intermingles with imperial reality to portray a world in which the colonist, rather than the colonised, often embodies evil in its most frightening and destructive form.

**Contextualising The Ebb-Tide as Adventure**

So what is the best way in which to engage in a critical reading of villainy in The Ebb-Tide as a revaluation of the colonial adventure? And, for that matter, can the text truly be considered an adventure? Unlike Stevenson’s previous novels The Master of Ballantrae and Treasure Island, which invite obvious categorisation as adventure texts, The Ebb-Tide to some extent resists straightforward classification. Indeed, while Julia Reid contends, that, ‘in The Ebb-Tide Stevenson moves beyond the adventure genre, deftly weaving together naturalistic realism with political allegory and a proto-modernist symbolism,’ this essay suggests that the novel can still be categorised within the adventure mode. It is a dark adventure, certainly, but an adventure

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5Stevenson, ‘Morality of the Profession’ 517.
10Bruzelius, Romancing the Novel 91.

nonetheless. *The Ebb-Tide* contains typical nineteenth-century adventure tropes such as a journey in quest of riches, an exotic setting, and (of course) a version of the demonic male as characterised by Attwater. Furthermore, Stevenson himself seems to categorise the text into this narrative mode, as demonstrated by his repeated references to the text’s trio of unlikely protagonists as ‘co-adventurers.’

A brief glimpse into the history of the novel’s conception also demonstrates that its theoretical origin does indeed lie in the adventure tradition.

At times, Stevenson seemed perplexed by the narrative development of this ‘most grim and gloomy tale. It will run to something between *Jekyll and Hyde* and *Treasure Island*. I will not commit myself beyond this.’ He wrote to his mother that she would think *The Ebb-Tide*: ‘vile ... horror upon horror’s head accumulated: barratry, drunkenness, vitriol, are the three golden strands that hold it together; and out of the four characters, three are mere wolves and foxes. Yet I think it has a certain merit, too; if the public will accept so gross a business, of which I am doubtful.’

His comment implies that the very essence of *The Ebb-Tide*’s plot detours from a typical Victorian adventure yarn to an extrapolation of the concept of villainy. The novel is supported by a framework of vice and propelled by the actions, not of heroes among villains, but of ‘wolves’ (or, at best ‘foxes’) among their own kind. Interestingly, despite the fact that Stevenson expected critical disapproval of the tale, he nevertheless considered it to be keenly relevant to the contemporary literary ‘tide.’

He wrote to Henry James that:

> the grimness of that story is not to be depicted in words. ... Well, there is always one thing: it will serve as a touchstone. If the admirers of Zola admire him for his pertinent ugliness and pessimism, I think they should admire this; but if, as I have long suspected, they neither admire nor understand the man’s art, and only wallow in his rancidness like a hound in offal, then they will certainly be disappointed in *The Ebb-Tide*.

According to this explanation, the purpose of *The Ebb-Tide* is not to ‘wallow’ in the worst of villainous behaviours but to explore them, unflinchingly depicting the reality of evil in the world and garnering insight from that portrayal in order to engage with it as a practical moral dilemma.

An argument might therefore be made for *The Ebb-Tide* as being primarily a work of realism. Indeed, to this end Oliver S. Buckton contends that Stevenson’s...

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13 See Stevenson, *Letters* Vol. 6, 289; Vol. 6, 330; Vol. 6, 401; Vol. 8, 158; Vol. 6, 423; Vol. 8, 31; Vol. 8, 67. Although *The Ebb-Tide* began as a collaborative effort with Stevenson’s stepson, Lloyd Osbourne, it became increasingly Stevenson’s own, to the extent that there was discussion of deleting Lloyd’s name from the title, since he had ‘nothing to with the last half’ and the first half had been heavily revised by Stevenson. See Stevenson, *Letters* Vol. 8, 156. Indeed, the manuscript of *The Ebb-Tide* is wholly in Stevenson’s handwriting. See editorial note in Stevenson, *Letters* Vol. 8, 91.


writing can frequently be aligned with a nineteenth-century literary trend which sought to: ‘reanimate the corpse of Victorian realism through a revitalized use of Gothic and sensational motifs.’\textsuperscript{18} Similarly, Joseph Bristow maintains that, ‘in Stevenson’s later fiction, the dream of adventure would fall by the hollowness of its own convictions. In two later works, ‘The Beach of Falesá’ and The Ebb-Tide, the island story witnesses grown men abandoned to the “realism,” one might call it, of imperial politics.’\textsuperscript{19} Similarly, Reid writes that The Ebb-Tide demonstrates how ‘romance itself, it appears, is degenerate: the ironic invocations of romance literature, such as Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and Virgil, suggest that adventure’s energies are depleted.’\textsuperscript{20} Ann C. Colley likewise asserts that the South Sea fiction abandons (at least to some extent) the vestiges of romanticism.\textsuperscript{21} Certainly, in contrast to some Victorian ideals of adventure, The Ebb-Tide charts Stevenson’s transition from romance to a radicalized disillusionment with adventure – a transition impelled by his confrontation with the brutal energies of imperialism. Its imagery of disease and corruption questions the curative value of romance, undermining the notion that it might restore a morbidly overcivilized world to a bracing and primitive virility. Instead, the novel represents the forces unleashed by romance as pitiless and destructive.\textsuperscript{22}

Yet are such claims actually substantiated by a careful reading of the text? Or can the work be read as Stevenson’s dismantling of colonial trends rather than of adventure *per se*? After all, as Stephen Arata points out, ‘the most visible feature of the late-Victorian male romance is its engagement with issues of empire.’\textsuperscript{23} This essay suggests that, through an intentional re-negotiation of adventure tropes such as villainy, Stevenson presents a fascinating subversion of colonial literary ideology. And, by extension, he offers an effective critique of the larger socio-political framework which is generally tied to this mode in the context of late nineteenth-century narrative convention.

**Colonial Deconstruction in The Ebb-Tide**

*The Ebb-Tide* begins on a Tahitian beach, with a description of three impoverished beachcombers: Herrick, an incompetent Oxford graduate; Davis, an American captain deprived of his ship; and Huish, a crass London clerk. Partly from greed and partly from despair, they devise a scheme to steal a schooner, the *Farallone*, of which Davis has been offered command due to its being considered contaminated after the previous captain and mate died of smallpox. Their voyage becomes complicated,

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{18} Oliver S. Buckton, ‘Reanimating Stevenson’s Corpus,’ *Nineteenth Century Literature* 55.1 (2000) 23.
\textsuperscript{20} Reid 48.
\textsuperscript{22} Reid 52.
\end{footnotesize}
however, when the schooner’s cargo of champagne proves too tempting for the brazenly hedonistic Huish and alcoholism-prone Davis. Robert Kiely suggests that, until the Farallone strays from its course, ‘Stevenson has succeeded in making the story come as close as possible to his early definition of “open-air adventure” in which the immediate demands of self-preservation subordinate and simplify the problems of the will.’ Yet this statement overlooks the possibilities of villainy which seem to lurk beneath the story’s surface from the onset. In his initial description of ‘the trio,’ Stevenson notes that the three men, ‘wore flimsy cotton clothes, the same they had sweated in by day and run the gauntlet of the tropic showers; and to complete their evil case, they had no breakfast to mention, less dinner, and no supper at all’ (6).

His use of the term evil is perplexing here (surely unfortunate would do as well?), unless we are to believe that it hints at broader existential questionings which emerge within the course of the narrative. This essay maintains that, in The Ebb-Tide, Stevenson’s formulates a construction of villainy as being manifested through the constructs of ordinary and extra-ordinary evil, which unite to shape a nightmarish environment. The following sections will provide a detailed consideration of these queries.

The Ordinary Villain
Stevenson observes that his ‘trio’ in The Ebb-Tide consists of ‘three rogues ... three types of the bad man, the weak man, and strong man with a weakness, that are gone through and lived out.’ His allusion to the primary characters of the story as ‘types’ demonstrates an aspect of universality in his portrayal: they are purposefully constructed as ‘ordinary’ people. Yet he refers to them as ‘a troop of swine’ whose behaviour ‘is really so deeply beneath any possible standard, that on a retrospect I wonder I have been able to endure them myself until the yarn was finished.’ This depiction represents a definite subversion of the Victorian ‘boy’s own adventure’ protagonist: as Robert Dixon notes, such ‘heroes typically travel away from England and civilisation into other lands whose savage inhabitants are inferior – morally, physically and economically – to the Anglo-Saxon adventurer.’ In The Ebb-Tide, however, the adventurers’ behaviour is frequently portrayed as morally inferior to the native peoples of the Pacific whom they encounter.

Nevertheless, Stevenson’s primary characters cannot be read as entirely unsympathetic. Herrick in particular emerges an intensely pitiable, if somewhat pathetic, character. The universal qualities demonstrated by Herrick as chief protagonist serve the function of making The Ebb-Tide, in Hugh Epstein’s words, ‘Stevenson’s most pitiless exposure of the illusions men construct in pursuit of the

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25 Stevenson, Letters Vol. 8 160.
26 Stevenson, Letters Vol. 8 107.
28 See, for example, Stevenson, Ebb-Tide 76.

ideal construction of the self." \(^{30}\) In Stevenson’s adventures it is only through a final shattering of the illusion represented by an individual’s ‘goodness’ that redemption becomes possible. \(^{31}\) Thus, despite Guy Davidson’s suggestion that Herrick ‘might be regarded as a prototypical anti-hero,’ it seems more appropriate to consider him merely a deeply flawed protagonist whose predisposal towards an ordinary form of villainy threatens to be his undoing. \(^{32}\) Indeed, Herrick’s previous adoption of an alias is portrayed as symptomatic of his ‘moral bankruptcy,’ and at the beginning of the tale he is already painfully aware of his own deficiencies (10). When Captain Davis confides in him that, ‘if you’re the man I take you for, we have a chance’ (in reference to stealing the champagne), Herrick’s response comprises a telling commentary on his self-perceived identity: ‘I don’t know what you take me for ... You can scarce take me too low’ (41).

While Herrick’s realisation of his own capacity for evil marks him out (in Stevenson’s construction) as a possible candidate for redemption, the same cannot be said of Huish. Despite the narrator’s remark that, ‘there is no one but has some virtue; that of the clerk was courage,’ Huish is blatantly vicious, described at one point as having ‘an evil countenance’ (14, 65). He is also referred to as gazing at Herrick ‘with a toothless smile that was shocking in its savagery’ (126). Near the conclusion of the story, when Huish has struck upon the idea of killing Attwater with vitriol, evil is most readily apparent in his description: ‘Huish sat there, preening his sinister vanity, glorying in his precendency in evil; and the villainous courage’ (187). That Stevenson, the perennially meticulous wordsmith, employs this quantity of words pertaining to evil (‘sinister vanity,’ ‘villainous courage’) in so short a description can hardly be taken lightly. Huish is certainly a wretched villain, although not an especially formidable one. The final member of the trio is Davis, capable of both kindness and cruelty, an alcoholic prone to bouts of extreme sentimentality as well as moments of violent rage. These three men – the weak, the base, and the volatile – on their quest for illegal gain seem to constitute anything but the traditional crew of heroes sailing off into a rosy sunset. Indeed, this portrayal certainly represents an act of conscious reversal by Stevenson as he employs, and then intentionally subverts, the prevalent colonial adventure trope in favour of a more universalised portrayal of villainy.

The text’s emphasis on moral distortion is crystallised by the increasing importance which Stevenson places upon the schooner’s chronometer (48).

Chronometers are nautical time-measurers, which, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, differ ‘from watches in having a more perfect escapement and a compensation balance, and are used for determining longitude at sea, and for other exact observation.’ \(^{33}\) The *Farallone*’s chronometer is slightly deficient from the onset.

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\(^{30}\) Hugh Epstein, ‘Victory’s Marionettes: Conrad’s Revisitation of Stevenson,’ in *Conrad, James and Other Relations*, ed. Keith Carabine and Owen Knowles (Lublin, Poland: Maria Curie Sklodowska University) 194.


of the voyage, and its inability to properly measure emerges as a significant metaphor for the skewed ‘moral scale’ of the schooner’s occupants (discounting the Kanaka crew). Not surprisingly, as Captain Davis becomes more and more dissipated, he relies increasingly – and blindly – upon the chronometer, thus demonstrating his own moral neglect (72). Indeed, Davis’ effort to resist the temptation of the stolen champagne is alarmingly brief: ‘the Rubicon was crossed without another struggle. The captain filled a mug and drank’ (62). Conversely, Herrick’s acquiescence to taste of the ‘forbidden fruit’ is related with all the drama and tragedy of the biblical Fall. ‘The champagne creamed and bubbled in the mug; its bright colour, its lively effervescence seized his eye. “It’s too late to hesitate,” he thought. His hand took the mug instinctively; he drank, with unquenchable pleasure and desire of more; drained the vessel dry, and set it down with sparkling eyes’ (63). The similarities between this account and the one recorded in the book of Genesis are noticeable: ‘and when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and th

34 Genesis 3:6 (KJV)

34 Genesis 3:6 (KJV)

The seemingly minor transgression of drinking stolen champagne may at first seem odd when juxtaposed against the crime of murder, yet it proves enough to unleash the Hyde-like beast of inherent evil amongst the inhabitants of the Farallone. Significantly, as Davis and Huish sink further and further into the slough of irresponsibility which will eventually endanger the lives of everyone aboard the Farallone, their inebriated revelry begins to grate upon Herrick: ‘a wave of nausea overcame Herrick at the wheel.’ He avoids entering the cabin, sending one of the crewmen to check the time because ‘he would not look himself [in at the clock], from horror of the tipplers.’ Even when the intoxicated duo come onto the schooner’s deck, ‘he paid no heed [to their calls], although his belly quivered with disgust and rage’ (68-70). Herrick comprehends not only the malicious nature of the clerk, but also Davis’s duplicity, for like Captain Hoseason in Kidnapped, Davis is truly a dichotomised man. On land ‘a vigorous seaman,’ almost respectable, and at sea, not

simply a knave, but a ‘drooping, unbuttoned figure that sprawled all day upon the lockers, tippling and reading novels ... the fool who made of the evening watch a public carouse on the quarter-deck,’ passing hours ‘in slavish self-indulgence or in hoggish slumber’ (70-1). Herrick’s horror at the behaviour of his fellow white men aboard the schooner is inextricably linked to the realisation of his own potential for vice. Despite the fact that the novel ends with Davis’s supposed conversion, which may imply some redemptive potential for this character, we are tempted to wonder if instead it is Herrick who has been standing on the brink of it all along. Indeed, while for Davis the attainment of salvation from his villainous self seems both problematic and ironic, for Herrick it remains an elusive possibility.

The Extraordinary Villain
The second means by which villainy is manifest in the text is through evil of an extra-ordinary, or even semi-divine, nature. Buckton observes that readers ‘can certainly identify elements of the fantastic in The Ebb-Tide, especially the uncanny desertion of the island and the sinister quality to the figurehead.’\(^{35}\) Moreover – and unsurprisingly – the fantastical aspects of the text are not merely vaguely supernatural, but rather maintain strong theological overtones. Alistair Fowler points out that The Ebb-Tide is ‘deeply involved with his [Stevenson’s] quarrel with God,’ and this struggle is frequently considered to be enacted chiefly through the character of Attwater.\(^{36}\)

Indeed, as the Fallarone’s journey proceeds, there are hints of an impending encounter with the supernatural. It can be argued that Stevenson’s text demonstrates a significant imaginative alignment with Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s ‘Rime of the Ancient Mariner,’\(^{37}\) in which an ‘ordinary’ protagonist engaged in the tropic adventure voyage commits a single momentous transgression which then forms the impetus for a nightmarish experience. The thematic similarities between these two narratives are certainly marked, since they both reflect heavily on the plight of human beings thrust into supernatural realms to deal with both the physical and the psychological ramifications of their guilt. The fact that the exotic world of The Ebb-Tide is patently less supernatural than that of Coleridge’s text is surely a function of its era as much as anything else. For a more modern text it can be considered to exhibit the same considerable weighting towards the supernatural – or, to use that term of solidly Scottish etymology, uncanny – that the ‘Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ maintains for its own period of composition. Significantly, Stevenson’s schooner travels beneath ‘the blinding heaven of the tropics,’ like an inverse of Dante’s journey through celestial realms (48). Where the Italian poet moves from hell and purgatory toward heaven, Stevenson’s trio seems to be, figuratively speaking, descending in the opposite direction. Significantly, the low point is embodied by Attwater, whose indifference to all humanity and ‘silken brutality’ render him thoroughly horrific (117). Rather than occupying the role of hero in the text, Attwater – with his polished savagery – is very much the antihero, and the result certainly rates among the most terrifyng in Stevenson’s repertoire of extraordinary villains.


\(^{36}\) Fowler 116.


Kiely points out that Attwater ‘personifies evil, not as a grotesque aberration, as in Mr Hyde, nor as a temporary failure of vision, as in Deacon Brodie, nor as a glamorous vice, as in the Master of Ballantrae, but as an integral part of the human organism.’ 38 Attwater is human, certainly, but he is also somehow more – somehow beyond the average mortal in scope. If James Durie, the antihero of The Master of Ballantrae does indeed have, ‘all the gravity and something of the splendour of Satan in the Paradise Lost,’ 39 then Attwater possesses a great deal of Lucifer’s archetypal hubris. When asked by Attwater what to call the marvel of his diving ‘machines,’ Herrick tellingly responds: ‘self-conceit’ (131). Attwater’s pride extends to his delusion of being a self-appointed ‘judge in Israel, the bearer of the sword and scourge’ (133). His villainy is far more dangerous than that of Huish or Davis because it is more powerful, more complex, and frequently cloaked in a veneer of light. Indeed, Herrick is shocked to find that, far from being a mere object for hatred, Attwater ‘intrigued, puzzled, dazzled, enchanted, revolted him’ (139). According to Fowler, Attwater is ‘by turns flattering and insolent; brutal and pious; evangelically sincere and unscrupulously Machiavellian; the object of satire and subject of enigma.’ 40 In this character, Stevenson has succeeded in creating a villain who is mysteriously incongruous. Here is an entity defined by paradoxes, not the least of which involves both natural and supernatural aspects.

Like other critics, Davidson points out that, besides being ‘a businessman and an exploiter of native labour, Attwater is also a religious fanatic, intent on inculcating his harsh version of Christianity in the natives.’ 41 Yet Herrick’s struggle to grasp the essence of Attwater seems more like that of a man engaging with a much vaster problem than that of a religious zealot. Herrick gives every impression of the ordinary man grappling with a larger idea of villainy as it relates to the existence of God in an ostensibly harsh universe. Vanessa Smith points out that Attwater ‘terrifies Herrick with his godlike’ 42 presence (he certainly impresses Herrick with his seemingly divine knowledge: ‘he knows all; he sees through all’ [163]). Yet her observation that ‘it is the ability to negotiate between the culture of his origins and that of his adopted context which renders Attwater an insurmountable force’ 43 does not fully account for his dual (and seemingly mutually exclusive) roles of semi-divine being and mere mortal.

While Attwater’s apparently supernatural attributes furnish him with vast power, his humanity entails an inherent evil which, when mingled with this power, is what makes it especially awful. As Kiely puts it, ‘Attwater is both an example and a minister of the doctrine of original sin.’ 44 Attwater tells Herrick: ‘oh, I can do everything ... You do not understand; what must be, must’ and refers to himself as a Determinist (142). But if he is the demi-god of his own island kingdom, then he must also be the one ordering this insular universe. Herrick realises this and – with all the vehemence of a man grappling with the divine – accuses him of murdering a servant:

38 Kiely189.
39 Stevenson, Master of Ballantrae 236.
40 Fowler 118.
41 Davidson 131.
42 Smith 164.
43 Smith 164.
44 Kiely 189.

'It was a murder,' he screamed. ‘A cold–hearted, bloody–minded murder! You monstrous being! Murderer and hypocrite! Murderer and hypocrite! Murderer and hypocrite!’ he repeated, and his tongue stumbled among the words. The captain was by him in a moment. ‘Herrick!’ he cried, ‘behave yourself! Here, don’t be a blame’ fool!’ Herrick struggled in his embrace like a frantic child, and suddenly bowing his face in his hands, choked into a sob, the first of many, which now convulsed his body silently, and now jerked from him indescribable and meaningless sounds. (157)

Later, Herrick despairingly confides his horror to Davis: ‘the whole thing is over, I tell you. There is nothing to do here, when he knows all. ... Oh, it’s no use, I tell you! He knows all; he sees through all. We only make him laugh with our pretences – he looks at us, and laughs like God!’ (162-3)

Attwater is more than a mortal; at times, he is able to act ‘like God.’ Indeed, Kiely believes that The Ebb-Tide reveals ‘an idea of a deity marked, like his [Stevenson’s] own creation [Attwater], by a fascination with sin, a love of vengeance, and a knowledge of evil.’ But is Stevenson implying that Attwater is, in fact, truly a representation of God? Or, is he a construct of villainy beyond the natural scope of humanity – yet fallible nonetheless? The answer to this question lies at the moment in the text when Herrick finally gives himself up to Attwater, and it is in this passage where Stevenson’s exploration of the idea becomes apparent:

‘Here I am. I am broken crockery; the whole of my life is gone to water; I have nothing left that I believe in, except my living horror of myself. Why do I come to you? I don’t know. You are cold, cruel, hateful; and I hate you, or I think I hate you. But you are an honest man, an honest gentleman. I put myself helpless in your hands. What must I do? If I can’t do anything, be merciful and put a bullet through me; it’s only a puppy with a broken leg!’

‘If I were you, I would pick up that pistol, come up to the house, and put on some dry clothes,’ said Attwater.

‘If you really mean it?’ said Herrick. ‘You know they – we – they –

But you know all.’

‘I know quite enough,’ said Attwater. ‘Come up to the house.’

And the captain, from the deck of the Farallone, saw the two men pass together under the shadow of the grove. (176)

In a text full of shattering illusions, Stevenson shatters this last one. Attwater is too much the clay man, like Judge Hermiston in Weir of Hermiston, to ever attain fully divine status. He does not, as Herrick so dreads, ‘know all’ – he only knows ‘enough,’ as Stevenson makes abundantly clear by his technique of shifting narrative perspective at the moment of this – perhaps Attwater’s only –

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45 Kiely 190.

admission of weakness. The scene, and (for that matter, the chapter) ends with Captain Davis’s perspective. Attwater is a villain, but he cannot be an omniscient deity because, from Davis’s point of view on the Fallarone’s deck, the reader is looking down on him. Whether or not Herrick can appreciate this, Stevenson’s ultimate contextualising of Attwater’s villainy, it nevertheless presents a great moment of hope amidst the almost overwhelming grimness of The Ebb-Tide. Still, the reality of this character’s almost supernatural evil, in conjunction with the more pedestrian villainy of the protagonist trio, serves to engender a truly nightmarish atmosphere within the text.

The Nightmare of Villainy

In The Ebb-Tide, Stevenson seems to be consciously constructing a potential for the glamorous facade of colonial adventure to fade whilst the ‘romance’ deteriorates into a nightmarish version of itself. And while such a dark contextualisation of adventure is a familiar aspect of the post-World War I narrative landscape, it certainly demonstrates an innovation to the colonial-era novel. Indeed, the foregrounding of a complex, and often morally problematic, setting is present throughout Stevenson’s oeuvre. Much like Treasure Island’s Jim Hawkins, Herrick begins his voyage relying upon ‘reminiscences of sea romance’ for interaction with the realities of everyday seafaring life (55). Since no consequences have yet occurred for his compliance in the crime of stealing the Farallone and her cargo (indeed, in a manner of speaking, the crime has not yet occurred), Herrick still maintains a typical Stevensonian dream-like state of innocence. However, the act of drinking the champagne – with its manifold connotations – destroys his idyllic illusions of virtue, causing him to lament: ‘it’s some beastly dream’ (64). At this point in the story, Herrick’s nightmare is only beginning. The Farallone’s approach to the island is marked by an eerie sense of the area’s dubious reality, its impression of the surreal. Stevenson writes that ‘the isle – the undiscovered, the scarce-believed in – now lay before them and close aboard; and Herrick thought that never in his dreams had he beheld anything more strange and delicate. The beach was excellently white, the continuous barrier of trees inimitably green’ (108).

The island possesses an aura of both beauty and strangeness such as we expect to encounter only in dreamscapes, and it serves as a prophetic mirror to the fantastical mixture of magnificence and grotesquery that the Farallone’s crew will encounter there.

Herrick quickly perceives the island’s geography as one of moral confusion: in a building belonging to Attwater he sees ‘a binnacle with its brass mountings and its compass idly pointing, in the confusion and dusk of that shed, to a forgotten pole’ (128-9). Like the faulty chronometer aboard the Farallone, this compass reveals the sense of ethical disorder that reigns in Attwater’s island domain. It is of course significant to Stevenson’s use of dreamscape imagery that the shed housing this compass is shadowy and chaotic, since such are the attributes of nightmares. Indeed, the bewilderment with which Herrick responds to his spatial surroundings on the island is paralleled by his reaction to the character of Attwater:

47 See also Stevenson’s longer descriptions for a fuller sense of the island’s surrealist atmosphere 102-3.

Herrick was like one in a dream. He had come there with a mind divided; come prepared to study that ambiguous and sneering mask, drag out the essential man from underneath, and act accordingly; decision being till then postponed. Iron cruelty, an iron insensibility to the suffering of others, the uncompromising pursuit of his own interests, cold culture, manners without humanity: these he had looked for, these he still thought he saw. But to find the whole machine thus glow with the reverberation of religious zeal, surprised him beyond words; and he laboured in vain, as he walked, to piece together into any kind of whole his odds and ends of knowledge; to adjust again, into any kind of focus with itself, his picture of the man beside him. (132)

With all the lethargy of a dreaming man, Herrick struggles to reconcile Attwater’s admirable and evil aspects, which seem to him so wholly diametrical. This correlates with some aspects of Stevenson’s earlier representations of villainy. Francis Russell Hart notes how, for Jim Hawkins in *Treasure Island*, ‘Long John Silver ‘is a moral enigma, and Jim becomes puzzled by him and responsible for him, his destroyer and saviour’. Similarly, in *The Ebb-Tide*, Attwater’s seemingly incompatible attributes signify not only his uncanny embodiment of evil but also the nightmarish surrealism intrinsic to his island environment. To some extent, then, this potential for nightmare should be viewed as significant in demarcating modern adventure narrative from earlier works in this mode, since for Stevenson the modern adventure is always prone to transformation into a nightmarish version of traditional romance. And, as a close perusal of Stevenson’s work demonstrates, he is both aware of this transformation and intent on manipulating current literary conventions to subvert colonial narrative and generate an alternative aesthetics of adventure.

When Herrick reaches the conclusion that death is his only escape from the appalling choice between complicity in Attwater’s murder and the betrayal of Davis and Huish, his resulting attempt at suicide is portrayed as the climax of a living nightmare. After swimming away from the *Farallone* with the intention of drowning himself, Herrick has the following realisation:

to stop swimming – there was no mystery in that, if he could do it. Could he? And he could not. He knew it instantly. He was aware instantly of an opposition in his members, unanimous and invincible, clinging to life with a single and fixed resolve, finger by finger, sinew by sinew; something that was at once he and not he; at once within and without him; the shutting of some miniature valve in his brain, which a single manly thought should suffice to open; and the grasp of an external fate ineluctable as gravity. To any man there may come at times a consciousness that there blows through all the articulations of his body the wind of a spirit not wholly his; that his mind rebels; that another girds him and carries him whither he would not. It came now to Herrick, with the authority of a revelation. There was no escape possible. The open door was closed in his recreant face. He must go back into the world and amongst men without illusion. (172)


Paradoxically, although this moment represents the final devastation of his once-held ‘illusion’ that he might somehow be ‘good,’ it simultaneously heralds the beginning of his eventual escape from the nightmare of his own villainy – a nightmare that began with crime of stealing a schooner and will end with inescapable bloodshed. It may be tempting to concur with Davidson’s proposal that, ‘The Ebb-Tide to an important extent envisages the moral frailty of its characters as indicative of the absurdity or meaninglessness of the human condition. Eschewing a redemptive narrative arc, as well as any intimation of alternative ethical soundness, Stevenson presents a thoroughly pessimistic vision.’49 Yet Herrick’s imminent escape from the nightmarish island resists such a negative reading, instead offering the possibility that this character’s recognition of his own propensity for villainous behaviour does have redemptive potential. By identifying and confronting his moral delinquency, the text suggests, Herrick may finally achieve that state of spiritual devastation which allows for the redemptive act. And, if Stevenson’s narrative is read as a performance of literary insurgence against nineteenth-century colonial ideology, then his protagonist’s acceptance of guilt certainly takes on profound theoretical implications for the philosophical underpinnings of adventure.

Conclusion
This analysis of The Ebb-Tide substantiates the text’s categorisation as an adventure narrative in which Stevenson employs the villain trope in a unique and culturally relevant manner. By manipulating the tropic framework of nineteenth-century colonial adventure, he presents a disturbingly universal depiction of villainy which applies as easily to the adventurers as to those whom they seek to control. 50 This text demonstrates the means by which villainy can be manifest through a combination of ordinary and extra-ordinary entities, which combine to constitute a nightmarish experience of evil. Clearly, in Stevenson’s re-formulation of an adventure aesthetic, the recognition of villainy and the dangers of ignoring it become an intrinsic function of the modern adventure construct. Indeed, through works such as The Ebb-Tide, he advances the notion that, despite some appearances of enlightenment, the modern condition cannot afford to bypass the evil which engenders villainy, since by its very nature modernity demands acknowledgement of evil. Yet, significantly, Stevenson’s portrayal of villainous behaviour never supersedes redemptive possibilities, thus providing a hopeful vision for this story and perhaps – by extension – for the adventure mode.

49 Davidson 138.
50 Indeed, to this end Buckton proposes that ‘the parallels between Tembinok and Attwater ... demonstrate the extent to which Stevenson views tyrannical rule and colonial domination as crossing boundaries of race and nation’(Cruising with Robert Louis Stevenson, 246).
Introduction: The Imperial Gothic and Catastrophic Transculturation

During the second half of the nineteenth century, a number of British novels began describing the potential of a reverse form of colonialism where either the subaltern or a competing European power decide to invade the green isle. In particular, the late nineteenth century – the period of the most intense British imperial expansion but also the time when the Empire begins to crumble – is fraught with these images. The bed-time story of the British Empire is thus one of the Empire breaking down under the forces of degeneration, socialism, universal suffrage, Oriental witchcraft or the vengeful imperialist scheming of the Chinese, the French, the Egyptians, the Germans, the Japanese or, as in H. G. Wells’ famous novel, the Martians. These texts have been the subject of several studies, including I. F. Clarke’s *Voices Prophesying War*, Cecil Eby’s *The Road to Armageddon* (1987), and Patrick Brantlinger’s *Rule of Darkness* (1988). Brantlinger importantly organises many of these narratives as belonging to the genre of ‘the imperial gothic’ and stresses their obsession with ‘apocalyptic themes and images’, with ‘individual regression or going native’ and with ‘an invasion of civilization by the forces of barbarism or demonism’.2

In this way, the imperial gothic insists that the encounter with the other in its various guises results not in a cultural merger, but in a Darwinian struggle for survival. When the empire and the other meet, the choice they both face is frequently between assimilation and annihilation, between cultural hegemony and a gothic apocalypse. The meeting of cultures, the hybrids that appear or do not appear as a result of this, and the vision of a looming apocalypse that the imperial gothic traces, speak overtly and covertly about empire in its various forms. These meetings are, of course, also the focus of transcultural and transnational studies. According to Pratt’s well-known definition, contact zones are ‘spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination’.3 In ‘Arts of the Contact Zone’ Pratt further explains how the meeting of disparate cultures in these contact zones give rise to hybrid cultures and subjects through the process of transculturation.

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1 I want to extend my gratitude to the Concurrences research group and to Anna Greek in particular for crucial feedback on various drafts of this article. I also want to thank the Swedish Research Council for their support of the Concurrences project and NORDFORSK for their support of the The Nordic Network for Literary Transculturation Studies.


Transculturation, she explains, refers to ‘processes whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture’. The process of transculturation is then assumed to produce hybrid cultures and subjectivities as these marginal and metropolitan groups invent new subjectivities, new languages and new modes of interaction and behaviour in the contact zones.

It should be noted here that while many texts have used Pratt’s concepts of transculturation and contact zone in a celebratory way, she does not suggest that all forms of transculturation produce good results. As Vassil Prodanov argues, transculturation entails the destruction of ‘some ethnic culture’. In addition to this, meetings between dominant and subordinate cultures are often described as dangerous in literature, art and film precisely because transculturation occurs. In fact, the possibility that both British and subaltern culture could transform in the contact zones that colonial practice created was a potential threat to the way that the imperial project was understood by the British. After Darwin and the biological turn, imperial ideology generally assumed that the British were inherently different (more civilized, more able, more fit) from those whom they set out to rule. ‘Englishness’ was understood to be not simply a set of cultural practices, but the result of evolution, the heritage of what Kipling calls a ‘breed’ in his poem ‘Recessional’. From this perspective, transcultural change could be construed as frightening evidence that there was little difference between coloniser and colonised, that Englishness could and would be invaded, infected and transformed in the colonies. This is why many gothic texts from the period envision the meeting between East and West as catastrophic, producing a corrupted, unpredictable and monstrous hybrid. This hybrid is not only aggressive and dangerous; it is also frequently infectious and transformative. It is this infectious nature that makes the gothic hybrid especially dangerous. It becomes a walking contact zone able to derail European modernity as such. In other words, much late-Victorian gothic imagines transculturation as a form of apocalypse.

Interestingly, the tendency of the imperial gothic to imagine hybridity as monstrous, and western society as facing imminent apocalypse is not confined to the late-nineteenth century. In the wake of neo-colonial efforts and a new wave of imperial sentiment, a great deal of modern gothic film and literature should also be termed imperial gothic as they threaten their audience with similar imagery, often, in fact, retelling the old late-Victorian gothic stories. With this in mind, the present article suggests that the late-Victorian and modern imperial gothic can effectively be discussed by modifying the notion of transculturation into catastrophic transculturation. Essentially, this term refers to a transcultural meeting that is seen as producing monstrous forms of culture, physiognomy and subjectivity, forms that then threaten the very existence of western modernity. The article will examine this concept through a reading of three gothic texts: the late-Victorian gothic novel Dracula (1897) by Bram Stoker and two modern versions of the same narrative: Elizabeth Kostova’s The Historian (2005) and Guillermo del Toro and Chuck Hogan’s The Strain (2009). Although separated by time, these novels engage with empire in similar ways, engaging in discussions and descriptions of invasion, degeneration,

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cultural and physical transformation, otherness, modernity, transculturation, and apocalypse.

The tendency of colonial fiction to portray transculturation as problematic has been discussed by other writers, most pertinently by Albert J. Rivero who observes in ‘Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* and the “Blank Spaces” of Colonial Fictions’ that ‘cultural hybridity’ is sometimes a recipe for disaster, leading to the ‘transformation of highly educated men … into savage monsters who must be destroyed to repair the fragile and porous boundaries between civilization and barbarity’.6 While *Oroonoko* is a seventeenth-century text, it operates in very much the same way as the late nineteenth-century gothic invasion narrative. As will be apparent, the late Victorian and the modern imperial gothic also insist that the monstrous hybrid produced by cultural encounter must be destroyed.

**Empire in the Twenty-first Century**
The concept of the contact zone as put forward by Pratt refers essentially to an actual space where ‘peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict’.7 Pratt’s important point is that the ‘interactive, improvisational dimensions’ of colonial encounters often have been ignored by previous scholarship and she wishes to rectify this by showing how both coloniser and colonised were, in fact, transformed within these sites of contact.

Pratt’s own focus of study is travel writing, a genre that is, of course, overtly concerned with contact zones. While much European travel writing was involved in trying to dismiss the possibility of interaction and improvisation within contact zones, the genre remains a testament to these processes. Travel writing is not the only genre preoccupied with presenting and representing the colonial other. Pratt suggests that ‘much of European literary history’8 is obsessed with the colonial periphery and Robert J. C. Young, writing from a similar theoretical and political perspective, concurs in *Colonial Desire*. In this book, Young traces the hybrid states of culture and identity that cultural encounter produces and observes that it is ‘striking how many novelists not only of today but also of the past write almost obsessively about the uncertain crossing and invasion of identities’.9

The step from travel writing to the gothic is notoriously short. A number of the most famous gothic novels are loosely disguised as travel narratives and the imperial gothic that Brantlinger discusses consists almost exclusively of travel stories. In this way, the imperial gothic is obsessed with the contact zone and what occurs at this site of interaction. Of course, the gothic does not need to pretend a scientific or documentary interest (although it sometimes does) and is free to imagine the process of transculturation as inherently problematic, even, as I have already suggested, catastrophic.

From this perspective, it should be noted that in the wake of the terror attacks of 11 September 2001, the notion that the west in general and the US in particular are involved in a struggle that is properly described as colonial or imperial has received new currency in historiography, political science and postcolonial studies. The US invasions of

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Afghanistan and Iraq have been termed imperialist projects by a great many writers. Noam Chomsky is one of many who have forcibly argued that America should be considered an empire and that the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, along with many other global US interventions, can only be referred to as colonial enterprises.

Interestingly this claim has been echoed by neoconservative historians, such as Niall Ferguson, Paul Johnson and Max Boot. Boot has actually claimed that American imperialism is the only practical way to amend the global turbulence supposedly caused by rampant Islamic extremism, unchecked Asian economic growth and old European arrogance, describing American imperialism as ‘the greatest force for good in the world during the past century’. Similarly, Ferguson argues that ‘America is the heir to the [British] Empire’ and that no other nation is likely to be able to shoulder this burden.

The resurrection of imperial ideology in the west allows for a number of comparisons between what Hobsbawm has referred to as the Age of Empire and our own time. Indeed, there are many similarities between the late Victorian period and the current historical epoch. Jonathan Schell has argued that ‘any student of imperialism will be struck by the similarities between the old style of imperialism and the new: the gigantic disparity between the technical and military might of the conquerors and the conquered; the inextricable combination of rapacious commercial interest and geopolitical ambition and design … the appeal to jingoism on the home front’. These similarities extend not only to current imperial practice, discourse and ideology, but can be perceived also in the concerns of modern gothic culture. As I have already observed, the recent turn to empire seems to have spawned a gothic revival in literature, film and computer games, a gothic revival that frequently resembles that of the late Victorian imperial gothic. This new imperial gothic can be perceived not only in novels and Hollywood movies, but also in computer games, news broadcasts and even political statements.

To explore this further, I want to first examine the usefulness of the term catastrophic transculturation in relation to Stoker’s Dracula. This is a text that meets all the criteria of the imperial gothic as defined by Brantlinger. Furthermore, it illustrates eminently well how cultural encounter leads to catastrophic transculturation and monstrous hybridity. Finally, Dracula is a story that, since its inception – an inception that was in itself a reiteration of previous vampire tales – has continued to haunt western consciousness, and the two other novels that are discussed in this article retell Stoker’s novel in various ways.

**Dracula**

At the beginning of Dracula, the solicitor Jonathan Harker is travelling to the Carpathian Mountains to discuss London property with Count Dracula. The region he moves through

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is hostile and essentially pre-modern and Harker’s impression is that he is ‘leaving the West and entering the East’.¹⁴ Harker has studied his destination at the British Museum, discovering that it is ‘one of the wildest and least known portions of Europe’ (D 2). Once there, he is surrounded by natives that, although fundamentally unaggressive, appear to be in dire need of some sort of (British) modernity.

Dracula is, of course, another matter. Harker finds the Count to be at the same time both more alien and more civilized than the superstitious peasants that surround the castle. Dracula is learned, his extensive library is full of English books and newspapers and Dracula himself claims that he, through this literature, has ‘come to know your great England, and to know her is to love her. I long to go through the crowded streets of your mighty London, to be in the midst of the whirl and rush of humanity, to share its life, its change, its death, and all that makes it what it is’ (D 19).

As a place where the East and the British intersect, Dracula’s castle is in many ways a contact zone. It is in this place that Dracula meets Britain through Harker, and where Harker is confronted with the specific otherness of Dracula. What ensues is a form of catastrophic transculturation producing two monstrous hybrids. Dracula’s access to Harker and all manner of British literature, from political tracts to Bradshaw’s train schedule, makes him into ‘an “Occidentalist” scholar’ as argued by Stephen D Arata.¹⁵ The pre-anglicised and pre-modern Dracula, while perhaps more dangerous than the natives that surround his castle, would arguably be unable to cross the boundaries separating Transylvania and Britain. Now, learned in the ways of the British, modernised through his reading of Bradshaw and other seminal British texts, Dracula has in fact become a monstrous hybrid able to embark on his invasion project; an essentially abject being in many ways more terrifying than the comparatively timid Near East that spawned him.

Importantly, Dracula is not only a transcultural monster, a self-styled anglophile killer who drinks the blood of human beings and discards the remains. In Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters, Judith Halberstam makes the crucial point that the vampire actually also transforms his victims. Halberstam therefore refers to Dracula as ‘a technology of monstrosity’ who purposely infects the hapless English with a host of monstrously alien qualities.¹⁶ In this way, Dracula is not only a monstrous hybrid, but also an agent of monstrous hybridization. His immortality and his unique transformative powers allow him to change any space into a gothic contact zone.

Harker’s transformative process is different from that of Dracula. The confrontation with the other does not transform him into a vampire – Dracula never bites men in the novel – but it does change him into a weak, impotent, feminine and ultimately un-English creature, subjected to will of the women that seek to embrace him at night.

The rest of the story is arguably part of modern, collective consciousness. Dracula moves his abode to London where he sets up shop at an ancient mansion. This site becomes the centre of a new and insidious contact zone from where Dracula can continue his project of catastrophic transculturation, a project that ultimately aims at a gothic apocalypse where all of London should become a realm of the undead. Harker observes

¹⁴ Bram Stoker, Dracula (London: Grosset & Dunlap, 1897) 1. This reference will henceforth be abbreviated as D.
that ‘for centuries to come he might, amongst its teeming millions, satiate his lust for blood, and create a new and ever-widening circle of semi-demons to batten on the helpless’ (D 48-9). Thus, while Dracula professes to be impressed with the gaslights, trains and modern mind of London, it seems to be his intention to change its current historical trajectory, to make London more like the castle in Transylvania he inhabits. Furthermore, much has been written about Dracula as expressing the fears of degeneration and atavism that embraced British and European society at the time of its publication (see Ernest Fontana and Kelly Hurley). The gothic apocalypse Dracula tries to accomplish must be understood as not only one of reverse colonisation, but also of reverse evolution. In this context, it should be noted that the vampiric bite, the aggressive agent of this monstrous hybridity, changes both the body and the mind. The vampiric body in Dracula is suspended between life and death, dead but still animated. The vampiric mind, meanwhile, is insatiable. It hungers for blood but also for euphemistic kisses.

Dracula’s apocalyptic project is eventually thwarted by the combined power of a group of European men who first recover the women that Dracula has bitten. This is done, famously, through a form of symbolic group rape where the men together drive a stake through Lucy then cut her head off. This defers her monstrous hybridity, her otherness and reclaims her for Britain, for Christianity and for modernity. This done, the men chase Dracula back to his castle and kill him. This prevents the gothic apocalypse that Dracula has planned from occurring, obliterates the vampiric contact zone in London, reinstates the Pax Britannica that formerly reigned and thus restores the former trajectory of British modernity.

**The Strain**

*The Historian* and *The Strain* are two modern gothic novels that explore the ideological and cultural landscape of Bram Stoker’s novel in different and interesting ways. While both celebrate the original to some extent, they also try to reinvent the vampire narrative, deviating from the original plot of Stoker’s tale. Most importantly, for the purposes of this article, these reiterations of *Dracula* also describe the phenomenon of catastrophic transculturation and present the reader with an apocalypse that, as in the original story, threaten the imagined trajectory of Western (rather than simply British) modernity.

*The Strain* by del Toro and Hogan is the name both of a trilogy of vampire novels and the first instalment of this trilogy. It describes the first stages of a vampiric apocalypse that beset present-day New York. The novel’s marketing slogan, the first thing to be presented on the novel’s elaborate website, makes the connection to the concerns of the imperial gothic eminently clear, telling the visitor that: ‘They have always been here. Vampires. In secret and in darkness. Waiting. Now their time has come. In one week, Manhattan will be gone. In one month, the country. In two months – the world’.

The novel does not begin in modern-day New York, however, but in Romania in Eastern Europe during the early twentieth century. This first sequence of the book is simultaneously a travel narrative and an attempt at situating the main vampire, here referred to as Jusef Sardu, geographically and historically. Sardu is pictured as ancient, but in the first novel, his personal history is conflated with the horrors of the Holocaust, where


19 http://www.thestraintrilogy.com/
the vampire feeds off the Jews and dissidents interred in concentration camps throughout Eastern Europe. In this way, Sardu is an overtly political vampire, feeding parasitically from the cruelties of the war, his victims conveniently burnt to ashes in the ovens of the camps before turning into vampires.20

The actual invasion project begins with the image of a gigantic airplane, stranded and quiet at the JFK airport shortly after landing. Upon opening the still airplane it is discovered that, with the exception of four apparently comatose people, all passengers are dead. This calls for the presence of the novel’s main protagonist, the recently divorced Ephraim Goodweather, head of the disease control project Canary. The many casualties on the plane suggest to all those involved that the occurrence is part of a terrorist attack and Goodweather begins to research the incident along with his assistant Nora Martinez, soon to be joined by the vermin exterminator Vasiliy Fet and the aged and seasoned vampire hunter and holocaust survivor Abraham Setrakian, the novel’s replacement for Van Helsing. These four find themselves pursuing and pursued by a host of tremendously aggressive vampires that threaten to quickly overrun the entire world. Charting only the first few days of this vampiric invasion, the apocalypse is not concluded in this first instalment of the trilogy.21

From this brief plot summary, it can be noted that those who resist the vampiric invasion of New York have a varied background with roots in Eastern Europe and South America. It would be wrong, however, to assume that these characters are less American because of this. All four are firmly integrated into New York society, and the novel thus appears as a homage to the American ‘melting pot’ rather than an attempt to queer the notion of a fixed American identity. In other words, the East still appears as the other in the novel, a place of confusion, darkness and dangerous secrets that may explode into the face of Western society and thus derail the current direction of (American) modernity.

The relationship between vampirism and political terrorism is overt in The Strain and closely tied to the descriptions of catastrophic transculturation and apocalypse that appear on its pages. Although Sardu is certainly not identified as a militant Muslim in the novel, he is closely associated with the fear of Islamic terrorism as destructive practice and infectious ideology. This connection is emphasised by the fact that Sardu chooses Ground Zero, the crumbled remains of the World Trade Center, as his lair. This site then becomes the primary contact zone, the centre of the catastrophic transculturation that spreads through New York.

The transformation that takes place in this contact zone is overtly ontological in nature. The catastrophic transculturation that occurs at the meeting between the vampiric terrorist other and the American subject in The Strain produces an utterly monstrous, hybrid body. After the initial infection, the vampiric body is pale and blue-veined, hairless, hot to the touch while the pharynx is transformed into a ‘stinger’, a vampiric feeding and infection device. The entire vampiric body thus becomes nothing but an instrument of feeding and transformation. In The Strain, the transformation even suspends sexual desire as the body of the vampire loses its sexual organs, leaving only a smooth patch of skin in its place. In effect, this means, of course, that the male and female sexual organs have been replaced by the retractable, phallic stinger, turning all vampires male in the sense that they are able to aggressively penetrate and transform the human population. In this way, catastrophic transculturation transforms even desire, turning intercourse into

21 In the consecutive novel that continues the trilogy, this apocalypse is completed. In the final instalment, however, a small group of resistance fighters manage to reverse the catastrophe.

an exclusively predatory and parasitic activity.

Because of the relentless thirst experienced by the monstrous and vampiric body, the first steps towards this gothic apocalypse are not clandestine as in Dracula. Instead, the newly born and zombie-like vampires stagger through the dark streets of New York, inserting their stingers into the panicking humans they encounter. The monstrous body has taken complete control of the mind, entirely suspending all intelligent thought processes. In this way, the nineteenth century fear of degeneration is echoed with a vengeance in The Strain, imagining a completely atavistic or ‘native’ mind that has been stripped of all forms of human civilisation and emotion and reduced to a single perverse, cannibalistic desire.

Furthermore, the monstrous hybrids produced by the process of catastrophic transculturation are the instruments of the apocalypse that Sardu initiates. Obviously, Sardu’s project will completely disrupt the current progress of American modernity. This is made clear in many ways in the novel, but perhaps most immediately through a series of passages that describe the destruction of the family in the wake of the vampiric transformation of husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, sons and daughters. The first victim of this gothic apocalypse is the nuclear family, arguably the touchstone of American modernity. In connection with this, it should also be noted that situating the novel in New York rather than in any other major city also relates to the way modernity is thwarted in the novel. Like the late Osama Bin Laden, Sardu perceives New York as emblematic of American modernity, and therefore the first and most obvious target when initiating his attempt at reversing American modernity.

The Historian
Elizabeth Kostova’s The Historian was published in 2005 and thus predates the The Strain by four years. In addition to this, The Historian primarily takes place during the early and middle twentieth century. Despite this, Kostova’s text appears a more modern novel in many ways. Essentially, it tells the story of how a number of historians from different generations, and connected through various family ties, are confronted with the reality of the Dracula myth and have to both try to escape the vampire and hunt him down. This novel is best described as a modern gothic travel narrative as it takes the reader through a series of journeys in Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria during the 1930s, 1950s and 1970s. These nations are situated on the borderlands between East and West and they are also places where the historical conflict between Vlad Tepes or Vlad the Impaler (the historical person upon which Dracula is presumably based) and the Sultan Mehmed II was acted out. This brings the main characters into constant contact with a host of different cultures, and the novel is concerned both with the liminal state of the characters and of the ancient conflict between Islam and Vlad the Impaler’s brutal brand of Christianity. Interestingly, and in contrast to Stoker’s novel and arguably also to The Strain, these cultures not only collide but are sometimes actually able to interact, merge and transform in non-catastrophic ways in The Historian.

This is one of the greatest differences between the three novels discussed in this article. The process of transculturation is not always catastrophic and gothic in The Historian. The main characters frequently find themselves in cultural contact zones and learn not only how to appreciate the different food, customs and thinking of the cultural other, they actually manage to span the divide between self and other, to some extent displacing the very notion of cultural normativity in the process. The cultural ‘self’ of the text is thus not necessarily located in the urban west, as it is in Dracula and The Strain, but
distributed over a much wider geographical and intellectual terrain. This can be partly attributed to the fact that the cultural and national identities of the main characters are much more unstable than those of Stoker’s novel. In fact, the novel’s female narrator discovers that her mother, and therefore she herself, is a descendant of the house of Vlad Tepes.

At the same time, the confrontation with what can be called ‘vampire culture’ in the contact zones of Eastern Europe still triggers catastrophic transculturation. This process results again in monstrous hybrids whose bodies and minds change. Here, the similarities with Stoker’s original text and with _The Strain_ are many, but there are differences between the novels also on this level. To begin with, the otherness that the vampire is associated with in _The Historian_ is not intimately tied to an imagined Orient or to any other specific culture. Instead, the vampire is the other to the people of Istanbul as much as to the Oxford scholars, so that coming into contact with this vampire is not necessarily to confront the East as such, as is the case in Stoker’s novel.

In addition to this, monstrous hybridity in _The Historian_ is epistemological in nature rather than ontological. While the vampiric bite suspends the body between life and death in this novel too, the corporeal transformation is not as pronounced. Skirting the sexual subtext to some extent, Dracula bites both men and women in the novel and the vampires produced after a number of such encounters can still pass for human in most cases. Furthermore, unlike in _Dracula_ and _The Strain_, the vampiric mind appears to retain some vestige of reason even after its monstrous transformation. Rather, the epistemological transformation that those bitten go through is characterized by a different perspective on knowledge, a change in the way the new vampires understand the past and the present. It is this transformation that truly frightens the historians that simultaneously pursue and escape Dracula.

The crucial nature of knowledge and understanding is stressed in many ways in Kostova’s text. In fact, the first contact between the vampire and the characters of the novel is not a vampiric bite but books that Dracula leaves them. These are ancient and hand-produced texts that contain a single image of a dragon in the middle. All other pages are blank. These books apparently cannot be given away as they always return to the person Dracula gave them to. The menacing nature of the book is an obvious threat, a warning, while the uncertain origin and the blank pages encourage the receiver to start his or her historical research, to locate its origin and fill the blank pages. Furthermore, the confrontations with the vampiric other in the contact zones of Europe occur most often in private, public or monastery libraries. Indeed, the most relentless of all of Dracula’s henchmen in the novel is himself a librarian. In short, the contact zones of this novel are typically places of epistemological storage and contention.

This is made even more explicit when the reader finally gets to meet Dracula in person through the remains of a tattered diary kept by one of the main characters, Professor Rossi. This particular historian has been kidnapped by Dracula and taken to the vampire’s abode below ground. Dracula’s lair proves to be not a slaughterhouse or even a tomb, but a remarkable library containing a wealth of unique texts. Furthermore, Dracula’s plans for Rossi are not primarily to consume the scholar, but to turn him into his librarian. Rossi has been taken by Dracula because of his unwillingness to cease his historical investigation into Dracula’s history. Now that Dracula has captured Rossi and begun turning him into a vampire, he wants to make use of his skills to catalogue his immense library.

This is tempting to Rossi who is utterly fascinated by Dracula’s collection. At the
same time, he knows Dracula to be an evil and dangerous creature and he has no wish to serve him. Rossi is torn between his love for this wealth of knowledge, his own pending transformation that is already beginning to manifest itself through an insatiable hunger, and his historical knowledge of Dracula or Vlad Tepes. Rossi, like the other characters in the book, fears Dracula’s vampiric state, but even more he fears what he knows about Dracula’s pre-vampiric cruelty. The unnamed narrator, researching the bloody history of Vlad Tepes, comes across a description of his habit of impaling friend and foe, of his countless cruelties, and she observes that ‘the thing that most haunted me that day, however, as I closed my notebook and put my coat on to go home, was not my ghostly image of Dracula, or the description of impalement, but the fact that these things had – apparently – actually occurred’.22

Rossi’s fear of vampiric transformation in the hands of Dracula has much to do with the fact that, as a vampire, he may come to accept and embrace this historical cruelty, losing his historical objectivity, his ability to properly understand the past, in the process. Thus, the threat and allure of Kostova’s Dracula is epistemological rather than ontological, although the two aspects are always interrelated. Dracula’s distribution of ancient books rather than corpses indicates most importantly an intimate relationship with the historical past. In this way, Dracula is the Historian the title refers to not only in the sense that he knows about the past; he is the Historian because he is of the past, even someone who may be able command the pasts, and thus generate new presents and futures.

From this perspective, it is obvious that Kostova’s Dracula also hopes to generate a form of gothic transformation of society, but this transformation appears less apocalyptic and markedly different from that which Stoker’s and del Toro and Hogan’s vampires aim for. Kostova’s Dracula has seen the world change and can see it changing further: “The world is changing and I intend to change with it. Perhaps soon I will not need this form” – he indicated with a slow hand his mediaeval finery, the great dead power of his limbs – “in order to accomplish my ambitions” (TH 608). Although these ambitions are never spelled out, Dracula obviously has dreams of a new historical trajectory, of the world changing, and of his changing with it so that his present, medieval form may become unnecessary.

In this way, the real danger Dracula poses is not directly related to his vampiric bite, but to his aforementioned command and ability to manipulate and transform history. Dracula’s power resides as much in this knowledge of history as in his ancient body, and it is through this knowledge that Dracula may be able to further his own form of societal transformation. There is an apocalyptic aspect to this possible future as well, since epistemological control is always related to ontological practice. To be able to manipulate or produce the historical past is to control the body in the present and the future. In other words, the societal transformation that Dracula seems to have in mind is one where the pre-modern habit of impaling and torturing friend and foe may take on a modern guise and become, again, an acceptable paradigm for imperial expansion and control.

**Catastrophic Transculturation and Contemporary Empire**

While the three novels differ greatly in their portrayal of vampirism and the nature of a coming apocalypse, the use of catastrophic transculturation is largely motivated by past and present political climates. Thus, these novels are fundamentally allegorical, explaining the presumed stakes of empire with the aid of the gothic. From this perspective, *The

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22 Elizabeth Kostova, *The Historian* (New York: Little, Brown & Company, 2005) 37. This reference will henceforth be abbreviated as TH.
Historian appears a more complex and less imperial text, refusing the simple identification of the vampire with the East. Meanwhile, Dracula and The Strain emerge as conservative narratives in the sense that they do not problematize the hegemonic power structures they rely on to any great extent. Instead, they appear to (re)inscribe otherness as Eastern. Even so, all three novels describe the confrontations between vampiric otherness and humanity as catastrophic. Similarly, the dangerous hybrids that are produced by catastrophic transculturation seem programmed to disrupt modernity, replacing it with a gothic apocalypse.

These images of catastrophic transculturation and monstrous hybridity are certainly not confined to these narratives. Countless novels and Hollywood movies describe the imagined meeting between (Western) explorer and the colonial frontier as a potentially catastrophic, even apocalyptic event. In the recent remake of the classic horror movie The Wolfman (2010), the wolf curse has been picked up in India from a ‘feral boy’. In the Alien franchise, exploration of outer space brings the human population into contact with highly aggressive predators who breed through what can only be described as the oral rape of the human host, turning the entire human population into a feminized vessel for the production of monstrous hybrids. These and other tales of the meeting between actual and metaphorical cultures, and the catastrophic forms of transculturation they produce, need to be seen as part of a wider discourse on empire and otherness. It can even be argued that the notion of catastrophic transculturation has been employed to structure the current American bid for global hegemony, tempered but hardly suspended by Barack Obama. George W. Bush’s use of a positively gothic vocabulary to describe the hiding places of terrorists in the epigraph of this article is one of many examples. This short passage suggests a form of catastrophic transculturation, as presumably innocent and unwilling youngsters are turned into terrorists willing to reduce buildings into burning rubble and people into torn and charred corpses.

The point here is that it is important to understand the discourses that operate in the imperial gothic and beyond since many texts that belong to this genre encourage a blind support of imperial practice. In The Strain, the utterly brutish vampires must indeed all be exterminated, or they will surely infect the entire world and permanently derail western modernity in favour of their own gothic apocalypse. While less certain of cultural categories, The Historian also threatens a form of gothic societal collapse and its protagonists are quite prepared to murder those infected by the vampiric bite to stop the apocalyptic tide. In this way, the meeting between the vampiric other results in catastrophic transculturation where the merger of two cultures produces monstrous and infectious hybrids. The meaning of these transformations, their relation to empire and the nature of the apocalyptic projects that follow in the wake of continued infection differs from narrative to narrative, however. The reading of the late-Victorian and contemporary imperial gothic with the help of the concept of catastrophic transculturation does not suggest that all novels have to reproduce xenophobia or pit European modernity against a form of oriental, gothic apocalypse. What it does suggest, however, is that even modern gothic appears programmed to eloquently engage with these issues, and that what they say transcends the confines of the genre.

Postcolonial Recycling of the Oriental Gothic: Habiby’s Saraya, The Ghoul’s Daughter and Mukherjee’s Jasmine

Ahmed Gamal

Introduction

Postcolonial texts seek to profit from Gothic narratives to problematise the power relations between the coloniser and the colonised in a transnational context. Regarding the Third World literature in general, the Gothic tradition is rewritten in accordance with the collective Oriental heritage to articulate the untold stories of the muffled Eastern subject. Drawing on the mythical narratives of the ghoul (ogre) in classical Arabic culture and old Arabic folktales and of Lord Shiva in the Hindu myth, this paper compares the rewritings of the vampire topoi of otherness, unspeakableness, foreignness, and border existences across language and identity in both Emile Habiby’s Saraya, The Ghoul’s Daughter (1991) and Bharati Mukherjee’s Jasmine (1989). The metamorphosis of Saraya into a laughing muse and Jasmine into a potent goddess can be taken to represent the liminal state of Dracula between life and death on the one hand and the convergence of cultures on the other. Where these two works differ principally is in the geographic location of this site of cultural interaction. Whereas Habiby (1922–1996), the Palestinian writer, traces the predicament of Arabs in Israel and the Palestinian diaspora, Mukherjee (1940–), the Indian American writer, writes of the potential synthesis of Indian and American culture in a transnational context. The mythical nameless horror of both the Arabic ghoul and the Indian lord Shiva is thus rewritten to counter the taboo on articulating the resentment of the victim/colonised vis-à-vis the brutality of the victimiser/coloniser. Postcolonial texts attempt to appropriate the Western Gothic trope to represent native subject matter and perspective without slipping into the dominant discourse. This paper considers these two postcolonial works in terms of counter-Orientalist discourse that simultaneously deconstructs Orientalist exoticism and eroticism and constructs a counter-image of Oriental agency as put to use at different geopolitical and historical contexts. Postcolonial writing recuperates the agency of the foreign other through deploying the oral and the metafictional in the Gothic genre to write back to the colonial canonisation of literacy and written culture. Both the Gothic and the oral are similar, as both have been excluded from the written scripts of the dominant. According to Smith and Hughes, the postcolonial Gothic genre contests the western dominant humanist discourse of the rational and the human by ‘raising often difficult questions about what it means to be human.’

The Oriental Gothic and the Postcolonial

The connection between the Gothic and the postcolonial is inescapable in a transnational culture governed by a hyper-real universe that presents itself as its own simulation. Popular Culture representations of otherness in relation to the ghostly and

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1 This is a revised version of an essay presented at the International Conference on Revisitar o Mito / Recycling Myths held in the Faculty of Letters, University of Lisbon, Portugal, from 2 to 5 May, 2012
the demonic are intrinsically associated with an exquisite amalgam of the imagery of Eurocentrism, imperialism, and neocolonialism. Gothic fiction is, thus, comparatively linked up with simulacra and simulation. Fred Botting, for instance, asserts that as Gothic joins ‘a world of simulation, its artifices are redoubled. Ghosts, phantasms, vampires, doubles proliferate, throwing up recycled shapes of haunted modernity, giving old form to new fears.’ Put differently, an uneven transnational development has created a transnational class of the dispossessed who are reduced in the global imaginary to a threatening cultural other. By comparison, in the realm of literary studies, the intermeshing of the Gothic and the postcolonial or rather the dominance of Gothic motifs in postcolonial fiction has been critically surveyed with special regard to the prevalence of otherness. David McInnis, for instance, observes: ‘At the heart of the Gothic is an engagement with the unrepresented other, usually a monster or a madwoman, in the same way that at the heart of postcolonial writings is an attempt to represent the other, often depicted as subaltern or female.’ Yet such critical analyses study the postcolonial Gothic as primarily mere rewritings or counter-texts of the Western canon of the nineteenth-century Dracula or Fin de siècle Gothic tradition and thus tend to forget the relative crystallisation of such tropes and their post-colonial specificity on the one hand and their universal significance on the other. For example, Judie Newman pinpoints that the Gothic is a European genre that does not travel well and consequently the postcolonial Gothic runs ‘the risk of slippage from oppositional to surreptitiously collusive positions.’ Such Euro-centric assessment of the Gothic disregards the universal esoteric repertoire of terror and demonology whether in its Western form of the prototypical cult of Dionysus who acts as a divine communicant between the living and the dead or in its Eastern pattern which drives the Yazidi of northeast Iraq to abhor lettuce as the devil’s food. It concomitantly foregrounds postcolonial strategies of appropriation and downplays those of recuperation. Postcolonial rewriting ironically portrays the tension established between the use of the tools and tropes of dominant discourse and the retrieval of cultural historicity and authenticity.

Thus, it is of paramount significance to espouse ‘a commitment to historicism’ to decode Gothic tropes according to the legacies of different colonial pasts. In consonance with new Gothic Studies that are pluralist and multi-temporal, this article considers two works which represent ‘the experience of writers writing out of colonised countries, and those who attempt to rationalise the confused and competing power structures and identities that may follow the departure of the absolutist-colonialist’ as adumbrated in the special issue of Gothic Studies on ‘Postcolonial Gothic’. Whereas Emile Habiby represents the first group of postcolonial writers,

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6 The Yazidi are a Kurdish-speaking people who adhere to a branch of Yazdanism that blends elements of Mithraism, pre-Islamic Mesopotamian religious traditions, Christianity and Islam.

Bharati Mukherjee belongs to the latter. In spite of the apparent difference between Habiby, who chose to stay in Haifa rather than escape with many of his fellow Arabs in the aftermath of the political and psychological crisis caused by the 1948 defeat of Arabs in Al Nakba (the catastrophe), and Mukherjee, who immigrated to Canada and then shifted into a celebratory mode as an immigrant, then citizen, in the United States, both suffered from exile, expounded a passionate nostalgia to translate their past into new presentist terms, and advocated a potential cultural exchange between various ethnicities and nationalities. Furthermore, such hybrid subgenre as the postcolonial Gothic is entitled to articulate the polarised categories of postcolonial and transnational third-world identity and history. Fantasy and the supernatural are everyday expressions of the imaginative experiences of Arab and Indian writers who use the Gothic to explore and expose the contradictions within their postcolonial societies, restraints upon people’s lives, and most specifically, gender roles. In Arab and Indian postcolonial Gothic works, the supernatural runs alongside realistic factual accounts to critique incongruities, some of which have been generated by either colonial culture or native cultural traditions.

Habiby’s three novels, The Secret Life of Sa’eed the Pessoptimist (1974), Ikhtayyeh (1985), and Saraya, the Ghoul’s Daughter (1991) provide a satirical and tragic perspective of the complex ways by which Israeli Arabs survived in their homeland under the rule of the Israeli Jewish majority while fighting to recuperate the Arab past and its mythical and metaphysical presence. Habiby was doubly marginalised by both the Israeli majority and his fellow Arab intellectuals. In addition, Habiby was one of the few Palestinian intellectuals to call his people in 1947 to agree to the establishment of two states, an Arab one and a Jewish one. This doubleness is reflected in his narrative oeuvre which interweaves the fantastic with the real, the supernatural with the prosaic, and finally the tragic with the comic. Habiby’s work uses irony and the Gothic to reveal the hidden contradictions of the reality of Arabs living in Israel. He deploys Arabic mythical tropes to cast light on tales of the repressed and abused lives of Arabs in their post-colonial state and simultaneously on the potential return or awakening of the dead as represented by the pre-colonial reality of Palestinian and Arab history. The nostalgic fantasies about a pristine past are thus inextricably linked to the real tolerance of colonial atrocities in the present. The two worlds are parallel, their influences leaking into each other, both equally real, equally esteemed. Moreover, the quest for the mythical and Gothic is an efficacious strategy of survival. ‘I am,’ Habiby claims, ‘holding the glory on both ends. I cling to my position without resigning my place. There is a difference between those who are subjected to the whip and those who count the lashes from afar. We in Israel have found our own way, the way of consistency and patience.’

Mukherjee’s two books of short stories, Darkness (1985) and The Middleman and Other Stories (1988), and the novels The Tiger’s Daughter (1971), Wife (1975), Jasmine (1989), The Holder of the World (1993) Leave It to Me (1997) Desirable Daughters (2002) The Tree Bride (2004) are all focused on hyphenated identities and transnational existences. She writes of the complications that result from being thrown between two worlds and the strength and courage it takes to survive and, ultimately, live. Like their author, her characters are alienated in both America and India and yet

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attempt creating robust bonds to new communities that might preclude total inclusion or assimilation. Mukherjee is just as doubly marginalised as Habiby, for she is agonised by the foreignness of her Indian culture in the U.S. and by the violence of the national process in the post-Partition Punjab. Mukherjee comparatively resorts to a double strategy that incorporates native Hindu myth along with the American tropes of the frontier and concurrently exposes the present pains and brutalities inflicted on South Asian immigrants in contemporary North America. Like the Palestinian Emile Habiby, Bharati Mukherjee uses the Gothic to explore hidden histories of repression and abuse and hidden passions of Asian young women. In Mukherjee’s *Leave It to Me*, for instance, Devi Dee is portrayed as suffering abandonment by her American mother and Eurasian father in an Indian orphanage in the late 1960s. The story of the young woman who is enraged about the fact that she was thrown out like a garbage sack on the hippie trail is associated with the Hindu mythology of the goddess Devi worshipped in Bengal, who was created by the Cosmic Spirit to do battle with the worst of all the demons, the Buffalo Demon. Devi’s torment is relieved by being fused with part of a larger design in which some higher power uses her to restore some kind of balance and purge evil out of California.

However, Mukherjee’s use of Indian myth and Gothic has a further function, namely that of creating personal Gothic tales and figures of empowered women. Unlike the second-generation Asian American writers Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan who use Chinese mythology as a kind of roots retrieval, she critiques traditional genderist myths and tales glorifying self-effacing women like that of Sita, Rama’s wife that is esteemed as a standard-setter for wifely and womanly virtues for all Hindu women, and rewrites her own fantastic versions of Hindu myth as confirmed in one of her interviews: ‘I would like to make up my own myths. As an immigrant I don’t have models here in America.’ In Mukherjee’s imagination, history and nation are in a state of flux that is to be remade and reinvented according to emergent legacies and affinities. Jennifer Drake asserts that Mukherjee has consistently rewritten her Brahmin stable past as an Oriental woman and her vision of home across different cultural and national contexts:

And she exchanges racial invisibility in India for ‘minority’ status in North America. She gives up a certain kind of home, home-as-comfort, home-as-talisman, exchanging that stable desh for imagination’s portability, its astonishing and insistent demolitions and reinventions, its work. In Mukherjee's America, ‘home’ says ‘freedom,’ ‘home’ says ‘war zone.’ ‘Home’ is no consolation, no place to rest. There are too many Americas and Indias for that.

Habiby’s *Sarayah, the Ghoul’s Daughter* attempts to reconcile its Gothic style to the reality of a colonial backdrop. It deploys the trope of the Gothic ghoul that takes Saraya as an adopted daughter by force to represent the confrontation between colonial, patriarchal hegemony and some timeless precolonial essence and authenticity. This rewriting is predicated upon the binaristic motif of female

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subjugation and empowerment: the central protagonist is a young girl confronted with a masculine Gothic threat of annihilation that is finally eliminated. *Saraya, The Ghoul’s Daughter* is fundamentally founded on the Palestinian folk tale of the girl called Saraya who was kidnapped, adopted like a daughter by a ghoul, imprisoned in his palace and finally saved by her cousin. Habiby accordingly rewrites the traditional ghoul’s trope in two ways: first, by shifting the focus of its vampiric malady across gender roles from the female to the male; and second, by transforming the ghoul’s cannibalistic and seductive desires toward its victims into patriarchal ones. Such patriarchal trope in Habiby’s novel is opposed to the beast and temptress imagery suggested by the figure of the ghoul in classical Arabic culture. In Ahmed Al-Rawi’s words, ‘the Arabs understood the ghoul to be an ugly female demon that intends to harm travelers and even to kill them in some cases. It has the ability to change its form and become a beautiful woman to attract men or even to mate with them.’ The ghoul’s desire to dominate and subsume rather than devour and eliminate Saraya must be understood in terms of global power relations. Spivak has already pinpointed the great interested use colonialism makes of patriarchy. That Habiby’s text can be linked to patriarchy and colonialism through the ghoul’s figure is further verified by the recurrent references stressing the connection between Saraya, Palestine, and Mount Carmel. In other words, Saraya becomes an allegory of the lost Palestinian identity and the author’s yearning to his pre-colonial childhood.

The structure of Habiby’s novel is cyclical: it begins and ends with telling different versions of the story of Saraya and the ghoul, identified from its first paragraph as an old Palestinian myth. The narrator’s reminiscences on a girl with the same name whom he knew in his childhood and who later disappeared into exile with her family take him into his own personal past and the collective psyche of the Palestinians. Generally speaking, Habiby’s novels portray women figures as symbol of the motherland and the pre-colonial past. Amit-Kochavi writes, ‘*Sarayah* and *Ekhtayyeh* both focus on Palestinian women by these names, representing old Palestine, who were the childhood love of the main male hero and are described nostalgically as fairytale figures.’ Throughout the novel Saraya is represented as linked up with a fantastic ghostly atmosphere that is associated with the homeland, that is to say the post-colonial Palestine. Saraya’s association with apparitions serves as indication of the novel’s Gothic background. Saraya appears to the narrator as an apparition out of the foam of the Mediterranean on the coast of the Palestinian village of al-Zib, north of Acre, as he is fishing on a summer night. Despite such ghostly visitations in Habibi’s *khurafiyya* (a fairy tale), it is deeply rooted in the realities of the Palestinian post-colonial history. Saraya appears in 1983 during the sixth war.

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12 In the session ‘myth and postcolonialism’ of the *Recycling Myths* conference, the issues of the body, gender and sexual identity and the ways in which they intersect with the vampire and ghoul traditions were further discussed by Professor Marina Warner of the University of Essex and me. In response to her query about the ghoul’s gender role, I stressed that Habiby was quite aware of the gender shift that has been created with regard to the ghoul in the novel. From a linguistic perspective, the ‘ghoul’ is a masculine noun, whereas the ‘ghoula’ is a feminine one inflected by an female suffix in Arabic. The linguistic feature of masculinity spotlights the dominant gender role of the patriarchal ghoul.


which was waged by Israel against Lebanon and calls out to him: ‘The homeland longs for its people Abdallāh. Have you forgotten about us?’\(^{16}\) The ghostly presence of Saraya is corroborated through the narrator’s response, which questions whether Saraya has come back alive or dead like the resurrected ghostly souls of the dead.

Habībi further associates the supernatural with the real body politic of the post-colonial homeland by examining the inextricable bond between Saraya and Mount Carmel. Saraya is identified with Mount Carmel which is depicted as an oasis rife with wells and green shady trees: ‘Saraya is as just as real as Mount Carmel and its highly generous flow. One can see, hear, smell, taste and touch both of them simultaneously. She is a palpable rather than an imaginary being’ (52). The extent to which the narrator’s idealised creations of the feminine and native space become visible to the reader relates to his construction of the idyllic love story he develops with Saraya in the edenic Mount Carmel. Saraya is depicted as used to feeding her lover-narrator the Carmel ‘jinni apples’ and quenching his thirst by letting him drink from its springs (105-06). However fantastic and exotic this narrative strand of the Gothic romance may be, it is inscribed alongside the political and postcolonial. The idyllic image of the narrator’s passionate love for Saraya that is structurally connected to a pre-colonial, uncontaminated Mount Carmel can be considered a strategy of resistance against colonial hegemony and the erasure of Palestinian space and history.

The narrator is, on the one hand, appalled by how Mount Carmel’s natural watercourses, trees, bushes, shrubs, and seasonal flowers have been drastically replaced by crowded streets and ugly urban scenes that are compared to dull cemeteries and on the other hand by how the Arabic street names have been replaced by Hebrew ones (107). Amit-Kochavi interprets Habībi’s ironic rewriting of the Carmel’s present against the backdrop of a lost paradise or past in terms of nostalgia for origins and authenticity: ‘Nostalgia for the old Carmel is expressed by Habībi as part of his longing for the Arabs who are gone now, as if the Carmel and Haifa had lost their glamour and beauty once they are no longer frequented by their original natives.’\(^{17}\) Thus, cultural opposition can be a constructive means of surviving the present and keeping alive the memory of the Palestinians’ connectivity to their land and history.

Mukherjees’s *Jasmine* central protagonist is a young girl confronted with a masculine Gothic threat of annihilation that is finally eliminated. The title character and narrator of Bharati Mukherjee’s novel, was born approximately 1965 in a rural Indian village called Hasnapur. She tells her story as a twenty-four-year-old pregnant widow, living in Iowa with her crippled lover, Bud Ripplemeyer. Her long journey encompasses five distinct settings, two murders, at least one rape, a maiming, a suicide, and three love affairs. Throughout the course of the novel, the title character’s identity, along with her name, changes: from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jazzy to Jassy to Jase to Jane. In chronological order, Jasmine moves from Hasnapur, Punjab, to Fowlers Key, Florida (near Tampa), to Flushing, New York, to Manhattan, to Baden, Iowa, and finally is off to California as the novel ends. Prakash, Jasmine’s Indian husband, succeeds in motivating her to question her feudal assumptions about women, marriage and caste and to start restructuring her identity. Mukherjees’s *Jasmine* therefore has a

\(^{16}\) Emile Habībi, *Saraya Bint el-Goul* (Saraya, the Ghoul’s Daughter) (Amman: Dar al-Shorouk, 1991), 35. Further references to this book will be included in parentheses in the text. Translations from *Saraya* in the present text are mine.

\(^{17}\) Amit-Kochavi 155


cyclical narrative structure: Jasmine’s metamorphosis is marked from beginning to end by the synthesis of Jasmine’s life and journey through India and America on the one hand and the Gothic and the postcolonial on the other hand. The postcolonial is incorporated in the appropriation of native Hindu myth along with the western Gothic mode in the new context of South Asian immigrant experience.

As a fictional and rhetorical device, vampirism functions as a transformative process of either passive othering or positive recycling. Whereas both Habiby’s and Mukherjee’s passive vampirisms are associated with solely the masculine malady and brutality of the Ghoul that kidnaps and imprisons Saraya and Half-Face who rapes Jasmine and steals her sense of innocence and happiness after coming to the USA, their positive version of vampirism is rather affiliated with the female potential of renewal and reshaping. Thus, vampirism is so deeply implicated with sexuality and power structures as to render the three inseparable in the postcolonial Gothic. When she is just seven years old at the beginning of the novel, the young girl Jyoti (Jasmine’s given name) is struck on the head by the old astrologer as she vehemently denies the legitimacy of his vision of her future widowhood and exile. Falling to the ground, she remembers, ‘My teeth cut into my tongue. A twig sticking out of the bundle of firewood I’d scavenged punched a starshaped wound into my forehead.’

The references to the teeth and bleeding indicate the vampiric flourishes which become associated with Jasmine. However, such Gothic references are relocated within the Hindu myth of the third eye, the holiest developed in the middle of their foreheads as recorded in Puranic texts and epics, and Shiva, god of creation and destruction in Hindu myth. Instead of exoticising Jasmine as a Hindu female other who is deemed to suffer widowhood and is consequently expected to devote her life to an austere pursuit of religion and never to attempt remarriage, Jasmine’s heterosexual desire is valorised according to the Hindu myth of Shiva that represents the binarism of life and death. Geoffrey Kain affirms the death/rebirth dualism as concretised in the narrative structure as well as in Jasmine’s migrant life:

The novel’s immediate emphasis on the ‘third eye’ thus sets the stage for what clearly emerges as the novel’s cyclical narrative pattern of destruction and renewal, as well as the characteristic energy of Jasmine’s own life: she becomes a force of both creation and destruction in the lives of others, and experiences a series of deaths and rebirths as her identity evolves in her passage from life as Jyoti and the Punjabi villager to Jasmine the questing immigrant enroute to California.

Thus, recycling the negative, degenerate vampirism of the canonical nineteenth-century Dracula as positive destruction of the unusable and inauthentic beliefs of Hindu caste and tradition on the one hand and recreation of usable and authentic postcolonial visions and strategies on the other is well represented by Jasmine’s cyclical transformation throughout the novel.

18 Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1989), 1. Further references to this book will be included in parentheses in the text.

The Oriental Gothic and Foreignness
Both postcolonial literature and Gothic writing are fundamentally focused on the representation of otherness and foreignness. Tabish Khair points out that Gothic fiction is essentially a ‘writing of otherness,’ because ‘it revolves around various versions of the other, as the Devil or as ghosts, as women, vampires, Jews, lunatics, murderers, non-European presences etc.’ Furthermore, the fundamental Gothic topoi of vampires, ghouls, ghosts, and monsters can be automatically attached to the colonial discourses of primitivism and cannibalism. A frequent corollary of such attachment is the postcolonial rewriting of the other that is to be textually repositioned as a source of redemption and recreation rather than a locus of destruction and demonisation. The various forms of the foreign and the marginal other are accordingly installed and then destabilised through the employment of sarcasm and irony in Habiby’s Saraya and female-empowering alternatives in Mukherjee’s Jasmine.

In the two novels, the discursive interference of colonialism is essentially demonstrated in the representation of native space in terms of menace, barbarity, and foreignness. Space, whether it is Haifa or Palestine in Habiby and Hasnapur or India in Mukherjee, is codified in terms of what Arjun Appadurai calls ‘trait’ rather than ‘process’ geographies. According to such typology, ‘trait’ geographies are telescoped through colonial conceptions of national and regional identity that tend to see areas ‘as relatively immobile aggregates of traits, with more or less durable historical boundaries and with a unity composed of more or less enduring properties.’ In Habiby’s Saraya the romantic setting of the Palestinian sea is transformed into a Gothic Hades in which Israeli soldiers guard ‘the state’ against the underworld departed souls or ‘the darkness ghouls,’ namely Palestinians (38). Mukherjee’s Jasmine comparatively represents how North Americans visualise South Asians as ‘Undocumented aliens’ (118) and how Asia is viewed as unfamiliar, whether as only ‘a soy-bean market’ (11) or as a wretched space plagued with poverty and water famines.

Habiby adopts sarcasm as a means of deconstructing essentialist constructs and fundamentalist certainties, whether they are predicated upon national or colonial myths. Both the Arabs’ sense of fatalism and Israeli colonialism are hence exposed as detrimental to national identity and history, respectively. Habiby’s rewriting can therefore be considered as grounded in revisionist attitudes toward history and culture. Generally speaking, his main goal, as articulated in the ‘Author's Preface’ to Saraya, is to review ‘dogmatic certainty’ (10). In Habiby’s Saraya, Gothic horror and ineffable menace are ironically implied through the presence of native Palestinian Arabs, primarily represented by Saraya and other Arab characters. A central preoccupation of Habiby’s novel is its examination of the behavior of Palestinians within a colonial context. Palestinians are delineated fundamentally as victims and yet ghostly. Early in the novel, they are placed within the Gothic mode as ‘wandering

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apparitions’ menacing the Israeli victors after the Arab defeat in the Six-Day War.22 They are tragically and yet ironically presented as roaming deaf, dumb and permanently irresponsible to others, even when they are inquisitively asked about what befell them or ‘when warmly greeted’ (26). Partly, the figure of the ‘Wandering Palestinian’ that is created by Habiby is an ironic recycling of the archetypal ‘Wandering Jew’ as constructed in Christian legend. The text itself questions Saraya’s identity and whether she is a female ghoul or a mere jinni. While Palestinians are portrayed as the ghostly demons of Gothic fantasy, the tale of their traumatic reality and suffering is effectively spotlighted to deconstruct and disturb colonial certainties about the validity of the colonial mission. The text presents the life of the Palestinians in Israel as a bitter series of abandonment, estrangement, deportation, and agony. For instance, the narrator sarcastically ridicules how his eighty years old sick aunt was brutally subjected to body search in Ben Gurion International Airport as if she were a terrorist hiding a gasoline or a cluster bomb in her underwear (139-41). Sarcasm is thus employed by Habiby as a means of resistance and survival.

By the same token, Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* portrays Hindu women as figures of menace and degeneracy and concomitantly as icons of agency and recreation. Degeneration and victimisation are hence entwined to frame women according to their discrepant national and ethnic legacies. Images of the Gothic represented in Mukherjee with regard to her view of a power struggle between different sexes, religions and ethnicities. Susan Koshi asserts that Mukherjee’s main characters are always marginalised as victims and that ‘they are shown as being marked by racial, religious, or class conflicts.’23 Early in the novel, Jasmine’s childhood is made to coincide with the time of unrest in Punjab due to the separatist movement for Khalistan, a separate Sikh state. Jasmine’s decision to abandon the traditional, modest *salwar kameez* in favour of the modern, fashionable *sari* is not religiously tolerated and is therefore depicted as a pretext to invite the ire of Sukhwinder, a fanatic friend of her brothers and a Khalistani activist who plans to kill her. According to him, all Hindu women are ‘whores’ and ‘the sari is the sign of the prostitute’ (58). He finally plants a bomb at the store where Jasmine is shopping with her husband. The bomb is meant for Jasmine, who becomes a political target because her aspirations pose a threat to the sociopolitical hierarchy based on women’s subjection in a caste-bound, genderist society. Violence to women is metaphorically represented through the ghostly visitation of the wolf-sized rabid dog, an animal usually associated with Stoker’s Dracula, which attacks Jasmine and tries to kill her toward the end of Chapter 8.

Throughout the novel Jasmine is menaced by masculine violence. When Jasmine leaves Hasnapur for the USA, she joins the unsafe, unstable category of ‘refugees and mercenaries and guest workers,’ passing into ‘a shadow world’ of endangered bodies (90). In New York Jasmine sees Sukhwinder selling hot dogs in Manhattan’s Central Park where she is au-pairing for Duff, Taylor and Wylie’s adopted daughter. This happens just as Taylor and Jasmine have been exploring their love for one another, a time of great happiness. However, Jasmine has to flee from

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22 The Six-Day War, known in Arabic as *an-Naksah* (The Setback), was fought between June 5 and 10, 1967, by Israel and the neighboring states of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria.

Taylor to save herself. Even in her life with Bud, she is threatened by death, in the form of the Iowan farmers’ suicides and when Harlan Kroener shoots Bud. In the United States, Gothic degeneracy and foreignness are intersected by gender, nationality, ethnicity, and race. As Dracula is perceived in terms of a foreign threat that might corrupt the body politic of the state, coloured women are represented as dangerously foreign bodies that come from the East to degenerate the West and therefore must be naturalised and familiarised: ‘In Baden, the farmers are afraid to suggest I’m different. They’ve seen the aerograms I receive, the strange lettering I can decipher…. They want to make me familiar. In a pinch, they’ll admit that I might look a little different, that I’m a ‘dark-haired girl’ in a naturally blond country. I have a ‘darkish complexion’ (in India, I’m ‘wheatish’), as though I might be Greek from one grandparent. I’m from a generic place, ‘over there,’ which might be Ireland, France, or Italy’ (28-9).

Furthermore, Jasmine is conceived as utterly foreign by her own American husband. Confronted by the repeated pleas from Bud Ripplemeyer, the father of her unborn child, Jasmine reflects upon how much he does not know about her. He has consistently avoided such knowledge, since her ‘genuine foreignness frightens him’ (22). Instead, his desire and interest are stimulated by his image of ‘Eastern’ women. She thinks, ‘Bud courts me because I am alien. I am darkness, mystery, inscrutability’ (178).

Female-empowering alternatives are mediatised through Gothic motifs of the body. Jasmine recycles the traditional imperial binarism of the inferior female body indicative of the colonised and the superior masculine body representative of the coloniser. The traditional polarities of the corporeal and the spiritual and death and rebirth are, installed and then destabilised; in Cyndy Hendershot’s view ‘Gothic bodies disrupt stable notions of what it means to be human. They break down the demarcations between animal and human, death and life, and male and female.’

Jasmine, thus, rewrites the female body as potent and creative and contrastively the male body as weak and vulnerable. After becoming a widow, Jasmine does not hide her body under coarse cloth or shave her head like her mother did. She then plans to commit ritual suicide, suttee, like her fellow young woman of Hasnapur who destroys her own life by dousing her body with kerosene after her husband’s death to get closer to Yama, the Hindu god of death. Unlike her, Jasmine identifies herself with Kali, the consort of Lord Shiva and the goddess of violent power whose incarnation is a figure and icon of enormous annihilation and recreation. In the United States, the American male sexuality of Half-Face is naturalised through his masculine body that is represented as ‘totally naked’ and ‘monstrously erect’ (103) only to be finally subverted and thoroughly destroyed by Jasmine’s act of murder and resistance. Like vampires, Half-Face’s colonial rape of Jasmine’s body is parasitic, feeding off living humans in order to survive. In addition, both Dracula’s and Half-Face’s uncanny masculine features are more forcefully emphasised during gendered encounters: as Half-Face’s body is depicted as monstrously erect before the rape of Jasmine, Dracula’s eyes are portrayed as ‘positively blazing,’ his face as ‘deathly pale’ and ‘hard like drawn wires’ and his eyebrows as ‘a heaving bar of white-hot metal’ during his encounter with female vampires. Although Jasmine’s feminine, fragile body is


threatened by the brutality of American manliness, she chooses to kill Half-Face instead of committing suicide. Thus, she is positively compared to Kali, the slayer of demons, when she slaughters Half-Face, who is associated with ‘an underworld of evil’ (103). In other words, the identification of Jasmine with Kali, according to Timothy Ruppel, suggests the binary motifs of destruction and renewal:

this restructuring and renewing function of Jasmine as Kali provides a key to the possibility of a postcolonial politics where resistance to the myths, histories, and narratives of the metropolitan center involves an active thematising of the structures of enforced identity, and an affirmative transformation that involves appropriating the weapons and technologies that have served to maintain the center.26

Jasmine’s slaughter of Half-Face could be, therefore, identified as a strategy of postcolonial resistance against neocolonialism in Southeast Asia, as Half-Face’s name derives from the loss of an eye, an ear, and half his face in Vietnam, where he served as a demolitions expert.

Vampirism, as plotted in this scene of rape and murder, is suggested through Jasmine’s bloody tongue protruding from her mouth. Jasmine’s slicing of her tongue could nevertheless be considered as counter to vampiric atavism, because her blood is represented as a means to purge her soul of defilement rather than a channel to nourish her body with life. She thinks, ‘My body was merely’ (108). In contradistinction to the vampiric cult of the corporeal, Jasmine transcends the vampiric emphasis on a corporeal identity and confirms instead that the soul is the site where the truth of desire and identity are to be found.

The Oriental Gothic and Border Existences
Postcolonial writing is naturally diasporic and transnational, thematising border existences and hybrid exchanges. Postcolonial Gothic texts are generally bound up with the transnational in terms of spatio-temporality. Tracing the diasporic rhetoric of Dracula who is himself displaced from the peripheral Transylvania to the metropolitan London among the teeming millions, Habiby’s text, for instance, reflects post-war al-ghurba (exile or diaspora), a word intensely resonant in the Palestinian lexicon, whereas Mukherjee's work deftly describes the new, late-modern diaspora that ‘never broke contact with the homeland as their departure from home coincided with cheap air travel, easy commodification and transfer of cultural capital through technology, initially VHS tapes and DVDs, now through the massive mechanisms of the internet’.27 Thus, most of the characters of the two novels live in a permanent state of relocation and displacement. Though the stories of the two texts are narrated in their entirety from the single perspective of the protagonist-narrators, the range of narrative space is expanded to cover different national, ethnic, and gender trajectories across the diasporic imaginary. In Saraya there is a direct reference to the Palestinian diaspora in Arab countries as well as in Sumatra, the U.S., and Argentina. Palestinians are therefore identified metaphorically with Saraya and Noah’s wandering dove which

27 Vijay Mishra, ‘Memory and Recall from Beyond the Troubled Black Waters,’ South Asian Review 32.3 (2011) 91.
kept flying to see if the waters subsided and hence never returned back (206). Jasmine likewise depicts how displacement does not dilute but reinforces memories of the abandoned locus of origin, complicating the process of redefining home. This diasporic redefinition does not involve radical change, but an inclusion of selves old and new. The scene featuring the arrival of Indian refugees, mercenaries and guest workers to the U.S. pictorially describes how Indian immigrants are set as ‘outcasts and deportees, strange pilgrims visiting outlandish shrines, landing at the end of tarmacs,’ and yet as never losing sight of the desire for future utopia that can be actualised in finding ‘a job or space to sleep’ (90).

Moreover, diaspora and border existences represent a paradigmatic feature of postcolonialism, transnationalism and vampirism. Gothic epistemology is further associated with fragmented subjectivity typically featured in the border imaginary, comprising convergence and dialogism rather than dialecticism and doubleness among various ethnicities and nationalities. Tracing the genealogy of Gothic writing, Robert Miles defines the Gothic as ‘a discursive site, a carnivalesque for representations of the Diasporic fragmented subject’.28 Both Habiby’s Saraya and Mukherjee’s Jasmine for instance, expound the motif of border existences which is a basic element of the Dracula tradition. As Dracula’s liminal locus is situated between the dead and the living, the postcolonial text is placed on the borderlines between the oral and the written and the fictional and the metafictional. Stoker’s Dracula, comparatively, foregrounds the instability of the written document by first inscribing it as ‘simple fact’29 at the outset and then subverting its mimetic engagement with the world at the very end. As Jonathan Harker, one of the main characters of the novel, mentions in the concluding ‘Note’ to Dracula: ‘We were struck with the fact, that in all the mass of material of which the record is composed, there is hardly one authentic document; nothing but a mass of typewriting, except the later note-books of Mina and Seward and myself, and Van Helsing’s memorandum.’30

The two texts hence highlight the complex interactions between written and oral cultural forms. Postcolonial writing recuperates the agency of the foreign other through deploying the oral and the metafictional in the Gothic genre to write back to the colonial and modernist canonisation of literacy and written culture. Both the Gothic and the oral are similar, as both have been excluded from the written scripts of the dominant. The rewriting of the Oriental vampire topos has obvious resonance with what is termed as ‘postcolonial metafiction’ with view to their common strategy of retrieving the ineffable legacy of the oral culture and language of the colonised and the marginalised. According to Ahmed Gamal, ‘Postcolonial metafiction can thus be defined as that self-conscious fiction that has a dual agenda of contesting and deconstructing colonial textuality and stereotypes and simultaneously recuperating and reconstructing native agency and language’.31 Thus, both postcolonial and Gothic writings are fundamentally intertextual, rewriting and revising predecessors according to new emergent discourses.

30 Stoker 326.

In postcolonial writing, language is the site of negotiation and opposition. Arabic in Habiby’s *Saraya* and Hindi in Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* are retrieved as symptoms that emerge in the text in correspondence to the Gothic return of the repressed ghostly to the vacant body of narrative memory. The oral and vernacular forms of Arabic and Hindi therefore dominate the narrative voice and structure of the two texts and simultaneously intersect with intertextual references to both Eastern and Western literary, religious, philosophical, and political canonical scripts. Despite the conspicuous differences between the two texts in terms of content and the nationalities of the protagonist-narrators, both of them evolve along similar trajectories of old memories that are retrieved in the form of oral tales and written scripts. *Saraya* is defined by the author according to Arabic folk legacy as *khurafiyya* (fairy tale) based on a Palestinian legend about Saraya, the girl captured by the ghoul. In structural terms, the whole narrative consists of mental associations and imaginative leaps that lack the structure of an ordered, scripted plot. What motivates Habiby’s alter-ego novelist to write/relate his novel/tale is the fictive universe haunted by the macabre Canterville Ghost in Wilde or the cries of Wuthering Heights in Brontë and the jinns or the supernatural creatures in Arab folklore as well as the mysterious female figure he catches a glimpse of over the sea. ‘The episode,’ the narrator asserts, ‘was a kind of key, like the ancient Egyptian key of life … or a magic mattock, like Aladdin’s lamp, which I took up as I began to excavate the mountains of oblivion, trying, as best I could, to penetrate the caverns of memory’ (25-6). The act of reading is subsequently presented as an imaginary voyage to discover who or what this apparition called Saraya was. The complex interplay of dream and reality, fiction and fact, orality and literacy, draw on an invented autonomous cosmos of metafictional sources and meditations (by turns serious and ironic) as disparate as Gorky, al-Mutanabbi, Plato, Hemingway, and Lenin. Furthermore, the reader constructs the true identity and reality of Saraya in his imagination, feeling free to give shape to fictive referents. ‘Fictive referents are more real to the imagination than are real ones. Stories are only stories – and therein lie their enormous power and value’. In the different tales narrated, Saraya accordingly takes on a fluid host of roles, sometimes shifting in the course of a single page from the flesh-and-blood beloved of the hero’s childhood to a whispery symbol of the wadis and ridges around Mount Carmel to a kind of laughing muse.

Analogously, Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* is constructed from the very beginning as a folk tale distanced ‘Lifetimes ago’ from Western modernity (1). However, all throughout the novel, Jasmine identifies herself with both Eastern oral traditions of Hindu mythical beings on the one hand and Western literary characters and popular culture figures on the other. Jasmine is portrayed as a potent goddess, as having the third eye, as Kali, as a tornado, and concurrently as a lady James Bond who romances with the men that come in her life while never forgetting her mission to survive and become a city woman as Eliza Doolittle who is instructed in gentility by Professor Higgins in Shaw’s Pygmalion. The Indian Jyoti is thus transformed into the American Jasmine due to the help of her husband Prakash. ‘Jyoti, Jasmine:’ the heroine wonders, ‘I shuttled between identities’ (70). Both Hindu myth and the Gothic canon are founded on the belief in alternate and multiple realities. Mukherjee meditates on

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such belief: ‘As a Hindu, I was brought up on oral tradition and epic literature in which animals can talk, birds can debate ethical questions, and monsters can change shapes. I believe in the existence of alternate realities, and this belief makes itself evident in my fiction.’ This fact ultimately helps Mukherjee in endorsing the tremendous potential of the marginalised immigrant and describing a threshold area in which cultural transformation may occur. Mukherjee’s belief in ‘alternate realities’ is therefore in accord with the postcolonial experience of borderlands.

Conclusion
Both Habiby and Mukherjee use the Gothic to explore and rewrite the hidden histories and transcripts of the repression and abuse of Palestinians and Indians in transnational contexts. They achieve this through establishing a particular strand of postcolonial Gothic writing, one which looks back to older stock representations of vampirism and one which looks forward to a return to the potential of cultural exchange and border existences. Gender is foregrounded in the narrative texture to demonstrate how the two writers’ vision of colonialism and primitivism is ghosted by masculinity and patriarchy. Habiby and Mukherjee both recycle and update the images of the ghoul and the vampire in order to suggest that they, like Saraya and Jasmine, represent the dilemma of a postcolonial self trapped by the past but struggling to create new liminality and hybridity in the present. The two texts provide additional evidence with respect to the potential of both South Asian and Middle Eastern writers to draw upon, return to, and build on a canon of folk tales and myths from the subcontinent, Middle East and the West. Thus, both of Habiby’s and Mukherjee’s works provide a crisscrossing of cultures, literatures and linguistic traditions to articulate their authors’ transnational experience which forged their career as writers.


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