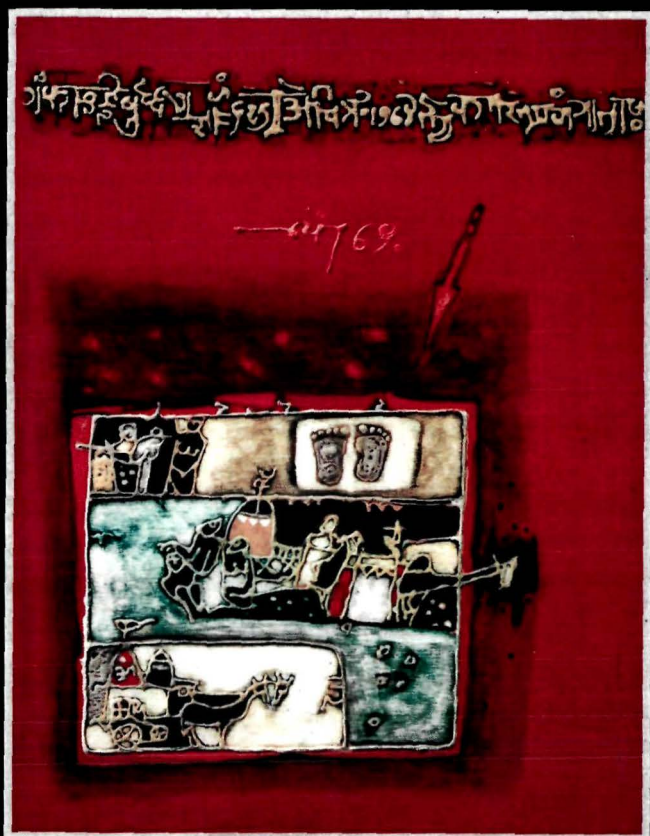




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Editor's Note

Looking through an old copy of *Wasafiri* to which I subscribed many years ago, I came across the phrase “cultural travelling,” which was employed to denote multifarious literary voices in contemporary writing that had come together in that journal. I too am mindful of “the transplantation, transference, circulation, and commerce of theories and ideas” as I go through the final readings of *Dialog* prior to its publication. Edward Said’s use of these verbs in his essay “Traveling Theory” is the guiding principle of the current issue that travels across geographies and histories, exploring subjects as arcane and somewhat befuddling as torture porn to what appears more comprehensible, but not commonplace, such as the narratives of the StoryCorps, a form of internet recordation in the United States. This issue of *Dialog* contains a variety of subjects ranging from film to comparative literature, and from feminism to cultural and postcolonial studies, making it an eclectic if not an eccentric mix.

To Edward Said who writes that “[t]here seem to be too many interruptions, too many distractions, too many irregularities interfering

with the homogeneous space supposedly holding scholars together,” I would respond that despite the heterogeneity of the intellectual output and the “incoherence” of the academic practitioners, there is no “uneasiness” here that he feels has accompanied the extraordinary specialization in literature and literary study today. Said means, possibly, that the sundry theory we have at hand has distorted what was called “literariness”. Indeed, the necessity for “methodology”, the need to make analyses “fit” a given concept or theory, is the controlling credo of the times. Said’s concern is triggered by the sheer de-radicalization of George Lukács’s 1930s analyses of the Hungarian Soviet Revolution of 1919, in turns, by Goldmann in 1955 and thereafter by Raymond Williams in 1970. The theorizing by later critics serves to discipline/domesticate the previously animated subject of Lukács that, under the gaze of “increasing specialization,” in another time and place, wilts and self-destructs, and loses its normative value, though at the same time giving way to new implications. Goldmann’s dialectics concerning Pascal and Racine come in the way of class-consciousness which is so important to Lukács.

While Said is more percipient than most in insisting that theory must not lose its original charge, theory does need to travel. The local can become meaningful only when it signals beyond the particular in much the same way as its exciting particularity and contextuality will depend on imposing limits on making too many broad generalizations. *Dialog* has aimed to use theory as it should be used—an invigorating device that both reaffirms and dislocates an established literary environment for scholars and critics. The diverse range of contributors expresses precisely the intention of not insisting upon literary borders and territories. Since we intend to create a forum for research scholars, I am pleased to say that *Dialog* has emerged over the years to become a dynamic journal that is interested in initiating literary dialogues across many disciplines.

Our lead paper by Pramod Nayar examines the torture film in relation to its material rather than physical representation; Nayar’s gaze rests beyond the superficial sadist aspect of the film per se to

discover human defenselessness in its susceptibility to torture and pain. He goes on to link material pain with the dehumanizing conditions of incarceration at Abu Ghraib in order to speak of a “shared precarity,” a condition of helplessness, which exposes the sheer vulnerability that underlies all humanity. The abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay was performed for camera, a sort of “staging of torture,” to enable the tortured to stand witness and confess to crimes they were assumed to have committed. The camera also allows, according to Nayar, an extension of torture from suffering to spectacle thus increasing the aspect of intersubjectivity and empathy when the audience gets involved. Inasmuch as the virtual has overtaken the human, the film (and photographic abuse of prisoners) becomes the appropriate genre to bring out the “dematerialization” of the human body, since we almost live online lives.

Rajyashree Khushu-Lahiri also engages with the media, but contrarily, to work against dematerialization. She links the human and the oral/aural to comment on everyday stories that serve to connect people, especially those that belong to the economically backward classes. Radio producer David Isay’s StoryCorps, which records and plays the conversation between two or more people, becomes Khushu-Lahiri’s means of engagement with the Habermasian “public sphere” that reflects the democratic intent of this digital form of communication. Where people are unfamiliar with technologies of writing and print, the StoryCorps steps in as a “new media culture” to create bonds of social connectivity through the internet.

Romita Choudhury’s paper moves the focus to the Indian “moral consciousness” and its overarching paternity that seeks to create a discourse about Indian womanhood during the nationalist phase of India’s history. Choudhury both challenges the conceptualization of “the woman question,” including its Gandhian parameters, and exposes how it is appropriated in contemporary discourse against male oppression in her examination of two novels, Attia Hossain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column* and Nayantara Sahgal’s *Rich Like Us*, written thirty years apart. Choudhury maintains that while the

Gandhian paradigms for women are subverted by Sahgal and Hossain, the intellectual female protagonists of their novels cannot transcend the maternalization of the nation at the hands of Gandhian ideology. Shymasree Basu also takes two novelists as her focus—Qurratulain Hyder and Tahmima Anam—to argue against the construction of “nations of intent” in a different context in Bangladesh. Both Choudhury and Basu emphasize, in their unique ways, how the master narrative of the nation is an exercise in silencing the marginalized, albeit in two different climes—a Hindu India and a Muslim Bangladesh.

Letizia Alterno attempts to see Amitav Ghosh’s fiction as polyvalent and multicultural, a “narrative of crossing” national and identity constructs. Her essay illustrates the significance of cosmopolitanism against the orthodox reading of Ghosh’s novels as testimonials of the conflict between colonial culture and the slaves and *girmitiyas*. She analyzes Ghosh’s employment of the sea-and-wave metaphor to suggest that transnationalism rather than homogeneity is more compatible with the violent history of India. Significant to Alterno’s work is the confluence that is enabled between Ghosh’s “leaping” text and the continuity of the wave; between the ebb and flow of stories told and retold and the deterritorializing movement of the sea.

Hema Dahiya and Nivedita Gupta complete our list of academic essays. Dahiya raises a challenge to the postcolonial conundrum that Shakespeare was the hegemonic tool the British employed to mentally colonize India. She reverses that stereotypical premise that has been appropriated by postcolonial studies, suggesting instead that Calcutta had a class of theatre-goers who could respond to Shakespeare in a variety of ways that had nothing to do with mimetic subservience. Nivedita Gupta’s research takes her to the Middle East, locating resistance to torture in the writing of the Egyptian novelist, Nawal El-Saadawi. She explores the metaphor of the *hammam*, or the Turkish bath—a kind of *zenana* quarters—where women met and exchanged views. This female space enables the articulation of women’s own observations and feelings, hidden from

men, and is synonymous with a “feminine harmony” and “collective agency.”

This issue of *Dialog* is organized a little differently. We have included a new concept, that of an interview with a literary personality—poet, novelist or critic. Our poet in conversation is Meena Alexander; she speaks to Vijaya Singh on the subject of her latest collection, *Birthplace with Buried Stones*. This is also our second issue with a section on creative writers of poetry. I am pleased, in these pages, to present Manash Bhattacharjee and K. Srilata, who have received numerous accolades for their poetry collections. Rohit Sharma’s first published poem also appears in this issue.

It is no surprise then that the exchange of ideas within *Dialog* itself approximates to the very meaning of the Kiswahili word *wasafiri*, which means “cultural travelling.” Said has raised the question whether “an idea or a theory gains or loses in strength, and whether a theory in one historical period and national culture becomes altogether different for another period or situation” once it has moved from one place and time to another. By opening up and negotiating political space, although in very different historical contexts, our intention to keep stirring the theoretical pot gainfully has been steadfast. By resuscitating Said’s famous essay of the 1980s, I hope we have been able to keep his concerns at bay while promoting at the same time, the “critical consciousness . . . for locating or situating theory.” To this end, we are graciously encouraged by Catherine Belsey and Homi Bhabha who have now joined our Advisory Board. We feel honoured.

RUMINA SETHI

PRAMOD K. NAYAR

***Saw(ed)* Off: Horrorism as the New Materialism in the Torture Film**

Seen any good surgery on unanesthetized people lately?

(Edelstein 2006)

I intend in this essay to examine a popular film genre in which a certain return to the materiality of human ontology is discernible: the torture film. I use the term 'materiality' rather than 'physicality' to indicate a set of features of which the corporeal-physical is only one; affect-sentiment and rationality being the other two. As work by Lauren Berlant (2004, 2011), Ann Cvetkovich (2012) and others has demonstrated, affect is material, and in the public sphere constitutes an important aspect of community-building or identity in the form of "public feeling." The term 'materiality' therefore gestures at a lot more than 'physicality'. As the 'new materialists' propose, 'materiality' is also meant to indicate the agential nature of flesh, its *material effects* on the world around it.¹

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While on the one hand there are the popular representations of bodily transcendence, online lives and digital existence in films like *The Matrix* series, there is also a genre which foregrounds the *materiality* of human existence: torture porn.² *Saw* (I-VI, at the time of writing), *Saw 3D: The Final Chapter* (usually referred to as *Saw VII*; and I am retaining this usage), *Hostel* (I-III), *Captivity*, *The Human Centipede* (I and II), *Vacancy* (I and II), *Meatholes* (I-V) and numerous other films contain graphic scenes of torture. Not surprisingly, these films have been reviled, attacked and dismissed as sick, perverted and as inspiring violence. (People who work on them are also suspect!). However, as Steve Jones, author of the first full-length book on the genre, points out:

The vast majority of torture porn's detractors have failed to adequately engage with the subgenre's content. Some of the subgenre's most profitable films have been addressed, but those responses are commonly superficial. Rather than dealing with torture porn itself, the subgenre's belittlers instead tend to replicate various prejudices about popular violent cinema, duplicating established rhetorical paradigms. 'Torture porn' misrepresents the films themselves then, but the label has also been utilised to incriminate the subgenre's filmmakers and fans. (2013: 2)

Jones's work also refutes, in great and painstaking (!) detail, the charge that the genre is either 'porn' or a mere exercise in sadism, although the term 'torture porn' remains the most widely circulated label and justifies my use of it in this essay. Since Jones's work is the backdrop to this essay, I do not need to rehearse his arguments about sadism here.

Torture porn is a genre that pays incessant attention to the materiality and vulnerability of the human. It might refer to cultural referents and historical conditions, such as Abu Ghraib, war or incarceration, where too, as I have argued elsewhere, the photographic evidence centres the body as the material and discursive object of East-West relations, international law and Human Rights work (Nayar 2014b).³ The true horror of torture porn is rooted in its apparently casual disposal—if you forgive the droll pun—of the human; but, as I shall argue, it is not really or entirely about the human's natural state of precarity but about a shared precarity that determines moral agency and choice and, more significantly, the

structural conditions of *helplessness* that are aligned with precarity. It is this last that, in my view, makes the torture film compelling social commentary.

In the insistence—via representations of torture—on the materiality of the human, these films offer an instantiation of the theoretical shift away from discourse to materialism in the age of the dominance of the virtual. With the increasing virtualization of everyday lives and the extensive intrusion of the media into our consciousness, there is perhaps, a dematerialization of the human body underway, at least according to the praise-singers of the digital age (Hayles 1999). Yet, concomitant with the dematerialization in theory (the legacy of the “discursive turn”) and practice (online lives), there has been an upsurge of interest in materiality. Labelled the “new materialism” in a 2010 volume, edited by Coole and Frost, this “matter-ialist” turn, as Rosi Braidotti terms it in her essay in the volume, calls for greater attention to embodied ontologies, the interlinked nature of existence, the mutuality of life forms and the agentic nature of both organic and inorganic matter. Human Rights scholars also see the vulnerable *body* as the cornerstone of “rights discourse” (Turner 2006; Anker 2012).

My arguments about horrorist cinema that reveal the vulnerability-helplessness contexts of the suffering human refer primarily to the *Saw* series, which made its first cut in 2004. Alongside an emphasis on vulnerability that all humanity shares, *Saw* forces us to address the conditions of *structural helplessness* that then becomes the focus of the films and our moral imagination. We all accept the vulnerability we share but we are also alerted through these films to the specific material conditions in which this vulnerability is aligned with helplessness. *Saw* is an instantiation of not only the new materialism’s emphasis on *material conditions* of existence, suffering, pain and deprivation, but also on the material effects, or the potential for effect that the material body might have.

My aim is not to conduct a detailed scene-by-scene analysis of *Saw*—that has been done with admirable results by Steve Jones—but rather offer a frame in which to read the torture film so as to

draw out the implications for a new mode of looking at the human in the age of the virtual.

Horrorism, Embodiment and Shared Precarity

Adriana Cavarero employs the term “horrorism” to describe a state of continuous and excruciating pain/suffering. Horrorism is not only about fear but also about repugnance, the inability to move: “gripped by revulsion in the face of a form of violence that appears more inadmissible than death, the body reacts as if it is nailed to the spot” (2011: 8). It is characterized by the “spectacle of disfigurement” (8). Cavarero writes:

The human being as an incarnated being, is here [in horror] offended in the ontological dignity of its being a body ... Death may transform it into a cadaver, but it does not offend its dignity or at any rate does not do so as long as the dead body preserves its figural unity ... (8)

The human body torn apart, argues Cavarero, is what makes contemporary horror, especially in war’s dismembered bodies, “unwatchable” (9). In this scheme, efforts are directed at “nullifying human beings even more than at killing them” (9). Further, horrorism is about underscoring not just the vulnerability of the body but reducing it to the “primary situation of absolute helplessness” (29). “Defenseless and in the power of the other, the helpless person finds himself substantially in a condition of passivity, undergoing violence he can neither flee nor defend against” (30). The scene of torture for Cavarero is a particularly powerful instance of horrorism where vulnerability and helplessness are conjoined as a result of “a series of acts, intentional and planned” (31). The body is objectified “by the reality of pain, on which violence is taking its time about doing its work” (31). The aim is not really death, but to “prolong the suffering inscribed in the *vulnus* [wound, and the root of the word ‘vulnerability’], bringing the vulnerable one to the limit of bearability of pain and offense” (32).

What emerges from the series of traps set by Jigsaw/John Kramer (the character who is the killer in the early *Saw* films), right from the first installment, is the extensibility of pain, and the

exploration of the limits of the human. If, as Elaine Scarry persuasively demonstrated in her classic *The Body in Pain* (1985), pain defines the limits of our existence, *Saw*'s horrorism defines the human almost entirely in terms of pain: the human is "objectified" by the "reality of pain" (Cavarero 31). Horrorist film might then be read as a genre that shifts our notions of what it means to be human away from domains like mind to the *embodied sensorium*. It is the body's vulnerability to one particular sensation—pain—that defines the human. Extreme pain is what causes dehumanization. But *Saw* makes one more addition to this thesis. The wound—*vulnus*—is common to all humans: the question is whether the vulnerability has been conjoined through structural conditions with helplessness.⁴

In other words, *Saw* turns our attention to an ethical question. While it is true that all humans are vulnerable, what are the conditions in which this vulnerability might be yoked to helplessness? War, torture, incarceration, famine, starvation and economic crisis are external conditions where the vulnerability of the human becomes embedded in his or her *helplessness*, as witnessed in totalitarian states, civil war and genocidal conditions. Unable to move, rooted to the spot (literally and/or figuratively), the human is helpless to avert the opening up of his or her *vulnus*. If one Jigsaw can force vulnerable people into positions of helplessness—the immobilized woman in the reverse bear trap (*Saw I*), or the search for the escape code using a candle when bathed in napalm (*Saw I*)—to await unrelenting pain, then it is possible to ponder over *conditions that produce mass helplessness*. A recent example would be that of Boko Haram and the kidnapping of several hundred school girls in Nigeria.

Following Cavarero, I further propose that it is the possibility of not death but disfigurement-dismemberment and the consequent destruction of the "figural unity"—and thus ontological integrity and dignity of the human—that characterize horrorist cinema. Elizabeth Anker has argued that liberal views of the human subject valorize the complete, integrated and "inviolable" human as the person, which paradoxically can be consolidated only by the "specter of abused, profaned and broken bodies" (16). *Saw* not only forces us to ask if

the violated and dismembered human is a person at all but also, paradoxically, seems to propose that the person is one who is willing to lose a limb or two in order to preserve a sense of the self. For example, Michael Marks in *Saw II* must cut out his own eyeball in order to retrieve the key to his spike-filled face mask that has been surgically implanted there. The profaned and broken body lacks a figural unity allegedly intrinsic to human beings. What kind of self exists after a self-induced disfigurement?

Scarry writes of “our recognition of pain [that] enters into our midst as at once something that cannot be denied and something that cannot be confirmed” (13). *Saw* forces every victim in pain to see and recognize another victim in equal if not greater pain. *Saw*’s horrorism is directed toward a shared precarity in the staged setting of the traps. It is in this move that *Saw* proposes a whole new mode of social empathy as a possible foundational text for humanity. Let me elaborate.

Tomie Hahn, writing about ethnographies of performance, argues that “extreme experience . . . affectively precipitates a sense of shared experience between members of a group” (2006: 91). In *Saw*, central to the entire series, is not only the embracing of precarity and pain in order to (i) save oneself, or (ii) to save another, but also a *sharing* of this precarity. What we witness is the *making* of this choice under extreme conditions. The man having the torture device piercing his side as he attempts to keep hold of the ropes that would keep the other victim of Jigsaw alive is warding off making a choice built around his precarity, even as he is aware that his precarity is played off against another fellow-human (who might be a loved one, a colleague, an acquaintance). How much pain is one willing to endure in order to reduce a similar pain for another?

The “precariousness of a body’s generalized condition relies on a conception of the body as fundamentally dependent on, and conditioned by, a sustained and sustainable world,” writes Butler (2009: 34). In the case of films like *Saw*, we witness *mutually constitutive torture*. The sustained and sustainable world that the body depends upon is embodied in another person, who too is

suffering excruciating pain. Butler makes the point that survival depends on the “constitutive sociality of the body” (54). But in the case of *Saw*, this is precisely what is overturned: the constitutive sociality of the body is simply a constitutive *precarity*. The world of *Saw* is one of mutually inflicted pain, but with the *illusion of freedom from pain if one is willing to let the Other die*. Indeed several characters in the films are willing to sacrifice others for their own survival (Xavier Chavez in *Saw II*).⁵ This last, of course, takes the film into the realm of ethics.

Scarry argues that there is an insurmountable distance between the tortured/torturee and the torturer (36). However, as Steve Jones notes, in these films “torturers may be tortured, and those tortured often consequently become torturers” (83). Jones thus elaborates the moral problematics of these films: that there is no easy binary between good victim and bad torturer because these are unstable identities in the film’s narrative. Being a victim seeking to escape necessarily involves inflicting pain on somebody else (Jones 84-6). In *Saw IV*, as Morgan pulls out the spikes jointly impaling both she and her husband Rex, she kills Rex in the process—as she had been warned would happen if she sought to escape the trap. What *Saw* does is to suggest that for a victim to escape, s/he needs to occupy, however briefly, the position of the perpetrator (of torture) or of the indifferent witness. If the only alternative left for Victim 1 is to allow the Other (Victim 2) to bleed to death, to suffer pain or to be simply left without help, then the role of victim can only be played out by occupying the place of an *associate* torturer. In other cases, the films question the morality of insurance policies and corporate codes. For example in *Saw VI*, insurance executive William Easton has to make the decision to save either Addy, a diabetic and family man, or Allen, his [Easton’s] young and healthy secretary. The choice lies between company policy and his own moral codes. Easton chooses finally to save Addy, and the film leaves it unsaid whether this was the right moral choice.

The Other here is the one who, for a period of time, occupies the same barbaric space as the Self (Victim 1). It is not a radically different Other but a fungible Other. The Other is one who *could*

replace you in this space of pain.⁶ The only factor that distinguishes the self from the Other in *Saw*'s world is the slim opportunity and agency given to the self (Victim 1): to escape, to help Victim 2 escape, or to condemn Victim 2 to death. There is no sustainable world in *Saw*. *Saw* exhibits that our material conditions are inextricably linked with those of others, and that any change in the nature of our location, bodies or choices, determine the life and death of somebody else and *vice versa*, just as in real life, the choices we make often determine the life-worlds of others.

Spectacle and the Performance of Material Death

One of the startling features of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay was the choreographed and staged nature of torture: these were performed *for* camera. Indeed, it is possible to propose that the camera was *materially* and *symbolically* integral to the torture because it showed the torturees the record of their humiliation. It is an instrument of the torture process. Stephen Eisenman in *The Abu Ghraib Effect* writes:

The photographs thus stage and record two kinds of desire: first, the supposed, perverse desires of Islamic detainees; and second, the actual, un-repressed desires of the US prison guards who freely wield guns, fists, handcuffs, dogs and leashes. The presence of the one provides ideological justification for the other, the supposed bestiality of the victim justifies the crushing violence of the oppressor. (2007: 101)

Jigsaw makes it clear that the torturees in his games have earned the punishment: each torturee has done something in his or her life that is unacceptable. Eisenman is right to note the *assumption* of the detainees' desire by the torturers in Abu Ghraib. In the case of *Saw*, Jigsaw assumes, judging them not only by his own moral codes (for example, that they do not value life enough) but also sometimes by existing social-legal norms (for example, that they bore witness to a hit-and-run accident), that his victims have committed a wrong. It is Jigsaw's sole assumption of their guilt that drives the game: it is his (and after his death, his collaborators', like Hoffman) ideological justification that gets staged and recorded. The larger point about the staging of the torture, and the admission of guilt on the part of

the tortured, is that the games serve as quasi-confessional: ‘quasi’ because these confessions are extracted under duress and may or may not be legally admissible evidence. But Jigsaw’s theatre of cruel games is a court in itself, even as, in many cases, the chamber functions as the execution cell. Thus, we need to conceptualize *Saw* as staging the interrogation, the confession and the execution. A key shift, however, occurs after *Saw III*. Until then there is a certain ‘morality’, if one may call it that, to Kramer/Jigsaw’s ‘games’: the appreciation of life (a “wake-up call,” as he puts it in *Saw II*), and the sacrifice one is willing to make to ensure one goes on living. With Amanda and Hoffman, successors to Jigsaw, this particular dimension is lost and the tortures become ends in themselves. As Wallis and Aston put it:

While Kramer’s games are ultimately “winnable,” those designed and implemented by his apprentices—Amanda, a former drug addict with a history of violence both against herself and others, and Hoffman, a corrupt and brutal police detective—are designed instead to singularly kill the people they entrap. They thus reflect a nihilistic and sadistic game-playing that contravenes Kramer’s original approach. (2012: 356)

Thus, Jigsaw’s games are not mere nihilistic or sadistic exercises; they serve a purpose beyond just inflicting pain, and are, at least in his view, a pedagogic device where pain is a performative through which the victims arrive at a better sense of them-*selves*. From this point, therefore, it is possible to see the films dwindling into mere sadism-as-spectacle.

There is an additional layer to the spectacle of torture in *Saw*. Jigsaw’s camera stands in for the witness in the torture chambers. Dean Lockwood writes: “Here it is not a question of the spectacle of the damaged or opened body such as we find in the ‘body horror’ of David Cronenberg’s oeuvre, for example, so much as the body suspended in the expectation of assault” (2009: 44).

There is also a second camera that records the first one recording the events. This second camera is of course a stand-in for us, the audience, and we see through this camera’s eye—a strategy to which I shall return in the next section, on spectatorship.

There is, in other words, a double witnessing at work in *Saw*. Jigsaw's camera functions as an archivist-witness, recording the torturee's admissions of guilt, pleas, suffering and in many cases, death. But Jigsaw also ensures that the second (the film's) camera draws the viewer-witness into the meaning-making around torture: the recording of confessions of wrong-doing become the witnessing of the 'crime' or 'deviance' that then justifies, within the diegetic space of the film, the punishment.

One final point about the staging and performance of death in these films is that usually one victim witnesses the death of another. Frederike Offizier, writing about the 'performance' of death, proposes that "in dying the bodily process becomes an act ... in that it is staged and closely observed" and therefore relies on "similar structures as staged theatrical performances of spectator and actor Dying can thus not be absolved from the relation to the Other" (2012: 127). Jigsaw constructs situations where protagonists trapped in his situations must necessarily assert the moral agency to witness the death of the Other victim (sometimes this is also a representation of dying). If witnessing carries with it the burden of someday bearing witness to the unspeakable (Oliver 2004), then *Saw*'s protagonists are to be haunted by not only their moral choice to leave the Other to her/his death, or fail to rescue the Other, but also to forever bear witness to the events that extinguished life/lives. *Saw* stages the performance of dying: it is very often in the death of the Other that Victim 1 discovers how close s/he has come to death as well. Witnessing bestows meaning upon the performance of death of/by the Other. The meaning of the Other's death implies the meaning of life for the first Victim. The suffering and death of the Other is *staged* for the first victim as well, underscoring the fungibility (as noted in the preceding section) of all the inmates in the chambers.

Moral Choice in the Face of Shared Precarity

With the recognition that bodies, fates and ontologies are linked, the *Saw* films also foreground the crisis of moral decision-making. People act out immoral choices when faced with extreme situations

and choose, therefore, only for themselves. Towards the end of *Saw V*, for example, the survivors discover that if they had worked together as a group of five to collect the required pints of blood, they would all have survived. But since every individual was thinking only of him/herself, they ended up killing several of the group so that the two survivors had to ultimately contribute five pints of blood each. Steve Jones proposes that it is their lifelong instincts of selfishness that causes them to abandon the social, and condemn each other (113). Jones notes that much of the moral theme in these films revolves around issues of moral *agency*, and forces us to ponder difficult ethical questions: "Is it ever necessary to take another person's life? To what extent does self-preservation outweigh one's obligation to others? What pressure could lead one to knowingly commit immoral acts?" (117-18).

I return here to the question of shared precarity, but this time to a slightly different line of argument. We have to see moral agency as emerging from a sense of shared precarity, of common threat and of being conjoined in conditions of helplessness—a truth that the protagonists of *Saw* discover. A moral commons is produced within the space of the torture room, but one that is nearly impossible to preserve in the *face* of extreme pain. I of course emphasise 'face' in the Levinasian sense. Victim 1 has to see the face of Victim 2, bloodied, suffering, screaming and eventually dying. His or her ethical limits are tested when brought face-to-face with the suffering Other as a part of the staged theatricality of *Saw*. Boltanski has argued that "having knowledge of suffering points to an obligation to give assistance" (1999: 20), but this obligation is precisely what the *Saw* films interrogate by pointing to the innate selfishness of humanity, especially when faced with unbearable pain and the face of the suffering other.

The victims not only accept their victimhood but also assume agency over it. *Saw*'s protagonists are indeed given a chance to assert their agency within the frames of their victimhood, provided they make a moral choice, to save themselves and condemn their fellow-victim/sufferer. When the victim calls out in *Saw*: "What do you want?" and "What do you want me to do?" to her/his unseen

captor/tormentor, the call gestures at the moral choice given to the victim. The escape from the trap involves not just a clever movement (discovering the key) but also the condemning of another victim to injury and death and a fair amount of self-destruction. This entails, in almost all *Saw* films: the victim undergoing excruciating pain in the process of escaping—inaugurated in *Saw I* with Lawrence Gordon sawing off his foot to Simone hacking off her left arm in *Saw VI*. Here moral agency is not only about condemning somebody else to pain and death but also about the paradoxical situation where the victim must possess and exhibit a willingness to self-destruct as a possible (but never definite) route to survival. It is less the condition of shared precarity than one of shared helplessness that brings the victims face to face: the *Saw* films thrive on the *look* each victim gives the other.

Spectatorship and the Intersubjective Condition

The CCTV features in over forty torture porn films (Jones 105-06). *Saw* was one of the first to deploy the camera as central to the acts of torture. To turn the gaze toward Abu Ghraib quickly, it must be noted that the tortures were performed on inmates *for the camera*, so that the pain and suffering, and the triumphalist gestures of the American torturers, could be documented. In *Saw*, we participate in the spectacle of torture even as we realise that we see somebody else observing and recording the events. Catherine Zimmer has proposed that the video in *Saw* serves to indicate Jigsaw's "organizational methodology to produce and control responses" (2011: 87). Further, the surveillance system is what blurs the distinction between the subject and object of torture (89).⁷

I suggest that the video camera and the CCTV function as instantiations of global mass culture, where the instrument of information gathering and dissemination is intimately connected to mechanisms of torture.⁸ The camera organizes not only the torture of Jigsaw's victims but also serves as a crucial factor in the organization of reception of these tortures: as, for example, when the policeman sees his son's tortures in *Saw II*. The camera, in other words, is used to *extend* the reach of Jigsaw's games and the

sufferings of his victims. The camera converts personal suffering into spectacle. But there is one more dimension to the role of the camera.

I propose, following the work of Judith Butler (2004, 2009) and others, that the torture film heightens our spectatorial sense of subjectivity by bringing home to us not only shared precarity of the people on screen but also by pointing to subjectivity as *intersubjective*. This sense is generated partly due to the position we take as witnesses viewing through the camera the unfolding of the events. But it is also due to the sufferer's position from which the film is made (Jones 61). If it is possible to see our bodies as linked in precarity and helplessness, as *Saw* suggests, then it is possible to envisage an empathy for a similarly-suffering body of the Other. I am here making a massive claim, surely, when I propose a reading of torture films—often dismissed as trashy, sadistic and repulsive—as constructing a new model of human recognition of fellow humans and of “social empathy” (Turner 139).

Following Ballengee's work on the “rhetoric of torture,” it may be suggested that the two cameras are complicit in the production of meaning: that of the victims' guilt and of their deserving punishment (2009: 1). Just as the audience is an active perpetrator in the deaths of the victims in *Untraceable*, we as witnesses to the events of torture in *Saw* are placed under the moral obligation to recognize the vulnerability of any/all victims. This recognition of human vulnerability is part of *Saw*'s politics of life itself: that any of us might be reduced to ‘bare life’ in particular socially induced conditions of helplessness.

Saw forces us to address the linkage between morality and suffering. Jigsaw emphasizes the point throughout that the victims are paying for the errors, crimes or unacceptable behaviour that they have committed in their lives. By making use of extraordinary situations in order to bring home to them the evil of their everyday lives, Jigsaw hopes to make them aware of the preciousness of their lives. He takes the real world—in the diegetic schema of the film—and produces suffering.

Although there is a very clear fictionality to what is being shown, *Saw* does not absolve us, as spectators, from producing our own empathic narrative with the victim in our sights. The question of spectatorship—which I admit, runs the risk of becoming mere voyeurism or worse, a deadening of emotions—is paramount here. Steve Jones proposes that it is the fictionality of the torture sequences, as in horror fiction/film, that “allows audiences to explore moral dilemmas *because* it is fictional and therefore is partially distanced from the immediacy of politico-historical circumstances” (69).

As in the case of Abu Ghraib, where the torturers posed for photographs of themselves and the torturees, in *Saw*, we as spectators of the film become aware of the presence of both perpetrator and victim *in the same frame*.⁹ But the crucial shift from Abu Ghraib’s visuals—where it is impossible to *not* stare at the grinning faces of Lynndie England and the US army torturers—is that *Jigsaw* appears as a masked doll/puppet/camera so that our intensity of recognition stays with the victims. Instead of having our attention *divided* between the face of the perpetrator and the face of the victim as in the case of Abu Ghraib, we give the victims in *Saw* undivided attention. In other words, the films force us to implicate ourselves in the events. “For the viewer, it is not possible to avoid the victims’ pain by focusing attention on the jailors; we are compelled to face the victims and their pain,” writes Möller (2008: 37), an argument that applies equally to us watching *Saw*. Thus the films are intersubjective in this sense as well: we find our subjectivity aligned more with the torturee than with the torturer.¹⁰ It is the expression—representation—of suffering *matter*, produced by specific conditions of helplessness that enables this empathy.

Horrorism, of the *Saw* variety, brings us face-to-face not only with the question of mutually constitutive precarity and vulnerability, but also the structural conditions of helplessness in which humanity might be trapped and is forced to make moral choices in the context of extreme pain. Horrorism of contemporary films like *Saw* foreground the human as (i) the body/matter that can (be made to)

suffer and (ii) rendered helpless due to specific, deliberately created structural conditions like war or incarceration. It is not the vulnerability of human matter that matters, suggests *Saw*, but the helplessness that is aligned with this precarity. The avoidance of *conditions* of helplessness is the need of the hour when entire populations are placed in conditions of extreme pain and suffering. How corporeal matter is subject to conditions of stress is the key focus. I further argue that the politics of life and death that we see in these films reinstates *materialism* and its cognates—affect, senses—as the foundational structures of being human. In a world dominated by simulations and the virtual, the representation of pain forces us to address this specific state of being human, even as we are aware that we are watching *representations*. To be vulnerable is human, and natural. To be helpless is a social condition, and artificial.

Notes

- ¹ A sample of the work of the ‘new materialists’ is available in Coole and Frost (2010).
- ² The term ‘torture porn’ was first used by David Edelstein in his 2006 *New York* article, “Now Playing at Your Local Multiplex: Torture Porn.”
- ³ On these films as reflecting real socio-historical conditions or as political allegories, see Jerod Holyfield (2009), Matt Hills (2011) and Catherine Zimmer (2011).
- ⁴ Cavarero notes that infants, the old, the disabled are *helpless*, while all of us are vulnerable.
- ⁵ In some cases, when they are willing to sacrifice somebody else in order to save their own, they discover that they have inadvertently triggered the death of the ones they were trying to save. (In *Saw III*, when Jeff shoots Joh, he activates the shot-gun-studded collar around his wife’s neck, thus causing the death of the woman he was trying to save.)
- ⁶ This is akin to systemic torture where part of the torture lies in keeping prisoners in enclosures adjacent to the torture chambers from where they can hear the screams of the tortured, and thus be made aware that they are next in line. Thornton’s novel about the Argentinian disappeared, *Imagining Argentina* (1991), foregrounds this theme.
- ⁷ It is within the frame of the torture film that the spectator might vacillate between the position of the victim or that of the sadist torturer. Steve Jones

- however believes that “torture porn narratives are aligned with sufferers’ perspectives much more consistently than they are with torturers” (5).
- ⁸ The film *Untraceable* exploited this to the fullest limit where with each viewer logging on to the ‘Killwithme’ website, the victim’s dying was accelerated. The point was that despite the knowledge that their viewing was responsible for the death, viewers continued to log on.
 - ⁹ The focus on the perpetrators might be the reason why the Colombian painter Botero excised them from his paintings on Abu Ghraib, choosing instead to focus on the victims themselves.
 - ¹⁰ I have elsewhere proposed that the dissemination of Abu Ghraib’s horrific photographs have implicated us in a global witnessing project (Nayar 2014a).

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Daughters of Indianization: Love, Rebellion and Gandhian Imperatives

Papa, a member of the ICS [Indian Civil Service] himself, had said with a pride I was used to hearing in his voice, "Sonali, people like you, especially women like you, are going to Indianize India." It was the day my name had topped the list in the competitive examination for the civil service. He was an emotional man and that day, fifteen years ago, there had been tears in his eyes with the achievement—his as much as mine—of having passed on to me, and only to me of his two daughters, a precious responsibility he had carried, and his firm faith that huge historical change could be peaceful. (*Rich Like Us* 1999: 22)

With this introduction to the lineage of her protagonist-narrator, Nayantara Sahgal prefigures the historical discourse of her novel, *Rich Like Us*. The task that Sonali's father confers on his bureaucrat daughter—that of Indianizing India—iterates the Gandhian edict that like the spiritual-cultural idea of *swaraj* that would return Indianness to independent India, the educated middle-class women of India, particularly, must become the custodians of the moral spirit of the nation. For Sonali, that moment of reconnaissance seems to

come with the Emergency Rule of 1975 imposed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Following her dismissal from the civil service, which was “more to [Sonali] than her home” (28), the novel embarks on an apocalyptic journey into the present state of the nation: the morass of greed and corruption masquerading as progress, the incarceration and murder of political opponents, and the cowardice and opportunism of those in power. These images are, time and again, interrupted by various invocations of “fathers,” real and symbolic, and their legacies of resistance to British rule: “the fiery young patriot of 1942 who had called on steelworkers to strike . . . the young idol on his white horse who had led Indians on a pledge of independence on a river bank in Lahore . . . the man in the loincloth . . .” (198). This self-positioning of the narrator acquires added significance with the recognition that Nayantara Sahgal, the author of the novel, is the niece of Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India; the executor of the Emergency, Indira Gandhi, is his daughter. While the wayward daughter assaults the legacies of the fathers of Independence, the good daughter, standing outside the realm of power, undertakes the task of reconstructing her inheritance largely through the stories and memories of women.

Rich Like Us is one among many novels where individual stories, passing through the predominantly moral consciousness of the narrator, variously seek to engender the paternal figuration of Indianized womanhood. For example, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* by Attia Hossain situates itself within the nationalist moment which constitutes the revivalist centre of *Rich Like Us*. Hossain also plots a narrative of Indianization. From the pre-Partition stability of upper-class Muslim culture, through the challenges of post-Independence reterritorialization, forced migrations and the economics of integration, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* charts a trajectory that places a crisis of feminine identity at the centre of the narrative. That crisis, although remaining unresolved, takes the protagonist, Laila, through the binaries of westernization and Indianization, tradition and modernity, “the greatness of the Islamic world” and the “cold shadows” and “sightless houses” (1961: 301), of the early years of post-Independence to arrive at an ambivalent

space of revulsion and acceptance. What emerges in both novels is not the formation of new identities; rather, the nature of the engagement with hierarchies of gender and class imparts to the Gandhian discourse of Woman, at the same time, expansiveness and uncertainty.

I

The Indianization (as the westernization) of Indian women has been a persistent strain running from the Orientalist period of the 1820s, through the policy of Anglicism, into the latter part of the nationalist upsurge. The gender ethos carved in the “entangled space of colonizers, indigenous literati and middle-class intelligentsia,” in Kumkum Sangari’s words, is predicated on the inherent nature of women (1994: 40). As Sangari explains, the overlap in British and Indian middle-class constructions of Indian women demonstrates consensus in the need for control over women and the desire for schooled women. While orthodox patriarchy claimed women were inherently immoral and therefore in need of improvement, the liberals claimed women were capable of wisdom through chaste and virtuous behavior with the possibility of becoming a pedagogical category themselves. The characterization of women signifies the overall problematic of reform and preservation in middle-class life, of a new self in similitude to Europeans as well as a purifying return to an earlier self as a means of maintaining moral and cultural difference.

Gandhi’s image of Indian womanhood, like the new spiritual idiom of *swaraj*, was integral to the goal of re-Indianizing India. As Partha Chatterjee has shown in his much-cited essay, “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question,” the discourse of nationalism had resolved the “woman question” through the differential construction of home and world. Since the reform period of the late nineteenth century, the home had been designated as the place where the “inner spiritual self” of the Indian people resided, where their “true identity” was secure and maintained (1989: 238). Far from being deemed the inferior companion of man, woman was the indispensable keeper of his non-subjugated self. Gandhi

reconfigured this protectionist discourse of home by the metonymic association of home with nation. Not only would the home come to stand for the anti-imperialist struggle to reclaim indigenous industry and culture, but within it, the nation itself would take precedence, anointing domestic actions with the touch of patriotic purpose: "the women have the right to even question their husbands' authority, if he does not let her take the Swadeshi vow," that is, to practise and promote the use of indigenous commodities (Patel 1988: 380). By symbolically removing the cultural barrier between the home and the world in political struggle, he was able to turn the home into a site of nationalist resistance, so famously critiqued as premature in Tagore's *Ghare Baire* [The Home and the World] both in the economic and socio-cultural sense.

The Gandhian figuration of Woman centred on the singular condition of woman as oppressed and exploited. To women, Gandhi attributed all the qualities associated with *satyagraha*. He preached that women, in suffering silently for many centuries, had learnt fearlessness, patience, *ahimsa* (non-violence), and most importantly, obedience. Woman, abused by religion and superstition, burnt as *sati*, married off as child and made prey to male perversion, cast off as a widow, used as a plaything, knew what it was to suffer. What made woman unique was her capacity to draw strength, even joy from pain: "What can beat the suffering caused by the pangs of labour? . . . She [Woman] can become the leader in *satyagraha*, which does not require the learning that books give but does require the stout heart that comes from suffering and faith" (Gandhi 1976: 29). Woman, having suffered and sacrificed by virtue of being woman, was thus naturally strong, courageous, patient, compassionate and forgiving, and therefore more suited to serve as the morally superior conscience of nation *and* home than men. Woman, as Gandhi never failed to repeat, *was* the true *satyagrahi*, the fighter for truth.¹

Women have affirmed, appropriated and reconstructed the Gandhian construction of 'woman' from a number of positions. Elite women in mainstream nationalist politics, for example, used their position to highlight the role of women as mothers of the nation.

Sarojini Naidu, the first woman President of the Indian National Congress and a prominent member of the Women's Indian Association, gave the following assurance to Congressmen in 1918:

I do not think there need be any apprehension that in granting franchise to Indian womanhood, they will wrench the power belonging to men. Never, never, for we realize that men and women have separate goals and separate destinies and that just as a man can never fulfill the responsibility of a woman, a woman cannot fulfill the responsibility of man. Unless she fulfills the responsibility within her horizon and becomes worthy and strong and brave there can be no fullness or completeness of National life. (qtd. in Agnew 1979: 159)

It is possible, as Radha Kumar suggests, that Naidu's adoption of a supplementary role for women in public life might have been "a device to render women's activism acceptable, by making it appear unthreatening" (1993: 57). With the growing involvement of women in politics, there was a continued emphasis on their presence as desirable mainly to "help improve the moral tone of society and elevate political activity" (Agnew 117). Women who began their political careers in the 1940s and the 1950s, and were in the forefront of such activities well into the 1970s, continued to project the private image to keep intact their credibility as political women.²

Granting women access to the public space of the nation as a logical outcome of recasting both motherhood and home, however, did not allow the experiences of women to shape political culture. Several members of the All India Women's Conference raised questions on behalf of unmarried professional women. At the 1929 meeting of the Conference on Educational Reform, the President, Rani Lalita Kumari Saheba of Mandi, made the following comments on women's education: "Women benefit by the highest education as much as men and it is a narrow view indeed which seeks to fit woman only for the needs of motherhood and domestic life, though it is not argued on parallel lines that man's education should be ordered so as to make him primarily a good father and a good husband" (qtd. in Bald 1983: 8). Voices such as these were, however, silenced by the overpowering surge towards political participation.

The Gandhian ideology of womanhood, with its vocabulary of

sacrifice, self-control and self-purification, has been seen as aimed largely at class harmony and deferring the desire of the marginalized classes for seizing the initiative for *swaraj*.³ The long-term economic effects of this politics of paternalism on working women and lower castes, both championed by Gandhi, testify to their continued subordination:

The Indian Constitution [adopted in 1950] was followed by a series of laws designed to further gender equality—Hindu Marriage Act, Hindu Succession Act, Dowry Prohibition Act, and Equal Remuneration Act. All were government efforts to achieve equality between the sexes. Nevertheless, since the women who had worked closely with the Indian National Congress during the nationalist struggle for independence came from the educated middle- and upper-middle classes, it was not surprising that in the working of these laws, it was these women who tended to benefit more than their illiterate and poor sisters. For example, whereas women professionals and executives and high-level civil servants now receive salaries close to their male colleagues, the women agricultural labourers, who comprise almost 80 percent of the working Indian women, earn only 68 percent of what men receive. A study commissioned by the Indian Council of Social Science Research indicates that the government itself is often in violation of the anti-discrimination laws. (Bald 11)

The above statistics show that organizations like the All India Women's Conference, functioning under the aegis of the nationalist movement, could not represent the interests of women from the subordinate classes. Therefore the argument that the support of leaders like Gandhi for the women's movement generated a certain amount of complacency applies only to the privileged classes. One of the legacies of Gandhianism, Madhu Kishwar suggests, is "the absence of the kind of hostility from men that women's movements in some other parts of the world had to face," which might "account for the lack of sufficient militancy in the women's movement on women's own issues in India" (1985: 1700).

The reason for this brief discussion of Gandhianism is not to re-evaluate Gandhi's role in the Indian women's movement, but rather to re-locate those aspects of the Gandhian mystique that persist as strategies of persuasion in feminist articulations of identity and differentiation. It is not by occlusion of the economic and social content of his gender ideology, but by highlighting morality, ethical

conduct and non-aggressive relationality that this continuity is established. Recognizing that Gandhi's constituency was largely the "urbanised middle-class upper-caste" (Patel 378), evident in the images of chaste, pure heroines of Hindu mythology which he upheld as examples of women's resistance against oppression, the idea of non-violence as an ethics of opposition and maternal experience as defence against sexual objectification remains for Indian women—particularly middle-class, educated women—inimitable factors of decolonization. Gandhi's propagation of asexuality and motherhood at the same time is seen by some Indian feminists as "experiments with changing key aspects of the usual power relationship between men and women" (Kishwar 1755). Feminist historians who have traced the "middle-class patriarchal" roots of Gandhi's gender ideology, and the "puritan-Victorian ideal" (Jayawardena 96), implicit in his call to women "to remain in the house and fight for Swadeshi from the house" (Patel 380), suggest that the power of Gandhi's construction of womanhood lay in "demolishing [woman's] seclusion and her image as a sexual object" (Patel 81). Most recently, Medha Patkar has described her relentless fight against powerful national and international corporations as a Gandhian revival of the ethics of care and justice for the downtrodden (2000: 2). These kinds of rearticulations give mobility to the symbol of Woman. Yet, they also leave unexamined the wider meaning of self-legitimation by drawing upon the reservoir of regenerative ideas, of intrinsic and "real" values.

II

The relationship between women's representation of gender hierarchies and Gandhianism is symptomatic of what Drucilla Cornell describes as "the complex interplay between fantasies of Woman and the material oppression of women" (1995: 76). These fantasies, Cornell explains, are not wishful or hidden; on the contrary, they "give body and weight to our form of life" (77). In *Rich Like Us*, the fragments, contradictions, incompleteness and silences in the stories of the women seem to thwart or resist universalization.

These stories infiltrate the narratives and actions of men in bursts. One woman's elderly father is jailed and tortured by the regime for participating in the wrong kind of march, but she is afraid to jeopardize her own stability by fighting for his release; another fasts and prays relentlessly to cope with her husband's illegal marriage to an Englishwoman whom he brings to live under the same roof; the protagonist's story is also one of passive witnessing, while struggling with loneliness and depression. None actively reinforces or contests the Gandhian symbol of womanhood. However, there is a tension between the moral strain of assigning blame to an amorphous, unidentifiable evil source that appears to have gripped the nation and repeated allusions to a collective blindness and complacency; between the experience of thinking like a woman and reverence for the idealism of the fathers. The novel's crowded setting of generations, histories and places, its frenzied movement from one to the other, also prohibits the sustained development of a critique of gender relations. Rather, the novel as a whole reflects the struggle to conjoin a politics of ethics and care with various levels of identifying and dis-identifying with the symbolization of Woman as conscience of the nation.

Rich Like Us presents the case for a revival of *swaraj* with a differentiation. It is not the story of Sonali, with her anti-colonial lineage, but that of Rose, a cigarette-smoking, scotch-drinking, working-class Englishwoman married to an Indian businessman, that will pass the test of Indianization. Rose, who arrives in India to find her husband, Ram, already married with a young child, is the quintessential Other. Shunned for usurping the legitimate wife's place, bearing no children herself, and creating irreparable fractures in the Indian household, Rose is drawn into "an undeclared war" that ends with her rescuing Ram's wife from the act of suicide (62). This spontaneously humane response to pain plunges her into the centre of her new home. Thus begins a process that not only argues for the validity of ethical and proper conduct but opens the door to an Other India for Rose—removed from Ram's metropolitan empire—with which she establishes solidarity, transcending race, class and nationality.

The first step in Rose's transformation is the realization that her husband's orientalist, cosmopolitan world is a fantasy that shields him from real changes that he fears, distancing him from "his own people's battles" (123). Rose finds herself increasingly alienated from Ram's cultured world of "Moghul miniatures, English poetry and Persian mysticism," as she discovers in the once alien world a space for her own history, her cultural memory (117). In that, Rose herself is made to represent a part of England that is distanced from the centres of power. Her love for India contrasts the upper class "Marcella's adoring India from the Government House" (111). Marcella, with her "neat gold braids" and "silver-sandalled feet," conjures for Rose "pictures in fairy tales of princesses disguised as goose-girls" (74). She comes and goes, organizing plays, parties and exhibitions. Rose treats Marcella's affair with Ram as inevitable: they were "matched . . . by centuries of being in command . . . [by] their grammar" (110). During the war, Ram's business of imported luxuries practically comes to a halt, and Rose must seek assistance from her father-in-law, Lalaji, whose own business was solely in "Indian cotton and wool from his own mills" (116).

The encounter with Lalaji constitutes the second stage in Rose's transformation and may be seen as her experience of "that other India," which Ashish Nandy has defined as "neither pre-modern nor anti-modern but only non-modern. It is the India which has survived the Western onslaught" (75). Through Rose, we come to see her father-in-law's austerity as a Western construction. Rose discovers instead a richness of experience, akin to the Indian cloths that glow with "the romance and colour of a subcontinent," quite unlike the "tame" English cloth good for "tea-and-tennis frocks" (117). At the same time Rose's inclusion in Lalaji's prayer meetings evokes Gandhi's affinity for what Nandy identifies as "the other culture of Britain, and of the West" that stands against "the history and psychology of British colonialism" (49). Lalaji's non-modernity is universalist, transcending social divisions of class, caste and colour. His prayer meetings, "patterned after the Mahatma's, with readings from the Gita, the Koran and the Bible," are peopled by "rich men,

poor men, beggar men,” as well as “all sorts and classes of Hindus and Muslims” (142). Lalaji’s Hinduism, fluid and activist, is shown as more creative than that of people who use religion as protection against what they cannot change.

Rose’s ordinariness is transformed as Lalaji links her name to those critics of the modern West he admires:

C. F. Andrews, college professor and friend of the Mahatma, editor B. G. Horniman who had taken off his English suit, put on a *pyjama-kurta* and joined the civil disobedience marchers in the streets of Bombay, and the English admiral’s daughter, now Miraben, who had given up an admiral’s daughter’s life for an ashram and a spinning wheel. (143)

Lalaji’s non-doctrinaire nationalism grants Rose a space that Ram’s unencumbered modernity cannot; carved out of a personal mythology, it is more than the response to a leader: “I had already joined the Quit India movement before it was called Quit India” (143). Ram seeks to assuage his own guilt and Rose’s restlessness by half-serious references to polygamy and polyandry in Hindu mythology, but it is Lalaji’s respect for Rose’s sense of duty and responsibility that finally helps her deal with her marginality. In fact, after Rose rescues Mona from committing suicide, she not only gains Mona’s trust and friendship, but also Lalaji’s affection and wholehearted apology for his earlier harsh judgements.

Is Rose’s Indianization empowering? Does her non-biological maternity, her inclusive relationality, and her surrender to India, “her exile, her home” (80), open the door to new possibilities for women? Does it, as Rosemary Hennessey asks of the potential of practical ethics in feminist critique, “convey the widespread, persistent, violent operations of misogyny across a range of interconnected social relations” (56)? The irony of Rose’s Indianization is that it remains ambiguous till the end, offering her no explanation for the forces against which she defines her Indianness. Like Sonali’s great grandmother, whom nothing—not even being an abolitionist’s wife—can protect from becoming *sati*, Rose’s connection with the India of freedom fighters, her unflinching loyalty to her acquired family, her passive resistance to the injustices around her, cannot save her

from her corrupt and greedy stepson, who has her brutally murdered by hired killers. Rose reads the signs of her impending death in the changing atmosphere of the house: Ram's terminal illness, Dev's unscrupulous business ventures, her own alcoholism. However, she can do nothing to resist or change the flow of events. She submits to the end planned for her. In fact, in the moment before her horrid death, "she [finds] herself as relaxed as a yogi in her cross-legged posture, her thoughts beautifully clear" (249). With this description of the murder/suicide of Rose, her Indianization seems to have been finally completed.

In the character of Rose and her story as a whole, Sahgal creates what appears to be the very opposite of Sonali's world. Rose's working-class background, her lack of formal education, and her unconventional sexual and domestic choices contrast sharply with the stable and secure life of Sonali "on whom a family's love and pride and a good education and years of training have been lavished" (37). Before meeting Ram, Rose had "never seen a smart expensive London" (41), nor learned about English history and English language, nor discussed "anything about poly-ticks" (66). Rose stands for everything that Sonali is not. Yet, the ways in which her westernized, outlaw household registers national history, while breaking the barriers of mistrust and blame, give to Sonali's intellectual conundrum an emotional unravelling, both confirming and extending the lineage that she attempts to trace.

III

Sunlight on a Broken Column opens with two overlapping scenarios between which Hossain places her novel, foregrounding a trajectory from solidity to crisis followed at once by an uncertain yet steadfast revival of Gandhian ideology:

- (i) The day my aunt Abida moved from the zenana into the guest-room off the corridor that led to the men's wing of the house, within the call of her father's room, we knew Baba Jan had not much longer to live.

(ii) "Child, put away that book. Those insect letters will eat away your eyes". . . "Bua, Bua," I said, hugging her. "These books will be garlands of gold round my neck." (1961: 17)

The death of the grand old patriarch and the education of the protagonist, Laila, in the aftermath of the passing of the old order, provide the backdrop for Attia Hossain's exploration of the meaning of women's emancipation in the newly-liberated Indian nation. Through her narrator's struggle for a sense of belonging during the turbulent years following the independence and partition of India, Hossain engenders the political realities of war, displacement and personal loss. How well Laila will be able to locate herself in the new nation depends on where the nation places her as a woman, a Muslim and an Indian. As principal witness and principal critic, Laila writes her narrative through the lens of patriotism, not nationalism, as the authentic political culture of India and the agenda of enlightened womanhood.

The dominant trends in women's writing of the 1950s and the 1960s evolve mainly from the concerns with housing the self or soul in a space that is "secular and universal" and at the same time "essentially Indian" (Tharu and Lalitha 1993: 91). Tharu and Lalitha contend that during this period the voices of national responsibility "lose all marks of social difference" (69), and the travails of the "solitary heroine" (91) come to be situated in "the human condition itself" (92). The position from which Laila perceives the cultural conjuncture of Partition, diminishing landlord power, rising communalism, and the fragmentation and liberalization of the *zenana* raises "the one spector" that, in Marshall Berman's words, "really haunts the modern ruling class, and that really endangers the world it has created in its own image, . . . [one] that traditional elites (and for that matter, traditional masses), have always longed for: prolonged social stability" (1982: 95). The ideological apparatus of *zenana* civility with its traditional encodings of social relationships cannot explain new alliances between Hindu businessmen, Muslim landlords and religious separatists or the deep prejudices among elite women, concealed in their "doing good" through "government-approved committee[s] for social service and women's welfare" (*Sunlight*

302). In the same way, Laila's vision overlooks the older arrangements of social forces that had sustained interlocking systems of exploitation and oppression.

Apart from the context of Partition, where fiercely defended economic and political interests of "different nationalisms" and "different families" confront one another, the novel's most overt statement on patriotism is directed at the nature of women's participation in the resistance to British rule. Akin to love of the nation without the narrow desire of possession and confrontation, patriotism is associated with benevolence, humanity and compassion.⁴

Among Laila's four friends, Nita Chatterjee is described as the "strongest character," with a genuine commitment to fighting British imperialism in an "organized and disciplined" manner, using "the kind of weapons that will not misfire" (*Sunlight* 124). It is important that Nita categorically differentiates her position from "that stupid cousin of [hers] who tried to shoot some pompous official and was nearly hanged for his pains" (124). The underlying reference is that of the revolutionary terrorist movements of Bengal and Punjab. It was strongly opposed by Gandhi who saw it as a passing phase among the younger generation, driven to it by a sense of helplessness and humiliation.⁵ The description of effective political methods is a critical response to the participation of women in terrorist actions: in February 1922, Bina Das attempted to shoot the governor of Bengal, Sir Stanley Jackson, and was sentenced to nine years rigorous imprisonment; in December 1931, two Bengali girls, Shanti Ghosh and Suniti Chaudhary, shot dead the District Magistrate of Tipper and were sentenced to life imprisonment; in September 1932, Pritilata Wadadar, a student of Dacca University in East Bengal (now Bangladesh), bombed an European club, and was found dead later, having poisoned herself with cyanide (Kumar 85-8). Nita's opposition to these anti-imperialistic tactics as "heroic but misguided" reflects the oscillation between the new image of women forged in struggle and the *zenana* civility of Laila's upbringing.⁶

In spite of her opposition to the tactics of violence, Nita's conduct

does not measure up to the ideal form of resistance that Gandhi describes as “an inborn gentleness and desire to do the opponent good” (qtd. in Andrews 1930: 279). Always arguing, always looking for social significance in every comment, always confronting her friends on their political opinions, Nita stands in contrast to the Anglo-Indian Joan, in whom Hossain places a civility that is “conscientious, simple and generous”; Joan’s “weakness in arguments came from the very quality that gave her personal strength. She did not hate as we did. She did not hate Indians as we hated the British; she merely considered them a race apart” (*Sunlight* 127). Whereas Nita’s aggressive criticism provoked the ire of her friends, making them angry and defensive, Joan “blunted the sharp points of prejudice” and “provided reason for respect” (127).

Hossain’s treatment of sexuality is a deeply submerged vein, glimpsed metaphorically in the rebirth of the nation. Laila reunites with her cousin, Asad, seven years after her husband’s death and four years after the declaration of Independence, in the cold, decaying surroundings of her erstwhile home. It is perhaps no coincidence that the person who extends solace and refuge to Laila is Asad. He looks “like a monk” and his life of dedicated action is “as indestructible as the cause” (318). His dreams live on in the world of dislocations, giving apposite reply to those who mocked his belief that he would “drive [the English] away with Truth and Non-Violence” (102). Laila undertakes the responsibility of sealing the relationship with platonic fervor that, in spite of its ambiguity, remains the final image of the text. The critical possibilities released by the educated, thinking protagonist’s awareness of the class and communal politics of her feudal ancestry are folded back into the more forcefully presented argument for dignified and respectable womanhood.

In both *Rich Like Us* and *Sunlight On A Broken Column*, written more than thirty years apart, the question of speaking the nation from the position of the Other (English, Anglo-Indian, Muslim and Woman) approaches the question of ethics primarily through a genderized poetics. That such a poetics necessarily revolves around a non-biological maternal body, split from the nation, itself

maternalized, resisting appropriation, objectification and violence, is not accidental but a sign of the struggle to link feminine difference with the national symbolization of Woman. While both novels centre the narrative on the educated and introspective female protagonists, granting emotive and historical validity to their account of the nation, they stall at reimagining the nation as a challenge to the hierarchies of gender and class. Their “unhoming” by the Indian nation is spoken of as a lament, a combination of nostalgia and righteous unmasking. The Indianized daughters of independence seek to close the fissures between the Gandhian definition of nation as spiritual home and the materiality of home as national (and domestic) space; a critique of this space from the standpoint of struggle and rebellion remains outside the grammar of their critique.

Notes

- ¹ The emphasis on purity had interesting class implications for women who answered his call. Gandhi declared that women’s issues must not revolve around women only, but should be concerned with rebuilding the whole society. For that, “the few educated women we have in India will have to descend from their western heights and come down to India’s plains. . . . (qtd. in Kishwar 1694). On the other hand, when prostitutes of Barisal organized under the Congress banner to undertake social work like helping the poor, nursing the sick, spreading education among themselves and involving other organizations involved in *satyagraha*, Gandhi declined to give them Congress membership: “None could officiate at the altar of *swaraj* who did not approach it with pure hands and a pure heart” (1693).
- ² In the foreword to the posthumously edited *Sucheta: An Unfinished Autobiography*, Acharya Kripalini, Sucheta’s husband, writes about the courage, dedication, and simplicity with which Sucheta performed her public duties as MLA, MP, and then as the Chief Minister of the state of Uttar Pradesh: “Many of her qualities I have described above are those of an ideal Hindu wife and a house-holder. However, in her case, they were practised along with hard and strenuous public activity—periodically going to jail before independence and, after it... conducting the affairs of the largest State in the Indian Union as Minister and as Chief Minister, organizing and managing a number of charitable and philanthropic institutions. Thus, she combined in herself the old virtues of Indian wife and the new virtue of working for the freedom of the nation and the service of its starving millions” (1978: xxiii).

- ³ See Amin, "Gandhi as Mahatma," for a fascinating discussion on how political consciousness and political action were translated by Gandhianism into spiritual commandments for the *sadharan janta* or common people (1988: 305).
- ⁴ Simon During places the meaning of the word in the eighteenth-century political debate between the Tories and the Whigs. In the Tory Bolingbroke's book, During notes, "a patriot is defined in a classical sense by his love of country rather than personal ambition [P]atriotism is given value in an anti-statist, anti-economist (though not anti-mercantile), anti-urban discourse. A patriot is neither an 'enthusiast' concerned with his or her inner life and relation to God, nor an urbanite interested in money and civility" (1990: 141).
- ⁵ Appadorai writes that Gandhi's stress on non-violence had made terrorism appear an illness that had to be remedied (1971: 34).
- ⁶ Laila's sense of the *zenana* as a site of resistance to civilization becomes stronger in the face of its usurpation by a new group of brocaded and bejewelled women, who are "prouder of Western culture than those born into it and more critical of eastern culture than those outside it" (*Sunlight* 129). The *zenana* of the past, in spite of its austere and regimented code of conduct, stands out in Laila's memory as a space that concealed a genuine spirit of tolerance and service within its numerous folds of propriety. Janaki Nair discusses how the *zenana* was used by the "daughters of empire" in their service to the imperialist project. The *zenana* as a site of resistance to the civilizing mission was corroborated and endorsed by the national patriarchy itself. Predominantly Hindu and Gandhian, this stream in nationalist discourse found expression in the work of Margaret Noble, Annie Besant and Margaret Cousins who declared that "woman alone represented that unbroken continuity with a precolonial past through her residence in that uncolonized space, the *zenana*" (Nair 1990: 23).

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**Deconstructing History and Memory:
Transnational Pasts and Futures in
Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and
*Sea of Poppies***

This paper reads Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies* as signalling a determined attempt at both forcefully resisting and dismantling cultural constructions of nation, history and identity that appear socially untenable and rigidly mono-cultural. It argues that the social and spatial experiences of Ghosh's main characters – who in both novels recreate and perform their lives in transnational but also multicultural terms – signal a critical departure from the emotional and identitarian anchor represented by fixed national and identity constructs, such as the ones advocated, for instance, by current British national politics. The complex socio-historical and political dynamics at work in Ghosh's novels deal primarily with colonialism but also with neo-colonialism, transnationalism and

border-crossing. This paper examines how Ghosh's novels expose as untenable what the authors of *Diaspora and Transnationalism* have indicated as the "relatively stable, lasting and dense set of ties reaching beyond and across borders of sovereign states" (Bauböck and Faist 2010: 13).

Ghosh's works engage with transnationalism in their representation of unstable and conflicting aspects of contextual colonial and post-colonial histories and identities that go beyond ideas of mimicry, hybridity and diaspora. The following analysis of *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies* will show how transformation and change are key components to their narratives and characters. So are cultural confluence and diversity. Most importantly, I wish to argue that sea-crossing becomes a transgressive practice in both novels enabling forms of communal dissidence and resistance. Instead of focusing on metaphors which have already been abundantly examined by recent criticism (the poppy metaphor, for instance), I give prominence to the crucial sea/history currents metaphor these texts recurrently return to, and suggest that it is strategically used by Ghosh to inhabit both the disordered spaces of his characters' often untold, traumatic colonial pasts and more recent and violent postcolonial histories of India. As the first section of this article illustrates, in both *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies*, the sea becomes symbolic of past ideological turbulence and resistance, cultural transition and change. Yet, as I argue in the second section, it also functions simultaneously as a discursive cultural circuit engendering fresh post-colonial approaches to caste and class relations.

Through the Waves: Intermingling and Conflicting Histories and Identities

Narratives of crossings are constitutive of *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies*. The former is an account of multiple experiences of traumatic socio-cultural, geographical and political change, revolving most prominently around the Morichjhapi region (west Bengal) and its infamously and relatively unknown massacre during 1978-9. Its story is narrated through a framework of transformative

voyages from India, the United States and within Bangladesh undertaken by its protagonists Kanai Dutt, whose involvement with translation makes him a subject who is always-already crossing over cultures; Piyali Roy, whose academic research interest in dolphins' migration ends up by transgressing both geographical and cultural borders; Saar Nirmal Bose, a self-declared Marxist activist and poet whose personal journey, involving his own death, functions as the story's catalyser, of which he becomes the first person narrator; and Fokir, a young and experienced fisherman of the Sundarban archipelago, whose strong sense of territorial and cultural belonging proves crucial to Piya's research yet whose cultural trespassing overcomes by far his limitations in speaking the English language.

Similarly, and against the backdrop of the Opium Wars, *Sea of Poppies* sees its protagonists embarked on a fateful journey aboard the schooner Ibis, a former British slaving ship refitted to transport indentured labour to Mauritius. The novel voices both subaltern and elite narratives of colonial hegemony and exploitation. Amongst its main characters are the story narrator Deeti, an impoverished high-caste Hindu and widow of an opium factory worker and addict; Zachary Reid, the mixed race schooner's foreman who keeps his origins a secret; the bankrupt Raja, Neel Halder, subservient to and victim of British power politics, who befriends a mixed race opium-addict convict, Ah Fatt; Paulette, the orphaned daughter of a French botanist escaping from her British foster parents; and her childhood Muslim friend Jodu, the son of her wet nurse and a lascar on the Ibis. The liveliness and originality of each of these characters is formally rendered through the use of a plurality of idioms and dialects that "creates a vivid sense of living voices as well as the linguistic resourcefulness of people in diaspora" (Chew 2008).

As the novels' synopses already indicate, the unfolding of the (hi)stories under examination cannot be detached from occurrences of wider national conflict and social turbulence, nor can they exclude instances of cultural and political confluence that are constantly associated with the transformative and regenerating power of water in its many forms (mainly as river/sea). It is no coincidence that

Ghosh makes use of what Franco Moretti suggests as one of the most recurring metaphors in the history of cultural analysis: the wave. However, Ghosh's utilization of the wave trope signals a much more disruptive function in these novels than Moretti would allow. According to Moretti, contrarily to the tree metaphor which "describes the passage from unity to diversity," the wave "observes uniformity engulfing an initial diversity," and while trees need "geographical *discontinuity*" he argues that "waves dislike barriers, and thrive on geographical *continuity*" (2000: 67). Problematically however, as the following analysis demonstrates, instead of "engulfing" diversity, Ghosh's waves perform the role of bearers and initiators of cultural diversity and change, as well as swallowers of uniform and normative ways of looking at history and nation.

The structured form of Ghosh's novels, for instance, explicitly acknowledges the crucial significance of wave-currents, as both novels carry section titles such as "The Wave," "The Flood," "Land," "River" and "Sea". It is also significant that Ghosh's storytelling, more prominently in *The Hungry Tide*, strives to follow the irregular rhythm of the tide as Piya and Kanai's stories retreat unevenly like ebb ("bhata," *Hungry Tide* 2005: 343; henceforth *HT*) only to re-emerge in subsequent sections, like tide-flows; Kanai's act of reading is also wave-like in its form as it is italicized in the text; while in *Sea of Poppies* – where narration also leaps from character to character following the retreating movement of the sea – stories intermingle and merge through diverse characters, whose connections are disclosed gradually throughout. Furthermore, the very title of *The Hungry Tide* alludes to the crucial transforming influence of the "changing," "hungry" tide and the "play of tides" (203, 311) on the protagonists' lives, one that disrupts permanence of territory and self ("the currents and tides that flowed around it [Lusibari] were too powerful to permit the construction of permanent structures"; the killing "tidal wave sweeping in from the sea; everything in its path disappeared as it came thundering towards them" [*HT* 37, 383]). More significantly, their characters' spatial identity as "bhatir desh" (lit. "the tide country") further entails the

oxymoronic proposition of being a nation in constant topographical reconfiguration, a palimpsest country (See *HT* 69, 77):

But here, in the tide country, transformation is the rule of life: rivers stray from week to week and islands are made and unmade in days. [...] nothing escapes the maw of the tides; everything is ground to fine silt, becomes something else. (*HT* 224-5)¹

The symbolism and rhetoric of wave potency in all its destructive and regenerating forms acts in these works as a strategic modifier of the temporal, spatial and psychological chronology of their characters' journeys. Tidal change also affects the route and history of the schooner Ibis in *Sea of Poppies* (2008: 343; henceforth *SoP*). In conjunction with the tide/wave symbolism, Ghosh chooses this bird (the Egyptian God of Wisdom, *Thoth*) to represent the Ibis as a "vehicle of transformation," an identitarian one. Its influence on the lives of its passengers is linked with the Ibis' alchemic associations with transmutation and the specific lunar functions—its curved beak resembling the crescent shape of the Moon—that control time and tide cycles. The Ibis has also a messenger function (similar to the Greek God *Hermes*) that allows it to break through the boundaries of plural spaces, including the underworld: "The Ibis was not a ship like any other; in *her* inward reality she was *a vehicle of transformation*, travelling through the mists of illusion towards the elusive, ever-receding landfall that was Truth" (*SoP*, 423; emphasis mine).²

For the main characters of *Sea of Poppies*, socio-cultural transformation is performed through the Ibis' colonial journey across the "Kala-Pani" or "The Black Water,"³ which also involves a process of colonial subjectification. Dispossessing its prisoner-subjects of any meaningful agency, Ghosh's novel makes subalternity a necessary condition for transport aboard the Ibis. Indeed, the Ibis' journey to the West effectively endangers both the identities and personal histories of its transportees, particularly its Empire-subject and indentured *girmitiyas*, whose very identities undergo a process of colonial "naturalization" when their names get registered onboard.⁴ As Hindus, they also fear losing caste and risk social

excommunication through the physical act of border-crossing, as Mr Burnham reminds his “gomusta” (who, as a transgender, himself is transgressing gender stereotypes): “Are you not afraid of losing caste? Won’t your Gentoo brethren ban you from their midst for crossing the Black Water?” (*SoP* 215).

Apart from the *girmityas*, two other subaltern subjects, marginalized as criminals, go through transformative journeys while being transported on the Ibis: one is an Indian Raja-turned forgerer whose previously privileged connections with British colonial and opium magnate Mr Burham eventually ruin him, and the other a convict “from across the sea,” an *afeemkhor* whose hybridity is signalled by his unfixed nationality as “neither Dan nor Fanqui” (*SoP* 314, 379).⁵ While the novel seems to compassionately denounce them both, “the skeletal Easterner and this tattooed criminal” (*SoP* 363), as conscious participants in and beneficiaries of the colonial opium trade⁶ both are illustrative of the monstrous potency of colonial exploitation, which is also physically inscribed — though temporarily, as it eventually washes away — on their bodies: on the Raja’s tattooed forehead, needled with the word “forgerer” (*SoP* 292),⁷ the place (Alipore) and date of its condemnation (1838), and in Ah Fatt’s opium-consumed body. Through these characters Ghosh forcefully introduces another potent metaphor which affects both personal and national histories. It has to be noted however, that the devastating effects of opium consumption appear earlier in the novel through the character of Deeti’s husband Hukam Singh, a crippled and exploited labourer in the British-owned Opium factory in Ghazipur who eventually dies from opium addiction. Opium consumption in the novel is thus strongly metaphorical for imperialistic exploitation and consumption, as the following French vignette about the British’s interests in the Opium Wars vividly suggests:



A French cartoon shows a British Admiral forcing opium down the throat of a Chinese person.

The British Empire, Vol. 2, Orbis 1979.

Ghosh's novel brings to memory an often neglected aspect of the history of colonialism that this article also wishes to highlight, that the British colonial enterprise was largely financed by drug crops such as opium.⁸ Both the water-space and ideology of Empire are tainted in *Sea of Poppies* by the colonial exploitative system nurtured by slavery, war and corruption. The etched date on Neel's forehead is, for instance, a cynical reminder that despite the Slavery Abolition Act of 1 August 1838 in the British Empire, near-slaves were still transported on the *Ibis*, though the schooner is described as an "old slave-ship" and the novel's main character Zachary Reid is said to be "the son of a Maryland freedwoman" (*SoP* 10). The exploitation of coolies and *girmitiyas* is in fact a residual form of slavery as Monsieur d'Epinay, a French plantation owner in the novel reminds Zachary: "Tell Mr Burnham that I need men. Now that we may no longer have slaves in Mauritius, I must have coolies, or I am doomed" (*SoP* 21). Ghosh's novel urges us to remember that together with the production of precious metals and other "Oriental luxuries" such as pepper and spices from East and South Asia in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the commercialization of human labour was the cardinal point around which a global imperial and capital-based economy developed.

Distinctively, *Sea of Poppies* examines British colonialism as a culture-violating and crossing venture, offering Ghosh a chance to intervene critically and question its ideology and epistemology.

Claire Chambers has already pointed out that “at the heart of Ghosh’s corpus is the contention that knowledge is produced by structures of dominance, particularly the military, economic and epistemic strategies of colonialism. His main focus is the impact that Western paradigms of knowledge have had and continue to have on India” (2006: 1).

Sea of Poppies performs a critique of the British colonial ideology through an account of the First Opium War between the British Empire and China (1839-42) that appears unfavourable to the eventually victorious British. It demonstrates how such victory is the result of drug-based capitalism, hegemonic ideologies, colonial greed and cultural prejudice, or in the words of Ghosh’s critique-empowered and Dickensian-like character Captain Chillingworth – who is ironically British – “another round of butchery”:

“‘Good’, sir?’ said Captain Chillingworth, struggling to pull himself upright in his chair. ‘I am not sure whose good you mean, theirs or ours? [...]’ ‘The truth is, sir, that men do what their power permits them to do. We are no different from the Pharaohs or the Mongols: the difference is only that *when we kill people we feel compelled to pretend that it is for some higher cause. It is this pretence of virtue, I promise you, that will never be forgiven by history.*’ (SoP 262; emphasis mine)

Ghosh’s novel is here unforgiving in its powerful critique from within the epistemic narrative used to justify British colonialism as an allegedly benevolent, divine and civilizing mission. Strategically, the critique of this enlightened humanism as an unevenly applied British liberalism intervenes earlier in the novel through the patronising words of the British judge to the condemned Raja who has failed to discharge

‘that sacred trust that charges us to instruct the natives of this land in the laws and usages that govern the conduct of civilized nations’ [...] a similar obligation, imposed by the Almighty himself, on those whom he had chosen to burden with the welfare of such races as were still in the infancy of civilization? (SoP 236-7)

In its verbosity and superfluous reverberation, this passage, reminiscent of Macaulay, offers a highly ironic caricature of the recurrent rhetoric of British colonialism. To this formal display of

British rhetoric by a British agent, Ghosh adds another original element. The novel entails the lucid awareness that the alleged victims of colonialism as well as their colonizers both share of and participate in the colonial process. The novel's critique of colonialism thus avoids accusations of unilaterality or straightforwardness. Significantly, Ghosh entitles an elite subject to voice the absurd and contradictory rhetoric of colonial justice. In the novel, this comes across through Neel's pondered reflections upon the judge's comment on "English law, the very foundation of which lies in the belief that all are equal who appear before it":

There was something about this that seemed so absurd to Neel that he had to drop his head for fear of betraying a smile: for if his presence in the dock proved anything at all, it was surely the opposite of the principle of equality so forcefully enunciated by the judge? In the course of his trial it had become almost laughably obvious to Neel that in this system of justice it was the English themselves – Mr Burnham and his ilk – who were exempt from the law as it applied to others. (*SoP* 238-9)

The key problem the above passage from *Sea of Poppies* exposes is the hypocrisy of British colonial juridical policies revealed by their refusal to justly apply their humanist principles of equality⁹ to their culturally diverse subjects.

In a different way, in *The Hungry Tide* the more recently post-colonial history of *Morichjhāpi*'s uprising in 1978-9 and the subsequent massacre of its dispossessed Hindu refugees ("the bastuhara" 254) by a left-wing Indian government function more explicitly as an indictment of Indian-bred colonialism. Through the powerful analogy of a surging tide that accompanies the narrative to its climax, the novel suggests that subaltern dissent at peripheral level can be radical and effective (though it also suggests failure in achieving certain of its goals).

In a recent talk about "Public Power in the Age of Empire," Arundhati Roy specifies that she hopes

it's not presumptuous to assume that the only thing that is worth discussing seriously is the power of a dissenting public. Radical change cannot and will not be negotiated by governments; it can only be enforced by people. By the public. A public who can link hands across national borders. A public which disagrees with

the very concept of empire. (2004)

A similar group of resisting people, who both succumb and survive to tidal insurgence, inhabits the postcolonial geographies of Ghosh's novel. The constantly changing topography of the tide-bound area of the Sundarbans thus informs not only the post-partition geography of colonial resettlement for the story's refugees but also its most recent history. Ghosh's geographical narratives also link in with contemporary environmental and worldwide conservation projects such as the WWF Tiger Protection Programme and current threats of forest extinction because of rising sea levels due to climate change. *The Hungry Tide* connects in particular the post-colonial histories of the Sundarbans with the politics of colonial and current governmental "preservation" projects and their often unconditional negotiations between human cost and habitat protection. As Ghosh suggests in the Author's Note, the government's suspicious investment in these projects is exposed in a source about *Morichjhāpi*'s uprising. Ghosh's note informs the reader that:

The state government was not disposed to tolerate such settlement, stating that the refugees were 'in unauthorised occupation of Marichjhapi which is a part of the Sundarbans Government Reserve Forest violating thereby the Forest Acts' (Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Department 1979). It is debatable whether the CPM placed primacy on ecology or merely feared this might be a precedent for an unmanageable refugee influx with consequent loss of political support. (Mallick 1999: 107)

One way in which the novel addresses this point (that is, being a crucial part of the colonial process) is through the creation of highly hybrid textualities, characters, times and spaces mostly privileging subversive narratives of crossing. Inter-textually, the mythopoeic resonance of Indian and world literature in both *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies* gives prominence to the cultural plurality of crucial moments of spatio-temporal and cultural crossing. Indeed, *The Hungry Tide* textually unfolds through intermingled links to Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, Indian poetry, 17th century missionary travel accounts, Nirmal's "misgendered

Scheherazade” tales (*HT* 148) and trance-like passages as in Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Various travel narratives equally criss-cross *Sea of Poppies*, amongst which the most prominent are the Hindu epics of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, the *Puranas*, but also the 1592 anonymously published volume, *Journey to the West*, usually attributed to the Chinese writer Wu Ch’eng-en. The *Ramayana* and *Journey to the West* in particular, refer to illustrious monkey figures, respectively the god Hanuman (also known as the “Lord of Crossings” – *SoP* 341) and the Stone Monkey King, whose trans-border adventures celebrate experiences of dislocation, crossing of national boundaries and self-discovery. Amongst the unveiled textual references in the text, one which allows a reading in reverse, especially in terms of colonialism, is Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899).

I want to point out that these inter-textual narrative journeys are all connected through experiences of crossings that eschew straightforwardness while appearing instead importantly problematic, conflict-ridden and transformational.¹⁰ Similarly, as in the above mentioned intertexts, Ghosh reminds us that “here, in the tide country, transformation is the rule of life” (*HT* 224). It is also the motivation behind the Marxist character Nirmal and his personal transformative connection with the tide country through Rilke, as he himself explains: “It was as if the whole tide country were speaking in the voice of the Poet: ‘life is lived in transformation’” (*HT* 225). Even if touched upon only slightly, the very physical and psychologically traumatic experience of Partition (resulting in the artificial birth of Pakistan), is in itself one of the most transformative national events in the novel. In a country whose mutability and tendency to change are integral to its topographical formation, as the territorial “boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable” (*HT* 7), the idea of confluence introduced by Ghosh, or “*mohona*” in the local language¹¹ encourages a positive approach—even perhaps a resolution—to cultural and biological intermingling, one that privileges diversity and variety proliferation over rigid ideas of national exclusiveness and racial purity as the following analysis of some of the novels’ main characters will show.

Border Crossings: Identities and Characters' Transformations

The crossing of Kala-Pani is not simply an act of colonial punishment and exploitation, but one of severance of social and personal ties for the transportees, whose journey washes out their past while reconfiguring novel identities for them: "When you step on that ship, to go across the Black Water, you and your fellow transportees will become a brotherhood of your own: you will be your own village, your own family, your own caste" (*SoP* 314). While it is noteworthy that the condition of being an outcast is here rendered through a caste-derived language (implying that the result of crossing will eventually recreate a substitute, a "Kalapani" caste), it is also significant that both in *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies* Ghosh has given space to casteless dimensions, such as the "badabon" revolutionary island of Morichjhapi, a utopian and casteless space (*HT* 51-2, 118, 172, 278-9), and the caste-free world of the Ibis:

On a boat of pilgrims, no one can lose caste and everyone is the same: it's like taking a boat to the temple of Jagannath, in Puri. From now on, and forever afterwards, we will all be ship-siblings – jaház-bhais and jaház-bahens – to each other. There'll be no differences between us. (*SoP* 356)

Both novels provide abundant instances of Ghosh's critique of extremely rigid and stratified caste-regulated societies. What strikingly unites Ghosh's characters' experience of migrancy with contemporary tragedies of border crossings is their desperate lack of choice and the awareness that border crossing inevitably transforms lives.¹²

The crisscrossing of boundaries and the attempted reconfigurations of national identities in these texts also appear problematic, especially if we assume the idea of transnationalism to ultimately reinforce a nationalist agenda (Khan 2009: 5). Indeed, as John McLeod has pointed out, while departing from fixed notions of identity and emotional attachment, transnationalism also seems to simultaneously reinforce a persistent agency of nation: "As a tool of contemporary sociological and (increasingly) cultural critique, transnationalism is important in that it recognizes the continuing

agency of the nation-state in a changing global environment where national borders are endlessly crossed but never fully broken" (2002: 58).

Despite this impossibility of abandoning national discourse altogether, Ghosh's interrogations and problematization of national boundaries remain crucial to the postcolonial debate. Ghosh's characters in *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies*, especially Piya and Paulette respectively, reinforce a positive and nostalgia-free idea of a "portability of national identity" among migrants (including diasporic subjects) which combines with "a tendency towards claiming membership in more than one place" (Sassen 1998). Having criss-crossed several countries and cultures, both Piya and Paulette have no strong sense of territorial belonging with their national affiliations (Canada and France); they end up inhabiting plural spaces (US, India, Bangladesh) and easily adapting to their adopted and culturally diverse environments. While Piya has been formed and educated in America, she has little difficulty in not only adjusting to India, but to eventually calling it "home." Responding, at the end of the novel, to Nilima's question to whether she would mind sharing the house with Kanai in the future, Piya replies, smiling: "Not at all. In fact it'll be good to have him home." [...] "You know Nilima," she said at last, "for me, home is where the Orcaella are, so there's no reason why this couldn't be it" (HT 400). Piya's words here significantly signal her strong detachment from an unproductive conception of nationhood that is anchored to territorial and cultural belonging. As for the younger character of Paulette, her reply to Halder's concerned discovery about her *girmitiya* impersonation in *Sea of Poppies* demonstrates her surprisingly mature and open-minded approach to cultural identity, standing in favour of plurality (and its truthfulness) while condemning hegemonic approaches to both gender and identity that restrict agency and freedom: "There is nothing untrue about the person who stands here. Is it forbidden for a human being to manifest themselves in many different aspects?" (SoP 497). As Ghosh says in an interview:

This focus on identity is not only untrue, in the sense that . . . all of us do have multiple identities... I also think that it is deeply, deeply destructive . . . , it creates a type of narcissistic culture where everybody is focused not upon the idea of the collective or the public good but upon . . . issues of pride, of boosting their own pride or issues of self-esteem, and I think it's a catastrophic thing that this kind of what you could call a sort of political narcissism has occurred at this particular moment when we, not just as a country but we as a species, really face a species-level threat from climate change. (Ghose 2013)

Apart from stressing an “untruthful” side to the social perception of identity, Ghosh’s novels and thoughts remind us – in the words of Steven Vertovec – that transnationalism should be understood as entailing the very ontology of crossing:

the literature on transnationalism generally underscores the fact that large numbers of people now live in social worlds that are stretched between, or dually located in, physical places and communities in two or more nation-states. Ulf Hannerz (1996), for instance, discusses people who live in diverse ‘habitats of meaning’ that are not territorially restricted. The experiences gathered in these multiple habitats accumulate to comprise people’s cultural repertoires, which in turn influence the construction of identity or indeed multiple identities. (2001: 576-578)

Similar to Vertovec, Claire Chambers argues more specifically that this criss-crossing of boundaries indeed characterizes Ghosh’s work:

[n]ot only do Ghosh’s works transgress generic boundaries but they also effortlessly cross national frontiers. His novels’ settings include India, the Middle East, Britain, America, Burma and Malaysia, and he frequently emphasizes that travel is not a recent by-product of globalization but something that societies have always undertaken for economic, religious, political or personal reasons (2005: 27).

The cultural confluence and diversity of the caste-free community journeying on the Ibis in *Sea of Poppies* and the casteless utopian society envisaged by Morichjhapi’s refugees in the *The Hungry Tide* signal innovative approaches to multicultural cosmopolitanism. Their significance lies equally in indicating some of the shortcomings and limited options that mono-cultural and ethnically discriminating approaches to life entail, that it is possible to practise and benefit from a transnational and multicultural life. As Kureishi puts it, multiculturalism should be “not a superficial

exchange of festivals and food, but a robust and committed exchange of ideas - a conflict that is worth enduring, rather than a war" (2005).

Moreover, supporting the idea of a productive cultural pluralism, as in *The Shadow Lines*, both *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies* strongly question the idea that nations can be clearly defined geopolitically, undermining the meaning of their existence today in ways which are evocative of the work of Benedict Anderson or Giorgio Agamben. Through a strategic use of the sea/waves metaphor as revolutionary agent of both history and memory (a sea that "washed away their past" *HT* 431), these works testify to the elusiveness, arbitrariness and incoherence of borders allegedly supposed to separate people and nations. Ghosh's novels are a product of the author's self-declared and constant attempt to problematize history through fiction:

And when you're writing fiction in terms of history, I think it's important to acknowledge that an historical novel is like any other novel: essentially it's about people. [...] It allows you to explore something with a richness and a sense of context, but most of all it allows you to explore people. So I don't think I could really say that the novel appeals to me because it lets me do this or lets me do that. I think what's appealing to me is that it doesn't have any borders, you can really make it what you want. (Chambers 2005: 30-3)

The following words by an almost Fanon-inspired Nirmal, taking sides with the dispossessed in *The Hungry Tide*, eloquently articulate the instability and viability of borders: Listening to the dispossessed's cry "Amra kara, bastuhara/ Morichjhapi chharbona" ("Who are we? The homeless. We won't leave Morichjhapi, do what you may"), he says, "Where else could you belong, except in the place you refused to leave" (*HT* 254).

Ghosh's novels hence acknowledge the current contingency that border crossing is part of a complex social and political scenario that links in directly with current politics of international border control. An anxiety similar to the one voiced above by Morichjhapi's dispossessed was recently expressed by one migrant from Ethiopia who, escaping life-threatening conditions in his country, arrived by boat to Lampedusa in 2007:

Let me tell you something. Whoever takes the path I have undertaken to come here will never do it for fun. If you did it is because you could not survive in your country. If somebody asks me about my crossing I will be sincere and will tell her/him that you may have just escaped death but you are heading towards the danger of death when crossing the Sahara desert and the sea.¹³

As these words testify, our increasingly dissociating world, made of geographical nations, political borders and ideological confines make Anderson's famous interrogation about the ubiquitousness of nations still relevant. Yet Ghosh's novels textually destabilize the view "that modern democracy is safely premised on an almost religious acceptance of the nation state" (Roy 2004). Indeed, significantly, in most of Ghosh's novels, "words" themselves are often represented as floating islands/territorial/meeting places ("It is as though the word itself were an island, born of the meeting of two great rivers of language"—*HT* 82). Encouraging multiculturalism and transnationalism as enabling practices, Ghosh's novels seem to answer positively to the following question: "Can people who differ in their moral perspectives nonetheless reason together in ways that are productive of greater ethical understanding?" (Taylor 1994: xiii). They point our attention towards a supra-national cultural connection and inclusiveness and towards people who are "ensnared by the illusory differences of this world" (*SoP* 503). Connective currents run through these works, whose regenerating ideological potential, that is, the more constructive approach offered by the current tides of multiculturalism and transnationalism, should not be ignored as "the waters must prevail, later if not sooner" (*HT* 205).

Notes

During an interview in 2013, Ghosh commented upon the threat of extinction and cultural dispersal posed by tidal changes in the Sundarbans: "As a Bengali, and as someone who has spent a lot of time in the Sundarbans, you can see that . . . threat is not a deferred threat, it is not going to happen twenty years or thirty year or forty years from now, it is happening today. We see how . . . Bidiya islands in the Sundarbans are going under water, we see how salt waters are invading the land, we see how literally millions and millions of people are being dispersed" (Ghose 2013).

² It is also tempting to connect the transportation of the “girmitiyas” in the novel, the Ibis’ indentured migrants, who are bound by contract to work for a British colonizer in exchange for the very act of passage to the colony, with Charon’s shipping of dead souls (who are delivered to him by none other than Hermes) across the river Acheron, a passage of transformation for the desperate souls.

That the Ibis is significantly gendered as female may also add to the transformational “character” (in both physical and spiritual terms) that is – albeit stereotypically – associated with femininity.

³ Surprisingly, the expression is always used in the singular throughout the novel. Mulk Raj Anand was among the first Indian writers to illustrate this caste-oriented, discriminating attitude towards crossing the Kala Pani in his novel *Across the Black Waters* (1939). See also the recent English translation of Joginder Paul’s *Beyond Black Waters: Paar Pare* (2007).

⁴ The crucial connection between colonial re/naming and subalternity in the novel is exposed by Ghosh in these terms: “While many would choose to recast their origins, inventing grand and fanciful lineages for themselves, there would always remain a few who clung steadfastly to the truth: which was that those hallowed names were the result of the stumbling tongue of a harried gomusta, and the faulty hearing of an English pilot who was a little more than half-seas over” (*SoP* 285).

⁵ Subsequent hierarchies of subalternity are formed internally in the Ibis between the lascars, the silahdars and the first mate, the second mate, and the Captain.

⁶ Ah Fatt’s confession in the novel is doubly ironic in its allusion to broader imperialist interests: “For opium, sir, [...] man can do anything” (*SoP* 457).

⁷ The ironic words and character of the British judge condemning Neel (Mr Justice Kendalbushe) illustrate well the close links between forgery and British colonialism: “Do you understand what that means? It means that forgery was a hanging offence – a measure which played no small part in ensuring Britain’s present prosperity and in conferring upon her the stewardship of the world’s commerce” (*SoP* 235).

⁸ Probably the first novel that investigates this silenced chapter in the history of British imperialism is Basu’s *The Opium Clerk* (2001).

⁹ In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, published in 1761, Smith advocates the universal principle of “natural” justice. While he is not oblivious to other culturally different contexts, he utilizes them as examples of political malpractice in terms of the application of “the natural sentiments of justice.”

¹⁰ For instance, Ghosh’s use early in the novel of the story of Draupadi of the *Mahabharata* is, rather unusually, detached from accounts of her virtuosity. Instead, Deeti’s character functions as an uncanny parallel to Draupadi, serving more as a denunciation of hegemonic gender violence than as a journey

- narrative: “a fortunate woman, a *subhāgyawati*, who bears the children of brothers for each other” (*SoP* 39).
- ¹¹ This idea is also present in the meaning of “Ganga-Sagar” in *Sea of Poppies* (396).
 - ¹² Think, for instance, of the numerous immigrants who recently drowned while journeying from the Sub-Saharan Africa and Eritrea towards Lampedusa, near the coast of Sicily—a first port of call to get access to the European Community. For further discussion of this point, see Chambers (1993); and Sigona (2013).
 - ¹³ This account, originally in Italian and translated by me, is part of the current project “Archivio Memorie Migranti” (Migrant Memories Archive), which aims to make memories of “others” part of Italy’s collective national and transnational memory by collecting and disseminating migrant memories and experiences.

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Reappropriations of Shakespeare in Colonial Bengal

This paper challenges the perception of postcolonial critics who consider Shakespeare to be an aid of imperialism, and view Shakespeare studies in India as merely an instrument used to materialize the colonial project of the British. The facts available about the teaching and interpretation of Shakespeare in colonial Bengal, as this study indicates, do not follow any single direction; rather they reflect a variety of reappropriations of Shakespeare dictated by a range of vested interests. This paper aims to highlight the role of culture and ideology in the varied interpretations of Shakespeare by different critics and teachers in colonial times.

The growth of Shakespeare studies in India is closely related to that of the city of Calcutta. Between the city's foundation in 1690, when Job Charnok anchored his boat in Sutnati village on the river Hoogly,¹ and its development into a seat of power in 1773,

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when Warren Hastings made it the capital city of British India, Shakespeare had been introduced to theatre-going Indians, soon becoming a rather well-known personality for the city dwellers. When the fortune-seeking British traders created the city, they also built a fort, and then a playhouse in 1753 (Raha 1978: 8). Kironmoy Raha sums up the growth of theatres in Calcutta:

Contemporary accounts of the plays and productions in the English theatre make [for] interesting reading. One is struck by the lively press coverage they received and by zest and accomplishment of those associated with them. The Calcutta Theatre [established in 1779] ran for thirty years. . . . In between had come and gone the brief but dazzling existence of Mrs. Bristow's Private Theatre. . . . Brief were also the lives of the Wheeler Place Theatre, the Dum Dum Theatre, the Baitaconah Theatre and the Atheneum. The most famous was the Chowringhee Theatre whose opening in November, 1813 was attended by the Governor-General, Lord Moira. (9)

It was in these theatres that Shakespeare was introduced to the Indian middle class intelligentsia of Calcutta, a sizeable number of whom had already acquired a high proficiency in the English language. The acquisition of English (in India) has been described by Sheldon Pollock, using Mary Louise Pratt's theory of "contact zones": "The social mechanisms that enabled English to migrate from its community of migrant native speakers to groups of potential Indian users consisted of four primary zones of interracial contact and acculturation," namely "the zone of employment," "the zone of marriage and family," "the zone of religious conversion" and "the zone of friendship and social relations" (Pollock 2003: 201-03). Thus, English in India was introduced, not after Macaulay's Minute of 1835, or with the establishment of the Hindu College in 1817, but when the British merchants had come to India in the early seventeenth century. Through business and social contacts, from private schools run by the wives of the British officers and the missionary schools, this multi-source spread of English in India, so well mapped by Pollock, also disproves the postcolonial contention that English in India was an imperial project to subjugate the natives.² The so-called "project" came two centuries after the English language had already arrived in India, long after the natives had been formally subjugated in the battle of Plassey (1757).

To begin with, English in India was the language of the officers and soldiers of the East India Company as well as of the rich merchants and civilians who had come from England. It is quite possible that these Englishmen brought with them the plays of Shakespeare along with other European literary works for their individual reading (Dasgupta 1964: 16-17). In fact, the British envoy to the court of Jahangir in 1609 may well have brought Shakespeare's writings with him (Dasgupta 16). But the actual encounter of Shakespeare with the native population took place in 1753 when the first English theatre was set up in Calcutta for the entertainment of the Indian elite (Bhattacharyya 1964: 29-30), and in 1817 when he was introduced in classrooms (Dasgupta 20).

In 1753, the Playhouse was set up by a society or club that called itself the "Young Writers of John Company" (Raha 9). Since there were no newspapers at the time to survey the activities of the Playhouse, not much is known of the particular plays that may have been popular with the Calcutta audience. Besides, the Playhouse was destroyed in 1756 when the troops of Nawab Siraj-ud-Daula attacked the English garrison in Calcutta (Moorhouse 1974: 41-5). However, an alternative theatre was raised in 1772 and the New Playhouse, or the Calcutta Theatre, followed in 1775 (Raha 9). Speaking of the old and the new Playhouse in his book on Calcutta, Moorhouse reports:

David Garrick had a hand in promoting the first and supervised the dispatch of scenery for the second, and the grateful local patrons sent him two pipes of *Madeira* for his kind interest. They then watched . . . Shakespeare from a seat in the pit at Rs. 12 or a bench in the gallery at Rs. 6; . . . (61)

It is only after 1780, with the initiation of two new newspapers—*The Bengal Gazette* and *The Indian Gazette*—that one begins to learn significant details about the activities of the Playhouse (Moorhouse 58-62). In these chronicles one finds—in the form of advertisements, announcements, previews and reviews of performances—news of the arrival and departure of actors or of theatre companies, and other information about the numerous patrons of the Playhouse, of which Governor General Warren Hastings was one.

From these newspapers one also understands that Shakespeare was the most influential and popular dramatist of the time. Between the establishment of the New Playhouse in 1775 and its closure in 1808, the playhouse had witnessed the performance of at least eight Shakespearean plays, including *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Richard III*. The last play, as mentioned by Francis Gladwin in the *Calcutta Gazette* of 31 January 1788, seems to have been a performance that was received with “well merited éclat” (qtd. in Poddar 1966: 159).

Thus, it would not be far-fetched to assume that between 1753 and 1835, from the establishment of the first theatre to the official introduction of English education in colonial India, Shakespeare had already become a cultural acquisition of the subject population. Antonio Gramsci has argued that cultural dominance often precedes political dominance (1971). However, it needs to be added to Gramsci’s observation that encounters between different cultures are not always in the manner of political confrontation where the dominant power subjugates the weak one; rather, cultural encounters are marked by interpenetrations between cultures, enriching both sides. This is evident from the newspaper reports of that time which claim that the subject population of Bengal did not go to enjoy Shakespeare’s plays as a homage to the British rulers. Instead, while in theatre, the mixed audience responded to the plays as theatre-going individuals, rather than as masters and slaves (Raha 9-12).

The transition of Shakespeare from the theatre to the classroom was far from smooth. Much before Macaulay’s Minute of 1835, leading Hindu citizens of Calcutta, headed by Raja Rammohan Roy, and guided by the Scottish watch-maker and philanthropist David Hare, had founded the famous Hindu College in 1817 (Mittra 1877: 7-43). Rammohan Roy, a social reformer and an intellectual, believed that the traditional system of education was no longer satisfactory for the young minds of the country that needed to be exposed to western education for effecting a change in society. There were other factors as well that contributed to the foundation of this college. An affluent section of the Bengali society perceived that exposure to western education, especially the learning of English, would

become a means to both increase their wealth and elevate their status in society. Additionally, there were those for whom western education was a route to better job-opportunities. As more and more people in Calcutta were beginning to see the tangible benefits of English education, there had emerged a growing necessity for institutions of higher education that would impart western education. Roy, who had been working in this direction for some time, collected like-minded people and proposed to start a college for the purpose. Though he was one of the key forces behind the college, Roy distanced himself (publically) from its day-to-day functioning and left that in the hands of David Hare. He did so because he felt that his 'unpopular public image,' especially in the eyes of the orthodox Hindus—created principally due to his radical efforts to purge Hindu society of various social and religious maladies—might cast an adverse impact on the image and success of the college. He wanted this college to be perceived as a secular institution of western learning; with David Hare at the forefront, Roy felt assured that the college would remain unscathed by any religious, social or political controversy.

The curriculum choices at Hindu College were initially designed by the Managing Committee as it was a privately-run institution. From 1824 onwards, when the college started receiving grants-in-aid from the government, all matters including curricula came to be influenced by the policies of the Raj. Despite the British influence, the college fortunately continued to remain unaffected by these external government forces, as it notably came to have H. H. Wilson—one of the English Orientalists—as Vice-President of the college committee. College committee members like Hare and Wilson always insisted that the curriculum emphasis in the institute remain unbiased and secular. According to the Shakespeare Commemoration Volume of the Presidency College, Calcutta, it was in Hindu College (later Presidency College, and recently Presidency University) where great emphasis was laid on literature studies, and where Shakespeare studies became, in course of time, a hallmark of English teaching in Calcutta, carrying the impact of new education beyond the territory of Bengal (Mukhopadhyay 1996:

3-5). Significantly, it was a time when missionary institutions in the country did not deem Shakespeare suitable for inclusion in the syllabus (Laird 1972: 223-62). However, Hindu College, from its initiation, came to have a series of Shakespeare teachers who would become legends in the course of time.

The first of these teachers was Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, a Eurasian, who joined Hindu College in 1828. Derozio had a seminal role to play in laying the foundation of Shakespeare studies in India, which included not only inspired reading and interpretation of the plays but also their performances in the college and in public places. Born on 18 April 1809, Derozio joined the famous David Drummond's school at the age of six where he studied until he was fourteen. Drummond taught his students not only philosophy—secular and skeptical—but also gave them strong grounding in English literature, especially of the Renaissance, and assigned Shakespeare a central place in reading, reciting, acting and interpreting the classics of the English literary tradition. As a student of the academy, Derozio acted in many of Shakespeare's plays, the reports of which can be traced in *The Calcutta Journal*. Before joining Hindu College, Derozio had started writing poetry and prose, which appeared in the journals of that time (Edwards 1884: 23-8). Besides the numerous echoes of Shakespeare in Derozio's poems, two of his sonnets are related directly to Shakespeare. That Derozio chose to write two poems—"Romeo and Juliet" and "Yorick's Skull" in the sonnet form—on themes drawn from Shakespeare's plays shows Shakespeare's deep impression on the young Eurasian poet. Again, in his prose writings on social, political and literary subjects, there are numerous allusions and references to scenes and characters from Shakespeare's plays. As a teacher in Hindu College, he inducted all these traits into his teaching and is believed to have electrified the classroom with his knowledge and depth of the subject. In this context, Mittra remarks:

I thus prominently notice his appointment, because it opened up, so to speak, a new era in the annals of the College. His career as an educator was marked by his singular success. His appreciation of the duties of a teacher was higher and truer than that of the herd of professors and schoolmasters. He felt it is his duty as such

to teach not only words but things, to touch not only the head but the heart. He sought not to cram the mind but to inoculate it with large and liberal ideas. Acting on this principle, he opened the eyes of his pupils' understanding. He taught them to think, and throw off the fetters of that antiquated bigotry which still clung to their countrymen. He possessed a profound knowledge of mental and moral philosophy and imparted it to them. Gifted with great penetration, he led them through the pages of Locke and Reid, Stewart and Brown. He brought to bear on his lectures great and original powers of reasoning and observation. (149-50)

However, with his irreligious and disrespectful approach towards "authority," Derozio ended up antagonizing the parents of many of his students. Although Derozio denied the allegations, the college authorities removed him from service in April 1831. Yet he continued his association with his students outside the classroom. Derozio died in December 1831 due to cholera but he left behind a legacy which continued to inspire generations to come.

The teaching of Shakespeare received another boost at Hindu College when David Lester Richardson joined the institution. Richardson was an Englishman who joined the East India Company's Bengal Army. More inclined towards reading and writing than military activities, he took to composing verses even as an army officer. Due to health reasons, however, he returned to England in 1824. Back home, he continued writing poetry, publishing several volumes, and founded the *London Weekly Review*. He came back to India in 1829 only to retire from the Company's army. In 1835, he became Professor of English at Hindu College and remained associated with it till 1861 when he left India finally and went back home, where he died four years later (Mukhopadhyay 6-7).

Richardson, the first notable Shakespeare critic, a writer of verse and prose in Calcutta, was better known for his criticism of Shakespeare. Some of his literary pieces—"On Literary Fame and Literary Pursuits", "On Care and Condensation in Writing", "On Byron's Opinion of Pope", "On Men of the World", "On Egotism", "Thelma and Clearchus" and "On Conversation"—give a fairly adequate idea of Richardson's credo as a critic of Shakespeare. Besides these, one also finds numerous references and explications of flower imagery from Shakespeare in his unique book, *Flowers*

and *Flower Gardens* (1855). Being an inspiring teacher and influential intellectual in the world of theatre and print, his criticism of Shakespeare made an enormous impact in Bengal, earning him the reputation of a legendary teacher of Shakespeare.

Richardson was devoted to the writing and study of literature, which made him a model teacher who separated literature studies from the politics of the day; keeping it confined to the realm of ethics and aesthetics. In the changed environment of the 'post'-theory period, such a separation may be anathema to critics like the editors of *Political Shakespeare: Essays on Cultural Materialism* (1994). But Richardson belonged to the nineteenth century and was influenced by the literary traditions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' humanism, particularly the critical theories developed by the Romantic poets. In his writings, as well as in his teaching, Richardson, while addressing the native students and intelligentsia, tried to relate Shakespeare to local conditions in Calcutta:

Shakespeare especially has addressed himself to the universal heart. The jealousy of Othello and the ambition of Macbeth are as perfectly apprehended by the intelligent Hindu alumni of an English College in Calcutta, as the students of a scholastic establishment in the poet's native land. But Pope was too much of a London poet of the eighteenth century. He is so local and temporary that many of his allusions are wholly unintelligible even to his own countrymen. His satires especially are limited and obscure. It would be almost impossible, for example, to make a native of Hindustan comprehend the greater portion of his *Epistle on the Characters of Women*. But Shakespeare's females are sketched with such miraculous power, and with such fidelity to general nature, that they are recognized in all countries and in all ages by every reader who can understand the language in which his plays are written. (1840: 314)

Almost Johnsonian, Richardson's reading of Shakespeare, pertaining to the Indian and world contexts, is a model of literary criticism which is part of the liberal humanist tradition, selecting that which is of universal relevance in a writer or a text. The earlier colonial or imperial tone of complacency,³ as well as the postcolonial enthusiasm to "write back" or "reinterpret"⁴ are both essentially against the universal spirit of great literature which Richardson finds in Shakespeare. His own writings and the memoirs of his students reveal clearly that his teaching and writing were free from the

imperial tone; so was his conduct as a teacher, and later as Principal of Hindu College, in tune with the vision that Rammohan Roy and David Hare had had for their institution. The vision that the college must remain a place of secular and intellectual contemplation, away from the politics brewing in the country at that time, remained alive for Richardson. It must be mentioned that even Macaulay paid Richardson the ultimate tribute for the latter's teaching of Shakespeare, when he said: "If I were to forget everything of India, I could never forget your reading of Shakespeare" (qtd. in Chaudhury 2002: 92). Such references bring forth yet another underlying contention that the attempt to reduce literature to a product of local culture in contemporary theory is to undermine the voice of literary texts that speak across cultures and nationalities.

Another prominent Shakespeare teacher at Hindu College was H. M. Percival. Percival joined the College in 1881 and taught until 1912 after which he went to England and settled in London. His nationality remains to be explored as some accounts find him Indian, born to Christian parents, while others find him British (Mukhopadhyay 65-6). His nationality notwithstanding, he took Shakespeare teaching to the third phase at Hindu College (the first two phases represented by Derozio and Richardson), as he produced critical editions of five Shakespearean plays, namely *As You Like It*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Tempest*, *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. He edited these plays at the request of his students, his intention being to make these texts comprehensible to Indian readers. Hence, these editions are furnished with long introductions and critical comments on key issues and events, with elaborate character-sketches, besides providing copious notes on words, phrases and lines from the text. Upon analyzing these editions, one also evinces Percival's affinity with the nineteenth-century critical tradition from Coleridge to Bradley, where the employment of character and the analysis of motivation and psychology, combined with ethics, were used as tools of interpretation. The only characteristic that seems to separate him from distinguished critics like Coleridge and Bradley is the strong moralism which allows him to see *Macbeth* as "Mr Badman," and *Cleopatra* "as coal tar that

looks so black" (Percival 1929: xvii, xxvi-vii).

Percival may seem inclined towards moralism at times but there appears no trace of racism or nativism in his writings. His view of Shakespeare's attitude to different races, too, illustrates his secular stance: "And by making Caliban take to Stephano and Trinculo at first sight, Shakespeare shows that he means to spare neither the black nor the white man, but to paint both as they are, and shows how like goes to like" (Percival xlix). It is also worth noting at this point that if Percival comes close to endorsing the standpoint of Cultural Studies—that every text is culture-bound—the fault lies with the critic, not the text, for great literary works are more universal than local. The Bard of Stratford continues to speak to readers of all cultures and nationalities. The stock of four hundred thousand books at Folger Shakespeare Library at Washington D. C. is testimony to that strength of his work (Harkavy 1996: 394).

Thus it is observed that these three teachers of Hindu College not only secured the foundations of Shakespeare studies in India but also did so with the conviction of intellectuals, and not as part of the hegemonic mechanism of British rule. It must be said, however, that there were forces in British India that were trying to achieve extraneous ends through English teaching, not sparing even Shakespeare in the process. There were, for instance, missionaries like William Miller, Principal of Madras Christian College and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Madras, who taught and interpreted Shakespeare from the viewpoint of the Christian colonizer. Note, in this regard, how Miller's book, *Shakespeare's Chart of Life* interprets *King Lear*:

Lear's initial error is not the only cause of the suffering he has to endure. . . . He makes no attempt in any way to arouse the tender feelings in which the order of the world allows it [Love or Devotion] to be obtained. They advise ways of their own for getting it. . . . They forget that good got in an evil way would cease to be good, even if it were possible so to get it. . . . The highest of all teaching make it prominent that the kingdom of God . . . is like the seed cast into the ground, which slowly, step by step, grows towards the perfect fruit "man knoweth not how." [. . .] It is the mistake of those who seem to suppose it possible in a single generation, if not in a single year, to put into full operation in India those principles and forms of government which, rightly enough, they regard as in themselves the

best. Shakespeare shows what this mistake results in. (1900: 32-3)

One can see here an unabashed use of Shakespeare for purposes both religious and political. The text of *King Lear* is so interpreted that it easily changes into a battle between good and evil, and thereafter between the impatient mortals desiring quick results and God blessing the fruits to grow from the seed onwards; and finally between the impatient Indian subjects and the ruling British. Miller, unlike Richardson, appropriates Shakespeare to suit his political and religious ends. While present day approaches, such as Barthes's "The Death of the Author", may not see anything wrong in Miller's interpretation of Shakespeare being "ethnic" and "ideological," such a reading might appear to be laden with an "intentional fallacy" from outside the text, which does not merit the title of "interpretation".

Angular interpretations of Shakespeare, or twisting his texts to suit a particular agenda, were not confined to Christian missionaries alone. On the Indian side also, there were scholars like Samarjit Dutt who interpreted several plays of Shakespeare—including *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *Hamlet*—from the oriental perspective. Giving each of his interpretations the subtitle of "An Oriental Study", Dutt's endeavor was "to study Shakespeare from the Hindu point of view" (1928: iv). He contends that several characters in the plays of Shakespeare are created under the influence of Indian mythology. Arguing that Desdemona's "conception is not in accord with Western morality" (Dutt iv), that she is modelled on Sita, he claims:

The fall of Constantinople ushered in the Renaissance in Europe, flooding it, so to speak, with Eastern lore. . . . So it is not unlikely, nay, there is reason to believe that somehow or the other the Ramayana or Raghuvansham, so widely known in both the worlds, found its way to Europe. Research may some day find out the missing links. (vii)

Quite apparently, Dutt is here relying on conjecture, making as far-fetched an interpretation of Shakespeare's *Othello* as Miller does of *King Lear*; both have their set agendas at the cost of Shakespeare's intention. Dutt does not stop at that. Like Miller, he

departs from the subject of Shakespeare's text, following his real agenda, hidden in the title, but overt in the "Preface", wherein he states:

The object of our dwelling at length on this point is to bring home to our readers the religious fanaticism that disturbs the peace of the world. . . . The spread of Islam with the sword in one hand and *Koran* in the other showed how far fanaticism might go. An archaeologist has recently unearthed a startling fact that Gregory, one of the 12 Evangelists, in his fanatical zeal to spread the Gospel of Jesus in Armenia in 301 A.D., raised to the ground the Hindu Temple and routed the Hindu colony which had been in existence there since 149 B.C. (xxiv)

Dutt seems a little confused here as Gregory, the illuminator, was not "one of the 12 Evangelists." Perhaps one could say that Gregory was an evangelist in that his mission was to convert the people of Armenia into Christianity. He can thus be said to have modelled himself on the twelve evangelists. Interestingly, all this and much more religious subject-matter is enlisted into Dutt's discussion of Desdemona in the "Preface" to his edition of *Hamlet*. What Dutt surmises might be nothing but a fantasy of his own; and even if his "historical findings" were true, of what relevance would they be to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or *Othello*? Dutt himself emerges in his commentary on Shakespeare as no less a religious fanatic than those he goes out to condemn, all in the name of teaching Shakespeare.

Thus through a comprehensive analysis of the critics of the colonial times, and their various interpretations of Shakespeare, there emerges a reasonably complex reality regarding the growth of English studies in India, a reality that challenges the dominant postcolonial analysis that exists on the subject. This paper belies the contentions of postcolonial critics like Viswanathan who surmise that the British in India introduced the study of English literature "to perform the task of administering their colonial subjects" (1989: 10). A factual study of the way in which the first college of Western education came up, and how the authorities were involved in the area of education, reveals a reality contrary to what Viswanathan suggests. Antithetical readings of the popular belief that English teaching in India served a colonial end prove to be significant: English

literature was indeed taught at Hindu College by Derozio, Richardson and Percival without toeing the imperial line. But Viswanathan's contention cannot be completely dismissed as there were critics like Miller too. Hence, the moot point is to visualize the reality as a whole rather than making sweeping generalizations. There are other critics who have made claims similar to those of Viswanathan. Ania Loomba states:

The process by which Christianity is made available to heathens, or indeed Shakespeare made available to the uncultured, is designed to assert the authority of these books, and through these books, the authority of European (or English) culture and to make the latter feel like clowns in the boudoir. (1998: 89-90)

Such observations take into account only easy examples like that of Miller and Dutt and ignore the three teachers at Hindu College and their contribution to the interpretation of Shakespeare during the colonial period. Such approaches are as extraneous to Shakespeare as those of Miller and Dutt for they selectively play up the interpretations of missionaries and educationists who appropriated Shakespeare for reading in schools and colleges.

Thus, it would be fair to contend that contemporary postcolonial theory takes recourse to straight-jacketed theoretical frameworks through re-readings of projects of imperialism and those of the "empire writ[ing] back," simplifying in the process the complexity of available facts and the density of literary texts. While there is no denial of the relevance of culture and ideology as critical tools, it must be maintained that there is always room for interpretation: the manner in which the three teachers of Shakespeare at Hindu College in colonial Bengal made their significant contributions in the midst of the ethnic and the ideological divide, is a way of subverting contemporary approaches to Shakespeare's plays by vested interests on both sides.

Notes

1. See Moorhouse's *Calcutta: The City Revealed* (1974: 30). Two centuries later, Rudyard Kipling described the event in verse as follows:

Thus the midday halt of Charnock – more's the pity:-

Grew a city
 As the fungus sprouts chaotic from its bed
 So it spread
 Chance-directed, chance-erected, laid and built
 On the silt
 Palace, byre, hovel – poverty and pride –
 Side by side;
 And, above the packed and presidential town,
 Death looked down. (qtd. in Moorhouse : 31)

2. See Viswanathan 167.
3. For instance, in Miller's *Shakespeare's Chart of Life*.
4. For instance, in studies like those of Viswanathan or Suleri.

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Disseminating and Archiving Stories of a Lifetime: StoryCorps, New Media and Orality

I style the orality of a culture totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print, “primary orality”. It is “primary” by contrast with the “secondary orality” of present-day high technology culture, in which a new orality is sustained by telephone, radio, television and other electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print. Today primary culture in the strict sense hardly exists, since every culture knows of writing and has some experience of its effects. Still, to varying degrees many cultures and sub-cultures, even in a high-technology ambience, preserve much of the mind-set of primary orality. (Ong 1982: 11)

This paper aims to foreground the ways in which ‘oral tradition’ has metamorphosed in the digital age leading subsequently to the creation of an alternate orality. This transformation, in Habermasian terms, may also be viewed as a new public sphere in the virtual world, a phenomenon that necessitates yet another radical

reassessment of the discursive space that Habermas envisaged as the “public sphere”.

The internet allows for real life stories of people to be recorded to form a contemporary orality. This connection between the space of the hearth and that of the cosmos challenges “the disintegration of the public sphere” (Habermas 1993: 175) as this orality/literature, which is a consequence of the digital age, has increasingly brought the public sphere into the home and vice versa. The paper further contends that oral tradition adapts itself to the technologically informed complex cultural and social environment, from which new text forms ensue, and with which they subsequently interact.

Habermas describes the public sphere as a space that allows individuals and groups to discuss matters of wider interest and possibly reach a common judgment thereby influencing political action. In popular convention, it is described as “a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk” (Wikipedia 2010). People who come from the economic sphere comprise labour and exchange, but they also constitute the important unit of family, and they oppose or debate with public authority. Their discourse can be defined as ‘public’ for three reasons: 1) because it occurs in public, 2) because it is practiced by the public and 3) because it is opposed to the actions of public authority.

The conjugal family is the first important structure Habermas brings under scrutiny. Habermas offers an essentialist description of a conjugal family as bourgeois, nuclear and patriarchal. He also claims that it offers a way for private individuals to enter society and provide the economic credentials and emotional training necessary to participate in the public sphere. As a unit, it depends upon the wider field of civil society, but at the same time has its autonomy as it is a property owning institution. As the state cannot interfere with private property, the family as an institution becomes increasingly independent. The independence granted by private property is the economic qualification necessary for the private person to join the public. But Habermas argues that the family also

provides the individual with a certain emotional training that prepares him/her for interaction with the public, thereby underscoring the significance of relationships between people and the emotional life of the family.

The present paper thus positions itself to analyse the role of a non-profit organization, StoryCorps, in compiling the stories of generations of Americans. StoryCorps was founded in 2002 at Brooklyn, New York, by radio producer David Isay. Drawing inspiration from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) of the 1930s, through which extensive oral history interviews were recorded across the United States, StoryCorps' "mission is to provide Americans of all backgrounds and beliefs with the opportunity to record, share, and preserve the stories of their lives" (Wikipedia 2010). It has recorded more than 45,000 stories across all fifty states in America. On the official webpage, founder Dave Isay, states:

The heart of StoryCorps is the conversation between two people who are important to each other: a son asking his mother about her childhood, an immigrant telling his friend about coming to America, or a couple reminiscing on their 50th wedding anniversary. Our goal is to make that experience accessible to all, and find new ways to inspire people to record and preserve the stories of someone important to them. Just as powerful is the experience of listening. Whenever people listen to these stories, they hear the courage, humor, trials and triumphs of an incredible range of voices.

This paper posits that there is a need to pay close attention to the innovative channels or vehicles which translate and re-create the traditional ways of story-telling by adopting a variety of novel visual, audio-visual, electronic and digital forms of communication. This process of digitalization of the oral word not only adds vigour to the mixed-genre literature, but also makes it a more democratic medium by establishing a deeper interaction with the audience. Moreover, this contemporary orality, exemplified in the animated series created by StoryCorps, may facilitate an evolving public sphere of private individuals that Habermas did not fully envisage.

Orality is the expression of thought and verbal narratives in societies where the population is unfamiliar with technologies

of literacy (especially writing and print). The study of orality is closely affiliated to the study of oral tradition. However, it has broader implications, in that it touches every aspect of the economic, political, institutional and human development of oral societies. Walter J. Ong, a celebrated scholar in this field, distinguishes between two forms of orality: "primary" and "secondary" (1982: 136). In defining secondary orality as "essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and print" (136), Ong distinguishes it from the orality of pre-literate cultures. Oral societies evolved in polychronic time, with many things happening at once. Socialization played a huge role in the operation of these cultures, and memory and memorization were of greater importance, increasing the amount of copiousness and redundancy. Oral cultures were additive rather than subordinate, closer to the human world, and more situational and participatory than the literate cultures.

Secondary orality, such as the radio or the voice of a television anchor reading the news, is dependent on literate culture and the existence of writing. While it exists in the medium of sound, it presumes and rests upon literate thought and expression, and may even involve the reading of written material. Thus, it is usually not as repetitive, redundant and antagonistic as primary orality. Further, cultures that have a good deal of secondary orality are not necessarily similar to primary oral cultures, as secondary orality is a phenomenon of the post-literacy era.

Ong's analysis of orality and literacy (5-15) rehabilitates the former as integral to human communication. It similarly marks the beginning of new media. This new media culture gains intensity with the sounds and images of film, radio and television, thereby facilitating a reversal of the cultural effects of print and advertising culture: the loss of reason, objectivity and individualism. The values foregrounded by the new media, on the other hand, are involvement, globalism and cooperativeness.

In his discussion of the death of the public sphere, Habermas uses the term "refeudalization" to describe how the modern day public sphere is manipulated to create a system that is no different from the ancient medieval feudal system, lacking rational-critical

debate, which is crucial to an efficiently functioning public sphere. This refeudalization is a consequence of the “flooding” of the public sphere with advertising that is an outcome of a market driven society (1993: 189). The result is an “engineering of consent” with features of a “staged public opinion” (194). It is feudal in that it imitates the “aura” of “personal prestige and supernatural authority” (195). Within the “decayed form of the bourgeois public sphere,” the “manipulated public sphere” and the “manufactured public sphere,” the media (advertising) both represents political ideology and ineffectuality in political communication (215, 217). In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas offers no emancipatory alternative to this manipulation and disintegration of the public sphere. I contend that the arrival of the new media and initiatives like the documentation of family stories by non-profit organizations, such as StoryCorps, has led to the transformation of the initial stage of oral culture into a new media culture, contributing to the formation of the “global village.”

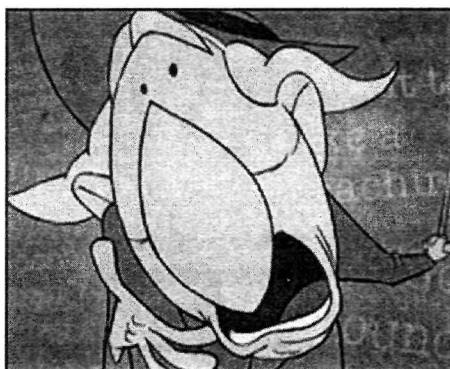
Thus, Ong’s concept of secondary orality (here referred to as contemporary orality) and Habermas’s concept of public spheres of private individuals, as developed in *The Structural Transformation*, share some vital elements. I use both these concepts to study the animated series created by StoryCorps. StoryCorps’ original animated short series features some of America’s best-loved radio stories which nurture and explore the connections American people see in the webs of social connectivity created by the internet. In Habermasian terms, this could be explained in the following way:

The bourgeois were private persons; as such they did not “rule”. Their power claims against the public authority were thus not directed against the concentration of powers of command that ought to be “divided”; instead, they undercut the principle on which existing rule was based. (28)

Rooted in both land and language, stories connect people to their places of belonging. These stories provide entertainment and education; they include informal accounts of personal events, nightly bedtime and just-so stories about how people live. These accounts

foreground the creation of family ties and portray every day, mundane activities. In ancient times, the crippled and the blind earned their livelihood by narrating stories and disseminating news in camps and villages. Their repertoire included foibles, tales, fables, stories and myths as well as epics of great formal complexity. In the following examples from StoryCorps, we see the creation of a new kind of oral literature which reflects the everyday life experiences of common people:

1) The Human Voice

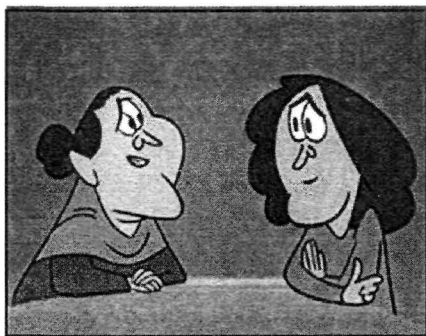


The famous oral historian, Studs Terkel, was an inspiration to StoryCorps. He was also an early participant in the project. In this animated shot he speaks of what has been lost in modern life and where he sees hope for our future:

What has happened to the human voice? Vox Humana? Howling shouting quiet talking buzz. I was leaving the airport. It's in Atlanta. You know, you leave the gate. You take a train that took you to concourse of your choice. And I get into this train. Dead silence. Few people seated or standing. Up above you hear a voice that once was a human voice. But no longer... now it talks like a machine. Concourse one Portworth, Dallas, Lubbock ... that kind of voice. Just when the doors were about to close—automatic doors—one young couple rush in and push open the doors and get in. Without missing a beat that voice above says because of late entry we're delayed 30 seconds. People looked at that couple as if that couple had just committed mass murder, you know. And the couple is shrinken like this, you know. Now I'm known for my talking. I'm, I am gabby and so I say

George Orwell your time has come and gone. I expect a laugh. Dead silence. And now they look at me and I am with the couple. The three of us at the head of congregation on Good Friday. And then I say My God, where is the Human Voice? And just then there's a little baby. Maybe the baby is about a year old or some and I say Sir or Madam to the baby. What is your opinion of the human species? But what does the baby do! Baby starts giggling. I say Thank God! The sound of a human voice.

2) The Icing on the Cake



Blanca Alvarez and her husband risked crossing the border to immigrate into the U.S. and then struggled to make ends meet. They hoped to shelter their children from these harsh realities, but Blanca's daughter, Connie, reveals how much children can really see of their parents' lives and the inspiration they draw from their struggles.

Connie: What kinds of jobs did you have since first arriving in the country?

Blanca: We were gardeners and we were cleaning offices.

Connie: I remember the offices.

Blanca: You remember that. We had the the nn, night shift cleaning that's why you know. We had to take you. You and your brother. I didn't had a babysitter.

Blanca: I have memories of running into everyone's office and eating candy from their candy dishes. I remember being with my brother in our pyjamas with the little plastic feet and I also remember you would always buy us a cuppo noodle from the vending machine.

Blanca: Right.

Connie: Like a snack and then, and then put us to bed on people's office couches. And then you'd carry us to the car when you guys were done cleaning in the offices.

Connie: I remember that.

Connie: Did they ever know, did your bosses ever know that you you took your kids?

Blanca: No, I don't think so. (Laughs)

Connie: Is there anything that you've never told me but want to tell me now?

Blanca: When we first came here we went through a lot of things like not eating.

Connie: Hmmm!

Blanca: I guess for six months your father lost his job and but we never told you that.

Connie: I do remember a lot of beans, bean tacos. (Laugh)

Blanca: But when you ask us why, why the same thing, remember?

Connie: Yeah.

Blanca: I, I didn't want to tell you why.

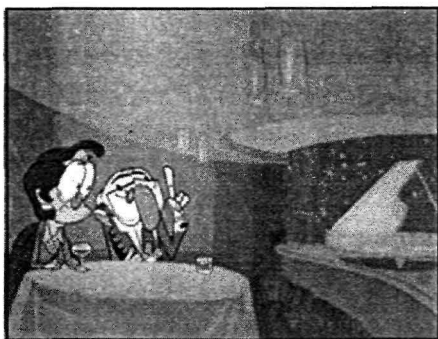
Connie: Yeah. Umm! If you could do everything again would you raise me differently?

Blanca: I would dedicate more time, I guess. You know. I was so busy doing, going to school to that I guess I neglected you a little bit.

Connie: No for me watching you go to school with two kids and trying to make ends meet that was the biggest inspiration for me to finish college. I thought there is, there is nothing that could stand in my way that didn't stand in yours more. It's the most important thing for me uu having gone to college and I feel like anything I do from here on now is ok because I've already achieved my dream. Everything else is icing on the cake.

3. Danny and Annie

Brooklynites Danny, an OTB clerk, and Annie, a nurse, remember their life together—from their first date to Danny's final days with terminal cancer. This remarkable couple personifies the eloquence,



grace and poetry that can be found in the voices of everyday people if we take the time to listen. Originally an animation in two parts, here you'll see a special version that combines both parts of their story.

D: She started to talk and I said listen I am gonna deliver a speech. I said at the end you're gonna wanna go home. I said you represent a 34 letter word. I said that word is love. I said if we're going anywhere we're going down the aisle because I am too tired too sick and too sore to do any other damn thing. And she turned around and she said of course I'll marry you.

D: And the next morning I called her as early as I possibly could.

A: And he always gets up early.

D: To make sure she hadn't changed her mind and she hasn't and every year on on April 22nd around 3 o' clock I call her and ask her if it was today would she do it again and so far the answer's been the same.

A: Yeah 25 times yes.

D: Yy you see the thing of it is I always feel guilty when I say I love you to you when I say it's a warp and I say to remind you that as dumpy as I am, it's coming from me. It's it's like hearing a beautiful song from a busted old radio.

A: Ohh!

D: And it's nice thing to keep the radio around the house.

A: If I don't have a note on the kitchen table I think there's something wrong. You write a love letter to me every morning.

D: But the only thing that could possibly be wrong is I couldn't find a silly pen.

A: To my princess. The weather out today is extremely rainy. I'll call you at 11:20 in the morning.

D: It's a romantic weather report.

A: And I love you, I love you, I love you.

D: When a guy is happily married no matter what happens at work, no matter what happens in the rest of the day. There's a shelter when you get home. There's a knowledge knowing that you can hug somebody without them throwing you down the stairs and saying get your hands off me. It it... being married is like having a colour television set. You never want to go back to black and white.

In January 2006, Danny was diagnosed with cancer. This story was recorded after that:

A: The illness is not hard on me. It's just, you know, the finality of it and him he goes along like a trooper.

D: Listen even downhill a car doesn't roll once it's forced and you're giving me a great push. The deal of it is we try to give each other hope and not hope to not live. Hope to joke... to well after I pass. Hope that people would support her. Hope that she meets somebody and likes and she marries him.

A: He has everything planned. You know.

D: I'm workin on it. She said it was her call. She wants to walk out behind a casket alone. I guess that's the way to do it because when we were married. You know how your brother takes you down, your father takes you down. She said well I don't know which of my brothers to walk in with. I don't want to offend anybody. I said I got a solution. I said you walk in with me, you walk out with me. And the other day I said who's going to walk down the aisle with her behind a casket. You know... to support her. And she said don't worry. I walked in with you alone. I'm walking out with you alone.

A: Hmm.

D: Here's the thing in life where you have to come to terms with dying. Well I don't come to terms with dying. I want to come to terms with being sure that you understand that my love for you up to this point was as much as as it could be and it'll be as much as it could be for eternity. I always said the only thing I have to give you is a poor gift and that's myself. And I always gave it. And if there's a way to come back and give it, I'll do that too. You have the Valentine's Day letter today?

A: Yeah. My dearest wife. This is a very special day. It is a day on which we share our love which still grows after all these years. Now that love is being used by us to sustain us through these hard times. All my love, all my days and more. Happy Valentine's Day.

D: I could write on and on about her. She lights up the room in the morning when she tells me to put on the clothes so that she can support me. She lights up my life when she says to me at night wouldn't I like a little ice-cream or would you please drink more water? I mean those aren't very romantic things to say but they stir my heart. In my mind, in my heart, there has never been, there is not now, and never will be another Annie.

A week after this conversation was recorded, StoryCorps broadcast it on public radio. Danny died that same day. Annie received thousands of condolence letters from radio listeners. She reads one each day in place of love letters from Danny.

The above stories explain how contemporary orality, despite the centrality of the visual image in the animations, uniquely combines visuality with both oral and written varieties of language. While visuality separates it from the exclusively aural medium of radio, its predominantly informal aural-oral mode of language use sets it apart from other broadcasting and print media. Orality is generally viewed as the natural mode of communication through language. Being face-to-face, interactive, immediate and non-mediated for example, through writing, print or electronic media, oral communication is considered by some theorists to be indispensable to a free and democratic life. Unlike oral communication, which is usually dialogic and participatory, written language separates the writer and the reader in space and time, and relies on the sense of seeing at the expense of other senses. Following this perspective, audiovisual media, especially the above animated versions of radio stories, restore the pre-print condition of harmony of senses by using the ear and the eye. For instance, in the animations above, the 'human voice' is brought to the fore by situating the stories in real life surroundings not only with the help of the ambience created in the animations but also with the use of hand gestures and voice intonations. This reinforces the fact that this kind of digitized orality provides a two-way communication flow from the broadcaster to

the hearer or viewer, thus affixing a fundamental feature of spoken language, its dialogue and interactivity. These animations however, unlike writing, overcome the barriers of space, and can reach millions of viewers, and may contribute to the dissemination of knowledge and thereby to the empowerment of the society as a whole. For example, StoryCorps gathers a wide range of stories under different initiative programmes. Examples include the StoryCorps Griot initiative which is part of the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to interview surviving ex-slaves during the 1930s and slated to become the largest collection of African American stories in history, or the launch of the StoryCorps Historias initiative which honours and celebrates Latino stories, or the inauguration of the National Day of Listening which was launched by StoryCorps in 2008 to dedicate to the spirit of sharing family stories in order to preserve conversations with loved ones during the holidays.

Many might view this form of storytelling as primarily oral, a perception constantly reinforced by the stories which try to engage the audience in an informal, conversational style of speaking with its frequent use of "you know" or "I guess". Among their other techniques are the use of direct forms of address, the maintenance of eye contact with viewers in case of direct talking or discussion which makes it appear like spontaneous talk, as witnessed in the animated story 'The Human Voice', where the animated Studs Terkel is talking directly to the audience. This digitized conversationality is also similar to everyday conversation in other significant ways. For example, animated talk includes features that are natural in face-to-face conversation, such as false starts, pauses, repetitions, hesitations and silences. Furthermore, the speaker is not required to have a resonant or polished voice, and articulates his or her speech in a very natural conversational style. The type of language used creates a sense of intimate involvement, a sharing of events as well as that of time and space. Similarly, another linguistic code — the frequent use of the present tense — is used to create a sense of audience involvement, and apparently allows the characters and the home audience to share the same moment with ease.

In spite of the presence of seeming spontaneity in other 'talk genres', such as television and radio, StoryCorps are usually semi-scripted and involve a preparation process including research, writing, editing and presentation. Unlike broadcasting and print media then, which create meaning primarily through language, this new orality engages in signification through the unity and conflict of verbal, visual and sound codes. Despite this multiplicity of meanings, language in new orality, as in all its other manifestations, written or spoken, does not serve every one equitably or effectively. Far from being neutral, language is always intertwined with the distribution and exercise of interaction in society. In its phonetic, morphological and semantic systems, language is marked by differences of class, gender, ethnicity, age, race, and so on. Similarly, the speakers/hearers are also divided by their idiosyncratic knowledge of language, and often communicate in "idiolects" or personal dialects. The dynamics of this type of signification has not been studied adequately. Much like verbal language, however, the visual and sound components of this new oral genre are polysemic, in that they convey multiple meanings, and lend themselves to different, sometimes conflicting interpretations.

Further, this contemporary orality may be viewed as the resurfacing of a more effective public sphere comprising of private individuals. In this kind of a public sphere, access is guaranteed to all citizens without any distinction of class and creed. Through such narrations, a portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body. They then behave neither like business or professional people transacting private affairs nor like members of a legal order subject to the legal constraints of a state bureaucracy. Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions, about matters of general interest. In a large public body, this kind of communication requires specific means for transmitting information and influencing those who receive it.

Habermas predicts the demise of this public sphere. He contends that traditional spaces of public discourse, including newspapers, magazines, radio and television, are increasingly getting manipulated by vested business and political interests. In such an environment of political and economic manipulation, the voices of common people are often unable to find an appropriate outlet; a feat that initiatives like StoryCorps seem to be achieving. Hence, it would not be far-fetched to argue that stories like the ones discussed become examples of the resurfacing of voices of private individuals and their interaction with those of other individuals, thereby resulting in the formation of a new virtual community. By watching the animated series one can discern the evolution of the human life cycle through the stages of infancy, childhood, adolescence, and then old age and death. Habermas says:

The status of private man combined the role of owner of commodities with that of head of the family, that of property owner with that of "human being" per se. The doubling of the private sphere on the high plane of the intimate sphere (section 6) furnished the foundation for an identification of those two roles under the common titles of the "private"; ultimately, the political self-understanding of the bourgeois public originated there as well. To be sure, before the public sphere explicitly assumed political function in the tension-charged field of state society relation, the subjectivity originating in the intimate sphere of the conjugal family created, so to speak, its own public. Even before the control over the public sphere by public authority was contested and finally wrested away by the critical reasoning of private persons on political issues, there evolved under its cover a public sphere in a political form — the literary precursor of the public sphere operative in the political domain. (28-9)

The animated stories also explore the various human relationships that exist among private individuals. In the first story, the connection that exists generally between ordinary people living in society who travel daily by subway, and the interaction between travelling companions, is observed. The other two stories discuss relationships between a mother and her grown up daughter, and an ordinary married couple who have grown old together, and are nearing the end of their lives. Finally, it exhibits the bonding that exists between people, who by listening to them develop empathy, and send condolence letters to the newly widowed Annie in the

story "Danny and Annie". This demonstrates and substantiates my contention of the emergence of a new virtual community that not only listens to the stories of others but also contributes to them by becoming part of them. Further, these animated series underscore the assumption that there is no original message since the public creates its own discourse through self-constructed media. These stories and the discourse emanating from them are different from most of the stories that the official media channels communicate. The Habermasian view of participation in the public space as being a political act, in that it challenges the structures of political authority, is also demonstrated here in two ways. First, a participation is evinced in the sheer display of the power of *Vox Populi*, the voice of the common person, especially in situations where mainstream media had become a conservatory of business interests. The voice of the common people has been adequately recovered and provided a medium for its expression instead of being customarily drowned in a pit of silence. Secondly, the concept also goes beyond the American feel-good experience, as the narratives of varied experiences also include stories of racially, economically marginalized sections. Their articulation is the first step in a larger process of redress through executive and legislative machinery. StoryCorps thus becomes the first step in that direction. Consequently, endeavours such as StoryCorps may be viewed as examples of the public sphere functioning well in a modern, connected society.

The analysis of StoryCorps' transformation of radio stories into animated series in a different medium helps understand more about this unique phenomenon and emphasizes the revitalizing of a new form of orality in the context of media transition. It is a novel way of recollecting the old familiar contents into the new media, and is in some ways also the future of a new kind of literature. While literature, in its original form can get lost, the essence of the everyday stories stays in people's memory and may be recollecting anytime in this new hybridization of the media. These animated stories, at the same time, reflect and reinforce the widespread socio-cultural processes of individuation and togetherness among individuals. They not only heighten the degree of agency people have in learning

about their world but also grant them a voice to interact and participate in that world. While it is agreeable that everyone does not have a voice to tell a story, yet there is unarguably a lot more chatter now than there has ever been before. In the words of Dave Isay: “By listening closely to one another, we can help illuminate the true character of this nation reminding us all just how precious each day can be and how truly great it is to be alive.”

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[This was Rajyashree Khushu-Lahiri's last piece of academic writing. Soon after she submitted it for publication, she met with an accident and died on 3 August 2014.]

**Prison as Cultural *Hammam*: Women's
Marginalization and Resistance in
Nawal El-Saadawi's *Memoirs from the
Women's Prison***

After almost sixty years of successive military dictatorial rule, Egypt rose to a popular uprising in January 2011, culminating in the ouster of the military President, Hosni Mubarak. The mass resistance ushered in a new era of a democratic political system in Egypt with Mohamed Morsi becoming the first democratically elected president.¹ The euphoria, however, was short lived and ended with the entire nation dividing into two irreconcilable factions — the Morsi supporters (the Islamists) and the anti-Morsi supporters (predominantly secularists) — leading to a military intervention, termed as a coup d'état by many. The ensuing civil strife, characterized by violent confrontations and armed attacks, has led

to a serious socio-political conflict in Egypt. In addition to hundreds of civilian deaths caused due to domestic militarism, thousands of civilians have been arrested, detained or falsely tried by the military interim-government in order to subdue dissension. The highest form of censorship has been imposed and freedom of speech has been criminalized as many of those arrested are journalists, writers, researchers and scholars resisting political repression. Amnesty International has raised serious questions regarding the ill-treatment and abuse of political prisoners who face the most brutal forms of torture, which include being routinely stripped, beaten by batons, humiliated, threatened and electrocuted inside over-crowded prisons and detention camps.² While men are tortured for violating the state, women face gender violence in the form of sexual harassment, stripping, rape and forced virginity tests while in custody, for not only violating the state laws but also for trespassing their prescribed social boundaries.

This all-pervasive phenomenon in Egypt—of censorship, detention, torture, incitement of fear and intimidation by rulers enshrouded in a democratic vocabulary—has given a new relevance and urgency to Nawal El-Saadawi's *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*. Written almost three decades ago, *Memoirs* gains a new significance as it marks a continuum with Egypt's long history of political violence, authoritarian governance and religious fundamentalism; a condition appearing more threatening as the country stands engulfed in inextricable political uncertainty.

During times of political violence, women often become the first victims of physical, ideological, economic and sexual violence perpetuated by both the social patriarchy and the state. Women, in an endemic conflict zone, are not only censored for expressing their opinions openly (their second-class status vis-à-vis the state does not permit them freedom of expression), but their personal choices of dress, mobility and social roles also become politicized. In this regard, Egypt has been no exception.

I

A little over three decades back, in September 1981, President Anwar Sadat ordered a massive round-up in which 1,500 political dissenters representing the entire gamut of political persuasions in Egypt were detained under arbitrary laws for germinating anti-nationalist sentiment.³ El-Saadawi, a physician, writer and activist, who had made prolific literary contributions to enlighten women against sexual repression perpetuated through acts like forced circumcision or 'glorification' of virginity, was one of the detainees.⁴ *Memoirs* is El-Saadawi's account of her own imprisonment caused due to her open opposition against not only Sadat's authoritarianism but also against the traditional, religious, legal and sexual oppression of women.

This paper attempts to re-read El-Saadawi's *Memoirs* and analyze the politics involved in the imprisonment of women within the context of the Egyptian state-sponsored dictatorship. The objective is to understand how the Egyptian state has been appropriating prison as a tool within its own power discourse to not only exclude women from the public sphere, but also to confine them to their marginalized gendered social spaces. The incarceration of politically active women (for not only violating the state but also for transgressing their traditional boundaries and defying the social order), thus necessitates an examination of prison as a gendered space where women face gender-specific forms of psychological, physical, emotional, spatial and political violence as a result of their interactions with the social and political systems that strive to maintain gendered marginalization. However, recent gender analyses have also proved that far from being beleaguered victims of the state, women modify and restructure state actions as agents (Rai 1996: 27; Sedghi 2007: 768). This latter phenomenon becomes the second crucial theme of the paper, which is to uncover women's everyday resistance from both within and outside the cloistered prison structure. While outside the prison, a woman political writer (imprisoned for freedom of speech) is seen to employ speech and writing to resist silencing and isolation, inside the prison, women are seen to form solidarity groups and alliances against the state's policy

of de-socialization and isolation. This sense of collectivity forms the basic premise of prison memoirs so that the text itself becomes a social space of communication, resistance and solidarity in women (Harlow 1990: 127-8). It is for this reason that *Memoirs* assumes a significant space as El-Saadawi gives a collective voice to her “memoir” (by calling it thus) by incorporating the testimony of other Egyptian women, especially those from the lower-middle class, who are not women political dissenters per se, but nonetheless share a common history of gender based exploitation and national oppression. Since these latter women cannot write their own history or register their voice in the mainstream, El-Saadawi becomes a spokesperson for them to register them as actors in the social struggle.

Incarceration has long been used as a punitive means of repression, coercion, containment and intimidation by all kinds of states—be they democratic, socialist or autocratic. Various forms of “repressive bureaucratic structures” are used to “police dissent” and ensure non-interference from the public vis-à-vis state policies (Harlow 1990, 42). Political prisoners are, then, largely defined as those who are incarcerated not as much for their actions as for their beliefs—political, religious or even personal—that oppose, contradict or contest the state ideological apparatus (Meyer 2008: 4). As writers, researchers, journalists or resisters of any form of oppression, these political dissenters act as the “conscience” of the society which has the potential and the influence to inquire, reveal and challenge the tacit power-structures of a fundamentalist state and hence, needs to be silenced. According to Joy James, revolutionaries become especially harmful for the hegemonic state as they garner popular support on the basis of their “ability to address the material needs and aspirations, as well as ideals, of their communities” (qtd. in Meyer xiii). Upheld as more dangerous to the ‘democracy’ than the reactionary enemies, they are thus often detained under arbitrary laws (Meyer xiv).

The primary purpose of incarceration is to isolate the violator from the ground of his/her popular support where his/her ideas can subvert the status quo. Within the closed confines of prison, the state security apparatus works effectually to silence the prisoner

with subversive strategies of torture, threat, enforced confessions and discontinuance of basic facilities of food, water, medical help and family meetings.⁵ The idea is to demoralize the individual and stifle his/her voice in the collective struggle: "Concealed from the public . . . the prison universe is a true archipelago: a transnational nation scattered across continents, but of one constitution, written day by day, and amended hour by hour, by the hand of the jailor upon the flesh of the inmate" (Larson 2010: 144). A political prisoner is therefore constantly rewritten and re-interpreted by the prison authorities during interrogations that use torture for forced confessions (Gready 1993: 492; Treacy 1996: 132). The prisoner loses control over his/her body, mind and sense of self, becoming completely voiceless and powerless. The discreet agenda of the hegemonic state is thus to stifle the social mobility and political participation of the dissenters. Where male political prisoners are incarcerated for demanding political freedom, female political prisoners are criminalized for not just resisting class and political inequities, but also for transgressing the traditional boundaries of their private roles in a patriarchal setup and for challenging gender based disparities, violence and male authority in the public/political sphere. Therefore, state repression of women is additionally informed by the patriarchal structures of society that formulate the need to control and stifle women on the assumption that women's bodies and sexualities are dangerous and impure. Incarceration of women political prisoners, thus, is a consequence and reinforcement of the gendered marginalization of women in a male-dominated society.

Inside the women's prison, along with several political detainees, El-Saadawi is seen nurturing a sense of solidarity with common law criminals (mostly illiterate and impoverished women of lower class) on the basis of their gendered marginalization.⁶ What informs this prison experience is the realization that the violence produced by successive military regimes, arbitrary foreign policies, increasing capitalism and religious conservatism has cumulatively resulted in female subordination and what can be described as the feminization of poverty.⁷ The post-colonial state of Egypt is, therefore, seen as an extension of the masculinist civil society that ensures gender

disenfranchisement through the exclusionist nature of its state policies. Prison too, then, emerges not as a gender-neutral space; instead as a coercive state apparatus meant to maintain existing power relations. A gender analysis of El-Saadawi's *Memoirs* thereby attacks the very structures of the Egyptian society which fail to provide for women's needs of education, economic sufficiency and social equality (Banks 2003: 93).

The Egyptian state, with Anwar Sadat as President, ignored the inclusion of gender and class issues in its development program. Sadat's *Infitah* policy, which 'opened the doors' of Egypt to Western investment, ignoring the domestic problems of poverty and unemployment, yielded an irreconcilable gap between the rich and the poor.⁸ A bewildering condition of high inflation, shortage of food and housing, reduced employment, poor working conditions and lack of equal opportunities magnified women's economic marginalization (Al-Ali 2004: 72). Labour migration, a fundamental facet of *Infitah*, also left women with complete responsibility of families and livelihood in the absence of their husbands (Hatem 1992: 238). Additionally, Sadat politicized religion to aggravate gender asymmetries and constrict women's social and political assimilation. A conservative reading of the "Personal Status Law"⁹ legitimized unwarranted patriarchal control over women and restricted their roles in personal and public spheres (Hatem 1994: 667).

Despite years of her commitment to the social upliftment of lower-middle class women, El-Saadawi's imprisonment in the al-Qanatir prison made her acutely aware of the troubles caused by these undemocratic state policies which promoted not just class and economic, but also gender-based disparities in the Egyptian society. El-Saadawi's descriptions of the Women's Cell and the Prostitutes' Cell reflect this reality as one observes that a majority of the women who enter prison are victims of "poverty or ignorance or oppression by *men* (my italics) (1986: 44)." She describes:

A man kills someone and escapes, his mother or his wife or sister enters prison. A mother tries to save her son, by claiming that she was the murderess. The wife, too, gives herself in sacrifice for her husband. A man escapes from the army, so they grab his mother and wife. A man pushes his wife into working as a prostitute

or into pushing drugs, and it's she who is out into prison. (1986: 71)

Be it Sabah-the beggar's imprisonment that reflects class oppression in the Egyptian society or Boduur's religious conservatism that exhibits women's appropriation by a politicized religion, El-Saadawi delineates numerous accounts of the subjugation and victimization of women in the Egypt of her times (1986: 71). And amidst these, the author presents the story of Fathiyya, the murderess, through which she displays an urgency to correct the power imbalance in social structures, especially when the readers hear of how Fathiyya kills her husband with a hoe when she finds him raping their nine year old daughter (Harlow 1986b: 513).

Prison, in the current context, can be viewed as an extension of the patriarchy-ridden home and nation where women are used and abused at will. While in prison, women are forced to live in wretchedly overcrowded, unventilated, stinking cells with lack of supervision and poor provision of food, health and care; they are regularly abused by prison staff, both male and female. Menstruation, gestation and lactation, and a few gender-specific liabilities like anxiety over the fate of the children and the fear of abandonment by their husbands and their families, cause extra physical and psychological stress for the incarcerated women. Therefore, women's imprisonment can be viewed both as a manifestation and a result of patriarchal control over the grassroots of social structures.

Prison also emerges as a strategic site where various economic, social, political and ideological divisions prevalent in the Egyptian society get institutionalized within closed confines. The agenda is to contain competing political discourses and curb mass mobilization, both inside and outside the prison. Sadat's repressive policies towards women's independent organizations and feminist agencies emanate from his dread of women's solidarity and political alignment (Hatem 1992: 231). To this effect, efforts to maintain class differences are not only maintained, but also bolstered inside the prison. One witnesses how the low-middle class women imprisoned under criminal offences are ordered to clean the cells of the political

detainees and thus show their subservience to the upper class/upper-middle literate class of the society. Unlike the political prisoners, the uneducated non-political women are made to live in unhygienic conditions, eat unhealthy food, face physical humiliation and perform menial duties for the political prisoners. To ensure that women's bodies, minds and speech remain incarcerated and hidden, the state forbids them from interacting with the political prisoners. In fact, on the demand of political prisoners to build a wall separating them and the ordinary criminals to keep away the excessive noise coming from their quarters, the prison authorities are shown to be "surprisingly" quick in obliging (Golley 2003: 154). The prison authorities also ensure a frequent replacement of women who clean the cells of the political prisoners because of the fear of "exposing them to [the prisoners'] ideas, or to [their] humanitarian treatment" (El-Saadawi 1986: 81). At the same time, the female political prisoners—who primarily belong to the upper-middle class and are well-educated—are put together in one cell despite their political and ideological differences, with the aim to aggravate their sense of isolation and separateness (El-Saadawi 1986: 40). Covertly, the state is seen to fuel disharmony and disagreement among the women prisoners (including the common law criminals and the political dissenters who oppose the state's authoritarian policies) with the hidden intention to thwart any possibilities of national unity.

Paradoxically the political prisoners are seen challenging the state and prison apparatus by building new social ties (Booth 1987: 40; Golley 155) and achieving an understanding despite political discordance, which is described by Harlow as "prison counterculture" (1990: 51). Against the state's attempt to isolate the prisoners by separating them from their families, these women are seen to be successfully forging new familial affiliations based on the ethics of love and care (Treacy 134).

Within the prison, women of various convictions and classes are also seen forming a unique sense of solidarity, precipitating mutual feeling and bonding based on their common context of struggle against social and political oppression (Golley 154-5). Despite their

diverse social backgrounds and oppositional political groups, these women find “mutual feeling and sympathy” which unite them into a strong political force (Golley 155):

Among the women and girls, I lived a communal life. I recaptured my happiness as a student at secondary school. Rejoicing, growing angry and fighting, mending our differences, feeling delight at the smallest things and growing sad for the simplest of reasons. (El-Saadawi 1986: 40)

These social ties formed among the women prisoners (in Egypt) reflect a glaring reality that challenges the state’s policy of segregation and debunks the state-concocted myth of sectarian strife, which is often used as a political ploy to imprison people, especially those who are perceived as politically dangerous and challenging.

II

This section of the paper focuses on analyzing the dynamics of the relationship between the state and the political prisoners (like El-Saadawi), who ingenuously challenged and unsettled the propagandist nature of the pretentious democratic regime. El-Saadawi’s narrative not only exposes the state’s pretense at democracy within and outside the prison walls, but also underlines social, political and religious oppression of women as a state authorized phenomenon to mitigate women’s activism and agency.

There was an en masse disapproval of Sadat’s “Peace Treaty” with Israel signed in 1979 (popularly known as the Camp David Accords), which intended to reclaim the loss of the 1967 War, that is, the Sinai Region, and put an end to the conflict between the two countries. The growing domestic and Arab hostility towards him made Sadat adopt policies intended to deflect this growing criticism against him (Cooke 2012: 153). What followed was a typical expression of an authoritarian regime that resorts to ad hoc policymaking and experimentation in order to secure power. In a frenzied urge to preserve his international footing, Sadat passed amorphous laws to purge any form of political unrest in Egypt; the

“Law of Shame” being one of them. In May 1980, Sadat replaced the “Emergency Law” (earlier installed by Nasser) with the “Law of Shame”. A disguised form of the “Emergency Law”, this new law criminalized any kind of condemnation of Egypt and its political systems. Ultimately, in September 1981, Sadat issued “Precautionary Detention Orders” to thousands of Egyptians “representing the entire spectrum of political opposition in Egypt, from extreme right-wing religious fundamentalists to members of the left-oriented Nasserite Progressive Union Party” (Harlow 1986b: 513). While the rationale given for the mass arrests was prevention of sectarian strife in the country, the real reason was to interminably curb political opposition to his authoritarian state policies, especially the “Peace Treaty”. El-Saadawi was one of the thousands of political prisoners detained under the same arbitrary law that held freedom as a crime. She was imprisoned in the al-Qanatir Prison for her writings against the state and its authoritarian policies that thwarted women’s rights and freedom.

In an authoritarian state, writing becomes an arena of struggle especially for a woman writer primarily because she invariably strives for self-expression against political dispossession; and secondarily, as the result of the gender inequalities embedded in the hegemonic narrative of the state. Both as a woman and as a writer, El-Saadawi faced blatant incrimination by both the state and the patriarchy for her writings on women, society, medicine, literature and politics. In 1972, she was blacklisted as a writer under the charge that she was misleading women into sexual freedom and immorality. Such measures are often adopted by the dominant ideological system which engenders the removal of political and creative thinkers from the public sphere to arrest social awareness and political consciousness in people. El-Saadawi herself explains such an expropriation and imprisonment as a result of “lack of mobility” promulgated by “tradition, religion, archaic feudal systems, and outdated laws” (1997: 202).

Imprisonment of political prisoners, jailed for self-expression and activism, aims at stifling their voice and visibility in the social/public sphere. They are put into isolation and denied access to basic privileges granted to others, like pen and paper, or access to

newspapers and information (Gready 498). For any political thinker, pen, paper and an access to information mean power. Therefore, a denial of these basic privileges works as a stratagem for the state to "deconstruct a detainee's voice" by remaking and rewriting his/her self-consciousness (Gready 494). Additionally, the prison structure intends to engender social isolation so as to stunt the individual's sense of collectivity and solidarity with the people who he/she is working for/with. The paper assumes that a political prisoner is a man/woman working for a social cause, thereby making it essentially important for the state to quell his/her prominence on the public platform to destroy the whole movement.

Despite being denied access to pen and paper, considered lethal weapons in the hands of political prisoners, El-Saadawi wrote her *Memoirs* in the secrecy of the night on toilet paper, which she would hide from the eyes of the prison wardens. Writing, thus, becomes a political act for El-Saadawi, who being detained for her political writings and self-expression continued to resort to the written medium to assert herself in the public domain (Golley 160). Restoring herself from the state-imposed silence, she also gave voice to several other disenfranchised women who she met in prison; thereby encapsulating the voices of an entire community of women persecuted by various forms of oppression. In doing so, she merged the private with the public by writing to reclaim her identity as a woman (against patriarchy) and as a writer (against the state).

Thus El-Saadawi's *Memoirs* can be read first as an expression of a woman political writer who writes the language of resistance inside and outside prison in order to situate her sense of self within the larger collective struggle for autonomy. Writing, then, becomes an act of resistance against the authoritarian structures which deny women voice, language and thereby a means to garner access to the public sphere, which is otherwise denied to them. Secondly, her memoirs become an expression of the collective struggle of the political prisoners who continue denouncing repressive social/political structures by displaying solidarity despite their ideological differences. The fellow-feeling and sense of togetherness that El-Saadawi missed in the outside social sphere is realized by her inside the prison walls,

where unmindful of ideological differences, the women get connected by a common context of struggle against political oppression: “[All] the faces around me beloved and near my heart. Even those faces hidden under the black veils . . . when the *nicaabs* were lifted I could see faces that were shining, clear, overflowing with love, a cooperative spirit, and humanity” (El-Saadawi 1986: 39). This possibility and the subsequent attainment of communal life inside the prison poses a major challenge to the hegemonic state that hopes for a more pronounced communal strife among the cellmates. Contrarily, women are seen becoming partisans in their collective struggle against the political and patriarchal hierarchies in Egypt. The prison in El-Saadawi’s narration thus becomes a metaphor of the cultural *hammam*, a traditional space where women met, talked and exchanged views.¹⁰ In this context, Lazreg notes:

The institution of *hammam* was, for women, the functional equivalent of the café for men. Here, women had their bodies cleaned, massaged, pampered and sometimes healed *while exchanging views and information about personal and social events* (my italics). (1994: 25)

The prison in the *Memoirs* also becomes akin to a cultural space for women outside the ‘demeaning’ male gaze; thereby allowing women to develop mutual identification on the basis of a feminine harmony. It also enables them to “overcome moments of ordinary divisions as well as conventions and norms of social discourse” and engage in a “moment of communion” (Hiddleton 2006: 93). Inside the prison, women transcend their customary differences and invoke a collective agency that serves as a strong resistant voice against patriarchal and political oppression. El-Saadawi describes her life amongst the women and girls in the prison as one that recaptures the happiness and joy of childhood:

From the disagreements among us in prison, one would have thought oceans separated one from another, and that each of us was an island unto herself. The dispute might grow yet more intense, but soon we would draw together, there would be harmony among us, and we would close ranks, a solid line facing the single power which had put us behind bars. (1986: 40)

Crucially, then, unlike *hammams*, it is the home that becomes a

prison house where gender inequalities prevail and women suffer from domestic violence and complex forms of patriarchal constraints: "As for women generally in my country, their husbands are their permanent prisons. It is very difficult for a woman not to be married. Extramarital love and sex are forbidden to women, but men are free in this regard" (El-Saadawi 1997: 5).

The actualization of a harmonious communal life in prison, on the contrary, aspires to challenge and undermine political, social and patriarchal oppression. Though the beginnings of women's collective action in prison stem from their mundane everyday needs like "repairing the toilet," aggrandizing into more austere concerns like displaying resistance, such as that against the transfer of Nur—the Christian cell mate—to another cell, one eventually witnesses the women not only submerging their ideological differences but also their class differences that are deeply embedded in the social fabric of Egypt (El-Saadawi 1986: 41). The impertinent threat of this solidarity is felt even by the state, which is then seen to issue new orders for "imprisonment of each group in isolated cells" in "dread of national unity" (El-Saadawi 1986: 40-1). Thus one gets an insight into the ideological frameworks that the state employs to promote sectarian and civil tensions/wars in its endeavor to assume tighter social control. Paradoxically, one also witnesses how once inside the prison, these women prisoners are free to exhibit their dissension and opposition to the repressive state structure and patriarchal oppression. They refuse to be appropriated by the state and give in to servitude. They raise slogans, criticize the government and forge allegiances with other women much against state orders. Further, they display uncommon defiance and renitence in the face of officials representing the Ministry of the Interior or the Internal Security police. While talking to the officials, they openly mock the despotic system that the officials represent and serve (El-Saadawi 1986: 48-9). Women's access to pen, paper, newspapers and radio inside the prison also proves the continuation of their political activism and agency against repression. They obtain newspapers and radio despite several obstacles posed by the prison structure. Notably, in a country where free expression and independent public opinion

are considered the gravest offense, writing becomes tantamount to killing because state reputation is held dearer than human life (El-Saadawi 1986: 73). It is in such a context that one sees El-Saadawi successfully obtain (in fact, sneak out) toilet paper to write her story of resistance despite being strictly forbidden from accessing “anything but pen and paper” (El-Saadawi 1986: 49).

The imprisonment of political thinkers also allows the state to represent them, to speak about/against them without allowing them the right to speak out in their defense. It leads to a perception of the prisoner as identity-less, voiceless and faceless.¹¹ Therefore, the state discourse becomes akin to the colonial discourse that functions on a similar theme of power, domination and control:

We were only able to obtain the Egyptian newspapers, which were all against us in their repetition of the speeches in which Sadat had accused us of instigating the sectarian rift and conspiring against the nation. They slapped charges upon us without any trial, and passed judgment on us without running any investigation – while we were in prison, unable to make any response or to defend ourselves. (El-Saadawi 1986: 92)

Although, in the Egyptian context, the women political prisoners did not undergo brutal torture or violence by the prison officials, the state had a clear authority over their bodies, actions and speech. These prisoners were silenced and made invisible, thereby authorizing the state to interpret their actions in any way that it liked (Treacy 133). The state also had the rights and the means to represent the prisoner’s action and speech to the public: “Prisoners are relentlessly rewritten within the official ‘power of writing’, from interrogation and the making of a statement, through legislation and the political trial, to the regulations governing imprisonment” (Gready 489).

El-Saadawi makes eloquent pronouncements for her love of writing as an end in itself yet it is evident that the writing of her prison experiences is an attempt to not only defy the repressive state but also to undermine the false knowledge disseminated by the state. Therefore, she feels a pressing need to write her side of the story against the state’s “authorized version,” which is based on “slander and falsehood” (El-Saadawi 1986: 187). Accordingly, her prison memoirs can be studied as an attempt to restore a sense of

self and seek empowerment by proclaiming “an oppositional ‘power of writing’ against the official text of imprisonment” (Gready 489). While inside prison, there are a number of falsehoods generated by a collaboration of government, civil servants and elements within the judiciary (El-Saadawi 1986: 499); her *Memoirs* become a means to seek empowerment by writing against the official history and reclaim her self-identity. For El-Saadawi, writing is a political act; thus, it becomes a weapon, a political tool, to continue the struggle against authoritarianism while inside prison. Prison itself becomes a means of “reinforcing the cause” for which the political prisoner (El-Saadawi, in this case) is detained (Abou-Bakr 2009: 261).

Notes

1. On 25 January 2011, Egypt rose to a popular uprising at Cairo’s Tahrir Square against the dictatorial rule of President Hosni Mubarak. Mubarak’s reign was marked as a period of extreme corruption, poverty and political repression. The revolution led to the overthrow of Mubarak’s government and the military takeover for six months until fresh elections (Cooke 272-307).
2. Amnesty International has recently raised serious concerns over the death, disappearance and detention of hundreds of political and non-political Egyptians and international journalists. For the organization’s coverage on Egypt, see <http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/egypt>.
3. Sadat institutionalized the “Law of Shame” which banned criticism of government policies punishable in the “Court of Values” in wake of the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty (1978-9), which made Egypt the first nation to recognize Israel as an independent nation. This resulted in Sadat’s sudden fall-out with other Arab countries and the Muslim Brotherhood. The detention of 1,500 political and non-political people in Egypt in 1981 was carried out under the same law. (Harlow 1986a: 33-58)
4. The author’s name appears in different spellings in English, like Al-Saadawi, El-Saadawi, Al-Sa’dawi, and so forth. I have chosen to use El-Saadawi in this paper.
5. Foucault writes a full account of the relevance of isolationist punishment to the prison system which aims at bringing the captive to a point of self-effacement (1979: 236-7).
6. Common law criminals are imprisoned for criminal offences like trafficking, murder, drug trade, theft and extortion.
7. ‘Feminization of poverty’ refers to a phenomenon in which women represent

- the disproportionate percentage of the world's poor. El-Saadawi links feminization of poverty with increasing capitalism and globalization, which result in adverse economic crises affecting mostly women, due to their already subordinate position in society (1997: 15-16).
8. El Guindi considers *Infisah* a political move based on the Ethnocentric view of development that discounts the traditional culture and fundamental realities of Egypt (1981: 465-85).
 9. Personal Status Law is a set of procedures based on *Sharia*, the divine law of Islam, which evokes a sexual division of labour and gives dictates on familial relations, including marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance. Moghissi discusses how Islamic laws are manipulated and misinterpreted to legitimize illegitimate actions against women (1999: 17).
 10. Traditionally, *hammams* (Turkish Bath) refer to social bath system where women were free from male control to engage in free exchange of views, beliefs and information (Lazreg 1994: 25).
 11. Gready exposes how political prisoners' voices and bodies are appropriated by the state security system to dehumanize the prisoner (489-523).

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Imagining Bangladesh as a "Nation of Intent": The Politics of Female Subversion in Qurratulain Hyder's *Fireflies in the Mist* and Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* and *The Good Muslim*

The task of imagining a nation through a text requires meticulous care. The author has to represent the nation as a space which contains within itself manifold discourses of identity, gender and culture. More importantly, the novelist in his/her choice of content, characterization and focalization has to transform the narrative into a creative template that relies heavily on the two subjective acts of remembering and bearing witness. The text must attempt to articulate discourses that have been officially censored or silenced to project an idyllic narrative of the nation. Chandhoke points out some limitations that a novelist might face in the task of negotiating and imagining the nation in the contemporary global scenario (2005).

She believes that the narrative of a nation cannot become a hermetically sealed discourse as such a condition fails to acknowledge the concept of a nation as an ever evolving entity. She writes:

[A] nation cannot be written or imagined . . . once and for all and left to fend for itself. . . . Unless the narrative constantly adjusts to changed conditions and altered aspirations, it will be quickly rendered incongruous and irrelevant. In other words the nation needs to be constantly re-negotiated to suit the needs of the present. If such re-negotiation does not occur through the adoption of fresh and appropriate techniques of representation, the narrative will fail to spark off collective imaginations of belonging and connectedness. (26)

Chandhoke also emphasizes that a master narrative of the nation is a misnomer since the techniques of representation themselves are variegated and the act of re-imagining a nation generates multiple imaginations of multiple nations that are an intrinsic part of a pluralist society. She describes these voices or narratives as "nations of intent" (27), observing that any contemporary discourse of a nation must necessarily try to articulate these multiple nations of intent:

As these nations of intent increasingly define their political identity against the original narrative of one, united political community, nationalism will have to come to terms with these assertions. It normally does so by acknowledging them, neutralising them, coercing them, or assimilating them. In each of these cases, the original narrative of nationalism is restructured as it battles with such developments – sometimes successfully, sometimes unsuccessfully. (27)

Through this paper I endeavour to explore the way in which two women writers, situated in different time periods and contexts, through their documentation and critique of female subjectivity in Bangladesh's nation-building exercise, have "imagined" their version of Bangladesh as a nation. The paper will also focus on how both novelists choose to articulate the silent discourses inherent in the construction of Bangladeshi nationhood by contrasting their treatment of female subjectivity in the context of the birth of a nation. Finally, I attempt to interrogate whether these texts may be read as representations of "nations of intent" contained within the Bangladeshi discourse on nationalism, especially in their depiction of women as victims of war crimes and as agents who perform the

important task of bearing witness to the violence-fraught genesis of the nation.

Qurratulain Hyder's *Fireflies in the Mist* (1994) is the author's own translation of her Urdu novel *Aakhir-i-Shab ke Hamsafar* (1979), and documents the history of Bangladesh spanning almost four decades, from the first stirrings of nationalism to the birth of modern day Bangladesh following a violent war of independence. Within the epic scope of the text, Hyder makes it possible for the reader to get an insight into the evolution of Bangladesh as a nation while casting a satirical look at the leaders who spearheaded the movement. The idealistic student activists and underground revolutionaries who figure in the first half of the novel are seen becoming complacent housewives and self-serving politicians by the time the novel comes to an end. Although some characters do retain their earlier integrity, they are at best evinced as tragic misfits or sceptics in the changing scenario of the nation's destiny. Hyder, in the first half of the novel, tries to document the undivided Bangladesh with Hindus, Christians and Muslims living in close proximity and sharing close ties with one another. Deepali Sarkar, the chief protagonist whose fortunes complement those of the nation, and Rosie Banerjee are closely involved in the activities of the underground Communist revolutionaries. Although their idealism and youthful exuberance cannot be faulted, they become involved in such activities believing it to be an adventure with all the trappings of a clandestine romance. Their friend Jehan Ara, the sheltered Muslim girl, however, cannot even conceive of participating in such trifles that are viewed by her Hindu counterparts as romantic escapades. Born into a conservative Muslim family, she has to remain content in observing the feminine duties that are expected of her and needs to maintain *Purdah* all the while. Jehan Ara's story must be read as a subtext or a nation of intent in itself, as it critiques Muslim politics which excluded women from participating in the nation-building exercise of the country. Jehan Ara is thus unable to define her subjectivity in the manner that her friends Deepali and Rosie do.

Thus, Hyder's delineation of the undivided Bengal under the British rule is imagined as a secular space in which the young and educated Bengali women were becoming conscious of their political responsibilities and participating in nation-building activities. Yet this space does not include Muslim women like Jehan Ara. On the contrary, there are women like Uma Debi who apparently emulate Western ideals of the New Woman in their lifestyle and attire even as their Marxist zeal cannot conceal their deeply-ingrained class prejudices. Hyder endows women with sufficient intelligence and a strong voice of protest to engage with the political destiny of what Bangladesh was to become shortly. Deepali Sarkar has the ability to be an agent of resistance but Hyder's narrative traverses a trajectory which sees Deepali graduating from her youthful idealism to a sceptical yet empathetic chronicler of her nation's destiny. Her involvement with the student leader Rehan Chowdhury has the makings of a fairy tale romance but it does not attain its desired end as Deepali breaks off the relationship after realising Rehan's opportunistic streak and his lack of integrity.

From this point in the narrative, Deepali Sarkar becomes the lens through which Hyder chooses to observe the nation's destiny. Deepali is seen losing her idealism. Although she bears witness to the destiny of her country and the parallel destinies of her peers, she never attains the stature of an articulate survivor. Her observations are objective and ironical. Her geographical remoteness from her homeland gives her a detached demeanour as she watches the fate of her country unfold. For her, the narrative of her nation, in equal measure, is tragic as well as pathetic. However, she evaluates the events as modern afflictions where nationhood increasingly has come to be defined by the vested interests of those in power.

Thus, the first generation of women rebels do not have the resilience to become role models for the next. By migrating to the domestic sphere, they choose to sever themselves from the enterprise of nation-building. Their voice becomes a narrative of intent. At this juncture, Hyder's depiction of gender crimes, which is a powerful unarticulated discourse, becomes the representation of

Bangladeshi nationhood. The second generation of rebels who usher in the modern-day Bangladesh Republic are overwhelmed with despair and scepticism. Hyder's failing lies in neglecting the figure of the *birangona* within her fictional landscape.¹ This omission flaws her narrative in a major way. When Deepali comes to Bangladesh for her last visit she meets Rehan's niece, Nasira. Nasira vehemently protests against the creation of a nationhood where the feminine presence has been denied. She also points her finger squarely at conservative Islamic forces within the Bangladeshi nation that have conveniently allowed this 'neglect' to remain part of the nationalist discourse of Bangladesh, believing that silence would preserve the honour of the Bangladeshi women. Nasira passionately cries out to Deepali:

Did the Ulema of Pakistan speak out against the war fought here in 1971? . . . [T]housands of Muslim girls were here during the War of Liberation, countless were forced to become street walkers. Not a single maulvi in the Islamic world protested against this horrible situation. (357-8)

Deepali takes the flight home to Trinidad in a philosophical frame of mind as she refrains from either judging the opportunist Rehan or supporting the angry Nasira. In her final observation, she is a detached old woman who sees the evolution of Bangladesh as just a narrative which progressed due to the divine workings of destiny. Deepali finds peace believing in this fallacy after a lifetime of experiencing and witnessing human suffering. Hyder's text does try to capture the upheavals in the construction of Bangladeshi nationhood but the epic scope of the narrative does not allow for any rational inquiry into the politics of silence surrounding the engagement of Bangladeshi women in the nation-building exercise. Nasira's accusation hints at the official policy of suppressing the dissenting or protesting voices in the emergent Bangladeshi nation. Deepali Sarkar's complacency at the end of the novel perhaps suggests Hyder's cynicism on the issue of the Bangladeshi women becoming empowered enough to affect the destiny of the nation.

Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* (2011; henceforth *GA*) and

The Good Muslim (2012; henceforth *GM*), on their part, try to rectify this flaw in the Bangladeshi nationalist discourse by foregrounding women and women's subjectivity as integral to a genuine nationalist discourse. Anam's protagonists are more self-actualized than the women characters in Hyder's novel; in her attempt to reinstate the female presence in the national narrative, one witnesses an acknowledgement of the complex discourse of Bangladeshi nationhood with its inherent nations of intent. Thus, Anam's novels subtly critique the politics of representation that patriarchy and the state apparatus have indulged in, consequently creating a linear and uni-dimensional nationalist discourse. Anam's novels trace the rise of the Republic through the eyes of the mother Rehana (in *GA*) and the daughter Maya (in *GM*), allowing for a more authentic rendition of the Bangladeshi nationalist discourse because it succeeds in narrating a history, which until then was, more often than not, projected as rigid and one-dimensional, despite being gendered and polyvalent. Thus, Rehana and Maya's voices are seen performing the important role of bearing witness to the birth and development of a nation that includes, if not prioritizes, the female presence.

The Liberation War in Bangladesh was marked by mass genocide which was sanctioned by the Pakistani army. Women were forcibly abducted and raped and some were even transported to rape camps. D'Costa cites extracts from the Human Rights Commission report to confirm the gender crimes of the Pakistani General Niazi:

During the present phase of our inquiry damaging evidence has come on the record regarding the ill repute of General Niazi in sex matters . . . The remarks made by his last witness . . . are highly significant: The troops used to say that when the Commander [Lt.Gen.Niazi] was himself a raper [sic], how could they be stopped. (2011: 79)

After the war, Prime Minister Mujibur Rehman made an attempt to rehabilitate the rape survivors, the *birangonas*. The term *birangona*, however, became a dubious label which identified the women as victims while ignoring the contribution of other Bangladeshi women to the enterprise of nation-building, especially

their role in aiding the guerrilla outfits during the *Mukti Juddho* ('War for Freedom' or the Bangladesh Liberation War). D'Costa analyses the reasons for the silencing of the *birangonas* in the nationalist discourse of Bangladesh. According to her, this was done to appease other Islamic countries in the post 1971 scenario, which were in a position to assist the new nation in attaining prosperity. She also points out that in an era of post 1971 diplomacy, with Islamic religious forces becoming a strong presence in the country, the Pakistan Army's genocide and sexual crimes had to be relegated in the background. Thus, the *birangonas* remained a "victim group with no particular agency of their own" (D'Costa 80-1). Saikia has also noted how the term *birangona* became saddled with ambiguous implications:

The only memory about women that emerged soon after the liberation of Bangladesh is about *birangonas* (brave women) or, in other words, victims of sexual violence. Women did not give themselves this label nor presented themselves as *birangonas*. The term was coined after the war in 1972 by the first Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, to officially acknowledge the women who were violated during the war. He hoped that through this recognition a space would be created for women to claim their contribution in the war. The label was backed by a concrete policy of redress to enable the women to reconvene a normal life in society. Men who agreed to marry *birangonas* were awarded with jobs and land. The effort was to re-create a semblance of normality and family life for women who suffered sexual violence. Sheikh Mujib's efforts at recognising and rehabilitating women were well founded, one would assume, but the outcome was counter-productive. The labelling of some women as *birangona* also marked them, and they were increasingly seen by society as 'fallen' or 'loose' women. Thus they were reduced to the level of 'corrupt' women equivalent to prostitutes. Very few women associated with the label of *birangona*, not even after it became widely used in official and activist circles. For them to have survived rape was a life-changing event. To have to confront a new social stigma was far from what they envisaged would be their reward thereafter. (2011: 64-5)

In the years after Bangladesh attained freedom, *birangona* became a trope closely allied with that of Bengali motherhood. D'Costa points out that "the *Birangona* Mother became a domain that the state could claim as its own" by projecting them as helpless victims (140).

The *birangonas* were projected as a representation of suffering

womanhood. There was no attempt to listen to their stories of survival or make their survival strategies an integral part of the nation-building enterprise. More importantly, in the official discourses of Bangladeshi nationhood, the role of the ordinary women was ignored. Tehmima Anam's *A Golden Age* and its sequel *The Good Muslim* try to address the problems relating to the difficult process of a woman attaining subjectivity at the time of the birth of a nation. Rehana, Maya as well as Piya, the *birangona* in the novel, represent the different nations of intent contained within Bangladeshi feminine subjectivity. As the three women in these two novels articulate their stories of survival, one gets to see the three separate processes of attaining subjectivity. Rehana tries to share the enthusiasm of her children but is successful only in acquiring a certain amount of political understanding of the situation, being uncomfortable about the gender violence that figures prominently in the original narrative of the Bangladeshi nation. Maya, the idealist of *A Golden Age*, is far more cynical in *The Good Muslim* after having spent time in the rape camps as a doctor. Piya is allowed a sufficient degree of autonomy to chart her own destiny. While Anam does not shy away from revealing the unflattering aspects of Bangladeshi nationalism, especially the revival of Islamic fundamentalist forces in the country, her novels seem to suggest that nations of intent are still possible while rewriting Bangladeshi history.

In *A Golden Age*, Rehana Haque, a widow who tries to keep her family together, is patriotic although she does not quite fathom the visceral pull of her son Sohail and her daughter Maya to the cause of the country. Her lack of patriotic fervour may stem from the fact that Bangladesh is her adopted country. She is also uneasy about certain aspects of the *Mukti Judhho*, especially its ideology of eschewing Urdu which is Rehana's mother tongue. She takes a maternal interest in the freedom fighters (most of whom are her son's friends) by trying to feed them properly and soliciting them to take care of themselves. While her understanding of nationhood is riddled with a mother's doubts and fears, she does not exert her maternal influence to stop her children from joining the freedom struggle. In the following instance, Anam characterizes Rehana's

doubts regarding her children's political idealism:

They were always telling her to come with them to their rallies and their get-togethers, but not being young or part of the student movement, and not having attended the conferences of the Nationalist Party or the elections of the student unions, and not, like Sohail and Maya, having read the *Communist Manifesto* and sat for hours under the banyan tree debating the finer points of the resistance, she did not have the proper trappings of a nationalist. She did not have the youth or the appearance or the words. The correct words, though by now familiar to her, did not glide easily from her tongue: 'comrade', 'proletariat', 'revolution'. They were hard precise words and did not capture Rehana's ambiguous feelings about the country she had adopted. She spoke with fluency the Urdu of the enemy.

No, Rehana did not have the exactness to be a true revolutionary. . . . She turned in to the kitchen and wondered how she would feed all those hungry dreamers." (GA 55)

It is clear that Rehana considers herself to be a misfit since she does not respond to the romance of a country beginning to forge its own destiny. She has mixed feelings about the "*bhasha andolan*", the movement to establish Bangla as the national language, as she is more inclined towards Urdu than to Bangla. Thus, she chooses to play the only role she can perform, that of nurturing these dreamers by cooking for her children and later allowing the rebels to use her house to harbour the fugitives and guerrilla activists. Thus, Rehana is not an active agent of resistance. This can be seen even when she is first shown the Bangladeshi national flag for which she has mixed feelings.

Rehana shouts 'Joy Bangla' (the chant of the *Mukti jodhhas*), inspired as she is by Mujibur Rehman's passionate rhetoric but very soon comes face to face with the ugly reality as Pakistan starts mass-scale genocide as part of Operation Searchlight. When she learns about the disappearance of Maya's friend Sharmeen, a leading student activist from the university, she fears for Maya's safety. Anam makes it clear that Rehana's response to these war crimes is typically maternal as she feels a personal sense of bereavement on both these occasions. She does not understand politics to realise that these war crimes are being committed by a despotic regime desperate to retain its hold over Bangladesh. On

certain occasions her views conflict directly with those of her daughter. Maya is the dedicated activist and freelance writer who finds it difficult to understand Rehana's position. On one occasion when Rehana forces Maya to come back home with her from the university agitation, Maya accuses her mother of insensitivity. Rehana is furious at this charge but later makes a concession to her daughter's wishes by sacrificing all her expensive saris, which held wonderful memories, to make blankets for the refugees. She tearfully tells her neighbour, Mrs Rehman: "We are at war and my daughter says I have to do something. To prove I belong here. So I'm doing something. . . . Making blankets for the refugees" (*GA* 106).

Finally, Rehana, despite her reservations, allows Maya to chart her own destiny as an activist. Maya leaves for Calcutta to serve as a reporter and volunteer. Rehana's parting blessing to her daughter is significant: "Write some good stories" (*GA* 145). Inherent in Rehana's blessing is the wish that her daughter is able to bear witness to the troubled times and record the victimization of Bangladeshi women. While Rehana remains politically neutral, she recognizes the need to tell the story of Bangladesh for which, she surmises, her daughter would be the most suitable chronicler.

Rehana's brief intimacy with an injured Major in a refugee camp in Kolkata revives her sexual self. Yet her sexual/physical self is not as important to her as her maternal self. Towards the end of the novel, Rehana chooses to save her son by telling the Pakistani army that the Major was Sohail, her son. She experiences only a brief moment of guilt for her betrayal of her lover. In the final passage of the novel, she confesses to her long dead husband in an imaginary letter:

"I came to tell you the story of our war and how we have lived.

The war will end today. I have aged a thousand years . . . But I live.

A man lived in our house for ninety-six days.

And yes, I loved him. For the smallest fractions of the ninety-six days, I loved

him.

[. . .] The war will end today. Niazi will sign the treaty and I will walk into the streets. Your daughter will hold my hand. A boy will sell flags for two taka and everyone will wave and crane their necks to see the road . . . we are spellbound, love-bound, home-bound singing 'How I love you, my golden Bengal' . . . and today I will clutch my flag, hold my breath and wait for our son.

[. . .] This war that has taken so many sons has spared mine. This age that has burned so many daughters has not burned mine.

I have not let it." (GA 314-15)

Rehana sympathises towards those who have lost their sons and daughters at the hands of war, but she celebrates the nation's victory as a day when she succeeds as a Mother. Her confession is unapologetic and Anam chooses to focus on Rehana's maternal subjectivity as the lens through which the war of Bangladeshi independence is witnessed. Her patriotism, however, remains uneasy, and her misgivings continue well into the next novel, *The Good Muslim*.

In *The Good Muslim*, Rehana has doubts before going to meet Mujibur Rehman. She is unsettled by Maya's decision to perform the abortions on the *birangonas* even though she is just following state orders. She sympathises with those women who did not want to undergo the abortion. In this scene, Anam deftly weaves Rehana's misgivings about the new nation of Bangladesh with Maya's determined effort to suppress her conscience. The entire episode ironically critiques the Bangladeshi official policy relating to the victims of gender crimes during the war, while creating a rare moment of mother-daughter solidarity bound together in a common sentiment of compassion for those victims:

Bangobandhu [President Mujib] had promised to take care of the women; he had even given them a name –Birangona, heroines - and asked their husbands and fathers to welcome them home, as they would their sons. But the children, he had said he didn't want the children of war. Maya told herself this every day, every day while she put the mask over their faces and told them to count backwards from 100. 'Isn't it better, Ma, to erase all traces of what happened to them? That way they can start to forget.'

'But their children, Maya, their children You're not a mother, you won't understand.' (GM 142)

The Good Muslim is a darker text in its meticulous probe of the aftermath of war. It is here that Rehana's confidence in her maternal abilities receives a setback as she realizes that she cannot heal the scarred psyches of her children. They come to terms with their hard-earned freedom as being only a temporary moment of victory, acknowledging that the sinister forces of nationalism and the demons of the after-war years had completely swamped their lives.

Anam's exploration of nationhood proceeds in a manner similar to the earlier novel where the lives of Sohail and Maya become the lens through which she chooses to address the tortured discourse of the emergence of an autonomous Bangladesh. Anam focuses primarily on two aspects of Bangladeshi nationhood in the days of its new-found sovereignty: the revival of Islamic communal forces, which damaged the secular basis of Bangladesh, and the manner in which the *birangona* narratives were relegated into oblivion without attempts to redress the woes of the victims. Maya, true to her fiery spirit, embodies dissent and protest as she raises her voice to critique the communal and reactionary forces in the country, and lobbies through her columns to give the *birangonas* their due honour. This is also done to redeem herself from the guilt of having performed a number of abortions by simply adhering to the government directive of getting rid of those whom Mujibur Rehman refers to in the novel as unwanted "bastards". Having witnessed the trauma of these women, an older Maya seeks to rectify the evils of an insensitive nation by trying to appeal to its conscience. She tries to ensure that the perpetrators of war crimes be brought to justice. Sohail, on his part, seeks refuge in religion as he tries to forget the war. He becomes a respected religious leader of the community and gathers devotees around him who read the Quran and offer prayers all day.

D'Costa has noted the detrimental effects arising out of the rise of communal forces in Bangladesh, especially with regard to the position of women:

Bengali 'secular' nationalism adopted religion back into its fold soon after independence was attained. The intricate politicization of Islam, combined with Bengali nationalistic fervour, was particularly harmful to women . . . The uneasy relationship between Bangladesh's identity at birth and how the political scenario changed in 1975 with Mujib's assassination rests on the tension between Islam and secularism, and between religious and ethnic identity at the heart of Bangladeshi nationalism. (105)

Anam chooses to imagine the nation by looking at the history of Bangladesh as gendered: the *birangonas* are correspondingly given an identity and a voice through the character of Piya, who becomes a sort of catalyst in the narrative. Yet the novel is actually a coming-of-age of Maya who is cured of her idealism and is able to see Bangladesh for what it is. Maya retains sufficient idealism as she holds fast to her commitment of making Bangladesh a better country. The novel sees her take decisive steps to ensure that the stories of the *birangonas* are heard. Maya not only bears witness to the emergence of Bangladesh but also empowers others to articulate their stories of survival. 'Sheherazade' Maya Haque thus rebels actively against the concerted politics of the state, which had silenced the *birangona* narratives and had been instrumental in marginalizing their presence from the nationalist discourse of Bangladesh.

At the beginning of the novel, Maya encounters Piya who comes looking for Sohail, who had rescued her from a rape camp set up by the Pakistani soldiers:

Maya saw women like Piya every day at the Rehabilitation Centre; they had been pouring into the city for weeks. Some had been raped in their villages, in front of their husbands and fathers, others kidnapped and held in the army barracks for the duration of the war. Maya was tasked with telling these women that their lives would soon return to normal, that they would go home and their families would embrace them as heroes of war. She said this to their faces everyday knowing it was a lie. (GM 69)

The official policy for the *birangonas* was to "forgive and forget," and to "erase and move on": "Just as [the country] had needed them, once, to send their brothers into the fighting, to melt their pots and surrender their jewellery, so it now needed them to forget. . . . It was the least they could do" (GM 70).

After her return home, Maya starts contributing articles to an underground journal: her dissenting voice gets its first outlet after a long time. She attends meetings of the speaker Jahanara Imam who advocates the necessity of redressing the war crimes perpetrated against women. Anam's creation of Imam's character is in keeping with the mood of Bangladesh in the post-1971 scenario. According to Saikia, it was only after the liberation of Bangladesh that the pre 1971 history came to be articulated (2011). She calls it the beginning for writing "a true history" of the nation (135).

In one such meeting, the image of Piya rises unbidden to Maya's mind. As Maya writes her column, her bold, assertive voice speaks for those thousands who have been silenced:

"None of us is completely free of responsibility — not when we live in a country that is a living example of what we fought against—a Dictatorship led by a man who cares nothing for this country, and a refusal to acknowledge the criminals who live among us. If we stand by and allow the crimes of the past to go unpunished, then we are complicit in those crimes. If the Dictator does not hold a trial for the war criminals, he too is a war criminal." (GM 226)

Maya's column is her first acknowledgement that Bangladesh needed to extend justice to the women who had suffered. The romantic euphoria of the independence had vanished; in its place is Maya's acknowledgement that her country was only "a broken wishbone of a country ... quick to anger. Quick to self-destruct" (GM 103).

The epilogue of the novel is set in 1992. Maya, along with her mother and daughter Zubaida, witnesses the trial of the war criminals. When Piya Islam takes the witness box, she publicly acknowledges her debt to Sohail Haque for rescuing her from the rape camp. At the end of the novel, Piya and Maya embrace. It is a symbolic act where the women who have come to tell their stories, and women who have come to bear witness, forge a unique alliance. Piya's son Sohail, and Maya's daughter Zubaida, look on as they also witness this sisterhood consolidated in the most difficult of times. The presence of the next generation in the court room suggests that these stories recounted by the *birangonas* must be fused with the original narrative of the nation.

Anam's novels document the difficult process of negotiating the identity of Bangladeshi women by engaging with the darkest period of Bangladeshi history. Through the lives of the women characters and their refusal to forget, Anam makes space for an alternative discourse of nation-building. By empowering the voices of Maya, Jahanara and Piya, she suggests that an unprejudiced recounting of the narratives of the Bangladeshi women will enable them to heal, if not attain closure. While Hyder sees women settling into domestic conformity, and in the process, unconsciously becoming victims of patriarchal ideology, Anam succeeds in creating a nation of intent by choosing to emphasize the significance of women's neglected histories in the narrative of nation-building.

Notes

- ¹ The *birangonas* were Bangladeshi women who were raped by the Pakistani Army during Operation Searchlight. Mujibur Rehman used this term for the first time in an attempt to salvage these women's wounded selfhood.

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IN CONVERSATION

... with Meena Alexander

“Stir Slowly” – Making a Poem is like That

Meena Alexander is one of the most prominent, lyrical voices of our time. Born in Allahabad, India, and raised in India and Sudan, she studied in England and now lives in New York. Her most recent book of poems, *Birthplace with Buried Stones*, was published in 2013. *Birthplace* is a political book that speaks with deep compassion and insight of the unspeakable sorrows of history. Speaking sometimes from the margins and sometimes from the centre, Meena is a witness to the sameness of history in different geographies. From the massacres of 1857 and 1947 in the Indian subcontinent to the current killings in Palestine—all point to a refusal to learn to love, although the poet in her cannot give up on humanity. She can rearrange neither history nor geography; so she experiments with both and brings together places as distant and dissimilar as Jerusalem, Karachi, New York, Shimla, Allahabad, Kerala, Kashmir, Delhi and the Indian Ocean to create a poetic landscape, a landscape in which the personal and the political cannot be separated, where language and music are fused like “root and rock”:

*I was born into a house where music didn't matter,
But now I know it is the one thing that counted—
An earthly music scraped from root and rock.
Stones stirred when no one was looking.*

*And then the overlap between soldiers and music, a sudden
shift to the violence of history:*

*Guns on the cliffs started to stutter.
It was a tongue we had not heard before.
Waves clustered, rose into a fountain.
But what can music do against the weapons of soldiers?*

(“Water Crossing”)

A flashback to the images of protestors standing helplessly with flowers in their hands in front of military tanks—Meena is one such bystander. **Vijaya Singh** interviews Meena Alexander here, mostly on her latest book of poems, and also on what it means to be a poet.

Vijaya Singh: Meena, you have been writing poetry since you were a child. Do you find yourself touching upon some of those themes even now, or have you moved away from those themes? In one of your interviews you say something that has since fascinated me: “It’s in childhood that the sensations, the bodily sensations which animate what I write, are most intense and vivid, and the connections between consciousness and things is powerful and unmediated in a way, and the world is live and quick.” How does one recover this almost pre-linguistic self?

Meena Alexander: I have been writing poetry since I was about ten or eleven. At first the poems were pale imitations of Sarojini Naidu, Toru Dutt—I remember how I adored her ‘Casuarina’ poem and carried it around with me. Tagore too. Then gradually I found what I thought was my own voice though it took me many years to

get there. I think it was the music in poetry that drew me on. I also loved the nineteenth-century French poets—Verlaine, Rimbaud. I think the music of poetry allowed an escape from the self, the “I” which felt constraining to me.

Concerning the “prelinguistic self”, the quick answer is that recovery is impossible. But the slow answer is that one keeps trying—surely that is the paradox that in poetry, an art of words, one searches for what cannot be spoken, the intensities of childhood and indeed of our later years. As children we don’t have all the filters with which we censor the world and our responses, something we learn to do as we grow up and survive in the world. Perhaps this is why solitude is important for the poet. Not all the time, or we would perish; but some of the time, so we can stew in our own juices and wait for words to flow.

VS: I want to ask a related question. In one of our conversations you once said that one can only work with what one has. What does it mean, “what one has”? What does one have? How does one become aware of what one has? I say that because in our lives, more often than not, we are taught to work away from what we have. For example, our emotions, our desires, our fears, our traumas. And yet this is the substratum of poetry, the intimate space from where it issues forth.

MA: Perhaps in the wordlessness of childhood, we touch a truth that we keep trying to reach later, in later life. So poetry is an art of silence. It is what cannot be said that gives great power to the poem. We have language with all its pitfalls and shortcomings; yet language is a great blessing for it draws out worlds that we could not even glimpse otherwise. Worlds within and time travel too. And to make the poem one has to have faith, faith because it could all be meaningless, a dreadful error. And discipline that allows one to work slowly with words and draw the beauty out.

But what does one have? Perhaps a certain temperament and also of course the family into which one is born, the biography of generations that somehow or the other stamps itself onto you, that and the environment which one did not choose. No one chooses

what family to be born into, or what kind of social circumstance. We use what we are dealt in making our art. I think of the cooking instructions that say: "Stir slowly." Making a poem is like that.

VS: So poetry is a negotiation with that which cannot be had as much as it is our struggle to come to terms with loss and our desire to somehow find its equivalence in poetry? All your books of poems, *Shock of Arrival*, *Illiterate Heart*, *Fault Lines*, *Quickly Changing River*, and *Poetics of Dislocation*, grapple with displacement of desire. In your poem "Lady Dufferin's Terrace" from your latest book *Birthplace with Buried Stones*, you say "desire makes ghosts of us."

MA: Yes indeed, it is. You are quite right, but it works with precisely what we have and do not know that we do, in that poetry like the body itself works most powerfully in the realm of unknowing, and this is where desire draws us. I think here I mean that what is gifted to the conscious mind is perhaps not what we are in search of, though we could not do without it, without those structures. Rather it's the pulsing truth of what cannot be voiced that leads us forward.

There is something else here, the struggle to bring together disparate worlds. I often compose as I walk and the light on a leaf, a bright pebble, a butterfly fluttering on a stone, all these lead me to spaces that I have inhabited, invisible now, but existing in the imagination. You asked me elsewhere about politics: surely it's the world in which all are plunged, but how to bring it into connection with the heart, the intimate longings that make us human? Sometimes a poem can do this.

VS: Poems like "Lychees", "Suite 19", "Viceregal Lodge", "Landscape with Ghost" and the ones on Lady Dufferin have deep resonances for me, because of my own association with the Indian Institute of Advanced Study. I remember the secret passage that some of us took to reach Lady Dufferin's terrace. You mention the ghost of Lady Dufferin; the Viceregal Lodge has these unexplored spaces and secret gateways. The Institute building itself is like a Gothic castle. Your poems capture the mystery, the melancholy and

the sudden joys of the lodge as also of Shimla, the capital of British India, with its scandals and intrigues. Please say more about how Basho, Lady Dufferin and the Viceregal Lodge all came together for you.

MA: The Institute and its exquisite gardens are very important to me. And I have been fortunate to be invited there more than once. Some years ago I lived in suite 19 with the great terrace outside and I would sit on the stone bench watching the sky and the mountains. There would be monkeys in the trees, shaking the leaves. In the morning I would sit on that bench with a cup of tea and my copy of Basho's *Narrow Road to the Deep North*. Basho was a great traveller poet and his words have always inspired me. I was travelling a lot that year and a half, a time when many of the poems were composed, and it was Basho who kept me company. He understood time in a way that is so important to us, and with it the sense of passage. He walked everywhere on foot. I tried to imagine him walking into the Dhauladhar mountains, he and Mirabai. Perhaps they were keeping each other company. As for Lady Dufferin—she fascinated me. She was clearly struck by the beauty of her Shimla surroundings, and had compassion for Indian women and children — she established a string of hospitals — but at the same time there was no question that she was a part of the colonial regime, part of its pomp and ceremony. I wondered if she felt she was an outsider in India and I think she sometimes did. At the same time it was strange for me as a grand-daughter of the Gandhians to be sitting on that magnificent terrace, part of a structure to glorify empire, sitting there and sipping tea and writing a few lines. But maybe this too is part of what it means to live our lives, here, now.

VS: *Birthplace with Buried Stones* has so many poets moving in and out. There's Basho, there's Ghalib, there's Agha Shahid Ali, Imru' Al-Quays, Joseph Brodsky, elegies for your father and Ramu Gandhi, poems recollecting childhood, the journey across the Indian ocean; the book is like one of those intricate Mughal tapestries we saw in the Chandigarh Museum. Please say something about poems

on your father and Ramu Gandhi, and also about how you went weaving and embroidering so many intricate patterns, as also the presence of these poets.

MA: You know Vijaya, this is in many ways a book of elegies and a book of conversations with others, including poets who have gone ahead. Maybe all of us carry within our heads an archive, an invisible archive made up of the sounds and senses we draw from the poets we admire, the lines that inspire us. And it is here that the conversation starts, with the figure of the poet who lives invisibly for us, the one who is no longer 'alive' in the world, but present in such a rich way in the imagination. This is also true for others we have loved and lost.

I sometimes feel I spend a lot of time talking to ghosts and they do talk to me, help me live my life. My father was a meteorologist who worked for the Indian government and at the time of Partition was posted in Karachi. When I was a child he told me the story of how he was asked to choose a country, and I thought that was such a strange thing — to choose a country. He brought me up to have a love of the winds and waters and clouds and not to fear great lightning storms that come with the monsoons; he called them "Nature's glory."

Ramu Gandhi was a dear friend and I used to read my poems to him and also talk to him when I was making them. He is a presence in several poems of mine, including "Bengali Market" which is part of the "Letters to Gandhi" cycle. Yes, I do like what you say about the tapestries and the book I have made. I think of one poem as a portal opening onto another, and I have to spend a great deal of time weaving it all in and out, picking threads, unpicking. Now a year later, I need to stand back to look at it again as a whole. But that said, I always feel there is something I was not able to say; still I hope the book has wings.

VS: One is truly grateful for the section "Jerusalem Poems" in *Birthplace*. Historically, culturally and linguistically, the middle-east is such a rich site, but the continual violence and its impact on world politics is staggering; it is as if peace will never come to that region.

In the rubble and destruction of history, how and where does one look for lucidity and not become overwhelmed with suffering and injustice?

MA: I spent a month in 2011 as poet in residence at Al Quds University in Jerusalem. I lived in East Jerusalem and travelled in the West Bank, and that was when many of these poems had their beginning. "Impossible Grace" was composed there and set to music. It was the lyric base of the first Al Quds Music Award. I went back for the performance a year ago. When I was living there I realized how very important poetry was in Palestinian culture, a way of expressing emotion when so much else is trammelled up, constrained. And there is enormous love for poetry, a great energy in the midst of difficulty. I wrote lines in my notebooks and then completed the poems about a year later. Just recently I composed a poem while walking in the gardens in Shimla. It is a poem which invokes the blue agapanthus flower I saw in the Shimla gardens. The poem was composed during the bombardment of Gaza. [<http://www.warscapes.com/poetry/poem-blue-agapanthus>]

VS: Yes, it is a deeply moving poem. The image of the blue agapanthus, flower of love, growing wildly in the desolate desert of war is really an answer to all such questions as to what use is poetry. In another poem, you say something similar: "We have poetry, so we do not die of history." In the face of so much brutality, pain and violence, your poetry is like the blue agapanthus. But what mode of knowledge is poetry? How do we get to its truths?

MA: The truths of poetry are truths of the heart which cannot be spoken; they can be evoked, in the way that music evokes, feelings that run as deep currents in our lives and cannot be boxed in, and pinned down with words. Yet, paradoxically, it is through words we try to reach that zone of intense feeling where the truth of our lives, however precarious, is momentarily revealed. It is a small art, unlike the novel, which needs a lot of paper; it is etched small but goes deep and can be borne in memory. This too is part of its glory. I also think that it is the task of poetry in times of difficulty to bear witness, to return us with some measure of tenderness to the earth, which violence cuts us away from.

VS: The next question is a little hackneyed, and one that irritates most writers, but still it has to be asked; so forgive me for putting it to you. Technologies like the internet and the mobile phone have made communication the aim and goal of life. Just about everything can be downloaded and shared with friends. It seems almost as if there were a surplus of books that can be read just for the asking and yet it seems that less and less is read. How can poetry, whose claims are so tentative, hope to flourish in such a hyper-jostling for attention? In one of your interviews you say there may be space for a published poem but not for its creation. How can that space be created in our personal as well as public life?

MA: I think particularly now in this age of instantaneous news, of faxes and internets and instant messaging, there is all the more need for the contemplative space of the poem and its evocative power. The news we find in poems is tied to our lives as living, feeling beings. While the published poem might find its place in the reader's soul, there is no space really where the struggle to create can be enshrined, except in the privacy of the poet's own life, in her flesh and blood and guts. In that sense it is tough to be a poet. People may well think you are mad as you sit there composing a poem. What are you really doing, they ask? How strange, they say. But one has to keep going.

VS: Who are the poets you find yourself returning to again and again, and why? What is it in their poetry that continues to appeal to you? And how have they influenced your own poetry?

MA: There are many poets I keep returning to—Wordsworth, Milosz, Tagore, Valery, Tranströmer, Galway Kinnell, Kamala Das, Jayanta Mahapatra, Anna Akhmatova, Adrienne Rich and so many others....

VS: What do you think of contemporary Indian English poetry? What do you feel are its strengths and where is it deficient, if at all one can ask such a question? Often, the anxiety for a lot of people reading this poetry in India is that it still speaks in a borrowed syntax, and that it is neither here nor there.

MA: I think that Indian English poetry has witnessed a real blossoming, and here certainly I do think that the internet has helped, so that one can sit in Kumbakonam or Kulu and read works that were written quite far away, and feel part of a shared world. Also there is often a real confidence now in how the language is used. English is also an Indian language.

VS: Indian English poetry emerging from India does not have as much visibility on the world stage, whereas fiction of Indian writers has greater acceptance. Do you feel this is mainly because fiction is in greater demand than poetry, or is it because Indian English poetry is still to come into its own?

MA: Alas, for some reason, I cannot quite comprehend. People often shy away from poems, and fiction is of course highlighted and in great global demand.

VS: One last question: what is your advice to younger poets struggling to find their voice?

MA: To young poets I say, do not give up; listen to the voice that comes to you, be true to it and try and try again. It's not easy to be a poet; no one is waiting out there for your poem. But have faith, keep writing. And read the best that is being written by others. Remember, the hardest thing is to read your own work with a critical eye, to be able to step back and make changes. There are poems that have taken me what seemed an eternity to complete. I have laboured over lines, verbs, commas. And time is crucial; the lapse of time allows one to see in a clearer way. There are poems I thought were completed, and realized afterwards were far from done. All this is part of the process; then when you really feel it is done, have the grace to let go. Also, and this is something that Jayanta Mahapatra told me once, have the patience to wait, wait for the poem. Have the courage to sit in front of a blank sheet of paper or an empty screen, as hard as that may sound. Often I walk when I am trying to compose, images come to me and I jot them down on a scrap of paper. Always have something to write on even if it's a paper napkin. It's easy to forget. You have to treasure what comes, even if you don't use it in your poem immediately.

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MANASH BHATTACHARJEE

Poet in Palta

For Prasanta

On a hot afternoon the poet
Turns pages of poems
Every page is an inscription
A minutely filmed time
Each page reverberates with
Names afloat on water
First enters a sparrowy singer
Then a boy thrumming
The future as he plays a drum
Then a forgotten actress
Appetising the youth's dream
Her open window closes
Before the long dream is over
Arrives Passolini's crow
To carry time amongst clouds
Till the wings are weary

Names fade into life's artifice
Retailers replace names
Influx of goods alter memory
Those letters in the mist
Appear like debt-ridden ghosts
And the man who hears
The poet record his edited past
Where does he disappear?

[Palta is a place in North 24 Parganas, West Bengal. The poet referred to is Rana Roychowdhury.]

No Play of Words

Love, lyric dove, bird in arched flight
Drunk by landscapes, hungry for sky.

Desire, moon attire, shadow play of light
Roams around in furs, heart full of pines.

Pain, sombre lane, air of dead leaves
Shadow on the page, echo among trees.

Pleasure, human leisure, aroma and song
The room laid bare, glass toppled over.

Hate, stormy gate, pushed in blank haste
Digs up the soil and discovers a skull.

Fate, O' Always late, knocks without apology
Bagful or empty, hands you the mirror.

Friend, the Age's trend, risked at doorstep
Lasts over the toast or departs without face.

Joy, nature's ploy, eyes drunk in clouds
World hangs on air, heart in the cradle.

Fear, ticking near, silence growing louder
Lure of ghosts laughing in the dark.

Time, fruit sublime, slippery thing to taste
Melts in the mouth, gets stuck in the brain.

Dream, tricky stream, a pervert's paradise
Taboos stripped to bone, gravity laid aside.

Woman, holy demon, fable's apple tree
Inscribed by walls, cuckolded in mirrors.

Sex, figure X, primordial rite of organs
Altar lit by blood, memory left with marks.

God, Father fraud, never brought to task
Sermons like a judge, hides like a thief.

Wisdom, tiny rectum, a mind bound to shit
Works the simple bone in a difficult posture.

History, mad tapestry, funeral march of elephants
A trumpet as it travels, a flute when it sleeps.

Life, epic strife, easier ploughed than mulled
Better served still, when heard till the end.

Death, a No-breath, the nobody of time
A last look at life, without humour or eyes.

Memory

It is a faithful dog
That refuses to let go.

You give it a hard kick
And it bounces back
With more ferocity.

It tugs at the bottom
Of your trousers
Like a brat who seeks
Attention.

But all this is a mere
Façade.

The dog is a slave of a habit
It learns to master
For survival.

It becomes part of the dog's
Nature to do the same thing
Again and again.

All this tires you out.

But only then the dog
Slowly comes to mind.

K. SRILATA

Home for Senior Citizens

The old days have crumbled
into Chinese whispers.

We spend our days
in a tent of shadows,
waiting
for such things as feckless love.

In the meantime,
the slow burn of future hours
smokes despair into our bones.

Poetry in Foreign Languages

I stow it away,
this poem,
written in a language
I do not know at all
and will never learn.

At midnight,
the poem opens its mouth
to reveal
a sea snake
hissing in a tongue
that is briefly familiar.

Kriya Shakthi

In Chinese,
the character for poetry
is made up of two parts:
word and temple.

But long before I learnt this,
I had taken to visiting,
my little goddess
on a hillock.

Streets

Walk down
a pair of eyes watching
a leaf on the walkway,
storing, for later use,
the generous spread of its veins,
the way it seemed to look
heavenwards.

Walk down laughter
and ordinariness.
Walk down silliness,

school-girl quantities of it,
and the feel of new grass
rough against your knees.

Walk down
the old, familiar god
of an empty street.

Your Name

Now that you are gone,
it has lapsed under my tongue.
I have no one to use it for.

The last time I called you,
you were standing
at the head of the stairs,
luscious as a hill orange.

I didn't know then
that you had made up your mind
to go away,
leaving behind the pip
of your name.

Now that you are gone,
the only thing awake under my tongue,
is that fresh, sharp tang of hill orange.

Paper Boats

*Why do the birds of the alphabet
attack my nails and my eyes?¹*

When paper boats built
to hold the sail of poems

remain docked in the harbor
of misspent time

they are likely to
topple mysteriously
beneath the stealth,
of skies un-inked.

¹ From "Las Cartas Perdidas" – "Lost Letters" – by Pablo Neruda.

ROHIT SHARMA

Poet

What a poet needs
is imagination.
You are a metaphor.

What a poet needs
is ambiguity.
You are an irony.

What a poet needs
is tension.
You are a paradox.

What a poet needs
is life.
You are a poem.

What a poet needs
is death.
You are a revolution.

Review Article

Recuperating Postcolonial Shame: Self, Sovereignty and the Indic (Imagi)Nation

Ananya Vajpeyi, *Righteous Republic: The Political Foundations of Modern India*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 2012. Pages 342, \$ 39.95.

Ananya Vajpeyi's book is a laudable attempt to move beyond traditional discussions of India's struggle for political sovereignty in order to trace the complex history of ideas that undergirded the search for an Indian "national self." Vajpeyi identifies a gap in historical narratives that, for the past two generations, have tried to understand the creation of the Indian nation while denying a political history to the self "to whom this sovereignty belongs, and over whom this sovereignty is exercised" (2). Vajpayi wants to ask what goes into the making of the *swa* of *swaraj*, given that "both the subject and the object of 'rule' (*raj*) is the 'self' (*swa*)" (1). To this

end, the book follows five founding leaders of modern India and their engagement with a classical legacy of ideas and ideals, ascribing to each engagement a political (and/or philosophical, or aesthetic) theme that might define the figure's contribution to the (re)imagining of the national self. For Vajpeyi, these figures and their respective politico-aesthetic themes are Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's *ahimsa* (the self's orientation); Rabindranath Tagore's *viraha* (the self's longing); Abanindranath Tagore's *samvega* (the self's shock); Jawaharlal Nehru's *dharma* and *artha* (the self's aspiration and purpose); and Bhimrao Ambedkar's *dukkha* (the self's burden.)

Righteous Republic is a work of tremendous intellectual rigour and interdisciplinary scope, traversing political, literary and cultural theory, history, religion, philosophy and critical philology, among others, because "the domain of the self extends over politics, religion, art and culture" (2). The book's central argument is that India's—or at least several of its national leaders'—sense of self was not derived from "western" ideals, though the colonial encounter with the West did play a definitive role in forcing the collective imagination into what the British philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre terms epistemological crisis, that is, "a state affecting the consciousness of either an individual or culture, wherein existing epistemologies, or ways of knowing, no longer seem adequate to accurately comprehend or describe the world" (3). Rather, as Vajpeyi argues, it was an engagement with Indic traditions—with "all the empirical, analytical and ideological purchase of that term," [...] a term whose value is "heuristic rather than definitive" (20)—an amalgamation of ancient texts, images and ideas, their splitting apart at various historical junctures, and their suturing together into a national imaginary that forms the crux of Vajpayi's project whose central task, then, becomes the recuperation of postcolonial shame.

This tracing of poignant "moments in India's moral imagination" (15) is a seminal contribution not just to Indology but to a range of disciplines and ultimately to epistemology. It is also an incisive tool for those of us who teach about India in European and American universities; who understand, on a deeply personal and political

level, the Indic traditions that Vajpayee draws from; and who are attempting to craft hybrid models born of critiques of, and a critical encounter between, “the east” and “the west” within western classrooms; but whose very location within the metropolitan academy pits such attempts strongly against globally dominant epistemologies.

Admittedly easier said than done, for *Righteous Republic* can be a culturally opaque text in a western classroom. The chapter on Rabindranath Tagore and his ode to the fifth century Sanskrit poet Kalidasa, for instance, is used by Vajpeyi to examine the pathos characterizing the relationship between India’s past and present, and the yearning for integration between the two. But how does one teach a group of American students what Vajpeyi means when she says “If India could be a poem, that poem would be Meghduta” (94)? How does one convey Tagore’s struggle with what Vajpeyi reads as “an aporia: silence in the stream of language, a gap in memory, a break in the imagination, a radical undermining of narrative logic that renders the text untenable” (90)? How does one unpack, for predominantly white spaces, the category of *viraha* (or the longing produced by separation between lovers) in Tagore’s Meghaduta corpus that, for Vajpeyi, signifies this aporia and becomes “the mode in which Tagore relates to the deep past” such that the “India of the past, then, becomes a place that he loves and from which he is, as a representative of modern man, sundered, perhaps irremediably” (90)?

But it is precisely because of this epistemic challenge that a book like *Righteous Republic* needed to have been written, and to have received on the global stage the attention—through both appreciation and condemnation—it has. Speaking of the latter, the book has been misread in publications such as *The American Spectator*, whose review dismisses India as the “self-righteous republic.” The well-intentioned review unfortunately misses the moot point, a point made quite lucidly by the author herself when she says: “in each of my protagonists I saw an ethical and epistemological engagement with self and sovereignty so profound and so sincere that I found myself able to reimagine India through their vision, the

place I name in the title of my book: Righteous Republic. This India arguably does not coincide with the nation-state born on August 15, 1947 [...] the righteous republic is a separate place" (10).

An appreciation of this "separate place" ultimately facilitates more nuanced treatments of taken-for-granted categories in mainstream scholarship. While the limitations of space do not allow for a detailed discussion of all aspects of this claim, I would like to examine two such categories: nation and religion. Speaking of the former, dominant theories of nationalism once framed the nation as based upon timeless, ahistorical notions of common blood, race, origin, soil, language and kinship. But such simplistic readings have long given way to more discursive and affective understandings of the nation such as Anderson's imagined community (1983), as Bhabha's narrative form (1990) and as Spivak's cultural and epistemological product (2010), which nevertheless also has, as Appadurai notes, profoundly real effects (1996). Some political scientists see nationalism as a derivative discourse, and the nation as an essentially Eurocentric category unsuited to "Third-world" countries. But here we need only recall Edward Said's argument that the history of all cultures is the history of cultural borrowings (1993: 217). It is argued that the nation as an imagined community and a cultural product is applicable only to modern socio-political formations brought into being through print capitalism; this in any case was Anderson's understanding of the nation, whose people are brought into collective being through the narrative forms of novels and newspapers and their synchronized daily reading such that only educated (or at least literate) peoples can comprise "a nation." Somewhat on the same lines, some postcolonial theorists such as Spivak see nationalism as an elitist failed project, condemned not only to promoting the interests of hegemonic groups but to repeating the epistemic violence of the colonial project it fashions itself after (1999). But such theorists as Ranajit Guha of the Subaltern Studies Collective have pointed to the need to acknowledge the contribution made by people on their own, independently of the elite, to the making of nationalism (1982). Besides, an undue emphasis on print narratives overlooks the power of other consolidating narratives such as cinema and politics.

Hence, while it is often held that the nation as a concept is ill-advised in the Indian context, given that people may identify more closely with their caste, class, region, linguistic community, religion and so forth, it can just as easily be argued that this presumption of linguistic and cultural sameness is again a very Eurocentric (and dated) notion of the nation, a notion that has been challenged not just in postcolonial but in all contexts of religious, racial, ethnic and regional diversity, including in “developed” countries of the west. In any case, even a wide range of diversities cannot erase the idea(s) of India. As Vajpeyi argues, “secular-minded liberals may object to what the Hindu Right means by “India” or an “Indian political tradition,” and vice versa, but this does not mean that India does not exist. These are not categories that can be argued out of existence, no matter what the magnitude of the conflict over their meaning on a given occasion” (15). Thus while, in its quotidian formulation, “A nation must subsume within its temporal location the past, the present and the future” [...] if nationalists felt *viraha* they could not busy themselves about nation-building” (115), *Righteous Republic* does get us to re-engage with the idea of India—and with the fraught relationship between “tradition” and “modernity” while registering the multiple histories of even these—in ways that are “not revivalism, not reconstruction, not historical fantasy, not nostalgia” (114). This nuanced re-engagement with the “nation”—and here one speaks neither against cosmopolitanism nor for divisive identity-politics, but rather, like Frantz Fanon (1967), of a genuinely representative postcolonial national consciousness that is quite different from the official ideology of nationalism—is arguably important for both political theory and praxis. For, to the extent that in India, the idea of the nation has historically provided a powerful legitimization of the state institution (Sunder Rajan 2003), the re-fashioning of a positive and affirming nationalist imaginary would, in turn, entail an alternative ethical and socio-political consciousness for the state.

The same nuances apply to religion. Not only is the religious versus secular binary deployed by many scholars working in, and on, India not an Indic idea, but the unhappy fallout of the Marxist

turn has been its conflating of Hindu with Hindutva. In contrast, Vajpeyi's entirely unselfconscious gestures—her reference to the intertwined relationship between *atman* and *brahman*, for instance, as well as larger discussions that draw from Upanishadic and other streams of Hindu thought—do much to unsettle this problematic binary, ultimately asking “how Hindutva as an ideology of majoritarian religious nationalism distorts and instrumentalizes history” (245). I would argue that it invites us to consider, via a close reading of texts and an interrogation of contexts, why certain images, ideas and practices develop within Hindu thought—its six schools of philosophy, its multiple texts, ideas and images, and its many visions and revisions of identity and ethics—while certain others get left out, or worse, politicized in a narrow, sectarian sense. This is a direction in which other scholars have taken us in the past: Uma Narayan's work on sati and Vasudha Narayanan's work on the complex treatment of gender in classical Hinduism and its androcentric oversimplification after the penning of the rigidly patriarchal Dharmashastras come directly to mind. Vajpeyi expands the scope of this discussion manifold, paving the way for other scholars.

So where does this book fall short? The answer might depend partly on one's own politics, and thereafter, on one's in/ability to look beyond. For instance, some of the limitations of the mainstream Indian political tradition constructed in modern times that the author alludes to, such as gender bias and “the bias towards literate elites and their texts and practices over the bulk of history as made, lived, and experienced by unlettered subalterns” (15) are charges that can be laid just as easily at the author's own door and her ‘big man’ approach. But to this entirely valid charge, one would need to pose the counter-question: what is it that the book purports to do? To write a feminist counter-history of India? To pen a subaltern account of the violence and vicissitudes that have historically made up the myths of the nation? Probably not. The book sets out to interrogate the idea of India by examining the intellectual breadth and ethical commitment of some of the founders of modern India, their “imaginative worlds” (248; 250) that straddle time past and time

present to make up the “national self.” Does the book succeed in its stated aim? I would say yes.

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DEBOTRI DHAR

A Time of Disconnect

Abraham Eraly, *The Age of Wrath: A History of the Delhi Sultanate*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2014. Pages 460. Rs. 699.

Abraham Eraly continues with his saga of India, bridging the gap between professional historians and the general reading public that requires history to be told to them in a narrative form, devoid of artificially created jargon. He remains informative without being pedantic, engrossing without being facile. This is the story of the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526) and its spread across India.

The book has at least two layers: the first is based on the writings of various court reporters and travellers to India, giving an account of the arrival of militant Islam in India, and its spread over this vast and variegated land mass that is taken to be one nation. This narrative, for the most part, is a dark tale of a series of murders, rebellions and treachery, and also reported mass slaughters of subjects, especially the Hindus. This last part is somewhat curious. Eraly quotes from Barani, Ferishta and others about the mass murders and pillage of the countryside by the Turkish sultans and their armies. Eraly takes these descriptions with a pinch of salt and admits that the court chroniclers tended to exaggerate the severity of the persecution of Hindus, which they regarded as a praiseworthy act. He also notes that these descriptions of mass killings are not borne out by contemporary Indian writing which barely mentions

the Turkish conquests. Yet he places the balance of evidence in favour of the Muslim chroniclers. One is never clear as to why this should be so, or why one set of texts should be exclusively privileged over others. But, in itself, this is a fascinating narrative.

The second layer of the book is a Christian narrative that posits the rise of Islam against the absence of institutions of governance in India. Eraly is a man in search of explanations. Why should Islam have succeeded so spectacularly in India even though there was no dearth of powerful kingdoms or of wealth in the country? He finds an answer in the lack of institutions of governance in India and the essentially inegalitarian character of Indian society.

But a brief look at the evidence he presents goes against his favourite answers. His narrative merely substantiates the great disconnect between the ruler and the ruled, which seems to have been the defining feature of Indian socio-political organization, both Hindu and Turkish. Kings seemed to be almost irrelevant to the populace, in that it did not seem to matter which ruler came and went. In the case of the Hindu kings of Gujarat—Ranthambore and Jalore—significant sections of the existing king's retinue seemed to have defected and sometimes even openly invited outsiders to invade their kingdoms. But the Muslim sultans were no different. Their nobles changed loyalties regularly. Rarely were they loyal to anyone. Internecine quarrels over who would hold the reins of power, and who would milk the coffers of the state, seemed to engage them more than the tribulations of the subject population. The populace returned such indifference in spades. People would not lift a finger to save any of the numerous kings who were assassinated by their own nobles or those who were driven out by invaders. It was no different when the British replaced the Mughals four centuries later.

Eraly maintains that the rule of the Sultanate had little impact on the villages of India which had their own mechanisms of administration and were merely required to pay the occasional tribute to the king. It was only the cities where the impact was visible. On

the details of the impact, Eraly is silent. About the living conditions of people also, there is limited information. Eraly is rather sceptical of the descriptions of the foreign travellers who deemed India to be a land of fabulous wealth. His explanation for these luminous descriptions is that the land was indeed rich although the people were poor. His clarification: the riches were cornered by a few wealthy elite; the poor lived at a subsistence level but had enough to eat in normal times. Contrary pieces of evidence, such as the report of an old inhabitant of fourteenth-century Bengal who told Ibn Batuta that he could maintain his entire family in just eight dirhams (small silver coins) a year, are attributed to the varied geographical conditions of India.

Nevertheless, the book has many interesting insights quite apart from the richness of the narrative. Perhaps the most significant point made by the author is that the power of the king was not used to create any of the permanent structures we routinely associate with governance with the exception of Alauddin Khilji who took a number of measures which any modern civil servant would recognize: the control of food prices to bring down the cost of living, prohibition on sale of liquor, and even a prohibition on prostitution, a thing unheard of in the India of those days.

For all his efforts, Alauddin got precious little gratitude from anyone. His severest critic was his own historiographer, Ziauddin Barni. Barni seems to do a hatchet job on Alauddin much in the manner that Khafi Khan was to perpetrate on Aurangzeb. Barni deplores Alauddin's lack of learning, emphasizing that learned men did not come to meet the Sultan. He deplores Alauddin's barbarity in putting down rebellion. Curiously, stories of this barbarism are not confirmed in any contemporary Indian text. What really seemed to stick in Barni's craw was the fact that Alauddin used his experience to create policies and laws of a general nature which were profitable to the general public.

The most telling of all is Barni's narration of the story of Alaul Mulk, a learned man and *kotwal* of Delhi, who came to reprimand Alauddin for his godless ways. Alaul Mulk, so he narrates, told

Alauddin that “religion and law and creeds should never be made the subjects of discussion by your Majesty. . . . Religion and Law spring from heavenly revelation; they are never established by the plans and designs of men.”

This was a fantastic idea in South Asia where religion and law were actually constructed by men. The entire *Smriti* literature defines Hindu law as that which is based on what the sages remembered and laid down as law. Indian philosophers openly acknowledged the authority of the sage to interpret the word of dharma. The very first chapter of the *Yajnavalkya Smriti* says, “The parishad of four wise men who are learned in the four Vedas or of three wise men who are learned in the three vidyas; what this parishad says is dharma or what even any one great scholar who knows the various branches of learning, that is dharma” (Rai 2011: 5).

With the exception of Alauddin, creating institutions of governance was never the forte of Indian rulers. The most striking example of this general inability was their failure to maintain a standing army of any significant strength. Sulayman, the trader, writing in the ninth century AD, points out this feature of Indian polity: “The Indian kings possess large armies but they do not maintain them. Whenever a king calls them to fight, they do so and maintain themselves with their own money; the king has no liability in this regard” (1989: 72). They seem to have depended almost entirely on the militias supplied by the hereditary landowners. Perhaps this was the main cause of the string of defeats suffered by Indian rulers at Turkish hands because an army, like any other organization, will work in a crisis only when it is trained in peacetime as well. This was something that Indian rulers never did. It was almost as though they were living a temporary life, never striking roots anywhere and never building anything designed to last.

The Turkish sultans soon learnt this practice; maintaining standing armies was far too costly an affair. They gave up the practice as being too difficult. They were just as unprepared and hapless in the face of the Mughal invaders in the sixteenth century,

as the Hindushahi rulers had been before the Ghaznis and the Ghoris in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. History repeated itself ruthlessly.

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M RAJIVLOCHAN

Up Close and Personal

Ritu Menon, *Out of Line: A Literary and Political Biography of Nayantara Sahgal*. New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2014. Pages 388, Rs. 699.

Autobiographies /memoirs, biographies and fact-based fiction, that had evoked considerable interest in the past, have catapulted to the centre stage of the literary world in the new millennium. Keeping pace with this upsurge has been the neo-phenomenon of celebrity-hood. Politicians, actors, sportsmen, thinkers, journalists and writers have either themselves penned down or authorized others to write the stories of their lives. A recent, well researched addition to this burgeoning genre is Ritu Menon's *Out of Line: A Literary and Political Biography of Nayantara Sahgal*.

One of India's leading post-colonial novelists and political commentators, Nayantara Sahgal has written nine fictional and ten non-fictional works, and continues to be an actively involved writer and thinker of twenty-first-century India. Her literary credentials as an author of several national and international award-winning novels, coupled with the conditions of her birth, inadvertently position her in circumstances that are without a substitute in the history of Indian English Fiction. The author has internalized the epic era of the struggle for independence, witnessed the euphoria of the "midnight" hour, and has been part of its proud and humbling moments thereafter.

Commenting on a reprint of Sahgal's autobiography, *Prison and Chocolate Cake*, Khushwant Singh remarked in 2007: "Nayantara is too genteel to allude to tensions that developed between members of the first family . . . I hope someday she will write a sequel and come out with the truth of the bitter family feud" (3). While Sahgal maintained her reticence, it is Menon's book that comes close to becoming the disclosure text which explains the internal chemistry between members of the Nehru family. Being an authorized biographer, Menon had access to private papers, archival documents and personal letters of Sahgal, in addition to her published fictional, non-fictional and epistolary works. Sahgal willingly gave "hours and hours" of personal interviews to her biographer and has revealed enough to help the biography become more expository than her somewhat circumspect memoirs.

The personal travails and troubles of the subject as well as her famed genealogy are the two predominant strands that knit the book together. Beginning with Sahgal's self-arranged marriage to a Punjabi businessman, Gautam Sahgal in 1947, the book empathetically unfolds her unease and suffocation in this incompatible relationship. Menon endorses Sahgal's description of herself as "a conventional woman whom circumstances drove to rebellion" (x), and juxtaposes an upbringing seeped in revolutionary ideas and gender equality with a matrimony that rested on patriarchal expectations. The narrative continues, almost like an engrossing piece of fiction, about her affair, and subsequent marriage with a senior bureaucrat, E. N. Mangat Rai, in 1979, and her fulfilled life thereafter. In keeping with her feminist leanings, Menon never forgets the woman in Sahgal, even briefly. With great sensitivity she has brought forth the synthesis of aesthetics and politics, of a sagacious prescience and morality.

Sahgal's first few novels, specifically *This Time of Morning*, *The Day in Shadow*, *Storm in Chandigarh*, *A Situation in New Delhi* and *Rich Like Us*, bear marked parallels with the happenings, people and places in her own life. The atmosphere of topicality, setting in post-colonial history, and heavy reference to coeval politics enhance the visibility of the lived experiences and responses from

the author's life in these fictional texts. Her three memoirs bear testimony to the actuality of the major characters and incidents mentioned in this fact-based fiction, quite convincingly. Menon has probed into and explored these overlaps to the optimum. The chapters are interspersed with analytical summaries of the novels relevant to, and coinciding with, various aspects of Sahgal's life. The biography is noteworthy for matching and merging the intimate and literary strands. Throughout the book, apt quotes from the novels, epistles, journalistic articles, addresses and autobiographies corroborate her impressions of the author's personal life and literary engagements.

Menon accentuates Sahgal's collateral family ties with the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty and has devoted a lot of thought and space to bringing out the fruitful as well as frictional impact of this dynastic connection. The evolution of the relationship between the cousins, Tara and Indira, remains the focus of two revelatory chapters in the book. A psychoanalytic probe into the inevitable political, cultural and familial circumstances of the Nehru and Sahgal families in the pre-independence period, subtly answers a lot of questions about the intra-family bitterness and hostility. The book is of special interest for understanding the behavioral propensities of Indira Gandhi as a political leader; her intransigence could be rooted in the complex interplay of familial relationships of her childhood. Menon has underscored the significance of lineage to the understanding of her work by including a glossary titled "Nehrus-Pandits-Gandhis-Sahgals-Mangat Rais" after the epilogue in the text.

With the family taking the foreground in the narrative, the "political" gets somewhat narrowly interpreted in "personal" terms, limiting Sahgal's penetrative, wide-ranging, holistic perspectives on socio-political issues to the Indian political scene. Menon's treatment of the writer's later novels—*Plans for Departure*, *Mistaken Identity* and *Lesser Breeds*—is less deliberate and a bit hurried. Located in colonial India, with the larger backdrop of the struggle for independence, these works exude a metaphysical calm that is a by-product of the transcendence, depersonalization and literary finesse achieved by the writer. An

emphasis on the intertwining of marriage(s) and the literary process in the life of the novelist has slightly sidelined her pioneering effort as a woman political historicist.

Richly ambiguous, the title of the book, "Out of Line", holds abundant possibilities for diverse interpretations by critics and acolytes alike. Overtly suggestive of the apparent improprieties committed by Sahgal against established social conventions, it quietly questions the very concept of toeing the line, or falling in line, under all circumstances. It actually celebrates the personal qualities of tenacity, resilience and understated courage that surface not only in the writer's turbulent private life but also gleam through her literary works. Menon clearly states that by "stepping out of line, consistently and constantly, whether in her personal life or her political choices, she managed to combine personal and political, political and literary, and literary and personal in a uniquely individual idiom" (353).

The subtitle of the book, "A Literary and Political Biography of Nayantara Sahgal" raises expectations of a more intangible nature. Will the curtain be raised on the cerebral evolution of the writer? How did the story of the Gandhian magic unfold in the courtyards of Anand Bhavan? What helped Tara carry forward the legacy of the lucid Nehruvian prose style? Has Sahgal given Tagore a miss? Did her specialization in History in a liberal atmosphere arm her to stand up against political and personal tyranny? Although the book gives out a lot, its texture remains primarily personal in the feel.

In the collective consciousness of a young nation, Nehru's popularity attained mythic dimensions and all his associations evoked national curiosity. The Nehrus are a vastly published family. Other than her memoirs, Sahgal has not only published the hoary letters written by Nehru, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit and Ranjit Pandit, but also her own intimate ones. The danger of being repetitive looms large over a project of this nature. Far from blundering in any manner, Menon sets the record straight by filling in all the gaps and silences left by her subject. The jigsaw puzzle has been reassembled with

great thoroughness. Most of the pictures in the photo section have not been in circuit before. As a matter of fact, the biography is an exercise in completion and newness.

Handling one's own fidelity to a well-known writer, and the contrariness of her polemical life, can be an intimidating task. The writer has achieved this fine balance with mellow ease.

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MANINDER SIDHU

Cartography of a Hideous War

Samanth Subramanian, *This Divided Island: Stories from the Sri Lankan War*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2014. Pages 336. Rs. 499.

The history of any war is a history of destruction. The history of the Sri Lankan Civil War fought between the Sri Lankan Army and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (1983-2009) is no different. Untold destruction is measured not only in terms of death and material deprivation, but also in terms of loss of identity, loyalty, belonging and hope. The United Nations had reported the killing of 40,000 civilians while the unofficial death toll in the 26-year-long war was close to 100,000. The imprints of the war are borne by deserted and wrecked towns like Jaffna and other former Tiger-dominated areas in north-eastern Sri Lanka even today.

The devastated remains of the war constitute the subject of *This Divided Island: Stories from the Sri Lankan War*. Samanth Subramanian narrates numerous experiences of carnage and trauma. He problematizes the periodization of the war, for the end of the war did not terminate the protracted violence. Pervasion of violence at home and outside, on roads and in religious places before the war, and even after the war, is registered in graphic detail in the book. The author creatively charts a map that locates violence across the coordinates of time and space.

The climax of the violence that had been continuing even before 1983, the year that marks the official beginning of the war, took place in Mullivaikal. This village was reportedly shielded from relief

workers and journalists. The severity of the war crimes was unknown till a video footage was aired on Channel Four, a UK-based public service broadcaster. For the first time, three months after the war, crimes on humanity both by the army and the Tamil Tigers were exposed to the world. The video was recorded on cell phones by survivors. The Sri Lankan government had been in the denial mode till then and maintained that it had pursued a “zero civilian casualties” policy until it acknowledged “unavoidable” civilian casualties in 2011. Efforts by the global community to conduct an international probe into the alleged war crimes remain opposed by the former Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa to this day. Subramanian’s interviews provide a vivid account of the memories of horror and helplessness experienced by the people trapped in Mullivaikal before they were finally moved to a welfare centre.

Since the war ended, there has been an emerging discourse about the actualities of the war. On the one hand, the Sri Lankan government perceives the war as a defeat of “the mad dog”; on the other, the Tamils perceive it as a project about “ethnic cleansing”. In this debate, the author maintains a balanced perspective, holding both the state and the non-state forces equally culpable of violence of the highest order.

This catalogue of conversations, as the book may be described, is an epitaph to loss of lives and hope. The stories Subramanian recounts reveal not only the loss of lives in the conflict between the army and the Tigers, but also the unknown fate of the many people who “disappeared” from the welfare centre and from outside war zones. This book becomes part of a larger discourse questioning the limits of state power and its “legitimate” deployment of violence. It also questions the effectiveness of armed movements and at the same time reminds one of the futility of a non-violent struggle in a country like Sri Lanka where Subramanian’s interviewees felt and experienced the denial of their distinctive culture and identity. The underlying question that emerges in the course of the conversations is whether there is a possibility of a middle path in bringing about a revolutionary change.

The book chronicles the multi-layered divisions along ethnic, religious and regional lines. Both Tamil and Sinhalese communities lay claim to an indigenous past. Subramanian's narrative uncovers the religion-based nationalist discourse propagated by the state and institutional discriminations faced by the Tamil community that set the ground for the final battle in 2009. He compares the violence triggered after the killing of thirteen policemen by the Tigers in 1983 to a "motor" finally roaring into "unstoppable life" (33). What this book uncovers is a labyrinth of violence mired sometimes in nationalistic claims for hegemonic identity and sometimes in personal agenda. To the author, Sri Lanka is a country with "an astonishing variety of terrain" (46) but one marked with the monotony of violence.

Subramanian's delineation of the Tigers takes on the shape of a parricidal monster. The narrative details the horrors unleashed by the movement under the leadership of Velupillai Prabhakaran. The Tigers were known for their ingenuous brutalities. However, the paradox in the ranks of the fearsome Tigers—cadres with "automatic weapons", "bombs" and "cyanide capsules"—is telling. Subramanian perceives them as symbols, mostly forged, of self-willed terror. They were but human-controlled killing mechanisms denied of any agency and scope for resistance and subject to victimhood, much like their victims. While some young conscripts, fascinated by the use of guns, were attracted to the militant outfit, many were forcibly drafted.

In the words of Subramanian, the LTTE was "the outfit that Prabhakaran built, cast in his own image of cruelty" (49), strongly recalling Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein who had cast the monster in his own image that later turned parricidal. Some former senior members of the Tigers were disillusioned with the movement despite their belief in the cause of Tamil Eelam, because the Tigers "had no reservations about slaying their own" (48). Prabhakaran was intolerant even of minor Tamil rebel groups that competed with him for supremacy. To many disillusioned Tamils, the Tiger leadership was totalitarian even as Prabhakaran was held by an idealistic few as a messiah who would deliver the 'promised land'.

Even though Subramanian offers a scathing criticism of the Tigers, he is no less critical of the hand-in-glove relationship of the Sri Lankan government with the Buddhist Sangha. Subramanian's conversations with prominent Buddhist monks explain the centrality of the Buddhist Sangha in the parliament of Sri Lanka and the instrumental role of the Sangha in propagating a Sinhala Buddhist nationalist identity. The Sri Lankan government equally lent support to this ideology. The author denounces the "chauvinist" political agenda of the Sangha that "needled its government to go after the Tigers more hungrily, to show no restraint in wiping the country clean of them" (211). To this end, 'post-war' Sri Lanka was aggressively fashioned into a pristine Buddhist nation that the Sinhalese had been clamoring for since the 1950s.

Subramanian shares the pain of the boxed-in lives of the Tamils. Contrary to the title of this book and the subject of multi-pronged communal lines that fracture Sri Lanka, there is unanimity in the sufferings of the people and the losses they experienced. Even as the author maintains a distance between his subjects and himself, the authorial voice sometimes merges with the voices of the survivors. One has to remain vigilant about the blurred lines between the author and his respondents. Subramanian feels he was shuttling between "two distinct slices of time" and gradually experiencing a melting away of "the boundaries between these slices of time" (286). He participates in the collective venting of repressed anger and pain by "demonizing" the war, and accepting with as much pain as the others that in war only loss prevails.

LEISANGTHEM GITARANI DEVI

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