Abstract
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Kunapipi is a biannual arts magazine with special but not exclusive emphasis on the new literatures written in English. It aims to fulfil the requirements T.S. Eliot believed a journal should have: to introduce the work of new or little known writers of talent, to provide critical evaluation of the work of living authors, both famous and unknown, and to be truly international. It publishes creative material and criticism. Articles and reviews on related historical and sociological topics plus film will also be included as well as graphics and photographs.

The editor invites creative and scholarly contributions. The editorial board does not necessarily endorse any political views expressed by its contributors. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with notes gathered at the end, and should conform to the Harvard (author-date) system. Submissions should be in the form of a Word or Rich Text Format file sent by email attachment to acollett@uow.edu.au. Image files should be high resolution tif format and submitted on compact disc if larger than 1mb. Please include a short biography, address and email contact.

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All correspondence (manuscripts, inquiries, subscriptions) should be sent to:
Dr. Anne Collett
Editor — KUNAPIPI
English Literatures Program
University of Wollongong
Wollongong NSW 2522
Australia

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*Kunapipi* refers to the Australian Aboriginal myth of the Rainbow Serpent which is the symbol of both creativity and regeneration. The journal’s emblem is to be found on an Aboriginal shield from the Roper River area of the Northern Territory of Australia.
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EDITORIAL

Sometimes I wonder why I took on this job, given the lack of time and funding made available to keep a scholarly journal alive; and sometimes I wonder why I don’t capitulate to the big publishing houses who offer to take the hassle and grind of production out of my hands; and sometimes I wonder why I persist in my reluctance to join the journal e-world when I recognise that the benefits of easy worldwide access are enormous. But when an issue finally comes off the press, it is always a thrill. Institutional measures of production and achievement come and go, none of them any better or any more meaningful than any other; but there is enormous satisfaction in the successful completion of a project that involved so many people — their various skills, their enthusiasm, their commitment to a belief that the creation of something imaginative and beautiful is of value in and of itself. And it is not just that a journal like this stimulates the mind with the jostle of new ideas and new ways of understanding and representing the world; there is great pleasure to be found in the look and feel of a book — the colours, textures, weight — a thing of beauty is a joy forever (of course the first thing I see when I open the book is the typo I missed on the first page which somewhat mars the pleasure — but only briefly for I have learned to become sanguine in the pursuit of perfection that always eludes me).

Rather than talk about the general contents of the issue, I would like this time to take my allotted editorial space to tell you a story, one of many stories that contribute to the pleasure of production but generally remain untold. Over the years I have had a number of students or family members involved in the management of the journal — dealing with the post for example — the requests, the complaints, the rare compliments… Last year I opened an envelope among a few addressed to the Editor of Kunapipi, that contained a manuscript with a letter to the editor attached and a floppy disk. My first thought was how strange that someone should be sending such obsolete technology (I no longer have the means on my computer to read a floppy), but the thought as quickly disappeared as it had appeared. I glanced at the letter and stuck the manuscript in my bag along with all the other paper I tote back and forth from office to home, day after day. Some nights later I read the short story and was impressed — a good story, well written and just what was needed for the current issue. Excited, I now read the cover letter to discover the author and noticed that it had been dated some five years ago … how very odd … how could this be? I had only just taken it out of my mailbox the other day (it would be more understandable if discovered under my infamous piles of paper and books that threaten to crowd me out of my office). There was an email address (but no postal address), so I emailed the author in the hope that the address was still the same (this is rarely the case over so long a period), and received a reply some few days later, the result of which was the publication in this issue of ‘An Unexpected Turnaround’ by Richard Lever. I’m sure you will be intrigued and perhaps as surprised as I was by his story.
My story’s intrigue lies in the five year gap that after some thought I finally resolved. Some seven years ago, a postgraduate student had taken on the job of working through the Kunapipi mail, had subsequently completed her degree and moved on; but some old folders were left in a filing cabinet that had sat undisturbed until the recent reorganisation of rooms and furniture discovered the contents which were then passed on to their respective owners, in this case, ‘The Editor of Kunapipi’. The moral of the story is, never give up hope! No time is too long a time to wait for the pleasure of being published, at least I hope Richard agrees, and I hope his pleasure is not marred by one of those pesky typos that insist on their claim to fame no matter what I, and the sub-editor and the proof-reader do to deny them.

Anne Collett
In her groundbreaking book, *Siblings: Sex and Violence*, Juliet Mitchell emphatically states, ‘[i]ncest is the crossing of boundaries, or perhaps, if we think about its sibling base, the absence of them’ (62). When Te Rua, the narrator-protagonist of Patricia Grace’s 2001 Kiriyama Prize winning novel, *Dogside Story*, copulates with his sister and fathers her child, he is clearly crossing these boundaries, and violating in the process what is considered by many to be the ultimate taboo. In nearly all modern cultures ‘breaking the incest ban strikes at the core of the family and society, if not the viability of the species’ (Turner & Maryanski 1), and for this reason, anthropologist Robin Fox believes that ‘at the very least, the idea [of incest] seems to make us easily uneasy, and at worst, downright hysterical’ (5). Grace’s use of the incest motif in *Dogside Story* utilises this ‘near–universality’ (Richardson 553) of the incest taboo to reinforce an innate, universalising fear — the fear of (and revulsion towards) the violation of the incest prohibition and the progeny it produces. Grace then takes these ‘universal’ fears about incest and challenges the assumptions that are at the heart of them to create a text that re-territorialises a reading of the causes of brother-sister incest — and the Dogside community’s reaction to it within a specifically Maori-centric framework.

This article explores these re-territorialised aspects of *Dogside Story*’s incest narrative, taking into account the ways in which Grace, by acknowledging and then deconstructing ‘classic’ (Western) literary incest tropes, provides ‘culturally appropriate’ alternatives (Pistacchi) to dealing with sibling incest that are not rooted in fear, hysteria, or the ostracisation of the ‘offending’ members of the community. The reading also acknowledges the ways in which Grace, like her *Dogside Story* characters, simultaneously invites and rejects an essentialist reading of the incestuous act, resulting in a text which ultimately evades moralistic positioning regarding long-standing prohibitions on brother-sister incest.
CONTEXTUALISING SIBLING INCEST IN DOGSIDE STORY

A reading of the incest motif in *Dogsides Story* is dependent on a scientific/evolutionary and a sociological/literary history that has long held a sense of horror and fascination with the tabooed act. From Aphra Behn’s *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1684), to Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814), and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997), the incestuous act, especially as it occurs between brother and sister, has been treated as both a frightening and an utterly captivating literary trope. Grace herself has shown a long-standing fascination with the violation of the incest prohibition and the ramifications of such transgressions in both her novels and short stories. *Mutuwhenua* (1978) makes reference to one of Ripeka’s aunts who ‘married a second cousin’ (92); *Cousins* (1992) addresses a widow’s need to flee from her family’s ancestral land out of fear the elders will force her to marry a relation she views as a ‘brother’; the short story, ‘Flower Girls’ (1994), addresses the devastating effects of father-daughter incest; and the character Baby, the namesake of *Baby No-Eyes* (1998), is the product of an incestuous relationship between her parents (who are cousins) and a descendent of Rorikohatu, a great-great uncle guilty of impregnating his niece. These early experiments with the relationship between incest prohibition and narrative foreground Grace’s much more exhaustive examination of the subject in *Dogsides Story*.

While incest is generally framed in Western literary fiction in terms of the shame and horror surrounding the act and its aftermath, as a theme in ancient creation myths the act is often portrayed pragmatically (Garry & El-Shamy 432). Incestuous marriages and copulations were ‘commonplace among the gods of ancient peoples’ (Cory & Masters 4), and creation myths from all over the world ‘resort to incestuous peopling of the earth’ for the commonsense reason that ‘if the first humans were few in number, possibly only two, then their offspring had no choice but to mate with siblings’ (Garry & El-Shamy 432–33). Polynesian creation myths are no exception. According to A.W. Reed’s *Maori Myths & Legendary Tales*,

Tane had seen the beauty of earth and sky, but he was still dissatisfied. He felt that his work would be ended only when Papa was peopled with men and women. Children had been born to Tane and his brothers but they were celestial, never-dying gods who were not suited to the earth and its ways.

The gods came down to earth and out of the warm red soil they made the image of a woman...The gods purified her and named her Hine-ahu-one, woman-created-from-earth. Tane became her husband and they had several girls as their children.

Tiki, the first man, was made by Tu-matauenga, god of war. He became the father of men and women who peopled the earth and inherited all the wonder and glory that Tane had made for them. (Reed 20–21)

In this version of the myth, mortal people of the Maori world are all considered to be descendents of Hine-ahu-one and Tiki, an incestuous genealogy that is viewed pragmatically, because its inception predates concepts of incest taboo and
prohibition, and because, according to psychologist Karin Meiselman, ‘as a theme in mythology and literature, sibling incest has been treated more frequently, and with much more sympathy, than parent-child incest’ (263).

Because, in a Maori cultural framework, ‘all things are connected in time and space in the great spiral of existence’ (Gwin 147), Grace is able to weave these ancient legends into Dogside Story’s modern incest narrative in a manner that lets her interrogate the taboo. The story of Dogside ancestors Ngarua and Maraenohonoho’s obsessive and possessive love of their brother exists culturally and narratively in reciprocal dimensions, allowing it to simultaneously invoke the ancestors (the pre-history children of Hine-ahu-one and Tiki), inhabit the past (in the recorded history of Dogside’s ancestors), and unfold in the present (in Rua and Ani’s story). Rua and his sister Ani’s incestuous relationship therefore spirals out of this layering of ancient myth and legend. They are the descendants of two sisters whose love for their husbands ‘never ever matched the love they held for their brother’ (8) and who ‘would have died rather than let the other have their brother’s heart, their brother’s love’ (10). They come of age in the physical landscape of Dogside, an area colonised and developed out of thwarted incestuous sibling desire and whose very name, according to ethnographer Elsdon Best, evokes long-standing incestuous connotations in te reo Maori:

Incest is termed irawaru, moe tuahine, and ngau whiore, the expression kai whiore being a variant form of the latter. Three of these terms are connected with dogs. Irawaru is the name of a person in Maori mythology who was turned into a dog by the magic arts of Maui, and who was afterwards looked upon as the origin, or tutelary deity, or parent of dogs. Ngau whiore means ‘tail-biter’. Those who commit incest are compared to a dog which turns and bites its own tail. (31)

Rua and Ani are, therefore, ultimately members of a community whose ‘tail-biting’ foundations put them on the losing side of a number of hegemonic oppositions: Godsiders are ‘cultured’, Dogsiders are ‘rough’; Godsiders are ‘devout’, Dogsiders are ‘ungodly’; Godsiders are ‘principled’, Dogsiders are ‘without morals’ (13). As one Godsider says of Rua and his incestuous past, ‘[a] dog will do what a dog will do. Sister, mother, grandmother, mother-in-law, it makes no difference to a dog’ (272). In spite of all of this, Grace acknowledges her bias for these rough and rebellious Dogsiders, admitting in the first chapter that the remainder of her novel is ‘one sided — it favours Dogside’ (14).

By taking these infinite pains to position Ani and Rua’s relationship so firmly in the mythological, historic and linguistic background of Dogside, Grace seems to be preparing her readers to accept that the children’s breaking of the incest taboo is determined from the opening pages of the narrative. From a Godsider’s (read: outsiders) perspective, Ani and Rua appear to be from ‘bad stock’; they are the descendants of ‘useless hua’ and simply cannot be expected to act any better than ‘mongrel dogs’ (13). Seemingly giving credence to this reading, Grace backgrounds the children’s upbringing in classic clinical lines, laying all of the groundwork for what researchers have found to be the common denominators
in the settings for brother-sister incest: a lack of parental/adult supervision (Meiselman 263); a dysfunctional family that exhibits violence (Turner & Maryanski 71); the absence of suitable sex partners in the community (Masters 83); the rebellious desire (by at least one of the siblings) to cross boundaries (Mitchell 62); and the termination of the sibling’s relationship as a result of the sister’s pregnancy (Weinberg qtd in Meiselman 273). In the rendering of each of these characteristics, however, Grace subtly re-territorialises them in Maori terms, demanding that her readers recognise the manner in which the confluence of the events leading up to the incestuous act in *Dogside Story* problematise the models of desire, agency and victimhood provided in traditional Western incest narratives.

While it is true that Rua and Ani spend a large amount of unsupervised time together as children, this time is spent roaming the beaches and bush surrounding their home marae — an area the elders in their community deem safe for independent play. Their childhood adventures often involve the excitement of partaking in tabooed activities (from playing in areas considered tapu by their elders, to daring each other to perform increasingly more dangerous feats of athletic prowess), but these transgressions can, in part, be viewed through the lens of stereotypical adolescent behaviour. Grace takes great pains to eloquently remind her readers that ‘older kids’ often have something itching, creeping round inside them that was airy and not quite there most of the time, though at other times there was a specific vegetable or animal feel about it. It was like plantlife putting out sticky clamps and climbing one two, one two, through chest and arms and head, or putting down hairy roots in a way which wiggled down through lower torso and legs. It was as if they were about to sprout green. Or it could have been something animal — leggy insects scuttling about and taking up spaces, could even have been legless and wormy making tunnels and funnels, tickling all over and keeping them all the time on the move, all the time gabbing, giggling, hooting and crashing, all the time awake. (Grace 224)

This ‘adolescent itch’ is manifested in the Pakeha children camping near Dogside’s marae in the form of ‘lover spotting’ (224). In Rua and Ani this itch is manifested in terms of daring each other towards increasingly sexual modes of physical contact.

In this sense, Rua and Ani’s incestuous act can be read as the natural culmination of years of physical play coinciding with adolescent hormonal bloom. Their relative isolation leads them to have an unusually intense sibling bond, and the secrets that they share about their tabooed adventures further drive them towards an inner social-circle of two. Freud believed ‘the more closely the members of a family are attached to one another, the more often do they tend to cut themselves off from others, and the more difficult it is for them to enter into the wider circle of life’ (50). Ani’s threat that she will ‘kill’ Rua if he ‘tells’ anyone about their activities further widens the gap between the siblings and those that surround them. It also serves to bind Rua to Ani in ways that are
unexplainable to their other family members. When Rua refuses to relocate to Australia with his father after his mother’s death, he ‘couldn’t think at the time why he didn’t want to leave, only saying to himself that there was treasure lying at the bottom of the boiling deep’ (71). This treasure is one of the tapu objects he and Ani have been searching for in their adventures, and the lure of staying and continuing their dangerous childhood game overrode the fact that ‘he’d felt sorry for his father’ (71) when he broke up the immediate family unit by choosing to stay behind with his extended family in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

At this point in the narrative, Dogside Story appears to have a great deal in common with classic nineteenth-century British incest narratives (albeit one that takes place in the sea and bush instead of in the moors and manor). Traditionally these narratives ‘feature various kinds of sibling (or quasi-sibling) relationships, all tending to follow the same narrative trajectory, from a shared childhood to a tragic end…the siblings or quasi-siblings are reared together, become erotically involved, and are separated by death’ (Richardson 555). Dogside Story incorporates the mainstays of these classic incest narratives, but ultimately undermines the tradition by subversively refusing to engage with the classic ‘tragic ending’. In Grace’s tale, there is no victim in the incestuous act and both siblings survive — and eventually thrive.15

This challenge to traditional/Western incest narratives manifests most profoundly in the actions of Ani, an avid reader of classic British/Western ‘kissy books’ (87) who often ‘steals’ (55) her word play from the literary fiction she is constantly devouring. Ani’s conscious pastiche of costumes, actions, words and phrases appropriated from her heavy diet of romance and adventure novels gives the incest narrative surrounding her a meta-literariness that very specifically sets Dogside Story in a post-modern and post-colonial relationship to the British Romance tradition. As readers, we know that Ani knows that she is playing a part scripted for her by a long history of incest narratives — narratives found in books she has literally stolen from the outside Pakeha world of ‘schools and shops and libraries’ (128) and taken out to her hut in the bush for digestion and reincorporation into her own ‘story’. She is able to both utilise and subvert this literary history to script her own drama, one that critically diverts from the traditional incest-narrative trajectory by offering a plenary rejection of the classic ‘punishment-by-death-for-transgression’ ending (Mitchell 65). Instead of engendering catastrophe, the result of Ani and Rua’s incestuous relationship eventually becomes the means by which their community begins to heal itself. Their union results in life, not death, and it is through Kiri, the progeny of this union, that the community is able to confront the secrets that have been pulling the family apart for nearly two generations. In order to get to this place of healing, however, Grace has to allow all of the characters to send their stories up ‘to the rafters’ (141)16 so the whanau17 can choose which histories to keep, and which ones need to ‘burn’ (298).
THE STORIES SURROUNDING THE INCEST

To fully understand Rua and Ani's story it is necessary to unpack the emotional minefields of their childhood backgrounds. Both children grow up feeling rejected from their mother’s love — Ani because her mother, Ramari, gave her away at birth to be raised by her grandmother, and Rua because his mother left him alone when she died. In many ways this means that the bond the siblings share over the years is not sexual, but emotional — a bond forged by grief, not physical passion. The siblings are ultimately bound together by their mourning over the loss of the mother figure, and their incestuous physicality arises out of the siblings’ attempts to restore ties of love and security that they feel have been shattered.

This sense of rejection and loneliness manifests in what Rua calls Ani’s ‘cruelty’ (40). Once rejected (at least in her mind) by her mother at birth, the girl spends the rest of her adolescence vengefully rejecting others. When her grandmother dies and Ramari asks Ani to rejoin them in the family house ‘out front’, Ani mocks her mother, choosing instead to live with a blind Aunty out in the bush. Her rejection of care is a defence mechanism, one signified by the way she defiantly sorts through the bags of clothing her relatives hand down to her, discarding all of the ‘red, yellow, green, blue and brown’ garments and throwing all of this colour ‘into the trees’ (40). Left with only white to wear, Ani cloaks her anger in the costume of the ascetic, one who needs no-thing and no-body.

Ani’s white garb also allows her to embody the role of Dogside’s ghost, a phantom/banshee figure haunting the bush surrounding the family compound. Her presence always seems to carry with it the threat of death, and her childhood games consistently include elements of danger (‘falling down dead’ (53), ‘walking the plank’ (55), swimming with taniwha18 (70)). When Rua returns from their frightening adventures, his elders ask him, ‘[y]ou seen a ghose, you Rua?’ (56), an appropriate question for a boy who might have just narrowly missed a drowning or having his eye put out by one of Ani’s handmade swords. In the best of times, Rua takes these games lightly, telling the reader, ‘[s]he always was bullshit that Ani Wainoa’ (39).

Most of Ani and Rua’s most transgressive activities, however, take place not during the best of times, but in the moments and hours directly following emotionally traumatic events (the morning after their mother’s burial [52], immediately following Rua’s father’s wedding [69] etc.). For Ani, meeting Rua for their secret play in the wake of emotional tragedies gives her an emotional edge. Juliet Mitchell writes, ‘Siblings, like hysterics, love where they hate’ (103), and Ani seems to embody this statement in every one of her actions. She hates Rua for being the one who was not given up by their mother, the one who got to grow up in the warmth of the ‘family bed’. She also loves him as she loves no other member of her family, leading her to constantly jostle between the conflicting desires to love Rua and to destroy him.
When the children’s increasingly sexual play (sword fighting, log rolling, skinny dipping) eventually leads to violating the sexual taboo, this love-hate relationship surfaces. Ani cannot tolerate, at any point in their childhoods, Rua to have the upper hand in their daring games. It is therefore no surprise that when Rua comes to tell Ani that it is he (thereby not her) who has discovered the key to finding the treasure they have spent their childhoods searching for (the knowledge of how to use the tides to get to the forbidden Cave Rock), Ani raises the bar on what it means in their relationship to possess transgressive knowledge. As Rua tells his sister about the key to unlocking one taboo, Ani Wainoa begins to slowly strip off her clothes, juxtaposing Rua’s story of tapu knowledge by navigating tabooed tides of her own. She dares him into the sexual act, telling him, ‘[y]ou wouldn’t know and you’d be so afraid’ but Rua ‘knew that she knew he wasn’t afraid, had never been afraid of anything they’d ever done together’ and so they ‘did it, did all of it’ (88).

**Incest: A Priori v. A Posteriori Knowledge**

Ani Wainoa and Rua enter into their incestuous act with an *a priori* awareness of their sibling relationship, but because the children are raised in separate households (Ani raised out in the bush by their maternal grandmother and Rua raised near the rest of the family by their mother Ramari) for many readers their sibling relationship is recognised entirely *a posteriori*. Although there are vague intimations as to the true nature of the children’s blood relationship early in the narrative (Ramari asks Ani to ‘come home to Mummy now’ (39) as early as Chapter 5), readers are only fully illuminated as to the truth of Kiri’s incestuous parentage when the full family genealogy is delineated in Chapter 16. This carefully chronicled revelation takes place well after Grace has detailed the sexual consummation of Rua and Ani’s relationship in Chapter 12.

Grace’s methodology here privileges a Maori-centric world-view, and arguably gives priority to the author’s indigenous audience. Emile Durkheim emphasised in his study of incest that ‘all repression of incest presupposes familial relations recognised and *organised by society*’ (qtd in Turner & Maryanski 2). What Grace subversively interrogates in her spiralling revelations about Ani and Rua’s parentage is the ubiquitous privileging in most New Zealand fiction of a Pakeha world view. In *Dogside Story*, as in most of Grace’s earlier works, ‘Maori ways of doing things and of seeing are treated as normal, while Pakeha ways are often confusing, unaccountably complex, and unfriendly (Whaitiri 555). The concept of the Western/Pakeha nuclear family therefore has no place in this story. Familial relations and the familial unit are not organised in this text around the concept of a married couple and their children sharing the same household. Within a Maori familial organisational structure, it is common for children to be raised by members of the extended whanau instead of by their biological parents, and for this reason the indigenous reader is more likely to recognise and identify Ani and Rua’s sibling relationship early in the text.
Rua and the Family Bed

Also important to understanding the nuances of familial relationships in *Dogside Story* is a reading of Rua’s Oedipalesque memories of his relationship with his mother. All of Rua’s recollections of his maternal relationship are evocatively sensual and richly steeped in vivid descriptions of Ramari’s body, her voice, and her smells. His most vivid memories of his mother involve sleeping in bed beside her and waking up ‘hot’ (41), acutely aware of the comforting sounds of his mother snoring beside him. On cold mornings he would relish his mother returning to bed after getting his father off to work, playfully asking, ‘[y]ou got me a warm place? Come on give me a warm’, before getting ‘back into bed with him, sweaty, giggling, her milk running and smelly and her straight, black hair coming out of its band’ (41).

In these moments of communal love and intimacy, Rua and his mother share an erotic connection that operates as a reassurance for the boy that he is loved, cared for, and safe. Rua thinks of the bed as ‘a cave’ (41), a womb-like space where he can relish being a ‘good boy’ (41) who is literally wrapped in maternal affection. Unfortunately for Rua, however, because these poignant memories of his mother are all associated with this ‘early morning bed’ (40), the later juxtaposition of these warm, loving recollections of the two of them wrapped in ‘smoky blankets’ (40) with the memories of his mother lying sick and dying in ‘that same bed’, make his emotional adjustment to her illness that much more traumatic. It is unbelievable to Rua how it took ‘no years at all’ (44) for his mother to be transformed by her illness into a small white, hairless woman whose arms that she held out to him each afternoon when he came home from school had been just hanging flaps of skin, whose hands picking at his face and scratching in his hair were like the twists of newspaper she used to get a flame from the stove element to light her cigarette with. The powder smell had gone and there was a smell and taste of ditches, a voice that said good boy, you been to school, you come home to Mummy. (44–45)

These frightening crone-like images starkly contrast the robust earth-goddess images that abound in Rua’s descriptions of his mother pre-illness. Her sickness and subsequent death result in Rua’s final ejection from the bed/womb, and eventually lead to the destruction of Rua’s feelings of familial security entirely. Shortly after his mother’s death, Rua learns that his father has been carrying on an illicit affair that results in the birth of Rua’s half-brother Tommy John. Within months of Ramari’s death, his father marries this mistress, thereby definitively displacing Rua’s mother from the family home/bed forever. Rua therefore spends the rest of his adolescence and early adulthood searching for ways to recreate the sense of maternal love and connection he felt as a child — turning first to his older sister and then to his older lover, Maina, in attempts to reclaim a sense of belonging and security.

According to Kate Soper, ‘[t]he mother’s body as the first ambience experienced by the infant becomes a kind of “archetypal primary landscape”'
to which subsequent perceptual configurations of space are related. As such, moreover, it is expressive of a nostalgia for a mother-child unity, this unity itself being a figure of a desired harmony’ (142–43). It is therefore not surprising that Rua spends his adult life desiring a fantasy figure that will inhabit the void left by the demise/death of the healthy mother figure. While Rua himself might be unsure ‘why he’d opened his mouth to say I know a place’ (74) when the character Maina (who, at 43, is nearly twice Rua’s age) is in need of a refuge from her emotionally abusive husband, it is clear to the reader that he offers his home to her because she strongly resembles (both in terms of physique and personality) the healthy/goddess image of his long-absent mother.

This nostalgia for the maternal ‘primary landscape’ runs strong (if unconsciously) in Rua’s recountsings of his early impressions of Maina. Her ‘baggy eyes and baggy face’ (45) are clearly reminiscent of Rua’s ‘baggy mother’ (40), and Maina’s ‘muscly arms’ (47) and ‘big fingers’ (75) act as vivid reminders of Ramari’s ‘round face’ and ‘strong hard hands’ (40). Rua becomes so lost in these nostalgic interweavings of past and present that the first time he leads Maina down the rough bush trail to his house, the sound of her ‘breathing hard’ behind him startles him enough to wonder if she is ‘[g]asping or laughing?’ (93) a clear nod to his reconstructed memories of Ramari pre-illness who would ‘gasp and huff and laugh and talk to him’ (40) as the two walked those same trails in his childhood.

The descriptive parallels between Ramari and Maina continue throughout the remainder of Rua’s first-person narrative, with him describing both women as constantly talking, singing, and dancing. After having intercourse with Maina for the first time (an experience that moves him to tears because this time he is ‘grown’ and there is ‘no trouble’ (130) with desiring the mother-figure who is not mother) he even goes so far as to draw parallels between the ‘dancing dress’ his mother used to wear after getting up from the family bed, and Maina’s party dress, hanging in his bungalow and ‘dancing there like a thin one of her’ (128). It is therefore through Maina that Rua is able to construct a healthy re-enactment of the mother-child unity of his childhood (which was temporarily reconstituted in the co-dependent relationship he shared with his sister) as an adult, and it is through this relationship that he is best able to move towards the ‘desired harmony’ and ‘oneness’ that he learns comes not from retreating into a devolved ‘fish-self’ but by developing into a fully formed man/lover.

**The Outcome of the Incest**

Rua and Ani’s sexual relationship results in the birth of their daughter, Kiri, a parentage that Rua refuses to recognise for years. Within hours of her birth, Ani runs away from Dogside and Rua gives the newborn Kiri to his bitter and sadistic Aunt Ladie Sadie, who in turn gives the baby to her daughters Amira and Babs to raise. ‘The Aunties’, as Rua calls them, are neglectful (leaving Kiri unattended at night, refusing to take her to a doctor when she burns herself), emotionally abusive...
(constantly calling her ‘makimaki, nikanika, rat, cat, witch’ [103] and telling her she was ‘shitted by a seagull’ [151]), and verge on being physically abusive in the ways they use Kiri as slave labour to clean for them both at home and at the Post Shop where Amira works. Rua in the meantime lives in self-imposed exile in the bush that was formerly (and quite significantly) inhabited by his ‘Nanny Blind’. Here, Rua is able to harbour the secret that he and everyone else in his community has been ‘blind’ to for years. It is only there in the bush that he can live in conscious recognition of himself as ‘the full dog’ (104) — the father of his sister’s child. The creek that lies between his shelter in the bush and the rest of his family members who live around the marae therefore acts as a chasm in the landscape that lies between ‘the secret for life that had to be left with the trees’ (102) and the whanau’s unconscious denial of Kiri’s true parentage.

It is only when Rua accepts an active role in the caretaking of his daughter (which he does at the spurring of the maternal Maina), and when the rest of the whanau is ready to recognise him as Kiri’s father that the entire Dogside community is able to come together at a hui [meeting] to discuss how the tribe can learn to take better care of its own. Grace believes ‘this hui over the custody of Kiri is crucial because the whole story line leads up to it’ (Pistacchi). It is therefore through and around Kiri — the child that is born out of incest — that the Dogside community is able to come together and to realise that they must start ‘ outing’ the secrets of their past if they are going to be successful in solving problems in their future.

This effort by Dogside community members to openly and honestly communicate about Ani and Rua’s relationship is a step that would likely be celebrated by social worker and Maori family activist Te Rauhina Te Hau who says, ‘I advocate the reunification of the whanau and if the whanau can be sort of built up again through something as appalling as this [incest], then whanau must all come together without judgment to awhi each other’ (qtd in White 4).

Te Hau believes that with troubling issues like incest, ‘The problem is while it’s not being discussed it’s not an issue, if we don’t discuss anything then it’s not an issue, if we can get everyone acknowledging that it happens then perhaps we can turn around and alleviate the problem’ (qtd in White 4). This belief that it is only through communication, and in the case of Dogside Story specifically intra-rather than inter-cultural communication (Drichel 4), that Grace feels solutions can be found to the problems facing contemporary Maoridom. She says, ‘I do not think of Dogside as a “broken community” because it has the means, the people, the spiritual fortitude, to solve its problems’ (Pistacchi). By reframing the incest in Dogside Story as something that brings a community together, instead of something that drives it apart, Grace offers a challenge to traditional/Western incest narratives. When Juliet Mitchell writes, ‘[d]oes death then feature in all sibling incest? I believe so’ (65) she is not taking into account incest as it appears in a narrative like Dogside Story — a tale told from a specifically indigenous
perspective and which imagines a community that ‘is not ailing’ but one that has found ‘culturally appropriate ways of dealing with its ingrained problems’ (Pistacchi). This is the reason that the Dogside community awards the right to sing the closing song of the hui (and the novel) to Atawhai, the family doctor/healer, because only he ‘is old enough to understand the extent of bruising, experienced enough to read the faces and know the right moment and the right song’ (300) that will lead Dogside into a healthier future.

NOTES

1 In Mutuwhenua, Ripeka’s aunt ‘married a second cousin and didn’t even know they were related’ (92). Ripeka’s mother blames this on the old people and says of the process of finding a husband or wife, ‘They don’t understand these old ones …Unless you knew all the old things, then there was no way for you to know…until the old people got their tongues going and told you everything. And sometimes it was too late by then and they blamed you’ (92).

2 In Cousins, after Polly’s husband Rere dies in combat, his family makes it clear they expect her to marry her young brother-in-law Aperehama, a boy who tells Polly he thinks of her as his ‘big sister’ (114). Upon learning of the family’s designs on her future, Polly says, ‘Aperehama was like a brother to me. I couldn’t stay there now that Keita’s intentions were known’ (102).

3 Shane and Te Paania realise long after courting, falling in love and becoming engaged that they are related by blood. Te Paania says of the situation, ‘[i]t wasn’t until our wedding day that we found out we both came from the same family, that Shane and I had the same great-grandparents. Gran Kura and my laughing grandfather were first cousins’ (21). While not incest in a legal sense, Te Paania realises that ‘if the old people had found out sooner about our close connections they may not have approved the marriage’ (21).

4 In Baby No-Eyes, Kura tells the grim tale of her great-uncle Rorikohatu impregnating his niece Roena, and the subsequent punishments that he suffers for his actions. When the family finds out about Rorikohatu’s relationship with Roena, ‘some of the men went looking for Rorikohatu to kill him. They found him, they didn’t quite kill him, but he was always a dead man after that’ (183). From that point on, Rorikohatu lives on the edge of the family property, never to be properly recognised, even in death, by his whanau ever again. He becomes to the family the ‘man-who-was-a-ghost’ (13), the man who no one would ‘see’, and thereby becomes a no-thing in their community.

5 It is interesting to note that in his book, Niuç-fekai (or Savage) Island and its People, S. Percy Smith states that in Polynesian Niue, ‘Tiki is the term for incest, of which the people had great horror. They deduce this word from their story of Māui, of whom there were three—some say five—Māui-matua, Māui-tama and Māui-tamā-tifine. The two latter, who were brother and sister, married, and the child of this union was named Tikiti, hence the word for incest’ (36). Smith goes on to point out the similarities between the stories involving Niue’s legendary Tikiti and the Maori’s mythological stories about their first man, Tiki.

6 This also proves true in Maori mythology. While the pragmatic and seemingly necessary incestuous relationships between the children of Hine-ahu-one and Tiki remain free from judgment, the story of Tane’s sexual liaison with his daughter Hine-titama is steeped in moral condemnation in nearly every re-telling of the story, including Patricia Grace’s rendition of the myth in Wahine Toa: Women of Maori Myth and Legend.
Chapter One of *Dogside Story* tells the tale of ‘two sisters, Ngarua and Maraenohonoho, who quarrelled over a canoe’ (7) that was once owned by their deceased older brother — an older brother the two sisters obsessively loved. The quarrel over the canoe eventually led the two sisters to split, with Ngarua and her followers moving to the south side (called ‘Dogside’) of the inlet the community lived on, and Maraenohonoho and her followers remaining on the north side (called ‘Godside’).

Ani and Rua spend a great deal of unsupervised time together, in part because their parents are not physically present during their adolescent years. Their mother died when both children were very young, and both of their fathers left the whanau’s ancestral land to find work in distant cities. Rua was left to be raised by his Aunt Wai, and Ani was left to be raised by her blind great-aunt, Nanny Blind. Many years later, when the truth about Kiri’s parentage comes to light, Rua’s uncle laments this lack of supervision admitting, ‘[w]e didn’t watch out, didn’t look after you good’ (172).

Ani and Rua’s dysfunctional family history is outlined in Chapter 16, pp. 113–16. This background illuminates why Ruahine (Ani’s grandmother) took Ani at birth to ‘bring her up as her own’ (116), and gives some psychological explanation as to why Ladie Sadie (Ani and Rua’s great-aunt) ‘hurt’, ‘beat’ and ‘slaved’ (287) her children.

Ani is raised deep in the bush first by her grandmother, and then by her blind great-aunt. The family worries deeply about the child’s isolation because they ‘didn’t want Ani Wainoa growing up in the trees, weird’ (65). Rua is Ani’s only true companion growing up (he visits her regularly both with his mother as a child and then alone as an adolescent). Ani calls Rua, ‘my true sibling, my utmost companion and friend deep in my heart’ (202).

Throughout their childhoods, Ani Wainoa consistently demonstrates a rebellious streak and it was she, and not Rua, who continuously made plans for a wide range of adventures that ‘weren’t allowed’ (70) by their elders.

Ani hides from Rua and the rest of the family during her pregnancy. Immediately after giving birth to Kiri, she abandons the baby with Rua and then flees (first to Auckland and then to Norway).

A marae is the meeting area of a community or a village which includes a courtyard and its surrounding buildings.

Something that is ‘tapu’ is sacred and usually forbidden or taboo.

By the end of the novel Ani is happily married to a Norwegian man and living in Scandinavia and Rua has taken custody of their daughter, Kiri, and is in a healthy relationship with Maina. As adults, both siblings seem at peace with one another (201).

The wharenui (meeting house) in a Maori community is ‘the repository of talk, and rafters are its storage place’ (*Dogside Story* 141). The stories of Dogside are therefore kept in the piece of tahuhu, or ancestral backbone, that supports the ceiling of their wharenui.

The Maori word ‘whanau’ translates in English to ‘extended family’.

‘Taniwha’ is most typically translated as ‘water spirit’ or ‘monster’.

The most prevalent example of the ‘confusing, unaccountably complex, and unfriendly’ nature of the Pakeha world in *Dogside Story* is found in Grace’s depiction of the New Zealand court system as Rua fights Amira and Babs for custody of Kiri. It is incomprehensible to the family why the issue cannot be sorted out in a hui (a family meeting held in the wharenui, where everyone is allowed to speak for themselves) without lawyers, affidavits and court-appointed strangers mediating the debate.
Maina is clearly self-conscious of the age difference between herself and Rua, reminding him at various points in the text that she has ‘a son about [his] age’ (84) and he should find ‘someone young, someone without…baggage…someone who’ll want to have children’ (167).

After fathering Ani’s child and then later losing his leg in a drunk-driving accident, Rua becomes deeply depressed, renouncing his fully-developed human self and reverting to what he refers to as a primal ‘fish-self’. Referring to the ‘ghost’ section of his amputated leg as a ‘fish-shaped gap’ (255), Rua retreats from the communal living area surrounding the marae to live in a solitary shelter in the bush. There he finds power in evoking his ancestral epistemology, calling himself a ‘fish among other fish’ (52), a title with metonymic echoes of his ancestress Ngarua, from whom Rua’s name is derived.

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Zakes Mda: Towards a New Ontology of Postcolonial Vision?

Introduction

Zakes Mda — novelist, playwright, painter and musician of the ‘new’ South Africa — started his career as a writer working in theatre-for-development with the Maratholi Travelling Theatre in Lesotho in 1985. Since then, Mda has written numerous plays which incorporate popular indigenous modes of performance to educate his audience for democracy. With the ending of apartheid in South Africa in 1994, creative writers transferred their energies from themes of resistance and struggle to issues of reconciliation in a newly democratic nation. They were, in Njabulo Ndebele’s terms, free now to ‘rediscover the ordinary’. Mda responded by moving to novel writing, finding in this fictional genre a new narrative freedom. Over the last few years he has published Ways of Dying (1995), The Heart of Redness (2000), The Madonna of Excelsior (2002), The Whale Caller (2005), Cion (2007) and Black Diamond (2009). His unique position in contemporary South Africa is reflected in the publishers’ blurb for his latest novel: ‘he commutes between South Africa and the USA, working as a professor of creative writing at Ohio University, as a beekeeper in the Eastern Cape, a dramaturge at the Market Theatre, Johannesburg, and a director of the Southern African Multimedia AIDS trust in Sophiatown, Johannesburg’ (2009). Commenting on Mda’s relationship to leading contemporary writers in South Africa, Johan Jacobs writes:

To the extent that Mda has made his mark as a literary and social theorist, as well as a playwright and novelist, he … invites comparison with a writer such as André P. Brink, or, for that matter, Njabulo S. Ndebele. The degree of self-reflexivity in Mda’s novels positions them in the same category as the metafictional discourse of J.M. Coetzee, just as their imaginative inventiveness is matched perhaps only in the fictional works of Ivan Vladislavić or Etienne van Heerden. And like Antjie Krog — indeed, all of these contemporary South African writers — Mda is concerned with examining the lives and experiences of ordinary people in democratic South Africa, and the ways in which they are coming to terms with the apartheid past, without their being overwhelmed by it or constrained by its categories. Mda’s is a significant voice among the many in contemporary South Africa that are exploring innovative forms to … scrutinise a culture in transition, voices that demand attention and critical appraisal. (Jacobs 1–2)

Mda’s third novel, The Madonna of Excelsior, is centrally concerned with ‘examining the lives and experiences of ordinary people’ as they move between apartheid and democracy. The Madonna achieves this dramatisation of a culture in transition by drawing extensively both on popular media representations (the
newspaper coverage of the notorious Miscegenation Trial in the small town of Excelsior in the Orange Free State) and the expressionist/symbolist paintings of the Jesuit priest, Frans Claerhout. In this article, I concentrate on Mda’s remarkable relationship as a writer of fiction to the visual. I argue that he inducts the reader into processes of vision or focalisation that radically destabilise conventional patriarchal perspectives. Creating these altered ways of seeing begins to construct, I believe, a new ontology of postcolonial vision, one that transcends our contemporary sense that vision always implies surveillance or coercion.

The phrase in my title ‘towards a new ontology of postcolonial vision’ derives from David Levin’s discussion, in Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision, of the way in which Western culture ‘has been dominated by an oculocentric paradigm, a vision-generated, vision-centred interpretation of knowledge, truth and reality’ (2). This paradigm of vision has been associated with domination. Levin asks, ‘[w]hat is left, today, of the rational vision of the Enlightenment? Has its institutionalization in the course of modernity given it historically distinctive forms of incorporation, power and normativity? How has the paradigm of vision ruled, and with what effects?’ (3). He remarks that these questions are complex since they involve ‘historical connections between vision and knowledge, vision and ontology, vision and power, vision and ethics’ (3). Where Levin asks whether there is ‘a postmodern future beyond the governance of ocularcentrism’ (3) and wonders what such a postmodern vision would look like, I ask to what extent a postcolonial writer like Mda can shift the boundaries of the visual in his readers’ apprehension so as to create an entirely altered political reality. Of course this subversion of dominant culture has been undertaken by artists and critics throughout the centuries. The contemporary theorist, Mieke Bal, shows how Rembrandt’s painting, Danae (1636), ‘[constructs] a masculine viewer whose visual potency is extremely problematic, (Bal qtd in Levin 387). She further argues that in Olympia (1863), Edouard Manet makes the gaze of the black woman looking at the white woman deeply ambiguous. Is her glance ‘of desire, of engagement, of friendship, or is it one of curiosity, of jealousy, of contempt?’ (Bal qtd in Levin 401). In Bal’s readings of these paintings ‘vision can be pluralized so as to deprive the colonizing, patriarchal gaze of its authority’ (Bal qtd in Levin 401). In this challenge to patriarchy issues of race, class and gender become central. Claerhout’s symbolist/expressionist paintings similarly foreground issues of race, class and gender, and Mda appropriates these perspectives for The Madonna of Excelsior. Where the discussion of art as subversion of dominant culture is for Bal centred on European artists, my investigation of Mda’s use of the paintings of Frans Claerhout brings into play a specifically African context: the political, social and cultural environment of a small town in the Orange Free State as South Africa moves from the oppressions of apartheid to a multiracial, multicultural context post-apartheid. Mda appropriates Claerhout’s vision by creating a story world drenched in the colours and forms of Claerhout’s paintings. The design of
The Madonna is distinctively African, both in its geographical settings and in its narrative structure, which incorporates such oral storytelling devices as the voice of a communal narrator who speaks for the whole community.

**In the Trinity’s Studio**

Figure 1 shows Frans Claerhout, referred to as ‘The Trinity’ because he is ‘man, priest and artist’ in Mda’s story world. Jacobs points out that the actual Frans Claerhout was born in Pittem, West Flanders, in 1919 and came to South Africa in 1946 to work as a Catholic missionary, eventually settling at Thaba Nchu in the eastern Free State (284). Claerhout was a leading exponent of South African expressionism and his work is both locally and internationally recognised. Jacobs divides the history of South African expressionism into three waves. The first, based on German expressionism, is represented by Irma Stern and Maggie Laubscher, the second by the Flemish immigrants Maurice van Essche, Hermann van Nazaret and Claerhout himself, and the third by a number of black artists of the 1960s ‘such as Gerard Sekoto, Sydney Kumalo, Julian Motau, Tshidiso Motjuoadi, Louis Maqhubela, Lucky Sibiya, Cyprian Shilakoe and Dan Rakgoathe’. Later waves include ‘Andre van Vuuren, Phillip Badenhorst and Marmus Havenga’ (286).

In the photo in Figure 1, Frans Claerhout is surrounded by paintings depicting mothers and children who have modelled for him as Madonna and Child. These models are drawn from the very poor local people on Claerhout’s mission station who earn money by sitting for him. You can see the artist at work among his paintings, adding brush strokes to incomplete studies, or comparing the positions and expressions of seated models. These are in the middle picture on the top left, which shows a single figure, and the large picture on the bottom right, where two women are seated next to a table on which paint tins and brushes are arrayed. Mda creates his fictional characters from these non-fictional models of Excelsior visible in Claerhout’s studio.

The most important fictional protagonists in *The Madonna of Excelsior* are Niki and Popi, the mother and daughter whose story dominates the novel. Niki works as a domestic servant for the white Afrikaans-speaking middle-class burghers of Excelsior, and ekes out her meagre wages by modelling with her child for the Trinity at the Roman Catholic mission at Thaba Nchu, 30 kilometres distant from Mahlatswetsa Township where she lives. The first chapter of the novel introduces Niki and Popi, who are visiting the Trinity. Popi, a child of five, is both excited and distressed by the lack of realism of the Trinity’s paintings. She is moved by his striking elongated people amid skewed houses, but distressed by their distortion, since she feels she can draw more accurate people and houses. Niki and Popi do not of course figure in this photo of the paintings in Claerhout’s studio, because they are Mda’s fictional characters rather than the real-life villagers on whom Claerhout based his pictures. Mda appropriates Claerhout’s paintings for the story world he creates around Niki and Popi.
Figure 1. ‘Claerhout in his Studio’.
Figure 2. ‘Sunburnt Christ’.
In the top right hand photo the artist can be seen to the side of a painting of a brown-skinned girl with dark eyes, long dark hair, and a white dress. Mda uses this painting to describe Popi at fourteen. A mixed-race or ‘hotnot’ girl born of the liaison between Afrikaner farmers and their black servants that is to give rise to the Miscegenation Trial at the heart of the novel, Popi is here introduced by a question: ‘Who is this little girl standing against a powder-blue sky with pink flowers for stars? Big sky and pink cosmos down to her bare feet like wallpaper. Who is this little girl in a snow-white long-sleeved frock?’ (113). The questions framing Popi’s identity here are central to her adolescent consciousness, for she is in search of herself and longs to be more like the other black children of Mahlatswetsa Township. Her slow journey towards self-acceptance is to become a feature of her bildungsroman. The celebration of difference at the heart of Popi’s story is everywhere evident both in Claerhout’s paintings and in Mda’s fictionalisation of these paintings.

For instance, in the bottom photo a brown Madonna can be seen on the wall at the back of the studio, a brown Madonna, described by Mda as having a ‘gaping mouth’ and ‘naked breast’. She is cradling a baby on her lap. The Madonna of this painting bears little resemblance to her Western Renaissance counterparts. She is secular, embodied, sculptural and somatic, wrapped up in the nurturing of her infant. Mda is attracted to this visceral closeness of mother and child which Claerhout constantly explores. What in Mda’s novel distinguishes the gaze of the Trinity from the gaze of the white farmers who lust after black women, is his calm, non-erotic attention to the subjects of his paintings. Two paintings away from the Brown Madonna, the photo shows Claerhout sketching at his easel. Beside the figure of the sketching artist is a striking, full-scale painting (see Figure 2, ‘A Sunburnt Christ’). This Christ is brown-skinned. The heavy lines and bloodstained colouring of his face bespeak his agony. Yet he is surrounded by vibrant colour and growth: huge, yellow sunflowers, and pink and white cosmos against a turquoise background. Behind the crucified Christ, a shadowy nun-like figure in a blue veil takes the place of the grieving Mary. Four figures in blue with red hats pass a round green and blue sun. The sky is awhirl with cloud effects, suggesting a gathering storm. This powerful painting is appropriated by Mda for the depiction of his protagonist Niki, victim of the cruelty of apartheid laws. No less a figure than the crucified Christ is appropriated by Mda to figure Niki’s suffering. Unlike Christ’s, Niki’s face has been ravaged not by the sun but by the skin-lightening chemicals she has applied over the years to change her racial categorisation from black to white. These chemicals have now caused her skin to cake and crack. Her trauma, as a victim of racial prejudice, is to be taken seriously, no less seriously than the suffering of the incarnate Christ — despised, rejected, and tortured on the cross. Here truly, crossing gender and race boundaries, are Claerhout’s and Mda’s visions of the Mater Dolorosa. Once again, there seems little connection between Claerhout’s painting, Mda’s story world, and the conventional religious paintings.
of the Renaissance. Where paintings of the Mater Dolorosa in Renaissance iconography convey the Madonna’s premonitions of the tragic fate of her child, this shadowy Madonna figure behind the Christ figure is enigmatic.

**Ecphrasis: Turning Paintings into Fiction**

Explaining the process of ecphrasis, Jacobs writes:

To appreciate fully how in *The Madonna of Excelsior* Mda narratively further indigenises a Western European art form that has already been indigenised by Claerhout, one needs to understand his fictional discourse in this novel in terms of ecphrasis, ‘the literary description of a work of art’ (Hollander, 1998, 86) … *The Madonna of Excelsior* is … an example of actual ecphrasis, where a literary work incorporates actual, particular works of art that pre-exist it, as opposed to notional ecphrasis where a literary text incorporates descriptions of purely fictive works of art. (288, 289)

I argue that Mda’s explorations of refigured identity are rooted in his strongly painterly imagination. This teaches the reader how to see anew by creating changed spaces in memory and culture which redress the negativity of the colonial experience. Mda uses authorial and figural points of view, perspective and focalisation to alter the reader’s understanding. Both the novelist Zakes Mda and the painter Frans Claerhout create, for ‘ordinary people’, the social and psychological conditions that may result in freedom. Through the narrator’s graphic depiction of the paintings, the reader is shown the art of Frans Claerhout. Claerhout’s style is a blend of expressionism and symbolism, transposing into an African context the bright colours, bold impasto brush strokes and deviation from realism that connects back to his European past: to Van Gogh, Gauguin, Munch and Cezanne, right back to Breughel. Like Breughel’s, Claerhout’s subjects are ‘ordinary folk doing ordinary things’. Yet, the novel insists, ‘God radiates from them’ (131).

Why does Mda build his story world on Claerhout’s art? According to Strydom, Claerhout’s expressionism foregrounds emotion, using contrast, dynamic movement and distortion to convince the viewer in a direct and empathetic way of the artist’s interpretation of reality: ‘The expressionist painting suggests involvement (wonder, compassion, humour) rather than detachment (contrast, judgement, caricature). It implies a view of reality rather than a mere representation of reality, one which is felt rather than seen’ (Strydom 10). In addition to his involvement of the viewer, Mda is attracted to the painter’s capacity to reconcile oppositions and to place individuals in dynamic, creative interaction with their communities.

From the opening of the novel the reader is inducted into a visual and epistemological world of startling complexity. Real paintings by a real painter illuminate the lives of fictional characters. These real paintings are seen and interpreted by Mda’s authorial narrator, who not only describes Claerhout’s expressionist and symbolist techniques, but also suggests that Claerhout’s ‘3-ness’ as ‘man, priest and artist’ captures the ‘3-ness’ of the ‘pen skies, the vastness
and the loneliness of the Free State’ (2). The Claerhout paintings at the centre of Mda’s story world are vividly described by the narrator’s words. For instance, the Brown Madonna who appears on the back wall of Claerhout’s studio in the photo is depicted as

> [e]xuding tenderness. Burnt umber mother in a blue shirt, squatting in a field of yellow ochre wheat. Burnt sienna baby wrapped in white lace resting between her thighs. Mother with a gaping mouth. Big oval eyes. Naked breast dangling above the baby’s head. Flaky blue suggesting a halo. Unhampered bonding of mother and child and wheat. (11)

But the reader has to imagine and focalise this portrait without the assistance of any visual material in the novel itself, for the text contains no traces of the Claerhout paintings. The only exceptions are an enlarged black and white Madonna and child on the inside front cover against which is juxtaposed a photo of a smiling Zakes Mda, and part of a black and white painting showing a donkey, a sunflower and some skewed houses on the inside back cover. No acknowledgement is made of either of these extracts, though the full-colour photo of sunflower fields near Bethlehem, Free State, that is used for the front cover, is acknowledged. My article reproduces and discusses several of Claerhout’s paintings which are important for *The Madonna of Excelsior*. These reproductions are taken from the book by Dirk and Dominique Schwager. The paintings are easily recognised from the narrator’s descriptions of them; but the only visual ‘quotations’ from Claerhout’s paintings used by Mda are postage-stamp-size images extracted from the paintings. These tiny sepia fragments preface each chapter, occurring as tiny images on the left next to the words of each chapter heading. Their relationship to the paintings from which they are extracted is virtually unrecognisable. Mda’s verbal and textual appropriation of Claerhout’s images is thus total. He adopts those painterly depictions that fit his fictional world, leaving the reader in no doubt that it is not Claerhout but Mda who controls the novel’s story world. This supremacy of textual authority over painterly authority is made clear on the last page, where the authorial narrator comments on the healing begun in Niki and Popi by the creations of the Trinity. Yet, the authorial narrator insists, ‘the trinity never knew all these things. His work was to paint the subjects, and not to poke his nose into their lives beyond the canvas’ (268). This fact brings me back to my title ‘Towards a New Ontology of Postcolonial Vision’ and the question of how a postcolonial writer may wish to adopt focalising strategies that enable readers to perceive cultural and political perspectives not endorsed by a dominant culture. When Bal writes about artists’ subversions of European culture, she does so from a feminist perspective. But both Mda and Claerhout are males, very much in the ‘God business’ of authoring painterly or fictional worlds. Can their mediation enable the escape from patriarchal values which my title implies?

Mda’s selection and ordering of Claerhout’s paintings makes use of two principles derived from multi-panelled altarpieces in Claerhout’s native Belgium.
which date back to the eleventh century — the principles of the cycle (which depicts a theme in a time-space continuum, showing consecutive episodes or phases in a history, such as the Stations of the Cross), and the series: ‘a repetition of a theme discontinuous in time and space’ (Strydom 16). These alternating principles of cycle and series allow the viewer or reader to understand continuity and change, development and variety: ‘the viewer recognises time and again the old in the new in a different guise’ (Strydom 17).

A further complication with which the reader is confronted from the very beginning of the novel is that of narrative levels. Mda makes use of two complementary but very different narrators. The first is the authorial narrator, responsible for delivering the author’s overall design. Through the authorial narrator may be glimpsed the implied author. Chatman explains this term: ‘The implied author is the agency within the narrative fiction itself which guides any reading of it. Every fiction contains such an agency. It is the source — on each reading — of the work’s intent [and refers to] a work’s “whole” or “overall” meaning, including its connotations, implications, unspoken messages’ (174). In addition to the authorial narrator, Mda uses the communal narrator, a resident of Mahlatuwetsa Township who knows all the protagonists and is involved in the novel’s action. As a member of Mda’s story world, the communal narrator is what Seymour Chatman calls a ‘fallible filter’, a term that he prefers to that of ‘unreliable narrator’. As Chatman explains, “‘[f]allible” seems a good term for a filter character’s inaccurate, misled or self-serving perceptions of events, situations and other characters, for it attributes less culpability to the character than does “unreliable”’ (150). Thinking of the communal narrator in this novel as a ‘fallible filter’ of the experiences of his community allows the reader to register his remarkable insight and compassion as he recounts the lives of his fellow township dwellers. It also explains his occasional lapses into racism and sexism. These are the inevitable result of his social conditioning under the oppressive and distorting ideology of apartheid. He is, after all, historically as much a victim of apartheid as any other character in the novel.

**Women, Donkeys, Sunflowers**

From the first page of the first chapter of *The Madonna of Excelsior*, the reader is drawn into the landscape of the Free State and the paintings of Frans Claerhout, whose chief subjects are women, donkeys and sunflowers. (See Figure 3, ‘Women Harvesting’, and Figure 4, ‘Boy Riding Donkey Backwards’). These subjects are imbricated throughout the novel, and woven into Mda’s story world:

Colour explodes. Green, yellow, red and blue. Sleepy-eyed women are walking among sunflowers. Naked women are chasing white doves among sunflowers … A boy is riding a donkey backwards among sunflowers. The ground is red. The sky is blue. The boy is red. The faces of the women are blue. Their hats are yellow and their dresses are blue. Women are harvesting wheat. (1)
Figure 3. 'Women Harvesting'.
Figure 4. ‘Boy Riding Donkey Backwards’.
The novel begins with the voice of the authorial narrator who remarks ‘all these things flow from the sins of our mothers’ (1). His is also the novel’s closing statement: ‘From the sins of our mothers all these things flow’ (268). The cycle begun in the first sentence — where the narrator ironically registers patriarchy’s simultaneous demonisation and instrumentalisation of women — will be closed by Mda’s choice of the concluding painting of four women described in the last chapter. This description begins:

The real new millennium has dawned. Four women with painted breasts walk in single file. Their long necks carry their multicoloured heads with studied grace. Their hair is white with age, but their faces glow with youth. They do not lose their way, even though they undertake their journey with closed eyes. (265)

The cycle of exploitation and humiliation that started with the Afrikaner farmers’ rape of young black women in the sunflower fields, and that reached its climax in the notorious Excelsior miscegenation trial, has ended with the same women. They now access a new identity as they choose their own way forward — just as Niki and Popi have moved from victimhood to agency by the end of the novel.

This section is entitled ‘Women, donkeys, sunflowers’. What of the donkeys? (See Figure 4, ‘Boy Riding Donkey Backwards’, Figure 5, ‘The Cherry Festival’, and Figure 6, ‘Profound Nostalgia’). Here I think Mda is again making use of the idea of the cycle, relying on the reader to perceive the connections between the donkey paintings and the characters and events of his story world. The donkey paintings can be understood as constituting another cycle. The first initiates us into Claerhout’s vibrant use of colour and expressionist distortion. Why is the boy riding backwards? For the same reason, presumably, that Claerhout sometimes places signposts in the middle of sunflower fields or depicts people ‘without feet or toes’ (1). The reader has to suspend disbelief and enter the characters’ own imaginative worlds, however unlike the real world these imaginative worlds may be. That is to say, he or she has to relate to the intensity of the yellow sun, the yellow sunflowers and the yellow donkey. Together these represent the joyful union of man, animal and landscape against the blue sky.

There are dozens of women, donkeys and sunflowers in the Claerhout paintings; but the donkey who starts ‘Cherry Festival’ is quite unlike the other donkeys described in this chapter, which records festivity, with gaily decorated processions of floats, people and animals in the main street on a Saturday morning. The donkey in this painting is not part of a landscape or a procession. It is enormous, and takes up the whole painting. The authorial narrator comments: ‘There is no room for anything else, except the red cock that the ass carries in a transparent bag strapped on its back and hanging from its side. The donkey and the cock own the world’ (43). This donkey is obsessive, excessive, exaggerated. Why?

In Mda’s accompanying story world, Niki and the Afrikaner, Johannes Smit, are at the Ficksburg Cherry Festival selling their wares at wooden tables under umbrellas. The white farmers Smit and Cronje fight for Niki’s favours. Cronje
Figure 5. ‘Cherry Festival’.
wins, and triumphantly drives Niki to a field on the outskirts of town for a night of passion, while the disconsolate Smit mopes alone at the Cherry Ball back in town. Now Niki has the husband of her enemy, Cornelia Cronje — who has previously humiliated her by forcing her to strip naked in front of the workers at the Excelsior Butchery — completely at her mercy. Niki’s focalisation changes in this moment:

[Stephanus Cronje] was deep inside her. Under the stars. She looked into his eyes in the light of the moon. She did not see Stephanus Cronje, owner of Excelsior Slaghuis. She did not see a boss or a lover. She saw Madam Cornelia’s husband with the emphasis on Madam. And she had him entirely in her power. (50)

Now Niki can see the stars that she could not see in the previous chapter. Like the cock and the donkey who preface this chapter she feels that she owns the world. So the magisterial donkey and red cock are chosen by Mda as objective correlatives for Niki’s moment of triumph; but the donkey is blinkered. Niki’s ‘triumph’ will prove short-lived in that it will lead to Cronje’s suicide, and her own and Popi’s ostracisation by the community. Niki will be shunned because of her liaison with the white farmers, and Popi will be shunned because she is
‘coloured’. This trajectory of suffering and bitterness on the women’s part will only be resolved at the end of the novel. Unlike the first donkey, which celebrates creative freedom, Mda chooses this blinkered donkey because it communicates foreboding.

Finally, the third donkey painting introduces a new era. It occurs in a late chapter called ‘Profound Nostalgia’ which begins: ‘All things are bright and beautiful’ (239), and tells of the changed fortunes of Niki and Viliki, the Pule Siblings, after the arrival of democracy in South Africa. Now the communal narrator enters, recording a major change that affects many of the township residents: they have ‘gradually moved from cow-dung to coal’ (239). The authorial narrator, though, records a much deeper and more pervasive change. Despite the new political freedom, neither Popi nor Viliki is contented. They long for the past: ‘A profound nostalgia for the romantic days of the struggle attacked them. Days of sacrifice and death. Days of selfless service and hope’ (240). In this painting of the donkey with the candle, Mda seems to challenge the reader to imagine a new time of transformation and hope where — the evils of apartheid now over — people of all races will be able to create a better future together; but as the next chapter, ‘Betrayed by the Elders’, makes clear, the way forward is full of pitfalls and disappointments. The candle-bearing donkey fuses the ordinary with the visionary. This fusion recalls the photographs in Schwager’s book which show Claerhout’s simple, usually illiterate congregation attending services in the mission church they built themselves. Their eyes are bright, and they hold candles in their hands. In the spirit which Jacobs has called ‘evenhanded’ in its ability to show corruption both amongst blacks currently in power and their white predecessors (5), Mda signals that change must be social as well as political. The candle must be kept burning to ensure that one cycle of oppression does not end only to be followed by another.

‘Women, Donkeys, Sunflowers’ — and what of sunflowers? Yellow sunflowers and pink, red and white cosmos appear abundantly in Claerhout’s paintings as constant accompaniments to individual depictions. In this respect, the flowers are woven into the painter’s chronotopes, part of the recurring space-time continua of his paintings. They also mark significant cycles. It is in the sunflower fields at the beginning of the novel that the histories of Mda’s instrumentalised women begin, and in the sunflower fields at the end of the novel that these same women come to experience creative community.

**Appropriating the ‘Madonna’ Motif**

Frans Claerhout as Belgian artist must of course have been thoroughly familiar with the depictions of the Madonna in Western painting, which have so complicated a relation to the legacy of Eve. Marina Warner writes, ‘[t]he emphasis on Mary’s body, on her miraculous virginity and motherhood, concentrates attention on female physicality and biological processes; it carnalises her figure, grounding her character in the flesh even as it makes her an exception to all
mankind’ (Warner xviii [my emphasis]). Deriving from tenth-century Byzantine icons which survived the Roman Empire, early madonnas were stylised and formalised rather than realistic. But with Chimabue, Giotto and Duccio in the thirteenth century, depictions of the Madonna moved toward humanism and away from symbolism — so that Raphael portrayed ordinary women in portraits which reflected a new secularisation through robust, sculptural qualities, while the Florentine painter, Masaccio, broke away from the conventions of European gothic art to depict realistically observed people in convincing situations. He was interested particularly in the way people see each other. In the high Renaissance painting of Piero della Francesca the Madonna is surrounded by panoplies of saints and angels. In this ‘Sacre Conversazione’ mode between Madonna, saints and angels, della Francesca may be seen to convey a balance between humanism and scientific enquiry by depicting the changes in the world he was living in, exploring particularly the new relationship of Man to God.

The Madonna motif which recurs in both Claerhout’s paintings and Mda’s text is a good example of what Strydom has called the series as opposed to the cycle: ‘the repetition of a theme discontinuous in time and space’ (Strydom 16.) The Blue Madonna who frames Chapter 17 is described by the authorial narrator as ‘different from the other madonnas. No cosmos blooms surround her. She is not sitting in a brown field of wheat. No sunflowers flourish in her shadow. Yet she exudes tenderness like all the others’ (107). (See Figure 7, ‘The Blue Madonna’.) This tender and youthful Madonna embodies, in Mda’s overall design, the creative interactions between the Trinity and the people he paints. In this chapter the Trinity transforms his models, Popi and Niki of the flesh. He gives his Madonna the features of her child — or rather, the features Popi will have as she grows older. Though initially neither woman perceives the extent of the Trinity’s influence on their lives, both Niki and Popi come to recognise the importance of his vision and of his values to their sense of themselves. Initially indignant at his creative licence, his ‘right to change things at the dictates of his whims. To invent his own truths’ (108), Niki will come to value the Trinity’s humorous interventions. She wonders, ‘[f]rom where did he get all that power, to re-create what had already been created?’ (108). Niki also comes to treasure the priest’s near-miraculous ability to heal discord. He dissolves an argument between mother and daughter by the gift of laughter. His impersonations of the braying of a donkey convulse Popi and completely melt her anger against Niki. Vision and the laughter that leads to self-acceptance: these are the Trinity’s gifts. The gift of laughter will later be celebrated in the novel when the daughter makes the mother laugh. Popi alludes to her identity as a coloured or mixed-race person and Niki laughs ‘for the first time in many years’. She exclaims: ‘I am so happy that at last you are so free of shame about being coloured that you can even make a joke about it’ (260). On one of her visits to the Trinity’s mission station, Niki prays for the continuing creativity of the priest who is also a comforter: ‘for his hands that must stay
strong. For his vision that must continue to find joy in cosmos, donkeys, women and sunflowers. For his passion for colour that must never fade. And for his muse that occasionally flung him into a mother-and-child mode’ (112).

The final painting I want to touch on is from Chapter 11. (See Figure 8, ‘Eyes in the Sky’.) Here we are shown an unusual Nativity. The Holy Family is bottom centre but most of the painting is given over to the ‘big eyes in the sky’ that observe the trio. Here surely Claerhout — and Mda — are responding to the ‘Sacre
Conversazione’ mode of della Francesco’s Madonnas, surrounded as they are by saints and angels who help the viewer to understand the relationship between man and God. Discussing ‘Sacre Conversazione’ Charles Hope remarks: ‘It has been suggested ... that the saints gathered around the Virgin are celebrating the celestial
liturgy, or that the child is held up like the Eucharistic host … more generally, altarpieces are said to be “about aspects of doctrine, such as the Incarnation” (Hope qtd in Verdon and Henderson 536.). Unlike della Francesco’s saints and angels, the voices and gazes of the citizens of Mahlatwetsa Township who are Niki’s neighbours are far from unambiguously affirmative. Their mockery has over the years ostracised Niki for her miscegenation, and Popi as the product of that miscegenation. The communal narrator confesses his own involvement in the community’s media-fuelled accusations:

‘We fear that even in your Johannesburg, people will see us as the bad women of Excelsior,’ added Susanna.
We jeered and cheered. The women were both heroes and villains to various sections of the crowd.
We mocked Maria: ‘Hello, Mrs. Lombard’.
We taunted Mmampe: ‘Hello, Mrs. Smit’.
We leered at Niki: ‘Hello Mrs. Cronje’.
We called each of the women by the name of the lover with whom she had been charged. (98)

Equally, the communal narrator enters into the community’s contempt of the black women’s white Afrikaner lovers: ‘[w]e cheered and jeered even louder when Johannes Smit and Groot-Jan Lombard emerged from the courtroom’ (98).

By contrast with the communal narrator, the authorial narrator is not judgemental. In this his world view resembles that of the Trinity, whose paintings celebrate and immortalise the previously instrumentalised. Though both Mda and Claerhout are male, their verbal and visual strategies may be argued to destabilise the will to domination of the male gaze. Bal, writing about the way in which the paintings of Rembrandt and Manet problematise the voyeuristic gaze, remarks:

The mode of vision I am trying to describe is … a different way of getting to know. The epistemology that is being tested here is based on relationality, or more precisely, on the model of friendship. Friendship requires getting to know other people in a dialogic mode. In the visual domain, this means a seeing radically different from the voyeuristic, asymmetrical mode that has for too long been hegemonic … it calls for a suspension of what we think we see, for a recognition of historical positionality, and for an appreciation of relations of reciprocity. (400)

Claerhout’s distorted, impassioned expressionist-symbolist paintings refuse voyeuristic hegemonic ways of knowing and seeing. This is why Mda appropriates them for The Madonna of Excelsior.

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NOTES

1 Mieke Bal defines focalisation as ‘the relationship between the ‘vision’, the agent that sees, and that which is seen’ (146).

2 For a discussion of the contrast between political revolution (following the removal of colonial political control) and social revolution (promoting equity and justice) see Mike Kissick and Michael Titlestad, pp. 149–67 in Jacobs.

3 The notion of ‘appropriating’ in this section draws the reader’s attention to issues of intertextual borrowing in Mda’s work. I attempt to demonstrate throughout this essay that Mda’s use of Claerhout’s paintings and his transposition of Claerhout’s story world into the story world of The Madonna is strikingly original. But there has been an international controversy over Mda’s incorporation in The Heart of Redness of verbatim quotations derived from Jeff Peires’ historical account of the Great Xhosa Cattle Killing of 1856–1857 in his book The Dead Will Arise. The controversy was sparked by the publication of an essay by a Yale Ph.D. student, Andrew Offenburger, who accused Mda of lifting dozens of quotations from Peires’ book without acknowledgement. BOOK SA ran a series of commentaries from South African and international scholars, including the South African writer Stephen Gray (who alleged plagiarism), American academic Byron Caminero-Santangelo (who denied plagiarism) and Mda himself. Mda argued that the Xhosa language is full of proverbs based on the Cattle Killing episode, just as Xhosa culture is full of songs about the Prophetess: ‘It is our story. Jeff Peires does not own that story. So I can’t steal it from him’ (Mda 2008b online). Mda also quoted South African philosopher Aryan Kaganof who argued that nobody objects to the intertextual borrowings of James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, or William Shakespeare. Kagan pointed out that ‘the greatest philosopher of all, Nietzsche, rarely, almost never, used footnotes. And indeed, he also lifted sentences wholesale from Schopenhauer, and from the New Testament, and from Kant, without mentioning where he lifted them from’ (Mda 2008b online). I close with the conclusions of the editor of BOOK SA. He maintained that Peires’ acceptance of Mda’s acknowledgement made the accusation of plagiarism untenable:

Peires is a top South African scholar. Call him a dissident scholar, in contrast to Offenburger’s orthodoxy, because, by accepting Mda’s acknowledgement as sufficient, he accepts the possibility of a world of greys. The thoughts of a top scholar are not nothing: indeed, they are oppositional to the thoughts of other scholars; they are potentially standard-setting. This means that in a top scholar’s opinion, the question of the book’s literary merit is the central one in relation to the value of the work. It follows that Offenburger has only succeeded in rejuvenating this question with his accusations: he has not displaced it, not succeeded in crystallising The Heart of Redness as ‘that work with plagiarism at its heart’, not transported the book to a world of blacks and white. We remain in grey territory, where art rules.

WORKS CITED


ON THE EVE OF A NEW YEAR

The streets are empty and full of longing.

Between occupants
potholes take deep breaths,
and wardens and traffic booths lean kindly
against each other, sharing
silent solace.

On these famished roads
traffic lights blink in disbelief,
tempted to scream. These
are streets that mourn,
and billboards reduced
to philosophical placards:

*Is this city the space,*
*Or the people?*
*Which came first — the road?*
*Or the journey?*

Tonight’s journey will end in the house
of God, where the pews will pant beneath
the mounting weight of expectant celebrants

for whom the coming year is another new road,
hidden from sight by a treacherous bend.

All the surviving minutes of this dying year
are like cars piling up on that road,
bathed in the hopeful glow of a million headlights.

There is a checkpoint ahead. It is on the other side of midnight.
THESE DAYS

At least once a day we pile the blame
on the hapless whoevers out there
whose job it is to stay up late
keeping the earth cold & warm
& breathing & forgiving (& maybe smiling),

forgetting that it’s also their duty to,
without fear or favour, find the time
to fix odd jobs like ensuring that planted bombs
go off as planned,
and carelessly made ones don’t.

But it’s getting easier to tell
that there’s nothing much wrong
with the world as it is,
and that the news is not as fucked-up
as people say it is, and that there’s nothing

that can’t be fixed as easily as
pushing a button or two.
For example, in the moments just after a blast,
what we shall do is touch rewind
to see it happen again, perhaps differently

and to learn
just what
do we need
to do right
next time?

Which leaves only one question:
what really matters,
and what is merely fluff
in this slushpile
of quibbling, self-important news.
MATHEMATICS

We are therefore forced, each one of us, to find our own units for marking the time, for making it countable.

I have chosen as mine things I salvaged from death’s unfinished dinner

Disch’s Blood
creeping drop-by-drop from a still-smoking gun
against a backdrop of all surviving July mornings filing out to pay their last respects

Shepherd’s Food Poems
fated to sate (for all eternity) starving Septembers
to be taken turn by turn from an infinite slideshow of Time

Wallace’s unfinished Final Sentence,
broken on the cusp of all the Octobers from there to here, but intact enough to be useful if we ever need to carbon-date or psycho analyse.

Time, no longer what it used to be, is now what it was never meant to be, the only fallen tombstone in the cemetery graffitied face of a mass grave bustling with the irredeemable children of Talent.
POETRY IN A TIME OF RECESSION

and there are the poems, running backwards
in baggy shorts across the earth,
but keeping straight, simple lines
in a way nothing else can.
Time, tickled, soars
off the earth without clearance,
to dance with the Piper-poet.
The dark numbers scramble too, off the smudged pages of newsprint.
They do not look back to see the hooded feet that drum this earth.
Today we will start by filling in the gaps.
Tomorrow, we will colour them with the poet’s newest, most insistent song.
JOHN O’LEARY

Speaking the Suffering Indigene: ‘Native’ Songs and Laments, 1820–1850

‘WE OWE THEM ALL THAT WE POSSESS’: ‘NATIVE’ SONGS AND LAMENTS

Nineteenth-century settlers, both British and American, wrote a considerable amount of verse about the indigenous peoples they, or earlier settlers, had encountered in the course of colonisation. Critical discussion has focused mainly on the major works they produced — pre-eminently on Longfellow’s Song of Hiawatha (1855), which is accorded a literary as well as historical significance.1 Much nineteenth-century verse about indigenous peoples was, however, of the casual or occasional kind, published, often pseudonymously, in newspapers, magazines and pamphlets, by poets of greater or lesser obscurity.2 This body of poetry has received, generally speaking, little critical analysis, yet it constitutes an intriguing index of nineteenth-century settler attitudes towards indigenes. It is certainly worthy of further discussion.

Casual or occasional verse about indigenes displayed considerable variety. One of the more striking forms was the ventriloquised lament, in which a settler poet spoke in the persona of an indigene about his or her sad plight. A good example is ‘The Gin’, which appeared in a Sydney newspaper in 1831. The poem’s speaker, an Aboriginal mother, begins with an evocation of her Coogee surroundings, which are represented as a kind of antipodean Eden:

The gum-tree with its glitt’ring leaves
Is sparkling in the sunny light,
And round my leafy home it weaves
Its dancing shade with flow’rets bright (‘Hugo’)

The poem’s pastoral mood does not last, for the Aboriginal mother reveals that her husband has been seduced away by the dubious delights of Sydney. As night falls and a cold southerly gale develops — images, both, of the Aboriginal mother’s comfortless existence — ‘Toongulla’s wretched child’ accepts that her husband is not going to return to his family. Gazing sadly on her sleeping child, she concludes that she and her people ‘have no hope but in the grave’. At this point the author steps in, appending a brief coda which invokes ‘religion’s aid’ to shield Aboriginal people from the ‘double storm’ of physical and moral ill. ‘Hugo’ finishes with a heartfelt appeal to the poem’s readers:

We owe them all that we possess —
The forest, plain, the glen, the hill,
Were theirs; — to slight is to oppress.
‘The Gin’ is a remarkable poem, as Elizabeth Webby has observed, notably in its artful appeal to white guilt and its carefully detailed description of Aboriginal life, which features the use of Aboriginal words (Webby 47). It is an example of the ‘Aboriginal lament’, large numbers of which appeared pseudonymously in colonial Australian newspapers in the earlier decades of the nineteenth century, and which allowed colonists to voice their concern over a controversial aspect of settlement. These poems indicate that during the early phase of colonisation in Australia — a period characterised, according to some historians, by violent, genocidal confrontation — settler society was not completely unable to cast a critical light on its dealings with Aboriginals.³

Ventriloquised laments of this kind were not confined to Australia. In South Africa during the same period, the emigrant Scottish poet, Thomas Pringle, was publishing in newspapers and journals short poems such as ‘The Captive of Camalú’, which creates a pastoral vision of the earlier life of a young ‘caffer or Ghonqua’ before describing the destruction of his village and the murder of his family by the Boers who have forced him into servitude (Pringle 1834 70–74). More substantial is ‘The Ghona Widow’s Lullaby’, in which Pringle draws on the traditions of the European Gothic to depict the night time dangers facing an indigenous mother and her child after an attack by settlers has decimated her tribe.

The jackal shrieks upon the rocks;
The tiger-wolf is howling;
The panther round the folded flocks
With stifled gurr is prowling (Pringle 1834 79)

Fortunately, the widow finds comfort in religion, confident that ‘a Mightier Arm’ will shield her and her child from harm. The happy ending does not diminish her suffering, however, nor put to rest the moral questions raised by the poem. Like ‘Hugo’ in Australia, Pringle was asking his society to confront uncomfortable truths about the treatment of indigenous peoples at a time when many — perhaps most — colonists preferred not to know the facts.⁴

In the former colony of the United States, too, poets were adopting the persona of the suffering indigene and ventriloquising his or her anguish in short poems published in local or special-interest newspapers. An example is Lydia Sigourney’s ‘The African Mother at her Daughter’s Grave’, in which a West African mother tearfully mourns the death of her child, the sole survivor of a raid by slavers (Sigourney 109–112). The African setting might seem to distance the poem from the concerns of its American readers, till it is recalled that at the time of writing the United States still practised slavery, and that there was a vast trans-Atlantic trade in human beings connecting West Africa and America. Sigourney’s poem emphasises the humanity of the African mother, thus underlining the barbarity of the slave trade and the moral lacuna of American complicity in it.
Closer to home is William Cullen Bryant’s ‘An Indian at the Burial Place of his Fathers’, in which a Native American is imagined returning to his father’s grave and meditating on the changes white settlement has brought. As is often the case in these poems, an idyllic rural scene is initially evoked. At this point, however, Bryant twists the convention by making his Indian state his displeasure at what he sees. Colonisers, the Indian complains, have destroyed the forests where his people hunted; worse, they have desecrated Indian graves. America’s first race can only retreat to a symbolically setting sun, pursued by a relentless tide of white settlement:

They waste us — ay — like April snow
In the warm noon, we shrink away;
And fast they follow, as we go
Towards the setting day —
Till they shall fill the land, and we
Are driven into the western sea (Bryant 61)

Like Sigourney and the other poets discussed above, Bryant uses his poem to emphasise the suffering humanity of his indigenous speaker, and by extension the inhumanity of white treatment of Native Americans. Atypically, white agency in the destruction of Native American societies is not glossed over. White settlers actively ‘waste’ the Indians and ‘drive’ them into the Pacific, whereas a more usual trope for this period figured Native Americans as passively ‘wasting away’ through some kind of ineluctable, fated process.\(^5\) Moral responsibility is sheeted home to where it belongs.

Laments of the kind described above were by no means the only form of ventriloquised indigenous utterance produced by settler poets at this time. In his ‘War Song of Makanna’, Pringle employs the rhetoric of Romantic Primitivism to voice the defiance of the ‘caffer prophet’ Makanna (Lynx), pursued by the British after his attack on Grahamstown in 1819 (Pringle 1828 95–96). The prospect of indigenous vengeance was likely to create an uneasy frisson in settler minds, and the indigene was in fact often seen to embody the uncanny, as Tim Fulford has shown in relation to depictions of Native Americans by English poets such as Coleridge and Wordsworth (Fulford 2006 12). This fascination with the indigenous uncanny lies behind another ventriloquised outburst of Pringle’s, ‘The Incantation’, in which ‘Makanna’s widowed bride’ pours her blood on the waters of a sacred stream and curses those who have persecuted her husband:

Thus the Mother’s feelings tender
In my breast I stifle now:
Thus I summon you to render
Vengeance for the Widow’s vow! (Pringle 1834 56)

The Gothic atmosphere created by Pringle is echoed in an anonymous Australian poem with a similar title, ‘Incantation Scene’. Here, three ‘Weird Sisters’ — clearly modelled on the trio in *Macbeth* — ritually curse the perpetrators of the
1838 Myall Creek massacre, which had seen the slaughter by stockmen of around thirty unarmed Aboriginals, including women and children (‘Incantation Scene’). These poems of defiance and revenge, though fewer in number than the laments discussed above, are worthy of note, for they construct the indigene as active rather than passive, triumphant — if only in death — rather than defeated. Whether they truly permit the indigene to speak is a matter that will be addressed later.

Settler poets did not always ventriloquise indigenous voices. Often the lament for the dispossessed or suffering indigene was direct, as in Bryant’s ‘The Disinterred Warrior’, Pringle’s ‘The Desolate Valley’ or Henry Parkes’ ‘The Murdered Wild Boy’, which offers a pathos-filled account — based, apparently, on a true story — of the torture and murder of a young Aboriginal (Parkes). Demands for better treatment of indigenous populations could be made straightforwardly, too, as in Sigourney’s ‘The Indian’s Welcome to the Pilgrim Fathers’, and in poems such as ‘The Caffer’ by Pringle, which displays a scathing indignation about the treatment meted out by colonists to South Africa’s indigenous peoples:

He is a robber? — true, it is a strife
Between the black-skinned bandit and the white…
A heathen? — teach him, then, thy better creed,
Christian, if thou deserv’st that name indeed! (Pringle 1828 146).

Settler verse about indigenes did not focus solely on themes of loss, revenge or abuse. Sometimes the idyllic prelude which often begins laments for dispossessed or suffering indigenes was expanded to fill complete lyrics depicting what settler poets imagined as the bliss of pre-colonial indigenous life. An example from South Africa is Pringle’s ‘The Kosa’, which uses the language of nineteenth-century medievalism to depict the simple, happy life of Xhosa tribesmen as they drink mead, tell tales of war and go forth ‘gaily’ on the hunt (Pringle 1834 18–20). From Australia comes Eliza Dunlop’s ‘Native Poetry’, in which Aboriginals are depicted according to the conventions of Romantic Primitivism as happy children of nature, who spend their time singing and dancing in the Virgilian shade of a ‘karakun tree’ (Dunlop ‘Native Poetry’).

‘Native Poetry’ is a translation of genuine Aboriginal songs, according to Dunlop; it is in fact one of a number of ‘translations’ of indigenous orature which settler poets engaged in (best-known are the numerous ‘Indian death songs’, which were written from the eighteenth century on and which form an extensive corpus of their own). While these ‘translations’ were often in fact pseudo-translations, or adaptations, rather than true translations, they do attest to a genuine (if rather naïve) interest in the culture and psychology of indigenous peoples at this period. This ‘capacity to recognise otherness in a positive sense’ (Carr 166) is characteristic of many of the ‘native’ songs and laments examined here. In her ‘Aboriginal’ chant ‘The Eagle Chief’, for example, Dunlop informs her reader about the talismanic crystals that featured in traditional Aboriginal culture (Dunlop ‘Eagle Chief’), while in poems such as ‘Amakosina’ and ‘The
Coranna’ Pringle depicts the customs of South African tribesman in peace and war (Pringle 1828 99–100, 120–21). While the anthropological substance of these poems should not be exaggerated — sometimes the detail is vague and general in the extreme — they can be seen as functioning as mini-ethnographies of peoples about whom the average early-nineteenth-century settler would have known very little.7 They are examples of the liberal, outward-looking Romanticism that presented the Other as unfamiliar, but not alien (Fulford 1998 59).

A Fascination with the Marginalised: Literary and Historical Background

A number of literary traditions lay behind the poems described above. Virgil’s first Eclogue had dealt with the theme of dispossession, as rustics driven from their native soil by civil convulsion complained about their loss (Virgil 20–27). During the Renaissance, the lament of the shepherd or nymph for a lost lover or former happy life had been a standard topos, the subject of innumerable poems and songs. The growth of Romanticism in the eighteenth century had fostered a taste for melancholy; in particular, it had focused an interest on solitary figures — mad people, the rural poor, homeless wanderers of various kinds — who existed on the fringes of society. These marginalised others could be European (an example is Wordsworth’s ‘Idiot Boy’) but they could also be non-European, for Romantic writers were fascinated by indigenous peoples, especially Native Americans, who were conceived of as both exotic and sublime (Fulford 2006 4, 12). This fascination is expressed by Wordsworth in poems such as ‘The Complaint of the Forsaken Indian Woman’, a ventriloquised lament in which an abandoned Indian mother faces her imminent death while mourning the loss of her child:

My journey will be shortly run,
I shall not see another sun,
I cannot lift my limbs to know
If they have any life or no,
My poor forsaken child! If I
For once could have thee close to me,
With happy heart I then would die,
And my last thoughts would happy be.
I feel my body die away,
I shall not see another day (Wordsworth 61–70)

Wordsworth’s poem brings us close, in theme and emotional timbre, to poems like ‘The Gin’ and ‘The African Mother at her Daughter’s Grave’, and indeed many of the ‘native’ laments discussed here possess a distinctly Wordsworthian quality.

Warrior chants such as Pringle’s ‘War Song of Makanna’ drew on different traditions, notably the Romantic Primitivism of Macpherson’s Ossian poems and Scott’s Border ballads. Add to these the tradition of the Gothic, whose brooding imagery was frequently employed to evoke the fate of the persecuted, abandoned tribesperson, and the taste for colourful exoticism fostered by poets such as
Byron, which delighted in depicting strange customs and rites, and it is clear that nineteenth-century settler poets had a rich variety of literary models, both Classical and Romantic, to draw on when they set out to depict the suffering or dispossessed indigene.

It would be wrong, however, to think of the ‘native’ songs and laments discussed here as mere literary exercises. Poets such as Pringle were motivated by a powerful sense of Christian duty, a legacy of the evangelical movement that had swept Britain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and which reached a peak in the 1830s (Stocking 240). Pringle himself was active in the anti-slavery crusade; Dunlop was the wife of a Protector of Aborigines, an office set up to shield indigenous peoples after a parliamentary select committee established in 1835 had collated damning evidence of atrocities in British colonies (Stocking 243). Each was committed, albeit in different ways, to ameliorating the lot of indigenous peoples, and each was capable, on occasion, of writing highly political poems that directly addressed the mistreatment of indigenes at the hands of settlers. In the United States, a parallel evangelical movement, the Second Great Awakening, had inspired a wave of social activism in places such as New England. This had focused concern on (among other things) the mistreatment of Native Americans, notably the Cherokees, about whom Sigourney wrote a pathos-filled poem, ‘The Cherokee Mother’, as part of a carefully-orchestrated campaign to halt the tribe’s removal west. Nor were these activists (as we would now call them) parochial or limited in their scope. Sigourney, for example, along with the American missionaries whose endeavours she supported, was concerned that British imperial expansion into southern Africa was going to lead to a repetition of the inhumanities already inflicted on Native Americans in the United States. Her poem ‘Cry of the Corannas’ describes the dire state of South African indigenes wasting away from hunger and disease (Sigourney 64–65).

While most settler poets were not as directly involved in reformist campaigns as Pringle, Dunlop or Sigourney, they shared nevertheless a common poetic discourse of imaginative sympathy designed (in Pringle’s expressive phrase) to ‘unlock the fountains of the heart’ (Pringle 1834 8). This discourse had its origin in the eighteenth-century cult of sensibility, which had focused on feelings of melancholy, distress, refined emotionalism and benevolence (Barker-Benfield xix). While this cult could be inward-looking and passive, it had also possessed an outward, active orientation which had found expression in a powerful culture of humanitarian reform (Barker-Benfield xxvi). The verse under consideration here was a product of that reformist, humanitarian culture; it was written to enlist the sympathies of its readers for the purpose of producing moral and social change. It is ‘engaged’ writing, albeit ideologically conditioned in ways that will be discussed presently.

The discourse of imaginative sympathy had been developed especially strongly by early-nineteenth-century women writers such as Felicia Hemans and
Leticia Landon, as Isobel Armstrong has pointed out (Armstrong 377). Dunlop, Sigourney and the other female settler poets who wrote about the plight of indigenous peoples should be seen as belonging to this expressive tradition of women’s writing. But men, too, were capable of producing ‘sympathetic’ verse about suffering indigenes, notably men — like Pringle — who were professional humanitarians. This created an interesting cultural dialectic, in which what might be described as a feminine world of sensibility — composed of poets, women, humanitarians and the indigenes whose suffering they described — was implicitly opposed to an unfeeling, exploitative, masculine world of commerce, colonisation and empire. The ‘feminine’ character of this verse is underlined by its frequent use of the figure of the abandoned indigenous mother, for mothers, as many critics have pointed out, were central to the cult of refined domesticity that reached its apogee in the nineteenth century (Barker-Benfield 276). Male indigenes were sometimes depicted as suffering — a striking example is Pringle’s well-known ‘The Bechuana Boy’ — but they lacked the psychic charge of the abandoned and suffering indigenous mother, torn from her hearth, bereft of her husband and nursing, most likely, a helpless infant. The victimisation of these indigenous mothers at the hands of slavers, soldiers and settlers was carefully choreographed and obsessively focused on; it sent a powerful message to nineteenth-century readers about the evils of empire in which they were, to a greater or lesser degree, complicit.

MOURNING, REPARATION AND THE ISSUE OF AGENCY: CRITICAL DISCUSSION

As noted earlier, the verse considered here has received relatively little critical analysis. Traditional humanist criticism, with its focus on metropolitan literary traditions and ‘important’ (usually male) writers, had little interest in pseudonymous verse in obscure colonial newspapers, or verse by ‘minor’ (usually female) writers such as Sigourney or Dunlop. Postcolonial criticism has analysed various types of writing about indigenous peoples, focusing especially on issues of race and representation. Terry Goldie, for example, has identified certain recurrent stereotypes which figure indigenes as sexual, violent, oral, mystical and prehistoric, that is, past or dead (Goldie 15–17). David Spurr for his part has detected a tendency to idealise, naturalise, and eroticise indigenous peoples (Spurr 125–40; 156–69; 170–83). Such stereotypes and tendencies can certainly be found in the verse examined here. The ‘native’ song or lament by its very nature tended to present the indigene as past, or about to become past, just as it tended to idealise indigenous peoples, depicting them as noble and innocent.

Such analysis is invaluable, highlighting as it does the ideological underpinnings of much colonial writing about indigenes. As Malvern van Wyk Smit has pointed out, in relation to early South African writing, postcolonial criticism has unfortunately tended to distort discussion of this literature, replacing one ‘univocal narrative of euro-centric imperial self-justification’ with ‘another master narrative (no less reductionist and no less binarist) of the passive exploitation or heroic resistance of the colonised, of the blanket perfidy of all settlers and colonial
agents, of the cultural obtuseness and imperialist complicity of all missionaries, and of the patronising ventriloquism of all colonial writers’ (Smit 12).

Of the poets discussed here, Pringle in particular has suffered at the hands of postcolonial critics, in part because he occupies the dangerous position of being seen, traditionally, as the ‘father’ of English verse in South Africa (Calder 4). One of his most famous poems, ‘Afar in the Desert’, for example, has been described as exhibiting ‘an exploitative colonial myth’ of self-sufficiency in a new land and performing ‘a crazy gloating’ over a conveniently empty desert landscape (Voss 18–19). Pringle, Voss concludes, is little more than the archetypal white colonist, ‘mounted, rifle in one hand, Bible in the other’ (Voss 20).

Pained laments for the suffering or dispossessed indigene like ‘The Gin’ might be thought to escape this kind of damning diagnosis, but according to at least one postcolonial critic, their apparently innocent plaints are in reality sinister proleptic elegies that articulate a barely disguised genocidal death wish (Brantlinger 3–4, 59, 86, 119, 142). Less extreme — but still negative in its connotation — is Susan Scheckel’s verdict that the numerous laments for the vanishing Indian that pepper nineteenth-century American writing constitute a ‘habit of thought’ designed to ‘assuage guilt and assure continuity in the face of change’ (Scheckel 37). Mourning of this kind acknowledges the fact of indigenous extinction, but its goal, Scheckel argues, ‘is to commit what is past to memory, to allow the mourner to move beyond it’ (Scheckel 37). The laments examined in this article are, according to this line of reasoning, carefully crafted psychological tools used by settlers to lay to rest the troubling ghost of the indigene.

While not wishing to limit the plurality of interpretations capable of being generated by these or any texts, I believe such readings are cynical, since they effectively accuse settler writers of universal bad faith towards the indigenous peoples they encountered. Such an accusation is patronising to say the least; it posits the ‘cultural obtuseness and imperialist complicity’ Smit, for one, does not find in the works of many early colonial South African writers (Smit 13). Rather than being set up as easy targets for a blanket ideological condemnation, Pringle and the other settler poets discussed here should, I believe, be granted the moral seriousness that their often oppositional and subversive voices deserve. These voices formed a strand in a larger language of anti-imperial dissent which Christoper Hodgkins, in his study of British colonialism, has identified as characteristic of English Protestantism as, over several centuries, it contemplated the excesses of empire (Hodgkins 2, 8, 137–38, 193–94, 198–202, 241). The dismay these poets felt at the treatment of indigenous peoples was, I believe, sincere. If, ultimately, it produced a textual rather than a real justice, it created nevertheless moving statements of sorrow and outrage. Rather than the murmurings of a murderous anger, or tools to ease the burden of guilt, these statements should be seen for what they were: as an attempt to alert colonial settlers to the injustice being perpetrated in the midst of their societies, as an effort to make reparation — to say sorry, in
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however inadequate a fashion — for the all-too-obvious destruction wrought on indigenous peoples by colonisation.¹³

Ventriloquising the suffering indigene, or writing about indigenous suffering in the third person, as the poems discussed here variously do, does nevertheless raise awkward questions for the modern reader. ‘Hugo’, Dunlop, Parkes, Pringle, Sigourney, Bryant and the other settler poets quoted above could never really know the indigenous peoples whose suffering they described; what right had they to speak for oppressed subaltern others positioned on the margins of colonial societies? In assimilating indigenes into a European literary discourse, were they not performing an act of appropriation, however well intentioned? In speaking for indigenous peoples the way they did — in representing them again and again as the passive recipients of settler contempt or violence, as depressed, dying or dead — were these poets not simply re-inscribing them as victims?

These are legitimate questions for modern critics, but not ones, I believe, that can be addressed to nineteenth-century writers. The poets discussed here were people of their time; conditioned by an ideology of cultural and religious superiority, and impelled by a strong sense of moral obligation, they did not doubt their right to speak for suffering indigenes — in fact they saw it as their duty. Presenting their suffering in terms of a European literary tradition of pathos and lament was indeed a kind of appropriation, but as the discussion above has shown, it was an effective way — perhaps, indeed, the only way — to convey this suffering and so move the sensibilities of middle-class British readers, as Peter Kitson has noted in relation to the Abolitionist discourse of the period (Kitson 25).

By the same token, the tendency to image indigenous peoples as passive recipients of settler violence, as depressed or dying or dead, can be seen as a realistic response to the often grim realities of settler society. Portraying the indigene as victor rather than victim, as active rather than passive, was not in fact unknown — see for example, Pringle’s ‘War Song of Makanna’, discussed above, or the striking encomium of ‘Honi Heki’ (Hone Heke) by Tasmanian poet Bassett Dickson, which figures the Maori chief as a brave patriot, successful in his defiance of the British government.¹⁴ But such positive portrayals could never be more than exceptions, in the light of the overwhelming military and economic advantage enjoyed by colonial settlers.

Given the facts of colonisation, the ‘native’ songs and laments examined in this article should be seen as realistic responses to real conditions, rather than as pallid literary exercises, or sly vindications of colonisation (Ackland 20). Without these poems, the suffering indigene would have been silenced, not merely because of the practical fact that at this period very few indigenes could write English well enough to articulate their suffering in literary form, but because the constraining discourses of the era, whether benevolent or malign, would have made it impossible for the voice of the subaltern indigene to be heard, as Spivak has proposed in relation to another colonial context (Morton 57–68). Considered
from the standpoint of the modern academy, ventriloquising the suffering indigene, or even writing about his/her suffering in a more distant third person, might be considered patronising, or worse. It was, however, the only option available to nineteenth-century settler poets who were determined to eschew the collusion that silence would have entailed.

**Speaking the Suffering Indigene — An Afterword**

The liberal, fundamentally humane note struck in these ‘native’ songs and laments did not last. The second half of the nineteenth century saw the development of a more punitive approach towards indigenous peoples, both in America and the colonies of the British Empire, as the development of social Darwinism and the impact of events such as the Indian Mutiny hardened racial attitudes (Stocking 92, 107). As a result, the kind of verse examined in this article more or less disappeared from the pages of newspapers and magazines. If indigenes were written about at all now, it was in the unreal, hyper-Romantic manner typified by Kendall in poems such as ‘The Last of his Tribe’, or in the dismissive, ‘comic’ satire of pieces such as ‘Black Lizzie’ and ‘Peter the Piccaninny’ (Kendall 1869 60–61, Kendall 1880 25–32, 104–10). It was a sad declension, for the earlier ‘native’ songs and laments, for all their undoubted ideological conditioning, had provided a space where a genuine outrage and sorrow at the treatment of indigenes could be articulated, demonstrating in the process a real sympathy for the suffering indigene and a capacity — naïve but well-intentioned — to recognise otherness in a positive sense. These qualities mark the poems discussed here as special, I believe, and suggest that they should be the subject of further study.

**Notes**

1. The critical literature on *Hiawatha* is vast. For recent discussion, see Carr pp. 101–46, Bellin pp. 175–82 and articles by Jackson and Lockard.
2. The verse of the more popular poets was sometimes collected and published in book form at a later date. See for example Pringle, whose *Ephemeraides* (1828) and *African Sketches* (1834) gathered up poems published in a variety of colonial and missionary newspapers and magazines, or Sigourney, whose *Poems* (1834; after 1838 *Selected Poems*) collected examples of the numerous casual and occasional pieces she had published in newspapers, journals and pamphlet form.
3. See for example Patrick Wolfe, who sees settler violence towards Aboriginal people as systemic to colonisation, which in its initial phase he judges as violently destructive of Aboriginal society (27–29).
4. Pringle actively campaigned for better treatment of South Africa’s indigenous peoples. His *Narrative of a Residence in South Africa* (1834) is a detailed catalogue of the abuses suffered by San, Khoikhoi and Bantu at the hands of white colonists.
5. See for example Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, the Indian agent and early ethnographer of Native Americans, who did much to shape mid-nineteenth-century perceptions of ‘the Indian’. In his poem *Alhalla*, Schoolcraft described Native Americans as ‘a broken link in the ethnological chain’ (1) doomed by God’s decree ‘to melt before the white man’s face’ (54).
6 For a discussion of the interest shown in the culture and psychology of Native Americans at this time, see Carr p. 17 and Fulford 2006 pp. 149–50.


8 See for example Pringle’s ‘War Song of Makanna’, which contains lengthy notes by Pringle detailing what he saw as the treachery of the British authorities toward the Bantu chief, and which was bitterly resented by his fellow settlers (Brantlinger 83–84). See too Dunlop’s ‘The Aboriginal Mother’, which was published in support of a spirited campaign to convict the stockmen responsible for the Myall Creek massacre. For a detailed discussion of Dunlop’s poem, see O’Leary 2004.

9 For a full discussion of Sigourney’s poem, see Brandon.

10 For detail about American missionary endeavours in southern Africa, and the extensive connections at this period between British and American missionary societies, see Porter pp. 351–57.

11 For a more detailed discussion of Dunlop’s place in this tradition, see O’Leary 2004.

12 Where a suffering indigenous mother was absent, she was sometimes created for the occasion, for example, by Dunlop. For discussion, see O’Leary 2004.

13 For a fuller discussion of the need to make reparation towards indigenous peoples, see Carr pp. 20–21.

14 Dickson’s poem compares Heke to a hero of ancient Greece (10), attributing to him Homeric qualities of courage and martial prowess (22). The main models for the Maori chief are in fact the revolutionary European nationalists of the 1840s (12).

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Speaking the Suffering Indigene


An Unexpected Turnaround

For three long years I was beastly treated, and heavy irons on my legs I wore
My back from flogging was lacerated, and oft times painted with my crimson gore
And many a man from downright starvation, lies mouldering now beneath the clay
And Captain Logan he had us mangled, all at the triangles of Moreton Bay
Like the Egyptians and ancient Hebrews, we were oppressed under Logan’s yoke
Till a native black lying there in ambush did deal this tyrant his mortal stroke
My fellow prisoners be exhilarated that all such monsters such a death may find
And when from bondage we are liberated our former sufferings will fade from mind
(from the convict ballad, ‘Moreton Bay’, c. 1830, anon)

I was getting a good rub-down from Mrs Plum when the summons came. I like
this body of mine, so does Mrs Plum. She devotes a lot of a time to my back,
which she says is as smooth and as broad as an Injun’s.
The prison has this effect on the body. You get squared up in it. There are few
outer chains and bars here; they are internal, in the muscles and joints, and behind
the eyes. Which is why we do good business here, with convicts and soldiers
alike: I massage the prison out of them. I have freed more prisoners with these
hands than have the hands of time.
‘It’s a woman’s lot to suffer at the hands of men,’ I said to Plum.
But Plummy was not to be consoled. In losing me — were it to come to that
— she would lose a close attachment. She would still have her husband of course,
but he didn’t do much for her. This place can be very lonely.
So rub on, Mrs Plum. Rub on and don’t stop, for when you stop it means the
hour of my execution has come.
A hollow knock at the door. On cue Plum’s hands stopped. ‘Come!’ she said.
And who should have come by with the summons? None other than my ‘little
gaoler’, as I used to call him. Christopher Chambers, a boy convict who was
the Captain’s runner — and my little go-between on the side. A squirt with an
imaginary key twirling on his finger. A glint in his eye and his teeth. His hair
was soft and golden. He would stand in the doorway as if he owned this room,
casting his eye imperiously around. This was an act to shield himself against
our trembling lovemaking, which left him vulnerable and beautiful. He knew I
knew this about him, so he must push me away and play the pimp with me. But
he couldn’t look at me for too long, not in the eye, otherwise he might’ve found
himself in love, and his whole world would have collapsed.
Tonight the tough act was gone.
‘What do you want?’ said Plum, rousing on him.
‘A summons from the Captain,’ Christopher said.
‘Yes!’ I beamed. ‘We know it already. The Captain’s walls have ears even when you’re not there. The game is up.’
‘Little savage,’ said Plum.
‘It wasn’t me, Reggie. Honest.’
‘Of course it wasn’t you! Would you cut off your nose to spite your little face?! It’s all right, Plum,’ I went on, softening tempers as is my way. ‘He’s all right. We’re all a bit upset at the moment. Besides, we know it’s someone blabbing with the chaplain. I suppose it was inevitable.’
‘I’ll find out the rat, Reggie. Honest. And whoever it was’ll pay for it.’

We fell silent. Plum went on squeezing, a little roughly I might add. I observed Chambers. Even now, with this crisis happening, and with his fear, he couldn’t help but gaze at my body, my hair wet on my shoulders, the steam and the scent of the oil intoxicating him.

Our eyes met. Yes, see me, I thought. See you. He lowered his gaze, then remembering himself drew something out of his pocket and held it out to me. One of Captain Logan’s dreaded red pennants of death.

I was suddenly angry. ‘Give that to me!’
‘I can’t,’ he said, trembling.
‘If the Captain dares order me over with one of those,’ I said, ‘I shall answer him with it personally. I am after all a free person, not a common criminal.’

Still he resisted, so I leapt off the massage table and stood before him in all my glory, shedding towels like swans’ feathers.

He clutched the pennant to his breast like a crucifix. I grabbed his hands and easily prised the thing free.

‘There! That wasn’t too difficult, was it? Now Plummy … let’s make me look beautiful.’

* * * * *

I confess I’d had my fantasies too (for fantasies abound here where living is forbidden) of who else would walk through that door, by mistake, to find me naked on the table, or near enough to it. The Captain himself. Oh I am sorry; he would say, and me with innocent shock grasping a towel to my breast; the Captain, visibly embarrassed, even blushing, the hardest man in this place, turning away and retreating out the door, but just before he leaves he looks back and sees my … behind — and pauses. My shocked innocence gone, now it’s innocent welcoming — but not coquetry, he would detest that. No, mine is natural expression with the heart visible. So he comes back into the room, closing the door behind him …

Occasionally the Captain’s wife Letitia appeared in my fantasies. She, for whatever reason, would come here to the Female Factory and lose who or whatever it was she was looking for in the twists and turns of the building, and would get
a little grimmish and frightened in the process, and finally stumble upon the Captain and me, together. And so spellbound is she, she herself joins us, admiring my beauty, admiring her husband admiring me.

* * * * *

Christopher escorted me out of the Factory. Complete stillness in the Settlement, the night clear but dark. We passed the soldiers’ barracks, then the prisoners’ barracks, and now we approached a deeper darkness that was the river and the world beyond. Instinctively I took the boy’s arm as we turned into the path running alongside the river and I felt the cool touch of the air.

Presently we came to the Captain’s office. Two sentries stationed outside gave a friendly hello. See, that’s the spirit, none of that nasty game-playing and bullying.

Christopher was told to wait outside while I was ushered in.

* * * * *

‘A little late for chats,’ I said, not intending to be arch.

‘Sit down,’ said Captain Logan.

I did so and gave the red pennant of death a little wave. When he didn’t react I placed it on the seat beside me and crossed my legs.

He himself did not sit. He wanted to pace, and what a pacer! — his steps full of deliberate purpose even in those few square yards, like a Napoleon, a caged Napoleon, his broad feet swelling the sides of his polished boots.

The man’s mind, clearly, was elsewhere. So much for love! He was troubled, or at least thinking deeply about something but it was nothing that had me at the centre otherwise I would’ve felt it, an animal-pulsing between us.

I cleared my throat … and was ignored.

He continued to pace on those legs that had stood in American forests waiting to ambush the Injuns and the colonial scum, those legs that had trudged through the muddy war in Europe, those legs that had carried him up the tallest mountain six leagues south of the Settlement, those legs —

‘I have given’ — at last he spoke! — ‘I have given all,’ he said gravely.

‘Discipline is the lifeblood of service. They don’t know it yet. They don’t know it. Without discipline you’re nothing. Discipline is … love.’

‘It can be!’ I said.
‘Discipline is the gift of our nation,’ he went on, so handsome. ‘We are nurtured through discipline, regulation, control. These are precious. They are the very foundation of our sense of who we are, our belonging. I give them this gift and this is how they repay me.’

‘You sacrifice so much and receive so little in return.’ I had no idea what he was talking about.

‘I’m being replaced, Regina,’ said he. ‘Word has come from the Governor.’

‘No!’

The floorboards were like the hull of a ship expanding and contracting under his rolling gait. The contraction of his brow as he took things in, worked things out.

‘The tide of public opinion has turned,’ he said. ‘The press. The emancipists. The Colonial Office. The very Governor is now against me.’

‘Bastards,’ I muttered.

‘First they said use severity,’ he went on. ‘Use the iron fist. Then We cannot condemn zeal they said when the complaints started to come in. Now all of Sydney Town is up in arms and what do they say? Serve king and country and get the hell out now that it’s convenient. Well, yes, I’ll go. I’ll do your bidding, retire gracefully, hide the blood that I spilt in your name. But from now on I’m outside your system. Get yourself a new lamb to sacrifice. I won’t be it any more.’

‘There’s something French about it,’ I said. ‘It has the French reek.’

‘India! They’re sending me and the family to India. What on earth are we going to do in India for God’s sake? Letitia and the children!’

‘A petition, Sir. Signed by all the staff under your command, saying how much good you’ve done here.’

He suddenly turned to me. ‘You were recommended to me.’

Recommended? By who? What for? The job or … the other?

‘Matron Plum speaks very highly of you,’ he went on.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘my position under Mrs Plum is very important to me. The Female Factory has made me what I am today.’

He looked me up and down. I welcomed the attention, but it went on and the silence and the probing became uncomfortable. I lowered my eyes as I felt a blush coming on. I hadn’t blushed since 1828.

Something he saw in me must have made him recollect his situation. He frowned and turned away.

‘I had such plans for this place,’ he said. Then after a pause he announced grandly: ‘Well, there will be no more punishments, not while I’m here. No more flogging. No more detentions for soldiers or lock-ups for drunkenness. Let the men make their way to your Female Factory. Satisfy as many of the men as you like.’

I froze. I was determined not to betray anything.

‘Oh don’t think I don’t know,’ he said, wagging a finger. ‘I know everything. Everything!’
I should have been devastated. Instead I found myself captivated. I wanted to be on his side. He was so inside himself, so intense.

‘Let the men seek their pleasures with you,’ he continued. ‘Let them become … whatever it is they become with you. And they will eat, too. As from tomorrow, the food ration will increase. Let there be bountiful helpings. Let them eat the fruits of what I’ve done. I’ve done the hard work, and now you’ll see the paperwork is coming, Regina. The legalities, the secretaries. I set this whole place up, from beginning to end, and now…! Well, let them have it. I shall enjoy myself, and the men will too. Let my replacement do the hard work and build what he can. The day of Logan is over!’

I was with him, literally on the edge of my seat. Yes! I wanted to say. Take it with you. Go, be free, fly triumphant. He was away inside himself, climbing those peaks, marching those miles through the mud of Europe, slinging his musket in the American wilds —

‘Let them deal with all the problems I’ve overcome,’ he declared. ‘They think it will be easy, but every day is a battle, every day. The mind must seize the world and lash it to itself or the whole thing will topple. Let them have it and let it all go to rack and ruin. They can go to hell!’

‘Amen!’ I clapped. ‘Amen!’

He stopped and looked at me. I mean really looked at me. I felt a thrill, as if he were going to take me in his arms. Yes, was on my lips. Yes, a thousand times. Then, with his teeth biting down on his lower lip, he swung a chair underneath him and straddled it like a horse. I could never have imagined Logan sitting on a chair in this lairy fashion, and never in the company of a wo—

Oh dear.

I met his frank gaze with hurt defiance.

‘So that leaves you and me, Regina,’ he said. ‘Or should that be … Reginald?’

I began searching my handbag for a hankie.

‘I won’t ask you to show yourself to me,’ he said. ‘Though I truly wonder how you escaped my notice before. How you’ve managed to keep going all this time.’ He looked at me in some wonderment.

Then he stood up. ‘You can keep that red flag if you like. As a memento of our meeting tonight. Besides, I won’t be needing such things anymore.’

I didn’t move from my chair. He knew about me, but he was going to let me go! He wasn’t going to drive me out of town like the others, or put me in prison or have me beaten up. I regained my composure, but now I found, as I was taking my leave, that I did not know how to look at him. I felt I had no eyes even though I was seeing clearly. I felt that he was on the inside of me, more inside myself than I was, that I was nowhere, and that forever more it would be this way, that he would be my centre and I would be his satellite, floating around in the emptiness of myself.
He was smiling — not I perceived because of any victory over me. He was pleased for overcoming the need to enforce the law. He was free of it, free! And now he started laughing. How could that be? I had never seen him laugh, no one had. And not mean laughter but joyous, joy and release that he was sharing with me. It was all right. I would go back to the Factory and have a tipple with Mrs Plum. Tomorrow we’d start the day with a good breakfast, and the picture I had in mind was the bountiful one Logan had put there: no more punishments, no more rations. Ham and eggs for breakfast and lots of strong tea, followed by a little bit of work. I felt like writing letters to my kin. The convict girls would need a lot of organising too.

‘Stay out of that chaplain’s way,’ he added as his laughter subsided. ‘He said I’d burn in hell if I didn’t ship you in chains back to Sydney. He wanted to have a good look at you too, in the name of the Church. Well, let him look up other women’s skirts. I told him you were mine and he should look after his own affairs.’

The way I left the office was something I’ll never forget. He wished me good luck.

Naturally in the weeks following, I saw the Captain on a number of occasions, but these were all in public: and he looked like he always did — stern, feared, hated. Until, that is, the day he was going on an exploration trip. It was a bright morning. He had a whole team of men, bullocks, supplies. He was mounted finely on his grey mare, leading the way out of the compound like a general. I came out to watch, with many others. As the team approached, Logan saw me, ignored me, then, when he came past, he glanced down, our eyes met, and he winked at me.

The Captain never returned from that mission. He was far from the Settlement, way up where the river is small, at the foot of the mountains. He became separated from his men and was killed by Blacks. He wasn’t ‘separated’ though: I’m sure he went off on his own. The country was his, and so he would ride off into it alone and find for himself whatever it was destiny meant him to find, far beyond the safe ring of other men.

As for me, the moment I walked out the office door my status leapt. I who had been befriended by the Captain, I who had brought laughter to that office, I whom it seemed fate was ready to destroy, walked not only untouched but blessed back into normal life. When I left the office, I wanted to make a smart comment as I passed the sentries, who were staring at me like I’d just done the most extraordinary thing they’d ever seen. But I found I couldn’t speak, couldn’t make light of what had just happened.

And there still was the boy Christopher, staring with his mouth open. I tapped him on the tip of his nose with my finger and said, ‘No more favours for you, honey bun,’ and tucked the Captain’s red flag into my handbag. I felt like sitting in the garden for a while. I wondered if it were possible to build a home here and what use I could make of my life.

Meanwhile the Captain’s replacement has tightened the screws and I’m up to my elbows in cons.
Re-Visioning Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Cracking India* in a Post-National Age

The current inter-disciplinary status of postcolonial studies is perhaps most accurately reflected in research on connections between historical discourses on women and gender from the Indian subcontinent and their contemporary literary representation. In 1986 Fredric Jameson earned the wrath of several critics when he put forth his claim that all third-world literatures necessarily ‘project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third world culture and society’ (69). Feminist critics like Josna Rege pointed out the problems with Jameson’s theory by showing that:

Recent feminist research on the colonial construction of Indian nationalism has demonstrated the extent to which ‘traditional’ conceptions of Indian womanhood have been bound up with the nationalist project. Women’s experiences in the postcolonial period have shown, again and again, that their interests are incompatible with the interest of the nation-state. (367)

Although, precisely for this reason, fewer women writers have chosen to adopt the allegorical form than men, Indian authors like Nina Sibal (*Yatra* 1987) and Gita Mehta (*Raj* 1991), and Pakistani women novelists, Sara Suleri (*Meatless Days* 1989) and Bapsi Sidhwa (*Cracking India* 1991), are among those who have written novels that fictionalise the birthing of the modern nation-state. This article explores the benefits as well as the limitations of this form in one such woman-centred text, Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Cracking India*, even as it attempts to provide a rationale for the apparent gender bias implicit in the form.

Nowhere is the conflation of women’s bodies with religious, national, and familial honour more apparent than in the events surrounding the partition of 1947. Official records estimate that approximately twelve million people lost their homes and were displaced because of the division of the country into India and Pakistan; one million lost their lives, and about 75,000 women were raped and abducted (Butalia 3). Women’s bodies once again became the means by which history was written as women were alternately ‘desecrated’ or ‘protected’ as a way of (dis)honouring manhood, families, and newly born nations. In September 1947 the Prime Ministers of Pakistan and India met in Lahore to declare that, ‘women and girls who have been abducted must be restored to their families, and every effort must be made by the Governments and their officers concerned to trace and recover such women and girls’ (Butalia 110). This declaration culminated in the Abducted Persons Recovery and Restoration Act of 1949 (Butalia 114).
Because the Abducted Persons Act defines an abducted person as a male child under sixteen or a female of any age, it suggests that woman have no agency if they have been abducted. Urvashi Butalia confirms this notion when she writes that, ‘[t]heoretically at partition every citizen had a choice of which country to belong to. If you were an abducted woman, you did not have that choice’ (111). As Butalia shows, the Act was clearly patriarchal in design with India and Pakistan acting as coercive parents bringing their abducted ‘women/children’ back home. In their eyes the idea of woman as a symbol of the honour of family, religious community, and nation took precedence over her agency as an individual citizen with equal rights.

Like the postcolonial countries India and Pakistan, the postcolonial novel also emulates its European ancestor and continues to use the metaphor of the family as a microcosm for the nation-state. *Cracking India*, for instance, is centred around the development of a child narrator who defines herself against the colonial and national narratives embodied in the adult subjects that surround her. As the narrative unfolds, she finds herself to be both complicit with and resistant to these adult narratives; thus, even as she tries to deconstruct them, she finds that she is already implicated in them. My article asserts that the act of (de)colonisation is not completed in Sidhwa’s text because in the novel the child’s vision continues to be implicated in colonial and nationalist discourses. Although *Cracking India* begins by trying to criticise these discourses, it ultimately cannot bypass the race and gender biases present in both of them.

In the novel the partition of the state of Punjab functions as an allegory for the division of India and the birth of Pakistan. The novel, based partly on Sidhwa’s own childhood, tells the story of Lenny, a young Parsi girl’s coming of age in Lahore against the backdrop of Indian independence and partition. Lenny is surrounded by a world of adults whom she loves dearly: her parents and her beloved Godmother; her servant Ayah; and Ayah’s flock of admirers that include the sensitive Masseur and the villainous Ice-candy-man. Other adult figures include Lenny’s Electric Aunt and Godmother’s Slavesister and Oldhusband, while Lenny’s older Cousin and her younger brother, Adi, also play important roles in her story.

Bapsi Sidhwa was nine at the time of the partition of India — Lenny is eight at the time of her narration — and in an interview with David Montenegro, Sidhwa remembers the fires and the riots and stumbling across the body of a dead man in a gunny bag (518), all of which are faithfully reproduced in the novel. The author’s own upper middle-class position is not very different from that of Lenny’s family and ‘many of the women in [the novel] were [in fact] inspired by [her] work with destitute women in Pakistan’ (P. Singh 298). In 1999 *Cracking India*, which was published in the subcontinent as *Ice-Candy Man* (1988), was made into a film called *Earth* by Deepa Mehta. As many critics have pointed out, *Cracking India* is important in that it is the first and only book written by a Parsi about the partition of the country.
The Parsis came to India from Iran after the Arab invasions of the seventh century. Although Mumbai Parsis such as Dadabhai Naoroji were involved in India’s freedom struggle, Lahore Parsis, like the Christians, remained neutral in the partition of the country (Mann 72). Mumbai, India, has the largest geographical concentration of Parsis, but they make up only a tiny portion of Pakistan’s population. In her 1989 interview with Montenegro, Bapsi Sidhwa says that at the time of partition there were about 300 Parsis in Lahore, the city where Lenny lives. That number dwindled to 92 in 1989 (523). In the same interview, Sidhwa says that, ‘Parsis in Pakistan are known for their honesty and integrity. But no matter how well you are treated — the Parsis are generally lionised in Pakistan — it is the Parsi attitude to themselves that distances them from others. This sense of alienation is very hard to overcome’ (296). Although Sidhwa does not elaborate on the reasons for Parsi alienation, Tanya Luhrmann in her anthropological study on the Mumbai Parsis, *The Good Parsi* (1996), describes the way in which the Parsis saw themselves as the natural inheritors of the Raj. Having done so well under the British, they were dismayed to find themselves with much less political power in the post-independence years. Luhrmann writes that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a cluster of symbolic markers of identity came to characterise Parsis. These included truthfulness, purity, charity, progressiveness, rationality, and civilised masculinity. Combined together, these attributes defined the Parsis as the worthiest community in Indian history. In the 1920s and 1930s, when Hindu-Muslim politics made it clear that small minorities had no place at the centre of power, a self-denigrating tone emerged in Parsi literature as Parsis began to lay much of the blame for their political impotence on weaknesses within the community (Luhrmann 45).

The Parsis, like other religious minorities such as the Christians, Jains, and Buddhists, tend to be written out of dominant nationalist discourses, which foreground either Hindu or Muslim nationalism depending on which country the writer comes from. Over the years in both India and Pakistan the primarily secular visions of Nehru and Jinnah have been replaced by the increasingly fundamentalist philosophies of their successors. Among the Muslim community it came to be believed that, ‘the intermingling with Hindu culture and the institutionalisation of British law ha[d] taken away many rights granted to women under Islamic law’ (Weiss 132). In pre-independence years Muslim women’s groups rallied around the cause of female education and in 1937 the British passed the Muslim Personal Law, which provided for such rights. After independence, the Muslim Personal Law of Shariah (1948) — which recognised women’s right to inheritance — and the Family Laws Ordinance (1961) — which regulated marriage and divorce — were passed. However, Zia ul Haq’s regime (1977–1988) saw the Islamisation of Pakistan. By the end of his regime, ‘a set of laws had been put in place which constructed an image of women as not having the identical civil liberties as men and which justified such laws in the name of Islam’ (Weiss 133) [italics
in original]. The passing of the Hudood Ordinances in 1979–1980 changed the law pertaining to rape and adultery and made fornication a crime. President Zia ul Haq also introduced the Qanun-e-Shahadat Order (Law of Evidence Order), which in some cases renders a woman’s testimony equal to only half that of a man. In September 1981 women’s groups came together to form the Women’s Action Forum and to protest these laws (Human Rights Watch 21–25), and they were finally revised in 2006 by the women’s protection bill.

In her 1989 interview with Montenegro, Sidhwa praises the fierce efforts of Pakistani women to fight against the Hudood Ordinances (524). Though it is set against an earlier period in history, her own book, *Cracking India*, is designed to awaken a feminist consciousness among her middle-class readership, both Parsi and non-Parsi, to the injustices done to women in the name of religion. Her book is also an attempt to write Parsis into a history of the Pakistani nation-state that seeks to exclude them by emphasising the importance of Islamic nationalism over any kind of secular vision. By going back to the origin of Pakistan, Sidhwa attempts to reaffirm the more egalitarian vision of its founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah.¹ She uses the familiar trope of a woman’s body — in this case that of Jinnah’s Parsi wife Ruttie — to represent the history of Pakistan. When Lenny’s mother shows her daughter a photograph of Jinnah’s wife, Lenny exclaims:

> The woman in the photograph is astonishingly beautiful. Large eyes, liquid-brown, radiating youth, promising intelligence, declaring innocence, shining from an oval marble-firm face. Full-lipped, delighting in the knowledge of her own loveliness: confident in the knowledge of her generous impulses. Giving — like Ayah. Daring — like Mother. ‘Plucky!’ Mother says. (170)

The woman in the photograph embodies the best of Hindu (Ayah) and Parsi (Lenny’s mother) qualities but perhaps foreshadowing the fate of minorities in Pakistan who face severe persecution today, hers is not a happy fate. Estranged from her husband, she dies at twenty-nine in 1929 after giving Jinnah a daughter, Dina Wadia. Jinnah was to die several years later, his health severely affected by the long hours put into his struggle for Pakistan. Akbar Ahmed points out that because a non-Muslim wife and a daughter who refuses to marry a Muslim — Jinnah’s daughter married a Parsi against her father’s wishes — are not palatable to an extremist Islamic nationalism, mother and daughter tend to be left out of such histories of the nation-state. He writes that, ‘Professor Sharif al Mujahid, a conscientious and sympathetic biographer and former director of the Quaid-I-Azam Academy in Karachi, does not mention either woman in his 806-page volume (1981). Nor [do] the archives, pictorial exhibitions and official publications contain more than the odd picture of the two’ (Ahmed 11). Moreover, it is Jinnah’s sister, Fatima, not his wife who is remembered in Pakistan’s national history as the Madr-e-Millat, Mother of the Nation (Ahmed 12).²

The fate of Jinnah’s wife becomes representative of the liminality of the Parsi position, which is represented by Colonel Bharucha’s story in *Cracking India*. 
Colonel Bharucha reminds the Lahore Parsi community of the need for their ‘neutrality’ in the fight between the British, the Hindus, and the Muslims, by invoking the mythic story of the Parsis fleeing to India from Iran in the seventh century. The legend goes that the Parsis were greeted by an Indian prince who gave them a glass of milk in order to suggest that India was full and that there was no room for anyone else. The Parsi priests added a pinch of sugar to the milk to imply that they ‘would get absorbed into [India] like the sugar in the milk… And with their decency and industry sweeten the lives of [the Indian prince that receives them] and his subjects’ (47). The story’s tacked-on moral implies that the minority status of the Parsi community would make them accommodate themselves to the desires of the majority communities in India and Pakistan.

This neutral character of the community can be said to spill over into the character of the first-person narrator, Lenny. Jagolev Singh writes, ‘[t]he neutral attitude of the narrator character, Lenny, has its roots in the racial psychology of the Parsis’ (25), and Sidhwa herself speaks of Lenny’s ‘objectivity’ in the novel (Montenegro 519). However, I believe that the nationalist historiography presented in the novel is far from ‘neutral’. On the most obvious level, Cracking India is designed as a corrective to popular Indian and British representations of partition and independence that (mis)represent Jinnah, and so it is consequently, not bereft of ideology itself. Harveen Mann writes that,

[Sidhwa] misdates Gandhi’s Dandi march by more than a decade; attributes the 1948 accession of Kashmir to India to the Britishers’ partiality for Nehru over Jinnah and thus places it alongside Partition in 1947; and portrays Gandhi as favouring the country’s partition when the contrary was the case, as evidenced by his refusal of political office after Independence. (73)

These historical inaccuracies in the story undermine the ‘objective’ or ‘neutral’ vision of Lenny’s narrative, making her, like Saleem Sinai in Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children, an ‘unreliable’ and not an ‘objective’ narrator.

On a more subtle level, I believe that Sidhwa’s use of national allegory imposes limits on the feminist implications of Lenny’s narrative and ultimately validates a patriarchal narrative of the nation-state. My reading of the novel departs from the interpretations of feminist critics like Niloufer Bharucha3 and Jill Didur4 who emphasise the female nature of the bonding between Lenny and the women in the novel. Ambreen Hai, in her recent article ‘Border Work, Border Trouble: Postcolonial Feminism and the Ayah in Bapsi Sidhwa’s Cracking India’, discusses the limitations of Sidhwa’s feminism in the novel but does not explore the character of Lenny in much detail. My critique of the novel shares some of the concerns raised by Hai but goes beyond her analysis to focus on the specific ambivalences and male-identified biases found in Lenny’s narrative.

There are two different allegorical methods presented in the novel. The most obvious use of the national allegory and the one that has received the most critical attention is in the narrative treatment of Lenny’s Hindu Ayah’s body as a symbol
for the Indian/Pakistani nation-state. As my discussion shows, Sidhwa is both critical of, as well as complicit with, the literary form and its limitations. On the one hand, by depicting the abduction and rape of Ayah, the novel is an attack on the ways in which nationalist discourses sanctify and desecrate women’s bodies; on the other hand, the end of the novel which validates the role of upper-class Parsi women rescuing their lower-class Hindu and Muslim counterparts from the savagery of Hindu and Muslim men only to house them in shelters for Homeless women, or to employ them as domestic servants, or to send them ‘home’ to the families and countries where they now reside, leaves intact the very same structures that the novel initially seems to condemn. The second use of allegory is more complex and is found in Lenny’s self-aggrandising narrative that uses the events which surround her as props that take on meaning only in the context of her own child’s world. Ultimately, the novel’s allegorical treatment of Ayah and the public world of rape and riots are co-opted by the narrator’s own sexual awakening and growth into maturity, and the allegorical treatment of the nation becomes instead the story of Lenny’s struggle for power. My analysis shows that despite the feminist overtones of the novel, Lenny’s coming of age is defined by her identification with and struggle to adopt the patriarchal values of the allegorical Indian/Pakistani nation-state.

At the outset of the novel, Ayah functions as the symbol of a secular India around whom all religions cluster. Although Ayah’s religious identity is specifically Hindu, she never emphasises this until late in the novel when fundamentalist fervour starts affecting all the servants. As Ayah sits under the imposing presence of Queen Victoria’s statue, the men who surround her — the Faletti house cook, the government house gardener, the masseur, the ice-candy-man, the zoo keeper’s attendant — represent the different religions — Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism — found in secular India. This group coexists in peaceful harmony as its different members slip away after dusk, content to leave behind ‘the one luck or the lady prefers’ (29). Sharbat Khan, the Pathan, and the ‘Chinaman’ later join her circle of admirers and Lame Lenny, the Parsi girl through whose eyes Ayah emerges is, of course, her most ardent admirer.

The statue of Queen Victoria serves as an extension of the colonial power that defines the limits of Ayah’s authority. In 1877 under the urging of Disraeli an imperial assemblage was held to celebrate the addition of Kaiser-I-Hind, or ‘Empress of India’, to Queen Victoria’s titles… The idea behind the title and ceremony was to represent the British rulers as the rightful heirs of the Mogul emperors. The monumental vision of the Raj produced in the imperial assemblage thus constitutes a forgetting directed at the ignoble scenes [from the war of 1857] out of which the Indian empire emerged. (Sharpe 150)

The allegorical role played by Queen Victoria’s statue complements Ayah’s representation in the novel. Ayah’s allegorical character is reinforced by the fact that her real name, ‘Shanta’, is mentioned just once in the novel. When Ice-
Candy-man asks Ayah why she wears saris and not the Punjabi shalwar kameez. Ayah responds that Goan ayahs (who are Catholic and perceived to be more Western by the English and the English-influenced Indian elite) wear saris and are paid more by their employers than those ayahs who wear Punjabi dress. Consequently, Ayah adopts a ‘foreign’ mode of dress to win credit in the eyes of her Western-influenced employers and to be paid more. Half way through the novel, as the fight for independence progresses and British authority declines, the group symbolically moves away from the statue of Queen Victoria and still later the statue itself is removed and Ayah is abducted by Ice-candy-man and forced to convert to Islam.

By forcing Ayah, who is Hindu, to become a courtesan and by renaming her Mumtaz, Ice-candy-man seeks to wipe out her Hindu ancestry and claim her as part of his own lineage, as part of the ‘kotha … the cradle of royal bastards’ (258), descendants of the illegitimate offspring of the Mughal emperors and their favourite concubines. In the days of the Mughal empire, these offspring were granted ‘royal indulgences’ and were relatively well off as royal concubines or musicians, singers and poets. However, with the passing of colonial legislation and the decline of feudal princely states, many of these men and women were deprived of their occupations and turned to prostitution.

The rape/riot metaphor in much colonial literature like *A Passage to India* (1929) and *The Jewel in the Crown* (1966) takes on a new twist in *Cracking India* as colonial allegories of the civilised English man and the barbaric native get translated into Hindu and Muslim nationalisms that demonise each other. Ice-candy-man’s actions provide a literal example of the way in which nationalist discourses both sanctify and desecrate women’s bodies. Throughout the novel he has been the one to identify women’s bodies with religious honour. For instance, his horror at the train with ‘two gunny bags load of Muslim women’s breasts’ (159) [italics mine], his subsequent violation of the lion-tamer Sher Singh’s Sikh relatives, and his abduction of Ayah out of revenge for the atrocities against Muslim women, suggest that he sees all the women as symbols of their religions. This makes his protestations of love for Ayah all the more unbelievable, particularly as Lenny’s Godmother points out he kidnapped her in February but only married her in May after finding out that Lenny’s mother had made arrangements to send Ayah home to Amritsar. Yet, by the end of the novel, Ice-candy-man has become so emasculated that Lenny’s narrative would have the reader believe that his ‘love’ for Ayah has rendered him harmless. The domestic servants, Imam Dim and Yusuf, and the Sikh guard who ‘protects’ the women in the homeless shelter are taken in by his appearance. Lenny, too, in keeping with her endorsement of patriarchal values, admits that, ‘[h]e has become truly a harmless fellow. My heart not only melts — it evaporates when I breathe out, leaving me faint for pity’ (288). It is noteworthy, however, that neither Lenny’s mother nor her godmother nor Ayah herself appears to be taken in by Ice-candy’s contrition. Moreover, if
one keeps in mind the fluidity with which he transforms himself from a seller of Popsicles to a bird-man who dupes naïve Englishwomen into buying his birds, to a ‘saviour’ who tricks Lenny into betraying Ayah’s whereabouts, it would seem that Ice-candy-man’s appearance as ‘a moonstruck fakir who has renounced the world for his beloved’ (288) should be read as just one more performative act designed to seduce a gullible public. However, the sympathetic treatment of Ice-candy-man at the end of the novel enables critics like Jagolev Singh to write, ‘[t]hat the Ice-Candy-man is willing to leave the land that he so much cherishes for the sake of his Hindu beloved, is not only an example of self-sacrifice but also symbolic of a future rapprochement between the two warring communities — the Muslims and the Hindus’ (34). Hai is also taken in by the sympathetic treatment meted out to Ice-candy-man and writes, ‘Cracking India ends with Ice-candy-man now romantically and guiltily devoted to his victim, sorry for his part in the madness, continuing pathetically to follow her across the border’ (409). However, the closure effected by this allegorical reading/ending completely denies the materiality of the obscenity done to Ayah as an individual and as a woman, and obscures the sinister quality that Ice-candy-man — her would-be rapist — continues to embody. Yet, it cannot be denied that the novel does end on an allegorical note. The Sikh guard considers the ‘returned’ Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh women to be his ‘sisters’ and ‘mothers’ thereby validating their societal role over their individual lives. Lenny, in a self-aggrandising move, joins in the choir of mourning women who ‘beat their breasts and cry: ‘Hai! Hai! Hai! Hai!’ reflecting the history of their cumulative sorrows and the sorrows of their Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and Raiput great-grandmothers who burnt themselves alive rather than surrender their honour to the invading hordes besieging their ancestral fortresses’ (285). Ayah decides that she wants to return ‘home’ to India and Lenny’s mother and Godmother help facilitate this return thereby enabling the narrative return to the integrity of India and Pakistan as two separate nation states. And so, Ayah, the violated woman, is effectively transformed into an allegory for the partitioned country.

However, the brutality of the treatment meted out to Ayah by men whom she considers friends and lovers, forces the reader to question the nature of the home she will return to. Beyond one brief mention that Ayah has family in Amritsar, Cracking India is completely silent about Ayah’s ‘home’ in India. Given the fate of Lenny’s new Muslim ayah, Hamida, who is disowned by her husband after her abduction, it is difficult to be optimistic that Ayah’s family will welcome her back. Godmother alerts Ayah to the possibility that her family will not take her back, but Ayah remains adamant, and Godmother is not able to present her with another more palatable option. Instead, she is reduced to invoking fate to explain Ayah’s current position, an argument that neither Lenny nor even Hindu Ayah will buy.

Godmother’s and Mother’s activism on behalf of the fallen women they help rescue is constrained as much by their class privilege as by their ethnic difference.
Like the middle-class social workers whom Butali interviews in *The Other Side of Silence*, they too are subjects of the state, who cannot envision a space for ‘fallen women’ outside of the confines of family and nation. One cannot help but inquire whether Godmother would have been as accepting of ‘fate’ had it been her goddaughter Lenny who had been abducted and raped. Certainly the family’s efforts to cure Lenny’s polio as much as their Parsi heritage would lead us to believe that they did not see themselves as passive recipients of misfortune.

This critique of the activism of the Parsi women in the novel should not take away from the tremendous bravery of their acts and particularly from Lenny’s mother’s willingness to confront an unruly mob in order to protect Ayah. However, it is important to note that their activism does not transcend nationalist and religious representations of these ‘fallen women’ in order to create a more inclusive solidarity that moves away from allegorical representations of woman, home, and nation-state. While *Cracking India* does an excellent job in raising the consciousness of middle-class Pakistani women, it cannot really go beyond allegorical treatment of its lower-class subjects because of the author’s own privileged and sheltered upbringing that, in Sidhwa’s own words, limits her to a middle-class sensibility (Singh 295).

*Cracking India*’s limited feminism is implicated in its allegorical desire for home, which denies Ayah any autonomy. It is possible that Ayah thinks of home as a pre-partition time and space where she was still inviolate and had nothing to fear but the implicit violence of Ice-candy-man’s toes. Yet, as the narrative shows, even her imagined autonomy was ephemeral, dependent as it was on male approval of her beauty and wholeness. If Ayah’s body is equated with home and India then Ayah’s desire to go home can be read as a desire to return to a time and space when she, like India, was inviolate. However, as the statue of Queen Victoria and the aggression of Ice-candy-man’s toes reveal, that time and space of imagined autonomy was, in fact, dependent on the benevolence of a colonial and a patriarchal gaze. Ayah’s domestic servitude and her class-based dependency on her employers do provide her with a degree of protection. Lenny points out that, ‘[Ice-candy-man’s] not the kind of fellow who’s permitted inside. With his thuggish way of inhaling from the stinking cigarettes clenched in his fist, his flashy scarves and reek of jasmine attar, he represents a shady, almost disreputable type’ (20). However, even as her Parsi employers guarantee Ayah some degree of protection within the walls of their home — protection that is rendered vulnerable when the rioters enter Lenny’s home — Ayah’s safety is dependent on their sense of propriety and not on her autonomy.

Unlike Ranna who is given a chance to tell his story, Ayah is rendered mute by her experiences. All she can utter is the pathetic refrain, ‘I want to go back to my family’ (273). In Sidhwa’s novel home/nation and Ayah come to be seen as indistinguishable and she is effectively allegorised out of the text. In this way she is no different to other women in the story who are (dis)honoured because of their
symbolic value within a patriarchal value system. The mullah’s daughter’s cries of pain reduce the men of Ranna’s community to little boys who sob unaffectedly and the muttered threat of a Sikh soldier that he would ‘bugger’ his female victim again suggests a male economy where homosexual desire is transferred onto the site of the female body. Ayah virtually disappears from the story after her kidnapping, suggesting that the novel’s vision cannot conceive of a post-abduction life for Ayah as an individual and not as a symbol. Like the dishonoured women in Butalia’s book *The Other Side of Silence*, who have no space from which they can tell their stories as women, Ayah too is so contained by allegorical representation that she has no space from which to speak as a woman. That privilege is reserved for the novel’s narrator, Lenny.

Ultimately, the allegorisation of Ayah’s body becomes the means by which a second story of Lenny’s coming into selfhood is told. We are given Ayah’s story from the perspective of Lenny and the materiality of Ayah’s existence tends to get swallowed up as Lenny uses an allegorical narrative to bring herself into individuation. Lenny believes that her private life and the outside world are one and the same, the latter merely exists to inform the former. For instance, she and the other children mimic the fasts of Gandhi and his followers in an attempt to get their way with the adults around them. However, Lenny’s allegorical conflation of two worlds is challenged when she lets Ice-candy-man into her family home only to discover that far from being the ‘saviour’ she thinks he is, he is a rapist and abductor who snatches Ayah from the safety of Lenny’s private world. Yet, despite Lenny’s rude awakening to the Ice-candy-man’s true nature, she is not able to transcend her male-identified vision, and later in the novel when she and Godmother visit Ice-candy-man and Ayah, she accepts his popsicles and feels sorry for him.

Another example of Lenny’s biased perspective takes place when at the outset of the novel Lenny and her ayah encounter an English man who tries to get Lenny to climb out of her pram and walk. However, when he is ‘confronted by Ayah’s liquid eyes and prim gloating, and the triumphant revelation of [Lenny’s] callipers the Englishman withers’ (12). It is easy to read this passage as an example of cross-class bonding between Lenny and her ayah. In fact, Fawzia Afzal-Khan writes, ‘[r]ight from the beginning, we see that Lenny and her Ayah form a bond that symbolically resists attempts by an outside, male world to subjugate them’ (275). However, the reader should bear in mind that this interpretation is based upon Lenny’s reading of the situation and that Lenny is not an entirely neutral narrator. In fact, Lenny is drawn to Ayah because of her awareness of the way in which men admire her. She writes,

the covetous glances Ayah draws educate me. Up and down they look at her. Stub-handed twisted beggars and dusty old beggars on crutches drop their poses and stare at her with hard, alert eyes. Holy men, masked in piety, shove aside their pretences to ogle her with lust. Hawkers, cart-drivers, cooks, coolies, and cyclists turn their heads as she passes. (12)
Lenny does not stop to interrogate the male gaze that Ayah is subjected to. Instead, she revels in its adoration and is willing to be bribed by Ayah’s followers in order that they may spend time with her ayah. In this way Lenny colludes with rather than confronts the patriarchal system that objectifies Ayah. She also learns from Ayah how to exploit this objectification to her own advantage. Lenny’s obsessive lingering on Ayah’s physical attributes also suggests that she is implicated in the male gaze of Ayah’s followers and cannot look at her ayah in a non-objectifying way. In fact, when she fears that she will lose Ayah to her lover Masseur, Lenny ‘starts sobbing. [She kisses] Ayah wherever Masseur is not touching her in the dark’ (168). As Hai points out, ‘the female narrator’s fascination for her servant’s body is catalyzed by her intense observation of male fascination for the same — as if both Lenny and Ayah’s men were rivals for Ayah’ (398).

Lenny’s relationship with Godmother is imbued with a similar power dynamic. Lenny narrates:

Flying forward I [Lenny] fling myself at Godmother and she lifts me onto her lap and gathers me to her bosom. I kiss her, insatiable, excessively, and she hugs me. She is childless. The bond that ties her strength to my weakness, my fierce demands to her nurturing, my trust to her capacity to contain that trust — is stronger than the bonds of motherhood. More satisfying than the ties between men and women. (13)

It is easy to posit this relationship as an alternative to the male-defined relationships that make up the book. Sidhwa herself comments, ‘Godmother has come to a stage in her life when she is not dependent on men… And she has come into her own as a woman’ (Montenegro 531). However, Godmother’s coming into her own as a woman comes at the cost of the emasculation of her husband, Oldhusband, to the point where he all but disappears from Lenny’s narrative and Lenny is willing to fight the other male rival, Godmother’s brother-in-law, Dr. Mody, for control over Godmother (in much the same way that she competes with Masseur for Ayah). Lenny’s attitude towards the Godmother/Slavesister relationship is also problematic. Godmother’s treatment of Slavesister is complicitous with patriarchal standards for had Slavesister been married like their middle sister, she would not have had to work as a servant for Godmother. However, Godmother’s dictatorial treatment of her younger sister, Slavesister, does not diminish Godmother’s value in Lenny’s eyes. Nor does Lenny show any sympathy for the abject Slavesister, though there is enough textual evidence for the discerning reader to feel sorry for her.

Sidhwa’s characterisation of Godmother appears to imply that autonomy as a woman is implicated in having the power to castrate those who are dependent upon you. I believe that it is this ‘strength’ that Lenny seeks. She is not content with the indirect machinations of her mother and her ayah whose autonomy is dependent on the whims of the patriarchy. She wants to be the patriarch herself. Despite, or perhaps because of, her physical disability which further marginalises her she over-identifies with her godmother’s endorsement of patriarchal values. Niloufer Bharucha writes that the goal of feminism ‘should not simply be to claim more
space for women under existing social structures but to deconstruct and transform the existing reality… The creation of female spaces entails going beyond the male-allotted spaces into the realms of true equality’ (93–94). However, Lenny does not appear to want an egalitarian universe. Indeed, she cannot appear to conceptualise a space beyond the victim/victimiser binary. This is made most evident when she anticipates a time in the future, ‘when [she] raised [her] head again, the men lowered their eyes’ (96).

Lenny’s desire for power is driven by the sense of lack that defines her being. Colonel Bharucha’s story of the vulnerability of the Parsi community is reproduced in the tale that Lenny’s mother tells her about the little mouse with seven tails. The mouse first has all its tails cut off and then retains one in order that it won’t be laughed at by its peers. Both stories suggest a kind of subterfuge whereby minorities who lack power adopt strategies that enable them to retain their difference while living in accordance with the rules and regulations of the majority. Lenny clings to her deformed leg because she feels that it is the only thing that will guarantee her love and affection.

Her brother Adi’s beauty wins him the adoration of everyone around them including Lenny’s ayah who thinks him more beautiful than any little English ‘baba’. Lenny, by contrast, always considers herself ugly and takes to heart her doctor Colonel Bharucha’s comment that ‘she is only a girl’ and, therefore, will want nothing more than to marry and have children. She is also fully conscious of the distaste with which she is viewed because of her ethnicity and her gender. As a child she angers a Brahmin priest because her shadow contaminates his caste status forcing him to wash again and as an adult she notices how a Parsi priest cringes from taking her hand because he thinks she might be menstruating. Thus she is able to occupy the anomalous status of surrogate male, but only in a constrained space.

All these events cause Lenny to reject powerlessness and victimhood and to claim agency for herself. Thus, she uses her class-based privilege to subject the child bride Papoo’s husband Toto Ram to her gaze and discovers that,

He is no boy! He is a dark, middle-aged man with a pockmark-pitted face and small, brash kohl-blackened eyes. He has an insouciant air of insolence about him — as though it is all a tedious business he has been through before. I cannot take my eyes off him as he visualises the women with assertive, assessing directness. There is a slight cast in the close set of his eyes, and the smirk lurking about his thin, dry lips gives an impression of cruelty. The women in the room become hushed. He shifts his insolent eyes to the ceiling, as if permitting the women to gape upon his unsavoury person, and then lowers his sehra. (199)

Toto Ram is so secure in his position of power that he appears to consciously participate in his own objectification as if he knows the women’s gaze is powerless to displace his position of strength. This makes Lenny’s agency indirect at best. She can see through Toto Ram’s façade of importance to his real self, but cannot do anything about Papoo’s marriage to this man. She is reminded once again that
her powerlessness lies in her gender and, this, in turn, promotes her to acts of violence against the men she knows as a means of coming into selfhood.

She claims agency in male-defined ways, by identifying with Ayah’s male admirers, with Godmother’s castrating gaze, and with the violence she sees around her. Although Lenny is initially afraid of the angry world outside — the zoo lion’s roars, the turbulence of World War Two, which penetrates and disturbs her dreams — she actively participates in reproducing the violence that surrounds her. After witnessing the violence of partition riots, Lenny comes home and rips her doll apart. At another point in her narrative, there is a strange energy with which she reveals that, ‘I broke plates, cups, bowls, dishes. I smashed livers, kidneys, hearts, eyes’ (94). As communal violence progresses, Ayah’s admirers turn on the low-caste Hari and rip off his dhoti. Lenny joins the crowd, her ‘dread assuming a violent and cruel shape [she] tear(s) away from Ayah and [flings herself] on the human tangle and fight(s) to claw at Hari’s dhoti’ (126). Lenny’s narrative normalises her actions suggesting that they are the natural reaction to the violent world she sees around her. However, this normalisation is problematic because on an adult level it justifies the fury of mobs and legitimises attacks on innocent civilians.

Lenny’s complicity with patriarchal values is most evident when she betrays Ayah to Ice-candy-man. Bharucha writes, ‘[h]ere Lenny is like Mucho who betrays her own daughter into male bondage. A betrayal, the result of centuries of patriarchal conditioning, a misplaced faith in the integrity of men and a searing lack of confidence in and hatred of the female self’ (138). Not only does Bharucha’s claim present a more-than-adequate explanation for Lenny’s actions, it also contradicts the critic’s earlier assertion that, ‘Lenny is not male-identified. She has strong female models with whom she has a woman-to-woman bonding’ (136). As my discussion shows, female models like Godmother only inspire a desire for power in Lenny’s relations with men. For instance, the castrating power of her gaze is felt by her Cousin whose masculinity is diminished by her comparison of him with the other men she sees. The seduction game the two of them play ends in Cousin losing the control he once enjoyed over Lenny and becoming her emasculated slave.

Although Godmother presents Lenny with her castrating ideal, Lenny also learns some of her tactics from Ayah and her mother. However, after Ayah’s abduction, she understands how fragile her ayah’s autonomy was. Similarly, even as Lenny is able to appreciate her mother’s use of maternal ploys to soothe an unruly dinner party or crowd, she is also the silent witness to her parents’ arguments and to the bruises on her mother’s body. As Jill Didur points out, ‘[i]n general, it appears that Lenny’s mother uses her agency in a consensual fashion — in the interest of maintaining her patriarchal patronage — and thus contributes to the perpetuation of elite patriarchal practice’ (54). Lenny is fully aware of how much her own personal happiness as well as her mother’s lies within her father’s
control. When, after a period of estrangement, her father finally starts talking to her mother again, Lenny writes, ‘Adi and I laugh and laugh and hug Father and our clinging mother, I feel deliriously lighthearted. So does Adi. Father has spoken directly to Mother’ (239). Because of the precarious autonomy embodied in the figures of Ayah and Mother, they do not serve as adequate role models for Lenny. Yet, she is willing to adopt some of their feminine strategies in her power struggle with Cousin as long as she can finally occupy the position of power manifested by her father and Godmother.

Lenny’s dreams suggest that she is aware that her ayah, her mother, and her godmother are complicitous in the patriarchal structure of things. Her sense of female ineffectuality is reflected in her dreams where she sees herself as the victim of male brutality even as the women she loves — her mother, Godmother, and Ayah — collaborate with soldiers in their amputation of the limbs of innocent civilians (31). Her dreams suggest Lenny’s intermingling of private and public worlds as her fears of amputation because of her deformed leg coalesce with her fears of the violence of World War Two and Nazi Germany that are coming ever closer to her sheltered existence. However, the theme of betrayal introduced in Lenny’s dreams functions as a subtext throughout Lenny’s narrative. When Lenny ponders over the meaning of Christ’s betrayal at the Last Supper, her thoughts foreshadow her own betrayal of Ayah, reminding the reader that on an unconscious level Lenny may be aware that the women she loves are implicated in patriarchal structures that are ultimately unequal and that even their attempts at rectifying these structures only reinforce the status quo. However, this suspicion is never consciously articulated by the novel’s narrator, Lenny. Consequently, I believe the novel ultimately endorses a patriarchal allegory, which denies both the materiality of Ayah’s body and the feminist subtext of Lenny’s narrative. Lenny’s coming of age normalises rather than questions the gendered inequities present in colonial and nationalist allegories of home and nation. In this way it reaffirms the limitations of the allegorical form to adequately speak for women’s experiences in colonial and postcolonial India and Pakistan.

Even though the form of national allegory has been used more often by male authors than by female ones, women writers such as Nina Sibal and Sara Suleri who, like Bapsi Sidhwa, use the form of national allegory to express female desires, find themselves similarly confronted with the limitations of the form. In Yatra Sibal presents the movement of her heroine Krishna from the private to the public world by showing how Krishna’s betrayal by her husband leads her to become an independent single woman and finally to adopt a life of activism and leadership. However, by using an allegorical form, Sibal ‘mystifies the woman as leader, typically by de-gendering and, then, canonising her’ (Sunder Rajan 83). Thus, Krishna’s independence comes at the expense of her womanhood. In Meatless Days even the community of women — her grandmother, mother, sisters, friends, and servants—Sara Suleri shares is not enough to sustain her from
the imperious demands of her home country and she ultimately escapes to the US in an attempt to become ‘ahistorical’ or ‘non-allegorical’. There, she learns of the untimely deaths of her mother and her eldest sister, Ifat — the first apparently an accident, the second probably a murder disguised as an accident — providing her with literal as well as metaphoric examples of the consumption of women’s lives by their nation-states. Although these few examples are by no means representative of all national allegorical narratives of the 1980s and ’90s, they provide important evidence of the ways in which the form imposes limitations upon a postcolonial feminist consciousness, making it necessary to reiterate the need for both writers and scholars to look for alternative, more woman-friendly presentations of postcolonial consciousness.

NOTES
1 Jinnah’s support for women’s rights caused his words to be cited in the charter of the Women’s Action Forum, which formed in the wake of Zia-ul-Haq’s Islamisation program. Fatima Jinnah played an active role in Pakistani politics and always appeared by her brother’s side in public. Anita Weiss points out that it is ironic that while in 1965, Islamist leaders supported Jinnah’s sister, Fatima Jinnah’s bid for presidency, in 1989 they wanted a fatwa issued to prevent Benazir Bhutto from becoming president (133).

2 In a letter to Dawn (10th February 2002), Pakistan’s national English-language paper, Mohammad Aziz Haji Dossa writes, ‘To translate Jinnah’s concept for a tolerant society, General Musharraf should instruct, the reallocation of Plot E, adjacent to the Quaid’s Mazar, for the proposed Ruttie Jinnah Grove (Tree Mazar-3: Dawn: July 30, 2002). This area for the Ruttie Jinnah Park was resumed but later shelved by the administration… The government had second thoughts and the project of Ruttie Jinnah alcove was sidelined, because of the warped reasoning that Ruttie Jinnah, though a convert to Islam, was a non-practising Muslim’ (online).

3 See Niloufer Bharucha, ‘From Behind a Fine Veil: A Feminist Reading of Three Parsi Novels’.

4 See Jill Didur, “‘Cracking the Nation’’: Gender, Minorities, and Agency in Bapsi Sidhwa’s Cracking India’.

5 In the post-independence years the Heera Mandi has fallen on very bad days. A succession of Islamic governments has sought to assert their Islamic credentials by penalising the women who live and work at Lahore’s ‘Diamond Market’.

6 Bapsi Sidhwa’s feelings of self-consciousness about what is arguably her weakest novel, The Pakistani Bride, where she tells the story of a tribal woman helps shed some light on this aspect of Cracking India’s limited activism (Afzal-Khan 271). See Niaz Zaman’s ‘Bapsi Sidhwa: I am Pakistani’, and K. Nirupa Rani’s ‘Gender and Imagination in Bapsi Sidhwa’s Fiction’.

7 See discussion of social workers on ‘Women’ in Urvashi Butalia’s The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition, pp. 85–136.

8 In his critique of O. Mannoni’s book about the Malagasies, Prospero and Caliban (1956), Frantz Fanon writes that no-one should be oblivious to the literal policing that is going on in Madagascar and, consequently, Mannoni’s purely psychoanalytic approach to the Malagasy condition is limited in its interpretation (Fanon, 83–108).
Similarly, Lame Lenny’s dreams of men in uniform dismembering parts of children while the women sit and watch is evidence of her psychic reaction to the ominous presence of British soldiers in India as well as the tension that affects all their lives through the outbreak of World War Two and later through the partition of India.

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Religion, Class and Nation in Contemporary Australian Fiction

Writing on the interplay of class and religion in the formation of the Australian party system, Judith Brett (2002) draws attention to the tendency for Australian historians to valorise class-based explanations over any others. Brett questions the emphasis on class as the determining factor for political allegiance among Australians, and suggests that the role of religion has been largely ignored by historians writing in the last sixty years because of their bias in favour of a class-based explanation. It would seem that there is similar bias in literary criticism, with class-based assessments predominating over other approaches in Australia. The result is that both works of literature and of criticism are sometimes judged according to the perceived status of the writer rather than on actual content. In this article I will draw attention to some examples of class-based criticism to indicate its limitations and the possible misreading it can generate. Furthermore, through the reading of works by David Malouf and Thomas Keneally, I will question the connection that has been made between high literariness and the symbolic endorsement of the White nation in Australia.

The tendency to over-emphasise class can be seen in Ken Gelder’s article, ‘Politics and Monomania: The Rarefied World of Contemporary Australian Literary Culture’, where the author writes of ‘Tory libertarian literary sentiments’ (52) that privilege a ‘rarefied aesthetics — epicurean, tasteful, stylish, delicately cultivated, decadent’ in much contemporary Australian writing that is canonised by ‘Tory’ journals (49). In his article, Gelder uses the word ‘Tory’ at least nineteen times to describe writers as various as Frank Moorhouse, Gail Jones, Helen Garner, Murray Bail, Robert Dessaix, Gerald Murnane, David Foster, Paul Sheehan, as well as several critics. It would seem that Gelder is in search of a highly rarefied political purity that makes him snub too many writers too summarily. Gelder sees Elliot Perlman’s Three Dollars as ‘one of only a few’ examples of contemporary Australian fiction that might be claimed by a genuine Left, presumably because all other works show ‘Tory libertarian literary sentiments’ (54, 52). Moreover, Gelder’s highly polarised approach leads him to look on criticism as territory to be possessed and protected from trespassers. The ‘important’ question the supposedly exceptional Three Dollars raises for Gelder is this: ‘to which side of the political spectrum does realism — literary realism, critical realism belong?’ (55). The defensiveness of this type of criticism and its marked tendency to label so much of contemporary Australian literature as ‘elitist’ is worrying. There
seems to be a certain partisan narrowness at work in this approach leading one to wonder whether some literary criticism in Australia is being hampered in the same way that Julia Brett suggests for its historiography. The question that articles like Gelder’s raise is whether this kind of literary criticism is the result of over-emphasising class and ignoring other significant factors.

The charge of elitism has been levelled at some of Australia’s most original writers as in the case of Patrick White and David Malouf. Some of the odium directed at these world-renowned novelists spills onto critics who value them, and onto academics who continue to teach them despite their unfashionableness in parts of Australia. In his 2003 Colin Simpson Lecture, David Marr reminded listeners of the inimical reception of Australian critics to Patrick White and showed how the political parties’ championing of art and artist has led to a return of that ‘exaltation of the average’ that almost scared White away from Australia. As Marr notes, ‘writers face the same predicament 50 years later as the old philistine culture of Australian politics reasserts itself’ (online). Marr points to an arrogant attitude towards artists, a ‘hands-on abuse’ where artists are ‘directed what to write and paint by politicians, preachers, teachers and journalists’ (online).

Like Marr, I believe that some Australian critics need to remember that ‘no commentator can ever tell a writer — a true writer — what to write’ because ‘that’s the wrong way round’ (online). The focus on class and elitism is influencing critics to subject writers to narrow notions of political correctness that do not make much sense as literary criticism. In her discussion of *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*, Brigid Rooney applies Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of the embodiment of the sacred in ‘high art and literature’ (2007 67) to David Malouf, whom she sees as pursuing ‘the literary project of promoting settler-belonging, and of sacralising nation’ (2007 67). It is, perhaps, a pervasive and excessive class-consciousness that makes even a sensitive critic like Rooney turn prescriptive at times, as she does when she suggests that David Malouf left out an important scene in *Remembering Babylon* (2007 69). Deciding what a writer should have written is surely not a valid way of reading him. Following Gelder, Rooney defines the literary in terms of a classist detachment from the common reader:

I use that slippery term literary…an impossibly chameleon category…as it’s defined by Ken Gelder: the most constant feature of the literary is the writer’s attitude, posture or intention towards readerships, which often manifests itself as discomfort with or refusal of the exigencies of mass readerships and the market. The literary attitude signals detachment from the market and its commodifying demands. (2007 66)

As Rooney suggests, Malouf cultivates ‘the national imaginary’ through ‘his characters’ quest for spiritual healing’ (2007 66, 68) and also, I would suggest, by complicating distinctions of class and wealth among the white settlers. Rooney writes of Malouf’s writing as being ‘expressive of a refined literary habitus’ (66), a place and role he maintains with care:
He is not alone in such a pursuit: the coalescence of literature, nation and the sacred performs a central role in the legitimation and consecration of writers, and likewise in the reproduction of the Australian literary field. (2007 67)

The sacred, it would seem, is little more than the writer’s means of obtaining ascendancy in society. Rooney goes on to argue that a ‘crucial scene missing from Remembering Babylon’ (69) is provided in The Conversations at Curlow Creek, as ‘Malouf’s novel answers critics of Remembering Babylon’ who had ‘read the book as distorting and suppressing realities of the colonial frontier, thus itself colonising Indigenous bodies and history’ (69). Rooney suggests that Malouf’s answer to the critics of Remembering Babylon is in the episode where the trooper Langhurst connects with the black tracker Jonas after Garretty causes him to break into ‘a high pitched wailing’ by narrating his uncanny experience of border violence (Malouf 114). I think The Conversations at Curlow Creek certainly treats not only the memory of border violence but even the lived experience of it. One of the troopers, Jed Snelling, had recently been killed by the spear of an aborigine. I have argued elsewhere that Malouf’s description does not allow the reader to accuse the whites of cruelty or of murderous intentions (Borg Barthet 2008). Many settlers who lived through border violence were themselves victims of empire and conquest. They had simply tried to survive in a world that treated them as harshly as many blacks, and thus they were justified in their claim to some share of the land.

I would agree with Brigid Rooney that Malouf spatialises narrative ‘to hold back or defer its linear, temporal impulses’, thus allowing ‘mediative crossings between past and present’ for Lachlan Beattie in Remembering Babylon and for Michael Adair in The Conversations at Curlow Creek (2009 126) As Rooney shows, ‘the observer figure comes to self-acceptance through quasi-sacramental images of metamorphosis or fusion that occur in suspended time’ (126–27). Rooney states that ‘the arrest of time signals aesthetic rather than political resolution, returning us to and affirming the literary’ (128). I would argue that the arrest of time in Malouf’s Remembering Babylon and The Conversations at Curlow Creek affirms the literary by showing its relevance to contemporary politics.

The Conversations at Curlow Creek certainly focuses on frontier violence but this does not mean that the darker elements of colonial history are ignored in Remembering Babylon; far from distorting the past in the earlier novel, Malouf helps readers to imagine it in all the complexity, contradictoriness and ambivalence of its humanity. Gemmy Fairley, like Patrick White’s Jack Chance in A Fringe of Leaves, is a white ‘exile’ who has lived with Aborigines for several years. He is not a ‘fake black’ as Germaine Greer suggested but a hybrid character that opens up a space between white and black for a contemporary Australian identity (qtd in Davis 4). His position on the edge does not displace the blacks who are portrayed as owners of the land and who accept him only ‘guardedly’ as was ‘proper to an in-between creature’ (Malouf 1994 28). I have suggested elsewhere that Malouf
creates a grotesque body in Gemmy Fairley to open up a new space between conflicting cultures (Borg Barthet 2001).

For Malouf, the making of Australian consciousness, the construction of the ‘imagined community’ of the nation, requires a re-working of the relationship between settler and indigene, a task that may be less difficult to achieve after rifts of class and race among British settlers are healed. Malouf’s fiction underlines the hardship undergone by all British settlers, whether of Anglo-Saxon or of Celtic race, of Protestant or Catholic religion, and suggests their unity in his fiction by erasing some of the features that distinguish the Irish.

In The Conversations at Curlow Creek the central character is an ambivalent figure, an Irish officer in the English army, brought up as both heir and orphan and struggling to find a cohesive identity and the inner peace that would enable him to go home to Ireland and his love Virgilia. The action of this novel takes place in the nineteenth century, it is partly set in Ireland and partly in Australia and many of the characters are Irish. There is not, however, a single mention of Catholics and Catholicism. Replacing the confession that the condemned bush-ranger Daniel Carney expects when Adair first enters the hut, the purification rite undergone by the bush-ranger before his execution is a climactic episode in the novel described in non-sectarian religious terms such as ‘laved’ and ‘the sanctity of things’ (199–200). The cleansing ritual is ‘aesthetically-charged’, as Rooney states, and, I believe, it sacralises the White nation, through an assertion of unity among Australians of British descent (2007 70). While I believe that Rooney’s suggestion that there is a ‘crucial scene missing’ in Remembering Babylon is mistaken, I certainly agree that Malouf adheres strongly to ‘his vision of national healing through the reconciliation of opposites’ in The Conversations at Curlow Creek (2007 8). As Rooney distances herself from the class-obsessed atmosphere generated by some Australian criticism, she makes some truly insightful and thought provoking comments: ‘Perhaps the spiritual continues to work in The Conversations at Curlow Creek as a category that ultimately contains the political’ (2007 70).

The ‘spiritual’, however, is still often seen as a mere dressing for ‘real’ socio-political positions. Writing of Australian historiography, Brett explains that ‘most historians writing in the secular second half of the twentieth century have preferred to see religion as a somewhat awkward fellow traveller of class interests, rather than as an agent in its own right, endowing people’s political commitments with moral conviction’ (45).

The Conversations at Curlow Creek underlines the hardship undergone by all settlers and suggests their unity by erasing distinguishing features such as the Catholic religion. Malouf’s desire for unity between Catholic and Protestant, Irish and Scottish, Welsh and English emerges clearly in the Boyer lectures.1 In his essay, ‘Made in England’, Malouf puts forward what Rooney aptly calls Malouf’s own ‘cosmopolitan style of Australianness’ with its ‘urbane adaptiveness’, an openness towards difference which may indeed help ‘recover a better national self against a dangerous tide of fear and paranoia’ (2009 133–34). Malouf is
conscious of the role of history in politics, conscious of the systems that turn past events into present historical facts and he does his part in his fiction to heal the rift between Protestant and Catholic in Australia and to defend the position of the white population there. Far from showing ‘a refusal of the category of the “political” in favour of a high literariness’, as Lyn McCredden has suggested (qtd in Rooney 2007 68), Malouf’s work demonstrates how aesthetics — and religion — can be political.

Although the symbolic mode of description is used by Malouf to promote settler-belonging, the national imaginary is not the only meaning generated by *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*. Patrick Morgan, for example, reads the novel as ‘an Australian variant’ of ‘an archetypal Romantic story’ involving the contrast between the orphan and the heir (2). It is also a story ‘of two warring potentialities within the same personality’ (Morgan 2), and I would add, a parable about an uneasy survival that is ever needful of absolution, as well as a story about telling stories that make life possible. As Morgan’s reading of *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* shows, Malouf’s fiction does more than assert the rights of the white race. Similarly, *Remembering Babylon* has generated a reading by Justyna Sempruch which applies the philosophies of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida to show how Malouf addresses ‘the dichotomy of being (oneself) and the other as entangled in the metaphysical thought of Western reasoning’ (1). Sempruch’s exploration of being and language in this novel yields the political: ‘*Remembering Babylon* is remembering the mixture of resistance and assimilation, remembering the failure of exchange as well as an attempt to move beyond that failure, which in the end seems to connect variously defined diasporic stories’ (7). The concern here is that such valid and rich interpretations may be foreclosed through the prejudice against ‘elite’ writing and reading.

Australian author Peter Carey has spoken of the ‘tall poppy syndrome’:

> Basically, the tall poppy syndrome is that if you have a field of poppies and one poppy gets taller than the rest, the head gets chopped off. And that’s how we generally celebrate success in Australia. (Boswell para. 20)

Peter Carey’s admonition should be taken on board by Australian criticism. It is perhaps only too easy for the common run of humanity to fear and even hate someone who is simply and innately more intelligent than others. Most people can, however, recognise the green-eyed monster in themselves and keep it under control.

Apart from the narrowness of excessively class-based literary criticism, I would like to suggest that it may be too simple to equate high art and literature with the sacralising of nation in Australia without enquiring into the equally nationalist projects of writers who cater for middlebrow and even mass readerships as these can be just as involved in justifying the claims of settlers on the Australian land. In this respect, it is interesting to see that while Malouf is indicted for ‘sacralising’ the White nation, Thomas Keneally’s more prosaic endorsement of White nationhood is rarely, if ever, questioned.
Keneally is seen as a writer whose work is not, like Malouf’s ‘expressive of a refined literary habitus’ (Rooney 2007 66). Some Australian academics have indeed denounced Keneally for his prolific output and presumed financial success. As Peter Pierce puts it

It seemed that Keneally’s many books had attracted academic disdain, rather than respect for his capacities as a writer. To be prolific and popular was evidently — for some — a sin against literary propriety. To have remained a best-selling author for so long seems to have compounded Keneally’s offence. (4)

The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith (1972), was short-listed for the Booker and brought international fame for Keneally. In this novel the subject position is occupied by the half-aboriginal Jimmie, so that Keneally would seem to be taking a very responsible attitude to fiction by ensuring not merely that ‘crucial scenes’ are not missing but that his own imaginative sympathy is devoted almost wholly to a character and a culture that was all but destroyed by colonialism.

It turns out, however, that just as Malouf is guilty by omission, Keneally is equally guilty by commission, although he is immediately absolved of the crime of foreclosing ‘aboriginal subject positions outside the realm of white liberal objectification’, since he ‘has since questioned his approach to the writing of the novel’ (Davis 14).

It seems that Keneally has absorbed the lessons of his critics — or learnt how to deal with their prejudices. In his interview with Robin Hughes in September 2002, Keneally states that now that there are a number of capable Aboriginal writers who can tell their own story, now that he has lost the recklessness of youth, he would not ‘presume to put [him]self in the mind of a tribalised half-Aboriginal half-European’ but would now make it a point to maintain the ‘cultural courtesy’ of leaving Aborigines to tell their own story (Hughes 94).

At this point of the interview, Robin Hughes raised the question of how it was that Keneally felt at liberty to write about women, about Americans, about Eritreans but not about Aborigines. Keneally’s answer about having written from the point of view of an observer, not from the point of view of an Eritrean in Towards Asmara (1989), did not change the fact that following independence in 1993, UN observers for the referendum ‘had to read’ Keneally’s book, a fact that has given Keneally one of his proudest moments (Hughes 97).

If it is fair to contend — with the author himself in this case — that one should leave Aborigines to tell their own story, then it follows that this should also be the case for Eritreans. Even if Keneally’s book does not usurp the fictional Eritrean subject position, through the book Keneally subsumes the role of the living Eritrean writer. Reading Keneally means that UN observers need not find out anything from, for example, the Eritrean, Wolde Yesus Ammar, whose book Eritrea: Root Causes of War and Refugees was published in 1992. My argument, however, is not that Keneally cannot or should not write about whoever or whatever inspires him, but that Keneally is inconsistent in what he says about
what a writer can be permitted to write. If he admitted himself blameworthy in
the case of Aborigines, he should certainly not have found his own substitution of
the Eritrean author a matter of pride.

Although Keneally’s style is very different from Malouf’s, he has frequently
made use of ‘the sacred’ in his fiction. In contrast with Malouf, however, Keneally’s
sacred is often a specifically Catholic rite. I would like to suggest that Keneally’s
use of religious characters and themes in his fiction has been just as useful as
Malouf’s highly refined ‘sacralising’ literary style in endorsing a particular kind
of Australian nationhood and that it may therefore be too simple to conflate the
pursuit of a national sacred with the world of high art.

Keneally’s *A Family Madness* is set in Nazi-dominated Belorussia in the
Second World War and in the Australia of the 1980s. The characters inhabiting
war-torn Europe include both positive and negative Belorussian and German
characters, but East European immigrants in 1980s Australia all bring a dark,
barbaric past with them and constitute a grave danger to the innocent Australians.
Irish-Australian Delaney is at great risk from the Kabbels who have ‘an armoury
adequate for starting a small revolution’ (15) in their apartment, and especially
from Danielle Kabbell who is about to ruin his marriage to Gina Terraceti, a second
generation Italian who has inherited ‘the honest and ancient connection with the
Earth’ of her Sicilian father and who could bring Delaney ‘the meat, bread and
greens of love’ (22).

Although Delaney’s obsession with Danielle is the result of his Catholic
education with the De la Salle Brothers, there are answers for Delaney’s
predicament in Fr Doig’s mature, secularised version of Catholicism. This
humane, open-minded, homosexual priest blames the church for Delaney’s lack
of emotional maturity. When Delaney was a sixteen-year-old student at De la
Salle, Brother Aubin had emphasised the need to maintain an ideal love where
the beloved remains forever the only one desired, ‘*Ti mon seul desir*’ (78). In
this atmosphere sexual passion is a ‘runaway monster’, and now that Delaney
has to admit his passion for the young Danielle Kabbell, he can only imagine
that his love for Gina had not been perfect. As Fr Doig tells him, Delaney cannot
compromise: ‘Because the church told you your sexual passions were runaway
monsters which would tear your house down. You have to tear your house down
now that the monster is out of its cave. Now that there’s such a thing as desire, you
have to throw Gina away’ (264). Fr Doig has made his own rational arrangement
over sex and the only consideration that stops him telling his parishioners about
the one man he loved is the knowledge that it is not ‘within their means to take
it in’ (323).

Keneally challenges readers to accept Fr Doig’s moral code, an Australian
secularised Catholicism that admits homosexuality, and promotes honesty,
maturity, and a reasoned approach to sex in all relationships. Fr Doig secularises
his church to promote a social unity led by Irish Australian values. He throws out
almost all the statues in the local church to the chagrin of older, more traditional Catholics like Delaney’s father: ‘He says that the Infant of Prague is Czechoslavak or something, and that St Therese was only patron saint of Aussie while the place was a missionary country, and that’s not on any more’ (40) With the same honest humility of Graham Greene’s whiskey priest in The Power and the Glory, Andrew Doig inspires readers with an ‘Australian’ code of ethics that attracts readers who are bred on liberal European values. His secularised morality can encompass different cultures and thus absorb potential challenges to the Anglo-Celtic centre of power.

The morality and the culture that A Family Madness serves is multicultural in accepting some Europeans in the Australian nation. It suggests, however, that tomato-growing Italians and their progeny are much safer members of society than are Serbs and Belorussians, who bring dangerous atavistic group dynamics with them.

The Catholic church in Australia, now run by the Australian-born, has increasingly recognised the need to carry out its mission in the multicultural ambience of contemporary Australia. Even if devotional practices are still predominantly Irish, the integration of European immigrants is a powerful trend as can be seen from the high level of participation on the part of Poles in the Australian Catholic church. But who, for Keneally, is to be integrated into the Australian nation? Keneally’s novel highlights the Catholicism of his wholesome characters and these are Irish and Italian, the Delaneys and the Terracetis — almost nothing is said of the religion of the dangerous Kabbels of Bellorussia or of the Serbs who knifed Delaney’s friend Stanton within an inch of his life. Like other decent Australians of the 1980s, Delaney was at risk from Eastern Europeans to whose alien culture, he ‘was a stranger and barely held a visa’ (187).

Written seventeen years after A Family Madness, The Office of Innocence (2002) makes a different use of Catholicism to respond to the more recent and stronger challenge of US influence in Australia. The novel is set in wartime Sydney and the protagonist is the Catholic parish priest Fr Darragh. His struggle with Master Sergeant Fratelli of the US army tests Australian decency against a materialism that deadens people to violence and to evil. The violence that America condones is brought out through the treatment meted out to Private Gervaise Aspillon, the black soldier who is arrested by the American military police for desertion after spending a few days with a white woman at her house in Lidcombe. The police corner the unresisting Gervaise Aspillon and open fire on him and on Father Darragh in the flimsy wood barn, needlessly and recklessly risking both their lives. At Lidcombe, Darragh learns first hand of the corruption and cruelty of Australia’s liberators. Darragh realises that although Americans were supposed to be the saviours of the Christian world, the chances of survival for Private Aspillon in the military prison are pretty slim after he has challenged society by acting on the assumption that a ‘nigger from Luisiana’ could enjoy the same privileges that other Yanks enjoyed in Australia (202).
For Fr Daragh, the difficulties he has with America are paralleled with those he has with Monseignor Carolan and with the church hierarchy. As he matures, Daragh breaks free of the imperial hold of the Vatican, Britain and the US to emerge as an independent Australian with an individual conscience who can grapple with wider political and moral questions.

In *The Office of Innocence* the attitude of ‘decent’ Australians in war-time Sydney towards the US and Britain is predicated on class. This is brought out through Mr Connors and Mr Regan who support the prime minister, John Curtin, for having ‘defied Churchill’ by bringing the Australian troops gradually home from the middle-east (208). They also support Curtin’s ‘brave plan to cooperate with the Americans’— ‘because Mr Churchill isn’t interested in our welfare, he thinks we’re *bad stock*’ (208). What the Connors and Regans have not yet tested is the depth and extent of America’s egalitarianism. As Fr Daragh is realising, their chain of command, like that of the Vatican, shelters those who abuse their strength, men like Fratelli, who started the fusillade upon Gervaise Aspillon in the hut. As the Australian private who informs Daragh of Fratelli’s responsibility in the shooting of Aspillon and the priest in the wood barn says, American soldiers think of Australians as hillbillies ‘even *their* hillbillies think we’re hillbillies’ (163).

Equality and justice will not come from the US army or from the Vatican. Catholicism, surprisingly however, can be a fount from which Australians may nourish themselves in the struggle for social justice. Through *The Office of Innocence*, Keneally withdraws from a Vatican that is ‘deep’ in the fascist state of Italy, from the politics Pius XII, under whose picture, Daragh grows increasingly uncomfortable. At the same time, a more Australian version of Catholicism — that espoused by Aunt Madge and Kate Heggarty, and of which Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical of 1891, *Rerum Novarum*, is the leading light — is presented as having answers for contemporary Australians. Kate Heggarty is determined to teach her son to consider poverty as ‘the sin against the Holy Spirit’ because it ‘debasers people to a state where they have no virtues because they’re at animal level’ (81). *Rerum Novarum*, as Kate’s father used to explain, was the ‘Church’s answer to Karl Marx’, an aspect of Catholicism that can satisfy the hunger for social justice. Bravely for the time, it advocates the formation of working men’s associations ‘so organised and governed as to furnish the best and most suitable means for attaining what is aimed at, that is to say, for helping each individual member to better his condition to the utmost in body, soul, and property’ (Leo XIII online).

While a decent income is a moral necessity, Keneally’s novel shows that material wealth often joins hands with abusive power. For Kate Heggarty, this means that sometimes, ‘capital goes to Mass and communion, and the poor go to hell’ (81). At this point, Darragh is not ready for Kate’s insight into the complicity of the church as empire (that is, the Vatican in the Second World War) in the exploitation of the poor. He experiences it first hand when Monsignor Carolan
will not let the orphaned Anthony go to the non-Catholic Mrs Stevens according to his mother’s wish, but would have him delivered to Killcare orphanage, to be stamped with the ‘automatic stigma’ of orphanhood (211). Darragh is now ready to plot ‘with a plump, ordinary woman of non-Catholic background against a monsignor and nameless expert nuns’ (212).

As he prepares to meet with Kate’s murderer Fratelli, Darragh enlists the help of the communist Trumble. Keneally’s novel reminds Australians of the unusual but traditional sympathy between Catholic values and aspects of Labor thinking in Australia to combat the capitalist aggression that fires American militarism in the new century. One year after 9/11 sparked off the war on terror, Keneally’s *The Office of Innocence* gives a timely warning to an Australian government that sent its men to Iraq as naively as, years back, their forebears were packed off to Gallipoli.

Keneally presents Catholicism as a force that can encourage people to question a powerful establishment. Driving back from the orphanage where young Anthony Heggarty has been left, Fr Darragh experiences a conversion like that of St Paul on the road to Damascus. He now knows that his vocation as a priest may demand disobedience of the Vatican. He has learnt to look at his community and to ask ‘God, source of all I am and home to what I might be, what would You have me know, and what have me do?’ (216).

Keneally presents Fr Darragh’s commitment to the hunger and pain of his community as a sacred vocation, the sacraments he performs connecting New South Wales ‘to eternity’ (5). Keneally’s use of the sacred is embedded in a prosaic style of writing that appeals to the mass of readers. Unlike Keneally, Malouf utilises a richly metaphorical style to signal the sacred and satisfies the demands of a highbrow readership. The political aims of the two writers are also very different, with Malouf promoting a city style of Australianness that is open to different cultures aimed at diminishing xenophobia; and Keneally stressing the Republican aims of dissociating Australia from imperial masters past and present. Despite these differences, both Malouf and Keneally sacralise Australia as a nation, suggesting that the marketplace is as good as academia in promoting settler-belonging, and that the sacred in Australian fiction does more than secure the legitimacy of the White nation.

NOTES

1 In Boyer Lecture 6 ‘A Spirit of Play’, Malouf argues that before the 1960s ‘the strongest of all divisions’ in Australian society was ‘the sectarian division between Protestants and Catholics’:

> When I was growing up in Brisbane, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, Catholic and Protestant Australians lived separate lives. They might have been living in separate countries. The division between them, the separation, the hostility, was part of the very fabric of living; so essential to life here, so old and deeply rooted, as to seem immemorial and impossible of change.
Catholics and Protestants went to separate schools and learned different versions of history. Secondary students even went to different dancing classes, and when they left school they played football with different clubs...People knew by instinct, at the first meeting, by all sorts of tell-tale habits of speech and attitude, who belonged to one group and who to the other. And these divisions functioned institutionally as well as at street level. Catholics worked in some areas of the Public Service; Protestants in others. In Queensland, the Labor Party was Catholic; Protestants were Liberals…

…Part of the bitterness behind all this was that Catholics were almost exclusively Irish, so that the division had an ethnic and historical element as well as a religious one. It was a continuation on new ground of the history of Ireland itself, based on ancient resistance to English invasion and tyranny, and on the English side on a fear of Irish subversion and a deep-rooted contempt for Irish superstition and disorderliness. All this created its own mythology. (Malouf, 1998: para. 15, 16, 17)

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THE BIG FISH

Nothing is happening
So I wind the clock
And watch birds alight on wires
Like notes the clouds composed.

The agaves sit immobile as stones
Catching dew which they turn to mercury.

It’s like this almost every day
The huge old strelitzia must widen
Imperceptibly stretching its suzerain
Towards the cumquat hedge
And still nothing happens
Yet birds disappear
And in their place the numinous arrives
Huge and invisible quiet as dew
The great fish that I am after
Which slides from my hook
Shy as night.
I can’t go to the Persian gardens with you
Even years ago it wouldn’t have been possible —
We did though visit some gardens of the Moguls.

And now lying under these stars listening to jazz
Because there are no carpets left
And these stairs are rough
You’ve given me your jacket to rest on.

Here is our bed
The only one we will have now.
The shape of the mosque is etched
In pink against the sky.

Our bodies side by side
Like notes of music falling
From the trumpet
And the drum beats on.

The warm night air is our sheet.
This is where our lives meet
On these ancient stairs
Surrounded by dark gardens.
THE RENCORET GARDEN SANTIAGO

The garden is the mind of the house
Music is playing
So the garden is humming
A little tune.

The floor of the verandah
Is of petrified polished wood
So that the garden can remember
Its history.

A square of white roses
On a green line of box
Is the garden’s flag
Which it flies for peace.

I was walking in the garden
When the unicorn joined me
Wearing a collar of shards of crystal,
Silver and pearls.

The unicorn blinked once or twice
Then drifted away
Into some dappled shade —
Its complexion was very pale.

Two gardeners stood bowing
And smiling — Pierros,
Who, let’s not forget,
Made it all happen.

I sat in a big cane chair
On the verandah and Mrs Rencoret,
Wearing shoes like the Queen
Shook my hand
Hers, soft as a horse’s muzzle.

The maids were the garden’s
Pink butterflies
Serving us tea.

Juan Grimm stood at the axis
Of the garden’s world
The King of Spades who had
To give in to the Queen
Who like every girl wanted
roses
In her old age as well as her youth —
Hard perhaps for a King to understand.

Finally we left
And the unicorn appeared from the shade,
Climbed into our bus
And we drove away.
SWEET PEAS

Lots of them today
Blooming against the fence
Offering their lilac, purple, magenta and pink clouds
Of scent. Also the floral skirt I bought today
Lying on the bed in its tissues like a tiger.
All these frivolous things
While serious matters are awry
With the economy.

The air here is full of the flowers’ perfume
Even though rain is just a memory
Yet, a vast rainbow appeared over the rooftops.
Sweet peas mean summer’s almost here
And this arrhythmia makes me grateful
As my slow pulse blooms like sweet peas
On the fence of my wrist with glorious irregularity
Boom, boom.........boom.
Recent Italian-Australian Narrative Fiction by First Generation Writers

The publication in 2008 of the English version of Emilio Gabbrielli’s (2000) novel Polenta e Goanna and the new re-introduced edition of Rosa Cappiello’s Oh Lucky Country in 2009 constitutes something of a landmark in Italian-Australian writing. Cappiello’s novel is now the second most-published work by a first generation Italian-Australian writer after Raffaello Carboni’s (1855) Eureka Stockade. Although Italians in Australia have been writing about their experiences since the mid 1800s and have produced texts such as those by Salvado (1851), Ercole (1932) and Nibbi (1937), a coherent corpus of Italian-Australian writing has developed only after the post-World War Two migration boom which saw some 360,000 Italian-born migrants entering Australia between 1947 and 1972. While the majority have contributed in some way to Australia’s economic development (see Castles et al 1992) only a few hundred have written about their experiences, producing memoirs, (auto)biographies, poetry, theatre and narrative fiction. Although this writing has made relatively little impact on mainstream Australian literary culture and has attracted relatively little attention it deals with political, social and cultural issues and an alternative perspective of Australia from the periphery that makes it worthy of critical attention.

The most substantial study to date of first generation writers is provided in Rando Literature and the Migration Experience (1988) which explores the development of Italian-Australian narrative fiction from 1965 to 1986 and examines some thirty-five volumes of novels and short stories produced by some twenty-seven first-generation writers who relate their feelings for and reactions to the new environment and their attitudes towards their place of origin. That study provides an in-depth analysis of works such as Pino Bosi’s (1971) seminal Italian Australian novel, Australia Cane (Australia is a dog of a place), and his short story collection, The Checkmate (Bosi 1973), Gino Nibbi’s (1965) short story collection, Cocktails d’Australia (Australian cocktails), and Rosa Cappiello’s (1981, 1984) novel Oh Lucky Country. In their totality these narrative texts relate the anger, frustration, the hopes and disappointments lived by the immigrants, the traumatic experience of leaving one’s native land and of having to start again in a new country with the realisation that perhaps one can never really ‘belong’ completely, and the need to negotiate liminal times and spaces which only the immigrant has known. It is a view of the migration phenomenon and of the host society that only the immigrant can give, a manifestation, as Bhabha points out,
that has the ability to shift the ground of knowledges through the possibility of cultural contestation posited by cultural difference (1990b 313).

Since the completion of Literature and the Migration Experience and related studies (Rando 1988b, 1988c, 1991a) the number of narrative texts in volume form (in both Italian and English — English being used somewhat more than in the past) published by first-generation writers has doubled and a substantial corpus of narrative texts in English by second- and third-generation writers has emerged. This article proposes to continue the examination of Italian-Australian narrative fiction by considering works published from the mid-1980s to the present by first-generation writers while a subsequent essay will address texts produced by the second and subsequent generations.¹

Rosa Cappiello is perhaps the first-generation writer best known to the Anglo-Australian reading public. An innovative and progressive writer among a group that does not often transcend biographical elements and is generally characterised by conservatism in both technique and concept, she is the only first-generation Italian woman migrant to have gained a measure of recognition by Australia’s literary institutions, factual errors, problematic interpretations, and controversies notwithstanding. A recent example of the problematic nature of critical engagement with Cappiello’s work is Nicole Moore’s part of the introduction to the 2009 edition which, inter alia, attributes the derivation of the title of Cappiello’s novel to Donald Horne’s well-known book while Cappiello has consistently stated that she had no knowledge of Donald Horne’s work when she formulated the title Paese fortunato (Lucky Country), using an Italian syntagmatic collocation that has implicit ironic connotations² — the English title was formulated by the publisher out of deference to Horne who at the time was Chair of the Australia Council. Moore then goes on to state that Cappiello was writing back to ‘her own troubled country in damnation of the migrant’s paradise. In the early 1980s Italy was rocked by a major political scandal … the pope was shot and a big earthquake in Southern Italy killed 3000 people’ (Cappiello 2009 vi). The relevance here is somewhat problematic since in terms of Italy’s socio-cultural situation the contextual background to Paese fortunato (as indeed Cappiello’s first novel I semi neri) is more appropriately located in the endemic social, economic and political problems of Southern Italy, in particular the Neapolitan hinterland, and their treatment in literature by Southern Italian writers (see, for example, Crupi 1979 and 2002). Later trends in Cappiello’s narrative writing indicated that she could distance herself from autobiographical migrant themes and capture something of an ‘Australian’ quality while at the same time retaining an Italian cultural and linguistic base. These trends are evident in excerpts of her third novel ‘in progress’ (begun during her time as writer in residence at the University of Wollongong in 1983 but unfortunately never completed), whose intertextual references combine the raunchy sexuality of Boccaccio’s Decameron and the existential alienation of Franz Kafka, as well as short stories such as ‘10/20 dogs under the bed’ (Cappiello...
Gaetano Rando

1988). This is a whimsical, spirited, punchy, paradoxical story told in the first person by an old man obsessed by sex and death whose existence is plagued by his mate Josse’s obsession with greyhounds in yet another vacuous get-rich-quick scheme.

Cappiello was to prove an isolated instance of a first generation writer of fiction who wrote exclusively in Italian, gaining a measure of institutional recognition although ultimately the language barrier and other factors made her decide to return to Italy. With the exception of Cappiello and Antonio Casella (the only first-generation writer to write and publish exclusively in English [see Casella 2007 41]), other writers have remained well below the radar of Australia’s literary establishment despite some increase in the production of narrative fiction in English and a diversification of themes beyond those strictly linked to the Italian Australian migrant experience. Raffaele Gesini’s novel Il certificato (The Certificate) (1993) provides a realistically pessimistic view of Italy’s public sector through the narration of the protagonist’s futile attempts to resolve a complex matter with an Italian government bureaucracy, noted for its labyrinthine machinations, and the extreme angst caused by this experience. Fernando Basili’s short stories (2002) are all set in Tuscany and relate in fine ironic detail the wit and ingenuity (reminiscent of some of Boccaccio’s tales) employed by their working class / lower middle class characters in finding solutions to complex life situations. Some of the short stories published in the anthology, Premio 2 giugno (1999), present themes that have no connection with the migrant experience and are in some cases intensely existentialist, while Pino Bosi’s novel, Moon Crescent and Silent Bells (2002), set in Israel, relates the story of an Italian Australian character, ex-Foreign Legionnaire Ludovico (‘Ben’) Benelli, caught up in the complex intrigues of the Palestinian/Israeli struggle but ultimately hopeful that there will be one day a world without nations or frontiers (Bosi 2002 175).

Paolo Mazzarella (1994) and Rina Arfi Fameli (2006 and 2007) have published romantic fiction written in Italian, possibly inspired by the widespread popularity of Amalia Odescalchi’s novels among first Italian-Australian generation readers. Both writers have set their novels in Italy and have adopted a formula commonly found in the Mills and Boon variety of the genre, although Mazzarella (128–32) does introduce a brief if slightly outdated discourse on female emancipation in contemporary Italy, while Fameli contains a passing mention of Italy’s disastrous condition after the First World War (5–6). A few first-generation writers have also published adolescent and children’s fiction, in some cases in bilingual mode (for example, Acquaro 2001), although these genres have tended to be mainly the province of second-generation writers such as Melina Marchetta and Archimede Fusillo.

A further example of the trend to diversified themes is found in Antonio Casella’s novel Southfalia (1980), a fantasy fable of Australia’s political present that is clearly relevant to Australian events of the 1960s and 1970s set in the context of Western Australia as a colony founded by the ancient Romans. The only explicit Italian migrant connection is one of the minor characters, the
Sicilian greengrocer Filippo Grassi, ‘an imported serf’ (30). Casella migrated to Western Australia with his family from San Fratello, a small mountain village in Sicily, in 1959 at the age of 15 and after some years engaged in ‘normal’ migrant occupations, obtained tertiary qualifications and pursued a career in teaching and creative writing (Casella 2007 41–42). The protagonist of his second novel, The Sensualist (1991), is first generation migrant Nick (Nicola) Amedeo. Since his arrival from Sicily in 1938, Amedeo has achieved substantial material success in the construction industry and contributed, like many of his real life compatriots, to the transformation of the Perth cityscape. However, after forty years events force both Nick and his Australian wife, Joyce, to confront themselves and their personal histories as well as their relationship with their two children. Joyce’s journey takes her back in memory to the north-west of Western Australia, a vast alien land feared by its white inhabitants ‘where a woman, more so than a man, might be lost and none would notice…a landscape that listened for the music of black-boys played like zithers by the easterlies’ (4). Nick returns in spirit to the harsh environment of the mountains of Sicily, a country ‘of eagle’s nest villages hanging precariously from white clay ridges in the sun’ (4) with ‘more arrogance than a beauty queen and white stone ridges as lonely as the Australian outback’ (88) conditioned by its myths and implacable rituals, to confront suppressed traumatic childhood memories.

A third novel, An Olive Branch for Sante (Casella 2006), as yet unpublished, is set partly in Australia, partly in Sicily. While in The Sensualist the rural settings of Sicily and Western Australia are marked by a sense of harshness, loneliness and alienation, in An Olive Branch for Sante the rural environment is presented largely as wholesome and spiritual, while the city is either non-existent or, when it makes an appearance in the Australian section, is vapid and alienating. Australian-born Ira-Jane, a product of contemporary Australia, decides to explore the Sicilian roots acquired through her adoptive nonni (grandparents) despite her conviction that ‘memories are self-indulgent, a sign of weakness, a wasteful sentimentality’ (1). Her trip to Sicily to re-establish contact with Ira la Rocca, the daughter of her nonni, leads her to meet Ira’s son Sante Marzano, born and bred in the hilltop town of San Sisto (province of Messina). Sante decides to return with Ira-Jane to Australia to become acquainted with the land where he was conceived and ends up working in Clem Franzetti’s olive plantation in Western Australia. It is in the countryside of both Sicily and Australia that the protagonists find spiritual solace, and in some cases transformation. Sante and Ira-Jane seal their spiritual union in the Kimberlies where in the ‘remote, galactic landscape [that] spoke of times far more ancient than the Mediterranean’ (305) both young people find what they are seeking — an identity beyond the confines of the space and the culture they were born into as well as some answers to metaphysical questions about life: ‘She could see it now. Ira-Jane without Sante was a leaf searching for a tree. Sicily brought them together, it took a pool in the Kimberlies to crystallize the significance of that event’ (305).
The West Australian outback is also the setting for Emilio Gabbrielli’s novel, *Polenta and Goanna* (2008), which is based on the meeting and intermarriage in the early twentieth century between traditional Western Desert Aboriginal people and Italian migrants in the remote northwest goldfields region. The novel presents themes of anti-racism and the gradual and tentative establishment of intimacy and kinship between people from radically different cultures (also found in Nievo [1994], to an extent in Salvado [1851], and as a marginal theme in Carboni [1855]) and an autobiographical twist is produced by the fictionalised account of the writer/protagonist’s search in outback Australia (similar to the technique adopted in Stanislao Nievo’s search for the New Italy settlers in his novel *Le isole del paradiso* [see Rando 1991b 50]) to recover a lost Italian-Aboriginal identity.

*Polenta and Goanna* is the English version of the original Italian text (Gabbrielli [2000]) which predates Franco Di Chiera’s SBS broadcast documentary *Hoover’s Gold* (2006) on Italian migrants hired by American engineer J. Edgar Hoover in the early 1900s to work in one of the then-richest gold deposits in the world, the Sons of Gwalia mine at Leonora. Gabbrielli extrapolates the stories of these miners beyond surface reality by blending the historical content with the arcane mystique of the writer/protagonist’s experiences in the Western Australian desert. These stories are imaginatively combined, providing a skilful tale of cultural adaptation and the blending that occurs between the Italian miners, the desert environment and its original inhabitants. One significant example is the story of the Sicilian, Angelo Bellini, whose relationship with Aboriginal people has led him to adopt a way of life in such close contact with the land that when the writer/protagonist finally finds him he appears Dantesquely mute in his lack of ability to converse in his native language: ‘in the last years of his life he had buried his original instrument of communication and was now, not unhappily, disinterring something he had pragmatically turned his back on forever’ (Gabbrielli 2008 215). It is through his close contacts with the Aboriginal families of these Italian miners and their descendants that the writer/protagonist, sharing a meal of spaghetti and kangaroo tail around their campfire, finally comes to the realisation that,

I was enjoying a spiritual communion with these people, with whom I did after all have something in common...And I thought I heard a human cry of recognition rising over the parched lake that night, like a challenge: a cry of solidarity with the bones turning to dust at the Norman Castle, the bones lying in the cemetery in Gwalia, the bones of Angelo Bellini soon to be laid to rest in the sand, the bones scattered in the deserts and the ‘dead hills’... (Gabbrielli 2008 235)

A postmodern interpretation of historical migration experiences is also found in Paolo Totaro’s (c. 1996) short story, *Storia patria* (‘History of the Fatherland’), which in 1993 won the literary prize *Premio Letterario 2 Giugno* promoted by the Consulate General of Italy (Sydney). The story focuses on how chance is the main factor in determining human events. It is told through an exchange of letters over 1859–60 between the characters living in Naples and Sydney who relate facts based
on the socio-historical realities of the period and their existential consequences that illustrate the similarity of the human condition in the two cities: colonialism (Naples too was colonised by northern Italians as a result of the *Risorgimento*); the vitality and the poverty of the people of Naples and of the Aborigines; the provincialism of art; the moral problems posed by the emerging sciences.

Another perspective on Italian migration to Australia is provided in Giovanni Andreoni’s historical novel, *Zucchero* (Sugar) (1995), set in the North Queensland sugar belt. Andreoni begins his historical, though somewhat sketchy, tour de force with the kidnapping of Micronesians to work as forced labourers in Queensland’s developing sugar industry and ends his saga with the internment of Italian Australians during the second world war. The novel is a social realist interpretation of relations between Anglo-Australians and ‘the other’ and focuses on the exploitation and discrimination displayed towards the Kanakas and the Italians who replaced them, as well as towards the local indigenous population reduced to living on the fringes of society.

Other first-generation writers have combined the existential, and in some cases highly personalised, dimension of post-World War Two migration experiences with socio-political themes. Pietro Tedeschi’s two novels relate the story of Morcia, a young militant left-wing fitter and turner from Reggio Emilia in northern Italy, who reluctantly emigrates to Australia in the early 1950s. Tedeschi traces Morcia’s physical and metaphysical journey from unsettlement in Reggio Emilia, an industrial city down but not out in the years immediately after the end of the Second World War, to potential resettlement in Wollongong, a developing industrial city without the technological sophistication and political worker awareness of Reggio Emilia. The first novel, *Senza camicia* (*No Silver Spoon*) (1986), begins with the worker occupation of the Officine Reggiane steel plant, Morcia’s subsequent unemployment and struggle to make ends meet, his decision to emigrate with the accompanying condemnation of Italian Christian Democrat government policy on emigration (the government treats Italian workers and peasants like two-legged animals) and ends with Morcia boarding ship to leave for Australia. In the second novel, *53B* (1993), written in English and only partially published (1991), the protagonist’s name is changed to Reggio. It begins with Reggio’s arrival at the Bonegilla migrant camp where he participates in the Italian migrants’ revolt against bread rationing and is subsequently assigned to the labour force at the Port Kembla steelworks as an unskilled worker despite his Italian trade qualifications. Reggio, in fact, soon discovers that although British and North European qualifications were recognised, their Italian equivalents were not, a state of affairs that led to paradoxical situations in which the foreman sought ‘advice from the [Italian] fitter’s labourer because he knew more than the tradesman himself’ (1993 182), while ‘the humblest, the dirtiest, the most impersonal jobs…were especially reserved…for the Italians’ (1993 183) even though ‘the big Diesel locos which pulled the trains on the railway network
inside the Steelworks showed in big letters the [Italian manufacturer’s] name ANSALDO’ (1993 183).

Reggio needs to find his space both in the steelworks and in the Berkeley migrant camp where he lives during his first twelve months in the Illawarra. His space at Berkeley is marked both by his association with his Italian friends, all young single men, and by the attempts they make to establish a rapport with some of the other migrants at the camp, mostly made up of English families. On the work front he is appreciative of the fact that the steelworks offers him the opportunity to regain his self esteem after years of forced unemployment. However the chaotic and inferno-like atmosphere of the place makes him uneasy (‘a steel jungle submerged in smoke, dust, fire, and the roars and bangs filling the air where people entered in hundreds as if swallowed by the giant jaws of hell’ [1991 183]) and he is dismayed at the primitive methods used in clearing a flooded area: ‘Both teams were going to dig a metre-deep ditch to reach lower ground seventy metres away. “How original! And what about water pumps?” I asked myself. “Leonardo [da Vinci] invented them four or five hundred years ago.”’ [1991 193]). Despite this he is prepared to adapt to local work practices by proposing a quicker and more practical way of clearing the flooded area, a solution that earns him the praise of his Australian foreman:

He pointed at me with a grin. ‘I couldn’t have done it without the help of me mate here.’…I didn’t understand one word Fred had exchanged with his compatriots, but I had grasped the real meaning of the definition ‘mate’ for the first time…Right down in the gut I felt good. (1991 194)

Reggio’s initial perception of Australia is positive and enthusiastic though critical and not necessarily accepting in all its aspects. Australia is seen as a land of rugged natural beauty that offers a fresh beginning, new opportunities and new experiences and challenges. His first year in Australia has changed him from the passive, limp, withered human being who had set foot on the boat in Genova to an assertive, self-confident and critical individual whose perceptions of the world have been set in focus and whose horizons have been widened (1993 190), thus forming a basis for further exploration and contact with the new country.

A counter-discursive questioning of dominant notions of history and nation applied to both Italy and Australia constitutes an important element of Adelaide-based Vincenzo Papandrea’s novel, La Quercia grande (The Great Oak Tree) (1996), which proposes emigration as an experience containing submerged values that need to be recognised, recovered and reassessed. These values are created by a blending of traditions and customs taken both from the place of origin and from the new land, and include family relationships, solidarity among people from the same town, class solidarity, accepting the new country without forgetting the old, the concept of personal political commitment. The novel is a detailed description of the thoughts, feelings and perceptions, hopes, doubts and disappointments of a group of contadini as they experience the transition from agricultural Careri
in the Calabrian mountains to Adelaide’s industrial belt. After the end of the Second World War, the *contadini* of Careri had, like their forefathers (see Crupi 2002 151), actively participated in the struggle for land rights promoted by the political left. Because of this the local conservative power elite (the landowners, the priest, the local government authorities) employ various stratagems to force the *contadini* to emigrate.

The initial impact with Australia is disorienting and disconcerting but with the passage of time most of the members of the group gradually begin to find their niche in the new order. Rocco Musolino works hard in Adelaide’s factories to save money to bring out the rest of his family and to buy land in order to resume his preferred vocation as a *contadino*. Sergio and Paolo become actively involved in their trade union but when Sergio speaks Italian at a union meeting he is quickly told to shut up (158). For most of the group, migration and settlement lead to the realisation of some of their dreams through sheer hard work. Rocco is able to buy his farm where, as well as commercial production, he can carry on some of the old traditions — making his own wine and tomato sauce, the annual killing of the pig to make ham, sausages and other smallgoods. Rocco’s son, Bruno, is the one who best manages to blend the old and the new. He obtains professional qualifications in agriculture which provide access to a career as well as allowing him to help his father manage the farm, while his contact with an Aboriginal elder leads him to gain an insight into Australia’s ancient mystique.

As well as existential and socio-political themes, the novels of Charles D’Aprano and Giuseppe (Joe) Abiuso raise the identity issues that confront the 1B³ and the second generations while Marisa Fazio’s (1992, 1997) narratives explore themes of nostalgia, place, identity, intergenerational relationships and the expressiveness of the Sicilian dialect. Abiuso’s novella, *Diary of an Italo-Australian Schoolboy* (1984 100–60), is a story in which bitterness and farce are intertwined as an adolescent Italian boy is put through the wringer of assimilation. Mario Carlesani, the protagonist/narrator, lives in Fitzroy (Melbourne) where his parents are caught in a vicious circle of poverty and misfortune. His school experience is equally disadvantaged as he keeps being failed and made to repeat third form in an education system that does little to address the special needs of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) students. When his family situation is ultimately resolved, Mario decides to drop out of school and go and look for work in the Northern Territory (which he considers to be the last genuine Australian frontier) where he will join his friend Geoffrey’s big brother in the top end’s ‘silent nights all surrounded by those white ghost gums’ (1984 160). Despite his problematic school experience, Mario has established a positive relationship with some of his teachers. The History teacher encourages his somewhat unarticulated search for the spirit of Australia while Miss K., who sometimes unofficially teaches sex education instead of mathematics, encourages Mario to become active in the Victorian Secondary Students Union. Mario thus moves
from a position of feeling alienated from all aspects of Australian society to an awareness of class solidarity and an appreciation of the ‘true’ spirit of Australia. Abiuso’s thesis is that while society, through its various institutions, excludes and alienates the CALD migrant, individual Australians can offer the migrant practical help or can lead the migrant to an understanding of the Australian spirit. While Mario becomes an active participant in Australian society even if he may not fully accept it, his parents fail to achieve this because of the isolation brought about by their lack of English and through their insistence in maintaining traditional Italian peasant values and their unwillingness to accept the new land.

Jim Romano, the protagonist of *Tears Laughter and the Revolution* (D’Aprano 1998), decides to join the Australian Army Labour Corps in 1942 when the country comes under threat of Japanese invasion as a gesture of solidarity towards his Australian friends (3). Over time his initial disinterest in Australian social and political issues due to his strong sense of Italianness dissipates as he becomes an active participant in union activities, and in 1952 he is sent as one of the Australian delegates to the Vienna peace conference. The trip includes a visit to Italy and proves to be both a physical as well as an intellectual rite of passage. He returns to Australia a committed left-wing intellectual with the conviction that change in the social power structure will be brought about by the working and peasant classes — a political belief that remains with him even when he obtains tertiary qualifications and pursues a teaching career. Jim Romano actively participates in the debates on multiculturalism, the emerging sense of Australian social and political awareness and the Republican movement as well as the more focused issue of the acceptance of CALD worker participation in the Australian labour movement. As part of the process, marked by a number of return trips to Italy, he also finds a resolution to the question of personal identity, reconciling the earlier swing from identifying as an Italian to identifying as an Australian with the emergence of an Italian Australian identity which combines elements of both thus being able to move effortlessly like a swallow through the liminal space that marks Italian/Australian boundaries.

Whereas D’Aprano deals with the experiences of the unskilled immigrant worker who eventually obtains professional qualifications in Australia but remains substantially ‘working class’ at heart, Enoe Di Stefano’s *L’Avventura australiana* (Australian Adventure) (1996) is a sensitively told and in parts moving novel about the aspirations of a middle-class couple that discusses, in some considerable detail and with feeling, the condition of Italian migrant women in the ’50s. These women are perceived by Di Stefano as simple and basically religious beings intent on following and generally supporting their husbands, creating a home and rearing children in the new country. The central character, Nica, an artist in her own modest way, arrives in Sydney in 1950 with her lawyer husband Enzo and finds she has to come to terms with a society which recognises neither her teaching qualifications nor her artistic aspirations. Nica and Enzo are quite dismayed when,
a week or so after their arrival, they begin to look for work and are advised by the ‘old’ migrants that the most they can aspire to is a job in some factory. Far from being a land of opportunity, Australia becomes, at least in the initial phase of immigration, a land of disillusionment. However, the couple never quite lose their initial optimism which is shored up by Nica finding employment as a decorator of statuettes for a manufacturer of Catholic religious objects in the city, while Enzo stoically accepts his lot as a sorter in a local bottle factory (a physically fatiguing and soul-destroying place that reminds him of Dante’s inferno) where he works extra shifts in order to save money to buy a house. When Nica becomes pregnant she feels isolated and alone without the family support structure she would have had back in Italy but the arrival of the baby takes on a symbolic meaning for her since she feels that she now has a definite commitment to the new country. This commitment is reinforced in the basically optimistic conclusion of the novel when Nica, finally settled into her own home and with her brother about to arrive from Italy, finds that she is pregnant again.

Diasporic issues and the situation of Italian migrants in Australia abandoned to their own devices by an uncaring Italian political elite constitute one of the many intricate, complex and at times confusing sub-plots that are intertwined throughout Pino Sollazzo’s, *Il Capolavoro del secolo* (*The Masterstroke of the Century*) (1988), a novel that brings together the themes of love, sex, passion, fast cars, criminal activity and the bandit-hero developed in his earlier short stories (Rando 1988a 355–57). The protagonist, Dino Crifone, is a Calabrian master criminal who, together with his associates, executes a number of daring criminal exploits that include a highly imaginative fraudulent scheme to squeeze money out of the Italian-Australian community. Posing as impresarios who are organising a series of concerts in Australia for a famous Italian popular singer, they sell tens of thousands of tickets for concerts that will never eventuate. In real life, such concerts constitute significant events in the Italian-Australian diaspora, particularly for first generation migrants, and Sollazzo comments that they are organised with great pomp and ceremony by impresarios who extort ‘Italian workers who rush in their thousands to see a singer from the fatherland … [and] cry like little children when they hear the Italian national anthem’ (10). Throughout the novel, Sollazzo provides further comments on the way that the ‘ordinary’ Italian migrant is subject to exploitation and discrimination. He criticises the Italian government because it has ‘virtually abandoned us to our destiny of migrants’ (9) and the high and mighty ways of its representative in Melbourne, the Consul General for Italy, ‘who considers himself better than everyone else and…rides in a Rolls Royce driven by a personal chauffeur… [but] if you want to get a document from the Consulate you’ve got to go through hell and high water!’ (48). Discrimination also comes from some Italian-Australian institutions connected to the Italian ruling class, such as Melbourne’s Italian language newspaper *Il Globo* as well as the anglo-Australian media — Sollazzo comments that ‘in this southern land
we migrants are like desert dust...every time we make even a slight mistake, they [the media] immediately shoot us down, or they give us a large dose of poison’ (47). In this context the protagonist Dino and his band, who finally repentantly stage the promised concerts in a gesture of solidarity with working class migrants, represent the ideal bandit heroes found in modern Calabrian literature, and in the Calabrian folk narrative familiar to many older Calabrian Australians. Although modern globalised bandits, they maintain close ties with the south of Italy and adhere to its traditional code of honour, stealing from the corrupt and exploitative rich to give to the poor and refusing to have anything to do with drugs. They are considered true sons of the south who with their pragmatic intelligence counter institutionalised Italian and Australian prejudices that portray southerners as primitive, ignorant and stupid. In this respect Sollazzo reflects concepts that are not uncommon among the older immigrants of southern contadino origin who regard the Italian government (and its institutions) as ineffective, something alien to their reality, an instrument of corruption and oppression.

Although not related to an Italian-Australian context, long time Perth resident Alfredo Strano’s novel Cristo se n’è andato (Christ Has Gone Away [2003] — the title closely calques Carlo Levi’s Christ Stopped at Eboli) — presents migration as existential defeat caused in part by the social and economic problems of Calabria, in part by the ruinous colonial policy pursued by Italy’s fascist government. It is the story of Cicillo, son of a small landowner of Acquasanta in the Calabrian mountains who had obtained trade qualifications as a mechanic and, rather than face unemployment, decides to leave his pregnant wife and follow the fascist government’s call for workers to emigrate to the newly conquered Italian territories in Abyssinia. There Cicillo establishes a relationship with Tatà who is of mixed Italian/Abyssinian parentage and with whom he has a child. He is also brought into extended contact with the fascist system as well as with the consequences of Italian intervention in north Africa that include instances of cruelty to the local inhabitants (including massacres). The outbreak of the Second World War delays his return to Acquasanta in 1947, no longer young and with the realisation that the leprosy he had contracted in Africa has now become terminal. Notwithstanding its conclusion, Strano’s novel presents the theme of hope, through the possibility of brotherhood between people of different cultures and ethnicities, as well as a message of universal peace, through the condemnation of war seen as a punishment from God and a manifestation of the madness of humankind (Strano 2003 191–92). This perspective derives from Strano’s concept of the social dimensions of Christianity enunciated in the first of a series of memoirs, Prigioniero in Germania (Prisoner in Germany) (1973), and subsequently developed as a constant theme in his other writings (Strano 1991 and 2001).

Writing about the migration experience is thus one of the many and varied cultural practices developed by Italians who have migrated to Australia. Although the number of first-generation Italian-Australian writers who have published in
volume form is relatively small in terms of the size of the community, they have produced a significant corpus of texts which can be seen as belonging to the ‘minority’ and largely invisible streams present in Australian literary culture. These texts present some points in common with the general corpus of alternative literatures although ultimately they display a number of differences through the themes related to the expression and critique of Italian cultural values and practices, the sometimes complex appraisal of the relationship with Italy and the equally complex relationship with the new country. Texts produced by first-generation writers in particular are often characterised by counter-discursive elements that function to interrogate and destabilise hegemonic views of nation, as well by the temporal and spatial dislocations resulting from the mapping of two overlapping cultural contexts.

Themes treated in texts of narrative fiction are to some extent more selective and more focused than in poetry, memoirs and (auto)biography (there has been a virtual ‘explosion’ in the production of memoirs and biographies by both first- and second-generation writers in the past fifteen years or so). While some narrative texts (Di Stefano 1996; Tedeschi 1986 and 1993) contain quite transparent (auto)biographical elements, others (Cappiello 1984; Gabbielli 2008) transcend the immediacy of personal vissisitudes to explore the more universal aspects of the human condition. In both cases, however, common themes are those related to the cultural and social identity of the Italian-Australian community, the generally un-nostalgic recall of the Italian pre-migratory past and the present relationship with Italy. There is an implicit critique of the Australian ruling class and, more particularly, of the Italian ruling class which is in many ways held responsible for the upheavals caused by the migration process. The effects of the migration process are, however, perceived differently by different writers. For some the passage to a new world involves the realisation of a richer and fuller life. For others the long crossing has not lived up to its promise. The dream did not become reality and nostalgia triggers a sense of not belonging either to the past or to the present, a metaphysical wandering that cannot be fully resolved. While many of the narrative works deal with the social realities of the diaspora, some also provide a constant and ever-shifting appraisal of two different worlds and two different cultures in the attempt to demythologise and remythologise past and present in the light of new experiences.

Despite the lack of cultural negotiation with the mainstream, first-generation Italian-Australian writing can be considered as providing an interesting example of Bhabha’s general observation regarding the potential of Australia’s pluricultural society to present views from the periphery (Bhabha 1990a 6). To what extent Italian-Australian narrative fiction (and also theatre and film) can contribute to this ‘rewriting’ yet remains to be seen, although the regional and localised differences articulated by some writers certainly contest dominant notions of history and nation, thus contributing to the interrogation of the national as emergent from both
local communities and global diasporas. It does nonetheless provide one of the many examples that can be incorporated in Sneja Gunew’s theoretical framework for analysing ethnic minority writing in Australia by changing the definition of what is considered ‘Australian literature’ and challenging conventions that appear to be attached to migrant writing (1994). In Haunted Nations, Gunew argues that there cannot be a full understanding of Australian culture and identity without the inclusion of minority cultures. This inclusion will allow the investigation of the representation (or of the absence) of the ‘other’ and provide alternative ways of considering Australianness. Gunew’s arguments present interesting links to Bhabha’s observation that minority discourse, as a subaltern voice of the people, can transcend time and space (1990b 309), and to the claim made by Edward Said that the exile/migrant can apply a double perspective — things are seen both from the point of view of what has been left behind and of the here and how (1994 44). The vision of the new world is filtered through the one left behind, leading to the development of an original/unique sensitivity and the construction of a new morphology of the present.

NOTES

1 The selection criteria represented by the terms ‘first generation’ and ‘narrative fiction’ are not entirely unproblematical. Peter Dalseno’s lightly fictionalised autobiography Sugar, Tears and Eyeties (1994), for example, is not included since the author arrived in Australia as a baby and writes about issues that are more pertinent to the second generation experience.

2 The irony consists in using a noun + adjective structure to state the opposite to the literal meaning expressed by the noun group. Cappiello’s novel clearly suggests that for the protagonist Australia did not turn out to be a ‘lucky country’.

3 The term is used to refer to individuals who have migrated to Australia as children or young adolescents and who have received some or all of their education in Australia.

4 The exegetical history of Abiuso’s novel has a somewhat unusual twist. The initial version was written in Italian and English in 1972, circulated in cyclostyled format, and an excerpt was published in Abiuso et al (1979 92–98). There are some very striking resemblances between Abiuso’s novel and the more sugar-coated film Moving Out, produced in 1982 by Pattinson Ballantyne Films, that could be construed as indicating that the film drew substantially from the novel but without any acknowledgement.

5 In his non fictional writings Strano (1991, 2001) presents migration to Australia in a much more positive light.

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Glimpses of Agency in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*

**INTRODUCTION**

‘Agency in *The God of Small Things*? ’ Surprise may well be readers’ first reaction to this thought as they recall the series of relentless tragic events that befall the chief characters of this novel. To commence this seemingly unjustified mission, I shall consider the kind and scale of agency one finds in Roy’s political writings. I adopt this procedure because Roy herself, in an interview with Terrence McNally entitled, ‘Finding Justice with Arundhati Roy’, explains that for her, writing as a novelist and as an activist are not very different activities:

> In fact, right from the time that I was studying architecture or even earlier, this political way of looking at the world began...The essence of what one is looking at is deeply political, but how one chooses to express that can change. (1–2)

Similarly, in *Power Politics* she argues:

> Now, I’ve been wondering why it should be that the person who wrote *The God of Small Things* is called a writer, and the person who wrote the political essays is called an activist? True, *The God of Small Things* is a work of fiction, but it’s no less political than any of my essays. (11)

What is evident in all Roy’s activist writing is her affirmation of agency for herself and fellow activists. In her essay, ‘The End of Imagination’, which concerns the issue of nuclear weapons, she insists: ‘we have to reach within ourselves and find the strength to think. To fight’ (122). Her passionate advice to her readers is therefore to ‘[s]tand up and say something. Never mind if it’s been said before. Speak up on your own behalf. Take it very personally’ (131). Such an action is possible in her view because:

> Everybody, from the smallest person to the biggest, has some kind of power, and even the most powerless person has a responsibility. I don’t feel responsible for everybody. Everybody also is responsible for themselves. (2001a 38)

Commenting in *Power Politics* on ‘the huge political and social upheavals that are convulsing the [Indian] nation’, and having in mind in particular the devastating effects of the government project to build huge dams, Roy brings her imperative to ‘stand up and say something’ closer to her own form of intervention: ‘One is involved because one is a human being. Writing about it just happens to be the most effective thing I can do’ (24). Fortunately for her, as Naomi Klein notes in her Foreword to David Barsamian’s *The Chequebook and the Cruise Missile: Conversations with Arundhati Roy*, ‘[i]n Roy’s hands, words are weapons —
weapons of mass movements’ (ix–x). What is needed on the part of activists like herself, she explains, is a ‘new kind of politics. Not the politics of governance, but the politics of resistance. The politics of opposition. The politics of forcing accountability’ (2001b 33).

In the case of her vociferous opposition to the Sradar Sarovar Dam in the Narmada Valley, Gujerat province, sufficient evidence of the odds faced by activists like herself is provided by the fact that criminal proceedings were instigated against her for contempt of court. She and others had dared to cite specific instances of government officials’ perjury in relation to the question of whether promised resettlement of villagers had been carried out. In this way she practises her own dictum that ‘we have to rescue democracy by being troublesome, by asking questions, by making a noise. That’s what you have to do to retain your freedoms. Even if you lose’ (2002 96).

The effect of the trouble and noise made by her and fellow activists leads Roy elsewhere to celebrate the success of the Narmada Bacao Andolan [NBA], the Save the Narmada Movement:

The NBA is a fantastic example of a resistance movement in which people link hands across case and class. It is India’s biggest, finest, most magnificent resistance movement since the independence struggle succeeded in the 1940s. There are other resistance movements in India. It’s a miracle that they exist. But I fear for their future. (2001a 16–17)

A significant qualification that Roy makes in the interview with Terrence McNally brings me closer to what I find relevant for my study of the novel:

finally you have to understand that more important than anything else is justice. The way we can turn the world around is if we are at least moving on a path towards justice. Maybe it can never be achieved in any pristine form. Right now, the powerful, and I don’t just mean the powerful in America, but the coalition of the powerful elites across the world are making it very clear that they are not even interested in justice. (5)

What I shall endeavour to show is that in The God of Small Things Roy creates situations in which historical class and caste prejudice seems to have an inexorable and deterministic force. On the other hand, however, she celebrates a variety of forms of individual agency. Within the time scope of the novel these forms of agency do not succeed but the tensions set up between the efforts towards significant acts of agency, and especially through the ending, seem to endorse the position taken up through her political activism: ‘[w]riting about it just happens to be the most effective thing I can do’. Thus I would argue that readers are, in turn, induced via imaginative sympathy to ‘reach within [themselves] and find the strength to think. To fight’, to ‘[s]tand up and say something. Never mind if it’s been said before. Speak up on your own behalf. Take it very personally’.

Arundhati Roy’s novel tells a story of forbidden, cross-caste love between Ammu, the divorced Touchable, and Velutha, the Untouchable handyman who works for her mother, Mammachi, and brother, Chacko. The events are largely
seen through the eyes of Ammu’s twin son and daughter, Rahel and Estha, first
while they are still children, then as adults, twenty-three years later with the return
of Rahel from the United States to her home in Ayemenem in the state of Kerala.
Ammu and Chacko’s family is traditionally Syrian Christian, although Chacko
proclaims himself a Marxist. However, both Christians and Marxists come under
Roy’s rigorous critical eye for their collusive support of the caste system.

Events unfold from the day when the twins’ cousin, Sophie Mol, daughter of
Chacko by his marriage to the English woman, Margaret, arrives with her mother
for a Christmas visit. Sophie Mol’s drowning, the culmination of an escapade
planned by all three children, and the revelation by Velutha’s father of his son’s
illicit love affair, are the pivotal crises for the later tragic developments: Velutha’s
death after a brutally punitive police assault, Ammu’s expulsion from the family
home, and in the long term, serious damage to the possibility of adult fulfilment
for both twins.

Before engaging directly with the novel, I need to offer a brief contextualisation
of the caste issue in India, using information derived from an internet paper by
Kurshid Alam entitled, ‘Untouchables in The God of Small Things’. Castes are
ranked and membership comes through birth. According to the Hindu sacred texts
of the Rig Veda there are four main castes, each of which performs a function in
sustaining social life. Untouchables, those who do not belong to any of these four
castes, are generally associated with professions such as, butchers, launderers, and
latrine cleaners. Since 1935 Untouchables have been called ‘scheduled castes’.
They are also called by Mahatma Gandhi’s name for them, ‘Harijan’, meaning
‘the children of God’. More recently these groups began to refer to themselves
as Dalits, a Hindi word which means oppressed or downtrodden. Despite some
improvements in certain aspects of Dalit life, 90% of them still live in rural areas,
and more than 50% are landless labourers. In many parts of India, land is still
held by the upper castes which use the ideology of the caste system to exploit the
low-ranking landless labourers. The caste system is alive and well in India today,
despite its being illegal.

Between 1888 and 1892 all the main Syrian Christian denominations — those
that claim the Apostle Thomas as their founder and use Syriac as a liturgical
language — initiated Evangelical Societies that sought out low-caste converts,
and built schools and chapels for them. The novel thus refers to the school of
‘untouchables’ built by the twins’ great-grandfather. However, as Roy points
out, even though members of low or polluted castes such as paravans (Velutha’s
caste) converted to Christianity, they were ‘made to have separate churches, with
separate services and separate priests’ (74), and thus continued to be treated as
‘untouchables’. After Independence, they were denied government benefits created
for ‘untouchables’ because officially they were Christians and thus casteless.

In 1957, under E.M.S. Namboodiripad (to whom Roy refers explicitly in the
novel), the state of Kerala became the first Indian state to elect a communist
government. Despite a split in the party in 1964 there have been communist-led
governments in Kerala more often than not. Alam quotes Roy’s statement that
the reason behind the Communist party’s success in Kerala was that it ‘never
overtly questioned the traditional values of a caste-ridden, extremely traditional
community. The Marxists worked from within the communal divides, never
challenging them, never appearing not to’ (2). This double standard is emphasised
when Comrade Pillai incites the workers of Paradise Pickles and Preserves to
strike against their owner, Chacko, but refers to the latter as ‘“the Management”.
As though Chacko was many people’ (121).

My initial summary of the novel will have already indicated the severely
deterministic tendency of the novel. I now proceed to argue that there is an
opposite tendency suggesting scope for agency even if only temporary, which
needs to be taken seriously. My case will be argued in relation to three prominent
concerns in the novel: history, story, and play (both in the sense of spontaneous
action, and in the sense of drama).

HISTORY AS DETERMINISTIC

When Velutha and Ammu gaze at each other unexpectedly at the time of
Sophie Mol’s arrival at Ayemenem, and while he is engaged in a playful ritual
greeting with Ammu’s daughter, Rahel, the narrator comments that ‘History was
wrong-footed, caught off guard’ (176). Furthermore, Velutha is described as
seeing ‘things that had been out of bounds so far, obscured by history’s blinkers’
(176). At this moment then the Untouchable man and the Touchable woman
seem magically released from the tyranny of an historical caste bondage. These
moments gain their force precisely because Roy otherwise presents history as
heavily deterministic. Just as in her political writing, the forces pitted against
activists seem insurmountable.

Indeed, in the very next moment after the two have gazed with such wonder
upon each other, Roy points out how they looked away because ‘History’s fiends
returned to claim them’ (177). Its claim is to ensure that they are once more
governed by the ‘Love Laws’ which ‘lay down who should be loved. And how.
And how much’ (177). The immediate agent of History in ensuring submission to
the Love Laws is ironically Velutha’s own father, Vellya Paapen, who comes some
days later to inform Ammu’s mother, Mammachi, that he has seen his son and
Ammu intimately together. Grotesquely ironic is the way in which Mammachi, in
her fury on hearing Paapen’s news, loses control and not only touches Paapen, but
pushes him backwards. His collapse into the mud below the back door steps of
the house is an ultimate degradation, a sinking below even his customary polluted
caste level. In this pathetic state he shows how fully he has internalised the caste
laws, by actually offering to kill his son in order to protect the touchable Ipe
family from further disgrace. And Baby Kochamma, for her own devious reasons
(and having incited Chacko to assist her), is only too ready to destroy Velutha and
banish Ammu.
When Chacko asks the twins, at an earlier stage, to think of the whole Ipe family as Anglophile, his explanation depends on an analogy between history and:

an old house at night. With all the lamps lit. And ancestors whispering inside. ‘To understand history,’ Chacko said, ‘we have to go inside and listen to what they’re saying. And look at the books and the pictures on the wall. And smell the smells.’ (52)

As the twins understandably interpret this explanation literally, they identify the ‘old house at night’ with a remote deserted, and haunted house they have heard of, and which had once been occupied by an Indian equivalent of Conrad’s Mr Kurtz. David Punter notes how the ghost is himself ‘the phantom of a feared miscegenation, a perverse hybridity’ (74). This particular house then becomes for the twins the site of history because they choose it as their refuge when they run away from the adults in order to induce them to offer more certain proofs of their love. The twins arrive there, however, in a state of exhaustion and extreme trepidation because Sophie Mol, who had entered with relish into their conspiracy, drowned when their boat capsized in the turbulent river. Through a bizarre twist of fate the History House is also Velutha’s chosen refuge on the same night after Mammachi, enraged by Vellya Paapen’s information, has vilified and dismissed her erstwhile trusted worker. Roy’s sense of history as an apparently deterministic, inexorable force, then becomes specially manifest through the brutal police assault on Velutha, instigated by Baby Kochamma, which takes place there. Thus Roy comments in an advance hint of Velutha’s appalling fate: ‘History visited [Estha and Rahel] in the back verandah’ (190). So too, in offering a kind of mock excuse for Comrade Pillai, the local Marxist leader’s treacherous abandonment of Velutha, a card-carrying party member who came to seek his help after Mammachi’s denunciation, we are told that Pillai ‘merely slipped his fingers into History’s waiting glove’ (281).

**Story and Play as Spontaneous Action**

In relation to the consequences of the patriarchal ideology of a caste-bound culture that ‘cultivates snobbery and violence to maintain social order’, the critic Tapan Ghosh emphasises that Roy has a ‘story of her own’ to tell (185). I would like to draw out the full implications of this comment in relation to Roy’s own comment in her WordsWorth Interview with David Barsamian when asked whether her view is ‘that happiness is illusory and any love is doomed’:

> Actually I wouldn’t see the book that way…the way in which the story is told, or the structure of the book, tells you a different story. The structure of the book ambushes the story — by that I mean the novel ends more or less in the middle of the story and it ends with Ammu and Velutha making love and it ends on the word tomorrow. Though you know that what tomorrow brings is terrible it is saying that the fact that this happened at all is wonderful. (qtd in Mullaney 56)

I begin by noting, as several critics have already done, Roy’s fascination with wordplay. Sumanyu Satpathy notes in ‘The Code of Incest in The God of Small
Things’ how Roy’s use of wordplay extends even to hinting at the eventual incest between the twins. In a more general way Ghosh reveals how Roy uses wordplay as an evocation of childhood: ‘a tactile world of smiles and laughter — with its sense of wonder and curiosity’ (185). Corrado Micheli, concerned with the theme of Anglophobia in the novel, traces some of the ways in which Roy uses innovative English — she ‘frequently coins words or compounds, plays with pronunciations, and capitalization’ (212) — as a means of opposing Anglophobia.

What strikes me most about this fascination on Roy’s part, however, is the kind of significance it gives indirectly to the possibilities involved in play. She herself, in the Salon Interview with Reena Jana, comments on her interest in the graphic design of the language: ‘that was why the words and thoughts of Estha and Rahel, the twins were so playful on the page… I was being creative with their design’ (4). Often Roy uses short, stunted sentences for special emphasis as in her description of the way Chacko holds roses for his expected ex-wife and daughter — ‘Fatly/Fondly’ (137), or to convey the way in which a mood of intense disappointment overwhelms Rahel (as if her consciousness is invaded by the crushing disappointment associated with Pappachi and the new species of moth he discovered but was not credited for):

Out
In
And lifted its leg
Up
Down. (293)

This kind of foregrounding or highlighting of individual words and phrases is also used several times for the key motif of the novel:

The God of Loss
The God of Small things. (265)

The twins have a particular relish of words as, for example, Rahel’s thought that ‘boot was a lovely word. A much better word, at any rate, than sturdy. Sturdy was a terrible word’ (41). Sometimes the narrator’s predilection in the novel for unusual or invented words seems to reflect the children’s mode of perception as, for example, when Margaret Kochamma tells Sophie Mol at the airport, swinging one arm like a soldier, ‘to Stoppit. So she Stoppited’ (141); or in the description of Rahel’s intervention in the activities of ants, as if they are participating in a religious ritual: ‘After [the Antly Bishop] had waited for a reasonably Antly amount of time, he would get a funny Antly Bishop frown on his forehead, and shake his head sadly’ (185). In ‘When Language Dances: The Subversive Power of Roy’s Text in The God of Small Things’, Cynthia vanden Driesen refers to the way the twins delight in taking a word like ‘Nictitating’ apart (180) and suggests that ‘this child’s-eye view of events interrogates and subverts the adult view of reality’, that indeed the children ‘enjoy a kind of power through their play with language’ (368). She is particularly struck by their reading backwards as
‘tantamount to a powerful subversion of the established order’ (368). This point seems to me to be closely related to what I shall finally argue about Roy’s structure in the novel. Her attention to the evocation of children’s spontaneous engagement with language, and her concern with the graphic possibilities of words in the novel as a whole, seems to become more generally a means of affirming the opportunities for individual agency. These offer in miniature form a sign of the larger possibilities available for authorial agency and thereby provide implicit encouragement for future activism.

Roy’s political essays from which I have already quoted do not reveal any particular use of word play. However, Roy’s two essays ‘The Great Indian Rape-Trick I and II’ in which she decries Shekhar Kapur’s strategies in his film, Bandit Queen (based on the life of Phoolan Devi), contain instances of what she refers to in the Salon Interview as ‘the graphic design of the language’ (4). Prominent examples are:


Or:

Phoolan Devi’s first war, like almost every dacoit’s first war, was fought for territory. It was the classic beginning of the journey into dacoitdom. But does it have rape in it? Nope. Caste violence? Nope. So is it worth including in the film? Nope. (I, 4)

And from the second article:

After I saw the film, which was about three weeks ago, I have met Phoolan several times. Initially I did not speak of the film to her, because I believed that it would have been wrong of me to Influence her opinion. The burden of my song so afar, has been Show her the film. I only supported her demand that she had a right, a legal right to see the film that claims to be the true story of her life. My opinion of the film has nothing to do with her opinion. Mine doesn’t matter. Hers does. More than anyone else’s. (II, 3).

Each of these examples reveals a choreographing of word arrangements in the service of sardonic humour as a spur to protest. It is through this kind of humour that Roy’s choice of agency on Phoolan Devi’s behalf becomes manifest.

**Play as Drama**

What then of play as in drama? How much agency is involved in that use of the word in the novel? Some important distinctions are called for at this stage. Sophie Mol’s arrival and presentation to the relatives at Ayamenem is referred to as the ‘Welcome Home, Our Sophie Mol’ Play (164). It involves an imposed, highly artificial form of behaviour, every aspect of which is dictated by the wishes of adults. Even the front verandah of the house at Ayemenem lends itself to ‘the dignity of a stage and everything that happened there took on the aura and significance of performance’ (165). Roy brings out the implications of this kind of trap sardonically through Rahel’s awareness: ‘Rahel looked around her and saw
that she was in a Play. But she had only a small part. She was just the landscape. A Flower perhaps. Or a tree’ (172). Thus Rahel, as soon as she has the chance, ‘slipped out of the Play and went to [Velutha]’ (175). Now ‘outside the Play’ (182), she asserts her independence from the commotion over Sophie Mol by merrily insisting to Velutha ‘[w]e’re not even playing’ (182), an assertion which he echoes.

As a result of the contrived, exhibitionistic behaviour associated with the ‘Welcome Home’ play, and Sophie Mol’s death by drowning, the twins’ potential friendship with their cousin ‘never circled around into a story’ (267). Story here has the force of a joint, creative bond of spontaneous enterprise. The potential for friendship, however, is shown clearly on the day after Sophie’s arrival when all three children dress up in saris as Mrs Pillai, Mrs Eapen and Mrs Rajagopalan and visit Velutha. Their untouchable friend enters fully into their play-acting — a small-scale drama which they have chosen and which they enjoy. He treats them as adults and makes no attempt to mock or even tease them. It is only when Rahel returns home, so many years later, that she ‘recognized the sweetness of that gesture’ (190): ‘A grown man entertaining three raccoons, treating them like real ladies. Instinctively colluding in the conspiracy of their fiction, taking care not to decimate it with adult carelessness. Or affection’ (190).

The contrast between this episode and the ‘Welcome Home Our Sophie Mol’ play seems to me crucial for the novel in the way it emphasises one of the qualities that, for Roy, characterise genuine adulthood: having the capacity to appreciate children’s desire for play and play-acting, In stark contrast Roy comments as follows on Comrade Pillai and Police Inspector Mathew: ‘[t]hey were not friends…They were both men whom childhood had abandoned without a trace’ (262). Collusion here, as distinct from so many other forms of social collusion revealed in the novel, perhaps most of all in the Marxist leader’s collusion with the caste system, is an ironic way of acknowledging Velutha’s ability to enter into the innocent consciousness of a child. The narrator’s further comment, ‘[i]t is so easy to shatter a story’ (190), highlights the intricate interweaving of the notions of story, history and play in this novel. This bit of spontaneous theatre on the part of the children is, in more sustained form than their wordplay, their story, a revelation of their agency which deserves celebration despite the doomed existence that awaits them. What is also movingly ironic about this episode is the readiness of Velutha, the untouchable, to grant the children a higher status than that of child in his response to their acting. In a consideration of Velutha’s relationship with the children more generally, Julie Mullaney notes how his reaching ‘out across the boundaries of caste to [them]’, also involves ‘extending the exuberant play on names and the mobility of identities in his renaming of Estha, “Esthappappychachen Kuttappen Peter Mon”’ (32).

Almost immediately after the adult Rahel’s recalling of the Indian ladies episode, as she watches Estha sitting in his room in the silence that has become habitual to him, the narrator describes the twins as ‘a pair of actors trapped in a recondite play with no hint of plot or narrative. Stumbling through their parts,
nursing someone else’s sorrow. Grieving someone else’s grief’ (191). There
could not be a more grim contrast with their childhood experience in visiting
Velutha: those moments of enchanting spontaneity make all the more disturbing
and unbearable the consequences for the twins of Velutha’s murder, and their
mother’s untimely end:

He left behind a hole in the Universe through which darkness poured like liquid tar.
Through which their mother followed without even turning to wave goodbye. She left
them behind, spinning in the dark, with no moorings, in a place with no foundation.

(191–92)

My argument, however, is that the moments of enchanting spontaneity are not to
be seen in retrospect as merely poignant but as the levers by which Roy induces
the reader into the kind of responsiveness that prompts agency: ‘to reach within
ourselves and find the strength to think. To fight’.

Play as drama appears in several further episodes in the novel. First I turn to
Ammu’s dream, later on the afternoon of Sophie Mol’s arrival, of the ‘cheerful
man’ with one arm who seems closely associated with Velutha, and who seems
moreover to be a means of rescuing her from a whole miscellany of ugly, violent and
threatening images despite his one arm. The image I wish to note here is the impression
created in Ammu’s dream of a kind of audience in a circle of folding chairs:

Beyond the circle of folding chairs was a beach littered with broken blue glass bottles.
The silent waves brought new blue bottles to be broken, and dragged the old ones away
in the undertow. There were jagged sounds of glass on glass. On a rock, out at sea, in a
shaft of purple light, there was a mahogany and wicker rocking chair. Smashed. (216)

These people simply sit and witness the incessant breakages and smashing
around them without making the least effort to change the situation. The rocking
chair relates to the chair which Pappachi smashed to pieces after Chacko found
his father violently abusing his mother, Mammachi, and warned him never to
do so again. The overall suggestion is of a moribund society which has allowed
a state of emotional, psychological and spiritual destructiveness to persist,
conning at its existence. This doom-laden imagery is a forerunner of the even
more harrowing description of the police assault on Velutha. Out of the tension
between such passages, and those evoking an impression of spontaneous action,
Roy’s aim, I would argue, is to enkindle in her readers the urge to engage in the
politics of resistance.

My next example concerns Rahel’s return to Kerala when she goes to watch
the Kathakali dancers that she and her brother had once watched with Comrade
Pillai. The name ‘Kathakali’ derives from the Malayalam words, ‘katha’, meaning
story, and ‘kali’, meaning play. Using characters with vividly painted faces and
elaborate costumes, the dance re-enacts stories from the Hindu epics. While Roy
pays tribute to the singular dedication and craft of the actors, the events portrayed
in their intense performance seem to mirror the state of the society itself, engulfed
in an apparently endless cycle of violence. Alex Tickell notes how the ‘epic
narratives [of the Hindu *Mahabharata*, on which the Kathakali dances are based] have often been employed to justify gender and caste inequalities’ (2007b 163). Thus, he maintains, Roy

adopts a covertly critical approach to the cultural history of the ‘Great Stories’ in her novel, short-circuiting a potentially nationalist/communalist celebration of Hindu identity by associating the *kathakali* temple performance with the ‘love laws’ — delineated in the *Manusmriti* or The Laws of Manu — that proscribe Ammu’s affair with Velutha and justify Velutha’s murder by the police. (163)

In the first story, Kunti, who had borne a son to the god of Day, reveals herself to this son. However, as he angrily realizes, her motive is only to ‘secure the safety of her five other, more beloved sons’ (233). Kunti’s invoking of the Love Laws for her purpose reflects a state of mind as twisted as that of Mammachi or Comrade Pillai in the main plot. A further link to Roy’s narrative is created through Karna’s resolve that he will go to war against one of Kunti’s other sons, Arjuna, the one who ‘publicly reviled Karna for being a lowly charioteer’s son’ (233). In this way the yoked ideas of class and vengeance disturbingly anticipate Velutha’s fate.

The next story, Duradham Vadham, involves Bhima’s hunting down of Dushasana who had tried publicly to undress the Pandavas’ wife. The fierce battle between the two men culminates in the brutal, prolonged killing of Dushasana. Roy explicitly links this barbarous scene of slaughter with Velutha’s death:

There was madness there that morning. Under the rose bowl. It was no performance. Esthappen and Rahel recognized it. They had seen its work before. Another morning. Another stage. Another kind of frenzy (with millipedes on the soles of its shoes). The brutal extravagance of this matched by the savage economy of that. (235)

Roy then shifts her attention to the actors’ activities outside the play. As if simply adapting their large-scale theatrical orgy of wrath and vengeancefulness to a domestic setting, they go home to beat their wives. Tickell notes how through the ‘miniaturized epic’ constituted by the Kathakali performance in the novel, ‘the politics of *TGST* are mirrored in Roy’s non-fiction, which also attempts to disclose and demystify the connections “between power and powerlessness”, and draws attention, continually, to “the absolute, relentless, endless, habitual unfairness of the world”’ (165).

Roy mocks false, artificial notions of play/drama in the recitations given to Chacko by Comrade Pillai’s niece and son. His niece recites ‘Lochinvar’ ‘at remarkable speed’ (271), and simply as an exhibition of her skill in memory and public speaking; there is no sign that she has any understanding of the poem. Of course Roy has chosen this ballad because of its underlying ironic connection with what Velutha and Ammu might have done in another kind of society. The son, Lenin, is equally concerned with mere fluency and does not understand a word of Mark Antony’s funeral oration in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, a speech that his father persuades him to bestow as a recitation on Chako:
[Lenin] began to race up and down the strip of front yard between the house and road, braying with an excitement that he couldn’t understand. When he had worked some of it off his run turned into a breathless, high-kneed gallop. ‘Lend me yawYERS;’ Lenin shouted from the yard, over the sound of a passing bus. *I cometoberry Caesar; not to praise him. Theeevil that mendoo lives after them, The goodisoft interred with their bones;* He shouted it fluently, without faltering once. Remarkable, considering he was only six and didn’t understand a word of what he was saying. (274–75)

Both children’s performances, although so amusingly described, represent play that has become divorced from any kind of spontaneity or deep emotion, and reveal indirect ways in which Roy intensifies her indignation at the hypocrisy of Pillai. As I have already noted, neither he, nor Inspector Mathew, have any trace left of childhood spontaneity. The Pillai children’s exhibition thus leads one to appreciate all the more that other close encounter of children with an adult: the sweet gesture in which Velutha gives full scope to genuine children’s play.

The Pillai children’s stultified playing also highlights the pathos of the twins’ explanation to Baby Kochamma about why they took (*stole* is her word) things from the house across the river: ‘we were only playing’ (316) says Rahel. Here one should note the ironic echo of her earlier assertion to Velutha, ‘we’re not even playing’ (182). Thus, in self-defence she is led to devalue that most carefully planned and serious drama of the children’s own deliberately planned flight from Ayemenem, a drama that turns to tragedy. This flight was initiated by Estha in his wish to escape the possible further molestations of a sexual abuser, and agreed to by both Rahel and Sophie Mol as a way to spur the adults to greater affection and caring. Baby Kochamma, in her narcissistic and vengeful scheming, so thoroughly manipulates the twins that they ultimately agree to her false version of what led up to Velutha’s death: that he had kidnapped all three children, and kept them hidden at the History House.

Baby Kochamma built up her case. She drew (from her imagination) vivid pictures of prison life. The cockroach-crisp food. The *chhi-chhi* piled in the toilets like soft brown mountains. The bedbugs. The beatings. She dwelled on the long years Ammu would be put away because of them. How she would be an old, sick woman with lice in her hair when she came out — if she didn’t die in jail, that was. Systematically, in her kind, concerned voice she conjured up the macabre future in store for them. When she had stamped out every ray of hope, destroyed their lives completely, like a fairy godmother she presented them with a solution [i.e. to allow the police to continue believing that Velutha had kidnapped all three children]. (317)

In response, Roy is at her most sardonic and at the same time, most compassionate in terms of her awareness of their future despair: ‘in the years to come they would replay this scene in their heads’ (318).

**History and Play (in the Sense of Drama)**

When Roy deals with the fatal assault on Velutha by a contingent of local policemen, she combines the concept of history and of play. As the ‘posse of Touchable Policemen’ (304) exact their remorseless brutality on Velutha, Roy
invites the reader to witness the scene through Estha and Rahel’s eyes, and points out: ‘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 the laws’ (306). That strategic ‘only’ makes the policemen seem the blameless instruments of a force more powerful than themselves. History is consequently seen with Roy’s acute sardonic eye to be: ‘masquerading as God’s purpose’ (309). More sardonically still, in light of Estha and Rahel’s presence, the phrase continues, ‘revealing herself to an under-age audience’ (309). A few lines further on, the connection between this aspect of History, and the novel’s frequent use of drama as a trope, is made even more explicit: the grim, cruel scene that the twins have witnessed on the History House verandah, is said to constitute ‘History in live performance’ (309). In this caustically paradoxical way Roy creates the almost overriding impression that history determines the present, and her sardonic treatment of the police becomes even more scathing:

the posse of Touchable Policemen acted with economy, not frenzy. Efficiency, not anarchy. Responsibility, not hysteria. They didn’t tear out his hair or burn him alive. They didn’t hack off his genitals and stuff them in his mouth. They didn’t rape him. Or behead him. After all, they were not battling an epidemic. They were merely inoculating a community against an outbreak. (309)

The apparent consequence that spontaneous play, as represented earlier in the novel, has no further place in a world where a destructive alliance has been forged between inherited prejudice and present action, works in a way, I would argue, similar to Roy’s strategies in her political essays. Her purpose is surely to stir the reader to inner revolt, to ‘take it very personally’, to ‘find the strength within oneself to think. To fight’.

Not only do the twins find themselves trapped in a recondite play but the emotional abuse caused thereby, damages their personalities irreparably. When Rahel returns to Ayemenem twenty-three years later, recently divorced from her husband, she feels desolate and empty. Estha, however, is in a far more precarious state, still suffering acutely from guilt at his lie to the police which led to Velutha’s murder. At the moment his mouth utters the betraying ‘yes’, the narrator prepares us for the long-term consequence for the child: ‘Childhood tiptoed out. Silence slid in like a bolt’. (320)

Estha has indeed retreated into total silence, a silence all the more striking and distressing because of his and the narrator’s earlier preoccupation with the effect of words. Furthermore he has become a compulsive-obsessive, frequently washing himself or his clothes. The only way in which the twins seem able to renew their childhood bond is through an act of incest which Roy describes with the utmost delicacy and compassion:

What was there to say? Only that there were tears. Only that Quietness and Emptiness fitted together like stacked spoons. Only that there was a snuffling in the hollows at the base of a lovely throat. Only that a hard honey-coloured shoulder had a semi-circle
of teethmarks on it. Only that they held each other close, long after it was over. Only
that what they shared that night was not happiness, but hideous grief. Only that once
again they broke the Love Laws. That lay down who should be loved. And how. And
how much. (328)

From this point of view the novel appears to be totally and grimly deterministic.
However, I have already stressed the related tendencies in Roy’s political writings
and in the novel which hint strongly at her underlying concern to rouse and indeed
empower the reader into a sense of agency. I turn finally to what is of major
significance for my argument: the surprise ending of the novel.

THE ENDING AS POTENTIAL COUNTER TO DETERMINISM

To come now fully to grips with the ‘story of Roy’s own’, I consider the
structure of the novel, the kind of large-scale exploration I have so far avoided.
In a novel where history has such determining force, Roy makes a bold authorial
bid for agency through a remarkable violation of narrative chronology. And it
is here, I would suggest, that all the glimpses of agency through wordplay and
spontaneous activities in the novel, find their fulfilment.

Many novelists since the beginning of the twentieth century have employed
various ingenious ways of reconstructing chronology for their own purposes. The
most common is to start at the end of the story and then proceed to work through
from the beginning till the end point is reached again. Many novels employ
flashbacks to build up the story gradually — Roy uses this device extensively
in her novel. The stream-of-consciousness technique, as employed by novelists
such as Joyce, Woolf and Faulkner, permits all kinds of intricate inter-weavings
of past and present but the story in general moves progressively forward. What is
startling in Roy’s case is that, although the basic structure of the novel involves a
steady continuum of alternations between past and present episodes, she does not
end with an episode involving the adult twins’ return to Ayemenem which would
be chronologically appropriate. Instead, in a resolutely a-chronological final
chapter, she returns to the lovemaking of Ammu and Velutha twenty-three years
earlier! This strategy acts like a defiance of history, exemplifying Nair’s claim
that ‘the truth of art lies in its power to break the monopoly of external reality’
(253), and, as previously quoted: ‘the story of the book ambushes the story the
book is telling’ (249).

At this stage I need to give some attention to the contrasting views of two
critics, Aijaz Ahmad and Brenda Bose, about this final chapter. Although Ahmad
has favourable comments to make about the novel, he finds it ‘a very great pity
that a tale so masterfully told should end with the author succumbing to the
conventional idea of the erotic as that private transgression through which one
transcends public injuries’ (115).

His impression of Ammu and Velutha at the end is that:

They become pure embodiments of desire, and significantly, not a word of intelligent
conversation passes between them. They seem consumed by helplessness, twice over:
before their own bodily desires, and in relation to the world that surrounds them and about which they appear to wish to do nothing. (116)

To begin with, one cannot help wondering whether Ahmad engages in intelligent conversation when he makes love. More seriously, his criticism of the lovers seems to me extremely unfair when one remembers Velutha’s involvement with the Naxalite movement, and Ammu’s sustained and desperate attempts to improve the quality of her life while suffering the persistent criticism of her brother, mother and aunt. Ahmad’s sense that, for Roy, ‘that resistance can only be individual and fragile…that the personal is the only arena of the political’ (119) seems to indicate a wish to turn the novel into a political document, a kind of blueprint for active resistance. It is surely clear from Roy’s political essays, though, that, on an overt political front, she believes strongly in group resistance. Through the novel, on the other hand, I would argue that she seeks to arouse individual readers to an awareness of the scale of the problems confronting her society, and to be deeply moved by an intensified focus on the possible transcending of class and caste boundaries, despite a tragic outcome.

In countering Ahmad’s view, Bose draws attention to a significant quotation from Chapter 8 (175–76) of the novel, where Roy offers Ammu’s reflections on whether it had indeed been Velutha that Rahel saw in the Naxalite march: ‘[s]he hoped that under his careful cloak of cheerfulness, he housed a living, breathing anger against the smug, ordered world that she so raged against’ (125). Thus Bose’s case is that ‘[a]pparently Ammu is not dismissive of Velutha’s red politics, but sees in its inherent anger a possibility of relating to Velutha’s mind, not just his body’ (125). Trenchantly, Bose goes on to remind one (in light of the passage from page 32 to 33 about the Love Laws that ‘lay down who should be loved, and how’) that:

The politics of [Ammu’s] desires, therefore has to do with cultural histories, with the ways in which sexuality has been perceived through generations in a society that coded Love Laws with a total disregard for possible anomalies. (128)

Supported by Bose’s case, I would then pursue my belief that, through Roy’s final violation of the original structure of the novel, she offers a means of counteracting what Ghosh refers to in the final paragraph of his essay, as ‘the frustrated quest for love and light in a man-made heart of darkness’ (193). Moreover Ammu’s and Velutha’s lovemaking, when they have calmed their fears, is full of play:

They knew that there was nowhere for them to go. They had nothing. No future. So they stuck to the small things. They laughed at ant-bites on each other’s bottoms. At clumsy caterpillars sliding off the ends of leaves, at overturned beetles that couldn’t right themselves. At the pair of small fish that always sought Velutha out in the river and bit him. At a particularly devout praying mantis. At the minute spider who lived in a crack in the wall of the back verandah of the History House and camouflaged himself by covering his body with bits of rubbish. (338)
And, almost as a talisman to undo the power of history, the novel ends with Ammu and Velutha’s consoling farewell word, ‘Tomorrow’. Thus by using modernist or poststructuralist narrative dislocation, Roy seeks to affirm most compellingly what has been achieved, and what must be hoped for in a tomorrow which she makes alive and real through fiction. I do not wish to suggest, however, that this ending lacks any ambivalence. My case in fact insists that there is ambivalence, rather than just a doom-laden ultimate resonance. Of course the final ‘tomorrow’ inevitably reminds one of the actual tomorrows in the lives of Ammu, Velutha and the twins, and the sense of defeat and loss that has been built up from the very beginning of the novel. Yet I would claim that the strategy of chronological disruption, precisely because it is employed with such impact in the ultimate sequence, persistently challenges the negative or pessimistic tendency of the ambivalence. This kind of challenge closely matches Roy’s resolute strategies in her vigorous campaigns against the kind of world that powerful governments (including her own) seem to have determined.

WORKS CITED


Lynda Chanwai-Earle is a New Zealand performance poet, playwright and scriptwriter of Eurasian descent. Born in London in 1965, she lived in Papua New Guinea for a number of years before moving to New Zealand as a teenager. She obtained a Bachelor degree at Elam School of Fine Arts, a Diploma in Drama from the University of Auckland and more recently an MA in scriptwriting from Victoria University’s International Institute of Modern Letters.

Chanwai-Earle’s career as a writer started while she was a student in Auckland. In 1994 she published *Honeypants*, a poetry collection that was short listed for the 1995 Penn Book Awards and the New Zealand Book Awards. The collection includes ‘To Hastings with Love’, a bittersweet reflection of her experiences with the Polynesian community in which she narrates painful experiences of domestic violence and dislocation, while condemning the hypocritical attitudes of a provincial society whose monotony she seeks to escape through anger and rebelliousness. Apart from her poetry, which has appeared in several journals and anthologies, Chanwai-Earle has also performed some of her plays in New Zealand and abroad, and has worked as drama facilitator and script coordinator in prisons around the country (Wellington and Christchurch), and as a journalist for *Asia Down Under*, a weekly TVNZ program about the New Zealand Asian communities.

Chanwai-Earle’s monodrama *Ka Shue (Letters Home)*, which premiered in 1996, was the first play to reflect on the New Zealand Chinese experience. In this solo show performed by herself, Chanwai-Earle fictionalises her family history and looks at the predicaments of three generations of women confronted with
evolving notions of their identity and changing perceptions of China as their ancestral home. In *Foh-Sarn (Fire Mountain)* (2000), Chanwai-Earle creates a tragic love story which unfolds amidst the conflicts affecting the diverse Asian communities living in contemporary urban New Zealand. Both works, which appeared in a 2003 Women’s Play Press volume, remain the only published dramatic material about the experiences of Chinese New Zealanders to date. She has also written a play for children, *Monkey*, (based on *The Journey into the West* and *The Monkey King* stories) which premiered at the 2004 International Festival of the Arts and was nominated for two Chapman Tripp Awards.

Apart from reflecting on the historical and contemporary conflicts affecting the Asian communities, Chanwai-Earle’s plays present tragic stories of cross-cultural and universal appeal and include characters of diverse backgrounds. In *Alchemy*, a piece of dance theatre choreographed by Merenia Gray which won Best New Work in the 1998 Wellington Fringe Festival, the audience witnesses a tragic story of unrequited love in which Chanwai-Earle interweaves Maori mythology and Western elements. *Box/Role/Dream*, published in the volume of monodramas, *Red Light Means Stop* (2003), and nominated Outstanding New Production for the Chapman Tripp Awards in 2000, is a juxtaposition of three stories of loss and conflict, which affect men and women in different but equally painful ways. Her new play, *HEAT*, which premiered with the STAB Festival at BATS Theatre¹, November 2008 in Wellington, is set in Antarctica and narrates a love triangle between a man, a woman and a penguin. *HEAT* was nominated for two Chapman Tripp Awards in 2008: Outstanding Composer of the Year and Actor of the Year. Naked, body-painted and with no lines, Brian Hotter won the highly coveted Actor of the Year, for his role as BOB the Emperor penguin in *HEAT*. *HEAT* also made history as New Zealand’s first ‘off-grid’ theatre, with the STAB season performances powered by alternative energy (solar and wind) emulating Antarctic conditions. *HEAT* is looking to tour in New Zealand and overseas from 2010 potentially as a ‘world first eco-friendly production’, powered entirely by solar and wind.

As a scriptwriter, Chanwai-Earle has co-written the short film, *Chinese Whispers* (MAP Productions, 1996), and co-directed *After* (2003) with Film Director Simon Raby. She recently finished a feature filmscript, *Little Dragon*, (with development funding from the NZ Film Commission) and among her future projects is the completion of her first novel, *Lotus Hook*. Chanwai-Earle is a pioneer voice and a major representative of the young generation of New Zealand writers of diverse ethnic origins whose works have contributed to the inscription and understanding of New Zealand’s multicultural identity. This interview took place in August 2008 in Brooklyn, Wellington, where Lynda currently lives with her partner and two children; and was updated in March 2010.

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PALOMA FRENSO CALLEJA: My first question has to do with your professional experience as a poet, a playwright and a scriptwriter. I would like to know in which of these genres or mediums you feel more comfortable.

LYNDA CHANWAI-EARLE: These days I’m most comfortable writing for theatre and for film. I haven’t yet had a feature film produced, but I love the feature film format. Theatre for me is the most accessible and it’s the one medium where you can have your work produced because it doesn’t cost millions of dollars, and it’s incredibly rewarding when it does happen, when you get a very good director and the right cast and creative team. It is always a great privilege to see your work lifted off the page. And it’s different every time it’s performed, which is another reason why I love theatre: it’s organic, it’s always about the live relationship between the audience and practitioner and actors. It’s happening in that space in that moment and its ephemeral, every single performance is going to be slightly different and unique, even though it is still the same play.

But I still love performing my poetry and just haven’t had the energy or the time to write a lot of new stuff. I do love the form and towards the end of my Fine Arts degree I did creative writing with Albert Wendt (a Masters paper at Auckland University). It was here that I discovered my love for theatre, and it was because I was trying to find a medium where I could marry — as a visual and multimedia artist — performance, writing and installation art, and theatre was the most logical. I did a Fine Arts degree at Elam in Auckland and that’s where a lot of contemporary artists were working, people like Niki Caro who are working now in different fields. Along with many of my contemporaries, I thought that we were going to be visual artists, sculptors or painters, but as time progressed we discovered film making and theatre instead.

PFC: Apart from Ka Shue, have you performed some of your other plays?

LC-E: Yes, I have. In my very early forays into theatre I went from being a performance poet into creating a kind of very experimental theatre with a rambling kind of jazz poetry. The cover of Honeypants features one of my characters. Those were the days when I was a lot fitter; I really loved physical theatre but what I wanted to do at the time was wild experimental stuff. I wanted to marry physical theatre with language. I loved extreme physical theatre where actors did acrobatics, but I also wanted to hear them sprouting beautiful language. After endlessly bruising myself on the swinging trapeze, I realised that I wasn’t cut out for life in the circus.

PFC: Does your training and experience as an actress determine the way you write?
LC-E: Yes, while I’m writing I definitely try to put myself in the actors’ shoes. Probably because I was prepared to do anything in those days, I expect actors to put themselves into my roles, because for me it’s about taking risks with the writing but also on the stage, pushing boundaries.

PFC: Can you tell me how your background and upbringing have affected your writing?

LC-E: I was born in London and then my parents travelled back here because they are New Zealanders. Just before I turned six we moved to New Guinea. We did not get back here until I turned thirteen and started my first year of high school. Growing up in New Guinea meant that I was in a very multicultural expatriate community, privileged, because we were expatriates. We were there during independence and my parents were very liberal and they always told me and my sisters to respect the cultures we were living with. We travelled very widely as children around Southeast Asia, Polynesia and Melanesia, so I was very lucky to be exposed to lots of different cultures. I got a huge culture shock when I arrived in New Zealand as a teenager in 1979. We moved to Hawkes Bay. I wasn’t expecting to encounter that kind of parochial, very white, very rural, very redneck racist culture back then.

PFC: Many of your characters — not exclusively those of Chinese descent — have similar multiethnic or multicultural origins; the protagonist of Alchemy is of Maori and Hungarian descent, and in Box/Role/Dream the characters come from a range of backgrounds, like the Greek and Maori protagonist of Box, for example. One gets the impression that through these characters you are constantly challenging cultural and gender boundaries.

LC-E: Yes, that’s right. But that’s really from life. For me, particularly in Box/Role/Dream, truth is always stranger than fiction and these scenes were based on real life experiences. I really did meet the man who was talking to me in that kind of way in the public swimming baths; and then the piece, Role, did happen. I had actually intervened in a domestic and then got beaten up. In Dream³, I had been scuba diving down on the Mikhail Lermontov (a Russian cruise liner that sank off Port Gore, Marlborough Sounds in 1986) and I brought up a dress that I found in an old suitcase on the deck. A Russian crew member lost his life during the sinking. His death was a spooky reminder of the fragility of life, as I explored the sunken wreck. I was so inspired by that very physical experience that I went on to write about it. So Box/Role/Dream came out of these three very different stories.
PFC: Dream is a story about migration, but a very different one, too. There is a reversal in that the immigrant story is told by a dead person, a man who before dying has planned to dress as a woman in order to escape and start a new life.

LC-E: Yes. That was a lot of fun to write. The central character MAN is lamenting the fact that he’s a ghost, stuck on the sunken wreck. This was also a very Chinese thing, too. In the old days, if you died, your bones would be dug up and sent back to China — your last wish to be buried on your homeland, in a lucky spot near family. In Chinese culture the dead are still living in the afterlife, so if your boat sinks with your bones aboard, you are doomed to roam the sea as a ghost, dying a second ‘bitter death’. In Dream MAN is protesting the pillaging of his graveyard — the sunken wreck — saying: ‘what are you doing? You are tearing apart my ship! This is all I have left!’ His big dream of jumping ship dressed as a woman, to live life anonymously in New Zealand, was thwarted by unexpectedly dying. Although Dream is based on a real event and a real person’s death, I fictionalised it.

PFC: What is the connection between the three pieces?

LC-E: The most obvious connection is me; I am very subtly mentioned in each one — or not subtly — like in the middle piece. In that one I am actually taking the piss out of myself, there is a lot of self-directed irony, to the point where it was quite uncomfortable. The character based on me feels so virtuous because she is trying to save this other woman from domestic violence, but really she is being patronising. So I pushed it as far as I could, having a really hard look at myself. I’m the connection with these three in the fact that it is all based on real life, but fictionalised. On top of that, in each one there is a tragedy and there is the loss of life, loss in a small sense and loss in a big sense, loss for every single one of the characters.

PFC: There is also the common motif of the enclosed spaces, which dominate the three pieces. I find the play very claustrophobic...

LC-E: Yes, that’s right. The water, the sauna, the inside of the cupboard that gets smaller and smaller, the bar, the toilet, or the ship. But I didn’t want it to be overt. I hope to be able to leave some things to the audience’s imagination, to allow some questions to go unanswered, to allow spaces for the writing and story to breathe.

PFC: How comfortable do you feel writing about Maori or Polynesian characters, considering that most non-Maori playwrights do not normally take this challenge?
LC-E: It’s not that common, but Dave Armstrong does it in *Niu Sila*, Niki Caro adapted *Whale Rider* to screen and there have been other writers that have included Maori characters in their works. So it definitely happens. I got a lot of support in *Alchemy*, which was directed by Jim Moriarty. Again, *Alchemy* was based on real life experiences: I was camping at Mahia (near Gisborne) and this local man was telling me about his family history. He inspired me. The story came to me, and I fictionalised it.

With respect to your question, definitely I’ve been challenged. When I wrote *Monkey* I wanted the two bullies to be Polynesian, and the Polynesian actors at the time asked why. It was because there are certain parts of my experience running through, but at the same time those bully characters redeem themselves. I did get challenged by the Maori actor in *Alchemy*, asking ‘why are you making him a drunk?’, and I said ‘because he is grieving and he is angry and he is enraged and remorseful because he killed his brother and had an affair with his sister-in-law. Wouldn’t you hit the bottle?’ For me, this is very important. I think this applies to all my characters, no matter their ethnicity: I refuse to sanitise a story just to please a section of the audience because I’m frightened I might offend them. I refuse to do that because that’s not real life.

On the other hand, in *Box/Role/Dream* and in *Honeypants* there are elements of *Once Were Warriors*. Actually, I published ‘To Hastings with Love’ before *Once Were Warriors* was published. And yes, there’s anger and there’s grief, and so on, but there’s also a lot of love and respect for the communities and also, I think, a very open-eyed view of why this dysfunction happens, not just a victimised kind of blind blame. So for me that’s really important.

As for Chinese characters, in *Ka Shue* the grandfather hits his daughter. He is suffocating in a way that’s unhealthy and it did offend some of the most conservative members of the Chinese community when it was originally performed. With *Fire Mountain* ironically, sometimes, I offended liberal intellectuals because maybe they saw my themes as politically incorrect. My Asian characters were gambling and involved in abortion and other sensitive issues. I was challenged by a Chinese student in Witi Ihimaera’s New Zealand literature class at Auckland University, (where they were studying my two plays). He asked me, ‘Don’t you think that you are actually reinforcing the negative stereotype by having all these negative things happen?’ My reply: you don’t ask the same thing of a European writer. You never challenge a European writer over the same kind of material. But you will challenge an Asian writer because you want a rosy-coloured view of the world and positive reflection of the Asian communities. In reality bad things happen. There’s a high rate of abortion among young Asian women, just like there’s a whole range of issues around the high prevalence of domestic abuse among Polynesian
communities. I understand artistic responsibility but is it racist to create characters of different ethnicities that are flawed and negative? Or are you really being racist when you write sanitised versions of history and reality?

**PFC:** *In fact, other New Zealand artists of Chinese descent have often talked about the negative reactions they get when they do not fulfil the expectations of their communities in creating works which offer positive portraits of their culture...*

**LC-E:** And if they don’t then it is as if you are letting your community down, bringing shame or embarrassment to the family, embarrassing other people and that’s not the point. In fact, *Ka Shue* was written with a huge amount of love for the community and for my family. Yes, my Chinese grandparents would turn in their graves if they read it and, in fact, the Pakeha ones would too! But it’s done with love; everything I write is done with love.

Incidentally, I did take ‘To Hastings with Love’ back to the family that it was about and back to the boy that was depicted in it. Ten years after I’d written this he came looking for me, he wanted to apologise, which was really good. He’d been the first major relationship in my life, I met him when I was fifteen and was with him until I turned nineteen. It was a very confrontational experience, but I survived it without losing my optimism in life. So I read it to him and then I took it to his parents and read it to them and they accepted it and I made peace with him.

**PFC:** *You have already mentioned some of the negative reactions to Ka Shue, how about the positive responses?*

**LC-E:** For some Chinese audiences it was the opposite, which was absolutely wonderful. There were women of my mother’s generation and also younger, sometimes men as well, in tears after performances saying, ‘that was my story you were telling!’ I also had a young woman coming up to me and saying, ‘I saw your play in Christchurch and it changed my life and my sister’s. We are both Eurasian and we never had anything to do with our Paw Paw, she spoke Cantonese and we could not understand her. But I saw your play and I was really moved and we really made an effort to speak to her’. That was great! It cannot get much better than that. And when I say that I don’t mean it in an egocentric way, I have had hot and cold reviews; I’ve had fantastically positive feedback and the negative reactions of people walking out.

**PFC:** *Have you performed the play outside New Zealand?

**LC-E:** Yes, I took it to the University of Hawai’i. I have also done readings and short performances in Ireland, Australia, the Philippines, Hong Kong and in China. In China, there have been very positive reactions. They
were fascinated with the fact that it was a diasporic view of old Chinese culture.

**PFC:** *Does it bother you that the labels ‘Chinese New Zealander’ or ‘ethnic’ are often employed to define you? Have these labels limited you as a writer?*

**LC-E:** Tusiata Avia⁶ and I talk about becoming flavour of the month, being trendy because you are Samoan or because you’re Chinese, but then it’ll pass and then you’ll be forgotten. That’s very annoying for us because it is categorising and marginalising. When I worked at *Asia Down Under*, one of my colleagues had a lovely way of putting it: ‘Us Asians! First we are marginalised, then we are scrutinised, then we are ghettoised!’

I’m a writer first and foremost and I write all sorts of things, and I write across genders, across cultural boundaries. That’s what I hope I’m doing and it can be quite hard when you’re trying to get from these issues to a play about Antarctic scientists as in *HEAT*, but there is the challenge and the enjoyment. On the other hand, yes my ethnicity does politicise my work. You can’t help being informed or politicised by your personal experience, especially if you are of mixed ethnicity or if you have experienced racism. Having said that, the limit of your imagination is the limit of your writing, so for me it is about pushing boundaries.

**PFC:** *Ka Shue is obviously a reflection on your family history but the play has also acquired a wider communal dimension, as the first work ever to tackle the history of the Chinese community in New Zealand. Were you conscious of this when you started writing the play?*

**LC-E:** No, at the time I didn’t realise that. The more I researched for it, the more I realised I was uncovering the lid of a big can of worms here. It was pre-poll tax apology⁷, I didn’t even know what the poll tax was myself, neither did my mother at the time. Then she said, ‘yes I remember now! Your grandfather had to pay a poll tax, but I don’t know very much about it. You have to go and talk to Esther Fung’. He is a very wise and knowledgeable person in the Chinese community and Esther said to me, ‘you need to know about your history. We all had to pay a poll tax. You’re a poll tax descendant. Do you know what it was all about?’. And I said, ‘no’.

I have here an archival photograph of my grandfather’s poll tax certificate. It’s almost the actual size. It’s slightly larger than this and his thumbprint would have been on the other side. He went from Canton to Vancouver to Auckland. His first name was Chanwai and his surname was Dong, and immigration got it wrong and hence a whole branch of Chanwais came out of the Dong claim. It’s like saying ‘Mr Lynda’, so there’s a whole lot of Mr and Mrs Chanwais. When I published
*Honeypants* in 1994, it came out under Lynda Earle. But in continuing to embrace my Chinese history, I adopted Chanwai-Earle (my mother’s maiden surname) for further writing.

Only the Chinese were asked to pay the poll tax and that was in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. But New Zealand was particularly bad at the time, because they raised it from £10 to £100 as part of the Asiatic Restriction Bill that Prime Minister Richard Seddon wanted to pass. Chinese were counted like cattle; you were only allowed to have a certain number of people per tons of cargo. It was really alienating.8

**PFC:** *There are very interesting connections to be made between the experiences of the Chinese community in New Zealand as reflected in Ka Shue, and those of Chinese communities in other countries. Has the work of other Chinese American, Chinese Canadian or Chinese Australian writers influenced you?*

**LC-E:** Yes, definitely. First and foremost, I’d say William Yang, the Australian Chinese playwright and photographer inspired me. He wrote *Sadness*, a solo show about being gay Chinese and growing up in Queensland; he also talks about being a banana - yellow on the outside and white on the inside — something I can identify with.

I know the obvious link with *Ka Shue* is Amy Tan’s *Joy Luck Club*, because of the intergenerational story and the ways in which she canvasses the personal drama against the backdrop of the World War and the Japanese Invasion, very much like I do in *Ka Shue*. Amy Tan was a huge influence and I read her way before I even thought about theatre, back in 1989, while I was doing my final year at Art School and doing creative writing. There’s the connection with the ghost world, our ancestors being imprisoned and living with us, which is also a Maori thing as well. But I think I am quite a different author, I’ve taken a different step in looking at Tiananmen Square and my writing style is very different.

One of the big influences for my poetry, which also got me into theatre, is a Los Angeles poet called Pamala Karol, ‘La Loca’. And Tom Waits, I love his lyrics and music. And of course there are twentieth-century playwrights from Jean Genet to Tennessee Williams; Sam Shepard is one of my favourite authors. I’d say that some of my latest work, like *Box/Role/Dream*, is a little bit more like Sam Shepard’s. I love his white trash characters. Jean Genet was a huge influence at the particular time that I was writing *Honeypants*: his life on the edge with marginalised people — a huge part of that appealed to me and influenced my writing. I love New Zealand artists as well: Briar Grace-Smith, Hone Kouka, my Masters tutor, Ken Duncum — I have a huge respect for his work. I really like Dave Armstrong’s writing. There’s all sorts of people whose work I enjoy, I can relate to and I’ve been inspired by.
PFC: Why did you decide to make Ka Shue a monodrama?

LC-E: At the time in 1995 when I first started researching Ka Shue I went to my friend James Littlewood, who directed it and he said, ‘why don’t you write a play and use your mother’s story?’ Then I started researching it. At the time, to the best of my knowledge, there were no other mainstream New Zealand Chinese theatre pieces. The only few Chinese actors I knew were people like Helene Wong who had worked (as a script co-ordinator) in Illustrious Energy. There were a couple of male actors, who ended up not working in New Zealand. So there were no actors and I could not have afforded to put it up with a full cast. So I decided to perform all five characters myself. For me it was a practical reason.

I’d also just seen Jim Moriarty play Michael James Manaia and had been working with Miranda Harcourt and Stuart McKenzie co-writing the short film Chinese Whispers. So I was very inspired by Miranda Harcourt as solo performers. Seeing Jim Moriarty perform with nothing but an armchair was inspiring, and watching Miranda Harcourt perform Verbatim with nothing but a few props and just simply turning round to become another character, that’s where it started. I had so much to learn! It was extremely ambitious at the time. I did not have any classic training in acting. I’d done Murray Edmond’s one-year post-grad diploma in drama course in 1993, which covered all the bases from writing to performance, which was fantastic and I’d learnt a lot, but the acting — I had to learn it the hard way. I owe Ka Shue to two key people: James Littlewood for coming up with the idea and initiating it, but also Jim Moriarty for really training me as an actor at the time and really reshaping it for touring.

PFC: There have also been other solo shows in New Zealand, like Jacob Rajan’s Krishnan’s Dairy, that have also been essential in this process of inscribing the voices and experiences of different ethnic communities.

LC-E: Jacob Rajan and I were both doing the writing and developing our shows at the same time, pretty much within months of each other. That was extraordinary, and then they both ended up being the first of their kind in New Zealand.

PFC: Both Ka Shue and Fire Mountain use the events in Tiananmen Square as a point of departure, one of them going backwards and the other moving forwards. Was this a planned connection?

LC-E: It became something as I was researching and writing Fire Mountain because initially I wanted to write a tragic love story, and that still remains, but the more I wrote it and the more I researched it, the more I thought I could bring Tiananmen back into it. Fire Mountain, like HEAT now, was really ambitious for me at the time because I was trying to cover
a lot of different things, I was trying to look at the way media perceives the Asian communities, I was trying to create a tragic love story, I was trying to do the immigrant drama as well. In the performance of it I was blessed with some of New Zealand’s most talented creatives. We had a Chinese choreographer who was really amazing in training actors to do the movements based on the old-style theatre. I was trying to marry quite a few things ambitiously, very old-style stuff with very contemporary realistic film images. For me, those two plays do suit each other being published back to back, the old Chinese story and the new Asian New Zealand story. They belong together.

I’ve been criticised for *Fire Mountain* for playing on negative stereotypes. I think that as long as there is a strong reaction, that’s good. Because it means it’s pressing buttons and if somebody gets offended and walks out, well, they’ll be thinking about the play, won’t they? They’ll be probably quite cross about it as well, cross enough to criticise it, and that’s better that just having lukewarm reactions.

**PFC:** *It is very interesting that the actress playing the role of Mei Ling in that first production was Roseanne Liang who actually became the protagonist of her own cross-cultural love story, as narrated in her documentary, Banana in a Nutshell.*

**LC-E:** Yes, at the time when she was performing *Fire Mountain*, she and her husband were secretly seeing each other. The only drawback for her performing that lead character was that the boyfriend was played by Derek Ng, who is actually her cousin. They couldn’t bring themselves to kiss each other! So we stylised the love-making scenes. But, in every other sense, they were really brave. Apart from Helene Wong, many of the Asian actors in *Fire Mountain* had very little acting experience; they hadn’t been in a professional production until then.

**PFC:** *In the introduction you mention that Fire Mountain was inspired by Romeo and Juliet. Shakespeare’s play also served Oscar Kightley as the basis of his comedy Romeo and Tusi*, which also portrays a cross-cultural love story and similar inter-ethnic conflicts.

**LC-E:** Yes, the same kind of element… It’s archetypal, isn’t it? *Romeo and Juliet* is about two warring families, but also in New Zealand we have the two warring cultures, and in *Fire Mountain* Taiwan and China, the good boy and the bad boy, the good family and the bad family…

**PFC:** *Would you say that you are you more influenced by tragedy than by comedy?*
LC-E: Yes, but I like black comedy, which is why I love Sam Shepard and a lot of New Zealand writers like Oscar Kightley and Dave Armstrong. I love the comedy because I think it is really important to find a way to make an audience laugh, before you make them cry.

PFC: *In Fire Mountain* you use Cantonese and Mandarin; the characters juggle several languages and because they come from different areas they cannot always understand each other. How was this linguistic variety translated into the performance of the play?

LC-E: The actors all had to learn some Cantonese and Mandarin, and they were all fantastic. I don’t speak Cantonese myself. I am struggling to learn alongside my little girl, who is two-and-a-half, by taking her to Cantonese Kindergarten, once a week. She’s actually doing better than me. My mother was too ashamed to teach us because she thought that her Cantonese was very rustic. Every time she spoke Cantonese around new Immigrant Hong Kong Chinese they just laughed at her, so she just stopped using it and she did not want to teach us. But I am learning it because it’s part of my cultural heritage, and language being at the heart of culture, it is incredibly important for me to try and understand it. Therein lies the frustration of the language barrier for me particularly with Chinese characters I need the language to put myself in the shoes of those characters.

PFC: Why is mythology such an important element in your plays?

LC-E: Not in every play. *Box/Role/Dream* does not have mythology in it and *HEAT* doesn’t either. *HEAT* is hyperrealistic. We are recreating the interior of an Antarctic hut where scientists, a husband and wife, winter over. The whole hut is recreated inside the theatre and so we leave the whole of Antarctica to your imagination outside the concealed entrance of the hut.

To answer your question, I don’t always bring mythology into my plays, but I try to find other ways of having it there subtly. In *HEAT* it is very subtle; there is the sense of a ghost, because the couple are haunted by the loss of a child. But it’s a love triangle inspired by Carson McCullers’s *The Ballad of the Sad Café* which is about a man, a woman and a dwarf. It’s a classic love-hate triangle. The woman loves the dwarf, the dwarf loves the man, the man loves the woman. The woman hates the man, the man hates the dwarf, the dwarf hates the woman. Mine is a man, a woman and a penguin.

PFC: And why Antarctica?

LC-E: I asked myself the same question. My friend Chris Orsman, who was the inaugural Antarctic fellow in 1997\(^\text{15}\), said to me ‘why don’t you go
there?’ and I said, ‘Why on earth would I?’. But the more I thought about it, the more it really grew on me, the more obsessed I became about it. I haven’t been there yet, but there are so many people that I know who have been there. Gareth Farr who is doing the music for HEAT is another Antarctica Fellow. It’s such an extraordinary place!

PFC: Can you tell me about your future projects?

LC-E: I am also working on Little Dragon, a feature film. This is my third feature script. It’s had development funding from the New Zealand Film Commission and we are in the process of applying for more development funding. It has just been pitched at the Shanghai Film Festival.

PFC: And what about a novel?

LC-E: I have a first draft not quite finished but I just need to make the time to go back to it. It’s called Lotus Hook. There are a lot of elements of Ka Shue in it. It’s about a little pair of Chinese feet that travel the world — concubine’s bound feet, encased in gold. It’s got quite a lot of autobiographical stuff in it; there is a section set in Papua New Guinea. It’s one of these projects I’ll come back to and I know I’ll want to rewrite it from scratch. Alison Wong¹⁶ has published her first novel and it is the first major historical New Zealand Chinese novel, which is fantastic.

PFC: There have been a large number of historical novels, mainly by European or Pakeha writers, published in New Zealand recently which include Chinese characters, but always presented from outsiders’ perspectives.

LC-E: Yes, that’s right. So it’ll be high time to have Alison’s novel come out. My novel is extremely different writing, some of it is historical, and it is probably going to be more of a leap of faith in that I am taking a lot more artistic licence. I love fantasy.

PFC: Do you see this as a way in which so called ‘ethnic writers’ can escape from traditional historical or autobiographical approaches to their stories, embracing less conventional formats or genres?

LC-E: Yes, absolutely! I’ve written a three-hander about a man a woman and a penguin! And the two human characters are Pakeha and that has nothing to do with my ethnicity, so it is a huge branch away for me. Challenge yourself. Writing outside your comfort zone is vital.

PFC: How do you see the future of New Zealand literature in connection to the changing face of the country?

LC-E: I think already we can see it depicted in a lot of literature, films, and theatre, a lot of Pacific Island and young Asian voices that are coming
through in very different genres, formats and arenas. The face of New Zealand has changed. My personal opinion is that New Zealand was always a multicultural society; it’s only that New Zealanders didn’t see it that way. In the past they saw it as bicultural; white and Maori. New Zealanders needed to open their eyes. The white people themselves were made up of many different cultures and the Chinese were here too, but they were just ignored.

**PFC:** *Why do you think it has taken so long for these multicultural voices to appear?*

**LC-E:** It takes a while for mainstream culture and the dominant groups to recognise where they may have gone wrong in the past and to acknowledge that. Sometimes these histories are buried for a long time. There are people like the artist Guy Ngan who have been working for a long time. They were visionaries in their own time and some people wouldn’t take him seriously because he was Chinese, and the Chinese community wouldn’t take him seriously because he should have been working in the family business (being an artist was not seen as a valid occupation). It does take a while, not only for these artists, but also for people of my mother’s generation and even for me and my generation to step out of the square and rock the boat.

**NOTES**

1. BATS is an acronym for the Bane and Austin Touring Society (named after Rodney Bane and David Austin, the founding members of BATS). In 1995 BATS Theatre created a commission specifically designed to allow theatre artists to experiment in a supportive environment. It has since built to be an essential part of the BATS annual programme. The STAB commission can be accessed by all performance media — dance, theatre, opera, music, film, magic, interactive media.

2. Niki Caro is a New Zealand filmmaker whose film version of Witi Ihimaera’s 1987 novel, *Whale Rider* (released in 2001), has been widely acclaimed both in New Zealand and internationally.

3. The play fictionalises the accident of the Russian cruise liner, *Mikhail Lermontov*, which sank off the New Zealand coast in 1986 and still lies at the bottom of the sea. The only casualty of the accident was a 33-year-old engineer crew member on which Chanwai-Earle based her character. The protagonist appears on stage dressed as a woman, the way in which he had planned to abandon ship and start a new life before the accident. This event is also the subject of her poem ‘Gasp’.

4. Co-written by Dave Armstrong and Oscar Kightley, *Niu Sila*, is a comedy about the friendship between a Pakeha and a Polynesian kid, growing up together in Auckland.

5. The publication of Alan Duff’s novel, *Once Were Warriors* (Auckland: Tandem Press, 1990), which Lee Tamahori adapted to the screen in 1994, was surrounded by controversy because of its unprecedented portrayal of urban Maori culture, gang violence and domestic abuse. These are all topics which appear in ‘To Hastings with Love’ included in Chanwai-Earle’s collection of poetry *Honeypants*. 
Tusiata Avia is a New Zealand poet and performer of Samoan descent. She is the author of two poetry collections: *Wild Dogs Under My Skirt* and *Bloodclot*. In an interview recorded for the New Zealand Book Council in 2006, Avia and Chanwai-Earle reject the restrictive use of the ethnic label.

In February 2002, the New Zealand government offered a formal apology to the descendants of the Chinese migrants who were required to pay a Poll Tax before entering the country. Helen Clark’s speech regretted the unfair treatment historically inflicted upon Chinese people and acknowledged the contribution of the Chinese community to the country’s economy and cultural heritage since the 19th century.

In 1881 the Chinese Immigration Restriction Act imposed a £10 poll tax on Chinese migrants, limiting the number of entries to one person per 10 tons of cargo. Richard Seddon promoted further anti-Asiatic restrictions as soon as he became Prime Minister and in 1896 the poll tax was raised to £100.

*Illustrious Energy* is a 1988 New Zealand film directed by Leon Narbey which tells the story of two Chinese goldminers in the Otago area.

*Michael James Manaia* is a monodrama by James Broughton.

*Verbatim* is a solo performance by William Brandt.

Racob Rajan’s monodrama, *Krishnan’s Dairy*, which premiered in 1999, was the first play to reflect the experience of the Indian community in New Zealand by dramatising the struggle of a couple running the local dairy shop. Together with *The Candlestick Maker* and *The Pickle King*, the play was published in the volume, *Indian Ink*.

Roseanne Liang is a New Zealand filmmaker who has written and directed several short films. Her most widely acclaimed work to date, the documentary *Banana in a Nutshell*, narrates her decision to marry a Pakeha man and her struggle to convince her Chinese parents to accept this relationship.

The unpublished comedy *Romeo and Tusi*, co-written by Oscar Kightley and Erolia Ifopo, premiered in 1997 and deals with the love story of a Maori boy and a Samoan girl.

The Artists to Antarctica Programme was established in 1996 to allow New Zealand artists to travel to Antarctica and reflect their experiences in their works, thus promoting knowledge of the area among New Zealanders.

Alison Wong’s novel, *As the Earth Turns Silver*, is the first work of its kind to have been published by a New Zealander of Chinese descent.

**LYNDA CHANWAI-EARLE BIBLIOGRAPHY**

**POETRY**

Chanwai-Earle, Lynda 1994 *Honeypants*, Auckland UP, Auckland (including ‘To Hastings with Love’).

Chanwai-Earle’s poetry has also been published in *Landfall*, *Printout*, and *Hecate*, and has appeared in edited collections, including *New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre, Honoring Fathers: An International Poetry Collection*, (Yson & Abad), and *New New Zealand Poets in Performance*, (Ross & Kemp).

**PLAYS (AND PRODUCTIONS)**


**Films and Filmscripts**

**Works Cited**
Liang, Roseanne (dir.) 2006, *Banana in a Nutshell*, Banana Film.
HEAT

by
Lynda Chanwai-Earle

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All enquiries to the author's agent

Playmarket Playwright's Agency PO Box 9767, Te Aro, Wellington, New Zealand, Tel: 64 4 382 8462 Fax: 64 4 382 8461
info@playmarket.org.nz
Heat
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Playmarket Playwright's Agency PO Box 9767, Te Aro, Wellington

CHARACTERS:

DR STELLA CLARK (K98)
Mid thirties. A Biologist - studying mammals and birds, particularly the mating systems of the Emperor Penguin and the effect of melting sea-ice due to global warming, on their survival.

DR JOHN CLARK (K121)
Late thirties, Stella’s husband. A Physicist - studying the ozone hole, thermal waves and the thermal conductivity of sea ice in relation to global warming.

BOB
A lone Emperor penguin 'adopted' by Stella. (Played by a male actor, possibly naked throughout)

VHF - DARREN (Scott Base Manager) can be pre-recorded voice-over or a live feed from the Stage Manager backstage

ICE ROCK FM DJ - American accent, pre-recorded voice-over by the actor playing BOB.

PRODUCTION NOTES:

This play is meant to be performed without an interval.

A hut chained to the rocks, somewhere near Cape Crozier, the Ross Ice Shelf, Antarctica. The hut is filled to the minutest detail with equipment needed to survive 'wintering over'. The entire interior of the hut fills the stage. The walls of the hut form the edge of this world. The only entrance and exit to the hut is through the obscured “freezer door” upstage. Nearby, a single window. Eerie blue light filters in. The outside world with it’s changing light and seasons are partially viewed through the window. To the audience nothing exists beyond the perimeter of these walls but empty blackness.

A double bunk stretches along the far wall of the hut. Near to the bunk is a small shelf; on it sit personal effects. On the opposite side of the hut, perched on several shelves in the far corner are the VHF radio system and a video camera.

JOHN and STELLA'S workstation is a small two-sided bench. They have a laptop each. DVD’s are viewed on their laptops, a web camera sits on one. Sprawling across the table: a radiosonde, science journals, survival manuals, medical
journals and a small collection of Antarctic poetry. The table is littered in an orderly fashion, with objects of STELLA’S work as a Doctor of Biology; a microscope, thermometers, latex gloves, a penguin muzzle, specimen bags, small containers filled with various poisonous looking substances and a stills camera (wrapped in a baby's blanket). Several small chilli bins are piled under the table with “SAMPLES” stamped on the sides. A small extension to this worktable serves as the dining area.

The kitchen consists of a small sink with several labelled waste buckets underneath (plastics, paper etc), a small gas stove, and several boxes of kitchen utensils, pots and pans. The bathroom and first aid area is next to this. The plumbing is simple, aided by buckets. Off to one side is the toilet: a toilet seat positioned over two buckets labelled ‘Poos’ and ‘Wees’. There is shelving, a mirror and a small drying rack for underwear above. A door separates the toilet from the inside of the hut but one side of the toilet is open, revealed to the audience. A sign on the door reads: "Gentle Annie". Plastered around the walls: an Apsley Cherry-Garrard quote “..this journey had beggared our language: no words could express its horror.” - clashes with a poster of scantily clad bodies on a hot, tropical white sand beach. A road sign on the door reads: “GO SLOW, Penguins crossing”.

(Offstage and unseen) JOHN’S research equipment is situated just outside the hut near the main entrance, in a heated annex for drying clothes, hydroponics, storage and ‘Puss’ the generator - heavy outdoor boots are left here. Any scenes OUTSIDE THE HUT are played far downstage, next to a large block of real ice, direct to the audience under a tight spot of cold light, assisted by sound effects.

Costumes for STELLA and JOHN: Both wear military issue body-tags. Indoor: Thermal underwear, tracksuit pants, and a mish-mash of casual clothes, heavy socks, ugg boots. Outdoor extreme cold: Balaclava, leather gloves, fur-lined leather hats, nose wiper, goggles, outer jacket, Mukluks (Sorrels) - leather boots, salopettes, crampons, ice picks.

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The Antartic Research Centre, Victoria University, Dr Lloyd Spencer Davis (Otago University), Dr. Lillian Ng (Sole Medical Officer, B.A.S. Halley V Base, 2000), Dr Katja Reidel (NIWA), Dr Stephen Bannister (Institute of Geological and Nuclear Sciences, Victoria University), The Claypoles, Australia.
Carson McCullers for The Ballad of the Sad Cafe.
PROLOGUE:

Darkness, creaking and moaning of the ice. Music.

Eerie blue light falls across a huddled shape shivering in the gloom.

BOB squats, alone out on the ice. He turns slowly, arching his neck.

He tips his head back and opens his mouth as if to let lose an unearthly cry. Silence. Bob is mute.

Lights fade to black. Music and whining of the wind swells.

SCENE TRANSITION

SCENE 1: LAT.77°51'SOUTH

February, late Antarctic summer.

Deep throbbing of helicopter rotors and growls of a Hagglunds moving across the ice surround the audience. A single bulb lights the interior of the hut. Several provisions boxes sit in a pile in the centre of the hut.

Suddenly the hut door flies open, glaring white light fills the space, a flurry of drift. JOHN, clad in Antarctic overalls, face obscured by goggles, enters holding a provision box. He stumbles, dumping the box on the pile, then lurches out, whistling to a Bruce Springsteen number.

The hut is empty, muffled roar of the helicopter and Hagglunds offstage.

A moment later STELLA (similarly clad) enters clutching a box. She dumps this on top of JOHN'S.

JOHN enters with the last box and dumps it on top of the pile.

JOHN

STELLA
You’re lucky, if we lived in the Tristan da Cunhas we’d be doing guano trips. Good for potatoes apparently.

The throbbing sounds of helicopter and Hagglunds fade away. STELLA and JOHN stand at the doorway, waving and calling goodbye to the retreating helicopter.

STELLA
Thank you! See ya’ mate!

A beat as they eye the bunks. They both scramble for the top one, giggling wildly. JOHN claims it first, STELLA resigns herself to the bottom. JOHN reaches down, they kiss, savouring the moment.

Profound silence.

STELLA
My god. (Beat) It’s so quiet.

JOHN turns the transistor on. A burst of music. They dance. STELLA busies herself, sorting the boxes against a checklist. She closes one box, heaving it towards the wall by the kitchen.

JOHN picks up the camcorder, he starts recording, highly excited.

JOHN
Hello to everyone back home, mum, dad.

JOHN swings the camera in Stella’s direction.

JOHN
Well, we’ve finally made it. Kilo98’s sorting our provisions. Winter manager Darren Harvey did our last "drop off" from Scott Base this morning, 7 Hours by Hagglunds!

STELLA waves briskly at the camera.

JOHN
We’re on our own now, won’t see another soul for months!

She grimaces playfully at the camera. JOHN shoots the room.

JOHN
Here’s the communications desk, VHF radio, our web cam. The VHF links us to Scott Base.

* * * * *
SCENE 3: ANTARCTIC CONVERGENCE

The separate scenes play down simultaneously.

Late autumn, twilight. Sense of mist.

STELLA stands downstage, a tight spot on her face - she’s outside with the penguin colony.

STELLA

Everyday. Expanding, ebbing, this low-salinity body of highly-oxygenated water, creeping around us, sinking below the subantarctic surface. A cool, cool darkness, ever flowing Northwards. And now sea ice everywhere; Larsons, the Wordie, Wilkins, Prince Gustav, the Peninsula, all breaking up. Melting like icecream on hot pavement. (Beat) My poor, poor birds, how will you live when it all finally disappears?

The blue light of permanent dusk filters through the window of the hut.

JOHN is upstage, on the VHF radio to Scott Base. The Base Manager’s broad Kiwi accent crackles back.

JOHN

Scott Base, Scott Base, this is Kilo121 on Channel Six, how copy? Over.

VHF - DARREN(V.O.)


JOHN

Roger Darren, gid'day, temperatures today at minus 10, wind speed one knot, wind-chill factor nil. A balmy day mate, over!

VHF - DARREN(V.O.)

Sounds like paradise, over.

Krilling sounds from the darkness. STELLA pulls out her camera from it’s baby blanket. She snaps photos of the Emperor colony.

JOHN

Any news of the Crusaders? Over.

VHF - DARREN(V.O.)

Just heard we spanked the Blues. Over.

JOHN

Fantastic. What's the score? Over.
VHF - DARREN(V.O.)
35, 18: Merhtz slotted six penalties. Over

JOHN
Excellent. Old Merhtzes still proving his worth eh. Cause for celebration. Hey, had your polar plunge yet?

Across the stage STELLA wraps the camera back in the blanket, shoving it into her jacket. She pulls a small record book from a pocket and scribbles notes, fumbling in the cold.

STELLA
Pairbond’s A4, C7. Pink plate on lower bill scarred. (beat) Arching necks, cloaca contacting.

Data on sea ice temperature variations been hard to get up to now, over.

VHF - DARREN(V.O.)
Be the herbies holding you up?

JOHN
Yeah, been blowing constantly ’til yesterday. Finally got some peace and quiet.

VHF - DARREN(V.O.)
Weather's been foul here too. Hear about the Aussie ship? Aurora got held up, nearly iced in. Had a close call with several growlers as she was leaving Mawsons, bergy bits everywhere.

JOHN
Shit that's a close call. Over.

STELLA
B6, H3. (beat) Two mutual calls, a bow, pat, pat.

Across the stage STELLA is beginning to edge closer to the penguins, trying not to startle them. Sounds of penguin chattering.

VHF - DARREN(V.O.)
What's the numbers like? She know? Over.

JOHN
A thousand and thirtyish last count. Over.

VHF - DARREN(V.O.)
Kilo98 happy with that? Over.

JOHN
Not good, colony's down a bit. There’s hope though. She’s predicting three quarters will produce eggs.
STELLA
L12, J5. (beat) Neck, bum, neck, high pitched call, cloaca contacting.

The light on JOHN dims, growing hotter on STELLA. She forgets herself. She begins to imitate the penguin’s movements and sounds.

VHF - DARREN(V.O.)
Sounds like the horny little buggers have been busy.

JOHN
(laughs) Yeah, it’s gonna be a bumper crop. You know she gets this weird kick out of watching them root ...

Across the stage STELLA is completely immersed. A small shadow in the darkness shuffles towards her. STELLA’S reverie is broken; she stops her movement, disconcerted.

STELLA
Bob? Is that you?

She peers into the darkness. A pale child’s face seems to emerge from the gloom.

STELLA
(recoiling) Cam?

The face disappears, krilling sounds, distinctly penguin.

Lights down on STELLA.

Sounds of the penguin colony and creaking ice gradually turn into the whine of wind.

Music swells and continues into the next scene.

SCENE 4: FISH, FLOE, FLOWER AND FOG

Some days later. Early winter. Music sounds cooler.

JOHN’S a little bored. He checks temperature gauges by the entrance. STELLA enters holding her clipboard, she’s energised. Sounds of penguin hooting offstage.
STELLA

Last of the girls left today. The boys have the clutch now.

JOHN fidgets with the gauges then scribbles the results on the record sheet by the VHF. STELLA looks out the window with the binoculars.

STELLA

Bob’s been a bit funny.

Thoughtful silence, STELLA’S absorbed by what she’s seeing. JOHN waits. He turns the radio on. Static and intermittent music.

JOHN

And? Why’s Bob funny?

STELLA

Oh, he had no mate. Kept being shunted out of the colony. Never seen that before.

JOHN

(peeviously) How do you know “it’s” a ‘Bob’?

STELLA

He’s the one with a scar, on his right flipper.

JOHN

(shrugging) Maybe it’s an adolescent.

STELLA

No, he’s old enough to breed.

JOHN

(beat) Temperatures dropped again.

STELLA

Hm?

JOHN

Temperatures dropped. Minus 14.

STELLA

(vaguely) That’s nice.

JOHN

What’s up now?

STELLA

Herbie by the ridge – nah. It’s moving away. (beat) Saw a funny thing, the other day ...

She sighs heavily.

STELLA

Probably nothing, just shadows.
The radio interrupts her reverie. The American DJ’s voice an urbane drawl.

RADIO (V.O.)

(Static) ... And if you aren’t already out there on the ice, drop what you are doing right now and head up to Observation Hill to witness the most stunning sunset ...

STELLA looks stricken, she puts the binoculars down.

STELLA

My god. We almost forgot.

Intermittent radio continues under the dialogue.

RADIO (cont’d)

Let’s say farewell to our friendly orange lady. It’s April 25th - officially the last day of the sun here in this chilly antipodean deep freeze. We won’t be seeing the light from her beautiful face for the next five months.

The song “You Are My Sunshine” (Jimmy Davis) plays down. It crackles, tinny from the small transistor.

JOHN moves to the shrine by the bed, taking the wooden box.

It’s time.

JOHN

Yes. (beat) No.

I thought we discussed this earlier. (beat) Okay, just a tiny bit, like sprinkling pepper.

STELLA

(forcing a laugh) And the protocol? Darren would have a hernia.

JOHN

I’ve seen a lot worse.

STELLA stops him.

STELLA

Wait.

JOHN

(urgent) C’mon Stella, we need to do this. It feels right -

STELLA

I can’t - No, stop John.
JOHN

But it feels right -

STELLA

Not to me. Please.

JOHN hesitates.

STELLA

Lets just read the poetry.

JOHN

(impatient) You know what the counsellor said.

STELLA

(angry) Fuck her.

Stella -

STELLA

Yeah, whatever.

She tries to take the box, JOHN pulls it away.

JOHN

(hurt) We had an agreement -

JOHN hugs Cam’s ashes, STELLA tries to take the box again, gentle.

STELLA

Well I’ve changed my mind. I’m allowed to do that aren’t I? Give him to me John -

She places a hand on his cheek. JOHN resists silently.

STELLA

Please ...

They stare at each other. JOHN silently hands STELLA the box and exits. STELLA picks up the poetry book, offering it.

STELLA

(placating) You can still read the poetry ...

JOHN has gone. Immediately a flaming glow lights STELLA’S face, bathing her in rich pink and violet hues.

STELLA

Jim-Boy ...

STELLA holds the box of ashes, pressing it hard into her chest. She stands in the doorway, taking a deep breath. The
They stare at each other. JOHN silently hands STELLA the box and exits. STELLA picks up the poetry book, offering it.

STELLA (placating) You can still read the poetry ...

JOHN has gone. Immediately a flaming glow lights STELLA’S face, bathing her in rich pink and violet hues.

STELLA Jim-Boy ...

STELLA holds the box of ashes, pressing it hard into her chest. She stands in the doorway, taking a deep breath. The sun sinks below the horizon - light travelling down her body.

A shadow passes over the hut. The light through the window creates dark cut-out shapes of her body, silhouetted against deep blue.

Lights fade.

“You Are My Sunshine” (Jimmy Davis) continues to play down on their radio, throughout the transition.

TRANSITION: JOHN enters, shining a flashlight at her. STELLA begins to strip down, laughing, JOHN mirrors her movements.

JOHN Ohh yeah. C’mon baby ... you’re a bad scientist!

They cram onto the lower bunk, giggling, making love under the blankets with the flashlight.

Lights out, music fades.

* * * * *

SCENE 6: THE GREAT ICE BARRIER

Permanent twilight gleams through the window. The ice creaks outside.

Lights up on STELLA waking alone in bed. She’s dishevelled and half dressed. She begins pulling on her clothes, ugg boots last.

A banging sound comes from the annex - sounds like JOHN fixing the generator.

STELLA glances towards the sound, irritated. She moves towards the kitchen area. A bright red waste bucket sits under the sink, catching her eye.

STELLA pulls out a used condom. She holds it up, inspecting it. It appears to be broken, frozen into a gooey ‘cumsicle’. Some gunk gets on her fingers.

STELLA Gross!
Fuming she tosses it back into the bin. Offstage JOHN continues his hammering.

Abruptly she moves to the bathroom area, picking up her small toilet bag. She goes into the Gentle Annie, sits, opens the toilet bag and pulls out a pregnancy test kit. She pees onto the stick, tinkling sounds. She waits, studying the stick for a result.

JOHN can be heard at the entrance.

STELLA fumbles, looking around for somewhere to place the pregnancy kit. She puts it on the toilet shelf and emerges, zipping up the toilet bag. STELLA replaces the bag in the bathroom area.

JOHN enters - wearing a “Silly Hat” he has created from kitchen implements and a stainless steel pudding bowl.

He walks up behind her, showing off.

JOHN

Made a hat.

She glances at him, not impressed.

JOHN

Wotcha up to?

STELLA

None of your business.

JOHN

If you need some space, just say.

STELLA sighs loudly.

JOHN

Okay. I’ve gotta take a piss anyway -

JOHN enters the toilet. He exits, holding up the pregnancy test stick.

STELLA

(accusingly) You keep breaking condoms.

JOHN grins sheepishly.

STELLA

It wouldn’t be good, not here.

JOHN

Not now of course, but once we’re home?
JOHN
Wotcha up to?

STELLA
None of your business.

JOHN
If you need some space, just say.

STELLA sighs loudly.

JOHN
Okay. I’ve gotta take a piss anyway –

JOHN enters the toilet. He exits, holding up the pregnancy test stick.

STELLA
(accusingly) You keep breaking condoms.

JOHN grins sheepishly.

STELLA
It wouldn’t be good, not here.

JOHN
Not now of course, but once we’re home?

STELLA
(hesitates) Yeah.

He gathers her in a fierce bear hug.

JOHN
God, it makes me so glad to hear that. I love you.

STELLA
(squirming) Ditto. I have to go –

She kisses him quickly, then grabs her camera. She heads to the annex, grabbing her outer jacket (dressing offstage). JOHN calls after her.

JOHN
Lets make a night of it. I’ll cook, make us a romantic dinner.

He whistles cheerfully as he regards the test stick in his hands, hesitating before he chucks it into the plastics waste bin. He rummages in the kitchen area, pulling out a packet of spaghetti. He looks up, notices the webcam, smiles up at the camera, suddenly self conscious.

JOHN
Hi Howick Primary, year 8, for whenever you’re watching this. Excellent question from Tammy C – about the 2nd law of thermodynamics. It says that heat travels from hot to cold bodies and not the other way around. Heat is really a measure of disorder and, in physics, disorder is often quantified as ‘entropy’.

He grabs the spaghetti, holding it up to the camera.

JOHN
Take this packet of spaghetti for instance, uncooked, it’s a bundle of aligned pasta sticks. It has low entropy because it shows high order ...

Lights fade on JOHN.

JOHN
Lights up on STELLA by the penguin colony. She is crouching on the ice, engrossed, filming a large male with an egg.

STELLA
(softly) Yeah baby, that’s the one I want.

Sounds of krilling and shuffling. STELLA struggles with the camera, it appears to have frozen over.
STELLA

Damn it. Don't do this to me now.

STELLA tries to clear the lens, cursing. She doesn't notice the shadow emerging from the darkness behind her. A pale face of a boy flickers in the gloom. A soft sound like a child's voice, STELLA turns, peering into darkness.

STELLA

Oh my god.

She holds her breath. The boy appears still, beyond reach in the gloom.

STELLA (whispers) Cam, is that you? (beat) Sweet Jesus, it is.

STELLA edges closer to the child. He doesn't move. She breathes carefully.

Cam, come to mummy.

She shifts closer. The boy appears to shimmer, turning into the shadows.

No, don't go.

She reaches for him.

STELLA

Please, stay. I miss you. (smiles) Hey Cammy, Butzy Buh. (beat) Butzy Buh.

STELLA stops suddenly, peering into the gloom, confused.

Bob? (disconcerted) Bob? I thought ...

She rubs her eyes. The shadow retreats into darkness. Sounds of a shuffling mass, krilling.

Lights snap back to JOHN as he finishes his speech.

JOHN

So the second law is tied to the progression of time, the unfolding events and the ultimate fate of the universe ... just like spaghetti!

Lights and sound change.
TRANSITION: Lights dim, JOHN opens the hut door, a snowball narrowly misses his head, smashing on the door.

He yells, exiting. Through the open door the audience can see weaving torchlight. A snowball fight – STELLA and JOHN chase each other, giggling, squealing.

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SCENE 8: THE GLACIER’S FISSURE

A few days later. Darkness, howling wind.

The inside of the hut is dimly lit by the heater and lamp. STELLA is alone, hanging her big undies on the drying rack in the toilet.

She looks slightly crazy and dishevelled. She ignores the noises from outside even though the hut shudders. A sudden noise at the door makes her start.

JOHN, heavily clad, gropes his way into the hut. A blast of snow follows him. He lurches up against the heavy door, slamming it behind him. They avoid looking at each other, tense.

JOHN

Fucken skidoo broke down again.

STELLA

(offhand) Shit. You okay?

JOHN

Had to leave her there.

STELLA

Where?

JOHN struggles to remove his large gloves and outer jacket.

JOHN

Not far. By the grumpy bog.

STELLA

Fuck you. I would've had to do an S.A.R.

JOHN

Rubbish.
They avoid eye contact

STEELA
It's pitch black out there. You could have -

JOHN
It's just a tiny herbie -

STEELA
I could have lost you.

JOHN
Don't be hysterical. Anyway, someone was accusing me of not doing any field work -

STEELA confronts him

STEELA
And now's a good time to go out there -?

JOHN
(changes subject) Looks like they were chasing Bob around again. (Laughs)

STEELA
Don't pretend you didn't hear.

JOHN
Is it ... (points to camera) turned on?

STEELA
Don't give a pig's arse if it is.

JOHN
Okay, okay.

STEELA
Why do we always go round in circles?

JOHN
A little louder perhaps?

STEELA
It's turned off.

JOHN
I'm not the one who's been in a bitch of a mood lately.

STEELA fumes silently.

JOHN
Fine.

He makes a move for the door, STEELA, half laughing, tries to bar his way. They wrestle for the handle; the wind howls louder outside.
STELLA
(laughing) John! I'm sorry okay?

JOHN
(laughing) Get out of my way.

STELLA
This is stupid.

JOHN
(laughing) Get. Go on.

STELLA
Please - I'm sorry, don't -

JOHN
(attempting to joke) I may be some time.

They become serious, jostling.

STELLA
Please.

He pushes her aside and yanks open the door, snow blasts in again. JOHN tries to shut himself out. They have a tug of war with the door.

JOHN
(overlapping) let go.

STELLA
(panicking) Come on, you can't be serious -

JOHN disappears into the night

STELLA
John!

She stands at the door for a moment, the wind howling. Then she slams it shut, slumping against it. The wind continues to whine outside. A strange krilling sound starts up; the penguins calling to each other. STELLA becomes keenly focused on the sound. Suddenly a scraping noise can be heard from the other side of the door. STELLA starts, she scrabbles to open the door.

STELLA
John?

She yanks the door open. BOB the penguin thrusts himself into the hut.

STELLA
Bob?
He approaches STELLA, aggressive. STELLA backs away, alarmed. He surveys the hut, then collapses. STELLA stares at the naked form huddled at her feet, awed.

Strange, sad music begins under.

STELLA regards BOB cautiously. After a moment she moves to him, reaching out. Slowly, very gently, stroking his back. BOB moves slightly, STELLA withdraws. She strokes again, her actions bolder. Suddenly BOB rears up, pecking viciously. STELLA gasps, clutching her hand. BOB lurches aggressively then stops, swaying, eyes fixed on her.

STELLA springs into action, searches through her equipment, finds a harness, using it to bind BOB’S flippers behind him. STELLA backs away, nervous, groping for the penguin muzzle.

STELLA and BOB struggle, BOB rears, nipping, she muzzles him. BOB squirms and goes limp. STELLA picks up a pair of latex surgical gloves, sheathing her hands ominously. She hovers over BOB with a thermometer, checking the reading.

With one swift expert movement she twists BOB around, sliding the thermometer up his arse. BOB rears up, startled, but STELLA keeps him pinned down. She murmurs comfortingly. BOB settles in her grip.

STELLA pulls out the thermometer, noting the temperature. She frowns, eyeing the secretion on the thermometer. She rubs a little between thumb and forefinger, studies it. She looks down at BOB.

STELLA

It's okay honey. It's okay. We'll get you well again. Just you see.

STELLA puts away her instruments. BOB huddles on the spot, eyeing her warily.

STELLA rummages in the “SAMPLE” bins for a small bottle filled with medication and a feeding tube. In the kitchen area she rifles through a provisions box for a tin of tuna (or sardines), which she opens.
Using an eye-dropper she mixes the medication and tuna. She spoons the goop into the feeding tube, approaching BOB.

STELLA
There's a good Bob. No more biting please.

Cautiously she removes the muzzle. He is still. She holds up the feeding tube, enticing. He arches away, disdainful. She tries again, coaxing.

STELLA
Please Bob; it'll build your strength up. It's not fresh, but it's the best I can do.

BOB eyes her as if she's insane.

STELLA
Sorry, but I can't very well go and catch the bloody stuff can I?

STELLA moves away leaving the food in front of him. BOB sniffs, then tastes it. STELLA watches him struggle, then she moves to help him. He guzzles the food greedily. She begins stroking gently. This time he doesn't bite.

STELLA
(cooing) God, you're starving. Poor baby.

BOB finishes feeding. STELLA gently wipes away the spilt food on his body. He begins to nip at her fingers, and then stops. She continues wiping him down, lovingly.

STELLA
I know what you want. I do. I've been watching you for a while now. Didn't know that did you Bob? I've been watching you too.

Lights and sound change. Time passes.

TRANSITION: Looking like a giant Michelin Man, JOHN enters the hut fully clad. The wind swells with his entry. JOHN and STELLA hold the table as BOB rears up, lurching at them. Suddenly he becomes feral, cat-like. He leaps over the table, removing his muzzle on the way. As BOB lands he becomes penguin again. Lights snap back on.
SCENE 9: TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

A day later. STELLA moves around the kitchen area, rummaging for cans of tuna. BOB pecks curiously at objects in the room. He wears STELLA’S silly hat.

JOHN sits apart from them, at his laptop. He flicks it on. A DVD of an old All Black game plays down (1987 World Cup with Buck Shelford).

JOHN

God, anyone one would think it was human the way you carry on.

BOB becomes riveted by the rugby, squatting in front of the screen. He stretches, keening silently. JOHN tries to avoid him, shifting away.

JOHN

Fuck it’s freezing in here. Do we have to have to leave the heater off?

STELLA

Yes. I don’t want Bob overheating.

JOHN

Why didn’t you tell me about the pregnancy test?

Silence

JOHN

Don't you trust me?

STELLA

Do we have to talk about it now?

She indicates BOB. JOHN looks at the penguin and back at STELLA.

JOHN

What are you afraid of?

Silence. STELLA speaks casually, without looking at him.

STELLA

I forgot to tell you. Bob will need to stay a while.

JOHN

Eh?

STELLA

He’s sick. He needs to be separated from the group or else –

JOHN

You're joking. It's been almost two days already Stella, it's bloody long enough.
STELLA
He'll die. I can't risk that.

JOHN
'It' is a bird. It's the laws of nature. (beat) Where are we going to put it?

Turning to him, quietly.

STELLA
We can make the room. He can sleep in here, with us. I thought I'd make a separate area and then you and I can take turns huddling with him -

JOHN
(disbelief) Huddling? (Laughs) Fuck off!

STELLA silent. JOHN starts laughing.

JOHN
God sweetie, you're too much sometimes. (laughs harder) that's why I love you -

JOHN moves up behind her, kissing her neck affectionately, still laughing.
STELLA jerks open a can of tuna.

JOHN
(faltering) You're not - I don't believe this. You'd be breaching your permit.

STELLA
Permit's fine. Bob's tagged.

JOHN
What about the, the Madrid - ?

STELLA
What about it?

JOHN
Within 5 meters, minimal environmental impact, $10,000 fine, jail for a year -!

STELLA
Don't patronize me. This is different. Bob came to us. He came to us and I will not turn him out.

But huddling ...

JOHN
shuts his laptop, ending the rugby. He looks at BOB, snatching STELLA'S hat from BOB'S head when she's not looking.

JOHN
(sarcastic) Sure you're not suffering from polar ennui darling?
STELLA shrugs indifferently. JOHN picks up his rugby ball, rubbing it anxiously.

STELLA
I'm talking about taking turns keeping him company. He's a community creature; he needs to feel part of the group. A group huddle. It's the best way to make him feel at home -

BOB has seen JOHN'S rugby ball; he becomes fixated with it, watching JOHN'S every movement.

JOHN
Oh he's at home all right. I am not going to sleep near that fucken putrid pile of feather and shit - Stella, for gods sake, it'll stink us out, we'll get fucken diseases, Hep B, campylobacter, please tell me you're joking, Jesus.

STELLA
(quietly) I'm not going to beg.

JOHN sulks.

STELLA
(firmly) It's important. This is my work.

JOHN fumes silently. BOB shuffles awkwardly towards him, JOHN backs away, still massaging his ball.

STELLA
I've made sacrifices for you.

JOHN
This is not right. It's not natural. You don't have fucken penguins in your bed -

Pointing at BOB with the ball, BOB is riveted.

STELLA
(matter of fact) I used to sleep with our family Labrador -

JOHN
I don't - Labrador? Fuck.

STELLA
You have a cesspit for an imagination.

JOHN
It's a wild creature, a big one, with a razor sharp beak - Bet the E.I. Supervisor would love to hear about this - a wild bird, trussed up, kept captive by an insane researcher.

STELLA flinches. She moves across to the web cam and switches it off.
STELLA
He'll die. You've seen for yourself how he's been rejected -

JOHN
Yeah, wonder why? Probably sodomized some poor innocent chick last summer. He's a rapist, that's why he's been kicked out -

STELLA
Emperors don't do that. On the other hand Adelies have been known to (have homosexual encounters) -

JOHN
Oh, so now he's a penguin. Bet he's a fucken chick molester or something. How do you know this one's Bob anyway? How'd you know you haven't got Terry or Dave or - or - Rupert! They all look the bloody same to me.

STELLA stubbornly dishes up three portions of tuna goop. She holds one out to JOHN. He puts the rugby ball on its shrine, taking the plate.

Please, honey.

Looks at the plate, it looks like shit.

What the hell's this?

STELLA
Dinner. (Placating) I think it helps if we don't eat um, red meat or chicken in front of him. Please John, just for a little while?

JOHN is speechless. The three begin to eat. BOB keeps shuffling towards JOHN, nudging him. JOHN pushes him away with his foot each time. STELLA is trying to help BOB to feed.

(smiling) He seems to like you.

JOHN
Feeling's not mutual.

STELLA
Be nice to him John, please.

JOHN sulks. When STELLA'S not looking, he gives BOB a vicious little kick and moves across the room to finish eating in silence. He puts the plate on the table. BOB pecks at it curiously.

Lights and sound change.
TRANSITION: JOHN retires onto the top bunk. STELLA gets a blanket. BOB and STELLA stand opposite each other, downstage, mirroring movements. They kneel together into a huddle, heads and necks arched over each other.

***

SCENE 14: INCUBATION

Inside the hut JOHN and STELLA stare balefully at furniture, avoiding each other’s gaze. They sit at the small dining table, a bottle of bourbon almost empty between them, their speech slurred.

BOB attempts to shuffle closer to JOHN. Each time he touches JOHN, JOHN pushes him away with his foot.

So we’re not talking.

JOHN grabs the bottle and swigs hard. STELLA snatches it back, wiping the top aggressively on her sleeve. She swigs.

What’s to talk about.

Us.

STELLA

What’s the point. All you do is whine, whine, whine. I’m the one that does all the work around here. You think it’s easy taking care of him?

Kick him out -

STELLA

You’d like that wouldn’t you. Maybe you should give me a hand sometime instead of bitching -

Listen to yourself -

STELLA

It’s always the same. You think your work’s more important than mine. You leave the hard stuff to me -

What are you on about?
STELLA
Look at him, he’s sick. He’s been rejected by his colony. Cam needs us, we need to pull together -

JOHN
You just said Cam -

STELLA
I did not.

JOHN
You did too.

STELLA
Whatever. You know who I’m talking about.

She looks at BOB.

STELLA
Don’t you worry Bob, I won’t let the mean man kick you out. No I won’t. Mummy loves you, she does, yes she does ... Mummy (laughs) Silly me.

JOHN stares at her.

JOHN
Nothing’s going to bring -

(snaps) I know!

STELLA
Silence. JOHN breaks it.

JOHN
We all know you love your work Stella, but this is beyond a joke. That bird’s been squatting in our hut for weeks -

Days.

STELLA
What?

Days. Not weeks. (beat) I need some space.

JOHN
Like I said, kick him out and we’ll have our space back.

Not from Bob.

STELLA
Silence. JOHN registers.

JOHN
Jesus.

STELLA
Bob’s not going anywhere. Not until winter’s over.
STELLA grabs the bourbon bottle and the video camera and lurches towards the Gentle Annie.

JOHN

Stella -

STELLA

Leave me alone. I’m going to talk to someone who understands.

She staggers into the toilet, slamming the door behind her.

JOHN stares at the closed door for a while. He looks down at BOB, still nudging his leg.

JOHN gets to his feet, unsteady. He pulls on his boots, outer jacket. He rummages through the grog box, pulling out another bottle of Bourbon. He cradles it. BOB sidles up to him. JOHN is about to close the box when he spots the condoms. He pulls a packet out. Looks at BOB.

JOHN

After you.

JOHN and BOB exit.

Lights cross fade to STELLA, sitting on the toilet. She struggles, starts recording, addressing the camera.

STELLA

(Slurring) Ap-Apeno (correcting herself) Aptenodytes forsteri ... Bobby baby. You know, I can’t understand why you like John better than me.

STELLA

I’m the one that feeds you, cleans up your shit, I do so much for you ... god fuck-fucken damn it!

She swigs the bottle ferociously, then slumps, passing out against the toilet wall.

Lights fade on STELLA.

TRANSITION: A short while later. Music swells. The strange moaning and creaking of the ice can be heard, echoing eerily.

Lights fade up on the interior of the hut.
His arms are full, brimming with blown-up prophylactics. They scatter about the hut like macabre balloons. JOHN leans awkwardly against the bunk struts, blowing up another condom. BOB waddles around him, delighted, attempting to sit on each one, popping them as he does.

John
If you can’t beat em, join em, eh Bob?

John sits on one too, popping it, laughing raucously.

Bob pounces on another balloon, anxiously trying to squeeze it under his brood pouch. BOB becomes increasingly frustrated as the condoms burst. JOHN picks up the Bourbon bottle for a good swig. He regards BOB for a moment.

John
You’re a strange one, aren’t you?

He offers the bottle to BOB. BOB sniffs it curiously, tastes the liquor.

John
My dad taught me this old poem about you guys once, how’dit go again? (mock Irish accent)

“O Creature which in Southern waters roam,
To know some more about you I would wish,
Though I have seen you in your limpid home,
Don't think I can rightly call you "fish"!
To taste your body I did not decline,
From dainty skinners fingers coming fresh,
’Twas like show leather steeped in turpentine,
But I should hardly like to call it “flesh”!

He laughs raucously. BOB arches his neck in response. JOHN soberes for a moment.

John
’Spose that was a bit insensitive. (Sincerely) Sorry mate.

He places a condom over BOB'S beak, BOB shakes his head, the condom goes flying. JOHN laughs, ruffling BOB'S head affectionately.
JOHN
Not such a bad bird after all.

STELLA emerges from the toilet holding
the video camera and nursing her head.
JOHN stares at her hungrily. She stares
at the broken condoms littering the
floor.

STELLA
Bob?

The VHF crackles into life. All three
stare at it.

VHF - DARREN(V.O.)
Come in Kilo191? Roger John, you there? It’s Darren, you got
your daily stats yet? Over.

JOHN rushes to the VHF, fumbling with
the clipboard next to it.

JOHN
Roger Darren. Uh, yeah. Somewhere. Here, here. Temperature
today, minus 42 - sorry mate, 22 (struggles).

BOB sidles up to his leg.

JOHN
(Under his breath) Piss off. Look I don't have any more
rubbers.

STELLA puts the camera down, picking up
JOHN’S rugby ball, absent-mindedly
playing with it.

VHF - DARREN(V.O.)
How's Kilo98? Over.

JOHN
Stella's okay. She's right here. Want to chat? Over.

VHF - DARREN(V.O.)
Roger John, put her on.

STELLA signals no, but JOHN holds the
radio piece out. She lurches over,
takes the VHF. She puts the ball on the
floor under her foot, rolling it. BOB
immediately waddles over to
investigate. JOHN hovers behind her.

STELLA
Darren. Over.

VHF - DARREN(V.O.)
Hey Stella, you’ve been very quiet lately. We were wondering
why your web cam’s been switched off?
STEELLA looks over at BOB. He has claimed the rugby ball, perching on it. He tucks it protectively beneath him. JOHN hasn't caught on.

STELLA

(giggling) Technical hitches, wiring. No biggie, we'll sort it. Over.

VHF - DARREN(V.O.)

Just that one of the guys thought he saw a penguin in your hut the other day. Over.

STELLA

Roger Darren. A tagged bird followed me back. He was eggless. Got really broody but he's found a surrogate egg now, so all's well. Over.

VHF - DARREN(V.O.)

Must be a relief, over.

JOHN looks down at BOB squatting happily on the rugby ball.

JOHN

What the fuck?

JOHN tries retrieving it but BOB instantly flares up, pecking viciously.

JOHN

Get off. Pesky bird. Get the fuck off my ball!

VHF - DARREN (V.O.)

Stella copy - what's up? Over.

STELLA

Copy Darren, sorry what was what? Over.

BOB nips fiercely at JOHN again.

VHF - DARREN(V.O.)

What's all that noise? Over.

JOHN

Stella!

STELLA

Oh John's watching footie, balls gone off side. Hey, gotta go, he's losing it. Over.

STELLA switches the VHF off.

JOHN

FUCK! My ball. Stella, make him give my ball back!

Nup.
JOHN
What do you mean nup?

STELLA
It’s his now. Losers keepers.

They stare at BOB as he squats, settled protectively over the ball, a strangely natural spectacle.

TRANSITION into bedtime, while STELLA and BOB prepare to sleep/huddle, JOHN moves to the toilet. Lights down on STELLA and BOB.

Lights up on JOHN.

JOHN sits in the toilet, sulking. Underwear is strung along a drying rack above his head. A large, ugly pair of STELLA’S hang in his face. He snatches at them, throwing them onto the floor. (Beat) He picks them up, sniffing gingerly. Then he buries his face, breathing hard.
DIMA TAHBOUB

The Locket Becomes a Bullet: Nationalising the Feminine in Palestinian Literature

‘What is it that you’re wearing Umm Sa’d?
O, woman,
You have definitely changed your jewellery these days!
Umm Sa’d gave me a penetrating look,
Around her neck was a bullet,
Given to her by her son Sa’d, from one of his raids against the enemy.
It hung down like a locket in a metal necklace’.

(Umm Sa’d (Sa’d’s Mother), Ghassan Kanafani 1969)

Palestinian Literature as War Literature: A Sociopolitical Reality

Palestinian literature can be studied as a subgenre of war literature. War literature in this respect is categorised as any literary production, whose six pillars of writing, including characters, setting in time and place, plot, theme, climax and ending, directly or remotely, depict the context of war. War is defined as a state of conflict, fighting, or animosity, large- or small- scale between people, states or nations. War literature is set apart from other literary categories, as its very presence is governed by a state of war, actual or fictional, temporary or permanent, past or present, primitive or modern, which affects the configuration of the war story and its themes. The canon of war literature records the adapting of the war story to a set of non-literary parameters incorporating views on nationalism, socialism and commitment, all of which affect the pattern and content of the stories, either by the adherence to, or rejection of, those views. These parameters transform war literature from being the single-handed production and individual vision of an author into a public statement and picture of collective identity at a certain point in time.

The concepts of nation and nationalism, although primarily socio-political, have an impact on writing the war story. War literature promotes a distinctive image of a nation united by a common history, language, social and religious heritage, a geographical area and political aspirations. The voice of war literature is mostly that of the collective we, the nation as a whole (Eagleton 27). In war literature, heroes and heroines are depicted as national icons embodying and working for the national causes, and continuing in the footsteps of their ancestors. In this sentimental sense, the nation is not only a group of people, ‘it is a soul, a spiritual
principle...the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice, and devotion...a heroic past, great men...the common will in the present’ (Bhabha 19).

The key to opening the world of Palestinian literature is the understanding of the historical and political background of the Palestinian tragedy, starting with the proposed partition of Palestine by the UN in 1947 into two independent states: Israel and Palestine The resolution sought to give partial satisfaction to two competing nationalist movements — Zionism (Jewish nationalism) and Arab nationalism — as well as to resolve the problem of Jews displaced as a result of the Holocaust. Zionists did not accept the UN Partition Plan. They seized areas beyond the proposed Jewish State and did not recognise the International Zone. The UN Plan was used as a pretence for taking over most of Palestine. The actual occupation of much of Palestine through the 1948 war was preceded by mass Jewish immigration to Palestine, and settlement on Palestinian lands, facilitated by the Jewish Emigration Agency and the British mandate. The 1948 war was accompanied by a massive exodus of Palestinians to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, or outside Palestine to neighbouring Jordan, Lebanon, or Syria.¹

Just as Palestinians were starting to recover from the 1948 war, Israel defeated the Arabs for the second time in 1967, confiscating the remnants of Palestinian land, and occupying parts of Egypt, Jordan, and the Golan Heights in Syria. These events left Palestinians and fellow Arabs in a state of shock. The catastrophe of the nakba (the war of 1948 and its repercussions) of the Palestinian people in 1948 took time to sink into the minds of the Palestinians. ‘The Palestinian who lost his country and security was looking for something to explain the defeat and promise a near victory’ (Darraj 51). A more mature literary treatment of the subjects of Palestinian literature surfaces in the periods of the two Intifadas (Uprisings) in 1987 and 2000. Here the mood is critically reflective, with the recognised need for political and social reform directing the discourse and diction of literary works in these periods.

Ahmad Abu Matar, in his book al-Riwaya fi al-Adab al-Filastini 1950–1975 (The Novel in Palestinian Literature 1950–1975), stresses that the expression of Palestinian national concerns flooded all means of communication between Palestinians and Arabs — in particular, literature which represented in full, horrifying details the experience of deportation and exile, and preserved the memory and attachment to a lost safe haven. Literary effort was concentrated on serving the war effort at that turning point in the history of Palestine and the lives of Palestinians, just as socialist literature was used in the 1920s to advance Communism. Palestinian literature worked on ‘engineering the souls’, to use Stalin’s expression,² of its audience to unremittingly serve their cause. The themes of literature were engulfed by a sense of patriotic nostalgia, extreme didacticism and an unrelenting determination to return. The rejection of the notion and practice of experimentation in arts by some writers emerged from the sensitivity of the Palestinian artist towards his/her national cause and people. Writers felt
responsible to provide an outlet for their physically and psychologically tormented readers; there was no waiting for Godot, no space for absurdity or obscurity, the message of work had to be clear and positive. This resulted sometimes in imprisoning Palestinian literature in traditional moulds and patterns of artistic expression that swing back and forth across the fine line separating reality and fiction. On the other hand, it could be argued that the literary writing of the Palestinian tragedy helped the targeted audience, particularly the Palestinians, to accept their suffering. When writers dismantled the horror and bleakness of the socio-political events into the emotionalism and sentimentality of literature, suffering became honourable sacrifice, death was martyrdom, casualties were heroes, and the return to Palestine was envisioned and possible.

It is this political reality that led Palestinian writers to adopt the school of Sartrean commitment. Commitment in Palestinian literature became a rule rather than an exception. Artistic creation was not an isolated activity and the intellectual had no privileged position above the social entity. In this school of commitment, literature is not an individual vision or production; it is a combination of a particular kind of aesthetics that are associated with a particular ideology. ‘The word’ of a writer, according to Sartre, ‘is not a gentle breeze, which plays lightly over the surface of things, grazing them without alerting them. It is our shell and our antennae; it protects us against others and informs us about them’ (Sartre 11–12). The school of commitment claims that words are like ‘loaded pistols’ and writers are professional snipers who do not shoot to kill, but write to change. Palestinian writers were, and still are, constrained by these discursive notions and writing is a premeditated undertaking that is conscious of social and political expectation. The overlap of reality and fiction is apparent and believed to be justified, for ‘what is the credibility’, asks Arab critic Shirin Abu al-Naja, ‘of a text which ignores the massacres committed against Palestinians. How could a critic evaluate a Palestinian text without taking notice of real life situations?’ (107). It is no wonder then that Palestinian writers choose realistic modes of representation in their literary works, and avoid as much as possible the sophisticated and ambiguous modes of symbolism.

This ideology from Ghassan Kanafani’s perspective (a critic and writer recognised as the father of Palestinian commitment) shortened the period of infancy in Palestinian literature. The destruction and erasure of Palestinian culture pressured Palestinian literature to adopt the school of commitment. This was a move that transcended debate about the possible scope of creativity in the ‘committed arts’. Kanafani wrote that ‘Palestinian literature should be committed is a sine qua non. There was a pact between writers that aimless experimenting is an extravagance that Palestinian literature as a mirror of Palestine and Palestinian people is not ready to pay’ (33).

Some critics exclude works from the Palestinian literary canon whose themes divert from the Palestinian war and resistance, viewing them as ‘out of place’
productions by Palestinian intellectuals who secluded themselves from the concerns of their people, or who drew a line between their creative output and their political worries (Abu Matar 30). However, it could be argued that there is hardly a Palestinian literary work that totally disregards the state of war, resistance and occupation, even if the treatment varies in focus between emphasis on the subject or backgrounding it.

**PALESTINIAN WOMEN IN A MASCULINE TEXT AND CONTEXT**

Palestinian literature can be classified as a *bildungsroman* (a story of growth and development) in relation to the portrayal of Palestinian women, as it reflects the chronological, all-encompassing changes women have undergone, starting from the 1948 catastrophe through to the 1967 setback and return to the life of refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan, and reaching to the Uprising and the peace process period from 1987 onwards. The portrayal of women in early Palestinian literature starts with domestic woman whose sphere of influence is the home, and shifts to the image of the revolutionary comrade in contemporary literature. The bulk of early Palestinian literature focuses on themes of freedom and revolution; characters, whether male or female, are catalysts that help achieve the desired end. The flatness or roundedness of their character is event-based. Maternalism and paternalism were replaced by nationalism. In general, the feminine-masculine struggle for domination does not receive much focus. Gender issues, especially in early Palestinian literature are presented in the traditional pattern of female followers and male leaders, females weakened by their femininity and males empowered by their masculinity, housewives and battlefield soldiers. The concept of ideal womanhood is determined by male writers, who preceded women in writing the war story, setting national and mythical archetypes of women as emblems of the nation: Galateas carved and enlivened by the view of Pygmalions.

In early and modern Palestinian literature, Palestinian feminism can be seen to have escaped the Western division of the American ‘cult of true womanhood’ — a version of radical feminism emphasising the superiority of women and their distinctive nature — and the English ‘feminine ideal’, inspired by the teachings of bourgeois feminism (Showalter 25). Judith Tucker remarks that for some Palestinian women ‘the very existence of a European feminist movement was a problem, both in the imposing of its agenda on Arab feminists, and in the unfortunate association of feminism with the West and thus with everything the nationalist movement stands against’ (xiv). Miriam Cooke records how Arab women revolutionaries, reformers and writers — Palestinian included — rejected the feminist brand and tried to find alternative nationalist terms and practices in order to emphasise the uniqueness of the Palestinian female gender and femininity (viii, ix). The concept of ‘familialism’, a concept which honours and stresses the role of Palestinian women in nurturing and raising future warriors, best describes the trend adopted by most women in real life. This familial role of women, as
loyal, self sacrificing and obedient wives and mothers, was later highlighted and
iconised in literature.

Palestinian feminism under war conditions erected its own models. A radical
feminism that stressed the superiority of the female gender over the male, associated
with the idea that men and women occupy different spheres in life, has not found
much ground in Palestine, since the struggle requires the efforts of both sexes. If
radicalism has appeared in any form, it was directed towards the oppressor of both
males and females. Radical Palestinian feminism was modified into militarised
feminism that was also sometimes associated with the **femme fatale**. This
feminism depicts women engaging in mortal combat with the enemy, hijacking
aeroplanes, planting bombs in enemy positions, and uses stereotypical femininity
as a camouflage to distract or capture enemy soldiers. Bourgeois feminism and its
fight for independence and equality required the stability of statehood which was
(and still is) absent from the Palestinian context. But neither did Social or Marxist
feminism succeed in the early years of the Palestinian struggle in gaining the full
support of Palestinian women. The traditional conservative Palestinian society
was not ready for the practices of Marxist factions and the mingling of men and
women in their membership, or for the possibility that women might lead men.

Writers presented Palestinian feminism as a revolutionary rather than political
theory and practice. They represented women practising a form of reconciliatory,
liberal, where women worked with men in the war effort against occupation
in order to achieve long-lasting gains for both sexes. Supporting this argument,
Tamar Mayer in an essay entitled, ‘Heightened Palestinian Nationalism: Military
Occupation, Repression, Difference and Gender’, mentions that ‘Palestinian
women have stopped short of issuing a direct challenge to the patriarchal
structures … they feel the need to struggle alongside men against this external
threat … Many feel that this is an inappropriate time to be alienating their male
compatriots’ (44). Palestinian feminism is depicted as ‘mercurial feminism’ in
progression and regression, where women are attaining more acknowledgment
of their importance and roles at the local and national levels, and are at the same
time deprived of the basic rights of security, home and possession by the same
emancipator and defeater: war and occupation.

As for writing the female image, there seems to be a subtle, unwritten ‘literary
contract’, a ‘communal language’ of images and phrases, as described by the Arab
critic Subhi Nabahani. According to Nabahani, a representative national literature
should depict the partnership of women in life and war. Honouring fellow women
is deemed to be a guiding principle in the code of ethics Palestinian writers hold.
In his critical analysis of the human aspects in the novels of the **nakba**, Nabahani
makes the unqualified claim that Palestinian novels give equal place and agency
to women as to men. ‘Women are no different to men. They are assigned the
same roles on all levels of resistance as prisoners, martyrs and freedom fighters
and are depicted exerting similar behaviours of heroism and steadfastness’ (172–
Although Nabahani presents an ideal picture of the depiction of women in Palestinian literature, he nevertheless underscores that such depiction is essential to show that patriotism and national commitment are not exclusive to men, but extend to the other half of society, women.

Literature has celebrated these images after the 1948 war as the projection of the emancipated characteristics of the future Palestinian women, and as a form of wishful thinking about how women should become, not how they were at the time. This characterisation of women emanates from a strict code of didacticism that has no grey colours. It either elevates women to the status of motherland, sainthood, and martyrdom or casts them out as immoral traitors to the cause, the Palestinian people and the country. The pattern of literary didacticism commits the writer to what can be seen as a checklist of what and how women should be written, with the effect that the individual writers’ words may be different but they represent more or less similar truths and messages. This literary template however does not entail redundancy or flatness of character despite the similar, exterior pattern of character sketching, because each period of war brings new dimensions, colours and themes to existing images. Yet during the three distinctive war periods — 1948, 1967, 1984–2000 — female characterisation varied between self-immolation and self determination, agency and lack of agency, depending on the gender of the writer. The most famous literary symbol of womanhood is the mother from which two connected images evolved: the image of the motherland and the mother of martyrs. In relation to female imagery, Palestinian literature either presents women as positive heroines engaging actively in the struggle or the oblivious catalyst contributing to the nurturing of male warriors.

**Women as Hero(in)es and Works with a Positive Conclusion**

Contrary to the shocking Arab defeats in the 1948 and 1967 wars, the literary production of the period distanced itself from the widespread mood of defeat and depression. Writers seem to have taken on the role of guardians of the national morale and memory. They tried to avoid lingering over the defeat itself by diagnosing and treating its causes. The literature of these periods led a campaign to uproot all the political, social and cultural flaws responsible for the defeat. The general strategy was to silence tragedy; literature became the redeemer, the salvation and the resurrection of all that had died. The talk of women’s freedom and participation which had been confined behind the closed doors of bourgeois and intellectual salons, was expressed in the open and acquired a militant tone. Rather than accepting that a woman’s place was in the home, after 1967 society started moving women to the heart of the struggle. With the spread of revolutionary movements and factions, literature expressed unreserved support for the resistance as the only way to free Palestine. Writers themselves became members of political movements and factions, literature expressed unreserved support for the resistance as the only way to free Palestine.

No
The Locket Becomes a Bullet

matter how ghastly the suffering pictured, most writers adopted Maxim Gorki’s equation of a ‘positive hero’ and ‘positive conclusion’. The literary mission was to transform the aesthetic into the emblematic. Any image that did not conform to this code of positive heroism was cast in the negative in an indirect message from the writer to the audience to develop a similar dislike for characters at the centre of events who displayed anti-heroic qualities.

The symbolic importance of motherhood is largely uncontested in most Palestinian works of art. At the social level, the exploitation of the institution of motherhood is a must if any society at war is to reach its goals. Mothers are essential to war, producing, nurturing and educating the children who become its soldiers. The concept of nation itself derives etymologically from ‘natio’ meaning to be born, and as giving birth to humans is the role of mothers, giving birth to the nation might be said to follow. In literature, motherhood is iconised into many images, blessed with a spiritual drive to act not only as an individual mother of flesh and blood, but also as the mother of the nation, the symbolic motherland, and the mother of martyrs. The image of the Palestinian mother was elastic and writers stretched it to accommodate all the facets of self-denial, heroic service, and mobilisation according to the necessities of the war.

The icon of Palestinian womanhood, the mother, the motherland, the ideological warrior, the refugee, the all-in-one figure, is first presented by Kanafani in *Umm Sa‘d (Sa‘d’s Mother)* written in 1969. *Umm Sa‘d* is a novel that embodies Kanafani’s Marxist doctrines in terms of the characteristics of Palestinian women, and adheres to social realism which celebrates the working class and glorifies their suffering. Paralleling Maxim Gorki’s, *The Mother* (1906), Kanafani in plain language signals the archetypal nature of Umm Sa‘d in his introductory dedication to the novel in which he addresses her, not merely as an individual woman, but as a representative of people and an embodiment of the popular school of resistance. The novel consists of nine stories that are connected by interlocking images of Umm Sa‘d and through which Kanafani paints to perfection the minute details that lead to the completion of the image of this epic-like heroine. Kanafani chooses the mother figure presumably because he is aware of her role in bringing up the future generations, and because he knows she will be acceptable to both men and women. She is also a member of the poor working class, the vast majority of Palestinian refugees, at whom the Marxist teachings for social reform are directed.

The character of Umm Sa‘d transcends the limitations of the literary character and comes to represent all Palestinian women. This novel fits into the canon delineated by Kanafani, the ideological writer who prescribed the role of Palestinian manhood in various works. Umm Sa‘d is his vision of what Palestinian womanhood should become. The Palestinian critic, Faruq Wadi in his book *Thalath ‘Alamat Fariqa fi al-Riwaya al-Filastiniyya (Three Distinctive Marks in the Palestinian Novel)*, concludes that Umm Sa‘d has become an example to
all succeeding writers. Women characters have subsequently been weighed in relation to Umm Sa’d on a scale of resemblance or dissimilarity.

In dynamic language, Umm Sa’d is described by the writer as the motherland: ‘[s]he rises from the womb of the earth, as an arrow held by mysterious destiny escalating endlessly… She walks high as a flag carried by unseen hands…She is solid as a rock, patient as a prophet. She has grown ten years older trying to win clean bread for her family’ (Kanafani 15–16, 25). She is a member of the working proletariat who suffer the sordid conditions of refugee life. Rather than the laurels worn by the Roman warrior, Umm Sa’d ornaments her neck with a bullet fired by her son in one of his raids against the enemy.

The positive message the writer sent through Umm Sa’d was the role of women as the womb of the nation; the role of the mother who must overcome her biological instincts of maternal fear and protection for the sake of her national role and ideological beliefs; the role of begetting children and thereby increasing the Palestinian population in order to outnumber the Israelis. This, according to Kaplan, is the application of the perceived need to ‘populate or perish’ (Kaplan 15).

Umm Sa’d has a solid belief in her son’s involvement in the resistance, but occasionally her heart is overtaken by motherly fear and worry. She unconsciously abstains from food until Sa’d’s arrival from the front, but when she recovers from her fear, she regains her patriotic vigour in full force. These scenes showing the internal conflict Umm Sa’d experiences between her feelings as a mother and her commitment to the cause for which she sacrifices the most valuable thing she brought to life, her son. Through these scenes Kanafani creates a dialogue with all Palestinian mothers who may have the same worries, and equips them with the sublime conviction of sacrifice to overcome the biological power of motherly emotions in the same way that Umm Sa’d does. Such interaction between the writer and the reader, the fiction of the novel and real life, is not unique to Palestinian literature or the literature of commitment. The reader-response theory championed by Wolfgang Iser (Wirkungsaesthetik) emphasises that reading literature is a dynamic contact between reader and text that serves to enliven and broaden the work of art. This dynamism is what critics name the ‘politics of reading’ (Schwab 16). Post-modern theorists from Adorno to Derrida insist that there is a dynamic relationship between a text and a receptive reader, whereby each reading of a text functions as a rewriting and rereading in an ongoing dialogue between writer and reader (Schwab 16).

In contrast to critics who argue that women’s revolution is always motivated by a male catalyst,6 Umm Sa’d is superior to all her male acquaintances, and more heroic. She is more hopeful than her educated relative, the journalist, and beholds a vision of victory. She has to put aside her womanly instincts and motherly passion to mould her revolutionary character in order to become a revolutionary, while her son, the male warrior, has only one task to fulfil, and that is to fight. It is not her relation to her son that distinguishes her; she stands with her own leadership
qualifications. She assumes the role of a military leader, aided by other women, to defend the camp. Throughout the novel, the reader can detect Kanafani’s message which is perhaps best summarised by Syrian critic Buthayna Sha‘ban who says that ‘no nation could ever win a war without the help of its women’ (151).

**Hero(ine)-less Works**

Occupied with dramatising the suffering of the war as essential to the preservation of the national memory, some works of the period de-centre human heroism, especially that of women. The development of their characters is event-governed. In such works, women do not feature as main characters; the writers do not resort to psychoanalytical narration or employ stream of consciousness to reveal the inner thoughts and ideas of women in these traumatic periods. The suppression of the representation of feelings of fear and dislocation is intentional because, as some Palestinian writers believe, literature should aim to write a public image that women can identify with and emulate. It was thought that the task of literature was to create a belief in the state of womanly steadfastness, a state in which women’s identity is totally absorbed by the event.

In hero(ine)less works, not only are women ornamental to the plot, but they also appear as desexualised which neutralises their femininity in favour of a more masculine appearance. In the novel, *Buhayra Wara’ al-Rih* (*A Lake Beyond the Wind*) (1991) by the Palestinian Yahya Yakhluf about the 1948 war, one highly praised woman is Aunt Hafiza. Her praise is written in masculine terms. She is described as *ukht al-rijal* (the sister of men), an attribute standing positively for courage and bravery, although associated with negative connotations of manly behaviour and lost femininity. Generally, this term in Arabic culture is used to describe old women whose actions enable them to rise high in social esteem, equalling the importance of men. Aunt Hafiza attends the meetings of men to discuss war operations, smokes and orders some of her male relatives around. She is described as ‘*ukht al-rijal* … a kind of woman who never gets angry…she is capable of doing anything, she is still powerful, dominant and opinionated. She is always in full command even in her husband’s presence’ (62–63). Praise as it may seem, this woman is not self-sufficient to stand on her own or in comparison to other women; she needs a catalyst, a man or masculine qualities, in order to be marked and noticed. ‘Aunt Hafiza fights with the men, talks and argues confidently with them… Men used to call her a hero’ (249–52). This depiction makes the reader wonder if Hafiza is grouped with men because of the rarity of her type among Palestinian women after the 1948 war, or if the author wishes to maintain the dominance of male stories about wartime. Thus a woman cannot appear as a hero in her own right as a woman with womanly characteristics, but can only appear heroic as a pseudo-male.

On the other hand, this image of ‘manly women’, women described in terms of manly characteristics of courage and heroism, might signal the semi-acceptance by the Palestinian patriarchal society of the presence of women in the public arena.
of war. The process of desexualisation and endowment of women with manly qualities is necessary to overcome the social taboos that discourage interaction between women and men. This strategy relieves the social tension. For men, any woman who becomes ‘one of the guys’ is permitted to enter the cult of men and manhood which had been extremely exclusive and impenetrable before the 1948 war.

**Testosterone vs. Progesterone Writing**

The characterisation of women, especially in male-written works, revolves around extremes. Writers elevate them to represent homeland and nation or degrade them to a state of immorality and treachery. Even in contemporary works, women are used to embody a spiritual and emblematic stand. This virtue-vice paradigm is based on attributing all goodness to socially sanctioned images and all viciousness to controversial ones. When female writers took part in writing the war story the characterisation of women evolved from an infancy depicting dependency and adherence to social codes, to some form of maturity and confrontation. It is fair to claim that Palestinian women writers are more prone to take an oppositional stance in their presentation of the war story. This can be diagnosed as emanating from their sense of being the victimised party as a result of the war and the spread of the nationalist ideology, which they believe maintained fixed patriarchal social and gender structures. Although war and nationalism may be said to have accelerated the emancipation of women, bringing female rights and associated ‘feminist’ imagery to the fore, some Palestinian female writers argue that war, created and sustained by men, entraps women in mythical, motherly or maiden roles. In war literature, works by female writers are more critical than their male counterparts, because most women writers have taken to the scene of writing after the emergence of feminism. They maintain their right to have their own views of the events and to criticise the icons so strongly enshrined in the minds of their nation. They refuse to recreate the same female characters developed by male writers who succumb to the one nation, one story, one mode of writing. An example of the counter narrative produced by Palestinian female writers is provided by the works of Sahar Khalifa. In her novels there is always a focus on the internal battle with men and institutions of patriarchy more than the battle of the Palestinians against the occupation, and a call for the freedom of women prior to the freedom of Palestine. This form of writing the war story is assessed by some critics as ‘a repeat performance of colonialism…merging…tradition and colonialism into some new…hybrid’ (McClintock 260). Frantz Fanon describes such writers as ‘neo-colonial’ writers, carrying on where the colonial powers have left off in disfiguring society (7). In an unpublished M.A thesis that studies the literary works of Sahar Khalifa by Nisrin Shanabla, the researcher asserts that Khalifa’s novels are only Palestinian in title. She is amazed by Khalifa’s ability to distance herself from the Palestinian cause and produce novels unrelated to the ‘Palestinian context of heroism, martyrdom, imprisonment…etc’ (46). Khalifa holds to her own personal agenda. She herself confesses in her autobiography,
‘I never thought of myself as a part of community, but as an outsider’ (qtd in Shanabla). She admits that most of her female characters are an extension of herself, her own aspirations, and disappointments. Neither detached from her characters nor committed to her country’s cause, Khalifa manipulates a sort of confessional literature, in which she, like many women writers, inscribes her ‘own sickness, her madness…and her paralysis in her texts’ (Showalter 25).

For example, the *intifada* (Uprising), which is depicted by the majority of writers as being a positive and emancipatory transformation to the advantage of the Palestinian people and cause,7 is presented in the negative in Khalifa’s novel *Bab al-Saha* (the name of a location in the old city of Nablus). Miriam Cooke expected this novel to ‘provide the transformed context. The conditions would seem to be ideal because the *intifada* is the most explicitly feminized of all post-modern wars’ (195), but Khalifa has chosen to differ. One expects of Khalifa, as a proclaimed feminist, to take sides with her female characters, but in Khalifa’s literary world there are no survivors, neither women nor men — all are destined to failure (‘Abd al-Qadir 263). The feminism of the author is not passed on to her characters. Most of Khalifa’s female characters emerge as unfulfilled characters and leave the course of events as psychological wrecks.

Some argue that women can identify with their sex as well as men can with theirs, and thus produce a clearer picture of femininity and feminism. Rethinking the women in *Umm Sa’d* and *Bab al-Saha* in these terms suggests that the sex of the author does not govern literary characterisation. In terms of benefit to the cause of Palestinian women, feminist rights, and social effect, *Umm Sa’d*, the novel and character, is more emancipatory and memorable than the women of *Bab al-Sah*, whose characterisation and lives are not adorned with any form of special achievement. *Umm Sa’d* stands as an iconic feminist figure, while the women of *Bab al-Saha*, by the feminist author, are no more than everyday women struggling for self-understanding. Other critics argue that biological differences enrich literary production with a variety of views. They insist that ‘physical apartheid should at the very least be countered with literary integration’ (Cooke 5) (a valid point in the context of war literature), so as not to divert attention away from the main stream of thought and characterisation thought fitting for the war effort. To write with a feminist or masculinist voice, to exclusively prioritise male or female characters, may affect the message and nature of the war story, and may present a partial rather than an overall view of the stake and status of women in war.

**Conclusion**

In studying Palestinian literature and heroism, critics have to be aware of the politics of writing adopted by authors. Being a manifestation of war and influenced by a nationalistic rhetoric, cannot be a neutral, disheartened or individual depiction of life and characters; it must carry the message of resistance and employ a nationalistic ideology that does not hesitate to encourage warriors and mobilisation for war. To preserve the national image, Palestinian literature
employs selective historical, political, and social discourse to achieve a degree of representation of actual events and images. In this task of image preservation, war literature adopts an eclectic approach to depict a state of uniformity, conformity, and sameness in themes and characters. Some war literature has the effect of psychological conditioning, bringing the people at war or under occupation to believe in their unity, uniqueness, and a common cause. Images like the mother and the motherland in Palestinian literature with their code of behaviour, actions and ceremonies did not appear suddenly out of the blue. It took the writing of a great number of literary works with subliminal pedagogical messages about how a mother is expected to act in war, supporting her children and rejoicing in their sacrifice. These images grew in the subconscious of Palestinians and their nobility and reverence were immense and unquestionable.

In Palestinian war literature, there seems to be an agreement on the definition of nationalism as a devotion to cause and people, and the depiction of female heroic characters endowed with bravery and commitment to the justness of their cause. It has been argued that the essence of the war story is expected to maintain a degree of credibility and authenticity regardless of the gender of the writer, and that gender differences might act to enrich the war story by presenting a variety of literary treatments. In Palestinian literature, men writing the war story present women in a religious, mythical and sacrificial light — they are the symbol for which men fight. The female image written by men is either that of the saint or the Satan, praised endlessly for acting as mothers, wives and war supporters, or condemned limitlessly if they breach the social norms. Historical sources record that Palestinian women’s agency and participation are much greater than represented in war literature (Zuraiq 40), proving that male writers do not do justice to the imagery of their fellow female comrades. The picture is less predictable in the female story. Some Palestinian female writers do not defend the position of their female ancestors, but turn their back on all the heritage of war history and concentrate on writing the women’s plight as war goes on. Early war literature in Palestine represented a collective entity by manipulating individual suffering, charisma and achievement to speak for the whole nation.

At the early stages of Palestinian literature, the traditional images were difficult to defy as writers produced their version of war literature more in compliance with the dominant views and less in opposition because such opposition was judged as unsuitable to the accepted state of solidarity and steadfastness that war literature was supposed to promote. Not only were women set in fixed gender moulds, but also men and ideal manhood were governed by the national frame of heroism and bravery. Palestinian men and women are depicted in this literature as positive heroes and heroines who have been created according to the principles of social realism to reflect a positive conclusion and message. Gender issues of equality, sexuality, and social reform receive only minor attention in Palestinian literature of this period. As Tucker has observed, ‘the emphasis on the unity of men and
women in the struggle for decolonization postponed the critical questioning of the inequalities of power between men and women in these patriarchal cultures’ (43). There is little difference between the representation of men and women in these early works, whether the author is male or female. Palestinian writers in contact with the socio-political conditions of women have however recorded the changes that occurred in women’s status from 1948 to the present time. Recent stories of women in the intifada attribute agency and initiative to women, unlike the stories written about women immediately after the 1948 war, which portray them as a back stage chorus assisting male heroes.

Palestinian feminism in war and literature is pictured as mercurial, a form of ‘accidental’ feminism forced to the fore by war and grafted with Marxist, bourgeois, radical, extremist feminism, rather than developing as a discrete school. In contemporary Palestinian literature, Palestinian feminism is presented by Palestinian writers as a model in the making. While some writers such as Khalifa subscribe to the school of Western feminism, other nationalist writers such as Kanafani insist on the uniqueness of the Palestinian model, a model affected by the repercussions of war, the appreciation of some social values and the deconstruction of others (namely the restrictions on the presence, activity and mobility of Palestinian women), and the redefinition of issues pertaining to women’s honour and reputation. This identity crisis and inapplicability of a fixed model is also apparent in the history of feminist criticism of Palestinian literature. Barbara Harlow suggests that the concept of feminism in the Arab world, Occupied Palestine included, has become loaded with negative political and social implications, because it is a product of the West. She points out the difficulty of applying these feminist theoretical models in any analysis of the ‘literary output of geopolitical areas which stand in opposition to the very social and political organization within which the theories are located and to which they respond’ (43), that of the colonial West.

In addition, some Palestinian works understate feminist developments, failing to dramatise the actual positive and growing roles of women in war. Most often, Palestinian women are depicted as dogmatic feminists or even active agents of the revolution, upholding an unchanging belief in war and the justness of their resistance. With the absence of state, nation and citizenship in the Palestinian context, literature is judged by some as unsuited to host feminist revisionism. Many still hold to the belief that this literature (the literature of war) should work to implant and disseminate a collective view and a consciousness of a common Palestinian identity — past, present and future.

Nonetheless, writers set out to enshrine the battles of everyday women, avoiding the canonisation of Palestinian literature as the literature of the privileged or the elite. Some believe that Palestinian literature should not only produce archetypes for public consumption, but that it should also be humanist in the sense that it can shed light on everyday women living under occupation; it appeals to the everyday emotions, depicting how humble human dreams cannot
materialise for Palestinian women in a war zone. Highlighting this particular suffering of women can be an end in itself to evoke sympathy on the part of the unaffected outsider audience (readers as readers only), and prepare the insider audience (readers as actors and inspirers) to transcend suffering and accept it as part and parcel of attaining freedom. It is the aim of literature adhering to the teachings of social realism according to the critic Rufus Mathewson to ensure that ‘the small acts of staying morally alive become heroic; the hero is spiritually unbreakable, successful in his or her stance of opposition, true to his mission, an example for others’ (xvi). Negative conditions are presented in proportion to positive ones to maintain the authenticity of these stories, but the writer of these stories endows women with the strength to overcome adversity. Scenes of loss, complaint and tears are abundant in literary works produced in times of war, but the traditional mode of Palestinian literature puts the woman at centre stage who pledges to fight on despite her losses and emits ululations of pride (zagharid), thereby recreating Gorki’s vision of the positive hero(ine).

Palestinian war literature remains a stage for change, with writers at situated polar opposites — those adhering to a traditional image of female heroism and nationalism and those who foil it. The continuation of the Palestinian war ensured the continuation of war literature, which has given way in contemporary times to a degree of variance and split opinions unimagined in early war literature. While it is true that Palestinian literature is constrained by ‘unliterary’ entanglements including nationalism, political commitment and social realism, these should not hinder the literary appraisal and appreciation of war literature as a ‘phasic’ literature to be judged in this light. Reader and critics need to adopt a contextual, historical, and comparative analysis of texts. This involves analysing texts in relation to the period they are written in to evaluate how progressive or regressive, emancipating or confining, the images and themes are at a specific point in time and in comparison with other national and international works on war. It is difficult to appraise a Palestinian work written in the 1970s expressing extreme nationalism, with the critical mentality of the late twentieth century, when people worldwide believed nationalism to be a phase of human infancy. It is this critical understanding of the process of writing the war story in continuing war conditions that enables the readers and critics to view the feminist issues and the representation of women in proportion to a greater adversary holding back its development. This appreciation may mitigate accusations that Palestinian literature is overwhelmingly patriarchal or anti-feminist.

NOTES
1 The number of Palestinian refugees after the 1948 war is estimated to be between 750,000 and 914,221. The number of destroyed villages is 531. See Suleiman Abu-Sitta, The Atlas of Palestine 1948.
2 Quoted in Mathewson, The Positive Hero in Russian Literature, p. 3.
3 See Christine Bard, and Robert Jean-Louis, ‘From Feminism to Familialism’, p. 101. Familialism is a theory and practice that developed in socialist societies, entrusting the institution of the family with great responsibilities in maintaining the stability of life and society. Women and the concept of matriarchy received precedence since women were viewed as the guarantors of the social order. Familialism, nevertheless, is a collective framework that focuses on the family as a unit and not the individual identity and rights of its female and male members.

4 See Mathewson, pp. 161–68.

5 The Mother (1906) is the story of Pelageia Nilovna, the Russian mother who adopts the cause of socialism and joins the revolution after the arrest of her son Pavel. Pelageia has a strong Catholic belief, which helps her bear the ill treatment of her drunkard husband, and his subsequent death.


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ABSTRACTS

STELLA BORG BARTHET

Religion, Class and Nation in Contemporary Australian Fiction

This article tackles the charge of elitism levelled at some Australian writers by Australian critics and suggests that these assessments may be biased because of an over-emphasis on class. This kind of criticism connects elitism with the writers’ appropriation of the spiritual for the endorsement of the nation, and either rejects works that treat the spiritual, or it refuses to acknowledge a spiritual element in writing that is accepted for its working-class ethos. Through readings of David Malouf’s The Conversations at Curlow Creek and Thomas Keneally’s A Family Madness and The Office of Innocence, I question the connection that has been made between high literariness and the symbolic endorsement of the White nation in Australia.

GAIL FINCHAM

Zakes Mda: Towards a New Ontology of Postcolonial Vision?

In this article, I look at The Madonna of Excelsior (2002) by postcolonial writer Zakes Mda — painter, playwright, novelist and musician of the ‘new’ South Africa. Mda bases the story world of The Madonna on paintings by the Flemish-born expressionist/symbolist artist Frans Claerhout, a Catholic priest working on a mission station with local people in the Orange Free State. Mda juxtaposes the exuberant colour of Claerhout’s paintings against the black-and-white newspaper coverage of the notorious Miscegenation Trial in the Free State town of Excelsior. I argue that Mda’s painterly imagination deploys processes of focalisation to change the reader’s apprehension of social and political realities. The Madonna creates altered spaces in memory, history, and communal consciousness, which undo the stereotypes of apartheid and prepare for a new way of thinking in post-apartheid South Africa.

J.A. KEARNEY

Glimpses of Agency in Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things

In this article I challenge the notion that Roy’s novel is so immersed in the evocation of determinism in her characters’ lives that the possibility of agency is cancelled. Basing my approach on Roy’s own socio-political writings and utterances, I argue that through a variety of fictional strategies she integrates into the novel a counter-position that leaves the reader with a sense of ambivalence rather than of doom in relation to agency in Roy’s world. To begin with I give full weight to ways in which historical forces seem relentlessly deterministic in the novel, allowing betrayals through political power, caste and a whole range of related social prejudices to triumph. In contrast I draw attention to Roy’s special relish of word play and spontaneous drama as potential manifestations of individual agency. The complexity of Roy’s vantage point is heightened by the
way in which she allows historical determinism and drama to achieve a significant victory. Nevertheless, through a final and stunning chronological reversal Roy enables her fiction to challenge loss of faith in agency.

JOHN O’LEARY

**Speaking the Suffering Indigene: ‘Native’ Songs and Laments, 1820–1850**

This article considers the many short poems published by settlers in British colonies and the United States in the early decades of the nineteenth century in which settlers voiced their concern about the suffering of indigenous peoples in the face of colonisation. Though the indigenous peoples in question were very different from one another, and the nature of colonisation in the various colonies and states by no means identical, this verse shows a remarkable homogeneity of style and tone, being an expression of a common evangelical tradition and a shared fascination with the indigenous Other. The article argues that while these poems were certainly conditioned by an ideology of European superiority, and raise issues of paternalism and agency, they were sincere expressions of outrage and sorrow, and should therefore be accorded more weight than they are usually granted by postcolonial critics.

ANN PISTACCHI

**Interrogating ‘The Full Dog’: Reframing the Incest Narrative in Patricia Grace’s Dogside Story**

Maori author Patricia Grace has shown a long-standing interest in the violation of incest prohibitions and the ramifications of such transgressions. Her early experiments with the constitutive relationship between incest prohibition and narrative structure in *Mutuwhenua* (1978), *Cousins* (1992), ‘Flower Girls’ (1994) and *Baby No-Eyes* (1998) prepare the ground for Grace’s much more exhaustive examination of the subject in her 2001 Kiriyama Prize winning novel, *Dogside Story*. This article examines the ways in which the treatment of incest in *Dogside Story* diverts from the anthropological, philosophical and psychoanalytical paradigms of Grace’s earlier texts by placing the characters of Rua and Ani in a complex critical position that resists and ultimately subverts a traditional/Western reading of their incestuous relationship. By re-contextualising the act of sibling incest in *Dogside Story* within a specifically Maori-centric framework, Grace rejects essentialist readings and challenges what is at the heart of the near-universal cultural taboos surrounding incest.

GAETANO RANDO

**Recent Italian-Australian Narrative Fiction by First Generation Writers**

This article examines Australian narrative by first generation writers published from the mid-1980s to the present, a period that has seen both an increase in
the production of texts, a tendency towards the more widespread use of English with respect to Italian language and a diversification of thematic content. Apart from some very few exceptions (Rosa Cappiello, Antonio Casella), most first generation Italian-Australian writers constitute a largely ‘invisible’ presence in Australia’s literary culture with their works being largely overlooked by the mainstream literary establishment. Yet they present a discrete corpus of literary writing that focuses on making sense of the liminal space between the old country and culture and the new, and the physical and metaphysical transitions involved in the process of migration. While many of the narrative works deal with the social realities of the diaspora, some also provide a constant and ever-shifting appraisal of two different worlds and two different cultures in an attempt to demythologise and remythologise past and present in the light of new experiences.

ASHA SEN
Re-Visioning Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Cracking India* in a Post-National Age

The current inter-disciplinary status of postcolonial studies is most accurately reflected in connections between historical discourses on women and gender from the Indian subcontinent and their contemporary literary representation. Many postcolonial novelists in India and Pakistan, for instance, have adopted the form of national allegory and drawn parallels between the coming of age of their individual protagonists and the Pakistani or Indian nation-state’s birth and growth. However, feminist critics like Josna Rege and Lydia Liu have pointed out that this allegorical format is not always compatible with women’s interests. Drawing on such critics, my article presents a critique of the use of national allegory in Bapsi Sidhwa’s novel *Cracking India* (1989). *Cracking India* is centred on the development of a child narrator who tries to define herself against the colonial and nationalist narratives presented by the adults around her. Ultimately, my article asserts, the novel is a failed attempt at decolonisation because its narrator does not adequately interrogate the biases present in the dominant narratives that surround her.

DIMA TAHBOUB
The Locket Becomes a Bullet: Nationalising the Feminine in Palestinian Literature

This article presents Palestinian literature as a distinctive genre of war literature inspired by sociopolitical features. Using examples drawn from Palestinian novels, it discusses how the entanglement with the nationalistic ideology tailors the female imagery and literary iconography to highlight the values of resistance and steadfastness. The essay explores the numerous female roles and images through various periods of war literature, underscoring the difference in depiction between male and female writers.
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

STELLA BORG BARTHET was awarded her PhD by the University of Malta for her thesis on ‘Myth and History in the West African Novel’ in 1997. She is Senior Lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Malta where she teaches courses in postcolonial literature and theory, and in 18th- and 19th-century English and American fiction. Stella convened the conference of the European Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (EACLALS) in March 2005 and was appointed adjudicator for the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize later that year. She is the author of articles and book chapters mostly on African, Australian and Maltese fiction. Stella’s current research interests include Arab and Anglo-Arab writing.

Head of the English Department at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, and co-editor of the South African journal, The English Academy Review, GAIL FINCHAM has edited, co-edited, and contributed to three volumes of essays on Joseph Conrad (1996, 2001, 2002); has chapters in Literary Landscapes from Modernism to Postcolonialism (Palgrave, 2008), Joseph Conrad: Voice, Sequence, History, Genre (Ohio 2008), and Ways of Writing: Critical Essays on Zakes Mda (UKZN Press 2009). A chapter is forthcoming in J.M. Coetzee and the Aesthetics of Place (ed. Carrol Clarkson) and she is currently completing a monograph on the novels of Zakes Mda for the University of Cape Town Press.

PALOMA FRESNO CALLEJA is a Lecturer in the Department of English at the University of the Balearic Islands, Spain. Her research focuses on issues of multiculturalism, identity politics, gender and diaspora in New Zealand and Pacific Literatures. Recent publications on New Zealand and Pacific theatre or ethnic minority writing have appeared in The Journal of Postcolonial Writing, Australasian Drama Studies and The Journal of Commonwealth Literature (forthcoming).

J.A. (JACK) KEARNEY is a senior research associate at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Durban) where he taught in English Studies from 1970 until his retirement in 1998. Seconded to the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal Faculty of Education from 2003 to 2007, he became Acting Head of the Department of English. Presently he teaches English literary courses at two Varsity College campuses, Pietermaritzburg and Westville. Having published extensively on early and contemporary South African fiction, he then focused on fiction by Islamic South African writers. While at present he is engrossed by contemporary fiction generally, his immediate research concern is the fictional representation of children by writers from Africa.

RICHARD LEVER is a freelance editor and writer. He co-authored, with James Wieland, Post-colonial Literatures in English: Australia 1970–1992 (G.K. Hall 1996). He is a copy-editor for Giramondo Publishing and HEAT magazine, and
runs a professional manuscript assessment service, Manuscripts Online (www.manuscriptonline.com.au).

KATE LLEWELLYN is the author of twenty books. They comprise nine of poetry, four of travel writing while the others are essays and memoir. She is the co-editor of The Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets. The Floral Mother & Other Essays, The Waterlily, A Blue Mountain Journal, and Playing With Water have been made into talking books. Her latest book (Kate Llewellyn 2010) has been published by the University of Wollongong in the Poets and Perspectives series.


TOLU OGUNLESI is the author of a collection of poetry, Listen to the Geckos Singing from a Balcony (Bewrite Books, 2004) and a novella, Conquest & Conviviality (Hodder Murray 2008). In 2007 he was awarded a Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg poetry prize, in 2008 the Nordic Africa Institute Guest Writer Fellowship, and in 2009 a Cadbury Visiting Fellowship by the University of Birmingham. Tolu’s fiction and poetry have also appeared in The London Magazine, Wasafiri, Farafina, PEN Anthology of New Nigerian Writing, Litro, Brand, Orbis, Nano2ales, Stimulus Respond, Sable, Magma, Stanford's Black Arts Quarterly and World Literature Today. When he is not travelling, Tolu lives in Lagos, Nigeria.

ANN PISTACCHI joined the Department of English at the University of Auckland in 2002 as a tutor and lecturer specialising in comparative indigenous literary studies and contemporary women’s fiction. Her current research lies in the field of Maori fiction, and she has recently completed a doctorate titled ‘Spiraling Subversions: The Politics of Maori Cultural Survivance in Contemporary Maori Women’s Fictions’.

GAETANO RANDO is Associate Professor in Italian Studies and English Language and Linguistics at the University of Wollongong. He has written extensively on Italian-Australian studies including the recent translation of and introduction to Rosa R. Cappiello’s Oh Lucky Country (3rd ed., 2008). He has also edited Literary and Social Diasporas. An Italian Australian Perspective (2007) with Gerry Turcotte, La Diaspora italiana dopo la Seconda Guerra Mondiale. The Italian Diaspora after the Second World War (2007) with Jim Hagan, and Emigrazione e letteratura: Il caso italoaustraliano (2004). Gaetano has also published articles in recent issues of Studies in Australasian Cinema and JASAL. In 2005 the President of the Republic of Italy conferred him with the award of Commendatore, Ordine della Stella della Solidarietà italiana, for research and teaching achievements.
ASHA SEN is Associate Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Her recent publications include ‘Feminist Ethnographies of Desire and Resistance’ (*South Asian Review* 2007) and ‘Looking Forward, Looking Back: Pre-Colonial Sexualities in a Postcolonial World’ (*ARIEL* 2009).

DIMA M.T. TAHBOUB is Jordanian and is currently employed as an Assistant Professor at the Arab Open University, Jordan Branch. She completed her PhD at the University of Manchester in 2007 on Comparative Literature in the field of Middle Eastern Studies. Dima’s research interests include Women and War in Palestine and Ireland, the Literature of Commitment, and Postcolonial Feminism. She is a member of the Association of Professors of English and Translation at Arab Universities (APETAU).
EDITORIAL ADVISORS

Diana Brydon, Canada Research Chair, Globalization & Cultural Studies, University of Manitoba, Canada.

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Russell McDougall, Assoc. Professor, School of English, Communication & Theatre, University of New England, Australia.

Alastair Niven, Chairman of the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize Advisory Committee (previously Director of Literature, British Council, UK).

Kirsten Holst Petersen, Assoc. Professor in Cultural Encounters and English, Roskilde University, Denmark.

Chris Prentice, Department of English, University of Otago, New Zealand.

Bruce Clunies Ross, independent scholar (previously Professor of English, University of Copenhagen, Denmark).

Paul Sharrad, Assoc. Professor, English Literatures, University of Wollongong, Australia.

Kirpal Singh, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Angela Smith, Emeritus Professor, Department of English, University of Stirling, UK & chair of the Europe & South Asia panel of judges for the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize in 2006 & 2007.

Helen Tiffin, Professor, English Program, University of Tasmania, Australia.

Gerry Turcotte, Professor of English & the Dean of Arts & Sciences, at the University of Notre Dame, Sydney, Australia.

James Wieland, Adjunct Professor of Communications and Cultural Studies, Curtin University, WA, Australia.

Mark Williams, Professor of English, School of Culture, Literature & Society, University of Canterbury, New Zealand.