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dialog

A Bi-annual Interdisciplinary Journal

EDITOR'S NOTE

ARTICLES

BIDISHA BANERJEE, Understanding the Self as the Other: Geopolitics and the Dramatic Monologue in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

SAMEER CHOPRA, Popular Hindi Cinema and the Embattled Question of Gay Visibility

DAVID W. HART, Hummingbirds in a Box: The Human Nature of Etzler's Ecotopia

PARVINDER, Sports Autobiography: Aesthetics of In-betweenness

RAJESH BABU SHARMA, Judith Butler's Theory of Performativity and the Ontology of Subject/Identity

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VINEET MEHTA, Conservation Politics and the Decentring of the Tiger in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

INTERVIEW

"In Another World, In Another Language." Monika Kumar in conversation with Azad Zaidi

POETRY

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BOOK REVIEWS

Saugata Bhaduri on Pramod K. Nayar's *Citizenship and Identity in the Age of Surveillance*.

Maninder Sidhu on Hanif Kureishi's *The Last Word*.

Nishtha Saxena on Sachidananda Mohanty's *Cosmopolitan Modernity in Early 20th Century India*.

CONTENTS

EDITOR'S NOTE i

ARTICLES

- BIDISHA BANERJEE, Understanding the Self as the Other: Geopolitics and the Dramatic Monologue in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* 1

- SAMEER CHOPRA, Popular Hindi Cinema and the Embattled Question of Gay Visibility 18

- DAVID W. HART, Hummingbirds in a Box: The Human Nature of Etzler's Ecotopia 35

- PARVINDER, Sports Autobiography: Aesthetics of In-betweenness 51

- RAJESH BABU SHARMA, Judith Butler's Theory of Performativity and the Ontology of Subject/Identity 69

- MRINALINI KASHYAP, Misogyny and Patriarchy in Ancient Sanskrit Plays: A Temporal Observation of Shudraka's *Mrichhakatikam* and Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam* 87

- VINEET MEHTA, Conservation Politics and the Decentring of the Tiger in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* 102

INTERVIEW

- "In Another World, In Another Language." Monika Kumar in conversation with Azad Zaidi 117

POETRY

G. J. V. Prasad	131
Anisur Rehman	134
Rustam	137
Parminder Singh	140

BOOK REVIEWS

Saugata Bhaduri, "From Vulnerability to Compassionate Cosmopolitanism: Surviving Surveillance." Review of Pramod K. Nayar's <i>Citizenship and Identity in the Age of Surveillance</i> .	141
Maninder Sidhu, "Of Creativity and Carnality." Review of Hanif Kureishi's <i>The Last Word</i> .	148
Nishtha Saxena, "From Local to Global: New Perspectives on Cosmopolitanism." Review of Sachidananda Mohanty's <i>Cosmopolitan Modernity in Early 20th Century India</i> .	152

Notes on Contributors

Editor's Note

It almost seems like an inevitability to consider freedom of all hues and colours as the central motif of this issue. At a time when speaking truth to power or even maintaining silence is being interrogated, let us consider statist political agendas to not constitute an affront to individual intellectual freedom but instead, within autonomous academic space, as the provision of a possibility to come to a nuanced understanding of many concepts that need to be debated at institutes of higher learning, where men and women have been involved in research for years. Let writing become the face of the effort that seeks to support intellectual dissidence against reactionary forces that limit, define and regiment concepts and ways of being and becoming. Nationalism, Patriotism, Unity, Justice and Ethics were never discussed in the last 70 years in Indian universities and academia in the manner that they are being currently, a positive step forward since dialogue and debate are the bread and butter of intellectual engagement. The sustenance of discussion alone will create organic intellectuals.

A journal becomes a suitable platform for discussion because it does not intend to spew ill-conceived or hastily designed ideas. On

the contrary, journals contain well-reasoned and rehearsed pedagogy, and are expected to produce results only after years of thinking. In challenging orthodoxy, *dialog* attempts – after much deliberation – to stretch the limits of political and intellectual imagination often curtailed by the state. In so doing, we are grateful to our contributors for venturing outside the majoritarian view.

Our first contributor, Bidisha Banerjee, presents a powerful exploration of a Pakistani immigrant and his radicalization in post-9/11 America through her reading of Mohsin Hamid's novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Banerjee upsets the dichotomies that are often part of post-9/11 fiction by conducting a detailed examination of Hamid's use of the dramatic monologue as first-person narration. In posing the question whether Hamid's narrative is a conversation between the self and the other, she attempts to problematize the protagonist's sense of "fracture" or dichotomy between his two selves. But through her employment of Bakhtin's theories of dialogism, double-voiced discourse and polyphony, she significantly highlights the advantages of Hamid's polyvocal method of communication that pluralizes discourse and splits open the hegemonic unilateralism and terror of much 9/11 history.

Sameer Chopra's paper takes the concept of freedom to bear on the inherent fear of societal taboos, and draws attention to the criminalization of homosexuality through Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. As an interrogation of "idealized representations" in mainstream cinema, he challenges "the regimes of power that determine what can and cannot be seen or shown." The issue of possible homoeroticism in *dosti/yaari* films is extended to the more contemporary cinema that presents an "explicitly gay subtext" even as homosexuality is disavowed. Chopra points out that although these films are built on deliberate misreading of signs or gay transgressions within the accepted sphere of family interaction, they definitely exhibit a transition from being hitherto "unstated" to a level of greater visibility.

David Hart's unusual choice of Robert Antoni's novel *As Flies to Whatless Boys* brings forth an "incredible moment in British colonial history," that of fantastic ecological innovation through

technology in the 19th century initiated by the German environmentalist J. A. Etzler. In the novel, Willy Tucker recounts a journey to Trinidad in 1845 with Etzler and the Tropical Emigration Society. Etzler's patented inventions, the Satellite and the Naval Automaton, promised a paradise in the New World, which in fact ended up in disaster. While chasing a world of possibilities, Tucker realizes that the West Indians have a greater technological prowess "with their 'real' people and histories" that enable them to rescue the whites, than do members of the TES with their utopian implements.

Vineet Mehta explores an added element of colonialism within the issue of elitism in wildlife conservation. Why should the tiger be the chosen animal in the worldwide endeavour of protectionism? Surely there must exist an "environmental racism" that seeks to marginalize species considered less significant than the king of the jungle. At another level, gradation in animal species finds a parallel in the colonial practice of classification and regimentation of human beings. Not only is there a culture/nature binarism at work here, there is also a human/animal antagonism that underscores the segregation of the civilized from the wild. This is perceived in government policies that oust tribals and forest-dwellers while creating wildlife conservation parks and reserved areas for species like the tiger.

Rajesh Babu Sharma's discussion on the "ontology of the subject," offering a defense of Judith Butler's work on gender subjectivities, focuses on the concept of 'performativity' and emerges with an understanding of Butler's elaboration on the 'gendering' of the sexed subject itself. Doing away with primary interpretations about subjectivities by western philosophers, Rajesh attempts to explore how Butler's thought, in spite of serious lapses, explains gender as a matter of stylization through repeated performative acts rather than through the oversimplification of the sex/gender dichotomy. Parvinder's submission on life narratives of Muhammad Ali, Martina Navratilova and Milkha Singh is an attempt to re-write sports autobiography as a genre imbued with literary devices rather than hold the common assumption of these texts being a compendium

of scores and statistics. He thus opens up the field of culture studies to indicate that sports narratives can exist beyond “journalistic impersonality” even if they do not attain everlasting recognition. Mrinalini Kashyap is more conservative in her exploration of the declining status of Indian women from the Vedic times down to the writing of classical Sanskrit drama. Through a nuanced study, she examines the works of two ancient dramatists, Shudraka and Kalidasa, to show that the former kept alive feminist concerns and democratic thinking to an extent whereas the latter bears witness to the slow prejudice that had seeped into male writing.

As always, we have a set of fine poetry: I am pleased to showcase G. J. V. Prasad, Anisur Rahman and Parminder Singh. Saugata Bhaduri takes stock of Pramod Nayar’s new book on surveillance in civil society, which evaluates another kind of assault on our freedom.

The *dialog* interview this time features a Hindi poet, Asad Zaidi. Zaidi, whom one might hesitate to call a cosmopolitan poet, possesses a wit that spans an amazing range once the mind is fully engaged with his poetry. He is serious yet suave, metaphysical yet worldly. His conversation with Monika Kumar is wide ranging but focused. Zaidi responds to her probing queries with charm and great detail; he moves between topics – the significance of naming to the decline of regional languages – with both astonishing speed and remarkable restraint. He is a man of few words when you meet him but of great depth when read. In the interview, he speaks of one of his poems, “Aparāhn”, in which is written: “*ab main apnā dukh kyā kisī ghode se kahūngā?*” [Need I now share my sorrow with a horse?], which is poignant in the extreme, bringing a variety of connections with writers such as Anton Chekhov whose “halfpenny gingerbread horse” in the short story “Misery” serves as a listener; or Fakir Mohan Senapati who writes towards the end of his Odia novel *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* [Six Acres and a Third]: “Oh, horse, what difference does it make to you if you are stolen by a thief? You do not get much to eat here; you will not get much to eat there. No matter who becomes the next master, we will remain his slaves.” Why horse, I wonder? Perhaps because, as in Chekhov,

the horse is the only companion who does not object to hearing his master's woes when no one else seems interested; or, as in *Anhe Ghode Da Daan* [Alms for a Blind Horse], a Punjabi novel by Gurdial Singh, where the blind horse becomes a symbol in whose name the lower castes beg for alms. *Anhe Ghode Da Daan* tells the tale of the sheer marginalization of the Punjabi Dalit community who wander between city and village looking for a measure of dignity.

The horse, traditionally, is a symbol of freedom without limits. No other animal has contributed as much to the spread of civilization. But Shaktiman, a police horse, had to suffer amputation after being injured allegedly by a member of the Indian Parliament during a demonstration in the state of Uttarakhand. When a horse like Shaktiman is maimed, it symbolizes control over the freedom of spirit. There is a counter within literature, however, in a story about the seventh horse of the Chariot of the Sun. The seventh horse, yet another symbol epitomized in Dharamvir Bharati's *Suraj ka Saatvan Ghoda* [Seventh Horse of the Sun], has the potential of galloping through into the future full of dreams. So be it with intellectual engagement.

RUMINA SETHI

Understanding the Self as the Other: Geopolitics and the Dramatic Monologue in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

Introduction

Amit Chaudhuri begins his piece on Mohsin Hamid's 2007 novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, by telling the story of his chance encounter twenty years earlier with a South Asian man at the Marble Arch coach-stop, while on his way back to Oxford after attending a literary party in London. Chaudhuri confesses that he was drawn to this man by a feeling of homesickness and the fact that he was "someone from the subcontinent" (2008: 302). While this commonality draws Chaudhuri to the man, he also becomes acutely aware of the differences between them (primarily of class and religion). When he finds out that the man belongs to Pakistan, he

recalls, "it gave a new dimension to the encounter; of the seemingly familiar becoming imperceptibly unfamiliar – and, as a result, promising" (302). However, their encounter ends with an awkward conversation about religion leaving Chaudhuri unable to reconcile the man's stereotypically odd remarks with "his warmth, accessibility, the sense of comfort he gave forth" (304). Chaudhuri sees points of contact between his own chance encounter and Hamid's novel, namely "the notion of the unforeseen encounter and its consequences" (304). For me, this slippage between familiarity and unfamiliarity that Chaudhuri alludes to, is the key to reading Hamid's novel.

While Hamid's protagonist, an upwardly mobile, highly educated Pakistani immigrant who becomes radicalized in post-9/11 America, could not be farther from his silent interlocutor in the novel – an American visiting Lahore – there are points of commonality and even communion between them. On the surface, the two characters are dichotomized and maybe even pathologized, thereby allowing them to be neatly categorized in the reader's mind in terms of prevailing simplistic dichotomies: Eastern-Western, irrational-rational, radical-moderate, terrorist-CIA operative. However, there are other factors to consider, factors that cause the slippage between these two characters and what they represent. Changez, for one, is introduced to us as a firm believer in the doctrine of American meritocracy and eager to realize the American dream for himself. This makes him far less unfamiliar to the American than the latter might have imagined, as a fractured character.

Peter Morey argues that the novel is "an example of a sort of deterritorialization of literature which forces readers to think about what lies behind the totalizing categories of East and West, 'Them and Us' and so on – those categories continuously insisted upon in war of terror discourse" (2011: 138). This paper suggests that the novel not only forces us to think what lies behind these dichotomized categories, but also dismantles them, thereby bringing the binaries precariously close. Hamid accomplishes this most effectively through his narrative technique that combines first person narration and the dramatic monologue. By questioning and collapsing the polarizing

categories, he articulates the vision of a far less dialectical world. Critics have lamented the fact that despite the proliferation of creative works of fiction in the decade following September 11, much of what has been produced reiterates Western notions of the "Other" by pathologizing the non-white male, and often echoes the biases of Western intellectual thought. In his scathing critique of McEwan and Foer's novels as well as Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* (2005), Robert Eaglestone writes:

Despite their attempts, they show an inability to address the terror that is their proclaimed subject, and indeed perform their own failure and collapse of voice. And at the same time...their refusal to come to terms with it leads to a simplistic refusal to engage with the otherness of the terrorists and their ideas. Instead they use an array of techniques to recapture this within a pre-established framework of understanding: terror as simply evil (Foer), an illness (McEwan), or stems from universally comprehensible personal motives (Rushdie). There is little sense that there is, in the current crisis, a very different set of discourses that demand engagement, and that cannot simply be recapitulated (retranslated into, as it were) within a Western intellectual framework. (2010: 367)

I begin the article by demonstrating that Hamid's novel is a typical diasporic narrative in many ways and we get a double voiced discourse of migration from Changez – that is, we hear of his meteoric rise and then of his radicalization in a post-9/11 America. There is an implied conversation (although rendered in a single voice) between the Changez of the first half of the novel and his later, radicalized self. I attempt to show the contradictory ways in which, although the narrative is a dramatic monologue, we do in fact have several different monologues within the text: the primary monologue between Changez and his American interlocutor who is effectively silenced as the auditor must be in a dramatic monologue. There is also the monologue between the implied author (Hamid) and the implied reader (who may or may not be American/western). Through a Bakhtinian analysis of the monologue, whereby I argue that it is in fact dialogic and polyphonic, I move to my final assertion that the monologue is a conversation between the fractured self or the self and the easily recognizable and always, already internalized other.

An immi/emigrant novel

The Reluctant Fundamentalist (2007; henceforth *RF*) is the story of Changez, a 22-year-old Princeton graduate from Pakistan whose life and beliefs change dramatically after the events of September 11, 2001. It is in many ways a diasporic novel, delineating the gradual fracture of its protagonist as he is unable to cope with the internal conflict of his two lives that straddle two continents. When the novel begins, Changez's story is well on its way to following the trajectory of the typical immigrant's American dream. He is an excellent student at Princeton, who successfully interviews with Underwood Samson and Company, a boutique firm, to land himself a plum job at the enviable age of twenty-two.

He goes through the predictable stages of immigrant life – from shame about one's own country and culture through mimicry of the adopted culture – before culminating in a violent and necessary rejection of American culture impelled by the fragmentation he feels he can no longer ignore. As Changez becomes his boss's "fair-haired boy" (*RF* 95) – a curious term to use, since along with its implication of favouritism, it also seems to suggest a symbolic racial transgression – he realizes that he is entering the same social class in New York that his family is slipping from in Lahore. While on a brief posting in Manila, deeply troubled by the realization that not just New York, but even Manila is wealthier than Lahore, Changez resorts to something he had never done before – "I attempted to act and speak, as much as my dignity would permit, more like an *American*" (*RF* 65). Glissant argues that when the initial impulse of a transplanted peoples to return to the originary homeland has declined under pressure to come to terms with the new locale and culture, "the obsession with imitation will appear.... Not only is imitation itself not workable but real obsession with it is intolerable. The mimetic impulse is a kind of insidious violence" that can only lead to trauma (1992: 17).

On a trip to Lahore, Changez is embarrassed by how shabby his house appears. But as he begins to reacclimatize himself, he realizes it is "the Americanness of [his] own gaze" (*RF* 124) that

causes the discomfort: "I was looking about me with the eyes of a foreigner, and not just any foreigner, but that particular type of entitled and unsympathetic American who so annoyed me when I encountered him in the classrooms and workplaces of your country's elite" (*RF* 124). Following this, in a classic scene of dissociation and fracture, he stares at his own reflection in the bathroom mirror and resolves to "exorcize the unwelcome sensibility by which I had become possessed" (*RF* 124). It is only after his gaze is consciously rectified, that he sees his ancestral home as beautiful once again.

It soon becomes clear that Changez has been a fractured protagonist even before his radicalization in post-9/11 America. Hamid presents a nuanced narrative that is at times deliberately paradoxical. As Hartnell points out: "Hamid's Pakistani migrant protagonist is not simply alienated but also simultaneously drawn to the isolationist and exceptionalist currents of the American national narrative" (2010: 336). But this is not unique to Changez. Scholars like Sunil Bhatia and Vijay Prashad have studied the ways in which professional South Asian immigrants in the US, often called the "model minority," identify strategically with their sense of difference. Bhatia argues that the notion of American exceptionalism is rooted in the material success of model minority immigrants: "This belief that talent and ambition can overcome shortcomings and lead to success allows these immigrants to strategically background their brownness or ethnicity and make a case for a colour-blind meritocracy" (2007: 193). This accounts for the double voiced discourse with which the model minority often speaks due to the constant contradiction, struggle and negotiation between their different cultural selves. Acculturation for them is a highly contested process rather than a simplistic either/or phenomenon of marginalization or assimilation.

September 11 functions as a watershed moment in Changez's diasporic trajectory. The conflicts and rejection he feels, culminates with this apocalyptic event and its aftermath when his Muslimness is made the central aspect of his personality. The attacks take place almost half way through the novel and Changez recalls watching the events unfold on television. He says with chilling candour: "I

stared as one – and then the other – of the twin towers of New York's World Trade Centre collapsed. And then I *smiled*. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased" (RF 72). Until now the reader has been lulled into the comfort of reading a familiar diasporic narrative about a man working hard to fulfil his American Dream. However, from this point onward, the narrative takes on a disturbing psychological dimension as we are confronted by Changez's acute alienation and othering in the days following the attack on the World Trade towers. In the pages that follow, there are searing critiques of American policy and a fierce rage as he sees its repercussions generate ripples across the world. The narrative voice takes on an understated yet painful calmness as Changez speaks about gradually making a connection between the crumbling world around him and the destruction of his American dream, until he is no longer capable of self-deception.

His own turn, albeit reluctantly, towards radicalism is subtly suggested. On his way back from Lahore, he does not shave his two-week-old beard; he says, "It was, perhaps, a form of protest on my part, a symbol of my identity, or perhaps I sought to remind myself of the reality I had just left behind" (RF 130). Even the nature of his idiomatic expressions changes. Commenting on his lover Erica's gauntness when he goes to visit her at the clinic where she is institutionalized, he says: "I thought she looked like someone who was about to complete the month of fasting and had been too consumed by prayer and reading of the holy book to give sufficient thought to the nightly meal" (RF 134). This is coming a long way linguistically for someone who spoke of being a "fair haired boy" less than fifty pages earlier. The violence inherent in making one's religion the most important component of one's identity is underscored by the impact his beard has on the way he is perceived. He is subjected to verbal abuse by complete strangers and his colleagues speak in whispers about him.

In post-9/11 America, he gradually becomes more radicalized; *seemingly* no longer conflicted about loyalty between Pakistan and America as he begins to align more with his ethnic and racial identity. Consequently, he feels self-contempt for abandoning his people at

a time of war and living in the west. He calls himself “a modern-day janissary, a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine and was perhaps even colluding to ensure that my own country faced the threat of war” (RF 152). As he is forced to confront his national loyalties, he is unable to “focus on the *fundamentals*” (RF 98; my emphasis) as he had been taught to do at Underwood Samson.¹ He loses his job and resolves to return to Lahore. He notes the consequences of American foreign policy with horror – “And you acted out these beliefs on the stage of the world, so that the entire planet was rocked by the repercussions of your tantrums” (RF 168), leading him to the resolution that “[s]uch an America had to be stopped in the interests not only of the rest of humanity, but also your own” (RF 168).

Although he returns to Pakistan, he is unable to forget aspects of his diasporic life. Despite his growing identification with his Pakistani self, a unified self does not emerge, and the fracture he felt earlier, remains. He tells the American: “I had returned to Pakistan, but my inhabitation of your country had not entirely ceased” (RF 172). He remains emotionally entwined with Erica, has vivid and elaborate dreams of living a married life with her in Lahore and is tormented by feelings of sadness, regret and mourning. He speaks of never being able to fully recover from his relationship with Erica and being forever altered by it: “[I]t is not always possible to restore one’s boundaries after they have been blurred and made impermeable by a relationship: try as we might, we cannot reconstitute ourselves as the autonomous beings we previously imagined ourselves to be. Something of us is now outside, and something of the outside is now within us” (RF 174). Given that his relationship with Erica is a metaphor of his relationship with America, he is forever altered by his immigrant experience and a return to the homeland cannot cure the fracture he endured in diaspora. The narrative structure of Hamid’s novel mirrors this fracture that Changez continues to feel despite a seeming (albeit false) consolidation of the fractured self in the figure of the radicalized Muslim who returns home.

The Dramatic Monologue

One of the striking features of Hamid's novel is its first person narration. Throughout the novel, Changez addresses an unnamed American in Lahore the purpose of whose visit is unclear, gradually revealing to him the trajectory of his story from being a Princeton undergraduate to a high flying corporate man to a radical. We never actually hear the American's voice; everything he says or asks is relayed through Changez's voice. By denying him a voice and therefore subjectivity, Changez engages in an othering of his white, male interlocutor.

In her review of Hamid's novel, Melita Teale lavishes him with praise for his narrative device: "the genius of a novelist can be revealed by first-person narration, when an author displays the balls inherent in giving up his own omniscient third person and adopting the voice of his hero" (2010). She goes on to suggest that this narrative technique makes the text uncanny. Hamid has himself written about the process by which he arrived at the framework of a dramatic monologue for this novel. He tells us that in its first incarnation, the novel had an omniscient third person narrator. He rewrote the novel a year later, shifting the voice into an American-accented first person, but this did not entirely work either since he felt "there was not enough Pakistan" in the novel. He finally arrived at the frame of a dramatic monologue in which the Pakistani protagonist speaks to an American listener in what he "hoped was an appropriately catalysing voice, a voice modelled on class conscious, elite Pakistani schools (set up by the British a century and a half ago), which in its formal rigidity and potential menace and sense of hailing from the past, chimed stylistically with certain popular stereotypes about Muslims and Islam" (2014).

On the surface, the first person narrative works very well to bring out the suspicions and stereotyping of the American tourist. With disarming candour, yet troubling forthrightness, Changez deconstructs the American's preconceived notions in comments like: "You seem worried. Do not be; this burly fellow is merely our waiter, and there is no need to reach under your jacket, I assume to grasp your wallet..." (RF 5) or "Ah, our tea has arrived! Do not look so

suspicious. I assure you sir, nothing untoward will happen to you, not even a runny stomach" (RF 11). But there is another level at which this device of first person narration functions. It reduces what would have been a dialogue (between Changez and the American tourist) to a dramatic monologue where, in essence, one of the speakers is entirely silenced. Thus the "black and white dichotomies, generally seen as typical of fundamentalist discourses" (Pesso-Miquel and Stierstorfer 2007: 2) ostensibly established by the structure of the novel, is at the same time severely undercut by the enforced silencing of the westerner. Hamid's narrative technique not only brings mutual distrusts and stereotypes to the fore, but also self-consciously disrupts the dialogic resolution of these misconceptions; this particular narrative device allows him to blur and dissolve the boundaries between the self and the other, the native and the immigrant, thus enabling him to delineate the vision of a less dialectical world.

Commonly associated with Victorian poetry, a perfect dramatic monologue is said to include seven definite characteristics: "speaker, audience, occasion, revelation of character, interplay between speaker and audience, dramatic action and action which takes place in the present" (Sessions 1947: 508). Hamid's novel fulfils all these characteristics. Later critics of the form focus on whether the speaking subject is also the poet (as is often the case in lyric poetry, but not necessarily the case in a dramatic monologue). Sinfield posits the concept of the feint, arguing that a dramatic monologue "pretends to be something other than what it is: an invented speaker masquerades in the first person, which customarily signifies the poet's voice" (qtd. in Byron 2003: 14). So although there are signs that the speaker is not the poet and that this is a fictional account, the use of the first person narration creates a feint where we believe in the real existence of the speaker. In the case of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, something analogous takes place since the author's background is quite similar to that of the protagonist. Either man can be described as an upper class Pakistani who attended college and law school in America, worked as a business consultant, moved from New York to London soon after the September 11 attacks and

back to Pakistan several years later. Thus, in the novel we have a duologue – that is, two simultaneous dramatic monologues taking place concurrently. At the level of the text we have a conversation between Changez and his American auditor; but outside the text, we also have the implied author (Hamid) speaking to the implied reader. Byron, in his study of the dramatic monologue, suggests that “monologues which exploit dramatic irony indicate the presence of a double-voiced discourse, two differently oriented speech acts within the same words” (16). In Hamid’s novel, a similar “doubly voiced speech” of Mikhail Bakhtin can be observed, a discourse that “includes all speech which acknowledges not only what is being spoken about (that is, ‘the object of utterance’) but also the existence of another speech act by another addressee” (Pearce 2006: 227).

Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism may be particularly useful in exploring the first-person narration of Hamid’s novel. Bakhtin metaphorizes the notion of dialogue as we understand it (to mean conversation) and extends it to all thought production. Thus dialogue is based on *difference* which can be connected by *communication*. The binary opposition set up at the outset in Hamid’s novel, between the narrator and the narratee, provides for adequate differences – racial, national, political, and so on. However, the subsequent acts of communication are conveyed to us through the narrator since the narratee is silenced and spoken for. For Bakhtin, dialogue exists at the level of the word itself. Speakers do not coin their own words; the words already exist for others and function in their own particularities. He writes:

The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes one’s own only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language, but rather it exists in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions. It is from here that one must take the word and make it one’s own. (1981: 293-4)

Thus, all language expresses the intention of the self and the other, and there *can* be dialogue even when there is no perceived listener

or other. This is dialogue at the level of the individual word: "Dialogic relationships are possible not only among whole (relatively whole) utterances; a dialogic approach is possible toward any signifying part of an utterance, even toward an individual word, if that word is perceived not as the impersonal word of language but as a sign of someone else's semantic position" (1984: 184-5). When analysed through the principle of dialogism, it becomes clear that the dramatic monologue we hear in Hamid's novel is, in fact, a dialogue and an act of communication.

This analysis also allows a recognition of the relationship between Changez and his interlocutor as simultaneously oppositional as well as one that dissolves boundaries between self and other. Bakhtin's dialogic model of consciousness and meaning production is necessarily oppositional – "a word provokes its counter word.... Word is a two-sided act. It is precisely the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee. Each and every word expresses the 'one' in relation to the 'other'" (Morris 2002: 12-13). However, given that the word and the counter word are both articulated by the same speaker in the novel, the oppositionality is continuously and simultaneously undermined. When Changez articulates the American's queries or responses himself, it is akin to reported speech where "the boundaries between the speech that is reported and the speech which is doing the reporting (that is between the two centres of consciousness) are increasingly eroded" (Morris 13), in favour of a dialogic open-endedness.

In his work, Bakhtin uses Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, a short novel that has curious similarities with Hamid's. Part of Dostoevsky's novel is a monologue where the protagonist addresses an unnamed other in a confessional, anticipating criticism from the invisible interlocutor and then defending himself against it. Bakhtin uses the term "hidden polemic" to describe words that are articulated in response to words that are themselves not present in the text. While the word "polemic" may again suggest an oppositional stance, a refutation of the other's discourse, Bakhtin is quick to point out the contradictory effect. Describing the way in which hidden polemic works, he writes:

[D]iscourse is directed toward an ordinary referential object, naming it, portraying, expressing, and only indirectly striking a blow at the other's discourse, clashing with it, as it were, within the object itself. As a result, the other person's discourse begins to influence authorial discourse from within. For this reason, hidden polemical discourse is double-voiced. (qtd. in Morris 109)

Similarly, much of Changez's monologue is double-voiced, inward-looking and self-referential.

Hamid's novel then becomes a conversation that Changez has with himself in an attempt to negotiate his fractured identity in a post-9/11 world. The American interlocutor's discomfort with being on foreign soil mirrors Changez's own alienation in America, and although he repeatedly refers to America as "your country" in his confessional monologue, he feels a deeply conflicted sense of identity in the wake of his meteoric rise on the social scale in America, an identity that becomes further complicated by the events of September 11. The polarized identities of Changez and the American in the present time – namely radicalized Muslim and suspected CIA operative – become surprisingly enmeshed as the novel hurtles to its unexpected conclusion with both men seemingly poised to kill each other.

Polyphonic Narrative

We hear the story of Changez's immigrant life as well as his subsequent emigration from America through his own voice. This voice may be described in many ways; it is, as Hamid himself has taken pains to point out, anachronistic, overtly polite and vaguely menacing (Yaqin 2008: 46). As demonstrated above, it is also a double voiced articulation in the sense that Changez is voicing his split diasporic identity. Through him, we also "hear" the voices of the other characters in the novel – Erica, Jim, Wainwright and others, making it a polyvocal narrative articulated by a single narrator.

Changez's narrative is also confessional. He speaks with honesty and frankness to the American about the stages of his acculturation process, his romance with Erica as well as his subsequent radicalization and rejection of America. He even claims to be "bound by a certain shared intimacy" to the narratee

(*RF* 184). Confession as a narrative mode blurs boundaries of identity. Given the menacing undertone in their conversation as well as the fact that we are unsure of the precise nature of the relationship between the American and Changez, the veracity of Changez's confession and his reliability as a narrator are further undermined. He says to the American: "perhaps you are convinced that I am an inveterate liar" (*RF* 183). Morey goes so far as to call this "the novel-as-hoax" (139). He writes: "We cannot be at all certain that we are privy to his innermost thoughts: merely the carapace he wishes to construct" (140). All these factors create for a polyvocal narrative being articulated by one man. Instead of creating a strong identity for Changez, his narrative functions instead to blur, render fluid and dissolve his identity in the mind of the reader. Again, this is the Bakhtinian notion of polyphony which provides a plurality of consciousnesses and dramatizes contradictions "forcing a character to converse with his own double, with the devil, with his alter ego, with his own caricature" (qtd. in Morris 90-1). This is deliberate on Hamid's part and a necessary aspect of the discourse for understanding post-9/11 America that is offered through the novel. Like Bakhtin, Hamid seems to be suggesting that truth necessitates a plurality of consciousnesses.

Otherness and Fear

It is often argued that to fully understand one's self, we must be aware not simply of the limits of our identity but also of what lies beyond – its otherness. But where is the boundary between the self and the other located? How is this dialectical opposition formulated? These questions may be answered by understanding oneself as other. In this final section of the article, I propose that Hamid's novel, having a silenced narratee who listens to the narrator's dramatic monologue, as well as the polyvocal and dialogic narrative that implicitly emerges from this monologue, mirrors an attempt on the protagonist's part to understand the self as other.

The dialectic between otherness and fear is established very early in the novel in the relationship between the narrator and the American. The opening merits extensive quotation:

Excuse me, sir, but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America. I noticed that you were looking for something; more than looking, in fact you seemed to be on a *mission*, and since I am both a native of this city and a speaker of your language, I thought I might offer you my services. How did I know you were American? No, not by the color of your skin; we have a range of complexions in this country, and yours occurs often among the people of our northwest frontier [...] Instead it was your *bearing* that allowed me to identify you, and I do not mean that as an insult, for I see your face has hardened, but merely as an observation. (RF 1-2)

This passage sets up several binary oppositions between the speaker and the listener, the American and the bearded Lahore native (Muslim by implication), the self and other (note here the speaker is the self, making the white American the other), while also attempting to dispel such binaries by drawing attention to the fair skin of the Pakistani characters and statements like “sportsmen and soldiers of all nationalities tend to look alike” (RF 1). It also sets up a dialectic of fear and otherness because the American seems alarmed at being approached this way. Although there is a cultural texture to the story since Changez acts as the American’s guide, offering him advice on what to eat and drink in Lahore and explaining people’s actions around them, this dialectic of fear and otherness continues throughout the novel.

Discussing his choice of the dramatic monologue, Hamid has commented that the mode allowed him to generate a sense of tension between Changez and his American interlocutor: “[I]t is a tension which comes from a sense of mutual suspicion between America and the Muslim world” (Yaqin 46). Robert J. C. Young has written about the effects of terror and the absurd notion of being always already fearful of something, though we do not know what it is that we are fearful of. He writes:

‘Terror’ effects terror effects spontaneously, for terror comprises nothing but its effects. Terror effects are self-generating, uncontrollable, proliferating. Totally random... Terror is a kind of militarized aura, erupting indeterminately from the subject or event and in the viewer almost at the same time. The propaganda of the deed is more powerful because no one can be sure what its meaning may be. . . . It works as both an individual and a collective emotion, subjecting all to a charged state of fear, an overpowering sense of imminent danger – extreme anxiety, danger so near that it overwhelms and paralyzes you. . . . To declare war on terror

therefore is, strictly speaking, to declare war on – yourself. Or on something within yourself, that you feel sure somehow is not you, produced by someone or something else. (2010: 307)

The presence of the silenced other in the narrative and the dialectical relationship between the two men allows for a concretization of Young's "effect of terror" – they are both mutually suspicious and constantly wary of each other, and their motives remain ambiguous to the reader. It can be concluded then that the American and Changez are in fact one and the same person in a dialogue with two sides of the same being – the self and the other.

The othered American of the novel epitomizes the alterity and diasporic otherness that Changez feels as a Muslim living in post-9/11 America. However, this gets further complicated as the novel draws to its surprising, inconclusive and abrupt end. Changez begins teaching at the university in Lahore and becomes involved in some sort of anti-American protest movement. While the purpose of the American's visit is unclear, we gradually realize he might have been sent to investigate Changez's anti-American activities or even to assassinate him, and Changez may in fact be aware of this. The novel ends without resolution of the mounting tension as Changez (who has been receiving strange hand signals from the waiter of the restaurant who has followed them as they walk back to the American's hotel) reaches out to shake hands with the American and the American in turn reaches into his jacket revealing "a glint of metal" (RF 184). Thus we realize at the final moment of the novel's conclusion that both characters are poised to kill the other. The final scene hearkens back to Changez's words in an earlier chapter when he likened the American's shifty behaviour to "the behaviour of an animal that has ventured too far from its lair and is now, in unfamiliar surroundings, uncertain whether it is predator or prey" (RF 31). Hamid's double voiced, polyphonic narrative has broken down identity boundaries and the reader is left wondering who might be the predator and who the prey.

Conclusion

Such an ending suggests that the fractured self will always be in conflict with itself; the Lacanian search for an autonomous self is futile for the diasporic individual and the attempt to destroy or exorcize one side of the fractured self could lead to self-annihilation. The ending has been interpreted variously as a “classic cliff-hanger” (Scanlan 2010: 276), or a thriller. However, Hamid himself has expressed surprise at such characterizations of the novel: “The reason they call it a thriller is that they are already afraid when they start reading the book. So the invitation of the book is to step back from that and say, well, what if it is just a conversation? A dialogue?” (Yaqin 48). Critics like Hartnell have also argued that the novel creates “an atmosphere of mutual suspicion and impending violence . . . that challenges and implicates the reader’s own processes of identification” (337). Casting doubt on the strongly oppositional and mutually destructive relationship between the two characters along with the polyvocal conversation between the fused identities, between the self and the othered self, serves to dissolve and call into question their inherent dichotomy. Scanlan has hailed this novel as one that enters “dangerous terrain, the fault-line between the binaries of East and West, aggressor and victim, the formerly colonized and their former colonizers, and insist(s) on finding a living, breathing space” (277). In this space, violent polarities are dissolved as are fixed identities and narrative trajectories. My analysis of Hamid’s novel demonstrates that it is only by seeing the self as the other that we disrupt the perpetuity of violent othering, mutual distrust and self-generated fear that has become the norm of a post-9/11 world.

Notes

- ¹ A short story “Focus on the Fundamentals” adapted from Hamid’s novel appeared in *The Paris Review*, No. 178, Fall 2006.

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Popular Hindi Cinema and the Embattled Question of Gay Visibility

The recent reinstatement of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, criminalizing all forms of sexual expression “against the order of nature,” has, once again, brought the vexed issue of homosexuality within the narrative of the Indian nation into focus.¹ This paper purports to analyze the politics of the emergence of male homoerotic desire in popular Hindi cinema, or “Bollywood,” to argue that commercially successful films such as Karan Johar’s *Dostana* (2008), while inaugurating a vocabulary for the exploration of “the love that dare not speak its name,”² paradoxically perpetuate other silences on queer issues in Indian society, particularly pertaining to class and cultural location.³ The fact that homosexuality is now openly referenced in our films does not automatically challenge the regimes of power that determine what can and cannot be seen or shown. Not everyone across the social spectrum in India has access

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to the emancipating possibilities of “gayness”; the language of self-identification or “coming out,” one might do well to remember, is the preserve of the neoliberal elite. Through a close reading of *Dostana*, I intend to demonstrate how mainstream depictions of male homosexuality – framed within the late-capitalist ethos of unmitigated consumerism and the discourse of “privacy” – marginalize the more widely pervasive forms of male-male sexuality in India that do not organize themselves under the signifier of gay identity.

Cinematic representations need to be recognized as one of the main channels through which heterosexist values are disseminated, perpetuated and reinforced. Consequently, cultural invisibility, underrepresentation and misrepresentation in popular culture are some of the foremost concerns that ought to be addressed in both queer political praxis and social intervention. Given the seminal role of popular Indian cinema in imagining the “nation,” it is fundamental that we reflect on the ways in which homosexual social exclusion and inclusion have been articulated in this particularly potent medium.⁴ Undeniably, visibility is indispensable for a community that has been written out of existence in a context where any representation of counter-heteronormative sexual and gender identities fetishizes them as comic sidekicks or dangerous psychopaths. The recurrent figure of the “sissy,” for instance, in films such as *Ghulam* (1998, dir. Vikram Bhatt), *Pyaar Kiya To Darna Kya* (1998, dir. Sohail Khan) and *Taal* (1999, dir. Subhash Ghai), is little more than a caricature; his body so fully over-determined by his effeminacy and flaming desire for the macho-hero that it thoroughly effaces his subjectivity and implied homosexuality. If images are an index of social relations, the misrecognition and under-recognition of queers in visual cultures are indeed symptomatic of their subaltern position in a deeply conservative and homophobic society.

One must, however, not lose sight of the way visibility itself can undermine the political purposes it seeks to achieve. It is not a coincidence that most of the gay characters that form part of the current explosion of homosexual themes in popular Hindi cinema are involved in glamorous, “creative” fields. In Madhur Bhandarkar’s

Page 3 (2005), one of the first commercial Hindi films to feature a self-identified gay character, Abhijeet, played by Rehaan Engineer, is a Bollywood make-up artiste. *Rules: Pyaar Ka Superhit Formula* (2005, dir. Parvati Balagopalan) similarly features Jogi (Manish Chaudhary) as an advertising professional, whereas *Fashion* (2008, dir. Madhur Bhandarkar) has Samir Soni in the role of Rahul Arora, a top-notch fashion designer. All of them invariably hail from urban settings. Clearly exposed to “Westernization” or influences of post-liberalization modernity through life in the city, they are educated, well-heeled and tend to break into English every now and then. This indicates that even as non-heterosexual subjectivities are being acknowledged in mainstream cinema for the first time, their coding in terms of social background often ends up buttressing the nationalist contention that homosexuality is part of a set of deviant “excesses” “taken on” by those predisposed to “foreign” habits and ways of being.⁵ Of singular relevance here is Paola Bacchetta’s thesis on “queerphobia” in postcolonial Hindu nationalism (1999: 141-66). Bacchetta defines Hindu nationalism as a repressive ideology, wherein the “other” is labelled as queer and the queer is othered in the process: “the ideal Hindu nationalist citizen body rests on the exclusion of others who embody . . . improper gendering, sexuality and nationalization” (151). Added to this are the tropes of promiscuity and hyper-sexuality associated with the “porno-West” that are seen as threats to the chastity of the “heterosexual, virile Hindu nation” (153). In the current context then, Bacchetta concludes, “the queer continues to serve as a trope for all otherness” (155). It is clear from this analysis that sexual non-conformity constitutes a central node in an ever-expanding spectrum of cultural markers that are customarily reviled as “un-Indian.” The occupational pursuits that the characters mentioned above are shown to be engaged in supposedly gives them the “license” to “experiment” with up-market, non-traditional, hedonistic values and mores, so that unlike Radha and Sita – two housewives located in a non-affluent, quotidian, North-Indian milieu in Deepa Mehta’s path-breaking lesbian romance, *Fire* (1996) – they never pose any real threat to the moral imperatives of the nation.⁶

Dostana consolidates this trend. Set in Miami, the plot of the film revolves around Sam (Abhishek Bachchan) and Kunal (John Abraham), two Indian immigrants who pretend to be in a gay relationship in order to rent an apartment occupied by an Indian-American woman, Neha (Priyanka Chopra) and her aunt, Ms Melwani (Sushmita Mukherjee). When Sam's mother (Kirron Kher) discovers her son to be "gay," she is initially shocked, even hysterical, but eventually comes to accept him. The film concludes with Sam and Kunal attaining their joint residency permit and simultaneously revealing to Neha that they are, in fact, straight. Thus goes the surface trajectory of the plot, but a closer reading reveals how the film destabilizes its own efforts to unequivocally establish the "truth" about its protagonists' sexuality. It cleverly reignites the uncertainty around the precise nature of Sam and Kunal's friendship, resisting, in Judith Butler's terms, the "normative telos of definitional closure" (1990: 16). In the culminating sequence of the film, Neha, Kunal and Sam are shown relaxing on the beach when Neha asks the two men whether they had actually fallen for each other at any point during their deception. Shocked at her insinuation, Kunal and Sam shout out in denial, but as Neha leaves them alone to take a stroll, they remember the instance of their forced public kiss that they shared in order to placate an angry Neha for falsifying their real sexual identities. Too embarrassed to acknowledge that they might have actually found that moment of intimacy pleasurable, they nervously look away from each other, trying to shrug off the matter. In this fleeting moment, the central premise that drives the story forward, of Sam and Kunal's "real" heterosexuality lurking beneath the charade of being homosexual, is irrevocably queered/queried.

Half-way through the narrative time, Sam's mother, who remains unnamed in the film, arrives from London, and finding her son locked in an embrace with Neha's gay boss, Murli/'M' (Boman Irani), passes out. The following dream-song sequence, "*Ma da Laadla Bigad Gaya*," (Mama's boy has gotten spoilt [my trans.]) has Sam's mother walking around in public spaces, constantly "misperceiving" the two boys' behaviour as manifestation of their homosexuality. The "real" image, for example, of Sam and Kunal playing football

on the beach, transforms into the two of them playfully tussling in the sand. Wherever she goes, Sam's mother imagines her son and Kunal openly performing their "gayness": as babies in strollers, as a couple walking arm in arm, as businessmen in suits and as old men in wheelchairs. Here, the song and dance sequence performs a distinctly carnivalesque function: it renders visible and helps disseminate the very queerness that it ostensibly disavows as "mistaken," allowing the characters as well as the audience to promiscuously move in and out of heteronormative frameworks of representation.⁷

The song concludes with Sam's mother passing out yet again. When she comes back to her senses, matters turn more serious as Neha confronts her about Sam's identity, urging her to accept wholeheartedly the biggest truth of his life. Both Neha and Sam's mother carry the impression at this stage that Kunal and Sam are indeed a couple, and this allows the film to make a subtle plea for tolerance and acceptance of gay identity. Soon, Sam's mother is shown welcoming Kunal into the house in the same exaggeratedly ritualistic fashion that she would her daughter-in-law, even apologizing to her son for her initial disapproval: "Son, forgive me, I couldn't understand your love What kind of mother am I? I wished for my own son's sorrows." Amidst uproarious laughter, she hands over the gold bangles she intended to pass on to her *bahu*, or daughter-in-law, to Kunal, asking him to observe *karvachauth* (a ritual fast) for her son's long life. Emphasizing the importance of this sequence, the director, Tarun Mansukhani, states:

Definitely a statement I wanted to make with this film was that, as a parent, you must accept your child's preferences and choices because it's theirs and not for you to decide for them. However, to bring across a message like that, I knew I had to do it in a humorous way, in a way that would make it appealing for an entire audience, rather than just a select few.⁸

Although one could argue that the overall political thrust of this moment is assimilationist, and therefore not radically "queer," insofar as that term signifies a conscious opposition to forces of normalization and co-option, the acceptance of Sam and Kunal as

partners by a mother who gradually overcomes her visceral homophobia, significantly framing her son's desires for another man as "love," is a powerful symbolic message in a country where the family, even more than the law, becomes the greatest obstacle in the way of the realization of gay identity.⁹ If the biologically-defined family is *the* institution "that . . . naturalizes compulsory heterosexuality, delegitimizing potential flows of desire along innumerable and unpredictable dimensions," *Dostana* can be said to artfully queer its parameters from within (Menon 2007: 36).

Indeed, the very fact that the film invokes the word "gay" with such nonchalant frequency is a considerable paradigm shift. In the midst of convincing Ms Melwani to allow them into her apartment as tenants, Kunal exclaims impatiently, "*Hum gay hain, yeh mera boyfriend hai*" (We're gay and he is my boyfriend [my trans.]), causing Neha's aunt to almost faint in horror. The hilarity of the situation notwithstanding, the scene highlights only too well the reluctance with which Hindi cinema has hitherto dealt with the discourse of naming queer relationships in distinctly identitarian terms. So pervasive is the circulation of the word in the film and so effortless its utterability that it even infiltrates the homophobic vocabulary of Sam's mother, who then deploys it in the most off-hand, non-judgmental ways. Shortly after blessing Sam and Kunal's bond, she admonishes her son for not being more mindful of Neha's troubles at office: "*Maana ki tu gay hai, tujhe ladkiyon mein koi interest nahin, per ladkiyan dikhayi toh deti hai na puttar*" (I understand you're gay and have no interest in girls, but surely you do see them around you, don't you, son? [my trans.]). In the end-credits sequence, furthermore, a "God" figure declares to the audience, "*Yeh sach hai ki aapka beta gay hai*" (It is true that your son is gay [my trans.]), alerting them to the possibility that the matter might be closer home than they imagine. In a collection of essays that was published especially to commemorate the 2009 Delhi High Court judgment that struck down Section 377, the editors wrote:

Dostana . . . was perhaps the first instance in Bollywood cinema where the word 'gay' was used in an almost casual everyday sense. This was in stark contrast to

the first official mainstream gay film called *My Brother Nikhil*, which is about a gay athlete who succumbs to AIDS, and did not use the terms 'gay' or 'homosexual' even once. *Dostana* introduced queerness to the Indian public and initiated conversations around it in homes and offices (Narain and Gupta 2011: xxix-x).

Dostana's persistent, almost obsessive invocation of gay identity can be seen to rupture the cultural contract of silence on questions of sexual dissidence, rendering the homosexual subject nameable, and thus open for debate and deliberation in contexts from which it has thus far remained fully excluded. It is only when a society acknowledges the existence of a particular phenomenon – an unconventional or alternative sexual choice in this case – and accesses a language, an idiom, to speak unambiguously about it, can it proceed to, albeit grudgingly, come to terms with it. Seen in this light, the humour deployed in the film has a curiously enabling function; it not only sets up the contours of a distinct gay identity in the public imagination but also allows mass audiences to distinguish the homosexual from the other, more ubiquitously available figure of gender deviance in popular Hindi cinema, the *hijra* or eunuch. "For a South Asian viewership," Gayatri Gopinath remarks: "the relative visibility of *hijras* on screen [paradoxically] . . . closes down the possibilities of representations of other forms of non-heteronormative genders or sexualities" (2000: 294). By supposedly personifying the full extent of sexual non-conformity or cross-gender identification, the *hijra* becomes an overarching signifier, severely curtailing the prospects of portraying an effeminate character as, for instance, "gay." However one looks at it, it is a point difficult to contest: *Dostana* made the notion of being gay more legible for a mainstream audience, thereby initiating a gradual, but irreversible process of engagement with homosexuality in more positive and non-confrontational terms.

Not every aspect of this popularization of gay identity is just as unproblematic. Much is to be celebrated about the new visibility on queer issues in Hindi cinema, but it could be argued that the current emphasis on identitarian labels has actually robbed same-sex friendships of their former unselfconscious intensity. In the films of yesteryears based on the romantic idealization of male friendship

or *dosti* – Ramesh Sippy’s *Sholay* (1975) being the classic example – moments of homosocial bonding between men are usually less inhibited in their display of emotion and affection when compared to the more recent representations, unencumbered as they are by the burden of “gayness.”¹⁰ The expansive pleasures of homoerotic play that characterized the long and continuous genre of the “buddy” film in Hindi cinema – encompassing films as various as *Namak Haraam* (1973, dir. Hrishikesh Mukherjee), *Dostana* (1980, dir. Raj Khosla) and *Main Khiladi Tu Anari* (1994, dir. Sameer Malkan) – now seem to have been strangely circumscribed, pinned down to the metropolitan-centred, class-exclusive logic of visibility and identity politics. “Coming out” and owning one’s sexuality has been a cornerstone of queer politics since Stonewall, potentially affording tremendous individual and collective dignity to the one doing so, but the process can imply a rather homogeneous notion of a “closet,” and a simplistic idea of self-affirmation in escaping from it.¹¹ Within a postcolonial context, this model is sometimes charged with promoting a male, middle-class, urban-centric agenda, inappropriate to the experiences of those individuals from non-upper-middle class, semi-urban/rural, non-English-speaking backgrounds, negotiating multiple, complex vectors of identity, and for whom gay visibility has little or no significance.¹² Sanjay Srivastava, a sociologist of gender and sexuality, contends that “[t]he historically fragmented nature of Indian public spheres – along, say, the axes of linguistic identity, ethnicity, status, profession and kinship organization – makes it difficult to assume that centrally-fashioned ideas of discipline and roles/personalities might have been easily absorbed across various populations” (2013:5). This effectively means that although there are self-identified gay men in India, identity is actually an entitlement, a veritable form of cultural capital, accessible exclusively to the educated upper-classes. In such a scenario, the vital question to be asked is: “who is being visibilized at whose cost?”¹³ Different sections of the queer community in India face varying degrees of rejection because the hierarchies of class, caste, religion, language and education intersect with sexuality, creating deeper oppressions, some of which manifest in the very inability to plot oneself on the hetero-homo binary. Perhaps on one level, only middle-class men

have a sufficient sense of “personal life” and “individuality” through which to develop a homosexual identity.¹⁴ It is unlikely, then, that all those men who negotiate their queerness in idioms other than that of “gay,” – *dosti* or *yaari* (male friendship and love) and *masti* (homosocial play and “fun”), for instance – and whose desires resonate far more with traditions of male bonding that resist naming and identification, will gain much from the current cinematic “outing” of homosexuality. Gay visibility, in short, is the privilege of a particular class.

This becomes amply evident in *Dostana*, whose representational schema does not simply prioritize one idiom of male same-sex desire over all others, but also makes the connection between gay visibility and class exclusivity manifestly clear. The aesthetics and politics of the film are intrinsically tied to an unapologetic emphasis on consumerism, commodity fetishism and “the evacuation of many of the realities of Indian everyday life” (Juluri 2013: 162). Scholars have drawn attention to the “look” of Karan Johar’s films – the addiction to designer labels, the immaculate interiors, the good-looking and wealthy characters, and urban milieus from which all squalor, crime and poverty have been excised – to critique their socially myopic vision.¹⁵ This can be seen as an impact of the gradual gentrification of the nature of viewership of Hindi cinema and its relation to India’s economic transition into free-market capitalism. From its early years and until at least the 1980s, Hindi cinema largely reflected a trans-class and pan-Indian sensibility. The rise of multiplexes and shopping malls and the active film-going diasporic Indian populations contributed to the hierarchical classification of the audiences into “masses” and “classes” – old, colonial categories that have assumed a renewed valence in the neoliberal political economy. Cinema transformed itself in both form and content; the films of the late 1990s became sleeker and less likely to take the sort of technical liberties some of the earlier films did. Ranjani Mazumdar theorizes these formal and ideological shifts in terms of a rapid rise of a “regime of aestheticized ‘surfaces,’” suggesting that even more than the malls or multiplexes now burgeoning everywhere in urban India, it is the Bollywood film that

is suffused with the inequities of globalization (2007: 111). It seems particularly well-suited to articulate an “urban desire for scale and spectacle, seamless landscape, and high consumption” (Mazumdar 113). Central to her argument is the concept of a “panoramic interior,” a discursive location that effaces poverty and urban chaos in favor of expansive, artificially-stylized sets:

The new panoramic interior combines design techniques with architectural space to create a “virtual city” in which the contemporary “global” family can reinvent “Indianness” and modernity. In this scenario, the space of the Bombay street, the *chawl*, the train, and the crowds, which were all central to the narratives of popular cinema, are consistently marginalized. Instead, a changed perceptual experience emerges, one that is linked to the emergence of a new kind of “surface culture” (110).

The panoramic interior, as Mazumdar points out, is a hybrid category, to be found in big budget family melodramas in the 1990s but now swiftly readapting itself to simulate plush studio-apartments and bachelor-pads inhabited by wealthy Indians living, working or studying abroad. *Dostana* fully illustrates this change, even as it alters the erstwhile focus from heterosexual relations in Johar’s work to homosexual ones. The gay romance in the film is still imbued in the language of commodities, revelling uncritically in a dazzling iconography of material excess. While almost every frame in the film bears out this point, I will focus on a specific song-sequence to substantiate it. As soon as Ms Melwani lets Kunal and Sam in as the new tenants of her apartment – a large, upscale property complete with swimming pool, modular furniture and flat-screen TV – “*Jaane Kyun Dil Janta Hai*” (I don’t know why but this heart knows [my trans.]), a narrative of fun, friendship, and more importantly, unbounded consumption is heard on the soundtrack. Dressed in the trendiest of clothes, sporting designer shades, shorts and tees, Kunal, Sam and Neha set out shopping with a flourish. In an image that quite literally epitomizes the invasion of their lives by the market, Neha is seen carrying numerous bags of merchandise, while Kunal tows a shopping trolley in which Sam is seated. The individualization of commodities, which seem to acquire a life of their own in the narrative, entails a thoroughgoing commodification

of the individual, who becomes interchangeable with the goods s/he so fervently desires. In the scenes that follow, the best friends are variously seen having a rollicking time in a discotheque, dining at posh outdoor restaurants and leisurely driving a pink luxury Cadillac through the glittering streets of Miami and its snazzy hotels and pubs. As the song draws to a close, Neha emerges from the sea in a shimmering golden bikini, her perfectly sculpted body exuding the charm and allure of surfaces that Mazumdar considers a hallmark of the contemporary Bollywood film. Anthony Giddens terms this “commodity capitalism,” a form of capitalism that thrives by enabling every consumer’s “project of the self to be translated into one of the possession of desired goods and the pursuit of artificially framed styles of life” (1991: 196-7). *Dostana* projects the market as an inexhaustible site for plenitude and “freedom”; combining a visual utopia of affluence, glamour and leisure with romantic fantasy, it unabashedly endorses a privatized, socially vacuous sense of the self.

The greatest commodity on offer in the film is the male body, thoroughly processed *par excellence* in that other site of consumerist modernity, the gymnasium. The male body began to be viewed as a source of erotic allure with the rise of the bare-chested Bollywood hero Salman Khan in the mid-1990s, followed by other actors such as Arjun Rampal, John Abraham and, more recently, Shah Rukh Khan. This, in itself, might be considered a profound departure from established cinematic conventions of popular Hindi cinema wherein, as Monika Mehta observes, “[i]t is the female body that has been marked as the sexual body and the body that must bear the burden of Indian tradition.” “Conversely,” she continues, “the male body... [has] not been sexualised via the media” (2012: 17). It is fallacious to assume that the semi-nude body of Abraham surfacing from under the waves of a Miami beach in yellow trunks in the initial scenes of *Dostana* – possibly the most overhyped, displayed and downloaded image of the film – makes itself available only for the sensual gratification of the (heterosexual) female gaze. In the context of the theme and the stylistics of the film, the male body turns itself into a pleasurable spectacle for gay men (and queer spectators more generally) as much as for women. A flamboyant dress code

(or the lack of it) coupled with hyper-masculine images of the muscled male body renders the ostensible heterosexuality of the star homoerotic. Both the women's and gay movements have been instrumental in this changed dynamics of the male body in relation to the spectatorial gaze. They have consistently rallied behind the cause of mitigating the power of the hegemonic male, a dominant construct of masculine identity characterized by a rugged self-sufficiency and a disinterest in style and fashion, paving the way for the rise of the less monolithic, more provisional nature of masculinity of the "metrosexual." In 2002, the journalist Mark Simpson coined the term to describe:

A young man with money to spend, living in or within easy reach of a metropolis – because that's where all the best shops, clubs, gyms and hairdressers are. He might be officially gay, straight or bisexual, but this is immaterial because he has clearly taken himself as his own love object and pleasure as his sexual preference (qtd. in Harrison 2014: 189).

Handsome, well-buffed, and perennially willing to discard any clothes that he might happen to wear, Abraham in *Dostana* embodies all the features of an archetypal metrosexual. Perfectly gym-toned, he gleefully flaunts his washboard abs and an impossibly-chiselled chest, constantly inviting the camera to pleasure itself in the sight of his flawless physique. On one occasion in the film, he is shown waking from sleep in Dolce and Gabbana underwear, completely unfazed as the audience is given a titillating glimpse of his butt. Even so, Claire Harrison cautions us against unmediated optimism about the new vogue of "metrosexuality," deeming it to be part of an irrevocable, neoliberal turn towards "commercial masculinity," a phenomenon that does not so much directly challenge the hegemony of masculinity in contemporary societies as render it more palpable (189). From this perspective, the compulsive eroticization and objectification of the muscular, male body in *Dostana* is completely in line with the film's larger class politics, turning the metrosexual body away from the axis of subversion and re-configuring it as yet another strategy of retaining the power of a masculine, patriarchal self in rapidly shifting norms of gender and sexuality through an unfettered immersion in capital.

The examination of *Dostana* above highlights the manifold dangers of gay visibility. The fact that gay identity has begun to figure prominently in a number of mainstream films makes evident that silence on queer issues in India is no longer incontrovertible. Within the parameters and constraints of popular cinema, Hindi films have indubitably opened up a meaningful space for representing the cinematic other – the homosexual subject, previously unnamed and unexplored. What needs to be interrogated more incisively, however, is the *content* of these representations; after all, visibility, as everything else in the immensely stratified nature of neoliberal class relations, is a commodity not equally distributed or available to all. Catherine MacKinnon notes that in most histories of sexuality “the silence of the silenced is filled by the speech of those who have it and the fact of the silence is forgotten” (1992: 121). *Dostana* participates in precisely these processes of silencing, restricting the expanse of the imperative of visibility to members of a particular class. It cinematically enacts the biases that reside at the heart of the discourse of gay identity in India, based as it is on the submergence of other idioms of same-sex desire between men that operate more democratically across classes.¹⁶ Since only upper class, upper-caste, diasporic Indians – located safely at a remove, territorially and ideologically, from the sanctified values of the “homeland” – are represented as the beneficiaries of the new visibility of homosexual themes in cinema, the radical edge of gay visibility stands somewhat blunted. Visibility, in this instance, becomes a site of its own negation; it oddly reinforces the power of the same nationalistic dualisms of “we” and “they,” “inner” and “outer,” “West” and “East,” that deny the very existence of homosexuality except as an “imported” vice. In effect, *Dostana* isolates gayness from other markers of identity that constitute the differential processes of socialization in India, never extending its potential critique of the heterosexual matrix beyond the question of sexuality, and leaving unscathed the discourses of nationalism and capitalism that are deeply implicated in the cultural vilification and marginalization of the homosexual. Cinematic spectators are engaged in multiple negotiations of identity and identification

pertaining to gender, sexual orientation, religion, class and generation in the act of viewing a film. A gay male spectator might instantaneously identify with *Dostana* for its sexual politics, while being completely oblivious of other forms of oppression and domination he is complicit in. Gay visibility in *Dostana*, in the final analysis, emerges as a mixed blessing; it is discursively and politically discontinuous, forming part of a shifting terrain of differences and contradictions, neither wholly regressive, nor unquestionably progressive, at times affirming the hegemonic consensus of the power structures that shape us, at others offering utopian possibilities that approximate alternative realities and different ways of being.¹⁷

Notes

- ¹ In December 2013, the Supreme Court of India overturned a Delhi High Court order, passed in 2009, that decriminalized same-sex sexual relations between consenting adults. The phrase “against the order of nature” is taken from Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. This section, drafted in 1860 by Thomas Macaulay, reads: “Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine. Explanation: Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in the section.”
- ² “The love that dare not speak its name” is a phrase from Lord Alfred Douglas’s poem, “Two Loves,” first published in 1894. It is often invoked to refer to homosexuality and was mentioned in court during Oscar Wilde’s trial for what was repeatedly referred to in the popular press of the time as an act of “gross indecency.”
- ³ Karan Johar, the producer of *Dostana*, has consistently sought to, howsoever problematically, tackle the theme of male homosexuality in his mega-budget, immensely popular films. Gossip about Johar’s own ambiguous sexuality has fed the discourse additionally in his talk show, *Koffee with Karan* (2004, Season 1), through inside jokes about and references to his “personal” life.
- ⁴ For a comprehensive account of how popular cinema constitutes and is in turn constituted by the “nation,” see Virdi (2003).
- ⁵ Anthropologist Lawrence Cohen explores the genealogy of this particular stereotype in the context of the murder of Pushkin Chandra, a US-trained NGO activist based in an affluent neighbourhood of South Delhi, in August 2004. See his essay, “Song for Pushkin” (2007).

- ⁶ A significant amount of critical scholarship has been devoted to understanding the impact of *Fire* in the construction of an Indian public sphere characterized by dissent and debate. See, especially, Bandyopadhyay (2007: 17-90).
- ⁷ This dynamic between “real” and “mistaken” identities was inaugurated in another of Karan Johar’s films, *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003, dir. Nikhil Advani). There, a homophobic housekeeper Kantaben constantly finds Aman and Rohit, the two male protagonists, in positions she mistakes as signs of their homosexual bonding. Commenting on an emerging trend in Bollywood wherein homosexuality is invoked through comedy and homophobia, media scholar Shohini Ghosh writes: “In all such [filmic] situations, the ambivalence about whether the audiences are being invited to laugh at homophobia or homosexuality remains unresolved . . . Yet, it is clear that the possibility of homoeroticism can no longer be ignored, even if it has to be framed within the safe parameters of fear and anxiety” (2007: 426).
- ⁸ Director’s Commentary Track on the DVD of the film, *Dostana* (2008).
- ⁹ The word “queer” in this instance is not so much a substitute for “gay,” but invokes a more precise usage in the American post-structuralist academia. It rejects what Michael Warner calls the “minoritizing logic of toleration and simple political-interest representation,” favoring instead a “more thoroughgoing resistance to the regimes of the normal” (1993: xxvi).
- ¹⁰ Contemporary queer scholarship on popular Hindi cinema has focussed precisely on re-reading well known films of the 1970s and 1980s in the light of their hitherto unexplored homoeroticism. In particular, see Rao (2000: 299-306); Gopinath (2005: 93-130); Vanita (2005:174-90).
- ¹¹ For an overview of the significance of the Stonewall Riots (1969) in the making of contemporary sexual rights activism, see Meem et al. (2010: 93-4)
- ¹² See, in this context, akshay khanna’s brilliantly argued piece “Us ‘Sexuality Types’: A Critical Engagement with the Postcoloniality of Sexuality” (2007: 159-200).
- ¹³ The reasons for this are varied: economic and cultural pressures, marital and procreative obligations, lack of access to privacy, sex-segregation and a high degree of homosociality. On this point, generally, see Seabrook (1999).
- ¹⁴ For a compelling account of the inextricable connection between the historical development of gay identity and capitalism, see John D’ Emilio’s classic essay “Capitalism and Gay Identity” (1993: 467-76).
- ¹⁵ See, in particular, Gopal (2011:15-34).
- ¹⁶ For an incisive critique of the class elitism of the queer movement in India, see Gupta (2005: 123-42).
- ¹⁷ In this, I concur with John Storey, who chooses to define popular culture with reference to Antonio Gramsci’s notion of “compromise equilibrium,” that is, as a “terrain of exchange and negotiation between . . . resistance and

incorporation" (2011: 11). Storey adds: "[P]opular culture is a contradictory mix of competing interests and values . . . neither racist nor non-racist, neither sexist nor non-sexist, neither homophobic nor homophobic . . . but always a shifting balance between the two" (102).

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DAVID W. HART

Hummingbirds in a Box: The Human Nature of Etzler's Ecotopia

Your hideous wilderness, that is now a habitation of brutes, and venomous or loathsome vermin, and a few scattered miserable Indians, will rapidly become the delightful abodes of happy, intelligent, human beings. (Etzler 1836: 126)

This paper focuses on the historical discourse of J. A. Etzler's "ecotopia," which transpired two decades prior to the arrival of Darwinian logic, in the England of the 1840s, and has been fictionalized in Robert Antoni's recent novel, *As Flies to Whatless Boys* (2013; henceforth *FWB*). Etzler's era of technological and ecological advancement was marked by a perspectival change in the philosophical and aesthetic understanding of nature from being dark and threatening to being inviting (Hiltner 2015: xv). Antoni's novel represents this significant facet of British colonial history,

delineated against the backdrop of environmental determinism and the technological advancements of the industrial revolution.

Antoni's novel recounts the trials and tribulations of thirty-six members of the Tropical Emigration Society (TES) and their leader, the German inventor and utopianist John Adolphus Etzler, as they relocate their lives from England to Trinidad in the West Indies in 1845. The story focuses on William S. Tucker Jr. and his family whose lives, as TES members, are conjoined with Etzler's goals of taking over the soil, wind and waters of the New World through his patented inventions.¹ Both Etzler's writing and Antoni's recent novel suggest that this incredible moment in British colonial history stands as an eco-critical intervention in the promise of a new world. The current analysis will focus on the environmental utopianism and the historical contexts that inform Antoni's novel and propel Etzler and his TES members in their quest for a better future in Trinidad.

The central frame of the novel begins in England and moves across the sea to Trinidad for a good portion of the story, marking an unusual departure from most West Indian literature that delineates the reverse – emigration to England. Antoni's tale of his own ancestry digs into cultural memory and provides a glimpse into a moment of West-Indian history. The novel may be viewed as continuing the eco-critical themes introduced by the Barbadian novelist and critic George Lamming more than fifty years ago. In *The Pleasures of Exile*, Lamming asserts: "[I]t is not all by chance that so much of West Indian novels take place outside, in the open air" (1992: 45). In the same fashion, the greatest portion of Antoni's novel takes place outdoors through a frame narrative of a story told by a father to his son, sitting on the deck of a ship. He recounts a thirty-six-year-old tale of when he was young Willy Tucker, travelling with his family across the Atlantic ocean in 1845, with J. A. Etzler and the TES, dreaming of a new world of possibilities.² The historical contexts for the transnational narrative lead directly from Antoni's ancestors' dire straits to join Etzler's TES, believing in a life of utopian wonder.

An understanding of the dialectic of humanity/nature is imperative to grasp the social significance of the historical contexts concerning Antoni's fiction. The French philosopher Bernard Stiegler argues that humanity's use of technology as tools and appendages of our arms, hands and lives is central to what makes us human. He suggests that the material objects with which we accessorize our lives are part of our humanity – made for us by us – and therefore these objects are a part of humanity just as we are (1998: 142). Stiegler argues further that “human nature consists only in its technicity, in its denaturalization” (148), and that adaptation of technology to our everyday lives also gives depth to notions of time such as past and present (154). One may place human history in technological eras of “denaturalization,” for instance, before and after the printing press, trains, automobiles and the Internet, all of which use materials modified from the earth, such as metals or wood, to create accessories to aid human existence. The act of chopping down trees in a forest to create lumber for homes, for instance, changes the local ecology and effectively makes it part of humanity's existence. Stiegler's premise is evocative of Caribbean literature that often cites historical and ecological changes wrought by the arrival of Western European civilization. Antoni's novel invokes what Saint Lucia's Nobel laureate Derek Walcott describes as the “Muse of History,” which looms over much Caribbean literary creation, where “history is fiction, subject to a fitful muse, memory” (1998: 37). Antoni's novel incorporates the spatial geography of time through its engagement with the historical narrative as well as Stiegler's notion of technological denaturalization as integral to human existence. One may view the realms of history and humanity/nature overlapping in Etzler's and Antoni's writing.

The rise of Etzler's TES (and the story of Antoni's ancestors) exists within the historical context of the Industrial Revolution and the failing Chartist socialist experiment in England, which sets the stage as much for Etzler's utopian appeals as for their acceptance by those desperate for a better life. A more contemporary parallel exists in Lamming's *The Emigrants*, which charts the story of

representative West Indians travelling to England in the 1950s in the hope of finding a cure for the economic uncertainty of their homeland. The narrator asserts: "[N]o one knows what he's fleeing to, a better break" (1994: 50). Likewise, numerous British TES members subscribed to Etzler's ideas, his fantastic patented inventions, the Satellite and the Naval Automaton, and his promise of paradise in the New World out of necessity and concern for a better future.

In a recent essay, Antoni summarizes Etzler's utopian adventure as he observes that the TES was:

[A] joint-stock company through which capitalists could invest in the scheme; more importantly, even the poorest members of the working class could begin setting aside their shillings in anticipation of sailing off to Trinidad (each one-pound share bought them their own acre of tropical land, one half to be cultivated with Etzler's Satellite within the first year of arrival, the other half to be used as the society determined). (2013a: 66)

Antoni aptly focuses on the capitalist system that enables Etzler to finance his mission as one that preys on the poor with promissory notes that would never be fulfilled. For instance, even though the TES was a public-owned joint-stock venture, Etzler held the patents for his inventions: "Rather than give these designs to all the world, he now owned them" (Stoll 2008: 98). The eco-machinations of Etzler were capitalistic and utopian, if not also grounded in a sympathetic socialist morality. Etzler writes that at present "the wealthy lives [sic] upon the misery of the poor. The fortune of one is always to be built upon the losses and miseries of others" (1836: 186). By Etzler's "new means" (the Satellite and Naval Automaton), "man sees there the world is large enough, and rich enough, to afford superabundance of all things desirable for human life, for himself and all his fellow men" (1836: 187), a hope, which may have appealed to the TES members in need of "a better break" (Lamming 1994: 50). After a disappointing public demonstration of the Satellite just outside of Oxford prior to the trip, Willy's father also adds a unique perspective to the utopian dream of escape:

'Twill never work, he says. I've known from the start. And after today I know it better than ever. . . . Doesn't matter, he says. Not in the least. The only important thing is that we have something to believe in. Anathing. Only important thing is it's fervent enough to get us someplace. (FWB 85-6)

It is useful to understand why Etzler was still granted such credibility prior to sailing toward disaster in 1845. One may begin by viewing his ambitious declarations in his 1836 manifesto, *The Paradise within Reach of All Men, without Labour, by Powers of Nature and Machinery*:

I promise to show the means for creating a paradise within ten years, where every thing desirable for human life may be had for every man in superabundance, without labour, without pay; where the whole face of nature is changed into the most beautiful form of which it be capable; where man may live in the most magnificent palaces, in all imaginable refinements of luxury, in the most delightful gardens; where he may accomplish, without his labour, in one year more than hitherto could be done in thousands of years; he may level mountains, sink valleys, create lakes, drain lakes and swamps. (1)

Etzler's language, laden with hyperbole, persuaded more than seventeen thousand TES members; a group which at its peak in 1845 "existed in thirty-six cities and eight branches in London alone" (Stoll 124), and whose people believed that the world, as they knew it, would be forever changed within a year of arrival at their 'Promised Land':

Your hideous wilderness, that is now a habitation of brutes, and venomous or loathsome vermin, and a few scattered miserable Indians, will rapidly become the delightful abodes of happy, intelligent, human beings. By a simple application of the new means, the soil so prepared, will be covered with luxuriant growth of all desirable vegetables that the climate admits of, the finest gardens, extending many miles in every direction, in beautiful arrangement and symmetry, will at once appear. Snakes, mosquitos, and other troublesome vermin will have disappeared, the causes of their existence being annihilated. These first great things may be effected by the superintendence of two or four men, at the rate of several hundred acres per day!" (1836: 126)

In Etzler's imagined utopia, the "few" indigenous people are problematically dismissed along with other "troublesome vermin." His discourse on environmental determinism also suggests that the

natural environment is antithetical to humanity and may be subordinated to their will.

Etzler's passion and firm belief in the possibilities of his plans led him to write and publish another book in 1841 focused on his patented world-changing technologies: *The New World, or Mechanical System, to Perform the Labours of Man and Beast by Inanimate Powers, that Cost Nothing, for Producing and Preparing the Substances of Life*. As a sequel to his earlier work, this text delineates in great detail the use value and mechanical schematics of the inventions he refers to as the "Satellite" and "Naval Automaton" which would revolutionize many areas of human life including agricultural labour, travel by sea and use of wind energy. His approach to natural environment may have seemed promising because "landscapes that are imagined to be ahistorical are attractive precisely because they present an opportunity for human beings to unburden themselves of their own histories" (Handley 2005: 202). Historians have noted that "the vision of a harmonious pre-Columbian Indian wilderness outside of time . . . [does] not stand up to scrutiny. Static Indians living in a primeval, unchanging wilderness made little ecological, ethnographic, or historical sense" (Fisher 2010: 100). Indeed Etzler's plans for a radical disruption of an ecosystem seemed destined for problems and urge one to wonder why so many people would follow him down such a disruptive path.

One answer rests in an understanding of the Chartist society of England. To the peasant-class Chartists, burdened by poverty, the rapidly changing technologies of the Industrial Revolution offered a fantasy of a utopian tomorrow. In the 1840s, the Chartist society of England, led by Feargus O'Connor, believed in "rehabilitating a landed peasant proprietary class" (Armytage 1958: 96) and to them, Etzler's utopian ideas did not seem farfetched.

Etzler's dream of abundance without toil merely expressed contemporary hopes of a better world. Advances in the emerging science of physics and the achievements of technology made it seem possible that the powers in nature could be brought under control to guarantee abundance. This perspective epitomized a rationalist, materialist, evolutionary, if utopian, faith in keeping with dominant cultural aspirations – a projection of an energy paradigm on the age-old fantasy of a paradise regained. (Greenberg 1990: 714)

TES and the Chartists had similar goals – a new life in a new world of possibilities. The primary difference was the location of this socialist paradise. While for the Chartists, the location of colonization was the English countryside, it was the West Indies for the TES. Another significant difference between O'Connor's original plans and Etzler's work was that the former gave his Chartist members what he promised – the land to help them on their independent way at places that came to be known as O'Connorville, Lowbands, Charterville, Snig's End, Mathon and Dodford (Armytage 90-93). Etzler, on the contrary, only acquired the land in Trinidad at a location called Chaguabarriga, translated as "*Belly-a-mud*" (FWB 140), but could not fulfil his outlandish idea of a life of luxury by way of machinery. Historian Gregory Claeys suggests that "the enthusiasm shown for the TES can be interpreted as indicating the failure of the strategy of socialist land colonization in Britain, and hence a partial acknowledgement of the futility of [...] nearly ten years of Chartist political struggle" (1986: 352). Referring to the emigration of people to the land known for its hummingbirds, Stoll adds:

The subscribers leaked out of British society, the human fallout of an industrial system that made their submission a precondition of employment Given the daunting opposition, it is no wonder that thousands of poor artisans chose escape over resistance. Etzler showed them a way out of their hellhole. (105-7)

Etzler's followers, those members of the Tropical Emigration Society who could have stayed with the Chartist movement, included William S. Tucker Jr. and his family – the apparent great ancestors of Robert Antoni.

Hummingbirds in a Box: An Ecotopian Tragedy

Hummingbirds have become symbolic of life in the New World, with numerous species of bird found in the North, Central and South America, and the Caribbean islands. Trinidad in particular, is known as the "Land of the Hummingbird" – home to seventeen different species (Mendes 2010: 93). During his stint in Trinidad, William is recognized as "a taxiderminist, and illustrator of hummingbirds" and as one of the "first to capture images of living hummingbirds in

talbotypes" (*FWB* 19), gaining him the admiration of the Director of the Natural History Museum in London. Dr Francis Evans invites him to give a presentation of his work to the Ornithological Society of London. The receipt of this invitation in 1881 sets William on his return to London while recounting his story about travelling from England to Trinidad in 1845 to his son "R-W": "I couldn't tell you how this Etzler managed to mongoose everybody" (*FWB* 27). The letters exchanged between Evans and the grown-up William Tucker Jr. serve as a framing device, or a narrative box, containing the main story of young Willy's overseas travels and arrival in Trinidad. His book of hummingbirds, a reservoir of knowledge, becomes a metaphorical "box of hummingbirds," which is ruined in a rainstorm. This symbolic erosion of local knowledge contained in the book is significant for Willy as it is his primary (Western European) way of knowing this strange new place.

In his interest in hummingbirds as an attempt to control the non-human, Willy is not so far removed from Etzler. For instance, in the later part of the novel, Antoni returns the reader to Port of Spain, Trinidad, a couple weeks before the TES members leave for Chaguabarriga. Willy discovers a hummingbird struggling on the ground. He picks it up, only to watch it die a moment later in his hands (*FWB* 297-8). Instead of burying it, Willy decides to *preserve* it in his mother's pasteboard box labelled "buttons" (*FWB* 299). He soon gives the hummingbird to Marguerite, his sweetheart from 1845. Their romance is short-lived because Marguerite's uncle dies from Yellow Fever, forcing her to return to England with her aunt within weeks of arriving in Trinidad. In 1881, upon returning from England, he receives a letter from Marguerite with a package that she has held dear all these years; it is Willy's first experiment and present to her: a hummingbird in a box. Like their muted romance, the life of the hummingbird had been trapped in the pasteboard box, the beautiful memory of which remains in 1881. In a way, Willy's interest in taxidermy and hummingbirds represents his own inability to fly. He has captured and preserved them, and they, like him, are trapped in Trinidad. The gift of that first preserved hummingbird in the box is a gift of romance and nostalgia, a gift of nature,

denaturalized. It is because Willy finds no other way to embrace the beauty of the hummingbirds than through preserving and labelling them, that his actions are comparable to Etzler's colonial engagement with the land.

Driven by a feeling of loss, Willy's admiration and connection with hummingbirds compels him to preserve and control one true and beautiful thing, to maintain some sort of order against the anxieties of newness and change. He removes the bird's internal organs, stuffs it with old cotton and cloth, and sews it up using his inborn technical abilities, apparently in the first attempt. These actions comprise a form of "technicity" of humanity, which "denaturalizes" nature (Stiegler 142). If the free and living hummingbird was at first part of earth's abundance, it has now been modified from the earth to serve as an accessory to human existence. Even as minor interludes, the hummingbird episodes serve as a means of underscoring the complicity between the utopian charlatan Etzler (the obvious agent of eco-utopianism), Willy and the other TES members in their role within human/nonhuman interaction.

Antoni's narrative coincides heavily with history, and this can be observed when the TES arrives in the New World and is too late to colonize the land for free. Etzler's business partner C. F. Stollmeyer discovers and then explains to the TES members (who are still on board the ship *Rosalind* anchored just offshore the capital of Port of Spain, Trinidad): "[N]o tracts of free government land remained available for emigrants" (*FWB* 137). To make matters worse, upon arrival at Chaguabarriga, Etzler's great Satellite sinks into the bay and rusts, turning the water a dirty red, a few feet from the land it was supposed to conquer. Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris notes: "Nature is not passive. Nature erupts into orchestras of Nemesis. Yet it knows our peril for we are in nature, of nature's chorus" (1999: 43). Human technological error paired with the natural law of gravity conquers the Satellite, which being too heavy for the bridge of "bamboo rollers" that the TES workers make, sinks into three feet of water (*FWB* 190). In the novel, as in life, some of Etzler's subscribers leave him, and he blames them for

their own troubles. Etzler, on the other hand, runs off to Venezuela to begin a new scheme, which he insists will include those stranded in Trinidad. But he is never heard of again. Even historians lose track of him after 1846 (Stoll 137-8).

On a small plot of colonized land at Chaguabarriga, the remaining TES members interact with the African and native Warahoon labourers presenting an eco-conscious dialectic of ownership. At the lowest level of menial labor in Trinidad are John – the freed African – and Esteban and Orinoko – the native Warrahoon Indians – who possess the skills and knowledge of working with the land, quite unlike the recently arrived TES colonists – Willy and his Papee, Mr and Mrs Whitechurch, and Mr Carr.

John, Esteban and Orinoko are introduced immediately upon the arrival of the TES to Chaguabarriga, and their presence is often conflated with their work for Mr Carr, who was sent ahead to obtain the land (*FWB* 182-3). Upon their dramatic arrival carrying a “Quenk” or wild boar on their shoulders, “Mrs Hemmingway turned to bolt in the opposite direction, held back by she husband. These three men barefoot, they legs coated to the knees in black mud. Stark naked saving what looked to us like crude loincloths. Tied round they waists with pieces of rope” (*FWB* 182). Mr Carr comments:

And what have we here? Seems you lads’ve been busy hunting us up some supper!

It was the black man, John who answered –

Quenck sir. Wild pork. Cause Rinoko n’ Steban go cook he up in a nice stew!

And with that Mrs. Hemingway – with a solid thud – dropped to the ground in a faint. (*FWB* 183)

Mrs Hemmingway’s reaction to John’s comments about their dinner establishes the disparity in their status, propriety and biological necessity for food. She represents the conventional wisdom of upper-class Britain in her reaction to stereotyped barbarism, and returns with a small group to Port of Spain. Yet it is evident that if it were not for these three men who proceeded to make a stew with the wild boar, the TES members would have gone without food on their

first night at Chaguabarriga.

The TES members in Chaguabarriga display fortitude, intellect and willingness to break a sweat in working the land. For instance, they guide the flow of rainwater from the mountains through their multiple rows of garden seedlings, which is a revelation to Willy:

This flood came at us controlled, untainted, serviceable. Mother Nature, bent according to our collective will and design. Offering up her gifts. We'd achieved it *not* with the aid of machines, effortlessly, but by our own hands and our own hard toil. Most significant, we'd achieved it together. And now, together, we reaped our well-deserved reward. (*FWB* 210)

The success with the garden – a form of denaturalized nature – suggests a small victory of ecological planning and labor, without the aid of Etzler's grand technologies. The TES members' abilities to harness Mother Nature's energy illustrate the possibilities of land use, which still plays into the ideological conventions of humanity's role as master to nature. It is a significant but limited moment of success that serves as a precursor to the tragedy of Yellow Fever.

The impact of Yellow Fever demonstrates that humans can never fully control nature as Etzler argued, even as they have small successes in their engagement with the natural world around them. It is tragically ironic that the TES members perhaps contract Yellow Fever because they cut down trees in the nearby forest. It is arguable however, that nature was approached as a source of technological assistance to humanity. According to Rothman, like Stiegler, "until the 1890s," and "during the first three hundred years of the European experience in the New World, the response to the sight of a tree had been to cut it down and make it useful: into shelter, into transportation, into fuel, into an article for storing food" (2000: 5). Indeed, Willy remembers his father as a skilled millworker "who made the switch to timber as the raw material for pulp" when "Britain was hit by the nationwide shortage of cotton rags" (*FWB* 208). One of Papee's last revelations to Willy was: "You mark my words – the day'll soon come when paper will be made from trees. Trees,

Willy, trees!” (*FWB* 270). Yet “Nature is not always a willing partner with human life and never a subordinate” (Savory 2014: 254). Yellow Fever is spread by mosquitos that live in the upper canopies of the forest in Trinidad, and when the TES cut down the trees, the mosquitos indeed drop down with them (*FWB* 238).

John, Orinoko and Esteban, the three local workers who are now representatives of the local indigenous and indigenized populace of Trinidad, are initially merely a part of the land and social landscape to the TES members; they are there to be used for the purpose of building the TES utopia, and their local folk knowledge is misunderstood at best or completely dismissed by TES members at numerous episodes. However, their help is critical when Willy’s Papee becomes ill with Yellow Fever. In a desperate effort to save him, they carry him over the mountain hills from Chaguabarriga to see a doctor and meet the rest of Willy’s family that remained in Port of Spain (*FWB* 275-86). Initially Willy thinks the bamboo tool made by John is a giant kite, “what the Trinidad boys called a *madbull slinger*” (*FWB* 266-7). Only later does he realize that it is a frame with a hammock to enable the foursome to carry his father over the mountains to Port of Spain.

The technological prowess of the indigenous people seems far beyond what the British colonizers have brought with them. During the trek, and high up on an ancient native Indian trail, Willy is struck by the reality of seeing Esteban’s grandmother, a “Panol-Warahoon woman . . . smoking a clay pipe,” sitting and resting deep in the hills, while Esteban and the old woman have a brief exchange of greetings (*FWB* 284). But more significantly, Willy discovers he has only now seen Esteban as a human being:

And son, at that same moment something happened inside me. Inside my chest. A flood of warmth that had nothing to do with any of this toting of Papee over the mountains. Unless it had everything to do with it? I couldn’t tell you. I don’t know myself. Only at that same moment Esteban and Orinoko came alive to me. They became real – *not* a dream. figures out of a dream, caught up inside a dream – and all-in-a-sudden I became overwhelmed by my own emotions. Tears rolling down my cheeks. (*FWB* 284)

Willy's tears represent the revelations of the existence of time itself, that Esteban has a grandmother (with the technical capacity to have a clay pipe); a revelation of historical life and culture in Trinidad as well as the imminent death of his father. His revelation is of the impending before/after timeframe of Etzler's TES fiasco that envelops his existence. Willy and the rest of his family survive the eco-utopian tragedy. Many other families similarly continue in their struggle for survival while bearing the loss of their loved ones.

The eco-utopian dream is over. Etzler's vision was little more than a neo-colonial disaster stemming from the advances of the Industrial Revolution and despair from the struggling Chartist experiment in England. Perhaps this is also part of Willy's revelation on El Tucuche mountain: that he has now become dependent on an emancipated African and two Warahoon Indians, real people with real history and families, with access to local and useful ancient and modern technologies of the land, to take him over the mountains, only to return to the status quo of British colonial civilization in Port of Spain.

Ecological Implications

Antoni's novel is compelling because the characters and their various connections with land, air and sea relate so well to our contemporary ecological concerns. There is seldom an inquiry into such endeavors as the TES and Etzler's patented inventions. Stoll remarks on the ideological intersections that connect "Economy" with "Ecology," and Etzler's time with ours:

When did people begin to think that any society could escalate in wealth and consumption without limit, that a nation could enter a period of constant, ever-rising expansion? At stake is the entire conception of humanity and the environment, mediated through the relationships and institutions we call the economy. . . . There exists an unsettling disconnect between our hoped-for-lives and the failure of Economy to communicate with Ecology. The disconnect is simple. Modern economies expand, but the ecosystems that provide for them do not. They *change* – pine gives way to oak, coyotes arrive in New England, invasive grasses take over a marsh – but they do not *increase*. . . . Like Etzler, we expect more of everything. (6-7)

Indeed, ecosystems change, especially with ever-changing human presence and technologies. Antoni's novel illustrates these concerns about mankind's place in the world with dramatic highlights. As Etzler's plan unfolds, the reader views the human engagement with technological advances as a denaturalization of nature, which, as Stiegler suggests, is central to human nature. In a more contemporary context, the hydroelectric dams that create electricity, and other marvels of human technology like wind turbines, harness nature's energy to provide electricity for air conditioning and light. While ideologically problematic, Etzler's romanticized dreams of an ecotopia are not so far removed from the goals driving these more contemporary creations. His patented Satellite which was supposed to revolutionize agricultural labor in the New World, but sank into three feet of water in the Trinidad harbour, is just as much a part of humanity as the garden John and the TES members create. Derived from humanity's processes of denaturalization, the Satellite's rust is all too human, like a hummingbird in a box. As we attempt to control our "Nemesis," the chaos of the natural world, our lives are forever intermixed with it (Harris 1999: 43). Antoni's novel dramatically reveals the complexity of human nature to help the reader understand Etzler's place in British and West Indian history, right beside Antoni's own ancestors, while offering antecedents to current ecological concerns in the West Indies and the wider world.

Notes

- ¹ Stoll details Etzler's patented inventions: "Etzler received patents for the Satellite (described to the patent office as a locomotive propelled by stationary power, patent number 2396, December 23, 1841) and the Naval Automaton (a means of 'navigating and propelling vessels by action of wind and waves,' patent number 2533, April 1, 1842) (2008: 98).
- ² Antoni's novel incorporates multiple narrative frames. The outer frame suggests that the implied author (Antoni) is researching his family heritage through periodic comedic email conversations with the Director of the Trinidad National Archive, Miss Ramsol, whose ancestors arrived in Trinidad from India in the same year as Antoni's. This analysis, however, limits itself to the internal "main frame" of Willy's story.

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Sports Autobiography: Aesthetics of In-betweenness

Despite the recognition of autobiography as one of the forms of mainstream writing, all its variants are not accorded a literary status. Autobiographies of sportspersons, for instance, are dismissed as journalistic, “anti-intellectual” and “unworthy of academic study” (Dawson 1991: 768). The overarching presence of journalists as ghostwriters in these collaborative life accounts consolidates the impression of such autobiographies as being either too flat or aesthetically descriptive to sustain any critical attention. Most sports autobiographies are considered reportage of the testimony provided by the autobiographical subject to the scripter. They are assumed to consist solely of “scores and statistics – batting averages, shooting percentages, earned-run averages, running yardage, passing percentage” and so on (Shaw 1977: 148).

This paper intends to dismiss the presumption that sports autobiographies are merely stretched pieces of journalism. While maintaining that autobiographies of sportspersons draw mainly from their journalistic reservoirs, the paper elucidates that these accounts transcend the regulatory codes of traditional journalism and enter the domain of literary writing. These life narratives trudge along an in-between aesthetics effected by the simultaneous presence of literary and journalistic devices. The tropes that these accounts employ are simultaneously abstract and concrete, complex and simple, connotative and denotative, figurative and literal, implicit and explicit, reflective and active, verbal and visual, and ironic and un-ironic (Easthope 1991: 89). This paper underscores and critically evaluates the flexible grammar of sports autobiographies, paying particular attention to life narratives of the boxing legend Muhammad Ali, the tennis sensation Martina Navratilova and the ace sprinter Milkha Singh.

Andre Gide, in *If It Die*, asserts: "Memoirs are never more than half-sincere, however great the desire for truth; everything is always more complicated than one makes out" (1951: 250). "Truth" here implies a reliance on facts and empirical evidence. Gide suggests that life narratives are equally fictitious and imaginative and evince a degree of creativity. They penetrate the realm of art and utilize all "the rhetorical resources of fiction and drama" (Shapiro 1968: 421). In the process of exploiting the fictional resources, while life narratives of sportspersons transgress the boundaries of traditional journalism, they barely approach the distinction of canonical literature.¹ In the system of literary ghettoization, autobiographies of sportspersons remain a lower form of literature on the basis of their emergence from a field of popular culture.² They neither live up to the expectations of a literary "Great Tradition," nor do they succumb to standard journalistic conventions. Instead, they debunk the "polarized oppositions" (Easthope 90) – fact and fiction, entertainment and seriousness, personality and character, documentation and experimentation, timeliness and timelessness – that are embedded in the assessment of non-fiction and fiction respectively.

The life stories of sportspersons, more often than not, are written when the athlete is still active or till the time his or her image is abiding in the public eye.³ They are accounts of the immediate past or the simultaneous present, and tend to fall within the domain of journalism. It becomes an uphill task for an autobiographer to bring the text out of journalistic impersonality through some imaginative reconstruction in order to lend the book a scope of re-readability, a virtue denied to journalistic enterprises. Nevertheless, any kind of reconstruction has its own limitations. An autobiographer's imaginative and creative reworking on the content and style may emancipate the book from the burden of 'timeliness' but it cannot elevate it to the 'timelessness' of great literature. The autobiographical narratives of sportspersons, in terms of their sustainability, are deemed to be poised in-between the temporal extremes of daily decadence and everlasting impression.

The incompatibility of autobiography with imaginative reconstruction upsets a ghostwriter in developing an autobiographical personality. Unlike literary characters, there is little scope of build-up in the already established persona of an athlete.⁴ E. M. Forster, while speaking of literary characterization in *Aspects of the Novel*, asserts that "[a] memoir is history, it is based on evidence. A novel is based on evidence + or -x, the unknown quantity being the temperament of the novelist, and the unknown quantity always modifies the effect of the evidence, and sometimes transforms it entirely" (1927: 45). The possibility of a fundamental change in the institutionalized public persona of an athlete through some "unknown quantity" of modification seems disagreeable but an autobiographical narrative does not paint a two-dimensional media-driven image of the athlete. It rather penetrates the personal and the subjective and explores aspects of an athlete's personality beyond his normal news-value.

Roy Pascal, in *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, states that each autobiographical narrative differs according to its subject's profession and his "specific achievement" (1960: 132). A sportsperson's profession is to exhibit his sporting prowess on the playfield and his "specific achievement" is the entertainment of

spectators over a period of time. An athlete, in that sense, pursues “acts of far less significance and possess[es] attributes of far less stature than did mythological heroes of ancient times” (Berg 2000: 135). Unlike epic heroes, a sportsperson does not undertake heroic odysseys; nevertheless, he rises to a celebrated status.⁵ He performs simultaneously as a philanthropist, social activist and a representative of his race, gender and/or community. Therefore, in covering the lives of subjects who influence cultural dynamics, autobiographies of sportspersons cannot become pieces of sheer entertainment.

Autobiographies of sportspersons, defying the label of amusement narratives, assure seriousness but not to the level of spiritual profundity. Despite being the narratives of achievement, sports autobiographies do not match the heroic proportions of autobiographies of the nationalist elite, for example, in which life itself stands for a sagacious desire to ‘experiment with truth’ and encompasses their ‘long walk to freedom.’⁶ These autobiographies appear as national allegories where ‘the personal’ is just a means to chronicle ‘the national.’⁷ Life narratives of sportspersons also engage with issues of national and global importance but their credibility remains in the depiction of the personal experiences of the athletes. Unlike the testaments of national heroes, these effectively remain biographical and refrain from claiming that the history of the world is identical with the biography of great sportsmen.⁸

Novelistic Detailing and Ali’s Personal Quest

James Olney argues that in the field of Autobiography Studies, the focus has shifted from *autos* [self] and *bios* [life] to *graphein* [writing] (1980: 22). This emphasis on *écriture* and strategies of composition validates the fact that “we conceive of our lives in the image of fiction” (Blasing 1977: 67). An observation of the Afro-American pugilist Muhammad Ali’s autobiography *The Greatest: My Own Story* (henceforth *GOS*; 1976) reveals that it is “actually composed and framed as an artful invention” for it entails “all the devices of skilled narration” (Howarth 1974: 365). With the use of literary devices such as characterization, deployment of vivid imagery, setting a milieu, arrangement of plot, consistency of theme,

and psychological and realistic descriptions, the narrative of Ali's life attains novelistic ramifications, and the autobiography, in the process, tends to be more auto-fictional, while being realistic.

In *The Greatest*, the development of Ali's personal quest is traced through a mythological framework. Ali's self-portraiture seeks parallels with Jesus Christ as he entitles the chapters as "The First Coming," "Rumblings from the Grave," "Resurrection" and "The Second Coming." Thriving on mythical allusions, his actions and struggles take on a secondary meaning outside the world of factual referentiality. Ironically, the autobiographer employs Christian mythology to fight against the injustices meted out to the non-Christian/"black" race by the dominant Christian/"white" people. Notwithstanding, it enables him to pursue a dialogue with white America.

The Greatest infringes the journalistic dictum of chronology, according to which an autobiography must "begin at the beginning of the author's life, with a dreary recitation of where his ancestors were born, what their names were, and what day and hour he was born" (Shapiro 436). Ali's life narrative begins *in media res* when the boxer is already thirty-one years old and is returning home after a defeat. The story commences dramatically and a narrative suspense is maintained about the "most thrilling fight in history" (GOS 17). Gradually, the narrator, using flashback or analepsis, takes the reader back to the screams and cries of the crowd in the San Diego Sports Arena. Hereafter, a series of flashbacks, disregarding the linearity of time, leads to several parallel narratives: Ali's family and childhood, his mission of emancipating his people, his Christian past, his slave identity, the treatment of African-Americans in restaurants and hotels, and the beginning of his boxing career.

The journalistic mapping of the contingent incidents or the breaking-news phenomenon is surpassed as the personal narrative is woven around a historical backdrop that offers a thematic unity to otherwise autonomous events. In other words, independent incidents are linked within the larger matrix of history, where 'the specific' becomes a part of 'the general' and transgresses

contingency. The autobiographer attempts to sustain the theme of racial discrimination through the insertion of interviews, taped conversations, poems, personal letters, newspaper columns, television debates, epigraphs and religious sermons. These entries seem outlandish at the outset and give an impression that the story is a journalistic patchwork of eclectic forms, but they are strategic choral devices that provide an overall picture of what was going around. For instance, while passing by the old church in Louisville, the sight of small children singing religious sermons draws Ali inside. The children, thrilled to have their hero amongst them, respond to his request and start singing again:

What is God to you? We are not perfect, living in the way we do.
But God knows just what we have been going through. (GOS 32)

Through the direct inclusion of these lines that evoke an element of irony, the integrity of the Christian sermons is questioned. The autobiographer here implies that the Christian God is indifferent to the miseries of the African-Americans. The insertion of the Biblical sermon provides a thematic and textual (rather than a referential) unity in the text. Similarly, Bertrand Russell's letter and Langston Hughes's poem are embedded in the larger context of racial tension.⁹ Even though these references cater to the organic structure of thought, they are not catapulted to the level of literary allusions in their symbolic value.

The tone of Muhammad Ali's autobiography, like other narratives of minorities, is angry and rebellious. Unlike the non-committed account of a journalist, Ali's life story vehemently directs the outrage of a discriminated autobiographical subject towards white America. The element of anger, driven through his rhetoric, emancipates the text from its journalistic sophistication. Ali hardly minces his words as he questions: "How could they say that my religion, Islam, was a 'race-hate' religion after all the plunder and enslavement and domination of my people by White Christians in the name of white supremacy?" (GOS 141). In this instance, his emotional state of mind, which is subdued in the journalistic reportage, reflects through the tone of his narrative. The tone is further accentuated through

the use of images and metaphors that are discarded in traditional journalism.

The Greatest explores those sensitive traits of Ali's personality that hardly match his public persona. The multifaceted persona of Muhammad Ali is poised between the journalistic stereotype and the literary prototype. Inasmuch as the life narrative projects the human side of its subject, it dismantles the stereotypes associated with his personality and calling, and fails to elevate him to the canonical status of a "universal man" (Sartre 2001: 59). Ali's testimony epitomizes his own life or, at most, that of the African-American community in the United States. He is modelled on a Sartrean hero who, given the condition of his community in the States, "can only write about Negroes or Whites seen through the eyes of Negroes" (Sartre 58).¹⁰ The response to racism in the narrative is, thus, overtly expressed: "He never forgot how the whites treated him, would never let a white man come in the house" (GOS 37). Other canonical literary texts, such as *Heart of Darkness* and *Things Fall Apart*, deal with similar ideological content although the treatment of racism in these texts is "complexified" (Easthope 84) and "more layered" (85), calling for a "plurality of meaning" (84).

Despite such extreme stances taken in the course of narration, Muhammad Ali's life story never sounds monologic. The first person point-of-view hardly seems to limit the meaning as the whole story is reconstructed in the form of scenes and dialogues. The dialogues characterized by what Bakhtin calls "internal stratification" of the language into "social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons" (1981: 262) not only allow "a multiplicity of social voices" (263) in the text, but also anchor rapid shifts in the point-of-view. For instance, an extended dialogue between Ali and his wife depicts diverse perspectives on their religious allegiances. A major shift in the point-of-view takes place when Ali's wife, Sonji, responds to his charge that she was not performing the duties he "expected from a Muslim woman" (GOS 188):

Well, certain things would happen and I would try to discuss them with you. I'm the kind that can't believe in anything just on blind faith, not even God. The

arguments would come when I'd say something about the religious rules, or about the white devil, or . . . you'd take it back and ask the head of the temples, "Why is my wife in doubt about this or that?" You would never answer me yourself. (GOS 188)

Sonji's response offers significant insight into Ali's character. By confessing that she "can't believe in anything just on blind faith," Sonji implies that Ali's devotion to Islam was based on "blind faith." However, while the reconstruction of action through dialogue provides space for connotative interpretations, it takes away the possibility of reflection on the part of the autobiographical subject. The lack of reflection in Muhammad Ali's life narrative at times amounts to the explosion of explicit action at the cost of in-depth analysis. Although the narrative fails to penetrate the literary core in terms of depth and profundity, it possesses ample richness to transcend the journalistic superficiality. Following a middle path, the life narrative defies easy classification and emerges as a text of aesthetic in-betweenness.

Artistic Defamiliarization in Navratilova

Martina Navratilova's life story, *Being Myself* (henceforth *BM*; 1985), ghostwritten by American sports journalist George Vecsey, is an amalgam of opposite realities: serious and candid, political and personal. Similarly, the autobiography, in terms of textuality, is "definitely nonfiction and obviously literature" (Hogarty 1991: 58). On the surface level, the life narrative seems to be another bit of journalism. Vecsey, deriving substantial benefits from his career as a sports columnist for *The New York Times*, extracts facts and information about Navratilova's life from several newspapers, sports magazines and biographies on her life. The assemblage of already circulated material to create a life narrative exhibits a similarity with the process of deriving match reports from scorecards. Nevertheless, this seemingly journalistic method is curiously blended with the elements of creativity and fictionality that lend artistic excitement to the autobiography.

In autobiographical accounts, the methods chosen by the authors to retrieve the past "involve a degree of fictionality" (Gudmundsdottir

2003: 6). In *Being Myself*, the autobiographer claims that “I still get flashes of that now” (BM 26), or “I can remember it as if it was yesterday” (BM 33) but her memory is neither detailed nor coherent enough for a justifiable recapturing of the past. Rather, she provides a cursory account of her childhood adventures: “After we moved back from the Krkonose Mountains, the next part of my childhood was spent gathering mushrooms and blueberries on Brdy Mountain above my village of Revince” (BM 20). In the very next line, her shift from “mushrooms and blueberries” to the nuances of the Czech language exhibits her failure to capitalize on her almost forgotten childhood. She attempts to fill the void through imaginative reconstruction and fictional interplay. Fiction, serving as a “supplement of memory” helps the autobiography transcend the journalistic “truth-value” in favour of literary “act-value” (Gratton 1997: 253). In Navratilova’s life story, her personal experiences are intertwined with the on-going history of Czechoslovakia through fictional interplay:

They’d sign us out of school, take us to a parade where they played the Czech national anthem and always the Russian one, too. Everywhere we’d look, we’d see our red-white-and-blue flag hanging next to their red flag. There would be banners and billboards all over the place proclaiming ‘Friendship with the Soviet Union Forever’ – emphasis on the forever. (BM 74)

In order to defy the journalistic concreteness, the naked personal facts seek a garb of something grand or noteworthy. Either they appear in unison with public history or attempt to deliver a simultaneous ecological narrative. The linkage of the personal and the public, as exemplified in the above instance appears far-fetched, or at best causal, as the autobiographical subject, merely having a right to “look” and “see” (BM 74), is presented as a ‘participant’ rather than a ‘contributor’ in the making of history. Likewise, the autobiographer attempts to situate the actions in the specific seasons and hails natural surroundings and landscapes – the groves of apple trees, the Krkonose and Brdy Mountains, mushrooms and berries, snow and skiing – but the narrative does not achieve the finesse of mainstream writing in portraying the scenic beauty.

Since autobiographical accounts are based on the events that actually happened, it becomes a precondition for an autobiographer to present the already circulated reality in a defamiliarized manner.¹¹ Accordingly, as opposed to dreary reporting, *Being Myself* adopts the technique of literary realism to enliven well-known incidents. The narrator illustrates a lively account of the people's reaction to the Russian incursion into Czechoslovakia:

[W]henever one of the Russians would close the tank turrets, somebody in the crowd would pick up a rock and throw it at the tank. It would bounce off the armour, accomplishing nothing, but it made a wonderful noise. After a while, a lot of us started tossing rocks and pebbles at the tanks. Clang. Clang. Big Deal. (BM 76)

In this instance, the narrator, using the technique of realism, not only delineates the facts picturesquely but also captures the peculiar mood of the situation. The narration involves multiple temporalities since it hints towards past happenings and future possibilities. Realistic description gives the autobiographer an edge over the journalist by enabling him to sketch the character-portraits and set up the milieu. The readers witness several portraits like that of a "tall, handsome man with blond wavy hair" (BM 39) or "the redheaded left-hander from Australia" (BM 34), but these non-descriptive sketches lack the symbolic value that often compliments the actual self of the person being portrayed. The experiments to present the milieu in the life narrative often end up delineating the social status through talk of limousines and Cadillacs, pizzas and hamburgers, Virginia Slims and Avon, and furniture and carpeting.

As opposed to the use of pedantic language, Navratilova's life narrative exploits rhetorical devices such as symbols, imagery, metaphors, allusions and analogies to further the cause of defamiliarization. For instance, the different approaches of the people in Czechoslovakia towards life are displayed symbolically:

Every Czech and Slovak sees a little Svejek in him- or herself – but I had a very little dosage. I just couldn't be Svejek . . . In a country where people played a clay-court style of life, just to survive, I was the serve-and-volley kid. (BM 70)¹²

In this example, the Good soldier Svejek symbolizes passivity and defensiveness which is also synonymous with the Czech people's "clay-court style of life." On the contrary, Navratilova's approach towards life is that of an aggressive "serve-and-volley kid." The use of figurative medium undoubtedly employs literariness in the narrative, but the selection of sporting metaphors obscures the text to non-sporting readers. In the background of a sporting memoir, the argot from the playfield is bound to develop organically but it subsequently limits the readership of the book. Thus, with all its apparent experiments, the life story artistically 'excites' but fails to 'transport' aesthetically.

Anecdotal Recall and the Picaresque in *The Race of My Life*

Having the undertone of a tale, Indian athlete Milkha Singh's autobiography *The Race of My Life* (henceforth *RL*; 2013) apparently draws its energies from the picaresque tradition. Despite its protean nature, a picaresque narrative strictly demands certain protocols – a first-person narration, a protagonist of low station (generally a criminal or an orphan), his struggle for existence in the chaotic and hostile conditions, and his journey(s) leading to further adventures (Mancing 1979: 182). With Milkha Singh as an orphan hero who survives the hostility caused by the Partition, the autobiographical narrative qualifies as a real life tale in picaresque form. The life story, building upon the metaphor of running or 'race,' is indisputably an adventure story where the 'race' triggers the episodic unfolding of events – fleeing from Pakistan, racing trains to steal and survive, running to win an extra glass of milk, and sprinting to be hailed as 'The Flying Sikh.' The element of displacement, which is at the heart of picaresque narratives, develops automatically against the backdrop of the Partition. Nonetheless, Singh's life story fails to sustain the humorous and witty tone of classical picaresque writings for his 'adventures' turn into 'misadventures' in terms of the loss of family and the Olympic medal, and the train-looting 'Picaro' evolves into a 'hero,' a wise man and a role model.

In delineating the brutality of the Partition, Singh's autobiography parallels mainstream Partition literature written by Khushwant Singh, Saadat Hasan Manto and Amrita Pritam. Whereas the journalistic writings on the Partition depict the "pornography of violence," the literary endeavours present "savagery with a human face" (Kumar 2004: 42). Despite being a first-hand victim of the havoc, Singh reproduces his experiences empirically:

We were simple village folk and to us the creation of an India and a Pakistan were alien concepts. Our only concerns were to till our lands, earn our daily bread and live in harmony with our neighbours, whether they were Muslim, Hindu or Sikh. (RL 8)

Maintaining a sense of purpose, the life story refrains from resorting to journalistic sensationalism generally adopted for market gains. Rather, it seeks to neutralize the general sentiments against Pakistan:

This spirit of camaraderie, particularly from the Pakistanis, dispelled some of the rancour of our bloodstained past. (RL 62)

Though the life narrative sporadically displays the autobiographical subject's dual relationship with Pakistan for being a land of childhood adventures as well as painful memories, this ambiguous affiliation with the previous homeland is not developed as subtly as it is done in the mainstream Partition literature and other confessional accounts related to the event.¹³

The life narrative takes on an anecdotal flavour while sharing Singh's experiences on and off the field. An anecdote is not simply a journalist's tool since it leads to the partial explanation of the events. Singh's autobiography incorporates the amusing anecdotes and also situates them in their specific cultural contexts. He relates the account of a fellow athlete, Zora Singh, who had "a flourishing six-inch-long handlebar moustache, whose tips almost reached up to his eyes" that subsequently "terrified the English officer's three-year-old son" (RL 88). In another instance, Indian athlete Lal Chand on tour in Germany, makes unnecessary hue and cry in the hotel for his lost shoes only to find them again in his room (RL 85-7). The anecdote

throws light on the psyche of the people under discussion and also provides an insight into the culture being portrayed. Its intrinsic state of in-betweenness, with reference to the sensory and the tellable, or the elevated and the despised (Cohen 2006: 131), renders it naturally compatible with sports autobiographies.

Following an unusual trajectory, Singh's life was first adapted into a biopic *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*, directed by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra, before being put into words in his autobiography *The Race of My Life*. The cinematic adaptation of his life evidently affects the form of his autobiography. The generic urge of the biopic "to dramatize actuality" (Bingham 2010: 10) reflects even in the words on the pages. The textual medium, despite employing different tropes and techniques from its visual counterpart, *re*-produces the dramatic effect in the form of mental pictures. The influence of the screen on the script is apparent in the graphic narration of the autobiographer's on-field heroics:

The six of us finalists stood at the starting line in our vests and shorts. Khaliq got the outer lane and I the inner one. We wished each other good luck, a mere formality neither of us meant. The gun was fired and the race began. The spectators held their breath, watching, waiting. . . . We both completed the first 100 metres and were running in tandem, our steps parallel. Despite focusing on our running we were each aware of the other's progress and were pushing ourselves and our utmost limits. It was fast, it was furious, it was neck-to-neck. Then there was high drama. About three or four yards from the finishing line, I pulled a muscle on my right leg. Then my legs got tangled and I tripped and tumbled over the finishing line. At the very moment, Khaliq breasted the tape too. (*RL* 60)

The narration evokes visual atmosphere as it incorporates the meticulous details – both material and sensory. The concrete objects such as vests, shorts, gun and tape juxtaposed with sensory experiences, that is, watching, waiting, tangling, tripping and tumbling assist in unfolding the "high drama." The expressions such as "running in tandem," "steps parallel," "neck-to-neck," "four yards from the finishing line," and "breasted the tape" unfurl the elements of suspense and drama associated with sports. As opposed to a journalist's interest in 'who' won the race, by 'what' margin, breaking 'which' previous record, the autobiographical narration paints a

rather complex physical, mental and socio-political landscape around the race. Even when it comes to moments of 'flat' description *sans* action, the autobiography tends to portend, and sufficiently surcharge the narrative with curiosity and anticipation.

Touching the solemn strands of elitist historiography, *The Race of My Life* attempts to create the illusion of a national allegory. The chapters entitled "Life in Undivided India," "Ten Days in Jail," "My Army Life," "This was Not Sports," "My God, My Religion, My Beloved," "Meeting Pandit Nehru," "Going West," and "I Have a Dream" promisingly raise serious expectations to eventually culminate in bathos or anti-climax. For instance, the chapter entitled "Ten Days in Jail" parodies the incarceration narratives since Milkha Singh is imprisoned not as a political prisoner but for travelling by train without a ticket. Similarly, in the chapter "My God, My Religion, My Beloved," the running track deceptively turns out to be *his* God, *his* religion and *his* beloved. Deriving its title from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s path-breaking speech, the chapter "I Have a Dream" trivializes the very idea of "dream," exhibiting instead Singh's fatherly insecurities over the careers of his children. The titles invoke austere possibilities but the chapters deal with relatively mundane aspects of life. This failure suggests that despite transcending the codes of journalism, the life story does not deliver refined literary aesthetics, and hence, remains 'in-between.' Having a hero of national importance as its subject and set in the backdrop of the Partition, the life narrative attempts to map the 'nation' but the 'personal' retains its prominence.

The three autobiographies discussed in the paper attain a degree of literariness through distinct strategies. Muhammad Ali's autobiography does away with mere chronology in favour of a dialogic description of his thrills and bouts of humiliation; Navratilova's autobiography employs the strategies of defamiliarization to engender an element of fictionality; and Milkha Singh's life narrative runs its course by way of a racy retelling of personal anecdotes. The life narratives of athletes exploit the textual space to move independently between the boundaries of literature and journalism. Over the years, journalism has been upgrading itself in the form of 'New Journalism'

that illuminates non-fiction “with techniques usually associated with novels and short-stories” (Wolfe and Johnson 1973: 15). On the contrary, literature, with its flexibility, is all set to incorporate the narratives of ‘popular culture’ within its dynamic fold. Sports autobiography, in this inchoate phase, serves as a meeting ground for both kinds of genres.

Notes

- ¹ Literature aspires to canonicity following its own yardsticks of sublimity. This element of sublimity is found in the Literature (with a capital “L”) that epitomizes the “highest achievement of aesthetic,” “moral merit,” “universal resource of ethical and formal model for humankind,” “not of an age, but for all time” and “the best that has been known and said in the world” (Widdowson 1999: 4).
- ² Wendy Griswold suggests that breaking the old high/popular distinction, a literary ghettoization is taking place in which the literary system is breaking down into a tripartite system – “a high literary level, a middle-brow level, and a popular level of genre fiction heavily influenced by other forms of popular culture” (1993: 464).
- ³ Of the three autobiographies discussed in this paper, only Milkha Singh’s *The Race of My Life* was written several decades after his retirement from professional sports.
- ⁴ Gary Whannel asserts that the public persona of an athlete is a “social product, the result of a set of institutional structures, production practices, representational conventions and the relations of production and consumption” (2002: 49). He adds that the representations of an athlete are conventionalized to this extent that “any possibility of access to a ‘real’ seems to recede” (49).
- ⁵ In the ancient/mythological narratives, the hero was a legendary figure who “possessed attributes of great stature such as bravery, strength, and steadfastness, and who was thought to be favored by the gods” (Berg 134). Sportspersons, on the other hand, emerge either as “mediated heroes” who represent “exceptional morality, social responsibility and intellectual capabilities” (137) or as sporting antiheroes who rebel against social inequalities and “express disillusionment with the status-quo – in society and in sport” (142).
- ⁶ The very titles of the autobiographies of nationalist elite – such as *Long Walk to Freedom* by Nelson Mandela or *My Experiments with Truth* by Mahatma Gandhi – imply a quest for something greater than their own personal selves. On the other hand, the titles of the autobiographies of sportspersons – like Muhammad Ali’s *The Greatest: My Own Story*, Navratilova’s *Being Myself*,

Milkha Singh's *The Race of My Life* – convey a narcissistic engagement with the self.

- 7 Jameson avers that all third-world texts are “allegorical” (1986: 69). He maintains that even “the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society” (69).
- 8 Carlyle claims that “the history of the world is but the biography of great men” (1840: 34).
- 9 In a personal exchange of letters, Bertrand Russell praises Muhammad Ali for his courage to put up a fight against racism and expresses his wholehearted support to him (*GOS* 122-3). In this racial connection, Ali also mentions a poem entitled “I, Too” that was originally written by Langston Hughes in 1926, which exhibits the discrimination faced by Afro-Americans in public places (Hughes 1995: 46).
- 10 David Caute, in the Introduction to Jean Paul Sartre’s book *What is Literature?*, writes that literature, for Sartre, is not a sedative but an irritant, a catalyst provoking men to change the world in which they live (2001: xi). As a result, his heroes/anti-heroes are basically men crushed by the world although they choose and act (xii-iii).
- 11 Victor Shklovsky, in his essay “Art as Technique,” propounds the idea of defamiliarization. According to him, the purpose of art is to recover the sensation of life. The technique of art, he believes, “is to make the object ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (1965: 12).
- 12 The Good Soldier Svejk is one of the best known characters in Czech literature. He is the imbecile protagonist of Jaroslav Hasek’s novel *The Good Soldier Svejk and His Fortunes in the World War*. Living his life modestly without bothering anyone, Svejk appealed to the communists to use his persona with a “proper political slant” (*BM* 68).
- 13 For example, Urvashi Butalia’s *The Other Side of Silence* records the personal experiences of the many survivors of the Partition. The confessional chronicling of the experience exposes different faces of the same historical incident (Kumar 42).

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Judith Butler's Theory of Performativity and the Ontology of Subject/Identity

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues that in these postfeminist¹ times, if we desire to bring any change in the marginal gender subjectivities, there is need for a 'radical rethinking' of the ontology of the subject. To make better sense of the issues related to the female subject, it is necessary that the framework of understanding the female is reformulated:

Perhaps there is an opportunity at this juncture of cultural politics, a period that some would call "postfeminist" to reflect from within a feminist perspective on the injunction to construct a subject of feminism. Within a feminist political practice, a radical rethinking of the ontological reconstructions of identity appears to be necessary in order to reformulate a representational politics that might revive feminism on other grounds (Butler 1990: 5).

Butler proposes the theory of performativity to challenge the established conceptions of identity, gender and body. In doing so,

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she interrogates the theories of subjectivity, gender and body conceived by theorists including Simone de Beauvoir, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Montique Wittig and Michel Foucault. Her proposed aim is to resignify the identitarian acts to create the possibilities of change in the marginal gender identities. Butler contends that gender identities are constructed performatively in the identitarian acts of a subject – in the social, cultural, juridical and linguistic acts; and to bring a change in marginal gender identities, it is necessary that the identitarian acts be redefined and relocated.

The focus of this paper will be to render a critique of Butler's theory of performativity – to challenge her central contention and to argue that social and cultural acts are mere manifestations or rather operative knowledge systems of deep-rooted canonical narratives/discourse practices that create, organize and regulate the cultural, social and linguistic acts. It is Language (Symbolic, Other), in close association with the power structures, that creates structures of knowledge, which ultimately function as (de)legitimizing agency for the social/cultural/linguistic identitarian acts. Language pre-exists ontology, and gender performatives are the effects of dominant narratives. Therefore, the possibilities of change in the marginal gender identities cannot be realized by focusing on the performatives alone. To bring a change in marginal gender identities, it is necessary that the originating sources of knowledge, Language or canonical narratives, be recreated, reorganized and resignified.

Butlerian Gendered Subject and its Critique

Butler's theory of performativity has generated a profound debate amongst scholars working on gender issues. Over a period of time, serious doubts have emerged regarding her claims of revitalizing feminist studies and effecting a change in marginal gender subjectivities through the processes of redefining and relocating the performatives. Critics have pointed out some inconsistencies and inadequacies in Butler's theory of subjectivity. If for Butler, the subject is constituted exclusively in social, cultural, juridical identitarian acts, then the possibilities of re-signifying and redefining

the marginal gender identities are limited necessarily to the manifest social, cultural, juridical performatives. However, the fact that Butler believes in corrective action against dominant/marginal subjects suggests that the ontology of the subject pre-exists the subjects of cultural/social performatives. If the body can be resignified to bring a change in the marginal subjectivities, the implication is that the ontology of body exists before getting assimilated into the cultural significations. These methodological inconsistencies are highlighted by Jessica Cadwallader in her review article, "How Judith Butler Matters":

Importantly, however, the question of agency is also tied to Butler's interrogation of the ontology and temporality that agentic subjectivity has often presupposed. Those who suggest that performativity is determinist often characterize Butler as denying 'something' pre-cultural — the individual, an essence, 'the body' and so on — all of which are situated as grounding agency, whilst those who critique her for hyper-voluntarism suggest that she herself is committed to these essentialist ontological claims. Kirsten Campbell offers a new spin on this argument by suggesting, in 'The Plague of the Subject', a chapter in *Butler Matters*, that Butler neglects the unconscious, a result of her attempt to bring together Foucauldian and psychoanalytic conceptions of the subject, and consequently reinstalls the fantasy of the coherent, rational subject (2009: 290-1).

Butler's proposed aim of effecting change in marginal gender subjectivity is also viewed with scepticism – the agency of individual subjects is considered insufficient and ineffective. Boucher questions Butler's theory of Performativity on grounds of "methodological individualism" and for "the limitations of an individualistic account of subject formation framed in exclusively cultural terms" (2006: 112). "[The] collective dimension is missing from Butler's account of performative resignification, whose underpinnings in a theory of psychic dislocation confine its explanatory force to the private realm of individual action" (McNay, qtd. in Boucher 133). She criticizes Butler for neglecting the role of institutions in effecting changes in marginal identities: "Butler's theory of performativity lacks a focus on institutions because it constantly gravitates to the pre-social kernel of the individual in primary narcissism; so, it necessarily tends to reinscribe the dualisms characteristic of liberal political theory and neglect the material aspects of social formation" (133). Martha C.

Nussbaum criticizes Butler for indulging in the comforts of academic discourse rather than doing something concrete to bring a change in the lives of marginal gender identities. In her attack on Butler in an article, "Professor of Parody", Nussbaum dismisses the Butlerian feminist project altogether:

Butlerian feminism is in many ways easier than the old feminism. It tells scores of talented young women that they need not work on changing the law, or feeding the hungry, or assailing power through theory harnessed to material politics. They can do politics in safety of their campuses, remaining on the symbolic level, making subversive gestures at power through speech and gesture. This, the theory says, is pretty much all that is available to us anyway, by way of political action, and isn't it exciting and sexy? (1999: n.p.).

However, at this point, it is significant to note that the critical engagements with Butler too have raised issues that are related to the manifest, the outside, the material, the social and the cultural performatives. The issue of ontology of the subject, including the gender subjectivities, has remained obfuscated even in the critical discourses on Butler. Both Butler and her critics have overlooked the originating source of the subjectivity that constitutes the ontology of the subject – Language. The term 'Language' here includes all canonical narratives – religious, cultural, historical, literary, juridical, philosophical and many others – that are the sources of all knowledge/signification in the social and cultural space. Language includes the future possibilities of all the narratives as well. Language creates and interprets the knowledge systems. Language creates the principles of hermeneutics – it validates one kind of knowledge and invalidates the other. Butler, in her theory of performativity, in fact, concentrates more on the materiality of cultural, social and linguistic acts rather than on the ontology of subjectivity.

Butler's Theory of Performativity and Gender Identity

Butler rejects the Cartesian model of subjectivity that views human beings as born with a consciousness capable of rational decisions. She contends that human consciousness is not given but constructed. Identities are socially constructed and ritualized in the everyday acts of human life. We as subjects are always engaged in performing

the identitarian acts. Social rituals and cultural practices are intertwined with institutional powers to create dominant ideologies that ultimately legitimize and naturalize certain identities and delegitimize, exclude and marginalize others. Butler argues that heterosexuality is not a naturally normative practice, but a dominant sexual practice that has, in close coordination with the power structures and cultural practices of the society, marginalized and delegitimized the other sexual practices. Gender identities are crucial for Butler because they, in association with their social and cultural performatives, create substances of identities which she believes are otherwise fictional in nature:

The challenge for rethinking gender categories outside the metaphysics of substance will have to consider the relevance of Nietzsche's claim in *On the Genealogy of Morals* that "there is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything." In an application that Nietzsche would have anticipated or condoned, we might state as a corollary: *There is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results* (my italics) (Butler 25).

According to Butler, gender is not an essential substance that is naturally given, but an effect that gets accumulated and concretized as human beings move in the time and space of society and culture. The norms of gender are not naturally given to the body; they are socially and culturally inscribed on the body. In the construction of normative heterosexual gender identities, the role of power structures and law is intricately intermixed with the social and cultural performatives. On the one hand, gender is a fictional creation, an imaginary construct; on the other, it functions as real because it is generated, regulated, practiced and performatively enacted in the real conditions of lived life. In the sedimentation of gender identities, the performative aspect is significant. The subject enacts the gender through linguistic acts and through social and cultural rituals. The concretization of gender attributes and significations is a historical process in which the politics of power relations, dominant ideologies, religion and law play significant roles. The various "agencies" of creating, maintaining, regulating, circulating and multiplying the

“norms” of gender are difficult to specify – what is clear though is that gender or other identities are culturally enacted and consolidated through the agencies of power and discourse. “Consider gender, for instance, as a *corporeal style*, an ‘act’, as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (Butler 139). Butler clarifies the contingent nature of gender as enacted in an act, a performance:

In what sense, then, is gender an act? As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meaning already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation. Although there are individual bodies that enact these significations by becoming stylized into gendered modes, this “action” is public action. There are temporal and collective dimensions to these actions, and their public character is not inconsequential; indeed, the performance is effected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame - an aim that cannot be attributed to a subject, but rather, must be understood to found and consolidate the subject (140).

The theory of performativity as applied to the identity of gender cannot be comprehended only in relation to gender identities. It has also to be understood in close relation with the subjectivization of body. The body is commonly perceived to be naturally given. For long, feminists have contended that the male or female body is a substance, a reality, a truth on which the gender attributes are inscribed. The marginalization of female is through the gender attributes that are culturally assigned to a female body. Butler challenges this conception of body in feminist theory and considers the idea as paradoxical and foundationalist in nature. She argues that it is difficult to challenge the essentialist and foundationalist notions of masculinity by essentializing the female body.

In her theory of Performativity, Butler reconceptualizes the idea of body.² The idea of biology as destiny is radically reversed to question the very basis of dominant masculinity. Even more importantly, she questions the biology of a woman, which according to Butler has been essentialized by dominant feminist discourses. She argues that feminist theory could not move further towards

freeing the woman from the dominant masculine culture because the discourse of essentialism, of foundationalism, was never abandoned by the feminist theorists: "Feminist critique ought to explore the totalizing claims of a masculinist signifying economy, but also remain self-critical with respect to the totalizing gestures of feminism" (Butler 13). She adds that it is only by looking at sex and body as culturally signified constructs that we can redefine the role of both in constructing the subjects of sex. "[T]here is no recourse to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings; hence, sex could not qualify as a prediscursive anatomical facticity. Indeed, sex, by definition, will be shown to be gender all along" (Butler 8). Butler insists on considering the body or sex as a construct or a culturally crafted signified – the two dynamically engaged in a process in which gender and sex identities are concretized: "It would make no sense, then, to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, if sex itself is a gendered category. Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established" (7).

Butler's conception of sex, body and gender is a radical departure from what the feminists had believed in thus far. For Butler, body, sex and gender are all substance-less, and the essence of body and sexual practices is related to the cultural significations which are already and always attached to them:

Are the ostensibly natural facts of sex discursively produced by various scientific discourses in the service of other political and social interests? If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called "sex" is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all (7).

Butler's Re-readings of Identity Theorists

In proposing her central contention, Butler attempts a re-reading of some of the leading theorists on gender identity issues. Critical of Simone de Beauvoir's view that "the female body is marked within

masculinist discourse" (qtd. in Butler 18), Butler strives to reinterpret Beauvoir's famous stance – "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one" (1984: 267). In Butler's view Beauvoir's simplistic understanding of the distinction between body and mind becomes a problem, because the binaries of body/mind are further extended to woman/man, natural/cultural and others. Butler argues that the body and mind are much more complex constructs taking shape in cultural and social rituals and in the politics of power than they are ordinarily presumed to be.

Luce Irigaray's position that the female body is "marked off" from the domain of the signifiable (qtd. in Butler 18), also comes under the scanner. According to Butler: "For Irigaray, that phallogocentric mode of signifying the female sex perpetually reproduces phantasms of its own self-amplifying desire. Instead of a self-limiting linguistic gesture that grants alterity or difference to women, phallogocentrism offers a name to eclipse the feminine and take its place" (12-13). While she acknowledges that "Irigaray clearly broadens the scope of feminist critique by exposing the epistemological, ontological, and logical structures of a masculinist signifying economy" (13), she claims that Irigaray's theory itself does not account for the role of local contexts in the construction of subjects. Butler argues that Irigaray's theory becomes monologic and no monologic approach can account for the diverse conditions of subject-construction.

Monique Wittig is critiqued as well for viewing sex as a given biological feature, which in the case of a female is appropriated by male signifying economy to prohibit any pleasures beyond normative heterosexuality. Wittig's is a materialist feminist approach with the difference that here language creates realities on the material bodies. She tries to challenge the established foundationalist conceptions of sex and gender, to give freedom to the female by transgressing and transmuting the forced and prescribed structures of discourse and language:

Wittig is clearly attuned to the power of language to subordinate and exclude women. As a "materialist", however, she considers language to be "another order of materiality", an institution that can be radically transformed. Language ranks among the concrete and contingent practices and institutions maintained by the choices of individuals and, hence, weakened by the collective actions of choosing individuals (Butler 26).

However, according to Butler, though Wittig does create the possibility of going beyond genitally organized sexuality and explores the alternative economy of pleasures that may contest the normative heterosexuality, the problem with the latter's model is: "[I]f the model of a more diffuse and anti-genital sexuality serves as the singular oppositional alternative to the hegemonic structure of sexuality, to what extent is that binary relation fated to reproduce itself endlessly? What possibility exists for the disruption of oppositional binary itself?" (27).

Jacques Lacan, who has often been criticized by the feminists because of his Lacanian Law of the Father,³ the Symbolic⁴ articulatory system that excludes women, becomes the target of Butler's attack as well. She elaborates how Lacan's premise excludes women from the signifying system because it is dominated by the male. According to Butler, the unconscious is structured like language, and language is dominated by the male signifying system. While the male finds his entry into the Symbolic naturally and smoothly through the processes of castration, the female is left excluded. The exclusion of women from the castrating system creates women as the other.⁵ Also, there is no possibility of bringing any change in the Paternal Law, because the signifying system pre-exists the subject. Subject becomes what Language permits it to be. Judith Butler describes this "inevitable" Paternal law for the subject as a slave morality from which there is no escape:

This figuration of the paternal law as the inevitable and unknowable authority before which the sexed subject is bound to fail must be read for the theological impulse that motivates it as well as for the critique of theology that points beyond it. The construction of the law that guarantees failure is symptomatic of a slave morality that disavows the very generative powers it uses to construct the "Law" as a permanent impossibility. What is the power that creates this fiction that reflects the inevitable subjection? What are the cultural stakes in keeping power

within that self-negating circle, and how might that power be reclaimed from the trappings of a prohibitive law that is that power in its dissimulation and self-subjection? (57)

Structuralists like Claude Lévi-Strauss too are challenged for their “systematic totality,”⁶ which leaves no room for alternative possibilities. Freud is yet another theorist who is brutally attacked by Butler for authenticating and psychologically legitimizing the norms of heterosexuality and socially sanctioned gender roles through his thesis of incest, taboo and prohibitions. Butler contends that the dispositions of sexuality are not inherent in the body but are created, constructed through the prohibitions which pre-exist the birth of the body. Gender identity, which does not exist or which has no existence outside the fluidity of sexual cathexis, is formed through the internalization of prohibitive laws and gets concretized through prohibitions. “[T]his identity is constructed and maintained by the consistent application of this taboo, not only in the stylization of the body in compliance with discrete categories of sex, but in the production and “disposition” of sexual desire. The language of disposition moves from a verb formation (to be disposed) into a noun formation” (Butler 63-4). She argues that in the name of culture and nature, law produces gender identities which are presumed by us to be essences of bodies. “In the psychoanalytic narrative, the dispositions are trained, fixed and consolidated by a prohibition which later and in the name of culture arrives to quell the disturbance created by unrestrained homosexual cathexis” (Butler 64).

Julia Kristeva, another serious thinker on identity issues, who reformulated the epistemology of subject in post-Lacanian times by locating language in two spaces – the spaces of the Symbolic and the Semiotic⁷ – is scrutinized. While Judith Butler appreciates Kristeva for improving upon Lacan, she finds Kristeva’s Semiotic theory insufficient in making any real contribution in bringing changes in dominant gender identities. She contends that Kristeva’s Semiotic theory does not help in making a complete sense of the ontology of gender subjectivity. “The multiple drives that characterize the semiotic constitute a prediscursive libidinal economy which occasionally makes itself known in language, but which maintains

an ontological status prior to language itself" (Butler 80). She further questions: "[W]hether, it is even knowable experience according to either of their (Lacan and Kristeva) linguistic theories" (80). Another problem that Butler sees with Kristeva is the unavailability of the Semiotic space, so that it cannot be sustained to create the possibilities of resisting the Symbolic. Thus the Semiotic, according to Butler, becomes just a detour into wish-fulfillment. "Kristeva thus alternately posits and denies the semiotic as an emancipatory ideal. Though she tells us that it is a dimension of language regularly repressed, *she also concedes that it is a kind of language which never can be consistently maintained*" (my italics) (Butler 80).

Even Foucault's theory of discursive identities created through discourse and power structures does not fit in Butler's futuristic plans of doing away with hegemonic heterosexual identities. "For Foucault, the substantive grammar of sex imposes an artificial binary relation between sexes, as well as artificial internal coherence within each term of that binary. The binary regulation of sexuality suppresses the subversive multiplicity of a sexuality that disrupts heterosexual, reproductive, and medico juridical hegemonies" (Butler 19).

Performatives, the Ontology of Subject and the Possibilities of Change

Butler's project in *Gender Trouble* is to relocate the ontology of subjectivity from the grounds of foundationalist structures of knowledge to the grounds of possibilities of alternatives, gaps, contestations, challenges and re-identifications. The concept of ontology, for Butler, is not a stable or coherent concept. It is a contingently created knowledge framework that comes into existence through the acts of language that are enmeshed in the social, juridical and political discourse. "Ontology is, thus, not a foundation, but a normative injunction that operates insidiously by installing itself into political discourse as its necessary ground" (Butler 148). This implies that ontology of gender/sex is not related with the essence of a human being – it is a knowledge consciousness which is performatively operative in language, social rituals, cultural

practices, and legal and political systems. Butler presumably deconstructs the foundationalist frameworks of the ontology of subject and creates an alternative, more comprehensive framework of ontology:

The deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated. This kind of critique brings into question the foundationalist frame in which feminism as an identity politics has been articulated. The internal paradox of this foundationalism is that it presumes, fixes, and constrains the very subjects that it hopes to represent and liberate (148).

Butler further elaborates: "The task here is not to celebrate each and every new possibility qua possibility, but to redescribe those possibilities that already exist, but which exist within cultural domains designated as culturally unintelligible and impossible" (148-9). Subscribing to the Foucauldian theory, she argues: "[T]he culturally contradictory enterprise of the mechanism of repression is prohibitive and generative at once and makes the problematic of 'liberation especially acute'" (93). For Butler, law, culture, language and all other constructs of sex and gender identities are the very tools of creating the possibilities to effect a change in the repressive and oppressive systems of gender identity. The possibility of subversion is within the system. To imagine that the system can be reversed or a radically alternative system can be created to challenge the dominant performatives is an abstract proposition, and one that will fail because it is *not participatory* in nature:

[I]t is necessary to take into account the full complexity and subtlety of the law. If subversion is possible, it will be subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself. The culturally constructed body will then be liberated, neither to its "natural" past, nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities (Butler 93).

For Butler, the ontology of gender and sex identities is closely related with her theory of performativity; as ontology is not something that functions outside the social and cultural space. It is a concept that can be accessed only through the lived and articulated world. Gender and sex are signifying only in the sense that they are performatives

through agencies like law, culture, etc. So the ontology of sex and gender is concrete, material and real. They are real because they exist in this lived world; they are created, multiplied, circulated and articulated in the materially existing human world. Further, for Butler the ontology of gender and sexual identities is not fixed; it is open to the possibilities of change:

Gender ought not to be construed as stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. . . . Gender can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent neither original nor derived. (140).

Butler seeks to bring a change in the dominant repressive power economy that regulates gender identities through the performatives of the “cultural possibilities” that emerge “when the law turns against itself” (93). She believes that marginal identities can be redeemed if performatives that constitute these identities are reconstituted.

Misplaced Ontology: Performatives are Mere Effects of Canonical Narratives/Language

Butler attempts to create a comprehensive framework for understanding the processes of subject formation. She does succeed to a great extent in her project, but fails to fathom the depths of the ontology of the subject. Her claims to revitalize gender studies warrant scrutiny as some serious methodological issues in her theory remain unresolved.

Butler's central argument suffers from a grave methodological paradox. If the normative heterosexual identities are unreal or mere effects of the dominant social, political, juridical and linguistic practices (as conceived in the Butlerian thesis), the marginal identities too would be imaginary constructs or effects of marginal practices or beliefs. Any attempts to naturalize or centralize the ‘marginal’ will suffer from methodological inconsistencies. Hence, the problem with Butler's project is that she uses the theoretical tools of epistemology to redefine the ontology of subject. Prioritization of

any one kind of signification/identity over the other becomes paradoxical in methodological terms.

Identities are metaphoric significations attached to the bodies – bodies that ontologically stand outside the binaries of men/women, homo/hetero, dominant/marginal. To define identities, Butler draws upon Louis Althusser's thesis of subjectivization, according to which ideology constructs subjects; ideology interpellates individuals as subjects. Further, ideology in its essence is imaginary and material both. The 'imaginary' of ideology exists through beliefs, faiths, discourses and narratives, and these imaginary constructs have no existence outside the agencies of human society – the agencies which maintain, circulate, create and canonize these ideological constructs. Althusser remained confined to socially/ideologically constructed subjects and succeeded in creating the epistemology of subjects of ideology. Butler however, tries to construct the ontology of social subjects through the methods of a theory that operates on the strands of materiality and imaginary simultaneously.

The socially constructed subjects are like significations that get attached to the pure metaphors (bodies) for some time, but this temporal signification cannot define the ontology of the pure signifiers (read bodies). Bodies, before being signified (which is inevitable), are neither gendered, nor sexed. The subject can be saved from the persecuting normative heterosexual identities, or any other dominant signifying economy, if we are convinced about the vacuous nature of the significations that are incessantly used in identitarian acts. The identitarian acts create marginal and dominant identities only in so far as they generate significations that are appropriated by the powerful canonical narratives. The signifying economy that is controlled, manipulated and legitimized by the Unconscious⁸ is the source of all identitarian acts that are significations of the performatives. Hence, to effect change in marginal identities, it is necessary that the Unconscious, the Symbolic and the canonical narratives are re-interpreted, resignified and relocated.

Furthermore, to create space for marginal discourses and narratives, the metaphoricity of the signifying economy has to make

the subject believe in the non-canonical nature of certain kinds of signifiers, which is an arduous task since the existing canons of reality perceptions have been 'concretized' through centuries of practice and belief. Perhaps the only way to create alternative identities, to free the Narrative (Language) from a certain kind of dominant signification, is to create another Narrative (Language) which has the strength of the existing Symbolic, so that it can challenge the accepted, dominant narratives. However, that does not mean that one is more authentic than the other. Lacan's concept of the Symbolic, Paul de Man's idea of Language, Kristeva's concept of the Semiotic or Althusser's concept of the Ideology are not foundationalist as Butler believes them to be. These are the frameworks of the ontology of subject that do not indulge in the politics of identity. Butler draws on the conceptual frameworks of these theorists but fails to acknowledge their contribution in her theory of performativity.

The theory of performativity, howsoever comprehensive, remains insufficient in effecting changes in marginal gender identities. In this theory, the sources of identity formation are assigned to the effects of language rather than to Language proper. It is the Language or Master Signifiers that create discourses about knowledge (Lacan 1999: 16-17). And as human beings, condemned to live as signifiers, we are continuously participating in the creation of illusionary yet stable knowledge systems. The performative identities are the manifestations of those illusions of knowledge and significations. The subversion of dominant identities is not possible by changing the manifest performatives or the effects of Language – we need to change the constitutive agency. The constitutive agency of subjects is Language. The canonical narratives – the originating sources of dominant/marginal gender identities – are the metaphoric signifiers. These signifiers have entered in some unholy alliance with the economy of power and politics. Bodies, genders, identities can be freed from the persecution of certain dominant metaphors only if we free the Word from dominating signification and treat the Word as pure signifier. The operative signifying economy, the cultural significations, the identity-creating performatives, all draw their

legitimacy from the dominant narratives (knowledge systems) that operate as an authenticating force for the cultural/social performatives. It is only when the fluid and functional nature of knowledge and canonical narratives is exposed that the concretized and essentialized illusions of natural/normal/legal/legitimate gender identities may be challenged. Butler focuses more on performatives – neglecting the agency that assigns ‘legitimacy’ to one kind of performatives and ‘illegitimacy’ to others. This agency is Language, which includes the Symbolic, the Other, the narratives and all kinds of knowledge systems.⁹ The performatives, or cultural acts, or identities are like pure signifiers without signification. The powerful canonical knowledge narratives are used to signify these empty signifiers. To create and legitimize alternate canons of marginal narratives and to debunk the ‘truth’ of the centre, the canon of the dominant metaphors (narratives) has to be exposed, relocated and ‘re-metaphorized.’ And to do that, paradoxically, we have to create more metaphors.

Notes

1. The term ‘postfeminist’ is debatable. Butler has used this term in a historical sense – that feminism in its original form has lost its relevance. However, it is difficult to locate the ‘post’ or ‘pre’ of the concepts that deal with ontological issues of the subject.
2. Deconstructionists like Paul de Man have already articulated, more radically, what Butler claims as radical reconceptualization of the body. Paul de Man in “The Epistemology of Metaphor” (1978) considers identity a metaphor that becomes meaningful and substantial through an act of mind – the act of assigning substantial signification to metaphoric expressions. “*Being and identity are the result of a resemblance which is not in things but posited by an act of mind which, as such, can only be verbal*” (my italics) (De Man: 25).
3. ‘Paternal Metaphor’ is a term used by Lacan to refer to male control over the Symbolic. “[T]he Name-of-the-Father is . . . the fundamental signifier which . . . confers identity on the subject (it names him, positions him within the symbolic order) and signifies the Oedipal prohibition, the ‘no’ of the incest taboo” (Evans 2006: 122). For more on this, see Evans.
4. Lacan’s ‘Symbolic’ designates all cultural, social and legal practices and all the space of language that construct the subject in its journey in this Symbolic world.

5. A detailed discussion on this issue can be found in Helen Cixous's "Castration or Decapitation".
6. The term 'systematic totality' refers to the totalizing or foundationalist knowledge frameworks.
7. Julia Kristeva's theory of the Semiotic is a significant contribution to the debates on subjectivity. The semiotic space of language is considered most significant in making sense of the ontology of subject, especially the female subject. Kristeva considers the Symbolic as something that constitutes the male economy of significations, but the Symbolic space is also in the realm of false identitarian acts because the Symbolic itself is authoritarian that makes the subject follow its significations without questioning. However, Kristeva believes that the Symbolic alone cannot always govern us. There are moments when we defy the Symbolic – the logical order; and go to the Semiotic space – the space which has the maternal reverberations. The Semiotic is the defiance of the tyrannical Symbolic. It is the space of the Real where a being can experience its core, free from the burdens of identity and language that the Symbolic imposes on being. The coercive tactics of the Symbolic do not work here.
8. For Lacan, the Unconscious is structured like language. Lacan later changed this concept of the Unconscious thus: "If I have said that language is what the unconscious is structured like, that is because language, first of all doesn't exist. Language is what we try to know concerning the function of *llanguage* [sic]" (138). Language is the totality of "*llanguage*". For more on these concepts see Evans.
9. Lacan uses the term 'Other' almost synonymously with Symbolic and Language. See notes on the Symbolic.

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Misogyny and Patriarchy in Ancient Sanskrit Plays: A Temporal Observation of Shudraka's *Mrichhakatikam* and Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam*

Sanskrit literature, like any other form of art, offers valuable insights into the society and culture of the times in which it was produced. Through a reading of two representative plays, Shudraka's *Mrichhakatikam* and Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, this paper attempts to decode certain hierarchies governing the representation of women in ancient Sanskrit drama.¹

Patriarchy has been one of the dominant hierarchies pervading the cultural ethos of India, and the 'learned patriarchs' of ancient India are believed to have played a pivotal role in the construction of this discourse, along with creating an almost prescriptive notion of quintessential Indian womanhood. A temporal observation of the

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representation of women across the ancient times reveals that women definitely enjoyed greater respect in the 'Vedic or pre-classical period,' than they did in the later years, especially when drama as a genre emerged and started gaining popularity. Rig Vedic society, if not matriarchal, was not predominantly patriarchal either. Many sages in the Vedic period were named after a matrilineal fashion, enabling one to believe that women held an esteemed position at the time. It was only towards the end of this era – around the period of the compilation of the *Atharva Veda* – that one finds the birth of daughters to be deplored. Despite the prejudice against daughters, this latter period too was not overtly patriarchal: it was necessary, for instance, for kings to have their wives by their side while performing *Rajsuya Yajya*.² It is after the Vedic era that the status of women began to decline sharply. In the *Smritis*,³ one reads of women being bracketed with the *Shudras*⁴ and thus denied the study of the Vedas. Literature too, did not remain unaffected by this change, and authors went on to represent that which they witnessed in the evolving world around them. One of the most poignant testaments of this decline can be found in ancient Sanskrit drama. A deconstruction of the writings of Shudraka and Kalidasa reveals that women's social position became obviously inferior to that of men, and in fact, deteriorated with the advancing times – down from Shudraka's era to that of Kalidasa's.

According to Ratnamayi Devi Dikshit, *Mrichhakatikam* indicates the growth of a slow prejudice against the freedom that women of the earlier generations enjoyed (1977: 39). She adds that Shudraka's was also a period in which the ostracism of courtesans, as lowly women who would entertain men in return for money, started rising. One begins to hear of "buying female beauty" in the market (Dikshit 39). Against this backdrop, Shudraka creates an uncanny heroine in the adorable prostitute Vasantsena, who cares more for love and nobility than for wealth, which suggests that perhaps the author-king was more liberal in his choice and representation of characters than many of his contemporary Brahmin authors. It may not be incorrect to assume that Shudraka's world, despite its social prejudices, was not completely undemocratic,

allowing the author to challenge many existing hierarchies and perceptions. Shudraka conceives his play as a *Prakarana* – a form of drama not bound to any historical or mythical narratives; allowing for greater creativity in plot, and a befitting choice to narrate an unconventional tale of love between the free-willed courtesan Vasantsena and the poor but noble Brahmin Charudutta. Kalidasa, perhaps more constrained by his less liberal world, sketches far more customary tales of love. In *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, in fact, one finds Kalidasa transform a pre-classical myth, with a reasonably democratic temper, into a rather conservative tale of female subordination and feminine weakness.

Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, the love story of Dushyanta and Shakuntala, was originally narrated in the *Adi Purana* of *Mahabharata*, and in the *Padma Purana*, where the bold, assertive and free-willed Shakuntala dares to decline the king's proposal for a *gandharva*-marriage.⁵ She later agrees to the marriage but on one condition – the son born to her would succeed Dushyanta on the throne. Kalidasa, on the contrary, 'reimagines' his Shakuntala as the quintessentially submissive woman – a self-sacrificing, accommodating, frail wife and mother. The "Introduction" to *Revisiting Abhijnanasakuntalam* encapsulates this departure:

The king's court which legally sanctions the norms of caste patriarchy and represents a certain kind of household as ideal – cannot – recognize the *Gandharva* form of marriage that foregrounds a self authenticating female agency. Thus in the *nataka*, in marked difference from the epic version, Sakuntala needs to move from the forested margins of Dushyanta's kingdom to a more austere realm of penance where female sexuality is tutored in the norms of caste- patriarchy, "the conduct of a virtuous wife." (Sengupta and Tandon 2011: 11-12)

In the original narrative, a feisty Shakuntala is seen sermonizing her lover Dushyanta about righteousness. When the king refuses to accept her as his wife, Shakuntala walks away in anger and dignity, but not in self-pity. Kalidasa's Shakuntala is a weakling, reeling in despondency. Marxist Feminists may read this relationship between Dushyanta and Shakuntala as one between the bourgeois and the proletariat.⁶ Shakuntala, despite her high-caste and heavenly origin,

has no wealth and is inferior to the monarch in social class. The only 'wealth' she possesses is her son, that eventually enables her to achieve the status of the "chief queen." In fact, being a woman from the jungles, she may even be labeled a 'rag-proletariat.' Such an abjectly disempowered representation of Shakuntala in the play is a stark contrast from not only her depiction in the epics, but also Shudraka's delineation of Vasantsena.

The seductively beautiful Vasantsena defies all repressive cultural confines to assert her individuality. She speaks Sanskrit, overriding the prescriptions of texts like *Manusmriti*, that forbid *Shudras* and women from hearing *Sanskritic Vedas*. After the early Vedic period, Sanskrit gradually started becoming the language of culture, knowledge and power – the prerogative of only high class/ caste men. Yet Shudraka represents his heroine (a woman from a much inferior class) to be skilled in the "language of power," which seems to indicate that the world of Shudraka was relatively freer than that of Kalidasa. Shakuntala and her friends speak only *Prakrit*.⁷

Vasantsena is presented as a ravishing, free-wheeling courtesan, the consort of many men (Hagman 1977: 32). She is called a "dancing whore, denosed harlot and perverter of the family" by the lecherous brother-in-law of the king (Shudraka 1905: 58). Yet Vasantsena's Brahmin lover, Charudatta, thinks that she should be worshipped like a goddess. This is ironic, considering the heroine of Kalidasa is of royal descent. Shakuntala is the daughter of the celestial nymph Menaka and the royal sage Vishwamitra.⁸ But despite being superior to Vasantsena in caste – her stature being almost that of a goddess – Shakuntala has neither freedom nor power. She has to suffer terrible miseries after she marries the king of her own will through *Gandharva* rites. Shakuntala's miseries may even be read as Kalidasa's warning against flouting the 'preferred norms' of his society. *Gandharva*-marriage, though permissible, was not the socially favoured custom thus warranting a punishment that pans out in the play symbolically, through the 'curse motif' and the 'ring-motif.' It may be noted that the original story does not mention any curse given by Durvasa or any ring presented to the heroine by the

king that gets lost during the course of events, which corroborates the perception that Kalidasa had some ulterior motives behind connecting Shakuntala's undeserved pain to her *gandharva*-marriage. His 're-inventions' may either have been guided by his personal patriarchal beliefs, or a reflection of the intolerance of later times, which shackled the expression of the writers as well. Shudraka, perhaps less bound by any such social obligations, could focus elsewhere.

The female protagonist of Shudraka possesses many qualities. She honestly loves the poor but virtuous Brahmin, Charudatta. She is literate, intelligent, generous and humble. She wittily entrusts her jewel case to Charudatta on the pretext that the box would remain safe with him. Her real motive though is ensuring a reason to meet him again. She frees her slave Madanika to get her married to Sarvilaka, the Brahmin whom she loves. Maitreya, the Brahmin *Vidushaka* who dislikes Vasantsena and explicitly condemns the evil ways of prostitutes, is also awestruck when he sees Vasantsena's palatial house. As Maitreya enters one magnificent court after another, he ends up comparing the brothel to the "splendor of the divine realm" (qtd. in Hagman 32). Vasantsena is seen giving all her gold ornaments to Rohasena, the son of Charudatta, to get the child a play-cart made of gold. When her gold jewels are stolen, she remains calm. Even in the face of death, she remains dignified and does not succumb to the lecherous advances of the king's brother-in-law. Denying the king's brother-in-law (a powerful man) is a triumph of her individuality and free will, as she chooses the one she wants to be with. By profession, Vasantsena can be labeled a coarse prostitute who merely pleases men in return for money, but through her thoughts and actions, she proves to be respectable, dignified, and most importantly, free.

On the other hand, despite being titled *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, which means 'the recognition of Shakuntala,' Shakuntala's role in the play is nothing beyond a pathetically weak, romantic heroine, no different from most of Kalidasa's heroines who operate within their definite cultural confines, playing stereotypical roles of shy beloveds, loving wives and doting mothers. Shakuntala is meek and innocent

in her love for Dushyanta. She submissively consents to the *gandharva*-marriage. She unwittingly offends the sage Durvasa and consequentially invites his wrath. She tries to speak for herself in Dushyanta's court, but remains unheard. In the repudiation scene of the play, when the king makes a derogatory remark about the "inborn cunning" of women, the helpless Shakuntala says: "Thou, ill-bred man, those judgest everyone by their own heart; who else will ever follow thee wearing the robes of Dharma but resembling a well covered with grass" (qtd. in Jhalla 1949: 152). Her outburst is full of anger but she can only 'feel' hurt, and seems incapable of any profound reaction against the injustice meted out to her. Xaviere Gauthier sums up this "alienation of women":

As long as women remain silent, they will be outside the historical process. But, if they begin to speak and write as men do, they will enter history subdued and alienated. (qtd. in Lodge 2005: 316)

The only time Shakuntala is relieved from her misery is when she attains what may be called "the ever glorified motherhood," which too is a dominant patriarchal construct. Jasbir Jain says:

[I]t is the proxy nature of power that women acquire through motherhood and the contractual nature of marriage. Kalidasa's revisionary rewriting retains only some elements of Sakuntala's fiery independence. Rewritings work through selective representations and attempt to fit in with the prevailing social and moral code. (2011: 106)

Another stark departure marks Kalidasa's 're-creation' of Shakuntala. In the epic *Mahabharata*, King Dushyanta, in the attempt to lure Shakuntala into marrying him, helps her realize that she is the mistress of her own life, and that she should step out from the imprisonment of her patriarchal foster father and the invalid rituals of her society. However, in doing so, he ironically awakens Shakuntala to her powers and rights. Hence, when Shakuntala realizes her status as an individual, she puts her conditions before the king, for the *gandharva*-marriage. She says: "[I]f this is the course of the law, and if I am my own mistress, then, chief of the Pauravas, this is my condition in giving me in marriage, my lord"

(qtd. in Thapar 2011: 26). It may be mentioned that even though the epical Shakuntala is awakened to her rights (the first phase of feminism), she eventually finds in Dushyanta the seeds of an insensitive, patriarchal mind-set that was to rule women in the ages to come. She is betrayed into a marriage that remains invalid in her society, and is subsequently forsaken and left alone to suffer. But despite the tragic course of events, she never relinquishes her pride, choosing instead to raise her son alone in dignity, and thereby leaves the impression of a bold and self-asserting woman who would not be cowed down even in the face of adversity. The 'moralistic poet' Kalidasa, however, gives his Shakuntala no such awareness. In his play, Shakuntala readily agrees to the *gandharva*-marriage without any resistance. Instead of stating the conditions in return for her hand in marriage, she is shown to be bewitched by the charms of the king. All through the play, she meekly seeks the support of her Brahmin friends – Anusuya and Priyamvada – to find a way of being with "the captivator of her heart."

Thus, one may conclude that unlike *Mrichhakatikam*, *Abhijnanasakuntalam* makes no effort to transgress the existing social/cultural constructs. It cannot be denied that despite all radical departures, Shudraka too could not out-rightly reject his social conventions. Prostitutes in his times were treated with contempt. In *Mrichhakatikam* too, one hears Samsthanaka's companion, the Courtier, speak disparagingly of Vasantsena:

[Y]ou are common as the flower
That grows besides the road; in bitter truth
Your body has its price. (Shudraka 13)

The fool, Maitreya, makes derogatory comments about Vasantsena's constancy in love. The fact that the profession of a hetaera would pass down generations from a mother to her daughter and that there was no easy escape from the profession, unless it was permitted by the monarch, is reflected in the play as well. However, despite these social restrictions, Shudraka treats his heroine with uncritical dignity. The ultimate testament of his unconventional representation of a 'lowly' courtesan lies in Vasantsena's courtship

and eventual marriage with Charudatta, the poor but high caste Brahmin of the play.

While on the one hand Shudraka is seen representing the dictates of his society, he subverts, on the other, many of those norms in depicting Vasantsena's love for Charudatta. Shudraka also gives his heroine a remarkable strength of character. According to Lorri Hagman, Vasantsena is strong willed and persistent. She realizes what she wants and outwits many a man to achieve her aims. When Vasantsena is questioned by her maid about loving a poor man like Charudatta, she replies: "[A] courtesan who sets her heart on a poor man is blameless in the eyes of the world" (qtd. in Hagman 28). Reading between these lines, it is implicit that Vasantsena's love for Charudatta may have been a well-considered choice that the low-born prostitute makes to elevate her status in society – a marriage, that too with a Brahmin. Vasantsena's maid Madanika, through her charm and wit, also marries Sarvilaka, again a Brahmin. Thus, both Vasantsena and Madanika, though marginalized, are seen using their sexuality, wit and courage to assert their will and desires in a world dominated by patriarchal traditions. Their thinking and actions are symbolic of a nascent yet significant feminist assertion that the heroines of Kalidasa do not possess. In the relationship of Vasantsena and Madanika, Shudraka also symbolizes what modern feminists might read as yet another form of feminism – female bonding.

Another common symbol, used by the ancient dramatists to construct social hierarchies and cultural sensibilities, is jewellery. A decoding of the texts under study reveals that jewels symbolize stature and chastity when associated with the 'noble' woman; those very jewels symbolize sexuality and seduction in the representation of the 'fallen' woman. This tends to create the same extended hierarchy between chastity and seduction as there exists between noble and fallen women. In *Mrichhakatikam*, Vasantsena is seen using her jewellery to seduce her lover Charudatta and to ensure that their opportunities to meet do not cease. Her jewels play a significant role in the marriage of Madanika and Sarvilaka. When Vasantsena offers her ornaments to Rohasena for building a gold-

cart, the jewels are cruelly snatched away from the child and produced instead as evidence against Charudatta for committing the crime of courting a courtesan. All through the play, the lowly courtesan's jewels appear to be associated with forms of sexuality or seduction – elements thereby signified as base in the eyes of the 'gentrified' audience. In *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, on the other hand, when Shakuntala is introduced as a woman of the jungles, she wears no ornaments other than some rustic, natural pieces. She applies the unguent of *usira* (a herb) to her breasts, wears bark garments, decks herself up with a bracelet of lotus stalks and wears the *Sirish* flower on her ear. It is only when the author declares Shakuntala's Kshatriya origin that she receives her first piece of jewellery – a ring presented to her by the king, followed by a host of other precious ornaments that the trees bestow upon her, when she is to depart for her husband's home:

By a certain tree was put forth (i.e. offered) a fine silk garment, white like the moon, and suited to this auspicious occasion; by another was exuded the lac-dye for application to this feet; the ornaments were presented from other trees by the hands of sylvan deities put forth as far as the wrist and vying with the bursting of tender sprouts from there. (Kalidasa 1990: 139)

Thrilled with these unusual gifts from "Mother Nature," Shakuntala's friend Priyamvada is heard exclaiming: "Friend, by this favor is foreshadowed the royal fortune that you are to enjoy in the house of your husband" (Kalidasa 139). As the social position of Shakuntala rises upon marrying Dushyanta, so does the richness of her jewels. Exquisite ornaments replace ordinary flowers and leaves. Thus, unlike a courtesan's ornaments, a Kshatriya wife's ornaments seem to represent a higher order – material wealth and status. Similarly, pure white in colour, the pearl necklace of Charudatta's Brahmin wife symbolizes an honourable woman's sexual purity. When Shudraka pronounces the lone pearl necklace of Charudatta's Brahmin wife (Dhyuta) to be more precious than Vasantsena's entire set of jewellery, the value of chastity in a woman, especially one from the higher caste, is also symbolically established.

The construct of sexual purity is reiterated through yet another powerful representation, or rather the lack of it. Both the texts clearly

elide references to sexuality, especially when representing women of class. Only a 'sanitized' version of the traditional *pativrata*⁹ is delineated. In *Mrichhakatikam*, Dhyuta plays the role of the perfect *pativrata*. She unconditionally supports all her husband's desires, including his romance with Vasantsena. She is ready to be a "Sati"¹⁰ on hearing that her husband has been sentenced to death for committing the forbidden crime of courting a lowly courtesan. She is shown performing all the duties of an ideal wife, yet nowhere does one find any reference to the couple's sexual relations. A low-caste woman like Vasantsena, on the contrary, is neither bound by the social constructs of playing the devoted wife, nor is her sexuality perceived negatively. Prasad illustrates how domesticity nurtures its hierarchy through moral laws and different codes of conduct for the woman chained to the concept of *pativrata* (1990). Likewise, Shakuntala's sexual encounters with Dushyanta are carefully elided and mentioned only through fleeting metaphors towards the end of the otherwise 'purged' text. Sengupta and Tandon mention in the "Introduction" of *Revisiting Abhijananasakuntalam*: "The material investment in the erotic relationship is manifested more clearly later when the king mourns the loss of Sakuntala as 'my wife by right', the 'rich earth' in which he had implanted his 'seed' and of the 'harvest' of which he is the undisputed owner" (11). Thus, it would not be far-fetched to assume that the 'learned patriarchs' used symbols to control the discourse on not just femininity but also women's sexuality, a reflection corroborated when we see how the authors chose to ignore the sexuality of Charudatta's wife or punish Shakuntala for the expression of her sexual desires, even within wedlock.

The language employed in the sub-plots of the play also supports the further consolidation of the patriarchal discourse and of notions around ideal Indian womanhood. Kalidasa, perhaps in an attempt to appease his dominant, patriarchal audience moulds his women characters into the existing traditional confines. The advice given by Kanva on the departure of Shakuntala is: "Serve the elders; adopt the attitude of a dear friend towards their co-wives; even if offended by their husband's anger do not go against him" (qtd. in

Jhalla 150). The duties expected of a good Indian wife were: never to question her husband, bear him heirs and unwittingly resign to all his wishes, including his unfaithfulness. The mocking reference to Dushyanta's eldest wife Vasumati by both the fool Vidushaka and the maid Chaturika is a result of her inability to bear the king an heir. This may also be Kalidasa's attempt to censure Vasumati, who in her jealousy and grief resents her husband's infidelity. Such resentment had no room in an arrogantly patriarchal world. Hamsapadika too is seen lamenting about how she was once a favourite of the monarch, but no longer so with the passage of time. However, the author is rather apathetic in his representation of the demeaning condition of women in the king's harem. Sarvadatta, the young ascetic, is heard telling the king: "Here she is – your wife. Receive her or turn her out as you please. For, absolute is the power of husbands over their wives" (qtd. in Jhalla 152). Dushyanta also casually confesses his love for Hamsapadika and playfully accepts her chiding. But at no point is he remorseful about discarding her in favour of a new love/wife. He is seen as a polygamist who promises the anxious Priyamvada that Shakuntala would be "the substratum of his dynasty," amongst his multiple wives (Sengupta and Tandon 51). Such delineations reek of a looming patriarchal discourse, reiterating the perception that women had no individuality and very little power.

Further, Kalidasa employs some clever patriarchal twists to redeem the king of all his 'misendeavours.' For one, he conveniently blames Durvasa's curse (and not the monarch) for all of Shakuntala's misfortunes. Dushyanta's transformation towards Shakuntala coincides with his discovery that she is pregnant with his child, which may be read as yet another patriarchal twist. A man without a son in early Indian tradition was believed to be doomed. Being childless and in want of an heir then becomes an acceptable justification to 'accommodate' the otherwise deplored *gandharva*-marriage. The episode also points towards an allied patriarchal construct – if a wife could provide her husband with a son, her position in both her home and the society would be secured. Mothering an heir often became a significant cause of hierarchy

between wives. The wives could comfortably be categorized as the privileged or the unprivileged co-wives depending on who could bear a male heir and thereby achieve a 'glorified' motherhood.

Rustomji states: "[H]eroines in Sanskrit literature function within the confines of a system in which they have to play out their strictly defined roles as mothers, wives, mistresses, and sometimes sisters or daughter of the heroes. They do not and cannot really step beyond these boundaries" (1975: 51). The patriarchal poet Kalidasa too seems to be operating within the confines of these social standards when representing the stereotypical beloveds, wives and mothers. A poignant example is the manner in which the author dissociates sexuality from motherhood. When Shakuntala becomes a mother, her whole deglamourized persona is described with reverence attained after penance: "Then enter Sakuntala with her uncombed hair tied into single knot" (277). The king too is heard saying:

Ah, this is her ladyship Sakuntala. Who, wearing a pair of dusky garments, with face emaciated by her observance of vows, having her hair tied up once for all and of pure conduct, has been practicing one long vow of separation from me, extremely cruel (unto her). (277-9)

In *Mrichhakatikam* too, the Brahmin wife Dhyuta, is never described erotically; her beauty and sexuality are nowhere visible as she assumes the revered role of a young Brahmin mother.

Thus, one observes that it is the power of patriarchy, coupled with the ideological constructs of those in power, that coerce women into a position of subordination. Such a skewed power relation in favour of men perhaps emerges from economic inequality (Millet 1990). In the ancient Indian scenario, where women were mostly illiterate, ignorant and economically dependent on men, they were forced into an almost vicious cycle of embodying/acting out the examples glorified before them by the dominant patriarchy. Their role-models underscored the patriarchal order – Sita, who passed the *agnipariksha*,¹¹ and Savitri,¹² whose devotion to her husband was so pure that she fought with the God of death to save her husband's life.

To conclude, the 'learned' men – mostly Brahmin – while on the one hand, elevated the status of women in literature by comparing them to goddesses, degraded their stature, on the other, by binding them to several restrictive and disempowering social and cultural constructs. Jasbir Jain critiques this unfortunate polarization of female identity, in which the projection of women's images remain caught between those of "the goddesses" and "the public women" (104). Patriarchy had various devices to control the consciousness of society and to hegemonize women in life as well as literature. The ancient Sanskrit plays are a testament to this hegemony and can well be called phallogocentric texts that represent a dominant gender hierarchy. Both *Mrichhakatikam* and *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, when decoded, are replete (in varying degrees though), with varied instances of misogyny and patriarchy.

Notes

1. The two plays under study are widely popular, in both India and the world beyond, and are often considered representative works of ancient Sanskrit drama. They carry "the *perception* of what was regarded as the Indian cultural tradition" (my italics) (Thapar 2000: 7). Historians have officially corroborated that Kalidasa wrote somewhere between the 5th and the 6th century A.D. during the reign of Chandragupta II, in what is also known as the golden age of classical Sanskrit literature (Sastri 1987: 77). Shudraka, the writer-king, who wrote a few centuries before Kalidasa, has likewise been linked with the 2nd century B.C. He has been identified as Abhira King Indranigupta, who wrote under the pen name of Shudraka (Warder 2009: 4).
2. *Rajsuya Yagya* was a sacrifice performed by the ancient kings of India who wanted to pronounce themselves as more powerful than their counterparts. The powerful ruler would conquer other kingdoms and then invite the defeated emperors to a sacrifice ceremony that marked the victor's supremacy.
3. Scholars conclude that *smṛiti* is specifically a Brahminic tradition that refers to a specific body of Hindu religious scripture and is a codified component of customary Hindu law. Part of an oral tradition, the *Smṛitis* are believed to have been compiled in the post-Vedic, pre-classical era.
4. Hindu caste system, called the *chaturvarna* system, consisted of four castes – the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Shudras were the lowest in rank and with passing times were subject to tremendous social castigation.
5. *Gandharva* marriage was a marriage without rituals and without the consent of anyone other than the bride and her groom – a 'love-marriage' of sorts –

which had the sanction of ancient Indian laws. However, it was never a favoured concept in ancient Indian traditions.

6. The word proletariat can etymologically be traced to 'proles,' which in Latin means offspring. Proletarian then represents someone who produces offspring and has no wealth other than children (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proletariat>). 'Rag-proletariat,' or 'lumpenproletariat,' is derived from a combination of the German word 'lumpen,' which means rags, and 'proletariat.' The term 'lumpenproletariat' was originally coined by Marx to "describe the layer of the working class that is unlikely ever to achieve class consciousness." It refers to "the class of outcast, degenerated and submerged elements that make up a section of the population of industrial centers" which include "beggars, prostitutes, gangsters, racketeers, swindlers, petty criminals, tramps, chronic unemployed or unemployables, persons who have been cast out by industry, and all sorts of declassed, degraded or degenerated elements" (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lumpenproletariat>).
7. *Prakrit* was a dialect used by the illiterates, women and those considered inferior in the societal hierarchies; hence, unworthy of speaking a fine language like Sanskrit. Sanskrit, on the other hand, was assumed to be the language of the powerful and the learned.
8. Vishwamitra was a Kshatriya king by birth, who wanted to be a sage and so did great penance like Brahmin sages. For this reason, he is often referred to as 'the royal sage.'
9. According to Hindu principles, a *pativrata* or 'chaste woman' is one who never thinks about any man other than her husband and is fully devoted to him. It is believed that this service and dedication to her husband makes the wife achieve great powers.
10. Sati was the wife of Lord Shiva. According to mythology, when Sati's father, Daksha, did not invite Shiva to his house for a *yagya*, the wife, in her agitation, jumped into the 'holy fire of the sacrifice' and burnt herself alive. The story celebrates a woman's pride in her husband's status and dignity.
11. After Lord Rama rescued his wife Sita from the clutches of Ravana, Rama made Sita walk on fire, as a ritual to test her sexual purity. Sita emerged from the fire unhurt, thus passing the test successfully. This 'test' is called the *Agnipariksha*.
12. Savitri was a learned lady from ancient Indian mythology, who is often reckoned as the epitome of ideal Indian womanhood. She was so devoted to her ailing husband that the Gods blessed her for her virtue with wondrous powers, which helped her follow him even after his death, and get his life back from *Yamraj* – the God of Death.

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Conservation Politics and the Decentring of the Tiger in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

Wilderness and wildlife, and their relationship with humankind, have for long been a subject of critical enquiry. According to Greg Garrard, "The idea of wilderness, signifying nature in a state uncontaminated by civilisation, is the most potent construction of nature available in New World environmentalism" (2007: 59). An increasing number of voices are debating and questioning the dominant discourse of wilderness in which both wildness and wilderness have been identified with both the land and the national character of people (Nash 1982; Turner 1996). This discourse regarding wilderness seems to have been built along the Judeo-Christian, classical and romantic conceptions of nature, and is grounded in a dualistic thinking that treats nature as something apart from human civilization. The

dominant view regarding wilderness, which is essentially Euro-American centric, also formulates the 'universalist agenda' of wildlife conservation. In the globalizing agenda of conservation campaigns, the complex relationships of humans with nature in certain non-white cultures are evidently ignored. As studies by Graham Huggan, Helen Tiffin, Madhav Gadgil, Ramachandra Guha and others have pointed out, the wildlife conservation programmes, mostly framed at the behest of global elites, seldom take into account the human-nature mutualism existing in a number of regions falling in the 'global south.'

This paper explores how the debates regarding wildlife conservation operate in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004; henceforth *HT*). It is proposed that the dominant western discourse regarding wilderness is subverted in the novel by its focus on the 'human-nature dialectics' in the wild. An attempt has also been made to locate the position of the text in the anthropocentric-biocentric debate. It is interesting to discover how the tiger's position as an emblem of wildlife conservation has been decentred in this ecocritical text. Ghosh attempts to deconstruct the politics behind the promotion of 'species-specific' conservation projects such as the Project Tiger, and also points out the catastrophic effects of promoting such ventures on the lives and livelihood of forest dwellers living in ecologically vital regions such as the Sunderbans. In this paper, *The Hungry Tide* has been closely read as a postcolonial-ecocritical text where Ghosh has pitched issues of wildlife conservation and animal rights against the issues of poverty, environmental justice and human rights. The novel points out the "environmental racism" (Curtin 2005: 145) and injustice inherent in 'species-specific' wildlife conservation ventures, and also highlights the "cost of mistranslating the local human relationship to the environment with global transnational models" (Cilano 2007: 83).

The attempts to tame the wild, and establish "governmentality" over nature (Burchell et al. 1991: 87), seem to have been globalized during the enlightenment era. The European process of colonialism accentuated this project of managing, classifying and regimenting

wilderness and wild races. These efforts to restore wildlife to its natural, pristine settings emanate from a concept of wilderness as something apart from human culture. The deeply ingrained dualistic thinking, that perceives nature and culture as separate spheres, seems to have led to the establishment of wildlife reserves, preservation and national parks in the West, which were aimed at confining wild flora and fauna to a pure, idyllic setting. These preservation parks or reserves became the norm or model for wildlife conservation, expected to be imitated all over the world. The internalized duality between man and nature continues to make conservationists, and transnational institutions like the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), World Conservation Union and World Resource Union, disregard the closely intertwined man-nature relations in several 'other' parts of the globe. Donald A. Brown in his thought-provoking article, "Environmental Ethics and Public Policy," sums up the elitism of the environmental-conservation projects: "The only priests allowed into the temple of environmental decision making are scientists, engineers, economists and lawyers" (2004: 111).

The national parks and reserves, though initially established in the tundra and temperate belts in the global north, have become the 'standard' global model for management and conservation of wildlife. However, such a standardized management of nature has been found to be problematic in the case of certain locales in the tropics. Such standardized and globalized conservation norms are known to disregard local people, and ignore their valuable indigenous knowledge. In countries like India, the myopic application of technoscientific models of wildlife management has led to the displacement, impoverishment and disempowerment of the local "ecosystem people" (Gadgil and Guha 1995: 4). There is an 'environmental racism' inherent in such initiatives, aimed at providing 'human-free habitat' to wildlife, in regions where humans and wildlife have a long history of habitat sharing.

Environmentalists like Vandana Shiva,¹ Ramachandra Guha, Madhav Gadgil and others castigate the hegemonic preservationist discourse for ignoring the close proximity of humans and the wild fauna in certain cultural landscapes of the third world. They have

tried to expose how issues of wildlife conservation are interlocked with issues of environmental justice, poverty and rights of indigenous people. Demands for wildlife conservation, voiced by conservation biologists and nature lovers at various forums, can be viewed again as a construction of nature, and this construction often adopts 'orientalist methodologies' to argue for the universality of its position. It has been found that the preservation ecologists "tend to venerate wild animals while treating cattle, sheep, and cats as the destructive accomplices of human culture" (Garrard 149). On the other hand, a large section of forest-dwelling, tribal populace perceives wild animals, like tigers, bears and wolves, as enemies because they feed upon cattle and devour their source of livelihood. Many ecocritics, like Arturo Escobar, Cara Cilano, William Cronon and J. B. Calicutt, have also been critical of conservation ecology's or deep ecology's lack of concern for the socio-economic inequity within human society. A number of instances can also be illustrated from the recent history when the claims of forest-dwelling people have been ignored by setting up conservation parks and reserved areas for 'privileged species' like the tiger or the panda.²

Many influential writers, like J. M. Coetzee, Margaret Atwood, Chinua Achebe and Ghosh, have tried to explore the human-nature relationship in specific locales and highlighted the environmental effects of imperialism and economic globalization.³ The tying up of environmental concerns with issues of displacement, dispossession and divisiveness makes these writers popular exponents of what has been called "postcolonial ecocriticism" (Huggan 2010: 1). *The Hungry Tide* was written against the backdrop of a move to convert the Sunderbans into an ecotourist destination at the behest of corporate giants like the Sahara group. The writer raises his voice against the state's attempts to corporatize places of extreme ecological value like the Sunderbans (2004b). Presenting the Sunderbans as a unique ecological niche in India's cultural landscape, he observes: "The islands are the trailing threads of India's fabric, the ragged fringe of her sari, the "pachol that follows her, half-wetted by the sea" (*HT* 6). Interwoven in the narrative is also the writer's exasperation at the state-sponsored moves to convert this

largest delta region, having a thick cover of Mangrove forest, into a sort of “official landscape . . . imposed by government and corporations on local geographies without regard for the local peoples, cultures or environment” (Adamson 2001: 90).

Ghosh declares in one of his essays: “In India we are fortunate in that our literary traditions, powerfully influenced though it is by the West, have never wholly succumbed to the romantic imagining of Nature as a ‘pristine’, uninhabited temple” (2008: 12). The Wilderness Acts of the US (1964) define parks and wildlife preserves as places “where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man is a visitor who does not remain” (Calicott and Nelson 1998: 350). Calicott and Nelson remark that “wilderness preservation is paradoxical because it works against wilderness itself in order to keep it the same” (353). *The Hungry Tide* shows that wildlife conservation, biocentrism and biodiversity might be mere buzzwords to camouflage economic and political pursuits of state actors, certain transnational NGOs and multinational corporations.

Closely enmeshed in the politics of conservation is the obsession of the West and the urban anglophiles with the tiger. Conservation activism exemplified by ventures such as “Project Tiger” is also born out of a strange “speciesism” (Cohen 1986: 8) that privileges the need to create projects for tiger conservation while ignoring the rights of other species. These projects aimed at constructing exclusive habitats for the tigers in India seem to have historical roots in the Mughal representation of the tiger as a symbol of power and potency, and its “anthropomorphization” by the British into one of “Oriental ferocity and motiveless violence” (Ryan 1997: 104). The British obsession with the tiger is evident in the works of writers such as William Blake, Rudyard Kipling, Jim Corbett, Kenneth Anderson and many others.⁴ It can also be proved by the display of Tipu Sultan’s tiger⁵ in the offices of the East India Company, and since 1879 at the Victoria and Albert Museum (Chakrabarti 2010: 82). The British fascination for the tiger was also accompanied by large scale hunting and rapid depletion of the tiger population. A utilitarian perspective combined with an orientalist mind-set resulted

in the obsession of the British colonizer for the tiger. The British colonist's disregard of other ecologically vital species, including the poor, native *Homo sapiens*, was quite conspicuous and startling. In 1875, W. W. Hunter (47) talked at great length about the Bengal forests and wildlife, ignoring largely the forest dwellers who are mentioned only as a "few wandering tribes," classified after long lists of fauna and flora (1875: 317). The forest and wildlife conservation policies in the post-independence era in India have continued to imitate the ones followed by the colonial masters. As a result of this imitative policy-making, places like the Sunderbans have become "a local theatre for a large universal campaign informed by the science and politics of international capitalism" (Chakrabarti 90).

The Royal Bengal tiger, owing to its association with the Mughal and colonial images of hunting, and its present status as the national animal, has been occupying the centre stage of the wildlife conservation discourse. Works such as *The Sunderbans* by R. N. De have highlighted this pervasive tendency:

Bhadralok sensitivity to the Royal Bengal tiger with its association to both the regal and the colonial images of hunting as well as to its current position as national animal has often been deployed to mark the urgency of having the Sunderbans become a World Heritage Site and Prime tiger area. But the anthropomorphisation of tigers into that of *bhadra* symbol of national animal was questioned by the islanders through their presentation of another image of tiger. (1990: 339)

Ghosh chooses the tiger as a motif to portray the differences towards wildlife conservation between 'globe-trotting elites' and transnational organizations like the WWF on the one hand, and the impoverished local people whose lives and life style match the rhythms of their environment on the other. *The Hungry Tide* is set in the Sunderbans which is a known site for Project Tiger launched in 1973 aimed at saving tigers from extinction. Sunderbans, the largest delta in the world, is also a "jungle which is so thick that history has hardly ever found a way in" (Rushdie 1982: 359). The government has made attempts to convert Sunderbans into a tourist destination, so that the Royal Bengal tiger can be admired by tourists, while ignoring all along that "some three million people live in this biosphere reserve"

(De 1990: 3). The fact that hundreds of people are killed by tigers in this tide country is ignored both by the media and the government. *The Hungry Tide* highlights this tragic truth to show how the state, media and conservation groups often ignore the human costs involved in the promotion of exclusive ventures such as Project Tiger. Kanai, in the novel, realizes his complicity after his blinkered vision gets corrected:

“Because it was people like you,” said Kanai, “who made a push to protect wildlife here, without regard for the human costs. And I’m complicit because people like me – Indians of my class, that is – have chosen to hide these costs, basically in order to curry favour with their Western patrons.” (HT 301)

The official patronage for Project Tiger, abetted and supported by funds from global organizations like WWF, makes the officials, media and the tourists disregard other species inhabiting the mangrove forests of the Sunderbans, most importantly the *Homo sapiens*. Huggan and Tiffin in the editorial of *Interventions* entitled “Green Postcolonialism” point out:

Whereas the antagonism between conservation and capitalism has at times been muted, a separate conflict between conservation and human rights has become more acute. The conflict is based on the compelling argument that conservation measures inevitably focus on areas which have been relatively unaffected by development. These areas are often those parts of the globe where indigenous peoples are struggling to preserve their livelihoods and cultures against external encroachment. (2007: 4)

In *The Hungry Tide*, Kusum, representing the impoverished islander’s viewpoint, articulates her concerns about wildlife conservation projects pushed by successive governments. She laments:

“This island has to be saved for the trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is a part of a reserve forest. It belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all over the world.” Every day, sitting here, with hunger gnawing at our bellies, we would listen to these words, over and over again. Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? (HT 261-2).

The educated, anglophile, urban elites in India, fed on the poetry of Blake and Wordsworth, have romantic notions of wilderness. In the case of Sunderbans, they perceive the islands as a place of beautiful forests and home of the Royal Bengal tiger, and share the globalized image of wilderness as places of aesthetic enjoyment, an antithesis of civilization. They are complicit in the passionate, vociferous promotion of ventures like the Project Tiger meant for consumption of the global elite. Nature becomes commoditized as a space meant to be consumed, enjoyed and managed by the "global omnivores" (Gadgil and Guha 1995: 4), whose disproportionate consumption surprisingly goes unnoticed by conservationists and ecologists. Speaking from a third world perspective, Guha points out that the world dominance of the United States gives it the ability to utilize global resources, and therefore it can afford to keep areas of wilderness available for aesthetic enjoyment (1989: 4).

The Hungry Tide is an attempt by Ghosh to decentre the privileged position of the tiger as an emblem of wildlife conservation all over the globe. Due to economic and commercial interests the tiger has been privileged over other species that inhabit ecologically vital places like the Sunderbans. This strange 'speciesism' that privileges the tiger is subverted in the novel. Ghosh's decentring impulse is noticeable in the novel as he makes dolphins the primary motive for Piya's journey into the Sunderbans. Contrary to the official historiography, Ghosh attempts to write a counter environmental historiography through this fictional work. He banks upon local mythology and ancient Indian traditions in order to challenge the romantic image of the tiger present in the colonial, modern sensibility. Elsie Cloete, in the essay "Tigers, Humans and Animots" remarks: "It is ironic that the tiger that has become such a compelling symbol of Anglo-India has actually been treated with relative indifference in ancient Indian literature, art and religion" (2007: 2). Sujit Mukherjee also suggests that "the epic imagination in India was very little impressed with the beast" (1987: 2), and adds further that the tiger barely merits reverence in the realm of Hindu deities and animal-human gods.

In *The Hungry Tide*, the mythical tale of *Bon Bibi* and *Dokhin Rai* is shown as occupying a pivotal place in local folklore. In this syncretic, local folklore, the tiger is perceived as a demon inimical to the interests of the native forest dwellers while the dolphins are presented as messengers of *Bon Bibi*. The “decentring impulse” again makes Ghosh present the tiger as a malevolent natural force whereas the dolphins come across as benevolent creatures that signify the presence of *Bon Bibi*, the forest Goddess. The tiger in the novel, thus, comes across as a symbol of nature against which humans are engaged in a perennial, existential struggle for survival. An imaginary boundary line that divides *Bon Bibi*’s domain – the human realm – from *Dokhin Rai*’s realm – the tiger’s territory – also alludes to the tiger-human conflict and the precarious balance between the local islanders and the tiger.

Though the UN-sponsored Rio Earth Summit in 1992 attempted to shift the focus from the conservationist, species-based model to a concept of biodiversity, it is the privileged single species, the tiger, *Panthera tigris*, that continues to occupy the centre stage in the wildlife conservation programmes. Ghosh’s novel focuses on other species, and culls out incidents from local history which support his decentring attempts. *The Hungry Tide* tries to establish Sunderbans as the homeland of crocodiles, rhinos, snakes and a rare species of river dolphins, *Orcaella brevirostris*, whose extinction has gone unnoticed by the state, forest department, urban conservationists and other elitist, scientific organizations.

Piya, the cosmopolitan researcher, arrives in Sunderbans in search of the little known Irrawaddy dolphin, *Orcaella brevirostris*, which is quite contrary to the motive with which any globetrotter fed on the popular conservation propaganda would visit Sunderbans. *The Hungry Tide* thus challenges the privileged position of tiger in the conservation discourse by building a counter discourse in which the dolphins and poor islanders, like Fokir, Horen and Kusum, are the subjects of the writer’s empathetic gaze. The novel highlights the plight, struggle and resilience of the local people by weaving the plot around the *Morichjhapi* massacre. Ghosh shows how the capitalist corporations, state, media and the urban elite, all deliberately

and sometimes unwittingly collaborate to practise environmental racism often leading to the impoverishment of the ecosystem. The poor, silenced settlers of the Sunderbans eloquently voice their exasperation:

Where do they live? These people, do they have children, do they have mothers, fathers? . . . [I]t seemed that the whole world had become a place of animals, and our fault, our crime, was that we were just human beings, trying to live as human beings always have, from the water and the soil. No human being could think this is a crime unless they have forgotten that this is how humans have always lived – by fishing, by clearing land and by planting the soil. (HT 261-2)

The settlers' struggle and the *Morichjhap* incident reflect how the environmental refugees, who belong to the lowest layer of the socio-economic structure, are treated as a burden by both the state and its privileged sections. The *Morichjhap* massacre was largely ignored by the media but Ghosh highlights it to establish how the tiger conservation was used as a pretext by the ruling Left Front government in Bengal to order the dislocation and killing of thousands of Dalit settlers of the island. Ross Mallick in his analysis of the gruesome *Morichjhap* incident shows how human rights were blatantly violated by the government under the pretext of environmental conservation and wildlife laws:

The community was tear-gassed, huts were razed, and fisheries and tube wells were destroyed, in an attempt to deprive refugees of food and water. . . [T]he CPM supported the Tiananmen Square massacre, which has some parallels with its own practice, but given the marginality and isolation of the refugees, there was limited domestic and no international publicity. (1999: 111-13)

Ghosh explores the tiger-human conflict to bring out the deplorable condition of the locals who are at the receiving end, caught as they are between the apathy of the state and the man-eating proclivity of the coveted beast. *The Hungry Tide* narrates the islanders' tragedy:

It happens every week that people are killed by tigers. How about the horror of that? If there were killings on that scale anywhere else on earth it would be called a genocide, and yet here it goes almost unremarked: these killings are never reported, never written about in the papers. And the reason is just these people are too poor to matter. We all know it, but we choose not to see it. (300)

Subverting the conservationist and biocentric notions about the tiger, the novel projects the tiger as a hostile man-eater, as a recalcitrant being who often attacks the locals and their cattle. Critics like Annu Jalais in their writings have hinted that violence unleashed by the state on the environmental refugees in *Morichjhapi* might have accentuated the process of tigers turning into ferocious man eaters. Jalais in the essay "The Sunderbans: Whose World Heritage Site?" has portrayed the animal as one whose "gentle inoffensive nature irretrievably transformed into that of a man-eater by the bloody incidents of Morichjhanpi [sic]" (2007: 339). The locals in the novel, unlike the urban elites or the cosmopolitan conservationists, do not romanticize the tiger or consider it to be a special species to be coveted and protected. Thus, the local people differ from those involved in conservation or wildlife trade in "killing tiger not for profit but for survival" (HT 301). *The Hungry Tide* highlights the need to differentiate between subsistent need and corporate greed in wildlife conservation policy-making, indicating the need to differentiate between the subsistence practices of poor, tribal populace who consume nature for survival and livelihood and the elites who consume nature for generating profit or for entertainment, often making it a prey to their never-ending greed.

In the novel, a tiger gets trapped in a livestock pen while trying to feed upon a calf. The varied responses to this incident bring out the contrasting attitudes to wildlife in general and tiger conservation in particular. The trapped tiger is attacked by a hostile crowd of locals and consequently killed. The different responses, of Piya Roy, the cetologist, and of Fokir, the local fisherman, sum up how the tiger is perceived differently by the cosmopolitan, global omnivores and the local forest dwellers. Witnessing the trapped tiger being attacked by villagers, Piya/li reacts: "the scene was so incomprehensible" (HT 293). Being a devoted animal lover she grows panicky and shouts: "We have to do something, Kanai. We can't let this happen" (HT 293). The writer makes Piya's outcry seem typical of the response activism of theory-ridden ecologists in a similar situation. Piya represents the concerns of a cosmopolitan, deep ecologist who, like many conservationists, sees the human

world as separate or apart from the animal world. She shouts, “This is an animal, Kanai . . . You can’t take revenge on an animal” (HT 294). Through the argument between Kanai and Piya that follows the killing of the trapped tiger, the novel articulates varying positions and perceptions with regard to tiger conservation and the human-tiger conflict. Kanai’s retort seems to carry the authorial voice, and articulates the author’s position in this polyphonic saga, “But what did you expect? . . . Did you expect he was some kind of grass-roots ecologist? He’s a fisherman he – kills animals for a living” (HTHT 297).

The arguments are not resolved but through the portrayal of the fisherman, Fokir, Ghosh foregrounds the local subaltern class that has been ignored by history, the colonial regime, the postcolonial state and also its elite, urban nature lovers. It is in the sensitive portrayal of the native, “ecosystem people” that the author reveals where his sympathies lie. Kanai laments that the global omnivores, “who made a push to protect the wildlife here, without regard to the human costs” (HT 301), have failed miserably in localizing or contextualizing the conservation agenda. The need for the conservation approach to be holistic and also to be locale-specific is voiced in *The Hungry Tide*. Ghosh shows not only his commitment to nature but also reiterates his commitment to human rights and justice. The novel points out that the anthropocentric-biocentric debates that dominate the ecocritical discourse need to be multi-stranded, where the locale-specific relational dynamics between human beings and nature are taken into account. The need is to move from a bio-fascist paradigm to a bio-democratic policy where the needs, views and knowledge of the indigenous, “ecosystem people” are recognized and considered.

Notes

- ¹ Vandana Shiva was awarded the Alternative Nobel Prize (the Right Livelihood Award) in 1993. She is widely acknowledged as a bitter critic of “shallow” environmental campaigns as is evident in her works like *Soil Not Oil* (2009), *Staying Alive* (2010), *Making Peace with the Earth* (2012), amongst others.

- ² The term “conservation refugee” is being increasingly employed to refer to tribal/ indigenous people who are driven out of their traditional lands when these areas are set aside for creating a national park or a wildlife sanctuary. In recent history, the pygmy Twa tribals (also known as Batwa, Abatwa or Ge-Sera) of the Great Lakes region of Central Africa have been dislocated. In East Africa, the setting up of Serengeti National Park led to the eviction of Masai pastoralists. In Nepal, the setting up of Sagarmatha National Park was opposed by the Sherpas fearing eviction and dislocation.
- ³ Refer to Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999), *Lives of Animals* (1999) and *Elizabeth Costello* (2003); Atwood’s *Surfacing* (1972), *Cat’s Eye* (1988) and *Orynx and Crake* (2003); and Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960) and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987).
- ⁴ Refer to William Blake’s poem, “Tyger”, first published in 1794; Kipling’s *Jungle Book* (1894), particularly the short story “Tiger! Tiger!”; Jim Corbett’s *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* (1944); and Kenneth Anderson’s *Man Eaters and Jungle Killers* (1957) and *The Call of the Man Eater* (1961).
- ⁵ “Tipu’s Tiger” is an awesome, life-size beast of carved and painted wood, presented in the act of devouring a prostrate sepoy attired in the costume of the 1790s, first displayed in 1808 in the East India Company’s museum. After the dissolution of the Company, the tiger was among the items allotted to the Indian section of the South Kensington Museum, now called the V & A. “Tipu’s Tiger” has cast a spell over a generation of admirers and has become symbolic of the British fascination with the oriental beast.

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IN CONVERSATION

... with Asad Zaidi

In Another World, In Another Language

Asad Zaidi, distinguished Hindi poet and critic, has three poetry collections to his credit – *Behnen aur Anya Kavitaen* [The Sisters and Other Poems, 1980], *Kavitā kā Jīvan* [Life of Poetry, 1988] and *Sāmān ki Talāsh* [Search for Belongings, 2007], now available in a single volume, *Sar-e-Shām* [The Onset of Evening, 2014]. He is currently working on his next collection, *Bārish ke Nishān* [Marks of Rain]. A prolific editor, Zaidi has also edited and compiled several works, including a landmark two-volume anthology of contemporary Hindi poetry, *Das Baras: Hindī Kavita Ayodhyā ke Bād* [Ten Years: Hindi Verse after Ayodhya, 2003. Ayodhya in the subtitle refers to the demolition of the Babri mosque by Hindu nationalists in December 1992]. He has worked in various capacities in media, education and publishing. He edits an annual anthology of literary writing and translation, *Jalsā* [The Congregation], and since 2002, has been running an independent publishing house, ‘Three

Essays Collective', which brings out books on social sciences and humanities. Born in Karauli, Rajasthan, Zaidi spent his early youth in Agra, Jaipur and Udaipur, and has been living in Delhi for the last forty years. He studied sociology at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. **Monika Kumar** interviews him for *dialog*.

Monika Kumar: In the corpus of poetry available to us, the poet is often seen using pronouns such as he/she/it, avoiding the hazards of using proper nouns, possibly with an intention to give the poem a universal appeal. You have a penchant for using proper names – Mohan Lal, Saroj, Hemant, Shuklaji, Sushila Gujrawal, Sumitra Bhatt, Pratap Narayan and Mool Shankar – in your poems. Using such names seems strategic. A mere name (or a surname) in India is amply indicative of one's religious/caste/ethnic identity. If one observes your oeuvre in this light, a whole tribe of names reflecting the diversity of this country as well as their historic role in its making, becomes conspicuous. Please share your thoughts on this aspect of your poems.

Asad Zaidi: Naming is a major act and a defining ritual. A writer always names and renames. Names are nothing but coded destinies of people, objects and histories. To name is to historicize. A name like yours or mine, appearing in a poem or a work of fiction, would carry a whole lot of history and multiple social, cultural and emotional narratives. Writers like Saramago or Calvino, for instance, could spin tales just with a name or two.

I do not believe in pronouns; they are inherently faithless. They are like anonymous hotel rooms, where people lose a sense of location and identities are kept vague and ambiguous. A name is a house, a home to someone with all his belongings, all his dreams and misfortunes. Raghuvir Sahay's Ramdas or Dayashankar, Brecht's Herr Keuner, or even Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov have a greater chance of representing everyman/everywoman than a "he" or a "she."

In our democratic times, an element of choice has been added; a sort of marketplace has come into existence, creating an illusion of transcendence, that by freely choosing a name one may will a

new destiny; or at least modify it a bit, creating a new aspiration the new name might suggest. It may also serve the purpose that a name can help to mask or conceal something, and give us an escape route, from the depredations of caste, community and exclusionary pressures. Sometimes a correction to a purer form or deliberate distortion of a name serves a social purpose, or a statement of intent. But in doing that too, names give away so much. Then there are names or titles that people bestow upon themselves and others which tend to give them a new identity in politics and social life, an aura in the marketplace and a different biography of sorts.

Coming to the names you mention in your question, there are many more all over my work, which could be divided into three kinds. Some are consciously calibrated to make a forceful statement, others are de-calibrated to avoid making a statement and to be passed on as mere suggestion, and some of them are real. Now for instance, here are three names from the poem "1857: Sāmān kī Talāsh": Mool Shankar and Narendranath are the real names given at birth, but the Nation knows them as Swami Dayanand Saraswati and Swami Vivekananda respectively; not as people, but as mythicized figures associated with the making of modern India. What kind of India was being imagined is clear from the slogan 'Hindi-Hindu-Hindustan' coined by the third, Pratap Narayan Mishra (whose name is real). The poem "Ām Chunāv" [The General Election, 2006] throws up names like Mohan Lal who is just everybody, including you and me, our own comical and sometimes miserable selves. Sumitra Bhatt, M. V. Gauri Devi, Wahida Rehmani, Kusum Lata Mathur are remembered from an earlier time as if from past *janam* [life]. The objects of his undeclared affection were four women from four corners of the country. For a poem aspiring to combine humour, longing and political resolve, these names, representing everyman/everywoman, I thought, were crucial, to give the poem a certain immediacy and form. Hemant in "Dūsra Hemant" [Hemant II, 2002] is similarly placed. Some twice-born arbiters of literary taste, however, found the use of Shuklaji in the poem "Islamabad" [1997] offensive, for reasons obvious to you and me at one level, but absolutely baffling in terms of the autonomous

domain of poetry. Saroj in “Kalā Darshan I” [Sight of Art I, 1986] is a direct reference to “Saroj-Smriti” [Remembering Saroj, 1986], Nirala’s great elegy on the death of his daughter. Everything depends on that name, hence.

MK: Some of your poems like “Paani” [Water, 1990s], “1857: Sāmān kī Talāsh” and “Poorab Disha” [The East, 1990s] suggest that the Hindu community tries to appropriate and co-opt Hindi as a language. What is your association with Hindi?

AZ: I studied in schools where the medium of instruction was Hindi. There was no choice. Hindi was declared the official language of the Union of India when the Presiding Officer of the Constituent Assembly, Dr Rajendra Prasad, gave his casting vote in its favour at the time when the house was divided evenly during both the third and the final reading of the draft provision pertaining to the official language of the new Union. With such a decisive vote, the fate of languages was determined. Thus began the slow and painful decline of all regional and minority languages and cultures in the new republic. The word for all those who wanted a future for their children was: assimilation.

I was born and brought up in a small town in eastern Rajasthan which had cultural proximity to Western Uttar Pradesh and the Braj region. Everybody, with influences of Harauti, Dhundhari, Urdu and Persian, mainly spoke Braj. The language we spoke at home was Urdu, my mother tongue. As far as education, career and cultural identity were concerned, the region was ordained to be part of the ‘Hindi Nation.’ Of course, being a child, I was not carrying much cultural baggage or any kind of long memory, associated disability or resistance. Children are quick to adapt, and I soon found that I could speak and write better Hindi than most of my classmates who thought of themselves as *Hindibhashi* [speakers of Hindi], but were in fact *Brajbhashi* [speakers of Braj]. The reality was that we all were learning a new language. In my case, the language my family and I spoke at home (Urdu) was closer to this new ‘national’ language, Hindi.

Languages that claim alignment with *Khari boli* [a prestigious Western Hindi dialect spoken mainly in the rural surroundings of Delhi, the areas of Western Uttar Pradesh and the southern areas of Uttarakhand in India] per se, cannot be enemy languages. They would draw from the common stock and build on it, interact with and draw upon each other, evolve together rather than exclude each other. However, our great social reformers did precisely the opposite. The nineteenth century *Nagari* movement and the demand to replace Urdu with Hindi written in *Devanagari* was communally poisoned by the upper castes of the United Province (now Uttar Pradesh), the leadership of which was packed with post-1857 newly empowered loyalists of the Raj. From the point of view of popular masses, script was a non-issue, the literacy rate itself hovering between one and two per cent in the region. Moreover, it is not as if more people knew *Nagari* than the Perso-Arabic script. Being a Punjabi yourself, you would know that. In order to gain advantage of numbers, the crusaders of the *Nagari* movement had to align themselves with majoritarian forms of religious-cultural mobilization, to raise their profile by joining hands with the cow-protection societies. The Hindi-Urdu Divide, and the so-called Hindi and cow-protectionist movements, are after all textbook examples of the famous divide and rule policy.

I do not think that the Hindu community has appropriated and co-opted Hindi as a language. Rather, people of the region have been wrenched away from their diverse cultural and linguistic moorings in the service of a monolithic communal construct. An evolving language with potentially great power and reach has been repeatedly used to create a Hindu community instrumented by right-wing culturalist mobilizations. The political and cultural right have used the language cynically and retarded its progress, and at the same time weaponized it, turning it into a kind of radioactive material.

The upper-caste elite and the political leadership of the north Indian region have been responsible for jettisoning all the popular languages and mother tongues like Braj, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Maithili, Rajasthani and Chhattisgarhi, by turning them into dialects, even

sub-dialects of a modern language, Hindi, which is perhaps the youngest of them all, and ironically enough, nobody's mother tongue.

A great number of Hindi writers since the Premchand era, and more specifically from the beginning of the progressive and secular cultural movements of the 1930s, have been trying to recover the secular heritage of languages and fight against the systemic erasure of historical and cultural memory. Thankfully, they have determined the canons of creative literary expression in Hindi. Without them, no contemporary literature would have been possible. I grew up in this tradition and try to stay loyal to it.

MK: Your poems rarely begin with meditative thoughts before the action takes place or perhaps you do not care to 'prepare' the reader beforehand to witness an act of violence (referring to your poem "Karne Vāle Kām" [Things to Do, 2006], for instance). Such a style of writing supports the kind of themes your poems suggest. Your poems open up with a sense of urgency when the context is already charged and agitated. Are there any particular impressions of some other poets you admire or any anecdotes about developing and grooming such a style of writing?

AZ: Frankly, the beginning and ending of poems have largely been a mystery to me. I do not even try to work them. As Mirza says, "*āte hain ghaib se ye mazāmīn khayāl mein*" [These thoughts occur to me elusively]. You are right about the way most of my poems open, except that as somebody said the other day, I prefer to walk in unnoticed than make a grand entry. I do not know how it happens. It also occurred to me recently that when in doubt I tend to narrativize than versify. This habit, perhaps, has something to do the way a poem proceeds. Also, I am always more alive to the overall architecture of a poem, which often remains unrealized but is a source of inspiration as well as anxiety for me. Eventually, the poem may show just a part or fragment of the edifice or melody I have in mind.

Generally, I do not manage to write a poem dealing with a singular experience. Each of my poems is a lost member of a large

family or tribe, which adds to this feeling of randomness. A few opening lines that appear casual or thought-free at a personal level compress a whole array of emotions and weigh heavily on my conscience. Quite a few poems open in the middle of action, or at the end of it, as if to witness the dead bodies, the debris, to pick up the pieces.

Broadly speaking, I think I have been influenced by the great literary modernisms of the early twentieth century and their offshoots. By this, I do not mean Anglo-American modernism that is rather overlaid with formalism and tradition, but the rebellious modernisms outside it, literary and extra-literary, from other parts of the world. I realize that talking about modernism – literary modernism at that – is passé, but I also suspect that those who think so are settling for something flimsier and degraded. Then there are non-literary influences. One is never sure what influence would take possession and find its way into one's work.

MK: Your poem “Sanskār” [Rites, 1976] has been considered remarkable. The sudden crying of the protagonist at the railway station, as another Hindi poet Mangalsh Dabral remarks, appears to be coming from someone who could belong to the minority, a Dalit, a woman or anybody who is socially excluded, whose identity is constantly challenged by a powerful group that has assumed the authority to subjugate the other. The alliteration of the words “*dona*”, “*kona*” and “*rona*” [broadly translated as “cup made of *palash* leaves,” “corner” and “crying”] brings a sense of immediacy to the poem. The feeling of grief that the poem evokes reminds me of the sadness of Iona Potapov (in Chekhov’s “The Grief”). There is a long withheld despair; an urgency to share, which is deferred in the absence of a willing and compassionate listener to the point that the protagonist is unable to endure it anymore and bursts into a monologue. Do you have something more to share about this poem?

AZ: Speaking of influences, I am delighted you have mentioned Chekhov, whose characters like Iona Potapov or Vanka Zhukov have peopled my imagination for decades. Now that you say it, I

am quite ready to see my poem “Sanskār” as a belated tribute to the old master. There is, in fact, a poem of mine called “Aparāhn” [Afternoon, 1980s], which ends with a line: “*ab main apnā dukh kyā kisī ghode se kahūngā?*” [Shall I need to share my sorrow with a horse now?]

I think Mangalesh has interpreted the poem “Sanskār” quite well. He has, in a way, broadened its scope. I gratefully read his note about it and liked it more than I like my own poem. I felt like Ibne Insha who spoke of Mir: “*allāh kare Mīr kā jannat men makān ho/ marhūm ne har bāt hamārī hī bayān kī*” [I wish an abode in Heaven for Mir/ For the deceased wrote verbatim what we had to say]. There is just one more thing: there is a melodic fragment that is moving inside this poem restlessly, which is vital for its working as a poem, but I cannot make out the nature or the purpose of the melody.

MK: “Dūsra Hemant” is a poignant poem, recording alteration of social spaces, such as coffee houses. These small places had hosted intellectual currents in post-independence India for a long time until ‘the culture industry’ replaced them with homogenized and more sophisticated public places. A few such coffee shops are still functional in the corners of cities, existing more like antique ghettos than places that the brands-inspired youth would like to visit for food and recreation. The case of mistaken identity in “Dūsra Hemant” is a parallel history of how social spaces for communication have been altered by the forces of global capitalism and the onslaught of technology. It also hints at how such a change and shift adds to the existential crisis of the people who had nurtured such spaces for dialogue and keeps the spirit of dissent and disagreement alive. What actually prompted you to write this poem?

AZ: Ideally, the answer lies in two words: time and transition. Let me digress a bit. Human emotion often inheres in the personal, interpersonal and societal spaces, but occasionally it transcends these and floats distended, redefining the sense of tragedy and self. Poetry rivals religion in the sense that it catches these moments, becomes meditation and recovers a melancholy and a sense of irony that

religious ideologies try so hard to cover or bypass while promising some kind of solution. Poetry – good poetry at any rate – does not promise solution/salvation; it *is* solution/salvation. Its spirituality is different from what is generally meant by religious spirituality, or what the contemporary ‘spiritual’ industry professes. Poetry does not deny materiality and the existing realities within which it is experienced – realities of class, caste, social location, inequities of sex, age, attainment, various forms of entitlement, gains and losses. Its sense of eternal is quite concrete. A good poem cannot answer the question ‘who are we?’ with generalities. It starts with the specific, the concrete. In so doing, poetry – in terms of method and intent – is much closer to science than religion. Poets cannot afford to be charlatans. I say this because they are often lured into becoming so, and also because charlatanism has its uses; the ‘forces of global capitalism’ – I am glad you used this term – can handle them, deploy them, or turn them into a critical resource.

Coming back to your question, “Dūsrā Hemant” is about double alienation – from the time one represents best (the past) and the time one primarily endures (the present). You could call it a generational melancholy and, of course, a despair about the future based upon what one sees as the ‘future in the making.’ The cynicism, anger and despair caused by the poem are beyond the personal. In its description, the poem, you could say, is more ethnographic than poetic, but it is not entirely devoid of emotion. As you have guessed correctly, it is a spiritual scream in the corridors of late capitalism.

MK: Do you feel nostalgic about community living or living in a joint family? You come from a small town in Rajasthan (Karauli) and have been living in and around Delhi for the last forty years. How would you characterize your journey from a place like Karauli to being in a big city?

AZ: Karauli is past – a past only I represent; present-day Karauli is a different place. These days when I go there, my people see me as past coming to them, not New Delhi visiting them – and this is vaguely disturbing. I preserve and carry stories; they carry present-day narrative focus, of course with a reasonable depth of field.

They do not telescope into the past at every opportunity, but I do. Actually, I am myself a story my nieces, nephews and their kids have heard. My siblings and cousins represent continuity and accept transition in situ: they have evolved or moved on in their own way, while I am frozen in Karauli time circa 1950-1960. I represent that to them. Only I would talk about my *nani* [maternal grandmother] the way I do. My sisters in Karauli and Jaipur, may think about her and about my mother and father, remember and cry a bit as a matter of course – as it should be – but they see my attempt as poetic fancy or myth-making. Such is the fate of poetry – stuck between specific, empirical events and remembrance, between science and myth.

Of course, the reconstruction of past is possible only as past, when it is well past the time and space it belongs to. Community living, joint family, small town are all locations and moments seen through the urban lens. The city has been the real site of poetic revolutions and emergence of a poetic sphere, for at least a couple of centuries. It conditions our perception of the past and its lost worlds. The city is the real place of nostalgia. I am subject to this conditioning. Recovering human essence from a different era and its life to create a shelter in the present often motivates these poems.

MK: In your second collection of poems *Kavitā kā Jīvan*, you wrote in “Paurvātya Nirankushtā” [The Eastern Despotism, 1980s] that unprincipled brutes have invented the concept of nation, state and the idea of patriotism to turn people into negotiated objects. How do you respond to this poem in the current context?

AZ: Well, we are already one and a half decades into the new millennium and the answer has never been clearer. As people, Indians somehow managed to postpone this moment for more than six, almost seven, decades, but the forces of indigenous and global fascism that were converging in India for quite some time, now want to start their triumphal march. They want to alter all social and political contracts. They have permeated all levels of social existence. It seems the democratic project is just about to wind up. As citizens, it is our duty to resist with our minds and with our bodies, if it comes

to that. As thinking and writing persons, we should be ready to stand up and get counted. The eighteenth-century India taught us that bad times are good times for poetry – a truth the veracity of which was endorsed by the nineteenth and twentieth century Anno Domini. Why should the twenty-first century be different in this respect? Terrible times are upon us already; I just hope poets would be aware that good poetry is waiting in the wings even if it demands a terrible price.

MK: What prompted you to start the publishing house ‘Three Essays Collective’? What has been your vision to start a magazine like *Jalsā*?

AZ: Let me repeat here what I told a friend recently in response to a similar question. Publishing is a very simple and basic profession. It gives you a clear choice to remain true to your calling, honest and sincere in your conduct, and seek fulfilment by meaningfully participating in the socio-cultural and intellectual life in a modest way. A bit of talent and vision helps, but it is not needed in any extraordinary quantity; just dedication, doggedness, and sometimes courage. It can be run like a cottage industry, from a small garage, even out of a large suitcase, if one wants to.

Let me point out that historically all publishing was by default independent publishing. Big and bad capital developed an interest in it only in the nineteenth century, after a considerable expansion of readership and the emergence of a large public sphere. Increasing corporatization of information and knowledge now only underlines the need and relevance of independent publishing.

The resolve to start ‘Three Essays Collective’ came in late 2002. It was always at the back of my mind. All my life, from my student days, that is, I have been engaged in works that had to do with writing, reading, editing and planning. I saw I would soon turn fifty and there was this great Muktibodhan¹ question before me: “*ab tak kyā kiyā? jivan kyā jiyā?*” [What have you done so far in life? What life have you led till now?]. Well, I discussed it briefly with my wife and took the plunge. The idea was simple: to make contemporary scholarship of shorter length and sharper articulation

accessible for a wider readership in a book form. I would add this: if Babri Masjid had not been demolished, if genocide of Delhi (1984), Bhagalpur (1989), Bombay (1992-93), and Gujarat (2002) had not happened, I would not have perhaps turned to publishing.

As for *Jalsā*, let me admit the persistent taunts and rebukes – mild ones – from friends about being a Hindi man and doing publishing just in English, made me start this annual anthology of new writing and translation in Hindi. It is a lot of work though, a pleasure too, to publish my friends and whatever good writings they are willing to part with. I guess they like *Jalsā* a lot. I keep losing money on it.

MK: What precisely are you referring to in a poem when you deem it good?

AZ: You must have heard the old one from Mirza; nobody has put it better:

*dekhnā taqrīr kī laẓẓat kī jo us ne kahā
maiñ ne ye jānā ke goyā ye bhī mere dīl meñ hai*

[Looking at the relish of speech for what she/he said
I felt that ‘this too is in my heart’]

Maulana Hali elaborates it thus: There can be no better praise of anyone’s beauty of speech than that whatever idea emerges from the speaker’s mouth enters into the listener’s heart in such a way that he suspects that this idea was in his heart even beforehand. And let me quote my friend Manmohan (another Haryanvi like Hali) who says a poet’s reward comes to him/her instantly within the poem itself, even if it happens so rarely.

Let me not sound evasive on this. I believe in what Buffon said ages ago that the style is the man (“*Le style c’est l’homme même*”). I consider it as a great humanist statement; it also takes me to that immortal *rubai* by Mir Taqi Mir, uttered in the turbulent eighteenth-century India:

*miliye us shakhs se jo ādam hove
nāz usko kamāl par bahut kam hove
ho garm-e sukhan to gird āve yak khalq
khāmosh rahe to ek ālam hove*

[Let us look for a man who is a true human, he may be talented but does not assume airs, whose speech has the power to bring the world around him, who when quiet, is a world in himself].

I will go further, even at the cost of sounding a bit retrograde, to repeat after Ghalib that silence is the greatest source of meaningful utterance: "*khāmoshī hī se nikle hai jo bāt chāhiye*" [It ensues from silence finally what we seek out in speech]. We often judge good poetry by the quality and the rich and varied registers of its silences. I think I am putting it terribly but the matter is fairly simple.

MK: What are your chief interests? What provides you with a sense of renewal and recreation?

AZ: When alone or at home, I like listening to music, always music, mostly Hindustani classical. I also watch, think about and analyze what is called 'world cinema,' its past and contemporary masters. This is my therapy. Hindustani *khayal gayaki* [the modern genre of classical singing in North India] defines the outer limit of my spiritual experience. Of course, I am interested in a number of other things too. I read a lot, but never systematically. Being concerned with the sociopolitical conditions around us, I do my bit by way of writing and publishing; being useful in small ways. I try to live by the Gramscian dictum: 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.' I am a man on the left and have not shifted my stance in the last four decades, and am unlikely to do so in the near future. I am okay this way. Music, cinema, and left wing spirituality help me live with my afflictions and find some order in my chaotic existence.

MK: You often quote from Ghalib, Mir, Ibne Insha and many more Urdu poets. You have translated many world poets into Hindi and some Hindi poets into English too. *dialog* is the University's in-house journal. I would request you to suggest a few poets to our readers, particularly students, who see poetry as a very important medium of learning, knowing and expressing.

AZ: There isn't enough deep knowledge of world poetry outside the Anglo-American tradition. Neruda, Rilke, Brecht and Lorca are

a few exceptions. But most readers who read poetry in and through English have no idea how desolate the landscape of twentieth-century poetry and culture would be without great poets like Cesar Vallejo, Gabriela Mistral, Anna Akhmatova, Paul Celan, Tadeusz Różewicz, Marina Tsvetaeva, Yannis Ritsos, Cavafy, Mahmoud Darwish, Aimé Césaire, Wisława Szymborska, Vítězslav Nezval, Andrei Voznesensky, Sándor Weöres, Nazim Hikmet, Ernesto Cardenal. Closer home, students hardly know their Muktibodh, Jibanananda Das and Raghuvir Sahay. I wonder if many of us even realize that in Agha Shahid Ali, we have a poet of real stature – perhaps the greatest poet in the English language that this subcontinent has produced. To continue to think about these gaps and inequities and trying to make up for them by individual and collective effort is the essence of the politics and aesthetics of being a literary animal.

Notes

¹ Gajanan Madhav Muktibodh (1917-1964) was a distinguished twentieth century poet and critic who wrote in Hindi during his very productive short life. The word 'Muktibodhian' is perhaps indicative of his intense restlessness with worldliness, developed through the influence of existential philosophy that is evoked frequently through stunning images and symbols. As Asad Zaidi puts it: "For me the name Muktibodh, or the term 'Muktibodhian', stands for the modernist *and* progressive/radical conscience of Hindi literature after Independence." Muktibodh is best known for his long poems: *Chand ka Muh Teda hai* [*The Moon Wears a Crooked Smile*], *Andhere Mein* [*In the Dark*] and *Bhuri Bhuri Khak Dhul* [*Brown Dry Dust*].

G. J. V. PRASAD

Mother's Day

A mother is born
With her child

Not Krishna
But why not Krishna
Taken away at birth
Delivered to a new mother
Care perhaps even breast giver
Nurturer, nursing him
Through illnesses
Feeding him to health
Berating him
To the straight and
The broad minded

The sperm not his father's
The egg not his mother's

But making them
Mom and dad

But no, not Krishna

The sperm very much the father's
The egg very much the mother's
But born to a womb giver
Nourished by her blood
And comforted by the security
Of her heartbeat
The baby yearns to hear
Later

The father's child
The mother's child
But the cord
Binds the child to another

With the rented womb

The Runaway Grandmother

Love comes late to some

She married at eighteen
A shy frightened woman
Starting out on a life
She expected

In laws, duties
Husband, duties
Children, duties
Living life to the full

School, college, marriage
Grand children
She could ask for nothing more
Nothing more did she ask for

Then came trouble
With the looks
She had never looked for
A tongue she had never missed

Duties on one side
A full life
And an adventure on another
An unfulfilled life

The first tenant of her heart
Called

She decided to pay the rent

ANISUR REHMAN

Missing

1

Not a pang of mind
Not a pang of body
Not even the joy of meeting
Not even the pain of parting

Missing is a frozen moment in love.

2

Like a patch of dark cloud
Like a whiff of rainy wind
Like a misty winter dusk
Like a fig from a fallen tree

Missing strolls in silence.

3

In bi-lanes, he walks silently
In haze, he grows invisible
In sun, he evaporates
In form and moving, he is nebulous

Missing sits so calm today.

4

Not sweet, not sour
Not bland, not bitter
Not salt, not sugar
Not even a forbidden bite

Missing is indeed a queer love-fruit

5

Who can hear the parade of boots
Who can ever call the shots
Who will start the canon fire
Who will hear the mother's ire

Missing is a soldier's wasted shot.

6

A language lost in diction
An image missed in a mêlée
A myth mislaid in mind
A script blown in wind

Missing is Khayyam's cup and cask.

7

A kingdom shrivelled into a cup
A Delhi shrunk into a ladle
A fort turned into a garrison
A haveli tucked into margins

Missing is Ghalib's lost desire.

8

That is the caller from Porlock
That the door to be knocked
That is a book of history
That a manly image on a page

Missing is Coleridge's dream of Kubla.

9

This is Alpheus the river
This the river of alphabets
This is the tree of knowledge
This the fruit of knowing

Missing is the a b c of life.

10

Missing is the darling lover
Missing the darling beloved
Missing is my dear father
Missing my dear mother

Missing comes home today.

RUSTAM

Night

(Three Poems)

1

Night is good.
And night. And night.
Night is good, but not you, not you.
Night is better than you, and also you, and also you.
Night is good and you are not night.

Night is good, ah how good it is!
Night is good,
it gets deeper,
you don't.

Night leaves itself behind, remains neither night, nor
anything else.

Night goes on turning lighter, as if it were just a light
that's not visible and yet encircles you, and you don't
even get to know that you are encircled, it turns you so
light, in a free sky as if you were nothing, nothing at all.

2

Night does not stay awake, does not sleep,
it is not stubborn,
it doesn't love anyone.

It doesn't know what love and hatred are.
It doesn't even know you, nor will it ever know you.
For it you are nothing,
you, who want to be something,
want to be something,
really something,
you who want to remain,
want to remain
something,
always something,
for this one,
for that one,
if possible for everyone,
even for yourself,
even for night.

Watch out,
lest you come to nothing.
Watch out,
lest you end up dead
out there in the dust
that is not waiting for you.

3

Night is not with anyone,
nor is anyone with night.

Then,
is it alone?

No.

It
just
is,
here,
there,

I'm in the middle of it, even in the light here I'm sitting inside it, am writing these words, even in the light from the bulb it is night here, in this room, but it is not alone, nor am I alone, here in this light, and a peg of rum lies next to me, which I'm having, getting a bit drunk on it, and I'm writing. But am I alone, here, at this hour? Certainly not. I too only am. The way night is. Or the way rum is, the first peg of which I've just finished.

[Translated from Hindi by Teji Grover]

PARMINDER SINGH

A Distant Dream

Grandma's tales in those adolescent springs
of lifelike heroes, and of life-size kings,
I perceived one day would give me wings
and I shall too strike the perfect strings
of the instrument that was yet unseen
but to get the hang of which I was so keen
that I shut myself in a closet, and did wean
myself of comforts and delights umpteen.
In that covert castle of my own being
it gradually became infeasible to bring
myself to terms with each and everything
outside this one dream I was chasing.
Everything else was put on the backburner
and I sat on my haunches as a churner
pulling out fruits of diligence with fervor
strengthening day and night my armour.
What I had utterly overlooked in this venture
that in all those granny's tales of adventure
there was always a fiend, who would enter
when the rosy hues were about to mentor
the hero to hit the jackpot with a final blow.
I too have to confront such many a foe
but my distant dream is in my sight, I know
even though I trudge with steps too slow.

Review Article

From Vulnerability to Compassionate Cosmopolitanism: Surviving Surveillance

Pramod K. Nayar, *Citizenship and Identity in the Age of Surveillance*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pages 216, Rs. 595.

It is with a lot of enthusiasm that I picked up one of Pramod Nayar's latest books – *Citizenship and Identity in the Age of Surveillance* – not only because the subject is so relevant to our current modes of being, but also because it is written by one of the most prolific and creative minds of our times, and, needless to say, Nayar does not disappoint. The book, in itself, is a series of six related but discrete articles, presented as six chapters, which makes it even more interesting, free as it is from the burden of tying things up into one neat conclusion, and committed as it yet is to make the chapters talk to each other to build up the book's primary arguments.

From the very first chapter, "Vulnerability, Safety, Surveillance," the author departs from the classic formulation of "surveillance" as an element for "social sorting," moving instead towards the assertion that it acts as a basic element in the interiority of the subject – in subject-making itself – as it deals with questions of privacy and human dignity, and influences the framework of power between the watchers and the watched, which can also be subverted through acts of mockery on the part of the watched. The result is a "surveillance culture" that produces subjects who, in turn, readily acquiesce to produce surveilled spaces through three procedures: (a) producing discourse around the "vulnerable" citizen, who is potentially endangered by a faceless Other; (b) producing discourse around "safety," by shifting focus from punitive surveillance to preventive surveillance through a cultivation of conspiracy theories; and (c) activities and technologies of surveillance that act as necessary objects for securing the otherwise absent security of subjects in public spaces, in a project of "securitization." The surveillance carried out by the individual acts as a "supplement" to the state apparatus, which is in turn, put under the scanner through means such as the RTI and media sting operations, wherein visibility of government mechanisms also becomes a key factor in effective governance, leading to the discourse around accountability and transparency in governance. The author dismantles Foucault's model of the panopticon that is premised upon surveillance through physical visibility, and shows how contemporary surveillance bypasses physical distance since technology acts as a central mechanism in such a model. Although this is true only insofar as the collection of data itself is concerned, the interpretation of this data through certain codes, which then leads to meaning-making, is contingent upon human actors.

"Bodies and Biosurveillance" explores how biometrics brings the body of the surveilled into focus, establishing "biological citizenship" through virtual data collated and disseminated by international agencies, and attaching "biovalue" to every individual in terms of their race, gender, class, economic productivity, and so on. A dematerialization of the body is effected through such data by

creating a virtual "body double" aimed at predicting behavioral patterns, often allowing social stereotypes to come into play since these behavioral intents are attached to certain groups, with the individual acting as a synecdoche of the whole. As the author shows, biometrics functions by effacing environmental factors that affect the self of the individual, and by establishing a unique, constant identity that works at the intersection of measuring what is unique to everybody yet fits into a larger dataset of what all bodies constitute. Nayar particularly draws our attention to the state that by no means monopolizes the role of the watcher/observer. It is dispersed across individuals, communities and commercial organizations, and implemented apparently in the "interest of the public." Biological citizenship indeed acts as a transnational and transmissible form of citizenship, with biometrics dependent upon mobile features that cannot be removed from the unique identity of the individual, though this identity is always fragmented along the different pieces of data which can be recorded. The self which develops in an already surveilled milieu, as part of a self-fashioning, is thus but a projection of the self – a performed self – which the individual perceives as desirable by society, and which is encouraged and validated by the structures of surveillance around the idea of vulnerability.

"Data and Data Subjects," the third chapter, shows how the "data-gaze" of the culture of surveillance is posited as the precondition for identity, security, rights and privacy. Nayar argues how the process of collation of data pertaining to the individual forms a flow of information between the persons and their environment, wherein their interiority is shaped by the incoming information. This can also translate into an intrusion upon the selfhood of a person, as instantiated with reference to Instant Google Search, which predicts the direction of one's interest and ranks queries according to those that are the most searched. Thus, the virtual data-double is predicated upon societal codes regarding what is considered acceptable, resulting in a blunting of personality in order to fit into mainstream, propelling mass conformism. The virtual doubles control the opportunities and choices available to an individual

and a group, which is further facilitated by the dependence of public policies, product design and outlet locations on the social profiling of certain groups into certain demographics. The “group” is thus of an abstract nature, instituted through data shared by the individuals, voluntarily and involuntarily, and the belongingness of every individual within this community is through the processes of identification and affiliation, rather than filiation and identity. Specifically, Nayar points out how debates around genetic privacy and bio-surveillance are of great significance because the borders of privacy regarding the ownership of one’s genes are still under question, as genes are simultaneously unique and part of a larger narrative across generations, which implies that any invasion of the right to genetic data of a single individual is inter-generational. At the end of the day, every individual needs to fashion him/herself as a surveilled citizen since acceptance into the social order and gaining any semblance of legitimacy is contingent upon volunteering information regarding oneself. The creation of responsible citizens is necessitated through the discourse around vulnerability, and a connection of trust is established between the citizen and the CCTV, since all threatening activities are monitored, and every user becomes accountable for actions within that space, leading to securitization, albeit an “exclusive” one.

The fourth chapter, “Spaces of Surveillance,” offers an account of how surveillance produces vulnerable subjects and landscapes of fear that enforce conformism and homogeneity resulting in controlled spaces. The author takes the instance of Hyderabad as a techno-hub for global industries. While the city is globally connected and offers FDI opportunities, the inflow of information and capital requires control of the local space. Public spaces such as roads are often commercialized, allowing for intensification of surveillance. The organization of space is central to the integration of the city into the global marketplace; surveillance acts as one of the prime organizers of space and of activities within it. “Vulnerability cartography” refers to the mapping of spaces in terms of flow of threats, strangers, vagrants and others along with deterrent mechanisms. These imagined boundaries then mutate into real

barriers and the material reorganization of that space. A "secure space" is produced through vulnerability cartography and "interdictory spaces," as, for instance, through gated communities and malls. The existence of gated communities is predicated upon the landscape of fear which is created by the government and media, which demonize certain sections of the population. Similarly, malls establish the identity of the user as that of a consumer before being granted access to a surveilled space. A 'feel-good' factor is thereby initiated in the consumers of such a space since they are made to feel valorized and secure under structures of surveillance that legitimize their identities. Mobility through spaces is contingent not on the human, but increasingly on codes and mechanized processes. The citizen is thus transformed into a cyborg, and due to the coding of humans within the space, the secure and productive subject must become cyborged and surveilled. For Nayar, the nexus between the state and commercial institutions creates moral panic around the insecurity of "unprotected spaces," which propels the subjects of such discourse to increasingly aspire towards gated communities.

Nayar shows that unlike Foucault's conceptualization of surveillance embodied in the panopticon, one now has interactive and consensual forms of "multiveillance," where the top-down model has been displaced by a rhizomatic one, in which participatory surveillance is a condition of giving active consent to being surveilled. Surveillance becomes an individual's responsibility, and what was earlier the function of the state and its structures of authority becomes that of civil society. Belongingness and participation in the modes of governance is defined by virtue of participative surveillance. Multiveillance is therefore much more insidious and ubiquitous than the panopticon, as self-surveillance becomes the most dominant form of surveillance today.

Medical objectification is one aspect of such surveillance, wherein our bodies become vulnerable objects to our consciousness. Popular media produce discourses that persuade and shame us into observation, documentation and eventual regulation of our bodily processes. Another form of surveillance is that of "performative

surveillance,” wherein social networking sites and reality television, amongst other platforms, encourage users to perform their selves for public and private consumption. As people offer themselves up for surveillance, they not only establish and reinforce social norms but also resist being fixed as rigid, unchanging subjects. Reality TV is the spectacle of the everyday life which is presented as entertainment, and is eventually an extension and normalization of the surveillance drama of our movement in public spaces. Networking sites form, according to the author, a “digital agora,” whereby places and activities become encompassed by the monitoring of an interactive space. This phenomenon also includes commercial websites which document and disperse shopping choices of past users in order to implement targeted marketing in the future. Self-revelatory and confessional modes of surveillance, manifest in both social media platforms and talk shows, organize the data rendered into a cultural script that assesses the social processes within which the citizen functions. Participatory surveillance also takes more active forms of “dissident surveillance,” whose more organized forms can morph the citizen into the surveilling citizen-subject, even as processes such as sting operations and ‘leaks’ ensure a certain visibility in the processes of democracy and the state. Witnessing becomes a form of orientation towards the world and the witness-subject is a watchful citizen who reports corruption, atrocity and ‘deviance,’ and, for Nayar, what keeps one as an integrated, responsible citizen of this public space is the acceptance of one’s role as witness-subject.

Finally, we see how surveillance functions essentially as a form of social memory and a system of social relations. Surveillance is conducive to not only the emergence of the witness-subject, but the very formulation of the subjectivity of the witness-subjects, as they respond to the distant Other on the screen. A global witness culture is thus enabled, which generates particular forms of reading the world and the suffering Other, and the witnesses’ subjectivity emerges in conjunction with the suffering Other. “Mobile witnessing” is a form of surveillance wherein a performance is rendered across social, cultural and geo-political platforms, juxtaposed across

temporalities, so that the instant of the event, the instant of its utterance, and the instant of its being witnessed exist in separate but interlinked temporal spaces. The linkage between the eyewitness and those bearing witness extends the performance to a global stage instantaneously, which is recorded in the “global memory field.” The distanced viewer integrates the event into the social memory and conscience, armed with social frameworks of interpretation. Witnessing thus becomes an act of “occupation,” such that the public be allowed to remain in a public space, disallowing the potential takeover of this space by figures of authority, whereas subjectivity as defined in conjunction with the distant Other is made possible through this occupation. Members of civil society are forced to generate a responsible response to the reenactment of surveilled events, which places an ethical demand upon the subject. This subjectivity can be further defined as intersubjectivity since local events form inextricable linkages with the global to form transcultural narratives. Here, witness survivors act as migrants into these acts of memories, and these transcultural memories transform through time, space and political barriers, which are contingent upon the cultural mobility the witness experiences. The ‘modern’ witness-subject thus has the responsibility to aid and uplift the Other who is not yet modern. The making of a “compassionate cosmopolitanism,” which relies on the intertextuality of suffering – linking events similar in nature – redefines for Nayar the very nature of cosmopolitanism. In the neoliberal and globalized surveilled stage, the onus to respond lies on the individual since the state is rendered ineffectual. This Other-regarding compassionate cosmopolitanism is probably the biggest takeaway from the culture of ubiquitous surveillance that surrounds us today.

Nayar does, as is expected of him, a compendious job of bringing out the diverse vistas of how surveillance works in society today. More importantly, the book, in pointing out not just the commonsensical negative aspects of surveillance, brings into focus its enabling side, thereby turning out to be almost a manifesto of how to survive, if not to make use of, surveillance.

SAUGATA BHADURI

Of Creativity and Carnality

Hanif Kureishi, *The Last Word*. London: Faber, 2014. Pages 286, £18.99.

Hanif Kureishi's *The Last Word*, quite unequivocally, is a roman-à-clef, based on the startling revelations about V. S. Naipaul's unscrupulous personal life by Patrick French in his famous biography of Naipaul, *The World Is What It Is*. A take-off based on the famous opening line of Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*, "The world being what it was; only a fool would whistle all day" (2014: 250), describing the enigmatic septuagenarian in Kureishi's novel, is a clear indicator of this colinearity. The novel begins with an awkward, comic, cerebral clash between the literary maestro from the Indian subcontinent, Mamoon Azam, and his young authorized English biographer, Harry Johnson. Promising to "tell the *whole* story of this important man" (1), the young biographer quickly succumbs to anti-hagiography sensationalism. He labours towards a pre-determined tale of the "Great Literary Satan" having "stolen a lot of enjoyment" by being "a dirty bastard, an adulterer, liar, thug, and, possibly a murderer" (7-8) while feigning all the time to "embalm him in words" (13) in order to put an end to his financial woes.¹

The well-honed narrative skills, the spontaneous recall of the literary aphorism, the economy of style, imaginative correlation and the wry English wit do stand the novelist in good stead. Rarely mundane, the protagonists race through the clever disclosure drama of the author-biographer plot with well-scripted stopovers for tactical confrontations. The frequent dropping of clusters of literary names has to be excused on the pretext that the text rests on layers of literary fiction and biography. Besides, subtlety is not an art abandoned by Kureishi in this work alone; it is a skill he has left unexplored throughout his career.

Kureishi's addition to the expanding genre of biographical fiction, as mentioned, has an unmistakable correspondence to the love, locations and life of Naipaul. Some areas of the fictional resemblance between Naipaul and the central figure Mamoon are: their Indian origin, the Nobel Prize, an authorization of biography when alive, brute ambition, love affairs, prostitution, scandal, travel, absence of progeny and fetish for sport. Silence on British racism, the Faustian transgressor image, a leaning towards Thatcherism and intellectual elitism are some conceptual coincidences between the two. A moderately aware reader can easily substitute Naipaul's 'Dairy Cottage' in Wiltshire for Prospects House in Taunto; his first wife, Patricia Anne Hale, for Peggy; his Argentinean mistress of twenty-four years, Margaret, for Marion; his second wife, Nadira Khanum Alvi, for the feisty Liana Luccioni; and the housekeeper, Angela, for Ruth in the novel. However, the fictionalized biographer Harry bears almost no resemblance to the historian, Patrick French. It is in the character of Harry that the autobiographical element seems to merge with the imaginative, bringing about an impish playfulness, notoriety and outrage in the story.

Though the wide-ranging *oeuvre* of Naipaul has laid the conceptual foundations of many diasporic writers in Britain, a different sort of literary kinship is discernible between Naipaul and Kureishi. They share a history of Indianized roots, a common settler country and the postcolonial experience of double displacement. Harry's recall of Mamoon as the novelist whom he "had admired since he was a teenage book fiend, a nerdy connoisseur of

sentences, a kid for whom writers were gods, heroes and rock stars”(2), appears to be an echo of Kureishi’s own adolescent awe for the distinguished writer. There is also no disputing the fact that Harry’s reflection – “A writer is loved by strangers and hated by his family” (92) – resonates Kureishi’s dissonant personal life as depicted by the British media in the past.

While the reader savours the sprinkling of literary analogies on a delectably erudite plot, there is a yearning for some sort of direction. One waits for that uplifting whisper from the authorial voice that would sustain the cause of relationships, amorousness, fidelity, constancy and ethic, but there is none. As a matter of fact, there is not a soul in the book craving change or fidelity. The characters are too busy playing the ‘skin game’ – discussing the terror of “banal bourgeois existence” (84) or their desire for drugs and libidinal appetites; indulging in revelry, promiscuity, threesomes, boisterous copulation and maniacal fights; and unveiling sexual orgies from the past.

The narrative runs into the danger of turning into a story of sleaze in its zeal for enforcing the ‘muse’ theory in the world of literature. The writer wantonly negotiates the all-too-familiar literary terrain and pours out spicy anecdotal tit-bits marking well-known literary personalities from his enviable reservoir. These interminable saucy details appear to strengthen Kureishi’s thesis of the inevitable bond between carnality and creativity. In addition to Mamoon’s prurient escapades, the narrative impishly validates instances like the seventy-four-year-old Goethe asking for the hand of a teenager, and that of all whores in Paris paying their respects to Victor Hugo at his funeral. All of this and much more reaffirms the writer’s imperative commitment to the cause of frenetic sexual fervour.

Harry, Mamoon’s acolyte, is seized by haunting dreams of his own deceased schizophrenic mother while researching the diaries of Peggy, Mamoon’s first wife, who had died suffering of loneliness. He recalls his father’s harsh words: “The truth is, she was your whole life and she’ll be in your dreams until your dying day; she was your mother, Harry. But to me she was just another woman”

(75). On separating from his fiancée, Alice – the mother of his twins – to start a live-in relationship with his colleague Lotte, Harry imagines himself repeating the same words to his sons twenty-nine years hence. The circle is complete; nothing has changed in the ‘manly’ world of passion. Adulterous behavior cannot be reined in by the wounds of natal ties in male consciousness – at least, that is what Kureishi suggests.

While the over-sexed characters, metaphors, language and thought of this ‘Dionysian’ novel make the readers wonder about the hopeless chaos they have been drawn into, it is the epigrammatic skill of the writer that seldom disappoints. For instance, you sit up when told that “facts [...] were unarguable, like a punch in the face” (15); or get somewhat startled by the hedonism in the simile, “our lives are only as good as our orgasms” (103); try to gauge the depths of dystopia on learning that “the game is almost up for truth” (106); and struggle to make sense of the success mantras like “you can’t go wrong if you start off as a cynic” (160).

Adultery and sexuality have been the fad and fetish of Kureishi’s fiction since *The Buddha of Suburbia*, and working out these patterns of behavior in consonance with cultural and political themes is sometimes inevitable. By hyping subculture as mainstream, Kureishi comes across as an iconoclast, playfully subverting the established norms of societal relationships. *The Last Word*, notwithstanding its riveting literary ingenuity, tacitly condones the cool libidinal flamboyance and violence that, at the outset, it promises to uncover.

Notes

- ¹ All page references are taken from the 2014 edition of Kureishi’s book.

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MANINDER SIDHU

From Local to Global: New Perspectives on Cosmopolitanism

Sachidananda Mohanty, *Cosmopolitan Modernity in Early 20th Century India*. New Delhi: Routledge, 2015. Pages 169.

Cosmopolitanism is the belief that every being on earth belongs to a larger, cosmic community – one in which all individuals make efforts to bring about a new world order without any boundaries. If one analyses the etymological signification of the term ‘cosmopolitan’ as outlined in *The New Book of Knowledge*, one finds that it comes from the Greek word ‘kosmopolites’ which in turn is made up of two words – ‘kosmos’ and ‘polites.’ While the word ‘kosmos’ denotes ‘order,’ ‘polites’ comes from the Indo-European root word ‘pele’ which means a ‘city.’ In addition, the Sanskrit root of the term ‘pele’ is ‘pura’ which, interestingly enough, suggests a whole range of significations including ‘city,’ ‘intellect’ and ‘body’ — all are important and multivalent indicators of polity as well as politics. It connotes that a true cosmopolite combines intellect and body to perceive a harmonious, ethical world order in which the intermingling of the local and the global produces an ever-evolving whole. The Vedic and the Bhakti concepts of ‘rta’ and ‘loka’ both emphasize

the importance of cosmic order from the local to the cosmic levels of existence/creation. It is this cosmic and planetary consciousness characterizing the different discourses of culture in India that forms the template of Sachidananda Mohanty's seminal book on cosmopolitanism.

Mohanty narrates how the term cosmopolitanism gained currency in the age of late capitalism thereby aligning itself closely with the forces of globalization. He states firmly that such a monochromatic cosmopolitanism essentially viewed non-European or non-American nation-states as atavistic or inherently backward in comparison with their Western counterparts. Cosmopolitanism has been a subject of major debate in philosophical circles. On the one hand, we have engaging insights from Immanuel Kant, Jacques Derrida and Kwame Anthony Appiah, and on the other, Mohanty's concept of cosmopolitan modernity, which seeks to add fresh perspectives to the dominant versions of cosmopolitanism.

In a distinct and significant way, Mohanty's book expands the frontiers of the discourse of cosmopolitanism. He believes that the cosmopolitan modernity evinced in the lives and works of such important thinkers/activists as James Cousins, Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, Paul Richard, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Dilip Kumar Roy and Taraknath Das is not exclusivist in nature. It does not "devalue tradition even as it embraces modernity" (7).¹ It is significant that Mohanty does not use 'cosmopolitanism' and 'modernity' as umbrella terms that always signify 'rationality,' 'progress' and 'universality.' His cosmopolitanism is a critique of that "High Modernist Cosmopolitanism" (3) that in its effort to be cosmopolitan, self-consciously appropriates, and then flattens the native cultures and traditions into a cosmetic homogeneity.

For instance, the contribution of Western writers such as Richard and Cousins that Mohanty highlights will continue to elude the Orientalist gaze (in Edward Said's terms). Although they came from different cultures altogether, they sought a radical departure from the essentialist perception of the East as uncivilized and barbaric. Mohanty's invigorating account of their lives and works shows how

spiritual seekers from the West were turning to the East for “salvation of a materialistic West under the shadow of a destructive war” (67). He gives a detailed account of the friendship that persisted between Cousins and Tagore and the former’s belief in Tagore’s critique of staunch nationalism that was rising in Japan. Mohanty laments the fact that the perspectives of thinkers such as Cousins have been forgotten in contemporary debates about cosmopolitanism especially when Cousins “attempted to fashion out a new cosmopolitan imaginary based on reciprocity among the cultures of the world” (48).

Having been an Aurobindo scholar himself, Mohanty, in another chapter, underscores the effect of Aurobindo’s vision on the role of art in the evolution of the national spirit. He correlates Aurobindo’s perspective of art being a carrier of social change with that of Coomaraswamy. It is a holistic view that considers art as something indispensable for national growth. Aurobindo maintains that the “first and lowest use of art is purely aesthetic, the second is the intellectual or educative, the third and highest is the spiritual” (134). Similarly, Premchand’s seminal essay “Sahitya Ka Uddeshya” [1936; “The Aim of Literature”] states that literature should not be considered solely as a means of entertainment. A literary creation instead must be replete with enabling and ennobling ideas, a sense of beauty, and a reflection of life’s realities. Premchand underlines the importance of literature as a means to attain the end of freedom – aesthetic, intellectual, material and spiritual.

What is striking is Mohanty’s choice of Taraknath Das as a cosmopolitan thinker. A lay reader knows Das as an extremist who believed in using violent means to attain freedom from the British. He was the subject of Tolstoy’s famous “Letter to a Hindoo” (1908) in which the young revolutionary is urged to adopt peaceful methods for Indian independence. This also explains how and why Gandhi acknowledges Tolstoy’s influence on his innovative use of *satyagraha* or truth-force in South Africa. Mohanty succeeds in capturing the philosophical debate that ensued between Das and Tolstoy on the ethics of violence and non-violence that Gandhi uses later as an intertext in the structure of *Hind Swaraj* (1909). A

surprising fact regarding Das's cosmopolitanism is his belief in the idea of a world culture which could only materialize after the liberation of India from colonial rule. Despite being a passionate revolutionary, Das in his book *India in World Politics* (1923) underscores emphatically India's need to integrate with a larger humanity in order to usher in an era of peace and harmony. His cosmopolitanism can clearly be observed in one of the extracts that Mohanty quotes from Das's book in which he speaks of "a free India [that] will cooperate with all nations, not excluding England" (147).

Interestingly, almost all the Indian/Asian thinkers/activists Mohanty discusses have been in constant dialogue with the West. It appears that 'modern' Britain remained a favourite destination for almost all young and educated Indian elites to pursue their higher goals, for the sake of which they could all too easily have jettisoned their native identity. But what makes their lives inspirational is the kind of harmonious relationship they developed with Western culture without forgetting their own. They borrowed enormously from the enabling traditions of the West while interrogating simultaneously its disabling modernities in order to carve out such a cosmopolitanism that, in its mad rush to be global, does not reject the local.

Mohanty's book invokes some unsettling questions: Is it necessary to discard our tradition in order to absorb the conventions of modernity? Were our forefathers who played a massive role in the struggle of Indian independence not 'modern' enough? Is cosmopolitanism a monolithic term that only subscribes to the forces of globalization by undermining one's local roots? Mohanty's approach is not didactic; he leaves it to the reader to decide the kind of cosmopolitanism she/he espouses.

Notes

- ¹ All page references are taken from the 2015 edition of Mohanty's book.

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