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The Displaced Female Voice: Poetry of Natalya Gorbanevskaya

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Abstract

Natalya Gorbanevskaya’s poetry uses unanchored imagery, direct address, and other specific means of creating a mood of rootlessness that is ambiguous and echoes her own experience as a Russian exile. Her work focuses on themes of displacement and trauma that are common to those who are forcibly made to leave their homes. This article is one of the first close readings of selected poems by Gorbanevskaya that is to merit attention to her displacement, marginalized feminine identity and resistance to the hegemony of political repression. The loss of her home in a literal and a geographical sense, and her status as an expatriate in Paris, can be understood as a complete displacement for Gorbanevskaya, forging her identity as a political refugee poet. Her work further reveals the power of poetry in reclaiming identity, asserting memory, and resisting the patriarchal system.

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Introduction

Words will not become heavens,
as wood is not to be made of grass.¹

Natalya Gorbanevskaya was displaced from her home when she was sent to a Soviet psychiatric hospital for dissident activities in 1969 (Gorbanevskaya xiii). During this period, artists who were critical of the state frequently faced persecution by authorities. For example, following the rise of Stalinism, fellow Russian poet Anna Ahmatova was censored and her first husband executed; another renowned female Russian poet, Marina Tsvetaeva, committed suicide following the execution of her husband and the starvation of her daughter in a state orphanage. Gorbanevskaya was born in 1936, and she passed away in 2013. She was a translator, a dissident and a civil-rights activist who became known in the West after a 1968 Moscow protest against the state’s crushing of the Prague Spring. Kolla summarises:

¹ Natalya Gorbanevskaya, Selected Poems. Trans. Daniel Weissbort (Manchester: Carcanet, 2011) 26. Subsequent references to this work will be included in parentheses in the text.
Poet, editor, and translator, young Gorbanevskaya first commanded the attention of the government with the publication of her highly controversial poems in Soviet periodicals. However, it was not until Gorbanevskaya’s participation in a demonstration condemning the USSR’s 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia and the subsequent publication of a book on the subject that Soviet authorities promptly arrested her.2

As were some other artists in this social context, she was separated from her own domestic environment and even her freedom. Following her release, she was ‘expelled from the Soviet Union, taking up residence in Paris’ (Gorbanevskaya xiii). From Paris, Gorbanevskaya contributed to the paper Russkaya mysl’ (Russian Thought), and thus remained engaged with her Russian identity; however, she was not able or allowed to take up residence in Russia again and remained displaced from her homeland. Therefore, the poet can be seen to have experienced two distinct, forced displacements: one from her own home when she was sent to the psychiatric hospital, and another when she was ejected from her home country, Russia. The loss of her geographical home, and her status as an expatriate, can be understood as a quite complete displacement of Gorbanevskaya by the patriarchal system.

Gorbanevskaya’s poems demonstrate a focus on displacement, trauma, and Russian identity from a particularly female perspective; this mirrors her biographical experience. Perhaps she is the most known and visible female poet in the Soviet civil-rights movement, since Gorbanevskaya’s writings express her belief in human rights, and in human freedom. As a female poet and mother, Gorbanevskaya experienced significant trauma at the hands of the Soviet state, and this trauma is connected to displacement as she was taken away from her home and committed to a psychiatric hospital as a form of prison sentence. After being expelled from the Soviet Union and making Paris her home, Gorbanevskaya was examined by French psychiatrists who declared her mentally healthy; they indicated that her confinement in the psychiatric hospital had been for political rather than medical reasons.3 The poet remained officially stateless for three decades after moving to Paris; eventually, in 2005, she was granted Polish citizenship. Her displacement from Russia was clearly not only geographical, but also cultural and in some ways linguistic – Gorbanevskaya had worked as a Polish translator, then lived in France among French-speaking culture while writing poetry in Russian. This article seeks to reveal how displacement forms and informs Gorbanevskaya’s poetic voice and style.

**Ambivalence, Oppression, and Poetic Elements**

Overall, Gorbanevskaya’s poetic style and voice are often quite spare. Her poems tend to be relatively short, and the lines within each stanza are likewise often short. It is not uncommon for a line of poetry in Gorbanevskaya’s work to comprise between two and five words; she wrote many eight-line poems – although in translation some of the ‘eight-liners’ contain more than eight lines of text. Her poetry, overall, is the opposite of florid, and there are relatively few adjectives but rather sparse noun-heavy descriptions. When Gorbanevskaya’s narrator is in dialogue with another character, or with the world, or with God, this is often in a discursive or oppositional mode, and in terms of poetic voice, this choice mirrors Gorbanevskaya’s activist, dissident background. Because of her exile from Russia and the fact she lived for thirty years as a stateless person,

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Gorbanevskaya’s can be understood to be a displaced poetic and political voice engaged in argumentative dialogue with the state that expelled her and isolated her from her home, heritage, and family.

The institutional oppression Gorbanevskaya experienced can be seen as a kind of colonising force, and her identity as demonstrated in her poetry contains an oppositional response to the oppressive events and treatment she endured. Gorbanevskaya’s identity as represented in language also contains elements of French culture and vocabulary, from her experience living in Paris as a stateless person for three decades. Her work as a Polish translator, and her ultimate conferral gaining of Polish citizenship, reflect ambiguity and ambivalence about her transnational identity in terms of the language that she uses. Of course, reading Gorbanevskaya’s poetry in English translation also inherently contains another displacement in terms of language, as the best translations of poetry can only ever approximate the meaning of the original, while re-shaping elements of vocabulary and poetic form. In a poetic vocabulary and perspective such as Gorbanevskaya’s, which contains elements of Russian, French, Polish and other cultural backgrounds, there is already a highly ambiguous and ambivalent linguistic ‘space’ open before English translation. Ultimately, Gorbanevskaya’s physical and cultural displacement from her homeland sharpens the hybridity and ambiguities inherent in her work.

Perhaps for this reason, and undoubtedly additionally for others, Gorbanevskaya’s poetry has an overall sense of being unmoored or unanchored in terms of its setting, imagery and subject matter. The narrator is often in dialogue with another character, whose identity is again unclear to the reader, evoking ambiguity. To take an example, in her series of poems Another 13 Eight-Liners, setting is initially unclear:

A metro station,
named after a saint –
cannot be made out
which one.
The morning, like mineral water,
sparkling all the way down.
Never mind!
If only there were some honour’ (Gorbanevskaya 62).

The opening image of the ‘metro station’ is quite universal – the station could be in Paris or Moscow or anywhere in between. The naming of the station after a saint – and the impossibility of ascertaining which saint – places the reader in further ambiguity, which is grounded in a sense of history in relation to places being named after saints and the pre-Soviet religious traditions of Russia or other countries. Thus, this station is also a modern place steeped in the past, a sort of modernity that Boym characterizes as ‘contradictory, critical, ambivalent, and reflective on the nature of time; it combines fascination with the present with longing for another time’. The stark modernity of the station, devoid of specific location, is juxtaposed against cues from a lost cultural history.

Additionally, the imagery of morning like mineral water is powerful, and the phrase ‘sparkling all the way down’ gives the reader an almost visceral physical memory of the sensation of drinking sparkling water. Gorbanevskaya references a near-universal physical experience and sensation as a means to draw the reader into the universality of the scene, although the physical and

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geographical or historical grounding of the poem’s setting never becomes clear. In this way, the reader relates and has a sensory connection to the experience, but the reader is also disconnected from a particular time or place, which creates a tension or possible sense of unease in relation to the unfixed familiarity, an ‘anxiety about the vanishing past’.  

Additionally, Gorbanevskaya further draws the reader into the poetic experience by her habit of ‘breaking the fourth wall’ – the metaphorical wall between the reader and the poetic scene. In film and other art forms, this ‘wall’ is taken to mean that it is not acknowledged by the reader or the viewer who is being told a story – when this wall is up, the narrative is presented as its own experience, one that is to be regarded by the viewer or reader, but which is not directly participatory. Gorbanevskaya breaks this wall and acknowledges the created nature of the poem by referring to her own poetic technique, process and peers throughout her work. This instils in the reader an awareness of the ambivalent and ambiguous nature of the poet-narrator-reader relationships; the sense of identity and belonging is rendered unclear. For instance, Gorbanevskaya’s poetic narrator enters into dialogue with her own poetic art later in *Another 13 Eight-Liners*:

Don’t limp,  
my trochees,  
don’t go lame,  
or roll up,  
like Boreas, beginning to limp,  
beyond April,  
and May,  
lame,  
limping,  
like March,  
like death (Gorbanevskaya 62).

In addition to breaking the ‘fourth wall’, Gorbanevskaya plays with temporal ambiguity, progressing from April and May back to March and associating this previous month with ‘death’. Perhaps of greater note, the close proximity of ‘March’ and ‘death’ also evokes the association of ‘death march’, which connects to governmental force; through force and ambiguity being placed in close association, Gorbanevskaya’s own experience of displacement and dislocated identity is referenced.

Ambivalence in setting and ambivalence in terms of identity are encapsulated in another poem from the same series. Gorbanevskaya questions identity: ‘Is it I? – It is, you, and I myself as well / withdrawing from non-being’ (Gorbanevskaya 63). It is unclear who is the ‘I’ speaker, or the ‘you’ subject in this poem, and the wording captures the ambivalence of identity Gorbanevskaya undoubtedly experienced as a displaced person and as a woman. The phrase ‘withdrawing from non-being’ provides an interesting take on identity and existence, as withdrawing *into* being is an unusual use of a directional metaphor as it relates to identity.

**Memory, Displacement, and Resistance in Gorbanevskaya’s Work**

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5 Boym 19.

Gorbanevskaya’s poetry encompasses elements of what can be referred to as cogitocide or historicide -- an urge to forget history, to rewrite it once more, and in doing so, she is able to challenge it and assume some degree of control. Boym writes that communism is inherently threatened by nostalgia, as communism is oriented toward modernity: it is, she writes, ‘future-oriented, utopian and teleological’. Thus, Gorbanevskaya’s insistence on sentimental revisiting of her memory can be understood as an act of resistance. She draws on her experiences of displacement in writing about the past, and so her poetry encompasses a form of memoir that is related to ambivalent identity as a displaced person. Memory itself does not preserve history, but rather transforms it – as memories are recalled time and again, they take on particular aspects that may not be accurate to objective reality, and they assume a new form. Gorbanevskaya’s choices regarding poetic subject, voice, imagery and narrative do much to transform the memories that she commits to paper. Such reimagining, re-framing and re-remembering of personal and more general history allows her to retain a position of resistance, of dissent, in relation to the official narratives formed by the Soviet regime and others seeking to control the historical narrative. To some extent, she assumes control over her own narrative, which may be read as an act of resistance.

Poetic themes relating to displacement can readily be detected in Gorbanevskaya’s work including the recurring themes of isolation, the battle for human civil rights, and tension between the individual and the larger group. Although Gorbanevskaya stayed current with Russian thought through the diaspora and through the written word, the images of Russia she evokes in her poetry are necessarily historical and drawn from her own memory or the collective memory of the time in which she lived there. At the same time, Boym points out that in the context of nostalgia, a sense of ‘home’ is not dependent on a specific place, but more in a feeling of comfort and familiarity: ‘The object of longing, then, is not really a place called home but this sense of intimacy with the world; it is not the past in general, but that imaginary moment when we had time and didn’t know the temptation of nostalgia’. In this way, an interesting sense of temporal displacement is evident in her poetry, as it is poetry of memory and also of loss, or displacement, through, time.

Imagery illustrates this temporal displacement. For example, Gorbanevskaya’s imagery of snow can be seen as one way in which Russia is represented in her poems as lost and temporally displaced in relation to the author. In her Unfinished Poems, Gorbanevskaya writes of ‘a January Monday, / and the pealing of the bells, / floating among the snow–hills’. Snow is a significant part of the Russian literary psyche and history, as the amount and coverage of snow received in parts of Russia each year is far greater than that of European countries such as France. Gorbanevskaya’s repeated references to snow in this poem – and in others of her work – can be seen as longing for

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6 Boym 60.
7 Cathy Caruth, Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).
8 Boym 253.

the uniquely Russian landscape and its particular climate, and also as a poetic reference to nostalgia itself; in French, the phrase ‘ou sont les neiges’ is used to refer to nostalgia and a longing for times past.\(^9\) In Gorbanevskaya’s case, the poetic imagery of snow relates to displacement in geographical terms, in the linguistic connotation, and also more universally because snow is impermanent and melts. Imagery of snow can be seen as a thematic concern with impermanence and transience, which links to Gorbanevskaya’s identity as a stateless exile and a displaced person. She laments her identity and citizenship that are rooted in the Russian earth by birth right; she laments her status as a refugee and émigré in foreign lands:

My mother was born in Russia
and died there,
four days after the demise
of the USSR.

But I was born in the Soviet Union
and shall probably die in France,
labelled ‘Refugee, stateless,
a former Soviet citizen’ (Gorbanevskaya 74).

Gorbanevskaya makes use of certain other emblems of Russian identity, and the Russian landscape and culture, in her poetic imagery. For instance, from her collection *Flying Over the Snowy Frontier*, Gorbanevskaya poetically sketches the image of ‘wood… brought in by sleighs, as in the olden times / firewood to the yard. / Obviously from the forest. And you’ll not utter / creation in the yard, in the grass’ (Gorbanevskaya 26). The forest is central in mythology and imagery of Russianness over the centuries, and the poet makes reference to forest landscapes and creatures in her poetry. Billington refers to the forest and its associated forces as central to the Russian collective psyche, its fears and fascinations including bears, insects and the potential for – or experience of – forest fire.\(^10\) Likewise, the image and sound of bells is very important to Russian artists, composers and writers alike, as an emblem of Russian identity and the Orthodox church that pre-dated the Soviet era. Gorbanevskaya’s references to bells in *Unfinished Poems*, for example, reinforces the importance of bells as an emblem of Russianness through repetition: ‘the pealing of the bells, / floating among the snow-hills… and the pealing of the bells / drowns in the snow… while the bells peal, melt and drown, / but touch us, brush us, / with their wings’ (Gorbanevskaya 9). The repetitiousness of her mentioning the bells provides a sense of repeated bell-ringing tones, and therefore a visual image with a strong sonic component. Additionally, the rhythm of the short, one-syllable words in some lines reinforces the association of the sound made by bells. The insistent referring to the bells and the evocation of bells – which are assumed by the reader to be church bells – is another way in which Gorbanevskaya can express dissent and resistance to the Soviet state and its official policy of atheism. Her poetic voice is often grief-stricken, and some of her poetry can be read as a delayed-release mourning for the time she spent incarcerated, and the loss of the country – Russia – that was her birth right and her home. Gorbanevskaya’s homesickness for pre-Soviet Russia is, as mentioned previously, shot through her poetry in iconic images and resonances relating to old Russian identity and mythology.

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Gorbanevskaya’s displacement can correspondingly be understood in the context of the Russian diaspora as it relates to poetry, literature and broader artistic culture and aesthetics. The concept of a ‘diaspora’ originally refers to an ancient Greek word meaning ‘to scatter about’; it stands for dissemination or the lack at the centre. The diaspora of a particular national or ethnic group consists of those who have been scattered worldwide from their original homeland. Unfortunately, there are several examples of a globally-scattered people who have often had to leave their homeland due to terror, trauma or state-sponsored violence. Among any diaspora there is often a sense of desire to be reunited with other members of the national, ethnic, linguistic or cultural group. In Gorbanevskaya’s case, her involvement with the periodical publication ‘Russian Thought’ in Paris can be seen as a longing to stay connected with the Russian diaspora in France and, by extension, the Russian people as a greater whole. Gorbanevskaya refers to specific elements of Russianness, as discussed above, and also references specific places in Russia. From the Three Notebooks of Poems, Gorbanevskaya connects Russian place names: ‘My Moscow, a waxen board, / poems walk on the first snow, / my ennui, which I cannot hide, / but do not press to my pale brow’ (Gorbanevskaya 22). Later in the same poem, the poet refers to ‘prison-trains [leaving] / the Kazan Station for the East’ (Gorbanevskaya 22), and ‘the Neva and Onega run deep between their banks’ (Gorbanevskaya 22). By referring specifically to these emblematic cities and rivers of Russia, Gorbanevskaya connects herself to the rest of the Russian diaspora, and – by extension – to Russia itself. In psychological terms, mentioning these common geographical locations that are known to and experienced by other members of the diaspora goes some way to alleviating the sense of isolation that she clearly feels as a result of her displacement from home and from nation. Gorbanevskaya’s poetry echoes the meaning of her life as part of the diaspora. Accordingly, in the sequence Poems of the Last Century, Gorbanevskaya sets the scene in France and then refers to Moscow in the poem’s last two lines:

On the long, long rue Vaugirard
nothing of interest,
aside from its length,
but the gracious city
tosses on either side,
in the heat-haze
of the brick-flow.

You gave up for lost
your long, long, life,
but once in the long street,
outside your home,
you revive – not out of dogma,
but because you remember childhood places,
the short Neglinka,
the endless ring-road (Gorbanevskaya 47).

In terms of imagery and setting, here Gorbanevskaya repeats and highlights the ‘long, long’ French street and the person’s ‘long, long’ life – which is starkly contrasted with the short Neglinka street in the centre of Moscow. The contrast of long and short can be taken with multiple meanings – it

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11 Jenny Edkins Trauma and the Memory of Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 15.
refers to distance, obviously. However, the ‘long, long’ life refers to the passing of time and of memory. The short Moscow street has an immediacy in this context, as a childhood memory that is an instant rather than a long narrative. There is also the implication of diasporic longing for a lost location, one far away in space and in memory, and connection to Russia and its people. Gorbanevskaya’s sense of displacement that imbues the tone, voice and imagery of her poems has to do with time and landscape intertwined – landscape can stand as an emblem of time, and of time passed since the poet’s displacement. Conversely, she often references the passage of time through landscape, through Russia as a place and as a myth or ideology, and through the city of Moscow as it is known by locals. As Gorbanevskaya writes in ‘How Few Pinball Machines Now in Paris’, ‘Landscape, landscape – in truth, a landscape, / the more appealing, the more wretched, / rainy, like a birch tree on the edge of a grave’ (Gorbanevskaya 97). Here it can be seen how landscape and time are connected in Gorbanevskaya’s poetic world, and how both relate to displacement. The poetic quest is one for the truth to be revealed, despite displacement or exile or state oppression and silencing of those on the margins. The contrast of ‘the more appealing’ with ‘the more wretched’ holds in it the possibility that the more wretched could itself also be the more appealing to some. There is an honesty in the wretchedness of the landscape, and the image of a tree adjacent to grave points to the fact that some forms of life continue even after an individual person has passed away. The death of the individual human does not equate to the death of the broader landscape, which continues growing with plant and other life. Gorbanevskaya closes the poem with the question, ‘What would you give for it?’ (Gorbanevskaya 97), implying that human sacrifice is to some degree necessary in order to maintain, own or even remember a particular living landscape.

In solidarity, Gorbanevskaya finds the possibility of resistance and freedom: ‘“Let’s fly, friend!” comes the whisper. / Can you!’ (Gorbanevskaya 101). The poet uses poetic forms, voice and words to assert and re-shape her reality, and in this way, her version of events will shape the memory of others through being preserved in her writing. Poetry is therefore a means of individual freedom in constrained situations, and the displacement that is caused by Gorbanevskaya’s confinement and unjust treatment serves as a nexus of power in her poetic voice and imagination. In her writing, Gorbanevskaya frees herself from confinement and isolation, her words and her imagination enabling her to fly outside prison ‘slamming the door behind, / mounting the clouds’ (Gorbanevskaya 102).

However, it is also important to consider that Gorbanevskaya’s imprisonment can be understood as a way in which she is displaced and isolated not only from human society and human connection, but also from her own self and her own truth. Technically, Gorbanevskaya was being ‘treated’ for schizophrenia, but this was a politically-motivated diagnosis that French doctors later disproved. As Kolla has noted, the psychiatrist Malcolm Lader contends: ‘I could not have made this diagnosis but would have regarded Miss Gorbanevskaya as having repeated depressive episodes’. Her poetry encapsulates the dichotomy of being told that her psychological and personal truth is a lie, and for being incarcerated on false pretenses as a result of seeking to speak and preserve the truth at the Prague Spring protest:

This truth is a lie ...
This truth, I insist on,
don’t, don’t believe it,
do not test it, with a knife pinning
the tender throat to the wall (Gorbanevskaya 28).

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Here, the false truth that ‘is a lie’ is presented as a matter of extreme urgency, one that portends violence with the image of the knife to the throat. ‘[T]he naked truth, / or deliberate lie’ are similarly confusing and are ‘to be read as quickly as possible, / or you’ll not make it out’ (Gorbanevskaya 95). Finding herself in a world of chaos, in which reality and personal agency have been displaced and corrupted, and in which falsehoods and truth are exchanged, Gorbanevskaya retrospectively uses her poetic voice to correct the memory of the experiences she lived through, and to preserve her truth for the future.

Ambiguity of identity is also evoked through Gorbanevskaya’s experiences in the mental health system. The ambiguity of the division between mentally ‘normal’ or healthy, and disordered, is one which poets and artists of various backgrounds often consider in a context of tension, lived experience and psychological displacement. Gorbanevskaya’s incarceration and treatment by the patriarchal system on a falsified diagnosis of ‘schizophrenia’ was certainly politically motivated, and there is no doubt that this trauma led her to question her own sanity or reality at times. In this ambiguity and ambivalence regarding her own experience and reality, the language, imagery and voice of her poetry reflect her psychological displacement. Additionally, Gorbanevskaya can be seen to essentially dissociate from herself, her body and her psyche at times as a means of surviving trauma and abuse. Gorbanevskaya appears fatalistic and dissociated from herself in the poem: ‘Don’t destroy me, Lord, / losing me in a game of change, / sending me out to roam the world, / believing in nothing’. (Gorbanevskaya 9). The poet writes of ‘the unknown shadow land’ (Gorbanevskaya 69) and the ambiguities and conflicts present in her own memories: ‘What can I not forget, / subsiding, like a prisoner, in a corner? / I cannot remember but wouldn’t lie to myself, / threading this needle … These wounds, sores – where from? / Not to remember, not to forget either. / You lie in the bed you made, but the bed’s / no place to grieve or love in’ (Gorbanevskaya 68). In these phrases, it can be seen that Gorbanevskaya considers the acts of remembering or forgetting to be ambiguous yet potentially oppositional activities. ‘Sanity’ likely depends on an ability to accurately remember occurrences, but due to trauma, she cannot trust her own experience.

The melancholy or depression referenced can be detected in her poetic voice, which as previously mentioned is often grief-stricken or pervasively sad in its perspective. A possible description of an episode of melancholy or depression is to be found, for example, in the poem:

My dear, what’s happening,
when the hour doesn’t arrive,
when the hand sticks, unable to move,
and time twitching in the same place,
is unable to rise
one millimetre … Like a windless sail,
I faint in your palms,
invisible, undreamed, distant
in the complete revolution of a clock’s hands
from me, as once upon a time, as then (Gorbanevskaya 27).

The image of a stuck clock and the hand unable to move a millimetre is potent in depicting the immobilizing effects of serious depression, and the feeling that one is unable to move. This can be interpreted as further evidence of the sense of displacement in Gorbanevskaya’s work, as she is displaced emotionally as well as geographically and culturally. The phrase ‘my dear, what’s happening’ also projects a sense of dissociation either towards or as a patient. Again,
Gorbanevskaya’s tone and approach is one of some fatalism, as if she has no agency or control over her melancholic body and self. Further evidence of such melancholic dissociation can be found in the 1994-6 collection *Nabor [Type-setting]* in which one poem reads:

My head’s badly arranged,  
birthing not thoughts, just words,  
not self-generated –  
that’s about it!

The seed, dropped into flesh,  
to ripen in its own good time,  
bursts from the temporal,  
generating bones.

Unmilled flour  
coagulating into a martyr,  
mouthing, with a butted tongue,  
extracted, as by an empty ladle (Gorbanevskaya 39).

The image of birthing words rather than thoughts indicates displacement and, potentially, dissociation in Gorbanevskaya’s writing technique. The imagery in the third stanza is dark and melancholic, with images such as the empty ladle and the possibility of a martyr’s tongue having been extracted lend themselves to an interpretation of isolation and potentially torturous oppression. The association of trauma and its effects through the melancholic imagery suggest the effects of displacement.

Gorbanevskaya develops a resilient poetic voice in style and tone as a means of resistance, despite her experiences of depression and melancholy, her multiple displacements from Russia, and her isolation as a member of the Russian diaspora. For example, as an activist and a dissident, Gorbanevskaya’s poetic voice is often relatively discursive, contrary or even hectoring towards the Soviet state, towards an individual or towards the world. Even when discussing music in poetry, her voice is argumentative at times. In ‘Concerto for Orchestra’, written in 1962 before Gorbanevskaya’s imprisonment and exile, she argues with the composer Bela Bartok regarding his composition ‘Concerto for Orchestra’. Gorbanevskaya writes: ‘Bartok, listen to what you’ve written! / Like beating a rusty frying-pan: rat-tat-tat, / like mountains mounting mountains, / rivers circling themselves… it’s always the same: noise, / racket, not the real thing’ (Gorbanevskaya 4). Although at the time of writing this poem Gorbanevskaya was not in exile and was not part of the diaspora, she was already developing in certain ways a poetic voice and tone redolent of displacement.

Furthermore, by taking an argumentative, discursive stance, Gorbanevskaya not only continues her dissident, protesting work in the poetic form, but she also counters prevailing patriarchal views regarding women stating strong opinions in a direct fashion. Her strong and direct poetic voice can be seen as an element of activism and also an element of feminism, in which she will not have her opinions silenced by patriarchal society. Gorbanevskaya lampoons patriarchal expectations in a later poem, ‘The Female Sympathiser is Certainly Convivial’, in which the poetic narrator refers to a female character in infantilising ways that are based on her physical appearance rather than her mind, words or ideas. By drawing attention to the fact that patriarchal society judges women on how they look rather than what they say – women being often viewed as decorative,
rather than worthy of an audience – Gorbanevskaya’s poetic voice allows her to critique the current situation for women in the world: ‘The female sympathiser is certainly convivial, / a sweetie-pie, a pipellet, a receptacle of the spirit, / acceptably brittle, / like the first sleet underfoot / that year, when autumn lingered, / not a year passed, / but clouds were waking rustling, / and my soul scurrying over the snow’ (Gorbanevskaya 66). By portraying the female character as weak and brittle, comparing her to sleet versus the narrator’s emblem of snow, she underlines how women are seen as weak and inconsequential by comparison to men in a patriarchal system. In Gorbanevskaya’s poetic voice, even in translation to English, sarcasm and irony are important elements and ways through which she expresses her opinions and hopes for a better future.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

Gorbanevskaya’s poetic voice and imagery recalls a pre-Soviet Russia as a way of negotiating her displacement from her homeland. Imagery of snow can be seen as one way in which Russia is represented in her poems as lost and temporally displaced in relation to the author. Imagery of snow, in addition to representing old Russia, can be seen as a thematic concern with impermanence and transience, which links to Gorbanevskaya’s identity as a stateless exile and also as a displaced person.

Gorbanevskaya’s displacement places her within the Russian diaspora as it relates to poetry, literature and broader artistic culture and aesthetics. She stayed connected with Russians outside Russia by involvement in the periodical publication ‘Russian Thought’ in Paris, and also by addressing Russian themes, politics and the abuses of the Soviet state in her work. Gorbanevskaya connects geography with her own personal memories, and memories of the Russian diaspora more generally. She references specific streets, cities, rivers and place names that will spark recognition in other Russian or Muscovite – or Russian diaspora – readers. Her use of setting, of geographical markers and of temporal elements in her poetry reflects her status as a displaced person, and as a female voice oppressed under a patriarchal system.

As an activist and a dissident, Gorbanevskaya’s poetic voice is often relatively discursive, contrary or even hectoring. She holds strong opinions and at times in her poetry these are stated very directly. This can be seen as a form of feminist activism against the norm that women should be seen and not heard in patriarchal society, and also as a way through which she asserts her displaced voice as oppositional. Gorbanevskaya’s poetic voice, imagery, persona and work demonstrate her ambiguous, ambivalent and hybridized identity and experience which is shaped at least in part by her status as a displaced person. Yet, Gorbanevskaya will not have her opinions silenced by patriarchal society. Gorbanevskaya’s poetic voice allows her to critique political and cultural norms using sarcasm, argument and imagery that undermines oppressive situations and status quos: in Gorbanevskaya’s poetic voice, even in translation to English, sarcasm and irony are important elements and ways through which she expresses her opinions and hopes for a better future. At all times, her quest through the poetic form is for the personal and political truth – as an individual woman, as a displaced person, as a member of the diaspora and as a Russian. By telling her story through poetry, Gorbanevskaya can retrospectively un-silence herself, to let her words and thoughts be free and find connection with her readers in the Russian diaspora and further afield. Her poetic voice, formed in the context of her displacement, is truthful, fearless and profoundly powerful. She is able to negotiate her own ambiguous identity as a Russian living outside Russia for thirty years, and as a woman oppressed – but not crushed – by patriarchy.

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Works Cited

Reflections on the Writing Process: Perspectives from Recent Hindi Novels

Veronica Ghirardi

Abstract

Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as ‘fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality’\(^1\). Metafictional works, she suggests, are those which ‘explore a theory of writing fiction through the practice of writing fiction’. They are characterised by a tendency to self-reflexivity or, in other words, by a tendency to call attention to the writing process itself. However, even in dedicated critical works, it is not easy to find a clear and all-encompassing definition of metafiction. Generally, various types of texts are mentioned under this term: texts recounting their origin and birth, dealing with the history of narrative, recounting stories of writers.

Metafiction is generally considered an important feature of postmodern literature. In the postmodern era pure realist writing is perceived as a limitation and an unsuitable device to render the complexity of the contemporary world. As Baudrillard says, we no longer live in a world made of unequivocal meanings, we live in a world of signs. In this context authors, by reflecting on the writing process, foreground the fictional nature of their narratives. Because of this, the role of metafiction (which obviously cannot be considered as an innovation introduced by postmodernism) has become predominant in the postmodern era. Metafiction can follow different paths to reach its aims: its experimental component can be evident and radical or can be limited to a few pages or lines, without unduly affecting the perception of the story. In some cases, the reader will find no reflections on the structure or on the textual functions of the novel, but on its artistic and intellectual meaning.

Within the history of Hindi literature (referring here to Modern Hindi only) probably the most famous example of metafictional novel is *Suraj ka Satvan Ghoda* (*The Sun’s Seventh Horse*, 1952) by Dharmavir Bharati. The novel consists of three narratives about three women recounted by Manik Mulla to his friends over seven afternoons, in the style of *Panchatantra*\(^2\) or *Hitopadesha*\(^3\). Later, in the 1970s, Krishna Baldev Vaid published *Bimal Urf Jayen to Jayen Kahan*. From the earliest pages of the novel, the narrator addresses his readers with provocative monologues. According to the materials consulted in my research, there are not many other examples of self-reflexive novels until the 1990s: from this decade onwards, the metafictional component seems to gain new importance. The aim of this paper is to exemplify the new role acquired by metafiction in recent Hindi novels and to understand if it can be considered a possible postmodern trace.

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2 The *Panchatantra* (lit. *The Five Texts for Education*) consists of five books of animal fables and magic tales, with an explicit didactic intention. Each book contains a main story (frame story) and several embedded tales narrated by a character to another. The original Sanskrit work, attributed to Vishnu Sharma, was compiled between the 2nd and the 5th century AD.
3 *Hitopadesha* (*The Book of Good Counsels*) is a collection of Sanskrit fables, explicitly inspired by *Panchatantra* and by another not well defined work. Differently from *Panchatantra* it is divided in four sections only. *Hitopadesha* was presumably composed between the 9th and the 14th century.

1. Postmodernism and the Indian context

The first concept to be discussed is necessarily that of postmodernism: is it suitable for the Indian context? Even though this issue cannot be analysed here in detail, I will attempt to suggest its main coordinates. The concept of postmodernism was born in the ‘Western world’ and has become one of the keywords in debates among intellectuals in Europe and the USA since the 1960s. The prefix post- should not be read in a chronological sense, as it refers more to ‘logical and historical consequence rather than sheer temporal posteriority’. Postmodernism challenges scientific positivism, Enlightenment rationalism and the inevitability of human progress. In Derrida and Lyotard’s terminology, postmodernism deconstructs the grands récits, the totalising ideologies related to Enlightenment and modernity. As the concept appears deeply connected with the historical and socio-cultural background of the Western world, many Indian scholars are quite sceptical about extending this term to their own reality. Postmodernism is often considered merely to be an imported fashion, which is not suitable for a postcolonial reality such as India. There is no modernity in the subcontinent – they argue – so how can we talk about postmodernism? Nevertheless, in an interview I had with Sudhish Pachauri – one of the most important scholars who has written extensively about postmodernism and Hindi literature – he highlighted the importance of looking at India as a complex and multi-faceted reality. Simultaneously, we can find traces of pre-modernity in adivasi’s style of life; traces of modernity in democratic institutions and in the development of an extended middle class; traces of postmodernity in the revolution of telecommunications, in the participation in consumerism and globalisation. S.L. Doshi as well, from a sociological point of view, described India as a ‘kaleidoscopic interplay of tradition, modernity and postmodernity’. The economic reforms of the 1990s played a fundamental role in moving India towards a postmodern condition. During Narasimha Rao’s term as Prime Minister (1991-1996) India started its path towards liberalisation, consumerism and globalisation, even though aspects of a late capitalistic nation still coexist with others of extreme backwardness. The reality of the subcontinent – which is by its nature a mosaic of languages, cultures, landscapes – has become even more complex, a sort of hymn to pluralism.

Briefly, according to many critics, if we talk of postmodernism for the Indian context it corresponds to the cultural condition of post-liberalisation (post-1991). In the opinion of Sudhish Pachauri and Pandey Shashibhushan Shitanshu postmodernism can hardly be defined, as it is a highly unstable and uncertain condition. On one hand postmodernism refuses all unifying and

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5 The term adivasi carries the specific meaning of being the original, autochthonous inhabitants of a given region. It denotes the tribal groups populating not only India, but also Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.
7 See Sudhish Pachauri, Uttar-adhunik Sahityik Vimars (Delhi: Vani Prakashan, 2010).

centralising theories; it deals with minorities, with subaltern groups and shows their struggle against dominating and oppressive forces. In India this is expressed by feminist and dalit writing, raising their voices against patriarchy and casteism. On the other hand, if we look at the mainstream literature, during the last 25 years, a new and interesting dimension has appeared: it is playfulness. In our consumerist society people do not want to buy sorrow and suffering (which is a fundamental part of the realist tradition), but well-being and happiness. Therefore, we have started to encounter texts whose plots are extremely condensed, with no great ideals or eternal truths and especially no didactic intention. Postmodernism implies a new concept of literature of pleasure, in opposition to the previous realist tradition; playfulness and irony become new tools to express the complexity of the global world. There is no longer a univocal reality to be represented, but a world made of signs and only personal and partial perspectives can be proposed. Moreover, literature becomes a product of the consumeristic society and the distance between high and popular literature is erased.

In the following sections I will provide examples of metafictional writing from three Hindi novels, written after economic liberalisation, *T-ta Professor* (Manohar Shyam Joshi, 1995), *Kathgulub* (Lit. *Wood-rose*, Mridula Garg, 1996) and *Ek Naukrani ki Diary* (*The Diary of a Maidservant*, Krishna Baldev Vaid, 2000). The three authors, with different strategies, explicitly reflect on the meaning of writing, in a personal and intimate dimension. I will endeavour to demonstrate how this self-reflexive dimension can be linked to some typical postmodern issues, as the complexity of the world and of human experience and the impossibility of defining any indisputable truth.

2. *T-ta Professor* by Manohar Shyam Joshi.\(^9\) writing and disillusion

Mr Joshi is a middle-aged writer, experiencing some creative difficulties, who recalls his past as a teacher in a small village named Sunaulidhar. In particular, he remembers some episodes related to Professor Shashtiballabh Pant, better known as T-ta Professor, because of his way of pronouncing the white soldiers’ salutation (‘ta-ta’). Professor T-ta considered himself an authority on the English language and used to wander about with a notebook in his hand, just to

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\(^9\) Manohar Shyam Joshi (1933-2006) was born in Ajmer (Rajasthan) into a Kumaoni Brahm family from Almora (now in the state of Uttrakhand). He is often called the Father of Indian Soap Opera, since he was the scriptwriter of the first Indian TV serial, *Ham Log* (1982). A hugely popular show, this dealt with the everyday struggles of the Indian middle-class. A few years later Joshi created a new TV serial, *Buniyaad* (1987-1988), based on the story of a family of refugees during the Partition of India. He wrote screenplays for films like *Bhrashtachar*, *Appu Raja*, *He Ram* and *Nirmadhin Zameen* and in some of these films he was also a dubber. He also worked as a journalist; after his first experience writing for *Jansatta* in Delhi, he became a contributor to *All India Radio* and *Films Division of India* in Mumbai. He became assistant to the acclaimed poet and writer Agyeya at *Dinman* magazine and was part of the editorial staff on *Saptahik Hindustan*, *Weekend Review* and *Morning Echo*. He wrote for *Outlook India’s* column *Outlook Saptahik* until his death in 2006. In his literary work, he dealt with a wide range of subjects: from love in *Kasaap* to political satire in *Netaji kahin*. His best known novels include *Kuru Kuru Swaha* (1980), *Hariya Hercules ki Hairani* (1994), *Hamzad* (1999) and *Kyap*, an allegory of modern India, for which he won the Sahitya Akademi award in 2005. Unfortunately, his success as a scriptwriter for television has probably overshadowed his literary work.

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write down any new English word he encountered. He was obsessed by sex and found potential erotic allusions in any subject. Because of this he had become the ideal character for a comic-erotic short story. Mr Joshi tried to win T-ta’s trust by inventing improbable sexual experiences in order to gather as many details as possible about his private life. During one of their chats the Professor relates his sad story in what he called the ‘widows’ house’. Since his childhood Shashtiballabh had remained the only male in his family: he had been raised by his mother Ija, inconsolable after her husband’s death, his presumptuous auntie Bubu and his sister-in-law Bhoju, with whom T-ta had his first sexual experiences. But Mr Joshi found himself unable to write anything: the two images of Shashtiballabh – sad orphan and lustful old man – were fighting against each other with no possible reconciliation. Some years passed and Mr Joshi had no more contact with people from Sunaulidhar. One day, during the funeral ceremony for a relative, he was informed of T-ta’s death. He had suffered a heart attack on the first anniversary of his son’s death. The novel ends with an impressive image: Mr Joshi standing on a river bank looking at a dead foetus floating on the water.

As previously mentioned, the main character and narrator (whose name is significantly the author’s own name) is a storyteller suffering from writer’s block. Within a story made up of amusing episodes with plenty of sexual allusions, Mr Joshi introduces a much deeper and more complex reflection on writing potentials. From the beginning of the novel we find noteworthy excerpts foregrounding a basic question: can words still be immortal?

‘Poets must die when they’re young and novelists be born only when they’re old.’ Can’t recall where I read that line, or its author’s name. God knows who wrote it: a failed middle-aged poet or a successful old novelist. Sounds more like the former, if you ask me.

… Look, successful or not, I am a middle aged novelist too, and although I may now write to live, I no longer live to write. All the stories I put off writing, because I waited for them to mature, have grown old along with me. In fact, they are as close to death as I am now. So what immortality can this dying baggage have?10

The narrator talks to his readers, expressing a painful and disenchanted point of view on life and on the role of writing. We can find some interesting similarities with Italo Calvino’s novel If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller: On one hand both novels are, at the same time, a comedy and tragedy. In Calvino’s text we have a ‘light plot’ with two protagonists, the Reader and the Other Reader, who ultimately end up marrying; but the tragedy emerges through a reflection on the difficulties of writing and the solitary nature of reading. On the other hand Calvino, like Joshi, introduces his own double, an old writer named Silas Flannery, who reveals his intellectual crisis in a diary.

10 Manohar Shyam Joshi, T’Ta Professor, translated by Ira Pande (Delhi: Penguin Books, 2008) 1. Subsequent references to this novel will be identified with initials TTP. The original Hindi text used for analysis is Manohar Shyam Joshi, Manohar Shyam Joshi ke teen upanyas - Hariya Hercules ki Hairani, T-ta Professor, Hamzaad (Delhi: Kitabghar Prakashan, 2008).

Returning to Mr Joshi’s story, he recounts the sensations he used to experience through reading: he could burst out laughing or explode into tears and dreamt of recreating these same sensations in his future readers. In adulthood, however, the magic of words seems to have disappeared. Those unfinished stories of youth are growing old and slowly dying.

All those stories that I did not write in my youth have aged and died a little – like me – some outside me, and some within.

However, there were some promising stories that I looked at from time to time, to test their health, as it were. I raged against their ageing as I raged against mine. I have piles of dusty files with several opening chapters written between long gaps. All they seem to me now are mute reminders that both my imagination and handwriting have deteriorated over years. Among that collection of trash are also some luckless plots that took birth, developed, and died of suffocation in my mind even before they saw ink and paper.

What I am about to write is a requiem for just such a tale. (TTP 3-4)

This last line could be seen as an anticipation of one of the last images of the novel, which will be mentioned below. During the narration we can find several references to the impossibility of expressing properly in words the complexity of human nature and life. When Mr Joshi finds out about T-ta’s painful past in the widows’ house he feels paralysed. He continues to think about the three widows waiting for their bhau Shashtiballabh to come back from school: he would like to depict their sorrow and the innocence of that small boy. But this task appears impossible: every time the image of the old lustful man that Shashtiballabh had become insinuates itself into Mr Joshi’s mind. Nothing can be interpreted in a simplistic way: for any fact, for any behaviour there could be multiple reasons. Every person is a multi-faceted entity, which must be considered from several points of view. Moreover, every story is filtered through the lenses of the narrator and of the listener (or reader) and this awareness makes any univocal meaning impossible.

On the last page of the novel we find a decisive metaphorical reference to a tale, prematurely dead, to which the narrator is dedicating his requiem. During the funeral ceremony of a relative, Mr Joshi is chatting with a young poet on the bank of a river. A crow is pecking at ‘something’ on the surface of the water:

‘What are you watching there, sir?’ he asked. ‘It looks like some dead child’s body. I’m sure it is someone’s illegitimate child,’ he added in a disgusted tone.

I looked carefully then, and he was right. The crow was feasting on a dead foetus. Things blurred before me and the cawing of the crow sounded, to me, like someone calling: ‘T’ta.’

I couldn’t tear my gaze away: The dead child’s bloated body bobbing on the waves appeared to be asleep. A crow was singing it a lullaby and the lullaby had just two syllables: Kay-ne. Kay-ne. No-thing. No-thing. (TTP 138)

Mr Joshi cannot explain to the poet that he is staring at the substance of T-ta’s life, whose story could not be told. He is staring at it ‘as a child looks at his hand – without disgust or understanding – when he has smeared it with his own shit’ (TTP 139).

3. Kathgulab by Mridula Garg: writing to express female creative power

The novel is structured in five chapters depicting five different characters: Smita, Marianne, Narmada, Aseema and Vipin. Each of them recounts her/his individual experiences and traumas, but at the same time presents a different point of view on other characters’ stories. I will focus on Marianne, the second character introduced by the author. She is an American sociologist, with a lively, artistic flair. As a child she suffered because of her selfish mother, who only cared about her appearance and money, so she married Irving Whitman, an aspiring novelist without any pragmatic interest. He asks her to help in his research in order to find materials for his ‘perfect building’, his great novel. He changes his mind continually, but in the end he finds a suitable subject: stories of women who migrated from Europe to America at different moments in history. After being persuaded by her husband to have an abortion, Marianne dedicates all her energies to this new project. She hands over to her husband the stories of four women, with the aim of helping him in the creation of a novel, which will be considered the result of their joint consciousness. However, when the novel is published with the title Women of the Earth, there is no recognition for Marianne’s work. Her husband has taken away first her flesh and blood child and now her spiritual child. Marianne divorces and gradually tries to forget her hatred towards men. She remarries this time a more practical man with the aim of having three children. Unfortunately, after several miscarriages and analysis, she has to abandon her dream, and decides to adopt a child. Time goes by as legal procedures are completed, but finally a little girl is about to arrive in Marianne’s house. Only at this moment does her husband reveal his real thoughts: he does not like little children, he already has two from his previous marriage and has no desire to repeat the experience. After this second divorce Marianne abandons the idea of motherhood as defined by tradition and frees her creative energy by writing novels.

As Anne Castaing points out, one of the fundamental themes of Mridula Garg’s novel is the unresolved ideal of parenthood and the deconstruction of conventional female and male roles. Even though the feminine identity is usually associated with motherhood, none of the main characters manages to conceive a child: Smita and Marianne experience the pain of abortion, Narmada dedicates her whole life to raising someone else’s children and Aseema does not feel any desire for pregnancy until her menopause. Almost all the mothers that we encounter in the text are far from being positive figures devoted to their children: there is Namita, Smita’s sister,

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11 Mridula Garg was born in Calcutta in 1938. After graduating she taught Economics in Delhi University for three years. During the 1980s she wrote a fortnightly column in a Calcutta magazine, Ravivar, and more recently, from 2003 to 2010, she collaborated with India Today. Her first short story, Rukavat, was published in Sarika magazine in 1971 and was followed by many others (a collection in two volumes of more than 80 short stories, Sangati-Visangati, was published in 2004), by three dramas and three collections of essays. Her first novel, Uske Hisse ki Dhoop was published in 1975 and caused quite a stir. It is in fact considered the first text in Hindi literature to call into question the sanctity of both arranged and love marriages, leading in a natural way to sexually uninhibited behaviours. Her principal novels include Chittakobra (1979; which led to her arrest on charges of obscenity), Anitya (1980), Main aur Main (1984) and Miljul Man (2009), for which she won the Sahitya Akademi award in 2013.

who spends very little time with her children and has a harsh attitude towards everybody; and
Marianne’s mother, who does not care about human relations, but only about appearance and
money. While Smita and Aseema try to obviate their suffering through a life in close contact
with nature and of social commitment, Marianne presents a different way to express female
creative power: this is writing. After her first marriage, while writing the journals about emigrant
women, she has a special experience, which we can read in the dialogue below with her
husband:

‘This, my dear Marianne, is the difference between academic and creative writing,’ said
he. ‘We writers erect a big, perfect structure with our imagination but the slightest puff of
ill wind can raze it to the ground. Isn’t it a wondrous thing, this imaginary structure? We
lay brick upon brick when there is not a brick in sight. The plan, the design, the materials
… all imaginary. Incredibly light and evanescent, but once the bricks have been cemented
and the structure stands, nothing can bring it down until the Day of Judgement. The truth is
revealed to you in an instant of blinding insight. If you lose your concentration and the
wrong door swings open, the flame is extinguished leaving only the inky darkness of soot
behind.’ For a split second Marianne thought that Irving was talking about her. He had
homed right in. This is exactly what had happened when she wrote the diaries of Ruth,
Roxanne, Elena and Susan. The door of the cage had opened on its own. Freed from the
constraints of facts, she soared lightly with the wind. With a snap of her fingers, she had
fashioned bricks out of nothing and created a castle which was whole. This was her home,
personal and intimate, which she owned in entirety.\(^{13}\)

The fictional nature of literature is here wonderfully explained: a writer does not deal with
pragmatic reality, he creates his own imaginary castle. There is no objective truth, but
imagination and personal interpretations of experiences and feelings. This idea is strengthened
by the very structure of the novel. In fact the five life stories are not simply juxtaposed but
intertwined, and they propose alternative points of view on other characters’ stories.
Furthermore, in each chapter a first person and third person narrator alternate, creating a
fascinating game of perspectives. It seems that, for each story, the initial dimension of self-
referential narrative has to be transcended in order to put some distance between the events
(especially traumatic events)\(^{14}\) and the characters. This complex structure highlights the
importance of looking at any episode from several points of view, as there are no plain facts, but
partial and subjective versions of the story.

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Subsequent references to this novel will be identified with initials CG. The original Hindi text used here for analysis

\(^{14}\) We are reminded of the two abuses suffered by Smita: the first one presumably committed by her jija (Garg
2013: 19-24) and the second one by her American husband (Garg 2013: 49-55). Both of them are narrated by a third
person narrator, as if similar traumatic experiences could not be confessed in the first person.

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As mentioned previously, Irving uses Marianne’s journals about emigrant women in the USA and publishes *Women of the Earth* under his own name, without even acknowledging his wife’s contribution. This novel is defined as Marianne’s stolen spiritual child: through this first image the writing process is associated with pregnancy, with the act of giving birth. Actually, Marianne will not try to write again until the end of her second marriage. Indeed, after several miscarriages and an unsuccessful attempt at adoption, she decides to seek personal realisation in writing her new, recognised novels. Through writing she can therefore free her female creative power. As Mridula Garg stated in an interview, ‘There is no such thing as barren women. Any woman willing to nurture any one is a mother.’\(^\text{15}\) In this case it seems that Marianne has gone beyond nurturing human beings; she can experience an alternative form of motherhood through her art. This chapter is not only a celebration of the creative power of writing, but also an indictment of the male literary establishment. Marianne’s husband is not the only writer to steal a woman’s creative work; great names in the history of literature did the same to their wives (D.H. Lawrence and Scott Fitzgerald are explicitly mentioned within the novel as examples of this practice). Moreover, the majority of critics consider women to be essentially pragmatic, incapable of ‘abstract thought and historical sense’, as if there was not too much to expect from them (CG 84). Female voices are still subjugated by men and it is difficult to find space for women in a literary tradition dominated by patriarchy.

4. *Ek Naukrani ki Diary* by Krishna Baldev Vaid:\(^\text{16}\) writing to understand life and feelings

Shanti is a young maidservant who has had to interrupt her studies to start working and contributing to support her family. After her father’s death, she lives with her mother and her sister Paro, who has had the courage to leave her drunken and violent husband. Her brother Kundan is also addicted to alcohol, and on many occasions he comes home to steal from his mother. Shanti works in several houses, but she develops a special relationship with two of her employers, the *akhbar-wala* (Newspaper Saab) and Mrs Varma. They both treat her with respect and do not try to give her leftovers or hand-me-down clothes: for them she is not just a maidservant but a person. Mrs Varma has suggested that she should begin writing about her experiences and thoughts: the novel is, in fact, created from the diary that Shanti is keeping. Shanti writes about her daily routine, her dreams and her fears; in a short time the diary becomes


\(^{16}\) Krishna Baldev Vaid was born in 1927 in Dinga (now Pakistan). He studied at the University of Punjab and completed his education at Harvard University with a PhD in English literature. He published several texts both in Hindi and in English, novels, collections of short stories, dramas and criticism. He translated texts by Beckett, Racine and Lewis Carroll into Hindi. His first novel, *Uska Bachpan* (1957), is now considered a classic and was translated by the author himself into English with the title *Steps in Darkness*. It is a realistic novel, dealing with Partition, which brought Vaid immediate success. Despite this, the author soon decided to abandon the path of realism, considering it inadequate in giving a voice to his imagination. Vaid’s subsequent novels were, in fact, characterised by a desire for experimentation, transgression and by harsh irony. Among his most recent novels are *Bimal Urf Jayen to Jayen Kahan* (1974), *Guzra Hua Zamana* (1981), *Doosra Na Koi* (1978), *Kala Kolaj* (1989), *Lila* (1993), *Nar Nari* (1996) and *Mayalok* (1999).


an instrument by which she analyses herself and her world. In the second part of the novel Shanti leaves all her other jobs and moves to the home of Newspaper Saab and Mrs Varma (who have started living together). Unfortunately, after a few days she begins to worry about the choice she has made. Now she can sleep on a sofa and use a proper bathroom, but what will happen if she makes a mistake? One morning Shanti reads a terrible piece of news: an elderly couple has been killed nearby and their young maidservant has been accused of the murder. Shanti is upset. Mrs Varma and the Saab also seem to behave in a strange way. The girl hears her mistress wondering if Shanti suspects the maidservant and if she knows her. So not even Mrs Varma is free from prejudice. The following morning Shanti goes back home, leaving only a small note. She does not know exactly what she is feeling, but she can no longer remain in that house.

At first glance *Ek Naukrani ki Diary* could appear to be a ‘simply narrated realistic story’. Actually, as Sagaree Sengupta, who translated the novel into English, points out, it should be considered as complex as other texts by Vaid.\(^{17}\) Within this fictional diary, in fact, the reader will not only find out about Shanti’s daily routine, but will set out on a kind of journey through her inner world. She relates her dreams and aspirations, her fears and her doubts. Moreover, a fundamental element of the novel is the reflection on the meaning and the effects of writing. As the text proceeds, Shanti develops an increasing awareness of her ambivalent relationship with the diary. Sometimes she feels that she is just wasting her time, that nothing good will come from filling so many notebooks, but she cannot stop writing. The diary allows her to reflect on a number of subjects, to find relief from troubles and also to concentrate on her own body and on its sensations. Writing is like ‘taking all your clothes off. Not just your clothes, but your skin. Not just your skin, but the skin off your thoughts too.’\(^{18}\) She is a young woman, with contradictory feelings. On one hand, she feels irritated at any man’s lustful glance, but, on the other, she wishes to have her first sexual experience. Sometimes she feels that her body is on fire and touches on the secret pleasures that she is living in her dreams. However, she wants to avoid the experiences her mother and her sister had after marriage. Both their husbands were drunken, unemployed and violent; this is the reason why she keeps repeating, ‘I’ll never marry, I’ll never have children’. Nevertheless, she cannot silence the impulses of her body and wonders what the future will bring to her. In particular, writing becomes a fundamental support after the shocking episode of a girl’s suicide. Jharna was the eldest daughter of a Bengali family where Shanti used to work. She had a love affair with a Muslim boy, but her family firmly opposed it. After a clandestine abortion, the girl hanged herself in her room. A couple of days later newspapers reported the suicide of her boyfriend. The Bengali home was overwhelmed by sorrow and, in her diary, Shanti continued to wonder what had really happened in Jharna’s heart. The girl knows

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\(^{18}\) Krishna Baldev Vaid, *The Diary of a Maidservant - Ek Naukrani ki Diary* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007) 154. Subsequent references to this novel will be identified with initials DM. The present analysis is based on the original Hindi text, Krishna Baldev Vaid, *Ek Naukrani ki Diary* (Delhi: Rajpal, 2014).
that writing is a unique instrument enabling her to have a better understanding of her experiences and deepest feelings, a way to communicate with her own heart.

Writing here feels like talking to myself. It seems things have been sorting themselves out since I began to write in here. For instance, there are some things that I can write only here. And I can’t write even those things down fully – it’s as if there are parts of those things that remain buried inside me, or somewhere else. But these are such things that I never even feel like talking about them with anyone else. They’re not even my private thoughts. They’re something else entirely, and don’t come from my mind. Actually, they’re things that you understand only from writing about them. (DM 138)

During a meeting with the writer Geetanjali Shree, she dealt precisely with this issue. In today’s world, human life is too complex to be properly and completely understood. In Shree’s opinion we can only bear witness to what we experience: it seems that something is in the air and we know that we have to recount it, but how? In Vaid’s text the sense of urgency of writing is compared even to a kind of possession:

I write down whatever comes to me. Sometimes I feel I’m not the one who writes, that the writing gets done by itself. Just like certain words escape your lips on their own. Just like a goddess or a ghost suddenly possesses some people. Just like some women fall into trance. Just like some crazy people go on talking to themselves for no reason. (DM 69)

5. Conclusion

The perspectives on the writing process which emerge from the above novels are heterogeneous and may even appear contradictory. If Joshi’s text conveys a sense of disillusion and scepticism about the potential of writing, both Garg and Vaid propose a more optimistic view. In Garg’s Kathgulab writing is a powerful instrument for self-realisation, while in Vaid’s novel it becomes an essential device to better understand one’s own inner and outer world. In the recent Hindi literary scene there are further novels characterised by self-reflexivity. Kalikatha: Via Bypass by Alka Saraogi or Hamara Shahar Us Baras by Geetanjali Shree are two of the most noteworthy examples. Nevertheless, in these texts one more ingredient has to be considered, that is the presence of history. On one hand both the novels can be read as national allegories, meaning stories of ordinary people that become representative of the state of the Indian nation. On the other, they imply a reflection on the fictional nature of official historiographic accounts.19 For these reasons, the two novels may represent a fruitful avenue for further investigation.

Despite the differences I have identified in the three novels which I have analysed, they share metafictional elements. Paying explicit attention to the writing process foregrounds the fictional nature of literature and of its projected worlds. These authors are aware of the complexity of the contemporary world and of the different kinds of fictional realities that we all experience in our


daily lives. Joshi, Garg and Vaid perceive the impossibility of representing a monolithic reality or indisputable truth; they can only offer their personal view of life and of literature. All things considered, I identify a possible postmodern clue in this self-reflexive dimension. If we compare these texts to famous postmodern novels – such as those of Borges, Calvino or Nabokov – their metafictional experimentation is undoubtedly less radical and does not affect the perception of the story. However, as Wladimir Krysinski states, metafiction should not be considered as ‘a homogeneous mono referential discourse arising out of a limited series of problems linked to the narrative or novelistic process. Metafiction is rather a polyvalent problematisation of the critical, reflexive, analytical, or playful perspective of that which is narrated reflected upon itself’.20

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Works Cited


From Tramp to Traveller: V. S. Naipaul Mirrors Immigrant Experiences in *In a Free State*

Nivedita Misra

Abstract

There is a scene in ‘One out of Many’ in *In A Free State* where Santosh, a character from the foothills of Himalaya, looks at himself in the mirror and realises that he is an individual. He takes the step of breaking away from his employer and seeks his own identity in the big city of Washington DC. What does the mirror stand for in the the scene? Is the mirror symptomatic of colonial subservience, or economic servility, or caste demarcations that he must transcend to achieve individuality? Or is the mirror the medium to bridge the gaps between tradition and modernity, community and individuality, faith and rationality? Ironically, Lewis Carroll uses the mirror in *Through the Looking Glass* to invert the everyday world and reflect on reality. The article compares the text to Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass* in a bid to read Naipaul’s mirroring of immigrant experiences by presenting various personas from and in different parts of the world. Their immigrant experiences differ in specifics but all of them sense alienation from their environment and their communities. The same is reflected in the narrator’s experiences in the Prologue and the Epilogue with the tramp and the traveller being eternally alienated from their fellow travellers.

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V. S. Naipaul’s early novels were all based in the Caribbean. He then expanded his oeuvre to writing travel narratives about Trinidad and India. *In a Free State* marks a break and a return to Naipaul’s earlier fictional writings. He returns to fiction with a short story format, akin to *Miguel Street*, except that the stories are no longer bound by a time or a place or a region. The three narratives about immigrant experiences, an Indian in America, a Caribbean in England, and two English people in Africa, are framed in by a narrator’s own travels across the Mediterranean from Piraeus to Alexandria and by a trip to the pyramids in Egypt. However, *In a Free State* also marks a break from the form of the novel because Naipaul insists on piecing together separate pieces as a whole. Naipaul recounts that in 1971, Diana Athill wanted to publish the African novella, ‘In a Free State,’ leaving out the other pieces because it was a complete story by itself.¹ However, Naipaul insisted that there was to be no publication unless all the pieces were published simultaneously as a sequence because he felt that the other pieces defined the novella.

There is an extended passage in *The Enigma of Arrival* about ‘In a Free State,’ which its narrator says he was writing at the time of his arrival in Wiltshire.² In the passage, the narrator writes that he was reworking the theme of a traveller disembarking and entering a new space and

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² Though *The Enigma of Arrival* is titled a novel, critics including Dooley, John Thieme, Rob Nixon, Vijay Mishra and Timothy Weiss have read it as a semi-autobiographical text.
returning to the shore only to find that the ship had already left. He has nowhere to go. Naipaul attempts to capture such colonial anxieties across different nation states through different geographical settings of the stories and providing different lineages and legacies to his characters in *In a Free State*. Peter Kalliney argues for the crucial role that BBC Caribbean Voices programme and the Bloomsbury group played in providing Naipaul, Selvon, Braithwaite, and Lamming a literary atmosphere with easier access to a reading, writing and publishing audience. This literary exchange allowed ‘modernist tropes of urban alienation [to be] … readily adapted to representations of migrants suffering racism, deracination, and poverty.’

Though such a consideration tends to read all West Indian literature of the time as immigrant literature, it also allows Naipaul’s personal anxieties as an immigrant in England to be read into his writing. The sense of dislocation that Naipaul must have felt growing up in a Hindu society in the West Indies would have doubled as he travelled to England.

Each of the five pieces explores the human psyche and how migration makes unnatural demands on the person. The themes in *In a Free State* pertain to being and becoming, who is free or not, and whether a nation state can be a free State or not. Equally, the text explores the theme of immigration in postmodern England at the end of the Second World War and colonialism. Gillian Dooley argues that the text shows ‘Naipaul’s quest for the correct form’ pointing out that the ‘themes in this novel include the image of the journey, the many facets of the idea of freedom, and the accommodat[ion] of a variety of subject positions.’

Timothy Weiss argues that while in the early novels of Naipaul, journeys or voyages ‘signify openness, discovery, growth, potentialities in general, … *In a Free State* recounts journeys of loss, waste, absurdity, humiliation, brutality.’ Naipaul recognises that immigration, whether voluntary or involuntary, involves a renegotiation of one’s ties to family, race, class and/or nation such as in the case of Santosh and his ‘new’ relationships with Priya and the ‘hubshi’ woman. It also involves renegotiating the relations that one had in the ‘home’ country as in the case of the narrator’s relationship with his brother in the second tale. However, the English expatriates in the third tale do not renegotiate the new environment and this proves tragic. Reading the five pieces together is as if Naipaul is presenting various facets of the immigrant experience in a hall of mirrors where each image is individual and complete yet displaces all previous images, constantly defining and re-defining the self.

This article uses the image of a mirror, which is first used in ‘One Out of Many’, to read the ‘sequence’ of narratives as variations upon the theme of immigrant experience. The gap between an object and its image or enantiomorph is similar to the gap between the narrator and his writing. One cannot exist without the other and the writing/mirror hides/shows as much as it absorbs/reflects. One of the lasting images of the use of mirror in English literature is Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass* which details the journey of Alice through an inverted nonsensical world. *Through the Looking Glass* has been read as children’s literature and as

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nonsense literature. The popularity of the nursery rhymes and characters playing chess, hide and seek, cards ensure the recall value of the text. Supplanting the child with an immigrant, Naipaul is able to make sense of the immigrant’s expectations from a parent and a host country. Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*, much like *In a Free State*, can be read as a challenge to the novel of social manners with its well-ordered plots and neat endings with non-confirmative elements being shipped away or transformed and brought within acceptable social norms and everybody ‘living happily ever after’. The purpose of this comparison is not to imply that Naipaul uses it as a model for his own writing but to see the variation in the use of a familiar trope. The references from Carroll’s text comment on the appropriateness of the lines to the five sections of *In a Free State*. The significance of this reading lies in recognising subtle patterns of influence such that new meanings may be given to Naipaul’s text. It also enables us to read Lewis Carroll’s text as a text about the unsettling nature of the experience of displacement. By articulating a response to their new environment, Naipaul’s protagonists renegotiate and ‘theorise’ about the place that they are from, creating a critical distance between their previous selves and their present state, destabilising unified subjectivity both at the point of departure and arrival. My interest is to see how Naipaul uses the trope of the mirror to reflect an immigrant’s anxieties about ‘home’ that, paradoxically, had either been left behind or is deferred to the future but never realised in the present.

“So I wasn't dreaming, after all, unless – unless we're all part of the same dream”

In the above lines, Alice, after crossing over to the other side of the mirror, is ruminating if her experiences are a dream. The text, *In a Free State*, begins with a Prologue with the narrator travelling on a ship from Piraeus to Alexandria. The location of the narrative’s beginning is important because it is in international waters, away from strict societal strictures, and the focus is a Tramp who defies these very structures by his non-conformity. The Tramp is not particularly English but as Naipaul writes, he could be an English romantic, wanderer or a writer. While the Tramp travels cabin class, like the narrator, he is a misfit in society because he wears motley unwashed dress and eats and behaves in a manner that agitates the others, ranging from Lebanese business travellers to American students. Like one of the characters in Carroll’s tale, the tramp is an idiosyncratic character who dines alone and tears up his magazine in a fit of anger to gain attention and then runs away. He is completely at odds with himself: ‘He looked for company but needed solitude; he looked for attention, and at the same time wanted not to be noticed.’ The Lebanese sellers of wares indulge in a cat and mouse game where they bully the Tramp into fleeing the dining room and hiding in the toilets. The Tramp triumphs by blocking the Lebanese out of their cabin. The Tramp proclaims, ‘I think of myself as a citizen of the world (IFS 11).’ The declaration is significant because the world undivided by barriers of class, race and nations does not exist. It is equally ironical that the Tramp should feel threatened by perpetrators

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7 V.S. Naipaul, *In a Free State* (London: Deutsch, 1971) 13. Further references to this text will be included in parentheses in the text preceded by IFS.

of these barriers. Hence, the ‘citizen of the world’, rather than being a free individual, is seen as a threat to freedom by such non-compliance. He betrays an inability to accommodate or protect. The narrator never makes this clear but the theme of freedom continues in the next narrative with the social misfit getting transformed into a colonial misfit.

**Humpty-Dumpty: ‘When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less’ (TLG Chapter VI)**

In ‘One out of Many’, Santosh is a lower class Indian immigrant who achieves his American dream but feels hollow in his success. The narrator speaks in a displaced narrative of ‘both here and in India’ (IFS 25). Santosh has a previous history of migration from the hills to Bombay, leaving his wife and children, in search of employment and money. In Bombay, he lives a fairly contented life sharing camaraderie within his own community of footpath dwellers. The physical dislocation from his village to the city is a back-story when we first meet him working for a bureaucrat in Bombay. It is the second more comic and dramatic transition that sets the story in action. His boss is given a transfer to Washington DC and the servant Santosh accompanies him. The plane journey is a grand comedy of errors with Santosh travelling with his bundle of clothes and spitting betel juice all over the airplane alley and toilet. The claustrophobic journey in the plane is symptomatic of his life ahead in a cupboard-like space in his boss’s apartment.

His claustrophobic world collapses when he struggles through the apartment and the even more claustrophobic elevator before he reaches the green circle where he sees hubshi.8 Americans and the dancers with men wearing saffron robes and girls in saris chanting Sanskrit words in praise of Lord Krishna (IFS 34).9 Yet, he feels he has nowhere to go because there is no community or friends awaiting him. He realises that people are in communities while he is alone. Santosh finds America invigorating only because its race inequalities do not touch him. However, the feelings of loneliness become more and more exaggerated as he is seduced by the Afro-American woman. He runs away from the employer, starts life afresh as a cook and begins to earn ‘real money’. However, his fear of the unknown and of the past catching up makes him unstable and neurotic. In a world where he is free to move around, he wilfully locks himself in his room. He is unable to talk with his employer on equal terms and soon realises that he has to marry the African maid to gain his green card and legitimately live in America.

The desire to see the world and _not to return_ remains a very important aspect of immigration. Somehow, a return is mired in loss, regret and failure and is never an option for the immigrant. Naipaul obliquely comments on the need to marry to get a green card. There are many layers to Santosh’s American dream. In the first instance, Santosh never had the American dream, yet he is sucked into it unconsciously. The narrator allows the transition to be so smooth that the reader never realises when Santosh begins having the American dream. However, the ring of hollowness around Santosh’s success (‘All that my freedom has brought me is the knowledge

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8 A reference to Afro-Americans. In Santosh’s mind, the _hubshi_ (black) and the Americans (whites) are two separate entities, even though later, he marries a hubshi to acquire the green card.

9 The latter are probably affiliated to ISKCON, the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, which is a Hindu religious organisation, often seen to propagate their religious ideals on the streets through the use of a van, pamphlets, music and dancing.
that I have a face and have a body, that I must feed this body and clothe this body for a certain number of years. Then it will be over’ (IFS 61)) and his loneliness (‘In this city I was alone and it didn’t matter what I did’ (IFS 60)) defuses the American dream with America being the great melting pot. Santosh seeks the company of fellow men such as Priya but fails to keep up the pretence of equality. He does get his way by getting a clever pay hike but money and success do not earn him camaraderie and friendship.

Santosh is slowly sucked into a time capsule where events are fast paced and the reader is made to forget if Santosh’s success came in one year or a couple or ten or twenty years. His unnamed employer, the black woman and Priya all understand him better than himself. His confessions to them come too late exposing his ineptitude at triumphing over the world. What endears Santosh to the readers is that he is not a trickster or a social climber. His aspirations are clothed in understatements of his ability to negotiate. The only incident that stands out is his looking into the mirror and finding an image of himself that he does not recognise but desires so deeply that he acquires it. The mirror becomes a symbol of Santosh’s aspirations for finding money, status and stability in life. Inversely, it makes him aware of his own vulnerability and inability to survive by himself. The motif of seeing – the unnamed employer sees efficiency, Priya sees potential, and the hubshi woman finds him attractive – is offset with what Santosh feels – failure. Yet, paradoxically, Santosh is narrating his own story of ‘accomplishments.’ The green card is an ambitious undertaking for the rather uneducated unassuming Santosh. Just as Humpty-Dumpty argues, in the quotation from Through the Looking Glass above that the word means only what he wants it to mean, neither more nor less, this story is reflective of the narrator’s desire that people read his life for what he wishes it to mean, neither more nor less.

The loss of control not only over words but their meaning is compounded in the next story. While Santosh sees himself and then is unable to un-see himself, the narrator of the next story is unable to recognise the image he sees in his mirror. The narrator plays upon ‘real’ and ‘un-real’ as benchmarks of living, unable to realise whether he is dreaming or not. Similar to Humpty-Dumpty’s loss of control over his fate, Naipaul presents a narrator who loses control over his words and his fate.

Jabberwocky: ‘It seems very pretty but it’s rather hard to understand’ (TLG, Chapter I)

In ‘Tell Me Who to Kill’, the unnamed narrator manages to convey the unreality of living on the islands compared to the realities of living in London. The un-real nature of living is highlighted by the narrator who says that there was never a dream, never an ambition to pursue and reach somewhere on the island. His home is isolated from the rest of their community, and in his memory, has no specifics of place or time attached to it. The predominant theme in the early part of his narrative is that the narrator feels he had ‘no life’ (IFS 67). While he feels he had no life on the island, he knows he has thrown away life in England. The mirror effect is more dominant here than in the other narratives. The contrast between what he sees is played against an almost metaphysical awareness of life. His life in London is by no means easier than on the island. At both places, he toils hard for his money while his brother wastes away his life presumably on educating himself: ‘The ambition is like shame, and the shame is like a secret, and it is always hurting’ (IFS 71). This is similar to Santosh and his fear of his success. The younger brother plays with the expectations of the narrator. While the narrator feels that if he had the opportunity
he would have succeeded in the ‘real’ world with proper education, the younger brother falls through not doing well either at studies or in business.

The hollowness of the narrator’s life accompanied by an investment in an ambition for his brother burn him out. When his younger brother, whom he sponsors, stops sending letters to him, he embarks on a journey to England. However, he is crushed by poverty, racism, indifference and betrayal by the brother. Unlike Santosh, the narrator does not respond to his surroundings. He lives in his own world even while working at the cigarette factory and later opens a food stall in England. His hard earned money fritters away leaving him embittered with no escape: ‘When you find out who your enemy is, you must kill him before he kill you’ (IFS 83). He feels that the whites are his enemies yet cannot see how because the ambition is also a blessing given by the same culture. Yet, in the last measure, his brother is getting married to a white woman, a lasting betrayal, while he is struggling to keep himself out of jail.

This story is a twice-displaced narrative about living in the Caribbean because the narrator feels that ‘real’ life was elsewhere, either at the point of the East Indians’ original point of travel in India or at his point of destination in England. Life on the island carried a feeling of transition, a movement that is yet to reach its final destination. There is also an autobiographical element here. Naipaul writes in ‘Reading and Writing’, ‘For five months I was given shelter in a dark Paddington basement by an older cousin, a respecter of my ambition, himself very poor, studying law and working in a cigarette factory.’ This is Naipaul’s own description of his early days of struggle in London. It is as if Naipaul was writing his own life story. Ironically, though, Naipaul does not write in the autobiographical mode here but chooses the consciousness of the unnamed narrator, the elder brother, on whom Dayo lives almost parasitically and marries a white woman.

Moreover, the piece is also autobiographical in Naipaul’s return to use of Trinidadian locutions (French 287). Naipaul’s position on his own immigrant status states he was rather unwilling to re-view himself, ‘Hysteria has been my reaction and a brutality dictated by a new awareness of myself as a whole human being and a determination, touched with fear, to remain what I was’ (An Area of Darkness 16). And, where he was. His initial anxiety to become a writer soon transformed itself into hysteria at losing the ground beneath his feet, literally. Hysteria begins to affect him only after success and achievement of his initial goals of leaving Trinidad at 18 and becoming a writer. Naipaul, at this time of his career, had been contemplating a move to America or Canada but eventually settles in Wiltshire in England for the next ten years.

The narrative, ‘Tell me who to kill’, works through a lot of poses, alternately confiding in and distancing the reader. While on one level, the unnamed narrator is telling his tale, on another level, he does not possess the ability to critically distance himself from the tale he is telling. It is similar to Alice trying to figure out her own experience and at pretending to understand the nonsense poem, ‘Jabberwocky’, written in mirror writing. Unlike Santosh, the unnamed narrator fails to tell his story cohesively, falling into reveries of unclear happenings. The story is interesting, not in questioning the boundaries of freedom like the first tale, but in questioning the boundaries of expression. Santosh had closed his mind to new learning: ‘I have closed my mind


From Tramp to Traveller: V.S. Naipaul Mirrors Immigrant Experiences in In a Free State. Nivedita Misra. Transnational Literature Vol. 9 no. 2, May 2016.
and heart to the English language ... I do not want to understand or learn any more’ (IFS 61). The unnamed narrator of the second tale closes his mind and heart to English people, while questioning who were his enemies.

Both Santosh and the unnamed narrator question the gap between words and feelings, between success and accomplishment, between aspirations and failed goals. While Santosh has a comfortable life, he fails to make a transition to a new personality knowing that he has become the image he saw in the mirror. He knows that his green coat is oversized and hangs over him more as a burden than fit attire. In the second narrative, the unnamed narrator fails to make eye contact with his image and is locked in a world where conflicting images appear to overshadow the sequence of events leading to a negative image, poor self-esteem and poor rapport with his acquaintances.

The Walrus and the Carpenter: ‘Well! They were both very unpleasant characters’ (TLG Chapter IV)

In the third narrative, much like Alice’s suspended moral judgment in *Through the Looking Glass*, Naipaul inverses the roles of the travellers from the colonised to the colonisers. Just as Alice passes through the mirror to the inverted world, Naipaul writes from the other side of the mirror about the coloniser’s experience of the colony. The transition is also made from the autobiographical mode to the omniscient narrator who is always hidden and never scrutinised directly within the narrative. This also ensures that the narrative control is never lost.

‘In a Free State’ is about Bobby and Linda’s journey through the outback in a fictitious African country. The story explores various facets of violence in imposition of State and nationhood upon ‘free’ people whose cultures have not self-generated these concepts. It leads to internal unrest within these ‘new’ nation states since various systems co-exist and compete for power. A battle for supremacy breaks out between the African President and the African King while Bobby and Linda take the road back from the capital to a Collectorate in the South. According to Naipaul, the journey replicates the journey ‘from Kampala in Uganda to Nairobi in Kenya’. The conflation of various independent African nation states into a single state suggests Naipaul’s design of defining the colonisers’ experience without particulars. However, it also presents Africa as a single state with no distinctions, exposing Naipaul to the charge of writing a deeply orientalist African novel.

Czajka in his essay outlines the features of the African Orient that renders Africa a category lower than its Asian counterpart as defined by Edward Said. Czajka mentions striking differences in the representations of Africa and Asia that include:

- the notion that Africa lacks all evolution and culture, while Asia has actually de-evolved from a previous state of cultural greatness (albeit one still inferior to that of the Occident);
- interest in the related cognitive under-development and childishness of the African; and,
- the obsession with the ‘under-evolved’ African body (133).

In Naipaul’s text, we see the presentation of this African orient in Bobby and Linda’s brief

\[\text{11 Naipaul, Preface viii.}\]
interactions with the Africans (after all, there can be no meaningful dialogue with them).

There are three public spaces that are in focus in the text: the Bar in New Shropshire, the Hunting Lodge and the Colonel’s Resort. In the Bar in New Shropshire, the whites appear in ‘native’ shirts woven in Holland in bright colours while the blacks wear suits. The young Zulu African leads Bobby on and then spits on his face. The pattern is repeated with the Africans spurning Bobby’s offers whether it is at the Colonel’s resort or when he finally reaches the collectorate. At the Hunting Lodge, Bobby and Linda meet with the American ‘free bird’ in Africa. It is an interesting meeting because the American can claim to be not part of the colonial regime yet enjoy all its benefits including proximity to Linda. On their way out, Bobby gives a lift to an African who then asks another African to board the car and then begins to direct Bobby to a place. Bobby loses patience and drops them off at an edge in the rain – the exploiter and exploited borderline is close to breaking point. At the Colonel’s Resort, the Colonel repeatedly makes Peter say he is foolish. Peter, on the other hand, uses the Colonel’s resources for his own social advancement in his social sphere. There is a sense of the order passing from the British to the Africans. However, Africa is portrayed as a backdrop for the main protagonists’ journey and as a decor inside the public spaces.

Naipaul has been criticised more for the presentation of the Africans than the presentation of the expatriates. However, while the typical colonial explorer in Africa was characterised as white, heterosexual, middle-class man with woman either absent or as accompanying partner, Linda and Bobby are non-conformists and sexual deviants. In spite of being colonisers, they do not have the confidence or the ability to survive without the accompanying paraphernalia of the colonial mission. They rely upon voice, facial expressions and vanity to survive in the colonies. Even when, at the end of the story, Bobby contemplates firing his attendant, lack of English moral superiority and Christian values are highlighted. In each instance of interaction with the Africans, Linda and Bobby fail to make genuine contact or conversation. Gillian Dooley believes that Naipaul’s presentation of Bobby is ‘far more damning than Santosh’s Hindu-based racism or Dayo’s brother’s pathological confusion’. Since ‘the colonial state of mind is one that does not accept responsibility’, Naipaul condemns both the colonisers and the colonised. Instead of imbuing Bobby and Linda with the characteristics of the values expounded in ‘Our Universal Civilization’, Naipaul shows the colonisers as inept examples of whites obsessed with themselves. It is mentioned that Bobby had a meltdown in England and Africa is helping him to heal. Linda is looking for love while the Africans are trying to find their own voice. In the scene when Linda and Bobby go out walking by the Colonel’s Resort, they are faced with dogs. Much like the ganging up of the Africans against the whites, and the latter beating up Bobby upon his entry into the Collectorate, the dogs seem innocuous when they are separate. However, once they are confident in their numbers, Linda and Bobby literally have to run to save their lives. There is recognition that an immigrant is always more prone to an attack than a native because he/she is seen as an intruder, irrespective of who holds the political reins.

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12 Dooley 65.
13 Dooley 61.
‘Which Dreamt it?’

The Epilogue, much like Alice’s questioning in *Through the Looking Glass*, presents another transient travel experience, this time through a tourist town in Egypt. The Prologue and the Epilogue are mirror images of the narrator who doesn’t act in the first and intervenes in the second with no better results. The separation from the Lebanese, English, Germans and Italians that the writer had maintained in the Prologue is not so neat here. The overall tone of the ‘sequence’ is bewilderment. The narrator meets a Chinese circus troupe in Milan in Italy and then at Luxor in Egypt. The Chinese behave similarly in the two different geographical spaces. However, for the narrator, their gestures carry different meanings at the two places. While in Milan their pleasantries are a sign of their culture, in Egypt the very same pleasantries become insensitive displays in a self-obsessed world. The Chinese are no different to the Greek and Lebanese businessmen reading French and English newspapers because they fail to see the ‘distress of Egypt’ in little children competing to get sandwiches and apples from tourists. The mindless game between the waiter and the children affects the narrator who stops them. But he soon realises that there are too many people in the frame. The cat and mouse game between the waiter and the poor children is reminiscent of the one played between the Lebanese and the Tramp in the Prologue.

The various protagonists in the five pieces display different facets of the immigrant experience. The Tramp never overcomes the anxieties of a first time traveller. Santosh is an unwilling immigrant who sees continuity in travel. The narrator of ‘Tell me who to kill’ travels because he feels hollow in his own country. Bobby and Linda seek their own rehabilitation from failed relationships in Africa. The narrator of the Prologue, unlike Santosh and the unnamed narrator in the second story, holds back from action and responsibility. The narrator of the Epilogue, like Bobby and Linda who are ineffectual in a fast deteriorating colonial Africa, takes part to no avail. The narrator feels that perhaps his vision is flawed, ‘Perhaps that had been the only pure time, at the beginning, when the ancient artist, knowing no other land, had learned to look at his own and had seen it complete’ (IFS 255). Unlike the artist, the narrator’s vision discovers that nothing is pristine, that the immigrant is inevitably a latecomer, who must adjust to the inequities of the ‘new’ society because his ship has already left the shores and he can neither go on nor return.

Robert Young urges the need to stop the ‘othering’ of the other because as long as we have an Other, epistemological or otherwise, narratives are caught in the stream of definitions and categorisations.14 In a similar attempt, Naipaul uses the trope of the mirror to unsettle unified subjectivities. The five pieces exist ‘in a free state’ without a form containing them. It is their content that connects them in a ‘sequence about displacement’ that mirrors Naipaul’s search for a form that deconstructs fixed identities and decodes bearings of identity, place and traditions. In this respect, *In a Free State* is like Carroll’s text: it is often Alice who, like Naipaul’s narrators, is intervening in the perfectly structured and ordered world of the chess pieces in the inverted world.

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References


How to Write Home: (Un)Mapping the Politics of Place and Authorial Responsibility with Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*

Kelly Palmer

*When it comes to writers and writing, I use words like ‘onerous’ and ‘responsibility’ with a heavy heart and not a small degree of sadness.*

– Arundhati Roy

**Abstract**

Arundhati Roy’s 1997 Man Booker Prize-winning novel, *The God of Small Things*, was harshly criticised by Indian and international scholars alike for misrepresenting the cultural landscape of 1970s Kerala and greater India. Such criticisms deny Roy’s authority to represent Indian culture, and her right to speak of or accurately represent her birthplace. This essay draws from Roy’s first and only novel as a case study of place-based writing and its reception, then asks: can a responsibility to place or home ever be met in the genre of autoethnographic fiction? The first section of this essay surveys criticisms of Roy’s Kerala and reveals how transgressive place-based fiction can magnify negative stereotypes of a given culture. The second section investigates literature as a material artefact of place with value to sociology and cultural studies more broadly, thus situating the author as a social actor. Throughout, I reflect on my own autoethnographic writing practice, and devise questions about my personal onus to represent a fictionalised home that has the potential to (re)shape Southeast Queensland in the cultural imagination.

**A Place Called Home**

As a writer, I have assumed that the neighbourhoods of Southeast Queensland, where I learned to read and write, are mine to reproduce and twist into text on page, just as the region has yielded and moulded me. Southeast Queensland is the backdrop, the stage, and the pervasive presence in all my autofictions, and the characters resemble the locals: my neighbours, my co-workers, my family, me. Concurrently, there is a tug, like the pull of stitches, which reminds me that others are implicated culturally by how I represent the home we unequally share. Further, because I am privileged to have a voice within the context of the university – a voice that others may be unable to contest – I wonder whether a responsibility to place exists, and if so, whether this responsibility is loosened when the writing is principally fictional. To explore this dilemma, I turn my gaze outward and analyse the reception of Arundhati Roy’s 1997 Man Booker Prize-winner, *The God of Small Things*: a novel set in a fictional town in Kerala, which drew the attention of literary critics who read her work as autoethnography and evaluate her representations of the real Kerala and India.


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While Southeast Queensland does not share the same recent history of political turmoil and religious conflict as Kerala, both regions have memories and ongoing experiences of violent colonisation, the effects of which still oppress generations today. Of course, my writing may never see the same scrutiny that Roy has faced for *The God of Small Things*, and these two distinct places are not equally vulnerable to skewed representation, but in this comparison lies the question of responsibility to home in its multitudes of voices and histories. What, then, is the extent of a fiction writer’s responsibility in representing a place when it is bloodied, contested, and unequally shared among those who call place home? And can this responsibility to the place called home ever be met in the genre of autoethnographic fiction?

This essay analyses why literary critics are unsatisfied with the setting of *TGOST*, considering that the novel is a work of fiction. Extrapolating on such receptions, I consider possible consequences for my own fiction, a work that explores experiences of being a local in Southeast Queensland. I deduce that even fictional representations of place project directly at a real landscape, which then (re)shape place in the cultural imagination. I do not consider Roy’s novel emblematic or not emblematic of Keralan society, but instead refer to her novel’s setting as a highly personal, imagined projection of a real place, which has power in its fictionality. To understand why critics interpret setting as intimately linked with reality, I engage with pragmatic sociology’s progress on configuring the author as a social actor. Sociologists, humanist geographers, and theorists on place and belonging articulate fiction’s capacity to capture an essence of place of which few non-fiction genres are capable. Thus, place-based fiction becomes a highly subjective ethnography. One must then consider that a fiction of Kerala or of Southeast Queensland cannot remain self-contained – but inevitably forms a dialectic between identities of place beyond the text, and so becomes a representation of Indian or Australian society.

The Problem of Home

Much literary criticism of *TGOST* discounts the novel’s sex, class, and political discourses to argue that the setting, and indeed the novel itself, does not represent an authentic Kerala. Throughout such criticisms the onus is implicitly on Roy to write a particular version of Kerala that upholds particular ‘Indian’ values. The novel, though, undermines ideas of normative Indian sexuality and Indian political culture through its parallel storylines and characterisation, including incest between twins and a cross-caste affair between a Christian single mother and a communist labourer. Consequently, *TGOST* is seen as ‘powerful protest novel’ where ‘all sorts of boundaries,’ that is, boundaries between class and limits on sexuality, ‘are transgressed upon’. Because of these transgressions, the novel has been criticised internationally for failing to accurately represent the values and attitudes of Roy’s home state, Kerala. A.N. Dwivedi, echoing the concerns of other critics, argues that Roy ‘should have nurtured the social and cultural values of India,’ and labels such neglect as ‘a blunder’. Dwivedi does not specify what constitutes such ‘values,’ but based on his criticisms, seems to refer to nuclear family structures, heteronormative

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sexuality, and caste segregation, which stratify the political landscape of Kerala. R.S. Sharma agrees that ‘if [Roy] had any intention of writing a national allegory, she has failed’. Noteworthy here is that Roy’s novel set entirely within Kerala is read as a national text, suggesting that local and national identities ‘are categories which bleed into each other’. In excavating the novel for illustrations of the dominant culture, Dwivedi implies that ideology and landscape are not only co-dependent, but fixed to a static culture; transgressions are tantamount to lies.

Other critics argue that the novel is not unauthentic simply for being transgressive but is unauthentic because such transgressions are supposedly ‘Western’: an argument that establishes a binary of morals between India and the western world. Critics do not specify how an authentically Indian transgression might appear in fiction or otherwise, but they are adamant that TGOST’s transgressions are not that, so the novel cannot be realism. Sharada Iyer, who praises the novel’s setting for its ‘vivid scent’ and ‘colour’, maintains that the ‘story is about an Indian village … but the sensibility is urban, Westernised and modern’. Elleke Boehmer probes the novel’s references to ‘western cultural forms,’ including Elvis Presley, to establish that Roy has Westernised her work in attempt to make it ‘multiple, extreme, scented, sensual, [and] transgressive’. Boehmer further argues that TGOST is ‘[o]verdetermined in all its strangeness, abstracted from its local context, stereotyped and restereotyped’ and so has become ‘commodified and made safe for a western readership’. Inferring that Roy’s novel deliberately sacrifices an authentic ‘Indian’ sensibility in favour of a West-friendly rapport, Boehmer endorses Dwivedi’s assumption that ‘Roy has written her novel with the Western readership in mind’. According to Dwivedi, Roy trades authentic setting for commercial success, thus undermining the literary merit of the novel; while he concedes the accessibility of Roy’s text, he assigns to Roy the responsibility of representing a ‘true’ India. Dwivedi’s judgement is that Roy fails in this responsibility.

K.M. Pandey assents to a binary of transgressive/western/not real and cultivated/traditional/real while comparing Roy’s Kerala to Thomas Hardy’s fictional county of ‘Wessex’. Pandey disassociates Roy’s setting from Kerala in the same way that Hardy’s Wessex resembles, yet is not emblematic of, rural England. In doing so, Pandey implicitly identifies two Keralas: the fictional, textual Kerala, and the ‘real’ Kerala of his own lived and shared experience. Pandey quotes C.D. Narasimhaiah’s evaluation that Roy’s setting ‘isn’t

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5 Rob Garbutt, The Locals: Identity, Place and Belonging in Australia and Beyond. New York: Peter Lang, 2011 4-5
7 Iyer 137
9 Boehmer 67
10 Dwivedi 179
Kerala,’ but rather is ‘Roy’s fanciful picture, with remote resemblance to Kerala.’ 12 Because this distinction between two Keralas is built on the premise that Roy’s setting is fantastic, or even ‘dystopian,’ 13 the novel, and by extension, Roy, are not credited with any authority in representing her home. The fictionality of the setting – as the bedrock of the entire novel – is emphasised to the point that Roy’s having been born and raised in the setting of her novel, Kerala in the 1960s and 1970s, 14 does not legitimise the novel’s representations for these critics. As a result Roy’s status as a local writer too becomes destabilised. The fact that Roy can lose this status implies that it must be earned in the first place, and then actively maintained.

The transgressions of the text could reflect an authorial intrusion of anachronistic western sensibilities as well as reflect past and existing resistant cultures within Kerala and India broadly. Roy may style place as a westernised or transgressive India, but the two versions of reality do not have to cancel each other out. Sharma acknowledges that not all of novel’s transgressions are anachronistic, and observes:

Roy presents a negative picture of Indian life, dwelling with gusto on squalor and filthy habits she perceives around her. She exhibits the image of mother in an unfavourable light, includes incest in the story and attempts voyeurism … [M]ost of these things are part of today’s literary scene in India and some of them are imitations of Western trends. 15

Regardless of whether Roy ‘imitates’ western depictions of India, it seems the transgressive nature of text – which represents Kerala as politically unstable and sexually patriarchal – has been most commonly associated with the west, but that imitation does not in itself delegitimise TGOST as an authentic representation of Kerala. There is an obvious value judgment in Sharma’s assessment of characterisation in the novel, though he does illuminate a crucial point that India, at least in Western cinema and storytelling, is frequently represented as impoverished and turbulent.

Nilanjana Bardhan notes that Western depictions of an exoticised and unclean India risk inflating ‘the “third world” poverty stereotype of India … that is so often conflated with cultural worth.’ 16 In the case of TGOST, it is not a depiction of a ‘filthy’ landscape that skews the image of India, but rather it is the subjectively amoral conscience of Roy’s characters that blur an image of India as cultivated. This ‘cultivated India’ dialectically opposes that stereotype of squalor and despair, so is perhaps seen as necessary for Indian narratives to balance dominant representations in the cultural imagination. Implicit in Sharma’s critique is a charge of responsibility; Roy’s responsibility as a local Keralan writer is perhaps not to represent one part of India – Kerala – realistically; her charge is to instead showcase the other, underrepresented side of India as equally authentic to those mainstream western representations of India as the ‘third world’. She must, in some critics’ opinions, represent all of India in positive light so that

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12 C.D. Narasimhaiah 182
13 Pandey 80
15 Sharma 30

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India in the cultural imagination, rather than in any standalone text, can be represented as a multitudinous whole.

I had always assumed that depicting my home in fiction – the stained carpets, the broken furniture, the violent alcoholics, and the trolleys in the creek – could evade criticism since these are aspects of place I have seen and experienced. While I mean to write a realistic account of an imperfect place, respected peers warn that the low socioeconomic Southeast Queensland I write could read as poverty tourism: a voyeuristic exaggeration of everyday life. Southeast Queensland locals already have a reputation throughout Australia as ‘rednecks,’ especially since the second rise of the nationalist party One Nation in the state of Queensland. In Southeast Queensland the city of Logan measures high in disadvantage and the Gold Coast has become stereotyped in the news, reality television, and other fictions as the Crime Capital of Australia. On the other end of the scale, the Gold Coast is known as a place of privilege, as a ‘premier tourist destination… separated from the normal workday environment.’ While I do not expect that in an Australian context my representation of Southeast Queensland will be delegitimised as Roy’s novel has, I worry that I could reinforce a binary between representations of Southeast Queensland as either a dangerous crime capital or luxurious escape. This binary is not so polarised as that of poverty and exoticism to which India is subjected; however, these representations of Southeast Queensland are problematic since both silence Aboriginal Australian experiences and normalise the ongoing colonisation of land and culture by the west.

Both India and Australia have a violent history of European oppression, class and race wars, and an ongoing postcolonising culture that is often normalised in mainstream representations of place and being a local. Deepti Misri finds that ‘“India” is widely perceived by residents as a colonizing entity rather than a hospitable home.’ In Australia, Aileen Moreton-Robinson highlights how a claim to home is not equally accessible to all Australians since ‘the sense of belonging, home and place enjoyed by the non-Indigenous subject – colonizer/migrant – is based on the dispossession of the original owners of the land.’ Because the ‘history of Southeast Queensland in particular has not been addressed from a very balanced perspective’ my status as a white, first-generation Australian who has inherited the privileges of stolen land means I could continue the postcolonising process through the sheer act of writing a place-based novel with a stake of ownership in the word ‘home.’ Like Rob Garbutt, who reflects on his problematic status as a local in Australia, my ‘everyday experience is far from’ one of exile and oppression.

18 ABC 2011; Stockwell 2011
23 Rob Garbutt, ‘Towards an Ethics of Location,’ Landscapes of Exile: Once Perilous, Now Safe, edited by Anna
In even staking claim to any version of home that is mine I purport a ‘proprietal and possessive belonging’ that delegitimises further Indigenous perspectives of and right to place. The onus, of course does not lie on me to appropriate others’ stories, though I suspect that a novel that does not include Aboriginal collaborations, characters, or discourses cannot be an Australian novel. As the criticism of TGOST has demonstrated, a failure to capture the essence of nationhood equates to a failure to represent any scale of place within that nation.

Roy, though, does not simply represent a squalid India, although that is the main concern of literary critics. Her Kerala is patriarchal, moralistic, politically-turbulent, dangerous, and the landscape is lush and exotic. She represents Kerala as multi-dimensional and culturally rich – albeit complicated and oppressive – with transgressive characters who are educated/thoughtful, passionate, kind, progressive, and lost. Her Kerala is thus a tapestry, with gaps in representation and with privileged points-of-view, but multi-dimensional nonetheless. Representing place as multi-dimensional makes way for divergent and oppositional perspectives: we see that if a place can yield as much culture and as many contradictions as this, then there must be much more to place than even this. Bardhan observes that western perspectives of India and Indian perspectives of its many selves ‘are comingling in ways that often make it hard to describe cultural identity in terms of purity or sameness.’ Drawing from Homi Bhabha, Bardhan argues that developing an Indian identity or cultural politics is ‘lodged in difference rather than in sameness.’ Therefore, representing extremes of place is not necessarily didactic as long as contradictions, inconsistencies, and other points of view are also present in one way or another; it is from these various experiences of home that a multidimensional place is carved. Shakuntala Banaji analyses the reception of the Academy Award Winner for Best Picture, Slumdog Millionaire, which, like TGOST, was criticised for its narrow representations of India as an impoverished and dangerous landscape. Banaji grants that despite the cultural problem of exacerbating negative representations of India, such depictions are valuable in recognising the complexity of place when they sit alongside inclusive and divergent representations. Banaji writes:

this dialectic in opinion formation between (national, rational) self and the (exotic or despised) other is common to ethnographic documentary and to fiction film … it is equally important to recognize moments in his film and in others like it that draw us into dialogues, both real and imaginary but always political.

If a text can open a space of difference around and through which dialogues of place can develop, then does Roy or any writer have a responsibility to instead fill that gap with an equally didactic – albeit a positive and alternative – paradigm of place? To consider the problematic representations of home and the rightful/plural owners of the land who have been exiled and silenced means facing the potentially harmful effect a narrow or possessive representation of...
place can have on those groups. It seems that writing place is an act of definition, and of inclusion and exclusion for the environment and its people. While one text may never encapsulate all experiences of place, there are strategies for acknowledging such limitations. Leaving room for doubt, for transgression, and dialectical voices at least points to those who have been again silenced, but perhaps not erased. This is a moderate responsibility of place-based fiction if fiction is to (in)directly an entire locality or nation, and by extension, the people who call that place home.

There is of course the question of creative license in fiction. As Banaji explicitly identifies and other critics imply, place-based fictions are read as auto/ethnography. In the next section of this essay, I draw from sociologists and humanist geographers to examine why fiction authors are treated as social actors and their works read as material artefacts of place if not ethnographic documents.

**Literature as Material Artefact of Place**

Because Roy’s novel is criticised for its transgressions, the Kerala of the novel is delegitimised as merely fiction, which is ironic since the novel is criticised as if it were a work of auto/ethnography. Consequently, it seems that literary critics, and perhaps even the lay readers they represent, bundle writers of fiction with a responsibility to represent place, even if only some critics enforce and evaluate that responsibility. One might surmise that such efforts to prove a distinction between Roy’s Kerala and the perceived ‘reality’ of Kerala are unnecessary since the novel is marketed as fiction, and so some discrepancies between representations of place are expected. However, Roy’s Kerala remains a popular subject of debate, and so I ask why place-based novels are held to a standard of ethnographic documentation, and if such a task can ever be met in a work of fiction.

Perhaps one reason why literary scholars criticise Roy’s representation of Kerala as if her novel were a work of (auto)ethnography, and are accordingly offended by the novels transgressions, is because the novel might in fact contain autobiography and descriptions of lived events. If the novel were in fact based in Roy’s and her family’s history, then the transgressions of the novel would contribute to conceptions of place as autobiography, and Roy would be answerable only to those who could disprove her personal experiences. Reading her work as partial autobiography, or autofiction, means Roy’s fictional Kerala and her home Kerala converge and so become a valid depiction of that place’s identity. Although it is beyond the scope and interest of this essay to distinguish her novel as autobiography or fiction, or autofiction from ethnography, it should be noted that critics do attempt to find verifiable ‘truth’ in *TGOST*, perhaps to better classify the genre of the novel and its relative truth claims. For instance, Iyer notes the phonetic similarities between ‘Ayemenem’ – the Keralan town of Roy’s novel – and ‘Aymanam,’ an actual town in Kerala.²⁸ Boehmer too notes Roy’s ‘cross-caste background,’ architectural studies, and upbringing in Kerala – all of which Roy shares with a character in her novel – in order to establish that the novel is ‘conflation of biography.’²⁹ Julie

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²⁸ Iyer 138
²⁹ Boehmer 64

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Mullaney, Alex Tickell, A. G. Khan, and Dwivedi likewise identify several possible instances of autobiography and ethnography in Roy’s novel.

If Roy’s characters and plot points are accurate representations of her experiences, then her setting and the transgressions within setting are not fiction, as the novel is marketed, but direct responses to and representations of Indian culture. Roy’s novel, as a work of autoethnography, challenges the dominant political of ideologies of and conceptions of India as a manifesto. As a result, one must question of hybrid fiction: ‘where does ethnography stop and autobiography begin, given that writing the self and writing to significant other of the self can be classed as both?’

Kirin Narayan notes that because

gracefully written ethnographies and socially observant novels … overlap along a continuum of narrative form … this playful equation of ethnography and fiction points to a larger confusion about where ethnography ends and fiction begins.

This uncertainty about how to map the distinctions among ethnography, autobiography, and fiction drives the efforts of critics to prove that a work of fiction is in fact fiction. As fiction, Roy enjoys creative licence, but as autoethnography, the content of TGOST must be verifiable and thus contestable. Roy’s unbelievable insistence that her novel is fiction despite the feasible parallels drawn between her experiences therefore engenders suspicion among critics and her respective degrees of responsibility.

Conspicuously, during an interview, Roy maintained that her novel is neither autoethnography nor about Indian culture, but is about ‘human nature.’ However, this denial arguably concerns critics more than if the work had been marketed as non-fiction, because without clear categorisation associated with truth-telling, critics are disempowered to refute representations of place. Consequently, Roy is not responsible to accurately represent her experiences or the dominant ideologies of place. This could be why some critics, while at once reading Roy’s work as autoethnography, highlight the apparent unrealistic qualities of the novel in order to firmly situate the novel as fiction, thereby devaluing the legitimacy of Roy’s Kerala as autoethnographic. Critics thus treat Roy’s novel as a failure of autoethnography, because despite the social effects of fiction, fiction ‘does not bear the [same] responsibility [to] “truthful” representation’ as ethnographic writing. Therefore, responsibility to representing place is loosened if the writing is evaluated as principally fiction, though, Roy is deauthorised as an authority on Indian culture due to her representations of Kerala. Even as fiction, though, TGOST, because it is as a place-based novel, paints reality.

Pragmatic sociologists, Shai Dromi and Eva Illouz research the relationship between fiction and cultural knowledge, and explain that fiction is valuable to sociology because each viewpoint, however subjective, contributes to our conceptions of place and society. They argue that because


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these viewpoints reflect society, they should be debated: ergo, the novel is fiction, but the perspectives are not. For Dromi and Illouz, a politically, morally, or intellectually challenging novel and the resulting questions and criticisms ‘are an inseparable’ and important ‘part of’ reading.’34 This is because:

[A] reader’s criticism of a text is important to the sociologist regardless of his or her class, education, or training in literary criticism and whether or not it succeeds in persuading others. In this view then, moral judgment is not an anomalous reaction to literature but, on the contrary, a natural one, that is, one that responds to the moral competence of texts and their authors.35

For Dromi and Illouz, the ‘natural’ instinct to read a work of fiction as a cultural artefact or manifesto compels a critic to do so. In their eyes, the work of the sociologist or literary critic is to recognise and accept this impulse and subsequently treat the author as ethnographer. This shifts the weight of representation slightly from the text as the author’s manifesto to the text as the reader’s manifesto; although, the author on the other side of the work is still read as a mapmaker and social commentator.

It is worth noting that Dromi and Illouz do not mark a definite border between fiction and reality in their argument, unlike some literary critics. This is because fiction reveals social truths – or ‘human nature,’ as Roy points out – and so is faithful to an essence of place. Still, an essence of place blurs the boundary between the textual representation and the real place to which the text refers. However, a fiction imbued with apparent social truth situates the author as a moral or ethical being who is inescapably political in meaning. Therefore, a fictional novel, and especially a political one, is valuable in its dissection since one can explore the ideologies of author and critic, which, together, form dialogues about society and place. A place-based fiction is therefore not necessarily a record of a society and place itself, but rather is a record of attitudes and morality formed from society and digested again as it is read. Place, then, is a container of ideology, and the novel an imprint of those ideologies. Thus, an imaginative and political projection of any real place in the mode of realism ‘turns narrative analysis into an activity of “cultural analysis”’.36 Arguably, then, a writer of fiction is also an accidental sociologist – whose method is creative writing. Concurrently, consequently, when critics evaluate representations of Kerala, they do not do so in order to enforce high ethical standards onto fiction, but they do so in recognition that place-based writing inevitably is place in some form or another.

Douglas Pocock maintains that even in what he calls ‘imaginative fictions,’ that is, fiction that does not or cannot claim to resemble reality, ‘the truth of fiction is a truth beyond mere facts,’ and so ‘[f]ictive reality may transcend or contain more truth than the physical or everyday reality.’37 Pocock refers to empirical, personal acknowledgments of ‘truth’ and is not concerned

35 Dromi and Illouz 359
37 Douglas Pocock, ‘Introduction: imaginative literature and the geographer,’ Humanistic geography and literature:
with identifying facts; although, literary critics could internalise this concept of ‘truth’, either consciously or unconsciously, and thus concern themselves with the morality of the work and the responsibility of the author. In further (re)scoping the role of the fiction writer, Susan Friedman argues that in the case of TGOST, the novel ‘functions as the symbolic form of the national state,’ as a site of ‘encounter[s], of border crossings and cultural mimesis.’

Corroborating this perspective is Joan Sharp, a professor of geography whose research has led her to consider the significance of literary fiction in recording place and its social dynamics. Sharp assesses the ways in which literature can capture the voice of place: the socio-cultural and political, and environmental ambience of geography. She observes that geographers regard ‘literature as a material artifact’ due to ‘the evocative power of literary description’ for expressing ‘the less tangible, experiential aspects of geographies.’ Therefore, aesthetics of fiction that are comparatively regarded as subjective or immeasurable, such as metaphor, are in fact strengths of fiction in their contributions to social scientists’ conception of place. This is because metaphor, among other aesthetics, is trusted to symbolically represent an individual’s experiences, which are valuable in adding a pixel of colour to the larger snapshot of place. Therefore, the personal/subjective/mythic experience of place is privileged over the collective/objective/concrete measurements of place. In this light, ‘literature is part of material culture which intervenes in the mental appropriation of the world.’

If a fictional setting is indeed a container to preserve perspectives of place, or rather, a kind of stratosphere that contains the atmosphere of place, then that would stitch the fictional world and the reality to which it refers together. This idea submits that fiction viably demonstrates reality, and consequently, that the hero of the novel’s lived experience is either emblematic of, or is a microcosm of, all the multiplicities of that shared space in ‘reality.’ Consequently, the fictional writer, or more specifically, the regional writer, is a social actor, historian, translator, and biographer and can be criticised accordingly.

Writing Home

I am aware that ideological operations in the text could be read as my own manifesto if not an imprint of the discursive debates mingling in place itself. Unlike autobiography, in which the author is solely responsible for representing place as a projection toward their own lived and read experiences, fiction throws a wide net over place. Perceived responsibility to writing place in fiction varies, with cultural analysis and conflation of ethnography an inevitable part of reading fiction for place. Kerala, as both Roy’s childhood home and textual treatment of her home, shapes Roy’s authorial identity as she likewise shapes physical and ambient representations of that place. The cyclical nature of this logic embeds the two Keralas within each other, so unites the fictionalised Kerala of the novel and the ‘real’ Kerala in cultural imagination into a consummated whole. Critics subsequently tear at the stiches that bind ‘reality’

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39 Sharp 327
40 Sharp 328

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and art together. They are inclined to disprove Roy’s work as autoethnography and highlight the novel’s fiction, because these critics understand that to dispute truth one first must understand what is purported to be truth. When critics can map out what in the novel is verifiable, lived, or imagined, then they can enter a debate of meaning. However, as sociologists have observed, lived experience cannot be differentiated from imagination simply.

Writing about the Southeast Queensland for me, is not intentionally about asserting or recording ownership or familiarity over place, or what Susan Midalia calls ‘the pleasure of recognition.’41 But if I can disrupt stereotypes of Southeast Queensland as crime capital or site of egalitarian belonging, and instead focus on the different ways locals negotiate their alienation, I can capture a culture of ‘difference’ rather than simply reinforcing an image of static disadvantage. This approach of representing difference acknowledges that any one text limits the multitudes of place, and in doing so, somewhat avoids speaking on others’ behalf. As a result, ideologies and transgressions in the text embody place-making instead of representing didactically a possessed home. The author, with this approach, can responsibly contribute to the image of place in the cultural imagination, since the ‘genius of the author is to a great extent displaced into the logic of his or her social location.’42 Therefore my work could be read not as the Southeast Queensland or even my Southeast Queensland, but simple as one version of home as I know and share it.

Of course, writers can always write fiction and bolster that genre to absolve themselves from responsibilities of representation. But as place-based writers, whose work will inform dialogues about place in the cultural imagination, perhaps there is a higher degree of consideration required, especially when that place’s histories and ownership is contested, and belonging is unequal. In such cases, even local narratives – stories that attempt only to capture a microcosm or corner of a nation – are political in their representation of locality and diversity. Local narratives hold a self-and-spatial-awareness that can change the image of what a real place is.

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41 Susan Midalia, ‘The Idea of Place: Reading for Pleasure and the Workings of Power,’ English in Australia 47.3 (2012): 44-51. 44
42 Sharp 329

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), India’s messianic poet and Asia’s first Nobel Laureate (1913), promulgated a vision of peace through the cultivation of the ideologies of *Ahimsa*, or non-violence, which he derived from the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Advita*, or one-identity of the universe, which he derived from the *Upanishads*. This paper investigates how Tagore formulated this vision of peace against a backdrop of and as an antidote to the reckless ‘jihadism’ (both religious and secular) and ‘war-madness’ of the twentieth century, which witnessed the two World Wars as well as an on-going violence in different forms, effectively turning the world into a ‘tower of skulls.’ He attributed this ‘devil dance of destruction’ to three intersecting forces: the unmediated materialism of modern society; belligerent nationalism which often led to nationalist selfishness, chauvinism and self-aggrandisement; and the machinery of organised religion which, he said, ‘obstructs the free flow of inner life of the people and waylays and exploits it for the augmentation of its own power.’ His response to it was the creation of a global human community, or a ‘grand harmony of all human races,’ by shunning exclusivism and dogmatism of all forms, and through the fostering of awareness that human beings were not only material and rational as creatures but also moral and spiritual, sharing a dew-drop of God in every soul.

In July 1955, Bertrand Russell and Albert Einstein issued a joint manifesto, asking humanity to shun the path of conflicts and war and save the species from an impending doom. The choice facing the world, they said, is ‘stark and dreadful and inescapable: shall we put an end to the human race; or shall mankind renounce war?’ ‘There lies before us, if we choose,’ they added, ‘continual progress in happiness, knowledge, and wisdom. Shall we, instead, choose death, because we cannot forget our quarrels? We appeal as human beings to human beings: Remember your humanity, and forget the rest. If you can do so, the way lies open to a new Paradise; if you cannot, there lies before you the risk of universal death.’

Disenchanted and horrified by the devil dance of destruction by the pious warlords and suicidal ‘fundamentalists’ of modern civilisation (both secular or religious, who, to paraphrase Rabindranath Tagore, believe that Truth depends upon them and they do not depend on Truth), Russell even went on to depict the
following doom’s day scenario about the world’s future in which he envisioned peace through annihilation of the human race. He wrote: ‘After ages during which the earth produced harmless trilobites and butterflies, evolution progressed to the point at which it has generated Neroes, Genghis Khans, and Hitlers. This, however, I believe is a passing nightmare; in time the earth will become again incapable of supporting life, and peace will return.’

A senior contemporary of Russell (1872-1970) and Einstein (1879-1955), India’s national poet and Asia’s first Noble Laureate, biswakabi Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) also cautioned the world of a potential destruction through war, violence and bloodshed, although he never went to the extent of making a dark prediction like Russell. He was relatively more optimistic, who always saw a ray of hope in the midst of human lunacies and insanities – arising from, as he said, the blindness of contempt, greed, selfishness, hatred and ignorance – in the modern age. In this regard, he once famously said, ‘I have become my own version of an optimist. If I can’t make it through one door, I’ll go through another door – or I’ll make a door. Something terrific will come no matter how dark the present.’ Elsewhere he commented, explaining his ultimate hope in humanity, that although he saw the present civilisation in ‘crumbling ruins … strewn like a vast heap of futility,’ yet he thought that it would be a ‘grievous sin’ to lose faith in mankind.

It is because of this abiding optimism, despite what he lived through and what he saw, and his tireless efforts to bring back peace and harmony through inter-civilisational dialogue and through human fraternity, overcoming their differences, that both Russell and Einstein were full of praise for this iconic Renaissance poet and myriad-minded genius. In a tribute to Rabindranath, Russell, for example, wrote, ‘[Tagore] has contributed … much … to the most important work of our time, namely, the promotion of understanding between races… [and] on this account he is worthy of the highest honour.’ In a similar vein, Einstein commented, ‘[Tagore] served mankind … spreading everywhere a gentle and a free thought in a manner such as the Seers … have proclaimed as the ideal.’

Tagore always believed, very much like Noam Chomsky (1928-), a contemporary thinker, to put it in Chomsky’s words, that ‘another world is possible [by] seeking to create constructive alternatives of thought, actions and institutions’ and by bringing ‘a measure of peace and justice and hope to the world.’ This alternative world would be possible, according to Tagore, only through a symbiosis of the East and the West, and through a sympathetic understanding of our differences as people, which would allow us to overcome our suspicion of each other as aliens, or the ‘other,’ and appreciate that at core we are all one and the same, and that in spite of our outer differences we are all tied by an invisible bond of love, very much like the petals of a rose

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8 Quoted in Kripalani 360.
9 Chomsky 236-37.
that look separate at one end but remain united at the other (Tagore’s metaphor). Put differently, the ingredients of peace for Tagore were the spirit of inclusivity, empathy, ‘mutual sympathy’, ‘cultural cooperation’, cultivation of ‘an international mind’, ‘international goodwill’\textsuperscript{10} and a sense of ‘the spiritual bond of unity’.\textsuperscript{11} [T]he realization of the great spiritual unity of man only can give us peace’, Tagore stated unequivocally in his essay ‘A Cry for Peace’.\textsuperscript{12}

Thus while Tagore was furiously critical of the British atrocity and oppression in India during the colonial period and felt that the West was often immersed in commercialism, ‘moral cannibalism’, ‘homicidal orgies of cannibalistic politics’,\textsuperscript{13} militarism and ‘war-madness,’ and that it was too full of contempt for the East, yet he never gave up hope for a possible union of the East and the West, in which the East and the West would meet as equal partners in a creative engagement. ‘I believe in the true meeting of the East and the West’,\textsuperscript{14} Tagore wrote in a letter to his friend Charles Andrews. In ‘The Meeting of the East and the West,’ he declared, ‘it is a matter of the greatest urgency that the East and the West should meet and unite in hearts.’\textsuperscript{15} In a letter to Foss Westcott, Tagore further wrote, ‘Believe me, nothing would give me greater happiness than to see the West and the East march in a common crusade against all that robs the human spirit of its significance.’\textsuperscript{16} Moreover, when Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) notoriously said that the East and the West were too divergent and ‘Never the twain shall meet,’ Tagore responded in his characteristic hope of creating a unitary world:

Earnestly I ask the poet of the Western world to realise and sing … with all the great power of music which he has, that the East and West are ever in search of each other, and that they must meet not merely in the fullness of physical strength, but in the fullness of truth; that the right hand, which wields the sword, has the need of the left, which holds the shield of safety.\textsuperscript{17}

Tagore’s poetic response to Kipling’s opening line of ‘The Ballad of East and West,’ ‘Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet’\textsuperscript{18} was:

\begin{verbatim}
Man is man, machine is machine
And never the twain shall meet.
\end{verbatim}

In other words, to Tagore, West was not the problem, but it was the excessive mechanisation of the Western civilisation; the fetishisation of money, matter and machine, or its intense

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Tagore, ‘The Meeting of the East and the West’ in Das, 377.
\item Tagore, ‘A Cry for Peace’ in Das, 411.
\item Tagore, ‘To the World League for Peace’ in Das, 786.
\item Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, \textit{Rabindranath Tagore: An Anthology} (New York: St. Martin’s, 1997) 172.
\item Tagore, ‘The Meeting of the East and the West’ in Das, 377.
\item Dutta and Robinson 197.
\item Dutta and Robinson 213
\end{enumerate}
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materialism, which led to the East-West conflict, dissensus and binary, since such deification of the phenomenal and the material resulted in the obscuring of humanity in people and ‘smother[ing of] the higher spirit of man which you often find in the individual’.20

Tagore was aware that race conflict was an ‘age-long inheritance of mankind’ as humanity shared the animal instinct of suspicion for aliens, and that it was ‘the highest problem of human history’,21 which often expressed itself through bloody violence. His mantra against it was the assertion of human divinity, that mankind, like nature, was an expression of God, and that in spite of all their differences, they shared the same spark of God, and therefore love of self ought to translate into love for the rest of mankind. This was also the basis of Tagore’s faith in what he called Advitam or organic oneness and unity of the universe which he expressed in his poem ‘The Sick-bed 21,’ again using the metaphor of the rose and its many petals to signify the many and one of life and nature, in a similar vein as Whitman’s leaves of grass:22

I am a poet, I do not debate,
I look at the world in its wholeness –
At the millions of stars and planets in the sky
Revolving in grandeur and harmony
Never losing the beat of their music
Never slipping into derangement.
When I look at the sky I see spreading petalled layers,
A vast and resplendent rose.23

Tagore was born at a critical juncture in Indian history, in 1861 – four years after the great indigenous uprising against the East India Company was successfully crushed (1857), and three years after ‘the British Parliament passed the Government of India Act, transferring “all rights” that the company had hitherto enjoyed on Indian soil directly to the crown.’24 This transfer of power consolidated the British imperial hold on the subcontinent, creating an environment in which the Indians were enslaved by an alien power in their homeland. They became the beasts of burden for another society, toiling away so that the English could be fed, clothed, nourished and, as Tagore tauntingly says in a letter from Russia, ‘become great and do great things for mankind.’25 Tagore also lived through the violent riots between the two largest religious groups in the subcontinent, Hindus and Muslims, both after the partition of Bengal in 1905 and during Mahatma Gandhi’s satyagraha (search for truth) and swaraj (nationalist) movements, which were meant as non-violent non-cooperation movements but somehow, ironically, always ended up in violence and bloodshed.26 Moreover, he lived through the two World Wars which not only

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20 Tagore, ‘International Goodwill’ 646.
21 Tagore, ‘Race Conflict’ in Das, 360, 361.
22 In Leaves of Grass (1855), Walt Whitman uses ‘grass’ as a symbol of unity of all mankind – grass which grows everywhere without discrimination of place or people.
23 Dutta and Robinson, 373.
25 Dutta and Robinson, 121.
26 See Sekhar Bandyopadhyay’s From Plassey to Partition for a detailed discussion on how the mainstream Indian nationalism. that emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century, under the aegis of the Indian National Congress, was contested from all sides, and repeatedly, by various alternative communal visions of nation. This resulted in recurrent clashes between Hindus and Muslims. After the outbreak of a series of riots between the

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unleashed horrific devastations both in Asia and Europe but also claimed the lives of millions of people across the world.

Tagore initially took part in the nationalist movement which began after the partition of Bengal in 1905, in which the British, as a ploy to strengthen their hold on India, broke up Bengal into two provinces on religious lines, creating a separate province of East Bengal for the Muslims, with Dhaka as its capital, which later became East Pakistan (in 1947) and subsequently Bangladesh (in 1971). The British did this in an apparent attempt to help out the Muslims but actually to sow the seed of distrust and animosity between Hindus and Muslims, which they successfully did as the partition of Bengal also marks the beginning of communal politics in the subcontinent, eventuating in the breakup of India into two countries in 1947, India and Pakistan, and later into three countries, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, in 1971.28

The nationalist movement through the leadership of the Indian Congress Party (founded in 1885) was gaining momentum very fast and this was the best way for the British to derail the movement. Riots broke out between Hindus and Muslims as the Muslims were happy to have a separate province for themselves while the Hindus wanted to reunite Bengal. Tagore was in favour of unity and wrote many patriotic songs to energise the movement, such that Ezra Pound commented, ‘Tagore has sung Bengal into a nation.’29

But soon after, when the movement turned violent, with a Bengali nationalist killing two innocent British civilians in Calcutta in 1908, Tagore withdrew from the movement and never again returned to participate in any nationalist movement after that, including Gandhi’s independence movement, and in spite of Gandhi’s repeated requests to extend his support. This is because Tagore came to realise that, nationalism, together with the unmediated materialism of the modern society as well religious extremism arising from excessive faith in institutionalised religions, were the root causes of violence and warfare in the modern world.30

Hindus and Muslims in the 1920s, affecting all parts of the country, the situation became so bad that, to quote Bandyopadhyay, ‘An exasperated Gandhi lamented in 1927 that the resolution of the problem of Hindu-Muslim relations was now beyond human control and had passed on to the hands of God’ (335). The situation continued to deteriorate despite the best efforts from both Tagore and Gandhi. For Tagore’s attempts to heal the animosities between Hindus and Muslims, see my essay, ‘Hindu-Muslim Relations in the Work of Rabindranath Tagore and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain.’

27 The Muslim League, with an agenda to voice the grievances and expectations of Indian Muslims, was formed in 1906, soon after the riots broke out in Bengal. The founder of the party, Mohamed Ali Jinnah, was a member of the Indian Congress Party until this period.

28 My argument is that although the British were not solely responsible for the festering Hindu-Muslim relations in India that resulted in endless violence during the country’s independence movement, they made every effort to instigate, aggravate and exploit it to their political advantage, and to make sure that it played into their policy of divide and rule. However, it ought to be pointed out that Hindu-Muslim relations continues to be bloody and turbulent still after 70 years of the country’s independence. The current Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, a Hindu nationalist, is himself believed to have orchestrated a riot in Gujrat in 2002, when he was the Chief Minister of the state, which killed 1000 innocent Muslims (Datta-Ray, ‘Modi in Gujrat’). More recently, Modi has appointed a firebrand Hindu priest, Yogi Adityanath, as the Chief Minister of India’s most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, who controversially praised Donald Trump’s Muslim ban and is facing charges ‘of attempted murder, defiling a place of worship and inciting riots in Uttar Pradesh, a state where communal tensions run high and religious violence four years ago killed more than 60 people’ (Safi, ‘Controversial Hindu Priest’).


30 For my detailed discussions on Tagore’s views of nationalism and religious unity, see my following articles: ‘Paradisiacal Imagination: Rabindranath Tagore’s *Vossvovod* or Non-national Neo-universalism’; ‘Tagore and...’

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Tagore’s grandfather, ‘Prince’ Dwarkanath Tagore, was the founder of a religious movement, Brahmo Sabha, which later came to be known as Brahmo Samaj. The objective of this movement was to do away with ritualistic Hinduism and all its ‘inauthentic traditions’, which often had a ‘hypnotic hold’ on the people, and resulted in bigotry, hatred, intolerance, antagonism and cold-blooded oppression in society. Tagore saw this movement as a kind of ‘inner Hinduism’ that sought to reinstate the monistic basis of the religion as laid down in the Upanishads. Under its influence, Tagore came to believe that organised religions, with their many rituals and institutions, and expectation of total and unequivocal submission from their followers, were a recurrent threat to humanity. They divided people into cults and sects and cultivated the spirit of persecution among followers of different religions, and this has been one of the main sources of violence and warfare in society. ‘When religion instead of emancipating mind, fetters it within the narrow confinement of creeds and conventions, then it becomes the greater barrier against a true meeting of races,’ Tagore wrote in his essay ‘The Way to Unity.’

In a letter to Charles Andrews, he stated more incisively, ‘Formalism in religion … breeds sectarian arrogance, mutual misunderstanding and a spirit of persecution.’ Tagore was of the view that when we continue to worship our ‘tribal God[s]’ and remain ‘partitioned into mutually exclusive sects,’ then ‘the vision of the great is lost … aspirations fail to soar high … the spirit remains steeped in a perpetual despondency,’ and in such a state attaining the bond of unity or ‘kingdom of souls,’ which is the sine qua non for achieving peace, becomes impossible. It is because of such divisive powers of conventional religions that Tagore once stated, expressing his revulsion for such organised religions, that ‘Atheism is much better than superstition in religion’.

Tagore did not believe in any ‘temple, or scriptures … images or symbols’ but in the ‘intense yearning of the heart for the divine in Man’.

Temples and Mosques obstruct thy path,
and I fail to hear thy call or to move,
when the teachers and priests angrily crowd round me,

Tagore quoted in approbation in his Oxford Lectures, ‘The Religion of Man,’ from a Baul song sung widely by both Hindu and Muslim mystics in Bengal. His denunciation of organised religion as a source of cruelty, oppression and violence, and his longing for the freedom of the soul, is expressed eloquently in his following poem:

Those who struck Him once
in the name of their rulers,

Nationalism’; and ‘Imagining “One World”: Rabindranath Tagore’s Critique of Nationalism.’

Dutta and Robinson, Selected Letters 62
In Das, 462.


Tagore, ‘The Meeting of the East and the West’ 376
Tagore, ‘Spiritual Civilization’ in Das, 735


Tagore, ‘The Religion of Man’ in Das, 129.

Tagore, ‘The Religion of Man’ 129.
are born again in this present age.
They gather in their prayer halls in pious garb,
they call their soldiers – ‘Kill, kill,’ they shout;
in their roaring mingle the music of their hymns.
While the Son of Man in His agony prays, ‘O God,
fling, fling far away this cup filled with the bitterest of poison.’

Thus while organised religion destroyed the humanity of the individual by quashing his or her inner being – ‘it obstructs the free flow of inner life of the people and waylays and exploits it for the augmentation of its own power’, Tagore argued – the only way to restore peace was by accepting the Upanishadic teaching that every human being was an expression of God and therefore had to be loved and respected, for the sake of loving God. ‘However different be the symbols and rituals, God, whom they try to represent, is one without a second, and to realise him truly is to realise him in the soul of all beings,’ Tagore explained in his essay ‘Race Conflict’.

He poignantly dramatised this idea of loving God by loving one’s family, friends or fellow human beings – which forms the core of Tagore’s philosophy of compassionate humanism as well as his vision for peace – in the following poem, through an animated exchange between God and His devotee, in which God urges the devotee to turn to his family to discover Him, instead of going away on some vague quest for divinity:

In the deep of night the man averse to worldly pleasures said:
‘I shall leave home to seek my desired God.
Who is it that has kept me here, tied?’
God said, ‘It is I,’ but the man paid no heed.
Clasping the sleeping infant to her breast
The loving wife lay at one end of the bed in deep slumber.
The man said, ‘what are you all – the trickery of illusion?’
‘It is I,’ said God. No one paid any heed.
Leaving his bed the man called ‘Where are Thou, my Lord?’
God said, ‘I am here!’ Still His words were not heard.
The child cried out in his sleep hugging his mother;
God said, ‘Turn back.’ But His words were lost.
God heaved a sigh and said, ‘Alas! Deserting me,
Whither goes my devotee to find me?’

In a letter from New York, dated 14 January 1921, Tagore declared, ‘To me humanity is rich and large and many-sided.’ Human kind, he believed, were physical and intellectual as well as spiritual beings; they had a head, heart and a stomach, and therefore, to retain their humanity, a symbiosis and synthesis among these divergent forces was a necessity. However, Tagore found that the modern civilisation had failed to take into account the spiritual aspect of the human

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40 Tagore, ‘The Religion of an Artist’ in Das 685.
41 Tagore, ‘Race Conflict’ 361.
43 Tagore, Letters to a Friend 92.
personality and that is where it had gone wrong and become a breeding ground for war and violence. Without a moral and spiritual awareness, human beings become victims of their intellect and physical appetite, leaving them at the mercy of selfishness and greed, and devoid of a sense of empathy, understanding and fellowship with each other. Thus in a letter to Andrews, Tagore wrote, ‘When the spiritual ideal is lost, when the human relationship is completely broken up, then individuals freed from the creative bond of wholeness find a fearful joy in destruction.’

In his essay ‘Civilisation and Progress’, condemning modern civilisation as a ‘soulless progeny of greed’ and therefore a source of human suffering and deformity, he further wrote:

[Civilisation] must be the expression of some guiding moral force which we have evolved in our society for the object of attaining perfection ... A civilisation remains healthy and strong as long as it contains in its centre some creative ideal that binds its members in a rhythm of relationship. It is a relationship which is beautiful and not merely utilitarian. When the creative ideal … gives place to some overmastering passion, then this civilisation bursts into conflagration.

When the First World War broke out, Tagore blamed ‘overgrown materialism’ as its main cause: ‘The war, to my mind, is the outcome of overgrown materialism, of an ideal based on self-interest and not based on harmony.’ Likewise, after the war ended, Tagore cautioned that more wars could follow if human beings didn’t remedy the one-sided nature of the present civilisation by infusing a moral or the spiritual dimension into it:

The great war was one of the blows of God working to break down our materialism, our selfishness, our narrow nationalisms. It made a dent; but only a dent in the crust. Other blows will fall betimes. Until we learn to live together by the real law of our nature – law of love – veil will hide the beauty and wonder of the world, leaving us to wander alone.

In the above statement, Tagore accuses both materialism and nationalism as sources of war, especially the First World War. In ‘A Cry for Peace,’ he says more decisively, ‘It is the national and commercial egoism, which is the evil harbinger of war.’ In fact, Tagore saw materialism and nationalism as two interrelated forces that were almost fused, with nationalism acting as the political arm of the modern industrialised society. Tagore considered nationalism as an ‘organisation of politics and commerce’, hatched in the post-religious laboratory of industrial-capitalism. It brought ‘harvests of wealth’ and ‘carnivals of materialism’ by stoking the human greed and selfishness, and in the process sacrificed ‘the moral man, the complete man…’

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44 Tagore, Letters to a Friend 94.
47 Quoted in Kundu 82.
48 Tagore, ‘A Cry for Peace’ 411.
50 Tagore, Nationalism 5.
51 Soares 113.
to make room for the political and commercial man’.  
Nationalism was not ‘a spontaneous self-expression of man as social being’, but a political and commercial union of a group of people in which they congregate to maximise their profit and power: ‘the nations are not living beings, they are organisations of power … where the subjugation of humanity by the machine is complete, there the Nation is triumphant,’ Tagore argued.

Like Hobson, Tagore also saw colonialism and imperialism, to quote Hobson, as ‘a natural overflow of nationality’. After all, the colonisers came to India and other rich pastures of the world to plunder and so further the prosperity of their own nations. They were never sincere in turning their ‘hunting grounds’ into ‘cultivated fields’. They could hardly afford any altruism towards the weaker nations, because their very success depended on a cruel but a privileging norm that Tagore summed up in the following words in a letter from Russia: ‘For if no one was down below, no one was up above … the advance of civilization depends on keeping down the bulk of humanity and denying it its human rights’. However, such a privileging norm of the strong oppressing and exploiting the weak went against the ‘universal law of moral balance’, and violated the principles of love and truth and, therefore, no peace could be attained in such a backdrop. True peace could be achieved only when, Tagore explained in a ‘Message to World Peace Congress’ in 1936,

the average peace-loving citizen of the successful nations… [can] extricate himself from the obvious anomaly of wishing for peace whilst sharing in the spoils of war, – which exposes his wish to the charge of mere pretence.

Peace ‘must be founded on the strength of the just and not on the weariness of the weak’; ‘We cannot have peace until we deserve it by paying its full price – which is, that the strong must cease to be greedy and the weak must learn to be bold’, Tagore argued in the same message.

Tagore found the fetish of nationalism a source of war and mutual hatred among nations. The very deification of nation, where it is privileged over soul, God and conscience, cultivates absolutism, fanaticism, provincialism and paranoia. It also breeds animosity among nations through the Hegelian dichotomous logic of self’s fundamental hostility towards the other. Thus every nation becomes inward looking and considers another a threat to its existence, while war is hailed a legitimate, or even ‘holy’, action for national self-aggrandisement or self-fulfilment. Thus, in a letter from Vienna, Austria, Tagore wrote, ‘I have said over and over again that the aggressive spirit of nationalism … religiously cultivated by most of the nations of the West, is a menace to the whole world’. In a letter from Stockholm, dated 27 May 1921, he further wrote:

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52 Tagore, Nationalism 9.
53 Tagore, Nationalism 5.
54 Tagore, ‘To The Nation’, in Das 859.
56 Tagore, Nationalism 9.
57 Dutta and Robinson 121.
58 Tagore, ‘A Cry for Peace’ 410.
60 Tagore, ‘Message to World Peace Congress’ in Das, 813-14.
61 Dutta and Robinson 333.

The nations love their own countries; and that national love has only given rise to hatred and suspicion of one another…. When we hear ‘Bande Mataram’ ['Hail to thee mother' – a nationalist cry in India that became popular during the swadeshi movement in Bengal, in 1905] from the housetops, we shout to our neighbors: ‘You are not our brothers’ … Whatever may be its use for the present, it is like the house being set on fire simply for roasting the pig! Love of self, whether national or individual, can have no other destination except suicide.  

Tagore launched his first diatribe on nationalism in his poem ‘The Sunset of the Century,’ which he wrote on the last day of the nineteenth century. In a mood of outrage and disenchantment, tempered with intermittent hope, he wrote, foreshadowing the devastation that the two World Wars would wreak on peoples of the planet, and on Europe in particular:

   The last sun of the century sets amidst the blood-red clouds of the West and the whirlwind of hatred.  
   The naked passion of the self-love of Nations, in its drunken delirium of greed, is dancing to the clash of steel and howling verses of vengeance.  
   The hungry self of the Nation shall burst in a violence of fury from its shameless feeding.  
   For it has made the world its food.  
   And licking it, crunching it and swallowing it in big morsels,  
   It swells and swells  
   Till in the midst of its unholy feast descends the sudden shaft of heaven piercing its heart of grossness.  

However, despite this ominous foreboding, Tagore, as I have mentioned earlier, briefly participated in the nationalist movement which began with the partition of Bengal in 1905, only to withdraw from it in 1908, when the movement turned violent. His sudden withdrawal was seen as a betrayal by many who thought Tagore has taken the side of the British. Tagore responded to such criticisms in his novel The Home and World, which was first published in 1915. In this novel he crystallises his vision of peace through the doctrine of ahimsa or non-violence, thereby making him the first Indian to introduce and advocate this principle in modern politics, about six years before Mahatma Gandhi embarked on his non-violent non-cooperation movement against the British. Thus rejecting the nationalist dogmatism of his friend Sandip, Tagore’s protagonist and doppelganger in the novel, Nikhil, for example, says, ‘I am willing to serve my country; but my worship I reserve for Right which is far greater than country. To worship my country as a god is to bring curse upon it.’ Likewise, Tagore himself wrote in a letter to Abala Bose, wife of the celebrated Bengali scientist, Jagadish Chandra Bose, ‘Patriotism

62 Tagore, Letters to a Friend 143.  
63 Tagore, Nationalism 80.  
64 Explaining the efficacy of ahimsa, in a letter to Nanalal Dalpatram, on 3 February 1922, Tagore wrote, ‘I believe in the efficacy of ahimsa as the means of overcoming the congregated might of physical force on which the political powers in all countries mainly rest. But like every other moral principle ahimsa has to spring from the depth of mind and it must not be forced upon man from some outside appeal of urgent need’ (‘The Efficacy of Ahimsa’ 755).  
65 Tagore, The Home and the World 29. For a more elaborate discussion of Tagore’s vision of nationalism in The Home and the World, see my essay ‘Rabindranath Tagore’s Political Imagination in The Home and the World: A Textual and Contextual Reading.’

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cannot be our final spiritual shelter; my refuge is humanity. I will not buy glass for the price of diamonds, and I will never allow patriotism to triumph over humanity as long as I live.’

Tagore’s message in these two statements is quite straightforward. Like Russell and Einstein, he is urging us to remember our humanity and forget the rest, and for him the best way to forget our differences is to restore trust in ourselves, reach out to the goodness and love in us, believe in our divinity and one-identity as human beings, and keep the mind free from all kinds and dogmatisms – social, political or religious. Moreover, he advises us to shun materialism for a spirit of synthesis between the head, heart and spirit; nationalism for a cultural confederation between races and nations, in which every nation would, Tagore explained, ‘keep alight its own lamp of mind as its part of the illumination of the world’, and religious orthodoxy for a sense of fellowship and fraternity of all human beings. Only if we follow these instructions we could avoid war and violence and bring back peace to the world. Peace couldn’t be attained via hatred or violence, for ‘it is hateful to hate’, Tagore said, and, ‘Violence begets violence and blind stupidity’. The way forward lies in the three-fold teachings of the Upanishads – Santam, Sivam and Advaitam – which he explained in a letter to Charles Andrews, written from Kashmir, India, in the following words:

The first stage towards freedom is the Santam, the true peace, which can be attained by subduing self; the next stage is the Sivam, the true goodness, which is the activity of the soul when self is subdued; and then the Advaitam, the love, the oneness with all and with God. Of course this division is merely logical; these stages, like rays of light, may be simultaneous or divided according to the circumstances, and their order may be altered, such as the Sivam leading to Santam. But all we must know is that the Santam, Sivam, Advaitam, is the only goal for which we live and struggle.

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67 Quoted in Kripalani 268.
68 Tagore, Letters to a Friend 126.
69 Tagore in Dutta and Robinson 125.
70 Tagore, Letters to a Friend 50.
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Dancing in the Mirror: Performing Postcoloniality in Paulina Chizine’s  
*Niketche: Uma História de Poligamia*  
Meyre Ivone Santana da Silva  

Abstract  
Through female characters who decolonise their bodies and reveal their desires, Paulina Chizine’s *Niketche: Uma História de Poligamia* (2002), reinserts women’s voices in the socio-economic and political affairs of the postcolonial nation. By subverting cultural aspects that constrain women’s freedom, the narrative becomes a symbolic space for the reconstruction of women’s subjectivity. In this sense, Chiziane’s novel establishes connection between the fictional narrative and the extra-narrative world.  

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Paulina Chiziane’s *Niketche: Uma História de Poligamia* [*Niketche: A Tale of Polygamy*] portrays the lives of women who reinvent cultural traditions as they fight for the inclusion of their voices in nation building.¹ In the novel, women reveal their bodies, while exposing inconsistencies of post-independence period. By utilising the allegory of women’s sexual desire, *Niketche* discusses how political circumstances affect women’s lives. As female desire becomes a catalyst to destabilise political and patriarchal power, the celebration of women’s sexuality turns into an instrument for renouncing aspects of modernity that tends to annihilate cultural diversity.  

*Niketche* is a *Macua* dance, a sensual dance performed by women during initiation rites when girls inform the community that they are ready to perform women’s roles. ‘A dança do sol e da lua, dança do vento e da chuva, dança da criação. Uma dança que mexe, que aquece. Que imobiliza o corpo e faz a alma voar.’ [ Dance of the sun and the moon, dance of wind and rain, dance of creation, A dance that moves and warms. It immobilises the body and makes the soul fly. ] (160). As dance is interwoven into African cultures, the novel functions as a reminder to the reader of the many cultural traditions that have been considered the antithesis of modernity in Mozambique. As the *niketche* functions as a metonymy for African culture, Chiziane’s novel also establishes connection between the fictional narrative and the extra-narrative world. The novel attributes new meanings to dance and to performance, while female characters reconcile with culture and dance in pursuit of power.  

Rami, the narrator, a southern Mozambican woman, married to Tony, a powerful *assimilado* man, profits from the status of *assimilada* and the wealth of her husband.² She speaks  

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¹ Paulina Chiziane. *Niketche: Uma História de Poligamia* (Lisboa: Editorial Caminho, 2002). Subsequent references to this work will be included in parentheses in the text. All translations are mine.  
Portuguese well, has a European education, and is respected in her community, but she feels impotent and disempowered. After 20 years of marriage and five children, Rami discovers that her husband has four other wives and many children. Each woman comes from a different region of Mozambique. Julieta is from Inhambane, while Luisa, Saly, and Mauá come from the north. After many fights, Rami realises that her co-wives are poor women who need food and shelter and that Tony sexually exploits them. The wives do not have other alternatives for survival than to accept humiliation from their cruel husband. Rami helps her co-wives to become financially independent from Tony, while the women help her reconsider her body and desire.

Rami understands that her lack of knowledge about her culture is a result of colonial and post-independence policies. She sees herself as a product of history and struggles to undo the colonisation. Rami’s northern co-wives see her lack of knowledge about her body and sexuality as a result of a pervasive colonisation in the south of Mozambique. On her journeys to rediscover sexual desire Rami adapts traditional rites such as initiation and polygamy. By recreating traditional practices in urban Maputo, Mozambique, she has the possibility of examining which aspects of these traditions to recreate and how culture might work to their detriment. While her co-wives teach Rami how to rediscover her body and sexuality, she takes advantage of her colonial education and privileged economic status to help them overcome poverty. As Tony’s wives, metonymically function as each fragment of the nation, Rami plays with the possibility of assembling these parts without promoting cultural disintegration, or privileging one ethnic group over the other.

A rebellious collective that struggles to overcome disempowerment, Rami and her co-wives find ways to claim a space in their nation. On one side, through the xitique, a system of micro-credit, women can help each other to gain economic independence. The protagonist has the privilege of accessing education, speaking Portuguese and marrying an important man, utilising her money and influence to assist her co-wives to overcome poverty. On the other, Rami attempts to learn from the northern culture to become liberated and sexually fulfilled. While Rami feels like a person deprived of her own culture, a woman without roots, her co-wives teach her the ways northern women discover their bodies. They teach Rami to dance niketche to understand her body and desire.

While Rami attempts to understand how Portuguese colonisation and nationalist policies worked to shape her body and sexuality, the novel functions as a tool to decolonise female sexuality, while restoring women’s voices. As she performs the rites, she takes advantage of the transition phase, the liminal space where she is neither linked to the past, nor has yet gained a new status. In this space, she tries to promote social change through the consolidation of a female community that capitalises on practices often oppressive to women. Victor Turner suggests that ‘Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt, and between the two positions.’ In liminal space, individuals who go through the rites learn from elders to be prepared for their new status. At this stage, Rami joins her co-wives to learn from them, forming a community, what Turner calls ‘communitas’ which implies a ‘social relationship form’ or ‘a communion of equal individuals.’

From her ‘initiations,’ Rami learns northern women’s culture and forms a bond of solidarity with other women who give her advice about the female body. As a regular practice in the

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4 Turner, 96.

villages, experienced women offer advice on sexual life and pleasure to girls who are ready to initiate their own sexual lives. According to Signe Arnfred, women coming from specific caste groups are designated to give the girls lessons about women’s sexuality. Their roles are social obligations handed down through several generations via personal coaching. Arnfred suggests that ceremonies allowed women to have a gendered space for themselves. “The rituals always also provide adult women with the opportunity to get together under circumstances that permit a very different behavior: disrespectful, non-subservient.”

Women unite to learn from each other. In this sense, Rami’s journey begins with her concern about not being able to feel sexual pleasure or desire and wanting to be desired by Tony, but her experiences go beyond her initial concerns. The sisterhood among the wives shows how women access power when they help each other to overcome difficulties in a society where males are privileged. In the end, Rami discovers how solidarity among women might be a crucial element for their empowerment.

In her study of the Bemba ethnic group in Zambia, Audrey Richards examined girls’ initiation rites, providing some insights into these rituals’ purposes. She explains that within the rites there may be an effort to change some circumstances and maintain others. That said, ceremonies are the expression of a group’s effort to interfere in aspects that control social life. For instance, to understand the symbolism of rituals, it requires multiple interpretations because, as Richards suggests, rites are an effort “to change the undesirable, or to maintain the desirable.”

In *Niketche*, Rami and her co-wives perform together in an urbanised Mozambique not only to change the undesirable but also to maintain the desirable. The women get together to challenge patriarchy and to promote changes in women’s lives, but also to maintain the friendships among women that are possible by preserving some aspects of their culture. From this perspective, the dance becomes an instrument of women’s agency as well as a symbolic space to come to terms with the reconstruction of their subjectivity.

*Niketche* is set in the 1990s, after the civil war and the democratic elections, however, the protagonist struggles to come to terms with the legacy of Portuguese colonisation. When the Portuguese arrived in what is known today as Mozambique, they found bantu-speaking peoples who were organised into communities under the rule of chiefs who controlled the land and had religious authority. Before the seventeenth century, African kingdoms controlled a large area of Mozambique. The most powerful of them was the kingdom of Munemutapa, controlling a region from the southern bank of Zambesi River to Save River and into the highlands of contemporary Zimbabwe. Malawi Confederation was the second largest power in Mozambique, located northeast to the kingdom of Munemutapa. For the next four centuries, Portuguese entered some battles against the Munemutapa and the Malawi Confederation to take over the trade. After some years of conflict, Munemutapa ceded, thus acknowledging Lisbon’s suzerainty in 1607. In 1632, Portuguese defeated the Malawan ruler. Despite their efforts to control the region, their presence decreased from seventeenth century on. In the eighteenth century, Indians controlled ivory trade, gold and tropical products. During the nineteenth century, traders from Brazil, the

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Caribbean and the US traded ‘more than one million slaves from Mozambique.’ The presence of other foreign powers, such as the British, also constituted a threat to the Portuguese. During the conference of Berlin (1884-85), also known as the scramble of Africa, it was not easy for the Portuguese to claim Mozambique as its colony. European powers questioned Portuguese’s authority to cease slave trade in the territory. Through military force, Portugal started the pacification of Mozambique and the colonial rule had three periods: 1902-26, when a corrupt and weak government built an economy dependent of South Africa, 1928-62, during Salazar’s rule, a period of high exploitation of Mozambican resources to feed Portuguese industrial classes, 1962-75, the foundation of socialist party FRELIMO (Frente Liberal de Mozambique) [Mozambican Liberal Front] forced many reforms that precipitated the war of liberation.

Mozambique became independent on June 25, 1975. Frelimo had to handle many issues, such as illiteracy, poverty, racial and ethnic divisions. By attempting to promote unity, instead of tribalism, Frelimo not only maintained the Portuguese as the official language of the nation, it also disregarded religions, healers and cultural traditions. Renamo (Resistência Nacional Moçambicana) [National Resistance of Mozambique], a political party opposed to Frelimo, supported traditional institutions and recognised traditional healers. Renamo profited from this gap between Frelimo and traditional authorities to foment the dispute for power that resulted in a civil war.

When Rami says that she wants to learn the niketche, she counter-narrates nationalist policies by claiming her freedom to acknowledge cultural traditions as part of her identity. By performing it, Rami decolonises her culture, subverts traditions, and brings to light the significance of the symbolism and purposes of these ceremonies that give women opportunities to stay together and reflect on their condition. The women get together to challenge patriarchy and to promote changes in women’s lives, but also to maintain the friendships among women that are possible by preserving some aspects of their culture. From this perspective, the dance becomes an instrument of women’s agency as well as a symbolic space to come to terms with the reconstruction of their subjectivity. As a metonym for culture, the niketche becomes crucial for Rami’s sense of identity. In this sense, Chiziane’s novel makes a clear point that it is not possible to efface culture to embrace modernity, but that women should reconcile with culture by subverting and reinventing it in ways that will make it a suitable part of their lives.

Paulina Chiziane’s story is not about victimisation or women’s ever-lasting suffering from a cruel husband. It is about regeneration and women’s agency. In his book, Golden Cage: Regeneration in Lusophone African Literature and Culture (1999), Niyi Afolabi states that though the term regeneration might not be a novelty in literature, when taking an African perspective, regeneration is strictly connected to degeneration, as (re)birth is inseparable from death. In the beginning of the novel, Rami feels dead inside when she discovers Tony’s extra-conjugal relationships. When she enters her room, and faces her looking glass, she is not able to recognise the woman reflected in it. The image reflected in the mirror appears to be from another dimension. Rami cannot reconcile with the image, which might be an unrecognizable fragment of the self.

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7 Isaacman and Isaacman, 18.
Unlike Rami, the self in the mirror appears to be free of constraints; the woman on the other side can make choices regarding her own life. The woman in the mirror interacts with Rami, gives advice, exhorts her, and, in many ways, guides Rami toward her subjectivity. As Rami accepts the image in the mirror as her lost self, she finds the power to make a difference in the lives of those women who have materially less than she does, are more marginalised in society, and who thus have fewer opportunities. Rami finds strength and decides to meet each one of her co-wives.

Stephanie Urdang, in her book *And Still They Dance* (1989), comments that ‘Dance is a vibrant expression of Mozambican zest of life.’ Urdang remarks on the ways that dance and performing are important parts of Mozambican culture. People not only dance to celebrate, they also dance to fight and to heal. In *Niketche*, Rami is disconnected from her culture and initially she is unable to understand why the image in the mirror dances. The self in the mirror tells Rami that dance is healing. When the woman in the mirror starts to dance, the image makes Rami recollect her cultural memory. The protagonist does not recognise the image in the mirror that appears to be false and disconnected. She gets mad when the woman in the mirror starts to dance and asks: ‘Por que danças, tu, espelho meu?’ [Why do you dance, my mirror?] (18) The image reminds her that dance is part of a culture:

Danço sobre a vida e sobre a morte. Danço sobre a tristeza e a solidão. Piso para o fundo da terra todos os males que me torturam ... A dança é uma prece. Na dança celebro a vida enquanto aguardo a morte.

[I dance over life and death. I dance over sadness and loneliness. I send to the bottom of the earth all evils that tortured me ... Dance is a prayer. By dancing I celebrate life while awaiting death] (*Niketche*, 18).

Rami is in the liminal space. An educated woman from the south, she does not know how to perform African dances or rituals. The self in the mirror dances to remind her of her culture and the symbolism implied in performance and dance. Through memory, she reconstructs what is meaningful in her culture to reconcile with the self in the mirror. The image dances to educate Rami about the importance of continuity in a modern environment where changes become overwhelming. The self in the mirror reconnects her with culture. This reconnection makes her regenerate.

As the image forces Rami to remember the social function of dancing and performing in African cultures, Chiziane’s narrative not only regenerates cultural tradition through storytelling, but also makes a clear point about that cultural multiplicity might be part and parcel of subject-formation in the postcolonial Mozambique. By bringing women from several parts of Mozambique, the text not only highlights regional differences, but also focuses on women’s marginalisation.

The quest for women’s empowerment aligns *Niketche* with texts of other African women writers, such as Ama Ata Aidoo, Mariama Ba, Werewere Liking and others. Some of these women writers have acknowledged themselves as feminists or African feminists.

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Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo envisages a feminist movement that would seek justice not only for African women but for all African people, suggesting an inclusive movement with a pan-Africanist vision that could integrate all people into the construction of the continent. For her, there is no possibility of African development if women do not take part in the project, thus, ‘every woman and every man should be a feminist – especially if they believe that Africans should take charge of African land.’ For Aidoo, African males should be part of the feminist struggle to empower women in the continent. In her creative writing, Aidoo often presents emerging female characters searching for new roles within their countries.

Perhaps one of the most coherent alternatives to feminism comes from the Cameroonian writer Werewere Liking. Rather than using terms like ‘feminism’ or ‘African feminism’ in her writings, Liking invented the word *misovire*, a French neologism that means ‘male hater.’ In *Elle sera de Jaspe et de Corail* (1983), the *misovire* denounces bad governance in Africa, relating it to the inertia of male leaders and intellectuals. For Irene Assiba D’Almeida, Liking’s invention is ‘all the more important as the creation of the word also creates the function, and the possibility of another reality.’ It is worth noting that while Liking coined a new term to define women’s struggle in contemporary African contexts, she had in mind a common struggle among African women; in her work, she avoids examining specific issues of her own country, but rather adopts a Pan-Africanist approach.

In *Pedagogies of Crossing* (2005), M. Jacqui Alexander remarks that the idea of a Global Feminism, a transnational feminism or the feminism of the majority, often blurs categories of race, culture, and sexuality. She declares that these discourses have been filled with binaries such as oppressor-oppressed. These feminist approaches explain Third World women’s oppressions in terms of their relation to traditional practices, and they propose feminism as a way to save women from their own patriarchal traditions. Alexander warns of the dangers of subsuming the local into the global through applying the Western experience to the rest of the world. Certainly, if an ideal global feminism puts all women in one box in order to examine how they are oppressed by nature and culture, these women then become victims to be saved from their own backwardness and ignorance. Jacqui Alexander’s work aligns with Chandra Mohanty’s in advising us on how to conduct our practices from the position where local and global interests might converge and diverge, since categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality are differently nuanced in different locations.

*Niketche* brings to light a bond of solidarity and sisterhood created among these women. The narrative deals with women’s perspectives in the history of the decolonisation of Mozambique as women efface the country’s boundary between north and south. While Rami takes advantage of her colonial education and privileged economic status to help northern women overcome...
poverty, the women teach her to how to dance the *niketche*. By recreating traditional practices in urban Maputo, Mozambique, she appropriates and subverts cultural practices. While Rami and her co-wives unveil their sexual desires, Chiziane makes them public through the literary narrative. Sexual desire and pleasure are crucial to the narrative as they are turned into a parody to express other desires about women’s inclusion as decision-makers in the public spheres of the postcolonial nation.

*Niketche* also questions government’s policies that interfere in women’s lives, such as polygamous marriages. Mozambican nationalists banished polygamy in the country, however African men, like Tony, reinvent the practice in different ways. He has five wives, each one from a different part of the country and from a different ethnic group. Rami recognises that Tony is not a polygamist husband, rather he takes advantage of a system to appropriate as many women as possible. She criticises the ways that Tony exploits the system: ‘Que sistema agradável é a poligamia! Poligamia não é substituir mulher nenhuma... esperar que uma envelheça para trocá-la por outra’ [What a nice system polygamy is! Polygamy is not replacing a woman … expecting one to get older to exchange her for another one.] (96). Rami’s criticism is not about polygamy but about the ways that her husband utilises the traditional practice. ‘No caso do Tony são várias famílias dispersas com um só homem. Não é poligamia coisa nenhuma, mas uma imitação grotesca de um sistema que mal domina’ [ In Tony’s case, there are several dispersed families with one man only. This is not Polygamy. It is nothing but a grotesque imitation of a system that he barely controls] (96).

The theme of polygamy in African literature has generated several debates with some writers positioning themselves in favour of polygamy, and others firmly denying the possibility of accepting it. In the introduction of *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature* (1986), Carole Boyce Davies outlined the main fundamentals of African feminism and recognised polygamy as part of a feminist agenda that seeks women’s empowerment.¹⁵ However, other writers, such as Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, affirm that though some women defend the polygamous system by arguing that in traditional cultures a woman can benefit from co-wives helping with the household work, she firmly believes that there is no justification to maintain polygamy in postcolonial Africa, especially in the cities. She considers the system oppressive while suggesting that those women who accept it might be contributing to their own victimisation.¹⁶ Irene Assiba D’Almeida also suggests that those in the academic world tend to idealise polygamy, showing a positive side that does not often coincide with the lives of actual women who are generally forced to endure polygamy.

In African novels, this theme has been discussed, focusing on different aspects of the institution of polygamy. For instance, in Mariama Bâ’s *So Long a Letter* (1989), the protagonist is victimised by an institution that seems to have lost its significance in urban Dakar. Modu, a powerful man, chooses a teenager to be his second wife and ultimately abandons his family. On the other hand, Binetou, his second wife, accepts the marriage as a viable way to gain a stable economic life. Mariama Bâ’s novel does not acknowledge any positive aspects of polygamy and,

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while Davies defends that women in Africa should search for a new definition of polygamy that fits in postcolonial African societies, Bâ says that every form of polygamy in an urban environment runs the risk of being distorted.

In Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Changes* (1991), the protagonist enters a polygamous relationship to have more freedom and sexual pleasure. After her divorce, Esi falls in love with Ali, a very charming and handsome married man. In this new relationship, she has a perfect space to express her sexual desires and the freedom to focus on her career. The polygamous relationship becomes the perfect site for Esi to combine all her aspirations; she has her house to herself and receives a man on days when she is willing to have a nice chat and a good night of love-making. Every time Ali comes to her house after his long absences, Esi is fulfilled sexually in a way she never felt before. The quality of sex that Esi has with Ali gives her security to accept Ali’s proposal of marriage, becoming his second wife. Though Esi will be involved in a polygamous relationship, she is not the victimised wife who does not have the husband at home at all times. On the contrary, at the beginning she feels fulfilled by this kind of agreement. She finally has a perfect relationship in which she can be herself without having to deal with a man who interferes in her life. Ali is the perfect match for an independent woman with an established career. In her relationship with Ali, she attempts to combine ‘gender equality with sexual desire.’

By calling Tony’s system a grotesque imitation of polygamy, Rami accuses her husband of unfairness. Tony manipulates his wealth and power to abuse polygamy, refusing to respect the traditions and rules that are intended to govern the system. In addition, he declares himself a Christian, further complicating his relationship to culture. Rami does not intend to fight polygamy; however, she struggles to combat its distortion and insists that if Tony is going to take many wives, he must recognise each woman, pay the dowry, and assist with all the children. For the wives, Tony needs to be genuinely polygamous; he has to respect the conventions of the system.

Clear that it is not polygamy but rather the breaking of polygamy’s rules that is the issue, Rami unites all the wives and children, and introduces them to friends, family, and important members of the community such as the priest and Tony’s co-workers during a celebration of Tony’s birthday. All the family and important people are present in Rami’s house, and she introduces the four wives, telling everybody that Tony is not the Christian he pretends to be. He is an African man, a guardian of African traditions, and a polygamist. Rami’s husband is confronted with the contradictions in his own identity. Colonialism intended to produce a repetition of the European man, thus, Tony is, as Homi Bhabha suggests, ‘a partial vision of the colonizer’s presence’ Race, culture, and history contribute to disturb Tony’s postcolonial self; the fragmentation of his identity leads him to an unstable position. He is a polygamist who defends his cultural traditions, but, in the postcolonial Mozambique, he is also supposed to be a married, Christian man.

Rami, in satiric tone, compares Tony’s polygamy with the national project proposed by Frelimo: ‘Em matéria de amor o Tony simboliza a unidade nacional’ [In matters of love, Tony

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symbolises the national unity] (161). Tony’s connection with women from different parts of Mozambique is significant to Rami, and she sarcastically calls him a national man, comparing him to the national unity. Chiziane’s narrative deconstructs discourses of cultural integration central to national discourse. Frelimo’s main project was to eliminate differences in order to pursue its national cohesion. However, it had to eliminate all forms of tribalism and any cultural aspect that they considered oppressive to people.

Frelimo spoke out against traditional practices such as polygamy and lobolo (dowry) that could hold women back, putting them in a position of subordination. Frelimo argued that ‘just because a custom is African does not mean that it unquestionably enhances African life, and therefore fails to oppress.’ To address women’s issues, Frelimo supported OMM (Organização da Mulher Moçambicana) [Mozambican woman Organization] that functioned as an arm of the party. OMM backed many campaigns to end polygamy and lobolo in Mozambique. Despite Frelimo’s and OMM’s intentions to end women’s oppression, some groups of women criticised the government, claiming that even though women participated in the revolution, they were excluded from the party leadership – high-ranking members of the party were all male. For most dissidents, Frelimo assimilated all differences within the country under the umbrella of a class struggle.

Conceição Osório suggests that Marxist struggle provided women with a formal space to claim equality, however women’s voices in the revolutionary struggle did not translate into a change in gender relations. Within the political party women did not occupy positions of power always given to males, thus, revealing the main contradiction within the party concerning gender discourse and practice as women continued to be subordinated to men even within the political party. Though women participated in the revolutionary struggle, they continued to face restrictions in gaining leadership positions in a party where all leaders were male such as in the Executive and Central Committee of Frelimo. As OMM rejected colonial policies and some traditional practices understood as oppressive to women, such as polygamy, payment of the dowry, initiation rites, and others, the abolition of these practices become part of the struggle to free women from the authority of patriarchy. However, inside the Marxist party women faced a system of exclusion where, as Osório affirms, ‘forms of male domination were not called into question and that those in power relegated women to the role companion to committed men.’

Kathleen Sheldon states that OMM and Frelimo’s policies regarding traditional practices displeased many women, especially those women from the northern part of the country where most ethnic groups, such as Makonde and Makua, do not consider polygamy an oppressive institution as it is a way to provide women with an opportunity to marry and have a family. OMM and Frelimo’s liberation agenda included the abolition of polygamy as part of the struggle to free women from oppression without giving those women the chance to choose which marriage arrangements they would find suitable to their situations. Concerning the policies regarding the initiation rites, OMM saw the rites as a way to teach women to be subservient, to perform roles as wives, and to serve their husbands, thus being a system that reproduced male

19 Urdang, 2002.
21 Osório, 138
domination. Contradictorily, some Mozambican women saw the rites as a female space where women form a community to exchange their experiences and learn from each other.

The government had a commitment to create policies and implement legislation to benefit women, such as maternity leave for 60 days with a pay and child care, however, these policies had limited effects as the legislation could not benefit those women who work in agriculture or who do not have paid employment. As most women worked in their small gardens and family plots, governmental policies could not benefit those who needed them most. For those women, policies did not grant any benefits and changes did not occur.

The war in the 1980s hardened women’s lives because they were affected by the devastation of rural areas that contributed to poverty and displacement. Most of these women did not have the formal education needed to get a job in urban areas, thus they were stranded. The lack of education restricted opportunities for the majority of women who remained in poverty. In addition, austerity measures imposed by World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) have made women’s lives even more difficult. As Molara Ogundipe-Leslie affirms: ‘Women in labor process became the ‘proletariat’ of the proletariats, becoming more subordinated in the new socioeconomic schemes’23 While Rami’s husband attempts to secure his privilege of having five wives or as many as he is able to support, he does not realise that his powerful situation is also a result of colonial history. Through his connection to the colonialists, he can blend into the spheres of power and acquire wealth and privilege. While the colonial enterprise tried to banish some traditional practices that safeguard male privilege, it also generated disparate economic conditions, calcifying gender inequities. Like Frelimo's nationalism, Tony’s masculinity suppresses cultural difference. Because of his privileged situation as a high-ranking police officer, wealthy, and powerful, he is able to connect to each region of the country without running the risk of fragmentation – maintaining an apparent unity. He becomes the perfect symbol of the nation, a southern assimilated African man, educated, and wealthy who is able to forge an integration of diverse ethnic communities through appropriation. Nevertheless, Tony’s identity is somewhat disturbing, because while his African identity gives him license to be polygamous, his Christianity identity thwarts it, imposing monogamy on him. Tony’s African identity also becomes counterfeit in a postcolonial context where he is seen as an adulterous, rather than a polygamous, man. In many ways, Tony is forced to cope with his ambiguous identity that embodies multiple cultures – Mozambican/African and Portuguese. His privileged position enables his fragmentation. As an assimilated Christian African man, he is supposed to assume or flatten cultural difference, but his African culture marks difference and opposition to the European norm. Tony assumes a paradoxical role. While his identity has an irreconcilable aspect, he is also seen as an icon for national unification. This very project is destabilised by his African identity.

Mozambican government, after the decolonisation process, recognised and legitimised the Portuguese. For instance, the European language functioned as one of the means to cement and to promote the unity as different ethnic groups got together within the borders of the emerging nation. Frelimo decided to maintain Portuguese as the national official language. Like many other nationalist leaders across Africa, Frelimo opted not to choose one of the local languages to be the national language since the decision could instigate ethnic disputes. Some groups could argue that one ethnic group was being privileged to the detriment of others. Phillip Rothwell

23 Ogundipe-Leslie, 108

claims that government of President Samora Machel enforced Portuguese language as the only language through which to imagine Mozambique.24 Frelimo also believed that keeping Portuguese as an official language could connect Mozambique to other parts of the world, such as Brazil and other Lusophone colonies in Africa. Though Portuguese became the official language, at that time, only a few Mozambicans could learn the colonial language because the majority of the population did not have access to education. By avoiding linguistic multiplicity, nationalist government tried to avoid fragmentation. Chiziane appropriates the Portuguese language to write her story, thus imagining a nation where multiple cultures become acknowledged and legitimate. The European language, through her writing, becomes a tool to evidence Mozambican cultural diversity.

However, Chiziane’s portrays Africa as fragmented and diverse as women’s identities. Africa is metonymically represented as a woman who suffers exploration. Rami compares Tony’s wives’ destinies with the destiny of Mother Africa.

Há dias conheci uma mulher do interior da Zambézia. Tem cinco filhos já crescidos. O primeiro. Um mulato esbelto, é dos portugueses que a violaram durante a Guerra colonial. O Segundo, um preto, … é fruto da outra violação dos guerrilheiros de libertação da mesma Guerra colonial. … A primeira e a segunda vez foi violada, mas a terceira e a quarta entregou-se de livre vontade, porque se sentia especializada em violação sexual.

[I met a woman from the interior of Zambezia. She has five grown children. The first son is a slim mulatto from the Portuguese who raped her during the colonial war. The second, a black, … the fruit of another violation, from the guerrilla war of liberation … The first and second time I was violated, but the third and fourth I surrendered willingly, because I was a specialist in sexual violation.] (277)

The first son is a mulatto, a consequence of Portuguese invasion, the second one is an elegant Black, the consequence of another abuse. For Rami, the authors of the second violation are Africans themselves. She accuses the new government of continuing many of the Portuguese policies. The fifth child is certainly representative of democracy, when people have the chance to choose their leader. The raped woman is Africa, in general, and Mozambique, in particular. Rami parodies the comparison between Africa and women, a trope employed by colonialists and African male nationalists. For Rami, as Mother Africa, women are relegated to spheres of abstraction where their voices tend not to be heard. In Rami’s analysis, Africa is as exploited, abused, and humiliated as African women themselves.

Nationalist rhetoric thus frequently utilised women’s bodies as metaphors for the land, and their poems were hymns praising a beloved motherland, or Mother Africa, subjected to patriarchal power, thus creating a mythical ‘African woman’ who is always ready to sacrifice herself for the sons of her nations. Women’s identities are connected to the land, or to mythical mothers, thus being ‘virtually silent observers who simply fulfilled their destiny without questioning it or the structures that sanctioned the roles they were made to assume.’25

Niketche also challenges nationalist discourses that reinforced the patriarchal concept of the African continent as a motherland where her children come back to be nurtured and get strength. Chiziane’s perspective evidences Africa as a place of suffering, especially for women. While women may not despise their cultural roots, some also cannot accept the image of a fertile mother who has been often present in many nationalist narratives, as is the case in Senghor’s Negritude writings. As men struggle against the injustices of colonialism and search for the spirituality of Mother Africa to give them strength to fight the colonisers, women’s struggles are much more complex. Elleke Boehmer suggests that to women of color, motherland might not mean ‘home’ because they need ‘to resist the triple oppression or marginalization.’

Boehmer emphasises the ways that nationalist politics in Africa excluded the discussion about gender hierarchies and the need for female participation in the spheres of power. Though women participated in struggles of independence, their efforts were frequently not recognised by their male counterparts who became the leaders of the newly independent nations. In these masculine and nationalist narratives, women might occupy an erotic place or a spiritual place, as mothers of the nation or Mother Africa. In these cases, the subjects of the nations are the male heroes. When the trope of Mother Africa is applied to women, women’s function may be to nurture the males who will be in charge of constructing the new nations.

Chiziane’s novel examines some traditions that tend to function to the detriment of women, as is the case of the levirate marriage or kutchinga. During one of Tony’s escapades to Paris with another woman, his family thinks he is dead and Rami executes all the rituals of widow. One of these practices establishes that women should go through the kutchinga ritual. In this ritual, the husband’s eldest brother must have sexual relations with the widow eight days after the death of her husband. In the novel, Rami complains about the rituals she has to go through, such as cutting her hair, being locked in a room and so on, but the protagonist comments that the best part will be the kutchinga and she will do everything possible to have sexual pleasure. During the funeral, Rami knows already that Tony is not dead, but all she wants is for her husband to not return before the kutchinga. The kutchinga is ironically reversed and becomes a moment of sexual pleasure:

Olho para o Levy com olhos gulosos. Ele será o meu purificador sexual, a decisão já foi tomada, ele acatou-a com prazer ... Daqui a oito dias vou-me despir. Dançar niketche só para ele.

[I look at Levy with hungry eyes. He will be my sexual cleanser; the decision has already been taken; he obeyed with pleasure. Soon I'll be in his arms during kutchinga ceremony. I will dance the niketche only for him.] (220)

Rami reinvents the kutchinga by affirming that she will make sure to enjoy the moment with the brother-in-law. The kutchinga ritual is a way to exorcise the dead, giving the partner freedom to reinitiate her sexual life. It is a cleansing ritual in which the widow disconnects from the deceased husband. Through the kutchinga the widow inaugurates a new life, thus the ritual is part of the purification. As Audrey Richards suggests, the ritual is a way to ‘‘take the death off

the living partner.’27 It is a ritual to remove the deceased’s spirit from the living spouse.

Nevertheless, Rami subverts the ritual and takes advantage of the moment to have sexual pleasure. By deconstructing the ritual’s function, Rami empowers herself and becomes subject. The ritual would not be complete without the dance practiced by women during the ceremony. In an affirmation of her newly found sense of self, Rami – despite her age and her weight – says she will dance the niketche and Levi will desire her, while she has sexual pleasure. Through her dance, Rami achieves her liberation in terms of sexuality and empowerment. She also finds her voice on issues concerning the continuity and change of African traditions in a society where male privilege is secured by any and all means.

**Conclusion**

Though the allegory of women uncovering their bodies and unveiling their sexual desires, Chiziane’s narrative deals with the construction of women’s subjectivity and the inclusion of their voices in national affairs. As female characters subvert traditions, they denounce the incoherence of political policies when dealing with some circumstances of women’s daily lives. In the novel, while polygamy or girls’ initiation rites seemed to be abolished to protect women’s rights, patriarchal privilege is still ingrained in the society. Rami realises that only through an alliance among women is it possible to challenge patriarchy. Recreating her initiation rites affords Rami a space to be among women as a way of searching for a symbolic compensation. As Richards points out, rituals also function to heal daily life’s repressions or ‘as symbolic compensation for the unpleasant roles which society may assign to an individual or group.’28

With the recreation of the rites, Rami attempts not only to compensate herself but also to compensate the group of women who have to cope with the loss of power. Through the exposure of the rites, Rami brings to light a broader discussion about women’s freedom and choices. Women should be the ones to come together as a collective and decide what to do with culture or how to perform the postcolonial dance. As a woman who received colonial education and who speaks Portuguese, Rami attempts to restore her culture while coming to terms with her hybrid self: a self that pertains to a liminal space where ambivalence becomes part and parcel of the construction of subjectivity.

Rami realises that poverty leads women to accept Tony’s polygamy system because they do not have other means to survive. When women become financially independent, they break away from Tony, recover their voices, and restore their subjectivities. Most importantly, they create a community of women from diverse regions of the country and re-imagine a nation where cultural diversity is part and parcel of the identity construction of Mozambique. In Chiziane’s narrative, the postcolonial nation, instead of being a space for cultural suppression, becomes a place of inclusion and cultural negotiation.

As women freed themselves from Tony, the only wife who stayed with her husband was Rami, the legitimate one according to Christianity. But even Rami was not the same, she was pregnant with a baby that was fruit of the kutchinga, the fruit of sexual pleasure. The new Rami is a different woman, an ‘impure’ woman. The baby represents sexual freedom for Rami, while Tony experiences Rami’s pregnancy as another humiliation. Both Rami and Tony are faced with

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27 Richards, 34.
28 Richards, 118.
negotiating their ambivalent selves as they learn to perform new roles in a postcolonial environment.

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References


Mortality and Memory in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*

Virginia Yeung

Abstract

This article offers a reading of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* as a meditation on human mortality. Set in an alternative England in the 1990s, the tragic love story revolves around the relationship between three human clones. The novel depicts the trio’s growing awareness of their fate and the way they cope with the pressure and anxiety consequent on understanding what lies before them. The article investigates how the situation reflects human beings’ confrontation with mortality. The discussion places an emphasis on the link between mortality and memory, which is posited as a function of the mind that can help assuage the psychic trauma of mortality in the story.

*Keywords*: Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, cloning, memory, narrative, mortality, science fiction

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Introduction

As Walter Benjamin observes, at the heart of storytelling is man’s fate of being mortal: ‘Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death.’¹ Death lies at the core of the novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005) by Kazuo Ishiguro (born 1954). This tragic story, set in an alternative England in the late 1990s, centres on a trio of human clones who have grown up together, and hold close to each other again when they face their predestined demise.

Mirroring human experience in an intensified way, the characters live in the shadow of death. In their adolescent years, they first work as ‘carers,’ supporters of their kind who have started ‘donating’ their organs, and then begin their own ‘donations.’ Focusing on the characters’ growing awareness of their fate and the way they cope with the anxiety, this article offers a reading of the novel as a meditation on human mortality. The story depicts the powerlessness of love, art and other human endeavours over death. Yet by foregrounding heroine Kathy’s attachment to her past, it explores memory as a function of the mind that can help assuage the psychic trauma of mortality. The article investigates the link between mortality and memory perceivable in Kathy’s autobiographical narrative. In writing this work, the author has, in his own dictum, aimed to examine ‘the sadness of the human condition.’² It is worth exploring the novel from the perspective of mortality because human finitude is a crucial factor that leads to the ‘sadness’ of the condition.

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The awareness of mortality

In many stories with a sci-fi touch or dystopian element, scientific terms are used to create a sense of authority or an illusion of reality in the narrative. This is not the case in Never Let Me Go. In place of scientific jargon, the author uses a handful of simple words to describe the characters’ lives. They are referred to as ‘students,’ ‘carers’ and ‘donors’ during different stages of their lives while their childhood teachers are their ‘guardians.’ Euphemisms in the novel have a dual function of masking the enterprise of cloning as well as expressing death-related notions. Echoing the way human beings talk about death and its related concepts, positive-sounding words are used in the story to refer to such ideas. ‘Donation’ means enforced extraction of vital organs, and the clones ‘complete’ or die after the donations. Such euphemisms are closely linked to the notion of death because cloning is a science born out of human beings’ wish to exercise control over their mortality.

The fictional clones’ short, condensed lives magnify ‘being-toward-death,’ a mode in which all human beings live, according to Heidegger. The early part of the novel mainly describes the characters’ childhood. One of the core areas of Kathy’s recollection of her childhood is how the students at Hailsham, a boarding school-like institution for young clones, gain knowledge of their identity and unalterable fate.

The text positions the reader as someone with a similar background as the heroine, with Kathy interspersing her narration with phrases such as ‘I don’t know how it was where you were’ (13, 67) and ‘I don’t know if you had “collections” where you were’ (38). This setup spares the narrator the need to explain when she is talking about aspects of their lives that are unique to their kind. The result is an opaque text. It is only later in the story that information gaps are filled and earlier happenings become comprehensible to readers. For example, near the start of the novel, Kathy says that the students had to ‘have some form of medical almost every week’ (13). It is impossible for readers to know the significance of this until they obtain more knowledge later. The novel’s intelligibility and effect relies heavily on what Brooks terms ‘anticipation of retrospection,’ an awareness on the reader’s part that ‘what remains to be read will restructure the provisional meanings of the already read.’ The way readers develop a full understanding of the story resembles the process by which the students comprehend their fate. It is a winding process with many happenings making sense only in hindsight.

Kathy recalls that she ‘always knew about donations in some vague way, even as early as six or seven’ (81, italics original). It is a subject the children strictly avoid, as they notice that the guardians always get awkward when they come near such territory. In Kathy’s description the subject ‘embarrassed’ them (69, italics original). When they were nine or ten, they once punished a student severely for raising a question about smoking with a teacher called Miss

3 Subsequent references to words used in a special sense are not set off in quotation marks following usage in the novel.
5 All quotations of the novel are from Kazuo Ishiguro, Never Let Me Go (London: Faber and Faber, 2005).
Lucy, driving her to say that they must keep themselves healthy because they are ‘special’ (68, italics original).

While information trickles down to the students from an early age, the topic is discussed more openly by the time they reach their teenage years. Teachers mix in matters about the donations during lectures on sex. Kathy and Ruth remember one that took place when they were around thirteen. The teacher, Miss Emily, first talked about sex and then shifted the topic to the impossibility of the students having babies. The information did not provoke a great reaction because the students’ minds were focused on the sex lecture, a terrain which teens are naturally curious about. Knowledge about their identity is thus disclosed in a controlled way, building up an ambiguous feeling in the students of being ‘told and not told’ (79, 81, 82, 87). From when they were around thirteen, their attitude toward their future changed. It was still an awkward area but they started to make jokes about it ‘in much the same way we joked about sex’ (83).

Kathy’s memory of Hailsham includes two incidents that are pivotal to the characters’ growth. To test the bold, perceptive Ruth’s theory that Madame, who comes to Hailsham several times a year to collect the students’ art works, always keeps a distance from them because she is scared of them, the students devise a ploy. They will move straight toward her as a group when she arrives. Madame’s reaction proves that Ruth’s hypothesis is correct. She is afraid of them, ‘in the same way someone might be afraid of spiders’ (35). The experience gives the eight-year-olds a ‘cold moment’ (36), alerting them to the fact they are ‘something troubling and strange’ (36) in the eyes of outsider. They face an even harsher moment of truth at the age of fifteen, a year before they leave Hailsham. Miss Lucy, who disagrees with the institution’s policy of withholding information from the students, one day explains their destined path to them. With the ‘told and not told’ turned into explicit knowledge, the students’ perception about their future changes again:

It was after that day, jokes about donations faded away, and we [the students] started to think properly about things. If anything, the donations went back to being a subject to be avoided, but not in the way it had been when we were younger. This time round it wasn’t awkward or embarrassing any more; just sombre and serious. (87)

Hailsham provides the characters with a memorable childhood, a sense of prestige among clones from other institutions. The Hailsham experience is also a process through which the characters discover and learn to accept their identity. When they are small, they sense their destined role as a vague, childish embarrassment. In teenage years they adopt a joking, in other words, evasive attitude. When they grow into young adults, they understand it as something ‘sombre and serious’ (87).

The process parallels human conceptualisation of death. Piagetian research has established that children go through consistent stages in their understanding of death. When their cognitive development has reached a certain level, they are able to conceptualise death as a biological fact of life. The grown-up clones’ ‘sombreness and seriousness’ when they ponder the donations reflects and highlights human beings’ reaction toward mortality, the unconscious fear that sinks deep into the mind with maturation of the death concept. Heidegger argues that mortality is a

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condition exclusive to human beings. He explains that ‘mortals are they who can experience death as death.’ Being devoid of consciousness and language, it is impossible for animals to ‘experience death as death.’ Thus, they merely perish, without any prior awareness of finitude during their life-time. Following this vein, mortality can be interpreted as a privilege of humankind, a symbol of its superiority in being the only species endowed with an intellectual and emotional dimension. But mortality as knowledge has a downside. Unlike other living creatures, human beings face death not only once at the end point. Awareness puts them under the pressure of the prospect of death throughout their lives.

This pressure is subtly reflected through the male protagonist Tommy in the novel. He is described as being prone to temper tantrums since early childhood. Not being creative or talented in arts, an area that Hailsham highly values, he is often the object of teasing and student pranks which causes him to fly into frequent rages. In later years, he gains better control of his emotions and grows into a gentle, affable young man. But near the end of the novel, there is a scene that reminds us of his earlier disposition. Having heard the rumor that it might be possible for clones who are genuinely in love to get a deferral for completing donations, Tommy and Kathy, who have finally become lovers, go to Madame to make their request. The two leave in great disappointment after being told that deferral is impossible. During the drive back, Tommy asks Kathy to stop the car and let him get out for a while. Soon after, Kathy hears screams. She gets out and sees Tommy in a muddy field, ‘raging, shouting, flinging his fists and kicking out’ (269). The emotional outburst is a consequence of thwarted hope, yet it leads Kathy to a deeper understanding of his fits and tantrums:

‘I was thinking,’ I said, ‘about back then, at Hailsham, when you used to go bonkers like that, and we couldn’t understand it. We couldn’t understand how you could ever get like that ... I was thinking maybe the reason you used to get like that was because at some level you always knew.’ (270, italics original)

Tommy dismisses the idea at first, but after a moment he says: ‘ ... Maybe I did know, somewhere deep down. Something the rest of you didn’t’ (270).

The clones suffer a much crueler fate than human beings. But readers can resonate with Tommy’s feelings, given the impermanence of their own lives. The heroine’s placid narration has an intense undertone. Noticing the underlying tension and sense of existential angst that pervades the story, Harrison makes the much quoted comment that the novel is ‘about why we don’t explode, why we don’t just wake up one day and go sobbing and crying down the street, kicking everything to pieces out of the raw, infuriating, completely personal sense of our lives never having been what they could have been.’

The novel leads us to contemplate our existence, ‘why we don’t explode,’ by making the characters totally passive. Ishiguro explains their passivity by saying that in all his works he tries to ‘create a situation where the characters are emotionally slightly eccentric.’ One can recall

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10 Sean Matthews, ‘I’m Sorry I Can’t Say More: An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro,’ *Kazuo Ishiguro: Contemporary*
Etsuko’s indulgence in an illusory past to try to survive her daughter’s suicide in *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and Stevens’s self-deception and repression in *The Remains of the Day* (1989). The clones are ‘eccentric’ in the sense that they ‘lack volition and agency’\(^\text{11}\) and they quietly accept the dark, brutal program without any spirit of rebellion or defiance. The author has created this attitude as a magnified version of human passivity with respect to the unalterable facts of life. He claims that ‘we are much more passive than we’d like to think’\(^\text{12}\) and he explains that he has imagined the clones’ plight as a metaphor for the human condition:

> I suppose, ultimately, I wanted to write a book about how people accept that we are mortal and we can’t get away from this, and that after a certain point we are all going to die, we won’t live forever. There are various ways to rage against that, but in the end we have to accept it and there are different reactions to it. So I wanted the characters in *Never Let Me Go* to react to this horrible programme they seem to be subjected to in much the same way in which we accept the human condition, accept ageing, and falling to bits, and dying.\(^\text{13}\)

There are different reasons behind the clone characters’ acquiescence in the face of brutality and human beings’ quiet acceptance of death. The clones’ passivity is a result of childhood indoctrination and close invigilation.\(^\text{14}\) Human beings embrace the notion of death because they know their physical limitations. The metaphorical relationship focuses more on the psychological tension that arises from facing an inescapable situation, an unalterable state that one has no hope of changing.

**Confronting mortality**

In an interesting account of how human will to immortality has driven the growth of civilisation, Cave offers four ‘immortality narratives’ that he suggests explain the four basic forms of human attempts at everlasting life: preserving the physical body by searching for the elixir of life in the past and looking to medical science in the present; hoping for resurrection; belief in the immortal soul; and leaving a legacy, in such forms as cultural works and biological offspring.\(^\text{15}\) This section examines the will to life in the clones and compares it with the human condition.

Fully accepting their ultimate fate as organ providers, the clones understand that they can keep their physical body intact only until a certain time. Hence preserving the physical body through medical means is of no relevance to them. Living in a closed, godless world with neither a mythical tradition nor a religious dimension, the possibility of resurrection and an immortal soul are also not their concern. They are engineered in a way that biological reproduction is

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\(^{12}\) Sean 124.

\(^{13}\) Sean 124.

\(^{14}\) In the film version *Never Let Me Go* (2010), the children have to scan their wristband when they move about in Hailsham, suggesting that they are being tracked and managed like a herd of animals.

impossible, but they believe in love and creativity, and they attempt to leave a legacy by building an identity through structuring and narrating their past experience.

Ishiguro has not written the novel with the intention of representing a discussion of the ethical justifications of human cloning. But the story inherently raises the philosophical question of whether the clones can be defined as human. They differ very little from normal human beings in all perceivable aspects, yet readers are from time to time reminded of their alien quality. For example, Miss Emily confesses that ‘We’re all afraid of you’ (264, italics original). Critics who read the novel as a criticism of social injustices and prejudices explicitly or implicitly are acknowledging the clones’ human qualities. McDonald defends Kathy’s humanness by describing the human world as one that ‘goes so far as to disenfranchise her from the human mass.’ On the other hand, Menand notices something ‘animatronic’ about them. If a human-like physicality and an emotional and intellectual faculty do not sufficiently prove humanness, in the novel the Hailsham teachers try to show that the clones are in no way ‘less than fully human’ (256) by showcasing their artistic talents.

Gastil proclaims that ‘all forms of life behave as if persistence into the future – immortality – were the basic goal of their existence.’ Artistic works have a special place in the human world because they are born out of the human desire to transcend physical life. They prove that humankind has interiority which is not subject to decadence and demise as the physical body is, and hence that there is a timeless dimension in human existence. In a comparable manner, the teachers encourage the students to engage in artistic creation so that they can prove to the outside world that they possess something deeper inside, that they have a soul. Their intellectual life is further evidence of their ‘human’ quality. Kathy remembers that in their years in the Cottages, a place that bridges Hailsham and the outside world, she reads a lot and the students would spend time ‘arguing about poetry or philosophy,’ and having ‘meandering discussions around the table about Kafka or Picasso’ (117). Their aspiration for a life enriched by arts and culture manifests volition, a will to live despite their obedience and passivity.

As the story progresses the theme of art and creativity takes on further significance, being entangled with the theme of love. A memorable event that takes place during the Cottages years is a trip to Norfolk. During the expedition, Ruth, Kathy and Tommy learn from their fellow travellers that the privileged Hailsham students stand a chance of being granted deferral of donor operations if they are really in love. Following their visit to a store, where they find a Never Let Me Go tape, similar to the one Kathy had when she was small, Tommy and Kathy hold a conversation. Tommy proposes a theory that seems to logically connect the deferral and their teachers’ practice of taking away their best art works to the mysterious Gallery when they were young. He conjectures that the works were taken away because they revealed the students’ inner self. The teachers needed them when they judged whether or not a couple was really in love and whether or not a deferral should be granted. Tommy and Ruth are still a couple at that time, yet the acquisition of the tape and Tommy’s supposition mark the beginning of a series of changes

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17 Louis Menand, ‘Something About Kathy,’ The New Yorker 81.6 (28 March 2005) 78-79.
in the trio’s relationship – their drifting apart soon after, and Kathy and Tommy becoming lovers years later.

The moment of *anagnorisis* – the transformation from ignorance to knowledge – comes late in this work. It arrives when Tommy and Ruth confront Madame and Miss Emily near the end of the novel. This is when the two clones understand the true purposes of the Gallery and that deferral is a fabricated tale. In their discussion of *Never Let Me Go* as a dystopian novel, Toker and Chertoff cite the theme of love as a case in point as to how Ishiguro reshapes the topoi of dystopian fiction in his work. In sci-fi novels such as *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty Four*, love is ‘a subversive force that threatens the stability of the system’. 19 But in Ishiguro’s dystopia, love not only fails to pose any challenge to the system, it ‘becomes a narcotic, one that goes a long way to reconcile Hailsham graduates with their predicament’. 20 The novel does not portray love and art as meaningless and futile. It highlights the warmth Kathy and Tommy draw from their transient yet supportive and genuine relationship. That Tommy carries on with his animal drawings after the meeting with the old ladies also shows that he has not created them solely in the hope of gaining a deferral; he has developed a real interest in the art.

The fact that love and art cannot add a few more years to the lovers’ lives in a sense parallels the human condition. It is generally believed in our world that love and art can be immensely transformative and uplifting, but despite all they can do to make our lives fulfilling and meaningful, they have little power and influence over our physical mortality.

**Mortality and memory**

Kathy’s autobiographical narrative begins with a self-introduction: ‘My name is Kathy H. I’m thirty-one years old, and I’ve been a carer now for over eleven years’ (3). The main story starts from her childhood. The temporal distance between the narrating and experiencing self, or the protagonist-narrator at a younger age, gradually narrows, and the narration closes with the narrator’s description of a recent experience, a trip she takes alone to Norfolk after Tommy’s death. Before recounting her childhood, Kathy mentions a donor who was once under her care. Having come through a series of operations and being close to death, the donor asks Kathy about Hailsham over and over so that he can ‘remember Hailsham, just like it had been his own childhood’ (5, italics original). Kathy says that this man who tried to graft her childhood memory into his own mind has made her stop resisting the temptation of looking back on her Hailsham days.

The donor’s request makes explicit two things: the consolatory power of memory and the link between memory and death. Memory is an important theme in all of Ishiguro’s novels. His works often highlight the subjective and reconstructive nature of human memory. In *Never Let Me Go* Kathy starts her narration after losing her best friend Ruth and lover Tommy. Her autobiographical account is a reaction to the trauma of these experiences and also to the fact of her own death, which has become imminent with her life as a carer drawing to a close. This section discusses Kathy’s use of memory to alleviate the horror of finitude. It aims to show that


20 Toker and Chertoff 173.
if the ‘allegorical power’ of the novel ‘has to do with its picture of ordinary human life as in fact a culture of death,’ memory is an important part of this culture because it is a psychological phenomenon inherently linked to human fear of death.

Kathy tells her story with great emotional restraint and honesty. When she is not totally confident about the accuracy of her memory, she states clearly that ‘I might have some of it wrong’ (13), ‘I don’t remember exactly’ (25). Phrases such as ‘the way I remember it’ (138), ‘my memory of it is that ...’ (146) imply the possibility of a gap between memory and truth. The fluid and fragile nature of memory is further highlighted in places where Kathy disagrees with Ruth and Tommy about what happened, and where Kathy’s interpretation of the past is shaped by her friends’ remembrances. Pointing at the uncertainties in Kathy’s memory, Mullan describes her as ‘an inadequate narrator.’ However, unlike the unreliable narrator who purposefully hides the truth or misleads the reader or listener, the uncertainties in Kathy’s narration have more to do with her inability to fully grasp the situation.

Currie points out certain features in Kathy’s narration in his analysis of the time structure of the novel. First, as illustrated in such expressions as ‘I’d more or less forgotten about it when ...’ (13), Kathy often recalls events she says she has forgotten for a long time. Currie calls such rediscovery of lost memory ‘remembered forgetting.’ Another temporal feature is ‘recollected anticipation’ (Currie 97). An example is Kathy’s description of Miss Lucy getting into trouble after exposing the truth to the students: ‘After that morning I became convinced something else – perhaps something awful – lay around the corner ... What I didn’t know at the time was that something pretty significant had happened only a few days after I’d seen her in Room 22’ (90, italics original). The fact that Miss Lucy had been dismissed is known by the mature narrator, but not the young Kathy, who only vaguely anticipates that something awful is going to happen.

Whether it is ‘remembered forgetting’ or ‘recollected anticipation,’ Kathy’s nostalgic remembrances can be connected to a deeper psychological mechanism. Nostalgia is, to a number of researchers, a positive emotion. Sedikides and his co-researchers assert that it is a mental exercise that fulfills such functions as ‘enhancement of the self, support of the cultural worldview, and bolstering of relational bonds.’ Kathy’s recollection, ‘a deliberate response to an uncomfortable psychological state’, deepens her understanding of herself and her social environment. It also allows her to reconnect emotionally with her friends, creating a sense of warmth and secure attachment.

Aside from nostalgic emotion, Kathy has tried to recreate the ‘bygone world’ to better understand her past. Structuring one’s past experience and attempting to understand it as a unified whole is essentially an act of establishing an identity. Lockean philosophy holds that

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consciousness constitutes the self and ‘as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person.’26 Locke’s theory emphasises the innate link between personal identity and memory, a ‘consciousness that can be extended backwards to any past action or thought.’ In line with this thinking, many modern memory studies highlight the interrelationship between memory and the self. Cohen considers the defining characteristic of autobiographical memory to be ‘its relationship to the self,’ and she states that the personal events one can remember are ‘the building blocks from which the self is constructed.’27 Through these ‘building blocks’ one can achieve a clearer self-understanding and awareness. A better understanding of the self and its relation with the external world offers psychological comfort in the face of the horror of finitude. Psychologist Pyszczynski and his co-workers state that ‘conceiving of oneself as a valuable participant in a meaningful reality buffers the anxiety associated with the awareness of the inevitability of death.’28 It has the effect of buffering one against death anxieties.

In contrast to Kathy’s seriousness about the preciseness of the ‘bygone world’ she recreates, Ruth believes that the past can be manipulated to one’s own ends. Toward the end of their days together at the Cottages, tension has built up in the relationship between the two girls. A short while before she moves out, Kathy mentions in a conversation with Ruth an old Hailsham rule that students were not allowed to use a certain route in the school area. When Ruth insists that she has no memory of such a rule, Kathy is greatly irritated and she observes that Ruth speaks in a way ‘suddenly so false even an onlooker, if there’d been one, would have seen through it’ (198). The two relate to their pasts in markedly different ways. Kathy is never embarrassed about her collection box, used by Hailsham students to store mementos they acquired in childhood. On the other hand, Ruth throws away her collections having noticed that none of the older residents in the Cottages possesses such a box. Worrying that the past might stand as an obstacle to the present, she discards her treasures in a determination to adjust to the new life. Yet Ruth is not unaware of the emotional support that can be drawn from the warmth of memory. Many years later, when she has become a donor, she confides to Kathy at the medical centre that she wishes she had kept her collection box as well.

In these ways memory is presented as a mental activity with a positive value. It offers something mortals can fall back on when they come face to face with the eventuality of death. Ishiguro again shows his interest in ‘how one uses memory for one’s own purposes, one’s own end.’29 But unlike its role in his other novels, memory in Never Let Me Go is not used as a means of self-deception, denial or suppression in this story. It serves a pathetic and yet worthwhile function of being soothing and consolatory. Near the end of the novel, the theme of remembering and forgetting is again foregrounded. In the climactic scene of Kathy and

28 This is according to a study done by Greenberg et al. in 1986. See Pyszczynski et al. ‘On the Unique Psychological Import of Death: Theme and Variations,’ Psychological Inquiry, 17.4 (2006) 328-356, 344.

Tommy’s confrontation with the aged Madame and Miss Emily, the latter explains to the couple that the public’s attitude toward the organ-harvesting business was a kind of voluntary forgetting before they started their campaign: ‘And for a long time, people preferred to believe these organs appeared from nowhere, or at most that they grew in a type of vacuum ... So for a long time you were kept in the shadows, and people did their best not to think about you’ (257, 258). They achieved some success in raising public concern for the clones’ plight but with the closure of Hailsham ‘they [the public] wanted you [the clones] back in the shadows’ (259).

The heroine’s clinging on to her memories is a struggle against the public’s desire to forget. In Levy’s terms, Kathy’s autobiographical narrative is a ‘subversive act of protest,’ an attempt to ‘make sense of the traumatic past and to assert some form of autonomy in the face of a brutal regime.’ 30 The protest becomes more powerful by positing the existence of a listener. This narrative setup places the autobiographical narrative in a communicative and social framework. The act of narrating turns the heroine’s personal memories into a historical account, something that will remain in people’s memory and thus outlive the narrator’s life on earth. Memory holds no power against death, but it allows human beings to exist beyond their lives in a symbolic form. An extreme case in point is among the Swahili, a culture where the deceased who remain in the thoughts of other people are called the ‘living dead;’ they are not considered completely dead until the last to have known them are gone.31 This cultural belief suggests that human mortality can be understood as an idea covering a wider meaning than corporeal existence, and in a comparable manner, Kathy’s story allows her to live on even after her physical body comes to an end. This attribute of memory is an important factor behind the consolatory warmth that the unique mental activity brings to human mind.

Conclusion

Holding on to and finding solace in memories, Kathy accepts her tragic fate with tranquillity: ‘I’m glad that’s the way it’ll be. It’s like with my memories of Tommy and of Ruth ... I’ll have Hailsham with me, safely in my head, and that’ll be something no one can take away’ (281). Citing ideas such as Ricoeur’s happy memory, Teo observes that Kathy’s longing for her past and her wish to reunite with her deceased lover ‘offer a strange sense of hope that brings a spiritual element to the novel’s final moments’; the remainder of her life will be imbued with ‘a profound happy memory and peace’ (Teo 136).

It is possible to detect a spiritual dimension in Kathy’s serene attitude toward death. But the calm and placid tone also offers a more powerful expression of the extent of the heroine’s suffering. If we take the clones’ story as a metaphor for the human condition, the heroine’s silent acceptance of her situation poignantly expresses, in the author’s own words, ‘the human capacity to accept what must seem like a limited and cruel fate.’32 Human fate is, in a sense, predestined

to be ‘limited and cruel.’ Forster famously said that ‘we move between two darknesses.’\textsuperscript{33} Birth and death are two great unknowns to us, being ‘at the same time experiences and not experiences’.\textsuperscript{34} No matter how much effort is put into the subject, the ‘darkness’ of death will still elicit horror and remain an area humans cannot feel hopeful about, that they despair of achieving a clear understanding of on a logical and intellectual level. The ‘spiritual hope’ in the novel can be interpreted in a different light. Despite its emphasis on the inevitability of death, the story’s ending indicates the possibility of creating meaning in a finite existence. Asked by Tommy about the point of going on with her exhausting work as a carer when all donors will complete or die in the end, Kathy answers that the work is important because it ‘makes a big difference to what a donor’s life’s actually like’ (276). Kathy’s reply hints that one can create value in life even though it is transient, and impermanence does not necessarily equal futility or meaninglessness.

Artistic works are, on one level, aesthetically created memento mori. Within the realm of fiction, a character’s death – actual or figurative, as represented by the story’s end – is one of the elements that most powerfully provoke readers to reflect on life. It is beyond human capability to fully fathom the meaning of death, but the seemingly fruitless labour of contemplating death is not without a constructive side. As stated by Brombert, ‘confronting mortality paradoxically implies being alive, questioning how to live, raising moral issues.’\textsuperscript{35} Ishiguro’s tale of human clones raises a range of humanistic and ethical issues. The backdrop of mortality, the characters’ sense of urgency knowing that they cannot hold on to each other for long because death will force them ‘to let go, drift apart’ (277), and the mixed feeling of sadness, sympathy and unease it creates in readers who can identify the characters as their own shadows, contribute to the story’s inspiring, thought-provoking potential.

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\textsuperscript{34} Forster 57.
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Laura Deane

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Introduction: Culture Wars 2.0?
In 2017, with a Parliament that features the newly-elected Senator Pauline Hanson, flanked by a handful of One Nation members, Australia seems to be entering a new Culture Wars. Senator Hanson’s 2016 maiden speech, much criticised for its scapegoating of Muslim Australians, revisited old ground. Indeed, much of the criticism remarked upon the fact that she seemed to have simply inserted ‘Muslim Australians’ in place of the ‘Asians’ or ‘Aboriginal Australians’ who were represented as the ‘problem’ for Australia back in 1996, when the Culture Wars polarised the nation. The Culture Wars 1.0 were characterised by an over-reaction to the *Mabo* decision of 1992, which polarised the nation by recognising that Native Title was not extinguished by white settlement, and that Terra Nullius was a ‘legal fiction’. The newly-recognised rights of Indigenous Australians to *their* lands resulted in concerted opposition by powerful mining and pastoral lobbies, who argued that the *Mabo* decision diluted their rights to exploit Australian land. The Howard Government joined in, falsely claiming that Native Title legislation would threaten family homes. When the High Court found in the *Wik* case of 1996 that pastoral leases were not extinguished by Native Title, but could ‘co-exist’, the Government seized on the decision to find ways to extinguish Native Title. Howard’s *Wik* 10-point plan inserted a ‘national interest’ provision over Crown lands, and restricted both the time limits for claims to be lodged, and the types of lands that could be claimed. Mining and pastoral interests were reframed as ‘national’ interests, while Indigenous claims to territory were diluted,¹ with Indigenous Land Use agreements effectively extinguishing Native Title when Indigenous and non-Indigenous parties reached an agreement. However, compensatory royalties would be provided to Indigenous traditional owners in exchange for mining or other commercial activities on their lands.² In its dominant usage, ‘settlement’ in the Australian context implies the

¹ For an analysis of this, see Peter Gale, *The Politics of Fear: Lighting the Wik* (Frenchs Forest: Pearson Education, 2004).

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peaceable takeover of Indigenous territories in the name of the British Empire since 1788, with resultant waves of British immigration leading to the production of ‘Australia’ as a nation-state in 1901. These debates demonstrated that it was land – white possession and ownership – that was at stake throughout the following decade in an increasingly divisive debate about the politics of Reconciliation.

The question of how Australia was ‘settled’ was, and remains, a key issue in the vexed questions of Constitutional recognition, reform and Re/conciliation. As this issue of Transnational Literature is published in the very month that marks the 50th anniversary of the 1967 Referendum giving the Federal Parliament the power to make laws for Indigenous Australians, it seems timely to consider the state of Australia’s political relationship with Indigenous Australians through an examination of the current debates about Constitutional Recognition. The promised Referendum on the Constitutional Recognition of Indigenous Australians was to have been held this May, but has again been delayed. Fifty years after that historic Referendum on Indigenous rights, Constitutional recognition seeks to reframe the relationship between the settler state and the Indigenous peoples who have always lived here by instating a Constitutional presence in place of an absence. The move towards Constitutional recognition has strong bipartisan support, with former Prime Minister Tony Abbott arguing in 2015 that it would be a ‘unifying and liberating’ moment for the nation, and the Labor party naming Constitutional Recognition among its ‘100 positive policies’. Current Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull also supports the unifying principles behind the move. That nothing will happen on the 50th anniversary of the 1967 Referendum, which marked an important turning point in the relationship between the state and its Indigenous peoples, should not pass by unremarked. Recognition of Indigenous Australians in the Constitution, or more precisely, in the Preamble to the Constitution, was a 2007 election promise by the Howard Government to deliver a ‘new’ form of Reconciliation. This occurred 10 years after Howard’s notorious appearance at the 1997 Reconciliation Convention, where he refused to apologise to Indigenous Australia in recognition of the Bringing Them Home Inquiry’s recommendations. Instead, Howard stated, he would work towards ‘practical’ Reconciliation, improving Indigenous health, housing, education, and employment. This not only marked a new low in Indigenous affairs, but further derailed the formal process of Reconciliation instituted by Labor in 1991. In 2004, Howard axed the Reconciliation portfolio following a post-election Cabinet reshuffle, and moved to abolish ATSIC, Australia’s first national body representing Indigenous affairs. Reconciliation was formally off the Government’s agenda. However, in 2007, Howard announced that he would amend the Preamble to the Constitution to include Indigenous Australians, in a move toward a

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4 Labor Party, Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, available:
‘new’ Reconciliation, in which Indigenous national representation and land rights were secondary to a practical Reconciliation agenda that aimed to bring about ‘statistical’ equality.\(^5\) Changing the wording of the Preamble was Howard’s belated attempt to recognise the importance of *symbolic* as well as ‘practical’ Reconciliation. This history of political and policy shifts demonstrates the extent to which Indigenous rights to land continue to unsettle the settler nation in its willingness to recognise, and indeed, reconcile with, Indigenous Australia.

**Recognition and Reconciliation**

Constitutional recognition, in the political discourse at least, is represented as a pathway to Reconciliation. Its relevance to Reconciliation is visible in the Australian Government’s latest Closing the Gap Report, where it sits above, or frames, the Government’s statement on Reconciliation:

> The recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia’s Constitution is another step in the journey of healing. It speaks to the nation we are today and the nation we want to become in the future. It also complements the work all Australian states have done in recognising our First Peoples in their constitutions.\(^6\)

However, the character of the reform, whether a statement of recognition should sit in a Preamble to the Constitution or somewhere inside it, and how it should be worded, remain matters of critical debate. The Referendum Council released a discussion paper in 2016,\(^7\) and has been engaging in a process of consultation with Aboriginal communities, which will culminate in a national Indigenous Constitutional Convention to be held at Uluru in in May, coinciding with the anniversary of the 1967 Referendum.\(^8\) Its report will be provided to government by the end of June this year. Key directions for how the nation manages recognition are expected to flow from this process. However, if current indications are anything to go by, a Referendum on Constitutional recognition is unlikely to proceed. A report in the *Australian* at the beginning of April suggests that Indigenous Australians would prefer an Indigenous ‘voice or body in the parliament that could influence law and policymaking’ and offer a ‘substantive’ outcome rather than the ‘minimalist’ constitutional change currently being proposed.\(^9\) The body could have a ‘statutory right to make submissions on any proposed laws affecting Indigenous Australians’, an outcome, notes the *Australian*, that would satisfy Constitutional conservatives as a ‘reasonable

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\(^8\) Notably, the language of the Closing the Gap Report and the language of the Referendum Council differ. The Council’s website describes this as a First Nations Convention: see https://www.referendumcouncil.org.au/dialogues

compromise’. However, the article does not mention the reason that Constitutional conservatives would be so keen offer their support: because it would result in a ‘minimal’ change to the Constitution that would remove references to race and insert a statement of ‘acknowledgement’. The latest of these consultations with Indigenous leaders, held in Adelaide in April, renewed the call for a ‘constitutionally guaranteed’ and ‘properly representative’, rather than ‘hand-picked’, parliamentary body.

The call for such a body reflects the absence of genuine consultation between the Federal Government and Indigenous communities since ATSIC was abolished in 2005, and runs in parallel with the Indigenous campaign for a form of recognition that would encompass some form of Treaty between the Government and Indigenous peoples. As It’s Our Country: Indigenous Arguments for Meaningful Constitutional Recognition makes clear, there is much debate within Indigenous communities about the supposed benefits of Constitutional reform. Several contributors to this volume of critical essays argue that a Treaty should occur alongside a statement of recognition in the nation’s founding document. As Teila Reid contends in ‘Keeping the Fight Alive’, a ‘treaty provides a mechanism outside the Constitution to reformulate the relationship between the state and first peoples’, and could ‘replace a referendum process’ (IOC 158). This is particularly pertinent, as many Indigenous critics remain unconvinced that a Referendum will bring about the change they seek in their relationship with government. Some progress is occurring on this front, with both the South Australian and Victorian Labor governments opening Treaty negotiations with their Indigenous nations in 2016. Indigenous nations are considering a range of models that would provide them with the means to negotiate with State governments, and in South Australia, the Ngarrindjeri Regional Authority’s model has been proposed for other South Australian Indigenous peoples to consider as they formalise political structures and organisations to deal with the treaty process. Activism to bring about a Treaty between Indigenous people and the state has been strengthened by the Rudd–Gillard Government’s 2009 ratification of the United Nations Declarations on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP 2007), which obligates the nation to support Indigenous Australians’ economic, social and cultural rights, rights to land, and rights to self-determination. However, calls for a postcolonial settlement, taking the form of a negotiated agreement, or Treaty, between the Commonwealth and Indigenous peoples are not new. Indeed, such political demands have a long history in the Australian nation-space, originating in the swiftly overturned Batman Treaty of 1835 in Victoria, while, a century later, William Cooper petitioned then British King, George V, for Indigenous representation. Demand for recognition and

10 Fitzpatrick, Communities 9.
representation gained traction with the Yirrkala Bark Petitions of 1963, and the Barunga Statement of 1988, which prompted Prime Minister Bob Hawke to promise – but ultimately, to fail to deliver – formal Treaty negotiations with Australia’s Indigenous peoples. In 2000, Prime Minister Howard refused to countenance Treaty as a resolution of matters between the state and Indigenous Australia, arguing that ‘a nation does not make treaties with itself’. Yet, only a fortnight or so earlier, he had agreed that ‘this land and its waters were settled as colonies without treaty or consent’. In refusing to agree to a process of agreement-making, Howard failed to recognise that settler nations such as Canada, New Zealand and the United States had formalised agreements with their Indigenous peoples, and this had not threatened their national sovereignty.

The Referendum Council noted in 2012 that Canada, the United States and New Zealand all have treaties in place with their Indigenous peoples, conferring forms of dependent-nation, or nation-within-the nation, status on these indigenous nations. In all these jurisdictions, the right of indigenous citizens to self-government and indigenous sovereignty have been recognised at law, while colonisation – that is, the assertion of sovereignty by colonial powers – is understood to have ‘diminished’ rather than extinguished Indigenous sovereignty. By contrast, the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi signed between Maori and Pakeha in New Zealand can be interpreted as ‘cession’ of Indigenous sovereignty, although this is contested between the Maori and English translations. Therefore, Brennan, Gunn, and Williams conclude that recognising Indigenous sovereignty in Australia through the understandings of the concept available in international law is possible, as Treaties in settler nations refer to ‘internal’ sovereignty, rather than ‘external’ sovereignty, which means a nation is internationally recognised as a sovereign political entity. This is underlined by the practice of Australian sovereignty, which is not absolute, but divisible, as the arrangements between the Commonwealth and the States demonstrate. Thus, ‘internal’ sovereignty is already operating, and extending the concept to Indigenous political entities is technically possible in Constitutional law. However, as Stephen Cornell has noted in his 2015 article, ‘Wolves have a Constitution’, in Australia, Indigenous efforts to negotiate ‘substantive’ forms of self-government proceed ‘under conditions that are significantly more hostile’ than in other jurisdictions. Accordingly, Cornell concludes that Indigenous people must actively

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participate in, and work towards, reform of the national Constitution, because Indigenous support will be vital to effect durable change in Indigenous capacity. As he points out:

policies that not only recognize Indigenous aspirations for self-governing power but encourage Indigenous efforts to build capable governments that express Indigenous values and purposes are more likely, in turn, to win Indigenous support. In the effort to address long-standing grievances and difficult socioeconomic problems, such support will be crucial; the record of top-down policy-making designed to improve the welfare of Indigenous peoples is largely a record of failure.17

The texture of Constitutional reform, and the opportunities it affords to bring about a change in the colonial architecture of law and policy that shapes the relationship between the settler nation and the Indigenous communities drawn into that framework, are not without legal and technical challenges, or indeed, objectors. Many of the contributors to It’s Our Country take up these legal and technical issues to argue that Constitutional recognition and Treaty go hand in hand, notably Warren Mundine, Patrick Dodson, Noel Pearson, and Megan Davis. As Pearson argues in ‘There’s no such thing as minimal recognition – there is only recognition’ any ‘meaningful’ recognition can only occur through a combination of ‘rights, representation and treaties/agreements’ that requires ‘constitutional, institutional or legislative reforms’ (IOC 172).

He further contends that Australia should follow Canada’s model, and bring in a suite of practical reforms that ‘involve an increase in power’ through increased participation in decision-making power – a say as well as a seat at the negotiating table – as well as an ‘increase in freedom’, such as freedom from racial discrimination (IOC 168). Together, Pearson argues, Constitutional recognition, a Bill of Rights, and treaty mechanisms would offer an opportunity to ‘perfect our constitutional union and make ours a more complete Commonwealth’ (IOC 179). By contrast, Labor Senator and architect of Reconciliation, Patrick Dodson, argues in ‘Navigating a path towards meaningful change and recognition’ that any improvement in the relations between Indigenous Australians and the nation state must ‘address the structural inequalities’ that have produced the widening gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (IOC 180). He distinguishes between a treaty, which could ‘acknowledge the dispossession that occurred and establish a settlement process to redress and resolve historical grievances’ (IOC 181), noting that Constitutional amendment is not a pre-condition for such a process. Rather, this ‘is a political act that could be achieved legislatively’ (IOC 182). Constitutional recognition alone cannot adequately address these historical injustices, but could instead provide a platform for ‘how parliaments see and deal with us when they make laws that affect us as a people’ (IOC 184). Dodson warns that Indigenous Australians ‘have little cause to trust governments and the democratic parliamentary process’ in the wake of the NT Intervention and the handling of Native

http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1243&context=iipj

17 Cornell 13.
Title after *Mabo* and *Wik* (IOC 184). In addition, because the process to bring Constitutional recognition to the people has been left to ‘drift’ since 2012, public support has subsided, and ‘disillusion’ has set in (IOC 185). Echoing Cornell, he contends that both broad-based and Indigenous support for Constitutional recognition is ‘essential’, but that Indigenous Australia should not settle for minimalist reform if the referendum proposition does not get up in what is an ‘inherently conservative political and institutional landscape’ (IOC 186).

**Towards a Treaty, or Makaratta**

Echoing these sentiments, Megan Davis writes in ‘Ships that Pass in the Night’, that rather than agreeing to accept minimalist reform to the Constitution, many Indigenous leaders are arguing for ‘hardheaded reform’ that would encompass a ‘settlement’ of ‘unfinished business’ (IOC 90). Davis points out that steps towards a settlement are already in place through the commitment to ‘structural reform by Indigenous communities, parliamentary inquiries, commissions and university scholars’, so that both the ‘substance’ and ‘design’ of a settlement can occur even without Constitutional change. However, she notes that although the parliament sought to bring in a three-prong response to the *Mabo* decision, with the aim to provide a statutory framework to negotiate native title claims, a land fund to provide compensation to communities whose native title was extinguished, and a Social Justice Package to settle other unresolved matters, ‘the third prong of the Mabo settlement was never implemented’ (IOC 90). Another blueprint for structural reform leading to a just settlement resides in the work of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR). Both the ATSIC-drafted Social Justice package and CAR’s initiatives contain an ‘artful mix of policy, statute and constitutional amendment’, that far from being ‘ambitious’, are ‘common’ in democracies with Indigenous populations, comprising a ‘run-of-the-mill’, ‘unremarkable and sensible’ negotiated settlement (IOC 90). However, she also warns that the call for a just settlement remains a ‘source of disquiet’ for the settler state, as this requires a recognition that Aboriginal sovereignty was never ‘ceded’, and it is this fundamental ‘grievance’ that substantive reform must address (IOC 92-93). Therefore, Davis concludes, the hardheaded reform that is needed should be in the form of the Yolngu notion of *Makaratta*, which the National Aboriginal Committee adopted at its second conference in 1979. *Makaratta* refers to ‘coming together after conflict’ (IOC 94), and increasingly frames Indigenous calls for Treaty and recognition. The adoption of a *Makaratta* would offer guidelines and principles for how the state engages with ‘first nation polities’, and provide a ‘way forward’ in the process of Reconciliation (IOC 94-95). This, ‘in itself will not overcome the historical injustices’ that shape contemporary inequalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, but would be a ‘useful, productive, and collaborative starting point’ (IOC 96).

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This is particularly important because Australia is the only settler nation not yet to have entered into some form of negotiation or settlement process with Indigenous people. Calls to recognise Indigenous sovereignty through such mechanisms as a Treaty tend to be divisive, with the Expert Panel concluding that:

any proposal relating to constitutional recognition of the sovereign status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples would be highly contested by many Australians, and likely to jeopardise broad public support for the Panel’s recommendations. Such a proposal would not therefore satisfy at least two of the Panel’s principles for assessment of proposals, namely ‘contribute to a more unified and reconciled nation’, and ‘be capable of being supported by an overwhelming majority of Australians from across the political and social spectrums’.

With many states now embarking on a Treaty process, Adelaide Constitutional Reform Dialogue Co-convenor Klynton Wanganeen has noted that the tenor of the relationship between Indigenous Australia and the state is ‘not just about Aboriginal people – it’s a nation-building exercise’.

A Settlement of Terms, or a Threat to the Nation?

It is against this backdrop that another key player from the Culture Wars 1.0 has resurfaced, this time seeking to dissuade Australians from supporting Constitutional recognition. Enter Keith Windschuttle, strident opponent of the political and cultural Left, and a long-term denier of the Stolen Generations. Windschuttle has just published a series of extracts from his latest book, The Break-Up of Australia: The Real Agenda behind Aboriginal Recognition in the journal Quadrant, while an extract entitled ‘Separation, not integration, will result from recognition’, was published in the Weekend Australian’s Inquirer section last October. Windschuttle’s extract forms part of a wider series of articles in the national broadsheet exploring the obstacles, likely impacts, and challenges posed by a Referendum on Constitutional Recognition. It is the arguments presented in It’s Our Country that have prompted Windschuttle’s cynical attempt to re-ignite the Culture Wars of the 1990s, as he objects to the use of our in its title. Windschuttle


20 Stephen Fitzpatrick, ‘Minimal constitutional reform’.

21 See for example, Keith Windschuttle, The Fabrication of Aboriginal History (Sydney: Macleay Press, 2002) and ‘Why there were no stolen generations’, Quadrant 54.1-2 (Jan-Feb 2010) 8-21.

22 Extracts of the book were published in Quadrant as two articles in Nov and Dec 2016.

23 Keith Windschuttle, ‘Separation, not integration, will result from recognition’, Weekend Australian Inquirer, October 2016, 21-22.

24 Keith Windschuttle, ‘The Break-Up of Australia: Part 1 Quadrant, 1 November 2016, available:
argues that the move to recognise Indigenous Australians conceals a more sinister agenda that will lead to the establishment of a separate Indigenous state within Australia, and worse, the ‘potential breakup of Australia’. Indeed, in ‘The Break-Up of Australia, Part 1’, he claims that Indigenous Australians ‘do not regard the Australian nation as their true country’, but rather ‘grudgingly endure’ the ‘recently arrived’ settler state. Furthermore, he characterises the ‘motives and objectives’ of the Recognition movement as a move towards the establishment of ‘a separate state’, effectively ‘a nation within a nation’, in which Aboriginal sovereignty would prevail. The concept of Aboriginal sovereignty, he reasons, is ‘conspicuously absent’ from Indigenous affairs reporting, but has ‘long been the objective of the Aboriginal political class’: any recognition of Aboriginal sovereignty would, he claims, ‘irreparably divide the Australian nation’, and should be considered a move towards ‘partition’ (BAU 4). He suggests that calls for a Treaty or treaties conferring local or regional sovereignty on Indigenous nations move well beyond principles of self-determination enshrined in Australia’s ratification of the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and should be interpreted as the mounting of a case to establish a separate Indigenous state (BAU 6). Here, Windschuttle refers to Michael Mansell’s 2014 proposal for a seventh state, which would be a political and geographical entity located in the North of Australia that would comprise the bulk of Aboriginal controlled lands. As Windschuttle and others have noted, the problem with such a proposal is how a geographical location can provide for the diversity of several hundred separate Indigenous nations. Therefore, calls for treaties have become much more localised, with Indigenous leader Noel Pearson advocating agreements between Indigenous nations and both State and Commonwealth governments to recognise traditional owners and fast-track outstanding Native Title claims (BAU 6). Pearson is not alone in such calls, as several essays in It’s Our Country make clear.

It is therefore Native Title, or the proprietary interests of settlers in land itself, that is at stake in Windschuttle’s formulation of the problem. In ‘The Break-Up of Australia, Part 1’, and the extract published in the Australian, he calculates the amount of land under Native Title as comprising 2.3 million square kilometres, or ‘30.4 percent’ of all the land in Australia, with a further 31.7 percent of Australian land yet to be determined by the Native Title tribunal. All up, he argues, ‘Native Title will soon amount to more than 60 percent of the Australian continent’ (BAU 6). This is excessive, he states, given that Aboriginal people comprise only about three percent of the population, and most Indigenous Australians live in metropolitan and regional areas (BAU 7). Giving land rights to such a small segment of the population is ‘at odds’ with ‘any notion of rational public policy’, and ‘must appear a gross moral indulgence’ (BAU 7). Indeed, he constructs Indigenous calls for land rights and agreement-making with the settler state


25 Windschuttle, ‘Separation’, 22
as a form of ‘rent-seeking’ that will simply ‘reproduce all the devastating social problems of passive welfare’ articulated by Cape York Institute leader, Noel Pearson (BUA 8). In addition, he argues, citing Marcia Langton, a Constitutional amendment would ‘entrench’ agreements or treaties with First Nations peoples, and provide them with ‘constitutional force’ (BUA 8-9). This is particularly worrying for Windschuttle, as recent polling suggests as many as three-quarters of the Australian population would support a Referendum recognising Indigenous Australians as traditional owners or original inhabitants – the wording, of course, is not yet agreed. For Windschuttle, such an outcome would mean ‘that those of us descended from the more recent settlers would need to renegotiate our right to be here’ (BUA 10). Even more worryingly, ‘the Australian people would have little say in the establishment of a sovereign Aboriginal state, in the internal operation of its government, in the compensation due to it, or in the precise status of its relationship with the Commonwealth’ (BUA 11). Thus, what most Australians would regard as a ‘courteous symbolic gesture with no real consequences’ could risk ‘the establishment of a politically separate race of people, and the potential break-up of Australia’ (BUA 12). These ‘long-term risks for Australian sovereignty’ are simultaneously ‘slender’ and yet so risky that they are ‘not worth running’ (BUA 12).

Yet, in constructing Indigenous Australians as a separate ‘race’, Windschuttle invokes some of the objections made by Recognition opponents such as commentator Andrew Bolt, and the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA), who consider Preambular recognition, or any other Constitutional recognition mechanism, to be racist, because it gives ‘special’ recognition to one group of Australians on the basis of their cultural heritage. Conservative Indigenous leader Noel Pearson takes this group of opponents to task, noting that the IPA’s construction of any measures to recognise Indigenous Australians in the Constitution as ‘inherently racist and contrary to liberal democratic values and equality before the law’ are both internally inconsistent and baffling (IOC 175). Given that the IPA is so keen to ensure that equality means that all Australians are treated the same way, it is particularly baffling that it should so stridently reject the Expert Panel’s proposal to include a Section banning racial discrimination by government in the Constitution. Such a provision would entrench the principle of ‘equality’ the IPA is so keen to protect. As Marcia Langton notes in her essay in It’s Our Country, ‘Finding a resolution to constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians’, the very problem that the proposal to amend the Constitution would address is, in fact, the problem of ‘race’. She has commented elsewhere that amending the Constitution to recognise Indigenous Australians is not ‘racist’, indeed it is not even about ‘race’, but rather, about the Constitution’s fundamental silence on Indigenous Australians, or racial exclusion. In ‘Finding a Resolution’, Langton argues that:


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any idea of race and the ability of the parliament to use race in its law making should be removed from our Constitution. Because of the way that ‘race’ has been historically applied to Indigenous peoples in Australia, our rights to peoplehood have been undermined … defining Aboriginal people as a ‘race’, as the Constitution does, sets up the conditions for Indigenous people to be treated not just as different, but also exceptional and inherently incapable of joining the Australian polity and society. (IOC 31)

Langton goes on to name the Northern Territory Intervention as an example of the ‘exceptional initiatives that have isolated the Aboriginal world from Australian economic and social life’ (IOC 31). This can be considered racially discriminatory because the ‘special’ measures employed under the Northern Territory Emergency Response legislation included suspending the Racial Discrimination Act. However, she also asserts that the discourse of exceptionalism has created a ‘sense of entitlement’ among Indigenous Australians that they should enjoy ‘special treatment on the grounds of race’ (IOC 31). Against this, it is important to note how Indigenous legal scholars such as Larissa Behrendt criticise legal measures that promote notions of equality as sameness. As Behrendt points out in ‘The 1967 Referendum: forty years on’, the expectation that the parliament would use the ‘race power’ contained in Section 51 ‘benevolently’ to make laws ‘for the benefit of Aboriginal people’ has not been met. Indeed, she argues that legislation, particularly in the area of Native Title, shows that government ‘cannot be relied upon to act in a way that is beneficial to Indigenous people’. In the post-Mabo environment, the native title regime treats the interests of claimants ‘as secondary to the proprietary interests of all other Australians’, concluding that:

when Aboriginal people gain recognition of a right, they are seen as getting something for nothing rather than getting protection of something that already exists. Native title is seen as an example of ‘special rights’; … when Aboriginal people have a right recognised, it is seen as threatening the interests of non-Aboriginal property owners in a way that means that the two interests cannot co-exist. In this context, native title is often portrayed as being ‘unAustralian’. 29

Accordingly, as Indigenous Land Use Agreements actually extinguish native title, 31 Windschuttle’s claim that exclusive and non-exclusive Native Title will cover 60 percent of the continent seems a radical over-statement of the issues. It is his claims that are excessive, bearing little relation to the contemporary realities and limitations of the Native Title regime. Indeed, as

30 Behrendt 14.

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Cape York Institute senior policy adviser Shereen Morris pointed out in her reply to Windschuttle’s article one week later in the *Australian*, Windschuttle’s argument ‘is an example of an attempt to whip up irrational fear’, as he conflates constitutional ‘separatism’ with ‘constitutional inclusion’.

**Postcolonial Justice?**

By reading Windschuttle’s arguments against some of the essays presented in *It’s Our Country*, and against Indigenous scholarship in areas such as Native Title, it is clear that Windschuttle, along with other sectors of the right-wing commentariat, frames Indigenous claims for recognition, whether in the form of a Treaty or a Constitutional amendment, as a threat to the nation. The reframing of the proposed Referendum to recognise Indigenous Australians as a call for a separate autonomous Indigenous state-within-the-state is wilfully divisive. Further, Windschuttle either misreads, or ignores, the recognition of Indigenous sovereignty in other settler nations such as the United States or Canada, where the sovereignty of the nation-state has not been diminished or fragmented by the recognition of Indigenous sovereignty. To put this into perspective, it has been important to note what, actually, is being suggested by Indigenous proponents of Constitutional change. This prompts the question: what has provoked Windschuttle’s reaction? Is his reaction reasonable, or might it be an hysterical over-reaction to Indigenous claims for recognition and Constitutional status? It would seem that he is trying to build opposition to the referendum proposition. However, a ‘No’ case has already been drafted by Indigenous Constitutional experts, in order to sketch out the grounds for the debate.

As Marcia Langton notes in ‘Finding a resolution’, the ‘No’ case might recognise that Constitutional change is inadequate to solve the historical injustices it seeks to address. Furthermore, in setting out the No case, Indigenous legal scholars Megan Davis and George Williams note that opponents to Constitutional change would tend to argue that: ‘There are more important issues to address. Rather than changing the Constitution, Australia’s politicians should focus on ending Indigenous disadvantage by way of health and education reforms’ (IOC 33). This, of course, reverts the debate to a Close the Gap type of agenda. Windschuttle also objects to these initiatives in ‘The Break-Up of Australia: Part 1’, arguing that Indigenous Australians receive ‘more than twice as much money per head as any other Australian’, a total of $30 billion, which shows ‘no sign of ever decreasing’ (BUA 7). He further contends that much of this government expenditure funds ‘the lifestyles’ of the 21 percent of Indigenous Australians who live in remote communities ‘as unassimilated people’ plagued by problems of ‘alcoholism, drug taking, homicide, suicide, domestic violence, and sexual abuse of children’ (BUA 7). While it is true that remote communities do have problems of suicide, substance abuse, and violence, it is surely not the case that the rest of Australia is a social-problem-free zone. In addition, while

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Windschuttle bases his figures on the Productivity Commission’s 2014 calculations, he neglects to mention that most (81 percent) of this spending is on mainstream services such as health and education, with direct spending on Indigenous-specific services accounting for only 18.6 percent of expenditure. While Windschuttle constructs the problems of remote communities as problems of ‘lifestyle’, Sarah Maddison observes in her analysis ‘Indigenous autonomy matters: what’s wrong with the Australian Government’s “intervention” in Aboriginal communities’ that social problems and welfare dependency have their ‘roots in Australia’s colonial history and [are] perpetuated by a present-day sense of powerlessness and lack of control by Aboriginal people over their own lives’, a proposition that commentators like Windschuttle are unwilling to accept. Dispossession, she argues, is the key problem from which poverty, welfare dependency, violence, and substance abuse emanate. In addition, requirements for Aboriginal communities to be self-determining when Protection and Assimilation policies were abolished in the 1970s did not recognise differences in community capacity, so that ‘government policies of self-determination have been more concerned with organisational and community management than with placing meaningful political and economic power in Aboriginal hands’. Consequently, it is white bureaucrats who manage and administer Indigenous communities. Unlike Noel Pearson, who claims that the rights enshrined in the 1967 Referendum brought alcohol and welfare (or ‘sit-down’ money) to Indigenous communities, entrenching ‘passivity’ and institutionalising ‘dependency’, Maddison does not advocate the quarantining of welfare payments for behavioural breaches, a measure that is now routine for welfare recipients in the mutual-obligation environment in which income support now operates. Rather, she argues, Pearson’s ‘blame the victim’ approach, and his ‘influential neoliberal arguments’ will only reinforce Indigenous dependency and passivity in response to ‘paternalistic policies’ such as the NT Intervention, and spin-off policies such as Stronger Futures. It is clear that Windschuttle draws upon the sorts of neo-liberal arguments mounted by Pearson, whose influence extends to regular columns in the Weekend Australian, where he preaches to the already converted. The problems that Windschuttle and Pearson identify concern ‘responsibility’, but it is unlikely that policy responses framed in coercion and neo-paternalism will produce the genuine autonomy that Indigenous leaders advocate to overcome Indigenous disadvantage.

35 Maddison 49.
37 Maddison 51.
38 See for example, Noel Pearson, Our Right to Take Responsibility (Cairns, Qld: Noel Pearson and Associates, 2000).
This is nowhere more evident than in the policy framework of Close the Gap, which consistently fails to reach its targets, with six of seven targets to close the inequality gap currently not on track.\textsuperscript{39} As John Altman has demonstrated, the problems with welfare spending and spending on services under Close the Gap funding occur because of its ‘top-down’ and ‘dated’ design in a ‘monolithic modernisation paradigm’ that is ‘deeply flawed both conceptually and empirically’. He goes on to argue that the policy overlooks colonial history in producing the problems of Indigenous disadvantage, by looking for ‘mainstream solutions’ to non-mainstream problems, and ignoring Indigenous diversity.\textsuperscript{40} Further, he contends:

There is a clear logic for the settler-colonial state in rendering Aboriginal disadvantage a technical problem with no history, and rendering cultural difference either invisible or too visible and something to be eliminated. Such an approach allows the state to ignore politico-economic relations and the distribution of property and power, and to instead reframe difficult political questions as technical – to close the gap.\textsuperscript{41}

By reading Windschuttle’s campaign against the proposals for meaningful recognition and reform outlined in \textit{It’s Our Country}, this essay has sought to place these debates in their proper context: in the campaign for a postcolonial settlement of terms, or conciliation, between the settler state and Indigenous peoples of Australia. For Indigenous Australia, these are matters of postcolonial justice, in which the unfinished business of Reconciliation requires a coming to terms between the settler state and First Australians. Debates have arisen both between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and among Indigenous Australians, about the character of postcolonial justice. For non-Indigenous Australia, the matter of who rightfully owns the land, and whether Indigenous Australians might claim a greater share of it, is again at stake, as witnessed through Windschuttle’s calculations of the square kilometres at risk of being ‘lost’ to Native Title. The tenor of his contribution to Constitutional Recognition debates mark an attempt to institute Culture Wars 2.0, but the fear-mongering that worked in the 1990s seems to be failing to ignite the over-reaction it is intended to provoke. Whether the Referendum goes ahead at some point in the future, and whether it has any prospect of succeeding if it does, remain important matters in the vexed question of how Australia reconciles with its Indigenous peoples. The next few months will answer some of these questions. What remains startlingly familiar is that the spectre of formal recognition of Indigenous Australians’ prior occupation of Australia continues to haunt the nation.

\textsuperscript{41} Altman 14.
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Jennifer Osborn

Adelaide Writers’ Week 2017 was dedicated to Elizabeth Harrower. The address in praise of her work stated, ‘Admired by her contemporaries, including Patrick White and Christina Stead, Harrower is being read again. All of her books are back in print, and she is enjoying success here in Australia as well as internationally. She is being lauded by a new generation of writers and critics and being read by ever increasing audiences.’

Like Shirley Hazzard, the acclaimed Australian post-war novelist who died last year, Harrower’s reputation rests on a slender handful of texts. She published three novels late in the 1950s – *Down in the City* (1957), *The Long Prospect* (1958) and *The Catherine Wheel* (1960) – before writing the book that is celebrated as her masterpiece, *The Watch Tower*, in 1966. Her work largely disappeared from public view later in the twentieth century; its return was heralded by Text Publishing’s reissuing of her novels in their Australian classics series. Harrower’s fifth book, *In Certain Circles*, was published in 2014, followed by a collection of short stories in 2015.

I count myself amongst her second generation of readers. I was in primary school, still wearing plaits and reading Ladybird books when her novels were first published. But by the late 1970s and early 1980s, I was studying at university, discovering feminism and reading Australian literature. Along with Christina Stead’s *For Love Alone* (1945) and Shirley Hazzard’s *Transit of Venus* (1980), *The Watch Tower* became for me a mind-shifting, inspiring text. I shared the experience described by Joan London, in her introduction to the 2012 edition: ‘The novel gripped me like a nightmare ... I didn’t know. I remember thinking that. I meant: I didn’t know there was writing like this, in Australia, now, by a woman’ (viii).

What is it about *The Watch Tower* that provokes such strong reactions? The story is a deceptively simple one. Two sisters, Laura and Clare Vaizey, are growing up in Sydney in the 1930s. They are bright girls with promising futures: Laura ‘had thought that she might study medicine as her father had done’ (5) and Clare, at nine years old, loves reading and is doing well at school. Laura has a beautiful mezzo-soprano voice and ‘an aptitude for languages’ (6); Clare is a lively and energetic child (‘Clare liked to slide down the banisters to the ground floor. She liked to run, read, swim and sing’ [15]).

These ordinary, happy lives are broken by two people: the girls’ widowed mother and, later, Laura’s abusive husband. This is the brutal shock of *The Watch Tower* – that in a modern city, in twentieth-century Australia, these young women’s lives can be so easily undone by the very people who should care for them most. The novel has the archetypal feeling of a fairy tale, with Clare standing like a princess on the look-out in the watch tower, Laura turning into a drudge like Cinderella and direct references to the story of Bluebeard and his wives. But Stella Vaizey, the girl’s mother, is not an evil witch (or even a wicked step-mother, as London points out [viii]). She is merely a selfish, indolent woman, as lethargic and indifferent as Austen’s Lady Bertram, the mother in *Mansfield Park* who allows the unpleasant Mrs Norris to control her

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household. And although Laura’s husband Felix is compared with a figurine of Bluebeard, he is really nothing more than a petty suburban despot, an abusive and domineering middle-aged man.

Stella Vaizey leaves Sydney early in the war, abandoning her young daughters to the care of the man she has met only a few times. Laura (‘a born homemaker, a born housewife’ [20], according to her mother) is to marry Felix Shaw, the enigmatic older man who employs her in his factory; Clare, still of school-age, is to become his ward. They are handed over to Felix’s care as if they are packages rather than people, with no agency in the transaction: ‘Laura felt herself falter. None of this ... was of her planning. Who had constrained her? She felt like an object’ (67).

Laura’s degradation at the hands of her husband forms the substance of the novel. Gentle and well-intentioned, she is no match for Felix’s malevolence; once she has been installed in his luxurious house in Neutral Bay, she is as handicapped as ‘a novice tackling a master of jujitsu’ (74). Felix Shaw keeps his household ‘mesmerised with uncertainty and alarm’ (89), in constant fear of his sudden inexplicable rages and violent outbursts. His hatred of his wife – reinforced by his callous business partners, men like the well-named Peter Trotter – is ‘intense ... at once sexual and sadistic’ (99). Within a year of marriage, Laura has become Felix’s victim, ‘Hostage No. 1’ (117). Her mother had promised her conventional feminine happiness, ‘a new life as a young married woman’, ‘mistress of a beautiful home’ – her parting words, ‘You’re a very lucky girl’ (67).

Clare is initially in as vulnerable a position as her sister; she is also Felix’s dependent, living in his house, subject to his will. He breaks his promise to support her during her education, and she is forced to leave school at fifteen. While Laura keeps the house immaculate and works steadfastly in the business – as his wife, ‘she naturally received no wage’ (96) – Clare is expected to work in Shaw’s factory and to do as she is told at home. Unlike the passive Laura, though, she is active and articulate in her rebellion:

Why is my life so much less important than Felix’s? ... I want to be free! That’s not unnatural. I do not want to make artificial flowers in a factory all my life. Why should I? You want me to abase myself before him the way you do. I won’t do it! (149)

Clare does finally escape from the domestic prison of the watch tower, but she frees herself without her sister’s help. One of the most chilling aspects of the novel is the older woman’s willingness to subjugate the younger, Laura’s repeated attempts to ‘recruit’ (76) Clare to pander to Felix’s incalculable moods, his drunkenness and emotional abuse. Many feminist texts develop this theme of the lack of women’s solidarity, their collusion in their own and one another’s ‘meek and helpless subjection’ (100). I discovered this again and again when I read nineteenth-century fiction: Mrs Reed bullying Jane Eyre, Fanny Dashwood depriving her sisters-in-law of their inheritance, Lily Bart betrayed by her female ‘friends’.

Reading The Watch Tower, many years ago, was an unforgettable experience for me; re-reading it was affecting and disturbing in equal parts. As Joan London’s introduction to the Text edition reminds us, ‘it’s always instructive to return to a book you admired a long time ago. It carries the ghost of the first reading...decades later, [The Watch Tower] is still excruciating to read’ (xi). Harrower’s stark examination of two young women’s vulnerability and helplessness

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3 At the time of writing this review, I also read a distressing newspaper article in the Sydney Morning Herald: ‘How the Court System Allows Domestic Violence Perpetrators To Continue Abuse’ – describing how a man with an Apprehended Violence Order, arriving at court without a lawyer, was allowed to aggressively cross-examine his wife and eldest daughter. (20 February 2017).


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in the face of a domineering man’s savagery is painful to read. I have read it twice now and each time I have been moved by the clarity of Harrower’s vision, the terrible plausibility of her characters and the sheer power of the restrained emotion in her writing. It is a novel that deserves the closest and most attentive reading – whether you are coming to it for the first time, or the last.