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2006

# Convicts, Call Centres and Cochin Kangaroos: South Asian globalising of the Australian Imagination.

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## Publication Details

Sharrad, P, Convicts, Call Centres and Cochin Kangaroos: South Asian globalising of the Australian Imagination, at the Centre for Postcolonial Writing, Monash University "Globalisation and Postcolonial Writing" conference, University of Calcutta, February 2006. Under consideration for publication in proceedings.

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**Convicts, Call Centres and Cochin Kangaroos: South Asian globalising of the Australian Imagination.**

Paper presented at the University of Calcutta, February 2006 for the "Globalisation and Postcolonial Writing" conference organised by the Centre for Postcolonial Writing, Monash University

(Under consideration for published proceedings)

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Although Australia until recent times was known for its White Australia Policy and the dominance of a monolingual Anglo-Celtic population, various people have shown how its origins - not forgetting for one moment the originary presence of an indigenous people - were from the start of colonisation, multicultural. Alison Broinowski is perhaps the most celebrated example of scholars who have added to this reinspection of history and identity by showing how many contacts there have been (actual and literary, hostile and friendly) between Australia and Asia. Most attention in this context has until recently been given to China and Japan, if only because their peoples feature in the national mythology of Australia (the Gold Rushes and the Second World War). There is another region, however, with which Australia has had many connections from the beginnings of its colonial and national existence. That is India.

Australia's links with India came home to me when reading a fascinating book about the exploration and white settlement of the Blue Mountains. Turning the first page of the Introduction, I found a sub-heading: "The view from Jellore". It turned out to refer to an illustration in the journals of explorer Thomas Mitchell who camped at Mount Jellore in 1828. His name for the mountain is actually a twisted version of the Gundungurra name provided by an Aboriginal guide - something Mitchell later corrected as more like 'Geloro' (Thomas 4-6). The way in which Mitchell initially transforms this word, however, is interesting. Of course, many white arrivants to the new land garbled local names (when they did not simply erase them in favour of 'Tara' or 'Glen Something' or 'Avon Something else'). But what was there operating on Mitchell's unconscious to cause him instinctively to reproduce an Aboriginal word as though it were a town in India?

What this casual transliteration suggests is that, just as Bernard Smith shows how white Australian painters saw the land through filters of visual and artistic habit acquired in Europe, so too, there may well have been a British habit of thought arising from two hundred years of prior imperialist experience by which new parts of the globe were seen in South Asian terms. This idea was quickly reinforced when the same book on the Blue Mountains several pages later

reproduced some frames from an educational comic strip of 1958. Governor Macquarie is fretting over the need for more farmland, noting crossly, "The bread we eat comes from India." (Thomas 44).

India has a long history of connections to Australia. For a start, long before Captain Cook set foot on southern shores, cloth from 'the Indies' had traded its way from Gujerat and the Coromandel down through the Indonesian archipelago to be traded with Aborigines by Makassar seamen negotiating seasonal camps to collect trepang, fish and pearl. So from before its beginnings as a European outpost of Empire and then white commonwealth of states, Australia was part of a cultural diaspora and economic globalising.

Mitchell was, like so many colonial officials, a military man. The Imperial machine operated on a globalising movement of labour in which military travel played a significant role. Australia's literary history is part of this extended imperial system. John Lang published *Too Clever by Half or The Wetherbys* in 1853. This seems to be the first novel by someone born in Australia, but it failed to be accepted within an antipodean literary history for a long time because it has no bush or sheep; rather it described the social life of colonial Calcutta and military camp life in the satiric tones of a Restoration play, since Lang was

stationed there as part of the Empire's mobile labour force — in his case as a lawyer (Hosking). Later, of course, every would-be poet in Australia churned out imitations of Kipling's barrack room ballads with gum trees thrown in.

Men like Mitchell and Lang, from the 1820s on, were retired to land grants in Tasmania and later in other parts of Australia. It was they who brought with them the verandahs of the Raj that became part of Australian architecture and familiarity with India brought about the misrecognition of a marsupial that is now called a bandicoot. Towns and pastoral properties carry Indian names redolent of the Mutiny era (Lucknow) and there is in the West a Seringapatnam Reef, preserving the memory of Tipu Sultan and a young Wellesley via the name of the ship that foundered there.

When I was a boy living on the rural edge of Adelaide, where suntanned sheep farmers would ride to hounds in the blazing summer heat and the absent Queen took our salute in the school playground every Friday, my loving parents would protect me from sunburn, heatstroke (and as we now know, skin cancer) as I trudged from home to class and back by forcing on my unwilling head a helmet of gray canvas and glue-smelling cork lining. It was a sola topi straight out of the Raj and readily available in school outfitters everywhere in Australia of the 1950s. It is appropriate,

then (more so, given the numbers of my extended family now in the teaching profession), that one of the two brothers who brought my father's family line to the Antipodes arrived in 1848 on the sailing vessel, the 'Baboo'. The other brother is persistently rumoured to have been contracted by Sir Thomas Elder to go to what was then greater India and bring back some 'Afghans' and their camels with which outback cattle stations could be reliably supplied. This came about in 1866.

Personal and imaginative connections between Indian and Australia obviously dwindled under the closing down of the latter's contacts over time until they were mainly with the 'Mother Country' and Europe. For India, contacts were severely restricted by the already mentioned White Australia Policy, which lasted from 1901 to 1972, by India's break with Britain in 1947, and by anglophile Australian Prime Minister Menzies' suspicion of Nehru's left-leaning non-alignment ideals (Broinowski, 2003, 94-5). Nonetheless, some links remained. In fact, the White Australia Policy had its inspiration in laws passed in Natal to control the influx of 'coolie labour', and while it did exclude for many years anyone of non-European appearance, it came too late to affect a small settlement by Punjabis dating back at least to the 1850s, and it had no effect on Australian overseers working with Indian indentured labour on Fiji's sugar

plantations. These historical connections are reflected in occasional literary works such as Eve Langley's autobiographical novel *The Pea Pickers* (1942) and Walter Gill's frank memoir of Fiji canefields, *Turn North East at the Tombstone* (1970).

Many of the other literary links between Australia and India are by now familiar, although they still have not always received the amount of attention they may deserve.

They range chronologically from Ethel Anderson's period pieces from her time as officer's wife in 1920's cantonments of northern India, through Mena Abdullah's stories of a cross-communal Punjabi family working a sheep farm in New South Wales (*Time of the Peacock* 1965) to Christopher Koch's novel *Across the Sea Wall* (1965/82). Koch was a forerunner of the tourist trail that took a host of Australians through India en route to Europe or just through India, and his book has been criticised for being of its time: an account of culture shock amongst provincial white settlers raised on Beatrix Potter, Biggles and Kipling. The last induces a false sense of familiarity and fellow colonial spirit in Koch's callow Australian narrator, who is thereby all the more traumatised when his dreams of both the East and Europe are simultaneously shattered by close encounters with representatives of both. Janette Turner Hospital records her

time with an anthropologist husband in Kerala in a colourful romance adventure, *The Ivory Swing* (1982).

There are less obvious connections as well. I have set forth elsewhere the evidence of Murray Bail's debt to his couple of years in Bombay where he worked in advertising.

Colin Johnson, better known for his writings under the Aboriginal guise of Mudrooroo, has a set of poems based on his trips to India where he did some of his studies towards becoming a Buddhist, and he incorporated Indian symbology into his epic journey poem *Dalwurra*. By a long circuitous route, he now lives in Nepal.

Vicki Viidikas, first known as a young tyro of the hippie-era poetry scene in Australia, escaped to India and never really made it back from there. But her collection *India Ink* provides a deadpan set of snapshots of a traveller's experience of the foreign.

In more recent times, with the removal of one set of immigration restrictions (we won't talk about the detention centres for refugees!), the onset of university exchanges and writers' programmes, and the growing circuit of expatriate South Asians from all points of the compass, Australian visits to India are once again on the rise (and vice versa). Thus, Adib Khan, originally from Bangladesh and for many years from Victoria, sets his third novel in Delhi.



Inez Baranay, produces *Neem Dreams*, and only last year a novel clearly owing much to Mera Shyal's ethnic comedies in the UK has emerged from the Indo-Fijian community in Melbourne - somewhat predictably titled *The Bollywood Beauty*.

These connections have been steadily building towards a new component of Australian literary multiculturalism that is redefining the 'Asian' in our hyphenated 'Asian-Australian' label away from East and Southeast Asian. What I want to look at for a moment is the reverse: Indian images of an Australian connection.

If we stretch the category of 'India' to include colonial writing, then we can find interesting samples of an imperial pecking order of places to work in. The planning for a hill station settlement in Ootycamund, for example, urged yeoman farmers from Scotland to try their fortunes in South India's uplands rather than going to Australia where they would almost certainly bankrupt themselves in uncongenial conditions. (Grigg 459). B.M. Croker, somewhere around 1900, looks back fondly to life *In Old Madras*. Here we find a colonial romance of leisured soldiers and society riding to hounds and seeking fortunes while dodging gossip and female husband seekers. A young British heir to country estate comes to India looking for his long-lost uncle. In the

process, he saves the marriage of a cowardly bigamist, supposedly an owner of a coffee plantation, but actually living with his mixed-race family in hiding for part of the year and married to an Irish landowner for the rest. He thanks his benefactor go-between, adding that "If I'd followed my own instinct, I believe I'd have thrown up the sponge, and cut and run, to Australia." (197). Earlier, the young hero returns to Madras, relieved not to be subjected to its social whirl because most of his friends are "in the Hills, or gone home, or to Australia." (178). It is also mentioned several times and favourably, that people are riding 'walers' - horses bred especially for the Indian trade in New South Wales and elsewhere in Australia. So further South is seen as both a safe place to go for relief from the heat (South Africa being the other favoured venue), and as a last-resort bolthole for those who can't make it in India. This split reputation seems to continue into later writing by Indian nationals.

Raj Kamal Jha, in his novel, *The Blue Bedspread* London: Picador, 2000, writes:

My sister is four years older than me.... Her teacher is Mr Peter D'Souza, mine is Miss Constance Lopez. Miss Lopez's son died in a shipwreck near Australia. He had gone there on a vacation with his friends and the ship sank. I have read about Australia, the Great Barrier Reef, the Flying Doctor, I like Miss Lopez a lot. (36)

The TV was black and white, they kept showing an Australian movie, late in the night, where the actress, white, wore a velvet gown, black, and she looked through the window at a garden covered with snow, there was a black coffin in the middle of the garden, all around its four edges, were black stones. (195)

This seems to suggest a utmost remoteness, a place not even exotic, just surreally suspended and distant, and marking the boundary of human existence, like a symbol from an arcane rite. It is of interest from an Australian point of view because it does not reproduce the image Australians tend to have of their modern film production, which, until the very recent co-productions with Hollywood companies (such as 'Mission Impossible' and 'The Matrix'), were landscape period dramas, such as 'Galipoli', 'Picnic at Hanging Rock', 'The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith' and - in comic mode - 'Crocodile Dundee' and 'Priscilla, Queen of the Desert'.

Mahasweta Devi, in her story "The Hunt" picks up on one of the apparently common professions for Australians in India outside of Imperial service when she depicts her wild woman of the hills, Mary Oraon, as the offspring of a local woman and the son of an Australian plantation owner. One of Ethel Anderson's artist friends in real life married a tea planter from around Ooty, and much later Arundhati Roy has the drunken Bengali tea plantation clerk who fathers her protagonist twins in *The God of Small Things* find work in

Calcutta and then migrate to Australia. She also provides a rather unflattering portrait of Miss Mitten, a narrow-minded missionary from Tasmania who disapproves of the twin's ability to read backwards.

In *The Trotter Nama*, his epic fabulised history of Anglo-Indians, Alan Sealy comments on the rush to emigrate by this community as Independence looms on the sub-continent:

... the whilom Belle of Bangalore gathered up her daughters and left for England. ...

Next to go was half the Olympic hockey team; only they went the other way, Down Under. The result was that India's hockey supremacy was lost while Australia would become a team to reckon with. Australia took Trotters by the thousand, provided they were no less than seventy-five percent white. notwithstanding the percentage, Perth was the beginning of the end of the White Australia Policy (503).

Perhaps in keeping with the doubleness of the Anglo-Indian identity, Australia here offers its own dual image: a haven of improved prospects and a second-best option compared to Britain. Still more recently, Bharati Mukherjee echoes the Anglo-Indian migration post-Independence and under the radar of a slowly relaxing Australian immigration policy.

Mukherjee's plot turns on whether an Indian Christian doctor, brother of the schoolyard best friend of a Bengali Hindu, had a love-child with this *bhadralok* aspirant to a film career. Her friend, Poppy, marries an Australian and goes to live in Sydney (235). Again, there is the intimation that this is the best she could hope for — that America

would have been much more acceptable — though Mukherjee's US does not seem to make its Indian immigrants particularly contented either.

A singular positive mention of the Antipodes comes about, expectedly, as the result of sporting interests. In *A Strange and Sublime Address*, Amit Chaudhuri depicts his narrator's uncle listening to test matches with Australia on the radio. India does the honourable thing and loses; how could a nation founded on Gandhi ever win, asks the uncle rhetorically (73-4).

Partly through the sporting contacts and Steve Waugh's sponsoring of children's refuges in Calcutta, Australians continue to have an image of India as a land of poverty in need of 'First World' assistance. The Indian literary view is an instructive counter to this lingering colonial outlook. It is also a disturbing one, since it brings out the import for white Australians of Homi Bhabha's phrase 'not quite/ not white', by suggesting that these southern colonials are somehow inauthentic imitations of elsewhere, ranked lower than the colonial mimics in India. In the Indian-Australian connection there is also an interesting case of one 'periphery' engaging with another without directing traffic through the old centre of imperial power:

globalised networks become more complexly interactive, though they carry the ghosts of former systems.

Nowadays, when Optus tries to sell me some new communications technology, the person calling lives in Delhi, and a Gujerat mining company is promising to revitalise disused coal-mines not far from where I live. Two thirds of the local doctors are from India and have been here now for half a century. But while Australians are beginning to go to Tamil Nadu for cheap and reliable surgery, the popular prejudice about Third World skills resurfaces quickly at any hint of scandal. To attract doctors to country hospitals, medicos have been encouraged to migrate from abroad. In Bundaberg a Patel, resident in the US, attained the unenviable nickname of 'Doctor Death' for a series of apparent procedural bungles. This caused a massive public panic about the credentials of immigrant professionals. The global village remains in many respects divided by old colonial attitudes.

If we return to considering writers in Australia, but specifically those of South Asian extraction, we can detect elements of both the recycling of orientalist discourse through internalised sections of the national imaginaries of both Australia and India and a lively critique of them from a self-aware, ambiguous diasporic viewpoint. There have

been, of course, significant literary figures from Sri Lanka such as Yasmine Gooneratne, Chitra Fernando and Ernest MacIntyre, along with Adib Khan's early writing, taking potshots at Australian life. Two people of a different generation, raised in Australia from infancy rather than arriving here as adults, who have had some impact on the literary scene are Christopher Cyrill and Suneeta Peres da Costa.

Samir Dayal argues for a rethinking beyond diaspora as a tug-of-war between "the host [and] the home country" (46). For the second-generation migrant, the host country is the home and the home country, when family ties or curiosity compel visits, turns out to be the host country that is/was also somehow home but which frequently is not experienced as homely. It is only a particular kind of globe-trotting professional class that can maintain both nation spaces as home, and then it is not always the nation, but the regional or very local site that is thought of in this way. So diasporic consciousness is in a real sense 'transnational' — spanning, but also disregarding the nation spaces of both ends of the migratory shuttle. Dayal posits the nature of such a diasporic double consciousness in negative terms: not as 'both/and' so much as 'neither this/ nor yet that' (47). This is akin to Uma Parameswaran's poetic figuration of Indo-Canadian migrancy as the suspended animation/ death of

Trishanku. What we see in these two younger-generation offspring of migrants is an attempt to rework diasporic awareness along Dayal's lines.

As her name suggests, Suneeta Peres Da Costa's family originates in Goa. In her novel *Homework*, she creates a composite alter ego in the sensitive, eager-to-please but fallible Mina Pereira and her precociously academic sister Deepa, both scandalised by their younger sister Shanti, who is entirely devoted to physical exercise. The Pereiras have migrated following India's take-over of Goa. Mina's father has the paradoxical task of working for the Department of Immigration, vetting Cambodians and Vietnamese refugees. He also prints a small exile magazine in support of Goan liberation, cheers at Mrs Gandhi's death and in Canberra stages a sad but humorous one-man protest against the annexation of his original home to the total incomprehension of the general populace (154-6, 170). His wife finds work as a nurse in palliative care, but (in keeping with findings that refugee women frequently suffer more than men) goes slowly mad under the stress of starting a new life (Ferguson & Pittaway). Her obsessive identification with birds, both for their migratory powers and their nest building, drives her husband to despair and the girls to self-help survivalism. The homework of the book's title, refers variously to the draining effort of learning how to fit in



to a new country, the work required to make and maintain a home (a particular fetish in suburban nuclear-family Australia), and the homework the girls are given at school to indoctrinate a traditional Anglo vision of Australian history and identity.

Global commodification of identity is a visible theme in the novel: Mina gets into trouble for stealing a friend's tourist souvenir can of California sunshine to cheer her mother up (17); Deepa is seen to ridicule images of Australian stoic suffering by her over-enthusiastic participation in interactive convict exhibits at a theme park visited by Japanese tourists(168); the house is full of icons of Euro-Australian domesticity: Vegemite, meat pies, Streets' ice-cream. There is a clear sense that the family tries to buy its way into Australian life by consuming all the normative products. However, the text is also full of globalised signs (European literature, American cartoons, Rubiks cubes and Beatles tunes) and any easy access to singular identity is disturbed by Mrs Pereira, who stocks emergency supplies against some imagined disaster and desperately clings to 'home' items of cooking: coriander, pilau and pakoras.

If under a globalising consumerism "difference is effaced where it seems to be celebrated" (Dayal 50), as in the

homogenising of ethnic cultures under the banner of 'world music', or the clash of colours under the Benneton label, a writer like Da Costa makes us aware of consumer labels and how they are produced as signs of identity within a supermarket economy. In so doing, she points to the intersection between global consumerism and national belonging, pointing to real difference through the paradoxical, otherwise empty signifiers of product names. WD40, an anti-rust lubricant, becomes a metaphor for Australia's suburban ethos of self-help embodied in the home handyman at the same time that Vegemite is gutted of its national iconic force by being presented on a fictive shelf alongside a swag of other products supposedly offering belonging and comfort to all, but failing dismally to satisfy the visible minorities of predominantly Euro-Australian society.

*Homework* has been criticised for its overwrought language, and for its somewhat superfluous gesture to magic realism in the snail-like 'feelers' that protrude from Mina's head. These operate as an embarrassing indicator of her emotional state (symbolising the hyper-sensitivity of both the migrant and the girl on the brink of adolescence) until they wither and drop off as she enters maturity and finds release from the anxieties of her parents. There is perhaps a mix-up in that the language is sometimes more appropriate to the

bookish Deepa, but it does carry the sense of the surreal reality of migrant experience, the painful sensitivity of someone trying to fit in to a new society without knowing all the rules. Ivor Indyk defends the book against criticisms of its style along these lines:

This kind of associative method seems to me a perfectly appropriate way to tell a story set in an Australian suburb, where people come from all over the place, and nurse all sorts of private histories and private obsessions. Beneath the endless elaboration there is a deeper anxiety, that the mix of realities may not hold, or that the individuals who exist at the intersection of these different realities, so far from being enriched by them all, may instead feel they don't belong to any. That's why the fear of madness (embodied in Mina's mother), and the fear of exclusion (Mina's own sense of *anomie*), are central to the novel, and why some of its most powerful images — the can of sunshine, the sea monkeys, the empty eggs — are elaborations of nothingness. (29)

R. Radhakrishnan speaks of the "exhilarating *anomie*" of living between deterritorialization and reterritorialization, (1) but quickly adds that such a celebration of transitional hybridity ignores the pain and absolutism that can also characterise diasporic experience (2). Along with Zizek, he looks for a means of empowering the hybrid diasporic as symptom that will also "transform the body politic where it resides as 'symptom'" (4), and sees it as a "tactics of resisting representation from within the field of representation" (6). Hybridity in itself is taken over by the media to the point of becoming a

banal part of everyday life. What happens in *Homework* is precisely the staging of consumerised hybrid identity as a global truism against the alienation of diasporic betweenness (we see Meena against a backdrop of refugees from Nazi death camps, from Cambodia, from Goa, so that the novel works to historicise and politicise the concept in all its agonistic drive).

If Rosemary Marangoly George's model of diasporic Indian writing is valid, then *Homework* is more part of 'migrant' literature, since it does not foreground ties to South Asia or show the makings of a supportive diasporic Indian community (182). For the children of this isolated Goan family, there is little looking back, and potential community is a multicultural mix of Jews, South East Asians, Japanese tourists and the barbarian offspring of Anglo Australians. Ties are loose and fragile, and society is a surface of consumerism. The mother tries to fly away from it, and the father tries to dig down to escape, but this brings catastrophe and the girls are liberated into a brighter but bare present. Mina will survive because she has at this point lost her sensitivity, but she is not uncritical of the world she inhabits. The book uses the representations of the Australian national field of power-knowledge to resist and expose that very field; it challenges depth by showing up the shallowness of its

representations, but also finds a certain delight in the potential homeliness of those superficial symbols.

In this, Da Costa — who after all had her book signed up in New York and published in London and Sydney (Baker)— echoes someone from an older generation who has not left India.

Nayantara Sahgal asserts that there is nothing wrong with a globalisation that offers liberating change and prosperity, though there is something to be concerned about in the 'fundamentalist' universalism of market-driven monoculture (Sahgal 6, 8). But as a specific instance of diasporic South Asian, Da Costa does not exactly inhabit the kind of cosmopolitan middle road Sahgal can envision from her national base; rather, she enacts what Samir Dayal terms a 'catachrestic' display of ironic doubling that troubles boundaries between here and there as well as between modernity and postmodernity (47, 55). The postcolonial is seen to inhabit both but not in any comfortingly harmonising way. "If diasporic double consciousness interrupts the Eurocentric or neo-colonial manipulation of the machinery of representation, it also ironizes the myths and images which the home country presents to itself." (56). Thus, *Homework* exposes the fabrications of Australianness as exclusively Anglo-Celtic, but also indirectly ironizes the usurping of a tiny colonial outpost by a large ex-colony in the name of national liberation.

Eugenie Pinto describes the narrator of Christopher Cyrill's second book, *Hymns for the Drowning* (1999) in the usual terms of migrant dislocation:

Stranded in the country of his birth (Australia) and exiled from that of his parents (India), the writer dreams of the life he might have lived and re-imagines a culture that he could only experience at second hand. (399)

By contrast, his first book, *The Ganges and its Tributaries* (1993) is described by Australian reviewer Sophie Masson in a more up-beat mood:

This is not a novel of migrant angst or inter-generational conflict; nor is it about a clash of cultures. There has already been so much mixing of cultures in Christopher's family that a bit more here or there is not a problem.

Even the narrator's parents, "neither pine for nor reject India", and sponsor a large number of relatives to join them in the South. (To this extent, it is a more typically diasporic novel than Da Costa's, and is characterised by signs of communal identity, the now clichéd icons of food being a point of criticism for some commentators such as Annamarie Jagose. 776)

It is true that Cyrill's narrator lives part of his life through second-hand stories of the India of his parents

because they seem more colourful than his immediate world. There is nothing particularly remarkable here in that it is a phenomenon common to many Australians (other than Aborigines), Anglo settlers over generations living partly in an imaginary world of knights, bandits and Dickensian coaches if not also family tales of hardship or lost splendour 'back home', always more dramatic than the drab here and now. There is a Gnostic drive in both of Cyrill's books towards signs, patterns and talismans that promise a redeeming order to the postcolonial split consciousness — a magic spell such as Christopher Koch identified as infecting the minds of 'fifties British Australia. Sunitha and Ramachandra note the Trinity and mandala motifs in *Ganges* (425-7) and Cyrill himself talks about the pattern of four in *Hymns* and his "constant references to lineage, inheritance" that they may help realize ("Towards" 653-5).

It is interesting that Cyrill, having 'returned' to India in 1994, creates not a realistic fiction, but a dreaming image of some exotic hybrid Xanadu made out of artworks, literary allusions and references to pre-modern Hindu culture (Manu, a Blue God and Ganesh, for example). Before he makes the journey, his real home is (like Meena Pereira's) registered in *The Ganges and its Tributaries* in all the banal detail of the suburban everyday and India features through

transplanted rituals and maps. The consciousness is global and realist rather than local and surreal-modernist, although a parodic comic tone runs through both books and reflects the ambiguous identities of the author/narrator, tending towards a 'postmodern' self-awareness and perhaps solipsism in *Hymns*. (This in fact may have little to do with a hyphenated identity so much as the influence of Cyrill's mentor Gerald Murnane; in fact, Cyrill pointedly distances himself from the kind of reading often applied to 'migrant' or 'hyphenated' writing by declaring his distancing devices in *Ganges* and stating, "Experience organised and structured and reinterpreted is artifice. Autobiography does not exist." (Womersley 24; Cyrill, 'Towards', 654)

The global is clearly signified in Christopher Cyrill's *The Ganges and its Tributaries* by the photo on his novel's cover: two women in saris and sunglasses standing beneath a large concrete globe labelled in Devanagiri script and featuring a map of Australia. In the cover design, the southern continent is picked out in gold and rayed like a halo above the taller woman's head. As we discover on page 41, the woman beatified by Antipodean locality is the narrator's mother, standing outside a Calcutta office block. Her son, another Christopher, imagines himself straddling the oceans between India and Australia like a Christ-bearing



colossus (43), though his quotidian world is scaled down to cricket and teenage concerns

The book is written in the drab factuality of a boy's diary: "In 1974 my father started work at General Motors Holden in Fisherman's Bend" (23), and loaded with domestic details of food and life on new housing estates at the fringes of Melbourne. This typical, mundanely local narrative, worthy of the acid pen of Patrick White, is perhaps deliberately 'ordinary' to show how typical of Australia's general migrant experience is the story of the particular and usually unrecorded Anglo-Indian community: we see Christopher's father sponsoring a series of family members, large 'pot-luck' parties, tales of 'home', sport (124), ethnic speech habits (112), family albums — the sorts of motifs found in Greek and Italian and, later, Chinese-Australian narratives of an unsettled settling in. The repetitive insistence on dates and exact addresses (8 Cararas Street, Waverley Gardens, Dandenong, St Kilda, the corner of Pitman Street and Dyx Crescent, 55) suggests not only the unstable newness of housing estates still under construction, but the sense of fixating on specificities of location to compensate for fluidities of movement, physical and mental, that have been shared by white settler and brown migrant alike. Against this anchoring in material local reality, there is a mental awareness of the global, not only

as second-hand memories of India, but as a bookish consciousness of the heavens and the sweep of human history. The Bible, Jewish custom, Siva, Dante, Nat King Cole, Columbus, swimming the English Channel, Mozart, Omar Khayyam, Delacroix, the Crimean War, and Johannes Keppler all get a mention in the otherwise closely contained Anglo-Indian community of outer Melbourne.

Where the book departs from most social realist novels of migration, is in the drive to imagine something less tangible: to set forth possible connections across space and time within a globalised world of symbol and dream. An example is when work at the Metropolitan Transport authority demands a thorough knowledge of tram routes around Melbourne and this mind-map transmutes into a mental palimpsest of global exploration and fanciful imaginings of distant lands (74-5). This works best in the context of the narrator trying to discover the elusive nature of his connection to an India he personally has never known (46), but often the details in this aspect of the book seem random and gratuitous (springing self-indulgently from the boy's "dream diary" and his rather self-indulgent sense of himself as a lost soul, despite his participation in all the rituals of Australian sport and student slumming - e.g. 73), but some take on wider meaning. The image usually picked out for attention is the floating map of India in the garden

pond of the narrator's new house (19-21). It becomes a symbol for the unanchoring of 'home', the gradual dissolution of memories and attachments, the unstable drift of migrant consciousness. Its positive side is manifested in Christopher's father's advocating of 'drift' and mixing as the future of the world (146). Aesthetically the drifting image is matched by the somewhat aimless narrative of a recently graduated BA trying lazily to make sense of his young life by putting it all down on paper as it comes to mind.

There are two phrases beginning over half the sentences in the book: "I walked..." and "I imagine...". The narrator is rather too keen to present himself as an artistic flaneur "As I walk I imagine that I am carrying the writer on my back. I imagine that he memorises everything he sees". This documenting does not make for lively prose, nor do the entirely subjective imaginings carry much sense of necessity or aesthetic power. As when the narrator puts the dog's lead around his own neck, it seems like a juvenile straining after the obvious: the dog is walking the man, ho, ho (134). One wonders whether the title and structure of the narration are not simply a literary joke: that this is merely an experiment in *roman fleuve*. Christopher's writing matches his girlfriend's artwork:

Nowadays when I write, I imagine that I am composing my sentences in the same way that Sussanah made her collages. I imagine the writer in me rearranging the backgrounds of photographs, fitting gulfs into bays, and transplanting the rooms of houses. (133)

The times of his narration jump around for no apparent reason (1979 to 1986, for example: 134-5), although eventually randomness becomes its own logic and implies the anomie of alienated second-generation hyphenated youth. (Christopher himself is sterile as befits his unproductive life 126-8).

The narrator's cousin Vismara, takes his dream book to India to find a mandala to decorate it with. Critics Sunitha and Ramachandra refer to the mandala as "an enclosure for the play of consciousness" (427), which is not a bad description of Cyrill's fiction. In so far as it is also "a plan of the universe", it mediates the interior and exterior aspects of the novels, drawing our attention to the globalised, variegated but potentially harmonious world of diasporic identity – a series of patterns that contain empty spaces and may trap the quester in sterile circles, but which promises fertile ground at its centre (428-9).

As Eliot had it: 'In my end is my beginning', and *The Ganges and its Tributaries* opens with a quote from the Upanishads: "Whatever is one's thinking, therewith he enters into

life." The title seems to imply a universalism — on the one hand, the Pangaea of primordial unity and utopian human mixing celebrated by Christopher's father, and on the other a foundational origin in relation to which Anglo-Indians are tributaries to mainstream India, and even a brash and bleakly new Australian suburbia is a tributary to ancient learning and India. But the book does not support such a reading overall. It is restless and unsatisfied. In its world, people mill about or separate; it is only in the narrator's mind that things come together: continents collide, India is fused with Australia, historical periods coalesce under the influence of his father's saxophone playing (168). His writing ultimately attempts what it figures in the final sentence: the global as an act of the imagination never completely unified with or freed from the local: two intersecting circles — not unified but partially linked (173). Perhaps this could stand as an figure for Australian-Indian connections in general.

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