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Fabricating Community: Local, National and Global in Three Indian novels

ACLALS Congress, Hyderabad, August 2004

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This paper has its beginnings in thinking about the theoretical limits of recent work by one of the theorists of postcolonialism, Bill Ashcroft. In his *Postcolonial Transformations*, Ashcroft puts the case for expressions of power being always subject to interpolations by marginal agents, to appropriation and transformation. In the context of gobalisation, he asserts that local communities can adapt outside commodities, building them into their own habitus and thereby giving them new meanings unforeseen by their makers and merchants. He offers the example of the ubiquitous T-shirt, citing a debate between Homi Bhabha and James Clifford, in which the former read the phenomenon as disabling uniformity and the latter suggested that "the Kanak militant in a Tarzan T-shirt or the Lebanese militiaman in a Rambo T-shirt" are "localising global symbols for the purposes of action" (224). We could add that a Chinese T-shirt slogan can so mangle or estrange both the English language and the genre of wearable wit that we are instantly alerted in a wryly resistant way to the fact that we have been converted everywhere into walking billboards.

Despite this necessary positive theorising of agency and resistance, it seems to me that its productive limits lie in its simultaneous reading everything as text and writing and its projection beyond that small disciplinary space into a general theory of change. The subversive transformation of the T-shirts relates to the reading given to what appears on them. The fact remains that the Pacific Islander and the Lebanese are both wearing a fabric and a design originating in the fashion of the First World and the global mills and sewing factories of its multinational corporations. Wearers may interpolate their claim to interpretation (meangingful only within their own community and misread if seen out of context on global media), but they have little self-determination over the material production and global commodity trade that frames their claim.

Certainly globalisation does allow cultural mixings that are very complex, internally and across boundaries. They operate via 'intercultural osmosis and global melange'. But Jan Pieterse in *Globalization and Culture* takes this a step further than Ashcroft: 'Still what are not clarified are the *terms* under which cultural interplay and crossover take place. In terms such as global

melange, what is missing is acknowledgment of the actual unevennes, assymetry and inequality in global relations.' (71) The kind of transformation play of meaning suggested by Ashcroft finds its limits in such a recognition of frameworks of power. Pieterse expresses it aphoristically: 'There is free cheese only in the mousetrap' (111). The interpolation into, subversion and transformation of power is always a trade-off in which something is given up for whatever is gained.

The strength of the global mousetrap, however, is perhaps also its weakness: its capacity to standardise and disseminate commodities (as in the fact that you will find the cotton T-shirt worn by the Sydney futures trader and the kid fossicking on a Manila rubbish tip) also reduces its global effect to mere banality. How we wear the shirt, what we put on it, how we ironise what comes to us on it by our performance of wearing it in a particular social context is where the real meaning lies and that is a horizon of possibility rather than an imprisoning boundary. Nonetheless, if the spread of T-shirt wearing results in the disappearance of ritual body markings amongst Aranda women in inland Australia or sari or kurta wearing amongst Indians, then it clearly carries a strong negative effect of imperialist uniformity. This is made clear in Amitav Ghosh's novel, *The Circle of Reason*. A West Bengal villager, Shombu Debnath, has spent a lifetime learning to weave from several communities and is persuaded to teach young Alu his trade. This requires time, bodily pain and the learning of a vast specialised language of the loom, cloth and patterns. But the village is destroyed and Alu exiled. In one generation, the craft skills will be extinguished, and no amount of subversion, interpolation, or transformation will alter this fact. Unlike global commodification networks, craft arts require community to sustain them, just as they also sustain communities.

The collapse of Shombu Debnath's weaving family is caused by a combination of local politics and the movements of transnational power: here the break from Pakistan by Bangladesh. Postcolonial theory has tended to see the nation state as an inheritor of colonial forms of power and complicit with their contemporary expressions in global trade systems. Its literary origins have allowed it to ignore at times the hard realities of political and economic inequality in its search for a theory enabling liberationist cultural activisms. But its own insistence on disciplinary roots in colonial history (and not just apolitical literary aesthetics that hide Western universalist values) reveal that the figurative language of art cannot be separated from the material effects of politics and trade. Wole Soyinka, in an interview with Nathan Gardels, describes the 1884 Berlin Conference that gave us many of the conflicts of recent years:

> the colonial powers that ruled Africa met to divvy up their interests into states, lumping various peoples and tribes together in some places, or slicing them apart in others like some demented tailor who paid no attention to the fabric, colour or pattern of the quilt he was patching together.

If we put this up against the many metaphors of nation as a single cloth – if not a seamless one, then certainly a continuously, harmoniously joined patchwork (an image repeated in Nina Sibal's novel of north-west India, *Yatra*) – we can see a deeply entrenched way of thinking about the national space as organic and unified despite internal variation of pattern, and seeing anything else as fragmented, less than whole, inorganic. Post-colonial collapse is founded on a contradiction of Western thought (often working through native elites) trying to create the uniformly woven social space of new states by stitching into them the uneven tensions of different fabrics and threads that of necessity confirm post-colonial spaces as lesser, flawed versions of the European ideal. (Salman Rushdie's metaphors in *Midnight's Children* of the cloth with a hole at its centre and the body cracking up are instances of this textile discourse as it operated in the disastrous cutting and splicing of Bengal into two parts, greater Hind into India and Pakistan, Pakistan into Pakistan and Bangladesh, India into its component language groups and so on. Amitav Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* sees the inevitable end of this unravelling of the national fabric as myriads of balkanised tribes each on its own hill with its own flag.)

One such tribal fiefdom is created by the ivory trader-cum-bringer of enlightenment in Conrad's Belgian Congo. Kipling's 'The Man who would be King' also reveals how this fragmented personalised unity is at the heart of the wider impersonal imperial dream, and works to its own destruction. It is both the quintessence and the inverse of the imperial system. Soyinka's application of the patchwork metaphor to Africa, however, reminds us of the other figure in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* – the Harlequin Russian seaman abandoned on the fringe of Kutz's domain. If 'all of Europe' went into the making of the abominably deified Kurtz, then the Russian with the English seaman's manual and the patched rags reflects back onto that Europe, showing how its own sense of divinely ordained national probity and unity is also a set of provisional mismatched cutting and stitching; an operatic tragi-commedia of the success and failure of universalist rationalist idealism.

In contemporary life, the tussle between theoretical seamless expansionism and patchy pragmatics occurs across nations and global structures and can also be read in terms of fabric and fashion. Every year in Australia around major festivals, I receive in the post glossy catalogues from Amnesty International and Oxfam touting handicrafts from exotic places such as Rajasthan

or Hyderabad. These include products from offcuts of sari cloth, kalamkari palampores, cotton dhurries and so on. So white middle-class Australia is gradually patching together a decor that redefines its location in the world, even as it reproduces old habits of paternalistic consumerism of 'Third World' craftwork to convince itself that it is not also a client state of other more rapidly industrialising economies. At the same time, this globalised system of consumer charity keeps alive the production of crafts that at their home local level symbolise tradition and identity and which might otherwise disappear under the onslaught of industrialisation. It also, while operating globally, maintains signs of national difference as part of its marketing appeal.

This is not unlike my own discipline. One of the lynchpins of postcolonial literary studies is the promotion of signs of cultural identity across a globalising anglophone community and in contest with the old imperial centralised control of proper expression and civilised values. We are part of a globalised project, even at our origins in adding to the Eng. Lit. canon. But the history of the emergence of our field of study lies with analysing and validating expressions of difference as they have been mobilised in the service of nations working free of colonial domination. Our discipline has been organised much like the Commonwealth that gave it its first label: spokespersons for individual national literatures grouped around a table with the Queen and/or her English in the presiding seat. Early conference papers (Ken Goodwin's edition *National Identities*) and field overviews (Bruce King's *Literatures of the World in English*) reflect this, and the theoretical quest has been for a unifying logic and method that will allow a non-universalist comparative analysis of the cultural politics and textual dynamics common to the various national and regional literatures (Helen Tiffin has been a major exponent of this project). This nation-based comparativism still continues, but one of the reasons for the re-labelling of the field, signalled in Anna Rutherford's collection of papers *From Commonwealth to Postcolonial* (1992) was the recognition that in the contemporary world, 'state power remains strategic but it is no longer the only game in town.' (Pieterse, 82).

Historical shifts and sectional investments have led to two main critiques on postcolonial studies: one that the model based on emergent national cultures fails to take into account hybridity, complicity and transnational flows of people and ideas; two, that as a transnational field, postcolonialism is too universalist a category, leading to ongoing effacement of national autonomies and particularly of the specific struggles of micro-national groups (Hodge and Mishra, for example, in the Australian context). This is, of course to simplify a whole range of critiques from arguments over the meaning of 'post' or 'Third World' (Aijaz Ahmad, Ella Shohat), to Marxist suspicion of the emptying out of social critique into a 'textual turn' (Benita Parry), or to interrogation of the politics of the cosmopolitan academic (Arif Dirlik). Within the

narrower postcolonial field of Anglophone literary studies, David Carter has pointed out that the inbuilt dialectic between national and global has generated certain limits to critical practice, such as the tendency to equate realism with a passé phase of the national or with emergent sub-national minority voices and to favour allegory and magic realism etc. as the effective tool of the contemporary cosmopolitan (globalised) writer and critic. Timothy Brennan is well known for his criticism of this particular turn of taste. I want to suggest in this paper that any attempt to see a national-global binary as clear polarities or as a developmental narrative is mistaken, and that the two aspects of national and global postcolonial literary practice have value in themselves but mainly as positions from which to correct each other; they are neither sufficient nor autonomous categories per se.
(As Anshuman Mondial points out in his recent study of Indian and Egyptian nationalisms, modernity, nation and fiction operate complexly across a whole range of contestations, and globalisation is no less multiform and conflicted. Jan Pieterse suggests we should in fact speak of globalisations, plural. 59-60.)

I think there is often an underpinning narrative to the 'progress' of postcolonial studies complicit with the narrative of modernity underpinning most forms of globalisation discourse, such that we have matured from raw enthusiasm promoting new writers to 'cooked' analysis of theory and method. It is reflected in some of the hostility towards Arundhati Roy's novel, which forgets that if the author has sold her soul to nasty postmodern globalisation, her book shows no developmental narrative of modernity: one can absorb colonial culture and global influences and even travel to America or Britain and still remain trapped – perhaps even more so – in personal neuroses and small-town prejudice. Equally, she demonstrates that local culture is a many-layered mix that has not always been well served by World Bank agricultural programs or international tourism. And her often remarked upon 'post-modern / experimental' style actually rests on a strong realist-satirical base, founded on the way children think and talk and on the closely observed sensory details of local existence. David Carter concludes his article by cautioning us, 'As we leap from the pre-modern to the postmodern we should not forget the particular conditions under whichr ealism could be a modernising and – and therefore – a de-colonising discourse; this might lead in turn to a reconsideration (a disaggregation) of modernism.' (301).

Simon Gikandi notes that the narrative of globalisation itself is fractured and plural, manifesting as 'competing narratives, one of celebration, one of crisis' (629). For some it is held as a social materialist dream of First World comforts that retains notions of modernity as progress and drives economic refugees away from their homes (we can think of the Communist movement

and labour drain in Roy's Kerala as regional instances of these vectors). For others, it has become a textual set of representations and theories, Appadurai's 'mediascapes' of hybridity and heterogeneity (628). Both are diferently located around the perceived failure of nationalism and the universalising Enlightenment ideal. Within academe, he sees a shift from earlier sociological models of modernity to textual and cultural interpretations of our contemporary condition (633), but notes that the novels favoured as signs of newness and postmodern critique are still tied to notions of the nation even as they deconstruct them, that 'although English literature has become the most obvious sign of transnationalism, it is continually haunted by its historical – and disciplinary – location in a particular national *ethos* and *ethnos*.' We should not stop with global images 'at the site of their contemplation' but consider also the processes and material experiences producing them (632-3).

In *The Circle of Reason*, Amitav Ghosh shows very clearly how the Indian national space is intersected by both international events (the emergence of Bangladesh), and micro-national politics (rural landlord Bhudeb Roy's self-aggrandising machinations). Personal rivalries and student politics replicate the debate in postcolonial studies over the relative possibilities of theoretical idealism and practical action, but the very local conditions of student hostel personal cleanliness in Calcutta are informed by the legacies of Enlightenment France – revolutionary secular abstraction and scientific disinfection. Ghosh demonstrates how rationalism needs enthusiasm to achieve effective social agency, but emotional investment simultaneously distorts the reasonableness of ideals. His plot demonstrates humorously how national security melds with global surveillance as a bird-watcher policeman pursues across continents a motley group of refugees suspected of terrorism.

Ghosh clearly depicts the haphazard movement of subaltern labour across state and national borders, noting in the process how artisan skill can be carried from place to place, but the subaltern language of specific communal craft (in this case of a sub-caste of Bengali weavers) ceases to have power as it moves away from home. He suggests, on the other hand, that no matter how far we travel, even into the sandy backblocks of north -west Africa, we do not escape our personal pasts, our communal and national traditions or questions of how to keep them meaningful, nor the grand narratives of enlightenment reason. Universals are not abandoned, neither are nations. Local politics in a Gulf state are affected by international power plays, the dreams of illegal migrant workers and the attempt to replicate global consumerism in a postmodern shopping complex. The construction project, commercial and political, sparks off centrifugal movements and all things collapse since they are literally and figuratively built on sand. What keeps the whole plot together is community; and the link is dedication to a craft

collective. It is Alu's weaving skills that give him access to a line of flight across India and beyond; it is the professional skills of his medical acquaintances that see them moving all over the globe, and these keep them also grounded in their origins in Bengal. Alu is sandwiched between two concrete slabs in the collapsed construction and saved by the solid iron sewing machine he has been seeking to take back to his Aunt, though at the end of the novel he is told that there are models just as good made at home now: national and global are intersecting spaces, just as they are also in opposition. Ghosh may reject the label of a Commonwealth writer, but he has a lot to say to those of us who work with texts and postcolonial cultural politics.

Ghosh's novel illustrates Gikandi's point about globalised postmodernity being made up not just of a single narrative of modernisation but of coexisting and conflictual time-spaces, so that the construction of a mammoth palace of consumerism occurs simultaneously with a social protest expressing itself as a subaltern religious cult. And to follow David Carter's analysis, it is worth noting that, alongside some comic gestures to Rushdie-esque magic realism, his writing style is predominantly the realism of the 'old school' nationalist era. The mix is most harmonious perhaps in *The Shadow Lines,* which is, after all, a critique of the national, but its uneasy blend can be seen in th*e* lurch from an all-out postmodern fantastic in *The Calcutta Chromosom*e (still at its core interested in subaltern counter histories of a non-rationalist nature) to the familiar realist historical novel in *The Glass Palace.*

Ghosh's evident interest in buried narratives and other modes of discourse and his central concern in *The Circle of Reason* with weaving and sewing links me to Dipesh Chakrabarty and Gayatri Spivak, since they both work with a binary of text and textile to discuss the limits of academic disciplines with Western/national power bases like History and postcolonial studies. Spivak sets up a contrast between texts of entertainment and instruction and 'the textile of activism'. Chakrabarty calls subaltern narratives, 'knots in the fabric of dominant historical narrative'.

Cloth, fabric, textiles and their use both underpin and challenge the construction and practice of our discipline. I do not need to point out the role of cotton, khadi and certain modes of dress in consolidating a national identity for India. This is memorably invoked in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, and continues to be dramatised in the sari-cloth covers of Writers Workshop publications. I have a theory that anglophone postcolonial writing dresses itself in textiles (sometimes literally as in the Writers Workshop, but also in printed tapa cloth images on writing in the Pacific) to authenticate itself in a national context. In a sense it wraps itself in the flag of indigeneity and tradition to escape the charges of neo-colonial complicity with English, the novel

and/ or writing itself. But in doing so, it inserts itself into the story of transnational trading and the translatedness of cloth and identity as material goods and the labour producing them are moved around the globe. Rao's celebration of Gandhian social and economic reform via a return to handcraft is undercut at the beginning by the charkas being mass-produced in the towns and at the end by the fact that the village has to be rescued by 'the city boys' (Mondial 129). Global industrialisation is already taking the potters off to factories making tiles, and the nationalist zeal of the villagers is founded largely on labour unrest amongst exploited coffee plantation workers brought in from another state. The mythical nations of 'the red men' across 'the seven seas' invoked in the collective village voice in the opening pages are the other end of a trade in cardamon and nutmeg that has already had an impact in introducing the plantation economy to Karnataka. The dispersal of the village community at the end of the book hides behind a celebration of the nationalist moral high ground and the rosy glow of cultural tradition, but the outcome beyond the covers of the novel is the Indian pieceworker in a London sweatshop and the call centre functionary memorising baseball scores in Bangalore to service clients in Boston and Baton Rouge.

This is only an unequivocal disaster if one adopts a fundamentalist position on national identity. And such a position, as we have just seen in the case of a writer who could arguably be aligned with nationalist culturalism (despite years of expatriate living) is always already shot through with contradicitons. Global or diasporic identity is likewise conflicted and mixed. The woman today in Bradford England who wears her sari under a cardigan and on top of woolly socks is displaying a sign of difference and 'home' in the same spirit as Mohun Vassanji has his grandmother carry a gunny sack of clothes and stories to East Africa, transmitting it to her offspring who move on to life in Canada. But in both cases, the mix of fashion and the mix in the bag relate not just to a past home and fixed self, but to a resourcefulness of living one's own life ambiguously, complexly, syncretically, in the present, so that home becomes multiple, but not blandly, uniformly global.

In *The Gunny Sack*, Vassanji's small Cutchi-speaking Shamsi community track their lineage and security network across the small stores of East Africa. These stores deal in identity management; they sell the clothes that denote tradition, class, modernity, so that a returnee from Zanzibar is hailed by street urchins" 'Africa se haya hai!' He comes from Africa, a hat wearer", the turban having been forsaken (8). The tensions that cause migration from India are related to a national fabric in which "India was only beginning to fell its seams" (7) and the small rents of early diasporic movement are restitched and carefully maintained amid the more radical multicultural patchwork of colonial Africa as reflected in the stock of the Shamsi village stores:

> There are three Indian stores and one Arab. The largest is two stores in one, selling cloth on one side, general produce on the other. The cloth store appears dark from the brilliant, sunny outside. Inside – rolls and rolls of cloth standing upright or lying on shelves; khangas of all colours hang, neatly, partly folded, from wooden beams and pipes hanging from the ceiling; khaki and black shorts clipped to a board in two rowa for display; frocks hanging from a rack, a clump of baby knickers and bras hand-sewn and brought in from the city. P.T. Somji says the Coca Cola board outside. (40)

The cloth itself is part of the global economy represented in the the contrast between store contents and the Coke signboard: "bright Indian kikoi and msuri, white Marikani no longer from Amerika, and colourful khanga and black kaniki" (60). While each cloth carries indicators of specific usage and identity (86), the stock as a whole mixes Africa, India and America incorporating difference into the hybrid style and language of Swahili society across three emergent nations. As in the other two novels discussed here, people carry their sewing skills with them, adapting their Singer machines to local need. The narrator's mother cuts and sews ready-mades for her store (105) but adapts to the military occupation during the Mau Mau campaign, sewing mosquito nets for soldiers (71).

Attempts to maintain a stable insular society, both at communal and national levels are foiled by the internal variety of peoples and the external influences of world movements. The syncretic Shamsi culture holds itself together by a collective Indian opposition to Africans but is crossed with state demands for national military service, colonial networks that produce pen pals in Sarawak and relatives in Kenya and India (114) and global media, such that the narrator grows up not only with Coca Cola, but a mix of the Arabian Nights, Hercules, Tarzan, the Pandava brothers, the Famous Five, Bollywood and Elvis Presley (121, 141, 153). But as Indian and East African politics produce sectional interests with party power bases, the Shamsi community eventually splits into Hindu and Muslim, traditional and progressive components (220), as East African nations fragment into rival factions and racial division. Indian traders attempt to keep themselves part of the national fabric by making token gifts to African groups (technology transfer of some sewing machines to local women's associations), but the piece of cloth that gives symbolic unity to the independent Tanganyika becomes itself a sign of separate communities, its Black, Green, and Gold separating out under politician's rhetoric (162).

As with the laundry work in K.S. Maniam's Malaysian novel about the offspring of indentured Tamil plantation workers, *The Return*, this late-colonial portable trade is replaced with a newer

form of professional skill, education. Vassanji's mixed-race narrator's spouting the appeal for racial sympathy from *The Merchant of Venice* doesn't save him from a beating (ironically with a cricket bat) because of his African girlfriend, but it does provide both him and his left-wing lover, after the disruptions of repressive national politics and Idi Amin's Uganda (244), with a means of escape to Britain and North America. In its extreme Maoist phase, Tanzania's policing of national revolutionary morality had its own curious blend of local and global, clothing and trading: to eradicate the insidious influence of Western decadence, people had to discard their stovepipe jeans and submit to having a 'king-size Coca Cola bottle' pass down their trouser leg to be pronounced decent (255). As the title of one chapter suggests ("Dar, Massachusetts, New York, the Moon"), global awareness has coexisted with village and communal isolation from the beginnings of this story and sets a trajectory for its ending. The gunny sack, with its load of history and communal knowledge, becomes an item of academic curiosity and sign of nostalgia, but it also serves as the inspiration for the 'present' writing of the novel, which is an assertion in the global diasporic market of local identity and heritage (even when that fabrication of localness carries its own globalised seams), and a marker of a new phase of future diasporic generations. Vassanji's experience of an Indian trading diaspora under the impact of decolonisation, illustrates Gikandi's assertion 'that the nation becomes both the form that structures modern identities and the sign of their displacement and alienation. In a literary sense, nation is booth metonymy and metaphor, realism and symbol (Mondial 3-6) Vassanji accordingly writes under the symbol of the gunny sack as unifying hold-all, but works with a realist narrative that fractures into scraps of memory as it is refused the national frame that would give it continuity.

One book that brings together the arguments of Gikandi and Carter is Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*. It is an epically detailed recording of 'local scenes of being and belonging' (Gikandi 639) in a seemingly old-fashioned realistic social panorama. The novel traces the craft careers of several people: a Parsi widow, Dina Dalal tries to survive by sewing for the neighbourhood [55-7], but with failing eyesight employs two tailors to do piecework for an export company and takes in her schoolfriend's son as a boarder. Career changes are made possible and ultimately destroyed first by Gandhian nationalist reforms (the tailors come from the Chamar caste but are trained by a Muslim who they save in a communal riot, but the Thakur who runs the elections violently represses lower-caste attempts to exert their new democratic rights, driving the two excapees away to Bombay's slums) and then later by Indira Gandhi's Emergency (this enables relaxing of trade restrictions and the union-busting sending out of piecework by the entrepreneurial sector – here wonderfully named Au Revoir Exports 73, but also clears the slums the tailors live in and reduces them in the end to beggary because of a botched enforced vasectomy). Mistry loads a tragic dice against all his characters, but he does show how the

globalisation of India sits village tradition alongside national change, fashion export to New York boutiques alongside nineteenth-century sweatshop production, colonial tastes in concert music beside Bollywood pop tunes. In Gikandi's terms, '*progress, time* and *reason*' (642) coexist with an irrational devolution of fortunes in a narrative of flashbacks and reconnections that nonetheless has the forward momentum of a conventional realist narrative. The novel stylistyically seems to refuse a location in the postcolonial global while also offering a clear critique of national systems; it gives an apparently encyclopedic look into the back alleys of subaltern city life without taking on the techniques of a 'radical' deconstructive textuality supposedly equivalent to Chakrabarty's knotty subaltern fabric of narration.

Despite a couple of sly metafictional references to Mistry's other titles (Firoszha Bagh is mentioned 66 and the trip to Bombay is described by one character as 'such a long journey' 228), and although the transliterations of swearing ('Shameless eunuchs from somewhere' 329) have a Rushdie-like ring , and the city is described as 'a story factory... a spinning mill' (398), there is a clear resistance to postmodern textual play. One of the hapless tailors, returning from being press-ganged into a government labour camp, pleads, 'Please, bhai. no more adventures for us.... Stories of suffering are no fun when we are the main characters.' (389). Whether Mistry is having a go at the more internationally popular purveyors of literary Third World adventures or not, I do not know, but he is certainly using a bit of their technique to challenge the complacent reader and to reclaim the kind of insistent social realist politicised referentiality that many theorists (e.g. Linda Hutcheon) have identified as a defining characteristic of postcolonial writing. And the main vehicle for this is attention to work, here focussed on artisan textile production, and the community it generates. Gikandi sees 'one of the central shortcomings' in the theories of 'progressive' postcolonial critics 'is that in their desire to secure the newness of theories of globalization, to posit them as global and postcolonial, as it were,...[they] no longer seem interested in the 'Third World' itself as a source of the cultural energies – and the tragedies – that have brought the new migrants to the West.' (645) – or we could add, the non-migrants to the Western factories and call centres in their own national territory. Novels like *A Fine Balance* that attend to the economic edges of Wallerstein's world system, and to the actual conditions of textile work can provide a corrective vision to the theory and favoured literary texts of a globalised postcolonial studies.

It is the community of craft, a loose (and possibly romanticised) assemblage of beggars, slum dwellers, demonstration organisers, hair-collectors (172), bone sellers(156), rag pickers, eating house proprietors, nightwatchmen, students and so on, that offers an ambiguous locus for the fine balance of Mistry's novel. One side of the story shows the truth of global market forces –

everything has a cash value and poorly sewn ready-made shirts will displace well crafted hand tailoring if the price is right (519). The other side illustrates how even in the poorest circumstances mere economic forces are no match for personal manias or social bonding. Individually, each character is a doomed cypher in India's urban mass; but in group relationships there is a possibility for humour, satire, wry stoicism, even hope. A displaced lawyer turned proofreader turned morcha organised quotes Yeats's celebration of equanimity in the face of change (230, 566), and the central community of widow, paying guest and tailors arises out of a common investment in sewing and a progressive involvement in the creation of a quilt from the scraps of their labours. This itself is an ambiguous symbol, sitting half-way between the sanitary pads also generated from fabric offcuts and the fashion items worked up from factory cloth and patterns. For the depressive student Maneck Kohlah, it is a figure for existential despair: God is a giant quiltmaker for whom the whole thing has got out of hand so that he has abandoned his creation (340); for Dina Dalal it is a saving expression of her resourcefulness; for her household it becomes a document of their interconnected lives (385, 489-91). It is also a marker of the different temporality that Gikandi finds in globalisation theory and Bhabha seeks in the liberationist threads of postcolonial textuality: public history between 1948 and 1984 unfolds in the fiction beside and around private story and the two are mediated by the flexible time of the novel 'on its journey across the always shifting line of the present' (491), ambiguous except for the final determining twine of mortality (517). Life operates on the flip-edge between (the simultaneous doubleness of experience is a repeated idea (311, 342). Like Derrida's 'tain', the sliver of silver in the mirror, or his more pertinent metaphor of 'tissue', the life-quilt is the interface, the *differance*; but it subsists not only in academic textuality, but in the material conditions of existence. The characters and the novel attempt a fine balance on the joins in this mixed fabric of living, a fabric that is at once, local, national and global.

Bill Ashcroft makes the point in his follow-up book to *The Empire Writes Back*, that the imperialist idea of uniformly extensive space and time leads to globalisation, but that the forms of global power and local resistances to them are sufficiently complex (in his borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari, 'rhizomic' 161, 213) as to allow variations of texture if not kind in our experiences of our place in the world. Space (temporal or geographical) is converted by us into place, and we inhabit place in different ways to make it our site of belonging (156). The rhizome unfortunately, does not undo uniform extensivity, since the lateral proliferation of bamboo or potato shoots carries exactly the same genes and physical forms across its network; it might not be hierarchical like the vertical root, trunk and branch metaphor, but it is an appropriate figure for McDonalds-style globalisation. Interestingly, Ashcroft doesn't adopt the other Deleuze and Guattari term, 'striation', but at the theoretical level, this seems a necessary figuring of what

Bhabha would call ‘incommensurable’ difference at the deep cultural/conceptual level that fundamentally disrupts the idea of universal ‘smooth’ spatiality and teleological temporality. Like the strata in a rock sample, histories or cultural experiences combine to make up the whole, but do so by sitting in juxtaposition as different kinds of geological composition, and may not extend equally through the sample. This is the kind of spatio-temporal difference that Gikandi sees inhabiting global narratives.

We can read the broad sweep of postcolonial history (in the sense of the term as that dynamic of power stemming from acts of colonisation) in Ashcroft’s model as struggles between forms of enclosure and horizons of liberation (164, 185). These poles are interconnected, in that the nation is both an enclosure policing its citizens and a horizon of secure identity opposed ot imperialist entrapment. Globalisation likewise offers a wide horizon of possibility that transcends for some the tyranny of nation, but in its very universality constitutes an ultimate limit to freedom. International fashion, perhaps especially that extreme sampling of ‘ethnic funk’ that makes a bricolage of minority cultures to pander to not just Western, but a generalised cosmopolitan yuppie taste, certainly degrades the cultures it samples by reducing their contextual and political complexity to commercialised design. Sometimes the result is often so outlandish (and we can hold with the sense of ‘odd and outrageous’ the original sense of this term as ‘cast out into placelessness’) that for most of us the globalisation into ‘flat’ commodification of everything rebounds on itself, generating a critique in the viewer. Sometimes this enables a revolt against the insular uniformity of the state, as in teenage grunge cosmopolitan fashion in Japan; at times it may provoke curiosity about the cultures being sampled, thus leading to a politicised awareness of the ecology of cultural diversity; or it may simply make us conscious of the unnatural ways in which globalised commercialism operates such that we can begin to see that alternatives to its universalist programme are possible.

To bring this debate to a close, let me return to the T-shirt. I was sent one as a present from Mumbai. It encapsulates some of the key elements of globalised cosmopolitanism. The design over a heading ‘Tribal Blast’ is a rip-off of Ratna Raghya Dhulsada and maybe others’ paintings of Warli tribal ceremony and art (coincidentally reproduced but with acknowledgment on the 1992 collection of ACLALS papers *From Commmonwealth to Postcolonial*), so the wearer can feel politically correct in displaying a cheap allegiance to subalternity; the shirt brand (Tantra) makes allusion to national philosophical tradition – but that part of it which will sell as ‘sexy’ – and the marketing tag ironises that entire tradition as it is commodified for consumption by contemporary yuppies wherever they may be in the world. It is, perhaps a fine working example of knowing self-parodic postmodernism at work, loaded with ambiguous effects as it moves

about the global marketplace. Here we have a text -cum- product signalling the micro-national, the national and the global all at once, but it is still a piece of factory woven cloth cut and stitched to a standard global pattern and carrying an inevitable destructive load for the tribal culture it publicises and plagiarises. We need, as Jan Pieterse, says, a theory of global political action that can deal with all of these aspects (77). At the same time, we also need to sustain the kinds of interstitial communities signalled in my choice of novels, fragilely located within and between national and global spaces. This is particularly important in contemporary decolonising practices, since as geographer Derek Gregory powerfully demonstrates in *The Colonial Present*, his recent study of conflict in Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq, appalling violence is made to seem justified by the discursive division of space into opposing realms of 'civilisation' and 'barbarism' that reproduce the manichean binaries of old imperialisms. To quote Gregory:

> If global capitalism is aggressively *de-territorializing*, moving ever outwards in a process of ceaseless expansion and furiously tearing down barriers to capital accumulation, then colonial modernity is intrinsically *territorializing*, forever installing partitions between 'us' and 'them'. (253)

Dismantling this fundamentalist vision of the world does require the kind of subversive access to modes of representation that Bill Ashcroft advocates in his *Postcolonial Transformations*, but we need also to take into account the textual limits to that project, and to find communal spaces that cross and deny binary oppositions of power interests, state and global. If as Hart and Negri argue in *Empire*, globalisation leaves no place outside of its space, there are nonetheless sites within it that are differentially incorporated or not: the space of contemporary empire is by no means uniform or smooth. In these 'third spaces' (Bhabha) of subversion and resistance one site of commonality and potential community is artisan production: the rap singers on both sides of the Israeli Wall pointing out the mutual imprisonment it imposes; the fabric workers who share respect for common skills, even the writers of novels. Here realist testimony of suffering can work with metaphors of hope and unity.

We have to continue to think with, through and beyond the national without simply subscribing to an anti-national hostility or 'end of history' post-national globalised triumphalism. As literary scholars we need, in doing this, to avoid setting up developmental narratives of our own that relegate certain styles and modes such a realism to second-grade or outdated ranking. Such a ranking is really only sustainable as an illusion within a globalised anglophone field, and many works in other languages would reveal its limitations. Even within this expanding, influential but still narrow global field, attention to motifs of material culture in literary texts can work to

illustrate not only the complexity of contemporary postcolonial experience, but also the complex interweaving of narrative styles to ground global and national fantasies in the globally and nationally informed but very local realities of the everyday craft of survival. We need to work towards a fine balance between optimism and despair, material production and textual reception, realism and symbolism, local communities of craft production and global networks of consumerism. In the words of Gayatri Spivak, a balance between attending to the "web of the text" and the "weave of work."

If we look at this element of postcolonial writing, we can see that our task as teacher-critics is a small one: putting a few postcolonial texts into an English curriculum will not do a lot to alter high unemployment, imprisonment and mortality rates amongst subaltern communities, but not to do so will leave mainstream perceptions and blind-spots unchanged and do nothing to alter the social status quo. Working with such 'dissident' or different texts may also begin to unravel one corner of the weave of power, may be able to bring global attention to bear on local inequities to lever national remedial action, while keeping in play expressions of national and regional difference that resist the homogenising effects of global consumerism.

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