**Between Two Worlds: The Narration of Postcolonial Nation in Rushdie and
post-Rushdie Indo-English Fiction**

By

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in partial fulfilment of

The requirements of the degree of

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Institute for Comparative Studies in Literature, Art, Culture and Comparative
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**"Between Two Worlds: The Narration of Postcolonial Nation in Rushdie and
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
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Abstract

The subject of my thesis is the narration of nation in the work of Rushdie and in post-Rushdie Indo-English fiction. It is an attempt to evaluate the articulation of national identity in these narratives as part of their endeavour to forge a postcolonial rupture with colonial history. The thesis will demonstrate how this politics of narration is fraught with contradictions, as postcolonial fiction continues to predicate itself on the colonial cultural legacies. While the tradition of postcolonial fiction tries to retrieve its right to narrate its own story, the deep contradiction at the heart of these narratives is expressed in their conventions by which the “native” makes his/her reappearance in the postcolonial context and versions of nation often emerge as the underbelly of their colonial counterparts. While such projection of national identity may be a part of the still continuing colonial cultural legacy, the literary and academic success of such “exotic” ventures play a no less significant role in the production and proliferation of these narratives, mostly published in the West.

This thesis attempts to analyse the complex articulation of nation in these narratives as well as bring to light a strong reaction that has been building up in recent writing in the tradition against the exoticising techniques evidenced in the acclaimed narratives. Its purpose is to prove that post-Rushdie fiction is an embattled terrain where postcolonial voices continue to grapple with the two-tiered significance of ‘postcolonial’ as a historical aftermath and discursive legacy on the one hand, and a resistant and oppositional consciousness on the

other. As an integral part of this embattled terrain, this thesis aims to bring to light cultural specificities of subcontinental societies, thus enhancing the readers' understanding of texts produced in 'different' cultures.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to read and analyze what constitutes the writing of 'nation' in postcolonial literature, more specifically, fiction of the 1980s, in the context of present global, metropolitan culture. The aim is to analyse the ideological complexities of postcolonial nation narration in Indo-English fiction from the subcontinent since the 1980s through representative works of Salman Rushdie, Sara Suleri and Arundhati Roy. In the first section of my introduction I broach the ambivalent history of the postcolonial condition to stress a continuing Orientalist project in its apparently conscious ideological resistance to Western hegemony. In the next section I trace this ideological ambivalence in the narration of nation in the fiction of the 1980s. I focus on Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*, Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* as a composite site where the ideological tension is played out. In the final section, in the process of analyzing and elucidating this tension and as part of my interpretive objective, I suggest ways of articulating cultural difference without censuring the postmodern interpretive strategies that, in the present times, have acquired global applicability.

Although postcoloniality is above all a chronological specificity and should refer to the post Second World War period in the history of the world, it is currently used as a strategic fashioning of literature (both theoretical and imaginative) from the ex-colonies according to the metropolitan demands of

inscribing *difference*, and currently replaces "Third World" as a defining category.

In her work, *Critical Difference*, Barbara Johnson asks a question which, together with the answer she provides, is important in this context. Johnson asks: 'Is difference determined by 'the complexities of fact, or out of impulses of power? Is it a matter of description or disagreement, information or censure?''¹ Johnson's answer to the question is offered in the penultimate chapter of *A World of Difference*, where she argues that "questions of difference and identity are always a function of specific interlocutory situations and the answers, matters of strategy rather than truth."² In the context of western rhetoric, postcolonial difference, which overwhelms by its complexities of fact, both historical and cultural, selectively generates a body of information that supports and sustains the (western) discourse on difference. This discourse is located not only in the currently popular "postcolonial," but also in an earlier discourse on the "Third World". Its roots are to be traced back to the early days of colonialism, in the orientalist discourse of the erstwhile colonial regimes.³

Multiple factors gave birth to the postcolonial. Historically, its large scale acceptance in the 1980s coincided with the passing away of the outmoded paradigm, "the Third World." The terminological shift indicates the professional

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¹Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference: Essays in contemporary Rhetoric of Reading* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1980) x.

²Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1987) 178.

³Orientalism, as a system of knowledge formation, and a means of exercising control over the so called inferior cultures has been discussed by Edward Said in *Orientalism*. See chapter I for a detailed discussion of Orientalism.

prestige and theoretical aura that postcolonial issues have acquired, in contrast to the more activist associations attached to "Third World" concepts and issues. The reduced attention paid to the Third World concepts and issues is associated with a number of complex political developments. As Ella Shohat puts it:

The period of so-called "Third World euphoria" – a brief moment in which it seemed that First World leftists and Third World guerillas would walk arm in arm toward global revolution – has given way to the collapse of the Soviet Communist model . . . the frustration of the hoped-for tri-continental revolution . . . the realization that the wretched of the earth are not unanimously revolutionary . . . and the recognition that international geopolitics and the global economic system have obliged even socialist regimes to make some kind of peace with transnational capitalism.⁴

The crisis in "Third World" thinking made way for an overwhelming enthusiasm for the term postcolonial, a new nomenclature for theoretical discourses, literary theory, and, last but not least, fiction. Irrespective of different discursive registers, postcolonial theory and fiction deal with issues related to colonialism and its consequences, covering a long span of history, including the present. It is significant that the suffixes '-ism' and 'ity' are considered largely redundant to the issues that are being debated within the corpus. Instead, the *adjective* postcolonial is frequently attached to such nouns as 'theory', 'studies', 'space', 'condition', 'intellectual'. The ultimate consecration of the term came

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⁴Ella Shohat, "Notes on the Postcolonial," *Social Text*, 31-32. (1992): 100.

with the erasure of the hyphen in post-colonial, and the installation of “the postcolonial” as the paradigm of a certain kind of discourse. This shift of meaning from a historical condition (post-colonial) to a certain form of discursive practice(postcolonial) is not without its ideological ambiguity or functional ambivalence that will be discussed throughout the thesis, and particularly in the first chapter.

One wonders what may be the reason for this scramble for the ‘post’. According to some critics, it is a politically viable choice of intellectuals from the Third World or Commonwealth countries who aim to insert a different form of discursivity into the mainstream western tradition, and yet a form of discursivity still predicated upon the acknowledgment of the cultural hegemony of the West. According to Anne McClintock:

In the case of “postcolonialism” at least part of the reason is its academic marketability. While admittedly another p-c word, “postcolonialism” is arguably more palatable and less foreign sounding to skeptical deans than “Third World Studies.” It also has a less accusatory ring than ‘Studies in Neo-colonialism’, say, or “Fighting two colonialisms.” It is more global and less fuddy-duddy than “Commonwealth Studies.” The term borrows moreover, on the dazzling marketing success of the term “post- modernism”. As the organizing rubric of the emerging field of disciplinary studies and an archive of knowledge, the term postcolonialism makes possible the marketing of a whole new generation of panels, articles, books and courses.⁵

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⁵Anne McClintock, “The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term Postcolonialism,” *Social Text* 10 (1992):93.

McClintock's observation that postcolonialism is a neo-colonialist venture which is ensured "dazzling marketing success" by its proximity to postmodernism, as well as a new "archive of knowledge" for the global market, points to the ambivalent aspect of this intellectual enterprise. The ambivalence of the enterprise resides in the fact that while postcolonialism announces a contestatory break with the colonial past, and a rupture from its post-colonial predicament, what it actually produces and circulates is a modified version of the colonialist paradigm that, for a while, operated under the organizing rubric of "Third World" in the West.

The term "Third World," as Eric Wolf suggests in his introduction to *Europe and The People without History*, has more rhetorical power than analytic precision. "Third World rhetoric," according to him, is a conceptual reworking of the East -West paradigm prevalent in colonialist discourse on the Orient. According to him this rhetoric is but a way of maintaining the same East-West dichotomy in which the West was obviously the privileged over its underdeveloped counterpart. He suggests:

It becomes easy to sort the world into differently colored [billiard] balls, to declare that "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." In this way a quintessential West is counterposed to an equally quintessential East, where life was cheap and slavish multitudes groveled under a variety of despotisms. Later, as peoples in other climes began to assert their political and economic independence from both West and East, we assigned these new applicants for historical status to a Third World of underdevelopment, a residual category of conceptual billiard balls – as

contrasted to the developed West and the developing East.⁶

Wolf's statement points to the traces of colonial/orientalist symptoms in the discourse on the "Third World". The "dazzling marketing success" of the postcolonial depends to a large extent on validating the Orientalist/Third Worldist assumptions in a different context. As cultural institutions and academies of higher learning not only define and process information and cultural production but also determine the *content* of cultural commodities, what is being made and circulated in the global market is aimed at accommodating the politico-cultural logic of the "developed West." The complexity of this phenomenon becomes even more interesting when one considers that its logic emanates at present not merely from Western centers, but even from outside.

As Arif Dirlik points out:

Much of what we associate with Eurocentrism is now internal to societies worldwide, so that to speak of "Europe and Its Others" itself appears as an oxymoronic distraction. Legacies of Euro-America are everywhere, from global structures to daily economic practices, from ideologies of development to cultures of consumption, from feminism to the centering in politics of race and ethnicity."⁷

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⁶Eric Wolf, *Europe and The People without History* (Los Angeles: California UP, 1982) 67.

⁷Arif Dirlik, "Is There History after Eurocentrism? Globalism, Postcolonialism and the Disavowal of History," *History After the Three Worlds* (eds.) Dirlik, Bahl and Gran (New York, Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2000) 31.

The Euro-American cultural domination spoken of by Dirlik is to be seen in the wide acceptance and dissemination of categories like “Islamic” “Chinese” and “Indic” “Indian” or “South Asian”, generic terms built on assumptions of racial stereotypes. It is especially prevalent in the realm of literatures and performing arts where objects of cultural consumption circulate as exotic artifacts. The agents of this new tendency are a generation of cosmopolitan writers, both national and diasporic, whose special status as the *insiders* of a given culture allow them greater authority to narrate the “quintessential East” or the underdeveloped Third World for Western consumption.

This observation is especially relevant for postcolonial Indo-English fiction, which Salman Rushdie has ironically called the “bastard child of the Empire.” Especially since the 1980s, which historically coincided with the birth of the postcolonial, “India” has been continuously marketed according to Western cultural imperatives. While “India” is invariably the subject, the terms of its articulation are rigorously drawn from a continuing discourse on its antiquity and socio-political underdevelopment. In the context of the postcolonial project, this, I will argue in the next chapter, is a continuing orientalist discourse that goes back, in the history of the subcontinent, to the early days of the Raj and continues to the present times, within a global political network even as it tries to articulate a resistance to the discursive vestiges of colonialism.⁸ The symptoms of this neo-orientalism are evidenced, on the one hand, by a

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⁸I am drawing from Said’s definition of Orientalism as a discourse about the irreducible difference that separates white from colored, occidental from oriental.

fetishization of India's national culture, which transforms the latter into an oriental, exotic artefact, and on the other, by a discourse that dutifully traces the subcontinental national trajectory as negative and inferior to that of the accomplished democracies of the West.⁹

Rushdie's novels are models of the kind of neo-orientalist narratives that have been normalized in the West as "Indian fiction". They have come to be seen as the foundational texts for a new kind of postcolonial novel, one in which the cosmopolitan consciousness uses both the vision and the vocabulary familiar in metropolitan centers to write a subcontinent that has continued to symbolize "stratified, unevenly developed societies that feel a shame and defeat in their history."¹⁰ This is especially true of Rushdie's first novel, *Midnight's Children*, which was hailed by *The New York Times* as "a continent finding its own voice." There has been a spate of critical writings accounting for different aspects of the novel's success and literary influence. Critics, especially in the US-UK, have spoken at length about Rushdie's literary heritage (mostly Western), his postmodernism, his narrative art, and his deconstructive use of history and at the same time celebrated "the ferocious indictments of India's evolution since Independence" in the novel.¹¹

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⁹It is an aspect of postcolonial fiction discussed in details in the first chapter.

¹⁰John Updike's review of *The God of Small Things*, *The New Yorker*, 23 and 30 June. 1997:156.

¹¹Review of *Midnight's Children* in *India Today* quoted from the back blurb of the Picador edition of the novel.

The commercial success of Rushdie's novels abroad not only created an unprecedented metropolitan demand for Indian writing in English, but also inspired a whole generation of writers *from* India, who are sometimes called "Rushdie's children," to follow in Rushdie's footsteps.¹² This Indian writing follows the trajectory set by *Midnight's Children*, namely that of a narration based on the interpenetration of the individual and the national.¹³ This is done in a way that makes the narration of "nation" a cultural imperative but allows the narrator/writer to *imagine* it in ways that can often make its narration a product of selective remembrance *and* forgetting. As a consequence, the articulation of (Indian) history is often subject to mutations and silencings, and tends to offer images of the nation, as I will argue, that confirm the Third World/Orientalist paradigm.

The debate over the strategies of representing nation and national culture has acquired a new dimension and a new urgency in the field of postcolonial literature within the context of the continuing cultural domination of the West and the proliferation of postcolonial narratives which confirm, rather than contest, the presuppositions and premises of Western-specific models about supposedly "inferior", "non-Western" nations. The situation is aggravated by the fact that

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¹²See Josna Rege, "Victim into Protagonist? *Midnight's Children* and the Post-Rushdie Narratives of the Eighties," Keith Booker, *Critical Essays on Salman Rushdie* (New York: G.K. Hall & Co, 1999) 250-281.

¹³"While individual history does not make sense unless seen against a national background, neither does national history make sense unless seen in the form of individual lives and histories" Anita Desai, "Where Cultures Clash by Night," *The Washington Post* 15 March.1981.

these narratives continue to be consumed in the West as objects with a foreign flavour.

Resistance to such a neo orientalist trend has been developing in the field of postcolonial studies itself since the 1980s. In the work of critics like Timothy Brennan, Graham Huggan, Neil Lazarus, Annie Coombes, Arif Dirlik, Benita Parry, Aijaz Ahmad and others, there have been significant attempts to engage postcolonial studies on its own grounds, refusing to validate the hermeneutic enterprise of Western theory. The postcolonial is at present an embattled terrain in which a conscious postcolonial insurgence is often disabled by an ironical engagement with the very epistemology that most postcolonial critics seek to dismantle.

The situation is equally complex in the case of postcolonial fiction writers. In spite of their apparent intention of narrating their past and present as a mark of postcolonial self-assertion, the writers run the risk of turning their subjects, which are invariably a melange of personal and national tragedy, into predictable items, rehearsing in different versions “the great Asiatic mystery” which has long fascinated the West.

In “East isn’t East,” Edward Said suggests that one might read the heavy “emphasis on the local, regional, and contingent” that we find in much of the best postcolonial work as

connected in its general approach to a universal set of concerns, all of them related to emancipation, revisionist attitudes toward history and culture, a

widespread use of recurring theoretical models and styles, a leading motif [of which] has been the consistent critique of Eurocentrism and patriarchy.¹⁴

Although Said's *Orientalism* was a pioneering work in this regard, his argument that "the consistent critique of Eurocentrism" has been strengthened by the deployment of the local and the regional is debatable. The strategy of selective representation of national cultures has, more often than not, contributed unconsciously to a Eurocentric perspective instead of challenging it. This point will be developed in my first chapter, in relation to postcolonial criticism, in particular in connection with Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's use of Indic material. In the second chapter, I trace the continuing ambiguity about Eurocentrism in the representation of India in postcolonial fiction, where the strategy of selective, often partial representation of national culture and history to contribute to the contained image of the subcontinent has been equally pronounced.

Following an analysis of Rushdie's novels, *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*, the thesis will examine Sara Suleri's fictional memoir *Meatless Days*. My choice of Suleri is due to her being the first voice from the subcontinent that contests Rushdie's version of history narration on its own grounds. Probably taking a cue from Rushdie's notion of *pickling*, Suleri seizes on the notion of *cooking* to narrate the complex history of a subcontinent that refuses to be contained within

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¹⁴Edward Said, "East isn't East," *Times Literary Supplement*, 4792.3 February. 1995:5.

the metropolitan mapping of fictions from the developing East. In *Meatless Days*, a fusion of autobiography and fiction, Suleri blends individual and national histories as Rushdie does, but brings to the idea of nation writing the extremely relevant question of the writer's responsibility. This makes her narrative a crucial contribution, albeit one somewhat muted by the current versions of nation narration, to the field of fictional narratives from the subcontinent. In her effort to write Pakistan, Suleri grapples with the problem of how to narrate the history and the cultural complexities of a nation without losing sight of that nation's political crisis, and how to narrate that crisis without simplifying and denigrating Pakistani culture. Apart from "de-Third Worlding" subcontinental fiction, *Meatless Days* is a significant attempt to restore a much needed dignity to the literatures of the "amnesiac nation(s)."¹⁵

The final chapter of the thesis analyses Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*, arguing that its ambivalent optic, incorporating elements of the narrative strategies and ideologies of both Rushdie and Suleri, produces a more complex version of postcolonial narrative: a complexity characteristic of the fictional works of the post-Rushdie generation. As it delves into the rich history of Keralian (South India) Christians, Roy's narrative remains sensitive to the complexities of the history narrated in the broader national context, and yet at the same time, I will argue, it undermines this complexity to rehearse yet again the Orientalist image of the East. At once asserting the historical significance of

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¹⁵I am borrowing Rushdie's definition of India in *Midnight's Children* in an ironic way.

nation and trivializing it, Roy's novel remains poised between canonical and counter-canonical status within the field of postcolonial fiction because of its ambivalence.

While conscious of the inevitability of speaking to some extent from *within* a dominant Western theoretical/ critical framework (as do the authors I am critiquing), I have attempted to develop as well a resistant strategy for reading the texts, relying more on the intra-historical valences of the cultures represented than on theoretical/ literary frameworks that tend to subject these narratives to the cultural demands of marketing *difference*. This resistant strategy consists in making national cultures speak for themselves in terms of interpretive strategies. In other words, it attempts to read the national (postcolonial/Indian) from within, adopting strategies of cultural intervention without ignoring the reading/ interpretive categories that have become indispensable in postmodern/ postcolonial times. Peter Hulme suggests that "postcolonial theory, if it is to develop, must produce 'native terminology' ", by which he means terms of reference that are local, rooted in specific histories. In the context of my thesis, it means liberating postcolonial (Indian/Pakistani) fictions from a generalized national context by teasing out their local and regional strands that resist any easy, formulaic "national" representations.

To insert culturally specific details to show *how* and *how much* the history of a nation is (dis)articulated in postcolonial writing from the subcontinent is only part of the project. In the process of analysing these narratives, I also try to introduce into the critical framework relevant historical and cultural data to

indicate that reading different literatures also involves going beyond the established frameworks of knowledge in order to transfer the reading of that difference out of the realm of linguistic universality and deconstructive allegories into *contexts* in which difference speaks with its own voice and vocabulary. As the manner in which the context is invoked, the nature of the context and the way the context itself is interpreted depend on prior determination regarding the kind of interpretation one wishes to make, I have to add that the contextualizations in my thesis are made with a view to questioning the Western/Orientalist strategies of cultural overdetermination.

In the first chapter of my thesis, entitled "Nation, Narration and Postcoloniality: An Orientalist Aftermath", I discuss the terms and conditions of postcolonial nation narration and trace their roots back to the colonialist period. I then take a short detour through postcolonial theory to establish the framework within which nation (India/Pakistan) gets articulated, and then move on to the issues raised by postcolonial fiction. In the second chapter, "Postcolonial Fiction: Submission in Insurgency", I trace the historical roots of the deep self-division at the heart of postcolonial fiction back to their origins in the "pre" and "post" independence Indo-English novels and demonstrate how postcolonial fiction of the 1980s brings to fruition some of the ideological problems already present in pre-Rushdie fiction. In the third chapter, "Pickling Nation: the Art of Salman Rushdie," I attempt to show how Rushdie sensationalises Indian and Pakistani history to comment on the supposed ideological bankruptcy of a discarded nation. The fourth chapter, "Postcolonial Tragedy: Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days*,"

demonstrates how the narration of a nation's history can be thematically and structurally grounded in historical specificities without giving up the privilege of speaking from within the 'West'. Finally, in my fifth chapter, I discuss "postcolonial performance" in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, suggesting ways in which post-Rushdie fiction has complicated the conditions of its own narration by endeavouring to be "counter-canonical" and provocatively different. The complexity of the narrative of *The God of Small Things*, as my analysis proposes to show, demonstrates the janus-faced condition of postcolonial fiction. My conclusion is a brief summing up of the postcolonial condition in Indo-English fiction and my critical response to it.

Chapter I

Nation, Narration and Postcoloniality-- The Orientalist Aftermath

“If I seem to take part in politics, it is only because politics encircles us today like the coil of a snake from which one cannot get out, no matter how much one tries. I wish therefore to wrestle with the snake.” — Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948).

The subject of my thesis is the narration of nation in postcolonial fiction of the 1980s. In this chapter I will develop the theoretical issues and debates around these three terms and show their relational significance in the realm of nation writing in two different genres: that of the novel and of the fictional memoir. As I will argue that postcolonial fiction, despite its oppositional valence, retains traces of colonial discourse in its delineation of ‘Other’ cultures I will start by analyzing the concept of Orientalism both as Western discourse on the Oriental Other, and as Edward Said’s critical study of the phenomenon.

Most textual mappings of the colonial encounter take their cue from Said’s interpretation of imperial discourse as a project of representing, imagining, containing and controlling the incomprehensible Orient through the manipulation of textual codes and conventions. According to Said, Orientalist discourse manifested itself as a significant body of ideas, or as an inter-textual network organizing the institutional contexts of colonial hegemony. Writing the Orient through certain well established tropes or images was also a means of

underwriting the positional superiority of Western consciousness and, fashioning the Orient as a familiar field for Western “desires, repressions, investments, projections” (Said 1994 [1978],8). The Occident’s imaginative control over the Orient can be read as a preparatory text for militaristic and administrative domination. Said argues that there are two forms of Orientalism – that of the apparatuses of classical scholarship, constructing its object, and that of the “descriptions of a present, modern, manifest Orient articulated by travelers, pilgrims and statesmen” (222-3) – which existed separately and finally converged: “what the scholarly Orientalist defined as the “essential” Orient was sometimes contradicted, but in many cases was confirmed, when the Orient became an actual administrative obligation” (223).

According to Said, Oriental/classical scholarship has in general, been innocent of any conscious theory, and was mostly guided by the writer’s aesthetic sensibility (or free association) and unconscious assumptions about the society whose ‘primary’ texts the scholarship examined and directly read. Orientalists project a picture using the texts they read as evidence, a picture that reflects and fulfills their unconscious and predetermined values, i.e., their prejudices about the Orient. By the 1980s, the critique of Orientalist scholarship was overdue. Well before the publication of Said’s *Orientalism*, there were scholars who were already thinking about interrogating the Orientalist paradigm.

It was a prepared ground that eventually proved receptive to Said's work in the field.¹⁶

Edward Said's *Orientalism*, a comprehensive study of a dominant Western ideological framework is largely accepted as the founding text of postcolonial studies.¹⁷ Gayatri Spivak, for example, has celebrated Said's book as the 'source book' through which 'marginality' itself has acquired the status of an object of study within the Anglo-American academy. In her words, "the study of colonial discourse, directly released by work such as Said's, has blossomed into a garden where the marginal can speak and be spoken, even spoken for. It is an important part of the discipline now."¹⁸ The editors of the Essex symposia series on sociology and literature have reinforced Spivak's claim by suggesting that Said's work has single-handedly moved the colony-Empire situation to "centre stage in Anglo-American literary and cultural theory."¹⁹

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¹⁶"A personal note: By the mid-1950s, while Edward Said was an undergraduate student at Princeton University, some graduate students in the West Asian and North African field were already voicing such disaffection. For what it is worth, and for the historical record, I recall that Ibrahim Abu-Lughod was the center of quite a striking and colorful critique of Orientalist scholarship." R.A. Abou-El-Haj, "Historiography in West Asian and North African Studies," in *History After the Three Worlds: Post-Eurocentric Historiographies*. (Ed) Dirlik, Bahl, Gran (New York, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000) 81.

¹⁷Elleke Boehmer's survey of colonial and postcolonial literature follows Said's guidelines and describes British colonialism as a "textual takeover" of the non-Western world (Boehmer, 1995) 19. Her account projects imperial textual production as an endeavor, through writing, to domesticate the formidable Otherness of "recalcitrant peoples, unbreachable jungles, vast wastelands, huge and shapeless crowds" (Boehmer, 1995) 94. By refashioning the colonized land through familiar stereotypes, colonial writing demonstrated, according to Boehmer, "an attempt at both extensive comprehension and comprehensive control" (1995) 97.

¹⁸See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 56.

¹⁹Barker, Hulme and Eversen (eds), *Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994) 1.

I will begin by analyzing the constituent elements of Said's discourse. Said discusses Orientalism as a paradigm of 'degraded' knowledge, to be countered by an adversarial and oppositional counter-knowledge. His analysis of the field is based on two 'meanings' of Orientalism, which he emphasizes at the beginning of his book. First, Said invokes the conventional understanding of 'Orientalism' as a field of specialization about the Orient. 'Orientalism' designates the efforts of eighteenth-century scholars of Oriental cultures— such as William Jones, Henry. T. Colebrooke and Charles Wilkins— who undertook the first translations of Indian classical texts like the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Shakuntala* and sections from the *Upanishads*. Second, Said explains his own understanding of Orientalism as an immense inter-textual system of rules and methods that regulate any thoughts about the Orient. This second meaning marks the juncture at which any Western attempt to 'know' or directly engage with the non-Western world is mediated, as James Clifford argues, by a tendency to dichotomize the relationship between the 'Occident' and the 'Orient' into an us-them contrast, and then to essentialize the resultant 'Other'; to speak, that is, in a generalizing way about the Oriental 'character', 'mind' and so on.²⁰

Said's ultimate analysis delivers an understanding of Orientalism as a discourse in Foucault's sense of the term. In every society, as Foucault writes,

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²⁰James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*, (Bloomington: Harvard UP, 1988) 258.

[t]he production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality.²¹

Discourses are, by this definition, cognitive systems which control both the mode and means of representation in a society. Accordingly, colonial/Orientalist discourses are typical of discursive practices whenever they claim to *speak for* the mute and uncomprehending Orient, and in so doing, relentlessly represent it as the negative, impoverished 'Other' of Western rationality. In short, 'Orientalism' as a discourse starts at the point at which it proceeds to produce stereotypes about Orientals and the Orient, such as the heat and the dust, the terrorist, the courtesan, the Asian despot, the immature native, the enigmas and horrors of the mystical, mysterious East. These stereotypes, Said tells us, confirm the desirability and the necessity of colonial government over the positional inferiority of the East. What they deliver, according to him, is an unchanging image of "a subject race, dominated by a race that knows them and what is good for them better than they could possibly know themselves" (Said, 1978,35).

It has to be admitted, that in spite of its phenomenal importance in the field of postcolonial studies, Said's reading of Orientalism as a product of colonial epistemological arrogance is too formulaic and actually creates an *Occidental*

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²¹Michel Foucault, "The Order Of Text" in *Untying the Text: A Post-structuralist Reader* (ed). Robert Young (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987) 52.

stereotype. It also leaves out the radical uses of Orientalism made in Nationalist discourses, especially in the deployment of affirmative Orientalist models.²² As well, Said is also somewhat overreaching in his view that Orientalism includes activities of any professional Western academic, currently or previously engaged in studying, researching or teaching the 'Orient'. Second, he abandons the disciplinary confines of studies of the Orient as such to argue that Orientalism refers to *any* occasion when a Westerner has either imagined or written about the non-Western world. Yet, in spite of certain sweeping assumptions about Oriental scholarship, the underlying truth of Said's enterprise can hardly be overstated. It has received ideological support from another major work in the same field. Rana Kabbani's *Europe's Myth of the Orient*, avoiding the theoretical difficulties of Said's work, complements his *Orientalism* by chronicling the sexual fantasies implicit in European artistic and literary representations of the Orient. Kabbani concludes that such representations followed a structure that may be described as: "the gaze into the Orient . . . as in a convex mirror, to reflect the Occident that had produced it."²³

In the following section, I will analyze the Orientalist paradigm in the context of Indian colonial discourse in the nineteenth and the early twentieth century, both in administrative documents and in British literature on India, demonstrating how the "essential" Orient was confirmed when the Orient

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²²See Partha Chatterji, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1993) 33.

²³Rana Kabbani, *Europe's Myth of the Orient* (London: Macmillan, 1986) 85.

became an actual administrative obligation. It is important to understand that while demonstrating the ambivalence of Oriental stereotypes, I do not intend to construct Occidental stereotypes. After all, it is unfair not to remember William Jones's attack on the cultural insularity of Europe when he accuses the European consciousness of racial bias and acknowledges his historical role in this collective guilt:

Some men have never heard of the Asiatik writings, and others will not be convinced that there is anything valuable in them; some pretend to be busy, and others are really idle; some detest the Persians, because they believe in Mahomed, and others despise their language, because they do not understand it. . .we all love to excuse, or to conceal, our ignorance, and are seldom willing to allow any excellence beyond the limits of our own achievements.²⁴

Such dissenting voices as Jones's make us aware of oppositional modes of representation even within a dominant discourse.²⁵

Orientalism, "India" and the *Sahibs*

"Orientals," Edward Said has claimed, "were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analyzed not as citizens, not even as people, but as

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²⁴William Jones, "A Grammar of the Persian Language," in *Sir William Jones: A Reader*, (ed.) Satya S. Pachori, Oxford UP, Delhi, 1991(Orig. published 1771) 68.

²⁵See Rana Kabbani for a similar cautionary note.

problems to be solved or confined.”²⁶ In the history of colonization of the Indian subcontinent, such an Orientalist paradigm is applicable in a more complex way, as ever since the eighteenth century British power was frantically looking for ways in which a racial fear of the native colonized could be *seen and described*. In the context of the subcontinent, the British desire ‘to see’ engendered a multi-volume work, *The People of India: a Series of Photographic Illustrations with Descriptive Letter Press of the Races and Tribes of India*. It was a document serially published by the Politics and Secrets Department of the India office in London, significantly, between 1868 and 1875. Pre-existing notions of difference were now freshly articulated through nearly five hundred photographs supplied by amateurs employed either by the civil or the military government, each accompanied by a ‘descriptive letterpress’. These volumes attempt to compress the impossible variety of Indian peoples into categories of caste, race, religion and occupation seen not as dynamic and evolving but as a static inheritance from the distant past. *The People of India* reveals the attempt both to master colonial subjects and to represent them as unalterably different; it thus represents both the intrusiveness of the colonial gaze and an inability to comprehend what it seeks to codify. This early foray into ethnographic photography was designed to record a “photographic likeness of a few of the more remarkable tribes of India,” and became, together with James Mill’s *The*

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²⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978) 207.

History of British India, a textbook for British administrators training for the Indian civil service.²⁷

The text's attempts to read race in terms of 'caste' differences are significant. The multifarious and complex nature of the caste system proved so troubling to the colonial imagination that it turned it into a symbol of opacity (a "problem" to borrow Said's term), and transformed the very act of looking into narratives of 'looking through'. The complexities of the caste system were finally ascribed to the peculiar working of the "Indian intellect". Herbert Risley, a nineteenth century ethnographer, ascribes the "growth of the caste instinct" to the peculiarities of the Indian intellectual disposition:

It is clear that the growth of the caste instinct must have been greatly promoted and stimulated by certain characteristic peculiarities of the Indian intellect – its lax hold of facts, its indifference to action, its absorption in dreams, its exaggerated reverence for tradition, its passion for endless division and subdivisions, its acute sense of minute technical distinctions, its pedantic tendency to press a principle to its furthest logical conclusion, and its remarkable capacity for imitating and adopting social ideas and usages of whatever origin.²⁸

This oscillation between racial particularities and a homogenous Indianness, and the resultant impasse creates what may be called a colonial language of fear and anxiety by which the demand that India be written in an

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²⁷*The History of British India* was originally published in 1817.

²⁸Herbert Risley, *The People of India* (Calcutta: Thacker Spink and Co, 1908) 265.

idiom comprehensible to the West is constantly felt to be thwarted by the immensity of alien details. The obvious imbalance between political and intellectual power probably accounts for a sense of guilt that continued to shape the imperial discourse on India.

The economy of guilt has a central place in the rhetoric of Edmund Burke, the British statesman whose speech on Fox's East India Bill insists on the difficulty of representing India in a discourse familiar to his nation. Punctuated by astonishment and horror, Burke's speech insists on the impossibility of "handling India":

All this vast mass, composed of so many orders and classes of men, is again infinitely diversified by manners, by religion, by hereditary employment, through all their possible combinations. This renders the handling of India a matter in an high degree critical and delicate. But, oh, it has been handled very rudely indeed! Even some of the reformers seem to have forgot that they had anything to do but to regulate the tenants of a manor, or the shopkeepers of the next country town.

It is an empire of this extent, of this complicated nature, of this dignity and importance that I have compared it to Germany and the German government – not for an exact resemblance, but as a sort of middle term, by which India might be approximated to our understandings, and if possible, to our feelings in order to awaken something of sympathy for the unfortunate natives, of which I am afraid we are not perfectly susceptible, whilst we look at this very remote object through a very false and cloudy medium.²⁹

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²⁹Edmund Burke, "Speech on Mr. Fox's East India Bill," in *The Complete Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, rev. (Boston: Little Brown and Co, 1866), vol. 2, 446.

Central to Burke's discourse is the difficulty of translating India into the language of its colonizers. There is also a feeling of awe for the "dignity and importance" of this ancient nation, together with an imperial guilt for not doing justice to the culture and history of the colonized race. Burke's speech invokes magnitude, density and opacity and artfully turns these invocations into a *theme* that deserves literary attention. Such an aestheticizing of political discourse, and what Sara Suleri calls "idiosyncratic retreat from the parameters of rationalism into the categorization of irrationality", makes India a "sublime" theme in the British colonial discourse.³⁰ That the Indian Sublime continued to haunt the British Imperial psyche even as late as the early twentieth century is evident in E.M. Forster's *A Passage To India*:

The caves are readily described. A tunnel eight feet long, five feet high, three feet wide leads to a circular chamber about twenty feet in diameter. This arrangement occurs again and again throughout the group of hills, and this is all, this is a Marabar Cave. Having seen one such cave, having seen three, four, fourteen, twenty four, the visitor returns to Chandrapore uncertain whether he has had an interesting experience or a dull one or any experience at all. He finds it difficult to discuss the caves, or to keep them apart in his mind . . . Nothing, nothing attaches to them and their reputation – for they have one – does not depend on human speech. (116)

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³⁰Burke's idea of the sublime had been published earlier, in: *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Also, on the subject, see Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India*, 27.

Forster's rendition of the discursive opacity of an Indian experience matches those of Burke and Risley in so far as all of them make a failed attempt to transcribe Indian Sublime in the rationalist terms of their own discourse.

Yet what characterizes the Indian experience in this discourse above all is the condescension felt for the "unfortunate natives", as evidenced in Risley's formulation of the "Indian Intellect", as well as in Forster's characterization of Professor Godbole in his novel.³¹

The complex definition of Indianness is very important in the colonial discourse of British India and had an immense impact on the foundations of the British system of education in India in the eighteenth century. If Burke had an imaginative respect for Indian social structures and institutions, his successors James Mill and Thomas Babington Macaulay did not share in his cultural sympathy. According to Mill, India's claim to antiquity was either apocryphal or proof of the subcontinent's tragically prehistorical status. Book II of *The History of British India* informs its readers that:

Rude nations seem to derive a peculiar gratification from pretensions to a remote antiquity. As a boastful and turgid vanity distinguishes remarkably the oriental nations they have in most instances carried their claims extravagantly high.³²

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³¹ Professor Godbole, a character in Forster's *A Passage to India* is an Oriental stereotype for an Indian intellectual, childish almost comic.

³² James Mill, *The History of British India*, ed. John Clive (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1975) 27 (Orig. pub.1817).

Such opinions about Indian “rudeness” culminate in Macaulay’s historically notorious “Minute on Indian Education”, a summary dismissal of Indian vernaculars and the indigenous system of education. What is evident here is an imperial arrogance that assumes the noble responsibility of bringing the civilizational apparatus to the “orientals”:

I have no knowledge of either Sanscrit or Arabic. But I have done what I could to form a correct estimate of their value. . . I am quite ready to take the Oriental learning at the valuation of the Orientalists themselves. I have never found one of them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.³³

These ambiguous attitudes, conflicting and paradoxical, constitute the British colonial discourse on Indian experience. The horror of the Burkean sublime mingles with an over-determined representation of the fundamental irrationality of Indian culture. The antiquity of India is exaggerated, not so much to address its venerability as to turn away from the alternative civic society that it represents. The underlying argument appears to be far less complicated than its discursive symptoms. Since India is too old to be rational, the master need waste as little effort as possible on attempting to pay attention or read the existent structures that are in place in the colonized terrain. Behind this imperial arrogance lurks the fear that the colonial imagination experiences in the face of

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³³Thomas Babington Macaulay, “Minute on Indian Education,” *Selected Writings* (ed.) John Clive (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1972) 241.

so much novelty. Throughout the nineteenth and the early twentieth century, popular fiction mimes the cultural anxiety of the imperialist discourse.

From the analysis of Orientalism in the preceding sections, the discipline may be seen as rehearsing a simultaneous exaltation and denigration of Oriental cultures through representational control. These representations, as is evidenced from the British writings on India discussed and analyzed in the previous section, reveal both a vindication of the colonial imperialist project and a paradoxical guilt about it. In the following section I will argue that in the post-imperial era the residual remains of the same imperialist logic continue to shape the discourse of Otherness.

I will start with the examination of certain categories like “Commonwealth Literature” and “Third World literature” to demonstrate how the underlying principle of such categorizations reveal the continuation of the same colonial/Oriental discourse through successive terminological shifts.

“Our” Literature, “Their” Literature: Third World Aesthetics and Commonwealth Literary Studies

In his discussion of the relationship between narrative and a verifiable reality “out there”, Said reminds his readers that orientalism is neither a tissue of lies nor a distortion of some discernible truth. Rather, it is a body of knowledge and has commanded an epistemic stature precisely because it is, at multiple levels, productive of both power and knowledge. He notes further that

representations, in order to be effective, require a discursive consistency, a consistency that is:

a form of cultural praxis, a system of opportunities for making statements . . . they operate as representations usually do, for a purpose, according to a tendency in a specific historical, intellectual, even economic setting .[Re]presentations have purposes, they are effective much of the time, they accomplish one or many tasks. (Said, 1978, 273)

Contemporary critical thinking on art and aesthetics performs a number of well-rehearsed discursive moves decipherable in the trajectory of cultural studies. All these discursive traditions have influenced a generation of 'First World' critics in significant ways. A major characteristic of this discourse is the overarching suppression or displacement of the structures, agencies, and trajectories of the colonized inhabitants of the Third World and the periphery of the 'First'. According to McCarthy and Demetriadis:

The tendency in such criticism is to disavow or silence the historical specificity and productivity of postcolonial narratives and genealogies in artistic practices and cultural forms,[introducing] a crucial and paralyzing elision.³⁴

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³⁴Cameron McCarthy and Greg Cameron, "Art and the Postcolonial Imagination: Rethinking the Institutionalization of Third World Aesthetics and Theory," *ARIEL* 31:1 &2, Jan-April.(2000):231

An example of this critical construct is Frederic Jameson's controversial essay "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capital."³⁵ The ostentatiously democratic and generous tone of Professor Jameson's essay is symptomatic of the institutional Western discourse on these "other" nationalisms. It is always slightly ill at ease, ashamed but enormously forgiving of these aberrant nationalisms sprouting in the underdeveloped nation states. In his essay Jameson declares:

All third-world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call *national allegories*, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their form develops out of predominantly Western machineries of representation, such as the novel... Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic – necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*.

Jameson's Third Worldist rhetoric merely confirms the cultural assumptions built on the still uneasy distance between the native (Third World) and his erstwhile masters. Speaking of 'Third World Literature' Jameson states:

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³⁵Frederic Jameson, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capital," *Social Text*, no 15, Fall (1986): 65-88. Also, see Aijaz Ahmad's response: "Jameson's rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory'," in *Social Text* No 17, Fall. (1987): 3-25.

If the purpose of the (Western) canon is to restrict our sympathies, to develop a range of rich and subtle perceptions which can be exercised only on the occasion of a small but choice body of texts, to discourage us from reading anything else or from reading those things in different ways, then it is humanly impoverishing. (66)

The “rich and subtle perceptions” developed by the Western literary canon are juxtaposed to “reading[...] things in *different* ways” in the Jamesonian sentence. The concession to this difference is then justified from a humanist perspective. The immense allowance made to the texts from the Third World from the point of view of Western canonicity is made apparent by justifying their readability, not on the grounds of their literary merit, but on the grounds of political correctness (read “humanitarian” grounds). Jameson’s “otherness” rhetoric becomes more and more clear as he goes on:

Why, returning to the question of the canon, should we only read certain kinds of books? No one is suggesting we should not read those, but why should we not also read other ones? We are not after all being shipped to that “desert island”, and as a matter of fact – and this to me is the conclusive nail in the argument – we all do read different kinds of texts in this life of ours since. . . . we spend so much of our existence in the force field of a mass culture that is radically different from our “great books.” (66-67)

A Third World reader learns many things from Jameson’s exposition. First: the Western aesthetic sympathies are shaped universally by a ‘canon’ (Proust,

Joyce, Dostoevsky) which is a small but a choice body of texts. Second: this choice body of texts enables the Western reader to develop a range of “rich and subtle” aesthetic sympathies. Third: in spite of being shaped by this canon, Western readers (“we”) should not hesitate to read “many different kinds of texts” as they are already trained to suffer the difference by being forced to consume “mass culture”. Assuming a binarism between “classical” and “popular”, “Third World” is generously given a berth in the latter, to be consumed by the liberal First World reader in its irresistible alterity.

It is significant that a pluralist like Jameson finds it necessary to embrace the unified self-image of the West, if only to lament its failures to keep alive a sense of collectivity. Having established a politically empowered Western subject at the centre of his discourse, Jameson goes on to posit an a priori theory of “Third World Literature” and clinches his argument by posing a rhetorical question:

Need I add that it is precisely this very different ratio of the political to the personal which makes such texts alien to us at first approach and consequently resistant to our conventional Western habits of reading?” (69)

By assimilating the enormous heterogeneities into a single metaphor, Jameson reduces Third World inhabitants (who are obviously not his addressees) to a dehistoricized type and demands that Third World subjects articulate themselves in a form commensurate with this type. “Third World

literature” with national allegory as its metatext appears to be the only sanctioned shelter for all the poor voices from the Third World.

The right to narrate Third World Otherness is quite un-ambiguous in Jameson’s article. As Radhakrishnan puts it :

During the course of this essay Jameson talks too glibly about ‘the return of nationalism’ in the Third World as though nationalism were enjoying a rerun in the Third World. The confident use of the term ‘return’ suggests that within the universal synchronicity of Western time, nationalism is repeating itself in the Third World whereas historically nationalism is new to the Third World. Throughout this essay (in spite of an initial gesture of unease), Jameson has little difficulty in maintaining his official conviction that Third World histories are a predictable repetition of the histories of the ‘advanced world’; hence, the masterly confidence with which he ‘allegorizes’ the Third World on its own behalf.³⁶

The meaning of Jameson’s essay hinges on his problematic handling of Otherness or, “difference”. His exposition of this Otherness is rendered indistinguishable from the Orientalist approach, as he writes an eulogy of difference with the underlying assumption of its assumed inferiority. Thus, the formulaic “difference” becomes a conceptual rehearsal of the master’s continuing preoccupation with the “nativist culture”, and an equally persistent ignorance about it. Both these traits are amply represented in the urge to

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³⁶R Radhakrishnan, “Post Structuralist Poetics: Towards a Theory of Coalition ,” *Postmodernism/Jameson/Critic* ed. Douglas Kellner (Washington: Mouton Press, 1989) 268-300.

formulate a certain axiomatic truth about “Third World Literature” and a certain philanthropic appeal to respect the inferiority of those “alien” texts that represent it.

The rhetoric on Third World aesthetics, as demonstrated by Jameson’s article, fails to recognize the following facts: that all nations are *not* the same; that history, like literature, is *not* a homogenous concept and demands attention to specificities; and finally, that its articulation demands a critical awareness of the historical and cultural diversities within the field and a thorough analysis of these diversities.

The kind of representational control displayed in Jameson’s essay is also evidenced in the field of Commonwealth Literary Studies. In 1975, in an essay entitled “Colonialist Criticism,”³⁷ the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe castigated a number of European critics for being negligent about the cultures that informed the texts they were attempting to critique. He had recognized the imperialist politics implicit in the “universalist claims” of European literary criticism and in its assumption that what was of cultural value to Europe was of equal worth in other cultures. In “The Novelist as Teacher,” Achebe explored the very different relationship between the artist and the society, culture and community that pertained in Nigeria and showed how ignorance of that relationship precluded the critical understanding of much of the literary and cultural significance of Nigerian texts. Clearly in Achebe’s view the national

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³⁷ Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (New York:Doubleday,1975) 3-28.

(African) context is the essential one within which to consider the meaning and value of individual works.

This perspective is conspicuously lacking in such academic and scholarly undertakings as Commonwealth Literary Studies, where the applicability of Western categories to Other literatures often implies the positional inferiority of the latter. The frame of reference in such instances is always a parent tradition that relegates other literatures to subsidiary status through evolutionary or tributary metaphors (*different* literatures). All such metaphors in the field of Commonwealth Literature stress the connection to Britain and the implicit dependence on it as a means of producing meaning.³⁸ While taking into account the serious cultural impediments in the path of the European critics in perceiving and exposing the discursive dynamics of such texts, such broad parent-offspring mappings often tend to become appropriative, concentrating on similarities of the texts with what they understand as “Parent” literature. In her article entitled “Commonwealth Literature and Comparative Methodology”, Helen Tiffin reports such an appropriative utterance:

Malcolm Bradbury came to Queensland to give a series of seminars comparing and contrasting developments in the modern American novel with those in the modern British novel; that is, the structure of his course presumed that the United States had produced a literature different from that of the United Kingdom. The texts listed for discussion as “modern British” confirmed that while literary independence had been granted to a “mature” imperialist power,

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³⁸This is a practice that continues in postmodern criticism, as will be shown in the context of Rushdie criticism in the next chapter.

English-speaking Africa or India could not expect the same recognition of separate identity.³⁹

Such cultural representations are grounded, as Tiffin's comments clearly indicates, in assumptions of political and cultural superiority and are to be located within the larger political discourse on nationalism and 'Other' nations.

Although Third World rhetoric is no longer the dominant model for literary criticism, its presence as a meta-narrative in the discourse on developing/underdeveloped countries cannot be overlooked. I will demonstrate in the following section that an underlying ideological assumption about Otherness informs post-Third World discourses on nationalism, especially when it is increasingly identified with the political situations in these 'other' nations. I will henceforth use the term "neo-Orientalism" to designate the discourse that continues to rehearse the Orientalist devaluation of the Other in a changed political scenario.⁴⁰

"Nationalism" and the West

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³⁹Helen Tiffin, "Commonwealth Literature and Comparative Methodology," *World Literature written in English*, vol 23, no.19. (1984): 26-30. Among the novels discussed was *Midnight's Children*. Bradbury traced its roots back to the novels of Sterne and hence, to the British literary tradition.

⁴⁰On the subject of neo-orientalism and Islam, see R.A. Abou-El-Haj, "Historiography in West Asian and North African Studies," in *History After the Three Worlds: Post-Eurocentric Historiographies*. (Ed) Dirlik, Bahl, Gran (New York, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers) 67-84.

The neo-Orientalist discourse happens in the larger context in which the world is perceived as confined to a metropolitan West, whereas all other areas (the rest of the world) are either perceived as retrograde vernacular variations to the central theme, or are simply ignored. The works of a number of postcolonial authors (Said, 1978, Chakrabarty, 1992, Sinha, 1994) remind us that the story of “how the West was one” (Klein, 1994) has always been inextricable from the story of how the “rest” was rendered multiple and voiceless. What is important is that the colonial perspective still continues to *speak for* these other(read “*non- Western*”) nations, arrogating to itself the right of representation.⁴¹

Over the period of the last seventeen years or so, ever since the dissolution of the USSR, there has been a significant return to the question or problem of nationalism in the politico-cultural scholarship of the West.⁴² The impact of the collapse of communism, the end of Apartheid and other developments in Africa and Asia have marked a conspicuous change in the interpretation of nationalism according to the Western discourse on the subject.

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⁴¹On the subject of a continuing Orientalist discourse in the West, see Sankaran Krishna: *Postcolonial Insecurities: India, Sri Lanka, and the Question of Nationhood*. Minneapolis London: Minnesota UP, 1999.

⁴²I will henceforward be using “West” not as a geographical specification but as a methodological principle. “West” in my thesis is a politico-cultural imperative that regulates and determines the discourse on history and culture. There is no historical discourse that is not centered on this “West”. My deployment of the category is somewhat similar to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s deployment of the term “Europe.” He writes: “If a language, as has been said, is but dialect backed up by an army, the same could be said of the narratives of ‘modernity’ that almost universally today, point to a certain ‘Europe’ as the primary habitus of the ‘modern’.” Dipesh Chakrabarty, “ Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who speaks for the ‘Indian’ pasts ?” *Representations* 37.(1992):20-21.

Since the Second World War, which also coincides with the beginning of the postcolonial era in world politics, many theorists and intellectuals have been critical of nationalism and this critical perspective has become practically hegemonic since the 1980s.⁴³ Fictions about nation too have undergone transformations compatible with this discursive shift. Commenting on shared opinions in the West about nationalism in the postcolonial world, Neil Lazarus points out:

The contemporary studies and reports that classify and deplore the adamantine “persistence” or volcanic “resurgence” of nationalism in Algeria or Serbia or Georgia or Afghanistan tend to be premised upon an expedient naturalization of the trajectories of nationalism in the metropolitan West. In what Tim Brennan terms “a convenient European lapse of memory”, “our” nationalisms – to the extent that they become visible at all as objects of inquiry – are typically classed as finished projects and are taken to have had benign effects: modernizing, unifying, democratizing. “Their” supposedly still unfolding nationalisms, on the other hand, are categorized under the rubric of atavism, anarchy, irrationality and power-mongering.⁴⁴

This “rubric of atavism, anarchy, irrationality and power mongering” that characterizes the present day Western discourse on what Lazarus calls “their nationalisms” appears to be the continuing legacy of the same

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⁴³See Hans Kohn: *Nationalism: its Meaning and History*, (New York and Cincinnati: Van Nostrand Company, 1965). Elie Kedourie: *Nationalism*. (Essex: Anchor Press 1960).

⁴⁴Neil Lazarus, *Nationalism and Cultural practice in the Postcolonial World*. Cambridge; New York: (Cambridge UP 1999) 69.

colonial/imperialist imagination discussed in the previous sections, transposed into a post-imperial key. Although the terms of the equations have changed drastically, and the polarity between First/Third World discourse has been replaced by the 'West/rest', 'developed/developing' discourses that claim to be more politically specific, the general logic of imperialism continues to manifest itself in an economy of discourse that rehearses the idiom of the erstwhile empires. In short, the fear, awe and mistrust that characterized the colonial psyche continue to haunt the West as it tries to control and manipulate the historical and cultural identities that continue to occupy its gaze. Such a perspective leads to new versions of "oriental Otherness" with the same colonial discursive logic.

It is a discourse that continues to circulate, emanating, as Lazarus points out in his book, from policy centers, media headquarters and academic institutions in Britain, France, Germany, and, of course, the United States. According to Partha Chatterji:

Nationalism is now viewed as a dark elemental unpredictable force of primordial nature, threatening the orderly calm of civilized life. What had once been successfully relegated to the outer peripheries of the earth is now seen picking its way back toward Europe . . . like drugs, terrorism and illegal immigration, it is one more product of the Third World that the West dislikes but is powerless to prohibit (Chatterji, 1993,4).

The deeply flawed nature of this dominant conception of nationalism becomes stark when placed against some other prevalent theoretical grids.⁴⁵ What is lost or silenced in these representations is intra-historical complexities that have *both* positive and negative meanings, irrespective of the politics of individual nation states. Ahmad makes this point when he states:

They [progressive Western scholars] no longer distinguish, in any foregrounded way, between the progressive and retrogressive forms of nationalisms with reference to particular histories, nor do they examine the even more vexed question of how progressive and retrograde elements may be (and often are) combined with particular national trajectories (Ahmad, 1992, 38. Emphasis added).

Eric Hobsbawm's study of nationalism can be taken as a case in point. He tends to present nationalism as a unitary phenomenon— one that has almost invariably been successful, but paradoxically, with ghastly consequences over the past two centuries. Refusing to distinguish between different nationalist projects, Hobsbawm construes nationalism as an inherently violent and destructive phenomenon, toward which he does not hesitate to express uniform hostility. He insists that nationalism can only be a nostalgic and reactionary ideological enterprise today— a perverse indulgence that no democratic consciousness should tolerate. Hobsbawm's critique of inaccurate or deluded late twentieth century nationalisms is chronologically inclusive of anti-colonial

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⁴⁵Ernest Gellner, *Nation and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992) 48.

struggles in Asia and Africa. And in this regard, his insistence on the erroneously anti-modern nature of these insurgent nationalisms carries within it the echo of an earlier Hegelian perception of the 'lack' characterizing the ancient cultures of the 'East'.

Hegel's philosophy of history conveys the notion that civilization (and modernity) travels West. In this scheme of things, the non-West is consigned to the nebulous prehistory of civilization and of the completed and proper nation-State. Thus nationalism outside the West can only be premature and partial—a threat to the enlightened principles of the liberal state and, therefore, symptomatic of a failed or 'incomplete' modernity.⁴⁶ Hobsbawm's *Nations and Nationalisms since 1780* concludes with the author's disparagement of nationalism in the post 1945 period as "a substitute for lost dreams," as he looks forward to the time when it will be wiped from the face of this earth (178). He takes comfort from the fact that nationalism is being fiercely debated today among historians, and draws the following conclusion: "...[it] suggests that, as so often, the phenomenon is past its peak. The owl of Minerva which brings wisdom . . . flies out at dusk. It is a good sign that it is now circling around nations and nationalism" (183).

Many progressive Western scholars have tended to embrace the Hobsbawmian axiom in their blanket repudiation of *all* nationalisms. As Anne McClintock suggests, nationalisms loom as "dangerous" not in the sense that

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⁴⁶See G.F.Hegel, *The Phenomenology of the Mind*, 3 vols, trans, J.B. Baille, London: Macmillan Co. Also see C.Butler, *G.W.F. Hegel* (Boston: Twain Publishers, 1977) 40-64.

they represent “relations to political power and the technologies of violence” but in Hobsbawm’s sense of “having to be opposed.”⁴⁷ As Benedict Anderson puts it, this tendency on the part of “progressive, cosmopolitan intellectuals . . . to insist on the near pathological character of nationalism, its root in fear and hatred of the Other, and its affinities with racism” receives a distinctive and paradoxical expression in the field of postcolonial literature.⁴⁸ This is a point to which I will return in the course of my discussion.

Both the interest in and repulsion against nationalism are the logical consequence of the rise of German, Italian and Japanese nationalisms. But it is quite possible that the denunciation of nationalism in the very Euro-American terrain in which it grew is also a reaction to the threat of insurgent nationalisms all over the world during the same period. Herbert Schiller, for example, pointed out in 1976 that since 1948, at least ninety states had risen out of the debris of colonial empires destroyed by the war.⁴⁹

This de-affiliation of the new ex-colonies from the very nations that provided them the ideological apparatus of nation building may well have contributed to the misgivings against these emergent nations.⁵⁰ Yet, to remain

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⁴⁷Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the colonial Context*. (New York and London: Routledge, 1995) 352.

⁴⁸Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983) 129.

⁴⁹Herbert Schiller, *Communication and Cultural Domination* (White Plains, New York: International Arts and Science Press. 1976) 1.

⁵⁰See Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* New York, London: Methuen, 1987.

faithful to the historical context, what has reinforced and given some basis to these misgivings is the fact that in many of these countries the liberationist rhetoric has actually turned out to be a mere smokescreen for continuing the colonial mode of exploitation by an indigenous elite. This is a part of the political reality in Chile, Egypt, Haiti, Pakistan and also, to a certain extent, in India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. It is such ironies and reversals of national histories that have lent credibility to the homogenized category of “atavistic” nationalism.

Without necessarily painting all of recent Western discourse with the same brush, it may be said that Neo-Orientalism, as a discourse on Other nations, is further consolidated, legitimized and empowered in the West through the *seeming* endorsement and understanding of non-Western cultures. The tendency is pervasive not only in the realm of theory and literature but also in other areas of cultural practice. This trait lends credibility to the assumption that neo-Orientalism is indeed an attempt to exercise imaginative command over the developing nations in a post-colonial terrain. The appropriation of Other cultures in the name of interculturalism is manifested in the realm of the performing arts. In the context of the intercultural practices in Western theatre, Rustom Bharucha comments:

From my study of interculturalism, I found that its practice cannot be separated from what could be described as a neo colonial obsession with materials and techniques from the “Third World”. These resources drawing primarily on our traditional disciplines — our modernity being of no concern to most interculturalists — have been recorded, transported,

appropriated and transformed in other scenarios for other audiences. Kathakali, Yoga, breathing exercises, Kundalini and other martial arts have provided the base, as it were, for a new “science” of acting, an “anthropology” of theatre, where “laws” and “rules of behavior” . . . have been formulated at transcultural levels.”⁵¹

Bharucha’s indignation is at the appropriative gestures by which Indian material has been subsumed in the theatrical cadre of the West.⁵² Bharucha questions the ethics of such an appropriative gesture. He asks: “Can the expressivities of particular performance traditions be divested from the narratives in which they are placed and the emotional registers by which they are perceived?” His question draws attention to *the method* by which such an appropriation is carried out. What is clearly evident in such gestures, according to Bharucha, is the proliferation of oriental cultural markers in their gestural emptiness.⁵³

While the Western political discourse endeavors to naturalize “unfolding nationalisms” as a “dark, elemental and unpredictable force”, its cultural counterpart continues to express what Spivak calls a “hyperbolic admiration . .

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⁵¹Rustom Bharucha, “SOMEBODY’S OTHER. Disorientations in the Cultural Politics of Our Times,” *The Intercultural Performance Reader* ed. Patrice Pavis (New York: Routledge 1996) 207.

⁵²A very detailed analysis of this phenomenon is to be found in Marvin Carleson, “BROOKS AND MOUCHKINE Passages to India” in *The Intercultural Performance Reader* ed. Patrice Pavis (New York: Routledge 1996) 79-92.

⁵³It is a tendency that has been discussed in this chapter in the second section, in connection with Forster’s delineation of the Marabar Cave, an enduring metaphor of the Oriental/ Indian experience.

. or pious guilt“ for the rich cultural heritage of these same nations.⁵⁴ The double project of Orientalism thus gets split into two parallel discourses (not necessarily unrelated), that in turn denigrate and exalt (Other) national traditions. The admiration is reserved for the ancient aspects of the culture, the contemporary times having little or no relevance to the obeisance paid to the *East*.

The continuation of this colonial/Orientalist gaze from the 1950s to the seventies and its cultural ramifications in the Indian context are summed up by Gita Mehta in *Karma Cola*:

It was fitting that the Beatles raised the cry Eastward ho. The Gentlemen of the Empire had left their visiting cards three hundred years ago, and their great grandsons could now at last afford to be indiscreet and dabble in the *murky waters* of Indian thought. Earlier in the century the Brahmins of Western intellectual thought had paved the way. Aldous Huxley had struggled with Vedanta and dared to expand his mind. William Butler Yeats. . .had found in the East something *ancestral* to ourselves, something we must bring *into the light*. . .Now it was the turn of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones to become pacemakers for a faltering Western heart, and they achieved a more striking success.(67-68, emphasis added).

Mehta's irony highlights the continuing Western zeal for bringing something "into the light" even as this endeavor is seriously threatened by the innate incomprehensibility (murky waters) of "Indian thought".Tracing this tendency

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⁵⁴For an ironic discussion of (reverse) ethnocentrism, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Nelson and Grossberg (London: Macmillan: 1982) 271-313.

from its source in colonial times to the twentieth century, she emphasizes the persistence of the colonial/Orientalist legacy in the present times, corresponding to what Myers calls “a universal fascination with the savage and the incomprehensible.”⁵⁵

The politico-cultural paradigms discussed in this section get tragically inserted in the oppositional consciousness of postcoloniality, in spite of the latter’s claim to mark a decisive break with the past. This, as I will argue in the subsequent sections, is the underlying irony of the dominant postcolonial project.

Postcolonial Otherness, or the Nation Retold

The postcolonial as a potential site of disciplinary and interpretive contestations has emerged since the 1980s as one of the major concerns in contemporary cultural discourse. Postcolonialism has been seen by some of the major practitioners in the field as a discursive resistance to the bewildering amnesia of the colonial aftermath. It is a disciplinary project concerned with the mission of revisiting, remembering and interrogating the colonial past. The process of returning to the colonial scene discloses a relation of reciprocal antagonism and desire between the colonizer and the colonized. And it is in the

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⁵⁵Jeffrey Myers, *Fiction and the Colonial Experience* (Ipswich: Boydell Press, 1974) vii.

historical unfolding of this troubled relationship that one starts to discern the ambivalent character of the postcolonial condition.

If postcoloniality is to be reminded of its origin in colonial oppression, the theoretical urge to invoke the seductions of colonial power must remain central to it. The forgotten archive of the colonial encounter narrates multiple stories of contestations and its other, complicity. Thus, in the therapeutic retrieval of colonial past, postcolonialism is seen by scholars to be needing to define itself as an area of study which is willing to make theoretical sense of its past, in terms both of these contestations and this complicity. In pursuing this imperative, postcoloniality is obliged to negotiate the contradictions arising from its unquestionable historical belatedness: its post-coloniality, or political, chronological derivation from colonialism on the one hand, and its cultural obligation to be meaningfully inaugural and inventive on the other. Thus, its actual moment of advent is predicated upon its ability to successfully imagine the colonial past and implement a decisive rupture with it. However, in the never-ending debate on the distinction between “ post-colonialism “ and “postcolonialism”,⁵⁶ it has been suggested by some critics that it is more urgent to think about postcolonialism not just as a chronological aftermath, but, in a more positive way, as a contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism. According to Ania Loomba:

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⁵⁶“Post-colonialism” is a chronological term as well as an ideological positioning that announces a rupture with the colonial past. The deleting of the hyphen is supposed to focus more on the disruptive aspect of the historical condition. Many critics see in the omitting of the hyphen postcoloniality’s dubious collusion with postmodernity. On the subject see Simon During, “Postmodernism or Postcolonialism?” *Landfall* 39.3. (1985): 366-80.

Such a position would allow us to include people geographically displaced by colonialism such as African-Americans or people of Asian or Caribbean origin in Britain as 'postcolonial' subjects although they live within metropolitan cultures. it also allows us to incorporate the history of anti-colonial resistance with contemporary resistance to imperialism and dominant Western culture⁵⁷

The importance of postcolonial oppositionality has also been emphasized by Jorge de Alva. According to him, postcoloniality should "signify not so much subjectivity 'after' the colonial experience as a subjectivity of oppositionality to imperializing/colonizing (read: subordinating/subjectivizing) discourse and practices."⁵⁸

The very fact that postcoloniality feels the need to articulate its difference from the 'post-colonial' as an attempt to liberate itself from the antecedent colonial condition, proves that the project is yet to be accomplished and the cultural obligation must wrestle with the chronological derivation in order to arrive at an adversarial meaning. To put it simply, the theoretical project to arrive at an oppositional consciousness that is *not* interlocked with its post-colonial status has so far been more a matter of desire than its actual accomplishment. Further, the very desire to effect such a rupture proves the seductive prowess of 'post-coloniality' in the field of postcolonial discourse. The ambiguity of its

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⁵⁷Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London, New York: Routledge, 1998) 12.

⁵⁸J.J.K.de Alva, "The Postcolonization of the (Latin) American Experience, A Reconsideration of "Colonialism", "Postcolonialism" and "Mestizage," in G. Prakash (ed.), *After Colonialism, Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press) 245.

historical status and its ideological objective reveals, as I shall argue, a deep self-division at the heart of the postcolonial condition itself. The problem is as much methodological as historical. Postcoloniality is, above all, a struggle to represent, create or recover a national culture and selfhood that has been systematically repressed and eroded during the colonial rule. Yet, paradoxically, the retrieval of a nation's suppressed identity often turns into an elaborate performance of reverse ethnocentrism by which the (ex-) native becomes an image in which the (ex)colonizer sees himself. It is a trap that Fanon warns against in "On National Culture". According to him,

[t]he efforts of the native to rehabilitate himself and to escape from the claws of colonialism are logically inscribed from the same point of view as that of colonialism. The native intellectual who has gone far beyond the domains of Western culture and who has got it into his head to proclaim the existence of another culture never does so in the name of Angola or of Dahomey. The culture which is affirmed is African culture. The Negro, never so much a Negro as since he has been dominated by the whites, when he decides to prove that he has a culture and to behave like a cultured person, comes to realize that history points out a well defined path to him: he must demonstrate that a Negro culture exists.⁵⁹

Fanon's observations on the complex phenomenon of "Negritude" are also applicable to the Indian postcolonial condition. The urge to reinvent a national identity that had been destroyed by the historical/ epistemological violence of

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⁵⁹Frantz Fanon, "On National Culture," in *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963) 212.

the colonial experience propels the oppositional consciousness of Indian postcoloniality to rediscover an Indianness that mimics the discourse on Indian essence that the tradition feels pledged to reject. Drawing more deeply from its indigenous resources, and colonial archives, re-inscribing past histories and myths about India, it resurrects a national identity whose *difference* sadly replicates the colonial *essence*.

Since articulation of difference is also largely predicated upon the articulation of uniqueness, the oppositional consciousness of the Indian postcolonial condition is often trapped in its own discourse, narrating the unfamiliar and the alien in cultural and historical terms that recreate the stereotype of the “native”, whose image is an all-too-familiar re-production of the familiar figure of British colonial discourse. The evocation of the nativist position through nostalgia for a lost or repressed culture idealizes the lost origin without allowing for the fact that the figure of the lost origin, the ‘Other’ that the colonizer had repressed, had itself been constructed in terms of the colonizer’s own self-image.

The scope of such an oppositional self-image may draw from the histories and myths of classical times, from ancient folk culture, or from anecdotes and incidents about the colonial encounter to which the discourse owes its origins. The complex, ironical nature of the postcolonial enterprise is commented upon by Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks. According to her,

[to] elaborate, what this subdiscipline is perceived to offer today that ostensibly no other minority or ethnic studies does is not so much revolutionary method, inventive theories, or even new fields of inquiry, but quite literally (and perhaps crudely) an exotic new frontier, a hitherto unaccounted for margin that must be tamed or theorized.⁶⁰

The outcome of this vision is a proliferation of the “exotic” in postcolonial theory and narrative, together with other constituents that rehearse the Indianness integral to the British colonial discourse. A significant portion of this discourse is reminiscent of the “Exotic India” that occupied the colonial imagination for almost two centuries and continues to haunt the West in postcolonial times. According to Todorov,

The best candidates for the exotic are the peoples and the cultures that are most remote from us and least known to us . . . knowledge is incompatible with exoticism, but lack of knowledge is in turn irreconcilable with praise of others, yet praise without knowledge is precisely what exoticism aspires to be. This is its constitutive paradox.⁶¹

Indian postcolonial theory’s appeal in the metropolis is based, in large part, on exotic metaphors which are exotic precisely because the cultural explanations that must accompany such metaphors are not always deemed

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⁶⁰Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, “At the Margins of Postcolonial Studies: Part 1,” in *The Pre-occupation of Postcolonial Studies* (ed.) Fawzia Afzal-Khan and Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2000) 8.

⁶¹Todorov, *On Human Diversity*, Chapter on “Exoticism.” quoted in Huggan, “The Postcolonial Exotic: Salman Rushdie, The Booker of Bookers,” *Transition* 64.(1994):26

necessary to the particular narrative's demands.⁶² How does this exotic function? As Huggan puts it:

This exotic world produces wonder: it rejuvenates the sensibilities of a readership tired of provincial navel gazing; tired also of a literature that reflects the realities of a society from which they badly need release". (Huggan, 1994,26)

The various exotic signifiers (local color, unfamiliar cultural practices, references to ancient traditions) constitute the "essentialized difference that continues to circulate in the metropolitan domain."⁶³

The oppositional energy of postcoloniality is thus subsumed by the conditions of its own utterance in which "exotic new frontiers" determine the degree of its acceptability. As a result, the postcolonial energy is absorbed into, and made to contribute to, an anthropological information-retrieval process by which such binaries as "developed" and "underdeveloped", "civilized" and "primitive" are perpetuated in the narratives of the West and Empire. It is a phenomenon that at least partially, promotes the revival of interest in non-Western traditions that are frequently transformed into the convenient signifiers of "ancient cultures" and are narrativized through references to classical texts,

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⁶²It is interesting to note how specific areas of Indian history are narrativized into theory through metaphors that elude the audience. See my discussion on Spivak and Bhabha in the following section.

⁶³For this paradox of exotic remoteness, see Graham Huggan, 1994: 22-29.

ancient meditational practices or classical theatre or dance forms.⁶⁴ As a result, Indian culture is reinvented according to paradigms integral to previous discourses on the Orient.⁶⁵

This pressure on the “native” to aid in the information retrieval process is caricatured in Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia*. Kureishi’s Anglo-Indian protagonist Karim, in pursuit of a career in the theatre, agrees to participate in an audition organized by the theatre director Shadwell. Unfortunately, Karim’s unmistakable South London accent belies Shadwell’s expectations of exoticism. Karim, he finds, is hopelessly British and he therefore asks him to “work on his Indian accent”. Eventually, as a reward for his efforts, Karim lands the part of Mowgli in Kipling’s imperialist classic *The Jungle Book*!⁶⁶ The postcolonial intellectual, according to Spivak, finds herself in a similar position. Where the West once insisted on the illegitimacy of non-Western knowledges, now, Spivak laments: “we postcolonial intellectuals are told we are too Western.”⁶⁷

The resurgence of interest in Oriental knowledge is manifested in the Euro-American academic centers, in the field of South-East Asian Studies, in

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⁶⁴See Vinay Bahl, “Situating and Rethinking Subaltern Studies for Writing Working-class History” in *History After the Three Worlds: Post-Eurocentric Historiographies*. (Ed) Dirlik, Bahl, Gran (New York, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000) 102.

⁶⁵On this subject see Patrice Pavis (ed.) *The Intercultural Performance Reader* London, New York: Routledge, 1996. The collection of essays discusses how the Orientalist discourse continues in our times in transcultural productions in the sphere of the performing arts.

⁶⁶Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, (London & Burton: Faber & Faber, 1990).

⁶⁷Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Postcolonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, (ed.) Sara Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990) 8. On the subject of the native as an agent for information retrieval in Ethnocentric Studies in the West, see “Three Women’s Texts and a critique of imperialism,” *Critical Inquiry* vol2. (1985): 245.

Postcolonial Studies and also in Departments of Religious Studies. Abou-El-Haj studies the latter phenomenon in the light of the revival of interest in Islamic Studies in the West. According to him:

Examples include the US-based Fulbright Fellowships, which are devoted to such studies, and Georgetown University's newly endowed center for the study of Islam. Schools are scrambling to appoint scholars who can teach Islam, even though no standard of teaching or scholarly parameters has been set. With this new interest in Islam, yet another justification for the production of neo-Orientalism comes into play.⁶⁸

The uncritical, and often unconscious, alignment of many postcolonial intellectuals with this mode of knowledge production has been one of the major reasons for the field's debilitation as a contesting political impulse that challenges existing forms of knowledge-production about the non-West.

The ambivalence and contradictions at the heart of the postcolonial intellectual condition are not necessarily confined to diasporic locations; they are also to be detected within national frontiers. It is proved in the continuing engagement of ex-colonies with Western strategies of cultural representation.⁶⁹ In India, the phenomenon is seen in literature's persistent engagement with the 'Western reader', who is the addressee of its discourse. It is a strategy that will

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⁶⁸See R.A. Abou-El-Haj, 'Historiography in West Asian and North African Studies' in *History After the Three Worlds: Post-Eurocentric Historiographies*. (Ed) Dirlik, Bahl, Gran, 74.

⁶⁹See Vinay Bahl, 'Situating and Rethinking Subaltern Studies for Writing Working-Class History' in *History After the Three Worlds: Post-Eurocentric Historiographies*. (Ed) Dirlik, Bahl, Gran, 102.

be analyzed in greater depth in the next chapter, as the situation has interesting corollaries in Indo-English fiction.

The situation is aggravated in contemporary times due to the escalating global presence of institutions and cultural agencies representing the West.⁷⁰ The politics of representation goes far deeper than efforts of Westernized elite groups in academic and non-academic circles. It is interesting to observe for example, how cultural discourses on Other cultures are authenticated, valorized and empowered at political levels through Indian governmental patronage. Commenting on the reception of Peter Brook's version of *Mahabharata* in India, an indignant Rustom Bharucha states:

On the one hand, it is possible to criticize Peter Brook's appropriation of the *Mahabharata* within an Orientalist frame of representation, but it is more jolting to see how this essentialist reading of "the *Poetical history of Mankind*" was actually endorsed by the Indian government and validated as part of its propagation of "festival culture" in the world. Not only did this trivialized reading of "Hindu" culture return to India as a commodity, it was hailed by the press and a large section of the intelligentsia in elitist forums for invited audiences.⁷¹

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⁷⁰On the subject of neocolonialism and Western imperialism, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Neocolonialism and the Secret Agent of Knowledge," in *Oxford Literary Review*, March, 1991. Also see "Negotiating the Structures of Violence," in *The Postcolonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, (ed.) Sara Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990)138-151.

⁷¹See Rustom Bharucha, "SOMEBODY'S OTHER. Disorientations in the Cultural Politics of Our Times", *The Intercultural Performance Reader* ed. Patrice Pavis (New York: Routledge 1996) 199.

In a post-colonial world, the “Western” discourse on the East has become extremely ambivalent. In the present economy of democratic cultural exchange, neo-Orientalism is no longer a Master’s discourse. Rather, it is consolidated through collaboration, voluntary or otherwise, between systems of power that perpetuate the colonial system of representation within a post-colonial context, reconfiguring the nativist longing of colonial British literature.

In the following section I will discuss how the ideological crisis at the heart of the postcolonial enterprise gets demonstrated in the works of some of the major contributors to Indian postcolonial scholarship, notably in the theoretical categories of Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. What is interesting about both these theorists, but especially Spivak, is the way they themselves get implicated in their own critique of colonial discourse.

Reorienting the Native – the Troping of India in Theory

It’s not just that if you participate you are an Orientalist. If you participate in a certain kind of way you are an Orientalist and it doesn’t matter whether you are white or black. Today you don’t need to have the right kind of skin colour in order to be an Orientalist. There are lots of us dusky and swarthy who are interested in this easier way, and who in fact— again this is very fraught ground— who are interested in talking about admirable reforms that they have instituted in their own institution as the be all and end all of anti-neocolonialist work.

You have models that you imitate from a fractured semiotic field, so that you think you are something else. So you can actually be doing yin and yang, when actually what you are doing is a travestied Hegel

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

The irony and the contradiction that characterize dominant postcolonial discourse are best understood by analyzing the works of Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak in relation to Spivak's self-conscious indictment of the neo-Orientalist venture.⁷² In light of my earlier discussion of the tension between "post-colonial" as an evocation of the colonial antecedent, and the "postcolonial" as an oppositional, anti-colonial consciousness, it is significant how the critics whom I am about to discuss are complicit in the very ideological act that they denounce in their debates.

The desire to represent nation gets compromised by the techniques, both cultural and methodological, that are quite frequently adopted to articulate (Indian) difference in terms of history and culture. The theoretical positioning of these writers, in spite of their intention to fight the alienating principle of the West/East, Occident/Orient dichotomies, ends up normalizing the very discourse that they seek to dismantle in their anti-colonialist articulations. History, mostly colonial, is chosen as the subject of discourse and is represented by reports and surveys from British historical archives. Occasionally, when (as in the case of Spivak) the attention is turned to contemporary history, the terms in which it is articulated echo the colonizing techniques which these critics themselves denounce in their work.

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⁷²Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. "Neocolonialism and the Secret Agent of Knowledge," *Oxford Literary Review*, March. 1991:220-251.

Such (mis) appropriation of history is often effected through the reduction of history to a 'tropic element' in their discourse. According to Hayden White, "troping":

[I]s the process by which all discourse constitutes the objects which it pretends only to describe realistically and to describe objectively...[t]roping is both a movement from one notion of the way things are related to another notion and connection between things so that they can be expressed in a language that takes account of the possibility of their being expressed otherwise.⁷³

A classic case of such troping is Bhabha's representation of an event in early nineteenth century Northern India, involving a few members of a certain community and a native priest.⁷⁴ The incident involved a native catechist, Anand Messeh, trying to interpret "the book of the Sahibs" to a small group of rural natives. In the course of their adoption of what they call the *Book of God*, the natives change its message to suit their own ideas, explaining that they will "conform" to all the "customs" of Christianity, except that they will not take the Sacrament, "because the Europeans eat cows' flesh and this will never do for us".

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⁷³Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, London: John Hopkins University Press, 1987) 2.

⁷⁴Homi Bhabha, "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817," *Critical Inquiry* 12. Autumn 1985:144-165.

The *Book*, according to Bhabha, becomes “an insignia of colonial authority”. When rearticulated by a native, the colonialist desire for a nearly similar Other is enacted as a parody, a dramatization, to be distinguished from the exercise of dependent colonial relations through narcissistic identification. In this “hybrid moment”, according to Bhabha, what the native rewrites is not a copy of the colonialist original, but a qualitatively different object where misreadings and incongruities expose the uncertainties and ambivalences of the colonialist text and deny it its authorizing presence:

Read as a masque of mimicry, Anand Messeh’s tale emerges as a *question* of colonial authority, an agonistic space. To the extent to which discourse is defensive warfare, mimicry marks those moments of civil disobedience within the discipline of civility: signs of spectacular resistance. When the words of the master become the site of hybridity – the warlike sign of the native – then we may not only read between the lines but even seek to change the often coercive reality that they so lucidly contain. It is with a strange sense of hybrid history that I want to end.(162)

The creation of this hybrid discourse is offered by Bhabha as a strategy of colonial insurrection:

By taking their stand on the grounds of dietary law the natives resist the miraculous equivalence of the God and the English...when the natives demand an Indianized gospel they are using the powers of hybridity to resist baptism, to put the project of conversion in an impossible situation. (159-60)

In Bhabha's analysis, the native resistance in the incident consists in returning the look of surveillance, replacing it by the displacing gaze of the disciplined. It reads in the incident those moments when colonial discourse, already disturbed at the source by a doubleness of enunciation, is further subverted by the object of its address, being given performance by the native who underwrites the colonial script. The fracturing of the colonial text by the colonized, rearticulating it in broken English, perverts the meaning and the message of the English book and thereby makes an absolute exercise of power impossible.

This reading of an incident recorded in the *Missionary Register, Church Missionary Society 1818* has only a partial significance in relation to the evangelical accounts from India's colonial past. Bhabha's analysis does not offer any significant glimpse into how the evangelists – *both* white and non-white – at once collaborated and resisted colonial authority. Instead, he turns an isolated incident into a metaphorical construct of *mimicry*, conflating colonial history with a single incident and then turn the incident itself into a metaphor signifying the Lacanian field of discourse.

Bhabha's manoeuvre is facilitated by the fact that the insertion of this little-known incident from the annals of the East India Company into the issue of nativist resistance appears so appropriate that the strategic deployment of

troping hardly strikes the unsuspecting reader.⁷⁵ Further, the tropic displacement by which colonial resistance is sought to be explained in Bhabha's theory actually subverts "the subaltern sign of the native", by perpetuating familiar figures of the colonial imagination through their re-inscription in postcolonial theory. The therapeutic retrieval of the colonial past becomes instead, the evocation of a very alien culture, rooted in the dietary and religious orthodoxy surrounding the life of the colonized subject, whose ignorance and child-like cunning underwrites what Bhabha is inclined to call "warlike" resistance to colonial authority.⁷⁶

Further, if Bhabha's theory on colonial resistance serves as a model for (post) colonial insurgence, the very terms of its articulation (Subject/Other, native/English, Master/slave) go on to implicate this critical stance in the very conditions that his "hybrid history" wants to end. This tropic deployment of history is quite evidently the insignia of the postcolonial imagination and makes frequent appearances in the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as well. The familiar question "Where does the postcolonial critic speak from?" is perhaps best answered by Spivak herself:

My theoretical model is taken from Paul De Man. De Man suggests that a critical philosopher initially

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⁷⁵It is interesting how consistently Bhabha subjects Indian history to Foucauldian and Lacanian categories. Also see "In the Spirit of Calm Violence," in *After Colonialism* (ed) Gyan Prakash.

⁷⁶For a critique of Bhabha's essay, see Ania Loomba, "Overworlding the 'Third World'", *Oxford Literary Review* 13. 1991: 164-91. Also see Benita Parry, "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse," *Oxford Literary Review* 9. 1987: 27-58.

discovers that the basis of a truth claim is no more than a trope. In the case of academic feminism the discovery is that to take the privileged male of the white race as a norm of universal humanity is no more than a politically interested figuration. It is a trope that poses itself off as a truth and claims that a woman or the racial other is merely a kind of troping of that truth of man— in the sense that they must be understood as unlike (non identical) with it and yet with reference to it. In so far as it participates in this discovery even the most essentialist feminism or race analysis is engaged in tropological deconstruction.⁷⁷

This tropological deconstruction is also the basis of what Spivak terms 'catachresis', which she defines as a negotiation of postcolonial position "in terms of reversing, displacing and seizing the apparatus of value coding."⁷⁸ The postcolonial positioning , according to Spivak, is a catachrestic space where words or concepts are wrested from their proper meaning, in "a concept metaphor without a proper referent". In the seizure of the sign, as Homi Bhabha goes on to explain,

...there is neither dialectical sublation nor the empty signifier: there is a contestation of the given symbols of authority that shifts the terrain of antagonism. The synchronicity in the social ordering of symbols is challenged on its own terms, but the grounds of

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⁷⁷See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: *in Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, New York: (Methuen, 1987) 74.

⁷⁸ See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Postcoloniality and Value" in *Literary Theory Today* (eds) Collier and Rayan, 313.

engagement have been displaced in a “supplementary” movement that exceeds those terms.⁷⁹

Spivak applies the notion of catachresis to her own critical investigation of colonial discourse with astonishing results. In the essays that constitute her studies on what she calls Master Discourse/ Native Informant,⁸⁰ she observes the absence of a text that can “answer one back” after “the planned epistemic violence of the imperialist project” (“Rani of Sirmur”, 131) and seeks to develop a strategy of reading that will speak to the historically muted native subject, predominantly inscribed in Spivak’s writings as the subaltern woman.

The leitmotif: “one never encounters the testimony of the woman’s voice-consciousness,” “There is no space from where the subaltern (sexed) subject can speak,” “The subaltern as female cannot be heard or read,” “The subaltern cannot speak” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 271, 272, 273) emphasizes a theoretical dictum arrived at from studying the discourse of *Sati*⁸¹ in which the

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⁷⁹Bhabha, “In a Spirit of Calm Violence” in *After Colonialism*. 329. Bhabha’s commentary on Spivak’s “catachresis” is also an indicator that the postcolonial is a unified field of discourse. It is one of the reasons why some often refer to Said, Bhabha and Spivak as the ‘Holy Trinity’ of postcolonial discourse.

⁸⁰Spivak: “The Rani of Sirmur” in *Europe and its Others* (ed.) Barker et al, (Colchester: University of Essex, 1984) 128-51. “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” *Critical Inquiry* 12. (1985): 242-61. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (eds.) Nelson and Grossberg, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press 1988) 271-233, “Imperialism and Sexual Difference”, *Oxford Literary Review* 8. (1986): 225-40.

⁸¹Sati (Su-thi, or suttee) is the traditional Hindu practice of a widow immolating herself on her husband’s funeral pyre. “Sati” means a virtuous woman who remains eternally faithful to her husband. The woman who committed Sati was worshipped as a Goddess, and temples were built in her memory. Sati was prevalent among certain sects of the society in ancient India. Ibn Batuta (1333 A.D.) observed that Sati was considered praiseworthy by the Hindus, without however being obligatory. The Agni Purana declares that the woman who commits sahaḡamana (accompanying) goes to heaven. However, Medhatiti pronounced that Sati was like suicide and was against the Shastras, the Hindu code of conduct. In the nineteenth century the practice reached

Hindu patriarchal code converged with colonialism's narrativization of Indian culture to efface all traces of woman's voice. Spivak finds instances of doubly oppressed native women who, between the dominations of a native patriarchy and a foreign masculinist/ imperialist ideology, intervene by "unemphatic, ad-hoc, subaltern writings of the social text of Sati-suicide." ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 129). She cites two instances: first, a nineteenth century Rani (princess by marriage) from North India who appropriates "the dubious place of the free will of the sexed subject as female" by expressing her intention to be *Sati* against the British colonial administration; and second, a young unmarried Bengali woman who in 1942 hanged herself under circumstances that openly defied Hindu interdicts. In her tropological deconstruction (DeMan, Derrida) of colonial discourse (Foucault), Spivak erases all differential factors between the two *sexed subjects* to create a perfect example of "a doubly oppressed native woman." Issues of race caste and class are silenced in order to demonstrate how the "native woman" functions in colonial narratives.

In "Rani of Sirmur," the native woman is also a queen (gendered *subaltern!*). The article analyses the imperialist project of constructing the "Ranee" and sometimes "this Ranny" without according her the privilege of a

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alarming proportions in Bengal when young widows were sometimes forcibly burned on their husbands' pyres under religious pretext. Raja Rammohan Roy was the first among the Bengali elite who fought to eradicate Sati. The ritual was banned by the British Government in 1829 during the tenure of Lord William Bentinck. Although committing Sati is a punishable offence in India, it still remains a social problem in the remote rural areas of central and western India. As late as 1980s there was one instance of Sati reported in Rajasthan and another in Madhya Pradesh in 2002. Both the incidents caused a lot of controversy and social turmoil. For a discussion on how British colonial discourse narrativized Sati as a marker of quintessential Indian womanhood, see Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London, New York: Routledge, 1998).

name. This exnomination, according to Spivak, is the proof of this woman's absolute insignificance except as a pawn in the East India Company's political advancement. Spivak's essay is a microscopic analysis of how the Rani as an object is constructed and how "she emerges in the archives because of the commercial and territorial interests of the East India Company." While her deconstructive analysis exposes the discourse of British territorial ambition, it is significant that in her own figuration, the Rani is continually denied her right to, as Hayden White puts it "be expressed otherwise." In Spivak's own truth claim, the history of the native hill states does not allow the truth about the Rani to emerge, although there are no cracks in the history which hint at other possibilities of interpretation based on the information found in the imperialist annals. As Spivak herself notes:

Only two specific acts of hers is (sic) recorded. As soon as she is strictly separated from her deposed and banished husband, his other two wives who had been parceled off (were) asked to come back, and are received. Soon after she remembers her great-aunt with whom her husband had long ago quarreled and reinstitutes a pension for her. These events are recorded because they cost money . . . We imagine her in her simple palace, separated from the authority of her no doubt patriarchal and dissolute husband, suddenly managed by a young white man in her own household."
("Rani of Sirmur," 143-144)

But this destabilizing element within the imperialist narrative itself is dismissed by stating, "there is no romance to be found here". There is a clearly

discernible intent in Spivak's own narrative to allegorize the Rani as an object caught between patriarchy and imperialism. Her belief in displacement does not stop her from creating a foundational subaltern who remains as muted as she was in the imperialist/ colonialist discourse. In Spivak's own discourse, the subaltern comes to imply, globally, "the subversive potential of the marginal presence", erasing all distinctions of class caste and race between a young woman from a Brahmin, middle class family from Bengal and her tribal, north Indian feudal counterpart. Both emerge as *subjects* of postcolonial discourse through their status as metaphors narrativizing subaltern (Indian) history. As Benita Parry points out in her article,

[f]rom the discourse of sati, Spivak derives large general statements on woman's subject constitution/ object formation in which the subaltern woman is conceived as a homogenous and coherent category and which culminate in a declaration in the success of her planned disarticulation. (Parry, 1987,35)

Indeed, Spivak's pronouncement of the colonial subaltern as "the allegory of the predicament of *all* thought, *all* deliberative consciousness" (1987,204 emphasis added) reveals that postcolonial troping is truly a "politically interested figuration" which *constitutes* objects to claim them on behalf of dominant theoretical representations. One is tempted to ask whether history repeats itself as the postcolonial native replicates the predicament of the colonial native,

returning, in her theoretical insurrection, the “look of surveillance” as a *mimicry* of a continuing colonialist gesture.

The nativist intervention, in Spivak’s theory, chooses a figure that was a colonial favorite: the burning widow or Sati. Almost every European commentator of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries stops to savour this picture of oriental barbarity and female helplessness and devotion.⁸² Eastern royal or upper caste women being watched by, consorting with and being saved by European men is a feature of colonial narratives from the seventeenth century to the present.⁸³

These “exotic” references drawn from the history of the colonial encounter make colonial entrapment the determining factor in most postcolonial utterance – as if the ex-colonized must reinvent the native of the colonial/Orientalist discourse in order to be heard. What Robert Young has to say of Bhabha is relevant also in Spivak’s case:

Indeed his (Bhabha’s) use of disparate and conflicting theories produces just that kind of ambivalence which subjects the reader to the colonial discourse’s disconcerting ambiguity: is Western theory being employed rigorously in its own disciplinary context or does it function more by power of suggestion and analogy? Is it being used as a model or is it a form of

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⁸²See K. Telscher, *India Inscribed, European and British Writing on India 1600-1800*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press) 1995.

⁸³For example, in John Master’s *The Deceivers* (1952) William Savage sets out to rescue a beautiful widow and is seduced, not by her but by the goddess Kali and in M.M. Kaye’s *The Far Pavilions* (1978), made into a popular television serial in the 1980s, the hero sets out to save another royal widow, and ends up marrying her half-sister.

mimicry, hybridity, a ghostly and ghastly doubling that acts out the duplicity of Bhabha's own name?⁸⁴

The ambivalence of these theories is produced by the deployment of cultural metaphors that, while apparently resisting the theorizing advances of the metropolis, at the same time normalize the metropolitan urge to "speak for" the Other cultures. A process of "self-Othering" is set in play as these metaphors are turned into fairly well-known oriental stereotypes that legitimize the relevance and applicability of (Western) categories of cultural representations.

The ambivalence of postcolonial mimicry becomes especially conspicuous in Spivak's deployment of the category of "the subaltern". Spivak's definition is drawn from Gramsci's "On the Margins of History: History of the Subaltern Social Groups". Gramsci uses "subaltern" along with "subordinate" and "instrumental" in his class description to mean an "inferior rank" of a particular, not universal, status. It may signify the many dominated groups who do not possess class consciousness, for example. According to Gramsci, "The historian must record, and discover causes of. . . every assertion of an independent will and its efforts to break with those above it and to unite with those of others in its class" (*Selections*, 52). In developing a movement to unseat the hegemonic bourgeoisie, "every trace of independent initiative on the part of the subaltern groups should therefore be of incalculable value for the integral historian" (Ibid.55)

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⁸⁴Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995) 256.

It is not quite clear whether, if at all, Spivak is using the term in its own context or twisting it to suit her own version of subaltern history. In the context of her own performance, what she has to say about the role of a subaltern historian sounds ironic:

The arena of the subaltern's persistent emergence into hegemony must always and by definition remain heterogeneous to the efforts of the disciplinary historian. The historian must persist in this awareness, that the subaltern is necessarily the absolute limit of the place where history is narrativized into logic. (Spivak, 1987,207)

Since Spivak's own attempt "to narrativize into logic" the subaltern consciousness severely undermines the task she sets for a subaltern historian, the *heterogeneity* of her own history writing does not appear to be above suspicion. Mimicry in the postcolonial context, after all, is also partly collaborative, as it tries to "conserve the subject of the West, or the West as subject" (Spivak 1988,271). Consequently the "historical subaltern reality" is reduced to archival material that strengthens stereotypes and, is often relegated to the realm of impressive footnotes/ endnotes playing no major role, except as "metaphors in a text of Philosophy."⁸⁵

The success of this politically ambivalent enterprise is presumably ascertained in the Western academic and publishing world by the fact that the

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⁸⁵See Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," in *Margins of Philosophy*, (tr.) Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1982) 209-271. Originally published in *New Literary History* 6. 1974: 7-74.

postcolonial intellectuals who are actually (as immigrant professionals), and technically (by training), contracted to the West show a tendency to draw from those areas of cultural reference that are fairly unknown in the metropolis, thus bringing some newness into a *discourse* it understands so well. In the context of the Indian subcontinent, aspects of history, race, gender, ethnicity, and sometimes the linguistic peculiarities of different states can well elude a Western reader even as (s)he recognizes the broad theoretical concepts that confer on these cultural metaphors a false sense of familiarity. The task of providing the desired “newness” or cultural authenticity is made fairly easy for the postcolonial writers as even in an age of global communication, ignorance about the postcolonial/ Third World histories is endemic to citizens of the First World.

This is commented upon by Dipesh Chakrabarty in the following way:

There are at least two everyday symptoms of subalternity of non-Western Third World histories. Third World historians feel a need to refer to the works in European history; historians of Europe do not feel any need to reciprocate... the “greats” and the models of the historians’ enterprise are always at least culturally “European”. “They” produce their work in relative ignorance of non-Western histories, and this does not seem to affect their quality of work! This a gesture, however, that “we” cannot return. We cannot even afford an equality or symmetry of ignorance at this level, without taking the risk of appearing “old fashioned” or “outdated”. (Chakrabarty, 1992,2)

This “asymmetry of ignorance” certainly plays a major role in the tropic displacements of (national) history through stabilized metropolitan critical

categories. What is produced as a result of this theorization is a satellite theoretical field whose supposedly “subversive and heterogenous” formations in reality function only to assure Western academics that “their” theories indeed have a global and universal signification, in so far as they are able to offer an explanation for *all* politico-cultural events, even those that happen “in the rest of the globe”. As Ashcroft has pointedly remarked:

An instance of hegemony can be seen in the export of theory, and this of course works on its own momentum long after the official end of Imperialism. Thus, where a surplus value creates wealth for the center in a fairly obvious way, so the cultural surplus works to the same end. Even when manifested in apparently subversive and heterogenous formations such as poststructuralism .. this cultural surplus works through language to diffuse opposition and preserve the system of wealth creation. . . Thus the general economy of Imperialism is an economy of discourse. The oppositionality of the postcolonial finds its greatest material success in the counter discursive.⁸⁶

The deliberate ambivalence of this self-conscious discourse draws attention to its *performance*, as much on the level of language as on the level of its critical idiom. It is important to stress at this point, that the ambivalent double coding of postcolonial Indian literature and criticism is to be seen in relation to its shared linguistic bond with the history that it tries to oppose. In so far as language and concept are inevitably linked (though not locked), the

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⁸⁶Bill Ashcroft, “Excess: Postcolonialism and Verandahs of Meaning,” in *De-Scribing Empire*. Eds Tiffin and Lawson (New York: Routledge 1994)37-38.

performance of concepts in literature are in a direct relationship to the language in which they are expressed.

In an effort to subvert the colonizing gestures of what they themselves identify as imperialist criticism, some of these postcolonial critics invent a language that is aimed, symbolically, at interrogating the very terrain of Western Reason through a systematic deployment of linguistic opacity. Yet the degree of complexity to which the imperialist language (both grammar and syntax) is subjected turns the exercise into a self defeating act run as the very insistence on outdoing the master culture through performance in language inversely asserts the primacy of a culture they are trying to overturn. The ambiguous 'meaning' of such a resistance inheres in its claim to seriously challenge the master on its own ground. The amount of flak that the discourse draws from its audience is extremely significant in this context. Terry Eagleton remarks caustically:

Post-colonial theorists are often to be found agonizing about the gap between their own intellectual discourse and the natives about whom they speak; but the gap may look rather less awesome if they did not speak a discourse which most intellectuals too, find unintelligible.⁸⁷

Eagleton's sentiments are echoed by Gilbert Moore:

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⁸⁷Terry Eagleton; "In the Gaudy Supermarket," *London Review of Books* (1999) 2. A similar charge is brought against Bhabha by Arif Dirlik in "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism," *Critical Inquiry* 20 no.29. (1994): 328-56.

One can plausibly argue that Bhabha and Spivak are in fact more difficult to read than their methodological mentors. Certainly Kristeva, for example, offers none of the difficulties I have experienced with Bhabha's work and I have found Derrida generally more lucid than Spivak even if his actual ideas are no less complex.⁸⁸

However, the political meaning of such deliberate obfuscation is commented upon by Eagleton as:

It might just be of course that the point of a wretched sentence like "the in-choate-in-fans ab-original para-subject cannot be theorised as functionally completely frozen in a world where teleology is schematized into geo-graphy" is to subvert the bogus transparency of Western Reason. Or it might be that discussing public matters in this hermetically private idiom is more a symptom of Reason than a solution to it.(3)

Eagleton's ironic observation draws attention as much to the opacity of Spivak's style as to the political ambiguity of her project. As both Gilbert Moore and Eagleton suggest, part of the ambivalence of postcolonial mimicry can be traced to its use of language which is loaded with terminological and syntactical ambiguity. The elliptical syntax, the repeated interruptions in style, the loaded terminological baggage rehearse what may be termed "Caliban's curse."⁸⁹ The

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⁸⁸B.Gilbert Moore, *Postcolonial Theory* (London: Verso, 1997)167.

⁸⁹In Shakespeare's *Tempest*, Miranda, Prospero's daughter, accuses Caliban of ingratitude: "When thou did'st not, savage,/ Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like / A thing most brutish, I endowed thy purposes / With words that made them known" (I.ii.355-58) Caliban's response is: "You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse" (I.ii.363-4)

linguistic as well as theoretical indoctrination links the postcolonial with its colonial antecedent like Caliban to Prospero, in a compulsive struggle-onto-death that signals bondage rather than liberty.⁹⁰

Scripting the Nation-State: The Postcolonial Vogue

This embattled situation is further reflected in the (Indian) postcolonial attitude to the contemporary national situation. While national culture is represented in terms of traditional customs, colonial history, and class/caste/gender stereotypes, the engagement with the actual national trajectories appears to be faltering and often, embarrassed. In spite of the fact that the discourse's theoretical mapping of the (post) colonial encounter invariably draws sustenance from its reference to a national culture, this anti-colonial discourse proves to be a mirror which, in fact, reflects its estrangement from the national scene. Although socio-political concerns about nation-states are not altogether missing, nationalism is hardly present in the discourse as a form of counter textuality. The lack of enthusiasm is reflected either in a disregard for significant phases in national history, or – and this is more significant – in a bitter critique of the actual workings of the nation-state. Ahmad's take on the Western definition of Other nationalisms is curiously

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⁹⁰For this dichotomous relationship I am drawing from Hegel's notes on "Lordship and Bondage" in *The Phenomenology of the Mind*, vol. I. trans, J.B. Baille, (London: Macmillan Co, 1910) 175-88. In his analysis of the master-slave relationship, Hegel observes that the master and the slave are perpetually engaged in a struggle. This continues until the weak-willed slave, preferring to live than be free, accepts his subjection.

relevant in the context of a large section of postcolonial nativist articulations of the post-independent nation.

Spivak's writings on nationalism and subalternity provide an excellent basis for the understanding of these issues. Her central argument is paradigmatic to the thesis of subaltern (read Indian/postcolonial) historians. According to Spivak, *all* nationalist discourse – colonial as well as anti-colonial, liberationist as well as bourgeois – is irrevocably linked to an authoritarian construction of the subaltern as a discursive figure that is by its very nature incapable of self representation.⁹¹ Criticizing such claims as coercive, she directs the reader's attention to the disenfranchised millions, who, by virtue of their subalternity, are never authorized to speak within the elite constitutional sphere of "the nation". As a gesture of solidarity with the disenfranchised, she withholds her approval from all manifestations of nationalistic impulse.

Spivak analyses Mahasweta Devi's short story "Douloti the Bountiful" to prove that the author uses "Empire" and "Nation" as interchangeable.⁹² Her commendable effort to give "voice" to the subaltern is nevertheless fraught with problems. Since the appropriate application of the Gramscian concept of "the subaltern" *always* happens under the organizing rubric of *Indian* history,

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⁹¹Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculation on Widow Sacrifice," *Marxism and Interpretation of Culture*, ed, Nelson and Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988) 271-313. This essay has been discussed in the body of the thesis in the context of Spivak's own ironical representation of the subaltern. Postcolonial subalternity will also be discussed in the context of Arundhati Roy's handling of the untouchable in her novel.

⁹²Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Woman in Difference: Mahasweta Devi's 'Douloti the Bountiful'," *Cultural Critique* 14 (1990), 107. Spivak's problematic handling of the Gramscian term "subaltern" is discussed later in this chapter, as part of my discussion on Spivak herself.

subalternity, by implication, acquires an *Indian* specificity and loses its international relevance as representing a dominated group devoid of class consciousness. Further, and this is more relevant in the context of my discussion, if subalternity as a visible political marker can only be traced in the history of the subcontinent in both the colonial and postcolonial contexts, then, by implication, the truth of claims by Lazarus and others about the atavistic nature of “still unfolding nationalisms” is demonstrated, and this time by the custodians of these nationalisms themselves. The analysis of (Indian) history only in the context of underdevelopment and oppression lends credibility to the discourse on Other nationalisms discussed by theorists alluded to by Lazarus and discussed in an earlier section. That subalternity can happen again and again *only* in the national history of the subcontinent proves the “elemental” nature of such a history as opposed to the “finished project” of Western nationalism. The backwardness and primitively coercive nature of Indian democracy becomes yet another signifier in the discourse on “other nationalisms” analyzed in an earlier section. Only this time the roots of this discourse can be tracked down, ironically, to the discourse surrounding postcolonial resistance to imperial agency of knowledge. The ambivalence of the postcolonial project of nation narration is further underscored by the fact that postcoloniality has, since its inception in the 1980s, been increasingly identified with diasporic location. The diasporic (postcolonial) critic’s dislocation from the

national culture often announces, as in the case of Bhabha and Spivak, a deeper politics of location that will be analyzed in the following section.

Timothy Brennan in his discussion of the ideological complexity of nation-writing in certain forms of discourse emanating from the “Third World”, identifies simultaneous assertions of exile and nation-ness as the contributing factor in this complexity:

. . . in one strain of Third World writing the contradictory topoi of exile and nation are fused in a lament for the necessary and regrettable insistence of nation-forming in which the writer proclaims his identity with the country whose artificiality and exclusiveness has *driven him into a kind of exile* – a simultaneous *recognition of nationhood and an alienation from it*. (Brennan, 1997, 63, emphasis added)

Such ambivalence of location finds a significant exposition in the works of Said and Bhabha. Both the critics deploy the notion of hybridity in a way that signifies, not without ambivalence, the geopolitical location of the diasporic intellectual, his implication in a colonial past, as well as a certain form of superior cultural understanding over those speaking from an essentialist, nationalist position. As the third meaning gains primacy in their discourse, hybridity or the condition of exile appears to acquire an ideological significance that is discussed by Brennan in the above mentioned quotation. The play on the idea of hybridity yields interesting meanings in the context of my discussion.

The concept of hybridity occupies a central place in postcolonial discourse. It is “celebrated and privileged as a kind of superior cultural intelligence owing

to the advantage of in-betweenness, the straddling of two cultures, and the consequent ability to negotiate the difference.”⁹³ This is particularly so in Bhabha’s discussion of cultural hybridity. Bhabha developed his concept of hybridity to describe the construction of culture and identity within conditions of colonial antagonism and inequity.⁹⁴ For Bhabha hybridity is the process by which the colonial governing authority undertakes to translate the identity of the colonised (Other) within a singular universal framework, but fails, producing something familiar but new.⁹⁵ Bhabha argues that the new hybrid identity or subject-position emerges from the interweaving of element of the coloniser and the colonised and challenges the validity and authenticity of any essential cultural identity. For Bhabha, it is the indeterminate in-between spaces that are the locale of the disruption and displacement of colonial narratives of cultural structures and practices. He posits hybridity as a form of liminal in-between space which he terms the “third space”. I will presently return to this term in my discussion.

The “hybrid” appears in Said’s work variously as a form of geopolitical displacement, a form of cultural understanding emanating from mingling with the

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⁹³Hoogvelt, A, *Globalization and the Postcolonial Studies: The New political Economy of Development*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP,1997) 58.

⁹⁴Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge 1994).

⁹⁵On the subject see Papastergiadis, N, “Tracing Hybridity in Theory” in *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multicultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*, (eds) Werbner,P and Madood, T(London: Zed Books, 1997) 257-81.

West as well as a form of disruptive presence that disturbs the hegemony of (Western)colonial discourse:

The *voyage in* then, constitutes an especially interesting variety of hybrid cultural work and that it exists at all is a sign of adversarial internationalization in an age of continued imperial structures. No longer does the logos dwell exclusively, as it were, in London and Paris. No longer does history run unilaterally, as Hegel believed, from east to West, or from south to north, becoming more sophisticated and developed, less primitive and backward as it goes. Instead, the weapons of criticism have become part of the historical legacy of empire in which the separations and exclusions of “divide and rule” are erased and surprising new configurations stand up”(Said, 1993,244-245).

The “hybrid cultural work” that constitutes “the voyage in” is analyzed as: “the intellectual and scholarly work from the peripheries, done either by immigrants or visitors both of whom are *generally* anti-imperialist” (emphasis added). The emphasis here is not so much on individual markers as on interruptive movements that intrude into the metropolis both ideologically and geopolitically.

These movements, according to Said, far from being “expansions of mainstream culture”, are struggles over territories of experience, history and tradition, that challenge the underlying logic of this culture. This hybrid cultural work, lastly, represents “a still unresolved contradiction or discrepancy within metropolitan culture” which through co-optation, dilution and avoidance partly acknowledges and partly refuses the effort of intrusion and struggle.

The repository and beneficiary of such effort is a certain “we”, whose representation in the context of Said’s whole work renders the question of postcolonial hybridity extremely problematic. As Ahmad points out:

Any careful reading of the whole of his (Said’s) work shows how strategically he deploys words like ‘we’ and ‘us’ to refer in various contexts, to Palestinians, Third World intellectuals, academics in general, humanists, Arabs, Arab Americans and the American citizenry at large. (Ahmad, 1992,171)

Indeed this ambiguous deployment of the pronouns makes one question the validity of the marginal (self) representation of the postcolonial intellectual. The ambivalent nature of this deployment is only too transparent in Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*. ‘We’, the guardians of the exilic, marginal, subjective, migratory energies of modern life in Said’s discourse, weep over an undefined “homeland”:

To answer such questions you must have the independence and detachment of someone whose homeland is ‘sweet’ but whose actual condition makes it impossible to recapture that sweetness, and even less possible to derive satisfaction from substitutes furnished by illusion or dogma, whether deriving from pride in one’s heritage or from certainty about who “we” are. (Said, 1993, 336)

Yet this nostalgic “in-between-ness” of the exilic figure is seriously qualified by an earlier deployment of the pronoun ‘us’:

. . . those of us who live in the West have been deeply affected by the remarkable outpouring of first-rate literature and scholarship emanating from the postcolonial world, a locale no longer 'one of the darkest places of the earth' in Conrad's famous description, but once again the site of vigorous cultural effort. (*ibid*, 243)

One is no longer sure about the site from which the 'we' speaks: whether 'we' stands for the exilic, or for the authoritative, Orientalist West that exercises an overwhelming influence on the critical apparatus of the Third World/postcolonial intellectual. The ambiguity deepens in the section quoted, when this 'us' dissociates itself completely from the postcolonial world. One is not even sure of the *adversarial* effect of the *voyage in* so elaborately analyzed by Said, when one notices the absolute primacy given to non-European intellectuals who have at their disposal a high degree of European theoretical/critical competence:

These figures (the metropolitan intellectuals) address the metropolis using the techniques, the discourses, the very weapons of scholarship and criticism once reserved exclusively for the European, now adapted either for insurgency or revisionism at the very heart of the Western centre. (Said, 1990, 29)

The 'European-ness' of Said's discourse focuses on the ambivalence of postcolonial hybridity. It is somewhat strange that the "insurgency" of the postcolonial intellectual should derive its "adversarial" energy ultimately from

European exclusivity, and that the vernacular national subjects should go absolutely unrepresented. Further it is of some interest to note how the “insurgent discourse” derives its meaning from its acceptance and approval within the unified field of European discourse.

The conscious effort to enter the discourse of Europe and the West, to mix with it, transform it, to make it acknowledge marginalized or suppressed or forgotten histories is of particular interest in Rushdie’s work and in an earlier generation of resistance writing. I call this effort *voyage in* (*Ibid*, 216)

The ambivalence of Said’s work resides in the way he makes the terms “metropolitan” and “postcolonial” coextensive, according them identical connotations in terms of situatedness and writing strategies.⁹⁶ Viewed in the context of the metropolitan postcolonial, the fact of his/her hybridity enables the writer to negotiate and shuttle between various political locations in which the sign of hybridity allegorically acts on behalf of a chosen group with a specific linguistic-cultural formation, even as it appears to act on behalf of all those born of the hybrid moment of history. Various negotiations take place under the aegis of hybridity: Insofar as it is a “recognition and legitimation of heterogeneity” as a social and cultural norm, it elides the degree to which the metropolitan location overpowers the “homeland”.

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⁹⁶Apart from *Culture and Imperialism*, my reference in particular is to the following essays: “Third World Intellectuals and Metropolitan Culture,” “An Intellectual in the Postcolonial World”.

The metaphorical inscription of the term “here” in these texts operates as a normalizing agency and influences all forms of knowledge constitution, even and especially when it deals with *forgotten* and *suppressed* histories. The relational imbalance between the “here” and the “there” and the production of truth in metropolitan/postcolonial discourse appears to be explicitly related, in the Foucauldian sense, to the deployment of power. As the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* tell us:

To speak of a postcolonial discourse in Foucault’s or Said’s sense ... is to invoke certain ways of thinking about language, about truth, about power and about the interrelationships of the three. Truth is what counts as true within the system of rules of a particular discourse; power is that which annexes, determines and verifies truth. Truth is never outside power or deprived of power, the production of truth is a function of power and as Foucault says “ we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth.”(167)

While the reference in the quotation is to the production of truth in colonial discourse, it is ironic that the postcolonial production of truth about hybridity follows the same principle within its own domain and exercises control over other possible definitions.

That the “voyage in” is essentially a set of prescriptions that privilege *discourse* as a primary form of social engagement, releases the intellectual from engaging in active responsibilities of participation in a nation’s history. Bhabha answers his own rhetorical question “ what is to be done?” without hesitation:

. . . the dynamics of writing and textuality require us to think the logics of causality and determinacy through which we recognize the 'political' as a form of calculation and strategic action dedicated to social transformation.

"What is to be done?" must acknowledge the force of writing, its metaphoricity and its rhetorical discourse as a productive matrix which defines the social and makes it available as an objective of and for action". (Bhabha 1994,23)⁹⁷

"Action" in the political sense is thus reduced to a discourse dedicated to social transformation. This excessive reliance on discursivity has been questioned by many, even within the metropolitan center. Benita Parry, for example, asks:

what then is the politics, on the one hand, of a criticism that sets out to identify both the dominant and oppositional ideologies embedded in texts as expressions, transformations and functions of an extralinguistic situation, and on the other, of textual paradigms where discourse is privileged as the primary form of social praxis and which seek to expose the making, operation and effects of ideology by stirring up and dispersing the sedimented meaning of dormant texts? (Parry,32)

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⁹⁷Bhabha's relentless effort to dissociate political articulations from their context of radical activism and transform them into theoretical gestures is quite striking. In this case for example, he is possibly referring to Lenin's famous *What is to be Done?* See V.I.Lenin, *What is to be Done?*,(tr) S.V and Patricia Utechin, (Oxford: Clarendon Press,1963).

Parry's question points to the central problem of metropolitan 'in-between-ness'. The recognition of the political is a cultural imperative for those who must continue to talk about their "sweet homeland" in a nuanced language and enhance its "resistant ambiguity". Yet the foreignness of race and upbringing of the postcolonial intellectual, it appears from these theories, must remain intrinsic to the linguistic imperative of stirring up *dormant texts* from a nation's colonial past, as Parry suggests, cultural difference thus can no longer posit a threat, as it is accommodated within the familiar territory of discourse. Complex political trajectories of a nation's past and present are thus simplified, and the nation emerges not so much as a geopolitical entity materially constituted, but as an *idea*, poised precariously between remembering and forgetting.⁹⁸ It is this cultural negotiation that explains Bhabha's theory on the politics of translation:

The language of critique is effective not because it keeps forever separate the terms of the master and the slave, [...] but to the extent to which it overcomes the given grounds of opposition and opens up a space of translation: a place of hybridity figuratively speaking where the construction of a political object that is new, neither the one nor the other, properly alienates our political expectations, and changes as it must, the very form of our recognition of the moment of politics (*ibid*, 25).

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⁹⁸In Chapter IV I will show how Sara Suleri turns this very act of remembering and forgetting into a very positive narrative technique for retelling the history of Pakistan.

According to Bhabha, this “space of translation” is also the “third space of enunciation” which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, and which with its disruptive potential displaces the narrative of Western nations. What Bhabha overlooks is the fact that any and every act of translation has to happen within a material context. Since what gets translated is largely dependent on the target language as well as a target audience, the cultural control that these audiences exercise, together with the political implications of the act of translation, can hardly be overstated. As most of these translations happen in the Euro-American context, Bhabha’s “hybridity” by his own definition ends up normalizing the very master’s discourse that he undertakes to dismantle. The power of discourse that *annexes and determines* truth is reflected in the fact that what gets the most attention in this discourse is *not* the cultural constituent but the language and theoretical categories into which it gets translated.

In the light of this obvious politico-cultural imbalance of its method, it is striking, perhaps, how these theorists with their exorbitant emphasis on discourse have tried to assimilate and diffuse the energy of radical ideologies that recognize more active forms of social praxis. A suggestive instance is Bhabha’s use of Frantz Fanon for the elucidation of the politics of identity, which eliminates significantly the content of political activism from his writings.⁹⁹ The

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⁹⁹Benita Parry: “Signs of Our Times; Discussions of Homi Bhabha’s *Location of Culture*,” *Third Text* 28/29 Autumn Winter. (1994):13. For a later critique, see F. Shelley “Africa, Frantz Fanon and the Postcolonial World,” *News and Letters* 40.5 June (1995): 8.

objective as well as method of this excessive discursivity as a means of understanding the postcolonial condition is evident in Gyan Prakash's elucidation of what he calls "post foundational history" (which is also postcolonial history). He comes to the following conclusion:

It is difficult to overlook the fact that all of the Third World voices identified in this essay, *speak within and to discourses familiar to the West* instead of originating from some autonomous essence, which does not warrant the conclusion that the Third World historiography has always been enslaved, but that the careful maintenance and policing of East West boundaries have never succeeded in stopping the flow across and against boundaries and that the self/ other opposition has never quite been able to order all differences into binary opposites. The Third World, far from being confined to its assigned space, *has penetrated the inner sanctum of the First World* in the process of being 'Third Worlded', arousing, inciting and affiliating with the subordinated others in the First World. It has reached across boundaries and barriers to connect with the minority voices in the First World: socialists, radicals, feminists, minorities.¹⁰⁰

The great emancipatory move that Prakash celebrates in his essay is fraught with several difficulties, however. The "arousal" of the First World to "thirdworldness" appears, in Prakash's rhetoric, to be the ultimate proof of potency of the Third World as a politico-cultural presence. But this "arousal" happens so much within the greatly enabling arena of the West (or the First

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¹⁰⁰Gyan Prakash, "Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 1990: 403, emphasis added.

World), that the liberation of the Third World can only be understood and appreciated in terms of a Western metalanguage. Such infiltration is to be further admired, according to Prakash, since these Third World voices derive their significance within a discourse of center/periphery, mingling with “socialists”, “radicals”, “feminists”, and last but not least, “minorities”. Although what Prakash terms “penetration” posits postcolonial as a triumphal stance over the colonial project, the very terms in which it is enacted confine it to the very margins that it seeks to demolish. The heavy dependence on Eurocentric conceptual provenance is as much the basis of Prakash’s rhetoric as that of “postcolonial” as a signifier of its own cultural/ intellectual history.

The ambiguity of the postcolonial project and the problematic response that it generates come out quite clearly in an anti-postcolonial discourse marked by suspicion about its underlying ideological/critical agenda. In Stephen Slemon’s observation:

It [postcolonial] has been used as a way of ordering a critique of totalizing forms of Western historicism, as a portmanteau term of our retooled notion of class, as a subset of both postmodernism and poststructuralism (and conversely as the condition from which those two structures of a cultural logic and cultural critique themselves are seen to emerge); as the name of a condition of nativist longing in post independent national groupings; as a cultural marker of non residency for a Third World intellectual cadre; as the inevitable underside of a fractured and ambivalent discourse of colonial power; as an oppositional form of “reading practice” and — and this was my first encounter with the term — as a name for a category of ‘literary activity’ which sprang from a new and welcome political energy

going on within what used to be called “Commonwealth literary studies”.¹⁰¹

However, what gives these critiques credence is the valorization of a certain form of theoretical/ critical practice associated with a small but powerful group of metropolitan elites. Arif Dirlik defines the history of the postcolonial in his article in the following manner:

A description of a diffuse group of intellectuals and their concerns and orientations was to turn by the end of the decade into a description of a global condition in which sense it has acquired the status of a new orthodoxy both in cultural criticism and academic programs.¹⁰²

Prakash’s rhetorical enthusiasm (discussed above) loses its adversarial glamour when viewed both in the context of his own rhetoric and in the context of the marketability alluded to by Dirlik. Indeed there is something about the privileging of the concept in both the First World academic and publishing worlds that makes one exceedingly uneasy. A recent article on the postcolonial phenomenon gives a graphic account of the economic significance of

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¹⁰¹Stephen Slemon, “The Scramble for Postcolonialism,” in *De-Scribing Empire*, Eds. Tiffin and Lawson (London: Routledge, 1994) 16-17.

¹⁰²Arif Dirlik, “The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Era of Global Capitalism,” *Critical Inquiry* 20 9.(1994):330.

“postcolonial.”¹⁰³ In the last few years at least as many as five substantial introductions to or readers and anthologies of “postcolonial” criticism have been published by major academic presses. Major journals such as *ARIEL*, *Callaloo*, *Critical Theory*, *October*, *PMLA* and *Social Text* have published special issues on “postcoloniality”. This has been accompanied by the growing appearance of “postcolonial” sections not just in college bookstores but also in the outlets of major popular chains.

Further, an analysis of some of these major introductions demonstrates that certain discourses are treated as foundational to postcolonial studies. In addition to their obligatory references to Foucault (and somewhat less often, to Lacan and Derrida), the tendency in most of these introductions is to trace a trajectory of postcolonial studies coextensive with the development of Said, Spivak and Bhabha, beginning in the 1980s. Among the critics of this academic politics, two of the most ardent are Aijaz Ahmad and, Arif Dirlik. Both Ahmad and Dirlik are Marxist-influenced critics and both are sensitive to the institutionalized articulation of the postcolonial in the 1980s and the 1990's. Ahmad sees it as a contractual agreement between these critics and their patrons in the First World in which, under the signs of “hybridity” and “in-between-ness”, the First World reclaims nations and cultures as refractions from the “hybrid” subjectivity of the postcolonial intellectual. For Dirlik, the poststructuralist/postcolonial critic is guilty of obscuring and obfuscating

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¹⁰³ Arnab Chakladar, “The Postcolonial Bazaar: Marketing/Teaching Indian Literature,” *Ariel* 31:1,2.(2000): 183-201.

"concrete political and historical issues" and of textualizing all politics, to the extent of stifling any possibility of resistance. Both Dirlik and Ahmad trace postcolonial academic theory back to its origin: a set of elite transnational intellectuals, who from the comfort of the metropolis set forth discourses (à la Foucault, Lacan, Derrida) that marginalize the problems and struggles of those who, in Dirlik's words, "continue to be victimized by Euro-American power."¹⁰⁴

What is important in both these critiques is their insistence on the fact that the geopolitical locations of the key postcolonial theorists make their "in-between-ness" a facade for their unmistakable alliance with the cultural forces of the First World. When Prakash exults in the fact that "careful maintenance of East-West boundaries has never succeeded in stopping the flow across and against boundaries", he corroborates the statements made by both Ahmad and Dirlik. What he seems to miss is that the political reality has always been very different from that which he projects — that the flow across the boundaries has always been a one-way traffic and the inequalities in terms of power and control represented by the divide have never quite been resolved. Besides, in most cases, even what flow did exist, understood this time as a movement back and forth, came to an end as the privileged voices gained an increasing control over the discursive field, and came to occupy significant status in the realm of metropolitan cultural Studies, not *in spite of* their difference, but, precisely *because of it*. The institutionalization of diasporic in-between-ness and hybridity

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¹⁰⁴Arif Dirlik, "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism , " *Critical Inquiry*, (1994): 328-56 (350).

as the privileged terrain of discourse has led to their widespread acceptance as discursive paradigms by a significant section of the national elite from the developing countries. It is something that both Ahmad and Dirlik seem to have missed. The slippage from a geopolitical hybridity to an ideological one makes the techniques of representing and containing national histories and cultures both national and transnational phenomena. The theorists and writers however are united, not merely by “traveling theories and traveling theorists”¹⁰⁵ but also by conditions of metropolitan acceptance. As Graham Huggan puts it:

Their [the Third World writers’] esteem in the U.S. magazines, reviews and seminars does not come in spite of their backgrounds — the case of many pre-war writers from the colonies — but precisely because of them. Whenever they write, the banner “India”, “Latin America” or “Africa” is never out of sight. Being from “there” in this sense is primarily a kind of literary passport that identifies the artist as being from a region of underdevelopment and pain. Literary sophistication against the troubled backdrop, this is doubly authoritative because it is a proof of overcoming *that* to join *this*. (Huggan, 1997,38)

The important point to be observed about Huggan’s statement is that it focuses on how the metaphorical “there” and “that” of the Third World are subsumed and guided by the dictates of the First World “this”. This implies that Third World writers (appreciated in the US magazines) share the same political strategies of writing and therefore share similar ideological concerns and their

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¹⁰⁵My reference is to the title of *Inscriptions 5*, (eds) James Clifford, Vivek Dhareshwar, 1989.

attending ambivalence; and that all these writers make meaningful contributions to what Huggan calls “literatures-of-use”. The usability of these products in the First World is determined by what they bring in from the “regions of underdevelopment and pain”: “...a fund of hidden histories and traditions”.

This ambivalent hybridity of the postcolonial stance comes out strikingly in Spivak’s ironic definition of postcoloniality:

[P]ostcoloniality – the heritage of imperialism in the rest of the globe – is a deconstructive case. As follows: those of us from formerly colonized countries are able to communicate with each other and with the metropolis to exchange and establish sociality and transnationality, because we have had access to the culture of Imperialism.”¹⁰⁶

It seems from Spivak’s words that the possibility of any communication within the postcolonial space presupposes an access to the “culture of Imperialism” and further that this access is reserved for those “from formerly colonized countries”! The earlier part of Spivak’s definition, that postcolonialism is located “in the rest of the globe” is complicated by the latter part, where she posits an ambiguous “we” as the privileged Subject who has “had access to the culture of imperialism”. The right to communicate is, apparently, the privilege of the migrant intellectual living and working in the Western metropolis. But given that “culture of imperialism” is ubiquitous in the era of global capitalism (of which

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¹⁰⁶Spivak: *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (London, New York:Routledge,1993) 280-281. The same passage occurs in the book in three different versions.

Spivak herself is highly aware), the “we” may just as well speak of those working from within the national frontiers. Ahmad misses the rich ambiguity of Spivak’s evocation of the postcolonial subject position when he points out: “the figure of the migrant (postcolonial) intellectual residing in the metropolis comes to signify a universal condition of hybridity and is said to be the Subject of Truth, that individuals living within their national cultures do not possess”(Ahmad, 1995,13). Spivak’s deployment of “we” seems to hint at a completely different truth as geopolitical in-between-ness merges with ideological in-between-ness to announce a joint agenda of scripting nation.

These intellectuals,”floating upward from history, from memory, from time” to use Rushdie’s words, are assumed to possess a superior understanding of both cultures by virtue of being what Said calls, “cultural amphibians”. The “subject of Truth” whom Bhabha proudly announces to be a privileged onlooker (Bhabha, 1994, 5) acquires a greater applicability as the postcolonial intellectual is not constrained by his/her geopolitical positioning provided (s)he shares the common project of compounding a “recognition of nationhood and an alienation from it”. “The shifting margins of cultural displacement — that confounds any profound or ‘authentic’ sense of ‘national’ culture or organic intellectual” (Ibid.21) can thus be the privileged site from which postcolonial intellectuals from the “rest of the globe” may speak. Since their “double vision” is located within the metropolitan culture, standing “on the shifting margins of cultural displacement “, their “truest eye” locates precisely those aspects of “national culture” that articulate *difference* in the most exotic terms, reinvoking coalition

even while articulating resistance to colonial legacy. The “travestied Hegel” of Spivak’s own theorization becomes a more than eloquent comment on her own and the institutionalized postcolonial performance of nation.

The postcolonial celebration of nation and nation-ness thus becomes an integral part of an academic culture in which marginality is considered a space of agitation and theoretical renewal. But if one examines the claim of postcolonial marginality as an essentially innovative space, one realizes its inappropriateness. For it is carried out, according to some critics, only through the evasion of material history. The ambiguity of postcolonial “resistance” can be seen in light of what George Yudice has to say about the resurgence of the marginal in mainstream Western culture:

There was a time when to be ‘marginal’ meant to be excluded, forgotten, overlooked. Gradually throughout this century, first in the discourses of anthropology, sociology and psychoanalysis, ‘marginality’ became a focus of interest through which ‘we’ (Western culture) discovered otherness and our own ethnocentric perspectives. Today, it is declared, the ‘marginal’ is no longer peripheral but central to all thought.¹⁰⁷

Postcolonial studies has gained a rather ambivalent and ironical status within this paradigm. The insurgent self-assertion of postcoloniality has been locked in the Western project “to give [members] the Third World the chance to

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¹⁰⁷George Yudice, “Marginality and the Ethics of Survival,” in *Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1988) 214.

be themselves unimpeded.”¹⁰⁸ As the margin’s “chance to be” is predicated upon the degree to which such a right may be exercised, postcoloniality, in spite of its contrary political impulses, must remain somewhat uncritically aligned with a discourse in which issues of race, nation and ethnicity as well as conditions of marginality and exile are positioned in a synchronic relationship with Eurocentrism and related methods of inquiry and understanding. The double bind of postcoloniality lies in its dependence on this “politics of recognition” (Taylor) that shapes both its form and discourse. The underlying logic of the recognizing authority comes out in statements that reiterate, in an indulgent vein, the discourse that has continued to shape mainstream Euro-American discourse:

It is reasonable to suppose that cultures that have provided the horizon of meaning to a large number of human beings, of diverse characters and temperaments, over a long period of time – that have, in other words articulated their sense of the good, the holy, the admirable – are almost certain to have something that deserves our admiration and respect, even it is accompanied by much that we have to abhor and reject.(72-73)

Projects such as these are based on the strict maintenance of cultural borders by which the ambiguous “we” – used in the discourse retains the privilege of granting authenticity to all representations of cultural Other. The

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¹⁰⁸Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, (ed.) Amy Gutmann (New York: Routledge, 1994) 31.

“horizon of meaning” of postcoloniality has to be appreciated in terms of such complex ideological gestures. The position of postcolonial marginality (construed as a potentially subversive space), is sometimes claimed but often imposed on postcolonial subjects. It is a marker of the profound contradiction of the project that Spivak should warn against this ideological entrapment even as her own work exacerbates it:

The stories of the postcolonial world are not necessarily the same as stories coming from “internal colonization”, the way the metropolitan countries discriminate against disenfranchised groups in their midst. The diasporic postcolonial can take advantage (most often unknowingly, I hasten to add) of the tendency to conflate the two in the metropolis. Thus this frequently innocent informant, identified and welcomed as the agent of an alternative history, may indeed be the site of chiasmas, the crossing of a double contradiction: the system of production of national bourgeoisie at home, and abroad, the tendency to represent neocolonialism by the semiotic of “internal colonization”.¹⁰⁹

The result of this problematic analysis of postcolonialism’s “double contradiction” is that, by homogenizing and masking the contingent otherness of postcoloniality into an undifferentiated margin, Spivak enacts the ideological entrapment that she locates in the postcolonial condition.

The challenge for postcoloniality as an ideological construct is in bringing back political efficaciousness to its proclaimed agenda. For many postcolonial

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¹⁰⁹Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Who claims Alterity?” in *Remaking History*, (ed.) Barbara Kruger and Phil Miriani (Seattle: Bay, 1989) 274-75.

scholars, as also for those situated outside the field, postcolonial studies claim to offer the possibility of a radically revised narrative: the reinscription of history by a persuasively dissident method of reading and interpreting that will revolutionize the way race, nationality and ethnicity are narrativized in the current academic atmosphere.¹¹⁰

In his *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* Iain Chambers argues that the presence of increasingly vocal postcolonials in the metropolis not only challenges the univocity of European thought but contests the binarisms of self and Other, English and native, margin and center. The consequence of the disruption of these categories, according to Chambers, will lead to the exposure of Eurocentrism and its derivative, when deployed as Negritude or nativism. Chambers quotes Johannes Fabian's observation that, "To relinquish such a perspective leads us to recognize a post-colonial and post-European context in which historical and cultural differences, while moving to different rhythms, are coeval, are bound to a common time. Communication is ultimately about creating shared Time."¹¹¹ According to Chambers, the dispersal of such dichotomies will expose the cultural apparatus of repressive and ideological operations that provide the very foundations of the currently institutionalized postcolonial discourse. While the urgency to forge such a discourse, as

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¹¹⁰See Satya.P. Mohanty, "Us and Them: On the philosophical basis of Political Criticism," *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 2, no.2 spring (1989):1-31. Also, *Literary Theory and the claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multi cultural Politics*, Ithaca and London: (Cornell University Press,1997).

¹¹¹Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London: Routledge,1994) 74. Chambers is quoting Johannes Fabian.

Chambers points out, is on the rise, its emergence as an uncontested optic within the unified field of Postcolonial Studies is more a matter of optimistic speculation than a felt actuality.

Postcolonial fiction shares the same ideological dilemmas in its own modes of nation narration. While it attempts to disrupt the “repressive ideological apparatus of colonial discourse”, its post-colonial bondage to the legacy that it tries to denounce confers to the tradition an ambivalence no less problematic. In the following chapter I will discuss the deep-rooted contradictions at the heart of postcolonial fiction, tracing their origins back to the Indo-English literary tradition to which these fictions owe their roots. The history of Indo-English fiction already foreshadows the ideological ambiguity of postcolonial/Post-Rushdie fiction.

Chapter II

Postcolonial Fiction: Submission in Insurgency

Before I embark on a detailed analysis of certain works of postcolonial fiction and trace how they respond to the ambivalence of the postcolonial condition, it must be demonstrated that postcolonial fiction in English has to be appreciated as a trend that both continues and interrogates the Indo-English literary tradition that dates back to colonial times. This tradition has its origins in the complex intellectual history of British India and starts, metaphorically speaking, with Macaulay's "Minute on Indian Education," discussed in the previous chapter. As postcolonial fiction has to be seen in the light of this tradition, I will start by describing the intellectual and cultural scenario of colonial India, where the story begins.

English India and Vernacular Resistance

Gauri Vishwanathan's seminal work on the role of English education in the colonies, *Masks of Conquest*, analyzes the phenomenon of cultural domination by consent: that English education during the colonial period was especially instrumental in transforming the native subject as "actor in history" to "the

reflective subject of literature.”¹¹² As Vishwanathan correctly points out, the institutionalization of English literature did not begin in England, but in India, where it played a key role in the British maintenance of colonial control. It fast evolved into a strategy of cultural domination exercised over the colonial subjects in a way that eventually proved more effective than the operation of sheer brute force. The seeming neutrality of the carefully selected texts, as she shows, allowed the English government to proselytize without seeming to violate the clear separation between church and state— hence the invisibility of its power. The consequence was ever-more subtle ways of justifying and absolving a brutal colonial regime, of turning “the rapacious, exploitative, and ruthless actor of history into reflective subject of literature”.¹¹³

The policy of maintaining cultural hegemony gained increasing strength through the recruitment from the national elite, who saw immense benefits in the introduction of the English system of education. K.R.S. Iyengar states:

Rammohan Roy, in his plea for English instead of oriental education, asked (Governor-General) Lord Amherst in 1823 to compare the state of science and literature in Europe before the time of Lord Bacon with the progress made since and added:
If it had been intended to keep the British nation in ignorance of real knowledge, the Baconian philosophy

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¹¹²Gauri Vishwanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) 437. Terry Eagleton, in *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis; University of Minnesota Press, 1983), made a similar statement about the political significance of English education by showing how it was deployed to tame and subliminate the “philistine” commercial middle-class of Victorian England.

¹¹³Vishwanathan, 437.

would not have allowed to displace the system of schoolmen which was the best calculated to perpetuate ignorance. In the same manner, the Sanskrit system of education would be the best calculated to keep this country in darkness, ... But as the improvement of the native population is the object of the Government, it will consequently promote more liberal and enlightened system of instruction, embracing the Arts and the Sciences, and by employing a few gentlemen of talent and learning educated in Europe and providing a college furnished with necessary books.¹¹⁴

The transformation of the intellectual horizon of the Indian elite is recorded in an ambivalent register in Kipling's *Kim*, in the depiction of Babu Hurree Chunder Mookerjee:

After a huge meal at Kalka, he (Hurree Chunder Mookerjee) spoke uninterruptedly. Was Kim going to school? Then he, an M.A. of Calcutta University, would explain the advantages of education. There were marks to be gained by due attention to Latin and Wordsworth's *Excursions* (all this was Greek to Kim). French, too, was vital, and the best was to be picked up at Chandernagore, a few miles from Calcutta. Also a man might go far, as he himself had done, by strict attention to plays called *Lear* and *Julius Caesar*, both much in demand by examiners. *Lear* was not so full of historical allusions as *Julius Caesar*. . . Still more important than Wordsworth, or the eminent authors, Burke and Hare, was the art and science of mensuration. . . Through the volleying drifts of English, Kim caught the general trend of the talk and it interested him very much.¹¹⁵

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¹¹⁴K.R.S. Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* (Bombay: Asia publishing House, 1962) 6

¹¹⁵Rudyard Kipling, *Kim* (London: Macmillan & Co Ltd, 1963. Originally printed in 1901). 231-32.

However, the deep division within the national elite about the viability of excelling in a foreign tongue did not surface till the 1920's. The language debates that polarize English and Indian vernaculars first appear as part of the modernist trajectory of nation-making in the 1920s and the 1930s. Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* (1909) asserted the need to valorize indigenous literatures and establish a national language. It also inspired vernacular writers who protested against the imposition of "the foreign tongue".¹¹⁶ In 1933, surveying Indian verse in English, Latika Basu concludes: "As long as the vernaculars of India are alive. . . it should be the aim of Indians to develop them, for writing in a foreign tongue can serve no useful purpose."¹¹⁷

The assault on Indo-English literature continued through the early 1960s and took place mainly in newspapers and periodicals. Apart from the quarterly *Quest* (28, winter 1960, 29, Spring 1961), *The Statesman* (Dec.3,4,17,1961), *The Times Literary Supplement* (Sept. 17, 24 1964) and *The Times of India* (July. 10, 1966) participated in the debate. The ideological schism among the national elite in the post independence period took on the character of warfare. Ayyub, the editor of *Quest*, questioned the national identity of such a literature in his editorial on Sept.26 1960: "fiction and poetry in English by Indians cannot but be regarded as freakish or at best as highly exceptional." The

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¹¹⁶M.K Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings* (ed.) Anthony. J. Parel, (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press 1997).

¹¹⁷Quoted in Aparna Dharwadkar and Vinay Dharwadkar, "Language, Identity, and Nation in postcolonial Indian Literature," in *English Postcoloniality: Literatures from around the World*, (ed.) Radhika Mohanram and Gita Rajan (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1996) 89-106.

inappropriateness of writing in a language that was not rooted in the national culture was raised by another critic by asking the following question:

How can a writer use a language creatively when all around him another language is being spoken and when the creative centers of the language are thousands of miles away? From where can he receive the feel of the living changing language?¹¹⁸

This persistent interrogation of its legitimacy by the vernacular tradition, together with its own anxiety for acceptance, is probably reflected in the Indo-English fiction writer's continuing engagement with nation as a discourse. In the following section I will analyze how this anxiety is enacted in some major representative novels.

Anxiety of Nationness and the Image of the Mahatma

From out of their misery and hope, varied sections of the Indian people seem to have fashioned their own images of Gandhi, particularly in the early days when he was still to most people a distant, vaguely-glimpsed or heard-of tale of a holy man with miracle working powers...peasants were giving vague rumours about Gandhi a radical, anti-zamindar twist.¹¹⁹

The Indo-English novel made a diffident appearance in the 1920s and gradually gathered confidence and established itself in the next two decades.

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¹¹⁸David McCutcheon, *Indian Writing in English; Critical Essays* (Calcutta: Writer's Workshop 1969) 26.

¹¹⁹Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India 1885-1947* (Madras: Macmillan India, 1983) 181.

The continuing preoccupation in almost all the novels written during this period was nation. Throughout the 1920s to the 1930s, the discourse on nation traversed boundaries of language and community. In its contribution to this unifying discourse, Indo-English fiction probably made the first claim to national identity in the highly charged terrain of contestation.

Although it is difficult to arrive at a general statement, the novels that I briefly survey in the subsequent paragraphs largely derive their raw material from the national and political scene of India between 1920 and the 1960s.

The deep insecurity at the heart of this tradition is nowhere more evident than in its continuous engagement with Gandhi, either as an actual historical reference or as a fictional character. It is in the tradition's discursive investment in the man who had virtually given a clarion call for its death that the deep anxiety of English fiction is best enacted. According to Meenakshi Mukherji:

The most potent force behind the whole movement, the Mahatma is a recurrent presence in these novels, and he is used in different ways to suit the design of each writer. He has been treated variously as an idea, a myth, a symbol, a tangible reality, and a benevolent human being. In a few novels he appears in person, in most others his is an invisible presence.¹²⁰

In Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938), the "master" is as noble and compassionate as Gandhi himself, who, as a trope in the novel, seems to be the

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¹²⁰Meenakshi Mukherjee, *The Twice Born Fiction: Themes and Techniques of the Indian Novel in English* (London, New Delhi: Heinemann, 1971) 61

site for the convergence of two dominant strains in this political myth making: on the one hand compassionate, gentle and benevolent, and on the other—mystical and distant, not comprehended by the masses.

The emergence of Gandhi as a trope for the narration of a national myth in Indo-English fiction is too stark to be missed. He appears as a person in Anand's *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942) Abbas's *Inquilab* (1955), Nagarajan's *The Chronicles of Kedaram* (1961). In the second novel, he is a noble being seen through the emotional reverence of a young boy overwhelmed by the fact that he has met the symbol of the nation's rising aspirations face to face. In Nagarajan's novel, Gandhi comes to Kedaram to resolve a long standing dispute between two Iyengar¹²¹ sects. Gandhi as the unificatory principle is far more important than his actual words or presence, because even if no one could hear a word of what he said in the temple, the feud is somewhat miraculously resolved after his visit.

The grand narrative on Gandhi is sometimes disrupted, as in Mulk Raj Anand's novel. Anand does not idealize Gandhi. The revolutionary group from whom the protagonist Lal Singh imbibes his political ideals, does not think very highly of Gandhi. One member of the group speaks sarcastically of the "godhead" achieved by Gandhi, and another answers "but as you know God appeals to the imagination of our peasants and can still be exploited" (200). Lal Singh agrees when the Mahatma says that fear is the first enemy of the

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¹²¹The Iyengars are a conservative section of Brahmins from Tamilnadu, South India, belonging to the Vashnavite cult.

peasants. But he cannot accept the basic Gandhian principles of renunciation and passive resistance. He prefers direct positive action, and detects something less than perfect in the Gandhian values:

The Mahatma seemed full of himself, of his spiritual struggles. And Lalu felt himself lapsing into listlessness, as if he were being suffocated by the deliberate simplicity of the egoistic confessional talk of self-perfection. (207)

Yet, even as the protagonist articulates a different perception of the Gandhian phenomenon, the marginal disruption in the novel appears to confirm the presence of a strong nationalist-conservative discourse in the narrative tradition, revolving around Gandhi as its most potent trope. Anand's novel reinforces, rather than subverts, the value of the of this discourse in the realm of both 'pre' and 'post' independence fiction.

East writes West

The discourse on nation in these novels (as reflected in the thematic importance of Gandhi) is often marked by a deep interrogation about self and national identity and as a measure of self scrutiny, reconstructs the Orientalist gaze as a mirror in which the native subject sees himself. The Oriental essence is evoked in an attempt to arrive at a fuller understanding of what it means to

belong to a race. It is sometimes done with a sardonic humour and sometimes with a seriousness that borders on the tragic. In Mulk Raj Anand's *The Village* the question of race is evoked as part of a description of a buffalo:

But the Indian buffalo is not unlike the Hindu race, a tame, docile species, tolerant and hospitable in the extreme, spontaneous and natural, weak-willed through want, and yet possessed of a curious fire which has helped it to endure through thousands of years.¹²²

The anxiety of being Othered is clearly played out in terms of a denigration and exaltation of the "Hindu race" that is clearly built on the Orientalist stereotypes of "Indian" essence. At times this self-questioning appears as a more serious query into the innate inferiority of the Indian subject and surfaces in some the novels written in the 1960s. In Manohar Malgaonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges*, this query marks the protagonist's anagnoristic moment: "Was it part of the Indian character itself? Did he (Gyan Talwar, the protagonist) in some way represent the average Indian, mixed up, shallow and weak?"¹²³

That it is not a part of a casual ironical self-denigration of the protagonist is made clear as the narrative persists in confronting the negative significance of Indianness in presenting characters like the brigadier. In the description of the brigadier the abysmal 'servility' of the Indian subject is made more tangible:

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¹²²Mulk Raj Anand, *The Village* (Bombay: Kutub-Popular, 1954) 128.

¹²³Manohar Malgaonkar, *A Bend in the Ganges* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1964) 122.

“He was soft and fat and dripping with perspiration. . . He was the embodiment of all that was servile in India. . . How many such creatures did India possess? Thousands upon thousands.”(256-57)

The reinscription of the Orientalist gaze within a national narrative is probably symptomatic of a greater unease about the East-West paradigm that is inscribed in Indo-English fiction. It is manifested quite often through the consciousness of the protagonist, or the omniscient narrator, who becomes the author's double in articulating this unease.

The ambiguity about the West as a cultural principle surfaces at times as a discourse of conflict which the post -independence writer sees in its disabling, alienating aspect. It threatens the national identity of the protagonist/narrator and makes her/him see the privilege of Western education as a lack from the national standpoint.

This conflictual relationship between two cultures is quite stark in Nayantara Sahgal's *A Time to be Happy*. The novel is about Sanat Shivpal, a product of the British public school system, an executive in a mercantile firm, a good tennis player. He is troubled by the question of belonging: “It occurred to him that his parents had gone to a great deal of trouble and expense molding him to be a figure that would never have any reality.”¹²⁴ The dilemma is reiterated as Sanat mourns his fate: “I don't belong entirely to India. I can't. My education, my

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¹²⁴Nayantara Sahgal, *A Time to be Happy* (Bombay: Jaico Publications, 1963) 113.

upbringing, and my sense of values have all combined to make me un-Indian. What do I have in common with most of my country-men?"(147)

The anxiety about the alienating impact of Western education receives a similar treatment in Attia Hussein's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*. Laila the protagonist attains a painful moment of self recognition as she sees a figure in *burqua* get into a car: "She is closer to the people than us, sitting, standing, eating, thinking and speaking like them, while we with our Bach and Beethoven, our Shakespeare and Eliot, put 'people' into inverted commas."¹²⁵

The anxiety of being 'Westernized' becomes more significant as most of the novels inscribe the 'Western reader' at the heart of their nation narration. In the following section I will demonstrate how the narratives try to approach a condition that makes them acceptable to the Western reader, even as they try to integrate into a national literary situation .

The West reads the East

The first comprehensive bibliography of Indian fiction in English, an annotated bibliography published in the United States in 1960, comments on the works according to the value they have for sociologists and anthropologists. Remarks such as the following are fairly common in the work:

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¹²⁵Attia Hossain, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961) 258.

This passage as it stands is a bit of ethnography which adds to my knowledge of the caste system. . .
 Mohan Singh, for example, gives us a conception of the Punjabi character which is probably not idiosyncratic.¹²⁶

The thrust of the Bibliography is not unique and is representative of a dominant critical trend in many of the texts written by Western theorists. M.E. Derrett's *The Modern Indian Novel in English* finds that the primary aim of the Indo-English author is to provide the West with information about India:

The aim of the authors, their real necessity, is to express their mixed and sensitive feelings to a potentially, and very recently, interested outside world; they show in practice through this medium how a common language may help, not to minimize national differences, but to inform us concerning them, and to widen understanding within India and abroad.¹²⁷

Kai Nicholson's appreciation of what he calls the "Indo-Anglian" novel not only reads in these texts information about a different culture, but the titles of the chapters, "The Indian", "The Family", "The Sahib" also indicate the areas in which the reader's interest could be located. This, together with long and somewhat unwarranted excursions into the meaning of "Dharma" and "Karma" in the chapter entitled "The Indian", make the text more the reconstitution of an

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¹²⁶Dorothy. M. Spencer, *Indian Fiction in English*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1960) 15, 24.

¹²⁷M.E. Derrett's *The Modern Indian Novel in English, a Comparative Approach*, (Belgique: Editions de L'Institut de Sociologie, Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1966) 147

“Indianness” than a study of a certain literary tradition, as the author claims to undertake in his text.¹²⁸

The Indo-English writer’s response to the ‘Western reader’ establishes a relational reciprocity with such critical ventures and legitimizes the Western critical idiom. Quite often the Indo-English narratives insert cultural information into the text that valorize the Western reader as the intended audience. In Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* the description of the long awaited monsoon is an appropriate example:

Monsoon is not another word for rain. As its original Arabic name indicates, it is a season. There is a summer monsoon as well as a winter monsoon, but it is only the nimbus south-west winds of summer that makes a *mausem*— the season of the rains. The winter monsoon is simply rain in winter. It is like a cold shower in a frosty morning. It leaves one cold and shivering. Although it is good for the crops, people pray for it to end. Fortunately, it does not last very long.¹²⁹

The cultural images of India in the novel are no less interesting. The reader is informed about the caste system and its effectiveness despite modern laws, the importance of horoscopes, the joint family that problematizes sexual life, population explosion and family planning, yoga and the transmigration of the

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¹²⁸On the subject see Klaus Steinvorth, *The Indo-English Novel: the Impact of the West on Literature in a Developing Country* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1975) 23-4.

¹²⁹Khushwant Singh, *Train to Pakistan* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1956) 79-82.

soul. A passage where the protagonist informs the reader about sexuality in the Indian context is telling¹³⁰:

Iqbal felt irritated. It was not possible to keep Indians off the subject of sex for long. It obsessed their minds. It came out in their art, literature and religion. One saw it on the hoardings in the cities advertising aphrodisiacs and curatives for ill effects of masturbation. One saw it in the law courts and market places where hawkers did a thriving trade selling oil made of the skin of sand lizard to put life into the tired groins...One read it in the advertisements of quacks who claim to possess remedies of barrenness and medicines to induce wombs to yield male children...No people used incestuous abuse quite as casually as did the Indians. Terms like *sala*, wife's brother ("I would like to sleep with your sister") and *susra*, father-in-law (I would like to sleep with your daughter") were as often terms of affection for one's friends and relatives as expressions of anger to insult one's enemies.¹³¹

The role of the author as the agent for information retrieval becomes twice meaningful as the very terms of the representation through which the retrieval is set into motion follows the same orientalist trajectory that I have discussed in the first chapter. Two Indias circulate in the quotation, and are continuous with each other. One, the India of *KamaSutra*, the classical Indian erotica still popular

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¹³⁰Associating the Oriental (both man and woman) with sexual deviation was prevalent in Orientalist discourse. An example of this is Sir Richard Burton's translations of the *Kama Sutra* and in *The Perfumed Garden*. He translated only texts that had an erotic appeal since for him eroticism seemed the only interesting thing that the East could teach the West. See Sir Richard Burton, *The Perfumed Garden* (London, 1886), 6. For an interesting discussion of interest in exotic sexuality in Victorian England, see Rana Kabbani, "The Text as Pretext" in *Europe's Myth of the Orient*, London: Macmillan, 1986.

¹³¹Khushwant Singh, *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingales* (London: John Calder, 1959) 94

in the West, and the other, the contemporary nation (represented by “law courts”) whose progress is seriously contained by the perpetuation of age-old superstitions and unenlightened practices. The normalization of a homogenous “India” and “Indians” and the context in which it is carried out reiterate the anxiety about “rude’ nations and oriental intellects.

Of course, it has to be remembered that the politics of representation privileging a Western perspective is not always as lacking in sensitivity as in the quotation from Singh’s novel. Yet the guiding impulse of generating an India that has been circulating in the West since colonial times seems, in Indo-English fiction, to be more than an accident. This strategy of double-coding, by which two fields of idiomatic references are mobilized¹³², speaks as much for the historical formation of the Indo-English writer (discussed in the previous section), as for the pertinent strategy of ensuring the acceptance of Indo-English fiction by the target audience. It is an aspect of Rushdie’s fiction and of post-Rushdie narratives that I will discuss in the latter part of this chapter.

Such double-coding often returns to mythical times to explain the relevance of a contemporary event. One of Raja Rao’s protagonists asserts:

Ravana, the king of Lanka, in our great epic the Ramayana was compared to Mahatma Gandhi, who

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¹³²By double-coding I am referring to the tendency to fuse polarities (representational as well as ideological) in a work; It may be detected in combining the classical and the vernacular, the traditional and the modern and, last but not least, the plethora of images representing the West and the East.

read the poem everyday to the British government of his time.¹³³

As a matter of fact, cultural double-coding is strikingly demonstrated in Rao's novel. While it is characterized by the narration of *The Ramayana* every Saturday and the blessings it brings, it also contains the Chinese fable of Wang-Chu and Chang-Yi and the tale of Tristan and Isolde. The overall narrative method of blending registers is also in keeping with the character of the protagonist, who is the author's double, a product of many cultures—"born in South India and into the Sanskrit tradition, having a French intellectual discipline, and writing in the Indian language."¹³⁴

The deployment of the mythical element for defining a crisis of identity is to be found in B. Rajan's *The Dark Dancer* in the figure of Karna, a tragic character in *The Mahabharata*:

"Which son of Kunti do you suppose I am?" he asked her.

"You're Karna," she replied without hesitation. "The man who could not belong." (133)¹³⁵

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¹³³Raja Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope* (London: John Murray, 1960) 185. In a striking model reversal, Ravana, the Demon-king who was destroyed by Rama was seen as representing the native insurgency against Rama, who represented the Aryan violence on the Dravidian culture symbolized by Ravana.

¹³⁴Raja Rao describes himself thus in *Tribute to E.M. Forster*, (ed). Natwar Singh (New York, 1964) 27.

¹³⁵According to Meenakshi Mukherji: "Karna at first seems to be a convenient figure to represent the predicament of the modern man who is uncertain of his identity; but looking closer we find that Krishnan's situation in *The Dark Dancer* is by no means parallel with that of Karna. In *The Mahabharata* the question 'What is my place?' is crucial because it was a strictly hierarchical society where every man had his prescribed *dharma*, a given role to perform. If there is any lost character in the *Mahabharata*, any man who is caught

The tendency to deploy myth-as-technique in narrating contemporary times appears to be integral to the doubleness of enunciation that is central to the Indo-English nation narration project.

The deeply divided Indo-English author that the Indo-English narratives project is, in the final analysis, as much a product of the mixed cultural heritage of the literary tradition as he is of the material conditions of textual production. Acquiescing to 'the Western reader' is also a matter of professional survival for the novelists.

In the following section, I will discuss briefly how the material conditions of writing and publishing in the English language affect the material circumstances writing in the realm of Indo-English fiction.

The 'English' Book

When Leela Gandhi talks about the "Janus-faced split-consciousness" of the (Indo English) novelist, she ascribes the phenomenon to the cultural

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between two worlds, it is not Karna, but Ashwathama. Ashwathama was born a Brahmin, and he had the training of a Kshatriya. Yet he could never properly understand the *dharma* of a Kshatriya. . . Krishnan the hero...whose main preoccupation in life is self-analysis..offers no real point of comparison apart from giving the novel a pseudo-mythic appearance" For a detailed discussion of the novel and its deployment of the myth, see Meenakshi Mukherji, *Twice Born Fiction* (London, New Delhi: Heinemann, 1971) 162-63. I will discuss the Karna myth in Chapter V in connection with Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, where the myth has a complex relevance.

hybridity of the national elite.¹³⁶ The fact remains that this cultural hybridity as projected in the novels is also a matter of conscious choice for the novelist, as it is the utterance of her historical complicity with an alien culture.

Despite the importance of English in India, creative writing in English has, since its inception, enjoyed a limited audience in India both in the colonial and post independence period. Apart from the cultural alienation from the mainstream literary traditions endemic to the Westernized elite, the strong presence of vernacular literatures as well as the low literacy rate of the country, are responsible for the distribution and circulation of English fiction only in the metropolis. The Indo-English writer is thus forced to look outwards, as a broader and more lucrative market exists for these works in the countries where they are published.¹³⁷

A system of literary patronage had set in within the tradition by which the Indian writer was virtually introduced to the 'English' literary scene by British writers. In many of the novels published between the 1940s and 1960s, a foreword bearing the stamp of approval from a British novelist had become the norm. As Steinvorth observes:

If some man of letters writes a foreword for their novels,
he always is from the West, never from India. It is often
E.M. Forster who wrote the prefaces to Anand's

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¹³⁶Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) 152

¹³⁷For a detailed discussion of the commercial aspect of Indo-English fiction see Klaus Steinvorth, *The Indo-English novel* (Weisbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1975) 43-56.

Untouchable,[...] Ahmad Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (London 1940),[...] Huthi Singh's *Maura* (London, 1951). Graham Greene wrote an introduction to some of Narayan's novels (Narayan regularly sends him his manuscripts for review and most titles of his books are Greene's), Anthony Burgess wrote one to G.V. Desani's *All About Hatterr*[...]Hilton Brown introduced K.Nagarajan's *Chronicles of Kedaram*(Bombay, 1961) and Maurice Collis M. Sarabhai's *This Alone is True*.¹³⁸

The dependence on the foreign market became even more direct from the 1960s with the beginning of migrations and the gradual emergence of diasporic writers, who had to compete not only with fellow writers of the group but also with the native writers publishing from the metropolis. It is to this literary colonization that the strategy of nation narration in Indo-English fiction is to be ultimately traced.

In his *The Intellectual in India* published in 1967, Nirad. C. Chaudhuri advises the young Indian intellectual on how to find a Western publisher and exhorts him to stick to Indian subjects.¹³⁹ That the choice is more a matter of strategy than one of nationalistic impulse is made clear in the same book:

Even when an Indian writes in English, to be taken seriously, he has to publish abroad. This is due to an egregious snobbery or xenolatry, but the state of affairs has to be reckoned with whatever might be its reason. I am quite sure that had my books been published in

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¹³⁸For a detailed discussion see Klaus Steinvorth 53.

¹³⁹Nirad.C. Chaudhuri, *The Intellectual in India* (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1967) 77.

India, only few dozen copies would have sold, whereas coming from London, they have sold in thousands.¹⁴⁰

The adoption of 'West' as a point of view results in the establishing of the Othering principle right at the heart of the narrative by which the colonizing gaze of the West is acknowledged. As pointed out toward the end of the previous chapter, such a project is predicated upon a strict maintenance of cultural margins by which the normative Western perspective retains the privilege of granting authenticity to all representations of the cultural Other.

This self-Othering principle appears in different registers in the realm of Indo-English fiction as much in the choice of titles as in the selection of themes. The titles of many of these novels hold up the promise of an exotic India (*The Private Life of an Indian Prince*, *Untouchable*, *Sugirtha: An Indian Novel*, *The Brocaded Sari*, *Purdah and Polygamy*, *A Bend in the Ganges*, *The Raj*) and the promise of the titles is upheld in the narratives which rehearse the grand oriental(Indian) narrative.¹⁴¹

The ideological ambivalence of Indo-English fiction is evidenced in the continuation of a colonial Orientalist discourse within a narrative tradition that ceaselessly strives to affirm a unique national identity. The stereotypes that one

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¹⁴⁰Although this particular book was published from Delhi, his three preceding books, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951), *A Passage to England* (1959), *The Continent of Circe* (1966) had been published in London, so that the Indian market was ready for him.

¹⁴¹On the stereotyping of 'Indian Woman', see Meenakhshi Mukherji, "Awareness of Audience in Indo-Anglian Fiction," *Quest*, 52, 37-40. Also see Klaus Steinvorth, *The Indo-English novel*, 64-93. for more Indian stereotypes like Maharajas, Brahmins, poor natives and corrupt politicians.

sees in many of these fictions are not too far removed from those found in colonial fictions, where the East is invariably conceived as the less powerful Other. As Edward Said explains in *Orientalism*:

The Oriental is irrational, depraved(fallen), childlike, “different”[...] But the way of enlivening the relationship was everywhere to stress the fact that the Oriental lived in a thoroughly organized world of his own, a world with its own national, cultural and epistemological boundaries and principles of internal coherence. Yet what gave the Oriental’s world its intelligibility and identity was not the result of its own efforts but the whole complex series of knowledgeable manipulations by which the Orient was identified by the West. . . The Oriental is depicted in Western political and literary texts as something one studies and depicts (as in a curriculum), as something one judges (as in a court of law), something one disciplines (as in a zoological manual). The point is that in each of these cases, the Oriental is contained and represented by dominating frameworks.¹⁴²

Thus Edmund Candler’s *The Mantle of the East* reiterates the wonder and awe at Indian antiquity, the obverse side of this awe being the conviction about the essentially anti-progressive nature of such a civilization:

We (the British) soar the Ganges for them with iron, and the faithful use our road to approach their Gods without sparing any of their awe for the new miracle. To the devout we and railways are a passing accident, to be used or ignored as indifferently as stepping stones by the side of a brook [. . .] India is too old to resent us. Yet

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¹⁴²Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 40.

who can doubt that she will survive us? The secret of her permanence lies I think, in her passivity and power to assimilate. The Faith that will not fight cannot yield.¹⁴³

The Macaulayan binarism evident in this passage continued to shape colonial fictions, as is evident from Forster's representation of Indians in his *A Passage to India*. The bafflement experienced in the Marabar caves is matched in the novel by a delineation of certain Indian stereotypes. David Rubin, in his study of Indo-English fiction, states:

Forster, for all his real sympathy for Indians and his censure of the ignorance and heartlessness of colonial Englishmen, is not free from certain common prejudices. Consider first his Indian characters [. . .] Aziz, both childlike and childish, sentimental, prone to tears [. . .] helpless in a crisis, capable of great vindictiveness and the most astonishing fantasies and lies, such as telling Adela that his wife is alive; mediocre, cowardly and silly doctor Pannalal; the fatuous Nawab; and professor Godbole, who is not so much profoundly spiritual as merely absurdly irrational. In the long run, their India remains true to the convention of muddle and what the author himself terms "the celebrated Oriental confusion."¹⁴⁴

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¹⁴³Edmund Candler, *The Mantle of the East* (London: Blackwood, 1910) 28-9.

¹⁴⁴David Rubin, *After the Raj: British novels of India since 1947* (Hanover, N.H: University Press of New England, 1986) 17. For a detailed analysis of Indo Anglian novels, see Sara Suleri and Fawzia Afzal Khan.

Even as Indo-English fiction asserts and alternately examines its national identity, it continues, if somewhat embarrassedly, the cultural control of the colonial narrative framework.

It is against the background of the continuing colonial legacy that I will evaluate the nation narration of Rushdie and Post-Rushdie fiction as both a continuation of and a rupture with the Indo-English narrative tradition.

Postcolonial fiction: The Arrival of Salman Rushdie

In general, the Indo-English literary scene in the late seventies and early eighties was in relative disarray. In the official Sahitya Akademi¹⁴⁵ publication, *Indian Literature*, the annual review of 1980 summed up the English literary scene as “mediocre and. . . meretricious.”¹⁴⁶ The novel in English seemed to be stagnating, in both content and form. The publication of *Midnight’s Children* (1981) and its winning the Booker the same year (and subsequently, the prize for the best of twenty-five years of Bookers), put the Indo-English tradition back on its feet.

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¹⁴⁵The Sahitya Akademi was set up by the Government of India in 1956 to foster and coordinate literary activities in all Indian languages and to promote through them a cultural unity. The Government of India Resolution describes it as a national organization, instituted to help actively in the development of Indian letters and to set high literary standards.

¹⁴⁶*Indian Literature* 25.1. 1982:128.

When Rushdie toured India in 1983, it was hailed as a “triumphal homecoming.”¹⁴⁷ According to a 1988 article in the Indian weekly, *Sunday*, “copies of pirated editions (of *Midnight’s Children*) flooded the pavements before the paperback edition reached India.”¹⁴⁸ In 1984, Shyamala Narayan informs us: “Publishers claim that the novel sold four thousand copies in hard cover, and forty-five thousand in paperback editions. . . these sales figures are unprecedented for an Indian-English novelist.”¹⁴⁹

This “unprecedented” success of Rushdie is a clue to the rupture from the preceding literary tradition in Rushdie’s fiction. Even as Rushdie continued to share and express some of the common concerns of the Indo-English novelist, he ushered in a new perspective that had been absent from this tradition before his arrival on the Indian literary scene.

In Rushdie’s fiction, the anxiety about national identity, coupled with the cultural alienation of a colonized national elite, is never out of sight. These symptoms culminate in his work, as in the works of other Indo-English writers before him, in a desire to narrate the nation with which the tradition had always maintained a nebulous relationship.

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¹⁴⁷Quoted from Shyamala Narayan, in the 1983 Bibliography, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 19.2 (1984). Rushdie had lived in England since 1962, where he studied at Rugby and then went on to read History at King’s college, Cambridge, during which period his family moved to Pakistan. Rushdie had been back to India just once when *Midnight’s Children* was conceived.

¹⁴⁸Mukul Padmanabhan, et al. “The Empire Writes Back”, in *Sunday* 4-10. December:1988.

¹⁴⁹See Narayan’s Bibliography cited above. Narayan also mentions that the figures do not include the sale of the pirated editions.

What however is *new* in Rushdie's fictional universe, is making the narration more overtly political. In *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* Rushdie inaugurates the complex discourse of nation and the nation-state. If in the previous novels nation was equated with nationalist aspirations and the zeal surrounding the nation-building process, Rushdie's novels deal with its aftermath and the disappearance of the nation-building romance in the post independence period. Discourse on nationalism as a progressive cultural practice is replaced by an indictment of the nation-state taking hold of the cultural practice and transforming it into a coercive discourse to establish its hegemony.¹⁵⁰

Predicating the articulation of national identity on the *post-colonial moment* of Indian history, Rushdie professes to make his narrative articulate a *postcolonial* rupture with the history and politics of colonization.¹⁵¹ Rushdie's essay "Outside the Whale" is ample evidence of the situatedness of Rushdie's rhetoric and the construction of the post-colonial narrative:

This is why (to end where I began) it really is necessary to make a revival fuss about Raj fiction and the zombie-like revival of the defunct Empire. The various films and TV shows and books [about the Raj] [. . .] propagate a number of notions about history which must be

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¹⁵⁰On the subject of nationalism as a cultural practice, see Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London and New York: Verso, 1992) 102. Also see Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context*. (New York, London: Routledge, 1995) 353.

¹⁵¹I have discussed the difference between 'post-colonial' as a historical term and 'postcolonial' as a strategic rhetoric for expressing difference in the previous chapter.

quarrelled with, as loudly and as embarrassingly as possible.¹⁵²

Protesting the recycling of the British Raj by the British TV and film industry, Rushdie inserts himself into the colonial discursive field by contesting the images of the subcontinent they propagate. “Ultra-parochially British”, this revival of the Raj within the British system of cultural representation is in radical disagreement with his own experience of colonial rule – “only the latest in a very long line of fake portraits inflicted by the West on the East”(126).

What is noticeable in Rushdie’s postcolonial self-representation in the essay is the rhetorical posture of this self-positioning. Acerbic and polemical, he attacks the reproductions of the Raj in both *The Far Pavilions* and *Jewel in the Crown* and their TV versions. He sums up M. M. Kaye’s book as “the purest bilge,” and Paul Scott’s book as a “literary version of Mulligatawny soup” that “tries to taste India, but ends up being ultra-parochially British”(126-27). Rushdie’s appropriation of authority on the subject of colonial rule on the subcontinent is directed at “the revisionist enterprise” that in Britain’s political game seeks to revamp the “Empire’s tarnished image”(129).

Rushdie’s ire is directed as much at the ex-colonizers as at those who help perpetuate the symbolical Raj rhetoric through reciprocal cultural gestures. Later, in *Satanic Verses*, he directs his satire at the archetypal post-colonial agent, Zeeny Vakil:

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¹⁵²Salman Rushdie, “Outside the Whale,” *Granta* 11 (1983): 138.

she was an art critic whose book on the confining myth of authenticity, that folklorist straitjacket which she sought to replace by an ethic of historically validated eclecticism, for was not the entire national culture based on the principle of borrowing whatever clothes seem to fit, Aryan, Mughul, British, take-the -best-and-leave-the rest?— had created a predictable stink, especially because of the title. She had called it *The Only Good Indian*.¹⁵³

Dismantling the image of “the only Good Indian” in the West, Rushdie decides to narrate a different version in which the relation between the nation and the nation-state is viewed in its post-colonial context. But the gesture itself turns self-defeating as the combative rupture with the post-colonial moment fails to produce a positive discursive alternative. The failure of the postcolonial government to deliver the promises of the independence movement becomes central to Rushdie’s venture of nation narration. “At once eulogy and elegy” as Josna Rege situates it,¹⁵⁴ Rushdie’s nation narration occupies an in-between space between patriotic discourse and its complete subversion, ushering in a new politics in the Indo-English fictional tradition. As Rege puts it:

In (this) period of postcolonial consolidation of the nation-state, the Indian English novel, once caught up in the dynamism of the nationalist movement, settled into a rather tired social realism that no longer throbbed with urgency or captured the creative imagination. It seemed as if the drive toward freedom that had engaged the Gandhian novels now gave way either to

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¹⁵³Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, (London, New York:Viking, 1988) 52.

¹⁵⁴Josna Rege, “Victim into protagonist? Midnight’s Children and the Post-Rushdie National Narratives of the Eighties ,” in M. Keith Booker, *Critical Essays on Salman Rushdie* (New York: G.K Hall & Co, 1999) 257.

mechanically formulaic, politically correct nation-building or, on the other hand, to rejections of the public sphere. The national idea, which had once been an inclusive vision of “unity in diversity,” shrank into a more rigid, centralizing monolithic concept as the Congress Party sought to secure centralized state power. In terms of the relationship between the individual and the state, it seemed that either one was a patriot, wholly identified with the nation and its symbols, or else a traitor; there was little middle ground. This was especially so for the Indian English novel, whose loyalties were already suspect in its use of the former colonizer’s language.(256)

In Rushdie’s fiction, the anxiety about Indianness is expressed in a far more complex way as the narrator seeks to reclaim the lost national ideals only to discover the impossibility of attaining success in such a venture. What is overlooked conspicuously are the national achievements (even during the pronouncedly dictatorial phases), which yield a more complex picture of the history of the post independence nation.¹⁵⁵ In a convincing portrayal in which the nation-state is depicted as a lack, the postcolonial insurgence in Rushdie appears in the form of an ironic orientalist throwback in which the Indian nation-state is projected as the obverse of the liberal, rational and enlightened nation-state, of which the West is the implied model.¹⁵⁶ The dubious political undertone of such a narrative is commented upon by Rushdie himself. In *The Moor’s Last*

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¹⁵⁵In *Midnight’s Children*, Rushdie’s indictment of Indira Gandhi and the excesses of Emergency completely eclipse the other positive economic and political achievements of her term in politics. The same myopic vision of history is found in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, which provides a rather unflattering, (though not wholly incorrect) version of the rise of Hindu fundamentalism in the state in the nineties.

¹⁵⁶See my discussion of Other nationalisms in the previous chapter in the section entitled ‘Nationalism and the West’.

Sigh Rushdie's protagonist-narrator discusses his mother's (Aurora's) artistic withdrawal in a decade after independence:

It was easy for an artist to lose her identity at a time when so many thinkers believed that the poignancy and passion of the country's immense life could only be represented by a kind of selfless, dedicated – even patriotic – mimesis.

Public opinion—not for the last time – swung against Aurora...scoundrelly patriots called her a traitress, the godly called her godless, self-styled spokesmen for the poor berated her for being rich...those artists truly in thrall to the West. . . abused her for “parochialism,” while other... artists reviled her just as loudly for losing touch with her roots. . .

Aurora retreated somewhat from public life. . . (and in her bitterness and isolation), announced that neither Marathi nor Gujarati would be spoken within her wall; the language of her kingdom was English and nothing but.¹⁵⁷

That the artist refusing to produce “patriotic mimesis” in her art should take refuge in English and “nothing but” even as she is critiqued by those “in thrall to the West” appears to be much more than a comment on a specific fictional character. The double-coding that characterizes Aurora's choice in life and art matches the ambivalent undermining of “patriotic mimesis” in Rushdie's own fiction. Yet Aurora's withdrawal from “public life” is replaced in Rushdie's situation by the articulation of a new kind of artistic engagement that relies increasingly on the comic and the mock heroic modes to open up new

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¹⁵⁷Salman Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995) 173; 178-79.

possibilities of re-imagining and reconstituting nation. If Aurora breaks under the pressure of mindless patriotism, Rushdie counters it by a humour that points incessantly at the absurdity of such ideological gestures.

In an interview in 1983¹⁵⁸ Rushdie wondered why Indian novels in English are always so “solemn” and found it “amazing” that the clown protagonist figure so common in Indian folklore and theatre never became the protagonist in these novels. He also commented that the solemnity owes more to the influence of classical English writing than to the English language as such – “English language is less of a problem than people make it out to be” – and was confident that younger writers would use English a lot more unproblematically, with more verve and Indianness as the memory of the English fades and the language becomes more domesticated and gains currency as one of the Indian languages. *Midnight's Children* heralded the arrival of the anti-hero figure, but more importantly, the uninhibited, postcolonial use of English.

For many critics, Rushdie's language was insurgence itself, forging a new idiom to express a transfer of power enacted in linguistic terms. If the imposition of a foreign language on people is to be seen as a form of oppression, both *per se* and in the sense of affecting epistemological processes, then Rushdie's taking control of English and bending it to the purposes of postcolonial insurgency not only makes it more expressive, but, as D. M. Fletcher points out:

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¹⁵⁸Salman Rushdie, “A Writer of New Times,” *Deccan Chronicle* 20 March. 1983.

'[it] also explodes post-colonial stereotypes about the formerly colonized country that seem to have become embedded in the language itself."¹⁵⁹

According to Rustom Bharucha:

I am grateful to Salman Rushdie for having swallowed my world in so eloquent a manner. In doing so, he has made me accept that the consequences of Macaulay's *Minute* need not be humiliating for Indian users of the English language. Not only has Rushdie grasped the absurdities and contradictions of my post-independence India, he has represented my world in a language totally unprecedented in the history of English literature (despite its echoes of Lawrence Sterne). This makes me proud. . . I am exhilarated to see and hear the English language so resoundingly "chutnified." For someone who was once advised by a senior professor of India to cultivate the "Queen's English," this chutnification is truly liberating.¹⁶⁰

The humour of Rushdie's narratives is to be located primarily in the much applauded "chutnification."¹⁶¹ In Rushdie's novels, language becomes the site where the ambivalent "patriotic mimesis" is played out. As the narrator continues the discourse on the nation, its voice is tinged with an unmistakable Indianness.

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¹⁵⁹D.M Fletcher, Introduction to *Reading Rushdie: Perspectives on the Fiction of Salman Rushdie* (Amsterdam, Atlanta: Rodopi, 1994) 4.

¹⁶⁰Rustom Bharucha, "Rushdie's Whale" in D.M Fletcher (ed.), *Reading Rushdie: Perspectives on the Fiction of Salman Rushdie* (Amsterdam, Atlanta: Rodopi, 1994) 171.

¹⁶¹It is a trope which I will apply in the next chapter to explore the political implications in the context of narrative technique.

This metaphorical voice in Rushdie has been divided by Bishnupriya Ghosh into four categories: first, modes of utterance: recognizable colloquialisms, street slangs, idiomatic speech which draw on various oral registers and the syntax of the Indian vernaculars; second, popular cultural resonances: meanings drawn from context specific or local collective memories; third, recoded material; and fourth, cultural signs from one locale reinterpreted and inserted into another, and citations: iterable phrases that require specific cultural and political knowledges.¹⁶²

This immense corpus of untranslated linguistic and cultural artifacts speaks in the novels with a forked tongue. The chutnification of the Queen's English in the Indian context is a revenge on Macaulay's *Minute*. Yet, the contexts in which they appear represent the continuous engagement with nativist *difference* as inscribed in language.¹⁶³

Rushdie in the West

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¹⁶²Bishnupriya Ghosh, "An Invitation to Indian Postmodernity:: Rushdie's English Vernacular as Situated Cultural Hybridity," M. Keith Booker (ed.) *Critical Essays on Salman Rushdie*.

¹⁶³The glossary of Indian terms in Bharucha's article bear witness to this strategic deployment of Otherness. See Bharucha cited above.

The complex achievement of Rushdie's fictions becomes clear in the obvious disparity between Western reviews of these fictions and the responses of critics in the subcontinent.¹⁶⁴ According to Huggan:

. . . an obvious discrepancy exists between Western metropolitan reviews of *Midnight's Children* – generally depoliticized and uniformly favourable – and the more politically concerned responses of the subcontinental critics, some of whom take Rushdie to task for his “trivialization” of their culture. Not surprisingly the Booker judgements fall into this category. (Huggan, 1994, 28).

The highly abstract terms in which these novels are praised in the metropolis become an indication that “forgotten histories” or their adequate representations are of no interest for the metropolitan readership. *Midnight's Children*, according to Malcolm Bradbury, is a “rich expression of the contemporary fictional imagination, a flamboyant, experimental celebration of the power and potential of human narrative”. Bradbury's effusive imprecision indicates that the novel's historical specificity is no part of its cultural significance in the metropolitan context. Moreover, the global significance given to

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¹⁶⁴ Among Indian critics Rushdie's popularity has been on the wane since the nineties, and expressions of admiration have become rarer although there are some exceptions. R.S Pathak sees Rushdie's recreation of Indian history as restoring the “much-needed sense of dignity” to the individual in history, given that Indian history has been mutilated by the British. Pathak also admires the entertaining comedy in Rushdie's works as does Thakur Guruprasad, who credits Rushdie for having “conjured up a ...new genre” that combines ‘fairy tale with savage political indictment’ through a “fictional family story intertwined with dismal political history in a comic strain.” See R.S Pathak, “history and Individual in the Novels of Salman Rushdie,” and Thakur Guruprasad, “The Secret of Rushdie's Charm” in *The Novels of Salman Rushdie*, G.R Taneja (eds.), New Delhi, Society for Commonwealth Studies.

“contemporary” and “human” smacks dangerously of the universal, rationalizing tendency that makes appropriative gestures in understanding Other texts even as it admits their cultural difference.

Significantly, the iconicity of Rushdie (like that of Said, Spivak and Bhabha in the realm of theory) in the postcolonial novel is clear in such passages where the name Rushdie becomes synonymous with the politico-cultural condition designated as ‘postcolonial’:

The condemnation of Rushdie by the Islamic postcolonial world raises interesting questions about the category of postcolonial itself. For the Islamic postcolonial world, the moral is clear and succinct: to write in the language of the colonizer is to write from within death itself. . . postcolonial writers who write in the language of the Empire are marked off as traitors to the cause of reconstitutive postcolonialisms. . . postcolonial writers compose under the shadow of death.”¹⁶⁵

An interesting “truth claim” emerges from such a definition. The metropolitan postcolonial (Rushdie) is opposed to an Islamic(Rushdie’s non-Western enemies) postcolonial. This metropolitan postcolonial writing in the language of the Empire is then legitimized as a normative category¹⁶⁶. The assumptions of the critic are: first, the postcolonial writer is also necessarily a

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¹⁶⁵Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, *Colonial discourse and Postcolonial theory: A Reader* (New York: Columbia UP, 1993)277.

¹⁶⁶This a tendency in many Postcolonial Readers. see *The Empire Strikes Back*

person who resides in the metropolis or is affiliated to it; second, he is also one who writes in the language of the empire; last but not least, this writer is committed to a truth that makes him a “traitor” in the eyes of “reconstitutive postcolonialisms.”¹⁶⁷

The growing suspicion about the intention of postcolonial literature has been on the rise ever since its inception, especially as the oppositionality of this literature is very often contained within the fractured, parodic narratives of the Western literary tradition. Richard Cronin, comparing *Midnight's Children* to *Kim*, has argued that Rushdie has to be an Anglo-Indian writer even to have attempted to conceive of India-as-a-whole.¹⁶⁸ The Western influences usually cited are Rabelais and Sterne, and more conspicuously, Günter Grass and Garcia Marquez. Rudolf Bader, Eric Herd, Patricia Merivale and Kenneth B. Ireland have analysed the similarities between Rushdie's novels, particularly *Midnight's Children* and *The Tin Drum*, while Colin Smith compares it to Grass's work in general.¹⁶⁹ Al-Azam has discussed direct influences from Rabelais and Joyce, similarities to Genet, and similarities to Garcia Marquez resulting from the Joycean influence.¹⁷⁰

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¹⁶⁷For the politics of universality and colonial politics see Robert Young, *Colonial Desire ; Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. (London: Routledge, 1995).

¹⁶⁸Richard Cronin, “The Indian English Novel” (1987); see also, Michael Harris, “Transformation Without End” (1986).

¹⁶⁹Bader, “Indian Tin Drum” (1984); Herd, “Tin Drum and Snake-Charmer's Flute” (1988); Merivale, “Saleem Fathered Oscar” (1990); Ireland, “Doing very Dangerous Things” (1990) Colin Smith, “The Unbearable Lightness of Salman Rushdie” (1989).

¹⁷⁰Sadik J. Al-Azam, “The Importance of Being Earnest about Salman Rushdie” (1991).

The assimilation and absorption of postcolonial resistance in Rushdie into the postmodern cognitive terrain raises serious questions about both the intention and efficacy of the proclaimed politics. The doubts generated by such literary gestures implicate not only Rushdie, but also those writing under his shadow. What Linda Hutcheon sees in Rushdie is an important example of the complex operations of this narrative style:

Though Saleem Sinai [*Midnight's Children*] narrates in English. . . his intertexts for both writing history and writing fiction are double: they are on the one hand, from Indian legend, films and literature and on the other from the West – *The Tin Drum*, *Tristram Shandy*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and so on. (Hutcheon, 65)

It is significant how easily the author identifies the Western references while remaining absolutely silent on the Indian allusions that make Rushdie's intertextuality doubled. The identification of the Western references places the novel firmly within the Western narrative tradition in which "other" cultural references (Indian films, legends, literature) are dismissed for the reason presented by Dipesh Chakrabarty in his article quoted earlier about "Third World subalternity". It also corroborates the statement made by Huggan about "the illusion of cross cultural reciprocity" and the suggestion that it is the consumer-supplier collaboration that determines both the patterns of production and consumption of "forgotten histories."

Aijaz Ahmad begins his article on “The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality” by saying that postcolonialism in the field of literary theory produces in him a sense of *déjà vu*, even “a degree of fatigue.”¹⁷¹ Asserting that postcolonialism is a rubric under which, within the disciplines of Sociology and Political Science, the questions of social reorganization in the decolonized states of Asia and Africa were discussed, he writes;

Now as this term surfaces in literary theory, without even a trace of memory of that earlier debate, I am reminded of something that the Cuban-American critic, Roman de la Campa said to me in conversation, to the effect that “postcoloniality” is postmodernism’s wedge to colonise literatures outside Europe and its North American offshoots – which I take the liberty to understand as saying that what used to be known as “*Third World Literature*” gets rechristened as “*postcolonial literature*” when the governing theoretical frame work shifts from Third World nationalism to postmodernism.”(27)

Ahmad’s observations, apart from drawing attention to the complicity of “Third World” and postcolonial discourse, also helps to focus on the various strategies adopted by Rushdie and the post Rushdie generation, according to the expectations of the dominant cultural idiom.

In the following section, I will discuss the dispersal of various techniques associated with Rushdie’s style in fictions written by the post Rushdie fiction writers, who are sometimes not so generously dubbed as ‘Rushdie’s Children’.

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¹⁷¹Aijaz Ahmad, “The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality,” *Race and Class* 36.3.(1995):1.

'India' After Salman Rushdie

Post Rushdie fiction in English has to be placed in the context of Rushdie's narratives and the attending ideological gestures. The search for legitimacy and the hyperbolic anxiety to establish the *English* presence in Indian literature continues but the assertion of national identity is done with much more confidence as it follows the track tested out by the phenomenal success of Rushdie's first novel. For the first time since its advent, the English literary tradition staked its claim to a national status achieved at the cost of vernacular literatures. This historic reversal of roles is announced by Rushdie himself in the following unequivocal statement:

The prose writing – both fiction and non-fiction – created in this period (the fifty years since Independence) by Indian writers working in English is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the eighteen “recognized” languages in India, the so called “vernacular languages” during the same time, and indeed this new, and still burgeoning, “Indo Anglian” literature represents the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books. The true Indian literature of the first postcolonial half century has been made in the language the British left behind’. (Rushdie; “Damme this is the Oriental Scene for You” *The New Yorker*, June 23, 30.1997,50).

What is seen in this passage is yet another postcolonial truth claim. One notices a telling shift between the first long sentence and the following short one.

The first makes a comparison and finds greatly in favour of Indo Anglian literature. Toward the end of the first, rather convoluted sentence, the comparative slides into the superlative (*stronger* and *more* important→*most* valuable). In the second sentence, the politically interested nature of the statement becomes evident as “Indo Anglian” literature emerges as the “true” Indian literature, a linguistic and cultural particularity being quickly transformed into a national marker. *Indo Anglian* is now collapsed with *Indian*, transforming the former into a universal national paradigm. Further, Rushdie does not restrict this claim to fiction alone but stretches it to include nonfiction as well, showing clearly the mutually supportive coalition of theory and fiction.

The vocabulary and vision of this cultural Other manifest themselves in the postcolonial Indian novel’s search for its patrilineal ancestry with a difference. If the colonial/ Orientalist view of the Indian Other is authenticated with a postmodern vigour, the ‘Indianness’ of such a discourse is not sacrificed by Rushdie or the post-Rushdie generation.

The inscription of the nation proves to be an emancipatory move that allows the erstwhile native to represent himself. But, ironically, the thematic and linguistic terrain of such a representation betrays the continuance of colonialist entrapment, appearing very often as another version of Orientalist romance. The reinscription of such a romance has a necessary commercial angle that has to be taken into account.¹⁷²

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¹⁷²See Arnab Chakladar, “The Postcolonial Bazaar: Marketing/Trading Indian Literature, *ARIEL* 31:1 & 2. Jan-Apr.(2000):184-201.

The success of *Midnight's Children* has resulted in a proliferation of novels that follow a trajectory established by Salman Rushdie himself. Rushdie's works have come to be seen as foundational texts for a new kind of postcolonial novel, one in which a critical, disillusioned, cosmopolitan narrator/protagonist narrates stories of post independence nation-states.

Rushdie's writing is symptomatic of postcolonial fiction and is largely accepted as a model of postcolonial nation writing by a generation of new writers. In the period starting with the 1980s, Indian English novels imitated *Midnight's Children* in style and structure. Some prominent novelists of the 1980s whose works are indebted to Rushdie include Amitav Ghosh (*The Circle of Reason* and *The Shadow Lines*), Upamanyu Chatterji (*English August* and *The Last Burden*), I. Allan Sealy (*The Trotter-nama* and *Hero*), Shashi Tharoor (*The Great Indian Novel* and *Show Business*), Nina Sibal (*Yatra*) and last but not least Arundhati Roy (*The God of Small Things*). Sanjay Iyer states:

In privileging the experiences of nation and postcolonialism, Rushdie, as a literary giant, has powerfully set the terms for inclusion in this [counter canon of Third World literature]. The result is apparent to us every day, in the spate of novels that do take the personal as the national. . . the price of this has been the marginalization of countless works that are not obsessed with national experience.¹⁷³

Josna Rege points out:

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¹⁷³Sanjay Iyer, "East, West: No Home is Best," *Indian Review of Books* 4.3 Jan.-Feb.1995:2.

Rushdie-influenced works by new novelists have variously been seen to include one or more of the following features: 1) a multigenerational mock-epic family saga. . . that tells the story of the protagonist's family as a national history; 2) rejection of the traditional social realist novel: larger than life allegorical characters and events in the tradition of magic realism; 3) both a fluency in standard English and a confidence with the language that allows the confident use of various kinds of Indian English; 4) a sprawling rambling style full of digressions and humour; 5) the use of myth, oral tradition, and different versions and ideas of history; 6) a playful irreverence for the sacred cows of nationalism and religion.¹⁷⁴

The recognition for such performances comes in the form of overwhelming critical and commercial reception of such products in the West, as most of these novels continue to reiterate the common predilections of Western cultural idiom.

If postmodern theoretical advances recruit from 'the rest of the world', "academics supposedly marginated by the advanced state of their intellectual sophistication," postmodern fiction appears to have fared no worse.¹⁷⁵ The intellectual sophistication of its literary corollary is reflected in the choice of stylized fragmented narratives in which 'history' follows its own self-propelled trajectory, blending the personal and the political, to unfurl a tale that endorses metropolitan politico-literary expectations. The novelist operates within

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¹⁷⁴Josna Rege , "Victim into Protagonist? *Midnight's Children* and the Post- Rushdie Narratives of the Eighties," (*Critical Essays on Salman Rushdie*) 273.

¹⁷⁵See Donald Morton, "The Politics of the Margin: Theory, Pleasure, and the Postmodern Conference,"*The American Journal of Semiotics* 5.1.1987: 95-114.

established postmodern narrative traditions. Quoting from Rushdie's *Shame*, Linda Hutcheon observes:

Historiographic metafiction like this is self-conscious about the paradox of the totalizing yet inevitably partial act of narrative representation. It overtly 'de-doxifies' received notions about the process of, representing the actual in narrative – be it fictional or historical. It traces the processing of events into facts, exploiting and then undermining the conventions of both novelistic realism and historiographic reference. It implies that like fiction, history constructs its object, that events named become facts and thus both do and do not retain their status outside language.¹⁷⁶

The quotations in their ironic contexts, appropriation, intertextuality, as well as use of common representational vocabulary from films, newspapers magazines and advertisements contribute to a narrative that, while subverting the historical Grand Narratives, expresses a desire to be sanctioned as the 'truth'. Postcolonial fiction thus rehearses the fact-making and meaning-granting processes of history without relinquishing its claim to a 'fictitious' status. Reappropriating existing representations that are effective precisely because they are loaded with meaning and putting them in their ironic context can be said to be the central strategy of fictional representation of national history in this tradition. Magic Realism is a preferred terrain, though realism with all its trappings has not altogether disappeared from postcolonial fiction.

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¹⁷⁶Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London, New York: Routledge, 1989) 78.

What the (metropolitan) reader ‘sees’ as well as “hears” in stories that fall comfortably within a Western narrative tradition are stories, myths and legends with local flavours paraded under the banner of a nation (“India” or “Pakistan” in my thesis) so that differences based on race, caste, religion and gender are elided, and the ‘regional’ is collapsed with the “national” to fabricate a “nationness” that undermines the complex politico-cultural realities of the subcontinent. It seduces the readers with history, offered, to borrow Rushdie’s own words, through “a peep show” or, “a perforated sheet”.

As *talking politics* is a criterion that must be fulfilled for the sake of a liberal, democratic audience, politics, often chosen as a subject in these novels, is aestheticized in a way that has given currency in literary criticism to charged terms like “politico-exotic”, “Indo-chic” and “tropical-classical.” What, however, the metropolitan reader *does not see* is the aesthetic control over the political content that is exercised through the use of figures like subtlety, irony and understatement that helps the novelist in troping the historical/ political content. This aesthetic control is the hallmark of postcolonial fiction. Inspired by Western accolades, political troping is the signature of what is gaining increasing currency in the market as postcolonial literature.¹⁷⁷ Brennan observes:

The rich promise of the tropes of political fantasy and migrancy – perhaps the two key conceptual offerings of Rushdie’s translation of the Latin boom – have proliferated in a collection of inspired echoes forming

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¹⁷⁷I have discussed troping in connection with postcolonial theory.

the stock-in-trade of the newspaper reviews and the undergraduate lecture without adding anything fundamentally new to the original concepts. The scenario – if not the details – of this vital story-telling have become not routine so much as emphatic about the archetypal points of contact: the suddenly unrepressed information that needed desperately to be conveyed; the political stories one could not escape without sublimating.¹⁷⁸

These “political stories” are told in complex, disjunctive, overlapping narrations that supposedly allow the readers to have their own version of the story. Yet, in fact, the multiplicity of images and perspectives and the careful deployment of subtlety, irony and understatement conceal, rather than convey, the complex trajectories of the national situation.¹⁷⁹

What is more, the genre revives some of the paradigms of the Orient/Occident East/West, Developing/developed discourse. As David Spurr states in *The Rhetoric of Empire*:

In colonial discourse every individual weakness has its political counterpart – uncivilized society, according to this logic, being little more than uncivilized mind and body writ large. Hence a certain parallelism in the themes of debasement employed by the discourse: the qualities assigned to the individual savage – dishonesty, suspicion, superstition, lack of self discipline – are reflected more generally in societies

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¹⁷⁸Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1997) 47.

¹⁷⁹On the troping of India’s freedom struggle in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* see Timothy Brennan: “India, Nationalism and Other Failures” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 87:1, Winter (1988):131-146.

characterized by corruption, xenophobia, tribalism and the inability to govern themselves.¹⁸⁰

The narration of this nationness, in the case of post-Rushdie fictions, is more often than not cloaked in a dark, disturbing humour that transforms post-independence national history into a mock epic peopled by demented fools and villains.¹⁸¹ The comic narrativization of a morbid nation with supposedly tragic import sends its audiences into peels of laughter or, alternatively, shocked silence as situations demand. This strategy becomes one of the hallmarks of post-Rushdie fiction.

There are, quite frequently, two clearly differentiable strains of narration in which India's epic past in all its glory is constantly juxtaposed to the parodic state of its present history.¹⁸² Mythological characters, gods and goddesses, and heroes from India's epic literatures jostle with modern/postcolonial clowns and caricatures to announce the writer's awareness of the commercial viability of the exotic Oriental.

Narratives in this tradition opt for a canvas that, while talking contemporary politics, invariably draws attention to the antiquity of national culture. In Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*, history is evoked in its classical antiquity and blended in with the first flutterings of colonial invasion:

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¹⁸⁰David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing and Imperial Administration*. (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 1993) 76.

¹⁸¹This is an aspect of postcolonial fiction that I will discuss in chapters III, IV, and V.

¹⁸²It is a strategy I discuss in the chapters on Rushdie and Roy.

Indian cloth was found in the graves of the Pharaohs. . . It was the hunger for Indian chintzes and calicos, brocades and muslins that led to the foundations of the first European settlements in India. All through those centuries cloth, in its richness and variety, bound the Mediterranean to Asia, India to Africa, the Arab world to Europe, in equal, bountiful trade. India first gave cotton, *Gossypium Indicus*, to the world. The cities of the Indus valley grew cotton as early as 1500 BC. . . It had King Sennacherib of Mesopotamia in its toils by 700 BC, and before long it had found its way to Herodotus in Greece. It travelled eastwards more slowly, but its conquests were no smaller in magnitude.¹⁸³

With a subtlety that is reminiscent of Rushdie, Ghosh's story weaves in the mysterious pre-Christian eras from India's past into his narration as part of the preamble to its colonial history. In Ghosh's narrative, the historical and the grandiose work in unison to create vivid and mysterious visions of everything 'East' and make India a part of that very Orientalist representation.

Sometimes these Eastern tales confer on the narration of history a mythic framework in which the epic narration becomes the allegory for contemporary forms of decadence and disintegration. In a rhetorical gesture that mingles irony with laughter, Shashi Tharoor, in *The Great Indian Novel*, announces:

I tell them (the fellow Indians) they have no knowledge of history and even less of their own heritage. I tell them that if they would only read the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, study the golden Ages of the Mauryas and the Guptas and even of those Muslim chaps the

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¹⁸³Amitav Ghosh, *The Circle of Reason* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1986) 56.

Mughuls, they would realize that India is not an underdeveloped country but a highly developed one in an advanced state of decay. They laugh at me pityingly and shift from one foot to the other... and I tell them that, in fact, everything in India is over-developed, particularly the social structure, the bureaucracy, the political process, the financial system, the university network and, for that matter, the women.¹⁸⁴

The ideological alignment of the narrative with *Midnight's Children* is announced quite early in the novel as the narrator, like the narrator of Rushdie's novel, assumes the persona of Vyasa, the narrator of the *Mahabharata*, and discloses to the reader the secret of his illegitimacy, as does Rushdie's Saleem Sinai, but in a somewhat less complicated manner. The success of Tharoor's enterprise is proved by the accolade he won from *Chicago Tribune* which applauded the novel as "an outrageous feast, spilling over with myths, rhymes, tales of ancient treachery and wisdom, and tales of modern foolishness and heroism."¹⁸⁵

Narratives in this tradition derive their dubious strength from a portrayal of what Huggan calls "politico- exotic: a troping on democracy in a setting of poverty, disease, dictatorship and revolution".¹⁸⁶

Characters are, more often than not, examples of various shades of human depravity, or else, victims of ignorance and poverty. The portrayal of a

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¹⁸⁴Sahashi Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1989) 17.

¹⁸⁵*Chicago Tribune*, quoted from the back flap of Tharoor's novel.

¹⁸⁶Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997) 205.

diminished present is made more stark by constant reference to the grand, epic past of a now fallen nation. The ideological alignment of the culturally alienated narrator comes through in political sarcasm, with what Brennan calls “ironic detachment, employing humour with a cosmic, celebratory pessimism.”

Upamanyu Chatterji's *English, August* is an example of such a narration. It is an account of a thoroughly Westernized Indian's encounter with what the novelist paints as traditional Bharat.¹⁸⁷ Brought up, like other “English types”, on Marcus Aurelius, *Heat and Dust*¹⁸⁸ and *Jewel in the Crown*¹⁸⁹, Augustya's dilemma about his own identity is played out against the shabbiness of Madna, a fictitious small town in India. Madna, with its two-lakh (200,000) population and its incongruous mixture of small town values and luxury hotels is the site where the protagonist confronts the futility of his existence:

In Madna he could never take sleep for granted. He would repeat the activities of the afternoon, thinking that for more than twenty years he had always slept well, except for one or two nights when excitement had kept him awake. . . . But in Madna he seemed to have appalled sleep. When he finally dropped off, it was out of weariness even with despair.¹⁹⁰

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¹⁸⁷Bharat is the classical Indian word designating ‘India’.

¹⁸⁸A novel by Ruth Prawer Jhavwala, it is a love story against the backdrop of The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. It was only after this insurgency that India became part of the British empire.

¹⁸⁹*Jewel in the Crown* by Paul Scott was also made into a famous BBC production. It has been discussed in relation to Rushdie's postcolonial gesture. The reference in this novel is to the latter.

¹⁹⁰Upamanyu Chatterji, *English, August: An Indian Story* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988) 73-4.

As the title of the novel suggests, Augustya's story entwines personal disappointments with, a discourse of national underdevelopment and is presented in a language that moves freely between the serious and the flippant, exploring the farcical possibilities of narrating what it means to be an 'Indian'.¹⁹¹

Taken together, these works constitute a significant corpus of fiction that feeds the metropolitan anxieties and expectations about the subcontinent even as it provides them with rich, though ambivalent insights into a nation's life. This neo-Orientalist trend has to be understood in the context of the continuing awareness of the Western book market deeply entrenched in the Indo-English novel, especially because, as Stephen Crofts puts it: "A fantasy of a foreign market can. . . exercise an inordinate influence over "a national product".¹⁹²

Postcolonial fiction thus shares with its non-fiction counterpart more than "the language the British left behind". Translated into the language of fiction, the "truest eye" of the postcolonial novelist is fixed in a pronounced way on images that *perform* a nation. The enterprise takes on two strategies. The first and the most obvious is managing and working on what Ahmad calls "cultural hangover from the empire" and recycling images and concept metaphors that spill right out of colonial writing, an intensely exotic cadence tempered by the colonial discourse of insularity and backwardness.

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¹⁹¹On the novel, see T. Vijay Kumar, "I Can't Get No Satisfaction: Upamanyu Chatterjee's English August," in Vinay Kirpal (ed.) *The New Indian Novel in English: A Study of the 1980s* (New Delhi, Bombay: Allied Publishers Limited, 1990) 169-78.

¹⁹²Stephen Crofts, "Reconceptualizing National Cinemas", *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 14.1993: 56.

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* for example, abounds in exotic semiotic markers: fakir, soothsayers, genies, strange women in veils, snake charmers and over-spiced food. This last item in the list of Othered artefacts operates as a gastronomic metaphor for the consumption of readers and transforms what is to be read — including history — into a pickle – a traditional totem for exotic gastronomic adventure!¹⁹³ As Huggan points out:

Cultural differences devolve into the stuff of tourist spectacle: “otherness emerges everywhere”; the world becomes a theme-park. The ubiquity of exoticism doesn't make it less exotic – but it does help to convey the illusion of cross-cultural reciprocity. . . The blatant hypocrisies of exoticism – complacency masked as appreciation; novelty mediated through cliché; the creation of a cultural distance that the discourse claims to narrow – are inimical to the objectives of anticolonial writers such as Rushdie. Exoticism remains integral, nonetheless, to the reading and writing of postcolonial literature. (Huggan, 1994, 27)

The second part of Huggan's observation hinges on the word “illusion” . Huggan, not unlike many Indian critics, suspects that this cross-cultural reciprocity is the camouflage for an intellectual hierarchy in which the represented culture (Africa, India) appears in an unequal relationship in which the terms and parameters of its appearance as a weak partner are determined by the ones that are more powerful.

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¹⁹³I have discussed *chutnification* and its relation to nation narration in chapter iii. The gastronomic metaphor is also integral to all the three postcolonial fictions discussed in my thesis.

The increasing currency of these novels is presently facing a challenge not only from the critics who have grown increasingly suspicious about the evacuation of *specific contexts* of these nation narrations, but also from some novelists who are engaged in the same postcolonial nation writing project. Although they are still easily outnumbered by the more celebrated and internationally acclaimed practitioners in the field, the narrative methods of this second group disrupt the Rushdie-like discourse with strength and ardour. This is a welcome, though not yet conspicuous energy building up within the tradition of postcolonial fiction. The alternative strategy takes as its starting point the adoption of an optic that views national history in all its problematic aspects without succumbing to the rhetoric of the eroticised European imaginary. These novels demonstrate that such a mission can be accomplished even within the nebulous realm of the English language.

Such alternative versions of nation narration start off with the basic assumptions of postmodern/postcolonial discourse and bring it to crisis. A striking example of this strategy is to be found in Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days*, discussed in Chapter IV. As we shall see, Suleri transforms Rushdie's discourse on individual and national history into a disarmingly frank yet touching reinvention of Pakistani history.¹⁹⁴ Sara Suleri represents this other, less articulate strain in postcolonial fiction that resists the disabling ambivalence of

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¹⁹⁴Suleri is possibly the first writer from the subcontinent who interrogated Rushdie's discourse and gave metropolitan readers the inaugural version of alternative nation writing after the onset of 'rushdieitis'. I will develop this idea in the chapter on *Meatless Days*.

normative nation writing. It is significant that Suleri seizes the postcolonial apparatus of inscribing the personal in the national and turns it into a critical exposition of dreams and disillusionments about a lost nationhood. Suleri's nation writing broaches the problem of *responsibility* in narrating a country from which the writer has "taken leave."¹⁹⁵ Her narrative invites attempts at possibilities of a *different* interpretation where cultural and historical valences of Pakistan are made to intervene as interpretive categories to make the act of theorizing more challenging. In the chapter on Suleri's *Meatless Days*, the purpose is to unravel the cultural complexities articulated *in the text* that speak for a national history whose narration is inseparable from a politics of location. It is an attempt to show that knowledge, not information, about a culture is integral to the productive understanding of a culturally different text

Such performances of resistance indicate that post-Rushdie fiction, instead of taking indeterminacy and postmodern insurgency to its chaotic perfection, is struggling to move into the realm of narrative commitments about adequate and appropriate representation of nation.

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¹⁹⁵Unpacking discourses of resistance to Orientalism has been a relatively unattended field in postcolonial theory. Even Said admits in the introduction of *Culture and Imperialism*:

What I left out of *Orientalism* was that response to Western dominance which culminated in the great movement of decolonization all across the Third World. Along with armed resistance in places as diverse as Algeria, Ireland and Indonesia, there also went considerable effort into cultural resistance almost everywhere, the assertions of national identities, and, in the political realm, the creations of associations and parties whose common goal was self determination and national independence. Never was it the case that the imperial encounter pitted an active Western intruder against a supine or inert non-Western native; there was always some form of active resistance, and in the overwhelming majority of cases, the resistance finally won out.(xii)

In Mukul Kesavan's novel *Looking Through Glass* (1995), the protagonist is a photographer whose perspective on history is determined by the lenses of his camera. The distance thus created between his subjects and himself is progressively diminished in the course of the narrative and the protagonist's own position merges with that of his subjects'. A magical time travel pushes him into the turbulent Quit India movement of 1942.¹⁹⁶ The protagonist/narrator then lives a Muslim India version of history from the inside. As this was also the period when Muslim points of view were getting quite conspicuously marginalized inside the Congress party, and later from grand narratives of Indian history, Kesavan decides to narrate this erasure through allegory that follows the stylistic prescriptions of Rushdie: overnight, innumerable Muslims disappear. As Josna Rege observes:

Looking Through Glass carries many of the hallmarks of the post-Rushdie novel: its portrayal of the vexed but intimate relationship of the personal and the political, the ambivalence of the protagonist, its challenging of official history and parallel presentation of alternative versions, the magic realism of its time travel, the making

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¹⁹⁶“Quit India” resolution was passed at the Bombay session of the Indian National Congress in 1942, when all negotiations for joint administration of the country by the British and the national subjects failed. The movement acquired historic proportions with Gandhi's declaration: “We shall either free India, or die in the attempt; we shall not live to see the perpetuation of our slavery.” At the instance of Gandhi, the movement remained unswerving in its path of non-violent confrontation with the imperialist power, and became identified by the slogan “British, quit India”. The British Government answered with severe repression, declared Indian National Congress illegal, and also decided to imprison Gandhi, along with other national leaders and countless volunteers. An indirect aftermath of the movement was the formation of the Indian National Army (I.N.A) by Subhash Chandra Bose, famous for his appeal to the nation's youth: “Give me blood and I shall give you freedom.” By 1945, with the growth and spread of revolutionary terrorism, it had become quite clear to Great Britain that its days in India were over.

concrete of its metaphors, and its valorization of political engagement.¹⁹⁷

Kesavan's novel is equally committed to national history yet refuses to adopt a lens that reflects yet another image of the postcolonial Other.

With two competing methods of nation narration within the same fictional tradition, post-Rushdie fiction is an embattled ideological terrain where contesting modes of representation vie with each other to establish dominance. The site of this struggle is as much different versions in different texts, as two versions competing for primacy *within* the same narrative frame. The arrival of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, the second Booker from the subcontinent, belongs to the last category and proves that the struggle against colonialist rhetoric in postcolonial fiction, although announced, is not quite over.

The engagement of the two antagonistic strains of narration in the postcolonial theatre is acted out in the fiction of Arundhati Roy. The "attitudes" at the heart of both these traditions try to block each other out in Roy's narration. Partly following the Postmodern/postcolonial dictate, partly resisting it by giving deep insights into a socio-historical complexity that defies facile homogenization, Roy's fiction proves to be the very terrain in which the two contesting modes of narration struggle for domination. Fashionably cosmopolitan, yet in a certain sense resistant to the demands of cosmopolitan nation-writing, Roy both resists

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¹⁹⁷Josna Rege, "Victim into Protagonist? *Midnight's Children* and the Post-Rushdie Narratives of the Eighties," (*Critical Essays on Salman Rushdie*)276.

and succumbs to the temptations of being enlisted by metropolitan intellectual expectations. The fact that Roy still lives in India also proves that the normative postcolonial nation writing is indeed an *international* product and can be produced even from *within* the boundaries of a nation. In the fifth chapter, devoted to Roy's novel, I will try to show how cultural complexity is *partly* and strategically articulated and/or silenced to narrate a nation, that though sensitive to its own history, still remains within the dominant strain of postcolonial depiction of "national experience".

Afterword: Need for a "native terminology"

As Said points out in *Culture and Imperialism*, "Culture is a sort of theatre where various political and ideological causes engage each other" and postcolonial fiction as cultural form embodies the very "attitudes, references, experiences" at the heart of both imperialism and decolonization. "The power to narrate," Said claims, "or to block other narratives from forming or emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism and constitutes one of the main connections between them." (XIII)

The task facing the postcolonial critic is complex. It is, on one hand, to narrate the intra-historical complexities and intra-identitarian valences of a given national culture with inter-historical perspectives in a way that the two worlds are thought coterminously and coevally through processes of negotiation and

narrativization, so that the act of (Western) “theorizing” or “imaging” is not preconstituted and anchored in the guarantee of an inevitable final meaning. In a truly postcolonial world, cultural explanations need to interrupt, at times even polemically, a tyrannical *meaning* that is often imposed on intra-historical valences to legitimize certain pre-constituted paradigms about an Other culture.

This interventionist strategy involves disavowing the “intellectual sophistication” that is today the hall mark of institutionalized postcolonial studies. It requires a “strategic climb down” from the advanced state of critical/theoretical prowess and a reinscription, even at the cost of being unfashionable, of all literatures in their national context, before beginning the analysis of the (non)visibility of the national framework and its relevance in the Western theoretical context.

The case can be restated thus: different strategies of reading should be available to the postcolonial critic so that “the postcolonial” emerges as something other than oriental spices to be consumed in all their exotic alterity. This is to be done by letting the multi-layered histories *speak* for themselves in terms of interpretive strategies. The postcolonial, not denying its colonial past, should be able, metaphorically speaking, to “speak the other’s language without denouncing (its) own.”¹⁹⁸ That would mean to read a national fiction (Third World/postcolonial/Indian) from within, adopting strategies of cultural interruption without renouncing the reading/ theorizing strategies that have become global

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¹⁹⁸Jacques Derrida: “Racism’s Last Word,” *Critical Inquiry* Autumn. (1985):294.

in the post modern/ postcolonial world. Reading literature from India or other Third World countries should be, as Henry Schwarz points out: “. . . a political practice of reflection of our own situation, a reflection that makes us aware of the gaps and blind spots within the strategic model we have developed, and of what we are doing about them.”¹⁹⁹

Peter Hulme suggests that “postcolonial theory, if it is to develop, must produce “native terminology” by which he means terms of reference that are local, rooted in specific histories.²⁰⁰ In the context of my thesis, it means liberating postcolonial (Indian/Pakistani) fictions from a generalized subcontinental context by teasing out their local and regional strands that resist any easy, formulaic representation of national cultures and literatures.

The objective of my thesis is to risk just such an enterprise, so that (post/colonial) history as a subcontinental lived reality always guides the reading of texts that are produced and circulated as emerging from Third World/ postcolonial locations. The aim is to plot a path of critical resistance to existing strategic models in literary analysis through the exploration of Indo-English novel since Rushdie.

In the following chapter I will analyse the mode of nation writing in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* to underline the ambiguity and inconsistencies of his postcolonial project.

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¹⁹⁹Henry Schwarz, “Provocations towards a Theory of Third World Literature,” *Mississippi Review* 49/50.(1989):198.

²⁰⁰Peter Hulme, “The Locked Heart: The Creole Family Romance of *Wide Sargasso Sea*,” in Barker, Hulme and Iversen (eds), *Colonial discourse/Postcolonial Theory* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1994) 72.

Chapter III

PICKLING NATION – The Art of Salman Rushdie in

Midnight's Children and Shame

‘Meaning is a dead,’ she told Chamcha when she gave him a copy. ‘Why should there be a good, right way of being a wog? That’s Hindu fundamentalism. Actually, we’re all bad Indians. Some worse than the others.’ — *Satanic Verses*, 52

Rushdie’s arrival on the Indo-English literary scene was predicated upon a conscious political positioning vis à vis the West, the continuation of which is to be seen in his numerous conscious attempts to articulate a politically viable postcolonial identity. Reflecting on the “problems of definition” for a postcolonial Indian writer in England in a 1983 essay, Rushdie asks the following question:

What does it mean to be an Indian outside India? How can culture be preserved without becoming ossified? How should we discuss the need for change within ourselves and our community without seeming to play into the hands of our racial enemies? What are the consequences, both spiritual and practical, of refusing to make concessions to Western ideas and practices? What are the consequences of embracing those ideas and practices and turning away from ones that came with us?²⁰¹

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²⁰¹Salman Rushdie, “The Indian Writer in England,” in *The Eye of the Beholder: Essays on Indian writing*, ed. Maggie Butcher (London: Commonwealth institute, 1983) 81.

The hostility towards “racial enemies” receives a meaningful expression in his 1984 essay “Outside the Whale”, in which Rushdie consciously announces a polemical postcolonial agenda. In her essay “The Politics of Post-colonial Identity in Rushdie,” Anurandha Dingwaney Needham has the following comment to make on the radical postcolonial stance that Rushdie adopts in his essay. She writes:

What interests me particularly is the significance of Rushdie’s intervention in terms of its *timing* and its *tone*. “Outside the whale” follows his much-touted appearance on the international literary scene via *Midnight’s Children* (1980) and *Shame* (1983). (*Midnight’s Children* had already been awarded the prestigious Booker Prize; *Shame* was nominated for it.) By the time “Outside the Whale” appeared in 1984, Rushdie had acquired fame and the stature and authority that usually accompanies it. His fame, moreover, ensured that his intervention would be heard/read.²⁰²

Needham sees the belligerence of Rushdie’s discourse in the essay as a strategic mode of intervening into a hegemonic Western discourse that allows the indigenous people from the subcontinent only “walk-ons” (“Whale,” 128).

The overtly political significance of his rhetorical gesture in the essay can hardly be missed, especially as it hinges on making “a devil of a racket,”²⁰³ both

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²⁰² Anurandha Dingwaney Needham, “The politics of Post-Colonial Identity in Rushdie,” in *Reading Rushdie* ed. D.M. Fletcher (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994) 147.

²⁰³ See my discussion on Salman Rushdie, “Outside the Whale” in the previous chapter.

in terms of post-colonial rupture and the artistic engagement with postcolonial resistance.

The rupture with the colonial past is not only exemplified in *Midnight's Children*, in the figure of the protagonist who is “handcuffed to history”, but offers a perspective, also in *The Moor's Last Sigh*:

Christians, Portuguese and Jews; Chinese tiles promoting god-less views; pushy ladies, skirts not saris, Spanish shenanigans. . . can this really be India? *Bharat-Mata*,²⁰⁴ *Hindusthan-hamara*,²⁰⁵ is this the place? War has just been declared. Nehru and All-India Congress are demanding that the British must accept their demand for independence as a precondition for Indian support in the war effort; Jinnah and the Muslim League are refusing to support that demand; Mr. Jinnah is busily articulating the history-changing notion that there are two nations in the subcontinent, the one Hindu, the other Mussulman(87).

In a *Time* magazine article (part of the ado in the western press surrounding the fiftieth anniversary of Indian Independence), Rushdie stated that the “idea of India” has been central to his life and writing. He also argued that despite the vast complexity of the Indian subcontinent, the idea of India as a single entity remains viable, because “the country has taken the modern view of the self and enlarged it to encompass almost 1 billion souls....it works

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²⁰⁴ *Bharat-Mata* is the equivalent of ‘Mother India’ in most Indian languages. (*Bharat* = India, *Mata* = mother).

²⁰⁵ *Hindusthan-Hamara* means my own Hindusthan (India). It is a phrase taken from the famous patriotic number by the poet Iqbal, who later became the national poet of Pakistan.

because the individual sees his own nature writ large in the nature of the state.”²⁰⁶ Indeed, Saleem, the protagonist-narrator’s personal biography, beginning with his birth at the moment of Indian independence at midnight on August 15, 1947, becomes an obvious analog to the history of the postcolonial Indian state.

Yet, the manner in which this history has been narrated has not allowed critics to reach a general agreement on the significance of Rushdie’s engagement with history in the novel. In a pithy summing up of Rushdie’s nation writing in *Midnight’s Children*, Keith Booker points out:

The political critique of *Midnight’s Children* is aimed at Indian society after Indian independence, not before, and the villains of the piece are not Thomas Babington Macaulay and General Dyer but Indian politicians such as Indira and Sanjay Gandhi.²⁰⁷

In the hands of Salman Rushdie the narration of India and Pakistan is an opportunity to explore the post-colonial responsibility . The story he proposes to tell is of a nation coming to think of itself as something more dignified than a corollary of the British empire-building process. But the dignity of that narrative is challenged as it cannot but articulate itself in a rhetoric of shame . The central

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²⁰⁶Salman Rushdie, “India at Five-O,” (11 August 1997). For a similar argument about the viability of India as a political entity, see Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1997.

²⁰⁷M. Keith Booker, “*Midnight’s Children*, History and Complexity: Reading Rushdie after the Cold War,” in Keith Booker (ed) *Critical Essays on Salman Rushdie* (New York: J K Hall & Co, 1997) 294.

irony of his narrative has been pointed out by Timothy Brennan in the following terms:

In fact, the central irony of his novels is that independence has damaged Indian spirits by proving that 'India' can act as abominably as the British did. In a kind of metafictional extravaganza, he treats the heroism of nationalism bitterly and comically because it always seems to him to evolve into the nationalist demagoguery of a caste of domestic sell-outs and power brokers.²⁰⁸

The end result of such a complex "patriotic mimesis" turns post-colonial celebration into postcolonial mourning, and implicitly validates the imperialist claims about the positional inferiority of the once subjected race.

There are many reasons for Rushdie's critical prominence in the West, the most important of which is that he employs in his fiction particular techniques and strategies that have an established currency in the West. As Keith Booker points out: "His use of irony, parody, and exuberant carnivalesque imagery and language have for many critics made him a paragon of postmodernism." (Keith Booker, 1997, 2). This aspect of his work that was also pointed out by Sara Suleri in her critique of *Shame*: "The genre of fantasy gestures toward a western audience, long since sophisticated at reading the language of the surreal."²⁰⁹

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²⁰⁸Timothy Brennan, "National Fictions, Fictional Nations," in *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation* (London: Macmillan, 1989) 27.

²⁰⁹Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India* (Chicago, London: Chicago UP) 179.

But the most important reason for Rushdie's popularity in the West is the 'political' engagement in his novels with the history of the Indian subcontinent. Rushdie has gained prominence not simply because of his literary strategies, but because of *the manner* in which he deploys these strategies to narrate the history of the subcontinent. Not only do his novels feed admirably the multicultural, ethnocentric/ postcolonial cravings of western literary scholarship, but his representation of those cultures in the *political idiom* of the West makes him a very welcome arrival in the western academic market. His role has been vital in this field, especially for his ability to draw from the cultural reservoir of India and Pakistan, the countries in which he can claim his roots. Rushdie's special cultural hybridity as a Muslim from India who has lived most of his life in Great Britain has been particularly convenient in this regard, as he can truly speak a language that is wonderfully suited to match a western idiom with an "eastern" subject. Writing in such a register is to write from an in-between space, claiming a nationhood while announcing an alienation from it. Questions of allegiance and identity are thus conveniently obfuscated as the nation is made into a discourse of convenience. In the metropolitan postcolonial context, such a discourse is to write about a mysterious Orient that attracts as it repels, bringing back to the literary scene the colonial anxieties about other nations and matching them with a hyperbolic admiration for its ancient culture. This neo-Orientalist trend has been the central ideological issue of postcolonial (Indian) narratives and has been both contested and affirmed in the works of the post-Rushdie generation.

The troping of a certain “nationness” as demonstrated in (Indian) postcolonial theoretical expositions can be seen as a neo-Orientalist project as discussed in the previous two chapters. The ideological collaborations between postcolonial theory and fictional narrative can be traced to their privileging categories such as imagined nations and “in-between-nesses” of speaking subjects, together with their tendency to use their narratives as corroborative models of Oriental Otherness. In performances that can be seen in theoretical and fictional narratives such as these, narrative strategies are deployed that obfuscate and mutilate national histories with a clear view to entertain a metropolitan audience.

It is a charge leveled against Rushdie, especially by Indian critics. Asha Kaushik, for instance, expresses concern that Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* shows an “essential western tendency to present India as either exotic or antiquated.” Kaushik’s charges are echoed by the following comment of Kumkum Sangari : ²¹⁰

The narrative (*Midnight's Children*) embraces all mythologies in an effort to activate an essentially plural or secular conception of Indianness; it even tries to grasp Indianness as if it were a torrent of religious, class and regional diversity rather than a complex articulation of cultural difference, contradiction and political use that can scarcely be idealized. Through the diversity of its narrative techniques and the diversity it seeks to record, *Midnight's Children* effects something

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²¹⁰See Asha Kaushik, *Politics, Aesthetics And Culture: A Study of the Indo Anglian Political Novel*. (New Delhi, 1988, 111). Kumkum Sangari, “The Politics of the Possible,” *Cultural Critique* 6. (1987): 181.

that verges on an indigenized “tropicalization” of the subcontinent.

The material nation in such cases is either summarily dismissed or divested of its sociopolitical context. What takes its place is a nation remembered and forgotten, carefully tailored to please the tourist gaze of the west. The making of Salman Rushdie is a product of this strategy and the installation of his method of nation narration as the only viable form is to be understood in the context of games played out under the regimes of power and knowledge.

Something that has to be made clear at the start is the unquestioned mastery with which the virtual nation is portrayed in Rushdie, the manner in which rare insights into national history make the simulated nationness stand in for the thing in itself. Critics such as Parameswaran and Srivastava, among many others, comment on the treatment of history in Rushdie's works. Parameswaran draws attention both to Rushdie's productive use of historical information and his attempt to comment on the nature of history itself, particularly in ways that challenge or even “spoof” traditional historical accounts. Srivastava compares Rushdie's narration of history with the act of ‘writing’ history as an ideological act, designed to support political or moral systems. She goes on to comment that “What Saleem attempts by writing the novel is to avoid the confining selective process involved in chronological history-telling, and

instead to follow the Indian urge to encapsulate the whole of reality" (75).²¹¹

What makes Rushdie's narratives poignant is the writer's oneness with the culture narrated. His familiarity with what constitutes a regional/ national culture increases the credibility of these narratives. Therefore the deliberate strategy of decontextualization in these narratives is easily overlooked, even by the most astute of critics.

The intimate cultural details that constitute the life of a community, weaving together the minutest of religious and social practices make these narratives authoritative in the eyes of the reader. In the thickness of the regional details that the credibility of the narrator is established:

August in Bombay: a month of festivals, the month of Krishna's birthday and Coconut day; and this year—fourteen hours to go, thirteen, twelve – there was an extra festival on the calendar, a new myth to celebrate, because a nation which had never existed was about to win its freedom, catapulting us into a world which, although it had five thousand years of history, although it had invented the game of chess and traded with middle kingdom Egypt, was nevertheless quite imaginary: into a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will – except in a dream we all agreed to dream; it was a mass fantasy shared in varying degrees by Bengali and Punjabi, Madrasi and Jat, and would periodically need the sanctification of and renewal which could only be provided by rituals of blood" (*Midnight's Children* 129-130)

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²¹¹Uma Parameswaran, "Handcuffed to History: Salman Rushdie's Art," *ARIEL* 14(4). (1983): 34-45. Aruna Srivastava, "The Empire Writes Back": Language And History in *Shame* and *Midnight's Children*", *ARIEL* 20(4). (1989): 62-78. The relationship between history and narrative in Rushdie is discussed in numerous critical works and articles. I shall mention only some of those I found relevant to my thesis. See Brennan, Keith Booker, Parameswaran, Reder, Rege, Srivastava, in the Bibliography. All of them discuss the relationship of Rushdie's narratives to the history of the Indian subcontinent.

In passages such as this the twin tendencies of claiming and disclaiming a nation are well illustrated. The mention of the humid August in Bombay in the month of “Krishna’s birthday” and “coconut day” locates the narrator within the cultural matrix and confers on him the right to narrate a postcolonial nation. This legitimization is put to use in defining Indian independence respectively as a “dream” and “mass fantasy”, making a tumultuous moment of history of the post independence years “rituals” of (human) sacrifice practiced supposedly by non-western, idolatrous, communities. Seen from the perspective of a discourse of progress, the political experimentations are written up as a mere nothing. The decadence of the ‘here and now’ is then contrasted to a ‘classical’ India with “five thousand years of History”. Such aesthetic strategies, hallmarks of Rushdie’s style, are summed up by Timothy Brennan as “politico-exotic” (Brennan 1997, 205), a strategy of marketing Oriental otherness.

Before I go into a detailed analysis of what constitutes the “politico-exotic” in Rushdie, I propose to analyze *Midnight’s Children* and *Shame* to demonstrate how nation is performed in the two most publicized novels from the subcontinent.

“Handcuffed to History”: *Midnight’s Children*

Salman Rushdie begins *Midnight’s Children* with the birth of Saleem Sinai—an event that happened “once upon a time.”

I was born in the city of Bombay. . . once upon a time.
No, that won’t do, there’s no getting away from the date:
I was born in Doctor Narlikar’s Nursing Home on Aug 15
1947. And the time? The time matters too. Well then: at

night. No, it's important to be more. . . On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. . . oh spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world. . . A few seconds later, my father broke his big toe but his accident was a mere trifle when set beside what had befallen me in that benighted moment, because thanks to the occult tyranny of those blandly saluting clocks I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country".(9)

It is clear from this humorous opening with the announcement of the narrator/protagonist's birth, that the novel will be in part picaresque: that is, the narrator will be conscious of his roguish performance before an audience and will try to hold it in thrall with action abounding with wit and mischief. This striking similarity with a picaresque opening also suggests to the reader that the narrator is a *trickster* who will occasionally *dupe* his audience into sharing his point of view about history as live performance. Together with this, the reader is given to understand that the protagonist is as old as post-independence India. The contrived collapsing of the two births allows the narrator to talk about the history of the subcontinent even as he narrates his own life, in the same informal comic vein, emphasizing, as the *picaro* does, the decadence of a world which makes it impossible for him to rise above his debauched, deformed existence. The narrative makes some attempt to anchor itself in space and time ("I was born in Bombay") and then escapes into the spirit and language of fairy tale with a "once upon a time". The phrase casts its spell upon the readers who are by now transported to an imaginary realm where the history of a nation blends with the

unreal, shifting lives of the protagonist to create a world whose accuracy not to be questioned or verified.

Saleem Sinai, and the family history that he recounts with such precision, are blown to bits when the reader learns how, for no apparent motive, the nurse switched babies at the nursing home, transferring the bastard child of the British gentleman Methwold and the attractive wife of a poor street performer to Amina Sinai, Saleem's adoptive mother, and giving hers to the impoverished entertainer, to be raised as Shiva! Yet, once baby Saleem is with his unsuspecting mother Amina Sinai, his relations with her and the family influence his life as well as his story. But the switching of identities of Saleem and Shiva is a forewarning that things are not what they appear to be. In fact, the narrator (Saleem) is the only person empowered with the truth, and he will keep this truth from his reader as long as he thinks fit. The reader is thus at the mercy of Saleem Sinai the trickster- narrator, who not only decides *what* is to be told but also *how*, and what precise incidents or characters are to be highlighted or suppressed to fit the dominant mode of the narrative. Therefore, the reader consents to a willing suspension of disbelief as he goes along with the narrator's presentation of two lives: that of a nation and that of the individual whose life serves as a metaphor for a doomed, new born nation.

There is no doubt in the reader's mind that Saleem is a shifty narrator, a fact that adds to the postmodern aspect of the novel. Saleem acknowledges his misdating of Gandhi's death and of the election of 1957. He admits equivocally, "To tell you the truth, I lied about Shiva's death"(427). The narration in

Midnight's Children is complicated by the fact that Saleem fails to recognize the difference between a "truth" and a "lie," as is revealed by this paradoxical statement. As a result his rambling , absurd analysis of "the passive-metaphorical, passive-literal, active-metaphorical and active-literal links between India's history and his family's" (238) problematizes the veracity of both. Rushdie clearly discourages reading *Midnight's Children* as a straight allegory. He comments that, "allegory is a kind of disease" and goes on to add "the book clearly has allegorical elements, but they don't work in any kind of exact formal sense; you cannot translate the structure of the book into a secret meaning, the book is not a code."²¹² Rushdie's refusal to make *Midnight's Children* yield a secret *meaning* is justified by what the narrator has to say in the novel itself: "In a country[Pakistan] where truth is what it is instructed to be, reality quite literally ceases to exist" (326).

Dismantling the traditional binarism of the real and the unreal, the true and the false, Rushdie narrates a strange tale where truth is reduced to a matter of belief and where history and fiction are interchangeable. In *Midnight's Children* even something as certain as standard time is put into question. A character responds to the fact that Pakistani time runs half an hour ahead of that of India: "If they can change time just like that, what's real anymore? I ask you? What is true?(79). Kelly Hewson notes that "Saleem, we can see, will not lay claim to absolute knowledge of, or offer total explanations for anything. His art

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²¹²Salman Rushdie, "Midnight's Children and Shame," *Kunapipi* 8 no 1. (1984): 3

has a deliberate air of uncertainty and unreliability about it". Nancy E Batty believes that "Only future exegesis which takes into account the dialectic between the historical and the literary dimensions of *Midnight's Children* can hope to measure the efficacy and effects of Rushdie's project".²¹³

Amidst this erasure of the dividing line between 'true' and 'false', 'real' and 'unreal', Saleem lies to the readers about his parentage or keeps the truth a secret for close to a quarter of the book. And when he does reveal the secret of his birth to Padma, his lover and listener, Saleem the provider of "clues" also assures her that "*it made no difference*"(118). Saleem's artistic truths are personal, and they are anything but "perfect". After admitting to lying, Saleem confesses: "That's why I fibbed, anyway; for the first time, I fell victim to the temptation of every autobiographer, to the illusion that since the past exists only in one's memories and the words which strive vainly to encapsulate them, it is possible to create events simply by saying they occurred"(427). The reader realizes in retrospect that Saleem's story about family likenesses was nothing but a fabrication:

On Aadam Aziz the nose assumed a patriarchal aspect.
On my mother, it looked noble and a little long suffering;
on my aunt Emerald, snobbish; on my aunt Alia,
intellectual; on my uncle Hanif it was the organ of an
unsuccessful genius. . . the Brass monkey escaped it

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²¹³Kelly Hewson, "Opening up the Universe a Little More: Salman Rushdie and the Migrant as Story-teller," *Span* 29. (1989): 89. Nancy. E. Batty, "The Art of Suspense: Rushdie's 1001 (Mid-)Night's Children" *ARIEL* 18, No 3. (1987): 64.

completely; but on me- on me, it was something else again. But I mustn't reveal all my secrets(14).

As John Stephens points out in his article "To Tell you the Truth I lied," the reader has no idea at this point what or who the "Brass monkey" is, and no apparent grounds for believing that "who would have believed..." is a real rather than a rhetorical question. Further, there is no cause to see a literal rather than a purely idiomatic meaning in "something else again" and, therefore, no grounds to suspect that "all my secrets" implies more than a narrator's normal preoccupation with creating suspense. In Stephens's view, more important is the account of Saleem's amnesia. First the reader is told he was hit on the head by a flying spittoon. Later, Saleem apologizes retrospectively for the apparent exploitation of a cinematic motif in the incident:

With some embarrassment I am forced to admit that amnesia is the kind of gimmick regularly used by our lurid film makers. Bowing my head slightly, I accept that my life has taken on, yet again, the tone of a Bombay talkie; after all, leaving on one side the vexed issue of reincarnation, there is only a finite number of methods of achieving rebirth. (350)

According to Stephens,"the relationship between the two accounts of Saleem's amnesia is a microcosm of the operation of retrospectivity and

deconstruction in *Midnight's Children*”²¹⁴ In the midst of these inconsistencies, carefully sustained, the reader is assured that statements such as “ history is meaningless” or “emptied of history” are, likewise, not to be taken too seriously as the claims may be reversed as abruptly as the story of Saleem’s life.²¹⁵ The status of history is, like the rest of Saleem’s story, unsure as it is reduced to a “mouthful too large” for “ten-year-old gullets”(229). Or, history is a series of fictive reincarnations for the narrator in which one sees bits and fragments of post-independence Indian society, highly coloured and, to borrow Rushdie’s own metaphor, seen through a perforated sheet:

At one time I was a landlord in Uttar Pradesh, my belly rolling over my pyjama cord as I ordered serfs to set my surplus grains on fire. . . at another moment I was starving to death in Orissa, where there was food shortage as usual. . . I occupied briefly, the mind of a Congress party worker, bribing a village schoolteacher to throw his weight behind the Party of Gandhi and Nehru. . . also the thought of a Keralian peasant who had decided to vote communist.”(174)

Yet, it is not difficult to see that history, or its material constituents, for the most part, is never given primacy over the fictitious tale of the birth and the final dissolution of Saleem Sinai. Spanning India from Kashmir to Bombay, from

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²¹⁴John Stephens: “To tell the truth, I lied”: Retrospectivity and Deconstruction as Strategies of Reading Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight's Children*,” in *The Given Condition: Essays in Postcolonial Literature* (ed) Peter Simpson, *Span* 21.(Christ Church: New Zealand, 1985) 196-197.

²¹⁵On the subject see Michael Reder, “ Rewriting History and Identity: the Reinvention of Myth, Epic and Allegory in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight's Children*,” in Keith Booker (ed) *Critical Essays on Salman Rushdie* (New York: J K Hall & Co,1997) 225-249.

Karachi to Dacca, the novel covers the tumultuous history of a nation born and divided since 1947. Discussing the years of despotic rule by Indira Gandhi, for example, Rushdie arranges history and fiction to make a strange product in which the history of the eccentric Sinais mingles with the story about a no less eccentric nation. It is clearly a signature of this strategy that actual characters such as Nehru or Indira, General Manekshaw or Niazi are part and parcel of the novel's fictional world, as fictitious as the remarkable Sinais.

What happens in *Midnight's Children*, to use Rushdie's own trope, is a "*chutnification*" in which such raw historical materials are only secondary to the function of 'the eyes' and 'a nose', "capable of discerning hidden languages of *what- must-be -pickled*, its humors and messages and emotions. . . (460,emphasis mine). Saleem admits to the "inevitable distortions of [this] pickling process" and its role in immortalizing "fruits, vegetables, fish, vinegar, spices" and history:

To pickle is to give immortality, after all: fish, vegetables,...embalmed in spice – and – vinegar; a certain alteration, a slight intensification of taste, is a small matter surely? The act is to change the flavor in degree, but not in kind;. . . to give it shape and form, that is to say meaning. . .

One day, perhaps, the world may taste the pickles of history. They may be too strong for some palates. . . I hope nevertheless that it will be possible to say of them that they possess the authentic taste of truth.(461)

By a clever touch of language, the “distortions”, “alteration” and “intensification” of material ingredients become commensurate with the ingredients themselves, the heightening of flavors and tastes becoming the sole guarantor of the authenticity of things subjected to the pickling process. The “pickles of history”, in short, become more desirable than history itself, because more attractive to the palate.

The trope of “chutnification” may be matched with another trope from the novel to explain what Rushdie does to intensify and immortalize the history of the subcontinent. Chutneys vie with “Hindi film” for the status of dominant metaphor for Rushdie’s narrative technique. The *immortal* pickles leak into *lurid* Hindi films as the narrative describes the picaresque journey from Kashmir to Karachi, from Dacca to Calcutta through successive phases of life and history. Just as Saleem describes the various stages of “chutnification” with obvious relish, he also gives a very succulent summary of “Hindi film” in his narrative. “Lurid”, “melodrama piling upon melodrama”, with “too much incident”, a stereotypical Hindi film is described vividly in the rantings of Pia, the actress wife of Hanif the failed director:

. . . put in dances, or exotic locations! Make your villains villainous, why not, make heroes like men!...put in a little comedy routine, a little dance for your Piya to do, and tragedy and drama also; that is what the public is wanting!(242)

Hanif's failure and his subsequent suicide is in fact a fitting finale to his commercial failure in the Bombay film industry. His hubris: becoming the "high priest of reality";

Sonny Jim, he informed me, "this damn country has been dreaming for five thousand years. It's about time it started waking up" Hanif was fond of railing against princes and demons, gods and heroes, against, in fact, the entire iconography of Bombay film; in the temple of illusions, he had become the high priest of reality; while I, conscious of my miraculous nature, which involved me beyond all mitigation in (Hanif- despised) myth- life of India, bit my lip and didn't know where to look." (244)

The narrative's complete immersion in the *temple of illusions* is reiterated again and again in the course of the narrative, by, among other things, the narrator's choice of vocabulary. "Nobody from Bombay" says Saleem, should be without a basic film vocabulary.²¹⁶

Saleem's own choice gives his narration a frame of reference that completely rules out realistic representation of any kind, making his narration precisely what uncle Hanif failed to deliver: a punch of comedy with a dash of tragedy and drama. Saleem "zooms out slowly into long shot" and allows the "sound track music to drown his words ;" permits himself to insert a Bombay talkie style close-up; "superimpose turbulent long shots of street riots, medium

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²¹⁶In his essay "Imaginary Homelands" (1982), Rushdie comments: "The movement towards the cinema screen is a metaphor for the narrative's movement through time towards the present, and the book itself, as it nears contemporary events, quite deliberately loses deep perspective, becomes more 'partial'. . ." (130).

shots of burning buses and blazing English language libraries owned by the British Council and the United States Information service.” History is thus subsumed into melodrama, drowned by characters, incidents, sounds and colours until, as Saleem states, “illusion itself becomes reality” and satisfies Saleem’s “desperate need for meaning.” (116)

The *meaning* as well as the process by which it is constituted take their cue from the movie world. The recapitulations of incidents and the foreshadowing of what is to come are described by Saleem as “movie trailers” (346) in one of his telltale cinematic metaphors. According to Nancy. E. Batty,

Saleem’s employment of trailers. . . is pervasive, and it is complemented by yet another cinematic narrative device which Saleem does not consciously identify. A close examination of *Midnight’s Children* reveals that the chapter by chapter progression of the novel resembles the structure of an episodic film, or serial, in which synopsis of previous events provide a rhythmic counterpoint to the tantalizing teasers which anticipate events to come.²¹⁷

With a style that approximates the conditions of pickle-making and Indian commercial blockbusters, Rushdie writes the history of a nation to which the narrator-protagonist is handcuffed, so that the narrator’s life, replete with melodrama, becomes the nation’s and its tragicomic significance becomes a national one. Hindi films and pickles leak into each other in Rushdie’s narrative.

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²¹⁷Nancy. E Batty; “The Art of Suspense: Rushdie’s 1001 (Mid) Nights,” *ARIEL* 18.3. (1987): 56-57. It is a strategy pursued methodically also in *Shame*.

The process of leakage contaminates his discourse on nation and makes it a composite product of two industries with a distinctly *Indian* flavor; pickle making and cinema! Such a “writery” that blends flavours and shots transforms national history into a ready consumer good like the “thirty jars of pickles waiting to be unleashed on an amnesiac nation”(460).

What Saleem unleashes on his readers, metaphorically, are pepper pots and vinegar that scald even as they spike up the recipe of nation writing. The tangy ingredients leak into Saleem’s narrative and taint all his shots – about national villains and buffoons. With a stubbornness and determination that Saleem might have inherited from his mother, he dismisses other possibilities of narrating a nation:²¹⁸ “Smelling” the pickles fuses slowly with “smelling” putrefaction and corruption. Olfactory suggestions slowly turn the reader’s attention to more “tarnished perfumes”:

A long hot dusty bus ride through streets beginning to bubble with the excitement of the coming Independence Day, although I can smell other, more tarnished perfumes; disillusion, venality, cynicism. . . the nearly thirty-one- year-old myth of freedom is no longer what it was. New myths are needed; but that’s none of my business. (457-458)

The *tarnished perfumes* confirm a general smell of decay in the novel, an ambience of rottenness and disintegration that affects not just the narrator-

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²¹⁸Saleem’s grandmother feeds Amina with “fish salans of stubbornness”, “biriyanis of determination”.

protagonist but other characters in the novel as well. Grandfather Aziz's bones crumble until his legs will no longer carry him. Amina disintegrates with guilt and verruca pain. Ahmed breaks under the combined pressure of jinn, tetrapods, frozen assets and reproductive failure, post-independence pallor and a stroke. Parvati begins to "rot". Picture Singh collapses like a fallen tree. Hummingbird is butchered by assassins and Musa inflicts himself with leprosy. Central to all this pain and putrefaction is the disintegration of Saleem himself at the end of the novel, a disintegration that he describes with a masochistic verve

Watch me explode, bones splitting, breaking under the awful pressure of the crowd, bag of bones falling down down down, just as once in Jallianwalla. . . only a broken creature spilling pieces of itself into the street, because I have been so-many too-many persons, life unlike syntax allows one more than three, and at last somewhere the striking of a clock, twelve chimes, release.(463)

Like a pickle that has been over-marinated with vinegar and pepper Saleem's narrative overwhelms its readers with an abundance of characters and incidents until, unable to sustain the pressure, it disintegrates. Things come to an end, like a Hindi film with a hasty, improbable resolution. Since the narrator replicates the nation, his final dissolution forewarns the reader about a similar explosion of the national body, rotting with disillusion, venality and cynicism.

This ending in negation is not simply accidental in *Midnight's Children*, nor is it decided by the somewhat uncommon demands of Rushdie's plot. It is

integral to Rushdie's discourse on nation, and to his refusal to propagate myths of renewal. Significantly, negation also characterizes the conclusion of *Shame*.²¹⁹ The narrative's impotence, as Rushdie might put it, is active-metaphorical. The fact that Rushdie's narrators are either impotent or have no legitimate heir is not just a fictional accident. It is also an indicator of the novel's refusal to generate any other narrative possibilities that might 'talk' about a possible resuscitation.

The Palimpsest Country of *Shame*

In more ways than one, *Shame* is a sequel to *Midnight's Children*. First, it picks up the narrative threads from the earlier novel and completes the other half of the story promised, that of "the diseased reality of (my) Pakistani years." The narrative meanders through successive military regimes of the post Jinnah years to the execution of Z. A Bhutto. Second, it follows the same narrative strategy of weaving together a national (melo)drama with the family saga of the fictitious Iskandars and Harappas. And, finally, it follows the same strategy of "distortions", "alteration" and "intensification" to develop a fantastical tale about an imagined country that ends in a "nothingness of the scene."

But there are differences as well. Though *Shame* follows the same method of simultaneous narration of individual lives and history, the domestic events are

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²¹⁹James Harrison makes the same observation in his book. See Harrison, 52.

more ingrained in the political history of the supposedly fictional country. The characters are national leaders who, instead of being “handcuffed” to history, act as active agents in the decline of the nation. Yet the politics of *Shame* is touched by a greater sense of the unreal than that found in the earlier novel. *Shame* takes Rushdie’s narrative technique a stage further by hesitating to state the narrative’s relation to “fact”:

The country in this story is not Pakistan, or not quite. There are two countries, real and fictional, occupying the same space, or almost the same space. My story, my fictional country exists at a slight angle to reality. . .
(24)

Rushdie thus consciously repudiates all claims to writing something even remotely close to a “realistic novel” about Pakistan and instead, decides to narrate “a sort of modern fairy-tale.”²²⁰ Which will provide a distorted reflection of that reality. The “slight angle to reality” appears to be an understatement as the narrator begins retrospectively in the fourteenth century of the Hegiran calendar:

All these happened in the fourteenth century. I’m using the Hegiran calendar, naturally: don’t imagine that stories of this type always take place long long ago. Time cannot be homogenized as easily as milk , and in these parts, until quite recently, thirteen hundreds was

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²²⁰See Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India* (Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1992) 180.

in full swing.(6)

Rushdie's disclaimer about the space of his novel being "not Pakistan" is matched by a fictitious time: "fourteenth century or not quite". It is against this fantastical backdrop that the tale of the "duelists", Raza Hyder and Iskandar Harappa is narrated. All the characters in this version of *The Arabian Nights* are genealogically rooted in this "blood jungle", as Bilquis tells us. Three moments are of immense significance in the lives of these characters as well as the plot. They are the birth of Omar Khayyam, the birth of Sufiya Zinobia, "the wrong miracle", and the entry of little Mir Harappa (the cousin of Isky Harappa), which finally completes the narrative destinies of the Hyders and the Harappas, especially that of Iskandar Harappa. Omar Khayyam's birth was by a mysterious process of inversion of reality:

Our hero, Omar Khayyam first drew breath in that improbable mansion which was too large for its rooms to be counted; opened his eyes; and saw, upside down through an open window, the macabre peaks of the Impossible Mountains on the horizon.(14)

Omar Khayyam's "improbable" world is the fictional world of *Shame*. It is significant that in both the novels, the worlds are half lit, a grey zone of light and darkness that highlights the illusory nature of things perceived. As Rao observes, the world of shadows reflects "a dubious impossible reality" (Rao,

1992,72). As the narrative proceeds, Omar Khayyam, the consciously proclaimed hero, becomes more and more a prisoner of illusions as his insomnia takes a serious turn:

by this time he is sleeping barely two and a half hours at night, but the dream of falling off the world's end still troubles him from time to time. . . at such times he is assailed by a terrible vertigo, as if he were on top of a crumbling mountain and then he leans heavily on his sword concealing cane to prevent himself from falling.(137)

Shame, more than *Midnight's Children*, hints at a world that is blurred, full of ominous possibilities. At the center of it is the "wrong miracle", Sufiya Zinobia, a creature belonging to the world of dark forebodings. The union of Sufiya and Omar is realized in a setting that inspires terror:

Omar Khayyam finally screwed up the courage to ask for Sufiya Zinobia's hand. . . when he arrived, grey, respectable fifty, at her marble home and made his extraordinary request, the impossibly old and decrepit divine Maulana Dawood let out a scream that made Raza Hyder look around for demons.(173)

As the narrative progresses in a world of contrasting parallels, the mystery of this sensational world increases until it acquires a cruel character amidst tales of betrayal, suicide and murder. The narrative both contrasts and collapses the domestic and the political in a way that is not found in *Midnight's Children*. Whereas in the earlier novel actual political characters like Nehru or "the widow"

remain on the margins of the plot and retain their separate identities from other fictional characters, in *Shame* the Hyders and the Harappas clearly hint at the rivalry between Z.A Bhutto and General Zia Ul Huq albeit with some amount of “chutnification”. Raza Hyder’s rise precedes that of Iskandar Harappa just as that of Bhutto preceded that of Zia, and the meteoric rise of the two constitutes the national history of Rushdie’s fairy land. Raza Hyder’s personal life gains a tragic intensity as his political career becomes more and more glorious. The tragedy comes in the shape of yet another daughter! Simultaneously there is an intensification of tragedy in Rani Harappa’s life:

Plus daughter, minus husband, she is stranded in the backyard of this universe Mohenjo, the Harappa country estate in Sind, stretching from horizon to horizon, affected by a chronic water shortage, populated by laughing scornful monsters. . . (100)

The entry of little Mir Harappa, the cousin, is the third important political event in *Shame*. He enters as a looter and destroyer of the Harappa mansion. As again in the fluctuating and alternating fortunes of the two families, Raza Hyder’s achievements in the gas fields follow his own domestic tragedy:

Raza Hyder led his gas soldiers out to the needle valley after a week after which their activities had so alarmed the town that the state chief minister Gichki had ordered Raza to get moving double quick before the stock of virgins available to the bachelors of Q dwindled to a point at which the moral stability of the region would be

jeopardized. (134)

The patterned biographies of Hyder and Harappa are sustained carefully to the end of the narrative. In a series of alternating drifts of fortune between the spheres of political glory and domestic disaster, Raza and Hyder fulfil their narrative destinies as fictional lessons of a national Shame. Raza Hyder's case is more poignant, as the shame turns into a self-inflicted violence when Sufiya Zinobia's mysterious mental retardation increases in alarming proportions.

As the narrative traces the rise of Raza Hyder in the political sphere from the Minister of Education, Information and Tourism to being, finally, the President of the anonymous country, it also reduces the achievement to a mere nothing by the simultaneous disintegration of his daughter Sufiya into a beast. She develops into a creature of cannibalistic interests when she almost kills Talvar Ul Haq on the day of his marriage to her sister "Good news". Even Omar Khayyam, her physician husband, fails to rein in the beast in her. The mysterious corruption of her mind seems beyond control:

It was impossible not to believe that a struggle was taking place, Sufiya Zinobia against the Beast; what was left of that poor girl had hurled itself against the creature, that the wife was protecting the husband against herself.(260)

The narrator's claiming of Sufiya Zinobia as his own ("my" Sufiya Zinobia) makes her more than a character in this great saga. She also acquires a

metaphorical status in the narrative itself as the *shame* that must turn into a self-destructive violence in order to articulate itself. It is significant that the disappearance of Sufiya Zinobia coincides with the conclusion of the novel, intensifying the beauty and the bestiality of its final outcome.

The Hyders and the Harappas remain inseparable as much in life as in death. The pattern is clearly suggested by the narrator himself: "Once upon a time there were two families, their destinies inseparable even by death"(169). At the moment of Iskandar Harappa's execution, President Raza Hyder has to come to grips with the suicide of his second daughter "Good News", after the birth of her thirty-two children. Harappa's death by hanging is already established in Raza Hyder's family history, making two domestic histories coalesce into a pattern of alternating rise and fall. It is a pattern that echoes the career graphs of Zia Ul Huq and Bhutto.

This carefully architected piece of fantasy, as if unable to sustain itself, withdraws like the turbulent inner world of Sufiya Zinobia into a world of darkness – the metaphorical Nishapur – and then simply crumbles. Characters disappear or are reduced to phantoms. The Shakil sisters disappear like characters in a fairy tale:

. . . but the Shakil sisters had vanished and nobody would ever see them again, not in Nishapur, nor anywhere on earth. They had deserted their home but they kept their vows of retreat, crumbling perhaps, into powder under the rays of the sun, or growing wings and flying off into the impossible Mountains in the west."(315)

The finishing touch to this disappearing world is the dissolution of Omar Khayyam, who crumbles under the pressure of his chimeric, turbulent fantasy world.

Shame appears to be the narrative strategy of the novel, and a trope with multiple meanings. The “male plot”, “the masculine tale” of “sexual rivalry, ambition, power patronage and betrayal” crumbles as the overwhelming *shame* of narrating such a tale of feudal decadence overpowers the narrative and silences it. As a matter of fact, the narrator, from the beginning, is faced with the dilemma of a choice between shame and shamelessness in his own narrative endeavour:

Between Shame and shamelessness lies the axis upon which we turn; meteorological conditions at both these poles are of the most extreme, ferocious type. Shamelessness, Shame; the roots of violence.” (124)

The symptoms of both shame and shamelessness are the same. Neither the narrator nor the reader can locate the precise juncture where the shamelessness of the male plot becomes symptomatic of its opposite, that of female shame. Female shame makes its presence felt at the end, as Sufiya Zinobia stands helpless, not able to make any sense of the world around her:

She stood there blinking stupidly, unsteady on her feet, as if she didn't know that all the stories had to end together...and that the power of the Beast of Shame cannot be held for long within any one frame of flesh and blood, because it grows, it feeds and swells, until the vessel bursts.(317)

Shame is also the “choice” to remain silent, not to write about certain things. Shame is a self-inflicted censorship, an opting out of the opportunity of “telling other tales”.²²¹ Translated in terms of the narrative, it remains a deliberately sustained improbability on the levels of plot and characterization, a generic censorship, perhaps unconsciously exercised, to prevent any journalistic narration of the violent history of Pakistan. If the likenesses of Hyder and Harappa to their historical counterparts Zia Ul Haq and Bhutto makes the novel, at times, too much like a political allegory, the presence of Sufiya, or “Shame”, guarantees that the allegory remains sufficiently veiled so as not to make the narrative too articulate about a history that may be a product of a collective shamelessness. The fairy tale about a Beauty turned Beast is a choice *not* to tell certain other tales, or at least “talk too much” and turn *Shame* into a realistic novel.²²² The narrator confides in his audience:

But suppose this were a realistic novel! Just think what else I might have to put in. . . By now, if I had been

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²²¹“And now I must stop saying what I am not writing about, because there’s nothing so special about that; every story one chooses to tell is a kind of censorship, it prevents the telling of other tales” *Shame* 72-73.

²²²On the subject see Sara Suleri: “Salman Rushdie: Embodiments of Blasphemy, Censorships of *Shame*,” in *The Rhetoric of English India*.186.

writing a book of this nature, it would have done me no good to protest that I was writing universally, not only about Pakistan. This book would have been banned. . . burned. All that effort for nothing! Realism can break a writer's heart.”(71-72)

Fiction becomes a product of shame that haunts both the history and its narration. The violent tale of *Shame* acquires a double meaning in Rushdie's narrative. On the one hand, it is the shame of (Pakistani) history itself. For, “the disgrace of barrenness” becomes collective and “sits on (us) all and bends(our backs)”. This collective shame of barrenness acquires a more specific, more poignant meaning as the narrative withdraws into a world where only the incredible can happen. To keep silent is to *not* talk about this barrenness. To be ashamed, to have *sharam*, is to have the feminine privilege of keeping one's secrets and the privilege, most of all, of “telling other tales”.

In a certain sense, then, *Shame* marks a new stage in Rushdie's technique, one in which the narrator openly admits his inability to narrate in a factual vein. As a result, the “chutnification” – the “inevitable distortions of the pickling process” – reaches a level at which the original ingredients are lost amidst an overwhelming addition of flavoured spices. The “lurid” techniques of the Bombay film world remain, only to create a world more fantastical.

In *Shame*, as in *Midnight's Children*, “melodrama piles upon melodrama” and previous events provide a “rhythmic counterpart to the tantalizing teasers which anticipate the events to come”. The technique reaches such a level of perfection that no history “leaks” into the main plot of the Hyders and the

Harappas. Unlike *Midnight's Children*, where history is sometimes allowed to seep in, *Shame* tends to dismiss history as something shameful and therefore unspeakable and receives very occasional reference as in the following passage:

Pakistan is not Iran. This may sound like a strange thing to say about the country which was, until Khomeini, one of the only two theocracies on earth (Israel being the other one) but it is my opinion that Pakistan has never been a mullah dominated society. The religious extremists of the Jamaat Party have their supporters among college students and so forth, but relatively few people have ever voted Jamaat in an election. Jinnah himself, the Founder or Quaid-i-Azam, doesn't strike me as a particularly God-bothered type. Islam and the Muslim state were, for him, political and cultural ideas; the theology was not the point.(277)

It is precisely in such sections that history is narrated only to be pushed out and neutralized. The facticity of Pakistani history and related complexities are given up in favor of an exotic tale located in a fifteenth century Mohammedan setting. Writing up history as an exotic tale is a fairly common strategy in postcolonial narratives from the subcontinent. The strategy has gained overwhelming accolades from metropolitan critics as being in the "magic realist" tradition. Rushdie reminds his reader that "this is a completely Eastern story" and thus its eccentricities are to be appreciated strictly in terms of its *different* narrative framework, just as its credibility is not to be questioned by a reader who has "become too westernized"(173). Having thus identified realist narratives as predominantly *western*, Rushdie narrates this very *eastern* tale of eastern

irrationality in a farcical vein. Within the framework of this tale the slow breakdown of democracy in Pakistan from the post-Jinnah years to the execution of Bhutto and the reestablishment of military regime appears as an afterthought, a “joke” that is reported to the narrator and, what is more, the “joke” becomes a comic interlude in the “juicygory” tale of two warring families.²²³ It is a joke about how “God” eliminated the “politicos” at Ayub’s behest, how “God’s thunderbolts wiped out Ayub”, turn(ed) Yahya into a cockroach and swept him under a carpet” and promises to flatten Bhutto like a chapati”(120).

The utter ludicrousness of the joke diminishes the tragic complexity of Pakistani history into a “tale told by an idiot”, the dynamics of the civil and military regime having been reduced to a performance of comic villains twice over. If the ridicule is well hidden in the narration of the Hyders and the Harappas, the crude joke with a very *eastern* flavour (cockroaches, chapatis) leaves no doubt in the mind of the reader that what *is* being narrated, is, after all, Pakistan. The contrast of Rushdie’s method with Suleri’s narration of the same period of Pakistani history is significant in this context. It is with a bitter irony that Sara Suleri narrates the decline of Pakistani democracy. Her narrative method is very different in so far as she gives Pakistani history a *tragicomic*

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²²³Transforming political events and characters into a *joke* is also the hall mark of *Midnight’s Children*. On the subject see M Keith Booker, “*Midnight’s Children*, History and complexity; Reading Rushdie after the Cold War,” in *Critical Essays on Salman Rushdie*, 302. Turning political events into a joke is also a signature in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*. I shall discuss this point in the Chapter V.

perspective, but does not ignore the *noble* vision of Pakistan with which the nation had initially started.

The process of “chutnification” reaches a final form in *Shame*. However, it is a strategy that gets more intense as he moves on to *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, a novel in which Rushdie’s sense of the seriocomic reaches what Suleri would have termed a *vertiginous* dimension.

Rushdie, *Masala* and Hindi Film

Partly because “chutnification” as a narrative mode “leaks” into the cinematic techniques of “Bombay talkies”, and partly because commercial Hindi films are often referred to as *masala*²²⁴ films in India, it is imperative, for a fuller understanding of Rushdie’s technique and ideology of the narrative to explore the cultural implications of Hindi films and relate them to Rushdie’s narrative mode in the two novels.²²⁵

The Hindi film is variously referred to as “masala film”, “song and dance film” or melodrama. At the risk of sounding too homogenizing, the plot of a Hindi film more or less follows a predictable trajectory. It goes through many tortuous twists and turns until all the characters originally introduced and then dispersed come together and establish a normative order. Justice is served, the villains are

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²²⁴In Indian languages, the word *masala* means spices, and metaphorically, anything that is a little too spiked up.

²²⁵As films directed and produced in Bombay are in Hindi, I shall henceforward, refer to them as Hindi films.

routed, and the show ends almost invariably with the union of the hero and the heroine. The rambling, often incoherent plot is structured on certain axioms of “Indianness” that are both continuous and discontinuous with the elite and popular Indian cinematic traditions.

Although Hindi film depicts class/ caste privilege, in almost all these films, the sociopolitical privileges of the elite are questioned and often undermined by the hopes, dreams and disappointments of the disenfranchised. Yet neither of the two traditions is upheld at the other’s expense. Insofar as Hindi films reflect the hopes and frustrations of the disenfranchised and bear the psychic force of common existence, practices and values, Hindi films come closer to the popular tradition; Yet, as it depicts the existing social structures it goes on to validate the dominant system. The conclusion of most of these films betrays a certain evasiveness about confronting class/caste issues and thus the message in these films is always a status quo that in a sense neutralizes both the elite and the popular the traditions. For obvious commercial reasons, the Hindi film, caught in a limbo, points to the discontinuities in both modes of discourse and struggles to heal the ruptures in some way or other. Part of the absurdity of an average Hindi film plot arises from a bold attempt made by the script writer/ director to resolve, in the plot, the ongoing conflict between these two sociocultural spheres. The strategy generally followed is to mingle or superimpose two levels of consciousness to create a complex, often contradictory version of a mythical Indian-ness that may appeal to the largest cross-section of film goers.

The *myth* generally projected by Hindi films given over the four decades of film-making in the postcolonial period deals with the problem of developing social responsibility as an “Indian”, beyond the immediate loyalties of family and caste identity. It embodies a search for the promise of change and renewal, even amidst the bleakest possible circumstances, and yet, almost invariably, the old certitudes about social hierarchies and value systems brought back via new routes of power and authority.

The national myth of Indianness is projected through a *hero* who becomes the binding force of the often wobbly plot. He is rebellious, seductive, charming and reckless, daring and vulnerable, and an idealistic law breaker.²²⁶ The hero’s clash with the forces of Evil (the villain) that is almost always the climactic moment in a narrative that, according to Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, reflects the “psychic geography” of the Indian population. In his book *The Movies on Your Mind* Lawrence Greenberg writes:

I regularly use cinema as a Rorschach test. During the first few sessions I ask about favorite films and invariably some heretofore well concealed aspect of psychic geography will be thrown into bold relief. The movies, like waking dreams, interpret every aspect of our lives- the unquiet past, the trouble present, our anxious premonitions of the future, our neurotic conflicts and our inspired gropings toward the light.”²²⁷

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²²⁶For an idea of the ‘hero’ phenomenon of the Bombay film industry see *Indian Film*, Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, 280-284. Also, Sumita Chakravarty, *National Identity in Popular Cinema*.

²²⁷Greenberg, 1975, 3-4, quoted in Barnouw.

Quoting Greenberg, Bernouw suggests that the plot in a Hindi film reflects all of the following symptoms regarding aspects of socio-political life in India: caste, arranged marriage, the status of women, dowry, joint family, state law, political corruption and so on. All these issues, he goes on to suggest,

. . . involve age old traditions that are challenged by pressures from the growth of industrialization, urbanization and communication. The pressures cause uneasiness. Many in India, perhaps even more than elsewhere feel that the world they knew is slipping from under their feet, and that something must be done to keep India Indian. While on one level they welcome the new, on another they cling to the old. (Bernouw. 1963,281-282)

The search for a way out of the schism between traditional values and those that are the products of industrial development is sought through the hero, whose ultimate victory over the villain, a ready symbol of a threat to this mythical Indianness, provides a simplistic solution to the crisis. At the risk of generalizing, it may be said that a stereotypical villain in a Hindi film is a 'threat' to the traditional social values regarding state, family and law, as well as the religious and moral understanding of virtue and vice. He threatens to destroy all these values that constitute the rubric of Indianness. Interestingly, the discourse on the corrupting influences of the post-industrial value system makes the villain, more often than not, a *westernized* man, whose lifestyle makes him an alien in a world that he inhabits. Alcoholism, promiscuity and opportunism characterize his life

till such time as he is vanquished by the hero and his devoted band. The journey of the hero towards the resolution of the crisis is through a rambunctious plot that takes the audience through an impossible number of situations, each of which reflects, in some form or other, the anxieties of the “psychic geography”. Incidents used to represent these anxieties are unrealistic though at times emotionally fraught, and have a farcical effect. The narration of the tale is often so absurd that it is sometimes quite difficult to extract any acceptable significance from these narrations. The often fantastical narrative modes, in different registers, are frequently conflicting and bring the narrative technique of Hindi films structurally very close to the technique of history writing in ancient and medieval India in both the Hindu and the Muslim tradition.

Itihāsa, Dastān and masala film

Itihāsa, the closest equivalent to history used in Sanskrit literature, means “thus it was”, or, “so it has been”. But the word did not denote the factual in the strict sense and came to stand for legend, history and myths as well as tales. The purpose of *Itihāsa* was to narrate the events of the past in such a way as would relate them to the goals of the Hindu tradition. The historical narrative grew out of a number of literary practices current in the Vedic period, the most important being *Gāthās* (songs), *nara samsā* (eulogies of heroes), *ākhyāyanas* (dramatic narratives), and *Purāna* (ancient lores).

The forms of historical writing produced in India, including the commissioned Biographies of Kings and Emperors from AD 600 to 1200, testify to the dominance of these literary conventions. The authors were sophisticated court poets who did not hesitate on occasion to sacrifice historical veracity to an elegant turn of phrase or to dramatic analogues. In Sanskrit poetics, *Itihāsa* is a genre of composition like *Kāvya*(poetry), or *nāṭya*(drama) and the presentation of facts was never accorded the highest premium in *Itihāsa* compositions.²²⁸

The same can be said about the tradition of secular Urdu narratives called *Dastān*. A *Dastān* in Urdu or Persian literature is simply a long-winded stream of consciousness tale that incorporates many related and sometimes loosely strung together tales and assorted humorous anecdotes. In Urdu someone wishing to say that a person is telling a “cock and bull” story would say “Are bap voh *dastan* laga raha hay” (He is narrating a *dastan*).²²⁹ A *Dastan* portrays a world full of “marvelous events – mysterious inexplicable and magical.”²³⁰

Like the *Itihāsa*, and the *dastān*, the narratives in Hindi films are not exactly shackled to the demands of verisimilitude even when talking about sociopolitical specificities. They stretch themselves to include not only the

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²²⁸On this subject I have consulted Meenakshi Mukherji, *Realism And Reality: The Novel And Society in India*, Delhi: Oxford UP, 1985.

²²⁹*Dastans* as a form of secular Muslim narrative will be dealt with in details in the next chapter. On the subject see Farooze Gauzily, “Rushdie’s *Dastan-e- Dilruba*: The SATANIC VERSES as Rushdie’s love letter to Islam”: *Diacritics* 26,1.Spring 1996: 50-73.

²³⁰On this subject see Frances Pritchett: *Marvelous Encounters: Folk Romance in Urdu and Hindi*. (Riverdale , MD: Riverdale, 1985) 73.

fabricated but also the impossible. In this make-believe world strange things happen to expose and explore the problems of Indianness in an idyllic setting that represents a desire to escape the pressures of actual circumstances.

The escape is formulated in simple, happy resolutions in which Vice is routed and Virtue (which is tantamount to Indianness) vindicated. Trying to define Indian cinema at the Thirty-third International Film Festival in Venice, Sehdev Kumar Gupta called it “at once a night club and a temple, a circus and a concert, a piazza and poetical symposium”²³¹.

Rushdie’s version of “chutnification” comes strikingly close to the narration of *Itihasa* as reflected in Hindi films, but with an important difference: whereas “piazas and poetic symposiums” cohabit in Hindi film scripts, in Rushdie’s narrative they belong to two distinct narrative spaces. If the nation is represented in Rushdie’s novels as largely a parodic performance, the sage voice of the narrator, tinged with cynicism and bitterness, clearly dissociates him from the scene, making him either a passive or detached participant, as in *Midnight’s Children*, or a withdrawn ubiquitous narrator, as in *Shame*, commenting on the absurd performance of nationness with Lucretian pleasure.²³² The complete disjunction of the two spheres pitted against each

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²³¹S.K Gupta: Address, Symposium on Indian cinema 33rd international Film Festival, Venice, quoted in Bernouw *Indian Film*, 280.

²³²Lucretius (Titus Lucretius Carus) was a Roman poet and the author of the philosophical epic *De Rerum Natura* (On the Nature of the Universe), a comprehensive exposition of the Epicurean world-view. The stress and tumult of his times stands in the background of his work and partly explains his personal attraction and commitment to Epicureanism, with its elevation of intellectual pleasure and tranquility of mind and its dim view of the world of social strife and political violence. I have borrowed the term “Lucretian pleasure” from Charles Lamb’s essay, “The Superannuated Man”.

other makes it impossible for the nation to rise above the status of the trivial²³³. In the absence of what Greenberg calls “(our) inspired gropings toward the light,” as reflected in the psychic mapping of Hindi films,²³⁴ Rushdie’s nation becomes an embarrassing spectacle of corruption, ignorance, and, above all, stupidity. It is this absence of a positive message that makes Rushdie’s narratives different from the narratives of Hindi films. His strategy becomes especially clear in Saleem’s account of Mrs Gandhi as “the Widow”. The narrative, while focusing somewhat excessively on the terror, repression, censorship, suspension of civil rights and persecution of political enemies during her regime, brushes off the genuine economic progress that the country had shown during her years in office. Keith Booker comments:

. . . unable to uncover any actual horrors that could be attributed directly to Mrs Gandhi and that would make the economic advances made under the emergency appear insignificant in comparison, Rushdie simply manufactures horrors, including a graphic description of the forced sterilization of Sinai and the other children of midnight.²³⁵

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²³³The detachment of the narrator is justified in the narratives as Rushdie identifies the narrator of *Shame* as an “Outsider” and “trespasser”. See *Shame*, 23.

²³⁴Greenberg, 4.

²³⁵On the treatment of Indian politics by Rushdie, see M. Keith Booker, “Midnight’s Children, History and Complexity: Reading Rushdie after the Cold War” in *Critical Essays on Salman Rushdie* (ed) M. Keith Booker, 283-313.

From this angle, the most significant departure of Rushdie's narration from that of a Hindi film is its dismissal of the 'hero'. A hero in a Hindi film is a complex phenomenon. The component that gives what Bernouw calls "the complex, chaotic rambunctious" Hindi film its *meaning* is the hero who naturalizes the evasive notion of Indianness and all that it signifies.²³⁶ What makes these films a complex discourse on nationness is the presence of the hero, whose dialogues, loud introspections as well as responses to situations articulate the complex search for national values, a search that is almost an obsession of postcolonial (Indian) discourse and is reflected in every aspect of national culture. Significantly, in the cultural idiom of India, 'hero' or 'heroine' are words that stand for 'star' in the Hollywood context. For these actors the distinctions between life and art are only tenuous as they become national icons and represent the aspirations of a nation. As Bernouw points out,

A fascinating example of this phenomenon was the transformation of M.G Ramachandran from "film hero" to Chief Minister of Tamilnadu, with dramatic crisis en route. Film roles as folk warrior against evil usurpers apparently infused his political image as southern champion against the "oppressors" of the north - the establishment in New Delhi. (Bernouw 1963 ,280)

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²³⁶ "as complex signs embodying historical cultural and economic meanings (reconstructions), the stars are in themselves cultural interfaces and 'compromises' of bewildering complexity": Mishra, Jeffery and Shoesmith,: "The Actor as Parallel Text in Bombay Cinema," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 11, no 3. (1989): 52.

The ramifications of the national-heroic image transform a facile cultural form into one of immense historical significance.²³⁷ As Madhava Prasad points out: “there is a degree of seepage of star value into the acting role”. (Prasad, 1998, 133).²³⁸ The said “star value” of such an actor or ‘hero’ overpowers and undermines the potentials of the ‘role’ which he plays. As a result, “the acting role” becomes tainted by the image that the “star” zealously guards in accordance with the demands of the national audience.

Rushdie empties out his own “melodramas” of heroes who might infuse some seriousness into the performance. The ritualistic debunking of the ‘hero’ in *Shame* is significant in this regard. Rushdie clearly denies his audience the pride and pleasure of looking up to Omar Khayyam at the start and draws attention to his unheroic status: “Dizzy, peripheral, inverted, infatuated, insomniac, star gazing, fat: *what manner of hero is this?*” (*Shame*, 19 emphasis added). At the end of the novel Omar Khayyam himself confesses to his unheroic status in the idiom of stage performance:

I am a peripheral man(..)other persons have been the principal actors in my life story. Hyder and Harappa, my leading men...and several leading ladies. I watched from the wings, not knowing how to act. I confess to

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²³⁷For the “star” phenomenon, see Sumita Chakravarty and Eric Bernouw. “A strange aspect of Indian stars is that devotees, fan magazines, and even critics refer to them as “film heroes” and “film heroines” rather than as “actors”. An actor having achieved “film hero” or “film heroine” status is usually afraid to accept roles that blue the image. Actors thus tend to become stereotypes. Public persona fuses increasingly with film image”. Bernouw, 280.

²³⁸One such occurrence in the history of Bombay film industry is the “Amitabha Bachhan phenomenon” see Sumita Chakravarty, Madhava Prasad.

social climbing, to only-doing-my-job, to being corner man in the people's wrestling matches. I confess to fearing sleep. (*Shame*, 314)

Omar Khayyam's disclaimer hinges on the two-tiered meaning of "actors". While the term is borrowed from the world of performing arts, 'actor' acquires a greater significance as 'one who acts as opposed to one who remains inactive.'²³⁹ Acted upon instead of acting, Omar Khayyam is only a step removed from Saleem Sinai, the protagonist of *Midnight's Children*, whose impotence (more metaphorical than literal) makes him incapable of assuming a heroic stance or more specifically, 'acting'.

Such absences are possibly Rushdie's comment on a history that, according to him, does not deserve the heroic, or a form that reflects, the national longing for it. To show his point, Rushdie transforms his novels into a battleground of comics and villains, eliciting nothing but contempt and shame at the performance of Nation and national identity.

Rushdie's nation writing in both the novels is a 'joke' that derives its strength from the much advertized "chutnification", the strategy of sensationalizing details and heightening of effects through omission and overwriting:

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²³⁹Sara Suleri makes a more nuanced use of the significance of action in her trope of *Hamlet*. I have discussed it in the next chapter.

Matter of fact descriptions of the outré and the bizarre, and their reverse, namely heightened stylized versions of everyday - these techniques, which are also attitudes of mind, I have lifted - or perhaps absorbed - from. . . Shiva-of-the-knees.”(*Midnight’s Children* 218)

These techniques, Saleem tells us, “are also attitudes of the mind” and they invariably function by severing imaginary incidents from their immediate political contexts and magnifying beyond all proportion the details that render the history narrated either repulsive or, simply, foolish. The West- East Pakistan conflict, a complicated phase in the history of the subcontinent leading to the birth of Bangladesh as a nation, is troped as a pageant of genocide in which Pakistani soldiers operate as “bloodhounds” of a theocratic state :

Bloodhounds track the fleeing enemies of national unity. . . and newspaper offices, burning with the dirty yellow black smoke of cheap gutter newsprint, and the offices of Trade unions, smashed to the ground , the roadside ditches filling up with people who were not merely asleep- bare chests were seen, and the hollow pimples of bullet holes. . . (Our) Boys, our soldiers of Allah, our-worth-ten-Babus jawans held Pakistan together by turning flame throwers machine guns hand grenades on the tiny slums. (426)

These techniques (“attitudes of the mind”) heighten the atrocity of the scene, mixing blood and gutter dirt with Islam and spiking it up with hyperbolical descriptions of violence. What gets left out in this Hindi film shot are the complex linguistic, political and cultural issues that precipitated the crisis in Pakistan.

Depoliticization of such incidents coupled with strong visual details leaves an impression of a barbaric race fighting a senseless war propelled by misguided fanaticism. While the atrocities committed during the Bangladesh war were real, projecting these atrocities as disconnected acts of bestiality undermines the long political history that culminated in the war. It is interesting how every significant event in the nation's life gets subsumed by literary strategies that transform history into a melodrama. The history of the Communist movement is by this strategy reduced to a squabble of street magicians²⁴²:

Fire eaters and sword swallows applauded the guerilla tactics of the Naxalite movement; while mesmerists and walkers-on-hot-coals espoused Namboodiripad's manifesto, (neither Muscovite nor Pekinese) and deplored the Naxalites' violence. There were Trotskyite tendencies amongst card sharpers and even a communism-through-the-ballot-box movement amongst the moderate members of the ventriloquist section .(399)

A not-so-subtle double reductionism is at work here, transforming not only the communist upheaval of the seventies into a debate between low-life magicians and tricksters, but also Chinese communism, which continues to influence communist discourses in India and elsewhere, to "Pekinese", alluding both to the Chinese capital and a canine breed of the same name.

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²⁴²The history of the Communist Movement is discussed in more detail in my chapter on Arundhati Roy.

Oscillating on the axis of “Shame and Shamelessness,” a sense of culpability exudes from the narrative itself for “cutting up history to suit (my) nefarious purposes”. (259). The process of truncation and mutilation of history finds a striking trope in the scene where young Saleem composes an anonymous letter pasted together from newspaper cuttings to Commander Sabarmati informing him about his wife’s infidelity. History is truncated with a sadistic glee to destroy lives and reputations:

I confess: what I did was no act of heroism. I did not battle Homi on horseback...instead, imitating the action of the snake, I began to cut pieces of newspapers. From GOAN LIBERATION COMMITTEE LAUNCHES SATYAGRAHA CAMPAIGN I extracted the letters ‘COM’; ‘SPEAKER OF PAK ASSEMBLY DECLARED MANIAC’ gave me my second syllable, ‘MAN’. I found ‘DER’ concealed in ‘NEHRU CONSIDERS RESIGNATION AT CONGRESS ASSEMBLY.’ (259)

The “nefarious purpose” of Rushdie’s project in the novel appears to be to fabricate a joke which elicits paradoxical responses of laughter and contempt.²⁴³

A case in point is the passage where Mrs Dubash tries to make her son Cyrus into “India’s richest Guru...Cyrus the Great.” The pamphlet that Rushdie’s

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²⁴³David Lipscomb’s discovery that Rushdie appears to have lifted most of his information about Indian history from a western introductory textbook, Stanley Wolpert’s *A New History of India* on the subject is significant. It goes a long way to prove that he was not seriously interested in other versions of (Indian) history per se but in one that was most readily available in the west, so that his “joke” becomes easily discernible to his chosen audience. See David Lipscomb, “Caught in a Strange Middle Ground: Contesting History in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*,” *Diaspora* 1. no. 2: 163-188. Wolpert’s text has undergone many editions since then. Rushdie probably consulted the first edition.

narrator formulates, “cutting up” certain aspects of Parsee and Hindu faith and religious practice, is merciless in its parody:

Know O unbelievers, that in the dark Midnights of CELESTIAL SPACE in a time before time lay the sphere of “blessed KHUSROVAND.!!! Even MODERN SCIENTISTS now affirm that for *generations* they have lied to conceal from the people whose *right it is to know* of the Unquestionabel TRUE existence of this HOLY HOME OF TRUTH!!! Leading intellectuals of the world over, also in America, speak of the ANTI-RELIGIOUS CONSPIRACY of reds, jews, etc, to hide these VITAL NEWS! The veil lifts now. Blessed Lord Khusro comes with irrefutable Proofs. Read and Believe!. . . Send donations to PO Box 555. Head Post office, Bombay-1. BLESSINGS! BEAUTY TRUTH!! OM HARE KHUSRO HARE KHUSROVAN OM (268).

The passage is glutted with markers that portray the nation as a pack of illiterate, greedy imposters and dupes, in which swindlers defraud the illiterate masses with phony religious prescriptions. Words misspelt jostle with phony scientific evidence and blind adulation of the West as part of a rhetorical persuasion to mock a degraded national history. Finally, sparing nothing and none, Rushdie mingles Zoroastrianism with Vaishnavite cult and Vedic hymns to create the figure of Cyrus the Guru, an avatar of Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Persian empire. The evocation of “the bottomless deeps of Celestial Space-Eternity” mingles with the chantings of the name of Lord Krishna in the Vaishnavite cult (Hare Khusro in the novel, instead of *Haré Krishna*). And, last but not least, the ritualistic “OM” that accompanies Vedic evocations puts the

finishing touch to the lampooning that strives to destroy three religious traditions with a single, cleverly done, easily recognizable cultural idiom. Brennan comments:

Khusro's accretious motives, prettified by his supposed devotion, exemplify in miniature the nation's use of sacred origins to achieve its real goal: a viable domestic market. Even to this extent, Rushdie has internalized the sociological bases for his satire as if glossing Eric Hobsbawm or illustrating Hans Kohn. Greed is not greed in general but a component in the drive of a recognizable underdeveloped country (which is named) to consolidate its power. The commercialisation of religion is portrayed not as a sign of our irreligious age, but as an age old, well honed tool in public opinion management".(Brennan 96)²⁴⁴

In *Shame*, the span of history performed is more limited yet more colourful, and thus, more of a "joke".²⁴⁵ The novel, for the most part, focuses on the rise and fall of Bhutto, his execution in 1979, and the succession of Zia Ul Haq, the military dictator. The colour is enhanced by the courtly feudal setting in which the narrative operates, and the melodrama reminiscent of Bombay films defines the life of a nation. In the true spirit of a commercial Hindi film maker, Rushdie chooses precisely those commodities from an underdeveloped country that guarantee an (inter) national blockbuster:

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²⁴⁴I have discussed Hobsbawm's version in Chapter I, under the subsection 'Nationalism and the West'.

²⁴⁵For a contrast see my discussion in the next chapter on Suleri's treatment of the same Pakistani history in a different vein.

The family tales were lurid affairs, featuring divorces, bankruptcies, droughts, cheating friends, child mortality, diseases of the breast, men cut down in their prime, failed hopes, lost beauty women who grew obscenely fat, smuggling deals, opium-taking poets, pining virgins, curses, typhoid, bandits, homosexuality, frigidity, rape, the high price of food, gamblers, drunks, murderers, suicides and God. (78-79)

Notable in the above passage is the dominance of Third World markers over the global (opium, smuggling, bandits, typhoid, the high price of food etc.). Religious charlatanism joins hands with poverty, death, disease and other abominations to make Rushdie's "palimpsest country" doubly attractive to its intended audience.

"Chutnification" and Women

If "chutnification" characterizes Rushdie's depiction of the Indian and Pakistani nation, it naturally does not spare, as it indeed cannot, the most convenient raw ingredient for the pickling process: women. The gallery of women in the two novels fills up that very popular slot 'Third World woman', the theme of First World feminist discourse.

Virgin Ironpants, whose virginity is an admission of feminine powerlessness as she views feminine sexuality as vulnerability itself as "this woman's body brings a person nothing but babies, pinches and shame", cohabits in this world with Rani Harappa, whose rebellion can only be expressed in a silent embroidery

of her husband's crimes in a series of eighteen shawls. The two of them are only slightly more privileged than Pinkie Aurangzeb, the mistress growing prematurely old, and the perpetually pregnant Naveed, whose only salvation from her "marital bliss" is obtained through suicide. Women in *Shame* illustrate more tellingly than those in *Midnight's Children* the plight of women in a developing country and even more so of *Muslim* women in an Islamic state.²⁴⁶

Rushdie's depiction of women has led critics such as Ahmad and Grewal to question the intentions of such depictions. Ahmad analyzes the "disjuncture between particular episodes. . . (and) a generalized structure of representation where every woman, without exception, is sexually over-determined. The frustration of erotic need. . . appears in every case to be central fact of a woman's existence" (Ahmad, 144-152). Grewal's critique points out that Rushdie inscribes Pakistani women as passive and fails to draw on their existing "history of struggle ... instead of subjection" (Grewal 36-40).²⁴⁷

As Lippman points out, "there is probably no ism that has more unfavorably influenced the western world's image of Islam or more preoccupied law makers in Muslim countries than the status of women" (Lippman 1982, 34). Women in *Shame* appear to reinforce and confirm the stereotype of woman as victim, against the backdrop of a Third World (Muslim) nation. Rushdie's mode of

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²⁴⁶ Although Saleem's family in *Midnight's Children* is also portrayed as Muslim, the fact that the story happens in a *secular* country, and that the clan is quite anglicized affects Rushdie's portrayal of Muslim women in the novel.

²⁴⁷ On the subject of the treatment of women in *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* See Ambreen Hai, "Marching in from the peripheries": Rushdie's Feminized Artistry and Ambivalent Feminism," in *Critical Essays on Salman Rushdie*.

narrating women seems to go against what he himself promises to do in *Shame*, namely fight a policy of exclusion exercised by the “male plot” of (Pakistani) history:

But the women seem to have taken over; they marched from the peripheries of the story to demand the inclusion of their own tragedies, histories and comedies, obliging me to couch my narrative in all manner of sensuous complexities, to see my “male” plot refracted, so to speak, through the prisms of its reverse “female” side. . . so it turns out that my “male” and “female” plots are the same story after all.”(189)

Yet, in reality, one does not exactly see *women marching* into the narrative. What one *does* see is how the “male” plot narrates them as subjects of an Islamic patriarchal system: revengeful, jealous, bestial. If they are not silently suffering, as in the case of Sufiya Zinobia, they are turning to self-destructive violence. The women that one sees in *Shame* are, as Inderpal Grewal points out, “gory, grotesque and farcical”:

Rushdie’s aesthetic combines the gory, the grotesque, and the farcical. Though Sufiya’s description as a “squeegee” and a “sponge” may have humorous reverberations, they require an aesthetic of distancing and merely depict the voyeuristic stance of Rushdie which could be that of the reader as well. It is

considerably difficult for an Asian woman to be spectator enough to “enjoy” this drama”.²⁴⁸

The only point at which Rushdie comes close to demonstrating his that “not all women are crushed by any system, no matter how oppressive” is when the women march “against God” after the death of Iskandar Harappa. Significantly, as Raza Hyder investigates these marches, he finds the guilty one and puts her in jail when he gets the evidence that she was involved in human trafficking. The Women’s March is thus literally confined to one paragraph and summarily dismissed.²⁴⁹ If the women of Pakistan are “much more impressive than her men” as the narrator of *Shame* asserts, there is nothing to authenticate the statement in the narrative itself, which disposes of Pakistani womanhood as a pack of virgins, whores or wives who fail to produce male heirs.

What is significant about Rushdie’s nation narration in *Shame*, however, is its collapsing of Islam, repression and the persecution of women:

Repression is a seamless garment; a society which is authoritarian in its social and sexual codes, which crushes its women beneath the intolerable burden of honor and propriety, breeds repressions of other kinds as well...contrariwise dictators are always – or at least in public, on other people’s behalf – puritanical.(189)

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²⁴⁸Inderpal Grewal, “Marginality, Women and *Shame*,” in *Reading Rushdie*, 138. Grewal also goes on to point out how very fractured and inaccurate Rushdie’s portrayal is in the context of the serious resistance to patriarchal oppression offered by Pakistani women in their own country and in Britain.

²⁴⁹For an account of Muslim women’s participation in politics in the subcontinent, see Jayawardena, *Feminism And Nationalism*, 93.

This diagnosis of Third World maladies as patriarchal oppression, Islamic fundamentalism and military dictatorship makes *Shame* a precious commodity for aesthetic consumption in the metropolitan market.

Commodification and “Modern Fairy Tale”

If *Shame* takes Rushdie’s art a stage further in “chutnification”, as pointed out earlier, his palimpsestic rendering of nation attains a degree of fictitiousness that is absent from *Midnight’s Children*. What makes *Shame* different is a virtual elimination of what he himself calls, in his earlier novel, “Public Announcements”: those narrative moments that offer occasional glimpses of factual, material constituents of national history. Rushdie’s disclaimer that the country depicted in *Shame* “is not Pakistan” privileges the fictitious mode in more ways than one. It absolves the writer of the responsibility of narrating the complex history of his adoptive nation. Yet, at the same time, the negation is a titillating invitation to the reader to look precisely for those cultural markers found in plenty in the novel, which, in fact, prove just the opposite of what is claimed.

In conjunction with the suggestion of possible censorship (his own reason for *not* narrating Pakistan), this “modern fairy tale” fabricates a new history that is abundant in fictions or, inversely, a fiction abundant in history. The narrative

in *Shame* excludes the objective, the documentary, the far less sensational and more complex truths about the nation's existence and survival.

The end result of Rushdie's project is a neat package of *cultural otherness*, one that is attractive and, at the same time, impossibly farcical. While *Shame* allows its readers the privilege of being with the rajas, princes and princesses in a monarchistic, feudal universe, it also grants the audience the privilege to enjoy this world as a "joke". Since the special attraction of *Shame* comes from its moorings in an Islamic culture, part of the "joke" springs from Rushdie's use of the Quran to enhance its parodic appeal. As Brennan points out:

On the level of Quranic parody(. . .) The tale of the whole nation is therefore no longer autochthonous and plebeian but bequeathed: a tablet, fixed in heaven, prescribing nationhood from above, in much the way the historical Zia did when, according to Tariq Ali, he 'informed' a bewildered nation that he had been overpowered by a dream in which a voice (presumably that of the Almighty) had suggested that elections were un-Islamic (Brennan 1989, 128).

The narrative structure in *Shame* is a parodic representation of the Quran, non-linear, apocalyptic in its ramblings. According to Norman.O. Brown:

The Koran is not like the Bible, historical, running from Genesis to Apocalypse. The Koran is altogether apocalyptic. The Koran backs off from that linear organization of time, revelations and history which became the backbone of orthodox Christianity. The

rejection of linearity involves a rejection of linear narrative.²⁵⁰

The clue to this Quranic parody is Bariamma, whose narration of family history, full of the inexplicable and the miraculous, mimics only too closely the Quranic prescriptions :

Her stories were the glue that held the clan together, binding the generations in webs of whispered secrets. Her story altered, at first, in the retelling, but finally it settled down, and after that nobody, neither teller nor listener, would tolerate any deviation from the hallowed sacred text.(79)

What makes Bariamma's "stories" different from those in the Quran is that, divested of the sacred meaning, her narration becomes simply "lurid affairs" that only go on to heighten the triteness of the world portrayed. In their secular context, Bariamma's stories become an arbitrary recounting of generations of depravity and disaster. Besides, the Quranic parody also reminds the readers that in the specific context of *Shame*, history truly repeats itself as a farce!²⁵¹

The narration of contemporary history as a third world joke or a religious farce draws its self-righteous strength from making a strong case out of the present history of the nation as a manifestation of *Kali yuga* – the age of

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²⁵⁰Norman. O. Brown, "The Apocalypse of Islam," *Social Text*, 8, (1983-4):166.

²⁵¹On the subject of Quranic parody see Timothy Brennan, *Salman Rushdie And The Third World*. 125-131.

darkness in Hindu religious mythology. The degraded nature of the subject of narration gains further intensity as reminders of other luminous ages loom in the background. Human depravity and corruption acquire greater proportions as the audience is reminded of the times when mortals enjoyed divine stature and Gods agreed to narrate their history.

Think of this: history, in my version, entered a new phase on Aug 15 1947 – but in another version that inescapable date is no more than one fleeting instant in the Age of Darkness, Kali-Yuga. . . I should add nevertheless that the Age of Darkness is only the fourth phase of the present. Maha yuga cycle which is in total, ten times as long; and when you consider that it takes thousand Maha-Yugas to make just one Day of Brahma,²⁵² you'll see what I mean by proportions.”(194)

Postcolonial history, narrated from “3200 B.C.”, is portrayed as a transient aberration(*Kali Yuga*) in a time cycle that is bound to return, as it must, to the pristine Age – *Satya Yuga*.²⁵³ Such a narrative suggestion must turn the attention of the metropolitan audience to a civilization whose farcical present triumphs over its grand, mythical past, infusing the audience with a sense of its present inadequacy.

Midnight's Children, viewed from this perspective, is a mock epic narration, a sequel to Mahabharata, just as *Shame* is a parodic rendition of history as

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²⁵²Brahma is one of the manifestations of the Hindu Trinity. He is the originator of Creation. Along with Vishnu, the Preserver, and Shiva the Destroyer, he is the Keeper of Life and Death in the universe.

²⁵³Indian Time is conceived as a cycle of *Yugas*- the four phases being *Satya*, *Tretā* *Dwāpar* and *Kali*.

narrated in the Quran. Complete with a Saleem Sinai, the postcolonial version of Lord Ganesha, the narrator of *The Mahabharata*, the novel can only laugh at the unseemly nature of its own subject matter.²⁵⁴

As part of this larger project, the novel teems with references that constantly evoke India's mythical past; names taken from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata: Arjuna, Bhima, Brahma, Ganesha, Ganga, Hanuman, Kali, Krishna, Rama, Ravana and Shiva. What is more, the names seem to pass on some of their originary significance to their modern counterparts. As Harrison observes:

Rushdie's handling of Shiva, Saleem's "shadow" or doppelganger, is quite Hindu in spirit. Nowhere is he held to blame, as the widow is, for the destruction he brings or makes possible. Perhaps, as with his divine namesake, he is the embodiment of a seemingly cruel, destructive, but inescapable aspect of the cosmos." (Harrison, 1972,60).

Rushdie emphasizes a repetitiousness in the behaviour of characters and situations, codified in ancient myths and continued in 'the here and the now that blends the contemporary with the mythical, highlighting the "unseemly nature" of history after midnight. Rushdie's attempt to blend the two patterns is evident in passages such as the following:

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²⁵⁴The parallelism between Ganesha, the elephant-headed God, and Saleem, who has an oversized nose, is too obvious to be missed.

Once upon a time there were Radha and Krishna, An Rama and Sita and Laila and Majnu;. . . The world is full of love stories and all lovers are in a sense the avatars of their predecessors.(259)

Rushdie's anxiety that his chosen audience may miss the point comes out in the comparison of these mythical and folkloric Indian lovers to their western counterparts: Romeo and Juliet, Hero and Leander and, not without a touch of humour, Spencer Tracey and Katharine Hepburn. The paraphrase "because we are not unaffected by the west" is both tongue in cheek and confessional. Fusing western cultural references with eastern cultural stereotypes familiar in the West, the narrative self-consciously reminds the readers that, despite its Indianness, "its articulation relies on a western context."²⁵⁵

Although *Shame* is free of such direct references to Quranic characters and incidents, the reference to the Hegiran²⁵⁶ calendar is perhaps meant to direct the reader's attention to a beatific time when Islam was a hallowed word untainted by the sins committed by Muslim states! Moreover, Pakistan's history narrated as a perverted Quranic formula creates a contrast between the glories of the early Islamic civilization and its present corrupt, subcontinental version, where lives can only be represented as "lewd tales".

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²⁵⁵ Suleri, 1992, 175.

²⁵⁶ It is a calendar that begins with the flight of Mohammad in the 7th century.

Desire, Derision and Otherness in Language

What is produced as a result of this pickling process, metaphorically speaking, is a gastronomic adventure. The history of the subcontinent is made into an exotic product that is mouth-watering, and at the same time – a digestive disaster. The reduction and dismissal of the present and the glorification of the distant past in Rushdie's novels is a continuance of the great colonial project: the construction of the other as at once an object of "desire and derision":

..in order to understand the productivity of colonial power it is crucial to construct its regime of 'truth', not to subject its representations to a normalizing judgement. Only then does it become possible to understand the *productive* ambivalence of the object of colonial discourse – the 'otherness' which is at once an object of desire and derision, an articulation of difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity.²⁵⁷

Rushdie's narrative method demonstrates the production of this otherness while narrating the history of the subcontinent. As part of this project, exoticism²⁵⁸ is used as a tool. The 1923 Sencourt text, *India in English Literature*, tells its readers:

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²⁵⁷Bhabha, "The Other Question," 19.

²⁵⁸"The best candidates for the exotic label are the peoples and cultures that are most remote from us and least known to us...Knowledge is incompatible with exoticism, but lack of knowledge is in turn irreconcilable with the praise of others; yet praise without knowledge is what precisely what exoticism aspires to be. This is its constitutive paradox..." Todorov, quoted in Huggan, "The Postcolonial Exotic," 26.

Literature shuns the obvious; but she has found in India something that provokes those *elusive qualities* of the mind which give writing its distinction, which by its choice of sounds and suggestions makes life more *mysterious*. . . [its] essence has given satisfaction to an instinctive appetite of mind and heart which is more than a *craving for the exotic*. And without the hunger for the *rich and the strange*, it is impossible for the West to assimilate India...its very name echoes the name as it suggests the power, of *earth's Eternal City*.²⁵⁹

The production of this “Otherness” in Rushdie is as much a choice of narrative mode as it is the manufacturing of a certain vocabulary that enhances its paradoxical attraction. The significance of Rushdie’s language is *not* in the use of “Indian English” as opposed to *English* English. It is rather in the forcing of linguistic/cultural strangeness into the narrative. The use of expletives transcribed generously into the narrative – words like “arré” (oh), “bāap-re-bāap” (in the name of my father), “chhi-chhi” (shame), ek-dum (at once), fut-ā-fut (at once!) – enhances the mystery, not just about a distant culture, but about the very means of its articulation.²⁶⁰ Yet, what is most disturbing about Rushdie’s exoticism are the “dirtyfilthy” words, the blasphemous and the obscene, sometimes simply transcribed, sometimes literally translated that create a strange disorder in the narrative:

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²⁵⁹Quoted in Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India* 181. emphasis mine.

²⁶⁰For a detailed account of Rushdie’s use of Indian words see Rustam Bharucha, “Rushdie’s Whale” in *Reading Rushdie*.

Sisterfucking bastard spawn of corpse eating vultures. Does he think he can insult me in the public and get away with it? Who is the elder, me or that sucker of shit from the rectum of diseased donkeys?

Who is the bigger landowner, me or him with his six inches of land on which even the lice cannot grow fat? . . . Tell him who can do what here, and that he should come crawling to kiss my feet like a *murdering rapist of his own grandmother* and beg for pardon. The *nibbler of a cow's left nipple*. . . (*Shame*102, emphasis mine.)

The appeal of such invectives consists in the imaginative meticulousness of details that is so alien and incomprehensible to what Brennan humorously calls "the relatively unimaginative and somehow more vicious (even if more reserved) swearing of the Anglo-Saxon world!"²⁶¹

It is possibly in this pickling of the *mysterious* that Salman Rushdie articulates his masterly stroke to postcolonial otherness. Language in *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* brings to the fore a complicated set of questions concerning identity and allegiance that is located in the deployment of local flavour in vocabulary and syntactical ordering. In Rushdie's own words, "this Angrezi that I am forced to write" (*Shame* 34) is marked by a heteroglossia in which words, phrases and syntactical structures from Indian languages (especially Bombay-Hindi)²⁶² jostle with English to create a linguistic hybrid that supposedly mimics

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²⁶¹Brennan 1989, 134

²⁶²On Rushdie's Hindi see Bishnupriya Ghosh, "An Invitation To Indian Postmodernity: Rushdie's English Vernacular as Situated cultural Hybridity," *Essays on Salman Rushdie* Booker (New York: G.K Hall & Co, 1997) 129-151.

the mastery of the master. In Bhabha's words, this language, "*almost the same but not quite*"²⁶³ articulates a defiance against the language of the colonizer. In reality, however, Rushdie's deployment of language is a marker of both defiance and surrender.

Indianization of English words and syntactical structure neutralizes the 'Englishness' of the narrative. Yet the trivial contexts in which such words and sentences appear to render characters and situations farcical undermine the very "Indianness" that Rushdie's narratives lay claim to. The sheer awkwardness of such linguistic and stylistic markers, sprinkled generously over the main *English* narrative that is easily identifiable with the narrator's voice, (unlike the cacophony of the *Indian* characters), ensures that the Indianness will be savored in all its exotic intensity. It is significant that most western critics are impressed by the innovative language of Rushdie's text, particularly by his ability to introduce *Indian accents*. Mario Couto notes for example that in *Midnight's Children*:

Rushdie uses phonemes and word patterns to suggest the vigor and liveliness of folk culture, the pace and variety of Indian life, the mythology of Bombay films, the brash exuberance of affluence, the violence simmering and on the boil...His prose, liberally sprinkled with Urdu, Hindi and Sanskrit names, the deliberately uncontrolled flow of sentence with repetition and sonorous content, suggests the chant of Indian classical texts.²⁶⁴

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²⁶³Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Men", *Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) 86, 89.

²⁶⁴Maria Couto, "Midnight's Children and Parents," *Encounter* 58. (1982): 61-66, 63.

The above passage exhibits an impulse to experience Indianness in terms of its “brash exuberance” as well as its “sonorous content”. Yet what clearly impinges on the critic’s consciousness and leaves a lasting impression is the “violence” and “uncontrolled flow” of languages that mean little more than “phonemes and word patterns”. What may be diagnosed in Couto’s appreciation is a metonymical deployment of ‘language’ for a national culture that is perceived, in the first world context as no less “brash”, “violent” or “uncontrolled”, yet whose (Indian) name itself is synonymous with the *chanting* of incomprehensible, *sonorous* “classical (*Sanskrit*) texts.”

The ambivalence of Rushdie’s postcolonial project is thus confirmed in the reception of his *language* by the very master’s discourse that his narratives claim to subvert. Rushdie’s linguistic self consciousness thus becomes a marker of a deeper shame which he must articulate, that of a nation which is *not quite not his own* in terms of both identity and allegiance. The outcome is a complex narration of subcontinental history as a performance of postcolonial resistance, but also a systematic debunking of the same history from a western refuge. In Rushdie’s narrative, the project of “pickling” history in order to “preserve” it is overwhelmed by its very own process of “chutnification” and demonstrates its engagement with the metropolitan anxieties and expectations about a lively and violent nation.

Chapter IV

A Postcolonial Tragedy - Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days*

Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days* works from within the ideological parameters set by Rushdie's narrative, only to subvert the terms and conditions of such narration. Like Rushdie, Suleri blends the personal and the political to articulate a postcolonial difference and broaches the complex subject of the post-independence nation-state. Yet this narration is grounded in a social materiality that is constantly absent from Rushdie's fiction and denied a status except within the terms and conditions of his imaginary nation narration. Circumventing the temptations of such a narration even as she accepts its fundamental premise, Suleri resolves the crisis in a striking manner. She makes her project one of fictional memoir²⁶⁵ where the "I" as narrator grounds itself in the narrative as both the material Subject and object of factual history. There is, in other words, a subtle dialogue in Suleri's narrative, between the literal and the literary that constantly reminds the readers that the country she is talking about is, after all, Pakistan.

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²⁶⁵ Although there are clear indications that what Suleri narrates is her own life, the slippage of material evidence into fiction in a language that is not without its roots in the postmodern tradition, makes *Meatless Days* a work of fiction.

In *Meatless Days*, Sara the narrator — even if she is willing to admit that much of what is being told may, in fact, be fabricated²⁶⁶ — continues to be primarily concerned with articulating some understanding of what constitutes “Sara” in historically specific terms. In this regard, *Meatless Days* has affinities with the autobiographical tradition and can be seen in the context of postcolonial autobiography.²⁶⁷ According to Linda Warley:

If the notion of identity is a problematic one for all autobiographers, it is perhaps the obsession of post-colonial autobiographers. Because of the post-colonial subject’s double-interpellation by competing indigenous and colonial discourses, “identity” can never be entirely located within a single, coherent subjective space. Some theorists of autobiography have suggested that the autobiographical impulse is grounded in a desire to discover a meaningful pattern in one’s own life, but autobiographies such as Sara Suleri’s *Meatless Days* emphasize just how difficult that process is. Far from solving the problem of the self, *Meatless Days* thematizes the problem of how the self might be known as it negotiates between various discourses of history (both personal and political), family, class, race, gender, and place.²⁶⁸

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²⁶⁶In the text, Sara’s life is shaped by “performance” as an actress in her early youth and later, as a teacher. She compares the two professions in the following manner: “Now I feel that a classroom requires far more exertion of performance, putting you in charge of an ostensible script but withholding the serenity of a plot that ends — that may fall apart, or perhaps trail off, but do finally end — uncomplicated by the threat of future resumption” (178-179). The theater and the classroom acquire a very important spatial significance in the narrative and makes “performance” a pertinent metaphor in the context of Sara’s own narrative. Also see footnote 1.

²⁶⁷On the subject of *Meatless Day’s* autobiographical resemblances, see Oliver Lovesey, “Postcolonial Self-Fashioning,” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 32,21.(1997): 36-50. Also see Henry Louis Gates jr’s “Remembrance of Things Pakistani: Sara Suleri Makes History,” *Village Voice Literary Supplement*, December. 1989: 37-38. Daniel Wolfe’s “Talking two Mother Tongues,” Review of *MeatlessDays*, *New York Times Book Review*, 4 June. (1989): 30.

²⁶⁸Linda Warley, “Assembling Ingredients: Subjectivity in *Meatless Days*,” in *a/b: Auto/Biography, Studies*, 7,1. 107.

'Sara' is precisely the site where "the post-colonial subject's double-interpellation by competing indigenous and colonial discourses" is played out and contested. Establishing the Subject's location in post-colonial times, Sara's narration seeks to install a woman's perspective as the organizing rubric of her nation narration, thus dismantling the coercive, colonizing discourse of male narratives. Seeking the "conversational way"(1), Sara disrupts the other narrative that, figuratively speaking, threatens her own. Sara's version of history is pitted against the version of her father "who needed badly to retain his version as the only form of history" (127).

The narrator in *Meatless Days* is a post-colonial woman who is defined by her 'Third World' identity and by the hegemonic discourse of the West. Sara's narrative fights the discursive colonization by maintaining that Third World is, after all, "a discourse of convenience" (20), and not a geographical location and, discursively speaking "there are no women in the third world" (20). The statement is clearly ironic, as it is preceded by images of women who define nation in the narrative:

A face, puzzled and attentive and belonging to my gender, raises its intelligence to question why, since I am teaching third world writing, I haven't given equal space to women writers in my syllabus. . . Unequal images battle in my mind for precedence — there's imperial Ifat, there's Mamma in the garden, and Halima the cleaning woman is there too, there's uncanny Dadi with her goat. Against all my own odds I know what I

must say. Because, I'll answer slowly, there are no women in the third world(20).

The adoption of the status of post-colonial woman is for Suleri an insurgent posture as she is aware of the pitfalls of representing alterity. In 'Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and Postcolonial Condition', referring to Spivak's articulation of the "problem of autobiography" for ethnographers, in the light of the risk of objectifying the ethnographic subject, Suleri argues that theorists like Trinh T. Minh-ha and bell hooks idealize the post-colonial female subject's otherness.²⁶⁹ Suleri in *Meatless Days* does not fetishize postcolonial alterity by portraying her life as *the* signifier of Pakistani womanhood,²⁷⁰ nor does she embrace what Benita Parry criticizes as "the role allotted to the post-colonial woman intellectual...who must plot a story, unravel a narrative and give the subaltern a voice in history. . ."²⁷¹ Rather, the post-colonial woman in *Meatless Days* is a resplendent variety articulating "the unpronounceability of my life" (138).

In a text that is no less self-conscious than Rushdie's novels, the "unpronounceability" of the life retold is spelt out in locating it at the intersection of several narrative registers. *Meatless Days* is a pastiche of anecdotes,

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²⁶⁹Sara Suleri, "Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and Postcolonial Condition," *Critical Inquiry* 18, 1992: 756-69, 765.

²⁷⁰Henry Louis Gates Jr states: "If autobiography is often viewed as *the* postcolonial genre, it is not without its attendant risk: the ruinous desire to be representative, to collectivize the first person. It is a desire of which *Meatless Days* is wonderfully free". See previous citation.

²⁷¹Benita Parry, "Problems in Current Theories of colonial Discourse," *Oxford Literary Review*, 9, 1-2. (1987):27-58,35.

parables, farce and passionate romance woven into the principal narrative of individual and history. Yet, the text also insists on the paradoxical legibility of the lives scripted, as when Richard X is described as “a narrative device” for Mustakori, or Mustakori as “the etymology of irritation” for her friends or, on a more ominous note, when Ifat, after her murder, becomes “the news” and Sara in America becomes “historical” (68, 45, 125, 127).

Composed as the centre point of postcolonial narrative that resists the othering principle, the life of the narrator is poised between two poles of eastern and western significance, for Sara’s tale is nothing without its oscillation between “Dadi”, her father’s mother and “Mamma”. Both these characters in their own ways emphasize the impossibility of formulaic generalizations. If the narrative must deal with Dadi and her “burns” in order to remain “historical”, it must also reconstitute Mair Jones (“Mamma”), the Welsh woman, who after marriage to Sara’s father becomes Surraiya Suleri. The post-colonial bind of the narrative acquires, as Rushdie would say, a literal-metaphorical meaning in the narrative’s dependence on Mamma, who became Surraiya Suleri, but never a Pakistani woman. She is forever “a guest in her own name” (163), a stranger among her children. Her own children too are strange to her: colored, exotic. When Sara blames her lack of friends in England on her complexion, her father is outraged, but Mamma is charmed:

For my mother loved to look at us in race. I have
watched her pick up an infant’s foot – Irfan’s, perhaps,
or Tillat’s – with an expression of curiously sealed

wonder, as though her hand had never felt so full as when she held her infants' feet. They were Asiatic, happiest when allowed to be barefoot or to walk throughout the world with a leather thong between the toes— a moving thought to Mamma.(160-61)

The relationship between the mother and the daughter is sometimes expressed in silence, as when they share “no conversation” (16). At times Mamma is inaccessible, having retreated into a Britishness that her Asiatic children hardly understand. But this silence, with its various inflections, acquires a meaning when she becomes “that haunting word at which narrative falls apart” (157). Yet, it is also a lesson that helps Sara write her version of history:

[My mother] seemed to live increasingly outside the limits of her body, until I felt I had no means of holding her, lost instead in the reticence of touch. I could tell that she was still teaching me, I sensed throughout a day the perpetual gravity with which my mother taught, but I was baffled by her lesson: if I am to break out of the structure of affection, I asked her silently, then what is the idiom in which I should live? (156)

Mamma's lesson in silence and reticence is for the daughter an unfamiliar idiom which she must learn in order to set discursive limits to her tale with an Eastern significance. Dadi, on the other hand, with her “flair for drama” and “gossip” (2,3) is the rambling Eastern tale itself. If Mamma glides through Sara's narrative as “one who hid the precision of her judgement in a dispersed aura that spread throughout each room she inhabited” (156), Dadi overpowers Mamma's

“perpetual understatement” and “art of moderation” (139) by her dramatic exposition:

“For men,” said Dadi, shaking the name off her fingertips like some unwanted water, “live as though they were unsuckled things.” “And heaven,” she grimly added “is the thing Muhammad says (peace be upon him) lies beneath the feet of women!” “But he was a man,” Shahid still would rage, if he weren’t laughing, as all of us were laughing, while Dadi sat among us as a belle or a May queen. (7)

Mamma’s abstractions mingle with Dadi’s absurd histrionics in Sara’s narrative to fight the coercion of both the western “discourse of convenience” and male versions of national history.

Refusing to turn ‘Woman’ into a “celebration of (third world) oppression”²⁷², Suleri makes their presence tangible in a narrative that resists “history dressed as *The Pakistan Times*” (119-20). The grand narrative of Pakistani history in Sara’s narrative is represented by Pip’s “marshalling facts” in a way that made women’s lives hopelessly predicated upon men’s desires. As Sara says:

Years later, I would think reproachfully about the phrase and the ideas (“marshalling facts”) it (Jinnah’s letter to Z.A Suleri) put into Papa’s head, because he has been marshalling facts ever since. He would forget that we weren’t facts and martial us too, up and down the nation. (115)

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²⁷²Sara Suleri, “Woman Skin Deep”

“The Father” in its dual significance gives the notion of history the post-colonial significance in a Pakistani context as the ‘father’ formulates history imitating the “poetical posture” of the ‘Father’ who “manhandled” a nation into being:

He [Pip] saw to it that I grew up in a world that had only a single household God, called the Quaid, so that even today I feel slightly insolent to my upbringing when reality prompts me to call him by his real name, Jinnah. It is a curious epithet, the Quaid, that— after he had manhandled the country into being – Pakistan had adopted to call the Leader, but in our home that title conveyed an added twist, becoming in Pip’s impassioned discourse nothing other than the Father.(113)

All the women in the narrative together as well as the men, are somehow intertwined in this discourse, from the enigmatic Mamma and the histrionic Dadi to the “imperious” Ifat, who in a complex way gives significance to it even as she tries, literally, to run away from it. For Ifat’s runaway marriage to Javed, “the polo-playing army man” is at once a rebellion against her father and a sign of her devotion to Pakistan, the subject of her father’s “powerful discourse”(157). Yet the submission of these lives to such a history is invariably punctuated by resistances, culminating in Sara’s assumption of agency in narrating a very womanly version of Pakistan’s history that hinges on various “proper names of pain”. Ifat’s death for instance gives significance to a greater pain, a greater grief:

It [Ifat's death] cut away, of course, our intimacy with Pakistan, where history is synonymous with grief and always most at home in the attitudes of grieving. (19)

The anxiety of writing this new history where the lives of women illuminate discourse on a nation tinges Sara's own idiom, as when she wonders how she can make Mamma inhabit the same space as Papa's powerful discourse:

How can I bring them together in a room? My plot feels most dangerous to me when I think of bringing them together. Can I even recollect how they sat together in a room, the most reticent woman and the most demanding man? Something in me wishes to recoil, to say let it be hid, the great exhaustion of that image (157).

But Suleri goes ahead and does it anyway, seizing on the metaphor of cooking as a means of narrating both a post-colonial nation-state and the women's lives lived inside it. As Oliver Lovesey puts it:

Meatless Days [also] avoids the Shandean "modern fairy-tale of history in Salman Rushdie's *Shame* and the divine comedy of history in *Midnight's Children*, which Suleri refers to in an interview with Julian Samuel as an example of "national allegory". While, like Rushdie's, Suleri's counter-history is anchored in a concern for something other than a chronology of facts, tracing the trajectory from partition to Islamization and searching for the rat's tail of origins, her historiography is more private and more tragic".²⁷³

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²⁷³Oliver Lovesey: "Postcolonial Self-fashioning," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 32 2. 1997: 41.

In the following section I will show how Suleri uses the metaphor of “cooking” to narrate history in the text.

Cooking, History and Memory

Meatless Days is all about “cooking”, just as Rushdie’s novels are all about “pickling”. Yet cooking for Suleri is not tantamount to creating sensational concoctions, or “lurid tales” to be “unleashed on an amnesiac nation”. Cooking for Suleri means a synthesizing of various flavors to convey to her readers a nation lost and remembered. The flavours, as much as the incidents that they bring back to Sara the narrator, *contextualize* the history that Rushdie in *Shame* transforms into “scandalous vignettes”.

If Rushdie’s first two novels chart a trajectory for postcolonial narrative in which nation acknowledged is also nation disavowed, Suleri in *Meatless Days* explores different possibilities of narrating nation that do not demonstrate “a vertiginous absence of responsibility” (Suleri, 1992, 184). What Suleri does in *Meatless Days* is acknowledge, in the confessional tone of an exile, the responsibility of narrating the history of a nation with its “luminous qualities of Islamic landscape” (3). It unfolds in her “aesthetically pleasing moments” which she narrates with love and pain.

In *The Rhetoric of English India*, Suleri accuses Rushdie's novels of having "the disarming quality of a joke that knows it is a little too long," and of reducing the history of a nation to a "discourse of gossip". As she points out:

Shame, . . . , is not prepared to contextualize this tale (Bhutto's rise to power) representing it instead as though it were a folklore, a constant in the atmospherics over the Pakistani landscape. Here the narrative demonstrates a will to inscribe the writer's own idiom of contextless exile on its subject matter, so that the need to take on a historical plot becomes curiously synonymous with an impulse to dehistoricize. This impulse surfaces in *Shame's* reliance on the discourse of gossip as its ordering principle." (184)

Suleri's discourse in *Meatless Days*, drawing from the same period of Pakistani history as *Shame*, tries to meet the demands of contextualization without giving up the writer's prerogative of aesthetic transformation. Consequently, the reader in *Meatless Days* is openly invited to "consume" the text as do various characters in Sara's story. Sara herself "feeds in the pleasures of (a word) conversational way". But alternately, she can also "eat grief," a trick she learned from her mother. One might almost say that the reader's business is to ask questions like "what's cooking?"

Indeed for Suleri, writing is tantamount to cooking just as Pakistan is tantamount to the company of the women she left behind. Writing in *Meatless Days* tempts its readers with flavours from subcontinental kitchens where surprising assemblages of spices produce tastes and flavours that are

sometimes too stringent on the palate! They can be sweet too, as are the reminiscences of Lahore like “dates soaked in milk” or rich and intense as are the memories of the pre-fast meal during the Eid Festival. The narrative possesses the richness and intensity of “bread dripping clarified butter, curried brains and cumin eggs” (30), and delights the reader like the “spinach leaves' porridge” (s)he is refused the privilege of consuming. (S)he is invited to relish “the tenderness of fresh fruits, most touching to the palate” (31). Flavours from the sharp and tangy to the mellow and the sweet are constantly evoked by the narrative, conveying to the reader the full meaning of what it means to be a Pakistani woman.

The metaphors of cooking and food acquire multiple significations in *Meatless Days* giving the reader insights into the act of writing and invoking memory and history in a specific context. As Sara herself confesses: “. . . My parable has to do with nothing less than the imaginative extravagance of food and all that transmogrifications of which it is capable. . . food certainly gave us a way not simply of ordering a week or a day but of living inside history measuring everything we remembered. . . ” (34). If history was, by Sara's own account, “Allah Ditta era” and “Quayum days”²⁷⁴, then it had its own distinctive flavours and tastes corresponding to the matching phases in Pakistan's national

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²⁷⁴It is Suleri's strategy to invoke the history of Pakistan in the context of the kitchen in the Suleri household. Therefore, phases of Pakistani history get identified with a series of cooks who served the Suleris at those specific political phases. I will elaborate on this aspect of the narration in the course of my analysis.

history. But Sara learned early in life what to look for in Pakistani history: the ubiquitous presence of pepper, cumin and coriander:

to some degree all of us were equally watchful for hidden trickeries in the scheme of nourishment, for the way things would always be missing or out of space in Pakistan's emotional market.

We lived in expectation of threatening surprise. . . the milkman had accidentally diluted our supply of milk with paraffin instead of water... our days and our newspapers were equally full of disquieting tales about adulterated foods and the preternaturally keen eye that the nation kept on such promiscuous blending. (28-29)

The “parable” of adulterated food is an allegorical mode of depicting Pakistani history, which *Meatless Days* says was marked by “betrayal” and “outrage.” But if food is a way of measuring history, those “various water levels of a nation's outrage”, it can also move people to intensities, especially those initiated into the mysteries of subcontinental cooking. It is a lesson that Sara learns from the Allah Ditta era and Quayum days and applies to her writing full of culinary intensities: “I wish I had the imagination to intuit all the unwonted jokes people tell when they start cooking food.” (27). Clearly, in Sara's parable, narrating is cooking and its humour finds a succinct metaphor in “gol guppa”!:

a gol guppa is a small hollow oval of the lightest pastry that is dipped into a fiery liquid sauce made of tamarind and cayenne and lemon and cold water. It is evidently a food invented as a joke in a moment of good humor. (39)

'Golguppa' teaches Sara the possibility of turning things fiery into objects of humour and possibly guides her to narrate the bloody tale of Bangladesh through Yahya's²⁷⁵ mistress, the Muse! For humour too, can be as painful as that cayenne-tamarind-lime concoction knocked onto Sara's lap by a friendly elbow! Like the fiery liquid, humour too can make interiors "gaunt and hollow eyed". The histrionics of the Mistress draped in silk for breakfast, sighing over the "trying, trying times" makes the massacre of countless in East Pakistan (soon to emerge as Bangladesh), more macabre by contrast.

The complex nature of Sara's parable demands that the narrative follow the rules of dissembling to create either comedy or pathos and in most cases, both, as in that dinner in Sara's youth "where chicken had been cleverly cooked to resemble veal". Dadi, the "anecdotal thing", is part of the dissembling art for she

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²⁷⁵ Yahya Khan, the martial administrator of Pakistan, took over power from President Ayub Khan in 1969 looking for the options through which he could hand over power to the elected representatives. On March 29 1970, through an Ordinance, he presented an interim constitution: The Legal Framework Order. The Legal Framework Order was actually a formula according to which the forth-coming elections were to be organized. The general elections in the history of Pakistan were held in December 1970. The trouble started when the results of the elections were announced. Awami League under the leadership of Sheikh Mujeeb-ur-Rahman swept 160 out of 165 seats allocated to East Pakistan. However the party failed to get even a single seat from any province of the Western Wing. On the other hand, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party emerged as the single largest party from Punjab and Sind and managed to win 81 National Assembly seats, all from the Western Wing. This split mandate resulted in political chaos where neither Bhutto nor Mujeeb was ready to accept his opponent as the Prime Minister of Pakistan. When Bhutto and Mujeeb failed to reach an understanding about convening a session of the newly elected National Assembly, the ball fell in Yahya Khan's court. He used the army and paramilitary forces in East Pakistan to crush the political agitation that resulted in a bloodbath unprecedented in the history of the subcontinent. This resulted in the beginning of the War between Pakistan and India in the winter of 1970. The war ultimately resulted in the defeat of Pakistan and the emergence of Bangladesh as a new nation-state. Surrender of Pakistani forces without giving any resistance and the fall of Dacca made Yahya's position untenable. Yahya was left with no other option but to hand over the power to the leader of the most popular party of the remaining part of Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, on December 20 1971. Later Bhutto placed Yahya Khan under house arrest in 1972.

is actually a living lesson of surviving the traumas and ravages of partition. Dadi too was burnt!

Writing and cooking demand that the cook/narrator blend ingredients and let things “raw and quivering” acquire the flavour and tastes of the spices with time. Writing, like food, has to “come into lavishment” and must take on a flavour and a color like “carrots covered with green nutty shavings and smatterings of silver.” Sara's fascination with the magic of cooking, the “transmogrifications” of food, are contrasted with her disdain for “Curry in a Hurry” and “Cook me Quick,” those tinned curries and spices that offer the western world an easy and adulterated access to the time-honoured recipes of subcontinental curries: “I would grudgingly allow for the Such Stuff As Dreams Mattress,” she says, “but the Cook Me Quick packet of dried curry sauce struck me as nothing other than obscene” (63).

Suleri's art draws on traditional ingredients as well as traditional methods of blending them: histories of men and women are blended together with obvious relish to create a parable about a nation. Suleri's parable of food is also a definitive statement on her own idea of postcoloniality. It is what she metaphorically calls “living on the inside of a space.” She remains faithful to the specificities of history and culture and resists the ever growing demand for a fabricated Third World/postcolonial merchandise in the metropolitan supermarket. Her refusal to package “dry curry sauce” is also her refusal to create imaginary homelands, those convenient literary artifacts presently in currency in literature from the subcontinent. Pakistan may prove too stringent for

the palate but there it is for the reader in all its uncompromising richness and complexity. Sara's desire to "learn how to cook" goes hand in hand with her desire to relive and narrate Pakistan.

Suleri's writing in *Meatless Days* can be analyzed on four levels: writing about to the personal and the political; writing fact and fiction; writing Urdu and finally, writing of/about women. *Meatless Days* is a recipe for writing "pain". Conjuring strange, sometimes half-forgotten images and remembering semantic confusions of childhood (Mama, marmalade, squirrels) are only some of the numerous ways of writing the "proper names of pain":

. . . A Tillat pain folds back into illusions of serenity, putting that bonny girl into silences of what cannot be said. Shahid pain insists his sensibility is done; an Anita pain suggests that you have reneged on the duty of sensibility. . . A Fawzi pain insists she must be a child, so that as she engenders children's love, she watches horrified and whispers: 'I am one of you - do not give me love so soon, not yet!' A Papa pain glances as a stranger would upon the thing it loved; Mama pain suggests the immortality of absence. Nuzzi's pain draws on her bravery: something must be suffering each time she laughs. And an Ifat pain inhered in the hilarity of her brooding manner, the one that darkly looked up to her brightness, saying, 'Love me while you can.' (173)

These proper names of pain, surfacing and resurfacing in Sara's memory in a temporal blur of "now" and "then", talk about a greater pain: ". . . long before the *Kapura* made a comeback in my life, we in Pakistan were bedmates with betrayal and learned how to take a grim satisfaction from assessing the water

table of our outrage.” (29) This pain, through an elliptical turn, gives Suleri’s book a title: lean times, meaty times. An elliptical flow transforms a nation and its history into various proper names for pain. Anecdotes turn out to be allegories for the reader who is looking for a “method in this madness.”²⁷⁶

For Sara, meatless days appear as some “vast funeral game, where Monday’s frenetic creation of fresh things beckoned in the burial meals of Tuesday and Wednesday.” This “vast funeral game” is as much about the history of the nation in decline as it is, on the political level, about the failure of certain government regulations to “conserve the national supply of goat and cattle.” But this account of meatless days would remain incomplete if it did not talk about the busy Begums (wives) and the incorrigible Nuz (Sara’s half sister)! Suleri’s own discourse on “the vast funeral game” operates on three levels. It tells the reader about the political murders that characterized the post-Jinnah era in Pakistani politics. It also talks about a certain government regulation in Pakistan for keeping Tuesdays and Wednesdays meatless in order to reduce the consumption of goats and cattle. But the political dimension is touched by humour, as Suleri talks about the women’s obsession with keeping their “averagely carnivorous household” eating meat for three days!

The Begums had to remember to give the cooks thrice
as much money, the butchers had to produce thrice as
much meat; the cooks had to buy enough flesh and

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²⁷⁶My allusion is to Polonius’ observation in *Hamlet*, Act II sc ii: “Though this be madness, yet there is a method in’t.”

fowl. . . To keep an averagely carnivorous household eating for three days. . . And so instead of creating an atmosphere of abstention in the city the institution of Meatless Days rapidly came to signify the imperative behind the acquisition of things fleshly. (31-32)

The collapsing of the macropolitical and the micropolitical is punctuated as much by the Begums as the appearance of Nuz in the narrative:

Nuz stood small and dark in the chicken-monger's shop, ordered her birds, paid for them, and then suddenly remembered her housewifely duty: "Are they fresh?" she squawked, clutching at them, "Can you promise me they are fresh?" The chicken-monger looked at her with some perplexity. "But Begum Sahib", he said gently, "they are alive. (32)

Blending Memory and History

Meatless Days' allegorical method blends tragicomic family saga with grand national narrative to acknowledge 'the narrative's responsibility to the story it must tell'. (Suleri, 1984, 177) The story that *Meatless Days* tells blends history and memoir and thus challenges the traditional notion of a historiography which assumes that history is something objective, organic and homogenous. But she does this in a manner that makes her narration different from Rushdie and Roy.²⁷⁷ Sara's growing estrangement from her father coincides not merely with the shattering of his dreams for Pakistan, it also coincides with her growing

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²⁷⁷In Chapter VI will discuss how Arundhati Roy's narration of nation is both compatible and incompatible with Suleri's.

dissatisfaction with the oppressive national grand narrative, and with her father's need to "retain his version as the only form of history". Sara's preferred version of history is not:

the press clanking, deadline-demanding sort that kept us trotting from town to town throughout our childhood to the extent that not one of us today would ever claim we missed the texture of the newsprint. For, the problem with such hurly burly is that it can feel convincing, as though you are always residing in what Papa used to call the fact of the matter, never nuanced, never on the periphery of things. (105)

Even as she takes her reader through the rise and fall of a nation, Suleri nuances things historical with remembrances, teetering precariously between the will to remember and the desire to forget:

One morning I awoke to find that during the course of the night, my mind had completely ejected the names of all the streets in Pakistan, as though to assure that I could not return, or that if I did, it would be returning to a loss. Overnight the country has grown absentminded, and patches of amnesia hung over the hollow of the land like fog. (18)

Suleri's narrative struggles through this fog, yearning for a legibility that often proves elusive:

It was my last morning in Lahore, and I wanted to be respectful to the graves of my mother and sister. I found the thorn trees and the dust, but once I had passed through Miani Sahib's gates, I was surrounded by a city that I could not read. (87)

An aura of forgetting and imprecision hangs over *Meatless Days* as Suleri traces the trajectory of Pakistan from Partition to Islamization, and creates her own private and tragic historiography. Yet, though Suleri is the narrator/historian of her own memory, her Pakistan is not simply a "palimpsest country", as is Rushdie's. In *Shame*, conjecturing that the problem of Pakistan, a "new" country inscribed on the history of an ancient land, is that it was "just insufficiently imagined", Rushdie states:

As for me: I, too, like all migrants, am a fantasist. I build imaginary countries and try to impose them on the ones that exist. I, too, face the problem of history: what to retain, what to dump, how to hold on to what memory insists on relinquishing, how to deal with change.²⁷⁸

Fiction in Rushdie replaces history. For him, physical alienation from a country inevitably means that incapable of reclaiming precisely the nation that he has lost, he replaces it by fictions, "not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind." (Rushdie, 1991, 92)

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²⁷⁸Rushdie, 1991, 10.

In Suleri, on the other hand, the will to remember is a synonym for a will to be that takes many forms. One significant aspect of this will is a constant search for geopolitical and spatial metaphors to represent the body. As Oliver Lovesey points out, "These metaphors, while retaining a certain phenomenological density, stress the bond between the individual and the nation as in Foucault's archaeology, in a different context, of the metaphor of the city and the body"²⁷⁹ Through these geopolitical metaphors, the discourse of the self is fused with a Pakistani discourse. Sara tells her friend Mustakori playfully, "I have reclaimed your mind from swampy nothing into land and they could build an airport on you now! (70), while the sister (Ifat) who was "a house I once rented" becomes in her death a "reorganized municipality" (42, 104). Disappointed by the "geography of perpetual dismantling" in India and the "perpetual rewriting" of Pakistan's border lines, Suleri draws solace in the idea of her own mental landscape as "a metropolis, a legislated thing" (87). Javed, Ifat's husband, "signified to Ifat a complete immersion into Pakistan.. . and what greater gift could she give my father than literally to become the land he had helped to make?" (140). Sara makes Ifat "my geography, my terrain of significance"(182).

These geopolitical metaphors mingle spaces with lives lived, making "history" unfold in actually lived places. Space for Suleri is not merely a regional description, but the actually lived sites and relations with the lived sites,

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²⁷⁹ Oliver Lovesey: "Postcolonial Self-fashioning," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* vol. 32, no. 2. (1997): 38. Lovesey reference is to Foucault's *The Order of Things: an Archaeology of Human Sciences*.

Suleri's history unfolds in many such places: the Nazir Khan Mosque in old Lahore, the Anarkali Bazar, the old campus of Punjab University, the Nathia Gali, the Bhatti Gate fish market, the Kinnaird College, and a string of Suleri residences in Karachi and Lahore. These "real places" remind the reader of the Foucauldian heterotopia, not a "perfected form", but one that is "messy". The heterotopia, Foucault states,

. . . is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible.. they have a function in relation to all the space that remains. This function unfolds between two extreme poles. Either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which life is partitioned, as still more illusory.. Or else, on the contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed and jumbled. The latter type would be heterotopia, not of illusion but of compensation,. . . And I wonder if certain colonies have not functioned somewhat in this manner."²⁸⁰

While Rushdie's rhetoric in *Shame* can be accounted for by what Suleri calls a lack of responsibility, Suleri's confirms her ambiguous yet unflinching allegiance to things Pakistani by invoking Pakistan as a geopolitical space. The messy jumbled Lahore hovers over the meticulous New Haven to the point that Sara finds it difficult to appreciate the difference. Sara's other "real space" is clearly overpowered by the jumbled real space of her childhood and youth, from

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²⁸⁰Foucault, *The Order of Things: an Archaeology of Human Sciences*. 1986, 25-27.

which she realizes she cannot escape. The ambiguity of Sara's position is proved by the fact that she finds solace not in that other 'perfect space' which is New Haven, but in Lahore which reminds her of everything that makes (her) life meaningful -- Mama, Ghalib, Dadi, and of course, Ifat.

Lahore hovers over New Haven which is "happy to acknowledge disrepair and the superfluity of appearance" to the point that Sara finds it difficult to appreciate the difference:

. . . (sometimes), in a room that looks aslant on the gothic roofs of Yale. . . (the) proliferation of cupola and dome deranges into something different in my eyes, offering me a landscape that sometime in its history was devoted to making mosques. . . representing an Islam I do not know. Then the city dissonance seems in collusion with some shrill Quranic cry as though destiny has again placed me, as it always will, in a Muslim country. In those moments I am glad to go out wandering again, breathing in the intellection of the West, feeling in the air a heavy peace of books unwritten and books written, never to be read. (183)

"The intellection of the West", metaphorized spatially in the Yale campus, is clearly juxtaposed to the Islam Sara does not know. Foucault's heterotopia of compensation is clearly an applicable category here. Yet the binarism implied in the Foucauldian categories (perfect/messy; meticulous/ill-constructed; well-arranged/jumbled) proves insufficient in defining Sara's sense of belonging to

precisely that space which she apparently rejects. Sara feels that 'destiny' has *placed* her 'as it always will' in a Muslim country. It is in this confession of rootedness that Sara's narrative situates itself, self-consciously, against the grain of the hybrid identity of the national subject - a much favoured category in postcolonial theory.

Although Suleri's nation-narration stems from a "disruptive temporality of enunciation" (Bhabha, *Location*, 37), it *does not* situate itself in the gap between 'an a priori historical presence' and the 'performance of narrative'. (Ibid. 147) As a result of this "dissemi-nation", Kamala Visweswaran tells us, the national subject of postcolonial history becomes a subject in suspension:

When the historian can depict neither past nor future, chronologies are destabilized and temporality itself is subject to suspension. That is to say that the subject of such a history is itself one in suspension, signaling a suspended temporality, a repudiated nation. The subject speaks betwixt and between times and places. (Visweswaran, 1994, 69)

This *suspension of temporality* does not allow the subject in *Meatless Days* the convenience of spinning a "modern fairy tale". If Sara must narrate a nation as a subject 'betwixt and between times and places', her narrative *does not* signal a repudiated nation or a forgotten national tradition. For, she is unwilling to be a 'tourist' in her own life. She confesses "there is too much autonomy in images." (78) This autonomy of images forces her narrative into acknowledging

the geopolitical reality of the tale she narrates. Suleri, unlike Rushdie, does not write a “national allegory”²⁸¹ or transform her narrative into an Eastern story, as in *Shame*. *Meatless Days* does not try to disengage from the “molecular profusion of facts that constitute political discourse” (*Rhetoric*, 179). Nor does it betray a rhetorical uneasiness at its complicity with a thing called Pakistan, as does the narrative in *Shame*:

The country in this story is not Pakistan, or not quite. There are two countries, real and fictional, occupying the same space or almost the same space. My story, my fictional country exists, like myself, at a slight angle to reality. I have found this off-centering necessary; but its value is, of course, open to debate. My view is that I am not writing only about Pakistan. (*Shame*, 29)

Though Sara rejects her father’s kind of history, she overcomes her uneasiness about being “the plagiarist of her own experience” and becomes historical, unlike Rushdie, all too accurately. For Suleri, writing the nation is not simply a “performance of narrative”; it is an ethical imperative. As Oliver Lovesey points out:

Meatless Days shares elements of other discourses of the self: the apology and the confession. Here however, the confession is not a Foucauldian calling of the subject into being, but rather an acknowledgment of the interdependence of the individual and the imagined

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²⁸¹Sara Suleri interviewed by Julian Samuel in the documentary film *The Raft of the Medusa: Five Voices in Colonies, Nations and Histories* Montreal, 1993.

community, an implied acceptance as Suleri writes elsewhere of the 'narrative's responsibility to the story it must tell'. . . perhaps . . . *Meatless Days* is a confession to Suleri's father for forsaking her duty to the state of Pakistan. . . through a sense of shame she disciplines herself to remember the awkwardness of her national affections and personal affiliations.²⁸³

Suleri's narrative of "leave-taking"²⁸² never quite takes leave of Pakistan even when she is "not a nation any more". Even as a "minority" in "a world with fewer deadlines, less notoriety" (123), Sara refuses to evacuate her memory of the bruised but fond recollection of what it meant to be in Pakistan and in Pip. It gives her narrative a flavour she had thought she had grown tired of: "But we were coming to parting, Pakistan and I. I felt supped full of history, hungry for flavours less stringent on my palate, less demanding of my loyalty" (123). The narrative of what it means to be historical ironically reinvokes precisely those flavours which, in her Pakistani days had made Sara tired:

The food itself, designed to keep the penitent sustained from dawn till dusk, was insistent in its richness and intensity, with bread dripping clarified butter, and curried brains and cumin eggs, and a peculiarly potent vermicelli, soaked overnight in sugar and fattened milk.(30)

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²⁸²Lovesey, 39.

Unlike Rushdie, who writes of Pakistan “at a slight angle to reality” and is “supped full of history”, Suleri never allows her narrative to be detached from its context. For her, “faces do not remain distinguishable from their context”. Nuz is “Karachi’s maniacal sprawl, its sandy palms and crazy traffic,” just as Ifat is congruent with Lahore. Yet Sara’s own context keeps shifting between Lahore and New Haven. She has to remind herself repeatedly, “You never lived in Ifat anyway; you live in New Haven”. (182).

A narrative such as this calls for an interpretation that is situational, shaped and constrained by the historically relative criteria of a particular culture. Unravelling the meaning cannot be achieved by general categories that contain the text within a dominating theoretical framework. In reading *Meatless Days* the reader does not feel comfortable with the convenient hermeneutics of “hybridity” and “in-betweenness” in interpreting the ‘the great Asiatic mystery’.²⁸³ Louis Gates, Jr. points out that: “As against Rushdie’s reductionism – which reproduces the familiar view of Pakistani politics as poised between playboy Westerners and Islamic fanatics – Suleri manages to convey the paradoxes that underlay Jinnah’s vision of a Muslim modernity, because they subtend her own family history.” (*Voice Literary Supplement*, 1989, 38)

Meatless Days therefore demands a partially fact-based reading – one that situates the narrative in the contexts that are fundamental to its meaning. In the following sections I will analyze the narrative in the context of Pakistani history

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²⁸³Edward Said uses this phrase in *Orientalism* to demonstrate how the West creates an Oriental ‘other’ as an antagonistic value system.

from the Jinnah years to the military dictatorship of General Zia-Ul-Huq, as well as in relation to the linguistic and cultural particularities of Pakistan. My aim is to explain what Suleri means by "living on the inside of a space", and to demonstrate what she feels is crucial to narrating nation without authenticating the comic performance of post independence history that she, as a postcolonial writer, finds so shocking in Rushdie.

Narrating a Nation

In talking about the situation in contemporary Pakistan, the Pakistani critic Eqbal Ahmad perceives a "sense of sadness" there which is in contradiction to the vivacious tradition of the Pakistani people. "What you find very striking now is that a sense of extreme sadness pervades Pakistan today. You feel that the energy of these people is sapped by some sort of grief." According to Ahmad, this sadness has replaced the former "intensity, the obvious dynamism of Pakistani street life, the Pakistani social life, the faster traffic, the frequency with which people break out into laughter or singing or prancing in the streets, the intense nervous energy with which you'll find workers working".²⁸⁴ At the time when the comment was made, the Pakistani people were still reeling under the effect of the coup d'etat of 1977 in which Zia Ul Huq (General Zulu of *Meatless Days*) ousted Zulphikar Ali Bhutto and executed him two years later. The

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²⁸⁴Nubar Housepian: "Pakistan in Crisis: an Interview with Eqbal Ahmad ", *Race and Class* 22,2. (1980): 132.

sadness is related by Ahmad to the people's feeling of guilt, perhaps of shame, and to their sense of responsibility for what had happened. It is perhaps the same feeling of guilt and shame that informs Sara's narration of that critical moment in Pakistani history:

Away in America I cringed to hear the unseemly news that Bhutto had been hanged. What had happened to the memory of those minds, I thought, that they could so abuse a body that they once loved?(125)

"The narrative's responsibility to the story it must tell" is reflected in the sombre tone of the final chapters. That unseemly accident in Pakistan's history which is the death of Z.A Bhutto finds strange resonances in the sudden death of Sara's mother, struck down by a rickshaw driver, and more poignantly, in the unsolved murder of Sara's sister, Ifat. It is perhaps this feeling of shame and guilt she senses in the people that makes Sara think of the national and domestic tragedy in terms of the retributions of history:

I could feel that a brute energy was building up in Pakistan, as though the ghost of that populace – mercilessly cast about in 1947, then again in 1971 – had summoned up its strength again, but this time for revenge. On us, at least, the vengeance came. (125)

The "us" in this passage and throughout *Meatless Days* not only intertwines the history of Suleri family with the national history of Pakistan, it also proclaims the narrator's immersion in the collective fate of the Pakistani people and

consequently her own participation in that national guilt and shame. The oneness with the nation becomes a recurrent element in Sara's narrative even earlier, when she narrates the decline of the dream that was Pakistan:

Something of our spirit broke in the war of 1971. It was not so much the country's severing that hurt as the terrible after images we had to face: censorship lifted for a flash flooding us with photographs and stories from the foreign press of what the Army actually did in Bangladesh during the months of emergency that preceded the war. "I am not talking about the two-nation theory," I wept to my father, "I am talking about blood!". He would not reply, and so we went our separate ways, he mourning for the mutilation of a theory, and I – more *literal* – for a limb, or a child, or a voice. (122, emphasis added.)

The story that *Meatless Days* has to tell breaks down sometimes under the pressure of the literal – in Sara's own words, “a limb”, “a child”, or, “a voice”. *Sharam*, the Urdu codeword for feminine shame is no longer a rhetorical figure for untranslatability in *Meatless Days*, as it is in Rushdie's novel which deals with the same critical period in Pakistani history. In *Shame*, Rushdie writes:

This word: Shame. No, I must write it in its original form, not in this peculiar language tainted by wrong concepts and the accumulated detritus of its owner's unrepented past, this angrezi (English) in which I am forced to write, and so forever alter what is written. . . *Sharam* that's the

word. For which the paltry 'shame' is a wholly inadequate translation.²⁸⁵

As Suleri observes, shame in Rushdie, is not simply "a figure for censorship, an area of repressed significance that represents the untranslatability of an Eastern culture into a Western context" (*Rhetoric*, 186). It is also a strategy of silence, of creating telling gaps in Pakistani history to construct a highly stylized fiction. For Sara, shame is integral to her apology and confession that narrate the inability either to alter the course of history or accept it merely as a theory, as her father did.

In his youth, Z.A.Suleri, had fallen in love with the theory of a Muslim nationhood. The paradox of Muslim nationhood, the idealistic adventure of such a nation formation offers a backdrop to the story in *Meatless Days*. It is the story of a country that saw a dream turn into a nightmare. What the leaders did not envision was the essential weakness of making religious difference a basis of nation formation. The rationale behind such an impossible adventure was stated categorically in the Lahore resolution:

two different religions, philosophies, social customs, literatures. . . They belong to two different civilizations which are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions. They have different epics, different heroes and different episodes. . . musalmans are a nation

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²⁸⁵Shame 38-39.

according to any definition. . . and they must have their homelands, their territory and their state²⁸⁶

The emotional force behind this discourse on “difference” overlooked something that was not poetry: that Islam could become a myth for glossing over other differences and justify it in the name of its sanctity. The danger imminent in Muslim nationhood was strangely clear to many Muslims at its inception! The Sindhi leader G. M. Sayeed spoke for many when he expressed his disgust with the League leadership:

Do not forget also that Islamic society actually in existence is that in which the religious head is an ignorant Mullah, the spiritual head is an immoral Pir, the political guide a power-intoxicated feudal. . . landlord their cry of “Islam is in danger” becomes a cloak for dark deeds and reactionary moves,. . . such is the extent to which mockery can be made of Islam in these days of. . . commercialized politics²⁸⁷

Sayeed's worst suspicions were to be confirmed with the passage of time. When General Zia (Zulu of *Meatless Days*) became the chief Martial Law administrator and crushed the democracy with renewed vigour, he claimed authority in the name of that mythical Islam which had fired the romantic imagination of so many League leaders.

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²⁸⁶Sayed, 1984, 51.

²⁸⁷G.M Sayeed, *Struggle For New Sind* (Karachi: Tughluq Publishers) 1949.

Oddly enough, Jinnah, the man who maintained his “poetical posture in history” was clearly unaware of the canker in the rose. In his first address to the constituent assembly in Karachi on 11th August 1947, the Pakistan that he promised was a utopia that had nothing to do with Islam in the rigorous sense of the term:

You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this state of Pakistan. . . we are starting with this fundamental principle that we are all citizens and equal citizens of one state. Now I think we should keep that in front of us as our ideal and you will find that in course of time Hindus would cease to be Hindus and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the state.²⁸⁸

The emotional sweep of Jinnah's address could barely cover the impossibility of what Jinnah's poetry had to offer. If Pakistan was the culmination of the struggle for a Muslim nation, then, surely, secularism was a somewhat inappropriate ideology for it ? After all, a Muslim nation could certainly demand a Muslim Constitution. If Jinnah's vision of a “free” Islam could be practiced in Pakistan, why could it not be practised in a united India? Was the Quaid-I-Azam not aware that there were still forty million Muslims in India who could have made

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²⁸⁸Quoted in Tariq Ali 1982, 42.

Muslims a stronger force? All this escaped his notice for he was indeed a man of "vision"!

History proved that the political contradictions which dominated the formation of the new nation-state from its conception were not to be subsumed by a political rhetoric and were to acquire a more alarming dimension with the passage of time. The sanctified muslimness proclaimed by the state affected not only the minorities, but also the Muslim women whose subjugation to the (male) state was authenticated in the name of Islam.

Even when the latent contradictions of such a nationhood became apparent, Z.A Suleri, like Jinnah, had continued to believe that such a thing was possible and was outraged when it did not happen. But the theory as an undisturbed essence remained with him long after its demise. For Sara, the literal-minded woman, the reality was all too apparent. For her, the reality of Muslim nationhood was great mutilation and murder. It meant the mass destruction that led to the birth of Bangladesh, an independent nation and the demise of the two nation theory in Pakistan. Sara's apology is for her inability to share her father's dream or contribute to its realization. Sara tells her audience: "But we were coming to a parting. Pakistan and I. I felt supped full of history, hungry for flavours less stringent on my palate, less demanding of my loyalty. Ifat told me that she always knew I had to go" (123).

This is not to suggest that the "literal" and the "literary" remain irreconcilable binaries in *Meatless Days*. Rather, one is sustained by the other and corrodes the partition between language and experience. In spite of her commitment to

articulating the *literal* of Pakistani politics, Suleri demonstrates an equal passion for the *literary* potentiality of narrating Pakistan without falling a victim to the seductive charms of language. History can be literal, relying on politics in the traditional sense of the term:

How different Pakistan would be today if Ayub held elections at that time in 1968, instead of holding on until the end and then handing power over to -- of all people! -- Yahya. . . if Ayub had held the elections there might still have been a deathly power struggle between Bhutto and Mujib. . . there probably would have been a Bangladesh anyway, but maybe with less blood.(121)

But history also has a story to tell. Throwing the anchor into the literal, Suleri writes both a tragedy and an epic, depicting with devotion and with detachment a history that occasionally provokes derision and laughter along with tragic emotions at the passing of the dream that was Pakistan. In this mock-heroic mode, the sudden and abrupt rise and fall of national leaders is woven together with the biblical genealogy of the cooks in the Suleri household: "after General Ayub came General Yahya; after the Bhutto years came General Zulu Huq" (34). The chronology of the leaders is matched by the "Quayum days" and the "Allah Ditta era". The grand passion of the epic narrative is shattered to expose the diminutive scale of Pakistani politics. This reductive strategy becomes clearer in the parodying of the biblical genealogy. Thereby nation is reduced to a kitchen, national upheavals to flavoured curries, sometimes taxing the palate: "Quayum begat Shorty and his wife; and they begat the Punjabi poet

only called Khansama; he begat Ramzan and Karam Dad the bearer; Ramzan begat Tassi Passi and he begat Allah Ditta, meanest of then all" (34). The mockery inherent in this mock- biblical kitchen-nation analogy is aimed at a history that is incapable of sustaining the solemn heights of epic narration. History provides some comic relief, as the truncation of Pakistan in 1971 is narrated through the farcical performance of Yahya's mistress:

The following morning General Yahya's mistress came to mourn with us over breakfast, lumbering in draped in swathes of over scented silk. The Brigadier lit an English cigarette. He was frequently known to avow that Pakistani cigarettes gave him a cuff – and bit on his mustache. "Yes", he barked, "these are trying times". "Oh yes, Gul," Yahya's mistress wailed, "these are such trying times", she gulped on her own eloquence, her breakfast bosom quaked and then resumed upon authority over that dangling sentence: "It is so trying", she continued, "I find it so trying, it is trying to us all, to live in these trying trying times". Ifat's eyes met mine in a complete accord : mistress transmogrified to Muse. . .
(9)

The sham eloquence of the mistress-turned-muse, contrasted to the soaring passion of the Miltonic Muse (Sara also talks about Pip's Miltonic blindness) heightens the complete absence of glory in the epic of a lost nation. General Yahya is no fallen Archangel, and a limb or a child symbolizing Sara's penchant for the literal are only innocent metonymies for that "the vast funeral game" conducted by Yahya in East Pakistan (Bangladesh). Tariq Ali reports:

Yahya's uniformed hoodlums spread death and destruction in East Bengal. The soldiery had been told that the Bengalis were an inferior race, short, dark, weak (unlike the martial races of the Punjab) and still infected with Hinduism. Jr. and senior officers alike had spoken of seeking, in the course of the campaign, to improve the genes of the Bengali people. Fascist talk of this character gave the green light for the mass rapes suffered by Bengali women regardless of class or creed. . . Bhutto's first reported comment on the butchery unleashed in Bengal was: "thank God! Pakistan has been saved" .²⁸⁹

"Monday's creation of fresh things" and the "vast funeral game of Tuesdays and Wednesdays" acquire a darker symbolical significance in retrospect, placed against the backdrop of this history. The narrative imperative in *Meatless Days* interfaces the literal with the literary, fact with language to write a saga of ambition, power, betrayal and death; a saga that gets darker and darker as the narrative nears its end. Language in *Meatless Days* finds its nourishment in the intimate truth of a nation's history. Suleri's idiom is not one of a "contextless exile" for whom a historical plot becomes the other name for a desire to dehistoricize. 'Molecular profusion of facts' and not a 'discourse of gossip' (*Rhetoric* 184) becomes the ordering principle of *Meatless Days*, which embraces the material nation-ness and not hybridity as its destiny. Indeed, the narrative demonstrates a will to push the contextless-exile-without-a-nation to the margins of the discourse. It makes the exile, at best, a negative signifier in a

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²⁸⁹Tariq Ali, 91.

discourse of/about a nation. Insofar as (s)he becomes an emblem of what it means *not* to be in a nation.

Suleri also provides a reason in her narrative as to *why* the exile must surrender her right to narrate in the person of Sara's friend Mustakori. Mustakori's insecurity is an indicator of her unsure hold on a history which she claims, at least partially, as her own.

Exile – without – a - Nation or Mustakori

What kind of signifier is Mustakori? A complex one. The anecdotal introduction of the character hides a deeper and disturbing significance in relation to the narrative in which she is placed: "On days when the mind is most concerned with maintaining an untrammelled lethargy, then Mustakori is bound to arrive, washing windows, emptying ashtrays, chirpily hammering a nail askew in a bookshelf long past repair."(45)

Is her eagerness to be in others' lives in some way related to her rootlessness, a fact that is so carefully registered in the narrative?

The first place where she lived was East Africa. . . Mustakori was born in the early 1950's, in that Tanganyika that was, the Tanzania of today. Her birthplace was Arusha, a coffee growing girdle of a district, lying in the shadow of Mount Meru. Her parents, Asiatics, claimed origin from the Indian Punjab and Kashmir, via a detour through Hong Kong, but I cannot stop to explain the complex wrinkle. Mustakori ended up in Dublin when she was two years old, living with a

relative who held the dubious distinction of being the first Indian in Ireland to put *salan* into cans and marketed under the inventive brand name, “Curry in a Hurry”. After Ireland she was sent to English boarding school for girls, places that wrung the Swahili out of her insides, leaving instead a single minded need to remain faithful to her idea of home as a solitary mountain rising very exactly, out of East African terrain.(52)

Mustakori, the contextless exile-without-a-nation, is that perfect example of the postmodern multiple subject position²⁹⁰ which has been a privileged category as the situation of a diasporic in postcolonial theory. Significantly, in Pakistan, she is seen as a ‘brown European’ and becomes subjected to a ‘deep historical dislike’ in Lahore (49). As if in response to this dislike, Mustakori turns her identity into theatre. She is a woman whose body suggests a “deep allegiance to the principle of radical separation, so that mind and body, existence and performance would never be allowed to occupy the same space of time” (49).

A product of a nowhere-and-everywhere history that has taken away her language, Mustakori chooses to live in languages and histories not her own. Not possessing a stable identity, she is compared to post-independence Lahore, which is described as structured by a central lack that can only be reached by a road full of monuments that build up anticipation. Not familiar with ‘what it means to be historical’, Mustakor alias Fancy Musgrave alias Faze Mackaw alias

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²⁹⁰Inderpal Grewal, “Autobiographic Subjects and Diasporic Locations: *Meatless Days* and *Borderlands*” in *Scattered Hegemonies*, (eds.) Grewal and Kaplan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1994)231-251.

Congo Lise can only be a poor actress who builds up anticipation of an excellent performance (doesn't acting/performance require the ability to be "plagiarist of one's own experience"?). She is but a mediocre "ventriloquist" whose performance turns into a sad imitation of other people's voices:

As she talked on the voice grew more and more familiar, giving me the strangest sense of déjà vu, but it was only when Fancy darted a guilty glance in my direction that I finally realized what she had done. She had pilfered my voice! In my absence ventriloquized me to a T[...] "Mustakori", I said very firmly, "Give it back to me". For a second, she looked as though she considered feigning ignorance. But then, "I'm glad I had you for a while", she said most cheekily. (68)

Mustakori's eagerness for many voices and colours (Shaheed says about her: "That Tanzanian transvestite. . . wears the clothes of a Macaw") goes on to heighten that central lack, which makes her at best an inept presence on the borders of a discourse on history. Devoid of roots and language (and possibly also poetry: where Sara is "figurative", Mustakori can only be "obscene") Mustakori can only hope to be a Horatio to Hamlet (who plagiarizes his own experience too?) living a philosophy without strangeness. Having migrated most of her own life, she asks Sara to return 'home' to write a book: "HAMLET COME HOME WRITE YOUR BOOK IT WASTES THE YEARS YOU WANDER STOP LOVE HORATIO STOP" (72) Mustakori's clarion call to Sara implies strains of related thought: first, that the "book" *has* to be written. Second, it can only be written by a subject who can "come home". The Hamlet-Horatio analogy is

significant. It is Hamlet who knows, suffers and acts. Horatio is a passive witness to the tragedy.

For the first time in the text, and probably for the last, Mustakori the exile manages to acquire a voice of her own as she sends her awkward message to Sara, her friend, if only to declare her inability to narrate a turbulent national history. Lack of nationness is synonymous with disempowerment and loss of agency in *Meatless Days*. As Grewal puts it:

In Suleri's text postmodern selves seem sometimes to be disquietingly marginalized, unsure, silenced, and sometimes even seeking for some surer grounding for identity that seems not to be available to them. New anti-essentialist, non-exclusionary postmodern subjects seem to be available here as syncretic, diasporic, immigrant selves, but we do not find ways in which to make these positions politically powerful.²⁹¹

The 'surer grounding for identity' in *Meatless days* is unmistakably Urdu, the national language of Pakistan and the story that it has to tell.

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²⁹¹Grewal, 244.

Urdu, *Ghazal* and *Dastān*

The sense of disquieting marginalization makes Sara waiver in her narrative, as is clear from the nervous self-consciousness with which she approaches the anticipated accusations of intruding:

But just at the moment I could murmur, “the stillness of a home”, Urdu like a reprimand disturbs my sense of habitation: “Do you think you ever lived on the inside of a space”, it tells me with some scorn, “you who lack the surety of knowledge to intuit the gender of a roof, a chair? (177)

If living “on the inside of a space” is tantamount to living in language, then Sara, like Mustakori, cannot hope to reclaim her lost land. Speaking Swahili first and English next, Mustakori is a complete stranger to that part of the Indian subcontinent in which she nervously claims her roots. Sara, unsure of the gender system of Urdu, is an exile too. One cannot help noticing the similarity between this passage in *Meatless Days* and a passage in *Shame* where Rushdie anticipates a similar reproach from an imagined nation:

Outsider! Trespasser! You have no right to this subject!. . . Poacher! Pirate! We reject your authority. We know you, with your foreign language wrapped around you like a flag: speaking about us in your forked tongue, what can you tell but lies? I reply with more questions: is history to be considered the property of participants solely? In what courts are such claims

staked, what boundary commissions map out the territories?²⁹²

Whereas Rushdie's narrator acquiesces to the reprimand, and accepts the censorship by making history 'a story', the country 'a fictional country', and his writing 'not about Pakistan' (*Shame*, 29), the narrator of *Meatless Days* stakes her claim to the 'inside of the space' (for, is it not her destiny to be a Pakistani woman?). She chooses to come home, returning, if only figuratively, not only to Pakistan but also to a language whose existence is historically linked to that of the nation. Sara confesses, "Urdu opens in my mind a passageway between the sea of possibility and what I cannot say in English".(177) While Rushdie, the self-exile, remains comfortable in the knowledge of his "forked tongue" and "foreign language", Suleri is painfully aware of her inadequacy and yearns for 'a different speech' because 'living in language is tantamount to living with other people'.(177)

If *Meatless Days* pushes the stereotypical syncretic and diasporic to the margins, it certainly does not disempower Suleri, who evolves a strategy of "maintaining an establishment in a history" she did not forsake even though "one could only be at one place at a time"(177). Apart from narrating a nation, Suleri also narrates a language, making nation and Urdu two primary categories in the writing of Pakistani history. Yet, unlike Rushdie's, her language catches the

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²⁹²*Shame*, 28.

subtlety and sensitivity of the Urdu language. Unlike Hindi in Rushdie, Urdu in Suleri, is the language of poetry, love and pain.

The narrative structure in *Meatless Days* uses Urdu as a signifier of the nation and invokes its music in the repertoire of Sara's vocabulary, making her poetical mode of narration approximate "what (she) cannot say in English" (177). In *Meatless Days*, history, unlike in Rushdie's *Shame*, is nothing if not seen through the lens of Urdu. Both have the same story to tell: the story of aspiration and glory, lost dreams and suffering. But Suleri, unlike Rushdie, refuses to make it an *angrezi* (English) tale, weaving into it patterns of Urdu language and culture that give the narrative a flavour distinctly Pakistani. If Rushdie acquiesces to Western readers in giving them a familiar discourse, Suleri's strategy is strikingly different. She refuses to be "(an) otherness machine" and insists that the reader become familiar with the markers of the Urdu/Pakistani culture.

But if Urdu (or, for that matter Hindi) did not define that "most modern thing, a Muslim nation" (116), it continued to flavour lives in a strange way. Betrayed by a "nation," it would maintain a private sphere of its own, refusing to be obliterated by a history that strove to use it only as a signifier of an imaginary national identity.²⁹³

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²⁹³"It was decided by Jinnah and approved by the League's high command that Urdu would be the national language of the country. The Bengalis argued that there should be two state languages, Urdu and Bengali. Liaquat Ali Khan, the prime minister, replying to protests, had stated: "Pakistan is a Muslim state and it must have as its lingua franca the language of the Muslim nation. It is necessary for a nation to have one language and that language can only be Urdu and no other language." Bengal rose in anger against this display of philistinism and was answered by state repression". Tariq Ali, *Can Pakistan Survive? : the Death of a State* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England : Penguin Books, 1983) 45.

While the fathers of the nation maintained their respective “poetical posture in history”(113), the silenced nation's voice thrived in popular culture in a language (Urdu) that the Quaid-I-Azam neither spoke nor understood.²⁹⁴ Years later, Sara, no longer in Pakistan, would discover the meaning of '*kapura*' in New Haven. Pakistan, in memory, would be tantamount to Urdu, a life on the inside of the space, thriving in poetry and music:

For Chishti gave us the ghazal. . . filling our brains with a mathematical ingenuity that felt heady as incense "It's like geometry -- no, it's relativity," we breathed, in wonder that our faulty discourse had not noticed this before. Chishti's face would transform at the thought of a verse and we, spellbound, could only follow the lineaments of his expression as it coaxed us in precarious veers up to the vertiginous idiom of Mirza-Asadullah-Khan-Ghalib. (99)

Ever since the birth of Pakistan Urdu continued to remain the lingua franca in (West) Pakistan and leave its indelible mark on the national culture. *Ghazal* and Ghalib are not simply words entrusted to the archive of memory. Why, otherwise, should Sara's own narrative define Ghalib's *ghazals* by approximating their style? As Aijaz Ahmad points out:

For a poet like Ghalib – and for all the great Urdu poets really – time does not happen in sequences, but in a

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²⁹⁴“with all his surging popularity, there were several limitations that the Quaid-I-Azam suffered from... he did not speak Urdu fluently and as a result of increasing mass participation in League meetings... his speeches had to be translated. . .” (Sayeed 199).

sort of circular motion: immediate grief becomes a part of total grief, the poem written at sixteen enters into the poem written at sixty, all poems become part of a single poem, which in turn, signifies the morality of a single mind.²⁹⁵

Viewed in the light of an Urdu *ghazal*, the “various proper names of pain” in Sara's narrative yield meanings that might not easily be discernible to a Western audience. With these various pains scattered all along the passage of time, not sequentially, *Meatless Days* acquires a structure of pain whose significance may be better understood by those familiar with the inner workings of Urdu poetry. Tears shed in a New Haven restaurant for Tom are linked to Lahore monsoons and the eating of juicy mangoes. All over this structure based on associations of images in language, Suleri leaves the indelible traces of her own identity. “Sara” scattered over the narration claims these pains as her own, as do Urdu poets like Ghalib.²⁹⁶

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²⁹⁵ Ahmad, 1971, 14

²⁹⁶ It is a stylistic uniqueness of the composers of *ghazals* to personalize the experiences talked about in their songs. As an example, I quote a *ghazal* from Ghalib:

no more those meetings, parting tears
 no more those days, nights, months, and years!
 Who has time for love, it's lore?
 Delight in beauty? Now no more.
 All that was from the thought of someone,
 a grace that's taken, now long gone,
 Tears now hurt more; they flow deep.
 Heartsick these days, its blood we weep.
 Oh Ghalib! Weak limbs, no hope disgust :
 no balance now, even in this dust. (*Ghazal* 13).

Translated by William Stafford . Quoted in *Ghazals of Ghalib* (ed) Aijaz Ahmad
 1971)

Having blended/inscribed her “proper name” into her narrative of pain, Suleri invokes Ghalib, who “mourned fiercely for the demise of the city he had known”(99). This may be more than a mere reminiscence of her Pakistani childhood, for Ghalib, in Urdu poetry, is the other name of memory and suffering. As Aijaz Ahmad states in his introduction to Ghalib’s Ghazals:

Ghalib lived at a time in the history of the subcontinent when a whole civilization seemed to be breaking up and nothing of equal strength was taking its place. Worse still, what replaced the older civilization ran altogether counter to what Ghalib stood for.(21)

When Sara “*salaams*” Ghalib, at the beginning of her narrative, one sees the flickering of that “sentimental honour of the East” mentioned elsewhere in the text, that calls for a formal obeisance paid to the literary icon by those who aspire to belong to the same tradition. The structure of memory and suffering brings Suleri and Ghalib together, adding an “eastern” significance to what she does with her own sense of pain and betrayal.

Apart from the tradition of *Ghazal*, Suleri’s narrative of pain also follows the tradition of *Dastān* in its narration of Pakistani history; not the *dastān* of the fantastical, as in Rushdie, but another subgenre that is more serious and poetic in nature.²⁹⁷ Suleri’s narrative of leave-taking creates a strong impression of a

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²⁹⁷See Feroza Jussawalla, “Rushdie’s *Dastan-e-Dilruba: The Satanic Verses* as Rushdie’s Love Letter to Islam,” *Critical Essays on Salman Rushdie* (ed) M Keith Booker (New York: GK Hall&Co,1999) 79-105. Carlo Coppola, “The Angare Group: The Enfants Terrible of Urdu Literature,” *Annual of Urdu Studies* 1. (1981):57-69. William I Hannaway Jr, “Persian Popular Romances,” *Review of National Literatures* 2 Spring. (1971): 139-60.

dastān-e-dilruba,²⁹⁸ as in it she talks about a beloved, her own country, which she could not “have” because of the constraints of the “times”. It is, like the *dastān-e-dilruba*, a tale which will possibly disappoint the beloved, for whom she writes her tragic *dastān*.

What is more interesting, Sara’s narrative is also reminiscent of the *dastāns* in the Islamic-religious tradition, in which the text at times speaks out against the corruptions of the religious practice. *Meatless Days* reminds one of the late nineteenth century Urdu poet Hali, whose *dastān* was written to criticize the shape and form Islam had taken.²⁹⁹ As Hali warns Islam about its decadence, Suleri seems to issue a warning to her country of origin in its present state of Islamic dictatorship: “Neither you nor your friends will be saved. If the boat sinks all will be drowned .” (14) Love, separation from the beloved, and the loss of a life cherished loom large over Suleri’s tale with an *eastern* significance, making it read, at times like a *ghazal*, or, at times, like a *dastān-e-dilruba* or even, a *musaddas*.

In *Meatless Days* deployment of things eastern seizes the apparatus of storytelling and bends the post-colonial idiom to yield a truly postcolonial significance. The rupture is articulated in the very narrative method. For, is

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²⁹⁸The form of the *dastan*, a long prose narrative delivered as a complaint to the beloved, is a genre that has its origins in the Indo-Muslim literary tradition, dating back to the Mughul times. In this tradition, love for one’s religion, whether Hindu or Muslim, is expressed as love for a beloved, both in lyric poetry and longer oral narratives, which is why the *dastan-e-dilruba* (a love song for the beloved) is an appropriate metaphor for the structure of *Meatless Days* as Suleri’s memoir is a lovesong too, mourning the separation/demise of the beloved. The religious discourse, in Suleri’s *dastan* is replaced by a complex national one, in which the nation and its history are not idealized.

²⁹⁹Altaf Husain Hali, *Musaddas-e-Hali*, Karachi: Peer Ahomed Ebrahim Trust, 1975.

postcoloniality not for Suleri both “a free-floating metaphor for cultural embattlement” and an “almost obsolete signifier of the historicity of race”? Suleri's own view of postcolonial surfaces in her article “Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition.” Stating that “the current metaphorization of postcolonialism threatens to become so amorphous as to repudiate any locality for cultural thickness”, Suleri goes on to express her solidarity with Kwami Anthony Appiah in the following terms:

A symptom of this terminological and theoretical dilemma is astutely read in Kwami Anthony Appiah's essay, “Is the Post-in Postmodernism the Post-in Postcolonial?” Appiah argues for a discursive space clearing that allows postcolonial discourse a figurative flexibility and at the same time reaffirms its radical locality within historical exigencies.³⁰⁰

At every turn in *Meatless Days*, the “radical locality” of the narrative “within historical exigencies” is induced by the introduction of the Urdu semiotic field that serves as a constant reminder of the intrinsic difference of the narrative's idiom from one that, even while describing distinctly eastern significances, erase markers of the historicity of the race. Although post-coloniality is acknowledged as a chronological specificity through her references to familiar categories in British literature, her postcoloniality inscribes itself steadfastly in Urdu words and

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³⁰⁰ Sara Suleri, “Feminism Skin Deep,” *Critical Inquiry* 18 Summer. (1992): 759. Suleri's reference is to Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?” *Critical inquiry* 17 Winter. (1991): 336-57

expressions. Although Sara describes her father's blindness as "Miltonic", and the gun in front of a Lahore Museum as "Kim's gun" (55), she thinks of herself as "*khalā*", not maternal aunt (9). She knows that coming home to Urdu she can "eat grief" and "offer her (deceased mother) into the earth and not bury her" (177).

The desire to "be in Urdu" seeks out the literary predecessor for her own narrative in a man who almost epitomizes, along with Hafiz, the Urdu poetic tradition – Ghalib. A thought about Tom, her lover, brings to her mind a fragment from one of his *ghazals*:

and so I waited to conduct the ceremonies of welcome,. . . If not Tom, then tomorrow Mustafa or Dale or Jamie or Tillat would come to visit. It brought to mind that past master poet Mirza Ghalib of Delhi and his taut gaiety of phrase that spoke of the age it had been since his lover was his guest, making his home great with conversation that lit candles through the night. I'd think of that when I was visited.(83)

The desire to be in Urdu infects Shahid too. The Urdu *ghazal* structured as geometry and heady as incense would remain with Shahid and twenty years later he would declare, "Urdu is the only poetry for me", and that he could "never take to English" (100). "When that most modern thing" turned into a nightmare of history, the daughter of a man who was a "Pakistani before Pakistan" would suspect that the father was making incomprehensible attempts to return to the language he had forsaken in his youth:

Papa's finger moved in ghostly hieroglyphics, as though to abjure the idiosyncrasy of speech. "But what is he writing?" Tillat marveled. "It must be something Urdu, for he is moving right to left." I told her I was sure that she had misread the event, that his finger moved with the pattern of the fabric, left to right. "Are you certain?" she asked disbelievingly, "I could swear it looked like Urdu." But as we whispered on in the half light we both felt cognizant of a more pressing issue; in a room we could not see, a hand was still awake. (130)

The indecisive movement of the index finger suggests that both Tillat and Sara were right after all. In the light of Pip's Miltonic blindness the more pressing issue felt by Sara and Tillat becomes significant. Was Pip too, writing an imaginary confession for having abandoned poetry for mere "poetic postures in history"? What, however, Urdu could offer was poetry. That was something that the nation at that critical hour of history did not need. As a language with a distinct preference for images and metaphors, Urdu could not meet the demands of specificity of the political discourse needed to articulate a nation. The new nation was to be articulated in another space in a different language. Years later, Sara's father, Pip, would tell her about his "betrayal" of Urdu (112). He had no choice but to betray, for: "... a young man of his times hardly had a choice when he found himself seduced by history but to give up Urdu and Hindi in the service of English, which was history's language then"(110).

This "seduction by history" was complete as nations were born in discourses in Whitehall and Foreign and Commonwealth Offices. Farmers and villagers who did not have "history's language" were made to listen to the historic

declaration of the birth of a nation as Quaid-I-Azam stood up in front of the emerging nation to read his Pakistan Declaration in *English!*

What a strange occasion it must have been: crowds of hundreds of thousands gathering in the open field in Badshahi mosque, of which how many understood the two hour speech Jinnah rose to give prefaced with the calm disclaimer “The world is watching us, so let me have your permission to have my say in English?” (114)

It was not in Pakistan alone that minds were being seduced by history’s language. In the land which Dadi was made to leave India, the first Prime Minister would declare independence in a language that he had mastered at Cambridge:

Long years ago, we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge. . . . At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends and when the soul of a nation long suppressed finds utterance.³⁰¹

Such “poetical postures in history” would feel more secure when maintained in a discourse which was also the discourse of power

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³⁰¹Speech delivered by Jawaharlal Nehru in the Constituent Assembly, 14th August, 1947. Quoted in Rushdie and West, (1997) 1.

The indeterminacy of Pip's ghostly hieroglyphics raises certain questions for the reader: Is the symbolic gesture of going back to Urdu the rejection of a discourse that had taught him, in his early youth, about the desirability of a Muslim nationhood? Was Pip too writing a *musaddas*, as his daughter would, years later? Significantly, Z.A. Suleri's "Miltonic blindness" coincides with Pakistan's steady transformation into a fundamentalist Islamic state. The movement of his finger may be read as a symbolic effort to return to a language that put the nation in an alien discourse. History "was turning his eyes inwards" and realizing that nations have to be in a context, a language, so that they can inhabit "the inside of a space." This does not happen in an alien (English) narrative, not entirely rooted in national culture.³⁰²

The "two-nation theory" which was the basis of the creation of Pakistan in 1947 was essentially a British design to divide a nation they had ruled for nearly 200 years. After the Partition, revolts by minority communities in Pakistan and later the secession of East Pakistan and the birth of Bangladesh proved that the Muslim nationhood was indeed a myth.³⁰³ It was one of the ironies of history that the word "Pakistan" had an English genesis, first used in a four page leaflet entitled "Now or Never" published in January 1933, and signed by Chowdhry

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³⁰² Khalid B Sayeed, *Pakistan The Formative Phase* London, New York: Oxford UP, 1968.

³⁰³ On this subject see Tariq Ali and Barbara Harlowe 'Resistant Poetry' in *Resistance Literature* (New York: London: Methuen, 1987) 40-44.

Rahmat Ali, the originator of the word, as well as by three other students in Cambridge.³⁰⁴

As the daughter relives the father's trauma about history, her narrative, in the true spirit of an apology and a confession, seizes the colonial idiom and bends it to write a *ghazal*, perhaps even a *dastān-e dilruba* and a *musaddas*: encapsulating the history of an entire nation that a 'tainted' language could not possibly narrate. By using Urdu, both as a culture and a language, as the marker of her narrative, Suleri neutralizes the "Englishness" of her narrative, spells out her refusal to be an "otherness-machine" (71) and, in her own words, refuses to "scale(s) down the postcolonial condition in order to encompass it within North American academic terms'. (Suleri, 1992, 65). In *The Postcolonial Critic* Spivak tells her audience that,

[I]f one looks at the history of post-enlightenment theory, the major problem has been the problem of autobiography: how subjective structures can, in fact, give objective truth. During the same centuries, the Native informant [was] treated as the objective evidence for the founding of the so-called sciences like ethnography, ethno-linguistic, comparative religion, and so on. So that, once again, the theoretical problems only relate to the person who knows. The person who *knows* has all the problems of self hood. The person who is *known* somehow seems not to have a problematic self".³⁰⁵

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³⁰⁴The incident is narrated in *Meatless Days* on page 110.

³⁰⁵Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Postcolonial Critic* (London: Routledge, 1990) 66.

The “problematic self” of Sara articulates itself through a systematic undermining of facile generalizations along canonical ethnographic lines. The refusal to be a part of what she so pointedly calls “a discourse of convenience” is inscribed by the alien presence of Urdu language and culture in a narrative that is generated in New Haven but conjures things Pakistani. Nation, woman and history in the text are loaded with specificities of Pakistani history and culture. These specificities offer a resistance to what Suleri calls “cultural tale telling” relying on a Western cultural context. Suleri’s discourse forges a coalition between the “molecular profusion of facts that constitute political discourse” and the transcription of a language and its literary traditions, constantly drawing attention to the inappropriateness of narrating an *eastern* tale in an alien language. *Meatless Days* fights this discursive politics by clearly emphasizing the importance of historico-cultural specificities in the discourse of/about a nation. These specificities in language and culture situate her narrative within a context. At the risk of being un-fashionable, Suleri insists on portraying life in a nation, not as “imaginary”, but as something concrete. Suleri’s language, a complex blend of English vocabulary and Urdu syntax, does not attempt to defamiliarise a world to heighten its potential for creating sensational effects. In this she is radically different from her literary forerunner Rushdie. Language works in *Meatless Days* as a tool for situating the nation within its own specific historical/cultural context and resists the appropriative gesture of any theory that might identify the text as

an (other) postcolonial fantasy on nation and history.³⁰⁶ If Rushdie's "Hinglish" (Hindi+English, his own term) is carefully grafted into the fantasy world of India or Pakistan, to defamiliarise a world whose farcical potentials it must explore, Suleri's language tries to narrate the complex culture of a nation. Refusing to turn it into another "Third World national allegory", in which cultural and ethnic prescriptions such as language serve as verbal idiosyncracies at their most luscious, it articulates the author's intention to be complicit in the history that she claims as her own. Her strategy is different from that of Rushdie, who refuses to have a role in the history of his "imaginary nation".

Although Suleri too is sensitive to the comic possibilities of narrating Pakistan's history, her method is not in the least reductive, as is Rushdie's. Her narrative oscillates between laughter and sadness as it moves from the nation's story to the stories of lives around her. Unlike Hindi in Rushdie's novels, Urdu operates in *Meatless Days* not to create sporadic farcical effects. It is the central marker of a culture that "cannot be said in English". Sara's narrative repeatedly seeks out signifiers (even at the risk of sounding essentialist) that highlight the nation-language nexus. Urdu and nation become clearly synonymous and tend to shut out those, who, so to speak, do not live on the inside of that space. By this count, Mustakori the brown European, looked at generally with suspicion, is only at a slightly more disadvantageous position than Sara's Welsh mother. Suleri turns her narrative into a complex discourse in which ethnic and cultural

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³⁰⁶Just as Linda Hutcheon claims Rushdie's novels as canonical postmodern texts.

prescriptions reaffirm the demand that each (postcolonial) nation be articulated in a unique fashion, keeping in mind the cultural exigencies.

Suleri's narrative method thus articulates the writer's intention to be complicit in the history that she claims as her own. Whereas the comic in Rushdie signifies his refusal to take part in a history that he claims does not merit any degree of seriousness, the comic in Suleri tinges her tragic acceptance of the hopelessness of the Pakistani situation.³⁰⁷

What Dadi Did: Language, Women and Nation

Language and women are inextricable in *Meatless Days*. Nation, we are told, is tantamount to women. It is women who lend their voices to Sara's narrative to give it a flavour as varied as that of the subcontinental curries! It is small wonder then that the tale of a nation and language should collapse with the story about Dadi and other women.

Dadi, my father's mother, was born in Meerut toward the end of the last century. . . . When India was partitioned in August of 1947, she moved her thin pure Urdu into the Punjab of Pakistan and waited for the return of her eldest son, my father. He had gone careening off to a place called Inglistan, or England, fired by one of the

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³⁰⁷In an interview with Kumkum Sangari Rushdie said: "*Shame* is comic in its mode, because it seemed to me that what you had in Pakistan was a tragedy enacted by people who were not tragic figures. The Zia-Bhutto relationship is tragic – the protégé becomes the executioner – but the figures haven't the stature you can associate with high tragedy. These are people who don't deserve tragedy." Sangari, 1984, 248.

several enthusiasms made available by the proliferating talk of independence. Dadi was peeved. (2)

One notices the metonymical deployment of 'thin pure Urdu' to signify Dadi's life (for Dadi, too, lived in Urdu) that had to be moved after Partition. "The thin pure Urdu" of northern India is shifted, displaced to the Punjab of Pakistan, making this Urdu and the lives lived in it alien, uncomfortable in a different land where the language of the people was neither too *thin* nor too *pure* (the Punjabi language is generally considered closer to the land, unlike Urdu, which is famous as language of the courteous). Urdu, then, stands for the pain of separation and the sorrow of an alien in a distant land. Does it also stand for the insecurity and the search for identity of the millions who had made Urdu their home? Hailed as the new language of "that most modern thing, a Muslim nation," it could not find a place in the discourse of a nation craving for a concreteness that, perhaps, Urdu could not offer.

If Urdu tells the tale of a nation, how does it narrate the woman who remained always but not quite a part of that tale? Mair Jones, Sara's Welsh mother (or shall we call her Suraiya Suleri?), would always remain a guest in that charmed intimate space, a mysterious stranger unable herself to assimilate with the cultural strangeness that signified the world she inhabited:

Mamma's Urdu was an erratic thing, with sudden moments of access into idioms whose implications would throw her audience into gasps of surprise. When Barkat's recalcitrance kept her children denuded of

white starched shirts and dresses to wear to school each day, Mamma's Urdu took a deep breath and opened the nearest idiomatic door, which sent her unknowing into the great precisions of classic amorous discourse. Barkat did not know where to look in his chagrin when Mamma gazed at him and said, her reproach as clear as a bell, "Barkat, how could you cause me such exquisite pain? (41)

The outrageous implications of such a discourse clearly escaped Mair Jones. As an alien participant in Pakistan's history, she could read and tentatively decipher deeper meanings of which she would not always be sure:

My mother was a guest, then, a guest in her own name, living in a resistant culture that would not tell her its rules: she knew there must be many rules and, in compensation developed the slightly distracted manner of someone who did not wish to be breaking rules of which she was ignorant. (163)

The opacity of "other people's homes" taught Mair Jones alias Suraiya Suleri to live apart, apart even from herself, take the life around her as a mysterious Eastern text and allow herself to be permeated by its strangeness. As a result, she too was transformed into "a creature of unique and unclassifiable discourse"(166) even to her children. Making forays into Mamma's life would be for young Sara and Ifat an aesthetic participation in her "hidden variety"(168). As daughters turned reader, they could at best guess an imaginary significance:

“I will be blistering daylight”, I decided, “an exhausting thing to be as long as such a posture gives to her the region of the afternoon”. “I will be the flamboyance of the night”, declared Ifat, “if only she will show me just one sentence of what her afternoon sleep must read. (168)

With her “disembodied” Englishness Mamma would always remain an enigmatic space about “the living lessons of the costs of history”, a space untouched by the heady incense of Urdu. In the context of Pakistan, Urdu, both as language and culture, becomes the marker of “the postcolonial cultural embattlement” and “historicity of a race” that Suleri talks about elsewhere.³⁰⁸ It finds its ardent advocate in a daughter who admits, despite her “devotion” to Mamma that “Her (Mamma’s) plot must waver” (164). As Sara herself says, “. . . what could that world do with a woman who called herself a Pakistani but who looked suspiciously like the past it sought to forget?”(164)

The articulation of such a postcolonial stance is not without ambiguities for Sara. Born of a Welsh mother, brought up with English as her first language, Sara too is aware of the ironies of such a nationhood, for she too can stake a tentative claim to be “living in language”. This explains why she approaches Urdu with a sense of guilt and shame, why Urdu ‘disturbs’ her speech, and tells her with scorn “do you think you ever lived on the inside of a space, you who lack the surety of knowledge to intuit the gender of a roof, a chair?”(177) This *lack* makes

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³⁰⁸Sara Suleri, “Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition,” *Critical Inquiry*, Summer,(1992): 759.

her suspicious and unsure about words and things that make up her narrative. “*Kapura*” becomes the emblem of that unknowability that affects Sara’s narration of history and gives it a faltering rhythm despite the “molecular profusion of facts”. The revelation about *Kapura* being goat’s testicles and not sweetbread makes Sara say: “..something that had once sat quite simply inside its own definition was declaring independence from its name and nature claiming a perplexity that I did not like” (22).

Kapura brings with it a sense of inadequacy which, significantly, she blames on her mother: “It was my mother, after all, who had told me that sweetbreads are sweetbreads, and if she were wrong on that score, then how many other simple equations had I now to doubt?” (23) As Linda Warley puts it:

How can a Pakistani not know the real identity of the main ingredient of an indigenous dish? What does it mean when such absences of knowledge are uncovered? It means that ideas of what constitutes ‘reality’ have to be adjusted. What was once stable is now uncertain, and knowledge itself must be negotiated. But the fact that *Kapura* are goat’s testicles is not as significant as the narrator’s attempts to uncover the origins of her assumptions about the food and the long personal history she has with it. The text records ways of coming to knowledge; it does not assert being in knowledge.³⁰⁹

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³⁰⁹Warley, 115.

With the recognition that “knowledge itself must be negotiated”, Sara goes on to incorporate other women’s lives into her narrative in her attempt to unfurl her *dastan* about Pakistan and Pip.

Narrating Women

Sara’s “coming to knowledge” is nuanced by her perception of history not merely as speech but also as silence. If Pip’s story in *Meatless Days* derives its full significance from “generations of Urdu conversations in his genes” (112), Sara’s own is embedded in lives not available in recorded history. She tells us right at the start that she is talking about a place “where the concept of woman was not really a part of an available vocabulary” yet, “. . . once in a while, we naturally thought of ourselves as women, but only in some perfunctory biological way that we happened on perchance or else it was a highly practical joke we thought hidden somewhere among our clothes” (1).

Sara suspects that her audience may be peeved by this lack of a definition for “woman”. Her audience is “lost and angry to be lost.” Therefore, she must find “some token of exchange” for “this failed conversation”(2). Denied an adequate definition, Sara must look into individual lives past and present, to resume her failed conversation with her audience and tell them precisely what it meant to live the costs of history as a Pakistani woman. Although all her stories represent

Sara's coming to knowledge through narration, things told about Dadi and Mamma provide Sara with a frame for her narrative of women in a nation.

In Dadi, knowledge is precisely a problem of language. "She is like a question mark interested only in its own conclusions" (5); her discourses "impervious to penetration" (6). Even within the family circle she is impossible to define because she is forever "outside our ken, an anecdotal thing"(19). Dadi means a disconcerting strangeness. She is in the habit of praying on top of the dining room table; she is a fanatic regarding food and ritual sacrifice. Her marriage to a man, who, apart from marrying her, "liked to ride camels" and her forgetting how many children she had borne or how many sisters she had, together with her complete nonchalance about whether her son was in Switzerland or Swaziland make her as strange and cryptic as her letters to her son who stopped speaking to her. Like creating tiny purses from scrap materials, Sara reconstitutes Dadi from the strange memories as one of the enigmatic markers of (Pakistani) womanhood in the text.

Dadi teaches Sara what it means to survive the ravages of history because she survives both the Partition and the burns. Sara tells her audience:

She (Dadi) had long since dispensed with any loyalties larger than pitiless give-and-take of people who are forced to live together in the same place, and she resented independence for the distances it made. She was not among those who, on the fourteenth of August, unfurled flags and festivities against the backdrop of people running and cities burning. About that era she would only say, looking up sour and cryptic over the

edge of her Quran, “And I was also burned.” She was,
but that came years later.(2)

Deftly, the narrative weaves together two “burns”, that of the “Independence” and Dadi’s actual burns years later, to make her life one long story of pain and suffering in which the personal acquires a deeper, political significance against the backdrop of a subcontinental/national tragedy.³¹⁰ It is significant how Dadi’s recovery from her burns is graphically described to signify survival through the passage of time:

By the time Mamma left for England, Dadi’s left breast was still coagulate and raw. Later, when Irfan got his burns, Dadi was growing pink and livid tightropes, strung from hip to hip in a flaming advertisement of life. And in the days when Tillat and I were wrestling, Dadi’s vanished nipples started to congeal and convex their cavities into triumphant little love knots.(14)

Sara’s coming to knowledge of history means coming to terms with such enigmas, which far exceed the grasp of available vocabulary. Lives, disposed of by history like scrap, teach her to reconstitute her own from those unspoken things that narrate the nation in a much more telling manner. These lives intersect with mainstream history at significant junctures to establish other

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³¹⁰On the subject of trauma of the Partition and Indian/Pakistani Independence, see Sukeshi Kamra, *Bearing Witness: Partition, Independence, End of the Raj*, University of Calgary Press, 2002. In the book, Kamra contests the official version in both the countries which says that Indian/Pakistani Independence was a milestone of national triumph.

potential sites where history can be written. As the nation witnesses Islam's degeneration in the land of Pakistan, 'Dadi patched herself together again and forgot to put prayer back into its proper pocket'. (15) And when Bhutto was hanged and "(our) imaginations were consumed by the public and historical dying, Dadi too ceased being a mentioned thing" (17). The death of Dadi coalesces with the execution of Bhutto, making history signify lives that were hitherto suppressed in the grand march of its narrative.

Mamma's story is more nuanced than Dadi's, for she was "more political". Yet little did Mamma know that in her "disembodied Englishness", she succeeded in being what she wanted to be: a Pakistani woman. "The only trouble with female in Pakistan", Ifat complained years later, is that it allows for two possible modes of behaviour – either you can be sweet and simple, or you can be cold and proud"(166). The English woman would abide by both the modes, being "a creature of translucent thought gliding into the realm of the noncommittal"(158). Is it because she intuited the rules of the land she knew so little, that she refused to be the central character in a narrative, a tale? For Mamma, too, like Dadi, lived a grand narrative in which she was a qualifying word:

Papa's powerful discourse would surround her night and day -- when I see her in his room, she is always looking down, gravely listening. They were rhetorically so different, always startling each other with a difference of their speech. (157)

Her children were thus born of a strange wedlock between “history and silence” (158). And they inherited a “crazy language” that was as eloquent as it was silent:

words that blustered out their understatement, phrases ironic of their scorn. To Papa's mode of fearsome inquiry we married Mamma's expression of secret thought, making us – if nothing else – faithful in physiognomy.(157)

As Sara writes her text, “silence” seeps into history and makes her own narrative as evasive Mamma's rhetoric, difficult to follow. Sara's “crazy language” is related to the narrative style of *Meatless Days* and will be discussed shortly.

Meanwhile, this narrative has to return to Mamma and her writing of history. Perhaps her long acquaintance with a “resistant culture” told Mair Jones that even as the qualifying word she should not be discourteous enough to dismiss a discourse that she might find too dogged or committed. Why else should her stepdaughter Nuz discover in her a “Mrs. Ramsey”? She tells Sara “Mair was *To the Lighthouse* for me – she was Mrs. Ramsey”(153)³¹¹ The aura of mystery and fatigue about Mrs. Suleri probably meant that she had intuited long before her daughter did, that her life could only serve as a metaphor for the coercive discourse of her husband, who created babies and “familiar discourse for the words of his desire”(122). Married to a man who “kept himself preoccupied by

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³¹¹ The reference is to the sad, depressed Mrs Ramsay in Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*.

inventing newspapers and procreating”(117), Mrs Suleri would make subtle forays but recede again to a secluded space like “the sea”; an “expression of secret thought”. Sara would sometimes complain: “mother”, I would sometimes exclaim in new exasperation, “you are too retrograde, you have no right to recede so far!” (159).

Mamma's firm resolve not “to grip” is history. It is where Pakistani history intervenes to define what it means to live at the limit, harnessing all critical enterprises that may read *woman* as a homogeneous Third World entity. Being a woman in Pakistan also means being surrounded by a powerful discourse of sanctity and custom³¹² “Gripping,” in such a discourse, is not a woman's prerogative. In the historically specific context of a Pakistani woman, reading and writing in the 1980s, ‘living at the limit’ would be a statement of her institutional marginalization and not just a rhetorical expression. Because it would also mean living the significance of Hudood Ordinances legislated in Pakistan in 1980 under the dictatorship of Zia-Ul-Huq (General Zulu of *Meatless Days*). In the words of Asthma Jehangir:

The Hudood Ordinances were promulgated to bring the criminal legal system of Pakistan in conformity with the injunctions of Islam. . . two levels of punishments are introduced in the Ordinances. Two separate sets of punishments, and, correspondingly, two separate sets of rules of evidence are prescribed. The first level of category is the one called Hadd which literally means

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³¹²Shanaz.J .Rouse: “Gender(ed) Struggle: The State, Religion and Civil Society,” in *Against All Odds* (eds) Bhasin, Menon and Said Khan (New Delhi: Isis International and Kali for Women, 1994) 16-34.

the limit and the other, Tazir which means to punish. Living at the limit means in the context of these laws to live only as half a man. An additional piece of legislation concerns the laws of evidence, which rules that a woman's testimony constitutes half of a man's.³¹³

According to Jehangir, "a gang of four men can thus rape all the residents of a woman's hostel but the lack of ocular evidence of four Muslim males will rule out the imposition of Hadd punishments." In a country where a woman is but allowed to live as half a man, circumscribed by the forcible discourse of male supremacy, Mrs Suleri's silence may well be interpreted as a tragic acceptance of the womanly predicament in the Pakistani context.

If women's lives were being negotiated by such Ordinances in the 80s, Mrs. Suleri's retrogression merely serves as a preface to all the other lived narratives. Was the limit immanent in Muslim nationhood? It is in the context of such historical specificities that one has to read Ifat's tale. The daughter's "complete immersion into Pakistan", unlike her mother's "disembodiedness" signified the limit in a bizarre way. It is suggestive how different lives (grandmother's, mother's and daughters') converge to tell the same tale about "conducting precise negotiations with what it meant to be a sister, or a child or a wife or a mother or a servant".(1) Sara admits that she too is "damned by (my) own discourse"(1). History made by the fathers signified no movement when it wrote women :

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³¹³ Asthma Jehangir and Hiral Jilani, *The Hudood Ordinances :A Divine Sanction?* (Lahore, Pakistan 1990)
 24 For discussion on 'hudd' also see ", Sara Suleri, "Feminism Skin Deep."

... she (Ifat) went with her mother-in-law to the family's ancestral village in the Punjab to perform an annual sacrifice of some poor animal – a goat was killed for God and then doled out to the village's poor. Later she discovered that the rite was a traditional atonement, performed on the spot where Javed's greater grandfather had slain his infant daughter so aggrieved was he to have a female as a child.(141–142)

The incident is history in the devastating sense. Later Ifat herself would be murdered, by unidentified assassins and would be recorded as an unsolved murder case at the Lahore police station. Who ordered her sacrifice? The multiple possibilities in the narrative only help to make the question more poignant. Man's "tyrannical dependence on history and on women"(101) remains constant in a nation that passes through the different phases of Muslim nationhood . Mair and Ifat, mother and daughter thus become exemplary of a shared historical silence. The mother who chose silence signified a Pakistan that was different from the Pakistan of a "polo playing army man" (141). Yet both inhabit that limit which defines womanhood in the state that was undergoing an inevitable transition from a romantic Muslim nationhood to a fundamentalist Islamic state.

As fathers make the nation that undergoes slow but inevitable transformation from a romance to a nightmare, mothers, wives and daughters, relegated to the realm of living, continue to illuminate the inherent contradictions of such a nationhood by remaining the suppressed signifiers of its history. It is precisely in this living that Ifat and Mair operate as different yet identical

metaphors. Indeed, women are always metaphors, each in different and complex relationships with nation and history and to each other : "but Ifat is a tale unto herself, not a fruit in someone else's basket, as she would be the first to claim, "Am I", she suggests in spirit "as simple as an analogy?" (49). Analogy, *Meatless Days* tells us is to be discarded in favour of metaphors that in their own ways illuminate living as a woman in history and nation:

. . . Kinnaird College! For women! On Jail Road! in Lahore! A place to imprint on unsuspecting faces looks of indelible surprise! The college was indeed on Jail Road, as was the jail, and the race course, and the lunatic asylum too: daily we found it hard to believe ourselves, but it was true. All those institutions looked identical, built out of the same colonial red brick in a style that suggested a profusion of archways and verandas and enclosed gardens highly walled. Massive thrice- locked gates dotted that potent street, which the city vainly tried to rename, but Jail Road – a simple and accurate appellation — refused any alias.(47)

In the spatial distribution of Kinnaird College so similar to the design of Coke town in Dickens's *Hard Times*, Suleri evokes the coercive masquerade of utilitarianism to draw attention to another history, where the same principles were used to compel other Sissy Jupes into silence.

In spaces such as Kinnaird colleges, women must learn how to acquiesce to men's dependence on women and history. Sara tells her reader that Kinnaird, after all, was nothing but "a magical arena containing a few hundred women of prime time marriageability in an architectural embrace" (47). Women "felt

imprisoned in the very place' and were "a trifle sad, made to wake and sleep to the rhythm of being perpetually wanted"(48).

Yet what it means to be a Pakistani woman is not one homogeneous tale of silence and suppression. For, there is Sara, too. Tillat makes her life meaningful in motherhood and Ifat, who once explored the nocturnal possibilities of a girls' hostel, sacrifices herself to "the Pakistan of polo playing army men". But Sara 's task, she tells herself, is to "stave off marriage"(58)

Suleri's narration of women's lives contributes to the controversial debate on Third World women in (Western) feminist discourse. The questions that were raised about the theoretical monolith date back to Chandra Mohanty's paradigmatic essay "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses". "What happens", Mohanty asks, "when an assumption of women as an oppressed group is situated in the context of Western feminist writing about Third World women?". Mohanty's answer to the question is categorical : "Western feminists alone become the true 'subjects' of this counter-history. Third World women, on the other hand, never rise above the debilitating generality of their subject status."³¹⁴ Suleri, who refuses to be '(an) otherness machine' takes pains to portray the Pakistani woman as a multiple possibility rooted in a historic - culturally specific context. At the beginning of the tale, Sara is at a loss when faced with a question about women in the Third World; she finds it difficult to answer:

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³¹⁴Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 71.

Unequal images battle in my mind for precedence – there's imperial Ifat, there's Mamma in the garden, and Halima the cleaning woman is there too, there's uncanny Dadi with her goat. Against all my own odds, I know what I must say. Because I' ll answer slowly, "there are nowomen in the Third World." (20)

As “unequal images” jostle in Sara's mind, the reader too is teased with various possible significations. On a literal level, there is no such place as Third World except “as a discourse of convenience” (20). Sara's musing might just mean that global categories such as these do not approximate an actuality that is specific and at the same time multiple and diverse. Consequently, she prefers to approach lives in their concrete connotations, in how they “conduct *precise* negotiations with what is meant to be a sister or a child or wife or a mother, or a servant” (1, emphasis added). But, since she is writing nation and history, Suleri is also, possibly, in a deeper way fighting the colonial history of *womanhood* in the subcontinent. In dismantling ‘Third World woman’, Suleri resists both colonial hegemony and nationalist patriarchy to write a nation of woman that unsettles any formulaic representation of subcontinental womanhood. In order to analyse Suleri's resistance, I will make a brief detour through woman in colonial and nationalist discourse, as it is this discourse that underwrites Sara's discourse in the text.

Writing History “Woman” and Colonial Discourse

By rejecting the notion of woman in the Third World, Suleri is probably rejecting the ideological burden of womanhood imposed on the subcontinent by the colonial power and turned into a celebratory essence by the nationalist discourse.³¹⁵

"Woman" is the site where Suleri articulates her discursive dissociation from the post-colonial bind. Choosing to say "there are no women in the Third World" instead of "there are no Third World women", Suleri may just as well be pointing an accusing finger at colonial history itself which made a unified womanhood part of the prevalent vocabulary in nation's discourse.

During the British period, colonial intervention introduced some notion of commonality among women into the representational practices of the subcontinent. The Reform movement of the 19th-century, involving both English and Western-educated Indian elites (there was no Pakistan then) conveniently deployed the notion of 'Indian womanhood' as a term in their modernizing discourse. It was done with a view to forging and ideological bonding among women irrespective of caste or class so that they could see their lives as gendered in similar ways³¹⁶. As 'woman' becomes a potential site of contest

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³¹⁵On the subject Suleri comments in "Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition." According to Partha Chatterji, "nationalism as a European discourse of domination is appropriated by the Third World nations for self-empowerment in the struggle for independence. This lack of autonomy, however, marks a paradoxical situation, because the subjugated people who use nationalism to oppose the Colonial rule or European hegemony invariably speak the language of Colonialism: modernity, progress, development and so on: The very process of approximation means their continued subjection under a world order which only set their tasks for them and over which they have no control." Partha Chatterji, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: a Derivative Discourse* (Delhi: Oxford UP 1986) 40.

³¹⁶On the subject of 'womanhood' in nationalist discourse see Partha Chatterji. *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (Delhi: Oxford UP 1986).

between the imperialist forces and the nationalist resistance, 'Indian woman' as it entered the discourse of history assumed an interesting dimension. Although the Indian reformers admitted that social evils (Sati) could best be eliminated through education, education should aim solely at perpetuating orthodox ideology and enable woman to redefine her role as wife, mother and daughter: "education would not turn the women away from their familial roles, but improve their efficiency as wives and mothers and *strengthen the hold of traditional values in society since women are better carriers of those values.*"³¹⁷ By a strange irony of history the colonized collaborated with the colonizer in redefining woman by essentially reproducing a cultural definition that was prefabricated and imported, always already tainted.

On May 7, 1849, John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune, in the speech he delivered during the inauguration ceremony of the Calcutta Female School gave a clarion call to the 'young men in Bengal' to 'extend the benefits of education' to the other half of the inhabitants:

I believe that you, having felt in your own person that elevating influence of good education, would before long begin to feel that want of companions, the cultivation of whose taste and intellect might correspond in some degree to your own: that you would gradually begin to understand how infinitely the *happiness of domestic life may be enhanced by the charm which can be thrown*

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³¹⁷See Vina Mazumdar, "The Social Reform Movement in India from Ranade to Nehru," in B.R. Nanda(ed.) *Indian Women from Purdah to Modernity* (New Delhi, 1976) 171. emphasis added.

*over it by the graceful virtues and elegant accomplishments of well- educated women.*³¹⁸

As “woman” passes hands from the colonizer to the colonized elite, she does not disturb the patriarchal hierarchies. As she makes her way from the colonial to the nationalist discourse, her involvement in the public space is only negotiable, up to a point. She must nurture feminine qualities and bring to full fruition what is latent in her! In other words, “woman” continues to be the subject of nationalist discourse in the early phase of the 20th-century. In 1921, Gandhi stated: "to me the female sex is not the weaker sex; it is the nobler of the two: for it is even today the embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge". Woman in Gandhian discourse is confined to the private space of home:

In framing any scheme of women's education this cardinal truth must be kept in mind. Man is supreme in the outward activities of a married pair and therefore, it is in the fitness of things that he should have a greater knowledge thereof. On the other hand home life is entirely the sphere of women and, therefore, in domestic affairs, in the upbringing and education of children women ought to have more knowledge.³¹⁹

This highly gendered discourse was strengthened with icons from myths.

Sita, the monogamous, chaste, self sacrificing spouse of Rama together with

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³¹⁸Quoted in Sibaji Bandopadhyaya, “Producing and Re-producing the New Woman: A Note on the prefix ‘re’,” *Social Scientist* 22. 1-2, 1994:(19-39) 22-23, Emphasis added.

³¹⁹M.K. Gandhi, *India of my Dreams* compiled by R.K Prabhu (Ahmedabad: Navajiban Publishing House, 1962) 67.

Savitri, the princess who brought her deceased husband back to life becomes the markers of Indian womanhood. These images of ideal womanhood, partly emptied of their mythical content reinforced the claims of 'Indian/Hindu womanhood' as transhistorical in character. The nationalist discourse, on the one hand, denied her all active mediation, and on the other, transformed the code of feminine passivity into that of power. These apparently contradictory qualities of power and passivity amalgamate in nationalist discourse to give a pivotal role to 'Mother' as a synonym for 'India' in nationalist literature.

After the birth of Pakistan, although this transhistorical "Indian womanhood" receives a jolt, the qualities attributed to her reappear in the historically specific figure of the "Pakistani woman". The self-denying passive woman of (Indian) nationalist discourse finds its counterpart in the relatively new "Muslim woman" who assumes a similar transhistoric character and reinforces precisely those values that defined Indian womanhood in the colonial/ nationalist period. This value system reflected in a "feminine" code of conduct is reinforced by both traditional and contemporary culture. As Mumtaz and Shahid point out:

[F]olk tales, songs and legends as well as contemporary media combine to project and reinforce the prescribed roles for women. . . in novels, commercial films and TV plays women are self-denying mothers who sacrifice themselves for the sake of their children (in most cases their sons). Similarly, the 'good' wife is a self sacrificing person who suffers without complaint all the miseries imposed on her by her husband and in-laws. . . working women in particular face sharp criticism from the mass

media and are accused of neglecting the house or the children.³²⁰

Such a notion of “woman” can be seen in women's literature since the beginning of the 19th-century. For instance, in 1905, Begum Rokeya Hossein begins her reverie “Sultana's Dream” with the following observation: “[O]ne evening I was lounging in an easy chair in my bedroom and thinking lazily of the condition of Indian womanhood.”³²¹ For Begum Rokeya, Indian womanhood is an ontological state just as it was for the Gandhian nationalist political discourse throughout the nationalist period.³²²

Suleri's narrative, which thrives in “companies of women,” is thus historical in the deeper sense of the term. By insisting on the various “proper names of pain” and their “unequal images” (Ifat, Mamma, Dadi, Halima), Sara's narrative refuses to turn her writing into a celebration of oppression and a valediction in praise of the disempowered ‘woman’ in the subcontinent.

As a resistance to the essentializing strategies, ‘woman’ in *Meatless Days* is an impossible variety like “food”. She promises, like ‘curries’, fusion of ingredients in numerous and unexpected combinations. Meanings shift and change as Sara goes on to portray the “disembodied’ Mamma” to the “uncanny’ Dadi” or the “imperious” Ifat, women who occasionally or always turn their

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³²⁰Mumtaz and Shahid, 1987,24.

³²¹Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein, “Sultana's Dream” in *Women Writing in India* volume II (Eds) Susie Tharu and K Lalitha (New York: Feminist Press 1991) 342-52.

³²²See Sujata Patel “The Construction and Reconstruction of Woman in Gandhi ,” *Economic and Political Weekly* February 20. (1988):77-87 .

subjugation into various forms of resistance. Formulating binarisms is impossible in such situations: Dadi, who refuses to pray when Islam is taken to the streets; Mamma, who refuses “to grip”; Ifat, who defies Pip only to enter “a flamboyant runaway marriage” and “arrives at a complete immersion into a different Pakistan” prove that subjugation and assertion as binary categories can only form “a discourse of convenience”.

Yet as if in acknowledgment of ‘womanliness’ as a potential site for writing history, Suleri’s style approximates the two most familiar functions in a (Pakistani) woman’s life – cooking and giving birth to serve as metaphors for writing nation. Sara learns from Ifat that cooking and pregnancy are congruent:

(For) Ifat always was a fine source of stories about the peculiarities of food, particularly on the points of congruence between the condition of pregnancy and the circumstance of cooking, since both teeter precariously between the anxieties of being over done and being undergone." (36)

It is perhaps Ifat who decides the tone of Sara’s narrative that is characterized by the prevalence of ‘food’ as a metaphor for history and writing? Sara tells us that she is herself “the sleepy side of Ifat”, and that Ifat has ‘several voices in her throat’ (131-32), that there were “always several Ifats with us in the room ‘with multiple successions of her face’” (139). Ifat seems to have transmitted to Sara some of her anxieties of food being overdone (Tillat suffers from it too!) or underdone and as she writes the lives of the women around her,

her choice of metaphors of food expresses her desire to make it exactly to the point:

[D]ried dates change shape when they are soaked in milk, and carrots rich and strange turn magically sweet when deftly covered with green nutty shavings and smatterings of silver. Dusk was sweet as we sat out, the day's work done, in an evening garden. (5)

In Sara's narrative the richness and the sweetness of a dessert glides smoothly into the dusk of Lahore, conveying its attractions in the half light through the perceptions of taste and colour. It is an art that she learns from the women around her and transfers to her writing. Her narrative, Sara tells us, is a *parable* that "has to do nothing less than the imaginative extravagance of food and all the transmogrifications of which it is capable"(34). "Food" is a yardstick with which Sara measures history:

[F]ood certainly gave us a way not simply of ordering a week or a day but of *living inside history* (emphasis added) measuring everything we remembered against a chronology of cooks. Just as Papa had his own yardstick – a word he loved – with which to measure history. . .so my sisters and I would place ourselves in tune by remembering and naming cooks. (34)

This kitchen-nation analogy has several functions. It does not merely expose the triviality of Pakistani history in the '60s and the '70s. The "Ayub era"

or the “Bhutto regime” matched by “Quayum days” and “Allah Ditta era” also attempts to transfer the infinite flavours (and also the chaos) of a subcontinental kitchen to the narrated history. It also conveys some of the cook/narrator's anxiety about food/history being underdone or overdone. Further, by making the familiar and the day-to-day a 'yardstick. . . with which to measure history' Sara's counter-history about nation introduces those voices that were previously eliminated from Pip's discourse. In *Meatless Days* women are no longer surrounded by the 'powerful discourse' of a nation. They speak in their own voices as Sara makes history a part and parcel of the familiar concerns in a woman's life. Nation blends with gossips and scandals about *kapuras* and camisoles and “Nikki Pikki stuff” is sprinkled on history to make it a felt actuality rather than a “great machine at the heart of things” (118). The act of living no longer happens on the peripheries of history as it did it with Papa:

[B]ut Papa's delight in his babies often implied that they were a respite after he had dealt with the day's true significance. As a result we stood like curious animals, urging one another to step forward in examination, to stalk around and to sniff the great machine at the heart of things from which we were a respite. It had a manufacturer's name emblazoned on one side: when we learned how to read, we bent down and spelled out 'h-l-s-t-o-r-y'." (118)

Suleri's history allows no such binarisms between the intellectual and the corporal. They stand in a complimentary relationship as Suleri narrates nation mixing the journalistic with the anecdotal. History is no longer a matter of officially recorded events spelled out with a "Dickensian zeal". It creeps precisely out of those spaces where women conduct their precise negotiations with the various socially sanctioned roles imposed on them. These negotiations, recorded in language, fulfill "the narrative's responsibility for the story it must tell." This epic imperative to gender and nation does not mean that woman-talk is elevated to the status of a theoretical principle of history-narration. Indeed, Suleri is vociferously opposed to such a strategy:

[W]hile lived (woman's) experience can hardly have been discounted as a critical resource for an apprehension of the gendering of race, neither should such data serve as the evacuated principle for both historical and theoretical contexts alike. (Suleri, 1992, 761)

If *Meatless Days* proposes to install an alternative male-identified objectivism in narrating history, it does so by constantly tempering what Pip calls "the fact of the matter" with images and metaphors that bring into focus the unacknowledged (feminine) of the nation's life. Making such things happen in language means for Suleri to make "history's language" come closer to the gendered idiom of the nation.

Since Suleri is insistent on the *specificities* of the lives lived, in *Meatless Days*, women themselves offer an impossible variety, as varied as the narrative style in the text. It ranges from the literary style of Mamma and her daughter, a professor of English at Yale, to the quaint idiom of Dadi, brimming over with invectives against the male species. If Mamma teaches Sara how to speak in metaphors and Dadi teaches her how to be anecdotal, most women around Sara appear to lend her something of their own voice. When Sara forges her own idiom, she not only remembers to fuse the familiar with the poetical, as Ifat does in her letter, she also fashions it as the “circumstance of cooking”, and introduces into it the condition of “hair-raising representations of bodily functions” (137). The corporal act of delivering a child becomes a signifier for remembering and writing. As Sara remembers Ifat, her writing represents the labour of all these women who taught her something about life:

[T]hen commenced keen labour. I was imitating all of them, I knew, my mother's laborious production of her five, my sisters' of their seven (at that stage), so it was their sweat that wet my head, their pushing motion that allowed me to extract, in stifled screams, Ifat from her tales. We picked up our idea of her... slippery in our hands with birthing fluids, a notion most deserving of warm water. Let us wash the word of murder from her limbs, we said, let us transcribe her into some more seemly idiom.(148)

The “laborious production” becomes a metaphor, not merely of transcribing “Ifat pain” into a more seemly idiom, but also of writing nation in terms of the feminine act of giving birth. If women are tantamount to Pakistan, as Suleri points out on the very first page, the condition of writing the nation cannot be far removed from the condition of motherhood. Remembering and writing the nation for her comes close to the pain and joy of giving birth. It is in the choice of inscribing “woman” as style that Sara takes her final leave of her father

It is , after all, from Ifat that Sara takes her first lessons in seeing darker, deeper meanings hidden in apparently innocent words. As Ifat coaches Sara in the un-speakable secrets of nursery rhymes, Sara, aged eight, “crumple(s), seeing it, for Ifat's devastating knowledge seemed designed to rob (Sara) of the pale of innocence, insisting that innocence was a lie, a most pallid place to be”(137). It is a lesson that helps Sara years later when she starts looking for hidden meanings of history. It is the time when meatless days reveal to Sara their symbolical possibilities for narrating Pakistan. The “*kapura* parable” throws open deeper ways of apprehending history; of looking at the silent life of a nation.

Chapter V

POSTCOLONIAL PERFORMANCE: The Representation of India in

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*.

The publication as well as the reception of *The God of Small Things* in the international arena marks a further stage in the history of nation narration in postcolonial narrative. The novel demonstrates not only a desire to narrate nation, but also a conscious decision to counter the orientalizing tendencies in present nation writing in Indo-Anglian fiction. Yet, even with a demonstration of the kind of responsibility that Suleri establishes in her nation narration, Roy deploys a form of representation that achieves the opposite of what is desired and ends up narrating “the vast, violent, circling, driving, ridiculous, insane, unfeasible public turmoil of a nation” (20) In an exotic cadence that blends wonder with horror, Roy talks about a country “poised forever between the terror of war and the horror of peace.” (20) In this chapter I will analyze how the novel's deeper meaning evolves out of the tension between the author's desire to resist the grand narrative of postcolonial nation writing and the counter discourse that undermines its objective.

Although Roy denies being influenced by Rushdie, the resonances of *Midnight's Children* are too conspicuous in Roy's novel to be missed. The title itself is reminiscent of an announcement in *Midnight's Children*: “But if small things go, will large things be close behind?”(222) The inspiration to blend the

small and the large, the personal and the political, appears to be in line with Rushdie's novel – but with an important difference. Whereas the narrator in Rushdie's novels withdraws from the insane turmoil of the nation he chooses to narrate, Roy's narrator fixes her gaze on the complex history of her nation, producing a novel less "entertaining" than those of Rushdie.³²³

As well, Roy's *The God Of Small Things* is similar to Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days* in more ways than one. Both authors interweave childhood and adult experiences and memories with national trauma. Both narratives circle around painful events that give the texts their historical significance. Both *Meatless Days* and *The God of Small Things* are committed to the narration of a nation's history, fusing the pain and sufferings of the characters with the political traumas of postcolonial nations. But the essential difference between the two texts is in the discursive outcomes of resisting Otherness as a narrative principle.³²⁴ Negotiating endlessly between histories large and small, Suleri narrates the paradoxes integral to Jinnah's vision of Muslim nationhood and their fateful consequences in life as lived within the Pakistani nation. Roy's novel, on the other hand, spanning the period from the 1960s to the 1980s in Indian history, ultimately fails to rise above the level of an exotic tale about an *insane* and *violent* nation.

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³²³Entertainment as an orientalist spectacle is denounced in Roy's novel as "traveling circus" It will be analyzed in the course of my discussion.

³²⁴ The sense of metropolitan appropriation of Other Cultures is quite strong in Roy as will be discussed in a subsequent section on Kathakali. In her interview in *Frontline*, she clearly states that a significant section of her addressees is "White Men". Also see footnote 337 for her comment on "Heart of Darkness".

Although autobiographical suggestions are strong in Roy's novel, it is, unlike *Meatless Days*, a fiction that blends the story of a nation with allusions to myths, American films and western pop culture to create an *Indian* story that continues to haunt its metropolitan audience.³²⁵ The novel is narrated by an omniscient narrator, who often adopts the perspective of Rahel, a young woman who has returned from America to Aymenem, a village in Kerala, a state in South India, the home of her mother's once wealthy family. Rahel is confronted by the past, specifically an accidental drowning twenty three years earlier, of her cousin Sophie Mol, and the events surrounding it. The readers get acquainted with characters who occupy their own distinctive imaginative space. Rahel and her brother Estha are "dizygotic twins" (Twins who are born from two fertilized eggs), a fact which allows Roy to establish a double vision in the novel that slides between the two of them: "Edges, Borders, Boundaries, Brinks and Limits have appeared like a team of trolls on their separate horizons. Short creatures with long shadows patrolling the Blurry End" (5). Rahel's mother, Ammu, dies at the age of thirty-one from dissipation and "madness which was said to run in the family". She lives on the unsafe edge of things, and has an affair with a Communist Untouchable who is scapegoated as the cause of Sophie Mol's accidental drowning.

The characters are introduced from their perspective yet firmly placed in Kerala of the late 1960s, a period when communism was attempting to negotiate

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³²⁵*The God of Small Things* did not get much attention in India, a point which shall come up in the course of my discussion.

the existing social hierarchies. The secret of the seduction produced by *The God of Small Things* lies in the teasing presence of the factual amidst a carefully structured fictionality. The tragedy of a Syrian Christian family is placed against the greater tragedy of a disintegrating nation, to be fashioned by Roy's postmodern realist technique into something that could have happened, only in "God's own country", as one of the chapter headings suggests.³²⁶

History and fiction operate as dizygotic twins being strangely attractive in their subterranean oneness. The fusion of history and fiction is the secret of *The God of Small Things*. As Rukmini Bhaya Nair points out:

The thrill of the novel, its sheen, comes, as I see it, from a deeply narcissistic impulse. Genres merge in it: autobiography reaches out flirtatiously for its image in fiction when the adult Rahel is described. One would have to be blind not to recognize Roy from the photograph on the backflap of her book, even if one has managed somehow to miraculously avoid all the hoopla, the glossy magazine photographs and interviews.³²⁷

Fiction always makes tantalizing gestures at actual persons and events, so that at times, it is difficult for the reader to extricate the fictional from the nonfictional. The technique creates a deliberate confusion between actual incidents and persons and their fictional representations. In short, an aura of authenticity is transmitted in Roy's representations that comes to her aid when

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³²⁶Roy, unlike Rushdie, makes frequent use of the realist mode of representation, gliding smoothly between postmodern and realist fictional techniques. On Roy's use of the realist mode of narration, see Aijaz Ahmad, "Reading Arundhati Roy *politically*," *Frontline* August 8. (1997).

³²⁷Rukmini Bhaya Nair, "Twins and Lovers," *Biblio: A Review of Books* 11.5, (1997):4.

she narrates historical events. One may as well go a step farther than Bhaya Nair, and suggest that the “sheen” of the novel comes from Roy’s strategic depiction of India even as she talks about a dysfunctional family in Kerala. The autobiographical suggestions detected by Bhaya Nair enhance the narrative’s appeal as a “factual” presentation about an Indian family.³²⁸

Perspectives on a nation’s history become inseparable from the narration of personal tragedy in what the reader sees as the “decline and fall of an Indian family”(*New York Times Book Review*, June 7, 1998). The difference between Roy’s narrative and Suleri’s goes far deeper than the difference between a novel and a fictional memoir of remembering and forgetting. Although Suleri’s narrative is also an expression of her resistance to what she herself calls the “texture of newsprint”, Sara, the protagonist, is sensitive to the dynamics of contemporary time in the unfolding tale of a nation.

Although definitely located within the period from the 1960s to the 1980s, Roy’s novel, like Rushdie’s, make history and historical characters appear in a fictional context, or under a fictitious identity, sometimes not without questionable consequences.³²⁹ The accent on the ‘story’ is clear from the inscription at the beginning of the novel, “Never again will a single story be told as though it’s the

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³²⁸In an interview given to *India Today*, on October 27, 1997, Mary Roy, the author’s mother, says: “There was much trauma for me in the ’60s as Kottayam did not accept me as I was a woman separated from my husband. We are not divorced though. It is only when I read her book that I realized that even at five she was conscious that we were unwelcome in the native home and that I expected her to be able to stand on her own feet . . . In the book Arundhati lampoons almost all the people who surrounded her at that time . . . She has drawn the bare bones of the characters from the family. But it is not wise of me to say that I am ‘Ammu’.

³²⁹It is an aspect of the narrative that will be discussed in a separate section.

only one". Making the 'story' continuous with the "Great Stories" of *The Mahabharata*, the Indian epic, the epigraph announces is not only the fictionality of what is narrated, but also the blurring of boundaries between history and myth.³³⁰ An attempt is made to make Ammu's story, located in the sixties, merge with the stories about women at a time when women fell in love with gods and bore them sons. As a consequence, history (in the novel Kerala/India of the 1960s to the 1980s) manifests itself as a series of modern transmogrifications in which contemporary versions of India's history blend with its mythical past to narrate one continuous story about an ancient culture. Roy takes her cue from Kathakali, a form of classical dance that epitomizes mythic time as it reenacts ceaselessly the incidents from the Indian epics, *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*, to an audience that is invited to draw lessons from this classical performance. She reminds her readers that:

. . . the secret of the Great Stories is that they *have* no secrets. The Great Stories are the ones you heard and want to hear again. The ones you can enter anywhere

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³³⁰The Mahabharata Great (Maha) India (Bharata)) is an ancient Indian epic in the Indo-Aryan tradition, which has existed in many forms. Starting in the middle of the first millennium, B.C.E., it existed in the form of oral stories about a feudal world in its earliest phase, articulating concerns ranging from the philosophical to the social, illuminating a civilization that was trying to come to grips with its emerging social and political strictures. Later, after 350 C.E., it came to be unified as a sacred text of more than 200,000 verses, written in Sanskrit. Finally, it came to exist in numerous literary and popular transformations (with the exception of Tamil, a language that had developed a classical literature in the first millennium B.C.E.) shortly after 1000 C.E. It is one of the cornerstones of Hindu culture and continues to exercise its influence on the cultural life of India. The innermost kernel of the epic is the story of two groups of cousins belonging to the same dynasty, Kuru, -- the five sons of Pandu, the Pandavas, as they were called, and the hundred sons of Dhṛitarashtra, Pandu's elder brother. The dynastic war was fought by the Kauravas (the sons of Dhṛitarashtra), and the Pandavas in which the former were wiped off. The destruction of the Kauravas, ushered in a more ethically balanced era in Bharata (India). The epic raises and problematizes the concepts of right and wrong as well as truth and falsity, both in the private and public spheres.

and inhabit comfortably. They don't deceive you with thrills and trick endings. They don't surprise you with the unforeseen. They are as familiar as the house you live in. Or the smell of your lover's skin. You know how they end, yet you listen as though you don't. In the way that although you know that one day you will die, you live as though you won't. In the Great Stories you know who lives and who dies, who finds love, who doesn't. And yet you want to know again."(218)

The story that Roy narrates draws sustenance from *The Mahabharata*, as performed in a classical dance form of India, the Kathakali. Invested with a mythical relevance, the movement of the narrative continues to circle around the class/caste tragedy of Ammu and Velutha. It makes us enter "India" with characters who have been invested with complex significances drawn from the epic, and the reader has only to learn, if (s)he can, what they symbolize, in order to be able to understand how the destinies of the characters are already determined. The reader's responses to them are to be construed accordingly. Roy's deployment of the Karna/Kunti episode from *The Mahabharata* as well as the slaying of Dushasana (with an ironic twist) make the story of Ammu, Velutha and the twins another version of the polyvalent myth of Karna and Kunti and the Pandavas.³³¹ While Ammu corresponds to Kunti, Karna gets split into Velutha

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³³¹Before her marriage to Pandu (who could not have sexual intercourse due to a curse), the young and beautiful Kunti, the daughter of King Kuntibhoja, received a boon from the sage Durvasa who was pleased by her gentle nature. He gave her a mantra which empowered her to consort with gods, a power that she would be advised to use by Pandu after marriage. The young girl stood in the sun and chanted the mantra, inviting Surya, the sun-god to become her lover. That night, in a blaze of light, the Sun appeared before her. A son was born to her. Surya assured her that she would still be considered a virgin and would not have to face social opprobrium. Scared of social stigma nonetheless, Kunti put her first-born into a wicker basket and sent it floating down Yamuna. The basket was washed ashore and found by Adhiratha, a charioteer, who adopted the child and named him Karna. Karna, the son of Surya, grew up to be heroic and valiant. He grew close to the Kauravas,

(the hero of low birth among upper caste Indians), and Estha (the child abandoned by his own mother due to social pressure). What actually “happens” in the novel is an always already given: that is, a narrative which has a pre-constituted end that does not “surprise” or “trick” the reader. The postcolonial/post-independence history enters into a dialogue with the ancient Indian epic narrative.

Roy’s choice of Kathakali as a trope for her narrative is therefore only too appropriate for the purpose of her novel. For Kathakali too speaks of things that happened long ago and holds a dialogue between the mythical and the historical time at the site of its performance. The audience is made to participate and draw lessons from a time very distant from its own. The outcome of this choice by Roy is a mysterious tale of crime and punishment, in which contemporary social and political issues feed into the timeless depiction of Indian class/caste mysteries.

Roy’s narration appears to be caught between two versions of history. The first projects India as a country with a complex politico-cultural identity and makes a persistent demand on the reader to examine each and every fibre of its social fabric from the ancient to the present times. The second is a different version found in Roy’s novel, that sees contemporary Indian history as an irreducible “Indian” essence whose significance is drawn from the mythical

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who did not shun him despite his apparently lowly birth. In the battle of Kurukshetra, in which the Kauravas and the Pandavas confronted each other, Karna, elected the Commander of the Kauravas in the final phase of the battle, proved a serious challenge to the Pandavas. As a desperate measure to save her legitimate sons, Kunti decided to break her silence. On the bank of the Ganges, on the eve of the battle, the mother and the son confronted the terrible secret of their lives. Karna rejected Kunti’s offer that he join the Pandavas, assuring her that he would not touch her sons, except Arjuna, his rival in love and prowess. There is a very touching narration of this incident in Roy’s novel. I will quote it in another context in a subsequent section.

stereotypes. This version draws its sustenance from an ancient classical-mythical discourse on Indian-ness found in *The Mahabharata* and gives it a new orientation.³³² In Roy's version of this irreducible essence, mythical stereotypes, retaining at times their original significance and at times representing the obverse of what they stood for in the myths, enumerate national vices and other forms of debilitation that go back to the Indo-Aryan civilization, or, in other words, to the times of *The Mahabharata*. The first is articulated by Chacko (Rahel's uncle), and deals with the colonialist interventions into a nation's history; interventions that changed the history of a country forever. The second, of which Velutha and Ammu are victims, is history as an impasse, rehearsing endlessly the religious and cultural valences from the time of *The Mahabharata*. But unlike the discourse in *The Mahabharata*, Roy's version fails to develop a complex understanding of the problems of Good and Evil which the epic demonstrates through its characters who have to struggle with moral dilemmas and make difficult choices.

As a way of distinguishing between two versions, I will henceforth call the second 'history-as-essence'. The novel's ideological problem inheres in its inability to blend the two versions to narrate a nation in which the forces of modernity and tradition are constantly in conflict and precipitate a situation of crisis.

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³³²During the colonial phase, nationalist discourse turned characters in the epics and ancient myths into national icons of courage, masculinity, chastity, motherhood and every transcendental value whose proliferation was deemed necessary to the recuperation of a pride in Indian national identity. For interesting discussions of this discourse in colonial India and the national elite, see Indira Chowdhury, *Frail Hero and History*, (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1998). Also see Sibaji Bandopadhyay, "Producing and Re-producing the New Woman: A note on Prefix 're'," *Social Scientist* vol 22, nos 1-2 Jan-Feb. (1994).

This chapter will analyze how Roy's narrative, as a result of this unresolved crisis, reveals a deep contradiction at its core. While showing a striking ability to diagnose the symptoms of both tradition and modernity, retrogression and progress in the Indian national situation, the novel fails to curve out, in its own discourse, a complex perspective that makes facile generalizations impossible. It is especially tragic because the desire to articulate a cultural difference without succumbing to the Othering principles of postcolonialist rhetoric seems to be the central concern of the novelist. In other words, the novel gets trapped in the same orientalizing project that it consciously tries to subvert. *The Mahabharata* is made into a metatext of the novel and the epic characters transfer some of their symbolical valences into the narrative and openly ask the reader to read the novel, sometimes as an ironic inversion of the "Great Story", and at others as a reiteration of its cosmic significance. The result is a complex method of story telling that remains ambivalent about history-as-essence, as it gets inserted into the modern history of a nation. Roy's relentless pursuit of the epic dimension and effort to find its resonances in the history she chooses to tell lead to erasures and omissions, and create a version of history that left many Indian critics wondering about the sincerity of Roy's project.³³³ The representational strategy thus works against itself in portraying a nation that continues to cling to an ancient world whose faith in the moral order, sadly enough, falls outside the scope of the narrative.

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³³³The reception of the novel by the national critics and the national media as well their western counterparts is significant in this connection and will be taken up in the course of the analysis.

In the first part of the discussion I will analyze how *The God of Small Things* deals with the first version of history, as it narrates the complex history of the Syrian Christian community of Kerala (India) from its origin to the present times and blends it into a larger national perspective, bringing both colonial and postcolonial Indian history into the “Story” that it has to tell. In the second, I will analyze the dilemma at the heart of the narrative, showing how, despite the author’s best intentions, Roy’s nation narration is ironically undermined by her pursuit of the very modes of representation that she herself denounces in the novel.

Caste Hindus and Caste Christians

The narration of history in the novel starts around 1876 when a seven-year-old Syrian Christian boy is blessed by the patriarch of Mesopotamia.³³⁴ This act marks the beginning of a future “Reverend” and of the tragedy of his unborn daughter as well as his grand-daughter, intertwined in the novel with the amazing tale of the Syrian Christian community of Kerala:

They found themselves right in front of a group of people whom the patriarch was addressing in the western most veranda of the Kalleny house, in Cochin. Seizing his opportunity, his father whispered in his young son's ear and propelled the little fellow forward. The future Reverend. . .applied his terrified lips to the ring on the

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³³⁴In the subsequent section I will discuss the history of the Syrian Christians.

Patriarch's middle finger, leaving it wet with spit. The Patriarch wiped his ring on his sleeve, and blessed the little boy. Long after he grew up and became a priest, Reverend Ipe continued to be known as Punnyan Kunju – Little Blessed One – and people came down the river in boats all the way from Alleppey and Ernakulum, with children to be blessed by him." (23)

History seeps through the cracks of the narrative to reveal other discursive possibilities. The brief ritual conducted by the Patriarch transforms the boy into '*Punnyan Kunju*' (blessed child)– a Christian spiritual head in a culture that had for a thousand years been accustomed to worshipping Hindu deities in temples. This highly sanskritized title given to the Reverend also points at the relational ambivalence between Christian and Hindu devotee communities in a strange land where Saint. Thomas the Apostle is believed to have converted thirty-two Namboodiri (Keralite Brahmins) in 53 C.E.³³⁵ Further, the Brahminic title given to a reverend implies much more than just the cultural affinities of two communities living side by side.

Stories and histories cross borders and one starts resembling the other when it comes to narrating the (Syrian) Christian world of Kerala. I will first examine the history of the Syrian Christians before discussing their indianization in the Kottayam district of Kerala and the significance of this history in the novel.

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³³⁵Corinne. J. Dempsey: "Rivalry, Reliance and Resemblance. Siblings as Metaphors for Hindu-Christian Relations in Kerala," *Asian Folklore Studies*. vol 57. (1998): 51-70. Dempsey talks about a prevalent cultural tradition in the Kottayam district of Kerala in which local lore and rituals associate Hindu deities and Christian saints as siblings.

The Christian community in Kerala is divided into four identifiable groups. Its origin dates back to 52 C.E., when Saint Thomas came to the region, landing at the port of Cranganore near Cochin. He is said to have visited different parts of Kerala and converted local inhabitants, including many upper caste Namboodiri Brahmins. Members of the present Christian population descended from this group are popularly known as Syrian Christians. The name 'Syrian' was derived from Cyrus, the king of Persia (559-529 B.C.), who conquered Babylon (539 B.C.) and liberated the Jews by permitting them to return to Judea. It was an equivalent of 'Christian' and was applied to Christ's followers in Antioch because those converted Jews believed that Cyrus, their Liberator, resembled Christ, the liberator of mankind in bondage. The name Syrian was associated first with the Christians of Syria and later with the Christians of Mesopotamia, Persia and India.

The Syrian Orthodox church of Antioch can be traced back to the dawn of Christianity and claims to be one of the earliest apostolic churches. It was in Antioch that the followers of Jesus were called Christians as narrated in the New Testament: "The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch" (Acts 11:26). From the middle of the fifth century, the Bishop of Antioch, and his counterparts in Alexandria, Byzantium and Rome would be called Patriarchs. The patriarchate was forced to move from Antioch in C.E. 518, after a period of turbulent history, to various locations in the near East till it settled, finally, in Mardin, east, during the thirteenth century. India has its own place in the history of Syrian Christianity. It is traditionally believed that, Syrian Christianity was established in India by

Saint Thomas who arrived in Malankara (Kerala) from Edessa in 52 C.E. The close ties between the church in Kerala and the Near East go back to at least the fourth century when a certain Joseph of Edessa traveled to India. The Church of Kerala is an integral part of the Syrian Orthodox Church, with the Patriarch of Antioch as its supreme head. The local head of Church in Kerala is the Catholicose of the East, ordained by and accountable to the Patriarch of Antioch.

Apart from these Syrian Christians who form a significant section of the Christian community in Kerala, there are four other identifiable Christian groups: the Knanayas – who claim to be the descendants of a Persian merchant, Thomas De Cana, who came to Kerala in 4 C.E. and belonged to the Catholic or the Jacobite church and also to the Eastern orthodox tradition; the Latin Christians– the lower caste sinners converted by Saint Francis Xavier in the Sixteenth century and constitute the Catholic church of Latin rites; the Anglo Indians – the people of Indo-British descent who belong to the Catholic church; and, finally, the “converts” – the descendants of untouchables converted in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries by the Anglican and the Protestant churches. These mythical/ historical claims to their *Hindu* origin create a caste hierarchy among the Christians of Kerala: the Syrian Christian being the highest and the converts the lowest in the social order.

What is significant in the above hierarchy is that the different Christian groups perpetuate in their world the very Hindu caste hierarchy that is supposedly alien to the egalitarian principles of Christianity. The developments

in the novel must be understood in the light of this strange irony of history. Otherwise it is difficult for readers to appreciate how a Christian man can defile a Christian woman or why a Christian woman should plot revenge on a Christian man for loving her niece. The irony of history also explains why a Christian police officer should join hands with a Hindu Communist to eradicate a Christian evil. What happens to Velutha and Ammu, Margaret Kochamma and Mammachi is inextricably linked to the complex history of Christians who were formerly Brahmins.

Smelling History: Caste, Religion and Nation

“To understand history,” Chacko said, “we have to go inside and listen to what they are saying. And look at the books and the pictures on the wall. And smell the smells.”(51)

Roy blends the individual story of Ammu and her dizygotic twins Rahel and Estha with the complicated class caste history of Kerala, presenting a tale whose resonances go far beyond Aymenem, the village in which the novel is set. As Padmini Mongia points out, certain fundamental questions are raised in the novel about the problematic relationship between the individual and history :

Do we choose to love? Or are our loves chosen for us by where we come from and who we allow ourselves to love? The products of Communisms and histories, of specific moments and their ancient antecedents, our lives are circumscribed by what is demanded of us, and

when the laws are broken lives have to be paid in recompense.³³⁶

In its blending of “specific moments and their ancient antecedents”, and its narration of “who lives, who dies, who finds love, who doesn’t”(218), the reader experiences is an attempt to fuse myth with history, from the ancient down to the postcolonial, portraying a nation that grapples with ancient traditions and beliefs even as it tries to respond to the demands made by the changing times.

The performance of the first version of history in *The God of Small Things* explores Keralian/Indian history in a way that problematizes simplistic categories based on religious, caste or class distinctions. History in the novel is a product of dilemmas about Christian and Hindu identities complicated further by the assumption of racial purity. Christians who are Brahmins and Christians who are untouchables make any easy generalization on caste and race inadequate. In her precise representation of the caste stratifications in the Indian (Hindu) hierarchy, and class-caste nexus in Kerala, Roy invites her reader to *smell* the history narrated in the novel.

History in *The God of Small Things* is ambiguous, portraying on the one hand a complex multilayered saga of religious and caste identities, and on the other being juxtaposed to a “Toy History” conveniently slotted and objectivized for the curious gaze of “tourists“. Roy’s ironical and satirical depiction of the tourism industry in Kerala bears witness to her own resistance to the fetishization

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³³⁶Padmini Mongia, "New Writing By Indian Women ," *WOMAN* ,8/3 Autumn (1997): 340.

of exotic alterity. Yet, as I will discuss in the second part of the chapter, it is also indicative of the self contradiction that is embedded in the very texture of the narrative, making it a representative instance of postcolonial consciousness. “Toy History”, as Roy deploys the term in the novel, becomes a metaphor for the national exotic industry that manufactures “culture” for foreign consumption:

Kari Saipu’s house had been renovated and painted. It had become the center piece of an elaborate complex crisscrossed with artificial canals and connecting bridges. Small boats bobbed in the water. The old colonial bungalow with its deep verandah and Doric columns, was surrounded by smaller, older, wooden houses—ancestral homes that the hotel chain had bought from old families and transplanted in the Heart of Darkness. Toy Histories for rich tourists to play. Like the sheaves of rice in Joseph’s Dream, like a press of eager natives petitioning an English magistrate, the old houses had been arranged around the History House in attitudes of deference. “Heritage” the hotel was called.” (120, emphasis added)³³⁷

The author’s derision is hardly concealed in the sarcasm directed against ‘painted’ colonial bungalows and ‘artificial’ canals for “rich” tourists to “play in”. Such commodification of history into a convenient ethnic toy simplified for easy handling is matched by the watered down Kathakali performances provided to the tourists, in which ancient “Stories” are “collapsed and amputated” for

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³³⁷“The metaphor [The Heart of Darkness] appears in *The God of Small Things* as a reversal of Conrad, a kind of laughing reference to ‘*Heart of Darkness*’. It’s saying that we, the characters in the book, are not the White Men, the people who are scared of the Heart of Darkness. We are the people who live in it, we are the people without stories. I keep referring to the war in Vietnam, saying we are the nameless geeks and gooks who populate the Heart of Darkness. In Ayemenem, in the heart of Darkness, I talk not about the White Man, but about the Darkness, about what the Darkness is about” – Roy in an interview to *Frontline*, August 8, 1997.

audiences with a “small attention span” (121). The problematic aspect of this derision will be analyzed in the latter part of the analysis.

The texture of the community in all its complexity and richness is hinted at in sections where Mammachi tells Estha and Rahel that she can remember a time in her girlhood, when Paravans were expected to “crawl backwards” with a broom, sweeping away their own footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping on to them. “In Mammachi’s time,” the readers are informed,

Paravans, like other untouchables, were not allowed to walk on public roads, nor allowed to cover their upper bodies or carry umbrellas. They had to put hands over their mouths so that their polluted breath did not pollute those (upper Caste Christians and Hindus) whom they addressed.(71)

The collusional politics of the Syrian Christians and the Brahmins (Namboodiris) in the joint persecution of the untouchables indicate not merely the dubious social practices of two religious communities living together for centuries, but also a deeper collaboration rooted in the origin of the Syrian Christians stated elsewhere in the novel.

Torn between past and present, the Syrian Christians, as the novel indicates, seem to inhabit a twilight zone where egalitarian principles of Christianity are subsumed by the Brahminical pride in the superiority of their original caste. A ferocious defense against any possible pollution of its purity divides the society along caste stratifications. History, inscribed in caste

violence, is thus the joint work of “Caste Hindus” and “Caste Christians” who zealously guard their lives against the threatening invasion of what is polluted, and hence, not to be touched. The full implication of Velutha’s and Ammu’s transgression can be grasped only in the light of this Brahmin – Christian *mélange*. Velutha is destroyed not simply because he was a suspect in the drowning of Sophie Mol, but because he touched what he should not have touched. As a matter of fact, there is a discourse on smell and touch in the narrative that articulates the abhorrence of the impure and defines the nature of the Ammu-Velutha affair and its tragic consequences.

It is significant that Velutha’s (and also his father’s) whole existence is perceived in terms of smell and touch, an existence that disturbs the hierarchies of the caste-ridden Hindu/Syrian Christian community. The very thought of Velutha’s smell overwhelms Baby Kochamma as she comes to learn of her niece’s transgression. It is a fact that is narrated twice in the novel: “How could she stand the smell? Haven’t you noticed, they have a particular smell, these Paravans?” (75, 243). This “olfactory observation”, “that specific little detail” charts a history, not only of past and present in the novel but also of subsequent events in the future. The aura of uncleanness that surrounds Velutha in Kochamma and Mammachi’s fertile imagination is articulated as much in Baby Kochamma’s “dramatic shudder” as in the violence with which Mammachi greets the news of her daughter’s adultery: “Baby Kochamma, walking past the kitchen, heard the commotion. She found Mammachi spitting into the rain, THOO! THOO!

THOO! and Vellya Paapen lying in the slush” (243). Mammachi’s visceral outburst is a reaction to the impurity that has corrupted her own flesh:

Mammachi’s rage at the old one-eyed Paravan standing in the rain. . .was redirected into a cold contempt for her daughter and what she had done. She thought of her naked, coupling in the mud with a man who was nothing but a filthy coolie. She imagined it in vivid detail: a Paravan’s coarse black hand on her daughter’s breast. His mouth on hers. His black hips jerking between her parted legs. The sound of their breathing. His particular *Paravan smell* Like *animals*. Mammachi thought and nearly *vomited*. Like a dog with a bitch on heat. (244, emphases mine)

Words and phrases announce a foreknowledge of uncleanness/sin that calls for the ritual of purification. The mother joins the aunt in a venture to purge the impurity that defiles the sanctity of the family and their privileged position in the community: “[W]hen Vellya Paapen finished, baby Kochamma turned to Mammachi: ‘he must go’ she said. ‘Tonight. Before it goes any further. Before we are completely ruined.’(244)

In the “Terror” that is unspooled, the established binaries of the social structure: Congress/Marxist; Christian/Hindu --converge to eradicate evil. Negotiations take place in the corridors of power to destroy the caste enemy: Comrade Pillai and Inspector Thomas Matthew, a CPI(M) and a Congress official, a Caste Hindu and a Caste Christian, “two hounds of History”, prepare to destroy a Paravan because his presence violates the sanctity of the socio-religious order. Significantly, the political differences between a CPI(M) party

worker and a Congress official recedes into the background as they plot the destruction of an untouchable Christian:

They were not friends, Comrade Pillai and inspector Thomas Matthew. But they understood each other perfectly. They looked out at the world and never wondered how it worked because they knew. They worked it. They were mechanics who serviced different parts of the same machine. (248)

The blending of apparently irreconcilable opposites is effected in a social situation where political rivals rise above their differences to make a pact to restore purity through cleansing. The narrative grows unforgivingly cruel as a “posse of *Touchable* policemen” attacks Velutha as part of “history in live performance.”

With the deft transformation of the smell, the scene of destruction turns into a scene of ritual offering/sacrifice to appease God/history. History is thus made through rituals, in which the touchables and the untouchables collude to make “Crawling Backwards” into an affirmative gesture aimed at preserving the sanctity of Christian/Hindu upper caste order. *Crawling Backwards* does not stop Vellya Paapen from feeling gratitude even though “it bent his back”(70). It is this order that ironically Mammachi violates as a shocked reaction to the news of Velutha's transgression. The unexpected violence of her reaction is narrated in the following manner:

Suddenly the blind old woman in her rickrack dressing gown stepped forward and pushed Vellya Paapen with all her strength. He stumbled backwards down the kitchen steps and lay sprawled in wet mud .He was taken completely by surprise. Part of the taboo of being

an Untouchable was expecting not to be touched . . . of being locked into a physically impregnable cocoon. (243)

By a consensual agreement the father accepts his place in the “mud”, the “filth”, thus acknowledging his role as an agent of impurity. His son, Velutha, on the contrary, sins by *not* consenting to this agreement, and, as a recompense, he must pay with his blood. This persistent focus on purity, defilement and cleansing of social life makes Roy’s story what she claims it is: a story that began a long time ago “long before the Marxists came. Before the British took Malabar before the Dutch ascendancy. . .”(33). Her performance, at such narrative junctures seethes with an ancient story that goes back hundreds and hundreds of years.

Originating in a society where division of labour was correlated with degrees of inherited purity, the untouchables in a Hindu order were traditionally agents of defilement as their social existence was related to filth. Professor Ed. B. Harper observes:

A Brahmin should not be in the same part of his cattle shed as his untouchable servant, for fear that they may both step on places connected through overlapping straws on the floor. Even though a Havik (Brahmin) and an untouchable simultaneously bathes in the village pond, the Havik is able to attain a state of *madi* (purity) because the water goes to the ground, and the ground does not transmit impurity.” ³³⁸

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³³⁸Ed. B. Harper, “Rituals of Impurity,” *Journal of Asian Studies* xxiii,(1964):173.

The untouchable, the filth, is a problematic presence because, though a matter out of place like all impurities, he is necessary to the social order. He is, so to speak, the byproduct of a systematic ordering and classification of matter and has to be sacrificed, for the ordering involves symbolic rejection of inappropriate elements. This ritualistic notion of pollution and cleansing is something that unites different religious communities, Comrade Pillai with inspector Matthew, as well as the touchable and untouchable Christians Vellya Paapen and Mammachi, in a ceremonial participation in destroying the impure. Even blood ties are considered irrelevant to the restoration of the purity of the social order. It is this ritualistic behaviour that problematizes the very use of terms like Brahmins and Christians as binary categories in the Indian/Keralian context. Roy shows the reader how history infiltrates: through the cracks, revealing a society that is too complex for available social codifications along the class/caste axis. The reader should know that Roy's novel speaks about the Kottayam district in Kerala, which, though highly Christianized, has continued to maintain a relational ambivalence between Hindu and Christian communities. It is a district where local lore and festivals associate Hindu patron deities and Christian patron saints as siblings. Yet, history in the novel is not just a "Regional Flavor", a tale solely about the Syrian Christian community of Kerala. In a deeper sense, it also touches the life of a nation which had continued to struggle with the "smell" even during the Imperialist/nationalist phase.

In the following section I will discuss how the discourse on untouchability and impurity continued to influence the nation even in the colonial/nationalist

phase when the British Administrative authority, together with the Indian National Congress was trying to eradicate the social anomaly. The deep entrenchment of the caste hierarchy in Indian culture is proved by the discourse of cleanliness found in the Hindu Nationalist debate. From this perspective, Roy's ability to "smell" history speaks for itself.

Smelling (Post)colonial Nation

Long before the CPI(M) made forays into Kerala, even earlier than the CPI(ML)³³⁹ insurgency, Hindu nationalist discourse had tried to negotiate and accommodate the notions of uncleanness and untouchability instead of dismissing them categorically. Menon points out that, as early as 1929, Gandhi and the Congress had defined the problems of caste discrimination in terms of opposition between cleanliness and the lack of it. This Hindu/nationalist discourse addresses the whole issue of untouchability, not as economic and social anomalies, but as a hygienic state.

In a meeting organized in 1929 in the North Malabar (present Kerala) three concerns were brought together—cleanliness, nomenclature and Congress activity. The Congress insisted that the main reason for the lowliness of the untouchables was lack of cleanliness! Untouchability, it was decided even earlier,

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³³⁹The Communist Party of India (CPI) was formed in the early 1920s, almost at the same time as the Communist party of China came into being. The party formally split into CPI and CPI (Marxist) in April, 1964. The CPI was perceived as pro-Soviet Union while the CPI(M) was pro-China. The Naxalite Movement, a Maoist peasant uprising in Naxalbari, a village in northern Bengal, was started in 1967. The formation of CPI(Marxist-Leninist) in April 1969 gave the movement a concrete political identity.

in the Nagpur session of the Congress, was anathema to Hinduism and by 1921 Congress workers would redeem the unclean occupations by participating in them at the instance of Gandhi. The ensuing debate exposes an interesting circularity that came to reinforce the very desirability of this social ostracism. The Congress workers hoped to expiate their sins as Hindus for having pushed the untouchables to the margins of society. But, before they (the upper caste Hindus) could atone for their sin, the untouchables, it was agreed, had to be thoroughly cleansed! Cleanliness as a secular metaphor for caste-ness assumed the same force in popular discourse as did the idea of socialism in the next decade: "Cleanliness is the only thing that distinguishes the upper castes from Harijans."³⁴⁰

History tells us that for the untouchables during that phase, it was a choice between purity and punishment . What is interesting is how the Hindu nationalist discourse produced a deliberate ambivalence by collapsing the notions of genetic and hygienic impurity, ascribing uncleanliness to the class of untouchables as a whole. It was a ploy that was possibly sensed by the Harijans themselves, because, in many instances, the adoption of pure lifestyles was inspired by the threat of force by their upper caste supervisors. Impurity and uncleanliness ironically, became for the historically unclean, modes of resistance against the benevolent tyranny of the upper caste nationalists. As an act of active defiance,

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³⁴⁰Harijan, literally, 'those close to Hari or Lord Vishnu', is a Gandhian euphemism for the Untouchables in India. See Dilip Menon, *Caste, Nationalism, and Communism in South India, Malabar, 1900-48* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge UP, 1994) 86.

other Veluthas in History remained aloof from caste purification. In the Kasergode Congress, activists invited a washerman in spotless khadi to drink water from the same well as they. The washer man was subsequently ostracized by his own community and had to pay a heavy fine for re-admittance to his caste. Against this backdrop Velutha becomes a signifier for both the smell and the refusal to crawl backwards, and thus represents a History that is not necessarily confined to the southern state of Kerala, nor the decade of the '70s which is the time frame of the novel.

So deeply entrenched is the untouchability ritual in the nation's history that any kind of socialistic or democratic experiment seems, at best, to be an imperfect imposition on an preconstituted configuration. *The God of Small Things* demonstrates, by its subtle forays into history, how even the basic principle of benevolence and charity of the Christian faith is threatened in the caste bound Christian community in Kerala. The rock solid monolithic faith in the caste/purity system appears far stronger than Christianity in the text. One wonders whether it is partly because Christianity operates as a plurality in the state that its forces are neutralized by an overwhelming assertion of one Hindu hegemonic way of life. Vellya Paapen's "bardic Stories" of Mammachi's and her family's "Christian munificence" pale into insignificance when compared to her (Hindu) fundamentalist urge to destroy what she can "neither subdue nor deify" (292). In this she is no different from her Irish Catholic sister-in-law. The two women complete the Hindu/Christian pattern that is crucial to the understanding of the "Terror" that broke loose and changed everything in a day. While Baby

Kochamma's deep rooted revulsion for the Paravan smell prepares her to "unspool Terror", her professed faith hangs loose around her neck, in the form of a crucifix on her chain and any spiritual relevance of it in her life is deftly portrayed as an empty gesture like in the incident when she is sitting at the police station, planning to destroy Velutha:

Baby Kochamma wiped her shining sweaty face. She stretched her neck, looking up at the ceiling in order to wipe the sweat from crevices between her rolls of neck fat with the end of her pallu. She kissed her crucifix: "Hail Mary, full of grace."(299)

"The words of the prayer", the narrative tells us, desert her as she embarks on the final stage of Terror. Words of prayer as much as the symbolic gesture of kissing the crucifix acquire a diabolic dimension when she participates in destroying the unclean. Her conviction that "he (Velutha) must go" has a sinister ring to it that far outweighs the performed solemnity of her prayers. Baby Kochamma's Catholicism generates a comic effect in that given moment in the novel that further highlights the odiousness of her actual performance.

That the basic premises of Christianity are subsumed by an overwhelming presence of Caste-based hierarchy is not merely a matter of confused choices in the novel, made by two eccentric old women. It is integral to the social setup and affects the institution of Church itself:

When the British came to Malabar, a number of Paravans Pelayas and Pulayas. . .converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican church to escape the scourge of Untouchability. . . It didn't take them long to

realize that they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire. They were made to have separate churches, with separate services, and separate priests. As a special favor they were even given their own separate Pariah Bishop.”(71)

That this separateness is no bardic story is confirmed by the observation made by Pascale Chaput, as she quotes from C.D.F. Mosse: “. . . Il ne faut pas poser le problème de l’existence des Castes à l’intérieur du Christianisme, mais celui de la place du Christianisme à l’intérieur du système des castes.”³⁴¹ Indeed, caste structure operates in the novel as a machine and moulds all the Christian characters, reducing Christianity merely to a matter of form. Chaput’s comments elucidate the caste-religion nexus in the novel: “La possibilité de la conversion au Christianisme ne permet pas de changer de Caste a volonté puisqu’en se convertissant on conserve la “marque” de sa Caste d’origine: un hindou de basse Caste deviendra un converti tandis qu’un nayar sera assimilé a un Syrien (337)”³⁴² In the world where untouchable Christians are not allowed to leave footprints at all, the benevolent tyranny of their social superiors is reflected in the special favor granted to them in the form of a “pariah bishop” !

Language in the narrative insists on blurring boundaries between religions and cultures to create a world where official demarcations of social identities are

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³⁴¹ Pascale Chaput, “Castes, religions et sacré au Kerala (Inde du Sud) des Chrétiens dans une société multi-castes,” *Revue Française de Sociologie*, 38.2 1997:345 (“One should not state the problem as the presence of Caste at the heart of Christianity but the presence of Christianity at the heart of the Caste system” my translation)

³⁴² “The possibility of conversion to Christianity does not allow a voluntary change of Caste, since a person who converts, retains the mark of his Caste of origin. A low Caste Hindu will become a convert while a nayar will be assimilated to a Syrian” (my translation).

made virtually impossible. There is a pointed satire in “Caste Christians” and “pariah Bishops” that transforms *The God Of Small Things* into a searing account of the social anomalies that continue to shape or destroy the lives of individuals trapped by the circumstances of their birthmark.

As a strategy of reinforcing the discourse on caste-ridden cruelty, the narrative remains provocatively ambiguous about the exact nature of Ammu’s sin. Whereas adultery, a much used motif in western fiction, makes Ammu’s transgression a general moral frailty, the fact that she had loved the impure makes her a sinner twice over. Aijaz Ahmad is quite correct in pointing out that the plot of *The God of Small Things* follows the framework of the novels of transgression familiar in the West since the nineteenth-century:

But fictions of transgression, especially sexual transgression, also end in another way, very familiar since the nineteenth century novel in which the wages of sin are death and the individual is helpless against the overwhelming weight of social hypocrisy. Anna Karenina is the classic of this genre but much Victorian fiction ends this way and the convention survives to this day³⁴³

While Ammu’s predicament is similar to Anna’s, there is an essential difference between them that makes the nature of their sins very different. Ammu is no Anna, simply because Velutha is no Vronsky and there is no counterpart for Karenin in Roy’s novel to make Ammu’s transgression one of simple adultery. The man to whom she was once married is without a name and a face and is simply “Baba” to the twins who barely remember him. In the absence of a

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³⁴³ Aijaz Ahmad, “Reading Arundhati Roy *politically*,” *Frontline* August 8. (1997):105.

husband, Ammu's transgression acquires a different character, and its significance is to be sought elsewhere, in the trope of *smell* that reigns supreme in this world, articulating sin and purgation, hatred and love. What makes Ammu a sinner is her passion for the very "smell" that is abhorred by history. The "smell" of Velutha that makes Baby Kochamma shudder is the very thing that draws Ammu to him. The accent on the smell is made through repetition:

She *smelled* the river on him. His particular Paravan *smell* that so disgusted Baby Kochamma. Ammu put out her tongue and tasted it, in the hollow of his throat. On the lobe of his ear. She pulled his head down toward her and kissed his mouth. (317, emphases mine)

Ammu's biology takes in the "smell" that history has taught her to shun. Therefore she is punished as all transgressors are. By a strategy of creating alternative perspectives, Roy transmits an aura of uncleanness about the desire of Ammu and Velutha that defiles its poetic possibilities. The passion that is perceived as a "rose" by the victims of history becomes a bestial act of a "dog with a bitch in heat" when perceived by history's persecutors.

Ammu's defiance of the Order is in stark contrast to an event which happened in the family a generation earlier, a defiance that was at least partially condoned by history, when Baby Kochamma fell in love with an Irish Jesuit priest and decided to convert to Roman Catholicism:

Displaying a stubborn single-mindedness (which in a young girl was considered in those days as bad as a physical deformity—a hairlip perhaps or a clubfoot) Baby Kochamma defied her father's wishes and became a Roman Catholic with special dispensation from the Vatican. She took her vows and entered the convent in Madras as a trainee novice. She hoped somehow that this would provide her with legitimate occasion to be with Father Mulligan.(25)

With a rich ambiguity, that makes Roy's choice of words so politically provocative, the narrative hints that compared to that of her niece, Baby Kochamma's defiance was treated with relative indulgence not because no sexual gratification was possible in her case, but because she had preferred "the Irish Jesuit smell" over "the Paravan smell":

She said (among other things), "*How could she stand the smell? Haven't you noticed, they have particular smell, these Paravans?*"

And she shuddered theatrically, like a child being force-fed spinach. She preferred an Irish-Jesuit smell to a particular Paravan smell.

By far. By far.(75)

By building up typological contrasts, the novelist obfuscates the real difference between the aunt's transgression and the niece's, developing instead the trope of smell as a metaphor for the race/ caste discourse. Such clever touches in language make the discourse on caste/class mixing in Roy's novel much more nuanced than an open, straightforward indictment of the social practices of the (Syrian) Christian community in Kerala.

The Empire writes back.

If the novel demonstrates, as we have seen, how tradition in the form of customs and beliefs, continues to reign the world that is being depicted, it also shows the phases of transition through which the nation was passing after the Englishmen departed the land they had ruled for almost a century. Roy depicts the passage of time from the colonial to the post colonial in a story spanning three generations. It starts with Pappachi, Rahel's Grand father, a noted entomologist who "bought a skyblue Plymouth from an old Englishman in Munnar" (47) and never doubted the moral integrity of the English. He would not believe that the cause of her leaving her husband was her husband's boss, the English tea-planter who had taken a somewhat unseemly interest in her:

Pappachi would not believe her story—not because he thought well of her husband, but simply because he didn't believe that an Englishman, *any* Englishman, would covet another man's wife.(42)

Pappachi's anachronistic deference to the ex-rulers made him adopt a lifestyle that was hopelessly inappropriate to the circumstances in which he lived, "looking outwardly elegant but sweating freely inside his woollen suits"(47). The colonial heritage finds a more refined expression in his son Chacko, "a Rhodes scholar. . . [who] read classics and rowed for Balliol"(232) and eventually became consumed by a romantic passion for Marxism. Chacko's transition, from an "Oxford Avatar" to an ardent supporter of E.M.S Namboodiripad,"the flamboyant

Brahmin high priest of Marxism from Kerala” (64) marks a further stage in the postcolonial history of the nation. Blending the personal and the political, the small and the big, Roy portrays the ideological clash between colonial and postcolonial, as the father and the son are made to recount a critical phase of Indian history when the post independence Indian/Keralian society was still finding it hard to grapple with new socio-political models:

Every morning at the breakfast table the Imperial Entomologist derided his argumentative Marxist son by reading out newspaper reports of the riots, strikes, incidents of police brutality that convulsed Kerala. “So Karl Marx!” Pappachi would sneer when Chacko came to the table, “what shall we do with these bloody students now? The stupid goons are agitating against our People’s government. Shall we annihilate them? Surely students aren’t people anymore?” (65)

Yet the underlying bond between the warring generations appears to be rooted in history, as both father and son grapple in their own ways with the aftermath of the colonial enterprise. The novel shows how the colonialist intervention into a nation’s history leaves its permanent mark making it quite impossible to return to a “pre-colonial cultural purity”.

Chacko’s, awareness of the cultural contamination wrought by colonization is clear in his discussion of “Anglophilia”:

Chacko told the twins that, though he hated to admit it, they were all Anglophiles. They were a *family* of Anglophiles. Pointed in the wrong direction, trapped

outside their own history and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away. He explained to them that history was like an old house at night.(51)

What appears in Chacko's discourse to be an indictment of the Ipe family tradition broadens into a more tragic assertion of the epistemic violence of the English colonial enterprise affecting the national elite.³⁴⁴ Talking about History he says:

"But we can't go in" . . . "because we've been locked out. And when we look in through the windows, all we see are shadows. And when we try and listen, all we hear is a whispering. And we cannot understand the whispering, because our minds have been invaded by war. A war that we have won and lost. The very worst sort of war. A war that captures dreams and re-dreams them. A war that has made us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves." (52)

In Chacko's acknowledgement of the collective acceptance of the imperialist epistemological project one sees the confirmation of Caliban's curse: a search for a new identity that is hopelessly predicated on the colonialist encounter.³⁴⁵ The portrayal of the postcolonial aftermath is not merely confined to the self-recognition of Chacko. Its never-ending effect is worked out through

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³⁴⁴An interesting example of the anglophiliac elite is Baboo Hurree Chunder Mookerji in Kipling's *Kim*. See my discussion in Chapter II.

³⁴⁵See my discussion of Shakespeare's *Tempest* in connection with Postcolonial theory in Chapter I.

the portrayal of younger characters in the novel, who recite from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and Walter Scott's "Lochinvar" with a Malayalam accent.³⁴⁶

The entire discourse on Anglophilia in the novel merges with a general love for Western culture as the family goes to a show of *The Sound of Music*. It is Ammu, not Chacko, who misses the cultural implication of the act:

Chacko said that going to see *The Sound of Music* was an extended exercise of Anglophilia.
 Ammu said, "Oh come on, the whole world goes to see *The Sound of Music*. It's a World Hit."
 "Nevertheless, my dear," Chacko said in his Reading Aloud voice, "Never. The. Less." (54)

The postcolonial West, as "an extended exercise of Anglophilia" (symbolized in the world of the Ipe family by Julie Andrews and Elvis Presley) thus enters the narrative world of the novel. Significantly, the novelist herself is implicated at least partially in this extended exercise, as the Indian critic Rukmini Bhaya Nair points out in her discussion of the novel's literary frame of reference:

The most potent literary influences, it is my conviction, are often the most scrappy. . . In Roy's case these influences consist in the cadences of childhood. They inhere in nursery rhymes, A. A. Milne, the retelling of the Greek myths by Roger Lancelyn Green, vistas from comic books, Popeye, 60s lyrics, her school

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³⁴⁶Malayalam is the regional language of Kerala, India.

Shakespeare, Scott, Tennyson and of course the 'peppermint' melodies of *The Sound of Music* with their catalogue of small things. . . from which Roy quotes at loving length.

Kipling, Conrad, Marquez and the unmentionable Rushdie certainly figure. . . I can spot few Indian influences, apart from Chemmeen and Kathakali³⁴⁷

The uncomprehending recitations of passages from such works that distort the original versions and yet retain the form become a metaphor for Chacko's metaphorical "war" that has been won and lost, and point to the ambiguity of the Indian postcolonial experience.³⁴⁸ The unconscious mimicry of the Master's tongue acquires an added significance in the context of the novel's reference to Kipling's *The Jungle Book* from which Ammu reads to Estha and Rahel. The native's encounter with his/her orientalized self-image becomes a potent, if passing, moment in the novel.³⁴⁹

The consciousness of the Orientalist/exotic paradigm even within the anglophilic/westernized cultural situation is deeply entrenched in the novel, as in Ammu's sharp reaction to Chacko's (ex-)British wife's cultural queries when Kochu Maria, the cook kisses her daughter's hands:

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³⁴⁷See Rukmini Bhaya Nair, 6. I will discuss the significance of the Indian influences in the following part, where I propose to address the self-contradiction in the novel.

³⁴⁸See for example Lenin's recitation from Anthony's famous speech in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Act III, sc. ii (260) in the novel and his cousin's performance of Scott's "Lochinvar" (257).

³⁴⁹See my discussion of Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* in Chapter I.

“What’s she doing?” Sophie Mol wanted to know, tender London hands clasped in calloused Aymenem ones.

“Who’s she and why’s she smelling my hands?”

“She’s the cook,” Chacko said. “That’s her way of kissing you.”

“How marvellous!” Margaret Kochamma said. “It’s a sort of sniffing! Do the Men and Women do it to each other too?”

She hadn’t meant it to sound quite like that, and she blushed. An embarrassed schoolteacher-shaped Hole in the Universe.

“Oh all the time!” Ammu said, and it came out a little louder than the sarcastic mumble she had intended. That’s how we make babies.” (170)

That Ammu’s response was not inspired by an urge to be simply witty comes out in her outburst a little later as Chacko insists she apologize to his ex-wife: “Must we behave like some damn godforsaken tribe that’s just been discovered?” (171). The shame of being depicted as such a “godforsaken tribe” will be discussed in the following section.

Regional Flavour

. . . but there are also my special blends , in which. . . I am able to include memories, dreams and ideas, so that once they enter mass-production all who consume them will know what pepperpots achieved in Pakistan . . . believe don’t believe but it’s true. Thirty jars stand upon a shelf, waiting to be unleashed upon the amnesiac nation. – (*Midnight’s Children*, 460)

Unlike the self-conscious irony of *Midnight’s Children*, Roy’s scorn for pandering to the “Overseas market” as a trope for depicting the irony of the postcolonial situation is much more direct and scathing. In her attack against the

exoticization of national/regional culture, Roy makes use of two tropes that blend the regional and the national, using South Indian (read Kerala) markers to signify a market-savvy Indian-ness.

On the Plymouth roof rack there was a four-sided, tin-lined, plywood bill board that said on all four sides, in elaborate writing, *Paradise Pickles and Preserves*. Below the writing there were painted bottles of mixed-fruit jam and hot-lime pickle. . . Next to the bottles there was a list of all the Paradise products and a kathakali dancer with his face green and skirts swirling.[...]Ammu said that the kathakali dancer was a Red Herring and had nothing to do with anything. Chacko said that it gave the products a Regional Flavor and would stand them in good stead when they entered the Overseas market. Ammu said that the billboard made them look ridiculous. Like a traveling circus. With tailfins. (45-6)

The justification for using the image of the kathakali dancer in- appropriately to promote the sale of pickles signals three things: first, that disparate modes of representations can be held together by the underlying cultural logic of marketing Otherness. Second, the incongruous nature of such a representation (Ammu calls it “ridiculous”), however discernible to the insiders, will have little negative impact on the foreigners, who would see the code name ‘India’ operative in the images that would represent two of the most potent sources of Indianness in the West: pickles and Oriental dance forms. Third, in the metropolitan market, Art and edible products share the same semiotic space as products to be consumed.³⁵⁰

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³⁵⁰See Jerzy Grotowski, “AROUND THEATRE The Orient-the Occident” in Patrice Pavis (ed), *The Intercultural performance Reader* (London, New York: Routledge, 1996) 93-98.

The raging Kathakali dancer, dancing to "imported attention spans" to "collect his fees" in a none too tangential way, is pursued as a trope for pandering to the foreign market:

In the evenings (for that Regional Flavor) the tourists were treated to truncated Kathakali performances ("Small attention spans", the Hotel People explained to the dancers). So ancient Stories were collapsed and amputated. Six hour classics were slashed to twenty minute cameos. (121)

It is important at this point, to grasp the importance of the Kathakali dancer as a trope. As painted by Roy, it is quite possible to see him as the double of the postcolonial author:

In despair he (the Kathakali dancer) turns to tourism. He enters the market. He hawks the only thing he owns. The Stories that his body can tell. He becomes a Regional Flavor. In the Heart of Darkness they mock him with their lolling nakedness and their imported attention spans. He checks his rage and dances for them. He collects his fee. He gets drunk. (219-220)

The central ambivalence of Roy's narration is to be located in this trope. Kathakali has a double function in the construction of meaning in Roy's novel. While it roots the "Story" that Roy has to tell firmly within both Indian and Keralian context, its appeal in the metropolis as yet another cultural marker from India,

besides Yoga and Tantra, makes it a product made for the metropolitan market.³⁵¹

From this perspective Roy's choice of the trope is rather telling. I will argue in the following section that the ambivalence of the narrative is to be located in the applicability of the trope to Roy's own nation writing.

There are two aspects of the Kathakali performance that are highlighted in the quotations above. First, it tells the reader how a traditional art form is "slashed" to suit the "short attention spans" and "imported attention spans". Second, it also tell the readers that the narration of the form is reduced to a performance of Regional Flavor. Given the association established earlier in the novel between pickle and Kathakali, and given the emphasis on "Overseas market" and "imported attention spans", it is not difficult to understand, what Roy is critiquing is the pickling of cultures to suit the orientalist gaze. The deep ignominy of such performances comes out clearly in the section where the dancers, hired by the "hotel people" perform for the tourists:

The performances were staged by the swimming pool. While the drummers drummed, and dancers danced, hotel guests frolicked with their children in the water. While Kunti revealed her secret to Karna on the river bank, courting couples rubbed suntan oil on each other. While fathers played sublimated sexual games with their nubile teenage daughters, Puthana suckled young

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³⁵¹ See my discussion in Chapter 1. Also see Rustom Bharucha quoted and discussed in the same chapter.

Krishna at her poisoned breast. Bhima disemboweled
Dushasana and bathed Draupadi's hair in blood. (121)³⁵²

In the conscious denouncement of this neo-orientalist project, Roy's irony is different from Rushdie's self-congratulatory irony on the pickling process. Roy's depiction of touristic Kathakali shows not only how reductionism is operative in such orientalist spectacles, but how this reductionism makes the narration of a culture hopelessly inadequate. The anger and frustration of the Kathakali dancer even as "he collects his fee" underlines the insufficient and ignominious nature of such a performance. However, as I will show in the following section, how Roy herself falls into a similar trap in spite of herself, performing the very thing (truncated Kathakali) that she denigrates on a conscious plane.

The Story of Kathakali

Kathakali, a dance form that originated in the Malabar (present Kerala) can be traced back as far as the sixteenth century, but is certainly more ancient. It tells us stories from India's epic past: history made with vigour, dynastic wars, kings slain, thrones usurped, laws made and broken, empires built and

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³⁵²Dushasana, one of the Kauravas at the behest of Duryodhana, dragged Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas by her hair to the court, as Yudhishthira, the eldest Pandava had earlier staked her at a game of dice and lost. Dushasana tried to disrobe her in front of all present. Draupadi prayed to Lord Krishna, who ended her ordeal by making her sari unending. While the other Pandavas remained mute and watched in silence, Bhima, the second Pandava, and also the most passionate of them all, vowed revenge. He took an oath to dress Draupadi's hair with Dushasana's blood. He kept his oath. It is a very popular episode in Kathakali performances and known as "Raudra Bhima" as well as "Dushasana Vadham". It is narrated in the novel and discussed in the following section.

destroyed. Narrative forms such as Kathakali are among the most interesting aspects of Indic culture. These tangled tales crammed with lessons to learn, complex mythology, religious philosophy, models for life, and sometimes, just plain fun, have been enacted at least since the sixteenth century. To a large extent the retelling of the tales has belonged more or less to performed arts, from musical recitations to dance drama.

But above all, Kathakali conveys a wide range of emotions. The emotional spectrum of Kathakali performance is wide and may range from the “erotic” and “comic” to the “terrible”, the “odious” or the “wondrous”. The actor may swing between emotions, be “furious” or “heroic” and finally returned to “calm”.³⁵³ The emotions have to surge, like waves rising from the sea. Tenderness may prevail in the beginning, only to be supplanted as the night grows darker by the “furious” and the “heroic” till calm settles down at the crack of dawn. A plethora of emotions is contained in the concentrated performance of an entire epic, perhaps, *The Mahabharata*. In its brief performance of a gruesome incident, the Kathakali retells for the audience the entire saga of lust, vengeance as well as frailty and dignity recounted in *The Mahabharata*. Although the form occasionally captures tender moments in the characters' lives as in the “Karna Shabadham”, narrated in *The God of Small Things*, erotic passion or filial affection seems out of place in a form that concentrates on the “heroic” and the “furious.”

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³⁵³The emotional spectrum of Indian classical dance consists of nine emotions: *Śṛṅgāra* (erotic), *Hāsyā* (comic), *Karuna* (pathetic), *Raudra* (furious), *Vīra* (heroic), *Bhayānaka* (terrible), *Bībhatsa* (odious), *Adbhuta* (wondrous), *Shānta* (calm). On the subject see Vatsyāyana, Ambrose. The theory of the *Rasas* is from Bhārata's *Nāṭyashāstra*, a classical text on Indian aesthetics.

A very ancient world is revealed to the foreigner as he observes the retelling of the "Great Stories":

As I observed the range of cultural performances. . . it seemed to me that my Indian friends -- and perhaps all peoples -- thought of their culture as encapsulated in these discrete performances, which they could exhibit to visitors and to themselves.³⁵⁴

One such fragment enacted frequently in Kathakali is *Dushasana Vadham*. The following is a representative fragment:

The scene is Bhimasena's slaying of Dushasana, the wicked Kaurava. He has insulted Draupadi, the wife of Bhimasena and four other Pandava brothers. He has done the unthinkable: dragged her by the hair in front of other courtiers in the presence of her husbands. She has been a pawn in the chess game of the eldest Pandava. The game is lost. Dushasana claims the spoils (including Draupadi) on behalf of his brothers. Draupadi stands shaken, pleading, outraged in the royal court, her hair untied. Bhimasena vows revenge. Draupadi leaves her hair loose in remembrance of the pledge.

What starts is a fierce civil war. Kauravas and their allies perish. Dushasana and Bhimasena come face-to-face. The actual Kathakali sequences of this

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³⁵⁴Bonnie.C.Wade, *Performing Arts in India: Essays on Music, Dance and Drama* (New York, London: America UP 1972) 71.

section are repeated faithfully in the novel in a scene in which the protagonists watch the dancers perform the ritual:

In the early morning light, Esthappen and Rahel watched Bhima fulfill his vow to Draupadi. He clubbed Dushasana to the floor. He pursued every feeble tremor in the dying body with his mace, hammering at it until it was stilled. . . Then, with his bare hands he tore the body open. He ripped its innards out and stooped to lap blood straight from the bowl of the torn carcass. . . Gurgling blood bubbles pale pink between his teeth. . . When he had drunk enough, he stood up, bloody intestines draped around his neck like a scarf, and went to find Draupadi and bathe her hair in fresh blood. He still had about him the aura of rage that even murder cannot quell. (223-4)³⁵⁵

It is probably due to Roy's deep immersion into Kathakali as a form and the rich artistic possibilities she sees in its application, that her own entrapment is carried out. In both straightforward and ironical narration of the two episodes (Dushasana Vadham and Karna Shabadam) that form recurrent motifs in the narrative, Roy's story succumbs to the iteration of the "Great Stories". The choice of the two traditionally popular episodes from Kathakali as metaphors for her story (even when the resemblances are purely circumstantial) make her narrative an unrelieved tale of injustice and moral depravity. In her eagerness to portray the cruelty of Dushasana Vadham what Roy overlooks is that in the episode

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³⁵⁵This performance, mentioned in *The God of Small Things*, has been referred to as "Duryodhana, rather than "Dushasana" Vadham", possibly an editorial slip.

Bhima, the Persecutor of Dushasana, is also a symbol of *Dharma*. He is not history's villain but its hero.

As I had pointed out earlier, two versions of history circulate in the novel and the narrative's failure resides in its failure to blend the two versions. In the following section, I will demonstrate how the second version of 'history-as-essence' as a discourse on the decrepit body of an ancient culture eclipses the initial promise in *The God of Small Things* of narrating a "history" that is far more complex in nature.

The history that Chacko defines in his "Reading Aloud Voice" is *not* the same history that is narrated as Velutha is destroyed by the "hounds of history":

The twins were too young to know that these were only history's henchmen. Sent to square the books and collect the dues from those who broke its laws. Impelled by feelings that were primal yet paradoxically wholly impersonal. Feelings of contempt born of in-choate, unacknowledged fear – civilization's fear of nature, men's fear of women, power's fear of powerlessness. (292)

The universals in terms of which the destruction is announced makes this history timeless and therefore more in line with the myths enacted in the two episodes of Karna Shabadam and Dushasana Vadham. In the "Terror unspooled"(244), mythic stereotypes reemerge as contemporary versions. The narrative falls a victim of the seductions of "Great Stories" and recounts the

shattered lives of such mythical characters as Kunti, Draupadi, and Karna and remembers what befell Dushasana and Duryodhana in an ironic context.

Between Myth and History

Further, even as the mythical version of contemporary history focuses steadfast on the customs and superstitions of a culture a thousand years old, it is in significant inversions of the mythical relevance of the Kaurava brothers and the second Pandava (Bhima), that the narrative surrenders to an unconscious drive of nation narration. If *The Mahabharata*, despite its unresolved ethical and moral issues, celebrates the reestablishment of *Dharma*, the transcendental moral principle, Roy's postcolonial epic expresses no such hope in the renewal of the social body.

The fact that the epic villains get transcribed as history's hero and vice versa, disavowing the very message of renewal ingrained in *The Mahabharata*, betrays a deep rejection of nation's history as entirely negative. The fact that Bhima, the avenger of Draupadi's shame gets split into "hounds of history" as well as the "posse of Touchable policemen" while Velutha becomes both the slain Dushasana and a non-heroic version of Karna³⁵⁶ speaks eloquently for the transformation of the message of *The Mahabharata*.

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³⁵⁶See my discussion of versions of nationalism in the West in Chapter 1.

In other words, in this second version of history that dominates the narrative, the innocent and the righteous are butchered as villains prevail and prosper. These telling reworkings of the epic narrative make her nation tragically similar to the land of the “godforsaken tribe” surrendering the narrative to the same orientaling strategies that the novel, through Ammu, scorns on a conscious plan.³⁵⁷

As the novel goes on to recount, in the vein of Kathakali, “who lives, who dies, who finds love, who doesn’t”, the narrative plan reflects some of the basic principles of the Kathakali. Love (Śṛṅgāra), though a motif, pales in significance in comparison with the panorama of emotions in which the “odious” and the “fearful” mesmerize the audience. The story’s bloody innards, like those of Dushasana in Kathakali, reveal a world threatened by superstition, violence and social prejudices that have their roots in the delineation of caste in the Vedic times.³⁵⁸

The narration in *The God of Small Things* oscillates between two disparate emotions associated with the two episodes of the Kathakali performance mentioned in the novel: the tragic beauty of *Karna shabadam* (Karna’s oath) and the gruesome spectacle *Duryodhana Vadham* (Destruction of Duryodhana). The novel delves deep, as all Kathakali performances do, into contrasting and

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³⁵⁷ Ammu is the only character in the novel who puts up a conscious resistance to the Orientalized self-image of the native.

³⁵⁸ The definition of caste is to be found in *Purusa Sukta* The Rig Veda, 10.90: “His (the Man’s) mouth became the Brahmin; his arms were made into the warriors, his thighs the People, and from his feet the Servants were born.”

contradictory emotional patterns blending classical myths with postcolonial history to form a continuous pattern that is indeed timeless. The concepts of social hierarchies are thus shown to have their roots in the classical period of Indian history.

Significantly, Roy's anxiety of acceptance is inscribed in the way Rahel (who by all appearance is Roy's double in the novel), is seen/perceived as an alien in a nation. Larry McCaslin, her American ex-husband, thinks, as he first sees her "a jazz tune" and later, when she goes back to Aymenem from America, children call her a "hippie". Seen through both western and eastern eyes, Rahel's deep alienation from her own culture probably focusses on the ideological dilemma of the novelist herself.

Together with her portrayal of the caste hierarchy, the narrative seems to remind her readers that 'Indianness' has always been an eternal monolith of injustice and ruthlessness. What gets lost are the complex social and temporal contexts in which these injustices occur, as well as the resistance, built into the social system against an uncontested practice of such injustices. There is, in short, no scope for new stories, no space in the present version of the myth for renewable, oppositional or reworkable narratives. There is no room in Roy's "Great Story" for other versions about a decrepit nation a thousand years old. From this perspective, Roy's own Kathakali matches the performance of the dancer whose despair she narrates with such tragic overtones.

Yet this is not to say that important events in the history of the nation are omitted from the narrative. On the contrary, their presence in the story as important landmarks both in the history of the nation as well as the lives of her characters strengthen the novel's partial mooring in the realist tradition. Almost all important historical road markers (Indo-China war, the war with Pakistan, Communism, the Naxalite Movement, China under Mao Tse-tung) clearly have a place in Roy's novel. What is significant is the way these events are neutralized, or sidestepped, for more exciting things happening in the novel.³⁵⁹

As pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, Roy's narration is much more complex than either Rushdie's or Suleri's. She demonstrates both the ability to narrate a nation with responsibility and, at the same time undermine her project by resorting to methods of representation that make everything Indian in the novel inspire gentle pity for a national decline ("Crawling Backwards", so to speak) that is commensurate with the degree of dysfunctionality of most of the characters in the novel. The contradiction between politico-cultural articulateness and a simultaneous lack of precision at certain moments in narration creates a discourse that appears to be determined to present a unified image of national atrophy. Especially because the novel demonstrates Roy's profound understanding of the complex social fibre of her community (Syrian Christians of Kerala) as well as the political situation of her nation (India), her method of discriminating representation at certain critical junctures in the novel, together

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³⁵⁹A case in point is the character of Velutha.

with the political perspective that it builds up, happens to cast doubt on the design of her performance.

Much as the conscious plan of the novel points in the opposite direction, this aesthetic method is reminiscent of the orientalist paradigm worked out in colonial novels by British novelists. This statement underlies Forster's *A Passage to India* and Kipling's *Kim*.³⁶⁰ In the case of postcolonial novels, the discourse is made difficult to decipher for primarily two reasons. First, since the agency of this discourse has passed on to the natives who are insiders of the culture, the likelihood of their being able to narrate their nation with more accuracy and less bias, is normally taken as a primary precondition of narration. Second, their methods of representation of national culture appears to capture so accurately the complexity of the politico-cultural aspects of a nation, that the political ambivalence of the discourse produced and its symptoms go largely unnoticed, by both the author and the reader.

Roy's situation, in this context, betrays the same irony as the situation of most of these other novelists. These fictions operate in the same mode that Brennan terms "politico-exotic."³⁶¹ It is to be understood as a process by which politics is made integral to the aesthetics and is thus, paradoxically disabled. The representation of political events in such a mode are made according to the demands made by the overall narrative frame and the aesthetic control of the

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³⁶⁰I have discussed this aspect of colonial rhetoric in Chapter 1.

³⁶¹Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World, Cosmopolitanism Now* (Cambridge, Mass. London: Harvard UP, 1997) 205.

author. Contained by such as a representational strategy the political energy of the narrative is deactivated. The sense of the political disablement in Roy's novel arises from an imbalance in the narrative by which the epical framework together with Roy's own transformation of some of its contents, makes exorbitant demands on the mode of narration. This, together with her reliance on the frame of Kathakali as a metaphor for narrative performance robs the novel of the potential to narrate the history of an ancient nation that has passed through varied forms of political turmoils. It is tragic to say the least, especially as the novel shows enormous potentials of resisting exoticization.

In the following section I will show the irony of Roy's situation by which she disempowers the very story that she attempts to narrate.

Toy Histories

In view of Roy's attitude to "Toy Histories" (discussed in an earlier section), her own version of the "politico-exotic" makes one wonder whether she is to some extent laughing at herself in the novel. In other words, she is perhaps aware of the deep irony of the situation of the postcolonial novelist – that is, the near inevitability of becoming embroiled in the very discourse that he or she is seeking to displace. For narrating the political turmoil of the 1960s and the 1970s, Roy's narration has recourse to erasures that transform the discourse on nation into a pessimistic celebration of failure and disappointment. If Roy critiques different versions of "Toy Histories", Roy's own turns out to be more

complex and far less entertaining than those that simply activate the Orientalist/touristic gaze.

The gloom that surrounds the Aymenem family becomes symptomatic of the regional as well as the national situation.³⁶² The dissolute uncle, the silenced nephew and the unstable aunt, as well as the abused grandmother and the impulsive mother, add a personal edge to the history of a region where institutional politics have become a masquerade with insidious intent and revolution is articulated either in the context of misguided energy, or a general political naïveté, that, after a brief period of questionable triumph, ends in failure. There is, in other words, an aestheticization of the themes of underdevelopment and degradation in Roy's novel which introduces ambivalence into her project of representing the nation and its history.

From this perspective, the treatment of not just the Naxalite Movement but the entire chapter of Communist activity in the nation's history make one seriously wonder about Roy's own ideology. Communism in different forms surfaces in Roy's novel as an aberration (CPI(M) politics in Kerala), an aimless celebration of the proletarian cause (the demonstration which is witnessed by Rahel and Estha), an idealist's broken dream (Velutha) and, a tourist spectacle (E.M.S Namboodiripad's house in Aymenem). An occasional comic touch is

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³⁶²Interestingly, by Roy's own admission, there is too much darkness in the novel. See her interview in *Frontline*, August 8 1997.

added to it in the form of 'armpit wiping Communists.'³⁶³ Communism performs an important function in the novel but is disempowered by a rhetoric focussed on its inadequacies and failures. While the presence of "Communists" in India is acknowledged, the contexts in which they appear emphasize again and again their less than heroic status.

Roy treats the movement in a consistently ironic mode that tends to make it look ridiculous, inept and corrupt – a treatment of the Communist movement which is strikingly reminiscent of its earlier disparagement in *Midnight's Children*. As Keith Booker points out in discussing Rushdie's novel,

[C]ommunism is treated by Rushdie as essentially a joke. In particular, Saleem becomes involved with a group of Communists whose figuration in the book as "magicians" not only runs counter to the materialist basis of Marxism but suggests that Communists are charlatans whose political program is primarily composed, as it were, of smoke and mirrors.³⁶⁴

In Roy's version, communism is a blanket term designating not only the Trade Union Movement, but three historically different versions of communism

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³⁶³"To the West, to Eastern Europe, to Scandinavia, Aymenem became a buzzword for a child's view of the adult world, a little world peopled by tragic feudal Christians, a Communist who wipes his armpits with his terylene shirt, and a few handsome untouchables": *INDIA TODAY*, Oct.27, 1997. More will be discussed about this review in connection with the reception of Roy's novel in India and abroad.

³⁶⁴See M. Keith Booker, "Midnight's Children, History, and Complexity: Reading Rushdie after the Cold War," in *Critical Essays on Rushdie* (ed) Keith Booker, (New York: G K Hall and Co, 1999) 283-313.

in the Indian subcontinent.³⁶⁵ This depiction of communism alternates between “the comic” (*Hāsyā*) and “the odious” (*Bhayānaka*) to suit the narrative mode of the incidents.³⁶⁶

The real secret was that communism crept into Kerala insidiously. As a reform movement that never overtly questioned the traditional values of a Caste-ridden, extremely traditional community. The Marxists worked from *within* the communal divide, never challenging them, never appearing not to. They offered a cocktail revolution. A heavy mix of Eastern Marxism and Orthodox Hinduism, spiked with a shot of Democracy.” (66)

This User’s Guide to the Communist Movement in Kerala ends with an introduction to the rise and fall of a more militant form of communism on a national level:

Peking switched its patronage to the newest most militant faction of the CPI(M)-the naxalite who had Staged an armed insurrection in Naxalbari, a village in Bengal. They organized peasants into fighting cadres, seized land, expelled the owners and established People’s Court to try Class Enemies. The Naxalite movement spread across the country and Stuck terror in every bourgeois heart. (66)³⁶⁷

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³⁶⁵The Communist Movement in India went through three successive transformations in the postcolonial period: CPI, CPI(M) AND CPI(ML).

³⁶⁶See footnote 353 for the chart of emotions in Indian classical aesthetics and the emotional spectrum of Indian classical dance forms.

³⁶⁷The Naxalite Movement originated in West Bengal in 1967, in a year which saw the historic defeat of the Congress party in the fourth general election. A movement that rocked the nation for five years can be roughly divided into five phases. The first: The Naxalbari revolt itself; the second: the Stage that began after the

The reaction to the proletariat revolution is narrated through a highly dramatized response of the "Cardamum Kings, Coffee Counts and rubber Barons – old boarding school buddies" (67). In passages such as these, the much applauded 'heightened capacity for wonder' and the 'defamiliarising quality' of the stylistic devices used by Roy flatten a political event that demands a lot more than such cursory interest in terms of their real importance in the nation's history.

In particular, Roy's narrative pushes to the limits the significance of the Naxalite movement itself. What is reduced in the novel to a terrorist upsurge aimed at "Striking Terror into every bourgeois heart" in fact, put armed struggles onto the agenda of Indian Revolution. Since then, the Indian political scene has never been the same.³⁶⁸ It is significant in this regard that some of the prominent critics from the subcontinent have been enraged by Roy's systematic denigration of a very significant phase of national history. Kumar's objection to the

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collapse of the revolt and continued up to 1969, when the CPI(ML) was formed. The third phase witnessed rural uprisings, the most sensational of which was in the Srikakulam district in Andhra Pradesh. The Naxalite policy in this phase was "annihilation of class enemies". The fourth phase began in April 1970 when the movement acquired the character of a cultural revolution and made Calcutta its center. The annihilation tactic was implemented soon after. The fifth and final phase Started in July 1972 when the Government imprisoned or annihilated the hardcore revolutionaries by winning over the lumpen elements in the party.

³⁶⁸Naxalbari happened at a time when not only the masses were getting disillusioned with post independence politics but also when world history was being redefined by countries like Vietnam, Laos and Kampuchea. Massive anti-imperialist demonstrations against US involvement in Vietnam were rocking Europe and America and was being matched in the US by a violent outburst of Black women's movement. France under De Gaulle was facing a Student worker revolution. And, last but not least, in China the Great Cultural Revolution was attacking the supposed ossifications of Marxism. In all Communist parties all over the world, people were compelled to take positions in the Great Debate between the CPC (Communist Party of China) and the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union.) Which had been going on since Krushchev restored Capitalism in the USSR in the late 1950s. Naxalbari was a child of this ideological ferment taking place through out the world.

implications of the political content of the novel are summed up in the following passage :

Those who had fought are now dead, those who are alive only happen to be survivors – or, as in the case of the unnamed Communist leader, in one of the novel's more egragarious twists, turn their homes into tourist hotels. You begin to doubt the reality of those who fought.³⁶⁹

Aijaz Ahmad's comment in this context is also significant

Her (Roy's) ideological opposition to communism is not in itself surprising; it was very much a sign of the times. . . (and) fairly common amongst radical sections of the cosmopolitan intelligentsia in India and abroad. The peculiarity is that, judging from the novel, she has neither a *feel* for community politics nor perhaps rudimentary knowledge of it."(Ahmad, 1997, 103-104)

Although sensitive to the underlying politics of Roy's narrative, Ahmiad fails to see the actual crisis in Roy's narration. What is in question is not Roy's *knowledge* of Communist politics, of which she gives ample evidence in her novel. Indeed, it is difficult to accept that a person who writes about class/caste with such merciless precision would be impervious to the long history of leftist politics in Kerala or elsewhere in India. What is important is how in her urge to narrate a nation's antiquity, such political "minutiae" are deemed secondary to the main plot. What is more, and this is evident in the outraged outcries from Indian

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³⁶⁹ Amitava Kumar, "The God of All Things: the West reads India's 50 years," *Race and Class* 3 (1998): 87.

critics mentioned above, these details (though very important for the Indian reader), occasionally get reduced to trivia, serving as comic relief in an otherwise dark drama.

Ahmad is very close to the actual diagnosis when he protests that

references to Namboodiripad, an actual historical figure and a towering presence in Kerala and beyond, belong straight in the realm of libel and defamation. It is simply not true that his ancestral home exists anywhere near Kottayam or that it has been turned into a "tourist hotel" where Communists serve as waiters. (104)

Ahmad's critique is based on the section where Roy describes the "Heritage" hotel. The entire passage is as much a reduction of the Communist tradition of Kerala as it is a positive proof of Roy's astute understanding of the orientalist tourist industry:

Comrade Namboodiripad's house functioned as the hotel's dining room, where semi-suntanned tourists in bathing suits sipped tender coconut water (served in the shell), and old Communists, who now worked as fawning bearers in colorful ethnic clothes, Stooped slightly behind trays of drinks.(120-121)

In passages such as those criticized by Ahmad, Roy deploys the farcical as an overarching principle of representation. 'Hāsyā', or "the comic", makes its appearance at precisely those points in the narrative to retrieve the otherwise unmitigated rendition of the "odious" and the "fearful". Roy's concern in the quoted passage is *not* the depiction of an actual Communist leader but the

portrayal of a political stereotype bearing the same name, ideologically transformed to fit the comic reductionism of Roy's narrative.³⁷⁰

Roy's reference to a fictional Namboodiripad is significant in this context: She reduces Namboodiripad, whom she herself calls "Kerala's Mao Tse-tung", into a decadent feudal who enlists his feudal ancestry as a commercial product in the lucrative (International) tourist industry. It is significant that of all the traditional objects used in that section of that narrative to trope in the feudal background, *Traditional Kerala umbrella* and *traditional dowry box* are marked in italics to draw attention to the two most internationally debated and discussed topics on Indian social anomaly: caste and dowry.³⁷¹

The strategic reduction in this part of the narrative is less a function of *what* is said than of *how* it is said. The narrative plays on the contrast between (left) ideology and capitalist economy to undermine the idealistic fervor of a Maoist dream. The comic derision is *not* in portraying E.M.S Namboodiripad as Kerala's Mao Tse-tung, but in depicting him as a political derelict *vending* tradition from a non-Communist past. It is not for nothing that the traditional Kerala umbrella and traditional dowry box are italicized in the narrative. Communism melts into thin air in the subsequent passage where "old Communists" 'fawn' on tourists

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³⁷⁰E.M. S. Namboodiripad did in fact sell his family home to renounce his status as a feudal landlord. But Roy's claim that his ancestral home has been transformed into a hotel is a fiction. Considering the almost iconic status that he has in the context of CPI(M), Kerala, to say such a thing is something immensely more than aesthetic license. For further comment, see R.J Rammohan, "Kerala CPI(M): All that is Solid Melts into Air" *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol.33.50 Oct 3, (1998): 2579-2582.

³⁷¹Mammachi tells Rahel that she remembers a time when "Paravans were not allowed to carry Umbrellas". *The God of Small Things*, 71.

dressed in "ethnic" clothes. Even their "stoop" operates as a symbolical stylistic defeat of the leftist ideology in the hands of hard core commerce.

This rather partial representation of the very complex and rich history of the Communist Movement of Kerala leaves one wondering about the intentions of such a depiction. Communism appears again and again as a demoralized political stance from the uppermost echelons to the lowest. Lenin, Comrade Pillai's son, the novel tells us, goes on to work as a service contractor for foreign embassies and what may be termed the bourgeois complacency of the situation is reflected as the proud father parades his son's middle-class achievement to Rahel with obvious pride:

He (Pillai) handed Rahel the cellophane sachet. They were mostly photographs of Lenin and his family. His wife, his child, his new Bajaj scooter. There was one of Lenin shaking hands with a very well-dressed, very pink man.

"German First Secretary," Comrade Pillai said.

They looked cheerful in the photographs, Lenin and his wife. As though they had a new refrigerator in their drawing room, and a down payment on a DDA flat. (125)

Capitalist market is a pervasive marker in Roy's novel of global awareness of the growing importance of capitalist economy in Kerala and by extension in India. Indeed, the economic buoyancy and the growth of the consumer market created by the inward remittances of those whom Baby Kochamma calls "mostly sweeper class" creates one of those politically articulate moments in the narrative:

Then the Bombay-Cochin people came out. From the cool air into the hot air. Crumpled people uncrumpled on their way to the arrival lounge.

And there they were, the Foreign Returnees, in wash'n'wear suits and rainbow sunglasses. With an end to grinding poverty in their aristocrat suitcases. With cement roofs for their thatched houses, and geysers for their parent's bathrooms. With sewage systems and septic tanks . Maxis and high heels. Puff sleeves and lipsticks. Mixy grinders and automatic flashes for their cameras. With keys to count and cupboards to lock. . ." (134)

Details jostle with one another to constitute a certain ambiguity about communism and economic progress alike. The crassness of "rainbow sunglasses" and "gaudy dresses" easily neutralizes those details that portray "money" as a source of redemption(cement roofs, sewage systems). The scorn for the mercantile culture (in which the Communists collude with the uncomprehending mass is expressed in the "maxis" and "puff sleeves" which symbolize the anachronistic fashion of the *nouveau riches*. But, such images also dismiss a very important social development as a comic pageant.

The political "burlesque" that Ahmad objects to is one part of the political discourse in the novel that is rich in ambiguity. What both Ahmad and Kumar miss is the novel's full fledged rejection of *both* the political choices facing the society at a given moment in its history. The "burlesque" is aimed as much at the institutionalized Marxism of Kerala as at the vaunted economic development of the state. While Comrade Pillai who represents in essentials the corruption of the Trade Union bourgeoisie in the country, is trivialized to "a Communist who wipes

his armpits with Terylene Shirt", markers of economic development are equally denigrated by emphasizing their lack of sophistication and inappropriateness.

The obvious lack of balance in Roy's political discourse can hardly be ignored. T.J. Nossiter for instance, has described Kerala as "India's problem state" but has also argued that:

Probably the most lasting contribution made by the Communist Movement in Kerala is its politicization and mobilization of the propertyless and the underprivileged. The 1957-59 government in particular did much to liberate the poor and free the society from the tyranny of caste and communalism... At the same time it must be conceded that the beneficiaries of Communist rule have been the peasants (in part by design) not the labourers and (unintentionally) the government employees not the workers in the traditional cottage industry sector..whose condition has changed little since 1945.³⁷²

Paul. R. Brass also confirms some of Nossiter's findings and observes that:

When they [the landless low castes] attempt to mobilise for political agitations for higher wages against the landed castes, however, they generally meet strong resistance and their movements usually fail, except in Kerala. At times when the ruling Communist parties there support their demands.³⁷³

The nuances of Roy's text appear problematic in such a composite context that is almost like a chiaroscuro background structured both by academic as well

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³⁷²T.J Nossiter, *Communism in Kerala: A Study in Political Adaptation*.(Delhi: Oxford UP, 1982) 371-72.

³⁷³Paul. R.Brass, *The Politics of India Since Independence* (New Delhi: Foundation Books, 1992) 308.

as activist source material. The ludicrous Trade Union leader who plays a key role in the unleashing of the novel's destruction and violence also functions in the novel as a comic villain (a widely prevalent stereotype in the Bombay film industry). It is significant that he has a touch of "the Frog", Rushdie's comic villain in *The Moor's Last Sigh*.³⁷⁴

Roy's strategy of representing India becomes much more telling in her depiction of a Communist demonstration in Kerala. As the family car is stranded in the midst of a Communist demonstration, the readers get a glimpse of the demonstration through the terror felt by the women inside the car. All that we know about it is the "noise umbrella" and Rahel's fleeting recognition of Velutha among the angry strikers. Images evoking fear, incomprehension and awe turn the workers' march into a symbolic representation of an undifferentiated Communist upsurge and make the actual purpose of the demonstration redundant to the narration. The narrative at this point focusses instead on the potential menace of the scene depicted. The political details of this protest march are deemed to be outside the scope of the narrative and the gullible reader has every reason to believe that the demonstration has been organized by the ruling CPI(M) for inconsequential demands for reform, while the rage that fumes in the demonstrators is almost "Naxalite" !³⁷⁵

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³⁷⁴The similarity between Rushdie and Roy becomes too stark as in the case of these two comic villains. They are both grossly comic and repulsive and have an equally devastating effect on the lives of principal characters.

³⁷⁵See footnotes 339, 365, 367 and 368 for the different phases of Communist movements in India.

While Roy is quite aware of the three different stages in the history of communism in India (CPI, CPI (M), and CPI (ML) or the Naxalite), their ideological differences are deemed inconsequential to the overall structure of the novel. As Ahmad points out:

'Naxalite' is something of an all-purpose term in Roy's fiction. The same ambiguity is there about Velutha himself. We are told that he is a card holding Comrade of Pillai and thus a member of the CPI(M), which the book portrays as a party of traitors, more or less; but when Rahel tells Ammu of having seen them in the CPI(M) led demonstration, the latter *hopes* that the child is right and that Velutha is a 'Naxalite' and thus a true revolutionary – a "rumour" that Baby Kochamma also presents to the police, but with opposite sentiment. This breakdown of Realism in depicting the Communist world, and an attendant rhetoric of sheer condemnation, takes peculiar shapes. (Ahmad, 1997, 104)

The use of a narrative view point very often synonymous with a child's world view (that of Rahel and Estha), has the effect of constructing the young Communist Untouchable Velutha in a way in which much of his political identity is suppressed.³⁷⁶ This confusion about Velutha's political affiliation is also characteristic of the parts of the novel from the perspective of the politically ignorant upper class women (Ammu, Baby Kochamma). Indeed, Velutha's political ideas are not clarified in any section of the narrative and his Naxalite leanings remain at the level of a *rumour* that is not corroborated by evidence.

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³⁷⁶ A similar power game is played out in Spivak's famous essay: "Can the Subaltern Speak?" See my discussion on Spivak in the introduction.

Overall, the untouchable remains unknown and unknowable to the end, except in his sacrificial role in the “Terror”. In the end, the perspective of Rahel and Estha is made continuous with that of the narrator. That this perspective is severely impaired by childhood trauma and the limited understanding of children in a Syrian Christian household does not seem to disturb the author.

Discrepancies such as these severely impair Roy’s own narration of history. The overtly dramatic presentation of the Naxalite Movement serves Roy’s purpose of sensationalising history for immediate and speedy consumption:

In Kerala they [the Naxalites] breathed a plume of excitement and fear into the already frightened air. Killings had begun in the north. That May there was a blurred photograph in the papers of a landlord in Palghat who had been tied to a lamp post and beheaded. His head lay on its side, some distance away from his body, in a dark puddle that could have been water, could have been blood. It was hard to tell in black and white. In the gray predawn light (66)

The excesses of militant communism transport the readers to a world of “excitement and fear” transmogrified in the macabre images of the beheaded torso and the head lying on its side, and made more dramatic by their depiction in the journalistic colours of black and white. The narration of the political in Roy’s novel, together with her mockery of “Toy History” underwrites the deep irony of her of her own situation.

Further, one wonders whether Roy's unconscious performance of the "politico-exotic" goes deeper, implicating her in the same "impenetrable Touchable logic" (72) that casts Mammachi in the role of a persecutor. Although there has been an impassioned defence for seeing the class-caste bound erotic utopia as a radical discourse in the novel,³⁷⁷ one wonders why the material constituents of radicalism (class-caste) have been so over powered in the narrative by "the beautifully-written-erotic passages."³⁷⁸

In these erotic passages, it is impossible to overlook the untouchable as a suppliant looking up to the goddess of desire: "[H]e folded his fear into a perfect rose. He held it out in the palm of his hand. She took it from him and put it in her hair" (319). Does Velutha ever rise above the circumstances of his birth? Is sexual radicalism merely a bodily act not to be translated into a discourse by the agents? Or, does one see a deeper politics as the narrative articulates history through the predicament of the lovers, a reenactment of a social vice that even the Christian tradition could not eradicate? Is Roy's ruthless silencing of Velutha a mimetic indictment of the timeless practice that she finds repugnant? Such questions remain unanswered in the course of the novel. The mood of the narrative grows darker and darker, as the novel approaches another *Dushasana Vadham* in a different history. Only this time, as pointed out earlier, history's villain, unlike the epic's, is also its victim.

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³⁷⁷My reference is to Brinda Bose's article "In Desire and in Death. Eroticism as politics in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*," *Ariel* 29:2. April (1992): 60-71.

³⁷⁸Brinda Bose, "In Desire and in Death. Eroticism as politics in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*," 65.

The narrative grows unforgivingly cruel as "a posse of touchable police men" attacks Velutha as part of "history in live performance":

Unlike the custom of rampaging religious mobs or conquering armies running riot, that morning in the Heart of Darkness, the posse of touchable policemen acted with economy, not frenzy. Efficiency not anarchy. Responsibility, not hysteria. They didn't hack off his genitals and Stuff them in his mouth. They didn't rape him. Or behead him. (293)

Unlike Bhimasena,³⁷⁹ who destroyed his enemies for personal revenge, the Kottayam police worked as agents of history. They were merely "inoculating a community against an outbreak (of an epidemic)" (293). As the narrative moves on to depict police brutality, Dushasana Vadham comes to life. Personalized Myth blends with Roy's version of history as she turns the Untouchable into a timeless symbol of caste persecution in the section where Velutha becomes the "work" of craftsmen (the Kottayam Police) seeking "aesthetic distance":

[T]he blood on his breath of bright red. Fresh. Frothy. His lower intestine ruptured and hemorrhaged, the blood collected in his abdominal cavity. His spine was damaged in two places, the concussion had paralyzed his right arm and resulted in a loss of control over his bladder and rectum. Both his knees were shattered.(294)

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³⁷⁹See footnote 352 for an introduction to the significance of Bhimasena..

The reduction of Velutha from a revolutionary of the 1960s to a timeless symbol of caste persecution strengthens the mythical frame of the novel. The “Terror” of his situation keeps him contained within a framework in which he is viewed merely as a weaker version of Karna, another protagonist who was sacrificed in the centuries old class-caste conflict.

Draupadis and Kuntis

Since politics is made a part of the aesthetic project, the reader may fail to see the way in which it is allowed to surface in the narrative, affecting that of communism as well as the depiction of women. Mythical stereotypes symbolizing women as frail and subjects of the patriarchal order are chosen to narrate history-as-essence. Draupadi and Kunti emerge as metaphors of Indian *womanhood* from *The Mahabharata*, and Roy significantly fails to include in her narrative the Gandharis, who challenge this essentialist representation.³⁸⁰ The politico-exotic affects not only Roy’s depiction of the “unfeasible public turmoil of a nation” as the women inhabiting it. The novel does indeed talk about women, whose suffering, silent or eloquent, forms a significant part of what is *said* in the novel. But in its focus on history as myth, metaphorized by Kuntis and *Puthanas*,

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³⁸⁰ Gandhari, the mother of the Kauravas, along with many other female characters in *The Mahabharata*, stand for an indomitable spirit and an unflinching faith in morality. She had warned her husband about the evil nature of Duryodhana, her second-born, who was primarily responsible for the great war. She refused to bless him as he was about to embark on the war. As the son sought his mother’s blessing, her ambiguous reply was “Let Dharma prevail.” Gandhari’s supplication to Dhritarashtra to disinherit and banish Duryodhana is a potent moment in the epic.

it erases the possibilities of resisting these stereotypes in places where such possibilities exist.³⁸¹

(Indian) womanhood is another word for “despair” in *The God of Small Things*. If Rahel's eyes “behaved as though they belonged to someone else” (20), the narrator tells us, it was because “it [things] was never important enough. Because Worse Things had happened. In the country that she came from, poised forever between terror of war and the horror of peace, Worse Things kept happening ” (20). Nation as well as women who inhabit a nation, can only see “Worse Things” happening to themselves.

Women belonging to different generations make their subtle entries and give to Rahel a portion of their own lives that enter into the narrative. The narrator talks about a life that is quilted out of the bits and pieces of grandmothers and grand aunts and mothers, all unique and yet at the same time one in so far as they contribute to one epic narrative of suffering – with or without words. It is possibly this sameness that explains why women do not enter in the generational sequence – grand aunts come in before mothers, and great grandmothers make their entry as mothers disappear from the pages:

Aleyooty Ammachi [Rahel's grandmother] looked more hesitant. As though she would have liked to turn around but couldn't . Perhaps it wasn't as easy for her to abandon the river. With her eyes she looked in the

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³⁸¹Puthana, the mythical demoness had been enlisted by Kaṇṣa, Krishna's uncle, to kill the infant-god. As she attempted to suffocate the child while feeding him, Krishna bit into her breast and killed her. In all probability, she stands for Baby Kochamma ,who destroys the lives of both children in the novel.

direction that her husband looked . With her heart she looked away. Her heavy dull gold, kunukku earrings (tokens of the Little Blessed One's goodness) had Stretched her ear lobes and hung all the way down to her shoulders. Through the holes in her ears you could see the hot river and the dark trees that bent into it. And the fishermen in their boats. And the fish.(30)

The schism between Aleyooty Ammachi's *eyes* and *heart* utters a truth not merely about her husband with the "confident ancestor smile," but also about her being in a state of captivity and silent pain. Images write her life in a way that makes her passive suffering more articulate than words. Her yearning for the river juxtaposed to her obedient look across the road is only part of her life story. More poignant are the holes in her delicate ear lobes made by her earrings, tokens of her husband's *goodness*, not love! Ear piercing becomes a complex symbol of subjugation and deformity as the narrative focuses insistently on the unseemliness of those earrings to frame and shut out things to which Ammachi "would have liked to turn around but couldn't": the river, the trees, the fishermen in their boats.

What the great-grandmother bequeaths to her great granddaughter, as the narrative goes on to reveal, is the pain of living (as a woman) in a country where "various kinds of pain competed for primacy". As the narrative goes on to describe Rahel's eyes that had so offended Larry McCaslin, her ex-husband, it seeks out precisely those images that describe later that great grandmother's life in pain: "but when they made love he was offended by her eyes .They behaved

as though they belonged to someone else. Someone watching . Looking out of the window at the sea. At a boat in the river. . . " (20). But the meaning of Rahel's eyes is deeper than this reminiscence of Aleyooty Ammachi. It suggests, for her personal pain had to be put in the context of a political one and its history makes the great granddaughter's gaze more complex than the hesitant gaze of her foremother:

[P]ersonal despair could never be desperate enough. That something happened when personal turmoil dropped by the wayside shrine of the vast, violent, circling, driving ridiculous insane unfeasible, public turmoil of a nation(20).

Women of the Ipe family drift around in the novel, unfixed in space and time, crawling backwards in their feeble crazed attempt to turn back the wheel of History:

She (Baby Kochamma) was wearing a lot of jewelry. All of it. Winking rings. Diamond earrings. Gold bangles and a beautifully crafted flat gold chain that she touched from time to time, reassuring herself that it was there and it was hers. Like a young bride who couldn't believe her good fortune. *She's living her life backwards*, Rahel thought. It was a curiously apt observation. Baby Kochamma *had* lived her life backwards. As a young woman she renounced the material world, and now, as an old one, she seemed to embrace it. She hugged it and it hugged her back. (23)

'Hugging' time bonds the grand aunt with the mother, who wants to move back in time through a sheer force of will:

With the last of her meager salary she had bought her daughter small presents wrapped in brown paper with colored paper hearts pasted on. . . They were presents for a seven-year-old; Rahel was nearly eleven. It was as though Ammu believed that if she refused to acknowledge the passage of time, if she willed it to stand still in the lives of her twins it would. (152)

The refusal to acknowledge the passage of time as an "Unsafe Edge" (44) in the mother affects the daughter as well; for when Rahel reaches her mother's "die-able viable age" she walks straight into the arms of her brother Estha, in an incestuous coupling in which they ironically fulfil the promise they made to their mother before they were separated: "Promise me you'll always love each other she'd say", as she drew her children to her. "Promise", Estha and Rahel would say. Not finding words with which to tell her that for them there *was* no Each no Other" (215). For the long-separated twins, incest represents a symbolic effort to crawl backwards into a time and space when there was indeed no each no other. Desire to recede in time becomes in the novel, particularly for the women, an attempt to escape from an oppressing present in search of an idealized time beyond their grasp.

The lives of these women merge into one another forming a pattern as important as their relationships with the men in their lives. Women's Identities are threatened as their names get lost. Names are introduced and then obliterated from the narrative, transfixing the women in the roles that they have accepted

only with reluctance. That Mammachi (the grandmother) was once *Soshama*, or that Baby Kochamma was once *Navomi Ipe* are irrelevant details in Rahel's narration of the tragedy of the Ipe household . Nor is Rahel's mother Ammu entirely spared. She is granted the rare privilege of holding only half a name, for, being divorced and unwelcome in her father's family, she does not know which family name is worse: the husband's or the father's.

Women with no names or half a name inscribe personal turmoil with the political as their pains, both physical and emotional, coincide with national upheavals: Mammachi's daily beatings from her husband coincide with the beginning of the CPI(M) chapter in Kerala's history only to provide an ironic contrast to India's very own proletarian revolution. The birth of Ammu's twins and her subsequent separation is caught in the turmoil of two wars, with China and Pakistan. And her suicidal affair with the untouchable becomes part of a larger transgression, the Naxalbari uprisings in Eastern northern and southern parts of India.

These *public turmoils* write the history of a nation as women grope with the various insignificant details of their *personal turmoil* and suffering. But their personal spaces too are invaded and transformed just as Paradise Pickles and Preserves is taken over by Chacko, and made into a symbol of male vanity:

Up to the time Chacko arrived, the factory had been a small but profitable enterprise. Mammachi just ran it like a kitchen. Chacko had it registered as a partnership and informed Mammachi that she was the Sleeping Partner.

He invested in equipment . . .and expanded labor force. Almost immediately the financial slide began, but was artificially buoyed by extravagant bank loans that Chacko raised by mortgaging the family's rice fields. . . though Ammu did as much work in the factory as Chacko whenever he was dealing with food inspectors or sanitary engineers, he always referred to it as *my* factory, *my* pineapples, *my* pickles. Legally, that was the case because Ammu as a daughter had no claim to property. (55-6)³⁸²

What appears in this passage as a childish vanity assumes diabolic proportions as Chacko pushes Ammu out of the ancestral home as a punishment for adultery, an act that ultimately destroys her. As an irony of history, mother and aunt connive with the brother to destroy the daughter.

It is striking how space, or the lack of it, continues to define the lives of all the women in the novel. Significantly, it is only outside the Ipe family that spaces become, figuratively, synonymous with life. When Margaret decides to leave Chacko she tells him she needs "her own space" (111). In the context of the Ipe women, space becomes oppressive, reductive and yet seems to cast a spell on women who are confined within it:

Baby Kochamma loved the Aymenem house and cherished the furniture that she inherited by out living everybody else. Mammachi's violin and violin stand, the Ooty cupboards, the plastic basket chairs, the Delhi beds the dressing table from Vienna with cracked ivory knobs. The rose wood dining table that Velutha made. . . she viewed ethnic cleansing, famine and genocide as

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³⁸²For details of the Christian Succession Act, see foot note 384.

direct threats to her furniture. She kept her doors and windows locked unless she was using them. She used her windows for specific purposes. For a Breath of Fresh Air. To Pay for the Milk. To Let out a Trapped Wasp.(28–29)

Baby Kochamma appears to be under the spell of a house that makes the outside world of little or no relevance to her. It makes her fond of inanimate things as memory, political turmoils, relationships as well as family tragedies (Velutha) are reduced to nothing compared to the cracked furniture that feeds Baby Kochamma's obsession with the Aymenem house. The narrator tells the readers how she used her windows for specific purposes. In the details under the specific purposes the need "for a breath fresh air" occupies, tragically, the same space as the other trivia of her life such as paying for the milk or letting out a wasp.

The women who choose to live accept all the demands made by the Aymenem house and survive in a strange death-in-life situation. Those who do not, die nonetheless. With masochistic verve, the narrator goes on to narrate in minutest details Ammu's funeral and her reduction to a "little clay pot":

The door of the furnace clanged shut. There were no tears. The crematorium "In-Charge" had gone down the road and didn't come back for twenty minutes. That's how long Chacko and Rahel had to wait for the pink receipt that would entitle them to collect Ammu's remains. Her ashes. The grit from her bones. The teeth from her smile. The whole of her crammed into a little clay pot. Receipt number Q498673. (155)

The cold anonymity of Ammu's death enacted in front of her dazed, traumatized daughter becomes doubly meaningful as she watches "the grit from her [mother's], being "crammed into a little clay pot". The *grit* being *crammed* with a numbered receipt is a fitting finale for a woman, who unlike her aunt (metaphorically speaking), refused to lock her windows. Yet, an Aymenem house ruled over for generations by "the Blessed One" with "the confident ancestor smile" and the "Imperial Entomologist", holds a different meaning for Chacko, the only heir to male prowess and property, a man with a "Marxist mind and a feudal libido":

the enigmatic, secretly thrilling notion of Men's Needs gained implicit sanction in the Aymenem House. Neither Mammachi, nor Baby Kochamma saw any contradiction between Chacko's Marxist mind and feudal libido. They were only worried about the Naxalites who had been known to force men from Good families to marry servant girls whom they made pregnant. (160)

Chacko's enabling talent to reconcile the irreconcilable, *Marxist mind* with a *feudal libido* makes him different from Ammu who refuses to separate her *Needs* from *Feelings*. In a strange world where values are reversed, libertines walk away with the family's good name while women in love are branded as "Veshyas" (prostitutes). Law and family connive with each other, to fix Ammu in the role of a prostitute. As Ammu visits the police station to deny the allegation

of rape brought against Velutha, she is branded, as much by words as by the touchable touch:

He (Inspector Matthew) stared at Ammu's breast as he spoke. He said that the police knew all they needed to know and that the Kottayam police didn't take statements from *Veshyas* or their illegitimate children. . . Thomas Matthew came around his desk and approached Ammu with his baton. "If I were you", he said, "I'd go home quietly". Then he tapped her breast with his baton. Gently. Tap tap. As though he was choosing mangoes from a basket. . . Inspector Matthew seemed to know whom he could pick on and whom he couldn't. Policemen have that instinct. (10)

The words "Veshyas " and "illegitimate" would leave permanent scars in a child's mind as much as that tapping of her mother's breast by a stranger. Rahel would be expelled from her school because she deliberately collided with the seniors behind doors "to find out whether breasts hurt" (18). And young Rahel's life would be punctuated by persistent inquiries "into breasts and how much they hurt" .

As the women in *The God of Small Things* hurt each other and hurt themselves even as they try to make discrete inquiries about how much it hurts, they write the suppressed history of a nation of which anonymous "pink receipts" can only be an innocent metaphor. As Ammachis and Mammachis get pushed around by husbands and sons, and Ammus are destroyed for leaving their

husbands, (Indian) womanhood as a material constituent of history makes its appearance, if only in different versions. The Syrian-Christian household in the novel becomes a metaphor for other households in other religions. Indira Jaising points out:

In all religions, the father is the sole natural guardian of the child. Hindu law still gives to sons a birthright in ancestral property, to the exclusion of daughters. Muslim men may marry four wives, but their women may not marry more than one husband, whereas marriages of Hindus and Christians are expected to be monogamous. A Muslim woman cannot unilaterally divorce her husband whereas she can be divorced by him. All divorced women are entitled to the maintenance under section 125 of the Criminal Procedure Code, but Muslim Women, thanks to the Muslim Women's (Protection of Rights of Divorced) Act, 1986 are not. The right of divorce for Christian women, compared to men is so severely restricted that they virtually live in bondage.³⁸³

Yet, it has to be remembered that if suffering is integral to the situation of (Indian) women, so is resistance and rebellion. In this context Ammu's rebellion is significant, both as it feeds into the narrative logic in the novel as from an autobiographical optique.³⁸⁴

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³⁸³Indira Jaising in Bhasin and Menon, 1994, 65.

³⁸⁴In 1983 Mary Roy, Arundhati Roy's mother, had challenged the Travancore Christian Succession Act which decreed that when a man died intestate, his widow had a mere life estate over a portion of the family property and that "the daughter shall receive a quarter of a share of a son, or Rs. 5000, whichever is less". See Mary Roy, "Striking Down a Succession Act", in *Against All Odds*, Bhasin and Menon (eds.) (Delhi: Isis International and Kali for Women, 1994) 117-22.

Rahel's own "civil solitary form of corruption" sets her free to make discrete inquiries into what it needs to be a woman. Her efforts lead her to mixing hurts, personal and historical, real and mythical: Ammu and Kunti. As if in an endeavour to go back to the origin of the hurt the narrative returns at significant junctures to the mythical foremother, whose life is the first parable about womanhood and hurt:

She [Kunti] told him [Karna] of a young woman who had been granted a boon. A secret mantra that she could use to choose a lover from among the Gods. Of how, with imprudence of youth, the woman decided to test it to see if it really worked. . . .the words had scarcely left her foolish lips, Kunti said, when Surya the God of Day, appeared before her. . . .nine months later she bore him a son. . . the young mother loved her firstborn son deeply, Kunti said, but she was unmarried and could not keep him. (221)

The youthful imprudence of Kunti, as much as her inability to keep her firstborn son joins her with Ammu and makes Rahel's forays into the narrative of an ancient nation's womanly hurt so touching that the reader is inclined to forget that this might not be the only version of women's lives in the "insane unfeasible public turmoil of a nation". Indian womanhood, like Indian nation, is reduced to a truism that is all too familiar in the realm of what may be termed "Third World scholarship". Roy's depiction of the Ipe women feeds the notion of (Indian) women as powerless victims of a "turbulent" nation of men, tragically attractive in their resilience.

Although potential and actual male oppression is a large part of the socio-historical constituents of Indian womanhood, the resistance to the oppression and not just the surrender forms the other half of the story that does not surface anywhere in Roy's version.³⁸⁵ The narrative destroys Ammu's grit, just as it destroys Velutha, reducing her somewhat abruptly into an ugly alcoholic, whose awkward manners are in stark contrast to her earlier sophistication, and then eliminating her altogether by an abrupt death. If Ammu were to live on, she would probably rob the novel of the metaphorical darkness that characterizes Roy's version of a nation's history.³⁸⁶

The hollowness that sets into Ammu's life after Velutha's death and her subsequent wasting away after a brief belligerence at the Police Station culminates by the logic of things in her pathetic death in a cheap, lonely hotel room. The stylistic abruptness that characterizes Ammu's end so uncharacteristic of Roy's otherwise nuanced narrative that it has not gone unnoticed. As Ahmad points out:

Ammu had been all through her adult life a woman of great grit and this grit is what makes possible for her to take the initiative in breaking the Love Laws even as Velutha hesitates. That she would not be able to face the consequences of her own grit is an odd decision that the author makes on her behalf; more or less arbitrarily. (Ahmad, 1997, 106)

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³⁸⁵On the subject of the Third World woman as a subject of Western gaze, see Talpade Mohanty, 1988: 52-80

³⁸⁶On "darkness", see Roy's interview to *Frontline*, August 8, 1997.

The life and death of Ammu together with the lives of other women before her form a pattern of defeat and shame that is not disturbed by her daughter's life story. That Rahel goes out into the world, from Aymenem to Delhi and then on to America only to return to the "Heart of Darkness", does not inscribe any *difference* into the collective woman's life in the novel. Though not without a faint flickering of rebellion and defiance, all the lives end in much the same way: in nullity and death. This unmitigated "darkness," being the only available truth in the novel, puts a finishing touch to Roy's very own Kathakali performance unsullied by hope.

If women in *Meatless Days* become a "proper name of pain", the narrator, Sara, defies her socially assigned role as a Pakistani woman and goes on to make a life of her own, leaving behind the two symbols of patriarchal oppression in her writing: Pakistan and Pip. Roy's narrative of pain claims no such redemption. Her refusal to produce a *difference* within dominant representations makes her ideologically complicit with "The Hotel People" who are the subject of her own derision.

Her discourse on nation and woman ensures that the narrative structure, its repetitions, its generous yet discriminating details ensure the metropolitan reader's interest in the mysteries and tragedies that her "Great Story" articulates. The enthusiasm generated by Roy's novel in the West as an 'Indian novel' strikingly demonstrates the irony of its success.

The West and the 'Indian Novel'

In David Malouf's travelogue-novel, *A Foot in the Stream*, the protagonist falls a victim to India's temptations to voyeurism: "I don't think I have ever been in a place" he confesses, "that is morally and spiritually so dangerous". In *A Foot in the Stream*, which is one of the four sketches in which Malouf explores the development of multiple selves, the multiplicity is defined by the places it inhabits. For Malouf, the tourist, India is pleasure. But, it is also the threat of being overwhelmed. As Malouf puts it, fear "comes in many forms. Fear of dirt, fear of illness, fear of people; fear of the unavoidable presence of misery; fear for a readable" (195). What Malouf tries to impose on multiple touristic perceptions, is a "pattern-seeking aesthetics."³⁸⁷

Similarly, Roy's intention to narrate "Small Things" leads her to offer specially designed package tours for western readers: dense and incomprehensible places, strange men and women, and democracies and communisms that seem at times to be mockeries of the very definitions.³⁸⁸ In this respect, the treatment of the *only* Indian literary reference in Roy's novel (apart

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³⁸⁷I am indebted to Graham Huggan for directing me to Malouf's work. See Graham Huggan "Transformations of the tourist gaze. India in recent Australian fiction," *Westerly* 38/4/summer (1993): 83-89. In the article, he defines "tourist gaze" as the cognitive processes by which the tourists encode or decode their experiences through a socially organized structure of preconstituted knowledge and beliefs.).

³⁸⁸See introduction for the Western discourse on Third World democracies.

from *The Mahabharata*), is a case in point. *Chemmeen*,³⁸⁹ a famous novel in modern Malayalam literature, is about a young woman of the fishermen community of Kerala and her love that comes to a tragic end due to the age old traditions and taboos of the community. While the story serves as an allegory for what happens to Ammu and Velutha in the novel, the very terms of its portrayal reveal a pattern that is significant in this context. The narration of the story in Roy's novel moves away from its own realistic depiction of the harsh realities of life in the community to concentrate on the folkloric aspect of the story, and it retelling, much in the mode of a story within a story, adopts a universalist mode of narration that is the characteristic of folklores.³⁹⁰ The transformation of the story into a song sung by the children and their mother gives it a timeless lyrical quality that eliminates the reference to the sociohistorical content that makes the novel a significant social document in the realm of Malayalam and Indian literature:

Pandoru mukkuvan muthinu poyi,
(Once a fisherman went to sea)

Padinjaran kattathu mungi poyi
(The west wind blew and swallowed his boat,)

Arayathi pennu pizhachu poyi
(His wife on the shore went astray)

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³⁸⁹*Chemmeen* (The Prawn), is a modern vernacular (Malayalam) novel from Kerala written by Thakazi. S. Pillai and was published in 1964. It is based on the life of the fishermen community of Kerala. Also see the quotation from Rukmini Bhaya Nair in the section entitled "Aftermath of the Empire."

³⁹⁰See *The God of Small Things*, 208-09.

Kadamma avaney kondu poyi
(So Mother Ocean rose and took him away) (209).

Roy's style of narration transforms the locale into a literary reference similar to what critic Pico Iyer describes as the "Tropical Classical" tendency among postcolonial and diasporic writers:

The ability to season high classical forms with a lyrical beauty drawn from the streets and beaches of their (postcolonial/diasporic) homes. To learn from the tradition of Homer and Herodotus and Augustine. . . to put sparkling new wine into cobwebbed old bottles, and shake the whole thing up to make it fizz.³⁹¹

What enhances the Orientalist/exotic appeal of Roy's novel is, apart from the evocation of an ancient culture, the depiction of a dark and mysterious tropical "fear", in a climactic and topographical setting that, together with its dense and plural culture of the country it represents, "overwhelms" the reader. Roy talks about Caste warfare, the lushness of the Kerala green, the treacherous tropical climate, the Indophil Sahib, the Meenachal River, about Margaret, the long legged British woman discovering India, who is Roy's very own version of Miss Quested,³⁹² and about Kochu Thomban, the temple elephant. Such exotic touches, together with her retelling of the Malayalam novel *Chemmeen*,

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³⁹¹Pico Iyer, *Tropical Classical, Essays from Several Directions*, (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1997) 124.

³⁹²My reference is to Adela Quested, the English woman in E.M Forster's *A Passage to India* who was in search of a 'real India.'

demonstrate her penchant for the “Exotic East” in both its traditional and updated versions.

Critical Reception – India versus the West.

In the light of my discussion of the “politico-exotic” and the “tourist gaze”, one can conclude that the *difference* articulated in the rhetoric of remoteness and mystery in Roy’s novel is probably what explains the striking metropolitan-national divide reflected in its reception. The author herself appears to be aware of this discrepancy. In her 1997 interview in *Front Line*, she comments:

You know, it's interesting but in America... not one single newspaper asked about the money... in Europe too, the excitement was about the book... just the book. In India sadly, it was just the opposite.

Published on the occasion of the worldwide celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of Indian independence, *The New Yorker's* Summer 1997 Fiction issue carried an article which defined the location of the postcolonial writer in the Indian context. Bill Buford, the writer of the article, answers his own question, “what does it mean to be an Indian novelist today?” by referring to the photograph accompanying the article:

It was taken in London on the morning of May 30th. Two weeks earlier the plan had been to have it taken in New

York. In truth, the photograph could have been taken just about anywhere, with more or less the same fortuitous mixture of Indian writers on hand— anywhere that is, *except India*. On the occasion of the particular shoot, Arundhati Roy had arrived the night before from Amsterdam, Vikram Seth had arrived a few hours before from Vienna. Others came from Toronto, Boston, New York and Cambridge. Only one – Vikram Chandra – journeyed from India – and that was because he was visiting family; he lives in Washington DC³⁹³ (emphasis added)

The epithet “Indian” in the title of the article appears in the body of the article as a displaced sign, emptied of geopolitical signification, found, apparently, everywhere *except* India! *Indian-ness* thus comes to designate, not so much a sense of belonging to a polity, a nation, but a manner of writing *about* a nation that is endorsed by the metropolis. “The shifting margins of cultural displacement “are thus normalized as the cultural marker of writing about the Indian nation. For example, in his eagerness to collapse “metropolitan” and “Indian”, Buford fails to recognize the fact that Arundhati Roy is in fact *from* India! Yet his mistake points towards an important fact: that Indianness is, above all, a matter of narrative strategy and has nothing to do with a writer’s geopolitical location.

Collapsing “Indian” with “Indianness” as a narrative strategy has certain interesting consequences in the realm of metropolitan criticism. For example, Alan Davies writes of *The God of Small Things*:

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³⁹³Bill Buford, “Declarations of Independence: Why are there suddenly so many Indian novelists?” *The New Yorker* fiction issue June 23,30, 1997:8.

[I]t's a book I will reread and probably teach as well, a book that *opens India* to me as other relatively recent books by Bapsi Siddhwa and Rohinton Mistry did--- though a more *magical book* than those others *because of its style* — a book in short, to conjure with'.³⁹⁴

The New York Times sees in Roy's novel "a devastating meditation on the decline and fall of an Indian family ". (*New York Times Book Review*, 9, June 7, 1998) 7). The commercial potential of "India" in the West is clearly brought out in Donald Eickert's appreciation of the second Booker from the subcontinent:

As if grudgingly, the worldwide readership is waking up to India's potential as a *treasure house of stories*. For a nation of a billion people and three millennia of history one might have taken it for granted, but there is something strong about this culture that is Bharat, *the way Indian cuisine is strong*, which makes it an acquired taste. So when first time novelist Arundhati Roy earned the Booker prize this month the acceptance in the *educated modern world* thus signalized may be said to have been hard won". ("The Booker Born" *The Week*, Oct. 26, 1997. Emphasis added).

The entire game of commodification that Roy so abhors, is played out in these words. Indianness gets totemized as "a treasure house of stories" and is consumed, like "Indian cuisine " by the readers, simply because it is not like anything found in Western culture. The consumers of course belong to the "educated modern world" whose stamp of approval is required to sell these items

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³⁹⁴Alan Davies, "Armchair Traveler," *Hudson Review* Vol 51, no.2. Summer 1998: 438, emphasis added.

that have come, by implication, from a *non*-modern, *non*-educated world (rest of the globe?) with three millennia of history. The postcolonial novelist is faced with a challenging task: while she has to develop a “theme park” playing out “three millennia of history” of a strange culture called “Bharat,” her task becomes all the more challenging as she has to tone down the “strong” taste and make it suitable for the Western palate. Roy’s awareness of this dilemma is to be found in the novel itself:

It was Chacko who christened the factory Paradise Pickles and Preserves...At first he had wanted to call it Zeus Pickles and Preserves, but that idea was vetoed because everybody said that Zeus was too obscure and had no local relevance, whereas Paradise did. (Comrade Pillai’s suggestion – Parashuram Pickles – was vetoed for the opposite reason: too *much* local relevance. (56, emphasis in the text)

Striking a delicate balance between national culture and its image in the metropolis, Roy’s “Indianness” illustrates the dilemma of the postcolonial condition itself. The appreciation of India’s classical past expressed in Eickhert’s comment on the Booker masks for example a certain prejudice about a nation with a fifty-years-old history of “reconstitutive nationalism”, as is evident in the next section of his article:

And what a joy it was to have a thoroughly intelligent young Indian woman up there accepting the prize, belying with her ready wit *the stupidity of the Indian*

establishment with its talent for self aggrandizement.
(*Ibid.* Emphasis added)

Two Indias appear to circulate in Eickhert's understanding of Indianness. One, a civilization with an ancient past, and the other, the present nation-state which bemuses the "modern educated world" by its "stupidity" and "sense of self aggrandizement". While the first is wrapped in the exotic aura of cultural commodity fetish, the second reassures the West about its unquestionable superiority by a display of its own political/ intellectual inadequacy.³⁹⁵

In diagnosing 'India' as the commercial cultural marker Huggan explores the sociological processes that unfold both *Midnight's Children* and *The God of Small Things* and comments on the media mechanisms that have "created" the two authors:

This is not necessarily to accuse; It is rather to draw attention to these two talented writers' awareness of the media mechanisms through which their works and they themselves have gained prestige. And one such mechanism... operates through the code word "India". (...) the publicity Roy's novel has generated has helped place it firmly within the recent invented tradition of "Indo-chic". This journalistic label is appropriately catchy; it is also *global* in its implications, coinciding with the recognition of India's emergence as a world economic power. "Indo-chic" and Roy's contribution to it are not simply to be seen as Western constructs; they are the products of the globalization of (Western- Capitalist) consumer culture, in which "India" functions not just as

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³⁹⁵See my discussion of Charles Taylor's comments in the light of the western politics of recognition..

a polyvalent cultural sign but as a highly mobile capital good.³⁹⁶

The Politics of Language, Or, "Why We Chose Arundhati"

One of the reasons for the resounding success of *the* "indo-chic," *The God of Small Things*, is the language in which "the Great Story" is narrated. Words from Indian languages are employed to make the use of English fashionably peripheral; yet the regional identities of these words are sometimes inappropriate or mistaken. Divested of "meaning" in specific contexts, these words function as ethnic components in the rhythmic performance of the "language drum" in the novel. In other words, the italicized Malayalam words will produce that much-longed-for "Regional flavor" like the drum of the Kathakali performance.

The particularity of Roy's language is that it enables its readers to experience British and American style with a very occasional sprinkling of Indian/Keralian words. That English is Roy's mother tongue and that the acknowledged literary influences on the narrator are clearly Anglo American contribute richly to this manoeuvre. Roy's facility within the English tradition enables her to modify the Master's language to an extent that it is defamiliarized even as it strikes familiar chords. Her own mastery is demonstrated in her frequent use of single word sentences, paragraphs one sentence long (All the way to Cochin), italics, capitals within sentences, joint words written without a gap

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³⁹⁶Graham Huggan, "Consuming India," *Ariel* 29.1 January (1998):253.

(chinskin, bestfriend) and of course, similes that make up a paragraph, as in the following example:

He [Vellya Paapen] said that there were only black cat-shaped holes in the Universe. There were so many stains on the road. Squashed Miss Mitten-shaped holes in the Universe. Squashed frog-shaped stains in the Universe. Squashed crows that had tried to eat the squashed frog-shaped stains in the Universe. Squashed dogs that ate the squashed crow-shaped stains in the Universe. (79)

English (and not 'Hinglish') remains Roy's chosen domain and in it she employs foreign sounding words to do justice to her "ethnic" subject. That the dominant linguistic pattern of her novel is what attracted the attention of the metropolitan readers is suggested by the way the Booker committee responded to her novel. Jason Cowley tells us:

What the judges most admired, was not its Indian setting, its slightly hackneyed working of the old duchess-and-the-game keeper plot in the story of cross Caste erotic love between a Paravan and a Syrian Christian or the admittedly valuable insight Roy offers into the complicated politics of Kerala. It was rather, her verbal exuberance.

She has a heightened capacity for wonder, seeing the world as a child might. This accounts for the *defamiliarising* quality of her prose, her metaphorical exactitude and striking similes: A moon-lit river falling from a swimmer's arms like "sleeves of silver"; the smell of shit hovering over a village "like a hat."³⁹⁷

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³⁹⁷Jason Cowley, "Why We Chose Arundhati," *India Today*, Oct. 27 1997 (emphasis added).

The language achieves “metaphorical exactitude and striking similes” and yet retains its own Indian voice. The result is a sensational strangeness that gestures, like other ethnic markers towards an unfamiliar culture. Like the “tandoori pomfret.” Like the “Kathakali”. “Like the pickles and preserves of Ammachi's factory”. Rukmini Bhaya Nair's sums up the novel's linguistic exuberance by saying by saying “the plethora of stylistic devices” create too much background noise.”³⁹⁸

Like Chacko's Paradise Pickles and Preserves, the novel strives for a perfect blend of magic words conjuring strange images “structured to render the world view of children”(Cowley), and a syntax which will make the *music* sufficiently entrancing like the sound of the drums in a Kathakali performance. It matters little to those not conversant with the intricacies of the Malayalam language whether *Thozilali Ekta Zindabad* should actually be *Thozilali Aikyam Zindabad* or *Kooki paayum theevandi*³⁹⁹ should displace *Kooki paadum theevandi*. Why should one, after all, object to the *sari* end being called *pallu* instead of *thumbu*?⁴⁰⁰

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³⁹⁸See Rukmini Bhaya Nair, :4-6. The charges of over writing are also made by Shirley Chew, *Times Literary Supplement*, May 30 No. 4913: 23.

³⁹⁹Both “Ekta” and “Aikyam” are Sanskrit words meaning unity and exist in most Indian languages. In Malayalam however “Ekta” (used by Roy on page 63) does not exist at all.

⁴⁰⁰According to Bhaya Nair, Roy is confused between the two versions of sari end. Sari, a six yards- long unstitched cloth, is the traditional dress for Indian women and is worn like a long flowing gown with one end tucked in and the other slung over either the left or the right shoulder. In all traditional saris the sari end is intricately designed and stands for regional uniqueness. The word Roy uses for the sari end is Hindi and is not used in Kerala. The synonym in Malayalam, which is the language of Kerala is ‘thumbu’. Rukmini Bhaya Nair's

The God of Small Things articulates a memory that is open to imaginative improvisation of the enigmas of childhood, crucial moments only half understood. Memory, as fragmented awareness of meanings, finds its expression in the language of a child from a Syrian-Christian family in Ayemenem. What the Booker Prize judges admired in *The God of Small Things* is, significantly, the 'childish' quality of Roy's prose. As Jason Cowley correctly points out, "she has a heightened capacity for wonder, seeing the world as a child might". Significantly, the child's anxiety to make sense of things is also precisely the transformative space where the novel attempts to empty out its political potentials and India, paradoxically, is performed with gem-like brilliance.

Sometimes the child's vision merges with a mad man's chaotic perception to produce a verbal opulence that deactivates potent moments when it makes its appearance:

Muralidharan had no home, no doors to lock that he had his old keys tied carefully around his waist. In a shining bunch. His mind was full of cupboards, cluttered with secret pleasures.

An alarm clock. A red car with a musical horn. A red mug for the bathroom. A wife with a diamond. A briefcase with important papers. *And I'm sorry Colonel Sabhapathy, but I'm afraid I've said my say.* And crisp banana chips for the children.

He watched the trains, come and go. He counted his keys.

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review points out this linguistic inaccuracy in the novel.

He watched governments rise and fall. He counted his keys.
 He watched cloudy children at car windows with yearning
 marshmallow noses. (61)

With his fragmented memory and clouded perception, Muralidharan acts as the double of Estha toying with images and words, trying to make sense of the dynamic chaos. Meanings file past him in an incomprehensible blur: trains, governments, children, the homeless, the helpless, the sick. His world, like Rahel's and Estha's, is made with 'well-formed words' that do not always connect. These individuals, Muralidharan the mad man and Rahel and Estha, the dizygotic twins, collude in the narrative to transform the communist march into "the sound of a thousand voices spread over the frozen traffic like a noise umbrella". Communist slogans, like the fall of governments, get subsumed in the "noise umbrella" that articulates it. As Amitava Kumar points out:

In Roy, especially in the case of the children's sentences, the words spelled backwards, the remembered rhymes and their repetitions seem incantatory protections, drawn up by those who have at their disposal nothing other than the device of language to save them. (Kumar, 87)

Indeed this incantatory language in Roy's "fairy tale realism" not only casts a spell on the readers to transform the familiar into an object of wonder, it also creates a perception that resists the inherent opposition between the real and the non-real, making the readers participate in the chimeric unfolding of what in

the novel is *constituted* as 'real'. Roy's art can be compared to Rushdie's in more ways than one, and what Kumkum Sangari has to say about Rushdie, is at least partially relevant in Roy's case.

According to Sangari, Rushdie deploys preexisting transformative capacity of indigenous narratives (the epic and the folklore) to activate a sense of wonder in his reader :

[H]is [Rushdie's] fabulation finds a fertile ground not just in classical and oral culture but also in the social perception of art. This perception does not always constitute the real and the not-real as a binary opposition, but as co-existent; and in it, sacred and the secular art forms can be read as miracle or *chamatkar*, signifying not the presence of the miraculous per se but an elasticity and capacity for wonder on the part of the listener/viewer/reader that can give the quality of revelation. (Sangari, 178)

But, according to Sangari, this indigenous narrative mode is used in Rushdie as a technique for transmogrifying Indianness into a folklore or a myth that seizes the imagination of the West as something novel or different. According to her, the transformative spaces are precisely the sites in Rushdie's narrative where Indianness gets reduced to an indigenous performance and not "a complex articulation of cultural difference, contradiction and political use that can scarcely be idealized." (180)

Although Roy demonstrates a great degree of sensitivity to the commercialization of native culture, her own technique hardly confirms a breach

from this narrative trend. In Roy's novel, under the spell of the *chamatkar*, history acquires magic proportions as in the allegorical transformation of the colonial/postcolonial into the History House:

The History House with cool stone floors and dim walls and billowing ship-shaped shadows. Plump, translucent lizards lived behind old pictures and waxy, crumbling ancestors with tough toe nails and breath smelled of yellow maps gossiped in sibilant, papery whispers. (50-52)

The magic touch of language transforms a colonial bungalow into a gothic feast, as mysterious and attractive as the once-upon-a-time master of the house, Kari Saipu. A very distant cry from Conrad's Kurtz, "the Black Sahib" exists as a trope for a fictional version of the colonial past:

The Black Sahib. The English man who had gone native. Who spoke Malayalam and wore mundus. Aymenem's own Kurtz. He had shot himself through the head ten years ago, when his young lover's parents had taken the boy away from him and sent him to school. . . ouse had lain empty for years. Very few people had *seen* it . But the twins could *picture* it.(51, emphasis added)

Such visual and verbal images transform history, past and present, into patterns that turn it into a magical experience.

At times the grimness of such narrative moments form a contrast to the lyrical outbursts that introduce a melodious mood in the novel. The narration of

"God's own country" remains strangely ambivalent in relation to the actual "things" that make up a nation's historical memory.⁴⁰¹

Bhaya Nair's somewhat harsh judgement of Roy's exoticism is also a comment on the bind faced by most Indo-English writers of the post-Rushdie generation:

Roy may not be Orientalist, but her readership in "the West" could well view her with the same admiring gaze that they reserve for beautiful parakeets who, amazingly, can do linguistic imitations as well. (Bhaya Nair, 6)

The (post)colonial bondage is not necessarily a linguistic servility as indeed Indian English has proved. It goes far deeper than that and can best be explained in terms of the inescapable fracture in the postcolonial consciousness that, ironically speaking, struggles to approximate, in its hybrid moment, the condition of pre-colonial discursive purity.

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⁴⁰¹On the absence of material constituents of India's history in Roy, see Amitava Kumar, "The God of All Things: the West reads India's 50 years," *Race and Class* 3. (1998):83-94.

Conclusion

In my thesis I have demonstrated how postcolonial literary writings from the Indian subcontinent reveal a split consciousness that subject them to the very colonizing ideology and literary techniques that they strive to negate. The cause of this Janus-faced consciousness of postcolonial (Indian) writing is to be traced back partially to the 'colonial context' of the history of English studies in India. The deployment of literature as a means not just for imparting cultural literacy but also for exercising cultural power has been of crucial significance to the production of postcolonial Indo-English fiction. In the first chapter I have traced the intellectual background, both colonial and postcolonial, necessary to the understanding of the contradictions of such narrations.

Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest*, discussed in the second chapter, demonstrated how the literature of England was put to use to convey an ideal Englishman to the Indians, especially after the 1835 English Education Act, which required natives of India to submit to its study. 'English Literature' was also represented as the signifier of universal truths, and as a discipline that trains the native's mind to think "objectively." Production of thought thus came to define the true "essence" of the Englishman and his material reality as subjugator was camouflaged by his intellectual contributions to ameliorating the native intellect. The second chapter demonstrates that the Indian novel in English as a genre is a product of this long cultural indoctrination, with the novelists in the tradition

embracing a Western form (the novel) and its attendant ideological assumptions about Otherness to depict their own culture. As a result, even as postcolonial fiction struggles to express its break from colonial bondage and to articulate the postcolonial condition as a means of interrogating and resisting cultural colonization, it continues to vocalize its resistance according to ideological prescriptions which have been ingrained into the psyche of the Indian elite since the colonial period.

A good example of this crisis of self-definition is Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, discussed in Chapter II. Tharoor offers hilarious parodies of colonial texts and their writers: Forster, Scott, Kipling. Chapter titles include 'The Duel with the Crown', and 'The Bungle Book'. Forster's Ronnie Heaslop steps out from *A Passage to India* to learn that books mean trouble: "Basic truth about the colonies, Heaslop. Any time there's trouble you can put it down to books. . . If ever the Empire comes to ruin, Heaslop, mark my words, the British publisher will be to blame."⁴⁰² Postmodernist techniques of parody and literary borrowing are put to an anti-colonialist use, and aimed at familiar colonial literary targets. Yet the radical politics behind this technique is severely impaired when Tharoor's parody attacks the very (postcolonial) redefinition that postcolonial writers strive to attain when he lambasts India's struggle for democracy during the Emergency of 1975-7 through a parody of *The Mahabharata*.⁴⁰³ Such dilemmas and

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⁴⁰²Shashi Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel*, 38.

⁴⁰³See my discussion of Tharoor in Chapter II.

contradictions make postcolonial nation narrations a terrain fraught with ambivalence.

The third chapter on Salman Rushdie inaugurates my textual analysis of this postcolonial bind, examining the complex postcolonial discourse on nation in the novels of the post Independence period and especially in the novels of Rushdie and the post-Rushdie generation. If nation and national identity underwrite most of the narratives of this period, postcolonial nation as represented in them is often a retrofitting of colonial/orientalist assumptions about the hierarchical inferiority of non-Western cultures, assumptions that continue to persist in the current global acceptance of the Euro-American paradigm.

On a more positive note, the discursive complexity of postcolonial fictions is also challenged and undermined from within the same ideological parameters, as writers become increasingly aware of the neo-colonial discursive imbalances in postcolonial fictions. Although the trend is not yet dominant, the 'difference' that these narratives have started to proclaim has begun to contest the fashionable nation discourses from the subcontinent. Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days*, discussed in Chapter IV, is a rare and distinctive example of the venture to resist narratives of cultural Otherness. On a conscious level, such narratives make a meaningful political gesture of repossessing their 'stories' and the right to narrate them. They also serve as a means of forging a new self-definition for the postcolonial subject. Yet this attempt is problematized by the modes of representation chosen by most of these writers to narrativize the national situation.

The fifth chapter on Arundhati Roy focuses on this problematic aspect of nation narration. In making a conscious gesture to narrate what she claims to be “God’s own country,” Roy wavers precariously between the exotic enterprises of Rushdie and the resistant techniques of Suleri to produce a narrative that becomes, in a certain sense, representative of the ideological ambivalence of post-Rushdie fiction.

In analysing Rushdie and post-Rushdie fictions, I have tried to anchor my discourse in a truly postcolonial terrain by bringing to my analysis meanings and cultural information that demonstrate, on the one hand, the ironies and contradictions in these fictions and on the other, the complexity of the project of nation narration that all these writers have undertaken. Gayatri Spivak endorses Foucault’s suggestion that “to make visible the unseen can also mean a change of level, addressing oneself to a layer of material which hitherto had no pertinence for history and which had not been recognized as having any moral, aesthetic or historical value.”⁴⁰⁴ This thesis is such an attempt to “make visible the unseen”, by inserting the novels in the hitherto undiscussed particularities of their historical and political contexts, and by attempting to move away from simply ‘mimicking’ Western theorizing. As Arun P. Mukherji puts it in a different context, “This kind of theorizing leaves us only one modality, one discursive position. We are forever forced to interrogate European discourses. . . [On the contrary] our cultural productions are created in response to our own needs, and we have

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⁴⁰⁴Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 285.

many more needs than constantly to parody the imperialists.”⁴⁰⁵ Postcolonial resistance resides precisely in moving away from such parodic ventures and articulating what it takes to write a postcolonial nation. For while the production of a ‘different’ terminology does not have to discard the familiar critical discourses of our postmodern world, it has to focus ceaselessly on the possibility of ‘different’ forms of critical ventures in appreciating culturally different (non-Western) texts.

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⁴⁰⁵Arun P. Mukherjee, “Whose Postcolonialism and Whose Postmodernism?” *World Literature Written in English* 30,2 (1990):1-9.

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