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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of urban spaces in E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1924) and Ahdaf Soueif’s *The Map of Love* (1999). In particular, it investigates how colonialism – as a cultural activity – produces traces of its hegemony and how these traces transform and fashion the colonial and post-colonial urban spaces in the two novels. Through examining how *A Passage to India* and *The Map of Love* present the utilisation of space, this paper explores the ways colonialist superpowers have left traces of their presences which are marked in all of the spaces they subjugate and dominate. Interestingly, space and its concomitant socio-political divisions/hierarchies are viewed, by and large, through the responses and perspectives of the women characters in both novels, represented by Forster’s Adela Quested and Mrs Moore and Soueif’s Anna Winterbourne. The paper will also show how employing Edward Soja’s term of Thirdspace can illuminate the significance of the courtroom episode that each novel presents.

Keywords

Urban space, E.M. Forster, Ahdaf Soueif, Thirdspace, Colonialism/Post-colonialism

Introduction

The ability to possess, command and take control of urban space allows the coloniser to establish control, and consequently, achieve hegemony. Creating an urban identity allows the coloniser to create a social setting that conveys a specific and unique sense of character and spatiality onto the taken area. Therefore, control and manipulation of the urban space are vital to colonialists since its form and structure represent a colonial power’s authority and supremacy. Urban space acts as a method and tool for colonial practice and dogma. That is to say, colonial power acts as a carrier for its ideology, and this power forms, impacts, and alters the colonial urban space through, to quote Jon Anderson’s words, the ‘ongoing production of traces’\(^1\) which has the capability of re-structuring and re-shaping the colonial urban environment according to its own codes and principles. By identifying colonial traces, we are able to locate colonial ideology, its objectives and motives, and understand how these traces influence the perceptions of the people

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living within the colonised space. In other words, colonial powers sought to re-create the colonised urban spaces in such a way that it becomes an extension of their imperial identity. The designated space would later become both unique and identifiable only to colonial identity.

The concept of urban space has become a major focus and interest for researchers in recent years, especially literary theorists and critics. According to Petr Chalupský and Anna Grmelová, the city has always been associated with literature. As Malcolm Bradbury states, ‘there has always been a close association between literature and cities. There are the essential literary institutions ... There, too, are the intensities of cultural friction and influences, and the frontiers of experience.’ The city offered people the chance to express themselves, something which the rural did not. This newly gained and exciting urban experience was often reflected in literary texts.

Critical perspectives on A Passage to India & The Map of Love

Forster’s *A Passage to India* and Soueif’s *The Map of Love* can both be read as critiques of the British imperial administration in India and Egypt in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Both works make use of the characters’ journeys and experiences to represent the racial and ethnic tensions and conflicts that separate the coloniser and the colonised. Moreover, by setting the characters in a historical and colonial milieu, these texts provide the reader with a glimpse, albeit fictional, of the life under British colonial rule in India and Egypt, respectively. By doing so, they reveal the truth behind the colonial enterprise and expose the hypocrisy of the colonisers.

Overall, urban space plays a crucial role in developing the events of the two novels, and hence, analysing how the two authors depict urban space reinforces the reader’s understanding of colonialist and imperialist discourses in the two texts. Both works have been dealt with from various perspectives; however, they have not been compared or analysed together within a spatial-geographical context. Despite the fact that the two novels were written in different periods, their representation of urban spaces makes the comparison between them viable. This is especially facilitated by the fact that Soueif’s novel is a historical novel set in the early twentieth century, that is during the same period that Forster portrays in his novel. In addition, the socio-political spatial divisions are viewed through the eyes of the female characters in both novels represented by Forster’s Adela Quested and Mrs Moore and Soueif’s Anna Winterbourne. Still, the two novels’ representations of urban spaces reflect the differences between novels written during Britain’s colonial era and those written in a post-colonial world.

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According to Judith Scherer Herz, upon its publication, *A Passage to India* was first ‘received as a political novel’ because of Forster’s critical account of the British Raj in India; however, soon after, reviewers began to examine the novel from different perspectives. To quote Herz’s words, critics have extensively studied the novel for ‘its complexity of theme and structure and its metaphysical implications.’ For instance, Said argues that the novel draws ‘narrative form from the triumphantist experience of imperialism into the extremes of self-consciousness, discontinuity, self-referentiality and corrosive irony, whose formal patterns we have come to recognize as the hallmarks of modernist culture.’ In contrast, Lionel Trilling criticises Forster’s portrayal of the English characters, claiming that ‘Forster’s portraits are perhaps angry exaggerations.’

*The Map of Love* has been explored and analysed by critics such as Shao-Pin Luo and Catherine Wynne as a study of transculturation, with the main focus being on the trans-cultural experience, travel, and cultural hybridity. The novel sheds light on other important issues like Oriental discourse, identity, and British imperial rule in Egypt. The idea that Soueif’s novel concerns itself with both oriental and postcolonial topics may appear to some critics as inconceivable. For instance, Anastasia Valassopoulos raises the question, ‘how can a novel be harlequin romance ... and an embodiment of postcolonial discourse at once?’ In the novel, Soueif explores the impact of colonial rule and domination from the perception and experiences of her characters through time by depicting a transnational relationship. Joseph Massad states that ‘Soueif uses letters, diaries, flashbacks, and political communiqués to contextualize, layer and interrupt the narration.’ In this context, it can be argued that Soueif employs the technique of flashback ‘to create parallelism’ to connect the past and the present together, allow the reader to re-examine colonial Egypt through the present and to draw attention to post-colonial issues. Therefore, spatiality in *The Map of Love* can be explored through its ‘temporal peregrinations.’ Moreover, this back and forth journey through time and space allows diasporic writers like Soueif to further explore their geographic dislocation.

Forster’s *A Passage to India* provides a profound insight into the intricate relationship between the British and the Indians, a relationship which encompasses the complex struggle

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5 Herz 35.
7 Lionel Trilling, *E.M. Forster* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions Books, 1943) 146.
11 Massad 79.
between the coloniser and the colonised. The novel consists of three major parts or landscape structures: the Mosque, the Cave, and the Temple. Forster employs the three structures to presents a colonial India that is spatially divided and controlled by imperial domination. Thus, the novel explores how urban spaces were shaped by the colonial project and it also reveals traces of hegemonic colonial power that are reflected in the segregation of the geographical and urban spaces of colonial India at the beginning of the twentieth century.

By the same token, *The Map of Love*, as Amin Malak succinctly puts it, is ‘a tour de force of revisionist meta history in the twentieth century.’ The novel intertwines several themes: it introduces the reader to the historical, cultural, and socio-political aspects and issues of colonial and post-colonial Egypt. Similarly to *A Passage to India*, *The Map of Love* explores the possibility of a meeting between two different peoples from two different cultural backgrounds under colonial rule. Despite the difficulty of such a meeting, Soueif is able to bring down language and cultural barriers through tolerance, compassion and understanding. Her novel treads on a carefully drawn line between an Orientalist and post-colonial novel. The title of the novel contains the word map which, like *A Passage to India*, also suggests a journey across geographical places. Soueif portrays Egypt in two different periods: one in the late nineteenth century, where the events take place in London and in British colonial Egypt. The remainder of the events take place during the twentieth century in New York and post-colonial Egypt. Like Forster’s novel, *The Map of Love* portrays colonial urban spaces and shows how they have left their traces on post-colonial Egypt.

**Space, social production and traces**

Space as a term, is often associated with an empty area. As a discipline, space is dealt with as an abstract notion. However, Marxist French urban sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991) has argued against this approach. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre argues that space or social space is not a medium or a mode of production, rather it is produced and reproduced by social forces and is considered fundamental to everyday life, experience and activity. According to Lefebvre, spaces are ‘empty abstractions’. They only obtain real meaning through the social or cultural context. Space, therefore, is defined by analysing the context it is produced in. However, Lefebvre’s major focus revolves on the production of social space and argues that social space is produced as a consequence of the interaction between society and social relations; that is, space is produced and influenced by the different social factors, practices, and set of operations and it is their interaction with one another that makes up the space. Lefebvre also

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15 Lefebvre 12.
16 Lefebvre 31-33.
maintains that social space includes all the activities that the ‘built environment’\textsuperscript{17} produces, and hence, it is not a product of its own.

In post-colonial literature, space is crucial in relation to power. In this context, Lefebvre argues that social space is ‘a means of control, and hence of domination, of power.’\textsuperscript{18} Lefebvre concludes that the produced spaces act as a ‘tool’ of ‘thought’ and serve as a ‘tool’ of ‘action.’\textsuperscript{19} That is to say, the spaces produced can be used by dominant groups to achieve power and authority. Hence, space is used as an expression of colonial power. As a result, in colonised spaces the ‘built environment’ such as cities, markets, buildings, houses ...are marked with symbols of colonial presence and can be easily distinguished from other, native, spaces.

In this context, Jon Anderson introduces the notion of ‘trace-making’\textsuperscript{20} by cultural groups and their activities which generate the similar effect of influencing and modifying urban spaces. Places, according to Anderson, are made up of a ‘blend’ of what Anderson terms as ‘traces’. Symbols of colonial presence and power are represented through traces. Anderson defines traces as ‘marks, residues, or remnants left in place by cultural life’.\textsuperscript{21} They are either material, like physical and/or visible traces, or non-material that we sense, feel or reflect upon in memory.\textsuperscript{22} As diverse cultural activities leave various traces, each in accordance with the dominating cultural activity which happens to be taking place within the place or spatial context, these traces embody and reflect the cultural activity in both forms. Seen from this perspective, one may argue that colonialism is a cultural activity produced by social activities and relations and that it is generated by a group of people and their activities. Therefore, colonialism has the ability to produce traces that impact the urban environment and influence the perception of the people living in these surroundings. Put differently, colonialism – as a cultural activity – represents one form of a power establishment, which influences and in turn is influenced by the geographical context or space it takes place within. In order for such a cultural activity to fully colonise the geographical place or setting, colonial power must gain control and modify the geographical urban space.

Space, according to Lefebvre, can be analysed by understanding the ‘Lived space.’\textsuperscript{23} The analysis of \textit{A Passage to India} and \textit{The Map of Love} shows that spatiality in the two texts is best expressed in Lefebvre’s notion of ‘Lived space’ which he defines as ‘the space of “inhabitants” and “users”, and also of some artists and ... is the dominated – and hence passively experienced

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{17} David Harvey, ‘Labor, Capital, And Class Struggle Around The Built Environment In Advanced Capitalist Societies,’ \textit{Politics & Society} 6.3 (1976) 265.
\bibitem{18} Lefebvre 26.
\bibitem{19} Lefebvre 26.
\bibitem{20} Anderson 20.
\bibitem{21} Anderson 5.
\bibitem{22} Anderson 5.
\bibitem{23} Lefebvre 38-39.
\end{thebibliography}
– space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate.¹²⁴ It is also endowed with specific marks like ‘images’ or ‘symbols’ associated with the urban environment that represents colonial power and is articulated and manifested in the form of traces. The production and representation of the ‘lived space’, thus, depends on the authors’ encounters with the designated space, meaning that it is their ideas, views, or experiences that construct how spaces are perceived. This is reflected in the characters’ own confrontation with urban space which is limited by the authors’ preconceived notions and experiences, which shape and affect the discourse of their fiction. It is also limited by colonial discourse, a major factor which determines the characters’ attitudes and responses towards native space. When comparing the two novels, it is evident that the authors’ and characters’ perception is represented as either ‘nothingness’ or ‘muddle-d’²⁵ as seen in *A Passage to India*, and an ‘in-between’²⁶ or a space of change as presented in *The Map of Love*.

**The Representation of Urban Spaces in *A Passage to India* & *The Map of Love***

By presenting the utilisation of spaces in colonial and post-colonial India and Egypt, the authors explore the ways colonial authorities have created spatial divisions that reflect the cultural division between the two cultural groups and are marked in the segregated spaces between the coloniser and the colonised. Both novelists depict the socio-political spatial divisions between the colonised and the coloniser from the perspectives of the female characters represented by Forster’s Adela Quested and Mrs Moore and Soueif’s Anna Winterbourne. In *A Passage to India*, Forster’s portrayal of India can be considered both sympathetic and stereotypical. His conventional views stem from the fact that he is an Englishman and a product of his own time. Most of Forster’s English characters associate India with negative and derogatory words like ‘ineffective’, ‘low’, ‘abased’, and ‘dangerous’. This ‘pejorative framing’, is mostly due to these characters’ inability to make sense of the ‘Other’ where they were not able to find a place among the unfamiliar landscape, and thus, the novel mirrors Westerners’ colonial mentality and their inability to grasp what is different and unknown.

Native spaces such as Indian Chandrapore are depicted as mysterious and tangled in their own environment, while colonial spaces like the Chandrapore Civil Station are viewed in an orderly and civil manner to further enhance the colonial image; they are also segregated so as to isolate the British from the natives. Anderson terms this method as the ‘pejorative framing of particular actions, people, or places that they claim are “dirty” or “polluted.”’²⁷ According to Anderson, the ‘pejorative framing’ can be judged as ‘natural, novel, or normal’. In this context,

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²⁵ E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (London: Penguin Books, 1979 [1924]) 58. Subsequent references to this novel will be included in parentheses in the text.
²⁶ Ahdaf Soueif, *The Map of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999) 66. Subsequent references to this novel will be included in parentheses in the text.
²⁷ Anderson 58.
'natural’ is what people want to associate themselves with since it is described as ‘good, right, and appropriate’; on the other hand, ‘novel’ is viewed more as ‘risky, dangerous, and even evil.’

*The Map of Love* begins with a detailed description of the geographical setting of urban Chandrapore. Indian Chandrapore ‘presents nothing extraordinary’ (3). The India that Forster depicts is a mystery and its people and their actions are as confusing as the tangled environment around them. Forster likens the landscape and the Indians to mud. The landscape of the city, according to Forster, mirrors the features of the people living in it. Forster uses different words to describe the Indian Chandrapore like ‘mean, ineffective, hidden, filthy, and deters’. By associating the Indian spaces with ‘novel’ labelling, colonisers guarantee the outcome or the necessary perception generated of those places, which implies that the people inhabiting the native spaces are dirty, confusing, and mysterious, and hence, uncivilised, which in turn, justifies the colonial presence for the newcomers or other observers. Moreover, by framing these places with selected choice of colonial labelling, it further deepens the spatial segregation and generates a general opinion that the people inhabiting the native places are unwelcome and out of place.

In contrast, the Civil Station is ‘sensibly planned’ where the British are unambiguous, ordered, and are clear of any mystification. The colonial Chandrapore where the Civil Station is located ‘appears to be a totally different place’ and is described as a ‘city of gardens’. The colonial space is described as ‘a tropical pleasance, washed by a noble river’ (3). The Civil Station is categorised with ‘natural’ descriptions, which has an appropriate impact on influencing how people perceive the colonial space. The English are physically and purposely separated from the natives; hence, they are separated from their everyday lives and have no physical or emotional connections with Indian culture, people, or traditions. The newly-arrived settlers would be tempted to stay, while those living inside the colonial space would use it to project their agenda. As for the natives, they would feel intimidated by that power, and thenceforth, British control and hegemony can be successfully applied or established.

In contrast, spatiality in *The Map of Love* is portrayed differently. As a British Arab writer, Soueif seeks to inhibit the ‘Mezzaterra’ which she defines as ‘an area of overlap, where one culture shaded into the other, where reflections added depth and perspective, where differences were interesting rather than threatening.’ She sets up this ‘common ground’ or neutral space of cultural understanding by deconstructing the colonial discourse and by depicting a transnational relationship. In the novel, as Yousef Awad argues, ‘the two interlocking stories of Anna and Isabel ... foreground the possibility of a cross-cultural dialogue.’

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28 Anderson 58.
30 Soueif 6.
spaces and her protagonists’ experiences through time, Soueif subverts some of the conventional images and ideas and transforms what are at once exotic and dangerous spaces into familiar and identifiable places. Soueif presents fragments of Anna’s diary that documents her travel experiences and thoughts, and at the same time, she goes back and forth between two time periods to reveal the effects of colonial domination on post-colonial Egypt.

Soueif explores how identity and urban and racial segregation entwine since the latter is as a symbol of colonial power and British superiority versus Egyptian inferiority. The city is divided into two different spaces. The colonial urban space or colonial town is inhabited by the British authorities and settlers. The structural layout of the colonial town is designed to create spatial divisions, articulate the historic, cultural, and social identity of the colonial power and to visually claim the taken space as their own. Upon arriving in Cairo, Anna describes Cairo and how the city is not quite as she imagined it to be. Anna immediately recognises the impact of British colonial power and its influence over the city which is represented in the segregated communities where the British settlers live. If it were not for the familiar traces of native life, she would have assumed she had arrived in another typical ‘European city’ (61).

Colonial traces can be found throughout each narrative. Traces produced by colonialism in A Passage to India have the capability to border and define places. This is best illustrated by the British Club, where it only consists of English members since the natives were prohibited from entering it. The colonised spaces were designed specifically to imitate the kind of lifestyle they enjoyed in their homeland. These duplicate spaces were saturated with cultural ideas that were meant to represent the British in a superior and civilized manner. This disconnection is emphasised when Adela Quested and Mrs Moore express their wish to see and experience the ‘real India’ as they were met with heavy criticism by members of the club. The Club also consists of several material and non-material traces that are symbolic of colonial power and identity and they act as borders that determine who is welcome inside the club and who is not. For example, ‘the windows were barred, lest the servants should see their memsahib’s acting’ (17). Other non-material traces that identify the club as a symbol of colonial power are the National Anthem and theatrical plays like Cousin Kate. Overall, the Chandrapore English Club serves as a sanctuary for the Anglo-Indians and by producing material and non-material traces, it further reinforces British cultural values, morals and ideals onto the colonised urban space.

Likewise, traces of colonial power in The Map of Love come in various forms. For instance, Shepheard’s Hotel, like the English Club, is a material trace that reflects colonial culture. The hotel is highly symbolic and stands for many historical and cultural aspects of the British culture. Anna ponders: ‘I sit in my room at Shepheard’s Hotel possessed by the feeling that still I am not in Egypt’. Ironically, instead of feeling at home and welcome, Anna begins to feel a sense of displacement. Anna feels that there is something that ‘eludes’ her and she is unable to ‘grasp’ it (102). At the same time, the hotel asserts the space that it is built upon as colonial or, to use the
words of Anderson, ‘as a space of empire.’\textsuperscript{32} Therefore, when locals, tourists, or colonial settlers see or observe these material traces, it does not simply represent for them an urban structure used to accommodate locals and travellers; rather it is ‘a material trace, tightly bound up in a range of cultural ideas’\textsuperscript{33} which, in this case, would represent colonial ideas and these traces would later come to form and construct a major part of what makes up the place of colonial Cairo.

Other material traces in \textit{A Passage to India} are also seen in the Bridge Party which ironically highlights the cultural and spatial division between the British and the Indians. The real reason that Mr Turton suggested the Bridge Party was not to bridge the gap between the cultures or to mix and get to know the natives even though that was the wish of Mrs Moore and Adela. According to Mr Turton, the ‘Bridge Party did good rather than harm’ and at the proper moment Mr Turton ‘retired to the English side of the lawn’ (36). The Party is deemed unsuccessful, mainly because the Indians are not welcome to socialise with the British, and the atmosphere becomes awkward and makes both Mrs Moore and Adela feel uncomfortable and aggrieved. As both parties turn up, the social divide becomes more evident in the way both cultural groups avoid each other, and each stick to their own as ‘most of the Indian guests ... stood massed at the further side of the tennis lawns doing nothing’ (30). Moreover, the physical arrangement of the tennis court in the middle is another example of material trace that divides rather than brings together the British and the Indians.

Similarly, in \textit{The Map of Love} social events that are meant to shorten the distances between the colonised and the coloniser ironically deepen the chasm between the two groups. For instance, like in the Bridge Party, in the Khedives’ Ball, the English and the Egyptians stay closely together within their own social circle as observed from Anna’s perspective: ‘Naturally there was a very large British presence. The Native notables were there ... But they kept to themselves’ (94). The Ball, described as a ‘grand affair’ where ‘all the Nations mingle’ (92), increases and widens the social and cultural divide. The physical space created as a result of their separation represents a material trace. Interestingly, both groups, English and Egyptians, are successful in creating a social and racial divide between the British and the Egyptians that is expressed in the spatial separations in all the areas they take.

In \textit{A Passage to India} road signs are tools that the colonisers utilise to demonstrate their power and authority, and hence they may be viewed as colonial traces. While travelling on the roads, Aziz reflects on the street signs and muses on the fact that they were named after British generals to celebrate British control and victory: ‘The roads, named after victorious generals and intersecting at right angles, were symbolic of the net Great Britain had thrown over India’ (46). Non-material traces are also recognised in \textit{The Map of Love}. Anna’s journey into native spaces continues to enrich her experience and alter her perception of the other. This is illustrated in the

\textsuperscript{32} Anderson 5.
\textsuperscript{33} Anderson 5-6.
Harem scene. Stories from the Western Oriental tales depict the Harem as exotic, a place where women are oppressed and subjugated. However, Anna finds out that ‘the harem is not a place of licentiousness and sexual indulgences, but a secluded space where socially and politically active women discuss political and cultural matters in a safe and quiet environment.’

In fact, for Anna, the Harem becomes a space of peace, harmony and spiritual indulgence; it ‘brought a certain awe into my heart and I realized it was like being in church’ (378).

Understanding the impact of colonialism on urban spaces allows us to grasp how deeply imbedded the colonial culture is in post-colonial societies. Soueif demonstrates that traces that alter urban spaces are not as significant as the ‘trace-chains’ that are produced later. This is because trace-chains carry ideas of generations that have been influenced and modified. Amal, who is trying to reconstruct Anna’s story, reflects on the fact that the British colonial rule in Egypt is replaced now by US hegemony: ‘I think of the officials of the American embassy and agencies today, driving through Cairo in their locked limousines with the smoked-glass windows, opening their doors only when they are safe inside their marine-guarded compounds’ (70). Amal links the colonial past to the post-colonial present. American diplomats in contemporary Cairo utilise space just as British colonial administrators did in the past. Massad compares the American limousines to ‘the veil that Americans must wear in public spaces inhabited by dangerous, yet seductive locals.’

The limousines, one may add, are another form of colonial bordering and segregation that ensures racial and spatial separation. Thus, by imposing their life style in order to establish control, these hegemonic powers have left traces of their cultural and belief system in all the spaces they take.

**Borders, Nature and Transformation**

When comparing *A Passage to India* and *The Map of Love*, it becomes evident that Anna’s attempt to see Egypt can be viewed as a vastly different experience from that of Adela Quested who wants ‘to see the real India’ (18). Even though they are both English and both are influenced by the same colonial discourse on the Other, the differences between the two protagonists lie in their different approaches. Adela’s approach to India is naïve: her inexperience and the fact that she builds her judgment of the Other on Orientalist scholarship rather than first-hand experience, eventually lead to the unfortunate interpretation of events in the Marabar Caves. On the other hand, Anna’s approach to Egypt is much more nuanced and experienced. She is careful, observant and does not make her own impressions about Egypt and its people by relying on preconceived notions and prejudiced concepts: ‘I am very sensible that I know very little of the country and must be content to try and educate myself until such time as I am equipped to form my own views’ (71).

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34 Awad 131.
35 Massad 80.
The colonisers attempt to culturally delimit and influence the colonised spaces, including the natural landscape. As Bill Ashcroft puts it, ‘boundaries are critical in the colonial taming of the wild and the control of space.’\footnote{Bill Ashcroft, \textit{Post-Colonial Transformation} (New York: Routledge, 2001) 162.} This is because vast areas of ‘blank’ spaces, creates a pressing need amongst colonisers to ‘develop’ those areas, which, in turn, leads to the control and exploitation of native lands.\footnote{Ashcroft 162.} Therefore, for both the coloniser and the colonised, the act of inhabiting is crucial because it is where a conceptual shift occurs from spatiality to ‘place-ness.’\footnote{Ashcroft 158.} For the coloniser, it helps to create and gain their ‘ideological identity’ through transforming the colonised spaces, and hence, they can acquire control over the colonised space and enforce their power on the natives.\footnote{Ashcroft 158.} For the colonised, ‘habitation of a place’ is crucial since it represents a spatial boundary or location which cannot be penetrated by the coloniser; it highlights their ability to ‘transform the external cultural pressure which constricts them.’\footnote{Ashcroft 159.}

In \textit{A Passage to India}, the natural elements refuse to be controlled by colonisers. That is to say, nature in \textit{A Passage to India} is a symbol of India’s unity and integrity; it encompasses all elements of India and all attempts at defining it are futile. Nature refuses to be subdued by the English; it is mighty, powerful, defiant and is capable of conquering waves of invaders. It rejects this sort of colonial bordering or ‘inhabiting’; it is the one element that remains unchanged, and unidentifiable to the coloniser. Forster describes India as an ‘appeal’ where ‘generations of invaders have tried’ (120-121) to take a hold of it and make sense of it but have failed. Despite the persistent attempts by colonisers to understand India, India refuses to make home for the coloniser and remains unfathomable and unidentifiable to all foreigners and invaders.

Forster employs the many elements of India to illustrate how both cultures are almost completely disconnected and are unable to comprehend and grasp one another, thus emphasising the gap between the two cultures. Refusal to overcome their differences and become friends is central to the conflict between the two cultural groups. In the novel, Forster suggests that beside cultural divisions that separate the two groups, there are ideological and power differences that deepen the chasm between them. However, Forster suggests that while it might seem impossible to form a friendship between the two cultures, hope still exists perhaps in another time or place where colonial power no longer intervenes: “‘No, not yet,’” and the sky said, “‘no, not there’” (288). Nature, represented by the sky, is adamant that it is not time yet for colonised-coloniser comraderies.

For Adela, nature remains a separate entity, outside of any colonial or cultural influence. She is unable to inhabit it because she cannot make the ‘shift from space to place’, and therefore, to use Ashcroft terms, Adela is unable to ‘live horizontally’, where the true ‘force of
transformation" is made possible. In other words, Adela cannot realize the possibility of living beyond colonial boundaries.

Mrs Moore’s experience inside the caves is a devastating one. She is perhaps one of the most caring and considerate Western characters in the novel and most understanding of India’s oneness with nature. However, when faced with the echo, she realises that not only is the sound ‘entirely devoid of distinction’ (130-131), but so is everything else in her life. The experience shocks and unsettles the kind lady; the echo causes Mrs Moore to disconnect and detach herself from everything. The echo shatters her mind and spirit, and makes her wonder about religion, life, and the utter meaninglessness of it all: ‘everything exists, nothing has value’ (132). Thus, by imposing colonialist perspectives on nature, Adela and Mrs Moore fail to appreciate its beauty and grandeur. They are less appreciative of nature; as a result, they become disoriented and bamboozled in the Marabar Caves. Symbolically, the echo represents the cultural gap which can never be identified or understood by both sides. It further represents the deep racial divisions between the two cultural groups and the obstacles which cannot be overcome or bridged.

In contrast, Anna’s experience or confrontation with nature in *The Map of Love* is not nearly as dramatic or distorted as it is with Adela or Mrs Moore. Anna sets out on a journey across the desert in an attempt to step out of colonial boundaries and explore the native life. Therefore, Anna’s attempt can be viewed, from Ashcroft’s perspective, as a way ‘to transform boundaries by seeing the possibilities – the horizon – beyond them.’ Anna describes nature as ‘a vastness which I have never before experienced – the land, the sea and the sky, all stretching unbroken and united’ (190-191). In contrast, both Adela and Mrs Moore’s experience was an attempt to ‘inhabit’ nature, and hence, it can be seen according to Ashcroft, as ‘a way of engaging colonial boundaries’ and occupying them ‘in a way which redeploy the power they administer.’ Seen from this angle, Anna’s experience with nature is far more successful than that of the two English women in Forster’s novel since the former unreservedly embraces nature while the latter wish to impose their outlooks on nature.

That is to say, while Adela and Mrs Moore try to understand nature from their perspectives as colonialists, Anna is more open-minded and, and hence, tries to understand nature within its native context. Soueif portrays Anna as someone who seeks to step out of the colonial boundaries and expand her horizon. For Ashcroft the horizon is a way to resist the boundaries of the western thought. He contends, that the horizon is about ‘extension, possibility, fulfilment, the imagining ... a way of conceiving home, and with it identity which escapes the inevitability of the imperial boundary.’ For Anna, nature is the opposite of the colonial urban space, and

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41 Ashcroft 183.
42 Ashcroft 183.
43 Ashcroft 182.
44 Ashcroft 183.
45 Ashcroft 183.
hence, it offers a horizon of possibilities, and inner peace: she is captivated by nature and landscape and her experience in the desert is unlike anything she has ever come across before where ‘no amount of reading of guidebooks or travelers’ accounts, not even the stretch of desert I saw at Ghizeh, could have prepared me for this’ (190).

Even though Anna presents a stereotypically orientalist image of the Egyptian landscape, namely magical, vast, and mysterious, the text itself deconstructs the orientalist image of the Other through Anna’s journey and transforms the mystical space into a place of hope, peace, and possibility: ‘I ... observed the sea, and the darkening of the waters ... and I too offered up a prayer ... for peace of mind and peace of heart, for it seemed that more than ever now they were within my reach’ (197). Nature, thus, is not merely an empty landscape or painted scenery; it becomes, to quote Ashcroft once more, ‘the scene of the transformative interaction of dominant and local cultures [...] the zone and interactive possibilities of boundaries.’ It is where Anna’s transcultural experience takes place for it is a space where she is able to counter and subvert the colonial discourse that endeavours to exclude, marginalise, and even demonise, the other.

The courtroom as a Thirdspace

The struggle to define a geographical location where cultural power can shape the space according to its own cultural dogma requires the formation of a new space. In this context, urban geographer Edward Soja relies on Henri Lefebvre’s theory of the social production of space and his spatial triad, as well as Foucault’s concept of power to introduce what he terms as a Thirdspace. According to Soja, Thirdspace ‘provides a different kind of thinking about the meaning and significance of space.’ It includes activity, city, geography, and territory etc.; it is where all aspects of space, first and second ‘subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable’ combine.

The two novels depict episodes that take place in what Soja terms as Thirdspace. In this sense, one may argue that the courtroom in each novel is a Thirdspace where British colonial authorities attempt to claim the area as their own by enforcing colonial traces. As Anderson reminds us, ‘power can be exercised by all individuals, yet the power to transform place is of paramount importance.’ This is because any act or exercise of power leads to the formation of place and creation of identity. In this context, Anderson defines two power groups that generally occupy the geographical space: they are the ‘Dominating’ power and the ‘Resisting’ or dominated power. According to Anderson, ‘the Dominating power has the power to define’; on

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46 Ashcroft 194-195.
48 Soja 1.
49 Soja 56-57.
50 Anderson 67.
the other hand, the ‘Resisting’ power seeks to intentionally oppose, challenge, and dispute acts of dominance.

The group that controls the dominating power can effectively and formally create its own versions of reality. This is because the dominating power ‘seek[s] to influence how we think and how we act by defining actions in particular ways’ and this influence generates a common sense opinion or attitude towards a specific cultural group which is achieved through tactical traces. According to Anderson, ‘tactical traces…intend to re-establish order in the face of threat’. In this context, tactical traces inside the courtrooms represented by foreign legal proceedings, colonial trial procedures, preconceived notions … etc, all play a major role in defining the accused as guilty and dangerous. Hence, the dominating group is able to successfully transform their beliefs into an ‘ideological order or law’, and achieve spatial domination.

In *A Passage to India*, each of the two cultural groups that occupy the space inside the courtroom represents a form of either power. Naturally, the British represent the ‘Dominating’ power. Inside the courtroom the two power groups encounter each other; the ‘Dominant’ group seeks to dominate the space by imposing their own ‘oppressive acts’ and ‘colonial trial procedures’ to guarantee the reproduction of their ideas and system of belief. Ronny, Mrs Moore’s son and the City Magistrate, believes that it is best to appoint Indian judges to the case because they are more subjugated and oppressed by the British: ‘Conviction was inevitable. So better let an Indian pronounce it, there would be less fuss in the long run’ (91). It was their duty to be kind to Adela, especially when the person who allegedly attacked her was an Indian, an uncivilized Other.

However, the British are faced with the ‘Resisting’ power. Traces of the ‘Resisting’ power are outside the courtroom where Indians employ the space to demonstrate their resistance to the colonial authority. Mr Turton, British official and tax collector, notices ‘under his very eyes, the temper of Chandrapore was altering’ (189). Traces of the ‘Resisting’ power are also seen inside the courtroom, and this is demonstrated by the outcry from the Indian crowds inside the court, and the defences, argument against colonial trial proceedings. The barrister from Calcutta objects to the presence of the British inside the courtroom because ‘[t]hey will have the effect of intimidating our witnesses’ (196). The British colonial administrators, as the ‘Dominating’ power, were not successful in asserting their own trial procedures over the natives, and thus, could not claim control or power over space.

51 Anderson 59.
52 Anderson 63.
53 Anderson 54-63.
In contrast, Soueif portrays how British authorities had enforced their own legal procedures in the trial of Denshwai, named after the village where the incident took place. Soueif’s depiction is based on historical records. The court consisted mainly of British colonial officials who have become the overriding power that transformed the space into a colonial space of power. The Egyptian *fellaheen* (peasants) were found guilty without a real trial and swiftly convicted for the killing of a British officer. The decision to have the *fellaheen* executed was already made: ‘before the trial even [began] ... Cromer [British commander of Egypt] had decided to have the men shot’ (428). Soueif shows how during the trial of Denshwai, the ‘Dominant’ power was ultimate: it was successful in suppressing any form of ‘Resisting’ power that might come from defence or public. Thus, by ‘legitimating a dominant redistribution of power that reduced Egyptians to minority status,’ British colonial authorities were able to successfully establish hegemony and transform the courtroom into a space that embodies colonial power.

**Conclusion**

This paper has provided a comparative analysis of two literary texts: E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* and Ahdaf Soueif’s *The Map of Love*. The two novels depict urban spaces from colonial and post-colonial perspectives. A closer examination of the two novels reveals how space has become a site contested by colonialist and post-colonialist ideologies. Urban space is defined in relation to its cultural power and those who exercise that power. Put differently, colonialism, as the analysis of *A Passage to India* and *The Map of Love* suggests, is capable of such power and influence because it has the ability to tear down cultural orders and borders, create and establish new ones, and introduce new cultural identities through the act of traces. The vast expanse of space and the unfamiliarity of places grant colonisers a feeling of entitlement to impose their geopolitical hegemony over land and people. Spaces produced in this manner are utilised by colonialists as a tool to enforce specific rules and codes that ensure colonial domination. How that power is implemented and by whom it is exercised defines and affects the space, which in turn leaves traces of its power and influences the people who live in it.

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The Struggle for Identity and the Need for Documenting History in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

Mónica Fernández Jiménez

Abstract

The work which will be the primary source of analysis in this paper is *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2008) by Junot Díaz. The novel places the concept of diasporic identity formation as a challenge which directly affects the daily lives of second generation Dominican-Americans living in Latino and Caribbean majority neighbourhoods in the United States. These groups often suffer categorisation practices imposed on them both by the mainstream North American society and by members of their same community. These practices, added to the generational gap between them and their immigrant parents, often translate into fragility and fragmentation when developing an identity.

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* has been chosen for the paper because it includes some chapters dealing with the past of the Dominican Republic. In this way, it does not consider diaspora an isolated phenomenon, but rather relates it to past historical events. The purpose of the broad historical scope of the novel is to highlight the importance of transmitting a critical historical memory of the country of origin to the second-generation individual. Documenting the past might help these characters overcome fragility in the formation of a stable Dominican-American identity. This need to provide young generations with critical historical information is reflected in the novel through the efforts that the narrator makes to recollect and retell the personal story of Oscar, the protagonist of the book, and his family.

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1. Introduction

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2008) by Junot Díaz includes important ideas about the situations and struggles that Dominican diasporic individuals in the United States experience. Through the description of the lives of a Dominican-American family in a Latino neighbourhood,¹ and an effort on the part of the narrator, the protagonist’s sister’s boyfriend, also Dominican-American, to recover the historical memory of the Dominican Republic and the particular stories of the characters, Díaz establishes unexplored parameters by which the process of Dominican diaspora can be analysed.

This paper will first explore which problems related to in-betweenness may arise linked to the appearance of these Latino neighbourhoods in the United States as a result of extensive migration and also linked to the structure of the diasporic family network. This novel gives

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¹ I use the term ‘Latino neighbourhood’ to mean a neighbourhood where Spanish is spoken and the inhabitants are not exclusively Dominicans. Peruvians and Puerto Ricans are also mentioned in the novel.
detailed descriptions of situations of those living in those neighbourhoods. Nevertheless, other novels such as *Drown* (1996) or *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* (1991) will be used to illustrate the concepts described. Problems related to having an immigrant origin and living in segregated communities include being the victim of categorisation and labelling practices imposed on individuals and the subsequent creation of artificial and unstable identities.

The second part of the paper will explain how *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* makes use of history and memory to help young individuals understand and interpret – or re-interpret – their condition. Díaz’s extensive use of historical elements seems to reassemble some fragments lost in the process of migration and diaspora and to try to recover a history that can seem ‘tantalizingly out of reach’ to second-generation individuals. Through Díaz’s text and other sources, I will try to demonstrate how important documentation about the historical past is for the establishment of a stable Dominican-American identity in the United States.

2. Dominican-American Diasporic Identity Problems Related to In-betweenness and Categorisation Imposed on Individuals

According to Ignacio López-Calvo, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* establishes Dominican diasporic identity as one of its main topics. The fact that Daniel Bautista calls Junot Díaz ‘the face of Dominican American identity’ says something vital about the novel and about his writing in general. It can be deduced that Díaz’s writing may help understand how the identity of Dominican diasporic individuals is constructed once they arrive to and settle in the United States. This part of the paper will examine which identity problems may arise in second-generation Dominican-Americans’ lives because they are children of immigrants.

Díaz mentioned in an interview with Céspedes and Torres-Saillant that his characters, like himself, belong to a generation of Caribbean-American people who, unlike previous generations, start to ‘affirm themselves’. By this, Díaz means being aware of having foreign roots and being able to talk about it instead of hiding or ignoring it. This is shown in *Drown*, a collection of short stories about the Dominican diasporic existence written by Díaz twelve years before *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which shows that the mother of the narrator of the stories, who travelled to the United States in order to escape poverty, seems buried in silence. She never speaks neither about her identity as a foreigner, nor about her past:

She had discovered the secret to silence ...

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5 Daniel Bautista, ‘How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie’, *Romance Notes* 49.1 (2009) 81.

6 Diógenes Céspedes and Silvio Torres-Saillant, ‘Fiction is the Poor Man’s Cinema: An Interview with Junot Díaz’, *Callaloo* 23.3 (2000) 896.
You have travelled to the East and learned many secret things, I’ve told her. You’re like a shadow warrior.\(^7\)

This paragraph puts some emphasis on migration and diaspora and their traumatic effects, which will be discussed later. Belicia Cabral, the mother of Oscar, the protagonist of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, does not give much information about her past either, although readers know her story when her adoptive mother – La Inca – tells it to her daughter Lola.\(^8\)

Lucía M. Suárez uses the phrase ‘broken identity’ of the Caribbean diasporic, since it is fragmented due to the way identity and memory have not been properly connected.\(^9\) The characters of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* are a family of Dominican-Americans who live in a neighbourhood in Paterson (New Jersey), what the narrator calls ‘the ghetto’ (23). They fit within this description of fragmented identities. The mother, Belicia Cabral, fled the Dominican Republic after a tragic incident having to do with Trujillo’s regime – an event which she does not mention to her children. Oscar’s father abandoned him and his sister at an early age and they were both raised in the United States although in a mostly Latino neighbourhood. Oscar and Lola are not Dominican like their mother because, although she was the one who raised them, she did so in the United States. However, their looks and roots remain. Their neighbourhood does not allow them to feel fully integrated in the culture of the country either.

Bridget Kevane explains that when Latinos or Caribbean immigrants arrive in the United States they encounter segregation and economic disparity in the neighbourhoods where they settle and therefore realise that they are not part of mainstream America.\(^10\) In the interview with Céspedes and Torres-Saillant, Díaz also explained that the United States deprives immigrants and second-generations of some of their essence, the parts that seem less acceptable.\(^11\) *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is a journey in search of what has been erased and establish one’s identity as both Dominican and American without feeling an in-betweener.

The condition of the children of immigrants living in those neighbourhoods is fragmented since, apart from being segregated from mainstream Americans, they often do not feel connected with their roots either because of their parents’ silence. Díaz explains that ‘Latinos of the generation right before me … didn’t talk about being Puerto Rican or Dominican’.\(^12\) When trying to establish their whole identity these characters realise that they do not know many things about the story (or history) of their family and the family’s homeland. When Lola is sent to the Dominican Republic by her mother because of her reckless behaviour she sees pictures of Belicia as a young girl in La Inca’s house: ‘The kind of photos she has never seen in her house’ (77). Torres-Saillant calls this family’s situation a ‘dysfunctional diasporic family network’.\(^13\)


\(^8\) Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008) 78. Further references to this work will be included in the text as page numbers. All ellipses are mine.


\(^11\) Céspedes and Torres-Saillant 896.

\(^12\) Céspedes and Torres-Saillant 896; ellipsis mine.

The condition of second generation Dominican-Americans is very nicely described in ‘Doña Aída, with your Permission’ by Julia Álvarez. Here Álvarez responds to criticism by the Dominican poet Aída Cartagena Portalatín about the fact that she writes her novels in English. Álvarez explained that she is neither Dominican nor American and feels at ease writing in English about Dominican topics: using the language of the land she has been raised in to talk about topics of the land where her roots are. The comments that follow this explanation are useful to explain what Caribbean diasporic identity consists of:

It’s a world formed by contradictions, clashes, cominglings – the gringa and the Dominican, and it is precisely that tension and that richness that interests me. Being in and out of both worlds, looking at one side from the other side … With our finger-snapping, gum-chewing English, sometimes slipping in una palabra o frase español. With our roots reaching down deep to the Latin American continent and the Caribbean where our parents or abuelitos or we ourselves came from. With our asabaches and SAT score; our fast-paced, watch-checking rhythms combining with the slower eternal wavings of the palm trees.¹⁴

The young characters that appear in the works of Junot Díaz and Julia Álvarez show an identity that oscillates between the influence of two different worlds; in Álvarez’s words, ‘a country that’s not on the map.’¹⁵ In Álvarez’s novel How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents the struggle that such individuals suffer is very well depicted in the thoughts of one of the protagonists, a young university student whose parents are described as ‘heavy-duty Old World’: :

For the hundredth time, I cursed my immigrant origins. If only I too had been born in Connecticut or Virginia, I too would understand the jokes everybody was making on the last two digits of the year, 1969; I too would be having sex and smoking dope; I too would have suntanned parents who took me skiing in Colorado over Christmas break, and I would say things like ‘no shit’, without feeling like I was imitating someone else.¹⁶

The adaptation problems this character has do not only come from the fact that she is of foreign origin, since she has already spent many years in the United States. They relate to the way she has been educated and to the fact that García girls’ parents, who feel they should be the main influence on their children and who often also impose stricter controls on them than North American parents who are not Dominican, do not really understand the, according to them, too liberal education of North American youths.¹⁷ Second generation Dominican-Americans often have more problems in developing a stable identity than their parents since they live in the middle of two worlds: what they have been taught about life and the world does not fit with what they see and still they cannot escape the huge influence that a parent has on a child.

Similarly, Díaz’s novel shows a clear fragility in the identity of Oscar, the protagonist. The novel starts this way: ‘Our hero was not one of those Dominican cats everybody’s always going

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¹⁵ Álvarez, Doña Aída 822.
¹⁷ Álvarez, How the Garcia Girls 96.
on about – he wasn’t no home-run hitter or a fly bachatero, not a playboy with a million hots on his jock’ (11). From the very first sentence it can be observed that the novel includes the idea of labelling the individual as normal or not-normal. The ideas of Michel Foucault about the individual and identity can be related to the expectations the protagonist of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* suffers.

Foucault uses the term ‘dividing practices, which means that the individual is either divided inside him or herself or from others. As a Dominican-American, Oscar is expected to fulfil certain expectations. ‘How very un-Dominican of him’, says Yunior, the narrator, at one point because Oscar is not successful with girls (11). When Oscar goes to university these expectations arise again: ‘The kids of color, upon hearing him speak and seeing him move his body, shook their heads. You’re not Dominican’ (51). Many Dominican-Americans suffer Foucault’s dividing practices in the categorisation of people into the labels of mainstream American and immigrant, or with immigrant origins. Oscar, as a Dominican-American, is expected to show the attitudes and abilities by which people categorise ‘Dominican-Americanness’. As he does not show such attitudes, he is rejected by both spheres: the mainstream American and the Dominican-American, since these expectations are mostly accepted.

In the parts of the novel in which Oscar goes back to the Dominican Republic, he suffers a similar kind of process: his Dominican family establishes yet another categorisation: the Dominican who stayed – like Oscar’s cousin Pedro Pablo (285) – and the Dominican who left, and had children who cannot even speak proper Spanish – like Belicia and many people who still emigrate in order to escape poverty. After not having been to the Dominican Republic for a long time, Oscar mentions that ‘all long-term immigrants carry … the whisper that says You do not belong’ (286).

The previous ideas about dividing practices and categorisation imposed on individuals can be related to another concept explored in Foucault’s ‘The Subject and Power’. Foucault claims that there is a form of power that directly affects the individual and ties him or her to an identity. For Foucault, identity is merely an imposed and artificial ‘law of truth’ so that individuals recognise themselves and, more importantly, are recognised by others. Therefore, an identity which is defined by expectations imposed upon how people with a certain ethnic or national origin should behave is not real.

Collocations like ‘normal boy’ (11) or ‘typical male’ (20) are recurrent in the novel, showing the prevalence of practices like those described by Foucault in ‘The Subject and Power’. Furthermore, the narrator points out that otherness is even more salient and, therefore,
persecuted in 'the ghetto', a place which as I have mentioned, contributes to this fragility of identity: ‘You really want to know what being an X-Man feels like? Just be a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto. Mamma mia! Like having bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of your chest’ (23).

The fact that second generation Dominican-Americans lack critical information about their roots and the history of their country has often translated into an idealisation of the historical past. Lucía M. Suárez writes:

> a more sustained reflection of memory obliges us to recognize that memory can also be confining … Numerous studies of immigration show that displaced populations often mythologize and ossify the culture and habits of the country left behind. … Many children of the Caribbean ‘return’ to the island of their childhood, or to the island of their parents, in search of an abandoned world, seeking to match the emotional family memories to the geographical place. But this is not possible. The island that was left long ago has, like any place in the world, changed dramatically.21

Rumbaut describes how American society tries to ‘make a superidentity’ out of the multicultural blend that its inhabitants constitute. If this process of Americanisation fails, ‘one-size-fits-all panethnic labels’ arise.22 This relates to Foucault’s dividing practices in which individuals must be in one label or the other.23 If something or someone escapes that logic, society is afraid and insecure since fears of not being able to recognise and categorise take place. There are two possible responses to these practices according to Rumbaut: second generation individuals either reject ethnic roots and ‘assimilate into the white middle-class majority’, or develop a ‘heightened ethnic awareness within solidarity’. This last case is especially common when individuals are easily recognised as having immigrant origins due to physical appearance.24 Having a salient physical appearance, or one that is different from the mainstream, favours the emergence of Foucault’s dividing practices since it contributes to two-sided categorisation.

If, according to Foucault, identity is an imposition, the pressure on second-generation Dominican-Americans to accept an identity which is often far from the truth can be related to this notion of identity as a false ‘law of truth’ that society imposes on individuals in order to label them into fixed categories. Therefore, characters in these novels often show fragile identities and artificial attitudes and need to explore the histories and stories of their country and family more deeply. Their condition of living in the middle of two distinct cultural spheres of influence and feeling that they are outsiders in both the homeland and the mainland complicates the development of a Dominican-American identity. Transmitting an accurate and critical historical memory of the country of origin of second-generation diasporic characters is essential for them to construct a stable identity. The following part of the paper will deal with the issue of

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21 Suárez 5; ellipsis mine.
23 Foucault 326.
24 Rumbaut 753-4.
Mónica Fernández Jiménez. The Struggle for Identity and the Need for Documenting History in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.

**3. Historical Memory and Documents and Dominican-American Identity.**

Memory can keep individuals from moving on and imprison them in the past. According to Suárez, this happens when the image of the past is frozen. Despite the negative effects that idealising the past can have on the development of a stable identity, memory can also be used in positive ways for this purpose. Memory needs to be brought to the present to overcome trauma and define one’s cultural identity as a second-generation individual. Being able to notice the difference between official history and historical memory is the first step to take.

On the one hand, official history can be defined as an officially legitimate fact unable to create affection because it does not connect the past with the present. On the other hand, memory connects the past with the present and feeds on personal stories. Junot Díaz’s *Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is an innovative novel in this sense because it considers personal stories of great importance to define a nation’s cultural identity. In Flores-Rodríguez’s words, Junot Díaz gives historical importance to ‘traditionally dispossessed characters’. Furthermore, the novel continuously refers to the violent past of the Dominican Republic without omitting controversial facts which might be a taboo in other contexts.

Walter Benjamin’s view on history is more related with memory than with official history. Benjamin criticises what he calls ‘historicism’ by arguing that it perceives history as a stable and eternal unit which is perceived in a single and unique moment of time. On the contrary, Benjamin sees history as an image which is perceived from the present moment and that changes as time – and progress – go by, so it is always changing. In an interview with Edwidge Danticat, Junot Díaz criticised Vargas Llosa’s approach to the ‘Trujillato’, claiming that it was identical to a biography of the dictator written forty years. Díaz’s point is the same as Benjamin’s: that history should be told according to the present situation. In this interview, Díaz mentioned the following quote by Glissant: ‘the past, to which we were subjected … has not yet emerged as history for us.’ History is an active process and narratives like *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* are needed to construct it. Time also contributes to perceive the past in different manners. For example, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is able to discuss explicitly the barbarities perpetrated by Trujillo’s regime without euphemisms, something which is only possible when time has passed. According to Benjamin, official history does not always tell the truth; it has just taken possession of it. Since history is always changing, new narratives

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25 Suárez 18-19.
29 Benjamin 17, 18.
31 Benjamin 12.
are also needed. Yunior tells the story – and the history – in an uncommon way. This process of retelling official history is what the novel’s characters need in order to develop a stable identity.

The narrator makes many references to historical events, thus exhibiting a desire to understand the past. Although Oscar and Lola do not explicitly explore the country’s historical events, Yunior includes much information about ‘El Trujillato’, the dictatorship of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo in the Dominican Republic which lasted from 1930 to 1961. This dictatorship is claimed to be the historical motive for the start of the Dominican diaspora in the novel, according to Machado Sáez.32 Through the footnotes, fragmented information about this past researched by Yunior is added to the main text. Characters do not talk about events such as how Trujillo’s regime repression may have made Belicia unable to talk about her past, for example. But information of this kind is included in the footnotes. On page 233 the narrator describes how violence was used in the regime to perpetuate silence and censorship:

he aspired to become an architect of history, and through a horrifying ritual of silence and blood, machete and perejil, darkness and denial, inflicted a true border on the countries, a border that exists beyond maps, that it is carved directly into the histories and imaginaries of a people.

The problem with the history of the Dominican Republic is its excessive violence,33 which often generates taboos and silences. The need for fiction and literature to recover historical memory and to understand the Dominican-American condition has been of great importance to many critics and diaspora writers. An example is Díaz’s use of science fiction in this novel, which can be translated as an impossibility to explain certain facts without recurring to fantasy and imagination. Regardless of his extensive use of fantasy, Yunior, the narrator, insists on the story being real on many occasions:

Would it be better if I had Oscar meet Ybón at the World Famous Lavacarro, where Jahyra works six days a week, where a brother can get his head and his fenders polished while he waits … Would this be better? Yes? But then I’d be lying. I know I’ve thrown a lot of fantasy and sci-fi in the mix but this is supposed to be a true account of the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao. (296)

This quotation portrays Yunior’s obsession with transmitting the story of Oscar and his clear awareness of his role as a narrator. Retelling official history and, at the same time, Oscar’s story, has certain implications: Yunior seems to perceive himself as a representative figure of the diaspora embodying the role of the storyteller. Díaz sees the storyteller as a figure wanting to order and explain things and, ultimately, find an explanation for oneself.34 The importance of the role of the storyteller is also highlighted in the Dominican-American novel In the Time of the Butterflies (1994), written by Julia Álvarez. One of the characters, Dedé, performs this role and

33 Suárez 8.
similarly seeks an explanation for what happened to her sisters and to herself:

But all I hear is my own breathing and the blessed silence of those cool, clear nights under the anacahuita tree before anyone breathes a word of the future. And I see them all there in my memory, as still as statues, Mamá and Papá, and Minerva and Mate and Patria, and I’m thinking something is missing now. And I count them all twice before I realize – it’s me, Dedé, it’s me, the one who survived to tell the story.35

Nevertheless, Yunior encounters difficulties in retelling both Oscar’s story and the history of the Dominican Republic.36 It is noteworthy that the problem Yunior faces is similar in both (hi)stories: fragmentation and missing information; therefore, the story cannot be told linearly.37 Hanna argues that the impossibility of telling the story and history in a linear way parallels the diasporic condition of the family.38 The double narrative of Oscar’s life and the Dominican Republic history establishes both ‘histories’ as deeply connected. The history of a nation (dictatorship, migration, diaspora …) might directly affect the identity of the individual. But again, the violent history of the Dominican Republic makes the reconciliation of history and identity almost impossible. Bridget Kevane explains that: ‘A dictatorship tears apart not only physical homes and nations, but the very identities of individuals’.39 It is hard for characters like Oscar to understand how a history that they have not lived may affect their own identity, even more when confronted with their parents’ silences.

Fragmentation, in the case of telling Oscar’s story, comes from the pastiche of influences he has to deal with: his Dominican mother and his North American education. Furthermore, Flores-Rodríguez explains that Oscar’s exposure to much media entertainment – including Japanese animated series or videogames – reflects multiculturalism,40 a phenomenon which defines the present-day world of migration, diaspora, and cultures in constant contact. Derek Walcott vindicated the need to treat the merging of different cultures as something defining of the Caribbean identity, something which he finds fascinating instead of confusing or fragmentary.41 The merging of cultures is something that also takes place in the United States which, like the Caribbean, harbours a multitude of different nationalities and cultures due to migration.

Walcott also expresses his mistrust for official history: ‘The sigh of History rises over ruins, not over landscapes, and in the Antillean there are few ruins to sigh over.’42 In order to recover the historical memory of Oscar’s family, the narrator is confronted with these fragments that come, apart from the conjunct of cultures intrinsic to the Caribbean identity, from the process of diaspora to the United States. When talking about the formation of the nations of the Antilles, Walcott mentions the disparate races and cultures that converged: Asian, African, European, and so on. Diasporic individuals’ identities can relate to this concept of different cultures brought

36 Hanna 498.
37 Hanna 498.
38 Hanna 500.
39 Kevane 10.
40 Flores-Rodríguez 100.
42 Walcott.
together, since, as Diaz mentioned, the Dominican Republic and the United States show a sharp contrast. Unlike what the characters of novels like *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents* perceive, this merging of different influences reinforces, according to Walcott, the identity of the people who populate the land. Walcott affirms that such identity is created by the people themselves, by ‘restoring our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary’. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* reconsiders historical memory and a multitude of cultural influences so that, following Walcott’s view, it can reconstruct a stable and authentic cultural identity. Being able to create a collective memory out of fragments is more constructive for developing stable identities than relying on official history and ‘ruins’.

By opening *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* with Derek Walcott’s poem ‘The Schooner Flight’, Diaz makes a point about the heterogeneity of the Caribbean diasporic identity. ‘I am either nobody or I am a nation’, the poem says, alluding to the disparate nature of the Antilles. However, as I mentioned in the first part of the paper, otherness and heterogeneity are often rejected in the diasporic community in the United States, in which certain behaviours are expected according to national origin. The fact that Oscar’s masculinity does not comply with what a Dominican macho is expected to be implies a rejection of this kind of labelling attitudes towards individuals. The narrator uses the marginal figure of Oscar as a representation of the diaspora so that readers are aware of his atypicality. When readers become aware of it, Oscar’s place within the Dominican community becomes visible. Thus, a metafictional reflection about the power of narratives is made: thanks to narratives like the one Yunior tries to build, second generation Dominican-Americans, and other members of a society corrupted by the need to categorise individuals, can be aware of how to develop an identity free from external pressures.

The last reflections of Dedé in *In the Time of the Butterflies* can also be applied to *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*: the defence of fiction and literature to supply a need for critical information and documentation. Monica Hanna comments on this aspect of the novel and offers a glimpse at the importance of documentation about the past for dealing with the present. She explains how, at the end of the novel, Yunior fantasises about the time when Lola’s daughter Isis will grow up and the fukú will come to her. Elena Machado Sáez defines fukú – the family’s curse – as the violence that haunted the Dominican Republic in its darkest days returning to the lives of the Dominican diasporic subjects. However, Hanna explains that thanks to the documentation about Oscar de León’s story that Yunior will offer Lola’s daughter, she will not have to confront the same identity problems as her uncle: ‘Memory acts as a sort of talisman for her.’ This assumption can be related to the previously mentioned distinction between memory

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43 Díaz, ‘Junot Díaz Redefines Macho’.
44 Walcott
45 Walcott
47 Machado Sáez 533
48 Hanna 516.
49 Machado Sáez 526.
50 Hanna 516.
and official history made by Fernández Polanco. By recovering personal stories rather than relying on the official and accepted history, one can to deal with the past instead of idealising it, and repeating the same kind of mistakes.

The fukú is fascinating for Díaz because its origin dates back to the creation of the Caribbean and its convergence of different cultures and races. The first words of the novel explain this:

They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles (1).

Yunior’s attempt to write Oscar’s story is meant to be a counter-spell for a curse which feeds on death and repression. In the interview with Edwidge Danticat, Junot Díaz reveals that what mattered the most about fukú is the ability to see it, not to destroy it. Therefore, the idea that documentation is vital to develop a stable identity as a Dominican-American relates to the purpose of this book: Yunior writes a story which serves as documentation so that future generations understand and overcome a past defined by violence, repression, and silencing.

In conclusion, the novel shows that repression and impositions on individuals can be fought with the use of documentation. The tragic history of the Dominican Republic, which includes silence and repression due to the many years of dictatorship the country suffered, might have created an ideological national structure which has been unconsciously transmitted to second generation Dominican-Americans, even though they may have not lived through the historical events which led to it. Expectations such as the fact that Dominican males should have a strong sexual desire and a violent attitude are widely accepted among young Dominican-Americans living in the United States. This rejection of difference and otherness is a representation of the Dominican dictatorship history. Because such history is so violent and traumatic, works of fiction and the use of imagination are needed in order to understand and work through it. The novel The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao places an atypical Dominican-American male as the protagonist in order to defy these intolerant attitudes. Furthermore, documenting the past of the nation is needed so as not to repeat the same cyclical attitudes of repression and violence. The need to maintain and recuperate Oscar’s personal story parallels a further need to inform young second-generation diasporic individuals about the past of their nations of origin.

4. Conclusion

The extensive processes of diaspora of Dominican-Americans and other nationalities have

51 Díaz Interview with Edwidge Danticat.
52 Flores Rodriguez 94.
53 Díaz, Interview by Edwidge Danticat.
55 Flores-Rodriguez 101.
56 Hanna 500.
resulted in the emergence of Latino segregated majority neighbourhoods in the United States, and a generation of people who live between two spheres of influence. This is known as hyphenated identities,\textsuperscript{57} which are more and more common in the American social scene due to increasing mobility and migration.\textsuperscript{58} Thus, second generations can feel insecure and fragile due to their state of in-betweenness. Their parents do not often feel integrated in the mainland, they do not feel connected to their roots either, and certain attitudes of categorisation and segregation deprive them of feeling part of mainstream America.

In this paper, I have tried to demonstrate how the encounter of both cultures has often resulted in practices of categorisation. In the novel, both mainstream North Americans and Dominican-Americans accept the imposition of labelling practices upon children of immigrants. This imposition – that Dominican-Americans should be violent and promiscuous, for example – can entail identity struggles to characters like Oscar who do not comply with this definition. Furthermore, an identity which is based on expectations imposed according to ‘one-or-the-other’ categorisation practices is far from being authentic; it is only an imposition.

\textit{The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao} is different from other Dominican diaspora novels because it includes a broad historical scope to which present-time identity struggles relate. With this consideration of history, Díaz connects a contemporary social phenomenon experienced in the mainland with past historical events lived many years before in the homeland. Díaz dates the origin of the diaspora to Trujillo times.\textsuperscript{59} Therefore, historical events about the dictatorship had to be included in the narration of Oscar’s story, by way of footnotes.

My purpose was to demonstrate that the emphasis put on historical memory in the novel tries to convey the notion that documentation about the past is essential for the development of a children of immigrant identity. Not only documentation is needed, but also a reconsideration of how the official history has been told. The way in which the novel achieves this is by using a double narrative: Oscar’s and his family’s stories, and the history of the Dominican Republic. By recovering personal experiences and not ceasing to tell stories and create narratives, a collective national diasporic identity can be recuperated.

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\textsuperscript{59} Machado Sáez 523.
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Khaled Hosseini’s 2003 novel *The Kite Runner*, as the first Afghan novel published in English, garnered attention in a post-9/11 political climate fascinated by the potential for insight offered by its setting and subject matter. The invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 brought unprecedented attention to a region that had been summarily ignored by conceptions of history formulated by the West, despite the impact that Western politics had had on its development. Hosseini’s novel advocates for Afghanistan in a Western context whose dominant discourse has effectively reduced it to ‘the caves of Tora Bora and poppy fields and Bin Laden’, as Hosseini put it in a foreword to the tenth anniversary edition of *The Kite Runner*.\(^1\) Hosseini acknowledges an intended Western audience as he emphasises the fact that *The Kite Runner* has helped to make Afghanistan more than ‘just another unhappy, chronically troubled, afflicted land’ for his readers (III). Hosseini achieves this in a narrative that traces his protagonist Amir’s journey through political and personal turmoil, and, crucially, as a witness to trauma. At twelve years old, Amir is a bystander to the rape of his childhood friend Hassan; the incident traumatises Amir and leads him to a lifetime spent seeking redemption. This essay traces the ways in which Hosseini presents this assault as an allegory for the national rupture that occurs in Afghanistan during the mid-1970s as the country experiences the collapse of the monarchy and the invasion of Soviet forces. Through the use of this allegory, Hosseini translates the trauma of ongoing conflict for a Western audience.

**Khaled Hosseini, World Literature and the Post-9/11 Novel**

*The Kite Runner* emerged in the post-9/11 period as an example of world literature that challenged the rhetoric legitimising the invasion of Afghanistan. World literature is defined by the Warwick Research Collective as literature that emerges from the ‘dialectics of core and periphery that underpin all cultural production in the modern era’.\(^2\) Hosseini’s particular status – as a member of the Afghan diaspora and a full-time citizen of the West – can be seen as bolstering his decision to write fiction that might ease the difficulties of cross-cultural understanding in the post-9/11 era while providing a way for the destabilisation of the notion of the centre-periphery relationship. In her influential work on world literary relationships, Pascale Casanova argues that the periphery is defined by its relationship to the centre, whether it seeks consecration and approval or sets out to chart an antagonistic course.\(^3\) Peripheral writers are

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1. Khaled Hosseini, Foreword to *The Kite Runner* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003) III. Note: Further references to this text will be included in parentheses in text.
ultimately, according to Casanova, defined by their decisions to ‘perpetuate, or alter, or reject, or add to, or deny, or forget, or betray their national literary heritage’. Such decisions can be seen to reveal the ‘very purpose’ of the work done by peripheral writers as they attempt to chart a course for their national literature within the constraints of an inherently unequal world literary system; much can be revealed by the decision of a particular writer to either eschew or adhere to the unforgiving slope of the global literary marketplace as they attempt to create a space for their national perspective.

For an Afghan American writer like Hosseini forced to grapple with complex identities by virtue of his emigration from Afghanistan to the United States, questions of centrality and peripherality are inevitable: how does such an author fit into ‘national’ literary traditions? Considering the relationship between national identity and literature in Nationalism and Literature, sociologist Sarah M. Corse notes that ‘national literatures have traditionally been understood as reflections of the unique character and experiences of the nation’. Corse posits that national canons are involved in the formation of collective identities: ultimately, ‘national literatures, like nations, are created by the cultural work of specific people engaged in an identifiable set of activities’. For peripheral writers, participation in such activities involves the navigation of their particular cultural or national setting and the consideration of where this might fit in the larger configuration of world literary systems. As Casanova states, the characterisation of a peripheral writer’s work, and its attendant goals, must ‘situate it with respect to’ both ‘the place occupied by the native literary space within world literature and his own position within this space’. Those practitioners designated to the role of national writer for the peripheral space must be cognisant of the wider settings of world literature as they attempt to set a course for their national literature and the peculiarities of the culture it represents.

As a peripheral writer situated at the centre and addressing a central audience, Hosseini occupies a fraught space in the world literary system; he operates within the strange space ostensibly created by globalisation and those migratory patterns engendered by conflict. Casanova describes peripheral writers as being in possession of ‘special lucidity’ when sensing and articulating their disenfranchisement within global literary systems. Central writers, on the other hand, tend to conform to the notion that their experience is universal and to the assumption of equity between literary spheres. Instead of weakening his perception of inequality, Hosseini’s exposure to central power structures allows him to perceive the challenges faced by peripheral voices with an uncommon degree of focus and lucidity. The mammoth task of advocating for Afghanistan from the West in the wake of 9/11 places a premium on this lucidity.

In order to capitalise on his dual perspective and the insights into world literary systems it affords, Hosseini must necessarily be sensitive to his position of relative privilege. His removal

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4 Casanova 41.
5 Casanova 41.
7 Corse 7.
8 Casanova 41.
9 Casanova 44.
10 Casanova 44.
from the worst of Afghanistan’s recent turmoil demands that Hosseini be declarative about his limitations as a national writer; he cannot represent, without the necessary narrative disclaimers, trauma which he did not experience. To attempt a straightforward adoption of the peripheral voice would be to risk the alienation of those perspectives for which he is advocating and render his efforts tantamount to reductive appropriation of the suffering of the Other. Hosseini is able to exercise narrative authority over those instances of national trauma for which he was present as a child, namely the 1979 communist coup and resulting upheaval. Later traumas which occurred following Hosseini’s emigration to the West, such as those incurred during the reign of the Taliban or the post-9/11 invasion, require an increased degree of narrative sensitivity.

In deference to these potential difficulties around subjectivity, Hosseini presents *The Kite Runner* to the Western reader in a form which indicates a desire on his part not to claim ownership over that which he did not experience; he harnesses his Afghan American identity to represent the Other as grievable, to apply Judith Butler’s concept, building a complex narrative structure in support of this ultimate goal. The novel initially adopts the familiar Western form of the bildungsroman as we witness our protagonist Amir’s journey toward the realisation of his ambition, shared with Hosseini, to become a novelist. In this sense, the structure of *The Kite Runner* mimics that of a performative metafiction as we are privy to the events of the novel as they come to us via the narrative voice of a novelist detailing his journey toward being able to tell this very story. On another textual level, however, this metafictional performance of Amir’s bildungsroman, once complete, can be read as an allegorical representation of Afghanistan as a peripheral nation, struggling to assert agency and achieve self-advocacy within the international community.

**Translating Trauma**

Amir’s bildungsroman creates narrative space at the beginning of the novel for the imagination of Afghanistan as a complex nation with a history comprised of more than its tragedies: we are given a glimpse of a ‘before’. David Jefferess notes that the novel has been praised for transcending ‘the locality of its setting to provide a universal and, ultimately, comfortably familiar narrative’. Jefferess acknowledges this approach as perhaps humanising Afghanistan for the ‘non-Afghan reader’ but questions whether the universal approach is problematic in its treatment of cultural difference. However, while Hosseini does appear to defer to the Western perspective in his representation of controversial issues such as religion, gender and alcohol, Hosseini’s characterisation of Afghan culture is considerably more nuanced than a straightforward capitulation to Western standards of universality. Hosseini employs a sensitive approach to the rendering of Afghan culture, dealing with its foibles and differences while also acknowledging its similarities to Western cultures. Contrary to Jefferess’ reading of the novel as reflecting Western ‘expectations’ of ‘liberalism, democracy and multiculturalism’, Hosseini

13 Jefferess 390.
seems committed, in his foregrounding of non-religious protagonists, to the notion that secular liberalism is not the sole remit of the Western state.\textsuperscript{14} Though it is important to remain vigilant to the Western influence upon Hosseini’s framing of Afghan culture, we can also acknowledge his rendering of a pluralistic pre-war Kabul as a sometimes problematic subversion of post-9/11 New Orientalist stereotypes that determinedly promote one-dimensional depictions of Muslim cultures as subsumed by religious devotion and representations of Islam as a singularly negative cultural influence.

Hosseini’s commitment to the careful depiction of Afghan history for a Western audience is never more apparent than in his rendering of Afghanistan’s national trauma, which he translates into Hassan’s rape – an incident witnessed by Amir. Hosseini frames Hassan’s rape and its resultant trauma as an allegory for the turmoil engulfing Afghanistan following a coup in 1973 which toppled the monarchy and precipitated decades of political uncertainty, starting with a communist takeover and the invasion of Russian forces in 1979. These events are only vaguely referenced, unfolding quietly in the background of the novel’s primary narrative. In Assef, Hassan’s rapist, we find narrative representation of all those factions – European powers, various powerful elites and later Taliban – whose violence has plagued Afghanistan for generations.

Translations such as this are useful because, according to Stef Craps, conceptualisations of trauma in the West are not necessarily suitable for direct transposition onto non-Western contexts.\textsuperscript{15} In ‘Beyond Eurocentrism: Trauma Theory in the Global Age’, Craps considers the imperative within trauma theory to diversify and address non-Western contexts; he argues that ‘the uncritical cross-cultural application of psychological concepts developed in the West amounts to a form of cultural imperialism’.\textsuperscript{16} To simply couch the experience of those living in non-Western spaces in Western terms assumes the universality of the latter perspective and perpetuates the subordination of the Other.

Conversely, differentiating between the types of trauma experienced in culturally dissimilar spaces allows for the recognition of factors which are unique to those spaces. Craps argues that the typically Western formulation of trauma as ‘an individual phenomenon’ stemming from ‘a single catastrophic event’ can be ‘problematic’ because it distacts from those wider social factors that ‘enabled the traumatic abuse’.\textsuperscript{17} Such factors include ‘economic domination, or political oppression’ or those issues pertaining to racism and ‘other forms of ongoing oppression’ which cannot be encapsulated by Western conceptualisations of trauma.\textsuperscript{18} More challenging still, and perhaps most relevant to Hosseini’s task within The Kite Runner, is the communication of that trauma born of ongoing conflict and violence to a Western context largely unfamiliar with relentless upheaval.

\textsuperscript{14} Jefferess 390.
\textsuperscript{16} Craps 48.
\textsuperscript{17} Craps 49-50.
\textsuperscript{18} Craps 50.
The transposition of Afghanistan’s national turmoil into a singular moment of traumatic rupture for Amir is effective in that it allows Hosseini to avoid the task of conveying to a twenty-first-century Western audience the unfamiliar prospect of perpetual conflict. Hosseini is meticulous in his use of that which Craps refers to as ‘situatedness’ as a means of justifying this approach to the narrative rendering of Afghanistan’s trauma.19 ‘Situatedness’ refers to a declaration on the part of the author or the protagonist that their perspective is one cultivated at a distance from the traumatic event. Building on Craps’ work, declarations of situatedness can be an effective means for authors and characters to deny what he calls ‘imperialist pretensions’ as they renounce claims to first-hand knowledge or experience of the trauma in question.20 In doing so, the author is able to prioritise perspectives better acquainted with the particulars of the trauma and avoid accusations of appropriative intentions. Hosseini utilises the established metafictional frame to position the Western reader at a degree of removal from the incident taking place in the alley and the events of national significance it is designated to represent. We are privy to Hassan’s assault via Amir’s recounting of his childhood memory; the narrative distance enacted here precludes the possibility of over-identification on the part of the Western reader.

As Amir describes his experience as witness to Hassan’s assault, the allegorical filter of Western-conceptualised trauma is immediately employed. Amir’s description of his response to what is occurring in the alley falls in line with Western conceptualisations of individualised trauma stemming from a singular catastrophic event. Cathy Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, defines this Western take on trauma as ‘an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events’.21 According to Caruth, traumatic experiences constitute those which happen ‘too soon’ or ‘too unexpectedly’ to be fully known to the individual.22 Caruth argues that traumatic experiences may only be made ‘available to consciousness’ as the trauma ‘imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor’.23 The individual can only come to understand and gain ‘knowledge’ of the traumatic event as it is revisited and its ‘belated impact’ is felt and worked through.24 This typically Western characterisation of trauma lends itself well to narrative representation. Caruth suggests that literary fiction can utilise language in ways which mimic the effects of trauma and therefore aid the reading audience in coming to comprehend the severity of what is described.25 Literature can employ a language that ‘defies, even as it claims, our understanding’.26 In other words, even as the traumatic event is continually encoded by language and we bear witness to its

19 Craps 54.
20 Craps 54.
22 Caruth 4.
23 Caruth 4.
24 Caruth 4.
25 Caruth 5.
26 Caruth 7.
passing, literature allows trauma to persist in resisting ‘simple comprehension’ through ‘enigmatic testimony’.27

In *Trauma Fiction*, Anne Whitehead summarises Caruth as arguing that the narrative representation of trauma in fiction requires a ‘literary formulation which departs from conventional linear’ structure.28 The mere recounting of a terrible incident from the perspective of a detached narrator will not capture the complexity of what trauma constitutes and how it behaves. For Craps, the resultant dedication to mimicking trauma’s disruptive capacity encapsulates the approach to writing about traumatic experiences typical among Western novelists.29 Craps explains the emphasis on ‘experimental, modernist, textual strategies’ in Western trauma fiction in terms of the mimesis it purports to effect for the reading audience.30 Craps notes that such modernist applications, though perhaps effective in communicating the nature of the trauma experienced in Western contexts, are largely modes of literary expression emerging from a ‘European cultural tradition’ often unavailable to non-Western spaces.31 As such Craps challenges the usefulness of such modes of expression where trauma is not defined in terms of an individually-focused psychological experience.

The apparent futility of attempting to narrate non-Western trauma via Western modes of literary representation, perhaps explains Hosseini’s mediated approach to narrativising Afghanistan’s national trauma. The frame of Western-conceptualised individual trauma, once employed, necessitates that Amir’s narrative perspective destabilises and shifts intermittently away from what is happening in the alley as Hassan is set upon by his attackers. The narrative is interrupted by memories and remembrances of dreams which spring unprompted into the path of the reader – a rare instance of upset in a novel which otherwise avoids experimentation with form or structure. It is not clear to the reader whether the memory intrudes into the consciousness of our adult, narrating Amir or into that of his younger self. This blurring of the lines seems deliberate given the nature of trauma and the instability of perspective it inspires, representing the moment at which Hosseini’s protagonist is forced to confront a horror so immense that he is unable to effectively process its enormity.

One such interruption occurs as Amir describes seeing Hassan’s face briefly immediately before Assef carries out his sexual assault. According to Amir, the look he witnessed there was one of ‘resignation’ – enough to bring to Amir’s mind a similar look of resignation he witnessed on the face of a sheep one Eid as the mullah cut its throat. The narrative cuts away to a detailed description of this memory, effectively doubling on a structural level Amir’s inability to process the scene as it unfolds. The horror of the recounted memory, with the violence it entails, allows for Hassan’s trauma to be rendered via a conduit experience, thereby communicating devastation without forcing its articulation.

Once returned to the alley, Amir recalls that he ‘stopped watching’ and ‘turned away’, unable to continue in his role as witness (72). Amir considers briefly that he might still step in and save Hassan from Assef. In the end, however, Amir is rendered incapacitated by trauma and runs

27 Caruth 7.
29 Craps 50.
30 Craps 50.
31 Craps 50.
from the alley, leaving Hassan to suffer his assault alone. Adult Amir, narrating from the comfort of the present, admits to a number of reasons for turning his back on Hassan. Among these reasons, at least those consciously recognised, were cowardice and fear but also uglier thoughts about Hassan perhaps being the ‘price’ he had to pay for his father’s affection (73). Amir echoes the words of Hassan’s attackers as he refers to his friend as ‘just a Hazara’, making reference to Hassan’s status as an ethnic minority – and therefore dispensable as collateral damage (73).

The significance of these uncomfortable admissions becomes clearer when contextualised within the allegorical representation of Afghanistan enacted by Amir’s metafictional bildungsroman. Amir views his apparent cowardice in this moment as being complicit in Hassan’s rape. However, the reading audience, while disappointed by Amir’s inaction, does not experience his childlike response in the same way. From our removed perspective, we are able to recognise Amir’s inability to save Hassan as unfortunate, even tragic, but not necessarily as a sign of any inherent failing in his character. Once Amir returns home to seek comfort and longed-for acceptance in the ‘warmth’ of his father’s chest, we recognise the childish desperation underpinning his choice to stay silent and perhaps question whether he had the capacity to effectively intervene (74). Nevertheless Amir becomes determined at this point in the narrative to castigate himself for his inaction and place himself within the same category of guilt as those directly responsible. The implicit unreliability of Amir’s traumatised childhood memory serves to undermine the notion that he must atone for any active role in either his own trauma or that of Hassan.

On an allegorical level, this destabilisation of assigned responsibility poses a direct challenge to the notion that Afghanistan must atone before it can be rendered grievable on the world stage. In presenting this allegorical representation of Afghanistan’s political upheaval through the perspective of a traumatised child, the Western witness is able to read both situations with compassion. Importantly, Hosseini problematises Amir’s fixation on his own guilt and identifies him as an unreliable narrator in this regard, noting later in the narrative that he was ‘always too hard on himself’ (205). The novel’s preoccupation with the theme of redemption is thereby refocused to deal more precisely with the project of working through trauma so that agency and the capacity to speak back can be reclaimed on both narrative levels.

As Hosseini’s narrative proceeds in the wake of this trauma we bear witness to the failure of language and the collapse of Amir’s relationship with Hassan. Significantly, the narrative at no point turns to Hassan’s point of view during the rape, and the reader never receives a sense of his physical or psychological trauma. Amir admits to steadfastly ignoring the tears on his friend’s face, the ‘crack in his voice’ or ‘those tiny drops that fell from between his legs and stained the snow black’ (74). Hassan, for his part, neither volunteers to recount his assault nor makes any reference to Amir’s obvious determination to ignore the fact that something terrible has taken place in his supposed absence. Hassan displays typical signs of trauma as he finds himself momentarily unable to speak or to find language to reorient himself within his surroundings. Amir recalls that ‘Hassan began to say something and his voice cracked’ (74). Since Hassan was making no progress in his attempts to articulate his traumatic experience, he eventually gave up, ‘took a step back’ and ‘wiped his face’ (74). Amir remembers this as the closest he and Hassan ‘ever came to discussing what had happened in the alley’ (74).
Hassan’s role as a servant means that he has to carry on with his duties despite the immensity of the trauma suffered; as an illiterate member of an ethnic minority, Hassan does not possess a platform from which to enact the witnessing of his trauma or to disrupt the status quo by calling attention to his own needs and experiences. Amir recalls that ‘for a week’ he ‘barely saw Hassan’ (76). Hassan eventually re-emerges reluctant to address the impact of the attack; he appears to be aware of his powerlessness and the futility of dwelling on his trauma. In his silence, Hassan represents within the narrative those marginalised groups who remain the voiceless Other. Ultimately, both boys are rendered unable to articulate their experience due to the trauma it engendered. Even adult Amir, narrating from his place in the present, is unable to name Hassan’s assault as rape. Instead, he consistently refers to it vaguely as something that ‘happened in the alley’ (74). Ultimately, this incident is traumatic not simply because of the emotional or physical injury it inflicts, but the shift it represents in their young lives. From this point onward, the trauma exists as something unspeakable between Amir and Hassan, breaking down their previously easy relationship into one made up of fraught, tense interactions until its final collapse.

As Amir’s rift with Hassan worsens, unaided by the collapse of Amir’s proficiency with language and storytelling in the wake of his trauma, we are presented with the allegorical representation of the ways in which Afghanistan is rendered voiceless and summarily abandoned by the West in the wake of its difficulties. Unable to cope with or work through the trauma, Amir begins to turn his back on Hassan and the progression of his bildungsroman is indefinitely halted. This crisis, both within the metafictional development of Amir’s bildungsroman and the allegorical representation of Afghanistan’s national turmoil, is embedded in the structure of the novel as narrative attention is pulled away from Afghanistan and Amir leaps forward a number of years to his and Baba’s emigration to the West. By turning away from Afghanistan in these intervening years, Hosseini demonstrates for the reader the ways in which a failure to acknowledge or give voice to suffering engendered by violence or political upheaval can have far-reaching consequences.

As a result of the developmental stagnation that is the result of trauma, Amir’s emigration to the West does not mark the turning point in his bildungsroman that the reader might expect. Significantly, the impact of trauma on Hassan is not explored any further; his exit from Baba’s house marks Hosseini’s final engagement with how Hassan is affected by his rape. The narrative leaves Hassan behind as it opts to focus on the wealthy Pashtun boy and trace his ascendency to the role of national advocate. Though Amir appears to go through the motions of a successful integration into Western society, he remains incapable of leaving his past behind. Hosseini allows Amir’s unease in the West to mirror the uncomfortable place Afghanistan occupies in Western discourse. In fleeing Afghanistan, Amir does not manage to cultivate a life removed from the shadow of trauma. Amir eventually finds work as a novelist, marries Soraya and mourns the death of his father; however, a sense of unease haunts this section of the novel as Amir’s life in America never quite grants the escape he seeks.

Amir’s career as a novelist seems to fall short of providing genuine fulfilment. Once his success in the field has been established, we hear little of his output and few details about the subject matter of his novels. Indeed, while Amir seems to have achieved his boyhood goals, any reader satisfaction at his apparent success is undercut by the sense of hollow achievement and
foreboding that Amir experiences in America. Amir becomes a novelist, and yet he remains unable to utilise language to articulate the trauma haunting his existence. Hassan’s rape, and the national upheaval it symbolises, is still unwitnessed at this point in the narrative, as our resident storyteller remains subject to the limiting powers of his own trauma.

Return to Afghanistan and Recovery

In line with Western conceptualisations, working-through and overcoming trauma involves for Amir a return to Afghanistan decades later and a direct confrontation with the source of his torment. Importantly, in returning the narrative to Afghanistan Hosseini must confront the challenges inherent to witnessing trauma that has transpired in Amir’s absence and which he did not experience. Amir is forced to perform an identity he can no longer claim as entirely his own; he must literally wear a disguise in the form an ‘artificial beard’ and ‘Shari’a friendly’ clothing to gain access to the Kabul of his childhood (213). Amir assumes the role of the familiar outsider, at once invested in Afghanistan’s fate through history and heritage but no longer entitled to claim ownership over a region whose misfortunes have no great bearing upon his existence. As such, Amir’s identity becomes a focal point of the narrative as his primary sensibility shifts from the ‘authentically’ Afghan perspective of his childhood to that of an interloper attempting to pass undetected in a country he can no longer un-problematically represent.

Amir is placed as a witness to the periphery whose insights and perspectives are now modelled after, and intended for, the centre. In order to facilitate witnessing for this central audience, Amir defers authority in certain matters to characters whose perspectives have been cultivated by lifelong residence in Afghanistan. By acknowledging Amir’s limitations in this regard Hosseini prioritises the peripheral voice and gives narrative space to those perspectives typically silenced at the centre. Hosseini utilises the metafictional structure here to allow Amir to abdicate his role as primary storyteller in this section of the novel – perhaps even momentarily suspending his function as direct allegorical representative – and concede centre stage to those characters situated within the narrative as being of the periphery, like old family friend Rahim Khan.

Through Rahim, we gain insight into the time that has elapsed in Afghanistan since Amir’s departure; significantly, Hosseini tasks Rahim with communicating to the Western audience that the arrival of the Taliban was not celebrated for its brutality. Instead, the rise of the Taliban is contextualised within decades of conflict from which they promised deliverance. In a fashion that mimics Western ignorance of this context, the reader is only privy to the turmoil that preceded the Taliban’s arrival by way of an explanation as to how Afghanistan fell subject to their rule in the first place. Amir’s curiosity, set up to mirror Western interest in Afghanistan, takes as its focus the most extreme, publicised example of brutality and approaches the question of their reign in a manner which implicitly positions Afghans as complicit in their own oppression.

Significantly, Amir’s silence on the subject of Afghanistan’s troubles is questioned by those meets during his trip to Kabul. Wahid, a man he encounters during his trip, on hearing that Amir earns his living as writer, enquires as to whether he writes ‘about Afghanistan’ (217). Wahid, confronting what is ostensibly the metafictional purpose of The Kite Runner, suggests that Amir
should use his skill as a writer to ‘tell the rest of the world what the Taliban are doing to our country’ (218). This prompts Amir to declare that he is ‘not quite that kind of writer’, bringing the conversation to an end (218). Amir’s sheepishness on the topic of his writing is conspicuous here when we consider the importance storytelling held for him at the outset of the novel. This is ultimately the closest Amir comes to outwardly articulating the distance that trauma has placed between his innate writerly talent and his ability to facilitate the witnessing of anything significant, whether of personal or national importance.

Amir’s confrontation with Assef, now a Taliban leader and captor of Hassan’s orphaned son, is the narrative culmination of our protagonist’s struggle to deal with the lifelong consequences of childhood trauma. This section of the novel seeks to placate the Western reader who might expect their particular formulation of individual trauma to find resolution in confrontation. Amir submits willingly, even with relief, to Assef’s violence. Though Amir understands this incident as securing his redemption, as noted, Hosseini has problematised the notion of Amir’s liability and, by extension, that of Afghanistan. We are thus able to read this encounter more precisely as an excision of demons, Assef’s defeat representing a rejection of those destructive forces for which he stands.

Nonetheless, once Amir has worked through his trauma in this way he is able to finally articulate its enormity to Soraya and move forward at last toward genuine realisation of his bildungsroman. Amir describes feeling ‘something lift’ off his chest as he tells his wife ‘everything’ (298). Following this confession it is decided that Amir and Soraya should adopt Sohrab, Hassan’s son, and bring him to the United States to live. The adoption process proves difficult, however, and Sohrab is further traumatised as a result of its frustrations. Unable to cope with prospect of returning even briefly to an orphanage before the adoption can be completed, Sohrab attempts suicide and narrowly escapes death. As a result of this episode, Sohrab is unable to speak for the remainder of the novel and as such represents the lasting impact of trauma upon future generations of peripheral voices.

Conclusion

Amir informs the reader that ‘while Sohrab was silent, the world was not’ (332). He explains that ‘one Tuesday morning last September, the Twin Towers came crumbling down and, overnight, the world changed’ (332). Amir describes the feeling of disorientation as Afghanistan became a topic of conversation across the country and people would stand ‘in grocery store lines talking about’ cities such as ‘Kandahar, Herat’ and ‘Mazar-i-Sharif’ (332). Importantly, Hosseini does not frame these attacks as something for which Amir, and the Afghan community described in the novel, must answer. Instead, Amir notes that following the attacks and the subsequent bombing of Afghanistan, he becomes an advocate for the Afghan community ‘out of a sense of civic duty’ (333).

Having finally confronted and worked through the trauma of his youth, Amir is able to participate in the project of rebuilding the Afghan community and the creation of an atmosphere in which Afghanistan can exist in Western consciousness as a fully realised nation. At the level of metafiction, Hosseini places Amir, by the novel’s end, as a character who has finally found his voice and recovered his ability to tell the kind of stories required for the purposes of world literature. At this point in the narrative Hosseini has brought us, full circle, back to find the Amir
we first meet at the outset of *The Kite Runner*, finally ready to assume his role as a voice of the periphery.

No longer plagued by the silencing trauma of his youth, Amir is now able to act as proxy – for Hosseini, Hassan and Sohrab – and facilitate our witnessing of Afghanistan’s turbulent history through the allegorical retelling of his coming-of-age story. Analysing the allegory itself, we recognise Afghanistan speaking from the periphery and giving voice to the trauma which has prevented its complex representation on the world stage. As we witness this return to agency, we are cognisant of the myriad obstacles overcome along the way. Hosseini is therefore able to present Afghanistan’s re-emergence as something important and significant in its own right, quite apart from the context of 9/11; Hosseini has effectively undercut any expectation we might have for these characters to answer for the attacks as by the novel’s end their grievability, and by extension that of Afghanistan, has been so thoroughly established as to preclude recourse to any rhetoric suggesting their implicit culpability. Through Amir, and the complex narrative structure offered by his allegorical bildungsroman, Hosseini has provided the Western reader with insight into Afghanistan’s vast cultural landscape and provided us with the capacity to view its struggles and traumas with compassion and genuine cross-cultural understanding.

The final chapters of *The Kite Runner* find Hosseini engaging once again with his role as an Afghan-American novelist and therefore with the fraught space he occupies in world literary systems. The setting for the novel’s closing sections is the Western location of San Francisco, where the narrative’s metafictional frame has been situated all along. The explicit placement of the novel’s resolution in this location is problematic in its dependence on the Western context for realisation. By providing a relatively happy ending and signalling the beginnings of Sohrab’s recovery, particularly in his new Western home, Hosseini risks suggesting that a resolution is only possible in such a context. Additionally, in offering the reading audience a cathartic ending, Hosseini potentially undermines his efforts at destabilising divisionary thinking; he perhaps allows Afghanistan’s national trauma to serve as only a temporary narrative complication resolved within the scope of the story rather than a lasting source of disquiet for readers. These imperfections notwithstanding, Hosseini’s decision to have the narrative remain in the West is arguably an effort to acknowledge as the novel closes the disparity inherent to world literary systems and to demonstrate the ways in which such systems can be, if not changed, manipulated effectively to facilitate the peripheral witnessing and cross-cultural understanding so desperately needed in this post-9/11 era.

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Works Cited


Revisiting History and Reconstructing New Forms of Belonging and Identity in Kamila Shamsie’s *Salt and Saffron*

Quratulain Shirazi

**Abstract**

This article is a study of Kamila Shamsie’s *Salt and Saffron* (2000). The novelist uses family stories as symbols of Indo-Pak history and represents the Pakistani nation allegorically through the family stories that are narrated in the novel. It will explain how these family stories reveal national history, where history is deconstructed as a linear and fixed entity. The characters in these family stories sustain as well as resist dominant nationalist discourse. Their family politics interlocks with national history, and home becomes an ambivalent site where the effects of national history and a shifting national modernity are explored. This article will also argue that this nationalist discourse is a gendered phenomenon where women are confined within the boundaries of the private space of home, which is away from the public sphere of modernity and progress. Therefore, Shamsie rewrites nation while using the family stories to highlight the ambivalence of both family and nation as sites of domination and resistance. After negotiating the complexities of past and present, ultimately Shamsie has reconstructed Pakistan as a space of cultural integration, assimilation and coexistence.

**Keywords:** Kamila Shamsie, *Salt and Saffron*, nation, gender.

**Introduction**

As a study of Kamila Shamsie’s *Salt and Saffron* (2000), this article will argue that the novel revisits South Asian history while deconstructing the periodisation of South Asian historiography and its narration in terms of the stories of kings, rulers and ruling dynasties. This narration of South Asian history highlights the position of those who were ruled and whose stories were either lost or were silenced by the dominant political and social narrative. This analysis of *Salt and Saffron* explains that the nationalist discourse is a gendered phenomenon where women are confined within the boundaries of a private space of home, away from the public sphere of modernity and progress. Therefore, Shamsie uses a transnational feminist perspective in her novel to critique the oppressive forms of nationalism while narrating the women’s experiences. The first part of this article will explain how nation should be reanalysed as an open and enunciative space against different forms of nation-centred narratives, including the British imperial and the anti-colonial Pre-Partition nationalist narratives which reinforced themselves by their hegemony over the ‘Other’. It will explain how Homi K. Bhabha points out the fixities in the discourse of nationalism and suggests the narration of a more open and inclusive form of nation and nationalism. As Kamila Shamsie identifies the unequal gender positions within the patriarchally-controlled home/family and nation, she reconstructs the family/nation as a space of reunion and reconciliation where gender roles are redefined and the family/nation is reimagined.

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as a space of refuge and reconciliation. In doing so, she is revisiting the South Asian history and reconstructing a new Pakistani-transnational feminist identity that is removed from the fixities of patriarchally-controlled Pre-colonial, colonial, and Pre-Partition nationalist narratives of identity.

**Postcolonial Nationalism and its Contradictions**

Modern nations like India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are political communities which are products of colonial history, but are also products which have been forged during the struggle for power by the national bourgeoisie, who took control from the colonial masters. South Asian postcolonialism is informed by the moments of independence, and the newly acquired nationhoods are charged by the emotional vocabulary of nationalism and love for nation. Such postcolonialism often frames the early twentieth-century anti-colonial nationalist surge as a revolutionary moment against the cultural/racial oppression of the colonial era. Franz Fanon endorses anticolonial nationalism’s agitational resistance against the forms of dominance and oppression. It is a source of recovering from colonial wounds and furthering the process of decolonising. This recuperative power of nationalism is expressed through national symbols such as anthems, slogans, images, leaders, narratives and poetry. Such symbols constitute an imaginative unity between disparate cultural and religious props of identity. On the contrary, such a nationalist narrative is also fixed around selective appropriations of religion, history, culture, region and language. Ayesha Jalal points out that in the case of the postcolonial nation-states of India and Pakistan, such a selective appropriation of religion, history and culture is quite obvious. She opines that independent India justifies its separate national identity in terms of an (imagined) ideal, secular and inclusive nation and Pakistan justifies its creation by projecting a distinctive Islamic identity.¹

Bhabha postulates in *Nation and Narration* that ‘nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realise their origin in the mind’s eye’.² He explains that it is the ‘instability of cultural signification’ from which the narration of nation originates.³ It is a ‘dialectic of various temporalities’ such as modern, colonial, postcolonial and native, which are unstable sets of signifiers.⁴ In other words, traditional national narratives are static and closed, and within the space of a modern national narrative such fixities should be contested and national identities should be narrated as if they are in a state of flux. Bhabha points out the fixities in the discourse of nationalism and insists on a focus on temporality instead of historicity.⁵ He points out that, ‘historians, who are transfixed on the event and origins of the nation ... never pose the essential question of the representation of the nation as a temporal process’.⁶ He further explains that people are not products of simple ‘historical events’ or a

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³ Bhabha, *Nation* 218.
⁴ Bhabha, *Nation* 218.
⁶ Bhabha, *Location* 204.

‘patriotic body politic’; in fact a nation’s people must be thought of in terms of ‘double time’. This double time refers to the pedagogical which is a set of pre-written nationalist narratives given by empires and nation states. The other side of this double time is a production of nation through narration, where scraps, patches and rags of daily life are reassembled to narrate the coherent national culture. Such a production of nation deconstructs national subjects as objects of national pedagogy and records their performativity. In this context, there is an ambiguity that lurks within the idea of nation as it originates from the contradiction between the romanticism of national narratives and the suppressed and oppressed reality of those individuals who live in these nations. When nations are narrated, nationalism also becomes a literary genre that explicates the dichotomy between the national idealism and the reality of individuals who comprise nation. Such a nationalist narrative is ambivalent in its nature because it captures the position of national subjects who remain at the margins of a national centre occupied by the rulers or administrative heads of nation-states. This narration of nation is dialogic and enunciative. It generates a dialogue between central and marginalised subjects. It gives voice to the subalterns and oppressed people who remain outside the fixed national narratives and static national histories. Eurocentric histories, British colonial history and the post-independence Indian or Pakistani state-controlled histories carve such fixed national identities that exclude what Antonio Gramsci calls the ‘subalterns’. Therefore, any postcolonial nationalist representation of subaltern voices exposes the fixity of these dominant histories. Aijaz Ahmad informs us that nation and nationalism are not the only available forms of collective identification for dismantling the fixities of postcolonial nationalism. He suggests that nation should be replaced by a much more open and inclusive ‘collectivity’ – in terms of class, gender, caste, religious community, trade union, political party, village, prison – combining the private and public without necessarily referring back to colonialism and imperialism.

Another problem with nationalist narratives is that they are a gendered phenomenon grounded in the patriarchal imagination, so they often exclude the narration of the experiences of women.

**Nation and Feminism**

It is therefore evident that within the current postcolonial nationalist discourse, the nation cannot be studied as a male-dominated, monolithic construct, excluding the role and experiences of women. The discussion of nation needs to relate the issues of gender and feminism so that it can be better understood. Gayatri Spivak points to the fixity of first world colonial discourse; it cannot represent a third world female colonised subject because, as a discursive platform, it is closed for postcolonial and feminist scrutiny. In ‘Nationalist Resolution of the Women Question’, Partha Chatterjee points out a modernist/traditionalist dichotomy at the heart of anti-colonial nationalism that emerged in the early twentieth century in united India. This nationalist ideology was based on the separation of culture into two spheres; the material and the spiritual. The material refers to modern, outer, public and colonial/local cultural exchange, while the

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7 Bhabha, *Location*, 204.

spiritual refers to the inner, homely, culturally pure and sacred. Within this cultural dichotomy, women are confined to the spiritual sphere. They have to guard the sanctity of religion and purity of culture and have to stay at home to do so. Yet men are assigned the material, they engage in cultural exchange, have the opportunity to modernise and to collaborate within the imperial enterprise to attain material benefits. This dichotomy is instrumental in understanding the nationalist project and its implications for women. This assignment of gender specific roles prevents the benefits of modernity from reaching women, and so they become the carriers of tradition. Mrinalini Sinha proposes to situate gender and feminism within the global, where gender is not a binary between male and female; indeed, it is a more open form of understanding which when removed from its local and indigenous misinterpretations, goes beyond national, local and indigenous to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity.

In an effort to dismantle the fixities of Pakistan’s nationalist discourse, Moon Charania highlights the tension between feminist activism and contemporary collective consciousness in Pakistan. She points out that feminist activism is usually mistaken for a reinstatement of Westernisation. A female activist is rejected as a western propagandist or as Uma Narayan points out, she is framed as ‘a privileged native woman in white face’. Therefore, Charania identifies that those who raise a voice for women’s rights in countries with a strong patriarchal hold are usually united in a transnational field of international social justice where they work for women’s right in the ‘backyard of (Pakistani) state and feudal powers, empire, militarised patriarchy and violent domesticity’. If contextualised within Charania’s and Narayan’s suggestions, the feminist resistance against patriarchal structures of power should be framed within a transnational feminist discourse. Kamila Shamsie, as a Pakistani-diaspora feminist novelist, is attentive to this tension between Pakistan’s patriarchally-controlled nationalist narrative and transnational feminist resistance. Therefore, in her novels, she reconstructs the new forms of transnational feminist identity and belonging for a Pakistani female subject. In her writings, we can see a strong drive for expressing the aforementioned inclusive and more open form of Pakistani identity. Cara Cilano suggests that contemporary Pakistani writers should endeavour to explore the ways in which the literary texts imaginatively look into the past, express the present, and project a future in terms that facilitate a collective sense of belonging.

In light of what Cara Cilano and Moon Charania are pointing out, this article will explore Shamsie’s technique of investigating postcolonial national modernity, and her objective to carve new postcolonial identities for female subjects in transnational spaces outside Pakistan’s territorial boundaries.

Salt and Saffron is an affective narrative which employs family stories and family history to represent processual national identity. Family is a site of memorial transfer and continuity across generations; it is also a trope that expresses longing, loss and desire for reunion. This novel about family becomes a melting pot where the political and social intersect with the familial and homely. This intersection revisits the history and reconstructs national identity. Another important tropological function of family is to symbolise the hierarchies of gender and power dynamics within a home/nation. Family, as a social structure, legitimises the subordination of women and children as natural dependents on fathers. Anne McClintock explains that nation and family relationship as family trope is a natural way for ‘sanctioning social hierarchy within a putative organic unity of interest’. Susan Strehle explains that an ordinary home, in traditional context, is a patriarchal realm and is more connected to public space, and therefore resembles a nation. Thus, if seen from the feminist perspective, home and family carry the same agenda that a nation and empire carry in producing subjects and subalterns’. When seen from the feminist perspective, family is also a site where the subalterns reside and resist against dominant power structures. Family stories are also similar to nationalist narratives of history; any heroic, progressive and constructive achievement is labelled as a male domain in which women remain foreign, and are delegated as inactive, traditional and regressive, and their agency is confined within the home. Femininity, within such patriarchally-controlled nationalist history, is usually a symbol of weakness, with all internal and external enemies labelled as feminine, and who are outside the nation’s masculine centre. However, when family is revisited as a space where female characters remember the past and transfer it to the next generation, family becomes a space of transmission and femininity becomes an idiom of remembrance and memory. Therefore, in a postcolonial novel, any new reimagining and narration of national identity from a feminist perspective diverges from more traditional patriarchal family narratives, because the focus is on women’s contribution in the process of nation-building, and this new focus dismantles the dominant patriarchal, historical and nationalist narrative. Consequently, a postcolonial feminist reading of family and past is a source of counter histories, and this highlights the role of women and marginalised characters that resist patriarchal control and unequal gender positions. Both family and home in the postcolonial feminist context are ambivalent sites of oppression as well as of resistance against that oppression.

When reading nation through family narratives, history remains a common denominator. Jalal postulates that South Asian historiography is seemingly unchanging and is often locked in an ‘essentialising mould’ when it is narrated in terms of Hindu rulers, Muslim rulers or colonial masters. She emphasises the need for an identity which should be outside such rulers based on the periodisation of history. In such a narration, the history of the ‘ruled’ should be more prominent than the ‘rulers’. Dipesh Chakrabarty points out that Indian history needs to be

17 Strehle 64
18 Strehle 64.
liberated from the metanarrative of nation-states such as India and Pakistan. In the light of this argument, Shamsie performs this corrective task of liberating South Asia’s history from the metanarrative of nation-states (both India and Pakistan) by revisiting history through the lens of family past. She revisits ‘history’ at three different levels: the pre-colonial, colonial, Partition and post-Partition. In this way, she resists Pakistan’s state-controlled nationalist tendency to forget the past or to frame it within a state-controlled narrative. Her motive behind revisiting ‘history’ is to gauge its processual temporality, to deconstruct its fixities and to invent new ways of national belonging. In this way, she cures the condition which Leela Gandhi calls ‘historical amnesia’. In Salt and Saffron, history is not treated as a ‘Eurocentric’ concept where all other histories remain silenced. The reading of history in terms of family past focuses on both the central as well as peripheral subjects. As a result, the narration of the family past in Salt and Saffron inculcates an open and inclusive understanding of South Asian history and the Pakistani nation. This bonding reconstructs new forms of belonging that not only includes the stories of elites but also those of subalterns such as women and colonised men, who were traditionally silenced or ignored in patriarchally-controlled colonial, anti-imperial and post-partition nationalist narratives. The next section will give a brief summary of Salt and Saffron and an introduction to its characters and situations.

Salt and Saffron

The main conflict in Salt and Saffron is between the protagonist Aliya and her grandmother, Abida. Aliya has internalised her parental past through the stories told to her about her parents and grandparents, and about the family patriarchs and rebels. She also has a strained relationship with her grandmother, Abida, because Abida once called Aliya’s cousin Mariam a ‘whore’ because Mariam married the family cook. Aliya reacted to this remark and slapped her grandmother. In the Dard-e-Dils family, there is a perpetual fear that Aliya will behave as rebelliously as Mariam; therefore, in order to resolve her own dilemma of whether or not she will bring down the nobility of Dard-e-Dils, Aliya engages in an inquiry into her family past. The name Dard-e-Dil is a symbolic Urdu title that signifies an ache in the heart. The writer has meticulously chosen the title to convey a sense of belonging to the past, and it is grounded in the North Indian Muslim religio-cultural linguistic and historical idiom of Dard or pain. In Urdu literary tradition, such a pain or ache is a suppressed emotion, a longing or an enduring struggle in love, or a love that perhaps remains unrequited and unfulfilled.

Salt and Saffron depicts two sets of characters based on the generational divide. One group comprises the ancestors of the Dard-e-Dil family such as the founders, their successors, the princes and nawabs; all of them mostly male patriarchs who are revered within the family tradition as paragons of power and control. This group also includes the female matriarchs such as Abida (in Pakistan) and Baji (in India), who, after the death of family patriarchs, assumed authority and control to retain family superiority and pride. These characters comprise the first

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21 Gandhi 6.
22 Gandhi 340.

two generations of the Dard-e-Dil family. They are conspicuous by their high aristocratic lifestyle and manners during the Mughal rule and the colonial era. Their names display the nomenclatures that signify social superiority and aristocratic pride, such as nawabs, sahibzadas and begums. Some of the prominent characters in the novel are Nuruljahan (the founder of the Dard-e-Dil clan), Nawab Hamiduzaman and Qadiruddin (the commander in the army of Nuruljahan who died while fighting for freedom). Aliya revisits the family archives to check the authenticity of the claims of family superiority and nobility. While doing so, she discovers the other set of characters, who rebelled against the family traditions. These characters include Taimur, Mariam, Taj, Taj’s mother and the unnamed fourth cousin. They are silenced within the family traditions and are marginalised as outcasts and rebels. In the narrative, Aliya retrieves their lost voices and reclaims their honour.

Dard-e-Dil family past

The Dard-e-Dil family past revolves around the family patriarchs (who are imagined to be at its centre) as progressive, heroic and creative heads of family. Aliya sets the record straight by working out the ambivalence and contradictions within these gendered narratives of heroism and glory. In order to maintain class distinction and social superiority among other ethnicities, north Indian Muslim migrant families often claim to be the descendents of the Mughal dynasty. Such claims were common among all north Indian citizens before the Partition as well as after the Partition. The members of that imagined north Indian Muslim elite (ashraf) were primarily the residents of urban quarters like Delhi and Lucknow, and after the Partition, most of such families resettled in Karachi. These claims of cultural and social superiority were also founded on the financial stability that this class had attained throughout pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial times. As far as the authenticity of such claims is concerned, all the families who claimed to be of royal lineage were not the Mughals or the Nawabs. Many families who acquired economic well-being and accumulated wealth while being entrepreneurs also claimed to be royal descendents. The motive behind such claims and connections was to establish the family as a noble household and to pose as aristocrats. The Dard-e-Dil family also narrates such stories and anecdotes to keep alive the memories of their royal past and lost glories. Their past comprises a corpus of family traditions, prejudices, fears and generationally-transmitted myths and stories.

In order to conceptualise a more open form of identity, the past is narrated in Salt and Saffron as a nonlinear, irregular and fluid concept, which has not been retrieved from any colonial, national, postcolonial state-controlled archive. Rather, it is retrieved from more irregular forms of collective memory, such as storytelling, anecdotes and family gossip. Shamsie uses the epistolary mode, subplots, dialogues, discussions and flashbacks to tell the story of the Dard-e-Dils. She explores the intergenerational transmission of past in her novel through memoirs.

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stories, photographs, the behaviours of parents and other relatives, family trees, letters, oral narratives and genealogies. Jopi Nyman points out that memory and storytelling are two important techniques that Shamsie adopts to revisit the past. She retrieves the past through memorial repertoire and retells the story coloured by her own feminist and diasporic awareness.24 This performance of revisiting the past is also a form of rewriting history, which dismantles the metanarratives of the patriarchally-controlled historical archives of pre-colonial and colonial India. Due to being generationally removed from Mughal rule (1526-1707 CE), The Revolt (1857), colonial rule (1858-1947) and Partition (1947), Shamsie revisits these events through the ancestral memory of the Dard-e-Dil family. Family gossip and family archives are significant sources for retrieving the lost information about these historical events. Meanwhile her generation has to come to grips with the nationalist, territorial and identity politics of postcolonial subjectivity and Pakistani citizenship. The residual effects of these past events are felt by the new generation and are therefore discussed in Salt and Saffron, particularly in the stories of the nawabs and patriarchs of the Dard-e-Dils. The next section will examine the Dard-e-Dils as a family whose past symbolises South Asian history, which Shamsie employs as a symbol to explore and understand the intricacies of modern national identity.

The first phase of Aliya’s revisionist approach is to investigate the benign role of the fathers and patriarchs of the family. She embarks on a journey of separating myth from reality. She meticulously works out the real character of family patriarchs against their constructed and imagined righteousness and unquestioned glory. For example, despite the constructed family image that the Kingdom of Dard-e-Dil was a significant ally of the Mughal kingdom, Aliya sceptically reveals that this Kingdom was completely non-existent. Instead, the head of the Dard-e-Dil family was only a landlord and his land was not big enough to be a state or a kingdom. Like the Mughals, the descendants of the Dard-e-Dil family traced their origin and lineage back to the Turco-Mongolian Timurid dynasty and heritage, though in reality, they were not competent enough to establish a kingdom like Timurlane (1336-1405 CE) or Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur (1483-1530). Therefore, what remained behind were the myths and stories on which the lame claims of dominance were founded and were transferred and authenticated through family stories. Aliya also discovers that the title of ‘Sultan’ was posthumously given to NurulJahan.25

The protagonist deconstructs the claims of family superiority in another anecdote where she describes a scuffle between Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur, who was the founder of the Mughal dynasty in India, and the then patriarch of the Dard-e-Dil family, named Zain. Zain was the favoured son of Nawab Asaddullah whose ascension as family patriarch was a result of his father’s partiality. Out of sheer incompetence, Zain made an offer to Emperor Babur that, if he (Babur) felt homesick in India, he could make Zain his vicegerent in India and should travel back to Bukhara to enjoy the bounties of his homeland. The offer ignited the Mughal emperor’s wrath and resulted in Zain’s assassination. His brother Ibrahim replaced him as the head of Dard-e-Dil. The playful, humorous and sarcastic tone of this story has strong ironic

25 Kamila Shamsie, Salt and Saffron (Bloomsbury: London, 2000) 141. Further references to this novel will be included as page numbers in parentheses in the text.
undercurrents in the novel’s plot. It recreates the truth about famous family patriarchs, as Aliya deconstructs the assumption that the Dard-e-Dil was a ‘kingdom’ in itself and the family patriarchs were infallible beings. She discovers that the Dard-e-Dil was just a part of the Mughal Empire and one of its members, Nawab Hamiduzaman, was not a nawab. Indeed, the title was conferred upon him, posthumously, to assign honour and reverence (45). The Dard-e-Dil family past abounds in stories of such fixed identities that were imposed upon certain male members by the patriarchally-controlled family narrative of the Dard-e-Dils. Aliya highlights the ambivalent character of the Dard-e-Dils, where there was social intimacy between the Dard-e-Dil’s royalty and the Mughals, and on the other side, they were the collaborators with the British forces in sabotaging the Mughal ruling establishment.

As Aliya challenges these preconceived traditions in the family, she also produces a counter narrative to expose the fragility of those constructed family traditions. Despite the fact that traditional servicemen were employed to preserve the record of who is royal and who drifts away from the royal lineage, Aliya revisits the family tree with educated feminist criticism. She finds out that claims of royal lineage were a gendered affair and royal honour was only bestowed upon the male descendents. Aliya discovers that although the Dard-e-Dil patriarchs were good administrators, they were also notorious for their sycophancy and were not brave enough as warriors and statesmen, to pose any threat to the Mughal establishment. Therefore, the Mughal rulers never perceived them as potential threats to their kingdom. The Dard-e-Dils were heavily dependent on the Mughals for their feudal pride and power and thus their claims of family superiority, nobility and high social pride revealed shades of perversion, moral laxity and sluggishness.

This narration of the ambivalent character of the Dard-e-Dils during the Mughal rule helps a new postcolonial Pakistani subject to understand the pre-colonial and colonial past that shapes his/her modern national identity. In doing this, Shamsie has reacted against what Jalal calls an ‘elitist tendency’ inherent within all historical narratives of South Asia. Jalal explains that pre-colonial South Asian history ‘over emphasises on kings and courts’ and the colonial and national historians are transfixed and bedazzled by a handful of English educated elites ‘imbued with notions of liberalism and nationalism borrowed from the West’. Shamsie and Jalal both are pointing out that South Asian history is not simply a history of ‘privilege and exceptional’ rulers; indeed, it should also narrate the identity of those who were ‘ruled’. Aliya’s critical reading of her family’s patriarchy is a reaction against the pride of the Dard-e-Dil (imagined) rulers and as the story moves on, Aliya further investigates her family past by reading further Dard-e-Dil archives and exploring the role of family patriarchs during the 1857 Revolt and the advent of British rule in India.

The Ambivalent role of the Dard-e-Dils during the 1857 Revolt and British rule in India

Apart from the evident sycophancy, weak administration, and the treacherous feudal character of the Dard-e-Dils, their moral laxity was also evident in their relationship with the British. As the

26 Motyl 3.
27 Motyl 5.
filthy rich, they played a treacherous role during the collapse of Muslim rule and the subsequent establishment of British colonial rule in India. The role of the Dard-e-Dil family during the Revolt or the first War of Independence (1857) is discussed in the novel, laced with heavy undercurrents of sarcasm and irony. Aliya investigates how the Dard-e-Dils avoided the series of punishments inflicted upon the common Indians, who fought against the British invasion during the Revolt and the War of Independence. Aliya mentions that the then nawab in the Dard-e-Dil family sent his heir apparent to join the supporters of Bahadur Shah Zafar (1775-1862 C.E), who was the last Indian ruler before the advent of colonial rule. She recognises the disguised incompetence of the heir apparent. He was sluggish by nature, and he delayed from joining the Revolt because for him joining was a bad idea; he preferred pleasure before duty and found no serious reason to gallop around the country like an ordinary messenger (143). Instead of fulfilling the mission of joining the Revolt, the heir apparent entered into an illicit love affair with an unknown woman, who later gave birth to his illegitimate child.

Aliya discovers this story with all its disguised negativities which were silenced within the circle of family gossip. While investigating the imagined nobility and family honour of the Dard-e-Dil family, Aliya discovers that it had shades of impurity and perversion. Within the gossip circle, the family celebrated the heir apparent’s inability to join the Revolt, because it saved them from disgrace and the capital punishments that British law in India inflicted on the Muslim rebels. Consequently, the Dard-e-Dils joined the British establishment and supported the advent of British rule. However, Aliya critically revisits this story where she, as a postcolonial subject, is attentive to the ambivalence of the Dard-e-Dils as collaborators and facilitators of colonial rule. Aliya juxtaposes this disloyalty of the Dard-e-Dils with another forgotten story of loyalty and sacrifice within the Dard-e-Dil family. While reading the Dard-e-Dil archives, Aliya discovers that there is a tragic story of the unnamed and uncelebrated ‘fourth cousin’ of the same nawab or ‘heir apparent’ who did not join the Revolt. As Aliya revisits the disloyalty of the Dard-e-Dils, she explains the tragic story of the fourth cousin:

From the roof of the Dard-e-Dil palace you could see trees in neighbouring states from which the Rebels were hanged ...There was one tree in particular which the Dard-e-Dil royals could not bear to look at – the tree from which the Nawab’s fourth cousin, ruler of the neighbouring state and participant in the Revolt, had been hanged. In Dard-e-Dil (home), you could hear the creaking rope as his body swayed in the breeze. All his lands were annexed by the British and a portion was also given to the Dard-e-Dils as a recognition of their loyalty. (144).

As Aliya listens to this story, she expresses her resentment and mentions her personal desire that the British should also have hanged the unnamed ‘heir apparent’, for not fighting back and resisting the colonial rule. He did not join the Revolt, did not resist against the foreign invasion in his native land and deserved a punishment for his infidelity to Muslims while supporting the British rule in India (145). While narrating this injustice within the Dard-e-Dil family, Aliya represents and recognises the plight of the unnamed ‘fourth cousin’, who sacrificed his life as a martyr during the Revolt, and who should have been a celebrated person. Instead, his name reminded the Dard-e-Dils of the capital punishment for participants of the Revolt, and became a symbol of fear. They feared that they could also be punished like he, in the case that the heir
apparent had joined the Revolt.

The ‘fourth cousin’, along with many other characters, features in the narrative as an important subaltern whose sacrifice and contribution is unrecorded within the family past. While revisiting the family archives, Aliya retrieves his position in the family as an unsung hero. Such a revisionist reading is an intervention into the ‘guardianship of meanings, histories and interpretation’ of these family archives. As a postcolonial novelist, Shamsie insists that such forms of controlled interpretation should be challenged. Bhabha also points out that the process of archiving a tradition only bestows a partial form of identity. Therefore, a reconsideration of such archives is necessary to establish the shifting reality of an event. In new times, any revision of the past introduces the cultural temporalities that were previously left aside in the ‘invention of tradition’. 

Aliya’s objective behind reading the archives of her family past is to analyse these originary and principle characters from whom the narratives of family superiority originated. Aliya intervenes into these fixed familial (national) narratives and identifies the anxieties in them against their historical certainties. She disputes and questions the ideas and ideals that come to her most naturally. Aliya questions the conventions and customs that she inherits thus she displays a creative behaviour that allows her to represent the life she leads. When contextualised within postcolonial modernity, Aliya’s reading of the Dard-e-Dil’s patriarchal order is a palimpsestic reading of the precolonial and colonial family past. The protagonist resolves her own dilemma by reanalyzing the past of the family and by narrating a revised family story that overcomes the fixities of patriarchal dominance.

**A Deconstruction of Family Fears and Prejudices in Salt and Saffron**

Another conflict in the story revolves around the exclusions and disposessions of some family members which include Taimur, his (unnamed) wife and his daughter, Mariam. This conflict erupts from the tension between her family’s claims of nobility, the demands for pure royal lineage and the rejection of both by rebel family members. This clash has given rise to some traditional family fears and prejudices according to which some family members were expected to rebel against the family’s (imagined) pride. Shamsie uses the trope of not-quite twins to explain the fear, prejudice and anxiety that lurk within these unfounded claims of nobility in the Dard-e-Dil family. The not-quite-twins trope encapsulates family fears due to certain trends set by rebellious members of the family. The Dard-e-Dil family remains under a perpetual fear of the appearance of certain individuals who brought down their family pride and grandeur either by marrying into lower classes or rebelling against the royal decorum of the Dard-e-Dils. The not-quite twins were not biological twins, but they are likely to exhibit certain behavioural similarities that make them resemble twins. These characters are Taimur and Mariam. Aliya probes the story of Mariam to check the validity of the not-quite twins myth. According to this myth, Aliya is considered Mariam’s twin. Thus, Aliya’s bonding with Mariam holds significance within the narrative of the Dard-e-Dils as both are imagined to be outside the family, Mariam as a rebel and Aliya as the possible twin of Mariam. Aliya revisits Taimur’s and Mariam’s story as

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29 Bhabha, *Location* 2.
rebels and outcasts in the family, whose exclusion, she discovers, is also a gendered issue.

In Mariam’s story, there is a strong criticism of family prejudice and class consciousness. In the Dard-e-Dil family stories, Mariam becomes a symbol of shame and humiliation, as she marries the family cook. This rebellious act against the royal decorum of the Dard-e-Dils is believed to be the result of her impure birth and impurity in her blood due to Taimur’s (Mariam’s father) marriage to a commoner. Both Mariam and her mother were excluded from the family as imperfect and unexceptional characters. Mariam’s return to the family after her parents’ death is shrouded in ambiguity, as she has been sent to the house of the Dard-e-Dils after a long separation between them and her parents. The writer addresses the repercussions of forced displacement, family dispossession and gendered identities in the novel through Mariam’s story. The feminine subjectivity of Mariam remains unique in the novel as the protagonist Aliya continuously looks up to Mariam as a role model and a source of inspiration. Through Taimur’s and Mariam’s marginalisation, Shamsie introduces an opposition between feminist resistance and patriarchal constructions of family pride and honour. Taimur, Mariam and Aliya are quintessential rebels against the family’s imagined royalty and this confrontation is a source of tension and drama throughout the course of the family past.

Aliya’s reading of Mariam’s story intends to redress the injustice done to Mariam in the past. This injustice intertwines with the injustice done to her father, Taimur, and due to that, the Dard-e-Dil family had dispossessed both. As Taimur underwent the toils of displacement, migration and expulsion from familial comfort, so did Mariam. In order to understand the gendered exclusion of Mariam and her mother from the Dard-e-Dil family, the explanation of Taimur’s plight in the family past is important. This gendered conflict intertwines with the nationalist issue where the emancipation of women either within a family or a nation is not a standalone, isolated phenomenon. It is inextricably interlocked with the emancipation of men. Taimur appears as one of the three sons of Aliya’s great-grandfather, and was born into the Dard-e-Dil family on 28th February 1920. In 1938, he challenged his family’s aristocratic tradition of travelling to London and graduating from Oxford. Instead of going to London, he mysteriously disappeared from the family scene and moved to an unknown destination to realise his nationalist dreams which were anti-imperial. Within the dominant family narrative, he remained silenced and unrecognised. After his departure, he was labelled a rebel and discussion of him only reignited the Dard-e-Dil family fears and prejudices. Taimur was born after the Jallianwallah Bagh massacre or Amritsar massacre in 1919, when British soldiers, led by General Dyer, killed the Indians mercilessly for attending a public gathering during a curfew. The incident ignited strong anti-imperial sentiments among the Indians.

Aliya finds Taimur’s real story and his nationalist stance in a letter which he wrote before defying the family tradition of joining the Imperial army or Indian Civil Service and rebelling against the tradition of acquiring a higher education from Oxford. He reveals his stance against his anglicised upbringing before leaving the Dard-e-Dil home forever. He writes.

My brothers, we were born the year after the Jallianwallah massacre. Think of this when you are strolling down paths in Oxford, studying how to be Englishmen and do well in the world. I lack your gift of erasing, nay! evading history … those years of English schooling.
have robbed me of the ability to write Urdu … I am not an Englishman nor are you. … No more the Anglicized Percy. I.
I am now Taimur Hind. (24).

This letter is famous within the family lore as a last statement that Taimur gave before disappearing. However, no Dard-e-Dil family member later investigates what happened to him or whom he married. Taimur lived up to his words till his death and remained outside the Dard-e-Dil family.

Within the context of the early twentieth century anti-imperial nationalist movement in colonial India, Taimur belongs to the group of anti-imperial, nationalist elites. Elleke Boehmer highlights the appearance of certain anti-imperial elites in colonial India, whose education and training were anglicised but they were poised between local cultural traditions and anglicised education.⁴⁰ In such a situation, they worked out a new space for themselves, where they resisted against the colonial rule and nurtured their nationalist dreams. In *Salt and Saffron*, Taimur personifies what Boehmer calls ‘anticolonial intelligentsia’ in colonial India.⁴¹ As a rebel, he loved his local traditions, the Urdu language, and he preferred a local religio-cultural identity as an Indian Muslim. He relished indigenous culture from which he was distanced due to his anglicised and aristocratic upbringing in the Dard-e-Dil home. Therefore, he carved out a third space for himself, out of the two polarised cultural spaces that were colonial India and the United Kingdom. Bhabha calls such an act of carving new spaces ‘regenerative interstices’ that emerge out of the strategies of resistance and empowerment.⁴² While carving out such an interstice, or third space, between London (as an imperial centre) and colonised India, Taimur moved to Turkey where he lived his life independently. Thus, he was relieved from the dual pressures of colonial rule in India and from the imperial centre of power that was London.

This reclamation of Taimur’s honour within the family story is related to Aliya’s own empowerment in the Dard-e-Dil family. Through Taimur and Mariam’s story, the writer establishes that within the collective family lore there are forgotten stories of injustice and marginalisation. As a feminist, Shamsie is sensitive to these gender inequalities and she criticises this discrimination due to class and gender. The symbolic placement of Taimur’s story, Mariam’s story and Aliya’s scepticism about claims of superiority and royalty of the Dard-e-Dils, directly opposes the stories of family patriarchs; the ill-founded accounts of their heroics and their celebrated nobility. While narrating these two contrasting realities of the Dard-e-Dil family, Shamsie describes modern postcolonial subjects as descendents of the collaborators of the colonial set up as well as of the nationalist rebels like Taimur, who nurtured their anti-imperial dreams. For Shamsie, a young Pakistani should revisit the historical archives to retrieve such suppressed realities of the past and to have a more informed view of his/her temporal national modernity which should be removed from any elitist appropriations of the South Asian history.

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⁴¹ Boehmer 115.
⁴² Bhabha, *Nation* 291.

Treatment of the Partition in *Salt and Saffron*

The discussion of nation continues in *Salt and Saffron* and the feminist and nationalist identity of the new-generation Pakistanis is redefined in the discussion of Partition and its repercussions. Just as she returns to the Revolt and colonial times, Shamsie also revisits Partition as a significant event in South Asian history. The discussion of Partition is framed within intergenerational dialogue, resolution of family conflicts, and reconciliation between family members, who were separated and estranged due to Partition. The story of three brothers is related to the division of the Dard-e-Dil family during Partition, when half of the family members stayed back in India and the other half migrated to Pakistan. In America, Aliya meets the family relatives who stayed back in India and discovers then that there is division in the family due to Partition. Within the family lore, Taimur’s other two brothers, Akber and Sulaiman, were famous as siblings who disagreed politically when the Muslim league demanded a separate homeland for Muslims and the Congress favoured the demand of united India’s independence from British rule. It was a common belief within the family lore that Akber went to Pakistan as a Muslim league supporter and Sulaiman remained in India, as a supporter of Congress’s united India doctrine. Their separation is framed within the family tradition as a politically motivated decision. However, Aliya discovers that their separation was not entirely motivated by politics, because Akber came to Karachi in 1946, and it was a personal fight over their cousin Abida that prompted Akber’s departure to Karachi, which was wrongly framed within the family stories as a migration to Pakistan. In her meeting with Indian relatives, Aliya records and contemplates the lack of trust and absence of communication between the relatives divided across borders. The relatives on both sides of the Pakistan-India border continue to blame each other for the division of family.

In this novel, Partition is treated as a trauma which invites two different reactions from two generations. In order to understand this interrelation between generations, a brief understanding of the notion of postmemory is required. Postmemory is an ambivalent term which explains the connection between a generation and its parental past. It is used when a member of a new generation connects with the previous generation’s remembrance of the past. ‘Post’ in postmemory signifies a belatedness, a critical distance as well as a profound interrelation with parental memory. Marianne Hirsch explains that ‘it helps in understanding the structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. It is a consequence of traumatic recall but at a generational remove. Hirsch also explains that when an individual grows up with ‘overwhelming inherited memories’ he is under the risk of being dominated by narratives that preceded his birth. In such situations, his own experiences are at risk of being displaced or even erased by those of the previous generation. In *Salt and Saffron*, Aliya has this sort of troubled relationship with her parental past. She is confused by the deeply internalised yet strangely unknown past of the Dard-e-Dil family. Therefore, in order to connect with her parental past, but also to make things clearer for herself, Aliya meets Baji and her

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34 Hirsch, 106.
relatives from the Indian side, in order to understand their stance towards Partition. Thus, she is using postmemory to connect with her parental past and using her own discretion to resolve her dilemma.

The microcosm of the divided Dard-e-Dil family in India and Pakistan reflects the macrocosm of the post-Partition rivalries between India and Pakistan. The older generation of family members in the Dard-e-Dil family, which include Baji, Aliya’s uncle and Taimur’s brother, Sulaiman, could only visualise Partition as a moment of division. They repeatedly insist that ‘Pakistan was a huge mistake’, a statement which Aliya, as a Pakistani, could hardly tolerate or understand (37). Being a member of a new generation, a Pakistani and a female subject, who crosses territorial borders to meet her Indian relatives, Aliya interprets Partition differently. After meeting her Indian relatives, she realises that they were still traumatised by Partition, a trauma of which she didn’t have a firsthand experience and therefore could not relate to it sentimentally in the way that they did. Aliya’s reaction to the Partition story is interesting. She cannot find any interest in the traumatic stories of Partition to which her Indian relatives still relate after fifty years. In her meeting with her Indian relatives, she declares that her interpretation of Partition is not one of lament and regret. Her interpretation profoundly focuses on ‘moving on’, where Partition is synonymous with ‘Fruition, Revision, Condition’ (37). However, her Indian relatives (such as Baji) had witnessed Partition, so had only understood it as a ‘division’ (37). Believing that Partition was division and holding fast to their insistence, they remain separate from the relatives in Pakistan. They made no effort of reconciliation with those residing in Pakistan. Baji’s insistence on framing Partition as ‘division’ is similar to what Jalal calls post-independence state-controlled narratives of India and Pakistan, which call for ‘territorial sovereignty based on the singular and homogenising idea of nation’. Contrary to the fixed interpretation that Partition was only a division, Aliya’s act of reconnecting with her relatives in India is a form of reversing the divisions that Partition had caused and finding new connections across the (imagined) impermeable borders between India and Pakistan.

The divisive status of Partition is problematised in the plot. Thematically, Partition is an ambivalent moment of transition in national and colonial history and a lived reality with its good and bad consequences, conspicuous in India’s and Pakistan’s national history. Related to this ambivalent moment of transition, postcolonial national identity is redefined in Salt and Saffron to be in close relation with temporality. In recording two entirely opposite responses to Partition, one of ‘division’ and the other of ‘Fruition, Revision and Condition’, Kamila Shamsie articulates the processual and ambivalent nature of national identity (37). Vazira-Fazila and Yacoobali Zamindar argue that Partition is a ‘prolonged process’, rather than an event that took place within the states of India and Pakistan, and not just on their borders. Shamsie implies that as a process, it needs recurrent ‘revision’ and it is also a still prevailing ‘condition’ that persists as a current political reality in the subcontinent. India and Pakistan are still present as two separate nation states, as they were expected to be after Partition in 1947.

36 Motyl 2.
However, in the transnational field, in which Aliya moves, the territorial borders between India and Pakistan are rendered less closed and more permeable. Interestingly, the novel concludes with a moment of reconciliation between the Indian and the Pakistani sides of the Dard-e-Dil family. At the end, one of the three brothers, Sulaiman, arrives all the way from India to set the records straight about Taimur, Akber and himself. Thus, the divisions in the Dard-e-Dil family that occurred during colonial rule and Partition days are reconciled in new post-Partition times. The family members unite and negotiate the longstanding misunderstanding between them. Taimur’s connection with Turkey helps Aliya to figure out that Mariam is in Turkey, happily married to Masood (the family’s cook) and they are running a food business. At the end, the Dard-e-Dils, as family and home, is reconstructed as a space of mutual understanding and harmony. The long-standing differences between family members, differences of class and gender, are resolved through reconciliation. The revision of family myths and prejudice brings relief of the tensions within the family.

In revisiting history and reconstructing new forms of belonging, the protagonist in Salt and Saffron redefines national identity at three different levels. At first, she interrogates the family past as symbolising nation, and explicates that the boundaries of nation as an imagined community which are constantly shifting and therefore need continuous redefinition. Her national identity is shaped by the socio-political reality of her originary home that is Pakistan but this national modernity is a part of a historical antiquity comprising complex South Asian historical phases, such as Mughal rule, colonial rule and Partition. At the second level, Pakistan’s national identity is also redefined in terms of a feminist position, where Aliya deconstructs the nation as a male-dominated sphere and rewrites it in terms of more balanced male and female identities. At the third level, she rethinks nation in terms of the multiple homes she has in Karachi, London and New York. In this case, she is articulating the Pakistani nation in terms of a transnational feminist perspective, where certain women like Aliya and Mariam are marginalised from the central family and symbolically from the business of nation. They are excluded, dispossessed and silenced. But Aliya brings their stories to light and situates them within an irregular, non-territorialised transnational feminist space. To conclude, such a narration of identity and belonging is ambivalent because it is informed by past, multiple spaces of existence and negotiation, and is still evolving under transnational influence. Through multiple stories, Shamsie destabilises the traditional territorially and culturally fixed nationalist narrative, while imagining new ways of belonging and a processual form of Pakistani national identity.

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Introduction

Bahiṇāī Caudharī (1880-1951) was an ardent devotee of Viṭṭhal, the god worshipped by Vārkarīs. Her son Sopāndev was puzzled when he learnt that she repudiated village kīrtans, performances primarily in praise of Viṭṭhal, at the age of sixty. When he asked her for an explanation she said, ‘No, no, I don’t want to attend kīrtans anymore. They keep saying the same things! Tukā mhaṇe, Nāmā mhaṇe. Has god given them nothing of their own to say?’ There is a sense of frustration in Bahiṇāī’s response. Despite the larger tradition of literary stalwarts like Tukārām and Nāmdev in the Vārkarī fold, kīrtankārs of her time seem uninspired, having had nothing of their own to say.

This essay explores how Bahiṇāī reinvented bhakti outside the prevailing framework of kīrtan, through a genre now eponymously remembered as Bahiṇāīcī gāṇī (songs) or Bahiṇāīcā ovī. In the first section, I elaborate on the centrality of repetition in performing bhakti. In the sections that follow, I argue that a critique of both kīrtan and writing as modes of devotional expression is implicit in Bahiṇāī’s oeuvre. Firstly, writing is considered incompatible with the mobile life circumstances of pastoral Maharashtra, and secondly, ovī is preferred to kīrtan for it enables encountering Viṭṭhal through coevally performing and labouring bodies. This critique thus foregrounds different models of embodiment as conditions of devotional expression. Authorship in ovī performance is predicated on what I term the generative model of embodiment. To Bahiṇāī’s credit, this model relates authorship to the bhakta’s body differently from how kīrtan and writing do.

The Paradoxical Banality of Repetition

What did Bahiṇāī mean when she said ‘They keep saying the same things’? In this section, I...
contextualise the anecdote I began this paper with. I suggest that Bahiṇāī’s remark is symptomatic of the paradoxical banality of repetition in bhakti performance – while repetition is central to bhakti performance for several reasons, some of which I recount below, it also thwarts an aspiring bhakta from adapting the existing repertoire to new life circumstances.

Rāṣṭrīya kīrtan gained popularity in the urban counterparts of late nineteenth-century Asoḍā, Bahiṇāī’s agricultural village in the Khāndeś district of Maharashtra. Rāṣṭrīya kīrtans were performed with the explicit goal of ‘awakening people’ during the nationalist movement. In this subgenre of kīrtan, recurring refrains like ‘Jay Jay Rām Viṭṭhal Hari’ swiftly move into jap (chanted repetition of a deity’s name), creating an affective milieu of bhakti as the backdrop for introducing nationalist figures. Anna Schultz argues that this pattern of repetition effected the transformation of nationalist events into religious public memory (SHN 157).

Rāṣṭrīya kīrtans highlight two fundamental characteristics of bhakti performance. At the level of individuals, refrains and other kinds of repetitions sung to a beat create temporal landscapes that are amenable to memorisation. Repetition therefore familiarises one with unfamiliar performative content – eventually, everyone manages to sing along. On a larger scale, repetition reinforces, preserves and reinvents bhakti publics. A bhakti public is ‘a social unit created through shared cultural phenomena and reinforced by demonstrations in public of these shared cultural phenomena’ or as Christian Novetzke has recently articulated, a public in general is ‘an open, social audience, one that attends to, but does not necessarily participate in, a capacious and circulating discourse within a given region, language, or other social context.’ The political function of a performance genre (not always explicit as in Rāṣṭrīya kīrtan) is predicated on the fact that performances exist for and within bhakti publics. Importantly, bhakti publics require reinforcement through repetition because they are ephemeral; they are not physically demonstrable things, always present and verifiable. Repetition evokes nostalgia and identification through aesthetic excess. Hence, spaces where kīrtankārs frequently perform are believed to continually echo performances from the past – like containers that emanate the essence of asafetida even after it is fully expended.

Moreover, specific bhakti publics are nodes within what John Hawley calls a ‘bhakti network.’ Its ‘osmotic membrane’ distinguishes regions, languages and poets across centuries,

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8 Rāṣṭrīya literally means ‘national’ or ‘of/for the nation.’
and also enables the transmission of poems across these distinctions. In his discussion of Basavā, Nāmdev and Ravidās, who belong to different times and therefore different publics, Hawley poignantly shows how a common repertoire of bhakti idioms and motifs serves as background for the same poem to ‘adapt itself to the life circumstances of individual bhaktas.’

Life circumstances – the mountains of Tamil Nadu, the deserts of Rajasthan, the drought ridden farmlands of Maharashtra, temples, royal courts, and so on – make poems ‘new’ despite their shared literary heritage. This shift of agency from the poet to the poem is crucial. It implies the ability of poems to transmit from one milieu to another in multiple renditions, and the parallel inability of poets to do away with the basic stuff that poets have been dressing in new garbs for centuries together. When Bahiṇāī asks, ‘Did god give them nothing of their own to say?’ she is questioning the average kīrtankār’s ability to give the existing repertoire his or her own voice through his or her specific life circumstances.

In Asoḍā, and perhaps many other places, mere reproduction – ‘they keep saying the same things!’ – is the performative norm. Most poets ‘copy’ their progenitors with regard to more or less unanimously accepted frameworks of genre, image, language and emotional timbre. This form of repetition thrives a paradox for a bhakta such as Bahiṇāī, who aspires to re-render bhakti through her specific life circumstances – she was an illiterate women who spent time farming, cooking and rearing children in the rural fringes of Maharashtra. Repetition, at once central to forming and sustaining bhakti publics, seems also to thwart the process of expressing bhakti anew. As the Sūrdās tradition would have it, the paradox is one for poets who are ‘little more than fireflies flickering here and there’ aspiring to be the sun – having a distinct, self-exuding voice, that stands out against the background of flickering lights. This paradoxical banality of repetition is consequential; Bahiṇāī stopped attending village kīrtans altogether.

How then did Bahiṇāī reinvent bhakti outside the prevailing framework of kīrtan? In the next section, I explore why engaging the written word as a mode of devotional expression was not a viable alternative for Bahiṇāī, despite kīrtans having severely thwarted her experience of bhakti.

On Writing: Pustaka anī Mastaka

In the Vārkarī tradition, Bahiṇāī is not the only poet known to have been illiterate. Nāmdev, one of the five principal Vārkarī poets who popularised the genre of kīrtan is also remembered to have never written. The primarily oral/performative traditions of kīrtan and ovī co-existed with practices of writing, and are therefore within the purview of what Walter Ong terms secondary

11 Hawley 303.
12 Hawley discusses idioms relating water, milk and flowers used while worshiping Krishna. See, Hawley 298-301.
13 Hawley 306.
14 McDermott adds in a different context of devotional poetry, ‘This is certainly not a problem within a devotional framework; after all, does the Goddess care about poetic brilliance?’ See Rachel McDermott, Singing to the Goddess: Poems to Kali and Uma from Bengal (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 10.
Despite the coexistence of writing and orality however, Nāmdev’s tradition is premised on an unambiguous relationship between the two mediums. Novetzke argues that Nāmdev ‘does not require the medium of writing to ensure that his songs will endure. In the place of writing, he has initiated the medium of kīrtan’ (DA 236). Kīrtan ‘conditions and trumps writing’ (DA 237) in so far as it is more effective in preserving Nāmdev’s public memory.

Kīrtans are led by individual kīrtankārs who are almost always accompanied by a group of kīrtankārs and musicians. ‘Narration, allegory, humor, virtuosity, erudition and entertainment’ in celebrating the glory of Viṭṭhal are the main features of a kīrtaṇ. Novetzke terms the authorial processes that undergird this genre corporeal or corporate – an essentially collective process that has the following components. Firstly, corporate authorship is genealogical. A kīrtan typically ends with an ideograph such as Tukārām or Nāmdev. The ideograph attests a kīrtan as belonging to the literary oeuvre of the respective poet, and not as owned or composed by individuals named Tukārām or Nāmdev. A kīrtan is genealogically authored in the sense that it is an exploration of the believed authors’ thoughts and intentions through a literary oeuvre that is contributed to by multiple individuals in a single genealogy. Secondly, corporate authorship is transient. The performing kīrtankār’s authorship lasts only through the duration of the particular performance. In Vārkarī kīrtans, transient authorship is symbolised by conferring the viṇā (a stringed instrument) to the lead kīrtankār at the beginning of the performance; the viṇā is returned at the end of the performance, thereby concluding the kīrtankār’s transient authorship. ‘Creatively altering and melding narratives, engaging the material with his or her unique artistic abilities’ the transient author marks a performance as ‘an original composition in total’ in a spontaneous and extemporaneous fashion (DA 38-39). This original composition rendered through the kīrtankār’s unique artistic abilities remains within the threshold of the kīrtan genre. Thirdly, corporate authorship is divine or eponymous. It attributes the invention of the genre to a god or a saint. In the case of kīrtan it is Nārad Munī or Nāmdev. And finally, the fourth component covers the larger processes of printing, editing, producing visual culture, etc. that continually reinvent and distribute Nāmdev’s public memory through new technologies. In this detailed framework of authorship, the Barthesian concept of the dead author - the solitary repository and defender of meaning conveyed through written texts - does not pose a problem. This is because the existence, and meaningful transmission of a kīrtan does not depend on a single author, and is not measured against one verifiable manuscript (although verifiable


18 Another way to say this is ‘the author is incorporated’ (DA 238). The word corporeality conveys both senses. Personal communication with Novetzke in November 2015.

19 Novetzke builds on the idea that in bhakti traditions ideographs do not signify ownership of the literary product. This idea was first proposed in John Stratton Hawley, ‘Author and Authority in the Bhakti Poetry of North India,’ *The Journal of Asian Studies* 70 (2011) 269-90.
documents like the bāḍās Novetzke discusses, and other forms of print and visual media remain important in the process of sustaining Nāmdev’s public memory).

One could think of Bahiṇāī’s ovyā as forming a bhakti public through incorporated authorship. Ovyā, composed in the Khāndeśī dialect of Marathi, are short couplets that follow a simple rhyme scheme (lost in translation), rife with aphorisms and allegories from household and farming spaces in Asoḍā. Ovyā are humorous (also lost in translation), known for their peculiar light-hearted caricatures of rather painstaking everyday chores. Bahiṇāī sings in the following ovī -

No oil in the lamp,
Darkness gathers round the night.
At last the oil was found,
The mouse ran away with the wick!
Rolled a shred into a wick
Pour oil in the lamp,
Now where is that matchbox?
The mule – at a standstill again!

Sighted the matchbox,
Darling daughter of the fire jinn,
And in it the single, precious
One and only remaining match stick!

The match it was struck,
The flame burst forth bright,
But, unnerved by the pitch darkness,
She extinguished herself, out of fright!

This genre is eponymously remembered, thereby attributing Bahiṇāī with its invention. Ovyā are typically sung by groups of women in lieu of everyday conversation, thereby forming a cohesive public through collective singing. But there are two important differences in the specifics of this genre as corporeally authored, in relation to kīrtan. Firstly, Bahiṇāī’s songs do not end with ideographs. This is a curious characteristic, as Rairkar and Poitevin note, because in a tradition that has a shared repertoire of idioms and motifs, ideographs clearly place ‘new’ poems within a saint-poet’s genealogy. Secondly, unlike the lead kīrtankār, Bahiṇāī’s unique artistic abilities are not bound by an already established framework of genre and performance convention – her contribution to the bhakti repertoire lies precisely in stepping out of the framework of kīrtan to

21 To get a sense of how ovyā sound today, see the digital archive made by People’s Archive of Rural India (PARI), in the Grindmill Songs Project (GSP).
create the distinct performative genre of ovī. Do these differences imply a different authorial process?

As we noted earlier, Bahiṇāī could not read or write, but she certainly saw people reading and writing in her immediate milieu. In a succinct and rhythmic aphorism alluding to a sense of circularity between the reader and the written word, Bahiṇāī says,

Mastakāṭla pustakāṭ gela,
Pustakāṭla mastakāṭ āla (BG 201)

What is in my head goes into the book,
What is in the book comes into my head.23

Notably, Bahiṇāī uses the word mastaka to refer to the reading individual. Mastaka has a visceral connotation, generally translated as ‘skull’ or ‘head’ – an unreflexive and static body part. Besides the rhyme scheme (pustaka – mastaka), there seems to be a silent critique of writing as a medium of devotional expression undergirding Bahiṇāī’s peculiar choice of words. Unlike mastaka, Bahiṇāī uses the word mana, translated as mind in the context of movement, mobility and exploration in surrounding landscapes.24 Bahiṇāī sings in an ovī titled Mana (Mind).

The mind, a roving cow
Loose among the crop.
Drive it off again, again,
It still keeps coming back.

The mind unbridled, loose,
It goes so many ways,
Like ripples on the water
Running with the wind.

The mind so fickle, fickle,
Who can catch it in his hand?
Breaking out and running
Like the blowing of the wind.25

The divine inspirations and objects of worship in Vārkarī bhakti, Pāṇḍuraṅga/Viṭṭhal and Sarasvatī, are similarly articulated in pastoral and earthy idioms. Snehalata Caudharī argues that in Bahiṇāī’s literary oeuvre, Viṭṭhal’s darśan happens ‘āpasuk’26 – on its own, or automatically, when Bahiṇāī engages in mobile activities. Bhakti comes to Bahiṇāī through the wind that

23 All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
whispers Pāṇḍuraṅga’s whereabouts; through leaves and sunlight that tell her about every step Pāṇḍuraṅga takes (BG 20).

My mother Sarasvatī,
teaches me how to sing.
In Bahiṇāi’s mind,
she has planted many secrets.

For me, Pāṇḍuraṅga,
Your Gītā Bhāgvata,
is immersed in the rains,
and is growing in the soil.²⁷

A bhakta’s mobility, like Bahiṇāi’s constant in and out of home and farmland seems to be necessary groundwork to see Viṭṭhal āpasuk. The acts of reading or writing a book not only suspend the agent’s perceptual surroundings, as suggested through the dizzying circularity between the pustaka and the mastaka, but also render the agent immobile in a manner antithetical to the mana that is best understood as roving like a cow, breaking out and running in the fields. Mastaka, unlike mana, could therefore be understood as implying an unproductive engagement with the written text; or as theorist and poet John Hall argues in another context, the writer’s fixed gaze unto the written object and the writer’s immobility eventually lead to an ironic ‘loss of modality through itself.’²⁸ That is, writing begins to ‘lose meaningful contexts and even physical locations to contain it … at some point the activity of writing turns into the contemplation of “not writing.”’²⁹

In Bahiṇāi’s immediate milieu, there seems to be a constant loss of meaningful contexts and physical locations to contain acts of reading and writing. This is primarily because the sense of confinement and fixity inherent to engaging the written word is incompatible with life on a farmland. And additionally, home for Bahiṇāi is spatially continuous with farms – storing, cleaning, and threshing the crop is done in the same places where meals are cooked and children reared; where groups of women labour away and sing together. Home is not a private, isolated and quiet interior enclosed by doors and windows. Homes and the outer landscape are porous, as Bahiṇāi alludes to in the following ovī. Any attempt at seeking solace in reading or writing is most likely bound to fail.

O brother, reading fat books,
let it fall upon my ears.

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²⁷ (BG 113).
²⁹ Hall 59.
O dog, don’t you bark, 
have you gone mad?30

Unlike the fickle, loose, unbridled mind, that goes so many ways, the writerly–readerly mastaka is at loss of modalities not only to engage with written words, but to also experience Viśṭhal āpasuk, and it is precisely these aspects of writing that Bahiṇāī evades by singing ovī. There is a positive argument to be made here, with respect to how Bahiṇāī relates ovī performance and writing – performance does not thrive the ironic loss of modality through itself, and in this sense also, trumps writing. Performance is preferred for it is congenial to making meaning in and through new places, capable of enriching bhakti through Bahiṇāī’s pastoral and mobile life circumstances.

Thinking of writing as inimical, and orality as conducive to devotional expression seems odd given how orality has been theorised. A dominant view proposed by Jack Goody, Walter Ong and Ian Watt is that orality is the necessary teleological precedent of writing. Walter Ong writes, ‘orality needs to produce and is destined to produce writing.’ Literacy or writing on the other hand is ‘absolutely necessary for the development not only of science but also of history, philosophy, explicative understanding of literature and of any art, and indeed for the explanation of language (including oral speech) itself.’ Secondary orality is considered to persist in societies that are yet to undergo the complete cognitive shift effected by writing and print technologies. The question of what inventive processes undergird orality is considered unimportant because creative expression that involves meticulous thought is considered solely the disembodied writer’s concern. Orality, unlike writing, is spontaneous. Primary orality promotes spontaneity because the analytic reflectiveness implemented by writing is unavailable; secondary orality promotes spontaneity because through ‘analytic reflection we have decided that spontaneity is a good thing.’ In the latter, analytic reflection implies spontaneity in a blatantly contradictory manner – performers ‘plan their happenings carefully to be sure that they are thoroughly spontaneous.’

Ruth Finnegan nuances this teleological model by arguing that orality and writing are only different in degree; that writing is structured by non-verbal elements, and it is therefore wrong to think of writing as having done away with its oral inheritance. Despite the postulated common elements, processes that produce the two mediums remain polarised. On the one extreme, in

30 (BG 194).
31 Ong 14.
34 Ong 134.
35 Ong 134.
Finnegan’s framework, orality supposedly consists of spur of the moment, frantically embodied, energetic performances led by individual artists. Oral performances therefore have ‘no existence or continuity’ apart from the specific meaning generated during the sporadic performance. At the other extreme, Albert Bates Lord endows orality with continuity through tradition. He argues that orality ‘is always being preserved with every truly traditional performance by a truly traditional singer.’ ‘True tradition’ provides performers with set formulae (as the discipline of Oral-formulaic Studies clearly suggests), and individual performers are believed to innovate within the framework always already provided by ‘true tradition.’

The inventive processes that go into making performances form a theoretical blind spot; this blind spot is filled in by the supposedly self-explanatory notions of embodied spontaneity or ‘true tradition’. In the next section I explore the specific model of embodiment underlying Bahinäici gāṇī. Since oral traditions are characteristically variable, that is, there isn’t a single performance that sets the measure of ‘authenticity’, the idea of embodiment implies the lack of processes that authorise performance. Specifically in the context of bhakti, Norman Cutler uses the phrase ‘theology of embodiment’ in arguing for the ultimate communion between god, performers and audiences effected through and during bhakti performance, but it remains unclear how embodied authorship legitimises or even leads to a collapse of identities during the performance. Cutler writes, a bhakti poet is entitled to saintly status only if he or she composes without premeditation … spontaneously in a burst of inspiration.’ In Bahinäici gāṇī however, as we saw, movement into surrounding landscapes is the condition for seeing Viṭṭhal āpasuk: the mastaka-pustaka duo does not meet these conditions.

Models of Embodiment: Embedded, Alleviative and Generative

In this section, I describe three different models of embodiment in bhakti performance – embedded embodiment in Rāṣṭrīya kīrtan, alleviative embodiment in Nāmdev’s tradition, and generative embodiment in Bahinäici gāṇī. I elaborate on each model in terms of how the body of a bhakta is relevant to the respective genre’s authorial processes. Based on these models I argue against the idea of spontaneous embodiment, to emphasise how different genres of bhakti performance are undergirded by different models of embodiment.

41 Cutler 7.
Schultz argues that Rāṣṭrīya kīrtan instantiates ‘devotional embodiment’ (SHN 168) or ‘embedded embodiment’ (SHN 173). Between complete loss of bodily sensation (trance), and enacted experience (drama), devotional embodiment occurs when the audience, led by the kīrtankār, begins to show physical symptoms of abandon. Rāṣṭrīya kīrtan is indeed, as Schultz describes it, a formal event with a definite beginning and an end, a stage, designated space for audience, and a clear political goal as I noted earlier. In such a setting, the kīrtankār and audience visibly cease to identify with their individual bodies through physical symptoms such as ‘sweating, dizziness, crying, detached expressions’ (SHN 168) and so on. That is when they exit the realm of performance and enter that of embedded embodiment - a prerequisite for renewed merging of identities between the many bhaktas, the kīrtankār, the invoked saints and political figures. Eventually, a ‘feeling of natural belonging to a Hindu nation’ (SHN 168) is experienced through merged embodiment. Through performances with explicitly Hindu nationalist messages, the locus of a Rāṣṭrīya kīrtan’s intended effect is postulated beyond the individual bhakta’s body – the collective experience of the devotionalised nation. Renouncing identity with one’s own body, the collective experience of merging identities, and the eventual collective experience of a devotionalised nation are the criteria for deeming a Rāṣṭrīya kīrtan complete.

In Nāmdev’s tradition, authoring and performing a kīrtan is believed to abate the universal arch-rivals of an author – time and death – by making a vivacious public memory of Nāmdev permanent. This form of reminiscent permanence is at the level of publics. At the level of individual bhaktas, Novetzke tells us that, ‘kīrtan is called a “remedy” for bodily affliction (tapatraya) and the drudgery of life (samsāra)’ (DA 223). Let us call this model of embodiment alleviative. Here, the permanence effected by kīrtan is predicated on slowly decaying human bodies; as the song goes, ‘Let the kīrtan pour into your ears and you will be cooled inside’ (DA 223-4). Kīrtan is experienced by transient authors and the audience as a way to undo the decay set into their body through everyday life. Energy spent during the exclusive duration of kīrtan, singing and dancing ecstatically in informal gatherings, is experienced as an antidote to the physical fatigue acquired otherwise. In light of kīrtan’s recuperative powers, the mass of peasants walking the vāri barefoot for three weeks, or singing and dancing together after a day’s manual labour seems perfectly comprehensible.

In Bahiṇāicī gāṇī, we see a different understanding of how samsāra relates to the authorial process. Bahiṇāi sings,

Oh Gharoṭā Gharoṭā,
my hands ache a lot.
The songs of samsāra,
I keep singing along.
Oh Gharoṭā Gharoṭā,
just as the flour emerges from you,
so too, songs born in my stomach
well up to my lips.\footnote{BG 125.}

Gharoṭā, also called jāta or grindmill, is a mechanical machine used to make flour. It has a hole where raw grains are added little at a time by one hand, while the other hand simultaneously turns the attached lever to set the machine in motion. Freshly ground flour slowly collects at the bottom, which is then used to make bread. This incredibly tedious task is done by pairs of women sitting on the ground first thing in the morning. Women like Bahiṇāī, begin their days before dawn, by singing ovyā to the rumbling, monotonous sound of the jāta. For Bahiṇāī, these are the songs of samsāra.\footnote{Philip Engblom, Jayant Karve and Maxine Berntsen have translated samsāra as ‘married life.’ See, Chaudhari (1980) 103. As will be clear in this section, Bahiṇāī seems to use the word in a much broader sense. I therefore use Novetzke’s translation of samsāra as ‘the drudgery of life’ (DA 223).} This highlights an important difference in how ovyā and kīrtan are authored. Unlike kīrtan – either in the form of a formal event as in Rāṣṭrīya kīrtan, or an informal gathering as in Vārkarī kīrtan, Bahiṇāī’s songs are sung while women do hard physical work. Which is to say, ovyā are authored in the midst of women’s inevitable life circumstance – everyday labour.

Contrary to the desired effect of kīrtan (alleviation of samsāra), singing ovyā helps Bahiṇāī get through the day’s work, without seeking bodily relief. Just as the flour emerges from you, / so too, songs born in my stomach, / well up to my lips. What raw grains are to the flour, Bahiṇāī’s samsāra is to her songs, the grinding gharoṭā being symbolic of her toiling body. Bahiṇāī’s innovative leap outside the framework of kīrtan is precisely owing to this reversal – while kīrtans remedy samsāra, Bahiṇāī’s ovyā emerge from samsāra. Repetition in Bahiṇāī’s ovyā, literally and metaphorically, seems to embrace the grind through what I call the model of generative embodiment. Unlike bhaktas who experience gradual relief through performance, who have exclusive time to celebrate their bhakti, Bahiṇāī sings addressing herself,

Oh come my life,
a lot of work remains.
As I work, as I work,
I will see god’s image.\footnote{BG 19.}

Bahiṇāī was married off at the age of 13 to a vatandār (landowning farmer) from Jalgāo – Nathuji Caudharī. Nathuji was 30 when he married Bahiṇāī; Bahiṇāī was 30 when she was widowed. As a widow, she had the additional burden of repaying Nathuji’s debt, while also raising two sons and one daughter. For these reasons Bahiṇāī was indeed bound to her farms and household, unable to give exclusive time for bhakti through writing or kīrtan. This is not to say however that Bahiṇāī’s songs instantiate generative embodiment only by way of negation or constraint. Again, there is a positive argument to be made here. Generative embodiment has to
be understood as Bahiṇāī’s way to creatively ground bhakti in matters that shape her life.

O Pāṇḍuraṅga, tell me,
how do I do your bhakti?
Before your image,
comes the Sāvkār. 45

My sweat drips in the farms,
my bones break.
Now take Hari’s name,
and clap along. 46

Concluding Remarks

As Courtney Bender poignantly puts it in a different context of everyday kitchen labour, ‘religion happens in the midst of important things going on.’ 47 I have argued that Bahiṇāī authors bhakti in the midst of important things going on – one of them, for her and many women alike, is spinning the gharoṭā in preparation for the next meal. The gharoṭā stands for coevally labouring and performing bodies; it is not conferred and then returned to mark the duration of an ovī, as is done with the vīṇā during a kīrtan. This process of authorship is intransient, incompatible with acts of reading and writing that are predicated on immobile and leisurely bodies. Bahiṇāicī gāṇī go on for long hours, and women take turns to embrace the grind while singing in lieu of conversation, at times in praise of Viṭṭhal, and at times about the joys and sorrows of their own lives. Indeed, joys and sorrows are never distinct in the doldrums of quotidian routines, and the body knows this all too well. In an ovī titled ‘On the way to my Maher,’ 48 as Bahiṇāī sings,

Going to my maher,
Though blistered my soles,
They walk and keep walking,
With that tug at my feet.

Hastening to my maher,
Though I slip and fall,
The stone on which I stumble,
Speaks forth to me and calls!

45 Money lender.
46 (BG 30).
48 Maher is a married woman’s natal home. Bahiṇāī’s maher was Asoḍā.
‘Tread carefully, dear child,  
Don’t hurry and skid so,  
After all, I am a rock on the road  
That to your maher goes.’

On the way to my maher  
Look, that little salunki bird takes wing,  
To race me to my mother’s doorstep.  
And of my arrival sing.49

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The Power of Nothing(s): Parahumanity and Erasure in Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People*

Matthew Loyd Spencer

Abstract

Indra Sinha’s 2007 novel *Animal’s People* is a fictionalised account of the Bhopal industrial disaster with a physically disfigured and twisted protagonist who is vulgar, comical, and often deeply touching in his observations about life and the plight of his neighbors. While the novel has received much attention for these aspects, including being awarded a Commonwealth Writer’s Prize and shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, scholarly attention has largely ignored the intertwining of Animal’s dual animal/human nature with the destruction of the chemical spill that twisted his body. This article employs a theoretical frame based on Monique Allewaert’s concept of parahumanity, as well as a variety of work in posthumanism to explore the ways in which Animal’s denial of a singular category of being is representative of a creative force. This force rises from the destruction of the chemical spill and serves as a means of survival for Animal and the people of Khawpur. However, for this generative force to come into being the past must be reckoned with. Animal presents this reckoning as he consistently declares his inhumanity while maintaining traits that firmly cement his conditioned human nature, including his quest for sex, love, and his occasional misogynistic attitudes. What Animal and the novel as a whole ultimately suggest is that rather than being seen as wastelands, sites of erasure can serve as spaces for invention.

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Indra Sinha’s 2007 novel *Animal’s People*, a fictionalised account of the legacy of the Bhopal industrial disaster (1984), centres on a young man who has been physically altered by a large-scale chemical spill that killed thousands and left countless more ill or disfigured. Left with a permanently bent spine that necessitates walking on all fours, he is constantly teased by other children in his youth and dubbed with the epithet ‘Animal’. Rather than separate himself from this derogatory name, he embraces it and all that being an ‘Animal’ entails, all but shunning his humanity and forming a strong, often vulgar personality in the process. In many ways, the character presents a case of what critic Monique Allewaert terms parahumanity.1 Allewaert suggests that parahumans exist on a horizontal plane alongside humans and animals, thereby subverting enlightenment organisational thinking that places a definite border between the two. Animal falls beneath the theoretical umbrella of parahumanity due to his inability to maintain a humanist or posthumanist ethic, owing to his failure to deconstruct his own psychological and


Matthew Loyd Spencer. ‘The Power of Nothing(s): Parahumanity and Erasure in Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People*.’


sociological divide between his desire for sex, love, and the ability to walk upright, which he believes would reclaim his humanity, and his constant claims that he is nothing but a mere animal incapable of such pursuits. In this way, Animal reflects an outwardly imposed, traumatic resetting of his being that allows for personal and social reinterpretation. This reinterpretation can occur because of the multiple erasures that create the unique setting of the novel, including those of Animal’s humanity, the safety of Khaufpur—Sinha’s fictionalised Bhopal, and the responsibility of Kompani—the novel’s stand-in for Union Carbide. The gas spill that disfigured Animal stripped him of his humanity, but through embracing the change, he is able to reconstruct his being and eventually arrive at a place of acceptance. However, this acceptance is tainted by internalised binaries that, although challenged by Animal, are never escaped. On a larger scale, the novel offers a redefinition of identity and acceptance of perceived deficiency as untapped potential for combatting neocolonial exploitation and injustice on a personal as well as a communal level.

The novel’s opening lines first introduce Animal’s nonchalant and seemingly confident dismissal of his humanity: ‘I used to be human once. So I’m told. I don’t remember it myself, but people who knew me when I was small say I walked on two feet just like a human being.’ With this bit of narration a precedent is already set, in which Animal’s humanity is a past condition that has been removed by the trauma, both mental and physical, of the moment of the chemical spill, an event Animal refers to only as ‘that night’ (AP 14). In presenting this narrative model, these lines establish the night of the gas spill as the source of most of the erasures that are presented within the narrative. Animal reflects on this fact to what he perceives as the numerous ‘eyes’ of the audience, telling them that ‘my story has to start with that night,’ although he was too young to remember the spill. He claims that when such an event occurs ‘time divides into before and after, the before time breaks up into dream, the dreams dissolve into darkness’ (AP 14). Beyond relying on Animal’s narration as a source for evidence of the terror caused by the spill, the characters themselves serve as living reminders of the effects of the gas. Animal is the most striking example as his body and its mode of locomotion ensure that not only his life is forever tied to the event, but also his presence serves as a signifier for large scale disaster, the invisibility of the poor, and large scale corporate greed and irresponsibility.

While Animal is the most pressing example of physical signification of the spill, other characters also bear its legacy. Somraj, once a famous and admired singer, lost the ability to sing due to ‘that night’. Ma Françi, a Roman Catholic nun and Animal’s surrogate mother, lost her capability to speak or understand either Hindi or English, leaving her only her native French, which Animal alone understands among the Khaufpuris. Other characters suffer more indirectly from the long-term effects of air, soil, and water pollution: the tragicomically named I’m Alive is miraculously untouched by the spill physically, but must still confront the mental toll of being surrounded by persistent illness and death. As well as signifying multiple losses for the characters, the harmful lingering effects of the disaster are also illustrative of what is termed ‘slow violence’ by critic Rob Nixon. Nixon defines the term as ‘a violence that occurs gradually

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2 Indra Sinha, *Animal’s People* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007) 1. Further references to this text will be included in parenthesis in the text preceded by AP.
and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.\(^3\)

While the initial violence of ‘that night’ was shockingly evident in the thousands of deaths it caused, its after effects are largely unaccounted for. Only the people of Khaufpur, the government agents they appeal to for justice, outside sympathisers aiding in their struggle, and reporters such as the ‘Kakadu Jamalis’ who serves as the framing agent for the narrative, seem to care about or even be aware of the ever-increasing death toll. Of those parties, only the citizenry of Khaufpur must face the realities of their own corporeal insecurity daily. This point is exemplified in Animal’s trademark scatological manner as he explains the virtues of communal defecation to Elli, eventually arriving at the observation that ‘then there’s the medical benefit. Your stools can be examined by all. You can have many opinions about the state of your bowels, believe me our people are experts at disease’ (AP 184). Instead of being sources of wonder or pride, the bodies of Khaufpuris have been transformed by toxic pollution into what Jesse Oak Taylor describes as ‘loci of accretion, sites where chemicals interact and build up over time, producing new form and unknown reactions.’\(^4\) Paramount among these ‘unknown reactions’ is Animal’s twisted body, the physical appearance of which drives the deep-seated internal conflict over his lost humanity that the ‘eyes’ of the audience are privy to throughout the novel.

The central theme of Animal’s inner turmoil is his being identified as a literal animal, whether by another or by himself. As narrator, he does not shy away from discussing how his public image has come into being, beginning with the emergence of his physical condition which serves as his first conscious moment of remaking following the erasure of ‘that night’. At the age of six he begins to experience pain so severe that ‘nothing else do I remember from that time, my first memory is that fire’ (AP 15). In this way, Animal’s first memory is of being torn from his perceived humanity and redefined as something other. As he develops and ages other children inevitably notice his new bodily structure and form of locomotion. After biting a classmate during a game he is rechristened as ‘Animal’ and later his name is affirmed while swimming with other children: ‘A girl about my own age, she pushed me and left the prints of her muddy fingertips on my body. The mud dried pale on my skin. She said, “Like a leopard!”’ (AP 16). After other children join in painting the spots on his body they reiterate the use of ‘Animal’ and ‘The name, like the mud, stuck’ (AP 16). Although the origins of the name are in childhood play, it is reinforced and transforms from a playful nickname to a concrete identifier for the human being as it is used by everyone within Khaufpur, and the reader never learns Animal’s given name due to the erasure of ‘that night.’

The motivation for the thorough adoption of Animal as the protagonist’s name is rooted in the dichotomy between human and animal, specifically as it was developed in the West during the Enlightenment. This underlying doctrine is hinted at when Animal says about his name ‘the nuns tried to stop it [his nicknaming] but some things have a logic that can’t be denied’ (AP 16). The logic of which he speaks is the strict and definite separation between what is ‘human’ and what is ‘animal’. This dichotomy is often called upon when distinctions must be made between what

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is ‘civilised’ and what is ‘savage’. This separation grows from the anthropocentric thinking of the Enlightenment and the subsequent development of humanism as a highly influential ideology. Michel Foucault’s theorisation of humanism is especially useful in advancing the idea of the topic being put forth in this analysis. He asserts that ‘it is a theme or, rather, a set of themes that have reappeared on several occasions, over time, in European societies; these themes, always tied to value judgments, have obviously varied greatly in their content, as well as in the values they have preserved.’ As he points out, the exact parameters of humanism have fluctuated over time, but they have always been predicated on value judgments about what defines and constitutes humanity and, more importantly for understanding Animal, what does not.

In developing her concept of ‘parahumanity’ in *Ariel’s Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics*, Monique Allewaert traces a historical development of personhood in Anglophone politics and philosophy beginning with Thomas Hobbes, who defined it according to performance ‘as an entity with a capacity to act or represent, whether on one’s own behalf (natural persons) or on behalf of others (artificial persons).’ This view gives way to John Locke’s reliance on consciousness as the core criterion that consists of ‘a collection of substances, parts, actions, and memories that are organized into a “vital union”.’ Finally, she interrogates William Blackstone’s legal slant on personhood that combined, or possibly confused, the idea with that of the body, as she explains:

> If in Locke the body and the person endowed with consciousness are formally analogous but distinct, Blackstone all but conflates the body with the person. A natural person is an individual and organic human body that appears ‘such as the God of nature formed us,’ but an artificial person is the product of human laws and is conceptualized through the somatic metaphors of the corporation or body politic, which imaginatively endow the artificial person with the bounded, centralized, and organized form Blackstone saw as the fundamental characteristic of the natural person.

The conflation of the ‘natural body’ with the ‘artificial body’ demonstrates the fragility that is inherent in any definition of humanity or personhood. Furthermore, the ideological definitions of humanity that emerged – many of which have remained in intellectual circulation – have shifted the focus of their value judgments from the species level to interspecies concerns among humans, such as the construction of gender or race. Katherine N. Hayles offers a brief interrogation of what she terms the ‘liberal humanist subject’:

> Feminist theorists have pointed out that it has historically been constructed as a white European male, presuming a universality that has worked to suppress and disenfranchise women’s voices; postcolonial theorists have taken issue not only with the universality of the (white male) liberal subject but also with the very idea of a unified, consistent identity, focusing instead on hybridity; and postmodern theorists such as Gilles Deleuze and Felix

6 Allewaert 11.

Matthew Loyd Spencer. ‘The Power of Nothing(s): Parahumanity and Erasure in Indra Sinha’s Animal’s People.’
Guattari have linked it with capitalism, arguing for the liberatory potential of a dispersed subjectivity distributed among diverse desiring machines they call ‘body without organs’. These perspectives on the development of the concept that we (often flippantly) refer to as ‘humanity’ illustrate the contingency of the term and the flimsiness of many of its foundational theories, theories that may have reached their limit of efficacy. For this examination of Animal’s People, the vital distinction to make is between ‘humanity’ and the rhizomatic possibilities that could supplant it, especially those beyond the realm of bodily modification or unification with machine. The posthuman subject is not a robot or cyborg, but instead an individual possessing a new set of schema for interpreting and being in the world. The Parahuman is an amalgamation of humanist and posthumanist concepts arranged along individual subjective lines influenced by oppressive exterior forces. Cognition and socially motivated negotiation of identity are of paramount importance in both theoretical frameworks, as well as in the novel.

The need for a new formulation of individual subjectivity is apparent in the dichotomy between animal and human, which is a conventional reference point that fills the vacuum of identity created by the erasure of the chemical spill in Animal’s People. However, in perpetuating such a potentially harmful binary, the people of Khaufpur and Animal himself are only expanding the subjugation he suffers as a third-world subject and victim of transnational capitalism run amok. If reliance on humanist modes of thinking only reinforces false dichotomies and serves to subjugate Animal as a non-human that walks on four legs, then a new mode is necessary to allow him to recreate his identity. In response to the theme of literary humanitarianism that is associated with novels of mass disaster, Jennifer Rickel offers posthumanism as that mode. Literary humanitarianism is deeply flawed as a narrative strategy as it robs the subject of agency in relating their story. Rickel more specifically identifies the treatment of trauma as the main failing of the model, positing that, ‘by approaching political violence as unspeakable and prescribing testimony to treat its symptoms, literary humanitarianism dislocates suffering from complex histories and politically and economically situated conflicts.’

Rickel argues that Animal’s narration of the novel challenges the primacy of a humanitarian reading of the novel that is predicated on the dehumanisation and he and of his fellow Khaufpuris. Acceptance of such a reading would not only reinforce a ‘testifier-witness dialectic between narrator and reader’ as Rickel argues, but it would also accept the nebulous, problematic concept of humanity as a condition that was present but erased by violence of the chemical disaster.

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8 Jennifer Rickel, “‘The Poor Remain’: A Posthumanist Rethinking of Literary Humanitarianism in Indra Sinha’s Animal’s People,’ ARIEL 43.1 (2012) 89.
9 Rickel 90.
10 Rickel 89.
Reading Animal as a posthumanist figure is certainly possible, although the term ‘posthumanism’ is just as contentious as ‘humanism’ and is the subject of ongoing debate. Hayles defines the posthuman subject as ‘an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction.’

This formulation can be applied to Animal in light of observations made about him by others, notably Nixon’s application of Kristevan abjection:

If we associate abjection with the rupturing of systemic order and sealed identity from within, then Sinha has created in his picaresque Animal a potent compression of disturbing, porous ambiguity, a figure whose leakiness confounds the borders between the human and the nonhuman as well as the borders between the national and the foreign.

The rupturing of identity experienced by Animal in the aftermath of ‘that night’ has led to the ‘continuous construction and reconstruction’ of the ‘boundaries between the human and the nonhuman’ as well as the social boundaries between himself and others.

It is crucial to note at this juncture that this reconstruction is not taking place physically through bodily modification, especially in light of Animal’s ultimate refusal of surgery that could potentially grant him the ability to walk upright (more on that later). Such a change would be more constitutive of a transhuman or cybernetic posthuman approach, both of which emphasise the physical alteration of the body in order to transcend its naturally prescribed limits. While such approaches are useful in certain scenarios, they could only be applied to Animal’s situation clumsily due to their disregard for physical embodiment. Animal’s story is gripping because he embodies the suffering imposed upon him by the chemical spill; he embraces his corporeality to the extent that he enjoys eating chunks of dried skin from his heavily calloused feet (AP 13). Hayles proposes that not only is embodiment an intersection between humanism and posthumanism, but that it has been ‘systematically downplayed or erased in the cybernetic construction of the posthuman in ways that have not occurred in other critiques of the liberal humanist subject, especially in feminist and postcolonial theories.’

However, such downplaying is not the case in less transgressive constructions of posthumanism, such as that suggested by Cary Wolfe, who echoes Hayles’ criticism of humanist threads within posthumanist thinking in claiming that ‘posthumanism in my sense isn’t posthuman at all – in the sense of being “after” our embodiment has been transcended – but is only posthumanist, in the sense that it opposes the fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy, inherited from humanism itself.’

Although Wolfe finds common ground with Hayles on this point, he is also quick to point out that her scholarship tends to ‘associate the posthuman with a kind of triumphant disembodiment’ that disregards the coupling of embodiment with the posthuman. For posthumanism to be applied to a character such as Animal and a novel such as Animal’s People with its multiple examples of body-centered violence and slow violence, it must be in a

11 Hayles 3.
12 Nixon 55.
13 Hayles 4.
15 Wolfe xv.

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form that does not privilege a leaving behind of the human body, such as would be examined in a cybernetic context.

Wolfe formulates the most promising conception of posthumanism for an examination of Animal’s People. His posthumanism is concerned not just with the human body and embodiment in an insular sense, but also with the comingling factors that have been present in the development of humanity over the course of our history. His posthumanism ‘names a historical moment in which the centering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatics, and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore,’ a moment that requires ‘a new mode of thought that comes after the cultural repression and fantasies, the philosophical protocols and evasions, of humanism as a historically specific phenomenon.’

The grounding in historical embodiment he suggests couples with the physical embodiment that is also a hallmark of his interpretation to form a view of the posthuman that accepts both the weight of non-human development and one’s own body. Neil Badmington echoes this sentiment in claiming that posthumanism does not and cannot ‘mark or make an absolute break from the legacy of humanism’, and instead must ‘take the form of critical practice that occurs inside humanism, and should consist not of the wake but the working-through of anthropocentric discourse.’

To challenge the inherent anthropocentrism present in the construction of the human being, we must ‘attend to the specificity of the human—its ways of being in the world, its ways of knowing, observing, and describing’ along with influential factors that exist, organically or artificially, outside of humanity narrowly defined. In fact, Wolfe suggests that the human is ‘fundamentally a prosthetic creature that has coevolved with various forms of technique and materiality’ that can be considered ‘radically “not-human”,’ but have nevertheless ‘made the human what it is,’ among which are forms as diverse as agriculture, the Internet, and language.

This construction of posthumanism can be applied to Animal’s condition when taken in combination with Foucault’s theorisation on the ‘body politic,’ which he refers to as ‘a set of material elements and techniques that serve as weapons, relays, communication routes and supports for the power and knowledge relations that invest human bodies and subjugate them by turning them into objects of knowledge.’ As a physical representation of the injustice and horrors of ‘that night’, Animal’s body is certainly the most conspicuous object of knowledge within the narrative owing to his experience of the disaster and its physical and political aftermath. Furthermore, the ‘body politic’ is useful not only for discussing Animal, but also for working toward the historical and material grounding required of the posthumanism synthesised here from the work of Wolfe and Badmington.

A posthumanist reading relying on Wolfe’s conception would also necessarily need to address autopoiesis, the term originally developed by Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J.

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16 Wolfe xvi.
18 Wolfe xxv.
19 Wolfe xxv.
Varela to describe the autoproduction or self-creation of oneself, specifically as a system embedded with ever more complex systems. Such a task is required given Wolfe’s reliance on the process as a means of breaking from humanist thinking. Beyond a basic definition of autopoiesis, Maturana and Varela also hold that autopoiesis is always conserved across systems, specifically in the case of environments and their inhabitants: ‘If we turn our attention to the maintenance of the organisms as dynamic systems in their environment, this maintenance will appear to us as centered on a compatibility of the organisms with their environment which we call adaptation.’ This adaptation is present in Animal’s body’s twisting in response to the violence enacted on Khaufpur and the erasure of its former state as a result of the toxic spill. Such massive change momentarily stalled its self-creating, autopoietic function, but only temporarily, as illustrated in the way that nature is reclaiming the interior of the abandoned factory. Trees and other plants grow within despite the unsettling of absence of insect life due to lingering poisonous chemicals.

Animal’s autopoietic function was also temporarily halted by the initial event, and then six years later when as a child his body suddenly underwent the painful transformation that twisted him into his animal-like shape. However, at the time the narration of the novel begins it is well in place. He is keenly aware of his status as it has been defined according to humanist rationale, but it does not prevent him from attempting to reconstruct his being from within, such as when he observes that ‘people see the outside, but it’s inside where the real things happen, no one looks in there, maybe they don’t dare’ (AP 11). He recognises the false dichotomy that has created his animal/Animal label, but at the same time he rejects it and seeks to create himself apart from it. The same seems to be true in the novel’s close, when Animal makes his final decision regarding the surgery that could restore his ability to walk upright:

I’ll never do it and heres why, if I agree to be a human being, I’ll also have to agree that I’m wrong-shaped and abnormal. But let me be a quatre pattes animal, four-footed and free, then I am whole, my own proper shape, just a different kind of animal from say Jara, or a cow, or a camel. (AP 208)

In saying this, he is denying the dichotomy of human vs. animal, returning to his initial definition as animal Other and subverting it. To admit that he needs the surgery to be human is to deny the humanity he believes he embodies and accept that his current physicality is something else, something abnormal. In refusing to do so, he maintains an autopoietic agency that allows him to recreate himself despite the multiple exterior powers that have physically and mentally shaped him. After all, he is ‘an animal fierce and free’ (AP 172).

However, the autopoietic claims made by Animal in the course of the novel, especially at its close, betray any posthumanist thinking that he may express as they are imminently tainted with humanist logic. For instance, he reveals that he has saved the money he has earned from working for Zafar and others in order to pay for the surgery that he has now decided to forgo. In fact, up

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22 Wolfe xxiii-xxiv.
23 Maturana and Varela 102.
until this final admission, his yearning to walk upright has been a driving plot point, beginning early in the novel: ‘My name is Animal,’ I say. ‘I’m not a fucking human being, I’ve no wish to be one.’ This was my mantra, what I told everyone. Never did I mention my yearning to walk upright’ (AP 23). That he has abandoned this aim, while seemingly reflective of a posthuman turn, does nothing to remove the motivation of romantic love that drove much of his agonising over his quadripedal nature. During his first encounter with Elli, Animal admonishes himself through the many voices that often cloud his thinking, bluntly stating that ‘you got angry because when you looked at you thought sex, when she looked at you she thought cripple’ (AP 72). All that has changed with respect to this drive toward romantic involvement at the novel’s close is that his attitude has become more positive and he sees this change, along with his saved up money, as the missing pieces to achieving his goal: ‘now that cash, plus a little persuasion from Farouq’s friends, will go to buy Anjali free and she will come to live with me’ (AP 366). Animal may have come to question the human/animal dichotomy that created his name and outer persona, but he still subscribes to deeply humanist thinking internally, representing the deeply rooted nature of the ideology. He seems to have realised that he does not have to buy into his separation from humanity, but he also wants to secure the comforts that only being human provides, namely a romantic relationship, albeit one gained through monetary exchange and strong-armed bullying.

A more fruitful term for analysing Animal and the erasures that allow him to recreate his identity is Allewaert’s parahumanity. Parahumanity is meant to ‘challenge the hierarchal organization of life-forms that was common to colonial anthropologies and natural histories’ while also working to ‘put animals, parahumans, and humans in horizontal relation ... without conflating them’ and adopting a double signification of the prefix ‘para-’ in which it ‘can describe a perversion of that prior category’.24 The body within this category of life is recast as ‘an organization of matter and parts and also fantasies about this organization of matter and parts,’ that is the ‘prima facie site through which personhood is produced and negotiated as well as where the overlapping economic, biological, and social systems that compose place are produced and negotiated.’25 As should be evident, this formulation of life includes many of the criteria of both the human and posthuman that have been discussed to this point. Parahumanity seeks to redefine the conception of the body while also incorporating humanist ‘fantasies’ about its structure and physicality, fantasies that contributed to the models of personhood described earlier, models that ‘registered a deep skepticism about the desirability of the category of the human’ in the Afro-American populations that are the focus of Allawaert’s study.26 Incorporating these fantasies was necessary in order to identify the category of human as defined by Enlightenment-influenced organisational thinking in hope of suspending it ‘so as to prohibit any simple return to it’.27 This idea comes into play in Animal’s thinking as he recognises and even incorporates some concepts of the human ideal into his psyche – namely romantic love and sex – while leaving others in suspension in order to avoid them – the definition of man as strictly

24 Allewaert 86.
25 Allewaert 17.
26 Allewaert 86.
27 Allewaert 86.
bipedal. The dual meaning of ‘para-’ supports this seemingly contradictory identity construction that allows for Animal’s parahumanity to be a perversion of previous forms of humanity. The potentiality of parahumanity also allows for this construction: ‘parahumanity is not, then, a suspension of the category of the human that involves not-choosing. It is a parasitism and a paradox in which choosing keeps the nonchosen in play as a potentiality.’\(^{28}\) By this logic, Animal is free to construct an identity meticulously chosen from the available models, owing this mutability to the ‘copresence of a series of negotiations that allow both construction and intimacy as well as dissolution and alienation’ that parahumanity fantasises.\(^{29}\) It could even be suggested that Animal presents an example of a new, as yet unformulated state that could be termed, rather awkwardly it must be said, ‘paraposthumanity’ in which he perverts the tenets of that system while still maintaining aspects of it as they aid in the construction of his identity.

Perhaps the best encapsulation of Animal’s parahumanity is within the musical anthem that he composes for himself with the aid of Elli:

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\text{I am an animal fierce and free} \\
\text{in all the world is none like me} \\
\text{crooked I’m, a nightmare child} \\
\text{few on hunger, running wild} \\
\text{no love and cuddles for this boy} \\
\text{like without hope, laugh without joy} \\
\text{but if you dare to pity me} \\
\text{I’ll shit in your shoe and piss in your tea. (AP 172)}
\]

The primacy of the name ‘animal’ in the song is invested with a dual meaning that could refer to the name of the character or the definition of the living organism, either of which relies on a strict definition born of dichotomous thinking. Reference to himself as ‘this boy’ also relies on gender specific definition that is in keeping with his desire for romantic love and shows an autopoietic bent toward widely accepted definitions of gender and love. The closing warning against pity is reflective of a parahuman parallel structure in which there would be no need to pity another living thing. Furthermore, it shows awareness of the human/animal dichotomy and suggests its transcendence in which to pity him would be to subscribe to harmful binary thinking. Animal, shunning both humanist and posthumanist means of restructuring his identity following its erasure by the events of ‘that night’, falls back onto a third mode, Allewaert’s parahumanity, which allows him to better tailor himself to the multifaceted environment he inhabits, maintaining his adaptation and means of self-creation.

Animal is an imperfect creation for an imperfect novel. Sinha draws attention to the tragedy of Bhopal through the events and characters of Khaufpur, but the novel as a form is largely a static creation; readers consume it, spend some time thinking about it, and then likely turn away from it. However, it can be contended that like Animal’s unique parahuman system of identity construction, the novel shapes the tale of transnational exploitation and violence in fits and starts.

\(^{28}\) Allewaert 111.  
\(^{29}\) Allewaert 99

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and with the ability to absorb or deny attributes according to its needs. After all, the novel is a mere snippet of the timeline of the disaster focusing on only a handful of the characters affected, as any report or study of the real life disaster would necessarily be limited in scope. The novel’s narrative is incomplete, but it presents a portrait of personal recreation in the form of Animal’s life that illustrates the power of literature to live beyond the page by positioning itself at the heart of the matter without claiming to be all encompassing. Animal’s final words reinforce this view: ‘All things pass, but the poor remain. We are the people of the Apokalis. Tomorrow there will be more of us’ (AP 366). The novel ends, we are no longer privy to the in and outs of Animal’s struggle to define himself, but the story continues, both in the ethereal fictional space of the created world and in our reality, where the poor continue to die of conditions not far removed from those depicted in the novel. It may feel as if Animal’s people, as well as the reader, are left with nothing, but that nothingness contains untold potential for transformation.

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

Philip Sulter

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. 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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1 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.
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.2 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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or individual with meaning. 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.

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. 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. 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.

For Butler, the frame acts to ‘delimit the visual field’ and create a narrative about ‘what can be seen and what can be heard’. In essence, its function is to generate a certain ‘version of reality’. 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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6Derrida 7.
7Derrida 7.
8Butler 8, xi.
9Butler xi.
always keeping something out, always de-realising and de-legitimating alternative versions of reality.\textsuperscript{10}

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.\textsuperscript{11} 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’.\textsuperscript{12} 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.\textsuperscript{13} 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’.\textsuperscript{14} 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 \textit{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.\textsuperscript{15}

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’.\textsuperscript{16} 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 \textit{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

\textsuperscript{10}Butler xiii.
\textsuperscript{11}Butler 3.
\textsuperscript{12}Butler 73.
\textsuperscript{13}Butler 10, 63.
\textsuperscript{14}Butler 9.
\textsuperscript{15}Butler 10.
themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do’. 17 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’. 18 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’. 19 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’. 20 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. 21 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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18 Klein 282.
19 Klein 282, emphasis original.
20 Klein 282.
21 Butler 14.
in May 1900 (26). 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). 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’. 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). 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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22The 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).

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


Ronit Frenkel observes that the “‘alternative’ history of Islam’ Shukri employs in relation to South Africa constitutes a form of ‘strategic historic revisionism’.

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 liberatory 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’. 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.

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’. 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. 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


28 Frenkel, ‘Local Transnationalisms’ 127.

29 Frenkel, ‘Local Transnationalisms’ 128.

30 Frenkel, ‘Local Transnationalisms’ 128.

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reader is permitted to interact with the ‘shards’ that he leaves behind (64). 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). 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’. Rather than perceiving historical acts of conquest and

31 For a detailed analysis of Issa’s vanishing itself, see Minesh Dass’s discussion of The Silent Minaret in his PhD
Novels’, diss. Rhodes University (2014), as well as his article ‘Cosmopolitanism and the Unfollowable Routines
32 ‘History therefore includes the present’ is a quotation taken from an essay by Erich Auerbach titled, ‘Philology
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.
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’. 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’. 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

34Mbembe, 16, emphasis original.
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. 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’. 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.

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. 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. 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 –

38‘Nooi’ is an Afrikaans term for ‘young girl’.
39Jayawardane, ‘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 Dobrota 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. 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’. 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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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). 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’. 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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42The literal English translation of the Afrikaans word ‘doos’ is ‘box’, but it is more commonly understood as a crude and colloquial term for vagina.

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). 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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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.

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.


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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**Works Cited**


Identity and Nation in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *An Artist of the Floating World*
Silvia Tellini

Abstract


By focusing on the Americanisation of the Japanese culture and the generational gap created during the postwar period in Japan, the present article discusses universal conflicts that emerge from verticalised familial and social relationships through the lens of Ono who is having trouble dealing with his sense of guilt and internal conflict regarding his active participation as a nationalist propagandist artist of the empire during the war. His reminiscing reveals mechanisms of self-deception and repression to bury intolerable and unwelcome memories insofar as they are discussed against the backdrop of a unique fluid historical moment of intense upheaval and cultural change in Japan.

**Keywords:** Kazuo Ishiguro; *An Artist of the Floating World*; memory; identity; World War II

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Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro was born in Japan and moved to England at the age of five. In his early years of school, he experienced what might be called culture shock, finding himself ‘a curiosity in the playground’ and adjusting to a new reality.¹ The novelist has declared on a number of interviews that he considers himself an international author, which means that he is able to move in different linguistic universes since he is actually creating from a cultural cross-road.

One of the recurrent themes explored in Ishiguro’s narratives is wartime, especially moments of intense political and social upheaval. Memory and identity are elements that the novelist uses strategically in his narratives, contextualising them in a world where old values are crumbling, hence generating conflicts that stem from reminiscing unreliable narratives in the context of social and historical shifting values.

In *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) narrator Masuji Ono dwells on his personal history: his early endeavours as an artist around 1913, when he studies as an apprentice; his subsequent fame, reaching its pinnacle around 1938; and finally his post-war decline. The main narrative is set between October 1948 and June 1950. As the story opens we learn his wife and son have died in the war, leaving him with two daughters. Setsuko is the older married daughter and Noriko is the younger. Noriko lives with her father and is still single. We learn Ono is indirectly

held accountable for the death of his wife Michiko, who was in one of the bombings in Nagasaki, as well as the death of his son, Kenji, who fought overseas in Manchuria. Suichi, Setsuko’s husband, believes Ono is to be blamed for their deaths since the painter endorsed the ultranationalist group that ‘led the country astray’ and has led millions of the emperor’s soldiers and sailors to death, who were killed on the course of ‘that hopeless charge across the minefield’.  

Ono is worried about the possibility that his support of the nationalist government will interfere in his daughter’s marriage negotiations, and this compels him to undertake a self-evaluation of his career. He takes the reader back to the time when they had difficulties with each other; to the time when he worked at the art studio that produced cheap copies of stereotypical images of Japan; to the time when he worked at the bohemian Mori-san’s villa trying to capture the floating world; and back to his success as a nationalist painter. Always navigating on the blurred edges of these worlds, the narrative is presented with blind spots where the reader might suspect that Ono is leaving information out or that there could be different versions of the same facts.

Beedham observes that the critical readings of the novel have gone in different directions, revealing many of the issues that have captured the interest of the readers, some towards a socio-historic interpretation, others towards its cinematic qualities.  
The language used in the novel, an atypical English that conveys a Japanese-like sensibility, has also been the subject of investigation: despite writing in English, the author creates a discourse that mimics the voice of an old Japanese artist. Norman Page suggests that as part of the solution was to create an ‘English dialogue that is quite unlike contemporary speech in the English-speaking world in its extreme and sometimes archaic formality’.  

For King this pseudotranslation implies the mood of what goes on behind the formalities:

one of the delights of the novel is the notation of Japanese speech. Ishiguro shows how conventions of politeness and fear of showing disrespect lead to artificial behaviour, absurd conversation and failure of communication. The characters avoid shaming each

2 Kazuo Ishiguro, An Artist of the Floating World (New York: Random House, 1986) 56-7. Further references to this work will be included as page numbers in the text.  
4 Norman Page, ‘Speech, Culture and History in the Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro’ in Asian Voices in English edited by Mimi Chan and Roy Harris (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1991) 166-7.  

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other by denying that anything of a critical nature is intended; yet their subtle hints can be the cause of suicide.\(^6\)

Ono’s denials and motivations, expressed through what he reveals and does not reveal, convey an original instability to the reader’s interpretation. This experiment is not Ishiguro’s first, according to Shaffer, who asserts that Ono is the ‘fleshed-out version of Ogata–San’, Etsuko’s first husband in *A Pale View of Hills* (1982): ‘both are former artists and art teachers, former fascists, and aging widowers who have children whose political views contrast sharply with their own.’\(^7\)

Ono’s narrative is set against the backdrop of an ambiguous and contradictory society that has taken an abrupt turn towards a new direction in history. Working as a painter to support the fascist government, the artist struggles to adapt to a new scenario in Japan once the Second World War is over and is caught in the intersection between his individual narrative and the collective conflicting tensions surrounding the changing and fluid values that his society has been forced to adopt during the aftermath of the war. Through his eyes the reader is able to observe conflicting positions that emerge from different ideologies in dispute at a time of intense political upheaval in Japan, insofar as the characters expose their divergent values in face of the changes the nation has to make to move from being a colonial empire to accepting a new system of democracy imposed by the victors.

In the process of narrating his collaboration with the nationalist party before and during the war, Ono’s own conflicting perceptions about whether his past deeds were good or bad inevitably emerge. In one passage he ironically finds himself a ‘freethinking, critical artist-citizen’ as he declares: ‘I do not think I am claiming undue credit for my younger self if I suggest my actions … were a manifestation of a quality I came to be much respected for in later years – the ability to think and judge myself, even if it meant going against the sway of those around me’ (69). He remarks he is proud of defying ‘authority’ and in never joining ‘the crowd blindly’ (73), despite his trajectory proving otherwise.

Shaffer detects irony in a passage where Ono urges Shintaro, his former student, to ‘face up to the past’ since ‘there is no need to lie about yourself’ (103–4), something Ono seems to be telling himself indeed. Moreover, he highlights the fact that Ono approaches the matter only when addressing a student, showing that the tensions embedded in verticalised relationships such as those between student and Sensei (teacher and master) are at the heart of the novel.\(^8\) Ono’s development in becoming an artist, against his father’s wishes, progresses from being initially discouraged, to being apprenticed and eventually to becoming a leader as a famous Sensei, depicting ‘the tensions … between authoritarian art teachers and rebellious students [that] mirror the broader social and political events leading Japan into World War Two’.\(^9\) Ishiguro explains: ‘I needed to portray this world where a leader figure held this incredible psychological sway over his subordinates. And for subordinates to break free, they had to display a remarkable amount of

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\(^7\) Shaffer 39.

\(^8\) Shaffer 49.
determination. I’m pointing to the master-pupil thing recurring over and over again in the world.\footnote{Mason 340}

If on one hand Ono is subservient to the fascist cause, on the other hand he has broken free from what was expected of him as a child, since pursuing the artistic career was seen as an alternative to fixing his flawed character from his family’s perspective. There is a genuine level to Ono’s experiences that deny authority and break free from the authoritarian impositions of his businessman father, who regards a career in finance as useful in opposition to a useless career in the arts. He recalls a priest predicting that Ono was born ‘with a flaw in his nature. A weak streak that would give him a tendency towards slothfulness and deceit’ (45), and that therefore, ‘we’ve had to combat his laziness, his dislike of useful work, his weak will [since] artists … live in squalor and poverty. They inhabit a world which gives them every temptation to become weak-willed and depraved’ (46). As a result, the father burns his paintings. Against this opinion Ono responds: ‘I have no wish to find myself in years to come, sitting where Father is now sitting, telling my own sons about accounts and money … What are these meetings I’m so privileged to attend? The counting of loose change. The fingering of coins, hour after hour’ (47-8).

Ono stands up to his father in terms of pursuing an artistic career, despite showing subordination in surrendering his paintings to be destroyed. This situation occurs again when his master Mori-san accuses him of artistic insubordination and treason for exploring ‘curious avenues’ (142). The punishment should be the confiscation of the paintings and the traitors ‘would then abandon the painting, or in some cases, burn it along with the refuse’ (140). Since Ono refuses to bring his paintings this time, he is expelled from the villa. Mori-san assures him: ‘You will no doubt succeed in finding work illustrating magazines and comic books’, but ‘it will end your development as a serious artist’ (180).

Ironically, as a result of becoming supportive of the imperialist regime Ono will in turn be supported by the government to further his art through becoming a Sensei. This places him higher in the hierarchy than Mori-san, at a time when Ono involuntarily becomes an accomplice to the authorities burning one of his student’s paintings. However, the affair worries Ono, when he hears the government’s worker remark: ‘Bad paintings make bad smoke’ (184). The smell reminds him of the previous wartime: ‘It’s not so long ago it meant bombing and fire’ (200).

Endorsing the imperialist regime means pursuing the aesthetics of purity which leads Ono to adopt a skeptical attitude towards Mori-San’s art when he attempts to modernise the art tradition by using some European influences, expressing a certain degree of xenophobia in rejecting what is considered foreign. The former Sensei’s art is detailed, as if

he had, for instance, long abandoned the use of traditional dark outline to define his shapes, preferring instead the Western use of blocks of colors, with light and shade to create a three-dimensional appearance. And no doubt he had taken his cue from the European in what was his most central concern: the use of subdued colors, Morisan’s wish was to evoke a certain melancholy, nocturnal atmosphere around his women. (141)

As Ono is drawn closer to the nationalist ideology he criticises Mori-san for trying to embrace...
new European painting techniques, understood as ‘fundamentally unpatriotic’ (202-3). As he remarks to his former Sensei: ‘It is my belief that in such troubled times as this, artists must learn to value something more tangible than those pleasurable things that disappear with the morning light. It is not necessary that artists always occupy a decadent and enclosed world’ (180). He claims to be aware of ‘the steady decline of Mori-san’s reputation in the city’ once he attempted to ‘bring European influence into the Utamaro tradition’. Consequently, Mori-san’s art is marginalised and regarded as unpatriotic and he is exiled to smaller exhibition venues (202).

This is quite different to his initial impression of Mori-san when he begins to work as his pupil. He asserts that the master’s art longs ‘to capture the fragile lantern light of the pleasure world’ (174), ‘the intangible and transient (beauty of the) pleasure houses after dark’ and to transcend reality in celebration of the ‘floating world’ (150). Shaffer observes that in a stereotypical bohemian world, they have no routine and indulge in heavy drinking and sensual pleasures, which is what Ono’s father most feared for him. Despite the suggested freedom, Ono depicts the environment as just as authoritarian as the previous ones, when he describes their relationship:

> We lived throughout those years almost entirely in accordance with his [Mori-san’s] values and lifestyle, and this entailed spending much time exploring the city’s ‘floating world’ – the night-time world of pleasure, entertainment and drink which formed the backdrop for all of our paintings. (144-5)

Ono’s changing perceptions are also mirrored in the story of the Hirayama boy, a retarded child who mimics patriotic speeches and old military songs. Before the war, he was the object of popular approbation: people would ‘stop to give him money’ (61). After Japan’s defeat, the child would get beaten up for his chanting. Shaffer points out that the boy represents an irony in relation to Ono’s lack of vision and culpability, considering that he is also ‘shown to mimic patriotic themes and slogans, and to be incapable of understanding why his message no longer falls on sympathetic ears’.  

During that period, the idea of belonging to the nation suffers changes insofar as identity becomes less predetermined, hierarchical and non-negotiable, while it becomes more relevant on an individual basis. That is the moment in history when the global market and the idea of global migration, of both people and capital, coexists with the idea of nation, despite bringing the hierarchy of identities to an end. Ono’s narration begins three and a half years after the beginning of the occupation by the victors, in October 1948, and ends one year and ten months before the end of the occupation process, a time when Japan had no sovereignty and accordingly no diplomatic relations. No Japanese were allowed to travel abroad until the occupation was almost over; no major political, administrative, or economic decisions were possible without the conquerors’ approval; no

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11 Shaffer 52.
12 Shaffer 48.
public criticism of the American regime was permissible, although in the end dissident voices were irrepressible.\textsuperscript{14}

Dower points out that despite the arrogant idealistic agenda of demilitarisation and democracy that was imposed at first and the conservative post-war state, the ideals of peace and democracy became part of an experienced life rather than a borrowed vision, which was founded through many diverse and non-consensual voices. Nonetheless, there was no precedent for the kind of relationship that was established in the wake of the war: Japan was the symbol of the Oriental and pagan society that had succumbed to the colonial power enforced by the ‘messianic fervor of General Douglas MacArthur’.\textsuperscript{15} Therefore, World War II did not really end for the Japanese until 1952. Those years became, no matter how much the country developed economically, the hallmark for thinking about national identity and individual values: there was no ‘Japanese response to what had happened, but rather they reflected kaleidoscopic views’. The confusing vitality of the years that followed defeat created a space for debating other political models than state-led capitalism, which stimulated dreams of an international role instead of crawling under America’s nuclear umbrella. Dower agrees with Ishiguro about the fact that when we examine hardship in retrospective it has its attractions, and nostalgia sometimes sweetens the recollections of that time. Personal memories have, in recent years, been buttressed by an outpouring of publications in Japan that shows little sign of abating. … Many celebrities who made their names in the wake of defeat are only now passing away; and each such departure is usually accompanied by a piercing and poignant evocation of those years, so long ago and yet still so palpably connected to the present.\textsuperscript{16}

Despite the possible reinterpretations of the past, what remained crucial in those years of defeat and occupation was that the Japanese were forced to struggle in different ways and to question fundamental life issues to which ‘they responded in recognizably human, fallible, and often contradictory ways that can tell us a great deal about ourselves and our world in general’.\textsuperscript{17} The historical texture which Dower highlights is brilliantly captured in An Artist from the individual and intimate perspective of a first-person narrator, as Ono is propelled into reexamining his own experiences against the new values enforced in the post wartime period. Concerns with such fundamental life questions are intertwined with Ono’s reflections on wartime and emerge in a myriad of contradictory justifications, providing us with a picture of the fallible human condition.

Ono reminisces about a time when the majority of the Japanese people threw off a decade of militarist indoctrination, revealing the fragility of ideology of totalitarian regimes. If on one hand the Emperor’s warriors and sailors suffered contempt from society as they returned from the lost war, on the other hand their own misery contributed to the amnesia of the suffering they had

\textsuperscript{14} John W. Dower, Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II (New York: Norton, 1999) 23.
\textsuperscript{15} Dower 23.
\textsuperscript{16} Dower 28.
\textsuperscript{17} Dower 29.
inflicted on others; that amnesia seems to be lurking in Ono’s story as he struggles against his own denials.

Ono’s trust in the ultranationalist discourse of a power nation has suddenly become displaced in the new context of the liberal discourse of modernisation, progress and internationalization. He faces an ideological clash when, for example, Setsuko, his oldest daughter remarks: ‘Father was simply a painter. He must stop believing he has done some great wrong’ (193). In another passage Ono’s grandson, Ichiro, is enthusiastically playing at imitating Western superheroes like Zorro and Popeye, while the painter tries unsuccessfully to attract his attention and show the child his paintings. From a generational perspective, Maurice Halbwachs explains how old people, unlike the young, seem keen on reviving the past by going through old papers. However, that does not mean that they remember better than the young; thus, it is not the case that ‘old images, buried in the unconscious since childhood, regain the power to cross the edge of consciousness only in the state of old age’.18 The cultural gap between grandfather and grandson is perceived in the way they invest positive values in conflicting images and icons of two different historical moments. According to Dower (1999, 110), if before 1945 boys played with headbands and wooden spears pretending they were heroic pilots and sailors who saved the country against mock-ups of Roosevelt and Churchill, now in defeat and in the absence of indoctrination, they replaced samurai helmets as they learned to fold paper into GI-style hats. They also bought a commercial ten-centimeter Jeep toy that was associated with Jeeps carrying cheerful GIs who handed out chocolate and chewing gum to the children in the streets. Most kids’ first words in English were ‘hello’, ‘goodbye’, ‘jeep’, and ‘give me chocolate’. In response to the context of displacement Ono uses the language of ‘self-deception and self-protection’,19 which ‘tends to be the sort that suppresses meaning and tries to hide away meaning’.20 As he offers his story reconstructions, he ‘attempts to conceal the overbearing shame associated with [his] past’,21 so that his truths are slowly revealed to the reader while he fails to see them himself. Ishiguro asserts that the protagonists in his novels:

know what they have to avoid and that determines the routes that they take through memory, and through the past. There’s no coincidence that they’re usually worrying over the past. They’re worrying because they sense there isn’t something quite right there. But of course memory is this terrible treacherous terrain, the very ambiguities of memory go to feed self-deception.22

In the passage when he expresses concern about his younger daughter’s arranged marriage negotiation (miai) he mentions a conversation with Matsuda, a man who works for the Okada-Shingen (New Life) Society promoting the militarist and artistic cause; he asks Matsuda to answer any questions regarding their past ‘with utmost delicacy’ during the miai ceremony, to which Matsuda replies: ‘I realize there are now those who would condemn the likes of you and

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19 Mason, 337.
21 Cynthia F. Wong, Kazuo Ishiguro (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2005) 144.
22 Shaffer 9.
me for the very things we were once proud to have achieved’ (94). Matsuda is the man who convinces Ono to serve the imperialist government, hence launching his successful career, which has become a dilemma now that the imperialist aspirations have suddenly gained a negative connotation.

While Ono reenacts his past by reinterpreting and relocating his memories along with the reconstruction of Nagasaki, he struggles and gradually finds consolation in an open and hopeful future towards the end of the narrative. Nonetheless, the artist keeps reassuring the reader, or primarily himself, that his past deeds are noble, seeking confirmation when talking to his former colleagues and Sensei Mori-san about how much they contributed to the nation. The artist’s shameful past is echoed throughout his repetition of the word ‘shame’ which comes up in his conversations like when he declares: ‘there is surely no great shame in mistakes made in the best of faith. It is surely a thing far more shameful to be unable or unwilling to acknowledge them’ (125).

As Ono watches the place where the old night bar Migi-Hidari (Right-Left) used to be a symbol of the old days in the pleasure district of the floating world, now he sees a clear space with a few young trees and a single bench, a place where nobody now has time to stop and rest from their busy lives. While he struggles to come to terms with the new nation of the present, he somehow is able to keep alive his hope for a better future:

I feel a certain nostalgia for the past and the district as it used to be. But to see how our city has been rebuilt, how things have recovered so rapidly over these years, fills me with genuine gladness. Our nation, it seems, whatever mistakes it may have made in the past, has now another chance to make a better go of things. One can only wish these young people well (206).

King confirms the binary rationality of the world in which Ono lives stems from the opposition between the older and the younger generations: ‘If the old order is tyrannical and unrepentant, the younger generation is necessarily selfish. The choice seems to be between the living death of the past, which provides protection and guidance, and the new American democratic way, which offers opportunities and insecurity.’

Beedham, nonetheless, insists that the novel cannot be contained in only one world and that its instability allows the reader to place it in other worlds presenting similar troubles in which the moral order is at stake.

In his interview with Mason, Ishiguro observes that Ono’s mood at the end of the novel shows that he recognises the mistakes Japan has made but believes the nation will recover because its life is longer than a man’s, and despite having his dignity taken away, in the end he finds a way to hold onto it. Ishiguro explains he used the diary method to allow Ono to write from four different emotional positions, creating some irony:

There are no solid things. And the irony is that Ono had rejected that whole approach to life. But in the end, he too is left celebrating those pleasures that evaporated when the

23 King 207.
24 Beedham 41.
morning light dawned. So the floating world comes to refer, in the larger metaphorical sense, to the fact that the values of society are always in flux.25

The place where Ono used to spend pleasurable hours has now become an empty field, a passage alley, where new life struggles to be born; while he observes the trees from a bench, he understands they are not there for contemplation. He reflects on the new generation ‘full of optimism and enthusiasm’ that has no time to stop for reverie; though he is still observing them at a distance, their cheerful talk takes him back to the crowd that he used to meet at the Migi-Hidari in the past, and a thought suddenly comes to him: that that place had been the bridge between two contradictory worlds all along (204).

Conclusion

Ishiguro creates characters seeking redemption from acts they have committed, which they may not be proud of any longer, sometimes acknowledging their past as old homes which seem far away from their current paths. Ono’s identity is depicted with great authenticity: he is a Japanese painter who struggles to understand where he belongs in a society undergoing deep changes during the aftermath of the war. His narrative brings to light the floating grounds of politics and history during wartime as he is caught between ambiguous values: he longs for the preservation of the ideal of the old customs, although he eventually comes to acknowledge the mistakes of a totalitarian regime, while wishing hopefully for the reconstruction of the country.

Insofar as the nation is driven towards a new political and ideological scenario, the artist examines his role in history. While agonising over his support for the fascist movement, he struggles to accept that his past actions may have endorsed an ideology which has become a shameful affair in face of the new liberal democratic ideas suddenly enforced after the rendition. Self-deception, memory and desire are at stake when the painter attempts to justify his nationalist contributions. Contradictory stories inevitably surface when he struggles to bury unwelcome memories. Eventually, the artist perceives that there is a floating territory full of cheerful young people in transit, walking across a bridge between two worlds; and he feels hopeful about their future. While he is contemplating them from a distance, his description reminds us of the motifs he used to paint at Mori-san’s villa; paintings that had given him a glimpse of the floating world in the past, seem transmuted now into a floating optimistic hope for the future of the next generation.

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25 Mason 341.
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