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Speech

Australian Author Marion Halligan – Word Artist
Robyn Greaves

Australian author Marion Halligan writes about the paintings of Pierre Bonnard in her memoir, *The Taste of Memory*: ‘I realised his paintings are very much like novels.’¹ They ‘set up in us the desire to know ... There will never be answers to the Bonnard questions, not from him, though we can enjoy the puzzles; the way we live our lives is our answer. The questions are our business, the luminous moments are paint on canvas, they want us to gaze, they invite us to dwell in their dazzlement’ (*TM* 214-16). Halligan is a word artist. Her words ‘invite us to dwell in their dazzlement’ as she creates ‘luminous moments’ on the canvas of the page. Halligan is adept at capturing details we recognise in our own lives and weaving poignant, thought-provoking stories out of them; stories about how ‘ordinary’ people cope in the face of events that we all experience at some point, such as loss, grief and bereavement. Like the modernists before her, such as Virginia Woolf, Halligan sees art as the place in which to search for answers to life’s puzzles. While acknowledging that the answers are never definitive, that art alone and of itself is not the only answer, she sees it as a place to map out experience; to step back from it and discern its message to us. For Woolf, ‘the whole world is a work of art’ and ‘we are parts of the work of art.’² Woolf’s art form is essential to her life; she considers it a writer’s ‘business’ to ‘collect’ what they see and ‘communicate it to the rest of us.’³ Similarly, for Halligan, ‘it is artists showing you what they see that educates the heart, in novels, in paintings, in photographs.’⁴ Like Woolf, she is a passionate advocate for her art and has written about it in essays and fiction over the years.

Halligan’s first novel, *Self Possession*, was published in 1987. Since then she has published around twenty novels and collections of short stories. Her novels have been well-received and have won numerous awards, including the Age Book of the Year for *Lovers’ Knots* (1992). She has received a number of fellowships from the Literature Board of the Australia Council and won the inaugural Geraldine Pascall Prize for critical writing in 1990. Most recently, her short stories ‘A Willowy Woman’ and ‘Eating Oysters’ are included in the *Best Australian Stories 2012* and *Best Australian Stories 2013* respectively, and ‘A Castle in Toorak’ appears in *Griffith REVIEW 42*, 2013. Just as Bonnard is said to have “discovered strange and wonderful countries even in boudoirs and drawing-rooms” (*TM* 220), Halligan’s fiction draws on details of everyday life: the domestic or suburban realm. For Halligan, suburbia is a rich source of material; it is ‘where life happens, where people live and love one another and raise their children, where there is grief and recrimination and murder and pain, it is where the human comedy unfolds’ (166). The general perception of life in the suburban or domestic realm as nondescript and banal is perhaps a reason why Halligan’s work, due to its subject matter, has been critically neglected or overlooked.

Dorothy Jones, one of the few academics to analyse Halligan’s work, writes:

Marion Halligan’s writing dwells on the pleasures of daily life, and while readers can readily connect with this celebration of ordinariness, recognising in it patterns of our own existence, such subject matter can also provoke doubt, even distrust ... Continuing doubts as to whether suburbia is an appropriate subject for serious literature can result in writers who explore it being dismissed as bourgeois.\(^5\)

This is an issue Halligan feels strongly about. In a personal interview she comments: ‘the sort of writing that I do, if done by men is highly valued. If you think of somebody like Jonathan Franzen and *The Corrections*, or if you think of William Trevor or John Banville, they write that kind of thing and it’s where literature’s at, this basic birth, life, death, what we all go through thing, but if women do it it’s domestic, it’s trivial, it’s frivolous.’\(^6\) In the same interview she mentions the merit in the creation of a ‘prize in Australia for women writers like the Orange Prize’, due to this general neglect of women writers (*PI* 16). Since then, this has become a reality in the form of the Stella Prize.

This perception of women’s writing as trivial or frivolous remains a troublesome issue for female authors and one which is not easily overcome. Halligan doesn’t consider herself a ‘woman’s writer. I think I’m writing about people for people’; but acknowledges that sometimes male reviewers just sort of ignore them [her books] because they think disparagingly, “oh, women’s books’’ (*PI* 15). She is unapologetic about her subject matter:

> No wonder I write domestic novels; my life has been centred in domesticity. But I don’t write about mis-plumbed washing machines, I write about birth and death, and love and marriage, or not, about betrayals and jealousy. About life that is a walk with love and death ... The same subjects as the Greeks, and Shakespeare. The things that matter. My characters aren’t kings and queens, aren’t noble and grand, but their passions are as real.\(^7\)

This is an issue Woolf discusses nearly a century ago in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) where she considers ‘the effect of sex upon the novelist’ (71). For Woolf:

> It is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex; naturally, this is so. Yet it is the masculine values that prevail. Speaking crudely, football and sport are ‘important’; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes ‘trivial’. And these values are inevitably transferred from life to fiction. This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing room. A scene in a battlefield is more important than a scene in a shop – everywhere and much more subtly the difference of value persists. (74)

More recently, Garry Kinnane, in his 1998 article, ‘Shopping at Last!’, decries Australian creative writers’ inability ‘to come to terms with that vast suburban middle-world that our

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culture-spinners have loved to hate, though it happens to be the physical and cultural space in which the vast majority of Australians do their living. Kinnane recognises what Halligan and Woolf have long known and written about:

there is as much suffering and happiness, as much crime and passion, as much art and industry going on in the suburbs as anywhere else, except that it is often beneath the surface or behind the deceptive facade of tranquil streets and respectable houses. (45)

Halligan recognises the unease that exists ‘beneath the surface or behind the deceptive facade’ of our lives, the darkness that shadows us, and she explores this in her fiction. It does not take long for a discerning reader to recognise the deeper considerations in her writing.

Woolf was also aware of the unease that shadows our lives. Her works have similar considerations to those of Halligan; exploring themes such as human nature, beauty, life, and death. Woolf describes feeling sudden violent shocks throughout her life, moments of exquisite pain or great beauty, which she refers to as ‘moments of being’, and which she tries to capture in writing. She uses words and writing to help explain to herself the impact of what she experiences. By committing the experience to writing, Woolf felt that she ‘was not powerless. I was conscious – if only at a distance – that I should in time explain it’ (MB 72) and she felt that her perception in this regard was what made her a writer. Woolf’s characters also experience these revelatory moments. Clarissa (the Mrs Dalloway of Mrs Dalloway), sees ‘an illumination; a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed. But the close withdrew; the hard softened. It was over – the moment.’ These moments of illumination flicker brightly – a sudden, brilliant flash of light – and then they are gone, leaving a lasting impression on the receiver. In To the Lighthouse, Lily Briscoe considers: ‘The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark.’ For Lily, “‘you” and “I” and “she” pass and vanish; nothing stays; all changes; but not words, not paint’ (TTL 133). Similarly, for Halligan, ‘the world is a cruel and dark and difficult place and it is words that light the small candle flames to keep the dark at bay.’ Her character, Claire, in The Fog Garden, finds words which she hopes ‘will be shapely, memorable, poignant words for grief, death and disaster. Turning terror into a poetry of beauty and dignity.’ For Woolf and Halligan there is beauty in the midst of pain and they capture this in writing.

Halligan and Woolf both had personal experience of death in their lives and writing helped make sense of the experience. In Moments of Being Woolf writes: ‘I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole.’ She goes on to say, ‘I feel that by writing I am doing what is far more necessary than anything else. All artists I suppose feel something like this’ (MB 72-73). Halligan describes feeling the same way in an article entitled, ‘Why I Write’: ‘I write in order to put the world into words. I’ve always done that in my head. I can’t perceive anything without trying to find words for it.’ Woolf’s stream-of-consciousness writing technique allows readers intimate access to the workings of her

10 Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse (London: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2002 [1927]) 120.

‘Australian Author Marion Halligan – Word artist.’ Robyn Greaves.
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characters minds and the exploration of her themes. Halligan’s exploration of the value of art for her characters achieves a similar effect.

Three of Halligan’s novels spanning a ten-year period feature an artist figure for whom art is like the small candle flame. It provides a light that flickers briefly in the darkness, a ‘luminous moment’ (TM 216) which allays the sense of unease that shadows us due to the changeability and impermanence of life. This illumination is fragile, momentary; it waxes and wanes like the candle flames, causing the artists to return to their art again and again in an act of perpetual searching. In *Lovers’ Knots* (1992) the photographer, Mikelis, uses his art to try and make sense of the world.14 The photograph is a prompt for memory and a catalyst for storytelling in the novel. Lives are measured in terms of birth, marriage and death in a family chronicle that initially sprang from Halligan’s own life. In *The Golden Dress* (1998) painter Ray Pellerin is besieged by death from an early age and this shadows the rest of his life.15 Death robs him of his childhood; he is damaged as a result and uses his art to try and stay grounded in the world. Death shapes Ray’s art and also paralyses it as he struggles to reconcile his grief. *The Fog Garden* (2001) is an intensely personal novel which Halligan wrote following the death of her own husband. The novel’s main protagonist is a writer, Clare, who is also coming to terms with the death of her husband. In *The Fog Garden* death is not a past event but a present experience that the writer character grapples with, writing about it as she tries to negotiate her way through it. In these novels Halligan seems to suggest that the value of art is to provide expression which can lead to illumination and a sense of understanding, but which is only ever momentary. It is sufficient, however, to keep the underlying darkness at bay and allows us to find a way to ‘put the severed parts together’ and live in the face of experiences such as loss, grief and bereavement.

*Lovers’ Knots* is a novel spanning 100 years, weaving its way through an intricate web of stories stemming from the Gray family who migrated to Australia from England. The idea for the novel originated from memories of Halligan’s own childhood in Newcastle: ‘It began with “The Tin Mission”, which was originally a novella, or rather, a long short story. That was my parents’ courtship as I knew it’.16 The novel is structured as a set of short stories which Halligan initially wrote separately and in no particular order:

When I was writing it, every time I typed up a chapter (because I wrote it by hand), I’d have to give it a title. I couldn’t give it a number because I didn’t know what order it was going to be in. I had this big piece of cardboard on a table and I had the names of the chapters on little bits of card, and I’d rearrange them every now and then and I’d think, ‘now what about this order?’ I’d look up the manuscript and see where that bit finished, and quite often there’d be a sort of serendipitous connection because I wanted that image of the box of snapshots that just spreads out. We can understand people’s lives from that.17 (8)

The stories in the novel spread out from the family in ‘The Tin Mission’ as *Lovers’ Knots* traces a vast array of characters in an intricate web or tapestry of lives. ‘We sit in our lives like spiders,’ the narrator interjects at one point, and ‘believe that the web about us is of our own

16 Greaves, Interview 7.
17 Greaves, Interview 7.
spinning, but this is an illusion. It may appear to depend on that object, or this event; in fact the ravellings travel much further back – and will forward – than we are likely to observe’ (LK 149). The idea of searching for hidden patterns in our lives, or the question of whether those patterns even exist – when maybe ‘everything that happens to us [is] the most absurd accident of chance’ – is one Halligan considers throughout Lovers’ Knots (199). The characters experience many changes, triumphs and disappointments across generations as Halligan explores the nature of life and humanity through them. The image of the spider’s web is also used by Woolf in Mrs Dalloway, where she describes a ‘spider’s thread of attachment’ linking characters (MD 97). Like Halligan, Woolf wants to believe that behind everything ‘is hidden a pattern; that we – I mean all human beings – are connected with this’ (MB 72). Connections between characters, between past and present, are explored in both Halligan’s and Woolf’s novels.

The artist figure in Lovers’ Knots is photographer, Mikelis. Mikelis migrated to Australia from Latvia with his mother when he was a child. It was because of a word in a book of pictures of his birthplace that Mikelis came to his life’s obsession and occupation, photography. The word was ‘silver’ and described the light of Latvia: ‘the lands of the Baltic are bathed in silvery light’, Mikelis’ mother told him (LK 126). Light and colour remain of particular interest to Mikelis and to Halligan in her writing. Mikelis quickly developed a ‘compulsion to photograph: to turn experience itself into a way of seeing’ through this art form.18 Photographs function for Mikelis in the way that Woolf describes the novel as an art form: each provide ‘a structure leaving a shape on the mind’s eye’ in order to understand what one sees and feels (ROO 71). In Halligan’s novels, grief shakes the foundation of the characters’ lives and they use their art to provide a shape or structure through which to try and explain the emotion generated.

Mikelis becomes dependent on photography as his primary mode of perception: his ‘camera was his eye ... and did its own seeing’ (LK 45). He continually photographs his wife, Veronica, over the course of their lives together; immortalising her on film as testament to his ongoing desire for her. Their relationship is one of passion based around desire. It survives the death of a child and adultery on both sides in a mutual, spiralling, ongoing desire that is also composed of loss and lack. Mikelis photographs his ‘idol’ attempting to take possession of her through his art, to ‘know’ her, but never quite managing to do so (234). He takes pictures of her ‘that please him; not satisfy, but please’ yet is ‘little interested in conversation with Veronica’ preferring to try and explain her to himself through his art (259). Or is it more a case of explaining himself and his feelings through his photographs of her? Veronica dies unexpectedly at fifty-four, alone in her chair. Mikelis finds her and one of his first actions is to photograph her, later recalling:

The weight of such a moment saves you from it, it’s too large, too heavy; you can only slide around the edge of it. I went and got my camera ... Not until I’d photographed her death could I see it, my eye needed the photos, to know what it saw ... They’re a record not just of that event, but of my presence at it. What I was capturing was my loss. (246)

Mikelis needs the lens of his camera to process his loss. He uses his art in an attempt to see and ‘know’ the darkness he feels inside himself by distancing himself from it through the camera, attempting to preserve what he has lost and find a way to continue living in the face of death.

At the end of *Lovers’ Knots*, life is likened to the reverse side of a tapestry: ‘the back, the knots and tangles and rough ends’ – all we can do is ‘work out [its] pattern as best we can’ (*LK* 376). By structuring the novel with many story threads looping back over each other and linking together a panoply of lives over many generations, all circulating around the motif of the photograph, Halligan raises the question of how we shall live: connecting us to the stories as we recognise a ‘community of experience ... all the lives shuffled in together, all the generations, all different and all the same’ (44). Art connects us in this ‘community of experience.’ The photographs in *Lovers’ Knots* function as *memento mori*: static and poignant reminders of past times, people and places. They are a vehicle for memory and story-telling, measuring the lives of families, and a way of seeing, preserving and understanding experiences such as grief, loss and bereavement.

While the photograph and the art of photography explored in *Lovers’ Knots* are part of a narrative about the cyclical nature of life and death, *The Golden Dress* (also partly set in the working class suburb of Newcastle where Halligan grew up) contains a principle protagonist whose life has been irrevocably shaped by death. Death shadows artist Ray Pellerin, who paints ‘his own stories ... looking not outward, but in’ (*GD* 180). Throughout the novel Ray tries to make sense of his life and his place in the world in an ongoing ‘conversation with himself’ through his art (237). The novel’s epigraph is from Auden’s poem ‘Death’s Echo’: ‘The desires of the heart are as crooked as corkscrews/Not to be born is the best for man/The second best is a formal order/The dance’s pattern, dance while you can.’19 ‘Death’s enticing echo mocks’ (1.40) Ray throughout his life and he finds expression for his experience of it through his art.

Ray was brought up by his mother, Molly, and grandmother, Ivy. From its beginning, Ray’s life is about loss and absence. He is told his father died in a mining accident, causing Molly’s return to Newcastle to live with her mother and take up a job in the laundry where she began her working life. We find out later in the novel that Ray was the result of an unplanned pregnancy and he is given the false version of his beginnings to cover up sexual shame. Ray feels a sense of unease relating to the stories he has been told about his early life and his inability to recall them from within his own memory. As a result of this vague and blurred beginning, Ray thinks of childhood as a ‘formless world ... where you had to hang on to the idea of your own space’ (*GD* 5). It is only as an adult that Ray finds a way to give his childhood ‘form’ through art as he ‘paints his own life’: versions of a past which alters as he tries to fix it in memories he cannot entirely rely upon (237). He uses painting in a similar way to Lily Briscoe, the artist figure in *To the Lighthouse*, who ‘dipped into’ her memories to ‘refashion’ them and felt that they then ‘stayed in the mind almost like a work of art’ (*TTL* 120). Art provides a structure for Ray to process his memories.

Ray’s mother is a tragic figure in the novel. As a girl she is vibrant and full of hope. She has a love of life which expresses itself through her body, particularly in dancing. At the age of fifteen, she ‘jigs her feet and her skimpy skirt flutters’ as she believes ‘the world will be good to her’ (*GD* 68). Her life turns out to be a series of disappointments, from her first experience of sex at a party on the beach, to having to return to Newcastle with baby Ray, born out of wedlock. She continues to dream, however, and to find pleasure in clothes, dancing and dating until she falls in love again, this time with a married man. Believing his story of a dying wife and the promise of a life together, she and Ivy make the golden dress of the novel’s title from a ‘remnant’ of material, a piece of ‘pretty fancy rag’, to wear to a dance which her lover will

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attend. The dress is a ‘dark, golden yellow colour of honey, a heavy linen fabric with crusty embroidery in some sort of silky thread which the light caught and made to gleam like gold’ (130). Molly’s hopes for the future are dashed at the highly anticipated dance as her lover’s supposedly dying wife is there with him, appearing to be in good health. After discovering she is pregnant to her married lover Molly does not return from her usual morning swim and her body is found ‘washed up on the beach at Stockton’ five days later (140). The photographs of Molly dancing are among the few artefacts from Ray’s childhood and later he paints different versions of her, in a working out of grief and loss, ‘transforming Molly into a shining, hieratic figure’ in the paintings.  

The tragic death of his best friend, Step, by shark attack at a surf carnival alters Ray’s life yet again. He tries to wrest Step from the mouth of the shark but cannot save him. Ray internalises the deaths of his mother and best friend, becoming melancholic. He turns to painting as a working out of his grief and loss. Like Lily Briscoe, he ‘could not see ... without a brush in [his] hand’ (TTL 39). As an adult, Ray paints Molly and Step’s deaths ‘in various forms and versions’ in an attempt to find some sort of peace or understanding (GD 170). Ray’s girlfriend, Martine, recognises the underlying grief in Ray’s paintings, which she considers ‘turns into the grief in all human life’ (173). As she gazes at Ray’s painting she thinks:

It’s as though painting is what’s caught Ray, as if it’s what holds him safe, as though all of his youth before that was a falling and only when that reached out and grabbed him was he safe. He’s seen a lot of death, untimely death ... Painting saves him from all that. (240)

The shadow of death lingers over Ray, manifesting in a form of melancholia when he is alone in a studio in Paris. In this space of isolation, Ray’s attention turns to the *clochard*, a local homeless person who fascinates him, just as Halligan herself was fascinated by a similar figure during her time in Paris: ‘he was just there; and he was clearly a narrative that you didn’t know’ (PI 8). Ray begins to draw the *clochard*, then invites him into the studio apartment and prepares sumptuous, elaborate meals for him which he sketches in fine detail so that they become ‘part of a precise linear world’ (GD 26). Ray becomes so absorbed in these drawings he loses the desire for anything else. Ray’s world becomes more and more surreal as he becomes increasingly detached from it. The fine black and white sketches end up ‘piled on the floor in sprawling messy heaps. The pale dust that powdered the *clochard’s* clothes sifted into the studio and lay thick in fine particles over everything’ (26). None of this seems to register with Ray. The fine, detailed sketches are like the expression of an increasing melancholia as his obsession turns inward. Ray’s sense of detachment leads him to walk out onto the street one day and enter the nether world of the *clochard*, ‘knowing that the cage no longer holds him ... his indifference wells calmly and comfortably within him’ (27). He fades into an aimless, drifting existence.

Death has left an indelible mark on Ray. He is damaged by it in a similar way to Septimus after his experience of the war in *Mrs Dalloway*. The effects of too much death cause Septimus to suicide. His death reverberates with other characters in the novel. It causes Clarissa to muse: ‘Death was an attempt to communicate, people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded; one was alone’ (MD 156).

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This is similar to the experience of Ray in *The Golden Dress* – he is alone in his contemplation of death.

By the end of the novel Ray returns to reality, thanks to Martine, but the effects of death have left a luminosity about him, a translucence and fragility that is irrevocable. He is haunted by loss and absence in such a way that he appears destined to remain bewildered, disengaged and damaged. Ray paints images of his loss in an act of mourning which he does not seem entirely able to work through. Art helps him to transfer the images from his mind into a tangible, knowable form, but his pain is not assuaged and so he returns to art again and again. He needs more than art to maintain a connection with the world. He needs another human being. Halligan felt ‘that it was necessary for Ray to be brought back; I don’t think he really wanted to in the beginning. He is a very melancholy person, and a very damaged person.’ Art is an anchor for him and necessary to him, but it is not the only thing he needs to stay connected to life.

*The Fog Garden* (2001) is a further examination of these themes but on a more intimate level. The novel features a recently widowed writer who explores the experience of grief through writing. After her husband’s death from cancer Clare notices that ‘her life has begun throwing up stories, they fall around her like pages of a book, and when she picks them up they find their own order’ (*FG* 238). She writes these ‘shapely intricate narratives’ and takes the reader through the process of finding words and understanding in the midst of grief (134). There has been some debate over whether *The Fog Garden* falls into the category of novel or memoir, yet Halligan insists it is a fiction and has reiterated this on a number of occasions, including in the introduction to the book itself. She is interested in the nature of truth and writing, and feels that fiction allows a writer to be more frank than autobiographical writing or memoir. In *The Taste of Memory* published three years after *The Fog Garden*, Halligan writes that *The Fog Garden* ‘is a novel, it owes a lot to the events of my life but it is still a work of fiction. I needed fiction to be frank in a way I could never have been in a memoir’ (*TM* 10). Dorothy Jones, in an article comparing Halligan’s memoir and *The Fog Garden*, writes: ‘the overlap in the lives of author and character is in some respects *The Fog Garden*’s essence.’ From a place of deep grief and personal loss comes a novel of intimacy: a profound emotional journey following a life-changing event.

From the beginning *The Fog Garden* has an unusual and intriguing structure. The first paragraph begins with a specific place, ‘Lower Snug, Tasmania’, and a date, ‘11.12.98’; as well as a dedication, ‘For Graham, who died, 18.11.98’, situating the novel in reality. The repetition of the short emotionally charged opening sentence – ‘I do not crack. I do not crack’ – sets the tone for the chapter. There is an intimate moment when the narrator notices a ‘man nestles his hand in the hollow of his wife’s neck’ and she reflects on ‘the immensity of [her] loss.’ She is struggling under the weight of a grief which she eloquently describes as an ‘edifice ... a great cathedral’: ‘My grief is a great cathedral and the hand nestling in the neck is a small bird perched on the corbel of one of its arches’ (*FG* 1-2). Early on, the writer has created an imagined structure for her grief, a monument: a concrete edifice in her mind’s eye that helps her not feel so ‘powerless’ in the face of overwhelming emotions that threaten to swallow her. *The Fog Garden* epitomises Woolf’s thoughts on the shape that novels assume out of the ‘kind of emotion that is appropriate to it’ – in this case a cathedral of grief (*ROO* 72).

21 Greaves, Interview 8.
Following this first chapter is an introduction, and it is here that Halligan states quite clearly that the novel’s protagonist, Clare, ‘isn’t me. She’s like me ... Both of us have had to come to terms with being widowed, and sometimes we have made similar choices. Not always. Her voice is quite like mine ... But she isn’t me. She is a character in fiction’ (FG 9). It is difficult not to blur the distinction, particularly when other novels that Halligan has written, such as _Lovers’ Knots_ and _The Golden Dress_, as well as a short story, ‘Vermillion,’ are attributed to Clare in _The Fog Garden_. From this unusual start to the novel we enter Clare’s story, and as a result it is impossible for the reader to know which of Clare’s experiences are also those of Halligan’s. The first chapter and introduction serve to create the personal tone of the rest of the novel; one which seems even more authentic as we are aware the author has an intimate knowledge of the grief and associated desires experienced by her protagonist. The fugue of ‘ambiguous, paradoxical [and] counter-existing’ emotions that make up the cathedral of grief sets the narrator on a bittersweet journey of self-preservation and self-reclamation (239).

Clare’s grieving involves a sexual affair with a married man. Clare and her lover talk, read to each other, listen to music, and eat meals together. The lovers discuss the nature of their relationship even as they are participating in it. Their talk ranges over many topics: love, the nature of adultery, marriage, and, of course, art. In this way Halligan explores her themes through her middle-class, middle-aged characters. The affair has been described as presented in a ‘very literary context’ (‘WF’ 179). The lovers listen to a recording of Dante’s _Inferno_ and discuss the story of Tristan and Iseut. Clare writes about their relationship and reads the stories back to her lover. She

transcribes the stories that her life offers as she turns its pages ... She will not publish these stories, her grief and the expression it’s found in making love will remain as secret as the adultery. Which means that she gave them to her lover to read. They delighted him. It was like making love twice, once in the flesh, again as these other people. (FG 235)

It is when the lover’s wife discovers the affair and it has ended that Clare decides she will indeed publish the stories. Like Halligan, Clare’s stories

fall into her pen. They loop and spiral their frail elaborate structures around the central enormous fact of [Geoffrey’s] death. To begin with she thought most of them were unpublishable. They pleased her because they showed her she wrote to understand, not to publish ...

But time passed, things change, all writers are tarts in the end, she knows now she will let them go, send them out, after all. She has gained enough self-knowledge in the past months to know that for her to write and to publish have become synonymous; that is why she does it. To understand, yes, but showing other people what she has understood is an integral part of it. The logical and only end of the process. (FG 134)

This is similar to the sentiments of Mikelis in _Lovers’ Knots_: ‘We’re all tarts and prostitutes, whores and sluts and their pimps too, blithely selling love to art’ (LK 128). Just as Martine in _The Golden Dress_ thought that ‘maybe all story telling is betrayal’ (GD 262), Clare ‘knows that

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all writing is betrayal, or rather that you have to choose which betrayal it will be, your friends or your art’ (*FG* 167). In *Lovers’ Knots* Mikelis felt he could ‘only slide around the edge’ of his grief; likewise in *The Fog Garden*, Clare’s writing slides ‘around the central enormous fact’ of Geoffrey’s death (134). By making their art public artists risk betraying themselves or others through the many possible interpretations to which their art lends itself.

As well as discussing the nature of art and fiction with her married lover, Clare conducts an email exchange with a man with whom she had a sexual relationship prior to her marriage. Again, there is comfort, or therapy, in writing. Clare finds that ‘writing to him makes her consider what her life is about’ (*FG* 254). In one email she considers

> Fiction ... is about illuminating the world we live in ... That’s why we read ... to make sense of this difficult world ... What’s more it’s about consolation, she says. Like all art, it fills us with desire, which it doesn’t quite assuage, but itself is some comfort. (63)

Throughout *The Fog Garden*, Clare continually turns to writing and words to anchor her and give sense to what she is feeling and experiencing: ‘there are words that the mind gathers and lays like balm on the heart, believing that they will heal, but still the heart aches. Surely a little less? Maybe for a moment’ (231).

The choice of a cathedral as the structure through which to explain her grief suggests the immensity of Clare’s sense of bereavement and the many aspects to it. ‘The cathedral is a place of immense stony contemplative calm’ in which Clare (and Halligan) can imagine they feel safe (*FG* 150). The fog garden is also an actual sculpture in the novel, part of a ‘sculpture garden’ in which there is a restaurant. It is a favourite of Clare’s which she shows her lover after his wife has found out about the affair and it is ending. They watch ‘the white vapour eddy and billow and rise in rags of mist’ about them until it settles on Clare’s hair, where it seems to lay ‘a greyish veil’ (78–79). Her grief shrouds her, covering every aspect of her life, and urges her to find words to express it. For Clare, ‘If you’ve got the right words in the right places, then you can feel you’ve got your life in order, too. For a while’ (121).

As well as exploring her fog garden of grief through sex, friendship, food and writing, Clare embarks on a physical journey overseas. The ultimate result of this journey is also unexpected when she falls ill in Paris and comes face to face with the full force of her grief, unable to run away from it or skirt around it any longer. She decides to embrace it and through the experience is finally able to return home and take up life again. Through the whirling mass of unexpected emotions her experience of grief and loss generated, Clare writes her way to a new understanding of life and her place in it. At the end of *The Fog Garden* it appears she has found a way to reconnect with an altered life. She is again able to find happiness in small pleasures, such as a pair of curtains, or a newly flowering rose. She identifies with Woolf’s Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*: ‘Clare could identify with Mrs Ramsay, a woman who sits and thinks the world she lives into meaning ... Mrs Ramsay ... knows that it is the work of her body and mind to draw ecstasy out of the simple glorious things around her’ (*FG* 148). By processing her grief through writing, Clare negotiates a new way of understanding and living.

*Lovers’ Knots*, *The Golden Dress* and *The Fog Garden* are rich explorations of the value of art both for artists and recipients of the art, particularly in the face of profound emotional experiences. Halligan understands that art does not have (nor should provide) all the answers; it does not solve the mysteries of life, but helps us step back from them and question our lives, in the way that she sees the achievement of fellow Australian author, David Malouf: ‘He traces the little threads of circumstances, of choices and failures, that finally form the cloth of our lives,
and which we mostly do not understand because we are too close to it to see the whole; only later can the patterns be discerned if we care to look.\(^{24}\) The evocative stories woven into each work of fiction contain many layers and the reader is able to enjoy the puzzles of human nature explored in the novels.

Halligan finds ‘luminous moments’ in everyday life, similar to Woolf’s ‘moments of being.’ These moments can be captured in art and preserved forever. For Halligan putting these moments into writing ‘is one of the pleasures of literature; it gives our imaginations a shake and a shove, it changes us, for a moment or forever.’\(^{25}\) Halligan is adept at capturing the fragility of life in her art, its undercurrent of unease, which is part and parcel of what she sees as the imperfect ‘sublunary world’ (TM 164). She sees art as a way of expressing and exploring these undercurrents and their associated desires; what it is that makes us human and causes us to behave as we do. In *The Fog Garden*, Clare makes the comment that ‘art does not see us ... But we see it, and can know that it has seen, if not us, our condition. The likes of us. That’s something. Maybe enough’ (FG 148). Readers can see themselves in Halligan’s fiction in all their individuality, strength and frailty. We need art and artists to embrace the difficult emotions, to find expression for them in their art, time and again; to provide nourishment for our hearts and help us live in the face of life’s dark places as well as celebrating its light.

From her position discussing women and fiction in 1929 it was Woolf’s hope for the future that ‘we shall find [the woman writer] knocking [the novel] into shape for herself when she has free use of her limbs’ (ROO 77). Woolf exhorted women to write with integrity, without compromise due to issues of sex, and without apology: ‘If we have the habit of freedom’ she writes, ‘and the courage to write exactly what we think’ then we can free other women to write (112). Halligan has made the novel her own; she writes from what she knows with insight and eloquence. Yet the battle to be recognised as a female novelist persists. Perhaps we have come a long way since 1929, yet there is still work to be done. Women persist in their struggle to be valued as writers regardless of sex, following Woolf’s closing advice: ‘that so to work, even in poverty and obscurity, is worth while’ (112). Woolf made a remarkable contribution to writing and to ways of thinking about women and fiction. She has been extensively analysed and celebrated since her death. While Halligan is not writing in poverty and (total) obscurity she deserves more critical attention than she has received thus far for her contribution to Australian (and world) literature.

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Transnational Ireland on Stage: America to Middle East in Three Texts

Wei H. Kao

Introduction: Between the Local and the Global on the Irish Stage
Historically, the comprehensive Anglicisation of Ireland from the early nineteenth century, and the geopolitical location of Ireland in Europe, have laid the foundations for more Irish participation on the world stage. The rapid globalisation process, however, has not fully removed the frustration buried deep in the Irish psyche about the country still being in partition, but it has encouraged many contemporary playwrights to express concerns regarding other areas that are just as troubled as the state of their country, despite the fact that the Northern Ireland issue is not yet fully resolved.

It is noteworthy that globalisation, as the continuation of nineteenth- and twentieth-century imperialism in a new form, not only carries forward the exercise of colonial incursion but facilitates the oppressively homogenising effects on the less advantaged Other. This is partly due to the rise of critical theory to ‘productively complicate the nationalist paradigm’ by embarking on transnationalism since the 1970s.\(^1\) One consequence of this was to prompt reevaluations of existing cultural productions, thus initiating cross-cultural and interethnic dialogues that had usually been absent in colonial and Eurocentric establishments, and prompting the public to envisage the Other across both real and imagined borders. Even more significantly, the meaning of a text starts to shift if it is studied in an international context, and this applies particularly to a text in which the characters venture into unexplored territories and impel ‘meaning [to] transform as it travels’.\(^2\) The transformation of meanings is further accelerated by intercultural encounters that are motivated by globalisation that interconnects individuals and societies around the world. Our moral circle thus expands and is redrawn through such physical or imagined encounters with people of different ethnicities at distant locations. In the case of Ireland, how globalisation benefits or frustrates the Emerald Isle has been a subject for inquiry in recent decades, alongside that of the rollercoaster ride of the Celtic Tiger.

It might be of interest to see how contemporary Irish playwrights, by creating transnational dramas that highlight border-crossing experiences, reassess more rarely regarded Irish experiences, past and present, in international scenarios. Their attempts at going beyond sectarian politics, partly to cultivate a transnational audience, may aim at challenging the Irish-centered convention that has existed since the movement towards Irish Independence and the Irish Revival. It is noteworthy that they contextualise Irish history not necessarily from insular viewpoints but in connection with other regional or ethnic experiences, thus initiating multicultural counteractions with predominant world powers.

The three texts to be explored here are Frank McGuinness’s *Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me* (1992), Sebastian Barry’s *White Woman Street* (1992), and Colin Teevan’s *How Many Miles to Basra*? (2006), which are set respectively in Beirut, the state of Ohio and Iraq. The questioning of narrow national models in these plays may open possibilities for creating meaning in a transnational context and reveal how prejudices and boundaries can be transmitted to distant locations and then become institutionalised.

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Frank McGuinness’s Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me (1992): A Room without a View in Beirut

Born in 1953 in Buncrana, located in northern County Donegal, Republic of Ireland, and close to the border that divides the island, Frank McGuinness has admitted that in his youth the frequent border-crossing experiences from home to Derry had a significant impact on his writing, prompting him to be ‘a writer involved with politics’ in an attempt ‘to cause a different type of bother.’

Carrying these experiences into his adulthood, McGuinness developed a critical observational perspective concerning Irish relations with the outside world and those binary oppositions and ideologies that lead to political and religious sectarianism in Northern Ireland. Although some critics think that postcolonial studies, with their explicitly political nature of inquiry, have come under threat because of globalisation, they are essentially two sides of the same coin and deserve ‘a dialectical relationship with each other, [as the] histories of the two are inseparable.’

Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me, set in a cell in Beirut where three hostages of different nationalities are chained to separate walls, offers a global and postcolonial space in which to examine the man-made divides that trouble these characters from Ireland, England and America. As they have all been abducted randomly on the street simply for their skin colour, the significance of their given identities, becoming void, challenges existing political philosophies.

Regarded as ‘his most accessible play’ for American audiences, the play received international acclaim due to its ‘cultural references of brotherhood,’ as McGuinness mentioned in an interview.

Although this is not the first Irish play that has appealed to international audiences, it should be noted that its success is due to the presentation of transnational experiences that question sectarianism and suggest a humanitarian perspective on issues that are relevant in countries where the play is staged, despite the playwright once expressing the view that a political play cannot effectively change anything: ‘I don’t think you can change people’s attitudes and I don’t think you should try.’

Nevertheless, what McGuinness was attempting was an experiment through which an international scenario can be presented that enables Ireland to be seen in a broader context. Although set in Lebanon, the play was written by an Irish playwright who has to cross the border to the Republic for study and work and has acquired mixed views as a result of being both an outsider and insider of Northern Ireland. This drama displays a similar stance in that it allows the audience to cross borders in order to understand the complicated relationships between the Middle East and Western superpowers. This play also illustrates how McGuinness, mainly based in Dublin, has expanded his attentions ‘well beyond the concerns of the local and the national’, so as to produce an alternative view in which the public can see Ireland within an international framework and the wider world from an Irish perspective.

The play may not demonstrate a ready-made solution to the Irish/British political dilemma over Northern Ireland but it may, as Homi K. Bhabha claims, ‘emerge as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal’ of current ideologies. As Eurocentrism that has dominated

4 Jay 34.
5 Jacqueline Hurtley, ‘Frank McGuinness,’ Ireland in Writing: Interviews with Writers and Academics eds. Jacqueline Hurtley, Rosa Gonzalez, Ines Praga, and Esther Aiaga (Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998) 67. The play has won the London Standard Award, the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature, the London Fringe Award, the Harvey’s Best Play Award, and the New York Drama Critics Circle Award. In addition, from its premiere to 1998 this play had been translated into twelve languages.
7 Jordan 235.
8 Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994) 86.
western perceptions of the Orient that is disavowed, it is fair to say that it is not until these western hostages in the play are made powerless by their abductors that audiences can see how they are victimised by the Eurocentric myth per se. Take Edward, an Irishman and a hardline republican soldier who volunteers to join the UN’s peace-keeping troops in Lebanon, for example. The reason that Edward would volunteer for peace-keeping duties in the Middle East is in part to fulfill his desire for adventure: ‘[I was at] home wondering what it would be like to be here.’ His venture to the Middle East is not a scouting trip but is implicitly involved with European superiority over the troubled East, as far as the UN is concerned. The peace-keeping mission, protected by armed force, may fail to be accomplished but technically it is a defence of the failings of Eurocentrism. Interestingly, before Edward departs for the Middle East, he has sensed that at home in Europe he is trapped ‘in a bad hole’. As his home in Ireland has been a source of disappointment, his voluntary admission to the UN’s peace-keeping troops is thus an intentional breakaway from home and an adventure that should bring him new excitements. Ironically, his adventure with the UN – an organisation that operates beyond physical borders – is not as romantic as he had hoped but proves to be a fiasco, in that the European values he follows, perhaps unselectively, prompt him to be abducted and imprisoned in a windowless cell in which he has no idea of time, date, or year. Edward and his cellmates are faced not only with an endless predicament but the fact that they are the sacrificial victims of the Eurocentric illusion about ruling the East as a dominator and peace-keeper. Ironically, the cell is as borderless as the UN, but the operation of the UN results in a prolonged war in which no one has ‘any sense of causality, development, fullness or even duration’, as these hostages experience in their helpless state.

McGuinness’s choices of characters give this play a confrontational air, since these hostages are, at least in the view of their abductors, political and cultural intrusions to the Islamic world. Adam, an American doctor, whose research topic is ‘the effects of war on innocent young minds’, enacts American values in places where he is not welcome. The research that Adam conducts, which includes consideration of shell-shocked Lebanese soldiers, is not therefore simply a humanitarian task. Metaphorically, anywhere that American troops are stationed functions as an extended frontier within which American nationalism is celebrated and Adam’s research is duly supported. Although Adam’s presence in Lebanon may suggest the advent of modernisation and globalism – albeit for the benefit of the West – the random abduction of the hostages signifies the unpredictability of the Middle East crisis. More specifically, for Lebanese civilians, taking three white men hostage is more than an expression of animosity towards the military forces of the West, as these hostages experience in their helpless state.

10 McGuinness 92.
11 McGuinness dedicated this 1992 play to Brian Keenan, who published An Evil Cradling (1991) to describe his four and a half years spent as a hostage, along with other captives from twelve nations, in Beirut from 1986 to 1990. However, McGuinness, perhaps to respect the privacy of the other hostages, has on other occasions claimed that this play has ‘nothing to do with Brian’s life; there are parallels with what he suffered – but it isn’t his story’ (qtd. in Hiroko Mikami, Frank McGuinness and His Theatre of Paradox (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2002), 95.
13 McGuinness 94.

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windowless cell in which the three hostages are jailed and guarded by Lebanese warders therefore epitomises those people who are most powerless and deprived in the international political power struggle. The frustration, helplessness and anger of Lebanese civilians therefore lead to random abductions from a Beirut street market.

The three hostages’ isolation from the outside world indicates that the clashes are not simply between two nations but are confrontations between modernity and tradition, imperialism and nativism, Christianity and Islam, or more generally the West and the East. Specifically, with the hope of being released, Adam recites passages aloud from the Koran so as to impress the soldiers that he has been properly converted. The Bible, alongside the Koran in the cell, is of little use to strengthen the faith of the three hostages but confuses them about whether they may be magi or actually sinners already abandoned by the Christian world. However, they gain comfort and help in relieving their anxiety by engaging in chitchat about sexual encounters, arguments about word choices in Irish and British English, and plots they make up for horror films, as well as undertaking minor physical exercise in the limited space. In other words, what has been assumed to be universally or globally feasible may be locally problematic, antagonistic or meaningless in the multi-cultural scenarios experienced by these hostages.

It is worthy of mention that, in one production of this play, in 1992, Adam, the American hostage, was played by Hugh Quarshie, a black actor born in Ghana. The preference of the director, Robin Lefevre, for a black performer profoundly challenges the western perspective of the world, as it reminds the audience of ethnic biases against non-white communities in history. The intention of casting a black actor carries an irony in that American or European values have historically resulted in the dislocation of a huge number of non-white people from their place of origin, while Adam, being black, is seen as a scapegoat for the intrusion of the West in Lebanon. Although, metaphorically, the presence of a black actor in this production dramatises the interethnic and transcultural elements in international politics, and involves an implicit call to examine racism in a West/East encounter, it also implies the vulnerability of border-crossing exchange, especially for dislocated non-white people, in that globalism still guarantees Eurocentric and American interests on the front line. This explains why Michael, an English lecturer, is the only one who is not released at the end of the play but left in a desolate state in the cell. He is thus an involuntary blood sacrifice in the confrontation between the UN and the guerilla forces in Lebanon – most likely for the strategic benefit of the former.

McGuinness’s Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me dramatises a border-crossing experience by relocating Irish, American and English protagonists to a Middle Eastern scenario, which is symptomatic of the growing interest by Irish playwrights in visualising their nation within a global context and in giving a voice to those who had hitherto been neglected during the social transformation of Ireland. In order to discuss further the enduring antagonisms of the global and the local in relation to the Irish experience in an international context, Sebastian Barry’s White Woman Street, set in a small town in Ohio in the United States, will be explored in the next section.

14 Analyses of McGuinness’s Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me have, since its first production, been abundant and in depth. However, discussion about employing a black actor to perform this American role is limited, albeit that ‘there is no mention of his colour in the published text play’ (Jordan 168). The choice of a Ghanaian actor greatly complicates the transnational and cross-ethnic nature of the play and relates to two other plays to be discussed later in this essay. See Eamonn Jordan, The Feast of Famine: The Plays of Frank McGuinness (Berlin: Peter Lang 1997).
Sebastian Barry’s *White Woman Street* (1992): A Historical Revisiting of ‘1916’ in Ohio

One feature of a number of contemporary dramas that concern the foreign experiences of Irish people is that their characters often wish to be away from Ireland or have recently returned home. Only a limited, but not necessarily insignificant, number of Irish plays are primarily set overseas with an international cast, which diversifies the conventional Irish theatre – ‘by Irish authors, and plays relative to Ireland interpreted by local actors under a self-contained board of direction.’ It can thus be argued that Barry’s *White Woman Street*, looking at Ireland from an alternative historical viewpoint that is less keen to prove the universality of any perspective, illustrates an ignored Irish experience in a transnational context in America.

A noteworthy fact about this play, set in 1916 in the wilds of Ohio, is its correlation with the Irish experience in that particular year, when the Easter Rising, which is lionised as a key signifier in republican discourse, took place. Although that event is only mentioned in passing through an Irish protagonist’s description of home, the playwright’s choice of this significant year in Irish history creates a strong resonance among Irish audiences. Notably, by introducing a revisionist look at this crucial year in modern Irish history, the play touches on an often ignored but unsettling facet of the lives of Irish-Americans that had troubled their forefathers down the years, including those remaining in or emigrating from Ireland. In other words, in this play the Easter Rising rings its bell in a manner that is not obvious but is also not silent, in that the audience – watching a play set in Ohio in 1916 – returns to a historical year in which the Easter Rising took place and which has been consistently over-highlighted by Irish historians. This strategy allows the audience to observe, in a transnational context, how the Irish Famine and American Indian Wars had caused the Irish to be both victims and oppressors in the New World. This unpleasant facet of Irish life, however, was rarely featured by Barry’s early predecessors who were more concerned about the Irish (cultural) nationalism that gave birth to the Irish Literary Theatre, later renamed the Abbey Theatre. The neglected experiences of the Irish diaspora in Ohio, as the play illustrates, can serve as a critique of the master-narrative of nationalistic dramaturgy and unearth those Irish-Americans who ‘do not fit with the way we want to imagine our history’.

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15 Migration is a theme frequently visited by Irish playwrights with characters wishing to leave or recently returning. The settings may be across the Atlantic, within the British Isles, in Europe or the Southern Hemisphere. To name only a few: Brian Friel’s *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964), *The Loves of Cass McGuire* (1966), *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) and *Molly Sweeney* (1994), Martin McDonagh’s *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996) and *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1996), Hugh Leonard’s *Da* (1978), Tom Murphy’s *Conversations on a Homecoming* (1985), Anne Devlin’s *After Easter* (1994), Christina Reid’s *The Belle of the Belfast City* (1989) and *My Name, Shall I Tell You My Name?* (1989), Jimmy Murphy’s *The Kings of the Killburn High Road* (2000), Sebastian Barry’s *The Only True History of Lizzie Finn* (1995), and Jim O’Hanlon’s *The Buddhist of Castlenock* (2002). Dolores Walshe’s *In the Talking Dark* (1989), and Damian Smyth’s *Soldiers of the Queen* (2002), both of which are set in South Africa under apartheid; Dermot Bolger’s *In High Germany* (1990) and John Banville’s *Conversation in the Mountains* (2008), set in Germany in the 1980s and 60s respectively. Noticeably, there are also plays about non-Irish migrants in Ireland, for example Donal O’Kelly’s *Farawayan* (1998), *Asylum! Asylum!* (1994) and Gavin Kostick’s *The Ash Fire* (2002). However, I propose to focus on these three plays set in relatively unusual locations in Irish drama, in an attempt to explore those often marginalised Irish experiences overseas.


17 Barry does not have many plays set outside Ireland, *White Woman Street* and *The Only True History of Lizzie Finn* (1995) are two clearly set overseas, while the latter – set at the turn of the twentieth century about a returned woman migrant’s marriage with a descendent of the Big House in County Kerry – is partially set in Bristol. This play has a colonial subtext as regards the Boer War in South Africa.

18 The year is mentioned in the stage direction on page 122 and Trooper and Clarke’s conversation on page 161.

On the other hand, it should also be noted that this 1992 historical drama illustrates, to some degree, an Ireland that is being transformed into a global state. This is done by presenting characters of several different nationalities – with only one character, out of six culturally displaced outlaws, being Irish. It can be assumed that, compared to the revisionist debates which have focused by and large on Irish native experiences, the geographical distance maintained in the play brings about a ‘direct challenge to the primacy of the nation-state in its present form’, as well as an alternative perspective in (re-)writing Irish history.\(^{20}\)

The alternative perspective resides firstly in the background choices of multi-national characters who all live on the margin of migrant society as gangsters who plan to rob trains that carry gold and their future. What draws them together, notably, is the force that edges them out from mainstream society. Trooper, in his fifties, came to America from Ireland in his youth, and was a labourer on canals and railroads. Without having the means to support himself, and being unable to go home, he has joined the gang in order to make his fortune. James Miranda is a black slave who, on seeing his peers killed and dumped in a ditch by their owner, has run away from a farm in Tennessee. Nathaniel Yeshov, a young man in his thirties from Brooklyn, and of Russian-Chinese parentage, constantly feels alienated for being unable to speak properly in either Russian or Chinese, and neither can he identify himself as an American: ‘It was prison the way I be in the head.’\(^{21}\) Clarke, in his seventies, is a native American Indian from Virginia who has experienced the mass slaughter of his people and watched women being raped by whites. He survived by becoming a pimp for colonial officers and speaking ‘damn good English … [as] easy as white man.’\(^{22}\) Mo Mason, also in his seventies, is an Ohio Amish who has never returned to his puritanical community during the past fifty years but is still mentally trapped by its teaching, which is in conflict with his desire for whores. Blakely, an Englishman from Lincolnshire, is no less alienated than the other ‘poor robbermen without no homes.’\(^{23}\) Although they have been on the run together for five years and all have issues with each other, their common experience of having been in prison and wishing ‘to forget such places’ prompts their comradeship and desire to stay in the gang,\(^{24}\) alongside their collective longing for being ‘a true man with gold … Gold can turn a human creature any colour.’\(^{25}\)

The background of these six dislocated characters illuminates the creation of a performative space\(^{26}\) that potentially extends the realm of Irish historical revisionism by spotlighting the deprived Irish in the US and their little-documented experiences. On the other hand, the fact that the play was premiered at the Bush Theatre in London, and the dramatisation of the overseas Irish in relation to other ethnicities, imply the growing desire of Irish playwrights to boost the visibility of Ireland in the global network.\(^{27}\) Despite the play focusing to a great extent on Trooper, the Irish wanderer, and his

\(^{22}\) Barry 155.
\(^{23}\) Barry 130.
\(^{24}\) Barry 158.
\(^{25}\) Barry 141.
\(^{26}\) The performative space, or performativity, is a notion first created by Judith Butler, who describes it as a kind of ‘reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains.’ Although Butler applied it mainly to gender issues, this notion has been used as an interdisciplinary term referring to the challenge to existing ideologies and traditions or the intention of constructing new ones. This play, by presenting a foreign scenario that coincides with the 1916 Easter Rising, may be performative in this sense. For more details on performativity, see Butler’s Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex (New York: Routledge) 2.
\(^{27}\) White Woman Street was premiered at the Bush Theatre in London on 23 April 1992 and toured to the Abbey Theatre for another run from 21 May of the same year.
suspicious involvement in the mass slaughter of native Americans, his interactions with people of other ethnicities imply the double marginalisation of those already silenced in a transnational context. That is, regardless of whether these six characters have arrived in America as low-skilled labourers or economic migrants – brought by the early stage of globalisation – they are incapable of speaking with a public voice but have to survive individually on the lowest rung of society. Specifically, the tensions between the different ethnicities in the play and the killing of native Americans disclose the brutality inherent in the imperial rule of European settlers – usually unseen by the public or not featured in written histories – as it is always the winners rather than the defeated who get to write about themselves. Those who cannot be conveniently categorised as belonging to a recognisable nationality would be marked as inferior and consequently excluded from official documentation. Specifically, the six characters who deviate from their original courses in life would probably be written out of official history or, at most, be given only the merest mention in history monographs and textbooks. For this reason, as Ireland had not yet been recognised as a country in 1916, Trooper cannot help but fall through the cracks, which, along with his murder of a native American child prostitute, leads to him becoming an outcast in (Irish-)American society.

The emphasis on one’s national identity is thus a matter of challenge, in that all the other five characters are in a similar quandary because of their ambiguous identities. For example, Nathaniel cannot identify himself as either Russian or Chinese because of his mixed origins, his incompetence in speaking his native languages, and being unfamiliar with either culture. As for James Miranda and Clarke, their skin colour bars them from the political standing extended to white European settlers and their descendants, despite the fact that James, an escaped black slave, is also involuntarily relocated to America from a distant location. Clarke, the native American Indian, is on the cultural and political fringe in the ‘new world,’ even though no one in the play can be more native than him. Mo Mason’s lust for women makes him religiously unfit in the eyes of the puritanical Amish community. Blakely, the only one who retains a recognisable identity as an Englishman, cannot return to his home in Grimsby, Lincolnshire, as it has been devastated by famine. Under these circumstances, the distinctions between their national or ethnic identities are gradually eroded until they are merely classed as robbers of gold trains – without any further critical explorations being needed.

Although White Woman Street is set in Ohio with multi-ethnic characters, the Irishness of the play rests on young Trooper’s imagined encounter with an Irish prostitute whose presence is deemed to be unmentionable as a cure for the homesickness of Irish soldiers who are ‘sullied up by [Indian] wars’. Ironically, Trooper, travelling through ‘five hundred miles of wilderness’ and not meeting the prostitute he has long desired, ends up raping an underage native American girl who slits her throat in his presence after submitting to him. Such a horrific experience should not be seen as an isolated case but as one of many undocumented incidents which happened during European colonial rule up to the mid-twentieth century. Satirically, what initially draws Trooper to White Woman Street, a red-light district, is the urge to ease his homesickness by visiting an Irish whore from Listowel: ‘a sight of home, a goddess of my own countrymen,’ as she has been idolised as ‘a woman of a hundred stories, a hundred boasts, a kind of fire-hot legend of those days, such as had power over their talk and ... was likely a goddess, and surely built that canal.’ The playwright might well have intended to produce a counter image to Kathleen ni Houlihan, a mythical and over-

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28 Barry 149.
29 Barry 147.
30 Barry 149.
31 Barry 150.

politicianised figure in Ireland, whereas this insalubrious image of an Irish whore in Ohio may potentially add problems to the nationalistic discourse. On the other hand, these culturally and geographically displaced characters, including the Irish and native Indian prostitutes whom the audience never see on stage, illustrate the darker side of American history that involves injustice, racism and infringements of human rights.

It can be contended that, by inventing characters who are constantly on the move as robbers and escaped slaves, the playwright may want audiences to see these individuals within the larger historical context of the American society becoming highly capitalistic after the Gold Rush. As the Gold Rush produced a westward flow of people to California for the first time in American history, the *nouveaux riches* were promptly created, and the resulting capital was redistributed with a mixed impact on class distinction, slavery, and interethnic exchange. Arguably, by presenting an image of how these migrants survive in an interethnic scenario, the play reroutes the moral direction of a national drama on the world stage. That these characters are of Chinese, Russian, native American, English and Irish origins implies an advent of intercultural exchange in the coming era.

Last but not least, the playwright’s portrait of an Irish character overseas in 1916 unveils the parochial nature of the Irish nationalistic historiography in terms of its general dismissal of the experiences of Irish immigrants abroad. Notably, the play encourages the creation of an alternative perspective for the making of an international history of Ireland in which the Irish at home and overseas should both be considered in order to gain a more complete picture of the nation.

**Colin Teevan’s *How Many Miles to Basra?* (2006): From Patriots to Traitors?**

Born in Dublin in 1968 and having worked for extended periods in Paris, Edinburgh, Newcastle, Leeds, New York, and for six years in Northern Ireland, Teevan is different from many fellow playwrights who have lived mostly in Ireland. Though based in London, his frequent border-crossing experiences have sharpened his sensitivity and led to shrewd observations about cultural clashes; only in London does he feel ‘least anxious about the issues of cultural difference’.32 The mid-twentieth-century generation he was born into also experienced the Northern Ireland Troubles and their aftermath, witnessing how Ireland was transformed from an agricultural state to an economic power known as the Celtic Tiger.

Partly to examine how news can be manipulated, and partly to interrogate British policy in the Middle East under Tony Blair’s administration, Teevan’s *How Many Miles to Basra?* parallels the perspectives of different ethnicities and nationalities, in order to reflect on the imperial rule that once dominated Ireland and was now seen in another form in Iraq. First broadcast in July 2004 on BBC Radio 4 and later premiered at West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds in 2006, this anti-war play provides audiences with a critical distance from which to see the absurdities ‘in the white heat of the invasion of Iraq by Allied Forces’, as the playwright stated.33 What is of greater significance is that Teevan continues McGuinness’s and Barry’s attempt in contextualising characters of different ethnicities in a wider international context.34 By questioning deeply the legitimacy of the British and

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34 Teevan is a well-travelled playwright, and these experiences may have contributed to a perspective, often seen in his dramas, in which the Irish, even a single character, should be examined through a broader framework alongside those of other ethnicities. Compared with McGuinness’s and Barry’s, Teevan’s choices of setting are much more multinational. He not only adapted works by Euripides, Cervantes, Wu Cheng-en, Henrik Ibsen, Jaroslav Hašek, Edoado Erba, and Giuseppe Manfridi, but co-authored two plays with Hideki Noda, a Japanese playwright. He is one of the very few
American invasion of Iraq and their prolonged military occupation of the country, the play demonstrates how the two world powers had not only damaged the infrastructure of major cities, such as Baghdad and Basra, but also taken the lives of thousands of civilians as the country fell into anarchy.

Although the play challenges the rightfulness of the invasion under Tony Blair’s leadership, it is Ursula, a woman journalist from Ireland, who initiates a series of journalistic assignments that would potentially embarrass the British government, despite her reporting being, to some extent, questionable due to her insufficient research, biases, assumptions and personal emotions. The problem of news-making in producing a favourable storyline is unfolded at the beginning of the play, when Ursula is seen at a news agency in London, complaining that the items she has submitted for a report have not been sorted in chronological order as she expected. Arguably, what the playwright would like to illustrate through Ursula is not just the work ethics of journalism but also the anti-terrorist ethos that is nurtured by the western media. The news agency that Ursula approaches, which is an embodiment of the western media, should be seen as partly responsible for popular images of the Middle East crisis. Its biased reporting prompts misleading impressions about the Iraqi government supporting al-Qaeda and harbouring ‘weapons of mass destruction’, despite there being no clear evidence of a connection or of such weapons being held. Incidentally, the play, which was premiered in 2006, reflected the playwright’s highly critical views about the Blair government’s justification for dispatching troops to Iraq. In the play, British soldiers’ killing of a group of unarmed Bedouin civilians showcases this particularly unpleasant facet of the war.

Ursula’s reports about the killing of civilians are certainly not welcome to the right-wing media, whereas such killings can be common but are often strategically covered up or by the authorities: Stewart, a low-ranked British officer in the play, has experienced them on the front line in different trouble spots. Specifically, in contradiction to Ursula’s on-site observation, the cause of the deaths of the Bedouin civilians receives no mention in the British media, while the British military vehicle which is accidentally blown up by a British soldier is presented in the news as a result of terrorist action. It can thus be argued that the playwright intends to question the interdependence between the media and the British government. To achieve this, and partly to attract viewers/readers with visual or audible evidence and supporting matter, only those incidents which can be reconstructed by the media in a literal and lineal manner would be made public and they are often edited by people who have never been on the front line. Individual experiences, which Ursula thinks are more worthy of report, are often ignored or manipulated to suit political agendas, so as to solicit public support and to demonise the religious and cultural Other as potential terrorists.

A less discussed facet of the Iraq War, which this play explores, is how racism and sexism can be pillars of war. For instance, the soldiers’ sexual fantasies about and assaults on Ursula, and their constant racist remarks about Iraqis, illustrate the excessive western chauvinism that exists in military operations. For soldiers, a female presence is deemed to be a potential interference with military action on the front line. Ursula is thus the detested Other to be removed, although her presence, as well as that of the ethnic, religious and cultural Others from the Islamic world, is necessary for the western superpowers to verify their (masculine) superiority and to confirm their domination over the less defensible. Specifically, the demonstration of masculinity exemplifies the continuation of colonial domination over the Other and the weaker sex – even metaphorically. That Ursula is often called ‘bitch’ by the soldiers, and the fact that she appears in the sexual fantasies that lead to Freddie’s attempt to rape her, are a metaphor for how imperial and patriarchal power still
lingers in the twenty-first century. For these soldiers, Ursula is a much more convenient target for domination than the Iraqi guerillas. A further contradiction of the peacemaking mission of the Allied Forces is the verbal and physical abuse of civilians who are either carelessly killed like the Bedouin or are frequently dubbed ‘ragheads’.  

Unfortunately, how the violence is used is ‘classified information’, as the (accidental) killing of Bedouin civilians in the play is immediately covered up, while the number of British casualties is soon made public through the media. 

The play serves to illuminate agonising truths about of the Iraq War, in that the portrayal of brutalities is to some extent faithful, given that the playwright had interviewed several war reporters and soldiers who confirmed that ‘accidental killings at roadblocks’ and ‘payment of blood money’ did happen. Although highly critical of the military operations of the Allied Forces, Teevan does not seem to advance any perspective in describing the troubles in Iraq and their causes and effects, given that the reporting by western media about the Middle East was not always impartial and sometimes only reflected the interests of the winner, or the Bush’s and Blair’s administrations.

What is also noteworthy is a reference to Kabro a Generals, provided by Malek, an Iraqi taxi driver who is hired to take Ursula and the soldiers across the desert. As Malek explains, those enshrined in the temple as great generals by Alexander the Great are only ‘in his version of the truth’, while they are ultimately traitors in the eyes of the ancient Persians. Kabro a Generals thus represents ‘what was a sign of treachery to the East, [but] was a shrine to heroism in the West.’ With this reference to the Persian version of a historical incident, the presence of Allied Forces in Iraq as ‘another western invasion’ is comparable to that of the late Babylonian period, as Malek implies to his passengers. To Iraqis, the result of the extended war is not liberation but never-ending occupation that is regarded ‘more as arrogance’ on the part of the West. There is therefore an implicit satire here, in that these soldiers who are undertaking an unauthorised mission are not only traitors to Britain but are similar to those Greeks who once showed the white flag to the Persian Empire but were later honoured by Alexander the Great for political purposes. It can be argued that the truth will only be fully appreciated when an interethnic or intercultural understanding of history is established. Ironically, as the reports written by Ursula are subject to re-editing by the news editors in London, exactly how the coalition forces of the UK and US in the Middle East operate would only be available to those who are deeply involved in the action on the front line.

The Breakdown of Euro-Centrism in the Three Irish Plays

As was mentioned earlier, Eurocentrism has for centuries, both explicitly and implicitly, directed the making of the oriental Other, and it was only when postcolonial critics started to develop transnational perspectives that the insularism of nationalistic discourses could be examined and challenged. As for Ireland, its geopolitical and economic ties with Great Britain throughout history have provided a fixed point for critics from which to discuss the central-periphery model of

36 Teevan 29.
37 Sexton 1.
38 Teevan 71.
39 Teevan 71.
40 Teevan 70.
41 Teevan 70.
42 According to Malek, the Greek generals found themselves surrounded by hostile tribes, so they decided to negotiate with the Persians. However, the Persians refused any negotiation but cut off their heads and displayed them in public. However, seventy years later when the Persian Empire fell to the Greeks, Alexander the Great set up Kabro a Generals to house their remains and to honour the generals who were thought to have been sacrificed for Greece.

(post-)imperialism, and also provide a location for observing how transnationalism converts a nation-state into a global one.

The three plays discussed as a group exemplify a process that can be dated back to the native American conflicts, the Cold War, and the Iraq War, during which world power was reaffirmed through a series of military actions. Notably, the three plays demonstrate how the ‘zones of silence’ which are exclusively created by ‘a [Eurocentric] diasporan axis of political, military and economic affiliations’ have brought about the difficulties of lateral communications between and within oppressed countries. The windowless cell in Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me, the suicide of a native American girl in White Woman Street, and the miscommunication between British soldiers and Bedouin civilians in How Many Miles to Basra? all embody such communication failures as experienced by an individual or a group of mixed ethnicities in a transnational scenario.

One facet that these three plays have in common is that they were all premiered in the UK, rather than in Ireland. One reason might be because contemporary Irish playwrights hope to gain a wider audience outside the Emerald Isle with plays set in international contexts. They are also keen observers of the social and political transformation of British society and its problematic alliance with the US.

Both first staged in 1992, respectively at the Hampstead Theatre and the Bush Theatre, Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me and White Woman Street reflect the changing attitudes of the public as regards British Dependent Territories and their colonial links to Britain, particularly two years after Margaret Thatcher resigned from her post as Prime Minister. Furthermore, although Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me was adapted from the accounts of Brian Keenan, an Irish writer who attracted the attention of western media after being abducted in Beirut in 1985 and held captive for the next four and a half years, the play questions indirectly the British alliance with the US during the Cold War, and reveals the extended consequences that afflicted civilians in the affected nations.

White Woman Street, by the same token, is a dramatic critique, from an Irish point of view, of the British imperial mindset embodied by the 1982 Falklands War, following which the Conservative Party received a resurgence of support in the next year’s UK general election. The gap between the privileged and the powerless in an international scenario is further visualised in How Many Miles to Basra?, premiered in 2006 in London’s Tricycle Theatre, which is a venue known for its left-wing stance. The position taken is that the Iraq War was prolonged by leaders who could have terminated it – seeing that no weapons of mass destruction were eventually found.

The three plays under discussion suggest not only the need to reassess Irish experiences in the present and the past, but more significantly they offer retrospective views of imperial violence and its impact on people of different ethnicities. By not endorsing any particular ideologies or cultures, the foci of these plays are on marginalised individuals and their struggles in a transnational setting.

44 The name ‘British Dependent Territory,’ introduced by the British Nationality Act 1981, was replaced by ‘British Overseas Territory,’ introduced by the British Overseas Territories Act 2002. The British territories overseas were still officially called ‘Dependent Territories’ when the two plays were first staged.
45 Specifically, these two plays were staged after the first Gulf War (2 August 1990 – 28 February 1991) during John Major’s premiership. Major’s successful renewal of his term of office by winning the general election of 1992 was in part due to the success of the UN authorised coalition force to which the UK committed a major contingent, and in part to his replacement of Thatcher’s unpopular Community Charge with a Council Tax. In spite of this fourth consecutive victory for the Conservative Party, it is probable that both playwrights would have wanted to draw the attention of the audience to the institutional deprivation of the disadvantaged in the British system. The English lecturer, Michael, who is the only person not released from the windowless cell in Someone, and Trooper, the Irishman wandering in the wilds of Ohio in White Woman Street, showcase the playwrights’ concerns for these disregarded people.

which notably counteracts the lingering effects of Euro-centric imperialism. Set outside Ireland, the three dramatic texts may correspond to what Steffen Mau implies by his proposal for a more interactive international community in which ‘the social life of each individual is less and less limited to the nation-state territory’, the traditional borders of which are now constantly contested, de-naturalised and hybridised (23). As the three plays demonstrate, the more that confrontations are ignited by globalisation, the greater the chance that transnational dialogues will be able to build a platform for all voices to be heard.

One of the shared characteristics of the three plays is the challenge by the playwrights to European cognition of the world since the Enlightenment and also insular Irish nationalism. In McGuinness’s Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me, the hostages’ lives in Lebanon are entirely subject to people who revere the Islamic Koran, while audiences see Edward, the Irishman, and Michael, the English lecturer, argue over the correct use of certain English words. Their debate is meaningless, because what they believe to be appropriate usage is only ideological or simply customary. That is, when Edward insists that Michael should use ‘film’ instead of ‘movie’ to refer to a motion picture, it is the Irishman himself who holds on to a linguistic convention which makes him more English than his English cellmate. As a whole, what used to be regarded as major cultural values can be politically invalid or religiously void in the world of the Other. For Michael and Edward, their argument does nothing that contributes to their being released sooner from the prison of the Other, or their enemy.

Barry’s White Woman Street also challenges the nationalistic historiography about the year of 1916 by setting it in a transnational scenario in that year, although 1916 is only mentioned in passing during the play. Whereas fervent Irish nationalists were keen to posit a political identity that was different from the English one, and historians have documented and entered debates on the domestic turbulence, the ups-and-downs of Irish migrants are almost forgotten in the official records. For Trooper and other Irish migrants – whose love for Ireland is no less than that of any Irish nationalist – their bodily contact with an Irish whore, her smell and touch, is more important than the Easter Rising, in that her body prompts them to feel most physically in touch with Mother Ireland. Ironically, as Trooper has been physically and ethnically subjugated to the given social/colonial hierarchy, his rape of the young Indian girl, or ‘that furrow’, has allowed him to receive a temporarily improved status as a white dominator, even though he is also a socially marginalised character in that settlers-dominated, migrant society.

The depiction of the conduct of the Allied Forces in Teevan’s How Many Miles to Basra? can be seen as a strong critique of Tony Blair’s administration and its anti-terrorist agenda. Although Ursula and the news agency in London both have their own biases about how British Intelligence ‘sex(ed) up the dossier on Saddam’s weapon capabilities’, it is fair to assert that the extended occupation of Iraq allowed certain politicians to establish their interests through state machines and international networks. Ursula’s strong concerns over how the news agency decodes her submitted items imply the possibility that the war may be misrepresented. Furthermore, how the war should be represented often mirrors fear of and imagining about the Other. Fear as such is not necessarily created by propaganda or within cooperatives like the news agency, but it can be a factor that prompts individuals’ hostility to the Other, or whoever are regarded as potential terrorists. The indifference of the news agency in London to the three Iraqi deaths also emanates from such sentiments, leading to the killing not being worthy of inclusion in Ursula’s report, as the victims belong to the fearful and deniable Other rather than being innocent Caucasians.

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46 See note 18.
47 McGuinness 163.
48 Teevan 9.
Irish dramas that have international appeal are not limited to the three discussed in this essay, although they may reflect demands for reexamination of the Irish past seen from the broader perspective of contemporary Ireland. These three contemporary plays set in locations distant from Ireland demonstrate that first borders are no longer prerequisites for defining one’s identity, and second globalisation often incurs a revisionist view of ‘historical breakpoint’, as the ‘present premises and understanding of history’s dynamics must be treated as conceptual jails’. Through the compression of time and space, a transnational drama can present numerous, and sometimes contradictory, perspectives of those ‘jails’ conditioned by major or minor players on the world stage. The quandaries that trap all the characters may thus portend the collapse of political and religious confinement that leads some regions or countries into war or leaves them in a constant state of conflict. In addition, the interactions of Irish protagonists with those of other ethnicities should not be taken only as a minor Irish experience, in that they showcase the demand for the reshuffling of political and economic powers so as to accommodate the Other more amicably. The three plays, perhaps a collective theatrical response to how justice should be firmly upheld in a transnational community, should be seen as opening a dialogue aimed at peace.

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The Many Riches of Human Flourishing: On the Veiled Agent in Veil Narratives
Muneer Aram Kuzhiyan

Introduction
I begin with the popular tale ‘The Elephant in a Dark Room’ from the thirteenth-century Persian poet Rumi’s *Masnavi*. An elephant was being exhibited in a dark room, and many people thronged to see it. But it was pitch dark and, unable to see the elephant, they all had to feel it with their hands to get a sense of what it was like. One who felt its trunk declared that the beast was much like a water pipe; another who felt its ear said it must be a large fan; another felt its leg, and thought it resembled a pillar; another, after feeling its back, concluded the beast was nothing but a great throne. Depending on the part which each felt, they painted a different picture of the animal. For all its varied versions, the story continues to illustrate the dangers of partial or distorted vision and is no less relevant when it comes to engaging the agency of the female Muslim subject. This story, to my mind, has strong resonances for Malayalam writer Khadija Mumthas’ novel *Barsa*, which literally means ‘one who reveals her face.’ The blurb of the novel claims that in unveiling her face the protagonist Sabitha has in effect ‘opened up’ her very heart. The suggestion is that the narrative becomes a journey of learning through Islam with a free and ‘open’ mind. I want to trouble the value of this trope as a marker of enlightenment—a trope that often defines itself against the ‘closure’ of tradition, religious or otherwise. It seems to me that both the novelist and her mouthpiece are insensitive, if not blind, to the nuances of women’s agency, which the simplistic registers of submission and patriarchy fail to call up—the dual registers within which the charged sartorial symbol of the veil is more often than not rendered legible. It should not be mere coincidence that the depth of insensitivity and misrepresentation is writ large on the front cover of the novel with the enigmatic image of a face half-hidden and only one seeing eye.

Feminist scholarship has often located women’s agency in the political and moral autonomy of the subject. On this view, agency is reduced to the subject resisting or subverting relations of domination. What it all boils down to is that one is either being subordinated by or resisting norms. If a subordinated subject thinks that she is not dominated by anything at all, that is because of her false consciousness that masks the domination/

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1 I tried out an earlier, short version of this essay at the three-day international conference titled ‘Unveiling a Secret Agreement: Revisiting the Contours of English Studies’ organised by the Department of English Literature at the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad, India in November 2012. I am grateful to the audience of the seminar for their questions and thoughts. I also thank the two anonymous reviewers of *Transnational Literature* for their critical comments. Their close reading has offered me valuable suggestions on how to consolidate the arguments made in the essay, all of which I could not incorporate here, however. The phrase ‘human flourishing’ is from the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1981) 152. I use the term ‘veil narrative’ to designate any work of fiction in which un/veiling in any of its myriad forms and manifestations figures prominently as a thematic concern. Veil here indicates any of its diverse forms, including the headscarf covering the head and extending over the torso, and the face-veil covering the head, face and torso.


oppression for her, not because she is in fact under no subjugation. In an exercise of transference, Muslim women are usually presented as the stock victims of an oppressive patriarchal religion. In recent times, scholars have, however, called into question the assumptions undergirding this notion of agency and posited alternative ways of conceptualising it, not least in terms of embodiment and subject formation. This revisionist scholarship helps bring multiple modalities of agency other than resistance to bear upon the study of women in diverse religious traditions. Saba Mahmood’s seminal work Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject (2005) is key to this scholarly enterprise. In her fascinating ethnography of women’s mosque movement in Egypt, Mahmood challenges the regnant tendency within poststructuralist feminist theory to posit a liberatory conception of agency on ‘the binary model of subordination and subversion.’ This view, she argues, is restrictive in that it overlooks ‘dimensions of human action whose ethical and political status does not map on to the logic of repression and resistance.’ Thus, for Mahmood, it is imperative to dislodge the idea of agency from the interests of the ‘progressive political project.’ In this line of thinking, the modern notion of freedom and liberty as the political ideal does not exhaust the aspirations of humanity at large and there are specific cultural and historical conditions that engender specific human desires, including the desire to be free from, or subvert, norms. Then the right question to ask is about the ways of understanding operations of power that produce various types of bodies, knowledge, and subjectivities whose trajectories do not lend themselves to the model of progressive politics. It follows that the meaning and sense of agency, then, cannot be essentialised in one way or the other but it is important to engage the underlying principles that construct specific points of view. From this perspective, what might sound like a passive and docile case to progressive ears, for example veiling, may actually be a mode of agency if analysed within the discourses and structures of subordination that make possible the conditions of its

4 Both Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood, who is greatly influenced by the former’s work, have persuasively argued that religious practices are central to the constitution of a moral self and produce changes in moral subjectivity that cannot be reduced to some other phenomenon. Unlike Kantian and liberal political theories of personhood which assume an autonomous and transcendent moral self, Asad and Mahmood argue that the moral self does not have any a priori existence, but is the product of a series of cultural practices and procedures. See Talal Asad, Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) and Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); and Saba Mahmood, Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2005). See also ‘Preface to the 2012 Edition’ of Politics of Piety where Mahmood reflects on the critical reception of her work and consequently puts in better perspective the conceptual architecture of her fascinating ethnography. Charles Hirschkind likewise throws light on the role of creative and critical listening in the formation of Muslim spirituality in contemporary Egypt. Devout Muslims develop a pious ear through practices as diverse as listening to sermons on cassette and learning proper Muslim speech genres. See Charles Hirschkind, The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

5 Mahmood, Politics of Piety 14.

6 Mahmood, Politics of Piety 14.
enactment. So, as Mahmood quite succinctly puts it: ‘agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms.’

Taking these insights as a point of departure, in what follows I wish to subject to critical scrutiny what I call the monologue of ‘unveiled’ resistance that animates the narrative of Malayalam writer Khadija Mumthas’ novel Barsa published in 2007. Here I play on the word ‘veil’: veil both as a piece of clothing and as an act of hiding, as in the phrase ‘a veiled attack.’ The point is to show how the novel betrays a reductive view of veiling as passive and submissive through the subtext of a jarring monologue of agency conceptualised in liberatory and revolutionary terms.

‘The One Who Reveals Her Face’: The Sartorial Trope of Unveiling the Face and the Monologue of Agency in Barsa

Barsa, set in the Islamic heartland of Saudi Arabia, tells the story of a journey that starts at one airport and ends at another. While pursuing her medicine program, the protagonist Sabitha, a Hindu, falls in love with her local Muslim friend Rasheed. She finally decides to embrace Islam to take his hand in marriage. The couple then work in Saudi Arabia. The protagonist Sabitha is invested with the airs of a rebel Muslim right from the very first. She has her task cut out for her: to question a patriarchal/male chauvinistic Islam – a job she does almost perfectly, thereby leaving no doubt about her agency from a liberal-progressive standpoint. The novel, hailed as the first of its kind in the pantheon of Malayalam literature, earned its author a place among the long array of Islamic feminists such as Fatima Mernissi, Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas and Leila Ahmad, or so we are told by its champions. As for the liberal activists in Kerala who are too worried about the Muslim women’s plight within Islam, the novel provided the right subject, albeit belatedly. The Foreword to the novel adequately reflects the monotony of the rave reviews that it has attracted: an attempt to reread a male-centered Islam from a women’s perspective; a Muslim feminist novel, a novel that presents a free, ‘open’ understanding of Islam through a literally face-revealing protagonist, who in doing so, opens up her very heart; a protagonist who seeks to break the limits set by a patriarchal Islam, and so on. Given the normative progressivist proclivities that have given shape to the novel’s narrative, it is important to pause over why the novel was well received by a certain section of Kerala society, and this exercise, I think, will help expose the uncritical intellectual discourse that shapes public opinion in contemporary Kerala. But this, and the disturbing questions about the artistic merit of the novel, are topics that are larger than I have the space to address within the scope of this essay.

I will now turn to an instance in the novel where the author has her mouthpiece Sabitha espouse her revolutionary notion of agency that has a patronising ring to it. As the

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7 Mahmood, Politics of Piety 15.
couple is just settling down in their new flat, there is a conversation staged mainly involving Sabitha, and their friends Dr. Muhammad and Abdu. The friends urge Sabitha to share with them her new experiences in Saudi Arabia, thereupon she replies: ‘Yes, I have got to tell quite a few experiences, as a recent convert and then… as a woman’ (47). Then she fires her first salvo: ‘(I) have lots of doubts, confusions about several things…but if I disclose them, maybe it will amount to blasphemy? Do Muslims have the nerve to take criticisms?’ (47). After a while when Dr Muhammad explains that Islam actually enabled social change by uniting the warring Arab tribes under the roof of Islam, she quips: ‘O, because those draconian dictats that were necessary to tame the minds of the then Bedouin Arabs are still constantly imported to our times, Muslims are labeled obscurantists, and are humiliated?’ (49). She cites purdah and face-veil as contemporary examples of the so-called backward-looking norms of an early, ‘primitive’ Islam. She is shocked to see women accepting such norms without demur even today. The dissident in Sabitha continues to vent her ire on ‘this out-of-step-with–the-time Islam’ that she is confronted with in Saudi Arabia, but this is enough to press home the black and white conception of agency that has created the protagonist of Sabitha – one that is predicated on the notion that acts of resistance to relations of domination exhaust the field of human action. That is, the model of agency that colours the construction of Sabitha’s character takes resistance to norms as the only source of agentival capacity. But as Mahmood has shown in great ethnographic detail, resistance far from drains the well of human action. For a devout Muslim who strives to submit herself to God through constant inhabitation of norms, agency resides not so much in resisting norms as in living them. Of course, inhabiting norms also involves acts of resistance: resisting one’s self-interests or temptations in submitting oneself to the will of God – to cite but one example. But this resistance is not geared to achieving the realisation of a free, autonomous, self-owning individuality so central to the constitution of the liberal subject. Incidentally, Sabitha’s ‘red strands of hair that have escaped her headscarf’ – a phrase in the novel’s concluding paragraph – may be an ironic statement on her own ‘self’ that seeks to ‘escape’ norms.

‘Docile’ Agents and ‘Willing Obedience’: Some Reflections on Silences and Erasures in Barsa’s Narrative

Following Mahmood, I argue that Mumthas’ reductive view of Muslim women’s agency stems from her failure to delink the idea of agency from the aims of progressive politics that have sought to restrict the notion of agency within the trope of resistance against oppressive and dominating operations of power. This is not to deny the existence of this particular modality of agency, but to emphasise the point that ‘the meaning of agency must be explored within the grammar of concepts within which it resides.’

I suggest that what might appear to be a case of passive adherence to some backward-looking norms in Sabitha’s eyes is indeed a modality of agency if explained within a notion of agency that is not tied to the binary model of domination/submission. The unveiling of a Muslim woman in the spirit of liberatory endeavor constitutes one modality of action but the religiously-inspired program of moral formation, including adopting the veil, practiced by many Muslim women in Kerala, as elsewhere, and often decried for their patriarchal proclivities, is also a speech act that forms agency, no less. I find particularly useful here the idea of docility that Mahmood develops out

10 Mahmood, Politics of Piety 34.
of Michel Foucault\textsuperscript{11}: rather than being a synonym for passivity, ‘docility’ in this line of thought takes on a meaning of ‘teachability’ that demands will, effort and perseverance.\textsuperscript{12} This understanding brings to sharp relief the Foucauldian insight that specific relations of subordination enable and enact modes of human agency.

To illuminate the interesting paradox of ‘docile agent,’ Mahmood offers the now famous example of an accomplished pianist who ‘submits herself to the often painful regime of the disciplinary practice, as well as to the hierarchical structures of apprenticeship, in order to acquire the ability – the requisite agency – to play the instrument with mastery.’\textsuperscript{13} Notably, the agency of the virtuoso pianist rests on her ability to be taught, to undergo the required rigorous training, which is a classic docile condition. Although ‘docility’ is often understood to be a synonym for the ‘abandonment of agency,’ Mahmood wants to mark the fact that docility ‘literally implies the malleability required of someone in order for her to be instructed in a particular skill or knowledge – a meaning that carries less a sense of passivity than one of struggle, effort, exertion, and achievement.’\textsuperscript{14} Talal Asad also stresses the importance of the etymology of ‘docile’ as he says: ‘… I’m interested in “the docile subject” as someone who is teachable and therefore as someone who has the capacity to be taught.’\textsuperscript{15}

More importantly, in examining ‘disciplinary practices’ such as the various ways in which ‘religious discourses’ control, influence, and produce ‘religious selves,’ Talal Asad points up the centrality of the virtue of ‘willing obedience’ in medieval Christian monastic practice.\textsuperscript{16} Building on the Foucauldian analytics of power, Asad wants to think of power not merely as a repressive, external force but as an enabling, internal relationship – as potentiality, the ability to do something, to enact something in relation to other persons, things, institutions, and so on. Thus, the question that Asad seeks to forefront concerns not so much what meanings might be attributed to human acts as how one is able to do certain things.\textsuperscript{17} This way of thinking about power helps Asad to remain sensitive to the conditions within which obedient wills are created. As he puts it, in medieval Christian monastery, the will to obey was a Christian virtue cultivated through discipline:

The Christian monk who learns to will obedience is not merely someone who submits to another’s will by force of argument or the threat of force – or simply by way of habitual, unthinking response. He is not someone who has ‘lost his own will,’ as though a man’s will could be truly his only when it remained opposed to another’s. The obedient monk is a person for whom obedience is his virtue – in the sense of being his ability, potentiality, power.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{12} Mahmood, \textit{Politics of Piety} 29.
\textsuperscript{13} Mahmood, \textit{Politics of Piety} 29.
\textsuperscript{14} Mahmood, \textit{Politics of Piety} 29.
\textsuperscript{16} Asad, \textit{Genealogies of Religion} 125.
\textsuperscript{17} Scott, ‘Interview with Talal Asad’ 271-72.
\textsuperscript{18} Asad, \textit{Genealogies of Religion} 125; See also Asad’s discussion of agency and pain in Asad, \textit{Formations of the Secular} 67-99.
Thus, in highlighting the formation of ‘willing obedience’ to authority within the framework of the monastic life, Asad provides us with insights into how we may understand agency and subject-formation enabled by disciplinary practices in which one does live and inhabit norms rather than subvert them. Significantly, in this life world it is the very structure of authority or regime, rather than the freedom from it, that provides the conditions of agency. This notion, needless to say, sits uncomfortably with the normative conception of the liberal subject as a free and autonomous individual who makes or breaks his/her choices in life.

Also germane to apprehending the embodied character of tradition is the concept of *habitus* – a concept which, though first introduced into the social sciences by Marcel Mauss and popularised by Pierre Bourdieu, can be traced way back to Aristotle’s moral thinking and has influenced both Christian and Islamic traditions. *Habitus* is about ethical formation made possible by a certain pedagogical process through which a moral disposition is acquired. This process entails the acquisition of a virtue by a person through consistent physical exertion, assiduous practice, and discipline such that this virtue becomes permanently enmeshed in the person’s character. Drawing on Mauss’s formulation of *habitus* in his essay ‘Body Techniques,’ Asad employs *habitus* to refer to the ‘predisposition of the body,’ to its ‘traditional sensibilities’—to ‘that aspect of a tradition in which specific virtues are defined and an attempt is made to cultivate and enact them.’ One can see an echo of this principle in the fourteenth century Muslim thinker Ibn Khaldun’s (d. 1406) notion of ‘malaka’. As Khaldun puts it, ‘A (malak) is a firmly rooted quality acquired by doing a certain action and repeating it time after time, until the form of (that action) is firmly fixed. A (malaka) corresponds to the original (action after which it was formed).’ The notion of *habitus*, therefore, brings to relief the constitutive role of conscious, repeated performance of actions – virtuous or otherwise – in forging and augmenting subjectivities. This essay has sought to resignify the religious importance of *habitus* as a form of agency and consequently veiling as one of the legitimate means of self-realisation for devout Muslim women, rather than as the quintessential instantiation of patriarchal oppression and objectification of Muslim women.

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21 Scott, ‘Interview with Talal Asad’ 289. Also see Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* 75-76, and Asad, *Formations of the Secular* 251-52.
23 In order to put in perspective the Egyptian mosque movement’s conception of salat (ritual prayer), Saba Mahmood also draws on the Aristotelian formulation of *habitus*, which is taken to mean ‘an acquired excellence at either a moral or a practical craft, learned through repeated practice until that practice leaves a permanent mark on the character of the person.’ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* 136. For Mahmood’s critique of Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* for its inherent socioeconomic determinism and inattention to the pedagogical process entailed in *habitus*-formation, see Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* 138-139.
women, as Barsa would have us believe. In so doing, it largely foregrounds the fact that agency exists and flourishes in ways that are hard to recognise through a secular liberal lens that is invariably brought to discuss and ‘reform’ the plight of woman in Islam – a lens that no less imprisons Barsa’s narrative.

I have invoked here the critical scholarship on embodiment and subject-formation in order to draw attention to the diverse modalities of agency that are often obscured, if not obliterated, by the dominant model of agency as resistance to relations of power and authority. Mumthas’ monologue of agency in Barsa demonstrates no understanding that divergent conceptual understandings of a practice create divergent subjectivities as well as social and political life worlds, and that it would be a mistake to privilege one over the other. The novel, I argue, betrays the author’s dis-ease with the modalities of agency other than subverting norms and belies the burden of proving Islam’s compatibility with the ideals of liberalism – a burden she shares with many contemporary Muslim reformers who fit the bill ‘liberal Islam.’ Moreover, the rhetorical claim of the novel to be an open assessment of Islam by a ‘face-revealing’ Sabitha – note that Sabitha’s capacity to undertake a journey through Islam with an open heart is contingent upon her unveiling her face – allows to go unchallenged the putatively secular foundations and premises of critique. Thus it becomes very easy to take the argument to its logical conclusion: a veiled Muslim woman, by virtue of her veiling and not displaying her face, forecloses thought and debate and is rendered incapable of carrying out the kind of critical task that the unveiled Sabitha is involved in.

This argument, again, stems from an uncritical acceptance of the supposed clash between what Mahmood calls ‘the secular necessity and religious threat.’ According to this dichotomous characterisation, some kind of ‘religious extremism’ or ‘fanaticism’ often associated with a host of images and practices such as suicide bombers and veiled women is said to threaten secular liberal ways of life and conduct. On this understanding, religion is understood to be closed, ossified, uncritical, and stagnant in stark contrast to a secular liberal worldview, which is showcased as open, reflective, critical, and dynamic. Consequently, critique is celebrated as the hallmark of the latter. Mahmood unsettles this presumed secularity of critique and debate that is taken for granted in any academic and popular discussion of religion today. She argues that the conjoining of critique and secular culture and thought is predicated on the assumption that unlike religious belief, critique requires acquiring a necessary distance between the subject and the object and some form of reasoned deliberation. This view often makes itself intelligible against religious reading practices where the subject is taken to be ‘so mired in the object that she cannot achieve the distance

24 The term ‘liberal Muslim reformers’ is used as shorthand to refer to those who believe that the proper domain of religious practice is a putative private sphere marked by personal devotion. These reformers in Kerala are mostly left-leaning progressivist writers, including A. P. Kunhamu, who has written the Foreword to Barsa. This resonates with the case of Muslim reformers at an international level who come from a wide spectrum of political perspectives: some support the reformist trend within the Islamist movement such as the Egyptian Tariq al-Bishri, the Tunisian Scholar Rashid al-Ghannouchi and the Iranian Abdolkarim Soroush; and some are inclined to a more straightforward secular-liberal line such as the Egyptian Said Ashmawi and Aziza al-Hibri in the US. See Saba Mahmood, ‘Questioning Liberalism, Too,’ Boston Review, Vol. 28, No. 2 (2003) 18-19.

necessary for the practice of critique.\textsuperscript{26} As Mahmood points out, what is elided in this normative conception of critique is an acknowledgement of the ‘disciplines of subjectivity, affective attachments, and subject-object relationality’ that underwrite this particular, dominant paradigm of critique.\textsuperscript{27} Put another way, there is nothing essentially ‘neutral’ about the secular liberal principles of freedom of religion and speech aimed at negotiating religious difference and these principles have their own ideological moorings tethered to certain normative conceptions of religion, subject, language, and offence.

My point in reviewing this contemporary discourse on the taken-for-granted ‘secularity of critique’ here is to suggest that Barsa’s mobilisation of the trope of open critique of Islam – as exemplified in the ‘face-revealing’ character of Sabitha and in sharp contrast to the ‘docile’ Muslim women she confronts in Saudi Arabia – enforces a normative conception of critique such that this characterisation becomes an instantiation of the supposed secularity of critique vis-à-vis the closure of an orthodox Islam. Thus, despite its complacency about the labor of open critique it has arrogated to itself, readers of Barsa will, however, recognise the woefully closed and lopsided view of Islam, and particularly of Muslim women, that the novel propagates. To say this, again, is not so much to pass judgment on which view is true or false as to draw attention to the fact that Barsa’s narrative is not an empty, homogeneous phenomenon, but is in fact complicit with a larger secular liberal worldview with its own naturalised, normative assumptions about what is religion and proper religious subjectivity and conduct in the modern world.\textsuperscript{28}

A critique of Barsa in terms outlined above might be taken to task for its apparent religious obstinacy in dealing with a literary work which, in secular parlance, is presumed to be a world unto itself – a self-sufficient, free-floating entity unmediated by any politics and ideological moorings. The assumption is that such critiques taking literature at its face value issue from a lack of literary sensibilities on the part of those who mount them. However, I do not need to belabor the point that literature, fiction in particular, far from being an innocent practice, carries its own ideological baggage. It mobilises a particular set of images, figures, events, arguments, and narratives in order to construct and give expression to its cherished ideals and presuppositions. The various repertoires galvanised in a literary work such as its special images, figures, and events evoke disparate forms of recognition among its audiences who have diverse, at times mutually incommensurable, sensibilities – secular and religious, for example. It is, therefore, natural that depending on one’s personal stake and investment in the problem in question, a literary work engenders a variety of responses from its audiences. For instance, some celebrate it for what it is while some others resent it or even condemn it for the very same reason. Literature speaks to its diverse audiences with the intention of

\textsuperscript{26} Mahmood, ‘Religious Reason and Secular Affect’ 90.
\textsuperscript{28} For an insightful bunch of articles that call into question the seemingly secular bases of critique in the wake of the controversial Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, see Talal Asad et al, eds., Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009). Also relevant is Saba Mahmood, ‘Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation,’ Public Culture, Vol. 18, no. 2 (2006) 323–47.
provoking recognition among them and this recognition manifests itself in a wide range of responses that ensue. Thus, if Barsa could be legitimately hailed for its liberatory program of idealising the secular liberal, progressive ideal of agency, it seems to me equally legitimate to decry the work for its insensitivity, if not blindness, to other ways of constructing and enacting agency in the world. For, like the enthusiasts of Barsa, its critics are also very much part of the world that literature addresses, although they do not share its secular sensibilities, and hence they have every right to react to it in accord with the kinds of recognition it induces among them. It will not do to provide a celebratory account of Barsa’s questioning a patriarchal Islam and thereby asserting Muslim women’s self-worth. The elisions and erasures that are rhetorically secured in this account also need to be put to critical scrutiny. Reading Barsa against the grain by paying attention to the elisions and erasures enacted in the text affords us a better understanding of the issues that the novel is entangled in than a triumphalist account would allow.  

The Female Muslim Subject in Leila Aboulela’s Fiction: A Contrast

Finally, by way of comparison and contrast, I call attention to the anglophone Sudanese writer Leila Aboulela’s two novels The Translator and Minaret which, even as they exploit one of their key thematic concerns the role of religion in the protagonists’ identity formation and personal development, do not, however, contra Barsa, commit the mistake of reducing the agency of the female Muslim subject to acts of destabilising or dismantling relations of domination.

Set in Aberdeen, The Translator depicts the fraught and difficult romance between a recently widowed, devout, and veiled Sudanese woman, Sammar, and a Scottish professor of Middle East studies, Rae Isles. The main obstacle to their union is that he is an infidel and so cannot marry a Muslim woman. Sammar is the novel’s eponymous translator. She works as an Arabic to English translator for Rae, and the novel suggests that in so doing, she translates Islam into a properly felt system of beliefs for him. Though the romance has really blossomed, the obstacle to their marriage remains and Sammar decides to go back to Khartoum to live with her son. All is well when Rae converts to Islam and the two are joined in marriage.

In Minaret, cast adrift by a chain of catastrophes such as her father’s execution after a coup, her mother’s fatal encounter with cancer, her brother’s imprisonment in England in a drug-related attempted murder, Najwa, the Westernised daughter of a corrupt political official in Sudan, accepts her desire for spiritual peace and turns to Islam. Islam becomes the only relief to the sudden difficulties and great solitude in which she finds herself. Through her growing faith she discovers a new peace and a new community. The prayer meetings with other women, the hijab, which covers her head, and the mellifluous call to prayer from the nearby mosque all give her an unexpected power to deal with her everyday problems.

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29 While examining the politics of the historical novel Azazeel by the Egyptian author Youssef Zeidan, Saba Mahmood calls attention to the ways in which literary works mobilise and engage various repertoires in order to elicit certain reading practices that assume the ways of understanding the world in one particular fashion rather than the other. See Saba Mahmood, ‘Azazeel and the Politics of Historical Fiction in Egypt,’ Comparative Literature, Vol. 65, No. 3 (2013) 265-284.


31 Leila Aboulela, Minaret (New York: Black Cat, 2005).
The role of religion in fashioning the subjectivity of the protagonists in both the novels warrants a detailed analysis, but for our purposes here, I will only touch on it. *Minaret* presents an elaborate account of the hijab as clothing that is organic to a woman’s entire ethical disposition. Najwa’s recurrent reminiscences of her servants praying, girls wearing the hijab and students praying on the university campus in Khartoum, and the inexplicable envy and emptiness constitute stages in the eventual decision to wear the hijab – embracing the disposition that permeates all aspects of her life. The passages that follow attest to the fact that the hijab, to her, must mean more than a garment that covers her:

I stood in front of the mirror and put the scarf over my hair. My curls resisted; the material quashed them down. They escaped, springing around my forehead, above my ears … I didn’t look like myself. Something was removed, streamlined; something was deflated. And was this the real me? … untie the material; observe the transformation. Which made me look younger? Scarf or no scarf? Which made me look more attractive? The answer was clear to that one. I threw it on the bed. I was not ready yet; I was not ready for this step.  

Although Najwa still debates whether she looks younger or more attractive with or without the headscarf, her introspection also gestures to the nagging feeling that she has always lacked something. It now becomes clear that this emptiness originates from the lack of will and opportunity to embrace Islam in a manner consonant with the disposition she must cumulatively cultivate by familiarising herself with an Islamic lifestyle. Finally, when she does decide to wear the hijab, she feels a ‘new gentleness’ and ‘softness’ around her. That the hijab constitutes the final and not the first step in Najwa’s religious discovery is testimony to its importance as more than a piece of clothing. It is clothing heavily infused with the modesty and sobriety that are gradually acquired and embodied through the aforementioned acts of piety and religious devotion. This is in stark contrast to Sabitha’s rantings about the hijab in *Barsa* that we considered earlier. Thus, the evaluative frameworks at stake in understanding the practice of veiling in Mumthas and Aboulela are markedly divergent, and it is these frameworks that make all the difference to their contrastive portrayals of the veiled female Muslim subject.

Sammar in *The Translator*, like her counterpart in *Minaret*, chooses to wear the hijab and attend lessons at the mosque, much like the Egyptian women among whom Mahmood conducted her fieldwork in some mosques of Cairo, which eventually gave birth to *Politics of Piety*. Interestingly, Sammar even describes women as having ‘softer hearts’, a phrase that conjures up for me the image of what Mahmood might call ‘docile’ agents. In doing this, perhaps as an immigrant Muslim woman writer in the UK, Aboulela, much like her characters Najwa and Sammar, seeks to get visibility in a Europe where Muslim women, especially those who wear the hijab, are ‘visibly invisible’ to most eyes.

Much as her characters are assertive, Aboulela, unlike Mumthas, does not, however, take as the raison d’être of her characters the project of questioning a patriarchal Islam.

32 Aboulela, *Minaret* 245.
33 Aboulela, *Minaret* 247.
34 Aboulela, *The Translator* 124.
Aboulela’s characters accept the idea of polygamy. Sammar, after the death of her husband would like to become the second wife of an old man rather than remain alone. It is her aunt/mother-in-law that prohibits this. Polygamy is also a possibility in Minaret. Najwa contemplates it when Tamer asks her to marry him, “Well, to say yes, you must promise me you’ll take a second wife.” “What a stupid thing to say, Najwa!” “Because I might not be able to have children ... I wouldn’t want you divorce me. I would rather be in the background of your life, always part of it, always hearing your news.”

Sammar and Najwa, therefore, draw our attention to the necessity of discussing categories of identity, women’s agency, bodily form, political imaginary for a better understanding of how women can and do empower themselves through Islam in contemporary Europe and elsewhere. They invite us to challenge the normative feminist assumptions about women’s agency that give rise to typical progressivist narratives like Mumthas’ Barsa – narratives that are, to borrow Mahmood’s words, ‘encumbered by the binary terms of resistance and subordination, and ignore(s) projects, discourses, and desires that are not captured by these terms.’

Conclusion: The Epistemological Trap and the Labor of Critique

In conclusion, it seems to me that discoursing about the Muslim women’s veiling – even if she does wear the veil because she believes it is her way of deferring to God – borders on the Islamophobic. As Joan Scott convincingly argues, one of the ways in which the issue of Islam and the West has been put to political use in recent times is to paper over in the West all of the problems of gender inequality that are now being attributed to Islam.

This then allows the Westerners to project their freedom and equal status by telling a story whose theme runs like this: since headscarf/veil is the sign of inequality, the Muslim women who take the veil are unequal in contrast to the Western women who do not veil and by virtue of it live in an egalitarian society. This rhetoric on the veil as the epitomic symptom of oppression then becomes a convenient way to overlook all of the (gender) inequalities that persist in Western societies. In reducing women’s freedom to their freedom from certain clothes/norms, I have

36 Aboulela, *Minaret* 254-55.
38 The term ‘epistemological trap’ refers to a situation in which the outcome of enquiry is predetermined by the very problematics and interpretive grids that inform it. Cf. Sheldon Pollock, ‘India in the Vernacular Millennium: Literary Culture and Polity, 1000-1500,’ *Daedalus*, Vol. 127, No. 3 (1998) 43. Our analytical language is so deeply shaped by what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls the ‘disenchanted prose’ of a higher, (read also, reasoned, secular, universal), scientific language that it is not possible for us to make politically meaningful statements without employing this normative language — a language that is constitutive of the modern world we inhabit — despite the fact that there are so many ‘enchanted’ life worlds and worldviews on this planet that do not neatly translate into this language without running the danger of distortion and misrepresentation. Given the problems of ‘translating diverse and enchanted worlds into the universal and disenchanted language’ of the social sciences, it is advisable, as Chakrabarty suggests, to conduct such translations by ‘hold(ing) one’s categories open’ so that one can take the master code, say History, to ‘its limits in order to make its unworking visible.’ Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘The Time of History and the Times of Gods’ in *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, eds. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997) 40, 51, 52, 58.
argued that narratives like *Barsa* miss the wood for the trees. This is where I have found Aboulela’s stories refreshingly corrective: much as her characters struggle to find their feet in an alien world that every immigrant is caught in, they present their religious tradition to be enabling rather than restrictive and recognise modalities of agency beyond the confines of subordination and resistance.

Also, my intention in the essay has not been to impugn the modality of agency tied to resistance to relations of domination but to alert us to the fact that this normative conception of agency often works to blind us to other forms and manifestations of agency that animate different ways of being and acting in the world. In privileging certain normative assumptions about critique, *Barsa* also upholds the forms of exclusions, erasures, and hierarchies those assumptions create and seek to perpetuate. Similarly, narratives such as *Barsa* proceeds *a priori* from an always already problem of Islam without ever feeling the need to give second thoughts to the constructedness of this perennial problem and start asking reflective questions about the certitude of liberal, secular ethos. Thus, at a broader level, my critique of *Barsa* is intended as an invitation to defamiliarise one’s own confident, normative assumptions about what it means to be a human in this world in order to learn not only about but also from other umpteen riches of human flourishing on earth. Finally, although the sociality of Muslim women in Kerala, including the diverse conceptions of agency underlying their life worlds, needs to be explored in ethnographic detail, my concern in this essay has mainly been to comparatively probe the ideological fabrics of visions surrounding the female Muslim subject across what I have called ‘veil narratives’ in order to bring to light the workings of ideological suppositions that give shape and force to the narrative architecture of fictional prose.

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Narratives of growing-up or coming-of-age of a person from childhood and ignorance to the attaining of some vital knowledge about the world and the self, which have traditionally been referred to as *bildungsromane*, have particularly appealed to and inspired women writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Especially for women writers of minority and ethnic groups from former European colonies, the *bildungsroman* has transformed into a discursive tool to deconstruct imperialism and resist discriminations of race, class and sex, and to articulate multiple problems relating to the understanding of their identity. Carol Lazzaro Weis, in pointing out the difference between classical *bildungsroman* and its more modern form, also dwells upon the various ways in which postcolonial women writers find it relevant for their purpose:

> Nostalgic bereavement of loss, always a part of the definition of the form, takes a new relevancy in the more recent manifestation of the genre. Nostalgia, loss, home and community, and the generation gap, spoken predominantly in terms of the mother-daughter relationship rather than the father-daughter conflict of the 1970s, are all themes which characterize the more recent exploitations of the *Bildungsroman* tradition by women writers.\(^2\)

The trope of coming-of-age in female stories invests in them possibilities of opposition to the traditional *bildungsroman*. Such stories make a conscious effort to show that female development involves repression of personal desires for which society, social norms and patriarchal ideologies are held responsible. The identity that emerges as a result is defined in terms of gender and race, and the woman protagonist victim is seen to be shuttling between her desire for a pre-oedipal state and coming to terms with her present ambivalent identity. Typical of such examples are Merle Hodge’s *Crick Crack, Monkey* (1970), Jamaica Kincaid’s *Annie John* (1985), Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), and Patricia Grace’s *Dogside Story* (2001) to name only a few.

Such fictions by women seem to claim that women’s experience of life and reality are different from that of men. Indeed they are different, in as much as women and men differ genetically, physically and emotionally. However, even as experiences of the girl child are different from those of boys, literary representation of certain events as catalytic in the development of a child growing up in a particular culture, community, and family, are in my opinion, to certain extent similar irrespective of the gender of the writer or the protagonist. In this regard this paper will focus on Alice Munro’s short story ‘Walker Brothers Cowboy’ (1968) as a narrative of the growing up of a female protagonist, not into a gendered being, but a more mature individual in relationship with her immediate family and society. Simultaneously, this essay will discuss the psychological development of the narrator’s father as perceived by his daughter, through memory and narrative, with emphasis on human relationships as primarily
determining an individual’s identity. Although it is the story of initiation of a young girl, and about a single incident in her life that introduces her to the adult world, her story fits into the genre of the bildungsroman, a term which according to Susan Cocalis has been traditionally defined as a ‘process by which a young [f]emale hero discovers [her]self and [her] social role through the experience of love, friendship, and the hard realities of life.’\(^3\) Considering its chief concern with the development of its protagonist, I have deliberately changed the gender terms to address the female protagonist under consideration, since, as Cocalis goes on to state, ‘the Bildungsroman is traditionally defined in terms of content rather than form and since there is no consensus on what constitutes the genre’ (399). This paper looks therefore at how Munro represents a defining moment in the life of a child and her father, and brings out, in a poignantly unexpected way, the hidden dimensions of her characters, through the narrative lens of a fairly young narrator, ‘nothing less than the child entering into the ardures and the responsibilities of her inheritance, the transmission from father to daughter of human tradition and attitude to life.’\(^4\)

As the story advances we begin to understand that sex is only one among many other factors, such as complexity of human relationships, geographical location, economic status and religious faith of the individual, which determine a self-identity. The young female protagonist is seen as an ordinary human being in whom the reader identifies as sharing her or his personal experiences of everyday events, such as going out for a walk with one’s father, which when recollected in moments of calm reflection go on to take significant proportions. Not a lifelong negotiation of incompatible identities but little embarrassing moments such as going to market with her mother dressed outrageously in inappropriate clothes, or meeting her father’s girlfriend; little surprises that life springs, and uneasy secrets that need to be prudently guarded, are what leave lasting impressions on the consciousness of both the protagonists, marking these different selves vis-à-vis the social space they occupy.

The story reconfigures certain moments of the female protagonist’s childhood unsettling the reader’s presumption of predictable consequences as is found in more recent representation of such events. The young girls like Annie in Kincaid’s Annie John, Selina Boyce in Paule Marshall’s Brown Girl, Brownstones, or Saru in Shashi Deshpande’s The Dark Holds No Terrors would predictably grow up to be rebels against an oppressive patriarchal society serving as mouthpiece for their authors’ views on postcolonial cultural inheritance. However, ‘Walker Brothers Cowboy’ does not fit in with the confirmatory agenda of some contemporary theories or narrative modes. Although critics like Coral Ann Howells have taken help from theories of feminist philosophers like Luce Irigaray in order to understand the Munro story, such readings give only partial understanding of the female characters. Munro’s comments on her style of writing can be illustrative of her refusal to conform to such theories: ‘I’m not an intellectual writer. I’m very, very excited by what you might call the surface of life … It’s just a feeling about the intensity of what is there.’\(^5\) The story, in fact, is a reinscription of everyday incidents narrated with consummate skill.

Set in Canada of the 1930s ‘Walker Brothers Cowboy’ is about a girl and her father coming to terms with the world and its perceived difficulties in times of the Great Depression. Although the age of the girl is not mentioned the narrative suggests a precocious and perceptive

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3 Susan L. Cocalis, ‘Transformation of Bildung from an Image to an Ideal,’ Monatshefte 70. 4 (1978) 399.
5 Alice Munro, Interview. Eleven Canadian Novelists by Graeme Gibson (Toronto: Anansi, 1973) 241.
young girl in her pre-adolescent days growing out of childhood to knowledge and experience. The father, on the other hand, in the beginning has a childlike approach towards serious emotional and financial problems hoping to ward off difficulties by trivialising them. The girl protagonist narrates the story in first person; however, her keen analytical power and the mature tone of her recollections of the era may be ascribed to the intellectual faculties of an older woman. This doubling of perception reconstructs not only the father’s identity but also focuses with hindsight on the malleable persona of her own younger self, highlighting the ‘getting of wisdom’ or ‘initiation’ as the central trope of the writing.

Revealing her complex emotional relationship with her parents, which impinges upon the psychological development of the girl, the narrator begins by pointing out the difference between her father and mother. While the father speaks the language of the child: ‘Want to go down and see if the Lake’s still there?’, and instinctively relates to her, the mother in opposition to her husband, is concerned more about her child’s education. The narrator’s inclination towards her father could therefore be a result of her presumption of a shared ignorance and denial of the hardships of life. The possible outing with her father is juxtaposed against the narrator’s distancing from her mother: ‘We leave my mother sewing under the dining-room light making clothes for me against the opening of school’ (3). These first lines also draw out a difference between two forms of knowledge: one, gained through empirical experience, and the other more oppressive academic form of knowledge whose source lies in books and schools – the two forms represented respectively by the father and mother. One of these the narrator will accept and the other reject. The mother, with her ‘old suit and old plaid wool dress’ which she has ripped up, making her daughter ‘turn for endless fittings,’ is, so to say, tied to deep-rooted customs and tradition, becoming a symbolic personification of ideologies that she imposes on the girl making her feel uncomfortable: ‘sweaty, itching from the hot wool, ungrateful’ (3). The beginning, therefore, anticipates things to follow – a more intimate sharing of knowledge between father and daughter and a rejection of traditional knowledge through formal education. True to the vein of Munro’s story-telling strategy which makes no use of traditional ‘intellectual’ methodologies, unquestioning conformity to any kind of formal education, for the narrator, undoubtedly entails ‘endless fittings’ (3) by regulating one’s life/writing to suit the social/intellectual order and adopting its ‘moral’ values which, in most cases, are out of sync with individual needs.

While the mother keeps the children close at home, the father opens the girl’s eyes to the world outside the front yard and to the need for compassion towards those less fortunate. Her escape for the evening is her visit to Lake Huron with her father. At the edge of the water, above the beach, her father rolls a smoke and speaks to her of the awesome powers of nature that shaped the landscape long ago:

All where Lake Huron is now, he says, used to be flat land, a wide flat plain. Then came the ice, creeping down from the North, pushing deep into the low places ... And then the ice went back, shrank back towards the North Pole where it came from, and left its fingers of ice in the deep places it had gouged, and the ice turned to lakes and there they were today. (4)

Indeed, as Walter Rintoul Martin notes, the daughter here ‘is being initiated, naturally enough … into an awareness of history and the human condition, especially its precariousness and possible terror’ (2) by claiming that ‘his affection tempers the fright for his lamb … the father makes the
drama not altogether horrifying, but meaningful, manageable and stimulating for the daughter.\textsuperscript{6} However, Martin overlooks the fact that the daughter is not suitably impressed by her father’s narration and doubts his ability to recount historical or geographical events. Questioning historical memory and any form of knowledge that is gained second-hand, and emphasising the experience of the here and now, the narrator observes:

I try to see that plain before me, dinosaurs walking on it, but I am not able even to imagine the shore of the Lake when the Indians were there, before Tuppertown. The tiny share we have of time appalls me, though my father seems to regard it with tranquillity. Even my father, who sometimes seems to me to have been at home in the world as long as it has lasted, has really lived on this earth only a little longer than I have, in terms of all the time there has been to live in. He has not known a time, any more than I … He was not alive when this century started. I will be barely alive – old, old – when it ends. I do not like to think of it. I wish the Lake to be always just a lake, with the safe-swimming floats marking it, and the breakwater and the lights of Tuppertown. (4-5)

The narrator suggests that her father cannot comprehend the immensity of time. In biological terms he is not much older than she is and ‘has not known a time, any more than [her].’ After all the life-spans of men and women are hardly a century, and a superficial knowledge of history along with the unreliable nature of memory gives only a partial vision of truth. Philosophers like Michel Foucault have explicated on the fallibility of any kind of knowledge and the impossibility of arriving at fixed and stable answers:

And the great problem presented by such historical analyses is not how continuities are established, how a single pattern is formed and preserved, how for so many different, successive minds there is a single horizon, what mode of action and what substructure is implied by the interplay of transmissions, resumptions, disappearances, and repetitions, how the origin may extend its sway well beyond itself to that conclusion that is never given – the problem is no longer one of tradition, of tracing a line, but one of division, of limits … In short, the history of thought, of knowledge, of philosophy, of literature seems to be seeking, and discovering, more and more discontinuities, whereas history itself appears to be abandoning the irruption of events in favour of stable structures.\textsuperscript{7}

Ajay Heble also points out that by beginning her story with a ‘peculiar lack of assertion’ – ‘Want to go down and see if the Lake’s still there?’ – Munro ‘is already questioning the assumption that reality is stable and fixed – that it is something we can ever fully know.’\textsuperscript{8} Since there is no resolution to the complexities of time, nor are there easy solutions to problems that life poses, and although her father claims to possess the panacea to all ills: ‘And have all liniments and oils,/ For everything from corns to boils …’ (5), the narrator doubts the legitimacy of such easy answers.

The mother, on the other hand, ironically takes solace in memories of happier times when they lived in the silver-fox farm at Dungannon which, like many farms of the time had suffered the blow of the Great Depression: ‘My mother tries … to imitate the conversations we used to have at Dungannon, going back to our earliest, most leisurely days … ‘Do you remember when

\textsuperscript{6} Martin, 3
\textsuperscript{7} Michel Foucault, \textit{Archaeology of Knowledge} (New York: Routledge, 2002) 5-6.
we put you in your sled and Major pulled you?”… “Do you remember your sandbox outside the kitchen window?”” (6). She even pretends to be a lady and wishes to mould her daughter in her image, which the daughter resists. Neil Sutherland in his article ‘When You Listen to the Winds of Childhood, How Much Can You Believe’ refers to a passage in the story which registers the narrator’s acute sense of embarrassment triggered by the idiosyncratic behaviour of her mother who tries to make her daughter conform to the mores of a bygone time:

She wears a good dress … a summer hat of white straw, … and white shoes … I have my hair freshly done in long damp curls which the dry air will fortunately soon loosen, a stiff large hair ribbon on top of my head … We have not walked past two houses before I feel we have become objects of universal ridicule … She walks serenely like a lady shopping, like a lady shopping, past the housewives in loose beltless dresses torn under the arms. With me her creation, wretched curls and flaunting hair bow, scrubbed knees and white socks – all I do not want to be. I loathe even my name when she says it in public, in a voice so high, proud, and ringing, deliberately different from the voice of any other mother on the street. (6)

Ildikó de Papp Carrington describes the girl’s overdressing as ‘the child’s costumed public identity.’ Her shame is revealed by her refusal to identify publicly with her name enunciated the way her mother says it in a pathetic attempt to make the family stand out as being better than the common townspeople. In fact, the narrator never reveals her name in the course of the storytelling, denying a traditional identity marker. One’s identity like one’s name appears to be something personal and intimate, not to be put on public display. She would suggest that there is nothing unique about her experiences; that she is like any ordinary girl growing up in a particular social setup. Whether it be the father’s discreet dramatisation of a geographical past or the mother’s desperate attempts to ‘fix’ or place the daughter in a glorious familial past, the daughter rejects both. What she sees, especially in her mother’s desperate attempts to recover the past and pretensions to being a ‘lady’, is a pathetic enactment of the impossibility of reconstructing the past through an act of narration, which nevertheless she herself is also engaged in. Resisting the oppressive presence of the past even while she finds it impossible to disengage herself from the act of narration, the narrator points to the unreliability of any kind of narration since memory would always already be selective: ‘I pretend to remember far less than I do, wary of being trapped into sympathy or any unwanted emotion’ (6).

In fact the entire narration involves an overlapping of past over the present and is an expression of how the past impinges upon the present. What knowledge of the past the narrator chooses to accept will have a greater import on the development of her personality. Similarly, a conscious acceptance of the present will be the crucial defining moment of her father’s life. Foucault reflects on the moment of self-awakening:

The question of how the knowledge of things and the return to the self are linked … appears around that very old, ancient theme which Socrates had already evoked in the Phaedrus when, as you know he said: Should we choose the knowledge of trees than the knowledge of men? And he chose the knowledge of men … [W]hat is interesting, important, and decisive is not knowing the world’s secrets, but knowing man himself … Demetrius distinguishes between what is and what is not worth knowing …

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knowledge of the world, of the things of the world on the side of useless knowledge, and knowledge of man and human existence on the side of useful knowledge.\textsuperscript{10} Both, the narrator and her father reject the ‘knowledge of trees’ and accept ‘knowledge of man and human existence’ as useful knowledge. The story is neatly divided into two parts to demonstrate the point. The first part gives us a view of traditional knowledge that is handed down but fails to leave any impression on the narrator’s mind. Although geographical upheavals ‘had gouged’ and ‘left fingers of ice’ on the landscape, such knowledge is of no use to her. The second part of the story is a narrative of events that lead her father to a stoic acceptance of reality, at the same time initiating the narrator into workings of the adult world.

The first part of the story develops the setting by describing the father’s failure in business and the mother’s psychological depression. It also gives us a glimpse of the narrator’s relationship with both of them. While the father shares lighter moments of his evening with her the mother is engaged more in her household chores and initiates the daughter into lady-like etiquettes and feminine behaviour which to the girl appear uncalled for and artificial.

In the spirit of the traditional \textit{bildungsroman} where the path to self-awareness involves a journey that the protagonist undertakes, in the second half of ‘Walker Brothers Cowboy’ the narrator with her father goes out on a symbolic journey towards knowledge and a mature understanding of the realities of life. The girl is given a glimpse of the professional hazards that her father faces in his work and also something is revealed of his past personal life when she is taken with her brother on a field trip. Her father has been forced by circumstances to accept a job as a travelling salesman. The narrator reports on the bluff romantic air he enacts in relation to the job which he perhaps never enjoyed. The outing turns out to be a revelation of her father’s vulnerability opening a new dimension of his life which the girl hitherto had not perceived. She is forced to reassess their lives, involuntarily pushed towards greater self-awareness. The field-trip stands as a metaphorical marker for a point in time when the girl confronts the real world beyond the security of the family circle. Patricia Reis discusses the role of father in the development of a daughter’s personality:

\begin{quote}

Despite the changes occurring in gender roles, fathers are still experienced by daughters as a symbolic link to the outside world. It is well understood, both objectively and subjectively, that a daughter’s relationship to her father can make or break her feelings of self-esteem and self-confidence, her understanding of herself as a woman, her belief in herself and her own authority as she enters into the world.\textsuperscript{11}
\end{quote}

Unlike the little walks with her father after supper where she witnessed the utter poverty of farmers and the degenerating downtown industrial areas, in this trip she symbolically passes through her father’s ‘territory’ of deserted farmyards and gloomy lanes to have a glimpse of his personal love-life before his marriage. Unlike her brother who is ‘too young to spell’ (9) and ‘does not notice enough’ (15) the protagonist is at an age when she is beginning to ‘notice’ her father’s desperate attempts at a decent living, and also his heroic but ironic romanticisation of present misfortunes. Wondering about his duties as a salesman and his dealings with mysterious


\textsuperscript{11} Patricia Reis, \textit{Daughters of Saturn: From Father’s Daughter to Creative Woman} (New York: Continuum, 1997) 22.
clients the narrator is undoubtedly in awe of her father’s heroism in turning even his misfortunes into ‘a comic calamity’ (7). But her opinion undergoes a change when she becomes witness to her father’s humiliation in a client’s house where in response to his ‘hulloring’ the contents of a chamber pot are poured down. The father barely escapes the ‘pee’, but his sense of humiliation is quite apparent, and the daughter perceives his discomfiture. The incident reveals to her another aspect of her father’s character: she sees him as an ordinary human being with flaws and foibles of common men, and that his stoic exterior hides a frail and sensitive nature. The experience is the beginning of an awareness of others that initiates the narrator into the harsh realities of the outside world.

In a move that is best described as impulsive the father steers his car towards a lane with which his children are not familiar. The narrative suggests not only an unfamiliar geographical landscape but also an unfamiliar psychological landscape in which the father discloses a hidden dimension to his personality as a lover. In what appears to be a random drive he takes his children to a house where they meet a ‘short, sturdy woman’ and her blind mother. They too are apparently victims of the Depression and are struggling to make ends meet. What strikes the young narrator most about this woman is her cheerful exterior like her father’s, and her stoic resignation to adverse circumstances. She also notices that her father communicated better with the lady than he does with his wife, who, as her father says, ‘isn’t liable to see the joke,’ and he doesn’t want the children to tell her about the ‘chamber pot’ incident for fear of her unsympathetic response. However, Nora, the father’s girl friend, ‘laughs almost as hard as [her] brother did at the time’ (13), making the burden of the humiliation much lighter to bear. With Nora, a romantic denial of reality never becomes a necessity. She is an example of a woman who accepts the hardships of life without suppressing the fleeting and short-lived joys that come her way. The narrator had earlier commented upon her mother’s hard nature, ironically remarking on her constant complaints after the failure of business in the silver-fox farm: ‘(it did not matter that we were poor before; that was a different sort of poverty), and the only way to take this, as she sees it, is with dignity, with bitterness, with no reconciliation’ (5). The mother refuses to see and take comfort from the little joys that life offers and, which to a child are a luxury:

No bathroom with a claw-footed tub and a flush toilet is going to comfort her, nor water on tap and sidewalks past the house and milk in bottles, not even the movie theatres and the Venus Restaurant and Woolworths so marvellous it has live birds singing in its fan-cooled corners and fish as tiny as fingernails, as bright as moons, swimming in its green tanks. My mother does not care. (5)

Nora, on the other hand, like her namesake in Ibsen’s path-breaking play A Doll’s House, has a childlike simplicity that makes the most of whatever is available. She offers her lover whisky and would not even save the last bottle, like he warns, ‘in case of sickness’ (13). She drinks to his luck and even transfers some of her warmth and joviality to the children. While she would play the gramophone for the boy, she would teach a few steps of dance to the girl. The narrator feels the warmth of the woman’s comforting presence but she is also ‘embarrassed’ by her mature and gross physicality. She is left ‘breathless’ at the speed with which her acquaintance with Nora flings her into the adult world of unrequited love and unsatisfied desires. Nora becomes a learning experience, the turning point in the narrator’s life. The whole experience has the effect of a ritual of initiation.

Mordecai Marcus writes that ‘[t]he formalized behavior of so-called civilized people will appear ritualistic in fiction, chiefly under two circumstances: when it involves a response to an
unusually trying situation in which a person falls back on socially formalized behaviour, or when an individual pattern of behaviour results from powerful psychological compulsion.12 It is Nora’s psychological compulsion that transfers the young narrator to a ritualistic plane:

Round and round the linoleum, me proud, intent, Nora laughing and moving with great buoyancy, wrapping me in her strange gaiety, her smell of whisky, cologne and sweat. Under the arms her dress is damp, and little drops form along her upper lip, hang in the soft black hairs at the corners of her mouth. She whirls me around in front of my father – causing me to stumble, for I am by no means so swift a pupil as she pretends – and lets me go, breathless. (14)

Compared to the artificiality of her mother’s ‘lady-like’ clothes and manners which is a deliberate denial of reality, the narrator perhaps realises that Nora’s crude physicality with the ‘smell of whisky, cologne and sweat’ is more ‘natural’, stimulating yet comforting. Although at first the narrator feels strange and out of place in Nora’s company – after all, the woman is a catholic – she gradually accepts her as a warm and loving individual. Nora stands in as a mother-substitute, prepared to initiate the young girl into knowledge of her own femininity and the world at large. The ‘embarrassing’ but intimate physical proximity during the dance with Nora also serves as a reminder to the young narrator of her own not very distant, future physical maturity. Reis notes with reference to the myth of Persephone:

Oftentimes, women, particularly women who have been father’s daughters, will feel themselves to be what [Adrienne] Rich has called ‘wildly unmothered.’ This unmothered condition sets up a longing and yearning for a special kind of touch and holding. Many women, of course, seek it in men, looking to their husbands or mates for that which only another woman can offer. This can be a source of deep and secret dissatisfaction. Men can give women many things, but they can never give the kind of touch, warmth, nurturance that connection with another woman’s body can provide. In order to love oneself fully, physical cherishing from another woman must occur as a registered knowing in our body cells. If we do not get this from our personal mother, we may seek it in dreams, find it through our daughters or sisters, or receive it from another woman. However it happens, happen it must. Until a woman knows this experience, she will never be able to feel herself united body and soul.13

She realises that like herself, her father too must feel bound by her mother’s rigid moral and social values that aimed at converting her into ‘all I do not want to be’ (6). It perhaps also dawns on the narrator that among the many losses that her father had suffered is also the loss of Nora’s love. Perhaps in a convergence of their assessment of her mother’s ideals as oppressive and ridiculous a tacit partnership begins to gradually build between the adolescent narrator and her father.

The narrative seems to be building up symbolically on the ambiguity regarding who in fact of all the characters is blind. To her mother’s query of ‘Is that company?’ (10) Nora, without any reference, simply replies ‘Blind.’ All of them in fact are blind. While Nora’s aged mother is literally blind, ‘Her eyes are closed, the eyelids sunk away down’ (11), the narrator’s mother

13 Reis 123-24
chooses ‘to lie … with [her] eyes closed’ (7). The narrator too has been blind to her father’s need for love and security. Similarly, he also has been blind to Nora’s suffering by deliberately refusing to acknowledge the pain that her apparently happy exterior betrayed. Nora’s dressing up and her dance before Ben, the narrator’s father, so full of ‘buoyancy’ and whirling around before they finally bid each other goodbye, which Howells describes as her ‘flirtatiousness’14 but to me recalls the wild dance of self-sacrifice of her earlier fictional counterpart in A Doll’s House, just before she thought she was going to part from her husband for good. Performance in this case also becomes an act of resistance. All readings of A Doll’s House present Nora as the New Woman who slams the door on her husband and walks out of their marriage. However, we fail to notice the New Woman’s tragedy: her craving for love and acceptance; that if financial misfortunes had not followed, and her husband’s rigid religious biases not prevailed, Nora would have continued to live as her husband’s doll. Nora, in this case also, is a victim of her lover’s financial position and conventional religious biases. Of course, she has not walked out of the prospective marriage with Ben. It is Ben who walks out on Nora, exactly as he does at the end of this story, the narrative making a future meeting unsustainable. Nora’s grief at the parting is palpable in her quiet appeals to Ben to visit again, and the ‘unintelligible mark’ (15) she makes on the fender of the car with her touch. We cannot fail to note that the narrator has been silent about her father’s name until we meet Nora. Only after she meets Nora does her father gain an identity as an individual – other than a father, or a tolerant husband. Like the narrator we can sense the reasons for Ben and Nora’s separation, and attribute it to religious differences between Catholics and Baptists in contemporary Canada. The narrator refers to what she sees in Nora’s house: ‘There is … a picture of Mary, Jesus’ mother…. I knew that such pictures are found only in homes of Roman Catholics, and so Nora must be one’ (12). She also makes a mental note of the antipathy of her father’s family, who were obviously Baptists, against Catholics:

I think of what my grandmother and Aunt Tena, over in Dungannon, used to always say to indicate that somebody was a Catholic. So-and-so digs with the wrong foot, they would say. She digs with the wrong foot. That was what they would say about Nora. (12-13)

Parental opposition, therefore, must have been the cause of Ben’s separation from Nora. But it is not until we meet Nora, and know of his secret love, that we and the narrator understand Ben’s ironic denunciation of Baptists in the rhyme which he had coined:

Where are the Baptists, where are the Baptists,  
Where are all the Baptists today?  
They’re down in the water, in Lake Huron water,  
With their sins all a-gittin’ washed away. (7)

Although nothing is stated in clear terms, the narrator’s articulation of her father’s mockery of a religious order challenges orthodox values upon which a society rests. Social rules, it appears, be they religious or political, are in general apathetic to individual happiness. Such knowledge undoubtedly leads to a questioning by the subject of the factors that determine human existence and the place of the individual in the social scheme. Her understanding of her father’s life will definitely have an impact on the narrator’s understanding of her own ontological self. The narrative does not attempt to find solutions to the complexities of human identity, rather it

problematises the whole issue by remaining silent about the effect of the incident upon the young girl. It is up to the intelligent reader to draw conclusions from the permanence in memory of such experience. The only information given to the reader is that there is an unsaid agreement between father and daughter to keep the entire incident a secret from her mother. It is apparent that the daughter has grown up in the process. Instead of buying icecream or pop for the children the father buys a package of licorice: ‘a sweet, chewy, aromatic black substance made by the evaporation from the juice of a root and used as candy and in medicine’ (OED). It is pertinent to note that licorice is an acquired taste, a delicacy meant for grown-ups, and at times used to disguise the smell of whisky. By buying licorice for his children the father treats them as grown-ups. The secret tie between the father and daughter would, in Freud’s terms, be related to the ‘acquisition of femininity.’ Referring to Freud as her guide Reis writes: ‘a daughter’s relationship with her mother was the earlier and more intense attachment while the relationship with her father only assumes major significance in relation to the daughter’s later “acquisition of femininity.”’15 In the spirit of the initiation story which, in Marcus’ words, shows ‘its young protagonist experiencing a significant change of knowledge about the world or himself, or a change of character, or of both, and this change must point or lead him towards an adult world,’16 the female narrator here has had a rebirth through her experience in the company of her father. The reflective mechanics of telling the story gives the narrator not only some insight into the truth of her father’s superficial joviality, it also serves as an insight into the truth about the human condition. As the narrator reflects upon her father’s life she becomes more and more aware of the ambiguities and subtle reversals in mood and perception

flowing back from our car in the last of the afternoon, darkening and turning strange, like a landscape that has an enchantment on it, making it kindly, ordinary and familiar while you are looking at it, but changing it, once your back is turned, into something you will never know, with all kinds of weathers, and distances you cannot imagine. (15)

She is obviously touched by her father’s struggle to negotiate his past and present. Symbolically, as they approach home during their return to Tuppertown, the ‘sky’ too ‘becomes gently overcast’ (15). A sense of nostalgia prevails as the narrative ends with taking us back to ‘summer evenings by the Lake’ (15).

Nicola King claims that memory and nostalgia are innate parts of narratives of growing up:

All narrative accounts of life stories, whether they be ongoing stories which we tell ourselves and each other as part of the construction of identity, or the more shaped and literary narratives of autobiography or first-person fictions, are made possible by memory; they also reconstruct memory according to certain assumptions about the way it functions and the kind of access it gives the past. There are moments when memory seems to return us to a past unchanged by the passing of time; such memories tend to be suffused with a sense of loss, the nostalgia out of which they may be at least in part created. We long for a time when we didn’t know what was going to happen next – or, conversely, to relive the past with the foreknowledge we then lacked. But memory can only be reconstructed in

15 Reis 26.
16 Marcus 192.
time, and time, as Carolyn Steedman puts it, ‘catches together what we know and what we do not yet know.’

What becomes important to the narrator, therefore, is not knowledge of her father’s secret, but a reconstruction of the past that gives her a better and more mature understanding of the man himself and through him, herself. Just as there is no possibility of revival of her father’s lost love, it is a near impossibility for the narrator to regain the innocence of her childhood days of ice cream and evening walks with her father. In his Preface to The Tumble of Reason Heble writes, ‘Munro’s texts, like her characters, repeatedly insist on the abandonment of reason.’ However, in ‘Walker Brothers Cowboy’ the protagonists, far from advocating ‘abandonment of reason’, rather are guided by prudence of action. While the father nonchalantly accepts social restrictions, the daughter matures to the realities of life. Nevertheless, the narrative hints at a continuous process of search for reconstructing the past ‘with all kinds of weathers, and distances you cannot imagine’ (15). The whole process of trying to understand oneself is but an ongoing process and every narrative act is a ‘raid on the inarticulate,’ as it were. Munro points out the unstable nature of Truth:

Memory is the way we keep telling ourselves our stories – and telling other people a somewhat different version of our stories. We can hardly manage our lives without a powerful ongoing narrative. And underneath all edited, inspired, self-serving or entertaining stories there is, we suppose, some big bulging awful mysterious entity called THE TRUTH, which our fictional stories are supposed to be poking at and grabbing pieces of.

The narrator in ‘Walker Brothers Cowboy’ can, to a certain degree, be identified with the author for as Carrington notes ‘[e]ven if Munro’s protagonists do not write or create art in any way … they nevertheless adopt the psychological position of the writer, splitting into two selves, the observer and the participant.’ In another interview, to Atlantic Unbound, Munro ponders on the compulsion of writers to narrate events of childhood:

I think in my case, and in the case of many writers I’ve read, childhood events are really never lost or discarded. They may be seen in many different ways, but never lost … something about writers makes them want to recall these things, even if they are quite unpleasant, devastating things. Not in the sort of way where you get free of them or make them better, but to find out about them, to see what was really going on. This is tremendously important to me. I never think in terms of making myself a better person. I mean, recalling stories is not like what you might do with a therapist. It’s just exploring, taking out the layers of things, trying to see.

Exploring pieces of her past as a self-examining activity, therefore, becomes important for the narrator in order to gain a better understanding of her father and herself in the past, as well as of herself in her present. Every visitation to, and narration of, the past will help her to understand her life differently from the way she has known it. The process of her growing up will, therefore,

18 Heble ix
20 Carrington 31
be an ‘ongoing’ one of recognition and identity reconstruction, to accommodate ‘what we know and what we do not yet know’ about the world and our possible place within it.

Aloka Patel teaches in the Department of English, Sambalpur University, Odisha, India. She has worked on Jamaica Kincaid and is interested in women writers in a variety of contexts. At present she is working on representation of mythical women in Indian writings.
In her novel *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), Shani Mootoo creates characters that simultaneously inhabit both the centre and margins of her text. As part of the colonised nation of Lantanacamara, both Tyler and Mala are rendered homeless at the start of the novel, and not only do they find themselves swept to the side of their current residence at the Paradise Alms House, they are alienated by its inhabitants and rebuffed by its current cluster of employees. Similarly, despite the ultimate centrality of their narratives, at first glance, the personal voices of these characters seem difficult to locate within the larger context of the novel. Tyler has consciously written himself into the margins of the text, while Mala, unable to speak, is left completely voiceless, though, interestingly, not altogether silent. In fact, I would argue it is the story of Chandin Ramchandin that threatens to overtake this text, for just as the novel centres itself around his mudra house, so too does his narrative seem to centre itself within the novel. As colonised people, the characters in Mootoo’s novel find themselves dispossessed and marginalised upon their native soil. When Chandin deliberately chooses to build himself a house in Lantanacamara, he becomes a coloniser in his own right on a microcosmic level, making his home and its surroundings the seat of oppression and tyranny. Mala, as a result, is rendered doubly homeless, and because the reality of home does not exist for her either culturally or personally, she must imagine and create it in alternative ways. When Chandin is killed and his narrative accordingly silenced, Mala slowly redifines what home means to her, first by moving its focus into the garden spaces and ultimately by relocating it within her own imagination and memory. Furthermore, because Mala no longer has the ability to tell her own story at the novel’s end, she must rely on others such as Tyler to tell it for her. Thus, in the same way her home is decentralised, so too is her story, for it is the interweaving of her story, along with the stories of several other characters, that creates a narrative that not only lacks ‘a centre’ but ultimately defies it.

Set on the fictional Caribbean island of Lantanacamara, the novel opens with the character of Mala, who arrives at the Paradise Alms House as an ostensibly mad woman, unfit to stand trial for the alleged murder of her father, Chandin Ramchandin. In fact, Mala has become almost like the flora and fauna that surround her, imitating the parrots’ calls (rather than vice versa) and closely associated with the cereus plant clipping, given to her soon after her admission to the alms house. Tyler, a cross-dressing and sexually ambiguous male nurse, shares with Mala a kind of sexual hybridity that draws him towards her. Throughout the course of the novel, Tyler unravels Mala’s story and within it, that of her sexually abusive father, Chandin. Tyler learns that Mala’s mother had unwillingly left both she and her sister, Asha, for another woman, the same woman her own father had been in love with years earlier. In the wake of this abandonment, Mala and Asha become victims of Chandin’s despotic and, I argue later, colonial rule over their home that included incest and isolation. Despite this trauma, however, Mala does

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1 The reader learns later that is a victim of sexual incest, making her a sexual outsider and a victim of sexual patriarchy, much like Tyler.
not leave home, but rather becomes its protector and guardian, ultimately rebuilding her house in her own imagination.

In his phenomenological exploration, *The Poetics of Space*, it is the house that Gaston Bachelard is most interested in. In this work, Bachelard explores the house as a creator of memories and daydreams, and he is particularly interested in the imprint the home has on one’s imagination. According to Bachelard, the oneric house, one’s first home, is a kind of first universe, asserting that ‘all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home’. As a child, one experiences a sense of intimacy and memory in the home that precedes knowledge and conscious thought. For Bachelard, the house is the most intimate of spaces that allows us to dream and daydream, and, in turn, the house protects the daydreamer. In his concept of topoanalysis, which he defines as ‘the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives’, Bachelard asserts that these memories of home, and the multiplicity of spaces within it, set up ‘the theatre of the past ..., [and] the stage setting maintains the characters in their dominant roles’. Our past experiences and our initial moments of the first house are not so much remembered but re-experienced every time we enter a new home. In the end, Bachelard suggests that we carry the blissful dwelling we experience as a child engraved within us. We re-enter the rooms of our first house in our imagination, by means of the poetic images of daydreaming.

Living under the rule of imperial authority, Tyler and Mala already occupy a marginalised social position that is only further compounded by their sexual deviancy. Due to ‘the binary structures inherent in colonialism’, both Tyler and Mala are othered by the ruling hegemony, signified by the Shivering Northern Wetlanders, and the result is that the ‘notion of community that this novel produces is correspondingly not of universal incorporation, authentic belonging, or unambivalent identification’. Because of their cultural and physical origins, these characters are deemed strangers in their own land; however, not only are they marginalised by the dominant imperial powers, they are also slighted and estranged by their own society of fellow Lantanacamarans because of their anomalous sexual identity. Critic Grace Kyungwon Hong adds that, in his narrative, Tyler ‘situates himself and Miss Ramchandin as two marginalized figures whose “queerness” refers to sexual practices that transgress cultural codes of heterosexuality and masculinity, placing them outside social limits of acceptability’. Doubly alienated at the start of the novel, Tyler and Mala do not seem to occupy a central space in the social order of Lantanacamara, nor does there seem to be any geographical place to put them. Consequently, both characters are relegated to the outskirts of their community and find

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3 Bachelard 8.
4 Bachelard 8.
7 Hong 96.
themselves, at the novel’s opening, at the Paradise Alms House, which is ‘not en route to anywhere’ and where ‘nothing [lies] beyond’.  

In his essay, ‘Writing in Colonial Space,’ Dennis Lee speaks of the difficulties a post-colonial writer faces in terms of language and the ability to express himself in the most basic ways. He writes the following:

[I]f we live in a space that is radically in question for us, that makes our barest speaking a problem to itself …. And alienation in that space will undercut our writing, make it recoil upon itself, become a problem to itself.9

Although Lee is addressing his own experiences as a post-colonial writer who is living in a foreign nation, I would argue that Tyler, a native writer living under European imperial rule, faces similar challenges. He begins his narrative in relative obscurity and anonymity, marginalising his own personal story from the very start of the novel. Asking the reader to address him simply as ‘Nurse Tyler’ (3), he does not offer his last name and states that he is simply the narrator who existed on the ‘periphery of events’ (3). Tyler further underlines his subordination in the Lantanacamaran society by calling himself an ‘outsider’ (6), as he relates his unique situation of being the sole male nurse in a predominantly female field. Furthermore, even as a nurse, Tyler is relegated to doing trivial and menial jobs such as hosing down garbage pails and ‘scrubbing the concrete paths around the residents’ bungalows’ (11). Finally, he alludes to his own aberrant sexual identity in choosing to wear a colourful and feminine neckerchief (15), causing him to be the subject of a certain amount of mocking by his fellow employees. Although Tyler declares that his only function is to relate Mala’s story and not his own, one can also argue that in being denied his civil space as a colonial subject, he is also denied a verbal space, for as Lee notes, a ‘subtle connection’10 links the two. Facing these linguistic challenges, Tyler struggles to find a voice, and one can argue that he is consequently unable to form a personal narrative of his own.

Much like Tyler, when Mala is first introduced into the novel, she is both literally and figuratively difficult to ‘place’. Scandalous rumors circulate about her past, and the facts concerning her life are unclear and mysterious, as Judge Bissey complains that ‘he was not about to have an old woman, a crazy old woman, tried to his court based on a lot of words and no hard fast proof of anything’ (8). According to Dennis Lee, that ‘the colonial writer does not have words of his own’,11 and in the same way, neither Mala nor those around her seem to have the right words to describe her life’s story. With no authentic social identity to speak of, Mala becomes more like a curiosity and a grotesque, a misplaced oddity rather than a dignified human being, and even Tyler cannot resist the urge to touch her (11). Though Mala’s marginalisation represents a kind of spectacle to the Lantanacamarans, she is nevertheless unwanted, and when the policemen first bring her to the Paradise Alms House, Sister does not welcome her arrival,

8 Shani Mootoo, Cereus Blooms at Night (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1996) 131. Subsequent references to this work will be included in parentheses in the text.
10 Lee 398.
11 Lee 399.
for there is ‘no room’ (9) for her in the inn (as it were). Complaining that ‘this is a place for poor people. This is not a place for psychiatrics’ (9), Sister tries to deny Mala a spot in the already humble and meager community of the alms house and further negates her space in Lantanacamaran society. Homeless and destitute, however, Mala has no place else to go, and when ‘the men gently rest [her] motionless body on the floor of [Sister’s] office’ (10), Mala is further robbed of her humanity and treated, instead, like an inconvenient and inanimate object. When Tyler lifts Mala to her bedroom, he describes her as a ‘human bundle’ (13), and Mala herself soon becomes like the furniture, for not only was her body covered with ‘a sheet’ (13) upon her arrival, her arms and legs are strapped to her bed making her seem a part of that object (19). Even the cactus plant given to Mala soon after her arrival becomes like an object gathering little or no notice, and Tyler mentions that, in its dormant state at least, the plant ‘soon became as much a part of the room as her bedpan’ (13).

Living at an alms house in a colonised nation seems to reinforce both Mala and Tyler’s sense of socio-cultural and physical inferiority; however, Floyd-Thomas and Gillman note that Lantanacamara, at least, is an ‘alternative social imaginary’ and can therefore be seen as a liberating space for its colonised inhabitants. Vivian M. May explains further that because this fictionalised nation is ‘not tied down by real geographies, [it is] not limited to the spaces named by colonial rulers and mapped by colonial cartographers’. However, one can counter-argue that this imaginary place only serves to further obscure and complicate the identity of these characters. Even in this fictionalised landscape, the characters inhabit the margins, and, in a sense, they are doubly isolated and segregated, for the reality is that neither Tyler nor Mala is wanted in ‘Paradise’.

As a native of Lantanacamara, Chandin Ramchandin shares a marginal social status with Tyler and Mala; however, while they occupy the fringes of its society, Chandin attempts to appropriate its centre. Moreover, unlike Tyler and Mala, his life’s story is one that seems to be easily remembered and oft told, though ironically, Cigarette Smoking Nana recounts, ‘It’s like he [himself] disappeared off the face of the earth’ (27). Therefore, while Tyler and Mala appear voiceless at the novel’s outset, it seems as if Chandin’s right to be heard lives on longer than he does. Plucked from the fields of Paradise, Chandin is pulled from the periphery of society to its centre, and he is invited by Reverend Thoroughly ‘“to go and live in he own house”’ (30). However, though Chandin is asked to learn the values of the Shivering Northern Wetlanders and to appropriate their behaviours, Vivian May points out that ‘he is a symbol of appropriate assimilation and conversion for other Indians in the labor camps and simultaneously a symbol of the (heretofore) heathen-like, tropical non-Christian for his classmates’ (112). Therefore, despite his seemingly privileged upbringing, Chandin can escape neither himself nor his origins, and the result is that he is often relegated to the peripheral spaces throughout the Thoroughly home. Despite his own valorising of the coloniser’s way of life and his genuine attempts to embrace it,

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14 After his religious and social salvation by the Thoroughlys, the neighbouring Indians told each other to ‘Remember that name’ (31).
Chandin ‘was unsure of his place in this new household. He felt conspicuously lost’ (33). Even when he does find ‘a very definite place … a straight-backed upholstered chair’ (33), it seems to be a less important, less natural, and altogether less comfortable spot in the family’s living room. As a place to plant himself down in the Thoroughly household, this chair soon becomes an ‘antidote for [Chandin’s] uprootedness’ (33), however, rather than a symbol of fecundity and organic growth, the chair, composed of dead wood and elaborate fabric, offers Chandin nothing but sterility and ornamentation. Therefore, despite being raised by the reverend as his ‘own child’ (30), Chandin will never grow to become a part of the Thoroughly family and is left to function only as a kind of embellished showpiece of the reverend’s successful ministry.

However, Chandin is like the ‘chandelier that hung low’ (33) in the centre of the Thoroughly’s living room and continues to dream of appropriating hegemonic power by centralising himself within the Thoroughly family, and his sexual desire for Lavinia symbolises his own ruthless desire to unite himself with colonial and hegemonic power. This wish to spotlight himself within his adopted (and native) society also extends itself to Chandin’s narrative, and I would argue that the text starts to focus itself on his tragic story of unrequited love for his ‘sister’ Lavinia. Unlike Tyler, who at least claims to guard himself from the temptation to digress and relate ‘every scintillating detail’ (113) of his romantic relationship with Otoh, Chandin, from the start, seems intent on playing the role of the hero within a romance novel. Not only does he pine away over Lavinia, he determines to win her over at all costs and vows that his love for her, like the firefly’s flickering light, ‘would never die’ (40). I would argue further that his story drifts into a kind of overbearing and grandiloquent melodrama, as we read that Chandin ‘brooded with an air of romantic sullenness [and] stroked his chin habitually and reveled in the tragic knowledge that his love-sickness could bleed so freely within him’ (36).

Just as he tries to appropriate colonial beliefs and practices, then, so too does Chandin try to appropriate the narrative away from its focus on Mala’s life story. However, Chandin’s attempts to connect himself to the imperial culture only conclude in underscoring his inescapable differences from the Shivering Northern Wetlanders. Not only does his dark skin contrast with his ‘brilliant cricket whites’ (42), it makes him the centre of attention for all the wrong reasons. When the Thoroughlys’ return to Lantanacamara, they ‘spotted him’ (45) first, not because Chandin had successfully transformed into a fellow coloniser with imperial authority, but merely because he was ‘one of the few brown-skinned people on shore not employed in bringing the ship in’ (45). Although Chandin has internalised the values of his European colonisers, he soon realises that his external appearance functions as an insurmountable obstacle that will always relegate him to the margins of society.

Chandin does not get the girl in the end, and his own narrative of heroic romance and melodrama is truncated into a much darker story of a different kind of unrequited love. Although Chandin cannot align himself completely with the ruling classes, he still appropriates their sense of superiority over his own kind, and we read that ‘[h]e felt immense distaste for his background and the people in it’ (34). Therefore, though Chandin gives up his dream of building a ‘stone and mortar house’ (53), he does not, in fact, give up the desire to build a house altogether. One can argue further that because he no longer fits into the native or ruling societies of Lantanacamara, Chandin, in effect, colonises a little piece of the island just for himself and creates what soon becomes an oppressive and tyrannical autocracy of his own making. As a result, Chandin is both coloniser and colonised, as he simultaneously occupies both the centre and the margins of his
society. He builds ‘his own home’ in a cheap ‘underdeveloped section of Paradise called Hillside’, yet he centres himself within it as the ruling authority. He is further described as the home’s ‘overseer’, yet he also seems ‘to take no interest in the house itself’ (53), spending the majority of his time on the back porch, where he was ‘invariably to be found lying on his side in the hammock, rocking on the back porch’ (54). In the end, Chandin takes possession of land in order to underscore his own sense of authority, and like a proper coloniser, he does not consider the needs or desires of his home’s other inhabitants.

The house is meant to offer a lasting sense of peace and repose according to Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*. Bachelard calls the house ‘the human being’s first world’ where ‘[l]ife begins well, it begins enclosed, protected’. As the place where one’s first knowable experiences occur, the house should ideally function as a womb-like space that is protective and sheltering, and if one’s first experiences of home are of positive ‘well-being’, then those first memories will cultivate an endless store of reassuring and heartwarming daydreams. Not only does the house supply the space for daydreaming, but it also helps create and nurture it. Bachelard notes further, ‘We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of the protection. … Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home, and by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams’. Furthermore, Bachelard underlines this ‘solidarity of memory and imagination’ and goes on to say that the house one remembers is not, in fact, the real house of one’s childhood but a picture filtered warmly through the imagination.

However, the house that Mala grows up in does not seem to offer the ideal that Bachelard depicts. Even before Sarah and Lavinia make their escape, the Ramchandin house functions more like a prison than a protective shelter, and we see that Mala and Asha (and everyone else, it seems) prefers to be outside its confining boundaries. Captives in their own home, ‘Chandin’s family never made … trips’ to the countryside like other families (54), for in order for Chandin to retain his imperial-like authority, his subjects must remain within the precincts of his home. Therefore, when Lavinia starts to call on them, Mala and Asha were ‘unable to stand the waiting’, using her visits as an excuse to escape the tyranny of home for the freedom of ‘the beach or river’ (56). It is also interesting to note that though Chandin had redecorated the house in anticipation of Lavinia’s visit, even buying ‘a modest chandelier’ for the drawing room (54), the women immediately draw Lavinia away from the home’s centre (which according to Bachelard ought to be a comforting place rather than a suffocating one) into the more marginal spaces such as the kitchen and the garden (56). When Sarah and Lavinia make their final escape, the Ramchandin house becomes even more oppressive for Mala and Asha. The women have taken many of the mementoes that make a house a home, ‘gathering photographs off the walls’ (66); Chandin burns the remaining photos and, in so doing, turns the house into a kind of empty shell rather than the locus of memories and imagination. Not only has the house become a prison for these children, however, it has also become a kind of panopticon, and we see that Chandin ‘fence[s] off his house crudely with chicken wire’ (70), and like a sentinel, occupies a central

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15 Bachelard 7.
16 Bachelard 6.
17 Bachelard 6.
space within the home ‘in a spot equidistant from the back door and the front door’, never letting his children ‘out of his sight’ (70).

As a whole, the house, as Mala knows it, bears little or no resemblance to Bachelard’s idyllic model, and consequently, Mala does not find comfort within its four walls. Furthermore, the incest and trauma that Mala experiences creates a home of nightmares rather than of dreams. Even within the house’s interior, Mala’s experience of home has centred on its darker nooks and crannies rather than its more comforting corners. Bachelard maps the house from top to bottom, underlining its ‘centrality’ in one’s consciousness and its ‘verticality’ as a gateway for daydreaming. He further elaborates on the meaning behind significant parts of a home, focusing specifically on attics, cellars, and various stairwells. According to Bachelard, the attic is not only the site of rational thought, but it is also a place for dreaming. Mala’s house, however, does not provide her with this privileged space where she can ‘dream of heights’, for her house does not go up, but rather it goes down. The Ramchandin house has only two stories, the main floor and what is ostensibly the cellar. Although the ‘sewing room’ is located on what would be considered the ground floor, ‘an enclosed stairway (54)’ was the only access to this space, making it feel more concealed, constricted and subterranean. As the locus of one’s deepest and darkest secrets, the cellar ‘becomes buried madness, walled-in tragedy’, and it is therefore significant that Mala’s early childhood memories centre on this space. When Sarah and Lavinia’s affair becomes more pronounced and defined, their trysts move down into the sewing room, and Mala, aware of their secret, becomes a guardian of this room, keeping a watch for Chandin’s unexpected arrival. Furthermore, rather than using her imagination for cultivating heartwarming dreams in an attic that does not even exist, Mala instead indulges in her ‘childhood fears’ in the basement sewing room and ‘imagined [the women] kissing [and] imagined Papa finding them kissing’ (61; emphasis added).

As victim of incest and the consequent trauma associated with it, not only is the ‘unforgettable intimacy’ of Mala’s bedroom obviously destroyed, her memories of home are further eradicated. In her essay ‘Traumatic Departures,’ Cathy Caruth quotes Freud on the subject of trauma and memory:

People think the fact that the traumatic experience is constantly forcing itself upon the patient even in his sleep is a proof of the strength of that experience: the patient is, as one might say, fixated on his trauma … I am not aware however, that patients suffering from

18 Bachelard 17.
19 Bachelard notes that ‘in order to satisfy our daydreams, [a house has] to be differentiated in height’ (25).
Preferring the three-story house, he goes on to say that ‘one floor more, and our dreams become blurred’ (25).
20 Mootoo notes that even the roof of Mala’s house becomes like the ground, squeaking and sagging under the weight of ‘several pepper plants [which] had sprouted in the dirt and rust of the roof’ (124).
21 Bachelard 18.
22 Bachelard 20.
23 Bachelard 19.
24 Bachelard 24.
traumatic neurosis are much occupied in their waking lives with memories of their accident. Perhaps they are more concerned with not thinking of it.\textsuperscript{25}

As a victim of traumatic childhood events, Mala’s memories of home are cluttered with dreams that force themselves upon her unconscious, leaving no room for the daydreaming or imagining so important to Bachelard’s paradigm. By day she is occupied with forgetting her past, and by night she revisits it in terror. Mala cannot relive the home’s ‘memories of protection’,\textsuperscript{26} for the home itself has become the site of her own destruction. In the end, Mala uses the polluted memories of her past to remind herself of her own survival,\textsuperscript{27} and we witness Mala repeating a yearly ritual of self-affliction in which she reminds herself that ‘she had survived. She was alive’ (144).

A question we must ask ourselves as the novel progresses is why does Mala remain in the home space if it has served as a place for traumatic early childhood experiences, and it has been forsaken by everyone else? One possible answer is that Mala shares Chandin’s sense of ownership over the space; however, while Chandin had transformed the house and its surroundings into a colonial regime in miniature, Mala allows the land to grow into her own version of Paradise. Mala’s sense of rootedness to this place is first illustrated when she collects bits of seed and shells in preparation for her escape with her mother and Lavinia. As a young child, Mala sees home as a concrete and tangible place, and she literally tries to carry a portion of it with her. Ironically, it is this ‘bag with all the seeds and the shells and the cereus cuttings’ that causes Mala’s father to snatch her away and maroon her at home (67). Just as Mala cannot leave her little bag behind, neither can she bring herself to leave home. Because Mala has not yet learned to internalise her home into daydreams, the physical attachment to the home space trumps its symbolic significance.

Because Mala’s home has become a site of violence and violation, she designates herself as its protector.\textsuperscript{28} Her desire to protect the home space is first aroused by the story Lavinia tells her about snails in their shells, in which she declares, ‘Protect a living snail and when it dies, it doesn’t forget. … It will come back after it has died looking for its old home …, guarding and protecting you in return’ (58). This respect for home makes such a strong impression on Mala that she continues to protect (and collect) snails throughout her life, believing ‘that good fortune will be visited upon her as their guardian (98). In fact, Mala herself is like a snail in its shell, attached to the inanimate shell of her home as a form of her own self-protection, for as a victim of incest she is, in a sense, ‘half dead, half alive’ (109). One can also argue that not only is Mala guarding the home space by watching over the snails, so too is she protecting memory. Unlike


\textsuperscript{26} Bachelard 6.

\textsuperscript{27} Caruth writes, ‘the survival of trauma is more than the fortunate passage past a violent event, a passage that is accidentally interrupted by reminders of it, but rather the endless inherent necessity of repetition, which ultimately leads to destruction’ (33). She goes onto say, ‘What one returns to, in the flashback, is not the incomprehensibility of one’s near death, but the very incomprehensibility of one’s own survival. Repetition, in other words, is not simply the attempt to grasp that one has almost died, but more fundamentally and enigmatically, the very attempt to claim one’s own survival’ (34).

\textsuperscript{28} We have already witnessed this tendency in Mala when she tries to protect her mother and Lavinia’s secret from her father.

Imagining Home at a Snail’s Pace in Shani Mootoo’s \textit{Cereus Blooms at Night}. Anna Royal.

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Mala who has nothing worth remembering and everything to forget, ‘snails, like most things in nature, have long memories’ (58). In the end, we realise that the reason why Mala leaves her father’s dead and decaying body within the home space – or rather within his shell – is that she is merely transferring Lavinia’s advice (given to her when she was protecting snails as a young girl) to her new situation protecting her home: ‘Just wait to find some naturally emptied shells, honey’ (58).

Once Chandin is killed, Mala takes over as the house’s keeper, and we witness her slowly shift the centre of the house towards its margins. Living both inside and outside the house, Mala roots herself in the very real earthiness of the garden, yet she also searches for her own imaginary house in her memory. Bachelard calls this the ‘oneiric house, a house of dream-memory’, explaining further that the house one inhabits in his early life becomes ingrained in his memory as a kind of ‘Motionless Childhood’. It becomes a daydream one can visit again and again for comfort and pleasure. Bachelard writes further, ‘We live fixations, fixations of happiness. We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection’ and goes onto say, ‘the house shelters [this] daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace’. In essence, Bachelard is saying that the home space becomes a part of us, existing internally in our memories and dreams rather than externally in objective and subjective description. As a ‘home for the homeless’, the garden spaces are appropriated by Mala, as she extends the once confining perimeters of home. Turning the gardens into a refuge, Mala is often seen sitting there, rocking in her chair, remembering and daydreaming.

However, because Mala’s childhood home does not offer her the kind of solace and comfort that Bachelard writes about, Mala must utilise her imagination to search for and create a new home for herself. Bachelard writes that ‘imagination antedates memory’, and we read that when Mala recalls the past, she ‘remembered a little and imagined a great deal’ (152). At this point in her narrative, it is also interesting to note that Mala begins to disassociate herself from her childhood self, Pohpoh, and they become two separate beings: Mala existing in the real world, while Pohpoh living in the softer and fuzzier world of memory and imagination. Because Pohpoh and Mala do not have a benign and happy home to revisit, a ‘Motionless Childhood’ that Bachelard speaks of – an oneiric house, a house of dream-memory – Pohpoh must go on her imagined night-time adventures in search for a comforting ‘lamp in the window’ and an idealised space to call home, for, in her own home, we learn that Mala had ‘never lit a lantern in her house’ following the death of her father (249). Although Mala’s first attempt to find a home is upset by a barking dog named Tail, she soon finds a home where she ‘imagined bedrooms with a happy family, a fairy tale family in which the father was a benevolent king. There would be a fairy queen for a mother, and enough little cherub siblings to fill a very large shoe or pumpkin carriage, their fat pink faces smiling even as they slept’ (168). As Mala indulges in

29 Bachelard 15.
30 Bachelard 5.
31 Bachelard 6.
32 Bachelard 6.
34 Bachelard 120.
35 Bachelard 34.
imagination and recreates memory, she discovers a home that is the epitome of a child’s fantasy-land. However, even in this imagined memory, Mala sits perched like a gargoyle as the protector of the home space, and she further ‘imagined herself ... thwarting monsters and demons who tried to lay a finger on the little baby in whose room she found herself” (168). Ultimately, the home space becomes successfully and indelibly engraved into Pohpoh’s mind, and we read that ‘during these night-time adventures she had learned that the layouts of houses were predictable’ (170).

In the end, Mala protects the home space by not only remaining at the Ramchandin house after everyone has left, but also by imagining a new home in her memory. Furthermore, the home in Mala’s memory is not only indelible but also untouchable, as it is unable to be accessed or violated by those around her. In the same way, Mala protects Pohpoh by housing her inside of herself, and her body and mind become a kind of protective shelter for Pohpoh, one that the little girl inside herself never had. When the authorities come to investigate Mala’s house, she quickly hugs and protects Pohpoh, promising that ‘Mala will take care of you, Pohpoh. No one will ever touch you again like that’ (186).

‘Snails build a little house which they carry about with them,’ so ‘they are always at home in whatever country they travel’, Bachelard writes. In the same way, inside Mala’s memory, the home space becomes not only fortified but also decentralised and portable, not limited to one particular place and not tied down by geography. Furthermore, Mala successfully lives in the centre of the home space and also in its margins, for not only does she protect the house (and sleep amongst its gardens), the house also lives inside of her. No longer does Mala need to collect bits of dirt and seed to hold onto her home, for by relocating the home space in memory, she has both decentralised the concept of home and centred it within herself. Similarly, in Tyler watching over Mala, he too, is nurturing a protecting home. In the end, Tyler reveals that a series of letters from Asha addressed to a place – a house – ironically never makes it there. Instead, they are diverted and given to a person, Mala, and to the home that resides in her. One can argue further that Mala’s story, as told through Tyler, Otoh, and the interweaving voices of Lantanacamara, becomes itself an open letter: a homeless narrative with no fixed address, but with a hope that its message will, like its characters, one day find its way.

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36 Bachelard 122.
The Force of Argument and the Argument of Force: A Study of the Rhetoric of Achamba and Abaago in Shadrach Ambanasom’s Son of the Native Soil

Kenneth Usongo

Although Shadrach Ambanasom’s Son of the Native Soil is centred on the clan Dudum (Ngie), the society recreated in the novel can be perceived as a microcosm of Cameroon as the novelist interrogates larger concerns – of a nation riddled with numerous abuses like corruption (the Divisional Officer in Mbambe), misuse of power or authority (the humiliation of the magistrate in the front seat of the car by gendarmes), insecurity (the assassins of Achamba), cavalier public service (Achamba’s trip to the archives in Yaoundé), and perpetual conflicts (the Anjong-Akan land dispute). Through Achamba and Abaago, Ambanasom depicts a representative picture of contemporary Cameroon or even, on a large scale, Africa: its social, cultural, political, and economic landscape in its splendour as well as its sordidness; its resourcefulness as well as its ruthlessness. In this essay, I intend to demonstrate that whereas Achamba makes good distinction between the force of argument and the argument of force and privileges the former over the latter in his communication of unity and development for Dudum, Abaago conflates both types of argument as he pursues his objective, which is making Akan the political headquarters of Dudum even if it implies disposing of Achamba through force. Abaago essentially engages in partisan disputation, always intending to win, as opposed to Achamba, who tends to embrace protreptic argumentation, or striving to teach. At the macro level, Ambanasom seems to embed, in the rhetoric of Achamba and Abaago, commentary on minority rights, statehood, and governance in Cameroon or Africa with attendant ills such as suppression of freedoms, torture, and other abuses. The novelist interrogates these issues by engaging Achamba and Abaago in dialectic argumentation as both of them seek to know the truth about the history of Dudum.

More importantly, beyond the characterisation of Achamba and Abaago, Ambanasom frames an ideological vision about how respect for minority rights and democracy can function in Cameroon or Africa. He persuades the reader to buy into his vision of politics by partly constructing his characters along the continuum of virtue and vice and by making the argument of Achamba more convincing than that of Abaago. Interestingly, the relationship between Achamba and Abaago somehow plays out like the one between Southern Cameroon and La République du Cameroun as both politicians debate whether Southern Cameroon should gain independence through unification with La République du Cameroun or be absorbed by Nigeria. The UN had given Southern Cameroon only these two choices, ignoring the option of statehood partly on grounds that the territory was considered then economically weak to be autonomous. In reality, Foncha successively campaigned and subordinated the interest of Southern Cameroon (Akan) to that of La République du Cameroun (Anjong). This historical event is famously referred to in Cameroon as the Plebiscite of 1961.

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At the Berlin Conference of 1884-85, Cameroon was colonised by Germany. After the defeat of Germany in World War I, Cameroon was administered as a UN trust territory by France and Britain. Today, Cameroon essentially has a bicultural heritage, excluding numerous other ethnic cultures. While 80 percent of the country has a deep-rooted French colonial heritage (language, culture, administration), 20 percent is Anglo-Saxon. The latter section of the country feels politically, economically, and culturally oppressed by the French speaking majority. In other words, the relationship between these two groups translates as one between the dominant and the dominated as evidenced in the constant use of French in Anglophone sectors of the country. We notice Ambanasom’s apparent allusion to this in the conversation between Achamba and a guard as the former makes enquiries about the fate of Akan detainees in the Gendarmerie headquarters at Mbambe: “‘Qui êtes-vous Monsieur? et où allez-vous?’[Who are you, Sir? And where are you going?] barked the officer in French.”

1 The imperious tone of the guard is not only a simulation of the authoritarianism of one linguistic group over the other in Cameroon, but also a questioning of the Anglophone identity.

The novel, *Son of the Native Soil*, is the story of Achamba and Abaago from the village of Akan, which considers Anjong its political rival because the latter village is naturally better endowed to host an administrative unit for Dudum. While Achamba envisions politics from a unifying and conciliatory perspective, argues that Anjong is better suited than Akan to be the administrative headquarters of Dudum, and even weds Echunjei from the opposing village of Anjong in his endeavour to reconcile these two villages, Abaago perceives Achamba’s actions as detrimental to the interest of Akan. As a result, Abaago arranges for murderers to kill Achamba; Abaago later commits suicide when he is about to be exposed as a villain.

My analysis of the rhetoric of Achamba and Abaago is informed by both Afrocentric and Western theories of communication. By adopting Afrocentric and Western theories of discourse as a theoretical framework, my study of the rhetoric of Ambanasom’s protagonists will be enriched because this critical lens will bring to my argument a dynamic interplay, rather than an essentialist attitude, as I further explore the multifaceted nature of Achamba and Abaago. Moreover, there is a marked link between Afrocentric and Western theories of discourse as exemplified, for example, by the emphasis on style, audience, and the moral character of the speaker.

Afrocentric rhetoric insists on, among other things, the ability of the speaker to integrate rhetorical questions, rhythmic patterns, song, dance, metaphors, proverbs, spontaneity, and audience participation in his or her communication. Molefi Asante sums up Afrocentric communication in these telling words:

How we say what it is that we say and what we do with our own values in the saying of what we say dictates the alignment with cultural and personal beliefs. This means that communication derives from a cultural place, it becomes cultural only in the sense that it is based upon some lived experiences of people.

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1 Shadrach A. Ambanasom, *Son of the Native Soil* (Bamenda: Langaa Research & Publishing, 1999; 2009) 65. Further references to this novel will be included in parentheses in the text.

For his part, Arthur Smith posits that effective Black rhetoric is a combination of the rhetor’s reputation, the good elaboration of his or her ideas, as well as elocution skills: ‘The degree and intensity of the generating response to the speaker largely depend on the speaker’s reputation, style, and development of his ideas, as well as on his manner of delivery.’

Western philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Erasmus have all stressed the importance of ethos, logos, and pathos to rhetors who intend to convince an audience of a particular point of view. Rhetors are expected to command moral authority, presenting their argument in a systematic and compelling way with the objective of emotionally and intellectually connecting with their audience. But differently, rhetoric embodies both persuasion and informing, as an effective rhetor is constantly aware of the need to establish a convivial relationship with his or her audience.

Ambanasom’s *Son of the Native Soil* is revealing about discourse in Dudum (Ngie) in that it shows how rhetoric could be used to forge unity and also how it could bring about dissension. This is particularly evident in the utterances of Achamba and his staunch rival, Abaago. Each, in his own way, uses rhetoric to plead for his cause. On the one hand, Achamba is portrayed as an admirable rhetor that excels in persuasive language and uses this attribute to bring about social and political cohesion within his community of Dudum. On the other, Abaago is depicted as generally polemical, as interested only in the welfare of Akan to the exclusion of the rest of Dudum: ‘He was extremely partisan, very uncompromising and decidedly vocal as far as the cause of his village was concerned’ (35). He lacks the proper ethos and pathos that could persuade his audience to accept his point of view. Overall, the rhetoric of both Achamba and Abaago is generally couched in the social and cultural values of Ngie, the community recreated in Ambanasom’s novel. In the same vein, the Anjong–Akan rivalry in Ambanasom’s novel translates into the protracted struggle between the villages of Andek and Teze to be the political headquarters of Ngie (Dudum). At the metaphorical level, the Anjong–Akan conflict over an administrative unit mirrors the independence struggle of Southern Cameroon in the 1950s and 60s.

The differences in temperament between Achamba and Abaago are first seen during preparations for the visit of the D.O. (Divisional Officer) of Mbambe to Dudum. As Abaago and Ubeno work respectively on the behalf of Akan and Anjong towards writing separate welcome addresses to the D.O., Achamba strives to cast a vision that would pull together the disparate ideologies of Akan and Anjong. Achamba espouses a vision of elaborating a common platform that would reflect the commonalities of, not only both rival villages, but also the entire clan. As a result, he ‘appealed to Akaya to lift the so-called economic sanctions against Akan and to both chiefs to drop their belligerent exchanges. At a trying time in the nation’s history, he said, the government could not stand by and watch with a smile such a potentially explosive situation’ (98). Achamba here appears to be speaking to Cameroonians (both Anglophones and Francophones) to strive to resolve political differences that are rocking the country, particularly at a time when Anglophones are clamouring for statehood.

In an attempt to stem the animosity between Abaago and Ubeno, Achamba proposes that the welcome address to the D.O. should focus on social amenities such as a hospital, a post office, a

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good road for Dudum, and the government should be given the free hand to determine the site of an administrative unit: ‘It was that the Dudum people as a whole should ask the government to provide them with a hospital and a Post Office. But that it would be left to the government to choose the location of these’ (120). The idea of the government determining an administrative centre echoes how the United Nations used a plebiscite in 1961 to decide whether Southern Cameroon should achieve independence with La République du Cameroun or Nigeria. Unfortunately Achamba’s proposal does not satisfy Abaago, who sees in Achamba’s neutral stance covert support for Anjong, considering that it seems more conducive to hosting an administrative unit than Akan: ‘Abaago tried to raise an objection against the compromise, but he was voted down by the majority’ (120). The objection to Abaago’s proposal demonstrates how Dudum is more interested in a unified clan rather than separate political entities.

Another issue that puts Abaago, Ubeno, and Achamba at loggerheads is determining who should read the welcome address to the D.O. Abaago claims that it is his legitimate right to read the welcome address because he has often done so throughout his political career and also given his position as a former administrator in Mbambe: ‘As a former administrator; I’ve worked with the people in Mbambe, and I’ve been reading newspapers’ (121). Abaago’s claim to legitimacy and literacy is reminiscent of that of some long serving leaders or politicians in Africa who do not believe that they have outlived their usefulness and need to hand over governance to a more enlightened and freely elected generation. Ubeno scoffs at Abaago’s de facto claim to authority in the following words: ‘Look here, Abaago, you know that I know who you are. And you yourself know who I am. Are you speaking of foreign newspapers or just those produced locally?’ (121).

Faced with the possibility of the rivalry between Ubeno and Abaago degenerating into an argument of force, Achamba proposes that Mr Anagho, the headmaster of Anjong School, be chosen to read the welcome address: ‘Since none of you is satisfied to see the other read except yourself, I’d like to suggest that the address be read by a neutral person’ (122). While Ubeno accepts this compromise, Abaago objects to the proposal of Achamba and instead suggests that Mr Abuma, the headmaster of Akan School, should be the one to read the welcome address. This incident demonstrates how uncompromising Abaago can be; if he does not have his way in an argument, nothing can be considered settled.

In the face of the intransigence of Abaago, Achamba resorts to casting lots (or a mimicry of democratic and transparent elections) between Abaago and Ubeno in order to resolve the issue of who has to read the welcome address to the D.O.: ‘Achamba picked up the pieces of paper again and shook them in his closed fist several times and then cast them on the table’ (123). The result favours Abaago at the expense of Ubeno, who accepts the decision. The incident of casting lots recalls the outcome of the 1961 plebiscite in Southern Cameroon that fused it with of La République du Cameroun.

Granted that a rhetor should seamlessly combine wisdom and eloquence in his or her discourse, both qualities appear to be disproportionately shared by Achamba and Abaago. However, it should be stated that when we first encounter Abaago, we are captivated by his apparently pleasant personality. Abaago is an
ebullient man with an attractive voice and an intelligent face ... Generally a jovial person Abaago often put on an enticing smile when in good mood. A man of taste in matters of clothes he was fond of jumpers worn over trousers and low-heeled shoes. (35)

Because of his sojourn in Mpundu (South West Region of Cameroon) as a timekeeper, Abaago has acquired some sophistication through his contact with foreigners, an attribute that enhances his image within Akan. His historical counterpart, Endeley, studied in Nigeria and enjoyed considerable respect as a politician in the South West Region.

Unfortunately, Abaago’s major weakness is his subjectivity, his partisan approach to issues which makes him prone to sophistry and violence and diminishes his stature as a leader. Ambanasom adds that Abaago is ‘very uncompromising and decidedly vocal as far as the cause of his village was concerned’ (35). Like Nwaka in Chinua Achebe’s Arrow of God, Abaago is also portrayed as contentious, a war monger, as evidenced in his encouragement to Chief Umeitoh and the Akan people to fight Anjong over ownership of a parcel of land, Ukob: ‘it was Abaago who had fanned the whole land affair, coaxing them onto the attack on Abang’ (99). By embracing force as a solution to conflict, Abaago ignores the point that violence, as Martin Luther King affirms, instead works against wholeness and creativity; it ‘destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible.’ In fact, Abaago seems lacking in ethos as an effective rhetor within Dudum given his tendentious rhetoric on behalf of Akan to the detriment of Dudum. This is how he intends to promote the cause of Akan against Anjong: ‘What we need is just a little work ... Our village will outstrip Anjong in terms of development’ (133-4). The stultification of the growth of the cocoa that he encourages his people to grow is a symbolic reminder of his rhetorical inadequacies.

For his part, Achamba, like his historical counterpart Foncha, is a soft-spoken and articulate teacher, qualities that enhance his standing within Dudum. Moreover, Achamba is described as a ‘dashing gentleman with a certain romantic air about him, Achamba was a dandy, always smartly dressed ... His wardrobe contained well-tailored suits for special occasions’ (52). He is extremely self-disciplined even in times of crises. Ambanasom conceives Achamba as the prince of democracy or good governance. When Achamba learns about the attack on Anjong by his compatriots, he goes about educating his people to refrain from violence, and the need for peaceful co-existence within Dudum (65). Achamba clearly embraces the non-confrontational type of rhetoric, which explains why he is a pragmatic and more successful politician than Abaago. As one who understands the belligerent inclination of Akan, he writes a letter to Chief Akaya of Anjong, expressing regret for the behaviour of Akan and praising the restraint of Anjong in the face of Akan provocation. Achamba pursues this line of thought because of his conviction, as he states to his friend, Neba, that a ‘community, like a nation, can only progress very well when its inhabitants are fully mobilised and united behind their leader; when they live in a state of peace devoid of mutual distrust and suspicion, petty rivalries and jealousies’ (110). Achamba laments that politics has polarised Dudum, transforming the clan into two distinct blocs: ‘In Dudum you belong to either of two geographical zones, and this natural division has

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helped to nurture the political differences’ (109). This scenario can allegorise the cultural or linguistic division of Cameroon into Anglophones and Francophones.

Achamba elaborates on the theme of peaceful co-existence among diverse peoples by appealing to the elites of Dudum resident in Yaoundé: ‘In the evening he paid a visit to the Dudum people in Yaoundé, persuading them to save money for the development of their area ... Achamba also exhorted the younger generation working outside the clan to unite for the common good of the area’ (140). Again, this episode recreates how some Anglophone politicians like John Foncha and S.T. Muna campaigned for Southern Cameroon to unite with La République du Cameroun.

Achamba’s flair for lofty language, which also showcases his persuasive ability, can be discerned in his poetry. In his billet-doux to Echunjei, Achamba draws upon classical mythology to represent his romantic feelings towards his beloved. By alluding to Venus, the Roman goddess of love, beauty and fertility, and by intimating that he is vulnerable to the amorous slings of Cupid, the Roman god of desire, affection and erotic love, Achamba clearly celebrates his supreme love for adorable Echunjei, a relationship which he envisions as genuine and unshakable:

On this very romantic day
When Venus the goddess of love
Is moving in hearts bound together
By her son’s arrows,
By arrows from Cupid’s bow. (152)

On this score, he is able to win the love of Echunjei.

In another poem, ‘Elemental Fury’, Achamba demonstrates the evocative power of his language; he is able to describe, in a compelling manner, the fury of the storm and its destructive effect on humans and the environment:

When I hear in the howling of the wind
And in the drumming of Dudum Falls
The wailing of bereaved mothers,
And the groan of separated lovers,
I fear the agents of doom are at large. (216)

This section of the poem describes the potent effects of the forces of nature as they unleash havoc on the physical environment and also how they instill a sense of the forlorn in humans. This poem is particularly memorable in that it indicates an interconnection between human beings and the physical environment; it also demonstrates Achamba’s prescience as he obliquely hints at his murder, which will be undertaken, at the instigation of Abaago, under the cover of the storm. Culturally, among the Dudum (Ngie) people, it is not uncommon for the deaths of important people to be presaged by certain unnatural phenomena. At the metaphorical level, the storm can represent the threat posed to democracy by dictatorship throughout the entire continent of Africa.

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Unlike Achamba, Abaago’s rhetoric generally appears fruitless. We see this when he affirms that the construction of more houses at Ugum would ensure greater development – precisely an administrative centre and its attendant benefits – in Akan. This is how he prods Akan: ‘As soon as this little patch of road is completed, cars will be flowing to Akan market. I assure you. Work, watch and see. The Post Office, the maternity centre, the court hall and the civil registration centre which we desperately need will just follow’ (87). Abaago even arranges for a commercial land rover to drive down to Akan for the first time. He sits conspicuously in the front seat of the land rover in order to draw the admiration of his people to himself. Moreover, Abaago is determined, as earlier pointed out, to outstrip Anjong in development and he uses the incident of the land rover as a pointer to his belief that Akan will be granted an administrative unit by the government.

While Achamba works towards the development of Dudum and is aware that Akan does not present itself strategically as an administrative headquarters for the clan, Abaago is unrelenting in his subjectivity, placing the interest of Akan above any other consideration. Listen to what he says about the history of Dudum, which is contrary to findings of Achamba in the archives in Yaoundé: ‘Haven’t you heard that Ngiekum first settled in Akan from Widikum? Haven’t you heard that at the time of the Germans Akan was their headquarters? These are my reasons’ (144). Abaago’s attitude towards the historical facts presented by Achamba reflects that of Gorgias of Leontini in Plato’s Gorgias, who is more concerned with form rather than content, appearance rather than reality. His terministic screen or perspective, recalling Edmund Burke’s nomenclature in Language as Symbolic Action, is that development and peace can only come to Dudum through Akan.

Commenting on Anjong as a viable administrative headquarters, Ambanasom says that ‘Places cleared up and the horizon appeared in the distance, an inviting openness that was all the more attractive for its sharp contrast with the bottle-neck aspect of Akan’ (143). The author’s submission reflects the argument of Foncha to his Anglophone electorate about the advantages of uniting with La République du Cameroun rather than Nigeria. One possible reason why Foncha’s message won support among Southern Cameroonians was because of the harassment they often experienced at the hands of some Igbo traders at the Bamenda main market. Some indigenes saw this harassment as a foretaste of what awaited them if they achieved independence with Nigeria, an option which Endeley favoured.

Questioned by Abaago about Achamba’s preference for development in Anjong rather than Akan, Achamba refutes the charge of his apparent support for Anjong, arguing instead that, ‘we should bury our individual differences when we think at the level of the clan’ (144). Such an ideological vision earns Achamba more admiration within Dudum and shows him as a more effective rhetorician than Abaago. While Achamba often speaks with a certain gravitas, Abaago’s discourse is generally confrontational, raising doubt about the sincerity of his declarations and diminishing his credibility as demonstrated in his unsuccessful bid to persuade Akan youths to accept that Achamba’s influence is detrimental to Akan. He pooh-poohs, in front of the youths, the contribution of Achamba towards development in Akan by challenging them to stand up in defence of the village: ‘What is this I see and hear? Is this what you as the young torchbearers would be to Akan?’ (196). Abaago’s call for hatred towards Achamba is ignored mainly because of his moral deficiency: ‘But the meeting only ended up with the young people
split into two camps, with the minority adhering to Abaago’s philosophy, and the majority espousing Achamba’s ideas’ (196).

Abaago even accuses Achamba of ingratiating himself to Chief Akaya and the Anjong cause by marrying Echunjei, whom he qualifies as a mere girl, a common woman. Yet Echunjei is the first Dudum girl to attend college. Abaago’s disdainful appreciation of her instantiates his deep-seated jealous state of mind and partly explains why many Dudum people do not welcome his ideas. His rhetoric is so hurtful that he proposes the exclusion of Achamba from Akan, including Achamba’s father: ‘Let us avoid even his one-legged father, for is it not said that a kid nibbles only the blade of grass eaten by its mother?’ (160). Abaago fails to understand, as Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca intimate, that for argumentation to exist, an effective communion of minds must be realised. And that, when it is a question of arguing, a rhetor, intent on using discourse to influence the opinion of the audience, should be aware that it is ‘no longer possible to neglect completely, as irrelevancies, the psychological and social conditions in the absence of which argumentation would be pointless and without result.’

In the eyes of Abaago, Achamba is treacherous and dangerous to Abaago’s vision of Akan and so must be stopped. This is how Abaago denounces Achamba before Akan councillors in a typical Ngie simile loaded with repugnance: ‘I suggest that we from today declare Achamba the enemy of Akan. We should have nothing to do with him anymore. Being polite to Achamba is like incubating a rotten egg; it will come to soil you’ (159-60). Unfortunately for Abaago, he is lacking in dialectical analysis because his words and actions stem from envy, which is shunned by the youths that he is attempting to convince. He is unable to contract any Dudum youth to undertake the killing of Achamba because his ideas and methods are considered repugnant, totally in dissonance with democratic precepts; Abaago’s only recourse is to engage assassins from Nkoman.

In a speech to an assembly of students and teachers of Dudum, Achamba cautions them to avoid politicking and to refrain from negatively influencing the clan. His speech is punctuated with the maxim: ‘united we stand, divided we fall’ (147), an oblique reminder about Foncha’s role in the 1961 plebiscite in Southern Cameroon, as he connects emotionally with his audience. He implores his listeners to be development oriented and to eschew ills that may further polarise the clan: ‘You should avoid discrimination among yourselves because this will only help to pull us apart to our own disadvantage’ (147). As he delivers his speech, one can imagine how he holds his audience spellbound through his gestures and aphorisms, a clear indication of his rhetorical savoir-faire. At the end of his speech, Achamba earns a sustained burst of applause from his audience. His behaviour on this occasion ties in with George Campbell’s proposition that it is necessary for speakers to use arguments that are comprehensible, and to employ lively language. Campbell further states that a rhetor should adopt a form of repetition, like Achamba’s united we stand, divided we fall, that can arouse emotions in the audience. This device can be effective, granted that the rhetor is aware of the educational levels, moral culture, habits, occupations, political leanings, and religious affiliations of the audience. For example, according to Campbell, in addressing an audience of soldiers, the rhetor should emphasise military glory while an audience composed of industrialists necessitates a focus on wealth in the discourse of

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On the occasion of the meeting of Dudum students and teachers, Achamba, the teacher, acquires himself admirably by stressing the merits of education in his speech to an audience made up of learners and dispensers of knowledge.

Abaago’s response to Achamba’s speech in the Dudum students’ and teachers’ meeting underlies his rhetorical ineptitude. Instead of foregrounding his vision for this unique body, in particular, or for Dudum, in general, he engages in covertly attacking Achamba for stirring up political sentiments in youths: ‘A students’ meeting is not the right place for political indoctrination. The job of these young men and women is to learn, to study in school. Book and not politics is their concern’ (148). Abaago’s speech is drab, concise, and receives no applause. It echoes the rhetoric of some leaders on the continent of Africa that are scared of any form of demonstration, political discussion, or challenge to their rule, emanating particularly from a young generation. Some students even feel slighted by Abaago’s remarks, especially when he alludes to some of the students as irresponsible youths. According to Abaago, Achamba is involved in the political indoctrination of youths. Not only are Abaago’s remarks disingenuous, but they also sprang from malice and undergird his propensity for confrontation. In the words of Ambanasom, Abaago’s discourse was ‘marked at every turn by personal sentiments’ (148). Undoubtedly, Abaago’s speech clearly undercuts what one should expect from a rhetor: grace in gestures, persuasion, and logical appeal. Indeed, on this occasion, he portrays himself as the antithesis of an effective rhetorician by instead rousing the antipathy of his audience towards him.

Blinded by jealousy following the rising popularity of Achamba, Abaago engineers the summoning of his rival before the Akan traditional council on the scurrilous charge of conspiring against Akan:

Councillors and Elders of Akan, since our main aim of meeting here today is to decide on what to do in the wake of this unholy alliance Achamba is attempting to form with our avowed enemy ... I suggest that we from today declare Achamba the enemy of Akan. (159)

This is a popular ruse often undertaken by tyrants to stifle any opposition or threat to their authority. Abaago also exploits the coincidence that because Achamba’s would-be in-laws are from Anjong, Achamba is working in the interest of Anjong. Consequently, Achamba is instructed, by the village council, to give up his intended marriage to Echunjei.

Commenting on the proposed marriage of Achamba to Echunjei, Ambanasom avers that ‘a projected marriage that in a different community might have served as a unifying factor, in Dudum only threatened the unity of the clan’ (160). However, Achamba argues that his wedding to Echunjei ought to be a personal affair that should not concern the village. Moreover, Achamba denies the charge of working against the interest of Akan and bluntly admits that, although he has not told the government, he believes that Anjong is better adapted than Akan to host an administrative unit for Dudum. This admission on the part of Achamba symbolises the strong argument of Foncha in 1961 to Southern Cameroonians about the merits of uniting with La République du Cameroun.

6 George Campbell, The Philosophy of Rhetoric (Boston: Charles Ewe, 1823).
Abaago also falsely charges Achamba with not having shown concern towards the Akan detainees in Mbambe, an accusation which Achamba unequivocally refutes: ‘Not long ago our men were imprisoned in Mbambe, and I was of some help to them. The released prisoners are my witnesses. Do all these efforts show that I am uncooperative?’ (171). Indeed, Achamba’s insightful defence of himself, through rhetorical questions among other devices reminiscent of Mark Antony’s speech during Caesar’s funeral in William Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, throws the council into disarray: ‘But none of you can justly say that each time I am at home, I have failed to turn up for any group work ... Do all these efforts show that I am uncooperative? Yet the councillors say I am’ (171). While some traditional councillors advocate for sanctions against him, others (including Abaago) favour a softer response to him. One reason for Abaago’s reluctance to support tough sanctions against Achamba could be that Abaago is contemplating another scheme – the argument of force – to get rid of Achamba. On the occasion of his trial, Achamba’s rhetorical skills are displayed as the council, rather than accept defeat, instead resolves to give him more time: ‘But they arrived at the consensus that Achamba had not yet given them a satisfactory response; so he should be given more time to reconsider the charges and frame a better reply’ (173). It is a subtle strategy on the part of the council to save its face knowing that its argument has been soundly defeated by Achamba, or that the accusations against him are frivolous.

The animosity that Abaago nurses towards Achamba is further compounded by the news that the administrative unit which both Anjong and Akan have been fighting for is instead given to Buja. Both Akan (under the instigation of Abaago) and Anjong find more reasons to question the integrity of Achamba: while one group argues that he decidedly manipulated against the granting of this cherished administrative unit to his people out of sheer selfishness, the other insists that Achamba could not accept the giving of an administrative unit to his enemies and so fought for strangers to have it. Achamba’s ethos now hinges on how he handles this crisis. His fate reflects the backlash that Foncha, as the architect of the unification of Southern Cameroon with La République du Cameroun, is exposed to from many Anglophones who are still critical of the merits of merging both states.

Unknown or ignored by both Akan and Anjong is the fact that the D.O. of Mbambe, a morally bankrupt administrator, is exploiting the conflict between both villages to his financial advantage. Emboldened by his moral authority, Achamba, and not Abaago, rebukes the D.O. for his highhandedness and for deriving financial benefits from both bellicose villages:

> But while the D.O. was mentally shaping Achamba’s fate, the latter got home and set about writing a secret report on the D.O.’s activities in Mbambe. In it he exposed the weaknesses of the D.O. in all his dealings with the people he had been called upon to serve. (164)

Achamba’s discrediting of the authority of the D.O. restores Achamba’s moral integrity within Dudum. This situation is similar to Foncha’s rekindled popularity among Anglophones following his resignation from the position of vice-chairman of the ruling Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement (CPDM) because of what he considered the shabby and discriminatory attitude of the government towards Anglophones.
Perhaps nowhere else than the meeting of Dudum elites in Anjong can we best see the oratorical skills of Achamba. On this occasion, Achamba’s dress – white agbada, grey felt-cap on luxuriant hair – attests to his ethos as an educator and one who can lead an assembly of contentious individuals. As a humbled person, he plays down his importance, hinting that he feels unqualified to lead such an impressive group of Dudum elites. Achamba may, however, be subtly assuaging possible feelings of frustration in people like Abaago or Ubeno, who nurse ambitions of heading this newly born association. By toning down his influence: ‘I find myself in many ways unqualified for the great responsibilities placed on my shoulders’ (189), Achamba is telling his rivals that, even though he has been unanimously (or democratically) chosen as the president of this association, he is aware of the leadership potential of others. It is an indirect invitation from Achamba to his compatriots for them to suppress their differences and harness their energy towards the greater good of Dudum, or abide by democratic principles. Achamba’s speech constitutes an olive branch to all of Dudum to jump from battleground to higher ground in search for common ground.

Achamba’s speech to this august assembly is interspersed with proverbs such as ‘the voice of the people is the voice of wisdom’, alluding to his election as president of the group. His ethos, logos, and pathos are manifest in that not only does he speak as a teacher but he also presents his argument in a compelling manner, earning him applause from his audience. Emphasising the metaphor of the Dudum Falls, Achamba explains that ‘It is the voice of morality, calling us to order, calling on us to shun evil ways and promote worthwhile pursuits. It is the conscience of the thief at night, asking him some disturbing questions’ (189). By referring to Dudum, believed to be the birthplace of Dudum (Ngie) people, Achamba demonstrates his insightful analysis of issues. He also engages the participation of the audience in his rhetoric through the use of indigenous words like Amumba! Amumba! (It’s us). Through a series of rhetorical questions: ‘If not us, who? If not now, when? If not here, where?’ (190), he probes the conscience of his audience on their commitment to development. The audience is won over by the brilliance of Achamba’s speech as evidenced in the sustained applause that welcomes his speech and the excitement in the audience, which culminates in the repeated chanting of his name: ‘ACHAMBA-ACHAMBA’ (190). At this juncture, in line with typical Afrocentric rhetoric, you would imagine the women ululating while stamping their feet on the floor and pushing out their posteriors, and the men punching the air with clenched fists – a clear indication that Achamba’s message has struck the emotional chord of his audience.

Achamba’s successful convening of the Dudum Cultural and Development Association in Anjong, where he attempts to lay down democratic principles as reflected in the divergent issues debated or opinions expressed by the delegates, marks the tipping point in his relationship with Abaago. According to Abaago, Achamba, ‘like the ungrateful child in the fable, has bitten the finger that fed him and also stabbed in the back the foster mother to whom he owes his very existence’ (170). In other words, Abaago is stating that, in spite of the contribution of Akan in making Achamba the person that Achamba is today, he is instead working against the interest of Akan. Abaago soon realises that his vision for Akan cannot be accomplished unless he aborts Achamba’s dream for Dudum. In other words, it is time for Abaago to set in motion the

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7 Jesse Jackson, the American preacher, used an expression like this one in a speech he delivered in Yaoundé, Cameroon, that I attended in 1993.
argument of force. In this regard, he attempts in vain to fan hatred towards Achamba from a group of young people: ‘Are you going to sell your birthright to Anjong as your traitorous brother Achamba has done?’ (196).

Abaago will later contract assassins in Nkoman to murder Achamba. Thus, in killing Achamba, Abaago endorses violence as the way towards making Akan the political headquarters of Dudum. Unfortunately for him, his dream for Akan soon turns into a nightmare resulting in his suicide. The argument of force which he embraces not only shows his limitations as a rhetorician, but also undermines him. This is how Ambanasom describes Abaago’s tragedy: ‘But he would rather settle for the peril of his own making. Suicide would be the only way to die’ (275). Through Abaago’s death, Ambanasom envisions the kind of fate that awaits leaders, especially in Africa, who thrive on violence and oppression as a way of governance.

The differences between these two rhetors are glaring: whereas Achamba embodies laudable ethos, which leads him to be open-minded, to reflect on his words before speaking out, and to listen to his audience and accommodate various value systems, Abaago is tendentious in his world view. If only he had foregrounded argument over force, and aside from his criminal motives, Abaago would have been a successful rhetor. There is no doubt that he is development oriented, but Dudum is more interested in unifying the clan than creating multiple administrative units. Highlighting the merits of Achamba over Abaago, Ambanasom states that Achamba ‘was the first President of DCDA, first potential sub-section elections candidate from the new Dudum constituency, first university graduate from Dudum, and the lucky husband of the first Dudum girl to have graduated from college’ (195). In fact, whereas Achamba has a first degree in English, Abaago did not complete Standard Six. This partly accounts for their divergent political visions for Dudum.

Achamba envisions Dudum from a holistic perspective, as can be seen from his tireless contribution to the foundation of Dudum Cultural and Development Association and his wedding to Echunjei from the rival village of Anjong. He says to her: ‘An idea occurred to me a few days ago, a happy coincidence indeed, in which our love might turn out to be a positive contribution to the situation back home’ (167). On the other hand, Abaago is concerned only with how Akan would benefit through the new association. As a result, he indulges in scapegoating, attempting to convince Akan youths that Achamba is the stumbling block to Akan being chosen, by the government, as the administrative headquarters of Dudum. While Achamba employs rhetoric to foster harmony, peace, and development in Dudum, Abaago uses it to feed his ego and the cause of Akan.

Within Ambanasom’s imaginative universe, he problematises politics in Africa through the rhetoric of Achamba and Abaago, placing before the reader two ideological approaches to governance: one that seeks to win the audience through an insightful presentation of ideas in a democratic manner as represented by Achamba and the other that aligns with dictatorship or the subversion of popular will through violence as typified by Abaago. It would seem that by allowing the ideas of Achamba to resonate in the audience and to the detriment of Abaago’s, Ambanasom subtly vituperates a dictatorial approach to politics by foregrounding a democratic debate of issues, in a way that would enable people to freely decide their destiny. Through Achamba, Ambanasom entreats African intellectuals or elites to be genuine in their views, eclectic in mind, selfless in service, and catholic in vision in the struggle for democracy in their localities and across the continent.
The killing of Achamba or the attempt to crush the will of the majority, according to Ambanasom, is pointless; it is a futile endeavour because human life is transient, whereas ideas outlive human beings. Abaago may have succeeded in eliminating Achamba, but the latter’s revolution, encapsulated in the Dudum Cultural and Development Association, shall not perish. The democratic principles that Achamba encouraged through a free exchange of ideas within this association remain an invaluable legacy. On the one hand, Abaago symbolises tyrannical regimes rife on the continent of Africa, with tyrants who have embraced crude force or employed repressive strategies in order to foist their ideas on people, or ensure their political longevity as leaders. On the other, Achamba typifies the tendril of democracy as it has come under perpetual assault in Africa by ruthless leaders or politicians.

Son of the Native Soil, then, is a powerful allegory of politics in Africa; it constitutes an indictment of dictatorship as Ambanasom prescribes government by popular consent and not through the whims and caprices of a few people. In fact, Ambanasom’s proleptic vision of the fate of tyranny and oppression in Africa is symbolised in the demise of Abaago. In a sense, judging by Afrocentric and Western rhetorical typologies, Abaago is perceived as a man who lacks logos, ethos, and pathos, and this deficiency impairs his ability to speak well. This, according to Chinwe Okechukwu, is a serious deficiency, in behalf of Abaago, in a society like Dudum, which privileges oratorical skills. Abaago’s eloquence appears limited to reading drafted speeches like when he reads the welcome address to the D.O.; only at such moments is he regarded by his local community as the speaker of Ukara (English). Conversely, within Dudum, Achamba is presented as one possessing great communicative skills and unlike Abaago, who is lacking in dialectical analysis because his actions always veer towards conflict or force.

Abaago’s predilection for force is, as earlier remarked, evinced when he engineers the attack on Anjong women at Ukob, seizing their farm tools. This line of action boomerangs, resulting in the arrest and detention in Mbambe, by the government, of the Akan aggressors. Unlike Abaago, Achamba is a man of good intentions, but he has the misfortune to see his great vision for Dudum subverted by Abaago. Achamba exemplifies progressive rhetoric, one that embodies conviction and persuasion. In this regard, Chief Akaya of the rival village of Anjong underscores Achamba’s admirable rhetorical skills in an eulogy. He observes that Achamba had “the capacity to bring people together, to assemble enemies so that they could begin to exploit ways to bridge the gap between them” (249). Achamba’s charm, selflessness, and generous mind mark him out in Dudum as a man of the people, but not in the pejorative sense of Chief Nanga in Achebe’s A Man of the People, who is preoccupied with personal gratification.

Achamba is also seen as a consummate exemplar of different types of rhetoric – deliberative as attested to in his contribution towards an administrative unit for Dudum, forensic (when he investigates the history of Dudum in the archives in Yaoundé), and epideictic (when he addresses the union of Dudum students and teachers on issues such as girl education, obedience, and politics). Although Ambanasom presents Achamba and Abaago as representative of the kind of political rhetoric one would find among Ngie and other Anglophone politicians like Z.A.

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8 Chinwe Christina Okechukwu, Achebe the Orator (Westport: Greenhood Press, 2001) 47.
Abendong, T.E. Enokoh, Jethro Echobei, Ruben Mbang, John Foncha, and Emmanuel Endeley, beyond this consideration, the novelist takes satirical jabs at governance in Africa by portraying Abaago as symptomatic of a rigid and repressive central government, and by favourably depicting Achamba as a symbol of democracy or good governance.

Granted that Ambanasom’s novel is mainly concerned with portraying the aspirations and frustrations of Dudum people in their quest for an administrative centre, the novelist also broaches issues of rights and statehood. Thus, his fictional Dudum can as well represent Cameroon and other nations that grapple with problems of domination, oppression, and justice. One way of overcoming some of these impediments, Ambanasom seems to suggest, is by embracing a political ideology that foregrounds frank and open discussion with everybody, regardless of social, linguistic, or political affiliation.

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The ‘New’ World Literature: A Review Essay

Russell McDougall


Theo D’haen, César Domínguez & Mads Rosendahl Thomsen eds., *World Literature: A Reader* (Routledge, 2012)

Elke Sturm-Trigonakis, *Comparative Cultural Studies and the New Welitertext* (Purdue University Press, 2013)


Try to imagine just a few of the many varied scenes of reading that the Reading Room of the British Library has hosted and witnessed over the years. Now, which space are you visualising? Is it the one where exiled and poverty-stricken Karl Marx found safe harbour to sit and read and write of an end to capitalism, reputedly at Desk 07? Alas, that magnificently domed Bloomsbury scene is no more. You can still visit the space it once occupied, as home to the National Library 1857 to 1997, at the centre of the Great Court in the British Museum. But it is now an exhibition site for objects mostly other than books. The history of that ‘reading room’ reminds me of Marc Johns’s drawings of ‘objects reading books’ – a hand of bananas reading *Othello*; a world globe reading *Walden*; a salt-shaker reading *The Catcher in the Rye*. If you do visit the ‘old’ reading room in the Museum it is unlikely you will find any of these texts or artefacts; but the graphic staging of these absurd encounters, imagining things together that don’t seem to belong, serves as a neat reminder of the how reading scenes can change shape, shifting boundaries in and out of context, depending on what knowledge and experience the reader brings to the text. The walls between reading rooms are nothing if not porous. (The British Library’s Reading Room models the Library of Congress Reading Room in Washington.)

Perhaps you were imagining reading scenes in a different Reading Room, the one in the ‘new’ British Library, now located at St Pancras. But those scenes belong to a very different culture of letters – in a different time and a different place – from the one in which Virginia Woolf imagined herself (in *A Room of One’s Own*) as a passing thought in the huge bald forehead of the encircling dome, or where Hitchcock, that same year, the year of *Blackmail*, the first British sound film, shows the blackmailer falling to his death though the glass ceiling of the dome.

Historically most readers entering the old Reading Room for the first time did so with a sense of drama, producing – perhaps with an imperial flourish – their new reader’s ticket, an entry permit that also certified their membership of a literary culture that allegedly transcended national borders, a kind of floating world, which many regarded as the land of the Holy Grail,
but which many more now see sinking and, sadly, disappearing. Of course, the idea of res publica litteraria was never fixed; the consensus of its members about the constitutive values and ideals of their community throughout the Early Modern period was always a process of negotiation. Yet there is no gainsaying the fact of a dominant discourse that equated the Republic of Letters with the Commonwealth of England, as is clearly evidenced by ‘The Trial of the Letter ψ, alias Y’ appended to the seventh edition (1765) of Thomas Edwards’s The Canons of Criticism.

Once on a time the English Commonwealth of Letters, generally called the Alphabet, was very much disturbed; that a certain Greek letter whose real name was ψιλον had, contrary to the liberties and privileges of the English letters, insinuated himself into the English language; and invaded the province of an English letter: utterly excluding the said letter from several syllables, wherein he ought of right to exercise his office.

According to this history of the Commonwealth, it was of course the letter ‘I’ who was the most put out, for he found himself not only ‘wholly excluded from all jurisdiction in the end of words’ but also ‘frequently banished from the middle’ – ‘insomuch that in Chaucer’s time this fugitive Greek has usurped his power in Wyfe, Lyfe, Knigh, and innumerable other instances; and almost thrust him out of the English language.’

He called for a Commonwealth convention to deal with the foreigner, scaremongering amongst all of the letters of the Alphabet that they too would lose their privileges if the Greek were permitted to remain, since this would soon encourage a full-scale invasion. The Commonwealth, fearing the worst, closed ranks. But at the trial that followed they fell to petty squabbling amongst themselves, each defending his interests and territories in the most transparently self-serving manner. The immigrant accused the Alphabet of ingratitude, reminding them that without Greek assistance they would have neither their name nor even their very existence; but this the Letters simply ignored, oblivious even to the Greek ancestry of their anglicised Supreme Justice. Apollo found the claim of ‘I’ in the end groundless. Yet by his judgement he allowed the Greek only limited representation in the language of the Commonwealth, reserving all primary power to the Englishman.

In 1827, when Goethe formulated his idea of weltanschauung (world vision) and proposed it as a frame through which to see ‘world literature’, what he saw was in fact explicitly European (‘europäische, d.h., Weltliteratur’). It was not a series of discrete national literatures; and so it did require a commitment to comparative critical method, although that also placed a practical restriction on the scope of the enterprise, in terms of foreign language capability and multicultural literacy. It is not possible to be an expert in World Literature, in the way that has been assumed that one might become an expert in the literature of a nation. But then the concept was never to be taken literally. The erasure of national borders was more of a metaphysical conceit; and the scenes of reading that it figured forth extended from Europe only so far as America. It was hardly possible to imagine a military reading scene in Bengal, contemporaneous with the Weimar Republic, where a British soldier might enjoy the liberty of borrowing a book

from the East Indian Company station lending library and reading it in barracks. After all, reading in the early nineteenth century, as Gary Kelly says, was perceived in Europe as an activity required a certain ideological placement if it were to be beneficial, and a military barracks was a site not easily compatible with dominant ideas of appropriate reading spaces.\(^2\) How much harder, then, to imagine a future where a multi-lingual Argentinian author and self-proclaimed ‘citizen of the world’ such as Jorge Luis Borges might be reading the works of a German-speaking Jewish Czech writer such as Franz Kafka – let alone the many and varied reading situations of Australian literature explored in Robert Dixon’s and Brigid Rooney’s book, Scenes of Reading. The purpose of that book, as its subtitle makes explicitly clear, is to beg the question: ‘Is Australian Literature a World Literature?’ The answer of course depends on how we define the field and frame the question.

Scenes of Reading follows on from a symposium convened by Dixon and Rooney at the University of Sydney in 2011 on the same theme, obviously related to Dixon’s ARC DORA project, ‘Scenes of Reading: Australian Literature and the World Republic of Letters.’ (So too is the book he edited with Peter Kirkpatrick, Republic of Letters: Literary Communities in Australia [2012], but that book is not within the scope of this review.) The challenge in seeking to locate Australian Literature in relation to world literary space is that the overarching concepts of World Literature have continued for the most part to repeat the binaries of previous paradigms. Australian Literature, like most settler literatures, has until recently been situated primarily as a ‘national’ literature. In the 1980s and 1990s the Association for Australian Literature (ASAL) was not overly accommodating of the new comparative postcolonial perspectives that threatened to widen the frame of Australian literary studies. Dixon, a past president of the association, has done more than most to change that situation. But he must also know the collective labour that has gone into achieving the national literature’s profile, and what is at stake if that profile should now be diminished, with student numbers in Australian Literature courses already in decline and the book sector in crisis. If Australian Literature is now to be situated as World Literature, somehow that overarching concept has to be renegotiated as part of the process, a complex synthesis of global and local realities that will historically and geographically enrich the fundamental idea.

Vilashini Cooppan’s work is useful here, conceiving of World Literature as at once ‘locally inflected and translocally mobile.’ This implies that ‘world literature’ requires a rethinking not only of the ontology of the ‘world’ but also of the ‘nation.’ Cooppan’s concept of nations is relational: they are ‘fantasmatic objects knotted together by ambivalent forces of desire, identification, memory, and forgetting, even as they simultaneously move within, across, and beyond a series of spatial and temporal borders (us/them, territory/flow, present/past, life/death).’ It is this idea of ‘nation’ that provides the theme of the ASAL’s conference scheduled for later this year: nation as ‘the mark of a certain locality, rootedness, and even

oppositionality, in contrast to the mobility, routedness, and expansive cosmopolitanism that defines the ‘world’ in world literature.³

In fact, however, there is still much disagreement about the constitution of World Literature. Is it a canon of masterpieces from the world over or a mode of circulation and of reading, as David Damrosch contends in What is World Literature?⁴ Is it all national literatures as one – the aggregate of all literary production? This is how Damrosch apparently understands Goethe, which is why he suggests re-naming the subject ‘global literature’, to distance it from Weltliteratur. But how does this help, when as Zoltan Milutinovic rightly points out, what we call globalisation today is not unlike like cultural standardisation envisaged by Erich Auerbach in the early 1950s, ‘which makes the planet smaller day by day, diminishing differences’, and which, allowed its full extent, would eventually bring about ‘a single literary culture’, perhaps even ‘a single literary language’ – thereby both realising at the same time destroying the ‘the idea of world literature’.⁵ Should we then for preference take Fritz Strich’s reading of Goethe, whereby World Literature refers only to those texts that have travelled beyond the borders of nations and found themselves at home in other literary traditions as well?⁶ On the other hand, if only transnational texts can apply for ‘world literature’ status, the question of Scenes of Reading – ‘is Australian Literature a World Literature’ – would be almost pointless. But this is where the geographical frameworks begin to blur. Mads Rosendahl Thomsen’s book, Mapping World Literature. International Canonization and Transnational Literatures (2008), works hard to bring world and transnational literatures into a single frame, introducing the idea of literary constellations to assist the process. The literary descriptors ‘transnational’ and ‘world’ have since become virtually synonymous in many contexts. But then, if the one makes the other redundant, why are they so often compounded – as ‘transnational world literature’? Is it possible that transnational literature is something other than World Literature? In Australia, Michael Jacklin has questioned the timing of the surge of interest in the ‘transnational dimensions of the national literature’, for its coinciding with the disappearance of ‘multiculturalism’ from public discourse.⁷ In France, on the other hand, it was after five of the seven major French literary prizes were awarded to ‘foreign-born’ writers, in 2006, that the idea of ‘world literature’ (literature-monde) began to gain traction.

For Pascale Casanova the ‘conceptual tool is not “world literature” itself – that is, the body of literature expanded to a world scale.’ It is ‘a space: a set of interconnected positions, which must be thought of and described in relational terms.’ Thus, what is at stake are ‘not the modalities of analysing literature on a world scale, but the conceptual means for thinking of literature as a world.’⁸ Inspired by the writings of Fernand Braudel and Pierre Bourdieu, Casanova gave us our

first systematic model for understanding the production, circulation, and valuing of literature worldwide. What emerges is a ‘world’ of struggle for survival, where minor languages and literatures are subject to the invisible but implacable violence of their dominant counterparts. It’s a spatial elaboration of a psycho-drama not unlike the one Harold Bloom gave us in The Anxiety of Influence. Outsiders – like Kafka for instance – crash into world literary space at their peril, like Hitchcock’s blackmailer evading the police only by falling to his death through the glass dome of the old Reading Room of the British Library. Borges, like Kafka an outsider, imagines just such an impossible space in ‘The Library of Babel’: ‘The Library is unlimited and cyclical. If an eternal traveller were to cross it in any direction, after centuries he would see that the same volumes were repeated in the same disorder (which, thus repeated, would be an order: the Order).’

Underpinning Cassanova’s conceptualisation of the World Literature space, as well as Franco Moretti’s proposals for World Literature, is Wallerstein’s ‘world-systems’ theory. The system, as he describes it, is ‘not the system of the world’; rather, it is ‘a system that is a world,’ and which therefore can be – and indeed most often has been – ‘located in an area less than the entire globe.’ It is ‘a social system, one that has boundaries, structures, member groups, rules of legitimisation, and coherence. Its life is made up of the conflicting forces which hold it together by tension and tear it apart as each group seeks eternally to remould it to its advantage.’ It is not a space for empowering marginal identities. World Literature as a ‘system’ retains this sense of space, of metropolitan core and provincial or colonial periphery; it also retains much of the economic discourse of world-systems theory. This is why the Centre for Cultural, Literary and Postcolonial Studies at SOAS (University of London) insisted on foregrounding the question of non-European agency at its 2011 Interdisciplinary research workshop, ‘Approaches to World Literature’. It provides a partial explanation also for Emily Apter’s polemical stance in Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability.

The ghost of Auerbach haunts Apter’s vision of World Literature, the fear of standardisation – or to put this in another way, the nightmare of one universally accessible global idiom. The world of this ‘world literature’ is one where nothing lies beyond the reach of translation. In economic terms, we might consider the driving principle as that of free trade. In fact, the problematic of World Literature is most stark in debates about translation. World Literature, as Apter sees it, is a commodifying force – it is certainly true that the anthologies of world literature in translation are multiplying – a force for making ‘the world’s cultural resources’ easily accessible, convertible, palatable, consumable. Apter would insist that the reader be alert to the subtle differences between those words, not compounding them into one. She might even insist that, as a series, they are not translatable, their whole meaning being larger than the sum meaning of the individual words themselves. For her it is the idea of the untranslatable that drives the desire for translation and preserves its necessity; and World Literature, fetishizing mobility and cultural exchange, she sees as a corruption of translation, whereby everything is

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made translatable, in the service of global capitalism. It is precisely for the political purpose of deflating the grandiose pretense of this ‘worlding’ enterprise that she invokes and insists upon the idea of the untranslatable. There is a deconstructive understanding and operation at work here: an acknowledgement (and indeed demonstration) of the value of knowledge formation and a simultaneous recognition of their coercive and oppressive potential – that is, their colonising force. The idea of untranslatability, as Apter conceives of it, offers an important check on the power of that process, on the ironically parochial tendencies of World Literature.

The old ideas of World Literature, vacillating between the canonical (Best of the West) and the all-encompassing (the sum of all the literature of all the world), began to fall out of favour as the former colonies of Europe gained their independence and commenced to articulate their own national traditions and values. At universities, the subject was fragmented by traditional disciplinary and administrative divisions (English, Spanish, French, etc). In Europe and the US larger subject of a worlded literature became the sole province of Comparative Literature departments. Over time these developed strict rules of comparison, keeping their potentially unruly subject tightly bound and controlled. But the comparative literature departments never gained much of a foothold in the nation-building tertiary institutions of the former colonies. In these reading spaces, the challenge to the organisation of literary studies came from the rise of postcolonial studies. Postcolonialism offered new ways of thinking about alterity – which is one answer to Michael Jacklin’s question about the disappearance of ‘multiculturalism’ from public discourse at the same time as the ‘transnational dimensions of the national literature’ came to the fore – for postcolonialism was also instrumental in questioning the politics of reading strategies developed in service to the nationalising of ‘new’ or ‘other’ literatures. It’s important to realise that postcolonial thought and theory originated first outside of Europe and the US. But as it moved into the academies of those centres of learning and culture it also began to have a significant impact on the discipline of Comparative Literature. Postcolonial scholars in the end aligned themselves more with newly invigorated Area Studies (Caribbean, for example), inadvertently preparing the way for the transnational shift, than with Comparative Commonwealth Literature. So, for example, postcolonial scholars in Europe, since the founding of the European Union, have turned their attention to a postcolonial Europe. To some degree too the renewed interest in World Literature can be seen as an unintended consequence of the successful postcolonial championing of writers from ‘other’ parts of the world. But the new World Literature now is hardly an object of study (whether a small canon or a vast ocean of texts), but a paradigm for establishing context and connectivity, with the potential, for better or worse, to transmogrify completely not only Australian and other ‘national’ literatures but also many other objects of literary study, including regional configurations and periodisations like those of American and Victorian literature.

With its new History, Reader and Companion – plus a volume devoted to the theory of World Literature - Routledge clearly aims to capitalise on these developments. The ambition is huge. Ongoing debates about World Literature (Weltliteratur, littérature universelle, vishwa sahita etc.), the Editors note in their Preface to the Companion, might lead to a rethinking and reframing of translation studies, postcolonial and area studies, comparative literary studies. For readers interested in all of the ambiguities and uncertainties that have attended the conceptualisation of World Literature, from its early formation in the heyday of European

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nationalism to its current global reformulations, it is hard to imagine a better entry to the field - or a better set of secondary course materials for its university teachers.

The Reader contains thirty essays/extracts, beginning with the nomadic Spanish Jesuit, Juan Andres’s ‘On the Origin, Present State and Progress of All Literature’ (1782-99/1784-1806), and ending with Mariano Siskind’s ‘The Globalization of the Novel and the Novelization of the Global: A Critique of World Literature’ (2010). These are arranged chronologically, but the editors have also signposted six other possible reading paths (or clusters of texts) that address key topics in the field – the relationship between comparative and World Literature, the role of markets and literary systems, etc. World Literature in Theory provides a complementary exploration of the significant questions facing students of World Literature today. It contains more than 30 important essays, with authors ranging from Goethe to Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak – each essay with a substantive introduction as well as an annotated bibliography for further reading. This time there are four sections: the first, origins; the second, World Literature in the age of globalisation; the third, contemporary debates; and the fourth, and in some ways the most interesting, focusing on localised versions of World Literature. In this end section, for example, we find substantial essays by Paul Giles on the deterritorialisation of American Literature, Ronit Ricci on Islamic literary networks in South and Southeast Asia, Karen Laura Thornber on the rethinking of World Literature through East Asian Literature and its ‘contact nebulae’, as well as essays on World Cinema and digital modernism. The volume ends with a useful epilogue by Zhang Longxi considering the changing concepts of World Literature.

The Companion is perhaps the most generous of the Routledge volumes, providing no less than fifty critical essays, grouped so as to provide four different dimensions of the subject: historical, disciplinary, theoretical and geographical. Only the History is a single-authored monograph, and it is understandably the shortest, in some ways providing a summary of and guide to the other three. In effect, it adds to the number of pathways suggested in the Reader, allowing students to cross-reference and track – to give but one example - debates about World Literature as a system (Marx/Engels, Lukacs, Adorno, Jameson, Benjamin, Horkheimer, Habermas, Auerbach, Durisin, Casanova, Moretti and so on). Of course some writers/theorists need to be considered under several headings – Auerbach for example (in relation to Goethe and the Humanist Ideal of World Literature), or Benjamin (World Literature and Translation). Trying to cover so many bases, the History might seem too short and swift to succeed on its own, but as a rough guide to the debates anthologised in the Reader and focused through the more specific analyses of the Companion it is excellent, especially when supplemented by the essays in World Literature in Theory. I like particularly the list of ‘conclusions’ in the History at the end of each chapter, which for a teaching text are sufficiently ‘neutral’ and ‘open-ended’ to encourage further debate.

For the English edition of Elke Sturm-Trigonakis’s much cited Global playing in der Literatur. Ein Versuch über die Neue Weltliteratur (2007) we have waited six years. The translators, Athanasia Margoni and Maria Kaisar, enjoyed the collaboration of the author, who took the opportunity to revise and update the original text substantially. Comparative Cultural Studies and the New Weltliteratur seeks to expand on Goethe’s original concept of ‘world literature’ while maintaining the theoretical framework of comparative cultural studies – ‘with its emphasis on interdisciplinarity, the contextual approach, and evidence-based methodology.’ Her focus is on genres that cannot properly be classified under the rubric of ‘national literature’
either by their language, their content or their readership – texts that collate diverse cultural, literary, and linguistic traditions to create new modes of expression she designates as ‘hybrid texts’. Hybridity as postcolonial scholars have theorised it is the enabling third space of a stalled identity politics derived from the historical conflict between the coloniser and the colonised, the space of entanglement, where an authentic but new subjectivity becomes possible. For Sturm-Trigonakis, however, this is space of the ‘new world literature’ – an umbrella term for ‘migrant literature’, ‘minority literature’, ‘intercultural literature’, and so on – the literature of those marginalised by the national literatures that contain them. The texts she chooses are of Spanish, German, French and English origin, but her comparative method shows that they have more in common with each other, as a distinct formation (‘new world literature’) than they have with their individual national monolingual literatures that otherwise contain them (in the process repressing their anarchic potential).

This is a persuasive enough alternative to Apter’s rejection of the World Literature category. Apter’s critique reminds me to some degree of the postcolonial stand against postmodernism in the early 1990s, when it was postmodern rather than World Literature that seemed to signal the First World’s strategy for organising and consuming Second, Third and Fourth World alterities. At the beginning of the last decade of the twentieth century the whole point of the ‘post’ in postcolonial literary studies, Kwame Appiah argued, was to clear a space apart from the neo-traditional artifacts of the emerging globalised capitalist economy. As Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge saw it, the postmodern conceptualisation of literature pandered to the global market place in much the same way that Apter sees World Literature doing today, by producing ever more reified versions of marginalised ‘other’ worlds. The outcome, they predicted, would be the creation of what Bishnupriya Ghosh called, a few years later, the ‘postcolonial bazaar’ – a global market for texts sampled from those worlds but honed to the fashionable emphases on postmodern hybrids (on the left) and on globalized cultures or villages (on the right).

To be fair, once the postcolonial entered the mainstream it was quickly painted into the same corner, notably by Arif Dirlik, who saw the entry of ‘Third World’ intellectuals like Gayatri Spivak into the US academy as inevitably serving the conceptual needs of the First World generated by the new world capitalist order. Without necessarily disagreeing, Ghosh worried that the power of this discourse threatened to undermine the sense of necessity in the US academy for students to learn about the postcolonies: they might still encounter the same texts but in a different space, one their engagement would not need to reflect on the conditions that make those texts possible, or on the institutional conditions forming their own as well as their professors’ reading practices. This, according to many of its detractors, is the space of the ‘new’ world literature.

Collectively the editors/authors of the four encyclopaedic Routledge volumes – the Reader, the History, the Companion and, inevitably, the Theory volume – pack serious firepower. It may

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be worth considering their own constitutive roles in the global networks that are driving the reformulation of World Literature. Theo D’haen is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at K.U. Leuven University, Belgium, is Editor of the European Review (published by the Academia Europaea) and a former President of the Fédération Internationale des Langues et Littératures Modernes (formerly the Commission Internationale d’Histoire Littéraire Moderne, founded in Olso in 1928). FILLM comprises twenty member-associations – representing 40,000 scholars around the world – and is itself one of the member-organisations of the International Council for Philosophy and Humanistic Studies (ICPSH), a non-governmental organisation within UNESCO, which federates hundreds of different learned societies in the field of philosophy, human sciences and related subjects. Cesar Dominguez is Associate Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Santiago de Compostela in Spain and connects to D’haen in a number of ways: through membership of the Academia Europea, through La Sociedad Española de Literatura General y Comparada (of which he is currently Deputy Chair) – which gives joint membership to the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA), itself a member organisation of FILLM. Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, Associate Professor in Comparative Literature at Aarhus University in Denmark, again is a member of Academia Europaea, and serves on the Advisory Board of the Institute for World Literature at Harvard University, of which David Damrosch is Director. (Thomsen’s university is an institutional affiliate of the Institute. So are six Australian universities, though only one outside the Group of Eight – the University of Western Sydney.) Damrosch is Professor and Chair of the Department of Comparative Literature at Harvard, and Honorary Adjunct Professor, Beijing Language and Culture University. Djelal Kadir is the Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Comparative Literature at Penn State University and Founding President of the International American Studies Association. Kadir and Damrosch have both served on the Research Committees for the ICLA, and both serve currently on the Executive Board of the Institute for World Literature at Harvard University, of which David Damrosch is Director. (Thomsen’s university is an institutional affiliate of the Institute. So are six Australian universities, though only one outside the Group of Eight – the University of Western Sydney.) Damrosch is Professor and Chair of the Department of Comparative Literature at Harvard, and Honorary Adjunct Professor, Beijing Language and Culture University. Djelal Kadir is the Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Comparative Literature at Penn State University and Founding President of the International American Studies Association. Kadir and Damrosch have both served on the Research Committees for the ICLA, and both serve currently on the Executive Board of the Stockholm Collegium of World Literary History. (Damrosch, Dominguez, D’Haen and Kadir all are Fellows of the Stockholm Collegium.) I could go on ...

The network begins to look like a reincarnation of the eighteenth-century Republic of Letters, not as a trans-Atlantic metaphysical metaphor but as a global reality.

I have had to abandon the Australian Literature unit I have taught for quite some years focusing on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander texts alongside more canonical settler texts such as Prichard’s Coonardoo and Herbert’s Capricornia. The market will not sustain it. I am revising the one remaining Australian Literature unit to provide multiple pathways through literary history; and I am introducing a unit devoted to World Literature, in which there is one Australian novel. Of course, there is no way that I or any other university teacher in Australia could expect students to purchase the four Routledge volumes. They are simply too expensive for the Australian student market – which goes to the heart of Apter’s misgivings about the whole enterprise of World Literature’s anthologising and commodifying of cultural resources. Even if students could afford the money to buy into the encyclopaedic commentary on and sampling of the field it’s hard to imagine them having any real engagement with literary texts in a World Literature unit of study confined by semesterisation to perhaps ten to twelve weeks. In this sense the Routledge enterprise is, sadly, almost self-defeating – like that of Borges’s reader in the Library of Babel – which is cold comfort to Comparative Literature traditionalists who
might wish to maintain their rage against the perceived inevitable dilettante character of World Literature as an ascendant field of study.

It is certainly true that Australian literature now has a considerable international reach. In this context, how are we to consider its legacy as a national literature? This is the key question in Scenes of Reading. With Australian literature courses waning in popularity in Australian universities there is some urgency to the question, and some considerably cultural capital invested in the idea that transnational reading practices might renew not only the practice of Australian literary criticism but also the deteriorating interest in Australian Literature. Other literatures have had to try to reposition themselves in world literary space, for other reasons, with varying degrees of success. Time will tell whether Australian Literature can make the difference, either to World Literature, or to itself.

Russell McDougall is Professor of English at the University of New England, Armidale, Australia. He has published extensively on Australian, Caribbean and African literatures and is Executive Editor of Rodopi’s Postcolonial Lives series (commencing 2015). His most recent book publications are The Roth Family, Anthropology and Colonial Administration (ed. with Iain Davidson, 2009), and Writing, Travel, Empire: Colonial Narratives of Other Cultures (ed. with Peter Hulme, 2007).
It is with immense pleasure and intense pride that I accepted the invitation to launch this extraordinary collection of writings by Australian authors: pleasure that the book is a rich harvest from our own authors; pride that their writing makes me hold my head high.

The volume, *A Country Too Far*, is a collection of 28 pieces by 27 of our most remarkable writers: poetry, fiction, memoir, essays, on a theme that defines the heart of our society, deepens its moral centre and questions our ethical stature as individuals. It is, therefore, appropriate that a book of this depth and quality should be launched in the national capital, the heart of the nation, in its centenary year. *A Country Too Far* is an evocative and resonant title suggested, I believe, by Ngareta Rossell.

To Rosie and Tom one can pay the deepest tribute for bringing to our reading intelligence these pieces of stunning power with such lyrical beauty and ethical depth. Rosie and Tom are our celebrated writers: what is most wonderful to see is that they had the time, energy and commitment to write to so many writers – many who supported the project but couldn’t contribute due to other commitments – to see how profoundly and poignantly these writers have imagined the life of others so different and distant from our own.

This, of course, is the gift of finest literature. The literary imagination is the essential ingredient in empowering the powerless, making us see the invisible. The treatment of Asylum Seekers in our nation is not only a moral issue: it is political and personal, national and regional. Its echoes are universal and heard beyond our shores. It creates an image of us in the educated consciousness of others. It mirrors our life too.

The public debate the volume is likely to generate on a vital subject – with its biblical resonance, holocaust’s historical memory, the settlement of Australia and its colonial consequences – is imperative in our society. Australia is not a big power but, I believe, it can play a huge role in creating a humane literacy in our part of the world. We have the means and the people to make that difference.

*A Country Too Far* makes us imagine the situation of someone different yet so close to us. To give these faceless men and women and their nameless children a dignity and individuality is a major contribution towards humane conduct for they provide the insights into a nation’s compassionate imagination. It might just touch our conscience with a sense of justice and in the shaping of future policies in our Parliament.

I’ve read every word on every page – rarely have I read a book that engaged my moral being with such numinous words and epiphanic moments.

Rosie’s Introduction, so movingly and thoughtfully written, raises the issues that writers discuss philosophically and poetically. The language on Asylum Seekers, says the editor, has been debased in the political discourse and our media, even in our writing and academia. They are defined and demonised as terrorists – race and religion are both intertwined here – no-one talks of Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish terrorism – many acts of terrorism are immediately perceived as Islamic. Once that is done, like a racial definition, no further thought is necessary.
All this is creatively questioned in the writings here in the portrayal of personal tragedies in a language of clarity, compassion and searing beauty that makes art into life. Both tenderness and love shine through even the most grim darkness of the boat people drowning in the waves of our prejudices and indifference. The human drama and pathos find expression in words as ordinary as our daily bread.

In a book, meticulously and compellingly researched, titled Your Fatwa Doesn’t Apply Here, published earlier this year, law professor and human rights activist, Karima Bennoune, tells of thousands of Muslims who struggle against fundamentalist violence and their bravery is hardly reported in our media. For example between 2006 and 2008, 98% of al-Qaeda victims were Muslims. Facts can enlarge our understanding of good and evil in the garden of myth-making. In this collection our writers have focused their forensic intelligence on the issues, the details and larger questions of our humanity. The gift of eloquence is their gift to us.

To see this book as merely about asylum seekers is to miss the most fundamental point: it IS about us as a people, a community, a nation – the journeys they make is also part of our mindset and deeply embedded in our national culture and personal histories, in the very foundations our being and becoming.

The writer’s duty is to ask the good questions – let the politicians, public servants, academics and soldiers, come up with the answers – after all, the community pays them for thinking. To find solutions and there’s always a solution if we’ve the will and goodwill.

I could mention a litany of examples, moving and heartrending, that litter the pages of this anthology as dead bodies fitfully seen in the waves of the ocean. You’ll have to buy the book to discover for yourselves – our distinguished writers have done their job. We may well ask what is ours?

Words like disgrace, shameful, disgusting, do not create a sense of our shared responsibility, our complicity – these are words that condemn merely policies and parties. What the writers do here are more, much more –they challenge our own sense of the Other. Our capacity for empathy: it’s not just the tyranny of distance; it is really the tyranny of difference.

As Rosie says, the writers do it with grace – their stories show how closely our own histories mirror those of the Asylum Seekers and how our fate is only a heartbeat away from theirs. The future may be just a boat away or an island too far.

May I be personal: In April 1987 we had won the elections in Fiji after almost 20 years of racially elitist rule by a colonial hierarchy. Even before we could settle in our seats of petty power, six Sri Lankan refugees arrived at Nadi Airport, the place of my birth. The Labour Coalition Government of Fiji, of which I was a member, declared that these people must be sent back to civil war-torn Sri Lanka. It was a unanimous decision: not a single dissenting voice was raised, I’m ashamed to say.

Within a month Colonel Rabuka made half the population of Fiji desperately seek refugee status in New Zealand, Australia and elsewhere. New Zealand was more generous, although 60,000 labourers were cozened and indentured to Fiji to serve primarily the sugar interests of the CSR company of Sydney.¹ No member of my family had ever migrated outside Fiji – and today almost 80 percent of my extended family is in New Zealand.

Life can change so suddenly, so devastatingly. A moment can be eternity depending on what it contains. The stain of refusing refuge to those Sri Lankans is an indelible stain on my

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¹ 60,000 Indian indentured labourers were recruited from 1879 to 1920 to work on the sugar estates of the CSR Company of Australia to give the British colony some economic viability.

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conscience – I should have spoken; my words could have changed the PM’s thinking; he was a friend and often I used to write his speeches and Press releases. I could have made a difference – a small but significant one. I think knowing the truth and not speaking up is worse than telling lies. I remained silent – that’s my sorrow, my shame. Since then I’ve been haunted by the fate of displaced persons – thousands of them.

In June 2004 I launched a book in the precincts of Federal Parliament: *Refuge Australia: Australia’s Humanitarian Record* by Professor Klaus Neumann. That launch was chaired by Tanya Plibersek, now ALP’s Deputy Leader.

In 2007 I was invited to launch a book *Writing the Pacific* edited by Kavita Nandan and Jen Webb – for reasons subterranean, I quoted the poem ‘Refugee Blues’, written in 1939, by W.H Auden: here are a few lines:

\[
\text{Say this city has ten million souls} \\
\text{Some are living in mansions, some are living in holes} \\
\text{Yet there’s no place for us, my dear, yet there’s no place for us.} \\
\ldots
\]

\[
\text{The consul banged the table and said;} \\
\text{‘If you’ve got no passport you’re officially dead’;} \\
\text{But we are still alive, my dear, but we are still alive.} \\
\ldots
\]

\[
\text{Stood on a great plain in the falling snow;} \\
\text{Ten thousand soldiers marched to and fro;} \\
\text{Looking for you and me, my dear, looking for you and me.}
\]

I’d read this in year 10 in my secondary school on a river’s bank. That evening at the University of the South Pacific it came to me with a revenant force and subconscious power of the familiar.

All of us have presumably read *Dark Victory* by David Marr and Marion Wilkinson, Peter Mares’ *Borderline*, *A Watching Brief* by Julian Burnside, Robert Manne’s essay ‘What do we Fear?’, Christos Tsiolkas’s brilliant piece ‘Why We Hate Refugees’ in the September issue of the *Monthly* – the Canberra community is literate and well-informed, I’m told – and numerous other pieces by writers, journalists, academics, and judges, and testimonies of thousands who work and give hope to the Asylum Seekers. These are acts of true heroism. In reading and respecting such people our own self-respect is enhanced.

*A Country Too Far* will give you glimpses of the heartrending true-to-life stories but they will also brighten hope when you read lines like these:

The lies, the lies. The lies of the shock jocks, but worse than that the lies of our elected leaders…

It is true that our ancient, thin-soiled, fragile continent cannot take everyone … a country founded on the sweat of the poorest, most despised outcasts of nineteenth-century society, a country that saw those people come together to forge one of the best and fairest and most prosperous nations the world has ever seen, might make a different choice, a radical choice. Such a country might do away with millionaires’ business visas and stop cherry picking of the educated elite that strips the talent from the developing world. Such a country might make a more generous choice, and take the people more like our forebears – the despised poor, the desperate, the brave, the driven people who risk everything they have to get here and give their kids a better life.
That would be a policy my dad would recognise.

This is the last sentence of a piece which began: ‘I’m pretty sure that for much of his life my father was an illegal immigrant.’

A friend of mine recently sent me his book Hamlet’s Dream: The Robben Island Shakespeare.

Hamlet’s Dream tells the story of the notorious Robben Island prison where Nelson Mandela and his companions were jailed. They were Hindus, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Communists and Socialists – many sentenced for 30 years. But they survived in their solidarity with a copy of Sonny Venkatrathnam’s Alexander edition of the complete works of Shakespeare. They read and marked their favourite passages. That is inspiring: that Literature can be so deeply sustaining in such abject circumstances: to be confined to a solitary prison and yet be the king of infinite space through a writer’s work.

But the more devastating piece in Hamlet’s Dream is on home – asylum seekers leave their homeland to find a home and, it’s here, my friend David Schalkwyk comments – that home can also be strange, alien, uncanny a place of violence and self-destruction. The Macbeths turn their home and country into a slaughter house; Lear dismembers his country and family only to cast himself out into the wilderness; Othello finds in his new home the horror of his own self-betrayal and blind violence; Coriolanus declares of his home, there’s a world elsewhere; and Hamlet returns home from the university to find it a prison.

Something is truly rotten in the state of Denmark.

Australia is home to us.

We might have begun as a prison but we live in perhaps the freest country in the world, in a sense; in another sense we’re still prisoners of what Robert Manne calls our ‘ancient anxieties of race’. What makes a home great is when there’s place in it for the homeless.

Literature may not make us more just or humane but when you read this wonderful collection you’ll see that it sharpens our sense of justice and injustice and questions ideas of our personal humanity. That I think is the priceless gift of good writing – and this volume accomplishes it with compelling creativity and poetic grace. Its eloquence will echo in the hearts and minds of many, I feel.

In a footnote, the co-editor and our most prolific writer, Tom Keneally writes:

As this book goes to press I am horrified to receive figures from the Organisation ChilOut that show we now have the highest number of children in detention we have ever had in modern era … We who apologised to the Stolen Generations will have much to apologise for to those children who ultimately become Australian. Apology, however, will validate but not ease the present pain.

Gillian Triggs, President of the Australian Human Rights Commission, in her report published on October 2, 2013, concludes:

Australia’s share of asylum applications remains a very small fraction of the global total (2.2%). I urge the Australian Government to ensure that all asylum seekers and refugees are treated humanely regardless of their mode of arrival, and to continue to uphold our proud history of providing protection to some of the world’s most persecuted and vulnerable people.
And this protection you won’t get in Nauru – the island created by birds’ droppings: where there are no lakes with withered sedges and no birds sing. I don’t know if you have ever visited that most desolate and god-forgotten island. And to think Australia – this vast land – is sending refugees to these islands and calling it the Pacific Solution – why not the Paradise Solution? Such a big country with so small a heart? Even small islands are not spared our inhumanity: it gives you a sinking feeling.

When you read this collection, the question will arise: Can writers make a difference? I believe books like this do. They should be essential reading in every classroom and the prophetic voice of a writer can be heard into that far country – our conscience. And the near constituency our classroom. After all, most changes are made by the voices and words of a few individuals.

In 1999 I attended the CHOGM meeting held in Durban. My aim was to visit Pietermaritzburg, about 80 kms from Durban. I wanted to see the railway station where Gandhi was ejected from the train on a winter’s night on 7 June 1893 around 10pm. He was a 23-year-old dandy lawyer, recently returned from London. When I visited this station, more than a century later, that evening the station was deserted and the place looked desolate with its low-ceilinged station against a low darkening sky. What moved me most was that this young man had dared to raise his voice in that wilderness – and that voice is still heard. And which hand wrote more than Gandhi’s? Nothing was too small for him.

I do believe that our Australian writers have an enduringly significant role to play. We’ve PEN; some of us are proud members of it. And it has done wonders for writers and journalists in prisons. But perhaps we may think of something more for our region – A Parliament of Writers. It’s not as absurd as it sounds – judging from our many Parliaments. There’s a Parliament of Religions; in Strasbourg, there’s a Parliament of Writers – Wole Soyinka and Salman Rushdie have been its past Presidents.

You might not only attract writers to be its members but many a deposed MPs and PMs. And not necessarily from Fiji alone.

This anthology of writing, says a writer, is an act of imagining the lives of others, and such an act of compassion is holy as any. It is an act designed to make sure we do not stop ourselves from imagining, properly and in every human detail, the plight of Asylum Seekers in this country. And it is an act designed to make sure that we do not stop there; that we do something. We need to honour our obligations to them, and to ourselves. It is truly the sum of us all and all that you and I are and our children are likely to be.

May I, therefore, urge you to read this marvellous collection of writings from our most awarded and honoured writers. Buy your copies – so elegantly edited by Rosie and Tom, and so attractively designed and published by Penguin Viking Australia.

It is with pride and joy I launch this book here in Canberra, Jyoti’s and my home, with our three children and three grandchildren.

Satendra Nandan is a former MP and cabinet minister in the Bavadra Government in Fiji and a member of the Fiji Constitution Commission, 2012. An award-winning writer and academic, he is currently Emeritus Professor at the Donald Horne Institute of Creative and Cultural Research at the University of Canberra.