

**‘Trans-Cultural Exchange’: Reframing Historical Metanarratives in  
Ishtiyaq Shukri’s *The Silent Minaret***

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**Abstract**

The following article considers how historical metanarratives are critiqued in *The Silent Minaret* (2005), a novel by South African author Ishtiyaq Shukri. With reference to Judith Butler’s notion of the frame and Kerwin Lee Klein’s understanding of historical metanarratives, this paper examines how Shukri’s protagonist, Issa Shamsuddin, a South African PhD student who vanishes inexplicably from London, attempts to uncover and expose the residual influence that historical forms of unaccountable state power have over contemporary manifestations of political authority. Moreover, this article argues that Issa – through both his interactions with other characters and the work done in his PhD thesis – draws out the inevitable connections that seemingly disparate cultures, religions and nations share. In doing so, he encourages the reader to recognise the ‘trans-cultural’ dimensions of human experience in order to challenge absolutist framings of recorded history.

*Keywords:* Ishtiyaq Shukri, *The Silent Minaret*, Judith Butler, frames, metanarratives, history

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**Introduction**

In *The Silent Minaret*, a 2005 novel by South African author Ishtiyaq Shukri, the reader is required to investigate the disappearance of Issa Shamsuddin, a South African PhD student who vanishes mysteriously from London shortly after the 2003 American- and British-led invasion of Iraq.<sup>1</sup> The only information the reader gathers about Issa is through his past interactions with other characters – in London and apartheid South Africa – as well as excerpts of his thesis, which concerns the historical settlement of the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (hereafter referred to as the VOC) at the Cape of Good Hope in the seventeenth century. The motives behind Issa’s disappearance are never made apparent in the novel, and Shukri leaves the reader to reach her own conclusion about the fate of his enigmatic protagonist. Despite the lack of closure apropos Issa’s vanishing, one thing is apparent: the protagonist both appears in and disappears from Shukri’s narrative, as the author oscillates between various temporalities in his text. Issa’s corporeal absence from considerable swathes of *The Silent Minaret*’s narrative

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<sup>1</sup>Ishtiyaq Shukri, *The Silent Minaret* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2005). All subsequent references to, and citations of, the novel will appear in parentheses within the body of this article.

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therefore prompts the reader to consider how it is that one comprehends certain phenomena by means of a series of structuring frameworks – how one’s very perceptions, in other words, come to be made intelligible.

In the discussion below, I investigate how Issa, through both the work done in his thesis and his interactions with other characters, reconfigures the frame of recorded history. By scrutinising the exclusionary praxis of historical metanarratives, both Shukri and his protagonist present the reader with the need to be cognisant of lives and events that have ‘gone missing’ in the canonisation of certain colonial narratives, as they appeal to a form of recognition rooted in transnational and trans-historical awareness (164).

I will read Shukri’s novel through the lens provided by Judith Butler’s notion of the frame, as examined in her 2009 book, *Frames of War*. Butler’s interpretation of the frame as a structuring device is an appropriate theoretical tool for my discussion of *The Silent Minaret*, not least because of the novel’s multitude of narrative techniques, such as excerpts from Issa’s PhD thesis, snippets of radio broadcasts, and emails and texts messages, to name but a few. Moreover, the notion of the frame is *itself* a significant point of consideration within broader society at this present juncture.

The erection of absolutist interpretative frames around phenomena such as religion and culture – and the reliance on the nebulous realm of identity politics that this engenders – has been rife in the first quarter of this century, and appeals to nationalism as well as the idea of national history around which this notion is centred has in particular become demonstrably more popular in mainstream political rhetoric. What makes Shukri’s novel crucial in this context is its rigorous attempts to rethink the perceived singularity of these forms of alignment and allegiance, as both the author and his protagonist examine the totalising operation of the frame in order to make explicit the ‘trans-cultural’ dimensions of human history (26). But before I begin in earnest with an examination of *The Silent Minaret*, I shall first explain the significance of Judith Butler’s idea of the frame and demonstrate how it relates to Kerwin Lee Klein’s conception of historical metanarratives.

### **The Power and Function of the Frame**

According to Butler, the frame is an externally imposed method of governing perceptions insofar as it ‘implicitly guides the [act of] interpretation’ when one is presented with an individual, a population or an event.<sup>2</sup> The notion of the frame as a structuring device does not originate from Butler’s work, and is explored in detail by sociologist Erving Goffman in his 1974 book-length essay, *Frame Analysis*. Like Butler’s theory, Goffman’s examination of ‘primary frameworks’ concludes that they represent a schema of ‘interpretation’, in that they render a particular scene

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<sup>2</sup>Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London and New York: Verso, 2009) 8.

or individual with meaning.<sup>3</sup> Another prominent theorist apropos the notion of frames and framing is George Lakoff, whose book, *Don't Think of an Elephant* (2008), describes the frame as intrinsic to all instances of perception and comprehension. As the author states: 'Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world', adding that they are formed by the power that language has over human understanding.<sup>4</sup>

But perhaps one of the most influential theorists regarding frames – ideological, artistic and epistemological – is Jacques Derrida, from whom Butler inherits a number of her ideas. Although Derrida's conception of the frame as explored in *The Truth in Painting* (1987) relates primarily to its function in art, his emphasis on the importance of the 'presentation of representation' is noteworthy not only for its understanding of the necessity of framing an artistic subject but, more importantly, its interrogation of the manner in which language codifies the apprehension and viewing of a given artwork.<sup>5</sup> So, while Derrida is concerned primarily with how the notion of a framing device, or '*passe-partout*', functions artistically, the significance of his ideas in relation to Butler's work cannot be underestimated.<sup>6</sup> This is because the latter is also attentive to the manner in which 'form and meaning' are linked together, or, perhaps more pointedly, how a given form – or frame – works to manufacture meaning itself.<sup>7</sup>

For Butler, the frame acts to 'delimit the visual field' and create a narrative about 'what can be seen and what can be heard'.<sup>8</sup> In essence, its function is to generate a certain 'version of reality'.<sup>9</sup> However, the 'reality' enclosed in the frame is always open to interrogation:

The frame does not simply exhibit reality, but actively participates in a strategy of containment, selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality. It tries to do this, and its efforts are a powerful wager. Although framing cannot always contain what it seeks to make visible or readable, it remains structured by the aim of instrumentalising certain versions of reality. This means that the frame is always throwing something away,

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<sup>3</sup>Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organisation of Experience* (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1974) 20, 21.

<sup>4</sup>George Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2008) xv.

<sup>5</sup>Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* [1978] translated by Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) 6.

<sup>6</sup>Derrida 7.

<sup>7</sup>Derrida 7.

<sup>8</sup>Butler 8, xi.

<sup>9</sup>Butler xi.

always keeping something out, always de-realising and de-legitimating alternative versions of reality.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, the function of the frame is multifaceted: it creates and maintains ‘ontologies’ whilst simultaneously negating other realities which may run counter to the one it generates in the first instance.<sup>11</sup> One can therefore think of the frame ‘as both jettisoning and presenting, and as doing both at once, in silence, without any visible sign of its operation’.<sup>12</sup> Because it ‘seeks to contain, convey, and determine what is seen’, the power of the frame lies in its ability to influence and concretise ‘broader norms’ through its creation of a narrative.<sup>13</sup> Despite the ubiquity of the frame as a structuring entity, Butler also notes that the ability to ‘call the frame into question’ allows one to ‘show that the frame never quite contained the scene it was meant to limn’.<sup>14</sup> Put simply, the frame is revealed as a way of seeing and understanding which, although powerful and influential, is nevertheless *constructed* through the normalisation of certain phenomena.

In *The Silent Minaret*, through both the content of his PhD thesis and his interactions with other characters in the novel, Issa endeavours to expose the rigid framing of recorded history as a tactic of occlusion, in that it deliberately silences smaller perspectives which risk disturbing the alleged omniscience of dominant historical narratives. The protagonist therefore represents a subject who scrutinises the very structure of the frame in order to facilitate a process of ‘perpetual breakage’ through which the academic endorsement of specific colonial histories comes to be figured as an operation of power – a means of governing what an individual understands as a legitimate historical outlook.<sup>15</sup>

Embedded in the extracts of his thesis on the role of the VOC at the Cape are Issa’s attempts to combat the supposedly concrete status of what Kerwin Lee Klein calls the historical ‘metanarrative’.<sup>16</sup> Klein’s use of this term, of course, is influenced by Jean-Francois Lyotard’s explanation of postmodernism’s hostility towards master narratives, as examined in *The Postmodern Condition* (1984). Lyotard claims that historical narratives ‘define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question’, adding that since these narratives ‘are

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<sup>10</sup>Butler xiii.

<sup>11</sup>Butler 3.

<sup>12</sup>Butler 73.

<sup>13</sup>Butler 10, 63.

<sup>14</sup>Butler 9.

<sup>15</sup>Butler 10.

<sup>16</sup>Kerwin Lee Klein, ‘In Search of Narrative Mastery: Postmodernism and the People without History’, *History and Theory* 34.4 (1995) 282. Also see Hayden White’s work on the unavoidability of narrative frameworks within historical discourse, as examined in ‘The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory’, *History and Theory* 23.1 (1984) 1-33. Another important theorist who considers the difficulty of History as praxis in a postmodern era is Keith Jenkins. See his book, *Re-Thinking History* [1991] (Oxford: Routledge, 2003).

themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do'.<sup>17</sup> History, in Lyotard's terms, represents a collection of grand narratives which have flourished at the expense of other, seemingly inconsequential, narratives, therefore making them ostensibly more objective, more valid, than those they have eclipsed.

Similarly, Klein describes metanarratives as 'institutionalised, canonical, and legitimising', and he notes that they are in 'a position of intellectual mastery'.<sup>18</sup> What gives metanarratives their power – and permits them to compete with one another for epistemological hegemony – is that they 'pretend to represent an external object and then pretend *not* to be a [form of] narrative'.<sup>19</sup> To counter the totalising frame of a given metanarrative, Klein also argues that there is another form of historical narrative: 'local narrative', which is 'told by the subaltern' and therefore 'cannot easily be inserted into a master narrative'.<sup>20</sup> In the same way that Butler suggests that the frame of the media interprets in advance whether or not a life may be considered 'grievable', the strictures erected around certain historical metanarratives govern perceptions about the legitimacy of smaller histories.<sup>21</sup> If one controls the recording of a metanarrative then one is able to decide who – or what – may be included in its formation. Much like a novel, then, an historical narrative both includes and excludes for the sake of its agenda. In its occlusion of supposedly lesser histories from its interpretative frame, a metanarrative thus has the power to allocate ontological labels to certain individuals or populations. History, in this configuration, represents a means of demarcating a partition between 'us' and 'them' and, for the protagonist of *The Silent Minaret*, this divide is deeply problematic.

### Issa's Challenge to the Metanarrative

From an early age, Issa wants to scrutinise the validity associated with recorded historical narratives, and his high school nickname, 'dreamer, schemer, history's cleaner', is well-earned (26). His classmates give him the name after he argues that the role of the 'Black Watch' proved to be the catalyst for a British victory during the Siege of Mafikeng during the Second Boer War

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<sup>17</sup>Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* [1979] translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984) 23.

<sup>18</sup>Klein 282.

<sup>19</sup>Klein 282, emphasis original.

<sup>20</sup>Klein 282.

<sup>21</sup>Butler 14.

in May 1900 (26).<sup>22</sup> Shukri, however, notes that ‘history was not intended to capture this part of the story’, adding that ‘Baden-Powell went to great lengths to omit it from his report and from his diaries’ (24). Issa’s twelfth-grade teacher, Mr Thompson, dismisses the protagonist’s challenge to the recorded narrative of the Boer War as ‘mere speculation by a new-age bunch of leftists at Wits’ (26).<sup>23</sup> The teacher frustrates Issa even more by declaring that ‘History cannot be re-written ... History *is*, and at St Stephens, we accept only the thorough, rigorous and sanctioned historical version outlined in the syllabus’ (26, emphasis original, ellipsis mine). Issa’s disagreements with the authority of St Stephens’s colonised curriculum do not pay off, and in his final examinations he receives five distinctions and one solitary B – for History, of course.

Mr Thompson’s denigration of Issa’s apparent transgression is unsurprising. In fact, Neelika Jayawardane points out that when an effort is made to bring to light previously overlooked historical accounts, one is usually met with ‘boredom and indifference at best, or militant, state-sponsored aggression at worst’.<sup>24</sup> Rather than making him despondent, however, Issa’s examination results only fuel his sense of duty to argue for the lives and perspectives that are permitted no space in the narrow confines of prevailing historical narratives.

One important local narrative that Issa uncovers in his PhD research is the VOC’s 1694 rendition of Sheik Yusuf (or Tjoesoepp) – the ‘father of Islam in South Africa’ – from his native Makassar, Indonesia, to the Cape (71).<sup>25</sup> Yusuf, argues Issa, ‘represented a symbol of resistance to European colonialism’, and was the ‘most influential’ exile to the Cape (71, 72). He became a symbol for ‘Islamic resistance to colonialism and apartheid’ and, the protagonist maintains, even assisted in framing Islam as ‘synonymous with the struggle against oppression’ (72).

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<sup>22</sup>The very fact that the term ‘Anglo-Boer War’ is no longer accepted universally indicates that the metanarrative which controlled the facts of this war has been opened up to include the numerous African soldiers who died fighting in this conflict. It should also be noted that the Black Watch to which Shukri is referring is not the well-known Royal Regiment of Scotland – the second battalion of which did, incidentally, fight in the Battle of Magersfontein during the Second Boer War, and suffered heavy losses in the process. Rather, Shukri is making reference to the Baralong Black Watch, a collection of around 750 black South Africans who, along with Baden-Powell’s troops, defended Mafikeng from the Boers. See Peter Warwick’s chapter, ‘Mafikeng and Beyond’, in *Black People and the South African War 1899–1902* [1983] (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004) 28–46; as well as Frederick Saunders’s book, *Mafeking Memories* edited by Phillip Thurmond Smith (London: Associated UP, 1996).

<sup>23</sup>Wits is shorthand for the University of the Witwatersrand: a university in central Johannesburg.

<sup>24</sup>Neelika Jayawardane, ‘Disappearing Bodies: Visibility and Erasure, Mobility and Containment of the Third World Immigrant during the War on Terror’, *Centre of African Studies, scrutiny* 12.1 (2007) 55.

<sup>25</sup>For a comprehensive reading of how the figure of Sheikh Yusuf encapsulates the VOC’s exploitation of the Indian Ocean, see Tina Steiner’s article, ‘The Indian Ocean Travels of Sheikh Yusuf and Imam Ali Ali: Literary Representations in Ishtiyag Shukri’s *The Silent Minaret* and Achmat Dangor’s *Bitter Fruit*’, *Social Dynamics: A Journal of African Studies* 38.2 (2012) 172–83.

Ronit Frenkel observes that the “‘alternative’ history of Islam’ Shukri employs in relation to South Africa constitutes a form of ‘strategic historic revisionism’”.<sup>26</sup> However, it could also be argued – and Frenkel does just that – that although Issa is correct in pointing out how ‘the history of Islam in the Cape has an undeniable relationship to libratory politics’, his glossing over ‘the role of Islamic traders in the slave economy; the religious sanction on Muslims being slave holders; as well as the broader history of Islam in South Africa’ means that Shukri’s protagonist risks being accused of a kind of ‘strategic essentialism’.<sup>27</sup> In other words, Issa removes the more ‘intransigent aspects’ of Islam’s history from the content of his PhD thesis, picking and choosing what best suits his *own* narrative.<sup>28</sup>

While Frenkel’s pertinent comments might cast a smattering of doubt over Issa’s scholarly integrity, she also concedes that his references to the emancipatory impact of Islam at the Cape act as a microcosmic example of resistance which could potentially counter perceptions of the religion in the global imaginary, especially following the terrorist attacks of 9/11: ‘Faced with the overwhelming demonization of Islam in the West, *The Silent Minaret* can be considered an attempt to associate Islam with the more positive aspects of its history’.<sup>29</sup> Issa’s ‘nuanced and fractured trajectory’ of the Cape’s historical association with Islam thus exemplifies the interventionist venture of both him and his author: the redrawing – or reframing – of smaller histories in an attempt to insert them into contemporary metanarratives.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, Shukri’s appraisal of local narratives is not limited to his portrayal of South Africa’s colonial past, and in bringing to light ‘whatever shards of ... bastard truth’ that hegemonic narratives have attempted to erase, the author also includes in his novel references to various marginalised cultures that have fallen victim to the ‘literal whitewashing of history’ (64, 65, ellipsis mine). For example, he prompts the reader to raise a metaphorical glass in a ‘toast to all the folks that live in Palestine, Afghanistan, Iraq, El Salvador ... to all the folks living on the Pine Ridge reservation under the stone cold gaze of Mount Rushmore’ (222–3, ellipsis mine).

If one acknowledges that both fiction and historical discourse constitute forms of narrative, then it might be worth considering that Issa’s disappearance from *The Silent Minaret*’s frame indicates the ease with which smaller perspectives can be subsumed in the canonisation of certain histories. Issa, however, is not utterly erased from the scope of Shukri’s novel, and the

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<sup>26</sup>Ronit Frenkel, ‘Local Transnationalisms: Ishtiyag Shukri’s *The Silent Minaret* and South Africa in the Global Imaginary’, *Transversing Transnationalism: The Horizons of Literary and Cultural Studies* edited by Pieter Paolo Frassinelli, Ronit Frenkel, and David Watson (New York: Rodopi, 2011) 124, 128.

<sup>27</sup>Frenkel, ‘Local Transnationalisms’ 126–27.

<sup>28</sup>Frenkel, ‘Local Transnationalisms’ 127.

<sup>29</sup>Frenkel, ‘Local Transnationalisms’ 128.

<sup>30</sup>Frenkel, ‘Local Transnationalisms’ 128.

reader is permitted to interact with the ‘shards’ that he leaves behind (64).<sup>31</sup> In the same way that the protagonist attempts to uncover the smaller histories of the Black Watch and Sheikh Yusuf, the reader is encouraged to follow the traces of Issa that Shukri has intentionally included in *The Silent Minaret*. The protagonist is therefore both inside and outside the novel’s frame, so to speak, and his missing voice claws at the borders that separate the local narrative of what the reader knows of his life from the metanarrative of the novel itself.

Not only does Issa’s thesis question the limitations of historiography, but it also attempts to demonstrate how past acts of subjugation influence present day forms of politically motivated violence. ‘History ... includes the present’, he wants his reader to understand, and he emphasises that the capacity of powerful states to re-appropriate and learn from historical techniques of domination is what allows them to retain control over the scripting of prevailing narratives (63).<sup>32</sup> As the protagonist claims in the opening sentences of his thesis: ‘The history of early European exploration at the Cape of Good Hope remains universally and eternally pertinent’ due to the fact that ‘the procedures of dispossession and domination’ implemented in the young colony during the seventeenth century ‘would be repeated around the globe for the rest of the millennium, and then again at the start of this new millennium’ (63). Issa even goes so far as to accuse those who ‘declare these events over’ of being ‘perpetrators, collaborators, benefactors, and perpetuators’ of both the VOC’s reign at the Cape and other colonial and imperial projects (63).

The protagonist’s emphasis on the contemporary significance of historical forms of colonial violence links the VOC’s exploitative actions to present-day imbalances of political power, such as the ongoing War on Terror and the Israeli Occupation of Palestine. Where some might see individual, decontextualised situations – uninfluenced by material realities entrenched by colonial processes – Issa sees the residue that unaccountable and indiscriminate forms of power instil in the present. I therefore claim that history, for Issa, represents what Achille Mbembe calls a process of intricate ‘*entanglement*’.<sup>33</sup> Rather than perceiving historical acts of conquest and

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<sup>31</sup>For a detailed analysis of Issa’s vanishing itself, see Minesh Dass’s discussion of *The Silent Minaret* in his PhD thesis, ‘“The Stranger at Home”: Representations of Home and Hospitality in Three South African Post-Transitional Novels’, diss. Rhodes University (2014), as well as his article ‘Cosmopolitanism and the Unfollowable Routines and Rituals in Ishtiyahq Shukri’s *The Silent Minaret*’, *Journal of Literary Studies* 33.1 (2017) 94-107.

<sup>32</sup>‘History therefore includes the present’ is a quotation taken from an essay by Erich Auerbach titled, ‘Philology and Weltliteratur’, translated by Maire Said and Edward W. Said, *The Centennial Review* 13.1 (1969) 1-17. The full quotation reads as follows: ‘History is the science of reality that affects us most immediately, stirs us most deeply and compels us most forcibly to a consciousness of ourselves. It is the only science in which human beings step before us in their totality. Under the rubric of history one is to understand not only the past, but the progression of events in general; history therefore includes the present’ (Auerbach 4-5). This quotation is the epigraph to Issa’s PhD thesis.

<sup>33</sup>Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (London and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001) 16.

subjugation in isolation, the reader is encouraged to understand that they represent an ‘interlocking of presents, pasts and futures, [with] each age bearing, altering, and maintaining the previous one’.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Issa aims to inform his reader about the ways in which South Africa’s history of oppression and political disparity resonate – or interlock – with twenty-first century machinations of state power.

In addition to exploring the contemporary echoes of South Africa’s chequered and violent past, Issa’s thesis also scrutinises the ‘fallacy of race’ and the ‘synthetic fabrication of [an] inviolate national identity’ (64). These two concepts, the protagonist stresses, were instrumental in the configuration of South Africa’s apartheid-era legislature, as well as in the formation of many oppressive contemporary ideologies. Echoing Mbembe’s concept of interlocking temporalities, David Theo Goldberg asserts that it is the prerogative of the racially-oppressive state to be ‘reproduced, extended, and sustained’ which allows it to ‘exist over time’.<sup>35</sup> When read in conjunction with Shukri’s stratagem of fusing together disparate political circumstances, Goldberg’s claims highlight the eternal pertinence of South Africa’s racially-delineated apartheid state, and suggest why and how current power structures continue to subjugate, even erase, individuals and histories deemed to be threats to racially and/or nationally configured metanarratives. Thus, throughout *The Silent Minaret*, Shukri and his protagonist demonstrate that, in order to comprehend present-day forms of political violence, one should turn to seemingly lesser – yet undeniably vital – historical narratives.

### **‘Trans-Cultural Exchange’: Frances and Katinka**

If one understands that the operation of the frame determines how populations and individuals are (or are not) perceived, then, as *The Silent Minaret* progresses, it becomes clear that Issa’s attempts to expand the scope of South Africa’s recorded history is also a means of bringing to light *connections* across the gulf created by the propagation of certain metanarratives. Elements of his thesis, for example, examine the fifty years leading up to the first Dutch settlement at the Cape of Good Hope, as well as the VOC and Portuguese sailors’ reliance on the region’s indigenous population in order to reach the Indies. Issa declares that he is interested in the

hybrid dynamic, the *complex trans-cultural exchange* and fusion that, though fragile and uneven, nevertheless formed an integral feature of the early settlement and ensured its development; the heterogeneous bartering, which, by the time of the disaster of 1948, had been almost entirely obliterated from memory. (64, emphasis added)

Plurality and hybridity are fundamental to the argument of Issa’s thesis, as well to as his

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<sup>34</sup>Mbembe, 16, emphasis original.

<sup>35</sup>David Theo Goldberg, ‘Racial States’, *A Companion to Racial and Ethnic Studies* edited by David Theo Goldberg and John Solomos (New Jersey: Wiley, 2002) 253.

interpretation – or framing – of the world, and through his interactions with other characters, the reader is presented with a protagonist who has stories to tell, lessons to teach and frames to disturb. He never, according to Jayawardane, ‘resorts to identity politics’, and nor do the other characters in *The Silent Minaret*.<sup>36</sup> As such, the protagonist and his colleagues exemplify the connections across allegedly distinct cultures, classes and religions, lending credence to Pallavi Rastogi’s claim that the novel itself ‘demonstrates the impossibility of constructing absolutist identities’.<sup>37</sup> For example, Issa’s adopted brother Kagiso, and his mother Gloria, are black, but are offered sanctuary from the apartheid state police by Issa’s mother, Vasinthe. And Katinka, a ‘left-handed nooi’ from Ventersdorp and friend to Issa and Kagiso, relocates to the Occupied Palestinian Territories to be with her lover, Karim (107).<sup>38</sup>

Exposing the ‘trans-cultural’ similarities between seemingly dissimilar populations is not limited to Issa’s work on his thesis, and the protagonist’s reckoning of history influences the perspectives of other characters in the novel (64). The most notable of these characters is Frances, Issa’s upstairs neighbour in London. As an Irish Catholic living in the metropolitan heart of a former global empire, Frances is herself an embodiment of cultural hybridity. Issa – whose name, rather fittingly, is Arabic for ‘Jesus’ – teaches her a great deal about the biases of recorded history, and she uses her newly found knowledge to interrogate the assumed cultural uniqueness of both Britain and her Christian faith.

In the first chapter of *The Silent Minaret*, there is a conversation between Frances and her priest, Father Jerome, a Frenchman. Since Issa’s vanishing, these regular conversations have become opportunities for Frances to scrutinise the way in which Christianity and Islam have endeavoured to distance themselves from one another – in both history and practice – in the years following 9/11. Upon handing him a quotation from the Qur’an, which praises the historically Christian figure of Mary, Frances asks Father Jerome whether he knew that Mary was considered to be a prominent figure in Islam, and whether he finds it at all ‘peculiar ... how one religion remembers things another doesn’t’ (16, ellipsis mine). Father Jerome does not respond and, rather than engaging with her, his mind wanders to his next appointment: ‘Mrs Anderson on Stroud Green Road’ (17). This is precisely the ‘boredom’ or ‘resistance’ with which revisionist accounts of history are usually met, at least according to Jayawardane.<sup>39</sup> The priest’s indifference does not deter Frances, and she tells him that ‘Christ’s grandfather on earth ... was called Imran’ (17, ellipsis mine). While this revelation makes geographical sense –

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<sup>36</sup>Neelika Jayawardane, “‘Forget Maps’”: Documenting Global Apartheid and Creating Novel Cartographies in Ishtiyag Shukri’s *The Silent Minaret*, *Research in African Literatures* 45.1 (2014) 13.

<sup>37</sup>Pallavi Rastogi, ‘International Geographics: Looking Out in Ishtiyag Shukri’s *The Silent Minaret*’, *Research in African Literatures* 42.3 (2011) 21.

<sup>38</sup>‘Nooi’ is an Afrikaans term for ‘young girl’.

<sup>39</sup>Jayawardane, ‘Disappearing Bodies’ 55.

as Jesus of Nazareth would have been born in what was, and still is, historic Palestine – the clearly Arab name does not produce a response from Father Jerome, and he ignores these seemingly contentious bits of information in the same way that Mr Thompson, Issa's schoolteacher, refutes the historical validity of the Black Watch.

In overlooking Frances's claims, Father Jerome demonstrates an unshakeable belief in *his* particular version of history, as well as his unwillingness to engage in any counternarrative that might draw Christianity and Islam together. He therefore rejects the 'trans-cultural' dimensions of his own faith and, by doing so, shows the reader that the frame enclosing his understanding of history is too narrow, too rigid, to be altered by Frances's discoveries (64). His conception of Christianity, it seems, has been 'whitewashed' so that, to him, the religion appears as an exclusively European invention, free from any entanglement with the Middle East (65).

Father Jerome's denial of the scriptural and geographical similarities between Islam and Christianity only makes the title of *The Silent Minaret* more appropriate. The minaret in question is attached to the Finsbury Park Mosque in London, across the road from Frances's apartment, and it stands 'silent, like [a] blacked out lighthouse' (76, emphasis original). The mosque itself has been 'boarded up ... Shut down, like a shipyard, because of the threat it poses' (79, ellipsis mine). If one acknowledges that the abandoned mosque and its muted minaret represents what Dobrotra Pucherova calls the 'speaking position of Muslims in post-9/11 Britain', then I would argue that Father Jerome and his stubborn silence figures as the *listening position* of British and European nationalists towards Muslims in a post-9/11 context.<sup>40</sup> The fact that he is a Catholic immigrant from France, and therefore an embodiment of Britain's own hybrid cultural make-up, does not influence the frame through which he perceives the precarious position of Muslims in Europe. Unlike the Irish Frances, Father Jerome is unable – or simply reluctant – to recognise the similarities between the historical persecutions that members of his own religion suffered and the vulnerability of Muslims living in twenty-first century Britain. In other words, he does not remember what it was like to be 'at the bottom of the pile' and, for this reason, has no qualms with the literal silencing of Muslim places of worship – the removal of them from the frame of cultural and religious significance (222).

Frances's desire to dissect the binary of Islam and Christianity differentiates her from the figure of Father Jerome. As Paul Ricoeur, in *The Reality of the Historical Past* (1984), notes, 'when curiosity takes over from sympathy, the foreigner becomes foreign'.<sup>41</sup> By familiarising herself with the ostensible foreignness of Islam and questioning the frame through which the religion is perceived in Europe, Frances opts for 'sympathy'. Father Jerome, however, adopts an ideology that fosters not even 'curiosity', but ignorance. Thanks to Issa, Frances has come to

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<sup>40</sup>Dobrotra Pucherova, 'Re-Imagining the Other: The Politics of Friendship in Three Twenty-First Century South African Novels', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 35.4 (2009) 941.

<sup>41</sup>Paul Ricoeur, *The Reality of the Historical Past* (Milwaukee: Marquette UP 1984) 55.

realise that the *substance* of the two faiths is more akin than disparate – that their Abrahamic roots, dedicated monotheisms, geographical histories and reliance on scripture are more aligned than either religion would like to admit.

Another character who seeks to rework the binaries created by hegemonic historical narratives is Katinka du Plessis. She first meets Issa and Kagiso when the brothers are travelling down to Cape Town to celebrate the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990. Katinka had been hitchhiking down to the Cape until being kicked out of the car of a ‘racist doos’ (106).<sup>42</sup> Issa and Kagiso see Katinka standing on the roadside after this acrimonious exchange, and they offer her a lift. Once in the car, she explains that by journeying to the Cape for such an auspicious occasion she has abandoned her familial ties. She states that her father’s reaction to her departure was aggressive, racist, and final: ‘You are not my daughter any more. What do you think the people will say? How do you expect me to face them with a daughter who runs after a communist terrorist kaffir?’ (113). Katinka’s decision to reject her Afrikaans family’s entrenched belief in the apartheid system is similar to the way in which Frances abandons the comforts of her Christian faith to reach out across the void fashioned by her beliefs. Unlike Issa’s neighbour, however, Katinka does not require the protagonist – to quite the same extent – to reconfigure her framing of the world.

Like Issa, Katinka moves to London. While she is there she meets Karim, a Palestinian from the West Bank who is seeking asylum in Britain. His appeal is rejected and he returns home to his family in Qalqilia, where the West Bank Wall has ‘separate[ed] their house from their decimated olive-grove, their last remaining trickle of income’ (185). Rather than mourn the loss of her lover ‘behind The Wall’, Katinka resolves to join Karim in Qalqilia (188). Her remarkable act of voluntary deracination – the rejection of her historically and racially allotted position in the world – is another, albeit quite extreme, example of Shukri’s ability to create what Frenkel calls ‘transnational solidarities’.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, one has to consider that Katinka’s identification with the Palestinian cause is not reducible simply to her relationship with Karim. In fact, long before she journeys to the West Bank, she thinks of ‘Afrikaners and Arabs as brethren’, as they are ‘the two tribes it is still acceptable to denigrate and berate’ (194). Katinka’s capacity to recognise the trans-historical scope of prejudice is therefore informed by her own experiences in apartheid South Africa, her interactions with Issa, and her love for Karim (29). In moving to the West Bank, she *chooses* to inhabit a place characterised by oppression and hardship, and thus exemplifies an individual who refutes the rigidity of nationalistic frames in favour of a more transnational outlook.

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<sup>42</sup>The literal English translation of the Afrikaans word ‘doos’ is ‘box’, but it is more commonly understood as a crude and colloquial term for vagina.

<sup>43</sup>Frenkel, ‘Reconsidering South African Indian Literature Post-Apartheid’, *Research in African Literatures* 42.3 (2011) 14.

Katinka's understanding of the influence that historical forms of vulnerability have on contemporary imbalances of socio-political subjectivity is illustrated best when she remembers a school excursion to the 'site of the first concentration camp on earth', situated at a 'nondescript site on Long Street' in modern day Cape Town (220).<sup>44</sup> While her classmates and teachers pay their respects to the '26000 women and children [who] died in these camps', Katinka wishes she could scream at her colleagues, imploring them to realise that 'this place is not just about [their] tribe and the cruel indignity it suffered at the hands of the British', and that 'it's not just about the hundreds of black people who, by the way, also died in the camps' (220). Rather the site of Lord Kitchener's concentration camp is 'about the world' (220). She continues, or wishes that she could:

On this spot, on this very spot, the British initiated a system of incarceration which, fifty years later, would be refined with deadly efficiency on the other side of the world – a system of extermination in which ultimately millions would be lead to their gasping gassy deaths and for which this site, this very spot, provided the blueprint, the prototype, the inspiration. (220)

Like Issa, Katinka demonstrates an acute awareness of the capacity of oppressive political or national formations to learn from historical modes of domination. She cannot accept that the Holocaust and the imprisoning of Boer women and children are unrelated, that the latter has no influence over the former. For her, these two moments are intertwined with one another along an historical continuum. And in the same way that Issa reads the rendition of Sheik Yusuf to the Cape colony in conjunction with the ideological impetus that sustained South Africa's apartheid state, Katinka recognises the similarities and connections between two seemingly disparate examples of subjugation. She therefore holds the British responsible not only for the tragedies suffered by the Boers at the turn of the nineteenth century, but for devising a strategic form of containment and eradication which would be used to devastating effect nearly halfway through the twentieth. As such, she recognises that the Afrikaners, 'the "Volk", weren't the *only* victims' of concentration camps, but that 'they were *only* the first' (221, emphasis original).

Before joining Karim in Palestine, Katinka submerges herself in the world she will soon call home by learning Arabic. As her familiarity with the language grows, the narrator notes her delight: 'a veil is being lifted and slowly, a whole world – its symbols, its rules, its logic – is beginning to reveal itself to her, right here, in London. Where once she was blind, she can now do so much more than see. She can read' (176). As an Afrikaner living in London, her perceptual

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<sup>44</sup>See Thomas Pakenham's account of the systematic targeting of Boer women and children by the British colonial forces – with particular reference to the 'scorched earth' policy adopted by Lord Kitchener in his attempts to drive the Boers from the Transvaal and Orange Free State – in his book, *The Boer War*. 1979 (London: Abacus, 2009) 493.

frames are already bifurcated and, by learning Arabic, she adds yet another layer to the way she reads the world. She can think and speak in a language that brings her closer to Karim and his Palestinian family, and her growing awareness of a world heretofore unexamined prompts her to question the legitimacy of national, racial, religious, and cultural signifiers.

Katinka's increased understanding of Arabic coincides with her learning more about the history of the Arab world itself. Her knowledge on the subject is apparent when, at a dinner party in London, a fellow guest declares that 'the sum total of Arab contribution to modern culture ... [is] zero' (175, ellipsis mine). Katinka takes exception to this inane remark, and informs her interlocutor that the survival of both Plato and Aristotle's work was in fact the result of Arab scholars' translations being 'kept safe in the libraries of Baghdad' – a stark contrast to Europeans who 'deemed it best to *burn* the thoughts of their Greek forebears' (175, emphasis original). In one deft move, Katinka undoes both the ignorance of her colleague and the assumed scarcity of cultural similarities between the West and the Arab world. Like Issa and Frances, she disposes of the superficial labels of 'us' and 'them', and her claims emphasise human beings' entangled historical relationship with one another – regardless of nation, race, or religion.

Through the experiences of Frances and Katinka, Shukri alerts the reader to the similarities, as exemplified in both religion and knowledge, between Islam and Christianity – even between Britain, South Africa, and the Arab World. What Tina Steiner calls these small 'pockets of connection' become beacons of hope in *The Silent Minaret* but, as the American- and British-led invasion of Iraq takes centre-stage, the reader is reminded that, irrespective of how ardently one tries to bring to light histories that challenge ostensibly concretised metanarratives, these perspectives are all too often overlooked.<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusion

In an era in which identity politics seeks to divide rather than enjoin, a work such as *The Silent Minaret* remains relevant. Throughout the novel, the reader is exposed to an overlapping of 'trans-cultural' and trans-historical contexts in which individuals and perspectives are shown to be silenced or removed from the frame of recognition (29). Shukri's text undermines the ostensible absolutism of historical metanarratives in order to create connections between and across seemingly disparate populations and ideologies, and encourages the reader to acknowledge the pertinence of historical processes in relation to present configurations of power. Issa's thesis operates in much the same manner: by uncovering the 'shards' of history deemed too insignificant or threatening to include in a master narrative, Shukri's protagonist opens up a world of near-forgotten yet unquestionably significant histories, such as the VOC's extradition of Sheikh Yusuf and the importance of the Black Watch during the Second Boer War

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<sup>45</sup>Tina Steiner, 'Pockets of Connection against the Backdrop of Culture Talk in Ishtiyak Shukri's *The Silent Minaret*', *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 19.1 (2007) 56.

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(64). Moreover, the very fact that Issa himself disappears from the metanarrative of *The Silent Minaret*'s frame seems to me to be another means of the author suggesting the ease with which smaller narratives can go 'missing' from, or be subsumed by, master narratives (164).

Shukri's novel – without too much ungainly didacticism from the author – reminds the reader that instead of dividing one's allegiance along arbitrary markers of identity, one should work to see the inevitably entangled relationship that the individual shares with the collective. It demands that one confront one's own presuppositions and prejudices and, in that vein, I suggest that characters such as Frances and Katinka – and their ability to scrutinise the function of the frame – represent individuals with whom Shukri desires the reader to identify. Because they are able to rework the way they see the world, and thus critique the polarities created by the hegemonic ambitions of metanarratives, these two characters are wont to be emulated. Their openness towards divergent historical pathways encourages the reader to examine one's own historical biases, and to reconfigure the frames through which one considers both the past and the present.

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